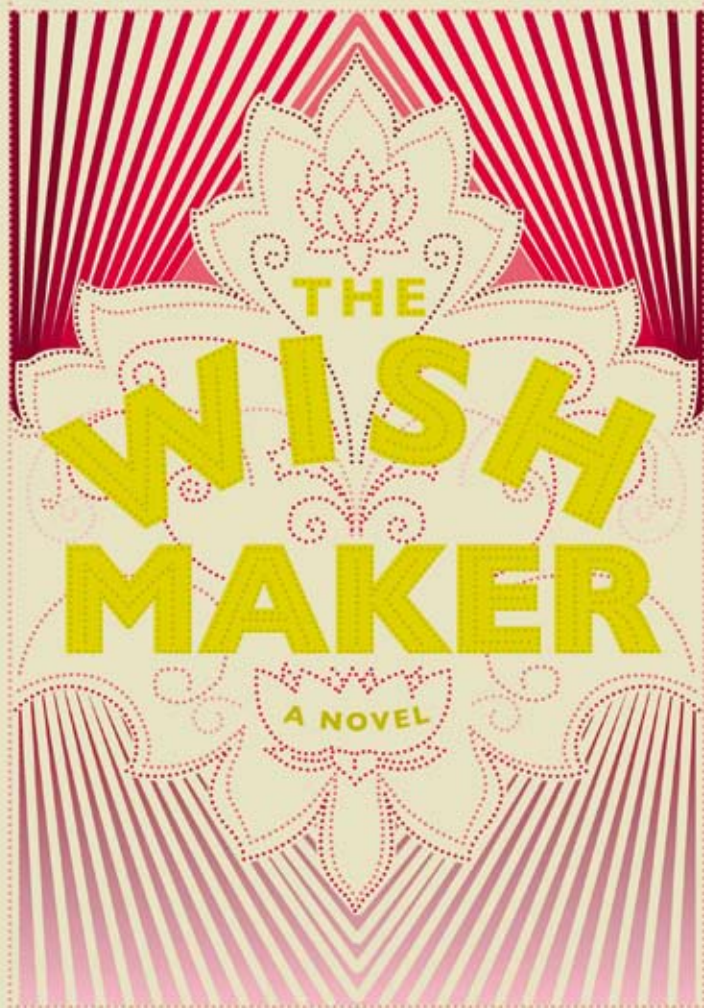


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by  
Ali Sethi

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# I

The clouds approached from below and went upwards and onwards until they had left behind the view; it was of the turf, grey turning to green and brown, a mosaic that now grew zones and roads and began to show the specks, expanding into vehicles, that were moving and heading in the pale morning light to destinations of their own.

Naseem was at the airport. She stood near the railing with her small, stout form pressed ahead into the bars. Her feet were placed solidly apart; she was trying to thwart the pushing crowds, trying to dominate the commotion with the square cardboard sign that was held above her head. It said my name (MISTER ZAKI SHIRAZI) in my mother's assertive handwriting.

I waved.

Naseem saw. She lowered the cardboard and grinned.

'Salaam, Naseem.'

She embraced me and tried to take my suitcase.

'Don't worry, Naseem –'

'No, no.'

'Naseem –'

'No.'

'But –'

'No, no.'

I followed her outside. The air was moist and cold, and the sky was smothered. The new airport had a beige exterior (the old one was white) and was planted with advertisements in the car park: we went past a sign for a restaurant chain, then a live screen that was showing an ad for a new brand of toothpaste. The ad was soundless; it ended with a splash of colour and started up again.

'It's not that cold,' I said.

'You're right,' said Naseem. 'It's not.'

The car was in the last row. A man was waiting inside, a young and relaxed-looking man with his knees drawn up to the steering wheel, his wrists crossed in stylish repose behind his head. He saw us and sprang up; he smiled and nodded vigorously and shook my hand and hurried to take the suitcase from Naseem, who didn't introduce him and instead monitored his movements with a tolerating look, the assessing, unsmiling stringency of delegated authority. She stood behind him and watched as he lifted the suitcase with a moan and hauled it into the boot. The impact sent up the smell of new carpeting.

'Had it serviced,' said Naseem.

She sat next to the driver and gave him unnecessary directions out of the car park. At the toll-booth she gave him ten rupees, which he gave to the warden beyond his window.

'Receipt,' said Naseem and secured it notingly.

The driver rolled up his window and began the drive away from the car park, away from the airport and out onto the road. His hands gripped the steering wheel. He was frowning in concentration and licking his lips.

'New driver,' said Naseem.

'I see,' I said.

'Yes,' she said.

We drove along a curve in the road and the car tilted, and Naseem reached for the strap above her window. Then the road was straight again. A part of it was cordoned off and still being paved; the labourers were absent and had left behind some of their implements as a promise of return. The road led into the bazaar and became cracked and dusty and crowded. Naseem was still holding onto the strap, and switched on the radio with her free hand; it interfered with the noise, the bumping and the shuddering, which lasted for some minutes. After that the bazaar was gone and the road was smooth again: we were in Cantt now, among large residential walls overgrown with bougainvillea and ivy, and among old trees and parks and military compounds that grew behind unproclaiming gates. The road was mostly empty. The driver became emboldened and skipped a traffic light, then another.

Naseem didn't stop him. She was absorbed in the radio: a female voice was lecturing its audience in a soft American accent on the perils and advantages of love. The voice laughed from time to time and Naseem laughed with it, and brazenly, for she was laughing at the audacity and outrageousness of the concept. She slapped her thigh and shook.

'Radio,' she said with a fond nod towards the thing.

'Ah, yes,' I said. 'Radio . . .'

We drove for some minutes in a radio-expecting silence.

'So, then,' she said, 'how is America?'

'America is well,' I said, as though formerly it wasn't. I wanted to say more but the question was vast.

'Good,' said Naseem. 'And how are your studies?'

'My studies are very well.'

'Very good.' She paused, holding on to her strap, her smile one of accepting and continuing goodwill. 'You know there is no place like Saudia.'

She had been recently to perform the Hajj in Saudi Arabia.

'Really?'

'No place like it in the world,' she said, and gave her head a slow and solemn shake. 'Everything they have: KFC, McDonald's, anything at all, you name it and they have it.'

'Really.'

'Oh yes. And the house of God – it opens up your eyes. Everyone is there: black, white, this, that, everyone from everywhere. Over here I am a servant, but over there no one is a servant. It has such a feeling of peace that your heart fills up with tears. I kissed the Black Stone with my own lips.'

'How does it feel?'

She blinked, trying to recall the experience. It took her a moment.

'Like a stone,' she said eventually with a note of surprise.

We passed a hoarding on the bridge. It was advertising a new deal for mobile phones. The model was a local girl and had her shiny shoulders up in a shrug; one hand held her pelvic bone; the other pressed a phone to her ear. Her head was tilted and her enlarged eyes were startled. 'Where is everyone?' I asked.

‘Here and there,’ said Naseem. ‘No rest in this time. But weddings will do that. Always, always, it is madness. You will see when you get home. No one is the same.’

★

The house was on its way. The paint was fresh and drying quickly on the outside walls; the wrought-iron gate was sharp with varnish; the driveway, once lined with cracks, was smooth now and still shining wetly in places with newly laid asphalt. And the lawn was mown. A dense row of marigolds on its fringes gave it the feel of a real garden, rather than just a plot of grass, while at night it became a rich, golden place, a revealed world of glowing depths and shadows, of dimensions and mysteries created by the positioning of hidden lights.

‘The bride can’t come right now,’ said my mother. It was morning, and she was talking on the telephone to the tailor, who was altering the blouse and wanted to have another round of measurements. ‘This is no way. We have trusted you, and this is what you are doing. We could have gone to many other places, but we came to you. And this is what you are doing. This is no way.’

Eventually my mother granted a time for the fitting but insisted that the tailor should come to the house with the outfit. The bride was resting and would see him briefly, and then he would go back and stitch up the blouse and deliver it on the promised date. After settling with the tailor she spoke to the beautician, again on the phone in the veranda, where she was sitting in a white wicker chair and leaning forward and rocking slightly with apprehension: the beautician was a detached Chinese woman who first wouldn’t come to the phone, and who then gave a weak and suspicious-sounding answer, an ‘Okay’ or a ‘Maybe’ that confirmed only the possibility of an appointment. And then there was a quarrel with the caterers, who had not included Diet Coke and Diet 7UP in the revised order: my mother threatened to cancel the order; they insisted it was right; she threatened to expose them in the magazine she owned; and they backed off slowly, coming round to the need for an apology, which she accepted in the end.

‘I don’t know why I’m doing this,’ she said. She meant organizing the wedding, and organizing it single-handedly, for though the funds and the resources had come in from all quarters of the family, there was a feeling, aired more and more now, that the toil and the drudgery had been left disproportionately to my mother. ‘I resent it,’ she said, and gave a short curt nod. ‘I do.’

Then she sighed and sank back into the chair and covered her eyes with her hands, as if to say that she was overworked and undervalued and thus allowed to say unreasonable things from time to time. And when later in the day the wedding cards arrived in a mound from the printer’s and were found to be satisfactory, she did say, ‘One does it for the children,’ in a way that affirmed her organizing role, her skills and her patience, as well as the vague parental function she was serving, and recast the whole thing in a positive light.

‘Look at this,’ she said, and trailed a proud finger along the first line of the invitation card:

You are cordially invited to the wedding of Samar.

‘What do you think?’

I said it was nice.

And it was more than that: it was valid and it was true, the granting of a wish-made send-off to Samar Api, who was my first cousin, once removed, and for whom, after years of separation, I had now come back to do the rites.

\*

I had returned to Lahore for the first time since leaving for university. And it was of university that I was still thinking. Over there, in Massachusetts, it was winter break now, the end of the autumn term, and that life – of snow and wind, of blocked, frozen streets and the retreat into heated buildings, the snow continuing to descend outside – that life went on as an imagined progression of familiar feelings: taking the shuttle on time to class in the morning, then from class to the dining halls and back in time for class. And at night: the sofa before the fire in the common room, a place that became noisy and rushed on the weekend with music and dancing

and a crowded slippery bar area, and then the culminating solace of a bedroom. That was my memory of it, newly formed. And with it I was filling up the present, knowing too that the halls were locked, the fire dead, the campus emptied and shut down.

That was there, and I was here now, at home.

But home too was changed. The airport was new, and the roads were new; the hoardings and buildings on the way from the airport, many had come up in these last two years alone and pointed again and again to the ongoing nature of things. There was an added estrangement from the known: the drive home was too short, the bridge too small, the trees not high enough on the canal, while in the house there was an odd shrunken aspect to things that made them less than what they once had been: the bed in my room was just a bed, narrow and hard, and the pillow was incongruously large, the room itself just a room with patching walls that would curl with moisture in the summer. The veranda was no longer an avenue, and all day the kitchen had a smell.

‘What smell?’ said my mother.

The smell of frying oil and onions and ginger and garlic.

‘Drink lots of water,’ said my mother.

It had a taste.

‘There is no taste in water.’

‘There is.’

‘Then get your own. Go to the market and get your own. Put your own things in the fridge. Make your own food.’

I got my things from the market and took them to the fridge. And it was full: the raw vegetables were in the bottom compartment, the *saalan* dishes and the chutneys and condiments on the upper shelves, the preferences of different people stacked precariously and collectively for now to make room for the bride’s requirements, which were on the final shelf: a small jug of freshly squeezed orange juice and a few cans of Slim-Fast, and some empty space for other things.

‘Grilled things,’ said my mother. ‘Dieting things. But sometimes she wants sweet things. You never know.’

\*

My mother was staying indoors. The books and magazines and newspapers in her room, once stacked on the floor and left to accumulate, had been organized and placed on shelves on the walls. There were lamps on all the tables now and no overhead lights: she had read about the adverse effects of bare lightbulbs, and said that she had always felt it as an influence on her temperament but had never had the sense to sit down and identify the problem. She believed in identification: she spent the last few hours of every night researching health-related topics on the Internet. And in the morning she was slow to rise and shift to the sitting area, where she lay again on the sofa and read newspapers, not one by one in quick succession, the way she had before rushing to work, but slowly, and with genuine involvement, lingering over things that had once been irrelevant. Over the course of the morning she drank down the tea in the teapot and sent it many times to be reheated. And she kept the TV alive. She watched it for the news but also for the cooking shows, the talk shows, for Indian shows in which young people stood on stages and sang old film songs with live orchestras behind them, and were then judged by panellists. My mother had favourites whose progress she followed until the end: she noted their singing skills but also their expressions, their dressing habits, their postures and physiques. She knew about physical fitness and sat through the late-morning exercise shows with the fast-paced music in the background. Sometimes she tried to repeat the moves, and the curtains were drawn. Then she showered and went to the office in her new car with the new driver, and Naseem came in to clean the room and afterwards sat on the sofa and watched the TV channels. In the evening my mother returned with Zarmina and Rubab, two new girls who were working with her on the magazine, which had expanded, and required a division between the management of content and revenue: Zarmina commissioned the pieces and subbed the English and sent the files on a CD to the Urdu department, which translated everything for the Urdu version of the magazine; and Rubab sat in a rotating chair at a desk and spoke on the phone to advertisers, making statements about sales and target audience and about the quality of the product, which was

made with the 'bouquet' approach and offered a wide range of things to read and things to look at. The last issue of *Women's Journal* had reports on rape and domestic violence, and an interview with the victim of an acid attack who was now seeking treatment in Europe; a long piece on literacy among the women of Pakistan, with pictures of peasant women squatting outside schools in the Sindh Desert, their arms stacked with bangles, and with accompanying pie charts in desert colours that gave percentages and years and the comparative costs of primary education in the four provinces; and a four-page spread on the global community of Muslim women who had in their own ways resisted the recent American invasion of Iraq, a piece written in an admiring and accessible tone by a Pakistani student at the University of Birmingham, UK. The last quarter of the magazine was devoted to Society, to photos of people at tea parties and dinner parties, weddings and milaads, the pictures brightened on a computer and accompanied by the names of the subjects, many of whom called in afterwards to thank the *Women's Journal* team and to give information about upcoming events, the corporate balls and fashion shows that had begun to occur frantically among the people who, in one of the earlier articles in the 'Issues' section, had been described as 'the new crop of disconnected elites that has come up in Karachi and Lahore'.

'Well, it's true,' said my mother, and went on talking despondently on the phone to a woman, an NGO-worker friend of hers who had sold her property just before the boom.

So there had been a boom. And there was talk inside the boom, talk in magazines and on the radio and talk on the TV channels, which had multiplied and were being watched by more and more people. In the morning, while cleaning the rooms, Naseem switched on the TV and saw politicians cut ribbons and make speeches for seated audiences. She heard the speeches and learned about violence, extremism and enlightened moderation. She saw the news when it broke: a programme interrupted, the flashing red silence and the newsreader's announcement; then sirens, policemen, the ongoing chaos at the site of the attack – the bombers had come in

from both sides and blown up the cavalcade; the president had escaped but his guards were dead; then the shift of scene to the well-lit studio, where analysts sat behind a long, continuing desk and were questioned by a journalist, who frowned and appeared to take notes. There was talk of the establishment, talk of America and its allies, its interests and its changing relations with the Pakistani military. There was talk of 9/11 and the Jews. And there was talk of Islam, a religion of peace that was being misunderstood. Some channels were devoted exclusively to Islam, to its history and doctrinal particularities, to questions about the hereafter and to questions about the here and now as well – the correct Islamic expressions for meeting and departing, the right amount of head-covering and the issue of make-up, whether things such as nail varnish were *haram* or *halal*. And there were channels where these things were taken for granted, channels where women appeared in half-sleeves and sat on sofas with their legs crossed and chatted with other women who held degrees in subjects such as child psychology. The women conversed and then took questions from callers. A housewife from Rawalpindi was worried because her eight-year-old daughter had seen one of the films her father kept in his night-time cabinet. The caller said she wasn't worried about her husband, who was unstoppable; she was worried about her daughter, whose young mind must now be rushing with things the caller couldn't bring herself to articulate, let alone explain in some way to a child. The housewife wanted to know of a way to undo those things and take them back out of the child's mind. The host nodded understandingly and deferred with her palms to the expert, who said that the question was a good one, the issue here was trauma, the child had been exposed at an early age, but there was no way of undoing the exposure; in fact it wasn't even necessary. It was parents who had to accept that children were intelligent and had motives of their own and were always going to break out of sheltered environments. Later in life they became adults and had children of their own and created those very same shelters; and again the children broke past. 'But that is the fact of life,' said the expert and smiled at the host. 'It is always going and going in circles.'

‘Going and going in circles,’ said Naseem. She was chopping salad vegetables on the stone worktop in the kitchen. She chopped briskly and transferred the choppings into a bowl, then returned to the act of chopping. ‘We are also going in circles.’ She said it comically, with a self-disparaging laugh, but also with a philosophical intention, a need to draw connections between ideas and things as they were in the real world, a need she had developed during her time in Saudi Arabia. There she had seen the people of the world brought together in one mission: they wore the same cloth and prayed to the same God and went round and round the same monument. It had alerted her to the presence of a single underlying system.

‘The house of God,’ she had said. ‘It opens up your eyes.’

Now she sought that larger logic in the everyday and came up repeatedly against herself. Last week she had been made the recipient of some money, ten thousand rupees that Daadi, my grandmother, had passed on to her as an offering, a kind of alms given out to mark the approach of a wedding. At once Naseem was planning what to do with it, seeking counsel and discussing possibilities. My mother advised her to invest in a sewing machine and to start a part-time stitching business from her quarter at the back of the house. It was a start, said my mother, and offered to print a black-and-white ad for Naseem in the magazine. Naseem was persuaded. She made the calculations and found that she would have some money left after buying the sewing machine, and she set aside a part of it for a well-known lottery. Then she announced that she was going to buy the bride a wedding gift.

‘No, no,’ said my mother, who was refusing on behalf of the bride.

‘But I must,’ said Naseem.

‘Why must you?’

‘I must.’

‘No, but why?’

‘*Buss.*’

‘But why?’

‘She is my child.’

‘She is everyone’s child, Naseem. We are all doing what we can. And you have done a lot; you have done just as much as the others. You don’t have to buy a gift. You must do no such thing.’

Naseem went on swaying where she stood, blushing and looking down at her feet, made emotional by her own offer, which was not that of a servant because it exceeded the means of a servant.

‘Save your money,’ said my mother. ‘Start your sewing business.’ And Naseem smiled and said that she would.

Then the weekend arrived, and she heard that her husband had appeared outside the gate. He was not supposed to be seeing her because he was unemployed again, after quitting his job at a factory near the village, and it was known that in these periods of recklessness he would exploit her. Naseem went outside the gate to see. He was there. They spoke. Naseem brought him inside, fed him in the kitchen and allowed him to stay the night. And in the morning, after he had gone, she was filled with remorse, having parted with most of her money and exposed herself again as a weaver of wishes, a person who habitually amounted to nothing.

‘You deserve nothing,’ said Daadi from her bed. She was in her seventies now and shrivelled; she no longer spent time on the sofa in her room and merely sat on it occasionally with her back hunched, her palms placed for stability on her knees.

Naseem stood where she stood and said nothing, her fists clenched and her toes curling.

‘Ten thousand rupees,’ said Daadi. Her eyes were narrowed in cold amazement and her eyebrows were up.

Naseem was swaying.

‘How much is left?’

Naseem opened her mouth and said, ‘Two thousand.’

‘Two thousand!’ said Daadi.

‘She can buy a pair of shoes with it,’ said Suri and laughed lightly. She was the elder of Daadi’s two daughters. She was considered active for her age and lay on the other side of the bed with her back propped up against pillows.

‘Or you can give even that to him,’ said Hukmi, Daadi’s other

daughter, who was younger than Suri by three and a half years. She made her comment and looked around to see if the others saw that this was exactly where those two thousand rupees were going to go.

‘It was my fault,’ said Daadi. ‘It was my fault. I shouldn’t have given her the money. I should have gone and thrown it in a well.’ And this was rhetorical, since there were no wells nearby.

‘Oh no,’ said Suri calmly. ‘You won’t throw it in a well. You’ll give it to her again. You’ll *keep* on giving it to her.’

And Hukmi said, ‘And she’ll *keep* on giving it to him.’

Naseem, smiling, drawing strength from her own abasement, looked up from the carpet and said, ‘Round and round.’

Hukmi looked at her blankly, then looked excitedly at Suri and said, ‘Village mentality!’

And Naseem went on smiling, not knowing what that was, not caring at the moment that she didn’t; the lift out of the scolding and into the present comicality had enabled her retreat, which was what she wanted.

But the talk in the room was of money even after Naseem had gone; it was of money for the rest of the afternoon, since it was money and not love that made the biggest difference, money that in the end made marriages and families and enabled understandings between people and money that made the world go round and round.

The sisters were inside the boom. Suri’s husband was now working out of an office at home and using phones and a computer to trade on the stock market. And Hukmi’s husband was running his own showroom of used and reassembled cars near Kalma Chowk on Ferozepur Road. They were living in the same area still but had restyled their homes: the driveways of both houses sloped gently outwards past steel gates, and the names of the owners and the house numbers were inscribed on separate brass plaques that were nailed to the outside walls. Inside too there had been changes: the upstairs bathrooms were fitted with jacuzzis and modern showers; there was wallpaper on the walls; there were split-level air-conditioners with remote controls in the living-dining area and also

in the bedrooms; and there was wall-to-wall carpeting downstairs, for which the removal of shoes was required. One of the homes, Suri's, had been used in an ad for a telephone service-providing company, and the experience was continually recalled with surprise and merriment: the names of the executives and the professionalism they had shown from start to finish, and the antics of the cast and crew, and the things they had said, on screen and then off screen, about the house and its contents.

'The sofas they all loved,' said Suri. She was not one to boast but this was a fact.

'And the loveseat,' said Hukmi. 'The actress wouldn't come off it. She said no, no, leave me here, leave me here.' She closed her eyes and swooned.

'*Taubah!*' said Daadi, and clapped her hands excitedly. '*Taubah!*'

To Suri and Hukmi she had surrendered her dependence. They took Daadi in the morning to the market, to the bank and to the tailor's and to the fruit and vegetable stalls outside Pioneer Store, where they haggled for her with the vendors, since it was they who now managed her money. They took her to the doctor's when she felt unwell but only when their own attempts to locate the problem had failed: they measured her temperature with a thermometer, took readings on the blood-pressure pump, stroked her back and monitored her posture on the bed. They were followers of physiotherapy and had replaced her mattress and had made her buy a new foam pillow that kept her neck straight at night. They regulated the items on her mantelpiece, the medicines she could need at any time and also the things she needed generally, the Swaleen pills and the packets of Johar Joshanda, which she drank every morning to kill the colds that developed suddenly in winter. The doctor had said that at her age it was necessary to take precautions. And for this reason the windows were kept shut, the heater was kept alive until night, and the tub of Vicks nose rub was always kept on the bedside table, between a tall cylinder of Tender Rose air-freshener and a framed photograph, old and spotted now, of Flying Officer Sami Shirazi, Daadi's son and my father, who had been dead for more than twenty years.

‘I can’t sleep,’ said Daadi. She was sitting up in bed. Her hair was spoiled. She had been changing the position of her head on the pillow but the noise outside had gone on.

‘You’ll never say anything,’ said Suri unhelpfully. She meant that Daadi was unwilling to go outside and stop the labourers who were setting up the marquee on the lawn. ‘You won’t say a word.’ She lifted a hand and ran it unhurriedly through her hair. ‘You won’t say or do a thing.’

Daadi said, ‘What can I say?’

‘You can say you will not have people in this house after two o’clock. You can say that, can’t you? This is your house too. You too have given for this wedding.’

‘We have all given,’ said Hukmi grandly.

Daadi frowned for a while, then said, ‘Does anyone listen? Does anyone care what I say?’

Suri said, ‘And how will they care if you keep sitting here and saying things? How will they care, when they have been *allowed* to think that they own everything?’

Hukmi said, ‘They *don’t* own everything.’

Daadi continued to frown, her annoyance brought out in this way and made binding by the involvement of her daughters. ‘I am telling her,’ she said decidedly. ‘I am telling her to wrap it up. There will be no hammering here. There will be no tent and no wedding. She can think what she likes; she can write it in her magazine.’

She meant to say these things to my mother, her daughter-in-law, who lived in the same house and ran a magazine and was organizing the wedding and was felt to have acted as if she owned everything.

‘There will be no wedding,’ said Daadi. ‘We are not responsible for any wedding.’

She had gone too far.

‘There is no need,’ said Suri philosophically, ‘for anyone to do anything for anyone else.’

‘And still people do things,’ said Hukmi.

‘They do,’ said Suri.

‘From their hearts,’ said Hukmi.

‘From their hearts.’

‘And we are doing whatever we can from our hearts.’

‘Because we feel,’ said Suri and placed a hand on hers, ‘that the girl is *our* child, that this wedding is *our* duty. We are not doing it for ourselves.’

And Hukmi said, ‘There is no doubt in it. There is not a doubt.’

It had come up earlier in the week. They had gone to Saleem Fabrics to buy outfits for the groom’s mother and sisters. It was an important marital tradition – the women of one family gifting embroidered cloth to the women of the other, so they all went: Daadi, Suri, Hukmi, my mother. And inside, amid the unfurling fabrics and the busy mewl of bargainers, they had managed somehow to agree: they consulted one another on colours and patterns, pressed their fingers to the material, made faces and asked for rates. Within the hour they had formed a pile of possibilities that was then reduced to eight final pieces, two from each of them. They monitored the measurements and oversaw the folding and wrapping. And at the counter their resolve collapsed: they were short of money, this was typical, who was short of money, and why should *we* give when *you* haven’t, and from there the accusations flew: I have done so much for this wedding while *you* have done nothing, *well*, well, what? Well, *we* are not responsible. Then who is? Who is?

The cashier pressed his palms together. Who was the mother of the bride?

They looked at one another and looked away.

Hands went into handbags. I’ll pay, no I’ll pay, no let me, no please . . .

And they left the shop and returned to the house in the car with the gift-wrapped bundles clutched to their laps.

★

I had been asked to distribute the invites. It was distressing. I didn’t recognize most of the names and addresses that now appeared in embossed golden script on the envelopes. But weddings, like funerals, required staging to an audience, and the final list of names had come to one hundred and seventy-three. I now had to make

perhaps as many trips to unknown houses in the city and was grateful when Isa and Moosa, my cousins, offered their help.

They had changed. Isa, Suri's son, had settled into adulthood (he was twenty-three this year) with an airtight, burp-coming chest and a toughened but tolerant look. He wore full-sleeved shirts with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and with his thumbs tucked into the pockets of his jeans, which were fitted along the thighs and bulged provocatively at the back with his wallet. (He had joined one of the new international banks on Main Boulevard.) When we met he posed many quick questions about life in America and then answered them for himself. He asked about housing, rent, taxes, interest rates, and then disregarded my answers and delivered an unprompted omen on the boom. 'Too much too soon,' he said in English, shaking his head gloomily, and I heard him repeat it later at night, so that it appeared to have been picked up from one of the new business channels on TV.

And Moosa had changed too, but not in the same way as Isa, who had come to inhabit his personality with an air of confirmation. Moosa, Hukmi's son, was twenty-one this year, only two years younger than Isa (and older than me) but somehow elderly already, as though he had learned a humbling lesson that had left him subdued and even grateful; he wore sweatshirts and baseball caps and walked around the house with a slouch. And he hadn't shaved in weeks, and responded to related inquiries with a smile.

'Mullah!' I had cried in greeting.

'Naw, man,' he said, shaking his head in the new disarmed way, 'bro's a hippie now. No more drama, man. No more of that stuff.' It wasn't clear what he was referring to – he was aggressive once but that was long ago, a thing from childhood.

'Smoking?' I said.

Again he shook his head, this time in defeat. 'Old habits, man . . .'

And again he smiled, incorporating the habit into his new, pleasant take on life.

Their car was now a red Honda City that Isa had acquired with a loan from the bank. It was a strong, stout car, inexpensive but

efficient; Isa gave me a proud external tour of the thing, tapping the shiny bonnet and praising the tough tyres that he claimed could handle a mountain. 'Get in gear,' he said, soaring his hand like an aeroplane, 'and that's it. Take off.'

'Frickin' awesome,' said Moosa, who was standing nearby and nodding.

I thought of the old Suzuki with its one functional headlight, its dark, furry boot and slackened dashboard. The memory was attached to the faults, things we had then wished away.

'Solid,' I said, and knocked on the bonnet to confirm it. 'Yup. Looks good. Take it for a ride?'

'Sir,' said Isa obligingly and held open the shiny door.

Most of the houses were in Defence, and these were easy to find – the division into sectors was surprisingly reliable. In two trips we had delivered more than half the cards. But areas like Gulberg and Garden Town were difficult: the houses had retreated from the roads, which had succumbed to boutiques and restaurants and shopping plazas, many still bare with cement and guarded by smart neon screens that came alive at night and painted promising pictures of standards surpassed and goals achieved. The houses were hidden behind these hasty conjurings, lost in a confusion of unnamed lanes that often died abruptly in empty plots. And other parts were stranger: the one time we went to Mughalpura our car got stuck in an alley. There were no boutiques here and no plazas, only small, unshuttered shops on the sides and rubbish heaped on the streets. Our car was stranded between a bus and a donkey cart, and attracted a pack of children, who were thrilled by our misfortune and banged their fists on the bonnet and dragged their squeaky palms across the windows.

Isa lowered his window and shouted, '*Maaderchod!*'

The laughing boy darted into the recessed shade of a house and made a shoving gesture with his fist.

'Frickin' *wild*,' said Moosa, who was sitting in the front and wearing sunglasses.

The children stared and kept walking, past the car and then along

the sides of the bus, dragging their palms with slow sureness across its shut doors.

Moosa said, 'They're like *monkeys*.' *He lit a cigarette and lowered his window a little.*

And Isa said, 'Education,' and stared defiantly at the children outside, without saying whether he thought this was the problem or the solution.

Morning was spent locating caterers and light-wallahs in obscure, grimy corners of Ichhra, then ordering the flowers in bulk from stalls in Liberty and stopping at the roundabout to negotiate with the dhol-wallahs, who wore starched silver turbans and yellow clothes and sat on the footpath with their drums. They took down the address and promised to be there on the night of the wedding. But there was more to do the next day, as the chores were renewed and led again into the afternoon, which was long and touched with sunshine and then a little cold, the large low sun hanging red behind the rising dust. In the evening we were asked to collect Aasia and Maheen, sisters to Isa and Moosa respectively, from their tuition centres in Muslim Town. They were in secondary school now and were preparing for their end-of-term exams but had nothing to say on the subject; they sat at the back of the car with their mobile phones, and played with the buttons and watched the luminous screens for results. They were girly in their habits but physically complete: their shalwar kameezes were tight around the waist and accentuated the bust and the pelvis, the sleeves short and modern. Aasia was older and had stocky upper arms that she stroked from time to time as if to soothe a rash. She had thin eyebrows and stylish black glasses with thick rims, and wore her hair in a ponytail that rose and fell in a fluffy S. Maheen was pale and lanky, also ponytailed, and wore no make-up other than a striking smudge of black around the eyes. Both carried handbags. They were at that place where, after years of conflict, they were discovering a quiet understanding with their mothers, who now appeared sympathetic and weirdly familiar.

At night I went with Isa and Moosa to see the new places of

leisure. There was a mini-golf course near Centre Point with gently sloping islands and fountains that coughed colourful water; a karaoke bar in Defence Market that played songs too new for nostalgia and not new enough to stir up the excitements of the present; and once a dim sheesha bar in Gaddafi Stadium, where two waiters in waistcoats sat idly at a table, surrounded by the dark décor and a ghostly absence of customers. They were surprised to see us, and talked and motioned erratically as they led us up a winding wrought-iron staircase into the smoking section. We settled into a sofa by the window and I saw that our arrival had stopped the advancements of a date: they were sitting in a corner, the boy now looking sourly in our direction, the girl speaking rigidly to the table as though someone had just switched on the lights after promising not to. An abandoned hookah sat between them like undestroyed evidence. They ordered the bill and paid it quickly, and left maintaining a careful physical distance.

And that was it. There was nothing more to do. There were still no bars or nightclubs in Lahore or in the rest of the country, where alcohol was banned. Isa said it was unnecessary since people went on doing what they had always done. He gave the example of Dubai, where they had achieved some kind of regulation by allowing alcohol only in the clubs; you couldn't buy a bottle and take it home with you. That system was better because it allowed things in small amounts and saved people from excess in the end.

'Over here,' he said hopelessly, 'everything goes on underground. Everyone does everything.' He meant the people in the Society pages, from whose world he was excluded. He went on to list their vices in a burning whisper: 'Parties-sharties, coke-shoke, anything and everything, E *bhenchod*, speed and heroin.' He recovered his voice and said, 'What the fuck is booze, man? It's nothing.'

'Orgies,' said Moosa with a smile of depravity, a guilty smile that suggested complicity of intent if not in the act itself. 'Swapping partners. There's a club in Karachi where you swap your car keys first.' He laughed mordantly, as if at a hard but distant memory of the thing. 'And gays. So many gays.' He said it with a sigh of amazement, a yearning for a time when it was still an occasional

occurrence and not a pervasive phenomenon, a thing that happened but didn't yet demand a reckoning by showing up so obviously around him.

'And bombs?' I asked.

'And bombs,' said Moosa, who hadn't thought of it like that. 'And bombs.'

'Basically it's all changing,' said Isa, whose vision of it had suddenly expanded and gone beyond the horizon; he saw it all at once and it compelled him to bring up his hand and rock it to either side like a raft in water. 'It's all up for grabs,' he said. 'It's all up for grabs.'

The alcohol still came from bootleggers. And their names were the same: Samuel, Emanuel, Joseph, Ilyas, Christians with purchasing licences. The imported bottles were sent from the warehouses of embassies in Islamabad, and in Lahore they were always more expensive. One evening we set out in the car to acquire our stock for the wedding. We were following directions delivered by the man, who was gruff and edgy on the phone and spoke only in codes ('the stuff' was ready, he said, five 'browns' and five 'whites'). The place was in Cantt, which was surprising, since only rich people and retired generals lived in Cantt. We got lost trying to find it. It was late already; the maghrib azaan had sounded and the sun had vanished behind the thick, dark trees of a park. Night would soon descend, and the policemen would surface at the kerbs, waiting to stop cars like ours (too rich to be poor, too poor to be rich) so they could search the seats and boots with torches.

'Dogs,' said Moosa, 'bribe-eaters.'

'No worries,' said Isa, who had tried this sort of thing and succeeded.

We found it in a dusty lane behind the polo grounds. It was a large grey house guarded by a tall gate of thick blue iron. The owner's name was inscribed on a white plastic plaque outside. It was not the name of the bootlegger, who went only by Ashfaaq.

Moosa offered to ring the bell.

'No,' said Isa and dialled a number into his mobile phone.

Moosa began to gallop his fingers on the dashboard.

‘Don’t,’ said Isa.

Moosa didn’t.

‘Ji!’ said Isa to the phone, suddenly buoyant. ‘We are outside. Yes, right outside. Okay, no problem, no problem.’ He held up the phone to check that it was the same number, then tossed it into the dashboard.

‘Coming?’ said Moosa.

Isa nodded. He was watching the gate beyond, which opened at last with a whine and a clang: a man emerged with his shoulders thrown back as if to further project the bulge of his stomach. A duffel bag was carried on his palms. He paused at the gate and looked quickly to either side.

‘Boss,’ said Isa through his window. He brought two fingers to his forehead in a casual salute.

‘Boss,’ said the man in response, with a wide but withholding smile that took in the seats, the open dashboard, our clothes and faces.

‘Stuff ready?’ said Isa.

The man passed him the bag, and Isa settled it in his lap and searched it with his hand, rattling the glass inside. ‘Set,’ he said and brought out the cash. He counted it carefully to ensure it was the right amount, licking his forefinger every few notes.

The man watched without altering his expression.

Isa stacked the notes on his knee and handed them over in a drooping wad. ‘Otherwise? All well?’

‘God’s grace,’ said the man with a hand on his heart.

Isa held on to a look of contentment and reversed the car. He kept his speed in the lane, then outside the lane, on the streets, avoiding the checkpoints and waiting until the danger had passed. And now came the rise of Sherpao Bridge, the wind and the lights in the sweep of transit: it was a memory and then a feeling, sitting in another car with Samar Api, her face turned to the window and waiting for a thrill that by then had always passed.

I looked now and found that there was no horizon, only the lights of distant houses coming on in the dark.

\*

The days leading up to the wedding were marked by the bride's absence. She was to be unveiled on the last night, after the two families had established themselves in a series of marital procedures that began with a milaad. It was held at our house on a weeknight. The veranda was covered in white bedsheets, which were spread out in overlapping squares and spotted with maroon velvet cushions rented from a shop in Canal Park. It was a ladies-only affair; they left their shoes at the entrance and sat in solemn rows on the floor, their heads covered and swaying to sad songs in praise of the Prophet. Then we attended a dholki at the groom's house. Our party went in two cars, the men in starched white cotton and the women in fabrics of varying intensities, led by Daadi, who wore cream silk and a collaring of pearls, and approached the house with a frail arm in the nook of Naseem's elbow. We were showered with rose petals at the entrance. Hands were held and cheeks were kissed. A photographer knelt and took pictures. We were shown into the enclosed lawn and were asked to take the front row of chairs, Daadi in the centre, Naseem at her feet on the carpet. Instantly she began plying Daadi with tissue paper to show that our elders were cared for in unfamiliar environments; twice Suri and Hukmi stopped a bearer to demand a glass of water for Daadi, and my mother leaned in repeatedly to name the guests, to locate them within the crystallizing family network. Daadi listened with a steady unsurprised expression as though the accruing information only validated opinions that had been aired earlier.

The dances began. First the groom's aunts performed the *luddi* in slow, restrained circles. Their dupattas were tied like sashes across their torsos and slipped when they bent to clap. Then the young men of the clan performed a rowdy bhangra. They wore matching black kurtas and yellow scarves in siphons around their necks, and kicked the air and jabbed their forefingers at the ceiling. Now a hush fell upon the room, and someone cried, 'Auntie! It's Auntie's turn!' There was whistling and hooting as a well-preserved woman emerged from the seated crowd and took confident, youthful steps into the centre of the room. Her golden sari held its shine in brassy dents. She began to tap her foot to the gathering beat, her

eyes closed, a hand massaging the chunky pendant at her throat. She was warming up. And now, her feet moving, she began to dance, but slowly, using only the features of her face, her mouth and her eyes and her eyebrows, and occasional twirls of her hand for expression. Daadi watched the dance with her own hands folded in her lap. She watched when Auntie closed her eyes and smiled, watched when Auntie began to dance in circles and stumbled and scowled and resisted with her fists the attempts of a concerned relative who was trying to take her away.

Later it was agreed that the event was mediocre at best, the groom's relatives brash and uncouth and overly affectionate and oddly endearing in their lack of refinement. It was a way of measuring the first defeat, theirs, against the success that was expected to be ours.

But the next event was a dholki organized by Aasia and Maheen, and it fell into the hands of their friends, girls as well as boys, many of whom were newly befriended and took their time to arrive. They began to appear on the lawn after dinner had been served, the girls in long, flowing skirts and short blouses, the boys in dark blazers and shawls that were worn over plain shalwar kameezes. Their arrival caused excitement among the guests: there was talk now of dancing and speculation about the possible pairings. In a corner the girls and boys were being organized into dancing positions by their leader, a thin, rosy girl called Bushra who had come from Dubai and wore her hair in a pile and was instructing her subordinates with swift slashing movements of her arm. A rumour began to circulate, instigated by a male fashion designer in a declarative mood, about the girl's temper at a photo shoot; she was a model or had been a model in the past; it was a shoot she had done for a magazine or a newspaper; the story travelled to the veranda, which had been converted with a screen into a place for men to stand with drinks and chat. Isa's colleagues from the bank were there, and Moosa was trying unsuccessfully to enter their conversation. He was nodding a little too much, his loud laughs were incongruous, and he was drinking against this growing failure as a form of resistance, a refusal to submit; soon he was lost in an

expression of bitter recall and staring with a drunk's disdain at the extended folly of sobriety. He was seen wagging his finger at someone, then smiling slyly and saying something about loans. After that he attached himself to the idea of Bushra, who was about to start her dance. He announced it many times, in each instance with fresh excitement, and it began to have an effect on the gathering, which dispersed and reformed into a crowd of clapping onlookers. Bushra danced alone in a clearing to a fast-paced song about a veil the singer wanted her lover to touch: she was dancing back and forth with her own veil held taut between her hands, plunging forward and coming up and plunging and coming back up. Among the watching women there were expressions of admiration, shock, enchantment and developing interest, as well as boredom and mild contempt. And the expressions on the whole were serious and preoccupied. Then Bushra was gone; she had sat down abruptly, and in her place a boy was dancing to the rest of the song, which was the lover's audacious response to the part about the veil. The boy too was fair-skinned and danced with slow movements of his shoulders, and it was instantly sexual, it was sexy in the extreme, and in the men's gathering to the side this was expressed as encouragement, acknowledged with small smiles and nods of recognition, while among the women it caused a contagion of chortling and hand-holding shyness. The song ended and another began; another dance was danced; the choreography went on as before and began to lose its grip on the audience, which was increasingly restless. There came a moment when the clearing in the centre was empty and the music continued unattended. A clapping uncle made the first incursion into this emptiness. And then the night belonged to all the guests, a democracy of dance that went on for almost an hour, and at last began to fade through small desertions, through partings and departures and through strange, sorrowful glances that seemed to acknowledge an unchanging truth that was always there towards the end.

So the day arrived. Almond-shaped lights appeared on the outside walls, on the frangipani tree at the edge of the lawn and around the

pillars in the porch. A brass band was installed at the gate and told to perform the main tune only when the groom and his entourage arrived. To pass the time the band played patriotic tunes, and they drew the attention of *mirasis*: they appeared at the gate in their tattered clothes and stood behind their leader, who held a tambourine in one hand and held out the other hand and recited a long, musical benediction that was dependent for completion on implied acts of charity. When no one came they struck their tambourines and sang traditional wedding songs. The manager of the brass band came outside and told the *mirasis* to go away; the *mirasis* stopped singing and stared reproachfully. The manager went inside and complained, and after a while the *mirasis* were paid and left, and the brass band was able to go on playing patriotic tunes.

In the driveway the caterers had set up long tables and lined them with steel dishes. For now the dishes were empty and the lids were raised; the forks and spoons and knives were spread out underneath in adjoining rows, and every table had its own ostentatious display of salads and chutneys, *desi* as well as Continental. Bearers in white uniforms hurried out of the kitchen with trays of stainless steel on their palms and carried them into the bloated white marquee covering the lawn, where guests were sitting in chairs and standing around charcoal braziers, and were turning again and again to look at the elevated stage where a sofa had been placed before a screen of hanging garlands. The sofa was empty, and was waiting for the bride and groom, who were going to appear after dinner, but first the marquee had to fill up. At last dinner was announced, and the guests gathered in lines by the tables in the driveway and returned with their plates and drinks to the lawn, where the chatter was suddenly loud and hectic and the sounds from the brass band outside had reached a pitch.

Inside, removed from the music and laughter, the bride was complaining.

‘This is too tight,’ said Samar Api and snarled. ‘I can’t even breathe.’

‘Try to sit up,’ I suggested.

She was sitting cross-legged on her bed, slouching and making

dejected faces at the ceiling. Her eyebrows, arched and sharpened during a frantic, seven-hour session at the beauty salon, had acquired strange new angles at the edges, and gave her face a cunning and almost comical look. Cracks appeared in the layer of foundation on her forehead when she frowned; it had been applied clumsily; her sleeves lifted when she sighed and showed the unpainted ochre skin underneath. She tugged at her blouse in agitation. Stars fell to the carpet.

‘Stop it,’ said my mother. She had entered the room and was holding a sheaf of envelopes. ‘You’ll ruin the outfit.’ She dropped the envelopes into Samar Api’s lap and began to count on her fingers: ‘Five thousand from Mrs Khokhar, ten from Mrs Zaidi and a crystal decanter from the Shahs. That’s fifteen plus a gift. Write it down.’

‘My blouse is too tight,’ said Samar Api.

‘O God,’ said my mother.

‘And the foundation is coming off.’

‘I knew this would happen.’

‘I can’t go outside like this.’

‘Typical.’

‘I can’t.’

My mother was still. She shot me a wounded look and marched out of the room. I watched her from the window as she returned to the lawn, pulling her mouth into a smile for the guests.

‘Did you bring it?’

‘Here,’ I said, and produced a flask from my pocket.

Samar Api held it, looked at it, then threw back her head and drank from it. The taste was stronger than she expected; she made a gagging, fishlike face and fumbled under the bed for her cigarettes.

‘Take it easy,’ I said.

‘Don’t tell me that.’

‘I’m just saying . . .’

‘Don’t.’ She paused to light a Marlboro, squinting against the smoke. She drank from the flask again, prepared for the tattle, her eyes closed in advance. ‘Do you think she’s angry?’

‘Come on,’ I said, and took the flask from her hand. ‘You know what she’s like.’

'I know but still –'

'No –'

'No, I know –'

We were quiet. The room became vacant and was taken up by the sounds from outside.

'Is he here yet?' she asked.

'Any minute,' I said, watching the window. 'Any minute now.'