

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SANGAM, A CONFLUENCE

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Sangam, Sanskrit for “confluence,” is a novel set across three storylines, all connected by a single ghazal poem, the evolution of which spans the lives and times of three men.

In medieval India, Sufi poet Amir Khusrow arrives at the ruins of an ancient Hindu Temple, seeking inspiration and revival for his work; centuries later, at the turn of India’s independence from Britain, young lawyer Jayant finds his idealism tested in against the nation’s messy beginnings; in the present day, a young Indian-American disc jockey navigates the night club scene, hoping to become the modern music star.

The novel is meant to mimic how music is sampled, re-appropriated, and remixed over time. In the same way songs are matched by a DJ for beats and melody, so too are the themes and emotional arcs of each man’s story line meant to echo one another, and resonate as a whole.

SANGAM, A CONFLUENCE

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts
2012

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Chapter 1

The caravan moved slower and slower in the heat, slugging across the land. The palanquin bearers' feet crushed the dry, yellowed grass, paving a cragged pathway across the field. At midday, the sun was high above, and beat down on their heads. Without a cloud in the sky, it was too bright to even look ahead. They held their heads down, silently cursing their duties and trying to forget the weight and pain on their bodies.

The caravan had traveled from Delhi, skirting the Thar desert across Rajasthan. It went up and down the rolling hills that were in spring bloom, sprouting daffodils and marigolds down their sides. As the band entered the new Gujarat territory, there were almost no signs of the army ever having passed.

Inside the palanquin, Amir Khusrow closed his composition book and tied it severely shut. He was frustrated. What had been a wellspring of subjects and emotions, inscribed onto the page like firebrand, had gone dry. He had observed in futility as his notebook, scrawled all over with miscellaneous stanzas, crude drawings, and small edicts, slowly petered out into more and more blank space. After awhile he'd went back to older pages to make use of any previous aphorisms or intriguing phrases he'd over heard. But upon re-reading, he'd realized he was merely recording the world around him. The edicts of princes and nawaabs from the Sultan's court, or the bedroom closet gossip of the servants and marketplace commoners, all seemed to mold into a scatological survey.

This wall, one he'd careened into and only realized after being thrown backwards to the ground, had stifled him. But what was this wall, and where had it come from? He didn't know.

Where had the emotion gone? Where had been the love, the magic, and mystery? As a young man he had been filled with life. Stanzas had flowed from his mind effortlessly. He could synthesize the pains, the trials, the torture of man's heart in such few, short, precise words. Oh, the joy of words! It was like climbing the mountain or fighting the thousand armies of old fables. To take an emotion or thought, so vague and gelatinous, so slippery that one would be afraid to lose it without constant concentration, and then mold it into form, breathing life with a rhythm to musical that would render it immortal.

But even more than the alchemy of making it permanent, it was the puzzle that Khusrow enjoyed. The shifting and arrangement of pieces, like a perfect set of teeth, the ridges and contours of top and bottom locking into each other as the jaws come shut; biting down and then chewing, savoring, and swallowing the words. The satisfaction of completion. And for many months till now, it had evaded him entirely.

Nowadays he would wake late in the morning, body drenched in sweat and filled in a daze. Delhi would already be in a commotion outside his home. A stale breakfast would and routine words with his wife would begin the day, after which he would be fetched to the palace. He used to walk over himself, crossing through the busy streets, taking a shortcut through the bazaar, and arriving at the gate, proudly announcing his arrival. Gradually however, he came into such good graces with the court that the Sultan considered Amir one of the royal household, and spared no luxury for him. Carriages were now waiting promptly, fetching him without delay.

The Sultan enjoyed a poem with his morning tea. He always saw it as a nice coda after the morning prayer, and a stimulation the rest of the day. Then later, he would ask for it during the evening, after dinner. It would bring pleasant dreams, he said.

At the same time, the Sultan had also developed a thirst for other things, namely the territories to the west. In his short time on the throne he had brought the entire Delhi kingdom under his rule by killing his uncle and placing his head on a pike. Now, he wanted to expand his power out to the sea. As the war campaigns went on, an messengers returned with dispatched of victories over bloody battlefields, Khusrow would be asked to follow up with his saccarine words.

After awhile Khusrow would not have a couplet or a poem prepared. He would get by sometimes be reciting something old and tired that he hadn't yet recited for the Sultan. When he tried to improvise, the syllables screech and tear against each other, and the rhythm would topple like a galloping horse that had lost footing and fell to the ground. Soon he was called out for not being, as his liege put it, "calling the hummingbirds in my head." but slowly began repeating himself.

Khusrow parted the curtain of the palanquin and peeked through. Farmers were still tending to their fields and crops, and women walked along the roadsides, carrying large clay pots above their heads. Their ankle bracelets gave tune to their walk. Their saris were rustic and plain, lacking the vibrancy or jewels that the courtesans in Delhi paraded in. Yet, there was still some color, some floral design that would attract Khusrow's eye and bring to mind a few words he entertained to write down. But as the palanquin came parallel he could see the line of women drift further to the side of the

road, and finally until they were walking in the ditch. As he passed, they turned their heads and peered back through the curtain with faces of disdain and unwantedness.

Khusrow shut the curtain, startled. He had never been looked at this way. It was the look that royals give to their servants, the way the Hindus look at untouchables, the way man looks at a mongrel dog. Khusrow twisted his mustache and caressed his beard. In his hand, the composition pages crackled. They had become limp from the humidity few days past, and now dry and stiff from the trip across the desert, and yellow, the color of unwashed teeth and bodily secretions. It was a defamation of the great words that I've written upon them, Khusrow thought. He heard again the ankle bracelets of the women with the gourds, and remembered a passage he had recorded recently into his book:

The creaking chain of Manjun is the orchestra of lovers.

To appreciate its music is quite beyond the ears of the wise.

Not his own, he reflected despondently. Another phrase intended for inspiration but instead borrowed, hacked. He'd tried writing his own opus of the old Leyli and Majnun tale, without success. Such simplicity in Nizami's words, such apparent connection between idea and metaphor. His whole life Khusrow had spent in pursuit of recording the acts and emotions of love and friendship, longing and embrace, in ways that would make the hearts of his patrons flutter. His couplets, first commissioned by local nawaabs and sardars quickly gained attention in town squares and among noble circles. Very soon, he found himself in the court of the Sultan Khilji.

The Sultan was particularly fond of ghazals. He enjoyed the short, terse phrases drawn out through eloquent song and rhythm. What Khusrow wrote would be given to

the courtesan, an enchanting girl named Sunita, and brought to life by her voice, deep but melodious like nightingales. As simple couplets, Khusrow felt his words were merely stones skipping across a pond. They would leave ripples in the water, marking a pathway, but eventually they would stop skipping, and the ripples would disappear.

But with music, he thought. With music the words are no more pebbles, but feathers. They fly into the air and soar. They dance in the sky and give chase to the birds and insects, and even as they begin to return to the ground, only the slightest breeze will carry them up again. With music his words seemed carry beyond the ears of the Sultan and the halls of the court.

It was the music that made him want to come to Somnath.

Ahead in the distance, the rubble formalized. In the middle he saw a monumental dome, burning and charred, still standing with weathered grandeur. Amidst the rubble, Khusrow noticed a rising spire of smoke lift up to the sky. It was ashen gray, certainly from a burning fire. Above, the smoke met with the wispy midday clouds and mingled with them, dissipating and becoming a singular haze that shadowed down on the royal party and brought an early dusk over their heads.

Khusrow could feel an ominous presence in the wind, at once he felt unwelcome and chastened to the land he and his horse stood on. The Hindus worshipped the elements as if it was another God. They saw God in all living creatures, from bird to serpent, from rat to mosquito. The species spoke to one another in some uniform language of worship and piety. Many times Khusrow felt he was given privy to this secret language, for he could sense something as well. There was a musicality in nature, how leaves rustled in

the wind, how sand scratched against the skin, and he felt it now as the wind enveloped him and seemed to beckon.

The bearers set the palanquin down, and Khusrow felt the ground thud up against his bottom. As he stepped out, the bearers had already begun to unload his few belongings off of the lone horse; writing materials, paper, clothes, and a few rations. Khusrow did not know how long he would stay. They'd told him there would still be wares of the priests, if he ran out, and if there were any left.

Khusrow started toward the rubble, but the bearers stopped him. He must take off his sandals, they said. To remain respectful. Khusrow pointed out the temple was desecrated. Even still, they commanded. He took off his sandals, and little by little, he edged toward the rubble. The sand burned under his feet. He looked back at the bearers, who told him it was part of the trial of a true devotee. As Amir continued, each step became feat of will and the fortitude of his skin. But if it is how the Hindus experience this temple's power, he thought, then it must be the way.

*

The shattered and torn pieces of the temple were everywhere. There was almost a chaotic beauty to the way the bricks and statues had been scattered around. Stone mistresses lay in the dirt face first, their feet sticking out in the air; mighty pillars broken into sections; the head of a lion had gone missing while the rest of its body still stood proud at the gateway, beaming down on Khusrow even without eyes.

What was left of the sandstone walls was crumbling bit by bit with every moment that passed, withering away like a sleeping giant whose beard has grown grey and tangled.

A few feet in front of the great stairs that lead up and inside, there was a freestanding gate – two erect pillars reaching out for the sky, capped down by a heavy awning. Voluptuous sculptures of goddesses and harems climbed up and down the pillars, tired bodies still erotic and curvaceous despite the erosion of time.

At the top of the gate rested the watchful face of a demon that had the mane of a lion and the teeth of a serpent. Blank stone eyes peered down at Khusrow and belittled his presence against the great stone relic.

He stood there, peering past the gate and demon to the marble steps that lead to the entrance of the temple, but he could only see an abyss, hollow and pitch black despite the beating sun shining above. The architecture was commendable here, he thought, with more dancing women, now joined by the armies and kings ages past on horseback, the lotus petals and archaic script. At the top of the dome, a torn flag laid against the jutting apex, with not even the strongest breezes forcing it to waft up as it had probably once done.

Looking closely, Khusrow noted a high level of craftsmanship in the stone. The faces were so round, so organic. He felt endeared to each one of the faces; even the carvings of soldiers and malevolent rulers seemed to invite him as a friend. The women looked angelic and fertile.

Khusrow thought of it like walking through a graveyard. Except there were no ghosts, no lost souls. There was simply the temperance of God. Khusrow wondered if the Hindu God would bring misfortune on him for being from the same court that destroyed this holy site. Maybe even right now, upon entering the rubble, a feeble rock may

crumble from the top of the dome and topple down, smashing his body into pieces that would add to the mess on the cliff.

As he moved closer to the origin of the smoke, Khusrow heard a voice, and the crackle of embers from a pyre. A man mumbling, he thought, what sounded like prayer. The chanting was low and soft, almost deafened by the fire. Khusrow tried to find its source, walking around the dome. He was flanking the wall of the dome's base, and carved into the stone across it was a great epic chronicled through figures and images.

Yes, it was there, he saw. The king charging mightily towards his enemies, everyman behind him, ready to take blade to body for his highness. Flames engulf the warriors, horses cry in agony, and a woman enters the battlefield, her caring maternal hands softening the pain of death; and finally the great king himself is laid to rest on a stone slab, carried by eight men on either side to what was most likely his funeral pyre. And then the story began again on the next wall of the temple, with variants bringing chariots, winged demon creatures, and Gods entering the mise-en-scene. And somehow, he knew, this was what the real battle must have been like that ended in such destruction. He began to feel nausea.

Behind the temple, under its large cast shadow, was the cliff overlooking the ocean. It was the legendary feature of the temple, its place at the edge of the country.

The crashes and tumbles of the waves below disturbed what Khusrow otherwise considered a serene and beautiful view. The setting sun's last golden rays sneaked and curved around the side of the temple to glaze over the beach and provide the last bits of light, while off in the distance, the water was taken into darkness.

Khusrow clasped the golden belt across his chest, and with a focused tug ripped it from his being. He held it in both of his open palms, the heavy-set ruby on the centerpiece weighing it out of his hold, and he let it slip, bit by bit, outstretching his hands over the rocks so it plunged into the water, and so it did.

“Do you know what lies at the other side of the sea?”

Khusrow slowly turned to meet the source of the voice, and found a small wiry man nestling himself against the pillars of the temple’s back threshold. He wore a white loin cloth, and nothing else, his skin milky white with a slight blush of red around the extremities, and he was completely bald save for a lock of amber-brown hair that grew from the top of his scalp, and tipped over down the back of his head.

The Priest resettled his draping loin over his shoulder and approached Khusrow, who replied, “I don’t know, what does lie?”

The small man was indifferently picking at a marigold, in fact ripping each orange petal one by one and tossing it at his feet. Amir stood in place, not sure whether to approach him.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?”

“I didn’t say I knew,” the man said. “I was simply asking you.”

He began humming a tune, and after a few bars it became a whistle. Amir recognized it as some kind of devotional song. He must be the last priest of the temple. The Priest’s lips were a carnation pink, almost like a woman’s. By the time he had

finished singing the song, the marigold had become barren, and he tossed the bud without direction into the sand.

*

It was deep into the night when Amar entered the small coffee shop, swept in by the parade of drunken souls, into the crowded space that was filled with the noisy murmurs of those slowly becoming more and more sober. He looked around for Erfan, but could not find him. Late as usual, as expected, even though they'd agreed on meeting here over an hour ago, and he was coming from a club just down the block. Amar walked to the back of the shop, where a couple was getting up, and claimed the table.

Even with the suffocating atmosphere of the high patronage and the muggy night, he was still able to breathe a sigh of bliss, having just come from one of his best events in his short career as a disc jockey. It was a wedding, and had taken place just down the street in the city's trendiest neighborhood, where the posh five-star hotels rubbed necks with popular nightlife spots. It made it easy and efficient for wedding parties to ditch the neutered family environment and take the party to after-hours.

Amar however, to his satisfaction, had prevented that from happening. When his time was up and he was at last song, at the proper hour of ten o'clock, he'd announced on his microphone,

“And finally we've come to the last song.”

And was met with a riot of “boos” and “nos.”

The notion of bars had since dissipated, the party environment had taken hold here already. Most of the older guests or those with children had left, leaving only younger, serious dancers on the floor. He was surprised, knowing that after the day-long ceremony and festivities they were probably tired of the Bollywood fairytale melodies, and wanted nothing more to leave and get a change of pace. Amar pulled out his “club stash,” as he thought of it – a modest collection of dance and house mixes, starting with Indian and then following the stream of bass backbeat into Western music.

Within the first two songs the screams and chants from the floor were drowning out the sound on his speakers. He had them pumped so high he couldn’t afford to go more and risk them overheating. Gradually, as he looked up to the floor, the patrons of his wares, he assumed it would be mostly empty save for the last few stragglers. Instead, it was still packed. Individuals were indiscernible. He caught eyes staring at him through the pitch black, highlighter from the roving disco lights he’d hoisted above his turntables. Looks of approval, of acclaim, and of, he felt bashful to think, endearment?

In the recess of the coffee shop, Amar leaned back on his chair. He fingered the business card he had sitting in his jacket pocket, and set it on the table, staring. It was his own, separated from its brothers inside his wallet, singled out for its inscription on the blank side: a name, and a number. He held it gingerly between his thumb and middle finger, trying to feel the ridges of the pen marks, and decipher her name through touch. *Kiran*. In his mind he tried to picture her, without much to work on. It had only been glimpses, and near the end when she came up close, it was in complete darkness. She looked as most Indian girls did. Wide eyes, and maybe a round yet slim nose. With a

drink in one hand, she's taken his arm with her other, and pulled him close to his face to speak over the blasting music.

"You are really good," she said, half drunkenly.

"Thanks," he replied.

"I think you won tonight."

"What did I win?" he asked, innocently as he could, though he could guess what she meant. He felt her fingers smoothly trail up and down his arm. And she told him her name, and a number, and then wrote it down on one of his business cards to show that she was serious.

"Don't forget," she said, sliding her arm out from under his, lingering across his palm, as she sauntered back to the dance floor, almost tripping off of the stage. She had on a tight black dress that wrapped around her legs, pinning them together from the knees up. Amar looked at the card, and at her name. Kiran, who apparently really liked his mixing. And he saw the current song that was imbuing the moment was about to end, and only with a few seconds to spare did he manage to cue the next one and transition over.

But Kiran had not been the only one tonight. Many came close to the "booth," as he'd began to think of it, propping up on high heels or bare toes, looking up and asking for their favorite songs. Even a guy begged that if Amar played Madonna he could get laid, and pointed out his girlfriend. Another said that she had a choreographed dance ready for "Dola Re Dola." Others simply whined or grumbled. During each of these negotiations of playability, Amar kept a neutral smile, his mind occupied in his work,

confined in the mix and only tangentially aware of people around him. The images of these pretty women flashed in his mind like a slideshow. At least for Kiran he had a name, and the memory of her touch. The rest were innocuous, without as personality, differentiated only by the requests he would forget soon after the event was over.

Erfan still had not arrived. Amar thought about getting a coffee or tea, and then debated it, lest he get back up and lose the precious seat. *Always me that has to deal with this*, he thought. The waiting. For now he could not keep still. Vigor ran through his nerves, and underneath the table his legs were in a constant jitter – up and down, up and down. He must have looked entirely intoxicated to those around him, even though he'd had nothing to drink, or eat, all night. The coffee shop was littered with a mostly hipster crowd, fresh from spending their nights in the adjoining and nearby bars, drinking cheap beer and discussing faux culture politics or making ill-composed sexual puns.

Amar thought he saw the barista at the counter give him a dirty look, psychically trying to tell him to buy a drink or move on out. Whether she did or not, he stared back at her. Short, finely cut auburn hair, and almond eyes veiled behind thin-rimmed glasses. It was the look of a mouse, in one way cute but in this demeanor unattractive. Her head turned back in his direction and he averted his gaze, looking again around the room.

At one table, a crowd of six or seven had all huddled around, all in torn pleated pants and checkered shirts, discussing what they had just been doing and chuckling along to it, like the laugh-track to a comedy roadshow. They were all piling over each other, brushing arms and overlapping shoulders, some beginning to pass out in alcoholic stupor, others tired, and the one who wasn't advocated to take the party going at his living room.

Amar took out his phone and tried to call Erfan. No answer. He resolved taking the risk and got up from the table, and headed to the counter. The girl stood with her hips leant against the large industrial espresso machine, sipping out of a mug and reading a paperback. Amar stood for moments until she noticed him and came up to the register. She feigned a look of service friendliness and asked, Can I help you?

Amar looked up at the chalkboard menu and tried to make a decision, and he gave a smiling look to the girl as if to say, Just a minute. But before he settled on anything, there was a buzz in his pocket. He took out his phone and saw Erfan's name lighting up the screen. He was several blocks farther down the street, at Three Kings Hookah.

He got up and left, back in the direction of the hotel that he had just torn apart with bass and dhol, he entertained the possibility of calling Kiran. He pondered if the girl was serious. It wasn't really possible. So many events, so many parties and weddings that he'd stood behind turntables, flipping back and forth from vinyl to CD to laptop and back, and most times at the end he was lucky to get a a new potential client rather than this kind of proposition. What angle did this girl see him in?

Around him, pairs of men and women dragged themselves into taxis and cars, up side streets towards their apartments and houses, no doubt engaging in the same tryst that between strangers that he was debating. As he got closer to the hotel, he wondered if she might even be out on street, still looking for a last drink at closing time. He scanned the windows of the bars he passed, most getting ready to close in an hour or so, and trying to spot any brown-skinned girls in tight black dresses. But by then he had arrived in front of his destination.

*

The hallway of the third floor on the east wing of the Ahmedabad municipal building was entirely empty, save for one cleaning man who was mopping the floor at the far end from where Jayant was sitting. He had an appointment with the Head Litigator of Estate Affairs. Today was Jayant's first day as the junior attorney. The cleaning man was humming some old melody as he washed the floor with a wet rag and a bucket of soapy water. Jayant heard the buzz of numerous fans from the offices surrounding him, with the occasional splash of water. Beyond that, everything was still and silent. There was still half an hour until he was due to arrive and his destination was only twenty yards away.

From this one bench, the hallway seemed to stretch on forever to Jayant. The bright sunlight was pouring in through the windows at both ends, and also spilled from the cracked doors of the offices, engulfing him in a golden brown haze, and his sense of depth evaded him. The cleaning man now stopped humming and sang his tune with an arbitrary sequence of "ahs" and "ohs." He didn't seem to take notice of Jayant.

Somewhere down the hall a large stack of papers fell. It was followed by a sharp curse, and then the creak of a chair. Jayant wondered whether it was from the man getting up or sitting back down. The chair creaked again, followed by a sign of exasperation.

Drops of water tickled his feet, and Jayant saw the cleaning man on the floor beside the bench, wiping away. "Pardon, sahib," he said and went on singing. Still twenty minutes to go. Jayant got up from the bench, and without warning his head was overcome with a strong dizziness. He lost his balance and accidentally kicked the other man, who didn't say anything, and went on wiping. Jayant shut his eyes for a moment and shook his

head, and then rested it against the wall. A heaviness took over his brain and he began dozing away into a lazy half sleep. In the back of his mind he still heard the cleaning man whistling at the end of the hall, but it faded out. Jayant sat back down and tried to compose himself.

He began wondering what he was doing here, what series of choices had brought him to walk into this courthouse on this damned hot day. Father had wanted him to take over the family's farm in Somnath. No, of course not, he thought. I was never going to toil in the sun all day. Jayant instead spent his maturing years seeking careers that would take him to the big city.

But in the summer it was hot either way, inside or out, and he began weighing the advantage of being shirtless in the fields or stuck in a black robe in a stuffy courtroom. He had worked hard in school, to pass his exams and make good relations with his professors. He had taken a semester in London, and even sat on cases in the Magistrate's Court. He asked himself, *did you even enjoy it in the first place?*

Between his days apprenticing at the High Court of Justice and studying for practical exams, he had taken walks through St. James' Park and seen couples out on picnic and on benches. They all looked unwed, a jarring sensation for Jayant, who was set to marry an unknown, parentally-chosen girl upon his return to India. Men worked in order to be with a woman, buying expensive gifts and caressing her hands and reciting lovely Byron. One time an elderly man sat next to him on the park bench and said "They're trying so hard to get up those skirts you wonder who is wooing whom?" Jayant had taken offense at this. He enjoyed reading the poetry of Hafiz and Tagore, and

believed in true love. He was about to argue the man's comments, but then remembered his light-wheat skin and his place in this country, and got up and left the park.

Upon returning to India his parents ambushed him with a plethora of marriage proposals from girls across various towns with wealthy dowries. Their families heard of the law student returned from England (no problem they were trying to rid the country's rule of India) who had bright futures ahead of him in the magistrate, who would enforce property rights and tax laws, who would argue when untouchables walk into reputable businesses. He would surely become a judge of the district by his thirties, and provide a worthy household for any wife and four lovely young daughters. Jayant had always expected and assumed this would be his fate once he had finished college, but his time in Britain let him experience courting proper, he'd made several excuses to stave off the pageantry of marriage.

Right now all he knew was the last place he wanted to be was in this infernal building.

What would this be like? Beyond his parents' overjoy, his town's celebration, and the commendable letters from his mentors, he knew that he was in the long line of work. The papers everyday threatened to throw the country upside down into a political and social upheaval. Different groups seemed to be forming everyday, waxing didactic against the English, beyond the reason of the national Congress. Jayant, as a civil servant, trained in English law, was entrenched in a system that was already toward demise. The uncertain future troubled him. Did he even have a future? His blood ran cold at the thought, simultaneously stirring him out of his daze and providing relief against the sweat.

Then he opened his eyes the world seemed upright again. The cleaning man was still not yet to the other end of the hall.

“Do you know where I can get a glass of water?” Jayant asked. The man kept singing. Jayant cleared his throat loudly, and in reply, the cleaner sang louder.

Never mind then, he resolved. He started walking down the hallway towards office 21A. As he got closer, he noticed that the door was almost shut, cracked only about an inch or so. Jayant took the last few paces very quietly, and then stood outside with a soft, controlled breath. He angled himself with the crack and peeked inside.

A man sat at the desk with a cloth covering the top half of his face, panting against the heat and fanning himself with court papers. His wig sat on his table, the fine white hairs spiraling out of their neat comb.

Jayant backed away from the crack and looked at his watch. He was still early by twelve minutes. He wondered if younger lawyers were required to wear the hideous wig. He had seen it in England. Perhaps maybe the rules are different for India, in this damned heat. They can't expect everyone to wear them. Indian men look silly with white hair, tucked away in a braid, with a black ribbon. Everyone knows it's fake hair, so why do they keep it? His first motion in court after gaining some prominence will be to abolish the practice of wigs.

He didn't bother to look at his watch again, and instead repositioned himself squarely in front of the door, and tapped on it three times. Inside, his soon-to-be superior rustled.

The door opened, and the man stood there silently with half-open, disinterested eyes. He had put his wig on hastily, and it sat crooked to the right of a head that was too small for it. In fact, he was smaller altogether than he had seemed sitting behind the desk – a good foot or so shorter than Jayant, with a unibrow and thin lips that pursed around his mouth even though it was now gapingly open.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Mister Bharatlal Dinkarbhai Prasad?”

“B.D. Prasad,” he spat, correcting him, and stuck a hand through the door.

“Sir, my name is Jayantilal Baxi. I am supposed to start apprenticeship under you today.”

B.D. Prasad reached his head out of the doorway and looked up and down the hall, looking as if he wanted to make sure no one had seen him. “Get inside,” he whispered, and ushered Jayant into the office.

Inside the humidity had built up from the lack of ventilation, and immediately weighted Jayant down into the rocking seat.

“Hey, get back up,” B.D. barked from behind, “I didn’t tell you to sit.”

Jayant got on his feet, and held his briefcase straight at to his side. B.D. reclined back into his chair and looked at him silently chewing on moist air. He picked up a few sheets of typewritten paper and fanned himself. Jayant saw the damp stains of sweaty fingers on it, the illegible ink smearing across the page.

“So, what do you want to do?”

Jayant cleared his throat and said, “I want to represent my fellow Indian citizens to make sure they get a fair – “

“*Na, na, bhaisahb*. Right now, what do you want to do? Have you eaten? You want some tea?”

“I’m fine, thank you. I came because I thought the case was starting at two o’clock, and I was told to come here – “

“Who?” B.D.’s eyes became inquisitive. His chair creaked as he sat on its edge. “Who told you?”

“No one. It was written on my letter of summons. Here, let me show you.”

“Oh.” B.D. leaned back, and the chair creaked again. “No, no, let it go, they always say things like that. It doesn’t matter, anyway. I’m not going to court today. Sit down will you, it’s bloody hot.”

They sat without a word for a few moments. Prasad continued fanning himself, Jayant trying to keep his tongue moist with few drops of saliva, should he be asked more questions. This was an interview, was it not?

A fly began buzzing around the room. B.D. Prasad’s eyes began following it, from the window to the bookshelf to the framed civil oath on the wall. Finally, it landed on the desk. He slowly rolled the paper, and with a quick *whack* brought it down on the insect. For a quick moment his eyes softened with some satisfaction and glee, and then went back to their indifference. He looked up at Jayant.

Jayant wasn't sure how to react. This man must have a reason for not going to court. He must know what he's doing. He has been in this profession for years.

"Yes, it's too hot. Forget the courthouse, it's on the other side of town. We're not going all the way over there. Here, sit down. Are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Well, if I could get a glass of water."

B.D. Prasad went to the window and put his face against the bars, yelling down below for two glasses of water. He sat back down, and the two men shared silence until a boy came to the door with a pitcher and steel cups. Jayant offered to pour both, and forced himself to wait until Prasad sipped first. But the man sat, unflinching, staring off at the ceiling as if he was deciding how to classify the shade of white that painted the wall.

"Are you married? Kids?"

"Yes, as a matter-of-fact my wife is pregnant right now."

"Good!" Prasad said. "Wife and kids is the sign of a good, stable man. I like having stable men in the office, more productive. They hang around here more often in order to escape their families."

Jayant forced a laugh to appease his new boss. It came out awkwardly. After a moment, Prasad tapped his chair and once again said, "Good!" and room the fell silent again.

"So, you will keep the judge waiting?" Jayant asked.

“No, he will probably leave as soon as he realizes I am not there,” he said as he took off his wig. “Actually, he may not come himself.”

B.D. poured a glass and slurped it down. Jayant filled one for himself, and strained himself to take patient gulps.

“So, Mister.”

“Baxi”

“Baxibhai, you can just go home, or we can sit here and chat, drink, and then go home.”

Jayant put his briefcase on the floor and poured himself another glass of water.

B.D.’s lightened for the first time since he came in. “Wonderful. Now tell me why you want to be a lawyer.”

Chapter 2

Three Kings stuck among the classy edifices of the neighborhood, with its blaring Arabic music and the bright neon palm tree that lit up behind the sign, proclaiming itself a “Middle Eastern Café.” Amar walked under it and into the smoke-filled café, which was quickly becoming as hurried and packed as where he had just been. The lights were dimmed, with a few of the purple UV black light rods hanging in corners in order to illuminate smoke and bright colored clothing. At first, it had all been playful features of Three Kings, and amused him and his friends well enough. Now, it was just a distraction from the relaxation.

As he entered, an arm shot up from the back of the room, and Amar knew it was his friend by the gold chain bracelet hanging from the wrist, and saw the top of the bush of sandy brown curly hair. He made his way to the back, and he sat down across from Erfan, his lithe, almost lanky body was slumped into the low-rise bench.

“How was your thing?” one asked. “Good, yours?” the other answered.

While for Amar the wedding had in certainly a pinnacle moment for the summer, Erfan had just started DJing at a club that his uncle owned. It was quite popular, but he’d been relegated to a small side room that was meant to specialize in house and lounge music. There, the crowds built steadily in the opening hours, and eventually drained as the DJ on the main floor built up the more popular dance sets.

“I think I’m getting the hang of it,” Erfan said. “I’m going to ask Raouf if he can push me up to the main floor sometimes soon.” Raouf was in charge of operations,

another family acquaintance, A family business, Amar thought. Of course it was easier than the constant meetings and courtesy calls he had to do for private shows.

“You’ve only been there for two weeks. Give it some time.”

“Whatever, I can handle it. The guy they have right now is hopeless. He keeps playing stuff from three years ago.”

“People like it.” Amar said.

“It’s not like your weddings, though. You have to pander to the whole age range. The old people, the whiny kids, everyone.”

“So what? It’s more variety.” Though he defended his position out of pride, he knew this wasn’t true. But Amar wasn’t content to stay in his tier forever, but he took pride in what he did do. In lieu of being at a club, he made sure to simulate the experience as much as he could.

“My ass, variety. This guy on the main floor has no variety. Same set every week top to bottom. Same crap that everyone plays. At least he can make it a little interesting. I have some hot mixes, that’s all I’m saying.”

The waitress arrived to take their order, but Erfan waved her away. “We’re still waiting for someone,” he said.

“Who are we waiting for?” Amar asked, as she left.

“My sister” he said casually.

“Your sister’s here, in town?” Amar had never met Erfan’s sister before, the girl that he’d heard described as “his twin but not.” They were actually half-siblings, but same age, one year older than Amar. But for as long as he had known Erfan, she had never come into the scene, having gone to college, and now medical school, out-of-state.

“She’s on Spring break.” Erfan explained.

“First year almost over, huh? Pretty cool.”

Erfan scoffed. “She’s always been such a science dork. It was either this or engineering, but machines always confused her. She’s a total idiot when it comes to moving metal parts.” Erfan would take any opportunity, any open hole, to poke fun at someone’s shortcomings, and Amar would join him in the usual cases where they didn’t know the person, or didn’t care. But he decided not to tamper regarding her, Erfan’s own sibling, and someone he would soon meet. He stared at Erfan and tried to imagine him as a female. Undoable, he decided.

Erfan let out a stifled belch. “But I don’t think I’m going to wait any longer,” he said. “She never has any sense of time.”

Neither do you really, Amar thought to himself.

“How was your thing?” Erfan asked.

“Well it started with the usual.” Amar said.

Ultimately every wedding was the same, even Indian weddings. There was the promenade *vargodho* of the groom’s arrival, with dhol drums banging loud as that side of the family approached the wedding venue. It was usually handled by a dhol player, and he

was hence relieved of the responsibility. After the trade of garlands, the “oohs” and “aahs,” the bashful looks from the couple, the ceremony would begin, and he would put on a droning sitar instrumental to keep the audience stimulated throughout the hours-long ceremony. Many priests managed to finish the long list of chants and prayers in an hour, but he’d had it go on for up to four. Once that ended, he, and the guests, were given a midday break from festivities, to reconvene for the reception. They happened as they happened -- background music, and then open dance floor. Standard songs; recent Bollywood dance hits, remixes of older songs, and a set or two of American pop if the family was so inclined. Bhangra usually found its way in the middle of everything.

Around halfway through the dance floor portion, some musical spark had been lit on the dancefloor. A couple good mixes, ones he had practiced and was itching to try out, had fired up the entire crowd of guests – old and young. From there, he was able to carry them along, catching them in a steady current of beats and rhythm.

The bride and groom demanded he go on until midnight, and said money was no option. Dumbstruck at the offer, he reflexively declined the extra payment, and went on going. Soon they began coming up to his table, where he was cordoned off on two sides by tables. On the third, open end, people came making requests. There had been many throughout the night, but now they were asked with a feverish desperation.

“Play more bhangra! We’re Punjabis here!” One said.

“Hip-hop man, ain’t no more old people here.” Said another.

His mind totally engaged and in synch with the beats as he cued from one track to another, he tried to register all the shouts that came at him through the noise, and

delegated which would work, which would have to left to the side, and which songs by moral standards of taste he would not play. Possessed by a robotic precision, he pulled discs out as needed, and replaced them just as efficiently, avoiding the clutter he usually made. He knew for himself and them as well, if one wrong move broke the spell, the bubble of pleasure would shatter. Every mix went, as far as he knew, flawlessly, and if there had been any skips or dislodged beat matches neither he nor anyone else was aware. For that full hour, he and everyone else in the room were charged on the one universal plane, and didn't relent for even a moment.

He tried to imagine himself, and how he would have looked to someone looking on him behind the bright LED displays. He didn't consider himself particularly handsome, but he had a tendency to be expressively transparent with his emotions. As crowds cheered, he saw his eyebrows rise; when they chanted with chorus verses, he would join in. In these actions, when he would momentarily look up, and catch sparkling gazes cast at him through the darkness, he could interpret it only as one thing. And one gaze, the eyes and it's owner had been encouraged enough to write her name and slip it in his pocket.

But he didn't say anything about this to Erfan. "Total rave man, tore the bitch up," he said, summarizing the last hour as much as he could.

"Not bad," said Erfan, neither requiring nor curious. Amar soured at the lack of excitement from him. Erfan already had a taste of working a club booth, but it was brief, and neither knew how long he would stick around. Erfan was flighty, and always had his

mind on the next part of his life. For him, the present was always a segue until he could realize his dreams of the future.

“Are you liking where you’re at?” Amar asked.

“It’s all right. I mean, it’s exposure, I guess. Eventually I have to rise higher though.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it. I’m sure your uncle will promote you pretty well.”

“No, he won’t. I don’t even know how long he’ll let me stick around.”

“What?” Amar was surprised at the remark, but then conceded to himself that it wasn’t unordinary. Erfan’s family was notorious for keeping only the most strenuous sense of family bonds and relationships. For the sake of blood, he got this single favor to help boost him in the local nightlife scene. But from here, it was his burden to deliver solid four-hour sets week after week, like a racehorse.

“We’ll see,” he said. “That’s why we really have to work on making our mixtape.”

For the two young men, the long-term goal for almost the entirety of their friendship had been to release a mixtape of their own original house tracks. A fusion of musical styles and traditions from both of their backgrounds; India and Persia, already centuries linked by expanding civilizations, wars, the Silk Road. For both it had been a surprise when, as they got to know each other better, they learned how similar their lives had been, choice words they’d been taught and spoken in the home, staple foods prepared by their mothers in the kitchen – essentially the same, only a vague, strange difference in it’s spelling or pronunciation. Where *gulab*, “rose” in Hindi, became *goleh* in Farsi,

where the *pulao* became *polo* only by the addition of an extra spice, they saw the opportunity to mash together.

“That’s going to take awhile, though,” Amar said. “We spent so much on the studio. I’ve got to work a little bit to get that money back.”

“Don’t worry about it, bum. We’ll get there. Just have to keep thinking about that stadium filled with eight thousand people, all jumping and bouncing and just screaming at you to give them more.”

Releasing the hookah from his mouth, Amar looked up from his thoughts and said through a mouth full of smoke, “Do you even remember what that DJ’s name was?” But there was no answer. He was waving his hand in the air again, and his sister walked to the back.

As she sat down, He now wondered to himself if he’d ever seen her before. There was a familiarity about her looks, a sense that she’d passed through his mind several times before. She did not look very much like Erfan. Her skin was shades lighter with blushes of pink, and her features sharper, which gave her a constant inquisitive expression. In the UV-lit dimness of Three Kings, she emitted certain radiance, with silky black tufts of hair cascading over her shoulders and reflecting hues of purple.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Dalia.” She put her hand out for a shake, and Amar took it lightly, not holding it so much as letting his own fingers graze the back of her hand, and then slipping them away. He introduced himself, and fell silent as she and Erfan began talking in Farsi. With Erfan’s interrogative tone, he assumed it was about her tardiness.

“We ordered without you,” he said, switching back to English.

She disregarded the remark and began scanning the one-page menu. Amar watched her eyes, intently searching the laminated card, as if somewhere in the list among tobacco flavors and canned beverages and dry under-spiced curries, she expected to find some perfect regal dish. As she did this, her bottom lip wrangled and caved backward under her top row of teeth, and finally, having made a decision, she put the menu down. Erfan sat reserved from all activity, his mouth bracing the smoke.

“You’re on break from medical school?” Amar asked her.

She looked up and paused, as if unsure the question was for her. “Spring break,” she said. “One week is not enough from that hell.”

“Any plans?”

“Party like crazy, if I can. Erfan said he’ll try to get me and my friends into Xenos.”

“Xenos?” Amar said. With a raised eyebrow, he turned to Erfan. “You have the connect there?”

“I do. Well, not really. It’s complicated.”

“Either you know a person or you don’t. Do you?”

“Yes. Well it’s one of my uncle’s business contacts. So I don’t know him directly, but I could probably get you in. And,” he turned to Dalia, “Raouf sometimes picks up doorman duties there. If he’s there this week, then we should be able to get you in.”

She let out a sigh of relief, as if the entire matter had been a burden she'd carried for days.

“If your uncle knows people at Xenos,” Amar asked, “then why don't you try to work it into a gig?”

“I told you man, family politics. He would say it would look bad on him, if he just gave away gigs to his stupid little nephew. The man carries himself around like he's some king, the goddamn fool. You should see him sometimes. He has his own driver, and he always keeps a cigar in his suit pocket like he's going to light it up any second, even though he never does. The guy's an idiot, like he saw a gangster movie once and decided he can live like that just by running a club.”

“Hey,” Dalia interjected. “Don't talk about him like that. He's still family, right?”

“I don't know. Isn't he from your side?”

A silence befell them. Amar knew, the split-fabrication of their family was a touchy subject, how there was only one shared parent, and the other was avoided in conversation. Only mentioned as a passing fact, like reading bio-data off a government document. After so many weddings, he'd become inundated with large families, melded together from all configurations of generations and siblings, treating each other with smiles and hugs and well wishes on behalf of a bride and groom. He'd yet to come across a set of parents that had been anything worse than congenial divorce or widowed. Erfan's family instead had remained mostly alien. He'd often thought about what Erfan's wedding would be like; who would attend, who would play what roles, what faces he would see.

“Well, in that case,” Amar said, “What about me?”

“I like you, buddy, but you’re not quite family”

“No, I mean, what about asking your uncle about me. For a gig, at Xenos?” The words sputtered out from his lips, and he blamed alcohol before realizing he’d never had any.

Erfan invested himself entirely in another long puff, then said without removing the pipe from his mouth, “Sorry, buddy. But that’ll only happen if we own the place. If we act like goddamn kings with asshole cigars.”

Dalia shot him a look of scorn. “You DJ too?” she asked, turning to face Amar. “Where?”

“He does parties for little teenie-weenie kids,” Erfan said, letting go of the hookah.

Amar snatched it from him. He told Dalia about the wedding he’d just come from, elaborating on specific moments, hoping the extra detail would help to make him more credible and void Erfan’s remark. The songs and mixes, the staring eyes in the darkness, of the colors and raves and how he was convinced he had to move on from being another party vendor. As he spoke, he saw her eyes get wider, like a child hearing a bedtime story, and his narrative in turn became livelier.

He thought about mentioning Kiran and her number in his pocket to incite a reaction from Erfan, but decided against it. Instead he looked at his friend and said squarely, “I can feel it in my bones. It’s time to give it a shot. Just give me the one little leg up, like your uncle gave you.”

“It’s a Faust pact man. Besides, I’m his nephew. Your not his anything.”

“Sadly I was born into a society that still has prohibition. What kind of family connections do you expect me to get?”

Erfan looked back, and without saying, understood the challenge. “All right buddy, calm down. Don’t make such grand statements yet. We’ll see what happens. Remember the mixtape.”

That wasn’t a yes or a no, Amar knew. A standard political answer from his friend, but he couldn’t push the matter further. The café was closing down, and they were thrust the bill, given change, and belted out to join the last stragglers of the early morning, retiring off before the sun cast over the storied rooftops. As they walked parallel on the sidewalk, Amar tried to restart the conversation.

“The mixtape isn’t getting anywhere. You don’t even like any of my ideas.”

“That bhangra stuff is played out, man.”

“I like bhangra.” Dalia said.

“Do you?” Amar said.

“Oh yea. My roommate turned me on to it. Shinda, and Lembher, all those guys.”

“Wow,” Amar said.

“Wow exactly,” quipped Erfan. “Do you do the dance and everything?” As they waited for the light to change on the street corner, he mimicked the movements, bending

his knees and sticking two fingers in the air, vehemently poking towards the sky. Amar stayed silent, refusing to indulge him. Dalia let out a small chuckle.

“Well, I’m back that way,” he lied, pointing his thumb over his shoulder. The hotel garage where he’d parked since the wedding, almost eighteen hours before, was only around the block.

“Okay,” Erfan said. “You want a ride, Dalia?”

“I’ll walk it,” she said

“Okay. Bye.” Erfan said, and crossed the street, walking down the hill until his head sunk under the elevation, and Amar and Dalia were alone. He looked at her, craning her neck around. A breeze whipped through the empty street, and she hugged her bare shoulders.

“Where is your car?” He asked her.

“I don’t have one. My aunt’s apartment is only a few blocks away. I’m staying with her.”

“She lives here?” Amar now looked around as well, seeing the neighborhood almost like new. This area, which night after night erupted into a bustling entertainment district, had long since ruled itself out in his mind as a community to live.

“Yes,” she said, and smiled, delighted by his innocence. Another breeze came through and she shivered again. In the small hours, the elation from his dance floor victory had kept him running, and it still felt as if he had fuel left in his body. He offered

her his coat, and used it as an excuse to say he would walk her to her home. Instead, she said, why not walk him to his car. He pursed his lips and turned around, leading the way.

As they walked, he felt her arm slip under his. There was a scent of... what? Honeysuckle? Attar?

“Thanks. It got chilly,” she said.

“It still isn’t technically spring. Your break is kind of early.”

“I’m just so used to the warmth at school.” He asked Dalia more questions about her school, listening to her answers, uninterested in what she was actually saying, but enjoying the sound of her voice, trying keep the conversation extended as long as he could. She told him about her med school in the Caribbean. It was an accelerated program, designed to give interning experience along with classroom so she would be able to move straight into residency upon returning the states. She had to play catch up. A bad set of MCAT scores had forced her to delay it for a year. She was one year older than most of the people in her class, and even that small difference stuck out. He felt in a similar position, a college graduate making a living playing radio singles for middle schools, stuck behind a table of fruit punch.

“I think they give us this early break so we can one week of peace, and then maximum cramming time for finals. It’s all a conspiracy to make us go crazy.”

“I never really studied much. Music major.”

“Just like Erfan. Easy way out, minimal studying needed. You guys even look alike, you know.”

“No we don’t,” he said, making a face like he’d just eaten something bitter.

“You look even more alike when you make a face like that,” she said, looking up at him. He looked back at her, and unable to think of anything to say, cracked a helpless smile. He felt herself being pulled by her as she started to walk faster.

“So, are you trying to make a bhangra track?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “There’s this trend that’s popped up lately of people mashing up Punjabi vocals to hip-hop beats. It’s pretty nice if they get it right, pretty atrocious if they don’t. I showed this to Erfan as the stuff that we should try to do. How, I don’t know, but now he’s got it in his head that I want to try and make a bhangra mixtape. It’s not even the same thing.”

Amar realized they’d arrived back in front of the hotel, for the third time. They must have passed her home a few times too, if it was close. Had she noticed? Had she cared? She remarked they’d just gone in a big circle, and he suggested instead why not go down to the pier. She pulled him along, and they scrambled downhill until they hit the waterfront, the harbor tranquil, the ships at the marina terminal at the other end just barely visible.

They continued to talk about their lives, both the grand sweeps and the inconsequential frivolities, finding similarities in the constant demands, the strict schedules, and inane stupidity of those they encountered. Before long, the first beams of sunlight began to turn the sky into a pale blue tinge. Dalia yelped, saying she had to sneak home quickly before her Aunt woke up.

“You know, don’t worry about Erfan’s ideas. He’s not really the brightest person to follow around. Anyway, I should get going.”

He went to take the jacket from her shoulders, and thought to use the moment as an excuse to brush his hands across her back, the slight touch of affection. But she slipped out of the jacket without effort.

“You don’t have to force yourself on something. You know, if it doesn’t fit, then just let it go. Sometimes it’s not meant to be.”

She gave Amar a light kiss on the cheek and let go, finally, of his arm, and strode off down the block and around a corner.

He stood in the morning light, weary and tired, content and refreshed. Kiran’s words echoed: “You won tonight.” He sat down on a bench, and his legs suddenly felt the soreness that had accumulated from standing almost nonstop for an entire day. He felt he should eat something as well, but he didn’t have any appetite for food. Instead he watched as the sun continued its rise. Walkers and joggers began populating the pier. The other half of the world, of morning rushers and commuter cup sippers, the kind of people he had seen less and less of lately, were now claiming the pier as theirs.

By the time he forced his tired body off the bench, back up the hill, and to the hotel, the garage had already begun its business hours, and he was forced to pay for two more hours on top of the overnight. No problem, he thought. George, his employer, would reimburse.

Chapter 3

As Jayant had little work during his first few months on the job, he tried to fill his time the best way that he could. He would arrive at his office promptly at nine am, to find no one there when he entered besides the same cleaning man, scrapping the wet dirty rag across the floor with his calloused foot.

He would sit in his chair, admiring his new office for a little while. Gradually he would begin slumping, and as the morning became long, the day's heat grew to a stifling level, putting him slowly back to sleep, and it was not yet noon. It was in the first few days that, as his slumber began to claim his consciousness, that his office-mate Kantilal came swaggering through the door. Jayant shot straight up in his chair, snatching at a pencil, notepad, book, something to make it look like he was working. Kantilal would however, just sit down at his desk and cackle back at him.

“We are very busy, eh?”

Jayant gave a nervous chuckle.

“You must learn to relax. This is why you studied like a dog for so long, so you could have a job like this.”

“I took the job because I'm interested in cases. I want to be in the court, to argue and defend and debate.”

Kantilal bobbed his head, as if he'd just heard Jayant recite a pretty limerick.

“*Wah*. Such enthusiasm.”

“Doesn’t it interest you?” Jayant asked. “What motives people to do things, despite the law? What pushes them to do what they know is against norm?”

The response was another bobbing of the head, the universal gesture, meaning yes, and no; very good, and satisfactory; perhaps; I’ll let you know later; understood; not understood, but I acknowledge; and a plethora of other definitions, taken however the bobb-er and bobb-ee took it to be. A very handy tool for a lawyer.

“Calm, calm, Jayantbhai. I can see you have great hopes. Don’t worry, the cases will come soon. Until then, our work is only time-pass.”

After such exchanges as that, the room fell silent again for another hour until Kantilal’s large belly would begin gurgling, and once the noise grew louder and more annoying for either of them to avoid, Kantilal would suggest it was time for them to order lunch. He would yell out of the window (and he sat on the far end of the office, closer to the door than the window, which he wasn’t shy about showing is disapproval for. Jayant in turn, was forced to feel a certain guilt for this usurpation of window privilege) for the boy, in the same manner that BD Prasad had called for chai the other day, like men who kicked stray dogs who scrounged their trash. To Jayant’s surprise, the boy was also the same who had brought the chai the other day. It turned out that the boy, whose name he would never end up learning, made food and chai deliveries for the entire municipal building, scampering up and down the two floors, ever perspiring, ever panting, as lawyers and judges and secretaries and bookkeepers called back and forth as if he was some live human telephone exchange.

The menu varied day to day, but Jayant quickly learned the standard options that Kantilal preferred, and by his guilted sense of juniority, Jayant was forced to agree with. Most days they would order simple tiffin meals of roti with either curried potatoes or a spicy fry of bitter melon. Sometimes they would get just that, parathas, thick and packed with fillings of potato, fenugreek, and onion, spread with generous dollops of mango and lime pickle, rolled up and wrapped in tin foil. There were occasionally days that the tiffin arrived containing only steaming dhal and rice, sending into a fit.

“We are not bloody Southies, Jayantbhai! A meal is only good with fresh piping roti and pickle on the side.”

He told the boy to take it back, having not even tasted the dhal. Jayant could sniff the steam that traveled across the office, picking up rich helpings of jaggery and coriander. But the boy had left, and Kantilal slumped in his chair hungry and pouting.

“Well, it seems we will not eat today.”

“I don’t understand,” Jayant said, stomach growling. “Doesn’t your wife know what foods you like and don’t like?”

“Wife?” Kantilal spat laughing. Jayant knew he’d said the wrong thing. “Wife, Jayantbhai? Cooking tiffin for me? She would not dare, *Baprebap!* And if she did, surely you don’t think there would be any for you?”

Jayant was struck by the indignance, but before he could say anything, Kantilal arched forward in his chair, making a sharp *creak* as his weight shifted on the rusty hinges.

“My wife,” he said, “would not lift three fingers to tell me the time if I asked her. She would not even lift one, if only to sign that I should be patient and wait a minute before she graced me with her attention.”

“She would not make tiffin for you?”

“Once there was a time. When I was a clerk over in the filing office, we had just married, so you know how it is. She was still proper and in line, doing her wifely duties that she’d been taught. I was also taking night law classes too, at that time, so perhaps that added to my sympathies. But once I got this job, you know, it just went *phoos*.” Kantilal made a whistling sound, and wafted his hand in the air, as if he was tossing a piece of garbage behind his shoulder.

“With all the extra money we started buying more things for the house. Telephone, refrigerator, toaster oven. Hired a cook and a cleaning girl. I just bought a television, too. With each, it seemed as if all of her time and energy went into it. Now, I come home, she is talking on the phone, to God knows who, since in all these years she’s yet to ever invite any friends over for dinner, as she watches *I Love Lucy* on the television. You know, I’m pretty sure she does not understand any English behind hi-hello, but on the show you can hear the people laugh in the background, so she always cackles like a goat, one or two seconds after it comes on the TV.

“And by that, Jayantbhai, I am admitting also that when I get home, I have nothing better to do than to observe her weird behaviors.”

Jayant rocked back in his chair, unable to hold back his amusement. He felt the muscles in his mouth stretching into a gaping smile.

Kantilal leaned forward on his desk, placing both palms flat on the charred wood surface. “I know what you are thinking,” he said.

“Do you?” Jayant mumbled.

“No,” Kantilal replied. “For a year now, not even a look towards me. What’s worse, she tricked me into it. Once she asked me if I was interested in children. I said no. The next time I leaned over her in bed, she said, ‘If you don’t want kids, why are you going through all the trouble?’ Sometimes – please, this is in utter confidence – I can see the girl in the opposite flat changing. Stupid girl, she has one of those Japanese screens in her room, but she forgets about the window behind. Yes, Jayantbhai, this is the state we live in.”

Jayant was flooded with thoughts about his own wife. Would she have the same evolution? Surely this was not the life she’d imagined for herself. Once the televisions and telephones came into the house she too, was the type that would engross herself in the electric tubes and wires as if it were as natural to her living as blood in her veins. They already had children, at least that would not be replicated. But then again, when was he last time...

He could only respond to Kantilal in one way. “So, what about lunch? Go to Law Garden?”

“Are you crazy? Too hot.”

“Do you mind if I go, then?”

Kantilal bobbed his head.

As soon as Jayant shut the office door behind him, he breathed a sigh of relief. He was not very hungry at all, indeed it was quite hot, but little by little the lounging around in the torn, squeaky leather chair was becoming maddening for him.

The hall was empty in both directions. In the distance, there were echoes of the languid activity that counted for the trade-craft of this place. Mumbles of conversation, newspapers thwacking on desktops. Slurps off the rim of a glass, possibly tea, since it was followed by a sharp curse and sucking of air. This was the business of the municipal court. Time-pass indeed.

For himself, Jayant figured that if in fact he had little more to do, than he'd long had a place in mind to spend his time. The courthouse library was on the far side of the building, opposite of the offices in case Kantilal or BD Prasad or anyone else would come looking for him. Jayant would sit at the large study table, cracked and splitting wood that rocked on one leg that was longer than the others, and open up a red-bound folio. The room was stocked with legal texts, yellowed and dusty, everything from argumentation manuals to trial references, most of them landmark British cases, precedents of concepts such as marital sovereignty and feudal taxation which he knew had very little impact on the culture of his own land, and yet somehow were still used as the measure by which Indian life was molded.

Jayant however moved past the practicality of the folio and treated it instead as a fiction, something to captivate and entertain him in the same way the narratives of Hafiz and Tagore would throughout college. They took him off to lands relatively near, such as Burma, Ceylon, and Malay, and in the faraway places of County Kent, Wales, and South

Africa. Each of these would become an arena, a stage for battles between the Empire and people over taxation, tea, opium, and diamonds. Revolts for marriage rights, religious rights, merchant rights, and rights for people not Anglo-Christian.

Jayant held an ambivalent fascination with the country that had schooled him, and had been formerly his protector just few years before. The rash of the British still itched at people's backsides, and everyone was quick to scratch and complain at the soreness and redness that was left afterward. But in his mind, it remained still defined only by the jam and toast from his landlady, eternally-cast rain showers, and the mystical vagueness of that phrase, *common-law*.

And so, voraciously but quietly, Jayant made his time-pass, eating away the stale muggy afternoons parsing through folio after folio, hoping that one day reading these epics, of kings and ministers, merchants and indentures, might actually be of some use.

On the days where it was not so hot, Kantilal would feel a little less lethargic and announce that it was a day to go out for lunch, and eat at the fountains in Law Garden. They would take bhel, mix of puffed rice with fresh cut onion and tomato and doused in tamarind and mint chutneys, light and crunchy and spicy and refreshing.

They would sit on the green at Law Gardens, watching the fountain steam groundwater into the air. Children would gather around, amazed at the sight, gazing for short sweet moments before their mothers pulled them away. Jayant knew that the fountain, while perhaps a novelty in Ahmedabad, was unimpressive compared to fountains he'd seen in Trafalgar in London, and those he'd heard about sprinkled across

the rest of Europe's old romantic cities, from Paris and Florence and Prague. Wait, he thought – was it Prague? Which country was that in again? Somehow, despite learning so much about the Empire from his reading, the rest of Europe still jumbled into one homogeneous land of pale skinned, funny-accented Christians, all who seemed aloof, reserved, and carried an air too high and dissipated for him to breath. He still felt narrow-sighted when trying to comprehend the any place beyond what he'd only experienced in his own five senses. If it wasn't written out for him, his imagination failed to compliment. Other than Ahmedabad, the only place he could envisage in his brain without struggle was the cold room in the English north country, shivering fingers turned pages of his law books and wishing for hot chai off the stall.

“So,” Kantilal said through mouthfuls, “have you gotten your precious case yet?”

“No,” Jayant said. “Not quite yet.”

“And you still want it, yes? The life of fly-swatting has become to boring for you?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I'll tell you a little secret. No one in the damn place wants to do any work, myself included.”

He paused, seeing Jayant raise a brow.

“Okay, not so much of a secret. But still, we are a lazy bunch. And the key to keeping it that way is not to ignore what work we have, but not to give it out in the first place. Any claim or suit that is filed is just kept in whatever cabinet and forgotten until the poor bastard comes back. If the police haul in some thief, the poor son sits in jail until

the kick him out to make room for the next. If a woman says she's been unfairly kicked out of her flat, we write out her statement and tell her to come back with the renter. After that the paper is tucked away. Usually they will come back once to ask about it, and we shake out heads and say 'one more month.'

No one in this city has any time to come back twice. They just fuss and let it be, and soon it's all forgotten." He put stuffed another helping of bhel into his mouth.

"So you see Jayantbhai, no work will come to you unless you ask for it. If you want a case, storm into BD Prasad's office and demand he give you something. Say something dramatic, like Dev Anand. 'Sir, *give me a docket, bloody now! And make it a bloody good one, something that will make me a judge, or else with a poor case I'll have to settle for taking your job.*'"

The two men broke apart in laughter, bits of their food flying about.

"Though, think you'd be an idiot for doing so." Kantilal said.

"Why?" Jayant asked, his jovial mood returning to irritation. "I don't understand. What's the big hesitance for everyone?"

"India is a young country, Jayantbhai, and you are a young man. Both you and she are still trying to figure out how life works. To control the mindsets of so many people is not that easy. So many things to consider, and with independence still fresh on people's minds, we are all a bit selfish. If court is about compromising, then Indian courts are the exact opposite. If a case is actually tried, it's not long before both the judge and the

barristers are at each other's necks to prove they are the bigger man. All the morals are sacrificed to bureaucracy and people throwing their weight around."

Kantilal, shocked and dulled by his own fatalism, shook his own fat belly to lighten the mood.

Jayant's face remained despondent. He sat quietly for the rest of their lunch hour, pecking away at his food. Though he did not say it aloud, he kept reciting to himself a line from Hafiz, the one he would read night before exams in college: *You need to become a pen in the Sun's hand. We need for the earth to sing through our pores and eyes.*

Back then, he'd taken it quite literally, thinking of his own pen as a fiery saber etching the correct theorems and argumentations on the lined essay paper, handing it in to the professor, and singing praises of joy when he'd just made it points above the passing mark. Now, he knew that interpretation was ridiculous, but still wasn't sure why it came to his mind today, sitting at Law Gardens with his round office-mate, nor how to parse its meaning.

"Oh well," Kantilal said, getting up. "I am going back to the office. I think it's time for a nap."

"I think I'll walk around some more," Jayant said.

The two parted and headed separate directions Jayant hoped in the rare event no one would need him, though it was possible. Prasad commonly fetched him at random

moments for small favors like reaching the top shelf of his bookcase, or giving a head massage, which Jayant assumed was all part of his junior status hazing.

But there was one place that he wanted to go to, that he hadn't gotten a chance to revisit since his return to India.

Some distance from the courthouse, near the municipal square, stood the old British Cantonment. Pigeons hung on the parapets, the alcoves dark and sentient, devoid of any signs of its recent military past.

Before Jayant had left for law school overseas so many eons ago, before India had birthed itself as Mother, the square was inhabited by an entirely different community at night, one that seemed to live in the dark catacomb sewers or the cracks between buildings, in some kind of day-light slumber – until flames were put against the lanterns lining the streets, and the community that fueled Ahmedabad had taken refuge in their homes.

In their place, the show people would appear.

In the British cantonment overlooking the square, late at night after the officers had left their posts, lonely distracted sentries plagued by sleep or penchant for booze gathered in the center as it came alive with the nomads and inhabitants of the night.

One by one, all kinds of entertainments would emerge, into the spaces they had occupied every night since as far as anyone could remember, and begin their shows. There were singers, dancers, puppeteers, and magicians. They did not seem to have any permanence in the city; instead appearing like vespers from the shadows shortly after the

twilight, keeping the deviants and drunkards entertained, relieving them of ill gained money and sleepless nights. Beggars would end the day's seeking for alms and spend the few coins they had collected on tobacco or sweet paan.

Later, as the sun arose on the new day, and the intoxications wore off, the show people were nowhere to be seen. They could not be found buying vegetables at the market, reading the newspaper at the tea stall, or riding the train into Kalupur station.

These were the pseudo-legends that Jayant had heard on the law school campus, way back then, in between classes when he and his friends would sit under the trees, alleviating sweat from the heat and the lesson.

“Three beedis for a ten rupees!” said his friend Motu.

“Swill booze that gets you drunk in just a few sips!” said his friend Sanjay.

“And oh, the women!” said both.

Jayant was teased and tingled by these notions but never assumed that they would ever resort to going to these places. As newly minted lords of their own lives, they knew little about the world beyond what had been administered from their parents, limited usually to the job of father and the shopping negotiations of mother. The professors had been adamant that the classes required hard study, and the hostel supervisor kept a strict watch once the curfew hour passed.

It was during dinner at the canteen some weeks before final exams, between mouthfuls of overspiced curried potato and stale roti bread, where he again heard murmurs of the sinful rituals that took place outside the walls. Students from the higher

classes, those only months away from achieving their law or medical degrees, or certificates on sociology or Sanskrit, made no secret this was how they spent their nights.

For Jayant, it was merely the upcoming first battle in a long war of examinations. After the barrier of informative but useless class lessons, he was caught firmly in the gravitational pull of memorizing and regurgitating information in essay after essay.

“Study hard,” Professor Bihari had extolled, “that is the way of our college. Think only of passing exams and widening your brains. Our civilization has a long, rich history of judicious practices that have benefitted both the princes and the paupers. You must keep this in mind as you pass the examinations, as you try your first court case, as you make your first judicial decrees.”

Natal Bihari, perhaps as old as the grouted iron cast bars of the college’s windows, once stood before the class, brandishing his chalk like a horsewhip, and proclaimed: “In the Mughal days the kings and nawaabs were known to be kindly and temperamental. They listened to any and all who came into the court before them, landed their head to the ground, and spoke with humble words. Back then, people did not march in the streets, shout chants of political subversions and martyr themselves for pittance causes. All that was needed was a carefully crafted appeal of words. A man in master of his vocabulary was master of the law.”

Such speeches were commonplace for Bihari. Jayant and the other students overheard him making similar recitations in the teacher’s break room, ruminating on the proletariat significance of masala chai or his deserved and hopeful appointment as vice

chancellor of the college. Every student knew he wanted to be chancellor himself of course, but such words of dissent never fluttered from his tongue.

By contrast, the actual teacher of Dialectics, Sarwan Punjab Singh, was a former ascetic who renounced his holy ways after losing a duel to his love for sweetmeats. Although he was now clean-shaven, the spindly wiry hairs, twisted from years of wearing top knots and unwashed beards, were still obvious on hurried days. Singh could not help but make any lesson into a prophetic statement about the cosmic nature of the world, and law simply as a tool to try and bring order in a crowded, wayward society. He would slip into that calm, cocksure tone that these holy men adopted when speaking to crowds under peepal trees, but Jayant couldn't help but feel that Singh had not been very good at doing that either.

Walking now, around the municipal square, formerly cantonment square, he realized what a joke they had all been. He could remember almost nothing about those. He remembered a night in his room, late and left in peace to himself, he had slammed an open palm onto his textbook, that insufferable being that stared back at him with taunt and ridicule. It was hard to read by the light of his small cotton wick, soaked in butter and oil to give a greater flame.

In front of him, excerpts from the *Manusmṛti*, ancient Hindu text that carried the laws for civilization bygone. Jayant's eyes rolled at the list of rules that dictated how to act in society and how to repent for crimes committed, throughout the social classes and castes. In his imminently new and progressive India, he wondered how he was supposed to carry these ideals as a civil servant. The text had been assigned for his History of Law

class, Bihari's class, confined only to the subcontinent and some minor dabbling in Hammurabi. And like that latter text, this too was an endless catalogue of musings some old bearded rishi must have had millennia ago:

No. 50: Drinking, dice, women, and hunting, these four (which have been enumerated) in succession, he must know to be the most pernicious in the set that springs from love of pleasure.

Jayant closed the book and lay back on his bed. While pious and patriotic rhetoric had escaped materializing for him when his parents only complained about the price of okra and the laziness of the servant boy. Between their values, morals of God, and demands of his teachers, his mind was sent spinning often.

This is when three beedis or swill booze would be useful, he thought. He had never smoked before, and only once before snuck hasty sips of his father's whiskey.

Instead, he pulled out a box from under his bed – stale, unwrapped paratha from his mother; an old paperback by Premchand he had never finished; a grainy and faded daguerreotype of his grandfather, fabled to be the first ever taken in Ahmedabad; a pocketwatch he had once taken that had fallen from the belt of a White officer – and stacked against the side of the box, two phonographs.

One was the Jai Mata prayer that lasted well over 40 minutes of a tired old man reciting *Hai Ma Jai Ma Jai Jai Ma*, the voice ripe but shaken and unstable on the long notes. The other a recorded speech of Gandhi, titled "The Justification of God."

As always, he chose Jai Mata prayer. He always seemed to need it. Wear and tear on both the disc and the phonograph scrubbed away at the sound, keeping it at a low pitch. Jayant reached under his bed again and pulled out a small *dholak* drum. The one he had begged his father to buy from the market, at its great expense, and had promised to practice, and never did. However, in these solemn sleepless nights, he would sit cross-legged on his bed and make quiet, insignificant attempts.

Nestling the drum in his lap, its two circular faces looking out over his knees, he listened intently to the *dhin-dha-dha* of the tabla from the craning mouth of the phonograph, and tried to reproduce it through the tips of his fingers, striking the smooth hide surfaces.

Dhin-dha-dha.

Dhin-dha-dha.

Dhin-dha-dhin

–!!!

And as usual, the slip-up sent his fingers limp, and he put the dholak away as quickly as he had taken it out. The record he let play out in its entirety, assuming the tired old man's prayer as his own.

Hai ma. Jai Ma. Please help me pass this exam.

He smacked his lips and imagined a beedi in between them, and what the smoke must taste like. Must be something to it, he imagined, otherwise why would the

handsome American movie actor constantly keep one in his mouth; as he took the woman in his arms and dug his face into her neckline, the smoke lingering on their tongues?

What would he himself do, if there were a woman here? Could he even bear to touch her? Do they scream or shout, or reciprocate each affection with soft pecks on the cheek like birds grasping at sweet berries? There weren't any women in the college, only the Chancellor's secretary, rotund old Ms. Bhabha, and Chancellor's wife, who walked around classrooms ordering servants to dust and clean them as if it were her own house. She carried herself with an air of regality, leading most students and professors to assume she had once been beautiful. Rich family, Jayant thought. Old heraldry that had sustained through the ages and kept them fat and live through sweeps of history.

Such rambling thoughts passed through his mind, as they did most nights, as he slowly drifted into sleep, his lamp still burning away in the muggy, stale room.

The exam was finished, and Jayant and his friends – Sanjay, Tussar, and Motu – shirking curfews and parent's insistence to abide by them, walked into the cantonment square and took in the sounds and sights; the drums and flutes of untalented musicians, the ornate floral patterns of the courtesan's saris.

The few leftover coins they had been given for food and textbooks would be spent on the most inebriating drink they could find – usually a few glasses of bhang, but tonight they had enough to put together and buy a cheap bottle of whisky. They took it to the side of the Sabarmati River and finished off as much as they could, discussing Natal Bihari's forest of ear hairs, and making conjectures about the deviant things Mr. and Mrs. Chancellor did in private life. They discussed what law they would specialize in or how

much dowry they would be offered for marriage, how many children they planned to have in the future, how many boys and how many girls, and in which order. Once this line of conversation had lead to Tussar revealing his parents meant to marry him off to his cousin as soon as he finished his degree, and he admitted cluelessness at what to do on the wedding night. The others had very little to say. None had ever held lasting affection for any woman, aside from the curiosity to see naked breasts at the courtesan's alley.

The whisky soon emptied, and Tussar and Motu passed out. Jayant felt Sanjay tug his arm, telling him to get up so they could go to the square. In a daze, he got up with help, and stumbled behind Sanjay, rambling in slur, "Drinking, dice, women...pernicious love of pleasure..."

A crowd had gathered for a show. British officers, daring themselves unafraid of the carnal arts, would always take up the front. Sometimes they would bring their wives or other courted White maidens, seat them on folding wooden chairs. and laugh as they shuddered and asked if they were going to be robbed by a bandit in the dark alleyways.

Sanjay was always angered by how they took the front row view. They would come early and stand in front, and at their considerably larger size than most Indian men, would usually block the view of anyone behind. Once they had seen a young Sikh try to push his way to the front, and a soldier brought his horsewhip down onto his face, and with one lash the creed had been established.

Instead, Sanjay pointed to the stair leading up to the cantonment's parapet, and noted the soldier meant to stand there had digressed into the show crowd.

“Come on,” said Sanjay, and tugged at Jayant’s arm.

Jayant disagreed. “Don’t risk it.”

The words of his teachers throbbed at his brain. Disembodied Bihari spoke to him: “Fraternizing with the enemy, what would Gandhi say? How would Sardar Patel feel, if he saw you with whiskey bottle?”

He looked at the crowd, gathered at the south wall, on which the opposite side Jayant knew stood the prison cells of thieves, murderers, and disobedient sepoys.

A flute rang up from behind this sea of mongrels, and they became louder and more excited. Tabla came alive in staccato beats, like firecrackers exploding inside a clay pot.

Dhak-dhin-dhin-dhak-dhin-dhin-dhak-dhin-dhin-dhadak-dha-dhadak-dha.

The crowd hoo-ed and whistled. There was arbitrary clapping from one person or the other, and some chuckles of glee. Jayant looked at their backs; day laborers, their unwashed hair and dirt-sodden clothes rubbing against each other.

“*Arey wah,*” They said. “She is something.” Jayant pushed his way through, sneaking under the larger men and climbing over the shorter ones. He bumped into a British officer and said “excuse me,” but he wasn’t allowed past and shoved to the back. At this, the others began to shove him as well, and he receded back to the outside.

Sanjay stood at the foot of the stair, his eyes large and glancing upward. Jayant met him and they raced up the flight. Crouched behind the stone railing, peering down, the watched:

She was a Nautch dancer. Jayant saw the look on her audience's faces, filled with the relish and savor of sweet chutney. Her sari was wide with many folds, compressing it around firm thighs like an accordion, intricate with cross-hatching of golden threads and small colored jewelry beads. Her deep black locks, pulled back into braids. Her tiny figure was dwarfed against the grand wall. Her face was away from the audience, and so viewable to Jayant, and with a soft strum of the sitar her right foot began tapping, and then her left. A tabla once again joined in symphony and her arms lashed out with the fury of the goddess Mata Durga.

Suddenly she whipped around, and the music resounded with fire and intensity. Ankle bracelets jingled and became part of the melody. Her arms swayed from left to right, inviting each man into her performance, and they swooned towards them. Her eyes scanned the group, and made winks at the officers. She smiled and looked up, and saw Jayant hovering above.

He watched her from his parapet, from this cold corner in the back where, the throng of peddlers and merchants and soldiers and beggars melted away; he suddenly seemed to be the only soul in existence. He told himself it was all part of the dance, to look in his direction. But then he was not supposed to be above there.

Her body twisted like a coiling cobra and she gracefully trot back and forth across the stage, still looking at him, her eyes reaching across the darkness. Each blink, each clash of her eyelashes seemed to evaporate from her face and waft into the air, floating over the bazaar, above the stalls and rotting vegetables, past the cart of marigolds and incense, until it dropped down and kissed Jayant on his cheek.

The tabla beat grew in pace and she moved faster. Each step was taken with precision and exactness, and her story continued through tact gestures of her hands – some religious history, an epic battle or the tutelage of a swami, worlds colliding and relationships torn.

Meanwhile, Sanjay had climbed atop the railing and was now walking along the precipice, directly over the crowd. He positioned himself on the ledge, and looked down not at the nautch girl, but two officers sitting in chairs. Jayant moved toward the head of the stair, waiting.

“Hey, duffer! Come on, come down!” Jayant said.

“*Chup!*” Sanjay hissed. *Quiet.* He attempted to put his finger on top his lips but instead poked his left eye, and swore. With that, he loosened the buttons on his pants and let them drop. Jayant averted his eyes, but he heard the steady stream pour between Sanjay’s legs, and heard the shrieks of a white lady, the bellows of her man partner, and then the *clack* of his boots as he ran around to the stair. Jayant heard the boots pass him, speaking “nigger bastard,” and make their way up to Sanjay, who laughed like an ass as his bare parts hung in sight for the crowd below.

The tabla stopped.

Jayant opened his eyes in time to see Sanjay dragged down the stair by a burly man with a mustache. Another man, bald and with more even more girth, stood at the bottom, grabbed Sanjay and held him back. He was beaten with five good, hard swings from a wooden baton.

The crowd turned their attention from the nautch girl toward the corner in front of the stair. The *dhak-dhin* exchanged for *thwack*, as the baton came down hard into his stomach, and he fell to the ground, and rolled on his back. Another *thwack* came hard onto his knee, and the pain was so sharp and great he could not muster a sound to show it.

The British men, satisfied, left him on the ground and took their companions away. Jayant closed his eyes intensely and re-opened them, trying to figure out if what he had just seen was a whisky-induced hallucination. Sanjay looked up at him, clutching his stomach.

The crowd had averted their attention back to the Nautch dance. The music had begun again. Sanjay, who lay still and clutching his stomach, was chuckling to himself, still in the stupor. The moment of terror had passed without any affection. This was the new India they were meant to usher in, Jayant thought, as the moors of brotherhood slip and drip through the night along with the puffs of tobacco smoke.

He looked back at the girl, who was completely amidst the rhythm again. He tried to decipher her, calculating the impact and suggestive nature of each dance movement, how it was in harmony with the music. With each however, he only saw the beauty and soul possible in some other world, in his past or future, with the heavens and stars all revolving around this Goddess.

A strong hand landed on his shoulder and took him out of his thoughts, back from law school, back from writhing Sanjay, back from the freedom of consequence. Jayant turned around to see a *hijra*, a eunuch, in a gaudy purple and red sari that was draped over his head to hide his mustache and terribly applied eye makeup. “Where are you

going?" he asked in Gujarati falsetto. Jayant got up from the bench he was sitting on and headed back.

Chapter 4

The next day Amar went to George Dos to return the equipment. George was the first person he'd met upon deciding to start to DJ, the only one he'd talked to and the only one who'd made him an offer.

Their working relationship started when Amar came across George at a baby shower for Sooni mutual family friend they'd both grown up with. He approached him out of necessity and circumstance, not because he wanted to work, but rather because both he and George were the only ones in their generation there. The baby shower was in the rental hall of the Hindu temple, grey stucco walls decorated with tacky ribbons and decal lettering that said *Congratulations!*

In the corner of the room, to a boy, younger than either of them, with wide frightened eyes, standing behind a six-foot table, upon which sat an outdated pair of decks and a small mixer. When Amar had heard that the expectant mother had hired a DJ for the baby shower, he'd gone quipping to every person at the party he knew, "Who has a DJ at a baby shower?" and no one had had an answer. Eventually as he made his way throughout the rental hall, he came face to face with George George. The recognition was immediate, as it was always been for each other. Neither had ever spoken much beyond nods and expressions of "Hi, I know you."

Amar was one or two years younger than Sooni, but George was older than her, enough that they'd never been in the same school together even though they lived on the same street. Amar's family would be called to dinners, Diwali celebrations, Christmas parties, and always the chubby Guyanese boy would be there, out of place. Amar recalled, finding Sooni attractive when he became a teenager, having the assumption that she and

George were a couple, and having a fit of jealousy after seeing them talk intimately at some holiday party. He gave up the crush soon after, and just took it as a stupid assumption of puberty.

By now, he had little communication with Sooni. Amar went to the party because he'd had no other reason to -- Erfan had his own family party to attend. Why George was there he wasn't sure, but it was not surprising. He'd known George to be a "good boy," the kind who didn't abandon family activities and the tiresome Indian social life simply because he'd gone to college and moved away from home. George had always been sober, soft spoken, and level headed, despite making a living out of a business that was anything but, and even worse in the elder's eyes, didn't require a graduate degree.

His mother always complained about Guyanese Indians, whose families had made the same cross-world journey as her generations back, but since were only a hop across the Caribbean from America. "You know they eat roti and stuff too," she said, "but really they are so different. Closer to Black people or Spanish." Amar had always been fascinated as a child by George's accent, the way "ohs" always turned into "ays," and that had been enough to keep George imprinted in his Amar's brain throughout the rest of their childhoods. Amar's mother chalked it up as one of the very many differences between Caribbean Indians and normal Indians. This only made Amar more rebellious, and all the more inclined to approach him. After a long back and forth nods and expressions, that grew into small conversation, he finally asked if George was looking to hire a DJ for his company.

"You know how to DJ?" George Dos asked.

“I know the basic technique.”

“Where have you DJ’d?”

At first, Amar was not going to give a false answer. He wasn’t bashful about admitting he’d never spun anywhere actually. But in that moment, hearing the word “where” come out of George’s pouty mouth, which was a part of his head, on top of which stuck a mane of molding gel with hair, Amar suddenly caught a vision in his mind: George at the decks, in a dark and nebulous booth, drowning in liquor and cheers of fandom. Well, he told himself, Erfan was going to hook him up. No harm in turning the clock forward a little

“Mostly house parties up until now, but I just played a couple gigs at this club downtown. My friend hooked me up.”

“Oh wow! Damn, you’re young too. Good for you, man. You know, I was young too when I got out there, still barely out of high school...”

Smug, Amar thought. *I know. We might not be friends but I’ve known who you are this whole time.*

“...it was fun and all, but you know, money’s not so hot.”

“Well, money’s not really the concern right now,” Amar said. “I do it for the pure enjoyment.”

George kept on without making notice of hearing him. “That’s why I’m taking more gigs for private events. You know, weddings and birthdays. Like this guy over here.”

After the cold buffet lunch served from aluminum trays, the DJ began an open dance floor. It felt awkward to hear the Bollywood party hits in a full-lit temple hall. Amar noticed the closest family members of the mother-to-be constantly approach the DJ, telling him to change the volume, change songs, cut the sound, hand the microphone; all immediate demands, like the flip of a switch. The effect of it on the music was like listening to a radio that wasn't getting full signal, cutting on and off.

“Okay,” George said. “Not really a good example, I guess.”

“Not really,” Amar replied. “At least now I know never to do an Indian baby shower.” He looked at the DJ, a young kid, younger than him, flustered at the bombardment of requests. Amar would later think back to him, wound up in the same situation at baby showers or engagement parties or backyard birthdays. He would sense the rage the kid must have felt, having his job dictated to him by someone else. From such a vulnerable and preyed vantage point, he began to fancy the thought of being barricaded by a glass booth and two large bouncers.

Amar now sat outside George's office, a small closet in the back of a large corporate office space smaller than some apartments. The faded pastel burgundy walls gave the impression that it might have been housed a quainter business before, perhaps a realtor or private law firm. But George had come and installed shelves and consoles to turn it into a hybrid studio and business establishment. Next to fax machines and copiers sat audio-ophile treasures, arranged across shelves and set up for live demo.

All around him, small symbols of George's past, of his own past at the company, leered at him. He knew that directly behind him was the framed artwork of George's first

mixtape, the only thing he had ever produced and managed to get out on the market. The market of course, was “the street,” which moreover was just the euphemism the meant brown college kids who talked to other brown college kids. Amar had been in sophomore year, the same year he’d met Erfan, when he’d first passed the kids standing outside the dorm buildings, with a box of CDs at their feet. “Yo free music! Free music! Hot shit man, it’s gonna be big!” At the time, they’d all made it seem like it was the advance promo of a new indie artist, someone who was going to play small gigs and then blow up big in the next year. *But you could get it first while no one knows about it and it’s still cool.* The entire campus had bought into it, Amar included, with the convincing cover art of George leaning against a brick wall in an empty alleyway, donning leather jacket and sunglasses, hair oiled back. The title was illustrated against the brick wall, the overwrought, over-punned *The Holy Trini-ty: Life, Love, and George*. As expected, the lyrics were about nothing but, even rarely about George himself, and instead focused on the normal hip-hop motifs of cheap alcohol, cheap women, and expensive merchandise. Amar had been one of the listeners who’d been disappointed by this, a minority of which otherwise included only Erfan.

Outside the office door, Amar heard George inside finalize a deal on another wedding. According to George, that’s where the real money was. “No matter how old you get, Indian people are always getting married, having three hundred, four hundred guests. Bars just want some kid who can scratch for cheap. Once you’re too busted, they spit you out.” Shortly after that baby shower, after George had agreed to take him on and train him, was precisely when he decided to move the company away from booking bar and club gigs and instead taking private parties.

Amar saw it as a step down, but stuck with it. He knew the pay was indeed better, and the prestige and class with a family wedding trumped sweaty drunken crowds. He accompanied George on a few weddings, and even got to mix a set once in awhile, the standard “Amitabh set” he began to call it – *Kajra Re*, *Shava Shava*, and a remix of *Khaike Paan Banaraswala* – after the film star who danced and lip-synched to those songs on screen. On days off, he begged George to let him take a couple decks and speakers home to practice on, and as late nights wore on, hunched over his kitchen table, the only place in the house with enough space for the huge record players, he honed his beat mixing. Before he knew it, he was at his first baby shower.

With business declining for the past several months, George had been trying harder and harder to undercut prices on wedding deals in order to get the work. What Amar had made on his first job for the company, a sweet sixteen, was now what he’d just made on last night’s wedding. Inside, he could hear his employer trying to cut a deal with whoever was on the other end of the line, a diva mother-on-law, an overworked dad, a corporate intern – anyone who had money to throw at musical entertainment, and had settled on electronic gadgets and whirring records. The almost sterile, technological nature of the work, Amar thought. He was, ultimately, a technician.

He heard the phone settle back into its cradle, and George called for him to come into the office. Amar walked in to small space, enclosed by paste-white walls in an awkward, trapezoidal shape. The office space had been the lower-end lease of a small business building, and George had taken a storage closet as his office. A large shelf had been fixed at waist height as a desk, cluttered with manila files, full of paperwork. An outdated calendar hung, next to some of the photos and posters of George from when he

used to play the clubs. His stage name had been George Dos, because his Christian name and surname were the same. The first time Amar saw him, at the Jungle Bar, he did not immediately recognize him. It was only after seeing one of the many postcard sized flyers on the floor, strewn about along with its countless brothers, that he saw the name, and realized who it was.

*

“So,” George said, slapping his hand down on a pile of contracts and forms, “how did last night go?”

“Pretty good,” Amar replied.

“Good.”

“Yep.” Somehow the need to elaborate the momentous elation he’d felt the night before seemed unnecessary now. George wasn’t going to be impressed by it, anyway. His name was still tossed around in some of the Caribbean dance hall bars, between sips of sky juice and rum.

“Good. So listen, this guy I was just talking to – his daughter’s graduation. Big deal, grandparents flying in from India and all that. He’s supposed to be a big doctor or something out in the ‘burbs. The party is at his house, one of those big mansions. He said his backyard was half an acre, with a pool and everything. Next Saturday, can you do it?”

“Not really.” and Amar stopped himself, and brought his arm around his head and began scratching it.

“Busy?” George said.

“I think I’m done with this.”

George sighed. “Sometimes we have to do the annoying kiddie party. Don’t have the marquee events every weekend.”

“No, I mean this, the whole deal,” Amar said, waving his hand around the office. “I think I’m going to try and break into the club scene.”

George didn’t immediately say anything. In matters of business, he was even-handed and tranquil, always waiting for the final word to be spoken before opening his own mouth. Right now, Amar knew that he would have to explicate further before he would get a response from his employer, and the uneasy quietness made him anxious.

“Well, you see, what I was wondering that is...do you still have your contacts at the Jungle?”

“Yes, I do. I’m still tight with everyone there.”

“So, you think you could put in a word for me?”

“Right,” George said, and leaned back in his chair, suddenly filling the entire space of the small office. “Is this supposed to be a permanent thing, or temporary?”

“I don’t know,” Amar said. “I just feel a need to do this.”

“A ‘need,’ Amar? This isn’t religion, man. It’s a business, and a cutthroat one. You can break in, get a couple gigs, but how long can you hold it? They’re always waiting for the next young kid to come along, who’ll do the same job for cheaper. Music is music, you know, no matter who plays it. And you’re at the same place, over and over

again. Same crowds, same lights. After awhile your sets become the same, almost robotic. And then they kick you out.”

Amar considered the words. He’d considered it the night before, with Kiran in his arms, and later, with Dalia’s hand in his.

“Why are you already trying to discourage me before I’ve even done anything? At least let me play the game first, then you can have your speech.”

“I was there, Amar. I was having it good. But you can’t do it forever. People change, things change. I knew my time was up. That’s why I tried to break into recording. When that didn’t work out, I started this company. And look how good it’s going.”

“Don’t bullshit here, George,” he said, sucking in a hard breath, “we both know it’s not going good. Anyway, I don’t care about the money. I want to do it to say I did. To see if I can. I just need somewhere to break in, so I’m asking you.

“What put the idea in your head, then?”

Amar paused before answering. He’d wanted to come in and begin describing the night before, about all of the requests, about the mixes, and even about the girl. But now with George before him, looking back hard, it all fell away. It was unnerving to deal with him in this role, again the good Indian boy, the model that all parents had wanted their kids to fulfill.

When he was behind the tables, George seemed to slipped into a new persona. Each flicker of light seemed to reflect off of the revolving disco ball and find its way to him, creating a luster around his hunched, hulking shoulders, wide arm movements

accentuating his large frame as he scratched in and out from one song to the next. It was the same as the stage star in Ibiza. The same aura, a taste of which Amar finally got to lick and savour the night before.

“Come on, George. I thought you would understand. You remember what it was like, how much fun. You and Éclair, remember? All the sets, the drinking, the beats.”

“You’re making a big mistake,” George Dos said, agitated. “I can really use you here. You have a future here, not there.”

“Look, just because you didn’t make it doesn’t mean I don’t have a shot.”

George slammed his meaty hand onto the table with a great thud. He suddenly became enraged and got to his feet.

“Who the fuck are you, mister big man?! You’re just going to dump me like this? You wouldn’t know anything about this business if I didn’t help you. Hell, you still don’t really know anything. Your mixes are barely competent, you can barely recall songs half the time.”

The comment stung. Amar never considered himself top-flight at his craft, but to have it thrown into his face by the one person he looked up to was crushing, especially when he got playful haranguing from Erfan every day.

“George, I..I’m not trying to dump you. I just thought you would support me. Hell, I even thought maybe if I got the gig then I could get you in, maybe play a couple sets with me.”

“So now *you* would give me a gig? Thank you, sir. Don’t you think I could get back in the game if there was a point? That time is past, okay? Long gone! It doesn’t do you any good, okay boy? Now there’s no choice here. Either you stay or you go.”

Amar now stood up too. “I guess that’s my cue then. But I bet you though, my name will be all over the place in no time.”

“Children make bets,” George said. “Guys like us only gamble.”

*

Ten minutes later, Amar emerged from of the office building, the sun hitting his face as he emerged from the tinted glass edifice. He immediately squinted his eyes and stood in front of the building, unsure of what to do now.

At once, it felt as if he’d been freed from shackles he’d never been conscious of before, and now that they were off, his wrists felt insecure, unused to the exposure. They felt naked and open, potential to hurt. He looked up and down the street. It was the middle of the day, and he was in the business district. Nameless bodies in iron-pressed suits and slacks and ties filtered from their offices for the lunch hour. Some hopped into taxis, and shouted their desired destinations, but remained in place as the taxis were halted in the traffic. Horns beeped, and drivers yelled at the people walking past them, through the red lights, through the oncoming cars. He felt an energy around him, strange, unfamiliar, just as he could intuit the reception of a song by the crowd. The vibe that their reaction created, but this was hurried, rushed, inorganic.

Amar's eyes began to hurt in the sun. Across the street from the building was a small park, where some of the office workers had taken their lunch, shaded under the tree canopies sitting on benches or the stone ledge around the fountain. He leaned under a tree, and breeze fluttered against his face, reliving him a little of his anxiety, and also shaking loose some of the blooming flowers from the tree. Tiny rose-colored petals came down, and he caught some in his hand. It reminded him of a line in his grandfather's old ghazal, *how the spring buds explode, and with it the life of every new year.*

He smelled the petal. It smelled like all flowers, nice, ultimately indistinct. He scoffed at himself, wondering why he was acting like some old romantic, like a Bollywood movie hero who'd just been smitten with the leading lady. Within seconds, he would have to burst into song and dance. Amar thought about all of the ludicrous sequences he had seen – rainy jungles, Swiss mountaintops, Pacific Islands – where supposedly romance was supposed to happen. Those scenes that were squeezed and forced out of context into the movie, small bubbles of passion and romance, insulted from the confusing, hectic plot.

As he thought of himself in those environments, he suddenly envisaged Dalia his companion, his partner, his songstress and lover. Her intrusion into the fantasy was unexpected, but yet, comforting.

He took out his phone and called Erfan. He could hear Dalia in the background, teasing him about something, to which Erfan would respond with his own retorts, and after a few halts in the conversation, Amar finally told him that he just quit his job.

“Good job, I never thought you had the balls,” his friend said on the other line.
“Now come over, please. Dalia is here and she is driving me freaking crazy.”

Dalia’s voice screamed in the background. It sounded like she said *Hi Amar* but he wasn’t sure. Her voice pleased him either way.

“I feel celebrating and blowing the money that I’m not making anymore. Not yet, at least.”

“Yeah, we’ll see dreamer. Just come and help me with this insanity.”

Amar said he would be there soon, hung up, and began walking.

Dreamer? Was Erfan reading his mind, knowing he was fantasizing about his sister?

It didn’t matter, Amar told himself. He didn’t watch Indian movies much anymore, and only kept apprised of the titles to keep up to date on the popular music. With every movie came at least five to ten new songs, all of which sounded the same to him, and any one of which could be demanded at an Indian party.

It was good, he thought, that he wouldn’t have to deal with that anymore. He could sample songs as he needed them. Take time to listen to each and see if it was worth to play. Would it play, in a club? Indian music had made a mild appearance in the mainstream scene, with the emergence of Punjabi MC. Beyond that, it was fair game. What would it be like, if he slipped one in, synched it up to some Euro trance? It was an idea to discuss with Erfan, for sure, for their mixtape...

He stopped himself from thinking too far. No reason to get too ambitious. He still hadn't gotten a gig anywhere. At this point it was all experimental, no reason to expect any of it to come to fruition. He smelled the flower petals again, but as he brought his hand up, the breeze blew again, and sent them out of his palm into the bustling street.

*

Erfan kept an apartment in the city, that came with the exorbitant rent and the high upkeep and maintenance fees. His philosophy was that one had to be in the middle of 'the scene' if one was to be part of 'the scene.' Amar could never afford something like this from the pay he made with George Dos, but Amar worked for his uncle, doing odd-end jobs and errands. Amar was still suspicious at whether that would give him enough for money, but he didn't ask. It was all part of the mystique of Erfan. But nevertheless, it had become his second home, a refuge in the urban chaos during the day, and a base of operations for the work they did at night.

The knob twisted open, and Erfan started talking before the door was entirely ajar. "Come in, she's been buggng me all morning saying to do something."

Amar followed him from the small foyer of the apartment, straight past the living room and kitchen, and to the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Both had pitched in money and converted one of the bedrooms in the small apartment into a makeshift studio, and there, sitting and swiveling around on a desk chair, was Dalia.

She said hello, and Amar felt himself say hello back, but he didn't hear it. He wasn't sure what else to say. *Should I ask her about the other night?* He thought. What

was that night? It was nothing. A stroll, a chat. Among friends. As we are now, hanging out, among friends.

She puffed air from her cheeks to part her black strands away from her face. She wore only sweatpants and a hoodie that had the name of her medical school, looking dazily around the room, clearly bored. Amar found it adoring. She got up and went up the main system, propped up on a large shelf they had nailed into the wall, and began toying around with the buttons.

“Can you guys actually make music here?” She asked. “Like, actually make a real song?”

Amar nodded, and Erfan said an emphatically annoyed “Of course!”

No self-respecting record producer would ever be able to cut a track on this equipment, not even capture a decent vocal performance, but it was solid and had enough to get by. It was modestly set up with only the streamlined necessary equipment: the standard decks-and-mixer system, a few monitor speakers, a 16-channel soundboard, and a microphone.

“Dude, all this stuff is pretty expensive,” Dalia said. “Damn Erfan, Uncle must pay you good if you can afford this much.”

“I paid for half,” Amar added. She looked at him demurely, as if to say *good for you*, that his contribution was really only in service to Erfan’s success.

“Show me how it works,” She said. “Play something.”

“I already showed you, that one time.” Erfan said.

“All you did was put a CD on and played it. I have my old boombox for that. Show me how it mixes and everything.”

“See?” Erfan said, turning to Amar. “Morning already and this terrorist is making demands on me.” He crumpled into the swivel chair she’s just gotten out of, resigning himself.

“Do you know how to work it?” Dalia asked. Amar took a moment before realizing she was asking him. What kinds of questions were these? They had talked so much already, she should know that he could. Had that night completely erased?

He hesitated and moment, and when it looked as if the machinery would lose her interest, he walked over behind the turntables, and reached behind her. It was a tight fit, and she tried to move pat him, out of his way. Their bodies brushed, and he caught a sweet scent of attar. *Even this early in the morning*, he thought.

Stacks upon stacks of music sat on bookshelves behind her. It was a mish-mash of any thing they could get their hands on, and in all forms – vinyl, cassette tape, CD. Though most of their music was in digital form now, they saw no reason not to have physical copies of older things, artifacts swiped from the drawers and dusty boxes, from family, friends, and garage sales, free promo discs handed out on the street, of no apparent use and yet novelties as relics. They sat dormant, in case ever needed.

“Umm, what do you want to hear?” he asked her.

“Just something to chill out to. Pretend that this is one of those classy lounges.”

Amar had always thought of the studio as a meditation chamber, a tank that he could lock himself with, and submerge into a place of peace and comfort. Countless times Erfan would toy around on the decks, constantly throwing random songs together to try and mix beats. While he would bounce around, Amar would sit in front of the speakers, eyes closed, and body still. He would let the sound waves pulsate from the heavy subwoofer, like a gust of wind, through his body, and alter his state of mind, as if they were organic material, able to affect him.

Before him, behind Erfan, he would look at the stacks and stacks of music, trying to absorb their melodies and lyrics by osmosis. Based on however he was feeling, Amar's mind would think of a different disc or tape in the catalog. If excited he would ask Erfan to update him on the latest techo, Van Buuren and Benassi. When he anxious he would think of the older jazz, Sam Cooke.

He found an old vinyl of "Under the Boardwalk," one he'd gotten from a garage sale from a house on his street. It was old and beaten, and the spastic spit of the sound made it known. Still, Cooke's gravely flighty voice emanated well, and Amar felt himself slide into that solemnity that he used the studio for so many times.

"Err," Dalia said, "Maybe something a little newer."

Amar watched her grate her bottom lip against her teeth, so the top row furnished her smirk. It was cute. "Do something Indian," she said. "Show me the stuff you would play at a wedding."

So she did remember, he thought.

“Oh god,” Erfan groaned. “Here comes the bhangra.”

“Don’t worry, you’re a lucky bastard.” Amar said. “I don’t have my Desi music on me.” He saw disappointment wash over Dalia’s face.

He looked at Erfan, who looked at Dalia and sighed. “That old box is still there,” he said.

Amar he dug around on one of the bottom shelves behind the decks and brought the box out. In those moments when he wanted nostalgia, he found the box of his parent’s old music. Old Bollywood songs, ones he’d thought slow and berating, the high pitches and sad lyrics pounding at the core of his head as if it was trying to induce listeners to suicide. There were also the peppy tunes, old party classics that were remixed to current flavors.

Amar chose a disc he knew was scratched, from multiple cross-country road trips in the car stereo. A male singer echoed, *Hey Dola Re Dola*...at least it was newer, he thought. The song, from an expensive and successful movie, had been performed to nausea at weddings and celebrations by the daughters of the family, whether or not they could actually dance. It went on for years before dying out, and Amar cringed when someone when someone wanted to dance to it again at one of his.

Dola Dil Dola Man Dola Re Dola. Swing, my heart swings, my soul swings. And on and on it went.

Dalia’s eyes perked up. “I know this one!” She exclaimed. She curtailed the narrow space, brushing again past Amar and edging around the in front of the speakers.

As the song continued, and the table drummed sped their *tub-tub-tub-tub-tub* pace, she spun and swayed with the music, improvising a dance. Amar watched, a spectator, as she moved with grace and precision, even in the baggy clothes. She spun hard enough that the hood flew up and over her face, causing her to stop and break in laughter.

“Nice job,” he said, clapping. “You’re a good dancer.”

“I used to do a lot when I was little. Not anymore. No time for those things.”

“Yeah,” Erfan said. “She performed at all the Persian events. Even did all that ballet and gymnastics.”

“No more time,” she said, puffing her hair clear once again. “The real world came calling. I wish I could though.” She began her routine again, though this time without the music, it was an uncoordinated prance. Her hands became wild, almost histrionic, and nearly hit Erfan in the face.

“See what I’ve been dealing with all morning with this retard?” He asked Amar.

“Well let’s do something then, you lazy ass!”

She went to give him a playful slap, as he sat in the chair, but he swiveled out of the way and she swung too hard, falling into his lap. He in turn gave her a few light slaps on her cheek, as both kept laughing without reason.

Amar was struck by their playful animosity toward each other, like a married couple who’d forgotten to consider divorce.

When they’d calmed, Erfan asked, “All right then, what do you want to do?”

They both looked at Amar for an answer.

“How about Jungle?” he said.

It was in a part of town that the mainstream crowd rarely hung out in, one that he was not familiar with at all at the time. It was the kind of neighborhood with steel gratings across the windows of businesses, with chicken-and-halibut takeouts every block. It was the kind that Amar’s mother cringed at, and considered a kind of nether region of society, a purgatory on Earth.

“Why there?” Erfan said, earlier that day. “Besides, it’s Thursday. The place is going to be totally dead.”

“Thursday is the best day, man. It’s Chutney Night.”

As a dance genre, as a party jam, it was a novelty. Later he would learn very little of what he heard that night was reggae, but in fact the wide spectrum of Caribbean styles; dance hall, soca, and of course, chutney – the Indian fusion.

“I’m not feeling it. Besides, I have to do something for my uncle. More slave work.”

“What slave work?” Amar asked.

“Duties, man. Duties. Don’t worry about it, I don’t want to go anyway.”

“What happened to my celebration?” Amar asked.

“You came over, we celebrated.”

“So you can’t come with us?” Dalia said. She said *us*, Amar thought. It was assumed *they* were already going either way.

“I don’t even want to. It sounds like some trashy place with cigarette butts and plastic cups.”

“Is it really like that?” Dalia asked

“What’s wrong with that?” Amar asked. “Be adventurous.”

Her eyes wandered long and hard, searching for an answer. He thought that she was trying, and hurdling, over creating an excuse to get out of it. The mellowed atmosphere of the room has seemingly wisped away, and left in its wake an uneasiness, like a ship constantly tilting back and forth.

“Honestly,” he said, “you could come in those sweatpants and they wouldn’t care.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s for me.”

“Oh god, please just go!” Erfan said. “Take her away from here man, otherwise she’ll just nag at me all day.”

“Fine, fine, your lordship. I’ll change into something a little more presentable.” She walked out of the studio, slapping him hard across the forehead as she passed him.

“Now?” Amar asked. It was still sunlight out.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Erfan said. “She’s going to need *all* of that time.”

Amar felt the reverie of sensations from the night before build up inside him. The way her hair rose and fell in the breeze, the way her mouth widened and pouted through the conversations. Her amiability, her inviting presence. Her excitement of the music, her support of his ideas. The arm slung through his, the scent of, what was it? Attar? A scent that had permeated his whole life, familiar and comforting. Something his mother wore, or his grandmother even. It was the smell of boring holiday house parties and wedding festivities. Tastes and smells came to him, the same rainbow-sherbet and Sprite punch, the snack trays of junk munchies.

While they waited, Amar continued to rummage through the box, and continuing his journey of mementoes. Flipping through the discs, he relived years where songs became cults to themselves, imitated, praised, performed, and parodied, over and over. Once something hit big, it stuck around and never left. Before the *Dola Re Dolas*, at some point he didn't mind hearing the same thing over and over again. Now music streamed through a revolving door, in and out, in and out.

The oldest record in the box was his grandfather's, an old vinyl still covered in its original yellow paper cover, torn at the corners but still clearly labeled: *Sangam*. He'd never figured out what it was, the store it was purchased from, the label that made it? Under it was lettering in Urdu, which he also couldn't read.

Amar slowly slipped the paper cover off, and held it, anked in his hands. He placed the disc gently on the turntable, careful not to let it crumble, aiming the center hole perfectly over the peg, and settling it down. He put the needle on with an even steadier hand, lining it up into the least coarse groove he could see in the disc, and then

hit the play button. Right away, the meditative mood of the room was restored, and he felt everything melt away – the machines, the walls, the chairs, the music.

Most of the original label had been stripped away, and what remained was still almost illegible, the cheap ink having faded and drained. All that remained was the beginning of the title, “L-A-I” in a bubbly Arabic typeface, and “M-A” on the other side of the needle eye. Erfan called it the *Lame EP*.

Song lyrics song lyrics

Amar knew all of the songs by heart, but his tender and loose association with Hindi still kept the meanings of the lyrics cryptic. He frightened at the idea of asking anyone he knew; anyone in his family would make fun of him, and of his age, he barely knew any fluent Hindi speakers at all.

By the time he'd finished looking through every last artifact in the box, Erfan had left for his work, and Dalia had yet to emerge from getting ready in the bedroom.

He walked over to Erfan's bedroom, the only other room in the apartment. The door was slightly open, and as he went to knock on it, his fingers tingled at the thought of seeing her in some compromised fashion.

But the room was empty, only the ceiling fan whirring slowly and the pungent smell of several colognes and perfumes in the air. He tried to sniff out the attar, but couldn't place it. He called out for her, in case she was somewhere else. He looked in the kitchen and the bathroom, and beyond that there was nowhere in the apartment for her to be.

Had she left at some point, like a ghost, without even saying goodbye? He didn't have a way of contacting her. All he could do was go to Jungle and hope.

Chapter 5

Khusrow discovered in himself the intense desire to prod the Priest for details on his inner thoughts. The man strode around the temple with his puritanical air, aloof of the materialisms of those he considered beneath him. He was untroubled by passion.

For meals, he assured that he dieted on rice and a small helping of the coconut, both the water and pulp, although Khusrow never witnessed him eat. He never spoke of any philosophies that did not emerge straight from the ancient texts, nor did he ever comment on the weather. He did not whistle or hum. The various sculptures of great-chested dancers who braced against the temple walls, while arousing they were to Khusrow, did not beckon even a small look from him. Khusrow almost gasped aloud when he thought to himself if the man hadn't emasculated himself.

Khusrow was perplexed that a man of God, who blindly devotes his livelihood into unseen forces, should go about his day without any convictions about the world his lord had created. He went so far as to spend a night crafting a small poem about God and the wonderful bounties that he created – from the celestial bodies to the marvels of small animals and beautiful flowers. When Khusrow recited this to the Priest he feedback was the “lord” referred to Allah, and therefore meant nothing to him.

“It doesn't matter what being the God is,” Khusrow said. “I was trying to capture the awe of how immense and glorious natural creatures are. Don't you see that?”

“I can see it perfectly. Why does writing it down make it different?”

“You have your Hindu scriptures. Prayers, rituals, hymns, all written down.”

“It is to help memorize the prayer, and to teach the future generations of devotees,” the Priest said. “I do not stare at the page for hours on end and then marvel at how the words have been arranged. Such activity is a waste of time. It is only there to learn.”

Khusrow stormed off at the remark. In the city he had been able to gain listeners of all castes, religions and partitions to come and hear his poetry. Did they only come because he was the court scribe, and the king’s reach extended as far as the commoner’s choice of leisure activities? He shuddered at the thought.

There were so many evenings, he would sit in the open area in front of the cantonment and unroll a parchment of writings. The anxiety he felt as he unknowingly picked one from the collection, and without pause or preface, would begin reciting it. There was an art to the way one is able to select a piece without meditation and can project it to the audience in the way that it needed to.

Their eyes would light up, trained on him, at his lips, but in fact they could see clearly what the lines described; the ladies of radiance, the trees bearing juicy fruit, the amber dusk. He caught them in their enchantment, and from this he had made his name and fortune.

Now who was this Priest to say it was meaningless? Khusrow walked past the domineering ceilings of the temple, his feet fleetingly pressed against the cool marble floor, and came out the other side back into the fiery sand. He walked off to rumbled gate, and stood before it looking out into the vast desert that lay before him.

In the horizon, he wondered which direction was the way back home. He looked up at the sun, but could not remember from which side it had risen in the morning. The

longer he spent here, more and more time blurred and become a figment to him. Sweat dripped from his temples and his mouth parched for water. He felt restless and scratched himself.

Chapter 6

On any day, weekend or otherwise, the Jungle Room was a reliable source of fun for Amar. It was a place of several significances for him, least of all which was that this was where he had first seen George Dos perform, and it was the one place he liked that he'd convince Erfan to come to. Since they'd been in college, it had always been Erfan whose choice and taste dictated their nightspots, and though he shot down any of Amar's ideas, this one had relented. For a while, at least, before he caught his huge house bug and eschewed pallor for any other type of music, least of all the type the played at Jungle.

Jungle was an out-and-out dancehall, situated between a small pizza takeout and a store whose wares Amar had no idea of since he'd always come after it had closed for the day.

A crowd had formed outside. There was always a crowd, as Jungle charged no cover fee. Amar huddled around with the rest. He couldn't see Dalia amongst the bodies, and wondered if he should wait for her.

But from inside, staccato rattling Caribbean drums vibrated in his own body, and the street, the pidgin echoes of Shabba Ranks, Ini Kamooze, Daddy Freddy, Vybz Kartel, and Marley (Bob and sons), rang out into the street, enticing all to come inside.

The massive huddle began pushing forward, and Amar was caught in it, squeezed against others until he finally made it through the bottleneck and was inside. Well, he was in now. He supposed Dalia wouldn't be delighted to deal with that in order to get in. He imagined her calling him, ordering him to meet her on the sidewalk and then they would go to a place of her choosing.

It was a humorous idea, but Amar scolded himself for thinking she'd already written off the Jungle before walking in. Although, he admitted to himself, anyone she knew, or any Persian for that matter didn't own it. He thought of the standard image he'd long held about Persians nightlife cartels. He thought of a large corporate table surrounded by Levantine men in white suits, all smoking cigars and drinking cognac.

The volume on the stereo began to rise. He was still early, and apparently she was going to be awhile. Amar understood women and their needs to dress well – but *how* long? He'd insisted that Jungle was laid back and didn't care about dress code, but she cocked her eye, as if he'd suggested she jump off a cliff, and he relented.

He decided to wait at the bar, and was given sky juice, gin and coconut water. Around him, tacky touches decorated the walls, made to induce patrons into experiencing a Jamaican vacation – fake palm leaves, a tiki awning on the bar, a Damien Marley poster on the wall. It was these little touches he liked Jungle for, and wondered what the Indian equivalent would be like. Spike lassis and bhangra remixes. He thought of Erfan's face, cringing at the idea and laughed out loud.

Why was Erfan become so averse to niche music? He'd only come a few times before, and willingly so, before giving up on it. Amar had asked if it was because he associated reggae with vagrant kids who tossed hacky-sacks between their ankles or smoked pot and fulfilled other hippie clichés.

“No,” Erfan had answered. “But this place won't get us anywhere. No gig opportunities.”

It was always about the business with Erfan – how to make connections, how to get foot in the door, or rather booth, how to get the prized demo and best, the residency.

Of course, without Erfan, he would have probably never attempted pursuing the idea professionally. Their initial meeting in college during English class, where Erfan had desperately grabbed the first kid that he thought would help him pass. Amar, for better or worse, had aced the first essay, and so became conscripted. It wasn't long before they connected over shared passions for music, and they jettisoned essay-writing sessions for pirating new remixes online. The decision to become the musicians themselves was almost inherent; in fact Amar couldn't remember any moment where either of them had said, "let's be DJs."

The first time they performed, at an Indian school event with a hundred and fifty students, was a disaster. The looks they were given by the audience reminded Amar of the way his vegetarian family would look at butchers in the grocery store. Faces upturned, tongues stuck out; like a wretched act of cold-blooded murder.

"You know what it was?" Erfan had said afterwards while packing, "we were playing these outdated crap tracks. They sucked back then and they aren't classics now. And we just picked them at random; they made no sense strung together. Hell, it made it seem like you weren't even Indian."

At that moment, he dictated they had to learn from pros, and so any chance they got, the night was spent at a club taking in the music and the operation. Amar filed through all of the rules he'd learned since then— beats per minute, reading the crowd, track sampling, switching genre, start old and go new.

But in the whole time, Jungle was one place Erfan didn't feel he could learn from.

"Cherry Ripe" from The Wailing Souls came on. All at once, the entire room locked into a slow, synchronous groove, like a blanket that falls onto the body and secures itself onto its contours.

Amar turned to the bartender and asked for the time. Ten thirty, he said. It had only been half an hour. Still early. But then again, it had been *half* an hour. What if she'd gotten lost? What if she'd gone to the wrong Jungle? Were these mistakes she would make? Amar didn't take her for a floozy, but then again Erfan constantly acted toward her as if she was.

What had been the plan then, Amar wondered? Erfan strung him only to upper-class establishments that demanded trendy clothing, polished shoes, and clean shaves. Places where drinks cost twice as much than everywhere else.

They'd stand in line outside, even in cold or rainy weather, trying to gain a sense of anyone in charge. But what kind of owner would stand outside, when the action was indoors? Once they were admitted, handing moldy fives to pass off as the twenty-dollar cover fee, they would claim a corner, a bench, or a section of the bar as their niche. Like beasts in the forests they'd mark it with their drinks and jackets, establish it as a base, a perch to seek out anyone who presented a hiring opportunity.

Amar would remain in the perch, wavering eyes admiring half-naked women, while Erfan would try and ingratiate with staff, get cozy, and perhaps strike a proposition. Night after night, week after week, at any venue that met his sophisticated criteria, they ignored him as just another patron. The bartender would shrug him aside, knowing others

were offering higher tips. Bouncers remained stiff and slack-jawed, gripping their mini-flashlights. In the end, he would return to Amar, throw a fit and complain about faults in the club's operation, and ask to leave.

Or sometimes he'd get caught up with a girl, and get lost somewhere in the void of the dance floor. Erfan's eyes always grazed over to women, and instead he'd be pulled away from their base, finding a dance partner, a drink partner. Every time, Amar imagined the same words coming out of his mouth, the same game being played – *Oh yea, I work here, this is my night off. What, you've never been here before? Can I buy you a real drink?*

It was laughable now, how long they'd kept up the practice before realizing it was futile. So much money had been wasted, so much time. In the process, Amar found himself growing more distasteful for that atmosphere; the demeaning scrutiny at the entrance, the sweaty bodies inside; the pageantry and pompous frivolity. That was more akin to political fundraisers and championship sports games. The sense of fun was drowned out, and Amar panged instead for the unfettered rowdiness of Jungle.

Amar turned and asked the bartender again for the time. Almost eleven. He took out his phone and called her, but there was no answer.

He yawned. Walking with her all last night hadn't given him much sleep, but at the time it was the last thing on his mind. He'd wanted the moment to continue as long as it could. Though the idea was cheesy, he had to admit it was like a movie, the quiet romantic stroll along the water, his jacket hugging her body.

But then he recalled what she had said. *You don't have to force yourself...if it doesn't fit, let it go...sometimes it's not meant to be.*

She'd said it as if continuing her talk about Erfan's music choices. But now, as he sat alone in Jungle, the comment stung. . Was it meant to be a veiled warning? *Don't get too close, asshole. My brother might be your friend but that doesn't make us lovers.* Like the Bollywood songs, where flowers and rain were codes for more lustful objects, was she saying something else? Amar became irritated, the high he felt before from the attar now dissipated.

Perhaps she'd just gone to sleep as well, and forgotten about the whole affair. Forget it, he thought, might as well get sleep tonight. Tomorrow, he had his demo at Xenos.

Chapter 7

One day Jayant was summoned into B.D. Prasad's office. That day, the entire building had an eerie buzz all throughout, as if someone had laced the floor with electric wires and passed a current through everyone's feet. Clerks and counsels were racing up and down the halls, quietly, but hurried. Their faces held a mixture of excitement and disappointment at once. Jayant assumed it was from the sensation of perhaps having to actually work for the first time since they'd been employed here.

He made his way to his office; Kantilal sat there, his face behind the newspaper. Jayant sat down, preparing for a work day that he knew wasn't going to happen – sharpening pencils, adjusting the rolodex of contacts, stacking files and dockets neatly for easy access – and as he did, Kantilal would every now and then chuckle from behind the pulpy paper, slowly wetting and falling limp in his hands.

“Anything interesting today, *bhai*?” Jayant asked.

“Huh?” Kantilal answered, looking up. “Eh, the usual. Country is going to the shitter before it ever got a chance to cook properly. Like bad digestion.”

Jayant squinted at the front page. It was splattered with the common headlines, of congressional strife in drawing territorial lines, setbacks of upstart Pakistan, and the laurels of bright new Indian prodigies. He had never bothered with reading the paper until coming across *The London Times* while abroad, and he found the newspapers in India was always curiously lacking in any actual informative articles, more just a chance to find any new thing to laud about the country. Even failures were spun into harmless

mistakes of a young country, as if India herself had a wrist to be slapped and the matter was finished.

But one word caught his eyes: *Junagadh*, in great black block letters. Why was his birth town on the front page of the newspaper today, with a picture of a tank next to it?

There was a knock on the door, and Kantilal barked back without looking from his paper, “Come in, come in. Just put it on the table.”

Jayant watched a young clerk walked in, a sweat-drenched silk shirt tucked into pants that had an almost hidden tear inside the thigh.

“Put what on the table, sir?” the clerk said.

“Just there. I’ll give you money tomorrow.”

“Money, sir?”

Kantilal set the paper down and squinted at him. “What did I say, eh?”

“Kantilal, be nice to the boy.” Jayant said. “He sn’t here with tea. He works here. like us”

“Oh. So what do you want, then?”

“Sir, I was ordered to get Mr. Baxi, sir.”

“You say sir so much.”

“Sir?”

“I’m Baxi,” Jayant said.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Prasad would like to see you.”

“So, boy, if we are both sirs, does that mean you well fetch us tea if we asked?
Nicely, of course.”

Jayant followed the clerk to Prasad’s office, which wasn’t as barren as the first day he’d walked in. In fact, a cart sat before Prasad’s desk, and on it boxes of files, some of which had spilled out and over onto the floor, onto the desk. There were more files stacked in the previously-empty bookshelves. Jayant noticed in fact, one of the big hardbound legal reference volumes had even been taken down, and sat open-faced on the desk.

It was in this book B.D. Prasad had his attention sunken. A slight bony finger traced across the page as he mouthed the words to himself, and Jayant could pick up crisp sounds like *s* and *p* and *t*.

“Sir?”

Prasad shot up in his chair, almost leaving the seat entirely. His eyes scanned the room before settling on Jayant, though he was standing right in front of him.

“Ah, yes, Baxi. Sit down, sit down.”

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yes.

Jayant was silent. Prasad sighed, and continued.

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, that place as gotten lively, as if little mosquitoes started pinching everyone in their asses. Taking back Junagadh has become this big scandal, which is fine, but one would think it would be political. Why do they have to stir us, here? We’re lawyers, not soldiers!”

“Taking back, sir?”

“Well of course, it is an Indian state, Baxi! It doesn’t matter what that Nawaab thinks, this Muhammad Khanji. Just because he has that name doesn’t make him a deity. Junagadh is not going to be part of Pakistan. The Chief Minister has asked us to negotiate with him, *diplomatically*, for him to hand it back.”

Prasad pointed to the open file on this table. “Take this to him. These papers outline what the state is proposing, which is simply a deed for the land. He signs here, giving the lease back to the state government.”

Prasad tapped his finger again on the file, raising his eyebrows. Jayant knew what he meant – that this deed was drawn up, out of thin air. The Nawaab’s only deed to the land was his own blood. This lease, contract, treaty, whatever, was a document of the new South Asia. One of signatures and officancy. Jayant thought he’d be elated when getting his first docket, but now the immensity bore down on him.

“Why did you choose me, sir? I’m the newest person here...”

“That’s precisely why, Baxi! You see, this Nawaab is probably going to be very grumpy and unwilling to talk to any of us. But you – who are you? You have no reputation from the old days, and nothing now. But, you’ve been to Britian. You carry

that Western air about you. You look like the type who knows the proper fork and spoon to use. Yes, I think he will want to talk to you much more.”

Jayant was shaken by the comparison. Did people really think of him as some kind of outsider? A mis-matched imperial transplant? As if answering the question, Prasad nodded slowly, up and down. Jayant noticed, for the first time, the man had a small bald spot on his head. Just like him.

Prasad continued, “All he has to do is sign and turn over the state back to India. Just like any normal estate transfer. Explain to him in clear, plain English – no Hindi or Urdu, just so there isn’t any confusions, eh?”

Jayant sighed. Well, it was now or never. “Yes, sir.”

“Good, good, *beta*. Now, can you tell me, what does this mean here,” he turned the file around and in a long scribbled deposition, pointed at the words: *malum probitum*.

“It means ‘wrong against the law’ or ‘wrong by the law’”

Prasad looked astonished. “Really, it means that?”

“Yes. What did the reference say?”

“Well it said the same thing, but I thought for sure it would mean the same as *malum* in Hindi. To understand.”

“It’s Latin.”

“To understand,” he repeated. “Latin.”

“Sir, didn’t you learn these things in law school?”

“Hey, hey, Baxi! We did not all get a chance to go over to Britain with the charity of our parents, eh? Besides, even if we did, would we? No, we were all marching in the streets. While you were there in smart suits and eating biscuits with the Queen, we were taking strikes from the *lathis*. Do you know what it feels like to have that wood smash against your head?”

Jayant stifled telling B.D. Prasad the truth, and instead looked down and shook his head, telling himself mentally: Not worth it. Not to blow the big chance.

Chapter 8

Bathing had become a terrible ordeal for Khusrow. The Priest was stingy with his water, he would affirm that it must be saved for offering to the Gods during prayer everyday, and that whatever was left should be used for drinking first, and then if still more remained, dabs of a wet washcloth were all that were required.

“Must you not bathe to perform the services?” Khusrow asked once.

“So it falls under the quota of the God’s offering. I cannot offer to them if I am not cleansed to approach them.”

“Perhaps then I should perform the services with you.”

“But he is not your God. It would not be a genuine prayer, if you are only doing it for your own comforts.”

“I think your God would want all men to be clean, relieved of fleas in their hair and sand in their crevices.”

“There is always the sea.” The Priest wove his hand over the cliff, understating the act of simply scaling down the sharp rock towards the beach and walking into the surf.

Amir wondered where the fresh water came from. The gourd was always filled every morning, without fail. He had not, and could not see a well out from any horizon around the temple. There was no river or stream. Could it be under the structure, flowing through a subterranean cave, collecting in small pools, free of sediment and small fish? Even still, it was a large gourd, and the Priest was a small man. He could not lift it by himself. Not everyday.

The thoughts made Amir scratch. He blamed the lack of a clean body as the reason his mind was also not clear to think. The sediment that was etched into his corpus seeped through the tiny orifices and permeated his insides, collected and sifting around like sand in an hourglass.

What had been completed so far? Not very much, he admitted with disdain. There were small pieces from before he had come here. He shifted the various pages around his table, toying with them like a puzzle; a secret lock that required coordinated gears. Of some he had only crafted the few opening words, of others a few lines. These he could cobble together, fit strand with strand and of them create a full sentence. As page overlapped page, seasons switched out of sequence and man professed love to other men.

No, these were bastard formations, void of their potency or meaning. To put two separate lines together, when they shared no relation of thought or impetus, only threatened to destroy both. As if the bride's veil had been removed, prior to the invocation of holy marriage rites; and now the groom has seen something incomplete, without fruition, and the couple cannot, can never, become one.

Khusrow swiped his hand across the table and let the pages flutter about. Some were caught by the breeze and twirled and danced in the air. For brief moments his heart jumped, as he realized they would soon be lost to him. But then he also realized he could not recall what was on any, what he had just read and attempted to muddle like temperate iron, and so Khusrow took solace as his words cast out down into the water.

Chapter 9

During the day, Xenos didn't look like the dark, anamorphous cave that Amar had imagined so many times. Light still spilled around the edges of heavy drawn curtains that shielded the windows, and gave a golden hue to the room. They were on the top VIP floor of the three-tiered "Elite" (as flyers had labeled it) club. The afternoon daze seemed to lull the room into a confused threshold between day and night.

The whole place looked to Amar like something out of a swords and sandals movie. "The trashy kind, not like *Ben Hur*," Erfan had warned. But Amar still felt robbed of the mystique – At best, it could be compared to an ancient-themed casino or amusement park ride; a tawdry mash up of generic Roman pillars and Egyptian obelisks. There was a golden glitter sprayed against the walls all up and down insides, spanning the three floors.

However, this visage died quickly in front of the windows. At the opposite end of the room, where Amar stood on top of a raised platform that overlooked the dance floor, he was sinking in a dim DJ booth.

"So, you're Erfan's friend, right?" said Raouf, the man giving Amar his audition. Amar wasn't sure what his actual position at the club was. Erfan had simply said, "He runs the place." When he'd introduced himself, Raouf had given his name and nothing else. He was dressed in is sharply cut suit, but not tailored Amar assumed. It had a kind of familiar design he knew was common in shopping mall windows.

"Yeah. He said you guys had a spot open. Thanks for letting me demo."

“Right on, right on. Normally we like to shop around for talent, but we figured this might be easier. He’ll make it easy for you to transition in.”

Great, Amar thought, feeling like an ass that’d bit the carrot. Now Erfan would be supervising his apprenticeship. But with George effectively rendered null as a connection, it was his last a shot at a gig.

“Okay,” Raouf said. “Let’s see what you can do,”

Raouf sat one of tables, palming a tumbler of ice water with a lime in it, as if it were a hard drink.

“What do you want me to play?” Amar asked. He hoped that Raouf couldn’t see his sweaty, fidgety fingers behind the massive console of one thousand sound levels and a Christmas’ worth of LED lights.

“Anything you want,” Raouf said. “Show me what your style is, what you can do. I guess Erfan filled you in on the usual kind of crowd that we get here?”

“Very upscale, young, diverse, that kind of thing.” Amar cut himself off before spurring out *preppy, overdressed, overeager college kids with parent’s money to waste*.

“Right. So...do your thing.” Raouf put out open palms in a gesture that commanded, *hurry up*.

Amar looked for the power switch on the system, and then realized that it was already on. He took a deep breath and turned to his crate of vinyls, and then his books of CDs. He took out a disc, an assorted mix of house songs from recent months, and popped it in. He hit play, and slowly turned the volume level up, feeling the bass grow, while out

of the corner of his eye, he could see Raouf shuffle in his seat. Though the room was empty, Amar pumped the volume a little farther, to drown out whatever other distractions that were going on through his potential employer's mind, and focus as much attention as he away from him. It's the music you're hiring me for, he thought. *Don't expect me to jump around like some rock star.*

A little bass, little gain. A trumpet hook on the track caught his attention, and he pulled out another CD and mixed in some saxophone house, the blaring horn spouting through the standard rumble, as if a jazz player had walked into the middle of an acid rave and simply started improvising in the middle of the crowd.

After carrying this line through a few songs, including hallowed house gods Tiesto, Sinclar, and a favorite, Benassi, Amar sighed with relief, feeling like he had his footing. Raouf however remained still in his chair, sipping, so Amar dared to venture out. From the house he carried in electronica mixes of Top 40 songs, the catchy hooks of video vixens and pop rock icons pummeled with rolling treble and extended fades. He mixed cleanly and smoothly, and moved his body in the rhythm of the beats as they came and went.

"Come on," Raouf shouted over the speaker. "I wanted to meet you because you're Indian. Give us some of that?"

Amar didn't say anything for a moment, and kept switching songs. No one who came to the club was going to care about Indian music he thought, or anything out of the ordinary at all it. Everyone only *really* wants the same songs they hear on the radio, alone

behind the wheel during rush hour traffic. This way, they can continue in their cars the same party, pretending they're somewhere between a stocked bar and mysterious singles.

Amar let his pre-recorded mash-up, a Madonna that tempoed down into Notorious BIG, play on as he flipped through for his hip-hop CDs. Of course, no one *really* cares about genre switch. They just want to come and drink. A DJ is just there to facilitate it.

“You got any bhangra?!” Raouf cried from behind.

Amar resisted the garble rising in his throat, saying *should I wear a turban, too?* He sighed, realizing that at this beat was unfortunately a perfect place to bring in some bhangra. He quickly flipped the pages back in his book and stuck in his go-to track just as BIG was dying out in the last seconds. The entire genre progression – house to pop to hip-hop – was a calculated story he'd woven, a history of jams that tore floors apart. Now the man wanted it truncated so the Indian could cross the channels and take over the sound system.

But he wanted the job. There was time to convince this fool later.

The mix into bhangra was coming in quite faulty. He kept wheeling the turntable back and forth, beats clipping like jagged flint against rock, unable to spark fire. He stopped trying, and just faded the volume down and up, letting Punjabi MC take over.

Raouf's didn't seem to notice the terrible mix. Instead, his eyes lit up for a brief moment, and although he didn't get up or make any great gesture, Amar noticed the impulse in his hands to dance. It was true, he thought, bhangra really did tear up a dance floor, no matter who was there, or if they understood it. The *dhol* drums rumbled across

the air, and Amar tried to imagine a crowd in front of him, of non-Indians, trying to switching grinding and grooving to this. Somehow, the drums always took over.

“This is what I meant, your *style*,” he said. “You got anymore of this?”

Amar nodded and continued switching between bhangra songs, mentally cursing each. Bhangra couldn't be mixed. It wasn't like western music. Hooks, fades, bass lines were non-existent. Just the rattle of drums improvised against the accompanying folk dancers. There was no way to string songs without that awkward gap of volume down-volume up, unless remixed.

He saw Raouf's interest dwindle, and reached back to the house. He had to rise the tempo of the bhangra to a level that turned it almost parody, but quickly got it to match the house beat, and brought it slowly in. He finished off with a few of the more classics, iiO, Van Helden, and ATB. Just to be sure.

Raouf was now bobbing his head, but his attention was into his cell phone.

Amar lowered the volume on everything, and felt an upsetting dizziness from within his stomach. He looked at Raouf, nodding as if he was concurring with a statement that hadn't been uttered.

“Okay, that was great!” he said, grinning forcibly. Amar stepped down from the higher stage of the booth.

“When would you get back to me?” he asked

“We'll be in touch. I have to run it by the big man.”

“Who’s the big man?”

“The big man.”

“Do you have any idea what he’d say? Does Erfan’s recommendation help?”

“Sure, maybe. But you forgot someone else’s opinion. Mine.”

Amar tried to keep a smile on his face as he packed up his crate, and walked down the stairs. The idea was three floors, three clubs – under one roof. The one he had just played on, the one to which access was otherwise possible with exposed cleavage or thick bankroll, was centered on house and techno. As he descended the spiraling staircase that ran through the center of the building, Raouf ominously behind him in synchronous step, he came to the second floor – Alternative. Here he knew, the fake hipsters who posed their humble dispositions turned their scruffy cheeks and whipped out credit cards to run hundred-dollar tabs. Raouf’s breathing was loud now, as if he was agitated that Amar wasn’t moving faster, like being escorted out by a bouncer, as if it was operating hours and Amar had spent too much time wasting the top-shelf booze. They reached the bottom floor, Hip-hop and Top 40. Nothing of interest happened here. Amar turned around, his crate in hand. He saw Raouf open his mouth for the usual parting pleasantries.

“So,” Amar said, “What is your opinion??”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. My say is important. But he writes the checks.”

“So, what would you say?” Amar bit his lip.

Raouf sighed and began rubbing his temples as if some great pain gripped them. “Come back this Friday night, okay? I’ll have your name on the guest list. Bring some plus-ones. Hotties, son.”

Amar nodded and walked out, his CDs and records rattling in the crate as he walked as many blocks as he could before the uneasiness in his stomach wore off.

Chapter 10

At the train station in Jundgadh, Jayant stepped off onto a small platform, that was barely the size of two car lengths but was crowded by at least fifty people. Those waiting for loved ones began clamoring at the windows of the train, searching up and down the cars even though most of the passengers had already gotten off. A couple of vendors straddled the sides, one selling freshly roasted peanuts in small newspaper cones, the other balloon off of a make-shift rack constructed out of a broomsticks. Jayant stood, briefcase in hand, lost in the shuffle.

A man approached him, saying his name was Pratab. He had a gingerly smile, teeth red from chewing too much tobacco. He spit, and extended his hand, saying “Hallo, how do you do?” and stated that he would be Jayant’s driver for the day.

In the open cabin of the automobile, the sun beat down upon Jayant’s premature bald spot and began to tease out beads of sweat, which grew and slipped down his cheeks and down his collar onto his white shirt. Brilliant, he thought. He’d made his wife launder his clothing just that very morning, so that they would look as new and clean as possible. She’d complained, but acquiesced when Jayant stressed the prominence of who he would meet.

As the car rolled and tumbled over the rocks and dust, Jayant attempted to make small talk with Pratab, questions about the torn, how it had fared in the past decade. Instead, Pratab told Jayant his life story, as they drove away from the station toward the Nawab’s estate, some few kilometers outside the city.

“All my life I have lived here, sir,” he said. “Two wives, with two kids each. Why two? Well, you see, one had run away not even a few months into our marriage after I beat her a couple times. You see sir, she was not doing her proper work around the house. It would be dirty when I came in at night, and only then would she bother to start dinner. So a few slaps here and there became necessary. But so, she ran off to her simple village with her simple family, and I quickly found another wife, who put oil in her hair every morning and made piping hot *bhajia* for my tea everyday. With her I had two children. Oh yes, I slapped her as well, many times in fact, but she did not run away. Kept making *bhajia* and chai like a good wife.”

Jayant casually responded with wide, but unassuming eyes. Pratab was short, with bushy hair and fat under his chin. He laughed to himself, and kept his eyes straight ahead through the windshield as the car rattled over the dirt pathway.

“But then,” Pratab continued, “would you believe, my first wife comes back with two twin girls, whom she had taken with her in her womb when she ran off. She began to demand money. Money for food, money for clothes, money for school. Such cute girls, sir! I would have showered them with candy and toys, if had the idiot woman not run off. But of course, how can I spare it after she abandons me? I drive for three gentlemen sir, to make a living. Three! And still I am wearing these tattered shirts.”

Such a marital scandal wasn't a shock to Jayant. When he was growing up, they were common among the circles his family moved around in. Kisses stolen with kitchen maids, daughters selling mother's jewelry to elope with poor boys, that sort of thing. There was something old-world about the seedy gossip. The kinds of affairs that Sufis

wrote about in plays, that were used in talkie films with chaste eye-batting and blooming roses to signify what they new happened behind the draperies, albeit in a more sophisticated, unspoken fashion. What got to Jayant was how it hadn't gone away in these progressive years, simply drawn out.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“I gave the girls what I had in my pocket and told them to go buy chocolates from the store down the street. Then I gave that woman a swift kick and sent her packing.”

Those affairs from his childhood ended, at the most, in violent tears, angry stares, and men expounding on dishonor in the community. As a child, witnessing it at weddings and Diwali parties was a tense and awkward ordeal. Against Pratab's story however, Jayant now found it tawdry. He twisted his right hand tighter around the handle of his briefcase, resting in his lap. His left hand vice gripped the leather seat of the car, slipping away from the moisture of the sweat as he squeezed more and more.

“How much farther?” Jayant asked.

“Around this hill, sir.”

The road, thought unpaved and unmarked, yet officially designated named a National Highway by the government, curved around a rising heap in a flat land.

Instead saw a modest, but sprawling estate. A side path veered off the road towards a circular wall that rose about six feet high, and at the head of the pathway a white wooden gate, at the head of which stood a stoic guard with a large mustache and

Lee-Enfield rifle. Jayant showed him his letter of introduction with *Gujarat High Court* printed at the head, and the guard waved him in.

As the car edged around the base of the hill, Jayant saw the Nawab's home. He had expected a grand palace, a downscaled version of the Taj Mahal or Lake Palace, jutting towers and domes and parapets. In the center of the cordoned plot of land, stood a lavish three-story bungalow, with pink walls and white pillars carved at the ends to look like unblossomed tulip buds. A small stable for horses and a shack for servants housing stood outside. Jayant remembered a diagram of a medieval castle he had seen once in a history textbook in London. Its walls contained everything that the king and queen would need to survive should an enemy attack, including a wine cellar, a church, and a dungeon.

Eyes of the servants and staff turned on the two men in the auto as it drove up to the front of the bungalow. Jayant noticed a burly man, brushing a horse and looking at him like he was an unwelcome wild animal. A woman carrying a gourd of water on her head stared directly at them, and kept walking in the auto's pathway. Pratab was forced to break suddenly and veer the machine to avoid hitting her. In the moment, Jayant forgot to take a breath and coughed.

Jayant slowly dragged himself off of the leather seat and closed the car door behind him. A man came down the front steps by twos and extended his hand, saying he was the Nawab's aide. He was dressed in a simple, but expensive looking silk salwaar and a small *topi*. As Jayant took his hand and shook it, he felt an awkward compulsion to bow, but didn't, and introduced himself.

“Welcome, Mr. Baxi. Please come, *maharaj* is waiting for you. You will have lunch, yes?”

Jayant said, “I ate before coming.”

“The chef has prepared simple *thali* of lentils and rice. Please, you will have some.”

Hearing “sir” from Pratab throughout the entire drive had already made Jayant self-conscious, and now coupled with the aide’s over-stressed “please” he felt as if he had stepped out of his skin and was now watching himself, some government drone, suited to the nines, a “ponsy boy,” as they’d said in England.

They went up the steps, one by one, and went inside the bungalow. They entered an open-air patio, the ceiling uncovered to allow maximum ventilation. The stone tiles on the floor were cracked all over, leaving a powdery brittle of dust, that collected with dried leaves and other debris. A woman was sweeping quietly in the corner, hunched on her knees. Jayant wanted to stop and look up at the midday sun, but the aide kept walking, and he followed, back out the other end of the house, and onto a roofed porch over looking a pitch.

“Please, sir,” the aide said. Jayant looked down at the end of the porch, and seated at the table, saw his highness the Nawab Muhammad Mahabat Khanji III. He was cloaked in the shade, and Jayant had to walk closer to discern his features – a long face, with jowls that pursed his lips together to create a pout; the head was supported on broad shoulders, however the arms caved in and disappeared under the table. Like his house, he was once a sturdy man who was slowly in decay, caving on himself. Khanji did not rise

as Jayant got closer, nor did he offer his hand. He simply nodded and said with elongated vowels, “*Velcome.*”

He waved his hand at the opposite chair, and the aide promptly pulled it out for Jayant. Jayant sat down and put the briefcase on the ground next to his chair. Then, as a long moment passed and Khanji did not say anything, he nervously reached for it, wondering if “getting down to business” was the most tactful way to conduct the meeting.

Don't bore him too much with this legal mumbo-jumbo, B.P. Prasad had said.

If I barely understand any of it, what makes you think that pompous fool will know?

Jayant let go of the briefcase again, and placed his hands firmly in his lap. Khanji was looking out into the pitch behind the bungalow. At one end, a little girl was riding a horse around a corral, and at the other, two young boys took turns tossing and batting a cricket ball. They were all dressed in neatly pressed white slacks and shirts.

“Your children?” Jayant said.

“My sister’s children,” he said without looking at him. “I do not have a wife. I never took one.”

Jayant scolded himself for not knowing. It was important to know such things about a client before he met them, whether or not they are married, if they have children, what they do for a living.

He could think of nothing else to say but talk about the case, but he knew the lunch was coming soon, so he let it wait. But then his highness Khanji kept looking out at

his niece and nephews in the pitch, and didn't make any notion of carrying a conversation. The boy who was batting swung and hit the ball clear of the pitch, far out into the distance. Khanji gleamed, mouth gaping open but not making a sound. Jayant watched his eyes follow the ball high into the air, come down, and hit the ground, and still, they stayed fixed out into the vista. Khanji didn't seem to be watching the children so much as he was watching specimens of life, against a vista passing before his eyes. The deserts of lower Gujarat stretched out before him, with rolling hills and stubbly patches of green shrubs here and there. Beyond it lay Rajasthan and the rest of northern India, with the extravagant palaces and ancient jeweled riches that Europeans wrote about in adventure novels. Behind, Jayant knew, the sea, and Somnath.

A gust of wind blew leisurely in from that horizon, and flapped the tablecloth over their laps. It shook Khanji out of his stupor and brought his focus back towards Jayant.

“These kids, their mother wants to send them to England for school. We just spent all these years fighting to get ourselves free from those bastards, and she wants to send them back to the mouth of the lion!”

“I went to school in England, sir. I got my law degree there.”

“Oh?” His eyes peaked. “What did you think of it? Worth the month-long boat ride? Worth the dirty looks from whiteys? Worth eating stale cucumber sandwiches and bitter tea without milk?”

“I'm sure it would be different for them now,” Jayant said. He didn't want to sound indignant. “Of course, schools in our country are very fine!”

“Humbug! They are like zoos – dirty and smelly with old farting teachers who bray all day like donkeys. The kids even, who knows where they come from? Children of street sweepers and beggars could be in the same classrooms.”

Was this man so unequivocally stubborn?

“Well you will have to choose one of them, sir.”

“Hmm, yes...” the Nawab said, and let the syllable trail off into the wind, and said, “Well. Sordid business.”

Now, Jayant thought, would be a good segue to talk about the case.

But the Nawab continued “Tell me about yourself, how is the job, how is the family?”

“Fine sir, both very fine.”

“Children?”

“Yes, twins as a matter-of-fact. A daughter and son. Both still babies though”

Nawab leaned back in his chair. “They will get big quickly, huh? Great swathes of time will pass in what will seem the smallest increments.”

“My wife would be glad to hear that. She wants to get back to her afternoons going to the tennis club and playing cards with her friends.”

“Tennis club? Are you a player?”

Jayant modestly nodded his head.

“Well, we must play sometime. I am an excellent player. I’ve loved tennis since I was a boy. See, I have the net right there.” He pointed out into the pitch past his two nephews, where, Jayant saw tennis net and poles rolled up and resting against the wooden fence.

“After lunch, we must play. You see it? Sitting there?”

“Yes. Do your nephews play?”

“No. These idiots and their cricket. Whacking a ball wildly in any direction requires no skill. Tennis is precise, exact. The player needs grand control to get the ball where he wants it. And then knowing how to return the other player’s hit – back and forth, back and forth. This is true sport. Knowing how to conquer the opposition.”

“*Wah*. You’re quite the poet, sir. That’s *PERSON X*, right?”

“Yes! You read poetry?”

“Not really. I’m enjoy classical music. That’s a ghazal of his, I believe.”

“Oh,” the Nawab said. “Is that right...”

At that point, a woman came out with two servants and began setting the table for lunch. “Ahh, Mr. Baxi, this is my dear sister,” Nawab said. She was dressed well – as a woman of her status would be, Jayant thought. A light pea-green sari, without any sign of wear and tear. She silently set the plates and ladled the food onto each, sat down, and gave a slight nod to Jayant.

The meal was modest; *dhal*, piping hot vapor rising from the mashed yellow lentils, flecks of cumin and red pepper visible in the thick gravy; a helping of white rice, slathered on top with a spoonful of clarified butter; three small bowls on the side offered pickles of mango, lime, and carrot; and a glass of *chaas*, cold yogurt drink to relieve the heat of the high midday sun. Jayant's stomach bubbled at the sight, as his highness dove his hands into the plate and began heaping morsels into his mouth.

"Don't eat like a pig in front of a guest," the woman said.

"Sarika," Khanji said, "this is how we eat in India. I am not some European who uses three forks and three knives for every meal."

Western air, Jayant smiled to himself.

"What are you talking about, 'This is India?'" Sarika said. "Do you see any silverware here? I am saying be a little cleaner."

"Please, eat," Sarika said after seeing Jayant had not yet taken a bite. He looked down at the piping portions, fighting the urge to push it away from him. Too much sun, too much anxiety. He felt uncomfortable in his chair, displaced from what he knew. Sitting here in front of the Nawab, he stared at a man who'd been stripped of any power and importance, and now sat slurping gobs of *dhal* laden rice, like any poor hungry beggar on the street. Sarika did not touch her food, instead watching the children play.

"Are the children going to eat?" Jayant asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about them,” Sarika said. “They’ll say when they’re hungry, otherwise best not to bother. They can quickly become annoying, nagging at you for every little thing. If only he would let me send them away.”

The Nawab looked up. “Yes, yes,” he said. “Ask Mr. Baxi here. He went to school in England. Tell her, is it worth it or not?”

“Oh?” she asked. “What did you study?”

“Law. I am certainly grateful for the experience,” he replied.

“Law? You’re a lawyer?”

“*Arey*, are you brain dead?” Khanji said to his sister. “He’s from the government, those bastards who will just shoo us off like the cleaning lady does to bugs.” He turned to Jayant, with beaming eyes, “Of course, I do not direct the scorn at a fellow tennis player.”

Jayant shifted in his chair. At this point *he* was more nervous about offending the royal Jayant’s fingers went for his briefcase for the report, that detailed, about the farmer, about how he’d encroached on land, and how Khanji, in acting on him, encroached on the new Gujarat law.

“We have a right to choose which country we want to be with,” Sarika said. “You think because we’re part of the old Nawabs, we don’t matter and you can just come and take everything!”

“Out with the old,” Khanji said.

“And did you know?” she went on, waving a palm in the air, “my brother isn’t some tyrant! He cared greatly for the land. We’ve personally cared for some of the last breed of stallions from this area. Kathiawadi stallions, Mr Baxi –“

“Please, Sarika.” the Nawab said.

“Ma’am, I –”

“They are the most majestic in the entire continent. Lovely manes, strong muscles. And he built a library. Think, sir, if you were a boy from this town, what it means to have books at your hands. Oh no, we are not going anywhere just because you don’t like us being around!”

The Nawab put his rice-caked hand down over his plate and sat with a look of stifled contempt. Sarika stopped talking, but remained upset. The tension hung in the air like old laundry; clean, but dry and crusted.

“Mr. Baxi,” The Nawab said. “Explain my situation to her, please.”

Jayant, who still had the briefcase ajar in his fingers, instead started talking without retrieving the report. He’d memorized the dry, passionless language, reading it thrice over on the train. Somehow, after the woman’s speech, he had to meet the challenge.

He told her about the government wanting to attempt diplomacy. How, if it didn’t work out, then there would have to be a small war within the country for the Junagadh state. Planes, on loan from the Russian government, would be flown over with troops. Tanks were stationed some distance away, at the border and ready to move in like the

King's own horse cavalry. Sarika chuckled at that comparison, and a glaze over her face, her eyes engaged. Her anger was still there, but the fury was gone. Her attention was directed on Jayant, as if she could analyze and glean from him some card to play. Jayant went on, describing how the crowd grew around as the Nawab's men took the farmer wrangling away. Sarika listened with, eyes engaged.

A servant returned, removed the dishes, and placed bowls of warm water before them. Khanji dipped his hands and cleansed them of the sticky yellowy food that caked around his fingers. Jayant realized that he had not even touched his food, but did so as well.

“It pains me to say this but, perhaps it is best.” the Highness said. “I’ll be glad to be rid of this mess.”

“How do I not know about this?” his sister asked.

“You might have been playing cards at the time,” he said. She shot a look of daggers at him and yelled for the kids to come and eat. The two men left the porch and went back into the bungalow. Again Jayant found himself in the cool middle passage, as a pleasant draft passed through from one side of the building to the other. He looked above, and saw the sweeper woman had made her way up on the second floor, her rattling reed broom scraping debris off the ledge and sending it fluttering down to the stone tiles she had just cleaned.

Khanji said, “Well, Mr. Baxi, my office is over this way. But, before we do business there is something I would like you to see.”

At the eastern wall, Khanji pulled back an ornate drapery hanging from the wall, revealing an iron cage door, with steps leading downward into a darkened abyss.

“Go ahead,” the Nawab said, smiling.

Jayant gulped. Where is he taking me? He could be walking into a dungeon for all he knew, to be locked away as a hostage in a state conflict. “Go ahead,” he heard Khanji say behind him.

As Jayant laid one reluctant foot down the step, he heard the echoing sound of drops collecting in a pool of water. A cool draft blew from below, and soothed his face, and he against his better mind, the relief from the heat enticed him further down. As he took more steps, light from above receded farther and farther, until Jayant could scarce see the next step before him.

Here, what had seemed an immense pitch black now settled in his vision, and he began to make out the space of a large room. Columns stood across the middle, and in the corner, the light from a torch glowed, outlining the shape of a man.

Jayant squinted his eyes, and it seemed the man was balled into the corner of the room on top of a bench, feet up on the seat and hands nestling his head. He sat sleeping. Jayant heard Khanji’s footsteps scrape about behind him, and a moment later the room was illuminated from gas lanterns fitted onto the columns, showing Jayant not the dingy miserable jail cells he’d imagined, but rather something else entirely: The walls were simple and drab, but had been covered with ornate sari tapestries with curiously welcoming hues – fertile greens, soft pinks, warm blues, and so on – and punctuated with portraits of royal ancestors and deities alike. Jayant has read a book in the court library

that detailed rooms like these, about a tradition going back to the Mughals, rooms under the ground below palaces and estates, offering refuge from the summer heat.

Under a large oil painting of a king, the small sleeping man shook, and woke, and looked up. He had a shaggy beard that concealed his mouth, and the small round eyes of a dog. Jayant thought he looked more like a *sadhu* than a farmer.

“What is his name?” Jayant said.

“I don’t know. He won’t talk.”

The man sniffed and grumbling something behind a closed mouth. Jayant addressed the man with *sir*, and *bhai*, and was answered with indignant looks. “Is he mute?” He asked.

“Let me show you something,” Khanji said. In the center of the room, a heavy *chaddar* had been laid out on the floor, its flowery petal design awkward against the grey marble it sat on. Laid out on the *chaddar* were a set of tabla and harmonium, and Khanji sat down cross-legged behind the latter. He tuned the instrument, left fingers compressing the folding bellows and right prancing about the keys.

“You see,” he said, “this is where I come to escape my sister’s whining and play my music. I am not very good you understand, but down here, no one else will know. I think, that you are probably thinking, is this some court jester I’ve locked down here? He actually arrived one day, seeking alms. Of course I would give him food, give him water, but on the condition that he recite some poetry for me. I did not expect much of course, but sometimes we are selfish, and need to be indulged.”

Khanji played three crass and repetitive notes in rising and falling pitch, the sound alerting Jayant from the cool stillness of the room. The bearded man loosened himself from the corner and walked past Jayant, trailing a stench of rotted hay and dust, and sat on the *chaddar*.

“But then,” he continued, “as I was sitting here under his mangy gaze, just as he has now, I the bearded fool sat down beside me behind the tabla, and began to sing...” And on cue, as Khanji kept repeating his banal composition, the bearded man stretched his spiny, bony hands over the drums; gently floating over with fatherly care, and fingers striking down in sharp, fleeting, taps. The melodies of the two instruments came into synch, and the harmonium ceased grating Jayant’s ears, and instead became robust, like a starving child fed with meal of grains and rice. Khanji’s three-note pitch sequence shifted to an alternating four, with grace and flight Jayant had never felt from the harmonium before. The bearded man went off on a staccato riff, and Khanji responded by wavering the bellows at elegant frequency. The two were enrapt in a broken but sustaining duet, playing off of the other adapting. The melody reached crescendo, and the two players quieted their instruments. As Khanji kept the harmonium chords alive, the bearded man opened his mouth, and released a vocal that had been suffocated in his belly; it crackled a little and then ripened with immense vitality as he went through the notes of the octave:

Sa. Re. Ga. Ma. Pa. Dha. Ni. Sa.

Jayant had to take a step back from the scene in front of him – a royal and a layman, sitting side by side and composing. It was his private concert to bear, an evolution of the street side musicians and amateur noisemakers who played for money.

Here below, the sound had permeated into the walls, and grown into them. All around Jayant felt the notes hover about him, like the warmth of a blanket. It enwrapped him with such care he suddenly felt a curious, unnamable, and yet familiar emotion in his belly.

His legs withered and lowered his body on to *chaddar* in front of Khanji and the bearded man. The issue of the case seemed evaporate from him, and instead he watched them play with great pleasure until their vigor petered down and they stopped playing.

The bearded man reassumed his contempt and folded himself against the pillar behind him. Khanji had a look of satisfaction, the kind Jayant remembered on B.D. Prasad's face after he'd smacked the fly.

“We have fallen into a bit of a routine, playing like this almost every day.”

“All alone? Down here?” Jayant asked. Khanji looked around the room, with wide-eyed un-believability.

“Well, didn't you enjoy that?” he said.

“Yes, I did.” Jayant replied. “I always wanted to be able to play the drums. Never had the discipline as a child, nor the talent.”

“You should come and practice with us,” he said. “You will pick it up quickly. He will teach you.”

“You must be joking. Besides, I'm here on official business, and —”

“And what, Mr. Baxi, I’m not going to be here much longer?” Khanji raised an eyebrow. “This is true, but if there is one thing I’m not going to do, is to sign over the deed of this bungalow to you, or to the government. This is my home sir, and even if I am stripped of my power, or exiled, this is still my property and I intend to keep it.”

He rose up from behind the table, with the same fortitude his sister had displayed earlier.

“I want to keep it,” he continued, “because what I have down here, is a rare thing, sir. No one knows about it. It’s our small little chamber, preserving something that’s long past and assumed dead by others. I know you agree with me, Baxi. Join us here. We will learn tabla, and play tabla.”

Jayant felt a *yes, certainly* stand at the precipice of his tongue before he realized what a ludicrous idea it was. He shouldn’t be here. His first case, and how could he abandon all procedure and fidelity of his profession? He was the legal counsel, not a background noisemaker. Outside, Khanji was on the other side of the courtroom, and only a thin stack of paperwork, part of a longer pile at the municipal office.

“Who needs to know about it, Mr. Baxi?” the Nawab said. “In this dark room we are away from the pressures of the world. No one can judge us. All we have is ourselves and our music.”

Chapter 11

Through the corner of his eye, Khusrow sees the Priest sit in the sand next to him. He fastens his cloth and remains silent, staring intently at Khusrow's quill, like it was a weapon that Khusrow could use to strike and assassinate him. Khusrow tries not to pay any heed to the man's presence; he does not turn his head, and diverts his gaze back onto the paper in front of him. It is still blank, save for some scratches on at the head, lines that are merely synaptic spasms and devoid of any metaphorical merit.

He frowns and scratches his temple with the sharp end of the quill, not realizing he has left a streak of black ink against across his cheek. The Priest does not seem to notice, for he is also looking at the paper. Khusrow contorts his face to project different levels of thought and creative impetus, so that the Priest will realize that right now important work is being done; words are being etched into existence that will pass through the ears of politicians and rulers, of artisans and commoners, stirring their minds and altering their everyday actions. Words that will make a man choose to give alms to a beggar, to pick rose petals and offer them to his wife, to pass knowledge to his children. Words that will echo like hymns in the temple halls, that will be chanted and recounted across generations, bringing together generations and peoples over the banks of rivers and the passages of between mountains.

But instead, Khusrow's mind is hollow and empty of what to write. He lets his quill hang above the paper, and prays to God that soon it will drop, and traverse the surface, making syllables onto phrases. His fingers shake, balking at the weight held within their grip.

The Priest lets out a breath; Khusrow cannot tell if it is a sigh of disappointed, or even worse, of boredom. He imagines the holy man has a thought to share, but dares not ask. *It must be criticism*, he thinks. *Surely it must be criticism*. What if he will belittle what I have done? He does not believe in Allah as I; he does not share the same passion of how lyrics roll emit from the mouth and roll of the tongue. His prayers are like a crow's call, screeching and endless notes that are taken to be song. Notes accompanied by toy cymbals, so that they will sound akin to music. Words must have vitality by themselves. The breath inhaled to speak them in turn gives them life.

But the Priest only sighs again. Restless, impatient. Both sit still. To Khusrow, the moment takes an eon to pass. He feels a bead of sweat form on his head. It drips down to his nose and begins to itch, but he does not stir. The sigh has challenged him.

Now Khusrow lets out a breath. He lets the iron weight of the quill pull his hand down.

“What are you writing about?” The Priest asks.

Khusrow's hand strays. The point of the quill strikes the paper and slides downward across the page, leaving a ghastly black mark similar to the one on Khusrow's cheek, and rendering the paper useless. He is furious. His mind is now imbued with thoughts, not of the natural world or eternal desire, but anger and calamity. But it only still stays in his mind. On his face, he tries to retain an edifice of serenity, of concentration, of unwavering craftsmanship.

“I apologize,” the Priest says. “I am only curious. You see, we holy men are not artistic types. We devote our lives to God. All of our thoughts, whether by our making or

not, become a prayer, and therefore can only prescribe to standard ideals – wealth, vitality, karma, knowledge. This act of interpreting the dark corners of man’s heart, I cannot even begin to try.”

Khusrow puts his quill down. “You make it sound like I am scripting some black magic chant. I write to verbalize the feelings that every person feels, a shared experience that both noble and servant know. Dark corners. You make it seem like a rotted core of the body that should be cut out and thrown away.”

“Noble and servant do not know the same experience. They cannot read the same experience. Which servants have you met that can read your words with the same ability that they sweep your floors or serve your meals?”

The Priests gets up and shuffles his cloth.

“Must they read?” Khusrow says. “It can be read to them.”

The Priests turns around. With both his hands under his cloth, he seems to gesture a pointed finger from underneath. “Do you read to them? Do you recite every morning as they wash your back? Do you ask which syllables to rhyme as they bring you your linen? Perhaps they request subjects for you to write about. Sir, please create a poem for my newborn son! Sir, I wish to remark to my wife the beauty of the sun, can you please give me the words to do so? Would a servant know about love, when he makes children with his own sisters? Would he know the beauty of the world, when he himself has the face of a goat?”

With that, the Priest walked back toward the temple. Khusrow remained, too stunned to lift his body and follow. The

“And what has put him in that position? Your backward system of hierarchy. He sweeps the floors because you Priests refuse to walk on anything that would soil the whites of the bottoms of your feet. He allows dirt upon his person so that it does not settle on the pillars of your temples or the silk pillows of your cots.”

“Every man has his duty in life. Your belief in one single deity makes you feel as if all men are likewise of one species. But no, there are many roles that must be taken by different men for the world to function, and hence there must be many Gods to perform the many holy offerings for men. Do not think yourself more important than others because you have literacy. This is not a talent, but only a hobby.”

Khusrow began writing, attempting not to pay attention. His quill dragged across the pages, with such pressure that it threatened to tear. But still he kept the point down, letting the empty pages become as filled with black as he could. The Priest stood over him, wafting his robe, supervising the entire process as if he had some command over what was to be published.

Khusrow let the images and ideas flow through his mind that could divert him from the rantings of this man who domineered above him, throned as king in a pile of rubble – the flowers he’d seen in the gardens, beggars in the street, past lovers he’d had, teachers who’d guided his pen with precision and confidence.

The pen went wayward, and soon Khusrow saw that he was not even making actual script anymore. They looked more like the scrapes of an idiot child, playfully

smearing his own face with dirt and grime. But still the Priest stood there behind him, looking down at the page, expecting something to appear.

Chapter 12

After leaving Xenos Amar went first thing back to studio, hoping that he could pester Erfan into working his convincing attitude on Raouf.

When he knocked at the door, there was no answer. In such a case, the assumption was always that Erfan was either still asleep or had never come back the night before. Amar fished out a key from his wallet, a spare that Erfan had suggested he make for this kind of situation. He unlocked the door and walked in.

The apartment looked more organized than it usually was. It was still cluttered, but at least with an order. Magazines were in a neat pile on the table, not simply stacked but fanned across. Empty cans and bottles had found their way to the trash, and the light coatings of dust that, according to Erfan gave the room a “distinct greyish hue” had been lifted.

He opened the door, and found Dalia playing on the turntable.

“Hi,” she said, looking up, her face pleasant and welcoming. He tried to resist looking at it, afraid he would forget his disappointment in her no-show at Jungle the night before.

Amar walked in. He sniffed the air, there was a whiff of something. It wasn't an air freshener, too strong. It pricked at his nostrils, but the scent was so pleasant he didn't mind. It filled the room, and gave a more tolerable environment than the chaotic strewn about madness of clothes and half-opened mail.

No doubt all of this cleaning was Dalia's doing, and Amar wondered just how much whining Erfan must have done to see that she'd violated his arrangement of things.

She'd tilted her head into the headphones, and watched the record spin in endless rotation. Her expression was bedazzled, like a child's. Amar wondered what she was listening to. He wanted to ask, but rather he stood there and didn't say a word, hoping any minute, she would pour out an explanation for her absence..

But she didn't look up, entranced in the song, and it was a few minutes until she looked back up and asked Amar if he needed anything, as if he was an attendant.

“Is Erfan here?”

“No, he's out. What did you want to see him for?”

Though he was still upset, Amar went ahead and spoke. He told her about the demo with Raouf, and the various songs he played, including the bhangra set. At this, Dalia's eyes rose with great interest, and Amar went on, embellishing details. As he did, she appeared more and more engaged, and he began to feel that actually, his set was rather good in retrospect.

“You will *get it*,” she said, with a giddy elation that made Amar chuckle to himself lightly, so she couldn't hear. These behaviors of hers – the way her bottom lip folded under her top row of teeth as she laughed, how her raven hair tumbled like flowing water – that turned his faint pangs of attraction into a cacophony of noise, blocking out all other thoughts, and when that happened, and he attempted to push that noise into the next level, the simple powers of time and space conspired against him, turning his love song into a nursery rhyme.

In his mind, Amar had already placed himself on that raised platform, under whizzing strobe lights and above a packed floor. He was spinning, everything and anything, so much his own fantasy could not decide. But it was noise and they raved. He *was* Tiesto, Van Helden, Sinclar.

Amar sighed, and the uneasiness from earlier in Xenos returned. But of course Erfan would come. Something had to interrupt his plans. And he couldn't argue around it. What if he'd need Erfan to make a case to the "Big Man"? If they were anything like Indians, he thought, a Persian owner would only listen to another Persian.

"Listen," Dalia said. "I was cleaning around, and I found this record here. I'm guessing it's yours. Erfan would never bother listening to something this...this...beautiful."

She removed the needle from the vinyl and lifted it so Amar could see.

"It's mine. I mean, it's my grandfather's really. I've kept it though.

He'd left it on the platter carelessly, despondent about her disappearance. Seeing it now, he was instantly taken back to his home as a child, when his grandfather had come to live with him.

He walked over to Dalia, the scent of honeysuckle emanating strongly from her, and told her where it came from.

Amar's parents had never been ones to patronize the arts. Music was limited to Kishore and Rafi songs in the car during long road trips. But it was a passive listen. Sometimes they would sing along, reminisce about the movie the song came from. Only

his grandfather, the antiquated gramophone with the golden horn, was the closest he'd known to avid music during his childhood.

His grandfather had, after much prodding and pleading from the family, decided to leave his property in India and come over to America at the beginning of summer, when Amar had just gotten off from school. The two of them would be alone all day. Amar would keep himself busy with television and toys modeled after his favorite cartoon characters, and would forget entirely that he wasn't alone.

But in the dead still house, Amar began to hear a slight twinge emerge from upstairs. Then someone began singing, but it wasn't his grandfather's voice. In fact, it was a woman's, and sounded like Hindi. Her serenade floated down and he ran up towards it.

In the bare bedroom that had been set up for him, his grandfather sat on the bed, hands clasped between his legs, head nodding down. On the dresser sat an ancient record player, the kind that Amar had only seen in movies that took place in World War Two, with the big megaphone that looked like a tuba horn. From here, the woman was singing. Her voice crackled through static, jumping over the crevices and indentations the record had picked up over time. Amar imagined she probably had flowers in her hair, and a red sari. He could make out tabla drums in the background. The silent house became a temple, and the song a religious meditation.

"Ghazal," his grandfather said, pointing at the phonograph. "Do you know what a ghazal is?" Amar had nodded. His parents had explained to him, old Urdu devotional songs. *Muslim songs*, they'd said. *Not worth it. But sometimes okay.* The song finished,

and his grandfather turned the phonograph off and went downstairs. Amar considered turning the record player back on and hearing the song again, but he didn't know how.

When his grandfather passed away, Amar took the old dusty record as his own, more as a keepsake than to play. It sat in a box in his college dorm, until he met Erfan and the two began hoarding every vinyl they could get their hands on, and so he re-discovered its charm, with a new appreciation for its rhythm and lyric.

“The words,” he told Dalia. “You have to look at the words. After you've spent four hours with some electric sounds screeching in your ears, it's nice to hear this. Just the tabla and voice. It just flows through the air, and crests, and then settles in your heart. The love and loss that he's singing about, all of a sudden you feel it. It's like the opposite of booze, really. Instead of making you dizzy, it grounds you. It's refreshing. Something new, I guess.”

“What does it mean.”

“I wish I knew what it all meant,” he said. “I don't really.”

Saying this, he was saddened. What magic did his grandfather see in it? Everytime the record played, Amar had been drawn not by the words, but lovelorn look he had. He wanted to know what it was, and wanted to feel it at well.

“How do you spin all of those Bollywood songs, then?”

“Just the music, the feeling. Sometimes you just know when the song works.”

He took the the faded label and cracked black grooves from her fingers, and slipped it back in the cover.

“I’m sorry I didn’t show last night,” she said.

Amar jolted up, his face red with lament and embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” She put the record down and took his hand. “I’ll tell you what – give me another chance. Let’s go out tonight like we planned. And I’ll tell you what the words mean.”

“You know what it means?”

“Well, it’s Urdu, so it’s a little closer to Farsi than Hindi. Jeez, I know more about your culture than you do.”

He smiled and looked at her, his anger calming. He imagined Dalia as the woman singing the ghazal, and wondered how she’d look in a sari.

“You look bewildered,” she said. “So, what do you think? Deal?”

Amar didn’t stop himself from saying, “Yes.” In fact, he did so whole-heartedly that the moment after the syllable left his tongue he immediately realized the kind of subordinate role he’d gleefully accepted, and remembered all the talk Erfan had made about Dalia’s regality and sense of entitlement. But he wanted to abide.

Chapter 13

More and more Jayant began requesting BD Prasad to let him travel out to Veraval.

“You know these royals,” he would say, palms folded to his superior. “They get tired so quickly. We barely get around to discussing one item on the deed and already he wants to take his afternoon nap.”

B.D. Prasad would slide his wig off of his head and wring it tightly, letting beads of perspiration collect on his dry birchwood desk, void of any lacquer or finish. He’d wait until the beads were soaked into the wood, put the wig back on and say, “Make sure to keep all of your train tickets. The court accountant won’t reimburse you for it otherwise.”

There was almost a divine fashion to how it worked out. On the weekends he felt compelled to stay with his wife. During the week, she would be at the Lion’s Club playing gin rummy with some of the other ladies, and she would be less likely to dwell on where he was and why. By going during the week, and during work hours, the court paid for his costs. And like that, Jayant whisked himself back and forth.

Mondays and Tuesdays he would sit in the office and try to finish as much paperwork as he could – stacks upon stacks of cases that he simply signed away as resolved – *The Municipal Court feels so-and-so is more than capable of tending his own crops, and will not further consider enforcing any injury compensation. The Municipal Court feels children are considered one man’s property, and by traditions of our country, dowry is acceptable means of purchasing property. In light of our greater concerns, the*

Municipal Court will not hear and instead collect fines for all cases that do not involve degree-one offenses.

Wednesday morning he would go to the station. He found something comforting in it. Just as midday lifted the sun to its highest and most scorching point in the sky, midweek found everyone in the Municipal offices occupied with tasks, some left straggling from the week before and others threatening them from the week ahead. In this confusion, he felt he could slip away, that no one would pay attention if he were missing.

On the train even, he would look around and see, men and women, old and middle aged, and even some children, all holding glassy eyed stares. They look out the windows or down the aisles or at the newspaper. Jayant's mused through all of the various things in the world that could be on their minds. The work waiting for them at the office, the ill relative they have to go see, debates in Congress, the cost of green beans in the market, the child whose latest grade report was less than satisfactory. And then he'd smile to himself, knowing that by the time the train reached the end of the line, none of this was of any consequence to him.

When he got to Verval, Pratab's smile would be waiting for him, seeping red saliva. And each week on the drive out to the Nawab's home, Jayant would get more of Pratab's life story, like installments of a television serial. He'd hear of the kids getting into trouble at school, the small rat had made its home in the stores of dry rice, or the blue film and whisky Pratab had spent his money on the night prior. Jayant wondered if this future lay before him, after his wife would have children, after he'd get appointed higher

in the magistrate, after the Nawab's estate transfer was, as it would eventually be, resolved.

They, Jayant and Nawab Khanji, would lunch on the patio everyday, then descend into the crypt of melodies, as they'd begun to call it. It was one of many jokes and chides that developed between them, as they'd sit before the instruments.

Nawab, the tutor, and Jayant, once again the abiding student, would sit on either side of the table drums. Jayant would hammer away at the coarse cowhide surface, striving to mimic the same notes that the Nawab uttered from his mouth, *Dha, dha, dha!* *Dhin, dhin, dhin!*

"Dha, I said!" He would yell.

"Sorry," Jayant would say. His fingers hurt, but he wouldn't dare admit this.

"Dha, dhin! How hard, Mr. Baxi? A man who has written long legal reports and constructed cases of intricate arguments and lines of theory, you can't even whack the bloody black spot."

"*Arey, bhenchod, whack your sister's bloody black spot!*"

The Nawab took the joke heartily, and Jayant mirrored him, but only briefly, immediately feeling ashamed for sullyng a woman who just a few feet above him, probably lounging on a patio chair, fanning herself, as she usually was whenever he would arrive.

Sarika would sit there as the men had lunch, and remain so when they emerged from their crypt, either unaware or unconcerned about her children. In that midday light,

as the sun began its descent in the West, Jayant thought she looked very ravishing, but distant, and cold. He would try to speak with her, but she would only look at him with daggers, then smile and nod. If the children came by, she would shoo them away, commanding them to eat dinner and wash and little else. As the day's light began to dim, she would retire early to bed. It was as if with the setting sun, her own world was leaving her.

But it was in these later, cooler hours of the day that Jayant and Khanji took up their other shared passion, tennis. Here, the Nawab had had less practice, and Jayant was not the student but rather peer. Their games weren't remarkable, but enjoyable. Still playful insults were volleyed with the ball, but Jayant was careful to keep boundaries in Sarika's earshot.

“Deuce, deuce!” Jayant would say.

“Deuce, your ass!” Nawab would cry.

They would laugh some more, and take pleasure in such jabs. It was the kind of humor that passed between soldiers on the battlefield, in the midst of enemy fire, or boys playing in the wilds, unwatched by parents. It was a friendship that developed despite the political nature of Jayant's presence there, and of this he was very aware.

As Jayant sat before the Nawab, taking instruction and doing his best to repeat it, he would strike the *table* harder so that his fingers would indeed hurt, a kind of penance for his subversion of duties. Was it a lie he had given to B.D. Prasad? Surely this kind of socialization was unheard of for counsel and their clients? How else could they make

effective legal action without having a person knowledge and awareness of each other, of the personality and the soul?

As time went on, preparations were made for the move to Pakistan. Crates and suitcases were packed and sent to Karachi. Sarika, as any woman of stature, had a many outfits ranging across colors, with the right bangles and *jhootis*, sandals, to match. A multitude of miniature paintings with Urdu calligraphy. A woman of class, Jayant thought, unlike his own wife, who though for all of her pretense at cards games and club luncheons, was not very knowledgeable about fashion or arts.

Though from an ancient line of nobility, and of a creed that had been categorized as without place in the New India, the Nawab struck Jayant as a man not too different from himself. He was a man who was bound to a vocation other than what he truly enjoyed. Beyond music, he was also an avid lover of animals. Muhammad Khanji was renowned for having one of the greatest animal preserves in India, on a plot of land some distance from the bungalow, further inland from the sea.

“Lest they decide to leap off and swim away,” he explained. “We cannot bare to let our greatest treasures leave the subcontinent.”

But this preserve had been shut down long before Jayant had arrived. Khanji’s most favorites were sent to the new residence in Pakistan, and otherwise the plot, like everything else, would be seceded back to Gujurat State for conversion into a safari for tourism. “Might as well take my Gir cows to market and just hack them up in front of everyone,” the Nawab said bitterly.

Back in Ahmedabad, life would continue like clockwork. In the Municipality, the arriving secession of the acquirement of Junagadh had spurred the clerks and assistants to actually hammer at their typewriters and shuffle about the hallways, passing chits and notes and reports between offices. Even B.D. Prasad himself became very acquainted with his phone, calling the various departments to make sure Junagadh appeared on state maps, that a constabulary was established, and commissions for electricity, and water if they could spare it.

At home, Jayant gathered few changes as well. He would call, and his wife would answer with a leisurely, “hello?” almost relishing his absence. He gave his pleasantries, and hung up as quick as possible. Later when he returned, he would walk into a home and feel, for a change, tranquility in the air, which quickly dissipated when his wife peeked her head from the kitchen and her face turned dour again.

One day that fall, as it had finally started to cool, Jayant walked into his office to find a letter on his desk. Kantilal looked up from his paper and asked, “Personal mail from the Nawab, eh? You two must be getting buddy-buddy.”

Jayant laughed off the comment and opened the letter:

Noble Baxi,

I think the moment has finally come. I can hear the planes over the house. One of my horse breeders said he saw tanks crossing the landscape during his morning ride. I think I can hear them also, now. They have a roar and rattle that I cannot equate anything to. Sarika and our children left for Pakistan some days ago. We have found a small house there, nothing as great as this of course, but we will live as Pakistanis among others like us. I must say, though I intend to return (as is still the plan, I hope?) I do feel an emptiness in this house without my sister. The presence of a woman does add to a home, Mr. Baxi. One like her, so passionate, as you know. Of course, lately she has not been her lively self. She is, and will always be

bitter about what happened here. But, still I say, passion, good sir! To have a woman unbridled with ferocity is more captivating than one who is demure.

At least we will be reunited soon. And I, with you, sir. I propose we make an engagement to meet once every three months, on the seventeenth. It is an auspicious day in my family. Perhaps it is best to keep communication at a minimum. I will make my arrangements to arrive, as will you, I'm sure.

Noble Khanji

Chapter 14

“I get to decide tonight,” she said.

Her tone was unequivocal for Amar, but he didn't mind. When she emerged from her bedroom, gone were the slinky dresses and the glitter speckled high heel shoes. Gone was the rouge under the eyes or matching nail polish. Instead, Dalia had on only a pair of jeans and a white, laced camisole.

“That's all?” he asked.

“What?” She stared back at him. “It's not a fancy place.”

“You, not in a fancy place?”

“What, you think I'm some kind of rich brat?” she said, crossing her arms.

“I think the word Erfan used was princess.”

“How about we try something? Let's not say his name for the rest of the night.”

Amar was perfectly fine with that.

They were going to a rave party at the harbor, on one of the piers. It wasn't at the waterfront they'd been at the other night, but farther down at the city limits, just before where the shipping yards began, but long after the restaurants and paddle-boat houses ended. There was a open-roof venue that held concerts and music festivals. But every spring break, Dalia explained, some unknown group of party promoters and DJs got together for an Ibiza-style grand dance pit.

“I used to go every year when I was here for college. Erfan would always beg me to take him along.”

She offered to pay for the taxi ride down. As they rode down, she edged closer to him in the backseat, and he wanted to know more about her.

She told him about her belly dancing days, about how her name became synonymous amongst her family and friends for being the girl who would strap on the belt of golden coins, with the matching halter top and skirt, and gyrate her waist. Erfan, still in his early mixing days, would stitch together cassette tapes of Arabic songs.

“Like something you would hear at the bazaar during the Crusades,” she described. “We were so stupid back then. It didn’t occur to us that we weren’t even Arab. We didn’t even know the words.”

She began dancing at community functions, and even taught a belly dancing workout class at the local gym. At fifteen, she was the youngest, and most popular, instructor. Her sessions had twice the exercisers than the zumba or spinning classes. She said she knew most of them were just there to look at her. “I was fifteen. Who doesn’t love that attention at fifteen?” Amar cringed at the frankness.

But one day, when the car broke down, her step-father had to come pick her up at the gym. Standing outside the studio, he caught the comments of chiseled benchpressers – men who he assumed moonlighted as football players or Navy SEALs during the weekends – *Sexy little kitten. Look at her shake.*

He forced her to pull from the gym's workout roster, and toss her outfit away in the back of the closet. She told him he was being unreasonable, and he said those with enchanting looks should beware of men who look upon them. She snapped back, saying that he wasn't her real father, and that he didn't give her those looks. So how dare he.

Bless the man, Amar thought, but didn't say. He asked if she still danced.

"Nope, never," she said. "By the time I was old enough to act on my own, I was too old to care. After that it was full and final."

"Think of all the buff jerkoffs you disappointed."

"Most of them were pretty nice, you know."

Amar was too scared to ask if they ever did make advances on her, because that would inevitably lead him to asking if she'd accepted. The thought seized him completely, and he went mute, mouth gaping.

"But, whatever," she said. "It's not like I had to worry about them. Buff guys aren't even my type. I wouldn't have even noticed them."

Amar felt his muscles tense further, and now pondered ways to become shirtless so she could see his bare, unsculpted, rectangular abdomen.

"Would you ever belly dance again, like if someone asked?"

"Who's asking?"

"Anyone."

“Not anyone. But someone.” *What did that mean?*

“But,” she continued, “the whole idea really turns me off now. You’re basically like a stripper, whoring out.” Her face sank a little at the embarrassment. “I guess that never occurred to me when I was little.”

When they arrived, the roar of the crowd was deafening, even at a distance of a hundred yards away. Out in the darkness, at the edge of the water Amar could see a rainbow of lights, flashing and sparking into the night sky.

On a rigged stage at the edge of the pier, just where the waves began to lap onto the coast, a lone DJ was spinning away. Headphones clapped against his head, pressing long waves of blond hair onto his face and shielding it from sight.

Amar was struck by the way he was at once dwarfed by his surroundings, by the large speakers and banners strung around him, and his audience’s fists swaying in the air like flags in a battle zone, and in turn, this contrast only made him seem more like some kind of scion.

“Here, can you hold my phone?” she said, slipping it into his hand before he even answered.

“Don’t you have a purse or anything to put it in?” he said, pocketing it.

She shook her head.

As they walked further in, the crowd grew more and more dense. Amar had thought that after so many experiences, he’d have trained himself to navigate through the sweltering collection of bodies, a snakelike movement with his outstretched hand parting

the way like an explorer's machete to the brush. He assumed Dalia would also be used to it, she was cut off by some dancers, and he felt her grip fall away in the sea of bodies. At once he was swimming, not amidst waves and foam, but drops of sweat and cheap booze and cheers of ecstasy. The reverberating trance buzz rendered him under its control, and he gave up to it. He was thrown around and disoriented.

Now the DJ was on top of one of the large speakers, and jumping up and down. Behind him, the records kept spinning. If this place is a temple, Amar thought, then the DJ was God's voice.

He felt a tight grip on his arm that pulled him through the surge of bodies. He found himself in Dalia's arms, and they jumped up and down with the rests, fists in the sky. For the moment was held in metronome. He drew closer, and pulled her into him. The beat remained constant, and for as long as it was that way, it didn't seem as if there was anyway he would falter. His hand slipped around her waist, tiny and slender. He felt her arms come around him, in suit.

The song hit a climax, and with a sharp cut the switched from a hyper-kinetic techno vomit, and deflated into a down-n-dirty grinder beat. The floor became a clothed orgy. Amar felt Dalia's body release from his, her smile contorted into a wry scrunch. The DJ bobbed his head, displaying white-toothed glee. "Clumsy fade, idiot!" he said aloud, but it was lost in the noise.

This time he was able to follow her out of the crowd, to the bars at the edge of the crowd. She ordered a beer and a shot for both of them. They touched their shot glasses, without dedicating the toast, and downed the acrid, cheap vodka.

“Wow, it’s been awhile. I’m having fun, Amar.” She said. “I’m having fun.”

He broke into laughter. “You know, I think this pretty much has become my life lately. It’s all I’ve really been doing.”

“Oh, that’s not good. It’s not healthy. You can’t let something like this consume you.”

“Well, Erfan says –“

“You always do what Erfan tells you?” she snapped back, her sharp eyes full of venom, and a scowl that made Amir uneasy. The playful sibling rivalry from earlier that day had vanished. Where did the animosity come from? Did something happen between them after he left?

Dalia noticed his reaction, and her face softened. “Sorry. I’m just saying that he doesn’t know everything. You’re smart. If you want to become something, you should do it on your own. Don’t rely on him, or anybody too much. Not at all”

Why did he keep bringing Erfan into the conversation? Amar scolded himself. She said not to mention him. His presence hovered over Amar’s shoulders like a shadow, watching each movement, preying on each spoken word.

Chapter 15

After awhile Khusrow gathered the courage to ask the Priest what exactly had happened in order to turn the temple from a grand fortress of God's enlightenment into an open tomb.

“An army came,” the holy man answered. “A great one. I have ever seen so many men in one sight. I did not even think that so many men were even there in the world to have an army so great. They did not charge in altogether, as the whole mass of them would have quickly crowded the space inside the walls of the temple. First, a band of about five or ten soldiers rode up to the walls. One announced himself as the general of the King Jalladin's army, but I don't know who that is. Ramcharan, another priest, asked him what his business was, and then he swiftly received a blade to his neck. The five or ten men then rode inside the walls, up the stairs and into the temple. Horse's hooves on the temple floor! Brother Haricharan was performing his prayer at the time, and had invoked only a hundred or so names of God before the blade came driving through his chest.

“They spared not a moment before disrobing saris off of the idols, along the jewelry, lanterns, bells, and anything else that had luster and apparent value. A box of donations, which we kept in the open, in the back near our quarters, was lashed with ropes and dragged away by the snorting beasts. Those five or ten men left, dragging the coffer across the sand to rejoin their main body, and as soon as they reached, I saw the general shout another command, and now the entire force, of hundreds, thousands, how can I even know, drove at the temple. They did not yell cries of battle or ferocity. I could only hear and feel the rumble of the hooves as the ground quaked beneath me.

“The wall came tearing down. It is not a strong wall, mind you. Dislodging one, perhaps two stones at the weaker areas will bring it all down, and these mongrels knew this. As if the draperies had been cascaded from a window, revealing the sun’s morning radiance -- but only now, there was a queue of malicious beasts standing behind. In the similar fashion, did they bring down the temple. Columns toppled and with them the structures they supported. Craters and dents marked the faces of these lovely stone bodies, their serenity now turned into scars of battle. Rock for rock, into pebbles and dust.

“And so my surprise, they set fire to the rock. I know what can burn in this world – oil, grass, flesh, butter – but rock! Whether they sat in piles of rubble or straggled isolated, the rock suddenly lit, surrounded by flame. But the rocks did not crumble away into nothingness. They remained the same size, the shape, as they were. But the embers went on. Soon there was a smell in the air of thick, black, gravel that swept up my nostrils and buried under my tongue. I remember spitting over and over, trying to rid of it, but it took days to leave. And so also for days, did the rocks continue to burn.

“Some still burn in fact. They do not wither away for God does not want them to. They are the pieces that build his home; he will not let them fall apart. But yet he keeps the fires burning, as a way to remind me, to remind you, and anyone else who comes here – such an act of destruction is only returned with greater wrath and vengeance. For tearing down this temple, your shah, will face such a collapse of his kingdom, that not only the Muslim temples, but his palaces, his towns, the homes of women and sleeping babies, shall crumble down and be swept away into the past.”

Khusrow looked at him, in half disbelief, and half uneasiness. His shaking voice asked: “How can you wish such malice as a holy man? Your scriptures do not preach reprisal.”

“Scripture and poetry are the same, sire, except for one difference. Poets craft ambiguous sentences about what is in their minds, and hence about nothing. What a selfish activity. Scripture has one meaning, borne of this Earth, that God wants us to find. All men strive for unity with each other. Malice comes only to those who want to retain that selfish mind.”

Chapter 16

As the years passed, the appointments happened as scheduled. Jayant would arrive as always for lunch and leave the next morning. He would go straight to the office and put in a good day's work, which was now piling up as the country matured and required duties of its public servants. Old family estates were sold off, new land tracts bought for high rise flats, roads paved to further bring country and city closer to each other, shrinking the world.

He would go home, telling his wife it had gotten busy the night before and he had slept in his office. She never quite believed him, he knew, but he didn't care. Time to time he would ask how the kids are doing, and she would shrug and say, "Passing school. Playing outside."

"We should give them music lessons, eh? After school."

"You can handle that. I have my bridge at the club in the afternoon."

Jayant would nod, and fantasize about seeing Ashish play the tabla. Mansi would need something else, more fitting for a girl like her. Sitar perhaps. Then, he realized, he could not in his own imagination conjure up what his children looked like.

Chapter 17

“I get to decide tonight,” she said.

Her tone was unequivocal for Amar, but he didn't mind. When she emerged from her bedroom, gone were the slinky dresses and the glitter speckled high heel shoes. Gone was the rouge under the eyes or matching nail polish. Instead, Dalia had on only a pair of jeans and a white, laced camisole.

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“I used to go every year when I was here for college. Erfan would always beg me to take him along.”

She offered to pay for the taxi ride down. As they rode down, she edged closer to him in the backseat, and he wanted to know more about her.

She told him about her belly dancing days, about how her name became synonymous amongst her family and friends for being the girl who would strap on the belt of golden coins, with the matching halter top and skirt, and gyrate her waist. Erfan, still in his early mixing days, would stitch together cassette tapes of Arabic songs.

“Like something you would hear at the bazaar during the Crusades,” she described. “We were so stupid back then. It didn’t occur to us that we weren’t even Arab. We didn’t even know the words.”

She began dancing at community functions, and even taught a belly dancing workout class at the local gym. At fifteen, she was the youngest, and most popular, instructor. Her sessions had twice the exercisers than the zumba or spinning classes. She said she knew most of them were just there to look at her. “I was fifteen. Who doesn’t love that attention at fifteen?” Amar cringed at the frankness.

But one day, when the car broke down, her step-father had to come pick her up at the gym. Standing outside the studio, he caught the comments of chiseled benchpressers – men who he assumed moonlighted as football players or Navy SEALs during the weekends – *Sexy little kitten. Look at her shake.*

He forced her to pull from the gym's workout roster, and toss her outfit away in the back of the closet. She told him he was being unreasonable, and he said those with enchanting looks should beware of men who look upon them. She snapped back, saying that he wasn't her real father, and that he didn't give her those looks. So how dare he.

Bless the man, Amar thought, but didn't say. He asked if she still danced.

"Nope, never," she said. "By the time I was old enough to act on my own, I was too old to care. After that it was full and final."

"Think of all the buff jerkoffs you disappointed."

"Most of them were pretty nice, you know."

Amar was too scared to ask if they ever did make advances on her, because that would inevitably lead him to asking if she'd accepted. The thought seized him completely, and he went mute, mouth gaping.

"But, whatever," she said. "It's not like I had to worry about them. Buff guys aren't even my type. I wouldn't have even noticed them."

Amar felt his muscles tense further, and now pondered ways to become shirtless so she could see his bare, unsculpted, rectangular abdomen.

"Would you ever belly dance again, like if someone asked?"

"Who's asking?"

"Anyone."

“Not anyone. But someone.” *What did that mean?*

“But,” she continued, “the whole idea really turns me off now. You’re basically like a stripper, whoring out.” Her face sank a little at the embarrassment. “I guess that never occurred to me when I was little.”

When they arrived, the roar of the crowd was deafening, even at a distance of a hundred yards away. Out in the darkness, at the edge of the water Amar could see a rainbow of lights, flashing and sparking into the night sky.

On a rigged stage at the edge of the pier, just where the waves began to lap onto the coast, a lone DJ was spinning away. Headphones clapped against his head, pressing long waves of blond hair onto his face and shielding it from sight.

Amar was struck by the way he was at once dwarfed by his surroundings, by the large speakers and banners strung around him, and his audience’s fists swaying in the air like flags in a battle zone, and in turn, this contrast only made him seem more like some kind of scion.

“Here, can you hold my phone?” she said, slipping it into his hand before he even answered.

“Don’t you have a purse or anything to put it in?” he said, pocketing it.

She shook her head.

As they walked further in, the crowd grew more and more dense. Amar had thought that after so many experiences, he’d have trained himself to navigate through the sweltering collection of bodies, a snakelike movement with his outstretched hand parting

the way like an explorer's machete to the brush. He assumed Dalia would also be used to it, she was cut off by some dancers, and he felt her grip fall away in the sea of bodies. At once he was swimming, not amidst waves and foam, but drops of sweat and cheap booze and cheers of ecstasy. The reverberating trance buzz rendered him under its control, and he gave up to it. He was thrown around and disoriented.

Now the DJ was on top of one of the large speakers, and jumping up and down. Behind him, the records kept spinning. If this place is a temple, Amar thought, then the DJ was God's voice.

He felt a tight grip on his arm that pulled him through the surge of bodies. He found himself in Dalia's arms, and they jumped up and down with the rests, fists in the sky. For the moment was held in metronome. He drew closer, and pulled her into him. The beat remained constant, and for as long as it was that way, it didn't seem as if there was anyway he would falter. His hand slipped around her waist, tiny and slender. He felt her arms come around him, in suit.

The song hit a climax, and with a sharp cut the switched from a hyper-kinetic techno vomit, and deflated into a down-n-dirty grinder beat. The floor became a clothed orgy. Amar felt Dalia's body release from his, her smile contorted into a wry scrunch. The DJ bobbed his head, displaying white-toothed glee. "Clumsy fade, idiot!" he said aloud, but it was lost in the noise.

This time he was able to follow her out of the crowd, to the bars at the edge of the crowd. She ordered a beer and a shot for both of them. They touched their shot glasses, without dedicating the toast, and downed the acrid, cheap vodka.

“Wow, it’s been awhile. I’m having fun, Amar.” She said. “I’m having fun.”

He broke into laughter. “You know, I think this pretty much has become my life lately. It’s all I’ve really been doing.”

“Oh, that’s not good. It’s not healthy. You can’t let something like this consume you.”

“Well, Erfan says –“

“You always do what Erfan tells you?” she snapped back, her sharp eyes full of venom, and a scowl that made Amir uneasy. The playful sibling rivalry from earlier that day had vanished. Where did the animosity come from? Did something happen between them after he left?

Dalia noticed his reaction, and her face softened. “Sorry. I’m just saying that he doesn’t know everything. You’re smart. If you want to become something, you should do it on your own. Don’t rely on him, or anybody too much. Not at all”

Why did he keep bringing Erfan into the conversation? Amar scolded himself. She said not to mention him. His presence hovered over Amar’s shoulders like a shadow, watching each movement, preying on each spoken word.

“Come on,” she said, leading him to the dance floor. As he walked behind, the scent of attar floated back toward him, impregnating his head with a sharp vigor. He imagined this is what taking drugs must have felt like, the jolt of euphoria, the rush of blood throughout the body.

Amar stood at the edge of the rackish black water, the musky air calm and dissipating. He was trying his best not to act as drunk as he was, and knew he was failing. Dalia meanwhile, who'd not taken a single drop, was in her own inebriation: throws of excitement.

The music, thankfully, had finally ended. It would be dawn in a few hours. Cabs lined the pier and groups began piling in, six and seven at a time, despite the protests of the drivers. Amar hesitated at the choices, compelled to find the right one. Would the driver be Paki, Sikh, African? Would he play his scratchy, worn cassette at the highest level? Would he take the quickest route, arriving in front of her house before he could have time to say anything? And most importantly, one where they would be left alone.

“Hey!” Dalia called. She'd chosen for the both of them.

He got in. The driver was indeed Paki. The flag hung from his rearview mirror, the white crescent moon against the block of green. As the car roved down the street, it dangled in the light, racketing against the beads. Amar caught the driver's eyes looking at him, at them. They told him he'd taken note of their skin, their complexion. Good kids, I don't have to worry about you.

“That was the most fun I've had,” Dalia said. “Ever.”

“That good, huh?” He stopped trying, and let his body collapse onto the stiff leather, ripped and torn. He patted his hand on the empty space next to him.

“I need a cigarette.” She said, drifting over. Earrings and jewelry began coming off.

“But neither of us smoke.”

“We both know that’s not true,” she said. “Don’t lie.”

“Let’s just keep driving. Back home, huh?”

“I could use one.” Clip unfastened. Hair tumbling. “You probably could too.”

She turned her head, beading brown eyes staring back at him. The orange beams of light passed through the cabin of the taxi like vespers as it rumbled through the streets. She stroked his head with the back of her hand, like his mother checking for fever.

Her face illuminated for a brief moment, and she said, disgruntled, “Don’t worry about it.”

Her gaze turned back to the night sky, and they sat, each at one end of the backseat. In the front, the taxi driver fiddled with buttons on his stereo, and a scratchy noise filled the silence, until a ripe male voice came through. The driver began humming along, and Amar recognized the song immediately, “Mere Saamne Wali Khidki Mein,” from *Padosan*. Another film he’d never seen, with a song he’d heard enough to last three lifetimes.

“Sir,” the taxi driver spoke, “where are we driving to again?”

Amar realized they’d never actually told him any destination. He almost had to yell Dalia’s address over the music. *Ek chand ka tukda rehet hai...*

“What, sir?” He motioned his hand into the small plexiglass window, motioning to come closer. Amar leaned to the edge of the seat and peered through, the song on full blast. The ID plate posted on the dashboard had the man’s picture, ancient with a 70s pornstar mustache, next to his name, Ali.

“This is where the young lady lives, hmm?” Ali whispered, repeating the address.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“But when we reach, date night will be over, yes? Forgive me, but both of you seem quite upset over a couples’ quarrels.”

Amar knew taxi drivers could be chatty, but even here was a fellow brown man, old enough to be his father, playing relationship therapist. He felt Dalia behind him, arching her body forward to hear.

“It is not good to part ways when in such moods,” Ali said. “Perhaps some food? An full stomach will cool the curdling blood.”

“Where? Now?”

“Can you kindly inform the madam we’ll be taking a detour?”

Ali slid the plastic door closed. Amar knew, while usually he wouldn’t be so comfortable with the driver making such a request, he wanted to regain some control over the night, to put Dalia in a position where she couldn’t make her royal demands.

He settled back into the seat, Dalia watching him with leering eyes. He cringed at the thought inciting more anger over the taxi driver’s whims.

“So, does he know where it is?” she asked.

“Yes, but he wants to make a stop for food.”

“What?” She leaned forward for the door.

“Well, couldn’t you use some food too? My stomach’s pretty empty.”

“Amar, how do you know he’s not going to take us to some back alley and chop us up?”

“Oh calm down. This is not a slasher movie. Be a little adventurous.”

“That’s not the point!” She was yelling now. They both looked at the front, but Ali was enrapt in his classics. Dalia moved closer, lowering her voice. “How you trust people so blindly?” The attar had fainted, but was still potent.

The song changed. As the window slid open, Amar could make out “Love in Tokyo.”

“So, is madam okay with our detour?” Ali asked.

“Are you taking us to the ghetto?”

“Ghetto, yes, admittedly. But this is the best food in the city. I go in this neighborhood many times. Just last night, even. No one will fool around with a stupid taxi.”

Amar sense taut tension in the cabin, but he didn’t want to give in to her, not yet.

“He’s a fellow brown man,” he said. “I don’t think he’s trying to rip us off or anything.”

“Fine,” she said, huffing and puffing like the wolf who couldn’t blow any houses down. She slid the window shut, and said to Amar, “Don’t put too much faith in people. You’re just going to get screwed up one way or another.”

Her remark didn’t alarm him anymore. He took it to be all part of her coded messages, her veiled assertions of power. Still, he thought about the people who he trusted in his life, but really, there was no one. Where he had gotten so far in life, had all been of his own action and drive. George had handed him the opportunities, but he was the one who had to go out and deal with the demanding clientele. And that had only brought him to a dry, dusty plateau. In the distance he saw the mountaintops that he truly wanted to reach, capped with shimmering golden snow.

She was still upset, but Amar sat silently, apathetic. He considered apologizing, and perhaps the amiable rapport would return. But if he could, if he had the motivation.

Another known tune played on the radio. It was a mellow pop tune, perfectly at place in a Peter Sellers movie, Hindi lyrics and all. He could place the voice as Rafi, or perhaps it was still late-era Kishore. The title he didn’t know, but he hummed along anyway, to the light-hearted flute whistle and soft horns.

The taxi stopped in front of a 24-hour kabob shop, the indoors fluorescent bright in the otherwise sleepy street. There were only a few small tables, one of which sat a two other taxi drivers, deeply mediating and masticating over a plate of chana masala and piece of hot buttery roti.

Ali the driver motioned for Amar and Dalia to approach the counter. “Please, have something. Good food. My friend owns it.”

As they took a step further, a hoodie and sweatpants brushed before them and walked up to the counter, quickly picking up an order and hurrying back out. Amar caught the eyes, blazen red, inside the hood. Dalia froze in her place, her hand lightly taking hold of Amar’s wrist. “Why don’t you go ahead, Ali,” he said. “I’m still thinking.”

Ali did not hesitate, and strode up to the young boy at the counter to place his order. He then popped his head up and down like a bird, peering into the kitchen behind.

“Hey, son, where is the manager? Where is Najib?”

“Not here, man.” The boy didn’t look up, focused on his doodling on top of a book of receipt slips. Ali turned and offered again. “Please, my friend Najib makes best kabob in the city. He is not here, or he would greet you himself. You would be able to try some of his famous complimentary lassi.”

“We got the lassi, if you want” The boy said, eyes still unwavering.

“A round, son!” Ali said, holding up three fingers.

The boy returned shortly with a tray of the lassis, in small plastic cups with red straws, and a Styrofoam plate of Ali’s chicken kabob and rice. The aroma was succulent, the oil still sizzling and bubbling on the skin, red-orange from the spices. Amar’s mouth watered at the sight of it. He took a long sip of lassi, the cold and sweet yogurt feeling smooth as it trailed down his throat. Dalia still didn’t touch anything.

One of the taxi drivers from the other table, a Sikh with bushy white facial hair, let out a egregious belch. He leaned back in the chair, and scrubbed his mustache.

“Oh, Ali!” He said. “*Bhai*, I did not see you there.”

“How are you, sir?” Ali said to the man. He swiveled his chair over to the other table, its legs screeching against the plastered tiles, and the two dived into a crossfire of Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi. The third driver remained mute, but listened intently.

Dalia sat across the table at Amar, face full of disappointment. Her stare was like his own mother was looking at him, from times as a child when he spilt milk from the heavy jug, left toast burning in the oven. Acts he took upon himself to become more self sufficient and independent, trying to show her he had control of a situation. But instead they backfired, and he'd be left casting his head down, unable to look at her mother's scorn.

He congratulated himself now for having, at least, the pride and confidence to stare back at Dalia as her lips twisted and shrunk into a pout, a silent protest. In response, he raised his eyebrows and cracked an uneasy smile. *It's not my fault*, he tried to make them say

He took another sip of the lassi to emphasize his own relaxation in the surrounding. He sucked through the straw all the way down, until only the milky foam was left at the bottom, and slurped it. Seeing her incensed at the childish manner, he did so loudly, until the look of anger diffused, and she took the other glass and took a sip.

“Let's just leave,” she said. “Aren't there other cabs out there?”

“We can’t,” Amar said. “Your phone is in the taxi.”

“Why’d you leave it there?!” she whispered sharply, rage returning.

“My mind was on other things.” It wasn’t entirely true, but not the reason either.

“Other things?”

He sighed. “I was nervous because you were upset.”

“I forgive you for your sympathies. But I’d still like to get home. I don’t see why I’m here, right now, sitting with you and three random old guys.”

Ali, still deep in conversation, didn’t notice any of this, and hadn’t yet touched his food. Amar rubbed his eyes and he checked his watch. Far past midnight, and he had an early morning. Going out on a Thursday night was a bad idea, but he knew why he’d done it, and scolded himself for his foolishness.

The white fluorescent lights felt quite unnatural at this time of night. The restaurant was a closed environment, like a petri dish, hermetically sealed off from the world. The smells wafted in from the kitchen, but with his lassi-filled belly, he no longer had an appetite, and in fact it made him queasy.

A car horn rang wildly outside the restaurant. Ali leapt from his chair, exclaiming, “That sounds like my baby.”

“How can you tell?” asked the Sikh driver.

“A driver creates a connection with his machine, yaar,” Ali said, pulling out his keys. “It’s oil and my blood are one and the same.”

“*Arey, wah*, mister poet. Go check it then. Come back and we’ll order another plate.”

Ali was already out the door. The two cabbies were again engrossed in their food.

“Let’s go now,” Dalia said. “As long as he’s going to the car, we can get my phone.”

Amar hated more commands, but this time he swallowed any retort. With the loss of her phone, her pedestal seemed to have gone, and now instead she’d become a damsel, calling for help. He let himself buckle to it.

When they both exited the kabob shop, they didn’t see Ali the driver anywhere. For a second they disputed which direction the taxi was parked in, neither having paid much attention at all during the drive.

Amar saw something glinting though, to the right. As he walked closer, Dalia in tow, he saw the glint came from broken glass scattered on the sidewalk, next to a taxi. Ali’s taxi. And Ali himself lay hunched behind it, in the street, groaning and wincing in pain. He clutched his head and blood dripped down his temple.

“Let’s get out of here,” Dalia said, grabbing Amar’s hand, pulling

“Don’t be stupid,” he said, brushing it away. “Help me grab him.”

She clutched his shoulders, standing behind him as Amar heaved and propped Ali’s body up against the taxi.

“Thank you,” Ali said, the pain still too great for him to open his eyes. “I came out here and saw these two black thugs sticking their hands through the window. I told them to get lost, but it seems that had different ideas in mind for me.”

“Foolish move, uncle,” Amar said.

“I’m always in these neighborhoods, but rarely do they ever try anything. And no one ever has a gun.”

“Gun...?” Dalia said.

“That’s what they hit me with, what they broke the window with.” He was slowly gaining composure back, and stood on his own feet. “You know, I wonder what they wanted to steal. The radios in these taxis are cheap, old things. We never keep much money.”

A window had been shattered. Amar couldn’t see any cell phone in the backseat, where he’d left it. He looked at her, but her expression told him she’s already looked, and knew as well.

“Sorry,” he said. She didn’t respond.

“I really am – ”

“Please,” Ali intercut. “If possible could you go get one of my friends from inside? They can drive me to a hospital, and you two back home.”

Her looked at Dalia, standing with her arms crossed, collapsing her slender frame between her shoulders, almost shivering. He knew she was not willing to go back alone,

and talk with those strange men, but also he knew it wasn't a choice to leave her there, not if he didn't want to lose his last opportunity to retain a bit of chivalry.

It was she who decided for them. "I will go inside."

Nearly three hours later, they arrived in front of her apartment in the Sikh man's taxi. He'd insisted on waiting in the emergency room until Ali emerged, and when he did, it was without any stitches or medication, only a bandage over his wound. "Next time they'll have to whack a little harder to take me down, eh?" He'd said, grinning.

When she got out of the car, in front of the apartment again, Dalia took Amar's hand and pressed it firmly, assuring him both that the blame for Ali's wound, his stolen phone, and her inconvenience was on him, but also that she empathized it was a mistake, and perhaps, forgivable in the future.

Chapter 18

Khusrow was growing hungrier and angrier, ready to lash at the Priest should he come closer to him, take another sling at his writing ability.

He stood at the rubble gate, looking back across the Thar Desert, wondering if he should, at this moment, run off into the distance as fast as he could, and not stop until he reached Delhi. Rather, in the distance, at the meeting lines between sky and dust, he saw a small black figure trawling toward him.

The man rode on a camel. Khusrow heard the jingle of small silver bells. Slung over the humps of the wallowing beast are sacks filled with jewelry, henna powder, dried jasmine leaves, gunshot, leather skins, and bamboo. The man would have had to travel to all corners of India to collect all of those things, Khusrow thinks and then concludes they must have been spoils of highway robbery.

He says, "How are you?"

Khusrow nods, and taking it as a cue, the man begins:

"I have with me the finest products that are needed in these barren parts. In these lands where man had trouble finding even water and shade in the heat, I come bearing the luxuries of the rajahs. Do you have a minute sir? You look like you're in need of something. Are you in need of something?"

Khusrow looked around, pretending like he was waiting for another man to arrive.

The man continued:

“Please sir do not be shy. Please sir, come here, have a look! I have dates, dried and washed, perfect for popping in your mouth when you desire sweetness on your tongue. You seem to be man of girth and power. Perhaps some rice grains to satisfy an empty belly? Ah, yes, so rice it is?”

Khusrow could not help his face from shooting up at the comment. He had not pleased in rice for some time. The Priest refused to share his, and otherwise strewn vegetables and coconut water only induced a feeling of nausea. The man had slithered off of the camel’s hump and disappeared behind the beast, whose gnashing teeth belied the remains of dry, yellow grass.

Khusrow searched himself, and realized he did not have anything on his person save clothing – neither any currency, nor a weapon in case the merchant’s act was a rouse and he meant something viler.

The small wiry stranger emerged from behind the camel with a small sack, filled to its edge by pearly white rice grains. Khusrow’s mouth salivated at the sight of them, and immediately he thought of how they would taste with some of the pomfret, stewed fine in a pot with the small reserves of chili pepper he had left.

“Now, how do you intend to pay me, sir?”

“I don’t have any money on me, I’m sorry.”

“You? By god, you must be fooling me.” The merchant took a step back and gestured, “Look at your clothing. I took you to be a member of some royal court.”

“I am.”

“Then you tell me you have no money? No problem, I also operate on a barter system. What can you trade?”

“I must disappoint you there as well. You see, I am living a hermit’s life out here. There isn’t anything I can offer that I am ready to part with. Only my quill and ink, and some paper.”

“Well then perhaps next time I come by you will save some of your wealth. To think, I have sold all manner of worthless crops and trinkets to so many men, but never have I faulted dealing on a bag of rice!” Stricken with anger and a dash of disgrace, the merchant turned around and went again behind the humps to tie his bags up.

For rice, Khusrow thought. For grains of rice I am standing here like pathetic street trash, destitute and discontented. His stomach grumbled once more.

“Wait, you.”

The merchant poked his head around the camel, with inquisitive eyes.

“Would you accept a poem in exchange for your wares?”

“Sir,” he said with an outstretched palm, “I am trying to run a business here. I provide service to men in need. This is not a coronation or religious festival. This is not any event similar to those that requires such an exalted status. A poem has no purpose here.”

“Do you have that little respect for your work?” Khusrow asked. “Everyman’s work is important. There should be a poem for the efforts of every single person who walks in this blazing sun, sweating and panting. To have a poem would be to give you

meaning in this world. Your toiling would not be a dry act, like breathing or blinking, but rather momentous occasion to be celebrated, just like the crowning of a king.”

The man stood in intense thought, perhaps just for show, Khusrow thought.

“What do you have for me?” He said.

Khusrow took another look at the camel. Bits of yellow grass came dislodged from its teeth and it chewed them further, then spit them out into the sand. Khusrow felt revulsion in his stomach. He cleared his throat with a heave that hurt in the pit of his belly, and recited:

“If one could count the tracks I have made in the sand,

traveling from sale to sale,

so would they also count the pieces of gold I collect.

For my distance is devotion,

and devotion is my prayer for profit.”

“Sir I am sorry, but that is not a very good poem. Why, I could not even recite that to my children without receiving laughter in return. However, your zeal and ability to improvise on the spot entertain me. Take instead these pieces of leather. In the damned heat of this summer no one buys it from me. See how it stretches.”

The merchant pulled at both ends of the hide. He tapped his finger against the middle, and the hide vibrated with a low, robust sound, like knocking against a hollow log. It echoed in the dry desert air.

Tabla, he thought. Twin drums, made of hollow wooden shells and covered in leather. He had neglected to bring his own on the journey to save weight. He liked to craft his poetry in total silence, without the distraction of wanting to compose music instead. But in the lack of any words, perhaps he could make do with notes.

“Do you have any more skins?” Khusrow asked.

“One terrible poem begets only one free trinket, sir. Sorry.”

“I can give you another.”

“For that, I will pass. I have seen the quality of your goods and I am sad to say, I do not wish to purchase them again.”

“I can craft a very good one, I promise. Come back tomorrow, I will give you a ten glorious lines that will make you want to sing them at the top of your lungs so that the birds and even God can hear you.”

“And where am I to spend the night, sir? I cannot live among cracking stones.”

Khusrow thought about the Priest as well. No reason to create hysteria with the arrival of a new guest. He smiled at the thought that the Priest would vomit were he to see the cow skins.

“It is only for a night. I will feed you as well.”

“Alas, sir it seems I am the one with the food. Otherwise you would not be so eager to buy even a small bag of rice from me. Negotiations aren’t for you artistic types, it seems. You lot are too pure and honest to cheat another man.”

*

That night, Khusrow, unable to assuage nervousness and the cold sweat that came with it, walked to the small cave behind the temple where the Priest slept. He crept quietly, on his knees and arms, to avoid waking the Priest. He assumed the man, with his dedicated schedule, must be an alert sleeper.

As he got closer to the alcove of stones, he began crawling slower and slower. In the night breeze wafted a dirty torn curtain, made from a once ornate red and green sari. Behind it, he peered into the darkness for the Priest's heaving body. He had a hard time trying to find the man's pale milky skin.

Closer even. Khusrow kept his entire body firm against the ground. My kurta must be sodden beyond a thousand washes now, he thought. Grains of sand, pouring in through the sleeves and collar, scratched against his skin. He brought himself closer.

The cave was empty. The sari bellowed up and down, and Khusrow could see an empty cot against one stone wall. Opposite hung a shelf that held linen and coconuts, and underneath two gourds. In one was the Priest's water, and the other, dry rice grains. Where was he, Khusrow thought? Had he taken a walk? Had he found the merchant sitting behind the outer wall, and driven him away?

He stood there, perspiration continuing to drip down his forehead, and felt shame. *I am deathly afraid. Of this small thin man in a loincloth*, he thought. So what if he finds me? He only has more blind-sided statements of morality and piety. No weapon, no malice he can inflict.

Quickly he took out the small sack the merchant had given him and filled it with as much rice as he could. He took a coconut as well, and left the cave.

The merchant happily boiled the rice over a small kindled fire, as well as t of Khusrow's surviving pomfret. He argued over using his own grains. "No sir, that is profit sitting in the sack. This is your goodwill, and hopefully God will grant you something later on. Please be early tomorrow, I wish to get a head start before the sun gets too high."

Khusrow wanted to slap the man across the face. Some of the Priest's words came to mind. But he clenched his teeth and walked back to his quill and ink, lit a small candle, and set down to craft under the high moonlight. He wondered, and almost wished, the Priest would confront him tomorrow at the missing coconut.

Chapter 19

Amar remained on the sidewalk long after Dalia had gone inside frustrated, perhaps even angrily, but silently after they'd had an encounter with the seedier parts of the city. He was unwilling to move from the spot quite yet, as if she would turn around and come back outside, apologizing and thanking him for a fun time. That, and, he wasn't sure where else he could go right now. He wasn't tired, but it was too deep into the night to bother with anything else.

The door opened, however. Erfan emerged. He had a curious look on his face, clear that he'd noticed Dalia's demeanor, but yet it was amused.

"She still angry?" Amar asked.

"Not really, but something's got her riled up. What happened?"

"I think I'll go say sorry."

"Oh no," Erfan said, holding him off. "I don't think it's wise to mess with the tigress."

"What are you doing out here, then?"

Erfan just shrugged his shoulders. "You tired?"

"Not really."

Amar knew Erfan was going to suggest going somewhere, but at this hour, it could only be somewhere fused in a drug-induced malaise and mind-numbing bass music, and he wasn't in the mood.

But ten minutes later, they sat at a late night café, Erfan in front of a cup of coffee, rubbing his head. Amar didn't drink anything, told him what had happened with Ali the taxi driver and Dalia's phone.

"Be honest with me man. Did anything happen between you and her?"

Amar didn't answer the question at first. His mind was elsewhere, counting down the days that Dalia had left in town. He thought back to the rave festival, how they'd danced for an eternity, bodies jammed together, sweaty and pulsing, and yet distant and platonic. It was purely the physical rub of skin, but Amar never felt what he wanted badly to feel, the electricity passing between him and her, some kind of connection.

Erfan, asked again, and Amar looked up into his eyes, trying to read the expression. This was Erfan, he wasn't simply interested in budding romance between his friend and his sister. Did he feel some kind of sibling protectiveness?

But before he said anything, Erfan continued, laughing to himself.

"Don't worry about her, man. Or her damn phone, she's a little too obsessed with it. Everything's a toy for her."

"It's not that, Erfan. I'm sure she's pretty shaken up about being in a dangerous place."

"Dangerous place? Amar I'm going to say this once, and you know I'm always right about everything." He paused to let the last part sink in. "Don't underestimate my sister. She acts like some helpless princess but she's a lot more cunning than that."

Amar thought back to her attitude, as she'd talked about the belly dancing, gleeful about the attention she got. *Of course she knew what she was doing. Who is she trying to fool?* He shook the idea away.

"I still feel bad, I guess. She was pretty shaken up."

"Trust me, Amar. With her, it's all part of the game. Tell me, was she all nervous and anxious when you were in that rave with a whole bunch of crazy drunk people jumping around? She probably acted like she went to raves every night. Were you the only person she was with the whole time?"

Amar thought back. He'd lost her several times in the sea of bodies. But it was natural, of course, with all of those people. She'd found him again, and pulled him over to a new group of people she'd suddenly gotten friendly with. Guys all taller than him, with sandy blonde hair and bare sculpted chests.

"Oh, bullshit." He said.

"Whatever you wanna think," Erfan said. "But I'm telling you. She doesn't really think about people unless they're a means for something she wants. What happened when y'all went to Jungle?"

"She didn't show."

"She told me you all went."

Amar shook his head.

"She came back all sweaty and tired like she'd been out dancing."

“Not with me.”

Erfan stretched his arms out as if to say, *voila*, and arched backwards onto his chair. They sat next to the glass panes looking out to the sidewalk. The glass was fogging up, as the early morning hit its coolest points before dew would form again once the sun rose. Amar tried to take in what this meant. Would she lie to him? They’d only met a few days before, what reason did she have?

Erfan’s phone buzzed. “It’s Dalia,” he said. “She’s wondering when we’re coming back. She’s asking if you’re coming back.”

“How did she message you without her phone?”

“Computer, dumbass. You can do that now. Seriously, you need to catch up with the technology today.”

“What does she want with me?”

Erfan sighed. “Listen man. You two have gotten along well together. She keeps playing this record of yours that was laying around. Some old sitar stuff. Over and over again.”

Hearing this, Amar was stirred inside. The thought of her standing at the turntable, alone in the empty studio, placing the record gently onto the platter and watching it spin around and around, breathing in the voice of that old beautiful singer. He thought this must be what my grandfather felt every time he listened to it, day in and day out. It wasn’t the song, but a more ethereal, more heartfelt element that tugged his inner romantic.

“But I’m telling you,” Erfan continued, “just drop it man. Take it from the guy who’s known her forever. You don’t want to mess with it. I don’t even know what you see in her.”

This was a surprising remark, Amar thought. What happened to the Erfan who got into street fights over her admirers?

“Do you think,” he said, “you could copy the record onto a CD? Can we do that in the studio?”

“For what?” Erfan asked, seeming agitated.

Amar told him about his ideas for remixing the song, and turning it into a house track. Erfan sat back and listened, patient and reserved. When Amar was done, he was silent for a moment before speaking.

“Well we could mix it sure, but the question is, what do we do then?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do we get it out there. Look man, the mixtape didn’t work. No one bought that shit. So many people are making crap out of their basements today, no one is going to take a blind chance. The only way is to send it out so people acutally hear it. Radio, or something.”

“What if you drop it at the club? At Xenos?”

Erfan sucked his teeth, and let out a sss like a snake. “I don’t know how that would go. My uncle, man...”

“Oh come on, would he care about one track?”

“You haven’t met him, Amar. You know what they call him?”

“‘The Big Man?’ Yeah, Raouf told me.”

“Yeah, well, he makes a lot of important decisions, okay? I don’t know if he’d be interested in a remixed classical Indian song.”

“Who would then? Radio stations?”

“Do you know any radio stations that play any brown people music?”

Amar sighed. As always, Erfan had a point. How could there be no venue for this music? Everyday it seemed as if there were new styles coming out from all corners of the country, of the world. A Thai folk artist hears grunge and suddenly there is guitar-strummed Tagalog. An indecipherable Polish phrase becomes looped into a hip-hop beat. The DJ was always the pioneer of new bastard concoctions and recreations. Frankenstein’s monsters that in their horrors, had some kind of pleasurable beauty. So why was it so hard for them?

“All right then,” he said. “I’ll drop it.”

“Where?”

“Xenos. Talk to Raouf about my gig. Tell him I want my shot.”

“Amar, are you sure you want to work there? You see the shit I have to put up with.”

“Well you said it was because you’re the nephew, right? All in the family. Maybe they won’t be like that with me.”

“Amar, this is a very small world.” Erfan hunched over the table and got close. “All in the family is the point. It’s like some voodoo cult. It’s a big business for men like my Uncle, but it’s a risky one, too. Clubs are closing down all the time if no one likes them. And if no one likes a club, the place people point fingers is the DJ. If you fuck up, they’ll drop you faster than you can drop any track.”

Amar thought about George, and what he had said. *Always waiting for the next young kid to come along...and then they kick you out.*

“Just talk to him, will you?” Amar said. “He said to come by the club Friday.”

“That guy would tell his own mother to come by the club on Friday.”

“Just do it, okay?! Goddammit why does everything have to be a fucking joke with you?!”

Amar now wished he had gotten a drink, if only so he could splash it on Erfan. He got up and headed to the door of coffee shop, glancing at Erfan’s reflected face in the glass, until he was outside, and then the door clanged shut behind him.

He walked back toward the apartment-studio. Dalia was still probably awake. If Erfan wouldn’t help him, at least he could ask her. The Big Man was her Uncle too. She was also part of this voodoo cult, this cabal.

He took out his phone and dialed her number. Only when he voicemail answered he remembered that she didn't have it with her. But still, he let her tender but purposeful voice play in his ears, asking for him to call her back again.

He kept walking on and on, his legs too numbed to stop, until the first rays of the sun shoot out from the horizon. When he opened the door to the apartment, all the lights were off. She was sleeping then. He left them so to not disturb her. He navigated his way back to the bedroom through the pitch-black passage, and creaked open the door.

A small crushing feeling formed in the pit of his belly. Dalia was asleep, sprawled over the bed, wearing nothing save for a golden halter and skirt. Tied around her waist was a belt of gold coins.

She'd been dressed to give him a belly dance.

Chapter 20

At the time of Khusrow's nocturnal theft, The Priest had come out to the edge of the cliff. He peered over the chasm, down to the beach, and tossed a coconut out into the sparkled abyss. The sound of it cracking against the rock traveled back to him.

At the right was a narrow and jagged latter than had been cut into the rock, ages ago by stone carvers and smiths of dead Lords or otherwise. Slowly and carefully, the Priest sat down on the edge and let his feet slide off until they caught a step in the stair while his fingers stayed grasped at the plateau. From far away his silhouette looked of a man trying to climb up towards the temple, desperately reaching closer to God.

One by one, left then right, the Priest let his feet make their way down the ladder, the toes firmly gripping onto the rock, followed by the ball of the foot and finally the heel. The wind clapped against his loins and wafted the sour salty smell of the sea into his nose. It stung and made his stomach turn upside down. He forced his feet to go quicker and quicker, and in doing so lost grip, slipping down a few steps before gaining hold again. He began to get lightheaded. A searing burn intensified on his leg, and even in the darkness he saw the white linen of his loincloth taint with a darker shade.

At the bottom he tore the loin off with one quick swing of his arm and saw a long gash from under his knee and ending just inches before his ankle. Dark amber blood was leaking out, had begun to collect in a pool around his foot. Before him in the sand sat two halves of the coconut, face up, with the white pulp glowing against the moonlight. Beyond, the seawater crept ashore, the sound of the waves almost silent.

And there, standing naked under the light of the heavens, the Priest took a set of deep breaths and said a mantra as he felt the blood run from his legs. When he was finished he picked up the coconut pieces, his loincloth, and limped across the beach, leaving behind him a track of bloody prints in the sand.

As his toes met the water, once more he said the mantra and took three more giant breaths, and then waded out. Almost immediately a rush of adrenaline and severe pain shot from up his leg and into his brain, as the salt trickled into his wound. He caught a yelp in his throat, bending all his will not to succumb to the pain. A daze began to take over his brain. It is a test, he thought to himself, a test from God. It is all a test.

With one coconut half in each hand, he stood at knee-depth, dipped them into the sea and collected water into both. Arms stretched, he offered it to the sky, closed his eyes, and began mouthing a prayer.

Trying not to pause between words, he recited his prayers to Chandra, God of the Moon, and builder of the temple. He thought to himself of the Lord Ram and how he and his army had done the same, looking onto Ceylon, and invoked Varuna. They had constructed an entire bridge of stones from India to the small island, and conquered the demonic King Raavan. He thought of the explorers and invaders, how they seemed to descend upon his land from all corners of the world. They would have different shaped eyes, so many colors of skin. Some of the men would wear the furs of beasts instead of armor, and some would come in dresses and shawls that seemed as if they belonged on women. He began mouthing the words that passed through his mind, asking, begging for Chandra to offer him a way to leave this land, to come onto another King's shores and fill

them with the knowledge of his ancestors and dynasty. A weakness began to take over his leg, and it began to shiver. *Stand still, and strong. What are you made of?*

The Priest started invoking the other deities, for their boons and blessings. From Ganesha, he asked a clear path without any hindrance; from Saraswati, the knowledge and forethought to think through the plan; from Lakshmi, the alms or charity to see him healthy. As the image of each appeared in his mind and the prayers manifested under his breath, muscles all over his body began to shake, and nerves detach. The Priest experiences a detached clarity, his consciousness leaping from his body and soaring above. He kept his eyes closed and focused intensely on God, in any and all forms He may conjure. *Please, Lord. With your willing and kindness, please help me fulfill this.*

Now the Priest did not feel his body at all, instead like a spirit. No bones seemed to anchor him to the earth, no fluids circulating through his organs. He saw himself transparent, weightless, and no longer man, but something higher.

Lord, what do I do with this man? His kind of idiocy ruined your temple. How do I remedy the blasphemy?

The Priest opened his mouth, at once releasing a gasp of air and a sound of ecstasy, and lost all sense of the world as his senses drifted up and away from the sea and towards the white, glowing moonlight.

Chapter 21

One day Jayant arrived at his office. Kantilal was punching away at a huge typewriter, depressing each key with one finger at a time. The machine was new for him, and he had immense trouble picking it up. Having only a passing familiarity with English, he frequently mistyped words. Time and again he would utter a sharp curse word under his breath as if he'd been cut or a cramp had seized him. Jayant would look up, and instead find Kantilal cringing at the paper before him, then rip it out with a grumble and trash it.

Today was no different, but as Jayant came in Kantilal immediately pushed the typewriter aside and piped at him, "Good morning, Baxi!"

"Good morning to you." Jayant answered.

"My, you know my friend? I don't see you so often now. Always you are away on business, for days at a time. Your wife can't be that bad, eh?"

Jayant forced a chuckle and sat at his desk. An envelope sat there, addressed from a postal box in Verval.

"What is it like down there in Kathiawad?" Kantilal continued. "Some backyard field, farmers tugging at weeds and trotting besides donkeys?"

"Not quite as much," Jayant answered, picking up the envelope. He opened a drawer in his desk and searched for a letter opener he thought he'd stowed away, but it didn't seem to be there. Typical, he thought, considering I rarely get mail anyway.

"Do you have a letter opener?" he asked.

“Of course,” Kantilal said, fishing out his own letter opener, and tossing it across the room. Jayant winced, fearing the blade my cut right into him, but it landed with a thud right on the table.

“*Arey*, watch out, hmm?” he said, cutting open the envelope

“Sorry, sorry. It is quite blunt though. You’d have to be some hoodlum to actually hurt someone with that.”

As Jayant began reading the letter, he continued. “So, what is it like, then?”

“Well, the air is always right. Since it is so close to the ocean, it’s never dry. Beautiful landscape. Hills as far you can see. Every night you can sit and watch the sunset behind the hills. So that even though you can’t see it anymore, there is still so much light everywhere. Sunlight without sun. Earth both dark yet glowing...”

Jayant’s voice trailed off, his mind more focused on the letter now.

Kantilal clapped his hands. “A true poet, Baxi,.”

“I swear, when I’m there it is not even this same world anymore...”

“Ha!” Kantilal’s chair creaked as he sat up-right. “I am glad to know Baxi, that you are doing good diligent work of the State at your five-star resort! Does the Nawab’s butler bring you chilled drinks on your command? And then a massage perhaps? Tell me, do you even go over all of the documents that you haul away in your briefcase, or just burn them in a big fire and roast mutton over it? You and that damned Paki!”

Kantilal ripped out another piece of paper from his typewriter, crumpled it, and threw it at Jayant, hitting him in the face. It did not hurt of course, but Jayant sat stunned, and disheartened. He wanted to ask why Kantilal was so angry, but then again, he knew exactly why. Lethargic as he was, Kantilal wasn't stupid, and neither were any of the others in the building. None of them liked working, but in Jayant, here was one suddenly passionate. Something wasn't right. Kantilal rose from his chair, eyes fiery with frustration and anger, huffing and saying, *I'm a lawyer too, I know how to make excuses.*

Instead, he said, "I want to speak to B.D. Prasad about this. Maybe you should have more partners on this work. It's quite a lot."

And with that, Kantilal walked out into the hallway. Jayant ran after him, leaving the opened envelope and its content lying on the table:

Noble Baxi,

It is with a heavy hand and heart I write this letter, to tell you that your State has played its final hand and evicted me from my home. Supposedly my refusal to play nicely with them in weeks prior has led to a more harsher "negotiation." A cavalry (do they still use that word, 'cavalry'?) surrounded the bungalow this morning, and holding my servants and myself at gunpoint, supervised the crating and removal of my things from the premises. As I write this, I am on a chartered plane to Karachi, which I must say was generously offered by the new government and is quite comfortable. But do not take that in offense. My soul will always remain in Gujarat. It's etched in those walls.

But unfortunately, walls we cannot read. And as you said, our shared talents beg that what we created in that 'crypt' be conserved, etched, and recorded to last into further later times, when perhaps the world can be as friendly with each other as we have been. Sometime after your last visit, I took the liberty of sending my man to Bombay to bring back some electronic contraptions. I had hoped that we would be able to record ourselves, so we would have a phonograph of our music, that we could play over to contentment. Who knows, perhaps now that I'm relieved on my chosen profession, there would have been a future as a star singer!

Alas though, it did not happen. But in best interests, I have left those machines in the 'crypt,' which hopefully won't be found so easily by those sala pig soldiers. I'm sure you, as still chief litigator of my property accession, have access to it. What you will do with it, I leave to you.

For my end, I could not figure out how to work the damned thing.

Best,

Noble Mahabat

Chapter 22

The night they went, Erfan said that Xenos wouldn't come alive well until midnight. He suggested they passed the time somewhere else. "Then you can see how those pieces of shit compare." Dalia opposed, saying why waste our money, but ensuing argument made Erfan excitable, and the discussion ended.

King's Hookah was a common destination for Amar and Erfan, and as it turned out, of Dalia's too when she still lived in town. Amar felt it too loud to relax, but was reconciled that by it their bring your own booze policy. The hookah itself was serviceable; prepared by a woman whom he was convinced had just entered the country hours before, been given an apron, and quickly taught to memorize a few choice English phrases of table-waiting.

Dalia insisted on strawberry, which neither of her companions liked, but it was her choice. Erfan snapped at the waitress with the broken English for butter chicken. Dalia scolded him for his tone.

"Why do you talk to roughly with them?" She asked, after the woman had passed through the beaded-curtain doorway.

He shot an indignant look. "She can learn some damn English. Why did she speak to me in Farsi?"

"It's a Persian place, and you look very Persian."

"That doesn't matter. I could be anyone, I could be from anywhere. She shouldn't assume. Anyway even if I *did* come right out and tell her I was Persian, she should still speak to me in English."

“Okay, okay,” said Dalia, assuaging her own temper. “Just forget it.”

“What? What are you getting so upset about?”

A silence hung between the three. Amar didn't think it wise to her between their battles. Who knew how much of it was ongoing sibling peevishness, and how much genuine rancor? Their arguments were fierce, but never about anything important, never something they hadn't already argued about or affixed their opinions on.

He opened a wine bottle and placed it on the table, but then immediately decided not to sip. Dalia didn't drink, perhaps he shouldn't either tonight. He decided he was hungry but didn't want any of the food here.

The wall-mounted television was playing a Middle Eastern music videos on a satellite channel, although it was muted in lieu of a lone speaker in a high corner of the ceiling that spat out generic, stereotypical rhythms – “opium den music,” Amar thought. Other men sitting around the bar sitting kept their eyes magnetized to the gyrating big-busted women, blurred through static and snow of the bootleg reception. Amar admired the fact that Dalia was completely unlike these women – lithe and slender, and appropriate dressed most of the time. He particularly liked the dress she was wearing. It was green and had an embroidered silver lining that came across her abdomen, like the trailing wake of a ship a top an evening sea.

Erfan himself constantly poked fun at her -- not having enough curves, not having brown eyes, not having bigger breasts – and Amar was always confused as to whether he should be in disgust or in agreement with his comments.

Their hookah came. Erfan gave it a few initial puffs, the water bubbling inside the glass jar, and released a cloud. He passed it to Amar – it did not taste like fruit at all, but rather a generic sweetness, like bland honey or toothpaste. The opaque white smoke caught the sparse beams of receding light bulbs, hanging for brief moments and refracting the glow. Dalia took a long puff and reclined back in the seat. Her body slid against the leather and soon her shoulder was cuddling against Amar’s body. He slowly brought his arm over and around her. Fingers hung momentarily near her elbow, until she lifted her hand and caught his.

Erfan snatched the pipe from her and sat cross-legged on the bench, mimicking the old illustrations Amar remembered in books of rajahs and sultans who lounged upon golden pillows, smoking a pipe and making royal decrees. Men with toys and limitless power.

“You just need a bushy mustache, and then you’ll look like a king,” Amar said.

“A shah.” Dalia piped, rolling her eyes.

“I already am,” Erfan said indignantly. “You’re looking at him, at Shehzad Erfan. The world just hasn’t seen it yet. I still got to hit it big time.”

“So when’s that happening?” Dalia said chuckling, though her voice had discontent and sting. Erfan didn’t speak, and stuck the pipe in his mouth and sucked hard.

She asked the waitress, “Where’s the belly dancer?”

“No, not tonight,” was the reply.

“Why not?”

“She is *achoo*.”

“What?” Amar asked.

“Cold. Sick.” Dalia replied with a sigh. She enjoyed the belly dancer more than either of the most of the men, or so Amar thought. She would start clapping with the music well before the woman would ever appear through the beaded curtain from the backroom.

Once she had gotten up and danced alongside, and even after the belly dancer’s performance was over, the men in the room began to flock over Dalia, caught in her rhythmic movement alone on the floor. One man, wearing Peter Sellers glasses and sweater vest, had held Dalia’s waist without any hesitation. Erfan had turned chivalrous and picked a fight with him, spilling into the street. Amar had watched the entire thing, feeling useless and outside himself.

Her head was softly resting on him now, and he caught a wondrous scent from her locks. He looked down at her, but she didn’t look up. Instead, he became aware of Erfan, watching intently.

Erfan grabbed the wine bottle; the one Amar hadn’t touched, and began sipping it. He quickly chugged the half of it and sighed.

“You need another one?” Amar asked. From the fringes of his sight, he noticed Dalia look up at him.

“Ahh, I was thirsty. Oh, look Amar. Hot bitch.” His gaze pointed at a girl across the lounge and let out a loud, uncensored burp, sounding like bloated cattle.

“You’re so damn disgusting.” Dalia said, and let go of Amar’s hand. She dislodged from his hold and took the wine bottle beside her. “No more for you.”

Amar felt cold from her absence upon him.

“I’m not drunk or anything.” Erfan said, and then burped.

“I don’t care, just stop.” She said.

“No, don’t stop.” Amar said.

“Stop what?” Erfan asked.

“Being a loudmouth, inebriated, chauvinist.”

“Hey, calm down” Amar said, putting his hand on her shoulder, and trying to pull her back to him.

“Oh look at you using three-syllable words,” Erfan said mockingly. “Been studying that vocabulary?”

Dalia tossed an indiscernible swear at Erfan, then got up and walked out.

For a while, Erfan kept looking at the television, pipe hanging in his mouth, as if the blow up never happened. Amar took a long sip of wine. Dalia didn’t return.

He looked at Erfan. “Should I go find her?”

“Don’t look at me, hero.”

“Shit. What about Xenos?”

“Xenos is still there. Raouf is still there. If you want to find out, let’s go.”

There could be other nights, Amar knew. Other nights with Dalia. If he got the gig, then that night could be when he debuted. He would bring her then, and play only for her.

“Don’t worry about her, man.” Erfan said.

Outside Amar found Dalia pacing around looking through her purse. As he approached closer to her, she pulled out a pack of cigarettes and picked one out with her lips.

“Since when do you smoke?” Amar asked.

“I don’t. I mean not regularly. I don’t know. I can’t find my lighter.”

“Come on back inside. Erfan wants to go to Xenos.”

“He’s just going to be a jackass wherever it is.”

She turned and looked down the street. Even from so many blocks away, they could see the crowds begin to form on their way to the clubs and bars. Lights, bright and fluorescent, turned downtown into an oasis within the dead of night. An amalgamated hum of bass traveled down back at them.

“I thought you wanted to go. Come on, it’ll be fun.” Amar said. He got close and put his arm around her. A breeze drifted in from the light beyond. Dalia shivered in his arms, her body’s weight on his swaying together. As it could have been on a dancefloor, a strobe light blazing and illuminating her face. He wanted to kiss her, there and now on the sidewalk in front of King’s Hookah.

“Maybe some other night. When he’s not there to act like a pain in the ass.” She groaned in frustration, as if she was lifting some heavy weight over her shoulders.

Amar let his hold remain statically. A little longer.

But she spoke again. “I know I should be grateful, but you can never understand him. Erfan wasn’t being chivalrous. He only loves himself. I love him as a brother, but not much else.”

“And... what about me?”

“Listen, Amar – ”

Dalia turned around and looked at him with her green eyes. They had the same luster of the bright city lights, the same allure and seduction. But she did not say any words to him, and didn’t need to. She put the cigarettes back into her purse, zipped it closed, and kissed him on the cheek. Amar felt his grip loosen, involuntarily, as her face, smiling, receding as she walked backwards.

When he was completely relieved of her, she said, “Just watch out for him okay? Don’t trust him with everything.”

“Dalia, but...”

“I’m sure you’ll get the gig. I’ll come then. I promise.” She said, hailing a taxi and climbing in.

His mouth was frozen, but tried to signal with his eyes, tried to send his own code.

*

When Amar got back, Erfan had paid the check and was ready to leave. He kept shaking with an uncontrollable excitement. In his hand he'd produced a mini bottle of gin, and much of it was already drunken. His sullen attitude from the entire night had vanished.

"We're gonna do some ethnography tonight," he said. "Some real National Geographic type shit. Observing the grizzly beasts and beautiful creatures of the wild as they commune in their natural habitat."

"Are we still going to Xenos?" Amar asked.

"Not yet, it's going to be boring right now, trust me. We can waste time at this other place I know. The kind of scene where people are real animals. I could just bring a rifle and start hunting them from the booth."

"Hunting?" Amar asked.

"With telescopic sights, man. Telescopic sights. We're getting up close and personal tonight. No wussing out, okay? I don't want none of that too cool for school act where you just crawl into the back of a booth and keep checking your cell phone all night. You're going to see some very gorgeous ladies and perhaps some very ugly things, but you're going to take it all like a player. Are you ready?" "Bitch," Amar said aloud. Erfan looked at him, and he continued. "You called Dalia a bitch in line."

Amar was caught. Dalia's departure had took with it his mood to do anything tonight.

“Of course you do. You can turn around right now, and go back to wherever you lost your balls. Or, if you want to take a second and locate them, we can get going. And I suggest you do that quick, because the first place has open bar for only another hour or so.”

They went first to Palmyra. A crowd of late twenty-somethings, still grasping for a semblance of college life as the first wrinkles of middle adulthood began to set in. The line was minimal, and Amar and Erfan were let in within minutes. The club had an open foyer with a few open leather couches, and a large bar at one side with a small crowd around it. Stairs led up to the rooftop. Tacky blue and green neon lights hung everywhere, simulating the tropical namesake.

Erfan began talking about Palmyra’s history: how long it had been in business, the DJs they had, the kind of music they played, who the owners were, what type of sports cars they had, some of their other invested businesses (two restaurants and a failed independent record label), and the facility of having waited VIP tables.

“Do you want a mojito?” Erfan asked.

“You brought me here for a mojito?”

“Yeah, they’re pretty good here. Probably the only good thing here.”

Amar agreed, feeling the need for a strong drink, and agreed. While Erfan went to the bar, he sat on the leather couch, and at the other end sat a couple talking to each other. Even from the next room, it seemed to flood down the steps and fill the outer area.

He peeked up the stairway and saw stiletto-heeled feet and tennis shoes prancing about. The DJ yelled something into the mic, the crowd responding with whistles and hollers that quickly died into the bass thump. Amar groaned; terrible. And he didn't even beat mix. Three songs passed as he faded out and back up. Only terrible DJs yell into the mic. If you music is good, then it will speak for itself. There was nothing better that could get an audience empowered than a good mix – it worked on that same level of horror movies, tawdry soap operas, and gossip among friends – the tension of wondering what lay nextm what evolved stage could be; harder, better, faster, stronger. It was elemental, and it was bliss.

Amar knew he had achieved it in what few parties he had done so far. But yet, still, he was now in tension, the other kind. Erfan returned with the drinks. Amar took a sip, and voiced his thoughts on the DJ.

“He’s okay,” Erfan said. “I mean, look at the crowd. They’re not looking for much.”

Erfan pointed at the bar. “See the bartender over there? Brandi is her name, with an ‘I’. She gives blowjobs for extra tips sometimes. So does the other one, Michelle, but she...well, no one asks her, though.”

“So?”

“So go up and ask her, why don’t you? You’re too caught up with this stuff. I think you just need to get some, good and fast.”

At first, Amar disregarded the outburst as more of Erfan's patented machismo. He waited to see if there was any more, and after a full minute when Erfan didn't say anything, Amar realized he was serious.

True, he wasn't much of a player. To say he had had a girlfriend was to force subtext into a few innocuous lunch dates. But Erfan's suggestion, as usual, was a little extreme. *I don't do that*, he thought, and leaned back into the couch, concentrating on the music. He moved through genre, linked between lyrics. Spinning was about telling a story with the music, connecting lines and threads across rhythmic history. Here, the story had just imploded, told by a child with a skip button.

Erfan spoke, jilting his thoughts: "My *point* is, even sleazy places make themselves important in small ways. Like the one bad pimple that flares every now and then on your face. For a couple of days, it gets so big its all you can think about, and finally you let all the sticky puss out and it goes away for awhile, until somehow it becomes big again."

Amar looked around at the pimple he was in. The alcohol had relaxed his mind, and the muscles on his face. Around the overgrown patrons scampered about, yelling into cell phones, ferrying multiple drinks in one hand, bobbing heads as their only means of connecting to the music.

"This place has poor acoustics, too" Amar said. "Soundproofing. There should be a way to keep rooms in their own vacuum, so that different types of music can be played without interference from each other."

“That’s stupid. Music should flow and mix. In case you forgot, that’s the point of DJing.”

“But not room-to-room.”

“What’s the matter, man? Dare to dream. How epic would that be? One the tables you mix two songs. Well, the next level of clubbing has to be mixing entire sets into each other. When you’re in a room, you’re hearing one DJ’s beats flow in one stream. Think about between rooms, you can hear them if they played off each other. Like echos.”

Erfan took a languid sip of his drink, smacked his lips.

*

In the line for Xenos, they stood flanked by outfits costing more than either could afford – silk suits, sequin dresses, imported, European, so many hundreds of threads. They passed the mini bottle of gin back and forth, and it was quickly finished.

“Do you think this crowd is worth playing for?” Amar asked.

“Does it matter? Look at them. They pay top dollar to get in, and you get some of that cut. Stop questioning everything. Trust Shehzad.”

Amar looked again – like a department store mannequin display, figures of vests and ties, escorting sequin dresses and elaborate hairstyles; they were alongside others dressed in more plain clothing, tight muscle shirts or halter tops above jeans. It was something cheaper, plainer, but perhaps Amar thought, soberer. Everyone seemed excited and anxious to enter, and yet no one gelled cohesively.

There were men speaking Russian and fixing up hair in the dim reflections of the storefront windows adjacent to the club, a group of Asian girls shivering as their bare backs meet the chill breeze, and two men who mumbled Spanish to each other, almost afraid of reaching the front of the line. Amar didn't see anyone brown, not even Persian looking.

Raouf, brandishing a clipboard, flanked the queue, the sleeve of his leather jacket brushing against the velvet rope. The jacket amplified the nimble body Amar had seen earlier, and he physically carried that same menace Amar remembered walking down the stairs. He had a small, coiled wire poking out of the neckline of the jacket, with the attached piece nestled into his ear. Amar and Erfan watched him approach the Asian girls, all very petite with short skirts and dresses showing off slender legs and slim torsos. Much like Dalia's green with the silver lining.

Raouf said something that made the girls blush and chuckle. Amar watched the his eyes travel up and down their bodies, as he leaned closer and began spitting out offers of a discounted VIP table. *Head of the line. Cash now. You're in.* The bouncer's duty.

"Hey, there he is." Amar said. "He's conducting business."

"Business my ass," Erfan spouted. "Hoping to get some later. Just ignoring the guys who actually have the money to pay."

Amar clenched his teeth as Raouf approached closer to them. Amar tried to make eye contact, and but he was consumed by the clipboard in his hand, flipping pages without reason. Amar imagined the list, and how having the name was the least important criterion, along with the clothing, along with the money, along with the cleavage and the

eye shadow, that clicked the tumblers loose and allowed entrance. Still Raouf did not look up, and Amar called his name and waved his hand.

Erfan also addressed him. “Raouf! How are you, my good sir? How is your life?” Erfan slapped him on the back, and Raouf acknowledged him with a frozen stare.

“Hey Erfan. You’re not working tonight, I thought.”

“He’s here with me,” Amar said.

“Who are you?” Raouf said.

Amar almost didn’t respond, stunned. It had only been a few days, right? He looked at Erfan who wasn’t saying anything.

“I demo’d for you the other day, remember? You told me come today, and bring a hot plus one?” Amar laughed, waving towards Erfan. But Raouf squinted his eyes, not digesting the joke. Instead, he flipped through the pages and looked up. “Sorry, what was your name, man?”

Erfan instead responded, “He just wants to know if you hired him or not.”

“Want me to tell you, right here on the street?”

“Can’t we talk inside?”

“Look at it man, we’re blowing up tonight. Every single body counts.”

“I work here, mofo! Just like you.”

“Big Man’s rules. If you had a plus one I might consider it.”

“My sister was going to come with us,” Erfan said. “She had better things to do.”

“Oh my god!” Raouf’s eyes lit up in a way Amar hadn’t seen before, shot up into the sky as if he had just seen a vision of her. “Oh man, you should have brought her. She is too fine. Her loss for not coming.”

“Yeah,” Erfan said. “Stupid bitch.”

Amar took in air through his nostrils, but as he stepped toward the velvet rope the gin took hold of his head and he froze in place, sights hazy and sounds muffled.

“How did she get a body like that and you’re all tall and lanky like Gumby?” he snorted. “Can you set me up with her? So hot, man. I know she’s your sister and all, but those...”

Now he was raging to pounce on Raouf, the way Erfan had earlier at Three Kings. But the world was intangible around him. And he thought he saw Erfan nod his head at Raouf, grinning and saying, “Yeah, she does. Totally.”

Amar gripped the velvet rope, twisting it in his hands. He shut his eyes and tried to regain his senses, but he only became more bewildered, his mind consumed with trying to figure out how exactly Dalia decided to part, and why he knew now he won’t see her tomorrow before she left.

*

He didn’t know how exactly they finally got into the club, but there he was, sitting at a VIP table, in the second floor balcony overlooking the first, with Erfan, Raouf and a man he didn’t know. But Amar took little time deducing was The Big Man, Uncle

Ferdoun, donning three-piece silk suit and aging gracefully for being, as Amar understood, in his fifties. He was whispering something into Raouf's ears.

Amar realized surprisingly, up here he could hear well. The music, though still ripping apart below, only barely made it above. He turned to Erfan next to him and whispered, "Acoustics, Erfan. See?"

"Shh," Erfan said, his eyes on Ferdoun.

"Are we hiring this character?" Ferdoun asked Raouf, pointing at Amar.

Amar, for his part, felt all of the drunkenness evaporate from him. This was it.

Ferdoun then spoke Farsi again, and Raouf shook his head.

"Sorry, little buddy."

That was it. And yet, Amar didn't get a chance to let it sink in. The songs kept playing and mixing, and his head was drifting in drunkenness. And across, the discussion seemed to continue between the Persians sitting around him. Time kept moving on, refusing to let him pause and take in the moment all his efforts came crashing down.

"Come on," he interrupted. "I thought, I mean Erfan, didn't you tell them—was it my demo?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Raouf said. "We hired someone who's a little more comfortable with the Indian stuff."

"Why the hell are you so obsessed with the Indian music?!"

“Because,” Ferdoun spoke up, “We’re turning this into an Indian club.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what you think, sonny, but Xenos is a dump. It’s bleeding money like a stuck pig. We’ve seen that Bollywood music is getting big, and the dhol dhol stuff. Indian kids are going to clubs so often. Makes sense to do it.”

Amar looked at Erfan, who remained silent. He didn’t look back at Amar, instead gulped down a drink that was in front of him. He looked as if the blood had drained from him. Strobe lights flashed in Amar’s eyes, and he felt the delirium come over him again.

“But... what about Erfan?”

“Don’t worry about Erfan,” Raouf said.

“Erfan, did you lie to me?”

“Come on, buddy, I think you need to leave. We got work to do.”

“But he doesn’t like Indian music.”

“Erfan’s going have residency at our new place. We got someone else, someone who’s all over that stuff.”

“New place..?” Amar turned over and grabbed Erfan’s collar, shaking him hard.

“New place?!”

He heard Ferdoun and Raouf say something to him, but didn’t bother to heed it. He tugged on Erfan’s shirt harder and harder, trying to get his friend to respond. Erfan

was not the kind to take physical harassment, but the dazed look on his face remained, and he showed no response to Amar's rage. Amar felt large hands grasp his body. His muscles, loosened from the alcohol, didn't contest against it. He was lifted from the couch and taken outside. He couldn't feel his muscles as this happened, it was almost as if he was hovering across, flying away, strobes whizzing past.

*

But when they made it outside did he begin to regain any sense of the world around him. Gone was the music and the sweaty humidity. The air was dry and cool. Amar felt the crowd looking on him from behind. His crowd, the ones he was meant to provide endless hours of raging excitement. But apparently he wasn't.

Erfan was sitting on the ground next to him. His right hand came out of his pocket with another bottle of liquor, already half empty. He took the cap off, took a long sip, and stared at Amar, making a silent dare.

"Fuck you," Amar said, and started walking away from Xenos.

"Amar..."

But he then took a brisk pace, and kept walking. Once he'd gone a few blocks, he saw Erfan had caught up, but across the street. They walked on, parallel to each other, both with heads down. Erfan's tennis shoes scraped against the pavement, playing off the claps of Amar's own boots. They walked silently for another block or so, before Amar called across: "Do you want to explain that to me?"

Erfan stopped walking, but did not look at him, and did not answer. His eyes hovered around, towards the bulbs in the streetlamps, the cracks in the pavement, the orange clouds in the sky, the lone taxi drifting by on the road.

This was the zombie hour, as Erfan liked to call it, when everyone was between consciousness, awake and unaware, fully alive and moving in hypnotic trance. DJs had probably just put on their signature track of the night, or slipped in the latest leak that they wanted to test out. A few staggering people were peppered the sidewalks on their way to sobriety; it was still hours before most places closed. In some parts of town, the parties were just beginning.

“Hey,” Erfan spoke from across the road, “You want to know why you didn’t get the job? You think you’re more clever than everyone. They don’t want that. They want someone to fit into the box. Their box.”

“I don’t want to be in a box,” Amar said.

A cab off in the distance sped down toward them, running through a red light, the whooshing past with rambling dancehall bass blasting from its stereo.

“Vybz Kartel?” Amar said.

“See? I don’t know who the fuck that is.”

Erfan began shifting his feet to the side, sliding off of the sidewalk, over the curb, and into the road. He began pacing in circles across the breadth of the street.

“They wanted an Indian guy, okay? You’re the only one I know.” Erfan kicked the asphalt under him, as if he expected it to chip away into small pebbles at the lash of

his shoe. “You know, there are just some boxes you will fit into, and some that you won’t, okay? Sometimes just take a chance to not take a chance.”

Amar walked out into the street to join him. This was a rare moment, for Erfan to be frank and upfront. But still, rumbling below, Amar still felt his anger and betrayal.

Another taxi rounded the corner, about a mile down, and drove in their direction. Its speed was growing, trying to catch the green lights. Erfan sighed, long and deeply. He sipped half of what was left in the bottle, and handed it to Amar, who finished the rest, the liquid now burning and hurting rather than numbing.

“Him and my uncle man, they got this thing going, and they want me to be a part of it.

“Why didn’t you just tell me then, about the Indian club?”

The rumbling taxi engine died, halted at a red light.

“Because,” he said, “It’s not all. They want to start making tracks. My uncle heard some of our tracks and decided he wanted to get into the producing.”

“He wants to produce our stuff?” Amar asked.

“*His* stuff,” Erfan said. “My stuff. But he needed someone to take over my place Xenos before I could leave.”

They heard the taxi rev again, now only a few blocks away. It was getting faster.

“So you just handed me over,” Amar said, “like a sacrificial lamb? What about synth-tar? It’s *our* thing.”

“He doesn’t care about that. He just wants club tracks. I told you man, no one likes that bhangra crap.”

As the taxi closed in, in the split seconds as it’s headlights got wider and brighter, Amar wondered if Erfan was going to move at all. But as the roar closed in, he didn’t move, and Amar leaped out of the way.

The taxi screeched its breaks, and swerved around Erfan, who stood there cackling.

Dalia’s words echoed in Amar’s mind: *Don’t trust him completely*. If she knew Erfan was so reckless, why not tell him earlier? Of course, she didn’t really care. Not about Erfan, not about him.

“Bitch,” Amar said aloud.

Erfan looked at him, and he continued. “You called Dalia a bitch outside. Raouf was saying all of those things about her and you just stood there. Why, so it wouldn’t sour your ‘business outlook? What happened to the guy standing up for his sister before?”

“Just leave her be, okay? I feel like I’m on loop. You don’t want to deal with that. She can work her charms on me too, I guess, okay?” He huffed. “Besides, Raouf and I are now business partners. I had to be all chummy-chum with him.”

Erfan started laughing, uncontrollably. A glaze came over his eyes.

“Chummy-chum!” He repeated. “Chummy-chum-chum!”

He started walking down the street, staggering and cackling, and Amar knew that for him, the issue had passed again, waved off by a sly remark. Fade in and fade out.

There was nothing more to be said tonight, or, Amar admitted with reluctance, ever again.

Chapter 24

That night, shamed, jobless, and wishing now he had some poetic device to express his heavy heart, Jayant walked to the Municipal Square by himself.

It was quickly said and done. The court could not have it known that one of their own bright employees had been frequenting secret meetings with a Pakistani national for the past decade. Kantilal, standing there the entire time, even went so far to ask Jayant if he as a spy. Jayant looked at him quizzically, but was dejected when Prasad repeated the question to him.

It was agreed. He would resign, effective immediately. “Go empty your desk,” Prasad said. “I heard Indians are going back to England for school now. America, even. Perhaps we’ll find a bright boy to take your place, one with a Western air.”

Prasad placed his wig back his head. Kantilal hung his head and wagged it back and forth like a dog. “Jayantibhai, Jayanti bhai. How could you...”

Without responding, Jayant walked out of the office, but did not go back to his own. Instead he left the building, and went to a pay telephone and make a trunk call. If there was no more need for the secrecy, he might as well break his communication rule with the Nawaab.

The line rung and rung, a low guttural sound like sounded like lizards in the swamp. After awhile, he a man answered.

“Can I speak to Nawab Khanji, please?”

“This is he.”

“Oh, I thought it would be...”

Jayant heard a sigh at the other end. “It seems neither here nor there I am no longer a Nawaab, so best you stop calling me that. I must pick up my own phone, put on my own shoes, clean my own back. It seems Pakistan is equally invested in this idea of common equality among men.” His voice felt neutral, detached, almost how Sarika was on the patio so long ago.

“It’s just politics, sir.”

“No, apparently it’s not. Which means you must stop calling me ‘sir’ as well. The world has moved on. It seems our little arrangement must also move on.”

“But...” Jayant hung onto the receiver. Traffic bustled out on the street. Milk carts were trolleyed by riders on bicycle, and behind them farmers with their cows. Automobiles and camel-carriages congested the street, and the sight made Jayant choke inside his phone booth.

“Jayantbhai,” Khanji said, “We played music, we played tennis. We were friendly in these endeavors. But we cannot be friends, really. The rift between us is too great. You still represent the government that, unfortunately, put a gun in my face and chased me out with a rabid dog. Like a *bhikar* who’s shown at the door, asking for leftover scraps.”

“It’s just...I’ve enjoyed what we’ve been doing. It’s not the business I came for. Learning *tabla* was a wish of mine from childhood. Since then the entire country first broke free, and then split apart. Farmers who became revolutionaries then became civil

servants and then turned entrepreneurs. From marching and fighting for salt we've come to snapping fingers for tea. Still, as confused as we've become, so quickly, everyone can enjoy a good tune. You've given me that ability, to play a tune. Badly, but I can do it nonetheless."

"You're welcome, Mr. Baxi," Khanji said. "In that case, play onwards. I can leave you with that, at least. There are some machines there. Use them."

"It's not just that," Jayant said. "It was the music *we* created, together. These little improvisations can't be replicated. If we can meet just one more time – I just wish to be able to relive these moments again"

He heard the former Nawaab sigh. "I'm sorry, Mr. Baxi, but, perhaps you'll have to find someone else way to relive it with."

The statement struck Jayant like a spear. He had not wept upon rejection from B.D. Prasad, certainly not when his colleague accused him of treason. But at this, emotions swept over him.

He put the phone back on the receiver. Behind him, the operator/proprietor of the phone booth barked, "Six rupees!"

Jayant gave him whatever notes he had in his pocket, not bothering to check what they were. Dazed, he trudged out into the congested street, and decided he needed to find an emptier palce. Somewhere where he could breath, and think, not of what he would do next, but if he could, relive moments from the past. The cantonment it was.

The square was filled with various speech-criers, lambasting the virtues of gaining independence. There were small middle-aged men with white kurtas, woolen sweater vests, and the small *topis* atop their heads. They had round eyeglasses and neatly trimmed mustaches to show everyone they were educated but not westernized. Sometimes it would be the younger men, in light buttoned up shirts and slacks, flowing hair combed back and eyes wide with passion about what they spoke. They would read from every book that supported their views, from the Upanishads to Gandhi's writings, and even Greek philosophy for those inclined.

It certainly wasn't the same, Jayant thought to himself, but he did not mind it this way right now. He began to walk in an aimless circle around the square.

The fire-eaters and toy makers from the day had since gone home to their families, for rest and warm meals; the peddlers and merchants who had occupied the area during the day had all thrown long sheets over their stalls or strung up their carts and walked back to whatever hovel they had come from. The day laborers had were all home, eating whatever meal they could afford and then off to an uninterrupted sleep until the next dawn rose over the Sabarmati banks.

The only remnants of deplorable fun were the *hijras*, the eunuchs who huddled under a small tent during the day, fanning themselves and complaining about the hot sun. At night they would flock around in one large drove, batting eyelashes at men too drunk to tell their true gender. They would lure them into a kiss and then laugh the poor fool out

of the square. Although it repulsed them, Jayant and his friends had enjoyed watching their duplicitous tricks played on others.

But now even the multi-gendered harem seemed in pale shadow. Jayant looked at the one who had touched him, and could barely see any of the glee in his eyes. He only had to lightly shrug his shoulder to get the eunuch to let go. What clients they did have probably stopped coming, instead focusing on the newly birthed Mother. Were they so uncared for, that even the strides to sanitize the country passed over them?

He remembered what B.D. Prasad had said, and Khanji, about the new common man's India. Was it equal, really? Indians long decried that caste was a communist ideal, turned into class distinctions by the British, and wouldn't exist post-Independence. But here it was, the outcast Eunuchs, the outcast Nawaab, and now he from the profession he'd devoted his life to. Setting his foot around here again was unthinkable. Even the clerks and secretaries in the offices would look at him like some suckling pig ready for slaughter. The words of the *Manusmrti* cackled back at him, in the hearty laugh of Professor Bihari.

He cursed at himself for leading his brain down this train of thought. He was tired, but keeping these mental occupations would not going to help him. The possibility of going home and sleeping became more and more elusive.

But how can I go home? Jayant thought of his wife, and rage she'd incite learning he'd lost his work. He thought of his children, or rather the visage of them, running off to school, as he stayed at home, deadbeat and useless.

He looked around the Municipal Square to see if there was anything else that might captivate his attention for a couple more hours. Perhaps he would walk the long way around, take in the moon light along the riverbank. It was summer, and the moon was high in the soft dark indigo sky. It occurred to him it would take some time to get home still, but all the better.

Now that many more lamps and light bulbs had gone out across the city, he could see the stars clearly. They were like little pins holding the great curtain of night above him; covering him from some great audience that had gathered to see him. At daybreak, the curtain would drop, putting him in the center of a great stage, naked and displayed. He imagined Judge Xavier looking at him with deft eyes, and dare him to challenge the inescapable verdict.

Night finally settled into the square, and was left mostly empty. The paan-wala closed up his shop. "Five kids now, bhai," he'd said. "If I don't get back soon enough there won't be any food left for me."

It certainly wasn't the same. Whatever British were left, never came by anymore. For them, India had lost its exoticism and fun. It was now only a burden that was quickly falling from grip. It occurred to him if he would have any future once they left. If the British left, there wouldn't be anyone powerful or rich enough to encroach on the Rajput's land, and then no one bring lucrative cases to court.

And there was no more dancing girl.

He turned back to the *hijra* and approached him. The man smiled through the veil of his sari, and Jayant struggled not to avert his attention as he asked if any dancers would arrive.

“No, not really,” he said in falsetto. “Well, there are some but they aren’t that good.”

“There used to be one dancing girl here. A long while back.”

“Well that’s too far for me to remember.”

“She was very talented. I’m sure you would know.”

“What was she like?”

Jayant stopped himself from speaking. He found his vocabulary with which to describe the girl was not concrete detail at all. He remembered her so well – how she looked, how she moved – but then every dancer had sweet eyes, deep locks, and taut thighs. He tried to muster anything he could remember from the night about her.

“What was her name?” The *hijra* asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well then what bloody help can I give you?” And with that, he turned with an air of some bruised aristocracy, and rejoined the group. He spoke something to them and they all laughed, watching Jayant. He felt an acrid taste in his mouth, and looked back toward the ground. His eyes eased at the sight of the grains of pebbles and rock, slowly turning into an ashen grey under the setting sun.

“Oye,” the *hijra* called out to him. “Ask our begum. She would know. The hag is as old as that the shit pots in that building.”

“Begum?” Jayant asked. “Where is she?”

In unison, the group of *hijras* pointed in the direction of the river, and down southward along its bank. “Keep walking until the stray dogs don’t growl at you anymore. Then you know you are close – she’s the biggest bitch of them all.”

A tower of moonlight reflected across the Sabarmati, illuminating the still ripples in the river. From up high on the ridge, he looked down to the running water quietly hurrying through the darkness, trying to avoid waking sleeping Ahmedabad and scamper off to the ocean by the next sunrise. Below he could see a fisherman sleeping in his boat, tied to a rock on the riverbank.

The chill of the evening whisked itself under his clothing, through his skin, and settling into his bones as he walked along the river for better part of an hour, all the time wishing that he was also in sleepy malaise, so that he also wouldn’t be walking out here in the cold dark. He thought of his wife, and how they had been brought here the day of their wedding, to scatter flower petals and say a prayer for their life together. How they would have to come again soon, once the new child was born.

He wondered what she would be doing at home, and realized he hadn’t any idea at all. Cooking dinner was left to the cook, and cleaning to the cleaning girl. They had just bought a new radio, but she wasn’t interested in newscasts. Sometimes there was a music program on at night, where a man sung devotional chants, or perhaps a *raas-garba* band

had been recorded, with all the screams and joy and clacking of *dandia* sticks alive in the background static.

But did she like those? He had put on his phonograph once for her, the Jai Mata prayer, and she had listened, quietly and attentively. Later she tried to turn it on once, but pressed the needle down too hard onto the vinyl, thinking it had to be locked and secured into the groove, and so cracked the faded black ripples.

Instead he imagined her, doing as she had many times, sitting with her belly punched outward, gently tapping on it as if it was a way to play with the unborn baby.

“You’re just disturbing it,” he had said.

“If you were the one carrying it, it would go undisturbed entirely,” she had snapped.

When it was born, he had promised her to ask for better pay to support the child.

“Who knows,” she had replied under her breath. “We could have another.”

Another chilly breeze blew across the Sabarmati and Jayant swore at himself for not getting his jacket from the courthouse. He had left in such haste, almost stumbling to escape the room and the staring gaze of Judge Xavier. He sunk his head down, chin digging into the collar of his shirt. The dirt crunched under his soles as he took one step after the other; and in unison with the breeze, he began to sense a melody. *Whoo crunch crunch whoo crunch*. At least, he forced himself to find one as some means of entertaining himself on this bloody walk.

He wondered if the *hijra* had sent him out here as a joke. Another one of their famous practical jokes, now played on him. What would this begum tell him? These old madams spent their days stuck in their *khatla* beds, coughing up nasty mucus, from a lifetime of smoking opium pipes, and defecating into their saris.

Whoo crunch crunch. Whoo crunch. Woof!

He looked up and saw a small mangy canine, his sparse furs twisted and knotted all over, sticking up like cow licked hair on a humid morning after the monsoon. It growled at Jayant, protected the small pile of wrappers and rotted fruit pits that it stood next to. But of all of the menace it tried to project, Jayant didn't register any of it. He looked at the creature, into its opaque milky black eyes, starved for its own share of the pot. He was reminded of the poor filthy herder who slashed his neighbor in the same desperation, and had given him his first case in court.

In fact, he noticed there were quite a few dogs hovering around in the darkness, just as the *hijra* had said. Some had lain their heads down in rest, others scampered around in passivity. Behind them all was a hut overlooking the riverbank. There was a lantern hanging at the doorway, and a small woman stood under it, the rose-red of her sari lively even in such a dim light.

Jayant walked towards her and the hut, sending the dogs scampering, and she turned her head in his direction, her face hidden under darkness of the lantern. He imagined the begum's face revealed, old hag, a flea-bitten bitch, with sunken mouth and blackened lips.

But he got closer, and felt those same eyelashes graze on him, softer, and a little greyer, but still sweet. His heart suddenly went racing. *Dhak-dhin-dhin-dhak-dhin-dhin.*

“Yes?” the eyelashes said in their flutters.

“A *hijra* sent me this way. He said you are begum?”

“Begum who? Who are you?”

He paused, and thought, how do I answer? *I am a lawyer of the Municipal Court of Gujarat. I am a working class family man out for a walk. I am a Brahmin.*

Instead, he answered by asking, “What are you?”

“You think I’m a begum? What are you?”

I am a too-grown boy who once saw you and couldn’t shake your image from my mind.

“I don’t really know.”

She cocked her hip, one arm bent and hand on her waist. The other hand stretched out, palm open; interrogating, examining Jayant.

“I am cold, though,” he said.

“Come inside.”

Jayant looked around, and realized he was in a very secluded area, well out of the city. Behind him the last few lanterns still gleamed like flecks of gold embroidered into a salwaar, the fabric of the Ahmedabad skyline vaguely contoured by low rooftops and the

dome of the Jama Masjid, but it drifted away, as the moon reached an apex at the top of heaven, and he walked into the hut to meet his Goddess.

Chapter 25

The next day he woke up but did not open his eyes or stir from his bed. The core of his frontal lobe throbbed, battered and exhausted from the rivers of alcohol that had flowed through his system, and for a few minutes he spent under his blanket, swearing away at the pain, for that was all he had the motive to do. Gradually, as sunlight pounded his closed eyelids, threatening to burn through in pinhole slits, the events of the night before slowly returned to him.

After leaving Erfan in the street, Amar had decided to walk back to Xenos. What he expected to get he didn't know, and thought he'd all but assumed his time with Erfan was now over, the night still had awhile to go.

The line was still long, but the crowd had changed. It was younger, more stragglers trying to get at the last ditch to make something of the night. Amar looked around for Raouf, and not seeing him, approached the line.

Near the front, he saw a group of Indian girls. Indian girls all looked the same, the same white cream blush on their cheeks, blue eyeliner, the same right-parted bangs that went over the eye. But one looked familiar.

He got out of line and walked toward them. Yes, there: Kiran Goswami. As he got closer, he directed his gaze squarely at her, and ignored through his periphery the awkward and skeptical looks from the other girls. Kiran looked at him, and after a quick contortion of confusion, her face relaxed in recognition, and she said, "Hi."

It was one of the girls' birthdays. Kiran introduced them, but every name went into a repository in the back of his head, their faces juggled. Kiran herself had on a purple

dress, conservatively strapped and well close to her knees. Amar thought she looked very attractive.

“You never called,” she said.

“Yeah, well...mind if I join you now?”

She nodded, and with each girl in a scantily shiny dress, they were in quickly. At the table, the vinyl couches stood only inches above the ground. The familiarity of Kiran’s face comforted him, but he was still anxious Raouf wouldn’t catch him. He kept craning his head around the oblong room. Why did he come back? He wasn’t sure, but at least he was in, here, now, taking in the regaled hall of Xenos. It was underwhelming, he thought.

Her friends took three rounds of vodka shots in between talk of boys they knew and liked. The birthday girl, Richa her name, was shying from one more. She wanted to go dance.

One of the others complained, saying the weird stalkers would come from behind, grab them and ask them to dance. Another concurred, recalling another night when they’d been proposed, and then shrieked as if she’d seen a snake.

“What are you all complaining about?” Amar said.

“You don’t know,” Kiran said. “Some guys are total creeps.”

“It’s a club. They’re here to dance with girls.”

“Well we don’t want to,” said Richa.

“But look at you.” Amar motioned at their dresses. They hadn’t missed very many applications – highlights, lip-gloss, eyeliner. Their faces now became more distinct to him. They stared back at him blankly.

“You look like sluts,” he clarified. He surprised himself at the ease with which the words flowed from him. It was Erfan-patented blunt criticism, and the girls, after a moment’s hesitance, took it with smiles. He poured two shots of vodka, took one, and forced the other into Richa’s hand. “Happy Birthday.” He downed it.

The DJ was okay, but certainly the second-tier guy. Erfan was no doubt the first. Spin-scratch. Tailored electro hip-hop to get everyone in the party mood. On the low couch, he felt like clawing at the air to reach above the droning bass. Fades were dragged out, its jet-plane swish tugged to its end, and the treble toggled, to make the crowd second guess what could happen next.

“Did you know this actually samples a house song from Sweden?” Amar asked the girls. They all shook they all shook their heads *no*. He historicized the musicians involved, how it did injustice to their original by taking away its beautiful lyrics and applying rap. By the time he finished, Richa, with the others, had receded into their own conversation. Kiran, most likely out of politeness Amar thought, kept a look of interest.

He’d lost count of how much he’d drank tonight, but took another shot anyway, loose and lightheaded. His shoulders started to move to the music, exaggeratedly, mocking the ways he knew girls danced, unaware how awkward it looked. Kiran broke out a laugh and the others turned to see. Richa rolled her eyes and declared the group all to go onto the floor, and with one unified motion, they got up. Kiran looked at Amar with

stretched pause, and then said with an open outstretched hand, “Come keep the creeps off of us.”

There was a point when he was with Kiran on the dancefloor, and she was in his arms, her cheeks glittered as they had been the night he’d first lusted after her, except now he only saw it as tacky window dressing on her face. He became sullen, and wanted nothing more than to be in bed and end the night as quick as possible. Kiran read his look, and he was flummoxed to think how she’d interpreted a drooping frown as a signal for her to stroke his hair and suddenly pull him onto her and force open his mouth with her own, sharply, intently, practically swallowing his tongue whole.

The episode only made him feel further dejected. If only it was a few small hours earlier, could he have been kissing Dalia, feeling her fingers dig into his scalp instead? And this thought only lead him back to the bar for more drinks, and because he was a guest at the birthday party, he was morally compelled to buy a round for all of the girls, and buy the time he’d got home both his monetary and emotional banks were emptied.

But this wasn’t what panged him, as he rolled over, pulling the covers above his head and dive-bombing his forehead into his pillow, as if it would pulverize the headache into submission.

Again the crushed ball formed in his stomach, the one he’d had in sitting across from Erfan. The saliva somehow evaporated within minutes from his mouth as he told Erfan what a bastard he’d been. After he’d finished what he’d said, he’d felt as one did after vomiting; as the nausea subsides, the disgust at cleaning up the mess sets in.

And then Amar sat up straight, throwing his blanket off of him, eyes fixed wide open, dueling with the sunlight in his gaping irises.

Today was the day that Dalia was leaving town. Rather, he was only guessing but for some reason was certain, she'd already left.

And it didn't matter at this point. To get to her would mean to suppress the hangover in order to properly get dressed and walk out of the door, and then his only course of action would be to make up with Erfan, which would inevitably become a long, drawn out affair filled with goading of "I'm right, you're wrong" and petulant, childish ambivalence.

That same way he'd behaved last night Amar thought. *Behaved* was the right word, the kind of thing mothers say to unruly boys in supermarkets and when they disrespect strange elders. This was the level of maturity Erfan was, the pouty attitude and errant carelessness of maintaining a professional image. The way he'd talked about Dalia is own sister.

Again he thought of her in the green dress. He smile, sincere, promising him the world; sober and caring. It was how he would always think of her now.

Erfan he could only picture now as some kind of story-book wolf, sharp eyes and licking his lips salaciously. The glint that never leaves the eyes of sadists and sociopaths.

It was all his fault, Amar decided. His fault that I won't forgive him for.

The sunlight grew intense, and Amar's body urged him to give his eyes relief. But he didn't want to close his lids, for he felt moisture collecting at the rim, and even alone in

his room, away from Erfan and Dalia and the other clubbers and the world, he was too embarrassed to shut it, forcing the moisture into a full-bodied drop, and streak down his cheek.

His mouth quivered and body went limp. He fell back into bed and didn't get up for the rest of the morning, cursing his headache away.

Chapter 26

By the time Khusrow awoke the next morning, the merchant was nowhere to be seen. But Amir was happy. His stomach was content, and he felt a gleeful satisfaction at successfully undermining the Priest's food stock. Even if the thin man didn't know it yet, sooner or later he would become suspicious, and would be unable to do anything, weak and frail as he was.

Khusrow sat at his writing desk, ready to conquer his creative impulses, harness them, and wrestle them into form. He thought this is what an army of thousands must feel before marauding small hamlets, raiding and hoarding all loot for all its worth, growing stronger the more villages he came across. How thrilling.

Wait, he thought. What a violent metaphor.

The ruins around him, the sacrilege of his own king, bore down on him. The stone dancer, becoming more and more obscure with the passing days, holding onto her last bits of beauty and grace, seemed to be daring Khusrow into guilt.

No, something else, Amir thought. But what?

He suddenly wanted to write about Sunita.

He fixated on the image of her large nose ring, adorned with a golden chain strung across her milky cheeks, and pinned to her earlobe. He enjoyed taking it off, gently and meticulously, as if her face was a kind of instrument of love-making that required training to operate. Somehow he would always manage to pinch her, whether in the nose or the ear. She'd give him wicked looks, and he responded by kissing the spot of pain,

and then again. These little ways he would tease her, as she did him. He longed to tease back.

He commanded her away from his thoughts. Why did she enter his mind, like a spirit? He had hoped his passion was just a symptom of hunger, that the malnourishment made him hallucinate for bodily pleasures other than food. But it seemed Sunita willingly preyed upon him no matter where he would go.

The stone dancer eyes were on him, he knew. Sunita's spirit must have possessed it, tempting him to stray from his work. Keeping him in stasis rather than moving forward.

Khusrow put the quill down and got up from the desk. Another time I've sat, he thought, and another time I've risen without even an etching.

He wanted to find some distraction from her, and then he laughed as he realized his best option.

He was pleased to find the priest sitting at a small fire, cooking a pot of rice over it. Khusrow approached him, trying to hold back any smile, any shine in his eye, which would betray his crime from the night before.

The priest looked up at him, hand still stirring the pot slowly.

"I am happy to see you are still here," he said.

"Why would I leave?" Amir asked.

"That man who came on camel. I thought you might have left with him."

The priest gave a sly look, and Khusrow again silently cursed at the small man's ability to make him feel vulnerable.

"I am still intent on staying here till I finish."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Do you mind if I ask you, why are *you* still here?"

"I told you. It is the only place I have ever known."

"Don't take me to be naïve, priest. This is not a monastery. You weren't born into this profession like a servant."

"Still, it was my choice from early on. I have been performing ceremonies and ablutions even before my voice broke and stretched."

Khusrow was taken aback. "Such an early age!"

The priest shrugged, and kept stirring, as if the fact was just another grain in the pot, mixed among so many others. Khusrow thought about all of the moments from his own boyhood, all the sweets licked and chewed, all games played with friends. The old tales heard in the bazaar by weary old rhapsodists. Who would he be today without those? He'd always taken them to be part of any normal life, royal or slave class. Didn't the priest ever pang after sweet flour rolls? Flying kites in spring breeze? Holding a woman? Again the stone dancer billowed into his mind.

"How do you bear being a man of religion?" Khusrow asked the priest.

“What do you mean, ‘bear?’ As if this is some great boulder on my shoulders?
Am I Hanuman carrying the mountain on my back?”

“All the things you’ve forgone in life, that you could have had.”

“What could I have had?”

“Why, a wife, a child. A home of your own. Lavish clothing and good food. You are well-read and learned. Even you can’t tell me that in a big city you could make a good living at a number of trades, and live very comfortably.”

“Oh poet, you would be surprised at what little work priests are equipped to handle. Do I look like I have the build of an ox? Could I drag a cart down a stone path? Or if I tried something intellectual, I would have too much conviction to engage in business or merchant trades. That requires a keen mind, ready to seize selfish advantages at the cost of another’s goodwill. Could a man of religion ever do that?”

“I suppose not,” Khusrow said.

“Then how can you suggest that I would have any desire to do those things, if I would not be successful at any?” the Priest asked.

“Desire and ability are so far from another. Man wishes to fly, but he cannot. Only the birds, and Hanuman yes, can do that. Yet, that doesn’t stop people from holding it in fantasy. What I’m asking is, sometimes our fantasies get the better of us. There is a tale from the west, of a boy who sprouted wings, and then once he was in the air, he flew too high, too close to the sun, and his wings melted. He fell to the sea and drowned to his death. I find this kind of zeal interesting, the zeal that leads to danger, life-and-death

danger. I think penitence comes from men who rather than chase that zeal, put it all in the hands of God, and wait for their gift of flight to come when it is bestowed on them.”

The Priest stopped stirring the pot of rice.

“Flights of fantasy. Living in clouds. Is this me, you’re really speaking of?”

He was wondering the same this Khusrow was himself – in whose favor was that argument?

“No, I am just talking. We are just talking. Would you agree?”

“All men have desires. It motivates us to live throughout the day. To be pious and righteous, simply means one has mastered ridding themselves of desires that don’t promote enlightenment, and instead geared them towards God and ultimate *dharma*.”

“You’re simply pouring everything into one desire,” Khusrow said. “It sounds like it can make life monotonous, boring.”

“Not at all. For when you devote your desires towards one goal, then your entire being and livelihood follows suit. Now, when you wake up, every breath that you take, every bite of rice you eat, or every time you taste sweet honeymilk, dripping down your tongue, it takes on a new meaning, because it is the fruit of that devotion. God has given those things, and since you have geared your life toward God, you reap the manifestation of those efforts.”

Khusrow wanted to say next, how that theory faltered since one could not link God to the honeymilk. It was a byproduct of nature, extracted by the first mindful farmer.

But both he and the priest knew that was the obvious comment, and to speak it would only deter the conversation back to the animosity they'd only now quelled.

Instead, Khusrow took a brief pause, inhaled, and said, "Surely though, God can allow for some adorned clothing, or perhaps better food."

"God is not interested in seeing man be gaudy. We already live in excess, already taking too much advantage where we should not. Look around. Why did this massacre occur? Because the sultan's bloodlust could not be cured? For the great horde of riches? And why did we have those? Because we built a temple so great devotees flocked from across the land to pay respects. Bigger, larger, grosser, these are only the signifiers of a future downfall. You people. Cannot understand when to stop."

"What people am I?" Khusrow asked. "My want is to compose, to write. To capture soul and essence of people and this word, but it is such a deep undertaking, I have to acknowledge every act that man takes part in, carnal, sinful, and all."

"And yet you sit here day after day and cannot do so."

No words passed for a few moments.

And then for a change, while the priest remained silent, and Khusrow scratched away into the book.

"There is no need to make a show in front of me," the priest said.

"I'm not, I'm simply making a notation." Khusrow put the quill down. "There, see? My thought is already spent. My mind is beleaguered with too many things. So much is seething into my mind that it's become too muddled for me to pick out anything

of value. It's like trying to find the fresh ripe mango in a cart. Even ones that seem proper are not juicy enough, or pulp, or their skin is too unattractive."

"What a surprise," the Priest said. "You know how to pick your own fruit."

Khusrow looked at the priest, and read a self-assured mock in his gaze. It was always there now, where before it interchanged with the scowls and ocular lashes, now there was only this sense that behind the pupils the priest was having a great laughter.

Amir made a fist and rest his head upon it. Even the talk of the mango, he thought, was such a long-winded metaphor. The illiterate market rat who sold them could probably think up the same, or something better. Perhaps even the priest could compose better than I, Khusrow spoke in his mind. The man has recited such gorgeous ancient scriptures, and he knows them so well that, even if he cannot read them, has enough command of the language to think of something improvised. Even he does not know this power he holds, how his work is not merely that of enlightenment, but also mastery of a craft, to instill it to others. A simpleton would heeded any word that sprang from this man's tongue.

This man, Khusrow decided, is a dangerous man.

"You are indeed thinking hard, noble Khusrow."

Amir looked up, unhinging his jaw to speak, and then paused before speaking.

"I'm trying to figure out a problem."

"The writing, no?"

“No. Yes, the writing, ultimately, but something specific. A strand of thought perhaps.”

The priest began drawing lines in the sand, at first without direction, and then in a round direction, one after the other, onto one another, until rings upon rings had been etched in grain. He then passed his hand over his canvas, sifting it back to as it was before, and set about again circling.

“Too many things in your mind. Too many things. This is why we priests void ourselves of all of these worthless materials. Take anything you hold dear in life – your home, your lover, your gold jewelry – any one of those will just wither away, and crumble apart into small bits, eroding and eroding, until it has been sifted into the sand, and finally, it becomes sand itself.”

Khusrow turned back to his book and dipped the quill.

“Have you found your thread?”

“What you said, priest. It was exquisite, and I am ashamed and disgusted to say so.”

“As am I to hear it! What I say is not meant to be written for some cheap Mohammedan rags, to be read alongside namaz and roasted lamb!”

Enraged though he was, for once however, the priest did not get up and storm away back into the temple.

“Do not worry,” Khusrow said. “I won’t credit you. The secret will only remain with you, me, and great God.”

“Don’t taunt me!” the priest said, and his foot lashed out at the writing desk, bringing up a cascade of sand with force, and kicking the desk over, the ink spilling out, and wet pages smeared with black and spackled with golden grains.

“If you want to copy me go ahead, but here is the other secret that only you and I and God are aware – you’ve not been able to think of a single thing. Your mind has, as it should, shriveled up empty. Instead of being like a camel, when even that beast is smart enough to store water in its hump for the long dry heat, you’re acting as a ass, lost in the forest, unable to make it’s way back home and too stupid to make its way further. You think you attain some great knowledge by taking in all of these cruel habits, when in fact they only cloud the brain and make knowledge that much more scarce.

“If you are here, and wish to take something away with you, and I do hope you will depart from here quickly, learn the ability to shed some of those desires. If you stop focusing on things that you do not have, perhaps your mind will return to this world that we live in, during now. Understand, bastard son-of a pig?”

Khusrow was ignited at the insult. He did not bow once, let alone twice or five times for *namaz*, and heartily used foul language when sipping arrack with his poets circle. Even then, being equated to dirty mud dwelling hogs twangs in the mind of any blood-born Muslim, and to be called so by a man who expunges sinful manner.

But Khusrow stayed still, clawing at the sand. And so did the priest, huffing air and heaving his thin sunken chest, which had found a sudden girth.

And then the priest, as protocol, walked back into the temple, and this time Amir thought, he had actual penance to seek.

As soon as the visage of small white loincloth was lost in the abyss, Khusrow got up and picked the table up. He placed it upright, and gathered the papers. Some salvageable, some not. In the reservoir, he closed one eye and peeked inside some black viscosity at the bottom. He licked his lips with glee, whetted the quill, and dipped.

At the top of a blank page, his last, he wrote:

What desire do you wish to be rid of?

Chapter 27

Below him, Jayant could not see the water anymore. Clouds had cast over the moon. Somewhere he could hear a creaking boat flap in the tide. The insects chirped, and he thought where they could be, for he hadn't seen a bush anywhere nearby.

The woman came behind him, and placed her hand on his shoulder. "What are you thinking about?" she asked

"I was wondering if I should jump off of here."

He turned and faced her, but her face was unfettered. "Why? Is life so bad?"

Jayant could not answer her.

"Come back inside." She took his hand, and her warmth surged through his body. The chill that had nestled into his bones since walking there shook loose, and he let out a shiver. When he turned, she'd already retreated back unto the small hovel.

When he entered, he couldn't find her at first in the darkness. A match struck, and in the corner her face illuminated before a match. She lit another gas lamp and hung it by the window.

The hovel, one room separated by grass thatching for a wall, was lit only by a small lamp hanging from a window opposite him, looking out over the river. But its light leaked into the night air, and only a dim glow remained inside. The walls were covered with imagery; pasted, taped, hung, or simply caked and dried into the alabaster. It was a mosaic of faces and expressions staring back at Jayant, He could see the baby Krishna, Guru Dutt film posters, ads for stage plays and performances. There were grainy black

and white photos of village scenery and people, women sunk into their saris and men with great robust mustaches. Faces of the past, of people he'd never met or known. And standing there, he began to feel he never could.

She sat on the charpoy, letting out a heavy breath. The folds of her sari fell from her hair, and she waved her hand across her face. In the extra light, she had grown many ages younger, looking very fine and radiant, now almost as she had done before the walls of the cantonment those many years ago.

In her hands she held a small torn piece of clothing, and with her other drew a needle through it, up and down, up and down, braiding a gold stitch. Jayant watched her hands closely for a timeless moment, the needle secure between her thumb and middle finger. At this age, her fingers still refrained a firmness, and precision.

He took a pace closer to her, dragging the sole of his sandals against the floor, as if he was a thief who'd snuck in, with malicious intent. She didn't acknowledge his movement, and kept sewing, and guiltily he took steady feet and closed the space between them. As he got close, she rotated her head, stretching it like a wildcat at dawn, and the fold of sari draped over her head fell down to her shoulder.

He could see her face now, tired with age, wrinkles few, but sharply scorched into her forehead. He looked down at the stitching, reconstituting exactly on the original fractured line. It was lush green with circular blue patterns, like the national flag. In her mouth she chewed on a stick of neem, which in tandem with the sewing, gave the impression of a laborer, a workman. But no, that wasn't accurate either, was it? Her

fingers didn't operate with the usual grunt roughness, wayward and slow, but rather with a uniform flow.

He wanted to compliment the beauty of the garment, but instead asked, "Can I have a glass of water?"

"You should chew on neem. It will keep your mouth from growing dry."

"I used to clean my teeth with it as a child. Not anymore, though."

"Yes, now you walk into ladies' homes and first thing ask for water. What a smart young man you've become."

"Sorry. I'm very parched. I walked a long way."

She put the green-blue garment down, and took the stick of neem out of her mouth. She lightly smacked her lips and blew out any barky bits. She turned and looked at Jayant finally, and at the moment he saw her eyes, he felt his throat go completely dry and forgot his thirst entirely. His legs ached with the weariness of the walk. "I will go, I think," he said.

"Sit down," she said. "Where are you going to go at this hour? Didn't you see those dogs out there?"

"They look harmless."

"You are too scrawny for them, perhaps. Their tongues are always wet to bite someone or something."

"Have you been bitten by them before?"

“They don’t come so far to the hut. They keep around those piles of trash, as dogs do.”

She left the hut through the door on the other side, and Jayant heard the splash of water, a cup dipping into the gourd. She came back with a glass in hand, and a newspaper, fanning herself. He took the water gratefully and tried not to sip it too quickly.

After a quiet moment, he asked, “What are you sewing?”

“Some old thing. I don’t wear it anymore. Just to keep me busy.”

“Why not?”

She didn’t answer, and a flush of embarrassment swept over Jayant’s face. She put the garment down and sighed loudly. She continued to fan herself with the newspaper, strands of grey and greying black hair rising against the waft. Her gaze still went outside, complexion reflecting the star-speckled sky. Even in the impoverished house, Jayant thought she retained an elegance, untouched by the sand and dust. He took some more water. It had a metallic taste to it, but in his thirst it was refreshing nonetheless. The liquid traveled down his throat and settled into his stomach, cooling, relaxing him.

“Look,” she said. “How big the moon is tonight! Look at how its just sitting there above the houses on the other side of the bank, like some balloon, resting nimbly, ready to just roll away.”

He looked out of the small window. The moon was large, and bright. If it weren’t for the dark sky around it, or the quiet air, Jayant thought he would have mistaken it for the sun. “It’s so bright,” he said. “I can see everything almost.”

“Tsk,” she said. “Of course with all those bright lights everywhere. There was a time when there weren’t any large poles along the road. There was not even a road. And you could still see clearly on a night like this. The bank of the river, the soft ripples on the water. You could follow one, it was so bright. One small cascading wave as it traveled across the surface, from one side of the river to the other.

“When I was a girl I would just sit outside, on my charpoy, laying on my back and watching the sky, trying to make my own constellations out of the stars. You could see all of them without all of these lights.”

“I’m not that young, you know,” Jayant said. “I remember those times, too.”

“Of course,” she said, turning to face him. Her head was turned, so half of her face disappeared into the sari. “One always feels a fondness for the past. These days things change so quickly, even a few years could be considered generations.”

Jayant looked at his glass. He was surprised to see more than half of it full. Had so little seemed like a quenching gulp? The water sat still in the copper glass,

“What is your name?” she asked. He told her. He also told her where he was from and how many children he had, even though she did not ask. He told her Ashish, and his troubles in maths class, and Mansi, and her inability to get along with the other girls in school. He told her about his wife, how her tea was either too spicy or too cold. How she would constantly cut into vegetables as she peeled and chopped them, and would complain that she had to do it in order to check if they were rotten, and why didn’t he get a better job than they could buy from the clean refrigerated market. He did not tell her about his work or what he did even. Seeing the headline on the paper made him impotent

to the topic, as if it was forbidden to reveal he was associated with something so scandalous. To avoid the subject, he decided to end his autobiography, abruptly.

He thought perhaps she would take up the conversation from here, but she said nothing,

“Would you like me to go?” he asked.

“Are you uncomfortable being here? Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No, no. Actually I—“ He stopped himself, her direct comment stripping him naked, observed, insecure. She must have sensed this, for she asked, “Tell me more about your daughter.”

Without hesitating, as if the topic somehow lessened focus on himself, Jayant described the time Mansi paraded around the house planning her fourth birthday, making a list of various household items that Jayant had never wanted to spend money on, and she thought to ask for them as gifts from her guests. The woman listened, with joy slowly filling her previously blunt expression.

“I’d like some more water,” he asked when he finished. “I can get it myself. May I?”

“Back there.”

He went out the other door, to the gourd sitting behind the hut. Jayant thrust his hand into the water, not caring whether it was clean, and threw it back onto his face. It did little to cool his burning forehead. Sitting inside before her, talking about his children, it was as if a volcano had erupted inside of him. At once the pressures of home and of

work, the children and the Rajput, his wife and his illness, had accumulated and bore down on him, cooking, bubbling. It had made him immobile, locked in position for all to scrutinize

He splashed his face again. He was beginning to feel better. The volcano inside had not exploded, but gradually spilled over, the hot lava careening down the mountainside and hardening into new bedrock, firm and stable. He felt now he could walk on it without fear.

When he entered through the threshold of the door, the woman looked at him endearingly. Suddenly he was locked in her gaze, one he couldn't shake from. He remembered those bewitching eyes now, from that night at the cantonment. They were trained to capture men's minds, remain everlasting.

"See? You look refreshed. Like you've just woken from a restful sleep." She had put her garment and sewing needle away, and the paper down.

Jayant tried not to think about her gaze, and took the newspaper. Perhaps attempting to read article, busying his eyes with another activity, would erase the imprint of her green iris. He picked it up and noticed a headline of the page it was folded to. *Rajput Denies Claims of Defacto Law*, it said. He wondered if she'd read it. She was only fanning herself with it, of course. And it wasn't on the front page. If she read it at all, it was most likely only ever the unimportant sections in the back, somewhere near the astrology forecasts and sports articles.

He rolled it up and put it into his back pocket. She didn't seem to notice, or care even. Nevertheless, he put his focus onto the memorabilia around the room.

“Where did you get all of these posters and pictures and things?” he asked.

“Everywhere. If I saw it, and I thought it looked nice, I took it. After awhile people realized that I liked collecting photos and pictures, and so they began giving them to me as gifts.”

“Your friends have good taste.”

“No, not friends. Not necessarily. And they do not have good taste. Sometimes what they give is useless, but I take it anyway. Somehow though, everything finds its place on the wall.

Jayant nodded, affirming that her collection was one to behold. He wanted to take a snapshot of it, but he had no camera, and there was no way he ever could retain it all in his memory. The collage surrounding him was immense, like watching a projected film negative as it heated and lit on fire. Shades and lines that created the shapes of people, trees, buildings, vistas, melted and merged into globular shapes of color. He saw the dashing jawline of Dev Anand, his mouth open in midsong, overlapped by artist rendering of Krishna slaying the demon Putana by reversing the poison he suckled from her teat. There were small postcard photos, camels in the Thar to the north and the rice farmers in the South. The Himalayas in Nepal. Jayant realized how much his country he had never seen, and here it was all displayed in front of him, embossed surfaces corroded and faded, given new life after being joined and attached together.

“They hang so many images in so many places, and then just leave them there,” she said. After rain and sun and dirt it all corrodes away. I always feel so sad when that happens. So many artists put so much work into these images. One man asked me once,

‘Why do you want a Dev Anand poster? He will have a new movie soon, why have this old one?’ I said to him, ‘That’s all you can say? Don’t you go to the cinema? Don’t you enjoy yourself for an entire evening, and then sometimes even catch the next show right after? You people think it’s so easy to just sit down and watch a film, or a drama, or a dance, and after its over you leave and move on with life. You spent all this time with it. Doesn’t it should leave any impact on you?’”

“Creation is a labor, that’s true. Like the farmer’s labor to sow his crops, artists have the same.”

“See? Yes, you know.”

“I tried to play tabla when I was little. I thought it was too hard, too much effort was needed.”

“You were just a child. As children we have no patience for these kinds of things.”

“I don’t think so. My children do so much all the time. Mansi plays violin. She wants to go to Carnegie Hall in New York City, she said. I don’t even know where she heard of that place. And Ashish, he’s a little slow, but so dedicated to learning what he finds difficult.”

“You like to talk about your children. I can picture you playing games with them. Taking them for walks and buying ice pops for them.”

He didn’t say that it had been too long since he’d done those things. Perhaps even never, he couldn’t remember anymore.

Then, something in his mind slid into place, as if he'd been fumbling with a ring of keys, and finally found the right one. He turned to a photo he'd noticed before, but not registered. It hung next to the door he had first entered through, framed and tacked, separated from the others in its own glass showcase. It had a woman and a boy, frozen in black and white, staring back with somber eyes and frowning faces, as if the camera or its operator were some kind of demon. Her face was almost hidden under the boy's. He'd heard of villagers believing cameras and mirrors taking one's soul.

“Who is this?” he asked.

“A woman and her son. Close relations.”

“It is the only photo frame you have in here.”

“Well, the photo is from a long time ago. I keep it in remembrance. The boy is all grown up now. He's in America, going to college for an engineering degree. So many kids are going these days. We've only been our own country for less than a quarter century, and already they find it unfit for them. They flee off to something new.”

Jayant wasn't sure how to react. He knew of the vast migration of Indian students to US colleges. The floodgates in the immigration office had opened, and so many brown faces poured in. He hoped that within a few short years Ashish would be able to follow those footsteps.

“Perhaps they are right,” he said. “You know, there is only so much this country can offer. In such a short time no one even bothers with the Gandhi ideals anymore. Not that they could have helped for long, anyway.”

She jolted off of the charpoy, its aged wood letting out a sharp creak. She pulled the sari tightly across her breast, like a water lily closing bloom, and stood up straight. The crooked haggard woman from before had disappeared. “So, what? Do you want to go to America, too? Here I am in this hut, trying to preserve what rotten little idea of culture is left around here, what everyone rolls into a ball and kicks it down the path. When that bores them, time to go somewhere else, is that right?”

“Can you blame them? Everything is so corrupted. Trust me, I know.”

“You can’t run away. Look at me, I’m sitting here, in this filth. You know, before independence I used to be a real queen. I dressed in pure silk saris. You see this gold necklace? This isn’t a family heirloom. It was given to me. Men were at my feet, kissing them, touching them. They provided my food and drink. They took me on car trips during the weekends. I never had to worry about a thing!”

“But here I am now. I have nothing. Just this, my photos. And me. Do you see me complaining? Am I crying out for Gandhi’s shattered dream?”

Casting a look of a thousand spears, she didn’t say anything more. Jayant was hesitant for a moment, unsure of how to retort, and with his lip quivering, he didn’t dare attempt to. He felt like he’d been scolded by his own mother, and worried if maybe a hand was going to come down across his cheek. Was this broken composure the best that he, a state appointed court official could manage?

He shuffled around her, her eyes magnetic, keeping him attached like a swinging pendulum. Jayant sat at the charpoy, and felt the newspaper bend and crackle under him, and remembered the case again. It was hopeless, he thought a fright slowly creeping up

over his back, and anxiety curdling in his stomach. Why would his performance be any less different?

He was malleable in front of this woman, someone he didn't know. With a few stiff words she'd sat him down, like a tamed house cat. The thought of standing in front of a courtroom, arguing against the Judge was an impossible thought now (and to think of actually succeeding!). Instead he couldn't shake the antithesis from his mind. A scene played, with vivid clarity, of the farmer yelling his claim, and his defender eloquently selling his wild statements to the judge. The Rajput was no longer the center of attention; rather Jayant himself, fingers pointed from all sides. B.D. Prasad sat behind him and shook his head in saddened disapproval. When he went home, he would open the door to see his children standing before him, and somehow they would know his failure, punishing him with despondent eyes. His wife would not even care to hear what happened, rather make him feel guilty she should re-heat his dinner. *Could he have not come home sooner?*

He did not first realize she was singing. The note he thought was perhaps harmonium being tuned miles away at a temple, or a whistle of wind gusting across the river. When her voice became tangible, he did not pick up his head. As if pitch and tone were tangible layers, it carried within, buried deep in some kind of aural nucleus, a purpose of being that made its existence natural and expected, as regular as breathing and just as essential.

Tu Mera Aur Main Teri

Phoolon Ki Baraat Hai

Taaron Bhari Raat Hai

Tera Mera Saath Hai

Dil Ka Kahana Maan Le

Jayant knew that this was the woman's craft. Not the singing itself, there were so many who could sing, found on the street or on television, in a field or next door. Her skill rather, was its delivery. How it was chosen, assembled, packaged, and then opened. She had performed this song and dance for countless men, and by no doubt her voice must have pierced filled dingy late night dives, piercing coughs and cigarettes, alleviating fevers and tiredness. Every time, he knew, she was lauded and praised for her talents. The way she moved her hand to guide her through syllables, the right footstep for an elongated aria, and the left for a refrained lyric. It hurt him to imagine the girl in that visage, and seeing her now, this tender woman.

He tried to think of other things. He thought of how his mother warmed milk for him in the mornings before school, how his father had sat him down and taught him what it meant to become a new country, and how he hadn't understood it at the time. He thought of the day he got married, as he and his wife, a woman he'd never met before and since had spent every night lying next to in bed, held each other's hands, crumpled flower petals encased within. And he was reminded of the priest's chanting, his droning raspy voice, but it carried with it the same melody, the same devotion, whether to God or simply to the joy of singing. His first child was born, and then his second, and he had been so happy. They had grown older, and made demands that all children make. And then the other two arrived, and they all grew and made demands. His wife demanded on

the part of them all. He'd witnessed the overthrow of an empire, had an education across seas, meet leaders and important men, and somehow it was still not enough.

And inadvertently, against his will, he'd come back to the case. The notes seemed to command him to face his thoughts and memories, almost interrogating his mind for storing them, like the burden of wealth on a bank – forever in danger of being robbed.

“Come here, “ she said. He looked up at her, ruffling the other loose ends of tattered, dirtied silk, so it fell off of her shoulders and revealed her form.

Of course, Jayant thought. She was a whore by trade. A whore with class and taste, with talent and a tender face. But a whore still. Suddenly the small floorspace grew into leagues, and the shivers vanished, rendering him stiff and upright.

“Come here,” she repeated, serenely, as if she was still vocalizing.

He took steps toward her, one by one, each scrapping against the floor, until finally, he reached her end. His head was swimming now.

She told him to kneel, and he did. She took his head into both hands and laid it gently onto her breast. Her fingers ran through the tufts of his hair, stroking them, caressing and massaging into his scalp, and she began to hum, continuing the same song from before, repeating the main melody over and over in uniform flow, as if that it had always been the only verse in the entire song. Slowly, he felt himself easing, finding comfort against her abdomen as it heaved with every breath. He closed his eyes, and entered a conscious slumber, the world drowning away, except for her voice. She kept stroking his hair, and even when she lowered her lips and kissed him on the head, he

didn't move. His head remained lain, and her hum continued to soothe, until time itself seemed non-existent.

Suddenly uneasiness took ahold of his stomach, and pulled himself from her, leaving the hut. He went outside, knelt beside the water gourd, and let out a spew of vomit onto the ground. It took three convulses total before he felt emptied and relieved. He felt the heat inside his body subside, no longer sick. He felt, finally, freed.

Chapter 28

With no job, and any prospect of finding one having been severed, Amar decided to flee the pricey downtown district like a refugee seeking respite. Moving back to the burbs was unfathomable, as even occasional trips to the country for one of George's events made him uneasy. The serenity of the suburbs, the façade created by privately tended town parks and faux village style shopping centers filled with anxiety and paranoia, unable to reconcile the disturbing knowledge that perhaps nothing out-of-the-ordinary would ever happen. That by nine o'clock streets are emptied and everybody is home, sitting on patio furniture or engrossed in home theater systems. The world that Amar knew was regarded here as a kind of fantasy, and not in the engulfing, transportive way he felt it, but a laughable one, irresponsible boys with toys. Why go out chasing the degraded nightwalkers when relaxation was right outside the dining room, behind the foyer?

But now, even the busy downtown district, where all of the clubs and party locales were, began to look like that very kind of circus-esque manufactured imposition that those suburbanites must have been getting at. And really, he wondered, how dare these pompous owners and promoters push their trashy dancefloors onto us and demand that we pay almost week's pay for passable service? It was a dream that was bought and paid for, for Amar, he'd gone for a higher dream and paid more than he realized he was willing to. Gone he wanted from those wide, canyon-like streets streamlined by towers of opaque glass windows and grandiose ivory architecture meant to evoke some kind of old, hallowed civilization of power and wealth.

Things he did not have, things he did not want.

Instead, he found himself in a more beat-up, run down section of town. But it was not without it's charms. It was the part where all of the hippies and bohemians piled into studios and six-bedroom commune apartments, freely sharing their arts and drugs and sex with each other. He tried to stray away from it, taking a small basement room under the house of an old Indian lady that he thought was both lucky and ironically so. How hard he tried to avoid going to Indians , and yet unavoidable like attracted, opposite poles of the magnet.

There were still small coffee shops on corners and quaint pub-like bars, none of which featured neon lighting or an ill-placed bass speaker in the corner. Amar didn't argue against it, either. He was happy to stay out of that kind of environment for awhile. There was a gay bar on his block that he passed frequently, and every time he passed he cringed at the house music that kept drooling out uncontrollably, and his mind was flush with images of Raouf, arrows of hair sticking in all directions like TV antennae, as if he falsely believed he would receive some signals of benevolence from above.

Then one day, Kiran called with a proposition.

“Can you do a wedding for me?”

Amar held the phone for brief seconds. He hadn't expected her to call this soon, much less call at all. But she wasn't asking to go out. Not for drinks or dancing or to chat on the phone. On the other end of the line, he only heard silence, not even any sign of breathing. He had an image in his mind of her deeply inhaling with anticipation of his response, wondering if making the call was a blind toss in the first place.

“For who?” Amar asked.

“One of my friends’ brothers. She said. Then he heard some ambient noise behind her, and shook the idea. He admitted to himself she more likely had only part of her mind in the phone call, the rest involved in a clothing rack at the mall, or stoic, perhaps tapping her toe or . The question was pointed and specific. She needed a DJ quick, and cheap, and hadn’t bothered to look any farther than him. A business proposition.

“Indian?” he asked. He started typing notes into his computer as she talked.

“Yes, of course. He’s getting married in three months and we really need someone. Please are you free? Can you do it? Please?”

“Three months and they haven’t yet picked a DJ?” Amar felt the compulsion to keep asking questions, to interrogate her, and delay ending the conversation with his yes or no. The way she said “please” a second time irritated him, her assumption that he had to be buttered and greased like poultry in order to agree with anything she requested. It was simultaneously insecure and arrogant.

“Is that late? Well, I guess it is. I don’t know what’s going on. He’s not the best planner, I guess. But I don’t know him well. I just know they are still looking and I know you mentioned it last night. So, what do you think?”

Amar kept throwing questions at her, factors that would affect their partnership – what was their budget, did they want lights, was this both the ceremony and reception, what kind of music did they want – on and on. He tried to think of every final detail he knew from the Indian weddings he’d been to in his life that a DJ might be involved in. It only produced more questions for him, and to himself he wondered, *am I responsible for*

any instrument players? What about microphones? Do I have to announce things? In English or what?

Finally at the end of about ten minutes of talking, he looked at everything on his screen that he had typed up, senseless and arbitrary list of song titles and time marks, and sighed heavily into the phone.

“So, how much you think?” Kiran asked.

Amar simply doubled what he knew he could make at a small bar. “Fifteen hundred?”

“Sounds good,” she said, “I’ll let them know and give them your number,” and hung up.

He then took it next time he’d hear from her would be three months later, the week of, acting as liason for a bride gone insane, with a laundry list of song requests and remix suggestions and a roster of people who wanted to speak on the microphone.

Instead, within the next week, Kiran said the couple, Raj and Mita wanted to meet him, and so the four of them met for a lunch date at an overpriced Indian buffet, where all of the dishes were express-cooked, too quickly and shabbily without salt or flavor. Over plates of rice and tandoori chicken, they talked about details for the wedding, what music would be used and when. The couple, Raj and Mita, both accented, then asked how long Amar and Kiran had been together.

“Oh we...” Amar started, hoping Kiran would finish the sentence.

She said nothing, eyes widening. Raj replied, “Oh I don’t mean like us, of course!”

“No, of course!” Kiran yelled.

“I mean, nothing’s wrong with a little dating, you know,” Raj said. “I won’t tell your mom, Kiran.”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Mita said. “You know Raj and I started dating at SP Univerisity. I mean, we had to hide it. On the campus it was okay but around town we had to watch it. Our families lived in the same neighborhood. If we waned to meet we had to go to the other side of town. Sometimes we just took a train to Ahmedabad.

“I guess it could have become a big deal,” Raj said. “But then I got admission here, you know. And then...as it goes, huh?”

All four laughed, though Amar wasn’t sure what joke had been made.

For Kiran however, the lunch discussion was some kind of trigger. She began calling regularly, somehow taken in by his lifestyle. When he asked if it was because she was interested in living in the neighborhood, she casually replied, “Oh no, I could never live in the city. But it’s so cool, you know?”

After awhile they began dating. Amar could discern no real reasons for it that they shared, other than convenience of their singlehood and because the Laws of Desi Dating had decreed to that first generation of shameful mischievous second-generation Indian teens that a kiss is relative to the prom night pregnancy, in that after wards a courtship at the very least is expected, if only for appearance. But appearances were none to be had, as Kiran coyly avoided involving her friends in anything that they did together. For Amar, this was the preferable situation, as he couldn’t even remember any of their names or

faces, only that they were the standard cookie cutter brown girl he knew, and therefore worth very little for his interests.

Kiran, if she came from the same cookie cutter, was perhaps at least made of a different kind of dough that made her company at least enjoyable to Amar. She was headstrong and asked forward questions, never hesitating to ask his opinion on a new purse, if it was too big for her shoulder or if the rust brown complemented her eyes; or what he thought, as a young single man, about what RichaPreetaGita should do about her boyfriend so-and-so since he was acting like such a dog. All of these conversations made Amar feel wanted, and to some degree cherished by her, which was why he guessed he liked her company.

He was less sure of why she enjoyed, or at least, sought out his. What did he hold for her other guys did not? That note that she'd slipped him in the dark so long ago, was it sincere all along? He'd written it off as drunken whimsy, but yet here she was. Did he still somehow, even when not standing behind a pair of turntables, hold that aura that he know disc jockeys reveled in, that same aura the DJ in Ibiza had had, when he'd jumped on his table and thrown a record into the crowd, when he kicked over his monitors and began scratching like a wild man? That wasn't him.

But he didn't bother prying further, for what if she left him? Then he would be alone.

And that would subvert the reason why *he stayed with her*, since being without someone, whether it was simple dating, dinners at fancy restaurants and jaunts at the mall, forced to dig through racks of clearance clothes to find those panties passable-as-brand-

new, was at least enough to build the notion in him that this was his life now. That one before, and the people in it, were the thing of the past, and would not be spoken or thought of in the slightest, for like weeds, once the first plant pokes above the surface, before long it's infested everything.

Soon it became that to even think back to that visage of Dalia in the green dress was a trespassing act for Amar, for it only lead to the burgeoning of questions and queries of all of the different possibilities that were in store that night. When he did trick himself down that hole, he would begin listing the various factors at play – the bars, the people, the weather, the existing tensions and general discord – and where had they been unable to be mended into something fruitful? It was a short chance for a long shot.

The time spent with Dalia had been a small window, open, with the sea breeze (sea breeze? Why of course it could have been, Amar thought. At this point it can be anything since the reality has already been permanently recorded). Amar took the metaphor so seriously he began to dream of it, standing at the aperture with the breeze wafting through, tickling his nose and enticing him further. But as he got close, the window shut. Peeking through he could see her, standing at the edge of the cascading waves, toes barely meeting the surf, looking back at him briefly, and then racing out into the water, until she was submerged and gone from his sight.

Gradually Kiran began to spend more time at his small basement apartment. Though Amar had maintained a professional, unsociable conduct with his old landlady, she became excitable at seeing a young girl enter the house with him, even so much as calling the both of them up one afternoon for tea. With a shrewd ambivalence, like the cat

that offers and repels love, she warned him for any mischief happening under her house, but then blushed at the sight of what she had assumed was young betrothal.

Disregarding her extreme thoughts on them as a couple, or perhaps in deference, Kiran appeared in the cramped little doorway space one night, ringing the bell impatiently at one a.m. No sooner had Amar opened it than she threw herself on him, smothering him with kisses and clawing at his shirt.

The next morning, after they'd had sex twice, they laid in bed smoking cigarettes from a pack she inexplicably produced from her purse, given her vehement complaints on smokers when going out. She had her head nestled in his naked chest, her fingers brushing through the patch of hair that grew in the center. He lit a new cigarette and tried to forget Dalia's head had been the same way.

Kiran told him she'd been at the club that night with her friends, admitted even as far that one of them had been a guy she'd danced with, and they'd gone up to the open rooftop and kissed and groped each other for at half an hour. This he didn't mind hearing. He'd guessed as much from the beginning Kiran held no fidelities, and he was probably just one in a long list of men she sought out when she felt lonely or bored.

Whether or not this guy was one of them, she continued, "At some point, he was just all over me, and my mind just went somewhere else. The funniest thing, you know? I started focusing on the music. You talk so much about it all the time, instead of making out with this guy I wanted to just sit there and try to guess what song the DJ was going to mix in next. You know, like how you always play at the bars? Well anyway this guy

sucked, the DJ I mean. But I started thinking about when I first saw you, and then I had to come see you.”

“I didn’t know I left such an impression. I’m sure I’m not a better DJ than that guy.”

“No, don’t say that, you have a real talent for it. You were so sexy that night.”

He smiled. He’d not yet told her those days were well behind, instead giving excuses of it being “off-season” and he had a few music projects he was occupied with.

“You don’t believe me, huh?”

“Sorry, I guess I just don’t think about it.”

“Well, think, then! You weren’t on the floor, mister. All the girls kept talking about you. I mean...you know, I keep thinking how you were single when we started going out. I mean, you were, right? Not that I mind if you’re seeing someone else too, I just figured...”

“No, there’s no one else.”

She squeezed his arm and squinted her eyes, like she was petting a cat. He wanted to ask her to leave, why he didn’t know. He couldn’t say he had work to do, since he had none, and couldn’t tell her he simply didn’t want her company, because that would create friction in a relationship that he was content with.

Instead she ended up staying through the morning, and they stayed in bed watching television, passively surfing through channels. Amar would find a movie on

cable that he liked, an old action movie he'd watched twenty times as a kid, to which she would tell him to switch to something more mature, and it would go to a home improvement or cooking show.

Kiran announced she wanted to cook them dinner tonight. "If that's alright?" she said. "I mean, I feel we're at that spot where I should cook you something, you know?"

Amar agreed, but the idea quickly grew unappetizing when she said she would have to get ingredients for the dinner.

She dragged him to the one and others in his generation had dubbed brown town, a city block, that for some reason was wider than most, was teeming with businesses owned, operated, and patronized by South Asians. The Mohammed Rafi songs, coming from a boom box propped outside the music store, could be heard from almost two blocks away, almost masking the bustling murmur of Hindi and Urdu and the offspring of dialects from the subcontinent. There was a chaat house, where Amar had eaten his first plate of Indian-Chinese, a bastard concoction that sent him craving for normal greasy kung-pao chicken. There were two sari tailors, who competed for customers with alternating sales on salwars and kurtas, and a jeweler who was able to inflate his gold pendant prices because he had none.

Kiran took him into the Indo-Pak Grocery, humble establishment that still after many years, had not seen to renovate from its original grinding freezer units, or the rickety steel-frame industrial shelves. Stacks upon stacks of jars of mango and lime pickle, bags of lentils, ready-to-microwave curries, and hair oils threatened to collapse on top of him should they lose composure at any moment.

Kiran halted in front of a dazzling array of masala mix packets, a selection of savory powders that had tricked an entire generation of Desi cooks into thinking mixing some into a meat made up for centuries of cultivated rustic cooking methods. She started parsing through them one by one, reading the instructions, the ingredients, the nutrition grid, perhaps even Amar thought, the address of the factory, in trying to decide which one she would use in her recipe that night. To Amar were differentiated only by a teaspoon more or less of a certain spice – turmeric, cumin, chili powder – and named by whichever dish it went into – fish curry, goat curry, chicken tikka, biryani. In the end, it was the same concoction that was filtered over and over again, boxed and sold as something different.

“Aren’t they all similar?” he said.

“They all have different names, genius. If you read the ingredients they are a little different.”

“What are you planning to make?”

“Well, it depends which one looks the tastiest.”

“Like I said, I think they all taste the same.”

Kiran looked up and said, “Honey, listen, can you not bother me? There *is* a fine difference, and I have to read the box to see what it is. You know, the wrong spice is the difference between, like, super salty or no flavor totally.”

Amar reclined back, and she went back to comparing. Through a opening of hastily demolished drywall, the grocery store had attached itself to the adjacent property unit, and turned it into their music shop.

He told Kiran he would be in there if she needed him, but she gave a non-committant *hmm* without looking up.

When he walked through, the smells of the powders and pickles vanished, and he was greeted once again by the Rafi songs from the boom box. From the street, it sounded like a bullhorn, and inside it was more like a short-circuited gear box, static whirring and scratching through the small speakers.

Racks upon racks were lined with CDs and DVDs of more music and movie releases than he thought he'd ever known. The rack directly in front of him was stocked with the latest Bollywood, and he followed it down towards the back of the shop, as the titles got older and older. But as old as they got, it was not what he was interested in finding.

Soon the film songs changed to remix compilations, then to bhangra, and then to Indian pop. Here he stopped and flipped through some of the CDs. He didn't recognize many of the artists anymore. It had been awhile since he'd bothered to update himself with the newer music or styles, but surely not long enough that Jay Sean, Rishi Rich, all had vanished, and replaced with kids who looked like they were still in high school, with names that looked like drug names: K-Kola, Sukhi D, Jatty Fly. There was DJ Sukhbir and DJ Sukhwinder, one whose album was remixes and one who'd apparently adopted a misnomer, since his CD listed him as writer, composer, and singer of all of the tracks.

Amar thought about buying one to sample it for a brief second, and then decided against it. He kept moving on down the aisle.

In the back of the store were more old catalogued CDs, the true classics that he knew his parent and aunts and uncles enjoyed, the movies with bell-bottomed heroes and disco dance routines. The music that he always hated having to hunt down.

Amar continued scanning the shelves without purpose, until his eyes passed across a title that looked familiar. He slid the CD out and looked at the cover: *Laila Majnu*, starring Rishi Kapoor. From 1976. He assumed this was the same as Laila Majnun the story that was recounted in his grandfather's record. On the shelf, he found two other CDs with the same title the story had been adapted into Telegu and Malayalam language movies even decades before that.

He continued further back in the racks, as the covers became black-and-white, marking the early days of Indian cinema, and for that matter Indian popular music.

This was the stuff that was heard in his grandfather's young days, he thought. But of course, his grandfather had preferred something more antiquated, more sophisticated, romantic.

He'd tried to talk about it with Kiran once. He'd played the song for her, even the cleaned up MP3 that Erfan had made. "It's nice," she'd said.

As if by cue, Kiran found him out. She'd chosen to make vegetable jalfrezi.

"No meat?" Amar asked.

“I figure it’s healthier if we do vegetables. Speaking of which, do you know how to buy vegetables? You know, so they’re not rotten or brown and stuff?”

“The recipe probably has a bunch of butter and oil in it anyway. I don’t think anything is going to be healthy. What does the box say?” He reached for the pack in her hand.

“I know what the box says!” she said, snatching it back. “Actually you know, it’s probably best to get the rest of the groceries from somewhere else. I don’t know how fresh they are here.”

“You said this was the only place you could get the ingredients.”

“*This* ingredient!” she said, holding up the jalfrezi spice.

The thought of eating a dinner prepared by Kiran was interested him less and less. Earlier as he’d watched her get ready, she’d almost fallen over trying to put her clothes on, hopping around like a confused rabbit, and then later when she opened her purse to get her make-up, nail polish had spilled all over.

“Why do you carry nail polish in your purse?” he’d asked her.

“Emergencies. You never know when its needed.”

“Even when you’re wearing shoes?”

She wasn’t able to give an answer to that, and now, she’d admitted she wasn’t even sure what she’d had in mind for dinner. He assumed that as a med student, she was someone used to procedure and rationale, but it seemed that it was all in exchange for not

really knowing what to do at all unless it was all explained in a textbook to give authority, for her to read over and over and tell her what to do. Otherwise, an eternity could be spent deciding which spice alchemy to use.

The room fell quiet, giving a brief air of peace from the ripping static.. The Rafi CD had ended, and the store clerk, a tall slender man, with a tucked in shirt and short round eyeglasses and the disposition of an accountant, walked to the boom box. The next moment and the peace was gone, the Rafi disc removed, and replaced with a modern, electrohouse beat. Amar assumed it must be another Bollywood remix compilation. Songs he didn't know, didn't care for.

And then the lyrics came in, and he realized it was quite the opposite.

He went up to the clerk, standing behind a register and the new-release rack.

“What movie is this song from?”

“This?” he replied with a shrug, jutting his right hand in the air like he was cupping a ball. “I don't know, really. I don't know all of these new songs.”

“Well, can I see the CD?”

“This isn't a CD, *beta*. I just put on the radio.”

“What radio? This is Indian music.”

The clerk nodded his head forward, and looked at him from above his eyeglasses.

“Amar, dude,” Kiran said. “It's Radio Masala.”

“What the hell is that?” he said, cocking an eye

“Don’t give that look. I know that look. It’s great. They broadcast it from the college campus.”

“Yeah, but you see...”

“What?”

“Don’t you recognize the music, Kiran?”

“Sonny,” the clerk interjected. “It looks for once in my life I’m ahead of all of you kids. They play this Radio Masala show everyday, two pm. I keep it on to get youngster customers.”

“Radio?”

“You don’t know? You should listen. My son, good-for-nothing, he wants to stay in this place and go to that third-rate college so he can work at that station, when there are so many better places to be than here.”

The clerk saw Amar wasn’t interested.

“You know the song? Is that why you say?”

“I’ve known this song my whole life. It’s older than me, in fact. Older than you.”

“*Kaise gaana hai, beta?*”

“He’s asking,” Kiran said, “what song –”

“I know what it means,” Amar said. “I know exactly what it means.”

The song faded out, and the host took over.

– *And what is up boys and ladkis? That was “Arzoo” the signature track from our local boy DJ Erfan. Man I just love that sh-stuff, you know? Old school lyrics man, but hot, sick, hot beat! You know you can usually hear him spinning it during Sultry Saturdays at Xenos downtown. Shuts the club down!* –

– *And now keeping up with this Persian vibe next up we got this classic from when Arash came to Bollywood –*

And as was his fashion, Erfan had come ramming into the scene without warning or greeting. There was no build up or anxious wait. He simply came and happened, and left just as abruptly, and it seemed, if he couldn't do it in person, he was going to dive in on Amar's life sonically, and any other way he could.

This time, he'd come waving a huge middle finger to Amar. His grandfather's song. Erfan's remix. Erfan on the radio.

“Oh, I love this song!” Kiran cried. She was talking about the song that had come on after, “Bure bure” from the movie *Bluffmaster*.

“Amar!” she said. “I have the best idea. Indian food and *Bluffmaster*. Hmm?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, sure.”

“Well, really, you want to? I mean the songs are good, and it's pretty funny. Well, most of the scenes are. Some are stupid. Good overall.”

She went to the back, knowing exactly where the DVD was, and returned within moments.

“Are you okay? You look sad.”

“I’m just upset...you know, the radio station.”

“Don’t worry about it, no one expects you to know everything.”

Chapter 29

His wife was furious for the entire following week when he finally got home. The first day, she raged, “Why do you need to be outside at night?! Do you know what kinds of thieves and dacoits are running around in the dark?” She had a habit of opening her sentences in a calm, even tone, but by the full-stop it would helplessly turn into a stern bark.

“What is a dacoit, exactly?” Jayant had asked. He was surprised when he answer was slamming the pot so greatly that the hot *daal* went spilling all around the kitchen. He thanked himself the children were at school during this time, and would not see such hasty anger between their parents. And he didn’t go out that night, as asked.

He did not go out at all for the rest of that week at all, only sitting in the living room, reading the newspaper front to back. He saw the articles about the Rajput’s case, and scanned them indifferent from the rest. But his wife persisted on reminding him everyday, waving her hand above her head, saying, “You think God is proud that you just go off to work all the time and don’t pay attention to your family? I’m sure all those foods in the street and vendors are tasty, but we are starving here with only rice and vegetables every day!”

“But I didn’t eat—“

“And I’m sure all of it gives you gas!”

“Darling,” Jayant said, but stopped once she turned and gave him a bemused look. He realized he’d ever called her darling before, in fact had never heard the word spoken

before at all outside from the movies. But he continued, “I am out everyday to provide for the family. Is it my fault that the job, very ironically, doesn’t allow me to be here often?”

She didn’t respond. He’d spoken with too many clauses, too many subphrases and participles that it had gone over her mind. She’d come from a small village outside the city, and had she not been the a revered elder’s daughter, his parents would have never considered her for his match.

After she went back into the kitchen, the children arrived from school. Ashish said that they were going to begin music practice soon in his class. He begged for money to be able to pay for the drum set, forty rupees. When Jayant told him that kind of money would be hard to come by, he began displaying his percussion skills by banging on his bedroom door. Jayant had read a psychology book recently, and worried he developed a complex from growing up with only sisters.

Next came Mansi, who never asked for much. At sixteen, her mind was focused only on finishing her exams and going onto college. She sat at the lone table in their small living room and pulled out her books. She would do her practice problems until dinner, after which she would study for two hours more by candlelight until she fell asleep with the book in her hands, still in her school uniform. Watching her, Jayant would be reminded of his own school days, and quickly became saddened.

“Mansi, why don’t you go play outside?” he asked her.

“What for?”

“Because, child. You should have fun.”

“No, I cannot, papa. There are so many problems for school. Once I pass, then perhaps I can have fun.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can study the rest of your life but you will never get this time now to go out and play.”

She looked up from her book, frustrated. “How else do you expect me to pass, then? Playing will not help me in my class!”

“Perhaps it will. You don’t know.”

“But I *know* this will work. So I would rather study.”

“Okay, so maybe it won’t help, then. What do I know? I only went to school in bloody Britain. I am only a bloody lawyer for the bloody municipal court.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Papa. If I don’t study now I may not even get as far you.”

Abruptly, she closed her book and got up from the table, and went to her room.

He got up and followed her down, passing the kitchen, and went back to the only other room in the home, the bedroom. The flat had, before she had moved in, had two bedrooms, but a leak and corroded the wall separating them, and so it had been torn down. The remnant outline still remained in the center of the long walls of the newer larger room, chippings of the white paint collecting on the floor. On the right side, the folded sheets and blankets made the children’s bed.

“Mansi, what are you working so hard on?” he asked them.

“Okay, Papa,” said Mansi. “If you must know, I need to memorize the story of Laila and Majnu,”

“Oh?”

“My music class is putting on a performance. Everyone’s trying to get parts.” She paused here, and took a deep breath. “I’m trying to get the part of Laila..”

Jayant sat down. “My, how wonderful!”

“But none of the boys are big on singing. They will do sets and girls will do all the acting. The teacher is asking I should be Majnu because I look more manlier.”

“I see. Who is Laila?”

“Does it matter? Papa, do you think I sound like a boy? Do I look like a boy?”

“Of course not, *beti*. You are a beautiful girl.” Jayant meant it whole heartedly, but upon saying so he looked deeply at his daughter’s chocolate face, and her striking features. He realized he didn’t have a good notion about what she looked like, only a vague mental image of her as a baby, blended by snapshots he recalled from seeing her early mornings as she ran out the door to catch the bus to school. A boy’s part, my daughter?

“For our first song the teacher wants us all to sing a ghazal,” Mansi said. “I think it is because she is Pakistani.

“What is her name?” he asked.

“I don’t remember actually,” Mansi said. “Maybe its not Pakistani, but I’m sure she is. Who else would want to play a ghazal?”

“Okay, go on.”

“She wants us to sing a ghazal to prepare for the next Independence Day celebration. It’s the story of Laila and Majnu. She told us about it today. Oh, its such a great story, Papa!” She couldn’t contain her excitement, the pallor and disamusement from before had almost vanished.

“Well here, give me that book.” Jayant said. “I’ll read the Majnun lines to you, and you just concentrate on showing your teacher you are worth playing the enchanting princess.”

“No Papa, that won’t be fun,” said Mansi.

“What, why not?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know that you like playing pretend games.”

Jayant looked at his daughter, Mansi with a tightly knit braid. Only just before it had been free flowing. He could hardly remember what she had looked like as a baby. It was as if she’d never been born at all, and simply appeared through the door today. She looked at him solemnly, a silent plea to leave them alone, as if regretting she’d mentioned it at all .

“I will tell you what,” Jayant said. “How about we go to the music store, and I will buy you a record of the film songs. That way you will have it to practice with.”

She brightened.

“If that is how you will celebrate Independence Day, then you might as well do it exact to what the recorded version is.”

Jayant instructed her to go tell her mother that it was a necessity that she go out to get supplies for school, and that her father must therefore take her. She put her backpack on before making the request, in order to better sell the ruse. Such a bright child, he thought.

*

They took a rickshaw to the Sangam record store on CG Road. Jayant was surprised to find that it was still there. He'd never been since before college. Of course, he had only passed it, entering only once, to buy a lone ghazal record.

Mansi, carrying her backpack lead the charge inside. They were the only ones inside the shop. The lights were off to minimize the heat, a fan whirred above. As they went farther and farther into the shop, it became harder to read the hastily scratched-out labels on the plastic covers that held all of the discs. Jayant spotted the owner sitting in the back, behind the counter, almost as if he was trying to hide. He was chewing on a paan, and looked straight at them.

“Excuse me sir,” Jayant said. “I am looking for the songs of a particular film.”

“Mm-hmm,” the clerk responded.

“I think it's called – Mansi what is it called?”

“Laila and Majnu,” Mansi answered.

“Laila and Majnu,” Jayant repeated.

The clerk spit his paan out into a corner. “So if you know the name, go and find it.”

“Sir, I can hardly read these labels. If you turned on the light I gladly will.”

“Fuse is burnt up. The heat.”

Jayant pointed at the whirring ceiling fan.

The clerk shrugged his shoulders. “Different fuse.”

Jayant nodded his head and turned around. “Come *beti*, let’s look for it. If we don’t find it after awhile, don’t worry. We’ll leave and go somewhere else.” In fact though, he knew nowhere else in the city where records were sold. Of course, there must be so many shops, but he wouldn’t know. He didn’t know the city that well, usually only traveled from home to the office and back. In fact, many of the streets had become to seem alien to him, after having spent so much time in Veraval. Could he ask someone? Who would know? BD Prasad? No, he had probably never even touched a record player.

Mansi looked around, lost, unaware of how to navigate the shelves of a music store. He looked at them, and she began walking up and down the shelves, eyes passing over each vinyl disc she saw, unsure of what to look for.

Jayant decided to find the film song section, and then within it, “L.” Throughout the stacks, flipped various covers, titles passing his eyes, each innocuous as the next.

There were many titles in the section that did not start with *L*, or even *M* or *K* for that matter. Behind him, he heard the clerk spit again. He heard Mansi say, “Look at this one!” and Mansi respond, “Isn’t she so pretty?” Many of the covers had such audacious images, big-chested damsels and virile heroes. If it was a comedy, the hero would be dressed in a suit, grinning a toothful smile. If adventure, the cover would feature a smattering of blood across his face, and if it was a drama, he would look forlorn out at Jayant, begging understanding and pity.

There! His fingers swatted past it, and back – *Laila and Majnu*. He recognized the actor’s face immediately, Shammi Kapoor, his wife’s favorite. And the sumptuous Nutan was playing Laila. He wasn’t sure what to make of the movie from this. Her faces were not looking at each other, and seemed void of any electric passion that a romance like this should have. Instead, they looked out to a horizon beyond the borders of the cover, eyes filled with wonder at the future.

“Mansi, come here.” Jayant called. She rushed over ecstatically, asking what she knew.

“Did you find it, papa?”

“Is that it?” He showed it to them. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes. Let’s go have a listen.” The clerk didn’t make any motion. Before Jayant could mention about the fuse, she’d grabbed the disc and crammed into the listening booth at the back of the store, where there was almost no light at all. She was small, but the both of them made for a tight space. Jayant had barely shuffled into the

booth behind her when she started toying with the switches inside, trying to get the gramophone started.

“This button, Mansi, push this button!”

“No. I know what I am doing!”

The platter on the gramophone had begun to spin. He turned to give a look of daggers to the clerk, who turned his head away, nonchalantly.

Mansi began turning knobs and crying out why she could not hear the music.

“My dear, my dear!” He cried. She looked up at him, shrinking in the narrow vertical space of the booth. “Don the headphones, please.” He said.

Confusion formed on her face. There were two sets of headphones sitting on the gramophone, and he took one, pulling the two cups apart like halves of coconut, and nestled them over his balding scalp. Mansi took the other pair, and fiddled with the two cups, until each was positioned so it would not catch in her braid.

A silence gripped the booth as Jayant adjusted the needle on the outer edges of the record. Static and white noise clawed at their ears, but soon a melody grew clear. It was a pleasing, if trite, tune. Something catchy and pep, the kind of thing made to get college students snapping her fingers and nodding heads.

Mansi’s face however, turned sour, as if she’d just eaten lime pickle. It was not the right song.

Jayant looked at the record itself. The label at the center did not say *Laila and Majnu*. He squeezed through the booth door and approached the clerk.

“This is not the right one.”

The clerk took the record and placed it down on the counter. “So sorry. Try another one.”

“I want that one. My daughter wants that one.”

“But you said it’s not the right one.”

“So, find me the right one. Don’t take me for a fool, *gadha*. Look at my girl. She asked her papa for this one film song, and here I am, ready to buy it for her. Do you want my business or not? Can you make them happy or not?”

This man’s stagnant stare angered Jayant. He didn’t seem to have a care in the world. His eyes, thick and puffy, sat on heavy cheeks and round jowls. He looked like he smoked a lot of opium, and spent his days in an everlasting high, tunes passing in one ear and inconsequentially leaking out the other.

“Don’t try to cheapen my heart with the girl,” he said, and spit paan into his can. “This record, I think, was sold just last week.”

“What do you mean, sold?” Jayant asked. “The case is right here.”

“So what? I sell the record, I should also sell the cover? These are works of art, sir. I cannot just give these away because someone likes the song inside. What I do, you see, I put another one in the case. Sometimes some idiot buys the thing without checking.”

Jayant's eyes turned cross.

"But of course, sir," the clerk said smiling, "you are not that. It was good that you checked. You are a concerting buyer."

Jayant was getting full of this man's placating. "Okay, okay, don't get too smart. If you don't have it, then we'll be on our way."

The clerk shrugged his shoulders and tossed the faux *Laila and Majnu* into a heap behind him. Jayant headed for the door.

Mansi cried. "We can't leave, Papa!"

She stood on her toes to see over the counter at the clerk. "Are you sure, uncle? You don't have another one?"

But her father had already left the store. She ran after her father and tugged at his pants leg. He turned, head hung low at his failure. It was the first time in a long time that he had unabashedly devoted to his children, and ended unfulfilled.

"Darling, it's not here," he said with a heavy frown.

"Well, why don't you get something you like?" Mansi said.

"But will you like it?"

"We can't leave here without anything. We've come all the way, and we need something to listen to for practice anyway."

Jayant didn't respond, hurt and admiring the tenacity.

“And also,” said Mansi, “What will mummy say when we come back empty handed? She’ll be angry. She’ll say we just wasted our time.”

It was true, Jayant thought. His wife had a terrible habit of scolding him when money was wasted, but even more when time was thrown away for frivolities. Anything done had to produce some new, purposeful bauble for the house. In this way she’d slowly accumulated small ornaments and trinkets that adorned shelves and desks and tables around the flat, making it look like an antiques shop.

Well, this was going to be one more.

“Well *beti*, I don’t know too much about music.”

“Come, Papa,” said Mansi. “There must be something you like. What makes you excited? What makes you feel happy and sweet inside, like when we eat *raas gullas* for Diwali?”

Jayant could only think of one thing. He strode back into the store.

The clerk looked unsurprised, but irritated to see him again. Jayant slammed an open palm onto the counter to show he was serious.

“Listen, good sir. I’m sorry if I was curt with you before. You see, I was angry with you because you’re doing a lousy job running this business. You seem to have no interest in it, and that upsets me because I get the impression you do not appreciate this great chest of treasures you have. Music, sir! Have you become desensitized to the enchantment of music?! Have you grown too accustomed to record after record, so that you now no longer care?”

The clerk stood, silent, confused, and aghast with mouth open. A trickle of tobacco juice drooled down his chin.

“That is a shame,” Jayant continued. “To forget your music is to forget your heritage, your past. Now, I am looking for one specific thing. It is something you must have, something you better have. I don’t want to hear the wrong answer.”

The clerk stood, still, but his mouth began to shut.

“Tell me,” Jayant continued, “do you carry ghazals?”

“Only bhajan.”

“That is not what I asked. I asked do you carry ghazals?”

“Sir, are you a Muslim? I hope not because your daughter has red *kanku* dots on her head. It would be quite a shame if she had it on blasphemously.”

“Don’t use such big words in front of me. I have a law degree from England, okay?”

“*Gee, gee*, mister big shot.”

“Don’t ridicule me either.”

“*Arey*, listen, *maderchod*, don’t throw your degrees around here. I’m not some criminal on the stand. This is not an interrogation. What are all these questions for?”

“*Maderchod*, it’s you who are questioning me! I’ve given you a simple question: Do you, or do you not, have ghazal records? I’ve asked you to do nothing but your simple

job. You own a music store. Your job is to help certain folks, such as myself and my two daughters, those who have no real knowledge of music or its business, and guide them towards the titles that she would like to hear. Since you seem to fail at even that elementary task, of course it's only fair that I wield my degrees and responsibilities in front of you. There seems to be no other way in which I will get your attention, since it seems otherwise preoccupied in spitting tobacco everywhere, as if that's how you plan to paint your walls and floor red. *Maderchod? Maderchod, you, maderchod!* What words, I've rarely heard from a businessman like you. And I've done business with rajas, ranas, politicians, doctors! Men of such power and wisdom that instead of asking you for ghazals she would simply buy the store entirely and hire two men to search the collection for them. However, I'm not of that stature. I am still humble, I am still a quaint man like you, like your brothers must be, and your father. See me, I am also a father. This girl and another boy at home. They play, they laugh, and they listen to music. You have the music. And there is only one kind of music we are interested in. Ghazals. Now, I'll keep this simple so a *bhenchod ghadey khopti* idiot like you can understand. Do you have them? Or do you not?"

By now the tobacco drool had left a very opaque burgundy stain across his chin, almost forming a sort of reddened goatee. But it had continued trailing, dripping onto his shirt and speckling the simple white striped rag into a kind of tie-dye design. In some ways, he looked like the unnamed goon in a film, beaten or shot by the hero, his clothing speckled with blood to show he'd been defeated.

Jayant watched him scramble for another pack of chewing tobacco, watched him tear the small wrapper open and slide the pebbles onto his tongue, and slowly chew at them until the crunch became a slosh between his teeth. Then he spoke:

“I don’t keep many. You see, there could be looting if I did.”

“Who would loot a ghazal?” Jayant asked.

“Sir, dearest sir. Ghazals are more dangerous than bombs these days. Pretty as she may sound, soothing as the *raag* might be, she are still prayers to Allah. Hindus want to burn them because of that.”

“And Muslims?”

“Well, they will loot it because that is simply their nature. They feel it should be there, and I am seen as some kind of greedy hoarder. What, because I sell records? What greed is there in that? I am only a man trying to make a living. This seemed as good a business as any – as good as selling ice creams or *pani puris* or saris. What’s the problem they have?”

By now the clerk was shaking open palms in the air, as if pleading for a solution to his quandary.

“Don’t be too melodramatic. It doesn’t suit you.”

“But I’m not! Sir, it really does happen.”

“Don’t kid me. If you’re trying to get me to pay more by saying I’m getting some kind of rarity, it won’t work.”

“But...then what else can I tell you, sir?”

The clerk lifted up two open palms facing the ceiling, his frown still in the same position, yet somehow had stretched into a dog’s whimpering jowl. Jayant suddenly felt a cloud of shame grow over his head. He’d belittled this man. He’d unleashed a fury, one he didn’t even now resided within him, and embalmed this store clerk in it’s fiery wrath.

“I’m sorry,” Jayant said. “The anger of a father, I guess.”

“Well, I would not know. I’ve never married.”

“Never?” Jayant was genuinely surprised.

“No. No time. And even so, who wants to bother? Yapping, cawing women. They just ask for your money and then yell for booning them children.”

Jayant’s sadness quickly began to diminish, but now he still felt amiable.

“No, no, sir. You shouldn’t be so untrusting. See, look at my daughter! What beautiful little *chicklie*! As beautiful when she was born as she is now, and I am sure she will grow to be a beautiful woman. She’ll go through life like a queen, driving men mad at telling them apart. And it was only one night’s effort for me, eh? Two for one, what a bargain.”

The clerk, finally, laughed.

In fact, he roared with laughter. His closed lips, which were hindering even simple syllables from passing through, were now a wide gap, unleashing a robust guttural bellow.

“Ha! That is good, sir. And true, for you, I guess.”

“It *is* true, brother. Perhaps you should try. It’s not too late. Remember, we’re lucky bastards – privates ready to stand attention, no matter how old and fat the generals get. We simply find new leftenants to promote.”

The clerk calmed a little. “Eh? What leftenants?”

“You know what I mean, hmm? *Taro lund*, idiot.”

The clerk stopped laughing, or similing, and regained his previous disposition.

“Hey, what bloody disgusting things are you talking about? Here, in my store?”

“Oh, I just meant –”

“*Saala* don’t talk like that here! To me! In front of other customers!”

“But there are no...”

“In front of your daughter!”

Jayant turned around, and realized what he knew was inevitable.

Mansi was gone.

Chapter 30

In the short time since Amar had retired from weddings, George's studio had reverted back to a scene familiar with in college. Stacks of pizza boxes lined the walls, some empty and some not, and the leather chiffon sofas and glassware tables had been dragged to the side of the room, and piled on top were heaps of boxes, papers, wires, and machine gears. In the middle space that was left over, a group of folding chairs had been arranged in a circle. It was a crooked circle, the seats facing each other, and when Amar walked in three were already occupied. Two men and a woman, with George nowhere to be seen.

Amar walked in and introduced himself.

They all said hello back, out of unison. One of the men was on his cell phone avidly punching his fingers onto the keypad, his eyes intently staring at the screen. None of them gave their names. Did they work here? Had George found replacements so quickly, and three at that? They might be candidates, Amar thought, and this the tryouts. The woman was dressed in torn jeans and a pink shirt with one of the Powerpuff Girls.

The two men stood at the window, huddled in their own conversation. One of them had a white shirt that fell down to his knees, and the other a black t-shirt that sported a silver decal of a bird across the chest. Black Shirt he didn't know, but White looked familiar. For Amar it was unforgettable – the Rastafarian, Éclair, who was with George that first night at Jungle so long ago. They had since parted, before Amar met George at the baby shower. Over what it was, Amar didn't know.

But of all of the memorabilia of the Jungle that George kept around in his office, there wasn't a single vestige of Éclair.

The woman kept to herself, cracking her knuckles. Her neck-length hair was covered under a beanie cap, and didn't seem groomed. Amar thought she looked like the lead-singer in a rock band, with torn clothing and a slouch of defiance. Still though, she had very feminine features, accentuated by a large nose ring and thick black eye-liner.

A knot began to form in his stomach at the thought of having to come back to George for help. His normal even-natured demeanor was only credible to a certain point. When George was wronged, he didn't hesitate to let out a furious temper that would be expected from a man of his size. Amar had unceremoniously dumped him, and like a child told he's not worthy enough to play, he knew George would pout.

Amar stood for a moment, hesitant to his next move. The smell of stale greasy pizza had filled the room, making him hungry, but repulsed at the same time. Black Shirt and Éclair were still talking in hushed tones, and didn't look in his way. The woman shot a brief look at him, and then went back to her knuckles.

He sat down next to her. She would caress one hand in the other, and with quick reflex snapped one finger back – *crack!* – bending it back and forth, and then switch hands. She caught Amar staring at the process, fluid yet jarring

“My finger muscles started to spasm lately,” she said. “From mixing.”

“Do you scratch a lot?” Amar asked. The gleam of her nose ring gave luster to her otherwise sober face, with light, beige-colored skin. She looked a kind of Desi.

“Yeah, don’t you?”

“Well, I was trained on beats.”

“Aw, dude that’s not cool. You know, scratching is the one thing that makes us better than the kid with the laptop. It’s the true art, that’s where it all started. The tables are like your instruments, man. You gotta use them to the best of your ability. I mean, that’s man, it’s how you get really inventive, turn other people’s music into your own.”

She flexed her hands, ending their torture. “I’m not saying I’m beast or anything, but I try to be, you know?”

He shook her hand, her bones taut and limber.

“I’m Amy,” she said. “You look brown skinned. Are you Indian, like George?”

“Well, he’s Guyanese.”

“Right, that.”

“I’m Indian. But I do all kinds of music.”

“Huh,” she brought her head up and down, jutting a sharp chin. He asked her what she specialized in.

“I mostly spin mash-ups. Well, produce, I guess is what you would call it. My damn fingers, man. I was going to crazy, just couldn’t take it anymore. I started having these sharp pains. So now I just flow back and forth from tempo. By the time I put the song on my deck it’s pretty much mixed. I guess it’s kind of lazy.”

“Eh, at least you have a legitimate reason. Look at house DJs. It’s all one beat, but somehow these guys get really high and mighty, from having no skill at all.”

“Hey, hey, house is sophisticated. You might think it’s simple because its all one beat count, but there’s so much more. Coordinating fades and backbeats, knowing when to have the hyper bass or hi flow. All that takes true skill. Start working in clubs, man. You’ll see.”

But I do, I am. I’m one of you.

“You ever heard of DJ Amsterdam?” she asked, cutting him off from saying anything. “That’s me.”

He wasn’t sure what kind of response she was expecting from introducing herself.

He knew the name. A relatively new name, Amsterdam had grown a large underground following from his, or now her, mash-ups and remixes. Every couple of months, Amar would see men on street corners, handing out CDs of the latest mixtape for free. That next weekend he would hear those mixes playing around town, wherever he went. Erfan had declared her work stupid and boring.

“I got one of your mixtapes once. A guy I know said it was worth what it cost.”

“Oh, really?” Her body firmed out of its slouch. “And who was this? This ‘guy you know’ is not you, right?”

“No. You probably haven’t heard of him.”

“Well good, then I don’t give a shit.”

She crossed her arms and loosened her body again. Even seated, she seemed to exude a swagger. He thought of something else to talk to her about. The attitude was refreshing, and enjoyable. He'd forgotten his anxiety entirely, until George walked into the room.

He immediately noticed Amar. "Oh, Amar. Can I help you?"

"I need to talk to you. I didn't know you were busy."

"Busy?" Amy said. "You're not here for music club?"

"I guess not."

"Yes, Amar, things kept moving after you left. We're having a music club meeting, it's kind of a bad time."

"It'll only take a little bit. And this music club doesn't sound all that urgent."

"Well, fuck you buddy, but I spent a lot of time organizing this meeting. Some people weren't able to make it out. What gave you the VIP pass?"

Amar twisted his body around the room, pretending to look for someone that wasn't there. "Well when you got Éclair and Amsterdam in the same room, I guess it does look like quite the VIP party."

The other guests who watched the exchange with attentive but unimpressed expressions, like bus passengers forced to listen a lover's quarrel take place in the last row.

George saw this, and said, "This is Amar. He used to work for me."

“We used to work together,” Amar clarified.

“When did you become such a cocky bastard? You worked *for* me.”

Amy got up from her chair. “Okay seriously, I did not come here for this. I just wanted to talk about music, hear you guyses tunes, and chill out for a bit. If that ain’t happening, I can go home and play with my dog.”

Éclair spoke up. “Do I know you, man?”

“Not really,” Amar said. “I just know you, that you used to be with George.”

“That was before you came here,” George said.

“But I still followed him. Like I follow other people. I know he went down to the West End, had that big concert that DefJam sponsored. Sorry that didn’t work out. I know I’m pretty surprised to see you here, considering you and George didn’t split on good terms. But it looks like you got to spread your wings, huh?”

Éclair laughed, “Genuine fan, huh?”

By now, George had gone red, and Amar felt the knot inside him loosen somewhat, tipping the crowd favor more his way. It sent a thrilling current through his body to see the usually calm and buoyant George agitated.

In all the time that Amar had worked for him, not a week had past where George would not mention the “old glory days.” It was no secret that he wanted to leave smiling cheaply and coordinating cake cutting music. That he too, like Amar, wanted the glory of the glass booth.

The music club, Amar supposed, might really just be a subterfuge for George to get cozy with the more popular talent in town.

“Listen, man,” said Éclair. “Why don’t you just chill with us right now? Come on, I’m hungry and that pizza getting cold and stale.”

Slices were quickly picked apart. Sounds of chewing and slurping filled the awkward silence, a sense of order came back into the room. George re-composed himself and stood in the middle of the chair circle, before the others.

“Well, there was supposed to be one more, but he’s not showing I guess. Whatever. You all know each other – Amy, Éclair, Angel. And Amar is joining us, it seems. There was supposed to be one more, but he didn’t show. Okay, so I decided to put together this music club as a way for us to get together, and, you know, share our music.

“We’re all working in so many different venues and styles and genres, it makes sense we ought to get together and learn more about each other’s work. New stuff is always being created these days. It’s almost...no, it *is* impossible to keep up with all of it. But that’s kind of our jobs, right? Sift through the shit and find the hot stuff that’ll pop.”

The club members nodded agreeing, including Amar.

“Right, so, I was thinking we could go around and maybe share some tracks that we all got recently. Amy, you want to start?”

Amy looked around at the others, confused. “Start what?”

“Music,” George said. “Did you bring any?”

“You never said anything about bringing anything.”

“The point was to share our own music.”

Éclair and Black Shirt nodded as well. Then Black Shirt spoke, “Well, I mean I have some CDs in my car. Some new shit I’ve been playing when I’m bombing down the road. Should I get it?”

A net of silence cast down on the group. Amar watched George’s mouth open like he was heaving, and then shut again when he wasn’t able to say anything. The others were despondent and ready to leave.

Then out of a sense of begrudging loyalty, Amar said, “I have something to play.”

“You do?” George said.

Amar lifted the plastic bag to show him. George sighed, “Fine, go ahead.”

He went over to the demo tables. Earlier that day, he’d been disgusted by Erfan’s tables, suffering in dust and grime. This area was littered with paper cups and plates, empty water bottles, pens, and a pile of staples that Amar guessed had spilled from the box and never been bothered with. It was as if George had abandoned them, like a wife for the mistress.

He brushed off enough to make space, and took his grandfather’s record out of the bag.

“I *thought* you had a vinyl in there!” Amy said, as if it validated him more now that she saw it. He didn’t answer her. He placed the vinyl to one side, making sure it wouldn’t rest on any sticky soda stains. He then took the CD out, the copy of his grandfather’s song that Amar had transferred.

George kept vinyl-CD hybrid tables. Each deck had a small slot under the platter, and Amar gingerly stuck the disc in, and let the mechanism pull it inside like an animal devouring prey. He realized he hadn’t even checked the disc before, if it had even worked properly. It was the wrong time for static to crack, in front of Éclair and Amsterdam.

It played. The music was crisp and clear. *Erfan, you bastard*. Amar let the melody imbue the room. He scanned the faces of the DJs before him. George wrinkled his nose as his mind tried to place the song. The others looked on ambivalent, interested but confused at the slow, almost tantric percussion beat.

Boredom would come soon, he knew. He reached into the bag and took out some more CDs, ones he’d taken from the studio, whatever he’d managed to pocket as Erfan pulled him out of the door. Some didn’t even have anything written on them, they were faceless, nameless, surprises waiting for his ears.

He took one that did have a label on it, “Bollywood Catch-Up.” It was from two years ago, he recalled. It had been one of the first Hindi music discs he had made, a collection of what he’d assumed was popular and dance-worthy at the time. Songs Erfan ridiculed him for. He couldn’t remember what songs were on there, but recalled using it only a few times before retiring the disc entirely.

The ghazal went into its rolling percussion interlude, and he pressed a button to put it on an eight-beat loop. Headphones cuddled around his neck, he slid the other disc into a free deck, and quickly shuffled through the tracklist. Something caught his ears, and the beats matched.

It was Éclair who recognized it: “Daler Mehndi?”

Amar nodded, shamefully. The others broke in chuckles, including George, but they nodded their heads as well to the rhythm. Amar took another CD and placed it in the third back-up deck, his bhangra. The ghazal’s smooth and slow backbeat, still in loop, complemented the high-pitched spitfire lyrics of the new song, the amalgam bringing tempo and rush.

He faded the bhangra out, and took the ghazal off loop, playing it a few bars more into its ringing sitar, then turned the backbeat on again. Then he took a disc that wasn’t his, one of Erfan’s old house compilations. Any track will do, he thought, and let it play.

He was about to mix a song with vocals, when George said, “Okay, okay, I think that’s good.”

“I still got more,” Amar said.

“We need time for everyone else to share.”

“None of us brought anything, remember?” said Amy. To Amar, she asked: “Do you do mash-ups?”

“No.”

“You should.”

Black Shirt clapped. “What clubs you play at? Is that what you usually do?”

“Yeah, Amar, where are you these days?” George retorted, his face prickly like cactus.

Amar pretended not to hear, feeling a narcissistic glee, and kept fuddling with the controls. He couldn’t double-back and tell George about the wedding now, in private or in front of everyone else.

“Yeah, where?” Éclair asked. “If this is what you do, I definitely want to come check you out.”

Really? Is DJ Éclair saying he would actually want to come to my sets? Amar told himself not to let his mind runaway, but his mouth didn’t stop.

“My friend hooked me up at Xenos,” he said. “For sure, you should come by. All of you.” They all nodded, whether commitment or not, Amar didn’t care. It had been spoken. He’d won the war between he and George.

But now what if they did come? Going back to Erfan would mean groveling and begging on his knees, far worse than what he’d prepared himself for with George. Amar then realized he’d referred to him as *my friend*, but wasn’t sure whether he said it out of sincerity. Or did he just use the term for his own benefit with these people?

“Well, if no one brought anything” George said, “then I guess this meeting of Music Club is concluded.

The three happily got their things, and George began ushering them out, even as they tried coming up to Amar to shake his hand. Éclair even slipped his business card to him.

“Look out for my next invite!” George said, closing the door behind them. Now only he and Amar in the office-cum-studio.

Amar took a deep breath, and behind the demo decks, his legs suddenly felt fluid and weak. The others had been a support system, a crowd rallying behind him for his private battle with George. Now it was just the two, and George was still the bigger man.

The hulking figure turned around and faced Amar. He picked up one of the folding chairs from the circle; Amar was certain that it was soon to hurl at his face. But George placed it back down only a foot from its original place, and motioned for Amar to sit down. He did, and his legs were all-too-happy.

“Sorry,” he said, “for, you know, that.”

“Are you kidding me? You totally humiliated me there. Why, Amar? What was the point? When did you become such an asshole?”

It was true, Amar realized. He’d enjoyed what had just happened, gutting George’s hopes apart like a fish, usurping the music club for his own pedestal for his talent. Erfan’s influence seemed to be unshakable, and it he was disgusted with himself now. He hung his head low, shame transparent on his face.

George seemed to take notice, as he disappeared into his office and came back out with two beers. Amar let out his hand to grab one.

“No,” George said, pulling one bottle back. “None for you. Both for me.” He twisted one open and guzzled it down, the condensation dripping onto his fat, round cheeks. The amber liquid was gone in seconds. He opened the other and set it down on the floor as he took a chair.

“What the hell did you come here for?” he asked.

“Well, if I tell you now you’re not gonna give it to me anyway,” Amar said. “I guess I should just be on my way.” He arched forward, slowly, to get up, unsure if George would just be angered further at the abrupt departure.

“Sit! Sit, sit!” George protested. “I don’t get it, where did you get these lofty dreams all of a sudden? Business was going so well, we were getting gigs. I thought you and I had a good working relationship. That’s something you build, Amar. Over time. We had a past, *and* a future, too. We were really going places, Amar.”

Amar heard voices in his head go off, reciting to him all of the complaints that had built up over the years, the mental grumbles of the little annoyances over events; the feigned, imposed jovial salesmanship George urged him to have towards clients. It had been a long time since he had felt any going to any place. Business with George had become static, frozen, on skip.

“And now you come in here uninvited, ruin my afternoon, now you’re wasting my time giving me this nonsense.”

“I don’t want to waste your time. That’s why I’m gonna leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave. I want you to stay here and tell me where you learned that mixing.”

Amar turned his whole body to the demo decks, and made an obvious gesture toward it. “Why? You didn’t think I was capable of it?”

“Well...it’s just, I’ve never heard that music before.”

“I know, your face looked like a sunburned prune when I played it.”

More insults. He couldn’t control himself. He didn’t know why George was keeping him here. It was unnerving, sitting there in the chair like a prisoner on interrogation. George guzzled half of the second bottle.

“You know why *Hoy Trinity* never sold?” he said.

“From what I remember, it sold pretty well.”

“It *distributed* really well, and to who? Desi college kids. Spoiled shits of doctors and engineers who think because it’s on the radio, its good music. That’s what I did. I just copied what was on the radio.”

“You catered to the market. Where’s the problem?”

“So no sales. Who the hell would pay for that garbage, man? It’s easy for someone like Amy to put out a record, but then how long does it last in play? That’s why she has to put them out so frequently. You know only a week or so after mine came out, I was walking down the street and some guy stuck a promo in my hand. The picture was of

a guy on the street corner, dressed like a thug, and lyrics about guns and blunts. Same thing like mine.”

He finished the bottle.

“Legacy comes two ways man – you either keep putting yourself in other people’s faces so they can’t avoid you, or you create one really good awesome thing that sticks around forever.”

Amar immediate thought was that George must be drunk, but he could see from his eyes, an unusually pearly white, that he was serious.

“That, what you did just there. Pretty unique. Please tell me you’ve got more tracks like that.”

Amar hesitated. They were all on the studio computer, which was in Erfan’s apartment. Equipment that had been paid by Erfan’s money. Were they Erfan’s tracks now, as well?

“Yeah, a couple,” he said, “But they’re not good.”

“Doesn’t matter man. I just said, no one knows what good art is anymore. Did you see the looks on their faces? Looked like they got smacked in the face, they’d never heard anything like that before. You should put those tracks on when you’re spinning. I’m telling you. I don’t know why you didn’t think it was working out here, but if you’ve ever trusted me, take my word here. If you want the glory, I think you have the golden pass, man.”

“It’s an old ghazal, George. I don’t think anyone will care.”

“So? Do you know where all of hip-hop comes from? Old soul and R&b records, sampled and looped and given new vocals. And *who* sampled and looped ‘em, do ya think? Jesus, you’re a DJ and you don’t even know your own history.

“So you’re at Xenos?”

Amar now wished he’d had one of the beers, just to have something in his mouth so he wouldn’t have to speak. Now people with real influence and notoriety in the music scene were expecting him to be at Xenos. Amar followed this entrance process in his mind, past the velvet rope, past Raouf’s leery eyes and into the cavernous foyer that led to the huge floor. but when he finally looked up at the DJ booth, he could only see Erfan, hands raised high above the crowd, controlling the excitement like a puppeteer and his marionettes.

There was something else in his fantasy. In the center was Dalia, dancing, alone, the lights curving their beams on her body. He’d not thought of her consciously, conjured her as part of this vision. But there she stood, unwarranted and completely welcome.

Amar’s mind was swirling now. He’d walked in with a simple intention, and now was left with imposed dreams of riches and fame, paralyzing him, unable to think how he would go about doing what George and Éclair now expected him to do.

“You hear what I’m saying, man?” George asked.

“Yeah, it’s just...”

“Just what?”

“The real reason I came over here,” he said, his face crimson. “I was wonderin if I could borrow some gear.”

Twenty minutes later, Amar pulled up his car into the back alley behind the building, as he'd done hundred of times before late at night. At first he'd been worried that muggers would jump out behind the large trash cans and hold him up, take the equipment. After a while, he began to hope that they would.

George helped him load up the equipment in the car. In their hands, Amar thought passed so many events, so many smiles and thrills, shouts of excitement, so much money that had so quickly made them complacent in standard sets, tired clichés.

“A wedding, huh?” George asked. “And she’s not even the bride, and she asked you? Dude, she totally wants to fuck you. Is she hot?”

“There’s better. But there’s worse, I guess. Anyways, I’m gonna be too busy mixing to talk to her much.”

“It’s a weird position, huh? We run these celebrations of love and passion. But motherfuckers like us don’t even have the time for any of it ourselves.”

Amar pretended not to hear him, and made an exaggerated heave as he lifted another bass speaker into his trunk.

Chapter 31

Jayant walked out to the front of the shop, where CG Road was in cacophony. Horns from cars and rickshaws filled the air, while cyclists sped by like daredevils, slithering between other vehicles. At the intersection, a traffic policeman stood in the middle, blowing a whistle that was hardly audible and motions that no one heeded.

Jayant looked up and down the street, Mansi nowhere in sight. Where could she have gone? She didn't know their way around the city, or this market. Or so he thought, at least – perhaps in his absence, his wife had been taking her out during errands. Maybe she knew where to get a soda, or a bhel puri. But he could see the bhel puri cart just up ahead, and the ice cream man. She were not there. And of course, when *would* his wife had gone for errands?

He went the other direction a few paces, and then back, ultimately circling the area just in front of the Sangam music store so many times the clerk came outside at the doorway to watch him.

“Lost her, eh?”

“You didn't see her?” Jayant asked.

“No, with all of your grandstanding and acting like a bigshot, I'm sorry to say I didn't notice where your little cherub ran off to.”

She couldn't have gone far. She is a little girl, scared even to take their showers alone! She'd never walk out into the street.

No, Jayant reminded himself. That was years ago, and that girl had matured into this sharp-witted, clever young lady.

What would his wife say? Suddenly he became dreary, images of the wraith spouting her endless harangue of his worthlessness and incompetency.

And what were you going to do? Yell out her name all over the intersection? I'm surprised you even remember it!

Cold sweat began to form again at his balding scalp.

Suddenly, the sound of sputtering engines and honking horns died out, slowly over taken by chanting and the metronome of a large drum.

From further up the road a yatra procession came marching down. It was a crowd of at least 200 people, or so Jayant thought, as they sang a prayer in unison. In the center, hoisted on the base of their devoted shoulders sat a large idol of the Goddess Saraswati. She was adorned in a lavish sari, with gold trimming and a heavy gold necklace and buried in marigolds. Her palm, open-faced to the world, invited all to join the yatra.

Many of the motorists stopped over to the side to pay respect. From the stores and stalls, few hands tossed flowers and rice grains through windows.

The clerk of Sangam likewise, came out to the road where Jayant stood, and folded his hands in prayer. He closed his eyes muttered a few devout words to himself.

“Don't you have anything to say?” he asked Jayant.

“I guess not.”

“Idiot, duffer! Shameful. At least you can ask Saraswati to locate your daughter for you!”

Ashamed, Jayant bowed his head just as the statues passed him. He hadn't prayed for years, and he never thought the first time would be in a situation so pitiful as this.

But he knew the clerk was looking, and so shut his eyes tightly motioned with his lips: *Please help me find Mansi, and make her happy, somehow.*

The parade kept moving before them, worshippers leaving their business on CG road and getting in the march, picking up the chant. They severing themselves from the grocery shopping, the snacking, the shoe fitting, or whatever tangent they were on, and went in tandem with the band.

The yatra had reached the circle, and the traffic policeman, clueless as to what to do, simply took his hat off and knelt in prayer as well. Somehow though, the traffic slowed, and a pathway fissured through it.

“Like Moses parting the Red Sea.” Jayant said to the clerk.

“Eh?” the clerk asked. “*Kaun?*”

I should be ashamed, Jayant thought. Comparing his religion with allusions to another.

“You are one *akal-vagar* person, you know?” The clerk said, waving his hand around his head “Very strange.”

He went back into the store without another word.

Jayant felt trodden over. By a store clerk, no less. This carefree ideal that he'd adopted was not working out well.

“Psst, Papa!”

Jayant spun around.

“Psst!” Crouched behind an abandoned wooden cart, was Mansi.

“Baby! What are –”

“SHH!” Mansi cried out. “Don't say that so loud. Come over here,” she said, waving him.

Jayant walked around the cart. Behind him, the last members of the Yatra were passing into the traffic circle, and the road started to return to the normal circus antics.

“Look,” Mansi said, taking her backpack off and unzipping the pocket. She took out a record.

“You stole *Laila and Majnun*?!” Jayant demanded. He felt instant regret at getting angry, but the twins remained ambivalent.

“This isn't that one, Papa. Look!”

True enough, the record was for another film, *Mirza Ghalib*. Jayant took it from her hands. It was a lavish cover, the surface smooth from the acrylic composite paints, spat out probably in some factory on the outskirts of Bombay. The movie was black and white, but several different levels of tones and hues made gave the cover quite a remarkable image.

“Why did you take this?”

“That man was giving us so much trouble, Papa.” Mansi said. “It was obvious we weren’t going to get the music that we wanted. So I saw this one, so I took it.”

“Why this one?”

A shrug. “The woman is very pretty,” Mansi said.

The angelic, round face of actress Suraiya, shining like marble in the sunrise, looked down at a smaller figure of the hero, some droll, ugly, interesting looking fellow. Though his whole body was on the cover, it was shrunk and off to the corner, swallowed up by Suraiya’s radiance. Her face, and only her face, was enough to draw the viewer, the listener. He saw, or thought he did at least, a resemblance in her doe-like almond eyes.

“She is very pretty,” he said.

“We thought you would think so,” Mansi said. “When I saw her she reminded me of the woman you always talk about in your story.”

Jayant’s fingers went limp, and he felt the color leave his face.

“Are you mad?” Mansi asked, but he didn’t respond. “I know that it’s against the law to steal, but in this case it was justified.”

Jayant shielded his face from the girl, rubbing around his eyes with both hands. So, of his children, one of them had learned something. Not only that, it seemed that all of those years, when She was little and were loathe to go to sleep, as if each day was a unique gift and the next would only ever be a pale reconstruction that would never equal

it, his last recourse was to tell her stories of the enchanting bazaar dancer who moved like fire and sparkled like the fireworks in Diwali. He had thought the words were just that, soothing sounds that were as good as music

“I want you to take this back to the store,” he said. “Give it back to that man.”

“No, I wont, Papa. He didn’t help us at all and this is what he deserves. It’s only right.”

“Only *right*?” The words pounced out of Jayant’s throat. How could he, a lawyer, have a child who rationalized theft? But of course, that kind of humility couldn’t be expected when he himself had emptily watched the yatra pass just moments ago.

“Go take it back,” he said.

The girl resisted. Jayant felt the blood rush back to his head.

“Go now! Or I swear I will leave you here in the street with no way to get back home!”

It was an empty threat, of course. But the bluntness of Jayant’s delivery hit a nerve. Mansi shed a tear, and sobs quickly followed suit. She broke apart into a convulsing, heaving, cry. She flung the record to the side.

“Mansi, *beti*...” Jayant reached out to hold her shoulder, but she thrashed it away. Shame peaked its head somewhere in his conscience, and he stood frozen.

He could hear Mansi muttering under her breath. It sounded like a swear. It took him back as a boy in the schoolyard, angry and vulgar at everything. He remembered day

outside the courthouse, at time when he *was* in full disgrace after his performance before the judge, and thought about how B.D. Prasad had lashed out at him, using words like *gadhey* and *harami* and *mahchutiya*.

“What did you say?” his voice was still stern.

She wiped their tears, heads hung, unable to look up at their father.

He saw the record at their feet, and picked it up. It was a pretty cover, he thought. True art, and the woman was indeed gorgeous.

Mansi tore a snuffle. “I’m sorry, Papa. I’ll take it back.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Jayant said. “But then if you do, the man will probably call the police and create a bunch of trouble for us. Here, put it in your backpack. I think I will have to keep it to myself until I can see that the you are mature and law-abiding enough to handle it.”

“But Papa –“

“No buts, I am not a beedie can.”

Chapter 32

When they got back home, Mansi slinked around Jayant as he opened the front door and strutted back to her room, likely to put her head back into the book that she had left.

“Is Ashish here?” Jayant asked his wife.

“He stormed out, just as suddenly as you did. I don’t know what gets in the heads of you men, thinking you can just come and go from here like it’s a hotel.”

“Where did he go?” Jayant asked, ignoring the comment.

“He said to study with his friends,” she said, and arched her head back to the kid’s bedroom, and to Mansi she yelled, “As you better be doing, I hope, little miss!”

Jayant looked at her with a sigh of pity.

“Don’t give me that look. Of course I’m upset. What gall you have taking her away from her studies. She has exams next week! As does Ashish!”

“I can guarantee you he’s not studying!” Mansi yelled from the back room.

Jayant knew it was true. He’d heard of a pool-hall that the boys in the neighborhood would gather in, where they would smoke beedis and drink and bet their allowances over games of 8-ball, and listen to new American songs like Elvis Presley sandwiched between Sinatra and Dean Martin.

“Hey, why are you talking?!” The lioness continued to roar. “If you speak, it should be reciting lessons. How would you know anyway? I don’t think mind-reading is one of your subjects.”

What would it be, Jayant wondered? English, history, anatomy, maths? And endless list of facts and numbers and trivia that she would stuff in her head, like the first and last time his wife had bothered to cook aloo paratha. She'd spent an two entire days preparing the dough, one for washing it in water and letting it set, and the other to knead it all out. By the end, she complained about the strain in her finger muscles and the sweat forming at the edges of her nose and earlobes. Jayant, with great glee, mentioned there was no point of taking the time to roll them out, for to make aloo paratha she would have wrap a small helping of spicy potato mix in the dough and then roll them out. She threw her hands up in fervor, and called all of the housewives who wasted their times with such activities to be village idiots.

But Jayant, now more interested in continuing, and winning, what he'd seen as a game of wits, goaded her on. "So, it makes you less of an idiot that you *cannot* do it?" he asked her. She scolded him for trying his lawyer tricks, then picked up the wooden roller, her mothers that had accompanied her after their marriage, along with the dowry of new clothes for Jayant and a small allowance that was eaten up the following Navratri season.

At the end of three hours of anguish the parathas came out, piping warm and baked in their new industrial gas oven, in all manner of crooked circles and shapes. She acknowledged the shortcoming rolling the dough, but had too much pride to consider it a failure. Rather an inconvenience, a bothersome activity she'd done to humor herself, and realized it was a bore. He sometimes thought too, late at night as she slept beside him, that she'd considered the children to be one of these bothersome inconveniences.

When they'd first married, Jayant had found these eccentricities maddening. How could his parents have married him off to such a would-be begum? Her family was not rich, her father had been the apothecary of their small town, treating stomach aches and fever alike with the same plants and seed powders. Her mother did as all mother did, carrying gourds of water from the stream to their home, for cooking, washing, laundering, and cleaning. Still, her father's position had given him stature in their small town, they never went hungry and had all the hallmarks of a stable family: a car, radio set, English typeset books and even some English friends who'd taken to the native medicines. And that, in turn, at least put them on the radar of families in Ahmedabad searching for betrothals.

So, Jayant's background, his parentage, his profession, so exotic and regal that she assumed herself to be an urbane socialite once the garlands had been placed on each other's shoulders? What kind of a person is so dead set on such notions of grandeur if they've no cause for it?

After awhile he got used to it, as he slowly began meeting more and more wild characters through his various cases. The dresser who insisted he wore every sari that came into his shop to ensure its quality; the tea-staller who was caught for pissing into his wares, who called it his secret ingredient. Against these types, she was only another wife.

But lately, he'd come back around in a full revolution, and her demeanor was souring his mood when he was home. He was sure he read it in the children's faces as well.

He stopped outside the door to the kid's room, and peeked through the small opening. Mansi, sprawled out across her bed in the direction of the open window, a book open before her. But she wasn't reading, and instead staring out of the window. Jayant heart elated, she was imaging a life beyond the confines of rote definitions and calculations. She poked her palm with the finger of the other, and then stuck the finger in the air, said "ah!" and picked up her pencil, scribbling away into her notepad. Only a brief respite.

Behind her, her backpack was thrown open, and inside he saw the sleeve of the record of *Mirza Ghalib*.

After he'd denied it to her out on CG Road, her face had melted in a way he didn't know faces could before, as if every muscle in her jaw and around her doe-like eyes went numb, and sagged down, and she didn't have the strength to hold it up at all. He told himself to remain stalwart, and explained that now, after all of the exchange of scruples he'd had with the store clerk, it was not possible for them to go and give it back, but he only sunk himself deeper into the morality quagmire, forgetting that at sixteen, Mansi knew could tell the difference between her father speaking words of guidance and excuses. At this age, she cared for neither, and went to the side of the road to watch the rest of the Yatra as it passed. There, while he attention was tied to the regalia of tossed marigolds and blaring trumpets, Jayant slipped the vinyl into her backpack.

Had she noticed it, during the walk back home? He couldn't tell. She'd had to have seen it now, taking her books out of her backpack. Perhaps not, Jayant thought.

With her academically obsessed mind, her eyes had picked out only the hardbound pages, and cropped out any vision of the disc.

Now, in the midst of a problem, counting off another math problem using the inner grooves of her knuckles, she was immersed, and he pushed the door a little further open and slipped inside, and reached for the sleeve sticking out of the bag like the wagging tongue of a sleeping dog.

“You’re not taking it back, are you Papa?” Mansi said this, her head still facing the open window, thumb still marking off grooves in her fingers. She finished and spun around, propping herself up on her elbows and looking up at him.

“After all that talk you had, you’re going to give it back?”

“No, *beta*. Not give it back, exactly.”

“That would be hypocritical.”

“It would,” he said, lips pursed. He was amazed. Held at his wits by his own daughter.

“I just learned that word the other day in my vocabulary lesson. Have ever read a word in the dictionary and thought, ‘Aha! That is the word I have been looking for! Till now I couldn’t express so many things. I only called it odd, or weird, or sometimes I would say dictatorial.’”

Jayant stood, stunned.

“But that’s not right either. Hypocritical.” She said it again with a smile, affirming its existence like a gem among rubble.

“Do you want to keep the record, Mansi? Perhaps I was too strict at the store. Let bygones be bygones. Keep it if you want.” He placed it back down.

“I don’t want it Papa.”

“But you knew it was there, in your bag, didn’t you?”

“Yes. You put it there. Obviously it’s you who wants it.”

“It doesn’t make a difference for me, *beta*, I just didn’t know what to do.”

“Ah, Papa. Hypo...”

“Okay, okay.” He relented. He sat down on the bedding next to her, the hard floor jabbing against his buttocks. Is this what the children slept on every night? How were they getting a comfortable night’s rest this way? No wonder they were miserable during the day. Sitting inches from her, the dusk sunlight dripping orange on her face, he saw a tiredness in her eyes, the kind that approached women later in life, after a few years of marriage and home life. His own wife would have had them, had she not ordered that fancy cream from London, and applied it everyday. Suddenly Jayant wanted to hold his daughter’s head in his hands, and kiss it, to tell her he knows the strife of studies, the mental anguish of spending endless hours inhaling ink and dust from tattered volumes, repeating facts and formulas and theorems, and at the end still having not the slightest certainty you would pass. He wanted to tell her this, but then he knew he would also have to tell her how even if she passed, certainty itself was still far from it.

“Why didn’t you say anything, if you knew it was in there?”

“I figured keep it to myself. If we walked in with it, mummy would probably just scold me for making you buy it, and then you would have to give it back.”

“I would have just told her it was all my idea.”

“And she would have called your bluff, saying even if you did, it was a waste of money, and either way you’d still dragged me out away from my lessons. See, Papa? You can’t win.”

She smiled again with that devilish glee, and this time he smiled back. His daughter, indeed, had considered all of the angles.

“I didn’t think you watched films.”

“It’s not the film I want the record for.”

“The songs are okay, though. Not the best.”

“I’m going to give it as a gift.”

“Oh, a gift! Is it for mummy?”

Jayant stood up. “Back to your studying.”

She made a frown.

“For whom, then?”

“Someone who spent their time playing when they could have been reading. And now all they need is *filmi geet*.”

“Papa, please,” her voice a whisper, “I won’t say anything to mummy if you don’t want me too.”

“Hey!” He jabbed a finger, and held it in front of her face. “You shouldn’t be saying anything, okay? What did your mummy say? No talking. Now get back to your lessons.”

He picked up the record, and saw from the corner of his eye her face melting again. His wife entered the room.

“What’s going on here? What’s that you’re holding there?”

“Nothing.” Jayant said.

“A record? So you did buy her something!”

“This was...” Jayant stalled.

“Tell her, Papa,” Mansi said, her bottom lip quivering. “What it is.”

His wife, in a move he hadn’t seen her do in all their time they’d been wedded, took her dupatta and draped it around her head, as if she was in the presence of a moment needing some peity.

“Mansi stole this record from the store we went to today,” Jayant said. “I just found it in her backpack.”

Mansi, unable to strain her jaw anymore, let her face fall into open palms. Sobs emitted.

He saw the look of disappointment in his wife's eyes, but knew she wouldn't brandish her own punishment. Enough had been done already without her having to put forth effort.

Chapter 33

More and more, the Priest began disappearing. No more was he appearing over Khusrow's shoulder, without warning or sound, making criticisms of his blank page. Instead Khusrow would be alone at the cliff until midday, when finally he could come from the darkness of the temple, or around the side. It was always different. He could chant the prayer rituals to himself, carrying the dirty water out to toss, or going around placing small red markings on the few statues that still remained whole enough to make their original godly figure.

And because of this, Amir slowly began to ignore the priest's existence for entire periods of the day. Free from the intimidation and the commentary, he was now at peace to compose, and compose he did. He made good habit of waking before dawn, just as he could hear the bells clanging inside the darkened temple. He would wash his face and gesture hello to the sun rising over the ocean. As the sky changed from indigo to lavender to orange and finally bright blue, he had already constructed a thought into a meter, considered it, tossed it away, and rewritten it, performing the cycle several times before he took a break. The rice he'd gotten from the merchant was lasting well, a robust, wheat bread that must have come from the South, Khusrow thought. He only had to make so much to sustain him throughout the day. There was no need to steal away to the priests hut anymore, which pleased him further as it gave less opportunity for the half-naked scoundrel to intrude on his thoughts.

His poem grew. Almost by itself, a narrative threaded each of the lines from one to another, giving them further weight and meaning beyond the solitary imagery and rhyme. It was the epic romance Khusrow had wanted to write, though Amir had decided

that more could be done with it. The rhythm could be made more concise, rhymes tightened, each line forced together like young betrothals.

It was not until he'd written through the composition a few times, after many deliberations on central image and theme, that he realized without knowing, he'd only stolen a poem that had already existed.

He was recasting a classic tale that had been carried across the Persian empire for centuries. The very tale that was his name sake – the story of Khusrow and Shirin, the prince and the princess who loved each other intensely despite never having met, and once they did, being constantly torn apart by forces against their will. They only knew the pang in their hearts, and hastened to quench it. In their search, they passed each other on dark roads and mistaken encounters, never meeting for years. Even when they finally came together, they were kept apart by forces out of their control, strained and scornful in spite of their love, for the rest of their lives.

Amir sighed. My, such a wonderful tale, he thought. Woeful, too. Perhaps there was a way to change it, alter it so that it could become something more. Perhaps not too tragic? It was so dour, the clinched romance. It pangs one to think it was never meant to be for those two. Why would Allah put Khusrow the prince in the same moonlit pool as the bathing Shirin, only to mistake each other for vagrants and part?

Boldened, he kept working without straying from his intentions. So be it that it isn't original, he thought. I shall rewrite in such a fashion it will erase the original from all human knowledge, lost in proverbial sands.

He set down, that determined wince of all struggling poets crossing his face.

What is the note of which to sing my desires?

Were I to know it I life would envelope my entirely.

What is the pitch at which I cry to the stars,

“I will reach you someday, but till then look down on me?”

Deep down I know what is needed for success

Yet it gains distance from me further

That which I desire most

Is to be rid of my desires entirely

He stifled any urges to get too excited about the fact that after so much wringing, wrangling, battling the words as if it were a mauling tiger, and bracing it to the ground, coming out victor, he could not help himself but imagine flights of legacy. Would it go on to be one of the great dervish epics for the rest of time? Nizami had been the first to put *Laila and Majnun* to ink calligraphy, and that was almost a century ago. Before that, it was a popular tale passed by the mouth, from mothers to children, by traveling beggars seeking alms. Sultans for generations heard it from their court entertainers—puppeteers, jesters, and the like – those such as himself.

Khusrow was knocked from his stream of writing at the thought. Was that what he was, a comedian for pleasure? What if, these tales he spun of star crossed lovers and fated alliances, were not actually be taken seriously by the sultan and the rest of the

court? The narrative was trite, and old. Laughable almost, not the kind of elevated character dramas or more quotidian free-form poetry his contemporaries were creating.

When finally he'd gone the entire day, the rim of his ink well caked and stained from the wayward drops flying off his quill, he would stop. He would chew on some opium, and tell himself to take less as his snuff box was becoming more and more spacious. He'd lay back in the sand, cooling now in the late hours of the day, listen to the water below, reciting the lines to himself. The lap of the waves would score the rhythm of his words.

He thought back to Delhi, a modern city, robust with business and trade of goods from across the continent. He only had to step out of his own quarters, and not a minutes walk later he would be in the main bazaar. There, he'd walk among the life of the city, where craftsmen innovating new technologies everyday, from new crude boat-building to elephant armor to the methods of tailoring clothes. People were educated and erudite.

Khusrow, caught in the middle of royals and these commoner innovators, considered himself both a purveyor and conveyor of this world. His job was to filter it all and report it to the sultan, not in the dull muttering of his scout officers, but with the grace of one who knew the people, knew the current that rippled across. How many times had he walked out of his house, to catch snippets of conversation about the latest political rumors of the palace or the inherent philosophical differences of religion? Even then, there was no one as puny and simplistic as this Priest, spouting dogmas as if he was a sweets seller begrudgingly surrounded by sugar-loving children.

Khusrow suddenly began to miss Delhi. He thought of his wife, and his two children. He thought of the courtesan he'd eyed at the palace. He thought of his circle of poet friends, who met in the evenings sharing anecdotal moments of their week, rendering moments in the market or the court, each forced to make theirs more profound and insightful than he who went before. Khusrow enjoyed the rush that came with the pressure, and more often than not he was successful. Once, he had been especially proud, when paying tribute a beggar in the street whose hands had been tied to a monkey, and the two danced in the street for coins. Khusrow, holding back the laughter of he sight, managed to belt out:

As the monkey and the mullah hop and skip,

Forever bound by the rope between their feet

So too the gods point and cackle at them

and borne these beings only for this

Chapter 34

Amar walked alone into the small apartment den that he and Erfan had called their studio on that early Saturday morning. He didn't want to be here longer than necessary. All he wanted was his grandfather's old record of ghazals, and then get to the reception by four. It was noon now. But it was still too early. A bright rising sun had been blocked away by shut blinds, with one of the low hanging slats bent and broken just enough to let a thin sliver through. The ray caught the dust particles that floated in the air, and sight of them made Amar cough.

He hoped the dust wouldn't settle on his clothes. He had on a dark lavender dress shirt with matching tie, the narrow thin kind that costs extra. He had dark, crisply ironed slacks and shined dress shoes with large rubber heels. He was clean-shaven and even had on a gold wristwatch.

He looked around. In fact, most of the equipment in the studio had a light snow of lint and dead cells become illuminated, that gave a luminescence as the sunray cascaded in the dormant, dark room. Little had changed since the last time he had been in here. It all sat there; the mixer, the turntables, the computer interface, speakers, recording booth. He sat down on the torn swivel chair that sat in front of the main console.

Behind him, the wall of mismatched and disorganized shelves of CDs and choice vinyls, their names and labels impossible to see in the darkness of the room. After so long, Amar thought, most really could be considered collector's items. But Erfan insisted on using live for shows. Why doesn't he organize better?

There was one new addition, a recording booth. Two mattresses blocking off a corner of the small room. The microphone was state of the art however, for what they

could afford, and rang out a full-bodied, organic sound. Amar shook his head as he thought of this, however. They never had any singers to use it for.

Amar assumed that the bedroom was pretty much how it still was -- dirty clothes loitered around, a crumpled comforter in the corner of a large anamorphous mattress that was too big for the room. He didn't bother peeking inside the room: indefinitely the idiot would be curled in the fetal position, once hand under the pillow. If he'd brought a girl home with him last night, she would have most likely been pushed to the edge of the bed. Yes, it was too early for Erfan to be awake, especially the night after a show. Amar still had time. The reception was at four, and his roadie would already have gone ahead to begin setting up. I'll give it ten more minutes, he thought to himself. Then I'll wake the bastard up.

His hand rose and his fingers rolled at the thought of turning the soundboard on and playing around with the levels. He looked at all of the dust and hesitated even beginning to touch it and let more into the air. It wasn't important right now. He had only come here to get his record from Erfan. He would take it if he could find it in the rabble and piles of discs behind him. The luxury of going laptop, Amar mused. No more reason to keep organized.

Erfan's zeal for technology had been a burden since the start. Once the laptop software debuted, he cancelled his plans for an entire weekend and spent the time copying all of his music to his computer, and then backing it up onto a hard drive. Now the lag time in cueing up a track was eliminated and entire snippets could be mixed into songs live.

Although, Amar realized now, it was clinging to the old notions of authenticity that dragged himself down, while instead Erfan grew quicker, lighter, more innovative, and burrowed himself into the club gig.

Amar realized he had begun to start playing with the knobs of the mixer. It was good to touch the ridged volume levels, and in his ear the bass grew, banging, beating, threatening to erupt and tear apart the speakers, when all of a sudden it cuts, and a pulsing synthesizer fades and lingers in the space, and dies in the void of silence.

He lightly tapped his hands on the console and looked around as if he expected something to happen. He jumped out of the chair and went around to the other side of the soundboard to look for the power strip under the table. It was covered under piles and piles of black wires. He remembered stressing to Erfan, *this was the last thing you needed to worry about*, a power strip that would disconnect or get switched off simply from being under the weight of coils of cords. He had at one point, taped the strip to the bottom of the tabletop, but it must have fallen down at some point. No wonder this place was a mess, he thought. After not having been here for so long, how could it have been clean?

Finally he dug out the heavy black box, carefully lifting it so no other plug would come undone, and tapped the switch on. A warm, soothing *hum* emitted from the machines, a symphony of electric circuits and whirring fans. Assorted LEDs glowed in the dark room, allowing a little more light. Amar turned around at the wall of music. He could now make out most of the labels with some lucidity and scanned to find something that caught his interest. There was a host of dated trance, now seemingly antiquated, from the early days of euro house, back when it was still something “foreign” and “ultra-chic”.

The Armin Van Buuren, the ATB, and the Ace of Base; the last of which Erfan always hovered between being embarrassed about or considering an old classic.

Amar looked for his choices – everything with drums and bass, beats that kicked with rhythm and vibe. There was the CD of African and Reggae music that had given new life to some of his Indian bhangra that he hadn't listened to since college. He couldn't see either now. Likely Erfan had put them in a box somewhere, given them to a girl, or maybe even lost them somewhere. *What if he had lost the ghazal?* He felt anger begin to build up in him, but instead let out a thrust of air through his nostrils and aimlessly grabbed the first thing off of the shelf that his fingers caught.

He shoved the disc into the CD deck and raised the master volume. What came out surprised him. It was a flute, or harmonium of some sort. Not techno, not hip-hip. Something from back in India almost, and Amar immediately thought of the flutes of snake charmers that appeared in Rudyard Kipling. He almost hit the eject button on the player.

But no, there it was. *Boom, boom, boom.* Amar began bobbing his head to it, smacking of 90's old-school. Then the singing began. He didn't understand what was being said, but the language was very familiar to him. Farsi, and it was being rapped. Amar tweaked the levels a little and let the track play. How long it had been since he'd heard these syllables, the intoxication. He closed his eyes and let the music fill his mind, and little by little the anger at Erfan began to subside, much as it always did one way or another before he ever could get a chance to lash out at him.

“Oh it's you.”

Amar heard the voice behind him clearly through the static and crackle and hum. Erfan poked his head through the door; He was sporting a bushy beard, had gained weight, looking rather hefty now. His hair was a mess, eyes heavy with sleep, and he was sniffing back the fluids reeking of a wild previous night. “What are you doing here?” he asked through mucus-filled coughs.

“I was just playing around,” Amar said. “Listening to some of the old decks.”

“This is brand new. I don’t think you’ve heard it before.”

“No, I haven’t. What is it?”

“Persian rap man. It’s all over the clubs now, man.”

“You mean not just the one you work at?” Amar was used to debunking his myths.

“Whatever. What are you all dressed up for?”

“Wedding this afternoon,” he clarified.

“I thought you quit,” Erfan said.

“Well, when your residency doesn’t pull through there aren’t many options left,”

Amar retorted.

Erfan said nothing, and sniffed back more mucus. “Anyone I know?” he asked.

“No.”

“Right,” he said, non-chalantly. “I’m going to go freshen up.” He left the doorway, and then came back in, opening the door the whole way, and stood there stark naked holding his nether region cupped in his hands. “You’re gonna be here, right?”

Amar wanted to shake his head in disapproval but instead tried to veil it with a blank stare. “Yes, I’ll be right here.”

“Okay, good,” Erfan said. “Listen to track twelve, it’s pretty boss. Stay here.”

“Why?” “What do you mean, ‘why?’”

“Why do I have to stay here?” Amar got up from the chair and moved toward Erfan in the doorway. “Why can’t I walk around the office?”

“Because,” Erfan said, grinning with his hands outstretched, “I don’t want you to get lost.”

“No, no, I won’t get lost.” Amar didn’t have an appetite for jokes now.

“No, no, I insist,” Erfan’s hands now firmly pushing Amar back. “Please, you are my guest.”

“Since when have I been a guest?!” At that point, an inexplicable rage took Amar over, and he grabbed Erfan by the shoulder, trying to pry him from the door frame. But Erfan, immobile as ever and now paunchier, stood firm. He grabbed back at Amar, and the two fell to the floor.

He moved in closer and soon the two boys were locked in a struggle. Behind them, the music seemed to score the tussle, moving into a crashing instrumental and blared through the speakers.

They pushed and wrangled and squirmed. Erfan soon managed to get Amar’s left arm in a twist and was on top of him. The victor proclaimed:

“I told you man. Don’t mess with the King. Don’t mess with Shehzad.”

“Great king,” Amar replied, “You’re going paralyze me with my carpel tunnel.”

“You have carpel tunnel?” he softened his grip, and Amar slipped his hand from under, trying to topple him. But he was pinned down again. “You jerk,” Erfan said.

“Okay, this is really awkward,” he said, finally letting go. “Let me wash my face and get dressed. At least.” He got off and left the studio.

The two reunited not five minutes later.

In that time he'd almost revolutionized his look, seeming completely fresh and alert, as if he had been awake and energized for hours. Before Amar could ask about the record, he edged behind the turn tables and pulled a CD that was hiding behind the mixer and popped it into the other deck. He cued it up and mixed it into the Farsi rap, and put on replay twice. There was a section in the third quarter of the song where it switched from the hip hop into an electronica

"It's hot, right?" Erfan was grinning from ear to ear, nodding his head with the music.

Amar couldn't not agree. He found a certain glee – traditional flutes, the bass, the Farsi rap – it all worked and blended in perfectly. Whoever this artist was, had done it. What they two had been trying to do for so long; to sell to the club crowds, the street vendors, the scant producers they'd managed to gain a few seconds of attention for – here it was, on a fourteen-track album, with complete with interludes and skits like all the great rap albums do.

"Check out this one." Erfan said. He turned around to the shelf and without even hesitating to sift through the piles, plucked out the CD he wanted and put it in. It was more Euro-pop club. But now instead of some Swedish Lolita voice, some new vocals began to flow. *Sohni Kudi Tu Jaan Meri*. Hey girl, you're my whole life.

Punjabi, too? Amar thought. So it wasn't creative. But it was *there*.

"Screw bhangra," said Erfan, totally immersed in the mixing. Not even awake for fifteen minutes and already he had gotten a dance set kicking. He bounced around, his eyes lit up like a child playing video games. He smashed buttons like a maniac,

manipulating the track, testing out every layer of the song, from vocals to bass to the instrumental, emphasizing each and then wringing it through the effects, sampling the infinite possibilities for later when he would no doubt replicate these moments at the club. Amar likewise began mimicking him. The two were synchronous in an up and down bob. The volume ramped. “That’s the shit!” Erfan yelled atop the speakers.

“Yeah!” Amar replied with zest and fondness, for his friend. And then he stopped bobbing, shook his head, and swore at himself. The bastard had done it again, using his limitless infection of liveliness to make Amar forget all of the anger and frustration. It was how Erfan had gotten everywhere, by annoying and poking his way around people until they forgot they hated him. One time, Erfan had abysmally lost \$275 betting over five rounds of pool, but he talked so much trash against the other players that most of the people in the bar thought he had won.

Erfan looked over and saw Amar had practically frozen. “What’s wrong?”

“I came here for my record. That record I gave you a long time ago.”

“What record? I’m sure I have it here.”

“Do you?” Erfan lackadaisically started shuffling around on the shelf, to Amar’s discontent.

“What record?” Erfan asked again.

“The one— God. The one from my grandfather, you remember?”

“Oh yeah.” Nothing about his expression seemed to show that the significance of the record had registered in his mind. The music kept playing as their hands scrambled across the shelves. Amar began sifting his hands under the discs, letting any that fell to the ground go their way.

“Whoa, whoa,” Erfan protested. “Calm down, we’ll find it.”

“Erfan, it’s a hundred years old. The thing could break any second. How could you let it just sit around like that?”

“I’m sorry,” he replied half-heartedly. “I apologize, good sir. But getting mad isn’t going to help. Hakuna Matata.”

Amar clenched his fists and grunted. *This guy is impossible.* No matter what was said, no matter how much of a rage he could throw, Erfan would never crack, would never concede himself to be the wronged party.

The music ended and the room fell quiet. Amar brought his palms to his face and rubbed his temples as if he could massage the anger out. He let his hands fall to his sides, and looked at his former partner. “Okay, so, where do you think it is?”

Erfan’s let his eyes hovered around the room, as if he was avoiding the question. After a moment they fixed back at Amar. “What if I said that I don’t think it is in this building at all?” It was obvious he had reserved from mentioning this until the tension had settled.

“Not at all?”

“Nope.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“So where is it?”

“Good question.”

“Goddamit! What is wrong with you?”

“It’s at my aunt’s place.”

“Why?”

“Cuz it is, okay? You want it or not?”

“Can we go now?”

Erfan hesitated.

“Erfan, can we go *now*?”

“Yeah, yeah. One minute. Just put on your jacket, and we’ll go.”

“I already have it on.”

“Awesome, I’ll get mine.” Erfan shuffled out of the studio toward his bedroom, then stopped when he realized Amar was following him, and turned around. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Amar said, and backed away.

“I’ll be out in a second, just wait here.” He had a flat expression on his face.

“Why can’t I go with you? I might get lost.” He watched Erfan snap and bend his lips into a coy smile that said, *fine, have it your way*.

The door creaked, and to Amar stood by ready to take in the disaster. Instead, the entire room was neatly organized and clean – a dresser with a large mirror had on it only a two bottles of cologne and deodorant. The floor was relatively clean and a half-ajar closet door betrayed a wardrobe properly sitting on hangers. Only one side of the comforters on the otherwise made bed was upturned. Even a fresh scent hung in the air. Amar sniffed it. It seemed familiar, however he doubted that it was among his colognes.

“It’s not anything. Come on.” Erfan pulled him out of the room, shut off the light, and closed the door.

“Where did you hear that music?” Amar asked once they were on the street.

“There’s websites. Just look it up. There isn’t much though right now. Most of these guys are recording out of L.A. or New York. That Punjabi stuff I played was from out of Toronto.”

“Are these mixtapes?” Amar tried to imagine a Desi MC at open mic night in a dingy basement club.

“It’s all of these guys with music software and a microphone. They all think they’re hot shit, so they team up with a DJ or a producer and record a few tracks. I doubt this stuff will go anywhere, but for right now, its pretty good to listen to.”

“Sort of like what we used to do, then. Why didn’t we ever post that album online?” They had once made a CD of their three tracks and tried to sell it in ethnic groceries, on street corners, and outside clubs. Family members bought most of the few copies they sold.

“That was all stupid stuff. You can take those CDs if you want..”

“I think I will.”

“And that bhangra stuff too, man. I don’t need that. That dhol totally has no steady beat.”

They had to walk only a few blocks before Erfan stopped outside a trendy apartment building, the Montpelier. Something about the name felt foreboding for Amar. He hesitated briefly, but then the desire for the record overwhelmed him again and he entered the building. Inside, the lobby had a retro art-deco feel with ambiguous silver shapes hanging from the ceiling and green and blue polka-dots on the walls. A

receptionist who was on the phone weaned half of a smile as Erfan approached her.

“Going to Room 607,” he said. “I’m on the list.” He brandished his ID.

They both signed into a guest book. Amar noted a name a few boxes above his, for room 312: Kiran Goswami. He sighed to himself. The Montpelier, of course, he thought. Bhavana Goswami, her mother, was also a resident here. She’d mentioned it a few times before, when they would drive through this town, on the way to a “must-go” art show or a company-sponsored happy hour. Non-chalantly she would say, “You know, we should make a dinner date with my mom sometime. She’d *love* to just feed us *bhajia* till we pop.” Kiran’s attitude, regarding the maternal bonding like a quarterly conference, was off-putting. And then, was never followed up, to Amar’s relief. They’d met Bhavana once briefly, for a lunch. She’d taken well to him, upon hearing what he did.

But in the same spirit of pretense, none of that mattered. If he (or now his name) was seen around the building, and he didn’t stop by for tea and fried *bhajia* (and he didn’t want to), then he wouldn’t hear the end of it from either Goswami woman.

At the sixth floor, the highest, they turned a right from the elevator and walked to door 607. Before they were even in front of it, the door opened, revealing a small woman. She aged about fifty by Amar’s guess, but looking quite well-kept beautiful for her age. She was in an elegant black and white blouse and skirt, her hair tied back, and a glass of wine in her right hand. She stood cocked on her right leg, and in this stature looked a lot larger and glamorous than her frame seemed to allow.

“Erfan, baby,” she said, leaning and reaching up. Erfan obediently gave his cheek for a kiss, and returned it. “Auntie Fakhri,” he said.

Erfan’s aunt. Dalia’s aunt. Same blood, same beauty.

“Come in, come in.” She waved the two into the apartment. “Have something to drink.”

It was a two-level penthouse. A spiral staircase led up to the second floor, which overlooked the living room with the mismatched colors of rugs and prints all over the walls. Sitting on the sofas, covered in plastic, were two more women about the same fifty-ish age and with same preserved looks. They were speaking to each other in Farsi, one with a mole on her cheek, and the other with blonde hair, which Amar curiously mused over. They stopped speaking for a moment to nod hello to him, then resumed. He heard Erfan call from the kitchen, “Want some water?” he called. “No thanks,” Amar replied.

“Wine?” Auntie Fakhri offered.

“Oh, no. I’m fine.”

“Have something, please. This is your first time here, yes? Yes, must be. I haven’t met you, I don’t think. Have I?” Amar clearly picked up Erfan’s insistent tone in hers.

“No, no, I don’t think so. I’m Amar.”

“You can call me auntie if you want, although you know, I’m not that old. I still get asked out by men on the street.”

“You’re married, Aunt Fakhri,” Erfan said, returning from the kitchen with a glass of wine. “You sure?” he said, motioning the glass.

Amar ignored the question. “So, umm...the record is here?”

“Record?” Aunt Fakhri asked.

“Yes, yes. Not one of your precious records, Auntie. Don’t worry.” He braced Amar by the shoulders and ushered him toward the sofas. “Here, you sit down and talk to these lovely women while I go get it.”

“But get what, Shehzadi?” Aunt Fakhri asked.

“Nothing, don’t worry. Sit down, keep him company.” And like that he dashed up the spiral stairs to the bedroom on the second floor.

Amar sat there, now wishing he had taken the offer for wine. Not only would his mind be dulled, but he would have something to play with in hands instead of awkwardly nestling them in front of his crotch like a five year old. As he sat there, the three old and yet slightly attractive women gazed at him like doctors in the operation theater.

The blonde broke the silence. “I’m sorry, what is your name?”

“Amar.” He replied.

“You are Erfan’s friend?” Aunt Fakhri asked.

He said “Yes” but his mind began orating the longer, more truthful explanation. Were they still friends? Perhaps. Well, there had been some resemblance of their friendship in the past hour or so. “We used to DJ together,” he added

All three of them went “Aah.” He shifted in the sofa, and the plastic made uncomfortable sounds in the silence. He wondered if in comparison Bhavana Goswami’s tea and *bhajia* was a more favorable choice.

“Ah so you do that,” the one with the mole said. “*Chicka, chicka?*” She motioned the record scratching with her hands.

“Yeah,” he replied, forcing a chuckle. “Well, I do a lot of Indian weddings. A little different from what Erfan does.”

“Oh, you are Indian right?” said Aunt Fakhri. “You know there is an Indian woman in this building? We speak many times, she is very nice. Actually, she is supposed to be coming here now, I wonder where she is.”

“Oh, really?” Amar said, stressing disinterest. His stomach turned.

“Weddings are good. Good business, huh? I keep telling Erfan to do it. People pay so much.” Amar was about to respond but she continued, “I said to him, if your wedding is not happening soon than at least make money off of other people’s weddings. You are married, hmm?”

He began to doubt if the record was really in the apartment or not. Aunt Fakhri began feeling his face, and on her fingers he smelled the same sweet scent that had been in Erfan’s bedroom. It was tart and soothing at the same time, reminding him of the orange and yellow leaves of late autumn.

“No, no I’m not,” he said, with an angelic smile, and trying to avoid revealing his gritted teeth underneath. *Where was that bastard?* The women began agreeing on something Aunt Fakhri said something. Amar picked up “khosh.” Handsome. He yelled for Erfan, whose feet came thudding down the staircase, and reported, “Here it is.”

He held up a twelve-inch phonograph record. It was inside a plastic bag from some store at the mall, covered by a yellow paper casing that was torn and bent, but Amar had insisted be protected along with the disc itself. The record exchanged hands between the two men, and Amar let the weight of the polyvinyl sink onto his hands, and he thought of his grandfather buying this in some shop in Ahmedabad, probably the only one in town that sold records. He imagined how it sounded on the first play, clear and

clean and vibrant, and how crushing it must have been when the first specks of static came through the phonograph cylinder.

It was a ghazal, an old Urdu devotional poem that a popular singer from those days had recorded. He'd remembered his grandfather playing it at least once every day whenever he would visit India with his family. As a child, he'd taken it simply as a old person's idiosyncrasy, and then stopped wondering about it at all. When Dada had passed away, a box with his belongings had been shipped to him, and among it was the record. It sat in that box in his closet until college, when he met Erfan and became interested in the musical styles of his background. They played it once in the studio, and tried to remix it with effects. Then Amar parted ways, and forgot it there. Now, feeling the signature cracks on the vinyl through the plastic, he sighed, and looked at Erfan. "Thanks."

"Can we go outside for a second?"

They went out onto the balcony of the apartment. Below the Saturday leisure rush of the city was beginning to grow.

"Okay, so listen," Erfan began. "So tonight at the party, they told me that some guy from a label is going to be coming by, scoping out the rooms to see if there's talent. Apparently he has contracts ready to go *on the spot*. It's me, DJ Tiger, and DJ Blaze. Now, you know I got this man. I can kill those two guys, but I need that record tonight."

"It's an old ghazal. How does it play at a club?"

"This is no club man. You really have no idea what this is, do you? This song, I know it's your shit and all, but for me, it's more like a good luck charm. I don't know, I can't explain it. Sometimes I've just let it run on an empty deck all night and I'll listen in between mixes. It helps, like," and here his voice became esoteric and ponderous, "what

is old and in the past helps play what is new and current. But then last night I flipped the wrong switch and it played on the floor. I was able to cue up some Jay-Z behind it and it worked. But I'm going to try again tonight."

"You're crazy, you know that? That's all I can say. You're crazy."

"Trust me. Trust Shehzad Erfan. I am the king. I will make it work."

They walked back into the apartment, and to Amar's discontent, found Bhavana Goswami. She was sipping a glass of wine, her legs crossed with immense fashion, and sitting where he had just been, viced between Aunt Fakhri and the two other women. Amar considered his rudeness for not having asked their names, and now how he would further it trying to duck out of the apartment as quickly as possible.

Bhavana's eyes set on him, and lit up. "Oh, Amar, is that you?"

"Hello, Auntie, how are you?" He said. Aunt Fakhri looked back and forth in surprise, at the rouse that Amar had put up against her. She turned to Bhavana and said, "Oh, you know this boy?" Now there were two aunties, Fakhri and Bhavana, both sipping wine, both dressed like they were office secretaries, and both with a history of remarking on Amar's good looks.

"You know, Kiran just left," Bhavana said. "You should have let me know, we all could have had lunch."

"I'm sorry," he feigned. "I didn't know I would be here."

"You know kids these days," she said, turning to her friends, "they don't really tell you much anymore, huh? I don't know where she went, even." Back to Amar, "Don't you know what she is up to?"

“*Chi, chi.*” It was Aunt Fakhri. “Nice girl. You two should be together, get married. Good couple.” She waved her hands like it was a simple matter of royal decree, the required papers would be signed and people bribed and the deed done.

“Don’t worry, ladies,” Erfan hopped in. “Look at this gorgeous man. He is just taking his time, waiting for the perfect Rani to come around.” Erfan grabbed Amar’s cheeks and shook them. Now three remarked on his looks, trying to fill a desire he didn’t seem to have in the first place.

Chapter 35

This time, as he walked along the ridge overlooking the Sabermati, in the pre-noon daylight as the sun got higher in the sky, there was no wasteland before him. No growling mangers, saliva dripping from their abnormal, almost unnatural fangs. Jayant wondered if it had all been some weird hallucination, if his reminiscence of his college days had simply kept unspooling into a fantasy about his present. As he kept walking, he began to doubt if the hut was even there.

He was holding the record, in it's sleeve, gingerly in in his hands, and not all of his fingers at the same time. It was now like a dirtied, detestable towel, something he'd used to clean a mess with and now loathed holding in hand, wanting to rid himself as soon as possible. The night before, as Mansi's sobs turned into suppressed, heaving cries, his heart sank. Was he being a hypocrite, as his daughter had accused? He only told the truth, also as she'd asked of him, as had been taught to him over and over again by mentors and elders alike. Still, he imagined her hunched over a book, tears dripping from her eyes onto the old, yellowed pages, further damaging a rag of a book. She would cry this way through the rest of her studies, fueled by the contempt of the betrayal, the desire to become everything that her parents were not.

He then considered for a brief moment, that he would in fact return the record the next day, absolve him at the very least of this one sin. Later, as he and his wife had sat down to dinner, Mansi refused to join them. Ashish had also not come home yet, prompting another tirade from his wife about the uselessness about the kids, how she wished they hadn't had them. It was loud enough Jayant knew Mansi would hear, and he

imagined a pressure building in her head, a shame and embarrassment similar to what he'd felt when he'd been defrocked in front of the Municipal court, and at with this he grew enraged.

He stood up and with a twist of his wrist, he flipped his plate over, sending food spilling over the table and the floor. He glared down at his wife.

“Will you please shut your mouth!”

There was no hesitancy. “Where is this coming from? Telling me to shut my what? Listen here, barrister *sahib*, we're not in those ancient times anymore. You can't talk to any woman like that anymore, much less your wife.”

“Does that mean you can talk to your husband that way? You children? Do you know what the word hypocrite means, hmm? Have you ever heard that word? Did they ever teach it to you in whatever little hut in that third-rate village they called a school? Never, while they taught you alphabets over and over for three years, before deciding it was finally time you were ready for numbers? You want to keep complaining about how miserable you are at this house? Go out and get a job somewhere. Have a good day's work, a full morning-to-evening shift! Believe it or not, for most of us, that is how some people escape the banality of home life. Some people go to films, some play instruments. Some work.”

His wife only turned her head, so that she could not see him even from her periphery, and for the second time that day, wrapped the dupatta around her head, as if it gave her some higher moral stature to be demure and silent. Jayant took a heavy breath, and as he back was turned smiled greatly to himself. He hadn't yelled, or even spoken

very loudly on a long time. He'd never liked to. But he wanted Mansi to hear him through the closed door, to let her know if was on her side.

Neither he or his wife slept that night, neither wanting to share the bed with the other, and neither wanting to offer it to the other, lest it meant they would not sleep at all. In the dark early morning hours, she finally dozed off in the swing out on the balcony. Jayant however, wasn't sleepy at all. He went into Mansi's room. She'd fallen asleep, the book open next to her. Ashish had returned at some point, through the window it seemed since he would have had to pass them using the front door. Jayant sniffed the whisky from his breath, but he was in a soft slumber, unaware of the fractures that had happened. He sat there for a while in the dark, silently, with only light snores filling the room, stroking his son's head, and then his daughters, running his fingers through their hair, a blooming lush garden of hair from the thin sprouts they'd had at birth.

The record sat on the nightstand where he'd left it, hoping it likewise would be a sign of appeasement for Mansi. She'd left it untouched, it seemed. He picked it up, and left the room. His wife had left the balcony and commandeered the bed, back into the slumber. She was snoring loudly, something he'd never heard her do before, but he couldn't say for sure if it was an entirely new habit.

The night was still, the buzzing of dragonflies and the croak of frogs making noise outside, approaching a kind of musical harmony with his wife's snoring.

Buzz-creak-creak-buzz-creak-creak-zzz.

He took the record out of the sleeve with *Mirza Ghalib* painted across placed it on the gramophone that sat in the living room, untouched, and undisturbed. He switched it

on, and dust flew up at him from the rotating platter. He quickly put a hand to his nose to stifle a sneeze, and sat down on the sofa at its edge.

He reached across to pick up the needle, and then stopped.

The record was completely smooth and sheen like the still surface of the lake under moonlight.

It was a blank. No ridges, no grooves. It seemed the store clerk, in addition to putting the discs in the wrong covers, put entirely empty ones as well. Mansi, for all her bravery and feistiness, had taken a red herring.

Jayant listened to the frogs and the dragon flies and his wife for a few minutes. Then he got up and went to the bedroom. As silently as he could, his wife's body heaving and grumbling, he took off his *lungi* and changed into slacks. In the kitchen he filled a canteen with water and walked out of the front door making as little noise as possible, just as the first rays of morning light greeted Ahmedabad.

But now he'd walked and walked, retracing his steps from that night in the cantonment. And nothing was arriving. His canteen had emptied long ago, and at a certain point he'd dropped it without realizing. Good riddance, wherever it was.

Finally though, he saw the hut, standing alone without reason, nothing around it except a bare tree he hadn't noticed before, whose branches were perfectly arched over the small doorway to give shade throughout the entire day.

He entered the hut, but she was not there. He stood and waited, and then sat down in the chair. The hut had only the chair and the charpoy for furniture, and a dresser that

came waist-high, Upon it sat various cloths and stitchings next to the sew and thread that made them. Lavender scented skin powder and kajal for makeup, and a small, unmarked bottle of perfume. Jayant picked it up and sniffed it – it was elegant and made him think of stuffy drawing rooms and parlors from the fat Victorian novels he'd studied in college. This was certainly perfume from abroad, for an Indian scent would be proliferated with hints of vanilla and rose water, minty and sweet the way tea tasted without milk. He mused about where it could have come from. Another suitor perhaps, a businessman whose work took him frequently to Europe, or even a man from the West who'd found himself for one reason or another lost in the streets of Ahmedabad, seeking solace in the arms of a woman like her, radiant and welcoming, motherly. It could have been an ex-pat, a curmudgeonly old former colonel from the army who'd refused to budge after 1947, his only comforts in the society he knew best, even if it was not his own.

There was also a photo frame on the dresser, face-down. The picture of the woman and her son. He picked it up and turned it over, and saw again the boy, frowning, as if he was wrangled away from playtime with his friends to pose for the photo. The woman's face veiled by the sari draped across, the folds pushed to one side by a wind.

Was it her? Jayant kept staring at it, trying to discern the woman's face through the thin fabric and the grime of the film negative. The image was glossed over, giving it a smoothness and blurriness that made it more akin to an old oil-painting, an filtered reproduction rather than a carbon copy of life as Jayant saw through his own eyes. Still, for reasons he did not know, he wanted it to be her. Validating it give the picture a place in the abode, something that proved this woman had an existence beyond what he'd

known about her. It felt more real to him than the film posters and magazine ads that covered the walls and ceiling.

There was a rustle behind him, and he placed the frame back down, but not fast enough. When he turned, she stood in the doorway, one hand on her hips and the other holding a gourd of water atop her head. An eyebrow was arched, looking at him with playful interest.

“I see you like to just walk into people’s houses, too.”

“Yes,” he said. “I came looking for you.”

Her face deflated, and she put the gourd down. She looked younger, stronger, and more vibrant. She wasn’t wearing a hunch now.

“I am very busy.”

“I’m sure. But I don’t care. I have something for you.”

He gave her the bag with the record in it, fingers so sweaty the sleeve stuck to his hand as she took it from him. At first she didn’t say anything. Saliva gathered in his mouth. His nerves were acting up, just like the many times in law school when he’d submitted essays to teachers and stood mute and upright before the large oak desks, anxiously fearing their verdict.

“I haven’t seen this movie,” she said, looking up with a disarming smile. “Are the songs any good?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen it either.”

“Then what made you buy it?”

“I wanted to buy something for you. I mean –”

“For what...”

“But I didn’t buy this. Actually, it’s rather stupid. You see, the record is blank.”

“You got me a blank record?”

She took it out of the sleeve, passed her hand across it.

“Well –“ Jayant bit his tongue, lest he tripped over more words like a village idiot. He couldn’t recount had happened the day before. How could he explain? That she was holding contraband goods, that his own daughter was responsible for it’s theft? That the incident battered the already tenuous bond he had with his daughter, after last time he left her with the impression of being a strong paternal presence. He’d noticed that it was this detail that endeared him to her. It was this version of him that she’d called over, whose head she’d stroked with love, whom she’d sung to. Her beautiful voice. Even if there was music on the black disc, Jayant doubted it was comparable.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “As you can see, I don’t have a way to listen to it. Thank you, though.”

She handed him the record, naked and soft like a newborn baby.

“I’m sorry, I was just...”

“You don’t have to say. Please, don’t misunderstand. I don’t care for the music really. I told you, music these days is just a hopeless shadow of classical *raag*.”

“I know, but I was trying to find something you would like.”

“Did I say I didn’t like this? My, you’re a very flabbergasted person.”

She came up to him and put the back of her hand to his forehead. “Are you sure you’re not sick today, too?”

He smiled at her. He could think of no more words. He took the record and placed it back in the yellow bag that said *Sangam Music Store*.

She sat down, and began singing again.

Yah Raat Phir Na Aaegi

Aae Din Qaraar Ke

Mausam-E-Bahaar Ke

Tere Mere Pyaar Ke

Tujh Ko Meri Qasam Tu

Sun Le Dil Ki Raagani

He took her hand from his brow and held it in his. In her other hand she still held the sleeve.

“This is a very pretty cover though. I shall have to find a place for it on the wall.”

“Will you come with me? It’s far, but want you to come with me.”

“Please. We both are too old to have adventures.”

“I know,” Jayant said.

Chapter 36

The reception was being held in the Holiday Inn. The standard green-carpeted, gold paper walled room was open with all three partitions, about 25 tables littered across. A gaudy but large chandelier towered over Amar as he hurriedly swerved around catering staff and the florist's assistants to get to his table in the middle of the room. His roadie, Naveen, a nineteen year-old college dropout and George's latest supposed prodigy, was already there and had set up most of the equipment. Right now he was working on getting a speaker up on its stand.

"How is it going?" Amar asked.

"Good, good," said Naveen. He grunted, heaving the speaker onto his shoulder. Amar offered his left hand in the lifting, but Naveen said "I got it," with a hint of annoyance in his tone, and Amar let go.

In the short time, Amar had decided he was not going to like Naveen at all. Amar hated the way he looked. He was dressed in a suit made of very glossy and shiny material. Later, when photographers would take pictures during the dance, Amar knew the flash would reflect into his eyes from across the room. It was also clear that Naveen must have spent at least an hour in the bathroom getting ready, his sideburns perfectly razored into a thin triangle that pointed down his jaw, with a small goatee of peach fuzz on his chin. Amar wanted to violently shake the freshness out of him and say *what the hell are you thinking? We're just the DJs, we don't have to look like Armani models.*

But he didn't, only bit his lip and kept the kid around because his mother was Sharmista Patel, Vice President of the Gujarati Samaj, and with him, George was guaranteed jobs with other affluent members of the Gujarati community. It was business, all business from here on out.

Naveen managed to get the speaker on and hooked in the wire. He didn't wrap it around the stands for safety. Amar pointed this out, and the young boy grinned like a sly coyote, and repaired his mistake. *Every damn time*, Amar thought.

He told himself Erfan's stupid antics was already enough mental stress for the day, and so calmed himself and looked over paperwork for the reception. Family members, check. Music requests, check. Vendors, check (a photographer he'd never head of and Mughal Palace was doing the catering). Amar frowned to himself at the next name – Sweta Decorators. Sweta Pandit was a loud, abrasive woman, who although only had to set up her decorations and leave before the party even started, was still an unpleasantness to deal with in that short time.

Amar scanned her handiwork around the room. There were busty plaster figurines of women at either side of the main doors on the far end of the library that looked like they might have come out of an illustration in the Kama Sutra. Between them, a red carpet ran from the doors and across the dancefloor to the head table, which was overcrowded with chairs. An ugly red carpet on my dancefloor, he told himself. The tables were all covered with pearly white tablecloths, and each had a centerpiece vase with exactly five red roses. It was the same set up at every wedding. Indian designers were never original, nor did they ever bother changing their own styles.

Naveen interrupted his thoughts. "Which wire goes into the subwoofer again?" he asked.

Amar stifled a grumble. "The one with the blue end."

Sweta Pandit materialized in his periphery, asking with adamantly, “You mind if I put these flowers here?” She said “flowers” in that very homeland way, letting the *r* at the end drop off.

When the bride, the groom, their parents, their siblings, and their grandparents were introduced and seated at the head table, the schedule was already half an hour behind. After that came two dance performances, both featuring snippets of the same Bollywood song. By the time the second uncle (who wasn’t actually related but still had some significance) was halfway through his twenty minute speech, the caterer was nagging at Amar to let him begin serving pappadum to the tables and allow guests to get food at the buffet.

Naveen ran off to get food not seconds after he put on the dinner music, a light mix of Bollywood movie instrumentals. Amar always had an appreciation for dinner time. Guests became well-inebriated, the bride and groom had settled down from the cacophony of the day, and the music was on autopilot.

He prided himself in finding the songs that every one else didn’t play. So many various CDs collected from stores, friends, family members. Each fourth or fifth song was a well-known hit. Others would be finely selected and custom chosen for the couple; the B tracks from Bollywood albums, mastered LPs of forgotten oldies, new renditions of classic traditional melodies, and of course, the fusion Desi R&B that he could find from the internet. Amar considered disc jockeying to be an artistry of arrangement, a collage of notes and chords and lines, putting different musicians and sounds in symphony with one another; fantasy concert of the best, simultaneously performing across polycarbonate discs and 800 watt transistors. After all, the film songs Indians enjoyed in abroad were

the same that Indians in India were dancing to. It seemed perfectly sensible that as long as they were in America, and all of this wonderful cross-genre creation was occurring, it would be ideal for the new generation of Indian wedded couples. These were the couples that transcended the old moors and restrictions that their parents had, either forcibly or passively, accepted. Now, the Gujaratis would marry Punjabis, the Maliyali Christians would elope with Bengalis, castes lines were crossed without consequence, and lest it be mentioned, sometimes they (especially the girls) would turn their backs on heritage entirely and go off with with blacks or Muslims.

For Amar this was only more opportunity. Where else would he be able to play that Reggaeton mix of Malkit Singh? Sure, many times the younger crowd would go for it, but there would always be a few of them, along with the elder generations, that would stand limp on the dancefloor scratching their heads. Even with lighting effects and a cranked subwoofer, all the energy in the room would dissipate once heads turned toward Amar at the DJ table, faces wrought with confusion and disappointment. They would cry out for tired, five-year old songs that had passed off into cliché. Amar would nod politely and begin searching for something new, with the remix playing on. The crowd still though, will cry for immediate results, and soon even the groom approaches, slicing the air in front of his neck in the *cut it* gesture. Amar would switch it begrudgingly, and once their commoditized old favorite blared on the speakers, all discontent would be silenced and the party would continue.

It was this kind of thinking that killed Synth-tar (whether or not that would have ever been the final name) when Amar and Erfan first started to market it. Erfan would try it on his Persian family members and community functions. He always reported that the

younger generations went wild for it, and the elders, while not caring too much for the music, were glad that one of their own had a constructive hobby. And it was usually left at that. Amar would have the exact opposite. When he would reveal that he had produced a track, all of the attention in the room would focus on him.

Wow, what a creative boy.

Good for you, beta.

You know, you should take lessons in sitar.

These laudations would be flung left and right at him, but when he finally played the music for them, the comments quickly became one note –

What did you say this is called?

Oh, interesting.

Why not put some more dhol behind that, na?

Naveen sighed heavily after finishing off the last bits of rice from his plate – already devoured were the butter chicken, saag paneer, chana masala, two pieces of naan, and a tall mango lassi. No chutney, no salad. He leaned back in his chair and trained his eyes on the girls sitting at the tables. Amar watched them float from one to the next, their post-adolescent pupils expanding as one walked by the DJ table, in a slender green salwaar kameez and large gold earrings. Naveen rubbed his hin and felt the fuzz. He put his plate on the table behind them where the CD cases sat, their lids turned open like the treasure chests of adventure stories and folk tales, with the racks of discs almost gleaming like hordes of gold and diamonds, alluring with promise and wealth. Amar said he would go get his plate of food, now that Naveen was done and could monitor the volume, but

instead it was entirely an excuse to hand the plate off to one of the catering staff and take the dripping, oily curry remnants away from the music.

He made his way to the buffet line, ear trained on the sound. It was organic and robust, conflating itself into every corner of the large room. But still, he could clearly hear the conversation around him. He perked up for any comments about the music. Two girls stood in front of him in the line, the same two who had done the performance earlier, both with cut bangs across their face to the left, and both with blue eye-shadow.

“I wanna dance!” One said. Her bangs had gold highlights.

The other agreed with an excited look in their eyes. “I love this song,” she said, turning towards the speaker, as if she could face the song and view its form and composition, her eyes filled with awe as if she was looking for a buffed man-nymph. Her eyes instead caught Amar, looking, relishing the the appreciation of his favours, and both girls’ expressions went blank. *That’s the DJ*, their eyes said. No regard, no attention. No recognizing that the music may have a personality.

Amar dropped his head toward the carafe dishes, and guessed in sequence which items he would see. It was always the same three curries, the same triangle cuts of naan, the same arbitrary meat dish at the far end of the table to keep the White people and the Americanized kids happy. He put the plate down. A full stomach couldn’t jeopardize him getting woozy at the turntables later.

All of a sudden he didn’t want to be at this wedding. Not that I’ve had desires to be at many of my weddings, he thought, but something about this one was just bearing down on him.

He left the reception hall and found a secluded corner of art deco couches outside the hotel bar. A panel of frosted glass was hanging on the host table with the word “Salonique” written in black lettering. Amar rolled his eyes at the name.

The hallway was empty, save for the occasional bathroom pilgrim. An uncle, with thick glasses and dressed in a short-sleeved cotton shirt approached Amar and asked about his business; how the speakers worked, and what an amplifier does. And does he have *that* song? Could he play more classical? He sucked his teeth at each question. He told Amar he had a band that played private events and small Garbas. “but we think we’ll start the DJ, you know?”

Amar tried to explain the idea of a DJ and how that was ludicrous for folk music. “It would be like DJing jazz,” he said.

The uncle looked squarely at him, seeming to miss the analogy. But he took a business card and left to go back inside.

Amar looked around Salonique and considered getting a quick drink. He couldn’t get one inside from the open bar, that wouldn’t look professional, and even worse, he imagined, Naveen may start pestering him to sneak something. A rum coke, vodka cranberry, any drink that looked innocent from afar. But the Salonique bartender was nowhere to be found. The only two people in the bar were a couple at one of the benches, both his age, both guests from the wedding. The guy had a thick stubble but a clean head on top, void of even the slightest follicle. His suit was tight around his wiry frame, as he stretched his arm up and reached it around the girl. The girl Amar recognized. She had fair milky skin, eyes the shape of almonds, and narrow cheeks that came to a pout around her thin mouth. It was Kiran Goswami, and just as her mother had earlier in the day, she

held a wine glass atop her cupped left hand, leaning it inches from her face. She was smiling and focused on the guy as he was talking, about what Amar couldn't tell, but in this angle Kiran looked quite beautiful. She had on a black dress with thin straps, and dark red lipstick, that matched well with her soft, deep tufts of hair. Even from the time the two of them were children, he had always noticed a smart fashion sense in her. She bit her bottom lip and exposed her top front teeth, their white intercutting on the red lipstick, and then her tongue followed suit, peaking through the thin lips.

She turned to get a sip of wine, and the almonds fell on Amar. "Hi," she said.

Chapter 37

The entire way to the train station, her demeanor remained skeptical and begrudged, but without a spoken word of protest she followed him, hand in hand, as he led her through the chaos of office workers and tiffin deliverymen in the late afternoon. Time to time, her hand would tense in his, and he sensed it was perhaps the first time she'd ever been here, flooded by modernity and the new, corporatized Ahmedabad.

The train was relatively empty at this time of day, in this route. The bench across from the one they sat on was empty, and so they propped their feet up, watching the countryside go by. Gradually, she grew comfortable and let her body lean against his. She put her hand outside the window, letting it waver in the rushing air. They passed the farms that littered the outskirts of town that grew wheat and corn. Cows grazed in open fields.

“It’s so vast. So beautiful.”

“For now,” Jayant said. “In a little while all the greenery will vanish and it will just be desert. Then the land will stretch out as far as you can see, little spots here and there of grass, but mostly nothing.”

“Still, I will like looking at it.”

“Why?”

“This is my first time out of the city. The first time I’ve been anywhere.”

Again, this woman had managed to stun him. With the mural across her wall, the boy who'd been sent to America and the *au du toilet*, he'd thought of her as nothing but worldly, sophisticated. When he, who'd gone to the den of the British lion and back, had

sat in offices of powerful men, still fumbled before his children, she held class without any pedigree. She simply seemed to exist that way.

After awhile the farms did dissipate, and soon the rolling, dusty hills of western Gujarat rose up from the ground.

“You still haven’t asked me where we are going,” Jayant said.

“No, I haven’t,” she answered. “Just as I haven’t asked you why you were so keenly looking at that photo.”

“Please, tell me who the woman is. Is it you?”

“Why do you even ask? Aren’t people meant to normally assume that the photographs in one’s home are of their hosts?”

“Not with you. I cannot assume anything with you. I need the proof.”

“Proof?” she laughed. “You sound like a judge.”

They heard the conductor yell down the train car. *Ju-na-gadh! Ju-na-gadh!*

“I must hear it from your mouth. Whatever you say, I’ll accept as the truth.”

“I’m sorry, dear. If it means so much to you, I must remain a mystery.”

A lock of Jayant’s hair tumbled over his eyes. She stroked it back into place.

“You see,” she said, “That is how we don’t forget.”

Chapter 38

It was almost four in the morning when Amar picked up the last speaker out of his trunk, in the alley behind George's office building. Kiran sat in the car, in the front seat, drunkenly staring back at him and smiling like a schoolgirl who'd just learned about sexual relations.

"Do you need help?" she said, as she began fumbling with her belt.

"Just stay there in the car, I'll be back in a quick second."

"It all looks so heavy. You're so strong. So strong." She elongated "strong" so much it sounded like sarcasm. But then again, Amar thought, with the amount she'd drunk it was impossible to tell if anything she said was sincere.

"I so knew you would be so awesome," she said. She squirmed her body trying to get loose, the belt cutting into her fleshy curves. Amar walked around to her door and grabbed her hands, still fiddling with the buckle.

"Stay. Here. I'll be back." He said. She placed her palm flat on his face, then squeezed his cheeks, and broke apart in laughter. He kept wishing she would pass out soon and wake up the next morning with little memory of now, eliminating the guilt for either of them. Her laughter died out, and her face turned sour.

"I don't feel so good, actually," she said. "Looks like we can't have any fun tonight."

"Too bad so sad. Just stay here."

As he walked up, Amar cursed himself at why she was in his car in the first place. After the reception was over, and he'd packed up his equipment, he'd gone to use the bathroom. She'd been waiting out in the hallway, and pounced upon him, smothering him with kisses and fanfare. He thought of the movies where the hero would grab the damsel in his arms and lock her in passion. This was the total opposite. Kiran, with no stiffness in her muscles, latched onto his jacket lapel like a housecat, hanging on for composure.

Amar instead kept straight up, and didn't try to match any of her movements. He looked around, and realized that the hall was mostly empty. Only the cleaning crew was left, mopping spilled puddles of wine and sweeping up bits of ribbon and marigold petals. He had no choice but to bring her with him.

Inside the office, it was dark, as was likely the rest of the building, empty and desolate. Amar felt as if he had the whole place to himself. He could ride the elevators up and down, knock on any door, and twist the knob to see if it was open and unlocked. His back was aching hard, but it felt rejuvenating, as if he had been sick and bedridden for days, and finally risen, basking in a relief of freedom and pressure. Though he wanted nothing more than to get to sleep and end the day before it turned sour, he sat down in an office chair that stood in the middle of the room.

He didn't turn the lights on, and instead sat there, with only the glow of the streetlights outside. Gradually, shapes began to form and he could see the desks, the chairs, the soundboards. He rolled the chair around on the floor, scurrying from one end of the room to the next. He rolled it into George's office, opened the mini fridge and looked inside: two water bottles and a can of cheap beer. Amar grunted and got up onto

his sore legs to climb atop the cupboard and find the bottle of whisky he knew had been up there since the first day the company had started.

There was only a little bit left. Amar decided not to finish it all down, even though it was likely George had forgotten about it entirely. He took a plastic cup from the top of the fridge and poured half of what was there.

As he sipped, he turned on the desk lamp and looked around George's desk. He'd sat there many times, across from the burly Caribbean, but never took notice of what was there. The desk was always in calamity, a Bermuda triangle where pens and contracts and discs were lost forever. It was one of the first faults of George's that Amar had noticed, a chink in the lustrous armor that his mother and the other Indian mothers had so admired.

Most of the papers were gone now, tossed out or filed. Amar saw something he'd never known was there, a desk calendar, that had been hidden under the piles, and George had at points apparently brushed the debris aside to write in his appointments. Amar flipped back and forth through the months. Some names popped out at him, others unfamiliar. But surprisingly, he found he had little care for all of them.

The families, the couples, the birthday boys and girls who he'd spent afternoons and evenings with, moments that they all considered to be tender and life defining, he was privy to. He only saw it from a corner of the room, indifferently looking out for his next music cue. Now it was all about to be, no was, brushed under the carpet, not to be seen again.

When he left the door tonight, Amar realized there was no real reason for him to ever come back.

Was there a point to being here for so long at all? George had gotten his start so early, so why hadn't he just gone for it when he had the chance. George's fame had also fizzled very quickly, so there was that. But then he started this company, and it did him well. The company logo flashed before Amar on the computer screen, just as innocuous as the calendar. A symbol that he carried in his pocket, that he touted to so many paying customers, but felt no allegiance toward.

The bourbon began to calm his brain. Erratic images of the dancefloor flashed in his mind. It had been a fun night, he decided. Never once did he feel pressured or harassed, forced to play banalities or had someone tell him how to do his job. But now all he wanted to do was to put it behind him and go find Erfan and Dalia.

What was it George had said? *Every rung in the ladder is important, bro. You can climb up, but then how you gonna climb down?*

Erfan's rungs had all proved useless. None of the promised connections or meetings produced results. But then, how do you skip a rung?

Amar leaned forward on the chair and tapped the table. The computer hummed out of its sleep, and displayed George's email. Amar passively scanned the subject headers -- various business related things, payments made, and nonsense joke emails. One stood out, if only because it was the only of its kind. The subject line was loaded with asterisks, dashes, and other arbitrary keyboard punctuation, the actual words trailing off, too long for the display box. Amar clicked on it. He finished the last sip of his bourbon and poured the rest remaining in the bottle.

The full subject header read: JUNGLE PARTY THIS FRIDAY. DJ ERFAN SPINNING.

The email was sent by someone at VK Productions, one of the many promotion companies whose name Amar had come across before. There was a one-line message: *George, Today you will get a package of flyers. Hand out them all!*

Amar started looking around the office, but he couldn't see any flyers around. In fact, he had never seen any in the office at all. It was surprising to think of it now, that George would have in all these years never had anything sent. He'd been long away from the game, but was it too long?

Amar once again lifted off of the chair, this time unnoticing of the pain in his legs, and began scouring the shelves to see if he could see any package. Had George hidden them from him, to discourage any dreams that would take him away from this failing business venture?

It was clear, George was still connected somehow. No one, especially someone who'd basked in the glory for so long, could leave the aura for long. VK Productions must be an old buddy of his. The message itself began to irritate him. How "everyone" was capitalized, how it was blunt and ended with a dangling modifier. Who was VK Productions and how had Erfan gotten in touch with them?

The latch on the front door clicked loose and made his heart skip a beat. Kiran stumbled in the room, murmuring, "You said you would only be a second.."

Amar was surprised she managed to find the office, and thought she might have been exaggerating her drunkenness.

“What’s back there?” She started walking toward the office.

“Listen, just grab a seat out there, I’ll be done in a bit.”

“Why is it so dark in here?”

Kiran’s foot hit something, and Amar watched her silhouette topple to the floor. He hit the switch for the lights. She lay over a pile of boxes about the size of sock drawers, covered in packaging tape.

“Ow! I think I broke my goddamn toe!”

He ignored her, and brushed her leg aside from the box. The address label marked the sender: VK Productions.

“Help me up,” Kiran said, pulling on Amar’s arm hand-over-hand like a rope.

“Will you get off?!” He said. “I told you to stay in the car, you dumbass.”

She let go, the sound of her buttocks hitting the floor. Amar picked up the box on placed it on the table. It was mummified in the tape, with almost no aperture to break from.

“Do you have anything sharp?” He asked.

“What?”

“To cut this with.”

“Isn’t this your office? Don’t you have something here?”

Amar sighed at his own stupidity and walked around searching for anything that could puncture the tape. From the floor, Kiran yelled and complained about her toe, demanding they go to the emergency room, that he was a loser and he wouldn’t get any extra fun tonight. Amar heard all of it and let it drain from his mind immediately.

If there was, or had ever been any scissors or knife in the office, it was like everything else lost in the piles. He looked back at Kiran. She’d taken off her heels and played with her toes.

“Can we go now? I think it’s fine, actually.”

“Let me see your purse.”

“For what?” she said, clutching it.

“Are you sure there’s nothing in there? A nail file, or something?”

“A nail file? What do I look like, Amar? You think all girls walk around carrying a beauty salon in their bags? First you try and take advantage of me and now you just want me to go digging around my purse to help you. At this rate, I feel like I should almost expect to be paid after all of this. You know, two hundred for blowjob, one fifty for hands. Where do you get off, asshole?”

“I’m sorry, Kiran. Here...” Amar walked closer to help her up. She stopped him with her hand.

“Oh hell no. I *do* have mace in here and I will spray your face if you come near me.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Just sit there. Just sit down. I’d get up and leave except my toe’s broken – ”

“Your toe is not broken.”

“Don’t interrupt. And also, I can barely take two steps without having the whole world turn into a funhouse mirror.”

Amar rolled a chair over and sat down as she said. For awhile they were silent. She massaged her foot, and after awhile, started on the other that she hadn’t tripped over. Her eyes were still glazed. Amar thought back to that first night, when she’d slipped her arm under his, how with the simple gesture she sparked lust in him. The same night he’d met Dalia. Maybe he should have just gone to the hotel afterwards, consummated himself.

Instead now he found himself sitting in a lonely office, closing in on the next sunrise, trying to open a box. He searched its entire surface for a way to open it, but nothing seemed apparent.

“What’s in there?” Kiran asked after a few more moments of silence had passed by.

“Flyers, I think.”

“For what?”

“A party. Just some party.”

“Oh, ok.” She said, her eyes not leaving her feet. He wanted her to ask, to say, *don't lie, it's something special or you wouldn't be so anxious*, but she was too oblivious from drink and from simply not caring.

Even if she did see it, it wouldn't be monumental for her. Most flyers were standard design, never truly creative or eye catching in the way that enticed one to attend. It would always be hyper-bright text, attacked the eyes and yet daring you to look at it. The title would be large, and under it were drink specials, open door hours, addresses and contacts.

And always, depending on the designer's fancy, an actress or supermodel or pop diva was used on the flyer, infusing the invitation with promises of sex and fame.

But those were famous people, their pictures are everywhere, no one cared if it was used this way.

Amar's eyes were instead fixated next to the chunk of text, where Dalia was staring back at him. She stood, imposed before an electric red and purple background, her back was turned to him, but head turned and cocked, leering through a tussle of hair.

Chapter 39

Later that night, Amir felt uneasy inside the temple. At first he kept telling himself it was the hard marble floor and the sand scratching against his back. But he had been so tired from the altercation with the birds that physical comfort was not an issue. When he put his body down on the sleeping mat of reeds, aside the Priest, he could feel his muscles sink into the cool stone, almost as if they became fluid and unsubstantial at night.

But even so his mind stayed awake, racked by the Priest's questions about Sunita and her role in his past. What is it to him to ask me these things? Amir thought. If I have problems I go to the Imam in Delhi or to my wife, but why consort with his false holiness? He doesn't comprehend love or affection, especially not him, a serpent in that loincloth. Slowly perspiration formed on his face and neck and chest, bringing a disturbing weight. It reminded him of the other night, when a sudden rainstorm swept across the desert, and he focused on that to avoid her name passing through his mind again. That night of the rains, he had been woken by a stream of drops hitting his face. He could hear the water trickling through the drains, and had imagined out to where they all led.

Amir got and silently tip toed outside, and onto the cliff. It was a complete pitch black, and only the crashing sound of the ocean's waves gave him any sense of depth and height. Forgetting the drains, he lay down on the ground, realized he had forgotten the reed mat, then dismissed it and put his head down. The cool dry air blanketed him as he sighed relief and his heavy head began losing itself. He closed his eyes.

Sunita. The name tapped at his brain like a steady drum beat. Sunita. The beat was even, slow but paced. *Dhum-dhum-dhum, dhum-dhum-dha*. It would bounce and make

her giggle with joy. She looked at him tenderly as he closed his eyes, and her smile went wide and parted, revealing two rows of ivory white teeth. Now, in the recesses of subconscious, Amir opened his eyes, and there he was on the cliff again, standing against an amber dusk horizon, water below now more visible. The temple reconstructed in full, its majesty and craft on display. Life and the world had suddenly grown rich with promise.

He said her name again, to himself. *Sunita, Sunita*. The drum beat goes into a riff, quickening, staccato rapid bursts. *Dha-dha-dhum-dha-dha-dhum-dha-dha-dhum*. She moves, in fact hovers around him. She motions to the temple, eyes wide with delight. *See*, she says, *The stone chiseled so well, the marble shining like diamonds*. She doesn't part lips, but he hears her in his mind. She inhabits it, learning where he has been in the past and where he desires to go. With her hand outstretched, her rosy pink and dainty fingers, she calls to him. *Come, Amir. Come with me*, and he takes her hand, and off they go.

To the beaches on Somnath, in the shadow of the archaic temple looming out over the Indian Ocean. She pulls him along further and further into the water, which is not cold, and in fact the perfect warm temperature, comforting him. A steady *dhinak-dhinak-dhinak*. They walk farther and farther out, the water never dropping in level, and still as the temple becomes a glinting gem in the horizon atop the cliff, still only their feet and ankles are wetted. *Sunita. Su-ni-ta. Chh-chh-chh* her ankle bracelet rattles as the jingling steel balls crash into the lapping waves. They ring melodiously, and the drum takes a rhythm. *Dhun-dhak-dhak-dhun. Dhun-dhak-dhak-dhun*. The sun is setting as the ocean grows larger in front of them, and soon it is night, and the stars peek out in the dark sky.

“Where are we going?” Amir asks.

Just a little further, she says. Come, don't let go of me.

He feels his hand gripped tighter in hers, and she begins to pace faster, and soon it is a slow run, only so fast as she struggles to keep her sari from flapping in the water. Without stopping, she turns and glances back at him, and in that quick turn her silken cheeks seem to invite him, and he wants to reach out and hold her face in his hands and stroke her soft skin. He looks into her eyes, and smiles, trying to express that at this moment, he loves her completely and trusts her so. And her look tell him she understands, as they come closer to an edge in the ocean. It ends and opens into a great chasm where the water plunges into pitch black below and a soft mist rises.

Without hesitation or doubt she leaps off the edge, and he, wholly in her grip and control, follows and dives with all of his strength. They remain in the air for moments, without weight or consequence. Amir finds he can let go of her hand, and rises upward until they become level with one another.

He reaches out and takes her in his arms. As their bodies intermingle and become one mass they begin to descend, down into the mist, and slowly they are surrounded by the cool, white haze. "Sunita," he whispers, the mist droplets dancing around his lips with each syllable. They form on her face as well, on the rosy cheeks. How they still glow in this cloud. He brings his face to hers, and touches his cheek against her own, and the drum beat becomes a steady metronome. *Dhom. Dhom. Dhom.*

As they cast further down, she still smiles at him, her eyes filled with endearment. Finally, her lips part and her mouth opens, and Amir wants to kiss her badly. But the voice of heaven blossoms from inside her, filling the gaps between the droplets with melody and harmonium. It envelopes his ears and he can feel it soar higher than them

both; up, up, up, through the mist, into the sky, and touching the stars, making each glow brighter and brighter until the world entirely is consumed by her beauty and radiance.

He wraps his arms around her tighter, holding her body in full embrace. She heaves, and becomes firm in his grip. He reaches his head down and kisses her on the mouth, forcing her to stop singing, and beneath whimpers and passion suddenly the mist becomes warm and suffocating.

The water droplets grow and multiply and soon Amir feels his clothes becoming heavy from the dampening. *Dhin-tan, dhin-than*. He pulls his lips back and looks at her, but even in front of his face he cannot make out Sunita's silken cheeks. The weight pulls on him harder, and slowly the moisture loosens his grip on her. It is now hot and he cannot breathe. Even before he feels it, he plunges straight down, and he can still make out her silhouette falling with him through the cloud. He tries to move toward her, wading, pushing mist out of his way and kicking himself through the air. But the blackness quickly swallows him, erasing the droplets and the mist and the weight of the fall.

And in the shock of it Amir wakes up in a cold sweat on the sand at the edge of the cliff, the moonlight shimmering up above cascading blue over the dunes, and it was as if the moment had never happened at all. He stretches his fingers and feels clumps of mud stick against them. No, not sweat, he thinks to himself. Rainfall must have passed. The sand all around him had become caked around his body and creating a deep impression of his body where he lay.

He got up and to go inside the temple, but the doors had been closed on him. He pushed hard but the Priest must have barred them from the inside somehow, because they

wouldn't budge. Again without warning, as was the other night, the rain began to fall again. Gradually, the heat had become temperate, and Amir now began to shiver. He crouched besides the threshold, under the narrow arch of the doorway, and waited out the night, cursing the drops.

The next morning he found the Priest sweeping the floors of the great hall with a broom made of heavy reeds. He held a pot of water under his left arm, slightly to its side so it would liberally spill out onto the floor, and he would sweep the dirt from the marble to the sides. The reeds scrapped and scratched against the stone, never leaving a mark but, Amir thought, creating more noise than need be. He watched the water, blood-red from the mix of powders, stream away to the sides and through the small golden gratings into the gutters that ran beneath the temple.

"Would you like to help?" The Priest said. "Surely a devout man should be willing to clean the God's house in the morning. A clean house makes for clean prayer."

"I've never cleaned anything before in my life." It was true, Amir said to himself. He distantly recalled a time when he was little and he had eagerly helped the maids mop the floors of his father's house. When his mother had found him, he'd been scolded and sent away, and the next day there had been different maids working.

"Oh very well." The Priest went on cleaning.

"Well, I suppose I should do it."

Without raising his head, the Priest went, "No, you're right. First time, you would only make a further mess anyway."

Amir stood for a few more moments with a blank face, unable to let his own shortcomings and the rage against the insinuation come to cooperation. There had been

many maids around the bungalow where he grew up. A few men servants as well, but Father had thought it best to keep as few men as possible; women were not capable of assassination or treachery. For Amir, they stayed mostly nameless and faceless, although he would recognize them and their jobs. There had been the one with the hazel eyes, the large one, and the one with the large nose ring. She would playfully scold him, squeeze his cheeks and call him “badmash bachchu.” Her name had been Sunita.

But now the servant woman was hollowed from the identity, and only some shell he named Sunita remained.

Without bothering to switch into a new kurta, or fix his wayward hair, or even perform the morning prayer after the one he had already missed, Amir went to his tent outside and sat at his matla.

He took out some of his writings in progress. Looking at them now, he thought, many of these were worthless. Lot of time with little effort. They were well chosen words, artful construction of verse, but he had tired of their themes and ideas. Same old things – God. Nature. Love. Sunita, his muse.

No, he said to himself. There is no woman like that. There has never been. She existed only on his words and couplets. But still so vivid. Now again even in a woken state her beauty overtook his mind. Amir became again intoxicated but now also annoyed with himself.

In the stillness of that morning, he took his quill in hand, the blue green eye of the peacock’s feather staring back at him. The ink quaked inside the small jeweled reservoir, its thick ripples catching Amir’s attention. His eyes fixed on the ink’s dark color, and slowly the sun and water drifted from his consciousness.

He dipped the quill and hovered it over the reservoir. A drop of ink fell into the pool and again the ripples emerged. He thought of Sunita and her dark tresses, how he liked to bury his face in them. How soft they felt on his cheeks and tickled him.

Somewhere from the recesses, as if called to life by the thought of her, the drum beat began again. *Dhim-dhanak dhanak. Dhim-dhanak-dhanak Dhim-dhanak-dhanak-dhim.* Although Amir knew nothing about writing music, he began inscribing syllables onto his page, without rhyme or reason.

He wrote through and through, creating musical rhythm for four couplets by midday, and extending one into an entire lyrical song. He had no notion if this was a respectable composition or not. The Priest would not know. Only the sufis in Delhi might be able to give him some idea.

But for now it was his and his song alone, his love of Sunita, manifested to the paper before him.

He took a deep breath, and chewed on some opium, numbing his jaw and his face. He relaxed his eyes again and closed them. The quill fell from his fingers and dropped in the sand upright, the peacock's eye gazing out against the wind.

Chapter 40

As Jayant had hoped, without fail, Pratab stood outside the station, lounging in his car with his eyes closed and chewing a toothpick. When Jayant shook him on the shoulder, he snapped upright and caught Jayant's arm in a vice grip.

“Oh!” the driver said. “It's you sir. I wasn't aware you were coming.”

“I didn't know I was, either.”

Pratab noticed the woman beside him. He twirled the toothpick against his tongue and smiled at her.

“Oh, Mr. Baxi. I see you've brought Madame Baxi with you?”

Jayant heard her suck in a breath of air, but before she could say anything he cut her off.

“Can you take us to the bungalow please?” he said. “It's urgent. Business.”

Pratab sneered and looked back and forth at both of them. Likewise, she gave him a look of scorn and coldness. But Pratab put the canopy down, and without getting up, arched his arm to the back and opened the door of the car.

“Please sir, please. By all means. We will get there fast-um-fast!” His voice was overly pleasing.

Jayant helped her in, and sat next to her. He realized in the many times he'd sat in the car, this was the first that he'd been in the backseat. The car started, and they zoomed off towards the Nawab's bungalow.

As the rest of Sorth unfolded around them, they remained silent. Time and time he would look at her, admiring the scenery, her body thought again erect and uncomfortable. In the mirror, he saw Pratab, scornfully eying his new stranger passenger.

When they reached the bungalow, Jayant expected that she would gaze upon it with wonder, and exclaim what a large and gorgeous home it was. But she remained silent.

They sat in the backseat as Pratab got out of the car and told the servant to let Nawab Khanji know his favorite guest had arrived. Within moments the aging former-royal came out, walking down the front steps, his arms as wide as his smile.

“Greetings, Baxiji!” He stopped his descent. “Ah, and who is this?”

“Someone like us. Someone who wants to escape the pressure of the world.”

It wasn’t until they had reached the underground chamber, until the rusted iron gate clamored shut and it’s metallic echo pierced down the stairwell, that she spoke.

“What is this place?”

“A chamber of melody, madame.” The Nawab said. “Your husband and I have spent many, many hours here, performing and practicing and reciting.”

“Actually,” Jayant mumbled, “She is no –“

“You perform?” She looked up at him. “Down here?”

They nodded.

“Who comes to listen?”

“No one, really.” Jayant said. The Nawab gave him a scolding look for the admittance.

“*Tsk*,” she said. “Then you are only tapping and picking away at chords and drums. It cannot become music until someone hears it.”

She started to walk around the room, admiring the decorative floral design along the walls, peeking up through the ventilation holes that sprouted above ground. She stopped in front of the instruments – sitar, tabla, cymbals. She looked at Jayant.

“Which do you play?”

“I told you about tabla.”

“That you played as a child. Don’t try that with me.”

Khanji cleared his throat loudly. “Mr Baxi, why don’t we put on a little concert for her?”

“Is this why you brought me here?” she asked. “To give a private concert?”

She sat on one of the lavish chairs that adorned the room. Jayant always found them curious, not only that the Nawab had them when no one else was brought down, but also how it was brought down in the first place. This was the one he preferred though, the one that, if he was in power, might have been his royal throne. Now she sat there, a queen, looking down upon common folk, ready to judge them.

Jayant and Khanji hesitated, both tinkering with their instruments and examining them with great detail. At this moment, both exiled Mughal descendant and government employee were leveled on the same plane, neither quite confident at their skill, belittled by discerning eyes of a strange and intoxicating woman.

They chose a selection that was most familiar to them, an old qawwali they were fond of. They didn't know the name, despite having the lyrics memorized, referring to it only as "Tere Bin" after the first words of the song. Otherwise, its genealogy and composition were unknown to them, and any line could have been just as easily cherry-picked, and used to rename it. It didn't matter, neither of them had any fortitude to attempt vocalizing. It would be instrumental alone.

Jayant was glad to see that Khanji, like him, was forming sweat. They both looked at each other, took a deep breath and began playing. Throughout the entirety of the song, Jayant kept his eyes staring at the small perforations in the stone ceiling, his mind concentrated on each tap he made on the table, marking off every time his knuckle bent, every time his fingertips smacked the surface of the leather top. His ears drowned out the sitar. As they went on, not once did he hear the notes coming together in melody.

He followed it note for note as best he could, registering whether they floated like sparrows or sank like pebbles. Accountants did not make any many calculations in a given day as he did through the song. And yet, when it ended, he felt as if a day had gone by.

He finally brought his eyes down at her. She started clapping.

"Mr Baxi," she said. "It seems that you, like I, are also a mystery."

“Yes, madame,” Khanji said. “I must say so myself, that was rather a brilliant performance!” He got up, esteemed that his first audience gave approval. “Hmm, what do you say, Baxiji?”

“I think,” Jayant said, “It could do with some singing.”

“Yes, but alas, neither of us have the talent in that area. Sorry, madame.”

Jayant approached the royal chair she sat in.

“May I have it?” he asked. She gave him the yellow bag. He took the blank vinyl disc out of it, and held it up. In the dimmed subterranean light it still had a gleam that flashed as one turned it back and forth.

“Nawabji,” Jayant said. “I was wondering if I might take up your offer for that favor, between friends.”

*

It did not take long to set up the recorder. Jayant was amazed at how efficient the technology was, single wires for the microphone, sound monitor, the gramophone, all into one box, and out of it came a brand new creation of whatever sounds and rhythms the person wished for. It was a box of magic tricks, as far as he was concerned.

Khanji proved to be quite technologically adept, tinkering with the various knobs and levers that only confused Jayant. As he was setting up, Jayant saw her watching them, peering at the recording system the way one patients look into the operating room, before they are put under and wheeled in without their control.

“You don’t mind doing this, right?” Jayant asked her.

“It’s a funny feeling. To think that I will sing, and then my voice will be on that plate. Forever.”

“Well, not forever. These things don’t last that long.”

“How long do they last?”

“Long enough for me to enjoy it, for the rest of my life.”

“And what about after that?”

“After that, someone else can hear it. Maybe by then the record will be so scratchy they will think you’re voice is really a cat’s, screeching endlessly.”

They both laughed.

“I don’t care, though.” He said.

“You know, those men that brought me all of those paintings and posters. They all said they picked it because they felt like each image was something they could share with me. They always picked a movie that they liked, and then gave me the poster for it, like they were giving me part of themselves. I loved it. I loved each and every one. The pampering, the gifting. I felt each piece of art showed off a side of their personality. But, after a long time, after I grew old, and found my first grey hairs, I realized that very few of them had any personality at all.

“Now, here I am, giving you a piece of myself, and I am wondering, when the record is all scratched up and I sound like an annoying cat, will you think of me the same way you do now?”

Jayant put his hand to her brow, caressed it, and brushed a dark, silken lock of hair back in place.

“We are ready,” Khanji said.

The gears and belts inside the recorder began whirring in a great up-swell, and gave the feeling like a steamer ship making sail or generators lighting a large city. Energy poured into the room, attracted by some immediacy that Jayant felt, that he knew she felt and so did the Nawab.

“What should I sing?” she asked.

“Nothing new,” Jayant said. “Nothing from a film. A song that suits your voice. A song that has lasted forever.”

Without another word, Jayant went and sat on the floor behind the table drums. He flexed both hands until knuckles cracked and took a deep breath.

“Are we ready?” Nawab Khanji asked.

She nodded.

“We are.” Jayant said.

With two fingers, Khanji pressed down on a button on the recorder, and the platter rose up until the needle pierced the smooth black surface of the vinyl, spinning and spinning. Khanji threw up his hands to say, *go, go!*

She took a deep breath, and culling from the far recesses of her musical education, from all of the mimicry of starlet vocalists, from the few books she had read on music searching her memory for the song that would be eternally etched. There were some too fabulist, and others too commonly known. No, she had to search harder, and thought back to when she first had to sing for other men. She thought of Soman, the woman who so long ago took her in embrace when she'd first entered the life of a Courtesan. Under Soman, she'd learned how to smile, how to wink, coyly but not duplicitously, how to call them over with by arching a shoulder or batting eyelashes, and if that was futile, how to sing like birds in the new season, joyous and tempting of potential bounty. For this, Soman had taught her a simple tune, easy to remember, simple to belt out, and yet so resonant men after hearing it would return again, and again, and again, driven mad by this marriage of beauty and voice.

And so, from the first time she had been with a man, and every time since, she now took a deep breath and began:

Chapter 41

Amar was a man on a mission. He'd tasked himself to find out what exactly Erfan and his cohort collective had been up to in the time since their night out at Xenos, what kind of subaltern musical revolution they'd been planning, ready to rise up against the upper-crust production structure, and scream at them with middle fingers in the air, "No, fuck *you*. We control the beats, we control the rhythms. We decide the music. We decide if it's popular or not."

Never in the city, at least up to Amar's knowledge, had there ever been such a current or build up to a dance party. Flyers were posted in small little coffee shops; not even the avant-garde or homemade pastry kind, but even the chain establishments that sold their retail brand carafes and traveler mugs. On the radio, late at night, when the popular shows had ended and the airwaves only strung the mellow, monotonous voices of overseas news programs and sex therapists, one could catch a brief, mumbled shout-out: "And don't forget, this Saturday the tables will turn at the ultra-secret —"

Crackle, crackle.

"— only for those in the crowd. So if you don't even know, don't even bother."

And yet, the current ran deep.

One day, even George called Amar, saying he was sorry.

Amar told him he accepted the apology.

"Thanks man, I'm glad there's no beef here. But, hey, listen"—

He paused. Amar waited.

“So, I don’t know if you heard, but there’s this party goin’ down...”

“I did.”

“Are you going?” *Was he going to get to the point?*

“Maybe. Are you?”

“Yeah, well that is – I need access. I mean, I’m not really known in that crowd, you know?”

“Sure.”

“I know you’re buddy Erfan is one of the guys coordinating – “

“He’s just a guy I know.”

“Right. But you know him, right?”

“I can’t get you in, George.”

The phone clicked. Same old George, Amar thought. Down to business, never bothering.

Saturday crept closer and closer. Buzz grew and grew. Amar soon realized that there were many people talking about it, and very few of them knew really at all what this party was actually about, or where it was, or when it was happening. All of the promotion had stressed details would be given out scant hours prior. Only the first few closest friends of the coordinators would receive notice at first, and then they were instructed to give it to only a few choice friends of theirs, and so on.

And that was the event horizon, from where controlling only Moses himself would be able to control the flood of swapped texts, calls, messages, and any other communication that would be made. News of the party would reach the eyes and ears of freshman girls at the college campuses, of the suit-and-tie investment bankers downtown, the suburban princes and princesses looking to get into city mischief, and conveniently, the failed painters, writers, and performance artists living in a bohemian tenant building just blocks away from the Turn The Tables venue.

In that corner of the city, far away from the austere high rises and hotels, removed from the nightlife districts teeming with roves of underage kids looking to get into “trouble,” was a block of old unused warehouses. Factories that used to produce radios and talcum powder, printing presses for a newspaper, storage depots for imported farm produce – all things that had become outdated or unneeded, and left for rot.

Wayward folk, seeking refuge from corporate boardrooms to suburban life to homelessness, began taking up refuge in these warehouses. They brought with them a suitcase with their worldly possessions, usually some old dirty laundry and a bag of marijuana, and found an emptied office or closet to consider a new residence. It was undecided if it was permanent or not – these people weren’t the type for such long-term plans.

Soon, these living spaces developed into studios, for artists who need required canvasses not smaller than the hallway wall; for photographers who wanted only to lens dusty cobwebbed staircases and broken skylights; for culture cultivators who wanted only a couch, a beer, hash, and someone to chat with.

Erfan, and his collective, in the meanwhile had converted one of the buildings into their own private dancehall.

“This is not a club, mind you,” he told Amar. “It’s more like a . . . music pressure cooker. Just pack it in, just pack it in. Then blow it out, blow it out.”

Three rooms, just like Xenos, but larger, more open, and completely free. The DJs in Erfan’s collective roved in and out, switching back and forth between the different decks, playing whatever they wanted. Crowds formed at their will, usually late, after everywhere else had closed down, these parties still went into the early mornings. “Like those Manchester raves in the seventies,” Erfan said.

Amar was astounded. No bouncers, no cover fees. Instead, you just “had to know.”

He stood in front of the door, inconspicuously stuck out against the brick wall. In a side-alley, facing a thicket of trees and shrubbery, which in turn lined the freeway on the other end. The whoosh of late drivers zipping by was sunken by the cataclysm of whistles, fades, thumps, and cracks from inside the warehouse. Even from outside though, there was a harmony to it, he thought.

He tried opening the door. Locked.

Another door swung open – the cellar. *A basement, Erfan?* A glorified house party? Before his feet, like a ferret peeking above ground, a small little man, head hidden under a bushy beard and Eagles cap, sneered up at him.

“Password?” he said.

“Are you serious?” Amar asked.

“Password.” He repeated.

It was easy to remember, no less because Erfan himself had told him: “We are all kings.”

“And we are all slaves,” the ferret answered. “Join us below deck.”

Amar rolled his eyes at the idiotic exchange, and descended. Before he’d even gotten himself fully under the threshold, someone thrust a red cup of beer into his hand. When he got to the bottom, he found himself in a large room, with a DJ atop a small performance stage, behind a simple card table, and flanked by two grand cabinet speakers.

There was no real dance floor. At the very front, the crowd formed a wall before the DJ table, like groupies at a rock concert, and behind them was everything else.

Like Erfan’s description, the writhing orgy of the clubs was gone; instead, there was a scatological habitat of music around him – groups trading drinks back and forth, pockets of break dancers, and several marijuana pipes floating around. It was unclear who was VIP and who was a lucky bastard that sneaked through. There were no markers, no dress codes, no “we’re at capacity.” There were no lustful gazes, at least not egregiously, and no alpha male battles.

As if there was no other way to take in the scene around him, he took a large gulp of the beer. It was swill, and smacked him hard. He drank some more.

A large hand grabbed his shoulder, and whisked him around.

“I thought that was you, son!” It was Éclair.

Amar was unable to say anything, so he continued, hand resting on the shoulder.

“Hey listen, I’ve been meaning to come check you out. Just been busy, know what I mean?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Amar said. He’d forgotten about his subterfuge. Why is Éclair here? “Don’t you have to spin tonight down East side?” he asked.

“I am, but not there.” Éclair said. “Here.”

Amar looked around. “At this place? But it’s all…”

“Kids, yeah. New generation, you guys. Gotta keep up with the changing times, know what I mean?” Éclair took off his glasses, and gave a hearty laugh. Even in the lack of light, he could see that the man was getting far in the years. Even though he was still dressed in an impeccably current cream-colored satin suit, and with all of the stage charisma he carried with him, once Amar saw his deep irises, it all seemed to evaporate away. Éclair seemed an aging relic of a past.

“I know. You’re thinking, ‘what’s with this dude, he doesn’t belong here.’ True. But Erfan, man, the cat’s given me a whole new boost in my career with that track of his. I thought it’d be nice to come to his big party and do a set.”

“Well,” Amar said, “I hope you don’t think that track is a good example of my generation’s music.”

“Don’t tell me that, man. I put a lot of money into recording it!” He let out another big laugh, this time enough that people around them heard it over the speakers. Amar was glad for that as well, as he was stunned by what Éclair was suggesting.

“You know Erfan?” Éclair asked.

“Not really.”

“You know man, the big glamorous places are all good and the gig pays the bills, but – this is where it’s at. Look at everyone. Having fun, no one’s bitching about waiting on their girlfriends putting on make up in the bathroom, no one’s climbing over people to get a drink at the bar. Man, the clubs is nonsense these days. Look at this – chill and twice as fun.”

Amar nodded, and affirmed. This was beyond anything that he and Erfan had ever dreamed; all of their conversations, their brainstorming, their projected business plans, now seemed completely and utterly naïve. A beeline was moving up a staircase tucked behind a large hanging mural of graffiti art, a figure in the curtain. He attached himself to the back of the queue and trudged up the corridor, the aged, deteriorating wood creaking beneath his soles.

As they walked up, he realized the art was a painted recreation of the image on the flyer. Another recreation of Dalia. Amar fumed at the notion that she’d become some kind of pin-up, now open to the market to be copied over and over. And then he realized that of the hundreds of people storming the warehouse tonight, he was probably the only one that cared. Though he knew it would just upset him further, he took the card flyer out of his pocket and was affirmed at seeing her defined cheekbones and strands of hair. This version of her was more real, he thought.

Under her waist, he saw now what his jilted eyes had ignored the first time:

Launch Party for “Sur” Produced by DJ Éclair.

As he reached the landing, the smell of pot enveloped his face, sending his mind whirring and whizzing. He caught sight of the man next to him putting a lighter to his pipe, toking, and then passing it to the woman he was with.

“Want some?” He said, turning his pipe instead toward Amar.

Amar looked at his bushy red beard, which hung tightly from his chin as if it was stuck with Velcro, strapped by red locks that disappeared under a cap. By contrast girl was blonde and very fair skinned, but her bloodshot eyes complemented him.

“Yes,” he replied. “Please.”

Amar took the pipe, placed it between his lips, and then held the lighter to the bowl and inhaled, as he’d seen so many times in movies and TV. Somehow in college, he’d escaped the traditional night of guitar and ganja that seemed as natural a right of passage as was watching violent 70s world cinema or going through a “folk music phase.” But he hadn’t, and here he’d now finally lit up. In that first moment after feeling the smoke creep down his throat, he wasn’t sure what he felt. All he knew was it wasn’t at all like a puff of hookah.

He coughed, raspily, and the red beard patted him on the back. “First time?”

“No, just been awhile.”

“How long?”

“Uh, not sure. A while.”

“Shame, man. Fucking shame. Have another go.”

Amar took it in again, and then relented, for now the world was getting weary and blurry around him. He could hear music, but could see no dancing; only moving, splotches of colors shuffling in some sloppy stream, large suns of light hovering above. He backed away from the red beard man and his girlfriend, and found himself caught in the beeline again, dispersing into the even larger crowd that had grown on this floor.

He realized it wasn't a dancefloor, but a hallway. He could make out two separate rhythms coming from opposite ends of the hallway, the other two rooms that Erfan had mentioned. Amar allowed the current he was in to pull him where it may.

He ended up in a room with a half-step bass beat reverberating from two large cabinets on the floor. The DJ, he recognized, was Angel, from George's office.

Éclair was downstairs and Angel up here. And George calling asking about details of the party. Small world, indeed.

The gripping clouds of ganja were getting to him. Tears began forming around his eyes, turning the zipping light beams into auras that imbued his vision. Balance seemed awry, he pressed his heels down as hard as he could, until he knew he his feet were flat on the ground, and yet still things swayed left and right like a ship in violent tide.

He kept swaying. Angel was throwing in pops and whistles through a controller, his body spasming with each added sound effect. From his laptop he seemed to interlay tracks over another. *Another laptop*, Amar thought. Bogus.

Still, he found himself swaying. Though induced by his toke, it synched, or so he perceived, with the pops and whistles. As people around him moved to step-halfstep bass

rhythms leaving the floor in pumped bounces, he tried to join in, nudging his way further into the room.

Some dancers took notice.

He felt a girl brush by, slender and lithe, black locks and scent of –

...

Like someone had blasted a flamethrower through a dense fog, the haze in his mind began to lighten up. He still felt like a raccoon in daylight, unable to distinct colors and lines. Feet still caught in the dubstep, he turned his head back and forth, scanning the room. *No of course not.*

A raspy feeling formed again in his throat and he coughed. The heave cleared his nose, and he could swear he smelled it. The attar.

But why would she be here? Who does she –

...

His feet stopped tapping. They instead strode, taking him haggardly out of the room and back into the hallway, where against the beeline current, wafts of the hemp smoke smacking his face once more. He made his way to the next room, where there seemed to be more colored strobes than actual light bulbs, giving Amar the impression he was in a kaleidoscope. The haze began to come back. The room twisted and turned around him.

He tried to focus. Focus! A soundbyte shouted out, “Put your hands up in the air!” and he did, along with everyone else. The thicket of hands made it impossible to see.

“Put ‘em up! Put em up!”

The DJ for this room was up on his table, feet almost scraping against the decks, calling for more hands. Amar peered through, uncaring, unaware really of what was going on. He didn’t notice the DJ jump up, or send his deck flying off the table. He didn’t notice the crowd cheer either, when the DJ just shrugged and said “I don’t need that shit!” and let his pants down, displaying his naked ass. He kept his gaze at his own level, scanning around, sniffing out, like a dog, that scent. He didn’t turn to watch the girl who went up and licked one of the DJ’s bare cheeks, nor did he join everyone’s hollers and screams at the guy who licked the other. He was brushing through the onlookers, a rowdy peep show audience, and quickly reached the far wall of the room. He looked back across, peering through.

At the opposite side, at the windows that looked down onto the empty city street, stood his slender, lither figure. He thought he heard himself say the name aloud, but didn’t hear it in the music. *Dalia*. Her silhouette, against the orange tall streetlights beaming through and adding to the kaleidoscope, was too contrasted to make clearly. He couldn’t see her face. But he knew.

But he couldn’t see her face.

When the forest of arm trunks all came down, the room dragged back down to its normal state, a riot of digital garbage effects that amounted to some form of melody.

Some cleared out – need a cigarette, a beer, a joint. A migration of the tired and sober flocked away, and when all had cleared, the silhouette in front of the windows was gone.

He left the room and found another flight of stairs, leading to the top floor of the warehouse. Erfan had mentioned only three rooms, and Amar could hear no music descending towards him.

Then what was up there?

He climbed, step by step, heart pattering rapidly like a pummeled boxing bag. At the top, he saw another long hallway, with a door at the end slightly ajar. The only room lit. Is this where they smoke more joints, in peace? Perhaps with jam sessions? He moved closer, but this time no grassy odor passed his nose.

From it, he caught a laugh and a muffled comment, from a low, bellowing voice that boomed with *joie de vivre*.

Amar opened the door and announced, “Erfan.”

“Amar!”

Erfan, sunken in an old tattered couch with springs gutted, sat between two pale-faced men with piercing blue eyes and slicked hair. They wore clean white shirts, almost too clean for this environment Amar thought. On a recliner, little to his surprise, sat the Red Beard and on his lap, the Fair Blonde.

“Oh hey, man,” Red Beard said. “Up for another hit?”

“There is my boy,” Erfan said, with an outstretched hand. “My shahzad.”

“You’re shahzad, I thought,” Amar said.

“Not anymore. Shahzad is prince, Amar. In case I never told you or you never bothered to ask. I’m not the prince any longer.”

“No?”

Erfan scoffed, lightly and playfully, but intentionally. “No, of course not. Look at this man, I’ve been promoted. This is no Prince work. I’m a king, now. This is no Machiavelli, it’s Richard the Third.”

Amar’s focus was on the coffee table, bare except for a glass mirror, with a coat of white dust across its surface.

Erfan noticed. “Want a hit?”

“No.”

“Right, right. So you came.”

“Didn’t you think I would?”

Erfan got up from the couch. “Come here with me.”

He brought his arm around Amar’s shoulder, and braced bodies together like Siamese twins. Erfan had grown thick and burly, his flesh cuddling around Amar’s back and abs and hips. As they squeezed through the doorway, through the passage, Amar felt Erfan’s grip loosen, and then tighten again. With each step, Erfan leaned on him more and more.

They descended the stairs slowly, one at a time. Erfan's breathing became labored.

"The hash is pretty strong here, huh?" he said.

"Not strong enough for you, apparently."

"Oh what, that back there? No big deal man. Watch your head here, low beam.

No seriously, don't pay attention to that."

Amar was happy to comply.

Back at the second floor, people shuffled in two streams back and forth between the two rooms, knocking into each other, spilling beer bottles, sliding against the fading wall graffiti to get through, and Amar and Erfan were in the middle of it.

"Just stand here for a bit," Erfan said. "Remember Xenos, Amar? Shit, remember all of the clubs? How we would stand outside in lines for hours on end, with a bunch of douchebags and prissy princesses who would get in because they had more money or a curvier ass? Humiliating man, it was humiliating. And all we fucking wanted was to check out he beats. But all they were interested was getting some pretty people quota for their photo album.

"Well, this is everything we ever wanted that doesn't deal with any of that bullshit. A DJ's playground. Open to any and all. Any guy can roll in here with his crate or his laptop, hook himself up to the system, and start spinning."

"Any guy?"

“Yeah. I mean, we vet them all, of course. Someone in the Collective has to vouch for you, and you have to show your skills. But once you’re in, you’re in, and always welcome.”

“Is that why Éclair is here?”

“You saw him?”

They stood silently, with the music from both of the rooms compacting onto them,

Erfan pointed his finger up in the air as if he was checking for the wind.

“Hear that? The two fades?”

In the room at one end of the building, Amar heard a jet engine sound effect carry itself through the space, carried by a transitional beep-bop melody, and people began filing out of the room. Meanwhile at the other end, he heard horns increasingly cry louder and louder at higher tempos, until reaching a climax and erupting into chorus. The creaky floorboards shook as the crowd in the room stomped up and down.

“They’re coordinating sets,” Amar said.

“The coup de grace. My own genius idea, if I do say so myself. See, you always go to places and just get stuffed into one room and you stay there, and you miss what’s going on everywhere else. This way, the real ragers can hit all the high points of both rooms, but people who like a particular style can hang around. Total music democracy, man.”

A man carrying an ice chest passed the two. He and Erfan hugged like bears. “This party’s going awesome man!” he said, opening the ice chest and passing beers to the two. “Enjoy, brother.”

“See?” Erfan said. “It’s like family here. Real bonds, son.”

Amar nodded, sipping the beer. It was sour and heavily carbonated.

“What the hell is this?” he asked.

“Bathtub swill, my brother makes it.”

Community, Amar thought. Like a village.

They kept walking, and stopped at a ledge that overlooked the lower floor. Erfan grooved in place, enjoying the scene below him, again the king surveying the land, as if he’d created the earth itself and cultivated each seed that grew into tree and fruit. Here, the three music streams intersected, like wakes in the water at a clamorous port, navigating through and around each other to reach the docks and unfold a ship’s bounty.

Amar stood at the ledge next to the bouncing Erfan, watching the strobe lights passed across the faces, and trying to pick out any that looked familiar. Flashes of hair, sparkles of jewelry and make up winked back at him, taunting him, and making the scene visually incomprehensible.

“Erfan.” He paused as he tried to find the right words. “Is there anyone else I would know here?”

Erfan kept moving, his belly swishing side to side and head wobbling, without any purpose, almost as if he danced because he had to. He was lost in the world.

He passed Amar the blunt. “Chill out, man. Have some fun.”

“Did you hear me?”

“Light it up, bitch.”

His brain was swept up in a sharp ringing, the pot battling with the swill to control his moods. Within seconds room became unbalanced, and Amar could not help but dance as well. He could not tell if the floor was below his feet, almost as if it had disintegrated, and he was falling in place.

“This is it, man,” Erfan said. “This is bliss. This is heaven.”

He looked below at the smacked-out, drugged-out, plastered souls moshed together on the floor below, shooting and locking tongues together like a pit of snakes below, slithering and slinking with voracity for the next unsuspecting fool that would jump in and be overcome with their power. This power Amar felt too, it was vibrating all around the warehouse, in the walls, in the frosted skylight ceiling. One could see it in the haze, as the carcinogenic puffs of smoke and dust and humidity rolled and floated into shapes conjured by the emotions present. The rays of the LED spectrum speared through. It was as if Amar was looking at a reverse of the Sistine chapel, not a grand Fresca depicting the heavens, but instead looking down into mobile canvas, lost in the dredges of sin.

His eyes were fixated, unable to move. It had been so long since he'd witnessed such a scene, and he felt embarrassed that it engaged his mind so strongly. He asked himself again, *what am I doing here?* Without even bothering to contemplate an answer, he continued to leer, like a hawk, at those who were already content, and knew what they were getting out of the night. He looked as hands groped chests, as arms stretched out to catch the light, as if it could be taken as a souvenir. Small embers twinkled and vanished. He saw a dark shock of hair. Rather, it was a shock of dark hair, long and velvety and flowing. The LED cascaded across, and rippled across milky white flesh. Even in the haze, he knew, he told himself, it must be Dalia.

Erfan had disappeared from the parapet. Did he see her too? Maybe he'd gone to find her first, tell her to keep hidden, try to keep her away. He looked back down, at the dark-haired top, and saw it edging away from the center of the room and toward the doors to the side.

Amar went toward the stairs he thought they had come up, and instead found one of the smaller rooms. He went back to the parapet, looking over. He scanned the crowd again, but could not see Dalia, or her brother. He contemplated jumping from here. Perhaps the crowd would catch me, he thought. But then again, this isn't a concert mosh pit, and I'm not a rock star.

He went the other direction, and found only a dead end. At a large wall, he stopped, taken in by a graffiti mural that went the entire fifteen by five wall, of the artist painting that very same graffiti mural, going on and on within the image into an endless abyss. For a moment, in his dizzy state, he was sucked into the image, drawn into the

duplicated artist drawing his own visage, before losing balance and falling forward onto the wall.

The warehouse was a complete labyrinth. Erfan had led him around from one side to the other, and now he couldn't find the way down.

He found his only choice of getting off of this level was to go upstairs. Perhaps he could cross to the other side and find his way down. But as he scaled up, each stair was a laborious climb. As he ascended he started to pant, and had to hold the railing to keep from slipping. A cold sweat was forming under his clothing. He could feel all of the toxic in his body collecting at his head and his ears began ringing. The stairwell stretched on, and he became more and more anxious about getting up and out to Dalia, before she left, before she'd vanished again.

At top he found himself back at the room where he'd seen Erfan snort white powder. The door was mostly closed but slightly ajar in the same way it'd been before, but this time he didn't barge in immediately. He heard hushed tones, one male, and one female. He held still before the door and turned his head to the aperture. But he caught only mumbles, hushed tones.

There was exchange of verbal jabs, an excited yell. The guy bellowed for a second, but fell silent. Nothing more was said for a moment. Whispers. A slap across the face.

Amar was hinging behind the door, too nerve wracked to open it. What would he do, or say, if he did? This wasn't the fairy tale chapel where the prince stormed in during the illegitimate wedding vows. He strained to hear more of the conversation.

He heard Farsi. The meanings still cryptic to him, but the phonemes sang to him. The beating hit a roll in his chest.

Then he heard more of the language, and louder, that wasn't coming from behind the ajar door. It was coming from below, back in the main floor. A lofty-pitched vocal lain over zips and pops over the stream of electropop.

*

He went into the main room, where a droning bass rattle was keeping a floor in monotonous shimmying without any peaks or fades. Behind the decks stood Erfan, his face ravaged from booze and smoke, arms limp by his sides, just barely moving to crossfade from one track to the next.

Amar got up on the stage next to him. Erfan's body swayed from side to side. He was like a zombie, operating mechanically, without any feeling or emotion. The spastic hopping or excitable zeal that Amar had seen in the studio had diminished into retarded movement, and gone was any of the passion he had known long before.

Erfan leaned back into air, and Amar had to place his hand behind him, afraid he would fall.

“Erfan...”

“Who's that?”

“Me.”

“Who me?”

“Amar.”

Erfan turned to face him, a wide, glazed smile stretching across his face. He was gone. “Oh, right... what are you doing here man?”

“I wasn’t really sure.”

“Then get the fuck out.” As he talked the hands continued to move, without thought, turning knobs and sliding levels, keeping the best going at its sickly pace. Amar took his hands off Erfan’s shoulder.

“No, no wait,” Erfan said. “Stay. I didn’t mean that. Stay. Are you having fun? I hope you are man, I really did want you to be here. I wanted you to see something, to show you something.”

“What?”

“Well, it was supposed to be a surprise. Something I know you’ve wanted for a long time.”

“Just tell me.”

“Well, you got that CD, still? I actually need it right now.”

Amar handed it to him.

The army of sentient corpses before them, lost without any sense of their own existence, in slave like motion to the beat, did not take any note of the changing track. Amar listened closely, how the *raag* played in symphonically against the electronic *rat-ta-ta-tat* like the sliding tumblers of a lock, like the engine of the train being linked to the

cars behind it, and all trailing along on one singular pathway, his grandfather's song, stripped from the record and barren from its past, now layered and smothered by a new condiment of notes and beats, and served as one new dish.

Slowly, eyes began to turn, wondering at where this foreign melody had come from, why was there something so awkward and out of place from the rest of the night's selection? Amar saw the glances, aimed at Erfan like spears out of the desolate jungle, demanding change and for the better. The music was not welcome, even though the night had been so eclectic before, so wide in range and style.

Erfan looked over to him, nudging, *look buddy, I've done it. Your song, I've made it a classic.* Amar's temples burned with a kind of rage, one he knew now he'd felt before but at the time was not aware. It was the same rage, listening to Erfan make wild claims about his perceived grandeur, listening to him talk abhorrently about Dalia, listening to anything he'd done or said since they'd met that wasn't of pure selflessness to others. And of the latter, Amar could think of nothing.

Gradually the sentient bodies stopped moving, and became alert and lively, the magical spell was broken. Erfan took no notice of it, only staring dimly back and forth from the floor to Amar, a flat smile on his face as if he was humoring a bad joke.

And much to his surprise, Amar laughed too.

He laughed, and Erfan laughed with him, and they grew so loud their laughter, to them alone behind the mammoth speakers, drowned out the song entirely. Amar felt his chest heave, and deflate. What was the joke? Where was the humor in this, the dream he'd carried for so long like a torch through the darkened jungle.

“Man, I don’t want this night to end,” Erfan said. “Look at ‘em. They love it.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Of course they do. I can mix this shit like no one, man.” Erfan took out a small capsule from his pocket and brought it to his nose, and sniffed heavily.

The room began to empty.

Amar felt a presence, and turned to find the two pale-faced man behind him. They both had screeching blue eyes, one portly and the other smaller, but his near-transparent white shirt showed he was muscular. Both had Cuban cigars, though the smaller one held his in his hand. Amar hadn’t seen them walk across the room and up on the stage. Instead it was as if they’d simply crawled out of the wall, like phantoms.

“Erfan,” the smaller one spoke, a deep baritone voice. “What’d going on? No one like this stuff.”

“Keep it cool men, just dropping a new beat.”

“New beats?” The bigger one said. He laughed heartily, and Amar glared at him with a frown, but he didn’t seem to notice. Erfan caught this, and stared back at his friend with dispelling eyes, saying *don’t worry, he’s just kidding*.

Small phantom blew cigar smoke directly in their faces. “No, I’m serious. Turn it to something more current, more popular. I didn’t pay all this money to have people just bounce on me like this.”

“So what, they hear something new.” Amar said. “Isn’t that the point of this party, do something different than what you’d hear everywhere else?”

“The point of this is to get people so crazy and fucked-up that they come back next time!”

“No, no,” Erfan interjected. “Amar’s just saying, you know? They’re just going for a break, I always do this in the middle, you know? Just play some bullshit as like an intermission so people can take a piss or whatever. They’ll be back.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll be back,” the bigger one said.

“Yes, hopefully,” small one added. “But when they do start putting some real jams on. Understand me?”

“Okay, Yuri. Be calmed. Here, how about this?”

Erfan zipped around to his computer and clicked around. A funky eletro-pop back-beat underscored Amar’s CD. He went to the MIDI controller and pounced on keys, sending a plethora of whistles and horns and claps lain over the track. The discord of sounds tugged at ears, and a few people came back in, thinking the interlude was ending.

“There, see? You see?”

Yuri the smaller looked up at his counterpart, and nodded. Neither said anything, and left the stage, chomping on their Cubans.

Erfan mixed in more electro-pop, heavy synth behind a steady percussion.

Buzz-buzz dum-dum-dum. Buzz-buzz- dum-dum-dum.

He let his hands go from the mixer and balled them into tight fists. Amar braced himself for powerful, erratic swing. But Erfan kept his head and hands down. He sniffed. And then without warning, he brought them slamming down on the table, rattling the machines. The record jumped and an infinitesimal silent gap popped over the PA.

“What piece of shit is this Amar?! All these so-called classics you keep bringin out of your parent’s basement, like some wet cruddy sponge you found under the sink. They’re all useless. First your nonsense bhangra, bang, bang, bang, all the goddamn time. And now this thing? What the hell is this? He sounds like a yeti having an orgasm.”

“Who are those two? I thought you were running this.”

“Nothing’s free in this world, okay. That’s the brothers Yuri and Pacha, they put a bit of investment into the night, and so have I, you fuckin understand me? Don’t ruin this shit!”

Erfan’s face surged with blood, but Amar didn’t make any gestures to pacify it. He stood, and shrugged his shoulders, letting them give off whatever signal they may.

“Why are you here anyway?” Erfan asked.

“I can leave.”

He braced Amar firmly by the shoulders. “No one’s telling you to go, bro. That’s not what I said.”

Whether Erfan had developed a great strength, or if neither gave great effort to break the grip, Amar remained in place. He thought perhaps Erfan trying to throw him off of the stage. Good riddance, he thought. But he wouldn’t budge by himself.

At this point, his entire body was feeling worn, like a deflated tire, dragging and scraping across rough asphalt in a circle, over, and over again. He knew he should have never come, for who'd really lost out tonight? It was his own disappointment with Erfan he would spend the coming days losing sleep over and swearing silently like an affected mental patient; and also his song, that he'd cherished so much, turned into a joke before his very eyes, with him standing behind the stage; his own feelings for Dalia, unearthed from deep inside after so long, that he'd now have to toil again to bury away.

Amar looked at his once-partner, still caught in his tight grip. Erfan's head was down, eyes closed. He was breathing heavily, panting almost. He was holding onto Amar for support, to stay on two feet.

"Are you okay?" Amar asked. "I think of have a lot of stuff flowing through you right now."

"Hey man," someone cried from below, "you gonna change this song anytime soon?"

"Erfan, you need to get back on there."

"Is this new? Is this dance music?"

"Erfan, can you hear them? Can you hear *me*?"

"Maybe it's an intermission or something. Let's try another room."

And with that, the room began to clear up. Erfan didn't watch them file out.

And then he let out a wail, and with the dropped capacity of the room, it was well heard. Those few who still remained glanced up for a brief moment, and, passing it off to be adrenaline rush or drunken stage antics, turned away.

Erfan smashed the table again, this time so hard that even the smaller boxes on the table like the microphone receiver or grounding box leapt up off the surface at the force of his fists. The headphones fell over the edge, and dangled on the far side from where they stood, hanging before a pair of girls. One of them, brunette haired in tight sweats, contouring pulpy legs and formed ass walked up and pulled the headphones toward her.

“What you got coming up?” she asked, looking up at them, putting the headphones on.

Erfan bent across and over. “Something good. What’s your name?”

“Christy.”

“I can read your eyes, Christy.”

“What do they say?”

“Oh, perhaps, ‘you play the best music’ or ‘you’re so hot’?”

Her face was fixed under the headphones, faux pink fingernails that curved around the earcups.

Erfan had mouthed the words, “You, go!” before he jumped down on the floor, taking her in his girth. Amar watched his face contort into a half smile, with a brutish twisted smirk to the side. Erfan reached out for her and grabbed her right breast. In

almost one motion she swatted his hand with a hard slap and then smacked him in the face. *Hands off, creep*, rather it was. Erfan was amused and irritated. He nodded up at Amar, pleading him to work the turntables.

But Amar shook his head no. Redness formed in Erfan's cheeks, glowing under the strobe lights. He rotated the dance floor with Christy, nuzzling cheeks and noses with each other, but each time that Erfan's face came around, his attention would turn to Amar, urging him to find another track and cue it up.

Amar consoled by peering inside the crate, telling himself he'd take the first thing he saw and throw it on. But he irresistibly started parsing through the sleeves, torn and cracked at the edges, and the naked vinyls still smooth against his fingertips like they'd been doused in baby oil. He found one that he liked: Bhangra House from DJ Mike, something he'd bought a long time ago without even knowing who it was or what it sounded like, back when Erfan and he first assumed themselves music connoisseurs and he chose it as a lark from a used record store. He'd paid almost \$30 then, only learning later that the record had no notoriety and that price was a ripoff. In the anger, he put it aside and never used it again. So why would Erfan have it here?

And as if to validate its presence in the crate, he took it out of the sleeve and placed it on the second platter and dropped the needle.

He was hoping for the typical rapid-fire dhol drums, but instead he was dealt with deep grunge doldrums, and then lyrics that were familiar, but alien. More Farsi, in harsh, spit-fire rap. He looked down at the revolving disc, and saw the name of the angry soul was Hichkas. His words, probably teeming with deep political resonance, lamenting the

conditions of modern Iranian middle class or the neo-conservative religiosity or god knows what else, drove most of the crowd to a halt before Amar's eyes. Erfan didn't give any response. He'd gone to his knees on the floor, arms wrapped around the girl's legs.

Amar's hands dove back into the crate swiping at covers to find a record he knew wouldn't be a doppelganger. There was so much more to choose from – taking him from underground rave scenes in Manchester of the seventies to crude recordings of tribal chants in Africa. Little souvenirs of places he'd never been, some had never seen, not even on television. Even as he frantically searched, with Hichkas' rasping dogged voice in his ear, another part of his mind was throbbing and consuming his thoughts. He felt small and very lonely. Entire civilizations encapsulated on rigged black plates, carrying with them messages of love, pain, violence, prayer, for consumables like the body and the spirit, and ethereal clichés like the soul and ecstasy. They sounded so tired now, he thought. What had happened, that he'd listened to his grandfather's ghazal like a hymn, a mantra of solace and peace for so long, and now could only bellow?

And then, the music stopped.

The stage thudded under Amar's feet. As if they'd been waiting for the moment, wildcats ready to pounce, Yuri and Pacha were next to him, with ravaged and violent looks in their eyes. They didn't speak, since now they could be heard by all of the halted dancers, many who had assumed the party was over. Some of were gathering their coats. Others gazed forlorn at the stage like whimpering puppies asking for another half hour of dancing. Fifteen more minutes. Ten. Five, just five more minutes.

Amar sniffed the odor of stale vodka coming off of Yuri, huffing air with rage, wanting to bash and beat the person responsible for ruining the party.

On the floor, Erfan was kneeling, hands in his face. Christy was still next to him, though she was gradually edging away. A rumble of drunken chatter slowly built and filled the room, as people shuffled out. Amar skirted his way around Yuri and the giant Pacha, lest they cornered him on the stage, and got off.

Erfan, hands buried, heard his feet thump the floor and called out, “Amar, are you still there?”

There was a sob in his voice. But Amar, without looking at him, walked right past.

As he exited the room, his mind flooded with rebukes and second thoughts:

Maybe I should stick around. What will those guys do to him? I should have gotten the record, at least. Maybe a couple others that were mine. But where would I carry them. Whatever, I don't need them anymore. This is not my scene. He can keep them, he's had them this long. But what will happen to Erfan now? He had a lot invested, he said. Perhaps after this he'll be finished. If he's burned his bridges everywhere else, where can he go? No more spinning for Erfan? No more spinning for me...

His mind trailed on, crisscrossing thoughts, barely registering before the next flashed by, and left. Without any confusion, he walked this time out of the room, past the balcony overlooking the main floor, down the hidden stairs behind the curtain, across the main room, and up the stairs and out of the cellar door.

The air had run significantly colder. He shivered. The streets were almost empty. A car turned from the side street and careened up ahead, where the city street merged onto a ramp and turned into the freeway. The rear lights winked back at him, little red gems shrinking in the darkness as they went up the ramp, the headlights beaming ahead, until it all vanished behind the incline. He didn't hear the gravelly tread of the wheels at all, not when they'd run over the sewer covers, or the hollow freeway paving.

It was entirely silent. Had the music stopped in the other rooms too? He couldn't remember, as he'd walked out. Not with all the fuss they made, they wouldn't stop every DJ playing in the warehouse.

The building shook behind him. The stifled hum, emitted through the walls. He took a deep sigh and walked around the building to the front, or the back, whichever it had been. He flanked the long wall, holding his fingertips to the brick as it made slight erosions into the skin that he'd never notice, but would always remember were there. He'd be able to feel Erfan's fingers on his shoulders. He would feel, as he still did very much right now, the vibrations in his head from the potent cocktail of pot and punch.

As he came around the corner of the building, he saw an unkempt file of tired, disappointed dancers trudging out from an alley that cut through the side of the building. Huddling at the mouth of the alley, next to a pair of dumpsters, chatty voices and chattering teeth asked each other where they'd left the car, if the parking meter was still running, or if anyone was hungry for any food. A crowd began forming outside all desiring recluse from the cold and none sure how. One of them, Amar thought, can lend a cigarette.

In the alley way, a small group was passing cigarettes and lighters and murmuring drunken babble. They turned their heads up and looked at him, wide smiles expecting him to say something or move along. Behind them, a boy was bent, vomiting, a girl behind rubbing his back. The syrupy yellow splashed on the asphalt, and he stood up saying, "God, I feel liberated."

Under the single street lamp that stood in front of the warehouse, where he'd seen the silhouette, faces passed under the orange glow for brief seconds. Amar stood at the corner of the building, watching the faces, trying to spot one that had smoke emanating from its lips. He saw the couple who'd fornicated on the couch upstairs, he saw the guy who'd offered him the pipe, he saw DJ Éclair, and another guy who'd offered him another pipe, or pills, or, whatever.

There was some cover behind the dumpster. He snuck into privacy and unzipped his pants.

A gust flew into the alley, turning it into a pocket of frigid air that settled and didn't leave.

Amar wondered why he wasn't feeling liberated as well. As he zipped his pants, suddenly, even with the dozy murky bog of substances swimming through his capillaries, he realized one thing: he didn't really know why he was there. He'd met Erfan, who was now, effectively, a puppet of his own wayward compulsions. There was no chance of getting behind the decks, if there ever was. But he didn't want to leave.

He heard the door swing open on the other side of the dumpster, music spilling out of the warehouse like uncorked champagne, and fizzing out with it, was Erfan,

making bemoaning roars like a hungry bear. Amar kept hidden behind the dumpster. Sharp heels stormed away from the warehouse out toward the street.

“Ah, come on!” Erfan cried out. “Where are ya go—”

He broke out into a violent cough. Then, he let out a wild cry, an angry one, trying to break through all of the debris in his throat.

The heels kept walking.

“Hey, hey,” Erfan continued, clearing his throat. “I promise, I promise...he’s here somewhere! I didn’t make anything up.” He starting coughing again.

“Shahbanou...”

Amar’s heart pounded, and his hands wet with perspiration. All sensation left his legs, and he found himself scrambling to stay up on both feet. He felt the cold metal of the dumpster slipping away from his fingertips, and he thought of the last time he’d seen Dalia. He thought of that night jumping from club to club, outside on the street, with the lights glinting like gems at the two of them, of how she smelled and felt in his arms. He could not, however, for all he tried, remember how she looked that night.

He flipped through his memory, like a photo-book, briefly scanning each image – those so many days gazing at her black locks and almond eyes from across café tables and study desks, watching her slender body from afar across darkened rooms. But in all that, he only got a generic picture, an amalgam of what he thought she looked like, but it was unreal, artificial.

He had spent long suppressing any thought of her. Now it came that he desired to, intensely, and couldn't conceive what she looked like.

Amar summoned what strength he could find sunken in the booze, embracing the arctic pocket of air that stuffed the alley. He managed to get up and emerged from behind the dumpster, and found Erfan sitting against the wall beside the door, cuddling his bent legs against his chest.

Ahead, under the orange street lamp, he saw again, for a moment, black locks.

No, he told himself. It was dark, and he was drunk, and high. There was a glaze around his eyes.

“Amar!” Erfan said. “Listen, don't worry about...”

But Amar walked right past him, past the huddle of grinning smokers, and straight out of the alley.

“You coming back?” Erfan said.

But only himself. Amar had left his eyesight. Behind him the door swung open again and a barrage of footsteps swayed over him like a sandstorm, ignorant to his presence. Boots and heels surrounded him, tapping, as he and Amar had talked about for so long.

*

Amar ran behind her. In the dark of the night, her body seemed to transform into its own shadow, stalking and floating across the stone walls between the row houses and cobbled pavement.

It was quiet all over the street, and shadows don't make noisy footsteps. Amar darted around a corner to find only another empty alleyway. She could have been hiding in a small crevice, slipped through like a mouse. She could have been kneeling behind a car parked on the street, or steadily edged next to a tree, melding, blending, embedding into the city street and becoming part of its being.

He didn't want to call out her name. It seemed a forbidden swear, a black-tongued curse that would bring disaster were he to utter it. As if by saying it, recognizing that she had existence and identity, would in fact make her disappear, waft away into the breeze, and turn her once again into a spectre.

He turned around in a full circle, twisting his head so much he began to feel the strain in his back. The street was empty. The chill was seeping into his bones as his body cooled down from running around.

The draft was being pulled his way, down hill. He knew where he was. He walked in the direction of the air, tripping from the incline, staggering from inebriation, and altogether falling over himself by the time he reached the bottom.

Here, the air was still. Amar could not even feel it was there at all.

Benches and retro-fitted grass patches now lined the waterfront, where he had first walked with Dalia. He stared out at the water, at the clapping waves, hoping,

wishing, that perhaps by a shaman's magic he could be transported to that night again. Why couldn't it? That was the beauty of music. The memory, the time, the moment, the emotion, captured in every single note, burned into the smooth metal.

He sat down on one of the benches, and let out a heavy gasp as his legs suddenly grew very sore, as if he had just dragged hordes of riches across a vast desert. Not his own riches of course, but of another who superseded his existence, and used his labor for gain. All Amar was doing, could do, was take a short break, admire his horde, and move on. But Amar did not want to get up from here, not quite yet. He sat still, watching the water, and gradually the quiet took over and intensified, so much so that even the stray passing car or the horns of ships across the harbor were inaudible.

Instead, his ears throbbed with the sound of the Erfan-labeled, Éclair-produced song, not quite the form that he'd heard moments ago, but rather fragmented, split apart like a clock that had fallen and smashed apart. In one ear, he was grasping at the thin, elusive notes his grandfather had played repetitively. In the other, he was harangued by all of the thuds, buzzes, claps, horns, and sonic clutter that had been added to suppress the purity of the ghazal. That woman's voice, Amar thought. The sweetness and purity he relished in that song, pulverized into a mash. None of those fools will know now she was the originator. Never between sets and cigarette breaks will it occur that it was from her, and not Erfan.

Around him the airs of that night seemed to formulate like clouds. It was so pleasant outside, both warm and cool together, he could have walked with her all throughout until the sun came up, and then some. The air didn't feel too chilly anymore,

and instead he felt the balmy, humid, languid heat of that spring night after the blowout wedding. What if Dalia had been there, instead of Kiran? Would she instead have chased him, showing up late hours demanding him? In fact, Amar thought it was getting brighter around him, as he sat on that bench, almost like those first embers of dawn that had scared Dalia away, back to her aunt's house. When the potentials of the world seemed open to him, when the sunrise would be met with both welcome and lament, signaling the end of a raucous, debauched nocturnal adventure, and heralding the promise of another a few hours later.

Further in the distance, a ship trailed out of the harbor, onwards to a new port, a new land on the other side of the world, bringing new culture of goods to the masses – chocolates, designer clothing, electronics, jewelry, and god knows what else that people across the sea find enchanting and exotic about this place. It will be new and remarkable for awhile, and then it will become part of the fabric until someone opens a factory here to make the chocolates or clothing, and then it will be packed again, and shipped again. A constant cycle, round and round.

Maybe I should just hop on, Amar thought. Then I'd come back and this will all be new and exciting again.

Again, he laughed aloud at the thought, laughed out at the water and air, out at his and Dalia's ghosts, walking by him, hand in hand. He ridiculed the look in his own phantom's face, the enamored sparkle in his eyes. She would always be there, triggered by any note, any sensation.

Sur. It flew into his ears and rested on his drums, whispering and teasing. He broke the disc in two and denied himself hearing it.