

LONGING, BELONGING AND OTHER STORIES: TALES OF BENGALI IDENTITY
AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is one of the few nations where living citizens can recall being subjects of three different countries, all within one lifetime. Additionally, it is the only nation founded in pursuit of linguistic recognition. This non-traditional study explores the manner in which collective memory is used in nation building, the formation of Bengali identity and the evolution of this identity in the face of political upheaval, war, and for some, eventual migration.

By examining the identity politics and cultural implications of establishing collective memory, this project analyzes the pivotal role played by the concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983) – the idea that nations are socially constructed by constituents who perceive themselves as a group. Using a triangulation of existing literature, a content analysis of era-specific political rhetoric and collected oral histories, this study further examines the arbitrary lines drawn across the former Indian subcontinent, establishing such imagined communities and effectively rendering millions as prisoners of geography. The timeline for this longitudinal study includes: the end of the British Raj, the Partition of 1947, the Bengali Language Movement, and the Bangladeshi Liberation War of 1971, moving onwards into the twenty-first century.

Placing findings within the context of existing literature in the field, this project expresses itself in the form of creative short fiction, examining the push and pull factors of migration and the universal process of establishing and re-establishing identity. Each story is contemporaneous to real-life political events, bringing to light how a nation reconstructs and often romanticizes the past in order to carry these constructed identities into the future. In a globalized world, this project highlights the significance of embracing multiple, evolving identities, while chasing a sense of belonging.

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And lastly, to all those longing to belong.

*All the people like us are We,
And everyone else is They.
And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way.
But – would you believe it? – They look upon We
As only a sort of They*

- Rudyard Kipling, *We and They* (1926)

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PART I: OVERVIEW AND METHODS

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, our identities are constantly in flux; evolving in tandem with the influences that permeate our present and build on the traumas of our collective past. Bangladesh is one of the few nations where living citizens can recall being subjects of three different countries, all within one lifetime. They may have been born subjects of the British Raj, becoming citizens of the former East Pakistan upon the Partition of 1947, and once again, flowing with the tide of their impermanent identities, citizens of their own right with the birth of Bangladesh during the Liberation War of 1971. The war paved the way for Bangladesh to become the only nation founded in pursuit of linguistic recognition of the Bangla language and a distinctive identity as secular Bengali. Despite having to navigate a volatile path to freedom, this central characteristic is intrinsically woven into the collective memory of its people – the significance of language and in turn, cultural identity.

This project expresses the trauma and turbulent experiences following the continuous re-establishment of the self, using the vehicle of short fiction in order to convey these unique sociological experiences and seismic cultural shifts. To do so, I delve deeper into the two-fold themes that emerge when examining this particular period of South Asian History and how they are contextualized on a microsocial level. They are as follows:

- 1) the manner in which **collective memory** is used in nation building and the formation of Bangladeshi identity
- 2) the molding of this **identity** in the face of political upheaval, war and for some, eventual migration.

The research is divided into three parts. Part One examines existing contextual literature on the chosen historical time period; the expression of identity and how it is used as a tool for positioning, representation and perception - specifically, within the niche of Bengali and Bengali immigrant identity – and lastly, collective memory and how it feeds into the overarching concept of imagined communities. Part Two contains a short methodology section, in addition to key findings from interviews undertaken. The interview participants include those who witnessed these historical events in pre-partition India, and later Bangladesh, as well as first or second-generation immigrants to the United States. Part Three is a curated collection of short fiction, taking the reader on a journey through a multi-generational timeline, which explores the sociopolitical impact of each event and their manifestations on a micro level within the lives of each character.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CULTURAL IDENTITY

The core identity of the average Bangladeshi is built upon and nourished by tales of ancestors, protestors and revolutionaries who have risen from oppression, accounts that shape the foundation of the national collective memory. The primary disbursement method of this knowledge is through the mode of oral histories, or storytelling (Biswas, Tripathi, 2019) bridging the divide between each generation to build a bank of collective memory and draw from it to construct and represent a national identity.

Compared to other nations on the world's stage, Bangladesh is a fairly new country, 49 years young with a GDP growth of 8% (The World Bank, 2019), which indicates the outpacing of its neighboring countries of which it was once part of. In addition to being one of the most densely populated countries on earth with a population of 160 million, the Bangladeshi diaspora is one of the largest migrant communities in the world, comprised of 7.8 million people (UN, 2020). The advent of this sizeable diasporic community is one of the ways in which post-colonial, post-liberation Bangladesh finds itself grappling with an ever-changing identity.

This struggle to define and actualize identity in the context of culture - or in the case of immigrants, multiple cultures - is especially relevant in the maintenance and rebuilding of Bengali identity. Cultural identity is defined by Hall in two modes; the first as a "collective one true self" (Hall, 1996 p. 223) in terms of those who share the common denominator of culture, collective history or ancestry. In the second sense, Hall describes cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (p. 223) and, one could argue, of belonging. Hall further elaborates as thus:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past...identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall, 1996).

Rutherford's work studies a specific subset of the Bengali population categorized by Hall's latter definition – the *probashi* or expatriate Bangladeshi community and the manner in which new immigrant communities to the United States assimilate, causing them to examine the vicissitudes of their existing identities. Rutherford argues that this search for identity, to establish who we are and how we fit into our environment, is a universal process. It is seen as a microcosm of the human experience, “one of particular urgency for those away from home: the maintenance of a coherent personal identity. Here, the focus is on individuals as unique human actors.” (Rutherford, 1985, p. 36).

Furthermore, Rutherford examines Bengali kinship, as part of a distinctive system of symbols, a theme that is interwoven through all of the narrative arcs of the collection; the relationships between siblings, families and society at large (Rutherford, 1985). The collective, communal nature of these relationships are reflected in the quotidian of Bengali life. When we examine a narrowed focus of the individual migrant experience, it is evident that it reflects a shared global experience. However, while Rutherford's work delves into the lives of a highly skilled or educated segment of migrants - members of whom often pulling out poetry that was relevant to their conversations (Rutherford, p. 402) - the largely

unknown journey of the *probashi* Bengali community began with groups of seamen and peddlers, who arrived on Ellis Island in the late nineteenth century. Hailing from the undivided Indian subcontinent, these migrants did not

“experience the welcome that was promised to the world’s tired...poor...huddled masses. Most came with no expectation that they would stay; they did not come, in historian Sucheta Mazumdar’s words, as “part of incipient settler families clutching a one-way ticket in their hands and the American Dream in their hearts.” (Bald, 2013 p. 9)

Instead, these early immigrants, or as we would now refer to them, global labor migrants, formed a new strain of Bengali identity as they began to assimilate with existing communities of color. The role of women of color in particular is explored further in Bald’s work, as his research unfolds the stories of the families of these early migrants. However, despite their contributions to the economy and playing into the fetishizing of the “exotic” East, they were racially ineligible to become citizens of the United States. The aftermath of the United States Immigration Act of 1965 brought not only a surge of new immigrants to the country, but highly skilled individuals (Hatton, 2015). However, according to Bald, despite the arrival of this influx of skilled migrants, “in the very years that the United States became what its leaders would call a ‘nation of immigrants’, it also became a nation of immigrant exclusion” (Bald, 2017, p. 9) This phenomenon is explored in the narrative arc of two separate protagonists in the collection; for one, the latent struggle to preserve identity and instill it into the next generation, and for the other, a relentless desire to assimilate but being unable to find a sense of belonging in either space.

Lim & Pham further elaborate on this concept of positioning as related to culture and identity, although in the context of migrant, or international, students claiming these

students develop ‘intercultural competence’ over time, to “reconcile worldviews and practices that conflict with their own.” (Lim, Pham, 2016; Pritchard, Skinner 2002). Berry suggests that in the process of reconciling these competing worldviews, intercultural contact may bring about internal conflict that leads to “acculturative stress” (Berry, 2005). Furthermore, Berry theorizes four acculturative strategies often employed by migrants; integration, assimilation, separation and marginalization. Of these, the struggle to maintain Bengali identity is depicted through the lens of character arcs in Part Two of this paper, through assimilation, defined as “imbibing the host culture but eschewing the home culture” and separation, “retaining the home culture but not absorbing the host culture” (Berry, 1987 Lim, Pham 2016).

Further examples of this quest for identity are evident in the realm of diasporic literature. In a subset of Jhumpa Lahiri’s work examined for this particular project - *The Namesake* (2003) a novel and *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) a collection of short fiction - both chronicle the immigrant experience of Indian Bengalis. One story in particular, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” (Lahiri, 1999), occurs during a backdrop of what is described as a conflict between India and Pakistan in 1971. The narrator is a young girl, Lilia, whose parents befriend the titular Mr. Pirzada, as tensions run high in his hometown of Dacca. The reader experiences the conflict through her eyes, a powerful tool used by the author to express both the uncertainty and lack of ease of communication. Lahiri also uses the character of Lilia to highlight the delicate balance of her dual Bengali-American identity.

The concept of establishing cultural identities and the manner in which they are encoded are further explored in Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*. While describing the

idiosyncrasies of the cultural naming process among Bengali groups, Lahiri explains her protagonist's plight through the concept of Bengalis having a "daak naam":

In Bengali the word for pet name is daknam, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood...They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 25)

This highlights one of the facets of identity experienced by many in Bengali groups – both at home and abroad - one that begins having been given the gift, or burden, of two names, inadvertently creating public and private identities at birth.

This phenomenon can be further explained by using Goffman's theory of dramaturgy as a framework to examine the idea that cultural identity is largely performative. Goffman argues that social interactions are contingent upon time, place and audience, akin to a play unfolding on stage (Goffman, 1955). Under this dramaturgical model, within the play of life there exists the concept of "front stage" performances and "backstage" (Goffman, 1955) when no audience is able to view the enacted behavior, an embodiment of public and private identities exhibited by both migrant and minority groups (Lacy, 2020). This idea is further explored in Part 3, which examines the manner in which identity is contextual, in both interactions and presentation.

THE PARTITION

Partition is central to modern identity in the Indian subcontinent, as the Holocaust is to identity among Jews, branded painfully onto the regional consciousness by memories of almost unimaginable violence. The acclaimed Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has called Partition “the central historical event in twentieth century South Asia.” (Dalrymple, 2015)

It is interesting to note that the nascence of the Partition was rooted in a quest for identity – a struggle to actualize the imagined community of Pakistan, determining its paradigms as outlined by Muhammed Ali Jinnah, as part of the Muslim League of India in 1940 (Dar, 2015). This pursuit of a separate identity, a separate homeland for Muslims, drove a fracturing ideological wedge between the previously undivided India. To announce his new ideology, Jinnah began his speech in Urdu, before asking his audience of thousands, standing in the sun to hear him speak, permission to continue on in English (Dar, 2015). This is evident of both identity and the importance of language in its formation. It is suggested that Jinnah, who demanded the language of Pakistan be “Urdu and only Urdu” (Ahmed, 2003) struggled with the language himself, having been educated in England (Dar, 2015), while paradoxically implementing it upon his own newly created nation as an attempt to unite its population with vastly different identities.

From the time in which it was carved out as a nation in 1947, Pakistan, formerly comprised of East and West Pakistan, wrestled with its own fractured identity – “continuously and often violently” (Singh et al, 2016) as a divided nation, both figuratively and literally, by 1000 miles of India between its two halves. While presenting his ultimately disproved Two Nation Theory, Jinnah assumed the public cultural identity of a minority in

independent India, in order to further fuel support for his imagined community of Pakistan - united not on the basis of a common tongue or even geographical location, but solely by religion.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

For centuries prior to the British Raj, people of all religions coexisted in the Indian subcontinent (Dalrymple, 2015). What were the key historical events that allowed this harmony to erode over time? The resurgence of religious violence that periodically resurfaces in India, most recently in January 2020, is a distinct reminder of the othering of the Partition, the divisive fires lit over half a century ago that have still not been doused, the embers of animosity of which still glow. This myopic cultural collective memory is entrenched in the formation of a new national identity, othering migrated populations. Much of the trauma of the ever-changing identity, from one government to the next, leaving lands inhabited by generations (Dalrymple, 2015) is explored in non-fiction endeavors such as Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation*, which captures oral histories to construct an account of the Partition through material memory and perspective. Malhotra's work reflects on the memories of those who lived through the Partition, often escaping horrific violence, leaving with little but the clothes on their backs and the precious objects they were able to carry with them.

Anderson's theory of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) is an applicable framework in this context, as a lens to examine the evolution of both linguistic and cultural identity. Anderson describes nations as "imagined, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p.6).

In the context of the present day, these imagined communities have now shifted to the Bengali diaspora, established and upheld through the ease of communication and unrestricted ease of access made possible by globalization. Lorenzana examines this in the context of Filipino transnationals in their struggle to maintain identity and their “need for recognition that is defined by their particular context of migration” in existing social formations (Lorenzana, 2016), a mirror occurrence in the lives of the sizable Bengali diasporic community.

In the past, the common bond that held together India as an imagined community was striving for independence against the British, which then transformed into the Two Nation Theory with the birth of Pakistan, splitting once more into the struggle for Bangladesh’s independence. This further establishes that trauma is not only experienced by individuals, but by entire nations (Singh et al, 2016) but conversely, this can also be extended to collective memory. The importance of this collective memory and often romanticized notions of the past are explained in a Bangladeshi context by Chakravarti, as:

"...hagiography sometimes makes it appear as if nothing of import existed before 1971, the year Bangladesh was born, the year Bongobondhu, Friend of Bengal, won independence from Pakistan on the back of his charisma, an unstoppable momentum of identity politics that created history over the blood sacrifice of an estimated 3 million Bangladeshis and the generous help of India. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is Bangladesh’s folkloric George Washington by vision and verve, Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln by assassination, and Stalin by his advocating of a one-party state, among several factories that brought about his death, and the rebirth of radical Islam that Bangladesh thought it had buried in 1971" (Chakravarti, 2017 p.7).

Chakravarti's insight into the nascence of Bengali collective memory, a juggernaut fueled by the cult of personality of their first leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, shines a light on the curious phenomenon of their minimization of the Partition. This sentiment is juxtaposed by the twin independence days of their neighbors and former countrymen of India and Pakistan, both celebrated in August marking the end of the Partition, while Bangladeshis "tend to gloss over its brutality as a pathology of the moment" (Ahmed, 2017). Ultimately, the consequences of the British Empire, the ripple effects of centuries under a rule that chose to divide and conquer, left only division in its wake. The rise and fall of these imagined communities effectively rendered millions of refugees as prisoners of geography - uprooted by arbitrary lines in the sand that shaped not just collective memory and the history of nations, but the path of each individual as they moved onwards.

METHODOLOGY AND KEY FINDINGS

In order to craft a compelling narrative, with key details that allow these unique experiences to come alive in the mind of the reader, the scope of this project included conducting a series of semi-structured, personal interviews. Analyzing detailed accounts and recollections of pivotal historic moments helped shape each narrative in Part Three. The primary aim of the interviews undertaken was to discover if, and to what extent, these unique life experiences played a role in the formation of self, identity and language.

To further investigate this research question, a total of 10 interviews, both in the United States and in Bangladesh, were conducted. Interviewees were selected by both convenience and snowball sampling from acquaintances of participants, according to the following criteria:

- 1) Participants were either native, first or second-generation Bangladeshi
- 2) Participants must have experienced one, or all, of the following:
 - a. The Partition
 - b. The Language Movement
 - c. The Liberation War
 - d. Migration to the United States for a period of over 10 years

Additionally, participants were assured confidentiality in their responses - their names and identities are known only to the researcher in order to prevent interviewees from self-censoring. Each audio recorded interview lasted between 45-60 minutes, barring one serendipitous, hasty interview in a New York City cab.

While these oral histories provided deeper insights and further contextualized the chosen political events, the collection of memories can potentially be challenging. Although representative of the instilling of national collective memory, individual memory is often eroded by time and personal bias, perhaps leading to the exaggeration or minimization of actual events.

A common thread across all interviewees was the described partaking in the oscillation of cultural codes – exhibited in language, apparel and food – crafting both a Bengali identity and an American one; shedding one mask and donning another. Conversely, interviewees who experienced the Liberation War also experienced a similar form of this, code switching from Pakistani to Bengali nationalism in the 1970's. One interviewee described it as, "...the way you dressed identified you as more or less Muslim and by default, more or less Pakistani. If you wore a *sari* with a *teep* it was considered too Bengali – there were already clear distinctions."

This occurrence of code switching was mirrored in diasporic communities as well. One of the interviewees, Participant 6, described this both within the context of presentation and social strata within the first wave of educated Bengali immigrants in the 1960's and 70's, claiming, "...had we all been in Dhaka, which is sharply class stratified, a taxi driver would not have been socializing with a physicist. You don't see that anymore. But here, most were assimilating and closing that education gap within one generation." The assimilative success of the children of immigrants is largely measured by their education and career prospects – even in the least educated immigrant origin groups, children close most if not all of the education gap with the children of natives (Card, 2005). Another respondent detailed the habitual staging of a "second skin, like a second identity"

in their early childhood experiences. “I was this strange bird, who was American, but I wasn’t seen as American.” Such experiences are also found in the following coded interview excerpts.

INTERVIEW EXCERPTS

Participant	Insight
Participant 1	<i>“My grandfather did not want his only son to become a slave of the British Government, so my father became a lawyer; this was in 1920, 1921 maybe, and the British owned all the firms”</i>
Participant 2	<i>“I often wondered, are we Muslim first Bengali second, or Bengali, then Muslim? There is a dichotomy, which came first?”</i>
Participant 3	<i>“The fact that [my friends] were Pakistani and I was Bengali faded into the background - we were all Asians here. Or Pakis, like they called us. They were no longer big fish, we were equally discriminated against”</i>
Participant 6	<i>“We still supported the Pakistani cricket team, even after the war, because we didn’t yet have one of our own”</i>
Participant 6	<i>“We lived in a tiny town called [redacted] - we were the only people of color in the town and my mother insisted on wearing saris. I felt so othered. When I went to school kids would chant “blacky”.</i>
Participant 6	<i>“My mom wouldn’t let me wear halter tops because it was “not Bengali, not proper” so I would wear one outfit to school and once I would get to school I would change. This started at age 7 - trying to find a place for myself that I had to hide at home”</i>

Figure 1: Coded Theme: Identity.

Participant	Insight
Participant 4	<p><i>“We would not have been where we are today [if not for our Independence] it made way for the economic success of Bangladesh. Kissinger called us a “basket case” but despite everything we are the envy of other developing countries.”</i></p>
Participant 2	<p><i>“As you grew up, you realized the university students were always commemorating the past, scores of people killed by police firing and that became a ritual. That became a collective memory. Especially in the schools, you could not escape what had happened.”</i></p>
Participant 6	<p><i>“I’m American because of the Liberation War. Within a few months of my mother learning she was pregnant she said she wanted to have her child on what would be Bangladeshi soil. So 1971 and the importance of that was communicated to me a great deal. The Bangladeshi Association of New England, in the 60’s, 70’s they made sure their children knew about it.”</i></p>
Participant 4	<p><i>“...my first recollection of what I felt to be a Pakistani was singing the national anthem, not that you had an option”</i></p> <p><i>“What started off as the language movement became politicized as the demand. It was symbolic. Soon after, 1952 [the language movement] receded – the effort of the Pakistani government. But it had never receded from the memory of the Bengalis, oh no, never.”</i></p>
Participant 3	<p><i>“My uncle took part in the Language Movement, he was jailed. The identity, Bengali, was stronger for us than being Pakistani. Politically, my grandfather believed in Pakistan - are you taping this? - he wore Pakistani clothing, achkan porto, but his children believed in Bengali nationality. This was in the 50’s but even then, the war came much later.”</i></p>

Figure 2: Coded Theme: Collective Memory.

Participant	Insight
Participant 2	<p><i>“Sometimes I think maybe I made a mistake...my children don’t speak the same language as I do. They speak Bangla, but not like you and I are now. They speak English.”</i></p> <p><i>“My daughter prefers to speak English, she struggles with Bengali...I think we inadvertently facilitated a culture where Bengali became the second language.</i></p>
Participant 7	<p><i>“...to our own parents we spoke only in Bangla, which was undeniably their only language. I was the first generation to grasp and practice English in my family, because of my education”</i></p> <p><i>“Speaking in Bangla, it’s a question of who you are communicating with - it’s not a conscious decision”</i></p>
Participant 6	<p><i>“...growing up, one of the things I hated was my parents always being like “Bangla bolo, bangla bolo” and now I’m so grateful for it. When you know a language fluently you’re privy to nuances and traditions. That helped me cement my Bengali identity; I feel more Bengali now than I did when I was younger”</i></p> <p><i>“our community was very close but we weren’t ghetto-ized. we didn’t live in neighborhoods that were predominantly Bangladeshi - they were predominantly white. So everybody spoke English fluently.”</i></p>
Participant 9	<p><i>“There were some who didn’t speak Bengali, they only spoke Sylheti”</i></p>

Figure 3: Coded Theme: Language Cultural Identity.

The triangulation of existing literature, theory and these rich interviews were woven into each short fiction piece, incorporated in the narrative arc of two separate protagonists in the collection in how they establish and present their own identities. For one character, the latent struggle to preserve identity and instill it into the next generation, and for the other, a relentless desire to assimilate but in either space, being unable to find a sense of belonging. The content of each short fiction piece are as follows:

CONTENT SUMMARY

Longing

A preface to the collection, of sorts. The story of a small boy living in an Indian village, this chapter elaborates on the background history of the British Raj. The narrative describes some of the key events that paved the way for the Partition, as seen through the eyes of a child and his understanding of the events unfolding around him, all while he chases an elusive dream.

The Dawaat

A Hindu family invites a mystery guest to dinner. Set in Calcutta, against the backdrop of Partition, a series of events bring together the fates of two characters. This chapter explores the central themes of identity, food and religion.

9 months

This chapter tells the reader the story of Aasha, a young Bengali woman who migrates with her husband to the United States in 1971, as a civil war brews in her native country. Through a series of flashbacks, the chapter highlights themes of nostalgia, loss and the dual identities of future generations, examining the disconnect between first and second generation immigrants.

Belonging

Explores the ordeal of migrant workers, the invisible backbone of some of the world's most developed countries. They remain unseen, often anonymous, struggling to strike a balance between cultures. In first person narrative, the protagonist also unpacks his dalliance with the chimera of the American Dream on a journey to find home.

PART II: LONGING, BELONGING AND OTHER STORIES

LONGING

On the night that the skies fell, unleashing their wrath on the small village of Monirampur, Anwar experienced his own devastation. From behind the thin sheet of metal that separated their rooms, he could hear Amma, his mother, her cries ringing louder than the torrential downpour outside. A few days earlier his aunts had arrived to help them. His mother's village beyond the river was too far to travel to, especially in her condition, braving the rough, unpaved dirt roads. Huddled together on a small, wooden *khaat*, he lay next to his sleeping younger siblings, Sarwar and Roshanara, both oblivious to the commotion outside; the howling winds, battering rain and the screams reaching a crescendo in the next room.

He squeezed his eyes shut, holding his *kolbalish* tight to his chest and remembering what Amma had told him, before she retreated to her bed, not even emerging to play with him or feed his siblings.

“Remember you will be an older brother of three now, *babu*. It's your duty to look after your younger siblings,” she said smiling as she carefully put away the *boti* she chopped onions with, out of reach of her children. The tears that streamed down her face as the half-moon slices fell away always made her laugh; an almost childish giggle, like the tinkling of the tiny bells in the silver anklet she wore that had once belonged to her own mother. She was making Abba's favorite – pickled onions. Soaked in *sirka* and salt, after a while the crunchy onions deceptively resembled a plate of fuschia pink roses, leaving a telling, pungent scent in the air. Salt, taxed by the British, was a luxury in India but Amma

was a talented seamstress, charging the other women in the village to fashion blouses and petticoats, which they had only begun wearing a few decades ago. Prior to the transference of Victorian standards of propriety, spread largely by word of mouth, women simply wrapped the 9 yards of material over their naked bodies. Catering to these evolved conventions is how, despite never being formally educated, Amma contributed to their growing household. “So, what do you think this new addition to your army will be, *shona*?” she asked Anwar.

“A boy” he had replied assuredly, drawing lines with a twig in the mud, as he sat next to his mother on the makeshift porch outside their two-roomed house. “Three boys!” she exclaimed, setting free her voluminous jet-black curls from the restraints of her bun. “We should be so lucky! I think this one may be a little girl, a friend for your sister. They will hardly be two years apart! Won’t that be nice?” she said, as she lay a hand on her swollen stomach, always carefully shrouded by her the *aachal* of one of her colorful *saris*, protecting it from the evil eye. Pulling a glass jar from the windowsill, she dipped her fingers in the fresh coconut oil inside and meticulously threaded it through her curls, before gathering and weaving her hair into a tight braid. Anwar wrinkled his nose at the overpowering coconutty smell and shrugged. He didn’t think much about the new baby, his only preoccupation lately had been gazing at the sky, wondering when it would appear again, that elusive magical creature.

At first, he wondered whether he had fallen asleep under the *kathal* tree and dreamt it, with its wings effortlessly and gloriously gliding through the sky. He longed to be up there, playing hide and seek with the clouds, not bound to the borders of Monirampur, Jessore or even India as he was, free from the confines of the earth. But the noise - that

deafening symphony - was unlike anything he had heard before. Louder than the motorized boats that took them down the river, louder still than the trains that passed on the other side of the village, whistling as they journeyed onwards towards their destinations. He had never been on one before, but Amma had said soon, once Abba had some new equipment for fishing, they would all go on a trip. He closed his eyes tighter, willing himself to be on the train. The clattering of the rain as it battered down on the roof morphed into the sounds of the train's wheels, revolving rapidly towards an unknown destination. Any moment now he would hear the *choo-choo* of the whistle.

Instead, another scream. He wished there was a way he could get a message across the village without having to send someone, or a way to transport the doctor, unable to battle the elements to journey to their village on the *goru-garis* pulled by cows, horses and sometimes men. Most of all, he wished for some kind of magic potion that would numb Amma's pain. Suddenly the screams stopped, replaced instead by the shrill cries of a newborn. But then, another sound erupted, a kind of wailing chorus from his aunts. His heart jumped to his throat – something was terribly wrong.

They called her Tufaan, storm in Bengali, her namesake the devastating cyclone that took place the night of her birth, which left crops and animals dead, houses overturned, and several killed in its wake. As with all the women in their village, her *bhalo naam*, her formal identity, was a string of first names – Jahanara Yasmine Noor – as women were, of course, traditionally unable to carry the strong names of their fathers. In fact, the two brothers had their father's first names suffixed by their own first names; Mustafa Anwar and Mustafa Sarwar. Some of the boys at the village school, where Anwar was halfway through Class 4, had this phenomenon reversed. His best friend was Rafiq bin Anam, the

patronymic *bin* denoting he was the son of Anam. In lieu of family names, their father's names loomed over them, heavy with the weight of tradition and expectations.

Anwar sat quietly on the steps, an arm protectively over six-year-old Sarwar, who perhaps realizing the seriousness of the event sat obediently by him, a contrast to his usual restlessness. The men congregated in their wrinkled *panjabis* and white *tupis*, each passing their decree on the deceased, even though few had ever spoken to her. The sun shone brightly, illuminating the aftermath of the sky's tantrum, a mess of leaves and broken branches that had yet to be cleared away. He stared up at the inopportune clear blue sky, betraying him by arriving too late. Searching the fluffy clouds, he pondered what kind of mystic power propels humans to the heavens after they die, perhaps a giant bird upon which they fly away. Choto Khala, Amma's youngest sister, emerged from the house, pushing aside the floral drapes that covered the doorway in place of a door. Her face was pale and her wide, dark eyes seemed sunken in as she stared blankly at Tufan, who lay gurgling in her arms, blissfully unaware of the trauma she had caused their family.

He had first laid eyes on his youngest sibling moments after bursting through that very same door, on the night of the storm. The floor was a sea of red, his mother lying in the center of the room as his aunts sobbed, flailing over her lifeless body. The baby lay forgotten beside them, covered in slime, looking like the inside of a *kalo jam* – bright pink – wriggling and screeching, as if equally appalled by the world as it were with her. Her birth as a girl child, a second at that, would not have heralded a celebration by any means, but in the aftermath of the circumstances the village concurred that her existence was cursed. The mourners barely glanced at her, as if the misfortune that befell his family was contagious. Anwar felt bad for the baby, it wasn't her fault; she looked so fragile and tiny,

drowning in his hand-me-downs that were passed from their brother, to their sister and had now found their way to her.

As in the funeral customs of the Islamic faith, the men remained out front, while the women, their heads covered with the ends of their *saris* and *ornas*, scuttled to the smaller house, the same one his mother had died in 4 days earlier. The floor had been wiped clean, but the room had a heaviness of its own, an impenetrable melancholy that consumed it, making it impossible for Anwar to enter without feeling as though he was suffocating. The two larger houses, on the other side of the *uthaan*, were for his father's brothers, one a teacher in Faridpur while the other was a jute trader in the village, both wealthier than his fisherman father and locked in a silent battle to out-do the other, as they created extensions and annexes to the family property, eager to mark their place both on the compound and in the village. But the politics of siblings; the tussle of property rights, Islamic law and the God-given privilege unquestionable doled out to the firstborn son of every home still eluded Anwar, all of 8 years old. All he heard were the mourners whispering to one another in hushed tones. *What would happen to the children? Without a mother they were as good as orphans.* He heard them comment about his siblings, likening his two sisters to the *jinns* who lurked in the jackfruit and mango trees at night, wreaking havoc on whomever dared to walk underneath by pelting them with fruit and tripping them over their long, knotted roots. The village children were often warned to not walk under the trees at night, lest they be possessed.

As the mourners reached the crescendo of the funeral song, he rose to his feet, dragging a sleepy Sarwar up by the arm, joining the men as they folded their hands in front of their chests in prayer. The smell of the traditional blessing of rosewater permeated the

air, as the local mullah's apprentice sprinkled it on the crowd. A drop landed in his eye, the sudden painful sting making it water. He was surprised he had any tears left. Having partaken in the show of paying their respects, the guests began to move out, helping themselves to a *mishti*, the mullah taking two and stuffing them into his mouth, crumbs sticking to his long beard and falling to the ground. He found it strange that sweets, usually associated with happier events, were given out to guests at a *milaad*, as well, a time of grief. As a seemingly endless stream of people from the village left his family's compound, Anwar watched them, ignoring the pitiful glances cast his way. As they had lived for hundreds of years, coexisting, partaking in each other's faiths and festivals, the Hindu and Christian villagers followed the motions with their Muslim neighbors at the funeral and had stood around the graveyard the morning after, as they lowered his mother, wrapped in a white cloth, into the earth.

The following year, Abba had remarried - a marriage arranged by his elder sister to a recent widow from the village across the river, their misfortunes making them a pitiful match. He thought Abba's new bride, new Amma, who paled in comparison to his own Amma, looked like a *dainiburi*. She was thin, like a cricket, with pointy elbows and a long, crooked nose with a tiny mole, down which she stared at her four new children. She seemed young, but at the same time much older than Amma, and had brought along her own three children, two girls and a boy, each as thin and quiet as her. They reminded him of insects, the way they had crawled into his life and infested his home. She was frugal, skilled in stretching a *rupee* ("a fine quality in a wife," mused the village elders) but to Anwar this only meant the absence of the treats he would share with Amma on a whim; fresh sugarcane juice, sweet and salty *nimki* or crunchy toast biscuits in the middle of the afternoon.

New Amma meant well for the most part, like the time she realized Roshanara was three years old and, in the tumultuousness of her early years, had yet to have her ears pierced. Her nose would follow as she reached puberty, perhaps even before, with a traditional piercing on the left nostril. To remedy this oversight, one day she called Roshanara to sit in front of her, as she perched on a small wooden *piri* outside the house. The tiny, unsuspecting girl sat in front of her stepmother, her jet black curls jutting out in every direction. New Amma dipped a needle, held carefully over a flame, in a clear glass bottle of ether and before the child could understand what was happening, she pierced and pulled the needle through her ear lobe in one swift move, tying a black string through the new piercing and cleaning the residual blood off the needle. Roshanara's eyes widened, silent at first. Then, she screamed. Tears streamed down her face as she ran towards the back of the house, crying and rolling around the grass in hysterics, so much so that they were unable to coax her back to pierce her left ear. So that was how she remained, like a tiny pirate. with one ear pierced, her signature thick crop of wild, curly black hair a perpetual mess, staying as far away from her stepmother as she could.

It wasn't that new Amma was cruel to the children - she cooked for them, mended their clothes and disciplined them when she had to, giving them chores and treating them no differently than her own - it was just that she could never measure up to the light and joy their own mother had bestowed upon them. As a result, amongst the brothers, they called her the witch; this small act of defiance a petty balm for their broken hearts. New Amma seemed exasperated with Anwar, her patience turning to dislike. As the eldest of the brood he would talk back to her, the two tip-toeing a line of tolerance and mutual hatred as the days passed.

Once he ran up to the local general store, sneaking a banana and a packet of biscuits when the shopkeeper turned the other way. He was gleefully sharing his bounty with Sarwar and Roshanara, still sporting only one pierced ear, when Zaman, one of the insects, saw them and tattled to his mother. That night squashed between his siblings both new and old, his wounds from the earlier *jhaaru* beating still prickling, he wondered whether she was angry about his larceny or rather, that he dared to feel a moment of happiness. If he held his breath, over the symphony of cicadas he could almost hear the *jinns*, the spirit sisters as they danced under the trees, laughing at him, whispering to each other in delight about his inescapable misfortune.

The smell of food became the narration of his life, his clock and his calendar. The pungent aroma of *pangash maach*, the fish sizzling as soon as it hit the oil, meant Abba had done well that day, with enough to spare to feed his new family of nine. A mild, watery no-smell-at-all meant just *bhaath* for dinner - a few grains of boiled rice each, perhaps with some daal, never enough to quieten the hunger pangs that gnawed at him through the night. The scraping of the one metal spoon they owned against the metal pot meant the rice was ready, and you better come first if you wanted to be fed. There was no call for dinner.

As his tenth birthday came and went unacknowledged, it became clear Anwar had an aptitude for school. His uncle, the principal, a highly educated man ran the district's best school where Anwar passed both reading and numbers with flying colors, despite seldom studying. Instead, he could often be found lazing by the river or loitering near the general store with Rafiq, trying to decipher the long words in the newspapers that hung from the rack. The grainy black and white picture showed Mahatma Gandhi – he knew him from lessons in school – clad in sandals, wrapped in a white *dhoti* and carrying a walking

stick. For such an important man, every time Anwar saw a picture of Gandhi, he seemed to be in a *dhoti*, not unlike many of the men in his own village. Although he was certainly famous, perhaps he was not rich, as his pictures with the British always depicted the white men in their fancy suits, while Gandhi wore the same loincloth. In between their lessons of rote memorization at school, Anwar had learned from a loquacious teacher that a few years before his birth, the village had been abuzz at the prospect of something called the Swadeshi movement, in response to the partitioning of Bengal. “Partition, sir?” he had asked, confused.

“Yes boy, partition! Divided! Snapped into pieces like peanut brittle” Rao Sir exclaimed, gesturing wildly as his black, thick framed glasses slid off his nose.

“But we are still all in Bengal, sir...”

“Well, for a few years we were not, boy! They – the powers that be, our white overlords – had decided to divide and conquer, ripping apart the brothers of Bengal, creating a chasm with an east and a west. But you see, they underestimated us! *Amra Bangali nah?* We are Bengalis, no? We refused to let them divide the great goddess of Bengal. They could not contain our rage. In 1911, they welded us back together, but took with them the capital. Did you know, before Delhi, the capital of India was Calcutta, resplendent in all her glory? Now, the Bengalis, all the people who speak our mother tongue have been reunited, but perhaps the seeds of separation have already been sown...” he trailed off, muttering to himself about the wrongdoings inflicted upon his people.

Anwar was unsure what Rao Sir meant by this. He was prone to launching into speeches, pontificating about Tagore or a man named Marx and the time he had spent attending the University of Calcutta. As the eldest son, Mr. Rao was summoned back to

their village to care for his aging parents. Anwar learned from him that the Swadeshi movement allowed women to join the fight against the injustice of the British Raj's decision to split Bengal. In every home, women began to spin *khadi* – a fabric made by cotton yarn spun on the wheel of the *charkas* they had in their homes. Gandhi *ji* had proclaimed there would be no more British fabric, only clothes made nationally from now on, and everyone must help out. In Calcutta, Mr. Rao's lamented former capital of the Raj and the nearest metropolis to Jessore, he learned people were still taking part in this movement to boycott the British, but for the rural populations, burdened with poverty and their provincial problems, the fire for fighting the British seemed to have retreated to a low simmer.

Another picture in the newspaper a few days later showed Gandhi once again, on his knees on the coast, clutching a handful of salt. It seemed he had journeyed to a faraway place near the Arabian Sea, Dandi, on the other side of their vast country, by walking 241 miles over 3 weeks. Anwar was skeptical that this could be done. The newspapers said his quest for salt would “shake the foundations of the British Empire.” He didn't quite understand the link between the high prices of salt and the British, who had ruled their country since before him, or Abba, or Abba's Abba had been born. Malek Kaka, the general store owner, chuckled as he watched Anwar his brow furrowed in concentration as he deciphered the long sentences. “*Ki re*, what are you reading? Gandhi *ji* will pave the way to our freedom!”

At that very moment, Sarwar came running down the path that led to their homes. “Dada, dada, come quickly! The witch is looking for you!” he exclaimed. Behind him he saw his stepmother charging at him, her eyes narrowed in rage. Grabbing him by the ear,

she pulled him all the way back to their house, pushing him onto the chair next to the small table for her and Abba. He noticed his workbook lay open on the table, rubbing his ear as it pulsed in pain. “Sit, you ungrateful imbecile – all day I slave away for you and your wretched brothers and sisters and you can’t do any of your schoolwork? Look at this, books filled with drawings of birds!” she threw the book on the floor “Why do we even send you? You should be working out in the fields! But you can’t even do that, can you? You little shit...” her rant was stifled as a low rumbling sound cut through the air. She stopped, looking around in mild bewilderment, as the noise got louder. A cup of water, still in its silver metal thimble on the table, began to shake. He bolted out of the door, leaving behind his stepmother’s irate shouts as he craned his neck towards the sky, following the clouds. He ran, barefoot, as fast as his legs could carry him, through the paddy fields, along the brook, sprinting through the village, taking the shortcuts he could navigate blindfolded, his neck craned towards the sky until...there! He finally spotted it! That majestic, metallic bird as it played hide and seek with him, dipping behind the fluffy cotton-white clouds, its wings glistening in the sun. It propelled itself, flying through the air as if by sheer magic. It was a fantastical sight, a wondrous machine unlike anything he had ever seen. He reached out his arms, following the outstretched wings as far as he could, making a silent vow to himself – one day, he too would learn to fly.

THE DAWAAT

The 21st of February 1947, began as an ordinary, insignificant Friday, ripe with the glorious promise of the weekend that lay in wait. As dawn broke over the city, a rare moment of stillness preceded the cacophony of Calcutta. In moments, an orchestra of chirping birds would greet the morning, their tunes echoing through the streets, rousing each citizen into being with the first rays of the sun. The tram bells rang through the wide boulevards as the *coolies* shouted to one another, hoisting heavy trunks onto trains at a bustling Howrah Station. The newly constructed Howrah Bridge loomed tall in the distance, watching the day unfold. It seemed the only person immune to the rising buzz of the city was Gopi, the old security guard at 24 Sukia Street, as he sat in his usual state; dozing with his salt and pepper head against the wall, sitting on a cracked wooden stool beside the ornate black iron gate.

Upstairs in the house, Rekha awoke to a burst of sunlight streaming into her room, the warm space filled with the divine fragrance of her beloved *beli phool*, nestled in their pots on the roof. Of all the spaces in their three-storied bungalow style house, she loved her little room the most for this very reason; the vast, blue sky visible from the large windows dressed in white colonial shutters, with a plethora of flowers – tuberose, hibiscus and night-flowering jasmine – peeking through from the rooftop. It was her own space away from the chaos of her four younger siblings, especially good for devouring her beloved novels, in both English and Bengali. Her love for Tagore's work bordered on obsession, followed by Austen, Tolstoy and Dickens, each sentence as delectable as the last. She would happily spend hours lost in their prose, forgetting to emerge from her room for meals, the words her only sustenance. She stretched in her single bed, thinking about

her plans for the day ahead attending her college classes and the weekend that lay in wait after, but before she could contemplate any further, Dipa bundled into her room in her nightgown, a long ribboned plait cascading down her back as she jumped on the bed. “Didi! *Shunle tumi?* The British are leaving India!”

Rekha sat up in bed, her round, brown eyes widening in astonishment. “Leaving? What do you mean leaving? Don’t be silly, who told you that?” she asked her younger sister incredulously. “*Asho*, quickly, come to the table Didi!” Dipa said excitedly, as she jumped off the bed and hurried back downstairs. Rekha put on her green silk dressing gown and followed her sister to find Ma & Baba sitting at their large, dark brown dining table made of solid Burma teak wood, listening intently to the broadcast on the radio. Her youngest brother, one year old Debendranath, sat on their mother’s lap being fed *doodh bhaath*, while Ramnath and Mita, at ages six and eight, were engaged in a captivating game of attempting to sneak bits of their breakfast onto each other's plates when the adults were looking elsewhere.

It seems that while they had slept in Calcutta, the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, had announced at a meeting of Parliament in London – halfway across the world, where all decisions concerning India were made – that the British Raj would come to an end on a date “*not later than June, 1948*”. A few days earlier, Lord Louis Mountbatten, a man known for his heroism in recapturing Burma from the Japanese in the Second World War, was appointed as Viceroy of India by His Majesty King George VI. The Viceroy and Vicereine were to facilitate this transition of power to Jawaharlal Nehru, the leader of the future independent India.

As the announcer's voice crackled through the radio, Baba lowered his newspaper, his thick framed glasses fogging up with the steam from his *doodh cha* and took a pensive sip. 1948, that was only a little over a year away, he mused, how could they so quickly withdraw from centuries of rule? Baba had lived his entire life under the influence of the British, as did generations of his forefathers who preceded him. The British Raj had ruled India for over 300 years, since the time of the creation of the East India Company in the year 1600. Their sole purpose was to carve out a slice of the lucrative Indian trade, which at the time accounted for a quarter of all trade done in the entire world. Baba's father, the historian Nikhilnath Roy, was the author of the famed "Murshidabad Kahini", an account of Murshidabad, the fallen capital of Bengal that was once the wealthiest Mughal province. From this illustrious city came raw silk, ivory, music and art in the form of Murshidabad style miniature paintings. The defeat of the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud Daulah, in the Battle of *Polashi* (anglicized as the Battle of Plassey) allowed the British East India Company to capture Bengal, thwarting the rapidly advancing French army poised to overtake them. Their victory allowed the East India Company to sow the seeds of the British Empire; over the course of the next century, the British Raj would proceed to capture the entire Indian subcontinent, with the added prize of Burma.

Baba's family had never left India. Along with his three brothers, Baba studied Law at the University of Calcutta and practiced at the High Court. Although highly educated, they were traditional in many ways that Ma thought oppressive. To Ma, her family was far more modern; she turned up her nose at many of the practices of her in-laws which she followed nonetheless, leading her to live a life filled with waves of quiet disappointment, buoyed by her air of superiority. Her grandfather on her mother's side, Dr. Ramdas Sen,

another historian in the family tree and a famous one at that, was a *zamindar* in Murshidabad. Dr. Sen was allegedly one of the first Bengali men to leave India and journey to Europe to obtain his PhD. A polyglot, he was fluent in English, French and Bengali of course, as well as the ancient languages of Sanskrit and Prakrit - the ancestral tongues that paved the way for the birth of the Bengali language. He was fascinated by the clothing and liberal concepts he observed in the West; their marriages seemed to be carried out on the terms of consent and mutual attraction, a stark contrast to his own endogamous marriage to his second cousin (Ma's grandmother), as dictated by tradition, when she was only nine years old and he was twenty two.

Upon his return to his motherland, he employed an English governess for his children, who wore dresses with ribbons in their hair and played English instruments, like the organ and the piano, eschewing the traditional *harmonium* or the *tanpura*. This was how Ma grew up, the ninth of ten children, with all the women in her family educated, fluent in English, and with a great appreciation for English poetry, art and music. Ma's own father, who worked closely with the English for his government job and, considering them the epitome of taste and class, incorporated their imported customs into his own household, despite never being allowed to set foot in their clubs on account of the color of his skin. Although lately one would be blind to ignore the fact that the tempestuous relationship between the English and the natives, as he had often heard them refer to people of his creed, had reached a tipping point.

India had made her demands for independence heard, and felt, with protests and demonstrations culminating in the 'Quit India' movement as anti-British sentiment swept through the nation. Their involuntary participation of the second World War had led to

losing countless of their own lives to save their colonizers. The quest of setting themselves free of the shackles of the British Raj had allowed the recent undercurrents of religious tensions to surface. For centuries, they had lived in secular communities, partaking in each other's religious celebrations; Puja, Eid, and Christmas all meant food and festivals, not fear and riots. As tensions continued to rise, pogroms between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had become increasingly common, culminating in a weeklong communal riot between Muslims and Hindus in Calcutta that resulted in over 4000 deaths, later referred to as 'The Week of Long Knives'. While the two main political parties, with Jinnah leading the All-India Muslim League and Nehru heading the National Congress, tussled over Jinnah's demand for a Muslim homeland, it was, as always, the people who paid the price - inflicting on each other killings, arson, rape and forced conversion. The British, bested at a game of identity politics they themselves had began and could not contain, began to lay out plans to hand over power to India to sort out their own mess. They had brought with them the railroads, the postal system, cricket and tennis, but in their departure, planned to leave behind chaos.

Ma, unfazed by Prime Minister Atlee's declaration as she was by most occurrences, flipped through her bazaar accounts with one hand, a fat stack of itemized grocery lists held together by a steel binder clip which was starting to show a patina of rust at the edges. "Well, nevermind that now, we have work to do. Rekha, we have a guest coming to dinner tonight." Like her mother, Ma was married to Baba at the age of twelve, when he was a twenty year old law student. Rekha, the first of her 5 children, was born to her at sixteen, what the family elders deemed a long wait for the disappointment of a firstborn girl. She bore her in-laws one girl child after another, 3 in 13 years, after which fortune smiled upon

them with the arrival of Ramnath Roy, little Ram, at last the male heir of the Roy family, who was followed by Debendranath, or Deb, who now sat on his mother's lap, trying to scoop up a handful of the milky rice he was being fed.

"A guest?" Rekha looked up from her plate of hot toast, browned to a crisp, which she was coating with Polson's butter. She had picked up this habit from accompanying her father to the High Court Club as a young girl. Every Saturday Rekha, then a tiny tot, would hold Baba's hand and head out for the journey by tram to Esplanade. After a short walk through the park, they would reach the Club, where membership was reserved solely for lawyers and judges. She sat on a bench in the corner, watching wide-eyed while Baba played tennis with his high court friends. Harry Dada - whose real name was actually Horihor, shortened and anglicized as many native names were for the ease of British tongues - would fry up an egg, speckled with salt and pepper, and place it upon a hot, pan-toasted slice of white bread, smothered in the same rich, tangy, salty Polson's. An up and coming brand, Amul, had recently rolled out a fresh cream butter which tasted bland and paltry, almost flavorless compared to the real thing. It was likely only a matter of days till the small brand went under; the taste of Polson's was unparalleled. When her grandparents were still alive, eggs were forbidden in their strict vegetarian Hindu household, which made this treat all the more delicious.

"Yes, a guest, a young gentleman we met at Sajani *kaka's* party last night" she said, turning a page of handwritten receipts over. "Such a nice boy, he has a very talented voice and plays the harmonium so well! He is a Muslim I believe, in Calcutta for training. He must be in want of a home cooked meal so I invited him for dinner. A few of our friends

will be joining us to hear him sing, so we will need food for eight people - the children can eat earlier. Rekha, perhaps you can join us.”

Rekha stared at her mother as her dreams of the weekend ahead dissipated with news of this *dawaat*. In her parents’ circle of friends, a motley crew of lawyers, poets, artists and thinkers, their gatherings had a way of turning into a chain of reciprocal invites, a *nemontonno* for lunch, dinner or tea the following day, with no dearth of topics to be hotly contested over endless cups of *cha*. She couldn’t believe her brand-new stack of books from the library would have to wait until the cooking was done, that too for a Muslim boy in the midst of all the religious trouble brewing/steeping in the tea cup that was her city. Although the Calcutta of her youth was a multicultural metropolis, she didn’t have any close Muslim friends, besides the few girls at school who mostly kept to themselves. She had heard sometimes they go for a month without eating or drinking - how she wished today was one of those days! Her only other interaction with their community was peeping through the shutters as hordes of them passed their old house in Mohon Bagan Row, on an annual procession, yelling “*ya Hasan, ya Hussain*”. She didn’t know who Hasan or Husain were, where they went every year or what the fuss was about, but now here she was, slaving away for some unknown Muslim man coming to dinner.

Her books lay under the bed, untouched, her characters calling her back to a fairytale world of faraway lands and wonders. As a child, Rekha often hid under the bed to read and avoid chores, attempting to decipher the letters in the darkness. Even though Rekha was now 18, a college student on the cusp of adulthood, Ma ruled the house with an iron fist. She was already rattling off menu items for their guests and instructing Dipa to set out flowers. Rekha suppressed a giggle as their eyes met and her younger sister rolled

hers dramatically. “But Ma, I’m not even allowed to be there! Didi arranges flowers better than me anyway,” she whined. “*Chup!*” Ma silenced her with a glare. “Rekha, are you listening? I will do the *ghee polao*, perhaps *maacher jhol*, oh and *kosha mangsho* of course! I’ll ask Gopi to fetch some lamb. Why don’t you help the maids make some beetroot chops, and the *luchi* and *aloo posto*? What shall we feed them for dessert?”

Rekha groaned inwardly but didn’t dare complain; she wasn’t as audacious as Dipa. She felt the chops were the most laborious; boiling the cubed beetroot, carrots and potatoes, spicing, mashing then shaping them into large teardrop shapes and frying them in breadcrumbs. Even though they were fortunate enough to have household help, they did not have a cook. Ma, a talented in the kitchen, wanted her daughters to learn and prepare all the family recipes starting at the age of twelve. Dipa had proven herself hopeless in the culinary arts (although Rekha suspected this was a cleverly orchestrated ploy to avoid the cooking), so she was relegated to days when they did not have company. Rekha seemed to have inherited Ma’s talent, the reward for which was that she would be in the kitchen all day. An idea came to her for a brief respite. “Ma, since Gopi will be busy at the bazaar, how about Dipa & I go to Flury’s to buy dessert?”

“Buy?” Ma looked horrified, but she relented at the thought of the delectable baked goods. “Fine, I shall make *payesh* at home too, so they do not think us ill-mannered. But go to Nahoum’s for their fruit cake instead,” she said as she left the table.

Rekha was thrilled, a journey to the bustling New Market on Lindsay Street meant sneaking all the way to the back to visit the wide range of exotic animals that were kept for sale. Dipa, who loved animals far more than she did, fearlessly reached through the cages when the shop owners weren’t looking, to pet the birds. “Aren’t they magnificent Didi?”

Imagine what it would be like to know how to fly, far away to foreign lands, but instead be trapped here,” she mourned for the bird she was stroking, “Such a pretty thing, yet caged and unable to soar.”

Nahoums and Son’s Est. 1902, read the large metal sign above a small storefront, housing a wide range of pastries inside, in neat rows in glass cases. The bakery was started by a man named Nahoum Israel Mordecai, a member of the Baghdadi Jews, whose ancestors settled around the trade ports of the Indian Ocean. From the late 18th century, Calcutta was home to a sizable Jewish community, who built synagogues, schools and also this popular bakery. At Christmas, customers would stand in lines that spanned blocks to purchase their famous fruit cake, rumored to have been served to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Jewish community in India had achieved other accolades too. The first ever Miss India pageant would take place later that year, the winner being Pramila, whose real name was Esther Victoria Abraham, a famous actress who was Jewish, not unlike fellow film stars Sulochana (Ruby Myers) and Nadira (Florence Ezekiel). Pramila was 31 years old and pregnant at the time of her being crowned Miss India. Twenty years later, in a different world with different borders, her daughter with Muslim actor *Syed Hassan Ali* (who adopted an Indian screen name, Kumar), Naqi Jahan, would also be crowned Miss India - they would become the first mother daughter duo to do so. But for now, in British India, the Roy family readied themselves for their mystery guest.

As the doorbell rang that night, it’s tinkling sound ricocheting around the house, Rekha was in the kitchen, the *aachal* of her yellow sari wrapped around her and tucked into her petticoat, battling with the last dish for dinner. A speck of flour stuck to her forehead as she wiped a sweaty tendril out of her face with the back of her hand. The *luchi*,

meant to be served piping hot, refused to rise into the starchy, puffed perfection it usually did, as though weighed down by her disregard for this dinner. She piled a few that looked presentable enough on a plate and hurried to the dining room. Even in February, the old wooden ceiling fan creaked incessantly as it cut through the thick Calcutta heat, resulting it seemed, only in hot air being circled around the room. She sprinkled a garnish of cilantro on the thick *daal*, placing it next to a fresh, cool *kachumber* salad made of cucumber, tomatoes and onions, as the guests began to pile into the dining room. A stack of plates sat at the head of the table, with no cutlery beside it. As was the custom, the guests would eat with their hands.

She snuck away for a moment's peace, and as the noises of the guests chattering about politics and this morning's announcement by the Prime Minister died away, she overheard Ma engaging in an age-old Bengali hosting practice; bragging under the guise of self-deprecation. It was a finely tuned art, a performance she excelled in.

"*Bou-than!*" exclaimed their friend Sajani, better known as Sajanikanta Das, a famed literary critic. "We are not worthy of such a splendid feast!"

"Oh, it's nothing at all" Ma replied dismissively, "Just casual home food, simple preparation really. It pales in comparison to your wife's cooking I'm sure, the evidence lies in the small helping you have taken!" she said, gesturing to his plate. "Nonsense! I am just whetting my appetite for the next round" Sajani replied. "I'm ashamed in fact, there may not even be enough for this small gathering," said Ma, knowing full well that there was an abundance of food.

After dinner was over and she had fed and put to bed her younger siblings upstairs, Rekha joined the guests. They fanned out in the living room, eager to listen to the young,

uniformed man sitting in front of the *harmonium*, who had brought his own thick bound *Gitobitan* with him that housed a wealth of Tagore songs. He also sang some folk music by Abbas Uddin, more modern and upbeat. Dipa, considered on the cusp of adulthood at 16, sat on the stairs, peeking through the heavy, maroon curtains hung over the doorway. As he began to sing, Rekha understood why Ma had been so enamored by his singing; he had a deep voice, melodious yet melancholic and hauntingly beautiful. He was handsome, she supposed, with dark wavy hair, sharp features and bright brown eyes that sparkled, as though he knew a joke he was keeping from you. He spotted her watching him and smiled at her as he sang. She couldn't discern if it was talent or showboating when he hit the notes perfectly, as he finished what was no doubt a much practiced set, and bashfully shook his head at the murmurs of appreciation from the small audience. "Anwar here is a pilot, you know," Baba said, during a break in the singing as he introduced their new friend to another guest, "he fought in the war and is now going into commercial airlines, in what is sure to be a prestigious career!" he beamed, slapping him on the back.

Suddenly, she found him by her side. "You must be Rekha! Your mother mentioned you would be joining us, although I'm sure you had more interesting plans. I apologize for ruining them!" Rekha looked up at him, he was taller than she thought he would be.

"I also couldn't help but notice we have another guest, but perhaps she is shy," he gestured towards the stairs where Dipa was still peeping. Upon seeing their eyes on her, she quickly disappeared behind the curtain. Rekha laughed, "she is anything but shy, and yes, I would much rather be reading but here we are!" He seemed amused by her reply, asking questions about books, novels and literary magazines, surprising her by matching her opinions on

most authors. “This has been such a wonderful night, you see with my siblings in Dacca, it is always nice to revel in such a lively, jovial atmosphere.”

Ma overheard this and promptly said, “Then you must come again Anwar! Our home is yours.”

Over the course of the next few months, the Roy family saw more of their guest, who dropped in for dinners, badminton nights, attempting to evade the mosquitos on the lawn outside where they had set up a court, and even once unannounced, almost causing Ma to go into a tizzy over what to feed him. He sang often, alternating between Tagore and Nazrul and answered her younger siblings’ numerous questions on what it was like to fly a plane. Even Dipa, who feigned disinterest, would stop what she was doing to listen intently to his descriptions of the sky. On one of these occasions, as he wrapped up a story, Rekha commented “oh how lovely, to think of what it would be like!” when Anwar looked up and boldly said, “I could take you if you’d like,” he quickly looked at Baba and added “with your permission of course, *kaka*. There’s a small plane on the runway, you can all come!” he said looking around the room excitedly. “Although I can only take one person....since Rekha spoke first, perhaps it could be her.”

It seemed a convenient excuse to spend time alone, but she did not let the opportunity pass her by. A plane! She would be the first one in her family to ever be on one. As they climbed into their seats from a tall step ladder, Anwar respectfully helped her fasten her seatbelt and explained the mechanics of it to her and Baba, who looked increasingly displeased but unable to stop this snowballing of events. It was an off-white propeller plane, smaller than she had imagined, with an open cockpit and only two seats. How she missed her sister! Dipa had chosen to stay home, petulantly remarking that she

would rather practice the new hairstyle she had seen when she snuck into a morning matinee of the recent film *Jugnu*. She didn't care much about planes anyway, she said.

"Bismillah", Anwar said under his breath as he turned on the engine, using the Muslim invocation for blessed beginnings, half in jest, as he was not particularly religious but mildly superstitious. She gazed at him in wonder as he confidently propelled them forward, silently repeating the word to herself, her tongue tripping over the unfamiliar twists. She wondered, in an alternate universe, what religion their children would be - children! - she chastised herself immediately for even thinking of it. The plane lurched backwards and off they went, Baba's grimace and narrow eyes following her as she floated towards the sky. She watched her family, her tiny siblings waving as they stood, growing smaller and smaller before becoming tiny specs on the ground. How grand the views were, everything was matchbox sized; green patches and miniscule pastel colored doll's houses all lined up in a row. Anwar had promised Baba he would stay within eyesight, but they began to climb higher. Her stomach fluttered as they turned and the plane curved sideways, circling back to the airport. On the return loop, they climbed higher still, through a low cloud where Rekha felt little drops of precipitation land on her floral silk sari. She felt as though she were on a magic carpet, like the fantastical tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Everything was so serene, looking down on the ground from high up there; if everyone tried it, she was convinced they could achieve world peace. It was the most wondrous journey of her life.

On the third day of June, as the oppressive heat infiltrated their usually cool concrete home, they heard Lord Mountbatten's crisp English accent filter through the Indian radio airwaves as Baba kept adjusting the antennae, *"For more than a hundred*

years, 400,000,000 of you have lived together, and this country has been administered as a single entity....To my great regret it has been impossible to obtain agreement.....that would preserve the unity of India. But, there can be no question of coercing any large areas in which one community has a majority to live against their will under a Government in which another community has a majority, and the only alternative to coercion is partition.”

The events that followed unfolded quickly, both in Rekha’s life and for the lives of millions, who were reduced to numbers on dated maps. A British lawyer named Cyril Radcliffe drew arbitrary lines on paper, forever cementing their fates, carving out India and two Pakistans - East and West. In Bengal and Punjab, the two biggest provinces of India where Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs spoke the same language, neighbors began bolting their usually open doors shut, peering through their windows in suspicion of one another. Many began the arduous journeys to the unknown, taking with them only what they could carry; family heirlooms, precious papers and deeds that were worthless on the other side of the invisible border determining their new identity.

Rekha often wondered what would become of the Anglo girls, lining up at the tram station in their fashion forward skirts, fellow college students, secretaries and teachers who came from railroad communities. She had heard people mutter insults under their breath, “blacky-whites” and “8 annas”, not the full 16 annas that made up a *rupee*. Their identities depended on the fact that they were different, but in a peculiar chain of contempt, the British looked down on the Anglo-Indians, who thought themselves superior to Indians. Unaccepted by the people who created them, they were too Indian to be British but too British to be Indian.

As the turbulent summer continued, she had not told her parents or even her best friend Lina, that Anwar had asked for her hand in marriage – twice in fact. She had felt privileged to get to know him, despite courting amongst her entire family. Several girls from school had married much younger, meeting their future husbands over tea just once, before being given away, swathed in red.

In hurried handwritten notes left on the side of tea saucers or on window-sills, she had informed him that not all acquaintances must end in marriage, proud of her own pragmatism. It was an absurd idea, the current political climate notwithstanding, as they had hardly spent five minutes alone, but the pull she felt towards him, their connection, outdid the scenes from any of her novels. In a surprising twist, an unlikely ally, a usual stalwart of morality had pushed for their union - Ma. She sat down with her eldest, treating her as an equal for the first time, “I think you should marry him, religion be damned! He will allow you to finish your studies you know, that was our only condition. The future brings with it so much change, we cannot be stuck in the past,” she declared, as she pivoted to plan a wedding feast, leaving Rekha staring in shock at the familiar stranger before her.

When the day arrived, Rekha sat at her dressing table, coiling up her hair into a low bun at the nape of her neck and threading her favorite flowers carefully around it. It seemed strange, somber almost, as she prepared to be married in a brand new, pale pink sari, the gold threaded embroidery shining as it hit the sunlight. They had planned for a simple signing, with none of the rush or festivities of any other wedding she had attended. Her parents had let the family elders know in writing that morning, in an effort to thwart the protests that they knew were soon to come. The door of her room suddenly slammed open, as Dipa barged in.

“You didn’t even think of me,” she said through gritted teeth, her hazel eyes blazing. Rekha turned away from the large round mirror in bewilderment, unfazed by her usual melodrama. “Think of *you*? I didn’t realize I needed your permission, too, madam!” she remarked as she turned back to the mirror to find a bobby pin.

“What kind of marriage proposals will I receive now, Didi? Do you think any good households would want a bride from a family that intermarried? Himadri’s family...” she trailed off.

Rekha looked up at the mention of her Dipa’s classmate who came from a conservative, well to do Hindu family, meeting her sister’s tear-filled eyes in the mirror. She was used to her hysterics, but she hadn’t thought that her sister, only sixteen, had perhaps already dreamt of a future of her own. Before she could reply Ma came into the room and hurried them out - the clerk had arrived and Anwar and his friend were waiting downstairs; it was time.

Downstairs, Gopi stood staring at the padlock, as the man in front of him stood glaring, his light brown eyes squinting in rage. “Open this gate,” he growled “right this second!” Gopi slowly threw his *gamcha* over his shoulder, thinking. His undershirt, once white, was now a murky grey, plagued with holes and stained with kerosene, remains of his years of service for the family. He wondered how long a Muslim wedding took. Were the rounds by the fire longer or shorter? Unsure of how much time he had, he muttered flimsy excuses as he jingled his bunch of keys, “*acha, ek minute Dilip babu*, I can’t seem to find the right key....” Baba’s elder brother Dilip reached through the iron gate and grabbed him by his tattered clothing, slamming his face against the cold metal as Gopi wailed in protest. “*Kuttar baccha*, you think you are so clever?” Dilip spat, “Open the door

before I pull your head through these bars!” Gopi reluctantly drew the key from his pocket and turned the padlock, taking it off. Dilip flung open the gate, hitting him with it in the process, and hurried up the stairs with his two younger brothers in tow, as fast as he could move his overweight frame. Panting after his first few steps, wheezing by the second floor, he proceeded to climb up to the third floor to stop this abomination taking place. As he entered the living room, Rekha, her low bun covered in the aanchal of her sari, was putting down a fountain pen having just signed a large, pale blue leger.

He sputtered, “You” he pointed to Baba, “You allowed your daughter to marry one of them?! And to have this – this blasphemy occur on our father’s property?!” Baba stood silently as his red-faced older brother ranted, being held back by their younger siblings. Anwar smiled in the face of this commotion, taking Rekha’s hand, “How lovely of you to join us for this happy occasion, sir! Please have some of this exquisite *kheer* Ma has made in celebration. Unfortunately, you will have to excuse my bride & I, as we are heading to my home, in Dacca, on the next train.”

Years later, when her children were grown and her husband gone, she would wonder whether it had all been worth it - the loss of her family, her identity. The station was crowded, a frenzied buzz of families, the cries of small children drowning out the urgent bellows of the station master yelling out train numbers. With two small suitcases in hand, they maneuvered their way through the crowd, joining the lines of harried passengers. Some, like Anwar and Rekha, would arrive safely at their destinations, while others were destined to be one of the 12 million who spent months in refugee camps, or worse, be part of entire trains killed solely on the basis of their religion, the fount of their

new countries and their sole unifying identity. In this moment they were one, a thousand nameless, countryless faces, boarding trains to a journey into the unknown.

NINE MONTHS

January 31, 2020

When it happened, Aasha was not surprised by her adopted country's decision to leave the EU at all. The perpetually simmering tensions of the 60's, 70's and 80's may have been covered up, like the layer of raw dough that rests over a sumptuous biryani as it nears its finish; a sticky mess molded into presentability to cover the pot, all the while simmering beneath the surface lie the heat, spices and resulting steam, threatening to break through and ruin everything.

England was in fact the third country in her life Aasha had called home, having recently moved to live with her son, a successful investment banker, and his family. It was a blustery day in June, four years ago, when the shocking announcement broke. Her granddaughter Aria, a clever girl with a full head of dark, wavy hair not unlike her own, with the same bright green, inquisitive eyes as her mother, was sprawled on the leather sofa, somehow using both her laptop and her phone simultaneously. "*Dadi!* Listen to this!" she said, as she excitedly read out an excerpt, part of a poem perhaps - the screen had flashed before Aasha and all her dimming eyes could spot was a tiny blue bird. She had mastered the art of YouTube (using her voice controlled remote, which often misunderstood her to comic effect) - her partner for dancing in and out of nostalgia to the tune of old classics, watching clips from black and white movies that brought back precious yet fleeting memories. She could also use the voice note feature on WhatsApp to reach out to her many family members, now strewn in various pockets across the world, much like herself. Whenever the bright green logo of the app had a notification, it reminded her of a *teep*; a perfect red circle touting the number of messages she had. She was taught these

skills by Bilquis, a relative's maid, when she visited Dhaka for the winter. Despite never attending school, Bilquis was armed with her own cell phone and a litany of knowledge on how to use it, making her far more educated and connected than Aasha in this new world. The little mic icon and the smart, British assistant that came with it was the extent of her smartphone use. Not bad for an old woman, she thought. Increasingly, she often felt like a leftover relic from a time gone by, an anachronistic reminder of days passed.

The Tweet, Aria had called it that day, was by an author named Ted Scheinmann, (it was a trending meme now, she added helpfully, another word beyond Aasha) and it was this:



Figure 4: Tweet by Ted Scheinman.

How strange, yet true, she thought, thinking of her own country's traumatic past. This constant evolution of global ties often brought her back to her own family. Her parents belonged to three different countries, all in one lifetime, having never left their hometown as the world changed around them. Their grandchildren, her own children, ended up as citizens of a different country, oceans away, while their mixed race great-grandchildren belonged to yet another nation, with no ties at all to the place she once knew as "home".

December 31st, 1970

She examined herself appraisingly in the antique mirror, all of 21 years old. The smell of festivity permeated through the late winter air, a marriage of the sickly sweet aroma of crispy *jilapi* and *bhapa pitha* on the hot griddle, the inviting whiff of *biye bari'r* roast. From her window she could see the lights strung up in the garden, emitting a lackluster glow in the daytime, as the rising chatter of the guests echoed through the tent. Several of them - aunts, cousins, family friends, friends of friends and the occasional stranger - traipsed in and out of the house, stepping into her room to see the bride. The floor of the veranda, which connected her room to the rest of the two-story red brick house, was almost obstructed from view, piled high with wicker baskets; small circles, large rectangles and every shape in between, each holding a collection of gifts for her family. "Look at all the lovely *dalas* your in-laws have brought, Aasha! You are such a lucky girl!" exclaimed one of her aunts. A murmuring chorus of "oh, so lucky" rang out from the women gathered on the veranda, eyeing her trousseau with wide eyed, thinly concealed envy.

Luck and fortune, twin fickle friends who had seized control of her destiny and brought her to this day. It was bad luck that Abba's construction company had fallen through, leaving them penniless, but a fortunate turn that her beauty - light green eyes with flecks of hazel, inherited from Kashmiri ancestors, a stark contrast to her dark skin - had caught the eye of the local matchmaker at the shops lining the main road, to arrange this blessed union. Her mother had sent in her only recent photograph, taken at the studio in Rajarbagh. In it, she had an expression of mild bewilderment, making her eyes appear even more intense. Photographer Uncle had asked her to turn her head this way and that, making a frame with his index finger and thumb to examine her face and using a blindingly bright

white flash that left her seeing spots. Behind her lay a backdrop, inexplicably adorned with velvet curtains and Roman pillars. The last time she had been in a studio like this was to take the family portrait that now hung in their living room. Her father, a stately looking man, sat clad in his black sherwani, worn with a *Jinnah* cap. Beside him sat her mother in her best sari, an ivory silk, paired with ornate gold earrings, a thin gold chain and 4 gold bangles on each wrist. Aasha, the middle child, knelt on the floor in front of them, seated in her place between her two brothers. That photograph had been sent to him too, her future husband. Luck again, that his progressive family was eschewing the often incumbent dowry that her family would have never been able to afford. So why did she feel like she was attending a funeral?

This was the way it had always been. Sometimes it felt as though their own lives weren't really theirs to begin with, just a series of manifestations of the wishes of the elders, the gentle but persistent nudge of society towards the right path, always the same path, never deviating from tradition. As the buzz outside grew, her mother, aunts and older cousins adorned her with jewelry. Gold *chand bala* earrings, weighing so heavy on her ears that they threatened to split her dainty pierced lobes, 5 gold rings, one for each finger, joined to one another with strands of pearls connecting to a thin gold bracelet, a gold *tikli* with an ornate pendant hanging from it, the little gemstones glistening in the afternoon sunlight. A dozen red glass bangles were slid onto each arm, capped with two thick gold ones that once belonged to her mother.

The aunties attending squealed and gasped as she emerged from her small bedroom. Nothing made them happier than a wedding, it almost seemed to give their lives a sense of purpose, weeding out the next sacrificial lamb from amidst the festivities. "*Ki shundor!*"

Akdom doll *akta*, she looks like an absolute doll!” they gushed, as they gave her a onceover. She thought she looked like a clown. Her makeup was a few shades too light, the red lipstick and dark eyeliner, done by one of her aunts, garish on her small face. The *Benarasi* sari she wore was a bright tomato red - her least favorite color - with a thick, intricate gold border. The very same sari was worn by her own mother in law and her mother before that, carefully put away in a steel *almari* after each wedding, earmarked for the next bride. It was shiny and gaudy, much like the decorations outside, with an added veil so absurdly heavy that it took the help of three of her cousins and her best friend, Samira, to help her walk. But these were all good signs of a modern family, giving presents instead of taking. Only everyone seemed to be neglecting the fact that what they were taking was her.

It was the cusp of a new decade, the 1970’s. It seemed new, exciting. The turn of the new year brought with it so many changes – a new husband, a new country and a new life. Her name, Aasha, meant hope but she only felt uncertainty as she walked the long path towards the stranger on the makeshift floral stage erected for the wedding rituals. He was nice enough, she supposed. Not much to look at; an eager, round face with a bulbous nose, not very tall, not fat but not thin, not much of anything at all. They had spoken approximately once before this day, albeit indirectly, his deep voice reminding her of a college professor, droning on about history as they sat surrounded by their parents. He had arrived from America ten days prior and would be taking her with him when he left. She was not sure what he did exactly, but the family elders and the matchmaker had all deemed it a respectable profession. She found him exceedingly dull, but he was perhaps a safe choice for this new journey she was about to embark upon. In any case, it was better than

her parents, who had met for the first time on their own wedding stage; her at 15 and him at 27.

Her parents were married on March 21st, 1948, a Sunday, when the city of Dacca was abuzz with excitement with the news of a visiting dignitary. Dacca was the capital of the newly formed East Pakistan, separated from its brother, West Pakistan, by the vast expanse of India in between. Thousands of people flocked to the Ramna Race Course Maidan to catch a glimpse of the country's first Governor General, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, on what would be his first and last visit to East Pakistan. In his address, Jinnah had laid down the law, quieting the murmurs of more change that awaited the brand new country. "Let me make it clear to you," his gravelly voice echoed across the race course, "That the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead us is the enemy of Pakistan." The crowd was aghast - the imposition of Urdu meant that Bengalis would be kept in the dark, unable to decipher the nuances of education, media and politics, foreign to the language of their own country. There was no room for differences in Jinnah's Pakistan, carved out from India based on a common religion, it would now have a common language too, one that was not spoken by the majority.

In response, the Bengalis of East Pakistan had their first strike, a repertoire of political participation they would continue to use for many decades far into the future. That summer, the educated middle class, Aasha's newly married father included, expressed their anxieties by protesting. When she was two years old, the language movement, or *bhasha andolon*, was well underway. In the face of this growing discontent, the government invoked Section 144, a remnant from the British era once used against them on their own people, outlawing unlawful assemblies or public gatherings. On the 21st of February, 1952,

the masses organized a protest at Dacca University, the first university in East Bengal. In the height of the protest, police opened fire, wounding many and killing 4 student protestors, Salam, Barkat, Rafiq and Jabbar. It was the first recorded instance of citizens laying down their lives for the right to speak their mother tongue. Their names of those four young boys would become synonymous with the movement, spoken to generations that came after them. In light of the continued defiance of the masses, the government relented, declaring Bengali as the official language of the region.

But still, the tensions simmered. The West Pakistanis deemed their darker skinned brethren from the East beneath them. They were not Muslim enough, from their clothes to their culture, the women's midriff baring *saris* forgoing modesty, with festivities such as Bengali New Year not in line with Islamic principles. They were Bengali first and Pakistani second, their language crude and their people uncultured. That didn't stop them from taking and taxing their tea, their jute and encouraging the flight of capital from the East to the West. The problem was that East Pakistan had a larger population, generated more exports and income for the twin nation, yet received less funding, less clout and less respect. The country they had signed up for when they stepped away from India was failing the Bengalis, trapped in a never-ending loop of discrimination. Four years ago, in 1966, a visionary named Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had emerged as the leader of the opposition, for his party the Awami League. In the city of Lahore, he demanded the government agree to his Six Point Plan for East Pakistan, which was swiftly rejected by the politicians in West Pakistan as they filed charges for treason against Rahman and 34 political actors. A few weeks before Aasha's wedding, Pakistan had held its first general election, in which the Awami

League won by a landslide. The powers that be in West Pakistan had yet to acknowledge this win, turning up the heat on the boiling pot of resentment that stewed in the East.

On the first day of the new year, 1971, Aasha left the only home she had ever known to a future in America with her new husband. All twenty one of her first cousins, her brothers and her parents accompanied them to the airport to say goodbye, right up until the steps to the plane. With tears in her eyes she climbed towards the door behind her husband, quickly touching the white, cold metal exterior of the plane as she furiously muttered a prayer, remembering the traditional practice, as she did at her wedding not twenty four hours ago, to step with her right foot first for a new beginning. She gawked at the beautiful, smartly dressed PIA air hostesses who showed them to their seats. The plane lurched backwards, it's engine roaring as it sped down the runway, first tilting then lifting off the ground entirely. Aasha looked around in panic, she thought her heart would beat right out of her chest. Her husband, Belal, (although as their culture dictated she would spend their entire lives never once uttering his name, instead asking "are you listening?" when speaking to him, or later referring to him as "Raihan's father"), kindly placed a hand over hers. With palms clammy, she clutched the arm rest as the plane began to turn towards her new destiny.

As they began their descent, Aasha could have sworn the plane was gliding into the deep blue water below, as the early morning sun twinkled in the waves. It was mesmerizing yet terrifying and at last, seemingly out of nowhere, the safety of land and a runway appeared as they touched down. The bright fluorescent lights were the first thing she remembered about America as she blinked, trying to get her jet lagged eyes to adjust. In the two day journey to her new home, she had stopped in more countries to change planes

than she had ever been to before; first Karachi, in West Pakistan, then Baghdad, Iraq, followed by London, England and finally, the United States. Belal had written to his friend, Mr. Sen, a Bengali man from Calcutta, to collect them from the airport with a thick, new jacket for Aasha to combat the freezing winter outside. She stared at the unfamiliar landscape as the car whipped past it, muted brown and orange hued trees, mostly dead, with none of the lush greenery of home. The sky was a deep blue, not a single cloud, beautiful in its own right, but she missed the tumultuous, constantly evolving skies of home. Grey and dark in all its rage, a storm brewing one moment, but blue with fluffy cotton clouds the next. It suddenly reminded her of an old song she was forced to learn with her siblings when they were children; *shada megh er khela, lukochuri khela* - about the white clouds playing a game of hide and seek in the vast blue sky.

Everyone at home had thought she was so lucky to come to America, but Asha found herself caught in an overwhelming whirlpool of emotions. She had learned English at school of course, getting top marks in her class, but fumbled over the rapid, unfamiliar accented words hurled towards her. The coins made no sense in sizes or names – the nickels representing 5 cents, strangely bigger than the dimes, which were 10 - as she struggled to pay for ingredients to make a decent meal for her husband. Finding spices was a battle; green chili, coriander, cumin, her basic layers, the essence of her very being seemed so hard to string together in this foreign land. Amma had taught her recipes using the age old technique of *andaj*, estimates, following your heart to cook the recipe. It did her no good here, the food never tasted the same.

Even the bazaar, an indoor behemoth called a supermarket, was so modern, clean and organized. No squawking of chicken, no arguments or bartering with street vendors,

devoid of the colors and the rush of home. What shocked her was the space, there was no need to jostle or push through crowds, there were hardly any people and she was always the only one wearing a sari, often drawing stares. During one trip, Belal was at the hardware store next door, promising to meet her outside. She walked through the aisles picking up items and placing them in a large trolley that seemed to be able to hold a month's food, another luxury she was unaccustomed to. Lost in thought, finding herself at the checkout counter she began to unload things from her trolley as she had seen Belal do. A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black velvet headband and round pearl studs, her pale blue eyes narrowing, "Don't you dare cut in front of me like that," she said in a clipped tone, as she slammed her own trolley into hers. Asha stood, staring, confused. She hadn't even touched the woman; how could she have cut her? "Sorry," she whispered quietly, still unaware of what she had done wrong. Undeterred by her apology, the woman continued her public haranguing. "The line, by the way, is over there," she said, pointing furiously, "That's right, go straight to the back, right where you belong, and don't trip over that ridiculous outfit." Asha's cheeks burned, she felt as though she had been slapped. A pop song played through the speakers, about sugar, honey and a candy girl, piercing through the eerie silence of the store. All this cheery convenience left her feeling decidedly inconvenient, like an *elachi* pod left in a curry for too long, that had to be fished out to stop it from overwhelming the delicate balance of flavors with its stark taste.

She had come to relish the quiet moments before dinner. Not because of the calming monotony of the meals she cooked (which Belal seemed to enjoy, although he never actually praised them, just emitted a low approving grunt while he mixed his rice and *daal*, shoveling the food into his mouth) but for the map of aromas floating in the hallway. Her

neighbors, many from other countries, would also begin to cook, unleashing the captivating smells of unfamiliar ingredients in the air. Sometimes she would wander down the hallway, taking in each doorway – the smell of ripe tomatoes simmering in a sauce from one, a tart rice vinegar and garlic smell from another – it made her feel a little bit at home, reminding her of how all the women in her family would cook meals together. Not that any of them spoke here. Just passed each other by, lost in the minutiae of their own lives, hurrying through the thresholds of their tiny apartments and closing the doors shut firmly behind them.

Phone calls home were rare, expensive and underwhelming. “What? I can’t hear you....yes....how are you?” over a crackled line. She had little conversations in her head with each family member, over and over again as she went about her day, but when the time came to speak she couldn’t find the words. Instead she poured her heart out in letters, carefully drawing lines from which the familiar alphabets hung in her tiny script, etching out the neat curves, triangles and circles on paper.

March 8th, 1971

I hope you are well my child, your distance is palpable on the phone. Your brothers and their friends are forever traipsing through the house, but I feel only a daughter can bring joy to a home. But I suppose a daughter is never really one's own to begin with, earmarked for another life at birth. We always knew we would have to give you away, we just hope to have taught you enough to survive.

Emotions and tensions are running high here. As you may remember (if you still keep up with your home country's politics - I can hardly believe it's been three months since you

began your new life!) Sheikh Mujib, our Awami League leader, won by a landslide in the Elections in December. But the Urdu-walas still won't acquiesce to his Six Point Plan. It's too much, first we were oppressed by the British, now our own Pakistan has a civil war brewing. Life certainly is never dull around here. Imagine one's heart being so closed that you discriminate against your own countrymen based on language, or based on the color of our skin. I hope things change soon - our Bengali spirit and our voices are all we need to overcome their prejudice and cruelty.

Today Sheikh Mujib gave a rousing speech at the Race Course. We heard it on the radio, but would you believe our Alamgir went out to hear it first hand?! Sheikh Mujib told the crowd, loud and clear, "This time, our struggle is for emancipation! This time, the struggle is for independence!" Oh, it gave me chills, such a strong powerful voice he has, a true leader. I don't think I will forget it till the end of my days. I was worried there would be violence, so I had hoped Alamgir would not go, but you know your brother, stubborn as a mule. Azad is still too young for this kind of activism I think, only fifteen, although he looks up to his older brother so much. I caught him trying to shave off the few new whiskers he is sprouting, in an attempt to copy Alamgir's morning routine before he rushes off to college and Azad to secondary school.

Even your father had tears in his eyes - you know he has a soft spot for Urdu poetry, Jinnah and the Muslim League - but the Bengali in him triumphed, I suppose. Alamgir couldn't stop talking; new dawn, this, that, an independent country. I didn't even know he could speak so many words! He is usually too busy loitering in front of the Modhumita theater with that good for nothing boy, Aleya khala's son, (they are at Dhaka University together now) chatting up Viqarunnisa school girls in their uniforms. Another thing I worry about

- what kind of girl will he bring home? You know she will be the one looking after me in my old age.

I hope the winter has passed for you, but even spring there is colder than the harshest of our winters I hear. I wish I had a magic mirror to see into your new life. We will never even be able to even visit your shongshar, but look forward to when you return, perhaps with a bundle of joy to share with us! Send us some pictures with your next letter, make use of that fancy new camera your Iqbal chacha gave you for the wedding and don't forget to add extra rice starch when you wash your husband's shirts. Our regards to Belal.

Take care,

Amma

She laughed to herself as she folded away the crisp paper containing her mother's letter, half in happiness, half in disbelief. She did not know how Amma knew, but mothers can always tell, especially hers. When she was sixteen, Aasha was desperately in love with Faraz, a young man from the boy's school across the street from her own girl's school. Her mother took one look at her as she snuck back into the house late, after one of their clandestine after school meetings, giddy with the promise of young love. She simply said, "Well, you can forget about whoever this boy is. You think you're in love? The only love you should know is for your family, and in this family, we do not tolerate wayward women. I shall be picking you up at school from now on." With no way to communicate, her one teen romance quickly fizzled out. She still remembered the split second their eyes locked as she walked away from him and the front gates with her mother.

Predictor, it was called. It's blue and white packaging almost echoing the hope of the aunties back home, with their patriarchal preference for the first born child to be a boy. At \$10 it was a splurge, her entire week's grocery budget, but she didn't know how to go about seeing a doctor, or how to ask Belal. Despite being so deeply intimate with a man who was until recently a stranger, she was embarrassed to speak to him about such matters. While Belal sat outside the grocery store, absentmindedly reading the paper, she snuck over next door to the People's Drug Store to purchase it. The next day, while Belal was at the university, she carefully unpacked its contents. It came with a rather large plastic box which doubled as a rack, with a test tube, a dropper, and a mirror. She wasn't quite sure what the mirror was for, but quickly figured it out as she read the instructions. It was almost like chemistry lessons at school and she was not the best at sciences. After using the dropper to drip her carefully collected urine into the test tube, she left it on the window sill. Sure enough after a short two hour wait, a perfect red circle, round like the sun, appeared in the reflection on the mirror. She reached through the fabric of her floral sari, placing a hand on her exposed, flat stomach to see if she could feel the life which would grow inside her for the next nine months.

March 12th, 1971

Dearest Amma,

Hope you are all well. I do, in fact, have some news but at the time of writing I have yet to tell anyone. Well, I suppose by the time this letter reaches you I will have told my husband. The bundle of joy you speak of will arrive a little sooner than you think! How I wish you were here. Let's keep this between us for now, it is early days yet.

A group of Bengali students here demonstrated in front of the United Nations Headquarters a few days ago in New York City, calling for them to stop the mistreatment of our people. From his work colleagues, I believe he heard that Yahya Khan and Bhutto have begun negotiating with Sheikh Mujib - that's a good sign isn't it, Amma? I hope and pray that they will come to an agreement soon. How terribly nerve wracking it must be in the meantime. Give my regards to Abba, the boys, the cook, Qayum, the maid, my cousins and even that annoying crow who flies into the balcony - I miss them all terribly. We are well, he is kind to me and it is beautiful here. I am very happy, so don't worry!

With all my love,

Aasha

As she signed the letter, a teardrop rolled off her cheek and onto the page, blurring the ink. She would have to rewrite it now. The truth was that the freedom she had heard so much about, and had traveled so far towards, was suffocating. She felt like a bird, trapped in a gilded cage. Home alone while Bilal was at work, where could she go? Who could she talk to? There was a sizable Bengali community but they were spread out, driving hours to attend *dawaats* at each other's houses. Trips to Boston or New York aided in the hunt for spices, while meat was purchased from Jewish butchers, as kosher and halal rules formed a bridge, crossed cultures to bring immigrant families a little closer to the homes they left behind.

During the day, all she had for company was her own television, an unbelievable luxury but a lonely one all the same. It had a screen set in a wooden panel, three buttons and a dial on the right to change the channels, of which there were a few, a stark contrast to the monogamy of the sole PTV channel broadcast in Dacca. As she turned the dial, she

never found anyone who looked like her, just a sea of white faces, their stories bright and luminescent on the color screen. This television was much larger than the black and white NEC set Abba had purchased, now seven years ago, unable to afford an upgrade. She wistfully watched *The Brady Bunch*, a show about a large family, reminiscent of the neighborhood she left behind. They had to combine two families to make their bunch, she thought to herself in amusement, as she watched the little squares line up with the actors' faces as the title song began. With 3 children, her family was a smaller unit than most of her acquaintances - Samira had eight brothers and sisters, not including herself! They had lost touch, although she had written to her she had yet to receive a reply, but such was her new life, she supposed. Life in Dacca was an influx of characters, coming and going through the large house.

If she closed her eyes, she could picture it as clear as day; the periphery of the red brick exterior surrounded by lush mango, jackfruit and coconut trees, reaching towards the sky. In the summer, Amma would make her special mango pickle in the scorching heat, swatting her brothers away as they pinched and promptly devoured the pale gold flesh, hotly debating which variety of the fruit reigned supreme. As the seasons changed, the winter brought with it piles of *pitha* sprinkled with desiccated coconut. As children, they watched nervously while a man hired specifically for this purpose climbed up the slender, swaying tree trunk with nothing but a rope bound around his ankles. He scurried up the tree, dragging himself up at a remarkable speed, pulling coconuts with his bare hands and flinging them towards the ground. Qayum, their Man Friday, ran circles under the tree holding out a large jute cloth, trying to break the fall so they wouldn't crack on impact. As

the young, green coconuts crashed to the ground, Aasha worried about the man's skull bearing the same fate.

March 31st, 1971

Dearest Aasha,

I was hoping to write to you with better news; we had to leave Arambagh behind. The house, our things, everything, I could only quickly pack my overnight bag with my remaining jewelry and a few saris. It happened so quickly, I am not sure when we will see our house again, or even if it still remains standing. We are staying at your Iqbal chacha's, but how long will we impose on him and your Nagina chachi?

Where do I begin? The Pakistani army reacted swiftly as soon as talks faltered, opening fire on demonstrators as we have seen time and time again. Some are saying over a thousand are dead, but no one can be certain. A man named General Tikka Khan - they are calling him the Butcher of Bengal - has been sent to oversee this genocide. There are murmurs that it is being called Operation Searchlight; an insidious name for a dangerous hunt. They have made a list of people; all our intellectuals, our thought leaders, civilians, activists, even that nice man who does the nightly news talk show your Abba watches, all tracked down, dragged from their homes and ruthlessly slaughtered.

A bit of bad news - when they attacked the University Alamgir, who was out protesting without heeding my warnings of course, was hurt and taken to the hospital, unconscious. For a few harried hours we had no idea where he was but as of yesterday he is back with us, safe, while we stay at your Soheli chacha's. The idiot boy keeps talking about joining forces with the rebel army of freedom fighters, as the guerillas are calling themselves, the

Mukti Bahini. A promising cause but it's too dangerous for a spoilt city boy like him. Azad is well; such a good child, spends lots of time with his nose buried in books, the latest is the Art of War. I suppose the current climate is taking a toll on us all.

Sheikh Mujib declared Independence at around midnight on the 26th - he wants a new country, a Bangla Desh. Minutes later he was picked up from his home and arrested, the Awami League banned. The borders are shut and even if we could travel, where would we go? I will write when I know more.

Amma

Aasha did not know whether her nausea was from her deep rooted fear for her loved ones, or the smell of the mutton curry gently simmering on the stove. At a *dawat* that weekend, the Bengali community was distraught. A woman narrated how her friend Rekha, a professor and a widow with two children, watched from her fifth floor apartment as bodies began to pile up on the Race Course, the lush green field splattered with crimson blood. "She could hear them amidst the bombs and gunshots, the ones who were still alive, crying out for help, but who will go to save them? It's not safe to leave the house. She is Hindu, you know, it won't be long before they come for her too." A chill ran down Aasha's spine, thinking of the crowded, bustling streets of her beloved hometown empty, eerily silent with menacing tanks rolling down the wide boulevards. "Was her husband killed?" she asked, half terrified to hear the answer. "Oh, no, no, not in the war - he was a pilot. Died in a plane crash and it wasn't even his day to go in! She set the table for dinner and she waited and waited and he never came home."

April 14th, 1971

Amma,

I am so worried, I just received your letter yesterday after frantically calling the house and a few of our relatives, whose numbers I had thankfully written down in my address book. They knew you were safe at Abba's friend's but couldn't tell me who. Why didn't you call us? I suppose long distance is an imposition on others, but I was so worried when I heard the news. You can come live with us. When he heard about the baby he put a downpayment on a house! He said he had been saving for a while and we moved in two days ago. We live a 30 minute drive outside the city now, in what is known as the suburbs. We have three bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms (do you wonder what that is? I did. A half bathroom means no shower or bathtub. I suppose then it's no longer a "bath" room really...) a garage that fits two cars, and a big basement (the space under the house) that we are still deciding what to do with. In other words, plenty of room for you, Abba and the boys to come stay. You are all in my thoughts and prayers. I feel as though I'm not here, just an empty body, carrying another, while my heart is with you in Dhaka.

Love always,

Aasha

Over the summer, as a tiny flame of life flickered within her, many were extinguished in her homeland. As the days passed in a blur, stories of acquaintances, friends and relatives hauled out of their homes to be tortured or murdered became commonplace. Information out of Dacca was scarce; the little bits of news that reached them was ominous. During a particularly long stretch of silence from home, Belal quipped, "No news is good

news,” as he gently removed a cup of tea from her hands, now cold, as she sat lost in thought. On the first day of August, many of their Bangali acquaintances drove down to New York City, to attend a concert taking place at Madison Square Garden. The Concert for Bangla Desh, as it was called, came into being from the unlikely friendship of George Harrison and Ravi Shanker; one a pop culture icon and a former member of the Beatles, and the other an Indian classical artist, who hailed from East Bengal. Her heart swelled as she saw glimpses of the duo flanked by other famous musicians on the evening news, championing the cause of her homeland. She could not help her tears as the footage of George Harisson singing a song, Bangla Desh, flickered on TV that night, illuminating her dark living room - it was the first time she felt seen in her new country, while her heart longed for home.

Dear Asha,

I write to you with some difficult news; Azad is missing. I'm sorry you are having to read this in a letter - getting a telephone line out is proving to be increasingly difficult. I am hoping against hope that by the time this letter reaches you this will all be a distant memory. Perhaps it was my fault - I didn't realize he was so impressionable, so foolhardy, but he is only 16. My open admiration of the Mukti Bahini inspired him to join them, even though I wasn't brave enough to do so. He left us a note at dawn saying he was leaving to fight for freedom. He can't even swim, I shudder to think how he will navigate the tangle of rivers he will encounter. It has been over ten days since we heard he was last spotted, boarding a bus towards Tongi.

Amma is in no state to write, as you can imagine, but I knew you would want to know. The war continues; but this battle at home is consuming us.

Hope you are both well.

Regards,

Alamgir

As winter arrived, a thick blanket of snow covered the small front yard outside their house. She had been looking forward to seeing the twinkling holiday lights put up in the neighborhood for her first Christmas in America, but now they were only a morbid contrast to the darkness of her own home. She spent most of her time on the loveseat by the large bay window that faced the front of the house, staring blankly outside as the hours passed. Clenched tight in her fist was a copy of the old family photograph that hung on the wall in Arambagh, the creases rendering her siblings unrecognizable. She wondered if that was how Azad's face looked when they found him. The dreaded news of her younger brother's death had arrived in three short, life altering sentences, delivered by telex:

Deeply regret to inform Azad is no more. Killed by WP army. Burial at Azimpur.

By the 16th of December, nine months of pain, terror and uncertainty had come to an end. Oceans away, across the globe, as the Pakistani army signed the Instrument of Surrender, she was rolled into an operation theater, alone, as Belal sat in the waiting room with the other fathers, watching a football game. When she awoke, she belonged to a new country - Bangladesh - a fact that eluded her till the following day. In the meantime, she stared at the impossibly tiny wrapped bundle in her arms in awe, as a mirror image of her own brown eyes looked back at her. Her baby yawned, letting out a little cry, as she felt her heart jump. "Hello, Joy" she whispered, the Bangla word for Victory.

1988

“Joy? *Tumi eshecho?*” Aasha heard his footsteps as he stomped into the house, dropping his backpack by the bay window. “Joy?”

“Still a girl’s name, not responding to it” her son retorted, swinging open the refrigerator door.

Sometimes she thought she hated him. She knew she shouldn’t feel that way about her own firstborn son, but she did. How could this tall, brooding stranger have come from her womb? He spoke to her defiantly, in rapid, American English, sometimes interspersed with slang she could not for the life of her understand. He towered over her now, raiding the fridge after whatever American sport it was that he played now, she couldn’t keep track. Monika, his younger sister, was less disappointing; she embraced her culture, tried helping her mother. Joy went by his *bhalo naam*, Raihan, which increasingly metamorphosed to Ryan (Monika, went by a more anglicized Monica); not bothering to correct friends, teachers or acquaintances. She spoke to him in Bangla, as she always did with both her children, asking if he wanted rice and chicken *korma*.

“I don’t want baat, Mom.” He couldn’t even say it, the basic word for rice that most Bengali toddlers knew, *bhaath* - no ঠ sound came from him. When he was young and still needed her, he would spit out her cooking as she fed him by hand, each mouthful a tiny ball of rice and curry, instead he preferred frozen chicken nuggets in strange animal shapes, or mac & cheese, a pile of orange, synthetic goop from a blue box. “It’s too jaal, mommy” he would squeak - not *jhaal* - the hard curvature of the h sound was elusive to him. She didn’t know who this “mawmee” was. No Amma, Ma, or Mama, even. When he

started to speak, stringing sentences together and tripping over words, bilingual in all its beauty, she had found it endearing, naively thinking he would grow out of it. She couldn't imagine having a language barrier with her own children.

“*Bangla bolo!*” she repeated in the house, imploring them in vain to speak the remnants of the language left within them. The same language that countless people had died for, so that they would have the privilege to speak it. She knew their future children would know even less of it, if they knew it at all, and increasingly felt the ominous threat that languages, like people, could die too. “*Okey patao!*” her son replied, delegating his mother's request for a grocery store run to his sister, as he lay sprawled out on the couch watching TV. *Pathao*, she found herself mentally correcting. For what? He would probably end up marrying one of the American girls he drives off with and put her in a home. Old and forgotten, left to weekly visits or none at all, nothing like back home, where generations lived together under one roof. The thought scared her more than her first plane ride over. She often felt that it was a terrible mistake, raising her children here, but now it was too late.

It was all so easy for him. His light brown eyes and brooding pout attracted a bevy of young girls who often called the house and, as Monika gossiped to her mother, vied to pair with him for group projects, even going as far as doing all his work for him. Aasha was amused when he came home from kindergarten and announced he had his first “girlfriend” - of course, this was when he still shared things with her - a little blonde girl he would hold hands and play house with. She found it sweet when each year, he returned home with an armful of Valentine's Day bounty, little heart shaped valentines sent from little hearts. She was less amused when somewhere along the way, he realized he could

cruise through school, lazily shunning academics for sports, which only made him more popular. At 17 and almost 6 feet, he was tall for a Bengali boy, only he didn't identify as Bengali at all. No matter how many *deshi* meals she cooked, *choras* she recited, or cultural functions she dragged him to at the Kresge Auditorium, he was different from her. His culture was one of the many hats, the many masks of his existence that lay forgotten, tucked away in a box at the back of the closet, coming out twice a year like his Eid *panjabi*. When Joy received his drivers' license, he stopped attending Bengali functions altogether, with a quip about how BANE - the acronym for the Bangladesh Association of New England - was the bane of his existence.

The unaffected way he took for granted everything that they had worked so hard for, left so far behind was infuriating. The quality of his education, the opportunities he had, he assumed were his birthright. After working an easy summer job at a local Italian restaurant, where he spent more time flirting with the waitresses than washing dishes, he made enough to buy a car that would have cost a year's salary in Bangladesh. But he never thought of the small, burgeoning country, halfway across the world to be his own. Monica took a keen interest in her culture, or close enough, learning Kathak dancing, watching Bollywood movies with her mother and performing Bengali folk songs with the other BANE children. Yet she still yearned for her Joy, her Victory Day born son, to feel the same as his sister.

"Where are you from?" When she had first come to America, she loved answering the question, or being referred to as "exotic", which to her children it was an insult – they were American. The lingering question was a little jab, one that brought to light the bitter fact that no matter how much mac and cheese they grew up eating, or what color Ford they

drove, the color of their skin would always be their first introduction. “But where are you really from?” they would ask her American born and raised children, who were still not considered a part of it. She always replied Bangladesh, as seamlessly as her children replied the name of their state. To their credit, if it bothered them that their home was not the same as hers, they never uttered a word about it. It was their casual ignorance that spoke volumes.

She put away his shoes, and tucked his backpack neatly under the loveseat, catching a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror. She was almost startled by the stranger staring back at her; each grey hair at her temple, some criss-crossing her middle part, each wrinkle encapsulating tributaries of loss and sorrow, symbols of time never to return. She realized it was not just her children she didn't know, she could hardly recognize herself.

BELONGING

There's something intoxicating about being truly seen by the very people whose daily lives render you invisible. Until a recent turn of events, I have been invisible my entire life. In the late 90's, I left behind my small village and found work in a starkly different one, known as the West Village, in New York City. A place where children are pulled along on leashes, while dogs clad in designer clothes are pushed in strollers, but I was now immune to the flights of fancy of New Yorkers. My first job in this sprawling urban jungle was that of a bathroom attendant for a series of establishments, working my way up to cleaning the waste of the wealthy at a swanky restaurant, which on weekends turned into a wild, raucous nightclub in broad daylight, smack in the middle of the afternoon. My second and current job is the perhaps wilder occupation of driving a taxi cab, those yellow icons that are symbolic of New York City.

A woman flagged down my cab, she seemed unfamiliar with the act, with none of the rush of this great city as she leisurely stepped in. "Do you know where Bloomingdales is?" she asked through the plexiglass that separated us, my only protection from the dangers of picking up strangers in these strange times. I nodded, thankful for a tourist who was ignorant to the fact that walking the 3 avenues from one fancy store to another would be significantly faster - not to mention cheaper - than driving in peak rush hour traffic. Her loss however, was my gain. With time for a chat, I leaned back and called my friend Faruk, retreating into the comfort of speaking my native tongue in the middle of gridlocked Manhattan. "*ki re, kaj kamon?*"

It is ironic that my journey in the pursuit of freedom began from a jail cell. Not a real one, mind you, but a carefully designed, prison-like building with red brick walls and

white linoleum floors. The windows had iron bars on them, the lush gardens separated by more steel bars from Madani Avenue, where we stood in a line outside the Embassy of the United States of America in the capital, Dhaka. Once the line finally snaked its way indoors, after three separate security checks from the armed guards, I began to read the inspirational posters lining the walls - people who had made it, securing visas to attain the unattainable, that elusive American Dream. I practiced my English, a language which I had a second-hand, fifth grade knowledge of. *Am-bi-ti...shon*. Ambition. The marriage of the T and I formed a confusing *shh* sound, unlike when they stood next to each other in the word “time”, which I was quickly running out of. The pairing of these strange letters was not to be confused with the noise of the T and I in a Bangla word like *tingtinga*, what is how my family described me. I was the runt of the litter in a family blessed with 7 sons, a few blessings too many.

Perhaps it was this ambition, my Achilles’ heel, that led me to where I now find myself. I can trace its nascence back to a crisp day in early November, when an intriguing visitor arrived in our home. He wore a faded denim jacket with jeans and sunglasses that changed color depending on whether he was indoors or out. In his strange clothing and high tech eyewear, he may as well have been an alien to me, but I learned he was our older brother, who left before I was born. He brought with him gifts for all of us; a package of biscuits, he called them cookies, that arrived in a heap of crumbs and melted chocolate, sinfully sweet against our tongues; a small tub of cold cream for Amma, which sat untouched for years afterwards, too precious to be used, until the colors separated and the smell soured; t-shirts with English writing for some of the elder boys and a yo-yo for me, that lit up when it dropped. It was the most magical thing I had ever seen. He told us he

came from a place where success and wealth were yours for the taking. The first world, he called it, where even the poorest of the poor still had food to eat. They had food banks too - literal banks of food! I imagined stores full of food, like the library at school where you could take whatever you liked. The opulence of it all. This was a land of promise with equal opportunity for all.

“I want to go *Amrika*” I said proudly to the officer when it was my turn, sticking my chest out in my borrowed suit. My naïveté makes me cringe. You see, growing up in a village, we didn’t learn English from native speakers, but they expect you to be fluent as soon as you set foot on their shores. Never mind the fact that you may already be well versed in 2, perhaps 3, other languages, your inadequacy in speaking their tongue is your only introduction. But I’m getting ahead of myself. For the time being, I had to first amass a small fortune, in what some would say was a morally ambiguous manner, to be able to afford the plane ticket, travel to this glorious nation on a tourist visa and then proceed to overstay my welcome by twenty years.

I still remember my first flight, an unsettling feeling in my stomach, as I pressed my head against the cold window pane and peered out over the wing. The plane flew impossibly high, down below were tiny dots of light in patterns, blotches and lines, covering the vast expanse beneath us. They reminded me of the dot paintings done by the Aboriginals, the native people of Australia we had learnt about in school. Like us, they had also had their land taken from them, their native tongue with beautiful whimsical, melodic nouns reduced to the crisp efficiency of English, the lingua franca. Of course that was not the context we were taught, we just looked at the nice paintings, I learned this many years later on YouTube. A few places are still called by their names in Aboriginal

languages, of which there were around 300, but they no longer live there, cast away, their people and voices silenced. I traced the dots below with my finger, of each city, each with its own story, capitals that rise and fall. Like the former glory of Calcutta in ruins; a city now synonymous with poverty, and New Delhi, the new capital, crowned in its place. Or my own Dhaka - I couldn't imagine it no longer being the capital, but perhaps it was only a matter of time. I diverted my attention to the small screen on the seat in front of me, readjusting my cramped legs. The estimated time of arrival was 8am, which seemed soon to me. It was only 5am when we had left Dhaka, I had thought naively.

I stared at the form the air hostess handed out, with neat boxes that encompassed my existence. Not dissimilar to the way the leaders of past and present arbitrarily decide to draw boxes, lines in the sand declaring who went where, but it was never them who suffered. I started again, concentrating hard, neatly writing my name in block English letters to fit inside the boxes. *Fem...a...le...family?* I was here alone, so I put a mark next to the other option. *Cau...ca...si...an.* Caucasian. A fancy word for white, that I knew. Latino. I later learned there were many different kinds, but on that day, on that piece of green paper, they were all one. Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian. I circled that one, it seemed the most fitting; the closest country to mine was India. In two generations, the people of our country had been Indian British subjects, East Pakistani, and Bangladeshi and I had hoped I would soon be American.

I had always imagined America, that promised land of opportunity, as a sea of white. White faces, white furniture and a bright, white light shining over all of it. When I arrived at JFK 12 hours later, I was surprised to find a sea of color, people like me. Some were holding wheelchairs or clipboards, staring blankly at me as I wearily stepped off the

plane. I later learned of the invisible but omnipresent pyramid of power of this new home of mine. The backbone of its economy were people like me; scooping up menial jobs that our fellow citizens perched higher up on the food chain thought were beneath them. One of the things my brother had told me was that here, everyone was free. I later learned, much like in a book someone had once left next to me on the bus, that some were more free, more equal than others. That book was a children's book I think, about animals on a farm, but I still read it from cover to cover. Practice makes perfect. Which is why it was interesting that after all my practicing and my unrelenting desire to mould into this country and absorb all its qualities through osmosis, I still felt empty. My family who I had left behind all had Facebook now, they spent a lot of time together, tagging each other in *dawats*, Eids and Boishakh, their smiling faces portraying contentment. I thought it was time for a visit, perhaps to return and be seen as my brother did all those years ago, to show off my own American success story.

That creeping feeling of invisibility is especially acute while driving countless passengers, their faces a blur, through the busy streets. They forget you are in the front seat, or a person at all, they would mostly likely prefer one of those robot self-driving cars from Google. They stand in the streets, clutching their smartphones like zombies, searching for their precious Uber or Lyft while cabs pass them by. It baffles me, summoning strangers who have their names and addresses and paying a surcharge to do it. When these anonymous passengers do hop into my cab, some either start a phone conversation or continue speaking, outlining their lives from the mundane to the deeply personal; manners, lies, infidelities; who they really are comes alive in the back of a taxicab when they think

no one is listening. Sometimes they talk about me, but I suppose I talk about them too. Sometimes they talk to each other, allowing me to learn more about them.

“I don’t see color though, to be honest America is post racial now. I mean, we had a Black president!” said one passenger.

“Right. And I think it’s important that all lives matter,” replied the other.

Post-racial. Once they had left, after having a heated discussion about the market, I looked this phrase up on my own smartphone. It explained the notion of a place free from racial preference or discrimination. I re-read the definition a few times. Perhaps it was beyond my understanding, but I tried to imagine the bubble one must inhabit to consider prejudice a thing of the past, when many of us were cloaked in it, wearing it in the form of our own dark skin, unable to be rid of its pernicious shadow. That was New York I suppose; each person fighting a battle, each soul in search of acceptance.

A few weeks later, I made my way down the aisle. Of the plane of course, the Emirates flight that would take me to Dubai, then onwards to Dhaka. I find myself disinterested in the shallow pursuit of the opposite sex. There was a particularly annoying man occupying the middle seat next to me, who was neither able to find his seat or communicate with the airplane staff. People like this often make me feel apologetic for my own kind, the bad apples who ruin it for the rest of us who work so hard. Why come here if you refuse to learn the language? I promptly snapped at him in English. Unlike the confused passenger I was fluent now, perhaps a hint of a rounded vowel here and there threw me off at times, exposing my true identity, the one I worked so hard to rebuild for two decades, but it was still not enough to be seen as one of them. People like this man ruin it for the rest of us.

Another man moved up the aisle, joining us in our row. This man was kind to the middle seater, helping him fasten his seatbelt, not wrinkling his nose as he unwrapped a pungent snack. As I overheard their polite chatter in broken English, I learned he was a doctor in his homeland who had come to visit his family for the first time. I felt ashamed by my own intolerance, burdened by my own prejudice. You see, I realized I was the problem. Perhaps the political rhetoric spewed in the back of the incessant rolling footage of my taxi cab, the same stories played on loop, the same social media news, the hate speech trilling away over the months had seeped into my blood. I identified as “them”, the othered, but I longed to be the other them; the model minority. We were all in the same rat race, fighting for the same slice of the apple pie, chasing after the chimera of the American Dream - that never ending promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The chatter around me began to rise, you could sense the excitement to be homebound in the air. People exchanging the usual pleasantries, “*Apnar bari koi?*” delving into whether they had any common acquaintances from their villages. I scoffed, as if, out of a population of 160 million, they would have this one mutual acquaintance, Khokon from Ghorashal.

“*Oh, Afrad bhai er pola naki? Arey first class lokh!*” said the man in the row in front of me to his seatmate, using the Bengali colloquialism of “first class” to mean good or agreeable. An ironic term to use when we were wedged in these tiny seats like cattle. The other man pressed further, having learnt about this passenger’s family, asking him why he didn’t move them back, since he himself had returned.

“*Nah, Bangladesh manaibe nah oder. It won’t suit them. Je karone amader America bhal lagey nah, oder Bangladesh bhal lagbe nah. It is not their country.*”

The man seemed shocked at this idea, flabbergasted by the notion that one could consider anything other than their own land as theirs.

“But *bhai*, your generation gave us the golden age of freedom! And now we are digital Bangladesh. Look how nicely the children are doing new business, all using the internet! Even their protest, so well organized”

Ah yes, the protests. As we hurtled through the air towards our homeland, a kind of revolution was taking place. An uprising of the youth, that old repertoire of protest in the face of injustice we keep in our back pockets, bringing it out time and time again, from the British Raj, to Partition, the Language Movement, the Liberation War, and more recently a technologically abetted War Crimes protest in 2013, which brings us to today’s protest about students being killed in traffic accidents. A shockingly common occurrence suffered by school children rolled over by buses.

I was sure the conversations across the gilded hallway, shrouded by the thick, heavy, gold velvet curtain, were different. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine them. The rich in Bangladesh only seemed to get more staggeringly, maddeningly rich, creating a culture of impunity where rules were of no consequence.

“Oh, yes, I hit a rickshaw-wallah with my new A, B, C, E or whatever the new ruling class of luxury vehicles is. It was his fault for darting in the way! But it only cost 50,000tk to pay off his family. My seat on this plane is worth more.” The cost of a life. I had once thought America was devoid of corruption, a place of law and order, but I found injustice to be a global occurrence. People around me kept talking, each explaining their experience, credentials, prospects. I wondered how many of their stories were true. How many were

made up for the sake of returning home a hero and not someone who crawled back to the motherland a failure?

As we began to land, you could see the haze shrouding the city, like a sandstorm blowing through. The sky was split, its light blue hue descending into a foggy brown. I had heard of Dhaka's pollution of course, a sign of growth, of progress. So many cars on the streets, countless industries churning away, but I couldn't dream it was more congested than New York, with the constant fumes from taxis and buses, interlaced with that gritty New York City smell I had grown to love. As we neared the ground I couldn't take my eyes off the flitting scenes below, pockets of water, rivers and ponds, interspersed between the verdant greenery of lush fields and buildings, so many buildings. Just when we were about to land, I gasped upon seeing what was before me; the wide empty streets lined with green trees had morphed into a dystopian Legoland, little blocks of flats in shades of pastels. It was jarringly beautiful. When we landed, it was no longer at an airport that went by the code ZIA, a fitting shorthand for Zia International Airport. The newly expanded entity, like many other buildings and streets in the region, had been renamed Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, erasing any traces of past political dynasties in the country's brief 49 years of existence.

As I drove through the bustling streets, having been picked up by my cousin Nasir and my uncle, I felt a strange kind of *déjà vu*, like seeing an old, familiar friend who had morphed into a stranger. Flecks of old memories would appear, dwarfed by the high rises and jumbled between the tangled spirals of thick black phone lines that hung like bunting from each light post. There were pillars, eagerly perched on top of completed buildings, anxiously awaiting higher heights, more growth. Signs, ads and posters filled every square

inch of tight spaces, a plethora of color, with newer signs that lit up too and a screen, just like in Times Square. In two decades, the provincial town I had left behind (although back then, before I had laid eyes on New York, it was the epicenter of my world) had morphed into a pulsing metropolis.

We listened to the blaring symphony of horns from cars - not moving nor alerting other vehicles but perhaps venting their frustrations - as we sat, gridlocked, for an hour. I swatted my first mosquito, killing it against the window pane where it left a bloody inkblot. Even they seemed to have doubled in size. The country was gearing up for the centennial birthday of *Bongobondhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of our nation. The city was lit with posters, his speeches from the Liberation War played in the streets among a backdrop of posters and pictures. A huge concert would be taking place at the Army Stadium, formerly known as the Ershad Army Stadium, another fallen victim to the politics of naming. I checked Google Maps, navigating the newly constructed roads. Damn, the other route seemed shorter now, the dark maroon lines on the screen were now streams of red and orange, reminiscent of the colors of Central park, crisp in the fall. This country's traffic was unbearable, I was already comparing how long a similar journey would take in New York. It seemed increasingly the case that I was never satisfied anymore, the ability to be at two places at once haunted me.

As my cousin Nasir expertly played a game of traffic tetris, weaving us in and out of tightly packed spaces while pedestrians milled in between them, I noticed the scar on his arm, snaking its way up his sleeve. It was from when he was 7 and I was 9, playing trees when the branch gave way and he fell on to the concrete below. When he left, the area

known as Bashundhara had largely been fields. Now it was choked with stores, restaurants, cafes and a giant, futuristic mega mall. Everywhere I saw unrecognizable growth, prosperity but nowhere did I see home. I found myself nostalgic for a time that no longer remained.

As we neared the village, the air began to clear. As we drove away from the brickfields, billowing dark smoke rings into the air, I could finally breathe. In the new Dhaka, I could not. I got out of the car and stretched my weary legs, wincing in the oppressive heat as I walked out to the uthaan. It seemed smaller. The tubewell in the middle, shared by 3 houses, once shiny and new, had now acquired a patina of rust. I rolled up my jeans and pumped twice. I remembered drinking here as a child, the water tasting cool, sublime on a hot day. As the warm metallic taste hit my tongue I spat it out. It was not the water that had changed, it was me, too foreign for either place across oceans, no longer belonging in either place. I heard a thundering noise, amplified by the lack of traffic in these parts, as an airplane flew overhead. I squinted, turning my gaze skywards, as the plane cast shadow over the village, a brief respite from the scorching sun. It flew in a straight unwavering path, conquering the great blue vastness of the sky, carrying countless onwards in their journey to belong.

APPENDIX: GLOSSARY

<i>aachal</i>	The end piece of the sari, often left loose
<i>babu</i>	a term of endearment, lit. baby.
<i>boti</i>	a very large curved blade, used to cut meat and vegetables by holding it in between the two feet.
<i>goru gari</i>	lit. cow car. A bamboo cart on wheels, pulled along by horses or cattle, a provincial method of transportation
<i>jhaaru</i>	a broom made of dry branches or grass
<i>kalo jaam</i>	A traditional dessert made of milk and semolina. Dark brown due to its high sugar content, often with a colored bright pink in the center
<i>kathal</i>	lit. jackfruit. Found in abundance, the officially designated national fruit of bangladesh
<i>khaat</i>	Traditional woven bed, made out of natural fibers. Also, lit. bed.
<i>kolbalish</i>	A traditional body pillow, often cylindrical.
<i>mishti</i>	Dessert lit. sweet
<i>paangash maach</i>	Basa, a type of fish
<i>panjabi</i>	A long shirt, worn by men of the Indian subcontinent, paired with pants known as pyjamas. Also referred to as a <i>kurta</i>
<i>shingara</i>	A savory pastry, usually filled with potatoes and peas
<i>shongshar</i>	domestic life; seen as a right of passage for women
<i>tupi</i>	lit. hat. White embroidered tupis are often symbolic to the Muslim religion.
<i>uthaan</i>	courtyard or front area of the house, often used in a rural context

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