THE CREATIVE PROCESS
A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

Thesis submitted for the degree:
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

by

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2015
Abstract

This PhD submission constitutes a novel and accompanying critical commentary. My novel *Nobody Killed Her* provides an alternative history of the assassination of Pakistan's only female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. The thesis questions the choices I made in order to develop the writing of this novel and the decisions I took in order for it to reach its readers. I discuss the issues of creative integrity and the role of the publisher as an enabler, and as a modern day censor. I examine the role of literary influences and publishing pressures on the multi-layered and shifting strains of the creative process and explore fiction as a powerful tool for communicating the paradoxical state of modern Pakistani women, which my novel draws upon. Accordingly, my research narrative is interspersed with personal vignettes that helped shape my writing.

Reflecting upon the role of memory, history and politics, and literary influences that shape our writing, I try to interrogate the ‘flash-bulb’ moments of inspiration and argue that creative writing is actually a series of complex thought processes that shape our consciousness. I have also, during the compilation of this essay, looked critically at the role of the publisher in shaping an author’s creativity and the author’s desire for publication in influencing his or her creative choices. I have examined the role of the audience, by asking who the writer is writing for, concluding that the creative journey is more important than the destination i.e., the culmination of the writing into a published form. I conclude by contending that creative writing is above all communication, not just with the reader but also with one’s self. It is about self-expression and therefore must remain true to the self.

*Keywords*: Alternative history, Assassination, Bhutto, Censor, Creative process, Libel, Inspiration, Publisher, Pakistani women
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my children and my husband, whose patience was tested to the limits during the final stages of this PhD, for their support.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my supervisor Dr Harry Whitehead in making my PhD experience most interesting.
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NOBODY KILLED HER

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‘Who Killed Gigi Shah?’

‘Death doesn’t knock on the door before entering, Your Honour. It comes suddenly, unannounced and uninvited. A bomb blast, a bullet gone astray, a blow in the head and before you know it, the life has gone out of you. Cooked, as we say here in Karachi.’

‘Miss Khan…’

‘You are smiling, Sir! Perhaps you think I didn’t try to stop her… I tried to tell her there was danger. The General and his men… the Jihadists… they will kill you, I said. Why do you think they are letting you come back? So they can send you away for good! To a place you can never return from, I added in case she hadn’t understood. Her Urdu was not that good you see and my English… well never mind. So I said to Gigi Sahiba, don’t go, it’s a set up. Even told her the story of the spider and the fly. But she just laughed. Laughed that careless laugh of hers, so unafraid, so unaffected. As if death itself was on her payroll…’

‘Miss Khan, please- only answer the questions asked. Tell the court how you knew the deceased?’

‘I knew her the way I know God, Your Honour. I worshipped her, believed in her, yet never knew if she was real or an illusion. Perhaps, I had it imagined it all…’

‘Miss Khan, you are digressing again. Think back, and answer correctly.’

‘Think back?’

*
LONDON, 1981

The first time we met, you were wearing borrowed clothes. You sat there in your too big platforms, bell sleeves, and a neckline that plunged to the right. Your yellow jumper hung loose over your thin frame. Your head was defiantly uncovered, your frizzy hair as rebellious as your nature. Later you told me that your friend Yasmin had lent you the clothes because your mother had stopped your monthly allowance. She thought it would make you give up politics.

Your mother didn’t know you well.

Looking deceptively sunny in that blinding yellow, you smoked as Yasmin stood behind you searching through a high bookshelf. I had never seen a Muslim woman of your stature smoke, let alone sit publicly without a veil. To avoid staring, I looked up at the highest shelf, my neck craning as I tilted my head all the way up, then bending as I looked down to the last. I wondered if you had read all those books.

Perhaps it was my head bobbing up and down like a duck in water that caught your attention. Sit, you gestured and I nervously looked around for a chair to park myself on. I noticed your forehead crease in a frown as you crossed your legs like men do. You leaned back, stretching your hand over your knee and it was then I knew. With downcast eyes, I settled on the floor.

‘What’s your name?’ you asked at the exact moment I opened my mouth to say, ‘Madam, I want to help.’

You pretended you hadn’t heard and I knew from then on not to speak unless spoken to. Nobody can say I wasn’t a good learner.

*That much, at least, is true.*

Yasmin brought tea and as she handed around the cups, you asked me again what my name was.

‘Nazleen Khan,’ I said. ‘But everyone calls me Nazo.’

You smiled and I said, ‘Madam, I am working in Aijaz Sahib’s dry cleaners. You know Aijaz Sahib from Ilford? He sent me to you. He said you are very kind to people
fleeing the General’s regime. My whole family was murdered in the Coup. My father, who was a gatekeeper, resisted when they tried to break into the parliament…Later the General’s men came to our house and killed everyone…I hid under the bed…survived somehow…’

I could not carry on talking.

You called me to come and sit next to you. You didn’t offer me any condolence. Instead you said, ‘Can you type?’

And that was how it all began.

*
‘Miss Khan, I will now hand over to my able colleague, the famous Human Rights lawyer and good friend of the deceased, Mr. Omar. He will be the D.A. by special permission on this court case that he has brought against you, accusing you of the murder of Ms. Gigi Shah. Your witness, Mr. Omar.’

‘Thank you, Counsel. Now, Your Honour, Miss Nazneen Khan, commonly known as Nazo, is accused of conspiring the assassination of Pakistan’s first female Prime Minister, Madam G.G Shah fondly known as Gigi Sahiba. Although the body was charred in the explosion, new evidence has revealed that her death was not due to the suicide bombing as was previously believed but by a bullet wound shot at a close range. Almost as if by someone seated right next to her...’

‘Objection!’

‘Sustained.’

‘Very well. Let me ask a very simple and straightforward question. Miss Khan must answer why it is that she, who sat right next to Gigi Sahiba on the day of the assassination managed to escape unscathed, while Gigi lost her life. Now Miss Khan, tell the court who sat where...’
The cushion next to your desk became my space. Every day after work I came to your Barbican apartment and positioned myself by your feet. At first Yasmin did all your correspondence but slowly as my typing speed increased the typewriter too found its way down to the carpet. Tahtahtahtah. I typed like a machine gun, you once commented from your throne on the sofa. I smiled, silently collecting any scraps of compliments that came my way. For me you were the savior - the Prophet, who would rid us of the General.

I wasn’t the only one. Throngs of people came. Every day, the apartment grew, its walls stretched and sometimes I thought the square shape would bend with the number of people who squeezed inside, each offering whatever service they could. We grew rich in people power. Students pledged support. Immigrants rallied outside the Home Embassy. Housewives sent us parcels of food, children came with pictures. The pressure in the house spilled out across the seas and into the country we had left behind. Our day grew to eighteen hours as we worked nonstop. And then one day the Big Brother stepped in.

‘Senator Ted Kennedy called!’ You burst into the room and although I had no idea who he was, I found myself feeling inexplicably happy. You reached out and hugged me, ‘The day is not far,’ you said. ‘Don’t forget.’

I won’t, I thought, as I felt the warmth of your bony hands seep into my rough palms. Later I folded my hands into the tiniest of fists and tucked them into the folds of my hijab.

‘I won’t ever forget,’ I said to your receding back.

*

‘No one can silence us now. No one can take our voice away now that one voice has become the words of so many,’ It was 1982 and you were speaking at a rally in East Ham. Afterwards at the flat you explained that Washington had begun listening. ‘The world is finally looking beyond the communist threat. Now is our chance. We have to get in there.’

‘He can’t keep us out any longer, Gigi Sahiba,’ said a man so thin he could have been a reed. He came up to you and started talking. ‘The General has been exploiting the
country. Sending our people to the borders to fight a war that isn’t ours. In fact it’s nobody’s war. The Americans have exaggerated the threat. What do you think?’

I thought he was standing too close to you.

‘The General is cashing in on US fears,’ you replied, exhaling smoke. ‘He’s fleecing them.’

The man leaned his thin body further and his drooping mustache seemed to tower over you. Still you did not push him away.

*

That night I did not go home. I watched with unblinking eyes as you both talked through the night, endless cups of tea your only companions left. As the sun rose, you yawned and stretched across the sofa, ‘Fetch me a glass of water, won’t you, Nazo.’

But I did not want to leave you alone a second with the Reed. I called to the young boy, an Afghan refugee, who had been hired to help with the increasing number of visitors to the house and their endless demands for steaming cups of chai.

‘Refugee,’ I called out, my voice echoing in the still silent house. The boy rose from his makeshift bed on the carpet and rubbed his eyes.

‘Water for Gigi Sahiba,’ I said. ‘And make sure the glass is clean.’

When he brought it in I took the glass from him and wiped off his fingerprints from the frosty surface with the ends of my hijab.

‘Here you go,’ I said as you looked curiously at me. After you finished the water you handed the empty glass back to me.

‘You can show Mr. Riaz out.’

The Reed rose and smiled down at me.

‘I’ll save your gatekeeper the trouble,’ he said putting on his sunglasses.

*The Gatekeeper*

I smiled as I held the door open for him.

‘Till tomorrow,’ he said from the doorway just as the door slipped from my hand and slammed on his face.

*I never did want to be the gatekeeper*.
Since the takeover 5 years ago, in which the General had executed your father, our only elected Prime Minister, the Army and the Jihadists had run the country to the ground. It wasn’t the most liberal of places to begin with but now it was a prison, one giant cage for women and children, elderly and disabled, and all those others who weren’t men enough or Muslim enough. We were the waste, to be swept under borders of black cloth. My country had been colorful once, now it was a sea of black. Black burqas, black beards, black burnt down buildings, pockmarked with bullets…but amidst all this darkness, you had appeared like a white dove- a messenger of peace. Nobody really knew how you managed to escape the General’s prison but there you were- carrying on your martyred father’s mission.

Was I wrong? Tell me was I wrong to believe that you alone could free us from the Jihadist’s clutches. In those days in London, you worked day into night to make it happen. You promised to make it all better. And maybe you did.

It wasn’t long before your hard work began to reap its rewards. The West seemed to like the idea of the woman who had survived the General’s Coup, this veileless Muslim woman who threatened the status quo with her unusual western education and liberal outlook. The Americans called you Daughter of Peace. After all nobody could resist your charms…

And then, in 1983 the General finally gave into American pressure and announced elections. That day when I entered the flat, laughter greeted me from all sides. The mood was jubilant and I thought I must be hallucinating for you were spinning around in circles. Round and round you twirled like a Sufi Dervish, your skirt skimming around your black tights. Yasmin tied a bell edged tablecloth to her waist and joined in. She shook her thin waist then did some moves like a belly dancer. I clapped and you both stopped to notice me. The door was unlocked, I said. The silence was thick.

I began to turn around when you said, ‘Where to, Nazo? Join in.’

Smiling I walked into the circle. Dance, you said but I couldn’t. I had never felt more self-conscious in my life.
Standing next to you and Yasmin I suddenly found myself thinking about pores. Open pores, I thought as I saw the Reed coming out of the study. He winked at me and said, ‘You need some Bollywood music to see her moves.’ I wanted to show him a filmy punch instead but I held myself.

‘Will this do?’ you put on a tape of Nazia Hassan.

‘Aha,’ you said as I smiled. ‘Aha,’ you said again as you took my hand and we began pirouetting around the room.

‘Listen to this,’ the Reed said turning off the tape. He held out the radio he was holding against his ear just as the signature tune of BBC broadcast rang off.

‘What is it?’

‘Oh you missed it!’

You marched up to him and said, ‘Will you just tell us already?’

I saw your forehead crease at his silence. My stomach tensed. This better be good your scowl seemed to say as you pressed the rewind button on the tape recorder.

‘The jackass General has called elections- but banned all political parties,’ the Reed said.

‘What!’

‘You heard me,’ he said, switching off the tape.

‘Yeah, of course, he has,’ Yasmin said. ‘Must be unIslamic or too present century for him. Don’t you know 1500 years ago when Islam was being declared there were no political parties?’

‘And no democracy either,’ the Reed added.

‘That General,’ you said slamming the radio on the floor. ‘That General has definitely lost it.’

‘I can’t believe people are falling for this,’ Yasmin said untying the cloth around her waist and flinging it on the sofa.

‘How can he do this?’ you shouted. ‘How does he get away with this farce?’

‘Hitler said the bigger the lie, the more it is believable.’

All three of you looked at me as if I had spoken in Russian.

*
‘Gigi only knew you for a month before she promoted you.’
‘Sometimes it only takes a few minutes to know someone. Sometimes a lifetime is not enough.’
‘So you admit that you were a trusted personnel with access to the most confidential of information. You had the intelligence at your fingertips yet you did not stop Gigi from going to the rally. I was there. You goaded her. You dared her!’
‘Objection!’
‘The Court advises the Mr. Omar to take a more straight forward line of questioning.’
‘Your Honour, my intention is to reveal how the accused gained her trust. But perhaps it is better to begin at the beginning. Please tell the court, Miss Khan, how a barely literate asylum seeker like you, became Gigi Shah’s private secretary?’
In the days that followed I found you looking at me differently. It was almost as if you had spotted something that no one else had seen. When I next sat down to type, you shouted at Refugee and asked could no table and chair be found for me? I was so surprised that I could not even thank you.

‘It’s not like she’s playing the piano,’ the boy grumbled as he dragged in a desk from the study and placed it next to the sofa.

Perhaps you didn’t hear him, or maybe you chose to ignore him but I could see that you raised your chin slightly. It was enough for me. I grabbed the chair he was dragging and held his wrist.

‘Give your forked tongue a rest, boy. Don’t think too much about what I can and cannot do.’

The look you gave me as he left, was the longest you would ever look at me.

*

Later that afternoon you called me into your study.

‘Here,’ you thrust a brown package at me. I unwrapped it greedily, only to discover, it was one of your big fat books.

‘You look disappointed,’ you asked curiously.

How could I tell you that I was hoping for something more… practical, so to speak.

You crossed the room and stood very close to me. ‘Nazo,’ you asked, your voice tender, ‘You can read, can’t you?’

I felt myself shiver. A goose must have walked over my grave. Or yours…

‘Tell me, Nazo. Don’t be shy.’

How could I tell you? I was too ashamed to admit that although I could read perfectly well, I had no interest in doing so. But, I didn’t want to disappoint you either, so I said, ‘I can read enough to type your memos.’

‘I had a feeling you were just copying,’ you said rubbing your chin, disbelief drawn all over your face. Perhaps the image of being an illiterate fitted in well with your perception of me. I hung my head low.
I always was one to go along.

‘I think I know what you are worried about. Here, sit down,’ you pulled a chair and sat across from me. ‘Look, all that stuff the General’s men say about education being haram for women is wrong. Just imagine, the very first word revealed to the holy Prophet was Iqra. It means, read, Nazo. Allah asked him to read. That was His first instruction!’

There have been very few times in life that I’ve been wrong. This was one such time. Looking at the passion in your eyes, the honesty in your voice, I realized, it really was true- all that I had heard about you: your idealism, your commitment, your sheer belief in what you had set out to do. Perhaps the impossible was possible. The ten-year rule of the General’s could be broken, after all…

‘Nazo, are you even listening?’

I blinked in surprise.

‘I was saying that the very first word of the Quran was Iqra. It means Read. It literally means learn to read! Why would God do that if he didn’t want us to educate ourselves? Do you understand, Nazo?’

I didn’t. But I saw your mad unshakable faith in yourself, in your mission... I wanted so much, right then, to believe you.

‘Here,’ you thrust a bunch of paperbacks at me. ‘I want you to read these.’

I looked down at my hands, War and Peace, Anna Karenina, Macbeth, Hamlet…

You didn’t know it then Gigi, but you had started to shape me, the way one shapes wet mud.

‘Now go and read,’ you instructed. ‘Remember, readers become Leaders.’

They certainly do.

*

Your work for women’s education, banned under the General’s Jihadist regime, gained much publicity here and back at home. But some things are just not meant to be. All your lipping about women’s education came to a grinding halt. Perhaps you had said too much or perhaps you didn’t say enough…whatever the reasons, the General put a full stop to it.
The day the news came, I was the first one you called. When I entered the flat you were sitting with your head in your hands.

‘Nazo,’ you said and I found my heart sinking. Your voice sounded strange, muffled as if buried under a great bundle of cotton wool.

‘What is it, Gigi Sahiba? What happened?’

You tossed a newspaper towards me. I picked it up tentatively, haltingly as if it contained not the printed word but some deadly arson. And lethal it was. The news on that papery, thin broadsheet, as piercing as a bullet.

A teenage girl had been shot in the head for going to school. The Jihadists had proudly taken the credit for it.

I dropped the paper. My hands, I noticed, were trembling.

‘The girl took a stand,’ you were saying. ‘She refused to be cowered. She went to school, Nazo, because I told her to. I encouraged these girls. I told them to stand up for their rights. I’m a killer, Nazo. I’m a murderer. This little girl’s blood is on my hands.’

You slid off the bed like an ice cube melting under the hot sun. It was a strange sight, watching someone so resolute, crumbling so easily, so quickly. I felt angry.

‘Get up,’ I said.

You were too busy sobbing to hear me.

‘Get up,’ I shouted.

This time you looked up, outraged at being addressed like this.

‘You can let this get you down, Gigi Sahiba. Or you can keep going, unafraid and unashamed.’

I thought I saw you look at me differently. I thought -- I saw you try.

*

Sometimes clocks don’t obey rules. Time slips away unnoticed, days somersault into nights unseen. This was one such time. We worked unaware of the hours. The girl’s murder had given you the kick you needed to launch a full-scale human rights operation against the General. Appeals, campaigns, slogans, and fundraisers drew people in with their tentacles and it was there we stayed till our eyes could no longer stay open. As soon
as we awoke, the cycle began again. At times the exhilaration was unbearable. At other times it felt like being trapped in a nightmare. A kind of fear gripped us all the time; the kind that comes from knowing something too well. We all knew what the General and his men were capable of, if they remained in power.

The time had come for you to openly challenge him. There was no turning back now. You knocked at all the doors and surprisingly many of them opened; sick as they were of turning a blind eye at the General’s atrocities. World leaders were beginning to show their support but back home, people were still afraid. They say time heals all wounds, but for them they had turned septic.

Before we knew it, three years had passed. It was 1984. You carried on, the image of the schoolgirl’s brains blown out for going to school, pushing you on. ‘We have to win,’ you chanted night and day. ‘We have to defeat them. We have to. We just have to.’

And amidst all this, I worked the hardest. Even I couldn’t tell you what exactly, I did for you. Perhaps it would be easier to list what I didn’t do. All I knew was that I was no longer Nazo the typist. Somewhere somehow the lines had blurred. The divide was hazy and I crossed back and forth at will. I was your Woman Friday, ironing your shirts one minute, keeping your diary the next. Yasmin was only too happy to hand over the bulging diary. It was she who first started calling me P.A. Nazo.

‘Hello, Nazo Khan, Personal Assistant to Chair Person of Progressive Party G.G Shah, speaking,’ I’d say when I picked up the phone; my face flushed with pride at this unabashed self-promotion.

Every now and then, I’d see you look at me in amusement but you never once questioned me. Untill one day, like Ram’s Sita, I crossed a boundary I never knew existed.

*

It was a particularly busy winter’s day. We were edging closer to our goal. There was anticipation in the air, the central heating in the stuffy London apartment as stifling as the suspense of our mission. The phone rang. It was a well-known political magazine calling to ask if I could fit in an urgent interview with you that afternoon. They wanted to
do a profile of your stance for women’s education for the March 8th edition.

‘Certainly,’ I replied crossing out an appointment with the Reed’s father.

That afternoon, you called me into the room and asked why.

Surely you knew why, I thought staring at you and the Reed sitting side by side like two birds on a branch. You were here to lobby not socialize with silly old fogies. But I held my tongue.

‘Sorry, Gigi Sahiba, I thought it would be useful to meet the press. The wanted to focus on the cause for Women’s day…’ I should have stopped there but I didn’t. I couldn’t help but add, ‘I thought this meeting would be better use of your time.’

‘I told you she’s appointed herself your gatekeeper,’ the Reed said with an exaggerated sigh. You looked sideways at me.

‘Nazo,’ you said, your voice a strange mixture of alarm and anger. ‘I’ll decide who to meet or not. You just keep my diary ok? Not control it.’

‘But Gigi Sahiba, they will be here soon.’

‘See what I mean,’ the Reed snorted.

Once again he called me the gatekeeper, and once again you let him. I had been undermined, and you who was suppose to look out for me, had done nothing. But I knew I was more. Much more. And you…you were much more than the impressionable teenager you were behaving like, right now. You were Gigi Jan. That was the name your father gave you. You, and not your younger brother Shanoo, were his legacy. Were you forgetting that? He believed in you. People used to laugh at your father for educating a daughter but he didn’t care. You were the first girl from the city to go abroad for further studies. People taunted him, accused him, judged him but he didn’t care. Your father championed you. They called his faith in you fatherly indulgence. But the day the General killed him, you were the one who stood up for him. You, not your younger brother who went into hiding, you faced the General. That day you became Madam Gigi Sahiba, and now it was only a privileged few who were allowed to call you by the name he had chosen for you. I was one of them.

In the mirror behind you as the Reed laughed at me, his skinny jaw jutting out like a pair of scissors, I whispered your name. ‘Gigi Jan,’ I chanted under my breath as I consoled myself that he would never know the intimacy of calling you by your chosen
name.

The laughter ceased.

* 

_They say tears follow laughter the way night follows day. And death follows life..._ The very next day news came that your younger brother was dead. Your baby, your Shanoo, limp and lifeless lying face down on the stony cold floor of a villa in Kabul.

That night when everyone had left, I watched as the Reed held you against his chest, stroking your back as you cried.

‘She killed him,’ you sobbed. ‘She killed him.’

‘I didn’t even know he was married,’ I heard him murmur.

‘Two Afghan sisters. Daughters of the Royal family. It was some sort of alliance. They offered him refuge from the General. He had to marry to be allowed to stay. More business than marriage. Who would have thought she’d kill him? Poison him.’

‘Perhaps she wasn’t happy with this compromise…’

‘But to kill someone?’ you flared up and he quickly changed tack.

‘Back home, the General’s got the papers saying, Shanoo died of drinking…’

‘That bastard,’ you screamed.

Immediately he pulled you towards him and hugged you tight.

‘It’s alright, it will all be alright.’

Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at me. I looked away.

Earlier that morning, the General had sent a consolatory telegram. Under the customary, ‘Sad for your loss’, it read, ‘Alcohol is forbidden in Islam- foolish deaths are just one of the reasons’. Sprinkling salt on raw wounds, I thought as I angrily tore it into tiny pieces. I turned around to see the Reed standing behind me.

‘Aren’t you taking this gatekeeper business a bit too seriously?’ he asked. Then stubbing out his cigarette he said, ‘Let her decide for herself what she wants to rip up.’

He walked past me, then stopped.

‘I’d hide that if I were you. Gigi Sahiba doesn’t forgive easy.’

I swallowed the paper in one gulp.
You cried yourself to sleep that day. When you woke up, darkness had enveloped the room. The evening shadows stretched long and dark in your little Barbican apartment. You lay still on the bedroom sofa, your eyes fluttering open, then shutting tightly as you realized your brother was gone, forever.

Never before had I seen you sleep so long.

The boy ran to fetch a glass of water when you finally sat up but you waved it away. I went into the kitchen and brewed a cup of steaming hot cardamom tea. I held it under your nose and said, ‘Night before day, day before tea.’

‘Tea before whiskey,’ the Reed said strolling into your room without knocking.

‘Hush!’ you warned, gesturing towards me. He raised his eyebrows and murmured a sorry. I looked from one to the other. Did they really think I did not know? And what was it they were trying to hide anyways, their drinking or their affair? What was I supposed to think? That the ghosts drank up all those wine bottles that I found rolling empty on the floor in the mornings or that the crumpled sheets and used condoms were spirits having sex? Did they really think I was that naïve? No, they must think I’m stupid. That’s what it was. They thought I was too dumb to figure out what was going on under my nose. Or perhaps they thought I would judge them. Me, who would back you one hundred per cent no matter what you decided? For me you had blurred the boundaries of what a woman could do, or not do. You had challenged everything that had been hammered in my brain. It was you, Gigi, who taught me that it was ok to go for what you believed in. How, then, could you even think about hiding anything from me. The very thought that you couldn’t trust me made me shiver. The tea trembled in my hands and a few scalding drops splashed on my skin.

I turned to leave.

‘Nazo, stop,’ you said and I stopped.

‘Nazo, no one must know.’

I remained silent.

‘You know they are calling my little brother a drunk. They say he was a non-
Muslim, drinking himself to death. You know that mad General and his Jihadists have banned alcohol in the country. He’s using my poor dead brother as an excuse. He doesn’t realize people will just turn to hard drugs. They want to take the country to the Stone Age. It’s not just about alcohol…”

‘No one will know,’ I said, my eyes on the Reed.

Your tense face relaxed. You took the tea from me.

‘Thank you, Nazo.’

I stood there waiting but no more words came my way.

‘That’ll be all,’ the Reed said and held the door for me. ‘Come here,’ I heard him say as he shut it firmly behind me.

*

It was a full moon that night. I sat outside your door waiting for you to come out. But you didn’t. Nor did he. All around me the room grew darker and darker. The moonlight seeping in through the open windows painted shadows across the door. Every time the shapes shifted daybreak seemed closer than ever, but never came. Any minute now, I thought you would step out of your room. Tell me to show him out. But not tonight. Tonight it seemed the Reed would be staying over. A wave of nausea rose up my throat. I thought of all the calls that had to be returned, the letters to be written, the pleas to be posted. He was keeping you. And then I could think of nothing else but his chest hair. Wiry black curls, that peeked conspicuously from his unbuttoned collar. I hated the thought of those rough black whorls rubbing against your smooth ivory skin. It seemed to me an act of blasphemy. And everyone knows that blasphemy is unforgivable.

The first birds had begun their song by the time I reached for the telephone. My hands were clammy, my fingers as if made of ice. I dialed the number and waited as the bell rang. Back home, it would be noon.

*

The next day, news of Shanoo’s death in the papers was overshadowed by news of
your involvement with a certain tall thin, mustachioed man.

*
‘The person you trust the most often betrays you the worst. Isn’t that what happened to Gigi’s father? Shah Sahib trusted the Jihadi General and it turned out to be the biggest mistake he made. I suppose history does repeat itself.’

‘Heresy!’

‘Miss Khan, you were meant to be her protector. Madam’s safety is said to be your responsibility.’

‘Miss Khan was an assistant, Mr. Omar, not a bodyguard.’

‘The body is not the only thing that needs sheltering. Reputation, privacy, image, those things also need protection. And this is where Miss Khan failed...’
‘How did this get out?’ Your face was red as you walked into the dining room holding an Urdu newspaper.

‘What?’ the Reed continued to chew like a camel.

You slammed the paper on his plate. It tipped. The omelet landed on his lap and he yelped as he jumped up.

‘What the hell! Have you lost your mind, Gigi!’

You held the newspaper close to his face.

‘Smell it. It smells cheap.’

‘Gigi my darling, I’ve already seen it.’

‘Do you have any idea what this means?’ You slammed your fist on the table.

‘Gigi, you are overreacting. So what if they found out?’

‘Found out?’ Your voice was suddenly so calm that I feared you might strike out at him. ‘What, you should be saying right now, is that it’s not true. I want you to deny the whole thing. Outright.’

‘But it is true, Gigi.’

‘I see.’

‘I see what?’

‘I see what you are after. Publicity, is that what you want? Is that what this is about for you?’

‘Gigi,’ he shook his head and smiled. ‘Darling Gigi, my family is no less. Don’t forget my father is a leading industrialist. I don’t need your family name to be famous.’

‘Your father’s a crook. A corrupt defaulter and everyone knows that.’

‘Yours was no saint,’ he laughed.

‘Shut up,’ you threw the papers at his face.

‘Stop it!’ he pounded his fist on the table. The breakfast dishes spilled on to the carpet and on his trouser legs. You watched, meekly silenced, as the crockery scattered, the spilled juice glasses pouring steadily onto the carpet.

This was not the Gigi I knew.

I hurried forward to clean the carpet.

‘This stain will only grow deeper.’
You both looked at me in surprise. I pointed to his trousers with bits of egg stuck to it. ‘Take it off,’ I said. ‘I’ll wash it.’

‘But some stains never wash off,’ you said, kicking the newspaper like a sullen child who had been chastised.

The Reed shook his head. I couldn’t tell if he was annoyed with me or regretful about his outburst but all of a sudden he snapped off his belt and took off his trousers right there in front of me.

‘Here, take it. Now can you leave us alone?’

‘But the mess…’ I started gathering the mess but he pulled me up by the shoulder and said, ‘Go. Now.’

I looked at you but you seemed frozen by this new macho avatar of the Reed. Unsure, I walked out but left the door wide open. I wanted to make sure he didn’t hurt you. Anymore.

Collapsing onto the sofa in his green boxers and brown uneven socks, he crossed his pole thin legs and said, ‘Now, there is no need to panic. Let me think. There’s got to be a way out of this. Look Gigi, I know for you women, image is everything and everything is image and you are worried what people will think about you but it’s not the end of the world.’

I watched his mouth open and shut from the other end of the flat as I scrubbed the stain. When it had washed out, I came back in with the damp trousers, just in time to hear him say, ‘I am willing to marry you. That should save your reputation.’

I don’t know why but I burst into laughter.

You looked at me, then at him. You seemed to be recovering from your shocked silence.

‘Save your reputation!’ I said in between loud gaffaws and before I knew you had joined in as well.

‘What the hell is so funny?’ he shouted, staring at us as if we had gone mad.

Pacing the room, wearing a tie and blazer, with nothing underneath, I longed to say, you Sir.

You seemed to notice it too for you began to laugh.

‘Look Gigi, you won’t find a man like me.’
‘That’s true,’ you said, as he lifted one hairy leg and scratched.

‘For God’s sake, Gigi, think practically. The truth is, you need me. You think a woman can govern a country full of Jihadists? Far fetched my girl. Not in a million years. First of all it will be decades before democracy is restored back home. And even then it won’t change the way people think about women. Years of brainwashing by the General won’t get wiped out so quickly. Look, at least if you were married to a decent guy, your husband could lead the party and you’d still have an input backstage. What are your chances of finding a husband like that? Frankly who would marry you after you’ve been accused of sleeping with a man, which by the way, is true.’

You stopped laughing.

He walked up close to you. ‘Face it, Gigi,’ he said in a soft menacing voice.

‘Without a husband, the General’s men would chew you up and spit you out. My dear girl, you need me.’

You slapped him.

* 

Later, when you had flung his trousers out of the window and turned a deaf ear to his threats and rants, you stood in front of your father’s photograph.

‘I don’t need a man,’ you said, ‘I don’t need him. You said I could do it, Papa, you promised me that I was as good as a son. You said, I could do it, I could lead the nation just like you, I could fight the General like you did. I remember your last words, Papa…’

You kept talking feverishly to the dead man’s photograph, till you collapsed. I held you as we sprinkled water on your face. When you came to, you whispered, ‘I can.’

‘Yes, you can,’ I said. ‘You can and you will.’

I held a glass of water to your lips and said, ‘Even without your father, people will vote for you. His memory is enough. You are his legacy.’

It was the second time I saw you cry.

And the last.

*
In the midst of all this drama, it was I who brought you back to the real needs.

‘Gigi Sahiba, this is not the time,’ I said bringing you a cup of tea as you read the papers. You must have read yet another scandalous article about yourself for you crumpled up the newspaper and threw it on the floor. You reached for a cigarette and I immediately handed you a cup of hot chai. Your forehead creased but you said nothing.

After a tentative sip, you sat up and said, ‘You are right. This is not the time for wallowing in self-pity. It’s the time to leave it all behind.’

You grabbed me by the shoulders and said, ‘Do you believe in me?’

‘Of course,’ I said. *More than myself.*

‘Then let’s do it. It’s now or never.’

A decision was made. You were heading back, this time to stay.

And so it was - *the beginning of the end.*

*
‘What do you have to say about this headline Miss Khan? Who could have possibly leaked out this information? Who, indeed, was close enough to have known about the “alleged” affair?’

‘Things are not always how they seem.’

‘I agree, Miss Khan. Things are certainly not what they seem.’

‘I meant there was no affair.’

‘I’m sure you did. You are quite good at misleading others.’

‘Mr. Omar, where is this leading?’

Your Honour, I have reason to believe that Miss Khan may have been working undercover. Many believe she was sent to London to break into Gigi Shah’s personal circle, and to prove this I would like to call Mr. Riaz, a well known Businessman and good friend of Madam’s, to the witness box.’

‘Proceed.’

‘Mr. Riaz, thank you for flying in from London. Please take oath.’

‘I swear to tell the truth and only the truth.’

‘So Mr. Riaz, in your testimony you have stated that Miss Khan was a damaging influence on Madam Gigi.’

‘Objection! Madam Gigi was no child who could be easily manipulated!’

‘Ah but Miss Khan has her ways. What do you say, Mr. Riaz?’

‘Yes. I can give you many examples of her persuasion. I wouldn’t be surprised if she turned out to be a trained spy.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Riaz. Would you say that this psychological brain washing may have been a conspiracy to lure Gigi back from self exile, knowing that it was dangerous for her to return?’

‘Yes, I firmly believe that Miss Khan had been planning the assassination much before she met us. That is why she wanted me out of the way because I...’

‘Thank You, Mr. Riaz, you may step down.’

‘Your Honour, the testimony of a jilted lover is hardly credible. It should be
disqualified.’

‘Mr. Riaz’s testimony is of immense significance Your Honour. It is important to see Miss Khan as she was when she first entered the Shah household.’

‘Go ahead, Mr. Omar.’

‘Thank you, Your Honour. To support my argument I present exhibit A, her Asylum application.’

‘If you look closely, she was first offered refuge in the Netherlands as a victim of the General’s atrocities in 1979 but she waited another seven months to get a slot in England. She even agreed to wait in a prison on the outskirts of Dover till her application was processed. Would an actual terrified asylum seeker be so picky?’
It wasn’t till I chose to leave London that I decided to look at it. London, the place I had chosen, if for no other reason than, for the familiarity of the English language. I knew two words, Sorry and Thank you, and in my first few days here, believe me, they were enough to get me by. At first when they offered to send me to some place called Neverland where they spoke a guttural language and ate sausages, my heart lurched. I told them I’d rather wait indefinitely in a brick building where I was not allowed to go out, so long as I understood what was being said around me. I never could stand it when I didn’t.

Now in my last days in this city, I rode the big red double-deckers, passing aged grey buildings, bloated pigeons and unsmiling people, cold but free.

We passed through a tunnel near London Bridge. There was a traffic jam and the bus stalled by a place called Jacks, perhaps a kind of drinking hole or maybe some sort of music club. I got off despite the conductor’s protests and walked the sidewalks. Free as a bird, no man to tell me to cover myself, no moral police to send me back home. Here I wasn’t just a woman.

I felt human.

At St. Paul’s cathedral, I was struck by the way sunlight lit it up against the backdrop of a clear blue sky. It seemed ethereal. And I was allowed to enter, unlike the mosques back home where women were banned. But I couldn’t pause for long as the large crowds of people who seemed to constantly throng the narrow sidewalks pushed past me, jostling me along, almost as if I was some spare part on the assembly line of a machine. Everyone was going somewhere, scurrying like ants. Here, they did not stand about watching the world go by, as they did back home. Perhaps, it was time we did the same.

I sat down on the steps of St. Paul’s and watched the crowds of men and women walking shoulder to shoulder. Amidst the colorful, clothes I saw a figure swathed in black. At first I was gripped with fear, thinking that a Jihadi assassin had somehow gained entry to the UK but then I saw it was a woman in a black burqa, walking alone. I smiled thinking that back home she would not be able to step out unaccompanied, no
matter how wrapped up she was. But perhaps all that would change after your return.

A shrill honking broke into my thoughts and I saw a group of teenagers crossing the road mid-traffic. I watched as they made their way up the steps. Thin girls and even thinner boys in black leather or blue denim, their hair dyed various shades of pink, puffed up in spikes, smoke billowing out of their pale, blood drained lips. Some had their heads shaven, some had their face pierced, others had entire arms tattooed with blue and purple designs. The purple tattoos on the cheeks and forehead of one of the girls, reminded me of the bruises left by the Jihadist’s lashes on women who resisted the veil. One pierced and punctured girl sat down next to me. I thought to myself, here people do this to themselves deliberately.

*

When I got back I found Yasmin waiting at the door. Yasmin who had quit politics and moved away after getting married, had come back to the apartment one last time on your mother’s request.

‘Don’t go,’ she said. ‘They will never let you come back alive.’

‘Who said anything about coming back?’ you replied.

‘You can’t be serious, Gigi. The General’s men are everywhere. People say he’s worse than Hitler, far more paranoid than Qaddafi and even more brutal than Saddam. His spies will be watching your every move. Even if he doesn’t arrest you, he’ll make your life unbearable.’

‘He can employ all the spies in the world, but he still won’t win the elections. His days are numbered.’

‘Well,’ she tried another tack, ‘You have to admit he has a following.’

‘So did Hitler.’

Yasmin shook her head and sighed.

‘For old time’s sake,’ she said lighting up a cigarette.

You took it from her and stubbed it out.

‘No smoking.’

She looked at you with eyes wide open.
‘But you are a chain smoker, Gigi!’ she said.

‘Things change,’ you replied calmly.

Shaking her head Yasmin said, ‘Look Gigi, giving up cigarettes and alcohol or donning a Hijab won’t make the General and his Jihadists accept you. You’re still a woman to them, a worthless afterthought created from a spare rib! And it’s not the Jihadists alone - You’re fighting an entire team of people. From the top brass of the Army to the foot soldiers of the Intelligence Agencies, there’s a whole host of men out there who hate you and your family. Not to mention they find it demeaning that a woman might liberate them from the General.’

‘Well, thanks for the news flash. Do you think the three years I spent rotting in the General’s custody before I was exiled here, didn’t prepare me for this?’

‘For God’s sake, Gigi, please don’t go back there. They’ll kill you soon as you land. It’s lawless there. Who is to stop them?’

‘I have American support. Now that the Soviet threat is over they want to see a more progressive government in the country. The Jihadists are done. Their role is over. Don’t you see, the Americans want change.’

‘You think the Americans can protect you? You think they can undo the monster they’ve created? The General doesn’t play by the rules, Gigi, and you know that. He’s not going to roll over and play dead just because the Americans tell him to. He’ll find something else to string them along with.’

‘Yasmin, it’s more complicated than that. I know what I’m doing. Believe me. People back home need me.’

‘Look I won’t let you go. I don’t want to lose you.’

‘The thing is, Yasmin, I don’t belong to you to lose. I don’t even belong to myself. I belong to my country and my people. They need me.’

‘Save the speech, Gigi.’

‘This is not a speech, Yasmin! Don’t you see? I really believe in it. I have faith in myself, why can’t you?’

‘Because these men are ruthless!’

‘I am not afraid.’

I wanted, right then, to run up and hug you. However, Yasmin didn’t seem too
impressed. She held you by the shoulders and said, ‘Gigi, they will kill you.’

If there was one thing you loved- it was a challenge.

Your eyes flashed as you shook yourself free and said, ‘I survived before and I will survive again.’

‘But Gigi, at that time they thought you were just a woman, now they know you are a force to reckon with. Please my darling, don’t go.’

‘Yasmin, I have to do this,’ you smiled a sad little smile. ‘But I promise you this, I will be okay.’

Yasmin grabbed your hands. ‘I won’t let you go. I won’t let them kill you like they killed your father!’

‘Yasmin, my dear, nobody is going to kill me.’

You looked as unconvinced as I felt. However, you put on a brave smile and sat her down, ‘Look, seven years ago, the General tortured me mentally and physically, put me in a dark jail with rats and roaches, starved me, humiliated me, shamed me for being a woman- especially a woman who dared to dream. He tried to break me. Not only me, he killed our supporters, shot the protestors, hung the only legally elected Prime Minister the country had ever had...the fucking rat beheaded our party workers. He tried every which way to make me wither up and die. But you know what, Yasmin? He made one big mistake.’ You took a deep breath and said, ‘He let me go.’

I hoped, at that moment, that you wouldn’t make the same mistake.

*

After Yasmin left, I found you by the window, stubbing out a cigarette.

‘What’s this?’ I lifted the tail end of a cigarette from the floor. One amidst many, I noticed later.

‘A virgin’s kiss, I think they call it. Do you even know what that is, Nazo?’ Your look was cruel and I turned away.

‘So Nazo, any boyfriend, any lovers? Or do you only spy on mine? Tell me, who sent you here? Did my mother send you? Did the General send you? Are you spying on me? Is that why you cling to me like a shadow, you fucking bitch?’
‘You’ve been drinking.’
You laughed, ‘What are you? A closest Jihadi or something?’
‘Alcohol is dangerous.’
‘A glass. A single glass won’t kill me, stupid.’
‘But if anyone finds out….’
‘But they won’t. Would they?’ You looked sharply at me. ‘Forty lashes. The penalty for a woman found intoxicated. But none for a man. A man can do what he wants. Take four wives, rape, plunder, hit, snatch…’
‘Please stop Gigi. You are only distressing yourself. You were doing so well…’
‘I am doing so well,’ you corrected me.
Your left eye twitched and there were dark, hollow shadows under your eyes. You looked burned out yet you held my gaze till I looked away.
‘Please don’t do this to yourself.’
Ignoring me you put another one in between your lips and were about to light it when, with some unexplainable courage, I snatched the cigarette from your mouth.
‘You dare!’ you slapped me hard across the cheek. ‘Get out,’ your voice was sharp, cutting me like glass.
Outside, I leaned against the door and took a slow deep breath. The half lit cigarette burned my palm as I recited the prayer for success. Please God, this time let her succeed.

*

Just before dawn you opened your door a crack.
‘What are you still doing here?’
You looked like a scared little girl, in those oversized men’s pajamas. Your hair tied clumsily in two knots, your nose running.
‘I never left.’
You nodded and let me in.
‘Sit,’ you said and I sat down at your feet. I sat still, so still that I could hear the ticking of the wall clock behind you. Finally you spoke, ‘The thing is, Nazo… I’m scared. I’m very scared.’
‘Fear is a strange thing, Gigi Sahiba. My father used to say that if you let fear scare you it will paralyze you but if you embrace it, it turns into courage.’

You looked at me curiously.

‘Sometimes, Nazo, I find it hard to believe that you’ve only studied till seventh grade.’

I laughed and your gaze became even more curious.

‘Life is a better teacher than any amount of schooling.’

‘So it is,’ you said and slid down to the floor beside me.

That night you talked to me like you never had. Amidst the papers and campaign posters scattered on the floor, we sat. You told me about the jails, about the rats he let in at night and how the lights were turned off so you had only the sound of the animals scratching to guard yourself against. You told me how you moved from leg to leg, sleeping standing up so the rats wouldn’t bite your face. And then you told me about the infection on your finger tip which spread to your shoulder and how your brother’s contacts, finally managed to sneak you out through Amnesty, and had you admitted at a hospital.

‘The nerves in my right hand were completely dead. I thought it was all over; that I would never use it again. But the doctors here worked a miracle. They operated on me and restored all feeling. It was like being born again. I got a second chance. And that’s when I vowed, I wouldn’t forget about those who I’d left behind; those who couldn’t escape the murderer’s regime. I would go back for them. One day.’

‘But when?’

You looked surprised at the question.

Just then, the clock struck six. You looked guiltily at its outstretched arms as they pointed to opposing ends.

‘Nazo, why do we only notice time when it’s gone?’

*
'Whenever Gigi Sahiba’s life has been in danger, she has been close by. Your Honour, it should to be noted that when the first attack on her life took place in 1985, Miss Khan was right next to her...'}
KARACHI, 1985

We chose Karachi as the battleground. It was here in this city by the sea that you would first set foot upon your return. It was here that you would choose to test your loyalties. Only a handful were allowed to accompany you.

*Naturally, I was one of them.*

*

‘The risk is great,’ you said to me as I followed you on the plane. ‘This flight may take off but never land.’

But it did. And what a landing it was. Local journalists, foreign media, party workers, supporters, and surprisingly - women were waiting to receive you. *Burqa* clad with only their eyes showing through the slits, the women stood behind the men, their voices matching the men’s, in strength and in spirit. Everywhere the eye could see, the ground was filled with people welcoming you. Not an inch was left uncovered. And only one name was on everyone’s tongue. ‘Leader Shah, Gigi Shah, leader!’ the crowd chanted madly. ‘Our Leader lives on in you, Gigi Shah.’ ‘Long live our Leader’.

To say that I was overwhelmed, would not be a lie.

Before landing we had estimated that a few hundred people might show up to greet you. Less if the General could help it. The stories of torture to stop supporters on their way to receive you were ripe in the air, but people kept pouring in. Their faces sunburnt, clothes torn, and feet bare, yet they stood their ground, chanting, ‘Long Live Gigi Shah’. The sight was enough to melt the stoniest of hearts.

*Even you looked moved.*

And then you raised your right arm and placed it on your heart, the same way that your father used to. The crowd went wild. But that was not all - you raised your hand further up and touched your veil. I heard sharp intakes of breath all around - the crowd fell silent. You were about to unveil yourself; an act punishable by death under the General. Would you do this? Would you take this huge risk for us?

You unclipped your veil and the black cloth fell away, revealing your face.
your hair loosely covered with a small white hijab. But it was enough. The point had been made. Change, was on its way.

‘Gigi Shah!’ Once again the crowds roared your name and it was as if there were waves of sound drowning us all.

‘Gigi Shah, Leader Shah, Long live!’ the chant went up as many other women tossed their veils in the air.

Sirens rang through the air. A law had been broken. We realized with alarm that you had just given the General a reason to arrest you. A stampede broke out, with the loyalists chanting your name and the Jihadist supporters beating them down. I saw a man moving towards you with great alacrity. He didn’t wear the checkered cloth of the Jihadists but a black turban half hid his face. He was chanting the same slogans as the others but his eyes were unblinking. His focus was you.

It was a moment of choice. And I chose life. For you, Gigi.

Just as he pushed his way out of the crowd, I pressed myself against you.

‘Nazo, stop blocking me.’

You tried to push me away just as the man lunged towards us. I tried to shield you with my arms.

‘Get off!’

I enveloped you in a bear hug just as the man struck.

‘Allah Ho Akbar!’

I took the sharp twist of the knife in my back.

*

Later they told me the crowd fell on him like hungry dogs. Took him apart limb by limb. It was a while before people realized that you were safe. It was I, who had taken the hit.

‘A servant girl.’

‘No, a secretary!’

‘All the same, hired help.’

‘Thank Allah, Gigi Sahiba is safe.’
‘That’s all that matters, our hope is alive,’

The voices around me grew faint, the lights dimmed and I thought this was it. The End. I tried to keep my eyes open, searching the faces nearby. Why did I even think you would be by my side?

And then I heard you say, ‘Nazo! Look at me. Nazo, say something. Speak to me.’

A chorus of other voices muffled yours out. ‘Lets go.’ ‘No, don’t stop! Gigi Sahiba, go! You must leave. It is not safe here.’

‘No,’ I heard you shout.

‘But the General’s men may open fire anytime.’ ‘Sirens! Can you hear the sirens? The General’s men are here.’ ‘Hurry! They’re unleashing tear gas on the crowds. Lets go!’

In the chorus of panicky voices I heard your reassuring voice one more time, ‘But what about Nazo? I can’t just leave her here.’

‘We will take care of the girl. Don’t worry.’

‘The best hospital,’ I heard you say as they took you away.

‘Yes, yes. Now you must hurry. We have to leave.’

And so you left.

But not before you turned back to say, ‘We’ll meet again.’

*And so we did.*
‘That’s not the story I’ve heard. Your Honour, eyewitnesses say that Miss Khan was holding Gigi Sahiba down, not shielding her as she claims.’

‘But my client has already said that she used force only to protect Madam Gigi Shah.’

‘Even if I was to believe Miss Khan saved her life instead of attempting to take it, phone records show that there had been no contact from Gigi’s side after the hit. Why didn’t she visit her in the hospital? Not even a phone call to someone who saved her life? Surely Gigi suspected something.’

‘Gigi Sahiba was a busy person. Besides she didn’t want to disturb Miss Khan in the early days of her recovery. As you can see by the disfigurement scar on my client’s face, she suffered further injury by a fall right after her operation. The bottom line is that my client was welcomed back in the Shah household once she recovered fully.’

‘That is my next point, Your Honour. How did Miss Khan worm her way back in? That, you see, is the puzzle. And solving this puzzle is crucial in accessing her motive for murder...’
The next time we met, you were surrounded by people. And if it wasn’t for the intense heat and the blindingly brilliant sunlight, I would have thought we were back in your Barbican apartment. Laughter, smoke and drinks. So many chattering mouths, so many words flying across the room, it made me wonder where these people who sat about discussing politics in drawing rooms, got hold of all their thoughts. How did they have so much to say?

But I’m getting ahead of myself. On that hot humid August day, I got to your place just after midday. I stood at the gates of the Shah House waiting for the Independence Day crowds to thin. People had gathered there from all over the country. They waved there little green flags and chanted slogans. There was to be a feast afterwards and people thronged to the gates, lunging at the free food. The guards, thinking I was one of them, pushed me roughly to the side.

It was hours before the Refugee boy stepped out for a cigarette and saw me.

‘Nazo! What are you doing here?’

‘Refugee!’

I ran up to him and hugged him. He shrank back with a mix of surprise and shyness.

‘Look, Nazo, no one calls me Refugee here. I have a status now, you know. I have come back from foreign…’

‘Listen,’ I interrupted, ‘Has Gigi Sahiba asked about me?’

But he was in no mood to be hurried.

‘First, you tell me,’ he said, ‘how are you? Have you recovered fully?’

I decided to change tack. ‘What is there to recover from? My life is for the cause. Aren’t you going to offer me a cup of tea even?’ I asked, as he reluctantly invited me in.

‘So tell me, has Gigi Sahiba been asking about me? Did she not know I’ve been released from hospital?’ I asked, once inside.

‘The truth is, Nazo,’ he averted his eyes, ‘I really can’t remember. How long has it been? Nine months?’

‘Is it the rumours? You don’t believe them do you? You think I’m with the
Jihadists? That I was holding down, Gigi Sahiba, so the man could strike her? I saved her life, Refugee! The General’s men murdered my family. Why would I side with them? Look, look at the scars, look at the stitches, I risked my life and you…’

‘Oho, why are you getting so worked up? I’m not the one saying it! Anyhow,’ stifling a yawn, he added, ‘Now look, there is so much work to be done. I’m not just a tea boy any more, you know. I am the Cook now. I have a whole kitchen to handle! Three people working under me! Now shush. Fifty guests to cater for and you are wasting my time harassing me with faltoo questions.’

I knew that brisk abrupt manner of his from our London days. I used it myself when I wanted to dodge a question. I hovered around till the tea boy, now promoted to full Cook status, beckoned me close. Rushed off his feet, he pointed to the stove, ‘Now that you are here, you might as well make yourself useful.’

‘Fry those,’ he said.

‘Mix that.’

‘Wash this,’ and so on till he distractedly handed me a plate of sizzling hot samosas.

‘Serve these.’

*

I walked into the main hall with the plate, circling the place where you stood surrounded by an adoring crowd of party workers. The room was grand. A huge chandelier hung in the middle, crystals sparkling along the cut glass, like twinkling stars in a country sky. Long red velvet curtains around tall french windows opened onto a beautiful patio garden that could have been transplanted out of London itself. Men and women mingled freely, reminding me of a time before the General took over the country. Women without veils, although modestly dressed, and men without beards raised their glasses of juice to toast. And in the center of it all was, you- the woman, who would bring back freedom. You wore a long green dress, and your head was covered with a thin chiffon hijab that showed an elaborate hair do. You looked…so young, so glamorous -- more like a movie star than a struggling politician. In fact, you looked nothing like the
girl in the ill-fitting yellow clothes I had met in London, yet your eyes still shone with passion. Of course, I didn’t know then, that eyes could hide just as much as they could reveal. And unlike tongues there was no danger of the secrets spilling, either.

But you mustn’t misunderstand me. I wasn’t jealous. Certainly not disillusioned, either. I was, I suppose surprised to see this side of you. You looked unreal. Like a doll that could blink. Lifelike but not lifeless, I hoped. I reminded myself that you had risked so much for us…your people. You could have been someone’s trophy wife but you chose us. You chose sacrifice. I wanted, right then, to touch you so badly; to feel you, to know that you were real and not a mirage in this dry dusty city.

I moved closer.

Hidden behind a tray full of tall glasses, I nearly approached you twice but shied away at the last moment. As the crowd thinned, I began to wonder if you would even recognize me. It had been six months and I had lost weight. A scar on my face, after the operation, had left me disfigured and sometimes when I saw myself in the mirror, I too jumped back wondering who the stranger in the room was. I ran my fingers along the bumpy edge, feeling the crude roughness of my skin. After the operation I had tried to stand up too quickly, such was my hurry to get back to you, my darling Gigi. Still drowsy from the anesthetic, I had fainted and fallen on the hard floor cutting open my lip and chin. The doctors at the local hospital had stitched the wound coarsely; leaving an ugly mark that ran lip down to my chin, making me look like a dog that couldn’t stop drooling. I wondered now what you would think of me. Ugly, most likely.

_Ugly but faithful, as bitches tend to be..._

* *

When you finally saw me, you did your best not to notice me. It was only when there was no one else left in the room that I approached you. You had your eyes closed and your head back. A cigarette smoldered in your delicate fingers.

‘Gigi Sahiba?’

You said nothing.

Something crumbled inside me. Such indifference. _Was it really necessary?_
‘You are not a bad person, Gigi Sahiba,’ I couldn’t resist saying. ‘But you try so hard to be one.’

A smile broke out on your face.

‘Nazo,’ you said, without opening your eyes. You blew rings out of your mouth, perfectly circular puffs of smoke that surrounded you like fluffy white clouds. You looked, at that point, a goddess descending from a misty sky. I sat down at your feet.

It was a while before you asked, ‘When did you get out?’

‘It’s been a while. I wrote to you. Telephoned…’

‘Good that you came to see me.’

‘But you didn’t.’

You were quiet as my words sank in. Behind you the floor length red curtains gave the illusion of a stage that had been set.

*The play began.*

‘Gigi Sahiba, I think I know why. And that’s why I’m here.’

You were silent. And your silence made the rage inside me spill out.

‘You….you don’t believe the rumours too, do you?’ I felt my voice raising a notch. ‘You think I’d do such a thing!’ It came out shrill, high pitched, like the sound of nails on a blackboard. ‘I saw the knife coming at me but I didn’t flinch. I…I could have moved…I..’ I felt my voice break.

It was then you turned to look at me. I saw the faint look of distaste cross your beautiful features, as you quickly looked away. Ugliness always unsettled you.

You patted the space next to you on the sofa. In the entire time I knew you that was the closest you ever came to saying sorry.

I kept staring at the pattern on the sofa, memorizing the fish like shape of the paisleys, counting the times each one appeared before it was crisscrossed by an upside down one. I kept looking, kept counting, kept remembering until finally you spoke.

‘Nazo. Come.’

When I sat down, you said softly, ‘I wanted to visit. You know I did. But I didn’t and I really don’t know why I didn’t. I haven’t had the time to think about it. There was always something urgent or the other, but now that I look at you, I feel I should have come. Nazo I’m…’
‘Don’t say,’ I placed a finger on your lips. ‘There is no need.’
You shrank back at my touch.
Embarrassed, I smiled and felt the scar stretch along my lip. You turned your head away.
‘Ignoring is harder than ignorance, Gigi Sahiba. You have to keep on doing it.’
You finally turned to face me. This time your eyes focused in on my ugliness. You did not flinch.
‘Get me one of those amazing brews you used to make in London, won’t you Nazo?’
Behind you, a breeze blew and the curtains flapped. *Encore.*

*

I was smiling as I brewed the tea, the golden brown liquid boiling to a clear coral as I added the milk. Refugee didn’t look too happy to have me back in his kitchen but I ignored his grumbling. After all I was back where I belonged. In my rightful place. With you.
I brought out the chai and sat down at your feet. You turned on the BBC Urdu service and I heard the broadcaster say, ‘This is BBC Urdu, London.’
We sat in silence till the signature tune came on. It was as if someone had turned back time.
Later you talked about the recent political events till darkness gave way to light and sleep was no longer a threat.
‘Make yourself at home,’ you said stretching your arms with a wide yawn. ‘I need people I can trust around me.’
*And so we began again.*

*
‘I heard a saying once that it is easy to spot a spy. They look just like us.’
‘What significance does this have to my client?’
‘What I’m trying to say, Counsel, is that double agents in real life are less than impressive. They are ordinary people, average, usually working class...’
‘I’m afraid, Your Honour, Mr. Omar is wasting the court’s time with his musings.’
‘Counsel will see the point, when I ask Miss Khan my next question. It’s no secret that there was a lot of anxiety not just amidst the politicians but also within the ISI, the Army and other smaller pressure groups for the General’s rule to end.’
‘Can the D.A. please come to the point?’
‘Very well, I will. Now, Miss Khan, do you remember the time when you advised Ms. Shah to meet with the Army heads to overthrow the regime? No? Well surely you must remember this. Did you or did you not, at that point suggest she try to kill the General?
‘One can only try, Omar Sir, the rest is in God’s hands.’
I had got what I wanted. Or had I? Why is it that every time we think we have found the one thing that will make us complete, we change shape. The piece no longer fits or if it does, some other part dislodges. Perhaps we can never be whole. Were never meant to be.

And then just when I least expected it, life took another turn.

*

The day was not far, when you would be sitting in the Parliament. If only the jackass General would call elections. But why would he? Even he was clever enough to know that not even a cockroach would vote for him. And so he delayed and delayed. Until one day we got tired of waiting. You slammed the telephone into the wall after yet another call about delayed elections. You slapped the party worker who brought in newspapers blaring headlines of ‘No Polls Ahead’. You threw out the radio during a broadcast about conditions being too hostile for electioneers. You smashed the TV screen after the General’s speech telling the public that he simply could not put the country’s future into the hands of corrupt and power hungry disbelievers- in other words politicians. But the final straw was when the General announced that women could neither vote nor contest for office. You broke down.

It was then I decided that enough was enough. ‘Something has to be done,’ I said marching up to you.

But you just laughed at me- that mad laughter of yours that did nothing to mask how angry you were.

‘What can we do, Nazo?’ you said when the hysterical laughter had subsided.

‘Nothing short of death can stop that monster.’

_You said it, not me._

*
For days after that I could think of nothing else. One day when you were having
dinner, I approached you and said, ‘Gigi Sahiba, can I speak to you? It’s important.’
You didn’t look up from your food.
‘I have been thinking.’
‘Good for you.’
‘I think,’ I hesitated.
‘So do I.’
‘The General must die.’
You nearly choked on your chicken. Later when the coughing was over, you told
me never to disturb you during dinner again.
But the thought had been planted. Later as I was cleaning the table, I heard you
mutter, ‘As if it was so easy to kill him…’
I perked up. You threw me a bone and like the loyal bitch I was, I leapt to it. You
played me well.

*  

After dinner, I brought it up again. ‘Gigi Sahiba, it’s not difficult at all. There are
lots of factions within the General’s party. The cracks are beginning to show. In fact I
heard that one breakaway group have already put a price to his head. We can join their
mission and then…’
‘Stop!’
I stumbled back in surprise.
‘Always remember this, Nazo, murder is not the answer to problems. Killing one
bad person gives birth to ten more.’
But I didn’t remember. What could I do, my memory isn’t what it used to be...

*
I met him by chance.

It had taken much persuasion for Major Q to dine at 13 Clifton. The whole affair had an air of secrecy. The long red curtains were drawn shut. The shimmering crystal chandelier dimmed, and a feast laid out. You planned the menu for ages.

‘We have to get this right, Nazo,’ you kept repeating. ‘He can be our eyes and ears, if things go right.’

He turned out to be much more than that, but I get ahead.

That night after the appetizers had been served, the old Major, who was known to for his debauchery before his born again Jihadist avatar, debated whether to have a drink of whiskey.

‘We are all friends here, Sir,’ you said sweetly.

I placed a glass of whiskey before him. Major Q eyed the icy glass sweating on the table. ‘But, my dear, He is watching,’ he replied wistfully. ‘He is omniscient.’

A chill ran through my spine. If even the Major was scared of that dreaded General, then what hope was there of a coup? This meeting was useless.

‘Allah ‘O’Akbar,’ a soldier by his side said and it occurred to me that the Mighty one in question was not the General but the Mightiest of them all. The one who gave people like the General a free reign, the cruelest one of all, the Creator himself.

‘I never miss my prayers,’ he said.

‘Take this away, girl,’ he waved at the glass. I started as I realized the Major was looking at me.

‘You know, Gigi Sahiba,’ he said turning to you, ‘Alcohol taints the Wazu. Tempting as it, I will have to bathe before my prayers if I touch even a drop of this forbidden liquid.’

‘Then pray before you drink,’ I said.

‘Brilliant idea!’ You clapped your hands and laughed like a little girl. I could see your amusement at the nuances of religion.

The Major seemed appalled. ‘If the General should ever find out, my dear, he’ll have me hanged, or flogged and that too in public.’

You laid a hand on the Major’s shoulder and said, ‘Well then, he won’t find out.’
‘Yes,’ the Major leaned back. His paunch stuck out and a slight leer appeared on his face.

‘Say your prayers,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Nazo means to say, offer your prayers first and then have your whiskey, my darling Major Sahib,’ you said giving me a sideways glance to leave.

I left. But not before I handed him a prayer mat.

*

Three tumblers of whiskey later, the pious Major had to be helped out by his trusted soldiers. As one of the soldiers leaned over to support him, he slipped under the old man’s weight. I noticed it was the same man who had been muttering Allah ‘O’ Akbar, trying to ward off evil from the devil himself. As he stood up, something slipped out of his pocket. For some reason, I didn’t feel like telling him. Let it be, I thought turning away. In any case I would have had to bend between his legs to reach it and he would have had to put the drunken Major down to take it from me. It was probably nothing I told myself, as I shut the door firmly after the men.

As I returned to the living room to clear away the dishes, I tried to avoid looking at the creased sofa, the cushions scattered all over as if a battle had taken place. Instead I kept my eyes on the floor and that’s where I saw it. A piece of paper, folded many times over, in precise even squares.

I sighed, as I realized the paper I had dismissed as useless, was actually a Jeweler’s receipt. ‘Damn,’ I thought realizing that it would need to be returned, somehow. ‘Nothing is easy.’

Or is it? I thought as I tucked the square of paper safely in my bra.

*

The next morning I decided to visit the Jeweler. I stood outside for 30 minutes before I worked up the courage to go in. Once inside, there was no turning back. I handed
the young cashier the collection receipt.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘this has been pawned. You will have to pay the full sum plus the interest to get this back.’

He didn’t seem too happy as I asked how much.

‘All of Rupees 1550.’

I nodded, sure that whatever it was, would be worth much more than that.

He disappeared in the back and returned with a small green velvet pouch.

‘Here you are, exactly the way you left it.’

I snatched it and walked out before he could ask me to sign the return ledger with proof of ID. I broke into a run as he called after me and I didn’t stop till I reached your doorstep. Then in the cool dark interior of the servant’s bathroom I opened the pouch. Inside was a gold-medal for bravery. Next to it a chit that read, Pawned by Soldier Rahim Khan for the sum of Rs.900. To be melted in full, if borrowed amount plus interest not paid by June 24th.

I felt sick.

*

I spent the next few days trying to forget about the medal and how desperate someone must be to pawn a medal of bravery for such a small loan. Every now and then I would pull out the box and peer inside the lid, only to shut it quickly like the door of an occupied toilet.

And then once again, time sped up. Elections were on. Elections were off. The bloody General was more indecisive than a bride picking out her wedding dress. I wanted to grab his throat and shake his bald head till he said yes to the polls. But security around him was so tight that not even a mosquito could sneak through. Rumour had it that he made the American Ambassador travel with him wherever he went because everyone knew there wasn’t a safer hostage, nor a more willing one to safeguard himself against. The ‘will he/won’t he’ suspense was killing yet you seemed calm and serene, rubbing face cream into your skin as if all was well.

I wondered if you knew something I didn’t.
You sat staring adoringly at the jar of La Prairie cream you had sent over from London every few months. It was near empty. You scooped up the last of it and rubbed it into your cheeks. You examined your face from side to side, stretching the skin around your eyes, smoothing non-existent wrinkles and kneading your temples. Then you sighed, ‘Only 34.’

‘In politics, looking older is good.’
You frowned at me in the mirror.
‘Or so they say,’ I added hurriedly.
You tossed the empty cream jar at me. And missed.
‘You are right,’ you said, lighting up a smoke. ‘These creams don’t work anyways. Waste of money, not to mention all the trouble I go through asking friends to smuggle them in.’

I pointed at the cigarette in her mouth. ‘Well, that is something that actually does do what it says on the pack.’

You looked at the warning on the cigarette packet and burst out laughing. ‘Really Nazo, you are too much.’

You have no idea how much, I thought as I bent close to you and placed an ashtray beside you. As I moved away I scooped up your gold cigarette case and hid it in the folds of my hijab. Nasty habit, I thought, Nasty habit, this smoking.

You were still admiring your reflection when I left the room, my own face dull and plain in comparison. As a consolation I pressed the cold hard metal against my skin. You never knew what would come in handy when dealing with the poor and needy.

I wondered if the Soldier smoked.

* 

It took much convincing for him to even meet me. Soldier Rahim belonged to that rare breed of servants who stayed loyal to their masters all their life. Kicked and punched, left to starve, while their masters dined fine. They reminded me of dogs. But then, I liked dogs. Unlike men, they didn’t attack you for no reason. And so I gathered a few bones and went about laying a plan to entice him with.
It took Refugee’s relentless padding of bills, a week of watery lentils billed as meat to Gigi Sahiba’s manager, for me to find out next to nothing about the Soldier’s whereabouts. I began to despair. More and more I snuck into my room groping under the clothes in the cupboard for the medal. I was convinced that here lay the answer, but how? Perhaps this time, I was thinking the unthinkable.

*
'The Court will adjourn for ten minutes. When we return the questioning will continue.'

'Your Honour, may I approach?'

'Yes, Mr. Omar.'

'I would like to request a last question before the break. You see, I’d like to produce a witness depending on Miss Khan’s answer. The break would then provide us with time to brief the witness on court procedure.'

'Permission granted.'

'Thank you, Your Honour. Miss Khan, I am aware that you have a very selective memory but still I would like to ask you a question that is imperative to the investigation of this murder. Can you recall your whereabouts on the night of 7th January 1986?'

'No.'
I should have known that things have a way of falling in place, just as they have a way of falling apart. And so it happened that the next time Major Q came to our place, he brought the soldier along in his protection team. I now knew two things about this boy. He did not take bribes and he was poor. Poor and needy. Needy being the swinging factor. Suddenly breaking into the secret world of the General’s Intelligence did not seem so impossible. I watched as the Major prayed piously to his Lord then fell upon his alcohol like a thirsty man in a desert. Later in his drunkard state he kicked the honest soldier, thrusting his foot at him and telling him to tie his shoelaces.

‘Hurry up you sister fucker! Who are you waiting for, your mother to undress?’ he slurred.

I could see the soldier turn a beetroot red, yet he remained silent. Something huge must be holding him back, I thought. Whatever it was, it was big enough. Yes, big enough for him to do our bidding.

But if it was a difficult route to the General, getting to his staff was even more difficult. First I had to befriend Major’s driver Shafiq. And Shafiq was no beau to fool. A new recruit to The General’s Jihadism, he was hard as they came. But still, I was harder.

While the big folk dined inside, I sat outside in the driveway with the driver and Refugee. It was funny, I thought, how the distinction between the sexes ended once you crossed into the very poor or very rich zone. I sat in the company of men, my hijab hardly covering my head, yet no Jihadist came running up to lash me. Perhaps it was because people like me didn’t really count. I was, after all, just a nobody.

Anyhow, we sat in the evening breeze till Refugee was called back inside. After numerous cups of my by now famous brew, I managed to get Driver Shafiq to speak. Unrolling his long Jihadist turban, he accepted a cigarette and squatted beside me. The soldier’s name was Rahim I found out, and he was from Major Q’s ancestral village in the North West Frontier. This was a place where loyalties were fierce, friendships forever and betrayal, almost never.

‘Forget it,’ Shafiq said as I watched Rahim do the Major’s bidding. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself. Was I so transparent?

‘He won’t sleep with you.’
'What?'
'Don’t go falling in love with him, Nazo. Now don’t deny it, I’ve seen you staring at him. Us Jihadists are hard to resist, huh?
All I could do was stare at him speechless.
‘But listen here, he is already married. Has three daughters, a blind sister and a mother dying of cancer.’ He shook his head and continued, ‘Poor man has an army of nephews and nieces all dependent on the Major’s morsels. And you know what these Major X, Y and Z are like. No mixing between the staffs. As it is they like to keep the choicest bits of meat for themselves. And you know what Nazo Jee, you look pretty juicy to me.’
He ran a hand over the curve of my waist. ‘Arre, don’t be shy now. Everyone needs a release now and then.’ His grip tightened as he dug his fingers into my flesh.
For a moment I stayed still, wondering what I had got myself into. Did the Jihadist brain work only one way? Shafiq inched closer and I could see a bulge appearing in his loose trousers. His eyes were fixed on me and I could smell the curry on his breath. I felt myself stiffening.
*If you let fear scare you, it paralyses you but if you embrace it, it turns into courage.*
Slowly I told myself that I had survived the General’s men, travelled to London on my own, made the climb from servant to secretary. I wasn’t about to be mishandled by some two-bit driver.
Taking a deep breath, I lifted my shaking hands and unbuttoned the top of his shirt. I circled the wiry chest hair. Wrapping one around my finger I plucked it sharply. He screamed.
Bending my knee I kicked him in the crotch and shoved him back. ‘Hardest thing I’ve ever had to do,’ I said, ‘resisting a Jihadist.’
*The look on his face was priceless.*
*
‘There are two kinds of people in this world,’ the Major was telling you when I went back inside with the snack tray, ‘Good people and bad people.’
Wrong, I thought as I served you both. There are only clever people and fools. And the roles are not interchangeable. Once a fool, always a fool, I thought as the Major blew his nose ferociously then thrust the dirty tissue into the honest soldier’s hand. I watched in disgust as the soldier folded his palm, not a flicker of disgust on his face.

‘So tell me, Major Sahib, does that General of yours ever intend to hold elections or is he just stringing us along?’ you said.

The very pious Major knocked back another glass of whiskey before answering.

‘Truth is, my dear Gigi, nobody really knows.’

Your face slackened and you suddenly looked like a young schoolgirl whose ice cream had melted in her hand.

‘I wouldn’t give up hope though,’ he added hastily.

Probably he was one of those men who were afraid of a woman’s tears, I thought. As if you were the kind to burst out crying. But looking at you just then, I considered the possibility.

Quickly I jumped in, ‘But Major Sahib, we have heard that there are divisions within the General’s men. Isn’t it that his colleagues are frustrated because they cannot be promoted till he decides to leave his position? Surely he cannot be leader of the Jihadists, and President and General of the Armed forces for much longer. He must decide on one or the other.’

‘He is not a fool, my dear Miss,’ the Major said, a deep frown lining his already wrinkled forehead. ‘He knows that he will never be democratically elected and he also knows that if he appoints another Army General, a coup would be inevitable.’

Then looking you in the eye, the Major said very slowly, ‘But, my dear, like any God fearing man he, too, fears death.’

*
'All Rise.'
'The court is back in session.'
'Not long now, Miss Khan, before the truth is revealed.'
'The truth, Omar Sir, is what you want it to be.'
‘No.’
‘But Gigi Sahiba…’
‘I will not kill.’
‘It’s the only way.’
‘Don’t be such a fool, Nazo. I am not getting involved in any criminal activities.’
‘Killing a man like him would hardly be a crime.’
‘Murder is murder. And there is no other way to put it.’
‘But if it was done discreetly…no one need know…’
‘You think we can just hire some goon to shoot him? You foolish, obstinate, illiterate girl! The man has the protection of a Super Power! Even if we wanted to kill him, it is unthinkable.’
‘There are ways, Gigi Sahiba. You just have to say yes.’
‘No.’
You marched out, slamming the door behind you. Not even five minutes had passed when I was summoned to your study.
‘Call a meeting,’ you shouted when I stuck my head in.

The TV was on and the General’s ugly face filled the screen. He was announcing in his high-pitched nasal wail that instead of elections, a referendum will be held. ‘I will not let the reins of my blessed country fall into the hands of disbelievers,’ he raged on the TV screen. ‘I ask you, my countrymen, do you want some Kafir running our beloved nation? Do you want someone who drinks alcohol and lives in sin as your guide? Do you want someone who is an agent of the West to be your leader? Tell me, my dear countrymen, do you want to be ruled by a woman? If not, then say yes to the referendum. Say yes to the country being run by Shariah laws, the way the Prophet, peace be upon him, intended it to be.’

‘The Prophet?’ you shouted at the TV. ‘How can he drag the Prophet into this?’

Others who had gathered into the room, sensing the rage in your voice, started slinking out discreetly. You turned to me. ‘When will that man stop using religion as a tool?’
'Not as long as he is alive.'

'Now don’t start that again.'

'He doesn’t deserve to live, Gigi Sahiba.'

'Let God be the judge of that.'

'Since when did you start believing in God?'

'Since you started turning me into a murderer, Nazo.'

I laughed and the room seemed to echo my laughter. And then there was silence. A thick white suffocating silence as you stared coolly at me. Behind you the General’s face filled the screen.

'Gigi Sahiba …'

'Damn.'

You reached for a cigarette.

'Double damn.'

The pack was empty.

I took it from you and binned it. ‘Please listen, Gigi Sahiba, this is important…’

‘I could have sworn I had a full pack.’

‘Do you think killing him would make you a bad person?’

‘Fetch me a new pack.’

‘I know you only ever want me to do the right thing but all your Yale and Cambridge philosophy doesn’t apply in this jungle Gigi Sahiba. All that free society talk only works in the West.’

‘Where the fuck, are my cigarettes?’

‘Here a person has to separate their actions from themselves. Arre, doing something bad doesn’t make me a bad person.’

‘My cigarettes, Nazo…’

‘If I was getting raped, wouldn’t it be better for me to kill my rapist then to go knocking for justice on the door of a society where a raped woman has to provide four eye witnesses? What of that blind girl who has been jailed by the General because when she was being raped she was too blind to look for any voyeurs who might be standing around watching? Tell me, Gigi Sahiba, in a society like this are you going to wait around for democracy to come to you or are you going to fight for it?’
‘Enough! Do as I say, Nazo. Or do you not consider yourself my servant anymore?’

*

I don’t know what I considered myself, I thought as I stepped out in the harsh sunlight to buy your cigarettes. Your protector? Well-wisher? Friend? Healer? Schemer? A Witch from Macbeth, here to make you king…or perhaps I was more suited to the role of the evil wife who made him murder.

‘Oh to kill for the crown,’ I whispered to myself as I picked up a pack at the little kiosk nearby. I ran my finger over the warning.

‘Rs. 55,’ the shopkeeper said interrupting my reverie.

‘Giving, giving. I’m not running away with your measly cigarettes,’ I shouted at the skinny man sitting cross-legged in the kiosk. ‘Actually,’ I said narrowing my eyes at him, ‘you are the real murderer in all this.’ I stuffed some loose cigarettes in my hijab and folded the pack in my burkha.

‘Can’t take things without paying,’ he protested, ‘I’m not running a free house, you know.’

‘Shut up,’ I shouted more determined than ever not to pay him. ‘I’ll take what I want and if you say one word, I’ll scream that you were trying to molest me.’

The man touched the holes in his torn vest.

‘Look sister,’ he pleaded, ‘I have six hungry mouths to feed.’

I helped myself to chewing gum, pan masala and a large Jubilee chocolate bar.

‘Arre, why you making trouble for no reason?’ he tried to stop my hand.

‘Five lashes,’ I hissed, ‘for touching a woman in public.’

A few people were beginning to gather.

The poor man cowered in his corner.

‘Please pay.’

‘How dare you!’

A man dressed in the khaki fatigues of the Moral Police, approached. ‘Everything alright, Sister?’ he asked.

I looked at the shopkeeper, his eyes wide and terrified, and thought perhaps not all
of the Jihadist’s laws were so bad.

* 

Back at home, I found you sitting in the dark, a cigarette stub in your hand.
‘I thought you were scared of the dark? I switched on the bedside lamp and a soft golden haze surrounded us.
‘Not any more. Now I’m scared of light.’
You exhaled long and slow, smoke curling around you in circles.
‘At least darkness is always with you but light, you never know when it will leave your side.’
As if on cue, the lamp flickered.
‘Power failure,’ Refugee shouted from downstairs, as we plunged into darkness.
The real power failure was here, I thought.
Aloud I said, ‘I’ll get some candles.’
But I stumbled just as I got up. I reached for the curtains to keep me from falling but the cloth tore and I fell on my face. A high yellow filtered in from the streetlight outside.
‘Well, here’s the culprit,’ I said picking up the half empty cigarette pack I had tripped over.
You grabbed at it and lit one. You held it dearly, your fist wrapped around the cigarette, like an addict relishing his last fix. I couldn’t watch.
‘Gigi Sahiba, I have something else for you.’ I held out the chewing gums and the candy bars, with little hope. But you surprised me.
Stubbing out the cigarette, you picked up the bar and started to stroke it.
‘Papa used to get these for me.’
You tore it open and ate it quickly, almost desperately. And then you did something you had never done before. You reached out and hugged me.
I knew, then, things were worse then they seemed.

*
‘You can remain silent, Miss Khan, but things have a way of coming out no matter how much one tries to hide them. I would like to call my next witness, Soldier Rahim.’

‘Sir, the Police regrets to inform the D.A. that Soldier Rahim Khan has been seriously injured on the way to court. He is fighting for his life in a hospital bed at this moment.’

‘That’s shocking news. I should have known...But don’t think you are getting away with this that easy, Miss Nazo Khan. You may have thought that Rahim would never talk after his “accident” but unfortunately for you, we have his testimony right here. Perhaps now you regret not killing him earlier.’

‘Objection! Miss Khan was close to him. Why would she want him killed?’

‘Perhaps, Your Honour, because she is afraid he would recognize her for what she really is -- a pretender.’
When the first streak of orange lit the sky, I left the house. All around me the call of morning prayers rang out. Each Muezzin seemed to be competing with the other as he sang higher, louder and shriller. Their voices shot through the air like blind arrows. I ducked through these invisible strikes and made my way to the jewelry store, the medal tucked safely under my shirt. The Jeweler was not an early riser, nor a mosque goer, I realised after waiting three hours for him to open shop. Finally a thin boy came down the steps and began fiddling with the locks on the shutters.

‘Brother,’ I said, startling him as I stepped out of the shadows. ‘I have a favour to ask.’

He looked at me and then at the medal in my hand. He ran off screaming.

* 

It turned out that Soldier Rahim had showed up to collect his medal sans a receipt and when he found out that it had been handed to an unknown woman, he had wrecked the shop in his anger. He had threatened to beat the jeweler to death if the medal was not returned.

‘You sold my honour,’ he had screamed at them.

Thinking that they melted it for the gold and were giving him excuses, he gave them seven days to retrieve it, or else he would burn down the shop. Being Major Q’s bodyguard, the Jeweler had taken this threat very seriously. His relief, as I handed the medal back to him, was indescribable.

‘These are strange times,’ he said. ‘Nobody wants to take up against the General’s men, and that man, they say he is Major Sahib’s Man Friday. How were we to know?’

I nodded.

‘It was a mistake,’ he continued. ‘Anyone can make a mistake. But God save us from these Jihadists. They never forgive. Perhaps they are not created from the same mud as us.’

I counted the notes he gave me.

‘Well, Sister, here is the money you paid us. Thank you for bringing it back. I will
make sure my son doesn’t mix up peoples belongings again.’

I turned to leave just as he called out.

‘Please Sister, if you don’t mind I want to ask a question?’

I stopped in the doorway, my back to him.

‘What made you bring it back? Don’t mind but honesty is such a rarity these days that one tends to question it…’

I smiled and turned back to face him.

‘I never take what is not mine.’

*But I’d kill for something that is rightfully mine.*
‘Please take a look at this, Miss Khan. Recognize it? The blankness on your face tells us that you are trying hard not to. Your Honour, I draw your attention to a Jeweler’s receipt, ‘Exhibit B’. It’s for the pawn of a medal. Not just any medal but a gold medal for courage. I ask the court, what kind of a woman steals a Soldier’s recognition of bravery? It reveals her ruthless personality. She would do anything for money.’

‘On the contrary, Your Honour, it shows Miss Khan’s kind and fair nature. True that she took the medal. But it was a mistake. Mr. Omar has conveniently left out that Miss Khan returned the Medal to the jeweler despite being handed it incorrectly. I suppose Mr. Omar will have an argument against that as well?’

‘In the big scheme of things, it probably suited her plan. For the woman is a manipulator, an exploiter, a schemer of the worst kind.’
A strategist perhaps but not a schemer. Surely Gigi Sahiba you must know that by now. I just like to plan ahead, you see. Believe me, when you grow up in one room, crammed amidst six older and much stronger siblings, you learn to make up for what you lack in strength with what you can in cunning. Cleverness is discouraged in girls of my background. Unlike you, I didn’t have a father to send me to university. Mine thought I was trying to show off, to make my brothers look bad. I didn’t get praise for doing well, I got a slap. Still I learnt, thinking, planning, keeping ahead, those are the rules of the game. Yes, game. You see, I figured out early on that life was a game, a game of chess, you could say. And now, for every move that I made, I calculated the ten possible moves of my opponent first. Impulse, spontaneity, whims are all names for recklessness, I always said.

But then, if you had listened to me, you wouldn’t be in this situation in the first place.

Anyhow, that day at the Jewelers, I returned the medal without any quibbling. My only request being that when the Soldier came to collect his medal, I be informed immediately. I told them I wanted to apologize.

Of course I did no such thing. Instead I made the meeting turn into a fruitacious coincidence, bumping deliberately into him and sending the medal shattering through the air. I then fell on all fours to retrieve it, wrapping my hijab around my neck to unblock his view.

From the floor, I caught his eye as he stared down my cleavage, embarrassing him so that when I handed the medal back to him, it was he who apologized.

‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’ he asked as we left the shop.

‘I am only a servant girl.’

‘In one way or the other we are all servants,’ he touched his ear, ‘Servants of Allah.’

I glanced sideways at him, marveling that they still made people like him.

‘If there is ever anything I can do for you, let me know,’ he said and quickened his step.
‘Wait,’ I caught up with him.

‘What is it, Sister?’ he said.

I looked around me and spotting a large overweight man looking my way, said,

‘That man. He’s bothering me. I think perhaps he is following me.’

I expected him to tell me to complain to the Moral Police. I’d then ask for help trying to find a Jihadists, buying myself some time to get to know him. But the soldier was more pliable than I had imagined.

‘That guy?’ he asked.

I nodded.

The fat man smiled as the soldier approached him.

‘Don’t you have any sisters at home, you swine?’

The man barely had time to blink before the soldier’s fist hit him in the eye.

‘Lets go,’ I said taking his hand and dragging him away before the man could speak.

He looked at his hand, then at me. He didn’t pull away.

*

I took him home and put ice on his hand. Later I made him a cup of tea. He stared into the murky brown liquid with bits of cream floating on top and said, ‘Ah the impossible shade of home brew.’

‘Do you not go home often?’

A restless look came into his eyes and he took a tentative sip of the scalding chai.

‘Not as often as I would like to.’

I nodded.

‘And you?’

‘I have no one, no place to call my home’ I said and for the first time I realized what a blessing that was.

‘Oh I am sorry to hear that. It must be hard.’

I bit my lip suppressing a smile. The soldier took it for tears.

‘What happened to your family?’
I told him how they had been slaughtered in front of my eyes and he looked away uneasy at the thought of being a part of the Establishment. He got up abruptly.

‘I should go now. Thanks for the tea.’

‘Will I see you again?’ I asked.

He looked at his feet.

‘If God wills.’

‘Khuda Hafiz Soldier,’ I bowed my head and bade him goodbye, stepping towards the door at the exact time as him. As we pushed against each other I slipped my hand into his pocket and made sure the medal fell out, accidentally.

I guess it was inevitable. We would have to meet again.

*

He came to me on a stormy night. The soldier’s eyes looked terrifying. ‘I know you have it.’

It was not a time to play games. Wordlessly I went to the cupboard and retrieved the medal.

‘I did not have your address.’

It was as if he deflated. His shoulders dropped and his face relaxed.

‘Stop,’ I said as he turned to leave, ‘let the rain lighten. You will get soaked.’

He looked around at my cramped quarters at the painfully thin mattress on the ground and at the steel almanac in the corner. Relaxed by my poverty he settled down on the floor and asked for a cup of chai. I poured some from the kettle on a small kerosene stove I kept burning day and night, the brew as strong as a stiff glass of whiskey. We sat silently side by side the tension growing till he started to speak. He spoke about the unexpected rain, the high inflation, the rising crime in Karachi.

I placed my hand over his mouth.

‘Soldier Rahim, we are both from this city. We both know how bad it is and how good it can be.’

I moved closer to him and then very slowly I placed my hand on his arm as if to brush off some lint. I can get him, I thought when he didn’t move away.
I can get him easily.

I looked into his eyes and before I could say anything else, he grabbed me with both arms and pushed me down on the rough floor. Flicking his long shirt up, he loosened the drawstring of his shalwar and pulling savagely at my clothes, shoved himself sharply inside. I cried out in pain and it was then he realized.

‘You are a virgin?’
‘Were,’ I replied hiding my face in shyness.
Soldier Rahim fell back.
I had him.

*

That night, after the Soldier left for his own moth bitten bed, I couldn’t sleep. I started on the abridged version of Macbeth you had given me. I must have drifted off at some point for I dreamt of witches and mists, of daggers and blood stained cloaks. I woke up gasping in the dark. Groping for the light switch, I saw something dangling above me. On the ceiling a spider spun a web slowly, carelessly, dangerously unprotected. It was instinctive. I killed it before I knew what I was I doing.

I always did hate impulsiveness.

The squished spider remained glued on the ceiling directly in my line of vision, keeping me awake. I blamed it on Macbeth. This Shakespeare of yours could bring out the worst in people.

Should I have cleaned the ceiling? Perhaps. But I found it easier to find my bedding elsewhere.

I knocked on your door.

*

You looked alarmed when I entered.
‘Haven’t you heard of waiting for an answer? Are you dumb or just stupid?’
You held a cigarette in one hand and a glass full of some amber colored liquid in
the other.

I hung my head. Not out of shame but out of defeat. How could I draw you away from these things? It would take less than this for the General’s men to drag you out by your hair, onto the streets and lash you raw, should it get out. But thankfully, being your private secretary meant nothing could get past me. Unless, of course, I wanted it to…

‘Out,’ you shouted and took a big swig of the foul smelling drink.

‘Please don’t,’ I whispered.

‘Just get the fuck out of here, Nazo.’

Your voice slurred. This was a good sign.

I approached you quietly, stealthily, hoping to take the poisonous things away from you.

‘Your feet,’ I said stopping suddenly. You must have stumbled on broken glass for a thin trickle of blood trailed behind you as you got up to stop me.

‘Get out,’ you said, this time with even less vigour.

I looked around. Shattered glass lay everywhere. Accident or deliberate? Knowing you, it was probably some sort of redemption attempt. On a closer look little crisscross marks lined your feet and ankles. You were cutting yourself…again.

‘Stay still,’ I ordered and surprisingly, you listened.

I took off my headscarf and started cleaning your feet. I felt your hand stroke my hair. It was like a blessing. Almost maternal. Yet there was something else. Something almost primal that I could not ignore. The heat… the heat in the room was damning. I tugged at your pyjama. You did not resist.

The softness of your flesh was as haunting as the hardness of your heart. Did you think I would forget?

*Perhaps you wish I had.*
‘Truth is, she manipulated every relationship Gigi ever had! Look at this telegram she sent Gigi’s mother Begum Shah! It’s genuine, Counsel. Begum has confirmed that Miss Khan approached her to stop the wedding. The question is, Gigi was a politician, not some popstar or Bollywood actress, whose career would end after marriage. What possible reason could she have for interfering in her private life?’

‘Miss Khan, please answer the question.’

‘All I can say, Your Honour, is that politics is an obsession, an occupation, a disease, an addiction, a fascination, an absurdity, a fate. It is not a hobby.’
In the coming weeks you were edgy, nervous and uneasy around me. I thought it was because you had other thoughts on your mind. Pressure was building up from all quarters for you to marry. It seemed impossible enough that a woman would contest elections but an unmarried woman, a joke.

‘Find a man,’ Major Q advised. ‘Even if he is just a show horse.’

I could see you thinking, considering, deliberating. My darling Gigi, I could see you succumbing. I wanted so much to tell you just then, to hold on. I wanted to say, just a little longer. Not long before they have to listen to you.

But you were in no mood to hear me. You seemed agitated at the sight of me, distrustful, jumpy. I wasn’t sure if it was because you had opened up to me the other night, reached out and shown your humanness or if you just wanted to put me back in my place. Remind me that I was nothing more than hired help.

It didn’t help that every other person was asking you why it didn’t work out with the Reed.

The Maulanas were on your case. Every day a new slander on your character, a new insult, a new rumour. If you even stood next to a man, they had you sleeping with him. If you were photographed talking to one, you were deemed his mistress, if you were caught looking at one he was proclaimed your dirty secret. Even the women around you were not spared. They dug up old photos of you and Yasmin smoking at the Barbican flat and proclaimed you lovers. Strangely, we were never linked.

*People will believe anything but the truth.*

*  

The night our showdown happened, some close friends of your late father had come to see you.

‘Get married child,’ he advised. ‘Shut their mouths once and forever.’

His wife leaned forward and said, ‘Here they don’t take single women seriously.’

‘A woman alone is easy meat,’ another old Party loyalist added.

‘A man’s years are measured by his wealth but a woman,’ his wife added, ‘no
matter how rich or powerful, once she is past 30, no one wants her. After all, don’t you want children my dear?’

The final straw came when the old man stood up and said, ‘What were you thinking refusing to marry that nice boy you were linked with in London?’

‘Such a nice husband Riaz would have made. And from such a good background too. Lovely couple you would have made. Beautiful children you’d have had.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ they all chorused.

Reed’s words echoed in my ears and I looked across to see if you were thinking what I was thinking. But your face was blank. Your fingers curled tight around a Marlborough Light as furious white smoke billowed from your nostrils. Almost as if a fire raged inside you and perhaps it did. For when I came close to you, I nearly got burned.

‘God has created a partner for all of us,’ the old man’s wife was saying. ‘If you find the perfect man…’

‘Stay away from him,’ I said

You turned sharply to me.

‘It was meant to be a joke,’ I said but the room grew silent.

‘An angel must be passing,’ I said but still no one laughed. All eyes were on me, including yours.

‘Who is this girl?’ the bearded man asked.

‘What business is it of yours who Gigi Sahiba marries?’ his wife glared. ‘Such front from a servant girl.’

‘I am Gigi Sahiba Madam’s secretary. And Madam is here to run the country, not some man’s house.’

I looked the woman in the eye.

‘Shut up,’ you hissed from behind.

‘Gigi Sahiba ?’ I turned to you. ‘Please tell them that what you are doing is far more important. Aren’t we your children? This Nation…’

‘Enough.’

‘But…’

The old couples hurried out even though you were looking directly at me.

‘Gigi Sahiba, I…’

‘Get out.’

‘But…’

‘No, Nazo. Not a word more. I’ve had enough of your meddling. Just who the hell do you think you are? If you hadn’t come snooping in my life, I’d be happily married to Riaz right now.’

‘He was not right for you.’

‘You are not right for me.’

‘Gigi Sahiba please…’

You aimed an ashtray at me and missed.

A mirror shattered behind me.

‘It’s Madam to you,’ your voice was dry as ice.

I had to lean against the wall. My legs felt weak.

My voice was small, pleading, pathetic even to my own ears, as I said, ‘Do I mean nothing to you?’

You spun around.


I looked straight in your eyes and asked, ‘My loyalty means nothing to you?’

‘Loyalty? Just look at you, Nazo. Look at you now. You’re pathetic. Standing there in front of me with a newspaper tucked under your arm, diary in hand. I’ve more than made up for the fall you took for me. You came to me with nothing. Your entire family had been murdered. You were a bloody refugee for fuck’s sake and look at you today. My clothes, my shoes, hell you probably even wear my underwear. God knows what else of mine you have helped yourself to…’

‘I am not a thief.’

‘Of course you are not.’

You laughed a hollow little laugh that sounded more like a cough. And then you said something that stung me sharper than a slap.

‘You are a nobody.’
‘Wonderful! What a fantastic storyteller you are, Nazo Khan. Just have a look at her testimony! Have you ever tried your hand at fiction? No? Well they say paper is free in jail and as for time, you will have plenty. I beg your pardon, Your Honour, I digress. But you see Miss Khan seems to conveniently leave out little bits of truth which are imperative to the course of justice. The word unreliable narrator would be so apt were she a character in the novel. Alas, all this is real. Gigi is gone, never to return....’

‘Is there a question in this?’

‘Yes, I would like to know why Miss Khan switched camps.’
Things happen for a reason, I always say. After I left your house I found I had nowhere to go, no one to go to, except… I toyed with the idea and then thought why not? What more did I have to lose, I told myself as I knocked on Soldier Rahim’s door.

He took me in. Let me stay in his room. And then in his bed. He made no promises but he looked after me well. Even put in a good word with the Major and got me a job. I made the rotis every morning. Thin, crisp, round flat breads that nobody could fault. Soon I became indispensable.

Surely you would agree with me that was the one thing I was good at.

*

In many ways, being in the Major’s house was a blessing. Almost every evening there was a gathering of the top Army brass. I soon noticed that the growing discontent against the General was not just limited to the public. Internal conflicts were opening up. Grievances, complaints, neglect and corruption, they were part of the nightly discussion among the General’s men at Major’s house. No one paid attention when I went in and out of the rooms filling up their glasses with ice, serving snacks or collecting empties, my face always veiled with only the hideous scar around my chin exposed. No one knew who I was and no one cared.

I was becoming good at being invisible. I learnt how to merge in the background, melting against the plants, or shrinking into an unlit corner when confidential information was being exchanged. No one noticed me. Or if they did, dismissed me as nobody important. There were it seemed, many advantages of being a nobody.

Somebody like you would never know.

*

And then one day, I heard the unmentionable. I was filling the crystal bowls on the side tables with cashew nuts, when I heard Major Q lean conspiratorially towards another
old Colonel and whisper, ‘Now don’t tell this too anyone, but rumour has it that there is trouble in the Big Gun’s mosque.’

Mosques and guns, that’s all they were obsessed with, I thought with a toss of my head.

The old Colonel let out a low whistle. Taking a deep swig of his whiskey he asked, ‘But what of the small pistols? Can the Hangman silence them? What does the Big Brother say?’

‘If the Big Gun stays,’ a third man replied. ‘The small ones have to be squashed to make room.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Major Q rubbed his chest. ‘I’m beginning to like the smoke from one particular small gun.’

‘I’ve heard she’s quite a tasty thing,’ the other man laughed.

‘What does she taste like? Is she as fiery in bed as she is in her speeches?’ another old Colonel leered and they all roared with laughter.

A young soldier next to Major Q cleared his throat.

‘Even the walls have ears, Major Sahib,’ he said looking at me.

Major Q frowned at me and motioned for me to leave. I quickly gathered the dirty glasses and pretended to hurry out. Outside the door I stopped just short of closing it.

‘And shut the door behind you,’ I heard the soldier shout.

Quickly I pulled the door shut. Not a sound could be heard now. And then I noticed the glasses in my hand. I had always wanted to do this, I thought as I pressed one against the door.

*

Whatever I heard, I kept to myself. Mainly, because it did not make any sense. I knew it was a code for some top secret mission but what? For days I pondered over it. Talking to Soldier Rahim was useless, his lips more firmly sealed than the jammed handles of our rusty old window.

Everywhere I went, the words danced before me. Everything I heard, they echoed in the background. It came to a point that when I spoke, the words threatened to jump out.
It was then I became afraid. What if they got into the wrong hands? What if I repeated
them to the Major? No, I must write it down on a piece of paper and bury the paper in a
deep pit. My stomach was too shallow. It was as I was writing it down in my slow
hesitant scrawl that it hit me. The big gun was the General and the small one was you.
For the Big Gun to stay, the small one had to be crushed. And the hangman… it must be
the dreaded Intelligence service. So, they were the real killers behind your father’s death.
I always knew the General was too dumb to plot it all on his own and the Big
Brother…well, that was too easy to figure out. But the code, it was a date and the name
of a weapon. What could that mean? And then it hit me.

I rushed to your house. The guards let me through the gates but I hesitated at the
doorstep. As I was waiting, a car pulled up the driveway. The man driving it knocked
down the potted plants on the steps as he skid to a stop. One crushed sunflower came
rolling up to my feet.

I lifted the broken stem and looked up to see a pair of white leather shoes emerge
from the car. They stepped over the strewn flowers and proceeded up the steps to the
doorway. By the time my gaze travelled all the way up the man’s white suited back, all I
could see was an oil slicked mop of hair, jet black and styled like a film star.

It didn’t take me long to sum him up. Why was it that you, who knew what was
best for the nation, did not know what was good for your own self? Your taste in men
was appalling. And this man was no exception. Flamboyant, excessive, a womanizer and
a flirt, Sardar Balgodi was a feudal lord better known as the Pakistani Playboy. Why? I
asked myself. Why would someone repeatedly set themselves up for disaster? But then
again perhaps his flaws appealed to the perfectionist in you.

You never could resist fixing things.

*

I waited a couple of hours in the servant’s quarters catching up on the house gossip.
When Balgodi finally left your room, I slipped in. I found you sitting on the white
loveseat in the living room, your gaze fixed to the floor. The curtains I noticed were
drawn.
‘So he is the latest?’
You did not look up but I saw your forehead crease.
‘What are you doing here? Who the hell let you in?’
‘I have something to tell you.’
‘I don’t wish to hear.’
‘Gigi Sahiba, it is important.’
You looked up. Your gaze travelled the length of my body as you took in my clothes, my white hijab styled exactly like yours and finally you saw on my arm a handbag which unlike yours carried nothing but some loose change for the bus.
You laughed.
At that time, I did not understand why you were laughing. The fool that I was, I smiled back.
‘You are pathetic, Nazo.’
It was my turn to look down at my feet. I saw chipped red nail polish on stubby toes, a dusty chappal and huge angry corns. A few inches away your feet rested on the velvet footstool, the skin ivory cool, your toenails painted a flawless red, the soles soft and clean.
‘What do you want?’
‘I just wanted to tell you that…’I stammered, tripping over my own words.
The very words that till this morning had threatened to gush out in front of the Major were shy and reticent in front of you.
‘I… I… wanted to tell you that…and then I stopped.
I stared hard at the smooth skin of your feet, my vision blurred by the image of my own cracked heels. The more I stared at the softness of your heel, the more my insides hardened. Why did I owe you this loyalty, why did I serve you so faithfully? Would you do the same for me? Would you walk miles on a hot windless afternoon to come to me? Would you go hungry, waiting outside my door for hours just to warn me? Would you wear my cast offs? No. You wouldn’t even touch them. I was not someone to be copied, envied, or admired. I was just a nobody. In your scheme of things, I did not matter. And at that moment, something in me changed. Perhaps, I realized that things didn’t have to be this way.
‘Well, out with it. I don’t have all day,’ you lifted one smooth foot and crossed it over the other.

‘I just wanted to tell you…’

‘Tell me what? Don’t get married? I hope you haven’t come to give me any more of your useless advice. Listen, Nazo, I have had enough of you. I…’

‘That your life is in danger.’

‘What?’ you leaned forward.

I turned away.

‘Wait. Stop. Nazo!’

You ran after me and gripped my shoulders. Turning me around roughly you shouted, ‘Tell me everything you know. Where did you hear this? Who said it? How? When?’

I shrugged off your hands.

‘You owe me this,’ you said and grabbed my wrist.

I shook it free.

‘Wait. Look, I know you are working at the Major’s. If you have heard something…If the General is planning something…’

Fear was written all over your face.

‘I can’t go through his torture again. The rats…the darkness…I would rather flee. Look, you have to tell me.’

Your eyes darted from side to side. Your mouth was a thin line.

‘Wait, Nazo.’

I turned to go but the old loyalty took hold of me. My feet grew roots and I stood frozen. A moment of weakness.

‘At least tell me what I should do?’

‘What would you do if someone hit you?’

‘Hit them back?’

I smiled sadly. Without me you were nothing. If only you could see.

‘You know what you have to do,’ I said and placed my hand on your shoulder. You didn’t move it away.

I gave you the code and left.
How was I to know you would go through with it.

* 

‘But in 1987, she was reinstated.’

‘But as a maid.’

‘Nevertheless she was welcomed back.’

‘Exactly. Again and again Madam dismissed her. Yet somehow, she managed to crawl back in.’

‘It’s because my client is a true loyalist. Gigi Sahiba always realized her worth and welcomed her back with open arms.’

‘Or through pressure. Miss Khan, I think you were blackmailing her.’
It was a blast that rocked the city. Still the General survived. He was beginning to seem invincible. But at least it shook him out of his stupor. In 1987 elections were finally announced.

One minute we were reeling from the shock of the General’s announcement and the next minute yours. You were going to marry. The papers were full of it. In fact it wouldn’t be wrong to say that news of your wedding overshadowed news of the elections. That too in a country that had been under Jihadist rule for decades. No small feat, wouldn’t you say?

News travels fast. Despite your reluctance, your mother arrived from Geneva. And then the true fireworks began.

I was sent for.

Still hurting from the earlier spat, I made sure to wear nothing that had been owned by you or even resembled it. From my thin cotton suit to my cheap sandals everything was brought from my own money. I felt rich.

‘You look different, Nazo,’ you said as I walked in.

Probably because you can’t recognize any of your old things on me, I thought.

Aloud I said, ‘I must have lost weight.’

You turned back to your papers.

‘Mummy is coming and the new maid hasn’t showed up. You know what to do.’

I stared at you. Did you really think so little of me?

‘Bring me some tea,’ you asked as if I had never left.

*

I entered the kitchen, dazed and unsure.

‘The nuances of the rich,’ Refugee said. ‘Servants come, servants go, all the same to them. What do they care? Sometimes I wonder if there is any justice at all in this world, what with the rich and their ways,’ he wiped his brow and threw the sweat into the curry he was stirring.

‘Perhaps we all look the same to them,’ he laughed. ‘What do you think?’

I wondered if I had got my old job back.
Your mother swept into the house with a bevy of suitcases and a flurry of servants behind her. Begum Shah reminded me of the north wind knocking down everything in her path.

‘What is this?’ she demanded, her back straight as a rod, her hands fixed at her hips like the twin handles of an Egyptian jar.

For a second I thought she was talking to me.

‘Oh…’ I stammered glancing around me.

I moved quickly tidying up the already neat room, fixing the already straight pictures on the wall, dusting things with the ends of my clean white hijab. She marched towards me.

‘Sorry Madam…’

I cowered as she approached, dread inching up my skin with every step. But she walked right past me.

‘Just, what is this mess?’ she took off her dark glasses and shook them at you. It was then I noticed her eyes. Both seemed to be the master of their own will. One was fixed on me while the other roamed freely.

Despite the comical eyes, there was nothing funny about her. She stood this close to you and I could feel you burn under the heat of her breath.

‘Just what do you think you are doing?’ she spat out the words, chewing every syllable. ‘How can you announce your marriage without consulting me?’

You remained silent.

‘Well?’

‘You married Papa without telling anyone.’

She raised her hand. A sharp stinging slap landed on your face.

‘How dare you? How dare you compare your father with that two-bit Zamindar boy? Your foolishness has exceeded all limits this time!’

She raised her hand again to strike you and it was then I broke my silence.

‘Foolishness doesn’t come wearing a watch, Begum.’
‘What?’ she demanded.
‘I said…,’
‘I heard what you bloody well said,’ she blinked at me as if I was a pesky fly that had miserably wandered in.
‘I..’
‘Shut up and get out. I need to speak to my daughter alone.’
‘No.’
‘What?’ she spun around to face me.
‘You bloody fool. How dare you talk back? Get out!’
‘No. I won’t leave. Not if you treat our Gigi Sahiba like that.’
‘And just who the hell are you to tell me how I should treat my own daughter?’ she said raising her hand to strike me.
I stole a glance at your face and I thought I saw the hint of a smile. Chuffed, I announced, ‘I am Nazo.’
She dropped her hand.
‘Nazo!’ she said greeting me like an old friend.
I could see the surprise I felt reflected on your face.
‘So you are Nazo,’ she smiled and I wondered if this was the calm before the storm.
‘I remember you!’ Her voice changed and instead of the growl a sweet husky tone came out of her mouth.
‘Why didn’t you say so before?’ I could see the corners of her mouth twitch upwards in a vicious smile as she turned her whole body to face me.
‘Darling Nazo. How can I forget you? I am indebted to you. After all you’re the mole who told me about the previous suitor.’
I glanced across at you. Your hand was pressed against your cheek and you were staring at me in that unbelievable manner that can only be called, betrayal.

*

Later that day Begum called me into the dining hall. You were sitting next to her, staring at some invisible spot in the distance.
‘Nazo,’ she said in a saccharine sweet voice, ‘I’m not happy with you at all.’

She tilted her face towards you, patted your head and put a firm hand around your shoulder. ‘You have not looked after our Gigi Sahiba well.’

She leaned forward and pointing a finger at me, said, ‘After all, we depend on loyal faithful servants like yourself for Gigi’s welfare. And you let us down. It was your duty to inform me about this relationship. The matter has reached talk of marriage and I was not even told of the courtship! Ya Khudayi! I am not at all happy about this.’

She shook her head for emphasis, her eyes wandering in different directions.

‘The thing is, Begum,’ I hesitated unsure which eye to make contact with. ‘I no longer work here. I was sent for today…’

‘But why?’

‘Well, the Cook just said, Gigi wants to see me so I came...’

‘No silly girl, why do you no longer work here?’

‘I….I was asked to leave.’

‘What? Impossible! A nice girl like you?’

She looked towards you and said in a voice as clear and firm as a sunny Karachi day, ‘Nazo is staying here with you. And that’s final.’

*
'Like a cat, Miss Khan seems to go from door to door, never sticking to one house too long. And like a cat she knows how to play the mice against each other...'

'I thought you liked cats, Omar Sir?'

*
The news didn’t go down well in Major’s household.

‘Oye Nazo, you change households more frequently then our politician change parties,’ the driver said.

‘Yeah man, she must be a cat,’ another servant added.

‘They change seven houses before they settle down loyally in one!’

Only soldier Rahim was quiet.

‘So you are leaving?’ he said later that night as I rolled out my bedding.

‘Just the household. Not you,’ I smiled.

He took me in his arms and hugged me so tight I could hardly breath. ‘You will come back every night after work, won’t you?’

I hesitated.

‘I can’t really work at Gigi’s and stay at Major’s....’

‘Yes, you can,’ he said and pressed his lips tight against mine. That night he bit me, clawed at me, digging his hands roughly into my flesh.

I let him. Told myself it was the price I had to pay for a roof over my head when you turned me out.

‘Nazo,’ he kept whispering as he made love to me that night with a ferociousness he had never shown before. I lay still beneath him, my eyes closed, my fists clenched. I was afraid of what was happening to my body but I was more scared of what was happening to my mind. I found myself enjoying this queer violent side of Soldier Rahim. The more roughly he handled me, the sharper the fantasy became. Afterwards when he lay snoring next to me, his face aglow with tiny beads of pearly sweat, I finally realized whose face I had been imagining. In the hot windless night I felt my body grow cold. Because Gigi, it was you I saw.

* 

Begum sent for me early the next morning. I left Soldier Rahim, sleeping.

*
You avoided me the next few days. Every time I saw you, you turned away, cigarette smoke billowing out of your mouth as if your very self was on fire. It burned me to see you poisoning yourself with that filthy habit but I was powerful. You wanted nothing to do with me. Then on the last day of her stay, Begum invited your feudal lord boyfriend over for dinner. He was everything you were not. Flamboyant, crass, loud. He boasted his wealth, the expanse of his lands, the names of his ancestors. And you listened!

‘So, you are a farmer?’ I heard the Begum ask, as I brought out the tea trolley.

The man did not even know when to take offence. He twirled his moustache and said, ‘Farmer? Ah yes, yes, we have many farms. From here till there,’ he stretched his arms wide. ‘As far as the eye can see, the land belongs to our family.’

Balgodi frowned as he followed your gaze.

‘It is true, Mrs. Begum Jee. Has been with us for generations. Many big farmlands we are owning. Ask anyone.’

‘A farmer is someone who tills the land,’ I said.

You looked sharply at me as the Begum smirked. The words had escaped before I could stop myself and now I could feel your burning stare sear through me.

Balgodi frowned as he followed your gaze.

‘It is not good to give these servant types so much liberty, Gigi dear. All your western education has made you forget that here, the poor do not speak amidst the rich. It is out of order.’

You nodded.

‘Get rid of her,’ he said, ‘she has sprouted wings.’

Begum quickly interfered.

‘Oh let it go son,’ she said pushing the dark glasses up her nose. ‘These are poor people. What do they know about manners and etiquettes.’

‘But Mrs. Begum, give them a finger and they will grab your whole hand. Better not to let them take any liberties at all,’ he said.

He was talking about me as if I was not even there. Perhaps I had become invisible.

‘Oh come now, let it go,’ Begum soothed. ‘You know how it is, sometimes servants
forget their place. Besides good maids are so hard to find these days.’

I looked at you. You seemed to be thinking something. Reflexively you reached for a cigarette then immediately put it out as Balgodi turned to look at you, his eyebrows arched. You did this decisively, one jab and one grind, not the series of genteel taps you preferred normally.

Begum cleared her throat and said, ‘That’ll be all, Nazo.’

‘Yes Begum,’ I said feeling as if a string had been pulled on some part of my body. I heard myself say, ‘Thank you, Begum, thank you, Sir.’ Another pull and I picked up the tray to leave.

‘Wait, Nazo,’ I heard you call.

I turned, a faint smile of hope on my lips.

‘There are some clothes on my bedroom floor. Take them. We can’t have the servants of this house looking like trash. Especially not the old and faithful ones.’

You looked down at your knuckled diamond studded hands and I knew right then, you wanted to hit me.

*

I walked into the kitchen, my arms stacked with dirty teacups. For a moment I stood there, the soot-covered walls closing in on me. Perhaps I shouted at the boy doing the dishes. Perhaps he shouted back. I can’t remember. All I remember is the pounding of my own heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, opening.

Then I stumbled forward and threw the crockery in the sink. The washer boy backed away and Refugee started at me. But one look at my ashen face and he didn’t ask another question.

‘Get out,’ I said pushing the kitchen boy away. I did the dishes with such vigour that a glass smashed in my hand as I was washing it. Refugee knew better then to scold me.

Later when I had cleaned every corner of the kitchen, mopped the floor till my reflection could be seen in it, dusted every nook and polished every surface, Refugee announced it was time to turn in.
‘Come now, Nazo, that’s enough.’
I shook my head.
‘But there is nothing more left to do,’ he said.
‘You’re wrong,’ I said. ‘There is one more thing left.’

*

I sat on the cold floor outside your room, staring numbly at my feet till I heard you leave with Balgodi in his flashy red car. And then I walked into your room. The floor was strewn with discarded clothes, dirty underwears, even old unused pads. I leaned against the cool white walls of your bedroom and thought, once, just once, I wish you knew what it was like to be me.

*Be careful what you wish for.*

*
‘Mr. Omar is trying to mislead the court!’

‘Your Honour, my suspicions are not unfounded. Feeling defeated at Gigi Sahiba’s decision to marry, Miss Khan tried to break up the marriage.’

‘Guess work is not concrete evidence, Mr. Omar.’

‘Court will see the point in a moment. Your Honour, please see this fax dated 18th May, few months before the wedding. It is addressed to Begum Shah, who did not receive it until she got back to Geneva. It reads, ‘Danger- daughter getting married.’ What is dangerous about her daughter getting married?’

‘The man she is getting married to.’

‘Thank you Miss Khan. You confirmed my suspicion.’

‘My Client’s words are being misinterpreted, as is the fax.’

‘The fact is Counsel that Miss Khan tried to alert Ms. Shah’s mother and when that failed, she tried something else. Something so terrible that it can only happen in real life.’
Begum could not stop you from getting engaged to that mustachioed man but she did manage to install me back in your house for good. Our relationship was strained. You seemed more determined than ever to make me see my place. I was a reproach to you, and a necessity.

Once I heard you say to Balgodi behind my back, ‘I can’t stand her anymore. But she’s my mother’s mole. Just imagine, I took her in when she was an illiterate asylum seeker with no family left. I taught her to read, gave her my clothes, my shoes and now she wants to control me. She just doesn’t know her boundaries.’

What had I done to upset you that was so bad? I pondered a thousand times a day. All I ever wanted was to protect you. I loved you, worshipped you. But you mistook my admiration for imitation. By dressing like you I wasn’t trying to be you, Gigi. By warning you against the Reed, I just wanted to show you that he wasn’t good enough for you. By trying to get close to you, I just wanted to show you my love. But you couldn’t see it. You just saw me as a gatekeeper, an interfering servant who’d crossed her boundary. You never saw my love, my dedication, my loyalty.

My pride began to nag me. How long could I put up with such treatment? Love like milk can turn sour if left out in the open too long.

And so, I began to plot.

*But not against you.*

I told myself it was for your own good.

We were not much apart in age yet it felt as if you were a child. You had to be guided, warned, pulled back when you reached for something harmful, steadied when you stumbled. You had to be taught, to walk before you could run.

Like a child sometimes hits its mother, you too lashed out at me. But our bond was unbreakable. For no matter what you did, my heart refused to turn against you. To say I hated my heart, right then, would not be a lie.
The night Begum was to leave, I went back to Rahim’s house for the last time. He walked in just as I was packing the last of my things.

‘What happened?’ he asked softly.

I didn’t answer. He slid his arms around my waist.

‘You’re not leaving me for good, are you?’

‘I am.’

‘What?’ he stepped back.

‘I am leaving you. Forever.’

‘But…why? What did I do?’

I took a deep breath and turned around.

‘You lied to me. You are a married man. You are a father of three. You used me, Soldier Rahim. You have ruined me, left me with nothing.’ The words tumbled out like a torrent. I tried not to look into his eyes.

‘Nazo,’ he bowed his head. ‘I thought you knew.’

‘You thought!’ I shut the lid on my little tin trunk.

‘Nazo, I…’

‘How would I know? Did you ever sit me down and tell me you are married?’

‘Nazo, I thought someone would have said something. I mean everyone knows about my wife in the mountains.’

‘Look you are a married man and you should have told me that yourself before you…you went to bed with me.’

‘Nazo, I will marry you. A man is allowed four wives.’

‘Yes, only four wives but innumerable lies. No, Soldier Rahim. Once a liar always a liar.’

A sound erupted from his throat. A guttural sound that made me shiver. I watched as he raised his hands to strike me. Instinctively I covered my face. When no blow struck, I peeped through my arms and saw he was doubled over trying to hide his tears. The man really cared.

I stood where I was, wondering how it was that someone could love a person like
me.

‘Don’t leave me, Nazo. Don’t go. Please. No.’ He reached out and tried to grab me. And that was when I understood. There was no such thing as love. Love was just another name for possession.

‘I can’t let you go. I won’t. Stay with me, Nazo,’ he lunged at my leg as I walked out the door.

I shook his grip off my leg and stepped out. Before I shut the door, I turned back to look at him one more time. He looked shrunken, old, undone.

‘Get up Soldier Rahim,’ I said. ‘Crying doesn’t suit men.’

*It wasn’t my fault.*

* *

Back at your house, the garden and walls were lit up with miniature oil lamps, but the real fireworks were taking place inside. I walked in to find you arguing with your mother. Begum was blowing her nose into a handkerchief, her wandering eyes red and watery. Something told me it wasn’t a cold that had made her face swell up like a toad.

‘I have no choice, Mother. I must do this. For Papa’s sake.’

‘Gigi! Your father would have never wanted you to marry an uncouth tribal like him.’

‘Papa wanted to see me in politics.’

‘Oh Gigi, parents dream all sorts of things for their children. Yes, your father wanted to change things but even he knew he couldn’t install a woman on the heads of these crazies. They will never let a woman rule over them. Come back to London my darling. Leave this jungle of a place. You never have to come back here.’

‘No.’

A fresh bout of tears sprouted from the Begum’s wandering eye and she blew her nose even harder.

‘Mother, go back. You don’t need to worry…’

‘I can’t leave you to these dogs. They will rip you to shreds.’

‘Mother, Balgodi will take care of me. Mother, believe me. He has all the right
connections. People are…’ Here you hesitated and looked around.

I stepped back into the shadows.

‘People are afraid of him.’

Begum’s shoulders slumped.

‘He will protect me.’

Suddenly the Begum looked small and shrunken. Her red nose seemed to encompass her entire face, her eye shriveled up like raisins and I marveled at how vulnerable she looked. Perhaps she really did care.

‘I hope you never know,’ she said, gently letting go of your hand. ‘What it is, to walk away from your child.

She stood up.

‘Good bye, my little girl.’

You shivered as she walked out of door.

A chill of the heart.

*

Twice Rahim came to see me and twice I refused to meet him. By now everyone knew that something was up. I was afraid that Refugee or the Driver Shafiq would tell him that I already knew of his marriage. Deep inside I knew it was only a matter of time. I felt like I was in an elevator cut loose at the top. Falling, falling, not knowing when it would stop. I could have put a stop to it but no, I did not want to be caught. You see, telling a lie and being called a liar are two completely different things. One is an impulse, an instinct of survival, a reflex action. The other, plain wrong.

And I hated being wrong.

The bell rang again and I froze, wondering if it would be him. It was. But before Rahim could approach me, there was a flurry of voices at the door as Balgodi Sahib’s car entered the driveway. He stepped out in his usual flamboyant style, his white clothes so starched and unfitting that they seemed to be wearing him rather then the other way around. He walked with his arms held out against his sides like a wrestler entering a ring. A snap of his fingers and a servant came running up with a cigar and a matchbox. One lit
it while the other stuck it in his mouth. He waved them away and they melted into the background. Balgodi strode up the driveway steps. No one spoke for a while.

‘Is that the man…’ Rahim asked.

‘Who else.’

‘Only Allah knows what makes people fall in love.’

‘You should know Soldier.’

He looked at me and smiled kindly.

‘I won’t bother you anymore, Nazo. I only wanted to tell you that I’m leaving.

Going back to the village.’

I felt a tightening around my heart. Something was slowly squeezing, slowly stopping the flow of blood. I wanted right then to shut my ears, to stop him from leaving. Could it be that I had grown fond of him?

‘Don’t go,’ I said.

He turned around surprised.

‘What’s the matter, Nazo?’ Refugee murmured from behind us. ‘You are not falling for a married man, now are you?’

Soldier Rahim’s face flushed and he fingered the strap of his rifle.

‘Perhaps,’ I said without taking my eyes of him.

I took him to my quarters, away from the prying eyes of Refugee and the soft sniggering of the driver.

‘This is where it all started,’ I said as I pushed him down gently on the mat. The pan of milk brimmed over. Two cups lay in waiting.

‘Rahim,’ I said as I poured out the tea. ‘I don’t want you to go but I can’t be with you either.’

‘But why, Nazo?’ he gripped my hand. You are not her slave. You are allowed a life of your own.’

Even he could see how much I cared for you. The only person who couldn’t was you.

‘I can’t marry you…yet. But perhaps one day my heart will mend.’

He reached out and took me in his arms. And I let him. He made love with a tenderness that was completely unlike the last time. Afterwards it was me who reassured
him that all I needed was time. He closed his eyes, silent tears seeping out of his eyelids. I reached out to wipe them. Perhaps I too could have a home…

There was a knock on the door.

‘Get dressed,’ I said tossing his clothes at him as I rose hurriedly. ‘It’s time for Gigi’s afternoon tea.’

*

I was in the living room setting up the tea trolley when it happened.

‘What good will this do?’ Balgodi said coming up behind me. Before I could turn around, he had put his arms around my waist and was kissing my neck. The cups shattered to the floor, a deep stain spreading across the Persian carpet.

‘You?’ he said as I got down on my knees. Untying my headscarf, I began wiping the rug.

‘What the hell are you doing here dressed as Gigi?’

I scrubbed harder, the thought of your angry face circling my eyes.

When I looked up I saw him staring down at me. I tried to drape the hijab back across my chest but the wet cloth only accentuated it.

‘Ca…castoffs,’ I stammered as I picked up the teacup remains.

‘Send in fresh tea,’ he ordered as I rushed out.

Outside in the hall, I could still feel his eyes on me.

*

Rahim was waiting for me when I entered my little room.

‘What happened to you,’ he asked getting up from the bed.

‘The tea…I dropped it. On myself.’

He looked at me in that quiet way of his, then shook his head.

‘That man is not right. I’d stay away from him if I were you.’

I looked up. How could he know?

‘Now change out of your wet clothes before you catch a chill. The weather is
If only feelings could change the way seasons do. But no. There is no change of colour, no drop in the temperature, nothing in the air to warn you. And so it was, that I was caught unaware when one day watching your fiancé lean towards you, I felt a stirring.

I touched my throat. Would you forgive an unfaithful man?

I didn’t have to wait long to find out.

*
'Have you heard the saying about the animal who bites the hand that feeds it? I wonder if there is one for the servant who steals her mistress’s husband.'

'Objection, that’s slander. Besides Mr. Balgodi is not a quiet man himself, Your Honour. The world knows that he has a colorful personality. Mr. Omar has got his facts wrong. It is he who tried to take advantage of Miss Khan.'

'But if she was indeed being persecuted as you say, why would she accept gifts from him?'

'The fact that he was giving her gifts shows who was pursuing who, my dear Mr. Omar.'
I wondered if you’d forgive an unfaithful man but it never occurred to me if you’d forgive a woman who betrayed you...

And so it was that one day, as I was cleaning the dressing room mirror, I paused. I peered closely at my reflection, touching my cheekbones, stretching the skin around my eyes, pouting my lips. But no matter which way I turned I looked the same. Plain, ordinary, common and forgettable. And then I placed a hand over the scar. My face changed. I looked, I thought, almost pretty.

In the coming days I started to pay more attention to my looks. I brought a tube of whitening cream and started rubbing it in my skin at night. I also started using the scar fading medicine made out of shark bones the Chinese fish-seller had recommended. The scar didn’t fade completely, neither did I become as fair as you. But it made me feel, less like myself.

And when you live in the same house, tell me is it unusual to bump into others? It wasn’t my fault if certain people began to notice me in a new light. If at all it was the fault of your castoffs. As they say clothes make a man, or break a man in this case.

It didn’t surprise me that Balgodi had a roving eye, but that I enjoyed the attention was unexpected. I felt as if I had suddenly become powerful. I could walk in when you were deep in conversation and he would stop to look at me. At first you didn’t mind. I dare say you didn’t even notice. And then one day, he brought you a gold bangle. I stared from my place by the door as he put it on your wrist. Later when you went up to bed and I came in to clear up, he grabbed my wrist and thrust something into my hand. A silver bracelet. I laughed and the fool that he was, he thought he had me.

But he was wrong. I wasn’t laughing because I was pleased with the trinket.

I was laughing because it was so easy. I looked at him and thought, I could have him. I could have him too.

*

That evening when you went out onto the terrace to smoke, he didn’t follow you. He sat there smoking in the air-conditioned room, choking the air with his thin grey
spirals. I leaned forward to clear the dirty dishes in front of him. He stared coldly ahead. But when I turned to go, he grabbed my arm and pulled me into his lap.

‘What did you do with my gift?’
‘Let me go, Sir.’
‘Did you sell it?’
‘Someone will see us.’
‘Let them.’
‘What are you saying, Sir? My neck will be on the line.’
‘You didn’t like my gift?’
I smiled and bit the end of my hijab to cover my scar, ‘Gold for the swan and silver for the duckling?’
He laughed and loosened his grip. I got up and ran to the door.
‘Wait,’ he said.
My hand was on the handle, as he raised his arm.
‘Catch,’ he said and I caught it. A thin golden chain swung from my hand. The chain he wore around his neck. A 24 Karat gold one…
I folded my palm around the glittery gift and smiled. You see, the ugly duckling can turn into a swan.

*  

Perhaps it was the gold that made you do it. I was serving you your favourite meatball curry, when suddenly you gripped my wrist. You brought it close to your face and stared at the delicate chain hanging off it. I had wound it twice around my thin wrist and pushed it up my sleeve but you know what they say about gold dust and lust- two things one can’t hide, chupay na chupti.
You didn’t ask me where I had got it. Instead you stood up abruptly, knocking back your chair, and marched into your room. From the noises, as you opened drawers and cupboards, I could tell you were hunting for your own gold chain. You must have found it for you came out and resumed your meal as if nothing had ever been the matter. But I could see the familiarity of the chain had disturbed you. You couldn’t quiet place where
you had seen it before yet suspecting someone of theft was not a thought that could be easily dismissed. Suspecting them of cheating was even worse. The two thoughts must have collided in your head for right after the meal you marched up to the telephone and dialed his number.

‘We should set a date.’ You gripped the receiver hard, green veins crisscrossing angrily on the back of your hands. ‘For the wedding, Balgodi, what else?’

*
‘Your Honour, even a dog pauses before shitting in his own home. But Miss Khan did not think twice.’

‘Language, Mr. Omar!’

‘Apologies, Your Honour. Miss Khan, please tell the court what happened on the 17th of August 1987, the night of Ms. Shah’s wedding?’ Yes, that night. The night when you crossed a boundary no servant should.

‘Miss Khan’s silence says it all. However I would like to present before the court this curry stained cloth. It is Ms. Gigi Shah’s bridal veil, which was intentionally damaged. Witnesses have testified that Miss Khan deliberately pushed against Gigi making the plate tip. Her dress was ruined. The bridal veil which is a bride’s most cherished item had to be thrown away.

‘Just look at you Miss Khan. You’re smirking!’
And then the faithful, or should I say unfaithful, day came. The house was filled with flowers. Lit up like a castle. You came down, goddess-like in your flowing bridal gown. None of the frilly feminine stuff for you. You wore a graceful green dress with a delicately embroidered white veil. Green and white, the colours of the national flag. Your groom marched in, wearing tribal customs. Guests and dignitaries poured in, drinks flowed, gifts followed.

And then, it was my turn to give you a wedding gift. After all you had given me so much, Gigi. It was the least I could do to return the favour.

*

After the Nikkah, dinner was served in the white marquee set up on the sprawling lawns of your home. You sat smugly on the stage, not quite the demure little bride but not the fearless revolutionary either. Your groom mingled with the guests, drinking scotch after scotch until the echo of his laughter dominated all other sounds. ‘Why not?’ I thought sending Refugee out with yet another tumbler of whiskey, ‘After all it is his wedding day.’

Just before midnight, I went up to the stage with a plate of food for you.

‘Please eat something, Gigi Sahiba,’ I said holding it out to you, ‘You must be starving.’

You were talking to someone and when you saw me you said, ‘Nazo, come here. Meet Pervez Sahib, one of our old party loyalists. He has just been released from jail. Poor man has suffered a lot for democracy. Perhaps you can take him inside and serve him dinner. It is getting cold outside. Please go in, Pervez Sahib, Nazo will take good care of you.’

I looked at the man. He must have been young at some point but right now he looked as if he was born old. His lined face bore traces of torture where cigarette burns had been pressed upon his skin. The nerves around his temples stuck out and his eyes darted from side to side as if any minute now the General’s men might pop out of the bushes and drag him back.
‘Poor man,’ you whispered to me, ‘But for you, he’ll do.’

When you turned back to speak to him, I dropped the plate of food on the train of your white veil. Splashes of gravy smeared the edges and an oily stench stuck up the air.

‘Oh no,’ you stared in horror at the spreading stain.

‘Please forgive me, Gigi Sahiba,’ I said without a hint of regret.

You looked harshly at me.

‘I am sorry. I’ll wash it out, no one will even know.’

‘What do you mean,’ you said pushing me away. ‘You expect me to sit here without a cloth covering my head on my wedding day!’

I offered you mine but you looked horrified.

‘Please Gigi Sahiba,’ I said. ‘Give it to me or the stain will set.’

‘You can’t do anything right, Nazo. You are useless.’

‘Nobody will notice your veil is not on. Not at this hour,’ I insisted as you dabbed at it with a paper napkin. ‘It’s late and people are drinking. Only your close friends are left. No one will mind.’

‘Yes, yes Gigi Sahiba, let the girl clean it,’ Pervez Sahib added in his low shaky voice, ‘The guests have mostly gone. And thankfully none of the journalists are left. You never know whose side they are on.’

Reluctantly you let go of the bridal veil.

‘Five minutes,’ you hissed.

‘Five minutes is all it takes.’

*

Upstairs I stood naked in front of your dressing room mirror. I picked up a gold earring from your dresser and held it against my earlobe.

‘Charming,’ I said the same way you did when someone cracked a joke not to your taste. I put the earrings back and picked up your bangles, watching them slide down my thin wrists to my elbows. Your Chanel no. 5 looked too lonely to be left out so I sprayed it at my reflection then walked through the cloud, like I had seen you do. The red lipstick beckoned next. I drew lines with my inexperienced hands only to look like a child’s
drawing where the colour had seeped over the edges. Lastly I draped your wedding hijab
over my head. I looked in the mirror.

‘Mirror, mirror on the wall. Who’s the loyalist of them all?’

Footsteps sounded outside and I pulled the veil over my face.

Balгоди walked in clutching his bladder and rushed blindly to the toilet. So the
tumbler had the desired effect, I thought with a slow spreading smile. He was staggering
out of the loo when he noticed me. I sat down on the bed and pulled the thin cloth further
down my face. Beneath the veil I wore nothing.

He came close and began lifting the veil but the sight of my bare breasts stopped
him. That was enough. There was no need to uncover the face.

‘Let the wedding night begin,’ he said.

Three thrusts and he slumped over me. The snores began almost immediately.

It was over, in exactly five minutes.

*

You were humming when you came up.

I was scrubbing the gravy stains on your hijab, now caked with dry white semen.

‘Salaam Gigi Sahiba.’

You must have forgotten all about it for you rubbed your eyes when you saw me.

‘Nazo, what are you doing here? Do you even know what time it is?’

‘The thing about time is that it can change anytime.’

‘What nonsense. Now get out.’

‘Yes, Gigi Sahiba,’ I said, the invisible strings tripping my tongue and bowing my
neck. ‘Happy wedding night, Gigi Sahiba.’

You shut the door on my face.

I waited outside till I heard a small stifled scream. Then I walked up to the hall
mirror and draping the wet veil around my head, I told myself it was for your own good. I
warned you. But you went ahead and married a man who thought with his penis.

Your husband slept with me on your wedding night.

Yes Gigi that’s right. I had him first. Now, for the rest of your married life you
would be using my castoff.
   See what he had reduced you to?

*
‘Next you will accuse my client of murdering the china or the pottery…’
‘No. It is far more precious a target than that.’
‘Prey tell.’
‘Your Honour, through my next witness I will prove that this was not Miss Khan’s first assassination attempt on Madam. You see, she had tried to kill her once before. And I’m not talking about the airport dagger...’
They say nothing in life is free. Everything comes at a price.
I say they are right. The cost of revealing your husband’s truth was higher then I had expected.
That night when I slid into bed next to Rahim, he knew something was different. He turned away from me and when I reached out to caress him, he pretended to be asleep. Somewhere hidden in his jaggedly breath, I thought I heard a cry. 
And that is how, when the time came, I knew the child could not be his.

*

The next day, I walked into the house with my heart pounding. What would you do to me? Would you tear me into shreds? Throw me out? Send me to the Jihadists? I tried to imagine what kind of punishment I would be doled out but when I saw you, nothing happened. You ignored me.

You were freezing me out. Or perhaps you were just being your normal self. Had you, I wondered at this point, even noticed what had happened? Was the scream merely spotting a roach in the bathroom? I don’t know if I was deluding myself or just hoping for the best but I decided it was because you didn’t care. Balgodi, for you, was just a stepping-stone to a seat in the Parliament. It’s not like you loved him.

How wrong I was.
‘Your Honour, In the days leading to the General’s death one of the kitchen boys swears he had seen her mixing something in Gigi Sahiba’s food. I’d like to call my next witness, kitchen boy, Mr. Chachar.’

‘Proceed.’

‘Don’t be scared, Chahchar. Now that you are done with the oath, tell me, how old are you?’

‘17 Sir,’

‘Have you been working long at the Shah Shah house?’

‘Since I was 13, Sir.’

‘And you saw just before the elections, Miss Khan, mixing something in Ms. Shah’s food.’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you tell the Cook, Mr. Ali Refugee?’

‘Yes.’

‘And he ignored you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you say it could be poison?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you. Counsel, your witness.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Omar. Now Chachar, what happens when someone is given poison?’

‘They die.’

‘But Madam didn’t?’

‘Uh no. No, she didn’t die.’

‘So do you think it could have been something else like mint or aniseed or chooran? For as far as I remember Madam had terrible morning sickness. Am I right?’

‘Yes, Sir. She was sick everyday.’

‘So could it be that Miss Khan was mixing an indigestion remedy?’

‘I guess.’
'Well there you have it.

'Objection, Your Honour, she could be adding poison in small doses. Maybe it wasn’t morning sickness but slow death!'

'Your Honour, I’m afraid my colleague’s conspiracy theories are becoming outrageous. The truth is if my client wanted to kill Mohtaramma, she would have done so long ago.'

In all the hoopla about your marriage, the General had ceased to be the threat he was. Indeed a bigger worry these days on my mind was your domesticity. So engulfed had you become in playing house that I feared you might just give up politics all together. And it was this fear that led me to do what I did next.

*

Hardly had the excitement of your wedding died down that the news of your pregnancy spread like fire. The General, I thought, must be having the last laugh. Women, he must be thinking, good for running a home but not a country. For a politician I was amazed at your lack of planning. Firstly I couldn’t believe you’d allow that scum bag to come close to you. Secondly could you not have taken precautions? How potent must this man’s sperm be I thought, every time I saw you bend down to vomit. Day after day, night after night, you doubled over, throwing up till your skin turned grey. A time came when, one hand clutching your stomach, the other clasped over your mouth, you dashed to the bathroom in the midst of a political rally. No more meetings, no more strategies, you ordered. All you wanted to do was rest.

She’d be knitting next, I said to Refugee and indeed Balgodi’s next gift to you was not a piece of jewelry but a ball of wool. He threw one at me too but I threw it right back. What did he think I was, a kitten?

*

Meow. Curl. Scratch. If I was a cat, I’d scratch his face off, I thought as I picked up
the woolly strands you had dropped on the carpet that afternoon. You were dozing off in your green rocking chair, one hand on your belly, the other holding a pair of knitting needles. Gently I pulled the needles from your grasp. The stitches came undone. Astonished I looked at the sleek grey metal sticks in my hand. Without the wool, they looked like small steel swords. I pointed one at your belly.

‘Look what he has turned you into?’ I whispered. ‘A silly doting housewife.’

Pointing them accusingly at you, I thought, truly Gigi you have thrashed all my expectations. Whatever else, this content Mother Mary like avatar of yours, was something I never expected. Just then you let out a gentle snore and a soft belch. I shivered. Something had to be done. And as usual it fell on my shoulders.

I leaned closer.

*

Your unborn child was stubborn. Like you, not easily dislodged. I should have known.

After the accident with the knitting needles, when you bled profusely having poked yourself in the belly while sleeping, you gave up knitting all together. You became even more lazy, sitting around doing nothing. Not even listening to the news. All of the General’s latest exploits went unnoticed.

But as they say, necessity is the mother of invention. I tried ripe papaya, which Refugee told me you had to avoid strictly in your diet, but even that could not shift the bastard. One day as you began your second trimester, I managed to set fire to the long trail of your scarf, hoping that you would jump up and down and finally miscarry. But the unborn child was beginning to seem as invincible as the General himself. Perhaps that’s why their destinies turned out so similar.

*

Sometimes life doesn’t go the way we want it to. Like a house of cards, we are forced to watch it all come crashing down. While we standby watching, frozen and
helpless. This was one such time. I could see you throw it all away yet I was powerless to stop you. You neither listened to anyone, nor cared. I wondered if this would blow over but no. You were well into your second trimester and the damned baby was showing no signs of going anywhere but out into this world. I felt sorry for you. All your struggles, your sacrifices, your eight years of exile…all wasted. And for what? A selfish, demanding baby who would cling to you till your proud erect back bent crooked like a sickle, suck you till your beautiful breasts dried up like shriveled raisins and challenge you till your will broke. You were giving up your life Gigi. A life, that was meant for us. You had forgotten your promise Gigi. You were no longer our savior.

You needed a reminder.

*

Confident that you could not possibly campaign and give birth at the same time, the General fixed the date of the elections at the exact time of your confinement. If anything, this should have made you snap out of your domesticated stupor. But that was not to be. You continued to laze around like a bloated mother hen, obsessed with the sight of your own belly. You were not even ashamed to go out in public, waddling like a duck, looking anything but the future leader of our nation.

You were not the only one who’d lost interest in the General’s hide and seek elections. It was your pregnancy that dominated the media more these days. In fact even the uncertainty of the election was drowned by it. Instead of ‘will he or won’t he call the elections’, the question on people’s lips was, ‘Will she or won’t she quit after motherhood?’ It was hard enough for people to digest that a woman was vying for the top position but a mother-to-be, out of the question.

Only those close to you knew that even if you did contest, your chances of being elected were slim. You were hardly able to move, let alone campaign. Unless, of course, it was to do some more shopping for the baby.

Pregnancy had loosened the nuts and bolts in your brain. You were no longer capable of deciding your own good or bad. You spent hours reading ‘What to expect when expecting’ books when you should have been lobbying. Even the women’s
education cause didn’t light a spark in your eyes anymore. You’d ask me turn them back from the door, not even bothering with false promises of a fight on winning a seat. At first I was angry at your behavior, but now I began to pity you. After all it wasn’t your fault. Your body was going through a change. It was bound to affect your mind. But then one night I had thought: I was still the same. I hadn’t changed my stance on the General and his jihad. So why was I just standing there, watching you throw it all away. I had to do something. But what?

The answer to that came, from all people, your husband.

*

Once again the women’s group came knocking on your door and once again you were too weak and bloated to meet them. I slammed the door angrily, the disappointed faces etched in my mind. What kind of an example were you setting for them, that it’s okay to give up everything you’ve struggled for after you get married, that a woman’s rightful place is at home, delivering, producing, I slammed my fist on the table.

Just then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

It was your husband. He looked startled when I turned around.

‘How many times have I told you not to wear her clothes. Don’t you have any of your own?’

I could feel the blood pounding in my head at the sight of this man who’d turned you into the grass-grazing cow you had become.

‘Surely you know that she can hardly get out of bed these days,’ I said. ‘She is expecting you know. Expecting your child.’

Mistaking my anger for jealousy, he waved his hand dismissively and said, ‘Bring my tea.’

I turned to go.

‘And cut your hair short or something,’ he murmured. ‘You look just like her from the back. It’s disconcerting.’

Of course, I thought. That’s it.
Since the day of your tainted wedding night, I had been wondering whether you knew or not. I did not mean to humiliate you. I wanted to protect you, Gigi. I wondered now if your husband had noticed the difference when he finally made love to you. Probably he was too drunk to see his virgin bride had been replaced that night. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder if you knew. If you did, you hid it well. You always were so full of pride.

But the question was, if your own husband could mistake me for you…then why couldn’t someone else?

I called a meeting.

* 

Yes, Gigi you heard me right. I, your illiterate servant girl, called a meeting of the party big wigs. While you were busying playing house, I was setting up shop. The flag of Shah’s was not going to fly half mast just because your attention was diverted. Not as long as I was alive.

And so I began to plan. I made appointments, drew up agendas, set up meetings. You laugh, Gigi, but after all those years of rolling out meetings for you, I knew by now how to organize one for myself. Except I didn’t say it was for me. Why would anyone listen to me?

And you were right, Pervez Sahib did do it for me. But not in the way you would have liked him to. You raise your eyebrows, Gigi, but it was through Pervez Sahib that I operated. He was half deaf and half blind as it is and, in his zeal to please you, rarely questioned your orders. Yes, your orders. You may think you are as inimitable as your name suggests, but don’t forget, Gigi, God made each creature in pairs.
‘Impossible! Mr. Omar is suggesting that Miss Khan impersonated Madam! Am I the only one in thinking that this as ridiculous as it’s impossible?’

‘But that’s just the point! Miss Khan can make the impossible seem possible. She is as dangerous as she is clever!’

‘Mr. Omar’s imagination needs reining in, Your Honour. Members of Gigi Sahiba’s party are outraged at the suggestion. Does Mr. Omar take them for fools? Or will he accuse them of lying as well?’
How did I get away with it? *You are one to ask.* But if you insist I will tell you.

It helped that you hardly ever answered your phone those days. Even if anyone had any doubts they were unable to discuss them with you. Mostly I let the men talk while I sat quietly in a corner pleading a headache, your trademark white hijab wrapped closely around my face. At other times when I wanted to be involved in the discussions, I sat holding a large brick like phone you called the Cordless. ‘Gigi is listening through conference call,’ I would say making up a story about you being in a meeting with the American Ambassador or someone equally unquestionable. It was enough for them that their leader was present in spirit, if not in flesh. For you must have heard of the old Mughal strategy, ‘Kill the commander and the army’s morale dies with him’.

And the General, as you know, was a student of history.

*

But it didn’t stop there. I wasn’t just trying to keep up your party’s dying morale. I was out for victory. Whatever it took, however it took, whoever it took. I wanted you to win, Gigi. I wanted it so badly that nothing seemed too big a price.

Not even murder.

*

I made inquiries and when the time came I went to see the Caretaker myself. I wore the white hijab and your huge black Channel shades. I held myself straight with one arm crossed over my chest like you. I made sure to cover my face well. No names were exchanged. Only money changed hands for a sheaf of papers. It was the General’s itinerary, for his next round of meetings with the Americans.

By now I knew you would do nothing, even if I handed the PMship to you on a platter of gold. You just weren’t in that state of mind right now. But I knew that your husband was not such a patient man. He had hoped that the marriage would yield more
than just an idealist wife. If I’m not mistaken his eyes were on the end game. He wanted your power.

Nothing wrong with that, I told myself one night, as I handed a confidential document over to him. At least he too wanted to see you Prime Minister. And if he got in the way later, he could always be dealt with.

I underestimated him.

But that’s another story. For now, he played the dumb husband to perfection. I had to turn it right side up in his hands before explaining the power of the paper he held.

‘The General’s schedule,’ I said trying to keep the excitement in my voice down.

‘And the password for the Pak One plane.’

He stared at me, then at the paper. I could almost see the stream of questions running through his mind like the strip at the bottom of a news channel.

‘I have confirmed information that the Big Brother is willing to sacrifice one of their own. If that’s what it takes.’

Balgodi looked as if he would explode with disbelief. Scratching his head he launched into a tirade, ‘How did I get this information? Why had I given it to him and not to Gigi? Was I trying to fool him? Implicate him? Was it really genuine? What did I want in return?’

‘He killed my family,’ I said in reply to his bombardment. ‘I want him dead.’

When it finally sank in, he reached for the telephone and dialed furtively. ‘Aamir,’ he said, ‘a crate of our finest mangoes. Make sure it gets on this military flight from Karachi to Islamabad. I will send details of the passcode. And yes, the time has come to add the special ingredient. Make sure the mangoes are ripe. Check each one individually. Arre, don’t ask why. Think of it as a dying man’s last wish. People say he loves mangoes.’

*

That night after all the work had been done, I crept into your room. You were lying on the bed reading one of your musty old novels. ‘Crime and Punishment,’ the title read. I tried not to think about the contents.
‘Gigi, shall I massage your feet?’ I asked, wiping my hands on the edge of my hijab.

You raised your eyebrows but said nothing.

‘They look swollen,’ I said reaching for the bottle of oil on the dresser.

‘Ok but heat the oil first.’

I began to rub the warm oil into the soles of your feet. I could see your face relax and your eyelids droop.

‘Gigi,’ I said, ‘Won’t you consider making me your Personal Assistant again? I really miss all the party politics, the debates and discussions, the planning and campaigning. I like working in the house but being in the office is something else. I…’

‘Enough.’ You exhaled a long slow breath. Then peering at me over the book you said, ‘Nazo, I think you should also settle down now. Find some nice boy and get married.’

My hands shook and few drops of the hot oil dropped on my wrist. Pain seared through me, not so much from the burn but from your words. I wondered if all my efforts would go in vain.

*
‘Miss Khan where were you on the morning of 17th January 1988?
‘Sir, do you remember what you ate for breakfast day before yesterday?’
‘Excuse me?’
‘Sir, what I’m saying is that if you can’t remember what happened two days ago, how do you expect me to remember what I was doing on a particular morning years ago.’

‘Ah! Miss Khan, they don’t call you smart for no reason. Please remember that it is you in the dock and not me. Let’s leave the questions to me and answers to you.’

‘Objection, Your Honour, my client Miss Khan was trying to make a point. Mr. Omar is being patronizing.’

‘Overruled.’

‘Thank you, Your Honour, you see the reason why I think Miss Khan should remember the morning is because it was not like any other. It was the morning of General’s plane crash. It was the day she committed her first murder.’
The crash, when it happened was powerful enough to bring the entire nation to a standstill. Of course it did not stop the General’s Army colleagues from rushing to Islamabad where the vacant hub of power was. They flew off, even as the General lay burning to death in the flames of the invincible Pak One plane. No one knew how the US intelligence had been infiltrated. How did anyone know the General would be flying on this plane and not his usual eagle? There were no answers. All the clues had been burned. The only thing that remained uncharred were a few blackened mangoes that fell into the hills from the force of the explosion.

Villagers who found them said they tasted good enough to die for.

*

Like the sleeping beauty who wakes up to a kiss or the changeling who changes into a swan, you should at this point have reclaimed your rightful place too. This is where the story of your struggle should have had its happy ending. But instead, it was the beginning of the end.

The Jihadists had run to the hills and while the entire nation was rejoicing the General’s death, you alone were mourning. I entered the house expecting you screaming with joy, instead I found you in tears. You sat alone, forlorn and tired, dressed in a window’s black. Your hands were stretched out in front of you, your palms facing the sky.

‘Gigi Sahiba?’

I rushed over to you.

‘Dead.... Dead.’

‘Yes he’s dead! Isn’t that fantastic? Now nothing can stop you from your destiny.’

You slapped me hard across the cheek.

I had heard of people losing their mind to shock and I wondered if this was one of those moments. After all you had got your life long wish. The General was dead. The path to OZ was clear.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said pressing my palm against my cheek. ‘It’s alright. Everything
will be alright now.’

You began to shake, your whole body shivering, your hands clenching and unclenching.

I dropped to my knees.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said as gently as I could. I hadn’t prayed in a long time but I found myself on my knees. And I would have crossed all boundaries too had you not pointed to your stomach.

‘Oh,’ I said realizing that you were mourning another death. The death of someone who had not even entered the world.

Could God be so kind? I wondered, unable to believe that both birds had been killed with one stone. Could it really be true? Now, nothing could stop you. Except, of course, your own self. So many times you had been your own worst enemy. Still, I consoled myself, a known danger is better than an unknown one.

But how to make you realize? I wanted so much right then to make you see what a good hand fate had dealt you. But would you listen? No! You would think that I was trying to sabotage your happiness, keeping you away from the domestic bliss you seemed to crave so suddenly. So many times in these past few days I had caught you talking to your dead father’s photograph. ‘I will be just like you,’ I would hear you say. ‘I’ll have a house full of happy children and lead the nation as well.’ You fool! I wanted to shout at you. He was a man. He could have had ten wives and a hundred children, yet he’d be able to step out of the house each morning to work and not think once about them. A woman was different. A woman became bound to her child and stayed bound even after the umbilical cord was cut. And even if she did manage to free herself the world wouldn’t let her forget that her place was back home. Did you really not see how lucky you were as a woman to have got this far?

I shook my head. Already it had taken years for the public to accept you as a serious contender. Till now you were living off your father’s legacy, but for how much longer? A daughter avenging her father’s murderers can be inspiring. But a mother leaving her child to lead a country of men was an unimaginable proposition. The public would have to open their mouths very wide and shut their eyes very tight to swallow this, Jihadists or no Jihadists. And if by some miracle they did consider you their leader, how
the hell, would you go campaigning in your condition? You’d be nine months pregnant to
the dot when the polls took place. You’d probably be delivering on the actual day of
election. How would you get sworn in? With an infant suckling at your breast? A fat,
swollen, sleepless woman vowing to lead the country. Seriously, Gigi?

No, Gigi Jan, tears had blinded you. But thankfully, my eyes were still clear.
The baby was gone. I just had to make you realize what a good thing this was. You
were free now. Truly free. Free of the General who wouldn’t let you fly, free of the child
who had bound you down. Truly, you were free to soar.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I began, but you hushed me with the wave of your hand.
‘Please Nazo, don’t.’
‘Gigi Sahiba, it was God’s will. Perhaps He had other plans for you. Look....’
You pushed me away. I staggered but caught myself from falling.
‘Please Gigi Sahiba, listen to me.’
You began to cry, your body heaving with each sob.
‘My child, my baby, my little baby...’
How could I possibly bring up the General’s death at this point?
But still, I tried.
‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said softly, ‘Do you know what else happened today?
‘I don’t care, Nazo. I don’t care if the General blew to bits. All I care about is that
my baby left me.’

You hunched up again then suddenly sat up.
‘Balgodi! I didn’t even think about him. Poor man, he will be so heartbroken.’
I didn’t have the heart to tell you that he was busy raising toasts at the club.
And then it struck me. You really loved this child. You wanted him. But could you
truly not see how that would take you away from us? Your people? Weren’t we your
children too? But you were in no mood to listen. You sat there bawling, weeping like a
child whose favourite toy had broken

It was unreal, sentimental and overdone.

After a few minutes had passed I could stand it no longer. I walked up to your
rocking chair and held it still. Bringing my face as close to yours as I respectfully could, I
whispered, ‘Open your eyes, Gigi Sahiba. You are no longer a mother to be, but you still
have other duties to fulfill. You have a nation to lead. Elections to win. Everything you have worked for is yours. There is nothing in your way anymore. No one can stop you.’

Except you yourself.

You sat stone still, eyes scrunched up like a pigeon whishing away the cat, lips sealed and ears blocked. You reminded me of Gandhi’s monkeys. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil…

And then I had a thought. Perhaps it was me who had been the monkey all along. Was I not a fool to have seen this sooner?

The truth was before me. This is what you really wanted! You wanted to have a child. You wanted to be a leader and a wife and a homemaker… You really thought you could have it all. I no longer envied you, Gigi. I pitied you. I suppose a small amount of delusion is necessary to dream big but with a feudal husband like yours, you were in denial. Your heart would always be stuck in the child and all sorts of domestic responsibilities would land upon your shoulders. You would be tired, depressed, neither here nor there. You would never have it all. Suddenly being elected the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan seemed much more plausible than you and Balgodi being a happy family.

Slowly I rose to my feet and made my way to the door. If this is what you wanted, then this is what you would get. But my feet felt leaden. I remembered the saying, if you love someone let them go. If they come back they are yours and if they don’t, they never were. I placed my hand on the doorknob. Truly Gigi, I tried to walk away.

But I couldn’t. I loved you much too much for that.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said turning around slowly. ‘Have you told anyone yet?’

‘Balgodi’s phone is off.’

‘I mean a doctor?’

‘Phone lines are jammed because of the blast. Perhaps you should go to Dr. Jami’s clinic and fetch him.’

‘But the bleeding has stopped.’

‘Yes Nazo, but there could be complications. And the baby, I mean the fetus. It fell out…in the toilet… I mean I delivered…’ you broke down again.

‘Gigi Sahiba, please. Get a hold of yourself. Listen to me, Gigi Sahiba.’
I walked quickly back to you and pressing your shoulders said, ‘Gigi Sahiba, you must not tell anyone. Please! Not on the same day as the General’s crash. The media will hound you. They will say you killed your own child to contest elections. They’ll call you a Witch, a Dyan, a killer! The Jihadist will use it as propaganda. You have no idea how ruthless they can be. Wait a few days. Please.’

I could hear the slow creaking of the chair as it finally rocked to a stop. You wrapped your arms around yourself and shivered. The weight of my words sunk in.

‘Do you understand, Gigi Sahiba?’

You looked so helpless, so small and sad at that moment that I almost backed off. But then I reminded myself, at least one of us had to stay strong.

A low moan, almost like a wild animal’s howl escaped your mouth. ‘Nazo,’ you began to cry. ‘Just go away, Nazo. Let me mourn my child. My baby, my poor…’

‘It’s the truth, Gigi Sahiba. They’ll say you killed it.’

Your whole body shook as you cried even harder.

‘Gigi Sahiba, you have to listen to me. You’ve got to be prepared for the worst.’

‘What should I do?’ you whispered between the tears.

‘I know a woman who can help you. Very discreet.’

You stared unblinkingly at some faraway spot. At least the sobbing had ceased.

‘I will fetch her,’ I said without waiting for an answer. ‘She doesn’t live far from here. But before I go, where is the…’

I couldn’t bring myself to say baby and you couldn’t bring yourself to say dead.

In the end I followed the trail of blood to the toilet. Inside, in the toilet bowl I saw a tiny baby, no bigger then my palm. Its fists were curled, its head bigger then its entire body, floating in a pool of red.

It was a sight I would never forget.

*

The woman came. Nearly ninety she moved slowly and thankfully her eyes were too weak to recognize your face.

‘In my business,’ the old midwife murmured, ‘we only recognize vaginas.’
I would have laughed but she sent me off to bury the…thing. I couldn’t arrange a funeral or a burial in a graveyard, yet I knew I couldn’t dispose of it any other way. The wild dogs and the stray cats would find it and with my luck, leave it at your doorstep.

In the end, I buried it outside my bedroom window. It was the only place that could not be overlooked by the rest of the house. It was a shallow grave, yet, when I threw the first fistful of sand I felt as if the thing’s eyes flickered opened. I laughed at my imagination. What would it say if it came alive, I wondered. Probably accuse me of having wished it to death. But this time, I swear I had nothing to do with it. You still don’t believe me do you? I suppose my story is a bit like the boy who cried wolf.

Except in your eyes, I am the wolf.

*

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‘Mr. Omar, my client has organized many things for Madam Gigi Shah, but murder is not one of them. Anyone can confirm her loyalty and her dedication to Madam. In fact many times, she had been recorded as expressing her deep undying love for her.’

‘Well, as they say, Counsel, a foolish friend is worse than an enemy.’

My Lord, Mr. Omar’s accusations get wilder and wilder. He is wasting court’s time!’

‘I apologize. What I meant was that all was not well between them. Perhaps that’s why Gigi was so angry with Miss Khan that she slapped her. Do you remember, Miss Khan? It was the night you fainted. What happened between you two that night?’
When I first found out, I thought I would lose my mind. And that is the worst thing that can happen to me. I can lose anything but I can’t afford to lose my mind. My mind is all I have, you see. Money, love, health, life, it all happens in the mind. If you can control your mind, then you can do anything, I always say. But you never were interested in my views. Mind games, you called it.

‘If you don’t mind,’ I said knocking on your door, barely a week after the accident, ‘Could I speak to you in private?’

You were sitting in the same rocking chair in which I had found you a few days earlier. You wore the same mourning black. The edges still caked with dried blood. It was as if you hadn’t moved at all. At first, your inertia after the miscarriage made me anxious. It was disconcerting to see you sitting like a Miss Havisham…yes Gigi, I do occasionally read the books you leave lying around. I like to know what it is that absorbs you so thoroughly for hours. But I digress. What I was saying was that initially your motionless state, your lasting silences made me uneasy, and my unease grew to the point where it became an affliction. I would feel waves of nausea ride up my throat every time I saw you. But gradually I began to understand that although you were sad, you were content in your sadness. It was as if you had accepted your fate and were mulling over it. As if you had said everything there was to say…I only hoped you came back to your senses in time for elections. It would be horrible to see someone else reap the rewards of your hardwork. Someone, like your husband, I feared.

Last few days the papers had been full of stories, probably planted by your husband, about how he should be contesting should the elections go ahead. And instead of refuting the rumours he had been fuelling them with statements like, ‘I will do my best to stand by my poor pregnant wife. It’s the least I can do for her in this weakened state.’ I wasn’t sure if you were unaware or unaffected. In your statute like state, hardly anything seemed to matter.

Yesterday was no different. I brought you your tea, asked if you wanted to see the papers, make any calls, but you shook your head and dismissed me with a wave of your hand. Once again I felt uneasy. I blamed it on your inertia.
One minute I was putting down your tray, the next my head was spinning. As the
say, what goes around, comes around.

It was in the kitchen, that Refugee found me retching my guts out. He placed a
hand on my back and rubbed gently. ‘Don’t mind, Nazo,’ he said, ‘but you seem just like
Gigi Sahiba when she was expecting. Twelve times a day I found her bent over, puking.’

I sat up straight. On the outside I appeared impatient, brushing him aside as if I had
some very important work to do. Inside I was trying to calculate how long it had been.
Only after I was sure, did I knock on your door.

*

‘I’m pregnant,’ I said as soon as I entered.

A silence closed in on us. For a minute I thought not even this would snap you out
of your self imposed vow of silence. And then you began to laugh. It was all I could do to
hold myself back. I wanted to hug you, to know that you were still alive, still cared, still
had a bit of life left in you. But I did nothing. I just stood there staring taking it in. It was
the first time since the things death that you had displayed anything other than grief. You
laughed and you laughed and when you stopped laughing you got up and struck me. I
dint flinch. Grabbing my hair you pushed me hard. I stayed silent.

‘So that is why you are here. To gloat.’

‘It’s your husband’s child, Gigi Sahiba.’

‘Lies.’

You slapped me again. This time harder than before.

‘I would have expected a better story from you, Nazo.’

By now you had found out that Balgodi had a thing for other women, me being one
of them. Of course you blamed it on yourself, having shut him out after the incident you
told yourself it was his way of dealing with sorrow. I didn’t have the heart to tell you that
this had always been his way.

Your eyes moistened and a single tear began its descend. And then just as suddenly
your neck stiffened and your jaw tightened.

‘You think you can take my place?’ you shouted. ‘You two bit whore. So this is
what it’s about. This is why you didn’t want me to tell anyone about the miscarriage. And what a fool I am to trust you again. After everything that happened. All this time you were making a play for my husband. How dare you? You bitch. You fucking bitch. Get out!’

‘I would never. Please listen…’

You brought your face so close to mine that I was breathing your breath.

‘Get out of my house. Now.’

‘Gigi…’

‘Right now.’

‘I was forced.’

You halted. Just for a second but it was enough for me.

‘You have to believe me, Gigi Sahiba.’

‘You lied to me before and you’re lying to me again.’

‘Lying is only easy the first time.’

You were trembling now, tiny bits of spittle gathering at the corner of your mouth.

‘Get out, Nazo.’

I squatted down. I bowed my head and wiped the dribble off your feet with my hijab.

‘Gigi, please, just listen to me. Just this once.’

You did not move away.

‘I know now how hard it is to keep up a lie. Gigi. But the truth…the truth is only hard the first time. It takes courage to speak the truth, but after that, it is easy to say it over and over again.’

I stood up and placed your hand on my belly.

‘He came in on your wedding night. He was drunk and he mistook me for you…The child is his.’

You sank down to your knees. Your entire body shook. I don’t know why but seeing you crumpled like that made me feel as if I had lost everything. I didn’t mean to bring you down. All I wanted was for you to fight back. To see what a waste of time this pretend marriage of yours was. I wanted you to be aware of getting pregnant again but instead you were breaking apart. I had to do something. I had to make you hate me again.
Anger, after all, was adrenaline.

* 

You sent for me early the next day. I walked in expecting to find you hunched and huddled, half curled into yourself like a frightened mouse mourning your loss and my gain. Instead you were sitting up peeling an apple.

‘Fruit, Nazo?’ you offered.

I looked at the slice you were holding out and felt a wave of nausea ride up. I gripped my stomach and ran to the bin. It was a good five minutes before I was able to stand in front of you. You looked at my grey face, my trembling hands and started to laugh.

Instead of bile, I now felt anger rise up my throat. ‘It may be funny for you, Gigi,’ I placed my hand on my belly, ‘but what of this bastard in my stomach?’

You stopped laughing.

‘This Harami growing inside me. If Soldier Rahim was to find out…He’d never marry me.’

‘But how would he find out,’ your face was serious as you looked me in the eye.

‘Are you suggesting, I pretend the child is his.’

‘Look I know that you sleep around so please don’t try to play the virgin card with me. Everyone’s been talking about Rahim staying all night in your room. Why do you think I’ve been telling you to settle down? I don’t understand why you don’t just marry him.’

‘Because I don’t want to be just a wife,’ I replied but the sarcasm was lost on you.

‘Wife, whore whatever you want to be that’s your problem. The question now is what you are going to do with this child?’ you pointed at my belly with the fruit knife you were holding. A shiver ran through my spine.

‘Get rid of it,’ I said.

‘Then why tell me?’

I had to give it to you. When you wanted you could move like a chess pawn determined to reach the other side of the board to become Queen.
‘So,’ there was a briskness to your voice as you said, ‘you claim, he slept with you and now you are carrying his child. And you had no knowledge of this when you told me to stay quiet about my loss?’

‘Swear on my life, Gigi Sahiba.’

A slow smile began to spread across your face and I felt the familiar dull ache pulling at my heart. This was no ordinary smile. It was the calm before the storm.

‘Don’t get rid of it,’ you said.

You always were quick to see the loss and gains of a situation and I was no other. Just a situation that had to be dealt with.

‘Stay there.’

The words had barely left your mouth when you snapped into motion like a clockwork toy. First you went into the bathroom and took a long hot shower. When you reappeared you were dressed in your trademark white hijab and a long green dress over white tights. It was if you had washed off everything that had happened in the last 30 days. If your belly wasn’t still soft and protruding I would have thought I had imagined the pregnancy.

‘Bring me my diary.’

You walked up to the telephone but your hand hovered over the receiver. You turned to look at me and asked in a low hesitant voice, ‘Are you sure it is his? If you cross me on this one, Nazo, I swear I’ll kill you.’

I held your gaze. And for a second I thought I saw the old camaraderie we had once shared. I saw your hand quiver, the nerves on the back stand up green. I saw your fingers twitching, felt the vibrations in your body, a heat emanating from your insides. And then I saw through you. I saw the wheels in your brain turning, the sentences forming, the numbers clicking and then it was as if a curtain had dropped across the stage. There was only darkness. Complete and utter darkness.

When I opened my eyes again I found myself lying on the floor.

*
'What of the fact that Miss Khan put her own political aspirations on hold to raise Madam Gigi’s children?’

‘Ha! Next my fellow counsel will say she give birth to them too!’
The same old midwife was summoned. She declared me 5 months pregnant.

‘What?’ Both you and I shouted in unison.

‘How could anyone get this far without having any symptoms?’ you asked.

I told myself that this was my punishment for spoiling your wedding night. Though I was no believer of crime and consequence, even I could see the connection here. Once again I was touched by the fact that your heart was pure. For only those who believed, got justice.

Just then you pulled out a folded hundred Rupee note from one of your books and handed it to the old woman. I noticed it was the same book. Crime and Punishment- the letters seemed to mock. Again. I wondered if this was a sign.

But this was no time to mull over your fat yellowing novels. I pushed the toothless crone aside and asked, ‘I can’t have a child. I’m not even married.’

You grabbed my arm and turned me around.

‘Since when did that stop you, Nazo?’

I felt my face grow hot. You had known all along. But what you didn’t know was I did it for you. Did you really think I wanted that filthy, playboy husband of yours? But as the saying goes, you show them God but you can’t make them believe. There was no point in trying to explain.

‘You’re having this baby. And that’s final.’

‘But why do you want me to keep it?’ I said my voice rising. ‘Why should I? I can’t do this, Gigi. Not even out of loyalty. Surely you know the life of an unwedded mother in this society. If I live that is. With the General’s Hudood law still in place, I’d be stoned to death before I even give birth.’

‘I will bring up the child. As mine.’

I stood there silent. So this what it was all about.

‘Don’t pretend to be surprised, Nazo. You’re not that good an actress.’

I felt my cheeks grow hot. How could I tell you I never planned this. I who thought of motherhood as nothing but a shackle around a woman’s ankle. This was God’s curse on me for wishing your child ill. But surely I deserved a lesser punishment than this.

Intention is not the same as action.
‘Why not just hand me to the moral police. I’ll be out of your way for good.’

‘Oh no Nazo, my dear. I couldn’t possibly do that.’

So you did care after all.

But I had to hear it from you.

‘Why? I said, when I finally found my voice again. ‘Why would you do such a thing for me?’

‘Some things, Nazo, are best revealed when the time comes.’

*
This time was different. People were unafraid. They ran out of their houses to greet you as we toured village after village in your open top jeep. The General’s death had changed everything. No longer was the fear of the Jihadists clamping their voices. They cheered as you drove past and in return you waved back. You stood for hours on your swollen feet. People marveled at your stamina.

‘Not bad for a pregnant woman,’ I heard some men snigger. But you didn’t care. The road to democracy was open and you were busy making your way up.

Your energy was unrivalled, your enthusiasm inextinguishable. The elections were in the bag, of that I was sure. Everywhere you went people rushed out to greet you, ‘Our saviour, Gigi Shah! The harbinger of Democracy! Elections! Over thrower of Jihadists! Long live Shahs!’

I watched the crowds surround you, chanting your name, shouting slogans to your success, promising their support, and I thought this is it. This is what you wanted. This is where you belonged.

*I was mistaken.*

* * *

Everyday there were more and more visitors at your door. Old Jihadists changing allegiance, smaller politicians looking for a party ticket, people pledging support and women’s groups with a list of the General’s draconian laws against women they couldn’t wait for you to repeal. Nobody went disappointed from your door. You assured them all that once you came to power you would put everything right. As the political support around you grew, the possibility of a woman PM began to seem realistic. I was thrilled.

But your popularity was not the only thing that was growing with alarming speed. The wrong child grew and grew inside me until I felt my skin could stretch no more. I wore loose fitting clothes, stayed away from the communal bathrooms and cut off all contact with Soldier Rahim. At first I missed him. Sometimes at night I would stretch out my hand on the bare mattress beside me and feel the emptiness of the cold bed sheet creep up my skin. But that soon faded away once you suggested I sleep in your room. On
the floor of course but never the less, to be in the same room as you, to breathe the same air, to dream the same dreams, what more could I ask for?

Balgodi protested. Not liking the idea of me being in the same room with you, now that he had seen how useful I could be, he played the servant card. ‘You can’t have a servant sleep in the room!’ he shouted.

‘You don’t want anymore scares do you?’ you pouted. ‘The slightest of intimacy could cause me to miscarry. Like I almost did last time. I can’t sleep with you and I can’t sleep alone. What if I needed help at night?’

Like a petulant child, he persisted, ‘You need me more then ever now, my darling! Let me be with you night and day.’

‘No,’ you said. ‘With the elections so close, I need my rest. Besides, the doctor has said too much excitement can cause the baby to stop moving. And you know darling, how excited I get when you are close to me.’

Dumb as he could be I never expected him to give in this easy. But then again I have been wrong about worse things.

‘Anything for my unborn child’s health!’ he said, slobbering kisses all over your hand, no hint of the elections I noticed. Tears sprang from his eyes as he played the dumb husband to perfection. ‘Give me a son! Give me an heir,’ he whispered.

Such melodrama, I thought, the man should have been an actor. He would have surely fetched Pakistan her first Oscar. But you were no less. You batted your lashes at him and I watched as he succumbed. You handed him his pillow.

I moved in mine.

*

From then on it was easy to get involved in your day-to-day activities. I wondered briefly if Balgodi had gone along with the charade because like me he too wanted to see you in power, albeit for different reasons.

Watching you both, I often wondered, who was making a fool out of whom?

But soon things took off and there was no more time to ponders about motives. Once again your passion for democracy returned. Once again I became indispensable to
you. Once again our story began where it had left off.

* 

Every now and then, we would summon the near blind midwife to do a check up or should I say check in, on me. She would coarsely feel my belly, poke her knobbly fingers up my vagina and wail, ‘The child is too small! It’s not growing properly. You must take her to the big hospital. Take her to the city!’

‘This is the city, you old bat,’ I would remind her but she would crone on and on about how the British were doing wonders to develop Kolachi.

‘They’ve even put pukka roads in our little town,’ she’d say, her cataract-ridden eyes widening with disbelief.

‘The little town is now a sprawling city of 10 million people,’ I’d tell her but she would laugh as if I had cracked a big joke.

‘It’s better this way,’ you’d say handing a hundred rupee note to the senile old woman.

What were you thinking, Gigi? I’d shudder at the thought of delivering in the old lady’s trembling hands. She’ll kill me, and the child both, I would think. Many a times, I came close to voicing my fears but stopped midsentence wondering, if indeed, that was the plan.

*
‘I can see you hesitating. What is it? There is something you are not telling us. A secret perhaps…what are you holding back, Miss Khan?’

‘Some things must be held back. Should be held back, Omar Sir. With time those unspoken words and secrets become like the air we inhale. Totally unnoticed but wholly necessary.’
Time passed. The secret grew.

‘Don’t let me down,’ you’d say every time you’d catch me undoing the bandages I tied around my stomach to hide the pregnancy.

I had come this far for you, Gigi, I wasn’t going to stop now. I wasn’t going to abandon you like that two-cent husband of yours, who sat around drinking and seducing young maids in your own home. All in the name of men’s needs. Needs, my right foot!

And then the day came. The day of choice. Of right and wrong. Of endings and beginnings. The day began like any other day. We left the house early in the morning in your roofless jeep on the road to the Interior. People lined both sides of the road beckoning you, cheering you and urging you to visit their villages.

‘Come and see how we live,’ an old man shouted.

‘We have no medicine, we have no electricity.’

‘No drinking water,’ another voice called out.

‘Give us medicine,’ more voices shouted.

You waved to them and shouted back, ‘The days of darkness are over. We will bring light to you. I will complete what my father started. Vote for Shah and soon there will be food, shelter and clothing for every Pakistani. We are here to serve not to rule!’

A loud cheer went up at this reminder of your father’s slogan.

‘Roti, Kapra Aur Makkan,’ ‘Food, Clothing and Shelter,’ the crowds cheered as your jeep travelled slowly down the crowded highway. By the time we reached the first village, it was nearly lunchtime. As soon as we stepped out, a crowd of women gathered around us. The pawed at you, like animals, I thought. There faces were sun burnt, their skin coarse and their touch rough. But you didn’t back away. Instead you reached out and shook their hands.

A filthy little child came up to you and tugged at your shirt. To my surprise you picked her up and planted a kiss on her tear stained cheeks.

‘Do you go to school?’ you asked, looking around for the mother.

A chorus of giggles erupted.

The women looked at you, then at each other. They burst into laughter.

‘There are no schools here, Gigi Sahiba,’ one of the giggling women replied.
You looked angry and once again I was amazed at how aloof your idealism had made you.

‘Why? Why are there no schools here? It’s because the Jihadists don’t want you to study. They don’t want you to teach your children. They want you to remain poor and uneducated. But you know what? I will build schools. I will provide education for your daughters. I will bring change.’

The women looked uncomfortable and the one who had been speaking to you put the corner of her veil in her mouth, chewing it nervously. An old woman next to her said, ‘Gigi Sahiba, you are from the city. We village women are born to work in the fields, die in childbirth, that is our fate.’

‘Yes, yes,’ another old lady echoed, ‘It’s written in our kismet. It is our fate.’

‘Then change your kismet,’ you said. ‘Write your own fate.’ You stood up pulling yourself up to your entire 5 feet 8 inches stature. You looked down at the skinny, malnutritioned women scattered around your feet and said, ‘Iqbal said, ‘Build yourself so high that even god asks your will before writing your fate. Education will build you up. You can change your kismet, decide your own destiny, write your own fate!’

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I pulled you aside and whispered, ‘These old women can’t even write their own name, how can they write their fate?’

You gave me that look you did when I stated something practical which, of course, did not fit in at all with your idealism.

Rolling your eyes you said, ‘I didn’t mean literally, Nazo!’ You shook me off and started telling the women about the need to study again. ‘You must learn to read and write. You must teach your children. They in turn must pass it on to their children. That’s how change will come.’

As you spoke I could see the dense fog in the women’s eyes lifting. Although I was sure they’d never be allowed to step out of their miserable mud houses let alone be allowed to go to school, for a moment their eyes showed a glimmer of hope.

‘Education, Nazo, education is the key,’ you said as we walked back to the jeep. ‘It’s the best weapons we have. I’ll build hundreds of schools. I’ll…’

And then you tripped.

Your shalwar cloth had snagged on a nail making you fall on the hard ground. A
sharp cry escaped from your lips and you cried out in pain. The villagers rushed to your aid. They carried you to the nearest hut and put ice on your back.

‘The baby will come soon now,’ one of the women said.

‘A fall can induce early labour,’ another remarked.

They all nodded gravely. You tried to stand but your ankle couldn’t take the weight and you cried out in pain. The women mistook it for labour.

‘Anytime now!’ they cried.

Perhaps this was the news the boys in Islamabad were waiting for. Soon as Caretaker Army Generals heard the rumours of your confinement, they moved the date of elections closer. We had barely made it back to the city when we heard the elections were taking place the day after.

‘There is no time to lose,’ you said. ‘There is work to be done,’ you stood up abruptly but your ankle gave way. You collapsed back down. Desperate, you called a doctor who although did not dispense any medicine, managed to inform the press that you were not in labour.

‘A mere sprain,’ he said and Splat! It was splashed all over the papers.

‘False alarm, fake labour, Gigi Sahiba to not give birth’ ‘Electioneers, here she comes!’ ‘Nothing can stop Our Lady of Shah now!’ All sorts of jazzed up versions danced on the headlines the next day.

But the question, now, was would the elections still go ahead?

Of course not. The minute it became apparent that you were not all that indisposed, the polls were called off. ‘Till an indeterminable time,’ the notice from the Election Commission read. In other words, there was no hurry. The Army could now look for another candidate to stand against you, at leisure. And till they found the guy who could take you on, democracy could wait.

As expected, you were furious.

*

But anger never did slow you down. If anything, it built you up. ‘As if the General was not enough! Now the Army wants to play games! What are they playing at anyway?’
Do they really think they can delay democracy once again? Have they fucking learnt nothing from the General’s 10 year rule? Do they want to bring back the jihadists? Those fuckers! Anything but a woman! Those Khaki bastards!’ You raged and raved and then finally when you calmed down, you turned on me.

‘The baby must come now. I can’t wait any longer. If that’s what it takes to make the polls happen, then that’s what we will do.’

I stared horrified.

‘What were you going to do? Rip it out of me?’

You laughed.

‘Let no man born of a woman’s womb, slay Macbeth.’

‘What?’ I balked.

‘Shakespeare, my dear.’

‘Sheikh, who?’ Surely you had gone mad to be thinking of Arabs right now! And then just as quickly I realized you were banging on about your books again.

‘Which book are you talking about now?’ I asked, wondering if all I had to do was read some novel to get out of this one.

‘I mean Caesarean, Nazo. Have you never heard of it? It’s an operation where the stomach is cut to take out the baby.’

I swallowed.

‘Is there no other option?’

‘Oh don’t worry, they will stitch you back up. There’s hardly any risk at all. Besides you’d be unconscious the whole time.’

I thought fast. I couldn’t take the risk. What if you left me there to die? What better way to get rid of me and claim the child as yours? Then who would be there to keep you from chucking it all in for a life beside the cradle. No. I couldn’t let them take me to the theatre. But how could I convince you? I had to stop this. I’d never wake up, this much I knew. Once they put me out, you’d take the baby and leave me there to die. And the secret would die with me. Finish. Khalass. Game over and done. No. I had to think of a way to stop you.

‘Just think,’ I said. ‘The surgeon might recognize me. Somebody could tell the press. Soon everyone would know.’
'There is such a thing as a bribe.'

'The boys in Islamabad could offer a bigger bribe. You’d be entering a life time of blackmail.'

At that point you turned around and looked me in the eye. ‘The same could be said for you, Nazo my dear.’

*If you couldn’t trust me now, you never would.* Mustering up as much conviction as I could I held your gaze and said, ‘Your secret is safe with me.’

‘How do I know?’

Where had I read that no one believes the simple truth, but everybody loves a lie? In your case, the more unbelievable, the better. I knew then that if I told you I loved you, respected you, believed in you, and that I would do anything for you to lead us; you would not take me seriously.

‘Look, Gigi Sahiba, I know that my child will have a better future with you. Why would I want to sabotage my child’s future? Who wouldn’t want their child to be part of the Shah dynasty?’

You were quiet for a while. I wondered if you had really thought this true.

‘Caster oil,’ you said finally.

I drank a whole bottle. We waited an hour. Nothing happened. Not even a single menstrual single cramp.

And then in a span of six hours you had me try everything, from raspberry tea to skipping rope. It was as if you wanted me to cough out this baby. Finally, I had to beg you to stop.

‘We’ve tried every natural remedy there is!’

‘There is one thing we haven’t tried.’

‘What?’

‘Orgasm.’

Now I had heard everything.

‘Where do you think I would find a man to sleep with me?’

‘Well you could always get Balgodi drunk,’ you looked at me with such hatred, that I had to lower my gaze. So you did know.

‘Or there is always Pervez Sahib.’
I felt a bubble of laughter rising up my throat, ‘I thought you said orgasm.’
‘Yes, his blind humping would hardly have the desired effect.’
Suddenly we were laughing as if the clocks had been turned back and we were back in the cold and grey London apartment.
And then just as suddenly you were crying.
‘Gigi Sahiba, what happened?’ I tried to hold you still but you were heaving great big sobs as if you some great big wound had opened up inside you.
‘Please speak, Gigi Sahiba, what is it?’
You pushed me away and shouted, ‘Get away from me. I’m getting sick of you. I’m just so sick of it. Of you. Of Balgodi. Of the whole system.’
Before I knew it, you started throwing books off your shelf, ripping up papers, tearing party posters off the wall. And then you flung down your father’s picture.
‘Oh I bet it you never had to go through this,’ you shouted as you stamped on the glass. ‘Why did you do this to me? Do you even know what it means to be a woman in this fucking country? How could you do this to me!’
You brought your foot down with such force that glass shattered everywhere.
‘No!’ I cried as a shard landed on your ankle, cutting into your skin. But that didn’t stop you. Instead you kicked off your heels and started stamping until your soft white foot turned red.
‘Stop,’ I screamed, ‘Stop it!’
‘Take that, you bastard,’ you screamed kicking the broken frame.
‘Stop hurting yourself,’ I cried but you were hysterical.
I felt a sharp pain rise inside but this was no time to worry about myself.
‘Please, stop hurting yourself.’ I begged but you went on trashing the room. Finally you stopped in front of the dressing room mirror.
‘I hate you,’ you said to your reflection or perhaps to mine. Before I could ponder on the thought you lifted your jewelry box and threw it at the centre. The mirror cracked from side to side.
‘Gigi’, I wrapped my arms tight around you. I held you till you stopped struggling.
‘It’s ok, it’s ok, it will all be ok in the end,’ I kept whispering, my mouth inches away from your ear.
‘In the end it will all be ok, Gigi Jan. Please trust me.’
I felt your body going limp. You were still crying but softly now.
‘Hush, hush now. I’m here with you.’
I held you tighter, all the time repeating, Gigi Jan, like it was a prayer.
Slowly I walked you to the bed and began wiping the blood off your feet. I tore my hijab and wrapped it tightly around your ankle to stop the flow. Then I took off your bloodstained clothes and helped you into a clean white negligee. I lay you down, combed your hair, mopped your forehead with a cool cloth. Finally when you had calmed down, I turned to leave.

It was then I heard you say, ‘Stay.’
Very slowly I turned back to face you.
‘Don’t go,’ you said. ‘Don’t leave me.’
‘I won’t,’ I said. ‘I won’t ever leave you.’

*
‘I would now like to call my next witness, senior party worker and politician, Mr. Pervez.’

‘Please place your hand on the holy book and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and only the truth.’

‘I do.’

‘Mr. Pervez, would you say you are a dedicated member of Madam’s party?’

‘Yes Mr. Omar.’

‘Did Gigi Sahiba have complete faith in you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did she ever confide in you that she did not trust Miss Khan?’

‘Yes. I mean No!’

‘May I remind you that you are under oath. You must answer, truthfully. Did she or did she not try to keep Miss Khan out of Party politics following her appointment as PM.’

‘I can’t say for sure.’

‘Your Honour, Mr. Pervez’s uncertainty confirms my fears that Miss Khan was up to something that had raised Madam’s suspicions. But what? Only she can tell. But your Honour may I add that this reveals a lot about Miss Khan’s character. I would not be surprised if Mr. Pervez was threatened not to talk.’

‘Sss...Sir...I...’

‘Witness dismissed.’
It must have happened to you at some point. Time slows down. Everything appears in its full detail. You feel as if you can see the intricate patterns on a butterfly’s wings, you remember the taste of your mother’s cooking as if she was right there feeding you with her own hands, and then when you look into the mirror you see every line and crease and every trace that time has left on your skin.

Yet, you feel nothing.

It is as if you are a ghost, passing through the film set of your own life. Why, why does that happen? I don’t know but every time it does, it makes me believe in God. It is as if someone else is pulling the strings of my life, as if I have been turned upside down and emptied of all thought, all pain, all past. As if nothing else matters but the present. I become trapped in the moment. As if the here and now was a bubble floating aimlessly in the sky. But like all bubbles it too bursts at some point and that is when I come crashing down to earth.

Immediately my mind begins to race. To chase thoughts, hatch schemes, plans and plot. I become myself. But as I run around trying to convince, persuade, manipulate, sometimes I pause and think back to the frozen moment when time had stopped and nothing else mattered but the moment we were in. I think back to the moment we had kissed.

I know you must be shocked right now. I have broken the code. Spoken the unspoken. Told the truth untold. But the fact is, it happened. That night I sat next to you till dawn. I watched you breath, the rise and fall of your chest, the barely there parting of your lips as you snored gently. I watched over you. Like a mother, like a lover, like a dog guarding its master.

And then just before daybreak I leaned over and kissed your lips. It was then I knew, my deity was not made of stone.

Your eyes were closed and your breath even, but still you cannot deny it happened. I did not imagine it. And if the wrong child had not decided to make his entrance just then, it would have led to a lasting closeness.
The first rays of the sun were drawing patterns on the wall when I woke you. The Muezzin’s call to prayer began to filter in, as the curtains danced in the morning breeze.

‘Sleep is better than prayer,’ I said, as waves of pain rose up my belly, one after another, like the choppy waves of the sea.

You smiled lazily, your eyes still closed as if dreaming a secret dream.

‘Ya Allah,’ I said as a sharp pain tore through me.

‘Are you alright, Nazo?’ your eyes sprang open.

I nodded, trying hard to suppress the pain cutting through my belly.

‘And the …’

‘Yes, him too.’

“How can you be so sure it’s a boy?’

‘I don’t know,’ I smiled through the pain, ‘I just feel it. Maybe it’s my punishment.’

You propped yourself up on your elbows and looked at me with amusement. ‘Since when did you start believing in karma?’

‘Since I started caring,’ I said, the pain subsiding as suddenly as it had begun.

‘Caring?’ you whispered.

‘Yes, Gigi.’

You patted the space next to you and wrapping up my bedding on the floor I came and sat on the bed. Your hand accidently grazed mine. I remember your touch was warm.

‘You’ve done so much for me, Nazo.’

‘Believe me, Gigi Sahiba, I always had your best at heart. Whatever I did I did it for you. I only hope you can forgive me for…’

‘I guess it is the intention that matters,’ you said cutting me off.

I bit my lip. It was callous of me to bring up the wedding night right now…

‘Nazo?’

‘Yes Gigi Sahiba,’ I said, my words feeling warm and velvety on my tongue.

‘Can I trust you?’

‘You can trust me with your life.’

‘Don’t let me down.’
It was the right time. I could feel it. I came close. Today I was going to confess. Those three little words. Full of power. Full of passion. I reached out my hand. You took it.

That was the sign I needed. I looked into your eyes and said, ‘Gigi Jan, I…’
‘Yes?’ You squeezed my hand.

Suddenly I felt as if somebody had gotten hold of my insides and was twisting them into a tight knot.

‘Stop, Ya Allah, stop.’
‘Nazo,’ you said, your face pale. ‘Nazo, is it time?’
‘Yes,’ I whispered through the sweat pouring into my eyes. ‘Yes, it is time.’
‘Oh…oh…but…but…there is no one here.’
‘Gigi,’ I said trying hard to keep my breath steady. ‘All I need…is you.’

They say when a woman gives birth is the time when she is closest to God and to Death. I don’t know if I believe in God but I do in death.

‘Gigi,’ I said. ‘You need to do exactly as I say.’

Your hands were cold as you told me I would be fine. ‘You’ll get through this Nazo. Everything will be okay.’

‘Just do it,’ I shouted.

You nodded. And so once again you brought me back from the dead, and what is it they say about people who save your life? You become bound to them for life. Whether they like it or not.

I told you to tear the sheets, boil water, bring out the scissors. I told you to lay out the towels, soak up the blood and prepare for the afterbirth. I told you to hold the baby’s head when it finally emerged. And when the time came, I told you to cut the cord. Only then did I close my eyes.

When I woke up a few hours later the baby was resting on your breast. You had milk! Can a mother who has miscarried still feed? I was astonished. I took him from you and placed him on mine, but the little bastard turned his hungry sucking mouth away. Rejection! I laughed at the thought that men think they are born with that right. The little sucker. I couldn’t help but smile at his crumpled little face, his tightly scrunched eyes, my son…
‘They say it takes a while for the milk to come in,’ you said taking him gently back in your lap.

I nodded, my eyes already feeling heavy.

‘But Nazo, he is so small. What if he needs the hospital? He is premature after all…’

‘Take him.’

‘What? I mean, what about you?’

‘I’ll be ok. The world doesn’t need to know about me. Take him to the hospital or call the hospital here. After all you just gave birth, Gigi Shah. Let the world know. Isn’t that the news they were waiting for? For you to be recovering from the pain of labour while they call the polls?’

You seemed stunned by my little speech. But only for a few minutes. Soon as the baby started crying you snapped into action.

‘Alright then, let’s go little chap. We have calls to make. But first, I want you to meet your daddy.’

And I watched you go. Walk away with my child in your hands. And strangely, I felt no pain.

*


‘All this woman knows is to take, Omar SirJee. Take, take, take and then take some more. People like her do not know the meaning of giving back.’

‘How do you mean, Mr. Balgodi?’

‘My wife was too generous with her praise. I used to tell her, don’t spoil the servants, they will sprout wings. And you know how difficult it is to clip wings. I said to her, Gigi dear, always pick faults in what they do. That way they will be too busy trying to correct their mistakes, to think of new things. But my wife was too trusting. Look where the trust got her? Underground Omar SirJee!’

‘Can you give any examples, Mr. Balgodi?’

‘Yes Omar SirJee, you know my poor Gigi gave birth and went campaigning right away, while that lazy Nazo shut herself in the room for a whole week! That too, when Gigi needed her the most. And even when she bothered to come out, she pretended to be sick and moped around the house watching one drama after another, on my television too! Once I caught her asking the maid to massage her feet, can you imagine!’

‘Thank you, Mr. Balgodi. That’ll be all.’

‘Not all, Sir. She’s a jealous bitch. She killed my....my...poor...’

‘Steady Mr. Balgodi. Please, you may step down.’

‘Your Honour, Mr. Balgodi has a point. How is it that a new mother can travel around the country to campaign while Miss Khan who claims to be such a loyalist couldn’t accompany her? And that is not all. Taking advantage of Gigi Sahiba’s absence, she chose to steal. I have the testimony right here of a servant who says he saw her tampering with the safe...’

‘Objection. Miss Khan had access to party funds. If she wanted to steal she could have embezzled those. But not a penny has been mismanaged. The accounts are free to access should the DA care to check.’

‘Well then, perhaps she was looking for something in Gigi Sahiba’s papers? You know I’m pretty sure that is usually known as spying.’
They say good luck never announces its arrival. It springs upon you unexpectedly, catches you unaware, then smiles at your surprise. But in contrast, misfortune drops many hints of her coming. And so it was that the day after you rushed the wrong child to the hospital, the Generals and the Colonels in Islamabad announced a date for the elections.

‘To be held in forty one days,’ the Electioneer informed us.

The headlines screamed injustice.

‘A visibly frail Ms. Gigi Shah was seen leaving the hospital yesterday with her newborn wrapped in a blanket,’ the TV blasted.

‘How can a mother who has just given birth roam the country campaigning for votes?’ the activists demanded.

‘A Muslim woman must stay at home for forty days after birth. Will Gigi Shah break this tradition too?’ the outraged Jihadi loyalists and Mullahs screamed.

Foreign media showed repeated shots of you clutching the newborn, your face a ghostly white. And sure enough you walked in just then rubbing your temples and pretending to swoon.

‘Oh Nazo,’ you crooned.

‘I feel so weak. I can’t possibly campaign.’

We both burst out laughing.

‘So what happens now?’ I asked.

‘We are boarding the Khyber Mail train, tomorrow. We will stop at every station, get off, campaign, distribute food and medical supplies and get their pledges in return. Then off to the next village. And then next. And next till we reach Islamabad.’

‘But that journey will take days! Maybe weeks. It’ll be exhausting and tiring and…’

‘Exactly,’ you said with a slow spreading smile. ‘Not something you’d expect a new mother to do, would you?’

_In the heart of hearts, I knew you meant me._

*
What is that saying about saving a drowning man and sinking yourself? Well that is exactly how I felt as I held the whimpering little bundle in my hands while you prepared speeches for the campaign.

‘Can I help?’ I asked.

‘The baby, Nazo,’ you said waving me away, ‘Go look after the baby.’

‘That boy will call you Mother at this rate,’ Refugee would whisper jokingly, each time you called for me, the baby inconsolable in your arms.

The other party workers milled around you, discussing ideas and campaigns. I so wanted to be part of all this, I too wanted to make this change happen, I also wanted to be part of history. But every time I put the baby down he’d scream his lungs out. It was either you or me who could calm him down and as your work was more important, the baby fell on me. Eventually I thought it would be easier to tie him around my chest in a cloth sling and pretend I’m still pregnant, than to put him down and listen to his shrill painful cries.

In the coming days he slept on me, shat on me, suckled me, clung to me like a dying man. I began to feel like a prisoner. I found myself thinking of the tale in which Sindbad the sailor couldn’t shake an old man off his back. What did Sinbad do? I wondered one day when I had to take the baby into the bathroom with me to keep him from crying.

And that is when it hit me.

I can still remember the prickle of excitement I felt as I opened the medicine cabinet. I ran my fingers over the cool sticky exterior of the Calpol bottle. It had a picture of an innocent smiling baby, not of a skull and cross bones. Surely it couldn’t be dangerous.

As it is, you wouldn’t leave it lying around if it was. I opened the cap with a rush and shoved a spoonful into the child’s mouth. He promptly spat it out. Sugar. I thought. Running to the kitchen I pulled out all sorts of sweet treats and mixed the medicine in them.

Drink, I encouraged him and the greedy boy that he was, he drank like it was his last day on earth. And after that he slept. He slept the longest he ever had and even when
he awoke he was only half awake.

I began to mix it in all his feeds, and sometimes I even added it to his water. Now I too could be part of your entourage. I attended the party meetings with the baby sleeping peacefully in my lap or in his little Moses basket by your feet. You could get on with the business of election without guilt. And I could get on with my work. Once again all was well.

*Until the day I found out what his silence would cost me.*

*
I came in with the child at my shoulder. The little bastard was sleeping peacefully. You looked at him and your features softened.

‘What a sweet child,’ you said taking him into your arms. ‘You know, Nazo, the first few days I was terrified of his shrill piercing cries but now, just look at him.’

The boy promptly scrunched up his face and let out a loud snot filled sneeze. I quickly took him from you and cleaned him up.

‘Here,’ I said handing you a tissue.

‘Thanks,’ you said wiping the front of your shirt. ‘Thank God, Nazo, you are here to look after my darling little son.’

Had you lost your memory or your mind? I was the child’s mother or had you forgotten that too. The way you were cooing at him I could tell you wanted no reminding of the fact. Just then Refugee called out that there was a courier at the door that needed signing. You rushed out shouting that you’ll handle it.

‘No one is to touch this,’ you said.

That’s unusual, I thought as I watched you put away the delivered papers carefully under lock and key. I knew something was up. Later, when you went out to meetings that morning, I took my hairpin and picked the lock. Sure enough there lay the wrong child’s birth certificate.

Biloo Shah - Balgodi, it read.

Father’s name: Billah Balgodi.

And then there is was -- Mother’s name: Gigi Shah.

I leaned back against the cupboard and hugged the piece of paper tight across my chest.

What was I thinking? Of course this was bound to happen. But did it have to happen this way? I would have given you everything, Gigi. All you had to do was ask. But you…you didn’t even ask. You just took. What you liked, when you liked…

But some things in life can’t be snatched.

You always did get what you wanted. You were the rich girl, daddy’s spoiled little darling. I knew better than to stop you. This time, too, you will get what you want, but in the condition you want, I can’t promise.
From that day I increased the Calpol dose to twice its strength. And that is how the child came to be known as the *wrong* child.

*
'Miss Khan, you are going from absurd to delusional. I know that you were close to
the children but to call them your own... I’m afraid I think we need to question your
mental health.'

'Your Honour, it is Mr. Omar’s mental health that should be questioned. It is not
unknown for truth to be stranger then fiction. Miss Khan loved the children so much that
she calls herself their mother. Believes it to be the absolute truth.'

'Actually, Your Honour, this only goes to show how unreliable her version of the
truth is.'
Like most things in life I got over this one too. I shut myself in my little room till my bleeding body healed. Seven days later I emerged renewed. I felt no pain, no bitterness. I told myself you did it for the Nation. After all the Shah dynasty needed an heir. And what better way to get Balgodi off your back than to give him a readymade son. Perhaps now, he would let you concentrate on the politics.

And so I threw myself into the cause. There was so much work to be done. Now that I had got the child off my back, I could finally join in the party work, I could help you. Exhausted and raw as I was from the childbirth, I still did what I could, rallying women in the neighbourhood, distributing pamphlets and flags and most of all shouting ‘Long live Gigi Shah,’ with the rest of the crowd, every time you appeared in public.

Every now and then I found myself sagging; sitting down by the child’s cradle and talking to him about my worries. The poor drugged child would smile back, always happy, always content. At times such as these I would look away, steeling my heart for he was not mine to love.

‘What a sweet nature he has,’ you’d say if you happened to be passing. ‘Oloo loo, goo goo,’ you’d smile and croon some more.

‘He takes after me,’ I’d joke and you would turn your face away as if I had said something in poor taste.

Still I reveled in the fact that you were happy. You were smiling more, talking more, you kept saying you had it all, a sweet child, a great home and a wonderful career. You had it all.

But did you really, Gigi?

*

Before we knew it, the day was upon us. Votes were cast. After a grueling, nail biting wait of 24 hours in which TV presenters entertained us with stale jokes between poll counts, as if nothing life changing was about to happen and elections were a routine part of this tyrannical state, the results were announced.

Your party won unparalleled. There was celebration all around. Shots were fired.
Sweets were distributed. Alms were given to the poor. Even I who never bowed down before Him, found myself falling to my knees in gratitude. This was it. The darkness had lifted. It was time for light. The light you would bring to us, your people.

‘Gigi,’ I rushed up to you as the anchor on screen announced the results, her voice cracking with amazement.

‘We did it! We won.’

‘I’ve won,’ you said as shocked as a patient waking up from a coma. ‘I’ve won.’

I tried to ignore your use of the singular and said, ‘Finally women will have a say too. Oh Gigi Jan, do you realize what this means for us? We have a voice! No longer will be treated as birthing cows…’

But before I could say anything more, your husband burst into the room.

‘You did it! You did it!’

He picked you up and swung you around. I watched from the corner as you both laughed. Not a single glance fell on me.

‘Now hold that smile till I get back,’ he planted a kiss on your forehead. ‘Must dash, Baby doll,’ he said. ‘I’ve got to go down to the lands and tell the rest of the family. Oh, my little Gigi, you have done it. You have done the impossible.’

I watched in disgust as you reached out and kissed him. Love spilling from your eyelashes as he repeated like a parrot, ‘You’ve done it! You’ve done it, my girl!’

And then just as he was about to step out, he pumped his fist and shouted, ‘We are the Rulers! No one can stop us now. We alone rule this land. We’ll rake it in with both hands! Must go tell my Baba this good news. Oh how happy my family will be!’

I watched your face crumple as he rushed out as quickly as he had come in.

Once again it was me who held you from breaking into pieces. ‘You won, Gigi Sahiba. In the end, that’s what really matters. All’s well that ends well,’ I said. ‘Isn’t that what you always tell us?’

Instinctively your hand moved to your mouth. ‘And what if it doesn’t end well?’

I put my hand on your shoulder and said, ‘Then it’s not the end.’

*
‘When she couldn’t stop Gigi from winning fair and square she turned to other means. She tried to delay Gigi Sahiba taking office by having an affair with the Caretaker PM, General Kiyani.’

‘Does Mr. Omar have an ounce of evidence to support the claim?’

‘I do. I have an eyewitness.’
A week later I read in the papers the headline, ‘The tormentor is dead but his apparatus is still alive.’

How true I thought. You had a landslide victory yet the Parliament was not being formed. It was as if the caretaker government wanted to pretend the whole thing had never happened. You kept calling. They kept ignoring. In between Balgodi would come in and demand to know when they would be handing over the keys to the treasury.

His family would ring asking for favours, ‘Please daughter Gigi, get my bill passed in the parliament,’ ‘Look here daughter-in-law, this contract must come to us,’ ‘You have to get us this tender!’ ‘What happened about my bill?’ ‘My loan should have been passed the day you were elected,’ ‘When will you get your cousin a government job? Have you looked at the loan request I sent you yet?’

Demands flooded in endlessly. Amidst all this the baby fell ill. From morning to night, he would cry endlessly and you’d shut your ears shouting at me, ‘Take him away. Take him away. Please.’

I’d look at the poor miserable tot’s red snotty face and say, ‘Aren’t you glad he isn’t yours?’

And instead of feeling relieved, you would shout at me.

‘Can you be more insensitive, Nazo? How can you say such a thing? Such an ungrateful wench you are! After all I’ve done for you. Such a cynic. No tact at all…’

As per protocol, I’d stand there smiling, neck bowed, eyes lowered. *As they say, do a good deed and throw it into the sea.*

* 

And then one day I found you hunched on your desk with your head in your hands. ‘This cannot be happening,’ you said. ‘I have won elections fair and square. They’ve got to let me take office. How the fuck can a few men in Khaki have such power over the machinery?’

You were talking to yourself yet I said, ‘Don’t worry, everything will be alright.’

I came forward and placed my hand on your shoulder. When you didn’t react I
pressed down squeezing them gently. It was then you seemed to notice my presence. You shrugged off my hands and looked up blankly, erasing all memories of our earlier intimacy. In that moment I felt like a stranger at home. It was, as if no bond had ever formed between us.

At first I thought it was because of my leaky breasts, the smell of putrid blood and reeking sour milk that put you off, made you shrink away from me. But now it had been a few months and I was beginning to realize that the matter was something else all together.

‘What is it?’ I said.

You looked at me as if I had asked you to jump out of the window.

‘You are unbelievable, Nazo,’ you said.

I knew that tone of voice. You spoke like that when you were afraid.

‘Shush,’ I said. ‘You’ll wake the baby. Your baby…’

‘Fuck the stupid baby,’ you screamed. ‘And fuck you. Fuck all of you. Take that rancid little bundle of yours and get out of my sight.’

I looked hard at you and then at my reflection in the mirror behind you. You sat there, regal in your spotless white hijab, while I looked a shadow of my former self. My clothes were plain and dirty, stinking of sweat. There were bags under my eyes, my skin was papery thin, my breasts sagged and my stomach stuck out. You had asked so much of me, Gigi, and now you were asking some more. Yet, I did what I had to do, because it was my duty to serve you.

*And serve you, I did.*
That night I called soldier Rahim. At first he refused to talk to me, but when I threatened to write to his first wife about our affair, he relented. Still, I like to think it was my love and not my cunning that broke down his defense.

‘Things are not good, Rahim.’

‘Why? Your Madam has won the elections. Her husband is busy taking bribes left, right and center. He’s selling tenders, contracts and government jobs at 10% commission. They are raking it in even before taking office, so now what else do you want?

‘But that is just Balgodi. You know Gigi Madam is not like that. She wants to govern, not rule. She wants to serve but the boys in Islamabad are not giving her a chance. They won’t even let her take oath.’

‘They just want to show her who’s boss. Once she gives in to their demands they will step out of her way. That is as long as she doesn’t interfere in their work, national defense and foreign policy and all you know.’

No. I didn’t know that foreign policy was the work of the Army.

Aloud I said, ‘But of course.’

‘Yes, yes then she should be fine. She should just be patient.’

‘But Soldier Rahim, it’s already been a month. When will they reveal their demands? Soon the window of the world will be on Pakistan. In which nation is an elected Prime Minister not allowed to take oath? Look, try to speak to Major Sahib, tell him that Gigi Madam is saying they can either do a deal in private or battle it out in front of the world media.’

‘Nazo, I will try but you know they don’t care about international pressure. If Gigi Madam pushes them too hard, they’ll just start another skirmish with India to take the public’s eye of the ball.’

I conceded. That old trick always worked. Whenever there was a matter at home that needed attention, the Army distracted the people by starting a battle with India. I tried to put myself in the general’s place and thought, that would not only bring the public together in a sickening display of patriotism but all grievances would be forgotten and forgiven on the home front too. Who would care about a female Prime Minister raging to take office while the brave Army men were out there fighting for the Nation?
‘Well,’ I said pushing the scenario out of my mind, ‘At least try and find out their demands. She’s getting tired of just sitting around. Tell them, she just wants to be useful.’

Soldier Rahim seemed impressed by my change of tone and promised to help. I hung up feeling empty and hollow wondering how much more the Generals and Colonels of this country would take from us before they let us do our work. Even Shylock stopped at a pound of flesh.

*

A few more torturous days later I made up my mind to visit Rahim in person. Phone was too impersonal. Surely when he saw me and heard how badly you wanted to do something for the country, the patriot in him would kick in.

Early that morning, I knocked on your door. I knocked again impatiently and as soon as you opened the door, I handed you the baby.

‘What’s this?’
You looked at the bundle in your arms as if you had no idea who he was.
‘Wait!’ you cried. ‘Where are you going?’
‘I have to go. It’s important.’
‘Who would look after this?’ you asked thrusting him back at me.
The baby started to cry at all the juggling and changing of arms.
‘Hush, hush baby. Look, Nazo, he’s crying for you.’
I smoothed the baby’s blanket and said quietly, ‘For someone who wanted to have a child so desperately, you seem very reluctant to take care of him.’

You looked at me sharply. But before you could say anything, a man’s voice said, ‘Do you know what we do with people in our villages whose tongues grow too long?’

I looked up to see Balgodi lying half naked in your bed. His chest was bare and he was running his fingers through the thick hatch of hair that covered every inch of his skin. He looked like a wolf who had just had a big meal. Probably you.

He cleared his throat to get my attention.
‘What do they do?’ I asked, my voice bored and uninterested.
‘They cut off their spiteful tongues.’
Click, click, click, he made snipping noises and I pretended to gasp.

‘Forgive me, Sir,’ I said, thinking, the things I did to humour the rat.

‘Please, Sir, don’t cut off my tongue Sir. I beg you please, Sir.’

I snatched the baby back, pushed past you and laid his son next to him. ‘Your son, Sir.’ I backed away still mumbling apologies, ‘Forgive, forgive…’

Then without bothering to look up, I rushed out lest you called me back in.

I didn’t stop running till I was out of the house, on the street and standing shocked still in the middle of a busy road.

The road that led to just one place.

*

Once near Major Q’s house, I hesitated at the gates. What if he had me arrested? Surely he would have suspected some foul play when I disappeared from his house so suddenly and reinstalled myself in your life. On the other hand he may not even have noticed. Either way I was not taking any chances. I squatted down under the Neem tree by the road and began a long wait. A thin grey feeling of exhaustion began to climb up my limbs and creep into my neck. My jaw relaxed, my posture stumped and I suddenly realized that I had not rested properly, since the night I gave birth.

I must have fallen asleep at some point for when I woke up, a hundred mosquitoes were trying to drain the blood out of my body. I got up quickly trying to swat them away. The buzzing creatures danced even more spiritedly as I waved my arms above my head to ward them off.

A van braked and a toothless old man leaned out. He spat out a spleen of scarlet beetlenut juice as he eyed me. ‘Oye woman,’ he said winking at me. ‘Are you coming or what?’

‘What?’ I blinked, my head still heavy with sleep.

‘I’ve got money ready,’ he said waving a green note about.

I spat at him.

‘Fucking whore!’ the man shouted trying to swipe a blow from the window.

‘Motherfucker,’ I shouted as he unlocked the car door to come after me. I ran.
With the balding fat man at my heels, I forgot all my doubts and ran all the way to the Major’s house as fast as I could.

‘Quick, open!’ I began rattling the gates.
A tall, burly guard opened the eye slit in the metal door, ‘Who is it?’
Just a six-inch view of authority was enough to make the balding man behind me disappear.

‘Nazo, it’s me Nazo,’ I replied placing a hand on my heart to steady myself. What was the country coming to, I thought as I tried to calm my breath. Woman can’t even step out of the house alone. And if they do, they are taken for whores.

‘Nazo who?’
I peered closely to see if he was having a laugh. The man was as blank as an unused sheet of paper.

‘Soldier Rahim’s Nazo!’
‘You can be Mohammad Ali’s Nazo for all I care,’ the guard replied, shoving a chubby finger up his nose, ‘What do you want?’

‘You must be new. Otherwise everyone here knows me.’
The man looked at my dusty clothes and sweaty face and seemed unimpressed.

‘I’m here to meet Soldier Rahim. At least inform him.’
He told me to wait outside. I had to spend a good few hours staring at the man shove huge fingers into impossibly small nasal openings before Rahim came out.

‘Any news?’ I asked as soon he came close
‘Nazo,’ he said holding me at arms length and looking up and down. Up again.
‘Yes, yes I know I have changed.’
‘Nazo,’ he shook his head and drew in a long deep breath. ‘I’m sorry you had to wait. Major Q was in a meeting and I was guard.’

‘It’s ok.’
‘But it’s hot. Must have felt like hell out there without any shade.’
I couldn’t play the cat and mouse game any longer so I said, ‘Look we both know I’m not here to chat about the weather.’

‘Nazo, sit. Do you want a glass of water?’
‘Just come to the point.’
'The point?’ he shook his head. ‘Oh Nazo, what have they done to you?’

‘I am not a child, Rahim. No one has done anything to me. I know fully well what I’m doing and why. You’ll see, my sacrifices will pay off one day.’

‘That’s what my mother used to say when my father would beat her. And do you know, when she died of broken ribs he didn’t even give her a proper burial.’

‘Well then I better arrange my own burial before I go back to the Shah house,’ I said but he was in no laughing mood.

‘Come, let me feed you something.’

‘I am not here to eat, Rahim. I have to get back soon. The child…I hesitated.

‘Have you given that away too?’

The man knew how to reach inside and twist my gut with his words. I hadn’t told him but somehow he knew. He just knew.

‘Soldier Rahim, just tell me what I need to know and I will leave. Ok?’

‘Fine then,’ he shouted. ‘You are not the Nazo I know anyways. You are here on business so business it will be.’

‘I would do the same for you, Soldier…’

‘I’d never,’ he stopped and just shook his head.

‘Well?’

He inhaled slowly, ‘Their demands are high, Nazo.’

‘Gigi is rich.’

‘It’s not about money.’

‘Then?’

‘It’s about power.’

‘She’s willing to share.’

‘Is she willing to share herself too?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They want her. For one night. Three men…’

‘Stop.’ I couldn’t listen anymore. Hadn’t the bastards humiliated you enough already? Years of harassment and house arrest and now this. And that too when you had won the battle, fair and square. But then, I guess this was not about winning the battle at all. This was about winning the war.
I turned back slowly, wondering how on earth I would break this news to you.

_In the end I decided not to tell you after all._

*

I walked the five mile road back to your house in the scorching afternoon sun, all the time thinking, why the hearts of men were so hard. By the time I reached home the last thing I wanted to do was stand in front of the stove. Yet the first thing I did was to brew you a steaming hot cup of tea. Outside your study I removed the protective cloth I usually wrapped around the mug to keep it warm. Instead I wrapped my fingers around it. Pain seared through my fingers. But I smiled.

I entered without knocking. You looked up and nodded approvingly. Wordlessly I handed you the cup, my fingertips pressed tight against the hot edges.

‘Ah, just what I needed.’

‘I thought you might.’

‘You’ll burn your hands, you crazy girl,’ you said taking the cup carefully.

I smiled at this unexpected show of affection.

‘It keeps the tea warm.’

I pressed my burnt fingertips into my hijab.

‘You don’t have to.’

_Oh but I do._

‘What are you up to?’ you asked looking curiously at me.

If only you know.

‘Nothing,’ I said and walked out. My hands raw and achy, my heart light and happy.

*
‘I would like to call to the Witness Box, Mr. Bhooka who works the early shift at Hotel Clifton.’

‘Mr. Bhooka, on the morning of 1st March 1988, precisely a month after the elections, did you see Miss Khan at your hotel?’

‘Yes.’

‘How can you be sure it was her? A lot of time has passed.’

‘I remember because she looked a lot like Madame Gigi Shah and for a minute I was taken aback thinking it was her. But as she was approaching the reception she tripped in her high heels and her sunglasses fell off. That’s when we realized it was just some woman dressed like her.’

‘I see. And what was she doing there? Don’t be afraid. Please answer.’

‘She… she wanted to know which room the VIPs were in.’

‘And? What else did she ask you?’

‘She asked for ice and soda water. We don’t serve alcohol Sir but if someone brings their own…’

‘Thank you, Mr. Bhooka, you can step down now. Your Honour, why would Miss Khan be spotted in the company of Senior Army officers piling them with illegal alcohol when after a decade of military rule, democracy had been finally restored and that too by none other then her employer, Gigi Shah. Could it be that she was playing a double game?’
I spent the next few hours using Refugee’s help to set up a meeting with the Army Generals for that very night. We booked a room in a hotel under the name of VIPs.

As day turned to dusk my heart fluttered like that of a sparrow stranded in the cold. What if it all went wrong? What if it backfired? I’d be shot, killed or worse raped and dumped in some gutter. As I left the house I wondered if I would ever see you again.

Oh Gigi, once again I had taken on your pain, your stress, your sorrows and you my dear, did not even know. Tonight, it will be me who lies down before the triad. Me who would close her eyes and bear the humiliation. I imagined surrendering myself to the Chief of Army Staff, the Election Commissioner and the ISI Head. I imagined the sheer look of hatred as they spat on my face, kicked me with their boots, stripped me to the bone. And then, what if they shot me? The price of treason, after all, was death.

But if this is what I had to do, this is what I would do.

And in return you would get a phone call bright and early the next morning. The oath ceremony is taking place. Would you care to join?

*

In the end it went far smoother then I had imagined. Men, I thought were bigger fools then I gave them credit for. How did I pull it off, you ask? Easy. Drink is the devil’s curse but an angel’s blessing too. First I set up the meeting for that very night. I sent in three bottles of Balgodi’s imported whiskey with a note that Gigi was running late. I waited till their laughter became raucous and only then did I enter the room. I wore your trademark white hijab and large dark glasses that covered most of my face. I kept my head bowed, my arms crossed and my mouth shut.

‘Gentlemen,’ I said mimicking your voice and dimming the lights.

They fell right for it.

I poured the whiskey and with a flick of my wrist added a vial of sleeping powder in the tumbler.

‘Let us toast,’ I said removing the shawl from my shoulders. With their gaze fixed
on my cleavage, I moved forward.

It was all staged to perfection. Timing was everything I told myself.

I sat down, my hand accidentally overturning the table lamp as I did so. Darkness followed. The bald General reached out to help me. I flicked open a small pocket knife and pointed at him. Only a glint of steel against the General’s throat shone in the dark. The General gasped. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ I leaned closer and ripped his shirt.

Pressing my 4 inch heel into his thighs, I placed the knife on his throat and the bastard shuddered with pleasure. I would have dug it an inch or two deeper, if at that moment the baldie hadn’t closed his beady little eyes. I watched him flop his arms in one last attempt, as the tranquilizers worked their way up.

The other two followed suit. They swayed between disbelief and misbalance, as the drug took hold of them. One fell on his face reaching out to me and the other crashed into a wall.

In the morning they will remember nothing, I thought as I pushed one towards the bed, the other two into each other’s arms. I tore off their clothes with my pocket knife and smeared lipstick marks across their bodies.

For the final touch I took out your bottle of Channel no. 5 and sprinkled it subtly around the room. Carefully I placed your sunglasses on the General’s lap.

When the snores began, I stepped back and took a look at my handywork. Really, I thought, now I know how an artist feels when they create a masterpiece.

Enjoy ladies, I said as I placed my hand on the doorknob.

*

Outside I signaled to Refugee who came out of the next room where I had stationed him.

‘Got it?’ I asked.

He nodded and pointed at his huge belly stuffed like a giant football, with silver, crystal and other hotel knick knacks.

‘But why do we have to steal?’ he asked.

‘So we can call the Police.’
‘The Police! What if we get caught?’
I laughed and said, ‘A good criminal always covers her tracks.’
‘But you are not a criminal,’ he asked innocently.
‘Exactly,’ I replied. ‘That is why it is necessary to call the Police. They must know that I was never here.’
‘Then who was?’
‘Gigi was.’

*

You laugh. Go ahead. Laugh all you want. I won’t stop you today. But believe me, Gigi, the boys would have wanted proof that it had really happened. Besides I’m glad I saved you from the humiliation.
And from the General’s hairy old testicles.

*
Three days later, you walked up to the podium on the Caretaker PM’s arm, completely unaware that he was mentally undressing you. You smiled when the Commissioner winked at you and even let out a full throated laugh when the ISI Chief commented on how ravishing you looked. How naïve you were, my dear. Perhaps in trying to shelter you from the prejudice around you I had made you aloof. I had always been taught never to call a blind man blind or an old man old but in your case perhaps not calling a fool, a fool was making a fool out of them.

It was time for you to face the truth. At least a bit of it.

* 

There was little celebration when you got home. Balgodi was shut up in his room and refused to come out.

‘Get me a pack of cigarettes,’ you said after a fresh round of knocking on his door went unanswered.

It had been a long time since you asked me to fetch you a pack and I hesitated at the front door.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said coming back into the study. ‘You can’t start smoking now,’ I said, ‘you’re the Prime Minister. And…’ I paused, ‘a mother.’

Though in all honesty I couldn’t even remember the last time you had seen the wrong child’s face, much less held him. The child may as well have been a must-have accessory like that Louie Vuitton bag you flashed on occasions than locked up in your cupboard, safe in the knowledge that you possessed it.

‘The cigarettes, Nazo.’

I hesitated but your fingers tapping impatiently against the smooth Burma teak of your desk snapped my feet into action. When I returned with the cigarettes, Balgodi was still locked up in his room.

You lit one and took a long hard drag.

I thought it would be safe to ask, ‘Is Balgodi Sahib not happy?’

‘Oh, he’s heard some rubbish rumours that’s all. Somebody’s been filling his ears,’
Then you preened sharply at me. ‘You wouldn’t have anything to do with it now, would you, Nazo?’

I might have everything to do with it.

*
'Miss Khan’s presence in the hotel is debatable.’

‘But I have an eyewitness, who says he saw her!’

‘Witnesses can be brought. Besides he said he saw someone like Gigi Sahiba. He never said he did not see Gigi Sahiba herself.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Mr. Omar, perhaps you are not aware but that very night, there was a robbery at the hotel. The Police searched the entire hotel the next morning including the room where this so called incident took place. Only four sets of fingerprints were found. None of them belonged to Miss Khan.

Interestingly Gigi Sahiba’s sunglasses were found there, as was a teacup with her fingerprints...’
The next day you called a meeting of the top government machinery. Generals and Bureaucrats, Judges and Ambassadors all sat around your father’s long boardroom table.

‘Gentlemen,’ you began.

I watched closely to see if anyone would show disrespect by calling out ‘Ladies’ but, for a change, the room full of men seemed respectful, even appreciative of your authority.

‘I have gathered you here today to ask you for your solidarity so that we may work together towards creating a better nation.’

Balgodi stifled a yawn.

‘Our country is broken. It needs tenderness and dedication to heal. We must come up with literacy policies, swift justice systems, anti-corruption laws and move towards moderation. The whole world is watching us to see how we will emerge from ten years of Jihadist rule.’

Balgodi cleared his throat. You ignored him.

‘Are you all with me? We have an enormous task ahead and I can’t do it without your support.’

Balgodi scraped back his chair and left.

You carried on.

‘I pledge that I will see neither night nor day. I will work relentlessly.’ There was a round of reluctant applause as the men clapped halfheartedly. ‘Now, here are a few proposals I have been working on.’

I too was clapping from my little corner by the cupboard when suddenly you called out my name.

‘Nazo?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you Nazo.’

I snapped to attention.

‘Some of the files are missing. Could you fetch the blue prints for the women’s schools from my study?’

‘Oh. Right.’ What had been I been expecting, I scolded myself, a call to arms?
I ran up the stairs two at a time and as I passed your open bedroom door I saw Balgodi lying on the bed with a bottle of Whiskey in his hand. He was drinking straight from the bottle. Oh no, I thought. Surely he was gearing up to create a scene. Very gently I pulled the door shut and slid the bolt from the outside.

That should hold him.

When I came back into the boardroom, there was a passionate discussion going on.

‘Gigi, your plans are very idealistic. We’d be lucky if we can achieve a 5% literacy rate in 5 years. A 100% is next to impossible. In fact it is madness.’

‘Gentlemen, the world is changing. Literacy is the only way Pakistan can enter into the new century.’

‘I think we should focus on Islamic education instead,’ a grey bearded Maulana said. ‘Create madrassa, teach them about Islam and Shriah.’

‘I think my predecessor did enough of that,’ you said firmly.

The grey bearded Maulana frowned. Then wagging his finger at you, he said, ‘Don’t forget, Gigi, God does not like bold talk from a woman’s mouth.’

‘Now Maulana Sahib, don’t get so serious,’ Pervez Sahib quickly stepped in. ‘We are just discussing options.’

‘But, that is what I am saying also,’ the Maulana persisted. ‘Islamic education is cheap and easily available. The figures will go up instantly. I’m saying for her benefit only. But she is coming up with lunacy, all this talk of English Vinglish. What use is it to us? The name of God is all one needs to learn.’

‘There is no harm in trying,’ you said, ‘at least let’s discuss the options.’ I could see a vein throbbing in your temples.

‘The trouble is,’ a Bureaucrat said before the Maulana could reply, ‘the money we put into education doesn’t trickle down.’

‘Then we need a better accountability system,’ you said.

The District Incharge shook his head. ‘In my jurisdiction, the land owners and the feudals will never allow the villagers to go to schools. We’d be lucky if they allow the boys. Girls are out of the question. Ignorance is the best form of submission as far as they are concerned.’

‘That is why I’m saying give the funds to Islamic education. It is the best kind of
education only!’ The Maulana thumped his hand on the table.

You put up your hand to halt the discussion and laid out the plans.

‘Gentlemen, I have been working throughout my time in exile, on these strategies. I have been dreaming of a better nation. And the day has come to share my vision.’

‘This,’ you gestured to the papers on the table, ‘is the result of my labour. I have detailed policies, funding plans, literacy trackers, implementation strategies….’

The phone rang.

‘Damn,’ I had forgotten about those new mobile phones.

You picked up.

‘Get up right now,’ his voice pounded from the receiver. ‘You think you can lock me up? You Bitch! Get up here right now or I’ll break down the door. You fucking Whore.’

You looked at me and I looked away.

You snapped shut your mobile.

‘As I was saying…’

A loud banging could be heard coming from upstairs.

‘Are you having some work done, Madam?’ the Maulana asked.

Before you could answer, your phone rang again. You switched off the ringer. The home phone began ringing.

‘Well as I was saying,’ you began, ‘the next step would be…’

Somebody’s mobile rang.

‘Sorry,’ a young embarrassed looking officer said. ‘But it’s for you, Madam. It’s Balgodi Sahib. He wants you to come to the bedroom, right now.’

A deep red rose up your neck and crept onto your face.

‘Excuse me,’ you said. ‘I’ll be right back.’

You got up from your chair and stood hesitantly for a while, looking longingly at your plans spread out on the table.

‘Nazo will serve you refreshments in the meantime.’

I stepped out of my place in the shadows.

*
When you came back you seemed only half the person you were. In just half an hour the man had stripped you of all your dignity. You moved stiffly and I could tell by the difficulty you had in walking where he had assaulted you. Your lips were swollen, your eyes red rimmed, your hands shaking. The man had raped you.

Yet you continued with the meeting, albeit not as convincingly as before. The men too had an inkling that a woman had been put in place. The meeting that had been called to implement your vision turned into a booty war as the men divided up portfolios, while you sat back and watched. Every now and then you raised an objection in a small defeated voice, which was promptly overruled by the powerful voices surrounding you. If that wasn’t enough, the baby began to howl loud enough for the noise to drift into the boardroom.

‘Duty calls,’ the Maulana said.

You looked at him in surprise and then at the files in your hand.

‘But I am doing my duty,’ you said.

He looked horrified.

‘What kind of a mother are you, Madam? Your child is crying and you are sitting here chatting?’

I could have slapped the man. I could have kicked him. And if I had the means I would have killed him. But you just sat there stoically, inhaling long deep breaths. A sort of silence descended upon the room in which the baby’s crying became even more accentuated. Finally you placed your hands on the chair’s arms and raised yourself slowly by the elbows. I moved forward to pull the chair back and noticed with horror, three tiny spots of blood on the seat of your shirt. Quickly I draped my shawl around your shoulders to hide the shame. You seemed resigned and clutched the shawl tightly around yourself.

‘Gentlemen,’ you nodded.

‘Madam,’ they said, as they watched you leave with a slow heavy tread.

‘Women!’ the Maulana said, as he helped himself into your chair. ‘Think they can do a man’s job.’

I swung around but felt your hand restrain me.

*I suppose to win the war, you have to lose a battle.*
'Gigi trusted her but she abused that trust. There were many complaints against Gigi Shah’s government but what people didn’t know was that it was Miss Khan running the show. While Gigi Sahiba was busy with cultural activities and protocol during these early days, who was in charge? Miss Khan, who is a corrupt, unscrupulous woman. Bribes, petty politics, and underhand dealings are associated with her person.'

'But Your Honour, that can be said about many people around Madam. In fact she herself is not free of these accusations. And the fact that she felt comfortable enough to delegate her duties, shows her trust in Miss Khan…'
And now began a new era. Of corruption and terror. The little monsters the General had unleashed during his reign had become full blown terrors. There was blood in the streets as opposing ethnic clans battled it out in Karachi. Outside the house your opponents exploited these racial tensions, while inside the Parliament you were held to account.

And what did you do about it? You, who should have stepped up and held talks with the opposing groups, delegated it to the men in your cabinet. Pervez Sahib held round table conferences with the warring chiefs while you attended a fashion show. Cause: the liberation of women.

‘Women can be liberated in other ways than clothes,’ I suggested.
But you shot me down with a look.
‘Be patient, Nazo.’
I learnt to hold back. Once again I became the mute and dumb Nazo who watched and listened but did not speak unless spoken to. What else could I do? Every time I tried to speak, you silenced me. If I tried to do something you told me to be patient. When I wanted to accompany you to a meeting you asked me to look after the baby.

‘You are the only one I can trust, Nazo,’ you’d say, handing me the screaming little bundle.
‘I am his mother after all,’ I would say just to spite you.
You’d draw in one of your deep breaths which seemed to have replaced your habit of smoking and let out a long sigh, leaving me wondering what, if anything, you meant by it.

*

Things took a turn for the worst. Karachi turned in to a war zone. As if the killings were not enough, another monstrous issue rose up. This one was going to take you under, if you did not take a stand soon.

‘PM’s husband in talks with China.’ ‘Plans for a new Dam!’ ‘New Water Dam to block water flow to Sindh.’ ‘PM betraying her own homeland!’ ‘Plans to sell Pakistan bit by bit.’ ‘Mr. Balgodi snapped with Chinese envoy: discussing price of water?’ The
papers screamed betrayal.

‘Have you seen this, Gigi Sahiba?’ I said as I handed you your morning tea.

‘Perhaps you should have a word with Sahib. Don’t you think…’

‘Oh, so now you are going to tell me what to do?’

I stopped what I was doing and looked at you.

‘More tea?’ I asked, having been chastised enough.

You flung the tea cup at me. A few searing drops scalded my cheek. I pressed my palm against the side of my face. But it did not soothe the burn.

‘Take your witch’s brew and get out.’

Something inside me snapped. I stepped up. ‘You are being an ostrich, Gigi.’

‘Shut up, Nazo.’

But I couldn’t stop now.

‘He’s betraying you. Burying your head won’t make it go away.’

‘I’ll bury yours instead.’ Before I knew it, you grabbed my hair and banged my head against the wall. I flinched not from the pain but from the unexpectedness of it all.

I slumped down against the wall, my hands covering my face. It was not the first time you had hit me but it’s the first time it had hurt. What had happened to you Gigi? I kept thinking, where was the bright young girl who wanted to make a change? Who was this ruthless barbarian in front of me? Hot tears welled up in my eyes, not from the violence but from the helplessness in yours. You seemed so powerless, so weak, shoving me aside instead of yanking out that useless man from your house.

‘Gigi?’ I whispered as blood trickled down from a cut on my forehead.

You didn’t reply.

‘Just stand up to him. Tell him to stop. Stop him, Gigi, please. Stop him before he breaks you.’

‘It’s not so easy,’ your voice came out a whisper as you placed a hand over your belly. It was then I knew.

You were pregnant again.

*
The next day you got a call from the American Ambassador. I couldn’t tell exactly what he said but after you hung up your face was pale.

‘Get me Balgodi,’ you said, your voice urgent.

I dialled his number and brought you the cordless.

You snatched it from me and shouted, ‘Didn't I tell you not to meet with the Chinese?’ there was a pause then you screamed even louder into the phone.

‘How could you be so callous? How could you? I ask you to do one thing and even that you can’t do right. You just can’t do anything right.’

I had never before heard you talk to your husband this way. And moreover, why was he putting up with it. Just the fact that he hadn't hung up on you meant that he was tolerating your temper. Was it the pregnancy? Could men really love their wives such when they were carrying a child? Or was it because he needed you for something else? Something that his usual whores and harlots could not give him...

Before I could ponder further, you turned around and flung an overflowing ashtray at me. ‘This is still your job isn't it?’

‘Yes BB,’ I hurriedly cleared the ash off the carpet.

‘Wait,’ you said as I got up to leave.

There was something in your voice, a kind of realization, a weighing of things. I dared not breathe. You looked long and hard at me as if you were trying to see inside me. It was a while before you spoke. And when you did, it changed my world. Once more.

‘Can you type?’

*And so we began, all over again....*

Later that day, you called me into your study.

‘I have a plan.’ Your voice was strong. ‘I need your help.’ There was a finality to it as you told me to sit.

I watched as you jotted something down. You wanted to be proven right. And for that, you needed me. Since the day the General had died, this was the first time I had felt worthwhile, needed, dare I say, appreciated. You needed my support. Acquiescence.
Obedience. And I wanted to give that to you. To assure you that you were right - that I could make everything all right for you.

‘Here’s your appointment letter. You are hereby reinstated as my political secretary.’

As on previous occasions in my life I thought not in words but in little vignettes of memory. I had been here before. Out of the chaos and noise of this maddening city, the dirt and breath of politics, the indifference of the mob, I’d found a purpose again. This was my calling. Finally you felt it too.

‘Close your mouth or a mosquito will fly in.’
I realized than that I was gaping at you.
‘Catch,’ you threw the cordless at me.
‘You can handle the NGOs and the Press for starters. After that get my diary in order. But most importantly, Nazo...’
‘Yes?’
‘Keep an eye on Balgodi.’

*

So there was something more to this than just my services. You were like a jigsaw puzzle, Gigi. A jigsaw with the last piece missing. Anyone who attempted to piece you together got nothing but frustration. Why did you want me to keep an eye on him? Why not just have him shut up somewhere? Why must you play this game of happy families with a man who was nothing but trouble?

However I did as I was told and a week later I reported that Balgodi had been going ahead with meetings despite your warnings. Contrary to your reservations, he had entered into talks about the Dam. The press were sniffing. A scandal was imminent.

You slammed me. ‘I told you to keep an eye on him!’
‘An eye, not a leash,’ I replied.
You paused as if deciding how much of your thoughts to reveal.
Finally you said, ‘I want to make sure he doesn’t enter into talks with the Chinese again. This Kalabagh issue has gotten out of hand. Really, what should have been so
simple has become so complicated.’

I turned to go but something stopped me.

‘Gigi,’ I hesitated, ‘the people from the Environment agency were saying entire villages would be wiped out if this was to go ahead.’

‘Yes Nazo, I do know that and I do care. You don’t really believe all those rubbish lies that the Opposition is spreading about us? I would never let that happen.’

I was quiet.

‘Fuck you, Nazo! Here I am sacrificing my entire being for the people of this country and you think I’d sell out to the highest bidder. I would sell my land? I would sell my people? I would sell my soul? Me, who went through torture, exile and what not, to restore democracy?’

‘Not you but your husband.’

‘Listen Nazo, I’m in this for the long haul. Even if he wanted to do something vile like this I wouldn’t let him. I want to win the elections again and again and again till I set this country in order.’

I felt a warmth engulf my entire body. How could I have doubted you?

‘Do you trust me Nazo?’

I looked into your eyes and said, ‘I do.’

Little did I know then, what those two words would cost me.

*
‘So are you seriously saying, Miss Khan, that you were spying on Gigi Sahiba’s husband on her own orders? I’m sorry but this is just too much to swallow for any sane person.’

‘Objection, Your Honour, Mr. Omar is trying to walk my client into a trap.’

‘Overruled.’

Thank you, Your Honour. However Counsel’s analogy is very apt. Walk into a trap...how true. I’d like to talk about the Kalabagh Dam Project. I know for a fact that Gigi was strictly opposed to it. She bore it as a cross upon her heart. But the project went ahead and not only was it erected, the rights were sold to foreigners who are planning to turn it into a Nuclear resource plant for alternate energy, but not for us - for China! How did this change of heart happen? Perhaps Miss Khan could tell us?’
When a dog goes mad, most people would shoot it. But not you. You weren’t the kind to put animals down. You’d take on the trouble of nursing it till its dying day.

And when you invite trouble, it never comes alone.

That day there was a furious protest outside Shah house. Local and international media, and activists picketed outside your house. ‘Stop the dam, stop the dam!’ ‘Don’t sell our water,’ ‘Don’t sell us!’ ‘Looters, robbers, stop stealing our water!’ Voices rose and fell, anger lingered in the air.

Inside we were like an old couple by the fireside. I sat typing out your latest press release, jabbing the keys hard, one at a time. You were smoking, papers littered all around you. The outside seemed another country.

And then the peace was broken.

A red splosh, as sudden as a gunshot appeared at the window and I looked up to see a rotten tomato sliding down the glass. You sat up startled, your papers falling to the floor. *The intimacy was gone.*

My finger slipped and I mistyped. Angrily I tore out the paper mumbling, ‘See where marriage to Balgodi has got you.’

‘You have no idea.’

I looked up from the eerie clownish smile of the typewriter to see you staring serenely at me. It was unlike you to behave so calmly in the face of a storm. Had you become complacent? Or overconfident?

I watched you reach for yet another cigarette. It hung sideways from your lips as you struck a match and lit it. You sucked in your cheeks, taking a long slow drag. Your face took on the bony horror of a skull and for a second, I felt myself shiver. In the still heat of the room, you looked grey, ashen, almost ghoulish. But then as you slowly relaxed and your cheeks fleshed out, you transformed again.

No, I thought, people don’t change. They just reveal themselves slowly.

Loud noises broke out. The chants outside were getting louder and I could hear the distant wails of the siren as police vans arrived to dismantle the mobs.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I approached you cautiously. I had to know. Just had to. Did you really not care about the mob or was this all politics.
The slow buzzing of the intercom broke into my thoughts and before I could speak, you pressed the answer button.

Balgodi’s voice boomed into the room, asking you to join him in the library.

‘Of course, Darling,’ you said lovingly, as angry protests raged outside.

I watched as you bounded happily out of the door. A trick of the eye, I thought.

*

The next day you announced the twelve-member delegation that would be heading to Saudia to cement new trade pacts. After the names had been discussed and the list concluded, you made a surprise announcement. ‘And the delegation will be headed by Mr. Balgodi.’

Your husband looked surprised and a little horrified at the thought of seven whole dry, sexless days in the kingdom. His face battled pleasure and anger as he decided upon a reaction.

‘Darling, you know I can trust only you to get this job done right. The Saudis are loaded and need to be milked just right,’ you whispered.

That settled it. Balgodi coughed joyously and beckoned me to put him on the first flight to the ‘riches’ as he referred to the holy cities...

*

All week the phones trilled inside and the protestors rallied outside, but you went about your meetings as if nothing was wrong. But the day Balgodi got back, it all changed. That evening after everyone had gone to bed and the protests had died down, I found you slumped on your desk.

‘Gigi Sahiba?’

I shook you gently. When you looked up, your eyes looked drugged, your lids heavy, your tongue thick.

‘Nazo,’ you slurred as I bent down to pick up your empty wine glass.

Why was it always the case, I wondered, the more I begin to know you, the less I
understood you. Go far enough and something happens, a transformation, an effect of solitude and strangeness, of power and persuasion and you begin to turn into someone else.

‘Get me a new bottle,’ you demanded.

No, I was not ready to let go of the old you. Not yet.

I snatched away the glass.

‘All this drink will kill you.’

You swung around and grabbed my hand. Your eyes wide as a child’s as you said,

‘Why is it, Nazo? Everything that kills me, makes me feel alive.’

*

Somehow I managed to get you to the bedroom.

‘Really Gigi Sahiba!’

Heaving under your weight I said, ‘You shouldn’t be drinking in your state. It’s bad for the baby.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ you said slowly. You rolled up your shirt and patted your belly.

‘The bitch is a girl.’

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said genuinely shocked that you, who had spent your life proving to men that you were their equal if not better, would regret carrying a girl.

‘Shame on you,’ I spat out the words.

You let out a ridiculous little giggle.

‘It’s not me, you fool. It’s him. He wants an heir.’

‘You have an heir,’ I said forgetting for a second that the wrong child did not really count.

Perhaps you didn’t hear me or perhaps you chose to ignore me, because you continued laughing.

‘Oh Nazo. Sometimes I can’t figure out if you are really clever or very naïve.’

‘A girl can be an heir, Gigi. Look at you.’

‘Yes,’ you laughed harder. ‘Look at me.’

‘Your father chose you to carry his name, not his sons.’
Your upturned mouth took a downwards turn and your eyes began to glisten at the mention of his name.

Quickly I added, ‘And as it is, these days neither boys nor girls look after their parents.’

You smiled.
Encouraged I added, ‘Girls can do anything men can do and better.’
‘You’re such a feminist, Nazo.’
‘What’s that?’ I asked.
‘Someone who believes in equality for women.’
‘What’s wrong with cheering for your own kind?’ I asked.
‘It’s not me. I like girls. I want to have a girl...’ you paused and giggled at your own sick joke.
‘Gigi. You are drunk.’

You must have seen the disgust on my face for you looked sheepishly up at me and said in a little girl voice, ‘How do you do it, Nazo? How can you resist a drink?’
‘I don’t like giving into a bottle,’ I said remembering the one time when I had passed out after drinking left over wine from a party at your London flat. I had woken up dazed. I had no idea what or how I had ended up on the cold bathroom floor, lying face down in my own vomit. Rest of the day was spent shocked at how alcohol could take over a person’s very self, snatching control, taking charge, dictating one’s words, actions.

I had no memory of what I had done or said. No, not for me such a cruel unyielding taskmaster. Why people willingly let something take over them, I would never know.

I snapped out of my thoughts as your head slumped against the bedside table.

‘Come on now,’ I said, ‘Hand it over, you have had enough.’
‘No,’ you shouted, ‘mine!’
‘You are behaving like a child.’
‘And you, like a Headmistress.’

I reached over to snatch the glass from you. You moved back and before I knew it, I lost my balance. I tumbled forward and fell bodily on you. For a second you were pinned under me, the look of a dear in headlights, on your face.

And then the next thing I knew my mouth brushed against yours.
Quickly, almost apologetically, I moved away.

But the button on my collar got tangled in your necklace and we ended up tussling.

I hadn’t meant for this to happen but happen it did. I had vowed to myself that I would never come close to you again when you were drunk. But somehow, the pull was too strong. I became the Goddess on the flying tiger, a painting I had seen on the back of a water tanker. Together we were soaring. The more we tussled, the tangled we became.

My fingers couldn’t undo the knots and so I tried force. At first you resisted but then you seemed to relax. If I didn't know you better I would have thought you were enjoying the roughness. *Or perhaps I did know you well...*

I pressed your wrists into the mattress and you struggled, turning your head this way and that. Yes, I was right. You were enjoying this.

‘Stay still,’ I said, pressing your wrists harder.

‘Stop,’ you whispered.

But I didn’t.

I had not realized how strong you were. You shifted your weight and before I knew it you had gripped my shoulders with both hands. Then you turned me sideways and like a small child lay lengthwise against me, fitting yourself into my back and legs. Your chin rested at the nape of my neck, your knees snuggled in mine. Your breath slowed, evened.

I felt the warmth of your melting body against mine.

When I tried to speak you pressed your palm over my mouth. Pulling me in, you wrapped your arms and legs around my stomach and thighs, squeezing the breath out of me, imprinting yourself on my body. Like a sheltering mother.

But I wanted more than this innocent caress. I wanted something explicit, dominant and sensual. I lifted your hand and brought it close to my mouth.

You tried to untangle yourself and pull back but it was too late. I pulled you closer. Almost roughly I gripped your wrist, thrusting my back into your stomach.

We lay curved, like a double-edged sickle, pulling, pushing neither one of us giving in or giving out.

What did this mean, I thought as I sucked your fingers, while your arm wrapped itself around my neck. Had there always been this element of violence between us? Was it passion or repulsion? I didn’t know. All I knew was that I wanted to savour this
closeness, for as long as I could.

And then I felt as if my air supply was being cut off. Darkness began to descend on my lids. Truly, I would have died that night, had I not found the strength for one final push.

I broke away.

But not for long. You lunged at me and confined me with your whole body, suffocating me with your sweet sickly perfume till the pulsing of your blood numbed my mind.

I had your whole attention.

‘I am Gigi Shah. Do you understand?’

You yanked my head back. One more pull and you could have snapped my neck in half.

‘You alone are Gigi,’ I said, my voice a hoarse little whisper.

Resting your elbows on the matress, you slowly raised your head back. You looked like a cobra rising from his sleep. So cruel, so majestic, so unattainable.

I had never seen this side of you.

I remembered to breath only when you grabbed my head and folding your arms around me pushed it close to your chest. You held me close. Closer than the dark. You smoothed my forehead with your palms all the time pulling me close as if to pull me inside or perhaps to merge yourself in me. It hurt so much that I could see white spots in the space before me. I struggled to raise my head but you kept me headlocked, smiling that deep reassuring smile which made you seem indestructible.

It felt, almost maternal.

*

I did not sleep that night. Instead I died, a dreamless sleep.

I came to life only blinking against the early morning sunlight filtering through the curtain partings. My hands and feet felt as if they had been bound with ropes. Every muscle ached, yet I felt renewed.

I watched the sun come up and light your body golden. When the Muezzin’s call
for prayer began echoing through the sky, I pulled a sheet over you and touched your cheek. I sat at your feet, admiring your god-like charisma. Even in sleep you seemed perfect.

And then you sneezed. Little drops of snot flew out of your nostril and you turned your head, absently wiping your nose with the back of your hand. Your eyelids firmly shut, saliva gathering at the corner of your lips. You licked your lips and I smiled at this sudden vulnerability. You seemed so pathetically human. Gone was the indestructible, infallible, politician. You seemed…almost ordinary.

But your humanness assured me too. After all, even Prophets were allowed one mistake. I bent down and kissed your forehead.

*

Behind me, I heard the door shut softly. A click and the sound of footsteps disappearing down the hall, their echo sharp in the fading silence.

Had someone been watching us?

*
In the morning, you woke up as if nothing had happened. You kissed Balgodi on the forehead and sat down to breakfast. When I served you tea, you did not look up.

‘Gigi Sahiba, shall I get the day’s schedule?’ I asked. ‘Or shall I leave it till you have had your breakfast?’

No response.

Balgodi looked up, his expression blank and heartless.

You reached for the teapot and he lowered his paper to look at you. His gaze unblinking and cold, reminded me of a hunter lining up his prey through the eye of a trigger.

‘You still remember that you have reappointed me your political secretary?’

His eyes narrowed.

‘Gigi?’ I asked again.

You did not look at me as you chewed your toast.

The hunter was taking aim.

It was a full minute before you spoke.

‘I remember.’

I noticed you were careful to avoid the hunter’s eyes.

‘Thank you, Gigi Sahiba, I won’t let you down.’

The gun was lowered. The hunter leaned back as if the animal had just revealed a weakness, a limp or a wound.

‘That reminds me, have you sent off the press statements to all the major newspapers yet?’

‘I had some more urgent work to take care of first,’ I said as I picked up your empty mug, touching your hand as if by accident.

When I looked up, I saw your husband staring hard at me.

Ready, aim, shoot.

*
As I suspected, your husband had no foresight. He was a man who reacted only to what was in front of him, not bothering to see beyond the obvious. That morning as I was clearing up breakfast, he told you that he was buying horses.

‘I want to set up a stud farm.’

You continued chewing like a bloated cow.

‘Nazo, will take care of the logistics,’ you said without looking up from your toast.

I bit hard on my tongue. It was all I could do to keep myself in check. I tasted salt as blood seeped into my mouth. But it hurt much more that I had been discarded yet again like a used tissue. I was a dirty secret that must be hidden, bought, bribed.

I brought you your cheque book, and turning to your husband you asked, ‘How much?’

*And just like that, you put a price on me.*
‘Miss Khan had many uses but virtue wasn’t one of them.’

‘MR. OMAR is being derogatory.’

‘I have hard proof that she influenced Gigi on the dam. Your Honour, here is Opposition Leader Nawabzada’s testimony, in which he recalls how Miss Khan tried to influence Ms. Shah’s decision to hold off the Dam. He remembers because it was the only time they had agreed upon something.’

‘Do you believe everything you hear, Mr. Omar? Could this statement not be politically motivated? As an experienced staffer of the party, Miss Khan would be very resourceful in Madam’s absence. Surely Opposition doesn’t want that…’

‘Counsel, Nawabzada has a recording of the conversation.’

‘Ah, in that case has Mr. Omar, ever hear of the expression Devil’s advocate?’
‘The time has come for you to be useful.’
I looked up from my work to see you standing in the doorway.
‘The Opposition Leader will be here soon. There might be few officials with him too.’
‘Shall I organize tea?’ I asked.
‘There is more to being a political secretary than serving tea, Nazo.’
I knew that but I didn’t know that you did too.
Aloud I said, ‘Yes, Gigi Sahiba.’
You walked up to your desk and picking up a paperweight you turned to me, ‘This meeting will be a little different. Nazo, I want you to take part in it.’
Perhaps you mistook the surprise on my face for concern. In the next breath you said, ‘Of course I will tell you exactly what to say. You needn’t worry.’
Before I could protest you said, ‘Now here is the plan. When the issue of the Dam comes up I want you to disrupt the meeting. Ask questions, give out facts, quote figures...anything you can think of to support it.’
The Buzzer rang. Refugee’s singsong voice came through, ‘The guard says, Opposition Sahib is here with his bald head and protruding stomach, scratching his belly and demanding to see you immediately…’
You cut him off with the flick of a button.
‘Shall I make him wait?’ I asked eagerly.
You looked approvingly at me and smiled, ‘You learn quickly.’
After an appropriate wait of about half an hour I got up from my desk and with a stretch and a yawn announced that madam was now free.
There was some static as the opposition leader raged and raved about how his important time had been wasted. Finally he burst through the door with his entourage. Red faced and breathing through his mouth he lunged towards a chair and started heaving heavily.
‘Please be seated,’ you said with a sarcastic smile.
He looked at you with great annoyance.
‘We are not here to talk small.’
‘Small talk?’ you suggested helpfully.
‘Don’t act smart Madam. We are here to tell you that as long as I am alive the Dam will not be built. Over my dead body!’
You seemed like you’d easily walk over his dead body so I interrupted.
‘Sir the Dam will provide employment for millions. At present only one male in five families is earning in the area of Ghot Machira. The area where the displacement will take place is already dead. You see the fishermen have long since lost their livelihood to trawlers.’
‘Yes Nazo,’ you said patronizingly, ‘but we cannot ignore the fact that the people who have been living there for generations will be displaced. It’s a sensitive matter.’
I blinked. What were you playing at now? Why prep me with all the reasons the Dam should be build than argue against it?
You cleared your throat and I returned to the script.
‘But Gigi Sahiba, these people are starving. For centuries economic migrations have taken place for man. It’s the cycle of life. Is it not time for them to move on to greater opportunities? Don’t they deserve a chance?’
‘It is not just the people we are worried about,’ you argued. ‘What about the fish? It will be a great ecological disaster, Nazo.’
I shook my head. You always were soft at heart. Even the fish were not lost on you. But aloud I said as directed, ‘When there are people to worry about, how can you be thinking of something as small as fish.’
‘Nazo, it is a complicated matter.’
‘No, Gigi Sahiba, it is very simple. The Dam is good for the economy and economy is what makes the country run. I can’t think of one good reason for it not to be built.’
‘My first thought is for the people who live there. Don’t you agree, Nawabzada Sahib?’
Both you and the Opposition leader were at the same page now as you argued against my point.
In the middle of all this the leader suddenly realised that he was agreeing vehemently with you. He wiped his sweaty bald head and then pocketing the handkerchief in his waistcoat, he turned to you.
‘Gigi Sahiba, I have to say that I was not aware of your true intentions. You seem very knowledgeable about the dangers of building the dam. In fact some of the points you mentioned, we were not even aware of.’

‘Nawabzada Sahib, I am glad that you have finally realized that we are both working for the good of the country. I can assure you that like you I have no intentions of letting this project go ahead. But you must understand that I am under great pressure. You know that I have bosses too.’

The Leader nodded sympathetically and stared up at a photograph of the oath ceremony, on the wall behind you. From behind the framed glass, the Chief of Army staff beamed down at us with you standing forlorn beside him.

‘Yes,’ he mumbled. ‘The bosses…’

*

The meeting came and went. I was none the wiser than when we started but happy that the decision had been taken. You too didn’t want to see this ugly monstrosity built.

After we has seen Nawabzada safely out the door, beaming as he announced to his supporters that he had convinced you to his view, I brewed a celebratory cup of hot chai.

I knocked on the door and entered without waiting for an answer. You were smiling in to the phone, laughing as you said, ‘Yes Sir, the paperwork is ready. The Dam is ready to go ahead. I’m looking at the paperwork as we speak.’

My hands shook. I placed the teacup carefully by the papers and waited. When you hung up I said, ‘But Gigi Sahiba, you just agreed the Dam will be a complete disaster.’

‘The Nawabzada has left now, Nazo. No need to act.’

‘But the fish…’

‘Can go to hell.’

‘And the fisherman?’

‘Can leave.’

Why was I shocked at this new avatar of yours? Hadn’t you just said you too had bosses above you? And perhaps if you gave in on the Dam they would give in on the girls’ schools. I decided to leave it to you.
And so I left. But not before I knocked over your tea, accidentally of course, on the papers you were looking at so intently.

*

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‘A few days after the opposition leader’s visit, a letter of blackmail was found on Gigi Sahiba’s desk. Miss Khan was sent for right away. It doesn’t take much imagination to piece that one.’

‘On the contrary, my client was called in to be consulted. As mentioned before, Miss Khan’s opinion was highly valued by Madam Gigi.’
Things would have carried on in the same vein had it not been for the letter. Barely a few days had passed since the meeting with the opposition when an annoying Journalist wrote a particularly scathing article about of the project. Uproar followed, not that you cared. I was arranging a pacifying meeting with the Anti-Dam lobby when you sent for me. I entered to see you looking ashen, almost ghostly. For a minute I thought it was the backlash that had you in this state but no, I was wrong.

You got up when you saw me. Your forehead was scrunched up in anger and your fists balled tightly. ‘I never expected you to fall this low, Nazo,’ you shouted. ‘You have got what you want, so why resort to these tricks?’

When I didn’t reply you lowered your tone. ‘Look, is this about the Dam? Because I can assure you it is out of my hands.’

I shook my head, ‘Gigi, what are you talking about?’

‘The letter. Don’t say you have nothing to do with it. I know you well. I suppose it was too much to hope that a poor, hungry, low class woman like you can dream of something beyond the stomach.’

I felt as if you were slapping me with every word that you uttered.

‘Here I was trusting you and the backstabber that you are…’

‘Stop it,’ I said, my voice a near growl. ‘I don’t know what letter you are talking about.’ I held up my hand to stop you from talking. ‘No Gigi, you can either trust me and we can find out who is really behind this letter or you can go on insulting me and stay in the dark forever.’

You took a deep breath and turned your face away.

‘Look, Nazo, I’ll be honest with you. If it wasn’t for the photographs, I wouldn’t have suspected you.’

‘Photographs?’

You nodded. ‘Here, now you tell me, what am I suppose to think?’

You handed me an envelope, watching me closely as I opened it. I never got to the letter. The photo of two intertwined female bodies, made my hands sweat. The faces had been blacked out but there was no mistaking who it was.
‘What does he want?’

‘He or she doesn’t say. The letter just says they’ll let me know their demands when the time comes.’

A single trickle of sweat made its way down my forehead, resting on my temple.

You leaned in close and flicked it off like a fly.

‘Listen, Nazo,’ you stood so close that I was breathing your breath.

‘If this ever gets out, I will kill you.’

_I should have known you meant it._

*
‘Gigi was a visionary who could foresee change, economic growth, revolution, development. She knew that new alliances were needed. Old friends could no longer be trusted.’

‘I object, Your Honour! D.A. is insulting my client. His finger was pointing at Miss Khan when he said those last words.’

‘Actually Counsel, I was talking about countries. But as they say the guilty always feel accused. What I meant was that Gigi Sahiba knew that our country needed to form new alliances; that America alone could not be relied upon.’

‘What relevance is that to my client?’

‘Very relevant. Miss Khan did not want this to happen. It is common knowledge that the US is afraid of China’s growing influence and wanted to curtail Pakistan’s friendship with China. Now perhaps she was working for the Americans, or perhaps not, but for some reason or the other, she wanted the old status quo. These faxes and emails to the US consulate are proof.’

‘Your Honour, why would Miss Khan use her own email ID or staff number if her intentions were unclear? Surely this was a plan to implicate her.’

‘Oh but it didn’t stop at correspondence. She was intent on bodily harm. Miss Khan, is it true that you assaulted a Chinese Diplomat in Ms. Shah’s residence?’

‘She may remain quiet but here is a doctor’s report. Miss Khan hit the Diplomat so hard that one of his teeth came loose. If this isn’t an attempt to destroy diplomacy, what is?’
That afternoon you had an unexpected visitor. A man with thin yellow skin and grey slits for eyes, stormed into the house amidst the guard’s protests. He started speaking rapidly in what seemed like English but I couldn't be sure. He shook his head, gestured with his hands and stamped his foot. For such a small man, I thought, he certainly had a lot of energy. Before we could stop him, he sprinted past Refugee and me, and made his way up to your study. I don't know how he knew where you were but he knocked at the very room you were in. When you opened the door he fired off a string of insults. In the end he asked for Balgodi. Your complexion, I noticed, turned a ghostly shade of white.

‘Guards!’ You shouted for security and the men came running. ‘Calm him down. Show him to the living room.’

Immediately the security guards gripped his arms, which he shook free with three swift karate moves.

‘Don’t touch me!’ he screamed.

‘Please,’ you said. ‘Please calm down. We can talk about this.’

‘I am Diplomat,’ the small man asserted.

‘Mr. Kim, I know who you are. Please…’

‘No Madam. You have no idea who I am or what I can do.’

‘Oye!’ I shouted. How dare he talk to you like that.

He paused for a second.

‘I don't care who you are,’ I said. ‘How dare you talk to our Madam like that?’

‘Your Madam, crook,’ he said and that was when I landed him a left hand jab. The man looked shocked at being struck by a woman in a hijab but you looked even more shocked.

‘Nazo!’ you shouted as the man swayed left and right, before falling flat on his face. You looked mortified. ‘Between you and Balgodi, I don't know what I’ll do!’

The next thing I knew you were rubbing your temples and cursing as you dialed your trusted old party member Pervez Sahib’s number, ‘Please Pervez Sahib, come quickly and help me clean up this mess with the Chinese Ambassador’s attaché.’
China had not, in those days, shown its hand and I couldn't help but wonder what the fuss was all about.

‘It’s just the Chinese,’ I said walking into your study without knocking.

‘Please Nazo,’ you waved me away as you swallowed an aspirin.

‘But Gigi Sahiba, it’s not like we punched the American ambassador! In fact won’t the Americans be happy to hear this run-in?’

‘Ever heard the saying?’ you said as you picked up the phone. ‘Your enemy’s enemy is your best friend.’

So that’s how the game was played.

*

By the time back up arrived I was much more wiser and several shades calmer.

Pervez Sahib arrived in a nervous flurry and as always started talking before he had even entered the room. He fussed and fanned over the small yellow man, apologizing profusely for my behaviour, even going to the extent of making me say sorry.

‘Say sorry,’ he demanded as if to a petulant little girl. ‘Come on now, ask for his forgiveness.’ When I stayed stubbornly mute he said, ‘Oh, just say whatever you like, he won’t even know.’

I looked up at him to see if he meant it.

‘Just get the expression right,’ Pervez Sahib winked.

I went up to the Chinese man with a very solemn, sullen face.

‘Sorry Sir,’ I said to the little yellow man.

He looked at me with those little slits he had for eyes and squinted. The slits disappeared into thin black lines.

‘Osh!’ I let out, totally mystified by the disappearance.

The skin around the edge of the man’s eyes crinkled and he shook with what I could only guess was mirth.

‘You, very passionate about your Madam,’ he said.

I nodded.

‘Likewise, we passionate about our nation.’
'Harami Sala,' I swore with a smile.

'Yes, exactly,' the man said, stepping out of the room.

'Just like you,' he grinned before pulling the door shut behind him.

_Had he understood what I had said?

*

Next few days were spent keeping the Chinese away and the Americans happy. Where in all this was the time to look after your own countrymen?

It had become routine now for the newspapers to rage about you and your misdoings. Those who knew politics knew that you had little say in the house of parliament and those who knew you personally, knew that there was little you could do at the house you lived in to stop that husband of yours. I was one such person who knew both the home truths.

‘Democracy farce.’ ‘Gigi as corrupt as the General.’ Our sacrifices were in vain.’

‘Elected Government as corrupt as the Dictator.’ ‘A let down to women all over.’

They say scream a lie loud enough and it silences the truth. All those years of hard Jihadist rule had toughened the journalists. They had, in my opinion, become used to abusing those in power. Having power meant misusing it or so they tried to make the nation believe. Habits after all were difficult to break.

But I also knew that you were trying hard to balance it out. A hospital here, a shelter there, perhaps in return for all their bullying you were trying to get a repeal on the Hudood law. Although I had to say the pregnancy seemed to have dulled you mind. You seemed to have turned a blind eye to many of the things you would have raged about earlier. But I knew you well. You would never willingly do wrong to your nation. Not unless, and I sat up suddenly, as it occurred to me that perhaps you yourself did not know what was going on. After all why would they tell someone who wasn’t a player?

And just as I thought, not everything was as it seemed. You were too trusting. And it was my experience that if you trusted someone blindly, they became blind to your trust.

*
'Just like a king’s eyes and ears are his courtiers, a PM too cannot govern without complete trust in her staff. And it’s this trust, Your Honour, which is in question today.'
Barely had we settled things with the Chinese that another commotion erupted.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said, walking into the room, armed with newspapers blaring headlines that called you a liar and a cheat.

‘Have you seen the papers?’

‘Fetch my ciggies, Nazo.’

Oh no, I thought. Here we go again. The ostrich attitude, the burial, the denial…

‘Now.’

‘I will. But first, please answer me. What’s going on? Gigi, you gave me your word. You promised not to give in. You said that you will not sell out to the Chinese.’

‘I didn’t.’

I could hear the sincerity in your voice yet something was not right. You refused to meet my eye.

Suddenly the noise of glass breaking outside made you look up at me. In your eyes, I saw fear.

Shrill screams, loud thumping, raging footsteps and the next thing we knew the commotion outside had waded inside, knocking down the hundred year old wooden door in the courtyard.

Refugee came running up. His breath ragged and his eyes wide.

‘Gigi Sahiba, Madam! Oh God! Oh Prophet!’

‘They are all here,’ I murmured.

He ignored me and fell to his knees.

‘Tragedy has stuck. Gazab ho gaya! Oh no! Oh no!’

You stood patiently tapping your fingers on the desk, waiting for his theatrics to end.

‘Speak already,’ I cut him off with a little shove.

‘The Opposition leader has brought a large crowd to our door. He says if Balgodi Sahib does not come out, he’ll let the mobs loose on us. They have bats, stones, sticks, some even have guns!’

‘What?’ you looked at me. ‘Why wasn’t I informed of this? Surely he’d been planning this for a while.’
‘Gigi Sahiba, that’s what I came to tell you this morning. The papers are accusing Balgodi Sahib of selling out. They hold you accountable…’

‘How could you not inform me!’

Truth is, I had not taken the Opposition’s threat seriously. Such was my faith in you that I knew you’d do nothing wrong. I should have known though, that Balgodi could not be trusted. Now you had to suffer, all because of that greedy no-good husband of yours.

‘Get out,’ you said.

Refugee hurried out but I stayed put.

You switched on the TV.

‘The police has issued an arrest warrant against Mr. Billah Balgodi,’ the newsreader announced on the screen. ‘It is said that a case has been filed against the PM’s husband. The complaint has been registered on behalf of the residents of the Dam affected district by a female lawyer who does not wish to be named for security reasons.’

On television the opposition leader praised him, ‘This lawyer has done what we all could not do. Registered an FBI against a powerful man despite threats. His bravery must be applauded.’

You flicked channels and came across the Opposition leader nodding his bald head and addressing a think tank, ‘But of course, selling the nation's resources is unconstitutional. This lawyer has raised an important point. It must be stopped. The court is right to halt the proceedings and to issue a warrant for Mr. Balgodi arrest’s.’

You switched it off.

‘Nazo?’

I looked up expecting you to yell.

But you seemed calm. Calmer then I expected. Almost pleased, if I’m not mistaken.

‘Don’t say anything to anyone till I say so. Do you understand?’

Before I could ask you anything more, there was a knock on the study door. Your left eye twitched as you told me to answer it. A tall, figure clad in a long black burqa, stood outside.

‘Yes?’ I asked, ‘Who let you in? What do you want?’

‘I’ll handle this, Nazo,’ you said pushing me aside. ‘You go and hold off the Press.'
Remember, no comments.

I stood rooted, curiosity digging my heels deep.

‘Go on, off you go.’

I stepped out but did not leave. Instead I knelt down and peered through the keyhole.

‘Did you bring it?’

A pair of hands, the shade of exquisite ivory emerged from the folds of the black Burqa. The skin was smooth, the nails clean and cut neatly. But something seemed out of place. Perhaps it was the sheer size of the hands. Surely they were too big to be a woman’s. I tried to peer at the woman’s veiled face but even her eyes were concealed behind a pair of thick sunglasses. The woman thrust forward a brown file and if it wasn’t for the large white knuckles and the hairy wrists, I would never have guessed what you were up to.

Money exchanged hands. Though the notes were wrapped in yesterday’s newspaper, I could tell what was inside it. Why did people bother to wrap cash in paper? Anybody could guess what was inside even if they weren’t trying. I watched the wordless exchange than hid behind the curtains when I saw the figure approaching the door, her large Nike sneakers giving her away, most likely as the undisclosed lawyer who had halted the Dam’s sale.

As soon as the woman came out of the study, I slid out after her. By now I knew, I wouldn't get any answers from you.

‘Nazo,’ you called after me just as I descended the staircase. I pretended not to hear and was about to catch up with the woman but you shouted louder. I stopped, aware that your call was more to alert the woman than to beckon me. The woman hurried her step, exited through the back door to avoid the crowds and lunged into a waiting car. I watched from the window as the car sped down the street. There was, I noticed, no number plate.

*

Balgodi was arrested. We watched open mouthed as the police handcuffed him in
his own house. As expected he kicked up a fuss, shouted threats and swore loud enough to wake up the neighbourhood. The police went about doing their job almost apologetically, their heads bowed, certain that when he was released they would all lose their jobs. In the end when nothing worked he looked at you like a petulant child who was being dragged away to boarding school while the parents watched.

‘Gigi,’ he pleaded. ‘Tell them to stop.’

And to my surprise you didn’t. You stood their stoically clutching your belly, playing the great sacrificing leader who puts the nation before family. Wah Gigi! You could act when you wanted to.

Or perhaps, it suddenly occurred to me, you weren’t acting.

Instantly I felt happier.

‘Let them do their job, dear husband,’ you said tragically, a few crocodile tears glinting at the corner of your eyelids. ‘We cannot take the law in our own hands. If you are innocent, of which I am certain, you will soon be free.’

The police nodded appreciatively and the media was grateful for a sound-bite they could now replay all day. Personally I thought, a few days in jail would do the bastard good.

*
‘In a statement to the press, Mr. Balgodi has clearly stated that while he was in jail, Gigi Madam was misinformed by those close to her, causing her to misjudge the seriousness of the situation. Three guesses he was talking about Miss Khan...’
With Balgodi in jail a new era began in your political career. Once again you were the golden girl who put the law ahead of her own family. Even the Maulanas, who had berated you earlier for throwing your Lord and Master in jail, breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone seemed pleasantly shocked at the sudden end to Balgodi’s corruption. But like happiness, peace doesn't last too long either.

Now that the Dam issue had come to a halt, another crisis erupted. The head Clergyman of the Central Church of Punjab filed a case against you. During the flash floods last week, the entire village of Monti Basant had been wiped out. The Clergyman accused you of genocide. He issued press statements against you, saying that you were trying to wipe out the Christian population. He argued it was to build a vote bank of Sunni Muslims whom you had offered to resettle in a nearby village. All this after Balgodi had sold their ‘Masih’ land to a Multinational Company. Modern Colonizers the clergyman called them.

But it didn’t end there. I couldn’t help but relish when Balgodi sent word from jail. Once again he stuck his little foot in his big mouth with, ‘Why can’t the minority understand that foreign investment is good for us? The Christians should make room for progress instead of standing in its way.’

The message got in the hands of the press, accidentally of course, and started a crossfire.

‘So kill us off?’ The Christian leaders raged, ‘Is that your solution,’ they demanded. The Priest of the Sindh Central Church filed a lawsuit against the company. Others started to follow. The head of Christians Association in Karachi wrote a scathing letter to the press. The Minority leaders accused you of murder. The Opposition took the opportunity to jump up and organize a march, right outside your residence.

‘It is a well known fact, Ladies and Gentlemen,’ Nawabzada said in a speech outside the gates. ‘The Balgodi family are landowners who have long since exploited us peasants. Not satisfied with our sweat and toil, they now want our blood too. Will you let them get away with it?’

‘No!’ a chorus rose up from the crowd.

‘Down with Balgodi. Down with his wife.’ ‘Death onto them.’
‘Who pays these people,’ I said watching the drama from your study window.

Outside the Opposition leader wiped his round bald head and continued to rage like a black cloud.

‘The Balgodis have caused these floods. They alone are responsible. Their carelessness, their selfishness, their discrimination has caused the death of two hundred Christian villagers! There is no Gigi Shah. A wife does what her husband wants her to!’

‘Death on to them!’ the crowds cheered. ‘Down with Gigi Shah!’

‘Enough,’ I drew the curtains with a flourish. ‘Nawabzada is one to be giving marital advice. And besides just how can you be held responsible?’ I asked. ‘Aren’t floods an act of God?’

‘Apparently not,’ you said, without looking up. ‘The journalists are saying the flash floods were caused by manmade faults.’

‘What rubbish,’ I said. ‘Next they will say you lured the devil away from angelhood!’

You looked up from your files and stared thoughtfully at a spot on the wall. ‘I fear, Nazo, they may be right. To show the need for a new Dam, the Punjab government did not use the Kerbela Dam as it should have been used.’

‘You mean they deliberately let innocent people die to prove a point?’

‘It’s about money, Nazo. If they can prove the Dam is a must, they would get millions of dollars from the World Bank. And the dough would go straight into their pockets.’

‘But Gigi, you can’t let that happen!’

‘Oh Nazo, stop looking at me like I’m a magician who’ll whip out a wand and reform their corrupt selfish attitudes. My powers are limited.’

‘But your brain isn’t.’

‘What are you on about?’

‘Look how you managed to get rid of Balgoji.’

‘Excuse me?’ You raised your head slowly and turned your whole self to look at me.

‘Your plan,’ I said. ‘You know, to get rid of him?’

‘I did not plot to get anyone behind bars. Least of all my own husband.’
You stood up, your eyes on me.
‘I have nothing to hide.’
‘Of course,’ I said. Inside I thought, what were you up to now, Gigi? Why this sudden performance? I wondered if perhaps you wanted the Dam to be built. Could it be, that one of the pockets to get filled was yours?

I wasn’t too far off.

*

Few weeks later, the newspaper splashed pictures of Starry Mahal, your huge palatial house that had been purchased in Scotland, secretly and recently. A few weeks ago I would have never even doubted that Balgodi alone was behind this. I would not even have suspected your involvement but now with him behind bars, I wasn’t so sure.

*

That night I found you slumped on your desk, a glass of Whisky and an overflowing ashtray your only company.
‘The child wants to say goodnight,’ I said bringing the wrong child in.

You waved at him without looking up. By now the Calpol had made him permanently groggy. He always seemed slightly dazed and half asleep. I called Refugee to take him away and he toddled out, his head flopping to one side in perpetual drowsiness. You didn’t seem to notice.

Just as well I thought turning my attention back to you. You had bigger things to worry about. Like how to get out of the latest scandal your husband had embroiled you in. I shuddered to think that if he could influence you so from inside a prison, what would he do when he got out?

‘Gigi, don't worry,’ I said more out of loyalty then conviction. ‘It is probably another of the Opposition leader’s schemes to make you look corrupt. Since you turned your husband in, the public has been in your favour. They must be trying to manipulate public opinion by splashing all this nonsense in the papers.’
You shook your head. ‘It’s not so simple Nazo. The media and the Clergy are blaming me,’ you said rubbing your temples. ‘As if I singlehandedly am responsible for everything that went wrong.’

‘Surely Gigi, they have enough sense to...’

‘See for yourself.’

You turned on the TV.

Sure enough on a talk show a well known political analyst was saying, ‘To get funds from the IMF for a new Dam, the government deliberately put lives at risk. The waters were intentionally misdirected, the floodgates opened when they should have been shut. The PM alone is responsible for this. It is impossible that she had no knowledge of what was happening under her nose!’

You switched the channel.

‘Gigi’s Starry Mahal! A palatial home bought with innocent taxpayer’s money! Built on the deathbeds of those who died in the Kerbela Dam floods! Who is to blame if not our corrupt leaders?’

You switched again to find a fiery old ex-party worker demanding the Government’s resignation. ‘Fresh elections should be held. We must get rid of this corrupt regime.’

You turned off the TV and looked at me.

‘What have I done, Nazo?’

‘You’ve done the right thing. The honest thing.’ The fool that I was, I thought you were talking about turning him in.

You laughed a hollow little laugh. ‘I knew about the Starry Mahal.’

‘You did?’ For a second I wondered if I had misheard you.

‘I...I wanted to safeguard my daughter’s future. He... he said it was for her...her wedding dowry...’

Wedding dowry, daughter’s future...was I hearing you right? You, a woman who had taken on the Generals and the Jihadists to battle for women’s rights was planning her unborn daughter’s dowry?

‘Gigi Sahiba, how can you even talk about such a disgusting tradition like dowry? These are not your words. This is Balgodi talking. He’s playing with your mind, Gigi.'
He’s much more clever then anyone gives him credit for.’

‘He is clever, that is true.’

‘Clever as a slimy eel.’

You leaned forward and placed your hands under your chin.

‘You think if Balgodi was here, he would have stuffed their mouths shut?’

‘Don’t even think about it, Gigi.’

You rubbed your swollen belly and handed me a newspaper. On the front page there was a picture of your jailbird husband looking serious and contemplative.

‘This would never have happened if I had been there to protect my wife. I was her eyes and ears. Putting me in jail was the Opposition’s plan. Once I am out, I will shut that Nawabzada up so tight, he’ll forget where his mouth was.’

I looked up from the paper to see you reaching for the phone. ‘No,’ I whispered but it was too late to stop you. Your hand was already on the dial.

*
'The Moghul kings used to dress up as peasants to roam their kingdom at night. But modern day politicians have no choice but to depend on intelligence from their subordinates. Miss Khan was a trusted soldier who gave into greed. She misled her leader, her country. As a Political Secretary was it not her duty to keep Gigi Sahiba aware of the situation?

‘My client has never neglected her work.’

‘In 1989, hundreds of soldiers lost their lives in a fake war. A war that was planned behind Gigi’s back, an event that shattered her image in the public eye. As Political Secretary was it not your duty, Miss Khan, to inform her of public opinion?’

‘Can the Mr. Omar provide any evidence that proves Miss Khan had not done her duty? Please see, Your Honour, Exhibit D, a record of newspaper clippings and daily faxes which Miss Khan meticulously recorded and presented to Madam every morning. But as the saying goes, one can take a horse to water, not force it to drink.’
A new crisis erupted. The country found itself at war.

A mountain peak that was uninhabitable, a barren piece of land no good to anyone was being fought over with the archenemy.

‘Now why would anyone post their Army to protect a peak that’s no good to anyone?’ I said, as I read out the day’s appointment, a meeting with the Army General being top of the agenda.

‘Land is land,’ you replied without looking up from your notes. ‘We cannot give up even an inch, small as we are in size from India.’

I shook my head.

‘No Gigi Sahiba, a nation is made by its hands not by its lands.’

‘Well said,’ you smiled. ‘But still, it is a glacier. A source of water...’

‘Gigi, these water wars will take our nation down. Is it really worth the blood of our young men? Look at the Army causalities and for what? Peak or no peak, our taps are still dry!’

I heard the sound of clapping behind me.

‘Wah! Wah! Nazo jee! Very good, Kya baat hai. Where did you learn to sprout such wisdom?’

I took a step back.

Balgodi came forward. ‘Surprised to see me? Didn’t you tell her about my release, Gigi?’

He placed his hand on your shoulder, his eyes still on me. ‘You don't seem happy to see me Nazo. What to do, not even the strongest jail can keep me in for long.’

I swallowed hard thinking, that was all I needed- for Balgodi to suspect me as the woman who’d filed the case against him.

Twirling the ends of his moustache he strolled towards me and said, ‘Perhaps we’ve given you too much freedom.’

I winced as he pinched my cheek.

‘Clip her wings, Gigi. She is flying too high.’

I stepped back, a sick fear rising up my throat.

‘Now get out.’
In my haste to leave, I left my appointment diary behind. Outside, I stood at the door, about to knock when I heard him say, ‘I hope you have learnt your lesson. You are nothing without me, understand, nothing? A woman without a man is like a fish out of water. What did you think, Gigi? That you could leave me to rot in jails while you played Gandhi? The Army and ISI will chew you up and you would not even know. It is because of me that you are in that Chair, you understand? And what did you do for me? Send me to jail! You ungrateful woman.’

‘It...it helped the image of the party...’

‘Fuck the image of the party! People here have short memories. Your big sacrifice has already been wiped out by the floods and the discovery of our Palace. The public just needs flesh to bite on, you understand? Don’t you see, they are there to be exploited. It’s their fate, their need! Just like a whore needs to be fucked.’

I burst into the room.

‘Yes?’ he barked.

I stared at you. You were sitting there calmly. No tears, no remorse, not even clenched fists.

‘I....I just wanted to ask what should Refugee make for lunch?’

‘Cook all my favourite dishes, what else, you stupid woman? I’ve been having watery lentils for four long weeks. Meat, I want good meat.’

His mobile rang just then and he waved me away.

I closed the door softly and stood outside. Any minute now, I thought to myself, you’d stand up and put the bastard back in his place.

‘There, that’s sorted,’ I heard him say as he clicked his phone shut. ‘The new Army Chief has agreed to a meeting. Here, at 4 pm today.’

‘Now remember, Gigi, let him do the talking. It was hard enough negotiating this one. Do you even realize how much this skirmish with India over the peak is causing the Defense Budget? It all comes out of the Central Treasury you know. Less money for us.’

‘Oh well,’ he continued his monologue, ‘At least the public will be distracted. A battle with India always makes them forget about domestic issues. Just you wait and see, a few more days and nobody will even remember the Floods or the Palace. And don’t you dare pay any attention to that goof ball Pervaz Sahib or that witch Nazo. They are all out
I waited outside hoping to hear a reply. But none came. Not even one tiny protest at this manipulation, this rampant corruption, these baseless accusations.

I began to wonder Gigi, whose side were you really on?
‘Just look at this testimony of an old widow who lost her son to war. When she knocked on Gigi’s door for justice, Miss Khan had her thrown out. I’m sure that Gigi Sahiba would have reacted differently. But what would a childless woman like Miss Khan know of a mother’s pain.’

‘I’m not childless, Omar Sir. I just chose not to be a mother.’
The blue sky was streaked with orange. I yawned and stretched. Outside the sun was just rising from its slumber. I scowled at the nervous buzzing of a mosquito as it flitted lazily around me. It had been a restless night and the Muezzin’s high-pitched call from the nearby mosque added to my agitation. I slapped the mosquito dead on my arm.

Hearing me stir, Refugee called out from outside, ‘Get up, Nazo Madam. Say hello to God too sometimes.’

‘Get lost,’ I shouted as I picked up a cigarette and lit it.

Refugee poked his head around my door.

‘Tauba tauba,’ he touched his earlobes. ‘God forbid, Nazo, since when have you picked up this nasty habit?’

For a moment I thought he meant missing my prayers. It was only when he began to cough and told me to put the vile thing away that I realized he meant cigarettes.

Truth be told, even I had no idea when I had started to smoke. I thought back to a saying I had heard once about owners becoming like their pets. But it was the other way around in my case.

‘Well?’ he said leaning against the doorway, his huge belly protruding in front of him like a giant balloon.

‘Times change,’ I said. ‘Now just look at you. Such a starved, skinny refugee boy you were in London and now what a fat monster you’ve become.’

‘Oye,’ Refugee shouted throwing a dishcloth at me.

Before I could respond, a loud banging came from outside. It was as if someone was rattling the iron gates with all their might. We both ran outside to see the guards trying to hold back an old woman who kept throwing herself at the door. She was beating her chest and wailing as only a mother could do, ‘Murderer, killer, she took away my son. My only son! Dead! Come out you witch.’

I looked up towards the closed shutters of your window. Not even a stir.

‘Calm down, old woman.’

One of the bearded guards who’d left his prayers to rush over, grabbed her by the shoulders.

‘Take control of yourself,’ he said shaking her by the shoulders.
‘They killed my son! Sent him to that fake war. Butchers! Murderers! Killers!’
‘Be quiet!’ the guard shouted.
I rushed out.
‘Leave her!’
I turned to the old woman.
‘Be patient, Amma. Have faith in God. Your son died for the Nation, Amma,’ I said. ‘He’s a martyr.’
The old woman looked at me with such hatred that I had to lower my gaze. She flung her long chaddar at me and said, ‘Cover yourself, woman.’
I looked down to see that I had rushed out in my night clothes, my head uncovered, my braless breasts visible through the thin cloth.
‘Shameless, all of you,’ she said and turned to go.
I let out a slow breath and bent down to pick up the piece of cloth at my feet.
At that very moment she turned around suddenly and threw a brick at me. It went flying over my head and smashed the French window behind. A loud crash and then complete silence.
You slept on, as only the conscienceless do.

*

I brought you the morning post. More letters from widows and mothers who’d lost their sons in this useless battle.
‘Do you really have no say in this?’
‘No,’ you replied.
‘Gigi Sahiba, you are the Prime Minister. How can a country go to war without your consent? How do you expect me to swallow such farce?’
‘Then don’t.’
You rose up from the chair as if to leave. Than just as suddenly you sat back down.
‘I’m powerless.’
I couldn’t help but laugh.
‘If you are not powerful in the PM’s chair then what use is it?’
To my surprise you too broke into a laugh.

‘It must be Pakistan’s worst kept secret. But the PM really is just a puppet. You know who really rules Pakistan, Nazo? The Army. And whatever is left is divided between the ISI and politicians. The three forces are tussling with each other for power. But the real players are the Military.’

‘And you let them be?’

You looked up and smiled, Ah Nazo, sometimes you have to lose something to gain something. When you grow up, you’ll understand.’

Well then, I had better start growing.

*
‘The war was just the beginning, Your Honour. Miss Khan was testing waters with this. The real corruption began afterwards...’
They say the more a caterpillar struggles in his cocoon the more beautiful a butterfly it emerges. You had been struggling for a while but there were no signs of the end. Things were becoming worse by the day yet you could do nothing. You had fought so much, lost so much. When would the metamorphosis be complete?

The time had come to give you a good push. You were so close, yet so far. Once again jubilation turned into despair and I found you hunched on your desk with your head in your hands.

‘Gigi Sahiba?’ I burst in holding a confidential fax from your Indian counterpart. ‘Look at this! The Indian PM wants to put a stop to it. He wants a ceasefire.’

I expected you to jump out of your chair but you remained rooted to the spot.

‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘Army Chief has said no,’ you said flatly.

‘Fuck the Army chief,’ I shouted. ‘Put your foot down. Tell them you won’t let your people be crucified like this.’

‘You know I can’t. They’ll get rid of me and put someone who listens in charge.’

‘But if you don’t stop this war, the people of this country will do the same to you.’

Your silence was earsplitting.

Slowly I began to realize that this was your manner. You came close to achieving something then gave up just before you got to it. Perhaps you were afraid. Afraid of your own emotions, your own potential, your own power. You made things happen. Yet became stagnant at the realization that you could. You craved power yet you did not know what to do with it once you possessed it. Sometimes I wondered if you had become so obsessed at restoring your father’s legacy that you had no idea how the system actually worked. You with all your foreign education, you really thought that the country could be run with good will alone.

What a joke.

Just like a car needed petrol to run, a politician needed power. And power could never be handed over. It had to be snatched.

‘Gigi, you have to do something,’ I cried, my voice shrill and panicky with rebellion. But you were lost in some sleepless stupor. You were already miles away
looking at a tiny black and white print of your unborn’s latest ultrasound. Your features twisted in some maternal epiphany. The Indian PM’s fax lay untouched on your desk.

No Gigi, you could not do it. I had given you every chance. Had sold myself to smooth your path but you were a coward. You were afraid of your own power. You did not deserve it. You had to go - clearly you weren't the right person for this job. But then who was?

I looked into the mirror and knew the answer was me.

*
'Like I mentioned, Your Honour, Miss Khan was a dedicated employee and her only ambition was to serve.'

'Is Counsel saying that Miss Khan never took advantage of her position in Gigi Sahiba’s household to accumulate bribes and wield unauthorized power over others?'

'A preposterous accusation.'

'Well then, perhaps these bank statements of numerous deposits in her account might jog her memory? Surely a servant girl could not be drawing a salary such as this?'}
Like the cigarette smoking, it began so seamlessly that I myself did not notice how or when it all started. Perhaps it was when that industrialist called to arrange a meeting with you and I slammed the phone down, still smarting from your inertia on stopping the useless war. Twenty minutes later I found a briefcase on my desk filed with bundles of thousand Rupee notes and a piece of paper that said, ‘Please grant us an audience with Madam for five minutes. If she gives the building contracts to us, there will be more of this coming your way.’

I folded the note and carrying the case under my arm, marched up to your bedroom. I was hoping you could ring the corrupt industrialist and return the money before Balgodi saw it. I knocked but you weren’t in. I was about to bin the note and return the money myself, when a thought occurred to me. I found myself walking up to your dresser. I ran a hand over your creams and then looked at my reflection. I had the same pale complexion as you but whereas yours was creamy and glowed, mine was shod with pimples and dry patches from years of hard water and cheap soaps. We were both orphans but you were the heiress to a political dynasty and I a servant’s daughter destined to be a servant. Holding all that money in my hands I thought, why did it have to be this way? Why couldn’t a servant’s daughter become a Prime Minister and a PM’s child, her P.A?

Something sounded and I looked down to see I had crushed your jar of face cream. Blood seeped out of my palm and mingled with the thick white of the cream. It was a strange sensation. I rubbed my palms together but the two wouldn’t mix. Like us, I found myself thinking. We were both women, we both had the same colour blood running through us, keeping us alive, egging us on. But we could not be more different. You could touch heights that I would never be allowed to go near. What separated us? Glass walls which like promises were made to be broken.

It was time for a change.

*  

Back in the office, I emptied the money into the bin. ‘I’m taking out the trash,’ I shouted to Refugee as I closed the study door. But instead, I headed to the servant
quarters.

Later when I had hidden the bin bag under my mattress, I found the Industrialist’s note. I memorized the number and then did what I always did with unwanted paper. I chewed slowly, like a dessert camel in no hurry to get anywhere. It was all about the journey you see. The destination was secondary.

The following afternoon, I cancelled all your meetings with contractors and made sure that only the man who had sent me the briefcase got to see you. Naturally the contract was his. The next day I waited in anticipation for the next installment but nothing came. I knew what I had to do. I sat on his file till in desperation he called to ask why the paperwork had been delayed.

‘You tell me, Sir,’ I said and before long another briefcase arrived at my desk.

*And that is how it all began.*

At first the bribes were small and the jobs too. I'd tell people you weren't in when you were, not to keep you from something but to see how badly they wanted to meet you. Of all things I loved to make people wait for an audience with you. It made me feel like you were the queen, your authority was respected, you alone held sway over their destinies. I wanted so much for them to realize how important you were. And it worked. As it is with most things in life, when you pay for something, you appreciate it more. So, I put a price on it. First it was for meetings, then it was for papers that needed your signature, orders that needed verification, contracts, bills, I held onto all sorts of things causing unnecessary delays. As the tasks grew, so did the bribes.

*It was then I realized, I wasn’t alone.*

*

It turned out that I was not the only one playing this game. I already knew Balgodi’s intentions were not pure like mine but I had no idea he was not alone. There were so many other middlemen between you and the nation! There were hundreds of other departments where projects could be stalled, tenders halted, files stuck. All these people were in it for a cut and by the time a case reached you, the person would be at the end of his tether. I wondered if you too asked for a cut but then dismissed the thought.
What did you need money for?

But sometimes the closer you look the less you see.

I suppose that was the only explanation for your aloofness, Gigi. Else how could you not see the rampant corruption, the injustice, the bribes taking place right under your nose?

Lucky for you, I was there to restore some checks and balances. I came up with a system. For every five bribes I took, I gave three back to a women’s cause. I guess you could call me Robin Hood Nazo.

You think I lie, but I have no desire to make myself feel important. That’s for people who doubt themselves. I tell it straight. Did you know, if it wasn’t for me, a 60 year old women with six daughters, two of them widowed would have remained homeless. Not because she couldn’t afford one but because she invested all her savings into a Government housing scheme only to be refused possession. She couldn’t pay any more bribes, you see.

When she came to me, she had bills and paperwork saying she had moved in.

She took me to her shack outside the multi story building and said, ‘Tell me. She too is a woman and a mother. How can your Madam let this happen? Her officers lie, ask for bribes, harass my girls! We powerless women live under the open sky, roofless, despite paying them every cent we had for a house. And they show us as living here when the house is padlocked. No one comes to see the reality. They go by the fake papers.’

‘I have come,’ I said.

She looked at me with her hazy cataract ridden eyes. I’m not sure if it was disbelief or disillusionment I saw reflected but I wish I had been there to see her face when I sent ten of the city’s best goons to throw out the corrupt government contractor from the building. By now I knew it was useless talking to you. You’d sing your old song about how powerless you were. And the government chain of command would take years for the thing to be corrected legally. I had to make a choice and unlike you, Gigi, I chose to act.

*You see sometimes might is right.*
‘The deposits on Miss Khan’s balance sheet could match the earnings of a stock broker. A very successful one at that. But what is disturbing is that there are an equal number of withdrawals. In fact the credits overshadow the debits.’

‘The statements could be fake. How can Mr. Omar proof this is a genuine account?’

‘There is no doubt that this bank account belongs to Miss Khan. The question is who was she moving these funds to? A terrorist organization perhaps? Or maybe she had been plotting the assassination years ahead…’
It was a hot afternoon and I walked back to my room to find an even steamier scene unfolding.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’

I caught Refugee fooling around on my mattress one afternoon. The young tea boy Chanchar was pinned under him.

‘You couldn’t find any other place for….for,’ I smacked my head for lack of a better word.

‘Relax,’ Refugee said, putting his vest back on. ‘As it is your mattress is rock hard. Who can have any fun on this lumpy piece of turd.’

If only he knew why.

‘Well than take your soft pudgy ass and your thin bamboo stick lover and get out.’ Refugee laughed and said, ‘Don’t get angry, Nazo. You too have once loved.’

‘Don’t you two have any chickens to slaughter, goats to kill, eggs to whip?’ I pushed them out and bolted the room from inside.

Immediately I stripped the sheets and with all my strength flipped the mattress. I stuck my hand in and felt around the cotton stuffing. Nothing.

For a moment I berated myself for leaving the door unlocked. How could I have been so careless. What if they had robbed me?

And then I felt it. The thin crisp sensation of bank notes. Quickly I pulled each one out and stuffed them into a bin bag.

It was time to open a bank account.

*

Depositing money in a bank, turned out harder than borrowing it. Eventually it was Refugee who introduced me to the bank and helped me open an account.

In return I had to help him out.

‘Why do you only help women, Nazo?’ Refugee argued and showed me the photo of a man who had filed a case against the admissions committee of a prestigious college.

‘Because nobody else does.’
But Refugee was persistent. Much as I was reluctant, I took on the matter.

This man unlike most creatures of his gender wanted to educate his daughter. The cynic in me believed that it was because he had no sons but Refugee, who I suspected was probably getting a commission, convinced me otherwise.

‘Give him a shadow of doubt,’ he pleaded, ‘a mere sliver.’

After some poking, I found that he had taken a loan to get his daughter into the National Engineering College. But by the time he got the loan passed he’d had to bribe so many people that the entire loan amount went into the bribery. His daughter, Refugee told me, was one of the only three girls, to pass the entrance exam, had to sit out the year. But the next year too she had to defer, as the father did not have sufficient funds. She was promised a government bursary the following year. But when the year came they found her seat had been sold to someone else. The girl was crushed. The father defeated. The man had defied society, kept his daughter at home, refusing to let her marry so she could study and now that too did not seem likely.

But I was impressed with Refugee’s report. Despite the let down the father had not given up his fight, unlike some people who born into power and prestige took their privilege for granted. He continued to struggle for his daughter’s rights and I liked a struggler. My favorite being the upturned beetle who continues to kick his legs in the air. You see, I liked the idea of deciding its destiny. The power to crush the beetle or to turn it upright. And so I took on this little beetle. But how was I to know, playing God was not allowed to women…

Azizullah was his name. He paid Refugee the cut but I waited a few months before I saw him. I wanted to see if he gave up.

Refugee too had lost contact with him when suddenly one day I read about him in the paper. I rang up the journalist and got his number. The journalist was incredulous. ‘Gigi Madam herself wants to see a small man like him?’ he asked.

I sighed. Why do we believe the most horrid stories without a blink of the eye and if someone tries to do good, what do you get? Suspicion and sarcasm.

Following day I tried to reach Azizullah. When finally I got through, I said, ‘This is your lucky day. Gigi Sahiba wants to see you.’

He hung up on me.
‘Why are you joking sister,’ he said in a resigned voice, when I called back. ‘Why would the PM meet us? As it is they have thrown my case out of the courts because I did not have money to bribe a hearing. Leave us alone now. Please, I have no more bribes to offer.’

Like I said, suspicion and sarcasm…

*

It took many more calls before I convinced him. When the day came, I cancelled your meeting with a rich businessman wanting to open yet another Cooking oil factory and gave Azizullah the slot. My efforts did not go to waste.

You remembered him from the papers and immediately made calls on his behalf. See Gigi, I knew it. Deep inside you still cared. Your heart was in the right place. And that’s what really mattered.

‘Get the Principal,’ you said on the phone.

Azizullah sat resigned in front of you. Listless hands in his lap, head hung low, hopelessness stooping his shoulders and curving his spine, unable to believe his luck could change.

He shook his frail head and mumbled, ‘Perhaps I should just get her married.’

I saw a familiar flash of rage, two purple spots appeared and disappeared on your face. You said nothing but when the Principal came on the line, you did not greet him. Instead you asked, ‘How many years to your retirement, Mr. Principal?’

Subtle yet deadly.

I imagined the balding principal squirming in his chair as he absorbed the full impact of your words. Frantic pleading, like mice running skelter came from the earpiece. You held it away till it was over.

‘Now shut up and listen,’ you said. ‘The girl’s name is Rehmat Fatima. It is not a favour I am asking. Give her, her right. If she has cleared the entrance, granted a bursary, how dare you stop her admission? On what grounds? Oh don’t give me reasons. Not in my administration, you are not getting away with this.’

The next day papers led with the news of Rehmat Fatima’s admission and your
success. You restored the girl’s admission and in the process, your own formidable reputation.

And me? I remained in the shadows, happy to have set things straight.

*

But as always where there is light, there is darkness. A few days later I got a tearful call from the girl to say she had once again been dropped from the college.

‘Why?’ I asked, shocked that anyone could overturn the PM’s decision.

‘The college principal said it had been pre-allocated to a boy. My admission was a mistake. He said PM Sahiba herself overturned it yesterday…’

‘What nonsense,’ I shouted. ‘Gigi Sahiba was not even in the city yesterday. Let me find out the real story.’

I rang her father.

‘Is this how you repay Gigi Sahiba? She put herself on the line to help you and you flung it back in her face? You small people are all the same. Tell me, how much did you sell it for?’

The man was quiet for a while then said, ‘Miss Khan, you are right to tell me off but we small people have nothing save for our honour and when that is threatened…’

I was taken aback. ‘Who threatened you?’

‘At first they tried nicely. Said girls were a waste of a degree as they just got married after college while a boy would go on to earn and feed a family. The Principal’s PA begged me to give it up and when I didn’t, I started getting threats from unknown people. They said they would kidnap me, dishonour my daughter…’ he broke down.

So the Jihadists were back I thought. Aloud I said, ‘Don’t worry. I will take care of them. We’ll soon have her back in that college.’

‘It is too much for an old man like me, Miss Khan. I just wanted my daughter to become independent but perhaps it’s true, women are better off married. An unmarried daughter is a danger. I don’t want her to study anymore.’

‘Your daughter will go to college, but it might have to be a lesser known one. Perhaps a private one.’
‘Thank you but we have had enough.’
‘You can’t give up.’
‘Why not? Who are you to stop my daughter’s marriage?’
Not again, I thought.
‘Put your daughter on the line.’
The man passed the phone to her amidst great choking sobs.
‘I don’t care where I study Nazo Baji,’ she said as soon as she came on the line.
‘But please, I just want to become someone. I don’t mind going private but I can’t burden my father with the expense.’
‘You don’t have to worry about that. Just study hard and show them that a woman can do something useful besides cooking.’

*

It turned out the Jihadists weren’t behind this after all but someone much closer to home. It didn’t take much investigation to find out that the student the seat had been given to was Balgodi’s lazy nephew. You’d think a villain would get tired of being so predictable but not your husband.

There were fireworks of a different kind that night and I only hoped Balgodi didn’t find out about my role in it all. After all I’d kept his dirty secrets buried for so long.

I arranged for the actress Dolly to visit him at his office. What followed is not hard to guess except what he did not know was that it was all prearranged.

I started a rumour of their flirtation and sent you a copy of the cheque he made out to the actress for her services. When he got home that night you demanded an explanation. Of course he had none, so he stammered and stuttered, disbelief dripping from his face.

‘What actress? What money?’ The man couldn’t think on his feet. Not even to save his life.

I stepped in.

‘Balgodi Sahib is setting up a cultural fund and Madame Dolly was hired to do consultancy. He tried to hold her off but she kept throwing herself at him. The whole
office is witness.’

He looked at me in surprise and then began nodding his head like a china dog.

‘Yes, yes, oh yes.’

You narrowed your eyes at me before turning your back at him, your belly just beginning to swell.

*

Later that night I found him in the lounge, alone. I approached him with a glass of whisky.

‘Sir,’ I said.

‘I thought a dog’s curved tail could never be straightened, Nazo,’ he grinned taking the glass from my hands, his fingers lingering on mine longer than necessary.

‘I’m not a dog.’

‘Right, my mistake. You’re a bitch.’

‘They keep the mice away, Sir.’

I looked down as he twirled his rat like whiskers and smiled, ‘Thanks for helping me tonight.’

‘My pleasure, Sir.’

‘So what do you want from me?’ he grinned.

‘The girl whose seat you snatched…’

‘What? What girl? What seat?’

‘The Engineering student whose seat Gigi Sahiba herself restored.’

‘That girl chose to get married. Sensible thing to do.’

‘Yes, but you see, Sir, the media has been asking me who got the seat. For some reason they think a corrupt politician has something to do with it.’

Balgodi nearly choked on his drink.

‘What did you tell them?’

‘I didn’t give them any names, Sir, but…’

‘But what?’

‘But I told them that you would compensate the college’s injustice by providing a
lavish dowry for the poor girl. After all she willingly gave up the seat to a boy after all
the trouble Gigi Sahiba went through. You know what I mean, Sir?’

He leaned back and looked me up and down.

‘Impressive.’

‘I learn from the best, Sir.’

‘Hmm, dowry. Now that’s a good idea. A good solid tradition. And as I always say
a girl’s place is at home, behind the stove.’

‘Yes Sir. I have the cheque ready, Sir. You just sign it.’

He held out his hand regally, then let out a yelp.

‘Ten million!’

‘The cost of sealing one’s lips is high, Sir. Besides, it’s a one off.’

‘And how do I know I can trust you?’

‘Let’s just call it, honour amongst thieves.’

*
‘Unfortunately it didn’t stop at the bribes. The corruption was spreading. Important secrets were leaked. The Nuclear program being one such confidential document that got into the wrong hands.’

‘My client has denied any knowledge of it.’

‘Then why do we have a copy of a fax regarding the handover of Dr. Kabir to the Iranians, sent to the Army HQ from Shah House using Miss Khan’s swipe card and password?’

‘Like I told you before, it’s a set up. Any one could have used it to implicate Miss Khan or perhaps to save their own backs.’

‘They could have but how do you explain that the very same day she visited an Army Major. Co-incidence Miss Khan or is there a backstory to this as well?’
Just like the sea takes you in deep without you realizing, I found the sand slipping beneath my feet one day. It all began with a simple phone call. From Iran. I should have known, there is nothing simple about Iran.

‘Hello, Gigi Shah’s PA speaking.’

‘My dear Lady,’ the voice on the other end was heavily accented, ‘I am representative of the President, his Highness, the Honourable Ahmed Mojahideen, Security Head of the Republic of Iran. I am calling today because we wish to maintain confidential talks with your Madam. I repeat, confidential.’

Now I had no way of knowing if this man really was calling from Iran. After all why wouldn't the Ambassador contact us directly if it was so? Unless of course it was so confidential that even he didn’t know. In which case it was dubious, unofficial and risky - - something I wouldn’t recommend you get mixed up in.

I decided to play it safe.

‘Madam is busy for the next three months.’ I put the phone down, satisfied that I had played my part right.

Sure enough the phone rang again, immediately. The angry trilling echoed through the empty room. I settled into a chair and crossed my legs. The phone rang again as I was examining the back of my hands. My cuticles needed attention, I thought as the phone rang once more. The shrill trilling seemed to get angrier as the noise reverberated through the hall. Tring, tring, trininng! And then before I could decide whether to clip my nails or file them, the door opened and in you walked.

‘Are you deaf?’

You picked up the phone and glared at me.

‘Hello,’ you shouted into the mouthpiece.

‘What? Yes Of course!’ your tone changed and you smiled.

‘Your Highness. Yes, yes. I’m honoured, Sir. Of course, Sir.’

You motioned for me to get the diary.

‘Very well Sir, I shall pass you on to my assistant now. Of course, I have instructed her to find the first available time. And Sir may I just add, I am glad you came directly to
me instead of going to the Army or Intelligence. It is necessary not to discriminate the leader of the country on the basis of her gender. Oh yes, I know how highly you regard women in Iran.’

*

They say curiosity killed the cat, I say the nukes did. Yes, what I’m about to say now will hurt you but then the truth often does. You are the one, Gigi, who told me about Pearl Harbour, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. You are one who told me that revenge can destroy a human being. Killing one bad person gives rise to ten more…do you remember your own words? No because you are the one who showed me that words are just clunky hollow meaningless sounds, tossed about like crumbs to hungry mouths when an audience is needed and snatched back when no one is looking. You had lost track, Gigi. You had lost sight of your goals. You could no longer see the bigger picture. Where were all the women’s schools you were going to build? Where were the repeals to the Hudood Law? You were so busy hanging to your seat. It had come down to a sickening power game between you and the Army. You were lost, Gigi. But you forgot one thing, Gigi, I was keeping track.

You played your cards just right. You brought in the Scientist responsible for creating Pakistan’s Nuclear program. You questioned him, accused him of selling National secrets, till he went red in the face denying it.

It was then you said, ‘I believe you.’

The poor man looked so relived, he seemed to deflate like a punctured balloon. But then you got up and started to pace the room. You reminded me of a hungry tigress stalking her prey. ‘I believe you, Mr. Kabir, but no one else will,’ you finally said.

The man fell to his knees.

‘Please, Madam, you have to help me. The Army and the Intelligence, they will arrest me and my whole family. The Jihadists are already on my back. But I promise you whatever information has been leaked to them, it’s not through me.’

‘Only the Courts can decide, I’m afraid. I have no option, but to hand you over to the Police.’
‘Please Madam, your father brought me in. He was my mentor. I swear upon your father’s grave that I’m innocent.’

‘Yes, I know and that’s why I wanted to speak to you myself before the matter went public.’

‘Please, don’t let this happen. It will become a scandal. I’ll be ruined. My name, my reputation, all my hard work...’

‘It is your life, I’m worried about, Dr. Kabir,’ you said placing a hand on his shoulder.

The scientist looked up, as if suddenly realizing that the water was way over his head. The matter was no longer limited to a few journalists asking him uncomfortable questions or people calling him a traitor. It was a case of losing his life to the hangman’s noose. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his hands started to tremble.

You placed your hand on the sobbing man’s shoulder, ‘There is one way.’

‘Please, I’ll do anything.’

‘If you confess...’

‘But I haven’t done anything!’

‘I know and that’s why I will issue you a pardon and send you into exile. No. No, listen to me first. Not just any exile. I can send you to Iran, you can live in comfort in the best accommodation. Your whole family will be provided for. And most importantly you will not have to be ashamed. You will be welcomed there. In fact, you will be honoured. A position in the government will be granted to you.’

The man seemed relieved but then suddenly he asked, ‘But why Iran?’

‘Do you know any other country that does not bow down to the West?’

His shoulders drooped.

‘It’s not just a matter of you being tried in a Pakistani court my friend, the matter has reached the CIA. And you know the Army are American puppets. They will put political pressure on me. They will try to evoke the extradition treaty. And once you are handed to the Americans, it’s out of my hands. But if you are already out of the country, in a safe heaven like Iran, no one can reach you.’

‘I’ll do as you say,’ his body went limp and he seemed resigned to his fate.

‘Of course there is something I must ask you in return for the risk I am taking on
your behalf.’

You leaned closer and whispered something in his ear. ‘Secret program,’ ‘expertise’ ‘nuclear weapons,’ few snatches drifted my way. I watched from the shadows as the man covered his face with his hands. His whole body shook and a primal sound came out of his throat. He cried the way a grown man never should. I shuddered. There was something familiar about the scene.

And then I remembered a similar scene from twenty years ago. My father lay facedown on the ground and the General stood over him. ‘Bow,’ he said as he pointed a gun to his head. I remembered watching my father being shot in the head for resisting. I remembered his brain splattering out on the floor, the blood reaching my toes. I remembered my feet turning red.

This time there was no blood but your hands were still red. Gigi, you had to be stopped.

*

That night there was celebration at your house. You gave me the keys to the Champagne cupboard. ‘Use the flutes, the crystal ones. And send Refugee to buy Oysters. Fresh as they come.’

‘Any special occasion?’ I hoped you’d notice the sarcasm in my voice. Was I the only one who thought giving the bomb to Iran was madness?

You smiled and uncrossed your legs, ‘Lets just say that the Army is not the top dog around here anymore. The carpet has been pulled from under their feet and they don’t even know.’

‘Not yet.’

Your forehead wrinkled for a while but then you relaxed. You smiled and said, ‘Well, by the time they do, Dr. Kabir’s confession will be on National television.’ You got up and walked up to your father’s photo. ‘Oh the taste of revenge is sweet.’

I looked up and for the first time I saw you for what you really were. Just a woman. A broken one at that, hanging on by a thread. You didn’t need to do this. You didn’t need to fall this low. What difference was there between you and the evil General if this is
what power was about? What about the real cause? What about us?

Still talking to the dead man’s photo, you said, ‘I can’t wait to see the look on the Army’s face when they find their precious bomb’s been swiped from under their noses!’

I felt my face grow hot and hands cold.

‘But at what cost, Gigi. Did you even stop to think of that?’

You turned to look at me and frowned as if annoyed to find me still in the room.

After a small pause you said, ‘Some things cost more than others, Nazo. But it only sells if it’s for sale.’

I took a step back.

_You seemed to know the price of everything, Gigi, but you don’t know the value._

* 

That night I sat on my mattress and pulled out all the money I had. I laid each note flat on the floor and before I knew it I had a carpet of notes.

I had all this money, I thought. All this money! And what use was it to me? Could I save that Scientist’s life? Could I clear his name? No. I was just a toog in the machinery, a pawn in a game of chess. I had thought that if I had some money, some contacts, perhaps some power to my name, I would get your attention. I could get you to see. I used to think that you’d take me seriously. Listen to me. Understand me.

I was wrong. You were determined more than ever to ignore me. My advice was ignored, my presence unnecessary. You made me feel like a nobody. Every time I brought up the Hudood Bill, you told me later. Whenever I mentioned the stalled schools, you said there was no hurry; the rape injunction was low priority and the widow’s pensions, unmentionable. Lesser things demanded your attention.

But, it was my own fault. I was gambling too low. If I really wanted to change the state of affairs, I had to raise the stakes. It was time to take on something bigger.

_It was time, Gigi, to take you on._

*
'You can’t deny that cracks had began to appear in your relationship with Gigi Sahiba.'

'She was my mentor.'

'Really? I think that at this point you seemed to have found a new benefactor.'

'Objection.'

'Overruled.'

'Your Honour, all evidence points to the fact that Miss Khan was working as a double agent. The only nation to benefit from the whole nuclear fiasco and the fall out with Iran was the United states. The question now is, where did her loyalties lie?'
If anyone has asked me a few years ago if I would ever work for the Army, I would have called them crazy. But today that was exactly what I was about to do.

I took a deep breath and rang Major Q’s bell.

‘Soldier Rahim is not at home,’ the Watchman said as soon as he saw me.

‘Actually, I’m here to see Major Sahib.’

The guard looked suspiciously at me then told me to wait outside. Few hours and many bribes later the guard finally arranged to let me into his study.

‘Nazo? Gigi’s PA? What is she doing here?’ The Major was asking his assistant when I walked in.

‘Just five minutes, Major Sahib. Alone. I promise you I have something important to say.’

‘Alright,’ he said dismissing his assistant.

‘Sit,’ the Major said looking as shocked as I was to see him. His peppery hair had turned silver. Hi moustache was droopy and his left hand shook. Clearly the Army was not doing well under democracy.

‘I’m here to give you some important information,’ I began but as expected he didn't believe me. Fortunately, I was not one to back down easy.

‘Major Sahib, do you really think I would risk my life to come here if it wasn’t important?’

Major Q merely puffed at his cigar. I decided to try a different approach.

‘Is it true?’ I asked leaning forward, ‘that you are about to form a political party? Had enough of the Army life, Major Sahib?’

‘What nonsense. Control your tongue, girl.’

‘Then what should I do with my tongue?’ I licked my lips and the Major looked away, a deep red creeping up his face.

‘Looks like you have learned a lot more than politics from your Madam,’ he mumbled.

Despite myself I felt a flash of anger. I had to use all my self-control to keep from retorting. Instead, I forced a smile and said, ‘There is much that you can teach me too Sahib, of that I’m sure.’
The Major smiled smugly and said, ‘Ah yes. The Ladies...they always want me.’
I looked at his trembling old wrinkled hands and suppressed a laugh.
‘But first, there is something I want to share with you. And you have to take me seriously.’
‘Alright,’ he smiled.
‘Not like this.’
‘Then how?’
‘It comes at a cost. After all what I’m about to tell you may cost me my life.
Shouldn’t there be some security....some sort of ...’
Touching his fingertips together he placed them under his chin and said, ‘As they say, my dear, the best things in life are free.’
‘Well Major Sahib, then this is not a best thing. You only tell me, what is good about the Pakistani Nuclear technology being leaked?’
‘What rubbish,’ Major said.
I expected a more dramatic reaction but the old man just twirled his moustache and rolled his eyes. ‘Don’t’ waste my time, dear,’ he said.
‘I’m serious.’
‘Seriously deluded,’ he laughed.
‘But it’s true, Major Sahib. I have classified information that the secret has been leaked.’
‘Impossible. The Army has the knowledge sealed. It is not only difficult, it is impossible for anyone to infiltrate.’
‘Except, of course, the man himself....’
The Major stood up abruptly, knocking back his chair.
‘I don’t believe it. There is only one person who has this information and he...he would never....’
Now was my moment. I closed in for the kill.
‘History is my witness Major Sahib. Do you know why Shah Jahan had the hands of the craftsmen who created the Taj Mahal chopped off? So they could not create a replica. They too must have assured him that the knowledge was safe in their hearts but then again the heart is a strange thing Major Sahib. It rises us to great heights, then
plummets us down faster than we can say stop.’

The Major reached out and grabbed me by the collar. ‘Stop your riddles, woman. What has Gigi got on us?’

What is it with men grabbling collars, I thought. Gently I pried loose his grip and then folding his hands into my own I placed them on my heart.

‘Swear upon your life, Major Sahib, she's got the creator himself on his knees. The creator of the Nuclear program, that is,’ I added as he looked up. ‘Dr. Kabir has the knowledge in his brain. Till that is functioning, he can create as many Nukes as he wants.’

The old Major shook his head, ‘What are you saying girl?’

‘What you are hearing, Sir. She’s handing him over to the Iranians. To help them develop the dirty bomb. Top secret. Only three people know about this. Her, me and now you, Sir. Not even Dr. Kabir knows who his end user will be.’

The Major started pacing the room. ‘And if you are wrong about this?’ he asked.

‘The question is not if, but, what if? How will you stop this disaster from happening?’

The Major stopped pacing and rubbing his chin said, ‘If only the Iranians had contacted us first.’

‘You must have heard the saying, Major Sahib, if the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, then Mohammed will go to the mountain. It’s still not too late to get in touch with the Iranians. I understand that the Ambassador does not even know about this.’

The old Major pumped his fist in the air and shouted, ‘That’s it! An internal whistle blowing. Brilliant!’

Suddenly he looked up and frowned, ‘What’s in it for you, Nazo?’

‘Sahib, even an illiterate like me knows that if the technology gets in the wrong hands, it could mean the end of the world.’

The Major laughed. ‘Yes of course. End of the world and all.’

For a second I wondered if I had made a mistake but his mad laughter stopped soon enough and he composed himself.

‘Nazo dear, I mean, what cut are you looking at for keeping us in on this?’
‘A power cut,’ I replied.
‘Excuse me?’ the old Major looked taken aback by my answer.
‘You will know when the time comes,’ I said. ‘For now I’m doing my duty.’
I turned to leave than paused near the door. ‘But there are a couple of girl’s schools whose constructions been halted. Some ex-Jihadists in the Army are opposing it I hear. Perhaps you can get the work restarted?’
‘Of course dear, the schools should be fully operational in 6 months time.’
‘Thank you Major Sahib,’ I said turning to face him. ‘I’ll take your leave now.’
‘Nazo,’ the Major called after me, ‘you are smart for a woman, you know. You should be working for us.’
I stopped in the doorway and said, ‘You mean, with us.

* 

They say if you want to learn an art, study the Masters. And in Pakistan if you want to learn the subtle art of bribery go to the Army. They don't take bribes, they take commission. And the cut I got for giving the low brow on your Iran Nuke deal was enough to provide a future for hundreds of illiterate little girls.

And this was just the beginning.

Dr. Kabir’s release had been no small feat. But nobody saw it as a triumph of good over evil. People saw it as a power play. And once people in the market heard that the Army had dealt through me, there was no doubt left that I was the woman to go to. The bribes I was offered were enough to fill the stuffing in my mattress. But now it was no longer about money. It was about power- the power to do the work that really needed to be done but which you, in your PM’s chair were powerless to do.

I become the moat around your castle. The drawbridge they had to use to get through to you. But I had always said I didn't want to be your gatekeeper.

I just happened to be.

*
'She used her influence dangerously. She let people who bribed her have an audience with the PM and those who couldn’t afford to, were left out in the cold. Miss Khan behaved like a bouncer!'

'Mr. Omar, perhaps you are not aware but it is the job of a secretary to sift the important from the unimportant. Madam Gigi could not possibly meet everyone who knocked on her door. Miss Khan merely helped her prioritise.'

'But she treated Gigi’s diary like a power thrill. She wanted control. And we all know what a dangerous desire that is.'
It was then the threats started. Word spreads fast in the market and before I knew it, I had him on my back. I was counting my commissions to send on to a new women’s shelter, one day, when Balgodi showed up. He slammed his fist on my desk, ‘What do you think you are playing at?’

I would have thought I’d be scared at being found out but it felt surreal, like I was staring down at myself from the ceiling, or acting in a play. I couldn’t help but laugh.

It didn’t help.

Balgodi brought his face close to mine and said, ‘You are playing with fire, Nazo. This isn’t child’s play.’

‘I’m not scared,’ I whispered, ‘of a few singes.’

He caught me by surprise as he threw back his head and laughed. Then just as suddenly, he grabbed my arm and pinned me against the wall.

‘Do you know why they call me Mr. 10%? Because I take the cut. You get that? I take it. It’s mine. All of Gigi’s bribes come my way.’

He let go of me as quickly as he had grabbed me.

‘Looks like no one taught him to share,’ I whispered as he turned around to leave.

Big Mistake. Balgodi turned back and grabbed my jaw.

‘If you know what’s best for you…’

‘Don’t worry. I won’t take away all your toys.’

He brought his other hand to my breast and squeezed it hard. I tried to scream but he slammed my jaw shut.

‘You forget, Nazo. You are the toy.’

*

They say a hound that tastes blood never drinks anything else again. It wasn't blood I craved but something stronger.

Balgodi didn't know it then but his feeling threatened felt like a compliment to me. I began to feel slightly God-like. I could make things happen. It was so easy. Life was so easy. Giving life was hard but taking it…easy.
If you suspected that I had a hand in alerting the Army about Dr. Kabir’s handover, you never said anything. I wondered if at some level you knew what you were about to do was wrong. It was like a repeat of the wedding night but there was little time to think as at the height of the political crisis, you developed pre-eclampsia. You had no choice but to let me take on more of your work. During the few weeks when you were instructed complete bed rest, you gave me a free reign of your appointments diary. It was as if you didn’t care what happened to the country or the government. Now was my chance to make a change. Lobby for new laws, exercise justice and also rake in the bribes. Balance the good with the bad.

But I had to be careful. Balgodi was on my tail.

*
‘She forgot, Gigi Sahiba had other well wishers. Mrs. Yasmin Haroon is one such person. If she was here she would testify to Miss Khan’s deceitful nature.’

‘Then why isn’t she?’

‘Frustratingly, her passport was stolen at the last minute. She is unable to travel.’

‘Ha, I bet Mr. Omar would blame that on my client too.’

‘I would actually. You see Yasmin would have revealed her true face.’

I was going full speed ahead. The schools project was on a roll. Three new schools were being initiated every week. At this rate the whole country would have literacy centers in all the villages in just under an year. There was the matter of finding teachers, allocating lands, changing attitudes to girl’s education and of course a steady flow of funds, but I had it all in hand. Not long before this nobody became somebody, I found myself thinking one day -- somebody to reckon with.

But then something happened to put a halt to all my plans. A ghost from the past, a reminder of the person you once were, made a comeback.

*  

‘Mrs. Yasmin from London is here,’ Refugee announced one day as you were dictating a letter to me from your bed.

You looked at me but I was just as surprised as you were.

‘I didn’t call her,’ I added quickly.

You laughed.

‘I couldn’t be happier if you did.’

‘Gigi!’ Yasmin cried as she burst into the room. ‘What’s this she said?’ worried to see you laying in bed.

‘Yasmin,’ you said getting out of bed. ‘I’m so happy to see you, my friend.’ You reached out and hugged your friend.
I watched from the edge, twisting the ends of my hijab wistfully.

‘Well you’ve done it, Gigi! You really have, Madame Prime Minister,’ Yasmin said with an exaggerated bow.

‘Hard work pays off,’ you laughed back.

Your laugh, I noticed, was hollow and fake, as powerless as you.

‘Look at you!’ Yasmin held you by the shoulders. ‘You are a leader, a mother, wife, women’s right champion, tour de force!’

You did not even blink at the obscene amount of undeserved praise.

‘It’s been a hard journey. But I told you, nothing can stop me. You should have stayed with us, Yasmin. I wouldn’t have to depend on strangers then.’

You glanced sideways at me.

Point taken, I blinked back.

‘Ah, the kindness of strangers…’ Yasmin laughed.

‘Can be dangerous,’ you mumbled.

‘What?’ Yasmin asked.

‘Nothing. Tell me, have you come alone?’ you asked.

‘Yes, my husband had some business in Dubai so I thought I’d take a flight to Pakistan and see my old buddy. The children are with my in-laws.’

‘I’m so glad,’ you said warmly.

‘So am I. It’s hard to believe so much time has passed.’

‘Yes,’ you said and in the same breath added, ‘Nazo tell Refugee to arrange tea.’

‘So where is this son of yours, the future leader?’ Yasmin asked as I was leaving.

‘Bring in the child,’ you called after me.

Few minutes later I entered with the wrong child in tow.

‘Salaam,’ I said.

The child looked terrified and started crying.

Yasmin seemed to sense that there was something wrong.

‘Come here,’ she said to him.

He hid behind me.

‘He’s a little shy,’ you said and Yasmin stared at you with wide unblinking, lizard eyes.
I looked at you too but your face registered nothing. No emotion at all.

In this wordless exchange, I suddenly realised you were the only person who did not notice his deformity. I wondered if it was because you didn’t want to or you didn’t have to.

I remember wondering at that moment whether you loved the child at all. Maybe he was just a means to an end. You had used him to get to the elections and now that his purpose was over you wanted him out of the way. Maybe that’s why you always wanted me to keep him in the shadows.

‘Have you shown him to a doctor?’ Yasmin asked.

‘Why? There is nothing wrong with him. He’s just a shy little child. Keeps to himself. Peaceful and quiet, just like children should be.’

Your look was soft, almost mournful as you stared at him and I felt guilty for doubting you. Perhaps through some deep maternal instinct you wanted to protect him from a terrible diagnosis. Shelter him.

‘Anyways, I can’t stand loud, howling children. So distracting.’

Suddenly your look became hard and this time I found myself doubting my own judgment. The earlier softness in your eyes was not for the wrong child. It was for the child you never had. You hated the fact that your child died while mine lived.

‘Take him away now,’ you ordered as if he was some toy that had to be cleared away after playtime was over. You looked impatient, angry, and then it struck me. How could I have been so blind? How did all those Calpol bottles appear in the cabinet in the first place? And every time one ended, it was replaced by a new one!

My knees felt week. I needed to sit down.

‘Nazo, can you not hear me,’ you said. ‘Please take the child away. It’s time for his tea, I should think.’

I took his hand and pulled. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Wait,’ Yasmin said. ‘Come here.’

The child looked terrified.

‘Come here little one,’ she tried again. The child hid deeper into my legs, covering his face with his palms.
She walked up to him and gently pried away his hands. She placed a kiss on his forehead and handed him a present.

The child promptly tore open the wrapping, and out popped a Jack in the Box, his clownish smile eerily ominous. We all screamed in surprise and as I cleared up the paper, the child stepped forward.

‘Mama,’ he said and we both looked up at him.

*
‘I would like to present the court and Counsel with some further evidence. Please see the child’s diagnostic report at aged two. The child had an unusual amount of Paracetamol in his body. Evidence suggests he was deliberately made dependent on painkillers.

The only explanation that comes to mind is that Miss Khan did not want Madam to focus on her work. What better distraction than a sick child?’
Truly our destinies were intertwined. If you were inactive, I too must be made politically impotent. *Or so it seemed...*

Perhaps it was Yasmin’s concerns or your own insecurities, but you suddenly decided that I was needed more at home than at the office. You were in the hospital birthing your first child, or should I say second child, when you called and gave me strict instructions to leave everything and look after the wrong child. While the child was visiting you at the hospital, on Yasmin’s insistence one of the Doctor’s decided to check him and diagnosed him as slow. Whether it was the diagnosis or the guilt, you took it to heart.

‘Leave everything, Nazo,’ you instructed me in a panicky phone call. ‘Just look after the child.’

I wondered if it was because you cared or did not want anyone to know that you didn’t. The fear of being found out is all encompassing. *Trust me, I know.*

*  

That night I went into the wrong child’s room and caressed his sleeping forehead. Something happened inside me. I felt like a candle, its wax melting quickly and precariously. I pulled my hand away.

No, I could not do this. I told myself, I was not enjoying this. I wanted to be somewhere else. I was meant to be some other person. I was needed, elsewhere. I had girl’s education to think about, Jihadist laws to get repealed, dowry’s to fight. I did not have time for all this maternal bullshit. Not, I your gatekeeper Nazo. Not for me all this *sop.*

I went into your office.

It was empty, the phones silent, the in-tray sparse. Your diary was blank, barren and forlorn. With you in the hospital few people came to the office. The tenders were approved by Pervez Sahib and the other deals went through the President. The bribes had come to a slow grinding halt. As had the school’s project.

You had given power of attorney to Balgodi and he now had total control over your
affairs. Did I say affairs? Well that was one thing he had plenty of.

What is that saying? While the cat is away the mice will play.

*

And it was one such day when he was rollicking with his harlots, that we got our horns tangled. And how…

I needed another way to feed the projects I had started and your stupid pregnancy had halted. Now that the bribes had stopped and my party powers frozen, there was little to do but wait. Nobody was interested in backing the schools. The activists were too scared, the local governments uninterested and Balgodi, wholly against it. I had to find a new way to make thing happen. And that was when I discovered the most powerful organ of the body. And it wasn't the brain.

Outside it had been raining for six hours straight when the phones started trilling. An important bridge, newly built by one of your contractors had collapsed. The Press wanted answers. I paced the hallway. You were drugged and asleep in the last stages of your pregnancy at a nursing home. Pervez Sahib was locked away in the lavatory with some ingestion remedy and the other Party Seniors on a foreign delegation visit. There was no one I could consult. It wasn’t the press handling that was weighing me down but the fact that I had arranged your meeting with this contractor. I consoled myself with the fact that the bribe he had given had paid for the construction of a girl’s school in the most backward areas of the country. If only I could explain it to you before the press splashed it as front page news. Still, I doubt you’d understand.

I tried you once again on the phone. No answer. Just then I heard laughter coming from Balgodi’s room. The idiot was enjoying himself when six people were dead. That murderer!

I charged into his study. The room was full of smoke. There were bottles of whisky all around and a near naked girl was dancing seductively in front of him.

I threw her a towel and motioned for her to leave. She looked at Balgodi but I cut in, ‘Leave or I’ll call the police. You can phone him from jail to get you out. Now go!’

‘What the hell, Nazo?’ he slurred.
‘The President has called an urgent meeting,’
He looked up at me bleary eyed, ‘Now? ‘
‘No, next year.’
‘Make coffee. And keep the sarcasm for your groom.’
‘What?’ I said acidly. ‘So you are not going to marry me anymore?’
Balgodi dismissed the dancing girl and turned his attention to me.
‘So, you were saying something about marrying you?’ he grabbed my wrist and
pulled me onto his lap. ‘Haven’t we already celebrated our wedding night though?’
I felt my face grow hot. How could he remember? He couldn’t possibly! He was so
drunk…perhaps you had told him? No, you wouldn’t. You couldn’t.
‘Come. Bring that tight little body of yours closer to mine.’
‘Why should I give it to you?’ I played coy, though inside my throat was tightening
with fear.
‘The choice is either me or telling the President, the bridge Contractor was one of
your bribes.’
So he wasn’t that drunk after all.
‘Tell me one thing, why do you play so dumb when you know everything, all the
time?’
‘Didn’t I tell you, Nazo darling? You’re playing with fire. You are the toy. And I
am the fire.’
I shook my head. What was he? God? How did he know all this? Inside I was
trembling, but hell be me if I’d let him know.
Balgodi pushed my head into his crotch, pulling the hair on my head so hard that I
thought he’d rip my scalp out.
I struggled. ‘Rape laws are changing. You’ll go to jail.’
He laughed as if I’d cracked a joke. ‘I don’t see four witnesses. Do you?’ He said
pulling my hair so hard, I thought my scalp would rip.
I closed my eyes and got down on my knees. I unzipped his trousers and only after
the act was over did I look up. Never before had my mouth tasted so foul.
God had given me the ability to forget, if not forgive, easily. I waited a few minutes
till his head lolled back, then I got up and went into the attached bathroom. I
contemplated washing my mouth out with bleach but then settled for a lesser chemical. I must have gargled a hundred times for when I finally looked up from the sink my mouth was an angry patch of red.

I stepped out of the toilet and peered at him. He seemed to be settling into a deep sleep.

‘Nazo,’ he said sleepily, ‘Is it better with a woman?’

He winked and closed his eyes.

*

I stood where I was, my hand frozen on the doorknob. Words and images came back to me of Mahi, the fifteen-year-old who had been raped by her male cousin to ‘fix’ her. The NGOs had been knocking on your doors, protesting against this corrective rape. ‘It is becoming common practice,’ they’d said, ‘It had to be stopped.’ I had met with activists to discuss this while you waddled around in your pregnant best, promising justice when and if, you got time away from your knitting.

But I followed up on your hollow promises. I set up appointments with the legislative committee, negotiated with the press. At the last minute you had backed out, afraid that the Maulanas would crush you if you took a stance.

‘They will say I’m trying to promote homosexuality, Nazo. Please understand they will accuse me of being unIslamic. I can’t take this on, simply can’t.’

I knew now the real reason why you had backed down.

I pulled open drawers and cupboards, looked through shelves, behind pictures, under the bed till finally the first rays of the sun began to seep through the chinks in the curtains. Somewhere outside a car horn blared and a crow cawed. Any minute now Balgodi would wake up. I could feel the icy cold fear creeping up the back of my neck. My hands began to shake. Stop, I told myself. If I’m going to find it, then I’ll have to think like this bastard. I was tempted to kick him in the ribs but I used all my self-control to keep my muscles still. And that was when it hit me. Where would I keep something I didn’t want you find? Somewhere you’d never want to look.

Quickly I stepped over Balgodi’s limp body and rushed to your bedroom. There in
your cupboard, under a pile of unworn formal clothes, lay your gold edged wedding album. I found the envelope between its pages.

A photo of me. I was not alone. You were with me. Your arms were pinned down. I looked as if I was about to devour you. My head reeled. So it was true. Someone had been watching us and not just anyone. Your own husband.

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. Was there no one true to you? Blackmail. And that too by your own spouse. How low could a man fall? An envelope full of photographs, me and you in an intimate embrace, our bodies pressed tight against each other, coiled like a coma, me and you parting reluctantly…I tore them with a steely heart and swallowed each bit. I knew by now that there was no better shredder then the kind God had fitted inside our mouths. I was just wondering how you could stand a man so sly, when I suddenly realized it was because you had to. There was no way he’d let you go. You were his golden egg. Only in death would you be rid of him. But knowing him he wouldn’t even let you die in peace. No, he wouldn’t slay his golden hen…But as long as I was alive, Gigi, I would protect you from him. Even if it meant stripping you of your power. Me and you were a team. And in a team it didn’t matter who held the reigns.

Before I could ponder further, hidden behind Balgodi’s cigars I saw a roll of negatives sticking out. I struck a match and thought, Tsk, tsk! Balgodi should’ve known better then to keep the two together.

*

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'She began to think she was invincible. And as they say pride comes before fall...'
You came back from the hospital. It had been a tough labour, the doctors chorusing their surprise on the unusually tough second birth, after a simple home delivery the first time around. I wondered if you kept your front or squealed out and confessed at the first jab of pain. From what I hear, you held it together for a long while but the stubborn baby refused to come out. Perhaps she knew what was in store for her.

In the end you opted for a caesarean, the pain being too much for you. You were discharged a week later. Once back you tried to catch up on work, feeling exhausted amidst the new baby’s wails. You put up a stoic demeanor but the baby cried day and night. She clung to you, her small fists clutching your shirt with all her tiny might.

I watched you carefully. I wanted to see if there was any gratefulness or recognition. Hadn’t I been right about motherhood? Hadn’t I warned you? It sucks you in, Gigi. At least at this stage of your career you could afford to take a break but would you be where you are now if you had children before contesting? Oh Gigi, aren’t you glad you did what you did the first time around?

But no, there was no remorse in your eyes. You seemed alright, even happy at times to be spending time with a wailing little baby instead of solving the Nation’s problems. At times, Gigi, your fallibility shocked me.

Each time I looked at you, your housewifely behavior, your motherly instincts and stereotypical femininity disappointed me, terrified me. I needed to look away. Forget that I had once thought you were our Messiah. You were just another foolish woman. You didn’t want to be a leader. Everything about you was average. Average mother, average wife, average politician. You didn’t want to do great things. A little bit of this and a little bit of that. Do you think Jinnah cared about his family when he was creating Pakistan? Do you think Ghandi fusses about his children’s homework when he was resisting the British? Or how about Abraham Lincoln or even your favourite, John F Kennedy? Forget the men, Gigi, do you think Mrs. Thatcher got the title of Iron Lady by waddling around pregnant in public?

Respect has to be earned, Gigi. Leaders are made not born. You either cared enough to be someone or you didn’t.
Fueled by my anger, I began to take on even more under-the-table work. Yes, I did abuse my position. But, I only took on work, Gigi, which you should have.

*I began, Gigi, where you ended.*

I worked night into day to push my girl’s school’s project. People thought it was your drive but I didn’t care. I just wanted it to happen. I now knew my real power. It was all up here, in my brain. I feared no one and in turn everyone feared me. During the day I went about my work but at night I tossed and turned telling myself it didn’t matter who got the glory as long as the job got done. But a tiny thought still lurked. A gatekeeper’s daughter will also be a gatekeeper, a voice mocked. Political dynasties in this country were like royal ones abroad. A woman could rule only if she was blue blooded and perhaps that was one of the reasons the people of this land had accepted you. Daughter of the Shah, they called you. But me, I was a daughter of the soil, and like dust I was worth nothing.

Still I kept on trying. You always said, I was a stubborn one.

And soon enough the day came when people began to call me your number 2 and came directly to me with their requests. The bypassed you. NGOs approached me, Aid workers came to me, the poor and destitute knocked on the kitchen door sure that their cause would be heard and their bellies filled.

‘We had such high hopes for Gigi, but she has done next to nothing for our cause.’

I would nod and think to myself, that’s why I should be in her place. ‘The elections will be held soon. I am thinking of contesting.’

‘Well, you will certainly have our vote,’ they would nod. ‘You understand us. You are one of us.’

It was not just the needy who came to see me. The ones with too much money also came to me. Money is a habit you know. When you get used to making it, it’s hard to stop. You have to make more, at any cost.
‘Please help us, Miss Nazo,’ they would say, ‘Balgodi Sahib takes our money and there is no guarantee even that he will get us the contract. Where as with you there is satisfaction every which way.’

I wondered at the snide remarks but soon got used to it. They just couldn’t separate the woman from her sex but then, that wasn’t my problem.

My cupboards had overflowed and I had to open yet another savings account. If only Soldier Rahim could see me now! I had smiled at the thought as I walked out of the bank.

I see you are smiling too. But your smile is a sad one. You think I fell.

But Gigi, it wasn’t about greed. I wasn’t materialistic. I was practical. Money was the only thing that could make me powerful. And without power a woman was as useless as a second toe.

*
‘Miss Khan was a foot soldier who thought herself king. At first it began by taking credit here and there for small efforts, which were obviously carried out on Madam’s orders like the school’s project. But slowly she began to believe her own lies. She was like the spider who gets tangled in its own silken threads. She could not tell the difference between reality and her own fabrication.

Many people have said that she began to refer to herself in the third person like Madam. She dressed like her and tried to speak like her.

‘But Mr. Omar, surely Madam would have noticed such behavior.’

‘Gigi dismissed the imitation as flattery. Big mistake.’

‘My client was inspired by Madam. No harm in that.’

‘No harm? Miss Khan began to campaign for a ticket to the interparty elections!’

‘So? Nothing wrong with a bit of ambition.’

‘It was about power, Counsel. Read the kitchen boy’s testimony where he saw Miss Khan threaten the cook with a knife when he stood in her way. What does that tell you about her ambitious nature? She was, is, ruthless.’
A women’s group came to see you. You had been up all night with the new baby and your husband too, but for different reasons.

At my insistence the Watchman buzzed you, despite strict do-not-disturb instructions.

‘Gigi Sahiba is fast asleep,’ Balgodi shouted after cursing the watchman for waking him. ‘As it is we have bigger problems to solve then listen to these women wail. Get rid of them and don’t dare disturb us now.’

Downstairs, the watchman hung up with a bang. He turned around and shot me a murderous look.

‘Madam is sleeping fast,’ he said to the group.

‘But we have come all the way from Punjab to meet her.’

‘And we have written her many letters! Called her so many times. Surely she can give us five minutes of her time.’

‘Come back tomorrow,’ he said, trying to hustle them out.

‘It’s true, a woman’s worst enemy is another woman,’ a sorry looking woman said.

‘We had come with such high hopes.’

‘Perhaps we came too early.’

The disappointed women turned to leave. I knew tomorrow would be the same story so I ran after them.

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Please accept Gigi Sahiba’s apologies. This Watchman is new. Idiot doesn’t know what he is saying. Actually Madam is in a very important early morning meeting. She has ordered me to help you.’

The women looked doubtful so I added, ‘To do with national security.’

They looked at each other.

‘Your cause is important to her.’

They smiled.

*

I took them to the grease kitchen, a place I doubted you even knew existed in your
house. By the time Cook had served us all tea, I had heard their entire story. After my family’s murder, I’d began to feel that my heart had become stone hard and nothing more could penetrate it but hearing their story, I felt a stirring.

What the women told me was nothing new, it had been in the papers as had several similar cases before it, but listening to it made it real, up-close and immediate. Mai Mumtaz, a young girl from the interior had been gang raped as punishment for a crime her brother had committed. And worst this was not some barbaric impulsive act but a premeditated cold blooded one. The Jihadist tribunal of Elders, still functional in the remote parts of the country like in Mai Mumtaz’s village, had after much debate, deemed it the best possible justice. And when Mai had, after this horrific act, refused to lay down and die, the Provincial government had turned silent, pleading ignorance. And the Central government too had played it safe, saying they could not interfere in the Jihadists tribunal’s matter, lest they rise up in revolt and create another revolution. Police and judiciary all turned a blind eye. Instead of supporting her cause they put it down to custom.

The seriousness of men, I thought. None of these people in authority seemed to realize just how much courage it took for the girl to report her rape. Jumping into a river would have been easier. Living this nightmare everyday was harder. But for all practical matters she might as well have been dead. The world thought her disgraced and even her own family didn’t want her. Physically injured and mentally tortured, she had nowhere to go.

My glance fell on a quote from her father saying that if she had any shame she would kill herself. ‘Instead of telling the world the story of her disgrace, she should plunge herself in a river and spare us the shame. Atleast in death she would have had some dignity.’

It didn’t stop there. The Activists showed me more press clippings. So much slander, so much abuse, as if she had invited the men to an orgy. Were women really so helpless in our country? I could feel a rising inside me. In the hospital pictures of the battered woman, she seemed only half human. I looked away.

You slept comfortably in your four-poster while this woman struggled for her life in a narrow hospital bed. She was paying with her life for the laws you should have
repealed long ago. A salty bile rose in my throat.

It was time for a change, Gigi. A much needed change. I picked up your appointment diary and crossed out your meeting with the Arms Investor. Next I took out the inauguration of a new clothing boutique. Carefully in small dark letters, I wrote on top of the list- Justice for Mai.

*

In the coming days I had three more meetings with the women’s group. I sat with the women for hours working out the appeals procedure and reassuring them that you would get them justice. You were, after all, a woman and who else would feel another woman’s pain better?

*But I was wrong.*

‘It’s not easy to change these laws,’ you argued the next morning when I bought up your morning tea. ‘They are hundreds of years old, beyond jurisdiction.’

‘But Gigi Sahiba, if you don’t take this on, than who will? Do you expect a man to change them? No, this change…’

‘These things happen on a daily basis. It’s a man world out there. How many people will I take on, Nazo?’

‘But if you don’t get her justice…’

‘Look, this is the Jihadists you are talking about. It’s like stirring a hornet’s nest. Do you really want to create an uprising?’

‘If you don’t take them on, who will? And you know they will start getting stronger again if you leave them be. You’ve got to take a stand, Gigi Sahiba.’

Before you could reply the baby started crying. You took a deep breath and said, ‘This is a useless conversation Nazo. Things are not as black and white as they seem to you. No, please, I’m really tired. I need to breastfeed the baby and to be honest, my milk dries up with your speeches. Now pass me the newspapers and leave.’

I knew then that you did not have the courage to take on the Jihadist. It was up to me now to get Mai Mumtaz justice.

Things were about to get tense. *Finally.*
‘I warned you. You can’t change these things,’ Refugee said to me when I came back down.

‘She wants more milk to drink. She’s feeding,’ I informed him.

‘She’s turned into a cow, that one. Swear upon God, what happens to these women when they become mothers? Imagine this is the same woman who was fighting for democracy in London, few years ago only!’

‘Yes,’ I nodded, ‘she’s the same woman. Maybe it’s us who saw her differently back then.’

‘Now leave be, Nazo Jee. Don’t look so sad, here have some tea.’

‘Thanks,’ I sat down at the kitchen table amidst the newspaper clippings the NGO had left behind.

‘Probably the Jihadists got the hots for the girl and planted a fake crime on the brother,’ Refugee laughed as he placed some toast beside the mug. ‘They’ve been doing this for generations, where I come from. Every time they get horny, they organize a mass rape in the name of honour.’

Refugee’s words made me choke with anger. ‘Fuck these Jihadists,’ I said. ‘This is the last time they will treat a woman like an animal.’

‘Hah,’ Refugee snorted, ‘Even goats get more respect in the villages. At least they give milk. Women, good for nothing but giving birth to more mouths.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘I… I was just thinking from the Jihadist’s point of view,’ he added hastily as I reached for a sharp knife. ‘I would never think so lowly of a woman.’

‘Such men should be castrated, don’t you think?’

I pointed it at his privates.

‘Nazo Sister, you are scaring me!’

‘If it wasn’t for us women, you wouldn’t be here, you bastard.’

I slammed the knife on the table splitting an apple into two perfect halves. I looked up to see Refugee cowering on the ground, his head between his knees.
I put down the knife and laughed.

*

In the end Refugee was right. The NGOs got their aid and attention, thanks to my collection of bribes, but neither the Courts, the Press, or you, were useful when it came to getting her justice. The General’s Hudood law remained unchanged and the Jihadists thrived, snug in the fact that they hadn’t been reprimanded by a woman’s government for a vile act against her own kind. I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing. Can you blame me, Gigi?

So that is how I came to plan, what I called, the revenge.

*


‘They say Gigi didn’t forgive easily but Miss Khan neither forgave nor forgot. As for holding a grudge, she wouldn’t let go even if she was sinking with the weight of it.’

‘Forgiving people is not my job, Omar Sir.’

‘Then whose it is?’

‘God’s.’

‘So is providing justice, Miss Khan.’

‘In that case why am I here?’
It took more then half of the money in my mattress to dig up the dirt on the Jihadist Elder. It turned out that he was not as pure as he claimed, after all.

‘Let him cast the first stone who himself is free of sin,’ I said as I went ahead and plotted the public stripping of the man who had sentenced Mai Mumtaz to this fate.

I wasn’t surprised when I found out the Elder had a thing for boys. But I have to admit that even I was shocked when I found the victims were as young as five. Once my mole got hold of the abused boys, a sack of wheat was enough to get them talking. Photos were splashed in the newspapers, confessions telecast, Activists involved, until the Elder’s credibility was mixed in mud- his name a big, black blob. His entire family was shunned. He was removed from the Jihadists tribunal. And it wasn’t till he was disgraced from the village itself and had to leave his ancestral lands that I breathed a sign of relief.

But not for long…

*

‘I bet now he regrets his decision,’ I said, showing you the newspaper, next morning.

‘See,’ you replied as you changed the baby’s nappy. ‘These things have a way of sorting themselves out. There are NGOs and Activists to do this kind of work. All we can do is support them through aid. Find out which agency this was and give them an anonymous donation, won’t you.’

‘Gigi, it wasn’t an agency, it was…’

‘Please Nazo, not now. I need to feed her.’

I nodded. It was useless telling you anyways. You would never believe that I had brought a Jihadist Elder to his knees. I, Nazneen Khan, a simple girl from the ashes. No Shah in my name. No power in my game. Yet, Gigi, I had done what you with all your upper class privilege could not do. I had done justice.
‘Knowledge is power. Power to do good or power to do evil. In the right hands it can do wonders…but in the wrong ones, it destroys. Miss Khan was an insider who had the power of knowledge. Unfortunately she misused this power. It is no surprise Your Honour that her number was on the speed dial of every corrupt crook in the city.’

‘Being in the phone book is not a crime, Mr. Omar.’

‘No, it isn’t. But sometimes we get into waters so deep, we lose our grip on reality.’

‘Your Honour, I feel my colleague needs a break. He is being too philosophical.’

‘For what is to follow next Your Honour, I think we all need a break.’
If dealing with the Army had been a feather in my cap, bringing down the Jihadist was a whole nest. Soon I was not only negotiating with the Army and the Agencies but with other political parties as well. So it was no surprise when one day Refugee, who was now my part-time PA, came to tell me that some people from the Jihadist Tribal party wanted to see me. At first I was a little hesitant about fraternizing with the enemy but then I felt a little thrill that they were reaching out to a woman. I was flattered. Times were changing I thought, the Jihadist were asking a woman for help.

‘About time,’ I said, ‘the bastards understood whose in charge.’

‘Another opportunity to expand the business,’ Refugee chimed in.

I was flattered not deluded. ‘No,’ I shook my head. ‘No dealings with the Jihadist. Not unless they pledge their support on the rape bill repeal.’

‘Have you heard of shooting the messenger? I’m not delivering that message! They’ll be outraged at your front. Besides they’ll never give in.’

‘They’ll come around,’ I said with a slow smile.

*How wrong I was.*

*That day when the Jihadists came to see me, the systems had malfunctioned. Neither the buzzers nor the telephones were working. Even the doorbell was out of order. That should have been a warning to me but I was riding high on the fact that six new schools had just been inaugurated in my old neighbourhood. I ignored the fact that the guards were off duty or that none of the servants could be seen milling about. When the loud banging on the door began, I was the one who answered it.

‘We have heard a lot about you Nazo jee,’ the men said, pushing past me. I hesitated. I didn’t like their unshaven faces or their sweat drenched clothes. They wore large rolling turbans and their voice had the gravely accent of people from the mountains. They seemed like Afghan refugees or poor street hawkers to me, not someone the guards would let in without asking.

I discreetly pressed the silent alarm.*
‘We have heard a lot about your skills,’ the first man said with a lewd grin.
The second man coughed, ‘Exceptional skills.’
I realized what they were talking about and turned away. I was used to bawdy humour but this was too much. After all they had come to me. I didn’t go to them. The nerve.
‘Get out,’ I said, wondering why it was taking the guards so long to show up.
The one in front grabbed me by the elbow and jerked me around to face him.
‘It is good to share, Nazo jee. Why save it all for the boys on top. Let it trickle down to the ground as well.’
‘Yes, Nazo jee,’ the other one said pushing me roughly against the wall.
‘Let me go or I’ll scream.’
Before I could say another word the first guy pulled out a gun and pushed it into my back.
‘Scream and I’ll shoot you.’
Believe me, when one sees death in the face, it is not easy to think of anything else but death. I did as I was told.
‘Now come quietly with us or we’ll shoot you and that little rat of yours.’
I turned around to see the wrong child standing mutely behind me.
‘Go inside, Biloo,’ I said. Immediately, I felt a sharp pain in the small of my back as the man poked me hard with the gun’s nozzle.
‘I said no talking.’
He twisted my wrist so hard that I thought I’d never be able to lift it again.
‘Come quietly or there will be more pain.’
‘Ok,’ I whispered, pain blinding me as black spots danced in front of my eyes.
Refugee walked in just as the men were pushing me out.
‘Not a word,’ the men whispered. ‘Scream and we’ll shoot all three of you.’
Refugee eyeing me suspiciously. ‘Everything alright?’ he called out.
I looked at the men.
‘Answer him,’ they whispered.
‘Yes,’ I said my voice a shrill squeak. ‘Can you look after the child?’
‘Nazo, where are you going? And who are these men?’
The men pushed the gun hard against the small of my back and I moved forward without an answer.

We got into a waiting car outside. The gates, I noticed, were unmanned; the cameras and buzzers ripped out. I prayed feverishly that you were alright.

‘Where are you taking me,’ I asked. In reply they struck me on the head. After that darkness descended all around.

*

When I woke up I was in a bed with musty sheets and my wrists and ankles hurt. I tried to wriggle my hands but realized I was bound with ropes. My hands and legs were stretched out and tied at the bed ends. My clothes were missing. I was naked save for a dirty sheet thrown carelessly across my stomach and breasts.

A man came in and laughed at me.

‘They said you looked like Gigi. But I think you’re better than the real thing.’

‘Let me go,’ I shouted.

‘You are the one who sent the message about the Hudood law. You want to change it yeah?’

The men laughed savagely and closed in around me.

‘Let’s give you your own case to campaign for, yeah?’ one of them sneered.

‘Come on woman,’ another spat on his palm and rubbed me.

‘Dry as the Indus river,’ a second laughed.

A third appeared and took his clothes off. Soon all three were upon me. Calling me names, hitting me, kicking me. I thought they would tear me into pieces.

‘You think you can disgrace our Elders?’

He slapped my face and yelled, ‘You dare break the Jihadist? Take that you whore!’

‘You filthy woman! We will make an example out of you.’

They lit cigarettes and pushed the lighted ends into my skin.

‘When we are done with you, no one would dare raise a finger at the Jihadists.’

‘Gigi,’ I cried, ‘Save me!’
But the more I called out your name the more they laughed and enjoyed themselves.

‘When Gigi finds out she’ll skin you alive,’ I shouted.

They scalded me with burning hot water.

‘Clean up time you dirty street bitch.’

‘I will send you to jail. Gigi will have you hanged.’

But they only laughed harder.

‘Her hands are tied,’ one of them said crudely. ‘She's more fucked than you are.’

‘Stop,’ I screamed as they turned me over.

‘I’ll tell Balgodi! He will find you!’

One of them pointed a knife at me.

‘Stop. Don’t touch me. I’m telling you Balgodi will skin you. Don’t touch me. I’m his special woman….’

‘Who do you think told us about your tight little body, you bitch?’ they laughed like hungry hyenas and circled me.

‘Can’t keep the spoils to himself.’

‘No, no, it can’t be…’

They dug my face into the mattress and placed the tip of the knife on the small of my back. ‘You’ll have a good case,’ one of them shouted.

I screamed as the pain tore through me.

Before I lost consciousness I heard their laughter surround me. Like vultures circling the dead. Except I wasn’t dead.

_Not yet._

* 

Afterwards they threw my battered body out of a moving car on the road in front of your house. I had nothing to cover myself with. I cowered in the dark using the leaves of the banana tree to shield myself from the praying eyes of stray dogs. The guards were back at their posts. I crawled to the back gate.

I knocked at the grease kitchen door. Refugee mistook me for a beggar.
‘It’s me,’ I whispered, my body shivering and raw.
He dropped the pan in his hand.
I watched the oil sizzle on the ground before it traced a path to my bare toes. I didn’t flinch, though the oil was hot.

*

Later when Refugee had wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and put me in a tub of hot water, I asked for you. You didn’t come to see me until the next day. And when you did you averted your eyes. You never were good at looking pain in the eye.
‘I want to press charges,’ I said.
You placed your palm on my hand.
‘Do you know who they were?’
‘I know who sent them.’
You cleared your throat, ‘Nazo, thing is…’
‘I want justice.’
‘Justice?’ you laughed a hollow little laugh. ‘Justice says a woman has to provide four witnesses to the rape. Can you provide them, Nazo?’
‘Then change the law.’
You were silent.
‘You have majority in the Parliament. Use your power.’
‘Ha,’ you snorted. ‘You know well how powerless I am.’
I was sick of you playing the victim. I lay battered and bruised, shattered to my bones, my spirit crushed, my body humiliated and still it was somehow all about you.
‘Bull shit,’ I said. ‘Change the law. At least try. If not for me, then for other women who go through this.’
‘Look you’ve been through a lot. This is not the time to…’
‘Look at me Gigi,’ I flung away the sheet cowering my bruises. ‘We both know what this law is about. It applies to economic transactions not horrible physical blood tearing rape! Who in the world would stand by and watch a woman being raped and then go to court about it? Answer me, Gigi. This law is to keep us down.’
‘Nazo, for goodness sake! Haven’t you learned anything from all this? Look what bloody happened to you when you raised your voice against it. I have children, Nazo. I can’t afford to get mixed up with the Jihadists.’

I got up and slapped you.

‘Then, you don’t deserve to be our Prime Minister.’

You pressed your hand against your cheek and stared disbelievingly at me.

I slapped you again.

You remained silent, your guilt screaming louder then any words could have.

I grabbed your hair and pulled you close.

‘You don’t even have the courage to save yourself. How can you save anyone else?’

It was a few minutes before you recovered.

‘Nazo,’ you pushed me away. ‘Behave yourself. Let go of me, you crazy woman,’ you shook off my bruised hand, making me wince with pain. ‘I am trying to help you, Nazo. Going to court and telling people all about how you were raped by three men is not going to help you. You will become a laughing stock. Besides you brought this on yourself. The whole city has been talking about your exploits. You can’t just pick and choose who you bed. You…’

‘Gigi,’ I said my voice barely a whisper. ‘How did you know there were three of them?’

*
‘I won’t ask you what happened then but I would like you to tell the court what happened next. For I feel something important changed in your life. This was a difficult time for you. You became resentful of the system, laws and lawmakers. Would it be right to say you blamed Gigi?’

‘It is hard to tell exactly when you fall in love with someone, Omar Sir. But the moment you fall out of love is a definitive one. This was one such time.’
You avoided me after that day. Refugee brought me an envelope full of money and a letter of recommendation for the doctors to admit me at a private hospital. You always were good at polite little bribes. Both lay unopened. I did not thank you nor did I blame you. I simply stopped talking.

Soldier Rahim came to see me.

‘Come away with me, Nazo. We’ll start a new life far away from here.’

But something inside me had been broken. If the price of hubris was heavy, then the price of betrayal was even heavier. I felt shattered. Irreparable. For the first time in my life when I looked at you I felt nothing. No hatred. No love. Just numbness.

Where can I go Soldier Rahim, I thought. Everywhere I go it will follow me. If only I could leave this body.

Soldier Rahim shocked by the hopelessness in my eyes said nothing further.

The wrong child came to see me. Pawed at me with his little hands and consoled me in his incomprehensible speech but I felt nothing. Not even annoyance. I felt as if I was frozen. After a while you asked everyone to leave me alone. I was given no task to do. Not even light ones. All day I sat looking at walls wondering when they would close in on me. I watched you go to work, come back, eat, sleep, play with your daughter, as if everything was the same.

Only I knew that nothing would ever be the same.

*

‘Nazo,’ you came to see me a few weeks later. ‘Dr. Farooqi thinks you are suffering from a nervous breakdown. You need proper therapy. He…’ you looked away. ‘He suggested E.S.T.. It involves electric shocks. It will hurt but it will help you...’

I just stared at you, the same numbness making me close my eyes, even as you went on talking.

‘Nazo, it might turn into something worse like a mental illness. Look I know we have had our differences in the past but I can’t let you waste away like this. Nazo, at least try....’
I drifted into a deep cavernous black sleep.

*
'Miss Khan, you were admitted to a mental asylum. True or false?'
'My client was only there for a few days, due to a terrible shock. It is no reflection on her current state of mind.'
'I'm not so sure about that, Counsel. Your Honour, please see Exhibit E, a report from Dr. Farooqi about Miss Khan's diagnosis of Schizophrenia. I would like to call upon him to come to the witness box.'
'Permission granted.'
'Thank you, Your Honour.'
'Dr. Farooqi, please tell us some of the symptoms of Schizophrenia.
'Feeling paranoid, delusional...'
'And are such patients dangerous? For example if they start believing that someone is their enemy can they go so far as to kill them?'
'Yes.'
Perhaps I would have spent the rest of my life sitting in a dark unlit corner if it hadn’t been for the unexpected visitor.

There was a knock on the door. I opened the door to see no one outside. As soon as I shut it, the knocking began again. I swung the door open to, once again, see nobody standing there. I began to feel scared. I didn’t believe in ghosts or spirits but the invisible knocking was beginning to unnerve me a little. So when the knocking came a third time, I picked up a vase, threw open the door and swung the vase blindly before me. Nothing but the swishing sound of air cutting air.

And that is when I felt something touching my feet. Stifling a scream I looked down to see a cockroach climbing up my barefoot. The vase dropped from my hand narrowly missing the repulsive creature. I crouched down to take a closer look and sucked in my breath. The resemblance was undeniable. The same cross-eyed features, the same ruthless frown and the same buzzing antennas that gave him a frown of concentration, always scheming, always planning. And most of all, that look of ruthless self-righteousness.

There was no doubt about it. The cockroach in front of me was undoubtedly the General’s reincarnation.

My past had come back to haunt me.
Quickly I put an upturned glass over him. Let him suffocate, I thought. But then what if he came back as something bigger, something mightier I thought. Where had I heard that if someone dies an unnatural death they keep coming back till death claims them naturally.

‘It is your karma,’ I said to him, ‘that you have come back as the lowest form of life.’

‘Talking to yourself again?’ Refugee said as he brought me tea. ‘Are you feeling hungry today or still on hunger strike?’

I stared at him speechless, willing him to come forward and accidentally squish the cockroach General.

‘Step on it,’ I prayed silently.

But he walked right out without a second glance. When I turned to look down
again, the creature had escaped.

That was the first time I realised that there is such a thing as accountability.

*Perhaps you do get what you deserve.*

* *

By lunchtime he was back. I saw his little feelers waving blindly before he climbed up the leg of the table and sat himself behind your soup bowl. I held my breath. Would you notice him? You were so distracted by the news on TV that you weren’t even looking at what you were putting in your mouth let alone what was crawling about on the table cloth.

Still, I held my breath. What would happen if you saw him? Would you see through the disguise? Would you be repelled enough to crush him? I wondered if you’d step on him or perhaps you’d ask me to scoop him up with a piece of paper and throw him out of the window.

*You always did make me do your dirty work.*

‘Nazo?’

I looked up, startled at the sound of my name.

‘Are you alight?’

I continued to stare mutely, unable to bring the words out.

‘Stop staring at me. For God’s sake, speak! Really Nazo, I do think you should go see Dr. Farooq at the Psychiatric Centre. Believe me they won’t lock you up and put you in an asylum. He’ll just give you some pills to relax your nerves. I’ll see to it that you are taken care of.’

*That’s exactly what I was afraid of.*

* *

That night when I got to bed, the cockroach General was already on the pillow waiting for me. He scurried up to me, climbed onto my hand and up my arm and before I knew it, he was sitting on the tip of my nose. I felt my eyes centre in to look at him. He
nuzzled his feelers against my skin, tickling my nostrils. I sneezed. Achoooo. A loud sound, a swoosh of breath and spit and he went flying across the room.

Tentatively I moved closer. When he didn’t stir for another few seconds I wondered if I had killed him, once again.

*

The next day I awoke to a black dawn. There was a dust storm brewing. The darkness before the rain, I thought.

It seemed a long time since I had stepped out to the kitchen—my world now limited to my room and your suite. I took a few hesitant steps down to the grease kitchen.

I found it the same. How surprising that I had changed yet everything around me was still the same.

‘Ahh, Nazo, come, come,’ Refugee rushed to greet me as if seeing a long lost friend and perhaps he was.

He settled me on a chair as if I was some fragile piece of china, easily breakable.

‘Get her tea,’ he shouted to Chancher.

‘Ahh, my poor Nazo, what have they done to you.’

I tried to smile but the muscles around my face felt stiff.

‘Quick,’ he shouted to the tea boy. ‘Tea now!’

Chancher placed the cup down with trembling hands. I noticed he avoided my gaze.

‘You can’t bury the truth,’ Refugee said, as he stirred sugar into my tea. ‘You will see one day justice will prevail. They will catch those culprits.’

How could I tell him that I too was a culprit? Perhaps this was my punishment for plotting another human’s death. However nasty he may have been.

*

Refugee’s words kept circling my thoughts, darkening them like black clouds blocking out the sun. There was only one person who could help me.

It took great courage to telephone him. My hands shook as I dialed the number, my
palms sweaty as I waited for him to pick up.

‘Can you come?’ I whispered, my voice sounding foreign even to my own ears.

Barely an hour later there was a gentle knock on the door. Once again I found myself at his mercy. I fell into Soldier Rahim’s arms as soon as I unlocked the latch.

‘Save me,’ I said, tears flooding my eyes. ‘Only you can save me.’

‘Nazo, Nazo,’ he said putting his arms around me. ‘Oh Nazo what has happened to you? What have they done to you now?’

‘He's following me,’ I whispered. My eyes darted around the room as if any minute now he would pop out.

‘Who’s following you, Nazo? There is nobody here.’

‘He’s following me. Always following me.’

Who?

‘The General.’

The General? The General is dead, Nazo.’

‘He's back.’

‘Oh Nazo.’

‘Look,’ I pointed to the cockroach nestled comfortably in the folds of my hijab.

Before I could say another word, Soldier Rahim flicked it off and stamped it with his boots.

My screams were so loud that Rahim had to clamp his hand on my mouth.

‘Nazo please!’ he said.

‘You killed it,’ I said as soon as he lifted his hand off my mouth.

‘You killed the General.’

‘That was the General?’

Soldier Rahim looked at the crushed creature and let out a laugh that was louder than all my screams.

*

Why didn’t he believe me, I wondered that night in bed. Why did he think I had gone mad? Could anyone really deny the resemblance? Surely you would have believed
me.

If only you had seen him.

The next day, I decided with great conviction to tell you the truth. But instead of believing me you had me bundled up in the car and sent to the clinic for the first of the E.S.T. sessions.
‘Getting a shock and giving a shock, both are terrible things, Omar Sir.’

‘Mr. Omar? My client has answered your question. Is there any further questioning?’

‘No. No further questioning. Witness dismissed.’

‘Very well then. I would now like to ask the D.A., Mr. Omar to step into the witness box. For, after all, along with being a good friend to Madam Gigi, in the months leading up to the assassination, he too had been spotted at the Shah residence. Kindly step in the box, Mr. Omar.’
The cure was not much different from the crime itself. Once again my hands and feet were bound, my mouth gagged and my body tortured. This time with wires. Currents ran through my body at regular intervals. I felt as if I was being struck by lighting. Repeatedly. At the end of it my mind felt as if it would explode. I felt, when I came back home, only half the woman I had once been. But I vowed never to tell you this lest it gave you just the reason you needed to send me back to the torturer’s clinic.

That night I slept a dark deep sleep waking up the next evening. I felt groggy and disoriented as if I had been on a long journey and had only just returned. My hands were clammy and my mouth felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton wool.

I was just debating whether you had done this to avenge me or help me when there was knock on the back door. Convinced the General was back I swung open the door, my eyes on the floor. And what did I see? Not a black scrawny creature but ivory sculpted to perfection. I saw before me, the most exquisite pair of feet I had ever seen. Oval nails, perfectly trimmed and embedded in ivory, white skin, lighter only by yours. The beautiful feet before me, were clad in slim, tan leather slippers. I raised my eyes slowly, taking in crisp white trousers, a pale shirt with a Mao collar, wide chest, a strong burly neck, clean shaven jaw around pink fleshy lips, an aquiline nose and hazel eyes that stared deep into mine.

‘Hello’ the man said in a deep husky voice.

Something about his accent was reminiscent of yours.

‘Cambridge?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ came the surprised reply.

I smiled.

‘Yes, I went to Cambridge,’ he said. ‘Not many people can gauge my accent from just a greeting.’

He held out his hand and that is when I hesitated. There was something oddly familiar about those hands. Perhaps it was the sheer size of them. They didn’t seem to fit in with the rest of his refined, dare I say effeminate self. His hands were large and burly like that of a butcher or… a killer.
‘My name is Omar,’ he cleared his throat.
I looked at his hands and a shiver ran up my spine. I remembered now where I had seen such large hands before. The *Burqa* hadn’t done a good job of concealing them.
Slowly I held out my own limp palm.
He shook it. His grip was as strong as I anticipated it to be.

‘Hello? Miss?’

I realized I was still holding onto his hand. I let go.

‘The main entrance is the other way,’ I told him. ‘You’ve come around the back.’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘I have been here before but…I guess I got lost.’

‘Please come with me. I will take you around properly to the front of the house.
There is a very nice waiting area and reception there.’

Omar started to laugh.

Was I being rude? Perhaps I was missing something. I rubbed my temples, still groggy from the treatment.

‘Actually I’m a close friend of Gigi’s. Though we haven’t met for a long time. Not properly at least. All this feels a bit formal. But I guess she is PM now. One must follow protocol.’

‘Oh I see. In that case I’m sure Gigi Sahiba won’t mind if I take you straight through.’ I blame it on the medicines but forgetting protocol, I led Omar straight to you.

*How naïve I was back then.*

I crossed the inner courtyard and into the main house. Your study was the first door on the left and I could hear voices.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I walked in without knocking. You were having tea with the Party workers. ‘Your good friend, Omar from Cambridge, is here.’

‘What?’ you looked up abruptly.

‘Omar, your fr...’

‘What is he doing here?’ you asked in a shrill surprised voice.

The others turned to look at you.

Balgodi too looked up from his corner where he was puffing away at his cigar and flipping through a magazine, probably *Playboy*, I thought.

‘Who is this Omar?’ he frowned, ‘how do you know him?’
You shot me a look as if somehow it was my fault that his curiosity had been aroused.

‘Shall I ask him to leave?’ I asked still puzzled from the treatment.

Now it was your turn to frown.

‘No, no. I'm coming. Just ask him to…. Tell him to wait in the lounge.’

Then before Balgodi could quiz you further, you stepped out of the room, leaving me to answer his barrage of questions with my dazed look and fuzzy tongue.

*

Later when you rang the bell for Refugee to bring in the tea, I took the tray from him.

He gave me a sly look and said, ‘Tread carefully, Madam Nazo. Husn wallo say Allah bachai.’

‘What?’ I asked, sure that I had misheard him.

‘It’s hardly been a day since your treatment Nazo.’ He winked and added, ‘Don’t go falling for a pretty face now.’

Damn it, I thought. How is that in every house I’ve worked, the Cook knows before everyone else what’s going on.

‘You needn’t worry,’ I said.

And it was true. It was nothing less then curiosity that was making me restless about Omar. There was something oddly familiar and at the same time disturbing about him. Yet I was sure that I had never met him before in my life. Oh well, I thought, as I walked in with the tea, at least he got my mind off the Cockroach General.

‘Omar, it’s been so long,’ you were saying. ‘It is so good to see you. I was just thinking the other day it’s been too long. I must ring Omar, I told myself.’

You were smiling away as if you were very happy to see him. I was tempted to pull the mask off your face but unfortunately for me, it was glued to your skin.

‘Here let me get that heavy thing from you,’ Omar leaned forward and took the tray from me, our hands touching ever so briefly.

‘Thanks for tea,’ he said placing it gently on the table in front of you.
‘As if I would let you go without it. Shall I pour?’ you asked.

‘No,’ I cried and you both looked up at me.

‘I mean,’ I looked around wondering why I had screamed like that. ‘I mean, I will serve it. Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity.’

Omar laughed and you rolled your eyes.

‘This is Nazo,’ you said making a gesture with your hand as if to indicate I was not all there. I felt an angry heat welling up inside me. So English was not my greatest strength. But what right did you have to insult me like that? I looked at the fruit knife in the tray and maybe you caught my stare for you quickly added, ‘She is indispensable to me. The little ones, especially, are so close to her.’

You looked sideways and caught me staring at Omar.

‘And you know, Omar, poor Nazo has vowed never to get married. That’s how devoted she is to my son.’

This was news to me.

‘Well, I remember you taking a similar vow about not getting married and devoting yourself to the country,’ Omar said. ‘But I guess people change with time.’

Ha, I liked this guy already. Finally someone who thought like me.

‘Perhaps,’ he looked warmly at me, ‘Nazo will change too.’

*

That night, after a long time I felt something stir inside me. I felt a kind of warm curiosity bubbling inside about this handsome stranger. After what had happened to me I had vowed I would never ever let a man come near me. But something about Omar was drawing me towards him. Not in a sexual way, just in a warm comforting manner. I wanted to look at him and believe that there was beauty amidst all the ugliness life had thrown at me.

Just then Refugee buzzed to say dinner was ready.

‘I’ll call Gigi Sahiba,’ I buzzed back. I crossed in to the main house and was climbing up the stairs when I heard a crash. When I got closer, I heard loud noises coming from your room. Another argument, I thought.
I gauged your husband was having one of his tantrums and you didn’t want the baby to wake up. Sure enough when I got to the door, I heard him say, ‘But why does he have to stay here?’

‘Because he's my friend from college days.’

‘Whoever heard of a girl and boy being just friends.’

‘Oh Balgodi, I don’t have time for this nonsense. Look he's a well known human rights lawyer. Has power in the foreign media. He can be really useful to us. Perhaps he can restore your image in the public eye.’

‘What’s wrong with my image,’ I heard Balgodi shout.

‘I mean the misconceptions people have about you,’ you said soothingly.

‘Huh,’ Balgodi retorted.

Just then the baby began to cry.

‘Now look what you’ve done,’ I could hear you cajoling the baby. ‘And besides, Omar needs to stay here for a few days to complete a book he is working on. There’s a chapter in it on the first woman Prime Minister in the Islamic world.’

‘Don’t forget you could have never done it without me,’ I heard Balgodi say.

‘Oh yes, husband dearest,’ I could hear the sarcasm concealed in your voice as you proceeded to explain how Omar’s stay and subsequent book was vital to restoring public vote in favour of the Party re-election.

I laughed to myself thinking that every time you want a lie to become the truth, all you have to do is tell it to the press.

Just then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

‘Waiting for something, Nazo?’

I turned around to see Omar standing behind me.

‘Oh Omar Sir, yes Sir,’ I nodded, annoyed at having to miss the rest of the argument but at the same time pleased to see him. ‘I just came up to take the baby. But as you are here Sir, Cook asked me to tell you all that dinner is ready.’

‘Well then, lets go.’

I hesitated.

‘Shall we?’ he stood at the top of the staircase with his arm held out.

Was he crazy? Did he really expect me to link arms with him and walk down the
stairs?

‘Sir,’ I said smoothing down the creases on my castoffs. ‘You go on. I have to wait for Gigi Sahiba.’

‘Alright,’ he said whistling down the steps, two at a time, ‘suit yourself,’

If only I could.

*

Omar's presence in the house was like heralding in spring after a long lonely winter. Although I was still curious about his past, especially where you were concerned, I was now more intrigued about his future. What were his plans? Why was he really here? He always got a dewy look in his eyes when he looked at you and you seemed to spend more energy avoiding him then trying to explain your point of view to him, which is what you normally did with members of the foreign press. Who was he really? Why was he here? Something told me I would soon find out. All I had to do was to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut.

*

Something was about to happen, I could tell. I had a nose for these things, Refugee often said. There was a meeting of the top Party brass going on in your study and I stood outside wondering whether to go in or not.

‘You shouldn’t be here.’

My ear was pressed against your study door when I heard Omar’s gravelly voice behind me.

Never before had someone snuck up on me like that without my knowing. I turned around slowly. Omar's handsome face gazed down at me. He was standing close. Too close.

‘You shouldn’t be here either,’ I said.

‘You’re not easily intimidated are you?’

His English was much too good for my comprehension but I tried to keep up.
‘No I’m not an Intermediate but ask me anything and I’ll know the answer.’
He laughed a husky little laugh and said, ‘Ok I will.’
‘Go on,’ I challenged.
‘Will you have dinner with me?’
I gaped at him.
‘What happened? Thought you had the answer to everything.’
‘Sir,’ I said looking down at his handsome feet. ‘I can serve you dinner but…I can’t have it with you.’
‘Why?’
‘Because…’
I looked up at him. Did he really not understand? Was he that naïve or just incorrigible?
‘Yes?’
‘Because, that’s the way it is.’
‘Why?’
‘Because things don’t change around here.’
‘Why?’
‘Because if one tries to change them, they are stopped. Violently, harshly.’
Thoughts and images of the rape flashed through my mind and I stepped back. Once again, I could hear the voices in my head, feel the burns on my skin, and then the roach’s feelers began tickling my bare feet. I saw in my mind the dead man’s teeth.
‘Excuse me Sir,’ I said backing away abruptly as waves of nausea rushed up my throat. ‘I have to go.’
‘Nazo wait.’
I thought he’d grab my arm but he was a gentleman.
‘Please,’ he said.
I looked at his earnest expression and shook my head. No. Not for me, these matters of the heart. For my heart knew what my mind only thought it knew. And my mind told me, *stay away.*

*
I didn’t expect Omar Sir to persist and unfortunately for me, he didn’t. This was one time when I was annoyed at being right.

With the medication, I began to feel better and after a few days the violent thoughts no longer disturbed me. Strangely, now it was me who began to find excuses to talk to him. Brought him his food personally, knocked on his door at meal times instead of using the intercom to inform him, made sure to stop him after dinner to ask what he wanted for breakfast. All this he answered with the utmost politeness but he never once asked me out again.

It was unlike men. Yes, the more I thought about it the more I was convinced he was doing this on purpose. It was a strategy and it was working. I wanted him to pursue me. If for nothing else, then just for the fun of it. I watched him, shyly, day dreamed about him and made up stories in my head about his background. And for this I was grateful. For a little while and little while only, life once again seemed purposeful.

That is, until I found myself once again outside the gates of Paradise. You betrayed me, Gigi, just when I thought I could trust you.

*
'Mr. Omar, please take Oath.'

'Are you sure you want to do this, Mr. Omar? As D.A. you don’t have to. You can be exempt.'

'Thank you, Your Honour. But if my colleague feels I’m needed in the witness box, then I must respect his wish.'

'Proceed.'

'Mr. Omar, may I ask you as a close friend of Madam Gigi Shah, did you ever feel that Miss Khan felt any enmity towards her?'

'Well, enemy is a strong word.'

'I mean were there instances that Miss Khan was treated harshly by Ms. Shah? As employers I’m sure we all have those moments of impatience.'

'Yes there were.'

'And did Miss Khan retaliate?’

'I have to admit, I never saw her lose her temper at Gigi’s outbursts.’

'Well then how can you accuse her of being a killer? You have to hate someone a lot to even contemplate hurting them.’

'Perhaps she just hadn’t reached her tipping point, then.’

'Is there a reason why you say that? Did she receive a shock of some kind? Some sort of pedestal shaking news, a betrayal perhaps?’

'I think so...yes.’

'Please elaborate.’

'I’m afraid I can’t.’

'In that case, do you not think that if at all there was some misunderstanding, the person who caused it would be an accessory to murder? Do you know who could have deliberately created tension between her and Gigi Sahiba?’
I’m not sure what it was that triggered it but something made that familiar cold fear come back. It was at once unknown and recognizable, a strange trepidation, dread that inched up my skin. It had no name. I woke up in the middle of the night afraid that someone had broken into my room. Someone was there. With trembling fingers I flicked on the bedside lamp.

On the foot of my bed, I found Refugee going through a pillowcase.

‘Refugee?’ I asked my voice drugged with sleep.

‘Oh Nazo, I didn’t mean to wake you. I was looking for money.’

For a second I thought it was a bad dream. My friend was robbing me and not even a hint of apology in his voice.

‘But…but…’ how could I point out politely that stealing was wrong.

Refugee paused, then started to laugh. ‘Oh it’s for the school’s project. Haven’t you seen the news? The Jihadists have burned down one of your girl’s schools and are threatening to shut down others too. The school guardians are asking for security funds. I was hoping you had some stash stowed away but there is nothing here. If we don’t do something soon Nazo, all your hardwork will go to waste.’

‘Gigi will help,’ I said.

Refugee snorted, ‘Madam’s government is nothing but a bystander.’

Shame seared through me, worse than pain. Why did I, after all this, still feel as if it was my fault?

I felt under my pillow and pulled out the cheque book. ‘Here. This is the last of it.’

Refugee reached out to take it. ‘You have to get better, Nazo. Or all this will shut down.’

My head fell back against the pillow. I felt tired. Exhausted. Yet the journey had just began. Friends, I thought as I drifted deep into an uneasy sleep, friends make the worst enemies.

*  

The next morning, I woke up with a violent shudder. There sitting on my blanket,
staring right at me with a hundred watchful eyes, was the General.

It was all I could do to keep myself from screaming. I rang Soldier Rahim but he didn’t pick up. There was no one else I could trust. Except you. Despite the fear of E.S.T., I knew I had to tell you. For I alone was not responsible for his death. Was I?

‘Gigi,’ I rushed into your bedroom just as you were getting out of bed. ‘Gigi, I saw him.’

‘Saw who?’
‘The General. He’s come back again.’
‘Oh Nazo, don’t start that again. Not now please. I really don’t have time.’
‘But Gigi, you said you would believe me. Yesterday when I said there was something I needed to tell you, you said I could come to you. You said I could confide in you, especially anything to do with the General.’

‘Oh Nazo, I thought it was something important like a Coup being planned or something. How was I to know you’ve started imagining things again? Look Nazo, last week one of the servants told me that you insisted the General had come back as an insect to avenge his death because you were involved in his killing. Instead of all this nonsense which might end us both in jail, you could have just asked him for some strong pesticide.’

‘But it’s true.’
‘Nazo! I’m warning you…’
‘But Gigi, just look at it. He’s staring right at us. There’s got to be a reason he’s come back. Please just look into it’s revolting eyes.’
‘Nazo,’ you said gently, ‘that’s just a fly.’
‘But surely you can see the resemblance. The way it flutters its wings, the way it is staring right at me as if to say you killed me.’

You rolled up your newspaper and before I could finish my sentence you swatted it. The fly fell dead at your feet.

‘You killed it!’ You killed it.’

Perhaps it was the right thing to do to a hysterical person but it still stung when you slapped me.

‘You have become delusional, Nazo. Stop this behavior or I’ll have you locked up in a mental asylum.’
'How would you like it, Gigi,' I asked holding my cheek, ‘if no one believed you were the Prime Minister of Pakistan and insisted you were making it up?’

For a second I thought I saw light in your eyes. A sudden realization, as if you had finally understood what I was trying to say. But the next minute it was gone.

‘Enough Nazo. Go change the boy’s nappy. And if you don’t stop this nonsense I won’t let you near the children. You understand? The only reason I’m tolerating your crazy behavior is because the boy is attached to you. But if you don’t stop, I’ll forget that you are his mother. Understand?’

I didn’t, but I nodded yes.

*

That night as I was clearing up the dinner dishes, Omar walked in to ask for a cup of green tea.

‘I will bring it to you,’ I said, ‘the Cook has turned in for the night.’

‘I’ll wait.’

‘Five minutes,’ I said when he continued to stand there, ‘I’ll make it soon as I’ve fed the cats.’

I opened the kitchen door and threw the left overs to a pack of waiting cats. They scrambled towards it, scavenging and wailing, fighting viciously. A fly buzzed over their heads and before I knew my heart welled up. I found myself crying at the sight.

‘Nazo,’ Omar came close and put his hand on my shoulder, ‘Are you alright?’

‘Yes,’ I said pulling myself together and wiping away the tears.

He seemed embarrassed. ‘Look, forget about the tea. I can make it myself.’

‘No, no trouble,’ I said.

I walked in with the tea and found him looking at old photos.

‘Hey, would you like to see some of the photographs I took of wild life while I was in Africa. I’ve seen you feed the pigeons in the morning and the cats at night. Do you have a soft spot for animals?’

‘Only for strays,’ I replied.

He seemed unsure if I was serious or joking.
‘Ha, funny girl,’ he said after a moment. ‘Come, I’ll show you my portfolio.’

‘Come sit here,’ he patted the sofa next to him as started to sit on the floor. I sat up wiping my hands on my hijab, my thoughts still on the ferreting cats.

A photo of a two birds sitting on a branch made something break inside me. I turned to Omar Sir and asked, ‘Do you have any pictures of when you and Gigi were together in Cambridge?’

‘Why?

‘I want to know what she was like before...’

He nodded.

‘Yes, I know what you mean. She was a different person before her father’s death. She never wanted to go into politics, you know.’

‘She didn’t?’ I asked. It seemed unimaginable that you should do anything else.

‘Oh no. She wanted to be in the Foreign Service and travel the world. It was because of the sudden death, the hanging of her father, that she was pushed into politics. She had no choice, the poor thing. She was the eldest and Shah Sahib thrust her with the responsibility.’

‘She could have walked away if she really wanted,’ I said my heart still unconvinced.

‘It’s not so easy Nazo. The Party’s expectations were on her. And then a promise to her dying father...it was too complicated. Believe me, I tried. We all tried to persuade her to stay. If she had, perhaps we would have been together now.’

I looked up, shocked at this admission. But it was too dark to see Omar’s features clearly. In the fading evening light, he looked a mere silhouette. He seemed content though, lost in the sound of his own voice, seeing something beyond his closed eyelids that I couldn’t.

‘Did you,’ I hesitated, ‘did you want to marry her?’

He laughed and I saw my hopes rise.

‘Well, I was too young to think about marriage. But I certainly wanted to live with her, travel with her, and perhaps in a few years time our relationship would have become more serious.’

‘So why didn’t you?’
‘Gigi is more traditional than you think. I realized much later and with great surprise that the idea of living together didn’t appeal to her. She always wanted marriage, kids, a stable home, a large family, that’s why we were all so shocked to hear about her decision to give it all up and go into politics.’

I nodded, something slowly making sense.

‘She was so spirited then and full of great ideas for equality and democracy. But now,’ he shook his head. ‘Now she seems to have gotten comfortable with the idea of power.’

‘Absolute power,’ I said.

‘Absolutely,’ you said entering suddenly into the room. You switched on the light and we both looked up guiltily at your daunting figure looming in the doorway.

‘Shocking,’ you said in your most posh voice, ‘that a servant should be perched on my sofa like that!’

I wasn’t sure if you were joking or not. The piercing yellow light pricked my eyes when I tried to look at you. Still I apologized, ‘Gigi, I…’

‘Gigi Sahiba, to you,’ you said. I knew then this wasn’t a joke. I looked away.

I suppose it was true, time was a thief. Was this the same woman who had made me sit next to her, lie on the same bed as her? It’s not that I felt used. Instead I felt a great sadness inside. It was so unlike you, Gigi, to insult me like this in front of a guest. You wanted me to fall in his eyes. But did you really not know that by doing so you were lowering your own self? Why were you doing this? Clearly you were jealous? But what then of all your talk about your mad divine devotion to your husband and children and home…You are the one, Gigi, who doesn’t know where your loyalties lie.

I rushed out of the room and stood outside the door trying to hold back the tears.

‘Gigi!’ I heard Omar say, ‘what has happened to you? You’ve started behaving like some feudal lord.’

‘Don’t fret so much about her, Omar. She is just a nuisance. A zero, in my scheme of things.’

‘Even Zero has some value, Gigi.’ His tone was sharp.

‘Yes,’ you laughed. ‘But only if it stands behind a number. On its own it’s nothing.

A Nobody.’
‘Yes,’ I heard him draw in a long slow breath, ‘you are right. Put the zero in the right space and everything falls into place.’

‘It was invented right here,’ you laughed. ‘In the subcontinent.’

‘Yes, right here,’ he repeated.

I could hear the harshness in your voice as you said, ‘A zero has no value of its own, understand, Omar?’

Now I heard him laugh as he said, ‘Amazing thing this zero. Put it behind a number and the number increases its value. Let it come in front of a number and its value falls. In a way, don’t you think, Gigi, it’s a kingmaker?’

*
‘Miss Khan, what I’m about to ask you will be difficult for you to answer. I know that. But we both know that you must. There was an incident at Shah house, which upset you. What I want to know is if that is what triggered this horrible tragedy?’

‘Sometimes the predator becomes the prey.’

‘Sorry? A simple yes or no would do, Miss Khan.’

‘Omar Sir, all I can say is that sometimes you don’t realize that a person you are using is actually using you. It was the same with me.’
Later that night, Omar came to see me. I sat hugging my knees against the wall. He burst in without knocking.

‘Tell me, you don’t mind?’ he demanded.

‘Mind what?’

‘Mind being talked to in that nasty condescending tone.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You don’t know?’ he asked kneeling down beside me on the floor.

‘No.’

‘Fine then. Let me say it very clearly. I’m talking about Gigi. The person she has become. It…it upsets me when she treats you so badly. She wasn’t like that you know. Both of us. We wanted to do so much. I, through my writing and legal aid, and Gigi through her politics. And now look at us. All our idealism has gone down drain. I’m writing a book but more to fund my human rights campaign than anything else, and God knows what Gigi is trying to fund.’

‘Probably Balgodi’s pockets.’

Omar burst out laughing then seeing the look on my face, he stopped. ‘Sorry, I thought you were joking.’

I smiled, then frowned, unsure what I meant if anything at all.

‘Nazo,’ Omar said patting my hand. ‘Listen, I know it’s none of my business but it just irks me when I see powerful people treating others badly.’

So it wasn’t really about me…

‘You are good to her. You look out for her, take good care of her kids, her home and from what I’ve heard you were a darn good PA too. People say you were her wing man on the schools project. It must have been a lot of hard work to lobby the funds instead of using the state budget.’

If only he knew how. I tried to smile but instead a tear slid down my cheek.

‘If truth be told, Nazo, she is where she is because of you,’ he said.

‘Don’t sprinkle salt on my wounds, Sir.’

‘You don’t know your own value, Nazo,’ he smiled and squeezed my hand. ‘As they say behind every successful woman is another woman.’
‘What do you mean?’
Omar hesitated. He seemed to be debating how much to reveal. ‘I… I should go now, Nazo.’
‘Omar Sir, wait.’ I grabbed his hand and pulled him back beside me.

*Why did I think he would be any different?*
‘I killed someone.’
‘What?’
‘I killed the General and now he keeps coming back to haunt me. Today he came as a fly. Tomorrow… who knows what shape or form he will take tomorrow?’
‘Nazo, oh Nazo, it’s ok. You haven’t done anything. There is nothing to be afraid of. Believe me, no one is coming after you.’
‘But… but… I’ve done such bad things. I…’
‘It wasn’t you.’
‘Then, it was Balgodi. But you see, I gave him the secret code, I…’
‘That’s what you think.’
‘But then, who?’
‘What I mean is, that Balgodi does not have the brains to hatch such elaborate plans. There is only one mastermind behind all this,’ he grinned as I looked up, ‘and it’s not you.’

‘Excuse me?’
‘You are just a front, Nazo. A scapegoat.’

I had a sudden urge to press my palms against my ears. But I continued to listen, as if my mind and body had both been paralyzed.
‘You know how we let children believe they are getting their way when really it’s the parent?’

This time I really did not know what he was talking about.
‘What do you mean, Omar Sir?’
‘I mean you’ve been used. Led to believe that all your sacrifices were for a woman who’d restore order, avenge your parent’s death, lead the Nation out of darkness. Lies. All lies. The truth is that Gigi is not who she claims to be.’

I shook my head.
‘You don’t know anything, Omar Sir. The real truth is that her hands are tied. She can’t do anything for us because they won’t let her.

‘They who?’

‘The men.’

‘But she has majority in the Parliament.’

‘You don’t know half the humiliation she’s been through. She tried, she wanted to, but she couldn’t, don’t you see…’

‘That’s what you think Nazo, because she has made you believe it. The truth is, she loves Balgodi. She did what she did willingly for him. He painted rosy pictures of marital bliss in the palatial gardens of Starry and she went along with it. I knew love was blind, but in her case it’s dumb, deaf and stupid.’

‘Why are you lying, Omar Sir? I thought you were her friend! The truth is Gigi hates Balgodi.’

‘That’s what I thought too,’ his voice sounded bitter. It was then I realized, he loved you too.

‘He’s the father of her children,’ he said. ‘She’ll stand by him no matter what the cost.’

‘It’s not true.’

‘Then who do you think she loves?’ he shouted. ‘You? The people of Pakistan?’ his laugh was sudden, unexpected and hostile, like someone trespassing.

‘You think this is funny?’ I reached out and shoved him away. ‘Who do you think you are, huh?’ You come here challenging everything I have ever believed in. You are asking me to believe that the woman I respect, trust and love is not who she claims to be. You can’t do that, you understand?’

Omar’s face took on a deadly seriousness. ‘Choosing money over power is a mistake that everyone makes. But choosing love over power, is a mistake that only women make.’

‘The power of love is greater than the love of power, Omar Sir.’

‘Not if it’s wasted on the wrong person, Nazo. Wait here,’ he turned and walked out.

I was just wondering if I was trapped in some sort of dream, a mirage or a joke
when he strode back in.

‘Look at me,’ he commanded. The gentleness, the sweet demeanor was gone and I saw him for what he was—just another man, out to break a woman.

I buried my head in my knees. ‘Please go away,’ I cried. ‘Leave me alone.’

‘This isn’t time to hide, Nazo. It’s time to open your eyes.’

The seriousness of his voice accentuated the meaning of the words and slowly I raised my eyes to meet his.

‘I didn’t want to show you this,’ he hesitated. ‘But after tonight I think I need you to see the evidence I have found. Here, take a look at these documents. These are the photos, letters, faxes and emails I found during my research.’

I got up to leave.

‘Nazo, stay. The time has come for you to know.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘You have to.’

It was like witnessing a road kill. I did not want to look. I wanted to shut my eyes and turn my head away but it was as if something had taken hold of me and was making me watch, the blood, the gore, the anguish and helplessness of it all.

I could not tear myself away from the sight. The sheaf of papers before me were more sickening than the beheaded body of a crushed cyclist I had once seen sprawled on the road, his battered brains sprawled patiently beside him. It was just as terrifying and just as intriguing.

I touched the Bank Statements. They were under your name. Five wire transfers from the US. An enormous deposit from a bank in Beijing. Several more incoming payments from an Opposition leader. Two or three deposits by a Kashmiri organisation and a transfer of several millions to the Muslim Brotherhood Support, an arms receipt from the bloodiest terror group…the Jihadists.

I looked away.

‘Why should I believe you? It could be Balgodi using her.’

‘Does he tell her what to say and when, also? Take a look at these.’

Transcriptions of telephone calls with Iran, the export of nuclear technology not just to Iran but also to North Korea and Syria. But the most shocking of it all was a paper
tucked at the back, dating to 1987. I touched a fax from the CIA.

You had known about the General’s death all along.

In fact, you had planned it. You had instructed them to hand over the General’s itinerary to me. I felt like a puppet who had only just realized its strings were being pulled by someone else.

‘Like you, I too thought Balgodi was using her. I offered to take her away from all this, Nazo. I came here for her. Dug up all this evidence, yet…in the end…’

‘She betrayed us.’

I closed my eyes. So this is how Muhammad must have felt that day in the Kaaba surrounded by the stone idols, the realization only just beginning to dawn upon him that the statues were lifeless and powerless, their godliness just an illusion.

Like him, I too wanted to destroy every thing around me. I wanted to smash my phony idol. Avenge this betrayal.

But unlike him I knew I couldn’t. I was after all a woman. Only a woman. A thing to be seen and felt, but not heard, unless of course, it was to voice assent.

I knew now why people chose to stay silent. Sometimes silence is easier.

I picked up the fax with the General’s death warrant and ripped it.

‘No!’ Omar shouted.

It was too late. I swallowed the paper without chewing.

‘You fool!’ he shouted. ‘What did you do that for?’

*You were all the same underneath.* I shook my head and said, ‘I don’t believe you. Gigi would never,’ my voice broke. ‘She’s trying to protect him, can’t you see? She loves him…’

Omar put his head in his hands. His voice seemed resigned as he tried one last time, ‘Look the reason I showed you all this is because you are close to her. You can help her. We can help her together. Are you with me?’

*The answer was simple.*

I looked into his eyes and said, ‘No.’
The biggest mistake people make when they ask you not to trust someone, is they think you will trust them instead.

You see, I hadn’t yet forgotten the time when Omar came to see you in the Burkha. I was sure now that it was him. I knew that he had helped you get rid of Balgodi once before, when you could see no way out. I knew it was he who had filed the case against him. I knew you two went back a long way. What I didn’t know was why he wanted to expose you now.

But I did know that we all have many faces underneath the one we wear. Yours would be so terrifying, I could never have guessed.

You had played me Gigi but you forgot, the price of betrayal is high. But if you were a player, so was I.

You began this game, Gigi, but I would end it.

*
'I read somewhere that when you begin the journey of revenge, start by digging two graves, one for your enemy and one for yourself. An eye for an eye, a limb for a limb, revenge can drive the best of us to utter destruction. But don’t you think, Miss Khan, sometimes revenge is necessary?'

‘I think an eye for eye will make the whole world blind.’

‘Order, order. No laughing in Court, please.’
After that night, Omar’s charms failed to lift my spirits. For me he was just a dreadful reminder of your betrayal. I still could not believe that you had known about the General’s death but had let me suffer the guilt during my breakdown. But I suppose anger was fuel and everyday I felt a little bit better, revenge edging me on to recovery.

*

I spent most of my time trying to avoid him but he caught me standing by the window one day.

‘What are you looking at?’
I looked over my shoulder to see Omar standing behind me.
‘I’m looking at the cuckoo bird.’
‘Really, where?’
‘See there.’
I nudged him towards the glass.
‘That bird, the dark ugly one with the orange beak that looks like a scar.’
Omar’s gaze inadvertently travelled towards my own scar.
‘Do you see it?’
He looked away embarrassed.
I pointed to the window.
‘Can you see her?’
Tapping the glass I said, ‘We call her Koyal.’
‘Of course. The muse of many an Urdu poet.’
I nodded.
‘She’s known for her sweet voice. Not her looks obviously.’
Omar smiled and said, ‘She’s also known for her ability to mimic.’
I looked away.
He pointed excitedly. ‘Look, Nazo. It looks like she’s building a nest in that tree.’
‘No, Omar Sir, the Koyal bird never builds her own nest. She always stays in the nest of others. And do you know when she has eggs, she hides them in a crow’s nest. The crow brings them up thinking they are its own.’

‘But I have heard something else.’

‘What?’ I looked up slowly. His eyes were the colour of autumn leaves.

‘Tell me, Nazo, is it true that the bird throws them out if she thinks someone else has touched them?’

I nodded slowly.

‘Sometimes it is necessary.’

He held me by the shoulders and looked straight into my eyes.

‘Look, Nazo, I’m sorry for telling you all about Gigi. I feel somehow as if I’ve broken your favourite toy. Pushed your idol off the pedestal and smashed it into a million pieces. Please forgive me.’

‘My love for Gigi is not so weak.’

He hugged me.

‘Oh Nazo, we both just want the best for her. You know, I think I will miss you.’

I pulled away.

‘You’re…leaving?’

He nodded.

‘My work here is done.’

I stepped back and then closer again. I didn’t know what it was I was feeling, love, sorrow, excitement or rejection.

I shook my head and said, ‘Do you have to go?’

He nodded and smiled. ‘You want to come with me?’

‘You know I can’t.’

‘I don’t.’

I looked at the Koyal bird, her furtive glances, her neck bobbing up and down, as she tried to find a secure spot for her eggs, in someone else’s nest.

‘I will wait,’ I said, ‘until the breaking of the eggs.’

*
I was looking after the wrong child the day Omar finally left. He came to say goodbye and saw me feeding the boy with a baby’s bottle, his long legs dangling off my lap and touching the floor.

‘What’s wrong with him,’ he asked.

And it was then, I saw him through the eyes of a stranger. I felt chilled to the bone. I grabbed the child to my chest and held him close. Perhaps it was the very first time for he pulled away surprised.

Omar seemed to understand. He took a step back.

‘I see,’ he said.

And he did. He seemed to have understood everything without a single exchange of words.

I was terrified. His power of perception shocked me. I should have known then, this Omar of yours, was no ordinary person.

*
'Ah but revenge is a strange emotion. Someone like me, however angry would try to make a person understand their mistake rather than punish them but someone like you might eliminate the root cause of the problem. I believe the word is Kill. Horrible as it sounds, Your Honour, Miss Khan in her rage, wanted to kill not just Gigi but the entire Shah clan. She wanted to make sure the Dynasty did not carry on. It is not a new idea. Many revolutionaries have adopted this method to end royal and political dynasties. But in this case, she killed our hope as well…'
Soon after he left, I felt my very self spiraling down to zero. Omar’s departure felt like a big gaping ravine had opened up and I once again found myself thinking of things past.

‘It’s no use, thinking of things that are over and done with,’ Refugee would tell me but my mind felt as if a great big ravine was sucking it in. The three bearded faces would come to me in my dreams and I would wake up, gasping for air and wondering what I had done to deserve this.

As if things weren’t bad enough, he reappeared.

*

The General was back. Perhaps being blown to bits once and squashed to a pulp the next time had increased his Karma. This time he came back as a toy. And not just any toy but a hysterical laughing Jack-in-the-box, the children’s favourite toy. That laugh, I’d think every time the annoying toy popped out of its box, how can you not recognize that shrill piercing evil laughter. It sent a shiver through my bones every time I looked into its mad eyes, its tongue hanging out, its lips stretched into a moronic grin.

‘I’m back,’ it seemed to be saying. ‘You’ll never get rid of me. You can’t bury the past. Murder catches up with you…’

‘Oof,’ I screamed one day as I was changing the wrong child’s nappy. He was four and still refused to use the toilet. I had been playing a game of snakes and ladder with Refugee, and I was finally winning when the child called out, ‘Chi chi!’

Reluctantly I left the game, knowing that Refugee would turn a winning game into a losing battle by the time I got back.

‘Chi! chi!’ the wrong child was screaming as I came in. He sat there squalling in his own filth, his eyes closed and fists clenched. He barred his lips like a dog when he saw me, drooling as he did so. For a minute I felt an icy grip around my heart and I longed to reach out and pull him to me, to clean his face and plant a kiss. What had I done to this little creature? It wasn’t his fault that he had been born to a woman who could not become a mother and a mother who could not be an ordinary woman.
I touched his face and pushed his hair out of his eyes. And there it was, the same
dark eyes, the slight squint, the helpless gaze that was sure to melt my heart if I let it.

No I could not risk it. If I gave in now, I would crumble. It was given, a matter of
minutes before I would claim him.

I steadied myself.
‘Off,’ I said as I pushed him away from myself.
‘Mama,’ he mumbled and I tore my eyes away from his sweet goofy grin.
‘Mama,’ he said angrily now, trying to pull me towards him.
‘Don’t,’ I said swallowing a dry painful lump.
‘Mama, mama!’
‘I am not your mother.’
He started screaming, flaying his arms and trying to put them around me.
‘No, please.’
He lunged at me and I felt something wet splat against me.
‘Oh no,’ I said, as I saw a brown liquid stain the floor.
I picked him up and put him on the changing mat by the window.
‘My God, I can hardly lift you now. You have got to stop this child,’ I said. ‘You
are old enough to use the toilet.’
I forced down a wave of nausea as I folded the foul smelling cloth.
Just then he grabbed my hair and pulled, ‘Mama!’
‘Why are you making my life miserable?’ I shouted. ‘I am just a servant.’
‘Mama,’ he cried.
I looked around.
‘Shhh! I am not your Mama.’
The child screamed.
Just then the toy Jack-in-the-box jumped out and startled me.
‘Shit’, I cried as the nappy flew out of my hand and splattered on the carpet. ‘That
doll! That terrible doll,’ I picked it up and slammed it against the wall. ‘As if I didn’t
have enough work to do already!’

On an impulse, I opened the window and threw the laughing toy out. I stood there
for a while, feeling the sea breeze caress my closed eyelids, filling me with a sense of
freedom as I realized I was rid of the torturer, once again.

How was I to know that the wrong child would jump out after it?

*
The funeral was small. We stood in shocked silence, soaking in the unexpected Karachi rain. When they lifted his little body up for the burial, I ran after them.

‘Stop,’ the Maulana said. ‘Women are not allowed in the graveyard.’

I looked at you but you looked away. I watched as they took my son away and strangely it was the first time I felt like a mother. A shrill primal cry rose from my throat.

‘My son,’ I cried, ‘my child.’

‘Be strong,’ you said.

I pawed at his coffin, ‘My son.’

‘Nazo please.’

‘My son, my child.’

A few journalists looked at me curiously.

‘That’s enough, Nazo.’

My fingers slid across the coffin, I touched his stiff little fingers. Cold. Such deadly stealth cold. His small hand hung limp and lifeless, poking out of the white shroud. A cry emerged from the pit of my stomach.

‘Come back,’ I cried. ‘Come back, my son.’

‘He was my son not yours.’

I began to wail, a sharp piercing sound filled with longing.

‘Stop’ you said.

And I stopped.

*

In the days that followed, I sank into a strange contemplative silence. Many days passed and I stayed in my head. I spoke to no one and no one spoke to me. I went about my daily life as if nothing had changed, yet feeling a strange numbing ache inside. I had read somewhere that when people had their arms or legs amputated they continued to feel the pain where no limb existed. I knew now exactly how they felt.
Each time I came across any of his clothes or things I felt as if something was slowly squeezing itself around my heart. One time I came across his milk bottles and I felt I couldn’t breath.

But you went on with your daily life. People marveled how, despite being a mother in mourning, you showed such professionalism. Only I knew that you were heartless.

*

Do onto others as you’d have them do unto you. I used to think that was the most laughable of sayings I had ever heard. But suddenly it all began to make sense.

Not much time had passed when the Filipino Nanny you’d hired to look after your daughter reported that she didn’t respond much to anything. Fearing the same fate as the wrong child, you had her checked by the city’s best pediatrician. With great regret he reported that your daughter was deaf and mute.

You were shattered, less by her diagnosis and more by Balgodi’s reaction. Which was nothing. He was nonplused.

‘Well Thank God, she’s just a girl,’ he said, waving you away. ‘We’ll worry about who will marry her when the time comes. It’s not like she has to go out and earn. In fact it may even be a good thing, a woman who doesn’t answer back,’ he laughed.

Seeing the pain on your face, he got up and patted your shoulder, ‘Ok, now don’t look so worried. These things happen. It is God’s will.’

You placed your head on his chest. After a few minutes he gripped you tightly by the shoulders and turned you around to face him.

‘Now I want you to listen carefully to me, Gigi. From now on, you must keep her at home. Don’t send her to a school or to any birthday parties, not even to the park. I don’t want the whole world to know you’ve given me another dumb child. They’ll think it’s God’s curse or worse, there is something wrong with your eggs.’

You pulled away. Your eyes unblinking like that of a lizard.

‘Now then, Gigi,’ he said softening his tone and running his finger along the curve of your waist, ‘when are you going to give me a real heir?’
That night I found you snuggled in your daughter’s little bed, your feet curled around her and your arm placed protectively across her chest. I found my throat tightening. Is this what I had been protecting you from? This very raw emotion that no one could deny? The very feeling I thought would make you weaker was making you stronger.

I watched the moon paint you both silver and then tiptoed to the small blue cupboard in the corner. Opening it I gathered all of the wrong child’s belongings and wrapped them in a cloth bundle. Later I buried everything in the back garden along side the unnamed grave of the fetus.

I planted marigold seeds in the soils. Afterwards I kept toiling the mud around it till my raw hands became chafed. It was only then, that I felt some of the burden lighten.

In the morning I asked you to send me for the E.S.T. treatments. I wanted to stop feeling.
‘There is a difference between ambition and obsession. Miss Khan is someone who gets what she wants at any costs. It wasn’t luck or fate but coldblooded calculations that got her to the place where she found herself contesting as a Party member, vying for a place in Madam’s own party!’

‘Miss Khan had every right to pursue her political career. In fact Madam encouraged her to do so.’

‘When a dog bites its owner, Your Honour, most people would put it to sleep but not our Gigi Sahiba. Poor Madam kept trusting her blindly. In the end she paid for it with her own life.’

‘Speculation!’

‘Exhibit ‘F’, Party nomination papers. It is no secret, Your Honour, that Miss Khan contested from her party as an MNA in the re-election. What is not well known, however is that she did not have the support of Madam, herself.’

‘I would like to ask the D.A. how it would be possible for my client to attain a ticket without the Party Chairperson’s consent? My colleagues tales are turning from riddles to ridiculous.’

‘It is possible, Your Honour. Miss Khan launched a secret campaign while Madam was deep in grief over the death of her only son. Taking advantage of the distraction, Miss Khan ended up creating divisions within the party. Being childless herself and having no sympathy for a grieving mother, the heartless woman that Miss Khan is she saw her chance and moved in for the kill. She lobbied till the Acting Party Chief unaware of the differences between Madam and her, issued her a ticket.’

‘Your Honour, my client’s desire to contest shows ambition not suspicion.’

‘But Your Honour this was no ordinary ambition. This was a very dangerous act of dislodging the leader. Her eye, you see, was on the End Game.’
The government was dismissed. The court levied charges of corruption, the Opposition accused you of incompetence, and the public rose against you for raising inflation. You accepted your fate quietly, submissively, nicely.

Mice are nice Gigi.

Once again it was me who brought you back to your senses.

The Electric Shocks, repulsive as they were, were beginning to shake me out of my stupor. And that is when it occurred to me. Perhaps you too needed a shock…

I raised a motion for a party ticket. As your secretary, I argued, I knew the workings of the party better than anyone else. I wanted to contest.

It was only after the party granted me a ticket, not bothering to ask you for your opinion in your silent uncaring state that you snapped out of your grief. You came back to work.

You ignored me. And I ignored you. I told myself that you needed me. I suppose I was in denial, behaving like an alcoholic who consoles himself that the alcohol is addicted to him rather than the other way around.

In private I continued to grieve for the child I had never felt anything for when he was alive, and you continued to grieve for the child in front of you- one who was totally unaware of the affection you showered on her.

How I envied that child.

*


‘The End game? The game had not even begun Omar Sir. I did what I had to do because nobody else would have. You see nobody knew her the way I did. People were afraid of Gigi Sahiba’s cold demeanor but only I knew that to create warmth, it is necessary to light a fire.

*
Elections came and elections went. The party lost badly. The Opposition swept to power. But the public realized they had let a good thing go. Seeing the rampant corruption of the new government, people revolted. Not even a year had passed when the new Assembly was dissolved and fresh elections were called for.

This was your chance to resurrect yourself and you knew it. But what did you do? Instead of political planning, you were family planning.

You, who’d never believed in God, travelled to a neighbouring country to get the blessings of a hocus pocus holy man. I shook my head when I heard the news. The more I knew you Gigi, the less I understood you.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I asked, when I heard the news.

‘None of your business, Nazo.’

‘It is my business.’

‘You are not my political secretary anymore.’

‘I’m your political opponent now.’

‘We are in the same party you stupid fool.’

‘Politics within party. Competitors within or do you think all politicians are simple and straight like you, Gigi? Do you know the party has become divided about your leadership. People are calling for you to resign as Chairperson.’

You placed your elbows on the desk and held your head in your hands.

‘Nazo, what do you really want?’

‘I want to know why you are vying for power when at the end of the day all you are is a housewife who wants to breed. Do you know what they call you behind your back? They call you the Perpetually Pregnant Prime Minister. That’s what you’ve made of your father’s Pakistani Political Party.’

You gripped the edge of the desk and your knuckles turned white. I wondered if I had gone too far.

But I was wrong. You swallowed the lump in your throat and rolled your hands into tight fists. When you looked up, your eyes were red rimmed from holding back the tears.

‘Why can’t I be both, Nazo? Why won’t you let me? Thatcher did it. Indira Ghandi did it.’
I have to admit I was taken aback. I didn’t expect you to fight back. How could I explain to you that neither Thatcher nor Indira were married to a cruel and corrupt drunkard. Or should I say, devoted to.

It was the time to pull out the trump card.

‘Gigi,’ I said. ‘I have photos.’

*

You called my threat a buff but when you held the 5 x 7 glossies in your hand, you shook your head sadly.

‘Nazo,’ you said. ‘Did we really care so much for each other? Was there ever such intimacy between us?’

I looked away and you caught me off guard.

‘An honest mistake,’ you said snatching the envelope and ripping the photos apart.

I knew what I had to do next would not be easy for you but it was the only way to keep you from giving up.

‘You can’t give up, Gigi.’

‘I’m a woman first, a politician second. It is my right to have a family, like it or not.’

‘Then take a back seat. There are others to lead the party.’

‘Ha,’ you laughed. ‘The Nation won’t accept them. They want me because I am my father’s legacy.’

‘And I am yours. Let me take over.’

‘You?’

I could see disgust and surprise alternating on your face.

‘Yes.’

I produced the roll of negatives.

You laughed a mad man’s laugh and said, ‘I would have expected this from Balgodi, Nazo. But never from you.’

I bit my tongue and said instead, ‘What can I say Gigi. You don’t know me well.’

‘Oh, I know you well, you knifing bitch. I knew all along what you were after.’
I shrugged my shoulders, ‘Power is a strange thing. It gets the best of us.’

You threw your head back and laughed, ‘Even if I made you the Party Chair, the public won’t accept you. You keep forgetting, Nazo, you are a nobody. No family background, no vision, no brain. Just a stupid tag along. I never should have taken pity on you. You have seen my friendship so far, Nazo. Now you will see my enmity. Not long before I’m back in the PM’s chair and then…’

I could hear the fight in your voice. The plan had worked. You were back in form. What could I do Gigi? Despite all your betrayals, my heart still urged to shout ‘Long live Gigi Shah!’

_I guess, the power of love is stronger than the love of power._

*
‘If Gigi had been able to complete her campaign, had her life not been cut short, she would have been re-elected. Perhaps that’s why she was eliminated.’

‘She was a democratic leader not a Martial Law administrator that the only way to get rid of her was to kill her, Mr. Omar!’

‘Order, order. No laughing in the court.’

‘I beg your pardon M’Lord but I do feel D.A. is being tad too dramatic.’

‘Ah, but you forget, Counsel, that a dead leader is often the best election campaign a party can have.’
You called it blackmail but when a parent threatens a child to get him to study is that blackmail? No Gigi, it’s called doing it for your own good. I could only hope that one day you would realize this. But for now, it had snapped you out of your stupor and you poured all your energy into lobbying. Though you made sure to leave me out.

I didn’t mind, for as you once said, in your scheme of things, I was a zero. My job was to stand behind you and edge you on…to victory.

*

You were leading the pre-poll counts by a wide sweeping margin. You didn’t need to campaign this hard but it was as if a spirit had possessed you. I didn’t even need to bring up the photos. In fact I had burned and buried the negatives long ago. I had known that the mere threat of a scandal big enough to stain your Mother Pakistan image was all that was needed to jump start you.

But this time you seemed not just to be going with the flow but directing it. It was as if your old fighting spirit had returned. Once again you were the leader who’d lead the nation out of darkness. It was as if you had awoken from a long deep sleep. You were the Gigi from London, the one who would do anything for her people. The Savior. The Prophet. The Leader in you had returned.

It made me think, something was not quite right.

*

When Omar came back to see you, I was convinced that things were not as they seemed. One day you caught us sitting on your sofa and talking as equals but you did nothing to stop us.

It was the best of times and the worst of times. You neither acknowledged me nor ignored me. I constantly wondered if this was forgiveness or acceptance. After all, now I too was a contesting member of the Party.
As your campaign gained momentum, so did the threats. Word had it that the Jihadists were out to get you. ‘All we want is restrain,’ they said in a video statement. ‘A woman’s place is at home. We are only trying to show her the right path.’

‘And what if she continues to contest?’ the anchor asked them.

‘Then we will do what should be done with disobedient women.’

I felt a chill in the still afternoon heat when I heard those words. But I shrugged it off. You were Gigi Shah. You were invincible. Or at least you should have been. The show had to go on.

*There was an audience waiting*

And so we went on with our campaigns, you with your PMship and me with my humble local candidacy- presenting a united front. It was for the best. *Wasn’t it?*

Whatever emotions raged inside us, we both came together when we campaigned for the Party- your father’s pride, your legacy and our reason to unite.

*It was, you see, all about the bigger picture.*

*We knew there was danger but the day the first bomb went off, we were both taken by surprise. It wasn’t fear that haunted us but something bigger. A feeling of impotency, of hopelessness of being stopped that chilled our thoughts. We all have to die someday, I told myself, but you seemed to be hoping otherwise. Love does that to people, I had heard. It makes them want to live forever. It makes them afraid of death- of the inevitable. For three days and four nights you woke up soaked in cold sweat, clutching your daughter as if you’d never see her again.*

The fourth day you called me in to your office.

‘I’m going away for a few days.’

That’s right, I thought. Run away at the first sign of danger.

‘When I come back…’

*I will quit politics and raise a dozen children. Just as the General and his Jihadists*
Nobody

wanted.

‘Nazo, did you even hear what I said?’

‘Yes Gigi Sahiba,’ I pulled myself out of my thoughts and smoothed the front of my shirt.

‘You didn’t hear a word.’

I rolled my eyes, unable to hide my disappointment.

‘I asked you to get this list of things ready by the time I came back. Please go over it now. As you are obviously distracted!’

I looked down expecting, nappies and cooking batons but instead saw a list of campaign materials. To say I was surprised would not be a lie.

‘Gigi Sahiba, what’s all this?’

‘Sorry to disappoint you, Nazo, but I’m going ahead with the rallies.’

‘You are?’

I stared blankly, unable to comprehend this courageous side of you. I would have thought you’d bundle up shop after the incident and stay out. But you surprised me Gigi. Every time I thought you fell a bit more, chipped a bit deeper, peeled a little harsher, you emerged even finer. Perhaps my eyes hadn’t mistaken a stone for an idol, after all.

‘But…’ I took a deep breath.

‘Yes?’ you lifted a perfectly arched eyebrow.

Perhaps you mistook my concern as insecurity for your face hardened into a challenge. ‘Look my mind is made up. I’m going ahead.’

‘You can’t. You can’t go to a rally. It’s not safe,’ I argued unable to understand this change of heart.

You let out a laugh. ‘That very sweet of you, Nazo, but the thing is people are expecting me. You see, I’m Leader Shah’s daughter, the true heir. People want me.’

‘So do the Jihadists. There’s an open threat to your life. They’ll never let you…’

‘I can do what I like.’

‘But Gigi, it’s not safe…’

You drew in a sharp breath. My words seemed to be sinking in and I could see you were thinking about it. Finally you spoke. ‘I’m not a coward. Besides hiding won’t make me safer, Nazo. If death is my fate then it will find me. And if I’m meant to live…’
‘We only get one life, Gigi.’
‘I might as well use it.’
‘And lose it.’
Your mobile rang.

We both looked up, startled by the high pitch ringing. There was, I noticed, no number on the caller ID.

You pressed it to your ears. ‘Gigi Shah speaking.’
The voice at the other end was menacing. You clicked on the speaker and whispered, ‘Page the tracing team.’

I hurried to the pager just as the voice on the line said, ‘Stay at home. A woman’s place is at home. Shame on that bastard husband of yours who sends you out to work. Open your eyes to Allah’s word. Stay home.’

You couldn’t help yourself, could you? You had to challenge him.

‘Are you threatening me?’ you shouted.

‘I’m warning you,’ the voice growled.

A soft click and he hung up.

‘Losers, cowards! Who would have thought theses big bearded men would be so afraid of women! Bastards. All of them bastards.’

You lit a cigarette and took a long hard drag.

‘Nazo! Get my campaign schedule ready. Now!’

‘But Gigi Sahiba, you can’t ignore their warning.’

‘I see warnings everyday, Nazo. If I started taking them all seriously….’

And suddenly you started laughing. Your laughter cut the tension in the room like a knife slicing butter. ‘Catch,’ you said tossing the empty cigarette pack at me.

I missed it. Like all the other things I had missed before it.

*
‘Your glance at Miss Khan tells me that there is something you are holding back, Mr. Omar. You have no hard evidence yet you are convinced that Miss Khan is the murderer. Why?’

‘Your Honour, I know this woman is lying!’

‘How? Mr. Omar, the court orders you to tell us any information you are withholding, no matter how damaging to the deceased...’
Later that evening as you were briefing me on the campaign, Omar burst into the room.

‘Gigi, oh thank God you haven’t left.’

‘I haven’t, yet.’

‘Gigi, your life is in danger.’

‘My life,’ you laughed. ‘My life was never mine to keep, Omar.’

‘Gigi, you can do so much. Don’t play into the hands of these mad men. They are trying to coax you out so they can…so they can…’

‘Kill me?’

Omar looked into your eyes and said, ‘You are needed, Gigi. Much needed.’

I thought I saw an exchange, some sort of private look and I knew then where I had seen it before.

‘Nazo,’ you gestured me to leave.

I was hardly out the door when you said, ‘Don’t worry, Omar, my dear. I’ve cancelled the rallies we had planned. But what they don’t know is that I have organised new ones.’

*

When Omar stepped out of the room I was waiting for him.

‘So here you are again.’

He stopped at the sound of my voice, but he didn’t turn around.

‘It’s good to see you, Omar Sir. Always nice to see you in your own clothes.’

‘Sorry?’ he turned to face me.

‘I never did understand what you were doing in a burqa that day? I mean why the elaborate disguise.’

Omar stared blankly at me so I continued, ‘You know when you helped Gigi Sahiba put Balgodi behind bars.’

But the revelation did little to shock him. Omar smiled and said, ‘I underestimated you, Nazo. You are wiser than I thought.’
I smiled despite the sarcasm in his tone. ‘Not everything,’ I replied. ‘Some things I would have never learnt about-- without your help.’

The muscles around his jaw tensed though his smile stayed in place.

I was beginning to enjoy this. ‘But,’ I continued. ‘Nevermind our little secret, tell me about yours and Gigi’s? Don’t worry I’m only asking about the veil. Was it her idea?’

The smile got deeper, wider and even more strained. ‘You surprise me, Nazo,’ he said. ‘For someone who seems to know so much, you say very little.’

‘I’m not a tattletale.’

The smile disappeared. Omar looked grimly at me. ‘Thing is, Nazo, you forget that I’m a lawyer too.’

‘So?’

‘If I had filed the case as myself or even as a man, Balgodi would have tracked me down. And killed me.’

‘Or,’ I paused but only for a second, ‘he would have suspected you of being her lover.’

‘Nazo!’

‘Omar.’

My voice was calm even as his face became a deep red.

‘I know it’s her you were scared for. I know it’s Gigi you didn’t want him to hurt. I know, Omar Sir, I know because I would have done the same. Look, Omar Sir, I can see that you care about her. That’s why you are here. What I don’t understand is why you collected all that evidence about her. You don’t betray someone you love like this. You made me hate her. You wanted me to go public with it, didn’t you? You used me. You pretended you cared for me. But it’s Gigi you wanted and when she didn’t leave Balgodi for you--you tried to destroy her-- through me!’

‘Enough!’ He turned to leave, his eyes wide and his face flashing a deep red.

‘No. You can’t just leave. You have to tell me. Omar!’ I tried to hold on to him but he shrugged me away.

‘Just drop the act, Nazo,’ he turned back slowly, his face still red, his forehead creased. ‘I know, Nazo, I know what you have been upto. We all know that someone has been leaking important information about her whereabouts…’
‘And you think it’s me?’
‘Who else hates Gigi so much?’
‘You.’
For a moment he looked as if he would strike me but then he took a step back.
‘You think I hate her? I? The one person who has laid down everything for her?’
That was supposed to be my line, I remember thinking.
He stared silently at me when I didn’t reply. When he finally spoke, his voice was weary. ‘If at all, Nazo, it’s my fault for thinking you’d understand. I never should have told you about it. It was a moment of weakness. I hated to see you suffer. But I realise now, I shouldn’t have told you.’
‘So then why did you?’ my voice was cold, my tone harsh and accusatory.
But Omar seemed impervious to it. He came close, so close that I was breathing his breath.
And then he said, ‘For every good reason there is to lie, Nazo, there is a better reason to tell the truth.’

*
'Your Honour, I read somewhere that what we do for ourselves dies with us. But what we do for others lives on forever. It makes us immortal. As a leader we had many expectations from Gigi Sahiba. And so we became obsessed with what she hadn’t done and forgot what she did do. Would you agree Miss Khan?’

‘In her absence is her presence, Omar Sir. If only you could see what was right before you…’

‘Please, stop your riddles, Miss Khan. For God’s sake, stop it. It’s hard enough for me to accept that Gigi is gone. Your Honour, there is something I wish to tell the court. You see the reason I am so sure Miss Khan killed Gigi is because it was I who told Nazo about...’

‘Your Honour! I have something to say first!’

‘There is no need to scream Miss Khan.’

‘Sorry. It’s because I have something very important to say.’

‘Yes, Miss Khan?’

‘I just remembered that the day of the murder Gigi Sahiba received a threatening phone call and I had placed a request for it to be traced. Perhaps if the number has been obtained...’

‘The Court orders Telecommunications to provide details of the trace.’
And then came the day when you chose to rally in Rawalpindi, the playground of death.

‘Do you know how many leaders have died there?’ Balgodi asked, as you were getting ready.

‘Yes,’ you answered, looking at him through the mirror, ‘three.’
‘Oh,’ he said as if hoping to be provided with a less accurate figure.
‘And counting,’ I said.
Balgodi seemed to shiver as he walked up to you and said, ‘Perhaps you should go on your own.’
You turned around sharply.
‘You are coming with me,’ you said, placing a firm hand on his wrist.
‘Oh no Jee no! The Jihadist’s probably laid a death trap for us there. I don’t think you should go either.’
‘I’m going, Balgodi, whether you come with me or not. People are waiting for us.’
He stepped back just as I stepped forward.
‘I will come with you, Gigi.’
You smiled. And my fate was sealed.
Despite multiple threats by the Jihadists, you ventured out. You put on your bravest face and kissed your daughter goodbye. ‘Mummy has work to do,’ you told the little creature whose world sound couldn’t penetrate. I remember her tiny hands waving, her fingers outstretched as if trying to catch some magical residue you might leave behind. I remember you looking back at the little girl, your gaze lingering a second too long. I remember you stalling, hesitating, running back for one last hug before proceeding for the security briefing.

At the briefing, they said it was perfectly safe. Your vehicle was bullet proof or so they said. Barriers were in place, they assured us, although later when we got there, we saw only flimsy plastic partitions that people kicked down easily. They told us cell phone signals had been jammed so no device could be detonated but at the rally we saw people talking on mobiles all around us.

‘This is the tightest security ever,’ the Army Officer informed us at the briefing.

‘No,’ I said, ‘the tightest was when the General’s plane crashed.’

‘Don’t joke,’ the Army officer said.

‘Not at all,’ I replied. ‘I never joke about death.’

It was at that moment that Omar came back from wherever it was that he disappeared to.

‘Hello Omar Sir,’ I called out. ‘From the way you disappear, one would think you are Mullah Omar of the Jihadists!’

Ignoring my remark, he went straight past me and up to you.

‘It is not safe,’ he said looking deep into your eyes. If the urgency in his voice weren’t so earnest, you two would have looked like lovers about to elope. ‘You can’t go, Gigi. A journalist friend has intercepted direct intelligence reports. Look they clearly state that the Jihadist threat is real. Bin Laden has declared a woman’s government unIslamic. His supporters think killing you would grant them a one-way ticket to heaven. Gigi, do not go to that rally unless you have a death wish.’

Any sane person would have at that moment turned back, but not you. You threw your head back and laughed. ‘Papa used to say, don’t stop living for the fear of death.’
‘Gigi, your Dad preferred to die than bow down to the General. You can’t do that.’
‘He was a man of principle.’
‘And you are the mother of a child who needs you.’
That’s right, I thought to myself. Throw in the motherhood card! Now I would have to step in to prevent this from turning into a third rate soap opera.

‘Gigi Sahiba,’ I said, ‘perhaps you should take Omar Sir’s warning seriously. The rally can be rearranged.’

‘You stay out of this, Nazo,’ Omar barked. Holding you by the shoulders, he shook you hard, ‘Gigi, listen to me, there is danger.’
‘I’m going.’
He stepped back. His voice had a defeated tenor to it as he said, ‘Alright. If you’ve made up your mind, I won’t stop you. But before you go there is something you should know.’
‘Yes?’
He hesitated.
‘Tell me, Omar.’
He looked at the Army Officer who coughed and excused himself.
He looked at me and I looked right back at him.
‘I’ve heard rumours that there are people plotting to kill you. People close to you.’
His eyes were fixed to the floor so I couldn’t gauge your reaction. I moved closer.
‘Even if they regret it now, there is nothing they can do to stop it now. Gigi, it is risky.’
‘Even crossing the road is risky,’ you said.
‘You don’t have to take this risk, you’re a mother, a wife…a woman.’
You looked straight at him and said, ‘Omar, even Superwoman has to take a risk sometimes.’
And then you did something I had never seen you do in my entire life. You winked.

* 

The three of us stood outside as the convoy of cars rolled out. A sleek black SUV
stopped at your side. We watched as you climbed into the huge black car and
disappeared. I felt as if a giant eagle had swallowed you up. But then you rolled down the
tinted window and poked out your head.

‘What’s the matter, Omar? Don’t want to cover this event?’

Omar looked away.

‘Sorry, Gigi. You’re on your own on this one,’ he flung his hands in the air and
shook his head. ‘You never did listen to me.’ He looked away and I thought I saw a
solitary tear slide down his cheek. ‘Good Bye, Gigi.’

I watched as he walked away without a single glance backwards. You turned your
attention to me.

‘What about you Nazo? It doesn’t get anymore political than this.’

I looked at Omar’s receding figure and then at you. You were smiling. I took a deep
breath and climbed in after you. Immediately the sharp smell of leather made my head
reel. It was true. You smell fear before you feel it. I knew now why the General had
insisted that the American Ambassador fly with him. He must have been thinking the
same, keep your friends close and your enemies even closer.

Not that it stopped him from getting killed.

‘This is it,’ you said breaking into my thoughts. ‘It’s the final countdown.’

How was I to know, that for once, you were telling the truth?

*
'Sir the trace report has come back.'
'Well?'
'The sim card is unregistered but…'
'Yes?'
'It was bought using Mr. Omar’s credit card.'
RAWALPIND RALLY, 1990

You walked up to the podium. At first there was complete silence- then a low rising. The crowd seemed to be closing in on you. Slowly. Steadily. Seamlessly.

You tapped the mike. People stopped but did not back down.

‘My fellow countrymen, my brothers and my sisters, I Gigi Shah, salute you!’

People listened but did not cheer. I moved closer to check the wiring. I saw an old woman with deep furrows in her forehead staring straight at you. The sorrow, the rejection, the sheer indifference on her face was enough to make me look away.

You placed your hand over the mike and looked at me.

‘Is this even on?’

I climbed up and tapped the mike. We were losing them. They were starting to chatter amongst themselves. I shook the mike. A boom of static and a loud cackle, like nails on a blackboard made the crowd look up.

‘Salaam people,’ I basked in the attention. ‘Today you don’t have to go to the government with your pleas. Look up! The government itself has come to you. Come forward and meet your leader.’

A man with a checkered turban and holes in his vest shouted back, ‘Listen, listen, listen to these liars.’

Another man stood up, ‘Today these leaders have come to us for votes, because they need us. Tomorrow they’ll forget us, again. We won’t see them till next five years.’

A few media people joined in. ‘Where are the schools you promised? Where is the literacy? Where is the repeal to Hudood law Gigi Shah? Liar, Liar, Lair Shah, Gigi Shah, Lair Shah!’

You were losing patience, I could see. So once again I stepped in where you fell short. Snatching the mike from you I shouted, ‘Silence. Gigi Shah is here to serve, just like her father before her. Long Live Shahs!’

‘We’ve had enough!’ someone shouted back. ‘We won’t be fooled anymore. Times have changed.’

I cupped my palms around the mike and said, ‘Time doesn’t change, my friend. It
only passes.’

I started a counter slogan of ‘Long live Shahs’, and for a few seconds the restless buzzing subsided. Taking advantage of the silence you stepped forward and took the mike from me.

‘Listen to me my countrymen, you can’t see God but you believe in him. I can’t show you proof but I ask you to have faith in me. Like you did in my father before me. My father gave you a roof over your head, cloth over your body and bread in your belly. Look how he transformed a ghetto into a model township and look how the General turned it into a No-go gangster area. If you don’t want me, I will go away. Lord knows how much I have sacrificed already to be here with you. My home, my son, my father but if you support me, I promise to fight for your rights…Tell me are you with me?’

The zest, the fervor, the vigour as you chanted, ‘Long live Shahs’ was unsurpassable. The crowds rose up in appreciation. Never had I heard a more passionate speech, never had I seen a woman sweep a crowd off its feet without baring a single bit of flesh. Instead it was as if you had stripped off all facades of gender and class. You stood there with your soul bared. The crowds stared in rapture.

You had them. You had them in your palm, Gigi, because today, you were speaking from the heart.

‘I will get you justice. I will get you food. I will provide shelter. I will see that your children get the schools they deserve and your daughters are not punished for being born a woman.’

‘Jiay Shah, long live Gigi Shah!’

‘I will give my life for you. I am not afraid.’

‘Jiay Gigi Shah.’

The crowds chanted as if possessed.

‘Long Live the Shahs!’

I stood still as if under some sort of spell. Was this real or had I travelled back in time? As I listened I closed my eyes and imagined myself falling through the black whorls of time. It was 1982 and you were speaking at a rally in London. You were once again young, innocent and untouched by greed and corruption, the addiction of power, the pull of family. You were waving to the small crowd that had gathered there to hear
you. When they clapped you turned to me and said, ‘Not long now, Nazo.’

The noise was getting louder and when I opened my eyes I saw that crowds had moved in close. Dangerously close. There was a rising; a kind of stirring and suddenly the crowds tussled towards you. They wanted a piece of you. What had I missed? What could you have possibly said to get them charging with such vigour? All I knew was that we needed to get you back in the car. We pushed you in and locked the doors. The car began to rock from side to side.

‘What happened,’ I asked, my voice so high pitched that it sounded unrecognizable to my ears.

‘I told them a story.’

‘A story?’

You nodded, calm and serene, despite the crowds pressing against the windows.

‘Must have been some story.’

‘It was the story of Pakistan.’

‘Just what did you say to them?’ I asked as some people shouted your name with great fervor while others threw rocks with such force that I felt the bulletproof glass would shatter.

‘I told them the story of a country whose founder was an Ismaili, its President Shia, its Prime Minister Sunni, its Army Punjabi, its Bureaucrats’ Urdu speaking, its Scientists’ Ahmedi, its Biryani Sindhi and its Naan bread Afghani. Nazo, we are a nation of many mixes so why do we fight each other? Where is our tolerance? Our brotherhood? Our sisterhood? Our Nationhood? I want to build a Pakistan where people can live in peace together. Where men and women can work together, shoulder to shoulder. Where women are not sub-humans. I don’t want difference to mean distance. I want us to accept each other as equals. Embrace. Like I have embraced you.’

‘Me?’ Where was this going, I wondered. ‘But Gigi, people are reacting.’

‘I want them to react. I want them to think about my words.’

You were so open and exposed yet you seemed fearless. I, on the other hand could feel my hands trembling, my palms wet with cold sweat.

‘But don’t you think it was a bit risky to give a speech like that at such a volatile time? It could be the last one you give.’
‘What can I say, Nazo? Every story begins with an end.’

*

357
‘At exactly 5.13pm she was shot...’

‘You were the last person to see her alive, Miss Khan. What were her last words?’

‘Don’t stop living for the fear of death.’

‘And what did you say in reply, Miss Khan?’

‘Don’t die for the fear of living.’
And then there it was. The moment when you opened the sun roof and waved to your supporters. A gunshot, followed by a blast. Blood everywhere. I reached out to protect you but when I raised my hand, blood dripped down my wrist. A dull ache rose up my abdomen and I realized it was I who had been shot. I looked up to see you smiling benignly at me. In your hand, a small, steel contraption with smoke rising out of its nozzle.

‘Forgive me, Nazo. But for me to live, you had to die.’

*
'Let me remind you Miss Khan that you are under oath. I will ask you one final time, did you kill Gigi Shah?'

'Nobody killed Gigi.'

'Miss Khan, please answer the DA. Did you kill Madam Gigi Shah?'

'What does it matter who killed who, Your Honour? Death comes to all of us. We all have to go back to the maker one day. And we all go empty handed.'

'Your Honour, once again Miss Khan is dodging the question with the cunning of a chess player!'

'A game of chess, yes, that’s what it was, Omar Sir.'

'It’s over, Miss Khan.'

'Do you know what happens when a game of chess is over?'

'What?'

'The King and the Pawn go back in the same box.'
If I had known then, what I know now, would I have let you go?

Not that I could have stopped you. You always said that the world was divided into two kinds of people, those who knew what to do and those who were waiting to be told. You always did what you wanted. Dare no one could have told you otherwise.

Still, I wish I had tried. Perhaps then, in those last few moments after the blast when you wiped the blood from my eyes, I would have looked up at you and said, ‘Don’t blame yourself, it wasn’t your fault. Go and live your life. Be the mother, the wife, the woman you always wanted to be.’

But that would be a lie. Like you once said, in fear we recognize each other. And you had recognized me. So many times, with reason or without, I had pretended to be you, Gigi.

Now, it was your turn.

*
The Verdict

'The Honourable Human Rights Lawyer, Mr. Omar, has presented many fine arguments against Miss Nazneen Khan’s case. Although his words evoke passion, unfortunately the scale of justice only tips towards hard evidence. As such he is unable to provide any concrete proof that suggests Miss Khan’s presence in the car that day was for any other reason other than being Gigi Shah’s trusted employee and confidante. Therefore the court releases Miss Khan without charge.'

'What?’ ‘That’s injustice!’

‘Order in the court. Mr. Omar is reminded to observe court conduct.’

‘But this is insane! I know she killed her. She’s a murderer.’

‘I’m warning you, Mr. Omar. Now, Miss Khan, you are free to go, however, the court advises you to refrain from any political participation and rallying in the near future.’

‘Of course, Your Honour, I have already decided to leave politics and return to normal life... for the time being at least. Thank you, My Lord, for believing in me.’
‘The judge sold out’. ‘No justice in this land’. Everything is fixed’. The court buzzed with shocked murmurs and then all of a sudden, there was complete silence. People watched as she took off her glasses and adjusted her white hijab- a flick of the wrist, a nod of the head, and once again a new hum rose through the speculating crowd. Whispers rose high as people marveled at the striking resemblance between the poor girl in the dock and the dead politician.

When the cameras approached, the woman quickly bowed her head and turned away from the flashing lights. The court was adjourned and the crowd trickled out, the press following close behind amidst loud grumbles of a bribed verdict.

‘The whole trial was staged!’
‘A waste of time.’
‘The judge was bought.’
‘The case was a farce!’
‘Justice has sold out in this land.’

The muttering faded as people poured out onto the streets. Soon the court was empty. Footsteps echoed as the defendant stepped down and the lawyer hung up his cloak.

‘Omar,’ a voice called out and the lawyer stopped in his tracks.
‘I never knew you loved me so much.’
The lawyer turned around slowly. When he looked up his face was pale, almost as if he had seen a ghost.

‘Or that you were such a ruthless lawyer.’
The DA seemed to waver but only for a second. He gripped the edge of the table.
‘Gigi?’
She held up her hand.

‘Three weeks from now, we will begin again where we left off, far away from here. I will be waiting for you and for my daughter. You will bring her to me, won’t you?’

And before he could utter the words, she was gone. Only the faint echo of a whispered name remained.
'Gigi,' he said more to himself than to the receding figure. ‘Gigi, was that really you?’

The woman walked away without a backward glance.

Omar let out a long slow breath. For once he was glad he had lost an argument.

The lights dimmed and shadows grew long. Silence gathered in the airless courtroom. The lawyer stood where he was.

‘Poor Nazo,’ he finally said.

‘What’s so poor about her,’ a cleaner sweeping behind him asked.

Omar shook his head and said nothing. He waited till the sweeper had finished cleaning and then he too got up to leave.

Before turning off the lights he turned to the vacant bench and said, ‘Your Honour, once upon a time in Karachi, there was a foot soldier who wished to be king. Only he did not know that kings are born…not made.’

*
Love me or Hate me,
Both are in my favour.
If you love me, I will live forever in your heart.
If you hate me, I will always be on your Mind.

Her grave has become a shrine. More so, because overnight an epitaph has appeared on the tombstone. It is written in red and in daylight it looks like blood on stone. Some say it’s a quote from a famous playwright. Shakespeare perhaps. And why not? People say she loved books…

But then, people will say anything.

*

The End
NOBODY KILLED HER:

A Journey of Discovery into the Creative Self

A thesis submitted for the degree:

Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

by

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2015
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INTRODUCTION

On the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of December 1988, Benazir Bhutto became the 11\textsuperscript{th} Prime Minister of Pakistan, and the first woman head of state of an Islamic country. She served two terms in office, from 1988-1990 and 1993-1996 before being dismissed on charges of corruption and going into exile. In 2007, she returned to Pakistan after being granted amnesty. She was assassinated on 27\textsuperscript{th} December of that year, two weeks before the general election.

‘We cannot post ourselves back in time,’ writes Inga Clendinnen (Clendinnen, 2006, pp. 1-72). Yet that is exactly what creative writers so often do. Time and again, we revisit our past, trying to make sense of our experiences by measuring them through words, moulding them into forms. It was through just this creative process of accessing memories - pouring them into this artistic expression through which history and memory collide - that my novel \textit{Nobody Killed Her} (hereafter: \textit{Nobody}) came about, and it is this experience that will serve as the main focus of my essay. I will be considering the process of writing that enabled it, what Graeme Harper terms the ‘micro elements’, those singular choices of techniques, individual thoughts, emotional sparks - as compared to the ‘macro’ result or the finished product (Harper, 2012, p. 2).

‘In fiction as in life, we revisit the past in order to establish who we are now by examining and arguing over, and describing in words the shape cast by the shadows of our present form,’ writes Kathryn Heyman (Heyman, 2013, p. 3). Building on her words, I have traced the earliest moments when, moved by the uncomfortable feelings of a returning emigrant the first thoughts of pouring the experience into a story occurred to me. I have questioned the choices I made in order to develop my writing, and the decisions I took in order for it to reach its readers, discussing the issues of creative integrity and the role of the publisher as an enabler as well as a modern day censor.

In Part 1, ‘The Big Idea’, I consider how the novel’s subject came to be what it is. I first look at my memory of the eve of Benazir’s assassination and the experience that triggered my thinking in a particular direction. I consider what it meant to be a returning immigrant: my paradoxical engagement and disassociation with the culture from which I had evolved. In the concluding chapter of this part, ‘The Cohesion of Memory and
History’, I discuss how I came to write about Benazir fictionally, and why I chose a ‘what-if’ angle, examining the embryonic collision of memory and history in my creative writing.

In Part II, ‘The Act of Creation’, I consider the more technical aspects of creating fiction out of fact; particularly, the role of imagination and inventiveness in crafting research into storytelling. In the following chapter, ‘Finding Nazo’, I consider how another character muscles her way into the novel and takes over as the main narrator of BB’s life story. After experimenting with different point of views and settling on the unusual choice of a first person narrator, narrating for the most toward a second person ‘you’ – namely Benazir, I discuss my reasons for using the testimonial narrative angle in order to involve the reader directly as a character. In the concluding chapter, I consider the technicalities of craft and construction and the role of the testimonial as the main architect of the novel’s structure.

In Part III, ‘Publishing’, I discuss the unexpected good fortune of finding a publisher on the basis of a first draft and how that affected the writing process. I look at the creative choices I made and the literary influences which shaped the novel, trying to analyze the winning factor, which made this book stand out in the publisher’s eye. I have chosen to submit the second draft that was completed for the publishers editors through the period of my PhD. Although I describe in the final section under Re-Vision, my decision to now rewrite the novel to another agenda, nonetheless I believe it is correct to submit this version of the novel now. My reasons are threefold: firstly because it went through the rigour of both the full three year PhD process plus the Publisher’s edit; secondly, since any creative work may be argued to be an ongoing process perhaps never truly finished; thirdly, because the processual description this essay provides for the novel is essentially to do with how it reached the end-game of the second draft and what happened with my publishers. As such, Section III might be described as a kind of Appendix, and related more to that part of the PhD’s viva that deals with future publication, rather than with examining the thesis. I hope the examiners may treat it in this manner.

In Part IV, ‘Lessons in Libel’, I explore the choices a writer has to make in the face of publishing pressure. In the first two chapters, I look at the legal troubles my novel ran into, and discuss the compromises I considered in the hope of getting published. In the
following chapter, I return to my main themes of consciousness, and analyze why it is I wanted to write what I did. I look at my finished second draft and the beginning of a third draft, which helped me examine my reasons for writing, and the risks I took for retaining my creativity; and in the concluding chapter I question the authority of the author and the role of the publisher. I finish by explaining why in the end of this long creative process I chose to forfeit publication, or as Nabokov puts it: ‘the promise of meeting my reader on the summit of a misty mountain’ (Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, 1982, p. 2), analogizing the publisher as the mountain summit. I end by asserting the identity of the author as an individual and not an author function, affirming that creativity is in its essence about self-expression and in turn communication.
PART 1: THE BIG IDEA

As a student of Creative Writing, I’m interested in the choices we make as writers that shape our literary journeys. Before embarking on my PhD, I had, like many other writers, harboured the notion of writing as some mystical revelation that takes place in the subconscious, a gift by way of which words pour magically on to the paper. While not entirely debunking the myth of the muse, in this chapter I try to interrogate this ‘magical’ creativity, which earlier I would have cast aside as ‘flash-bulb’ moments of inspiration. Examining the role of memory, history and politics, literary influences and tastes that shape writing, I have tried, as Alain Robbe-Grillet put it, ‘to…find out why I wanted to write it’, for I have come to believe the journey is as important as the destination (Robbe-Grillet, 1963, p. 14).

In this chapter, then, I talk about the uncomfortable experience in my past that first stirred the desire inside me to express a different perspective about BB’s death, an altered status that made me view myself as the other, a stranger at home.
CHAPTER 1: THE ASSASSINATION

The sky above the amusement park was lit up with fairy lights, so bright that when I looked up, I couldn’t tell where the lights ended and the stars began. At the Ferris wheel people waved from the swinging boxes, their shrill cries a cross between terror and delight. A feeling of finality hung in the crisp Karachi air on that night of 28th December 2007.

There was a low grinding sound, and the giant wheel came to a halt. The suspended metal cages dangled precariously. People leaned out, half amused, half afraid. Someone, somewhere screamed. A child cried. The air began to fill with smoke and the pale ring of sirens could be heard in the distant.

‘Fire,’ someone shouted.

‘Shots,’ another cried.

A stampede broke out.

I had recently come back to Karachi after seven years abroad. My friend Suri and I had come to the amusement park with our children. We were pushed into a corner by the crowd and watched, terrified, as a happy evening descended into chaos. A woman appeared at our elbow, her face concealed behind a black veil. Only her eyes shone clear. There was, I remember thinking, a kind of madness to her. She leaned closer, and whispered, ‘Benazir Bhutto’s been attacked. This time, they say, the bullet caught her heart.’

When we finally made it to our car, and as we sat in the unmoving traffic, I mulled over the woman’s words, ‘The bullet caught her heart.’ Almost as if it was a fancy Benazir had taken to, despite being warned otherwise.

My thoughts were interrupted by a loud thumping on the car roof as we heard a man shout, ‘Go home. Get out. There will be riots.’ The driver rolled up his window and gestured for us to do the same. My friend checked the locks on the car doors before reciting yet another prayer. I held my son closer.

We sat in silence until I said, ‘Everyone seems to be trying to get home at the same time. All they’ve done is choke the roads.’
When Suri didn’t respond, I pressed her, ‘Suri, can’t you get a signal on your mobile? I want to call home.’

Clutching her brood closer she turned to look at me and said, ‘You people wouldn’t understand. When things like this happen they jam the mobile signals.’

I was stung by the remark ‘you people,’ as if I were being accused for being away in a better part of the world for the last seven years, away from the chaos and political unpredictability of Pakistan that ‘they’ were forced to live with.

We sat in silence till we finally got to a junction close to our neighbourhood. Suri suggested we walk the rest of the way to her house.

‘We’ll get home quicker walking than sitting in this unmoving traffic.’

I looked outside at the buses clogged with people, even the roofs were overflowing. Some people chanted ‘Long live Bhutto,’ while others shouted ‘Death to the General.’ I glanced at the thin boys on motorbikes, their bodies pressed tightly together three to a seat, something incestuous about their intimate grip. All around cars lined the road like ants, their drivers leaning out of the front window in frustration. I couldn’t see a single woman outside. Part of me wanted to rush indoors to safety while part of me wanted to stay out and observe.

Frustrated by my inertia, Suri shouted, ‘Stop gawking. This is what we live with everyday.’

Again I heard the accusatory note in her voice. Again I chose to ignore it.

‘But Suri, can’t you see? The killing of Benazir Bhutto is no ordinary event. We have been caught in the throes of history. We are witnessing...’

‘Then stay here all night,’ Suri said. ‘I have to get home. I have to cook dinner before my husband gets home. Put the girls to bed before the old hag of a mother-in-law starts ranting.’

I looked at Suri’s drained face. For a woman like her, leaders may come and go, messiahs may live or die, but dinner must be laid on the table. That was what really mattered.
CHAPTER 2: MYSELF AS THE OTHER

If there was a moment I could pinpoint when my creative journey into the accompanying manuscript began, I would pin it to this crucial incident: the night of Benazir Bhutto’s (hereafter: BB) assassination. Heyman writes that ‘the mystery is critical to the process of creative unknowing, and creative unknowing is the alchemical ingredient of fiction’ (Heyman, 2013, p. 6). That night, I did not know what shape or form it would take, but I knew I had to somehow make sense of my experience.

I felt uncomfortable and heavy, but I was used to that. As a writer I knew that awkward pregnant feeling when something inside needed to take shape in the form of words. Yet the situation that night made me feel confronted. It felt personal. As if I too had been attacked, along with BB. So I did with it what writers do: write about it.

On reflection, I think the way I felt that night can be compared to a character in Ahdaf Soueif’s short story ‘Knowing’, in which the protagonist is looking back on her childhood in the home country with great fondness but knows at some level that her memories are selective. In the same collection, the protagonist in Soueif’s ‘I Think of You’ is neither a foreigner who cannot comprehend the unwritten codes of behaviour or custom of a certain culture, nor identify completely with the way her culture has evolved. Being away has coloured her perspective; she finds herself questioning the customs, and feeling tested by careless remarks. In these stories, Soueif questions the dilemma of returning diaspora when confronted with the duality of unconditional hospitality offered to a visiting guest, mixed with the expectation of a ‘knowing’ attitude of a returning native (Soueif, 1996). However, sometimes this is a self-imposed foreignness in diaspora like myself when we return home to a world we can no longer relate to yet feel part of (perhaps in our minds we have never left or are convinced that time has stood still since). Kamila Shamsie recalls a similar feeling of a summer when she returned home to Karachi from the US to find that there were no mulberries in season. Her sister reminded her that she was never around during the mulberry season. This brought about a sudden realisation of being away, a feeling that most diaspora, including me, can relate to. Shamsie recalls that, ‘Prior to this moment, I’d had no trouble convincing myself that though I was at college in the US, the fact that I returned home for four months of the
year meant I was not really missing out on life back home’ (Shamsie, 2002, p. 86).

Like Shamsie, I too felt with immediacy the impact of having been away. There was a need to reacquaint myself with this situation I found Suri and I in - the urgency of which, her attitude seemed to imply, I was failing to grasp. For me, the death of a pioneering Islamic female leader was an important moment in Pakistan’s political history, one that could change its course forever. For Suri to brush it off as yet another upheaval in the country’s troubled state felt not only frivolous but dangerously ignorant for an educated middle class woman. It was hard to accept that here was a childhood friend who had received the same schooling as me, yet higher education abroad had varied our consciousness so drastically. Harder still was to accept being referred to as ‘you’ people, as if I was no longer part of the world I had grown up in.

Susan Muaddi Darraj describes a particular incident that Soueif experienced during one of her visits to her home country Egypt, which seems to echo my own experience on the night of Benazir Bhutto’s assassination. And perhaps it is reflective of numerous others. She writes:

Soueif seems to be among ‘her people’ until she is asked by one Egyptian, ‘What does your chap think he’s up to?’ The comment is a reference to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, but the anecdote illustrates that, while Soueif is often regarded as a foreigner by the English, she is not received completely as an Egyptian in the land of her birth. (Muaddi Darraj, 2003, pp. 97-108)

Darraj’s analysis comes close to summing up my own sense of isolation in a familiar culture. And this experience of questioning my own identity is imperative to my creative writing process, mainly because it is this feeling of belonging yet not being able to relate to my surroundings that deepened my discomfort; escalating my desire to write. Being referred to as ‘you people,’ and herself as ‘we’ made me realise that going abroad and attaining a foreign education had initiated a difference between myself and Suri which went far beyond the obvious momentary disease of an expatriate. It was a difference of outlook and more importantly of privilege and agency. Armed with an education and a
foreign passport I had choice on my side. This ‘choice’ was what separated me from a housewife who had to rush home to cook and tend to small children, despite the momentous historical events unfolding around her. The Pakistani housewife’s duty was first to her household and then to herself. I meanwhile, although also a Pakistani Muslim woman, had the privilege of choosing a different life, a life which, through education, had given me the choice to observe and perhaps take part in, events that extended far beyond the jurisdiction of house and home.

Was that to be held against me?
CHAPTER 3: ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING AT IT

In her TED talk, ‘The Dangers of the Single Story,’ Chimamanda Adichie describes a narrow and one-dimensional view of cultures and individuals focusing on only single defining elements and refusing to see beyond that. She says:

She [my roommate] had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals. (Adichie, 2009)

I was interested in exploring this side of Suri, which I could not see at that moment. But more importantly I was fascinated by the way Suri had perceived me. Before this, I had not been conscious of how higher education abroad had evolved me as a thinking, questioning, and politically opinionated Pakistani woman. The expectation to shed this progressive avatar reminded me of a line from Hilary Mantel’s novel Eight Months on Ghazzah Street (1997), about an English woman’s experience in Saudia Arabia. The woman, having just arrived in the Kingdom, wanted to hail a Taxi to her host’s home, when she was warned that she must leave all that she took for granted in the first world behind. ‘But you're a woman,’ the steward said. ‘You're a woman, aren't you? You're not a person anymore’ (Mantel, Eight Months on Ghazzah Street, 1997, p. 21).

I first read this book in the late nineties as a teenager growing up in a country still reeling from General Zia’s ten year draconian Islamic dictatorship of the eighties; never knowing the difference between a liberal society and a radical one. I had taken it for granted that this was how things were meant to be. I remember that the reason I picked up Mantel’s book in Karachi at a secondhand bookshop was because it mentioned Saudi Arabia. I thought there might be some cultural relevance, for most other western books
that were available in the few remaining bookshops in the city were either not culturally relatable or banned by the grown-ups as inappropriate reading. Rereading the book in 2007, I saw myself as the unaccustomed foreigner. As it often happens when you look at something from a distance, you see it differently. Being away had made me see the helplessness and sense of disempowerment of most middle-class Pakistani women, the lack of control over their own lives, and most importantly the illusion of power that existed due to the paradoxical deep respect for the woman as the mother, yet lack of status as an independent woman in a patriarchal society.

In this sense Pakistani women were different from their Saudi counterparts. Despite the imposition of a strict 10-year Islamic rule by Dictator Zia, women still had a voice, however stifled. Why then were we afraid to use it? Pakistani women were not sheep. They had far more agency than their Muslim counterparts in Arabia or Afghanistan, yet lacked economic status and control over their destinies like women in the West. Pakistani women were, as Mark Fineman wrote in The Los Angeles Times, ‘a modern paradox’ (Fineman, 1988, p. A8).

Fineman’s piece, titled ‘Bhutto’s Rise - The Paradox of Women in Pakistan,’ and published soon after BB’s electoral win of 1988, talks about the irony of being an urban Pakistani woman: respected yet restricted. He gives the example of an influential Islamic scholar, Maulana Mohammed Amin Minhas (who appears in the submitted draft of Nobody as Maulana Sahib, p. 176). ‘A nation that elects a woman will not prosper,’ Maulana Minhas had preached in his fiery Friday sermon just before the elections. After BB’s victory, however, he quickly changed his stance, calling her win ‘a gift from God’.

Maulana Minhas’s attitude seemed to sum up the double standards of esteemed veneration for powerful women contrasted with an almost dismissive attitude for the underprivileged ones who dared to venture outside their traditional role in Pakistani society. It seemed to me that the average Pakistani woman may appear to the outside world as not being interested in the bigger picture - not having time even for the greatest of political moments when more pressing issues such as cooking the family dinner demanded her attention but it really wasn’t her place to choose. This role had been thrust upon her by her class, just as the role of a modern world leader had been thrust upon BB, a woman who happened to be the first born of Pakistan’s first democratically elected
Prime Minister - Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – (and therefore exempt from such prejudices) whether she wanted it or not.

I was curious. What if the roles were reversed? Could an ordinary woman from humble beginnings aspire to such a position? And did a privileged woman in Pakistani society value that privilege or take it for granted, opting instead for a life of domestic bliss, breeding and keeping home?

And more importantly, how did I feel about it? Did I feel guilty for having the privilege of choice, did I feel a duty, or was I simply too distanced from the whole experience to feel anything but a nuanced curiosity? These were the feelings I hoped to explore through my writings, which at this point were mere scratchings in my journal.

I was also interested in knowing how the women around me felt about the assassination of a woman who had defied the odds to become the first-ever female Prime Minister of an Islamic country. Did she motivate them to break their own glass ceilings? Or did they see her as among a privileged few: to be admired but not copied?

I grappled with these questions, gradually becoming aware that these issues were being discussed and debated by sociologists and feminists in a much wider context. My feelings at the time could be summed up in Tracy Emin’s words. Emin said in an interview about whether her art could be termed Feminist that, ‘when I had my interview for art school in 1983, one of their questions was: “What do you think of Feminism?” My answer at the time: “I don’t”.’ (Emin, 2012). I too was not overtly conscious of my area of interest. At that time, instead of engaging with Feminist theory I was trying, I suppose, to channelize into creative expression, the silent and muted voices around me, into stories that could speak for them.

At the same time I felt frustrated that more was not being done to track BB’s killers. There seemed to be an atmosphere of quiet resignation in Pakistan. My frustration at the meek passiveness of society’s reaction matched my puzzlement at the submissiveness of the Pakistani woman, who remained silent despite having lost probably the only female role model in the Islamic world of a world leader. And how did other women view her, with pride or with envy? However, to touch upon it briefly here, when my writings began to take on the shape of fiction, I did not realise that, underlying a simple story, set on the eve of BB’s assassination, and one which seemed on the surface to be a murder mystery
or a political thriller at best, was a bigger question: that of the role of a modern Muslim woman. What did it mean to have the privilege of belonging to a certain upper/upper middle class, progressive background? And what of those without the privilege of class? How would such a woman, however determined, realise her dreams in a society as patriarchal as Pakistan? If she dared to dream at all, that is.

Hilary Mantel is quoted as saying: ‘In the absence of certainties, the mind starts to inspect accidents, reconsider choices. Every choice breeds its own universe’ (Mantel, *Two Doors: Which One Will You Open?*, 1994).

Being stranded on the night of BB’s assassination and the questions about choice leading to an alternative life of independence and agency that followed, would motivate the first draft of *Nobody Killed Benazir Bhutto*. For now, an idea had formed in my mind. What if the roles were reversed? What if a ‘Prince and the Pauper’ kind of situation were to take place between two Pakistani women of different class and backgrounds?

Surely all writing begins with curiosity. Imagination is perhaps another name for inquisitiveness. The question of privilege had planted the germ of an idea in my head. I itched to explore it. I could see the vague outline of a story. I knew I wanted to start with the assassination and I knew I also wanted to end with the assassination - bringing it full circle. I possessed, as Philip Larkin describes it, ‘a beginning, a muddle, and an end’ (Peat, 2002, p. xlv).

How it was all to be achieved would prove another story.
CHAPTER 4: THE COHESION OF MEMORY AND HISTORY

My engagement with writing about BB was as much to explore my own feelings about Fineman’s paradox - revered yet restricted Pakistani women - as it was an exploratory arc of her life and its impact on the average Pakistani female. The feeling of outrage and helplessness that followed, along with the realisation that life must go on, was overwhelmingly common in all Pakistani women, whatever walk of life we belonged to. I too felt frustrated and powerless about it.

Try as I might, my experience of her death would not translate directly on the paper. Instead, I saw it through my friend’s eyes. I saw a Pakistani woman’s dilemma, her torn loyalties, her lack of agency when it came to taking a stand.

Using the journal notes from the night of the assassination - rough sketches of the escape from the fairground, my thoughts on the mutilated loyalties of a Pakistani housewife, combined with newspaper clipping of the assassination - I wrote a short story titled, ‘The Malady of the Heart’ (Jillani- Javeri, 2010). In my story, a Pakistani woman on her way back from a traditional Hakim doctor hails a rickshaw. It is the third day after the assassination, and the story encompasses her experience of the death through the isolated streets and the chatter of the rickshaw driver. He is delighted by the ill fate of a woman (leader) who ventured out into the world of men instead of staying at home to cook.

Encouraged by the positive response to my story, I tried to expand it into a novel, to be titled Once We Were Beautiful. The mere act of attempting a full-length novel after a short story was daring enough, but this is something I come to later in the essay, in the section on structure. As William Faulkner put it:

[a] writer needs three things, experience, observation, and imagination—any two of which, at times any one of which—can supply the lack of the others. With me, a story usually begins with a single idea or memory or mental picture. The writing of the story is simply a matter of working up to that
moment, to explain why it happened or what it caused to follow’ (Stein, 1956).

I had the experience and the observation, but I lacked imagination in the sense that the story, as it would be told, was not yet clear. I knew the death of Benazir Bhutto had to be at the heart of the novel, although I was unsure what form or narrative it would take. The plot was vague. I was aware that my personal experience of her death, no matter how impactful to me, was of little interest to others. The story told from an observational angle - my friend’s perspective - seemed like reportage. Plus there was an element of moralistic preaching, for I felt my feelings towards Suri interrupted my writing. The omniscient angle I wanted to adopt came across as too intrusive and instructive. The plot too lacked imagination, unsustainable as a full-length novel. The characters in Once We Were Beautiful seemed to go only so far before their own one-dimensional life story was upstaged by the assassination of Bhutto. The character arc was missing. The plot was lacklustre. However the prose shone and as, at the time, writers from the subcontinent were being revered for their use of beautiful, sensory prose - Sarita Mandanna’s Tiger Hills (2010) and Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss (2007) to name a couple - my attempt received some positive attention. The in-progress manuscript of Once...went on to be shortlisted for the inaugural Tibor Jones prize and the Charles Pick Fellowship. However, I was unable to finish it to a publishable standard. Its main shortcoming was that the assassination seemed forced onto the setting and, rather than being a backstory, ran parallel to it. It impelled me to ask myself some important questions.

I wondered if it was possible, in a society as highly political as Pakistan’s, to create characters that were politically sterile or unaffected, as I had tried to write about a woman who goes on with her life in the face of the assassination, with a ‘playing the fiddle while Rome burned’ kind of attitude. It had been inspired by my friend Suri’s attitude, but the novel’s flatness told me that perhaps I was ignoring the ‘other’ side that Adichie talks about (Adichie, 2009). Could we really remain immune to the happenings around us? Was it possible to be impartial to the momentous events constantly unfolding in a volatile country like Pakistan? To go about one’s business, taking the honour killings, the derogatory laws against women like the Hudood Ordinance, and other such
discriminations into one’s stride as long as it didn’t affect us directly?

The privileged upper classes in Pakistan are rarely affected by the injustices around them, and the saying, ‘a rich [Pakistani] woman is better than a poor man,’ would not be wrong in a patriarchal society like Pakistan’s. However, as Mohsin Hamid writes, ‘Politics is shaped by people. And people, sometimes, are shaped by the fiction they read’ (Hamid M., *Does Fiction Have the Power to Sway Politics?*, 2015). It was important for me as a writer to voice these class discomforts. By discomfort, I was beginning to understand, was my inability to do something for women like Suri who did not possess the voice I, as a woman with choice on my side did. I knew that it was important for me as a writer to use my ability to give this story a platform. I was interested in issues of class, of gender, of power and of friendship. What, then, if I made my novel the story of two women from vastly different backgrounds, unashamedly political in their outlook, one by choice and the other by force? What if, instead of making the assassination a backstory, I made it the main theme? It was with these themes in mind, combined perhaps with a sense of duty, that I began *Nobody Killed Her.*
PART II: THE ACT OF CREATION

In the following chapters, I examine how Nobody metamorphosed from biographical research, theatre play and other works of counterfactual history and biographical novels, towards the novel it finally became. My main themes of memory and history re-scripted and of politics tied into the personal, led me to experiment with a narrative mode that demanded a lucidly engaging point of view. This, I hit upon after a series of experimentation with the more traditional modes of narration. After settling on the somewhat unusual choice of a first person narrator, narrating for the most toward a second person ‘you’ – namely BB, I reflect upon the literary influences that drew me towards the idea of the testimonial angle as a tool to involve the reader (in the narrative) as a character. I also examine why the ‘accessible’ language I used in Nobody was an unconscious effort to reflect the fast changing world around me. As a whole, by reflecting upon my writerly journey during the first complete draft of the novel, I have tried to show here that creativity is not just a measure of inspirational flash bulb moments but a complex process of literary and other influences which shape our consciousness.
CHAPTER 1: THE INTERPRETATION OF FACTS

‘If you want to know what really happened to people in the Napoleonic Wars and Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow, you can read the facts in the history books. But to know how it was to live then, we have to read War and Peace,’ Nadine Gordimer (Ulin, 2014).

During the better part of 2012, while conducting research on Benazir Bhutto’s personal and political history, I also read novels that experimented with creative biographies or alternative histories. Memoirs and biographies such as Daughter of the East and Goodbye Shahzadi (2008) enriched my knowledge about BB’s life and personality, but novels like Clare Morgan’s A Book for All or None (2011) which looks at the life of Virginia Woolf and Nietzsche as it would have affected two contemporary lives, proved the stimulant to stirring my creativity. It was, however, Curtis Sittenfeld’s novel American Wife (2007) inspired by the life of Laura Bush, which proved the catalyst to finally unite my research and creative impulse.

‘It is not easy to write fiction inspired by current events, especially if those events involve politics […] All too often political novels descend from satire into cheap farce,’ wrote Joe Klein, reviewing The American Wife in 2008 (Klein, 2008). Here was a standard to live up to, I felt. Another reviewer, Hadley Freeman wrote, ‘Sittenfeld, gazumped Bush on the telling of her life and told it not only better, but with surprising accuracy, considering she had never met her’ (Freeman, 2010).

Like the reviewers, I too felt that Sittenfeld did a marvellous job of humanising Laura Bush, an otherwise known to be aloof and reserved personality, by focussing on her early life and the intricacies of her married life. She did so without compromising the defining moments that had shaped her into the stabilizing figure she became in her husband’s world. The author achieved all this while keeping a distance from the actual chain of events that led to Laura’s life in the White House, in what I assume was an attempt to avoid legal confrontation. This was the kind of creative writing I wanted to aspire to. It was, of course, an ambitious attempt and one that was not without its pitfalls. Especially in legal terms.
Sittenfield was actually writing about (a character based on) Bush, but as seen through his wife’s eyes. This provided her the perfect opportunity to focus on the man behind the politics. However, to do so with BB’s life would be extremely difficult, as it was my fear that an autobiographical angle may lead to the creative writing became a creative autobiography and a farcical timeline adopted to avoid legalities, may, instead of engaging the reader, leave them frustrated. In that sense, to experiment with BB’s life, in any way other than how it had been scripted by her loyal scribes, may invite legal trouble and cause confusion to the politically aware. Therefore, I felt the best thing to do would be to imitate Sittenfield, in either creating an altogether different character who was loosely based on the qualities that defined BB, and most importantly had her empathy, or have her life story narrated by someone else closely linked with her, whose view was not necessarily reliable. I was inclined towards Robert Harris’s method in *The Ghost* (2007). He had taken the charm and charisma of ex-British PM, Tony Blair, and without mixing any obvious facts and timelines, portrayed an alternative history to the Blair years, focussing on the one defining factor that could not dispute who it was being talked about: the special relationship of the PM with the US. What made it more interesting was that it was narrated from the point of view of his ghost writer. I found Harris’s approach calculatingly creative and appealing in its craft.

Both novels offered great examples: writing research-oriented and politically inspired fiction in a humanising, authentic way with much room for creative manoeuvre (not least to avoid the possibility of libel). They also offered an insight into writing about the causes close to my heart, as well as, offering the opportunity to explore the psyche of great powers through the eyes of an outsider. Though the narrator, on whose limited viewpoint both novels depended was still to be discovered, one thing I was clear on, at this point, was the counterfactual angle. ‘Counterfactuals (that is hypothetical propositions that are contrary to the known facts of the historical record) are frequently used to initiate exercises in historical speculation, which are sometimes called ‘what if’ histories’ (Gallagher, 2007, p. 53) The idea appealed to me greatly.

Back in the 1930’s when Churchill wrote his essay ‘If Lee Had Not Won the Battle of Gettysburg’, counterfactual or alternative history fiction was considered playful and perhaps satirical- not something to be taken seriously. However in recent times,
counterfactual/alternative history novels have gained much popularity. Robert Harris’s *The Ghost* (2007) or even his earlier novel, *Fatherland* (1992) and Monica Ali’s *Unknown Story* (2011) are some of the more popular ones.

However like any craft, there are some rules to counterfactual novels. Catherine Gallagher writes that, ‘Counterfactuals (…) must be plausible, and should appear as real options in the historical record, and even when they are used to launch elaborate narratives which are called “alternate histories” or more grammatically correct “alternative histories”, (…) plausibility should be maintained. (Gallagher, 2007, p. 53)

It was to find this ‘plausibility’ that I moved on from research into a place of creative invention that was grounded in (alternative) reality. I began to experiment with fictional relationships and alternative endings to BB’s life. For as Nietzsche said, ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’ (Heller, 1988).
CHAPTER 2: FINDING NAZO

In *American Wife*, it is really President Bush’s rise to the top we are viewing through his wife’s unassuming eyes while in *The Ghost*, it is the ex-Prime Minister’s downfall through the central narrator (the ghost writer). I had, by now, realized that an additional pillar was needed to support the structure of this novel but, as yet, I was unaware of who that could be. That is, until inspiration struck, for as Whitehead asks, ‘how to articulate that process of creative direction and popping light bulbs?’ (Whitehead, 2013).

Though it is hard to pinpoint the source of inspiration in fixed terms, one event that changed the course of my thinking was reading *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel (2009). Her novel intricately combines the personal with the political. It is an example in craft. During a discussion at a book group I was attending, where the role of Tudor women in King Henry’s Court was being debated, I pictured an image of a woman on trial for Bhutto’s murder. Perhaps the two courts, the palace court with its castle intrigues and the law courts with their trials, had collided in my mind. Whatever the cause, the effect was lasting. I wanted to link the image of the woman in the dock to the assassination. The image, its freshness and ingenuity, made me think that, while much had been made of Bhutto’s associations with the men in her life, very little had been written about the women in her life. Her mother, Begum Nusrat Bhutto, and her personal assistant, Naheed Khan, had been constants in her personal life and political career, yet little was known about them. What then if the narrator was one of these two? It was a ‘popping light bulb’ moment that changed the course of the novel’s evolution.

Shortly after winning her second Booker Prize, Mantel spoke on the creative process behind her construction of the character of Cromwell:

Such men are very rare. He (Cromwell) cut through the social layers of a very rigid society; which makes him unique. No one of his background had ever risen to a position as high before. What did it take? And what combination of personal qualities and ambitions did he possess? And to him, how did it feel? These are the questions I wanted to explore.

(Hansen, 2009)
The idea of a Cromwell-type character standing up to my imagined BB appealed greatly to my creative sensibility. It also fit in nicely with the idea of two women from contrasting backgrounds, one privileged and the other making up in ambition and agency what she lacked in privilege. Naheed Khan, BB’s secretary, was a simple girl from a humble background, working at a travel agency in London when she met BB. She rose to become an important member of BB’s close circle. In her, I felt I could create a character that possessed all those qualities that drove Cromwell’s personality.

So I had my Cromwell, but I still had no clear plot in mind; a sense of it, however, was beginning to emerge.

Hanif Kureishi’s words on writing a first novel echoed my confusion at this point. He writes:

There is a sense – there has to be a sense – in which most writers do not entirely understand what they are doing. You suspect there might be something you can use. But you don’t know what it is. You have to find out by beginning. And what you discover probably will not be what you originally imagined or hoped for. Some surprises can be discomfiting. But this useful ignorance, or tension with the unknown, can be fruitful, if not a little unreliable at times. (Hanif Kureishi, 2013)

The puzzle was coming together. The influence of two women (her mother and her PA) on BB’s life and career was undeniable. So why was it never talked about?

Was it because they differed greatly on their approach to politics? Expounding this question in my imagination, I started work on the first draft. Here is where real ‘inspiration’ came in, i.e. the desire to create. It was a leap of faith, one that a writer just has to take armed with nothing but hope that in the end it would all turn out ok. Obvious as it sounds, this is an important step in creative writing: to begin. One can plan, ponder, draft for as long as it takes but the process of creative writing cannot begin till one starts to write. And then, as it usually happens, the story takes on a life of its own, with little regards to the drafted outline. As Tom Shapcott says in the chapter ‘The Idea of
Drafting’, ‘Each piece of writing is in some way a step into the dark; you have to be prepared for surprises; you have to let the computer of your subconscious sometimes lead the way’ (Harper, 2012, p. 72).

It took many unsuccessful attempts before I felt I had found the right voice. Gut feelings aside, how can one in a logical and critical sense, analyse what it is that constitutes the right voice? Why was it that instead of BB’s, it was Nazo’s voice that felt the rightful narrator? How did she grow so powerful as to take on the inspiration behind the novel itself?

Salman Rushdie once said about the writing process behind his novel, *Shalimar*, that ‘I wanted to make sure in this book that the story was personal, not political. I wanted people to read it and form intimate, novelistic attachments to the characters and if I did it right it won’t feel didactic, and you’ll care about everybody. I wanted to write a book with no minor characters’ (Livings, 2005). In some ways Rushdie’s words echo the wistfulness behind my own creative thought. I was on the hunt for a character to pit against BB but I was also aware that a novel about Benazir Bhutto could very easily become just that and nothing more. Having a clear sense that it was not the political I wanted to explore but the human aspect made it more complex as I had to find an angle into her story that would show the reader a different side to her. I decided to focus my lens on her relationships with the women in her life.

As I stated earlier, there was little information here to explore factually. None of the accounts of meetings with her contemporaries (other powerful or privileged Pakistani women like Sherry Rehman, Syeda Abida) or even with world leaders like Margaret Thatcher (in 1989), gave an insight into the emotions that drove these strong women. What was their motivation? Did they admire, envy or resent each other? I was particularly interested in Bhutto’s meeting with Thatcher, given that they came from such different backgrounds, one from a privileged political family and the other a greengrocer’s daughter whose rise to the top was a struggle throughout (Weaver, 1993). Exploring these encounters opened up a whole new playground for fiction’s inventiveness to play unhindered in my mind.

Once again I decided to turn from fact to fiction. If historians and journalists could not give me the information I wanted, storytellers, less restricted by facts, could. Michael
Frayn’s play *Copenhagen* (1998) and later, a BBC radio play about a meeting between Margaret Thatcher and her old chemistry tutor Dorothy Hodgkin, *The Chemistry between Them* (2014) by Adam Ganz (which recreates a meeting between the two women, about which little is known) served as a stimulus.

I was attracted by the way Ganz had pitted Thatcher’s pragmatism with Hodgkin’s lefty idealism. The play, although accused of simplifying the very complex relationship between science and politics, painted an intimate portrayal of the (imagined) relationship between two powerful women who had risen to unexpected heights in their careers. Hodgkin’s family criticized the work as inaccurate, but the idea that Hodgkin had been immune to Thatcher’s charm of power spurred on my imagination. Hodgkin’s niece wrote:

> Dorothy did not have a very high opinion of Thatcher; as a chemist she thought her average; as a politician she deeply disapproved of her. In 1985, when Oxford University debated the award of an honorary doctorate to Thatcher, Dorothy was opposed to the award because of the harm her government had done to university education. (Hodgkin, 2014)

The result was that Nazo, who was a soft sketch in my mind, became all the more defined as the narrator. Loosely inspired by BB’s PA Naheed Khan, (known for her unquestioning loyalty to the Bhuttos) Nazo grew into a deadly realist whose pragmatism was the stabilizing factor to BB’s naïve idealism. Like any two people who spend a lot of time together, somewhere along the way the two characters would evolve and, as Nazo becomes more and more convinced of BB’s idealism, BB herself becomes more pragmatic. This would be based on events inspired by the real timeline, focusing on examples where BB failed to take a stand on important women’s rights issues, draconian Islamic laws and even nuclear proliferation due to her lack of political support and parliament backing, prevented also, perhaps, by a need for self-preservation.

Though BB is known to be a very idealistic politician, she must have over time shed some of her idealistic persona to level with the dirty nitty-gritty of Pakistani politics. What interested me even more were the rumours that, later in her career (much maligned
by her husband’s rampant corruption), BB was willing to do anything to hold on to power. What had she sacrificed? What compromises on her beliefs, what attacks on her dignity, what did she give up to stay and (after the ousting by Gen. Musharraf) return to the PM’s chair? And how much tougher was it, being the wrong sex? In 2007 (just before her assassination, when she was campaigning for re-election), papers were filled with Benazir’s anxious lobbying in the US, India and even Israel. Little is known as to how much truth there is to these stories but, for a writer, a flicker of imagination is enough to conjure a whole story. I read an article in *The London Post*, which made me wonder if indeed a plot that was not just a whodunit could be constructed around the most famous assassination of the century. According to *The London Post*:

Ms. Bhutto was in power circles for long time and knew people in the know worldwide. People say may be she was reckless in keeping information safe and rattling many cages by spreading misinformation and made herself target of both friends and foes. (Benazir Bhutto: Victim of war on terror?, 2008)

I knew then that my novel would be not about ‘who’ killed her but about ‘what’. That is to say: choice. While my contemporaries engaged with bigger themes like the War on Terror (I discuss this further in Part III), I focused on a theme closer to home: the terrorist within (the class and gender inequalities of the society that lead to radicalization). I hoped to place the issue of gender inequalities at the heart of Pakistani politics and society; perhaps plotting it in such a way that the small problems, which give rise to the bigger problems, could be identified in a global context (though that turned out to be too ambitious a task at the time, but something that I turned to in the third draft).

Instead of addressing international terrorist attacks such as 9/11 or 7/7, I wanted to focus on incidents closer to home, like the murder of BB by the Taliban for being a woman. The incident of the mass school murders of young children in Peshawar by the Taliban (who are against women’s education and want to impose their version of Islamic law or Sharia), after talks broke down between the present government and their representatives, gave rise to further aggression. I couldn’t help but wonder if the country would have had a different fate had a liberal leader like BB been a man or at least had
commanded the same authority as a male leader? Would she have fought more successfully for women’s education, for a more liberal and secular Pakistan or would she too have succumbed to the pressures of the religious Zealots who wielded an invisible sword over the country?

This is something that I could explore through my narrator Nazo’s eyes. Their relationship would be fraught with intricacies bordering on a love-hate relationship with power being the determining factor. It would begin as one of idol and disciple but soon disillusionment would enter. It is a well known fact that Benazir could not or would not, take a stance on the Hudood Law that states a Pakistani woman cannot accuse a man of rape unless she can produce four eyewitnesses. I wrote a scene in Nobody (p. 68) where Nazo brings this up. Later in the book there are references peppered throughout, but due to a simple lack of house majority BB as a politician is unable to do anything. Here is where Nazo’s disappointment begins to set in when she realizes that, despite becoming the PM of Pakistan, BB’s character is nothing more than a puppet ruler.

However it was hard to show these mixed emotions in Nazo without lecturing the reader. I did not want to go down Ganz’s route of over-simplified black and white motivations. According to her niece, Kathryn, Dr. Hodgkin is inaccurately portrayed. She writes, ‘Ganz implies that she could be intelligent only in one domain, that of science, and that her political positions relied purely on naive idealism, in contrast to the deadly realism of Thatcher’ (Hodgkin, 2014).

I wanted Nazo’s motivations to be complex, changing according to the situations the two women faced. The reason for this, I discovered as I got deeper into the novel, was because Nazo (whose character starts out as a cynic and a self proclaimed realist) was becoming more and more convinced of BB’s idealism while BB in turn was becoming more pragmatic and realistic about her abilities to bring about change. A disillusioned Nazo begins to take it upon herself to set things right. In that sense, to create a protagonist with varying degrees of grey throughout the narrative was a challenge. It was not just a matter of pitting the good against evil but of creating a character who did more damage out of the good of her heart than from any maleficent intention to harm. Nazo takes it upon herself to help BB convinced, as she is, that if BB could, she would choose ‘the right thing to do’. She goes so far as to impersonate BB, double dealing with the
Army and Intelligence agencies on BB’s behalf as her party representative, convinced
that she was doing what BB could not overtly do. However, her ‘back channel’
diplomacy was not always welcomed by BB, who begins to feel threatened by Nazo. As
the saying goes, a sharp enemy is better then a foolish friend.

Here was an opportunity to create a monstrous influence in BB’s life, whose USP
was that she had her best interest at heart. But she would be far from foolish. She would
be a clever character whose every move was calculated and premeditated. Yet she would
not be villainous in her intent. I wanted somehow to capture the quality that Nabokov had
created in Humbert Humbert, that disturbing empathy for the misguided. However, I also
wanted to use Nazo’s character to create tension in the narrative. This I did so by not
making her reasons completely transparent. I wanted her motivations to be vague,
keeping the reader guessing whether it was her love for BB that was the main intention
behind her actions or love for what BB represented, i.e. power.

Gandhi is said to have believed that, when the power of love overtakes the love of
power, only then the world will know peace. Building on the saying, I tried to create a
narrative that interrogated the narrator’s unreliability: that uncertainty about whether it
was the ‘love of power’ or the ‘power of love’ that was driving the character’s actions.

Here is where inventiveness came in. I realized I was free to experiment, free to
create, as is an author’s prerogative. For as Nabokov so eloquently put it:

> Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came
running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels:
literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and
there was no wolf behind him. That the poor little fellow because he lied
too often was finally eaten up by a real beast is quite incidental. But here
is what is important. Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the
tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism,
is the art of literature. (Nabokov, 1982, p. 30)

My main themes of memory and history re-scripted, of politics tied into the personal, of
alternative history, were far easier for me to imagine through a fictional Nazo’s eyes
rather than to create a fully complex character based on BB, whose life has been so well documented. In that respect, writing the book from Nazo’s point of view felt much more ‘plausible’. However, the use of first person did not.

Why was that so?

Though it may be said that ‘I’ adds immediacy to the narrative, it also puts the writer right in the front row battle lines. The first person did not sound right in my work and I wondered if it was a self-conscious hesitation inhibiting the ability to immerse myself in the writing. While reading Nabokov’s wife Vera’s letters, I realised I was not the only author to feel unprotected by the use of ‘I’ (if for different reasons). In a letter to The New Yorker, Vera writes:

Its subject is such that V., as a college teacher, cannot very well publish it under his real name. Especially, since the book is written in the first person, and the ‘general’ reader has the unfortunate inclination to identify the invented ‘I’ of the story with its author. … Accordingly, V. has decided to publish the book under an assumed name. … It is of the utmost importance to him that his incognito be respected. He would trust you, of course, and Andy [E. B. White] to keep the secret. (Dmitri & J. Brucolli, 1989, p. 142)

I was certainly not afraid of being identified, nor was the work in danger (except in terms of libel laws, which I only realized much later in the process). So what then was the reason for first person hesitation? Did it in some way create a barrier to really encompassing a particular character? Was it a particular intimacy between author and reader that I was afraid of? Perhaps in creating an unreliable narrator like Nazo or portraying BB in an unusual light, the ‘I’ was much too personal a tool for me.

The elimination of the first person point of view (POV) would have generally led to third person POV, but that too did not feel right. It felt too impersonal. There was the limited third person but that was, well, limited. The perspective was exclusively grounded to one character, unless you cheat a little. This meant that I would have all the immediacy as well as the constraints of the first, but with only slightly more freedom.
The reader would still, however, only see what the protagonist wanted them to see - not giving me the free hand I imagined I needed to show Nazo’s mixed motivations. I would have a little more maneuverability, but would still be limited in how much I could reveal without planting what Woods calls ‘big authorial flags’ (Wood, 2009, p. 24). Wood goes on to say: ‘authorial style generally has a way of making third-person omniscience seem partial and inflected’. But he also argues that first-person narration is generally more reliable than unreliable. I wanted somehow to engage the reader in a debate, to let them have that freedom and the authority to decide whether the narrator could be trusted or not. I wanted, in a way, for the reader to participate.

It reminded me of the invisible cloak scenes from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997) series, where the cloak seemed almost a necessary narrative tool to show things objectively, without Harry’s subjective world view, coloring the readers’ perspective. However, this was a tale where an invisibility cloak simply would not do. Therefore, having exhausted both the first person and the third, close and limited POVs, I was left with the far less frequently used second person.

Hamid writes of his love for the second person, as it allows the writer to provide a participatory quality for the reader. Reading this, I was struck with the familiarity I too had felt. Hamid was ‘amazed by the potential of the “you”, of how much space it could open up in fiction’ (Hamid M., Discontent and its Civilization, 2014, p. 78).

I had just reread *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and was curious about the creative choices behind the brevity and tautness of Hamid’s prose, I too experimented with this style of writing. Later, I came across a quote in which Hamid describes his choice of ‘you’ in the book as a narrative tool for ‘casting the reader as the judge’. He writes about how he wanted to explore ‘feelings already present inside a reader - fear, anger, suspicion, loyalty – could colour a narrative so that the reader, as much as or even more than the writer, is deciding what is really going on. I wanted the novel to be a kind of mirror, to let readers see how they are reading and therefore how they are living and how they are deciding their politics’ (Ibid 78).

This worked well with what I was trying to achieve: a sense of trust or mistrust about the narrator (depending on the reader’s interpretation) as the story unfolded. I sought more books written in the second person. Lionel Shriver’s novel, *We Need to Talk About*
Kevin (2006) with its distinct voice, the POV and of course the complex relationship between mother and son lucidly narrated, further strengthened my belief in the idea of reader participation.

However, after many false starts of various POV experimentation, I felt the second person narration in my work seemed contrived and decorative. Who was Nazo addressing and why? I felt that deliberately seeking out the reader by constantly addressing them (instead of letting him/her lose herself in the narrative) was also just as limiting as showing things through limited third view. It was hard to find a balance without being authorial and hitting the reader on the head.

I wanted, at this point in my writing process, a narrative tool through which I could draw in the reader, wanting, perhaps at some subconscious level, to find a technique to combine the reader and the character simultaneously. Hamid does this effectively in Fundamentalist, using a dramatic monologue addressed to his American visitor whose persona the reader takes on. Shriver in Kevin also does this very effectively using a similar technique but in the second person. It was much later, upon reflection, that I discovered how the influence of Shriver’s unreliable narrator and Hamid’s use of the testimonial (in his dramatic monologue) helped me create the current POV. I found that I had discovered an interesting combination of the ‘You’ in which the first person narrator - Nazo - was addressing a second person - BB - directly throughout the novel (except in the trial scenes) and therefore the narrative was coloured with her vision, which in turn was challenged by the lawyer Omar in the court scenes (I discuss the trial further in the next chapter under structure) allowing the reader the flexibility to make up their own mind about both Nazo and BB thus forming a partnership between the narrative and the audience.

My challenge now was to create in Nazo a character through whose eyes we would see Benazir’s journey. She presented BB’s character arc: how she grew from a naïve idealist into deadly realist, and how she decided at the end that she did not want the honour or ambition that had been thrust upon her. (This, of course, was [counterfactual] invention on my part, for it is common knowledge that BB died campaigning for power). Through Nazo’s eye I wanted the reader to decide if, indeed, a world leader could be allowed such a concession as to desire the ordinary.
Standing in the dock on trial for BB’s murder, is how I finally met the narrator of my novel, Miss Nazleen Khan aka Nazo; a barely literate asylum seeker who came to work for BB as a maid, graduated to typist, rising to the status of PA and then Party Secretary. Witnessing BB’s rise and subsequent fall, she gradually became her silent pillar, her closest confidante, secret lover and finally, when spurned, her nemesis. But did she kill her?

That was the question.
CHAPTER 3: STRUCTURE & CONSTRUCTION

I have discussed the origins of the novel, the incidents that propelled it into the writerly world, and the desire to create a conflict in BB’s life via a complex voyeur like character, who, like Nabokov’s HH, was disturbing in her likability as a villain and her vulnerability as an idealist. I have also addressed the idea of political complexities, which shaped its main themes of power and love. I would now like to focus on the factors that structured its plot, structure, language, and other key elements of the writing craft.

First, I want to describe another memory whose significance is important in shaping the novel’s structure. For it wasn’t till this incident, that I moved away from characterization to construction.

In 2012, during a performance of Macbeth at The Globe, I was seated on the fourth floor balcony, courtesy of cheap last minute tickets. I found I had an unusual view-point, almost aerial, and could see all the stage directions going on. When Macbeth was killed, I saw him quickly getting into a trapdoor, while the others scurried off stage. It was here the idea took place.

As Shakespeare said, ‘All the world’s a stage.’

What if it was true, I thought? What if Benazir’s death was nothing but a theatrical escape from the mad world of politics? What if, instead of a World Leader, what she really wanted to be was a housewife and a doting mother? What if…? I had a vision of Benazir Bhutto getting into a large black armoured car. She turns around to wave goodbye to the person who would be her assassin. Or so she wants the world to believe…

That gave me the beginnings of a plot; but now how to present it in an interesting way? It was a complex narrative; a linear format, I felt, would not be able to hold the various threads together.

As Picasso said (or perhaps borrowed!) ‘Good artists copy, great artists steal.’ I had, from the time I read Vikas Swarup’s Q&A (2005), been fascinated by the flexibility its structure offered to the writer. To my mind, Swarup had very cleverly used the simple device of a game show, to bring in so many diverse strands of contemporary Indian society. He had used the quiz show and the multiple choice answers as a device for the
protagonist’s flash back, enabling the novel to combine different periods of history and weave various narrative strands into a single fluent story.

What was more interesting was that he took a popular game show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* - which remains an iconic show in the history of Indian Television, and whose host is synonymous with contemporary Indian culture - and turned it on its head.

There are two things here which inspired me to adopt the structure of a courtroom trial for *Noboby*. Firstly, the flash back opportunity it offered for the protagonist to ‘think back’ when faced with a question, much like the flexibility a quiz show format offered in *Q&A*. Secondly, Swarup successfully reverses reader expectations by making the character of the game show host in the novel, villainous and unlikeable. The host who by his very association with the very popular and iconic Amitabh Bachchan - host of the real Indian *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire* - would be expected to be righteous and honorable. Of course this is revealed slowly. It is not until the second half of the novel that the reader begins to suspect his duplicity.

Nabokov too does this successfully. He plays with reader expectations in what is known as his ‘chess moves.’ However, coming back to Swarup’s structure, I wanted to use a similar narrative device; the idea of structuring it around a trial appealed to me. As I discussed earlier, the image of a woman in a courtroom from Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, had already been on my mind.

In the aftermath of BB’s assassination, everyone was looking for someone to blame for the senseless murder. There was a sense of outrage that BB’s companions had survived while she was the only one who had lost her life. I wanted to use this as the opening line, and the image as the opening scene. The narration then ranged back and forth, the lawyers’ interrogation at the trial providing an easy medium for the novel to cover a wide expanse of time, canvassing two decades of political upheavals, Martial law and war with India.

I had to, in the end, find a way to connect the lawyer pressing charges to BB, in order to justify the passion he felt at her death. I did this, perhaps awkwardly, by making Omar, a human rights lawyer (BB’s friend and a former lover), the DA at the trial by special permission. I justified the co-incidence, not wholly through dramatic license as I would have liked to but, by peppering the narrative, as it climaxed to the kill, with references of
his love for BB. Hoping, also, to throw off the reader as to who really killed her.

Language

As for the tone and language of the novel, I was clear early on about deploying a plain narrative style and a traditional realist form. While reading Salman Rushdie’s autobiography, *Joseph Anton* (2012) I came across a quote that resonated greatly with my struggle to find a voice: a tone and language that matched my experience of Pakistan, especially the night of the assassination.

He had found an intersection between the private and the public and would build his book on that crossroads. The political and the personal could no longer be kept apart. This was no longer the age of Jane Austen, who could write her entire oeuvre during the Napoleonic Wars without mentioning them, and for whom the major role of the British Army was to wear dress uniforms and look cute at parties. Nor would he write his book in cool Forsterian English. (Rushdie, 2012)

Just as the themes in our work were changing, so was the language. For a narrative that mixed the personal with the political, the flowery sensorial prose fashionable in the subcontinent would not do. This book needed something pacier, wittier and hard-hitting. It was the age of Wifi and Wikileaks. What I had to say was complex enough in itself, so hiding it behind layers of flowery prose would distract the reader, I felt. I was impressed with Adiga’s language, as it reflected the changing face of modern India. The sense of place, as opposed to being a character in itself as was the prevailing trend, was instead constantly present in the writing through its absence; a style which was risky if not unfashionable at the time.

But perhaps, as I discuss in the section on publication, I was already at some subconscious level aware of the need to write in a more ‘accessible’ style, as the trend a few years later would suggest. As the unexpected Booker Prize winner, *The White Tiger* – written in a minimalistic style, in the first person - went on to prove, reading tastes were
slowly changing. In her paper on recent trends in South Asian fiction, Snerika Roy asks:

Why had a novice like Adiga and not a literary stalwart like Amitav Ghosh been chosen (winner of the Booker prize)? Did this reflect a trend of ‘giving prizes to 'accessible' books’? […] What is of interest is not the divergence of opinions concerning the judiciousness of awarding the prize to Adiga, but the underlying consensus that Adiga's novel represents something different, which does not conform to expectations of readers, at least in India, vis-à-vis the Indian novel in English. (Roy, 2009, pp. 57-67)

Publisher Ravi Singh, who had rejected The White Tiger in favour of the beautifully sensorial historic saga of Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies (2008), also went on to agree that, although he did not regret his decision, a general reader trend seemed to be leaning towards a different kind of book, the term ‘accessible’ synonymous with it (Singh, 2008).

Though at the time of writing, I was not fully aware of this, at some subconscious level it influenced my creative process. I opted for a style that was simple and stripped of any frills. One could say, ‘accessible.’

The street-smart speech of Balram, (the protagonist of Adiga’s White Tiger) in Nazo’s voice and Changez’s (from Hamid’s Reluctant Fundamentalist) slightly formal sub-continental English in BB’s, manifested their influence in the language and tone of Nobody. Not just Nazo’s voice, but her subjective life view and her ambitious ruthless nature and affable wit, her ambition to change her class, is in some ways, inspired Balram’s psychopathic charm. Similarly Changez’s dramatic monologue is not too dissimilar to Nazo’s own mutated first person narration and equally unreliable. In both these books there wasn’t a sniff of sari or mangoes or other culturally ‘exotic’ references described at length in heavily sensorial language, which had become synonymous with the Indian and Pakistani writing tradition of the late 80’s and early 90’s, including the beautifully descriptive novels of Kiran Desai and Amit Chaudhuri, amidst others.

Besides these two novels, another slim book, which I had returned to often in writing the first draft, was Antonio Tabucchi’s Pereira Maintains (1994), with its interesting
character arc which leans heavily on the plot - in fact Pereira’s change of heart is the plot. It reads almost like a testimony. Although I had read all these books without much thought to the times and political context they were set in, I had enjoyed the brevity of the language and the economy of words, which contrasted nicely with their heavy subject matter of human imperfection and political hypocrisy. In a recent kindle edition of *Pereira Maintains*, I found an introduction by Mohsin Hamid, in which he admitted that he too had been influenced by this particular book while writing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Hamid writes:

> […] what seemed most striking about the form of Pereira was its use of the testimonial. The novel is not a traditional third-person narrative in which Pereira is himself merely a character. Nor is it a traditional first-person narrative in which Pereira tells us the story of his ‘I’. Instead we have a testimony, with Pereira presumably testifying to an account of his actions transcribed by someone else. (Hamid M., Pereira Transforms, 2011)

Although the *Nobody*’s structure may have been influenced by Swarup’s *Q&A*, the staccato language style of the court transcript, used in the trial scenes, was at some level inspired by the idea of the testimonial in *Pereira*. The trial scenes in the first draft were conceived as court transcripts along the lines of the Shaw trial, following the assassination of JFK (Trial of Clay Shaw). But, the court scenes presented in a script like manner seemed to take on a theatrical quality, erasing for me some of the organic contrast between Nazo’s narration and the lawyer’s view of events. I wondered at this point whether the courtroom vignettes were more disruptive than they were accelerating. Taking away the titles from the transcript and limiting the dialogues to pure speech seemed to bring back the snapshot quality I wanted.

However, it was a challenge to differentiate between the voices without announcing who was speaking. This made it all the more interesting for me. The creative solution I came up with was to make the voices as distinct as possible so that the reader may know who is being addressed without being told so. For Omar, I kept the tone casual and prone
to emotional outbursts whereas for the Defending Lawyer (Counsel) I made the tone highly formal. I hoped to conjure a picture of the Counsel, through his formal and colloquial language, as an elderly gentlemen hailing from the pre-partition era, a veteran lawyer amused by young Omar’s emotional arguments.

As for Miss Khan (Nazo/BB in the court), I tried to keep her voice the same as in the main body of the novel so that the reader may identify her speech easily in the trial scenes. Her voice, however, changes as the trial progresses. In the first few scenes, it is highly nuanced almost overpoweringly reflective of her underprivileged background. But as the trial progresses and the court hears the testimony (and the reader/ BB hear Nazo’s account of things) the tone of the accused begins to change. She becomes less defensive, the roughness to her speech disappears and in the end when her real identity is revealed, it is slightly more believable for the reader to accept the con. Or so I hoped.

The language that I used in Nobody was an effort to reflect the fast changing world in the novel. This combination of political and timely subject matter and the minimalistic style that so interested me, I later discovered (while researching my thesis) had been discussed by Sarah Brouillette in her book, Literature and the Creative Economy. She looks at Adiga’s White Tiger (2008) and Monica Ali’s In the Kitchen (2009) through the lens of creative economy in literature, focussing on how both novels attempt to fuse the political and social aspect of a society. She writes that here are:

Two novels that are particularly informed by and interested in therapeutic conceptions of the self. Each protagonist has problems that clearly stem from wide-scale social and political ills, as both novels highlight the inequities of neoliberal capitalism, emphasizing disparities between rich and poor and how government countenances, ignores, and justifies them. However, each narrative also filters its protagonist’s experiences through a therapeutic language of crisis recovery, casting his troubles as internal psychic struggles to be treated not through social or political action but rather through alteration of his personal career trajectory and of his way of thinking about and narrating his life’s meaning. (Brouillette, 2014)
I was interested by the term ‘language of crisis’ - to me it suggested the urgency of the writing. *Nobody* had been written quickly, almost desperately as an outlet of frustration. Whether it was the helplessness I felt at the murder of an inspirational female leader, or my own discomfort at feeling something between a diaspora and a native, it had led to a piece of creative writing which was political in its subject matter and minimalistic in its writing technique. And this was a combination I was beginning to see much of in the literature around me. A new interest demanded a new language. The language of the era of snake charmers may have been eloquent and descriptive but the era of globalisation and its political conflicts demanded a language that was laconic, stripped and to the point.

Focusing on brevity of style and minimalistic language, using mainly speech, I began writing; ‘silencing the inner editor’ as Julie Cameron, (who encourages writers to carry on without worrying about the perfect sentence till they reach a desired word limit) calls it (Cameron, 1994).
PART III: PUBLISHING

In his essay, *Good Readers and Good Writers*, Nabokov invokes a beautiful evocation of how a writer and reader meet at the summit of a misty mountain of the imagination. He writes:

That mist is a mountain - and that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever. (Nabokov, 1982, p. 2)

In the next section, I discuss being ‘discovered’ by a mainstream publisher, completing the manuscript, and its journey up the slippery slope of Nabokov’s misty mountain - which I analogize as the publisher - and unexpected fall that sent it tumbling back to square one. I also try to investigate the reason behind the publisher’s interest, looking at recent writing trends and shifts in subject matter of literature being produced by Pakistani authors, and reflecting on my own conscious and subconscious choices as a creative writer, in developing the second draft (submitted here) through the course of my PhD, and later under the watchful guidance of my primary of my then publisher.
CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE MISTY MOUNTAIN

I had the voice, the language, and the structure; the process kicked in and the book began to proceed exceedingly fast. Within a few months, I had a rough draft in place. In my experience as a short story writer, it was always progressive to leave an idea alone until it had fully matured. I knew by instinct that I had all the raw ingredients, but I would not know which spices to flavor them with until they had cooked a sufficient amount of time, releasing their juices and mixing into each other. Only then could one determine the correct measure.

And so I let the pot simmer.

Perhaps the aroma drifted far outside, for soon I got an unexpected message, that made my creative journey much easier, or so I believed.

My creative journey changed dramatically when in May 2013 an editor from a well-known publishing house contacted me. She had read a short story of mine titled ‘The Lovers,’ about growing up in a conservative Muslim family in the West (Jillani, 2013).

Having enjoyed the story, she wanted to know if I was working on something larger, like a collection of short stories or a ‘novel perhaps’. Delighted, but without expecting anything to come out of it (for I had spent many an evening listening to writer friends lament about how hard it was to get an agent let alone a publisher) I sent them the first 50 pages of Nobody Killed Benazir Bhutto.

As discussed, the idea had been in my mind for a long time, but I had only begun working on it seriously in December 2012. I had the first 50 pages by January and a rough draft by May. Within a few days of reading the synopsis, The publisher requested the full manuscript. Without any great expectations, I sent off the first draft, unpolished as it was. I was hoping for professional feedback more than anything else.

A wait followed during which I hoped that they wouldn’t think of it as too raw. I didn’t have to wait long to find out for a week later I was called in to discuss the novel with the Publisher’s editorial team at their offices in London. An offer was made and before I could realise, the book had begun its climb.

I was stunned. I had achieved, without the help of an agent, a miracle that other
writer friends had been striving toward for years. It made me think, what was it that had set my work apart from other strugglers/writers? Was it the idea, the theme, the plot, or was it the craft and the technique? The theme or the central character of my novel was the same as my earlier attempts at writing about Benazir Bhutto, but perhaps the difference was that this time around I had approached my subject directly. I had a plot that centred on her assassination instead of being a backstory to it. And not just any plot but an engaging, timely and political plot. Was that what had increased its appeal so much so that the publishers were willing to acquire it without even being in its finished form? What was the winning factor? These were the questions I hoped to explore at this stage of my writing journey as I embarked on a creative journey to develop my novel under the watchful eye of the publisher,
CHAPTER 2: THE POLITICS OF WRITING

I was aware that the subject matter of my novel, the assassination of the first ever female leader of an Islamic country at the hands of the Taliban was very appealing at a time when Pakistan and its troubled neighbour, Afghanistan, were constantly in the news. In fact, in recent years, Pakistan seemed incapable of being addressed in isolation, given how deeply entrenched it had become in the global war on terror in the 2000s. In fact, ‘Af-Pak authors’ - a term linking Afghanistan and Pakistan together – was frequently being used in the news for everything from politics to culture to literature.

In the last decade, Pakistan has come to share a closer history with Afghanistan in terms of its radicalisation and rising threat of Taliban - the same terrorist outfit that took responsibility for killing Benazir Bhutto. In a *NY Times* article, William Saffire quoted US diplomat Richard Holbrooke as coining the term ‘Af-Pak’ for grouping the political and cultural problems of the two regions together. He quotes Holbrook:

We often call the problem Af-Pak, as in Afghanistan Pakistan. This is not just an effort to save eight syllables. It is an attempt to indicate and imprint in our DNA the fact that there is one theater of war, straddling an ill-defined border. (Saffire, 2009)

Since most of the novels coming out of this region were political in nature, using the term to group them together did seem appropriate. Even the recent novel by Pakistani author Soniah Kamal, *An Isolated Incident* (2014) while set in Indian-occupied Kashmir, was compared to Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini’s *Kite Runner* (2003) because of the political struggle of the protagonists. It made me wonder if politics could, indeed, be separated from literature? For weren’t the previous novels about partition by Indian/Pakistani authors also political in nature? Bapsi Sidhwa, Manto, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie and many other Indian and Pakistani authors of that generation had all spoken about partition, whether in fiction or speech. Were writers, then, influenced by the politics around them or were our politics influenced by the literature of our times? Three of my favourite Pakistani authors - Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam -
after having written about national culture and identity as the dominant themes in their work, had moved on to address themes of the individual in the *global* context today, tackling political issues of fundamentalism. All three had written about Afghanistan and the impact of terrorism in the Af-Pak region.

Shamsie - after three novels based in and around Karachi with themes of partition and identity at their heart - had written a hugely ambitious work, *Burnt Shadows* (2009): a novel about war and terrorism, spanning three continents and many decades of history.

Aslam, having previously written about themes of assimilation and integration of the Pakistani community in northern England - had written a political novel set in Afghanistan. Unlike his *Map for Lost Lovers* (2005), which was about honour killing in Yorkshire, his new novel, *The Last Vigil* (2008), centred on themes of terrorism and political radicalism and was set far from Yorkshire, in war torn Kabul.

Likewise Hamid’s next novel after his debut, *Moth Smoke* (2001), was *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007): a novel about a young man’s disillusionment with the West after 9/11, which in a strange case of life imitates art, happened just after he wrote the first draft. As Martha Green writes about Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*:

> Although [Hamid] had done significant work on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* before 9/11, Hamid revised the manuscript significantly to focus on Changez’s life in New York City around the terrorist attacks that took place that day. (Greene Eads, 2010, pp. 49-53)

It made me ask: was this a deliberate attempt to cash in on the hot topic of the day or could a fine line really not longer be drawn between the personal and the political when it came to writing about a volatile place like Pakistan. These were some of the issues I grappled with while reflecting on my chosen subject matter, my treatment of it and the response to it by the publishers during the development of the second draft.

Lebanese writer Hoda Barakat said in a recent interview to *The Guardian* that, ‘it’s true to say that a writer is indirectly the witness of their time, even through what they omit from their work, and denial of the “great causes” of their times is bearing witness to it as well’ (Man Booker International prize 2015: The Guardian, 2015).
Daniyal Mouddin whose stories describe the stark class distinctions in rural Pakistan, said in an interview that:

‘Pakistani writers look sexy right now because of Pakistan being so much in the news. When I hear of the hottest new Lithuanian writer, my heart doesn't leap. That's a prejudice but it's also true that there is a resurgence of writing in Pakistan.’ Readers have embraced the political nature of much of the new Pakistani fiction, looking perhaps for an explanation of the country's turmoil, which has accelerated after it sided with the West in the ‘war on terror’. (Shah, 2009)

The War on Terror had certainly bought Pakistan into the limelight. Though I was unsure if a clear distinction could be made as to whether the writers were reflecting the events around them or following a demand for fiction that reflected the ground realities of Pakistan, I was sure that my own interest in writing about a political personality had been purely organic. South African writer, Marlene Van Niekerk’s words expressed my deliberations. On being asked whether it was a writer’s ‘duty’ to engage with political issues of the day, she replied: ‘It is a political act to write, tout court, and one is caught up in the stories of one’s time whether one likes it or not’ (Man Booker International prize 2015: The Guardian, 2015).

As the novel’s editorial development progressed, I became aware that the topical theme of my subject matter, along with a minimalistic style of writing, had appealed to the publisher’s taste. Though I had been influenced by the political writings around me, I was also concerned that, although outwardly it may appear a political novel in the line of many other political novels being produced by Pakistani authors, at its heart it had been conceived, less as a murder mystery about a well known political assassination, and more as a story of a Muslim women’s struggle for empowerment. It was, in effect, a novel about choice.

I wanted very much to keep my vision unclouded but as the second draft came close to being finalized I became acutely aware that the novel had turned out more about BB and less about the woman who made the choice. However this was something I
acknowledged consciously only after the finished manuscript (second draft) faced Libel issues. I discuss this in detail in the next part of my thesis.
PART IV: LESSONS IN LIBEL

Surely few works of creative writing, particularly the novel, have a linear journey. My novelistic journey from inception to publication seemed fairly straightforward and systematic, but, as they say, things rarely go the way you imagine they will.

The second draft of my novel (submitted here) was now complete and delivered to the publisher for editing. However, out of the blue one day I got an email to say the manuscript of Nobody was now deemed too risky to publish in its current form, mainly for its subject matter: Benazir Bhutto. The subject matter, as discussed in the previous chapter, seemed to me the main motive behind the publisher’s keen interest. Therefore, to say that it was now the defeating factor was baffling. What had changed? Was there a saturation of political thrillers/suspense novels in the market? Had Pakistani writers become suddenly unfashionable? Or was it the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan that had made the world lose interest in the ‘Af-Pak’ region? Were they afraid of alienating a market? Or was there really a risk of prosecution? The questions were many but the answers few.

In this section I look at how my creative journey changed dramatically following a retraction of the Publisher’s interest.
CHAPTER 1: THE LIBEL SHOCK

Just as Nabokov saw Lolita initially branded ‘Banned,’ ‘Withdrawn,’ ‘Censored,’ so it seemed would be the fate of Nobody. It is my guess that Nabokov’s foreword to Lolita, by a fictitious psychiatrist Dr. Ray that he created, was placed not just to distance himself from the first word narration but also to put the novel in context and create empathy for HH. In doing so, he is giving the reader a chance to feel justified in their choice of reading, for he rationalizes this by referring to the ‘dangerous trends,’ that there are lessons to be learnt here (Nabokov, Lolita, 1955, p. 4).

Elisabeth Ladenson writes in her book, Dirt for Art’s Sake:

For one thing, there is the foreword, which not only places the narrative in the context of twentieth-century literary censorship proceedings, but also explains, among other things, why Humbert addresses his readers throughout as ‘ladies and gentlemen of the jury’…. Dr. Ray concludes: ‘Lolita’ should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world. (Ladenson, 2006, p. 193)

Perhaps the foreword was not security enough so, as an additional firewall, he was asked by his publishers to do an afterword to the novel, a sort of self-assurance note to the reader, explaining the creative intentions behind the work in all possibility on the insistence of his publishers in an attempt to assure the reader that it was not something lewd but high art at hand here. Aptly titled, On a Book Entitled Lolita, it was as Ladenson writes, ‘an essay he wrote to introduce the novel in 1957 before its publication in the United States and later appended to the text itself’ (Ibid).

I, too, was asked by my publishers to provide a foreword, and to take reasonable precaution to make the novel safer for publication. Naively, as it turned out, I thought this would prove – as it would for Nabokov – the solution.

Prior to submitting the final manuscript to the publisher, as an author, I tried to
introduce as many creative differences as I possibly could without compromising on the essence of the novel. In my foreword that was to accompany the novel to its libel read (see Appendix A), I argued that Nobody, although partially inspired by real life events that led up to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, was careful not to assimilate any similarities to serving or late political personalities, in its second draft.

In addition to that, I made several other changes to the original manuscript to avoid any further libel issues. These changes came about after numerous editorial discussions. Names, obviously, had been changed to protect identities. We chose Gigi because of its general form of reverence in Interior Sindh. Gigi Sahiba is used to refer respectfully to anyone from Elders to Officials. Later, in the third draft after the libel read, I changed it again to another name.

Although the storyline remained the same, names, educational institutions, and city of birth, family lineage and other identifying marks such as the number of siblings or number of children were also changed. In the second draft, the one similarity that the character of Gigi had with the late BB, was that the father was murdered by a General, and the political struggle that followed. Without this, the crucible of the novel would fail, as it proves the catalyst for her revenge. I argued that, as many people had suffered wrongfully at the hands of the Army in Pakistan, it should not be a sole identifying character. The fact that she was the only female Prime Minister was impossible to disguise, but all necessary precautions were taken to divert the timeline and political events leading up to the assassination so that they did not conspire with actual events. Any recognizable personality traits were also left out. Instead, I took different characteristics of world leaders and female politicians and created an amalgamation of sorts, a mix of Thatcher, Gandhi and Bhutto.

As for Nazo, the other primary protagonist, who was initially inspired by Naheed Khan, there was little or no similarity remaining in the current draft, as the character had already evolved through the writing. In the novel, the character of Nazo is an exaggerated Dickensian: a refugee/asylum seeker hailing from an improvised family background. She is poorly educated and starts her career as a maid. Her political rise (as well as her motives and actions), does not coincide with that of Naheed Khan or what is known of her. Naheed Khan hails from an upper-middle class background, has been
married to Senator Safdar Abbasi for more than two decades, and has adult children currently studying abroad. She came to work for Benazir as a political secretary while already working and studying in London as a student. She was not a refugee or an asylum seeker as far as I know. She belongs to a large family with many siblings. Her sister, Anila, is married to a noted policeman and is based in England. She is known to talk about her affluent upbringing.

The character of Nazo on the other hand hails from a lower economic background. Her parents are from a political/radical background and are brutally murdered in front of her eyes. Furthermore she is portrayed as an asylum seeker working at a Dry Cleaner. She comes to work for the politician Gigi (Shah Bibi in the attached draft), as a maid. In the book she never marries. Nazo’s love interest in the book is an ex-Army soldier, bodyguard to an Army Major. Naheed Khan has only ever been associated with Senator Safdar to whom she is happily married. Nazo has a breakdown and as far as I’m aware Naheed Khan had no history of mental problems. The most crucial factor that ceases all possibilities of any coincidental similarity between Naheed Khan and Nazo is that the character dies in the end, while Naheed Khan is very much alive.

The personality, family background, and political journey of Naheed Khan and Nazo could not be more different. They differed greatly in class, background, political rise, and personal history. So while Naheed Khan initially inspired the character of Nazo, in its evolution it had no resemblance left to it.

The character of Gigi’s husband Balgodi was inspired by BB’s husband Asif Ali Zardari. Although I tried to introduce personality traits of other Pakistani politicians, such as Imran Khan and Mustafa Kherral among others, this proved tricky, as most male politicians were such stereotypes of rich spoiled macho feudal that it was hard to portray them justifiably without creating a caricature. So I concentrated on the comic elements, exaggerating character flaws but changing major identifying elements such as lineage, family background and physical appearance so that it did not rest on any one person. I intended to use him as comic relief.

Thematically, the book followed a completely different timeline to the one leading up to BB’s assassination. BB served two terms (neither of which she completed) but the PM in the book serves only one. The date and year of the assassination had also been
changed as were the events building up to it. BB was in a self-imposed seven-year exile in Dubai before returning to Pakistan but the book follows a different path. It is based on a short span of five years while BB’s political career was much longer. Fictional events such as the Dam issue and Nuclear issue, which were scandals during Musharraf and Nawaz Sharif’s time, were added to confuse the timeline further. Personal events like the birth of BB’s son, were completely fictionalized. From physicality to personality there was no similarity between Bilawal Bhutto and the wrong child (the first born in the book). The fictional daughter too, was portrayed as deaf and mute taking the emphasis off Bakhtawar Bhutto.

However, the most important differentiating factor in the book was that Naheed Khan was never tried in court for Benazir’s murder. The whole structure of the book is purely a fictional conjuring- a ‘what if?’ scenario. In that sense, Nobody Killed Her, cannot be pinned on the story of any one individual as it is a collage of several. It looks at an alternative history and although loosely inspired by real life events, it portrays a very different outcome.

I argued that, while the book was inspired by real life events, by changing the timeline and concealing the defining characteristics of the actual personalities, I had confused the question of it being based on one particular politician or on a collage of many. True that there had only been only one female PM of Pakistan and that she was assassinated but that is where the similarities ended between fiction and reality. Gigi rises to PM and is assassinated in a similar fashion as BB in the second draft. However, as we find out in the end, she fakes her own death unlike the real BB.

BB died by a bullet wound and suicide bombing while my character in the submitted manuscript stages her assassination leading to a what-if situation. Fiction offers an author the liberty to speculate on alternative endings to historical events and that is what I have tried to do. As Nabokov famously said, ‘Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth’ (Nabokov, 1982, p. 5). And it is this inventiveness, this creativity and, along with it the dramatic license that fiction offers, that I had tried to assert in this what-if story.
CHAPTER 2: THE LEGAL BATTLE

At the time of submitting my revised manuscript (second draft), there were already various satirical and farcical programmes on Pakistani television centring on political personalities. *Banana News Network* was one of the most popular, where noted actress Feryal Gauhar played Billy Buttocks, based on BB’s son Bilawal Bhutto. The program had been on air for over two years and neither Bilalwal Bhutto nor any of the other politicians it mimics raised any objections. This made me feel secure in the knowledge that my book was unlikely to attract any libel action, as it was far less controversial or satirical.

The fact that in recent times there had been other South Asian novels centred around political personalities that had not attracted any objection gave me confidence. For example, Omar Shahid’s *The Prisoner* (2013) which talks about notoriously infamous Pakistani exiled politician Altaf Hussein, or Mohammed Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), about the assassination of General Zia, had not initiated the least bit of controversy. To give an international example, *American Wife* (2009) did not attract any libel action even though Mrs. Bush’s personal history was thinly veiled, (though names, locations and timelines had been changed). Robert Harris’s *The Ghost* (2007) also did not face legal objections, although it bent a lot of noses out of joint and was heatedly debated in newspaper reviews.

As Colin Greenland wrote in his *Guardian* review, ‘The Ghost is, finally, not about Blair; though it remains an indictment of everything he did and stood for’ (Greenland, 2007).

This was the kind of reaction I hoped for: for the discerningly political reader to grasp the subtext, without the work being identifiable with BB. To achieve this, I had to redraft my novel, mixing key attributes and personal traits so that each character was a sum of many and could not be traced to any one particular person.

All seemed well and the feedback I received from my editors was to focus now on sharpening up the prose and fixing the few remaining loopholes in the manuscript while it was submitted for a final libel read.
Meanwhile, Pakistan and its politics were still very much in the limelight but this time for a different reason. A dramatic turn of events brought the late Benazir Bhutto and her husband Asif Ali Zardari back into the international headlines. Zardari had served a legal notice of defamation against the distributors, Liberty books, Karachi; the publishers, Penguin India; and the author, Sadruddin Hashwani, of the book *The Truth Always Prevails* (2013). He claimed the book had indirectly referred to him, painting him in a negative light, thus causing damage to his reputation. He demanded 1 million USD as compensation. The *Herald Tribune*, a Pakistani daily, reported:

Former president Asif Ali Zardari on Sunday served a legal notice on Sadruddin Hashwani,...author of ‘*The Truth Always Prevails*’ as well as the publishers for what the notice says willfully publishing a ‘false, derogatory and vexatious publication full of blatant lies’ to damage his reputation. In a statement, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) spokesperson Senator Farhatullah Babar said that the legal notice [...] was served not only to the author but also to the publishers, the Penguin Books, Haryana, India, and Liberty Books, Karachi. (Muhammad, 2014)

Following this controversy, which saw Penguin India dragged to court, I received an email from my publishers to say that due to the controversial subject matter of the novel, the publishers were withdrawing their offer. They no longer deemed it suitable for publication.

This shocking turn of events left me completely confused. It was hard to understand what had gone wrong, for was it not the very nature of the subject matter that had attracted the publishers in the first place? Was it Zardari’s legal notice that had flared up this risk? Were the publisher’s scared of a similar fate?

Emails flew to and fro and a blame game ensued. As I thought, it seemed that the libel report feared the novel was likely to attract a lawsuit and possibly even criminal prosecution in light of the new legal developments. The publisher’s legal team seemed to completely ignore the pre-acquisition history of the novel and the fact that they consciously bought a novel that had the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in the title; they
were considering unilaterally ending the publishing contract. On questioning, the Publisher’s counsel wrote:

I think the risks extend to facing action in the UK courts for libel from Asif Zardari, Naheed Khan and/or other living individuals (e.g. Bilawal Bhutto) who may consider they are identifiable as characters in the book. These individuals would in my view be able to show that they have a reputation in this jurisdiction such as would entitle them to bring an action here.

Unable to accept that the years of my hard work could be swept under the carpet like this, I sought my own legal opinion, and was told that all the potentially libel factors pointed out could be dealt with editorially if not detrimental or essential to the plot.

I felt I had two choices before me: to accept the decision or to fight. My agent told me that it was better to make a few ‘convincing changes’ and try to save the relationship with the publisher than accept defeat or look for a new ally, or publisher in this case. ‘Novels develop repute,’ were his words. Nabokov’s infamous manuscript came to mind and I wondered if the influence had followed in the form of a jinx! But like Nabokov, I too refused to give up on what I thought was a misunderstood but viable and convincingly written novel. I was inclined to agree with my agent about making creative changes in the manuscript, but first I had to somehow convince the publishers to give it a chance.

In response to Publisher’s legal writ, my own lawyer found the manuscript unlikely to attract libel action, barring a few details, which she thought could be easily changed/added - adding the subtitle ‘a novel,’ for instance.

My libel lawyer’s full response follows (typos have been left uncorrected for sake of accuracy):

In present query it is work of fiction, which may be based on some real life characters. In such cases there are various measures which an author/publisher needs to consider in order to protect and raise a
considerable defense in case there is suit for libel filed against such work.

1) Disclaimer

A disclaimer is denial, refusal, or rejection of a right, power, or responsibility. A disclaimer is a defensive measure, used generally with the purpose of protection from unwanted claims or liability. Disclaimers in general do not remove liability meaning thereby that it does not bar any person from filing a suit of libel, tort or damages. For instance smoking is injurious to health, and not for children under the age of 14, although a clear disclaimer is published on packages the same does not bar anyone from initiating legal proceedings against the company/ product/ person.

A disclaimer for publications while helpful cannot insulate an author/ publisher from a libel suit. Such a disclaimer may support the defense that identification with the real person is unreasonable. Following could be some defenses for such publications:

2) Novel

The words ‘A Novel’ in the subtitle of your book has been considered to be the best form of disclaimer. In addition, a full disclaimer should appear on the reverse title page of your novel, or integrated into the introduction or preface of your book.

3) Distancing real life character from fictional character

Change the physical characteristics of the main character is enough to disguise his/her identity. The risk of being sued is further reduced if
your main character is treated as a likable character rather than a vicious and unscrupulous evildoer. If the character portrayed by author isn’t likable, it is even more important to disguise his/her identity. Change as many identifying details as you reasonably can namely, place of residence, age, physical description, personal background, occupation, and relationships with other characters even the character's gender or ethnicity.

4) Combining facts

Combine or clone several people’s physical traits and biographical facts, so no single person's actual DNA appears in your book.

5) Privacy Rights

While publication of factual information is generally considered a full defense to libel, private individuals can sue for highly offensive or embarrassing truths. If the author’s work reveals intimate areas of a person’s life relating to family life, medical procedures, and mental incapacity it may give rise to a privacy claim. The right of publicity involves the unauthorized use of a person’s name or likeness for commercial gain. However for novelists, due to free speech considerations, courts historically construe publicity rights narrowly.

6) Deceased character

A person who has expired cannot attract or unlikely to qualify for libel suits. However any interaction of an expired character with living ones may have counterparts among still-living real individuals. For example, consider a plot line where a character based on a real though dead person is depicted as a murderer, and his fictional brother is
depicted as failing to disclose the crime to the authorities; a real-life brother of the real-life, identifiable model for the killer character can file a libel suit.

7) Organizations

Businesses and organizations can sue for libel and accordingly identifiable real entity should not be maligned by the author unless its factual.

**Conclusion**

An author/publisher cannot be held for libel by depicting a character in fictional circumstances. Libel requires a *false and defamatory statement of fact* ‘of and concerning’ an identifiable living person (or business entity). If real people are depicted in author’s work only as engaging in acts they actually engaged in, which is matter of fact, no ‘falsity’ can be claimed. If real people are depicted in an author’s work as engaging in acts that are not at all untoward, a libel claim will have no basis as such depiction is not defamatory. In case an author depicts real people in engaging in negative/untoward acts then it is advisable to distance the fictional character from real life.

I found particularly my libel lawyer’s suggestion of ‘combining or cloning several people’s physical traits and biographical facts’ to avoid it being traced to one person, an interesting idea - one that I had already experimented with but wanted to take further. However, despite an independent evaluation which pointed out that it was very unlikely for the novel to attract a legal suit, the publisher showed its might by disregarding it. It stuck to its guns that the book in its present state was a risk.

For me, at this point, not writing the novel was a bigger risk. I was reminded of Jonathan Safran Foer’s stance on his second novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2006), which dealt with the uncomfortable matter of grief and moving on post 9/11.
How its style related to its subject was criticized by the literati, but he defended his novel as a sort of obligation, a challenge to him as a New Yorker and an artist. When asked by Michel Faber in a *Guardian* interview whether he feared his ‘attempt at encapsulating the 9/11 tragedy [was] a risky venture,’ he replied, ‘I think it's risky to avoid what's right in front of you’ (Faber, 2005).

Like him, I felt that here was a novel that needed to be expressed in its chosen form. Suppressing it would require more energy on my part than fighting for its survival. I suppose, as an author, it is easier to take the risks that creative expression exposes one to. However, as a publisher, the risk factor seemed to be determined by various other factors, top of which was the numbers game. Corporatism has often been associated with suppressing art, as sponsorship has often liberated art. But ultimately, could the two be separated? Can the author exist without the publisher or vice versa? This is a question I address later in this chapter.

For now, I as an author faced a strange dilemma. On one hand the chutzpah of the novel was the BB factor, on the other hand it was also its downfall. Though it was clear that the book would not be published in its current form, my lawyer’s libel report had, at least, forced the conversation back to the drawing board. Unfortunately, ‘likeability’ turned out to be the one factor both libel lawyers could agree on. As my libel lawyer had pointed out, ‘The risk of being sued is further reduced if your main character is treated as a likable character rather than a vicious and unscrupulous evildoer.’

In other words, create a likeable character. This challenged my entire vision, for the characters I had endeavoured to create were not necessarily likeable - as Nabokov’s HH would have been despicable, were it not for his voice that induced empathy from the reader. Like the fictional Dr. Ray, I too felt that there were lessons to be learnt here (presenting the characters as fallible beings with all their flaws).

Both strongly felt that if the novel was to go ahead at all, this one factor must be adhered to. However, I was not convinced. From the legal point of view yes, it might work; but from the point of view of literature, how important was it to like the characters in a novel? Mohsin Hamid wrote recently: ‘I confess: I read fiction to fall in love. And in fiction, as in life, characters don’t have to be likable to be lovable’ (Hamid M., 2013). He argued that it is the voice and not the character a reader falls in love with: ‘And it for this
reason that a paedophile like Humbert Humbert has us with his first ‘fire of lions’, and Anna Karenina is likeable despite her faults’ (Ibid). In such a case did the ‘character’ of the character matter?

Novelist, Zoe Heller’s counter response to Hamid’s argument on character likeability, was that:

Most authors aim to engender some species of readerly empathy for their protagonists. It’s not necessary to ‘like’ Hamlet, but if we’re so repelled by his treatment of that sweet girl, Ophelia, that we withdraw all sympathetic interest in his dilemmas, then the play is unlikely to mean much to us. (Heller Z., 2013)

I was not convinced. Despite being the inspirational role model for millions of Muslim feminists, a likeable BB seemed flat and one-dimensional. One with conflicting motivations seemed more humane and relatable. I had just started reading Clair Messud’s *The Woman Upstairs* (2013) and the character Nora and her headstrong and confrontational personality spoke to me. This is what I wanted to create: a strong voice. Not a likeable one, necessarily. The way I had imagined the character of BB in this book was that of a privileged woman abusing her privilege by not asserting it. She was not likeable yet she was a strong character for she made a choice - whether it was selfish or not - to follow her heart. Whatever response she induced in the reader, the fact that this character could stimulate a response was perhaps what creative writing aimed at. Characters that made you angry, frustrated or even disappointed, I personally felt, moved you more and tended to be more memorable than entertaining feel-good ones. In defense of these characters, Claire Messud says:

As a reader, I’ve long felt passionately about fictions that articulate anger, frustration, disappointment—from reading Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, in high school, when I thought, ‘my God, fiction can do this? Fiction can say these unsayable things?’ to reading Beckett or Camus or Philip Roth’s *Sabbath’s Theater* to Thomas Bernhard—these
are all articulating unseemly, unacceptable experiences and emotions, rage prominent among them. Because rage at life and rage for life are very closely linked. To be angry, you have to give a shit. (Wilson, 2013)

For me, as a writer, this was important. It was important to not just create a voice that could illicit a response but also because this ‘unlikeablity’ was essential to the plot. For Nazo’s motives for revenge to be justified, I had to create a character who starts out pure and innocent but ends up a cynical realist. The fact that BB did not wholly back the Hudood Ordinance, once in power, shows that there might be some truth to it anyways. Many feminists disagreed with her choice to have three children while in office. However, whether in real life she lived up to people’s expectation or not was not important here. This was a counterfactual novel, a ‘what-if’ piece of fiction about an imagined alternative reality along the lines of novels like Robert Harris’s *Fatherland* (1994) which creates an alternative world where Hitler had come to power or James Thurber’s New Yorker short story about an imagined counterfactual outcome to the American civil war titled ‘If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox’ (1930). Although counterfactual it demanded plausibility and a simplified black and white politician seemed forced. To recall Chekhov’s worldview: ‘It’s not my job to tell you that horse stealers are bad people. It’s my job to tell you what this horse stealer is like’ (Chekhov, 2014).vi

So, how then, to compromise creativity with likeability? Or rather dislikability with legalities? Messud’s response to a journalist who suggested her protagonist Nora from *The Woman Upstairs*, was too unlikable to be friends with, was: ‘If you’re reading to find friends, you’re in deep trouble’ (Wilson, 2013).

However, I did not want to write to make enemies either. Unconvinced as I was with the need to make my character more likeable, I confess that I did consider the possibility of introducing certain personality traits to make the BB of my novel slightly less selfish and lazy. But try as I might, I could not do justice to the character I had invented. I decided that it was not necessary to like a character to love a character.

How, then, could a creative solution be found to this end? It seemed to me that creating a distance while keeping the essence of the story alive was the only way to save
the book from a premature death. This, I felt, could be achieved editorially by introducing as many differentiating characteristics as possible, without necessarily making the character ‘likeable.’ I wanted to exaggerate the setting and characteristics, however not so much that the inspiration at the heart of the novel was lost. That is why, as mentioned in my libel note, I wanted to keep the character of Gigi as the only female Prime Minter of Pakistan and also incorporate the struggle against the Martial Law rule because, despite the differences, I wanted the discerning, politically aware reader to know who the character was based on.

However, at the suggestion that we keep these defining characteristics, the publisher’s legal team threw in another spanner:

Once a character can be identified or associated with a real individual, then the more extreme the differentiating factors which one might try to introduce to address this, the greater in fact the potential legal risk.

How, in such a case, was it possible for a writer to create a piece of creative writing for the historically aware and politically alert reader to see that the woman at the centre of the story was inspired by Benazir’s life, (because in terms of legacy and charisma she was singular, and the country was Pakistan, because it really is its own place unlike any other) yet have no identifying factors no matter how subtle they may be?

The next section attempts to find answers to those questions by examining the challenges presented by such a paradoxical dilemma to an author’s creativity and intent, and how the creative process suffers or improves when extreme outward pressures of publication are placed upon the writer.
CHAPTER 3: THE ROLE OF THE PUBLISHER

All writing is rewriting, as Hemingway implied when he explained that he wrote a particular page thirty-nine times, ‘getting the words right’ (Plimpton, 1958). However, my situation gave rewriting a whole new meaning. It was not just a case of disguising identities by changing names; I also had to find a way to preserve the book’s essence. If I wanted to keep my characters the way I had envisioned them, without compromising on their ‘likeability,’ then I would have to do away with any external political association, which may identify my protagonist/antagonist as a public figure. It seemed challenging and frankly futile to even attempt this novel without my essential pillar of BB to support its structure.

However, I felt I had no choice but to disassociate myself with anything that may draw attention to any association with political personalities, if I was to maintain the voice I had chosen for my characters.

Surprisingly, stripped of all political associations, I realized that the book was about a woman's struggle in a man’s world. Benazir was a way to tell the story, but not the only way. The characters were strong enough to stand on their own without any external association with political personalities, as in the original draft. They had gained their autonomy from real life. I began to feel hopeful that perhaps the book could be redrafted without any likeness to real-life personalities.

However, a new synopsis sent to the publishers, with the proposed changes, was also shot down. The publishers replied that, while they considered a book inspired by BB a risk, the bind was that not only were they not willing to take the book in its current form, they would not take a book that was unlike the one they had initially bargained for. The Catch 22 nature of this statement was enough to make me scream.

Perhaps a better way would be to keep the BB factor but portray it in a positive light, was the reoccurring suggestion. I was given the example of Monica Ali’s Untold Story (2012), which explores the idea of an alternate history to Princess Diana’s death. ‘Ali’s novel imagines a Princess Diana-like character’s post-fame life after faking her own death’ (Tripney, 2012), not unlike Nobody, in which Gigi stages her own assassination to
live a normal live, the story however leading up to it and not unfolding beyond it as in Ali’s work.

Ali faced no reported legal issues. Although I could get no response from her agent or publisher as to whether the book had been subject to a libel read (the general rule in UK being that you can’t libel the dead), it seemed to me that the fact that she focused on the likeability aspect, making the princess a victim of circumstances rather then an empowered woman deliberately choosing inaction, had helped. At least, it had in creating a safe distance from those alive who might deem it libelous by association. But from the reviews of the book, it seemed to have flat-lined the character. Princess Diana was known for her impulsive and assertive personality, the mousy suburbanite of Untold Story failing to capture the spark that had made her personality so fascinating. In her review in The New York Times, Michiko Kakutani, writes that:

Like Curtis Sittenfeld, who tried to channel Laura Bush in American Wife Ms. Ali does an engaging job of creating sympathy for her heroine, but she has a hard time making the reader believe, for an instant, that Lydia was once a princess — much less the high-strung, self-dramatizing Diana we have come to know from news and book accounts[...] It’s even harder to believe that the once moody, impetuous princess has become a predictable, suburban matron, who tells her boyfriend that she’d ‘do just about anything not to rock the boat.’ It’s as if the former princess had not only dyed her hair brown and had a little work done on her famous face, but had undergone a drastic personality transplant as well. (Kakutani, 2011)

Ali never fully explores Diana’s personality and even serious issues like eating disorders and depressive episodes (which are public knowledge) are treated in a flippant, by-the-way manner. Was this a deliberate attempt to avoid going into the depth of a character exploring realms, which had not been publicly discussed in tabloids? Unlike the imagined Laura Bush of the American Wife, Ali’s Diana - or, as the author has said, ‘a fictional character, based on Diana’ (Ali, What if Diana had faked her own death and is living
under a false identity in small-town America?’, 2011) - seemed inconsistent with what is known about the real-life personality, in her new right as rain suburban avatar.

The reviews of her book have discussed the reason for Ali creating such a one-dimensional character despite having proved herself as a great writer. Could this be to avoid legal implications?

It certainly seemed to me that, when writing a what-if novel inspired by real-life personalities, likeability helped or, as the legal report pointed out, greatly reduced the risk of being sued.

This view, it seemed, was more or less supported by my agents and editors. They felt that if we could show her in a favorable light as opposed to a negative, corrupt politician who let down her side, we could avoid legalities - more so because I imply that she was pressured into it partly by the power-wielding male bosses of her Party. ‘Why can’t she be the victim of the Taliban, as it is widely believed?’ was one suggestion. ‘Maybe the whole thing could take place around 9/11 or be about drones or if it has to be about women’s education we can have a Malala-like inspirational figure at the helm.’ The suggestions became more and more bizarre.

Once again I turned to Nabokov, who writes in *On a Book Entitled Lolita*, about some of the bizarre suggestions by publishers and their readers on how to make the book safer for publication.

One reader suggested that his firm may consider publication if I turned my Lolita into a twelve-year-old lad and had him seduced by Humbert, a farmer, in a barn….Publisher X had the naiveté to write to me that Part Two was too long. Publisher Y, on the other hand, regretted that there were no good people in the book. Publisher Z said if he printed *Lolita*, he and I would go to jail.’ (Nabokov, 1955, p. 357)

Like Nabokov, I found myself in a strange situation. The challenge in front of me now was not only complex but near impossible. It would be a herculean feat to find a middle ground here without compromising my integrity as an author. In short, I had to either back off or rewrite as dictated. I felt as if I was destroying a house I had lovingly built with my
own hands.

I did not want to end up with a safe but half-baked character that was likeable but unbelievable or inauthentic, as Kakutani’s review of Ali’s fictional Diana had suggested. I was convinced now that my manuscript no longer needed political association to tell the story of a woman’s struggle. However, the rise of a lower middle class woman and the fall from grace of a privileged one just did not have the same chutzpah as the plot to kill the first ever, Islamic female prime minister of Pakistan – at least, for my publishers, it seemed.

I found myself thinking of Constantine Cavafy’s Salome, that fatal woman who could seduce men with her art of dancing, but allowed her art to be corrupted by the promise of reward. Did I want to compromise on my creativity for the sake of a chance of publication, for the publishers were no longer sure if even the revised draft would be viable? Should I defend my creative intentions or attempt to find so dramatic (if even possible) a compromise?vi

After much reflection, I decided that the answers could not be found until I had interrogated the question of who it was I was writing for. Writing itself was a creative act for me, a form of self-expression but how important was publication? This was the answer I was seeking at this point, standing as I was at the crossroads of creativity versus commercialism.

Margaret Atwood, asking the same questions in Negotiating with the Dead, has this to say:

Only very occasionally is the answer specifically no one, but this is a misdirection, because we couldn’t hear it unless a writer had put it in a book and published it for you to read. (Atwood, 2002, p. 121)

Did this, then, mean for me that the desire to write was synonymous with the desire to be read? And if so, how far would a creative writer go in compromising or extending their creativity in order for their writing to become accessible?

Though I have mentioned it already, this is the moment to offer Nabokov’s quote on the ‘misty mountain’ in full:
The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but it does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says ‘go!’ allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. The writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. That lake between those trees will be called Lake Opal or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake. That mist is a mountain--and that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever. (Nabokov, 1982, p. 2)

Nabokov's evocative imagery leaves out one important thing: the essential middleman role of the publisher. The publisher is almighty in arranging this meeting between the reader and the writer (although it must be acknowledged that is changing with technology and the advent of e-books). Without the publisher (or publishing medium, at least) this union of the two is only fantasy. Who would know this better than Nabokov who, despite having proved his genius, had a tough time finding a publisher for *Lolita*. It is interesting, however, that he writes later in his essay that for any one of those people from the publishing world who misunderstood his work, ‘there have been a number of wise, sensitive, and staunch people who understood my book much better than I can explain its mechanism here’ (Nabokov, 1955, p. 359)

Though my journey is the exact opposite of Nabokov in the sense that I gained a publisher even before the novel was complete, I feel our fate was similar, given *Nobody* and *Lolita* were both misunderstood and subject to critique for their subject matter pre-publication, albeit for different reasons.

It may be ambitious of me and rather preposterous to compare my work with that of
a giant like Nabokov, and that is not what I am trying to do. What I am trying to do is question the role of the publisher as a self appointed censor, the iron curtain between the writer and his reader, the misty mountain that lets the climber grab a foothold only to let him slide down. In that sense, is the publisher the modern day censor? Not only for its fear of defamation or libel action, but by not publishing work that is considered unmarketable or controversial or experimental? And who decides whether it is marketable or readable? Again is it the readers who dictate the publishing trends or are publishers dictating the taste of readers?

*Lolita* was not censored in its content but the disrepute of the ‘ban’ that *Lolita* faced in Europe and many other places, preluded its reputation. In a passage from Nabokov’s accompanying essay (afterword) in the book’s defense on the subject of the ‘genre fiction of pornography,’ he compares creativity, unpredictably and inventiveness to artistic originality which is often discouraged in the name of reader expectations. He writes:

> In modern times the term 'pornography' connotes mediocrity, commercialism, and certain strict rules of narration. Obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation, which demands the traditional word for direct action upon the patient. Old, rigid rules must be followed by the pornographer in order to have his patient feel the same security of satisfaction as, for example, fans of detective stories feel, stories where if you do not watch out the real murderer may turn out to be, to the fans' disgust, artistic originality. Who, for instance, would want a detective story without a single dialogue in it? Thus, in pornographic novels action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. *(Ibid 356)*

It is interesting that Nabokov, however caustically, points his finger at ‘artistic originality’ as the ‘murderer’, when it is artistic originality that is being murdered here. To my mind, Nabokov is linking artistic originality with convention, cliché, and conformity. Originality, authenticity, creativity are all relative terms to my mind. For Nabokov, originality destroys convention. But is convention what the publisher wants to
promote if he is afraid of taking risks? Nabokov not only manages to make his point against the conventional expectations of artistic originality as imitating and measuring up to standards of safe ‘originality,’ but also manages to insult the publisher for promoting such designs, for not bothering to experiment and set new standards or takes risks in pioneering new standards of originality. Real artistic originality is discouraged. Is the publisher the new censor then? Prof. Hungerford says, Nabokov ‘suggests [in the afterword of Lolita] that it is the banal attention to convention that is, in fact, what needs to be censored, what needs to be done away with’ (Hungerford, 2008). If literature is indeed invention, as Nabokov says, then is the publisher the hangman aborting innovation and creativity in their inception?

The reason I discuss this is because I would like to link this expected artistic originality with prevalent publishing trends, which dictate an author’s creativity. How free is an artist, really, to create original work, when she has to keep publishing terms, libel clauses and marketing trends in mind? These are the questions I struggled with as I embarked on a revision process, trying to appease all expectation while keeping intact the authenticity of my work as I understood it to be, its creativity undamaged. I questioned if this process of conscious writing can be described as ‘creative writing’ after all, for was it not more like a ‘produced craft’ – akin to making a pot - than actual art. Where did the creativity end and the craft take over, the latter killing off the former?
CHAPTER 4: RE-VISION

In The Psychology of Creative Writing, Kaufmann writes:

The revision process involves comparing an existing text to a writer’s goals or ideal text, diagnosing the differences, and deciding how to reduce or remove these differences to bring to the text as close as possible to the desired status. (Barry Kaufman, 2009, p. 159)

The ‘desired status’ here had for me now turned into ‘the publisher’s expectations’. Nonetheless, making a decision to be positive, I wrote a detailed note proposing all the changes and their implications on the novel. Just as a book opens up in the second reading, and you begin to see symbolism and ideas you had missed in the first quick read, so looking at the manuscript from a critical legal eye had given me an insight into reading my own work anew and finding fresh possibilities for how it could be developed to reflect the same outlook, but through a different channel. A painful process had become one of further creative illumination, I decided.

Through my journal notes, I was reminded why I had begun writing this story in the first place: the incident on the night of the assassination, and my feelings of discomfort at my friend’s obvious lack of status and agency, as opposed to my own. The whole atmosphere of helplessness, and the outrage which led to the writing of this story, once again fueled my passion to rewrite it in another way but just as purposefully. I was confident that the story at the heart of the novel was about Pakistani women and their struggle against the paradoxical society they lived in. It was this that I wanted to tell the world and, with or without BB, I was determined to.

The question now was how I could retell this story without compromising the core values of the gender struggle, which I wished to bring out further in this edit. Here was a real challenge to my technical skills as a creative writer: how to make it a stronger draft and address important issues of our times that I saw now were critical to my work: mainly extremism and the fear of women’s empowerment – as had become increasingly
visible in recent years not just in Pakistan, but in other Muslim majority societies
including Afghanistan, Iran and Nigeria, to name a few.

The answer, perhaps, lay in the transitional nature of our societies. The last decade
has been a time of transition for Pakistani society as we were just emerging from the
influence of General Zia’s long, draconian rule (though it had ended in 1988, nonetheless
its after effects continued). This had, after all, given way to an even scarier and more
radical societal and cultural rule in the form of the widespread national support for the
Taliban.

Pakistani society is now beginning to realize that the fight against the Taliban is very
real. It has made people sit up and acknowledge that the threat of a takeover by radical
Islamists is indeed a possibility. It brings to mind Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s
Tale, where an exaggerated Christian fundamentalist, totalitarian rule is portrayed. Critics
have called the novel a feminist tract. In her book Margaret Atwood: Feminism and
Fiction, Fiona Tolan discusses the influences of Feminism on Atwood’s work (Tolan,
2007). She examines the choices of an author who is often labeled as a feminist but who
actively rejects being labeled. Atwood describes it instead as, ‘a study of power, and how
it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of
regime’ (Rothstein, 1986).

I found this connection between an extremist society and feminism interesting. The
shooting of Malala Yousufzai by the Taliban and the abduction of the schoolgirls by
Boko Haram confirmed the fear of women’s empowerment in radical societies. It made
me think that, by exaggerating the setting of the novel into an even more extremist
society, I could explore this very fear. And in doing so, it would not only take all focus
away from any living or dead political personalities, but also make it a timely and more
politically engaging read in today's world, bringing me closer to the theme of female
empowerment, which I wanted to explore deeper.

In the third draft of my novel (after wrestling back control from the publishers) I
have made changes to implement my original vision. Without giving into character
likeability (as the suggestions from the publishers had hinted at) I have tried to create
strong characters that do not need to lean on political charisma to support their story.
Although, after this creative journey, I’m aware that such an ordinary story of ordinary
people who do not do politics but instead have politics done to them may curtail its publishing opportunities.

In my new draft, I have changed the protagonist’s name to Shah Bibi and her background to a rural one from one of the most conservative parts of the country, KPK, along the borders of Afghanistan. I have made her ancestry Pathan, a fierce tribal race known for its oppression of women, and her fight for women’s education and empowerment which meets resistance after she marries. With the change of setting, and the protagonist's background to a conservative family from a remote province, her fight is now not just for political representation in the parliament, but for true and lasting female empowerment. The arc still follows where she realizes it is ultimately about choice—whether she chooses a career or domesticity, to veil or not to veil herself, to be a mother or not to have children, it has to be a woman’s own undeterred choice.

As for Nazo/Naheed Khan, her character has now evolved into its new avatar inspired by goddess Kali, who is often seen as a symbol of female empowerment (Dalmiya, 2000). The conflict between the two women from differing backgrounds is now about power and how they use it. In fact, this is not so very far from its original themes, from Nazo’s conflict between ‘love of power’ and ‘power of love.’

Instead of the Zia era, I have concatenated the timeline somewhere between the period when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan and General Musharraf was leading a pro-liberal government in Pakistan. Although it meant major revisions - almost rewriting the entire book - I felt it would be an interesting era to explore. Musharraf was able to implement very progressive laws that empowered women, which BB as a woman leader could not. But were these laws actually implemented in areas like the KPK, some of the remotest parts of Pakistan, where I have set the new draft? I have already explored some of this in the second draft but here was a chance to take this further and not necessarily from the point of view of a Prime Minister.

For a woman in power the journey merely begins with being elected, and this may be said for female leaders the world over, from Hilary Clinton, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher to Benazir Bhutto in politics, to Facebook’s CEO Sheryl Sandberg or Multinational giant PepsiCo’s CEO Indra Nooyi in the corporate world: they all have a story to tell, of struggling to juggle homes and careers. Nooyi was quoted in the Daily
Mail as saying, ‘Everyday you have to make a decision about whether you are going to be a wife or a mother (or businesswoman), in fact many times during the day you have to make those decisions’ (Davis, 2014).

Being successful and staying successful is a constant battle for women and perhaps staying in power is more difficult than coming to power. How do women use power? How does power use them? What are the hard choices they must make to stay in power? And what if they chose to reject this power? Should they be punished for it? These are the questions my novel addresses. In a way the journey of this book reflects my own battle with the publishers and the novel’s difficult gestation. However, at the end of it I’m pleased that I’ve been able to regain control of what I had set out to do and steer the novel back to what I consider to be its true course.
CONCLUSION

At the end of this creative journey, I feel that, quite possibly, I have ventured too far from what I originally intended to write. Was this creative rewriting, or no more than the craft of compromise? It is important for me, of course, to answer this question. In this essay, and as an important part of my life-work in writing my novel, I have attempted to examine the idea of memory and history colliding into each other to form an alternative history, while answering questions of identity and personal choice, both as an individual and as a collective whole of a divided society. I have tried to explore, in a systematic and analytical way, the creative journey of an idea into a novel and a novel into the promise of a book. It is only through the practice-based research of critical reflection and documenting of first order notes during the course of my PhD thesis that I am able to objectively separate the chain of events that led to the completion of my novel into a systematic thought process – a meaningful narrative. I am able to see that what I had previously considered an act of revelation or a moment of inspiration was actually an orderly and systematic thought process that resulted in the generation of story ideas. I have also, during the compilation of this essay, looked critically at the role of the publisher in shaping an author’s creativity and the author’s desire for publication in influencing his or her creative choices. I have examined the role of the audience, by asking who the writer is writing for. I have realized that one can and must ask questions, although the answers may often remain murky and even unconvincing.

At the start of this process I tended to the belief that creativity cannot be measured, just like inspiration cannot be bottled. Keeping a record of all the different influences on my writing has led me to conclude that creative writing is above all communication, not just with the reader but also with one’s self. Better: creative writing is about self-expression and by default communication. It is about the writer’s belief and knowledge, depending on how much of it they want to share with the world and in what form. And just as a personal faith cannot be shaken or moulded under pressure, nor can a writer’s creativity. It can and it must withhold pressure if a writer is truly convinced of their work and in return wants their work to be truly convincing.

I have a much better understanding of my work today than I did when I wrote my
PhD proposal. This idea of asserting one’s right to be creative on one’s own terms, shaped by the influences on one’s craft and not on one’s art, is what the process has proven to be for me. As Harper puts it, ‘Creative writing initiates, develops and supports open and one-to-one exchanges between human beings. In this communication agreements about what constitutes as “justified true belief”, come about’ (Harper, 2012, p. 113). At the heart of it is a desire to communicate, to express. And to express oneself the reason for doing so must be clear to the writer.

True to this, in my novelistic journey I have had the pleasure of writing unhindered by the promise of publication and then had the pleasure reversed to pressure by the demand to tailor my writing to a ‘safe’ standard. Had I not been clear in my understanding of my work, as I am now, and the reasons why I wanted to write in the first place, I feel it would have been impossible for me to withstand and, where correct, to critically bend to the pressures of external influences on my creative output and beliefs.

At the end of this essay I’d like to say that self discovery, self expression and the outward pressures and influences on it are the things that informed my understanding as I made this work of creative writing, which I hope will be able to stand up to the mighty mountains of publishing and one day embrace its reader at the top summit, unchanged and unhindered - in its essence if not always in its detail - as its creator wanted it to be. I have spent the last three years researching and writing this novel and essay, and they in turn have complemented each other by providing a fine balance between my creative writing and critical ability. Had I not been engaged in documenting first order notes to record this journey of creativity, I doubt I would have been able to critique my craft so objectively. And it is to this note that at the end of a long journey I decided to stand up to my publisher and refuse further snipping at my creativity. For as I said, creativity is communication.

To borrow from Paul Fry’s lecture on the ‘Death of the Author,’ the following words echo my restraint:

I stand before you as an author articulating an identity for the purpose of achieving freedom, not to police you, not to deny your freedom, but to find my own freedom. And I stand before you precisely, and in pride, as
an author. I don't want to be called an author function. I don't want to be called an instrument of something larger than myself because frankly that's what I've always been, and I want precisely as an authority through my authorship to remind you that I am not anybody's instrument but that I am autonomous and free. (Fry, 2009)

I hope that by now I have addressed all the questions I raised by coming full circle to the question of why I chose to embark on this journey of creative writing in the first place. The process of creative writing is a crucial and pivotal point in a writer’s journey, and the ability to look back and talk about one’s writing objectively is as important as a surgeon needing to have medical knowledge to conduct an operation. I have, by attaining a clear understanding of my creative motives, taken a stand.

Gertrude Stein is said to have quoted Picasso in saying that, ‘he who creates a thing is forced to make it ugly’ (Fitz, 1973, p. 237). I hope that I have resisted that effort, even while accepting certain realities involved in the ‘means of communication.’ I hope that I have retained the freshness of my writing and my inventiveness and creativity, by refusing to bow down to publishing pressures by tailoring my writing according to market trends, character likability or libel laws and creative censure. I hope that I have saved it from becoming stale and ugly.

However, will this digging in of heels, this resistance to copies of innovation, be fruitful? Will it lead me to meeting my reader on top of the summit Nabokov talks about, on my own terms? That is something only time will tell, but for now I am happy to have come to the end of a journey of creative discovery whereby I have produced a piece of writing that reflects my interests and beliefs, uncensored and unpressured by the promise of publication – if affected by its processes so that I have focused my narrative – and as yet unsullied by the ugliness of mutation.

- End -
Works Cited


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Primary Sources


Secondary Texts


APPENDIX A

LIBEL FOREWORD FOR PUBLISHER’S LEGAL COUNSEL

(Libel Note on) Nobody Killed Her by Sabyn Javeri, July 2014

Introduction

Nobody Killed Her is a work of fiction loosely based on the assassination of Pakistani Ex-Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. Although partially inspired by real life events, the narrative is careful not to assimilate any similarities to serving or late political personalities. I have taken all necessary precautions to conceal any co-relation; and any similarity remaining is purely coincidental. The following measures have been taken to prevent any defamation action.

Characters:

Names have been changed to protect identities.

Gigi

We chose Gigi (pronounced as Giggi) because it’s a general form of reverence in Interior Sindh. Gigi Saeeen is used to refer to anyone from Elders to Officials.

Along with names, educational institutions, city of birth, family lineage and other identifying marks such as the number of siblings or number of children have also been changed. The only similarity that the character of Gigi has with the late B.B is that the father was murdered by a General and the political struggle that followed. Without this
the crux of the novel would fail as it proves the catalyst for her revenge. As many people have suffered wrongfully at the hands of the Army in Pakistan it should not be a sole identifying character. The fact that she was the only female Prime Minister is hard to disguise but all necessary precautions have been taken to divert the time line and political events leading up to the assassination so that they do not conspire with actual events. Any recognizable personality traits have been left out. Instead I have taken different characteristics of world leaders and female politicians and created an amalgamation of sorts, a mix of Thatcher, Gandhi and Bhutto.

Nazo

As for Nazo, the other primary protagonist, who was initially inspired by Naheed Khan, there is almost little or no similarity remaining in the current draft, as the character has changed much through the writing of this novel.

Nazo’s background has been altered to be as far removed from Naheed Khan’s as possible. In the novel the character of Nazo is a refugee/ asylum seeker hailing from an improvised family background. She is poorly educated and starts her career as a maid. Her political rise (as well as her motives and actions) do not coincide with that of Naheed Khan or what is known of her, at all.

Naheed Khan comes from an upper middle class background, has been married to Senator Safdar Abbasi for more than two decades, and has grown up children who are currently studying abroad. She came to work for Benazir as a political secretary while already working at a travel agency and studying in London as a student. She was not a refugee or asylum seeker as far as I know and there is absolutely no reason to think she might be. She belongs to a large family with many siblings. Her sister Anila is married to
noted politician and is based in England. She is known to talk about her affluent upbringing.

The character of Nazo on the other hand hails from a lower economic background. Her parents are from a political/radical background and are brutally murdered in front of her eyes. She has no siblings. Further more she is portrayed as an asylum seeker working at a Dry cleaners. She comes to work for the politician Gigi, as a maid. In the book she never marries and her sexual partner is an impoverished ex-Army soldier, bodyguard to an Army Major and they meet in his (servant) quarters.

Naheed Khan has only ever been associated with Senator Safdar to whom she is happily married. Nazo also has a breakdown and as far as I’m aware Naheed Khan has no history of mental problems. The most crucial factor that ceases all possibilities of any coincidental similarity between Naheed Khan and Nazo is that the character dies in the end, while Naheed Khan is very much alive.

The personality, background and political journey of Naheed Khan and Nazo could not be more different. They differ greatly in class, background, political rise and personal history. So while the character of Nazo was initially inspired by Naheed Khan, in its evolution it has no resemblance left to it.

The Characters of Yasmin, Omar, Soldier Rahim, Major Q and Pervez Sahib are completely fictional.

Begum’s character is very loosely inspired by Nusrat Bhutto although physical and personality traits have been completely altered in the current draft.

**Balgodi**

The character of Balgodi is inspired by a mix of Asif Ali Zardari, Imran Khan and a
few other flamboyant political personalities. I have been careful to change major
identifying elements such as linage, family background and physical appearance so that it
does not rest on any one person. I have taken the comic elements and stereotypes of
Pakistani politicians and feudals and tried to create a completely satirical character. I
have exaggerated his character flaws to a caricature in order to remove focus from any
particularly distinguishing aspects of any one person.

**Time Line:**

The book follows a completely different timeline to the one leading up to B.B’s
assassination. B.B served two terms (neither of which she completed) but the PM in the
book serves only one. The date and year of the assassination has also been changed as
have the events building up to it.

B.B was in a self-imposed seven year exile in Dubai before returning to Pakistan but
the book follows a different path. It is based on a short span of five years while BB’s
political career was much longer.

Political Events such as the “Dam issue” and the “Nuclear issue” which were real
scandals during the reigning governments of President Musharraf and Nawaz Sharif
have been added to Gigi’s time in power to obfuscate the timeline..

Personal events like the birth of GG’s son, have been completely fictionalized. From
physicality to personality there is no similarity between Bilawal Bhutto and the wrong
child (the first born in the book).

The fictional daughter is portrayed as deaf and mute taking the emphasis off
Bakhtawar Bhutto. All of B.B’s three children are perfectly healthy while the ones shown
in the book are not. The number has also been changed.
Most importantly Naheed Khan was never tried in court for Benazir’s murder. It is purely a fictional conjuring.

So while the book is inspired by real life events the similarities stop there. I hope that by changing the time line and altering the defining characteristics of the actual personalities, it is hard to pinpoint if it is actually based on one particular politician or on a collage of many. True that there has only been one female PM of Pakistan and that she was assassinated but that is where the similarities end.

You will find after reading the manuscript this is a fantastical political satire and one that is cannot be based by any one person’s life. Instead it is an amalgamation of many different political personalities who have had a role in the state of women that is prevalent in today’s Pakistan.

In this respect the book is more a look at the state of third world Feminism where privilege and agency play a major role in defining a woman’s status and character than a hard look at the politics of Pakistan.

**Additional Information:**

I would also like to add that at the moment of writing this book, there are already various satirical and farcical programmes on Pakistani television centring around political personalities. *Banana News Network* is one of the most popular ones where noted actress Feryal Gauhar plays Billy Buttocks who is based on Bilawal Bhutto. The program had been on air for over two years and neither Bilalwal Bhutto nor any of the other politicians
it mimics, have raised any objection to it.

In recent times there have been other South Asian novels centred around political personalities (thinly disguised) which have not attracted any objection. For example Omar Shahid’s *The Prisoner* which talks about Altaf Hussein or Mohammed Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, which is about the assassination of General Zia, have not initiated the least bit of controversy. To give an international example, *The American Wife*, which is a fictionalised look at the life of Laura and George Bush, did not face any libel action even though the Bush’s personal history was hardly veiled. Although names, locations and the time line had been changed

Robert Harris’s *The Ghost*, which was loosely inspired by Tony Blair’s career also did not face any legal objections as names of people, location and key dates had been changed to accommodate an alternative political history.

**Conclusion:**

I have researched this concept thoroughly and have made an effort to ensure that key identifying elements have been changed. I have mixed attributes and personal traits so that each character is a sum of many.

In that sense, *Nobody Killed Her*, cannot be pinned on the story of any one individual as it is a collage of several. It looks at an alternative history and although loosely inspired by real life events, it portrays a very different outcome which although interesting, cannot be distinguished as the destiny or journey of any one particular living or dead personality with conviction.
Notes

1 Hudood Ordinance was enforced in Pakistani Constitution in 1979 by General Zia. The laws (mis)directed at women, mainly: the Zina Ordinance (which covers rape, adultery and fornication), have been deemed the most controversial part of the Hudood Ordinance. It is a law that is openly misused, lamented upon and criticized; as it requires a woman to produce four eyewitnesses to make an accusation of rape. If unable to do so, she is tried under adultery/premarital sex crimes, and jailed. This has deterred most women from speaking out in Pakistani Courts. For more information see: <http://cii.gov.pk/publications/h.report.pdf>.

ii Joe Klein is The Time’s political columnist and author of six books, most recently Politics Lost. His weekly column, ‘In the Arena’, covers national and international affairs, and his reviews are greatly regarded.

iii Benazir Bhutto, first met Thatcher as a student in Oxford and is said to have been greatly impressed by her personality. They met many times as politicians, in UK during BB’s first term. More information can be found in Bhutto’s profile in the New Yorker (Weaver, 1993).

iv The Pakistani Taliban (TPT) attacked a school in Peshawar on 16 Dec 2014, killing over 141 innocent school children. The TPT are against western education and women’s education. The school was run by the Pakistan Army, which has now also become a target of the Taliban after rumours of their involvement with the US capturing of Bin Laden. More information on the massacre can be found on the BBC Asia website (Khalil, 2014).

v In 2011, Taliban terrorists and members of Pakistani police were charged with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007. Further information is available on <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15605565>

vi Chekhov was discussing objectivity in fiction in a letter to A. S. Suvorin. His exact quote was, ‘You would have me, when I describe horse-stealers, say: Stealing horses is an evil’. He then went on to discuss various examples of portraying horse-stealers/character objectively. Anton Chekhov, Letters of Anton Chekhov to his family and friends, [chapter 30] translated by Constance Garnett (Adelaide: UAP, 2014)

vii In Salome (1896) by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy Salome instigated the death of John the Baptist as part of a futile effort to get the interest of a young sophist who was indifferent to the charms of love. When Salome presents to him the Baptist's head, the sophist rejects it, remarking in jest, ‘Dear Salome, I would have liked better to get your own head’. Taking the jest seriously, the hopelessly infatuated Salome lets herself be beheaded and her head is duly brought to the sophist, who ultimately rejects it in disgust—making her sacrifice futile.

viii Professor Amy Hungerford in her lecture on Nabokov, elaborates upon the writer's need for creative independence with reference to Lolita; transcripts of her lecture ‘The American Novel Since 1945’, are available at Yale Open Courses, <http://oyc.yale.edu> for further details.