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Things Left Behind

Aqeel Ahmad

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THINGS LEFT BEHIND

By

Aqeel Ahmad

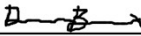
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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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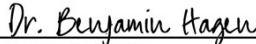
English Program
In the Graduate School
The University of South Dakota
May 2023

The members of the Committee appointed to examine
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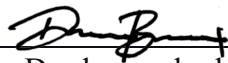
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ABSTRACT

Things Left Behind is the story of a family in a small town in Pakistan where both the town and the family are transitioning between their traditional ways of living and Modernity coming from outside the town. Through its various characters, the narrative unfolds the struggles of facing challenges put by technology and colonial projects. The characters long for the safety and familiarity of their rural and traditional backgrounds while becoming part of an urban and modern milieu, creating a conflict. The arrival of Modernity takes place at the cost of the rearrangement and modification of the traditional and familiar world. This narrative deals with the loss of leaving behind a world where one is coded to live. Toward the end of the narrative, my work pushes its characters to accept the loss of their traditional world, let go of their fears and move forward, overcoming challenges to exist in a modern world.

Thesis Advisor 
Dr. duncan barlow

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Artist Statement

“Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence,” says Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of *Midnight’s Children* (1981) while recalling his grandfather’s story which takes place thousands of miles away from him in Kashmir. Salman Rushdie, in his memoir, *Joseph Anton* (2012), writes that this line was supposed to be the first line of his novel. Later he “buried it elsewhere in the text, thinking it too Tolstoyan an opening” (69). He replaced this line with “I was born in the city of Bombay. . . once upon a time” (3). This change implies his novel is about promised dreams and how those dreams get shattered. He did not find it appropriate to open his book with a line about absence. However, unlike his book, my work primarily is about alienation and how the choices of other people in big cities affect the lives of people in small towns. I and the people of my town can say that most of our lives took place in our absence since our lives were defined by the narratives outside our town. My story begins with a man, Shakeel, losing his finger after a minor accident with an electric motor in the middle of the night. This incident alienates him from himself and the people around him. The rest of the work is about him coming to terms with his alienation and empowering himself after his brother is tried for murder in a big city. Apart from the protagonist, other characters also feel alienated by the encroachment of the modern world. Hajra, the female protagonist, has been living away from her village and refers to her early years with her husband as being in exile. The children feel disconnected from their parents and find solace from that alienation in their own ways: Jalil joins the religious fundamentalist, Khalil works at the shop and Adeel goes regularly to a storyteller. Like the protagonist, the town is alienated from the outside urban culture. My father and most townspeople recall stories of the government introducing public transport. The arrival and departure of the bus were a spectacle, and people gathered just to see the bus. One of my

acquaintances recalled that in the 1980s, he and other men would walk to a Urs of a Saint. It would take them half a day to walk there, but now it took them twenty minutes in a car. Through such stories, I have found individual narratives intertwined with collective history. In short, each individual character's story is also the story of the collective town since alienation is shared between them, and the objects from outside the town are shaping their lives.

This understanding of my work as a collective representation stems from Fredric Jameson's essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," where he hypothesizes that third-world literature should be read as allegorical. He argues, "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (69). My writing, in turn, is both about the individuals and the town in terms of alienation. For instance, the family and the town in my work are simultaneously opening themselves to a modern and urban world.

My inspiration to write in a collective way comes from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The protagonist in *Midnight's Children* narrates he has been "mysteriously handcuffed to the history of India" by being born at the time of India's independence (3). By virtue of that his "destiny" is "indissolubly chained" to that of his country (3). Rushdie presents this collective presentation to compare the life of the protagonist with that of India which go in different directions as the protagonist goes into exile and the country undergoes destruction. Through a collective presentation, my work is about the empowerment of an individual and the whole town. Shakeel and Hajra feel empowered towards the end. After the flood, the townspeople also come together and help each other.

For me, writing in English has been an exploration of the self and the world around me in an anglophone context. Most of my work is autobiographical consisting of stories I heard or

experienced while growing up in a small town in Pakistan. I left my hometown when I was ten for a boarding school in Attock near Islamabad. People in my hometown spoke Seraiki a different language and dressed differently than in the place I was where people spoke in Urdu and English both being the national and official languages of Pakistan. Ever since then, I have seen myself as a part disconnected from a whole.

English was the official language in my boarding school, and any other native language was discouraged. I was once belittled by a senior who overheard me talking to a friend in my native language. "Write for one hundred times you will never speak in your native language on campus," he yelled at my friend and me. For a long time, I felt that English was a language of institutional oppression and conformity. I discovered a softer side of the English language when I accidentally read George Orwell's *1984* and Oscar Wilde's works. This led me to do a Bachelor's in English Literature at a college in Lahore, Pakistan. During my undergraduate, an introduction to post-colonial theory helped me situate myself better in an English-speaking world, providing a holistic view of my post-colonial identity. My perception of myself changed when I read Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place (1997)* in my second semester at graduate school. Its first sentence liberated me and helped me reframe my narrative of alienation into a story of empowerment. He writes, "All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language" (03). Said came to his understanding of alienation after staying in the United States for fifty years. Through my writing, I aim to understand the self and the people I was surrounded by while growing up in my small town, as we all felt alienated in one way or another.

The main story of the family in my work is loosely based on my family. My mother was from a village, and her relatives did not allow her in the village after her marriage to my father.

My family has been in the goldsmith business for the last couple of generations. My father, like the protagonist, married another woman after falling in love with her. I have attempted to explore my family history and the town's history through the institution of the family.

The subplots of the children, Jalil, Khalil, and Adeel, are attempts to understand different facets of life in my small town. My hometown and many surrounding towns had become recruitment places for religious fundamentalists to motivate people to participate in Afghan Jihad. Growing up, I heard stories of people going to Afghanistan and not returning alive. Jalil, the eldest son, interacts with Qari Abdul Jabaar, a leader of religious fundamentalists who motivates Jalil to use his anger in the name of Islam. My experiences inspire these interactions with a real-life character who had been to Afghanistan once and was under the strict vigilance of local police. The inclusion of *Rambo III* is inspired by a neighbor who once went to Jihad and cited Sylvester Stallone his inspiration. Peter MacDonald's *Rambo III* (1988) tells the story of its protagonist who fights alongside mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Towards the end, the film gives tribute to the brave mujahideen of Afghanistan.

Khalil, the second son, represents the traditional aspect of small-town life. He is natural when it comes to the tools in goldsmith work. During his father's absence, he works obediently and is the family's sole breadwinner. In my hometown, several families have been working in different professions for many generations. The son of a goldsmith will be a goldsmith, and the son of a butcher will grow up to be a butcher. These rigid roles are trespassed by the doctor, who comes from a family of cobblers but has trained as an apprentice to a pharmacist in a big city like Karachi. This helps him put the local homeopathic doctor out of the business. This shows that working in big cities can help people transgress their families' rigid roles and professions.

Adeel, the third son, represents a sensitive and frivolous side of small-town life. He goes on a trip with his mother to her village, where he earns money by picking cotton. He hides a booklet of film posters from his father. He helps his friend Saad sell his father's poetry books and eventually befriends an older man, Ladhha, a storyteller. His love for storytelling increases to the extent that he decides to skip school to hear stories from Ladhha, which puts him in trouble. After reading Naguib Mahfouz's *Palace Walk* (1990), I decided to include the subplots of the children. Mahfouz's novel tells the Proustian tale of a family in 1910s Cairo. The family's patriarch, al-Sayid Ahmad, runs a store in the market. Yasin, the eldest son, studies at a college and falls in love with the mistress of his father. The elder son, Fahmy, joins a political party and is killed by British forces. Kamal, the youngest son, is a good student and befriends British soldiers at the check post. All three brothers represent different sides of Cairo in the 1910s undergoing transition. For Mahfouz, exploring the brothers' lives is an exploration of different ideologies and ways of living prevalent in the story's time period.

In addition, my decision to tell a story about a small town in Pakistan also comes from a gap existing in writings about Pakistan in English. Most of the novels deal with the lives in cosmopolitan cities of Pakistan with marginal or no presence of people from small towns. Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* (2000) is a noir novel about friendship and betrayal in Lahore. His second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), is about an unnamed narrator in Lahore who gives an overview of his life in Lahore and New York. A few novelists have tapped into the territories of small towns through the perspectives of land-owning families. Daniyal Moeenuddin's short story collection *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009) revolves around stories of servants in different parts of Pakistan, all connected to one landlord. Nadeem Aslam's *Season of the Rain Birds* (1993) is another novel about the investigation of the murder

of Judge Anwar in a small town. Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon* (2011) is the only exception that tells the story of the Baloch nomads through their perspectives in rural Balochistan (Province of Pakistan) and Afghanistan. I saw glimpses of rural life in Jamil Dehlavi's *The Blood of Hussain* (1980), a Pakistani-French production about the life of two landlord brothers. One of them complies with the policies of a dictator, while the other saves peasants from the oppression of the military. All of the above narratives, except Jamil Ahmad's *The Wandering Falcon*, only partially center around people's lives in small towns. My work about small town tries to fill in the gap present in Anglophone writing about Pakistan.

Moreover, I constructed the world of a small town after reading Rushdie's portrayal of Pakistan in *Midnight's Children*. Saleem Sinai spends his adolescence in Pakistan and compares his stay with that in India. He reflects, " and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence-- that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disoriented, amid an equally infinite number of falseness, unrealities and lies" (373). I extrapolated this description of Pakistan into a world of a small town. Shakeel lies about the accident, Hajra lies about the money and Daadi likes to tell or affirm false stories. I have included an anecdote on the competition of lying where people of the town sit together and compete on who can tell a better lie. Some people end up using this skill to earn money by performing at weddings.

The alienation that defines the lives of many characters in my work comes from the modernization of life in a small town and the state government's imitation of colonial projects by the government, alien to the lives of people living in a small town. In "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," (1984) Homi Bhabha considers this imitation a source of alienation because it takes away the essence of their identity (126). As a kid, I remember the

installation of streetlights in one street and people gathering around the spot and contemplating its structure for hours. Intezar Hussain, an Urdu novelist, in his magnum opus *Basti (1979)*, presents similar scenes of interest in installing electricity poles. People in the town think how their lives would change after the electricity poles. As time passes and dust starts gathering on the poles, people forget about those poles. However, those poles are adjacent to the walls of temples which are spots for monkeys, and the poles pose a threat to monkeys as they start dying one by one. Eventually, they choose to sit in a different spot away from the town. In my work, I have come up with similar instances where imitation of colonial projects poses a threat to the existing ecosystem of a place. In one of the instances, a man dies of electric shock and people debate whether to let electric wires pass through the village.

Mimicry is also present in the repurposing of objects for religious fundamentalism. Qari Abdul Jabaar, the religious leader, uses the Western t-shirt and trousers as the official dress for combat training. He brings out one of the first pistols brought by the British in colonial times and decides to use it for the great cause of Islam.

People of the town see modernity as a threat to the existing structures. My inspiration for such scenes came from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which is set in a small village. People react to technological advancements like trains, telephones, and modern medicine coming from outside the town and see them as a threat. Marquez's magnum opus also talks about the end of the old world and the arrival of modernity. Ursula, the female protagonist, is asked why the gypsies are not coming to Macondo anymore. She replies, "What's happening is that the world is slowly coming to an end and those things don't come here anymore" (189). Ursula's reference is clearly to an old world of tradition as modernity is making its way in numerous ways. Another female character sees a train for the first time and gets frightened by it

saying, "It's coming. Something frightful, like a kitchen dragging a village behind it" (227). This comment represents the arrival of a new world that is threatening the old world. I have included similar instances of people being suspicious of modern technology. Shakeel's grandfather shares his suspicion after the installation of the railroad that the British would chain away their lands. Adeel visits his grandmother's village, where he sees electricity poles without wires. Upon asking, he is told that the villagers are debating whether they want electricity since a man died of an electric shock in a nearby village. Similarly, Saad, Adeel's friend, reveals that his father has been opposing loudspeakers at the local mosque. These instances reveal a tension between the old world and the new world creating further alienation.

My work also shows the characters' inability to interact with modern technology like electric bulbs and other electrical appliances. Jamie Uys's film *Gods Must be Crazy* (1980) presents a similar theme where an African tribe finds a Coke bottle and thinks of it as a gift from the gods. At first, it is categorized as "the strangest and most beautiful thing they had ever seen." With the passing days, the tribesmen discover a new use for the Coke bottle. With its increasing use, "unfamiliar emotions begin to stir to wanting to own of not wanting to share" among the people which leads to conflicts. My work contains similar stories of people looking at technological objects in a new context. Stuart Hall, in "Decoding/Encoding," (2005) writes, "a message can be received at a particular state only if it is recognizable or appropriate—though there is a space for a message to be used or understood at least somewhat against the grain" (507). This inability to recognize the instructions of an object can be the cause of alienation. In one of the incidents, the protagonist in my work recalls anecdotes of men who mistake an electric bulb for a candle and tried blowing it off. This instance reflects the inability to read the instructions of an object. Real-life events inspired these incidents. During the Covid lockdown, a

man saw the news on Television about an Earthquake and misunderstood it as a prediction for an Earthquake. He informed his relatives, who took refuge on open ground at night. The police considered it a protest against the lockdown and took everyone to jail. Police interrogated everyone, and the man who misread the news came forward. After the finger accident, Shakeel is cautious with electrical appliances and even with a shaving kit. These interactions with technological objects further agitate him and take him away from himself only to feel empowered and overcome upcoming challenges.

This narrative aims to overcome that alienation by empowering its characters. However, the empowerment is temporary to help these characters surmount the current challenges only to return to similar cycles of alienation. Shakeel, the protagonist, helps his brother, who is accused of murder in a big city. Shakeel returns home with the demeanor of a character who has accepted his defeat and takes care of his children. All his struggles to deal with institutions takes place off-stage. Hajra, the female protagonist, miraculously survives the flood after struggling with grief for a long time. She faces the water in order to commit suicide. After the flood, acceptance makes its way into the life of people. For instance, they become content with a small amount of space even after their houses are demolished by water. The floods have been a significant part of my life. My hometown has been flooded three times in the last two decades. In 2022, the flood affected more than 33 million people. I have used the flood as a way to empower the people of the town as it usually brings people together.

This effort to empower the poor is inspired by the progressive writer's movement popular in the mid-1930s to 1950s in Urdu Literature. My early introduction to Urdu literature was through progressive writers like Munshi Prem Chand, Ghulam Abbas, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Faiz Ahmad Ahmad. These writers helped me constructively situate my socio-economic self at a

very young age. Through a progressive approach, my narrative works towards a similar understanding of the self in a post-colonial context. Despite taking place from a place of alienation, my work aims to empower its characters to accept themselves and the world around them. The empowerment of my narrative remains contentious because of the realism of its setting and the cyclical nature of lives in small towns. While accepting the job from Patwari, Shakeel recalls how his father and grandfather worked similarly for the local land-owning families and helped them oppress the poor peasants. Through such instances, my narrative questions the fragility of empowerment in a modern and post-colonial context.

Chapter 1

At midnight, Shakeel was looking for his lost finger. The blade of the water pump had malfunctioned and cut his right index finger which flew away in a pile of bricks. His wife, Hajra, sleeping in the courtyard, heard some noise in the bricks and woke up.

“I cut my finger while fixing this sisterfucker motor.”

Hajra rushed inside the room, found a piece of cloth, and offered to wash Shakeel’s wound.

“I will do it myself. You can’t even find a fucking bandage in this house. Look for my finger.”

Their three sons, Jalil, Khalil, and Adeel were awake now and looked at each other in confusion. The electric motor was still running and their parents were looking for the lost finger.

Hajra told Jalil to take one of his brothers and call on his Daadi. Hajra called for her mother-in-law not out of love for her mother-in-law but out of fear of being called an irresponsible wife and daughter-in-law for not telling her about Shakeel.

Hajra turned off the motor. Meanwhile, her mother-in-law arrived with Jalil and Khalil.

“Haye, Haye! What happened to my son?” Daadi said.

“He was trying to fix this motor and cut his finger,” Hajra said.

“Why do you let him do those things?”

Hajra did not say anything in response to her mother-in-law and told her children to go back to sleep.

Shakeel found his finger and went to the doctor.

Shakeel's finger was not recognizable when disconnected from the hand. The blood still sprouted out of the cloth bandage. The newly installed streetlights became Shakeel's guide at this dark hour. He had not been out at this hour in a long time. He was the only person walking at this hour.

"Are these hollow or solid from the inside?" He had asked when streetlights were being installed.

"Don't worry; these poles are hollow from the inside. If they fall on you, you won't die." the lineman had replied. The streetlights looked like yellow little suns making it easier for him not to step on stray dogs sleeping on the corners of the streets. However, the lights also made him an easy target for some dogs busy finding food in the heaps of trash on every street. The dogs looked at him distractedly only to return to the trash. With his right index finger in his left hand, Shakeel soon arrived at the doctor's house.

Like everyone else in the town, Shakeel knew the doctor was not a real doctor but was called a doctor. According to some rumors, the doctor came from a family of cobblers and worked as an assistant to a pharmacist at a hospital in Karachi. His ability to treat headaches and fever with modern medicine made him a household name and people chose to overlook his shoemaking past which people often gossiped about in his early days of practice. His popularity forced the local homeopathic doctor whose family had been in business for a couple of generations to quit.

When he last visited the doctor's house, which had served as a hospital during the day, Shakeel saw patients scattered in the courtyard on wooden beds with drips connected to their

veins and bottles tied with jute string to a nail in the wall. He had hired one assistant to manage patients. His assistant was also his apprentice and servant and came from a family of butchers. The doctor's room had only one kind of syrup well organized on six wooden shelves. He prescribed the same syrup for headaches, sore throat, cough, and fever. Shakeel told the doctor about his fever and the doctor took out an injection from a drawer table. The table did a job of distancing the doctor from his patients. The doctor found it difficult to identify the right vein and inserted the injection needle in three wrong spots. Shakeel screamed in pain and the doctor said, "This is what happens when you eat too much; your veins disappear in your arms." Shakeel walked out with swollen arms and syrup after paying money to the assistant who had a separate desk outside the doctor's room serving as a receptionist area.

While contemplating his past visit, Shakeel raised his right hand to press the doorbell visible due to a small electric bulb but stopped his hand midway. The doorbell button was broken with its small wires visible from the inside. He decided to stay away from electrical appliances and knocked at the door instead with his left hand.

A voice from the inside said, "These sisterfuckers don't let you sleep even at this hour." Shakeel looked around in the street to make sure no one heard this. He could see the streetlights which to him looked like some creatures with elongated necks who just heard what the doctor said. The doctor opened the door still struggling to put on his shirt.

"Yes, Shakeel," the doctor said.

"The water pump cut my finger," Shakeel said, showing his bandaged wound and finger. The doctor took Shakeel's hand and raised it under the electric bulb to have a better look. It took the doctor a couple of seconds to consider the damage. Shakeel grew impatient because the

fluorescent light was making it difficult for Shakeel to stand near the bulb without getting a headache.

“I can clean the wound and change the bandage. You must go to Multan to a surgeon for an emergency operation,” the doctor said breaking the silence. He made Shakeel wait outside his house and brought a new bandage along with a bottle filled with liquid. He cleaned the wound with an immense amount of liquid which increased Shakeel’s pain. The doctor produced a small grocery bag from his shirt and put the two-inch stump of Shakeel’s finger in it.

“Put it in your pocket and take it to the General Hospital right away. The insects can still infect your wound and then your whole body,” the doctor said. This time the doctor did not give him any syrup.

#

Why was there a need for an operation? He wished for easier and cheaper ways of fixing his finger. As he walked back home to prepare for his trip, he remembered a summer in his teen years when he’d been hired to transport a pair of gazelles for the local landlord. Shakeel touched the crooked end of a horn and it fell off. After he had finished panicking, he used glue to fix the horn and it looked natural. He’d heard of doctors using glue for wounds. Perhaps the doctors at the hospital could glue Shakeel’s finger back on.

Arriving at the house, Shakeel looked upon his home, the mess of construction projects somehow more haunting than before. The projects had begun when Shakeel had noticed a wall decaying due to the passage of time. He had demolished the wall to renovate it but misunderstood its strength. Without the wall, the house fell apart. It took him a day to demolish

the wall, but the house fell down in less than five seconds. Now his house consisted of one room which he made into a courtyard and bricks lay on one side waiting to be made into rooms. He expected to save money to build the house, but with this new injury, his objective was not possible.

“Can you give me the money I have saved for the house? I need it for the operation,” Shakeel said to his wife. His tone was calmer than when he had cut his finger. The word “operation” scared Hajra and Daadi. Hajra went inside the room—the only room, took the money from her bag and gave it to Shakeel.

“How much is that?”

“23000,” Hajra said.

“Where is the remaining 2000?”

“I bought new school uniforms for the kids.”

“I told you one thousand times not to use my money for your luxuries. I work like a donkey all day and you waste. If you ever feel like spending money on stupid things, go and ask your lovers whom you meet during the day,” Shakeel said.

Hajra stood there and did not say anything.

“Son, you should go for your operation,” Daadi said.

The kids listened to the whole conversation while pretending to be asleep. As Shakeel left, Daadi instructed Hajra on what it meant to be a good wife.

Shakeel waited for the bus as he stood at the quiet bus stop with occasional sounds of pots at a nearby tea stall where construction workers had gathered to have their early morning

tea. During the day, traffic horns and the noise adjacent fish market made it difficult to talk to someone. The smell of petrol and fish was still. Shakeel had never imagined this bus stop to be this quiet. He could remember the early days of buses when the government introduced a daily bus service. The sight of the bus was a spectacle, and people gathered from far-flung places just to see the bus. The bus announced its arrival with a loud yet distant horn, interrupting his chain of thoughts.

#

In the morning, Daadi ordered Hajra to accompany her to the shrine of Saint of the Horse to pray for Shakeel's wellness. The shrine was initially located outside the town, but the town's expansion had swallowed it, making it both a religious and business center. Daadi was a devotee of the saint whose grave attracted everyone in the town. They went through beggars and drug addicts who had gathered outside the shrine to beg, chanting, "Give alms in the name of Saint of the Horse." Daadi and Hajra ignored any beggar who made eye contact with them. The smell of incense and mustard oil was in the air. The hawkers were setting up their stalls to sell rice and sweets.

According to some stories, the saint showed up in town on his horse two hundred years ago. He asked for food from the landowner.

"I don't like to give alms to peddlers and beggars specially those who are able to earn a living but refuse to do so," the landowner said.

“God also disguises himself as beggars and the needy to test people like you,” the saint replied.

The landowner still refused him food after this adage. The saint cursed him for his arrogance and said the landowner’s wheat would turn to dirt once he would go home. The landowner dismissed the saint’s remark out of pride and arrogance. However, once the landowner reached home, his farmers came running and yelling with the news his tons of wheat had become dirt. The landowner hurried to the saint who had disappeared, but whose horse was still there. He took the presence of the horse as an opportunity for repentance. He looked after the horse and his crops grew normally. One day he found the horse lying on the ground. He figured the horse was not breathing. He panicked and yelled for the help of his servants who were out of his range. He applied pressure on the horse’s lungs with his hands. The horse breathed and it gave hope to the landlord. However, the horse went lifeless after breathing one last time. He had lost the only symbol of his saint. He cried that day as if he had lost his loved one.

He made his workers dig a big grave to preserve the last symbol of the saint in the form of a shrine. Over the next two hundred years, the horse was synonymous with the saint and the name of the horse was the name of the saint. Daadi bowed down in front of the saint’s grave and Hajra followed.

“Daughter, why can’t you take care of my son? Look at your beautiful house. I grew up in a boathouse on a riverbank until the age of ten. My son provided a roof over your head since day one. He works so hard for you and the children. He is always miserable because of you and the children. When he went to college, he came back in distress repeating he could not

concentrate on his studies since his twelve sisters and one brother did not have enough to eat,” Daadi said. She was more polite than she was after the finger incident.

Hajra had heard another version of the same story. Shakeel could not finish his college degree because he fell in love with a woman. He went to meet her at her place in the richer neighborhood of the town. He was about to kiss her when the woman’s parents knocked at the door. Shakeel looked for a place to hide and took refuge in a washing machine. Later on, her parents found a good match for her, and she had to marry another man in her class. Shakeel felt his poverty more than ever and returned home heartbroken. Her mother-in-law’s iteration of the story for the hundredth time agitated Hajra.

“Shakeel could have waited for the plumber to fix the motor. Why does it have to be my fault when something happens to your son,” Hajra said.

“Why do you get angry with me? What did I say to you? Perhaps the saying that educated daughters-in-law are brash is true. This is what you learned in your education. I spent forty years with my mother-in-law and did not dare look into her eyes. May the saint guide you on the right path,” Daadi said and raised her hands to pray.

Hajra knew her mother-in-law would not overlook what she’d said. However, she was more worried about lying to Shakeel earlier about the 2000 rupees. She had not spent the amount on the kids’ uniforms but given it to her mother for her brother’s treatment. Her mother came to her and said she had found a new saint in a faraway village who knew exactly what kind of spirits lived in her son and would get them out. Hajra knew someone was cheating her mother since all good saints were dead like the one in front of her, her brother was not possessed but had

autism, but she helped her mother regardless. Now, Hajra raised her hands and prayed for things to return to normal.

#

On his way to the hospital, Shakeel had a dream about a distant memory that resurfaced out of the graveyard of memories. Like Shakeel, people had gathered to see the installation of the first communication tower. He had not witnessed anything like this. Growing up he had heard stories of the railroad construction.

His grandfather had told him how scared they were when the British put metal in the land to make a railroad and they had speculated the British would chain the land and take it away from them.

This communication tower was vertical, unlike the horizontal railroad. One could see it from anywhere in the town despite it being located within two hours away. His religion teacher, always skeptical of new technology, had brought up the topic of Nimrod which sparked Shakeel's interest. His teacher said, "In the time of Prophet Ibrahim, Nimrod also made a tower that would reach the heavens."

Shakeel's friend said, "Look at these people working at the top of the tower, they are almost the size of a finger."

"What?" Shakeel said. His friend raised his hand to compare the size of the people with his finger. Shakeel looked at his hand and found his finger missing. He woke up and examined his bandage.

He was on a bus not near a tower. The interior of the bus smelled of sweat and dirt. The windows were open to let the air inside the bus, but it did nothing for the smell. Shakeel saw two goats on the bus. One of them sat on the floor indifferent to the surroundings while the other one stood and faced Shakeel. He recalled stories of goats eating children's fingers. He did remember a few incidents when he fed goats, they bit his finger. He suspected this goat wanted his finger. He reached for his pocket and felt his finger. He was relieved to feel it inside his pocket, but the goat kept staring. To distract himself from the goat, he looked at the sun scattering its rays on the cotton fields beside the road and the sun stood stationary while the bus moved forward. He still had one hour of the journey left. Multan was the closest big city to his town and was five hours away.

#

Jalil and Adeel were glad their father and mother were absent. They decided not to go to school. Jalil searched for his cricket bat underneath the bed. He took his bat and headed out of the house to play cricket in the street with his friends. Adeel reached for his film posters booklet hidden inside his school bag and read aloud the names of film titles and their actors. "Jurassic Park, Indiana Jones, Rambo," He kept repeating these names like a mantra. Jalil and Adeel kept their favorite items out of their father's sight who was critical of sports and films.

"Films and sports are nothing but ways to make fools out of you. How come a man who dies in one film is alive in another? If it's not a lie, then what is it?" Shakeel had said.

One year before, Jalil stood in the street outside his house. His friend handed him his pigeon. Shakeel came from work and saw a pigeon in Jalil's hand. Upon seeing his father, Jalil released his friend's pigeon who flew away above the neighboring houses into the open sky.

Shakeel made sure to punish Jalil in front of his brothers to make a lesson out of his transgression. Shakeel slapped Jalil twice on his face. Shakeel's hand was bigger than Jalil's face and each slap covered more than the profile of Jalil's face. Jalil did not say anything in his defense since he knew his defense was useless. Later that night, his mother told him, "When your father was your age, he was known for catching doves and seagulls. Only God knows why he got angry on seeing a bird in your hand." Jalil looked at his mother in surprise shaken by his mother's words.

Similarly, Adeel's last film magazine was discovered in a drawer by Shakeel when he was looking for an old key of the shop. He took the film magazine and threw it in the canal on his way to the market. After that Adeel had been hiding his new film magazine in his school bag which his father never checked. However, the fear always persisted since their bags were always under the bed where their father slept.

Unlike Jalil and Adeel, Khalil had nothing to hide. He decided not to stay home and went to school during his parents' absence.

#

"This finger is useless. If you had arrived one hour earlier, I would have been able to fix it," the doctor said and put the finger aside. He reached for Shakeel's hand and undid the bandage off his

finger. Shakeel was still considering what the doctor had said. The doctor was dressed in a lab coat and spoke to Shakeel in an indifferent tone. The hospital room was empty at this early hour and the doctor did not seem interested in talking about anything else. The interior of the hospital had a long corridor and was the biggest building Shakeel had seen in many years. Several men and women were asleep on the chairs in the corridor, who Shakeel guessed might be the families of patients admitted to the hospital. Several thoughts rose in Shakeel's head while he looked at his finger which was out of his reach. How would his life look from now on? People would ask him how this happened. Was he born like this or did an accident happen?

“We will use grafting. I will clean your wound, take tissues out of your arm, and put them on your finger. It will look natural,” The doctor said interrupting his thoughts. Shakeel agreed to this since this was the only way of getting a finger back. Shakeel was only familiar with grafting in his profession where broken jewelry would be stitched together through heat and impurities. His body was unlike the gold or silver jewelry he was acquainted with all his life.

Shakeel refused to take anesthesia and watched his whole surgery sitting on a bed in an empty room of the hospital. The doctor's tools were similar to some of the tools he used in his goldsmith work. He had a distrust for doctors as they might steal his organs while he was asleep. The doctor cleaned the wound using a brush made up of small metallic wires. The painful sensation of small metallic wires inside the meat of his finger made him want to scream but he suppressed his urge. Then, the doctor cut two inches of tissues from Shakeel's forearm. This was the difference between jewelry and the human body as the body could feel the pain and jewelry felt no pain no matter how it was treated. The operation was less painful and Shakeel observed this in silence. After the surgery, the doctor advised him to rest for one hour and told him not to use his right arm for the next month.

Shakeel was glad his finger had been fixed. The surgery had not only given him his finger but also saved his reputation. People would have made him part of a joke because of the way he cut his finger. Even though he was not the first person who had lost his finger in an accident he did not want to be teased about such mistakes. He would have become Ditta who saw an electric bulb for the first time and tried blowing it off mistaking it for a candle. For this mistake, he was teased mercilessly. In this happiness, Shakeel forgot about his original finger which the doctor had disposed of in a trash can. Shakeel paid all of his savings into this operation and headed home.

Chapter 2

Shakeel was home with a new finger on his hand and a bandage on his arm. He found his wife, mother, and children sitting on a charpoy in the courtyard where he left them last night. He was not sure whether his family was waiting for him in the courtyard or escaping the heat of the room. Shakeel knew something was different in the house, but he could not tell what, or maybe something inside had changed over the last couple of hours.

“I have informed your sisters and brother about your accident. They should be on their way to see you,” Daadi said.

“Everyone in the neighborhood knows too,” Hajra said.

These revelations stifled Shakeel. He expected a crowd of people asking him for the details of the incident. In the end, he would be the talk of the town. He was at the door of all his insecurities ready to haunt him.

“Why should I be the one to get an injury and why should it be my responsibility to tell the story?” Shakeel said. Hajra and Daadi did not say anything. He missed the good old days when his town was known for its storytellers. Growing up, he was a frequent audience member of a competition where people would gather to tell lies. Some of them used this skill to perform at weddings in nearby towns. He would have used someone like that for this occasion.

Soon he received visitors who were curious to know the details from the start to finish of the incident.

“It was midnight when I woke up to use the toilet. I switched on the water pump, but it made noises like someone was choking. It was better to fix it. You don’t know kids these days.

They might have ended up messing with it. Anyways, the blade of the water pump malfunctioned and cut my finger. I took my finger to the big hospital. The doctor advised a surgery which I underwent without taking any anesthesia,” Shakeel said and showed his finger.

Many visitors were astonished at his refusal of anesthesia and praised Shakeel for his bravery. "Your grandfather also refused to use anything the British brought to our town. Your refusal shows the blood of your grandfather runs in your veins. No one is sure what they put in those Western medicines. One moment you are here, and the next, you are in the afterworld," said Abdur-Rasheed, a close friend of Shakeel's father. Few criticized him for messing up with a machine and advised him to get it replaced with a better water pump. Despite some criticisms, Shakeel was glad his story had turned into a tale of courage. Over a matter of few hours, he had told his story more than thirty-eight times. Hajra made tea for everyone and sent it with the children to every guest. Daadi sat with Shakeel and reaffirmed all details of his story as the truth as if she was the witness of the incident. Shakeel’s twelve sisters showed up but his brother did not.

“Where is Rafeeq? I hope he is not up to any robbery,” Shakeel said.

“He will be here soon,” Daadi said. Shakeel knew his brother would not show up and in fact, he might be up to something with his friends.

#

The next morning Shakeel woke up to the rooster’s crows. He saw his neighbor, Jamil’s, rooster and a hen who would often end up in the courtyard. Shakeel shaved with his left hand. It took

him twice the normal time. His hand movement was slow, and he kept losing the grip of his razor which had rusted over a period of a long time. He did not bother taking a shower to keep his wound away from the water. He knew his injury would delay his clients' orders. He wondered if his left index finger were injured, his work would not have been obstructed. The doctor advised him not to use his right hand for the next four weeks or else his finger would come off. Shakeel looked at his wife, who still looked exhausted from taking care of thirty-eight visitors yesterday and was busy helping the children get ready for school.

“Send the children to the shop once they come back from school. I will need their help,” Shakeel said. Hajra replied in affirmative.

The rooster and the hen distracted Shakeel from his wife. He threw what was left of his bread to the chickens. The rooster did not eat and let the hen pick the bread.

“Why is he doing that—not eating and letting the hen have it?” Shakeel said to Hajra.

“Maybe he wants to show the world what does it mean to take care of a wife,” Hajra said after observing the chickens for couple of seconds. Shakeel was speechless as it took him some to understand his wife's comment. He heard the giggles of his eldest son who understood his mother's comment. Anger roiled Shakeel's blood.

“Somebody get these fucking chickens out of this house. Tell Jamil, next time I see these in this house, I will eat them,” Shakeel said. Jalil ran after the chickens and circled around the courtyard for some time.

Shakeel was content now there were no chickens to disrupt and people would follow his orders.

#

As far as Shakeel could remember he had never missed a day at his shop. His shop was located on the upper side of the town. It was the only place that went unaffected by the major floods of the past decades. The land-owning families had their houses and businesses in this part of the town. Shakeel's father and grandfather worked for local landlords and were awarded a small shop in the market. To own a business in the upper side of the town, one had to have good connections with the elites of the town. His father always required him to be in the shop instead of school. People often said that his father's attitude was one of the reasons Shakeel could not finish high school. The truth was Shakeel did not like his school. His teacher, Ejaz, would send Shakeel to bring meals for him and make him do different errands for his house. Ejaz's wife loved Pepsi and Shakeel's job also included ensuring she received one bottle every day. Ejaz downplayed his wife's love for Pepsi. To Shakeel's disappointment, his kids did good in school, he would have preferred them to work with him at the shop throughout the day.

He opened the steel shutter of his shop with his left hand. It was difficult to lift the shutter with only one hand keeping his right hand away from the shutter. He thought of folded wooden doors from the time of his father. The glass showcase at the front embraced the sunlight and illuminated the dust particles in the shop. It was time to clean. He took an old newspaper, skimmed the front page which talked about growing religious fundamentalism in the country, and cleaned the showcase with it. He swept the floor and wooden benches and gathered the dust beneath the wooden bench at one corner of his shop.

After he was done cleaning, he thought of treating himself to a cup of tea. In the market, one tea stall was present at every corner where shopkeepers frequently went to ask for tea for their customers. Shakeel went to Chacha Maula. Shakeel asked him to send a cup of tea to his shop. Chacha Maula was the oldest man in the bazaar; his name meant God, which was rephrased into "Mauhla," meaning a wooden stick used for grinding spices.

Chacha Maula, sitting behind his tea stove, raised his grey head buried in his accounts notebook and said loudly, "I will bring it in two minutes."

When Chacha Maula finally arrived at the shop, he asked, "What happened to your finger?" Shakeel narrated the whole story. Chacha Maula seemed indifferent.

"Where is your son?" Shakeel said.

"He left for Lahore. He wants to work in a factory. I am getting old day-by-day. I wanted him to take over my business," Chacha Maula said. Shakeel listened to him and sipped his tea. It was unusual for Chacha Maula to talk so softly and Shakeel did not find it appropriate to interrupt him.

"I was seven years old when I started working at a tea shop. My dad passed away and I was the only brother of five sisters. I had to take care of them. Now when I need my son's help to take care of me, he wants to move away. You don't know kids these days. The business of tea is diminishing too. People prefer cold drinks for customers."

A similar fear regarding children rose inside Shakeel, but he dismissed it thinking this was not a part of his problem or never will be. He never left his father who also never left his father. Shakeel's cup was empty now. He returned it to Chacha Maula and reached for his pocket for money.

“You don’t have to pay today and don’t tell other motherfuckers I gave a tea for free,” Chacha Maula said in a loud tone. Shakeel laughed.

Chacha Maula left Shakeel wondering what would happen if his children left him one day. Shakeel again dismissed the fear and took his goldsmith hammer to work on a gold strip by putting the strip against the metal frame. Once he struck the hammer, a wave-like electric shock went through his arm starting from his finger. Inadvertently, he used his right arm. The hammer fell out of his hand, and he held his right arm in his left hand. The pain went away gradually like a wave once it hits the shore. He looked at the hammer and the gold strip.

#

Hajra was alone at the home. The exhaustion from yesterday had only added to her distress. She was tormented by the lie she told her husband. She told herself while brooming the courtyard that giving money to her mother for Sarfaraz was the right thing to do. Her mother stood by her when Hajra’s relatives excommunicated her. Hajra’s father arranged a match for her with his best friend’s son, Shakeel. The people from her father’s village disliked this match discontinuing all relations with her and her father who passed away a few months after her marriage. Her stepbrother, Rab Nawaz, took her share of the property and left for a big city. For months, Hajra’s exile from her childhood home and early relations tormented her. She was like a crane separated from its flock losing her strengths day by day. Hajra’s firstborn helped her get her strength back and the idea of exile completely vanished with the birth of two other children. She was still sweeping the courtyard when she heard a knock at the door. It was her mother.

“The saint needs more money,” Hajra’s mother said after settling herself.

“Shakeel had an operation today and he spent everything there. We are left with nothing now,” Hajra said.

“Operation! What happened?” said Hajra’s mother. The word “operation” scared her mother too. She did not find it appropriate to bring back the topic of money. Both talked about the worse things that could have happened to Shakeel but did not and thanked God for saving him. Hajra talked about what would have happened to the children if something worse could have happened to Shakeel.

“Your father went for an operation in Multan, and it killed him,” Naani said.

“When your father passed away, your stepbrother took everything from us and my relatives helped me,” Hajra’s mother said talking to herself.

“I am sorry for bringing my misery to you,” Naani added.

Hajra went to the only room and reached for her purse. She came back to her mother producing gold earrings.

“You can have these. These are my only belongings now,” Hajra said. Hajra’s mother refused initially but took them upon her daughter’s insistence. Hajra was saving these earrings for any emergency, but she concluded this might be the emergency. Her mother left thanking her and praying for her and for her grandchildren’s well-being.

#

Jalil, Khalil, and Adeel were good at school. Jalil was the only student in his class and always stood first in the exams. He was good at Islamic studies. He often asked questions from his religion teacher that would make them question their beliefs.

“If God is so powerful, why is he dependent on our prayers?” He had once asked. Khalil was good at mathematics, excelled in his class of twenty students, and was a favorite among his teachers. He once solved a problem from grade 10 even though he was in grade 5. Adeel was good at school but not as good as his elder brothers. He just liked being at school.

His teachers would always say, “You have nothing in you like your brothers.”

Adeel did not seem to mind such comments. Once school was over, the children walked back and often competed to see who would reach home first. Jalil and Adeel took the road and Khalil went by the streets. The road appeared to be short, but the traffic made the walking tedious, and the streets were empty despite being narrow and long. Khalil reached home earlier leaving Jalil and Adeel a few steps behind. The mother saw them entering the house one after another. They put their bags under the bed and changed into regular clothes.

“Get your lunch and go to the shop. Your father is waiting for you,” Hajra said. This revelation did not amuse the children.

The children saw their father trying to work with his left hand. He was inserting pearls into a gold necklace. The sun's reflection illuminated the shop's interior, and the lights had not been switched on. They seated themselves near their father behind the counter on a jute rug with Jalil closest to his father. It went without saying that the eldest son would sit closer to the father. Opposite to them were wooden benches for the customers.

“How was your school and why are guys taking so long to finish your school?” Shakeel said without looking at his sons.

“We can’t request our teachers to promote us to two classes each year,” Jalil said.

“I know how school works. Take out the hammer from the drawer and help me with these earrings,” Shakeel said.

Jalil opened the drawer that had various tools whose names his father had helped them memorize over the years.

“Today I will let you work on gold. Your grandfather did not let me work on gold jewelry until I was eighteen. You should be proud of yourself. Don’t worry, whoever knows the names of the tools is already a half-goldsmith,” Shakeel said and offered Jalil a gold strip. Jalil looked at his brothers in confusion. He had seen his father striking a goldsmith hammer but had never done it himself. He heard the voices of nearby goldsmiths and decided to follow the sounds of their hammers. Sarafa Bazaar had goldsmith shops next to each other, and hammers could be heard all day. He could smell the acid too which was used to clean gold but that was not his concern right now. He trusted his sense of hearing and numbed all other senses. He raised his right hand and struck the small strip of gold by putting it against the metal frame with as much force as he could. With the loud sound, the strip broke and part of it flew into the trash gathered in the corner of the shop. Khalil and Adeel looked at each other and laughed. Jalil tried to laugh thinking he has amused his brothers, but he received a slap from his father on the left side of his face. Despite the hammering in neighboring shops, a serious quiet hung in the room.

“Go and find the broken strip,” Shakeel ordered. Three brothers dirtied their hands in the dust.

“Do not scatter my trash. It is of more value than any of you here,” Shakeel said. He was not wrong because every other month a Nihara, a different sort of goldsmith would buy trash for a good amount of money. The trash of a goldsmith contained traces of gold. Khalil found the broken strip buried under the dust and brought it to his father.

Shakeel melted the two halves of the broken gold strip and made it into one whole. This time he gave it to Khalil. He was careful unlike his brother and struck the hammer gently.

“Now these are the hands of a goldsmith, unlike Jalil’s hands which should belong to a blacksmith,” Shakeel said. Khalil was glad he did not receive a slap from his father and continued working on gold following his father’s instructions. In a matter of a couple of hours, they had made a pair of earrings. Jalil and Adeel sat there observing their brother and father. Towards the end of the evening, a customer showed up and asked for gold bangles.

“Take a seat. We can get you those from our other shop,” Shakeel said and ordered Adeel to go to Jamal’s shop at the end of the goldsmith market. Shakeel lied to the customer since he did not have another shop. Bangles were made on machines and Shakeel did not like any jewelry made on machines. He had come to a compromise to it to earn some profit. Adeel got back after a couple of minutes with an open palm and bangles lying on the palm. He showed the bangles to the customer.

“These are for ten thousand rupees,” Adeel said innocently. Shakeel forced a smile on his face throughout this dealing. The customer paid ten thousand rupees and left the shop appreciating the charm of this young shopkeeper. Adeel was proud he had done a deal of his own in the presence of his father. He returned the money to Jamal and got back to his father’s shop to

find his father boiling with anger. Adeel looked at Jalil and interpreted him to be the cause of his father's anger.

“Do you have any idea you were displaying those fucking gold bangles to all goldsmiths on your way here? All these goldsmiths are not our friends. They keep their eyes on people's hands. Which motherfucker taught you to tell the price directly to the customer? You should had told me by writing it on a piece of paper and I could have added a few hundred rupees over it. At the end of the day, we have to make some profit too,” Shakeel said. All these words were like a hammer to an eight-year-old Adeel who was still in disbelief about where he went wrong. He did not say anything and seated himself near Jalil away from the reach of his father.

In a matter of days, Shakeel was convinced two of his sons lacked what was needed to be a goldsmith. He kept repeating the stories of Jalil and Adeel to his wife and mother as tales of disappointment over the next couple of days. He would look at Khalil after he would finish making something and say, “I wish your brothers were like you.” Shakeel was glad one of his sons was helping him through the time of his finger's recovery.

Shakeel wished his younger brother was here to help but his younger brother spent most of his time coming up with new business ideas and all of them failed. Having his brother at work would elevate his status among other goldsmiths who often talked behind his back that he couldn't keep his brother in his father's profession.

#

The next morning, Shakeel's younger brother, Rafeeq, showed up at his house. He was ten years younger than Shakeel. His tensed forehead, thick eyebrows, and dense mustache reminded Shakeel of his father when he was young.

"Were you up to something malicious?" Shakeel said shaving his chin with his well-used safety.

"Something good this time," Rafeeq said.

Shakeel's hand stopped. "Last time you came up with something good, you lost fifteen thousand rupees," Shakeel said resuming his left hand's movement.

"I won't lose anything, I would only gain by making a lot of money," Rafeeq said.

"I hope you are not selling our mother then," Shakeel said.

"A filmmaker sent me a letter to star in his film in Karachi," Rafeeq said ignoring his brother's previous comment.

Shakeel accidentally scratched his cheek with his razor. "Motherfucker!" Shakeel said cleaning a small drop of blood. "Who has been putting these ideas in your head? You don't have a place to live in Karachi and what happens if this turns out to be a scam?"

"Our neighbor, Zafar, has a place where I can stay for a few days and the director has also praised my photos saying I am fit for his film about a rebel who goes against the state," Rafeeq said.

"If you get into trouble, I won't spend my money to come and save you," Shakeel said and finished shaving his face.

"I will make everyone proud. how is your finger by the way?" Rafeeq said.

“It is recovering,” Shakeel said.

“How is everything at the shop?” Rafeeq said.

“Since when it is your business to ask about the shop? It is doing good without you. Your formula to convert everything into gold drained all our savings. I curse the day I trusted you. It is better if you show up once in a while to account for your sins,” Shakeel said.

“I have to leave in the next few hours,” Rafeeq said and left Shakeel in disbelief. Shakeel felt something shattering inside him. He always took his brother’s presence for granted but now the thought of his absence unsettled him. He looked at his shaving kit consisting of new razors, a comb, a mirror, shaving cream, and scissors all put together in a plastic basket. He yelled at his kids to get the shaving basket and put it in the room.

Chapter 3

Shakeel's finger was recovering but he was not satisfied the way he should have been. A part of him was missing and that made him restless. He was unaffected by his brother's departure because to Shakeel he was mostly useless, but he just felt disbelief.

Shakeel would wake up at nights finding his wife and children asleep, alien to his suffering. He pondered numerous times to tell this to his wife but considered it a weakness. He had the example of his father to follow who got his nose broken in a fight at the local cinema. Shakeel recalled the details of the night when his father got his nose broken. His father took Shakeel to the late-night show at the ice factory which became a cinema at night where people would sit on a rug instead of chairs. The film was about two-family clans having a feud over generations. Ghulam Hussain Khan, his father's friend and the son of the landlord showed up drunk and stepped on the hands of a Punjabi man sitting on the floor. The man pushed Ghulam Hussain Khan into the wall, and he fought back. His father went to save his friend and received a punch on his nose which was intended for Ghulam Hussain. The Punjabi man realizing his blunder escaped from the cinema. Farid Bakhsh left the cinema without uttering a word and walked straight to his home with blood flowing from his nose and all over his shirt. In this, he forgot his son, who caught up after seeing his father walk out. Farid Bakhsh went to bed with blood coming out of his nose. Shakeel had to follow the example of his father for whom sleeping with a bloody shirt was braver than telling his wife to get a new shirt.

In the hours before dawn, Shakeel contemplated his life before the finger incident and confided his secret thoughts to the darkness of the night. In his pre-finger incident life, he considered himself pure as untouched by the harm of machinery. It was a simple and fearless life.

The incident had made him careful around machinery. He would stay away from electric motor and would ask his wife to switch it off. He thought about a life without electric motors and simpler times of the wells when fetching water was easier even if someone would fall into the well, they would be saved. He thought about his secret endeavors to ward off his fears.

Shakeel went to Peer Baba, who once was resurrected from the dead. His miracles of solving property issues, treating diseases, and ability to tell the future gave him fame. Shakeel moved forward in line and Peer Baba looked at his finger. After reciting something, Peer Baba took a permanent marker and circled the bottom of his index finger. Peer Baba asked him to undo the bandage. After repeating something, Peer Baba spit on Shakeel's finger.

"This should be the end of your misery," Peer Baba said.

It did not help Shakeel.

A friend advised him to go to Chammi, a new prostitute in the town. She was known to cure all spiritual diseases of the heart. Shakeel went to her place. She was a young woman who led Shakeel inside the house. Shakeel was baffled to see an old man smoking hookah in one room. The man was old enough to be the age of Shakeel's father.

"Don't worry about him. He is my father-in-law. Who would pay for his tobacco if I don't do all this."

Shakeel was alone with her in the room, where she started to undress. The thought of the old man in the next room unsettled him. Shakeel handed money to her and left without saying anything. As his fears about his finger grew, so too did his neglect for the house, which in turn created its own fear. His wife made comments about the state of the home.

For his house, he thought he had found an easy solution once he came across an eccentric construction worker who would demand only one bottle of coke for his wage. The worker often said, " I drink Coke; therefore, I am." After a day's work, Shakeel bought him a Coke. However, the one-foot wall he constructed collapsed the following day. Shakeel would reflect on all this all night. When the wind would change its direction, he would realize he was too far into his thoughts and would stop himself from thinking about his distress.

To distract himself from his thoughts, he recited Quran every morning. He had read somewhere reciting Chapter Maryam every morning would increase his livelihood manifolds. The chapter talked about the miraculous births of Prophet Yahya and Issa. He needed similar strong miracles from God to help him with building the house. However, he recited the Arabic part and did not attend to the translation. For him, it was a way to replace his restless thoughts and he recited those verses as loud as he could. His children woke up mumbling curses to their father for being louder than the neighbor's roosters.

#

A few days later, everyone prepared for the festival of sacrifice. Like all men, Shakeel and his children wore new clothes to go to the prayers to Eid Gah while Hajra stayed at home. The children were happy to wear new clothes and made their way to the open ground to offer special prayer with their father. Molvi sat at the pulpit and went over the incidents in the life of Abraham in whose act, this day was celebrated. He gave an overview of the relationship of Ibrahim with his wife, Sarah and mistress, Hajra. Jalil, Khalil and Adeel looked at each other and giggled after

hearing their mother's name linked to a mistress. Shakeel looked at his sons with tensed eyebrows as a warning to stop giggling in place of hundreds of men.

Molvi continued his story, "Ibrahim dreamt of sacrificing his son in the name of God and took him to a cave. He ordered the knife to work on his son's neck, but the knife refused to work. Soon the knife talked and expressed its frustration that God wants it to not work, and Ibrahim wants it to work." Like every year, children looked forward to the next part where Molvi said, "Khalil wants it to work and Jalil wants it to not work." From here, Molvi left the literal names of God and Ibrahim and adapted their figurative names of Jalil and Khalil. The children laughed looking at each other and the father warned them with his tensed eyebrows. Adeel laughed with his brothers but for the first time felt an emptiness for not being recognized in the story. Khalil and Jalil were in the story along with his mother, Hajra, but he was missing. The prayer ended and the men flooded towards the small entrance to make their way out. Adeel did not know when the prayer ended nor when he was supposed to move to the entrance. Shakeel had instructed his sons to hold each other's hands on their way out. Jalil and Khalil overcome by the joy of their names in the story did not pay much attention to their younger brother who was now stuck between men twice his size and struggled. He lost sight of his brothers and father. Tears came out of his eyes as he was being crushed in the crowd. Soon he found himself out of the gate and saw his brothers waiting for him.

"We will tell everyone you cried like women," Jalil and Khalil said unanimously. Adeel was glad he had found his brothers. Shakeel had already headed home.

#

To Hajra, everything continued to attain the appearance of stability. The children were helping their father and Shakeel's finger was also recovering. She presumed it was the fruit of her prayers. During this contemplation, the banging at the front metallic door shook her. It was her mother who was having trouble breathing.

“Your brother is missing,” her mother said. “He got off the bus with me, but I let go of his hand to take money out of my pocket. I looked back to find him, but he was lost in the crowd,” She added.

Hajra led her mother to the house.

The children got back from school and saw their mother talking to their grandmother. “Your uncle is missing. Khalil, go and tell your father. Jalil and Adeel, go and look for him in the whole town,” Hajra said.

The children were used to stories of their uncle getting lost once in a while. They obeyed their mother without getting to eat anything that afternoon.

#

Khalil interrupted his father who was engaged in giving the final touches to a silver ring he made with his not-so-proficient left hand.

“Uncle Sarfraz is missing,” Khalil said.

“I should go and look for him otherwise your mother would blame me for doing nothing,” Shakeel said.

Khalil sat at the seat of his father while his father put on his leather Bata slippers which he often used to beat his children.

#

“We got off the bus. He was happy when I told him you are going to see your younger sister. I let go off his hands and he was not there,” her mother said. Shakeel thought Hajra’s brother couldn’t recognize anyone because of his mental health.

“He may have sat in the same bus and gone to the last stop in the next town. I will immediately leave and look for him,” Shakeel said in a polite tone. He was less brash with Hajra in presence of her mother. Shakeel left for the next town.

#

Jalil and Adeel wandered from one corner of the city to another looking for their uncle.

“What is wrong with uncle Sarfaraz?” Adeel said.

“He is a lunatic. He talks to himself all day. He forgets his shoes and walks around the village barefooted. It would be better if we never find him,” Jalil said.

“What would mother say if she heard you saying this?” Adeel said.

“She would agree with me because she has been using all her savings on him,” Jalil said.

Adeel did not say anything.

“Do you remember what happened last time he got lost? People from the village found him near the canal and he threw stones at whoever came close to him. He injured twenty-five men. If we come across him this time, I will throw you in his way,” Jalil said teasing his brother.

“Is it him?” Adeel said pointing to a man sitting on a wooden bench in front of a tea shop.

“Yes, go ahead and talk to him,” Jalil said. Both made their way towards him crossing three wooden benches full of men.

“Uncle Sarfraz, everyone is looking for you. Come home,” Jalil said. Sarfraz was drinking tea from a bowl and his unkempt moustache had its traces.

“Do you know this guy? I have given more than ten bowls of tea and he keeps asking for me. Take him away before I get him arrested for not paying me,” the shopkeeper said serving tea to his customers who agreed with him.

Jalil had given up and it was Adeel’s turn to convince his Uncle who was still busy in last sips of tea. Adeel was afraid his Uncle might hit him.

“Uncle Sarfraz let’s go home. You will get more tea there,” Adeel said.

“More Tea?” He said.

“Yes!” Adeel said. Sarfraz stood up and followed Jalil and Adeel.

Adeel and Jalil felt accomplished for carrying out this task.

#

That night Naani coughed blood in the washroom and cleaned it with water without telling anyone. Next morning, she left with her son without giving anyone a clue about her deteriorating health.

#

To Shakeel, this was the most beautiful piece of jewelry he ever made. His first piece of jewelry with his left hand even though it took twice as long to make. This ring assured him that he could make beautiful jewelry without much use of his dominant right hand. This artifact took away all of his distress and distinguished the difference between his pre-finger and after-finger incident life.

Two women clad in Burqa showed up in his shop and walked to one side. Shakeel pulled the curtain which separated men's space from women's in his shop. and inquired how could he help them.

"My younger sister is looking for a silver ring," Kaneez said who had taken off her Burqa while the other one was still covered in Burqa. Shakeel recognized the voice of the first woman. She was his regular customer.

Shakeel handed the ring he had just finished to Khalil which was a sign for him to walk up to the women.

“This ring is handmade, unlike newer rings which are made of machines. These are the markers of a learned craftsman,” Shakeel said.

“Machines also make one lazy. People who are using machines are not real goldsmith. We are real goldsmiths,” Khalil said. Shakeel smiled at his son’s comment.

“My sister is not able to take it off of her finger,” Kaneez said.

Shakeel paused and took his goldsmith pliers. What he saw left him speechless and bewildered. Kaneez’s sister had an extra index finger on her right hand. He only saw her hand and felt completed. This sight brought a calm to his distressed mind. He used his plier to loosen the ring, but he was far-a-way. Soon a thought arose in his mind to possess this woman. With this thought he tightened his grip on the pliers and was successful. Shakeel altered the size of ring and gave it to Kaneez’s sister. Shakeel knew he was in love with her. Shakeel had lost track of time. He was possessed by that extra finger. All night he thought of her while pretending to be asleep. The next morning, he did not mind the presence of his neighbor’s rooster and hen. He switched on the motor by himself after a long time. He went straight to his mother who had woken up for the morning.

“I want to have one more wife,” Shakeel said.

Daadi paused for few seconds and wanted to advise his son against it. She saw this as an opportunity to reform her daughter-in-law who had been rude to her.

“You have my permission. In fact, this will ground our family more strongly. There must be a reason God has permitted four wives for one man. Even if your father had never wanted to have another wife, I would had given him my permission. I will go and talk to her parents,”

Daadi said.

Shakeel knew his mother was lying about his father. One time he manifested a desire to marry his dead brother's wife to get hold of his brother's wealth. His sister-in-law refused and Farid Bakhsh stopped having affairs with women. Right now, his father's story was not his concern and Shakeel had different motivations. Shakeel soon found out Kaneez's sister address. Her mother departed and came back with a positive answer.

Chapter 4

Hajra's children went to watch TV at the neighbors' house and came back with rumors. The women in the neighborhood had begun speculating about Shakeel's second marriage. Phrases like "Hajra is not beautiful" and "Hajra lacks the manners of a good wife" were floating in the neighborhood. She forbade her children from watching TV at the neighbor's house because it brought bad news. She wondered whether religious people who opposed television as an unIslamic object were right because it was bringing bad news to her house.

In Hajra's mind these phrases were darkness in the middle of the day. The world she felt she was holding together came down with a crash. She spent the whole day thinking about different scenarios. She could not believe it was happening in her life. Her grandmother had a similar story when her husband had brought another woman in the house. Hajra's grandmother was ignored by everyone in the village. Towards the end of her life, she was hunched and died in the middle of the street. Hajra's mother was married to Hajra's father when his first wife passed away. He was sixty-seven years old at that. He passed away in a few years and Hajra's mother had to live alone. Hajra was afraid she would have similar fates as her mother and grandmother. One morning, she gathered the courage and asked Shakeel about the rumors of second marriage.

"Do you not see what is in my hand?" he said. She looked at the Quran in his hand.

"I swear by this Holy Book I did not remarry anyone," he said.

Hajra closed her eyes and went back to sleep. She knew no one would take an oath on Quran for no reason.

Over the next couple of days, she noticed a change in Shakeel's routine. Every evening he would say he was going out for a walk and would come back two hours later happier than before. In those two hours, Hajra was afflicted with doubts and darkness. She had never seen him this happy.

One day she decided to send Jalil after his father and to tell her which places he went to for the walk. Jalil found his mother's request puzzling and followed his father during his evening walk.

Hajra prayed to God for those two hours to let this news untrue. She wanted to be saved from a life of ostracization and loneliness as was the case in the lives of her mothers and grandmothers.

Jalil came back and told her mother in a matter-of-fact tone, "Abu did not go for a walk, he entered a house few streets away from our house."

Hajra did not say anything and turned her face away from her children who were sitting close to her. She tried falling asleep but could not and stared into the space unaware when her husband showed up.

#

The children had started noticing a change in their house. Despite their parents' presence, the children felt their absence. Their father was going for walks in the morning and also in the evening.

While going to school one day, Jalil talked to Adeel.

“Have you heard the rumors about our father marrying someone else?” Jalil said.

“As long as he does not bring her home. I don’t care who he marries. There is hardly any space in the room,” Adeel said.

“Do you know what happened to Ammi? She has been sleeping all day hardly doing anything,” Adeel added.

“She is behaving like her brother, Sarfraz. That means she would stop recognizing us at some point,” Jalil said.

“Then she will be asking for tea all the time like Uncle Sarfaraz,” Adeel said. Jalil laughed.

After some time, to ten-year-old Adeel, the idea of his mother forgetting him was a blow in his face. What would the world look like if his mother would not recognize him?

#

One day Hajra decided not to save any food for her husband. He got home after his second walk in the evening and demanded his meal. The children sat quietly with their father and worked on their homework.

“Somebody bring my fucking food,” he said after waiting for couple of seconds. The voice shook the children who ran out to see their mother sitting on one side of courtyard which was a temporary kitchen. She sat near a cold hearth.

“I did not save any food for your father,” Hajra said. The children stood motionless without daring to go and tell their father.

Shakeel walked out of the room after yelling at everyone for some time.

“Has everyone been bitten by a poisonous snake in this family? Why is no one responding to my voice?” Shakeel said.

“Ammi did not save any food for you,” Jalil said.

“She can give food to you dogs and not save anything for me. How the hell she can do that? Why did you not save any food for me?” Shakeel said.

Hajra did not say anything. After not hearing anything from Hajra, Shakeel slapped her. Jalil rushed to his father and tried holding him back.

“How dare you hold me?” Shakeel said and pushed Jalil. Shakeel rushed towards Jalil while Jalil rushed towards the front door and ran outside the house. Shakeel came back and beat Hajra.

“See the kind of kids you have brought up? They don’t respect their father. My father would beat me to death but I never disrespected him all my life,” Shakeel said.

“Go and look for your brother,” Hajra said to Khalil. Adeel, upon seeing his father, felt his body shaking and rushed towards his father in an attempt to save his mother. Shakeel picked up Adeel and threw him against the wall. Adeel went unconscious.

“Yes, I have another wife. Do whatever you want. I can go to her place and have dinner,” Shakeel said. He looked at his motionless wife and unconscious kid. He averted his eyes to the piles of bricks still lying in the courtyard for the 1st time, he saw it for what it was— a desolate place which could never be constructed into a house anymore because of his lack of money and insolence of everyone around him. He wore his shoes and left the house. Men from the neighborhood gathered outside his home after hearing the loud voices.

“My children are not respectful to me,” Shakeel said after seeing the crowd.

“Shakeel, kids these days cannot be brought up the way we were brought up. You need to be gentle with them,” One of his neighbors said.

“Hearing something like this from an impotent man is strange. I know how to take care of my children,” Shakeel said.

“Advising someone these days is like conversing with a buffalo,” one of the neighbors said. Everyone scattered back to their homes.

#

A few minutes later, Hajra’s mind opened up to the presence of things around her. The empty hearth was there. The bricks were piled up in the courtyard. Adeel was standing up after lying there for some time. Hajra saw everything as if she was seeing it for the first time. She held her youngest son. Jalil and Khalil came back. Then the children went to sleep after revering from exhaustion.

Daadi arrived after hearing about the incident.

“Is everyone okay?” she said.

“Why didn’t you tell me about his second marriage?” Hajra said.

“You know how men’s minds work. They will do whatever they want,” Daadi said.

“I agree,” Hajra said.

“One day, Shakeel’s father beat him when Shakeel was Adeel’s age. He beat him with a stick until Shakeel went unconscious. I attempted to save him by putting my hands in-between them. He did not stop and broke all my knuckles,” Daadi said. She raised her hands to show Hajra her swollen.

“His father disappeared for two months. Only I know how to took care of my children,” Daadi added.

“The children are all asleep. Soon I will fall asleep too. I will keep you informed if something happens,” Hajra said.

#

After a while, the righteous of his certainty began to wear off, so too did his affections for Khalida. What Shakeel saw as completion ended up dividing him further. He thought earlier marrying the woman with an extra index finger would make him the man he was before. Men in his religion were allowed to have four wives yet he was not able to take care of two. What he did to his first wife and kids had left him crushed. He looked at his finger and thought he should have learned to live with it instead of craving for something more. He then looked at his second

wife, Khalida who was sleeping next to him. He could not divorce her too. He was afraid people would make fun of him that he is not competent enough to take care of his two wives and children.

That night he had a dream where he met his religion teacher who was a ray of hope for Shakeel. He made Shakeel sit on the floor and advised him about the ills of life.

“Shakeel, humans are creatures of anxiety. The moment you take control of the world around you, it all falls apart. Learn to float in this sea of uncertainty,” the teacher said.

Shakeel woke up in the middle of night. The message of his teacher did not make sense to him like most lectures of theology but seeing his teacher in his dream was a sign of relief.

Next morning, he went back to his house. He was welcomed as if nothing had happened. His wife made breakfast for him. His children were preparing for their school. Everything seemed normal to him.

#

Days passed by and one day, Shakeel’s mother showed up crying unable to hold her tears back. Hajra consoled her.

“Your brother, Rafeeq is in jail for the last three days in Karachi. Zafar showed up earlier this morning saying police captured Rafeeq for murder and robbery,” Daadi said.

“I know that motherfucker was up to something. Who told him he looked like a film hero. The mother has nothing to eat and the son wants to become a film star,” Shakeel said.

“Please go and save your brother,” Daadi said still crying.

Shakeel did not know what to make of the situation. Helping his brother would cost him a lot of money. Murder and Robbery were big crimes. He spent all his savings at his surgery and getting married again. He had only one option left. He will have to pawn his shop and save his brother with that money.

He got the shop’s paper and went straight to the local Patwari, a man responsible for recording ownership of the land and collecting taxes. Abdul Karim Patwari, a patwari by profession, had a side business of loaning money to people for their land. His profession had become extension of his name and he was proud of it.

Abdul Karim was surrounded by men. Shakeel waited for his turn. After waiting for couple of hours, Shakeel told him his emergency.

“I told your father to sell this shop to me long time ago. He refused as if he was going to take this property with him in the grave,” Abdul Karim Patwari said.

“I am not selling it. I will return your loan one day,” Shakeel said.

“I know you will,” Abdul Karim Patwari said and handed Shakeel three lac rupees. Shakeel gave twenty thousand rupees to Hajra to take care of expenses of the house. He handed five thousand rupees to Khalida. He left for Karachi that day. From the bus, he looked at his town disappearing slowly from his sight. From a distance, the upper side of the town and the lower side could not be distinguished. The houses and markets looked undisciplined from the distance.

Chapter 5

Hajra and the children were not accustomed to the freedom they had. This freedom effaced the pain from the quarrel with Shakeel, and they decided to make the most of this freedom. Hajra cooked whatever her children asked for. Shakeel did not allow anyone in his house to have cold drinks. "These cold drinks are nothing but poisons. They destroy you from the inside." Today everyone treated themselves to a cold drink.

Whenever Hajra's sisters-in-law visited her to inquire about Shakeel's departure to save their brother, Hajra empathized with them as much as she could. She offered them tea, but once they were out of sight, they were out of her mind. Part of her had forgotten how free one could feel after years of living with her husband. Recently, her husband's second marriage had divided her unconditional loyalty to her marriage duties.

She decided to do something which she had only desired and thought of. She planned to visit her mother's village completely aware she was excommunicated by everyone in that village. Shakeel's infidelity left a gap in her heart, and she wanted it to be filled with a connection. She ordered Adeel to go with her and instructed Khalil and Jalil to tell everyone she had gone to attend a funeral. She did not want any word about this visit to her in-laws, who could readily disclose it to Shakeel.

She paid the fare only for herself and asked Adeel to stand between the seats on the bus to save money. It was a fifteen-minute ride and after that, she got off in front of a few shops which were not been there when she visited the village with her father almost two decades before.

"This village was named after a shop owned by a Hindu. The building you see here was his shop," she said while walking by a desolate building. Adeel listened to this story. Hajra bought a few oranges and guavas for her mother and brother.

Upon entering the village, she let go of her Burqa and covered herself in a shawl. Adeel had never seen his mother dressed like this in public, but she seemed comfortable and happy walking in a mud alley surrounded by cotton fields.

Hajra knocked at a wooden door at the center of a mud wall. A man, unable to recognize Hajra, questioned her purpose.

"Tell your father the woman who was abducted is back," Hajra said after sensing some familiarity in the man's facial features. Hajra took deep breaths and stood there in anticipation.

A man with a grey beard got outside and said, "My daughter, you are back. I knew what my idiot son was talking about. Step inside the house."

"I am your mother's uncle," he said, looking at Adeel.

"I was about to inform you about something. Your stepbrother, Rab Nawaz, has been here for some time. He is ill. His wife and sons left him here a few days ago. Your mother is already here," Uncle said. Hajra followed him to a room of people who were surprised to see Hajra like this. Naani sat close to Rab Nawaz, who was trembling with cold.

"I am sorry for exploiting you and my sister. I took all your property, but to what use," he said. Someone had lit a fire in corner of the room to keep it warm. Both the smoke and grief were making everyone's eyes glisten.

"Sister, I am sorry for causing misery in your life," he said to Hajra.

“My problems were not because of you. God has everything written for us,” she said to comfort her brother even though she believed her brother put her and her mother under severe financial stress.

"As a brother, it was my responsibility to care for you even though I was your stepbrother, but we had the same father. Please forgive me, sister," he said to Hajra. His shaking hand reached for Adeel. Hajra pushed her son to be close to her dying brother. Adeel received a peck on his cheek from his Uncle.

"Go out and play with your cousins while I sit with your uncle," Hajra said. Everyone appreciated Hajra for forgiving her stepbrother. For her, it was a gesture of being accepted back into her village. Hajra sat with her stepbrother reassuring him she had forgiven him.

#

Adeel got lost in the world of newly discovered cousins.

"Do you go to school? I heard them talk in Urdu in School. Is that true?"

"Is there electricity in your town?"

"Do you guys have a television at home?"

"Can you say the days of the week in Saraiki?"

He was bombarded with questions. He knew the answers to some and did not know the answers to others. He was still trying to rub the coldness of his Uncle's lips off his cheeks.

"You wanna make some money with us," one of his older cousins said.

"I should ask Ammi's permission."

"You are a grown-up. Why do you need someone's permission?" the same cousin said.

Adeel agreed to go without asking his mother's permission.

His cousins took him to cotton fields spread across acres. Women and children were already walking in the fields with sacks. The electric poles without any wires were present in the middle of the fields.

"Why don't these poles have electric wires?" Adeel said.

"People in our village have not come to a conclusion whether they want electricity or not. Two years ago, a man died because of electric in a nearby village. After that, people have been scared of wires," one of his cousins said.

"For plucking one kilogram of cotton, you get two rupees. This is like an open treasure. Make the most of it," another of his cousins said.

Adeel plucked cotton and started piling it on one side. The cotton plucking made him feel more useful than he ever felt at his father's shop. After working for hours, he gathered his pile and got it weighed by Munshi, the accountant for a local landlord whom his cousins identified.

"Four rupees for two kilograms," Munshi said after writing figures down in his notebook with a ball pen.

Adeel accepted four rupees and was joyous to give this money to his mother. When he arrived at the house with his cousin, he heard women mourning inside the house and men crying at the loss of his step-uncle. People empathized with Adeel for losing his Uncle, whom he had

met a few hours earlier for the first time. He offered funeral prayers with the other men. Once he was done, he was on his way back to his home with his mother. He was glad he was finally returning, and he was also missing his brothers.

#

For Khalil, this new freedom brought nothing. He was obedient as usual and worked at the shop in his father's absence. The usual clients who had been visiting the same shop since the time of Khalil's grandfather would look at him and say, "You sure have grown up to be like your father and grandfather." Khalil would respond to this with a smile and return to his work.

#

Jalil was happy his father was absent. He missed school and spent all his days playing cricket with his friends at the old school ground.

One day he and his friends arrived at the ground with a cricket bat in his hand. The cricket ground was full of people for some religious meeting.

"Look at all these bearded monkeys; they have crowded our ground," one of Jalil's friends said.

"I want to use my cricket bat to scare all of them away," Jalil said.

"Use this anger in the name of Islam," a man said who overheard these comments. He had a long beard and was dressed in white clothes. He advanced towards Jalil with difficulty in his walking.

"Salam-alaikum, my name is Abdul Jabbar. This crowd is here for me," he said with politeness. Jalil wanted to run away with friends since he had made harsh comments, but the politeness of this man arrested him.

"Wa-alaikum Salam," Jalil mumbled the response.

"Look at this face and anger. Your demeanor makes me think about how companions of Prophets must have looked like when they were your age. Alhamdulillah, You have a great destiny ahead of you. One day you will make sure Islam becomes the ruling religion of the world," Abdul Jabbar said.

No one had ever perceived Jalil like this. He compared this stranger's politeness with his father's unnecessary harshness. Jalil knew his path to greatness was through this man. Abdul Jabbar left to address a crowd of people. Jalil stood there, anticipating what he would say.

"Islam has defeated Russian non-Muslims successfully. They were coming here to strip you of your religion, but we have successfully sent them back to hell, where all non-Muslims deserve to go. We want you to join our hands and contribute to this great cause of demolishing all non-Muslims. We have also made a new uniform for our young recruits made only for our great struggle." He showed pairs of T-shirts and trousers to the crowd. The crowd applauded with the noise of "Allah O Akbar." Jalil joined the crowd in these chants glowing with a smile. In his mind, his purpose was clear. He wanted to get that uniform and show everyone he could do something big.

He thought the return of his father would be an obstruction to this great struggle. He prayed to God to delay his father's return until he could get this uniform.

#

Adeel was not able to feel himself ever since he returned from his mother's village. He had been fixated on the questions his cousins asked about his native language, and the languages are spoken at the school. Before those questions, it all seemed natural to him. Despite this, he was happy he could make four rupees which he had yet to show to his mother and did not plan to do so. He thought of sharing this secret with his friend, Saad, who was proud of earning ten rupees every day.

"I have changed my job," Saad said. "My father wants me to sell his poetry books. He stopped going outside the house after people installed loudspeakers at the mosque. He says staying inside the house is his way of protesting against loudspeakers. Do you want to accompany me today? These poetry books are heavy," Saad added.

"Sure," Adeel said, aware his mother would not mind him staying out late because his father was away from home. He grabbed ten books with covers of a man sitting on his camel in a desert.

Saad went from one shop to another, pitching his father's new book to people.

"This book has poetry on the Prophet, poems about different families of the town, poems about first love and rejection in love," Saad said. Some people would request Saad to tell them poems about their families, while others would request poems about first love and rejection.

Saad had memorized most of his father's poetry collection and would eloquently recite poems. People would be impressed by his eloquence and would buy books immediately.

To Adeel, this was nothing less than a miracle. He presumed it was better to keep his meager earning of four rupees to himself.

"Who taught you all this?" Adeel said to Saad.

"It all is part of the inheritance. My father is a poet. My grandfather was a poet," Saad said.

Adeel needed clarification since he was not a good goldsmith.

"It is a job like any other job. Your family is in the goldsmith business, and my family is in the poetry business," Saad said, sensing Adeel's confusion.

Adeel was not quite convinced. He wanted to learn more from Saad so he asked Saad whether he could accompany him on his book trips every day.

Adeel was fascinated by this soft world of poetry as opposed to the hardness of tools at his father's goldsmith business. Seeing Saad talk about poetry to people and receive appreciation made me want to do something similar.

He was accompanying Saad on his bookselling trip when he was stopped by a voice near the bridge.

"What trash are you selling?"

"This is not trash. This is the latest collection of my father's poetry."

"I do not see any difference." The older man said indifferently. He had rags in the name of clothes and was smoking a cheap K2 cigarette.

"How much is the price?" He said after a pause.

"Twenty rupees."

"I asked the price of a book, not of your grandma," the man said. Adeel laughed at this remark, and Saad had nothing to say in response for the first time.

Adeel was intrigued by this old man who was named Laddha. Adeel contemplated that proximity with this old man would give him better command over language, and maybe one day he would also become a storyteller like Saad and his father or may be better than them.

The next day Adeel bought a pack of K2 cigarettes and went straight to Laddha, who ignored Adeel's presence and stayed motionless on a sheet made up of rags like his clothes.

Adeel forwarded a pack of K2 cigarettes, and Laddha acknowledged his presence.

"You know why I smoke K2 brand cigarettes," he said, posing a question to Adeel who did not know how to answer.

"It gives me a feeling I am smoking an entire mountain. Can't you guess it from the amount of smoke this cigarette makes?" he said.

Adeel looked at the smoke Laddha was exhaling and concluded he was right.

"Come, have a seat," he said, making space for Adeel on his sheet.

"You know why I am named Laddha?" he said. Adeel did not know the answer to this question too, and felt embarrassed for not knowing anything.

"Laddha means someone who is found. My parents found me when I was a kid, and they named me Laddha, and then they unfound me," he said, smoking his cigarette. In a matter of minutes, Laddha smoked the whole pack of cigarettes.

"Go away, I will tell you more things once you bring me more cigarettes. I know one thousand and two stories," he said and went back to sleep. Adeel had come across a treasure of stories where he could answer everything. He decided not to tell anyone about this even though Laddha's sheet was under the tree near the only bridge in the town where Adeel could be seen by his brothers.

#

Adeel ran to the door to open it and saw the same Uncle from the village.

"Is your mother inside the house?"

"She is."

"Tell her your Naani is not doing well."

Hajra hurried to the village to see her mother in the same room where her stepbrother had been lying a few days ago. It was too cold—no one lit a fire in the room to keep it warm.

Hajra's mother was happy to see her. She hugged her daughter as if both had been separated for years.

"I told you my daughter would be here," she said, holding back her tears.

A man holding a dextrose saline bottle interrupted this union by coughing. Hajra separated herself from her mother, interpreting coughing as a sign to let him do his job. He put the needle in Naani's vein and tied the bottle with a jute string over a nail near the wall.

Hajra was led outside by one elderly woman from the village.

"Your mother has a disease in her stomach. Doctors need three lac rupees for the operation, but no one has that money. We have lied to her she has a fever, and she will be fine in a matter of a few days, but this did not entirely convince her."

"Whatever Allah desires," Hajra said, tears rolling down her eyes. She cried not only for her mother but for her miseries, too, including her husband's betrayal and her early exile from her family. She spent the night in the village to care for her mother.

She recited the Quran near her mother with other women of the village. In the middle of the night, Naani asked for Hajra. She opened her heart to her daughter, "My sister and I have lived lonely lives. We were orphans. No one took care of us. I married your father and he was my grandfather's age. Everyone stopped talking to you without realizing anything about your situation." Naani told her life story for the first and the last time. Other women stopped reciting Quran and listened to her stories of misery. Once she finished telling her story, she fell asleep.

Naani passed away the next morning. The women decided to call for her son so that he could see his mother one last time.

A woman led Sarfraz to his mother who was dead. Unlike popular speculation and misconceptions that Sarfraz couldn't recognize anyone, he wept upon seeing his dead mother. Hajra consoled her brother. The women who were mourning beside the bed saw Sarfraz crying for the first time. After all, he did recognize his mother.

#

After her mother's death, Hajra had forgotten how she lived. To Hajra, her mother was a boat in the sea of uncertainty. Hajra would spend the entire day contemplating her mother's loss. Her memories with her mother who would help Hajra's father when he turned blind in the last years of his life. Despite his disability, he was determined to work on rugs he sold to Baloch nomads. They had been his customers for over three decades and he did not want to turn them away just because he was blind. Hajra's mother had learned to make rugs all these years. She would help Hajra's father without him seeing any of it. After he thought he was done, he would give it to his customers impressed by this blind artist's artwork.

“Your craftsmanship is getting better day-by-day even though you have lost your eyesight,” People would say. Hajra would think about this memory and smile since she was the only one who knew this secret.

With Hajra's dive into the ocean of her mother's memories, her distance from her children had increased despite living under the same roof. She would cook once a day and did not have much knowledge of how her children were spending time.

#

Instead of cricket, Jalil was spending time learning physical combat with other children and adults. They would run four rounds of the football ground shouting, "Haq Ho! Allah Ho!"

After weeks of training, everyone at the training received trousers and a t-shirt.

Abdul Jabaar walked limping to the group of trainees.

"This is your official dress for fighting in the cause of Allah. Tonight, we will watch a film about Jihad in Afghanistan. In our religion, films are forbidden except such action films because they promote the cause of Allah." Jalil was content that he had gotten his uniform but decided to stay for the film.

The credits rolled, and a man whose body was all ripped appeared in a crowd fighting with the other man. Soon he was in Afghanistan helping the people of Afghanistan against the Russians.

A boy named Hamid, the age of Jalil, appeared on screen holding a gun and fighting alongside other men. Jalil saw himself in that boy. He had made this far to get this uniform. Why not go ahead and fight like that boy?

After the screening, Abdul Jabaar brought a small box. He opened it and it had a pistol.

"The caretaker of this school donated this pistol. This is not an ordinary pistol. This was given to him by a British officer. When Allah wants to create sources for you, he does so from all directions," he said.

He held a register and asked for volunteers who would go to Afghanistan following month, explaining all their expenses would be taken care of. Jalil, under the influence of the film, got his name registered. He hid his uniform under the bed, away from his mother.

#

Adeel saved his pocket money to buy cigarettes and continued visiting Laddha, who told stories of the days gone by and the day to come. He narrated folk stories of other countries, and the time he almost fell in love with. He also told the story of when he almost got drunk or when he almost went to school.

"How do you have so many stories, Laddha?"

"I live a new life every day. I don't worry about food. I only worry about stories with every breath," Laddha said, exhaling smoke.

"How can I be like you?"

"You will have to choose your teacher. You will have to unlearn what they teach you at school." Laddha said.

The following day, on his way to school with his brothers, Adeel thought about Laddha's comment about unlearning things from school. I can learn things better if I choose to go to Laddha instead of school. He stopped by a stationary shop pretending to buy a notebook while his brothers were past the school gate. He went to Laddha, who had just woken up.

"What are you doing here instead of being in school?" Laddha said.

"I have quit school. From today I will be learning from you. You said I have to unlearn everything I learn from school. What is the use of going to school, then?"

"This is not what I meant. Go back to school. You are not allowed here anymore," Laddha said.

Adeel apologized, but Laddha was indifferent to him.

"I will get punished from school for being late. At least tell me stories for today," Adeel said.

Laddha grabbed Adeel by his arm and led him back home.

"Take care of your son; he does not want to go to school," Laddha said, handing Adeel to his mother. Hajra thanked Laddha.

#

Unlike Shakeel, who had given him a good beating for missing school, she did not say anything to Adeel. After a while, she heard another knock at the door. It was Abdul Jabaar with other men.

"We are here to get our young soldier, Jalil. We will be leaving for Afghanistan in a bit. He has signed himself up for the greater cause of Allah."

Hajra was surprised. She composed herself behind the door.

"Don't you feel ashamed for misleading young boys? His father left us in this condition. Now you want my son to follow you blindly and die. Please leave us alone," Hajra said.

She went back to Adeel and interrogated him. He gave away all his brother's secrets and brought back his brother's uniform from the room.

She burned it right away.

"I wish all of you had died the day you were born. I did not have to see this day or face any of this trouble," she said and broke down. Jalil saw his mother crying and asked Adeel the reason who told him about the uniform. He saw the remains of his uniform now reduced to blackened rags. After that day, no one brought up Adeel's decision to miss school or Jalil's decision to go to Jihad.

Chapter 6

Days became weeks, and weeks turned into months, but there was no news of the return of Shakeel. He sent messages through different sources that he was struggling with his brother's case. Hajra was short on money, and the house's expenses were solely from Khalil's work. She knew it was time to keep everything in check after Jalil's and Adeel's incident.

She accompanied her children to school and often reached earlier to get them back. During her school days, a blacksmith fell in love with her. An acquaintance saw her receiving flowers from him and informed Hajra's father. After that incident, her father always accompanied her to school and waited for her to take her back home. She did not like this surveillance, but she was doing the same to her children. Jalil and Adeel were not allowed to leave the house except for school. Only Khalil was allowed to go to work.

The worry of finances was eating her away. To solve that problem, She sold all the bricks in the courtyard to a construction worker without worrying much about the consequences.

#

On the other hand, Khalida could not pay the house's rent. She asked for help from her parents, who detailed their misery.

"When a daughter leaves her parents, she is no longer their responsibility. We thought our days would also change with your marriage to a goldsmith."

Khalida cried for her misery. For her, the world was a prison without a way out. Her night was full of distress. She did not know how she would come up with the rent.

One day, the landlord knocked at her door. She detailed her misery, and the landlord left, acknowledging her pain. Later, Khalida learned from neighbors that the landlord's wife fell in love with the landlord's friend and left him. The landlord was a police constable with a good salary and good family inheritance.

Khalida asked for her landlord's help in case of any difficulty. His visits to her door became frequent, and both were soon in love with each other amidst the conversations of rent and needs. He provided her with financial support in the name of debt, and she offered him food daily in gratitude.

#

It started to rain for weeks during that summer. All emergency warnings were issued for possible flooding. For days, loud mosque speakers announced emergency warnings and ordered people to get their belongings to the upper side of the town.

Hajra's house accumulated rainwater, and she constantly drained it with pots out of the house. They made a small passage for water to go out of the house into the street's drainage. They could drain from inside the house but could not stop the water from outside the town.

Hajra refused to leave her house despite the warning of a flood approaching the town. Almost everyone in the neighborhood had evacuated their homes.

The water entered the house, and Hajra stood in the courtyard, wanting to face the water.

"Water! Stop Right There. You are not allowed to enter the house of an orphan and a poor woman." It was her way of combating the water, but it did not work. The water was moving with such force as if it was looking for something to find and destroy it. Hajra was surrounded by water to her knees in a matter of a few seconds.

She was submerged in water and knew she would die. Her life passed before her. She stopped her struggle to get out of the water until she saw a woman's body floating beside her. This is how she would look when she is dead unrecognizable by her children. Something in her hated the sight of the dead. She had seen enough of those in the last few months, her stepbrother and mother, Both dead and far away from the confines of her world. Her legs moved, and she was swimming. She never learned how to swim, but she neither jumped into the water. She was pushing against the flow of water. She found herself at a roadside on the upper side of the town. She raised herself and stood near the flowing water. An old woman, her mother's age, offered Hajra a shawl to cover herself.

The water meant to drown her was bowing down in front of her feet. She had another river to cross now. To find her children, whom she let go before the flood. She looked for them and found them crying, holding each other hands. She hugged them in a way she never hugged them. She became a refugee to her crying children, who were sobbing. She became a mountain providing a valley of safety.

"How did you make it through the flood?" Jalil said, separating himself from his mother. Hajra knew they would not believe any of her stories. Even Hajra herself was astonished by her strength and what had just happened to her.

"Go and help other people," she said, pointing them to their neighbors struggling to push their sheep forward. She looked at the angry water beneath her flattening everything in its way. She thought about her miraculous survival. Who would believe her story that a woman who had never entered the water in her life swam through this massive flood?

The townspeople spent the night in the open air. Any available space had become an imaginary home with charpoys, cattle, and some pots and pans. There were no walls in between, so it was hard to distinguish where one home ended, and another home started. Hajra found a space and made such a home with her kids. They spent the night like with an imaginary home. The following day, the government rescue teams arrived and distributed rations and camps. The townspeople spent the days in the open until the water had lowered its level.

#

"Water got angry. That's what happened. I will look for it and lead it back to its source," Laddha announced one day and packed his belongings. No one paid any heed to his announcement except Adeel who was crushed at this news of departure.

"You can't come with me. You don't have what it takes to change the course of water. You have to learn to make your way through the world. You have bigger tasks to accomplish than this water," Laddha said after examining the lines on his palms. Adeel was glistening.

"In this great odyssey, you can walk with me to the edge of this town," Laddha said, patting Adeel's shoulder.

"How would you ask the water to return to its source?" Adeel said with innocence.

"Water is attracted to the songs of shepherds. I will have to find that shepherd and make him sing to lure the water back," he said. Like other stories of Laddha, this was unfathomable to Adeel.

Adeel said goodbye to Laddha at the edge of the town, which to Adeel, felt like the edge of his world. Adeel had never been this far away from home. He was losing his source of stories, but he was glad at the premonition that he had bigger tasks to do.

#

Shakeel was back with his brother after months of going through the courts and the police station. His disposition was changed, and he had acquired the appearance of a man who had accepted his defeat.

The flood had taken away everything from his house. His family had built a camp and temporary toilet at the same place. The flood also took away the electric motor. Khalida was missing, and so was the landlord. The flood had taken her away. However, there were rumors she had eloped with her landlord. Shakeel was not concerned about this. He had other things to be anxious about.

He had to work from scratch to build everything. After spending money on his brother's acquittal from jail, he was in debt. Despite all this, the familiarity of a temporary home rejuvenated him. His shop had also survived since it was on the upper side of the town. He had also realized the fulfillment he was looking for all this time after was not outside him. It was not in either growing

a new finger or marrying someone with an extra finger. It was within himself. After months of sufferings for his brother, he had learned to accept his damaged self as a complete whole.

Hajra told him everything about their children's tribulations. This was enough to evoke fear, but he was not fearful since he was a changed man.

He went to Abdul Karim Patwari and offered him his shop for the money Shakeel had borrowed.

"With recent floods, the land prices have gone to dust. I have a proposal for you. A man like you is always helpful for the kind of job I do. I am getting old and can't argue with these ignorant people, and you have saved your brother from the police and courts. Getting stuck with the police and court is like stepping down in a well with no way out, but you survived. Work for me for some years, and I will return your papers," Abdul Karim Patwari said. Shakeel wondered what this would mean for him. To settle in the town, his father and grandfather worked for the landlord and committed minor crimes for them. He was not serving the old master but would be a slave to a new master like Patwari, known for grabbing the peasants' lands.

"Only if I can work on my shop besides working here. My skill as a goldsmith has helped me through tougher times of life; I can't leave it like that," Shakeel said after thinking for a while.

"You can work half of the day at your shop and after that at my office," Patwari said.

"How did you manage to do all this?" Patwari asked Shakeel after a pause.

"After my finger incident, I was afraid of electric motors. When I was in Karachi, I was living near the electric motor industry. In my free time, I would observe how the electric motor

was being made. It is not different from the work of a goldsmith. It settled all my fears. I visited the place where electricity was being made. It was coming from these big structures. Being there was like being in the lap of my mother," Shakeel said.

"Hmmm.." Patwari said unable to decipher what was being explained. "Let me know if I can do anything for you," he added.

"I can't let my children survive in this town. Do you know any good but cheap boarding school," Shakeel said.

"I know one school in Muzaffargarh. I have recommended that to some people here. Perfect place, and the school's founder treats his students like his kids even though he does not have kids. Whoever goes to that school returns home as an officer," Patwari said.

Shakeel was relieved to hear this as this assured a better future for his children beyond the smallness of this town which he had realized after spending months in Karachi running from one place to another to save his brother. His sons would have to leave this town to do good in life.

"Take your children tomorrow and give Jamil Sahab my reference. Very kind man," Patwari said.

Shakeel discussed this with his wife, who agreed after persuasion. Over the next couple of days, new clothes for the children were sewn. They were happy to see how much attention was being given to them for the first time.

Daadi, who had also survived the flood, taunted Hajra for letting her kids go.

"Your love was not strong enough to stop them, I loved my children and they stayed with us."

Hajra had nothing to say in response since Daadi knew little about their calamities.

"See your house as much as you can because it would not be the same when you return," Daadi said, pointing to the temporary nature of the house.

The children did not know how to respond to things happening around them. They sensed something bigger than them that was shaping their lives. Why could they not stay in this town and study? What was wrong with the business of goldsmith? Thoughts like these were flowing through their minds. Finally, they left home. As they sat on the bus, they realized it was probably their first time traveling with their father. As the bus was moving forward, Jalil was getting excited about this new independence, Khalil was indifferent, and Adeel was lamenting the end of his known world and uncertain about the new one.

Hajra was alone at home. She was coexisting with the memories of the flood, which haunted her occasionally, but she was content she made it through. She looked at the cranes flying in a group in the sky. She did not feel like a crane separated from its flock despite being alone. Despite the geographical distance, she felt a link tying her with those she loved.

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