Submission

by

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Village Stray

Hajji Waqar hopped over a pile of rubbish in front of his neighbor’s home and spat over his shoulder as he passed. The stench of garbage in the summer heat was especially discomforting to him, unlike the stench of cow dung which was ubiquitous in his village, and therefore homely. He wiped his nose with his sleeve and adjusted the cotton cap on his head.

A black plastic bag swung back and forth from the aged man’s hand, eliciting slanted stares and candid quips from the neighborhood children. They pretended not to notice him as he hobbled by and continued their game of feeding bits of garbage to the stray dogs on the street.

“What do you think’s inside the bag?” A younger child asked the group.

An older child, the head of the pack, smacked the back of the younger one’s head. “Let the old bastard finish walking away before you ask what’s inside his bag. Besides, it’s nothing for you or me, so what’s it matter.”

The late afternoon sun took its time in setting, as if to remind the people that it would be back tomorrow in just a few short hours. Hajji Waqar’s sweat had colored his kameez a darker shade of beige under his arms and on his upper back. Baking bricks was the only kind of work he’d ever done since he was six years old, and he baked good bricks, uniform in color and dimension. Yet, he had no sense of pride in what he did, as a potter does, or a cobbler. He baked bricks because if he didn’t, he’d have to beg, and in the village, begging and stealing were hopeless endeavors. Everyone knew what everyone else had: nothing.
In Hajji Waqar’s home, a worn curtain hung where a front door normally stands. There used to be nothing but a raised mound of dirt to mark the entrance of his home, but a few months ago he had finally married. At 57, having saved enough money to afford a woman, he wed the daughter of a man who was constantly in jail for owing too many people too much money. The night she entered his home, Hajji Waqar’s wife said that she wouldn’t lie down with him while outsiders could see them in bed. Her request perplexed him, in that he didn’t understand what sense of dignity she was trying to preserve. He was poor, and so was she. His family was poor, and so was hers.

Who cared about who saw them do what?

Inside, his wife was preparing supper: flatbread with lentils and pickled carrots. She had her sleeves rolled up to her elbows so that he could see the muscles in her forearms ripple as she worked the dough into spheres, then patties, then disks. Her scarf was wrapped around her head like a bandana. Drops of sweat rolled down her cheeks and off the bottom of her chin. She was decades younger than he was, but her face bore the same sad expression as one who had outgrown hope.

Hajji Waqar placed the black plastic bag close to the fire, not too far from where his wife was crouched, and went to change his clothes. The couple did not say exchange words until midway into their meal.

It was her habit, when they ate together, to eat in small mouthfuls in anticipation of his needs. She poured water into a tin cup and placed it by his side. “It was hot today,” she said.

He didn’t respond.
“It wouldn’t have been so bad if there had been a breeze.” She watched his face for a reaction. The lump on the side of his cheek lessened in size as he gradually swallowed his food.

“Do you want another roti?” She motioned as if to get up. He raised his hand to stop her and took the bread that was in her hand. He ripped what remained of it into thirds and kept one piece for himself, returning the rest of it back to her.

Evening did not bring much respite from the heat. The temperature dropped slightly, but the wind still refused to blow. The sound of children at play subsided as they each went to their homes, leaving the stray dogs they played with to find refuge somewhere outside. Hajji Waqar folded the curtain at the entrance of his home to one side to let air in. He picked up the black plastic bag that he had left by the fire and sat down on his cot. He allowed his wife to finish smothering the fire before he summoned her with a glance.

In the fading light, he placed the bag in front of her. “Open it,” he ordered.

She undid the knot keeping the bag closed and revealed what looked like a crumpled bundle of newspapers. She looked at him for permission.

“Take it out.”

She pulled the warm package out and placed it on the cot, using the plastic bag as a mat. With great care, she pulled the newspaper folds back and revealed two neatly stacked columns of sweetened milk-fat mixed with nuts. It was like she had found gold.
The room seemed cooler and brighter than it actually was. The nutty, sugary aroma reached her nose and she almost stopped breathing.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like halwa?” He had expected her to smile, to show some sign of appreciation, to say thank you. Instead, she seemed upset.

“No, I like it,” she said. She nodded when she spoke, to demonstrate that she was earnest. “Thank you. These are my favorite.” She wanted to smile. She wanted to be happy. Her husband had brought her something. She was happy. But she was also afraid of happiness. Happiness wasn’t something she was used to, wasn’t something she was supposed to have. And yet, here it was: happiness, nestled in her lap, packaged in a bundle of newspaper. “I just…” She hesitated.

“I see. You never expected this from me. Right?” Hajji Waqar folded his arms. “You never expected this old man to make you happy in any way. You never took me to be thoughtful, or caring.”

“No, that’s not it. I...” she hesitated again.

“You take me for a bitter, angry old dog, isn’t it? An old dog that just knows how to sweat in the sun all day, and come home and eat whatever scraps are put in front of him. That’s it, isn’t it?” There was sadness in his voice, along with rage. “Isn’t it?”

She tried to speak but she didn’t know what to say. She had hurt him without meaning to, and she had never angered him before, so the knowledge of how to placate the situation escaped her.

“I didn’t choose to bake bricks all day.” He went on. “I didn’t choose to get married towards the end of my life, when I’d be half a step away from my grave. I didn’t
choose to eat pickled carrots from last year’s winter everyday of my life. I didn’t even choose you!” He laughed. “My own wife! Forced on me! Your father practically paid me to take you! Don’t you think a man should be able to choose his own wife? To choose who he loves? And what good have you done me?” He answered himself. “None.” And then he stopped. He realized he was almost shouting. He had hurt her. He tried to make out the expression on her face, to read her thoughts, but it was too dark.

She kept silent. She didn’t cry. She had expected this. She knew this is what happened when happiness entered a home, when it threatened to enter her heart. Happiness was only Misery sticking its foot in the door.


Before reaching for a square, she rose from the cot and grabbed one of her sandals. She made her way to the entrance of their home and stood by the doorway. In the middle of the street, there was a stray dog that had its face towards her. She took her sandal and threw it at the dog, not wanting to hit it, but to shoo it away. She watched the dog trot away, and only then did she unfurl the curtain and whisper a prayer. Envious eyes and malevolent spirits were never shy of knocking at the same house twice.
Dancing Boy

“How much for a bed?” Sikandar asked.

“100, sir.” The young man at the counter watched Sikandar fumble with the crumpled rupees in his pocket. A dim street light flickered above them haphazardly, giving the impression of lightning unaccompanied by thunder.

Sikandar managed to free a 100 rupee note and held it out for the boy to take. The boy snatched the limp note from between his fingers and stashed the money into his own pocket. With each burst of light from the defective street lamp, Sikandar’s brain began to piece together a clear image of the boy’s face: clusters of pockmarks along the cheekbones, a virgin mustache above the lips, thick eyebrows bridged together by a faint tuft of hair.

The hookahs at this truck stop were highly ornamented with geometrical patterns and dangling trinkets. Five hoses snaked out of each unit; gold capped the ends of each mouthpiece. Turbaned men with long beards and waistcoats smoked and drank Peshawari kava. They talked politics, sports. Occasionally one would get up to pee or stretch, and then another. They’d be there until dawn if they didn’t have to work the next day.

Sikandar pretended to have difficulty organizing and storing the money back into his pocket. He was stalling, waiting for the boy to ask, *Will that be all?* The boy stood behind the counter patiently, his hands behind his back, at ease.

Sikandar looked to his left, and then to his right. “And…” He leaned on the counter and flicked a nightcrawler away. “How much for a bunkmate?”

The boy responded in the same tone and volume as before. “200.”
Sikandar laughed and punctuated his laughter with a wheezing cough. “200?”

The boy nodded. The price was fixed. Haggling was for when you bought vegetables or fabric. This was a truck stop, not a bazaar.

Sikandar scratched his chest hair through the spaces between the buttons on his kameez. He looked around and, without making eye contact, shook his head, and fished two 100 rupee notes out from his pocket. The boy extended his hand to retrieve the money. Sikandar pinched the money between his fingers and squeezed the boys hand as if he were shaking it, the way you do when you want to give money to someone in secret. The boys hand was bony and moist, his fingers long. Sikandar held the squeeze and waited for the boy to look him in the eye.

“How old are they?” his voice was gruff.

“Mostly seven or eight. No older than ten.” The boy tried to pull his hand away, but Sikandar held it in place. One of the smoking men stood up and adjusted the drawstring on his trousers. He had tied the knot too tight before. Then, the streetlight emitted a quick flash and the bulb fused with a muffled poof.

In Afghanistan, Sikandar and his family had lived on land owned by his maternal grandfather, Bahadur Hassan: a soldier who had fought in the Afghan Army during the Soviet-Afghan conflict in the 80’s. Early on during his time in the army, a certain general took a liking to Bahadur, perhaps because of his fidelity to the cause, and as a result, he rose swiftly in rank. By the time he was in his late 20’s, Bahadur bore a colonel’s insignia on his uniform and had started a family.
The war had been good for many people for many reasons. Among other industries, the drug trade flourished with the help of the CIA, whose support encouraged opium farmers to push heroin into the USSR in hopes of crippling the enemy via substance abuse. In the end, both sides were crippled — it was like setting fire to a forest and expecting only the weeds to burn.

_Bacha bazi_, the Afghan tradition of powerful patrons sponsoring prepubescent boys to sing and dance for entertainment, also flourished during the war. The older men at war, for obvious reasons, could not bring their wives with them on campaigns, and since this was holy war, only a corrupt man raped another man’s wife or daughter. And so it was that the soldiers took to sleeping with the boys they trained to sing and dance for them. Modern pederasty in the middle east.

The men adorned their boys with anklets, bracelets, necklaces and amulets. They gave them scarves to wear around their necks, tasseled sashes to tie around their waists. Kohl for their eyes, rouge for their cheeks. It wasn’t uncommon for a high ranking officer to open a school equipped with music and dance teachers dedicated to _bacha bazi_. By the early 90’s, with the fortune he had amassed in spoils and opium investments, Col. Bahadur Hassan opened three schools where he trained and kept up to fifty boys between the ages of 12 and 18. Every school owner had their favorite boy, their own personal pet. The colonel’s favorite was Alamgir.

One June, on a seasonal trip into the mountains with a few comrades, Col. Bahadur spotted a group of village boys swimming in a mountain stream that ran through
a ravine. The boys swam shirtless, wearing cotton trousers with no underwear underneath. Unaware that they were being watched, they splashed each other, dunked each other’s heads underwater, leapt from boulders, and tried to swim against the current. The boys looked like scattered pearls twinkling in pristine wood.

The colonel hiked down the slope and edged closer to the stream. When he was close enough to notice the naturally occurring highlights in their hair, the pink in their nipples, he raised his voice so that they could hear him over the rush of the stream. “Nice day for a swim.”

All activity ceased. One boy remained in a crouched position atop a boulder, coiled in preparation to jump. The boys nodded, affirming that it was, indeed, a nice day. The rest of the colonel’s comrades completed their descent and joined him at the stream’s edge. The boys outnumbered the men.

The colonel focused his gaze on one of the boys. Alamgir.

“What is your age?” he asked.

The boy lowered his gaze and answered. “Maybe 11, sir.” Alamgir stood shin deep in the stream. The fabric of his trousers stuck to his thighs. The colonel stepped closer to the boy and motioned as if to hug him. Instead, he squeezed the boys traps, and then his shoulders. With a gentle touch, he lifted the boys chin and stroked his hair to one side.

“Precious.” He smiled at the boy and took a step back. He nodded approvingly.

“Continue playing.”
The boys resumed play, but only outwardly. They wanted to run home, to hide somewhere, to tell an adult what had happened. The colonel and his men watched, commenting once in a while about the weather, about how much further they had to hike. The colonel talked little, his attention focused on Alamgir. A burgeoning cloud blocked the sun and the wind began to take longer breaths. Some of the boys began to shiver and develop blued lips. The colonel waved his arm and ordered his men back up the hill. Before departing, he called Alamgir over to the log where he was sitting.

“What do they call you?” he asked.

“My name is Alamgir.”

“Alamgir!” The colonel made a face as though he was impressed. The name meant conqueror of the worlds. “Masha’Allah. Alamgir. You’re very handsome, Alamgir.”

Alamgir clutched his left elbow with his right hand and pinched the earth with his toes. Once, when he was 7, he had come to the same stream to fetch water with his mother. A leopard had been stalking them since they’d left the village. When the leopard came upon them, silent as death, Alamgir spotted it by chance and immediately began to throw sticks and stones at it. A fist sized rock landed on the cat’s nose and it hissed and bore its teeth, holding its ground. Alamgir pelted the cat with a few more stones and cracked a row of the cat’s teeth. He was ready to fight the leopard until one of them died. Such was the code he was taught to live by. When the leopard finally relented, his mother’s legs buckled from under her so that mother and son were about the same height.
They hugged each other and released the laughter that comes after meeting with, and walking away from, death. His mother had called him brave, then. *My brave prince.*

Brave. And yet, Alamgir feared this man who spoke to him with such tenderness, who looked at him as if he was the world’s greatest treasure.

“It’s true. You’re a very handsome young man.” The colonel repeated.

“Thank you, sir.” The boy looked at the colonel’s boots. His head started to ache, and he felt dizzy.

“Where are your parents?” The colonel asked.

“My mother is dead.” She had miscarried a child after Alamgir, and the miscarriage triggered a lethal infection in her uterus. “My father is home.”

The colonel nodded. “Take me to him.”

Because it wasn’t uncommon for military commanders to make the request that the colonel made, Alamgir’s father understood he was not to refuse. With the colonel’s crew as witnesses, Alamgir’s father gave his son to the colonel for a monthly allowance equivalent to 50¢. Alamgir’s father’s last words to his son were, “Don’t cause trouble for the colonel and do exactly as he says. And don’t think about returning here without permission. You’d be a disgrace to me and your entire tribe.” Alamgir and his friends did not wave bye to each other as the group left the village. They knew it would’ve made him cry.

♦ ♦ ♦
Alamgir learned to dance quickly. His teacher was a clean shaven man that had little tolerance for error. More than three slip ups during a session and you were forced to beat your own feet a hundred times with a switch. Once or twice a week, the colonel would take Alamgir along on outings, to parks, to sporting events, and he’d buy him sweets and tell him about the perils he had braved, the goals he had set for himself and accomplished. Alamgir never told the colonel much about his life, or about the leopard and his mother, partly because the colonel never asked, and partly because he sensed that the colonel wanted Alamgir to forget that he’d ever had an existence before, or without, him. And for the most part, Alamgir did forget. Towards the end of their first year together, the colonel bought Alamgir his first bells and personally fitted them on his wrists and ankles. Over his head, the colonel draped a red scarf, bedazzled with plastic gems.

With a wide grin that exposed his yellow-brown teeth, the colonel cooed, “You’re going to make me explode.”

Alamgir’s debut attracted village elders and police officials, in addition to other high ranking military commandants. His dance teacher sang and played the rubab for the night. The colonel sat in the corner of the compact dancehall, accepting compliments from his guests, pleased with his investment. Alamgir stomped the floor, threw his head back, and twirled with vigor. He flirted with members of the audience, dancing by their feet, and then pulling away when they yanked at his dress. He made a few false moves that only his teacher noticed. The crowd was too taken with his near feminine looks to
care: the soft sharpness of his nose, his small cleft chin, his lengthy eyelashes. Some of the men got up several times during the performance and rained cash over him. He was beloved to them all as long as he danced.

At the end of the performance, just after midnight, the men bid for a night with Alamgir.

“He goes with me!” One man shouted and flashed a wad of afghani bills.

“With me!” Another man stood up and opened his arms, as if presenting himself to Alamgir.

The bidding went on, with men teasing each other about how shameless they were, doggedly vying for a night with the boy. Then, from the corner of the room, the colonel began to sing.

*My Beloved’s lips are so tender,*

*His touch is all I crave,*

*Don’t torture me any longer,*

*Come, come and take your slave.*

The bidding, which had only been a formality, promptly ceased. Everyone knew that the first night belonged to the colonel. One by one, the guests saluted the colonel and thanked him, and made their way home. Then Alamgir and the colonel were driven to a motel. And just like that, the colonel willed the chase he had initiated a year ago to an end.

♦ ♦ ♦
The fifth daughter and seventh child to Col. Bahadur Hassan, Gul Bano was born at a time when war was rampant and young men were quickly becoming a scarcity. Perhaps it was because of this scarcity, or perhaps because her father feared he would not live much longer, that Col. Bahadur Hassan informed his daughter on the night of her first menstruation that she’d be married to Alamgir in less than a week. She was 14. By then, Alamgir was 17 years old, and he was set to retire as a beloved dancer. It was time for him to marry and start his own life, and as was tradition, his lover and benefactor would facilitate this transition.

In the peak of the wedding season, the marriage took place on the colonel’s largest estate. There were over a thousand guests, hundreds of which included complete strangers and hired hands: cooks, musicians, dancers, photographers. At least fifty men were recruited solely to chop the firewood necessary to cook all the food.

Alamgir’s ornate headdress and the white horse he rode in on made him seem like nobility. His features had grown sharper over the years, the innocence his face once communicated gone.

The two teenagers pronounced their wedding vows, first Gul Bano, from behind a veil inside her room, and then Alamgir, in the front yard. Afterwards, the colonel kissed Alamgir’s headdress and led him by the hand to the center of the front yard for a dance. He lifted Alamgir’s arm and announced, “My beloved, and now, my son!” Gul Bano heard her father’s words and the applause that followed after it. Then the music began to play, and she tried to envision what her husband might look like. She wouldn’t see him
until nightfall, when they would spend their first night together and consummate the marriage in their new home.

♦ ♦ ♦

Gul Bano loved Alamgir, from a distance, in awe of his reality. When she watched him eat the breakfast of naan and chai that she prepared for him their first morning together, she thought, *Here before me is my god-after-God.* Her entrance to paradise depended on his pleasure, his displeasure, therefore, damning. In return for her unwavering respect and her diligent servitude, Alamgir joked with her, brought her goodies from time to time, and talked to her about things women weren’t supposed to be interested in, like politics and sports.

Three months after they’d married, Gul Bano was expecting. The colonel died near the end of her term, blasted to pieces by an IED. In the days nearing his death, he would point to his daughter’s womb and say, “The child you’re carrying will be a great man.”

Gul Bano would giggle and say, “And if it’s a girl?”

The colonel would respond, “A girl it is not. I’m sure. But even so, a lioness can only beget a lion or a lioness. Your children will be lions, all of them. The world will know your name. That’s how great they will be.”

Gul Bano took her father’s words as something that any grandfather would say about his future grandchildren. Alamgir took his words as prophecy.

“When he is born, name him Jahangir.” This was the colonel’s final instruction. The name meant conqueror of the cosmos.
A few weeks after her father’s death, Gul Bano gave birth to a son and named him Jahangir. Alamgir inquired as to where the colonel was so that he could personally deliver the glad tidings. No one had told the couple that the colonel had died out of fear that the news would cause Gul Bano to miscarry. Now that the child had been born, they were told.

Gul Bano wasn’t allowed to cradle the baby because of her incessant tears. Her breasts wouldn’t produce milk because of her grief. Alamgir spent most of his day and night at the colonel’s grave. He would bathe the headstone with rosewater at dawn and at dusk, and when he could, he’d spend hours reciting prayers and reading scripture for his father-in-law’s soul. His own father had died years before, and he’d never done anything of the sort for him.

Time passed, and all that it brought was more war and more deaths. Hundreds of thousands fled the country, even more were displaced. To Alamgir and Gul Bano, it seemed as if the death of the colonel triggered a period of severe unrest for the Afghan people, as if God was unhappy with how the colonel had died. Day by day, there was less to look forward to, less to talk about, less that could be done: simple pleasures, like shopping and stargazing, extinct. This was the time period in which Jahangir was brought up. Few were the moments he saw his mother and father, or anyone, smile.

After the colonel’s death, Alamgir continued running the colonel’s *bacha bazi* schools. He even had his own favorite boy, his personal pet, named Farzaad. When Jahangir turned nine, the Taliban regime came into power and instituted strict Sharia law.
The schools were soon shutdown and repurposed as madrasas. The same boys that were learning to sing and dance learned to recite the Qur’an instead.

Financially, this did not affect Alamgir too badly, as he was still the owner of much of the colonel’s properties, and he found ways to make money. The problem was that he no longer had access to the same sexual outlets as before. For a while, he resigned himself to intercourse solely with Gul Bano, which pleased her, since the result was a long awaited pregnancy. Still, at times, he sensed something nipping at his insides.

Early in the pregnancy, Gul Bano spent a week in bed, vomiting everything she tried to eat. As much as she wanted to, she could not be of service to her husband. Another week went by the same way, and Alamgir tried to relieve himself on his own. Then another few weeks went by, and the desire for a boy gnawed at him on every level of his existence.

Before he was put to sleep at dusk, Jahangir was normally given a bath by the housemaid. Alamgir informed the house maid on this particular day that Gul Bano was especially sick, and that it would be better for her to be tended to, and that he would bathe Jahangir. It didn’t matter that what he had said didn’t make sense to her. She was a house maid who did as she was told. Besides, now that Jahangir was nearly eleven, she felt shy when his penis would swell spontaneously in front of her.

The housemaid prepared the bathtub and warmed the water, then left father and son alone.
“Take off your clothes and get in the tub.” Alamgir tried to sound relaxed. He wasn’t exactly sure what his intentions were.

The boy had never been completely naked in front of his father before, and something inside him prevented him from undressing.

“What? You’re shy?” Alamgir asked. Jahangir nodded. “Don’t be shy. I saw you naked when you were a baby. Come on, I’ll take my clothes off too. It’ll be like we’re swimming.”

The boy had one memory of swimming with his father in a river where women laundered their clothes. They hadn’t been naked then, but he remembered that they’d been happy, swimming, just the two of them.

Alamgir removed his clothes and Jahangir followed. The metal bathtub felt cold under Jahangir’s feet when he climbed in.

“How do you normally do this?” Alamgir transferred warm water from a large pot into a brass vessel for pouring.

“Uh, she normally pours the water, and then I scrub myself.” Jahangir made a scrubbing motion with the bar of soap in his hand.

Alamgir slowly poured the warm water over his son’s head and watched the water cascade down his body in splintering rivulets. He poured over his chest, his back, his arms, and then the vessel ran out of water. He watched Jahangir’s skin turn to gooseflesh.

“Uhm, more please.” Jahangir said.

“Sure.”
After a few more pours, Jahangir had completed his shower, but the pot still had plenty of water remaining.

“What do we do with this?” Alamgir asked.

“Normally she dumps whatever water is left on me at the end. It feels nice. She calls it a homemade waterfall.” Jahangir smiled shyly, embarrassed to be talking to his father about such things.

“Oh, homemade waterfall? That sounds fun.” Alamgir laughed. He looked at the pot, and then at the inside of the bathtub. “Do you think I could join you for this waterfall?”

Jahangir measured the area inside the bathtub with his mind, and shrugged his shoulders. “Why not? I think we fit.”

Alamgir climbed into the bathtub and bent at the waist to pick up the pot of water. He positioned himself so that Jahangir’s back was to him. Then he lifted the pot of water above their heads and tilted the lip towards his face.

“Count to three.” Alamgir said.

“Okay.” Jahangir smiled with excitement. “One… two… three!”

Alamgir and Jahangir both entered an orbital of peace and quiet happiness when the water fell over them. It was as if they had unknowingly tripped a wire, as if they had accidentally performed some form of subtle witchcraft. Black magic for the uninitiated.

The pot was emptied completely. Both Alamgir and Jahangir looked upwards towards the inside of the pot to see where the joy had come from. Then Alamgir looked down at his son, and then at his own nakedness.
“That was fun Baba Jaan.” Jahangir looked up at his father and chuckled with glee.

“Yeah, it was.” Alamgir smiled. “Let’s get you dressed.”

Gul Bano recovered shortly after father and son had showered together. Alamgir never fully understood what he had planned to do with Jahangir that day. That was the last time he did anything like that with the boy.

A second son was born to Gul Bano and she named him Sikandar, after Sikandar-e-Azam: Alexander the Great. Jahangir was an attentive older brother, and practically became a second father to the boy as Alamgir became less available. The Taliban had seized most of Alamgir’s assets leading up to Sikandar’s birth, claiming that they needed the land for training purposes.

“What sort of training could take place on a vineyard?” Alamgir had asked.

The answer had been, “Don’t ask too many questions if you value your life.”

After Sikandar was born, Alamgir spent most of his time at coffee shops or food stalls. The more he was surrounded by people, the less insane he felt. At home, he worried about poverty, about his family’s future, about the constant desire he had to have sex with a child.

Slowly, Alamgir sank into debt. Then came a time when it was no longer safe to be outside, and he was forced to stay at home with his family and his fears. When Jahangir turned thirteen, and Sikandar was four, a conflict between the Taliban and U.S.
forces left their city destroyed. The family was lucky enough to leave the city before it was bombed, but their luck ended after that.

Pakistan’s northern frontier became a target destination for millions of Afghans. That was where Alamgir intended to take his family.

Gul Bano was the first to be taken. The truck they were traveling in was pulled over by a Taliban troop, and all of the women were taken away, to be married to members of the Taliban. Those who were already married were forced to divorce their husbands. Then Jahangir was taken, at the border; he was the perfect age: young enough to be manipulated, and old enough to be useful.

After crossing the border, Alamgir and Sikandar made their way to Peshawar, the “City of Men,” so called because the city had, at one time or another, been inhabited by Alexander, Shapur, and Akbar the Great, Genghis Khan, Mahmud Ghaznavi, Pir Roshan, Nader Shah, and Ranjit Singh. Afraid and unsure of how to carry on, Alamgir turned to substance abuse. When Sikandar was seven years old, he ran away from home, reasoning that anywhere was better than the home of a heroin addict. Alamgir died of an overdose a week after Sikandar left.

♦ ♦ ♦

There were many reasons for a boy to run away, either temporarily or for good. Not enough food. Abusive parents. A broken home, literally and figuratively. Boys ran away simply because their fathers and older brothers had run away. Somehow, the boys who ran away always ended up hanging around truck stops. Truck stop owners rented the
runaway boys to truckers, along with hookahs and beds, since prostitution was illegal and women were less inconspicuous.

The boy Sikandar was brought was small. Even in the darkness, sitting on his cot, Sikandar could see that the boy was lighter in weight than a sack of rice.

“Hello. How are you?” Sikandar asked the boy.

“Fine,” he said.

Sikandar patted the spot next to him on the cot. “Have a seat.”

The boy sat. His expression was stoic.

Sikandar pulled a brown bag out of his pocket and opened it. He placed the bag on the boy’s lap. “Samosa. You can have them all if you like.”

The boy ate two, then paused. “I’m full. Can I save the rest?”

“They’re yours.” Sikandar replied.

The boy crumpled the bag shut and tucked it underneath the cot. Then he looked away, gripping the cot nervously.

Sikandar patted the boy’s back and sighed. “Sleepy?”

The boy shook his head and bit his nails.

Sikandar lied down, propping himself up with an elbow. “Well, I’m tired. I’ve got to drive tomorrow, so I’m going to rest. You’re free to join me if you like. The rest of the bed is yours.”

Sikandar used his arm as a pillow and shut his eyes. The boy sat upright at the foot of the bed. Sikandar hoped that the boy would join him and sleep comfortably for the
night. He wondered what the boy’s name was, but decided not to ask. It was probably something along the lines of “warrior” or “king.” Half asleep, Sikandar sensed the boy get up and take the bag of samosas with him. Sikandar opened his eyes to watch the boy scamper away. Safely across the street, the boy turned back once, but only to see if he was being followed.

Majnun and the Imam of the Grand Mosque

One day, Majnun is looking for Layla. She, hopelessly far away, and he, frantic, like a mother who’s lost her child in a throng. His heart is out there somewhere, beating without any blood, and somehow he is running. He looks everywhere: under tables, inside closets, drawers, and cupboards, behind trees, in between flower petals. It doesn’t matter that he checks the same corner twice — she could be there now, even if she wasn’t a minute ago, because isn’t she also looking for him, her heart also beating outside of her body somewhere, bloodless?

In his frenzy, he disregards passersby: women, children, anyone and anything besides Layla. Most don’t mind. His name is Qays, but they know him as Majnun, the possessed, the insane, one. Some laugh, some curse, and others pity him. Some ask, “Can we help? What is it?” but he doesn’t hear them.

Majnun runs towards the grand mosque. It is not quite time for the afternoon prayers, but the doors are open. He climbs up the stairs, looking over his shoulder when he reaches the golden gates (incase Layla is behind him), and then sprints into the mosque, muddying the thick carpets with his sandals. Inside, an elderly man, the imam of
the mosque, is praying. The imam’s beard, dyed a reddish-brown, reaches down to his navel. He mumbles his prayers with such vigor that the cotton cap on his bald head twitches with every word, his eyebrows wiggle with powerful focus. Furious, the imam tries to ignore the lunatic dirtying his mosque. Majnun yanks copies of the Quran off shelves, flips through them, and places them on the floor, opened to random chapters: the chapter of “The Night,” the chapter of “Yusuf,” the chapter of “The Star.” Majnun draws the curtain that veils the women’s section and checks for Layla there. He orbits around each pillar of the mosque an odd number of times, then pauses in the center of the mosque and cranes his neck backwards. He scans the inside of the dome, the grooves between the marble blocks, the curvature of the gilded calligraphy embossed along the walls. Then, as if someone has whispered a brilliant suggestion into his ear, Majnun claps his hands together and hums with approval.

The seemingly unending spiral staircase that leads to the top of the minaret proves to be a challenging ascent for Majnun. At first, he skips the stairs by threes, then twos, then, one by one. Then he palms the walls for support, and eventually, he climbs up the stairs on all fours, pawing and kicking his way to the top the way an infant would. At the top, his hands are chalked with dust, his shirt drenched with sweat. Breathless, intoxicated with distress and some form of runner’s high, he calls.

“Layla!” He scans the city for any sign of her. Miniature versions of people look up at him, their hands, raised to their foreheads, visors against the sun. They look like they are saluting him. Majnun cups his mouth with his dusty hands and holds the vowels, some of his breath regained. “Layla! Layla!” The people end their collective salute and
resume walking, shopping, or working. “Layla!” A few wicked boys respond in high pitched voices, feigning sensuality, “Majnun! Oh, Majnun!”

Majnun calls a few more times, then stops when the lump in his throat feels like it might launch out of his mouth. His lips begin to quiver and finally, he sinks to the floor. He opens his mouth to say her name once more and then he begins to sob in earnest.

A faint clacking of sandals grows louder as the imam of the mosque makes his way to the top of the minaret. Absolutely winded, the old man watches Majnun sob while he waits for his lungs to catch up with him. He notes the youth’s disheveled appearance, his unbecoming tears. Finally able to breathe, the imam remembers his indignation.

“You crazy or something? I mean, they say you’re crazy...but this is outrageous!” Majnun does not hear him. He gasps and wails louder. “Hey!” The imam grabs Majnun by his shirt. “Hey! You should be ashamed of yourself, crying like this, dirtying God’s house. Shameless! You know, you completely ruined my prayer! You ran right in front of me more than once and distracted me with your obscenities. What do you have to say for yourself!”

The imam’s proximity to Majnun’s face causes his sobs subside. He’s quiet for a moment, and then, Majnun begins to laugh hysterically, tears of sorrow mixing with tears of amusement.

“Praise God, the man really is insane.” The imam steps back from Majnun and slowly straightens himself upright. Majnun’s laughter coats the imam with another layer of anger. He wonders if he should call the police. “What’s so funny? You think I came up here to tell jokes?”
Majnun giggles and wipes his face with the tattered scarf wrapped around his neck. “First, I’m sorry I ruined your prayer. Second, I’m laughing because you say I’m shameless. But look at you.” Majnun points an open hand at the imam’s face. “Your imam of the grand mosque; you’ve got a beard that almost reaches your crotch and you’ve spent your whole life praying. Yet, you don’t know the first thing about love, or God, or life. You’re the one who’s shameless.” Majnun keels over with laughter.

The imam’s pride fans his fiery anger. “And how would you know that, you good-for-nothing know-nothing? I do know all of those things. I’m probably four times as old as you are, so I’ve done a lot more living than you. And maybe I’m not a lustful nut, such as yourself, but I certainly love God! I love Him more than you do, given all the respect you’ve shown to His house!”

Majnun sits up and wipes his forehead. With water in his eyes, he looks up at the imam and says, “You’re probably right. But know this. I never noticed you praying. I never noticed that I had entered God’s house with my shoes on. And if you loved God as much as I love Layla, you never would have noticed me running past you. You would have been blind to everything besides His face.”

The imam suddenly feels weak and registers only half of Majnun’s words, his old body no longer able to sustain such intense anger. “God forgive me.” He remembers his role in the community, how he must be a father to all. “My apologies for showing you my anger.” The imam sits down beside Majnun and places his hand on the young man’s matted hair. “Tell me one thing. Who is this Layla you were calling for?”
Majnun smiles at the imam, then looks at the wall in front of them, as if a painting of Layla hangs there. “I wish I could tell you. But I can’t.”

The imam says, “What do you mean? You can scream her name but you can’t tell me who she is?”

Majnun shakes his head. “I really can’t.” By way of making the imam understand, he asks him a question. “What is God’s name?”

“What?” The question confuses the imam.

“What is God’s name?” Majnun asks again.

“Allah.”

“What is it?”

The imam raises his voice a little. “Allah.”

“What?”

“Allah!”

“Come again?”

“Allah!”

Majnun slaps the imam’s thigh and yells into his face. “Louder!”

The imam’s body shudders with effort. “Allah! Allah! Allah! All—” He lets out a string of coughs, his throat hoarse.

Majnun pats the imam’s back. “Easy, easy. Okay, now, Imam: who is Allah?”

The imam shakes his head and clears his throat. “Allah is God.”

“Ah, but who’s God?”
“God is God!” The imam slaps the back of Majnun’s head, in return for the slap on his thigh. “Allah is God: the Creator, the Sustainer, the Merciful, the Generous, the Omnipotent, Alpha, Omega...” If Majnun does not interject, the imam will recite all 99 of God’s names and descriptors.

Majnun waves his hands. “You’re not answering my question. You want to know who Layla is, right? Well, I can tell you that Layla is a woman: beautiful, fair, and charming. I can tell you that her hair is black, her hands soft, her smile bright, her voice a mystery. But you still wouldn’t know anything about Layla.” Majnun starts laughing again. “The same way you still don’t know anything about God.”

Fatigued in every way possible, the imam stands up and looks down at the haggard, hysterical youth by his feet. Unsure of what to make of him — saint, lunatic, or apparition — he begins the descent down the minaret. Majnun’s laughs eventually cease. Alone, he stands and dusts himself off. He scans the city once more from the top of the minaret, the breeze, the hills, the maze of avenues below him, every fold of the universe, laced with traces of her essence.

*Wa li kulli Majnunin, Layla.*
Allah Yaar Chaudhry

He drank, which was forbidden, but so was backbiting and stirring up gossip, and everyone did those things. Besides, who’s to say which forbidden is better or worse than another? He was an important man, a respected sir, and because everyone is allowed at least one forbidden, one thing, drinking was his and that was that. In the heart of Punjab, amidst farm folk who ate a few ounces of meat twice a year and flatbread and lentils twice a day, Allah Yaar’s drinking said more about his financial means than it did about his moral uprightness. Some thought that he had servants brew the liquor for him, banana brandy or rice wine, in a shed behind his immense villa. Others reported to have seen wooden crates etched with English or American markings entering his home, and that
perhaps he had the spirits imported from abroad. Then there were those who believed that he never drank at all and that he had created the myth in order to add to his mystique.

Like this, the people spoke ill of him without really doing so, venting their frustrations over poverty, the can-not’s and have-not’s of their existence, by speaking semi-poorly about a can-do, have-all man. Blatantly opposing him, verbally or physically, was an impossibility; he owned most of the land they farmed, the expanse of which spanned almost until the foot of the mountain range that skirted their horizon. Much of the land came from generations of compounded inheritance, his small empire the result of wealth that took lifetimes to accrue: thousands of acres of fertile fields laden with orchards (mango, guava, citrus) and groves (pine nuts, almonds, cashews); miles of sparkling fresh water streams teeming with carp and trout; a family of devoted servants; four cars; two camels; a stable of horses; and half a dozen chests brimming with gold. He entrusted the work of overseeing his assets to himself, which meant that despite the supposed effect that names were supposed to have on people, Allah Yaar, the “Friend of God,” spent most of his days preoccupied with worldly matters.

Clad in a pair of freshly polished leather sandals, Allah Yaar started his morning with a steaming cup of kashmiri chai and a cigarette. Today was his driver’s last day of service. About a month ago, Khan Sahib had asked to be relieved of his duties. They’d been driving back to the Chaudhry’s residence from a town hall meeting.

“Chaudhry Sahib, you’re one of a kind. May God preserve you and give you a long life in happiness and health.” Khan Sahib had a habit of taking a quick snuffle before he lied or asked for a favor. “You know sir, as you can see, the hairs on my beard
have grayed, and my sons and daughters have all been wedded. I have fifteen grandchildren now, and seven great-grandchildren, praise God.” Allah Yaar remained silent. “I’ve lived a full life. When I was a boy, my father once told me: ‘This life is like an hour, the majority of which is spent at work or asleep. Spend the little time you have in service to God and His servants.’ At my age, looking back, I think I’ve done my best to serve. In recent days, I’ve come to feel the weighty truth behind my father’s words. I mean, wouldn’t you say it’s really like that Chaudhry Sahib?”

Allah Yaar gave it some thought, looking out the window at the vast fields of wheat. It was the first time his driver had spoken so many words at once. Then, he replied, “Fair enough. I understand if you wish to devote the rest of your time and health to your family. You’re free once you find your replacement.”

Khan Sahib had served him well for close to two decades, had been his right hand man in a way, seeing him through many trying times. About three years ago the politics of the region had pivoted, favoring the Malik’s, Bajwa’s, Bhatti’s, Abbasi’s — clans who had no qualms with greasing the palms of two-faced politicians and clergyman, (turbaned thugs, really), who walked around like ambassadors of the kingdom of Satan. Wholesalers, delivery men, truck drivers, every bazaar — vertically and horizontally, the entire market was under their control. They mixed milk with water, honey with syrup, rice with plastic, flour with sawdust, sold meat pre-packaged and pre-cut into morsels so that the donkey or dog that it had come from was unrecognizable. Powerful as he was, Allah Yaar understood the necessity of occasional compromise, but this was not that. He’d been threatened many times to “tread carefully,” to fall into step with the rest of
Punjab’s aristocracy or suffer the consequences, and in these adverse times, a trustworthy driver like Khan Sahib was essential.

Allah Yaar finished his cigarette and left a few sips of chai in his cup for his wife to finish off. It was a practice they’d kept since their honeymoon, a silent display of affection they shared. On days when she was upset with him, she’d have the housemaid dump the remaining chai outside where he could see. Today, she accepted the cup and added the remaining chai to her own fresh cup.

Allah Yaar stepped out into the sunlight and greeted Khan Sahib.

“I need you to take me somewhere before we meet that new driver.”

There was a tenant farmer who had not paid the season’s rent despite his having had a successful sugarcane harvest. Allah Yaar needed to speak with him.

“Your wish is my command, sir,” Khan Sahib said as he held the door open for him.

Allah Yaar’s work car, a black 2018 Toyota Camry with tinted windows and a “Masha’Allah” sticker stuck onto the back, pulled up beside a mud hut where children were at play outside while their mother tended to a fire and boiling kettle. Allah Yaar considered each child as part of his flock and made a point of asking their names and distributing candy. Somewhere, some time long ago, perhaps during a Friday sermon he’d attended as a youth, his heart could remember hearing about a door in paradise that could only be opened by those who were kind to children. And, since giving candy to a baby was even easier than taking it away from one, (let alone praying and fasting), it was
his habit to carry toffees and lollipops in a pant or breast pocket for precisely this sort of occasion.

The farmer he was there to see had just finished taking a shower. His hair flopped to the side unevenly as he buttoned his kameez and walked out into the sunlight to meet Allah Yaar. The young farmer, Zishaan, was in his early twenties. He was the only son of Sayfullah Shakir, a loyal tenant farmer that had spent all 62 years of his life on Chaudhry land. Sayfullah had died over the winter, a heart attack, which had been surprising considering he’d been physically sound for his age. The death had upset Allah Yaar, not only because it meant that he had lost a reliable asset, but because Allah Yaar was only two years Sayfullah’s junior. If death could come for the “Sword of God,” what would stop it from coming for His friend?

After greeting each other and having one insist on, and the other refuse to, tea, Allah Yaar began.

“You have handsome children. All of them: from the oldest to the youngest. God bless.” Allah Yaar stood with his hands clutched together behind his back.

“Thank you. They’re God’s gift.” Zishaan looked over his shoulder at his children. They had stopped playing, and instead, were now huddled together around their mother.

“How old is the youngest?”

“Going to be a year soon.”

“Masha’Allah. Time flies.” Allah Yaar shook his head. “Time flies. Feels like only yesterday your father was presenting you to me. You don’t remember that. You
can’t. You were just a baby in your mother’s lap. And now look at you.” Allah Yaar gestured to Zishaan with both of his hands and looked over at Khan Sahib who was smoking a cigarette, as if to have him share in the amazement of this spectacle of time. “Astounding, isn’t it?” Khan Sahib took a drag and nodded.

“Allah Yaar” Zishaan flipped his hair to the side with a flick of his neck. He had his hands on side and was a bit hunched over.

Allah Yaar continued. “How is your mother doing?”

“She’s all right, she’s inside. About a week ago she had a stomach ache that lasted a few days, so we called Dr. Sohail. He injected her with something and said it would pass. With God’s grace it did.”

“Good, good. That’s good.” Allah Yaar temporarily ignored Zishaan’s unwillingness to make eye contact. “What else is new?”

“That’s all.” A light breeze rustled the trees that surrounded the hut. “The same as always.”

Allah Yaar looked off to the side where a few goats were grazing. The outline of their ribs were clearly visible and their stomachs sank inward, then out, as though bloated. One of them, a brown one speckled with white splotches, brayed and hoofed the earth. Another one took shelter beneath the shade of a broad guava tree.

Allah Yaar walked over to the goats and stood among them, observing how they grazed and snorted.

“They like to eat tree leaves, if you let them.” He told Zishaan. “The higher the branch, the juicier the leaf. If you build steps or a scaffold for them to climb on you’ll
see. They’ll go right up.” He motioned upwards with his hand. “And you don’t have to worry about them hurting themselves because they’re smart enough not to jump down. They’ll only go as high as you let them.” Allah Yaar squinted through the sunlight at the tree top. “And then, when you want them to, they’ll come right back down the same way they went up.”

Allah Yaar paused for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to the shade, and then walked back to where Zishaan stood. He glanced over at the children and noticed that the tallest girl, the eldest, looked just like her mother: the eyes, the same rich shade of cocoa, the nose high and thin.

“Sweetheart? You said your name was Khushi, right?”

The girl nodded.

“Come here, Khushi.”

The girl’s father told her it was okay and her mother nudged her on.

“Khushi,” Allah Yaar kneeled down to her height. “I’m going to give you something. It’s for you and your brothers and sisters.” Allah Yaar reached into his pocket where he kept a stack of neatly folded hundred-rupee notes. “Keep it safe and spend it wisely.”

Zishaan snatched his daughter away. “Please, no, Chaudhry Sahib.”

“What’s wrong with you? Let me give her something.”

“No, please. Don’t do this.”

“Oh, come on.” Allah Yaar reached for Khushi’s hand in an attempt to place the cash in her palm. “It’s nothing.”
Zishaan yanked Khushi’s arm and stepped out in front of her so that she was behind him.

“Zishaan.” Allah Yaar paused. “Don’t be like this.”

Zishaan stood still.

“Come.” Allah Yaar beckoned.

Without looking him in the eye, Zishaan moved to the side and ushered Khushi forward. Allah Yaar kneeled down to her height once again and gently placed the money in her hand.

“What do you say?” Zishaan asked.

“Thank you, Uncle.” Khushi replied.

“You’re very welcome, dear.” Allah Yaar kissed her on the forehead, and then stood.

Khushi made a move to turn away, then hesitated. “Uncle?”

“Yes?” Allah Yaar replied.

“Is it true that you always carry a gun on you?”

“Khushi!” Zishaan scolded.

Allah Yaar laughed and waved at Zishaan to relax. He kneeled back down to Khushi’s height. “Is that what people say about me? They say Allah Yaar Chaudhry always carries a gun on him?”

She nodded. “That’s what they say. Either a Kalashnikov or a pistol. Always.”

Allah Yaar chuckled. “And who would say such a thing?”

Khushi shrugged.
“Hmm. And do you believe them?” Allah Yaar lowered his voice. “Do you think I have a gun on me right now?”

She neither shook nor nodded her head.

Allah Yaar rose and patted her on the head, dismissing her with a chuckle. He met the gaze of Zishaan’s wife, whose kohled eyes made her look older and prettier than she was. She carried the youngest in her arms, her waist acting as a buttress, supporting the weight of the child. Allah Yaar gave her a polite nod. He addressed her husband without removing his eyes off of her.

“You have a whole life to live, Zishaan.” Allah Yaar spoke evenly, almost as if to himself. “God has given you a wife and small children to tend to.” He turned to Zishaan who was now looking at the ground. Despite his age, the young man was balding towards the center of his head. Allah Yaar waited for Zishaan to look up. “Take good care of them.”

Inside the car, Allah Yaar decided that he’d give them a year if they weren’t already gone by then. Khan Sahib drove off without commenting on what he’d seen.

“Where to next, Chaudhry Sahib?”

Allah Yaar lit a cigarette and took a long puff before answering. “Let’s meet that new driver of yours.”

At times, Allah Yaar liked to think of himself as an executioner. There he’d stood, wielding a metaphorical axe that he could’ve brought down on Zishaan’s neck as he willed. No one could’ve stopped him, even if the axe was real. But that would only have
demonstrated a lack of finesse. His father had taught him that real power was in being able to subdue without force. An implied threat of force was normally enough, as a person’s inborn fear of pain, or in this case, destitution, would usually take care of the rest.

But therein was the problem. Zishaan had not been afraid. He’d withheld payment as a passive form of protest, unhappy with the steadily increasing cut that Allah Yaar took every year. He’d stood there, expressionless, his tone nonchalant, as though he were talking to an annoying neighbor who bored him. He’d made Allah Yaar feel like a graying lion with no teeth and dull claws: a worn out lion whose roar had lost its terrifying timbre.

…

From an early age, Allah Yaar’s father, Allah Bakhsh Chaudhry, favored him over the rest of his children. This, partly because Allah Yaar was the youngest, but mostly because he showed the most promise. When important guests would come over, Allah Yaar would be summoned into the drawing room where Allah Bakhsh would say of him, “I am ‘God’s gift,’ and Allah Yaar is His gift to me. He is to me as Solomon was to David.”

Allah Yaar’s training began when he was not much older than 12, around the time the hairs on his upper lip began to germinate into the thick handlebar mustache he donned at present. He became his father’s shadow, an expected and accepted presence in the daily dealings of Allah Bakhsh Chaudhry, learning how to maintain alliances and annihilate competitors. Content with where he stood with his father and intent on
becoming a deserving heir, Allah Yaar asked his father to free him from formal schooling.

“They don’t teach me anything worthwhile at school. And whatever is worth learning I can learn on my own: through you, through Ammi, through books of poetry and philosophy.”

Allah Bakhsh sighed. “Unfortunately, you have a point, son. But just know that this means you are resigning yourself to life in Pakistan. They won’t want you abroad if you are uneducated.”

“That may be so, but I, unlike my older siblings, am not keen on leaving my ancestral lands. ‘Love for one’s homeland is from faith.’”

To Oslo, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, London, Toronto, and Chicago, his siblings went: his brothers, as doctors, lawyers, and engineers; his sisters, as trophy wives wedded to doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Every few summers or so they’d visit their father and mother who seemed to age exponentially, gritting their teeth and putting up with the heat and dust of rural Pakistan.

“Is this all you do all day? Stay indoors and try to keep cool? I don’t know how you can stand it, brother. When are you going to give us a visit?”

Allah Yaar would smile then, radiating with soulful jubilance at the destiny he had penned for himself. His answer was always the same.

“I’ll visit when the sun rises from the west. Or, when the Pakistani rupee is worth more than the American dollar.”
Allah Yaar’s attachment to his homeland ensured that he was by his father’s side at the time of his death. He died in the spring, just as the peach trees began to bear their fruit. A single cumulus cloud hovered above the funeral procession of Allah Bakhsh Chaudhry. The cloud swole in size as the procession grew, until finally, the sky darkened and erupted with sweet rain water. At the interment sight, scores of men wearing Pashtun style turbans stood chanting prayers as the corpse was handed back to the earth.

Allah Yaar asked one of them where they had come from.

“We are from Swat. Our murshid sent us. Your father is our brother in the Way.”

His father had never been a religious man, nominally Muslim at best. Yet, it had been his lifelong habit to keep the month of Ramadan. For thirty days and thirty nights he’d retire to the local masjid and live as a devout believer.

“Death is the believer’s Eid,” said another of the men. “His death will be as useful to you as his life was.”

Allah Yaar invited the group of dervishes to his home and they replied, “If God wills.” And just as no one knew how they’d arrived, they left.

Life after his father’s death had been a blur. The cycling of night and day, the changing between the dry season and the wet, all of it seemed to compress together into a single moment. His siblings stopped visiting with the same frequency, no longer having the incentive to visit a place that reminded them of how selfish and privileged they were. His wife and children, for the most part, led separate lives from his own, content with minimally interacting with their benefactor. As for friends, he liked to think of everyone in terms of varying degrees of acquaintances. True friendship was too much to ask from
anyone. He reasoned that the level of fidelity and sincerity required for such a thing was beyond human capacity,

All his life, Allah Yaar was God’s friend, and God was his. Outside of this, in the twenty some odd years after his father’s death, Khan Sahib had come closest to being considered a true friend. He seemed to understand and embody the qualities Allah Yaar liked in people: he only spoke when he was spoken to; he never stole a lingering gaze at any woman, stranger or otherwise; he never asked to “borrow” a light when he wanted to smoke, nor did he ever refuse to “lend” a cigarette to someone who wanted one; he smoked cigarettes when he could afford them, and when he couldn’t, he told people he was fasting. Despite being from the mountains, he was refined in his manners and had an unfailing respect for protocol. When Allah Yaar had told him that he’d have to find his replacement, he half-awaited that Khan Sahib wouldn’t have been able to. Anyone could drive, but of course, there was more to it than that.

Khan Sahib parked the car on the outskirts of the main bazaar. It was midday. Most of the shopkeepers were napping under the shade next to their stalls, absentmindedly waving reed fans over their faces.

“Will we go to him, or will he come to us?” Khan Sahib asked.

“We’ll go to him.” Allah Yaar replied.

The pair walked past pyramids of nectarines and melons, fortresses of fabric rolls and shoeboxes, jewelers and chaiwalas. A world in its own right, the bazaar housed every
disease and its accompanying remedy. The bazaar both triggered, and satiated, the desires that materialized in the hearts of men.

Khan Sahib stood at the threshold of a video store called “MADINA VIDEO AND PHOTO.” The storefront windows featured posters of Bollywood blockbusters and World Wrestling Entertainment pay-per-view events, as well as samples of stock wedding photography.

“After you, sir.” Khan Sahib said.

Behind the counter, a man who looked to be in his early thirties rose from the small stool he was previously sitting on. The hook in his nose and the widows peak on his forehead told Allah Yaar that he was probably one of Khan Sahib’s relatives.

“Chaudhry Sahib, this is Ghulam Murtaza, the oldest of my grandchildren.” Khan Sahib introduced his grandson. “He is the strongest, wisest, most talented, most responsible boy in our family. I think you’ll find him to be a most suitable, most capable driver.”

Allah Yaar shook hands with Ghulam Murtaza.

“You keep a clean shop. Who will run it after you?” Allah Yaar asked.

“My brother. He’s my partner. He does the shooting and editing, and I take care of the business side of things.”

“I see.” Allah Yaar smiled. “Do you like driving?”

Ghulam Murtaza shot a glance towards his grandfather, looking for a hint. Khan Sahib’s face, riddled with fault lines and age spots, proved difficult to read.

“Haven’t done it often enough to give you an honest answer, sir.” He replied.
“Sure, sure.” Allah Yaar’s gaze drifted upwards to a TV monitor that hung from the wall behind Ghulam Murtaza. A wrestling clip from the 90’s was playing. One of the wrestlers lied unconscious in the center of the ring while the other climbed atop one of the ring posts. The wrestler pumped the crowd up before taking flight, then jumped off the post, elbow first.

“Who’s your favorite?” Allah Yaar motioned with his eyebrows at the TV screen.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Ghulam Murtaza replied, “Goldberg.”

Allah Yaar laughed. He recognized the name and approved. Although he’d already made his mind, he said, “Tomorrow we’ll test you out. You’ll take me on my rounds, and we’ll go from there.”

Outside the video store, Allah Yaar patted Khan Sahib on the shoulder. They stopped at a smoke shop on their way back to the car, where Allah Yaar bought five cartons of cigarettes for Khan Sahib as part of his retirement package, and as a thank you. Though it wasn’t Khan Sahib’s habit to do so, Allah Yaar decided he never wanted his long time driver, and closest-thing-to-a-friend, to have to ask to borrow a cigarette from anyone, ever, so long as he lived.
Dear Roof Atop Dada Abu’s House in the Village Whose Name I Don’t Know How To Spell,

There are no roofs in Lyndhurst. Or at least, not like there are in the village. Houses here have tops, or lids, that are shaped in various triangular prisms. The roofs in Lyndhurst remind me of you in how unlike you they are. Unlike them, you are forgiving, much more flat. Unlike them, you are open, welcoming of the elements. Roofs in Lyndhurst redirect rain into artificial streams that shoot off the sides of houses; the rain in the village pools into little lakes on the sunken parts of your face. During the late
monsoon, sparrows will fly in from the outskirts of town to ruffle and groom their feathers in your organic bird baths. One time, I remember thinking that the birds were tickling you and I laughed out loud as if they were tickling me.

Our house in America is fine, but it lacks a roof I can sit or stand on, so really it lacks a roof. I know, it’s a terrible flaw for a house to have: something you wouldn’t expect of a house in America, to have flaws, to lack a roof. I’m not sure what they call houses without roofs, but I don’t think they call them homes. Sometimes, I bother Ma and say “HWAR sweet HWAR,” after a long day far from home. The first time I said it was when we came back from our vacation in Pakistan three summers ago. We landed in JFK the night before I was supposed to start the third grade. Ma didn’t get what “HWAR sweet HWAR” meant and thought I yawned while trying to say “Home sweet home.” But then I explained that H.W.A.R. stands for “House Without A Roof” and she still didn’t get it because she thinks our house has a roof.

Ma says I’m “peculiar” as far as eleven year old girls go. She made me look up the word “peculiar” when I asked her for the definition. It means something between weird and odd, incase you didn’t know. She’s stopped calling me peculiar ever since Baba’s passed away. Maybe because she doesn’t want to hurt my feelings by teasing me too much.

I miss you, Roof. I think you know that already. But incase you don’t, there it is in writing: Aminah Masood misses Roof.
I hope you don’t ignore me now, now that you know I miss you. Like Ajay, this Indian kid in my language arts class. He’s ignored me ever since I told him I missed him that week he was absent for five days of school in a row. The day Ajay came back was the day our school was celebrating Multicultural Day. I was dressed in a scarlet colored sari studded with plastic diamonds. I had bangles on, too, that jangled when I walked. Baba had got them for me the last time we were in Pakistan.

I wrote, “Missed you while you were away,” on a yellow sticky note with a smiley face next to it in blue ink and passed it to Ajay. He read it, crumpled the note into a ball, and promptly asked the teacher to go to the bathroom. I didn’t know how to feel then, but I pictured Ma saying, “Boys are peculiar, sweetie,” and I felt better.

My best friend, Lisa Mary de Los Santos, says Ajay probably wanted to be excused because he was stiff in the crotch. When I asked her how she knew and what that meant, Lisa Mary told me that her older cousin, Linda Mary de Los Santos (an eighth grader), told her that boys get stiff in the crotch when they’re excited. I thought that was weird and asked Lisa Mary how she knew Linda Mary wasn’t lying. She told me that Linda Mary knows more about men than both of our moms combined and that she could never lie about stuff like that because she’d seen too much.

“It’s like, she already knows so much, she couldn’t even lie about it even she wanted to. You can’t just make stuff like that up, Aminah. Like, one time, Linda Mary got fingered so hard by a boy in the girls bathroom -- she started bleeding!”

I was, and still am, too afraid to ask Lisa Mary why Linda Mary allowed a boy to poke her so hard she started bleeding. I wish she hadn’t chosen to do it in the girls
bathroom because I haven’t used the bathroom in school ever since Lisa Mary told me about what happened to Linda Mary.

It’s hard for me to believe that any boy would do that to a girl because I doubt Baba ever did something like that to Ma. It’s hard for me to imagine Ma and Baba as ever having gone to school, as ever having been my age. Especially Baba because I never saw him without his beard, or with hair on his head. Only later did his beard thin, and even then, when I see old photos of him from his days in the air force, I always assume I’m looking at a younger brother of Baba’s and not him as a young man. It never really hit me that Baba could have ever been a kid until the first time we went to Pakistan.

I remember the heat, the muggy atmosphere, and the smell of sweat that welcomed me once we stepped out of the airport. I remember Ma telling me we still had to endure a three hour car ride from the capital to Baba’s village. Baba told jokes the whole way there, even though we’d all heard all of them before. We let him tell his favorite one twice:

So there’s this carney, his wife, and their son...The carney wants his son to study, so he puts him in school. The son does fine the first few years, but when he gets to the second grade, he starts to fail. The school’s headmaster regrets to inform the carney that his son will have to return to the first grade due to his flunking out of the second grade. The year after that, the headmaster, with a heavy heart, informs the carney that his son will have to return to kindergarten due to his flunking out of the first grade. The following year, the carney comes rushing into his house after having met with the
school’s headmaster and he says to his wife: ‘Quick! The headmaster just told me our son has failed out of kindergarten, and before he had a chance to say anything else, I ran back here as fast as I could to tell you to tighten the string on your pajamas -- there ain’t no way in hell we’re letting him go back in there again!’

I remember busy roadways for a while, and then open pastures for miles. The roads were so bumpy they made your bones vibrate. The van we were riding in barely fit through some of the narrow streets on the way to Dada Abu’s house, but Baba was smiling the entire time. Baba never once apologized for the boggy streets, the gnats. He was glad to be there, glad to see all was as he remembered it.

Up until that point, Dada Abu was a legend, a mythical figure who only existed in my thoughts and on the phone...

“As-salaamu’alaykum?”

“Wa alaykum salaam, princess! How are you?”

“Good, I’m good. How are you?”

“Good! Actually, I’m great, now that I’ve heard my sweet granddaughter’s voice!”

I’m just now realizing that Baba’s charm probably came from Dada Abu. Maybe even his ability to smile despite circumstances too.

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I remember Baba coming home one day from the hospital after therapy with a smile on his face. Ma looked like really tired and sad, like she’d been in and out of funerals the entire day. Baba had his hands behind his back and had me guessing as to
what he brought for me. I remember leaping in the air, trying to look over his shoulders. But Baba was tall, too tall with his shoes on. He brought me a bag of lollipops, the one’s with chocolate in the center.

When we finally reached Dada Abu’s house, it was almost midnight and the only light was a street lamp three houses away. I didn’t know Dada Abu was Dada Abu until Ma told me that the old man I was staring at was Baba’s baba and that the old lady standing next to him was Baba’s mama. Dada Abu was shorter than Baba and Dadi Ama was shorter than Dada Abu.

“As-salaamu’alaykum.”

“Wa alaykum salaam, princess! How was the trip?”

“Good, it was good. How are you Dada Abu?”

“I’m great! How could I not be, now that my sweet granddaughter is here with me!”

I was kissed at least thirty times on each cheek by both Dada Abu and Dadi Ama, as well as by dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Inside, Ma opened our luggages and distributed gifts from America to everyone, mostly Snickers bars and Ferrero Rocher. Baba named everyone who was there and I managed to remember a few names. He also gave me a tour of the whole house that night. Room by room, I kept thinking it was funny that this was probably the house Baba thought of when he thought of home. That was the night I learned what a drawing room was, and that it was possible to have a living guava tree inside a house. That was also the night I met you.
I still remember how Baba introduced us: “And four flights of stairs up from the drawing room, beyond this metal door with a latch lock without a padlock -- the roof.”

It was like finding Atlantis without having ever known of its existence.

It was past midnight by then, so I couldn’t really see any of the details I’d notice the next day, like the red brick inlays, the white cross-hatched concrete railings. I could see the dark sky, though, and the contrast of Baba’s broad shoulders silhouetted against the landscape behind him. There were mountains way off in the distance. Baba told me he used to sleep on the roof as a kid, along with his seven brothers and sisters. Each of them had their own wooden cot with mattresses fashioned out of interwoven reeds. I immediately asked if we could do the same and Baba looked at me as if I wasn’t serious. I was serious. Then he said, “I don’t see why not. Your mother shouldn’t have a problem with it either. Just be sure to douse yourself in OFF! spray before bed.” Baba and I slept with you every night that summer.

Now that I think about it, it’s funny that I took a liking to you so quickly. I’m actually scared of heights. But when I’m with you, it’s not like being on a roller coaster, or standing atop the Empire State Building -- I feel elevated, but not suspended. Like I’m a really tall tree with roots that run deep. Like I’m riding on Baba’s shoulders and his hands have clamped my legs in place.

*Clop, clop, clop* The princess is on her way to her royal bedchamber! *Clop, clop, clop* Her royal steed is as swift as the wind, as handsome as a horse can be! *Clop, clop, clop* And, there she goes, dismounting from her royal ride into royal sheets for royal rest!
In America, I sometimes lock the door to my bedroom, even when I’m not actually in my room. This bothers Ma. She says I’m hiding things from her. But really it’s because our house has no roof, and I want my own space, where I can be alone. I try to create my own space within Ma’s space. Like the space I used to have when I was little, when Ma, Baba, and me would all sleep together on their queen size bed.

Every night, I’d sleep sandwiched between them, Baba on my left, Ma on my right. I would tell them bedtime stories that always began with “Once upon a time,” and ended with “The End.”

**Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Amy.** She had dark brown eyes, dark brown skin, and really dark hair. She was the bravest adventurer, the smartest scientist. Amy’s parents loved her alot, and would say yes to everything she wanted. ‘I need a monster truck.’ ‘Sure, honey.’ ‘I’m also going to need a machete, cargo shorts, a vest, boots, and a safari hat.’ ‘Anything for you, dearest. But why?’ ‘I’m going into the jungle and I’m not comin’ out until I find the cure for all the diseases in the world.’

So Amy went off into the wilderness, fighting swarms of gnats, poisonous snakes, quicksand, tigers, panthers, and dragons. Finally, she reached a clearing where a single flower was in bloom. Amy carefully walked over to it, holding her breath, and cut one of the petals from the flower. Placing the petal in her bag, she made her way out of the jungle and back to her lab, where she mixed the petal with other herbs and created a paste that could cure all sickness. She distributed the antidote all over the world, and no one was ever sick again. The End.
I remember telling that story a few months after Ma told me Baba was sick, when no one knew for how long he’d be sick.

I get a version of that space, a glimpse of that time, when I’m with you every summer, sandwiched between you and the stars. Instead of stories, I tell you about life in America: about weird boys like Ajay; about my best friend, Lisa Mary de Los Santos; about Baba.

If I mail this out to you, I’m sure you’ll get it, but I’m not sure if I trust anyone to read it out to you. Dada Abu would’ve read it out to you, but he’s here with me and Ma for the winter. Dadi Ama doesn’t know how to read English and I don’t think she could make it up the four flights of stairs anyway. I think I’ll just keep writing and read all my letters to you the next time we meet.

Convey my love to Baba when you see him. Tell him that I love him, that I miss him.

With All the Love in All the World,

Aminah Masood
The Spaniard

Balancing a cauldron of water and the week’s wash on her head, Maria Núñez walked as though on a tightrope and thought of how this was the third time she’d done the wash since her best friend Catalina Diloné had eloped with the handlebar-moustached man they called The Spaniard. They had left in early June and it was now July. Nobody, not even Maria, had any tangible evidence of this elopement in the form of a farewell letter or an emptied wardrobe or an eyewitness. For now, all they had was the fact that the two had simultaneously gone missing. It was unlikely that the pair was playing an elaborate game of hide and seek, though Catalina’s father, Don Diloné, was certain his daughter wanted to be found. And since someone had heard from someone who had heard from someone who had heard from someone…and since it was easier, indeed more titillating, to believe rather than disbelieve neighborhood gossip, everyone knew, (as opposed to suspected), that Mirada Alta’s own Catalina Diloné was somewhere on the island’s coast, shacked up with the man they call The Spaniard in a beach house three times the size of her father’s farm shanty.

Maria Núñez stopped walking and lifted the awkward burden from her head. She nested the load atop the compact stump at the head of the ancient washing stone her family shared with the Tejada’s, Soliman’s, Garcia’s, and Diloné’s. Almost as if by design, the fossil washing stone sat at the center of the tight ring of tiny farm homes that
comprised Maria’s world. Organic monuments, like the communal washing stone, the
subterranean cave they sourced their drinking water from, and the oppressive hills that
gated the valley they inhabited, reminded Maria that the world was older and larger than
her 17-year old, 57-inch frame.

The Spaniard was tall — the tallest man Maria had ever seen — with olive skin
and black eyes. His eyelashes were so long they made you wonder if he used mascara, or
if other portions of his body were possibly inauthentic. The Spaniard often wore the
getup of a vaquero, though he worked for the government as a forest ranger. He looked
more Taino than he did Spanish, but they called him The Spaniard because he spoke with
a lisp. Maria had never been close enough to hear him speak to know this, and Catalina
had never mentioned this detail in her description of him.

“Last night we had dinner with a man Papi invited over from town. He works for
the forestry department and he’s helping Papi settle a land dispute. His name is Juan
Miguel San Sebastian, but everyone calls him The Spaniard.”

“Oh. What did you guys have for dinner?”

“Soup. He’s so handsome, Maria, I had some sort of tunnel vision when I first
saw him. I was all frozen in place and warm at the same time. I swear Maria, it was love.
Papi saw how I looked at him and he didn’t like it. He made me eat in my room, but I left
the door open a crack so I could peek at him. We talked with our eyes.”

Maria thought of how she’d never gotten tunnel vision before, how she’d never
felt frozen and warm at the same time. Except mornings, maybe, when she lit the first fire
of the day. “You’re crazy, Catalina. Besides, you can’t talk with your eyes.” She thought about it. “At least not with a stranger.”

“No, really, we did! Here, I’ll prove it to you: do you want to know what he said?”

“Thank you for dinner?”

“No! Really, Maria! This is serious.” She made an adult face. “Do you know what he said?”

“What?”

“‘I see you, princess.’”

“How do you even —”

“Can you imagine?! Princess!”

Maria and her best friend Catalina Diloné were never called by any nicknames, like “princess,” or “shorty,” but for different reasons. Catalina had a heart shaped face, skin the color of crushed cloves, eyes the color of fresh limes, long, lavish hair as dark as the night of a new moon, and so she could’ve been called Corazon, Clove, Lina, Luna, The Green-Eyed Girl, Bella, Rapunzel — any number of names sourced from the fountain of her physical features. And she undoubtedly was called these names by everyone in the neighborhood, but never to her face, and never in front of anyone who couldn’t keep a secret. Don Diloné simply did not approve.

As for Maria, whose facial features were unremarkable, whose face was a bore to look at — as for Maria, who was always doing the right thing, always working too hard,
always saying “Yes, Mama,” they called her, (again, never to her face or in front of anyone who couldn’t keep a secret, because it was simply too mean) Mama Maria.

For now, the washing stone was solely (Mama) Maria’s stone, as it was midday and no one but Maria Núñez was brazen enough to slap dirty clothes against a stone slab under the white hot gaze of Mirada Alta’s zenith sun. Maria’s three siblings, her mother, and all of her neighbors and the neighborhood animals, were presently enjoying a midday siesta or lying down with their eyes closed in the shade, waiting for the sun to allay its dogged grilling of the earth. Maria’s mother Margot often scolded her, in reprimanding words padded by a maternal lilt, telling her that she should not do the wash unless it was early morning or late afternoon. That way she would not suffer from heat stroke, or heaven forbid, char her skin into a darker shade of the burnt-caramel she already was. This was how her mother, all the women in Maria’s life, spoke: in should-not’s and do-not’s, in negations and omissions, in metaphors and in idioms, in an idiosyncratic XX-chromosomal code Maria only began to decipher after her twelfth birthday.

Notwithstanding her mother’s warnings, Maria liked to do the wash at noon, partly because she liked passively half-disobeying her mother, partly because she liked opening herself up to the sun’s blistering leer, and mostly because this way she could work in peace, avoiding the toxic talk of the neighborhood women: women who were so fake, so cruel at a level that was unreal, that Maria sometimes wanted to poke them to see if they really weren’t made of plastic.
The neighborhood bochincheras all said that Don Diloné could not have expected anything less from his only daughter, his only child, upon whom he had focused the sum of his energies and monies on pleasing and protecting.

Bochinche #1: “No quicker way to have a daughter run away from you than to spend your life kissing the bottoms of her muddy feet.”

Bochincha #2: “Do you know what that is, to spend five-sixths of your wages on pampering a daughter, a girl who isn’t even old enough to know how to wash her ears properly? That’s dangerous, that’s asking for it, that’s what that is.”

This particular point had made all of the neighborhood children (young adults included) grateful for the moderate levels of affection their parents had raised them with. Who knows what would’ve become of them had their parents gifted them those new pair of shoes they’d requested for last year’s Christmas?

Maria began the wash, beginning as she always did, with the menstrual rags. The wash had previously been her mother Margot’s responsibility, but one week, when Maria’s hair was still a blonde-brown and she still used her fingers to add and subtract, her mother took ill with a pulmonary infection and had asked her to do the wash for that week. She told Maria that the menstrual rags were dirty diapers, and this relabeling proved a sufficient explanation for the stiff cotton rags that were stained a dull merlot. Little Maria, seething with delight at the chance to be of assistance to her ailing mother, scrubbed each and every rag, shirt, and pair of pants so vigorously, so thoroughly, that the neighborhood bochincheras congratulated Margot on being able to retire from laundering duties before her mother had had the chance to fully recover. By the time her
hair darkened to a rich cocoa, Maria was also cooking, sweeping, darning: scrubbing her hands raw, fighting premature arthritis, and aging at the same rate her mother grew softer, more fair-skinned with the abatement of responsibilities and exposure to the sun. At present, mother and daughter almost looked like sisters.

“Psst! Maria!” Bicho shout-whispered at his oldest sister from underneath the shade of the lean-to next to their house. “Stop it! You’re going to wake Mami!”

Maria continued to slap the dirty rags against the wash stone, flipping them over so that Bicho wouldn’t see the blood, wouldn’t learn too quickly what it was that made a woman a woman.

“Maria!” Bicho shout-whispered with more urgency.

“Bicho!” Maria shouted his name at full volume and shot him a wide-eyed glance as though he were in danger.

Bicho flinched and hopped onto the miniature three-legged stool Maria used to sit on when she had done the wash as a girl. He scanned the ground for snakes, spiders, lizards...centipedes? What had Maria seen?

“Why don’t you go play with Cimarrón?” Maria suggested. The stray would be lying in the shade, just like everyone else. “Or better yet, fetch me some more water.”

Bicho made a sour face, like the face babies make when they’re about to cry. “You tricked me!” He was still shout-whispering. “And you’re crazy if you think I’m fetching you water.” He stuck his tongue out as far as it would go. Maria smiled at the bright pink triangle that protruded from his little mouth. “You know I couldn’t, even if I wanted to!” Bicho wasn’t allowed to go to the cave unaccompanied, and a full pail of
water weighed more than he did. “Wait ‘til Papi gets here and I tell him how mean you’ve been to me!”

“Uh-huh, yes, tell Papi when he gets here.” Their father, Pedro, along with some of the neighborhood men, were out of town, hunting down The Spaniard and her best friend Catalina Diloné. “That’s the first thing Papi is going to want to know after walking hundreds of miles: how hard Bichito has had it at home.”

With a “Hmph,” Bicho scampered back into the house.

Maria finished the wash and hung all the clothes to dry in just under three hours. The length of the shadows around her told her that there was still plenty of day left. Her stomach felt tender when she thought of night. For now, the sun whirled high above her and it was time to start on dinner.

As if someone had opened a tap somewhere, life began to trickle into the neighborhood streets. The men resumed work in the fields. Some women accompanied them while others started dinner. The boys resumed playing marbles, jacks, or tag. Some girls accompanied them while others helped their mothers start dinner. Some of the elderly rocked on rocking chairs, observing the activity and feeling active by way of vigilance: others clacked dominoes onto square tables meant for four. The young adults were in between, their roles not quite established since they weren’t yet removed from the fun or fully invested in the work. Maria’s role was set, however, had been set for years.
She walked into the house, her arms loaded with root vegetables, and found her mother praying the rosary. Her mother Margot clutched the rosary in such a way that made it look like a powerful fetish instead of a rudimentary abacus. She wondered if her mother ever actually kept count of her prayers, or if she prayed at all.

“You did the wash?” Margot asked without removing her gaze from the beads in her hand.

“Yes Mama.”

“Tsk. One day you’ll fry your brains like that.” Maria knew not to respond.

“Where is Bicho?”

“He must be playing with Cimarrón.”

Her mother considered this and made an impossible request. “Make sure he doesn’t get hurt.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Where is Linda?” Her sister’s name was Juana, but since “Juana” sounded like the name of your grandmother and not a 15 year old girl, they called her Linda, as in “pretty,” after her looks. The neighborhood boys called her Coco, as in “coconuts,” after her breasts.

“She must be lying down on her bed. Or on someone else’s.”

“Tsk!” Margot shook the beads in her hand. “Don’t talk like that about your sister. You can fetch her to help you with dinner.”

“Yes, Mama.” She wouldn’t.

“Any word?”
Maria shook her head.

Maria lit a match and allowed the orange flame to lick at the bunch of tinder she had aggregated. She plopped chunks of starchy vegetables into a cauldron of water that slowly came to a boil. She tied a fistful of herbs together in some twine and submerged the package into the water, sprinkling in coarse grains of salt thereafter. In order for this to be a proper stew it needed some meat: a chicken or two. She grabbed the machete and file, stood up, and paused midstep. She thought to ask Julito for help.

The first week of Catalina’s disappearance, Maria had wondered if the stories were true, if her best friend had really run off with The Spaniard. With time, certainty crept into Maria’s mind, erasing the question of “Really?” and birthing the question of “Why?” Maria, an honest-to-God virgin in every sense of the word, opened herself up to the courtship of Julio “Julito” Tejada, the only neighborhood boy around her age whom she didn’t find absolutely repugnant, in order to quell her inquisition.

She decided it was silly to ask Julito to help her slaughter a pair of chickens, especially since he would know she was only doing it for the attention. Besides, she couldn’t leave the fire unattended long enough to find him in the fields.

Maria tossed the freshly quartered chicken meat into the stew and covered the cauldron. She scraped her palms clean against a stone warmed by the fire and saw a lizard dart back into the brush. The shadows around her had lengthened and the air had cooled. The clothes she had hung to dry were waiting for her.
A flock of neighborhood bochincheras encircled the washing stone, some laundering their clothes, most relishing fresh bits of gossip, like desert vultures around a bloated carcass. Maria made her way to her clothesline, trying not to get sucked into the vortex of busybodies.

“That’s why they say, *hijo de gato caza ratón; hijo de píllo sale bribón.*”

“Exactly. His father was the same way: he would give it to any *chamacita* who happened to sit with her legs too far apart.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Poor girl. She had no idea. At the end of the day, it’s the parents who’re to blame.”

“It was destined to happen that way. Written.”

With her clothes folded over her left arm, Maria trotted back to her house with her head down.

“Don’t worry, girl! She’ll be fine!”

It was much darker inside than it was outside, where the sun was throwing its final rays over the hills. Margot was reading the Bible by candlelight, murmuring the verses aloud to herself. She was too young to be so devoted to religion, only 33, but Maria had everything else covered so there was not much else she could do.

Anticipating her mother’s question, Maria said, “The stew is almost ready Mama.”
Margot nodded and licked her fingertips before turning a leaf. “Take out a portion and send it to Doña Diloné.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Be sure to use one of the nice bowls.”

“Yes, Mama.”

The stew was perfect: if she let it go any further, the bones would slough their meat and the vegetables would disintegrate into mush. Maria forked out select chunks of vegetables, one or two of each kind, and scooped out an entire chicken leg. She ladled a few extra spoons of broth into a porcelain bowl decorated with blue roses, then double wrapped the bowl in a makeshift pouch.

Life slowed around the neighborhood as twilight approached. Men and women returned from the fields, and boys and girls played hand games, too tired to chase one another. Maria saw Bicho wave a stick at Cimarrón and then lob it over the dog’s head. She wanted to tell him to be careful, but she knew he knew to be.

Behind her, Maria heard hooves clop and a man clear his throat: Julito and his father with their mules. Maria felt her stomach tense and loosen at the same time.

“Hi, Maria.” Julito smiled through his exhaustion.

“Hi, Julito.”

“How’s it going?”

“Good. Hello, Don Tejada.”

Julito’s father lifted a hand to her in recognition, too tired for verbal interaction.
Julito smiled. “I’ll see you soon?”

“Maybe.” She lifted the bowl of stew as an explanation. “See you.”

The door to Doña Diloné’s house was opened a crack, as though she had been waiting for Maria. Before entering, Maria scanned the neighborhood for her sister Linda and spotted the group of girls her sister usually hung out with. She wasn’t among them.

It was even darker in Doña Diloné’s house than it was in Maria’s house. The windows barely let any sunlight in and the Doña hadn’t lit any candles yet.

“Hello, Doña Diloné.” Maria left the door open as she made her way to the dining table. “I’ve brought you some stew. I made it myself.”

The Doña shifted in her seat and wiped her face with a kerchief. Maria recognized the kerchief as Catalina’s. It was cut from a distinct flowery print.

She placed the bundle in front of the Doña and undid the knot on the makeshift pouch. She was hoping that the wafting steam would trigger an appetite in the distressed lady. Maria found two spoons and two small bowls in the cupboards and ladled a portion of stew into each bowl. The floorboards creaked as she maneuvered around the dining table and the chair made a sound like a question as she sat herself next to the Doña.

“It’s got chicken and boiled squash in it. I think you like those, no?”

The Doña’s gaze was fixed just over the bowl of stew. She didn’t seem hungry. Maria slurped a spoonful, then she gulped and sighed in relief, as though the stew had opened something inside her.
“It’s good.” Maria nodded reassuringly. “And not just because I made it.” She chuckled at her own joke. The Doña sniffled and shed a tear. She wiped it away promptly with the kerchief and continued to stare at something just over the bowl of stew.

Maria resumed eating, cautiously, trying not to disturb the Doña in her sorrow.

“He sat in that chair. The one on your right.” Maria stopped eating and looked to her right, as if she would see The Spaniard’s ghost. The chair was empty, mute.

Doña Diloné blew her nose into the kerchief. The Doña had probably given the kerchief more use than Catalina ever did.

“The son of a bitch never even thanked us for dinner.”

Maria finished her bowl of stew and emptied the porcelain bowl into one of the Doña’s bigger bowls.

“It’s okay if you don’t eat it now, it’ll be even tastier in the morning.”

Maria left the front door of the house open as before and made her way home in the darkness.

“Do we have any stew left?” Margot asked when Maria entered. The house was illuminated by lanterns. “In case your father comes home tonight.”

“Yes, Mama, more than enough.”

Her mother nodded. She was running her fingers through Bicho’s hair as he finished his supper.

“Do you want Maria to bathe you, or do you want Mama to bathe you?”

Bicho made a sour face and shook his head vigorously. “I can bathe myself.”
“Don’t be silly.” Margot kissed her son on the head and simultaneously sniffed his scalp. “Mm-mm. You still need your Mama.”

“Have you guys seen Linda?” Maria asked.

“She must be in her room.” Margot answered.

There was a knock at the door. Maria went with a lantern to open.

“Yes?” Maria didn’t recognize the man.

“Good evening. Are you Doña Núñez?”

“Her daughter. Is everything alright?”

“Yes. I carry a message from your father.”

“Please, come in.”

“No, that’s all right.” The messenger closed his eyes as if trying to remember the words verbatim. “Your father sends to tell you that he is fine and that so are the rest of the men. They are resting in Chegucay for the night and will be here in the morning.”

“Is that it?”

The messenger looked offended, as though she were testing him. “That’s it.”

“Thank you.”

Maria closed the door and turned to face Margot and Bicho.

“Did you hear?”

They nodded.

“Nothing of the girl?” Margot asked.

“Nothing.”
Margot bathed Bicho outside by lantern light. The night was cool, so the boy hugged himself and hopped in place as his mother poured water over his body.

“Stop fidgeting. It isn’t that cold.” Margot tested the water’s temperature by pouring it over her hand and letting the runoff pour onto the boys head.

Maria watched her little brother squirm and tighten the muscles in his face and body. Her stomach tensed and loosened as she observed the half moon rise above the hills.

“Should I fetch more water Mama?”

Margot splashed water onto Bicho’s back making him howl. “Shh! Spoiled boy.” Bicho shook in place. “I won’t be needing anymore. But you can fetch more for tomorrow, incase your father wants to shower when he arrives.”

Maria made her way to the back of the house to grab a couple of pails. She peered through the hallway and checked to see if Linda was in her room. The door to Linda’s bedroom was open a crack and all Maria could see was a column of darkness.

The mouth of Cueva Chorro was large enough for up to four men to enter shoulder to shoulder. Ten paces in and six feet below, a freshwater stream slowed to form a pool of an unknown depth before continuing to run further underneath the earth.

Maria left the empty pails at the lip of the cave and walked upstream in the darkness. She used the cave walls as a handrail, palming the moist earth, waiting for her hands to tell her when to stop. The stream never stopped whispering as she walked, as though in conversation with her footsteps. Her wrist struck warmth. Cotton. A body.
“Maria?”

“Julito.”

Maria liked to kiss in bursts, with pauses in between so that she could keep track of what she felt, which parts of her body stiffened when, which parts softened. She made mental notes of things like how her left foot hooked around her right ankle whenever he used his tongue and how his hands were always cold although the center of his body radiated warmth. She stopped when she felt like she’d fall to her knees.

“Do you think they have Catalina with them?” Maria asked Julito in the dark.

“I think so.” Julito rested his chin on Maria’s head. “Do you?”

Maria pressed the side of her head against Julito’s chest. She answered in tune with the beat of his heart. “Mhm.”

After the sun made its way over the hills of Mirada Alta, the villagers decided they couldn’t wait any longer for the caravan of men to arrive from Chegucay. They made their way to their respective posts to play their designated roles. The men arrived in the late morning, in clusters of three or four, five to ten minutes apart.

Maria’s father arrived in the fifth group.

“Papi!” Bicho ran to his father from the front door of the house. “Papi, Papi! You won’t believe how mean Maria has been to me since you’ve been gone.”

Pedro kissed Bicho on his head and laughed at how easily he could squeeze the boy in his arms.
“You must be tired.” Maria shouldered her father’s satchel. Bicho continued his protest.

“Papi, aren’t you going to say something to her?”

“What, that I missed her?” Pedro laughed and kissed Maria on the forehead. She shirked back without wanting to.

“Ugh.” Bicho sighed. “There is no justice in this world for a boy.”


“Inside.”

“And Linda?”

Maria froze.

“You’re home.” Margot motioned for her husband to enter from inside the house. “How was your trip?”

“Too long. I need a shower. It isn’t quite noon yet, is it? When’s lunch?”

Maria prepared a quick chicken fricassee for everyone and prayed that Linda would somehow appear before her father asked for her again.

Pedro bathed in the same spot Margot had bathed Bicho in the night before with a string of curtains veiling him from everyone save the sun.

Maria set the table for five. Margot sang a hymn to Bicho while he played with his fork.

_Cantemos al Señor un himno de alegría._
un cántico de amor al nacer el nuevo día.

El hizo el cielo, el mar, el sol y las estrellas

y vio en ellos bondad, pues sus obras eran bellas.

Pedro dressed himself in clean clothes without drying himself off and stepped into the house with a smile on his face.

“Wow, it’s great to be home. Maria, that looks really good.”

Linda stepped into the dining room from the hallway and opened her arms to her father.

“Papi! You’re back!”

“Hija!” Pedro kissed Linda on her head and hugged her briefly.

“How was your trip?” Maria looked at her sister as if to say, Where’ve you been? Linda gave her a look that said, None of your business.

Pedro sighed. “The trip? The trip was too long.”

Margot was the first to finish her lunch, mostly because she only served herself half a helping. Maria finished soon after her, anxious to hear news of Catalina. Bicho was a slow eater and Linda never finished her food, she simply stopped eating. Pedro was digging into his third helping.

“So what happened?” Margot asked, only because she knew Maria couldn’t wait any longer.

“Well, we started out in town. We asked the heads of the forestry department where their man was, and they claimed they didn’t know, that he was on vacation leave.
Don Diloné slipped one of them a few pesos and he told us that the man had a beach house in Sosua he liked to retire to, that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to see if he was there.” Pedro swallowed whatever was in his mouth and took a few gulps of lemonade.

“It took us almost ten days to get there, as none of us had a car, and we had mules with us, so there was no taking the bus. We arrived in the late afternoon and we asked the locals for a man known as The Spaniard. It took a few hours but someone was finally able to point us to the right house. By then it was dark, and there was only one room in the house that was lit. Don Diloné was almost crying he was so angry. He wanted to storm the place with torches and pitchforks but we were able to calm him down with more than a few sips of rum. Don Garcia knocked on the door three separate times before we forced the door open.”

“Papi you broke into somebody’s house? That’s awesome!” Bicho was enthralled.

“Not exactly. But yes, I guess you’re right. So, anyway, we make our way in, and we open the door to the only room in the house that’s lit, and we find The Spaniard in bed with a woman. Don Diloné all but attacks the guy, but we manage to hold him back. The Spaniard is a little more than surprised to see us, and the woman he’s with isn’t too happy either. She also isn’t Catalina, which surprises all of us.”

“Oh, no.” Margot frowned.

“Yeah. There we were, trying to rescue Catalina from The Spaniard, and we found The Spaniard, but no Catalina.”

“Where was she?” Margot asked.
“Well that’s the crazy part. The Spaniard thought she was with us, in Mirada Alta. He claims he actually loved the girl, that he had plans to marry her, but figured that the Don would never approve, so he ran away with her. He says that they made it to his beach house fine, that the girl seemed happy enough, and a few days later, he woke up to find that she had left. He figured she that she’d run back home for whatever reason, that maybe she didn’t feel like it was right what they did. He claimed he was heartbroken by the whole ordeal and still recovering.”

“So where is she now?”

“No one knows. We were hoping we’d find her here when we came back, but she’s not here, is she?”

Maria shook her head.

“Sad. Real shame. The worst part is that the Don has really lost it now. He says he’s going back out there to find her in a few days once he’s settled some things. He says he’s going to build a shack in his yard and keep her locked up ‘til kingdom come whenever he finds her.”

“I just hope the poor girl’s okay.” Linda shook her head in pity.

“Mhm.”

After lunch, Maria cleared the table and cleaned the dishes in silence. Pedro and Margot retired to their bedroom, while Bicho went outside to play with the neighborhood boys. Linda disappeared again before Maria had a chance to speak to her.
Maria made her way through the streets of the neighborhood, walking towards the fields. She passed by the Diloné’s house, where she saw the Don driving a pick axe into the dirt in his yard. His face was streaming with liquid, but it wasn’t clear if it was sweat or tears: probably both. She heard the bochincheras exchanging theories, not at all trying to keep their voices hushed.

“If you ask me, I think she ran away because the shame was too much to bear.”

“There’s no way she can come back home after that.”

“I still say it was the man’s fault. He should’ve known better than to take advantage of the poor child.”

“Child? At 17? I was more than grown by 17: I was old at 17.”

Maria made it to the edge of the fields where she squinted and tried to see if she could spy Julito. She scanned the rows of crops and looked for the swishing tail of his mule, or the tip of his straw hat. She waited a few minutes and continued to search, observing the vastness of the field. The breeze blew her hair to one side, so that it fell over her right shoulder. Maria hooked her left foot around her right ankle and hugged herself. It would be time to start dinner soon.
Distance

1.

I kissed Yasmin goodbye at the airport this morning. She was wearing jeans, flats, and a hooded sweatshirt that matched the gray scarf she was wearing. I kissed her more than once and told her that I loved her. It was hard seeing her cry, especially since her eyes were already puffy from a sleepless night.

“You’re fine. We’re going to be fine.”

I tried to comfort her, but I think she was still crying even after I watched her disappear. I didn’t leave the airport until her plane took off.

2.

Yasmin ♥
Today 6:52 AM

I miss you already <3

Yeah, me too.

<3

3.

Yasmin gave me a virtual tour around her apartment after she landed via Facetime. It seemed cozy enough, nothing crazy. She introduced me to her bubbly roommate Georgia and her cat Fiona, who was markedly aloof.
Yasmin was almost screeching with excitement. “Isn’t she just the cutest cat you’ve ever seen?”

Fiona wasn’t looking at either of us.

I smiled. “Yeah, she’s pretty cute.”

“Yes you are!” She kissed Fiona on the back of her head.

“Since when do you like cats so much?” I realized I’d never asked Yasmin if she liked pets, if she was a cat or dog person.

“Don’t be silly, Omar.” She stroked Fiona’s head and looked into her eyes. “I’ve always liked cats.”

4.

Mike and I went to The Lounge for beers after work. He thinks I’m nuts for trying to make this long distance thing work with Yasmin.

“We’ve been seeing each other for over eight months. I think we’ve got what it takes.” I thought I sounded pretty convincing. “We really care for each other, you know?”

Mike laughed and took a swig of his IPA. “Omar, even you don’t believe the shit you’re saying.”

5.

I Skyped with Yasmin just before bed. She told me all about her new job, her boss, her co-workers.
“They’re all super supportive. I think I’m going to like working here.” She still had her work-face on: false eyelashes, thick eyeliner, perfect lips, contoured makeup. Her face seemed to wax brighter as she talked. Maybe it was the lighting.

“What’s up with you, how’s work?”

I wanted to tell her about a dispute I’d had with my supervisor. I wanted to tell her about what Mike thought about us.

“Oh, you know, work. Same old, same old.”

“Mm.” She took a sip of coffee out of her lipstick stained paper cup.

“How’s Fiona?”

6.

Yasmin ♥
Today 12:34 PM
I’m on break, call me!

Today 2:12 PM
Shoot, I just saw your text.
Sorry.

7.

It’s been a week since Yasmin’s left. My supervisor is still being a dick and I miss Yasmin. I went for a jog in the park today after work. I needed to sweat.

For the first time in a long time I noticed how many trees there were in the park. They are mostly leafless now as November rolls in. I counted 246 trees before I stopped myself. There were other people in the park too: couples, some jogging abreast to one another, some walking hand in hand. I silently cursed them all, particularly the ones that looked good together. Some of the couples had children trailing, or trotting, behind, or
beside them. Sometimes I waved at the children, nodded, or smiled. At times they would gesture back, but mostly they gawked at me as I huffed and puffed my way through the winding walkways. This one child, a little girl without front teeth, smiled at me and it reminded me of Yasmin, how she’d told me in the beginning that she wasn’t sure about kids.

“Not sure about kids? Like you aren’t sure that they exist? Or you aren’t sure that they can be trusted?” I knew what she meant. I wanted to make light of the subject.

“Yeah, in my mind they’re on par with leprechauns. Myth or fact? Friend or foe?” She laughed nervously. I laughed with her to make the moment less awkward. I tried a joke.

“But instead of a ‘pot o’ gold’ over the rainbow, with kids it’s a ‘pot o’ potty.’”

I winced at the thought of the joke. I looked up at the horizon and saw that the sun was setting. I remembered that I was far from home. I sprinted for the last quarter mile of my jog and stayed for the sunset before heading home in the dusk.

8.

Mike
Today 7:37 PM
Watching a game if you want to come over.

I’m good, thanks.
Paul and Aziz are here.

Cool, tell them I said what’s up.

There’s kush. 😎🍁💦

Lol

9.

Tonight, Yasmin was wearing a loose T-shirt when I video called her. It was only 8:30 and she was already in bed.

“Where’s Fiona today?”

Yasmin shrugged her shoulders and smiled softly. “Out somewhere with Georgia.”

“Oh, so Georgia isn’t home?”

She shook her head.

“So you’re alone?”

Her smile widened so that her perfect teeth were exposed. She nodded.

“I’ll be right back, don’t move, just give me like 5 minutes.” I scrambled out of my computer chair and drew the blinds. “Don’t. Move.”

10.

At first, we’d only show our faces. Eventually, we’d both make our virtual debuts. The first time we did, I liked how I looked on screen. I wondered if that meant I was gay. I wanted to know what Yasmin thought it might mean.
“What if I was gay?” That was not what I had meant to ask, but it was easier than asking what I’d wanted to ask. *What does it mean if I like the way my penis looks on screen?*

“That’d be cool. As long as you’re cool with me liking girls. I’m cool with you liking dudes.”

I laughed. “I was being hypothetical.”

Yasmin nodded. “So was I.”

11.

At work, I thought about what Yasmin had said the night before. What if she liked girls? What if I liked dudes?

My phone buzzed. It was my supervisor.

*World’s Greatest Asshole*
Today 9:45 AM

Omar, please stop by my office as soon as you get a moment.

Shit.

Will do.

12.

_Mike_
Today 10:53 AM

Just saw you walk out of HR.

Everything cool?
Mike and I did shots at The Lounge after work. He didn’t let me pay.

“‘I still don’t even understand what I did wrong.’” It was true, I didn’t understand why I had gotten fired.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine. I’ll help you job hunt next week.” Mike threw back a shot.

I cupped the empty shot glass in my hands. “Yasmin said she might like girls.” That wasn’t true, she hadn’t said that. Had she?

“Ha, no fuckin’ way! That’s how threesomes happen.” Mike slapped my shoulder.

“That’s how threesomes happen.” Mike slapped my shoulder. “The stars are in your favor after all, my son.”

14.

Yasmin♥
Today 8:13 PM
Get on Skype, I want to see you!!
Fiona wants to see you too!!

Today 9:51 PM
Babe, where are you?

15.

I got home late from the bar last night, so I defaulted on my nightly Skype session with Yasmin. Recently fired, piss drunk, confused about my sexual orientation and hers — I probably did the right thing by not talking to her.

My alarm clock for work went off at 7:00 AM. I had forgotten to disable it. I couldn’t go back to sleep, so I got out of bed and went for a walk at 7:30 in the morning.
I didn’t have any destination in mind, but I was hungry (and dehydrated), so I decided to walk towards the nearest bagel shop for breakfast. I tried not to think about money or Yasmin and Georgia having sex. I focused on hating my ex-supervisor. I felt a twinge of envy for all of the white collared commuters on their way to their 9-to-5’s. One blared their horn at me and nearly ran me over as I crossed the street on a green light.

“It’s a green light! Are you blind? Get out of the way!”

“Fuck you, asshole! I have the right of way!”

16.

Back at the house, I felt a sharpness in my chest. I missed Yasmin. I decided I’d call her when she was on her on break.

“Hello?”

“Yeah, hey, it’s Omar, what’s up?”

“I know it’s you, babe. Caller ID, remember? Where were you last night?”

“Oh, last night, yeah, I had to stay late at the office. Some project deadline is coming up and...yeah, had to stay late.”

“Some project deadline?”

“Mhm. The one with Bloomberg. The one we’ve been working on for three months.”

I prepared a response to fire back to a possible follow up question but there was none. I could hear cars and voices in the background. She sounded like she might be
walking with a group of friends to lunch. How many of them were there? Were they all girls? Were they all guys?

“Yasmin?”

She was talking to someone else.

“Yasmin?”

“Yeah, I’m here. You were saying, about the project?”

17.

Thanksgiving was coming up and I prayed that Yasmin would come back even if only for a few days.

“I can’t,” she frowned and stroked Fiona’s head. “I just started working, so I can’t really request time off like that.”

“That makes sense.” I tried to sound nonchalant. I was crushed. “How’s Georgia?”

“She’s fine. How’s work?”

“Same old, same old.”

18.

Jobless, I stayed home most days. I forgot what it was like to have so much free time. I did everything in my power to fast forward time until evenings when I could Skype with Yasmin. I watched movies by myself, skipping through scenes that were either too scary or too emotionally moving. I tried writing poetry, the way I had done as an English Minor. I gave that up quick because I realized I was trying to sound like my 19 year old self. I
tried to pray and meditate, but then stopped trying when I realized I didn’t know how to do either. I Googled “how to relax” and “how to find inner peace.” I did calisthenics in the nude and checked myself out in the mirror in between sets. I told myself that this was normal male behavior, separate from the whole onscreen-dick issue. I borrowed books from the library and returned them without ever opening them. I bought a panini press and panini pressed everything. I ironed every shirt in my closet and arranged them by color. I did the same thing with my shoes, thoroughly shining them with decade old shoeshine. I cut my own hair, paired my nails, experimented with different facial hair styles. I took hour long bubble baths and walked around in a bathrobe all day long. I did everything but look for a job.

I had a little over three hours left before I could Skype with Yasmin. I took a long shower, letting the hot water beat on my skin until I couldn’t feel the water anymore. I slipped into my bathrobe and grabbed my laptop. I logged onto Netflix and scrolled through my suggested list. Scarface popped up since I’d been watching movies like Goodfellas, The Godfather and Once Upon a Time in America. I clicked play and watched. The movie was almost over when Yasmin’s video call popped up on my screen.

“Ooh, the goatee looks nice.” Yasmin was wearing a T-shirt and munching on some sort of snack food. “Since when do you wear a bathrobe to bed?”

“Don’t be silly, Yasmin.” I smoothed the collar on my bathrobe flat. “I’ve always worn bathrobes to bed.”
Yasmin giggled. “Really?”

I looked directly into the webcam and in my best Cuban accent I said, “I always tell the truth, even when I lie.”

“Okay, Tony Montana.” She shook her head and smiled. I was glad she got the reference. “Say, Tony,” she held a piece of caramel popcorn between her fingers and lips and said, “when can I say hello to your little friend?”

“Hey!” I gave her a stern look. “I’m Tony Montana! You fuck with me, you fuckin’ wit’ the bes’!”

I went over to Mike’s for Thanksgiving. Not wanting to show up empty handed, I brought panini pressed bite-sized hors d’oeuvre on a silver platter with a bowl of homemade spinach-artichoke dip in the center. Everyone thought it was hilarious, like it was some kind of joke.

“Aww, these are cute. Thanks for trying, Omar.” Mike’s girlfriend pecked me on the cheek and took the platter into her hands.

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t know what to say. Thanks for trying? I knew I should’ve brought box wine instead.

“Dude, they’re so small. Who’d you make them for, midgets?” Paul elbowed Aziz and they both had a laugh. Paul extended his arm to greet me but I pocketed my hands.

“No, Paul, I didn’t make them for midgets.” I was surprised by how angry I was. “But I guess they’re perfect for you and your fucking midget-sized brain.” I laughed hard,
mechanically, after I said this, but it was clear I wasn’t joking. Aziz looked confused and Paul looked hurt.

“Hey, Omar!” Mike came out from his room and opened his arms for a hug. “Good to see you bro, how’ve you been?”

20.

I left the party early and went home with my silver platter and bowl. Despite the mocking and teasing, everyone had done their best to give my hors d’oeuvres a try. I hadn’t eaten that much, even though I was hungry. I mostly drank the sangria Mike’s girlfriend had prepared and migrated between various corners of the room in order to give off the illusion that I was socializing. I tried to talk to Mike when he wasn’t busy playing host, but it was impossible to maintain a conversation over ten-second bursts of verbal exchange.

“How’s job hunting going? Any promising offers yet?”

“Yeah, umm, actually, I uh…”

“Hang on, one sec, be right back.”

At the apartment, I locked the front door behind me and placed the dirty dishes in the sink. I decided I’d tend to them them in morning.

I opened my laptop and logged onto Skype. Yasmin still wasn’t online, but that was understandable since it wasn’t yet 8 o’clock.

My phone buzzed.

Mike
Today 7:43 PM
Thanks for stopping by, it was nice seeing you.

I didn’t feel like replying but I didn’t want to be rude.

Yeah, thanks for having me. Good to see you too.

I checked Yasmin’s social media pages to see if she had posted any Thanksgiving pictures. My phone buzzed again.

Mike
Today 7:46 PM

I’m here if you need anything.

Whatever it is, just call.

I hesitated.

Thanks.

21.

It was now 11 o’clock and Yasmin still wasn’t online. I was beginning to get upset. I didn’t want to spend my Thanksgiving watching YouTube videos until midnight. I checked my phone for messages and saw that Yasmin had texted me around 6 o’clock.

Yasmin ♥
Today 6:11 PM

Hey babe, Happy Thanksgiving! 🦃

Don’t wait up, I’m going to be out late with Georgia and some friends from work.

Love you <3

I must have swiped the message away by accident before reading it.

Today 11:07 PM

I got fired. A while ago. I’ve been meaning to tell you.

I waited five minutes, hoping my text would illicit a response. When there was none, I tossed my phone aside, closed my laptop and sat on the couch for a while. The
thought of Yasmin out with “Georgia and some friends” stressed me out. I knew there was nothing to worry about, but it was easier to worry about my possibly lesbian girlfriend than it was to worry about my unemployment or my relationship with Yasmin in general. Where did I stand in her life? Where were he headed as a couple? Would we still be together, (whatever that meant in a long-distance relationship), by next Thanksgiving?

I felt like eating something. The kitchen light was on, so I had an excuse to walk towards the fridge. The interior of the fridge was relatively empty except for a carton of orange juice, assorted condiments, a jar of pickles, and three loose eggs that almost fell out when I opened the fridge door. I looked towards the kitchen counter and saw that there were a few hot dog buns in the bread box.

I took the dirty dip bowl out of the sink, put the eggs inside, and filled the bowl with tap water. Covering the bowl with a small plate, I placed the bowl and its contents in the microwave and set it to 6 minutes. The hot dog buns were stale, but I couldn’t tell the difference once I toasted them on the panini press and slathered them with ketchup, mustard, hot sauce, and mayonnaise. I filled the buns with dill pickle slices, ate them with the hard boiled eggs, and washed everything down with a tall glass of orange juice.

I turned off the kitchen light, walked over to the living room and flopped onto the couch. I contemplated going out for a jog, but there was no way I was running after all that food. I thought of turning in for the night, but I knew that I’d just be tossing and turning in bed, awake for hours. A hot shower felt like just the right thing.
22.

I stepped out of the bathroom with my bathrobe on and headed for the living room. I grabbed my laptop off the couch and flipped it open. It was almost two o’clock in the morning. I didn’t feel the need to sleep, though I wanted to dream. I decided I’d finish watching the final scene of *Scarface*.

Skipping past the part where Gina gets killed, I hit play where all the enemy goons begin infiltrating Tony’s mansion. At this point, Tony has nobody on his side: everyone he has ever cared about is either dead or gone, and everyone who has ever cared about him is either dead or has stopped caring.

I watch Tony kill over thirty guys single handedly, getting shot a few times here and there. At one point, he loses hold of his gun and just eats every round they fire at him, as if the bullets were irresistible somethings you couldn’t just have one of. A boss-goon, wearing sunglasses, even though it’s night, comes from behind with a shotgun in hand. With the blank expression of a hired assassin, the boss-goon delivers a double-barreled blast to Tony’s chest: arms open, Christ-like, Tony falls to his death. He lands face first into a small pool where his corpse floats and his blood starts to mix with the water. The camera slowly pans upward and a silver globe buttressed by bronze beauties reads:

“The World is Yours.”
Submission

Jasmine. Amber. Lavender. A deep smell of flowers fills her lungs, petals, stems, soil and all. A light, patient like the moon, puts its hands over her eyelids. The window in her room is closed, the door shut, and there she is, sitting in the middle of a garden, with roses, tulips, and lilies surrounding her like so many rings of Saturn. She might as well be a planet, the way the plates in her heart shift with unease, the way her body quakes with longing, her yearning a black hole, a vortex of immense pull. A voice tells her to move, and the ground trembles as she rises, the garden traveling with her as she walks. Outside, winter holds life in a sleeperhold and night pins day to the other side of the world. What
she would give to be so subdued, so thoroughly crushed by something older, infinitely bigger than her.

Barefoot, her eyes trained on her feet, she navigates the rose-laden path the garden creates for her. The thorns from the roses have been left untrimmed. Walking on a river of her own blood, she passes the line of trees that marks the perimeter of her own village. From above, snowflakes flutter through miles of sky and latch onto her woolen cloak. Spring at her feet, winter on her shoulders, the heat of summer in her chest, she walks until she falls at someone’s doorstep.

Amidst hundreds of doors, how does she know that this is the door? What wisdom has guided her here? Is it the same wisdom that guides the rains, that tells them when and where to fall? Is it the same wisdom that whispers to the bees, *no, not this flower, that one; take from here, give over there.*

Her knuckles touch wood, the knock sharp against the silent night.
A voice, the same one that told her to move, asks, “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” she says.

“I don’t know you.”

She hesitates. “How did I get here?”

“I brought you here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re here for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I brought you here.”
“Then let me in.” The cold night gnaws at her bones.

“No.” A pause. “There isn’t enough room for two.”

For a moment, she stares blankly at the door and wonders if she ever knocked. Heavy with snow, heavy with wait, her knuckles strike wood for the second time.

The voice asks, “Who is it?”

“Open up,” she says. “It’s you.”

A soft click of iron, and then, an open door. A shoulder, an arm, a hand. “Yes?”

“I have something for you.”

“What is it?”

“A poem.”

“Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“No. Not here.”

Her cloak is hung to dry, a new shawl is draped over her shoulders. Water is warmed for her feet and gentle fingers pick the thorns out of her soles by candlelight. Feeling returns to her body and she is starving. She needs to swallow something, to fill herself with anything. Slices of dry bread drizzled with olive oil are placed beside her and a cup of tea finds a temporary home between her hands.

“Recite.”

She sips a bit of tea hungrily and burns her tongue. The shadows on the wall huddle closer together.

In the heart’s bazaar, coins have no worth.
There are no price tags, no signs that say “for sale.”
The shopkeeper will ask for your head,
Your heart already in his hands.

There, the items choose their owners,
Muddling the arrangement of master and slave.
Listen closely and I’ll tell you my secret:
…

She pauses and sips from her cup, the tea still too hot. She waits, then sips again.

“Is that all of it?”

“No.” She eats more of the bread. It’s so good. “That was only half,” she explains.

“Do you need help completing it?”

“No.” She swallows. “The rest is inside me.”

A beautiful face. So beautiful. A nod.

A hand offers her a slice of bread and she accepts. “Finish. And then we’ll go.”

She bites off a mouthful of bread and barely chews before she swallows with a gulp. The remaining tea rushes into her mouth, scalding her throat and the rest of her insides. Pain is good, she thinks. Pain is what brought me here. The candles are blown. The verses are freed. The shadows on the wall whirl in response to the poem’s word, bringing light to wherever there is darkness.