MAN UP:
Stories of Parvez and Muna

by
Musa Syeed

A Thesis submitted to the
Graduate School-Newark
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program

Written under the direction of
Akhil Sharma

And approved by
Jayne Anne Phillips

Newark, New Jersey
May 2018
DROWNING.......1
A GREAT MAN....18
DADDY’S GIRL...34
PARADISE..........49
REHAB.............67
CRY IT OUT........86
DROWNING

His plan to meet a girl was simple. All Parvez had to do was board a plane, endure the frightened stares of his fellow passengers as he walked his bearded, brown face down the aisle, settle into his seat, remember not to take his crusty sneakers off because his socks invariably stank, take a brief nap, awaken to the shouts of a white nationalist terrorist announcing he was hijacking the plane, then offer himself as a hostage to said terrorist, then as the terrorist was binding Parvez’s hands, break free, strike the terrorist in the tento pressure point Guru Dave had taught him, watch the terrorist go limp in his arms, then present the terrorist--in a headlock--to the rest of the plane as if to say Well isn’t this an interesting subversion of mainstream narratives?, and there would be applause from the other passengers, amongst whom there was at least a few pretty girls--maybe even a couple Muslims and definitely at least one “into Eastern religions”--who might appreciate his act of heroism, who would appreciate his modesty, who would offer their numbers, or better yet emails, without him even asking. But, as he approached one of said girls to take her handwritten note, an air marshall, previously indisposed by the terrorist, would awaken and, confused by the turn of events, shoot Parvez dead.

But Parvez had a reasonable Plan B: Ramadan. The holy month in New York had become a kind of marathon meet market, a sprawling bazaar of bachelors and bachelorettes. Every night for thirty days, people had a good excuse to gather--to break their fast--and Manhattan, with its financial institutions and corporate law firms, had
enough nouveau riche Muslims who could afford to host these feeding frenzies. And for a twenty-something that didn’t drink and was not interested in arranged marriage or a long-term/post-modern dating situation, Parvez couldn’t do much better than an iftar.

So, Parvez and his friend Dawud had made a deal: they would play wingman for each other as they attempted to crash a yuppie iftar party every night of Ramadan. And on the fifth night of Ramadan, Parvez and Dawud found themselves in a luxury Midtown apartment, every one of its 600 square feet occupied by single, young, hungry Muslims. They broke their fasts on dates, prayed, and then patiently watched the aluminum trays of food sitting on the table, waiting for their host to peel back the foil.

“Bro,” Dawud rattled a box of mints in Parvez’s face.

“I’m good,” Parvez grabbed at the prayer rug’s tassles with his toes.

“There’s going to be a long line for dinner,” Dawud gestured around the living room, people and their prayer rugs crammed between a couch and a chaise longue. “You don’t want to talk to anyone with that Ramadan breath.”

Parvez put a hand over his mouth and exhaled. It was true. His breath did smell like fasting, like twelve hours of his stomach acids churning in on themselves and the cold, leftover mushroom pizza he ate before sunrise. He and Dawud popped their mints then glanced over their shoulders. Women were folding up their prayer rugs, some of them pulling off their hijabs, others keeping them. There were two rows of women to the three rows of men.

“I like these odds,” Dawud said and sprung to his feet.
Before Parvez could stand, the buffet table was overrun by the crush of guests clutching limp paper plates. He lost Dawud in the crowd, so Parvez let himself be carried along by a wave of investment banker guys. He didn’t speak to them as he quietly heaped biryani, samosas, and chicken makhani on his plate.

He stepped away from the table, surveying the room for a place to sit. The entire apartment, from the shoe-littered foyer to the floor-to-ceiling windows that perfectly framed the Empire State Building, was taken up by these yuppies, and their Tom Ford cologne, and their Brooks Brothers clothes, and their haircuts, and their firsthand furniture, and their careers that their parents likely approved of fully. There was no space for Parvez.

The plate sagged in Parvez’s hand, and he thought of his own semi-illegal basement apartment in Astoria, which was so humid in the summers that mushrooms grew out of the walls. He had hosted a small, sweaty iftar there last Ramadan, and one of his guests, his old college crush, stepped inside, looked at the ceramic tiles and shabbily-stuccoed walls, and said, “Your place looks like Pakistan.” He had decided then not to host any more iftars, or to have anyone over to his place.

“Parvez!” Dawud waved from the hallway. He was leaning on the wall next to Khadijah, one of the only other black people there. Parvez had met her a few nights ago at another iftar and thought of asking her to coffee, but he would defer to his friend now.

Parvez made his way over to Dawud, stepping over guests sitting on the floor, whispering apologies. But his plate suddenly caved. Samosas and biryani burst through the paper, through his hands, dripping and crumbling from his fingers.
Parvez froze, looking into space. Maybe if he didn’t look at the fallen food, or at the other guests, there was a chance no one would notice. There was a chance he could pretend it never happened, and he could tiptoe to the foyer, slip on his shoes, and walk out of this nightmare.

“I was waiting for someone to do that,” a voice came from below. A woman sat cross-legged on the floor, looking up at him. She pushed her bangs out of her eyes, furrowing her brow.

“I’m so sorry--”

“It’s OK. It missed me.” She pulled her knees towards her, inching away from his dinner, splattered on the hardwood. “If it didn’t, we’d have a problem.”

“I’m really sorry, it was the food--and these plates---”

“--yeah, well that’s what happens when you’re a fat ass.”

Dear God, Parvez thought, who was this woman? He instinctively sucked in his slight gut.

“That was a joke,” she said as she got to her feet. “If these people didn’t want chicken makhani on their floor, they should’ve brought out their china. You know they can afford it.”

“Yeah. Haha.” Dear God, who was this woman! A truth teller after his own heart.

“Here,” she handed him a napkin and stepped over the spilled food. “I’ll get some more napkins.”

“You don’t have to do that.”
“I know. I normally wouldn’t,” she smiled, “but I’m just feeling that Ramadan spirit.”

He watched her walk over to the table. Her pencil skirt and asymmetrical blouse looked like they were actually purchased at a thrift store, like his own paisley-print button-up, which he just realized had an ink stain on its breast pocket.

As she turned back, she caught him staring.

“I thought you’d have at least picked up the rice by now.”

“I was strategizing first,” he took half the napkins from her and they both kneeled over the spill.

“You’re not one of those guys who still has their mommies clean up after them?”

“No...”

“Yeah, right,” she said, “I bet she still wipes your ass.”

“What?!”

“You’re probably like, ‘Mummy, I’m done!’”

“No!” Parvez squealed. But he saw she was smirking and tried to regain his cool.

“I actually haven’t lived at home in like, seven years.”

“Where do you live?”

“Astoria,” he said as he threw another orange-stained napkin onto the heap. “But I’m looking at other places.”

To Parvez’s surprise, they continued talking even after they cleaned up his mess. They huddled there, barefoot on the carpet, quickly cycling through biographical
sketches. Asma: 25yo/Bengali/born in Flushing/middle child/rebelling against strict parents. Parvez: 25yo/Kashmiri/born in Indiana/youngest (along with his twin)/eternally searching for his father’s approval. She was in the city to pursue “publishing”, which meant she worked at an underresourced afterschool program teaching creative writing, and he was a “filmmaker”, which meant he begged his more entrepreneurial film school friends to let him PA on their corporate “branded content” productions.

They discovered they had both went to Film Forum for the newly restored Satyajit Ray film and they were both fans of a genre of music Asma called “songs for sad white men.” There seemed to be no limit to the common ground expanding at their feet, but then they were interrupted.

“Hey you two,” Sundous, the accountant hosting the party, wedged herself between them. “I had meant to introduce you, but looks like you already found each other.”

“Yeah, the two starving artists,” Zeeshan, her meathead fiancee appeared, chuckling with his square jaw. He did not sit down with the group, but stayed standing over them. Parvez imagined if Zeeshan attempted to squat to their level, he would split his tight pants.

“Shut up, Zeeshan,” Sundous smacked his leg, letting her hand linger for a moment on his calf muscle. She turned back to Parvez and Asma, fixing her hijab, and said, “So let me ask you a question, since you’re both creative types.”
“OK.” He knew what was coming. Ever since her engagement, Sundous felt entitled to play matchmaker. But she played the part like Nicholas Cage might--some strange, twisted gleam in her eye, always on the precipice of abject terror.

“What do you think love should feel like?” She tilted her head slightly, brought her palms together. “Parvez?”

Parvez blinked, studying Sundous’ deranged, dimpled smile. If he ever got the chance to direct a real documentary, he would never ask an interview subject such a vague, cliche question like the one he was meant to answer now. The response would just be some mushy drivel that he would edit out in his mind even as the words dribbled off the subject’s lips. But the two women and the towering manchild all looked at Parvez, expecting an answer.

“I think love---” he said, secretly digging the tines of his fork into his thigh, “--love should feel safe. Like you’re in the ocean. Floating in a big, calm---”

“--oh no way,” Asma cut him off. “Love isn’t supposed to be safe.”

“Oh?” Sundous raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, there should be some element of danger,” Asma punched at the air. “If love is an ocean, it’s like the stormy, roaring kind. Waves sweeping you up, crashing down, turning you into sand.”

“Wow,” Parvez bit his lip. She had hijacked his own metaphor, put it in a headlock.

“You have to be ready to drown.”
“Interesting,” Sundous smiled. She held a palm out to each of them, “But I guess it can be both right? Sometimes calm, sometimes crazy.”

“Mmhmm,” Parvez said, hoping Sundous had fulfilled whatever perverse pleasure she sought. She was like a little girl setting dolls on fire. Or a white guy watching a minstrel show.

“Listen, if it’s too loud here, you guys can go to the roof,” Sundous offered. “It’s really chill up there.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice view,” Zeeshan mussed Parvez’s hair.

“Thanks,” Parvez muttered.

Sundous smiled, lipstick stains on her teeth. Her job was done, so she excused herself and Zeeshan followed dutifully behind.

Parvez and Asma sat in silence for a moment, looking at the ground. Parvez giggled first, then Asma laughed, too.

“I like Sundous, but fuck!” Asma smacked her forehead. “She can be a nosy little bitch.”

“Yeah, what a f-freaking weirdo,” Parvez said, flinching a bit from Asma’s language. He had flirted with the f-word, but he could never make it sound right on his tongue. It always come out like “fack”.

“You know, the roof does sound good right about now,” she said, rifling through her purse. “Ramadan’s kicking my ass. I can deal with no food or drink. Even no sex. But I need a smoke.”

“You smoke?”
“You don’t?” She pulled out her American Spirits.

“No.”

“Nothing?”

“No.”

“Not even sheesha?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never,” Parvez’s voice was shrinking, afraid to say he believed it may be against God’s will. “I don’t like it.”

“How do you know you don’t like it if you haven’t tried it?”

Parvez shrugged.

“Don’t tell me you’re like a fundo guy,” she rolled her eyes.

“No, no, no,” he pleaded, “I’m not like that.” Not a fundamentalist. It was a point that often needed clarification. He had that face after all. The kind of face that made other brown people at mosques all over the country assume that he worked there and knew where the bathrooms were, the kind of face that, for the last two Halloweens, caught the attention of some frat boy who would call out, “Hey, look, it’s Osama!”

“You sure you’re not fundo?” she pulled out her lighter.

“Yeah, It’s just a health thing. It’s cool.”

“You’re cool?”

“Yeah.”

“How cool are you?”
“You know,” he held out his hands, as if balancing a block of cool in his palms.

“You know the Qur’an doesn’t forbid weed, right?”

“Yup,” he said. He looked back at the table where Sundous was laying out the dessert. “Do you want a cupcake?”

***

Parvez stood at Sundous’s sink, washing the serving dishes and spoons, as the party raged on in the next room. He hated dishwashing, but the chore had a dual advantage here. One, it allowed him to avoid going to the roof alone with Asma, and as Asma walked in to the kitchen, he achieved the second goal. She could see who he really is: a nice guy. Fundo guys don’t do dishes.

“The roof was cool,” she said.

“Yeah, I just wanted to help Sundous out,” he held up a sudsy spatula.

“That’s nice.”

“I find it’s relaxing, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Parvez sighed to show he was at ease.

“I could never get my ex to do dishes,” she leaned against the fridge, looking somewhere over Parvez’s head, past him. “He would always say, ‘I’m letting them soak.’ But we all know that’s bullshit.”

“Right.” She had an ex-something. But that was probably fine. After all, Parvez had broken a few hearts along the way. He had dropped his fair share of smiley faces in online chats and met for coffee with more than a couple girls. A real Kashmiri casanova.
“You wouldn’t think that it took me two years of living together to figure him out.”

So she had lived with her ex-something. That was probably fine, too. She must know how to live with a man, Parvez thought. He didn’t know how to live with a woman who wasn’t his mother or his sister.

“He always wanted me to be doing something for him,” Asma’s voice lowered now, almost a whisper. “I couldn’t work, couldn’t write with all that going on. Someone always yelling at me. Cook this, clean that. He was a white guy from Amherst, but he was just as much of a douche as a mullah from the village. I mean, he was just a dude after all.”

“Yeah, dudes,” Parvez scrubbed burnt chicken skin from a white porcelain tray.

“Sometimes I just want to sit on the couch,” she said, “watch some TV, have a drink. You know?”

“Yeah. Oh fack yeah,” he said. But he wanted to know what kind of drink she meant.

“Anyway, it’s been a couple years since we broke up,” she said, pacing the tiny kitchen, “and now that we’re friends again, I realize we should’ve just kept it that way.”

Parvez glanced at her. She had her back to him and chewed on her fingernail.

“My mom’s always on my case,” she sidled up next to him at the sink, now close enough he could smell the cigarettes on her breath. “She’s like, ‘Can’t you find a good Muslim boy?’”
“That’s funny.” He was not laughing. He stared into the clogged sink, beads of oil scattered across the surface. He thrust his hand into the drain and removed a clump of rice.

“I just tell her, ‘I’ll find one that’s good enough.’”

He laughed a bit too loudly, but then they were both quiet. Parvez imagined he could be Asma’s good enough Muslim boy. He could get her parents off her back, recite beautifully for them, stand up when they entered the room, massage her mom’s feet. He and Asma could cook their dinners together, side-by-side. They could go to the movies and discuss auteur theory. Then, when they went home and she drank a 40 on the couch, or if her ex-something came over and did the yawn-stretch-his-arm-over-her-shoulder move when they tried to watch TV, Parvez could sit and hide in the darkness of their coat closet until it was all over.

He picked up a wine glass from the counter and poured out the remnants of mango lassi, a stream of orange circling the drain. And then very deliberately, he smashed the glass against the stainless steel sink.

“Fuck!” Asma jumped at the sound.

“Oh God. I’m so clumsy.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Let me see.”

“No, I’m not cut or anything. Just a little light-headed,” Parvez staggered back from the sink. “You know, fasting.”
“All right. I’ll clean this up,” she said, grabbing the yellow dishwashing gloves he had neglected to use. “You should sit down.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, “I will.”

He left the kitchen, walked past the chit-chatting guests, and headed straight for the foyer. He stuffed his feet into his shoes, and walked out of the apartment without tying his laces, dishwater still dripping from his fingers.

***

The coffeeshop was full of the late night Ramadan crowd. Parvez recognized a few others from Sundous’s party and the iftar circuit, and there were also a couple tables of folks he didn’t know. Maybe the night wouldn’t be a waste.

He had run from Sundous’s apartment to the 28th street mosque, caught a few rakats of taraweeh, and followed the crowd of other twentysomethings out for coffee. He ended up sitting with Dawud and Khadijah, watching them flirt behind their iced lattes.

Parvez could tell Dawud and Khadijah would likely soon get married. He was on a MD/PhD track and she was a social worker. They were serious-minded, goal-oriented people. They weren’t screwing around like the rest of them.

Dawud didn’t need Parvez’s wingman services, so Parvez slumped back in his chair. He looked past the happy, soon-to-be couple, wondering if someone was out there for him. But the most interesting person in the coffeeshop was a drunk, sweaty man, possibly homeless, stumbling from the counter with an overfull cup. The steaming coffee lapped over the lip of the paper cup as he walked. and he spilled a little on a college student seated in front of a laptop. The student jumped up, and brushed the coffee off his
shorts. The student shook his head, waved it off, forgiving the man. The man didn’t move on, but stood, wobbling, in front of the student, and they continued to talk.

Parvez smiled. He pulled out his phone, hoping to take a secret picture of the scene. He had taken pictures like this since he first arrived in the city a few years ago--a Hasidic Jewish woman sitting next to a hijabi Pakistani woman on the train, a gray haired-Wall Street type helping a young mother with her stroller up the stairs. He had planned on starting a blog of these images, showing divergent city lives coming together in beautiful, mundane moments. The blog, though it was still just an idea, could continually renew his faith in the city. And when he didn’t have much faith left, it could at least get him a book deal.

Parvez angled the phone past Dawud and Khadijah, and he found his frame, a medium two-shot. He would capture whatever would happen next: a handshake, a fist bump, a hug. But then the man threw his coffee into the student’s chest. The student opened his mouth to scream, steam exploding from his t-shirt. The man grabbed the student’s throat, thrusting him into the wall.

For a moment, no one else noticed. Parvez said nothing, still holding his phone, watching through its viewfinder as the two strangers slammed again into the faux wood-paneling. The student yelled for help.

“Oh my God!” Khadijah screamed. Dawud jumped out of his seat and rushed towards the fight. But a petite woman in a hijab reached them first.

“Let go!” she pleaded, but the man paid her no attention.
Parvez sat forward, curious about this woman in a headwrap hijab and hightops, no taller than five feet, yelling at these men. She was probably going to make it worse, but Parvez held the frame.

Dawud lunged between the men, his shoulder breaking the drunk man’s hold. The student slipped away, and Dawud threw his forearm across the man’s chest and pinned him against the wall. There was a collective “Oh!” from the crowd, then silence.

“It’s over, brother,” Dawud said as the man stirred and tried to lift his arms. Dawud pressed his forearm harder into the man’s shoulders, so the man resisted the only way he could: he spit in Dawud’s face. Dawud flinched but he didn’t let go.

“Muna,” Dawud turned to the little hijabi, still standing by. “Step back. He might try something.”

“I’ll call the police,” she said.

Parvez finally got up from his seat and joined the ring of bystanders. He watched as Muna rushed around the coffeeshop, conferring with baristas, making phone calls, bringing napkins to the student.

“Parvez!” Dawud called.

Parvez was surprised to hear his name spoken. It was like the fourth wall had been broken and he had been cast into this little drama. He cracked his knuckles and made his way through the crowd. Maybe he would play The Muscle, The Fixer, The Badass With A Strong Sense of Justice But Who Sometimes Goes A Little Too Far. He marched across the coffeeshop, shoving chairs out of his way. But he stopped short at the sour smell of alcohol on the man.
“You got a couple bucks on you?” Dawud asked without turning to Parvez.

“What?” Parvez clenched his fists.

“I told this brother the cops are coming. And I’d like to send him on his way before they get here. But he needs some money to eat.”

“You serious?”

“If you don’t have anything for him,” Dawud’s teeth were clenched, his whole body still straining against the other man, “can you call Muna over here?”

“You know her?”

“What?”

“Muna. Is she cool?”

“Goddammit,” Dawud muttered and cocked his head to the side. “Muna!”

“No,” Parvez said, “I’ll do it.” He pulled a couple wadded bills out of his jeans. He stepped closer to the man. The man’s shirt had layers of sweat and dirt dried into its seams. Crumbs were stuck in the stubble on his chin. His glazed, black eyes seemed to gaze somewhere beyond Dawud.

Parvez stuffed the money in the man’s shirt pocket. He looked over his shoulder, to gauge the reactions of the audience. But Muna was busy making a cold compress for the student.

“Now open the door,” Dawud instructed. “He’s going to be leaving now.”

Parvez walked out into the balmy night air, and held the door open. The man, now released by Dawud, took a few steps towards Parvez, glanced at the crowd, then continued to the door. Everyone inside had their eyes on Parvez, the denouement to this
drama. As far as supporting roles went, this was not the worst. But it wasn’t what he had imagined.

The man shuffled past Parvez, his shoulder brushing Parvez’s chest. But neither of them made eye contact with the other. Parvez watched as the man trudged down Third Avenue. Headlights silhouetted his hunched, unsteady figure, and then he disappeared around the corner.

Parvez turned back to the coffeeshop. No one was looking at him now. Everyone inside gathered around Dawud, the other brothers slapping him on the shoulder, the sisters smiling in appreciation, the barista offering him some sweet, iced coffee drink. Parvez tried to spot Muna in the group, but she was lost in the commotion. He let the door close. It was time to go home.

Parvez walked to the N train. As he reached the 23rd Street stop, the hot, garbage breath of the subway hit his face, and he noticed another solitary figure climbing down the stairs ahead of him. It was the drunk man from the coffeeshop. Parvez doubted the man would even remember what had happened earlier, but he didn’t want to risk it. He skipped down the stairs, trying to overtake him. But a wave of late-night party people boiled up out of the subway, flooding the stairwell, pushing Parvez behind the man. Parvez held his breath as he fell into the man’s slow and staggered pace, both of them alone together, each ready to drown in the hot, churning belly of the city.
A GREAT MAN

War was good for the documentary business. You could point the camera at pretty much anything--soldiers getting ready for war, soldiers in the midst of war, soldiers recovering from war--and you had instant drama. Characters on an epic journey, life-and-death-stakes, a vague sense of pride and/or guilt about something. Award bait. Of course there were also the people the soldiers were trying to kill and/or liberate, but you had to shoot them before the soldiers did.

When a New York-based documentarian did manage to film locals in Iraq, they would call Parvez upon their return. He had become the go-to freelance assistant editor for these war docs, leveraging his four years of college Arabic classes, his film school degree, his work ethic, and, frankly, his face. When these battle-hardened filmmakers met him in their apartment offices or in coffeeshops, they wanted to hire him at first glance. He looked like someone they might’ve focused their lenses on in a Baghdad market, someone who knew what it was like “over there.” Of course he hailed from a different “there” altogether, but that didn’t seem to matter to him or to the string of directors who hired him.

One week, Parvez might be logging footage for a film about “an elite army unit and the unlikely, heartwarming friendship they form with their Iraqi police trainees”, the next he’d be prepping sequences for a doc “following a courageous, pretty young Iraqi
19

doctor hoping to contest elections in a state where misogyny rules”--at least that’s the way the directors pitched their films. He had asked his first boss, the woman who was making a film about “the hilarious hijinks of Camp Umm Qasr”, if they were normalizing the war, confirming Orientalist visions of the Middle East, and implicitly validating America’s misguided foreign policy. She had tilted her head, smiled, said “No?”, and he went back to work. She later said, “Some representation is better than no representation,” and he nodded, though maybe in part because she was holding his check.

The truth was Parvez had become lost in the fog of war. His current project, about American soldiers responding to medical emergencies in Fallujah, had gone over schedule. Which on one hand was fine because he was getting paid, but on the other, was not fine because he was working with the most difficult material he had ever laid eyes on. Last week, he had to make selects of a family recovering their 5-year old from their
accidentally bombed house. Parvez cut the scene ten different ways, as the director
guided him to find the right balance of violence. “OK, I’m with you on the leg stuff, but
we need at least a few frames of the bloody nose,” the director said, “I mean, this is
fucking Fallujah.”

That night after work, Parvez went out to dinner with his friend Dawud and, over
spring rolls, made a very specific request: “Punch me in the face.”

Dawud laughed, but Parvez didn’t.

“You’re serious?”

“You can wait until after dinner,” Parvez said.

“Why do you want to get punched?”

Parvez shrugged.

“You OK?” Dawud asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Parvez said as he stabbed a shrimp in his pad thai. “Just a quick one,
right in the kisser. Then I’ll be back to normal.”

“I’ve never punched anyone in the face before,” Dawud said. They sat in silence
for a moment, each of them sipping their iced teas. “What’s going on with you and
Muna?”

“Everything’s on hold,” Parvez muttered.

“Oh man, don’t tell me you’re playing games,” Dawud groaned, “just man-up.”

“That’s why I’m asking for the punch. Maybe you knock some sense into me.”

“Maybe.”

“Everyone needs to be a little broken,” Parvez said and sucked up a noodle.
“My Sheikh says that our job in this world is to tend to others’ broken hearts,”
Dawud said, “while bearing our own.”

“That’s kinda sad.” Parvez sucked up a noodle. “But I like it.”

“He’s actually going to be in town next weekend,” Dawud suddenly seemed to
brighten. “There’s a gathering. You should come.”

Dawud often talked about his Sheikh, his spiritual guide, who was from Senegal.
Dawud had put his own wayward youth behind him and had really gotten his shit
together----he was in a MD/PhD program and had married Khadijah after a two-month
courtship. He credited it all to the Sheikh.

“What would I talk to him about?” Parvez asked.

“You don’t have to talk to him,” Dawud said. “But if you want, I can get you
some time with him. You should feel free to talk about anything with him. Your family,
your job, Muna--anything.”

Parvez agreed to join Dawud. But after the next day at work editing a hospital
scene, he told Dawud he would only come as an observer, and that he wanted to film the
gathering. Parvez said the Sheikh could make for a decent short doc subject. A little,
gentle character portrait that would give him a respite from the war. Dawud wasn’t
particularly interested, but he secured permission for Parvez to film the gathering.

Parvez also figured he could pitch the idea to a distant film school friend who had
become the editor of a major newsmagazine’s nascent online video department. The
erator had told him they wanted more “Muslim stuff” and invited Parvez to the office to
discuss.
“What does it mean this guy’s a sheikh?” the editor asked Parvez after his initial pitch.

“He’s a spiritual guide.”

“And he takes advantage of these people?”

“No. I don’t think so. He’s more like...a faith healer.”

“Oh! So will they be like speaking in tongues and shit? You know,” the editor demonstrated by rolling his eyes back, fluttering his eyelids, and ululating.

“He’ll probably recite some stuff in Arabic.”

“Will there be people fainting? Snakes? Blood?”

“Probably not.”

“OK,” the editor drummed his fingers on the table, “why do you want to do this story?”

“It’s a window into an often misunderstood community,” Parvez said, repeating words he had written into many failed grant proposals.

“Hmmm,” the editor rocked in his office chair. “I remember the work you did in school--really beautiful, and lyrical. So lyrical.”

“Thanks.”

“But slow. Too slow. Web video is a different animal. It’s quicker. Like a cheetah. The stuff you made before was like, I don’t know, a turtle. A nice-looking turtle, but a turtle.” The editor folded his hands and put them on the table, a pleading gesture. “I know it’s stupid, but we’ve got to think about the clicks. We’ve got to think: what’s the what-the-fuck factor here?”
Parvez left with a soft promise that the editor would take a look at a rough cut and then make a decision. But, Parvez went ahead with the shoot as planned, and he recruited another friend from film school, Derek, to shoot while he would record sound. Derek’s dad was an anthropology professor, and he was always up for cultural excursions.

“So, is this guy your spiritual guide, too?” Derek asked as they organized their film gear at his apartment.

“No,” Parvez said. “But my friend has a lot of respect for him.”

“Should I dress up?” Derek asked. He was wearing jeans and a “Ithaca is Gorges” t-shirt.

“You should probably wear a button up shirt, at least,” Parvez said. He was wearing a crisp white oxford shirt he had bought just for the occasion. He had a couple similar shirts in his closet at home, but he could never seem to keep them white for long.

“Should I bring a C-stand for the boom?” Derek asked. “For the interview?”

“No, we’re not going to do an interview,” Parvez said, “this is strictly observational.”

***

The parlor of the Brooklyn brownstone seemed like it was arranged solely for the purpose of gatherings like this. There was no furniture, the walls decorated only with Arabic calligraphy. Incense hung in the air and pillows lined the walls, so elders could rest their backs.

The room was already full of the Sheikh’s followers by the time Parvez and Derek arrived. There were some potbellies in the crowd, a few feet with mismatched socks, a
couple smiles full of crooked teeth. Some wore colorful West African boubous and others wore t-shirts. Some men had kufis over their cornrows and some had bare heads. Some women tied their hijabs up, some let the cloth hang down. There were conversations carrying on about the Final Four, about a sale at H&M, about airfare to Dakar, about divorce.

“They seem pretty normal,” Derek whispered, as they peeked in from the foyer.

“What do you mean normal?” Parvez asked.

“I hoped they would be, I dunno, more cult-y.”

“Making movies about cults is easy,” Parvez said and tiptoed his way through the huddled mass of followers.

Parvez found Dawud and wedged himself in next to him. But no sooner had he sat down, then the followers rose as one mass, lifting him back to his feet.

“The Sheikh’s here,” Dawud said.

The mass of followers divided into two halves, leaving a path through the middle of the room. A man was revealed standing at the door. He didn’t look that different from others in the room. He wore a white boubou with marigold embroidery and a tall colorful knit cap. He had a open, simple face and his short beard was still mostly black.

Parvez looked around for Derek, and realized he had joined the group on the other side of the room. Parvez snapped to get his attention.

“Roll on this.”

“That’s him?”

“Yeah.”
Derek shrugged and hit record.

The Sheikh slowly made his way across the room. His followers reached for his hand, kissing it, touching it to their foreheads. The Sheikh neither smiled nor frowned. He seemed unaffected by the attention, letting his hand be taken by whoever wanted it.

“You should kiss his hand,” Dawud buzzed in Parvez’s ear.

“Really?”

“It’s not like he expects it,” Dawud said, “it’s just out of respect.”

“I don’t know...” Parvez said. “I need to retain objectivity.”

“Are you here for the barakah,” Dawud asked, “or the documentary?”

And suddenly, the Sheikh was in front of them. Parvez could see now his face was remarkably wrinkle-free and his eyes were lined with kohl. Dawud lunged for the Sheikh’s palm and pecked a respectable kiss on the back of the man’s smooth, hairless hand.

Parvez followed suit and took the Sheikh’s hand. He puckered up and bowed his head. But his dry, cracked lips missed their mark. He planted a kiss on his own hand, clasped over the Sheikh’s. When he looked up, the Sheikh’s big brown eyes looked directly into his, but only for a brief moment before the Sheikh continued on his way. As he passed, Parvez found himself looking directly into the camera lens, Derek standing opposite him.

“Are you shooting me?” Parvez asked.

“That was a good scene,” Derek said, holding his frame. “You looked awkward. Could be funny.”
“You can cut,” Parvez lifted his boom pole and directed Derek back to the Sheikh, “I’m not a character in this thing.”

The followers proceeded to recite their path’s litany together. As the follower’s voices lifted, Derek moved deftly around the room, covering the scene from multiple angles. The Sheikh smiled and nodded at Derek, and even motioned for him to come closer.

Parvez just left his boom pole stationary and kept his eyes on his mixer, though there wasn’t much mixing needed. He started to drift off, his head drooping, and Dawud shook his shoulder. Parvez snapped to attention and recognized the phrase the group was chanting. He joined in, adding his voice to the devotional chorus. But as soon as he did, Derek turned the camera on him, and so he shut his mouth.

At the end of the formal litany, the Sheikh left the group and went to another room. Plastic tarps were quickly rolled out and communal plates of rice and lamb cooked in peanut sauce were laid out alongside pitchers of hibiscus juice.

Dawud called Derek over to his plate, and Derek put down the camera.

“What are you doing?” Parvez asked, still clutching his boom pole. “We’ve got to shoot this.”

“Let him eat,” Dawud said, “and you should, too.”

“Yeah man, I’m hungry,” Derek said. “Besides, there’s no good way to shoot people eating.”
Parvez had to agree, having watched plenty of unflattering dailies of soldiers shoveling mess hall meals in their mouths.

Parvez put his gear down and scooted over to the plate.

“So what do you guys think?” Dawud handed them spoons.

“I liked the singing,” Derek said.

“Is that all the Sheikh does?” Parvez asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he just kinda sat there,” Parvez said, “I thought he was going to like, say something.”

“Something to change your life?” Dawud smiled.

“Well, someone’s life.”

“He’ll give a talk later,” Dawud said, “but sometimes, all you need is to sit in the presence of a great man to be changed.”

“What makes him so great?” Derek asked as he scooped up some rice. He caught a glare from Dawud and stammered, “I mean, how do you define a great man?”

“He is a complete person,” Dawud spoke now like a man in love. “He conquered the ego through worship, then adorned his character with service to the people. He has become a friend of God. All his veils have been lifted, so he sees with the sight of God.”

“Wow,” Derek nodded, “cool.”

“Do you think I could be a great man?” Parvez asked, keeping his eyes on the plate.

“You?” Dawud asked. “I mean, you’re a great guy.”
“Yeah, thanks,” Parvez sighed and shoved rice around with his spoon. “I don’t want to always be the guy who makes documentaries about great men. I want to be the great man.”

“So that people make documentaries about you?” Derek asked.

“No,” Parvez snapped, taking the joke a little too seriously, “that’s not it at all.”

“You want to be a great man, stick with Muna,” Dawud said. He used to work with Muna in Chicago and knew her well. “Marriage is half the faith. Muna will make sure you don’t half-ass it.”

***

The Sheikh was in a dimly-lit bedroom, sitting on a futon, and the followers were admitted to visit him in small groups.

“I can get you to the front of the line,” Dawud said, “you can ask about Muna.”

“We need to get the film in the can first,” Parvez insisted, “then I’ll worry about my personal problems.”

Parvez and Derek were allowed to film the Sheikh’s consultations with his followers, and they observed a variety of small healings. The Sheikh counseled a young married couple and prayed for their strengthened union. The Sheikh chewed a date, then fed a piece to a newborn infant. The Sheikh held a conversation in Wolof with a boy with down syndrome.

The “what-the-fuck-factor” of it all was very low, and Parvez led Derek out of the room to strategize.
“I thought we could do this fly-on-the-wall,” Parvez said, “but we need to do an interview to tie this stuff together.”

“You think that’s going to help?”

“You have a better idea?”

Derek shrugged.

“Let me see what we got so far,” Parvez said, “I can come up with a script.”

Parvez and Derek knelt there in the hallway and huddled over the camera to watch back their footage. Parvez watched the little LCD screen fast forward through the night’s events and even at 16x the speed, the footage looked dull. Parvez muttered, “Oh dear God.”

A few minutes later, Dawud stepped out of the Sheikh’s room and closed the door behind him. He joined Parvez and Derek in the hallway.

“You guys got what you needed?” Dawud asked.

“Not really,” Parvez said, “we want to do an interview.”

“Too late. The Sheikh just went to sleep.”

“Oh,” Parvez frowned. “Can we shoot that?”

“You want to shoot the man sleeping?” Dawud asked.

“It’s the kind of mundane, slice-of-life scene that could humanize him,” Parvez said, again regurgitating grant proposal jargon.

“Sounds riveting,” Derek said.

“Come on,” Parvez said, “we didn’t get what we needed.”
Dawud shook his head. He went back to the door, opened it a crack and peeked in. He motioned for them to follow him, and put a finger to his lips. They had to proceed quietly.

The three men tiptoed inside.

The curtains were drawn and the room had been cleared of all the other followers and teacups that had filled it before. The futon had been pulled out and the Sheikh lied there, no blanket, no pillow. His knit cap was at his side, his short braids exposed. He rocked gently in his sleep.

“Allah! Allah! Allah!” he moaned, his voice rising and crashing with his chest.

Parvez smiled. This was possibly the most interesting thing they had witnessed that night. He framed his fingers around his face, signaling Derek to get a close-up.

Parvez angled his boom mic above the bed and hit record. The Sheikh’s cries and breaths filled his headphones. “Allah! Allah! Allah!”

Derek opened the curtains slightly, letting in a slice of streetlight that cut across the Sheikh’s face. Derek belly-flopped to the floor, getting an eye-level shot of the Sheikh.

“Allah! Allah! Allah!”

Derek army-crawled to get a tighter shot. His bony butt stuck in the air.

“Allah!”

Parvez watched the Sheikh’s face grow in the camera monitor.

“Allah!”
Derek crawled closer, the Sheikh’s nose nearly pressing against the lens. Parvez trembled.

“Allah!”

The boom pole shook in his hand.

“Allah!”

Parvez bit his cheeks.

“Allah!”

“Ha-ha!” Laughter exploded from Parvez’s gut, his mouth, his nose. Derek spun around in disbelief. Dawud scowled.

Parvez sucked in his lips. But a strange giggle rippled through him, gripped him, like an aftershock. He couldn’t stop laughing.

Parvez bolted from the bedroom. He swung his boom pole in front of him, clearing the followers from his path as he made for the front door, holding down giggles in his throat, hot tears on his cheeks.

He ran out of the brownstone and began sprinting down the dark sidewalk. He didn’t get far before his legs got caught in the microphone cable and he hit the sidewalk, nose first.

His face felt warm and wet against the pavement. He got up slowly and brushed himself off, scanning the block for any onlookers. The sidewalk was only full of garbage out for collection.

There was an old, busted vanity on the sidewalk, sitting out with the trash. It still had a mirror, so Parvez approached it to check out the damage to his face.
His nose looked a little crooked and his forehead was scratched. He smiled. But spreading his lips hurt. And it also opened up his nostrils. Blood trickled from his nose, dribbling over his lips, dripping down his white, white shirt.

***

After Parvez walked over to a bodega and stopped the bleeding with napkins and washed his face with bottled water, he went back to the brownstone and apologized. No one seemed particularly offended. Derek gave him the night’s tapes and headed off to a friend’s party in Brooklyn. Dawud suggested Parvez try to get some sleep. He said the Sheikh would pray for him.

The next day during lunch, Parvez’s boss let him go. She explained that he had slipped behind on deadlines, and she felt that he was taking too many creative liberties for an assistant editor. In particular, she noted that he renamed the project file “Documilitary Industrial Complex”.

He thanked her for the job and asked if he could finish his burrito before he left.

As Parvez made his way to the subway, he texted with Muna.

i got fired from my job

oh no! what happened?

i don’t think the director gets me

He went underground and lost phone reception. The conversation was cut short.

On the train, Parvez stood and tried to read his paperback of The Wretched of the Earth. But his eyes wandered to the older woman seated below him. She had a leaf perched at the top of her head, the result of a windy fall day. Parvez stared at the leaf all
the way from 14th Street to 59th Street. He blew on it out of the corner of his lips, but it
didn’t budge. He tried to poke at it with his book, but it still didn’t move. He shifted his
messenger bag to the other shoulder, giving him a reason to swing an elbow over her
head, but he missed the leaf entirely. Finally, as she picked up her purse to get off the
train, he spoke up.

“Ma’am,” he pointed at the leaf, “you have something...”

“Oh,” she said, and bowed her head to him. “Can you...?”

Parvez hesitated for a moment, but then he leaned over her head and plucked the
leaf like it was a rare, delicate flower. He showed it to her.

“Thanks,” she smiled and hurried out the doors before they closed.

The train was soon flooded with daylight as it emerged onto the elevated track in
Queens. Above ground, he once again had mobile reception and his phone buzzed with
text messages from Muna:

\[ \textit{forget your boss} \]

\[ *i* \textit{think u r great} \]

Parvez smiled and realized he was still holding the leaf. He laid the leaf over his
current page and closed the book.

That night, Parvez and Muna set a date for their wedding.
DADDY’S GIRL

So Parvez followed Muna’s lead. When Muna helped her little brother Khalid draft a resume, Parvez would punch it up, turning Khalid’s gas station job into a “Customer Service Specialist” position where he “Conducted market research of diverse clientele”. When Muna would take her sister Arwa out for ice cream, Parvez would jiu jitsu his credit card into the hands of the cashier first. When Muna would stand over her mom’s shoulder, trying to learn how to make zorbian, Parvez would compliment Mama’s cooking, call her a fanaana, an artist. In Texas, Parvez always got the big piece of chicken at the dinner table.

But it was her father that was the ultimate center of Muna’s attention.

“Daddy is such a good driver!” she would say, as they climbed into his sputtering minivan with a sagging ceiling.

“Daddy is so handy!” she would say, when he tinkered around the house, needlessly replacing door knobs and painting furniture purple or yellow, just to keep himself busy in retirement.

“Damn, Daddy got style!” she would say, pointing out a photo of him in his early days in America, wearing a wide-lapel trench coat, Ray-Bans, and cowboy boots, his wavy hair slicked back.

Parvez then concentrated his attention on Daddy, too, which he was happy to do.
The old man reminded Parvez of the working-class, immigrant fathers who featured in his documentary films, men so full of stories of their self-made success they just needed a little nudge for it all to spill out. But Daddy could outlast them all.

Parvez was overcome by Daddy’s stories. They were full of men doing things like working factory assembly lines, faking identities and marriages to get papers, taking big risks with the money they scraped together. It was the kind of immigrant story he wished he could claim. His own father had a Ph.D. and had salaried jobs at non-profits his whole life—not exactly the hardnosed, rough-handed stuff of the street cred he desired.

If Daddy were to put his own story on paper, it wouldn’t take the form of a traditional memoir—it would look like a financial ledger. His brain had recorded his life primarily as an ongoing set of transactions across decades, countries, and currencies. Half a shilling for watermelon in colonial Aden. Four hundred riyals a month for his mechanic job long before Jeddah was overrun by skyscrapers. Twenty thousand dollars for the downpayment on his grocery store in the boonies outside Dallas. This mental ledger, down to the last nickel and dime, told a story of a life shrewdly lived. And he could look at the bottom line with pride. The numbers didn’t lie.

There was no fuzzy moral to Daddy’s life story. No quotes that would look good hanging on the wall. Just cold, hard directives:

1. Save Your Damn Money
2. Be a Fucking Man and Open Your Own Business
3. Free Yourself From The Goddam Slavery

So, as Daddy, Muna, and Parvez sat in his fenced-in, postage-stamp backyard,
drinking mint tea in the shade of a fig tree Daddy had managed to cultivate in the Dallas
dirt, the conversation turned to a familiar topic.

“"I went down to Home Depot,” Daddy said, slurping up his tea, “told them I’m
fixing to make a fence. I asked the guy how much they charge. You know how much he
say?”

“How much?” Parvez asked.

“Fifteen-hundred dollars!” Daddy nearly jumped out of his chair. “So I do it
myself. Guess how much I pay.”

“I don’t know.”

“Think!”

“Twelve hundred.”

“Three hundred!” Daddy tapped Parvez’s shoulder for emphasis. “Three o’nine
and some change.”

Parvez looked at the fence more closely. The wood had turned an ugly gray-
brown, and the support beams didn’t seem level. But it was still standing.

“That was material,” Daddy continued, “and then I need a little help, so I hire the
wetback--”

“Daddy!” Muna nearly choked on her tea. “Don’t say that.”

“Say what?”

“Wet--you know.”

“Why? I’m one of them,” Daddy laced his fingers over his belly. “When I first
come here, no one knew what the hell Arab is. What the hell Yemeni is. They call me
wetback. I’m one of them. I work just like the wetback. Good workers, the wetbacks—"

“Stop saying that word!” Muna raised her voice.

“I say it my whole life. No one has a problem.”

“Actually, Daddy,” Parvez spoke softly and raised a finger, as if it might divert their attention from the ensuing argument.

“No, Daddy,” Muna said, not noticing Parvez’s finger, “you’re not allowed to say that.”

“Who say? You? You think you better than a wetback?”

“Oh my God!” Muna clasped her hands to her chest, like her heart might leap out. It was a melodramatic gesture she had inherited from her mother, who inherited it from Turkish soap operas. “You know what’s wrong with you, Daddy?”

“You know what’s wrong with me?”

Muna narrowed her eyes at Daddy, considering how best to get in his head.

It was then the sparrow shat on Daddy.

Parvez noticed it first.

“Daddy, your shirt,” Parvez pointed to the fresh white streak down his father-in-law’s sleeve.

Daddy tugged at his thrift store flannel, which he had bought for $3. He peered over his glasses, studied the stain, then looked up at the heavens, and broke into a wide, snaggle-toothed smile. Muna and Parvez had to smile back.

“This is good luck!” he showed off the poop stain like a badge.

“Daddy,” Muna said, “I’m pretty sure that’s bad luck.”
“No, it means Allah hear me praying.”

“What did you make duaa for Daddy?” Parvez asked like a sweet little boy, even cocking his head at a precocious angle.

“I always ask the same thing,” Daddy said, “I ask Him to take me from this miserable place.” Daddy took a short sip then tossed the rest of his tea onto the dry grass.

***

Parvez spent most of his time in Dallas drinking sweet tea with Daddy and being carb-loaded by Mama. The last time he came, he put on six pounds in four days. So, Parvez made an effort now to get some exercise and took a walk around their suburban subdivision.

All the neighbors were immigrants, too—Ethiopian, Vietnamese, Mexican, Nigerian—all from blue collar backgrounds who had made it into the middle class. Parvez could sense the aspiration in the air, but it was undercut when he noticed a pattern with the street signs. The developers who built the neighborhood in the late 90s had named all the streets after South Park characters. Daddy lived at the corner of Cartman and Garrison Streets. The namesake of the streets where these people had staked all their hopes and hard work seemed to taint their piece of the American Dream. And it reminded Parvez of his high school years. As he made a loop of the neighborhood’s smooth, white sidewalks, the sounds of long, wet farts kept ringing in his ears.

When Parvez returned home, the house was quiet. Mama, Arwa, and Khalid sat eating dinner, only making a noise when someone scraped a piece of tandoor bread across a plate.
“Where’s Daddy? And Muna?” Parvez asked.

“Kallimha,” Mama said, then shook her head. “She stupid.”

Parvez went upstairs to the guest bedroom and found Muna crying under a blanket. He slid in next to her, letting Muna rest her head on his chest. In between her sobs and sniffles, she relayed that her fight with Daddy had continued after Parvez left. The conversation had included Muna saying words like “allyship” and “intersectionality”. It also included Daddy saying things like “You goddam crazy!” and “What the fuck you talking about?”

“You can’t expect your dad to get that stuff,” Parvez said. “Our parents were patient with us when we were kids. Now we have to be patient with them.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Muna sighed, “but we have to get out of here.”

“Yeah, you should get some fresh air,” Parvez said. “Want to go to Braum’s?”

“No. I want to go home. Tomorrow.”

After she had a good cry, and they had a quickie in a closet they hoped was soundproofed by Daddy’s old polyester suits, Parvez convinced Muna to stay the rest of the week as planned.

But the house was different in the following days. Everyone was cloistered in their own corner of the house. Daddy sat on the recliner with his duct-taped laptop, checking his stocks and news about the revolution in Yemen. Mama was on the couch scrolling through Facebook on her phone. Muna cuddled with the cat on the guest room bed. And Parvez circled the neighborhood’s sidewalks until he was dizzy.
“Why are you taking so many walks?” Muna asked Parvez as he made his way to the door one morning.

“Because I’ve got bread butt,” Parvez said and stuck his rear out to Muna. But she did not smack it, as he expected.

“You’re not spending time with Daddy.” Muna folded her arms. She was not in a butt-smacking mood.

“Neither are you.”

“So?”

“If you’re mad at him, I don’t want to get in between....”

“If I’m mad at him, you don’t have to be.”

Parvez squatted to put on his sneakers. “Aren’t I the one who said we should stay?”

“Yeah,” Muna said, “but that’s what a husband is supposed to say.”

Parvez walked out the door. It was an overcast morning, the whole neighborhood looked gray and old as he walked down Cartman Street. An old voice bubbled up inside him, his middle-school impression of Eric Cartman. The character’s lines came back to him now, and he muttered them to himself as he walked.

“Awww yeahhh.”

“Respek ma authoritie!”

“Screw you guys, I’m going--” Parvez paused at the start of his second lap, when he noticed the next door neighbor, a Mexican A/C repairman, knocking on the window of Daddy’s ground-floor bedroom. A moment later, Daddy opened the window slightly, and
yelled through the glass, “Luis! I’m here! Still here!”

“OK, Mr. Yaseen,” Luis said, “be good.”

Luis walked over to his pickup and caught Parvez staring. “Your dad OK?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“You should talk to him,” Luis said as he climbed into his truck. “He’s a old man.”

Parvez found Daddy sitting on the recliner in the family room. Even though it was the afternoon, the room was dark. There were no windows in the room, and Daddy hadn’t turned the lamp on. The only light was from his laptop screen.

“It’s kinda dark in here,” Parvez said.

Daddy glanced at him, nodded, and turned back to his computer. Parvez turned on the lamp and sat down.

“I don’t need no light,” Daddy snapped. “I keep my electric bill eighty-two, eighty-five a month.”

Parvez switched the lamp off again. He stared at his father-in-law, the jagged lines of stock charts reflected in Daddy’s eyeglasses. “I saw Luis this morning. At your window.”

“Hm.”

“Why was he doing that?”

“Allah,” Daddy sighed and closed the laptop. He sat back in his recliner. “Muna said this room too dark. What you think?”
“Yeah, it’s dark. But if that’s what you like--”

Daddy sighed again, propped his glasses on his head, and rubbed his eyes before burying his face in his hands. They sat for a moment listening to each other breathe.

“OK Daddy,” Parvez stood up, “I’m going for a walk.”

“Go ahead, haboob. Allah ma’ak.” He lifted his hands from his face and waved towards the door. Daddy opened his laptop again, and the screen light made his wet eyes glow.

“You want to come?” Parvez asked, as he stood up. “With me?”

Parvez and Daddy had never spent time together, one-on-one, outside the house. Daddy didn’t believe in most forms of entertainment. Why pay to watch a shitty two hour movie when you could watch fifty 3-minute YouTube videos about a variety of topics, like: “How to Adjust a Two Stroke Carburetor Without A Tool”, “The Signs of the Day of Judgement”, “How to Unclog a Garbage Disposal”, and “Girl Becomes Possessed By Jinn for Stepping on Quran”. Now that’s a show.

In fact, Daddy didn’t go out much with anyone. In his thirty years of living in Dallas, he had only traveled within a radius of 10 miles, leaving only to collect checks from and repair his rental properties. He was a king of his castle and no one could make him leave.

So, this walk, which Daddy had surprisingly agreed to, was a big deal. Parvez found a nearby park with a pond, grabbed a few scraps of leftover tandoor bread so they could feed the ducks, and even sprayed himself with cologne before he jumped into the
minivan.

But Daddy was at the wheel and said he knew another spot they could go for a walk. He pulled the minivan into the expansive parking lot of a shuttered department store.

They stepped out of the minivan and onto the pavement. Weeds pushed through every crevice of blacktop. The wind kicked up flattened chip bags and sent a couple of stray shopping carts squeaking along. Their first father-son bonding trip had brought them to this apocalyptic landscape.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Finally Parvez ventured to ask about Luis again, keeping his voice small and tentative for the private conversation he hoped to have.

“I ask Luis to do that,” Daddy’s voice, never lowered, echoed across the parking lot, “just to make sure I’m still kicking around. If I don’t come to the window, means I’m dead.”

“You think you’re going to die?”

“I wish! I wish I die soon. Be with Him!” He shot his pointer finger towards the sky, laughing. “That’s the best place!”

“Daddy, we’re going to have kids some day. We want them to meet their grandfather.”

“Blah blah blah,” Baba waved his hands, “you took too long already man.”

“We wanted to save some money first, like you told us to.”

“Yeah, how much you save til now?”
“I mean, we wanted to save--”

“That’s what I thought. No one take a goddam thing from me,” Daddy said, “so why shouldn’t I go back to Him?”

Parvez stayed silent for a while and listened to the passing sounds of faraway traffic, distant cars driving past like slow, soft sighs.

“Why did you ask Luis?” Parvez asked. “Why not the family?”

“You and Muna are not here. Mama don’t like sleeping with me, cause I snore. And she goes to Yemen all the time. Khalid busy, Arwa busy. I’m by myself. So I ask the neighbor.”

Parvez punted a soda bottle off their path. “So what did you tell him to do if he knocks, and...no answer?”

“I tell him to call police. I don’t want my body to stay too long,” Daddy was slowing down now, his limp becoming more pronounced. “Maybe it mess up the bed, the carpet. And replacing the carpet cost maybe one seventy-five, but without me, they don’t know what they doing. They’ll pay whatever Home Depot ask. Maybe four, five hundred dollars more.”

Parvez stopped walking. He looked up at the cloudless sky. A flock of singing blackbirds flew by overhead. Parvez looked over his shoulder, at the minivan. There was fresh bird poop dripping down the passenger side window.

“Let’s go,” Parvez said.

“OK, haboob. We go home now.”

“No. Home Depot.”
Parvez had quickly formulated a simple plan: buy a higher wattage/efficiency lightbulb for the lamp in the family room. He figured this small task might cheer up Daddy--an easy home improvement they could accomplish together. And Daddy liked the idea. So much so that he ran with it, made it his own.

After an hour at Home Depot picking up a variety of tools and materials Parvez had never handled before, they returned home to enact Daddy’s plan: to install a bay window in the family room.

“This going to give lotta light,” Daddy smiled. “And you don’t pay no electric.”

Within twenty minutes, they had decided on the window’s placement, made measurements, and fired up the bandsaw.

“Shouldn’t we slow down a little, think about this?” Parvez asked. He was used to creative projects that took time and procrastination to be fully realized.

“You want to wait til I’m dead?” Daddy pushed the saw into the aluminum siding.

He cut out a square of siding, then they went inside and took turns with the sledgehammer and battered the drywall. They laughed as the white dust settled on their hair and their noses.

Daddy and Parvez were busy knocking out the square of drywall when they heard the garage door opening. The women were home, and Parvez realized only then that their permission had not been granted for this renovation project.

Mama entered first. She clasped her hands against her chest, gasping.

“Oh boy,” she said. Then she cursed Daddy in Arabic, “You just shat yourself.”
Daddy and Mama began to bicker, but then Muna entered. Her eyes grew wide and she dropped her purse.

“Daddy,” she said, “what’s going on?”

“We making a window.”

“Why?”

“For you,” Parvez piped up. “You told Daddy it was too dark in here.”

“I didn’t tell him to do all this--”

Parvez squeezed her shoulder and she held her tongue.

“It’s nice, right, dear?” Parvez asked.

Muna was still silent, looking at the wrecked room.

“Yeah, habibti,” Daddy kicked at the crumbles of drywall at his feet, “what you think?”

“It’s going to look real nice, Daddy,” Muna said and went over to kiss his hand.

The old man was half-naked, dancing around the coffeetable. With each step and clap, the stringy white hairs around his nipples jiggled.

“Break it down, Daddy!” Muna clapped along to the fast, percussive oud playing on the stereo. She and Parvez were sitting on the couch, hypnotized by her father’s potbelly swinging back-and-forth over his futa.

Daddy and Parvez hadn’t had time to finish the window before nightfall, so the wall was patched with garbage bags. The plastic rustled loudly with the wind, so Parvez
turned up the stereo.

“Aiiwa!” Daddy yelled at the ceiling, raising his hands to heaven.

“Oh hell,” Muna sprung off the couch to join him. She crouched slightly, bent her arms into chicken wings then flapped and clucked and pecked after Daddy.

Parvez remembered his and Muna’s first dance, on their wedding day. After the dinner, a divider had been set up in the banquet hall, separating men and women. Parvez and Daddy were the only men invited into the women’s side, so Parvez could see Muna for the first time without her hijab. He stepped in and his jaw dropped. She had looked familiar, like herself--she hadn’t allowed the make-up artists to paint her skin white. But in that moment, she had also become a different person, his bride, his wife.

So thorough was his tongue-wagging/checking her out that he didn’t hear the DJ play the slow dance song. Muna pulled him towards her, but had had no clue how to hold a woman to slow dance. His mom and her dad were both watching, so he had put his hands on her shoulders, a safe bet, a gentlemanly choice. She smiled, grabbed his hands and placed them on her hips. They teetered and tottered around the hardwood, stilted and slow.

But then Muna yelled for “the song.” As soon as the opening horns of DJ Kool’s “Let Me Clear My Throat” blared out of the speakers, Parvez and Muna got down the way they imagined they would. They krumped, popped-and-locked, freaked, and generally ravaged the dance floor until they were one puddle of sweat and Parvez had to be dragged away.

Now, in his in-law’s home, Parvez watched Daddy and Muna dance, not so much
together, but in the same space, with the same manic energy. They occasionally bumped butts, though mostly by accident.

Parvez clapped and cheered them on, bobbing his head. And when Muna held out her hand for him to join them, he took it.
Parvez glanced at the ceiling of the autorickshaw and rolled his eyes. Like the rest of the vinyl-lined interior, the ceiling was decorated with a laminated poster of a white, blue-eyed, blonde baby. The driver, whom Parvez guessed was named Shahid from the “Hi, Shahid!” decal on his windshield, was a ratty looking teenager who could not possibly be the father of all these alabaster babies.

Parvez wondered if Shahid, between navigating his jittery three-wheeler around rust-stained buses and machine gun-toting army jeeps, reflected on why he, a ruddy-complexioned person at the foothills of the Himalayas, might decorate his family’s most valuable possession with posters of anonymous white children. Parvez studied Shahid’s pimpled face; they both shared the telltale Kashmiri nose, long and full and pointed. He felt a kinship with Shahid, and, therefore, a responsibility to educate Shahid, to draw him a flow chart, one bold arrow from post-colonial trauma to his current, utterly apparent inferiority complex.

But Parvez, as his uncle put it, “had no tongue.” He could not form simple sentences in Kashmiri, he could not even remember numbers. To negotiate the auto fare, Parvez had reluctantly relied on his twin brother Zeb, who, in his abundant free time, had studied up on the language. So Parvez stayed silent now and sat back on the duct-taped cushion, squeezed in next to Zeb, as the auto shuddered through potholes and rattled
around traffic. Parvez let himself be rocked side to side in the darkness of the backseat, the constant, whining rip of the auto’s motor covering him like a blanket. He stared at the poster overhead, into the cerulean blue of the baby’s eyes. In spite of himself, he felt a moment of calm.

Parvez lifted the window flap and peered out. The steepled astans of old Srinagar loomed ahead. The homeland. Or at least a land that had three weeks left to prove it could be a home. He’d last been to Kashmir as a small child with his parents, and in the twenty years since, his memories became clouded by other people’s mythologies. Here Mommy had left behind her “best life”, here was Jimmy Page’s “Shangri-La beneath the summer moon,” here was Emperor Jehangir’s “paradise on earth.” But Parvez didn’t have time for leisurely shikara rides across Dal Lake, or barefoot naps in manicured Mughal gardens. He had work to do. He skipped out on paradise, spending most of his time instead in Kashmir’s urban, high-altitude hell. The city was all crumbling concrete, rusted corrugated tin roofs, rotting wood balconies, open sewer drains, army bunkers. Everything was coated in a fine layer of dust—the cars, the trees, his lungs, history. But this was where he wanted to be, with the people. His people. He had not come to be a tourist. He had come to forge his own way forward, to dial back the decades he’d missed, to fully face reality the only way he knew: from behind a camera.

Parvez saw an opportunity ahead. “Waar waar!” he shouted at Shahid. Slow, slow. Parvez remembered this word well, since everyone here seemed to want him to slow down, to move at the pace of the glaciers. It pissed him off to no end. Shahid slowed the auto. Parvez took his camera out of his backpack, stuck his elbows into the window
frame to stabilize himself, and pointed the lens at his target. Young, long-nosed men filled the windows of a white jeep, clung to its roof, stood on its bumper, screaming a decades-old chant: “Hum kya chahte? Azadi!” Probably the first, and maybe the only, Kashmiri phrase Parvez had learned as a child. *What do we want? Freedom!* He smiled as the jeep wiped the frame; the shot was in the can.

Parvez had received a grant to make a film about faith healers treating post-traumatic stress, and he needed more visuals like this. He needed the ongoing conflict, which he had never experienced firsthand, to feel tactile, immediate. He needed to prove there was some hurt to heal.

“Did you need me to roll sound on that?” Zeb asked, a microphone and mixer in his lap.

“Oh my God,” Parvez shook his head. He played back the clip. The shot was silent, the revolution in the mouths of the youth muted. “I thought I had that shot.” His brother was pathetic.

“Just fix it in post,” Zeb suggested.

“You want me to get those goofball New York Kashmiris in a recording studio?”

“Why not?”

“You think they could dub a protest? You think they could sound as good as these guys?”

“Who could tell the difference?”

“Me!” Parvez braced himself as the auto shook. “Look man, whenever you see me roll camera, you should be rolling sound. I shouldn’t even have to tell you.”
“You said we were wrapped for the day.”

“When we’re here, we’re here,” Parvez said, “we’re never not working.” Parvez turned back to the window and stuck his head out, a black blast of lorrie exhaust burning his eyes. He regretted getting talked into bringing Zeb, even if he was free labor.

“Bechuur,” Mommy had said, “he just needs some new friends, something to keep him busy.” Of course, no one would say what Parvez knew, that Zeb had a problem, that he was drifting through the prime of his life with a pocketful of pills. Still, Parvez wanted to believe that this ruse, this geographical cure, could work. Away from his dead-end friends and dealers, maybe Zeb would fill whatever hole was in his heart with the love of their aunties, their cousins, their people. But also, maybe they were spending too much time here with Hazari Saheb, the faith healer. They probably had spent hundreds of hours filming his treatments, witnessing exorcisms. Hazari Saheb would hold knives to foreheads to drive the jinn out, slapping and spitting and splashing water on disturbed young men. Young men that looked like Zeb. That might’ve messed him up a little.

“Lutsa wasta!” Zeb yelled and slapped the ceiling, his fingers smacking the poster baby’s cheeks. Shahid looked at them in the rearview and cranked the auto to a rolling stop.

“What are you doing?” Parvez protested. This was not one of his planned stops. They had picked up Nutella from the shop on Residency Road, withdrew cash from the ATM, and were now on their way to the tailor.

“We didn’t eat anything all day,” Zeb said.

“The tailor’s going to close--”
“--it’s just a snack. I’ll get you something. Uncle Chips?”

“Fine.” Parvez had mostly cut junk food from his diet, but in Kashmir he made some exceptions. He devoured bags of chaat-flavored chips and threw back bottles of nimbu pani-inspired soda. The cultural specificity was comforting, making his pleasure a little less guilty. He handed Zeb a 50 rupee note. “And get me a Limca. A cold one.”

Zeb crawled out of the auto and showed Shahid his index finger. “Akh minit.” He then said something that Parvez couldn’t understand, but it left Shahid giggling. Zeb hopped up to the snack shop’s raised platform, and Shahid admired him the whole way. Shahid looked back in the rearview mirror at Parvez. “Hero!” he smiled, pointing to Zeb.

Hell no. Parvez wished he could show Shahid a highlight reel of his hero: the disappointment of Zeb’s shelved novel and poor work ethic, the shame of Zeb screaming at their mother, the uncanny terror of Zeb’s blissful, chemically-induced babbling.

Parvez stepped out of the auto and onto the dusty shoulder of the road. He checked the time on his phone, confirmed they were now very late, and remembered to buy credit for his cell phone. A few days had passed since he’d called his wife Muna, who was back in Brooklyn. For the last four weeks, their phone calls had kept him in good spirits; she listened intently as he described awkward encounters with relatives, new and exciting setbacks with the film, the daily trials of living with Zeb. She never complained or told him to come home. Each call, she encouraged him to push through another day. Muna was his ride or die chick. But the distance and silence of the last few days were creating dangerous room in his head. The other day, Parvez had sat with his
cousins sipping kehwa, almonds and saffron swirling in their cups, when he realized he was enjoying himself, and he thought maybe he should’ve married a Kashmiri girl. Then he wouldn’t be, as his auntie called him, “a confused person”. But also maybe, Parvez thought, he just needed to instill in his wife a deeper appreciation for this place. And so, he had commissioned a tailor to make a pheran for her, entirely by hand. He ordered a pheran like his grandmother’s, picked out an eggplant purple velvet, given the tailor her measurements, decided on a chinar leaf design for the intricate silver tilla embroidery around the collar. Now, a month later, he was on his way to pick up the finished product.

Parvez stepped up to the snack shop’s raised platform, looking for Zeb. The clerk stroked his henna-dyed beard and sat cross-legged on the counter. Aside from him, the shop was dark and empty. Zeb was not there. Parvez turned the corner and spotted Zeb next door, in a pharmacy. He was at the end of a line: a woman in a black burqa, an old man in a karakul hat, a teenager in tight jeans and a severe haircut, all in search of some “relief”. This pharmacy was, like most others, a pill mill. Parvez had wondered what his dad would say if he knew about the self-medicated haze descending on his beloved valley.

“Zeb!” Parvez surprised himself, screaming in public. Zeb turned to him but made no move to leave the pharmacy. “What the hell?” Parvez yelled louder this time. They were both surprised when his scream seemed to pick up a distant echo. But this echo continued long after Parvez’s, taking on a character of its own, becoming its own yell. The twins looked up into the sky, past the crosshatch of hastily strung electrical lines,
searching for the source of the muffled yell, as if it might descend from heaven. And slowly it became clear, the familiar chant.

“Hum kya chahte? Azadi!”

Then, a blast. A deep, bassy boom absorbed the chant. They felt it echo in their empty stomachs.

The brothers turned to the street and found it changed. Cars, people, autos, goats. Currents running, rushing. Like an engorged river sending streams of people down gullies, over footpaths, into homes. Movement in every direction--except forward, towards downtown, towards the tailor shop, to the pheran.

“Damn,” Zeb said. They were both dumbfounded, transfixed by the chaos unfolding in front of them. Children crying. Men yelling. A rising haze. The brothers felt suddenly very alive, very present, but also very confused.

“Birudderah!” Shahid shouted from the auto, waving to them, “paksa hey!” He cranked the auto and spun it around, pointing its nose homewards. He swung the door open for them, “Jaldi jaldi!”

“Come on,” Zeb pulled Parvez by the arm. Zeb’s mind, for once, was the sharper one.

“What about the pheran?”

“Fuck that!” Zeb jumped into the auto. “Come on!”

Parvez followed but stopped outside the door. He noticed now that Zeb clutched a paper bag. “What’s in the bag?”

“What?”
“What did you get at the pharmacy?”

“Shut up and get in!”

“Tell me--”

“Paksa bhaiya!” Shahid grabbed his wrist and tugged.

Parvez pulled away, ripping himself from Shahid’s grip.

“You’ve got a problem, Zeb,” Parvez said solemnly. “I don’t know why I even--”

his speech was cut short as a woman in a floral-print shalwar kameez, fleeing from the melee, shoulder-checked him.

“Lecture me at home.” Zeb stretched his hand, almost reaching his brother’s.

“Come on, psycho!”

Parvez stepped back. He glared at Zeb, summoning all the guilt, all the anger, all the filth he could locate in his body and said, “You are such a disappointment.” He caught just a glimpse of the shame flooding Zeb’s face and slammed the door. He turned and ran into the crush.

Terrified, long-nosed faces streamed past as Parvez pushed against the current. But his body felt pure and light, his legs fluttering as they carried him away from Zeb, through danger, towards the tailor. He felt invincible, righteous, worthy. He pictured Muna in the pheran, her toothy smile, her face framed by the beaded silver headdress and chandelier earrings of a Kashmiri bride. Parvez realized that amidst the destruction, he was smiling. God’s own little crusader. But as he neared the source of all the chaos, his eyes and nostrils stung with the creeping wisps of gas. Stumbling over the bricks and rocks strewn in the street, he lost hold of the image of Muna. A strange thought occurred
to him: perhaps his luck so far was not because he was invincible but more because he was invisible. Perhaps both the forces of good and evil were blind to his little life. For so long, he had been the kind of guy that bad things didn’t happen to. But maybe, here, now, at the edge of uncertainty, he was the other type of guy.

He stopped when he saw the bridge. He would have to cross to get to the tailor, but the bridge had faded into a fog of gas, only its zebra-painted railings were visible. Slowly, inky silhouettes soaked through the haze. Parvez pointed the camera at the bridge and hit record. The mysterious figures’ arms shot into the air, waving, flapping. It seemed they might lift off the bridge in flight, like angels returning home.

Parvez recognized them once the gas cleared. They were the same young men from the jeep. He stood and watched as they hurled rocks and bricks at an army bunker. The green helmets huddled behind the heap of sandbags and razorwire waited until the rocks fell back to earth. A moment of quiet. One of the helmets rose, revealing a hunched soldier and his AK47. He pointed the gun into the crowd, yelling but not firing. Other helmets, other soldiers popped up to return the rocks that had fallen within their reach. The protesters fell back, crouched, running to their end of the bridge. The soldiers ducked behind the sandbags, again just helmets. The young men rushed forward. They stooped to pick up the return volley of debris and once again launched the rocks into the air. A well-worn choreography.

Parvez felt an urge to join. His own life didn’t move with that kind of rhythm, that kind of grace. He had made so many offbeat, erratic, painful missteps--with Zeb, with his parents, with Muna, with his films. And there would only be more opportunities to fall
further out of sync, to drag his feet, to step on his partner’s toes. But there, on the bridge, a rock in his hand, he could in one simple, beautiful motion accomplish something of meaning. He could disappear into their dance, a two-step to heaven.

The helmet rose again from the bunker. This time, the soldier pulled the trigger. The young men on the bridge scattered, no rhythm, no logic to their movement. The music was gone, punctured by gunshots. Violence was so simple.

Parvez ran from the bridge, his legs heavy and tight. He kept the camera running as he threw himself down an alley, like a pebble skipping down the cobblestone.

***

Parvez woke up to the wailing of the dhuhr adhan. The nasal voice grated over the crackling speakers, a shoddy advertisement for God. Kashmir was known for many beautiful things, but its muezzins’ voices was not one of them. Parvez grabbed a gravestone and pulled himself off the grass, his ears ringing.

He looked at the lines of simple gravestones, the yard surrounded by old houses, their wooden frames sticking out of the brick like skeletons. Parvez remembered ducking into the graveyard after running through a maze of brick-lined alleys. He remembered the streets turning silent, the protester’s chants replaced by the pounding of his heartbeat. But he didn’t remember falling asleep. Maybe, Parvez thought, he was dead.

Parvez raised his hand to feel his pulse, but touched his camera hanging in front of his heart, the strap still slung around his neck. He scrambled to turn it on. If he was dead, he wanted to make sure he at least got the shot on tape. He played back the footage. The camera seemed further from the confrontation on the bridge than he remembered it,
but what came next was more promising. He had kept his wits about him during his run through the alleys, and he found the visuals compelling. The framing was inelegant, the exposure was off, but it was undeniable that something real, visceral, true was happening in the footage. You could tell this was someone running for his life.

“Theekhas?” An old man in a tweed pheran held out his hand, pumping a flat palm towards Parvez. The man stood at a slight angle, balancing himself on a walking stick.

“Yeah. Fine,” Parvez nodded and mirrored the man’s hand gesture. The man took a step forward, and his face became clearer, kinder and also familiar. Parvez knew this thick white beard, those deep-set, hazel-colored eyes, this unibrow. He scanned his memories, locating the face in the back pages of a family photo album. “Dadajan?”

The man smiled, happy to be recognized. He was Parvez’s grandfather. Of course, Parvez knew that Dadajan had passed away more than forty years ago, but hard information like that held no weight next to the miracle he witnessed now.

Dadajan used his stick to lower himself next to his grandson.

“Dadajan, wow,” he shook his head, smiling, “what are you doing here?” A dumb question. His grandfather had apparently achieved a spiritual state that allowed him to transcend space and time, so he could be anywhere, anytime he damn well pleased.

“So, it’s true then. You were--you are a real pir.” Parvez had heard stories since childhood that Dadajan had been a spiritual guide in service to several disciples, offering them prayers, counsel, and healing on a daily basis. But in recent years, he’d learned there had been debate among the family. Was Dadajan one of the last true spiritual
masters in the valley or was he a harbinger of today’s for-profit faith healers? Parvez grabbed his grandfather’s liverspotted hand. “I knew it,” he said and kissed the back of Dadajan’s hand, “I knew it.”

Dadajan seemed unmoved by the devotion and calmly withdrew his hand. He was modest, the mark of a true pir. He put his hands back on the walking stick and scratched its narrow end into the dirt. Parvez watched carefully as Dadajan carved circles below their feet. He tried to decipher these circles, but their meaning surely could not be literal. This was an otherworldly language, requiring otherworldly comprehension. Parvez closed his eyes and felt the spirals Dadajan drew move through him, stirring up memories.

“Oh!” Parvez opened his eyes. “Is that the stick?” He had heard smatterings of a story about Dadajan squaring off with the Devil himself, beating the accursed enemy with a stick. But beyond that, details were scarce, especially when the story was told by the family’s skeptics. To them, it was a joke. But Parvez wanted to believe it. He needed to know that he could drive evil out of his life. “Is that the stick you used to beat Shaytan?”

Dadajan just stared blankly at his grandson. His sainthood, clearly, did not include the power to understand English. Parvez reached for the knotted wood, hoping to illustrate his question through action, but Dadajan pulled the stick away from Parvez’s grasp. He signaled that his grandson was not ready to handle such supernatural weaponry. Parvez dropped his shoulders, let his head cradle in his hands. He had been put in his place. In front of a spiritual master, he could not hide his inner state any longer.
“I’m sorry you have to see the world this way,” Parvez faced the dirt and dared
not raise his eyes to meet Dadajan’s. “You see the reality. You know we’ve messed things
up. We’re a fallen people. Corrupt. Ungrateful. Just so shitty—” he clapped a hand over
his mouth, “sorry. We’re just so bad to each other. I mean, look at my own brother. If you
could see Zeb—” Parvez shut up. He felt Dadajan lay a hand on the crown of his head.
The old, bony fingers were heavier then he expected, made even heavier by the prayers
Dadajan whispered through pursed, dry lips. The barakah coursed through his
grandfather’s fingertips, into Parvez’s head, through his skin, making the hair on his neck
stand on end. Finally, Parvez collapsed under the weight, his face crashing into his lap.

He let himself cry for a while and briefly drifted to sleep. He woke to the muezzin
calling the iqamah over the mosque speaker. Parvez picked his head up and rubbed his
eyes.

Dadajan was gone. The only trace he left behind were the circles he drew in the
dirt.

***

The auto was unadorned on the inside. Its interior was sloppily upholstered with a
thick, gray polyester, making the backseat feel even more confined and oppressive than
the usual three-wheeler. It was like Parvez was stuck in a sweaty, ill-fitting, ugly suit.

The auto came to an abrupt stop, and the driver motioned for Parvez to get out.

“Well, this this?” he showed the driver a receipt. The tailor had given it to Parvez
when he purchased the material for the pheran, and the name of the shop was printed on it
as well as the approximate address: “Akram Tailor and Embroidery, Jamia Masjid”. The driver, a middle-aged man with a bulbous nose looked at Parvez like he was an idiot.

“Jamia Masjid,” the auto driver pointed out the door. They were in the shadow of Srinagar’s central mosque. It was not the typical dome-and-minaret affair. On each of its four, towering brick walls sat a tiered steeple, reminiscent of a stupa, a legacy of Kashmir’s Buddhist past. Parvez had seen the mosque before, when he first went to the tailor, but he marveled at the structure still and smiled at the driver. But the driver jabbed his finger out the window again and Parvez realized two things: the driver was not moved by the rich simplicity of this architecture, and the driver was not willing to guide him directly to the tailor shop.

“Oh. OK.” Parvez got out and layered 100-rupee notes in the driver’s hand until the man seemed satisfied and drove away.

The wide boulevards and the rows of market stalls around the mosque sat quiet and empty. The only sounds were the flittering of shop shutters closing and the whining of street dogs. He had never seen the city like this: no traffic, no noise, no people, no life. Parvez guessed that someone, or a few someones, may have been killed today, and the protesters had called for hartal. The strike would likely continue for several days, and his khala would make him stay home until the hartal broke, nothing to do but stare at the walls and drink tea and think about his imminent demise.

Parvez stood still, lost. Nothing in this ghost world seemed familiar. He scanned the street again, all shades of gray and brown, and finally recognized something, a piece of graffiti. *LOSING ALL HOPE IS FREEDOM* was scrawled in green spray paint against
a peeling white wall. He had his bearings. The tailor shop would be just around the corner, to the right. He walked slowly, hoping to stay invisible. He made his each step a light roll from heel to toe, trying to deaden the crunch of dust and gravel underfoot.

A large vehicle rumbled and groaned in the distance. Maybe a bus, maybe an army truck. Parvez picked up the pace as the rumbling grew louder. He ran down the street, kicking up dust. His bag rattled against his back, so he slipped it around to his front, clutching it to his belly, keeping it silent.

Parvez found the handpainted sign, the letters clean and straight: “Akram Tailor”. But he stopped in the middle of the road. The shop was closed, its shutter drawn. He felt very alone then. He had no auto to hail, no more money, no phone, no Zeb. There was no where else to go, and he had no clue how to get back home. If the army truck came barreling down the street now, he would lie on the asphalt, and let himself be crushed under its wide, thick tires. He would have to be counted as some kind of martyr. His broken body would be draped in holy verses and rose petals, then paraded to the graveyard, aunties wailing over him. Young men would raise chants about their long delayed freedom as they hoisted his limp body above their heads. And when they laid him to rest, everyone taking turns throwing handfuls of dirt on his body, Parvez’s everlasting soul would look up at them from his narrow grave, alone with the truth that he was a martyr for nothing but his own sniveling fear.

“Open up!” Parvez yelled and banged on the shutter with his fist. He was no longer invisible. Everyone could see him now.

“Pagal!” women yelled at him from the windows across the street. “Kar tsup!”
“Sorry!” he yelled to them, then turned again to the shutter. “Open up!”

“Kusu?” the tailor shouted from the other side of the shutter.

“Parvez. Bu chus Koshur, magar Amrika rozan--” Parvez trailed off when he realized he was not speaking English.

The tailor opened the shutter halfway and poked his head out. Parvez crouched until he was eye-level with him and displayed the receipt. “You have my pheran."

The tailor grabbed Parvez by the arm, dragged him inside, and slammed the shutter. The shop was dark, a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Shelves overstuffed with textiles rose from floor to ceiling and finished garments hung on a rope stretched from wall to wall. A woman, the tailor’s wife, sat on the floor in front of their afternoon tea. The couple exchanged a few, flustered words about Parvez. But the woman’s voice overtook the man’s, a glare in her eyes that reminded Parvez of his mom. The tailor fell quiet, crossed his arms, and faded into a corner of the shop. She pulled the loose open cloth over her braids forward, then gestured for Parvez to come sit with her. He handed his receipt to the woman, and she studied it, then passed it to her husband. He grumbled as he searched the shelves.

“Nuun chai chehewas?” she held up her thermos, her bangles clattering down her arm. Parvez nodded. She poured him a cup of the pink, milky tea, and he politely took a sip. Parvez normally bristled at the salty taste, but he found it comforting now. He suddenly became very aware of how cool the dark shop was, the pleasant shock of the burlap under his butt. Nuun chai was a drink that demanded to be sipped slowly.
“Khew baqir khan,” she pushed a plate of oily flatbread in front of him. He did as he remembered his chachu would do and tore off a shred of the bread. He ripped it into pieces, dropped them in his cup, and let them soak. This cup could last him hours, and in the midst of the hartal, he had all the time in the world.

“Tullsah,” the tailor swung a hanger in front of Parvez’s nose. It was the completed pheran. He wiped the grease from his hands and held the pheran, ran his fingers over the soft velvet, traced the chinar leaves embroidered around the collar. The thin silver thread was so intricate, so painstaking he couldn’t believe it was done by hand. He had laughed when they first told him it would take a month to complete, but now he understood.

His grandmother had worn a pheran almost exactly like this. Probably his great-grandmother, and his great-great, too. Parvez pictured her, his ancestor generations ago, tending to a samovar as she rolled up the sleeves of her pheran. In her time, children flew kites from rooftops, lakes and nallahs were clear and clean for an afternoon swim, men and women were satisfied to work side-by-side in the rice fields, and families ate at the same dastarkhan bathed in moonlight. Sure, there were difficulties like cholera and drought, but those were largely God-given indignities, not man-made problems or hazards created in the mind. Life used to be as tight, as delicate, as beautiful as that silver-threaded embroidery. But he was far away from that time now. He pictured Muna wearing the pheran, in Brooklyn, the two of them eating takeout on their wobbly couch, ambulances screaming outside their window, Zeb lost in some dark loft, the stars above washed out of the night sky.
Parvez folded the pheran into his lap. He drank his tea slowly in the dark, cool shop with the tailor and his wife, wondering how we would get back home.
REHAB

Like any good celebrity, Parvez was ready for rehab. At least that was the story he told himself. In reality, he was only a moderately successful documentary filmmaker, so his actual celebrity was, in the scheme of things, negligible. And, as a good Muslim boy who was too terrified to drink nor smoke anything in his life, the only substance he came close to abusing was CornNuts, which he would buy in secret, shovel the toasted corn kernels into his mouth by the handful, then tear the empty bag apart by the seams to lick the Cool Ranch-flavor dust off the plastic. By most standards for twentysomethings, he was doing just fine, maybe even very well, but during a recent midnight snack session, as Parvez sat alone on the couch, polishing off a bag of CornNuts, he caught a glimpse of himself reflected in the aluminum lining of the bag and thought, *Yup, I’m in trouble.*

Parvez was probably just plain old depressed, but it was much more fun--and easy--to imagine that his life was conforming nicely to the storyline of so many celebrity documentaries: a quick rise to fame, a precipitous fall to disgrace. The trouble with this obsession was that Parvez was still in the middle of his life and couldn’t yet see how the documentary would end. Would his story stay tragic like *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck,* or would it turn around and be an inspiration like *Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise?* Still, his worst fear was that his life would have all the weight of *Justin Bieber: Never Say Never.*
If a documentary was to be made about his life thus far, Parvez hoped it might be called *Hard Truths: the Undertold Story of Parvez Ahmad*. The doc would have a fast-paced first act, starting with a reinterpretation of his rather pleasant childhood as a hardscrabble, up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant tale, “My dad was never really around,” he would say, half-truthfully in interview, looking off camera, stifling a sniffle, a plinky piano scoring the cut to grainy home video of him as a baby, scratching at his onesie-clad crotch. But all this was only exposition to set the stage for the rising action: the release of his first feature length documentary.

In that film, *In the Shadow of the Valley*, Parvez followed a Kashmiri faith healer exorcising young men who were either possessed by vindictive jinn or suffering run-of-the-mill trauma from the region’s violent conflict. The film cut between two parallel sets of images: young men receiving their faith healing treatments—which consisted of being slapped, spit on, screamed at, and shaken—and young men receiving abuse from Indian soldiers—which consisted of being shot, whacked, dragged, screamed at, and stomped on. After its festival premiere last year, the trades published reviews that had used phrases like “suitably appalling” and “explosively authentic”, and one American critic had simply said “this movie will fucking break you.” In other words, they had loved it. It luxuriated in the kind of violence, specifically the brown-on-brown kind, that really revved their engines.

The critics had also acknowledged that the film’s “commercial prospects were slim,” but Parvez hadn’t cared. He had been busy sorting through all the subsequent film festival invitations and traveling on their dime.
Over the last year, he could count on walking into a sold out show of his film, every few weeks in a different country, the audience applauding him, laughing at his practiced punchlines during the Q&A, tugging him by the elbow for a photo. Those few months on the road were the first time in his life he had so many people, especially white people, so many flavors of white people, watching his every move in an unsuspicious, even adoring way. Even his parents came to one of the festival screenings and were proud. “There were so many people there!” his dad said, without commenting on the film itself.

Parvez had become, as Derek called it, “festival famous”, and though they joked that was about as low on the totem pole of fame as one could get, Parvez had unwittingly allowed himself to enjoy his own obscure, though highly specific celebrity.

But after that triumphant first act, Parvez knew there had to be, as the celebrity storyline demanded, a second act downturn, the part where a voiceover might say, “But behind the scenes, things were falling apart.”

If he had to pinpoint his own fall, Parvez would choose the moment after his red carpet screening in Poland, when Becca, an Irish filmmaker, cornered him at the afterparty, handed him a postcard for her documentary (some garden variety Indian poverty porn tearjerker), and gushed about her many summers spent in Kashmir. Parvez sang to himself, *She got Himalayan fever; she is brown boy crazy*. Parvez had clocked it when he saw her boho baggy pants and elephant-print scarf. But he had surprised himself by indulging her.
“Yes, Kashmir is the most beautiful place on Earth,” he had echoed back to her, “Yes, it is on its own spiritual plane,” he had affirmed, “Yes, there is a real erotic energy in the language,” he had lied, the dimly lit room hiding his blushing cheeks.

He had even answered when Becca asked his hotel room number. Of course, despite his uncharacteristic generosity in the conversation, he had not mentioned Muna, his wife.

When Becca had knocked at his door later that night, his hand touched the cold door handle but refused to turn it open. He was stuck imagining the outcomes of opening the door, intercutting between the one-night-stand-that-creates-a-cycle-of-guilt-and-further-promiscuity-leading-to-divorce-and-most-likely-fullblown-sex-addiction storyline and the find-shady-imam-to-perform-religiously-sanctioned-yet-clandestine-second-marriage-then-keep-up-secret-polygamous-long-distance-relationship-from-first-wife storyline. Both of these storylines, the only ones that seemed possible to Parvez if he opened the door, ultimately converged, landing on what he felt was the only plausible final frame--Parvez, fat, crying, and alone. As Parvez stood in silence behind the closed hotel room door, imagining his future, his fingers still on the door handle, Becca had walked away, saying, “I can hear you breathing, you little muppet. Grow some fukkin balls.”

On the long return flight, when his head was dizzy with jetlag and cabin pressure and homesickness, he brushed his peanuts to the side and wrote on the back of his napkin, “I have never felt so loved.” He read this sentence, ran his pen over “loved” until he transformed it into “alone”, studied this new sentence, then crumpled the napkin into his
plastic cup and shoved it into the flight attendant’s hands. As the plane landed, he had emailed all the upcoming festivals to decline their invitations.

Now, for the first time since the Poland trip, he would spend a night away from Muna. But it would not be spent in some fancy, faraway, frigid hotel room. This night away would be spent in a working class mosque with a bad PA system.

Parvez had made the intention, and secured Muna’s permission, to perform itikaf, to seclude himself in a mosque for the last night of Ramadan. If he spent that night in prayer, without leaving the mosque, intending to leave behind the material world, he would, as the traditions held, have all his sins forgiven. Not bad for one night’s work.

But Parvez didn’t want to take any chances, so he chose a mosque in Trenton, New Jersey. Trenton had the same empty lots, boarded-up row houses, and trash-strewn streets as he could find in his Brooklyn neighborhood, but the city’s lack of encroaching creature comforts, like artisanal donut shops and fashionable white people, made this city the ideal escape.

This would be his rehab, and if he was lucky, his third act shot at redemption.

***

Parvez skipped over the sidewalk cracks along Trenton’s Brunswick Avenue. The shards of glass beneath his feet glowed in the afternoon sun, lighting the way. He hummed a qawwali to himself as he followed his handwritten directions to Masjid Al-Saffat. He had shut off his phone before he left home and didn’t intend to turn it on again until his itikaf was complete. When Muna had expressed doubt about his going incommunicado, Parvez explained that, without a phone, he would be more present, in
the moment. As if to prove this to himself now, Parvez looked up at the block’s solitary tree, a plastic bag stuck in its branches, waving in the wind. The bag was a metaphor for something, he decided, and tried to work it out. A sad metaphor would be good, a tragic one even better. But his foot suddenly skidded on the sidewalk. Parvez lifted his shoe and found a dirtied condom stuck to his sneaker treads. Parvez scraped his sole on the curb, and watched the condom fall down a storm drain. As he stood on the curb, balanced precariously over the gutter, Parvez thought, Now here is a metaphor ripe for plucking.

Parvez pulled a black kamees from his backpack. He threw it on over his t-shirt, tugging at the hem so that it fell well over his knees. He rarely wore shalwar kamees, even when he was in Kashmir. But for itikaf, the kamees functioned like a fake mustache, a disguise that would allow the likes of him to disappear into the mosque crowd. And, more practically, if he was to spend his night kneeling and bowing in prayer, the kamees would provide his low rise jeans with additional coverage against butt crack exposure.

A taxi pulled up in front of Parvez, and he hopped back from the curb.

“Slailaikum!” The driver, probably Pakistani, had a gray, fist-length beard punching down his chin.

“Walaikum salam!” Parvez enjoyed giving the greeting to a stranger. No, to a brother.

“You going to masjid, brother?”

“Yes!” Parvez squealed.

“Come, I take you.” The driver unlocked his doors.
Parvez climbed into the passenger seat and shook the driver’s hand. The man, also wearing shalwar kamees, smelled like a mix of deep-fried pakoras and an earthy musk.

“I’m going to do itikaf!” Parvez said, smiling a bit too widely.

“Masha Allah, beyta,” the driver nodded like he was watching his kid make it all the way across a set of monkey bars. “Put on the belt.”

***

The mosque was a converted house of chipped red brick, and it was full of dudes. An old Bangladeshi dude with a fu-manchu beard, an Indonesian dude with dreadlocks hidden under his knit kufi, a Pakistani dude sucking in his potbelly, an Egyptian dude constantly scratching at his hairy arms sticking out of his short-sleeved galabiyya, a Senegalese dude who took pictures of everything with his cellphone, an African American dude with a yazar over his basketball shorts. They all had their younger counterparts, boys with peach fuzz on their lips, kufis pulled down tight over their buzz cuts, video games smuggled in their backpacks. The women were off in their own section of the mosque, somewhere off limits to and unseen by the men.

Parvez didn’t normally go for mosques that were so strictly segregated; he would spend most of his time worrying that Muna would be getting second class treatment. But now, on his own, in his imagined recovery, Parvez found an all-brothers support group appropriate.

Parvez found a sliver of open space and parked his amply-covered butt on the mosque carpet. He was between the fidgety, pimpled middle-school aged boys and a rosy-cheeked white guy whose fervent handshakes and intense focus could be explained
either by his zeal as a new convert or his being on the payroll of the FBI. But Parvez hoped for the best and willingly thrust his hand into the (likely) informant’s tight grip, and when the (probable) agent ended the handshake, Parvez touched his own chest, hand over heart.

The Imam, a middle-aged Desi guy with a well-kept beard, took his spot in the center of the group and, speaking in a calm voice that smoothed out the jagged edges of his Jersey accent, laid out the ground rules for itikaf:

1. Do not leave the mosque. Do not even leave the carpet. Once you leave, your itikaf is broken.

2. The only reason to leave the carpet is if you need to use the bathroom, which is down the hall.

3. The only reason to leave the mosque is if you need to take a shower, which is across the street in a brother’s rowhouse. And the only reason to take a shower is in the case of major ritual impurity, and the only relevant example of that is a wet dream.

And with that, the Imam left everyone to their own worship. But the last question created a buzz amongst the boys next to Parvez. He tilted his head in their direction, hoping to pick up a piece of the conversation.

“What’s a wet dream?” a chubby boy whispered to his friends, who quickly shushed him.

Parvez turned to the chubby boy. He felt sorry for him; the kid needed a cool big brother. And Parvez felt it might as well be him. “What’s your name, bro?”
“I’m sorry,” the chubby kid said, waving off the offense of his question, “I was just kidding.”

“No, it’s OK. It was a good question,” Parvez put out his hand, then added, “You can call me Parvez bhai.”

The feigned intimacy of “bhai” worked. The kid smiled and shook Parvez’s hand, looking at him like a big brother. “I’m Osama.”

“So look, it’s like when you have a dream...” but Parvez lost steam as all the other boys quickly encircled him. He was suddenly surrounded by innocent, pre-pubescent, prematurely side-burned faces, all those wide eyes on him. He had to proceed carefully.

“You know, like when you have a dream. At night.”

“Like a nightmare?”

“No, a wet dream is good. I mean, it can be good. Well, it’s definitely not a bad thing--“

“What makes it wet?”

“How do I explain this?” Parvez glanced at the clean, white fiberboard ceiling.”You guys know about, like, the changes in your bodies at this age--”

“You mean like puberty?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“The gym teacher talked to my class about that.”

“What did he say?”

“I don’t know. My mom didn’t let me go that day.”
“Oh,” Parvez nodded, “well, one of the things that happens is that, you know down there, your thing...” Parvez couldn’t find the words and found himself making a fist as a visual aid.

“Ew!” a bucktoothed boy flared his nostrils.

“No, not ‘ew’,” Parvez said, sitting up straight, breaking his fist. He was losing them. “It’s natural.”

“We can’t talk about this in the masjid,” a boy with a full mustache and a cracking voice said.

“Where else can we talk about it?” Parvez demanded. “Listen guys,” he said then switched to a whisper, “Islam is a sex positive religion.”

All the kids leaned away from Parvez, like he had just farted.

“That doesn’t sound right,” Osama said and scooted towards the corner, leading his friends in retreat.

The circle of innocent faces quickly peeled away, leaving Parvez bhai open to the elements, or in this case, the rotating fan, and Parvez felt its draft hit him in the face.

###

Though Parvez didn’t watch sports on TV, he did often find himself compelled by sports anchors, perhaps out of sympathy for their self-serious commentary and bad fashion sense. So during itikaf, as often happened when Parvez engaged in any kind of group activity, a sports announcer popped in his head, a kind of off-brand Bob Costas, transforming it into a competition.
The anchor would comment on Parvez’s comeback, pepper in some of his cooked-up underdog backstory, and run through his stats on the leaderboard, where Parvez held the number one spot:

Rakats Prayed: 8

Quran Chapters Read: 2

Dirty Thought Percentage: -10%

Second place would go to the uncle in the folding chair, who for the most part was plowing through his reading, but who Parvez had also caught dozing off and chattering about Pakistani politics. Osama would be somewhere near last place. Osama and the other boys had at first sat in a circle reciting beautifully, but they quickly devolved into slap boxing and farting and were currently hiding under their sleeping bags, watching anime on somebody’s cell phone.

Parvez put the Quran back on the shelf, and stretched out his legs. He looked at the digital display on the wall that listed all the prayer timings and the current time. Only forty five minutes had passed. There were still five hours left on the clock, and he had already run through his entire playbook.

Parvez wandered around the mosque, stepping over those who had already gone to sleep, weaving around the few who were still praying, careful not to cross their direct line to God. He found himself in the corner where his backpack was stashed, found himself pulling out his cellphone, found himself turning it on. Muna’s probably worried about me, he thought. He typed “I’m OK” and sent the message to Muna.
He then checked his email (no new emails), his Twitter (no mentions), and his Facebook. There was a new friend request from one “Becca Maharishi”. The filmmaker from Ireland. Parvez knew that last name was bullshit, her actual last name was Mc-something, and her profile picture further infuriated him: Becca with a group of poorly dressed brown children, probably in a village clinic, smiling amidst the squalor.

The phone suddenly buzzed in his hand. A message from Becca:

;)

A winking smile. Did he have a stalker? Celebrities had stalkers.

He closed his eyes, and considered his response. There were options:

A. Subtle Adjustment of Expectations: *Hey good to hear from you, FRIEND.*

B. Direct and Straightforward: *I’m sorry if I lead you to believe that I’m interested in staying in touch with you. My behavior was inappropriate at the party, and I sincerely regret it. I am happily married.*

C. Repulsion Via Negging: *Who dis?*

D. Confrontational: *I’m not your slumdog, bitch.*

Parvez felt the phone buzz in his hand again. But when he opened his eyes, he didn’t chance looking at the message. He just threw the phone back in its pocket and stuffed his bag back in the corner.

Parvez scanned the room. The dudes that were still awake seemed just as distracted as him--scratching themselves, chitchatting, swiping at their phones. Only the Imam seemed at peace, sitting quietly with eyes closed, deep in meditation. He had one
leg folded under his butt, the other bent in front of him, his hands resting on the lifted knee, his chin resting on his hands. He seemed immovable.

Parvez sidled up next to the Imam. “Hey.”

The Imam opened his eyes, blinked, and turned to Parvez.

“My name is Parvez, and I work in film.”

“OK,” he nodded.

“But I know I have to leave my profession.”

“You have to what?”

“I have to leave my profession,” Parvez looked at the ground, “film.”

“Oh.”

“I know it’s not what I should be doing.”

“What should you be doing?”

“I don’t know. Better things.” Parvez focused on the Imam’s hairy toes. “Like praying more.”

“You can’t pray all the time.” The Imam lowered his knee so that he was sitting criss-cross applesauce. “You have to feed your family.”

“I know, I know. But like film--”

“Listen, I had a guy come to me earlier today, saying the same thing, saying he had to quit his job because it was taking him away from Allah,” the Imam leaned in close to Parvez. “You know what his job was?”

“Something gross?”

“I guess. A little.”
Parvez’s eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

“Dentist,” the Imam said, putting a stop to Parvez’s imagination. “The guy’s a dentist.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

“Nothing. That’s the point. Your job is probably not what’s bothering you.”

“What is bothering me?”

“Good question,” The Imam pulled his knee to his chest again. “Tonight’s a good night to ask.” He smiled and pointed up to the heavens, then closed his eyes, laid his hands on his raised knee, and rested his chin on top.

“Oh, OK,” Parvez whispered, “cool. Thanks.”

***

Parvez barricaded himself in the basement. There were no snoring uncles or chatterbox boys down there. Just a cool, dark, low-ceilinged room with a slight mildewy smell rising from the carpet. It was what Parvez imagined rehab was probably like.

Parvez settled on the floor and focused his gaze on the brown water stain on the ceiling. This was how one meditated, he thought. And soon whatever he was doing seemed to be working, or maybe, he was just falling asleep. Either way, his shoulders began to relax and droop from their hunched position. He was almost ready to slump over when he heard the basement door creak open.

“Hell yeah!” Osama yelled and galloped down the stairs, the whole pack of boys avalanching after him. It was the beginning of a war.
Their pillows flashed white in the dark, and with each swing, their kameeses fanned out around their knees like little dervish skirts. Amidst the battle cries and flying pillow fluff and kids groping for their fallen glasses, no one noticed Parvez sitting on the carpet or his feeble protests.

“Hey guys, can you stop?” he mumbled. “Hey bro, can you cut it out?”

Osama knocked the bucktoothed kid off his feet, sending him crashing over Parvez’s head. They both hit the ground, Parvez’s nose burying in the carpet.

Meditation was no longer possible. Parvez threw the bucktoothed kid off of him, then tore the pillow from the kid’s hands. Parvez went to work.

In one stroke, Parvez clipped two kids at the knees, cutting them down to the ground. The mustache boy charged at him, but Parvez did a spin/duck type of move, and drove the pillow into the boy’s stomach. The kid doubled over and hit the carpet.

They all noticed Parvez now. But no one could tell if he was playing or not. Most of the boys backed away.

Only Osama stood his ground, facing off against Parvez. But the standoff only lasted a few seconds before Parvez grew tired of it and tomahawked the pillow right in Osama’s face.

The room was still again. The boys were laid out on the carpet, quiet, except for some muffled whimpering.

Parvez stood over the fallen boys, his chest heaving, a limp pillow in his fists. “I told you to stop!”
The basement door swung open, sending a shaft of light directly on Parvez. He squinted at the fluorescence. As his eyes adjusted, Parvez saw the Imam standing at the top of the stairs, his arms crossed, a frown somewhere in his beard.

As the Imam looked on, Parvez apologized to the boys and shook their hands. Together they all said a duaa, raising their hands in a circle, palms open to the heavens. They took turns beseeching God. Parvez asked that God save the boys from debilitating guilt. Osama asked that they all go to heaven. They all wiped their hands over their faces and went their separate ways.

Parvez tried meditating again, and this time, he promptly fell asleep.

An hour later, he woke up with a gasp. Something had changed. He found a blanket on him, the quiet good deed of one of the uncles. But that was not the change. He whipped off the blanket, and saw a dark, wet spot on his kamees. That was the change.

He bear crawled over the carpet, careful not to let his defilement touch the hallowed ground. He approached a Nigerian brother who was still awake, thumbing prayer beads. “Who has the keys to the house?”

“What house?” the brother kept whispering his dhikr and spoke out of the side of his mouth.

“The one with the shower?”

“Why you need the shower?”

“Because.”
He turned fully to Parvez and saw his thighs clenched together. “Oh.” He pointed to a kid snuggled up in his sleeping bag on the other side of the mosque. “Osama, it’s his house. You get the keys from him.”

Parvez cursed under his breath and crawled the length of the carpet. Osama’s topi was sitting next to his head, his hair swept back. Parvez whispered his name, but Osama didn’t wake up. He grabbed the kid’s shoulder and shook, Osama’s chubby cheeks jiggling. Osama opened his eyes, his eyelids peeling back slowly.

“I need the keys.”

“What?”

“For the house.”

“Why?”

“I need to take a shower.”

“OK.” Osama crawled out of his sleeping bag.

Osama led Parvez to the foyer’s shoe rack. He plucked the keys out of his high tops, but before he handed them over, he smiled at Parvez. “What happened?”

“I had, you know--”

“--a wet dream?”

“Yeah, OK, I did. It’s fine.”

“Who did you dream about?”

“Listen you little hornball--”

“OK, OK.” Osama handed over the keys. “It’s number 47. The bathroom is on the top floor.”
Parvez nodded and opened the door, the cool night air tickling their bare feet.

“Hey,” Osama asked, “do you think I’ll ever have one? One of those dreams?”

Osama held his topi at his waist, stretching its elastic band.

“Yeah,” Parvez nodded, “I’m sure you’ll have a lot.”

“Cool,” Osama smiled, “thanks, Parvez bhai.”

Osama’s house was rough. Peeling wallpaper, plastic wrapped furniture, old, dusty shag carpeting. Parvez made his way up the groaning stairs and into the bathroom. There was a yellow ring around the bathtub and the showerhead was covered in rust. But he forgot all that once he stepped into the water. Something about this shower--maybe the temperature, maybe the water pressure--was special. He took a longer shower than usual, standing under the water until the steam was so thick he couldn’t see his feet.

As Parvez got dressed, his phone fell out of his pocket and onto the linoleum floor. He picked it up and turned it on. There was a message from Muna waiting for him.

*How is it going?*

With his clean, wrinkled fingers, he typed a response.

*I had a dream about you.*
CRY IT OUT

NIGHT 1

I’m writing just to escape his screams. Right now, it’s a light, fluttering squeal. Like a squeaky wheel. But it’s about to get wet. A sputtering explosion. So much sadness from such a little body. He already knows what this world is about.

I keep imagining the neighbors charging down the stairs, in their pajamas, kicking in our door. This ends now! Give us the baby!

This is what my art is now. But maybe that’s what all art has always been. A buffer against someone/something screaming at you.

I’m already forgetting my purpose here. This is only really to note: Khidr down at 7:23pm. The rules: get up and check on him every 5 minutes, until he sleeps. No picking up, no Muna, so no boob. Only: pat on the back, hush baby, Allahu. Within a few days, we’ll have our nights back. Or so the doctor says.
I prayed he would be beautiful. And he is. He didn’t have to be. Long eyelashes, button nose, bright, black eyes shining like tadpoles. Everyone says he looks like Muna. OK, I guess. But somehow when he sleeps, I think he looks like me.

Sick people. That’s what Muna’s dad called us. He is not in support of sleep training. Neither are the Yoga Moms. They’ve assembled a little army in the park, mats slung on their shoulders like kalashnikovs. I always find a way around them. The Yoga Moms are too thin, too awake, too good at life for me to parade my burgeoning dadbod past. I’m an easy target. And so is Khidr. They want to tell me there is a better baby carrier on the market. They want to tell me their babies’ are in the 90th percentile for length/weight. They want to tell me about iron supplements. I wonder if, in the future, people will look at my son the way they look at me now.

Why do we have children?

Fatherhood is a craft. It requires study and time and practice to refine. Motherhood is a spirit that possesses the body. I envy her that. I want to feel like a father in my bones.

For 9 months, Muna would march into the bathroom, barf, and go right back to her laptop on the kitchen counter. I could hear it anywhere in the apartment. The wretching, the splattering. I must be some kind of empathy vomiter, because I would also gag. I’m gagging even now. When the due date came, I had a small job, hold her hand and say:
Breathe. But in our rush to the hospital, I forgot to brush my teeth, so my breath upset her. Stop breathing! she screamed. So I just offered my hand, and she squeezed my knuckles like lemons. She pushed him right out, no epidural, just a battle cry, forty-five minutes of labor. And for six months now, he’s been on her boob every few minutes, sucking the curls out of her hair. But when I find them sleeping next to each other, him, milk-drunk, lips barely unlatched from the nipple, her, drained, hair draped over his forehead, I think: this is the most beautiful thing. And I can only ruin it by coming closer.

Man, the kid can scream.

I should’ve been an investment banker. Or a lawyer. Then Muna wouldn’t ever have to go back to work. And I wouldn’t have to take whatever gig comes my way. At least my compromises would be clear.

I asked them to change the course name. But they didn’t go for “Manufacturing Realities: Visual Storytelling & The Craft of Perception”. “Intro to Video Production” sounds like I’m teaching kids to make wedding videos. Derek said that wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Lots of money in that, he said.

What does it mean to let a baby cry? Sometimes I think it might be ungodly. To hear the cries of the weak and do nothing.
Khidr needs the mosque in his life. I need it. Five years ago, when I first saw that storefront masjid on Malcolm X Boulevard, I felt OK moving to Bedstuy. I’m not like the others invading Brooklyn for some vague promise of cool. I’m not a colonist. The Caretaker and I call each other “brother”. We pray foot to foot, shoulder to shoulder. He gave me the shea butter I wipe on Khidr’s butt. And he takes good care of the little green mosque, where I suspect he also lives. All the coat hooks are occupied with his clothes hanging in plastic bags, and I saw a cot behind a curtain in the basement. God’s home is his home. And I also want it to be mine. I want my life to be a prayer. But I haven’t been in months. Not since the new coffeeshop opened down the block. Not since I started this teaching gig. Not since Khidr.

He’s winding down. It’s quiet. Somehow this is scarier.

I do the double check: my pinky under his nostrils, my hand on his back. He’s breathing quietly. Such peace after such terror. I think it’s his eyelids that make him look like me.

Asleep at 8:38 pm.

**NIGHT 2**

I woke up this morning with a kick to the face. Khidr scrambling to the boob. I don’t remember how he ended up back in our bed. I don’t remember anything these days.

Email passwords, student names, my laundry. I’m a zombie. But a funky zombie, Muna
says. Bouncing the baby for hours at a time has left me, even empty-handed, with a persistent spring in my step.

Khidr down at 7:45pm. Slight delay owing to his pooping in my hand on the way to bath time.

The poop-palmed Baba is the inverse of the breastfeeding Mama. Her flesh offering sustenance, my flesh a shit receptacle. But that is my job. That is fatherhood.

Muna’s laughing: I forgot the burp cloth. Khidr left milky clouds on both my shoulders. I’m looking at the picture she took, and I want to tell her what I see: little beds for the angels on my shoulders. But I don’t say it. That’s a little too precious.

She’s hooked up to the pump now, drifting to sleep. Suction cups attached to both her boobs, an electric lub-dub alternating squeezes: right, left, right, milk dribbling into bottles. It’s work. It reminds me of our babymoon on the dairy farm. Muna was so swollen then, ready to pop, watching the farmers work. The cows were so calm. Now she is, too.

The Yoga Moms got me today. A large puddle in the park rerouted our walk. I smiled as I passed, offering a silent acknowledgement that we’re all trying really hard, that we’re all succeeding, at varying levels, though the important thing is that we’re all trying. But they wanted to talk. Chat. A bunch of chatty Kathys. They recited baby statistics beautifully,
made incantations of vaccines. I think they gave Khidr gas because he farted like a full
grown man. But they were undeterred, giggling, asking his name. Oh wow, that’s—
what’s it mean? I wanted to tell them Khidr was a mysterious sage with knowledge of the
unseen world, a mentor to Moses, a saint who served the common people without
revealing his elevated station, a life I wish for my own flesh and blood. But I just gave
them the literal translation: Green.

-Oh, are you an environmentalist?

-Yeah. I compost.

I left them with a smile. I thought that was saintly of me.

I think people have kids hoping they turn out like David, my best student. He’s my focal
point when I stand in front of the class. He says the smartest stuff, keeps eye contact,
nods at my Parvezisms (“Plan the shoot, shoot the plan.”). He even writes them down.
David’s got the raw talent and work ethic to go far. I already know I will give him an A.
He is destined for a future greater than wedding videos. A future greater than mine,
probably. His existence is reassuring. I’m at least allowed brushes with greatness.

Wow, is Khidr howling now. I know when I sleep tonight, his screams will seep into my
dreams. Probably another nightmare about my dad dying.

I am formulating a spiritual justification for sleep training. He needs to know that his
cries may not be answered when he wishes, but they will be answered in time. He may
fall asleep, alone, in the dark, his blankie damp with tears, but at dawn he will wake up to our smiling faces. It’s never too early to make sense of God’s silence.

The neighborhood mosque has a small library in the back corner. Between “The Signs of the Day of Judgement” and “Rights and Responsibilities of Marriage in Al-Islam”, there is one VHS tape, labeled with black marker: “Seven Samurai Pt 1”. I saw the tape last time and wanted to ask the Caretaker why he had Kurosawa on the shelf. I suspect his personal collection got mixed up with the mosque’s. But I can see how it’s more compelling than “The Miracles of Science in the Qur’an”. Kurosawa has nothing to prove.

Sleeping soundly at 8:12pm, I guess this is working.

**NIGHT 3**

Put Khidr down at 7:30 on the dot. No dilly-dallying. I needed the day to be over.

I just wanted Muna to say thank you. Every day, I get up with Khidr at dawn, let her sleep an extra three hours, make her breakfast. Today was hard-boiled eggs. Yes, they were on the softer side. Kinda French, I said. Kinda inedible, she said. I didn’t want to hear her recipe at 8 AM. So I countered with accusations about undone laundry. I am not proud of that.
Five years into marriage, I know how to avoid fights. I can draw a flow chart of every fight we’ve had, a descending arrow stringing together text bubbles: ESSENTIAL CHARACTER FLAW to INCITING INCIDENT to MISPLACED ANGER to CURRENT PROXY POWER STRUGGLE. But that arrow gets away from me sometimes, slips through my fingers. Today was like a car crash, everything happened so fast. Or maybe it was more like a tidal wave, starting hundreds of miles away in the deepest parts of our oceans, quietly rippling along for a lifetime before making landfall.

Kidder? Critter? Caruther? The Yoga Moms waved to Khidr, their tongues labored with his name. I nodded like a maniac and walked right past. If you can’t say his name right, keep it out ya mouth.

Somehow, my son left a stain on the back of my pants. The class discovered it when I wrote on the board. David laughed the loudest. I spun around, catching him with his hand stifling a dumb little giggle. He is such a disappointment. Also: his documentary about his grandfather sucks. I thought it might be visionary, but I realize it just lacks structure.

I no longer have time for three-hour movies. So I picked up “Seven Samurai” during naptime and watched it in fast-forward. But I did play the final showdown. I imagine it’s the Caretaker’s favorite part: katanas slicing through marauding bandits, the pyrrhic victory of the samurai. It used to be my favorite, too. But now my favorite might be when Kikuchiyo saves the baby from the burning mill. “This child is me!” he screams, recalling
his own childhood, then collapses and sobs. It’s clumsy but effective. Or maybe it’s effective because it’s clumsy. I wish I could be so nakedly sentimental.

Mom said I was a “good” baby. I don’t know. But I do remember, as a kid, often locking myself away in my bedroom and sprawling on the carpet, or in the bathroom and sitting on the closed toilet, just to have a good, blubbering cry. It felt good to feel bad about myself. I wonder if I looked like Khidr. After bath time today, I handed him to Muna and locked myself in the bathroom. I tried to cry, but nothing came out.

Asleep at 8:03pm. Thank God.

**NIGHT 4**

I put him down at 7:32pm. He hit the crib quiet.

He’s still quiet.

You could call it a dry spell. I didn’t keep track. It’s normal after having a kid. But yes, it was practically a desert down there. Then today, God sent down rain to bring life back to the dead earth. Yeah, sex. Today was almost as awkward as the first time. Like we were back in that dusty motel room, our budget blown on the wedding, two kids fumbling in the dark. But it was also almost as thrilling. Like I was back in that Wal-Mart parking lot, sprinting in the rain, quickly realizing I would have to face a cashier to pay for my first
box of condoms. I laughed at myself when I came to the conveyor belt. I hid the Trojan box under a king-size Hershey’s bar. I laugh now. In these moments, everything seems possible. Even good things.

I don’t kiss and tell, but I do flow chart. Let’s just say, it could look like this: Two UNIQUELY BROKEN HUMAN text bubbles, each with a jagged edge, pointing to one full, radiant circle in the middle, WHOLE ECSTATIC BEING.

I wanted a difficult name for my kid. To simply say it should rewire the brain, I thought. But sometimes, a brain just needs to be still. Specifically, my brain.

A yogi will tell you: the inflexible break. The Yoga Moms will learn to say Khidr. And I’ll work on my headstand.

I stopped a few blocks short of the park and thought: people have a child so someone will pray for them when they die. So I walked the opposite way, Khidr sleeping against my chest. Up Malcolm X, past the bodega, past the closed upholstery shop, past the new dive bar. I walked up and down the block, peering in each unmarked door, trying the knobs. But I couldn’t find it. The mosque had vanished. There was no trace. I wondered for a moment if I had imagined the whole thing, some elaborate fantasy about belonging. I used to picture Khidr being held by the Caretaker. My boy’s fingers threaded in the man’s henna beard, and the Caretaker cradling his skull with his cracked hands, reciting
Qur’anic verses and my favorite Kurosawa quotes, “Man is a genius when he is dreaming.” I asked the people at the bus stop, “Do you know what happened to—”, but I realized: I never got his name. Who was the Caretaker? Was there another place for him to take care of? Was there anyone to take care of the Caretaker? Khidr woke up with a wail, and the bus stop ladies shouted their suggestions. “He’s hungry! You’re spoiling him in that thing! Where’s his mother?!” I wanted to run. But there was his little red face, his quivering lips the outline of infinity. He seemed to say, “The screams will not end. They never began. They simply are, echoing across eternity. I am not the one in need of training.” I held him close and bounce-walked home.

He hasn’t made a sound since I put him down. I feel an urge to lay down next to his crib, and keep watch all night, staring at my eyelids on his face. But the night is mine again. I want to watch a movie. I want to try to get lucky two nights in a row. I want to cook something fancier than ready-made tortillas and canned black beans. But first, I will lock myself in the bathroom and try to cry for the Caretaker.