

## **ABSTRACT**

Title of Document: UNBINDING HER

Shehzeen Choudhury  
Master of Fine Arts, 2008

Directed By: Howard Norman  
Professor, Creative Writing  
English Department

Divided into two sections, the thesis speaks for women, attempting to give voices to the voiceless buried around the world. The first is a collection of vignettes inspired by personal experience. Each piece attempts to capture an aspect of the Bangladeshi society affected by its history, emphasizing the failure to be affected, while exploring the inner conflict of the narrator returning to her motherland as a US citizen, moderately independent. The second section is inspired by true stories and personal experience. It is a collection of stories about women, exploring cultural boundaries, political, religious, and moral issues from national and international perspectives. Combined, they try to arrive at the cost of independence in an attempt to realize its worth in this confusing world that we call our own.

UNBINDING HER

By

Shehzeen Choudhury

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  
Master of Fine Arts  
2008

Advisory Committee:

Professor Howard Norman, Chair

Assistant Professor Maud Casey

Assistant Professor Hank Lewis

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2008

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# **FINGERPRINT ON THE WINDOW**

**A Collection of Vignettes**

## Rise

Summer Vacation, 2005  
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Allaahuakbar...

The sound of the azan stirs Zaynab awake. Again, after six years, she hears the lyrical sequence of Arabic words coming out of the loudspeaker of the mosque, calling the men of the Islamic nation to pray. Pray? Victims of jet lag should be excused from prayers. And it is still hauntingly dark outside. Lying on her back on the bed, Zaynab peeks through the wide gap between her tired feet. Squinting her eyes, she sees the wrinkled face of her grandmother preparing to pray on the jaenamaz set neatly on the floor. The sun is rising. She digs her head in the soft pillow and returns to her world covered in fairy dust.

The sun's golden rays fall on her wrinkled eyelids and reflect off the beads of sweat forming on the plump bags under her eyes and at the sides of her nose. Small puddles of sweat glue her body to the bed sheet and a silent groan escapes her mouth. Who opened the curtains? What curtains? There are no curtains in her room...Zaynab opens her eyes. This is not her room. Suddenly, a rough hand touches her naked shoulder and she jumps up.

Heart pounding in her ears, Zaynab tries to calm herself down after seeing a vaguely recognizable face. “Bua...” “Cha,” the maid hands her a cup of tea, the water still evaporating from the mixture inside the cup. But she hasn’t brushed her teeth yet. The woman smiles shyly munching on the corner of her saree tucked in her mouth. She leaves when Zaynab’s fourteen year old sister hurriedly enters through the door. Sawdah taps on the soft skin above her sister’s collar bone, “Get up, apu. We have to go see the baby.” Balancing the cup on her palm, Zaynab notices that a light brown circle is forming, marking the surface of the liquid inside, rotating around the white porcelain.

Zaynab’s eyes follow the slim body of the maid picking up a bucket of water that lay in the corner of the living room connected to this room through the door. “I know,” she says, “I’m just so tired. My body’s still running on American time. I hadn’t even recognized this place at first.” She watches the elderly woman bending her knees and sitting like a tense frog with her rear end barely touching the floor. She sweeps the floor with the wet cloth that was being soaked inside the bucket. Sawdah nods her head, her restless eyes shining, “I’m tired too. But I can’t sleep anymore. We’re gonna see the streets of Bangladesh again, after six years!” Six years, yet nothing has changed. She strained her eyes to see the wrinkles on the face. She cannot be much younger than their grandmother. “Six years...” “Stop talking. Nahas uncles’s here to take us to see the baby. Get up!” Zaynab drags herself up, with the cup of tea in her hand, “Where’s the bag of make up?” Looking down, she notices, the vapor above the cup has disappeared.

Their grandmother's cozy house disappears as they head for Zaynab's aunt's house at the center of the city, right beside Dhaka University, once called the "Oxford of the East." After leaving the airport last night, she had fallen asleep in the car. So she could not notice the changes that have transformed the streets of Bangladesh since she left with her family for America in 1999. Now she realizes, it has changed. High rise buildings, shopping malls, and flashy billboards have taken over the plain, uncomplicated city where she grew up. People fill up the streets like unidentifiable ants in a crowd. Her memories of the streets seem like a collection of distorted images inside her throbbing head enclosed by the sweat infested scalp. The Air Conditioner does not seem to be working too well. The colorful rikshaws go by, the rikshaw pullers panting under the scorching sun on this intense summer morning. "I can't wait to ride on the rikshaws again!" Sawdah squeals. Their uncle informs them that the government has started restricting the passing of rikshaws on many streets. What will happen to these people, Zaynab wonders, who make their livelihoods by bearing the weights of the passengers and cycling them to their destinations? And their wide eyed wives and children with protruding stomachs, suffering from gastric pains, waiting for their fathers to return home with food? A plate of rice and a bowl of lentil soup. A cup of rice and a pinch of salt. A fistful of rice blended in water.

The traffic light turns red. The car flows in the slow tide of cars and runs the red light with great ease. But it soon stops in the traffic jam. A little tanned girl in a ragged dress comes to Zaynab's window and asks her to buy a garland of white flowers, white petals with an orange core. "Should I...?" She reaches for the handle to rotate it and open

the window, but her father stops her. “If you give money to one, more will come. You know the rules.” She knows. She grew up here. She does not want to be sentimental and behave like an American new to the country with a heart weeping with affection for the poor and hungry people in this overpopulated third world country called Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a young country, only thirty three year old. What do you expect? Why did she expect? The engine starts again and the car moves. The girl’s fingerprints stay on the spotted glass of the window. Every time they stop, beggars—crippled, or with babies claimed to be dying without medication, appear at their windows. Little children, Sawdah’s age or younger, trail behind with chocolates to sell in their hands. Soon they leave them all behind.

Zaynab’s uncle tells the car to take a right and stop in front of a building. He takes a fat envelope out of his pocket and tells her father that he has go inside and pay some official in the office so that the man will look at his file that has been sitting in the pile for the past few months. He needs to build a house on his property. But the man in the office needs to sign the papers first. When he leaves, her father nods his head, “Bribe...” She watches her uncle walk up the stairs with a tight smile to bribe a man sitting behind the hard, wooden desk in the governmental office. She feels anger building up inside her, but she says to herself, this is normal. It is a cycle that must be followed. The lower class pays the middle class, the middle class pays the upper class. If you stop the cycle, people will get hurt. She is not Americanized yet. She grew up *here*. She understands. When her uncle returns, he smiles and declares that the work is almost complete. The man asked for a little more money. He only gets 5000 takas per month. His daughter goes to an English

medium school. The fee is 20,000 takas per month. That's how all the parents pay for their children's education here. Parenthood, the interest of the children comes above morality in every country. That becomes morality. That is the system. The engine roars again.

When they reach the street of Dhaka University, the car is suddenly stopped by a shattered, half burnt car lying in the middle of the street. Some police constables sit together, munching on food, gossiping, laughing, or using their sticks to hit the tires of rikshaws that pass by too close to them. Their driver walks up to the constables and asks if they can squeeze in and enter the street ahead. They laugh and tell him that if they want their car to be smashed, then they should go right ahead. Zaynab's father and uncle get out of the car and ask some people what is going on. The policemen are yelling, telling them to start moving. Her father returns with a serious face and says that the students of the university have been breaking cars on the street to protest the death of the girl. 28<sup>th</sup> of June, just three days ago, Shammi Akhtar Happy, a student of the University died at Shahbagh Intersection after having a bus run over her. The tire broke her skull into undistinguishable pieces. Her splattered brain lay on the ground while the passerby watched, on the same street that Zaynab have passed many times as a child. Sometimes in a car, or in a rikshaw, sometimes holding her grandmother's soft hands.

They are told to get out of the car and walk towards the house, on the same street, again, after six years. The same street where hundreds of Bangladeshi men and women died on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February in 1952 to protest oppression and injustice by the Pakistanis.

They marched on the streets for the right to speak in the mother tongue—Bangla, not Urdu. They marched for freedom while being hit by bullets from Pakistani machine guns. They marched for an independent Bangladesh. And here they have it. Independence.

They walk the streets again. Murals of freedom fighters fill the walls around them. Their eyes stare with expectation. We did our part. Now you do yours. They walk. The eyes of the people in the streets stare, observing their uncomfortable walk. Zaynab's uncle had already left with the car and the driver. It was just three women and a man walking in a rough manner, or perhaps that is how it seemed to them. Zaynab takes off the veil that rested at her shoulders and covers her chest with it, yet the men stand by and stare. She feels her body burning, shivering in their touch—skinless, boneless, naked. She bites her lips, trying to melt the pink gloss of the lipstick in her mouth. She wants to wipe her black eyeliner off and let the darkness of the mascara drip down her cheeks. She wants to run, like a lizard, and hide in some dark corner of a chipped, wooden desk. She wants to scream. Sixteenth of December—Bangladesh's Independence Day. Here she is, an independent woman walking down the never ending street of an Independent Bangladesh.

Soon the family reaches the house. Zaynab walks with them, up the stairs, but she feels as if she is still standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her family walking away from her, leaving her behind. She climbs the stairs, one step at a time, and wonders where they went wrong. Is this why Bangladeshis made the streets red with blood thirty three years ago? To soak it in this yellow infection? Who is to blame? People who gave

up? People like her? Inaction is an action itself, isn't it? When they reach the top of the stairs, the door opens and her cousins run out to hug them. Her aunt has given birth last night. Sawdah grabs her hand and pulls her inside the house. "Look at the baby..." Zaynab looks down at the baby girl sleeping in a cradle in her parents' bedroom. Beating softly in her chest, a cloudless heart filled with naïve trust, oblivious to the streets outside her dreams, her world, still covered in fairy dust.

## Life Goes On

A baby is born. A few days ago the opposition party had announced that the streets of Dhaka would be blocked on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 1984, due to the strike. All vehicles running would be destroyed. So the pregnant woman was transferred to her brother's apartment the night before. When her labor pain starts, the family would walk to the clinic two or three blocks away from the apartment. That night, the expectant mother had climbed a few flights of stairs carrying the weight of her hugely protruding stomach while her husband carried her weight, his large arms attempting to protect her trembling body. Suddenly, her water broke. And the rest of the stairs remained unclimbed. The next morning, both mother and baby wake up on the skeleton of a metal bed of the clinic, covered by a hard cushion and a thin, white bedcover above it. The mother smiles at her baby daughter and prays to God that one day, she will grow up to become a strong and capable woman—a woman of substance. She will make her mark in the world. She will fix this country. She will change the world.

Twenty years and less than seven months later, another baby is born in the same city of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Zaynab walks on the street with her family to her uncle's house to see the newborn baby. She walks as a twenty year old, a college student, and a citizen of the United States of America, back to Bangladesh with her family, after six years. On the first day on the streets of Bangladesh, their car is stopped. So she walks. The students of Dhaka University had announced a few days ago that the street would be blocked. All vehicles running would be broken or burnt down in response to the incident

of reckless driving by a minibus that killed Shammi Akhtar Happy and critically injured others on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, 2005. Her brains splattered on the streets while the passerby watched.

Soon they grew furious and it led to a three hour long violent reactions including clashes between police and students. The students set afire two minibuses and damaged at least thirty two passing vehicles. The police fired about 150 teargas shells and around 30 rubber bullets as the protestors threw bricks at them. Without wasting time, the political leaders of the opposite parties held meetings, turning it into a political issue, and urged the students to attack with whatever they have. The protestors attacked the proctor's office and ransacked it accusing the office for negligence in dealing with the students' safety. Two staff members were injured in the attack launched by nearly two hundred students. Some angry students beat two assistant Police Commissioners with bamboo sticks in front of the Fine Arts Institute. The others watched, boxes of paint inside their bags, drawing pencils poking out of their pockets, sculptures surrounding them, tired eyes unable to sleep.

Paint splattered on the walls, half built sculptures fell on the ground, and sketches lay on the grass and got trampled on by the boots of the police when in retaliation, they charged inside the campus areas to attack the students. Some students yelled out slogans against the police while others hid in their academic rooms and locked the doors to save themselves. But the police searched from room to room and broke the doors attacking the panicking students. They picked up many during the raids and left the broken bodies of

others lying on the ground, their shirts and dresses wet with blood and sweat. The next two days were followed by countless political meetings, the political parties pushing the blame on each other. Bangladesh Chatra League, the opposition party and allied student parties declared a strike for two days. At least fifty five students were injured as the Jatiyatabadi Chatra Dal attacked the protesting students following a bomb explosion on the rally on campus on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March.

And the next day, Zaynab is walking on the street of Dhaka University to see the newborn baby. The people stare as she walks surrounded by the faces of Bangladeshi freedom fighters on the walls painted by the Fine Arts Students. The eyes on the faces stare as she walks, expecting her to react. Zaynab tries to hold her head high, but her neck becomes jelly. And then she reaches the house. She looks down at the baby lying in the cradle. An innocent life, just like her own, twenty years go. Another life. She sighs in relief mixed with anxiety. Life goes on, even in calamity.

## Life Stands Still

Life went on, even in calamity, in 1971. But the youth did not stay still. Youth—people like Zaynab marched on the same street of Dhaka to protest the oppression by the Pakistani government. Pakistani bullets pierced their chests and their blood splattered on the walls, yet the march did not end. The fight did not end until freedom arrived after nine months.

Here she is, back, only six years after she left her motherland for a better future in a distant country. Here she is, walking the same street of Bangladesh, wet with the blood of the youth dying for no cause. Bangladesh—the baby that the freedom fighters gave birth to thirty six years ago. A bud they promised to help bloom by feeding it fertilizer made by their own blood. Bloom in the future, as a beautiful white flower, filled with purity, passion, and courage. The future has arrived and she has left their baby to search for her future.

After six years, Zaynab walks the street again, her head hanging low. She has left the baby behind, in its cradle. She walks back towards the end of the road block where their car would be waiting for them. The freedom fighters stare at her, their empty eyes devoid of hope, yet praying with the afternoon azan that she changes my mind, that she stops walking and turns around. Zaynab tells them, the war ended in 1971. But the war is still going on today. She shrugs her head and looks at God hiding in the clouds above her. This is not my war. I'm only here to visit, only for two months. So let me go.

Let me go. I want a better future for my family, for my babies. What about the hundreds of babies born here every day? A generation dies handing the responsibility to the next generation. The next generation flees leaving the responsibility to the next. And the next to the next. And the next. Duty is being thrown and forth, it is all a game. And politics has become a game too. The government feeds politics into the hungry, fed up students and they dance in its irrationality, they kill, they die.

For the next two months Dhaka University would be closed, the same University where Zaynab's mother studied when she was a student. The unemployed students wander around in worn down sandals trying to earn money to support themselves and their families until they graduate. The bored students sit at home watching television, Britney Spears dancing in her short schoolgirl skirt, Linkin Park screaming about being numb with expectations, Eminem rapping about challenging authority. They dream of adopting the Western culture; they dream of escaping, like Zaynab did. This country is too corrupt to be fixed by them. So they escape. For a better future. But which country isn't corrupted? Yet life goes on. And soon life comes to an end. What is a life worth anyway? Another baby, another life. Life goes on.

Zaynab keeps on walking, looking down at the ground, covered in dust. Little children in dirty rags run towards them, "O bideshi apa...Akta poisha danna." They have noticed her awkward walk, the discomfort seeping through every pore on her face as she covers herself with her veil. They have noticed the golden highlights on her escapee hair

that is revealed when her veil drops on her shoulders, her sunglasses shining under the scorching sun, her nose ring glittering. They have noticed her scared gaze at the men in the street staring at her body, taking those slow carnal bites. They know she is not from here. They call her foreigner. I am not a foreigner! The children ask her for money and her father pushes them away. They have lived here before, they know how it works. You cannot let your emotions drip on the streets. The dogs will smell it and chase you for more.

So she hides the American emotions in her chest and tries to forget the times when she fainted after donating blood to the Red Cross at her school in America, how she kept on drinking water to keep herself going at the Aids Walk, Walk for Breast Cancer, etc etc. She tries to forget the Amnesty International meetings, the donut sales to help raise money for third world countries, the charity shows for the earthquake victims. It is so easy to feel benevolent helping the near and distant world sitting in the comfortable zones of safety in America. But here, the pain is real.

The old, the crippled, the dying, and the deprived children of today form a crowd around Zaynab. They circle around her, “Bideshi apa, bideshi apa...” She wants to scream! Why are you calling me a foreigner? I am no foreigner! I was born here! I grew up here! This is my country! Then what have you done for your country? Zaynab shrugs her head and her neck becomes jelly. At the corner of the street lies the monument of the Shahid Minar—memorial for the freedom fighters. The red circle in the middle of the white bars stare at her. That is the blood that the youth of yesterday has shed on the

streets for the youth of today. The weary eyes on the murals speak to her. We have done our part, now it's your turn. She walks the streets of Bangladesh, her head held low. Why me? Her country stands still. Life goes on. Life stands still, waiting for the youth to rise.

## Shame

After six long years Zaynab is walking on the streets of Bangladesh again. She is suddenly conscious of all the curves of her body that had seemed insignificant as she lived her idealistic life in America drenched in feminism and independence taken for granted. But today, she is held captive in a body that she wants to escape, its construction reluctantly coming to life under the gaze of the idle men wandering on the streets, devouring her foreign discomfort, and burping in loud smirks.

The family of four walks, a long stretch of itchy silence trailing behind them. Father and daughter lead the way, their arms straightened cautiously along the sides of their waists, the backs of their hands close, but a safe distance apart. Sawdah turns around to look at her elder sister, following closely behind, their mother struggling to maintain her pace. A soft smile peeks from the corners of her lips as she notices her mother trying to hold her sister's hand as Zaynab, embarrassed, quickly lifts her nervous hand to her head and shuffles her hair. Zaynab straightens her already neat bangs along the sides her forehead, and when her hand comes down, it is tucked safely behind her back, away from her mother's grasp. Only five years apart, the two sisters have minds that are noticeably separated. While Sawdah hardly minds the opinions of others, Zaynab is becoming increasingly self-conscious every day. Now, at the age of twenty-one, she seems to be hard at work building a third eye at the back of her head so she can see how people react as she walks away from them.

Her sister's face was something to watch, Sawdah remembers, when the policemen kept yelling at them to move. When they got off the car and started walking, Zaynab's comfortable posture changed, and her body became tense, her pupils jumping, bumping around the edges, ready to leap. Sawdah was scared too, but there was such disappointment floating above the fear burning in Zaynab's eyes, that the ash prickled Sawdah, making her feel sorry for her sister. Zaynab's dark eyes pierced at the police constables sitting together on the sidewalks, munching on food, gossiping, laughing, or using the tips of econo ball pens to clean the lumps of brown glue inside their ears. Just one day after arriving in Bangladesh, they are walking on the same street that they had once left, for better education, their parents say. They were on their way to see their newborn cousin resting in its mother's arms when the car halted in front of a shattered, half burnt car lying in the middle of the street. The driver walks off to bring back news that the students of the university have been breaking cars on the street to protest the death of Shammi Akhtar Happy, a fellow student who stood in awe in front of a bus that ran towards her, the tire breaking her skull into undistinguishable pieces. Her splattered brain lay on the ground while the passerby watched. Walking swiftly in wide steps on the same street with gray smoke hovering above the burnt black tires, Sawdah decides to take half a turn around. She takes a peek sideways to notice her sister's face which is visibly disturbed, the puzzled look in her eyes becoming increasingly wild.

Zaynab walks, knees wobbling one and a half feet under her round hips. She wishes that her hips had no shape. A composition of flat meat and straight bones would do, a manly hip with no dent at the waist, no love handles jutting out. Her brown legs

trapped in the shalwar tremble in the hot vapor released from the sun-scorched ground. Drops of warm sweat form on her flat stomach and glide down, taking left and right turns at the top of her bellybutton, skipping over, or lazily landing inside and sitting to rest. She wishes that her stomach wasn't flat. An enormous, sagging stomach would do, a thick line of coarse hair running down the chest, passing the bellybutton, advancing downward towards the darkness. With drooping shoulders and bent elbows, she hugs herself while her neck becomes jelly, chin hanging low. She stretches out her arms and tightens them across her chest like the mummified arms of King Tut lying in his casket.

A few hawkers are walking around in dirty white tee-shirts, discolored lungis, barefoot or in tattered sandals barely hiding the cracks in the soles of their feet, cracks like lightning, only dark and dusty. The smell of roasted peanuts from their baskets enters Zaynab's dry nostrils, roasted peanuts, spicy chanachur, beans in chili sauce, guava slices covered in salt and chili powder. She smells the pungent dampness of her clothes clinging to her quivering body, sour, mixed with the fainting sweetness of her perfume. This is how New Market used to smell like, when she found her face plastered to the back of her mother's damp kamiz as they would make their way through the pavement with small shops laid out like two long trains of ants on each side. If she turned her face to any side, she would be hit by stiff knees bulging out of the lungis of the hawkers selling jewelry, hair accessories, and everything else that they could fit in the baskets hanging from their necks by straps that looked like leashes. The customers hurrying past her in a mad frenzy made her thin barely teenage body sway from side from side. She would hold her

mother's hand tightly so she did not sway far enough to disappear in the crowd of stinging bees.

During one of those walks, Zaynab felt a sharp sting on the plumpness of the area under her waist. She turned around to see a hawker with rough stubbles on his cheeks walking behind her in a shirt spotted with dirt clinging on to his sweaty chest. On his chest hung a rectangular basket, long and short silver safety pins shining brightly inside. She looked back and heard his booming voice yelling out "Safety pins, safety pins." The corner of the metallic container poked her again on the right cheek of the bulge covered in tight jeans, as he bent down to whisper in her ear "You want to buy safety pins, little sister?" She stared ahead, tightening the grip of her fingers on her mother's soft hand. The kerosene lamps hung low from the ceilings of the shops, the small specs of fire burning too softly. "Safety pins, safety pins," Zaynab listened to the same cackling voice all through the walk on the long curvy path that led towards the sun lit street outside of the deep dark market. She walked, the crack of the exposed plumpness of her back feeling the constant prodding of something sharp, like the end of a needle, that her mother said wasn't safe to touch.

The men stare as they walk. The mother covers her hair with her veil and Zaynab copies her, tucking strands of bronze highlighted hair behind the darkness of her veil, making sure that the length of the coarse cloth is enough to cover her chest as well. She taps Sawdah roughly on the shoulder and gestures her with glaring eyes to pull her veil down as well, without looking too obvious. People are watching. Sawdah does not

understand, or pretends not to, and keeps walking, her long athletic legs bouncing with each step, shoulders upright, neck erect, face looking straight ahead. Biting nervously on the stuffed flesh, Zaynab melts the pink gloss of her lipstick in her mouth. She tries to look up from under the eyelashes made longer and thicker by the darkness of the charcoal mascara.

From the corner of her eyes stained by a broad line of black velvet eyeliner, she can see the eyes of the freedom fighters, painted on the walls caging the street. This street, which is part of the Dhaka University campus, rests next to the Shahid Minar, the monument for the martyrs of the language movement of 1952. Sawdah has never been there, but Zaynab has. When she was little, on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> of February of every year, she would walk with her grandmother with a big bouquet of multicolored flowers, barefoot, with sandals in their hands. They would become a part of the long procession of people, the wave that rippled towards the Shahid Minar. They would become invisible, hidden by the shadows of the pillars of the monument with the vast red circle in the middle, marking the blood of the martyrs. She liked disappearing in the crowd, her visibility becoming more and more insignificant. Yet she frowned, feeling insignificant when she looked at the paintings of the martyrs on the walls. One day, she said to herself, staring at those empty eyes that refused to smile at her. One day she would become strong like them too, an independent woman in their independent country. After so many years, today, the same eyes stare back at her, laughing at the discomfort of a stranger drenched in foreignness and artificiality. She tugs on the veil resting at her

neck and tries to spread it over her chest so that the shape of her breasts will disappear under it.

Zaynab wishes that she didn't have breasts. Just a flat piece of meat would do, the chest of a man, with nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. Hot drops of sweat form in the shameful gap between her breasts and glide down the chest, down the flat stomach, around the bellybutton and halt at the hip, leaving a cool sensation on her wet, sticky body. Goosebumps rise on her skin, on the body of a raw chicken, its feathers taken off, the pink pores on its skin open wide like a screaming mouth. Arms hugging her chest tighter, she places her sweaty palm above my heart and crumples her fingers into a fist. The veins jut out, the green branches spread around like a spider web under the brown skin of her hand. Hidden under the chest, her heart prepares to explode. She can hear it pounding in her ears, she can hear it beating faster and faster, eager to leap out and splatter like a steaming omelet on the ground. She wishes that she didn't have a heart. A mass of vacuum would do, emptiness between the dirty white spikes of her ribcage surrounded by the rusty redness of her rotting flesh. She is a warm stew of blood, flesh, and bones, boiling in bronze flames, burning under the hungry stare of the men on the streets of Bangladesh on this hot summer morning.

On mornings like this, Zaynab used to walk in the streets with her grandmother, her little fingers holding the softly wrinkled hand softly, swinging it lightly. They used to peek through the gates of other people's houses, trying to see what kinds of plants they had. When they passed houses with no gates, they would tiptoe on to the yards, and steal

flowers, roses still wet with morning dew, maroon and light pink hibiscuses, morning glories that left a sweet scent in her fingers. “Why are we stealing, nanumoni? Isn’t it bad?” she would stand on her toes and try to whisper in her grandmother’s ears. But her grandmother told her “Tagore said, O traveler, if you have one coin, then buy food with it to survive, but if you have two coins, then buy a flower with the second coin.” “But grandmother, we are not exactly buying.” “Let’s go, some one might see us,” she would pull Zaynab’s hand and bring her out to the streets. Zaynab wonders now if Tagore really said what her grandmother said he did. She remembers reading a poem of his and it said, *by plucking her petals, you do not gather the beauty of the flower.*

Her grandmother told her stories about the war as they walked. She described how her grandfather would dig holes in the ground for their five children to hide in. She would gather food, blankets, and a radio, and jump in the muddy hole with her family. A thin block of shiny tin would cover the deep dark hole. There, they would hide in the darkness all night, cuddled together, holding hands, hearing the bombs hitting the ground near and far, the explosions deafening them, the machine guns running like the eternal moaning of a train making its way in between cities, towards an unknown destination. 1952, her younger brother did not come home. He marched too, in the streets, alongside other men and women, women not behind veils, standing shoulder to shoulder with the men, looking the enemy in the eye and marching down the street before feeling the sudden thrust of Pakistani bullets inside their chests. Zaynab can close her eyes and feel the blackness of that night. She can see the blood splattering on the walls, the young protestors falling on the street, the red seeping through the cloth, soaking their chests.

The next morning, when blood dried on the streets, Bangladeshis rejoiced, tears in their eyes, as they lifted the bodies off the streets.

These are not her memories, but Zaynab can feel them encircling in her veins, tangling the light green threads, tying them in knots. These are not her memories, but she knows the stories of those dark, bloody nights, like she remembers them, like they were her own. 1971, the war begins. Pakistani soldiers raids one house after another, dragging the men out and killing them in front of their families, then moving on to kill the children who are good for nothing. And then they advance towards the women who are good for only a little something. Their veils are thrown in the air and the clothes above their chests are torn to reveal the secrets hiding behind. Yellow teeth dig into their shame, a gang of hungry dogs smell it and tear them apart, bite into their flesh, break their limbs, eat them, and savor the taste in their mouths. And soon, the bodies are left in the corner of the rooms, broken, bitten, tied, torn, shamed for life. *Should we kill them?* They ask. *Nah, just leave them. They'll die of shame anyway.*

Shame. Zaynab remembers the statistics. Over 400,000 women raped by Pakistani soldiers and collaborators. Many died, many committed suicide in shame. And the others, they live in shame today, observing the country their blood has created. Many ask in agony, where did our brave children go? Where have they flown away? When will they return? She has returned after six years to walk the streets of Bangladesh again.

Sawdah turns around to look at her sister, whose face is stained with discomfort. “You look constipated,” she says a bit too loudly, “as always.” Zaynab glared at Sawdah, without saying a word. Then she taps her little sister’s shoulder again, “cover your hair.” Sawdah only shrugs her wide shoulders, and a loud groan escapes through her mouth. She shuts her mouth quickly as her father looks at her. Zaynab wonders if she is too protective sometimes, but that’s how things should be, she tells herself, she is the son of the family, this little family of four. Zaynab remembers the night before they left the country. The four of them were going to their aunt’s house in a rikshaw, the rikshaw-puller panting as he pulled them through the streets of the large city teeming with life. Her parents sat on the seat, with her ten year old sister on her father’s lap. She sat on the back rim of the seats, her behind sticking out of the rikshaw. With her arms around her family, she hummed happily, smelling the fruits hanging from the ceilings of the small shops that they were passing. On their way to the house, the rikshaw suddenly split, sharp shards of tin jutting out from the middle. Her father and sister fell on one side, and her mother fell on the other, and she fell further away from them, the hem of her skirt lifted to her chest. Her bare legs shivered in the wind, blood oozing from her knees. She could smell the raw meat hanging from the hooks in the butcher shops near her. The butchers stood around laughing at them, pointing and laughing like hyenas, their sharp knives shining under the light of the moon, all the silver hurting her eyes.

Squinting her eyes, Zaynab looks around suspiciously, and walks faster, tugging at her veil. The police officers stand around with sagging stomachs, picking at their teeth with narrow wooden sticks. They stand around gossiping. Foreigners, eh! They stand

around snickering, watching, their eyes filled with curiosity and mockery. I'm not a foreigner! She hugs her chest with her arms, and staring down at the street, she walks ahead.

The countdown begins on the streets of Bangladesh. 2003 is about to arrive in a few minutes. A mad thrill hovers in the air. The madness among the youth grows stronger as the liquor starts flowing. Motorcycles and cars park on the sides of the streets and the rowdy boys climb on the trunks of their cars or rest against their motorcycles. The girls walk around, talking to the boys, giggling, waiting. Modern, forward minded, they are wearing jeans and t-shirts, not too tight, not too loose. The boys stare at the bulge at their chests as the countdown begins. 10 seconds left...Here we go...9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1...The madness takes over completely. The boys yell and honk their horns. The music rides over the voices and the scream gets muffled.

A group of boys has yanked off the tee-shirt of one of the girls. Her bra hooks leave purple scratches on her back as it comes off in one of the boys' hands. The rest of the boys cheer and watch while the girl tries to run, hide, her arms hugging her chest, shame seeping through every pore of her skin. Her friends run towards her to cover her naked breasts with their bodies but the shame has already been revealed. They drag her towards the car, her shame dripping on the ground. The boys can smell it. They cheer.

"You were there?" Zaynab asked her boyfriend faintly remembering the news article that she once read in an online newspaper. "You didn't do anything?" she asked, a

plump caterpillar wriggling inside her throat. “No, I just turned around.” She pulled herself away from his tight embrace, “why didn’t you do anything?” With a face stained with common sense, he said, she was asking for it. “She knows what Bangladesh is like. It’s not like it is here in America. Yet she was wearing jeans and a tight top, showing off the size of her breasts. I hate girls like that.” She stares at his face devoid of emotion. Lying on his side of the bed, he extended his arm to hold her around the waist, his strong fingers digging deep into her skin. She turned around. Eyes burning, she stared at the emptiness of the white wall of her room in America.

The driver parks on the street next to the market. Her mother and aunt get out of the car to go shopping. *It will take an hour, they say. We’re giving money to the driver. He will get ice cream for you guys. But don’t bother him too much. Be good.* They leave. She looks at the three other kids around her. Her four year old sister sits beside her. Auntie’s kids are the same age as her sister or a little older. They cheer when the driver returns with four chocolate ice cream cones. *Thank you, Driver Uncle.* She smiles and takes the cones from his hands, his cold fingers touching her warm hand.

The sun is about to set and soon darkness fills the night. The lights from the windows of the market reflect off the car. She sticks out her tongue and licks her ice cream happily but it starts melting on her fingers, the brown drops gliding down her arm. The car is getting sticky. Flies start coming in through the windows, their buzzing exciting the children’s cloudless hearts.

*You have beautiful hair*, the driver reaches for her hair through the window. She is flattered, she smiles. *Thank you. I didn't wash it today though.* Her long, silky hair blows in the wind coming from the window. The driver extends his hand to fix it. His fingers comb her hair, untangling the already untangled strands. *You have beautiful hair.* She smiles. Her hands feel sticky. Strands of hair fall on her chest and he touches the silky smoothness of it. *Beautiful...* He strokes her chest with his palm. She smiles, looking away. She feels the touch of his hands on the skin of her chest. She feels his fingers for the bulge below her thin white t-shirt. *There's a fly!*

She moves away to catch an invisible fly. Let the kids play with them, the driver tells her. She sits back down. His fingers circle around her right nipple. *There's another fly!* She pretends to grab another invisible fly. When she sits back down, his fingers reach for her chest again. *Another fly!* She creates invisible flies all around her and starts capturing them in her enclosed fist. He finally holds her in place and says, *the flies are gone.*

She knows. She smiles. It's beginning to hurt. Why isn't he stopping? Maybe he doesn't realize that it's hurting. She keeps on smiling. She doesn't want him to feel bad. But it hurts. A lump forms in her throat but she smiles. He squeezes harder and harder and she smiles and smiles and smiles.

After an hour and half, the door of the market opens and her mother's face appears in the dark. The fingers move away from her chest and the invisible flies sit on

her heart, their claw-like hands tearing her veins. *Were you kids good?* Her mother asks. She nods as the engine roars and the car leaves the street, black smoke trailing off behind. The right side of her chest throbs, numb to her touch.

I didn't even have breasts then! I was only ten years old! Zaynab screams, silence filling the air. She never told any one about that night. It's a shameful experience that is to be kept a secret. It is her shame that cannot be shared with the world. A shame that dripped on the streets of Bangladesh and got licked by the stray dogs.

Lying on her bed in America, eleven years later, she stared at the white wall in front of her. There was a red ladybug crawling on the wall, walking above and away from her. She could feel the index finger of her lover circling her bellybutton. Suddenly embarrassed, she grabbed the blanket from under her waist and pulled it over her nakedness. She could feel the bed under her, wet. The ladybug crawled on to the ceiling and suddenly dropped on the ground. No one heard it fall. Dirty white raindrops formed in the dark corners of her eyes. No one saw them fall.

Today, years later, Zaynab is back on the streets of Bangladesh. A few years ago, Bangladesh was her reality. America—only a dream. She grew up here. She is not a foreigner. Sweat pours down, and memories wet the ground as she walks. She pulls the veil tighter around her, but loose enough so the shapes of her body remain undistinguishable.

When Zaynab was little she prayed to God not to give her breasts. She wanted to be like the rest of the kids she played with. She wanted to be like the boys who don't have to worry about hideous bulges under their shirts. She wanted to be able to play. But God must not have heard her prayers. She pulls the veil down to hide the shameful bulge. She wishes that she had masculine hips. She wishes that she had a hairy stomach. She wishes that she had a flat chest. But even then...

She wishes that she was a man, walking on the streets of Bangladesh. She wishes that she was free. The brave women on the walls stare at her, their eyes on fire. We fought for freedom. We fought for you. We did our part. Now it's your turn. Why me? America is today. Bangladesh is only a visit to yesterday. Their eyes burn with disgust. They look away losing hope. Shame, shame...

## **The Missing Blanket**

Summer Vacation, 2005

Sylhet, Bangladesh

Sun scorched pyramids have been sprinkled around a dusty field. The red bricks, initially rectangular in form, now chipped and broken, make up the shape of the short, rusty pyramids. Then there are the ones made of stone, big and small pieces of stone piled up in triangular shapes. And somewhere on top of one of these short, stony pyramids, sits a boy, perhaps nine or ten, breaking the stones with a heavy hammer with a wooden handle, the metal at the head catching and reflecting the golden rays of the sun. On this hot summer morning, as Zaynab leaves the house in Sylhet where she grew up, for fourteen years, the house that she called her own, she wonders where she has seen this scene before. After six long years, she has returned, to her home, her land, her country, Bangladesh.

The warm sunlight falls on the right side of her face, and small beads of sweat begin to form on the corners of her nose. She looks out of the window again to see the young boy raising his tanned arms above his head, his thin fingers tightly gripping the wooden handle of the hammer. Large drops of sweat pour from his small forehead, gliding down the sides of his face, reuniting at his chin. His thin white t-shirt clings on to his chest, wet, almost brown with dirt.

As she feels the wetness rolling down her own stomach, Zaynab rolls up the window and asks the driver if he could turn on the air conditioner. With a shrug of his shoulders, he says in Sylheti, a dialect so familiar to her, “The AC doesn’t work yet, madam. If I try to turn it on, the car might stop.” Sitting in the front seat beside the driver, her father says that it’s okay. He turns his head and passes to the backseat, an old newspaper and two or three magazines that he found lying at his feet. So she begins fanning herself with a colorful, glossy, film magazine with two plump Dhaliwood actresses dancing in the front. They dance, fluorescent green polka dots on their hot pink blouses hardly covering the sagging jelly of their stomachs. The gaudy clothes, the bright colors overwhelm Zaynab, and she looks away. Through the window, she watches the bent arms of the young boy come down at a fast pace, his hands facing his face, then moving lower, the metal of the hammer finally hitting the large stone at his feet, managing to chip it, only a little.

Leaving her home as a twenty year old American citizen, Zaynab remembers things that no longer exist in her memories. Perhaps the load of the memories was too much for her weak shoulders to carry. Perhaps she was too young. Six years ago, she left Sylhet, her small hometown, for Dhaka, the capital of the country. And the next day, she left the country, ambitious eyes searching for a new land, the land of opportunities. And now she has returned, ashamed and confused, wondering why she had left and why she is back. If this is just a visit to the past or a window to the future.

She looks out of the window again and notices the traffic tightly held in place. This is not new. She has been caught in traffic jams in America too. This is new. In American traffic jams, little children don't stop at your window and try to extend their dark hands through the gap, asking you to buy candies from them, balls of sugar, sometimes flavored – mango, orange, pineapple. They sell garlands of flowers too, white petals with orange in the middle. Shewlyphul, the flowers are called, she remembers.

There was a tree next to her grandmother's house in Dhaka. At night, the flowers would sway in the wind and fall on the ground. During the summer vacations spent at the house, every morning, Zaynab would wake up and run towards the tree, the cool breeze hitting her small body, making her shiver. She would pick up the flowers from the ground, wet with morning dew. If she forgot to bring a basket with her, then she would lift her dress or skirt, and make a well to drop her little treasures in. Dusting the dirt off their bodies, she would hold them inside the well, careful not to drop any. Clutching the sides of the cloth together in her fist, she would carry them inside the house. She would work patiently for hours, sticking the needle through the holes in the middle of the flowers, and pulling the flowers through the string connected to the needle. Soon, two or three garlands would be lying on her lap, still smelling of fresh morning dew.

Today, on this bright, sunny morning, Zaynab can only smell a stale scent coming from the soft, dirty garlands of flowers, almost rotting in the sweaty palms of the children. They smell like carbon, like gas, like the black smoke emitting from the vehicles on the street, trying to engulf the stray children on their path.

Looking past the dirty children in dirty clothes, Zaynab stares at the boy on the pile of round and pointed stones at the stone quarry, attempting to break what he can in front him with his hammer. A few other children are carrying red bricks, a folded cloth in between their heads and the baskets of bricks. The men in faded lungis and the women in rusty sarees wrapped tightly around them, grab the bricks from the baskets and lay them on top of each other on an unfinished brick wall, dark gray paste of cement in between each brick. As she stares slowly, the car starts moving faster. She looks at the boy from the corner of her eyes. Then she turns back to look at him through the speckled glass at the back of the car. Slowly, the young boy disappears, the dirty whiteness of his t-shirt mixing in with the white and gray and a few black stones surrounding him, hiding his existence.

He exists, somewhere in her memories. Or someone like him, covered in her warm blanket. She has seen him before, shivering in the cold. On winter nights, she has seen him on the porch of the laundry shop in front of her house, sleeping, attempting to sleep, on the cold, hard floor. His father begged for food and money during the day, and at night, he came back smelling like cheap alcohol, to lie down next to his son. Zaynab was nine or ten and he was the same age, probably older, it was hard to tell. Tanned, bony, with a large stomach, probably filled with gas, he would work with stones and bricks in the open field next to her house. Every morning, on her way to school, she would see him breaking the stones with his hammer. And on her way back in the afternoons, he was always at the same place, breaking stones and laying bricks, sweating

even in cold winter days. She watched him from the window, and often, he looked up to smile. Did she smile back? She cannot remember. Why he smiled, she cannot understand.

On her way back from late night parties with her parents, Zaynab saw him sleeping on the porch of the shop in his thin t-shirt and khaki shorts. Or maybe they were gray, or blue, she cannot remember. She never looked hard enough, because if she did, she would have seen the pain on his tense face. She would have felt the pores of his skin trembling in the cool breeze of winter nights as she cuddled in between her parents in the car. But she didn't notice. She didn't look. She went straight to bed and fell asleep holding her soft, warm, Australian blanket with fluffy koala bears climbing thick and thin branches. Every freezing night, she had her koala bears holding her tight while her unwelcome friend slept outside, his body pressed against the cold floor. He tossed and turned, thin arms holding his knees together against an empty stomach while she slept, an empty heart thumping in her chest.

She slept and dreamt sweet dreams, surrounded by fairies with wings the color of the rainbow, their arms extended towards her, soft hands holding pink bowls with strawberry ice cream melting inside them. She slept, covered in fairy dust, but one night, her father decided to wake up. On one cold, rainy night, as he returned home alone, drenched, the bottom of his jeans wet with mud, he made the decision. He left. When he came back, he declared with half a smile that the boy would have warmth for one night. One night only? Zaynab didn't think very hard. When she went to sleep that night, she was invited by the emptiness of the bed. Her blanket was missing. They had only two,

and could only afford to lose one. She tried to imagine the boy feeling the warmth of her koala bears. Trying to convince herself to feel happy, she went to bed with a confused face, and slept grudgingly in between her parents, all three of them sharing a big, warm blanket, hardly as fluffy as the ears of her koala bears.

Zaynab remembers the next morning more clearly than she remembers all other mornings. She remembers frowning on her way to school, searching for her koala bear ears and their blunt black noses sniffing for her on the porch of the laundry shop. She remembers straining her eyes to find the dark face of the boy who took her blanket. She expected him to smile at her, perhaps in a thankful manner. But he didn't look up from his stones that morning, as if those stones were all that gave any meaning to his life, those pieces of rocks, red bricks and that brick wall that would now separate her house from the field where he worked. Zaynab knows now that the wall was always there. She just couldn't see it before. And she wonders if it was she who laid the bricks, and not the boy. Me, or people like me. People like you.

Zaynab never saw her blanket again. If at night they passed the laundry shop, they would find him lying there, shivering in the cold, as he did before. Her father said that he sold the blanket for food, or film tickets, or perhaps his father took it and sold it to buy liquor. Give him another blanket and it too would disappear.

Through her window, she can see the boy disappearing, becoming a tiny spec in her memory. Six years have changed nothing. Hardened by the reality of her country, her

family has fled, to the land of opportunities, the land of dreams, where she could take her education for granted. She pursues happiness now, as if it is her right. That is what the Bill of Rights says, and she is an American now. I pledge allegiance to the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands...And poof. Fourteen years of responsibilities towards her motherland disappears, erased by just one pledge, one signature, one national anthem.

And today that she has returned, did she come bearing gifts for her country? Just a few graying memories and a nod or two of recognition. Nothing else. Not even a blanket. Would one blanket change anything anyway if the children who can make a difference, flee? As their car gets caught in another traffic jam, the children in torn clothes surround them again. It starts raining, yet they stand there in their wet clothes, awkwardly trimmed hair sticking to the sweaty wetness of their necks. They remain standing, but today, she has nothing to take and nothing to give.

Ashamed, Zaynab watches the hands extend towards her through the window, and she looks away. They are begging, she thinks, they are begging from me, but I am nothing but a beggar myself. I will shrug off the hands and I will shut the window and forget the faces. But the window is rusty, it won't shut, the hands won't leave, and so they stay, begging me to turn around. They stay, begging me to notice them, begging me to realize. They reach out, begging me to return.

## **Then there was Darkness And where was Light?**

America disappears in the darkness of the night. She can see it behind her, a spec of her fading memory. Zaynab leans back in her tight Economy seat and closes her eyes. Then there is morning and there is evening. One day and two.

It's her first day in Bangladesh after six long years and she is startled. The same things look so familiar yet the familiar things look so different.

On a hot summer afternoon, the Emirates flight lands on her motherland. Her land, the smell of which she has preserved in her memories. It smells so familiar, yet it smells so different.

Tired, she drops on her grandmother's bed and she sleeps. The bed, the smell of which she has preserved in her memories. She sleeps and she sleeps. Jet lag, you know. And there is evening and there is morning. And she sleeps.

There is light on her face reaching from the window, burning, scorching sunlight and she wakes up to a fresh cup of tea. Hot drops of sweat glue her back to the bed and she wakes up to a cup of tea made fresh by their ever smiling servant. Her tired body is reluctant to begin the new day, the new journey to the old, yellowing past. Jet lag you know. But she wakes up.

Then there is morning and there is evening. One day and two. And she is sitting in her aunt's house in Sylhet, the smell of which ceased to exist in her memories. But now that she is here again, the fragrance of the incense lit around the room seems oddly familiar. It's a hot summer evening and the hot drops of sweat glue her back to the old

chair made of thick bamboo. A yellowing photograph of a graying man hangs on the wall. A garland of dried, yellow flowers hang around it. The same things look so familiar yet the familiar things look so different.

“Whose picture is it, Auntie?” She used to come to this house at least once every week. She should know whose picture it is. But then again, it has been six years, six long years, and her memories have collected dust. They used to play hide and seek in this room when they were kids, Zaynab and auntie’s son, her best friend at the time. They played while their mothers, best friends at the time, sat in their room busy with their grown up talk. She is not Zaynab’s real aunt, but she treated her as one anyway. Her aunt probably didn’t hear her. So she asked again, “Whose...?”

“My father’s,” Auntie replies while fixing the bed for them to sit on so they can be comfortable as she describes to her the mysteries of America—her homeland and its glittering opportunities, McDonald’s, and the ever sparkling Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge that she has seen over the years in postcards from Zaynab. “Oh.” “Auntie, how did he...?” “During the liberation war.” Using a broom made of thin sticks of bamboo she sheds the dust off the bed. “Oh.” Why didn’t she know this already? “14<sup>th</sup> December.” The bed is clean now. She points her index finger in the direction of the bed, telling Zaynab to sit. 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1971, she tries to shed the dust off her memories. Machine guns go off in her clogged head and the sound deafens her. She walks towards the bed. There is silence and her mind is still unclean. “What happened to him, Auntie?” She is still trying to remember. She doesn’t remember. But she knows the stories, like she

remembers them. She closes my eyes. Then there is a knock on the door. “Come back later, Shanu,” Auntie says sitting on the bed, reaching her arms out to hold Zaynab’s hands in between her palms.

There is a knock on the door. Then they start pounding on the door and the pounding increases and the sound is deafening. The family huddles together in the dark. The electric wires have been cut. A baby is heard crying but the mother presses her hand over its mouth. The father points his index finger in the direction of the bed and tells his two elder children to hide underneath. *Go, now...don't come out until I ask you to.* The mother brings the baby closer to her chest, the thumping of her heart pounding in the baby’s left ear. The father tells his wife to hide in the bathroom and then he walks towards the door with a steady pace and opens it. Pakistani soldiers pour inside the room and surround him. Professor Azad? *Yes...*The Bangladeshi father replies, disguising his fear as dignity. *You're coming with us.* Professor Azad struggles to break free. Violent heartbeats pound in his ears as he demands answers, *But why? What is my crime? Give me a reason...*A Pakistani soldier spits on the ground and says, *We don't need excuses to arrest you filthy East Pakistanis.* Another soldier kicks him in the stomach and blood forms in the corner of Azad’s lips. They drag him through the door and away from his house. *Where are you taking me...?* he asks with a blood filled mouth. A baby is heard crying somewhere nearby but its cry is soon muffled. His head feels heavy. Then there is darkness.

There is a knock on the door. Then they start pounding on the door and the pounding increases and the sound is deafening. The startled child drops the page of the book he is about to turn. The mother helping her child with his homework reduces the light of the lantern with trembling hands. *They are here...* Sitting on the prayer rug, the grandfather listens with a pounding heart to the pounding on the door. *Allah, please help us*, his chanting continues. He tries to stand up on trembling knees. Hidden in darkness, his wrinkled hands search the cold floor for his walking stick. The father runs in to gather his family, *Please protect my family, Allah. They are in your hands.* He grabs his father's walking stick and helps him stand up. The family huddles together in the dark. *You all escape from the back door and do not turn back until I come for you*, he instructs them. *And you...?* His wife asks, her big eyes open wide with panic. The door breaks open and the Pakistani soldiers pour in. *Run...* He yells as he runs towards the door. The soldiers surround him, *Doctor Imtiaz, you must come with us.* Before he can answer, the soldiers grab him and drag him through the door and away from his house. *Where are you taking me...?* he tries to look back. His father's walking stick drops and falls on the ground somewhere nearby. The lantern shatters and the oil pours out. Then there is darkness.

There is a knock on the door. Zaynab opens her eyes and feels her heavy eyelids trembling. She grasps on to the cold, hard mattress under the bed sheet. These are not my memories, but she knows the stories of that dark, bloody night, as if she remembers them, like they were her own. This is what it must have been like. This is what her people have gone through. Her people. Her own. She is back after six long years and the stories of the land seem oddly familiar. She remembers them as if she had never forgotten. The night

still smell like fear, the smell which she has imagined in her memories, as if she had been there.

There is a knock on the door. Auntie's voice snatches her out of the memories that she never had, "Shanu, is it you?" Shanu, replies from the other side of the door. "Yes, didi...I have brought you light. So when the electricity goes out..." Auntie opens the wooden door and her servant walks in with a clean white candle standing erect on a small tin plate, the soft wax dripping on the sides. The golden fire flickers in the soothing breeze coming from the open window. Cool drops of sweat glue her dress to the back of her body and she asks slowly, "What happened to your father?"

There was a knock on the door. Then they started pounding on the door and the pounding increased and the sound was deafening. Her grandparents were praying in front of the statuette of Ganesh, the elephant God, while her mother put oil through her sister's hair and braided them with swift strokes of oil dipped hands while she waited for her turn. The loud sound made her father drop the pen from his hand. He left his unfinished article and stood up. The sweet sound of the metal bells in the prayer room got lost in the threatening pounding of the door. Everyone froze in place but her father walked calmly towards the door fixing the creases of his shirt with his palms. She saw the door open and the Pakistani soldiers pouring in. She recognized a familiar face behind the crowd of soldiers in khaki uniforms. Uncle Iqbal...Her father recognized him too. *Iqbal, you helped them find me...? But you were my friend...* Iqbal replied, his crescent lips resembling a smile. *No one is anyone's friend in war, Chakraborty.* Her father spoke, startled, *But*

*you are Bangladeshi...* Iqbal cut him off, *There is no nationality in war, Chakraborty.* Her father understood, *Yes, there is only greed...*” Iqbal uncle, the Imam of the mosque, wearing a topi on his head and tasbi clasped around his hand, turned his back towards his old friend. *Everything happens as Allah wishes,* he chanted and walked away as the Pakistani soldiers grabbed the collar of her father’s shirt and dragged him through the door and away from their house. She was young, she watched, her big eyes wide open with disbelief. Her family ran forward to stop the men, but a kind looking soldier made them stop them at the door. She saw her father’s glasses lying on the doorstep. She panics, her father would need his glasses, he can’t see without them. Then, the sound of a machine gun came from somewhere nearby. The red ink from her father’s pen wet the crisp paper underneath. The glasses broke under the weight of someone’s foot. Then there was darkness.

There is no knock on the door, yet Zaynab shivers. Her wet eyelashes feel cool on the soft skin around her eyes. She doesn’t ask any more questions. But the answers scream into the silence of the room.

And what happened then? And then they knocked on another door.

And then? Then they knocked on another door.

And? And they knocked on another door.

More than two hundred doors where knocked on that night. Some were broken. And the soldiers poured in, they looked for the targets and crossed each name from the list, one after another. 14<sup>th</sup> of December, 1971, the dark, bloody night, imagined in

Zaynab's memory, preserved in the memories of thousands of Bangladeshis. She hadn't imagined it for the last six years. It wasn't important to remember. But now, her memories are breathing again, whispering roughly in her ears. They killed her aunt's father because he was a writer, and also because he was Hindu. On the same day, Zaynab's father hid behind a wall of his university, a wall hidden in darkness. Her mother hid with her family in a hole that they dug in the ground, a dark hole behind the house, for shelter during air raids, bombings, and house raids like these. Her parents survived, she survived. She wasn't even born then. These are not her memories, but she knows the stories of that dark, bloody night, like she remembers them, like they were her own, like she lost something precious that night. Something that will never return. Light. The light of the candle is flickering in the cool breeze coming from the open window. Soon there will be darkness.

More than two hundred intellectuals died in that bloody night. The Pakistani army sat with local Islamist leaders and Bangladeshi allies, the Al Badr and Al Shams and made a list. They threw in professors, journalists, doctors, artists, engineers, writers, and all the intellectuals and scholars of East Pakistan that they could count, East Pakistan which would become Bangladesh soon, very soon, too soon. But even sooner there would be darkness.

More than two hundred intellectuals, men and women were dragged from their houses, and thrown into darkness. Blindfolded they were taken to Rajarbag in the middle of the capital city. Zaynab shivers when the cool wind from the open window slaps her

face. She yearns to hear the emptiness that echoes in the hollowness of the sockets of their eyes, still searching for light. With their hands tied in the back, they were made to stand in a line. The machine guns fired and the sound must have been deafening. But the dead could not hear. Then their bodies were piled up and thrown on top of each other in dungeons and dirty holes dug up in the ground. Then there was darkness.

Two days later the war ended. Pakistan surrendered East Pakistan to its people and Bangladesh took birth, like a tiny rose bud quivering in the breeze. No excuses given. No crime to pay for. Everyone cheered and danced in the streets. They looked up at the sky and thanked God. God watched. Then there was light?

These are not her memories, but she knows the stories of that dark, bloody night, like she remembers them, like they were her own, like she lost something precious that night, when her country drowned in darkness. People don't remember anymore. Zaynab had forgotten too. Her eyes had collected rust and she could not see.

She cannot see well. The electricity has just gone out and the night seeps through the open window and melts around the room like American cheese on a fry pan. She sits on the neatly made bed, huddled together in the darkness. The soft molten wax of the candle forms a rose-like pattern on the tin plate, a blooming rose. Soon it will harden. Soon they will be covered in darkness.

Auntie says with a tired smile curving up the corner of her lips. “Leave all this. It’s the past. You youngsters are the future. This is the perfect time to listen to young, bright stories. So, tell me about your country—America. The electricity never goes out there, does it? Is it always sparkling like it is in the postcards you send of the brightly lit tall buildings and that long bridge at night?”

She is sitting in her aunt’s house, the smell of which will cease to exist in her memories in two months. But for now, Zaynab wants to memorize the fragrance of the incense lit around the room. It’s a cool summer night and the cold drops of sweat glue her back to her dress. The yellowing picture of the once graying man hanging on the wall stares back at her. The same things look so familiar yet the familiar things look so different.

The candle slowly dies, leaving a dirty white rose in the middle of the tin plate. But Zaynab cannot see it. All her life, she has tried to preserve the rust in her eyes. So she could not see the rose. So she could not see the branches, the leaves, and the stems. So she did not have to water the roots. But if the glasses are broken, then how will they see? If the lanterns are shattered and the oil pouring out, then how will they light the torch?

The dirty white rose lies in front of her, sparkling in its eternal beauty. It’s dying, she tells herself, the candle taking its last breath, its beauty trembling in the wind. It’s too late, she tells myself, too dark, and she cannot see. She stands up to leave, their long awaited meeting has reached its conclusion. “It’s dark out there, where you are going.

Take it,” the graying aunt says, and extends her hand towards the young girl, the tin plate firmly resting on her palm, the light reflecting off the dark pupils in their eyes.

**FREE I AM**

**A Collection of Long Short Stories**

**AMERICAN STRANGER**

Allah, please, make me look ugly. Please don't let them like me, please don't let them, please don't let, please don't, please...Shehnaz chants under her breath as if she is reading a tasbi. Despite her diligent efforts to hide the glow of her soft, pimple-free, freckle-free, unspoiled face, the light of the candle clasped in her fist illuminates her face even more. She had expected the power failure to aide her cause, but it is working against her with the utmost vehemence. Her olive skin radiates between the two thick, black braids which she made with the intention of reducing the charismatic flow of her wavy hair. Escapee locks now curl around her forehead and fall in the way of her worriedly fluttering eyelashes. She does not move them for the fear that any kind of movement from her side might attract attention, yet all sixteen sets of eyes in the room follow her movements meticulously, like radar guns picking up speeding cars on the road. They record her skin color; that is the most important point of focus—the girl must be fair. Here Shehnaz could have disappointed them, but the darkness of the room and the brightness of her candlelit face make her luminous. The eyes try to determine her height, weight, etc etc, but it is hard to do so since the rest of her body is hidden in darkness; so they focus on the plumpness of her cheeks, structure of her cheekbones, sharpness of her nose, length of her forehead, etc etc. The reflection of the fire from the candle on her pupil makes her eyes sparkle in the dark, and so all the eyes in the room return to rest on the glittering holes half hidden by carefully lowered eyelids. She bites her trembling lower lip in a failed attempt to conceal the fullness of her lips, and mutters under her breath, Allah, please don't let them like me, please don't, please...

The chitchat, laughter, and commotion in the living room had died down a bit as

Shehnaz entered. It now resumes its cheerfulness, and the festive atmosphere returns. Shehnaz does not understand why everyone else is so excited about the approach of her doomsday. Even her two younger sisters helped her mother convince her to come out for a few minutes in front of the family who proposed to her family and asked for her hand for their son who lives with them in America. He was born in Bangladesh as Shehnaz was, but left the country when he was fifteen years old, and now returns after eleven years to get married to an innocent, Bangladeshi virgin. Shehnaz frowns in disgust as she thinks. Eleven years ago, his parents left for America because they wanted a better education for him, as if Bangladesh could not offer that. The thought angers Shehnaz; education is just an excuse these NRBs—Non Resident Bangladeshis use to reach the so-called land of opportunity. They just couldn't make it here, so they left. The land of opportunity, land of freedom, land of whatever, doesn't attract Shehnaz. Why does everyone want her to get married and leave the house where she grew up, where she and her sisters played with rag dolls, arranged weddings for them, and invited the neighborhood for feasts—soups made of mashed flowers, salads of leaves, beef kebabs of wet, molded mud, vegetable rolls of broken stems? Shehnaz acknowledges that her own life has become one of her childhood games. Now she has become the rag doll and the neighborhood will come to feast on her childhood.

She grew up here. This is the house where she and her sisters had gotten wet in the splash of rain across the bars in the veranda. Ma would get angry if they tried to go outside in the rain, so they had to stretch out their arms and grab the raindrops in their fists from inside the house. Shehnaz remembers—the drops of rain always escaped from

in between her fingers, just as her childhood is escaping with every breath in this stuffed, sweaty, living room full of people staring at her face. This is the house where Baba took his last breath, his palm resting on Shehnaz's head as he asked her to study hard and become a doctor who would find cures for incurable diseases. Shehnaz remembers her father's limp hand dropping on the side of the bed, brushing her hair and cheeks on its way down. She remembers his last rail for breath, his only failure in life. Baba was the bravest man Shehnaz had ever met; he did not die of old age or a weak heart; it was blood cancer that killed him. Since then, Shehnaz has waged a war against blood cancer, or cancer in general. She took all her exams and passed them with some of the highest marks in Dhaka board. She had applied to Dhaka Medical University and her acceptance letter arrived two days ago, a few hours before her marriage proposal knocked on her door and threw her dreams out the window.

Shehnaz tries to look around the living room though she was told not to raise her eyes too much. "Try to look modest for a change, Shehnaz," her mother told her before pushing her softly inside the room. There is an obese woman sitting beside a young man in a light blue shirt and gray pants. There are more than a dozen people in the room, but Shehnaz's eyes land on the woman even before scanning the room properly; she beams despite the darkness of the room. Shehnaz knows that if the family accepts, this woman would become her mother in law. She feels all the components of her digestive system churning—the stomach, pancreas, large and small intestines, and swallows the sudden bile rising at the back of her throat. The woman is wearing a heavy, golden sari on this hot, summer, night. Shehnaz feels a sudden flash of euphoria imagining her future

mother's discomfort due to the power failure. A golden watch shines on her wrist, and Shehnaz notices her heavy eye make-up under a pair of glasses with golden rims. Is that a golden dot in the middle of her forehead, or is it a mole? All this golden is hurting her eyes now. Shehnaz lowers her eyelids. Her mother's voice echoes in her ears: *try to look modest, Shehnaz*. Like the typical obedient Bangladeshi daughter who has been trained like a circus elephant to follow instructions, she tries. And she tries.

As she tries to recover from her feeling of disgust towards her possible new mother, she notices her old one on her side. Ma never wears anything that is not white, and look at this woman! Widows are not supposed to wear a lot of colors; cream or gray might have been okay, but ma prefers white. The sari she is wearing now has a gray hem and simple, light blue, teardrop patterns on the achal. She remembers how her mother cried on her father's deathbed, and after a few hours, how she composed herself for her three daughters. Shehnaz knows it is her duty to get married into a well-off, well-known family, and open the gate for her sisters. She does not want the neighbors to wonder why her mother's daughter cannot get a proper suitor; she hates how people gossip. These same neighbors whom she once invited to her dollhouse weddings now want to come to her wedding. They just want a little excitement in this old, boring town. And for their entertainment, she has to sacrifice her dreams. Sacrifice, she tells herself, just like the helpless, captured cows on Eid.

She is only twenty-two, Shehnaz considers, she has time in her hands. But Ma says that this time won't return, the family is rich and the boy is educated, and most

importantly, he has an American green card. “But I don’t want an American green card, Ma,” Shehnaz had tried to plead her case—“I like it here.” “Don’t be foolish,” her mother had replied. Shehnaz did not notice any foolishness in herself. She does not lust after the American dream; she has dreams of her own. And if her mother really wanted her to go to America, she could, for higher education, with a student visa. But her uncles told her how hard it is becoming to get student visas for America. The attack on the World Trade Center caused a lot of problems for Bangladeshi students. Her uncle who had come from America for her wedding preparations had told her one day, “We are Muslims, you know, they think we are all terrorists. We are not Middle Eastern, Arabic people, you know. Not that all Middle Easterns are terrorists. They’d rather accept Indians in their country than us. They think—if we are brown and Muslims, then we must be Paki, as if Bangladesh doesn’t exist. You know what’s funny? They go after Hindu Sikhs these days too, because they wear turbans. Some Americans tried to tear off one of my Sikh neighbor’s beard after the nine-eleven incident. He was just a domestic, little, taxi driver who gets beaten up by his wife at home. On top of that, he’s Hindu! It cracks me up!” Her uncle roared with laughter. She thought she saw tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. Were those tears of laughter or tears of pain and humiliation? She did not think about it much then; she is here in Bangladesh. Who cares what happens in America! But wait; does she have to start caring now? Now, that the American stranger is sitting on the familiar couch in their living room, from which she likes to dangle her legs as she eats mango pickles with her fingers, straight from the bottle, while watching the soap operas on BTV. This stranger is intruding into her space already. He can only bring destruction. She feels like a captive. Already.

Shehnaz tries to look at her mother while keeping her eyes fixed on the floor. All she sees is her mother's toes caught in the gray straps of her open toed shoes. She can feel a dirty spider crawling inside her, slowly, from her toes, it tiptoes upwards, carefully hanging on to her spine. It is weaving a web inside her heart, something soft and wet that quickly hangs on to one dark corner of the room, and now, it's spreading all over the room, and now it's covering up her life in its maze, the trap getting wider and wider, its grasp reaching farther and farther. And now, its enormity is engulfing her. With her eyes, she tries to untangle her mother's toes from the grip of the straps. Her eyes instruct the little toes to rise up and fall in a violent thump, the sudden weight flattening the rapidly spreading plague under the sole of the shoe. My soul, Shehnaz confirms, Baba would have never agreed to this degrading sale of my soul to a stranger. If only Baba were here, Shehnaz's cautious sigh escapes through the quivering holes of her thin nose. She only has to stand there for a few minutes to let the desirable boy's desirable family observe her, and determine if *she* is desirable or not. These few minutes seem like a lifetime, a lifetime of humiliation. A lifetime of hard work and ambition has given her these few minutes that are to change her life again. Shehnaz's mind trails back to the last few moments of her father's life, and his last few words. Study hard, become a doctor; his words were getting tangled with each other. He tried to wet the cracks of his dry, thin lips with his almost limp tongue, which seemed almost as dehydrated as his lips. Shehnaz had shut her eyes in an attempt to deny the reality of the present situation.

Her father stands behind her chair, and twisting her ears with his hard fingers

turns her face towards him as she bites her tongue. “Drawing, the night before your Biology exam...” he grabs the piece of notebook paper resting between the cracks of the two pages of her open Biology book. “I’m sorry, Baba...it will never happen again.” Shehnaz lowers her gaze, and stares at his brown, leather sandals. The next day, she returned from school to find her parents in their usual position on the porch. Their rocking chairs rocked back and forth as Baba looked up and put down the sweater that he was helping Ma knit back on his lap. “How was your exam, Shehnaz?” He gave her a stern look. “Um, it went well, Baba. Really.” Shehnaz widened her eyes to affirm her look of honesty. “Come here.” She walked up the stairs, slowly observing the chuckling face of her mother and the serious face of her father. Her father picked up something from the side table as she reached the last step. He extended his hand and the object held in it, towards her, “There is a right time for everything—study when its time to study, sleep when its time to sleep, and the rest of the day, is yours. Your hobbies are important. Don’t draw on scrap paper again.” Shehnaz grabbed the brown paper bag from his hand, opened the mouth, and peeped inside to find a handsome sketchbook lying there. “Baba...for me?” Her father continued, “Be the best at what you do. If you want to steal, don’t be a pickpocket, be like Phulan Debi, rob like the Bandit Queen. If you want to draw, be like Picasso, or Leonardo Da Vinci, and create another Mona Lisa. If you want to study medicine, be a doctor and find cures for incurable diseases,” he looked at his wife sitting next to him, “and if you want to be beautiful, be like your mother.” “Ishh...” her mother looked away, feigning annoyance, as her father reached for his wife’s hand and roared with laughter.

Tight nostrils opening a little wide, Shehnaz breathes for fresh air in this crowded room filled with the sweat from her future family's bodies. Shehnaz moves her gaze from the toes of her mother's feet to the cheerfulness in her eyes. She suddenly wonders how much truth lies in the sparkle of those eyes. The late District Commissioner's proud wife showcasing her beloved daughter to a family of American strangers, that too, half American. She wonders how far her mother can push her helplessness towards those deep, dark corners of her eyes, without wetting her eyelashes. Shehnaz realizes that she is not alone. Her ever strong, hopeful mother affirmed that Shehnaz can still be a doctor, even after marriage. But Shehnaz knows these typical deshi mother and father in laws, especially the mothers. She feels her temper rising. These people only care to know how thin she is, how fair she is. Honestly, the color of her skin matters more to them than her degree in biology. They want their sons' wives to be innocent, little housewives, doing all the work in the kitchen, taking care of the them, cleaning the house, taking care of the kids, attending the guests, taking care of their sons. Why don't they just get caretakers, servants? Oh, servants must be expensive in America, and they cannot sleep with their sons and create the next generation of the family, and oh, most importantly, there are no Muslim servants in America. Are there? They are not even called servants in America, are they? What will I be called?

Her thoughts trail off as her eyes come across another pair of eyes, the eyes of the young man sitting beside the woman in the golden sari. He must be Sahil, her fiancé to be. He does look like the guy in the photo she was shown, but she was too angry to look at it carefully then. And now that he is here, she has been so busy watching other things

that she has forgotten to notice him. Or maybe, she just didn't care enough. She still does not care, but decides to give him an angry glare anyway, but as she gets ready to look at his eyes, she halts. By accident, their eyes meet. But it does not seem like an accident. He catches her taking a glimpse at him, removes his own deadly glare from her face with a look of distaste and obvious revulsion, and shakes his head. Startled, Shehnaz stops her chanting, please don't let them like me, make me look ugly...and quickly recovers from the surprising gesture from her stranger, and lets the feeling lead to anger. She asks herself almost defensively—do I look *that* ugly? But the man does not seem to care about her looks or anything else for that matter. She finds her American stranger sitting there limply, his eyes tightly shut, his brows crooked, his lips twisted, lost in his own thoughts, in his own world, far far away from hers.

“I love you!” Sahil screams against the vastness of the ocean, his voice cracking. He is not an escapist, he’s not, he can defeat this ocean that he feels responsible to love, and reign over its unruly waves, if she stands by his side. They stand side by side at the beach, letting the sand escape from in between their toes, a little more, with each wave. Their arms are stretched out on the sides, with only his left index finger and her right, intertwined in the middle. The ocean breeze blows through his hair. It reminds him of Jen’s hands brushing his hair before their high school prom; she laughed as she complained about its messiness. Sometimes Sahil would pretend to forget to gel down his hair in the morning. He would not even brush it, and leave it the exact way as it was when he woke up. He wanted Jen to be disturbed when he arrived at the bus stop; she looked beautiful when she frowned. When they got on the bus, she would scold him for being so messy all the time, all the while, putting her hand through his shoulder length hair, untangling it, and brushing it with her hands. She never carried a comb, or a mirror; she wasn’t one of those girls. Even when she went to college, she did not enter any sorority, or many clubs, apart from FLY—For Loving Yourself, and Amnesty International. She was majoring in English, and read or wrote during her free time, or conversed with Sahil on the phone. Sahil was usually busy with his college courses for his chemistry major and other Pre-Med requirements. Jen remained patient, and waited for the weekends. Sahil waited too, his impatient adolescence changing into a silently responsible adulthood. When he went away to college and came home to Atlantic City on the weekends as a 6 foot 4 inch young man, Jen was too short to put her hands through his hair. Sahil’s hair was much shorter now too. That didn’t stop him though. He would bend down, or kneel down in front of her, as if he were about to propose. At times, he did

have the greatest urges to break down and propose, but always found it to be too early to face life and begin to try and change the course of the impending doom.

Now he realizes how late it was then, but then, then, he was a carefree bird, taking life as it came, moving from moment to moment, like the waves in the ocean, and the breeze on their face. Sahil looks over and finds the excited face of Jen, staring at the sky, where it touched the ocean. The sun had begun to set. The waves had come and taken away most of the sand from beneath their feet. Now they stood on little lumps of sand under their feet. His feet feel funny; he is sure Jen's do too, for she turns to look at him and a look of uncomfortable sadness comes over her face. A big wave comes towards them, and as it goes back, and more sand escapes through their toes, Jen suddenly turns around. Their intertwined fingers unlock; she runs towards the wooden boardwalk. He remembers not following her that day, but standing there, alone, with life rapidly escaping through his toes, waiting for something. Now, he can't remember what.

Sahil opens his eyes. For a second, he can't recognize the dark living room or the people around him. His toes feel sweaty inside the white socks, and his socks feel wet inside his black, polished shoes. No sand in between his toes, just sweat. The darkness of the room is not the result of the setting sun, it's just the stupid power failure. His mom's golden achal prickles his arm. Sahil wonders why his mother always has to overdo everything, her outfits, make up, gossip, and now her collection of suitable girls for her son. Why doesn't she understand that it embarrasses him? Dad works as a bartender in Trump Taj Mahal, and mom works in a shoe store on the boardwalk. They earned enough

money to buy two houses in Florida, which they rented out, using that money to pay for the mortgage. Their jobs or financial status never embarrassed Sahil, but their proud attitude at parties, and the way they flaunt his supposed intelligence and grades in school always embarrass him. When he graduated as the Valedictorian from Atlantic City High School, his parents threw a huge party in their small, birdcage-like house in Ventnor City. They were Bangladeshis, yet there was loud, Indian film music playing from his boom box. They held the knife together, he and his parents, as they pressed his fingers down and cut his cake for him. The Bangladeshi crowd, consisting of their relatives and his parents' friends, cheered, and some little kid started crying from the back: she had dropped the boom box on her foot. After that, the food was served, pure Bangladeshi cuisine, oily rice, fried chicken, the oil seeping through the napkin underneath, beef drenched in oil and masala, tuna kebabs, fried fishes, fish chutney, all kinds of chutneys, and pickles dipped in oil, different kinds of vegetable dishes, and salad. Sahil hates oily food; his mom knew that very well. He took his food on a plate, and walked down to the basement, into his room.

“You’ve got mail,” AOL declared as he signed in. Jen wrote: I miss you baby. They have gone out to the Casinos. They won’t be back until midnight. I’m alone in the house. Wanna come over? Even better, we could go to the boardwalk. The sun is about to set. Sahil wrote back: I can’t. It’s my graduation party. I’ll see you tomorrow? He didn’t want to bring up the topic of Jen again and ruin this happy occasion for his parents; he had already gotten their verdict. He told his other friends who IM-ed, that he wasn’t feeling well. He left the chat room where his friends discussed how to get into Pink Pony

with their fake ID cards. Sahil could hear the sound of hundreds of footsteps above him, heavy and light. He locked his door, and turned on the music system he pleaded for and succeeded in getting for his graduation from his parents, along with a big poster of the periodic table, a chemistry tool set, and a copy of *Chemistry for Idiots*—gifts he didn't plead for. He would have preferred a sketchbook, but *Chemistry* was more appealing to his parents. His father used to be a professor of Chemistry in Bangladesh. They said Sahil had too much intellect, and too little time, now that he's graduated, to waste, on such hobbies—his interest in art has always been an insignificant hobby to his parents. Initially, he had tried to protest, "But Rina, your sister's daughter is studying art at Rutgers University." His mom replied, "She has no brains, and a 3.4 GPA; its okay for her to be 'artistic.' Plus, she's a girl." Sahil pressed the play button of his music system, and Linkin Park blasted out—*Crawling in my skin, these wounds they will not heal, fear is how I fall, confusing what is real*. He tried to block out the sound of laughter coming from the living room. He knew some people were dancing, right above him, and in his head. Linkin Park crawled inside him—*I can't seem to find myself again, my walls are closing in...I've felt this way before, so insecure*.

Sahil realizes that he is doing what he has been doing for the last eleven years of his life, blocking out the laughter of people. Just like the night of his graduation party, this night too, he is blocking out everyone around him in an effort to own his own world. His armpits are sweating, making damp marks on his shirt too. He can smell himself, a strange mix of sweat and Polo Sport deodorant. He doesn't care if he stinks, the way he didn't care when his mom showed him the picture of the girl he is supposed to marry. He

realizes that she is standing right there, at the door, looking at him. He doesn't want to look at her, and closes his eyes again to try and picture Jen with her falsely cheerful eyes looking at him as he left for the airport. He saw no hope in her eyes; she was just pretending. Jen is good at that; she is the one who convinced him to let go of their relationship. She pretended to believe her words, and perhaps even managed to make her face look content as the sun set and the tears ceased to sparkle in her eyes, the wetness of her eyelashes disguised in the darkness. Jen bit her trembling lower lip, then slowly releasing it, she said, "If the future of our relationship hurts your parents, then I guess...we should let go. They immigrated to America for a better life for you." No, for better lives for themselves, Sahil corrected Jen's words inside his head. "They do odd jobs in a country whose culture is odd to them, in a society where they feel they don't belong." Yes, they feel that way, but I don't. They can't belong, so they want me to feel neglected too. They want me to remember my immigrant status every living moment, even though I'm a citizen now. They always said, Sahil, you know they'll never accept us as one of their own. You'll never be seen as a true American, and if you forget your roots, you won't be a true Bangladeshi either. You'll be a nothing, stuck between two cultures, belonging to neither. It is only Bangladesh where we're truly at home. But I feel at home here, Sahil told himself. "If you knew all along that they'll never agree, then maybe we shouldn't have dreamed so many dreams." Sahil remembered them reminding him from time to time, "Don't become Americanized." What is Americanization?—he had always wondered. Assimilation? Sahil interrupted Jen, "Assimilation. What's so wrong about that? Why can't we all accept each other and live happily? Why does race matter so much? And religion..."

Sahil watched Jen taking a silent but deep breath. Why did he always ask her the questions that she had every right to be asking him? Over the many years they spent together—middle school, high school, college, and now university, Jen had taught him how to dream, and Sahil taught her how not to expect those dreams to come true. Jen had learned her lesson well. They loved and dreamed, with full knowledge of reality. Forever wasn't part of the plan. It was only a matter of time. And the time had finally arrived. Sahil wondered if he truly loved her; if he did, could he be as blind to her emotions as he is trying to be? He continued with his torture and made her go down the list one last time—the list of reasons why—why they should not be together. She cupped a handful of sand, “Your parents are just not ready to let go of their own culture, that even in a foreign land, they want to preserve it, especially in their child. They have given you so much love and they worked so hard for you. Now it's your turn to return.” Her fingers spread slightly, and the tightly grasped grains of sand escaped through them as she let out a silent sigh. Jen's own parents had divorced when she was ten. She says she remembers her father, only the sharp stubble on his face, that too, only vaguely. She now lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend in a two-bedroom apartment that reeks of cheap beer. The few times that Sahil went to her apartment, her mother asked her to sit on a sofa with a dirty brown cover that had several tiny holes. He tried to push his index finger through the holes as he listened to the short, stout woman go on about her life in a nasal voice, her freshly dyed blond hair hurting his eyes. He would wait for Jen to come out, take his hand, and walk him to her room through the narrow corridor. Jen has her own room, which is her second heaven on earth, following closely behind her ultimate

paradise—the beach, during sunset, with Sahil at her side. She sometimes admitted to Sahil that she was jealous of him. He does not see any reason for that; in fact, sometimes, he is secretly jealous of her. Sometimes. At times like now.

Now. Where is Jen now? At the beach, watching the sunset? Alone? He can't help wishing to hold her in his arms again, and smell the freshness of her perfume, mixed with the saltiness of the breeze from the ocean. All he could smell now is his own sweat. Sahil feels a strong surge of disgust towards himself. What is he doing? Leaving Jen for this girl in braids whom he has never met before? Maybe he should turn to his side and tell his mom that he had slept with Jen, and that she is pregnant. What would mom say? He had a feeling she would stay calm, and keep smiling, and tell him that they can talk about it when they get home. Once at home, she would start screaming, and then calm down to tell him to tell her to get an abortion. But isn't it against the religion, Mom? He doesn't expect an answer. Jen isn't really pregnant, but they have made love many times. He still remembers her knees bending in his strong grip; he still remembers the smell...

“Look at her Sahil, isn't she pretty?” his mom's voice snatches him out of his memories and holds him down in the present reality. He glares at his mom, and then at the girl standing at the door. What is so pretty about her? He can't even see her in the dark, and he does not wish to see her in light either. He knows that she won't look half as good as Jen does when the sun sets on her face. Doesn't she have a life? Why can't she study and try to establish herself? Why is she so eager to get married? She's just after my green card. These stupid Bengali girls; he suddenly feels the greatest urge to flick his

green card at her face. Take it, and leave me alone. He does not attempt to hide the disgust and revulsion written all over his face, but removes his angry glare from her face. He knows he's being too harsh to her, but he can't help it. He feels like the goat ready to be sacrificed during Eid-ul-Adha. Just because a page in a monotheistic history tells the story of Hazrat Ibrahim (peace be upon him) deciding to sacrifice his son to fulfill his higher duty towards God than his lower duty towards his son, it is now the tradition to sacrifice cows, goats, etc etc. And now, history is repeating itself. Parents are sacrificing their sons and daughters. For whom? In the name of Allah?

“Hmm,” Sahil grunts. His mother develops an even more exhilarated expression on her face, showing her excitement and relief to hear that her son agrees to the fact that the girl is pretty, as if it makes a difference to her, or anyone else. “I think he likes her,” she exclaims, and pokes her husband with her elbow a bit too hard, and smiles at her new relatives. The sixteen pairs of eyes that were scanning the girl's face a few minutes ago now turn to his face that carries the most disgruntled expression. “Alhamdulillah,” an old man with a beard, beaded garlands around his neck, and a wooden walking stick declares, “So it's settled, then. Let's have some sweets and celebrate!” Laughter and cheerful chatter fill the room again, and the atmosphere seems to become even more festive as they all stand up and start reaching for the many different kinds of sweets on the table, in the middle of the room.

Suddenly, the electricity returns, and the room is filled with brightness. The ceiling fan begins rotating, and Sahil feels a slap of breeze on his face and through his

hair; he looks at the girl again. Just as their eyes meet, she blows out the candle, turns around, and walks out of the door. Sahil suddenly feel an odd desire to follow her. But he remains sitting there, watching the sacrifice of his soul in the celebration around him. He sits there, alone, waiting for something. He can't remember what.

"I love you," the American stranger mutters under his breath.

## **THE FIREFLY**

The firefly tries to flee, knocking against the moist skin of his palm, it pushes, pulls away, pushes again, forgetting to glow. Its translucent wings tickle his hand, taunting him, pleading him to unwrap his fingers. Dano loosens his grasp on the tender body, and lifts the enclosed fist to his right eye, shutting his left. With an eye half open, he peeks through the hole, the knuckle on his thumb hitting the bone of his nose. His thick eyelashes prickle the flesh of his index finger as he peeks inside. A smile spreads on his face seeing the darkness disappear, a small ball of fire glistening on his pupils. The fire burns as it flies, bumps on the walls, flies again, trying to find a gap between the fingers. Tired, it appears to rest, emitting a soft glow, darkening, glowing again, and darkening again, forgetting to glow.

Satisfied, Dano looks up at the night sky, the little stars twinkling on the black landscape. A strange glow has spread over the earth tonight, seeping through his skin, dripping on the soil below him. It is as if the trees are swinging in the wind, nodding their heads, approving his choice. His little street is twinkling tonight, the lights adorning the gate of the wedding house shining brightly, turning off, turning on, and turning off again. Through this gate, she walked in not too long ago, dark hair resting at her shoulders, thick bangs covering her wide forehead. And when the plastic fan at the gate rotated, blowing the air her way, her eyelashes quivered. Her eyelashes quivered and the air blew her hair back, exposing her neck, and those bare parts of her shoulder, undisturbed by the cotton of her pink blouse. The pink blouse, its golden hem reflected the moonlight kissing her

fair arms, the soft hair on her skin erect in the wind. Erect, as the thick hair on his arms, he watched the wind lifting the anchal of her cotton saree, and for a brief moment, the cloth slipped away from her body.

For a brief moment, the stars stopped twinkling, the trees stopped swinging, and the moon stayed still. Dano stood still, his heart floating above his body, like kerosene on water, as he watched the cloth slip, and her blouse shone in the moonlight. It was there, under the moon, waiting in front of him, all the folds and the creases exposed, the lines where the threads ran, holding the thin pieces of cloth together. And the skin of her chest, below the protruding collar bones and the top of her blouse, it glowed. It glowed like the round caps of the beer bottles, all the silver gleaming as he places his lips on the mouth and drinks sitting in the tea stall around the corner. Silver caps, round, like the hole on the stomach that glistened as the anchal dropped. Small drops of sweat scattered on the fair skin, larger drops gliding down the sides, and in the middle of all the festivities, there it was. A small bellybutton, a dark pathway, moist, open, inviting. Dano watched, standing at the gate, so close that he could have reached out his fingers and entered.

Standing at the same spot where she had left him, his face striped by the shadow of the bars of the gate, Dano watches the stars above him, glowing, darkening, glowing again, and darkening again. He touches the steel bars, cold against his fingers, and peeks through them, trying to catch a glimpse of the young girl, the shadow of her body, an

elbow, a finger, half a face. Standing under the star filled sky, he remembers the fishermen on the Buriganga, its waves lifting soil, weeds, life, from the corners of Bangladesh, carrying them through the city of Dhaka. They would sing songs of hope, of triumph, throwing their nets far and wide, splashes of water wetting the wood of their boats. The fishes would wriggle, shaking their fins, silver tails escaping through the holes in the net. Standing under sky sprinkled with little stars, Dano wishes to become a part of the fishermen clan. He too, would stand side by side with the other bare bodied men, the muscles of their chest, tense, arms stretched out, eyes sparkling, awaiting the glimpse of their glistening catch. He too, would hold a corner of the net and throw it over the little balls with silver fins, translucent scales covering their bodies. And he would watch, watch them dance, swaying their bodies, only for him.

Looking up at the stars above, dormant, sitting limply on the lifeless landscape, Dano wishes to shake their bellies, make them scatter around the moon. He wishes to capture them in his nets, and make them dance. They would quiver, five corners poking through the holes, sharp, yet powerless. Trapped, they would stop trembling and look up at him, waiting, and then, slowly, he would reach out and pour them inside his pockets. With pockets full of stars, he would reach her house. He would lay them out at her doorsteps, and knock. He would wait for her to open the door, and when her feet would trample the stars beneath, she would realize how precious she is to him. She would know how her beauty makes his skin burn, his heart turn into ashes, and his eyes, water. She

would believe that the first time he laid eyes on her, he transformed from a thug that people fear, to a mere boy, waiting for a hand to pet his back, a few fingers to shuffle his unkempt hair. He has transformed from the ruler of his streets, to a young boy waiting for his lover, a beggar, destitute and lonely, crawled up at her feet. A servant who watches the daughter of his master from a distance, with eyes full of awe, full of love, from the first sight, in love. *In love*, he repeats aloud, *in love, yes, I am, I am in love*.

*Is this love?* Mamoon asks his friend. *This is love*, Dano replies. Mamoon looks at his friend's face soaked with emotions, the colors of which he cannot recognize. What is love? He cannot understand. Only when he enters through the door to find his mother sitting with food on a plate covered by another, waiting for his return, does he think, maybe this is love. He sits next to her, greasy hands neatly tucked on his lap, and tells her to feed him. And when he asks her if she has eaten and she shakes her head, her fingers clutching the rice and lentil that she brings towards his mouth, does he nod and think, maybe this is love. During the fifteen years that he lived, his mother is the only woman that he remembers feeling any affection for. And maybe his friends, the whole gang that hangs out at the tea stall or at the mechanic shop while he works, covered in sweat and grease. The group that jumps on the streets at the order of their leaders, and burns tires, breaks cars, and bones if necessary, and sometimes for pure amusement. The elders play the game of politics in the city, and they, the leaders of tomorrow, rule the streets in their hood at the outskirts of Dhaka. Maybe he feels love for the group members, or maybe it

is just a kind of unspoken devotion, a few rules, some necessary relationships. Apart from that, the love that he knows is nothing but the black smoke exuding from the cars that he fixes at the shop. And the lover, nothing but a punctured tire.

When he looks at his friend's face between the bars at the gate, it seems flat to him. Only a year older than Dano, he feels the gaps of several years between him and his love stricken friend, who has just noticed some girl enter the wedding house. When his friend pointed her out to him, the short glimpse that he caught of her did not cause any unfamiliar sensation inside his body. He would rather look at women older than him, full bodied, not so frail like these girls his age. The girl that his friend has fallen in love with, her thirteen or fourteen year old body looked too flat for his taste. Her lips were too red, stained by a glossy lipstick, and her hair, too thick, but she was fair, fairer than most of the girls on their street. The girl next to her, the one with the dark complexion, with the short crisp hair, seemed to blend in the darkness, but she stood out. And caught his friend's attention, which he assumed would not last for long. In fourteen years, Dano has fallen in love three times, and Mamoon has delivered letters for him, fresh roses, gifts, and he has brought back with him, replies, letters, sometimes, locks of hair, sometimes handkerchiefs with red hearts sewn on them, once a tin ring, and even a plate of guava slices covered in salt and chili powder. On the way back, he bit a slice of the guava and shook his head, knowing that Dano's love was temporary, like the slices on the plate. But

the hand that sliced the tender guava, if it shook, the knife would cut her finger, so deep, that the bleeding may not stop.

*Let's go inside*, Mamoon says to his friend, *the feast is about to begin*. A girl from their neighborhood will get married to a boy from another neighborhood tonight, and the whole street is invited. Dano and his boys would go anyway, even if they are not invited, but they always are. Dano's elder brother's reputation is powerful enough to give him the liberty to roam around as he does, grabbing packets of biscuits hanging at the tea stall without paying, tearing off lemons from the neighbors' trees, plucking out new born flowers from their gardens. Mamoon has seen the room with the wide window where his brother stays with friends at the heart of the city. Colorful scarves, shirts, and lungis hung on the strings tied across the room, drying under the rotating ceiling fan. Dano took him there when he needed a job, when his father died of malaria, and his mother stopped eating at nights to save food for him. Dano's brother belongs to the ruling political party, so when he made Mamoon sit on the foot of his bed and pledge his allegiance, Mamoon did so without asking a question. The next day, he was standing outside the mechanic shop as the garage door opened, and soon, he was inside, his fingers scraping the edges of a black tire, blotches of mud stuck in its folds.

The feast begins. Mamoon watches Dano crushing the half smoked cigarette under his foot, and then he turns to his friend and says, "let's go inside." Mamoon

follows. Trampling on the grass in front of the house, they enter the brightly lit room, men sitting around on plastic chairs, eating biryani from melamine plates. The bride's younger brother walks around serving the guests, and in his hands, sits a bowl filled to the rim with beef curry. Oil drips from the sides of the bowl, a drop glides down his arm, and Mamoon notices a yellow stain at the bottom of the checked shirt tucked inside his over-sized pants. He comes forward, shoulders curved, bending his head, he asks Mamoon and Dano to sit, and Mamoon notices his hands trembling a little, another drop of gravy mixed oil pouring down his arms. Only a year back, the boy had refused to pass a letter from Dano to his sister, shaking his head violently, biting his lips, refusing to speak. Dano, only thirteen then, marched inside the mechanic shop and rummaged through the tools searching for a vile of fluid. He soon walked out, a container of Dano powder milk in his hands, that he threw inside a tin drum full of trash next to the boy's house, covering the lid before walking away. They covered their ears with trembling hands as a thundering noise was heard and the lid flew in the air, golden flames escaping from the gaping drum. And on that day, Dano found his new name, and a new love, which he forgot when another tripped on his path.

After they are served, Mamoon glances at Dano to find him dipping his fingers inside the rice on his plate, stirring the content, mixing it with the beef curry, oil seeping under his long fingernails. He catches Dano's eyes looking up at the door connecting this room to another, where the girls are sitting around, eating. A curtain covers their path,

separating the genders, but the sounds of girlish giggles flow inside their room, penetrating the thick cement walls. He knows, Dano's eyes are searching for the girl in the pink saree, but among the busy crowd of girls, he would not be able to find her. He also knows that tomorrow he will be sent out to look for her, which would not be difficult, and then he would become the messenger again. Dano would offer to go himself, to meet her at her doorsteps, look into her eyes, and propose, and then he would contemplate, wanting to take the perfect approach. *This one is special*, Mamoon can hear him say, and then he would turn to his friend, *Mamoon, buddy, do me a favor?* Mamoon would follow the order of his friend, and he would go, find the girl, and he would knock on her door. *My name is Mamoon. My friend is in love with you. He has asked me to deliver these roses. I hope you will accept.*

*I cannot accept.* Mukti locks the door and turns away from it. She frowns, remembering the scent of the red roses, as if sprinkled with morning dew. This morning, as she opened the door, she had expected to see her father return from the mosque, but instead, a boy, tall and lean, stood at the doorsteps, his hair unusually curly, like a poet's, she thinks, like Kazi Nazrul Islam. It is as if he is standing outside her door, waiting to recite a verse of poetry, about revolution, about freedom that Nazrul describes in the poems that she reads at school. And about love, she hopes. The boy stood at the steps, the long stems of a few fresh roses clutched in his hands, that part of the stem that the thorns haven't reached. Birds chirped on the guava tree in front of the house, and the morning air

still smelled of fog, of mist, a sweet scent entering her nose, the sugary taste of petals in her mouth. She looked down to see little beads of water lying on the petals of the roses, soft, red, with shades of pink, almost. Feeling little vibrations of excitement run through her body, she asked the boy with the curly hair to wait. *I will be back*, she said, *please wait for me*. And she ran.

Mukti ran inside the house, calling Beena, her cousin, only two years older, but she seems to know the answers to all the questions that the world throws at them. When Beena came out, her short boyish hair wet from an early morning shower, Mukti told her about the boy at the steps, her eager voice trembling. *Can I accept the roses?* She asked, her big eyes spread wide open. *No, if uncle sees the flowers, he would bury you alive along with me*, Beena replied, small eyes bulging out of the two deep holes set neatly on her face. Mukti saw the tiny beads of worry forming on her cousin's small forehead. She understood, and so she let Beena stand next to her as she refused the roses, bright red, like her favorite lipstick. *I cannot accept them*, she says, and watches the messenger look up, as if surprised, confused for a brief moment. And for a brief moment, she wonders if she could grab the stems from his hands, and decorate them on the vase on the table. *They are from Dano, he saw you last night*, the boy informs, biting his lower lip, the dirty pink flesh whitening where the teeth fell. *I cannot accept*, she says, shaking her head, thick strands of black hair dancing on her long forehead. She watches him leave without casting a shadow behind him, and then she locks the door, and turns away.

Mukti turns around to find the dark face of her cousin staring at her, her eyes still bulging out, attempting to jump out of her face. She smiles a little, thinking about the frogs that live on their front verandah when it rains, green and brown, some muddy, some clean. When she comes out to hang her wet clothes on the string across the verandah, she jumps, as they hop around her. She always looks down to find several pairs of bulging eyes staring at her, like the eyes of her cousin as she glares at her now. *Do you know how old you are?* Beena asks her, arms grabbing the sides of her bony waist, elbows sticking out. *Don't even think about accepting gifts from boys until you are sixteen, at least.* She tightens her grip around the bones under her flat stomach. *Especially not boys like Dano. You know, how he goes around threatening people with bombs stuffed inside those Dano milk tins, as if he is some famous scientist that people should respect. He is a thug, nothing else. Just fourteen, and see the guts of the boy.* Beena, only a year older than the thug, mutters in frustration, as Mukti protests, *I am old enough, almost as old as Tuli apa, and she just got married last night.* Mukti remembers last night, and feels a sudden tug at her throat, something spilling from inside, overflowing.

She remembers the night, the colorful pieces of paper decorating the room where the bride sat, small gold earrings shining at her ears. Tuli apa looked down as her friends teased her, pushed, poked the little bulge of her stomach barely covered by the anchal of her saree, red, but with a shade of orange, and a golden hem glittering brightly. And when

she looked up, her eyes glistened, and she seemed so happy, full of dreams of a beautiful future, a husband with a heart filled with undying affection, a small room, little babies on the bed, hanging from all corners, crying, giggling, laughing. Eyes gleaming, Mukti watched as the groom was brought to the room and placed next to the bride, his legs folded in front of him. When they exchanged the garlands of multicolored flowers, she felt her eyes wetting with tears. And when the bride was leaving her parents' house to go to her husband's, her friends cried, the mother clung on to her daughter's arm as her daughter cried like a child resting her head on her mother's chest. But watching the pouring of unrestrained tears, Mukti smiled, imagining her turn, waiting.

And today, her turn is here. She does not know Dano well at all, only seen him a few times, only short glimpses, but she can see him more often now, and she can grow to love him. Growing up, she has seen him playing cricket on their street, swinging the bat above his head, an aura of power surrounding him. Short, stubby, with thick thighs planted firmly on the ground, the arms holding the bat covered by dark, thick hair, Mukti remembers. He never looked at her before, but now, he loves her, and she knows, she can love him back, pouring out her heart in the front pocket of his shirt, right above his heart. *I am old enough to get married, she says, old enough to accept flowers. And Beena apa, those roses were so beautiful, red, but with a shade of pink.* Like the dirty frogs on their wet porch, Beena glares at Mukti, shaking her head, *Is this why we go to school, Mukti? There must be another reason.*

Sometimes Beena wonders if Mukti thinks that her cousin is secretly jealous of her because her skin is fair. It radiates while Beena's pimpled face, a few shades darker, blends with the darkness of the night. She walks, swinging her long hair at her shoulders while Beena's short, crisp hair resembles that of a boy's. Her full lips stay moist covered by vaseline, or lipstick, but Beena's thin lips, dry and chapped, shrivel against her face. All this should worry Beena, but they never do. It worries her mother, who tosses and turns in bed, never finding the right position to take before drifting to sleep. And after her father passed away, two years ago, she even wakes up crying, panting, sitting upright on the bed, open and closed fists thumping her chest, claiming that her one child, her poor daughter will never get married because her wretched husband had a heart attack before he could save up for the dowry. If his brother did not bring them to his house, then they would have died in a dark corner of their old, rusty house, a tin roof with holes wide enough for the rain to pour through. They would have died clinging on to each other, plastic baskets scattered around, collecting water, rain, pouring, like the rain in their eyes.

Though Mukti's life, like her face, seems spotless compared to hers, Beena does not feel a hint of jealousy. She takes care of Mukti like an elder sister should, protecting her from the glare of the scorching sun, shielding her from the wild wind that twirls her around and tries to carry her away. If Mukti breaks a glass, Beena takes the blame, listening, teeth pressed hard against her lower lip, as her aunt screams at her. If Mukti

fails a test, she stays up at night, teaching her the lessons under the light of the dying candle, explaining to her the reasons behind the red crosses on the pages. Beena likes it in this house, waking up every morning between her mother and Mukti, washing her face in the cool water with a rusty tint from the tube well in the corner, walking to school with her cousin on her side. A small school, only for girls, their hair tied neatly with ribbons, they bend down on the books that the teachers give them, and they read, memorize line by line, word by word, they learn. She plays sports as well, the long jump and the eight hundred meter run, traveling to another school in the city with her coach to compete with other girls, mostly from well off families. She wants to compete in the Olympics, craving to change the image of Bangladeshi women in front of foreigners. Beena knows, there must be other reasons to live, besides boys, marriage, and babies, something else to do besides cooking, somewhere else to go besides this dingy neighborhood. She knows, soon, something will knock on her door, and she will recognize the reason, a reason all her own.

The knocks on the door are endless, leaving Beena restless. Her uncle, the maulvi, has not come home from the mosque yet, so her aunt and mother stand behind pillars at different corners, the anchals of their sarees covering their heads. They watch as Mukti opens the door when the knocks fall on the wood, heavy and soft. The boy returns at the steps with a glittering chain, a thin string of metal dipped in golden fluid. *From Dano*, he says. Mukti refuses to take it, but Beena catches a shade of gold glistening in her pupils.

So he leaves, and he returns, with a letter sealed in an envelope, two pink hearts intertwined in the corner, uneven alphabets scattered around, "Mukti," it reads. Mukti, it means freedom, Beena thinks, the freedom to choose, the freedom to say yes, the freedom to say no. But tied to this paper envelope, Mukti seems so contained, sealed, her life caught in the suffocating space inside the folds of the love letter. The boy stretches out his arm, *from Dano*, he says. Beena notices a film of fatigue invading his eyes as he blinks it away, and stands still, stoic, stiff. With a few wide steps, she reaches the door, her tall body towering over her cousin's as she looks him in the eye, and says, *no, she said, no.*

*No*, Dano sticks his finger inside his ear, *no is a sound that doesn't enter through here*, Dano says, his face close to Beena's, close enough for her to smell his breath, a strange mix of rotten fish, the sharp sting of vinegar. *Tell your cousin to change her answer to a yes, or else*, his eyes burn into Beena's, her cheeks feel like two balls of fire, heavy heap of ashes lying at her feet. *Or else, I will leave a dark spot on her fair skin.* Beena watches Dano turn away, strutting off with his friend Mamoon on his side, a kind of urgency exuding through their skin, reaching towards the evening sky. The sun is about to set behind their house, and a reddish purple shade fills the sky, like open wounds, like the burns on her arm, burns from the oil spills, from the hot cooking pans. After repeated proposals delivered by his messenger throughout the day, and the repeated refusals, Dano arrived at their house, thundering knocks filling every corner of their

rooms. Beena opened the door and found him standing at their steps, golden flames of obsession becoming larger in his hungry eyes, devouring her body, consuming the house, burning down the whole neighborhood. He stood there, beads of sweat dancing above his upper lip, a thin shade of darkness where a mustache could have been, a dark string of hair on a darker face. She could smell his breath as he brought his face close to hers, *no*, he said. *No is a sound that doesn't enter through here*, and he stuck his finger in his ear, a never ending tunnel stuffed with dark wax.

Eyes still burning, Beena locks the door, and turns away. She walks over to her mother slumped on the bed, Beena folds her knees and sits by her side. She can hear her aunt screaming at Mukti, as the young girl stands near the door, pulling long strands of her into her mouth, biting them, cutting the split ends with her teeth. *Look what her fair skin has brought upon our family*, her aunt yells from one corner of the room to another. *What will I tell her father when he comes home?* Mukti trembles a little, twisting her lips, and then smiles a little, sitting next to Beena. *You have to be careful from now on*, Beena tells her, a motherly tone in her voice. She grabs a bottle of liquid from the table by her side, pours the coconut oil on her palm, rubbing it with both hands, and when it warms on her palm, she runs her fingers through her cousin's hair, untangling the knotted strands, massaging her scalp. She would braid the girl's hair, trying to steady her shaking hands, and then she would go to the kitchen and pour the guava jelly that she has prepared, inside little glass jars. Then they would sit together and study for tomorrow's classes, and

then they would go to bed, and forget that the world is so tangled. The fluid glistens on her palms, tiny drops of oil gliding down the sides of a hand, down her arm, towards her elbow. *Let's go to bed early tonight*, she says, waiting to shut her eyes.

The crickets are bickering too loudly tonight. Somewhere nearby, a fox might be howling. The crisp leaves rustle softly, and brushing against them, a group of heads covered in black masks swim towards the house. Harsh whispers echo against the trunks of the trees, a few murmurs, muffled laughter. They swim through the plants, brown mud sticking to the soles of their shoes. They swim towards the door, fireflies surround their path, appearing and disappearing, appearing again, just to disappear.

A knock wakes the man who owns the house, and he walks towards the door, sleepy eyes closing and opening slightly, closing again. As the door opens, a swarm of masks enter the room and scatter around his house, throwing him on the cement floor, cold against his cheek. They trample over his body as he tries to sit, his eyes wide in shock, a streak of pain running down his arms towards his thighs. Screams can be heard inside his house, but he remains plastered on the floor. His eyes close again, and he covers his face.

The crickets have stopped arguing, and the fox has disappeared. A different kind of sound stirs the girl in the middle, the shattering of glass, wood breaking against the

wall. She opens her eyes and finds a figure in black standing over the girl sleeping by her side, long hair covering her face. The sound of a click, and a torch light turns on. And in that light, she watches the dark figure taking out a little bottle of liquid from his pocket. He bends towards the sleeping body and raises the bottle, slanting it slightly. With a loud scream, she jumps up and throws it off his hand, and it crashes against the floor, the sound waking the sleeping girl. The torch drops from the hand as well, and turns off.

A few seconds pass, and another click, the torch turns on again. The neck in the dark mask curves, the head bends down and picks up the plastic bottle lying on the floor. The bodies are moving on the bed, sitting upright, screaming, their hands flaying violently on their sides. Faces uncovered, they look at the masked face as it straightens up again and stands upright. With a swift jerk of his hand, he twists the cap open and looks at the face closest to his, so close that his breath falls on her skin. He turns away, then turns back again, and throws the liquid from the bottle at her face.

The young girl on the bed watches as her cousin clutches the wooden headboard of the bed, then she jumps off, trampling over her mother, and picking herself off the ground, she runs across the room, from one corner to another, *boiling water, boiling water*, a shrill cry escaping through her thin lips spread wide apart. *Boiling water*, she screams, fingers grabbing the short strands of hair on her head, pulling them, tearing them apart. She screams, *hot, so hot, its burning my face*. She holds her forehead with her

thumb and index finger, the fingers entering through the skin like it's a pile of mud. Like sand, the flesh moves away, and holes begin to appear on the dark skin that is becoming darker. She watches, unable to speak, as the quivering body takes her fingers off her face and two holes appear on her forehead, wet bones peeking through them. Frantic palms cover her face, uncover again, and cover again, her cries piercing through the walls.

Eyes behind a black mask watch from the corner. *For car batteries*, his friend had said, *I need that fluid for car batteries*. So he had gone inside and returned with a bottle of liquid that he placed on the table. Sulfuric acid, 50 paisa a liter, he sells it in the garage every day. Why his friend needed it, he did not ask, did not care to know. Now, as he watches the girl trying to wipe the wetness from their eyes with the back of her hands, he recognizes what the reason was. He thought they were going to scare the family, maybe even kidnap the girl, but he did not know what was hiding in the pocket of his friend, his master. The bottle full of acid that he gave him was thrown on the floor, picked up again, and now lies on the floor again, empty.

With a pocket now empty, the masked man watches from the door. Before he leaves, he looks back and sees the girl with the fair skin sitting on the bed, the thin blanket that covered her body, now lying at her feet. She sits limply, no veil covering her chest, a haunting look in her eyes, hollow, but deep, he thinks, like the dent between her collar bones. He wants to walk over, untie the braid on her head, and run his fingers

through her hair, telling her how precious she is to him. He looks at her, hungry eyes craving to touch her soft body, pet her tired limbs, but quickly, he jerks his head and looks away, cursing her. He loved her so much, but now he hates her, and when he watches her, his hungry eyes crave to devour her body, waiting to crush her bones under the muddy soles of his shoes. He loved her so much, but now he wishes that the fair face that he adored last night would burn tonight and become a puddle of ashes lying at his feet. He looks away, and walks out of the house, the swarm of masked figures following him. He looks up at the sky above, searching for the stars, twinkling, disappearing, and twinkling again, only for him. But his stars have stopped twinkling tonight, and there is only darkness covering the lifeless landscape.

In Beena's world, there is only darkness tonight. Eyes shut, she lies, sprawled up on the floor, like a baby in her mother's womb. The liquid that she had mistaken for boiling water has eaten the skin of her face, and taken bites off her arms. At first, it burned, but when her fingers reached for her nose, searching for the long piece of bone covered by skin, she shrieked, as the tips of her fingers dipped inside two moist holes on a flat landscape. She shrieked, and the sound escaped through a long, never ending tunnel, carrying her pain with it, and disappearing. Lying on the hard floor, her face covered by sweaty palms, she feels nothing at all. She tries to speak, but cannot locate her lips, only teeth, sharp against her fingers. She lies on the cold floor, tired, waiting for a reason to return, a reason all her own.

Removing her hands, uncovering her face slowly, Beena tries to open an eye, to look through the bars of the window at the empty night sky. Her left eye has melted on her fingers, and there it lies on her palm, a composition of charred skin, gray flesh, and something thick, like guava jelly that she has stuffed in little jars earlier tonight. Something like hope, a dirty liquid, like mud, like sand escaping through the gaps of her fingers, but hope it is, stuffed in a jar, a small glass bottle. One hand risen to her right eye, heavy eyelids with burnt eyelashes prickling the flesh of her fingers, she peeks through the gaps. Through the gaps of her fingers, with an eye half open, the hole of her left socket shut, hollow, Beena stares at the night outside to spot a little firefly twinkling in the dark. Freedom, it used to flee, but now it flies freely, like the fishes in the ocean, like a white pigeon, like a glittering butterfly, a mosquito even, translucent wings spread wide apart, it flies, a small ball of fire glistening in Beena's molten pupils. Unable to blend with the darkness of the night, it emits a faint glow, and then it darkens, glowing again, darkening again, and glowing again, forgetting to darken, forgetting to disappear.

*Inspired by the story of Beena Akhter, who became an acid victim on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, 1996 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dano still walks free.*

**DUA**

*Thou art Lord; I am nothingness,  
I am a fallen sinner,  
A sinner by thee remembered.  
Thou hast led us out of darkness into light.  
Lord! My sin and my guilt,  
Take them and remove them.  
O God, O God, O God, Amen.*

The dua escapes through her mouth, the warm flurry of breath returning to her face, muffled by the soft pillow feeling hard against her lukewarm cheek. The other cheek trembles in the cool breeze coming in through the window beside the bed, its doors set neatly ajar. The darkness of the night disappears as faint shades of sunlight pour in through the crack. Rajaa lies on her stomach, hands resting on the sides of her face, arms folded at the elbows, one knee bent, moist toes sticking out, dry heels touching the slender calf of her straightened leg. With her right cheek plastered on the pillow, she stares ahead, anxious eyes penetrating the bars of the window, her gaze blocked by the trees outside, dancing softly in the wind. Like the couples in American movies, hand in hand, her head resting on his shoulder, quickening heartbeats matching the rhythm of the music intensifying with every dying beat.

The bickering of crickets among olive groves is getting softer, the urgency has disappeared. The orange glow of the sun has vanished as well, its yellow skin, naked, blending with the bare blue sky. Stripped of its color, it is escaping the space where the land and the sky meets, rising above, only to be blocked by the feathery clouds. Clouds, white, like the bareness of the walls surrounding Rajaa, the polychromatic peacock angel

peeking at her from the framed portrait, his dark blue chest protruding proudly forward. Feeling the last breath of the fading dawn, Rajaa prays to her angel, facing the direction of the sun, not knowing what terrible sins she seeks forgiveness for.

Rajaa feels the continuing gaze of Malak Ta'us, her angel's icy eyes disapproving her lazy prayer. The eyes remain on her idle body, peeling her skin, exposing her sinful flesh to the morning air. She looks away. She craves to walk outside, where birds have perched on the brown branches of the trees, preparing to sing. She prays, surrounded by the scent of the morning dew settling on the cold floor around her. She prays, half the prayer reflecting off the cloth of the hardened pillow, returning back to her mouth, open, as wide, as narrow, as the gates of heaven.

I am going home today, Rajaa whispers, unkempt strands of sleep swimming out of the corners of her restless eyes, squeezed shut. She fidgets, shifting her weight from side to side, as if being cradled, put to sleep in her mother's lap caressed by soft lullabies. Locks of black hair fall on the side of her face, the ends of her silky bangs tickling her nose, making her want to sneeze. She notices the girl on her side moving a little, adjusting her position on the bed, and becoming still again. On the floor, two girls are sleeping on rugs that barely hold the lengths of their bodies. Rajaa realizes that she can never show enough gratitude to these girls, to this family, to the man who has given her shelter, disregarding his wife's sincere protests. Being a tribal leader, he had the safety that his family needed, he said. He said he owed it to his conscience to help the child, wild eyes filled with raindrops pouring down her cheeks.

When the girl stood in front of his door, drenched in rain, thin strands of hair sticking to her cheeks, she knew that the night would be long. When the girl, only seventeen came out from behind the figure of the lanky boy who looked even younger, at first, the middle aged man with graying hair seemed alarmed. And for a moment, Rajaa thought he would hold them captive, run outside screaming like a madman, waking up the neighbors. Soon the whole neighborhood would be alive, surrounding the couple, her family stepping ahead from the center of the crowd, reaching out to grab her and drag her home by the hair to keep her locked inside a house where the sun will never rise. A hole dipped in darkness, away from the world, away from Kaseem, who would become a prisoner as well, surrounded by the burning gates of his hell.

Kaseem attempted to comfort her with hollow words as Rajaa listened, aching to hold his face in her hands, the smoothness of his freshly shaven cheeks melting like warm cheese in her fingers. She listened as he urged her to have faith, telling her again and again, that Allah will take care of them. He stood still, a foot away from her, stretching his hands in opposite directions, and when he brought them together again, he looked up at the darkening sky misplacing its color. Rajaa watched him, craving to put her hands around his, cupping them in the gesture of a prayer. She watched him as he prayed, his back curved, the small bones of his spine bulging through the thin white shirt, his head touching the small grassy area surrounded by dry sand. Then he sat up again, turned his head from side to side and raised his arms, the sides of his hands touching each other, his bony thumbs sticking out in opposite directions, erect despite the strength of the wind.

“Amen,” his lips touched and parted again, a little puff of warm breath escaping through the narrow gap. Finishing his namaz, he stood up straightening his body and walked towards Rajaa, who waited for him, eyes shaped like horizontal tears, meeting his gaze full of yearning for something that she could not understand. They stood side by side, their backs resting on the rough walls of the ruins of a small mosque near the town of Mosul. They stood, watching the orange glow of the sun disappearing behind the conical Yazidi tombs in the mountains in northern Iraq. They stood, toes trapped in their sandals, stagnant air covering the distance between their supple bodies. They stood, silent, only the sound of nails against wall penetrating the thick air, nails scraping the chipped bricks of the fallen wall. They stood, together, two lonely hands, so close they almost touched.

When the warm April sun hid behind the Maklub mountains, Kaseem picked up Rajaa’s bag, a few pieces of her favorite clothing quickly stuffed inside, the emblem of the peacock angel, and a few accessories that she imagined she would need. He carried the bag, as Rajaa walked beside him, covering her face with a soft veil, making sure with every step that no one familiar is lurching around the corners of the street. It is a street like this where Rajaa’s fingers almost touched a stranger’s hand reaching for the same tomato. Quickly, she snatched her hand away from the basket full red and yellow circles, mostly plump, pregnant with thick juice, sweet, a little sour. She took a step back, her head hanging low, a strange light shining in her pupils, filled with the colors of the rainbow.

In the outdoor market full of familiar bodies, the boy stared at the stranger's face, pink streaks slowly spreading on her fair cheeks. He stared, as she stood, her eyelids lowered, flickering eyelashes a few inches above a pair of full lips, adorned by a light red lipstick. Feeling conscious, Rajaa looked up. Suddenly aware, Kaseem took a step backwards, letting her take her pick first. Rajaa remembers, when she dipped her hand inside the basket again, she took it out, holding a red tomato on her palm, so ripe, that the skin had started rotting, little worms escaping the holes, dragging their plump bellies underneath. Little worms, white, creamy, like the naked sky above. She had screamed, dropping the tomato, which splattered on the ground, the reddish orange juices oozing out, the dust smearing over the dark holes.

On the dusty path leading to the house of the tribal leader, Rajaa remembers the festive day at the market a year ago, marking the arrival of spring. The black and gray lives of the Kurds seemed to be painted by the wide range of colors, bright fruits and vegetables in the baskets lying around, often tainted by dark shades where the pieces began to rot. Their odorless land was stroked by the sweet scent sometimes invaded by a sour tint. Kaseem bent to pick up the bleeding tomato, the outlines of his skeletal back visible through his shirt glistening in her pupils. She had not seen her cousins watching her until they stepped ahead and stood behind her. They asked her to go home with her sister and start preparing dinner, instead of sniffing around for American products hidden in the pockets of the vendors and underneath the pile of tomatoes. Rajaa listened, and

returned home with an empty straw basket, and a chest full of unruly beats scattering in random directions.

A boy had never looked at her face that way, barely taking a moment to breathe. No one had stood so close to her, his face aligned with hers and looked down at her lips instead of her eyes. And when she remembers their eyes meeting, strange sensations would taunt the insides of her stomach, something prickling the flesh downwards. In order to feel the same warmth of her smoldering skin, she met him at the market several times throughout the year, daring to say nothing until he grew courageous at the end of year when her father was too distracted with the price of oil made of olives. He whispered a word or two, barely decipherable, and handed her a letter, which urged her to meet him at the ruins of the mosque near the foothill of Mosul, where he would wait for her till eternity.

When they stood side by side against the wall with red bricks jutting out, the blush disappearing from her cheeks, her face losing its pink shade, she swore that it would be the last time that they met. But when her cousins noticed her roving eyes at the market, and discovered the object of her gaze, it was Kaseem whom she ran to, near the same wall with no roof over their heads. Her family grew furious, forbidding her to see him again, threatening to burn her alive. So she escaped for the last time, when her family sat at prayer, facing the sun, God's eyes watching over them. She stood, her tense back resting on the broken wall, a small bag lying at her feet. She watched Kaseem pray on the

sand, his hands raised towards the Kiblah. She watched as the orange sun set behind the mountains with Kaseem on her side, nails grazing the rough surface of the rusty bricks.

The path would end soon, the house was somewhere nearby, Kaseem said. His father knows the man, and though different in beliefs, they have maintained a mutual understanding that Kaseem admires. This man was not like the rest of the Yazidi leaders in Mosul who snicker at the mention of Sunni Muslims. And unlike other Muslim men, his father, a Muslim cleric, did not believe that Rajaa's tribe prayed to the devil, neither did he mutter obscenities under his breath when a Yazidi man walked by. Still, Kaseem knew that he would be disowned at the drop of one word attempting to declare his desire to marry Rajaa. Even if his father had wanted to, he could not have given shelter to the unwed girl from the other tribe. He was the minority, he would be killed in his bed before the arrival of dawn.

Before entering the eternal sleep, he would watch his family die in front of him, perhaps by beheading, the sharp knife pressing on the skins, digging into the bones of their arched necks. Kaseem could hear the scratching of metal against dry bones in his sleep. So he took her to the house of the Yazidi leader, who had more power to survive. His reputation as an educated, warm hearted man, led Kaseem to believe that they could drop at his feet, without the danger of his head being separated from his shoulders as he tries to stand back up. But Rajaa was not convinced. She had asked Kaseem not to take her there, but to keep her with him for the night. But Kaseem had nowhere to take her, and a home to return to.

It is Saturday, the day of rest. One cheek pressed on the pillow, Rajaa wakes up at the home of the man who gave her shelter after a long hour of deliberation and disagreement with his wife. She called him irrational, warned him of turning their own tribe against them. It's wrong, she said, the blood of Adam cannot mix with the blood of these people who have separated from his immediate race. They had the pure blood, unlike the blood of this young boy who stood before them, pink streaks of discomfort painted all over his face. She kept on speaking, keeping a distance from her husband, but at the end of the night, when the plump woman, enraged with fear, called him a fool, her husband led the girl inside the house, asking her to change her clothes, after showing her the room that she would share with his daughters for the night. In the darkness of the night, as Rajaa changed her clothes, mostly dry already, he remembered the troubled face of Rajaa disappearing behind the white wall next to the door. Kaseem left the house as he had arrived, his wet shirt clinging to his body, making him shiver repeatedly.

Lying in her new bed, Rajaa could imagine the silent curses spinning out of the woman's mouth, as she sat beside her husband listening to the knocking at the door during the prayer at sunset, the peacock angel gleaming from the frame on the wall. When the door opened, her mother spilled inside the house, with Rajaa's cousin on her side, their voices rising above the sound of prayers. The wife of the man led her mother inside the room where Rajaa sat on the bed, tense fingers clutching the bed sheet, her toes barely touching the cold floor. Anger burning her eyes, her mother glared at her, accused her of shaming the family, taking away all their honor all at once by giving away her

virginity and converting to Saddam's religion. Saddam has gone, along with his religion, there is no place in their town for Sunnis. This is not the American run government, democracy that the youngsters often discuss, this is their land, their laws, and the tribe would decide her fate, not her lover, not her parents, not God himself.

Before Rajaa could resist, her mother called her a fool, slapping her across the face, a pink blotch on her cheeks gleaming like a shade of American make up. She asked her daughter if she believed that they could not find out where she is, did she not know who her uncle was, and what her cousins are capable of. Suddenly she gripped Rajaa's hand and wiping the glare off her eyes, she said that she forgave her daughter. Surprised, Rajaa looked up, conscious of her heart beating loudly in her ears. Tears dripping down her cheeks, her mother asked her to come home. The neighbors had not felt her absence yet, she could return home the next morning at the end of dawn. Before Rajaa could ask, she said that they would accept the boy too, but Rajaa needs to come home first. The commotion in the other room, created by her cousin, caused her mother to stand up on her weak knees and storm out of the room, towards her cousin, whose back she patted violently, as they left through the door through which they came in.

It is Saturday, the day of rest. Dragging her restless body out of bed, Rajaa reaches for the bag that Kaseem had carried on the way to the house. She packs her bag slowly, taking her time with each fold of her clothes. I am going home today, Rajaa whispers in an attempt to convince herself of its truth. The morning breeze that cooled her body is now disappearing, a thick breath of air is filling the room, warmed by the sun

that has now risen, stripping the sky of the pink shade staining the blue. Rajaa's ears feel warm, little beads of sweat trailing down the back of her neck down her backbone wetting her red tracksuit top, and stopping at her waist, at the top of her black pants. Though she does not believe in the existence of hell, she feels as if the rusty gates of some unknown land has opened, a volcano erupting somewhere inside, the lava rolling down her skin. Shielding herself from the fire, she whispers a dua encircled by the warm breath escaping her mouth.

*Lord! My sin and my guilt,  
Take them and remove them.  
O God, O God, O God, Amen.*

The camera watches as the object moves, a solid trail of red on a crowded landscape. After much struggle, shaking, jerking in opposite directions, it zooms in on the face caught in a headlock. A middle aged man, a bush of sharp blades of hair above his lips, drags the object through the crowd. He drags with great urgency, tightening his hold around the neck, long strands of frenzied hair escaping from his grip. The scene is similar to a scene that was recorded not long ago, moments before a scrawny chicken was prepared for a fat man's dinner. The tall, bony chicken, petrified eyes spilling out of its skull, ran, shrill cries trailing behind it. It ran in random directions, until it was caught, caught and squeezed between the chest and the underarm, the man's elbows jutting out in order to make enough space. And with the other hand, he holds its head, twisting it slightly, as it shrieks, eyes exploding from its skull. Caught in the unfamiliar position, its legs fly in random directions, dirty claws grasping the air for something to grab on, its long nails scratching the skin of the man watching its struggle, a smile peeking through his tight lips. Slowly, the grip gets stronger, and the head is twisted further, before the sharp blade of a knife falls on the skin of its neck, cutting the spongy flesh easily, scraping the moist bones underneath, the sound of the crack barely noticeable during playback.

The recording continues as the object is dragged through the crowd, its back bent awkwardly, head facing the spectators, the rest of the body caught in an unfamiliar position, feeble limbs trying to set themselves free. Submissive legs follow the direction of movement, arms swinging by the sides, until it is thrown on the ground, light brown sand smearing over the redness of the tracksuit. The agitated crowd of about a thousand

men, cheer in unison, the volume increasing with each piece of rock that is being thrown at the center of focus. The focal point wriggles on the sand like a worm caught under the foot of a fat man, the thick rubber of the sandal squeezing the dark juice out of its body. Dirty sandals of men encircling the thing fall on its face, the fluid oozing out of the skin, its color matching the shade of the tracksuit top. Soon, the black pants come off, pulled off the slender legs with a few quick swings, and the camera zooms on the bare legs, black smudges marking the spots where the sandals have hit. Thin straps of black underwear covered in wet sand gleams on the screen as the camera trembles, interrupting the bumpy recording on the cell phone. Bending its knees, the object attempts to bring them towards the chest, and slowly it takes the position of a child in its mother's womb. More stones drop on the length of the body as a foot stomps on the face, a soft cheek pressed on the rough grains of sand. Overpowered by the cheering of the crowd, the screams would be hardly noticeable during playback.

The spectators watch, several arms stretched forward, trying to capture the scene on their cell phones. They were passing the street when the girl was dragged out by her uncle from the home where she sought shelter. They followed, hoping to witness the unraveling of a juicy household dispute in public. It is only when she was thrown on the ground, a rock hitting her chest from the direction of her cousin's unlocked fist, that they realized that the spectacle would become more interesting. The cell phones came out of the warm pockets and the arms were raised above the heads, in order to get a clear view. In front of their eyes, the confused crowd watching from a distance became a participating team, and they became a part of it. The uncle yelled, "unfaithful woman,"

and the men pounced on the body lying on the ground. They were like a soccer team, guarding the ball together, every foot on the field aching to reach for it, to kick it with the heartiest gust of passion. During the game, when a layer of clothes fell off, a few men surrounding her live corpse, felt something cold in their spines, something warm exploding in their chests, something sharp prickling the veins under the stocky meat of their bodies covered by thick skin. They stopped for a moment, holding their breath still, baffled by the scene disentangling ahead of them, awkward for a moment, before the smiles crept on their faces again. Goal. And the cheers of the audience followed.

Their eyes follow the structure of the body lying at their feet. The ones who are stuck in the back, raise their arms higher, so the cameras do not miss one movement, one limb bending at the joint. The cousin of the girl is shouting, telling the spectators to take pictures, to continue recording, so with renewed enthusiasm, the hungry audience focus on the broken body, mud from the sandals sticking to her skin, dusty hair outlining her face. A jacket is thrown at her from a distance, covering her waist, so the shame would not seep through and wet the sand under their feet. But the sand is wet already, red, like the blood dripping through her skin. The jacket falls off, exposing her legs again, the straps of her underwear close to snapping. A few try to look away, but something magnetic drags their eyes by the pupils, and hold them in place. The broken hand covering her face move away as she tries to sit up and cover the flesh down her waist. A face covered in red, with features no longer distinguishable, gapes at the crowd, as another kick throws her back on the sand, the jacket flying farther from her legs. On the ground, her thighs separate, knees apart, as tries to find a safer side, and the flesh joins

again, as she covers her face, dipping it in the sand. A man towers above, green veins forming a web on his neck, her body squirming in between his legs. He kicks where it hurts the most, an invisible stream of blood spilling out of a long tunnel in a dark cave. The scream gets lost in the hordes of laughter, instead of deafening the crowd.

I try to look away, but something magnetic drags my eyes by the pupils and holds them in place. I watch, wondering if a dua escaped through her skin the moment the gray cinderblock kissed her head and raised up towards the sky, its blue shade stolen by the white sun. I watched, wondering if a warm gust of breath escaped her lips when the heavy block came down again, falling on her head, her scalp covered in red sweat. Their sin and their guilt, take them, and remove them, O God, O God, O God, Amen? The commotion continues around her as the girl lies on her stomach, hands resting on the sides of her face, arms folded at the elbows, one knee bent, dirty toes sticking out, cracked heels touching the slender calf of her straightened leg. With her right cheek plastered on the sand, she seems to stare ahead, tired eyes, wet, penetrating the bodies of the men, her gaze landing on an unknown oasis, a single coconut tree dancing softly in the wind. Like the couples in American movies, hand in hand, her head resting on his shoulder, sluggish heartbeats matching the festivities of the crowd fading with every dying breath.

I try to look away, watching the lake expanding, the pool of red surrounding her face, the waves spreading farther, reaching towards the feet of the men circled around her, wetting their sandals. I watch the solid trail of red on the crowded landscape on my

computer screen, sitting close, the way I sit while watching Hollywood films. No, this is different, I tell myself. It is like looking at a painting in the museum, the serene portrait of a child sleeping on a puff of clouds. Suddenly, the painter's hand trembles, and a drop of red paint falls from his brush, forming a puddle around the child's head. Not allowed to touch, my fingers graze the surface of the painting, and the paint, still fresh at the wound, leaks on my fingers. I try to wash it off, but it doesn't go away. The stain remains on my hand as I move away from the painting, blaming the artist for his mistake, charging him with threats. I walk away with my back towards the child, a red hue surrounding her, the sun hiding behind the clouds. I shut down the computer, I turn off the television. I crumple the newspaper as I throw it away. I shut the book, the words bleeding on the pages. I put down the pen, the ink leaking on the paper, covering it in darkness. With fingers still wet, I cover my eyes refusing to look in the dark. And soon, the face vanishes.

*Inspired by the story of Du'a Khalil Aswad, stoned to death in the town of Bashika, Iraq,  
on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April, 2007, and buried with the bones of a dog.*

**WITNESS**

Summer of 2006

And now we return to the chaotic situation in Iraq. Another suicide bomber in Baghdad. Five soldiers wounded. Three American journalists missing. We have no more substantial information on the situation at the moment. Keep watching on the War on Terrorism...

Mary snatches her gaze away from the television screen and directs it to the plate of fried chicken sitting on the kitchen counter. The drumsticks stare at her face torpidly like bowling pins waiting to be shot down. But the wings, they jut out like the edges of a pair of scissors waiting to cut her heart out. Mary shivers in the heat of the approaching summer and stares back at the pieces of chicken lying on the plate limply, accepting their fate, and yet accusing her of the inhuman show of slaughter. Inhuman? What do chickens know about human nature anyway? She returns the accusation and shakes her head at the ignorance of the chicken. Humanity... Animals are more “humane” than human beings! They hunt for food, not for pleasure. Silence.

The sound from the television spreads over the room like American cheese on a hot frying pan; it melts around the corners. Parliament members continue to argue on the topic of the right amount of torture that American soldiers can apply on the Iraqi detainees. Mary glances back at the chicken that she has spent the last half an hour preparing for her family. The pieces were already cut and cleaned when she covered them with the salty paste of flour, but as she fried them in the steaming oil on the frying pan, she could feel the burning sensation on her own body. When she closed her eyes she could hear the chicken trying to scream as it died, railing against mankind. And she could

hear the silence after the screams, hovering over its naked body surrounded by scattered feathers with bloody polka dots. She looked at the pores on its pink skin that resembled the goose bumps that covered her own. Then, slowly, the skin was taken off, and the weight of a sharp blade fell on the body and chopped it up into smaller and smaller pieces. Blood, blood, and more blood gushing out...Mary feels the stream of blood wetting her fingers and rolling over her wrist down her arms. She quickly grabs the plate, opens the door of the oven, shrugs it inside, and slams the door shut. The plate filled with the mass of blood, flesh, and bones disappear into the darkness, orange flames devouring it.

Any time now, her husband and son will be home, sitting on the couch in the living room, biting into the flesh of the chicken resting in the oven at the moment, their eyes shining with the cannibalistic look of hunger mixed with victory. Victory. The game is over. The Georgia Bulldogs won against the Yellow Jackets of Georgia Tech. She saw it on the regional news half an hour ago. Her husband, an ex Bulldog, must be rejoicing with his friends and the rest of the alumni of UGA, beer bottles clanking against each other. But why did he have to take Andy with him? He looked so stuffed in the little red Bulldog jacket before they left. Mary's face saddens at the thought of her four year old son's body on his father's lap during the game, his little back resting on Bob's shirt that would cling to the sweaty chest. And after the game, he must have been lifted up on Bob's shoulders, his little head peeking on top of the crowd.

Mary told Bob not to drink. He would have to drive back. *If you're going to drink then leave Andy here and go alone. He's too young to understand the game.* A composed look of exasperation replaced Bob's impatiently, excited expression. *Stop whining all the time. I won't drink. He's my son. I can take care of him.* Your son? Mary's lips twisted, utterly disgusted. No, he's my son. I take care of him when you come home drunk every night. I keep him away from you, tuck him in bed after dinner, and make sure I close the door when I leave so he doesn't have to hear us arguing. And when he sees the cut at the corner of my lips in the morning or the bruise on my arm, I tell him, Momma fell and hurt herself. He is my son, my son, because of whom I haven't smashed your head with a hammer yet.

No, really, Bob isn't a bad guy. It's just the alcohol that infects his mind sometimes. At other times he's fine, he really is, Mary tells herself. He does not hit her on a regular basis, only sometimes, when the infection spreads over his body from his head, the parasite gripping his vocal cord to climb down the throat. It hops on to the heart, and like a monkey jumping from branch to branch, leaps on to his arm, and then lands on his hand. His hand rises and passes the parasite to her. It stays within her, but leaves his body, and he calms down. And when he is calm, he behaves like a good husband, mellow and accepting, and Mary does not complain; she never cared enough to complain or be happy. He does not cheat on her or threaten to leave her. He just gets frustrated sometimes. It's hard for him, she knows. Everyday is a struggle for both of them. She struggles to stay alive and pretend that the banality of her life is not engulfing

her. He struggles to keep living a normal, married life like the ones lead by his buddies whose wives love them. They both struggle not to regret getting married to each other.

Everything happened so fast that neither had the time to contemplate. They met at a club on a Friday night. She was drunk, he was drunk, and they made drunken love when they reached his apartment. In the morning Bob woke up to find the beautiful stranger sitting on the left corner at the foot of the bed, her long dirty blond hair covering the length of her slim, bare back, and when she turned around, he vaguely recognized the face streaked with dry tears. She finally spoke the first sober words, her lips trembling under the bright pink nose, *Last night never happened*. She pulled the blanket that was covering his body as he took a quick breath to swallow his beer belly inside him. She covered herself with it, grabbed her clothes lying on the floor, and walked swiftly towards the bathroom. Bob's plump fingers grabbed the pen from the side table, tore a piece of a page of the Atlanta Journal Constitution lying on the floor, and wrote on top of the face of an Afghani girl, a light blue veil covering her face, *Bob White, 404 580 6428—Call me if you need anything*. The tap in the bathroom sink turned silent, and when the door opened, he grabbed her purse and pushed the little piece of paper inside. The eyes of the girl smiled beneath the veil as Mary walked with urgency towards the bed, gripped the handle of the purse in her tense fist, and ran towards the door, her black high heels trailing behind her.

Two months later, Mary found herself dialing the 10 digit number with slow, deliberate pressure. Bob picked up almost immediately as if he was waiting for the call all his life.

*Hello.*

*Remember me? We met at the Buddha Bar two months back...*

*Yes, of course I do. I was hoping...*

*I'm pregnant.*

Two weeks later, they were married. And another six and a half months later, Mary gave birth to a premature Andy. But by then, a few things had changed. John knew her story, and Mary knew that he had no story to tell. It was a blank sheet of paper that Mary did not care to fill, and Mary's sheet was so full that John could not find a spot to fill.

CNN anchor Rudy Bakhtar is back with more news on the video presented by the Al Jazeera website on the three American journalists captured by a group of masked Iraqi men. They are demanding the release of 9 specific Iraqi detainees. Mary cannot tolerate the news anymore. It's always the same sensational stories. The war is over, but the discussion just won't stop. Why should I care about Iraq? My life has nothing to do with war. The past has passed. I don't want to live in fear every second of my waking present. She grabs the remote and decides to change the channel to something more hopeful.

Perhaps, she should check on the commentary after the game, but then, it's only a matter of time her husband and son return. Bob's big, round eyes would be shining with

excitement as he describes the game to her in detail—every significant move made by the players, the violent ways they fought over the ball, the fights, the war on the field of Athens, Georgia—the War. It’s just a game. It’s always, just—a—game. Football is the biggest part of her husband’s life, bigger than his wife, Mary hopes. It keeps him occupied, so occupied, that he hardly notices the haunting look that visits her eyes. Sometimes, something like fear strains her eyes, especially when the news is on, and the news is always on when sports isn’t. The phone rings, pulling Mary out of her thoughts, and keeps on ringing while she stands idly. Slowly she puts the remote back on the kitchen counter and walks over to the side table of the living room attached to the kitchen. She picks up the phone.

*Hello.*

*Hey, Andy and I will be back in an hour. We’ll be stopping over at Billy’s. Billy and Nancy are having a barbeque.*

*Okay, just remember you have to drive b...*

The line cut.

A free hour on her day off from wearing the waitress uniform—the tight white shirt and the black short skirt covered by a white apron, and a name tag on her heart. She dresses in white every day, like a bride waiting for her groom to arrive at the altar. Mary cannot decide if an hour is too long or too short. Around here, time does not move. The clock ticks, ticks, and ticks, but it’s like pushing a heavy vacuum cleaner on a rough carpet, push, push, and push, until your arms start hurting. But time alone is a blessing. Bob’s large, obese body does not come in the way and the constant expectancies of being

a wife do not hit her across the face, or in the vagina. Every night, she tries to prepare her body to lay under her husband's heavy weight, and take it, and fake it. Usually she remains numb, and usually, Bob can see the look of destitution in her eyes, even in their most intimate moments.

She closes her eyes and wishes to open them to find a different face bending over her. But it's always the same old face of her husband, wet with perspiration, and it's always the same old smell, and the same old disappointment. When he kisses her, she imagines her lips touching a different set of lips. She wishes that she were blind so she could live in her imaginations, in her dream world, with her handsome knight in shining armor. She knows that it is not a just a world that exists in her dreams. It also exists in her memories, in every breath that reeks of betrayal, and in every shattered piece that has been glued together to reconstruct her heart. The cracks remain, and the glue loosens its strength with every bomb that blasts in the mines of Iraq. Every stone that the Iraqi kids throw at the American soldiers hits her hard. And every death takes a piece of her heart apart. Every day she wants to turn off the television and crawl under the bed, shield her dreams from all the bombing, and pretend that the world is a peaceful place where lovers unite. But the news is always on and the fear never leaves. Wars never end and lovers never unite. But strangers do. The war roams around, dragging its sagging sack of tricks behind it.

Dragging herself towards the kitchen, Mary reaches the bottom drawer beside the oven and opens it. It's the last place where Bob would look, he hardly enters the kitchen.

Mary looks down to find a few butter knives sitting on top of a notebook with a blood red cover. Underneath it lays a four and a half year old copy of the TIMES magazine with the picture of an Afghani woman taking her veil off in the midst of a few other women behind veils. Mary takes out the magazine and turns the pages simultaneously anticipating and loathing rediscovering what lies inside. She reaches the middle of the magazine with its already broken backbone and comes upon a white envelope that shows traces of old age and bad handling. It is addressed to her, and the upper left corner of the envelope reads in red ink—John Smith, Kabul, Afghanistan.

Mary takes out the notebook and puts the magazine back inside. The woman without a veil smiles shyly as she shuts the drawer. With the envelope, and inside it, the letter, in one hand, she reaches for the door of the fridge with the other, and jerks it open. Grabbing a bottle of cheap beer, she shuts the door. Then she walks over to the living room across from the kitchen and sits on the rocking chair in front of the television. Liberating the bottle from the cap, she takes a sip of beer and remembers that she never really cared for the taste. She only drinks out of necessity. This is what urine must taste like, she considers, salty, and bitter, and stinking, like the taste of evaporation of urine in the bathrooms of the restaurant where she works.

Taking one big gulp from the urinating bottle, Mary sets it on the carpet along with the bleeding notebook, and with trembling fingers, takes out the letter from inside the worn out envelope. The letter has a yellowish tint along the edges and shows evidence of torture. It has been crumpled and straightened out, and crumpled again, and

straightened out again, then folded. The creases still remain. Mary opens the folds and looks up at the television screen. In the news, the reality of the realization of Iraq's new constitution is being discussed and Iraq is being compared to Afghanistan in its move towards democracy. It is working, very slowly, but it will work. The troops cannot return yet. Mary returns her gaze towards the letter lying on her lap. She decides to read it again although she has the words memorized in her head, and the story plays in her mind almost every day, like a movie. Like a song set to repeat on the CD player, it repeats itself, and repeats, and repeats. Or maybe like a broken record, it gets stuck on the same words, and repeats, and repeats. I'm getting married tomorrow, I'm getting married...

*Dear Mary,*

*I'm getting married tomorrow. Please don't cry. You know I hate it when you cry. I know you love me, and I love you. But we can't be together. I have a responsibility towards my country. And I have a responsibility towards the world that I have to fulfill. You didn't support me when I signed up for the military, but I know you were just scared, not selfish. You can't be alone. You need to be with someone who will always be by your side. You can't live in fear every day, so you broke up with me. But I know you were just angry, not selfish. I know, in your heart, you are still waiting for me. But I'm not selfish either. We are at a state of war, Rochelle. I need to protect my country. And I need to protect the innocent civilians here in Afghanistan, these people who I have come to save. There is someone I need to save. And I need your help because you're the best friend I have in the world. By the time you receive this letter, I will be a married man. And I'm sending my wife to America. Please try to explain it to Mom. Only you can make her understand. So I need you to pay attention, listen to what I have to say, and try to understand that there things in the world that are bigger than you and I. You will do this for me, won't you, Mary? You know I still love you, and I always will. But circumstances happen to people. War happens to people. And things change. My life took an abrupt turn in the last few days, and I want you to know what happened to me. So I'm sending you my diary. Yes, I have a diary now, funny, isn't it? There is nothing to do here. So we drink, and we write. And we remember. I remember you. But remember me not. And don't wait for me because when I return, I will be a different man. War changes everything.*

*Love, John*

*Kabul, Afghanistan*

*15<sup>th</sup> December, 2001*

*Ps. I'm sending a few lines from my favorite poem for you. Yes, I still love Shakespeare.*

*And I still love you.*

*Nay, if you read this line, remember not  
The hand that writ it; for I love you so  
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot  
If thinking on me then should make you woe.*

*-William Shakespeare, No longer mourn for me when I am dead*

Mary remembers the first time she read the letter. The paper crumpled enclosed in her fist as her veins exploded and the green branches spread around like a spider web under the pale skin of her hand. The clock ticked away, tick tick tick, like the beating of her heart, while John sat beside his bride. Mary remembers feeling the greatest desire to take a knife and cut his heart open, right through the middle, one red atrium and ventricle on each side. I want to examine it. With tongs, I'm going to uncover all the folds. I'll take a flashlight and delve inside. Is this a game to you? Hide and seek? Where did you hide the memories of us? Tell me it's there, and I'll stitch your heart back up and get you ready for your bride.

The diary drops on the floor. She bends down to pick it up, and on her way up, she takes another sip of beer and looks up at the television screen. Iraq is not on the news but there is a documentary on the situation in Egypt. President Mubarak's step towards democracy has proved to be just a step towards a liberal authoritarian government or an illiberal democracy. The Muslim Brotherhood has gained more support because now they are allowed to come out in the open. But the people believe that it is a step, a slow one, but a step towards freedom.

Mary fixes her skirt, blows the dust off the cover, and places the diary back on her lap. Then she opens it, and letting the damp smell of the paper enamor her, begins to read the words written in red ink on the first page, the red seeping through the pores of the paper, dripping on each other. Mary remembers not being able to concentrate, still caught on the words in his letter, tears of accusation dropping on the alphabets, wetting the paper. Your bride... Did you sleep with her, John? When you made love to her, didn't you imagine me in her place? Didn't you find two bodies in bed with you? When you kissed her, didn't you feel my lips? Didn't you feel my knees bending in your grip, under her skin? Didn't you remember the smell...?

She remembered the first time she read the letter, sitting on carpet, knees tucked in front of her as she stared at the clock. His wedding night. Tick. With his bride. Tick. Making love. Tick. Tick, Tick, Tick, and the legs begin to spread wider and wider, and again, they come together, and again, they spread away. The cycle repeats itself, again and again. What did he say to her, when their wedding dance was over? "I Love You?" The clock stops ticking as the legs come together. They spread apart again, and this time, they rotate counterclockwise.

Soon his story unfolded in front of Mary on the pages of his diary. It took a turn that she did not expect, and pulled her into the past, following the footsteps backwards—footsteps that her feet did not make, in a time and place unfamiliar to her. She could not recognize the faces roaming around or the traditions of the other world. The jealousy she felt towards her competition a few minutes ago transformed into numbness. The rage she

felt towards her ex-boyfriend quieted down to a silent understanding. She realized that he had traveled too far, and that she was nowhere in sight. She did not recognize his world or the world he recognized. After four and a half years, the old, unfamiliar world opens on her lap as she walks the pages of history once again. Once again she realizes how familiar it has become in her dreams, how far away, how close to her heart.

25th November, 2001

It's a different world here. Lying on my bed in Athens, Georgia, I have dreamt of fighting this war in Afghanistan, but I had no idea what it would be like to be here in flesh and bones. Layers of never-ending blankets of sand surround us. Dirt, guns, and us in our uniforms. A few men with turbans wrapped around their heads walking around, very few women, mostly covered in veils. We have landed near Kandahar-Herat desert highway to combat Taliban and al-Qaeda forces. Now we are in the Marines camp getting some rest before our mission begins. I'm preparing myself to face what is to come next. God help us.

6<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

I dream of home sometimes. I dream of waking from my dreams, sitting up on my bed, and looking out of the window to see the kids playing in the street. Riding polished bicycles down the street, playing with orange basketballs and polychromatic hula hoops. Kids. Suddenly Mom opens the door and yells at them for making too much noise. Then she takes a few quick, heavy steps towards the mailbox, the American flag waving in the light breeze of the hot, sticky day. She checks the mail, grabs hers and mine — mostly sympathy cards that say how sorry they are to know that Dad has passed away. I remember that I'm not sorry. Where he went is better than home where he lay in bed for years with a paralyzed spinal cord — mark of a proud war Veteran.

But I dream of home. The ice cream truck stops in front of the house and parks beside my Chevy truck. The kids run home to get money. The sticker of the American flag at the back window of my truck glares as the sunlight hits its surface. The kids come back out laughing and shrieking like the eager little sparrows chirping on the branches of the gradually balding sycamore tree around the corner of the street. Mom shuts the door once she is back inside. In my room, I slowly put on my cream and olive green camouflage military uniform. I put on my combat boots and hat, and I turn around.

A bomb blasts somewhere near by. The kids scream, and scream, and scream. Their screams stir me awake. I sit up on my bed and look out of the window to see the kids playing in the street somewhere in the distance. Rolling worn down tires down the street using sticks, playing with unshapely stones and dirty jackfruit seeds. Kids. A ten year old was heavily injured the other day while playing with a landmine. He took his last breath in the local hospital, in his father's arms. I watched.

Sometimes I think I can smell Mom's apple pies in the kitchens when we are raiding houses of suspected Taliban leaders. Babies crying, scared, wide eyed kids staring, the mothers, sisters, and wives begging while we drag out their husbands, fathers, or sons, and all I can think of is the smell of apple pie. Yes, sometimes we get the wrong men, but most of the times, they are the ones we are looking for. Sometimes I work as the interpreter since I have enough weeks of training in the Arabic language to assure them that everything will be fine. I'm the only one they understand, and I'm the only one who understands them. They speak to me sometimes and I try to understand. Sometimes they

curse us out and I try to understand. Some of us don't try, they react, and react badly, but I try to understand. I imagine the Afghani forces dragging Dad's limp body out of our house in America. I see Mom cursing at them. I smell the apple pie in their kitchens knowing that there is none, and I move on with my job.

I see Mary behind the veils of the Afghani women. Like some of the kids, some of the women spit at us lifting their veils, knowing that we will not retaliate. But they also lift their veils when they come to talk to us, to tell us their stories, to reveal hide outs of their fanatic relatives. Fear lurches behind them; you can see it in their eyes, even through their veils. But they are brave women. Like the American women I know. I know Mary is brave too, she is just angry, scared for me, but she is brave. I see her fear in the eyes of the Afghani women. I see her eyes full accusation when we take their men away from them.

Sam is here.

It has just been announced that the Taliban have agreed to surrender Kandahar to the Northern Alliance. However, no agreement has been made on the fate of Mullah Omar or Osama Bin Laden. But this is good news. I should go.

9<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

We are changing history here in Afghanistan. Afghani troops have hurt many of our people, but we are changing history. Many of my friends are hurt, two killed in a landmine accident, but we are changing history. We are tired, eager to go home, back to our families, but we are not giving up. We are changing history. The Taliban have surrendered Kandahar and they have withdrawn from the city. The ones who are left have been captured by the people. We are changing history, but why does it feel so strange? Like we are combating cruelty with cruelty.

What I saw today got stamped on my mind for the rest of my life. We watched Taliban officials and soldiers dragged along the streets by the people, beaten, and humiliated, their bodies causing friction against the gravel on the streets, clothes ripping off, wild cries, and begging to be released. Journalists were recording the scene, the rejoicing of the people, the Northern Alliance fighters riding in trucks, waving at the passerby. The photographers ran along the sides of the trucks taping or clicking their cameras. They recorded women taking off their veils, the hijabs, and the burkhas even. Click, click, click, they click the beginning of women's liberation in Afghanistan.

That's when I noticed a young girl in the midst of all the other women. As we were passing by, something about her eyes caught my attention, something, I don't know what. Perhaps it was the determined look of sad acceptance that revealed itself when she lifted her veil to look at the women around her. Then she looked straight at me, maybe

because she realized that I was watching her. We jumped on our jeeps and the engine roared. I turned around to look at her again. Her skin was fair, a sharp nose neatly placed between the pink softness of her lips and the icy coldness of her gray eyes. The jeep headed for our camp, and slowly, her face became smaller and smaller, and eventually disappeared in the crowd that now resembled a hill of ants.

I don't know why I'm writing about her. It's time to go to bed. If the others know that I'm up so late writing in my diary, they'll laugh at me. Not that they don't already. Sam calls me "the hippie soldier." They don't understand why I'm here. They say I need to be out there protesting the war, writing poetry and songs for peace. I know I'm not a typical soldier. Sometimes even I wonder why I signed up with the Marines. Perhaps to understand Dad a little better. He believed in the cause and went to Vietnam without a doubt or fear. I don't know if he bought the justification behind war when he lay in bed for years, paralyzed, too shocked to speak ever again. I couldn't ask him. So I'm here to find out for myself. They say I'm too unrealistic for war, always lost in my own world. True. But I would rather stay like this. So, now I'll just go inside, climb on my bunk bed, and enter my world of dreams. Maybe I'll go home again.

10<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

I met her again, sitting in front of the burned down corpse of a home, her left palm resting on the top of her head. The shade of strength had disappeared from her face. The ice in her eyes melted and rolled down her cheeks.

While we were in the city yesterday, Taliban forces had entered the nearby villages, and continued to push for their policies. They burned down homes of those that were known to be helping the Northern Alliance. We went to inspect the situation. I followed the female reporter who was covering the story of the incident as she went from victim to victim, until she came to the girl with wet cheeks who spoke in broken English with a haunted look in her gray eyes.

*My sister is still inside.*

When we brought the figure out on a stretcher and placed it on the ground, I realized that it was no longer a body of flesh and blood. The fire had devoured the hair on her head and spit out the rest of the body covered in its black saliva. It looked like a chicken with its skin peeled off, fried in steaming oil on a frying pan, accidentally over burnt, burnt, a body of black coal, a diamond in disguise. The girl leaped towards the darkness of the body and tried to hold it in her arms. I heard the clicking of cameras. Suddenly I felt something inside me burning. Mourning is such a personal ceremony. It's not for the world to use in order to create sensational news. I shielded the girl away from the journalists and photographers and tried to walk her towards the jeep, but she kept on pulling away, her arms stretched towards the crisp body lying in front of her. Slowly, her body seemed to lose its shape, her backbone became jelly, and she dropped in my arms.

What does a Christian American soldier do with the body of an unconscious Muslim Afghani girl covered in a silk black burkha, only her face showing? Since she

had no family left, I handed her over to a crowd of Afghani women. Some covered their faces, some looked at me with curiosity, some with eyes that seemed to dart looks of repulsion. When I looked they lowered their gazes, some kept staring. I stared right back. I know I am American, and the American government supports Israel at destroying Palestine, but I am here to help. I know we have taken some of their men away, but I am here to help. I know some soldiers have tortured the detainees inhumanely for information or for amusement, but I am here to help. I know some of them don't want our help, but I am here to help. Whether they want it or not. And if I could, I would help this girl who has just lost everything overnight.

11<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

I feel a strange responsibility to protect this girl. As if God has made me her savior. But, does she even need my help? And even if she does, where am I going to find her? And even if I find her, what can I do? Me, an American soldier, one of those who are bombing her country on a daily basis, killing innocent citizens along with the people they are targeting. Bin Ladin's forces have retreated to mountains in Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan. US troops are bombarding caves where he is believed to be hiding. He has not been found yet, but so many have died for the cause. Sometimes I wonder if all the deaths are worth the cause. Sometimes.

14<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

I found her. I was ordered to deliver a supply of medicines to the Red Cross Refugee camp. While looking for Sister Alice I moved the soft curtain and peeked inside the women's tent. The girl, uncovered by a veil was lying on a bed nearest to the mouth of the tent. I quickly closed the curtain but remembered hearing her voice faintly.

*Soldier...*

I tagged at the curtain and looked at her through the narrow gap. She had risen, and I saw her long, flowing black burkha again as she walked towards me, lifting the transparent veil that had dropped on her face. Quickly letting go of the curtain, I stiffened. I moved to the side when she came out and I stood a little far from her, trying to maintain a significant amount of distance. She bit the corner of her lower lip and took a deep breath.

*Thank you. For trying to help.*

*Do you know English?*

*Yes, I used to go to school. My mother taught us at home too. I know English. But not good.*

I remembered the smell of smoke in the village and the burnt figure of her sister.

*I'm sorry about your sister.*

*Do not be. She is in the heaven.*

A green shade came over her grey eyes as they trembled, moisture glistened in the corners. Her eyes were amazing. They changed color and texture with every new

emotion in her body. She looked uncomfortable in her long, black burkha which kept on reminding me of the empty night sky, no star glistening on its face.

*You can take off your veil, you know. The Taliban are not here anymore.*

Of course I don't remember the conversation word by word, but this is how I remember it. She looked at me, with the same steely eyes as I saw before.

*You think you are liberating women of Afghanistan, don't you, from the oppression of Taliban?*

With her left hand, she tightly held her veil in between her middle and index fingers.

*You think this is a sign of oppression? There is no Taliban in America or other Islamic countries? You do not have any Muslim woman in America cover her hair? Saudi? Egypt? Pakistan? It is only in Afghanistan? Afghanistan was not always like this. We had female doctors, teachers, and lawyers. They worked in burkhas. Taliban came into power. Stopped the women. They stopped our lives, but not our religion. They made their own religion. Because of them, I have no family today. I know what Taliban is. I know what oppression is. And I know what Islam is. You show us taking off our veils on your television as a sign of women's freedom in Afghanistan. I know, you videotape us, take photos. I want freedom from oppression, not from Islam. I want freedom of choice. I choose to wear this thing you call a symbol of oppression. But you don't understand. You don't remember that you are here to fight oppression, not religion.*

*I understand.*

The only thing I tried to do all my life is understand. Understand people who are different from us, yet so much alike. I studied literature, I studied philosophy. Just to be able to understand.

A little flexibility showed in her cheeks and her lips stretched in what resembled a smile, vaguely. The steel in her eyes bent a little and I realized that she was quite malleable, at least at this state. So I ventured further, ignoring the boundaries that were supposed to be there between an Afghani and an American, between a Muslim and a Christian, between a woman and a man.

*Why did they burn your house? Were you helping the Northern Alliance?*

*No, we were helping no one. We were trying to survive. But they will not let us.*

*And now only I am left.*

*Who? Who's after you?*

*I cannot tell you.*

*What happened to your family? Will you tell me?*

*Why do you want to know my story? You are not a journalist.*

*I know, still. I want to know. You can trust me.*

I felt a sense of courage noticing the level of comfort this girl shared with me. She was not like the others.

*I do not have much time, and I do not have a story to tell. But I can tell you the story of Zaida. It is famous in our village. I will tell you if you promise to write about it. Tell her story to the world.*

We walked over to the benches a little farther away from the tent. She seemed awfully modern for an Afghani girl. Something in her eyes said that experience has taught her to let go of her inhibitions. Even completely veiled apart from her face, the posture of her body surpassed mine in its forwardness.

*I'm not a journalist. I'm a soldier. But I promise to try. I promise to help.*

We sat on opposite ends of the wooden bench with a large gap in between us. Learning Arabic in college, ten weeks of rigorous schooling in the language, and reading the “green book” that describes the culture, customs, and phrases, came in use. Her lips trembled as she started speaking but soon they became stable, and her voice turned firm, constant. She spoke in fairly good English, and using Arabic words here and there revealed a story to me that I would never forget.

Zaida lived with her family in northern Kabul. At school she was well celebrated for her never ending strings of white teeth that beamed when she smiled, and she always smiled. She would tell her friends that she would become a lawyer when she grows up. The black burkha is like a black robe, you see. I will pace around the courtroom in my black robe and charge the criminals for their crimes. The judge will punish them and there will be no more crime in Afghanistan. She smiled. When she turned sixteen her parents found a suitable husband for her, and she smiled away her ambitions. She was married off to Alauddin Khwazammel, a Pashtun policeman who also owned a general store. Every morning, he would go to work in the village of Paghman, which was an hour's drive away. Alauddin would pour petrol in his Vespa scooter while Zaida prepared lunch for him. She would put it in a lunchbox and tie it to the back of the scooter. Her husband would smile and drive off to work. On his way back, sometimes he would buy glass bangles for her; sometimes he bought her Afghani music cassettes. They would sit together and listen to music in their small cassette player, and when her husband held her hand, Zaida would pull down her veil, covering her forehead and eyes. She would look down shyly, lifting the corners of her lips in a smile. It was a union that blossomed into love. Zaida soon gave birth to their first child whom they called Maryam. Two years later Aqsa was born. Another three years later, Allah blessed them with their first son, Thaer. Then in September of 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul. And everything changed.

September 19<sup>th</sup> 1996, Maryam remembers vaguely. She is turning thirteen today. Amma has promised to make beef kebabs for the special occasion. No school today either. Some students from the Madrassa came and closed it for the day. They told all the

students to go home and help their mothers cook. Maryam does not understand. Does that mean that the mathematics exam in third period will be postponed? But she is prepared for it today. Amma doesn't need help cooking. Maryam tugs her sister's hand and walks towards home. Aqsa skips along happily. She hates school and cannot wait to go home and play with her rag dolls. She asks Maryam to make a boy doll for her, "We will get the girl doll married to the boy doll and we will all eat beef kebabs to celebrate!" Aqsa chirps like a jovial sparrow in a group on a tree branch. A group of men standing in the corner stare at them. The man with the longest beard shouts, "Why are you girls wandering outside? Go home!" Aqsa stops skipping. Her chirping ends. Maryam grasps her little sister's hand tighter and speeds up.

Maryam can hear her uncle's voice as she reaches for the metal handle on the door. She kneels down and tucks Aqsa's hair inside the pink lacy hijab, then adjusts her own and ties the knot under the chin tighter. As she opens the door to step inside, she sees her uncle's back. Her father points at her mother, "I told her, Bhai. But she doesn't understand. I'll explain it to her. It won't happen again." "Make sure it does not happen again. Allah is watching you. And so is the Taliban." Maryam's uncle turns around and begins to leave but halts when he spots Maryam and Aqsa at the door. He turns back. "Oh, by the way, we have closed down all the schools for girls. There is no need for them to study. Teach them some cooking and cleaning. Teach them how to be pious, obedient wives. They'll have to get married soon. Take care of your daughters, sister Zaida." He snickers, "And put some clothes on them." His profile turns from Zaida to Alauddin, "We have a meeting at eight tonight. You are coming, aren't you, Brother?" "Yes, Bhai. I'll be

there,” Maryam’s father replies. “See you then. Salaam.” Her uncle turns around, passes the sisters on the way, and frowns at them as he heads out with their cassette player.

Her father turns towards her mother, “What was the need of arguing with him?” Her emotional mother throws a defiant glare at her husband, “The man doesn’t know anything about Islam. Music is haram? We were breaking God’s law for all these years? My daughters cover their hair. They read the Quran every day. But Allah asks every one to be educated in other fields too. Now our girls can’t go to school? Allah says all men are equal. He didn’t place women under men’s feet.” “Don’t talk about my brother like that. You know nothing about Islam. All men are equal. Not all men and women.”

That night, there is no beef kebab on the table. When her father returns home from the meeting and sees Maryam making dolls with torn rags and strings, he grabs them and throws them in the garbage. Things like dolls and pictures are haram, he had learned at the meeting. Her grandparents’ picture on the wall is taken off too because all sorts of art are haram; they take your mind off Allah. Maryam watches her mother’s face reddening, her nose trembling, and sudden violent surges of tears invading her eyes. Her husband grabs her hand, takes her inside their room, and locks the door. The children lay in bed, listening to the faint echo of their parents’ argument. Maryam’s parents start arguing that day and the arguing never stops.

Kabul has become a different city. The lawlessness of life in Afghanistan, a left over from the Civil War suddenly disappears. The Taliban governs everything in the city

now. Maryam's school never re-opens. Neither do the other girls' schools and colleges. The women are not allowed to go outside without close male relatives escorting them. So the girls are always stuck inside the house with their mother. Days pass slowly and nights do not seem to end. Maryam meets with her friends when her father or younger brother takes her to their houses. Thaeer has been shifted to the Madrassa for more devout Islamic studies. When he returns, he plays with other boys his age in the streets but Alauddin does not let his daughters step outside the house alone. Maryam knows that she loves her father but her respect for him seems to lessen with each day. He is not the same man anymore. "He is a Taliban now," she hears her mother tell Maryam's aunt, "He believes what that terrible brother of his tells him to believe, he moves as the man instructs him to; he has become a puppet." When Maryam asks her mother if the Taliban are bad people, her mother replies, "No, the Taliban are students. They are not bad people. It's just some of the leaders who are making their own rules. They read the Quran literally, but the Quran is a work of poetry, you see. Poetry can be interpreted in different ways," she smiles. Maryam realizes that her mother has also changed like her father has. The glitter has left Zaida's eyes and flown to some other country far far away. Maryam decides that some day, she will travel all around the world, search for the lost glitter, and bring it back to her mother's eyes.

A few months pass, and one day Maryam finds her mother's eyes glistening with the same shimmer as before. Zaida grabs her children aside and tells them in whispers that she is going to tell them a secret that they can never tell their father. "There is an underground school for women near the house taught by a Catholic nun and a few

Afghani women who work in a group called RAWA—the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan,” Zaida explains to her children. “Thaer, you’ll take them there when you’re going to the Madrassa and before returning home, you’ll pick them up. You all must reach home before your father returns.” The eyes of the children sparkle with excitement at the advance of adventure, the hope for escape mixed with the danger of getting caught. Their tense faces nod in agreement. And the plan works.

The plan works for several months, until one day her father returns home early due to a stomach ache and finds his daughters missing. Zaida tells him that Thaer has dropped them off at her sister’s house. But as soon as the girls enter with their brother, Aqsa runs towards her mother with her notebook, “Look what Sister April taught us today! A nice English poem! Twinkle twinkle little...” Alauddin slowly comes out of the bedroom and advances towards his wife. He stares at Zaida with icy eyes that never learned to blink. The children watch as their father slaps their mother across the face, throwing her on the ground. The dark mark of the five fingers does not leave Zaida’s face for a week. And the mark those fingers made on her heart, does not leave, until the end. The little star falls on earth and stops twinkling.

The fallen star never rises again. Afghanistan, which seems to have risen, now falls again. Zaida discovers with disappointment the fact that she is pregnant. Again. Another innocent baby to face the wrath of mankind—the inhumanity of life like it is. Madness has swallowed the mild, smiling face of her husband and spat out the bloody face of a monster. Bombings, mass rapes, and murders take place every other day and

Alauddin's job as a policeman takes him to all the specimens of gruesome cruelty around town, and soon he becomes desensitized to all the inhumane behavior of human beings. His brother feeds Taliban fundamentalism into his already infected brain, and the infection spreads throughout his body. He rages and loses his temper over small stifles at home, and soon he starts abusing his wife on a daily basis. At first he would slap her around, but now he has started beating her, sometimes with sticks. To justify his actions, he brings up the Quran; he states things that the Taliban leaders tell him to be true. Maryam reads the Quran too but she cannot find the phrases that her father mentions.

Maryam scans the Quran to find the part where Allah forbids his people to take medicines but her father says that medicines are haram, Allah will take care of the sick. Aqsa's fever rises but Alauddin insists that they pray. Zaida puts wet cloth on the burning forehead of her daughter, watching the struggle on her face. Finally she talks to her husband, "Your daughter is in pain, don't you see? We are praying, but the fever isn't dropping." Alauddin snaps at his wife, "Allah does not listen to prayers of impure hearts. Your heart has become corrupt. I have seen you wearing heels. It is forbidden. The sound of heels attracts men. You do it on purpose. You whore..."

Maryam throws her favorite pair of shoes away that night because it has heels. Tears drop down her cheeks as she prays and prays but Aqsa's fever does not drop. Maryam cannot see her sister in pain anymore. She finds a few dirhams in the pocket of his kurta while washing her father's clothes. She takes it and goes to the store with her brother to get some medicines. They return home and feed Aqsa but when Alauddin

returns, their world collapses. He realizes that the money is missing and starts growling like a tiger with a whimpering deer under its paws, ready to tear up the flesh and devour it. “Who stole the money?” Silence. “I have a family full of thieves and liars! Who stole it? Tell me or I’ll beat all of you up.” Zaida shields Maryam and Thaer behind her. Aqsa watches with faint eyes from the bed. “You won’t tell? You know what the punishment is for stealing? The Taliban are going to cut your hands off. That is Allah’s law.” The beating begins. Like a madman, he hits his family, one member after another and does not stop until Maryam shrieks, “I took it!” “You! Why?” Alauddin roars. “Aqsa needed medicines...” “I told you all to pray. Men cannot change their fate. Allah decides what happens to us! You think you’re God?” “No, Abba, Allah has given us knowledge, he has given us free will. He leaves it to us to make the decisions about our lives. He only knows what decisions we will make.”

A haunting silence fills the space between them as the father stares at his daughter in disbelief. “Are you teaching me? Are you speaking against me? I’ll show you what happens when you defy your father...” He takes off one of his shoes, slaps his daughter’s face and starts hitting her with it all over, her arms, back, thighs. When Zaida tries to stop him he punches her in the stomach and throws her to a corner, “You filthy creature! You don’t have any shame left in you and now you’re teaching your children to be kafirs too.” Zaida holds her stomach and moans, “My baby...” Thaer begs in fearful tears, “Abba, please...” Aqsa turns her face to the wall; two thin rivers flow down her eyes, wetting the pillow. “I’m telling all of you. Don’t ever dare to defy me again. I’m the man of the house and everything happens as I say.” He puts on his shoe and leaves the house. His

brother is speaking about the wife's position in the family at the meeting tonight. "Under the husband's feet."

Every day Alauddin tramples his wife a little more under his feet. And he seems to have found a reason to justify his actions—adultery—his wife must be seeing other men. "Two women have just been hanged for adultery. Hanged from a crane. Keep that in mind." The green eyes of the monster gain a red shade; Alauddin craves for blood. The beating does not stop. The children do not get away either. They dread the hour of his return. The moment his head shows at the door, they hide in their rooms and try to escape like little fishes struggling to swim through the tiny holes in the net. But Zaida can never swim through. She always gets caught in his net and rails for breath as she is pulled above the water.

Maryam remembers running to her aunt's house with Thaeer when her mother's water broke. When they return, Zaida, screaming in pain, delivers a pair of beautiful twins. With an ocean in her eyes, she says "I thought they had died inside me when he hit me..." The tears are not tears of happiness. When Alauddin comes home, he refuses to see the babies, "These filthy little things are not my babies. Maybe none of these things are my babies!" That night Maryam loses the last scrap of respect she had struggled to save for her father.

Six months pass. Pink, red, black, and blue, all shades of bruises cover the bodies of the women in the family. Zaida stops teaching her children at home; the institutions of

English and Mathematics are the last things she can relate to. A tired atmosphere balances the tension that hangs in the air, the desperation that seems to be reaching its peak, and very soon, it does. Alauddin drags his wife from their room, down the stairs, to the well next to the kitchen and threatens to throw her inside. Maryam does not understand what caused him to lose his temper this time. She realizes that there need not be a cause. “You filthy whore...” her father shouts, “Tomorrow I will go to the Taliban and they will stone you to death.” Stone to death—the punishment for adultery? Taliban? Why is Abba throwing Amma into the mouth of hyenas? Why does he think he is God? Alauddin slaps his wife, holding on her neck. Then kicking her away, he reaches for the bucket of water on top of the well, splashes his face with the water, and does wuzu. Then he leaves the house to go to the mosque and pray. That is when Zaida decides to kill her husband.

The planning begins. Maryam agrees that the plot needs to be infallible, so no one suspects them. Alauddin returns home and with no suspicion, demands his dinner as usual, and as usual, Zaida walks limply towards him with his plate of food. She sets it on the mat on the ground and places a bowl of water next to it. He sits on the mat, Islamic style, washes his hands in the water, and begins to eat. He takes one bite after another and finishes his food slowly. Then suddenly he turns to his wife, and looks at her with eyes full of surprise. Then he shuts his eyes and shakes his head as if he knows but no word comes out. Zaida pours water from a jug as he places his right hand over the bowl. He washes his hand and stands up slowly, stumbling at the first attempt.

Maryam peeks from the children's room expecting her father to run towards her and wring her neck. But he does not walk towards her but to his room with his elbow on his wife's shoulder. Tears glisten in her mother's eyes as she walks her husband towards the room to which they walked hand in hand and spent their nuptial night. Before entering the room full of a thousand memories, she turns towards the children's room. Her eyes meet Maryam's; they share a silent understanding. Zaida shuts the door.

In a few minutes a loud banging on the door wakes up the children. Maryam, who has been sitting in the corner, opens the door with a face streaked with dry tears. "I can't do this," Zaida stands panting at the door with a hammer clutched in her hands. "You have to, Amma. Or he will kill you. And he will kill us all. Do it for us." Maryam's face stiffens. She walks her mother back to her parents' room, pausing after every few steps. Wide eyed Aqsa and Thaer follow them without saying a word. Maryam halts when she sees her father sleeping like a baby, his face just like it used to be years ago; his lips twisted in a manner that resembles a smile. The sleeping pills crushed and mixed in the food must have worked very well, but it will not work for long. "Do it, Amma." Zaida raises the hammer in her hands and drops it. "I can't." She breaks down in tears and drops on the floor. Aqsa points at Alauddin's eyelids trembling slightly, "He is waking up!" Thaer reaches for the hammer in her mother's hands, "Hide it, Amma." "No," Maryam's face has become stone. She bends down to take the hammer from her mother's hand and stands up with her head held high. Alauddin's eyes tremble a little more, and soon they open drowsily. They open just enough to see the 10lb mason hammer raised in his daughter's hands come down and hit his forehead, splitting his skull, and smashing

his brains. Blood, blood, and more blood gushes out, wetting the pillow and splattering over the walls like an omelet on steaming oil in a frying pan.

The plan is to scream, Maryam informs his siblings. They scream and run out of their houses. Maryam picks up her mother from the ground and holding her, walks over to the well. She throws the bloody hammer inside the well in which her father had threatened to throw her mother. Then together, they tread towards the gate. “Dacoits! Dacoits robbing our house! They broke in and killed our father!” Zaida finally gathers herself, and lets out a shrilling shriek, “My husband, dead!” The neighbors open the doors of their houses and come out one after another to help the family in distress. “Dacoits, where?” The men grab whatever weapons they have in their houses, and comes running, but when they reach the house, they find no dacoit, but the body of Alauddin with his brains splattered over the pillow, blood on the wall. The dacoits have escaped.

Escape is still just a mirage in the desert. Alauddin’s family arrives at the crime scene, and Zaida’s brother in law immediately insists that an act of murder has been committed. He points at his sister in law—the murderer. Some of the neighbors believe him, some do not. Still, the police arrive and take Zaida and the twins to the police headquarters. Before Maryam can understand what is happening around her, her uncle grabs her arms, and pulls her and her siblings into his truck, and heads to his house. The next day she learns that her mother has been put in jail and the trial will take place soon. She remembers finding out from her uncle’s mouth, bent in a crooked smile that Zaida

has been beaten by steel cables for two days in a dingy prison cell, and she has finally confessed.

After much begging, Maryam's uncle brings her to the prison where Zaida is held. When Zaida comes to meet her daughter, she extends her fingers in between the bars, and Maryam grabs them. "Amma, I have to tell them that I did it, not you." Zaida spoke under the shadows of the metal bars, "No, you didn't do anything. Remember that. It was my decision." "But I must tell them or..." The mouth with shadows of zebra stripes cuts her off, "They won't kill me. They won't kill a mother. Don't worry." "But, Amma..." "You must not tell, you understand? Promise me. Whatever happens, you will live, you will take care of your brothers and sisters, you understand? You are their mother now." "Yes, but..." "Promise me." The female guard comes to peel Zaida's hands off the bars. "Promise me." Maryam feels the pull of her mother's fingers in her grasp. "I promise." Maryam still believes seeing a smile spreading on Zaida's face. She releases the fingers and watches the guard take her mother away.

Maryam goes back to the truck where her uncle is sitting with a rickety Aqsa. She holds Aqsa's hands, and turns to her uncle, "Can't we have the twins back?" "No, they need their mother's dirty milk. Who will feed them here? You? And what am I going to do with them? They are good for nothing." "I will take care of them." "Who will take care of you?" Maryam takes care of her siblings in her uncle's house. Their aunt does not torture them but she does not want them there either. "These kids have stomachs of whales, they eat too much food. For how long are we going to feed them? We have our

own kids to think about too,” she complains to her husband. “Have some patience. I am not feeding them for no reason. I cannot do anything until the court gives them to me officially.” Maryam and Aqsa do all the work in the kitchen; they wash the clothes, broom the yard in front of the house, and more. Thaer does shopping; he helps his uncle manage his father’s store that his uncle has taken over. And together, they try to eat as less as possible so their five cousins do not get deprived of the food that is rightfully theirs. Their cousins never complain, but Zaida’s children go to sleep on their mats on the ground, with no blanket and half empty stomachs.

Two and half years go by and nothing changes. Maryam is about to turn sixteen in two days. Finally, a court hearing is announced for Zaida’s case. Maryam sits with Aqsa and Thaer on the wooden chairs in the small, dirty courtroom, with even dirtier people scowling at them. Zaida, covered in a black burkha, appears in the box with her two little children. They have grown up so much, Maryam smiles despite the grief. Her eyes covered by a veil try to catch her mother’s eyes hidden behind the veil. Maryam likes to think that their eyes met, but she cannot be sure. The court begins its work. The police produce a report to the court charging Zaida of adultery. They reveal a secret that her children never knew. Five years earlier, during the civil war, she had crossed the front lines to get food for her family. She had been raped by Afghan soldiers there. How her mother kept this a secret from her children is still a mystery to Maryam. Why couldn’t she confide in me? Did Abba know all this time? Is that why he called her a whore? Could it be that the police are lying? The lawyer tells the court that Zaida is not a pure woman. She does not have a pure soul, but the soul of an adulterer. When her husband

found out from his brother that his wife had slept with other men, he decided to carry out his duty and tell the Taliban about his wife's adultery. That is the night when his cold blooded wife smashed his head with a hammer. She not only has the soul of an adulterer but also the soul of a murderer. Maryam notices her mother struggling to keep standing, but her knees wobble, and she drops on the ground and loses consciousness. Maryam stands up to run to her mother but her uncle holds her arm down. He looks straight at her eyes and says "She has been lashed regularly. There is no way for her to stand for long. I am surprised she is not dead yet." When her mother is taken away by the police constables, the judge, a devout Taliban leader, gives his verdict. "Zaida is an immoral whore who has murdered her husband. She must die."

The nature of the punishment will be decided in the final court hearing tomorrow. Zaida's children must speak. "Against your mother," their uncle confirms when they return to his house. "But they will kill her if we speak against her," Maryam cries. "They will kill her anyway, but if you do not speak against her, I will kill you, and your brothers and sisters." Maryam still does not agree. So the beating begins. Her uncle snatches Aqsa's hand and throws her on the ground. He takes a stick which is used to hit buffaloes in order to make them plough the paddy fields faster, and he begins to hit Aqsa's back, and then Thae's, and makes Maryam watch. Maryam closes her eyes and imagines her mother tolerating the lashes everyday thinking of the safe future of her precious children. "Promise me. Whatever happens, you will live, and you will take care of your brothers and sisters..." Her mother was beaten by steel cables for days yet she survived because of her children. Her precious children...Cries of pain forces her to open her eyes. "Stop! We

will speak against her...Uncle.” Her uncle throws the stick to the corner and smiles, “I thought so.”

The next day Zaida does not appear in court but her three children do. They come up in front of the judge one after another and confess seeing their mother kill their father. Maryam can feel the burning of Aqsa and Thaer’s back as they speak. Tears roll down her eyes behind the transparent black veil, but no one notices. After her children denounce her, the judge reaches the final verdict about Zaida’s future. “Zaida’s life can be spared if she can give ten thousand dirhams to her children for the loss of their father. If she cannot give the money in two months, she will be publicly executed for adultery and the murder of her husband. The children, including the two that have been living in prison with their mother are officially handed over to their respectable uncle, Ansari Khwazammel’s custody. Case dismissed.”

When the five children return to what is now home, they pass a group of men waiting in the courtyard. Maryam overhears her uncle telling his wife, “These men are from Khost, seven hours south east of Kabul on the Pakistani border. It’s a good place. Al-Qaeda has their main training camp there. They are here for Maryam and Aqsa.” Before the girls can understand what is happening, they are pulled out of their rooms and taken to the courtyard. Maryam’s face turns hot, and she can hear her heart beating loudly in her ears as her veil is lifted by her uncle. The man in the middle of the group walks towards them. With his right hand he holds Maryam’s chin up and looks at her, then he squints his eyes at Aqsa. Maryam recognizes the smell of the smoke of hukka from his

mouth as his face comes close to hers. When he smiles, she can see blackened yellow teeth in a mouth that can barely be noticed in between the graying mustache and the white beard. “They will do,” he announces. Her uncle beams, “The money...” “Sixty thousand Pakistani rupees for the elder and thirty thousand for the younger.” “They are pure virgins. Never been touched by a male hand. I am a poor man. If you could give a little more...” “No more than I have offered. Take it or leave it.” “No no, it’s fine. Think of them as your own.” “They are my own. My very own,” the old man smiles again with a glint in his eyes.

November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1999, the Radio Shariat announces Zaida’s execution in the sports stadium of Kabul. Thirty thousand people gather to watch. A red Toyota pick up truck drives in the stadium with three women covered head to toe in deep blue burkhas—Zaida in the middle, two female guards on her sides to hold her in case she tries to flee. They pull her off the truck and hold her arms while she walks to the middle of the stadium. The convicted Zaida pauses after every few steps. A man in traditional Afghani clothes, his head wrapped in a turban announces with a mike, “Zaida Khwazammel, daughter of Ghulam Abed is to be executed for killing her husband with a hammer five months ago.” Five months ago, Maryam shakes her head standing in the middle of the crowd. Three years will not fit Taliban’s promise of swift justice. Maryam holds Aqsa’s hands underneath the black burkha, “Don’t cry. Amma is dying for a good cause. This is a lesson for the world. One day her story will be told. And the world will listen.” The crowd shouts and cheers, but all of them, the men, women, and children fall silent when Zaida reaches the center of the stadium and is ordered to sit. “I cannot sit.” She complains

that her knees and arms are shaking too hard. She begs, “Someone take my arms...” A guard in blue holds her arm and makes her sit on the ground. Realizing what she is about to face, Zaida abruptly stands up, and tries to run. But she is dragged across the football field and brought back to the center of the stadium, and forced to sit again. Maryam tries not to think about her mother’s pain. This is an easy death. She remembers hearing about the woman the Taliban accused of carrying a walkie- talkie. Sixteen of them beat her with cable wires until she pissed blood. They made sure her head and face were covered by the veil so they would not be tempted by her looks. The beating is over for their mother. Only a few minutes left. Only a few minutes until peace. A man stands behind Zaida, aiming his Kalashnikov rifle at her head. Maryam tells herself again that this is an easy death. The last time there was a stadium execution, the convict was shot ten times. The victim’s family took turns to shoot him. This is much easier than that. Her mother does not know her murderer. He is just a stranger. Maryam presses Aqsa’s hands, “Don’t close your eyes. You must remember this moment. Life is only a journey. It is the destination that matters.” Maryam strains to keep her eyes open. She wants to remember this moment for the rest of her life. Her helpless mother struggles to break free, while the crowd watches. Don’t struggle, Amma. Death is only a journey... The sound of a shot stuns her. The journey is over. The stranger with the rifle turns around to face the crowd. He looks familiar. As he walks closer to the crowd, Maryam recognizes the face of her uncle. A few people in the crowd cheers, “God is Great!”

*End of Zaida's story.*

The girl looked at me and tried to smile, half a smile, half a look of pity. I gathered myself and looked around. The sun was about to set. I realized that I am very late, but I didn't feel like looking at my watch. I stared at the face that got darker as the sun set on it.

*What happened to Zaida's body?*

*Her body was sent to the Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital. For twenty days it lay unclaimed in the mortuary. Her mother refused to take responsibility of it denying that Zaida is even a memory to her since she brought shame on the family. Zaida is now buried in an unmarked grave three hundred yards away from her mother's home.*

*What about Zaida's children?*

*Their uncle kicked Thaer out of his house, along with the twins. Some say that Thaer was hanged by an electrical wire from a tree. Some say, they are wandering in the streets of Kabul, begging for money, searching in local dumps for food.*

*What about Maryam and Aqsa?*

*No one knows what happened to them. Some say they are still with the old man, some say they are in a better place. But you see, there is no better place.*

*I don't understand. How do you know this story in such detail?*

*Everyone knows. They all saw her die.*

*But they don't know how she lived.*

*John! Sam jogged towards me, Michael treading behind. We've been looking for you. What's taking you so long?*

I stood up immediately. The girl stood up too and hastily, let her veil down. She was suddenly uncomfortable at the advance of strangers. But I'm a stranger too, I thought. I realized that I had not asked her name.

*I'm coming, Sam.* I started walking towards him.

*I need to talk to you. I'll come again tomorrow.*

The girl didn't say anything. She just stood there, covered from head to toe. I was close to the jeep now.

A woman's voice called from a tent, *Maryam...*

*I'm coming, Sister Alice.*

I turned around. Maryam turned around too. I kept on walking as she walked away. The sun set in the desert and darkness filled the gap between us.

15<sup>th</sup> December, 2001

Despite all the snickering comments I received that night about my disappearance and encounter with the Afghani girl, I went to see her again. I found her vomiting in a bucket behind the tent, another woman patting her back. She was resting on a bench, holding her forehead and panting, not noticing that I was watching, when I heard the voice behind me.

*What do you need, young man?*

I turned around to find Sister Alice standing there.

*Is she okay, Sister?*

*She is fine, just pregnant.*

*Pregnant? Her husband...?*

Sister Alice takes me aside, *Please don't be so loud. If they find out, they'll come and take her away.*

*Who?*

*Her so called husband. Her uncle married her and her sister off to a man from Pakistan. They managed to escape with some money and tried to live in a small house in the village nearby. They survived for months, until the men found their hide out and burnt down their house. Her sister was burnt alive. They are looking for her now. We are trying to keep her safe here. But for how long, no one can tell.*

A figure walks towards us. I recognize the familiar black burkha. She lifts up her veil.

*I did not think you would come back.*

For a minute, I lost all my thoughts, all the American rationality that I've been taught to bear in mind. I looked at her and I knew what I needed to say. Or rather, ask.

*Will you marry me?*

It was as if a tornado had hit. The atmosphere changed and a speedy conversation of urgency began. It all happened so fast that I didn't have the time to contemplate. Before Maryam could reply, Sister Alice complained that she could not believe her ears. How irrational could I be? How is this possible? What do I really want? Maryam has just turned eighteen. She is not American. This is not America. Today's generation... I

stopped her. She has no family. She is pregnant. Her husband is looking for her. Does she want to abort? It is not allowed here anyway. Does she want to go back to him? Eighteen is a legal age to get married. This is the only way. I can send her to America as the wife of an American soldier, and after my contract is over, I will go and be with her. And we will have a good life. She will survive. Sister Alice would not listen. But how is this possible? The officials wouldn't agree. I tried to convince her. I will explain it to them. I will make them agree. Sister Alice complained. She is Afghani. How will she survive there? She will be fine, I assured her, and I have someone who can take care of her until I return. Sister Alice just couldn't stop planting thorns in my plan. But you two are too different. She is Muslim. You are Christian. Different religion, different color, different ethnicity. I tried my best to pluck out all the thorns. Why does it matter if we are of different religions, different colors, different ethnicities? We are all human beings, aren't we? That is our similarity, our humanity. I am here to help. If I cannot help this girl, then why should I remain here? Just for Bin Laden, who I don't know, don't care about? I am here for the people of Afghanistan. I am here for her, who I do care about.

*Just tell me, Maryam, do you agree?*

Maryam looks into my eyes. Perhaps she saw honesty there. Perhaps she was desperate to escape. I don't know. I don't care. She said yes. Sister Alice shook her head and looked away.

We are shifting our troop to Kabul tomorrow night. I must get married to her in the morning. Sister Alice, Sam, Michael, they have all offered to help, grudgingly. No ceremony. Just a signed contract. And we will ship her over to America, where she will

be safe. I must write to Mary. She cannot say no to me. I know she loves me. And I love her. But I have to do this for Maryam. Not to fulfill the responsibility of a lover but to fulfill the responsibility of a human being, which comes above all.

God is Great. Our God is Great, Mary. So is Maryam's. Even the Taliban's. God is the same for all. A few of us just can't recognize Him. What is God anyway? A little bit of faith, a little bit of trust. What is religion? Just a way to reach God. God is love, nothing else.

The bell rings. Mary shudders at the sound, her soft thighs hit one another, and the red diary closes itself on her lap. She remembers closing the diary the first time she read it, tears streaming down her cheeks like rain on a window pane. She had gotten drunk that night, and gone home with a stranger.

The bell rings again. The bell had rung one day, a few months after that night in the bar. Mary had opened it to find John standing there in his Marines uniform.

*I'm back.*

*And I'm married.*

She didn't have to say it. He must have known. And her heavily protruding stomach told half the story.

*How's your wife, John?*

It took John a couple of minutes to reply. John was never a realistic man. He was always lost in his own world. He seemed like a lost man now.

*I'm not married. Maryam disappeared the day we were supposed to get married.*

*What happened to her?*

*Some say her husband found her. Some say that she ran away because she knew a little more about reality than I did. No one knows.*

*I'm sorry.*

*I'm sorry too.*

Bob arrived at the door right then.

*I have to go, John.*

*Me too.*

He left for Iraq in a month to finish his contract. And the next time he wrote to her, he told her that he was craving for ice.

*Just one block of ice costs over 5 dollars here. These days all I can think about is an escape from heat and boredom. Time seems to have ceased moving. Thousands of civilians are dead. So many soldiers are dying, yet no nuclear weapon has been found. This is an area of the Sunnis. These people don't want our help. The kids throw rocks at us while their parents watch. I am here to help. But sometimes I wonder if all the deaths are worth the cause.*

Mary could not finish reading the letter. Bob had snatched it from her.

*Tell the bastard never to write to my wife again.*

The bell rings yet again. She picks up the bottle of beer with one hand, the bleeding diary and the letter written in red ink with another, and stands up. Taking several strides towards the kitchen, she reaches for the bottom drawer beside the oven, and opens it. The Afghani girls behind the veils smile at her as she puts the letter to rest inside the magazine, and places the diary underneath. She shuts the drawer and walks slowly towards the door, pausing after every few steps.

The bell rings again as she opens the door.

*What took you so long?* Bob shouted.

*Are you deaf or something?* Andy lets go of his father's fingers and runs towards his mother.

*You're back. I was waiting for you,* Mary smiled at her son. *I've made fried chicken for you.*

*Don't you ever listen? I told you we were going to the barbeque at Billy and Nancy's!* Mary does not have an answer for her husband. She tells Andy to go inside and change. Bob heads towards the sofa in the living room while Mary walks towards the kitchen, silence filling the increasing gap between them.

Opening the door of the oven, she takes out the plate of chicken. She brings it towards the trashcan, and tilting the plate, watches the pieces of fried drumsticks and

wings fall into the trash. What a waste! The mass of blood, flesh, and bones silently disappear into the darkness forever, without a fight. The war is over.

Witnessing the end of the chicken, Mary closes the lid of the trashcan and wonders if all the deaths are worth the cause. What's the difference between men who hunt the animals and the animals that are being hunted? They all reach the same destination. They all take the same journey. Hunt and be hunted. She stares at the television screen in the living room across from the kitchen counter.

Suicide bomber in Iraq. Five American soldiers wounded. News has just reached from Baghdad that one soldier has just taken his last breath in the hospital...

Mary shivers in the heat of the approaching summer. Bob changes the channel.

*Inspired by the story of Zarmeena who was shot in front of 30,000 people in the football stadium of Kabul, Afghanistan, 19<sup>th</sup> of November, 1999*