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**I. In the time of the others : a novel ; II. Out of east Pakistan : postcolonial colony Bangladesh as a case study of postcolonial state and postcolonial nation-state from east Pakistan to independence through the liberation war of 1971 : a critical analysis.**

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I. IN THE TIME OF THE OTHERS: A NOVEL

II. OUT OF EAST PAKISTAN: POSTCOLONIAL COLONY  
BANGLADESH AS A CASE STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL STATE AND  
POSTCOLONIAL NATION-STATE FROM EAST PAKISTAN TO INDEPENDENCE  
THROUGH THE LIBERATION WAR OF 1971: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

By

Nadeem Zaman  
B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1998  
M.A., University of Louisville, 2013

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, KY

May 2017

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A Dissertation Approved on

April 13, 2017

by the following Dissertation Committee

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Dr. Simona Bertacco, Director

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Dr. John McLeod, Committee Member

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Professor Paul Griner, Committee Member

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Dr. Ranen Omer-Sherman, Outside Reader

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents

Farhad Zaman  
(1947-2014)

and

Najma Zaman

whose stories of living through it all are the heart and the inspiration

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Professor Elaine Wise for accepting and welcoming me into the department in 2011, and from the beginning to the very end being a pillar of support and encouragement. Mere words are not enough for thanking my distinguished committee – Dr. Simona Bertacco, Dr. John McLeod, Professor Paul Griner, and Dr. Ranen Omer-Sherman – the vast sum whose individual, respective, and collective treasure of knowledge raised this work to levels I had not imagined it would reach at its inception. For her love, patience, kindness, and endless encouragement, my love and gratitude to my partner Amy Lynn Steiger.

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## ABSTRACT

### I. IN THE TIME OF THE OTHERS: A NOVEL

### II. OUT OF EAST PAKISTAN: POSTCOLONIAL COLONY BANGLADESH AS A CASE STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL STATE AND POSTCOLONIAL NATION-STATE FROM EAST PAKISTAN TO INDEPENDENCE THROUGH THE LIBERATION WAR OF 1971: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Nadeem Zaman

April 13, 2017

This dissertation is a combined creative and critical project consisting a novel and a theoretical component. The novel entitled *In the Time of the Others* is a fictional account set during the true event of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. Using the war as a backdrop, the novel tells the story of one man trying to manage his family, marriage, and financial situation by returning to an inheritance he never claimed. The journey brings him from his home in southern East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) to the capital city Dhaka, to the home of his maternal uncle and aunt under whose charge his mother had left the inheritance. Within days of his arrival the military regime of West Pakistan declares a crackdown on Dhaka, and East Pakistan, and the war that will eventually bring about the new independent state of Bangladesh begins. The novel encompasses the nine-months of the war, showing through the various journeys of its main and supporting characters a people and their identity and culture seeking to establish an independent country the making of a postcolonial state and the emergence of a postcolonial nation-state from Bengali nationalism to Bangladeshi sovereignty.



The critical analysis uses postcolonial theory to frame the creation of Bangladesh as a case study in postcolonial state and nation-state formation. In sections that examine the background of events from the end of British rule in the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 to Bengali identity and Bengali nationalism, fundamental European theories of nation, nationalism, and sovereignty that cannot be applied wholesale to the Subcontinent, to the intervention of Bangladesh and its emergence as a postcolonial state and postcolonial nation-state the theoretical and critical analyses are proposed. Also examined is the novel as the representative and chosen form of writers in postcolonial literature to imagine, re-imagine, contextualize, and decolonize the postcolonial *nation* through fiction.

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PART I  
THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

1

The train lurched once, its brakes squealed long and treacherously, and with a melancholy chug and swish from its mechanical, oil-and-grease heart, the Ulka Express made its slow crawl into Kamalapur Railway Station in Dhaka.

Imtiaz's eyes snapped open, and blinked several times to clear their sight. His neck was stiff, the sliver of a dull ache creeping down his spine. He stretched, yawned, and looked out the window.

An insistent drizzle had stayed with the last hour of the journey, petering out now to breaking clouds and columns of sunlight. Passengers were thudding around with luggage, arms and elbows and legs banging into each other from the disorientation of being useless for so many hours, couples griping at each other cranked up from the delayed arrival, manhandling tired, bawling children.

Three different passengers had been his cabin mates since he boarded in Chittagong, and Imtiaz recalled only one of them. He had tried to engage Imtiaz in conversation, a very young boy, too young it seemed to Imtiaz to be on his own, let alone be on his way to Dhaka to be a student at the university. Imtiaz remembered that he had talked about being unhappy. He was going to Dhaka because he was forced. His father threatened disowning him if he married the girl he loved. The boy knew that it would be

1

too late by the time he finished his studies and returned home. She would be married off to someone else. At the end of his tale, the student fell silent, staring wistfully at his small, soft looking hands. When he looked up again, his eyes had welled up with tears. Sniffing and mumbling his love's name he muttered what sounded like profanity at Imtiaz, indirectly, as he left the compartment and got off the train.

“You had a good, long sleep,” said the new passenger. He was a portly man, skull-capped and jovial, with a gray beard that came down to his sternum. As a young man he might have been an athlete, a wrestler perhaps or a kabaddi player, but with age had gone not soft but flabby. Out of the gleaming silver carrier, the man plucked, from various compartments, the condiments, which he placed in sections on a fresh paan leaf. After he had placed a satisfactory amount of condiments on it, he gave his work a final look, folded the leaf in small sections until was a perfect little triangle, placed it on his palm, and held it out for Imtiaz.

He motioned with his head to encourage Imtiaz to take it, the smile broadening again, this time showing teeth that had endured the ravages of a lifetime of paan chewing. Imtiaz was suddenly aware of his own unclean mouth. He had brushed his teeth before he left home for the station in Chittagong, and since then eaten three meals, and only rinsed his mouth with water that he spat out at the scenery speeding by. The train was finally emptying out. Imtiaz could tell because the ruckus was spilling out to the platform, merging with the ongoing chaos, restless passengers, screeching children, shouting coolies, hawkers and street vendors, and he used the excuse of needing at last to alight to politely refuse the offer of paan.

The man said he could have the paan and get off the train. “And it will take the grogginess right out of you.”

Outside Imtiaz saw the bustling platform full of disembarking passengers, hawkers, competing baggage handlers haggling with passengers and with each other, station officials blissfully unmindful of the chaos, and a duo of policemen laughing and sipping tea out of copper cups, equally devoid of giving any attention to the routine disorder of trains coming and going. He put his book into his briefcase, stood up, lifted the bag with his clothes in it, and once again thanked the man for his kindness.

“Take, take. It’s no kindness, my son,” the man said, pleasantly. Having seen him prepare it Imtiaz knew how good it would taste.

The man watched Imtiaz as if to make sure he ate the paan and did not throw it away. Imtiaz tucked the paan into his cheek and as soon as he bit in a sweet liquid seeped out and washed over his mouth. Then came the acrid, dry choon, tempering the taste, followed by the zing of jarda, all of it tousled by the sour undercurrent of the paan leaf itself.

“This is extremely good,” Imtiaz said. “Best I’ve tasted. Thank you.”

“Family tradition,” the man’s eyes twinkled. “I learned to make paan before I learned to talk,” he laughed. “Our family store was...is, is in Narayanganj.”

“I’m honored, thank you.”

Imtiaz had a sudden impulse to check the ground between his feet. Between his cramped legs stood his briefcase, and his suitcase shoved under the seat. He did not trust any other way of transporting his luggage.

“Everything is fine?” the man asked. “I didn’t see anyone near you since I got on. I know. It’s a shame that we can’t trust our fellow men as often as we’d like to.”

Imtiaz stretched, feeling self-conscious, and decided against making the situation further uncomfortable by telling the man he did not mean to suggest suspicion of him.

“Shahibs used to send for my father’s specialty tea and his paan,” the man said. He made his paan and popped it into his mouth. After concentrating on moving it around in his mouth, he said, “Alimuddin Brothers. I’m Hashmat Alimuddin. Once my father’s name was as famous as Khan Brothers here in Dhaka. Paan, tea, sweets, all homemade, all made fresh every day. We used to be called the Khan Brothers of Narayanganj. But this was not appreciated by my father. He hated being compared to other men.”

“Is it not around anymore?” Imtiaz asked.

“Too many other young upstarts everywhere thinking they know how to run a shop,” Hashmat lamented. “We have had to cut corners. But that is the reality of any business, no?”

On that count Imtiaz was in agreement. “It is,” he said.

“You know what it is,” Hashmat said, frowning thoughtfully, “it is the lack of regard for tradition. I see it everywhere. I’ve lived a long life, and it has gotten worse the older I have gotten.”

“My father said the same thing,” said Imtiaz. “Well, it was good talking to you.”

“The only family I have now is here in Dhaka,” Alimuddin continued, as though Imtiaz had not spoken. “My daughter. Her husband is a driver. Drives for a very good and well-known family here.”



“That’s very good.” Imtiaz placed his briefcase on the seat and dragged out his suitcase.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Alimuddin hunched forward. “They don’t know I’m coming.”

“I’m sure they’ll love the surprise,” Imtiaz barely got the words out when the paan spit gathered in his mouth leaked out. It dribbled down his chin and spotted his shirt.

“Spit,” Alimuddin laughed. “Make your mark on the earth.”

Spitting was a national nuisance, and Imtiaz especially hated paan spit. The masses of them that blotched pavements and streets, the disgusting stains, the reckless, filthy chewers that had no regard for public demeanor. But short of spitting right there in the compartment he had no choice. The collecting saliva in his mouth was fast becoming unpalatable.

The distended globule of crimson liquid spun in the air for several seconds. Imtiaz watched with horror as a fat man with an umbrella yelling at a skinny baggage handler behind him passed the window. The handler was no more than twelve or thirteen, and the burden of luggage on him was as expansive as the owner’s girth. The owner shouted profanity at the handler as the boy’s knees bucked under the enormous suitcase planted on his head, which he was trying to keep in place while clutching a second one in his hand, and a third smaller one under his arm. Imtiaz watched his paan spit near the ground at the moment the fat man’s polished moccasin moved under it, and with a sickly splat the juice smacked on top of the shoe.

“Shabaash! Well done!” Alimuddin clapped Imtiaz’s shoulder. Imtiaz moved back from the window, just as the fat man stood stumped in his tracks. The blood drained

from his face as he watched his defiled shoe as if a dead baby had been dropped in his path. The young handler took the pause to reassert his balance, and give his scrawny frame a break. The fat man glared at the platform, at the world, searching for the culprit. Hashmat Alimuddin was doubled over laughing, slapping his knees with his paan-making hands.

“Serves him right,” said Alimuddin. “Fat old cow, making that poor little thing work like an ass. You did the right thing, without even knowing.”

Soon the fat man and the skinny handler and the luggage dissolved into the crowd. Imtiaz wanted to wash out his mouth, and take a bath.

“What’s the rush, look how crowded it is out there,” said Alimuddin. “Sit, sit. We both paid money for our journey, might as well enjoy these awful seats a little longer,” he laughed, showing a flash of red that was his tongue from the paan. “This is the end of the line for both of us.”

Behind the laughter Imtiaz sensed a quiet desperation. Within the desperation was couched sadness, and seeing it made Imtiaz want to run off the train. Any which way, the situation was growing more intensely uncomfortable by the seconds. The long journey, worsened by delays, the heavy mind with which he left Chittagong, the last sight of his family at the station seeing him off as though he were being transported to a work camp for the rest of his days while they were left to toil under the tyranny of a landlord.

“I should really go,” he said.

Alimuddin sighed. “Very well, my young traveling companion. It was good to meet you. Even for this short journey. I love traveling by train more than any other way.”

“How long are you going to sit here?” Imtiaz asked. Why it mattered suddenly he could not fathom, but a touch of guilt prevented Imtiaz from abandoning the man to his loneliness.

“As long as the conductor will let me,” Alimuddin said.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I love train journeys, but don’t get to enjoy them often enough. This one was too short for what it cost me. Robbers and thieves overrunning the country, what else can honest people expect. And the buses are not meant for decent human beings! I can speak freely, and I will, don’t be worried. Army wants to keep law and order, but it’s a shame, big shame, that people, in the name of freedom want to run wild.” His jowls jangled with his shaking head.

“I’m not worried,” said Imtiaz, “just tired.”

Alimuddin touched his chin, while his gaze moved up and down over Imtiaz.

“You look like an intelligent young man, from a good family,” he said. “Forgive my old mind and what it thinks up. But truly, young man, this city is unlivable. You can’t look from right to left without someone there to bump into. The whole country is the same way. I’ve been to Karachi, and Lahore, and Pindi - now those are cities! Civilized, clean, orderly.”

“We’re the same country,” said Imtiaz.

“You know what I mean,” Alimuddin said, testily. “We are the same country, but who would think it.”

“My uncle and aunt live here,” said Imtiaz. “It’s been about ten years since I’ve seen them. Since my mother passed away.”

“Inna-lilla...” Alimuddin mumbled. “May she be in His care in a better place.”

“Two years after my father passed,” Imtiaz added.

“The death of parents is unlike anything else in life. Mine lived to be in their nineties, and still it feels like they went too soon. Too early.” His head shook mournfully. He crossed his arms across his substantial belly, and looked at the ground. Within seconds, his curiosity was back on Imtiaz. “So, young man, your family, they’re not traveling with you?”

Imtiaz gave a feeble headshake in response. The thought of them, once more, shot through him like a flame tipped arrow.

“I’m just here on a matter of business,” he said. “The children have school...”

“Their mother must be a very good woman,” said Alimuddin.

“She is,” said Imtiaz. His throat closed up. There was a moment that he and Alimuddin stared at each other during which Imtiaz felt incompetent, derelict.

“Masha’Allah, Al-hamdulillah,” Alimuddin muttered. “My wife, may she rest in His care for eternity, left me when our daughter was little. Our only child. She’s the one I’m here to visit.” Alimuddin gazed out the window, collecting his next thought. “She’s a good girl. Who knows what life throws at someone at what turn.”

A chorus of voices erupted out on the platform, men suddenly in a heated argument over ticket prices, and who paid first and reserved the right to board.

“Ah, here we go,” Alimuddin leaned into the window, “the best of our national transportation system coupled with the best of our nation’s citizenry.”

“Is your father going to refund my money?”

“Sir, there’s no need to be crude...”

“Crude? I’m crude? You people engage in daylight robbery and I’m crude? Listen to this...”

“Give me just one minute...the train only came now, didn’t it...there was a delay...”

“We’re aware of the delay...”

“We should get a refund and ride for free...”

“Sir, really, there is a system...”

“System...Conductor Sir, do your job first and then tell us about the system...”

The pitched battle wore on and quickly grew stale. Behind the men’s assault of voices showering on the conductor were women trying to calm them down. Children shrieked, and one infant bawled. The conductor’s weary, nasal voice was fast losing whatever authority it had.

“What a buffoon,” Alimuddin grinned, watching the scene. “With those paan spots on your shirt you look like a bona fide nawabzada,” he grinned at Imtiaz.

“I’ll have to get it cleaned,” said Imtiaz. Lubna had picked out the shirt the night before, laying it on top of his suitcase after she ironed it.

The conductor bounded in. Behind him straggled the men like a troop of hounds, followed by the women and children.

“Tickets, show me your tickets,” the conductor, sweaty-faced and miserable, stopped inches away from Imtiaz, panting. His breath reeked of pyorrhea. Imtiaz got a good, warm blast. “Hello, sir, ticket please.”

“I’m not going,” Imtiaz said.

“Not going? Then what you are doing here?”

“I was just...”

“Brother, what’s the rush, my friend and I were just having a chat,” said Alimuddin, still not rising from his seat.

“The rush?” the conductor panted, “Do you not see the people waiting to board for their journey? What is this? A hotel?”

Alimuddin gave him a gentle, patriarchal, and condescending smirk. “Brother, why so much temper. We paid for our seats just like your other passengers. We’re just waiting until the crowd thins out, and then we’ll be out of your way.”

“Crowd thins out,” the conductor muttered, jamming his fists into his hips. “Have mercy, will you, my lord, for God’s sake, and let me seat the people that are traveling. You want to sit and chat there’s the platform right there. Now, please, I beg you, be on your way.” Dramatically, he brought his hands together to further demonstrate his desperation.

“Dear brother,” said Alimuddin, “can a concerned citizen and passenger beg a question of you?” His eye darted at Imtiaz, who was having difficulty keeping a straight face.

“What,” the conductor pressed his lips, and let out a long sigh through his nose, thankfully, for Imtiaz, as he was in the direct line of fire of his foul breath.

“Why is it so costly to travel by train these days? There was a time a man could bring his wife and children, a full family of four, could travel together, comfortably, for half what it costs now just for one.”

“God help me,” the conductor mumbled. If he wanted Alimuddin to cooperate, and his restive load of new passengers not to lynch him right here, he had to draw a fine

balance. His expression said it all. He encountered old men with nothing better to do but take up the world's time simply because their lives had slowed down. Now, the world had to whittle its pace to keep step with their existence. "If you want to travel cheaper, there are options. Just look at the train from outside. There's plenty of place on the roof, on the floor in third class, on someone's lap, if you want to travel cheaper."

"You see?" Alimuddin wagged a finger in the general direction of Imtiaz and the conductor. "This is the kind of attitude one must accept these days when they show their concern for the way things are going. A concerned citizen has no place in this country."

The two policemen that had been drinking tea on the platform earlier passed by the window. The conductor glanced at them, desperately, and glared at Alimuddin.

"Make a complaint," said the conductor. "Do you see me being the master of things around here?"

"No, but you are the appointed representative. Is your job too much for you to handle?"

"I will get the police," the conductor threatened. "Tell them how they should do their job."

Imtiaz broke in. "Our car should be waiting for us," he said. "Let's go, Uncle."

Alimuddin gave him a confused look. "Car?"

"Yes. Now come, we have to go," Imtiaz said. "We have to hurry."

"Yes, yes, go. Listen to your nephew," the conductor jumped on the opportunity. Then he turned with a pleading face at Imtiaz.

"Throw them out!" one of the men behind the conductor demanded. He was promptly shushed by his wife.

The conductor threw a worried glance over his shoulder.

“Let’s go, uncle.” Imtiaz told Alimuddin.

After gathering his things at a leisurely tempo, while the conductor’s bloodshot eyes brimmed with anger, and the skin of his sweaty face filled with quiet rage, Alimuddin, clamping his paan carrier under his arm with great care, drew to his feet.

“I hope things get better,” he said, pushing past the conductor. “If we want to have our own country from the army one of these days, the least we can do is have something better in its place.”

Out on the platform, Alimuddin shooed away the baggage handlers that had immediately engaged in a civil war over who would carry his bags, swarming on them like an untrained platoon. One boy tugged at Imtiaz’s suitcase. As a more effective way of getting rid of them, Imtiaz took out money, told them to behave or no one was going to get paid, until the boys, wide-eyed with anticipation, their pupils following the cash Imtiaz held above his head, lined up and fell silent. Imtiaz gave each of the five of them the same amount to avoid them pouncing further on him and then on each other.

“That’s one way of spoiling the youth,” Alimuddin said.

“They’re children, and this is not the kind of work they should be doing,” said Imtiaz. “So, would you like a ride?”

Hashmat Alimuddin regarded Imtiaz, scanning him up and down like a stranger. “I have some things to do first,” he said.

Imtiaz had little patience to continue. He held out his hand, saying, “Thank you for the paan, and for your company. I hope you and your family enjoy your visit.”



“Yes. Yes.” Alimuddin pressed Imtiaz’s finger lightly.

Imtiaz walked toward the exit. Alimuddin had gone the opposite way. When Imtiaz turned after a few steps to see where he had gone, there was no sign of him. The platform was ringing with travelers and hawkers, peanut sellers and baggage handlers, crying children and admonishing mothers, young men reaching Dhaka for the first time in their lives with the promise of a future at the university or a clerical job, newlyweds, merchants, grandparents, and it made him think that his troubles were insignificant outside of him, that the world spun on, possibilities never ceased, and how arrogant it was for one man to think his trials could rank supreme.

He looked for the white Toyota Publica his uncle told him would be there to pick him up. Under the strengthening sun, unfazed by the rain, he found it baking in its white glare, with the driver's side door open, about twenty yards from the station's entrance. A few street children were hovering around it, curious and cautious. Seeing Imtiaz, they scattered reluctantly.

The driver was asleep, his mouth open and lips fluttering with each heavy breath. Imtiaz drummed the top of the car and drew his hand back at the stunning heat absorbed into the metal. The driver started awake.

“Are you Chowdhury shahib's driver?”

“Sir, yes, I am.” He tumbled out the door, fixed his feet into his pumps, which he grabbed from the floor of the car, and reached for Imtiaz's luggage. “Back seat will be cooler to sit.”

“No, it won't. I want to sit up front,” said Imtiaz.

“Move!” the driver yelled at the children, tiptoeing their way forward again. “Bloody urchins,” he said, giving Imtiaz an apologetic glance.

“Come here,” Imtiaz called to one of the girls. Her dress was a piece of sackcloth, torn into shape. It covered her lower body and part of her torso cutting diagonally across her chest to sit on a shoulder like a toga. One nipple was exposed. Her hair was matted with dirt and water from the recent rain. Lice would be in there having a carnival. “Come,

come, it's okay." He brought out money. "If I give this to you, will you make sure it's shared with everyone? For food?"

The girl's hand was formed into a claw ready to rip the money out of his hands. She stared at Imtiaz's words, which he repeated, slower and more sternly.

"I'm going to make sure you do," said Imtiaz, "and if you don't it will make me very angry. You understand?"

The girl nodded, understanding anger better than any other emotion, hunger being the result of it, living in and tormenting her. Behind her the rest of the children were a feral row of ruined lives. The girl was ready to wrench Imtiaz's wrist off it that was what it took. When at last she was able to get the money her snatching scratched his palm like the beak of a swooping crow.

"Best not to do things like that," said Amir, starting the car.

"You don't think so," Imtiaz replied, unsurprised at the reaction.

"Look at them, fighting like cats and dogs already."

Heat rose to Imtiaz's cheeks seeing the children pounce on the girl like pack hounds. He had no energy to make good on his threat to the girl. From the looks of it she had not had time to turn around and face the others and keep her end of the bargain before they attacked.

"These things will never change," said Amir. "Sir, I apologize for earlier, when I was sleeping. But..."

"The train was three hours late," said Imtiaz.

"My name is Amir, sir."

Amir reversed out of the parking spot he had created by bullying the nose of the car into the tight space between scooters and rickshaws. The speed caused Imtiaz to jerk forward. He shielded his face from crashing into the dashboard jamming a hand against it.

“Sorry, sir,” said Amir. The paper animal on Imtiaz’s lap was already scrunched. Amir saw it leaning on a buckled leg and thought how much his daughter, Sufiya, would love to have it. Why Imtiaz had bought it made no sense to Amir, besides to make the selfless point that he was helping the girl selling them. “Curfew starts at six,” he said, as they sped out of the station.

“That’s still an hour away,” said Imtiaz.

“Sir, I know, but these days you never know.”

“Do us a favor and drive carefully.”

Steering with one hand, Amir reached inside his breast pocket with the other.

“Keep this, sir.”

“What is it?” Imtiaz looked down at the folded piece of paper.

“Checkpoint and curfew pass.”

“But you just said...” Imtiaz let it go and tucked the pass into his blazer pocket.

Through the windshield the sun blazed on Imtiaz’s lap. He was thirsty and lightheaded, and he regretted making the trip. He made a crack in the window, which proved useless, and the stuffy, hot air in the car remained untouched. They neared the first intersection out of the station at the end of Kamalapur Road at Circular Road that made Amir slow the car and stiffen. Ahead was a checkpoint.

“You knew this,” said Imtiaz, unable to fully muster the strength to be angry.

“Sir, I didn’t want to worry you.”

Amir rolled down his window and had his pass at the ready as he brought the car to a crawl. Three soldiers lined the front of the barricade.

“Why would I do that,” Imtiaz mumbled, reaching inside his blazer.

One soldier strolled up to Amir’s window. Amir had the pass extended out. The soldier gave it a glance, and asked where he was going.

“Sir, I went to get my boss’ nephew at the train station,” he said. “The train was late,” he added.

“You people can’t do anything right or on time,” the soldier snorted. “God only knows what you’ll do with a country of your own,” he laughed at the improbability of his remark.

Imtiaz watched the exchange with consternation.

“What to do, sir,” Amir chuckled nervously.

“Don’t cause trouble and do what you’re told. But you people can’t even do that. That’s him?” the soldier’s head lowered, he leaned in, bumping the rim of his helmet against the top edge of the car door.

“Imtiaz Khan.” He offered the pass. The other soldiers were circling the car, peering into the backseat. One of them had gone to the rear and stood by the trunk.

“Khan? And you’re a Bungaalee?”

“Is that a crime?”

“Step out of the car,” said the soldier. He paid no attention to Imtiaz’s curfew pass. “Hurry up.”

Amir gave a sheepish, helpless sideward look as Imtiaz opened the door and climbed out.

“Hurry!” the third soldier, who had stationed himself on Imtiaz’s side, shouted. “Put your arms out, and turn around!” He shoved Imtiaz against the car, and began patting him down. His semi-automatic nudged Imtiaz’s on the lower back. “Empty out your pockets, drop them on the ground.” He shuffled Imtiaz’s wallet and keys with a boot. “Pick them up, put them away.”

The third soldier, watching the pat-down, waited impatiently at the trunk. Amir had his arms spread over the top of the car, trying his inconspicuous best, without setting off the first soldier, to keep his palms from touching the hot surface. At the same time, he was evading Imtiaz’s eyes. On his journey to the station Amir had barely been stopped, the pass he had held out nominally noted.

“Open this,” the soldier at the trunk shouted. “Hey! Did you not hear me? Get over here and open this thing!”

“Go, open the suitcase,” said the first soldier, from Amir’s side.

“Come here at once!” the soldier at the trunk shouted, gesturing with weapon.

“I don’t have the key to this,” Imtiaz pointed at the trunk.

“Are you being smart?” said the soldier waiting on him.

“I’m telling you I don’t have the key.”

Amir was pushed aside and the soldier reached into the car. He tossed the keys at Imtiaz.

“Hurry, hurry!”

With the trunk open, Imtiaz waited intentionally to be told to make his suitcase next.

“Such a large suitcase? What the hell are you carrying?”

The pat-down soldier sauntered over.

“What are you staring at my face for? Open it.”

“It’s only my clothes in there,” said Imtiaz.

“Your clothes,” the trunk soldier stared at Imtiaz vengefully, “or the clothes for your entire clan of kaffirs? What do I look like to you?” His weapon moved in an up-down motion around Imtiaz’s chest.

“I don’t have a clan.”

“Don’t talk more,” the soldier from Amir’s side said. “More you talk, longer you’re here.”

Imtiaz unlocked the small lock and rolled the zipper around from one end to the other. The soldier pounced on the suitcase like there was food inside and they had gone hungry for a week. He ransacked the clothes, grabbing and dropping them inside the trunk until the suitcase was empty. A few t-shirts and underwear had fallen on the ground. Deeply unsatisfied with his search yielding nothing controversial, the soldier spat, and looked up at his companions.

“Hurry up and clean this, and get going,” he told Imtiaz.

“What was the point of this?” said Imtiaz, feeling a light knocking at his temples. His fists were clenched. He had been sweating the entire time and his clothes clung to his skin. Behind him he sensed the pat down soldier’s approach.

“What was the point?” said the one that had tossed his suitcase.

“Did you find anything? I told you it was just clothes. Now they’re on the ground,” said Imtiaz. “This is what you people do? Harass innocent people sitting here day and night?”

Amir's stomach sank at the words he was hearing. Around them on the street there were a few scattered rickshaws, a smattering of pedestrians, and hawkers trundling off to the safety of their domiciles before the curfew.

He had heard much about this nephew in the last couple of weeks. He had thought that having a guest in the house would cheer up the master and mistress, whose longing for their sons deepened and weighed on them more and more every day. Here was the nephew now, not out of the station half an hour, courting death, for them both. Amir had not had a bad experience at checkpoints. Between a curfew pass and keeping his eyes down when asked questions, providing answers that were straightforward, uncomplicated, preferably monosyllabic, he had and could look past the small abuses, usually in the form of profanity. Especially the Punjabi soldiers, who carried the filthiest reserves of vulgarity, always involving sisters and mothers.

"Sisterfucker, you want to lecture me some more?" said the soldier at the trunk, moving in within inches from Imtiaz's face. On Imtiaz's other side the pat-down soldier had closed in, gripping his weapon, blinking feverishly to get the sweat out of his eyes.

The soldier attending to Amir gave Imtiaz a long, terse look, and walked over. When he addressed Imtiaz his gentle tone shocked Amir.

"Mr. Khan, do you work?" the soldier asked.

"What?"

"Do you work, at a job?"

"What's that got to do with anything? You want to harass me for my boss too?"

"No," the soldier lowered his weapon, and gave his shoulders a shrug to adjust the strap. "Any job that any man works he has to deal with all sorts of problems, right? It's



not easy. After a whole day of dealing with problems, the last thing he wants is more problems. Right? But still, they keep coming at him. Sooner or later the man will react. He might get excessive in his reaction, lose his temper. If only the problem causing people understood how simple things could be with a little understanding and cooperation.”

“Not everyone has those things you people have to deal with their problems,” said Imtiaz, nodding at the soldier’s semi-automatic. “And your problems would be a lot less if you allowed decent people to go about their business without putting them through this.”

The soldier laughed. It was a quiet, subdued laugh, thrown at the ground, it shuddered with a touch of melancholy.

“Decent people,” he said. “Decent people don’t shout in the streets and break the law.” He stepped away from the Imtiaz, and motioned for the others two to let him be. “Go ahead. Get your things together.”

“I thought it was bad in Chittagong,” said Imtiaz, as they drove away, Amir scowling at the road ahead.

“Dhaka is not Chittagong,” Amir mumbled.

Imtiaz heard him but left the matter alone.

From the station Hashmat Alimuddin took a rickshaw to Shantinagar market. For the first few minutes of the ride he was taken aback by the emptiness of the streets. The rickshaw puller confirmed that a curfew was declared for six o’ clock, which explained his irritation when Hashmat first walked up to him. It was the fare that the man could not

decline, especially on a slow day, and so had warned Hashmat that his stop at the market needed to be fast.

As they rode on, Hashmat found the absence of traffic perfectly soothing. It was a change from the usual racket that was the streets of Dhaka. If it took a curfew to keep things calm then so be it. Law and order were being maintained. It was the one great loss that had befallen the subcontinent with the departure of the British. Hashmat's father lamented it, as did his mother, uncles, aunts, the entire Alimuddin clan, who had served the British and been treated well in return, far better than by their backstabbing Bengali competitors in business who waited around for nothing less than destruction to fall on their heads.

A strong hand was exactly what these people needed to keep them in line.

At the market Hashmat found most shopkeepers in haste to shut down and go home. The ones that were still open for business had products that were less than appetizing. Worse, they would be insulting to bring as offering to the home of Kamruzzaman Chowdhury, the employer of his son-in-law. Mangoes would be the perfect gift, but the ones he saw made him reluctant to even touch them. He went up and down the stalls where limp heads of lettuce, pocked tomatoes, shrunken cucumbers, pulpy eggplants, and an assortment of vegetables that seem resurrected from becoming complete refuse were strewn about, not even arranged with the usual pride their sellers were wont to boast them. Finally, he spotted a row of six decent looking mangoes displayed outside a shop whose owner was busily going through the motions of closing down.

The shop owner frowned at Hashmat as he stopped and picked up the mangoes to feel them for ripeness.

“I’ll take all six,” said Hashmat, deciding they were on their last couple of days of being enjoyable. “Why are you all closing down in such a rush, brother?”

The shop owner was around Hashmat’s age, a small, bony man, with a skullcap, and hairs sprouting out of his ears. On his chin was a paper-white triangular goatee exactly in the shape of a gardening spade.

“Curfew, don’t you know,” said the man, wrapping the mangoes in newspaper.

“But there’s still an hour left, no? My rickshaw puller said it starts at six.”

“That’s not a rule, bhai. The army can do whatever they want. They usually keep their word, but no one wants to take a chance. Besides, have you seen the sorry state of our products?” The shop owner clucked his tongue and gave his head a single shake. “Every day things get worse.” He handed the wrapped mangoes to Hashmat. Without counting the money from Hashmat he tucked it in the pocket of his kurta, and salaamed him farewell.

At the address Hashmat had given him the rickshaw puller slowed down, and he dismounted before his rickshaw came to a full stop. He asked if he should wait for Hashmat, clearly more desperate for as much business as he could generate than to be safely home before curfew. Hashmat told him he was going no further, gave him a tip, and told him to be careful. Then, with a heavy heart, he thumped on the gate.

For decades the Chowdhury house had been a landmark in the area. When there were hyenas and wild foxes roaming the land, went a saying, it was the first the house that stood in the middle of the weeds and swamp. Once upon a time the land was cultivated as an indigo plantation. Ghosts of perished indigo farmers moaned with the winds, lamenting the destruction of their bodies in service to white landlords who chopped off their thumbs so they would not leave the plantation and take their expertise elsewhere. Before Kamruzzaman Chowdhury retired from the civil service it was the one of the handful of homes in Dhaka that entertained British and local officials on equal footing, no matter their official status. After independence many Englishman cried there, heartbroken at being kicked out of the only country they knew as home.

In the beginning years of East Pakistan, Kamruzzaman kept up his social association with the burgeoning military presence in government. And then when one general after another deposed each other in nightly coups, the socializing stopped. In the decade of Ayub Khan, Kamruzzaman's civil service career ended. Early retirement was forced on a league of Bengali men of his era so that crisp new recruits from West Pakistan could be entered into the civil service, so the official word circulated, to balance the presence of uniforms commandeering public life.

Imtiaz recalled the tales in a flurry as the car entered the driveway. Countless were the times he had heard them as his mother's nostalgic recollections. For the most part Imtiaz remembered the house as it now looked to him. Perhaps it was the rain, or

irregular maintenance, that gave it a dreary sheen. Water stains marked the exterior at various places, and the whitewash was chipped and flaking, the exposed brick like raw flesh. The carport was bedeviled with pocks of water stains and sparrow nests in its corners. Around the dim lighting of the fixture at the center of the ceiling moths and mosquitoes were already gathering for the oncoming night.

“We were going to send out a search party soon.” Imtiaz heard the voice as he climbed out of the car, tripping down the steps from the verandah. A voice as shrill, efficient, and undeterred as he knew it. His aunt, Zubeida Chowdhury, was making her way down. “Your wife, poor thing, has already called three times.” She was a heavy woman with a tall and wide forehead that could have her thoughts written on them before she gave them voice. Her arms were butcher-thick, and the rest of the heft in her had accumulated over years of coddling a sweet tooth. Miraculously, every tooth in her head was her own. A closer look revealed deep-set wrinkles that gave her face a layered appearance, as though one on top of another of her strata of worries had been compartmentalized according to severity.

Imtiaz met her halfway, and nearly tipped backwards when he straightened up from touching her feet.

“Okay, okay, let me see,” said Zubeida, taking her shoulders between her hands as if looking at a framed portrait. “You always had your mother’s face, but you look like a ghost, my boy.”

“Sitting in the train for three idle hours waiting for it to start moving, Mammi, I feel like I’ve disappeared into my exhaustion.”

“What is this? Is this a paan stain?”

“Yes. From the best paan I’ve tasted in my life.”

“Is he here at last?” the voice called from inside the house, and seconds later Kamruzzaman appeared.

“Take those things inside to the room,” Zubeida told Amir. “And also, your father-in-law is here.” The news fell without causing a reaction in Amir as he wended past them with the luggage.

In a navy blue tracksuit, with two matching white stripes tracking down the arms and sides of the legs, Kamruzzaman looked like he had just ended a game of squash, which he once played. Asthma had relegated him to a daily walk. He showed fewer signs of aging than his wife, most of it gathered in the loose skin of his jowls, a miniscule double chin, dark straight lines across his forehead, and a crinkle at the corners of his eyes when he strained his features and waited for something he was told to be repeated, louder. Hearing was not a problem. He was just used to communicating loudly and clearly, and mumblers irritated him. Getting near him Imtiaz heard the minute wheezing accompanying his breathing.

“What the hell happened? We thought the train took you to another country,” said Kamruzzaman. “No, no. No feet touching, stand up.” He took a quick look at his nephew. “So, your wife and children, they’re staying home?”

“You should’ve brought them along,” said Zubeida.

“The children have school, and Lubna was never one for traveling.”

“Come inside.”

Shonali was fanning her father with the palm leaf fan. On the bed, next to Hashmat, his granddaughter, Sufiya, lay dozing into a gradual slumber. Shonali had been distressed first, and then appalled that her father had not sent a word of notice before showing up. It had taken a good twenty minutes of going back and forth to get her to listen to him without interruptions. By then Hashmat was too spent to get into the real reason for his visit. Lightheaded, his heart palpitating, he asked for a glass of water, and for a few minutes to spend with his granddaughter, and then to rest. Now, with the swooshing of the palm leaf next to his head, and the child's peaceful intakes and exhales of breath, Hashmat was beginning to feel reenergized.

"It's okay, daughter, rest your arm," he said.

"Do you want me to press your feet?" Shonali asked.

Before he could answer he felt his daughter's work-hardened hands clamp around his feet.

"Oh, easy, my child, easy," Hashmat giggled. "You know how ticklish I am. All my life, and into this old age, ticklish as a girl on her wedding day."

"I was not ticklish on my wedding day," said Shonali.

"Uf, Allah block my ears, child, I don't want to hear that."

"You said it first."

For a while there was silence. Through weary eyes Hashmat watched the sunlight on the opposite wall. The square of the window was drawn in a slanted shadow on the wall, and Hashmat tried to concentrate on seeing if he could detect the changing of its shape as the sun descended. A kokil bird was wooing the air. Sparrows were shrieking their end of day reports to each other. Crows, hoarse from cawing, went on cawing.

Somewhere in the distance a dog bayed, and was answered by the yapping of its fellow hounds. A train whistled.

“Baba?” Shonali whispered. “I hear the front gate. Amir is back with the shahib’s guest.”

“Guest?” Hashmat mumbled.

“Shahib and memshahib have a family member coming to visit and stay.”

“Oh,” Hashmat heard his daughter’s voice in a dream. A flame flicked on and the kerosene lantern on the windowsill hissed to life. Shonali blew out the match and tossed it out the window. Hashmat labored to a sitting position, swung his legs to the ground, feeling his head as a light as a feather. His heart had calmed down. It was, he thought, a touch too much of sun. “You have no current up here? Last time you did.”

“Baba, shahib and memshahib prefer we use lanterns if we don’t need to use electricity,” said Shonali.

“I see. Well, that’s good. That is the smart thing to do.”

“Also, with the army on the streets, and curfew, you never know who will see what and just barge in anytime,” said Shonali. “It has been happening. People are living in fear.” She touched her daughter foot and gave it a gentle shake. Sufiya moaned, thick with sleep, made a clucking sound in her throat, and settled back into her nap.

“Let her sleep,” said Hashmat.

“She will be up all night eating my head,” said Shonali.

There were voices at the front of the house. Hashmat pushed to his feet, slipped them into his sandals, riffled through his small bag of clothes until he pulled out a towel; it was time for ablutions and the Maghreb prayer. Amir locked the car, and made a stop at



the kitchen for a glass of water. Mokaddas was soaking the rice in water at the sink. Amir poured himself water from the earthenware pitcher that sat at the entrance to the kitchen with a cloth covering its mouth.

“Your wife’s father is here,” Mokaddas said, without turning.

Amir refilled his glass, and sat at the table adjacent to the door.

“He is probably praying,” said Mokaddas. “I just heard the tube well run.”

“Why is he here all of a sudden?” Amir wondered, louder than he thought he did.

“Old people know when death is near,” Mokaddas said, as though answering a direct inquiry with the one and only honest answer.

“What is that supposed to mean, Kaka?”

“It means, he knows his days are numbered, and he wants to see his child and grandchild before it gets too late.”

“He told you this?” said Amir.

Mokaddas laughed softly. He turned off the water, leaving the rice in the sink, and went to a pot on the stove. When he removed the cover off it a blast of steam puffed upward, spreading with it the rich aromas of ginger and turmeric. After giving the pot a stir he set the cover back, and moved to the teakettle next to it. On the table in front of Amir sat a tray ready to be set with refreshments.

“No,” said Mokaddas, leaving his reply at that.

Amir found his wife changing their daughter, and from the room next door the shuffling sounds of his father-in-law praying. He had beaten the muezzin’s call, as it piped over the megaphone from Kakrail mosque while he was already halfway done.

“This room is bigger than the guest room,” said Zubeida, leading Imtiaz into the bedroom once occupied by her sons. “You remember sleeping here, I’m sure.”

Imtiaz entered the room with slivers of memories of being in there, during childhood visits with his parents on school and religious holidays. Murad Chowdhury was older than Imtiaz by half a dozen years, and Minhaz was two years younger. Since his parents’ deaths, Imtiaz had not stepped foot in the house for too many prolonged overnight stays. He had brought his family a few times, and that was it. Lubna and Zubeida Chowdhury got along well, and for a time Lubna even complained to Imtiaz that they should make plans to go to Dhaka to see his aunt and uncle more often. Over the years, quite the opposite happened. And then their marriage struck against its trials.

“This is fine,” said Imtiaz, tucking to the back of his head his recollections. He heard the call to prayers through the bank of windows along the wall above the bed.

“Mokaddas is making tea,” said Zubeida. “Hot water is in the bathroom. Wash up, and get something to eat. You look like you just walked out of prison.”

“Where did you people go?” Kamruzzaman asked from the hallway.

“In here,” said Zubeida.

“Mammi, I’m going to lie down for a while, if that’s okay,” said Imtiaz.

“Of course,” said his aunt. “Don’t force yourself. Later we will have dinner together. If you need anything, Mokaddas is here, and so is Amir.”

“Your garden looks beautiful,” Imtiaz said, going to the windows. “All Huda Mia’s doing,” said Zubeida. “You will never see a man his age with more energy or enthusiasm for gardening.”

“Listen,” Kamruzzaman walked in, “Patwari will have the documents for the house here tomorrow. I told him to be here at nine.”

“That old house,” Zubeida sighed. “Why it was not demolished years ago I don’t understand.”

“Demolished,” Kamruzzaman groused, “you don’t know what you’re talking about. His mother left it to him. He can do with it what he wants.”

There were knocks on the frame of the door.

“What is it?” Kamruzzaman said.

“Tea, for baba.”

Imtiaz recognized the voice and went to the door.

“Mokaddas kaka, how are you?” he said.

“I’m an old man long past my time on this earth, baba,” said the cook, widening his mouth in a smile that showed the missing the gap where his teeth were missing in the upper row. “Welcome back.”

“He doesn’t want anything right now,” Zubeida said.

“Oh, okay.”

“Kaka, leave it, I’ll have some tea.”

“By the way,” said Kamruzzaman, “did Amir give you the pass?”

“Yes. I have to say it’s unnerving, so many soldiers on the streets, the checkpoints. It’s bad in Chittagong, but here it feels like the whole city is a fort.”

“It is,” said Kamruzzaman. “So keep that pass with you all the time. Even if you step outside the gate for five minutes.”

“These talks, what is going to come of them?”

“Nothing,” said Kamruzzaman. “They’re a bunch of sycophants at the end of the day, and when they’re done stroking each other’s egos, they’ll put on a show that they’re at an impasse to throw the smoke in people’s eyes.”

Imtiaz had known his uncle and aunt to be lifelong activists. Among the legends of the Chowdhury house that he heard from his mother were accounts of meetings to plan marches and demonstrations against the Raj. Zubeida Chowdhury had taught for several years at the Dhaka University, and once been suspended for her derision of British policies that were dividing the Muslim and Hindu communities of Bengal. She was quickly reinstated after a walkout arranged by her colleagues in the Bengali department, before other departments followed, which they had threatened to do. Imtiaz thought there had to be something to his uncle’s skepticism about the cycle of talks between Sheikh Mujib and Yahya Khan.

Kamruzzaman was saying, “The day that anyone believed Yahya would hand over the Prime Ministership to Mujib was the day we abandoned our senses. And what happened? Bhutto went on his own tirade. Now his tantrums all up and down West Pakistan is there for the world to see. Fine examples, all of them.”

“Sheikh Shahib has been patient,” said Zubeida. “There’s only so much he can do.”

“All I’ve been hearing and seeing in the papers for the last year is demonstrations and strikes,” said Imtiaz. “How can things get done if there’s a strike every other day?”

“Hooliganism is what it is,” Kamruzzaman said. “Strikes have a sense and a rationale behind them. They bring about an end, or at least they try to. These philistine so-called Bengali leaders causing more ruckus than good are asking for trouble. When they get it, which they will I promise you, they’ll only have themselves to blame.”

“But then what should be done?” said Imtiaz. “Elections happened. And the Awami League won a landslide. What’s left to do but hand over power to Sheikh Mujib?”

“We can sit here and be pundits all we want,” said Zubeida, “but we have to remember that systems take as much time to break down as it took to build them.”

“But then what’s one to make of Sheikh Mujib’s speech?”

A few weeks before, on March 7, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had addressed a gathering of over a million people at the Ramna Racecourse Maidan. The speech had ended with the leader calling for a prolonged struggle for freedom and independence of Bengalis. It had enumerated grievances against the military regime of President General Yahya Khan, calling for soldiers to vacate the streets of Dhaka and other cities around East Pakistan and return to their barracks. He called for the shooting of Bengali civilians by soldiers and police to stop, for accountability measures to be put in place. He urged Bengalis to take up arms, in any and every way they were able, leading his speech to the edge of declaring secession from Pakistan to announce into being the independent state of Bangladesh.

“If he had said it,” Zubeida said, recalling the afternoon, “a million people would have been shot by the army right there that day.”

“Lubna’s brother says Sheikh Mujib should be in prison,” said Imtiaz. “Says the election was rigged.”

Kamruzzaman looked at Imtiaz. Despite his misgivings, a claim of the kind Imtiaz just mentioned stirred his ire.

“Rigged?” he said.

“My brother-in-law is a long-time admirer of the Bhutto family,” said Imtiaz. “He knows them, and he has business interests with Karachi that wouldn’t have existed without their help.” Imtiaz grew sullen. “Truth be told, without his help times would be extremely difficult right now.”

“How long have you been with the bank?” Kamruzzaman asked.

“Eight years. Recently, in the last year and a half, there were changes in upper management. Three of my superiors were transferred. They were mentors. Since they left, it’s been one bump after another, and now there’s the general manager’s brother-in-law in charge who is this close to using the bank like his own personal account. Six people got promoted in the last six months, all of them from the West, and each one there for less than two years. If we could, Mamma, we would raise a rebellion.”

“Don’t start telling me it’s only because you’re all Bengalis,” said Kamruzzaman.

“What else could it be?” Imtiaz said.

“I’ve seen plenty of Bengalis sabotaging each other, backstabbing and vindictiveness. Griping and complaining that Bengalis don’t get promoted in government and civil service, griping and complaining, that’s all they do. When it comes time to step forward you don’t see a single face or hear a peep.”

“Imtiaz,” Zubeida broke in, “rest for a while. We’ll talk more later. Let’s go,” she told her husband, “let him rest.”

“I should call Lubna,” said Imtiaz. “She’s probably worried.”

Imtiaz watched his uncle and aunt leave, sat down at the desk, finished his tea, and felt claustrophobic. The windows were open, and still he felt unable to breathe. Stooped over a patch of dug earth the gardener was padding the soil with fertilizer. Next to him was a cane basket filled with seed bags, a small shears, and pulled weeds. It was hard to imagine that weeds still grew on these grounds under such strict care.

“Imtiaz?” It was his aunt calling from outside.

“Yes, Mammi, come in, the door is open.”

Zubeida peeked in through the curtains over the doorframe. “It’s not my business, you know, but if you want to have alcohol, it’s in the living room, in the small cabinet next to the sofa.”

“Mammi,” Imtiaz was stunned. “Really?”

“Of course, of course. The stuff just sits around. Here is the key.”

The affair had started with blessings. It was an odd way of assessing it, but when Lubna found out, the first thing she asked was not Why but if that was what he truly wanted. Imtiaz was stumped. And when the young woman's father learned of it he was delighted, as would a father be who just learned his daughter had found a prince for a suitor. Mehreen Shams was twenty-two, bright, pretty as a mental image of Scheherazade, with skin like marble, deep, reverent eyes that flickered with mischief and knowledge, Harvard educated, and the daughter of Imtiaz's friend Mazhar Shams, a failed businessman that had taken his family's estate and depleted it in less than five years on as many business ventures. Between Lubna and Mazhar Shams's reactions, Imtiaz felt he was getting a pat on the head and Godspeed to carry on with Mehreen.

It was not what he truly wanted. Imtiaz was quick to answer. And still, Lubna never asked why he did it. Constantly preparing himself for the moment that she would, Imtiaz began to wonder.

The phone rang ten times, Imtiaz counted, before it was answered.

"Lubna, I'm here," he said.

"Thank God," Lubna's calmness prevailed.

"Bloody train was three hours, three hours, late. What the hell is happening to this country, I don't know. Not one thing can be relied on anymore. Why did it take so long to answer the phone?"

"I was downstairs. Timur got into a fight with Bablu again."



“My God, those people,” Imtiaz sighed. “Is he okay?”

“Just a scraped knee and elbows.”

“Where’s Tina?”

“Doing her homework. Do you want me to call her?”

“No. Yes. No, don’t. Let her concentrate.” Imtiaz remembered he was still holding the key to the liquor cabinet, which was directly across from him, at a right angle with the Grundig radio.

“Ammu, it’s burning,” Timur whined in the background. “Is that Abbu?”

“Here,” Lubna handed him the phone. “And stop touching the bandage.”

“Abbu, I made him cry I hit his nose so hard,” Timur yelled into the phone.

“That’s...Abbu...that’s...”

“That’s good, right? Three times this week he tried to steal my football and it didn’t even go over the wall into their yard. I was on the street, and the ball, it went past their gate, and he said it was his. My ball, he said was his.”

“I’m glad you got it back, Abbu. Now hand the phone back to Ammu.”

There was a loud clatter, ending with a thud, as Timur dropped the receiver.

“Hello?” Lubna picked it up.

“Please make sure our son doesn’t become a neighborhood goonda. Also, Mamma’s man, the one in charge of the house documents, is coming tomorrow.”

“Okay, good.”

“Lubna?”

“Yes?”

Imtiaz felt himself sinking deeper into the chair, an uncontrollable pull from a well of gravity stronger than the kind that ruled the earth drawing him in like quicksand.

“I’m so tired,” he said. His mind traveled down the path of telling her about the checkpoint episode. “Feels like I left Chittagong a year ago,” he said.

“I know. Get rest.”

“I will. I’ll call again as soon as there’s news.”

The assortment of spirits took Imtiaz aback. A lifetime spent in the civil service had brought the world to his uncle’s living room in the form of liquor. Irish whiskeys, scotch, a bottle of Woodford Reserve bourbon from Kentucky, a bottle of vodka that looked suspiciously as though it had been stripped of its Russian labels, and none of them touched. Kamruzzaman was not a drinker. These gifts and tokens of appreciation from former colleagues, contacts, and visitors remained in the dusty cabinet like old photos in an album tucked away, forgotten unless a memory sparked them into being brought out. Imtiaz took a bottle of scotch back to the bedroom.

He drank one peg and poured a second one. At last, the day had ended. His heavy head leaned against the pillow propped on the tall headboard of the massive four-poster bed, and he thought about the conversation he had had with his boss less than seventy-two hours ago. The general manager’s son embodied the disdain of Punjabis toward Bengalis in a way that amplified by it beyond reality. Imtiaz was not ignorant of the hostility, but over the years had met and befriended several Punjabis who abhorred the stupidity of the mentality and preferred Bengali friends to Punjabi ones. In any arrangement, it was nonsensical. Rizwan Mehmood, the new boss, lectured Imtiaz in his forced Americanized speech, telling him that time off meant time lost and time lost was

as good as time squandered. Which boiled down to a person's worth and usefulness to an organization. It did not matter that Imtiaz had accumulated leave time, and had not taken a day off besides religious holidays in two years.

"You people," Mehmood had said, as Imtiaz made to leave, "need to have a much better and more respectful grasp of professionalism."

"Sir?" Imtiaz opened his eyes. The voice was at the door.

"Yes?"

"Sir, it's Amir, sorry to disturb you."

"What is it?"

"Can I come in?"

Imtiaz set down the glass and placed the bottle in the drawer of the nightstand.

"Come in."

"Sir, I wanted to apologize for earlier," Amir said, entering.

"What happened earlier?"

"You caught me sleeping, and then what I said. I'm just very grateful to your uncle and aunt for this job, and for letting my wife and daughter live here."

"You don't have to worry about your job," Imtiaz smiled. "How long have you worked here?"

"Just over two years."

"Good. Listen, does this fan get any faster? It's hotter in here than it is outside during the day."

"Sir, it's a nice night," said Amir. "We are out on the courtyard of the servants' quarters. I mean, forgive me for suggesting you should come out there..."

“Sounds perfect.”

“My wife’s father is visiting,” said Amir. “He just came today, without notice. He’s a good man, makes great paans, but sometimes what he talks about makes very little sense.”

“There was a man on the train today, also made really good paan. Actually the best I’ve ever had. He was a character. Held up the compartment we shared and drove the conductor mad. His name was...it was something like...Alim...Alimuddin or something like that.”

Amir stared at Imtiaz like he had sprouted a second head. “Sir, Alimuddin? Hashmat Alimuddin?”

“That’s it. Yes, that’s the name.”

“Come, meet him again. He’s my father-in-law.”

Imtiaz heard the murmur of conversation in the courtyard of the servants’ quarters. The stern odor of beedi smoke was replete in the air. He saw the flicker of the kerosene lantern between the two figures hunched on stools facing each other, and as he approached them, his footsteps caused one of the figures to lift the lantern off the ground.

“Hello again,” said Imtiaz, to the startled face of Hashmat Alimuddin next to the lantern flame.

Amir laughed.

“Allah, Allah, masha’Allah” Hashmat set the lantern down, smiling, “you are the nephew of Chowdhury shahib.”

“The world gets smaller every day,” said Imtiaz.

“Sir, you want?” Amir lit a beedi.

“Give me that one,” said Imtiaz.

Imtiaz took the beedi and puffed on it. The pungent fumes scalded his nostrils and entered his lungs. Imtiaz had smoked beedis on about half a dozen occasions during his schooldays. For a time, in that brief period that lasted collectively three weeks, he considered his acumen at smoking them perfected. He puffed on them after school with his three closest friends – all of whom had moved to West Pakistan, carried there by their father’s personal and professional decisions – while ogling the female students from the neighboring girls’ school, chattering about which one they would take in a heartbeat and make his own without saying two words in advance of her swooning into his arms – and felt big, imposing, grandly masculine. As an adult now, the gross, acrid tendrils of smoke uncoiled insidiously, percolated inside him for a few seconds, before sending up a fit of coughing.

“Baba, why do you take that garbage?” Mokaddas stood at the entrance to the courtyard. With him was Anshuman, waving the beam of a large metal flashlight at the gathering.

“Salaam, baba, I’ve not been able to say a word to you since you have been here,” said Anshuman, the watchman, lancing the dark with his flashlight.

“Anshu-da, I hope you’re well,” Imtiaz croaked, not yet giving up on the beedi.

“Like I was born yesterday,” Anshuman laughed, shaking the beam, which he switched off.

“I tell my children what a fine watchman you are. Since I was a kid myself I felt safest knowing you had the place under your watch.”

“No, baba, another time,” said Anshuman. “Do you know how much thievery is on the rise lately? You would think with the army and the curfew these little urchins would soil themselves before thinking of thieving. But no. Business as usual. Okay, baba. You worry about nothing, okay? I’m here.”

“Baba,” said a woman’s voice, restraining its volume. Heads turned toward the servants’ quarters behind the gathering. “You will catch a cold sitting out here. Come inside.” Shonali’s form was an outline against the bright kerosene lantern she had burning in the room behind her.

“Woman, come out here and salaam Sir here,” said Amir. “Is she asleep, finally?”

“Remind me,” said Imtiaz. “I have some chocolates. I know my uncle and aunt won’t want them, but my wife insisted on sending them.”

A loud snore sounded from one of the other rooms of the servants’ quarters. It was followed by a cough, and then a long whistle, which dwindled down to a trembling end.

“Who is that?” Imtiaz asked. “Is that the child?”

“No, sir. That’s Huda Mia, the mali. Poor bloke works all day under the sun, in the rain, in hot and in cold, eats like a bird, and sleeps like a bear.”

“I saw him digging around earlier,” said Imtiaz.

“That is all he does,” said Amir. “That spade and he are inseparable. If you go and check it’s probably in bed with him right now.”

“Okay, enough,” Mokaddas said. “Imtiaz baba, come inside. I have to lock up before your aunt comes out here, and worse, your uncle. I have to sleep. I’m an old man.” He waited for Imtiaz to take his lead and step into the house.

“We will talk more,” Imtiaz said to Hashmat.

“Sir, if you need anything, just let me know,” Amir said.

From the front of the house came a staccato call, three broken shouts, followed by an extended, gradual drop in tone. Anshuman, the watchman, was keeping his territory guarded, letting it be known that dire consequences awaited those that dared breach his domain.

The razor's edge treachery of a headache played along his forehead when the knocks woke him after what seemed like minutes. Imtiaz was laying diagonally on the bed, without the covers on him, his head turned toward the east-facing bank of windows through which sunlight was twinkling between the nodding branches of the jackfruit tree. A breeze was making them rustle, creating the susurrus of whispered secrets.

“Baba, I have hot water,” Mokaddas said.

“The door is open, kaka,” Imtiaz rolled over, moved up to a proper position, landing his head on the unyielding pillow. That was his reason, he now recalled, for opting to sleep the way he did, as if the pillows were bolted into their places. Throwing them had not seemed right, like a slight to the hospitality being lavished on him. The things, Imtiaz thought, that become important to a drunk. He had spent a substantial amount of time, before finally passing out, mulling over his quandary with the pillows.

“Your uncle is up, your aunt has gone to market,” said Mokaddas, setting the bucket on the bathroom floor with a thud. “Breakfast is ready. Patwari shahib will be here any minute.”

Imtiaz checked his watch. It was five after seven.

“What's the rush?” said Imtiaz, laboring out of bed, the burden of his head grown three times its normal weight.

“Just be ready soon, baba,” said Mokaddas, scurrying out.



“Young man, good morning,” Hakim Patwari stood up and held out his hand. He was tall, with a broad chest, and more bone than flesh, but strong. The hair on his head was grey, slicked heavily with Brylcreem, and tightly combed. His clean-shaved face gave off the scent of after-shave liberally applied. In his sky-blue safari suit and languid social grace he looked like a tourist that had wandered into a new land and forgotten to leave. In one way, such was his relationship with Kamruzzaman. Decades ago, on the recommendation of a family friend from Calcutta, Kamruzzaman had taken Patwari, a recent graduate of Islamia College, under his wing. The young man was a magician with numbers. Not only did he prove adept at combining accounting skills with mathematical prowess that earned him an increasing bevy of clients from Kamruzzaman’s circle, it soon became evident that losing him would prove to be the wealth of the party he would end up with. Kamruzzaman employed him as his personal accountant. Ever since, the Chowdhury books, accounts, wills, and financial matters had been in Patwari’s keeping.

“Good morning,” Imtiaz said, as Patwari’s strong grip crushed his hand and sent a vigorous shake up his arm that vibrated through his shoulder to his aching head. “You look very well.”

“You look tired,” Patwari laughed. “Have some tea.”

“Did you sleep enough?” Kamruzzaman said.

“I did, Mamma,” Imtiaz lied.

A feast lay on the coffee table. A mound of fluffy scrambled eggs, toast, and parathas. The tray was laden with accompanying dishes of butter, three types of jam, a cozy-covered pot of tea, and silverware.

“Have some breakfast,” said Patwari, as he reached into a briefcase. “A full stomach makes up for lack of sleep. Ask your uncle,” he smiled.

Imtiaz began filling a plate with food, and ate while Patwari carefully lifted a file out of his briefcase. It was two-inches thick, bound with red string, seemingly as fragile as a precious relic from the way Patwari was handling it. A powerful musty odor wafted from it. Patwari laid it on the coffee table and untied the string.

“Tell me,” said Kamruzzaman, “how much time have you come here with?”

“I took off as much time as I could from work,” said Imtiaz.

“Well,” Kamruzzaman huffed, “if things are to be done properly, they will take time.”

“How long?” Imtiaz asked.

“That depends,” said his uncle, “how much you are willing to wait. Or if you want the house at all.”

“If I may,” Patwari intervened, gently, “the thing is, son, these documents,” he reached for the file, drew them closer, and, as he spoke, went through them like a patient tutor, “need updating. The most recent ones are at least twenty years old, and some of them go back as far as forty.”

“All these documents for one house?” said Imtiaz.

Patwari smiled, and gave Imtiaz an affectionate pat on the arm. “Eat your breakfast.”

Imtiaz was beginning to find his paternal ways condescending.

“Things in our country are never as simple as they could be. Are they?” Patwari was going through the documents, lifting them with the cautious fingers of an archivist.

“How long will it take to get them updated?” Imtiaz asked, tearing a piece of parathas and using it to scoop up the eggs.

“Let’s see,” Patwari stooped closer to the ancient leaves of paper, yellowed with age, pausing at the pertinent ones as he spoke. “There is the original deed,” he slid one sheet out with great care, “which was for the land, given to your grandfather. That was before Partition.”

“Father had land just outside Calcutta,” Kamruzzaman said. “Your grandmother, as you well know, was from West Bengal. Her father’s dowry to my father’s father was land on which he wanted his new son-in-law to build his future home with his wife and raise their family there, near him. He was a controlling, sadistic son of a gun, and he made my father know it every day. Good for my father that he refused to stay anywhere near the old coot.”

“But then,” Patwari took up the narrative, “Partition happened, and your family, being Muslim, lost that property, and was compensated by land here.”

“Compensation, nothing,” Kamruzzaman said. “My grandfather, old coot that he was, was as shrewd as they come. He knew what was coming and packed everything up before it reached him.”

“In any event,” said Patwari, “the old deed that he, your great-grandfather, basically cobbled together, is this one,” he laid the sheet on the sofa.

Imtiaz’s hands were greasy. Without touching the document he gave it a glance.

“So this thing is not even a legal document?” he said. “It’s a...a...fake?”

“No. No, it is not a fake,” said Patwari. “It is just not sufficient to be filed as legal tender for the transfer of the property. Your mother was named as the inheritor, but she left the matter in your uncle’s safekeeping.”

Imtiaz wiped his hands on a napkin, his head already swimming with too much information. He lifted the sheet of paper by a corner, and held it up to read. It was unintelligible, though written in English, the ink faded, and patches of white obliterating entire sections of what were the very reasons for the document’s existence.

“What will it take then to get everything updated and done?” he asked Patwari. His uncle looked resigned to let it all go to hell.

“What will it take then to get everything updated and done?” he asked Patwari. His uncle looked resigned to let it all go to hell.

“For starters, I have to have every document having to do with the land, and then the house, redrawn, notarized, and filed with the Board of Revenue, among other places. The house has then to be officially transferred to your uncle’s name so that he can then transfer it to yours-”

“Mamma, I thought that part was already in place,” said Imtiaz, suddenly ruffled.

Kamruzzaman grumbled under his breath. Then, aloud, he said, “If you were that interested in the bloody house why did it take so long for you to come after it? You never needed it before, and now that you do the whole world has to march to your convenience. That’s not how things work.”

“I’m not saying that, Mamma, but this, all this sounds like it will take more time than I have. Right, Patwari shahib?”

“I will try my best to expedite the process,” Patwari’s calm tone was unfazed. “If possible, though, see if you can extend your stay, should the need arise. We can hope for the best, but, to be honest with you, son, no one knows what will happen with the government from one minute to the next. I will file these papers, and an hour later there could be a coup. But don’t worry yourself. As I said, I will initiate the process immediately. Shall we go give you tour of the house, then?” Patwari smiled broadly.”

The house was just off Satmasjid Road in Dhanmondi, at the corner of the main road and the beginning of a quiet, tree-lined street, about fifteen minutes from the East Pakistan Rifles headquarters. Lining the side of Satmasjid Road were teashops and various hawkers' stalls selling cigarettes, paan, sweets, and magazines. The day's business was already commenced when their car stopped in front of the gate, and Amir, taking the key to the padlock from Kamruzzaman, opened the gate, and climbed back into his seat and drove the car inside.

From outside the presence of humans seemed a possibility long ago expired. The house was a remnant more than a structure. A vestige of an era not only forgotten, but become legend, in the way that its once reality was now regarded with little more than large amounts of skepticism. It was, on the other hand, an imposing three-story building, with a winding verandah, and corresponding balconies on the two upper floors.

The whitewash had ceased being white, worsened by the battery of seasons. The grounds around the house were overgrown. Hedgerows lining the driveway stood as tall as the visitors going past them. Lemons lay around the boundary wall rotted brown and shriveled, fallen from their trees and left to neglect. Along the rear of the property were mango trees, which most likely had become a haven for bats that had spent luxurious seasons gorging on its fruit without disruptions. Patwari drew out a ring of keys from his briefcase as the mounted the steps of the verandah.

“Who lived here last?” Imtiaz asked.

“A very nice Bihari family,” said Patwari, picking through the keys. “I knew them because your uncle left the rent collecting to me.”

Kamruzzaman had diverted from the driveway onto the front lawn, where the grass stood reaching above his ankles.

“After they left, I tried to keep the grounds cared after, but reliable people are hard to come by,” said Patwari. He undid the padlock after giving it a hard tug, shot the rusty bolt, and pushed the two panels of the door into the foyer. Imtiaz saw Amir in consultation with his uncle, nodding his head to Kamruzzaman talking and pointing around the perimeter of the lawn.

In the foyer was a set of matching cane furniture gone from their mocha tint to a discolored shade of dirt. Old blinds dressed in accumulated dust kept out the sun. The carpet they stepped over felt soggy, which spoke for the odor that had overwhelmed them upon entering. Patwari unlocked a second door, and they walked into a damp-smelling, dark sitting room.

“Last time I came I had new bulbs put in the rooms,” Patwari said, reaching for a row of switches on the wall by the door. He pressed one after another until a tube light on the ceiling buzzed and flickered to life. By it they saw the plastic-covered furniture, the dreary walls with water stains creeping down from cracks in the corners of the ceiling, more carpeting that was damp and odorous, and through an adjoining inner door, the outline of a dining table and chairs.

“Who does all this furniture belong to?” asked Imtiaz, walking toward the dining area.

“They’ve been with the house since it was built,” Patwari replied.

Imtiaz stopped before passing through the dark mouth of the doorway. “So, tenants got the place furnished?”

“They did,” Patwari said. “Not a shabby deal for the rent.”

Kamruzzaman called for Patwari from the lawn. Patwari held up a finger for Imtiaz to wait and went outside. In the dining room the odor of neglect was stronger. Imtiaz pulled out one of the chairs from under the heavy plastic covering, sending a puff of dust upward. It made him sneeze.

“God bless you,” Patwari said, reentering. “Your uncle is making plans.”

“To do what?”

“Do some cleaning up, at least around the grounds. Honestly, in order for the house to be livable will take time and cost a bit of money.”

Imtiaz sat down. The cushioning was as plump as if it was brand new. The chair was steady, it did not creak or give indication that it had been misused. The previous tenants must have been minimalists when it came to day-to-day living.

“Patwari shahib, to be honest, I have never given this place a second’s thought until about two months ago. My situation at the bank is not good. I was supposed to have gotten a raise last year, and a promotion by the end of the summer. Instead, I’ve been put largely on commission, and there is no word of a promotion for one single Bengali that works there. I didn’t want to believe it at first. But my wife sensed it right away. Our rent, the children’s school fees, books, expenses. If it hadn’t been for Lubna’s brother...I don’t know...”

Through the two doorways Imtiaz had a view past the front verandah, where he saw Kamruzzaman examining the hedgerows like a botanical expert. At his elbow was



Amir, nodding, and keeping step in the way of a devoted apprentice. Patwari slid out one of the chairs, waved away the dust, and sat facing Imtiaz.

“A lot of good people are being treated badly,” he said. “I don’t know when it got this way. I thought we were making headway, the country was finally working as one. But this Bengali, Punjabi, Urdu, Bangla stuff, it just keeps on going, getting nowhere and standing in the way of everything.”

“For years Amma told me about this place, but I never paid her any mind. I just had enough of hearing and seeing fighting over property, who got what, how much, why. When Abba died, he didn’t have one single one of his brother’s or their families at his side, because they thought he got the lion’s share of my Dada’s estate in Chittagong. You know what’s left of that estate, Patwari shahib? Nothing. Not an inch. Abbu fought the authorities to keep his share for years because of the adivasi settlements near the Hill Tracts. But he lost most of it in the end, which was all divvied up among the local government offices. Thugs and bandits, every single one. My chachas took their shares and sold them off immediately, and still they weren’t happy, and trained their children to be miserable about it, too. Ammu refused to touch this place, no matter how much Abbu wanted her to sign the property over to her. But she told me, more and more after I started university, and then got married. But I shunned her. And then, we just went on with our lives. She died. Here I am. Mamma is right. I’m an opportunist, I guess. But without money, you know very well, nothing happens in this world.”

Patwari checked a small diary he brought out of his pocket. “Today’s is 18<sup>th</sup> of March,” he said, looking through pages. “Let us say I file everything by the 25<sup>th</sup> at the latest, can you stay here at least till the end of the month?”

“I only took a week’s worth of leave,” said Imtiaz. “If I knew Mamma had not told me everything and how much needed to be done, I would have, I don’t know, made other arrangements.”

Patwari nodded. “I understand. But these matters are more convoluted than they need to be. That’s the reality.”

“Although, I don’t know what difference there is anymore between staying in my job and losing it,” said Imtiaz.

“No, don’t think such things,” Patwari thumped Imtiaz’s shoulder. “Things always look down before going up. Chin up, young man. You have a long life to live.”

“Where did you go? Imtiaz?” Kamruzzaman was on the verandah, calling into the house. “This place is a godforsaken dump. Who will want any part of it? Outside it’s a jungle, in here it’s a crypt.”

“Mamma, it’s not so bad,” Imtiaz slid the chair and covered it with the plastic. Patwari gave him a reassuring nod, and a fatherly squeeze to his shoulder. “Patwari shahib was just telling me that the possibilities are endless. We could turn it into a hotel and make some real money.”

“What nonsense,” said Kamruzzaman. “If you think that, Patwari, your head is as full of dust as this damn house.”

The second and third floors had gone without sunlight for so long because of the way the windows were sealed and covered with thick curtains that a permanent chill had settled in. The perpetual darkness had created an insects’ haven. Pests crawled around. Cobwebs interrupted their entrances through doorways. Scurrying mice beat retreats at the sounds of humans. When they reached the roof, Kamruzzaman’s breathing grew

labored. He sat on the low ledge overlooking the front lawn, and took a hit of his inhaler. Imtiaz saw Amir leaning against the trunk of the car, his back turned to them, taking pulls from a beedi.

“So? You still want to go through with this?” said Kamruzzaman, as his breathing came back under his control.

“I said I would get the documents ready and filed within the next five days,” said Patwari.

“And how long do you have to just wait around for things?” Kamruzzaman asked Imtiaz.

“I will make arrangements,” said Imtiaz. But another thought had not, until now, occurred to Imtiaz. “Mamma? The house is legally in your name.”

“So?” Kamruzzaman pushed to his feet.

“It means Murad bhai and Minhaz have claims over it, too,” said Imtiaz.

“They have claims over nothing,” Kamruzzaman snapped. He started for the stairs. “Let them make a claim and see what happens.”

They returned to a sizable crowd of young men and women. Kamruzzaman grumbled under his breath as he got out at the carport, where a few of them were straggling, and, seeing the car, became promptly rigid with respect. Kamruzzaman returned their greetings with good-natured grumpiness. Patwari, who had said he would come in to answer any questions Imtiaz had at this point, changed his mind. When Imtiaz asked him, he said he had a busy day ahead, offering a scowl in the direction of the men and women.

“Your uncle and aunt,” he sighed. “I’ll be in touch soon. Don’t worry.” He told Amir he did not need a ride back to his place, and started down the driveway.

The stragglers went up the verandah steps and into the living room.

“Who are these people?” Imtiaz asked Amir.

“They meet here every week,” he replied. “Students of begum-shahib. Awami League.” He gave Imtiaz a nodding grin and went around to the back.

In the living room were about twelve people, including the ones outside that had rejoined the meeting. They were seated variously on chairs, on the sofa, on the ground, and Zubeida occupied the chair next to the telephone table. Seeing Imtiaz, she beckoned him to find a place. Imtiaz stood at the door.

The meeting was somber in tone and volume, but there was a charge to it that came from the two young women that were the leaders. One was thin to the point of being frail, the other squat, rectangular with a neck as wide as a tree stump, speaking in a voice that overtook the room like a flood.

When they took a break, Zubeida gestured for Imtiaz to come over. She introduced the two women, and two men that joined them, as well as a quiet, sad-eyed girl who looked no older than sixteen. Imtiaz tried to keep up with the names. The frail one was Mitali, the squat one Rounak. One of the men, a latent anger in his eyes bristling through the rest of him, was Ranjan Das, the second Dilip, and third young girl was named Anju. As they talked another man walked over, his name was Khoka.

“They were all my students,” Zubeida said, proudly.

“Mammi, when did you stop teaching?” said Imtiaz.

“Oh, about six, seven months ago. I had thought about it off and on for the past five years, but these kids, they kept me coming back.”

“She should have never left us,” said Rounak. “There was an exodus. Everyone whose life she touched refused to continue at the university without her there. This one here,” Zubeida said of Ranjan, “is quite the writer. He’s been writing for *The People*.”

“It’s nothing,” Ranjan said, the anger in his eyes softening with the momentary humility, and reinstating immediately.

“You all talk,” said Zubeida. “I’m going to go see about lunch. You people get washed up quickly.”

Ranjan brought out a pack of cigarettes, which was summarily plucked out of his hand by Khoka, and two cigarettes slid out.

“Freeloader!” Ranjan snatched it back. Khoka tossed one cigarette to the third man, and the two of them rushed out, laughing.

“I want one, too,” said Mitali. Her, Ranjan gladly obliged.

“If your father asks me again where his daughter is getting cigarettes when he smells it on you, I’ll tell him you get it straight from Yahya Khan,” Ranjan chided. “let’s go outside and smoke quickly, before we’re called in for lunch.”

Ranjan struck a match and held it first for Mitali and then Imtiaz, before lighting his own cigarette.

“So, what do you think will happen?” Ranjan asked Imtiaz, angling a plume of smoke upward out the side of his mouth. “Will it make a difference with Bhutto coming?”

“I’m the wrong man to ask,” Imtiaz replied.

“Wrong man? What does that mean?” Mitali frowned. “How can you not have an opinion?”

“My opinion really doesn’t matter, does it?”

“If you had one, it would.”

“How about I tell you when I have one properly thought out,” Imtiaz tried to squeeze out of the path of her glare.

“He thinks it’s a joking matter,” said Mitali.

“Just finish your cigarette,” said Ranjan. “I’m starved, and I don’t need you insulting Zubeida khalamma’s nephew before we can eat and she throws us out of her house.”

“She is not throwing anyone out,” said Imtiaz.

“Oh, you don’t know this one,” said Ranjan. “She can get herself thrown out of a graveyard for waking the dead with that mouth of hers. Ask her father and mother. I’ve known her all my life. They lament the day a husband has to put up with that mouth.”

“Shut up,” Mitali dropped the cigarette, and mashed it under her foot. “You want a husband so badly go get one.”

“The poor bugger won’t have a day of quiet again,” Ranjan went on, giving Imtiaz a wink. “Not until he dies. And even after that she will visit his grave and tyrannize his eternal sleep.” A deep, guttural growl climbed up from his belly until it reached his throat, and flew out his mouth as laughter. Even as he laughed, a longing lingered on Ranjan’s expression as he checked Mitali’s face for the minutest sign of affection. What he saw was her stare fixed on Imtiaz. Ranjan spat, and flicked his cigarette over the boundary wall behind them.

Zubeida called from the verandah for them to come inside for lunch.

After lunch, which Imtiaz ate hurriedly sitting next to Zubeida, feeling Mitali's boring eyes on him throughout, when the meeting reconvened, he shut himself up in his room to wait it out. The postprandial slumber hit him quickly, and he succumbed to it seeing the scrutinizing stare of Mitali before his fading vision. He woke up two hours later, by his watch, feeling more refreshed than he had in the last forty-eight hours. The first thing he remembered was asking Amir the night before if his daughter liked sweets, and went into his suitcase for the Savoy chocolates.

The house had emptied out as if the meeting and the feast had never happened. Imtiaz figured his uncle and aunt were still resting. When he came out of his room he startled Shonali, who was sweeping the hallway. He had heard her voice the night before, which he recognized, and he was taken by her glowing fair skin and ruddy, plump cheeks that looked permanently touched with rouge. Her sari was wound tightly around her so the achol would be out of her way as she worked, leaving exposed her stomach and navel. Stretch marks ran across the slightly loosened skin of her belly. She quickly uncoiled her achol, covered her chest, and hooded her head.

"Is Amir here?" Imtiaz asked.

"Ji, shahib, he is watching the child. I will call him for you."

"No, you don't need to. Do your work."

She smelled of sandalwood.

"And your father?" Imtiaz asked.

"He is there, too."

“Here,” Imtiaz held out the chocolates. “This is for your daughter.”

Shonali examined the package. She was serious, frowning, turning the package over repeatedly in her hand to see if it revealed any secret threats.

“It’s chocolate, for your child,” said Imtiaz.

“Ji,” Shonali turned crimson, the natural hue of her cheeks blending with the rest of her face as the blood rushed in.

“Okay, good.” Imtiaz left her to her work, and went to the drawing room to call Lubna, get her caught up on Patwari’s assessments and plans.



Lubna did not sound surprised. Rather she found it perfectly normal that the process would be complicated and potentially long.

“I already want to leave, and it’s not even been three days.” Imtiaz told her. “Mamma and Mammi are as active as they’ve ever been. There was a meeting, Awami League students, and I got grilled by these youngsters for being a bad patriot. Tell me. How many times has your brother called today?”

Lubna let the sarcasm slide, and told her husband instead that there had been a teachers’ walkout at the children’s school.

“Walkout?”

“In protest,” said Lubna.

“In protest of what? Doing their job?”

“Bhutto’s visit to Dhaka.”

“Right,” Imtiaz sighed, eyeing the liquor cabinet. “There’s nothing better to do than hang on the lives of these politicians. So, when do they walk back in?”

“I don’t know.”

Out of the corner of his eye Imtiaz saw Kamruzzaman. “I’ll call again soon.”

Kamruzzaman was in a pair of old slacks, a salmon pink polo shirt, and tennis shoes.

“I’m going for my walk, come with me,” he said.

Despite the asthma Kamruzzaman was a brisk walker. Imtiaz had to trot at some points during the almost hour-long jaunt, and was drenched with sweat by the time they returned to the house.

“I try to get those in as often as possible,” Kamruzzaman said, pressing his inhaler to his mouth. “Who knows when we’ll be locked up inside.”

“Mamma, is it me or is...? I mean, here it seems like it’s an army camp. Chittagong has been pretty bad.” He saw his uncle’s expression tightening, his teeth cutting into his lower lip, and tried to lighten the moment. “This huge property, Mamma. You could train for a marathon just running around the house,” said Imtiaz.

“No,” Kamruzzaman said, brushing aside the humor. “These bastards don’t own the land.”

“Those students that were here. They were Awami League?”

“Chhatra League, the student arm. All your Mammi’s doing.”

“They seem...eager.”

Kamruzzaman brought out his inhaler and took a puff. “I’m going to go wash up and change. Mokaddas will tea on the verandah, if you want.”

Out on the lawn Imtiaz heard a child’s giggling laugh. Hashmat was carrying Sufiya and making rounds of the lawn, stopping under the jackfruit trees and letting the child look up. Every time a branch stirred or a crow beat out from the thick of the leaves and flapped away cawing, the child clapped her tiny hands and laughed.

“Did she like the chocolates?” Imtiaz asked, walking up.

“Her mother had to tear them out of her little hands,” Hashmat gave Sufiya’s tubby cheek a pinch. “What have you been doing? You’re drenched like a rickshaw-puller.”

“I went for a walk with my uncle. He’s a much stronger man than he lets on.”

Hashmat grew thoughtful. The pan he had been chewing had ground town to a blood red paste in his mouth, lining the rim of his lips with its stain.

“I worry,” he said, “seeing how things are here, in the city. I wish, I only wish people would listen to those in charge and obey the laws of the land. Then they wouldn’t have to put soldiers on the streets to enforce them. You know, this is what the shahebs did. They kept us in check. Troublemakers didn’t get far, not always. If it hadn’t been for that biggest troublemaker of all, that Gandhi, we would still be in good hands today. We served, we obeyed, we knew who the masters were, and we were rewarded accordingly, and accordingly held accountable. Is it any wonder that their civilization has flourished? And we? What have we to show for all our troublemaking? More trouble?”

“You don’t feel threatened when you go outside?” said Imtiaz.

“I’m willing to make a concession for the sake of safety and law and order. It’s better than hooligans running around with sticks and stones, ready to hurl them at anyone that gets in their way.”

“You and my wife’s brother will get long very well,” Imtiaz said, seeing Mokaddas on the verandah, setting down a tray on the cane table. Behind him appeared Zubeida. “I’m going to wash and get out of these sweaty clothes.”

“Where’s Mamma?” Imtiaz asked, climbing the verandah steps.

Zubeida placed a finger over her lips and patted the spot next to her.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she whispered. “Sometimes I feel like a conspirator both against him and myself, with myself.”

Imtiaz’s perplexed reaction was summarily informed.

“Minhaz called when you two were gone,” said Zubeida. “He does so, every so often. Mostly likely, his wife was not home, and so he had the chance. We’ve been trying to get Murad and your uncle to talk for two years now. But father and son are cut from the same cloth.” Zubeida shook her head.

“I didn’t know something was the matter,” said Imtiaz.

“Since they moved to Karachi, both Murad and Minhaz, they’ve been back once. That was one year ago. And their wives never liked Dhaka, from the beginning, and they don’t care about me or your Mamma just the same. Fine job I did raising two sons that can’t take a stand in front of their wives. Anyway, they’re grown men, they make their decisions. But last time they were here, there was a huge argument, because your Mamma said they should think about living in Dhaka, even for a little while. And Murad’s wife felt like she was being manipulated through her husband by her in-laws. Where that woman cooked up that idea I will never know, but that’s what she told Murad, and Murad dismissed your Mamma and his idea. My God, it was like a battlefield in here for a full day and a night.” Zubeida stopped, checked for sounds of her husband’s approach, and resumed. “He hit him.”

“Mamma hit Murad bhai?”

Zubeida sniffled, shaking her head, gave her nose a touch with the back of her hand.

“No,” she said. “Murad hit his father.”

“Why?”

“I don’t even know anymore,” Zubeida said, almost flippantly. She added, “I wanted to tell you, in case something came up, you know, and you found your Mamma acting strange. When Minhaz calls, some days I tell him, some days I don’t.”

“I won’t say anything.”

Zubeida noticed Imtiaz’s sweaty clothes. “My God, get out of those clothes before you catch a death cold.”

He had been overzealous in his pursuit of walking with his uncle, though he had been told instead of being asked to join, and Imtiaz spent the rest of the evening feeling lightheaded. At dinnertime he was asleep. The call from outside his door brought him out of a dream in which he was climbing over piles of rubble that were the remnants of the Dhanmondi house after it had been mysteriously destroyed, all except one small side door. Entering through it, he was stopped at the threshold by a fist on his chest. The fist was a cold hard block that pressed against him menacingly. Imtiaz looked hard, even though the body attached to the fist was at the end of the arm it belonged to. Behind the figure Imtiaz could hear his daughter and son and their mother, unable to tell whether the sounds of their voices were cheerful or signaling distress. Imtiaz reached behind and pushed open the door to let in more light. The light revealed the face of his brother-in-law, his fist curled and white-knuckled against Imtiaz making it impossible for him to move.

“Imtiaz?” Zubeida called, “come have dinner.”

Imtiaz heard her now, fully awake, and not as part of the dream, which swirled away like a hand had crumpled the page on which it was drawn.

“You had a long talk with Patwari at the house,” said Kamruzzaman, ladling dal over his rice. He had been a small, careful eater throughout his life. It accounted for the leanness preserved in his frame, and most likely the reason the asthma had not completely forced him into a sedentary life. “He’s a practical man, but you can’t just count on him to work magic.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said Imtiaz, eating the mashed eggplant, mixed with rice, hungrily.

Kamruzzaman grew impatient, “What I mean is you can’t just jump up out of the blue one day and think you’ll reach exactly where you want to.”

“I know, you’ve been telling me as much,” Imtiaz kept his face down. “Mamma, if you were so uncertain,” he said, “why did you encourage me?”

“Because,” Kamruzzaman spoke slowly, “part of me has been hoping you would come around to making this claim someday. I was happy to forget about it. If you don’t want what’s yours, why should I sweat my head over it. That doesn’t mean that it was my duty to be at the beck and call of whenever things would need to be settled. What’s yours is yours. That only is my responsibility to see through. Beyond that, leave me out. People need to take care of their own matters. We don’t live in those old days of money in the mattress and safekeeping elders that have nothing better to do with their time.”

Zubeida had been eating silently. A few times she exchanged glances with Imtiaz, but Imtiaz’s suspicion was that it had not to do with the discussion between him and her husband. She was afraid Imtiaz would betray her trust. Imtiaz had actually forgotten about their earlier conversation, though, in order to deflect his uncle’s flow of resentment,

which he wished he had known of before he came, throwing his sons at his face seemed perfectly fair.

“Day after tomorrow,” Kamruzzaman said, “my friend, Suleiman Mubarak, is having a gathering at his home. Some new officer, son of his friend. I generally don’t give a damn for these social affairs, but he’s a good man, and I trust his presence to be a good one. In any event, you should come along. He’s the sort of man that can be helpful in many situations.” For a second he glowered at a point straight ahead. “He’s been getting very friendly lately with army officers, but a man in his position...” he shrugged slightly and went back to his dinner. “Those passes,” he said, as if remembering suddenly, “it’s thanks to him,” and then with a soft laugh added, “the man bandies around town anytime he wants like he owns it. You’ll never see a soldier dare stop him. They’ll stop one of their officers before they get near Mubarak’s car.”

Imtiaz could hear the longing in his uncle’s tone, of days gone by when he was a man whose presence was respected and stood aside for. Perhaps Kamruzzaman had not been as kingly in his place as he described his friend being, but Imtiaz had scattered memories, along with his mother’s accounts, of the sort of genuine respect his uncle once commanded. In his day, being in the Indian Civil Service and reaching the high point in his career that Kamruzzaman did as a Bengali and a Muslim was no small feat.

After dinner Imtiaz retired to his room and poured himself two back-to-back pegs of scotch. He sat on the bed listening to the wind worry the branches of the jackfruit trees, not the smallest gust reaching him. He heard faintly his aunt speaking with Mokaddas about the next day’s work, self-consciously noting that the old cook’s work had doubled because of his visit, and then heard her outside his door checking in one last time before

going to bed herself. He told her he was fine, and would see her in the morning, and then he sank down against the headboard and drank deeply of the remainder scotch in his glass.

The servants' quarters' courtyard was around the corner from the bank of windows. Half an hour later, Imtiaz heard the muted conversation from there and went outside. Mokaddas was in charge of locking up the house. Imtiaz found him in the kitchen, making tea.

“Kaka, I could use some too,” he said.

They were in a half-circle around a kerosene lantern in the courtyard. Hashmat Alimuddin was rehearsing a story about the glory days of Alimuddin Brothers. Seeing Imtiaz, Amir held up his hand to quiet his father-in-law. Next to him Shonali was holding their sleeping child, and next to her sat Huda Mia, the lower half of his face dimly lit by the lantern. The gardener's head was nodding off every few seconds. Both of them stood up. Shonali whisked away inside, cradling the sleeping child.

“Sir, can I tell them?” Amir asked, as Imtiaz took a stool offered him by Mokaddas.

“Tell them what?”

“About...”

“Oh, yes. Fine, tell them. But don't tell my uncle and aunt. And give me one of your beedis.”

“Baba, why do you want that garbage?” Mokaddas grumbled.

Imtiaz smiled at the cook and accepted the beedi. Amir recounted the checkpoint stop, with a few fabrications that Imtiaz enjoyed and left alone. A part about a semi-



automatic being thrust in their faces was one such added detail. Hashmat took every word seriously, and sat with a disturbed expression.

“Well, thank God you’re fine,” he said. “But really, why must we make it more difficult for them to do their job?”

“Soldiers are soldiers,” said Amir. “Their job isn’t a regular job. Their job is to terrify. These Punjabi savages hate us Bengalis. That’s why they’re recruited. They think we’re unclean, we’re kaffirs.”

“Spare me the nonsense,” Hashmat snapped. “We had Punjabi friends that were like family. Good, God-fearing people that would lay down their lives any day, while the Bengali misers sat like vultures to see our ruin.”

“You and my uncle will get along well,” Imtiaz said, coughing through his first pull on the beedi.

“The truth is the truth,” said Hashmat.

They drank the tea in silence. Imtiaz felt it mixing poorly with the scotch while simultaneously giving him a nice jolt of energy. Still, he could tell he would sleep fine, the alcohol would win.

Being outside was better than the stuffiness inside. The house was huge, with plenty of doors and windows that were left open during the day. The heat, however, was too oppressive. When there was no wind the air did not circulate, and instead more heat crammed in and got trapped. Walking into the courtyard Imtiaz had been excited at the sight of Shonali, which now made him want to cower like a lecher. To Amir and to Lubna’s absent presence. He finished the beedi, and, as he yawned and rose to his feet, the watchman’s call came from the other end of the house.

Guests had been arriving at Suleiman Mubarak's house earlier than the time he had set the invitation for, and by the time Kamruzzaman, Zubeida, and Imtiaz were led inside by a uniformed bearer, the cocktails had been flowing liberally for an hour. The house was off Mirpur Road in Kalabagan, surrounded by a thick grove of mango trees, with a towering metal gate, which one had to be an expert climber to scale. A uniformed guard, flanked by two armed soldiers asked the names of guests as they arrived and crosschecked them against a list on a clipboard one of the soldiers held. They were asking only the civilians. Army officers and personnel were admitted immediately.

Kamruzzaman was exasperated, and taken by surprise. Imtiaz was a last-minute add on and was not indicated on the list as part of Kamruzzaman's party. For the second time in a few days of being in Dhaka, Imtiaz had come under the scrutiny of the army. One of the soldiers asked for identification, glared at Imtiaz the entire time that he held the ID, and returned it without flinching. Zubeida had leaned over to say something to the soldier when he stepped aside and waved the car in.

Making his way through the jungle of guests, Judge Suleiman Mubarak looked more apologetic than welcoming.

"Mrs. Chowdhury, salaam," he said, with a slight bow.

"Now it's your house too that's an army camp," said Kamruzzaman.

"Please forgive the need for it. With the guests here this evening," he lowered his voice, "it wasn't a matter of choice."

“This is our nephew Imtiaz Khan,” Zubeida introduced them.

“We brought him along,” said Kamruzzaman, “but I wasn’t aware his name had to be declared in advance.”

“Of course,” Judge Mubarak extended his hand to Imtiaz, “welcome, welcome.”

Suleiman Mubarak was two years older than Kamruzzaman, but had been held back in school as a child due to a series of illnesses over the course of two years that had all but resigned his parents to prepare for his untimely death. Whooping cough, smallpox, mumps, and an acute case of typhoid that turned him into a transparent sack of bones had all struck him during that time, but the young boy fought them off, to the head-scratching wonder of a team of doctors. Once fully recovered, he charged into his studies with messianic zeal. Despite the loss in two years of schooling, which the school would not allow him to skip, he coasted through his SSC and HSC exams. With the encouragement and help of a teacher that had detected his young student’s innate strength for debate in one essay after another, Suleiman Mubarak earned admission first to University College London, and then to Lincoln’s Inn, from where he passed the bar at the top one percent of his cohort. He returned to Dhaka, his home, against the wishes of his parents, with the Chancery courts ready to embrace him, and worked his way up from the lower courts to the appellate division, up to federal judge in the High Court of East Bengal, and subsequently of East Pakistan.

Judge Mubarak was of medium height, athletically lean from playing squash several times a week. Strands of grey-black hair were brushed back on his head, and a dyed-black beard covered his mouth. When he spoke the beard moved up and down like a small animal, his mouth in its folds releasing flashes of his brilliant white teeth. In a

midnight blue Nehru coat and matching pants he had the somber appearance of a politician bent on winning by any means necessary, when in reality Suleiman Mubarak was more bookish than lawyer, which earned him special fondness in the eyes of Zubeida Chowdhury. He led them to a section of the living room removed from the main area where the guests were gathered. After a long look out into the thick of the guests, the judge pointed out a uniformed officer with his visor cap tucked under an arm, directly on the other end of the room.

“He’s the guest of honor,” said the judge.

“That young boy?” Kamruzzaman squinted.

“He’s not so young. He’s a captain, and he’s done his time. In ’65 he was at Amarkot. And that woman next to him is his wife.”

“She looks unhappy,” Zubaida noted.

“Mrs. Chowdhury, I have yet, in all my life of knowing men in the armed forces, to come across one of their poor wives that can be said to be happy,” Judge Mubarak said. “Those two, however, might be working on being newlyweds still. Two years. They’re still children to the game,” he laughed softly. “His father is Hamid Shaukat, and hers Liaqat Gazi. Two households, both alike in dignity, in this sense united in expanding their status.” He lit his pipe. “Shaukat is a good man. I knew him in Lahore. When his son requested this assignment, he asked if I would help the boy be welcomed. He’s attached to General Farman’s command.”

At that point Judge Mubarak made a move to get the guest of honor to meet the new arrivals when simultaneously Captain Shaukat was taken aside by his wife. They

saw the captain excuse himself and follow her out of the living room. Judge Mubarak said they would have enough time later to make acquaintances.

“How in the world do you have the time to be a judge?” said Kamruzzaman.

“These parties seem to have become a major preoccupation.”

“I have younger and smarter people doing the work. All I do is show up,” Judge Mubarak laughed. “Truthfully, I’m tired. The sword of the law has long ago been dulled. The only reason I keep at it is because there is nothing else I know how to do in this world, and being useless for me is being dead. When I retire, God help me, I have had a good mind to spend the time reading all of Shakespeare. That is the only plan I have.”

“You can start with Rammohun Roy and keep reading until you finish with Sarat Chandra and Nazrul,” said Zubeida, landing a professorial gaze on her host. “Bangla literature will give you all the pleasures and the wisdom as Shakespeare.”

“Not for me,” Judge Mubarak held up his hands in surrender. “I’m proud to be Bengali, but I thought my teeth would break and fall out of my mouth when I tried reading Bankim. No, madam. That I will gladly leave to you. Besides, as it is, no matter how Bengali I am, here it’s my Bihari roots that are more conspicuous.” He caught notice of someone and waved her over. “Helen, dear, come here.”

A woman with curls of rich dark hair the color of teakwood hanging just above her waist, sapphire-green eyes, and paper-white complexion marginally tempered by the Bengal sun, shouldered past the group of men and women she had been talking to, making a beeline toward the judge. She clutched her wineglass by its circular bottom in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

“Here you are,” she said, giving Judge Mubarak’s arm a playful punch. “Leaving me helpless to the feeding mobs, shame on you.”

“Sit, meet my friends,” Judge Mubarak gave her hand a squeeze, and made room for her next to him.

Helen sat down, holding on to her wineglass, took one last long pull on her cigarette and snubbed it in a standing silver plated ashtray.

“Helen O’Leary, this is Mr. Kamruzzaman Chowdhury, Mrs. Chowdhury, and their nephew,” Mubarak paused, not recalling the name.

“Imitaz,” said Kamruzzaman, before Imtiaz could offer his name.

“Hello. Imtiaz Khan,” he said.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” said Helen. Her cheeks were flushed with wine, glowing red at the highpoint of the cheekbones. She sipped the remainder of it and set the glass down.

“Helen and her husband Walter,” said Mubarak, “I was telling them just now that you “have been in Dhaka since January. Mr. Chowdhury is a lifelong servant of the civil services, Helen. Anything you want to know about the idiosyncrasies of life and politics in this country, he is your best guide.”

Kamruzzaman nodded uneasily. His attention was roving around the room, growing increasingly perplexed at the sight of guests in army uniform.

“Is your husband here?” Zubeida asked.

“Walter is a curmudgeon,” Helen replied. “He’d rather stay at the hotel with the other curmudgeons lounging around the lobby waiting for something to happen.”

“Well, these days, who knows what will happen when,” the judge puffed on his pipe and exhaled.

“I haven’t seen Sam, have you?” Helen asked Mubarak.

“Not yet,” said the judge. “He is probably going to give me an excuse in a few days for not coming. I thought Americans were outgoing, jolly people. Between Walter and Sam they give the whole notion a bad name.”

“Americans say a lot of things they’re not,” Helen lit another cigarette.

“You speak of American as though you yourself weren’t one,” said Kamruzzaman.

“It’s not that. I think a time comes when what we say and what we do need to cross paths. That makes me sound, I don’t know, above reproach, holier than thou, I guess. But it’s true, isn’t it? We can’t get our shit together – excuse me, sorry – and then we fly around all over the world dropping our values on everyone else. It’s become such a boring exercise that even talking about it makes me feel like a cliché.”

“Spoken like a true patriot,” Judge Mubarak laughed.

“I detest that word,” said Helen, seriously. “My husband, however, believes in it more than he wants to admit.”

“Which newspaper do you write for?” Imtiaz asked. He had been fixated on Helen from the time she joined them, and there were moments when her eyes met his, each time catching his stare that made him blink away.

Before replying Helen giggled. Imtiaz was unsure if it was from his question or the wine in her system. She lit a cigarette and took a long pull, which looked satisfying, and she leaned back with a relaxed grin.

“Sorry, I wasn’t laughing at your question,” she said. “It’s just I imagined how Walt would answer it. He’d say he was an official employee of the Kansas City *Star*, but only on condition that his stories weren’t put through the wringer by hacks and charlatans. My husband can be magisterial in his spite for those that don’t take his work at face value. I think a better name for it is ego, but I try not to point that out too often. That said, he’s a good reporter, and the *Star* enjoys his occasional rants.”

“And pays him to keep them up,” Judge Mubarak added. “Don’t leave out your own place as a journalist, Helen. You Americans can be just as notorious for your pious sense of modesty.”

“If I’m ever able to finish a novel, I’ll consider calling myself a writer.” She grew suddenly self-conscious at the end of this thought. Her cheeks flushed, and she waved away the attention on herself with a chirping laugh, adding, “You didn’t tell me this was going to be such a big thing” to the judge.

“If I knew it would I would have,” Judge Mubarak said, flirtatiously.

“Who’s that, over there, in the glasses?” Helen asked. All eyes sought out the person she referred to, through an opening between two groups of guests. “I heard him talking about Bhutto’s visit, in fact, with Captain Shaukat. But his voice was too low for me to be discrete without falling down between them.”

Mubarak made sure he was seeing the same man that Helen was inquiring about, thought it was Kamruzzaman who answered the question.

“That’s Farman,” he said.

“Yes. That is Maj. Gen. Rao Farman Ali Khan,” Judge Mubarak confirmed.



In unison, they broke from looking in Farman's direction, just as Farman noticed their attention.

"After Gen. Tikka Khan, he is the man in charge in Dhaka," said Judge Mubarak.

"You know, I've wondered about that. With everyone with the last name Khan, how do people keep track?"

"Well, for these proud army chaps, it is a badge of honor of their Pathan roots," said Mubarak. "Their natural born warrior status."

"Nonsense," Kamruzzaman grumbled.

Imtiaz wanted to add his input, as he had never associated his pedigree, by association to his last name, to be the inheritance of warriors. At present he felt more like sitting prey than stalking predator or roused defender. He saw Farman breaking from the people he was talking to, and approach them.

"General, please join us," said Judge Mubarak.

"Quite the opposite," Farman said, officiously. "I'm here to beg leave for the evening. Thank you, again, for the hospitality, and for making Captain Shaukat feel at home. It's tough for new officers in places like this. The people, the climate. His father is a good man, a lifelong servant of justice. As I'm sure you know."

"This Mr. Kamruzzaman Chowdhury, speaking of lifelong public servants," Judge Mubarak said. "Mrs. Chowdhury, and their nephew. And this is Helen O'Leary."

Rao Farman nodded stiffly at each person as they were introduced. "Good night," he said and marched out.

Imtiaz excused himself to use the bathroom. The smoke and the stuffiness of the close quarters were making him dizzy. He had decided against drinking alcohol, which

proved to be a good idea. He splashed cold water on his face, held his cooled palm to his neck and forehead, and came out of the bathroom, seeking the way out to the front lawn for air.

The lawn was festooned with red, green, and white string lights hanging from branches, and arranged over hedges and coiled around the thin trunks of the lemon trees that lined the perimeter of the lawn. The setup and ambiance were more of a wedding than a reception for an officer of the armed forces. Only missing was the recorded shehnai snaking its tunes over the gathering. Imtiaz went toward the lights thinking of his and Lubna's wedding, the weeklong, exhaustive affair it had been, during which neither of them had said a word to each other. He walked along the lawn, the overwhelming scent of rajanigandha flowers honeying the evening air, troubled again by the onslaught of disturbing consequences that could befall him if things did not work out.

At the end of the lawn before reaching the caravan of parked cars, Imtiaz saw a man and a woman in silhouette against the light of the two lamps flanking the main gate. A hushed conversation was in progress. By the colored hue of the string lights Imtiaz caught the glint of embroidery on the woman's clothing. Facing her was a uniformed man. At the moment it was the woman's quite intense displeasure that was being conveyed. Her speech was a torrent, and she was speaking in English. The man's attempts to interrupt her were futile. The most he could get in were sighs through gritted teeth and frustrated breaths of exclamation.

"I'm sorry," said Imtiaz, though his presence had not been registered until then.

The woman immediately broke off. The man's head turned toward Imtiaz. Imtiaz backtracked.

“I’m very sorry,” he said again.

He saw a bearer come up to the couple.

“Captain Shaukat,” Imtiaz heard the bearer say, “Sir, dinner is served inside.”

Suleiman Mubarak played the host, introducing the guest of honor and his wife, and the couple sat on either side of their host’s seat at the head of the table. The number of guests had shrunk. Imtiaz thought it might be that there were two separate sessions to the party, a cocktail hour, and then dinner, where now, as it happened, the uniforms held a slight advantage in number over civilians. Kamruzzaman was seated one over from Shaukat, with Zubeida next to him, Helen at her side, and Imtiaz at the end of their row. Neither Shaukat nor his wife gave hints of recognizing Imtiaz from just minutes before intruding on their spat. Imtiaz likewise kept his gaze averted from them. Dinner proceeded punctuated mostly with bursts of discussions drawn out of small talk. The army officers held muted conversations with each other. Every so often short bursts of laughter drew heads and eyes in their direction. All was going blandly according to the decorum of a gathering of incompletely initiated acquaintances, until, the guest sitting across from Imtiaz, a stoop-shouldered man in a navy-blue pinstriped suit who had been eating his meal with trembling hands, picked up something from the officer beside him that made him set down his knife and fork.

“I wonder what makes you so certain of that,” said the man in the navy blue suit.

The officer was startled, as though he had forgotten there was anyone else around him.

“I beg your pardon,” said the officer. His companion officers leaned forward to get a look at the source of the interruption.

“You sincerely believe Mujib is going to hold up his hand in surrender, after all this time?” said the man in the suit.

“What else can he do?” said the officer.

“The same could be asked for Mr. Bhutto.”

“I do believe Sheikh Mujib is placing too much stock on emotions and not enough on the proper functioning of the government,” the officer said. He looked to his nodding fellow officers, and then around the table. “He has his scruples against the army, let him find a better solution.”

“I see,” said the man in the suit. “A democratic election is not, in your estimation, a sign of the government properly functioning. What is, then? Obstructing the process, as Mr. Bhutto and Mr. Yahya have been doing?”

At the mention of Yahya Khan, the expressions of the army officers were uniformly slashed with resentment.

“Gentlemen, the food, how does it suit your pleasure?” Judge Mubarak tried to intervene. In return he received glances of reproach from the two parties engaged in the debate.

“If it were up to the Awami League, sir,” the officer spoke with reverential grace, “the country would break up overnight. Convincing as Mujib may be, his Six Points, that he insists on is the solution for all Pakistan’s problems, are a biased, injudicious cloak that he wants to hide behind.”

“How long can one man hold an entire country hostage over a plan that sent him to prison?” said a second officer, seated next to the first one.

“How long do you suppose the army can keep martial law on one part of the country and not bat an eye at the goings on in the other?”

Heads turned to Zubeida. A gradual silence was beginning to fall around the table.

“I warn you, gentlemen,” Judge Mubarak tried again to cut in, with humor, “Mrs. Chowdhury is no slight opponent.”

“Madam, in order for us to be able to do our job,” said the first officer, “we have to have the law carried out with regularity. Would you rather have streets overrun by miscreants, or safety for every citizen at all times?”

“Safety?” said the man in the suit. “With machine guns and checkpoints where your soldiers follow whatever rules they make up on the spot? Do you know that we are at the mercy of their temperament when they stop us?”

“Sir, you can personally tell them my name,” said the officer, frustrated and wanting out of the argument, “next time they offer you the slightest insult.”

“Why must we be forced to do such things? Just to leave our homes?” said Zubeida.

“Madam, I am only a servant of the president,” said the officer. “I carry out his will and command.”

“Do you believe that his will and command are always right?”

“No, madam,” said the officer, “it is not mine to say if they are right or wrong. My oath is carry them out. For him. For my country.”

“It is easy for everyone wield opinions,” Shaukat said, igniting anew the alertness around the table. “When put to the test, few people take their words into action.”

“Captain Shaukat,” said the officer, as Shaukat opened his mouth to respond, “you will respect the presence here of senior officers.”

“Sir,” Shaukat relented. His wife gave him a cold sideward glare.

The man in the navy blue suit passed dismal expression around the table, like an innocent man ordered to a firing squad that no one was willing to protect. He pushed his chair back, and rose calmly to his feet.

“My apologies,” he said to Judge Mubarak. Before there was a response he left the room.

Judge Mubarak went after him, after an awkward apology to his guests, and returned a couple minutes later.

“Shall we have some desserts and brandy,” he said.

Captain Shaukat received a bump on the elbow. He looked at his wife, and then asked if they could speak in private. Before leaving Shaukat tossed a look at Imtiaz that had Imtiaz wondering if he had stayed a touch too long earlier on the lawn as an unintended interloper. Judge Mubarak had barely settled into his seat again, and, this time, rose to leave his guests once more without seeing the humor in it.

In the aftermath of the dinner row, many guests begged their leave, excusing their behavior by taking note of the curfew, which by nine o' clock had been in effect three hours. The three generals, who had been among the highest ranked men in uniform, besides Rao Farman, led the exodus. They made it clear to Judge Mubarak that it was an honor being his guest, but in the light of the fragile emotions and frail tempers it had become impossible to spend one evening in respectful conversation. As they spoke, Zubaida kept her stare on them. None of them met it in return. After their departure, Judge Mubarak appeared, contrary to expectations, relieved. He drank brandy and talked freely about the guests.

Sultan Shahzad, Mubarak explained when he and the three generals had left, was a former executive with Pakistan National Oil. He had lost his position to a younger West Pakistani, recently graduated from Oxford, the son of a retired colonel, the fact that salted his injuries beyond repair, after dizzy spells amounted to a minor heart attack. He was convinced, however, that it was nepotism and bias that had ousted him from the position he had helmed since the company's founding seven years earlier, appointed by its charter board of directors. He had, Mubarak told his audience, whittled down to Kamruzzaman and his family and Helen O'Leary, been a Muslim League supporter first, and them among the quiet minority of Bengalis in favor of Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, as well

as being vocally critical of Mujib and the Awami League. No doubt, Mubarak assessed, the outcome of PNO fiasco had pushed him to the other side.

“Had you spoken to him ten years ago, you would have heard a scathing denouncement of all things Bengali,” said Judge Mubarak. “Now, ask me who the officers were, and their identities are a matter of wonder unto their own. The one who had spoken so pedantically of patriotism to you, Mrs. Chowdhury, was General Khadim Raza. General Pirzada was on the end closest to me, and in the center was General Akbar Khan, chief of intelligence, the man who did not speak a word.”

“Maybe you should retire from the law and become a socialite,” Kamruzzaman said.

Judge Mubarak held a match over the bowl of his pipe, puffed until the ebbing embers of tobacco reignited, and took a sip of brandy.

“I said as much, did I not,” he said, “I let my young, able clerks take the real work. My job anymore is to know the case, understand the argument, pass the judgment. My days of arguing them, mulling over them in decisions, my friend, are in the past. My eyes hurt, my back is stiff all the time, so, perhaps you are right,” he smiled, holding up a toast, “seeing my days to their end in social extravagance may be just the solution.”

Helen had been listening intently to every word uttered, since the dinner argument, where Imtiaz had noticed her watching the participants with the suspicion of a teacher catching students peddling lies. The wine, which she had not taken a break from since Imtiaz had met her, had not affected her.

“Raza is the with the general office command, 14<sup>th</sup> Division, right?” she said, drawing Mubarak’s wide-eyed attention.



“How do you know that?” said the judge.

“Walt was talking about him, and the other two just a few days ago,” said Helen. “I just remember the name, Khadim Raza.” She took a mouthful of wine, swallowed thoughtfully, and pulled on her cigarette.

“You see?” Mubarak grinned at the others, “this young woman has learned more about the rank and file of our country than all of us put together. In three months. American ingenuity, it never fails.”

“I don’t know about that,” Helen’s shook her head. “Ingenuity would be giving it too much credit. My husband has a minor in military history. He has a thing for this sort of thing. Generals and coups and strategies. You get the idea now why we’re here.”

“He is in the greatest country on earth for that.”

Kamruzzaman was growing impatient. He had made several attempts to catch Mubarak’s attention without interrupting, but the likelihood of letting that process work out appeared thin. He yawned, and pushed to his feet.

“My friend, the night is young,” said Mubarak.

“I need to speak with you about something,” said Kamruzzaman.

“Very well, then,” Mubarak stood, holding his pipe, and drained the drop of brandy in his snifter.

“You come, too,” Kamruzzaman told Imtiaz.

Out on the lawn, where the string lights had been turned off, Kamruzzaman told the judge about the Dhanmondi house, what was entailed in the process, and time being limited.

Judge Mubarak was unlike any other time Kamruzzaman had seen him in matters of offering assistance or responding to a request for it.

“I wish I could tell you that I can do something,” said the judge, walking around the lawn with Kamruzzaman at his side and Imtiaz following behind.

“That’s was my thought,” Kamruzzaman said, surprising Imtiaz, as much as he had by bringing the matter up with the judge. If his uncle was trying to backtrack and save face Imtiaz could not tell. “I hope you don’t mind that I asked.”

“The day that you stop asking is when I will really mind,” Judge Mubarak said, with a tipsy edge to his voice.

It was after ten when Judge Mubarak had his car and driver give Helen a ride back to Intercontinental, instructing him to stay with the Chowdhury car all the way their house. The night was as quiet as Dhaka could ever be, for even in the depths of the most untrammelled hours of night, it was a city as vehemently against quieting down completely.

Two days later three of the Chhattra League members Imtiaz had met were back. But long before they arrived around ten o'clock in the morning, the Chowdhury house was awake and active. Imtiaz woke to conversation in the dining room, which was within earshot of his bedroom, that sounded like a casual gathering. Silverware tinkled and cups clinked. There was laughter, and he heard his aunt talking most of the time. As he washed and got dressed, Imtiaz remembered. It was the day of the Mujib-Bhutto meeting at Intercontinental. Zubaida had spoken of it, mentioning that she planned on going to the demonstration to be held outside.

At the dining table, he recognized the three Chhattra Leaguers, immediately meeting Mitali's eyes. Imtiaz wondered what he had said or done in one previous meeting to become such a source of revulsion. He was not a firebrand patriot like her, that was it. If she only knew, he had never been a firebrand anything in his life. As breakfast progressed, Kamruzzaman entered through the back porch, accompanied by Patwari. Kamruzzaman was finishing the tail end of a thought, and went to his seat at the head of the table as if there were no one else present. Reluctant to join the company, Patwari took the seat next to Imtiaz. For the rest of the time they were at the table Imtiaz felt they were a large, dysfunctional family gathered in mutually agreed amiability for the sake of a dying elder.

Imtiaz listened to one assessment after another offered by Rounak, as she and Zubeida dominated the discussion.

“If Bhutto doesn’t come to his senses, Sheikh Shahib should refuse another meeting with him or Yahya until they agree to return with complete acceptance of the Six Points,” Rounak said.

“As long as they’re reasonable,” said Zubeida.

“No, Khalamma, you cannot be reasonable with tyrants. If Bhutto wanted to be reasonable he wouldn’t be throwing tantrums from Islamabad to Karachi and threatening to unhinge the country. For all I care, let him do with West Pakistan what he wants. Let us take care of our business. Sheikh Shahib has always talked about fairness, which we will have only through autonomy. Bhutto and Yahya don’t want to hear anything but the sounds of their own voices. Let them put soldiers and checkpoints up and down West Pakistan and see how that’s taken by the people there. We have been part of their exploitation and borne the brunt of their bullying for too long.” The rise in her volume drew looks from her companions.

A short silence was filled only with the sounds of chewing and swallowing, quick slurps of tea. Mokaddas came around and filled teacups, took away empty plates and dishes. From outside came the bright, energetic laughter and shrieking of Amir and Shonali’s daughter.

“If the Six Points were going to be accepted it would have happened by now,” Kamruzzaman said, nonchalantly. “If autonomy was even being entertained by Islamabad as a pipe dream there wouldn’t be so much grousing and going back and forth. Men like Bhutto and Yahya make decisions, and they move on.”

“Ji,” Rounak said, respectfully, but not without frustration and disagreement couched in her tone. “Before they make a decision that causes more harm and violates more of our fundamental rights as citizens, we have to act.”

“And do what?” said Kamruzzaman.

“Bring the country, all of it, to a standstill.”

After breakfast the five of them waited outside. Ranjan smoked one cigarette and lit another immediately, anxious to tell Rounak to tamp down her rhetoric. She had taken charge as their de facto leader, and her already bothersome overbearing nature filled with more air every day. Ranjan had said as much to Mitali, who had dismissed him for a chauvinist. He argued that he had no desire to lead anyone or anything, but Mitali still called him an old goat that needed to keep his mouth shut. Old goat was what she had called him all their lives, and Ranjan forgot how the name came about. He knew he loved it as much as he loved her, hoping one day she would call him her old goat of a husband.

Crowds of demonstrators brandishing banners were clotted around the Intercontinental. Imtiaz was amazed at the open declarations glaring on the banners commanding Bhutto to go back to Pakistan, to leave Bangladesh alone. The hotel was barricaded by a cordon of soldiers, armed for battle. The three Chhattra Leaguers quickly found acquaintances among the demonstrators, some of whom Imtiaz recognized from the meeting at the house. Imtiaz stuck close behind Kamruzzaman and Zubeida, unsurprised, as they milled about, that his aunt and uncle could not take more than three steps without being greeted by friends and endless known faces and admirers. Patwari had set out before them, and emerged now from the jostle of bodies. If there was

enthusiasm in him for the day it was shrouded. He greeted Imtiaz again as if they had not had a meal together less than an hour ago. Scanning the crowd, Imtiaz landed on Helen O’Leary, who was meandering through the throng in their direction. Behind her was an enormous man with a cinderblock box for a head on which the crew cut looked brand new. If it were not for his crinkled slacks, loose-fitting shirt, and sandals, Imtiaz would take the man, whom he guessed was Helen’s husband, to be as her personal bodyguard. His size was not lost on the sea Bengalis around him who, at best, came as high as his sternum.

“Shouldn’t you be inside,” Zubaida said to Helen as the women greeted each other.

“It’s too full of sweaty, unwashed reporters in there,” said Helen. “Walt and I wanted to get some fresh air. This is my husband, Walter Munsen.”

Walter shook hands with Kamruzzaman, Imtiaz, and Patwari, and hesitated a moment when it came to Zubeida, until she laughed and took his, the size of a small table, in both of hers like a grandmother offering blessings.

“Here we go, then,” Walter said, like it was announcement.

“You’re the military expert, your wife told us,” said Kamruzzaman.

“Expert is stretching it, I’d say. I took every class I could on military history in college, and by the time I was graduating they added up to a minor.” When he grinned his mouth spread out almost as wide as his forehead, exposing rows of lightly yellow teeth as square as miniature matchboxes.

“How much have you learned?” Zubeida asked.

“Still figuring that out.”

A megaphone drowned Walter's reply cackling an indecipherable series of litany. The volume was turned to max causing distortions. At the end of the announcement, however, the crowd cheered. Banners rose, and Imtiaz noticed the one that said, in English, "Bhutto Go Back to Pakistan." If they were telling him to go back to Pakistan, Bangladesh must be where they were now standing. The thought chilled Imtiaz. Suddenly he wanted to not be there. The soldiers were focused on Bhutto's arrival for the moment, but if a threatening situation were to develop they would act accordingly.

Sirens wailed. A roar of simultaneous car engines grew louder as they drew closer.

Bhutto's motorcade swung around off Minto Road like a snake abruptly altering its winding course. Within seconds Bhutto's car was stopped at the main entrance. A team of bodyguards poured out of the accompanying vehicles, armed with machine guns and Tommy guns, blocking Bhutto almost completely from view as he climbed out. There was a flicker of a tired man, impeccably dressed, moon-faced, his jowls heavy with exhaustion, the frill of salt-and-pepper hair receding from his forehead head unkempt, pausing to secure the top button of his jacket absentmindedly before being herded inside.

It was the deafening applause and cheering at the arrival of the Awami League leader that had their ears ringing long after the day had ended.

The aftermath of the anticipated talks had been as anticlimactic as they had been charged. Mujib and Bhutto, it seemed to the country, threw tantrums, held their defiant grounds, blustered to their respective camps, and to the people, that the other was being impossible, the same as they had been complaining about each other since the December elections. Days followed the talks during which nothing happened, other than Bhutto stomping harder on his former insistence that he would launch a movement of civil disobedience in West Pakistan if the ultimate result of the negotiations failed to amount to the acceptance of his terms. The talk from one Bengali household to the next revolved around what had been dizzying talkers and listeners alike for months.

Negotiations had to, *had to*, yield results, formidable ones, ones that would be fair, honest, honoring the will of the people – all manner of soaring rhetoric that Kamruzzaman groused were idiotic. Mujib was barking at the military establishment to end martial law, he scoffed, which, he said, he would swear every uniform in Islamabad was roaring at, with laughter.

“Because Yahya Khan has suddenly had amnesia or become a different man altogether,” he said, “that his tail will coil between his legs and he will run to bow at Mujib’s feet. These blokes think they are going to talk to death their ideas of constitutional law and provincial agreements until there is nothing left to do but throw up hands and give in.”

“Give in to what?” said Zubeida.



“Chaos. What else is there? What else do these pundits make happen?”

Kamruzzaman waved the dialogue to its end.

Four days had passed. It was evening of March 25, the day Patwari had given Imtiaz as the last by which he would have finalized the filing of the property documents. For that reason Patwari had stopped by the house in person, and then been talked by Zubeida into staying for dinner. Heartened by the news that things were on schedule, Imtiaz could not help wondering what Hakim Patwari’s retired life consisted of, besides being Kamruzzaman’s accountant. When he asked, Patwari smiled into his cup of tea and shook his head tragically.

“Patwari shahib is an accomplished player of the tabla,” said Zubeida.

“Very amateur,” Patwari added. “As a young man I showed some promise, but not enough to become an ustad.”

In the courtyard of the servants’ quarters Hashmat Alimuddin had poked Huda Mia into another bickering match over the sanctity of Quranic teaching, which expressly forbade the consumption of alcohol, this time luring Mokaddas into the exchange, as Amir and Shonali listened to the three wise men in a contest to outdo each other in being supremely cantankerous. Huda Mia’s penchant for local brew was not a secret. While he spoke, his breath, soaked in the concoction, blasted Hashmat’s face like an ally. Inside, Amir and Shonali’s young daughter dreamed. Anshuman’s steps crunched on the driveway gravel, his calls ushering the start of the night’s watch still to come.

The conversation had pressed on late into the night, when Patwari saw the time on his watch, and said he should go. Kamruzzaman said Amir would take him home, but Patwari insisted the walk would do him good. As they said their goodbyes, with Patwari’s

repeated assurance to Imtiaz that all would be well, their voices were drowned out by the advancing growl of a jet. The DC-10 shrieked over the house, pointing north and west across the clear, starlit sky.

Imtiaz poured an inch of scotch and sat back with the glass on his stomach with his head against the pillow pressed up on the headboard. He could hear snatches of the conversation going on between Mokaddas and Hashmat, and Anshuman had sounded his inaugurating call. Imtiaz decided he would sleep, and keep sleeping until late into the next day. His watch read just before eleven-thirty as he gulped down the first peg and reached for the bottle on the nightstand for a refill.

His hand shook, as if seized by a sudden spasm, spilling the liquid on the bed at the rupturing, staccato explosions that seemed to erupt inches of from his ears. Imtiaz cursed and set the bottle down and brought a towel from the bathroom. He tried to soak the scotch off the bed sheet, as well as the splatter on his shirt that he had felt from the chill against his skin. A minute later, the explosions were still going on. Imtiaz went to the windows. The ramming, repeating thunder continued, like hails the size of small huts raining down on a hundred corrugated tin roofs. Their distance, which at first had had the effect of being next to him, had moved back out, expanded. Imtiaz knew that the direction the windows faced was that of the Dhaka University campus.

Five minutes after it had begun, the din tapered to a sudden halt. The vacuum left behind was filled immediately by firecracker claps scattering severally into the void. Then began a new assault. Machine guns, there was no doubt in Imtiaz's mind, as he rushed out of the room toward his uncle and aunt's. Kamruzzaman and Zubeida were not there. Their voices came from the verandah. There they were talking to a frantic

Anshuman. The watchman was shaking his nightstick and rambling. Behind him were Mokaddas, Amir, and Hashmat, as well as the cry of Sufiya, clinging to her mother, awakened by the commotion. The household stood inert in their places, their confusion subdued, until they fell silent. Outside, rifle-fire continued popping and exploding, the intervals between them punctured by progressively longer bursts of machine-gunfire.

End of Part I

## PART II: HELL IS EMPTY

13

In the eleventh century Islam came to the Indian Subcontinent with the capture of Lahore in 1021. Persianized Turks from central Afghanistan seized Delhi from its Hindu rulers some one hundred seventy years later. By the fourteenth century the sultanate had been established far and wide, from Madurai in the south to Gujarat in the west, and all the way to Bengal. Sufis associated with the spread of Islam regarded the Hindu scriptures as divinely inspired. They practiced the yogic rituals of Hindu Sadhus, rubbed ashes on their bodies, hung upside down while praying, and, through village folk traditions, the two faiths nearly blended into one. Hindus visited the graves of Sufi masters. Muslims brought offering to Hindu shrines. Sufis settled in Bengal and in Punjab.

In those places their numbers were largest, their influences most profound and readily accepted. Peasants converted en masse. In these two regions of the Subcontinent where centuries later both communities would draw enough blood from each other to drown their families, friends, neighbors, and business associates, Islam had flourished, revering Hinduism as its equal. But this meant nothing to the generals that unleashed Operation Searchlight on an otherwise calm March night in Dhaka. For nine months they would wage a campaign aimed at Bengalis for being feckless Muslims and last-minute converts, whose true allegiance were with Hindu India, against Pakistan, in order to save their lives. History was dead.

The American M-24 tanks nosed out of the cantonment at eleven-twenty-five, in hushed progress over the metal roads that kept their silence intact. Foot soldiers, ordered to keep their feet from marching too loudly, obeyed, as they flanked the tanks. Pedestrians, beggars, rickshaw pullers, shopkeepers and late night vagabonds thought nothing of it. Tanks and soldiers on the street were the norm. Things, as far they were concerned, were normal.

Hakim Patwari had left the Chowdhury house and decided to use the comfortable night to his advantage. He walked along Kakrail Road to the entrance to Ramna Park. Entering the park, he felt that cutting directly across it would be the best route, allow him to maximize his exercise, and reach home at decent time still to get a good night's sleep. He had spent most of his life on little sleep, and only recently cut down his consumption of tea. Last year, his annual checkup had revealed traces of hypertension. The doctor advised a bland diet with minimal salt, routine hours for work and for rest equally, continue his walking regimen. A number of Patwari's friends and colleagues had died early deaths. Had he been a married man, perhaps a wife and children would occasion better caring after his health. But as it was, at sixty, he could not be more thankful for being able to walk, talk, eat, have his body functioning as soundly as he could wish, and live without the aid of pills on a daily basis. Patwari had taken, for once, the doctor's recommendation to heart.

Walking through the park nowadays made Patwari sullen. No matter the hour of day or night, young people would be scattered about, bunking classes in favor of an afternoon spent in courtship. Vendors selling jhal muri and warm fizzy drinks, mangoes and starfruit sprinkled with chili powder and salt and impaled on sticks, would provide

sustenance. Patwari's mind drifted when he saw the young lovers lost to the world, dreaming, as though the universe was created for the sole purpose of nurturing those dreams. A snatch of whispered intimacy or lovers' spat, the laugh of a young woman freely falling in her mirth into the arms of her wooer, and sometimes even the end of something, a breakup that was as dramatic as any Victorian melodrama, could reach a pair of attuned ears.

Patwari had been in love. It was long ago, in Calcutta, when he was a student at the Islamia College. So long had it been that, with the years and age and the capacity of memory to erase just enough in increments so as to prevent madness, Patwari had begun in his mind to see the piecemeal obliteration of her face. In three months of going out for tea, the cinema, the theater, and walks around Victoria Memorial in groups of friends, they had spoken directly to each other once. It was her childhood friend that had conveyed to him the mutual fondness, and Patwari's heart had never known that feeling again. Less than three weeks later the same friend informed Patwari that her friend's marriage had been arranged. It was to a man ten years older. And what was more, she was Hindu. Her father would call down thunder on her if she dared speak of marrying a Muslim boy. Patwari had had his suspicion. Because the sole exchange between them had been her saying that her parents were devout Hindus and he responding that his mother and father could not care less for religion. If ever a conversation was wasted, Patwari had thought in hindsight, that was it.

Captain Fazal Shaukat sat in the jeep fuming. He had had enough of Umbreen's tantrums. Bad enough that she had come within a hair-breadth at the judge's party –

which was in honor of her husband – of emasculating him in public – she was now pouting at home, having dropped her ultimatum: he would ask for a transfer or...Shaukat was out the door. She never got it. She never would. That he was on the rise in ranks faster than most of his classmates at the academy, who had used their father's connections to land behind desks, happy with pushing paper and enlarging their waistlines until they were fat old bureaucrats with high blood pressure and ruined bowels to show for a career; that her husband wanted more, had higher aspirations, stood no chance against her tirades. If tantrums and pouting was what she preferred, she was welcome to it.

Shaukat watched the figures in the streets watching his jeep, the tanks up ahead, the soldiers crowding around like a blanket covering the moving caravan from external dangers, ghosts under the glossy, starlit night. Next to him sat Major Pervez Shahbaz, chewing thoughtfully on a mouthful of chewing tobacco. The scent of it was oddly soothing.

The journey lasted forever until Shaukat saw the grounds of the campus. Leafy and shaded, even in night, there was a serenity about the place that was unnerving. There was, Shaukat felt, too much comfort. Too much comfort in the way the dormitory buildings loomed over the grounds, like saviors. Too much comfort in the late night windows out of which a light here and there still shone. Too much comfort in sleep.

The four M-24 tanks took the two dormitories in pairs. Inside, the students were suspected of harboring Awami League sentiments, Muslim and Hindu alike. Their activities had been endured long enough. Before they caused more damage, a final act had to disable them. So went the assessment as Shaukat had heard it, and none of it

sounded to him as revelations. It did not take five general officers, including the president and Chief Martial Law Administrator of the country, to slap reasoning like that into a plan. Shaukat wedged a finger between his neck and collar to ease the tightness. He hoped Major Shahbaz missed it.

The other officers in charge had been far hastier. No sooner had the orders been disseminated than they were as animated as ribald monkeys jumping over each other to execute them. They had been in Dhaka longer. None of them had spoken a full sentence to Shaukat, out of a mix of hurried planning, and disregard. It did not take long for word to spread of a new arrival in the junior officer corp whose connections had created an obstacle-free path for him to sweep in. For Shaukat, it was enough that he had been attached to the 14<sup>th</sup> Division, under command of Gen. Raza to whom orders came directly from Farman and Tikka Khan. Shaukat watched as the tanks positioned themselves to face the dorms, unaware when the order had been given, if it had been given, for them to fire.

He first felt the seat under him tremble, the vibration scale up his spine. In seconds the night was altered. Strobes of light flashed from the mouths of the tanks, igniting the dorms in brilliant snapshots before the shell ripped off another piece of the exterior. The shelling suppressed the shrieking of the students in the buildings. Shaukat saw ant-like scrambling around windows and doors where students were trying to get out, most of them standing no chance. The tanks kept their aim unmoved for five minutes. The din of the shelling created a filter over Shaukat's hearing, as he had not remembered to plug his ears.



Major Shahbaz's lips were moving at Shaukat, the words fluctuating, going in and out of hearing as if a recording was being repeatedly stopped and started.

When the shelling finally stopped, Shaukat muttered a "Thank God." And then the shouted orders of Shahbaz and the other officers to the foot soldiers perforated the thin, shelling-induced gauze over his hearing. His driver gave him a glance that spoke daggers. Shaukat, too, had command of a company. He should have been on his feet already, anticipating his move. Shahbaz climbed out and waited for Shaukat to follow suit. As his ears gradually cleared, Shaukat's own voice reached him like a disjointed flow of sound. His throat was burning from the fire and smoke. He saw his company file in with the others as they entered the dorms, firing their machine guns. Shaukat's ears cleared, suddenly, as if the volume on a roomful of loudspeakers had been raised to maximum, inviting in the explosions, screams, and wails.

Patwari had cleared the park when his feet nearly gave out from under him. He thought at first that a power line had burst. He recovered his balance and picked up his pace. If he kept it brisk, he would be home in twenty minutes. A power line rupturing was not an unusual occurrence. But as he walked on, Patwari listened for a lull, a discontinuation of sound to accompany the sudden fall of darkness, and heard only the first explosion multiply into successive blasts. Even in the worst-case scenarios power lines did not keep exploding in consecutive barrages. As he walked, his heart beating like a trapped bird in chest, he knew he was hearing tank fire.

Before long he was jogging. As much as he could he kept his attention on the shelling. It appeared to not have an end in sight. Couched in the shelling was the occasional human scream. Patwari did not need a compass to know the direction of the

attack. He lived near the campus of Dhaka University, within walking distance of Curzon Hall and Madhu Canteen. Patwari hurried in the direction of his building.

Besides the university, the East Pakistan Rifles constabulary was shelled, partially set ablaze, followed by Punjabi and Baluchi soldiers sent in to finish killing the remaining Bengali officers. The Rajar Bagh district police station was defended in the face of tanks, bazookas, and automatic rifles, leaving even the attacking soldiers talking about the standoff for days afterward. Captain Shaukat, as he commanded his company to enter the dormitories of Jagannath Hall and Iqbal Hall shooting their occupants where they found them alive, including those still, astonishingly, asleep, heard the reports of about the EPR and Rajar Bagh incidents in the following days, and wished he had been at one of those. A real fight was one where fire was returned for fire. The students at the dorms had old bolt-action rifles, which they had used. But to take them as a match for the firepower they were facing was a joke. Shaukat saw their feeble efforts blasted through with machine guns and semi-automatics, before being marched outside to be mowed down in lineups.

House number 34 was where many of the noted faculty members lived. Shaukat learned this from one of the officers who produced a badly handwritten list of names that were barely discernible. A quick inventory followed, of which Shaukat made little sense, and the orders were given to enter the premises, find the people that corresponded to the names, and kill them. Shaukat entered the house for a few seconds before the close quarters trapped the echoing gunfire too tightly within the walls and left him momentarily deaf. As he staggered back out with ears ringing, soldiers were dragging out professors

and scattering with them around the campus grounds, one of whom he saw from the corner of his eye lurch forward, stumble a few steps, and buckle at the knees before a screaming soldier jerked him up by his t-shirt. The man's round face had the permanent touch of a smile, as though nothing could fluster him, let alone stoke anger. His glasses were crooked, his bowl haircut pasted to his forehead, the touch of a mustache dabbed below his nose. He was an old, harmless man, Shaukat could not help but take account, driven out of sleep in the middle of the night. He should be allowed to go back to bed.

Major Shahbaz bounded up to the professor and the soldiers handling him. When asked, the professor said his name was Dev. Shahbaz sprung his list into view like a magician, and smacked the folded and crumpled sheet open. Dev, he looked for the name. Finding it, he called it out in full. Gobindo Chandra Dev. Which the professor confirmed. Shahbaz ordered the soldiers to carry on, which they did by marching the disoriented professor to a nearby field, with Shaukat following behind, where they shoved G.C. Dev out into the dark and fired a single shot.

The corpses were piling up, the stench of blood, sweat, soiled bodies already unbearable. Shaukat could not tell where one company ended and the next began in the scurrying, screaming mass of soldiers. His own company could be anyone's guess. He looked for Shahbaz, and he listened for his stentorian bark. After leaving where professor Dev had been shot, Shaukat tracked his way back toward Jagannath Hall. There he found Shahbaz not shouting, but telling his soldiers as calmly as he would compliment them for a job well done to leave the corpses of the Hindu students on the roof of the dorm. The Muslim ones of Iqbal Hall were to be collected on the campus grounds and buried in mass graves.

“Do something!” Shahbaz had yelled at Shaukat, as he commanded a troop of his soldiers to organize into a firing squad. Shaukat, hashing out of the melee his own platoon, ordered them to the roof of Jagannath Hall.

The corpses were in a mound like branches and sticks stacked for a bonfire. Shaukat held his nose, gagged, and shouted at the soldier who had a flashlight beam caressing the mound. Faces stopped in mid-terror, mouths agape, eyes glazed over and incompletely shut, a foot over a forehead, one sandal dangling from an inert heel, he wanted to see none of it. Below them, on the grounds, the first round of firing went off.

Patwari was panting by the time he reached his door, his hands unable to grasp his keys long enough to find the right one and insert it into the keyhole. Once inside, he slammed the door. His head was pounding, and he felt dizzy. He reached for a light switch, only to realize after he had flipped it how foolish it was for him to think that of all nights, tonight there would be regular electricity. He lit a match, found a candle in the kitchen where fortunately the woman and her son that cooked and ran errands for him were doing a commendable job of keeping order, and placed the candle on a sheet of paper that he dropped wax onto for steadying it next to the telephone. The line was dead. Another realization that escaped him, even as his heart calmed, the dizziness slowly ebbed.

When he opened a window he inhaled gunpowder. The rumble of tanks could be heard, their locations inexact. They were roaming the campus grounds, Patwari had no doubt, and they also came from every which direction he could concentrate on. He sat at the edge of his bed, taking into account his breathing, the way the doctor had told him to

be aware when circumstances got tense. It occurred to him that the night watchman was not at the gate. He was a man who took his job seriously, saluting Patwari when he left and returned, sometimes even giving him a report of the day's unremarkable events. As for his neighbors, the only one with whom Patwari was acquainted was a former foreman of a power plant, Haldar Samad.

Patwari took his candle and went from door to door knocking, receiving no response. He repeated the cycle, until he reached the foreman's door again, where one knock this time around had the foreman hissing from the other side.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Bhai, it's me, Patwari.”

After a silence, the foreman said, “Oh, Patwari bhai, forgive me.”

The foreman's home was also candlelit. He asked Patwari to come in, but Patwari stood at the threshold.

“Where is everyone?” Patwari asked. “I've knocked on every door, twice.”

“Bhai,” the foreman slid his spectacles from being almost at the tip of his nose back over his beady eyes. “Everyone is fine. They are inside.”

“But they don't answer their door,” Patwari said.

“Bhai, on a night like tonight, who would? Come in, please.”

“Where is the night guard?” asked Patwari.

“I don't know,” the foreman said, ominously. “God only knows what is going on out there,” he sighed.

No one was allowed to have a hair outside the main entrance of Hotel Intercontinental. The glass doors opened from time to time admitting more soldiers, a luckless visitor, and at one point a group of British diplomats that had been placed under arrest on their way back from a party at their high commission. They were escorted inside and commanded to keep their whereabouts confined to the lobby. At one point during the night, Helen had heard a shout, a frantic announcement, “My God, they are shooting everyone!”

Walter had been on the phone. Fortunately, the lines were running, and he, along with a few other reporters had been trying to reach their sources around the city. Helen had tried reaching Sam Truman at the consulate. The chaos was far too overwhelming there for the operator to locate him. She called three more times, on each instance getting the same operator until she was told with no amount of subtlety to stop bothering them and holding up the line. Walter sounded as though he had some luck reaching contacts, but every time he set down the receiver his expression was as hapless as though the news he received was of loved ones’ tragic deaths. There was a flicker of hope when the call of a Bengali newspaperman he knew relayed the news that crowds armed with iron bars and staves were racing through the downtown area. The call came minutes before the lines went dead, and the beacon light on top of the telephone exchange winked off.

Helen and Walter joined the milling groups of reporters in the main lobby. One of the features of the lobby Helen found enchanting was the three Chinese canary cages and

their occupants. She went by them, and found that they were covered with damask curtains. Under them the canaries were asleep. Helen paused before them, lost in thought, until she heard the whispering slide of the glass doors up front, and saw Walter stepping outside. There was already a soldier barking at him as Walter ignored the ravings and kept walking. Helen went past the shouting soldier, who had rerouted his commands at her as immediately as a machine turned around by the flip of a switch, to reach Walter just as the barrel of an automatic rifle rose, level with his stomach.

“Sir, we have issued warnings,” the soldier was unexpectedly polite.

Behind her, Helen heard the shouting soldier quiet down.

“It’s stuffy in there,” Walter tried to joke. “Just a little air. That’s still free, right?”

Helen touched his elbow, and the soldier’s eyes darted at her.

“Go back inside,” the soldier pressed the rifle to Walter’s forehead. Walter stumbled backward from the push, but caught his balance. In size, he outdid the soldier by margins enough to place them in separate weight categories.

“Please,” said Helen, “You can put that down. We’re not armed.”

“Like these assholes cared about that,” Walter said, turning around.

“What did you say?”

“I said nothing,” Walter, towering over him, breathed his words into the soldier’s face.

“You think I don’t understand you?”

“I think you understand me just fine,” said Walter. “As I understand you.”

“Go back in. Keep your mouth shut. And keep your woman’s mouth shut, too.”

In the lobby Helen saw some of the reporters drawn by their curiosity clump together to watch the show. Not one was stepping forward, whereas, at any given moment they could be heard bragging about their war corresponded stints in Vietnam and Korea, and some of their first assignments both as reporters and soldiers in Germany and England in the last days of the war. There they huddled now, like teenyboppers eager to see their matinee idols, stumped into inaction with awe.

“Tell her yourself,” said Walter.

The soldier’s mouth fell open. He raised his rifle again, to Walter’s chest.

“Go in, both of you,” the soldier ordered.

“Come on,” said Helen, pulling Walter’s sleeve.

The reporters tried to disband hurriedly, without seeming as eager as they had been. Helen held onto Walter’s sleeve all the way to the elevators. There two soldiers and two bodyguards stopped them.

“Where are you going?” one of the bodyguards asked. Bhutto was at the hotel for the night, and the bodyguard’s Tommy gun was leveled at an angle, ready to rise to the occasion as needed.

“To our room,” said Walter.

“You are living here?”

“Well no, but we are staying at the hotel for the moment, yes.”

After the two bodyguards exchanged looks, and the one that had questioned them escorted Walter and Helen into the elevator.

“Stay inside the rest of the night” he told them at their door.



“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Helen. “Outside, like that.”

“You can’t seriously be afraid of these clowns.”

“No, but I’d rather be afraid than get shot.”

“We’re the lucky ones, aren’t we,” Walter exhaled.

“No. We’re not.”

“Did you get hold of the judge, or those other people I met that day?”

“Their lines were busy. I’m not surprised.”

“You okay?” Walter stroked her face with his thumb. “I mean...”

“I hate the world right now,” said Helen.

“I know.”

Fires dotted the cityscape. Helen and Walter stood at their window, rendered mute by the night scene before their eyes. It was almost three in the morning. Sleep was more unfamiliar to them than what they were witnessing, and it seemed an impossible feat to break away and touch their bodies to the bed.

“What the hell...?” Walter gasped. Helen followed his eyes.

A jeep with a mounted machine swung into an alley, directly below them, just within sight so that they caught its advance and turn. Soldiers followed the jeep carrying a rocket gun. Helen opened the window. In a rush the coarse night air invaded the room. They heard shouting, from the alley the jeep had just entered.

“Oh my God,” Helen closed her eyes.

Of the dozen or so youths that had shouted at the jeep, there was no telling what happened, because they had scattered as suddenly as they had appeared. Ranjan Das saw

them scattering, and grew more adamant than he already was about reaching the office of *The People*, as were Mitali and the others, for they were convinced now, seeing the jeep nose into the alley that it had come to destroy the office and whoever was inside. Soldiers began shouting for the building to be cleared. Their flashlights sliced the darkness of the alley as they scoured the area.

“We have to leave, now!” Rounak hissed. “We cannot go near there!”

They crouched nearby, aware that the hotel was under armed watch, and getting caught would mean death. The first rocket fired at the building of *The People* sounded as though it had torn it down to the last brick. But then the machine gun on the jeep discharged rounds into the windows, until the building caught fire.

Mitali said, “Sons of bastards.”

“Let’s go,” Ranjan peeled away, tugging at her arm.

Captain Shaukat watched the students transport their classmates’ and roommates’ corpses to the grave that they had been ordered to dig, dump them, and then stand at the lip of the grave to be shot. Shahbaz and two other majors oversaw operation. Shaukat had a notion that he was already despised, for he had yet to use his holstered pistol. In his ear rang Shahbaz’s earlier “Do something.”

He unclipped the holster and drew out the pistol. Striding up to Shaukat, while the two other majors watched, Shaukat asked permission to join.

“What!” Shahbaz yelled, because he could not hear him, his ears were ringing so badly. “What!” he screamed, eyes bulging. Shaukat feared the pistol clutched in Shahbaz’s grip would be turned on him. He went toward the grave where a new set of

corpses had been flung in. Soldiers were jostling students to get in line. One of them fell to the feet of one of the soldiers, begging to be spared. The soldier's boot smashed across his jaw. The student was pushing off the ground with his hands when Shaukat pulled the trigger. The student's head squirted blood, and his lifeless body slumped into the grave. Confused by his intervention, the soldiers, harried, unnerved, and blind and deaf with orders, watched Shaukat as he went down the line shooting the rest. After the last one had fallen in, Shaukat plunged his pistol back into its holster, and walked past Shahbaz and the other officers.

They had split up to avoid suspicion. As they crept along Hare Road toward Kakrail Road the scene around them was at once clear and surreal. Mitali and Ranjan crouched low, walking mostly on their haunches, weaving in and out between rickshaws with their drivers lying dead next to them or sprawled across the seat. One scooter driver sat in his driver's seat headless, the windshield shot through. In the center of his stomach yawned a bayonet wound. The odor of burning rubber from a bus tipped on its side drew tears from their eyes. When they reached the vicinity of the Chowdhury house, they breathed deeply, and dashed. Bursts of machine gun and automatic rifle fire rose and fell in the distance. Most of it erupted near the university. Reaching the gate, Mitali told Ranjan that they should wait for the others.

Five minutes later there was no sign of them. Ranjan thumped the gate. No sooner had his palm touched the metal than a sharp scold issued from the other side.

"You have to kill me to get past this gate," said Anshuman. "I don't care who you are."

Ranjan looked to Mitali, who was searching the street for signs of their companions. He whispered, "It's me, Ranjan Das. And Mitali is with me. Kaka, please let us in."

The padlock clicked, the bolt cautiously slid open.

"Get in, quick," Anshuman opened the cutout gate, barely enough for Ranjan to squeeze through and drag Mitali in. She insisted on waiting. Ranjan finally grabbed her bony wrist and pulled with all his strength. She could take it, he knew, because she was stronger than him, their lifelong arm-wrestling matches yet to yield him a victory. "Now, go around the back. Don't make a lot of noise. Go."

Ranjan and Mitali stopped short of the entrance to the servants' quarters' courtyard, and cupping his mouth, Ranjan called for Mokaddas. All fell silent.

The kerosene lantern neared, dangling next to Mokaddas's face from his hand, illuminating his unperturbed stare. He recognized them, and ushered them into the courtyard. Seated in a circle were Hashmat, Amir, Huda Mia, and Shonali. On her lap was Sufiya, in fitful sleep. Sporadic gunfire and shouts drifted over the boundary wall, but everyone had become used to them, even the child, who seemed more disturbed by dreams and discomfort than external perils.

"Where have you kids been tonight?" Hashmat asked.

Ranjan scratched his head, mournfully. His head and eyes were downcast. Next to him Mitali had finally taken a seat, and was motionless, only the sound of her impatient breaths puffing out time to time.

"We had dinner at the canteen on campus with a few friends," said Ranjan. "And then we were going to go to the newspaper office. I was going to write a piece about

last week's meeting. The time got away from us. We were on our way to the office when we heard the tanks firing at the campus."

"Allah, what is happening," Hashmat said. "Why can't people just obey the law?"

"Obey the law?" said Mitali. "Whose law?"

"The law of the masters," said Hashmat. "We are ordinary people, and there are those above us, better than us, more enlightened than us, daughter. Masters and servants have existed throughout human history. Even God created the world in that fashion. What happens when that system is broken is chaos. Just as Iblis tried to destroy God's plan and was cast out forever, to burn in jahannum. Whom God makes masters, man is not to defy."

"Go take look out in the street," said Mitali. "Have you done that?"

"Voices down," Mokaddas warned.

"I have no need to go look anywhere," said Hashmat. "I know my place."

"Chacha, forgive us, we don't mean any offense," said Ranjan.

"Don't speak for me," Mitali told him. "Your God is a criminal," she said to Hashmat.

"Allah, ya'Allah," Hashmat clamped his mouth and gritted his teeth. He got up, and without another word went to his room.

"What did you see?" Shonali asked.

"Nothing you want to see in a nightmare," said Ranjan.

A soft, low humming started, at first confounding them, until they realized it was the gardener. Huda Mia was rocking slightly, his eyes closed, his sun-battered face the shade of bark in the glow of the lantern, making a throaty, tone-deaf tune. No one spoke, not even Mokaddas, to refrain him or tell him to quiet down. They were soothed by the

gradual smoothing out of the lack of tune, until a beautiful, serene succession of notes took over, and lasted a full five minutes. When it stopped, Huda Mia's eyes opened wide, and he grinned, baring the gap where his two upper teeth were missing.

“My grandfather,” he said, “used to sing that tune.”

“What is it?” Amir asked.

“I don't know,” said Huda Mia, “I never heard him put words to it.”

“I think everyone inside asleep,” said Mokaddas.

“Will you sing some more?” said Shonali. “It makes her sleep.” Sufiya was curled against her, deep in sleep.

Huda Mia cleared his throat and began humming. A different tune, sweeter than the first. He hummed longer, stretching out the notes to their furthest potential.

Mitali was standing at the mouth of the entrance to the courtyard; Ranjan kept looking at her. Amir offered him a beedi. Mokaddas left to go sleep in the kitchen, saying that he preferred to be as close by as possible in the event that Kamruzzaman or Zubeida called for him. Huda Mia kept singing, the notes elongated and sonorous, and his enjoyment seated on his visage of complete peace. As his humming faded to its end, the silence betrayed Ranjan's tears, Mitali's angst, and was filled with Anshuman sounding his nightly call to arms.

Through the night Imtiaz checked the phone, while the rest of the house was in a state of silent agitation. Lubna could be counted on to be reasonable, Imtiaz knew. Given the state of affairs as they had been in the country, they had, even if in passing, talked about the possibility of an all-out conflict. Finally, he gave up, and went to his bedroom to get some sleep. It was three o'clock. His uncle and aunt were in their room, not asleep, but Imtiaz chose not to intrude and disturb them. As he settled in bed, he heard snatches of conversation from the servants' quarters' courtyard, and then the slow rise of someone humming. Later came Anshuman's nightly calls, just as Imtiaz was slipping out of consciousness.

Around eight o'clock Imtiaz woke to the sound of knocking. His aunt was asking if he was awake and wanted breakfast. He said he had a slight headache, but did want breakfast. He sat up, rubbed his eyes until they hurt, and realized that Mokaddas had not woken him to deliver the morning's hot water. He used the cold tap water to wash his face and rinse his mouth, dressed in fresh clothes, and went out toward the verandah, from where he could hear the voice of his uncle apparently in the midst of a lecture.

Kamruzzaman was pointing out to Mitali and Ranjan Das that the announcement they had heard about an hour ago was a reflection of the army's desperation.

"What announcement?" said Imtiaz, pushing past, it felt to him, Mitali's immediate homing in on him with critical eyes, and sitting next to Zubeida.

“There were trucks,” said Zubeida, “with megaphones warning Bengalis to take down flags.”

“Flags of what?”

Kamruzzaman said, “These hasty fools that want to fly the flag of Bangladesh before knowing what the hell is going on first.”

Mitali was uncomfortable with this, and lowered her eyes.

“Rounak, Dilip, Khokon, and Anju were with us,” Ranjan was telling Kamruzzaman and Zubeida.

“Stop fretting,” said Mitali. “They’re fine.”

“I’m also sure they are fine,” said Zubeida.

“Have you heard anything from Patwari shahib?” Imtiaz asked Kamruzzaman.

“I hope to God he made home on time,” said Zubeida.

Kamruzzaman said nothing. Ranjan and Mitali were on their feet, Ranjan more anxious than her. He went down the verandah steps. When he reached the bottom he lit a cigarette and began pacing, muttering to himself.

“You can stay here,” Zubeida told Mitali. “For as long as you need to. Upstairs there are two rooms. Or you can take sleep in the living room if you prefer. And he can sleep upstairs.”

“Khalamma,” Mitali, for the first time since Imtiaz met her, showed signs of not quite weakness, acknowledgment of generosity when it was warranted. “I wish I knew what to say.”

“No need to,” said Zubeida. “I have to make it to market before the curfew.”



Mitali joined Ranjan, told him about the offer, and Ranjan looked as though he wanted to bolt up the steps and thank Zubeida. Instead, she took him by his arm, and led him around away from their sight.

“They’re just going to stay here?” said Imtiaz.

“He was staying at Jagannath Hall, and she at Rokeya,” said Zubeida. “Where else would they go? Their families are in Jessore. I just hope and pray the others are okay.”

“Mammi, is it...I don’t know...safe? Having them around like this?”

“I won’t throw them out,” said Zubeida.

“I’m not saying that. I’m only worried that...what if people follow them here that you wouldn’t want coming here?”

Zubeida offered a tight smile to her nephew, and said, “If we were worried about what kind of people followed each other here then a long time ago something would have happened.”

Imtiaz took the cryptic remark and thought it best not to push further on the issue. They were veterans in activism. Threats and perils had been part of their existence far more than normalcy, if indeed that concept held any meaning. Normal was doing exactly what they were doing. And even if Kamruzzaman had grown cranky and cynical with age, he preferred being a skeptical supporter to dismissive brute.

“When we hear from Patwari we should go out to the house,” Kamruzzaman told Imtiaz.

The hours crept by. Zubeida went to market accompanied by Amir and Shonali. Imtiaz paced around inside, checked the phone a few times, and resigned himself to

waiting. No amount of drinking could allay the anxiety. At that hour, his uncle would cast severe aspersions on his state of mind and health if he saw Imtiaz drinking. Imtiaz defied his guess, and snuck a swig out of the liquor cabinet. He brushed his teeth, and went to Kamruzzaman's room, where he found his uncle turning the dial of his transistor radio.

"Nothing," said Kamruzzaman, seeing Imtiaz. "I should send a message to Mubarak. See if he has phone connection. What with his growing level of influence. Why are you looking so ghostly? Everything is fine. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried," said Imtiaz. "Not about...I'm worried about my wife and children."

"They are in a safe place, right?"

"I think so. I wish I could be with them."

Kamruzzaman kept silent and trying to catch a signal on the radio.

Imtiaz went to the third floor, out to the balcony that faced the front of the house. The day was sunny, heat pushing down from the sky and rising off the scorched earth in a battle over superiority, and cloudless. As far as he could see beyond the perimeter of the property, the streets were empty. It was the sky that was busy. Crows and scavenger birds were in the distance, mutely hovering in the skies above Dhaka University, ever patient, endlessly hungry. Imtiaz shuddered at the sight. In the opposite direction there were sounds, faint and consistent, of tanks. He had a fleeting thought about his aunt being out there, going about the business of her daily life as though it were another day without exceptions. If ever there were someone that could and would defy disruptions with disruptions of her own, it was Zubeida Chowdhury. At the front gate, he noticed

Anshuman, standing outside his watchman's hut, nightstick in hand, picking at lint and other debris on his shirt and pants.

Mitali and Ranjan were sitting under the carport drinking tea. Imtiaz came down the stairwell, which had to be accessed via the carport, and he gave them a nod, on his way to see what Hashmat Alimuddin and little Sufiya were doing.

"I'm sorry about your friends," he said. He had not meant to direct the concern at either of them specifically, but his reluctance was ambiguous, and Mitali had caught on. Imtiaz, to his chagrin, realized he had spoken at all because, in a way, he had looked for her approval, a sign that she accepted his concern as real.

"Sit, sir, sit with us," said Ranjan. "Mokaddas kaka just made this fresh pot, have some." He set down his saucer for Imtiaz, onto which he poured tea. The burn of the alcohol was drilling through his empty stomach, and Imtiaz welcomed the tea. Ranjan watched him take a few sips. He set down his cup and said, "Sir? What do you think? You believe we'll become independent?"

"You're asking the wrong man again," said Imtiaz, dodging Mitali's attention falling on him as soon as Ranjan asked the question.

"Not just autonomy, no. Independent. I think those days of thinking about autonomy and working together are far gone. If ever they were here. After last night, no. There can be no going back. These butchers have to be thrown out."

"I hope what you say is true," Imtiaz said.

"If we do as Sheikh Shahib urged us, it will be," Ranjan declared. He threw a cautious glance at Mitali.

“Your uncle was saying the right thing,” said Ranjan. “When people get desperate they act without thinking.”

“What about you? What do you make of it?” Imtiaz asked Mitali.

“Forget her,” said Ranjan. “She’s ready to kill the next bloke that crosses her path. You should have heard her last night, when we were at the canteen.”

“Shut your mouth,” said Mitali. “Always talking nonsense.”

“Yes, I talk nonsense, I know. You have known it all your life. And here you are with me. Sir, you know, she could not stand it that I was leaving our town to come here to Dhaka. Made a hue and cry about it at her house, until her father relented. This girl, who never did a day’s work more than she needed to and excelled in school. The rest of us duffers, all we ever did was keep our noses in our books and suffer our parents’ wrath. And she, the big brains of the century, made her smart quips, hated us all, and got a scholarship.”

“A scholarship, that’s very good,” said Imtiaz.

“Ask her what she did, though,” said Ranjan. “She denied it. Told them she would work to pay her way. To give the money to someone more deserving. What a martyr, isn’t she? I told her to write for the *People*. But get her to do something she refuses to do and see what happens. I have a head for writing, always have, but this one, she makes people move.”

Ranjan’s appearance altered when he gushed over Mitali. Mitali was looking away, her pupils darting every so often at Ranjan.

“What kind of work have you been doing?” Imtiaz asked.

“What kind of work? Nothing. Not one thing, sir,” said Ranjan. “We came to Dhaka, and wanted to start studying right away. But one thing after another started happening. Every day there was something. And then the cyclone came, and we both went down to volunteer. Along with our friends that – our friends that were with us last night.”

“Do you have to talk so much?” said Mitali.

Ranjan ignored her. “Sir, nothing like it had I ever seen, and I pray I never do. There were people hanging from trees, without heads. Children torn apart. Villages vanished. We looked out over the water, heads and arms and legs bobbing in the water. And that bastard Yahya Khan, what did he do? Did he do anything? Foreigners were there helping us faster than our own government. And you know why, don’t you?” He paused long enough to give Imtiaz a chance to respond. When Imtiaz did not, he said, “Because we mean nothing to them. If we don’t understand that by now, sir, we deserve to be doomed.”

Hashmat came out of the servants’ quarters’ courtyard carrying Sufiya, whispering prayers at her face while the child tried to push away his paan-soaked breath.

“I was just coming to see you,” Imtiaz told him.

“This one was sleeping just fine, and then the moment I started saying a quiet prayer over her she woke up,” Hashmat swept aside Sufiya’s hair and tried to press the curly locks down one side in a part. “Allah’s protection in times like this is the one thing that keeps one and all safe.”

“Allah’s protection, chacha?” said Ranjan. “Allah, Ram, Isa, all their protection together couldn’t stop the cyclone or the army. How is that protection? What sort of gimmick is that?”

“We are the servants,” said Hashmat. “He the master.”

“Then keep serving him, chacha. With all my respect for your years. Strike your head five times, a hundred times a day on the ground. I will not serve a master as selfish and as loathing as that.”

“Your language is foul,” said Hashmat, covering Sufiya’s ear. Sufiya was stretching both arms at Mitali. Mitali smiled, and in the next moment the child was gleefully in her lap.

“Forgive me, chacha,” said Ranjan. “May I die a thousand deaths for speaking foul words against Him, but what sense does it make?”

“When did God say He had to make sense to you and me?” said Hashmat.

“Then what can we ever ask for? If not sense from Him?”

“Nothing. Not a thing. Besides begging his mercy and forgiveness with every breath.”

Mitali carried Sufiya to the jackfruit trees, where a rambunctious fight was in progress between feuding crows. The rowdier the birds got the more Sufiya found joy. Mitali stood with her under a canopy of branches, under where the commotion was coming from. Curious to see what was happening Mitali also became entranced by the unusual stirring. The only time she had seen crows converge on each other with human animosity was when they pecked a pariah a death. She knew them otherwise to be faithful

to their own, down to mourning for their departed and carting away the deceased as a community.

“I will not beg anyone or anything that doesn’t show more mercy than fury,” said Ranjan.

“What do you think makes you entitled to mercy?” said Hashmat.

The branches fluttered, at first a small tremor that rose into a violent rocking. A nest, most likely, was up there and the tussle was a family feud. It was almost comical to imagine crows having a row, mother, father, brother, sister, children, over who got the largest worms, the best scraps available, or whose share went unjustly to a member of the family that was undeserving.

“I don’t care about being entitled,” said Ranjan. “Does it make sense to you, a child being ripped out of its mother’s arm and dashed against a tree? Who does that that knows mercy?”

The branch went into tremors. The crows had reached a critical mass. Had they been people they would have been in a tussle, tumbling on the ground, tearing at each other’s clothes and hair and eyes and anything else that could be grabbed. Sufiya was overjoyed. Mitali saw the coil emerge out of the leaves, hanging with a bounce like a piece of rope being thrown down for someone to climb. She knew what it was. She moved back with Sufiya, but she was curious. The snake dangled from the branch, directly over the boundary wall. Sufiya had her arm extended as though she wanted to reach for the snake, clutch it in her tiny fist. The crows gave the branch a final jerk. The snake shook precariously, making a lurch in their direction, which sent Sufiya further into

a fit of joy. Mitali watched as the snake detached from the branch, struck the top of the boundary wall, and tumbled to the other side. The crows were suddenly silenced.

“Allah, who can talk sense to these children anymore,” Hashmat lamented, looking for confirmation at Imtiaz. Imtiaz had been distracted into watching Mitali holding Sufiya under the tree. He left the twosome to their debate.

“I’m old enough, chacha, to understand enough,” said Ranjan.

Imtiaz stood next to Mitali and Sufiya searching for what had their attention up in the tree.

“Snake must have gotten into their nest,” said Mitali.



Captain Shaukat could barely keep his eyes open let alone see through the haze of exhaustion. His head was as tight as though he had been on a drinking binge. Sitting in his jeep, he could not imagine how there were students still left. But they were there, before him, on the field digging graves and being shot. Above he saw the crows, and above the crows the vultures. The air was singed with gunpowder. It was early morning, or maybe it was afternoon. Checking his watch meant little in the way of explaining how time felt altogether warped. The face of the watch was covered under a splatter of blood, which had thickened, congealed, and crusted over into a black mass. Shaukat did not want to touch it. There were dirt streaks on his pants. One sleeve was covered in blood. His hands appeared clean.

The tanks had been rerouted to patrol the streets. Above, the sky was falling increasingly behind a curtain of hungry, flapping crows. No matter how much the corpses were buried, there were the ones left to rot on the roof of the dorm that were waiting to be pecked at and gorged on. Shaukat's stomach turned at the thought of scavenger birds descending on them, a wasteland on which he would not want to step again. What he had done during the night, shooting the six Muslim students, had clarified in his mind. If they were true Muslims they would have fought on the side of right. Instead, they had joined forces with the enemy. Hiding behind being Muslim was as heinous an act as maligning the Prophet (Peace be upon Him), Shaukat thought. His father would agree. Shaukat had

done his duty first, to his uniform, to his country, to his faith. Just as at the judge's house he was ready to defend the army's job when the general shut him down.

The engine throttled and growled to life. Shaukat broke out of his thoughts between the gunning of other engines and Shahbaz's shredded vocal cords tearing itself apart on more commands and orders. Shaukat was unable to make out at all what was shouted at him. His driver pressed the gas and they sped out of the campus grounds.

Umbreen was quiet when Shaukat walked in. She watched him undress, which was a first, without the slightest regard to her presence. He dressed and undressed in private, and when they made love, took off his clothes with the covers drawn. How she took her clothes off never seemed to matter to him. His uniform piled on the ground at his feet like shed skin. After he bathed, he brought out a fresh set of uniform, shouted for the servant that assisted him every morning, and down to the polish on his shoes, waited patiently to be minted anew. He ordered the servant to destroy the soiled and dirty uniform.

He was hungry. He was starved. So powerful were the pangs in his stomach that he marched past Umbreen as she was speaking, sat at the table, and wolfed down the entire dish of scrambled eggs, six pieces of toast heavily buttered, and then drained the pot of tea. After he was finished, he sat back as though he had quaintly and quietly eaten a small bowl of soup. He let a long, low belch leak out. The servant brought a bowl of warm water with floating discs of lime slices. Shaukat looked into it, at his reflection, as satisfied as he had ever been with himself, touched the ends of his tapered mustache, and then dipped the tips of his fingers into the water.

Umbreen was saying something about the terror she had felt through the night. Watching her, Shaukat concentrated on her mouth, round, full, quivering between words. She was buxom, her hips rounded and larger than most women her age when they were in university, for which she was openly envied. Women and men both told her repeatedly how gorgeous was her figure and how lucky she would make a man someday, even when it became certain that that man was to be Fazal Shaukat. Right now, she looked more fat than fetchingly Rubenesque. Shaukat remembered that term, from where he could not recall, but it was one attributed to women that embodied sexuality in the folds of their flesh, folds thick as velvet drapes, in their girth and rounded opulent thighs, voluptuous because of the abundance of flesh they carried in their skin, on their bones, which a lover would never be annoyingly poked by. He gazed at his wife's wringing hands. They were too large for his taste. The knuckles were pronounced mounds, and, despite never working a day in her life, her palms were as rough as a brick-breaker's. He would often have to dissuade her hands from touching him in sensitive places when they made love.

The night was rough for everyone, Shaukat told her, getting to his feet. His belly was full, pushing against his belt. He made a mental note to start doing sit-ups again, get back to the form of his academy days. She asked him where he was going. He looked down at her. The day was just beginning, he said, moving toward the living room. The servant scurried out carrying a rag and brush. While Shaukat stood talking to Umbreen the servant gave his shoes a buff. Umbreen said she would call her father, which meant lodging complaints to the man about her unhappy life in Dhaka.

"I will leave," Umbreen threatened.

"No one is going anywhere, Umbreen, not for a while."

“You can rot in this hell all you want.”

Hell. Shaukat dismissed the servant.

Shaukat told the driver to go to the cantonment. Seeing Umbreen come out of the house, the driver stopped midway from putting the car into gear.

“What are you waiting for?” Shaukat demanded. Seeing his wife, he rolled down his window. “I will be back in a few hours. Umbreen, it’s not a day to be difficult.” He had his window up by the time Umbreen’s face enlarged on the other side.

Helen and Walter had fallen asleep side-by-side on the bed, clothed, their legs hanging over the foot of the bed. Walter woke with a start as daylight washed over them through the window. His movements brought Helen out of sleep. Before him she was on her feet as though waking late for an appointment she had stressed about all night.

Smoke columns were etched black against the clear sky in various parts of the city. There was smoke rising from the location where they had seen the jeep with the mounted machine gun turn into the alley. Helen called the hotel operator. All outside lines were down, she was told. After she hung up, Walter did the same, drawing irritation from her.

Coming out of the elevators they no longer saw the guards with the Tommy guns, and the soldiers, too, were gone. They guessed that Bhutto had left the building, and they had slept through it. Walter chatted with one of the Brits that had been herded and sequestered to that corner of the lobby the night before. The man was hung-over and jovial. He told Walter that Bhutto had left looking like Jesus being paraded to his crucifixion. Only, Bhutto’s defiance was far more of a motivator than cause for humility. He went on about something else that Walter did not bother to catch. Helen, too, had

been speaking with an Australian, whom they had both talked with before, and whose claims to journalism were more dubious than he let on. Still, Helen learned more or less the same information as Walter. Sullen, though charged with a quiet angst, Bhutto had left the hotel a man bent upon victory.

On the hotel grounds the presence of soldiers was diminished. Walter and Helen walked outside. Rumbles of tanks punctuated the silence of the city, and they also heard announcements, about the curfew that was to start at six in the evening, underscored by warnings of not flying Bangladesh flags. The soldier that had pointed his weapon at Walter passed by them, without recognizing either him or Helen. Walter said hello and grinned, to which the soldier said nothing. As the air lined with acrid smoke burned their nostrils and brought tears to their eyes, three army trucks, preceded by a jeep, revved through the entrance, their brakes squealing in competition as they convoy halted at the entrance. Walter and Helen stood back, but did not go inside. Outside or in, both options were unsavory.

The officer, looking slightly dyspeptic, rolled out of the passenger side with the ambling movements of a man twice his size. He placed the visor cap on his head, and approached the entrance. When he was close enough to Walter and Helen his name badge revealed his identity. Captain Shaukat's eyes locked fleetingly with theirs as he pushed past them to enter the lobby.

“What’s going on?” Walter asked, following Shaukat inside.

“Gentlemen,” Shaukat addressed the journalists in their corner of the lobby, “you have to go.”

“Go where?” asked Walter.

Shaukat turned on him as if an unseen branch had struck the back of his head and startled him.

“Who are you?” Shaukat demanded.

“Walter Munsen.”

“Who is this woman? Is she with you?”

“I’m Helen. O’Leary.”

Shaukat turned once more to the journalists, who were still stupefied and unsure what to do. “Outside, everyone,” he ordered. Soldiers tramped into the lobby. The hotel staff stood stricken, the receptionists frozen in place. Shaukat was uninterested in them, while growing impatient with the people that were not obeying his command fast enough. There was murmuring among the journalists. Some were rising, wondering what the next step should be, while others understood perfectly well what was afoot.

“Are we going somewhere?” Walter asked, getting in front of Shaukat. Behind him he heard a couple of the journalists echo his inquiry.

“You are all being transferred back to your countries,” Shaukat made the declaration en masse.

“You mean we’re being expelled,” said Walter.

“If everyone cooperates we will all be on our ways promptly,” Shaukat spoke past Walter.

“And if we don’t?” said Helen.

Shaukat shot her a cold glance, wheeled around, and gave his soldiers the go ahead to herd the people into the trucks by whatever means were necessary.

Silently, the journalists figured it was in their best interest to cooperate. Walter watched his colleagues file out of the hotel and climb into the backs of the transport trucks. He took Helen's hand, and strode up to Shaukat, standing next to his jeep, waiting for the load-in to be complete.

"This is illegal," Walter told him.

"Is it," Shaukat said.

Walter felt the nudge of a rifle barrel in the small of his back.

Late in the afternoon, a few hours before curfew, Hakim Patwari set out on foot. The Chowdhurys would be anxious, he knew, Imtiaz especially, to whom Patwari would need to make the suggestion of a delay in the process with the house documents. Delay could be putting it mildly. The world had erupted. Who knew what dissolved in the fissures that had opened, what could be reclaimed, reinstated, and what was lost for good. He had heard the declaration of independence on the radio. Major Zia spoke on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had been flown away to prison in West Pakistan, from Chittagong, and pronounced Bangladesh free, the war for its complete emancipation in effect.

Imtiaz was disheartened. He accepted the news and had a mind to ask Kamruzzaman if Judge Mubarak's influence could be drafted. Before he could Kamruzzaman mentioned it himself.

"I don't think it's a good idea," Patwari advised.

"Why not?" Imtiaz asked.

"For one, it's a bit crass to have a federal judge get involved with a local matter. Especially so on a personal level."

Patwari and Kamruzzaman were on opposing ends of seeking favors through connections. Since retirement Kamruzzaman's requests for favors had declined substantially, and in fairness, it was he who once attended to more favors in one day than



there were hours to consider each one. There was never a sense of quid pro quo, but Kamruzzaman believed in returning help with help.

“I thought as much,” said Kamruzzaman. “When I was telling him about it that day at his house, the moment I mentioned it, I wanted to take it no further.”

“On top of that,” Patwari added, “Judge Mubarak is a visible man, with connections in the army.”

“Yes, yes,” Kamruzzaman muttered impatiently.

“It’s just best,” said Patwari, “to let things happen as they will.”

“But how long am I supposed to let things happen?” said Imtiaz. “I’m only here for a short time.”

“Well, son, I wish there was something more useful I could tell you. Think about staying a while longer.”

Zubaida said, “I wish you had come with your wife and children. All of you could stay here as long as you wanted to. It would bring some life back to the house.”

Imtiaz was irritated at everyone’s lack of understanding. He nodded wistfully at his aunt’s suggestion. There was nothing he could do. He could change his mind about the whole thing and go back to Chittagong at first opportunity, which in itself seemed as impossible as taking ownership of the house, or sit tight indefinitely and fight against his impatience.

Zubeida had moved on and was telling Patwari about Mitali and Ranjan staying at the house.

“Why do you want to bring trouble like that to the house?” Patwari said.

“I said the same thing,” Imtiaz chimed in.

“Troublemakers should take their troubles elsewhere,” Patwari said, not specifically to Zubeida, or Imtiaz. “I should go. I just wanted to come by and make sure everything was okay. My maid and her son also didn’t show up this morning. They live in Shakhripatti, and I just fear something has happened. My neighbor went out early this morning, and he said the campus was all but razed to the ground. He saw dead bodies, and soldiers still roaming around. He said he could smell the death as if it was falling from the sky like rain.”

As Patwari made his way out of the living room, voices rose near the front gate. The four of them hurried out to the verandah. Imtiaz was halfway down the steps when Mitali and Ranjan appeared, rushing up the driveway, two women and two men in their company. Imtiaz recognized the newcomers from the meeting at the house last week. Patwari scowled in their direction and trotted down the steps past them.

The foursome was under a barrage of questioning from Ranjan. Mitali was not interested in asking or following up on any questions, and the more detailed Ranjan wanted them to be the more their replies came to his dislike. What was cobbled together was that after they had scattered in order to avoid becoming targets, the four of them then lost each other. As a matter of course and safety, they tried to stay in pairs, but soon found it impossible to keep track of their own course as well as that of their partner. By luck they had all thought of Madhu Canteen as a place they could revert to. Over the next hour, one by one they regrouped at the beloved café that lay destroyed, where only a couple of hours ago they had had a meal.

“You are all mad,” said Ranjan, “to go back there.”

“Did you forget already that we said Madhu Canteen was our designated meeting place if something happened?” Rounak reminded him.

“These people aren’t human,” said Dilip. “Even animals kill with a purpose, to eat, to survive. These Pak bastards,” he glanced warily at Zubeida and Kamruzzaman, “they went on a rampage out of nothing but hatred. They don’t consider us human beings.”

“We heard the gunfire all night. The shouts, the screams. They were not going to leave anyone alive,” said Rounak.

Khoka was trying to hide his tears. His face was down, and his head and back bobbed as he wept. “So many times I saw their bright lights and heard those Punjabi soldiers screaming, and I thought my time had come,” he sniffled. “Liars, murderers, all of them.”

“The women they brought out of Rokeya Hall, they didn’t just shoot,” Rounak’s voice caught in her throat. “They used their bayonets on them in ways that...” Anju, sitting next to her on the floor of the verandah, placed her hand on Rounak’s. The one in their group that never spoke, Anju was quick to make her sentiments take physical manifestations.

“Evil is what they are,” said Dilip. “The devils own hand in their heads and in their hearts.”

“Thank God you are all safe,” said Zubeida. “Where will you go now?”

“They will stay with me and my family,” said Rounak. “None of them are from here.”

“Where is that?” asked Kamruzzaman.

“Gandaria,” Rounak said, with pride. “My father and uncles have a wholesale business. My friends will be well taken care of.”

“For now, get washed up and have something to eat,” Zubeida told them.

“We should get home,” said Rounak.

“What about you two?” Zubeida asked Mitali and Ranjan.

A momentary discomfort swept over the group. Mitali and Ranjan did not want to seem ungrateful. Had it not been for the Chowdhury house, they might well be roaming the streets right now. Madhu Canteen was gone, and if their companions had been as unfortunate as the rest of the students living on campus, there was no alternative to think about resorting to. Rounak had mentioned her family’s home before, as a last resort, but now it was before them like a haven where they could all be together, as they preferred to be.

“It’s fine,” Zubeida said, “make up your mind either way, the house will always be open to you.”

The final decision was to stay at Rounak’s. The frenzy of the last nearly twenty-four hours amplified to a new crescendo as Mitali and Ranjan gathered their belongings and then the six of them, with the promise to stay in touch, touched Zubeida and Kamruzzaman’s feet and said goodbye.

Tejgaon Airport was barren. That it was the city's major thoroughfare of air traffic would have hit a stranger by surprise. As such the building was unremarkable. It was a giant white cake topped with a single air traffic control tower, and during regular operations would be thronged with people, passenger and non-passenger, like a bus or train swarming with bodies, resembling a beehive, that were emblematic of Dhaka's rail traffic and streets. The only occupants of the compound now were half a dozen army trucks, two army jeeps, and the patrolling soldiers.

Helen, Walter, and the other journalists were herded into the terminal building, and Shaukat gave them a brief, curt briefing along the lines that representatives from their embassies had been notified. They were to sit tight and wait for arrangements to be made for their transfer out of Dhaka, most like to Islamabad, from where further instructions would be provided. At that point Shaukat's voice dropped, lost its confidence, until with a clearing of his throat he stopped talking. Walter raised his hand. Shaukat ignored him, looking out over the heads as if he were taking mental note of every face present. Walter stood up, cleared his throat, and spoke anyway.

"How much of what you say is actually in the works and what part of it is complete horseshit, Captain?"

Groans and admonishments rose around the room. The Brit that Walter knew grumbled something about the subtlety of American diplomacy. Helen gave Walter's sleeve a tug.

As a reply Shaukat ordered his soldiers to go around collecting belongings from everyone. That included, especially, note pads, notes, tapes, most of which was not on every person. Still, the loss was not negligible for those whose materials were confiscated. When it was Walter's turn, he ruffled through his pockets, pulled the pockets of his pants inside out, and showed that he had nothing. Helen, too, frustrated Shaukat with nothing to declare.

"Where are your credentials?" Shaukat asked Walter.

"What credentials?" said Walter.

"Your press credentials."

"Why would I have press credentials?"

"As a member of the press, how else do you have permission to do your work in this country?"

"The thing is Captain, the reason I don't have press credentials is because I am not a member of the press," said Walter. "Neither is my wife."

"I can vouch for him." It was the Brit.

"Who are you? Where are your credentials?" Shaukat turned on him.

The Brit ogled him wide-eyed. He scratched his chin thoughtfully. He yawned, releasing a blast of stale breath directly into Shaukat's face.

"I'm not sure what to tell you, Captain," he said.

"Your meaning?"

"My meaning, Captain, is this: you see that sack right there that your man is carrying with the hand that is free of his machine gun?"

Shaukat followed where the Brit was pointing. The bag was hanging like skin stripped of a person in the soldier's grip.

"That's it," said the Brit, "my credentials are safely tucked in there."

Shaukat did not have the patience or inclination to go rooting for his identification. He was pressed more by Walter's evasions.

"He can't vouch for me," Walter said. "He's been out drinking all night. Ask him if he even knows my name."

"Bugger off," said the Brit. Then he tried to say Walter's name. He met Helen's eyes, sure that he did not know hers. "Ah, bugger off."

"You see, Captain? My wife can vouch for me and for herself," said Walter. "If you don't believe me, ask her. She's a good Catholic girl. She won't lie to you."

"Madam?" Shaukat looked to Helen. Helen sat slightly dumbfounded by Walter's antics, but seeing that it was working on Shaukat went with it.

"I am a liaison, yes, with the U.S. consulate, as if my husband," she said. "Mr. Samuel Truman is our contact. You can check."

"Liars," the Brit grumbled. A scatter of voices that understood what was happening immediately shunned him. Even if they could not eke out an excuse, they were on board with two among them that could dodge expulsion. Many had already been kicked out of the country in the last twenty-four hours. They were the last of the journalists on the ground in East Pakistan. "Liars, the both of them," he hissed. Despondently, he sat down in his chair and sunk his head in his hands.

"You can check," Helen repeated. Shaukat did not want to believe them. He was recalling what had happened just hours before, at the campus. The way the heads of the

student remained steady on their shoulders as the insides caved out when he pulled the trigger. How their knees buckled. How, without the ability for hesitation any longer, they tipped backward. How with a warm slap they made contact in the mass grave with those that went before them. Lightheadedness from it struck him. Shaukat tried to keep his balance, maintain composure. He had no idea how long he would be stuck with these people. His stomach lurched, and if he did not turn right then he would have dry heaved over Helen.

Outside, he gasped for air. The clear sky had a defiant knife's edge purity, as though the most turbulent storm or overcast clouds could not impinge on its virginal mask. Umbreen, he thought, was at home, fuming most likely, whining to her father or mother, or worse, one of her sisters, any one of whom would be only too eager to jump on the next plane to arrive at her side to humiliate Shaukat with her, until he would have no choice but to ask for a transfer. They would end up, he bristled at the prospect, not in Rawalpindi or Lahore, or even Karachi, but somewhere in the Frontier Provinces, where he would have to deal with goat-herders and mountain humpers that could not tell from one day to the next what was Pakistan and which India, and why Kashmir was stamped on their minds as the land of God. Because Umbreen and her drinking had cast them out, made of them exiles from circles into which Shaukat's father would no longer stick out his neck for them to re-enter. When she found out that she was not able to have children, she went further down the hole, digging, scraping, burrowing, until she could no longer find reason to seek a way out. And there she intended to keep him buried with her.

Walter was still on his feet. Shaukat strode up to him, disliking the fact that he was at his chin and had to lean his head back to make eye contact.



“Who is your contact at the consulate?” he asked.

“Samuel Truman,” Helen replied. “He’s my contact.”

“You don’t have a contact?” he pressed Walter.

“He will vouch for us both,” said Walter.

“He will,” Helen added. She had sounded as though she were separating herself from Walter, no matter how much, more and more, it appeared that Shaukat was a thousand miles away, and was going through the motions here.

The others were peeled to the scene, which neither Walter or Helen had realized until they heard a stillness around them that made them place seem empty. The soldiers, too, were confused, riveted.

“What were you doing at the hotel if you are not journalists?” Shaukat asked.

“Is staying at a hotel a crime?” said Walter.

“Answer the question,” said Shaukat.

“We are not staying there,” Helen said. “We were visiting a friend, a journalist, who you’ve already thrown out. We were going to leave when you brought us here.”

She heard a scoff and guessed it was the Brit.

“And where are you staying?” Shaukat asked.

“With Mr. Truman, at his house,” Helen replied. “We’ve only been here a couple of months.”

Shaukat glanced around the cramped terminal, which was further reduced in size by the huddle of bodies, both of the captives and his soldiers. He was the very center of curiosity.

“If you give us a chance, we can prove it to you,” said Helen.

“Do something.” That was what Shahbaz had hammered him with, and Shaukat knew the words would never leave him. For the rest of time they would have one sound, one way of resounding, a fired shot from a pistol like his that consistently never altered its report.

“If you are lying to me,” said Shaukat, “I will not be beholden to protocol.”

They saw him climb into his jeep. Walter glared in the direction of the Brit, who kept his eyes averted. Helen was watching Shaukat’s jeep. The only movements she saw were his head turning time to time to address his driver.

“Not beholden to protocol,” Walter said, sinking into chair. “You almost sank me there.”

“Sorry,” said Helen. “Let’s let it go, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Walter leaned his head against the edge of the low chair-back, and closed his eyes. He reopened them and looked again at the Brit.

In Shaukat’s absence the soldiers tightened their watch. Machine gun and automatic rifles pointed at their charges.

“He forgot,” said Helen.

“What?” Walter’s neck popped as he turned his head.

“Captain Shaukat forgot that we met.”

“Oh, really?”

“Last week, at Judge Mubarak’s house.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

Helen crossed her arms as she saw Shaukat exit the jeep and stride toward the terminal.

“You and you, come outside,” he pointed at Walter and Helen.

“Bloody hell,” the Brit hissed. Someone told him to shut up.

“I had a suspicion,” Shaukat said, leading them away from the building toward the runway, “that I have seen you before.” He was addressing Helen. “Am I right?”

“You two must have some kind of telepathy going on,” said Walter.

“Am I right?” Shaukat repeated.

“Judge Suleiman Mubarak’s home,” said Helen.

Shaukat looked struck. As though the information he heard did not match his assumption.

“Just last week,” he said, nonetheless.

“Your wife is beautiful,” said Helen. “Umbreen, right?”

Shaukat stood back, to take a hard look at Helen. Walter, too, felt that was he was in the presence of someone whom he thought he knew, whose sleeves were stuffed with tricks, with no method to what they were and when they might dazzle.

“You have the memory of a journalist,” said Shaukat.

“Which is hardly official credential,” said Helen.

“She’s a writer,” said Walter.

Unaffected by this tidbit, Shaukat ignored Walter, and said, “What exactly is your capacity at your consulate?”

“We’re glorified interns, Captain,” said Helen. “To Mr. Truman.”

“This Mr. Truman,” Shaukat’s eyes flashed cynically, “he *is* a real man?”

“Well...” Walter began.

Helen had no patience for a snarky retort. “He is,” she said. “And he makes us do the work to keep his realness confirmed.”

Shaukat was silent for a long time. He scanned the horizon past the runway. Under his visor cap he was squinting, not from the sun, but as though what he was looking upon in the distance was upsetting.

“My driver,” he finally said, “will escort you to the consulate.”

“What about them?” Walter nodded at the terminal.

“Why do you care?” said Shaukat.

“Because I do. They’ve not done anything wrong. They’re just reporters doing their job.”

Shaukat chuckled, almost tragically, and spikes of ice shot down Helen’s spine.

“If to malign Pakistan is their job, it’s better they leave it undone,” said Shaukat. “I don’t remember seeing you at the dinner I met your wife. You let her go out often by herself?”

“I do,” said Walter. “Guess what else? She also goes to the bathroom. All by herself.”

Shaukat shouted for his driver to bring the car around. Without another word he pointed his gaze toward the terminal. The knocks of his shoes on the pitch could be heard all the way until he was inside.

It was a little known fact that before going to England, Suleiman Mubarak spent one unremarkable term at the university. The murder of G.C. Dev shocked Judge Mubarak. He had met the soft-spoken, cordial professor on several occasions, as the

judge had been a frequent donor and supporter of Dhaka University. More often than not Judge Mubarak declined ceremonies honoring his contributions, but over the numerous times he deigned to accept invitations when other supporters were recognized, he met and got to know G.C. Dev.

He remembered G.C. Dev being a revered figure among his students, especially the ones in financial straits, many of whom he fed, and opened the doors of his home to. Among his colleagues there was a solemnity that fell over the room at the mention of his name. G.C. Dev was unaware of the adulation. Judge Mubarak recalled one their last conversation, in which G.C. Dev had spoken at length about the connection between philosophy and the law, and how one could not only inform and shape the other but facilitate much needed transformation in the carrying out of jurisprudence in the country. With all due respect, he had said to Judge Mubarak, the frailty of humans that philosophy could look into and expose could be an effective tool in rooting out narcissism and nepotism in the justice system, a notion which Suleiman Mubarak would not dispute one bit and rather wholly embrace.

Driving through the city, Judge Mubarak wondered if he had fallen asleep for a long time and awakened in another time. Three nights ago, the earth had concussed. He went to sleep, the brandy in his blood, the tobacco cradling his brain, his heart uneasy. Up and down the ghostly streets, abandoned at the last minute by fleeing masses, stained by the blood of those that could not leave as fast as the danger came for them, the judge drove along. He had not been behind the wheel in several years. Today he told his driver that he would go alone, because Judge Mubarak wanted no other presence around him to absorb the complete effect of what he might see.

He tried the army cantonment first. At the entrance he was close to being ordered out of the car and detained. The young MPs had barely started shaving, the splotchy shades of growth on their cheeks like water stains set into the surface over years of neglect. Judge Mubarak allowed them their confusion before offering his curfew pass, identification, and, as much as he hated it, naming names. The MPs gave him bewildered expressions at the mention of generals whom they would never see within touching distance, who were more mythical than human. Judge Mubarak thanked them.

Burnt rubber, seared flesh, and the scent of blood was everywhere. The heat of the day forced him to keep the windows rolled down, but the intrusion of the odors was severe. Judge Mubarak kept his curfew pass extended out the window. Soldiers were everywhere. Tanks were patrolling, jeeps were making rounds as if they were out on test drives. Judge Mubarak made his way to the Dhaka University area. At one point he stopped the car, peeked his head out to glance at the sky. The crows and vultures were so profuse that every so often they blocked the sun. He drove by House 34, where he knew G.C. Dev had lived, finding the building unlit and deserted, whatever dangers it posed, eliminated.

He passed the battered and shelled hulls of the dormitories. Near Curzon Hall he wanted to get out and walk the grounds, but a sight that immediately came into view pushed his heart into a thudding frenzy. He caught his breath, looking out over the mounds like humpbacks on the ground, and pressed down on the gas.

He did not care to think in terms of knowing people, dropping names. But so it had become thanks to the careless behavior of a number of Bihari judges that had created a situation that spread the message that Bengalis were their chosen, special targets. Petty

crimes that deserved a fine and probation were handed sentences of death. Being a federal judge meant nothing in the matter. It placed limits. It kept him manacled. The lower courts were running amok. Simply put. And it broke Suleiman Mubarak's heart.

He had faced the police bullets. Jinnah had stood before the crowd that day in '48 - gaunt to the point of skeletal, lungs screaming inside him, eaten up and ready to end their tenure, robbing their owner of enjoying for just a little longer the victory of his final act of defiance and obstinacy – and told Bengalis that only Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan. Had the judge had more foresight, he would have seen it that day. He had been a bad judge. When the bullets flew four years later, six protestors fell feet from Suleiman Mubarak. He went to their funeral, which was already a simmering rebellion. He was as Bengali as any of them that refused to accept Jinnah's slight. It was true that once he had lauded Jinnah, thought him superior to Nehru, Gandhi too, in his devotion to unity. He had, in fact, been suspicious of Congress' Hindu agenda, as much as he had distanced himself from the Muslim League's blindness. But now, here he was, having to prove himself, lessened in whom he was by association to the few who had made it about choosing sides. By the worst means possible. By antagonizing. Uprooted, displaced, left-behind slivers of people who were now turning the tables on the place that had been home.

Seeing the jeep parked in his driveway, Judge Mubarak wanted to turn around, not go into his own home. Captain Shaukat was leaning against jeep, and seeing the judge's car had raised his hand, a half-salaam-half-salute. His visor cap was trapped between his arm and ribcage. Young and fresh though his face was, it was scorched by the sun, and he appeared overall run down and depleted, despite his crisp uniform.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Captain Shaukat said. “I apologize for not calling first.”

“Of course not,” said the judge, getting out. “You look like you need a glass of cold water.”

Judge Mubarak let his guest settle in. Shaukat drank two glasses of water back to back, and then sat staring at the floor for five minutes. The judge looked at his watch and timed the silence, a habit he had acquired over the years on the bench to keep from nodding off during the more mundane cases.

Shaukat was more shriveled than he had seemed at first glance. And it was not only because he had gotten too much sun. There was an aspect about him that was withdrawn. In the short time since he had been at the judge's house for dinner Shaukat's body language had acquired an altered composure. The formal, military academy bearing, and the first few years of being in assignments where that comportment was the beginning and end of how he had to carry himself, was harried out by an urgency that Shaukat seemed not to adjust to with immediate success. Judge Mubarak noticed a stain, a dark, soaked-in smudge, on the top of Shaukat's visor cap, which was on his lap.



“Sir, it occurs to me that I’ve been rude,” Shaukat finally said.

“Have you?”

“Yes, sir. My father would be incensed.”

“Well, whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not as serious as that.”

“It is.” Shaukat grew so despondent before speaking again that the judge wondered if he was going to break down. “I didn’t properly thank you for the reception. Both Umbreen and I are truly indebted. This place...this city...Umbreen,” Shaukat was quick to add, “she just can’t seem to understand...or...well...she hates it here.”

After a pause Judge Mubarak said, “It was my pleasure. Your father is a good, respected man. I’ve known him many years, even if we were never close friends. Army wives have a tough life to begin with, and in places like Dhaka, especially when you’re so far removed from the culture and climate you’re used to in Lahore and Islamabad, it can’t be easy. Has she made friends?”

“Far removed,” Shaukat repeated. “We’re in the same country. One would think the difference should not be so...devastating.”

“It happens to be. That’s just the reality.”

“Umbreen is not usually open to making new acquaintances in a rush.”

Judge Mubarak wanted Shaukat to come out with the real matter behind his visit. He had been in too many situations where the conversation wavered from one filler to the next, making an already thick atmosphere needlessly more weighty.

“Last three days have been unlike anything I’ve experienced,” said Shaukat, staring directly at the top of his visor cap. The stain there had no effect on him. “That American woman that was at the party,” he said, suddenly, maintaining his respectful

composure, “I met her, I remember, but I can’t remember if she told me she was a journalist or not.”

“Helen.” Judge Mubarak took a moment to study Shaukat’s expression before going on. “She is a writer.”

“Her husband?”

“Also a writer.”

“His name was...he wasn’t at the party, am I right?”

“Walter was not there, you’re right.”

“I see.”

Judge Mubarak had heard about the expulsion of foreign journalists, and now the fear seized him that Walter and Helen was among them.

“Captain, how is it under General Farman’s command? I know him to be a man of principle, but as a general he must be quite a role model for his men.”

“I had occasion to see Miss Helen, and her husband.” Shaukat spoke as though the judge had not. “At Intercontinental. They told me they were visiting friends there.”

“Helen’s family knows people at the consulate. Her parents have a wide circle of friends in the diplomatic corp.”

“They told me,” Shaukat chuckled, “they were ‘glorified interns’ at the U.S. Consulate. Working for a man named Truman...? That was it. Truman. I remember thinking of the American president at the name.”

“Sam Truman, yes. I know him, too.”

“And you can vouch for their position at the consulate then?”

“That is not for me to do,” said the judge. “If you want someone to vouch for them, go to the source. Ask Sam Truman.”

“There is no chance then, that they’re journalists?” Shaukat asked.

“I understand, there was quite a comprehensive removal of foreign journalists out of Dhaka. You must know better than me. If you wish to know my source on that, it was Mr. Truman that told me. But he said nothing about Helen or her husband. That is probably because they are not journalists. Does that confirm your suspicion?”

“I’m not here to disrespect you or to cast aspersions on your friends,” said Shaukat. “My father has great respect for you, and he told me before I came here to seek out your counsel if I needed to.”

“I’m positive that you have the counsel of far better men at your disposal. Being under General Farman’s command, you must have an abundance of superior counsel.”

“I’m a junior officer, and I answer to junior officers that General Farman hands down orders to. I said three words to him at the dinner party. ‘Good evening, sir.’ You know him much better than I ever will.”

“He is a friend, yes, and he has been my guest on many occasions.”

“You know his intentions.”

“I know what he has told me, which is not much. He speaks quite a lot about his daughter.”

“I will most likely never say another word to him directly again,” said Shaukat.

“Or for that matter the other generals that were there.”

“You were prepared to challenge my friends, Mr. and Mrs. Chowdhury, at the dinner table, had it not been for the other generals.”

“Situations like that never fare well, for anyone,” said Shaukat.

“Depends on which side one is on,” said the judge. “I imagine in your place, among those generals, it is not the most free and open place to voice your opinion.”

“I’m an army officer,” said Shaukat, “opinions, when I can have them, are a luxury.” With great care he set the visor cap on his head, giving it a push once it was in place. “If you see them again, your friends, do give them my regards.” Shaukat bit his lower lip as though the last part was not supposed to have escaped.

“I didn’t have the chance to offer you some refreshments.”

“Thank you, but another time. I’m sorry again to have bothered you.”

At the U.S. Consulate there was chaos, too. Consul General Archer Blood had set off a firestorm between himself and his staff, the Department of Defense, and the State Department by issuing a telegram outlining the crackdown of the night of March 25. Judge Mubarak had to call back three times, each time being put on hold for several minutes, before being connected with Sam Truman. Slightly intoxicated, which was saying much for him, Sam Truman growled into the phone as soon as he picked it up. Evidently he had not been told who was on the line for him.

“Goddamn right those two boneheads were brought here, to me,” Truman started laughing. It was a harrowing, infectious laugh, lined with the garble of a smoker’s cough.

“So, they’re fine?”

“They’re hunkered down at my place for now. I don’t know how long that can be the case, but for now they’re snug little bugs. How’re you doing?”

Judge Mubarak told him of Shaukat's visit. Sam Truman heaved a long sigh after listening.

"You got the uniforms here, and we have Hank," he said, "tell me which one's worse and I'll show you a hangover that's preferable to either."

Hank was Sam Truman's self-professed arch nemesis, Henry Kissinger. He had met Kissinger on one occasion several years before at a dinner where their conversation had lasted ten minutes during which Kissinger had conveyed his moral, ethical, political philosophy with regard to the Third World in one word, depopulation. When Kissinger was appointed National Security Advisor, Sam Truman was convinced the world, Third and the rest, had seen the anointment of evil in the most delicate throne on Earth. Since the Blood Telegram, as the missive had come to be known, had leaked out of the consulate its greatest rival had been Kissinger, who had trampled on every foot, bullying his way from his office, to Defense, and State all the way to the White House to kill it.

"So, it went out?" Judge Mubarak asked.

"I'm still trying to believe it myself, but yes. Listen, don't worry about the kids. I'll let them know to be in touch. I'll be in touch myself when I can."

After hanging up the judge felt neither better nor reassured.

Imtiaz found it disorienting, the extreme calm in his wife's manner, which was louder than any protest she could have voiced. All-out tantrums were not in Lubna's character. That too would terrify Imtiaz.

The situation in Chittagong was not as bad as Dhaka, but there had been arrests and nighttime raids in home of Bengali sympathizers that were prominent citizens, journalists, and activists. What information Lubna had she had gotten from her brother, who, she told Imtiaz, was apoplectic one moment and eerily hopeful the next. Riaz Mirza had always been a quiet supporter of a unified Pakistan, or, as it were, against the notion of Bangladesh. As a Bengali his position was middle of the road. Had he been born into another culture, that would be that. He had no particular affinity for such allegiances or sense of self. His devotion was to his work, to the import and export business he had built with his father's inheritance. His extreme anger rose out of the insufferable mess everyone was suffering through because of Mujib, Bhutto, and Yahya, and in times when it seemed the army was on the brink of taking control and returning day-to-day life to a moving tempo, Riaz Mirza kept his fingers crossed.

Imtiaz had nothing either way to say about his brother-in-law or his inclinations, political or otherwise. Riaz Mirza saw money first, with monomaniacal practicality. The Mirza parents had resigned their finances to their son, had been forced and coerced by Riaz Mirza to do so, relegating themselves to being beholden to him for their living finances. Like a frugal, incorrigible moneylender, with a vacant chamber for accrued

interests where a heart was supposed to be, Riaz Mirza doled out his mother and father just enough to live on month to month. Their medicines, doctor visits, groceries, gas, water, use of amenities at the house, servants' salaries, were strictly monitored by an accountant that answered to Riaz Mirza.

What Imtiaz wanted above all else was to settle accounts with the man and hope he would be exit his center stage role in their lives once and for all. Hearing his son in the background Imtiaz asked Lubna to call Timur to the phone. Panting as though he had fled predators Timur blew his breaths into the receiver more than he talked. Finally, Imtiaz grew disgusted, refrained from scolding him, and told him to put his mother back on. Instead of taking the phone again, Lubna called for their daughter and handed the receiver to her.

Tina was her composed self. Each day, Imtiaz felt, his daughter aged a couple years. In the morning she would emerge out of her room different. The difference was not momentous, an outsider would miss it. To a parent it was a seismic shift. The way she would walk out, take stock of her needful things for her day, enter the dining room, set down her schoolbag with the care of a lifetime spent monitoring her movements, and engage formally with the routine of breakfast and small talk, which was not something she preferred and outwardly disliked. It was one reason she rarely found people her age bearable company. Tina, Imtiaz knew, was a listener. And so she listened more than that speaking as Imtiaz told her about Dhaka, the Chowdhurys, and the unfolding events, until he ran out of things to say and fell silent.

“She sounds too serious,” Imtiaz told Lubna. “Is everything okay?”

“Her teachers did a walkout.”

“Walkout? Where?”

“A walkout. In protest.”

“Of what? What the hell are teachers protesting?”

“The army,” said Lubna, as if it was a given and Imtiaz was a fool for asking.

“For God’s sake, they have nothing better to do? What are the children supposed to do? Become street urchins? When do they plan on walking back in?”

“There’s no definite time.”

“Tina I’m not worried about. She’s fine on her own.”

“Timur is also fine,” Lubna quickly pointed out.

She was never one for putting their children on an imbalance when it came to caring and disciplining. It was natural for them to be individually made up in their separate ways and characteristics, but she kept her parental grasp even. She often told Imtiaz that Tina would not be treated as a girl just because she was born as one, and Timur would not be brought up to understand he was different from his sister, for better or worse. They were equals. Imtiaz wondered sometimes how Lubna’s goodness did not drive him mad with loathing for righteousness, but the way she managed her convictions, without calling attention to them unless someone was looking for a way in to be critical, made them come across as facts that if they went unseen or unobserved would be a bigger oversight than being cautious and tiptoeing around righteousness.

“Of course he is,” said Imtiaz, weakly, eyeing the liquor cabinet, glad that Lubna was not in the room to see his need for a drink. That would be the point where her righteousness would become truly unbearable. “I don’t want to stay here any longer than necessary, but it will take longer...”



“Then stay.”

She said it without trepidation, without pressure. She meant it, more so than if he had tried to tell her in order to convince her. She did not hear his compulsions more than she already knew them.

“Maybe it won’t take so long,” he tried to sound hopeful. “Patwari shahib is a practical man, really.”

“You know best what to do...”

“Lubna, please, don’t say it like that. What else am I supposed to do? I made the right decision. This is all I had. What would I do? Beg your brother for more? As it is the man owns my blood...” he realized his voice was rising. “I don’t understand him, men like him. What’s going to happen? The world will open up and swallow his fortunes? How much money does one man need? For God’s sake, he’s not even married, has no children, nothing. Just himself...” again his volume was moving toward a peak he did not want to reach his uncle and aunt.

“Please don’t speak of my brother like this anymore,” Lubna said.

“Lubna, you and your strange worship of him that I’ll never understand, and your parents fear of him. Is it any wonder the man thinks he owns everyone and everything?”

Her silence in response had the power of a punch.

“I’m sorry,” Imtiaz said. “I hate it when you just stopped talking like that.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

That your egomaniacal brother is wrong, and I’m right, Imtiaz heard in his head, and kept it there.

“I’ll call back when there’s news.” A pause ensued, and he said, “Lubna, you have faith in me, don’t you?”

“I do.”

Wishing he could believe her, Imtiaz said goodbye and hung up.

The gulp of scotch he took right out of the bottle burned his throat, it set afire his insides, just enough to smolder the self-pity he could not handle.

A week later Patwari suggested they pay the house a visit, check to make sure things were in order. The night of the crackdown the area near the house was a hot zone. Minutes away from it was the Peelkhana barracks, as well as the home of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Patwari was certain that the old house had been left alone as always, but he believed it would offer Imtiaz some peace of mind to take a look in person.

Patwari came to the house after breakfast, and at first seemed uneasy. His eyes kept roving, searching for something. Catching on, Zubeida read his mind and told him the young people were no longer staying there. It embarrassed him for a moment to be so openly called out, but he managed to save face by turning his concern around on the Chowdhury house.

Imtiaz grew curious about Patwari’s inordinate level of not only discomfort and unease but latent dislike for his aunt’s young students. When he asked, Patwari was short.

“They think they’re something they’re not,” he told Imtiaz, gruffly.

As they left the house, the conversation in the car turned to the arrest of Sheikh Mujib and the declaration of independence. They kept their windows up, so their words would not fly out and land on the wrong ears. Soldiers patrolled the streets at all hours,

and tanks could be seen idling, or coasting down deserted lanes. Army jeeps flitted by every so often, breaking suddenly into sight as if blasting out of a rip in the universe, and disappearing just as swiftly in swirls of dust.

A provisional Bangladesh government had been established over the eastern border in India, led by Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed, and named after the leader of the Awami League, the Mujibnagar government. The government in exile had been set up functionally into fifteen ministries and divisions, including defense, which was placed under the charge of General Osmani. What any of this meant was not immediately clear, but Patwari was speaking enthusiastically about the development, his earlier tone and demeanor of suspicion and antipathy altered to one of almost childlike fancy.

Caught up in the much-needed sense of hope, Imtiaz shared his optimism, especially having to do with the transfer of the house, the money from it alleviating his financial straits.

“He really has you in a bind, doesn’t he,” said Kamruzzaman.

“Lubna’s brother is more talk than action,” Imtiaz tried to reclaim his optimism. He did not appreciate his personal life shared in this manner, and he tried to convey as much to his uncle with a scowl. Kamruzzaman was turned away, looking out the window.

“People like him usually are,” he said. “His father made his money on the black market during the Second World War. When there was famine in Bengal in ’43, Daulat Mirza was hoarding rice rations in a warehouse that he sold to the British at ten times the market price. Stomachs here were not as important to the war effort as fighting the Japanese in Burma.”

Imtiaz respected his father-in-law. From Lubna he had heard stories of his wealth and how he gained it, to which Imtiaz paid little mind. As he saw it, it was not his place to judge the man, to judge no man or woman for that matter. But such high-minded awareness aside, Imtiaz had been treated with love and respect by Daulat Mirza, and it was more than he could hope for, given his and Lubna's fraught courtship that was finally transformed into marriage by the interception of their respective mothers. Daulat Mirza even had an enviable dowry he was willing to part with. Imtiaz had no trouble not seeing his father-in-law as a war profiteer.

"His son seems to be following in father's footsteps with eminence,"

Kamruzzaman added, the spite in his voice unhidden.

"All wars have profiteers, Mamma. Let's see how truly patriotic every Bengali proves to be in this one."

"Well," Kamruzzaman sighed, "if these people and their exile government don't accomplish what they're making all the fuss about, God help them, they'll all be facing a firing squad."

The short-lived hopefulness in the car was now completely subdued. Imtiaz wondered if his uncle got pleasure out of his newfound cynicism toward everything. The man he remembered, and the vigorous, life-loving brother his mother bragged about to the point that her eyes shone, felt like a myth, like so many family myths that were larger than any truth could contain. Kamruzzaman and Zubeida had once been patriots, activists, fighters. Zubeida was continuing the legacy in her small way. She too was depleted, but did not allow her depression to weigh down the mirth of others. Imtiaz went on thinking, trying to understand his uncle's bitterness, until the matter with his son, Murad, came to

mind. As he wondered how he would react if, as a grown man, Timur had hit him, the windshield produced sight of the checkpoint near the traffic circle by P.G. Hospital.

Up ahead Amir saw the checkpoint. He slowed the car, causing conversation to lower until there was silence. One soldier manned it. Unusual though it was that the soldier did not have a companion, it was still a barricaded checkpoint. The soldier stood in front of it in a stance that was ready to deliver as necessary. Amir had reduced his speed far in advance. By the time he was within distance of the soldier holding up his hand to halt him, the car had rolled to a stop. Everyone reached for his curfew pass.

But the soldier was shouting, ordering them to step out of the car. Patwari turned around, checking with Kamruzzaman and Imtiaz, and then seeing what Amir was doing. Amir had pushed open his door. His hands were out and up, one of them holding the curfew pass.

Amir began waving it because the soldier gave no indication that he saw it. The soldier went on shouting orders, taking steps forward, all of which were in Punjabi. There was no need to understand what he was saying to hear what he wanted them to do. Precariously, his temper was rising. When he got closer Amir and the others saw that the soldier was drenched with sweat, his misery and rage linked to the heat under which he had to do his job.

“Sir, here, I have this, we all do,” Amir kept his pass held high. The others offered theirs, leaning toward the driver’s side window. Their heads converged like they were jostling to get ahead in order to have a good view of an attraction.

“Was I talking to your mother, son of a whore?” the soldier growled. His face closed in on the window. Under his helmet the sheen of the sweat made it seem as though he had just given his forehead and cheeks a shine. Up close was also visible a scar in the shape of a sickle. His name, written on the badge on his right breast, was Bismillah. He kicked the driver’s side door. The bang of his boot on the metal vibrated under the seats. His semi-automatic entered through the window, past Amir’s face, hitting the inside of the car immediately with a pungent blast of oil and gunpowder. “Do I have to tell you again?”

One by one they climbed out. Imtiaz was already aware, as he got out, that something was not right with Kamruzzaman. His uncle was trying his best to be inconspicuous as he tried to wrangle his inhaler out of his pocket. Kamruzzaman’s breathing had started to become labored.

Imtiaz wished there was a way he could warn his uncle not to fidget, but in his place he too would want relief as soon as possible. And, any sudden move or speech would set off the soldier, who was ranting again because they were taking too long, this time in Urdu.

“What’s the matter with him?” Bismillah asked.

“He’s ill,” said Imtiaz.

“Get your hands away from your pocket!” Bismillah shouted at Kamruzzaman.

“It’s his medicine,” said Imtiaz, “he has to take it.”

The soldier strode up to Kamruzzaman in three long, stomping steps, grabbed his hair and smashed him across the face. He kned Kamruzzaman in the stomach repeatedly, until Kamruzzaman started coughing and flailing his arms to get the soldier off him.

“When I say stand up straight, sisterfucker, I don’t mean jerk off all you want! I mean stand up straight!”

Bismillah flung Kamruzzaman back. He crashed against the car and sank to the ground.

“Why did you do that?” said Imtiaz.

Patwari glared at Imtiaz. “Sir,” he told Bismillah, “he’s ill. Please, let him take his medicine.”

“What wrong with him?” Bismillah asked, a little stunned by the groaning, grating sounds coming out of Kamruzzaman. “Did he swallow a donkey?”

“Breathing problem, sir,” said Patwari. Bismillah walked over and kneed him in the groin. Then the soldier turned to Amir and said, “Help him. Go! If you other two move I will shoot you.”

Kamruzzaman was fitful with panic. As Amir tried to help get his inhaler out Kamruzzaman smacked at the driver’s hand, not to prevent him but for himself to get to the inhaler first. Amir grabbed his arm and held on tightly, while with the other hand he reached slowly into the pocket and drew out the inhaler. As soon as it was held up for him Kamruzzaman snatched it.

Despite the plugs, Kamruzzaman kept heaving for breath. Bismillah stood over him and Amir. Kamruzzaman’s face contorted each time he inhaled, from the pain in his stomach. Amir looked to Bismillah, and then cautiously reached over to help Kamruzzaman to his feet.

“Where are your curfew passes?” said Bismillah. “Show me again!”

When the rest of them displayed theirs, Kamruzzaman, slowly recovering enough to stand and keep his bearing, found that his was missing.

“Where is your pass?” Bismillah raged at him. “Where is it?” He punched Kamruzzaman in the stomach.

“Wait a minute,” said Imtiaz, “maybe it’s in the car. He had it.”

Bismillah tramped up to him, brought his face near, within inches of the tips of their noses touching, leaking rotgut fumes and bad-breath, and nosed the point of his weapon into Imtiaz’s chest.

“Then look for it. Or the old man goes nowhere.”

Imtiaz went through the car, checking the floor in the front and back. The whole time Bismillah kept shouting for him to hurry up. The pass was nowhere. Imtiaz dug his hands in the crevices of the seats, searched under them, flipped down the visors, checked the glove box, places where the pass could never have ended up unless purposefully placed there. Sweat poured out of him like rainwater from a tree after a downpour. There were four of them, three, not counting Kamruzzaman, and they could overpower the soldier. Amir would be in on it, Imtiaz had a feeling, if Imtiaz made the first move. Patwari would be a reluctant ally, but would throw in his weight. As Imtiaz kept up his search, he saw Bismillah, shouting, pull Kamruzzaman by his collar and move him to the other side of the road, by himself, then step back. He was preparing to shoot him.

“Wait!” Imtiaz yelled.

Bismillah’s head turned on a swivel. “You found it?”

“What are you going to do? Just shoot him like this, in broad daylight?”

“I do whatever I want.”



“Fine. But what point is it to shoot a sick man?”

“You want me to shoot you? Where is the pass?”

Imtiaz, his heart crashing against his chest like hammer hits, scanned the ground around the car. There was no sign of the curfew pass.

“I have it,” he said. He had pocketed his own pass after showing it few minutes before. He brought it out, believing that the soldier did not read English. All passes would look the same to him. “Here it is,” he raised his pass above his head.

Bismillah pushed the edge of his helmet back and motioned for Imtiaz to bring it to him.

“Where was it?” he asked.

“On the ground.”

“This is his pass?”

“Yes, it is.”

Bismillah snatched it from him and looked at it. Watching him trying to read it, Imtiaz’s heart calmed down. He was holding the document upside down. A drop of sweat rolled down the soldier’s nose and dropped on the pass. He threw it back at Imtiaz.

Kamruzzaman was standing where he had been placed, eyeing Imtiaz and Amir and Patwari with an unreadable expression on his face. Imtiaz noticed scattered pedestrians wanting to stop for the show but thinking better of it. The bastards, Imtiaz thought, so much for their camaraderie and solidarity.

They were commanded to line up side by side again. “Are you kaffirs?” Bismillah waved his semi-automatic from man to man. “Are you?”

“No,” said Kamruzzaman.

“Recite the qalma.”

They stood silently.

“La-ilaha-il-Allah-Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah.” Amir recited.

“La-ilaha-il-Allah-Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah.” Patwari repeated.

Imtiaz intoned, “La-ilaha-il-Allah-Muhammad-ar-Rasul-Allah.”

Kamruzzaman, again homed in on by Bismillah, stared at the soldier for a long time. The pain in his ribs was throbbing and ebbing.

“There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.” Kamruzzaman recited in English.

At home, unable to accept that the pass had vanished into thin air, Imtiaz scoured the car again, once his uncle had gone inside. Amir watched in confusion, until Imtiaz told him what he was looking for and why.

“Scoundrels,” Amir said. “That was brave of you sir.”

As Amir said this, Imtiaz spotted a speck of white in a place that he would have to be blind to miss, sticking out from under the passenger seat. His hands and eyes had passed there at the checkpoint, yielding nothing but dust and grime and frustration. He reached for it, brought out Kamruzzaman’s pass, and held it before Amir like a piece of evidence.

“Our heads and eyes fail us in the worst ways when we need them most,” he said.

“Where did it happen?” Zubeida asked Imtiaz.

Patwari answered, without inflection, “At the checkpoint by PG Hospital.”

“My God, you were not even that far from here,” said Zubeida. “Thank God he let you go.”

Kamruzzaman was in the bedroom, with Mokaddas administering ice to his ribs, and resting. In order not to unsettle him more voices were kept low out on the verandah. Ranjan and Mitali were paying a visit, with news that they, along with their other companions who had been staying with Rounak and her family, had joined the growing liberation forces that had been gathering in the countryside.

“These bandits, they think they own us,” Ranjan hissed.

“Keep down your voice,” Zubeida told him.

“He’s right.” Imtiaz had tried to keep priorities in check. He was in Dhaka to mend his troubles, not add to them. But what happened at the checkpoint had driven home a realization that he had not paid mind to, or had willfully ignored. Boys, younger than Timur, had been shot in the streets by tanks. Young men and women were fighting war machines with sticks and stones and bricks. While still wary of the trouble Ranjan and Mitali might bring to his uncle and aunt’s house, a point on which he was in agreement with Patwari, Imtiaz found it difficult not to get swept up in Ranjan’s anger.

“Day after day, we’re letting them get away with it. He beat sir? I would have cut off his hands right there,” said Ranjan.

“And then take a bullet to your head, along with everyone else’s,” said Mitali.

“It is all my fault,” Patwari said. His face was drawn, his sturdy, otherwise proud posture stooped.

“It was not your fault, Patwari shahib,” said Imtiaz. “That idiot would have done it to anyone. He is probably harassing someone else right now. Besides, if it is anyone’s fault, it’s mine.”

“Forget faults,” Zubeida said. “Nobody cares whose fault it is.”

There was a clearing of a throat that made the gathering on the verandah look down the steps. Hashmat Alimuddin was seeking silent permission to come up. He too was sullen. His creased features were worried further into a pensive determination. With his hands clasped at his back, he looked like a professor in the midst of trying to find the best way to explain a troublesome legacy to vulnerable students who had nonetheless for the first time in their tutelage under him questioned his judgment.

“Chowdhury shahib is resting?” he asked, controlling his volume. He then went slowly up one step at a time, each one adding to the process of smoothing out in his head his speech. “Amir is very disturbed. He’s been sitting back there holding his daughter and cursing what happened. He won’t say a word about what happened exactly.”

“Nothing happened,” said Imtiaz. “We were stopped at a checkpoint. Before we knew it the soldier was shouting at us.”

“Please don’t misunderstand me, baba, but I’m only trying to understand why he would act that way if you all obeyed him from the beginning.”

“There was nothing to obey,” said Imtiaz. He looked to Zubeida, who was always open to the flow of ideas. Had Kamruzzaman been there, Hashmat may have been visited

by a less tolerant response, but Imtiaz saw his aunt, the former professor, all ears to her students' ideas.

“The army has ruled us for over two decades,” Hashmat said, “not always perfectly, I admit, but they have kept law and order, which is not an easy job.”

“You're right, it's not an easy job,” said Mitali. “None of what is happening is easy for any of us, or them. Which is why we cannot forget Sheikh shahib's call. It's time for these aliens to leave our land. And we have to make sure every last one of them is thrown out. In every way it will be better for them, and better for us.”

“Begum shahib is here, and with due respect to her, I will tell you that you young people think at the wrong times in the worst ways and act even worse than that when it's time to think.”

“Thinking about what?” said Ranjan. “Thinking and thinking and doing nothing will leave us ultimately with nothing.”

“What if something happened today?” Hashmat demanded. “If my son-in-law had been killed, what would happen to his wife and daughter? You would take care of them?”

“He had nothing to do with what happened,” said Imtiaz.

“Baba, I'm saying what if something had happened...”

“If it did then it would have been because of me. No one else would be to blame.”

Hashmat stared at Imtiaz, suddenly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

“Everything in life has a price,” said Ranjan.

“Life itself is a price,” Hashmat said, almost involuntarily. “Forgive me for intruding.”

Crows and sparrows were the only chatter for a long time after Hashmat left. A warm breeze swept through the verandah. The late afternoon sun was behind the house. Besides the occasional breeze the day was hot and still. The creaking ceiling fan complained in one repeating, monotonous groan with each revolution. On the lawn, Huda Mia was ripping out weeds and adding fresh dung to the soil, collecting the refuse in a wicker basket that he pushed along as he edged along crablike.

“The problem is what price they will exact from us in the process,” said Zubeida.

“Any price is too little, Khalamma,” said Ranjan.

“What do you know about paying a price?” said Patwari. “Big talk is one thing, getting on your feet and acting is a different game. You people with your student leagues and your rabble rousing cause all the trouble and then leave it to the rest of us to pay *your* price. Not one iota of responsibility taken by anyone. Go, shout in the streets, throw rocks, beat them with sticks, and then wait for them to smash into every house in the vicinity and shoot everyone.”

At this, Ranjan stood up. He did not challenge Patwari directly in any way, not even with a look. Too much of his respect for the Chowdhurys was at stake. Instead, he went down the steps and around the carport to have a smoke. Mitali watched without stopping him.

“I have to go,” Patwari said. “When he’s feeling better, let me know.” He said nothing to Imtiaz.

“So, what all have you been doing?” Zubeida asked Mitali. Mitali checked for Ranjan before replying.

“I don’t want him eating my head,” she said. “To be honest, it’s rudimentary. Most of the volunteers are kids, boys. And the girls, they’re no older. There’s little in the way of weapons. Nothing that can stand up against the army. But their belief, if belief could be a tank or a rifle...”

“Is there someone in charge?” Imtiaz asked.

“There is. Kader bhai. Kader Siddiki.”

“What exactly is your, his, your group’s plan?”

Mitali’s pupils darted at him. She was not pleased with the questioning, naturally preferring to offer information on her own terms, and primarily to Zubeida.

“Plans are to get weapons,” she said.

“How?”

Ranjan’s steps coming back up made Mitali pause. She glowered at Imtiaz.

“Let’s go,” Ranjan told her. “Khalamma, we’ll see you soon.”

“Be well, by God’s grace,” Zubeida said, as they touched her feet.

Kamruzzaman awoke in the dark, thirsty. He turned on his side and almost shrieked from the pain. His stomach, from the groin up, was numb and felt as devoid of life as a cement wall. Zubeida had given him the pain medicine before she went to sleep, and his movement shook her out of her light slumber.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I’m dying of thirst.”

“You are not dying of anything.” She poured water and held the glass to his mouth. She gave him two more pills for the pain, which he refused.

“They block me up,” he grumbled. He laid his head back on the pillow. “Did Patwari say anything before he left?”

“About what?”

“For God’s sake, about the house.”

“No. Go to sleep. Now is not the time to think about it.”

“What did Murad say?”

Zubeida kept quiet.

“What did he say? Imtiaz? Is he disheartened?”

He was not senile. Far from it. His memory had been the finest she had known. Throughout his career he remembered names of people after a second’s introduction. The names of wives and children, parents of colleagues, villages and hometowns, were at the ready in his head like files alphabetically arranged.



Zubeida heard the crisp smack. Murad's arm jumping from his side as if it had suddenly taken on a separate life. His hand swinging in front of his father's face like it was trying to be protective, swat away an insect. And when it retreated, the filling blood vessels on his father's fair cheek, so fair that people used to think him of mixed blood, half European of some sort, the outline of long fingers, identical in shape to his father's, and Kamruzzaman's life draining out of his eyes.

"Yes, he is," Zubeida finally replied.

"We can just give it to him. How much could it be?"

"Unless he asks, we shouldn't tell him what he needs to do. As it is he's here. Think how much it must have bothered him."

Kamruzzaman nodded feebly.

"Lie down, don't think about it now," Zubeida gave his shoulder a gentle push.

"If Murad had been there today he would probably have killed that soldier,"

Kamruzzaman said into the darkness.

"I know. Thank God he wasn't."

Kamruzzaman let out a puff of breath through his mouth, followed by a snore that trickled out in a jagged sound from his throat. Zubeida heard Anshuman somewhere on the grounds of the house, far off enough that it seemed as though she was in a place far more expansive than home.

For two weeks, Helen and Walter had the house more or less to themselves. It was not unusual for their host to be an absent host. Sam Truman, when he came home at an hour they were able to log by conventional methods of timekeeping, crept in unheard,

like an intruder in his own house, not by choice, but because stealth had become such a part of his body that moving around any other way in the world had become alien. The only indication of his presence was the tinkle of ice being dropped in his glass of whiskey at hours that were too late and very early at once. Otherwise, the servants cared for them as if they were the owners of the house. In fourteen days approximately, Helen and Walter had exactly three face-to-face interactions with him. One of them touched on, among other things, their prospects of staying on in Dhaka.

They were up working on a story they had decided had to be a stepping stone to larger reports of what had started in March and gotten increasingly worse, giving rise to the recent flight of refugees out of villages around the country, fleeing from targeted killings by the army. Working their way out from their firsthand experience with the army's tactics, Helen and Walter sketched a profile of the mindset that ordered massacres and those that carried them out. Captain Shaukat, they agreed, was so incredibly torn between duty and conscience that at any moment he was liable to snap into one or the other vein, and act accordingly. Either choice ending in further detriment of his mental state. Unless, they considered, like many an order-following killer before him Shaukat too undertook a job first, the fulfillment of an oath over all else. When they heard Sam Truman preparing his nightly drink, they knocked on the living room door.

Truman, after going through three refills while he listened to the premise of their story, and the sketch they had prepared, let out a long breath and said, "So, in other words, it's the ever-loving privileged eye of Western morality shedding light on Eastern savagery."

Helen and Walter were caught by surprise by the reaction, where they were expecting encouragement, when it was information Truman had given them that had served as the backbone of their story.

“It *is* savagery,” said Walter. “They’re bayoneting babies. Raping women with bayonets. Shooting little boys and old grandfathers. Burning...”

“I’m your source,” Sam Truman held up a hand, “no need to lecture me.”

“What do you suggest we do? Write under a Bengali pseudonym?”

“There’s an idea,” Sam Truman chuckled, pouring a refill.

“You want us to scratch what we have then,” said Helen.

“No. I’ll bear your message and make sure it gets where you want me to get it. I’m just pointing out that no matter how you say it it’s going to be two Americans, safe in their bubble, decrying morality and decency in a place that they know nothing about, and never will, with all due respect and all that.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Walter pressed. “Sit on our hands? Is that going to give a great impression of American morality?”

“No. Absolutely not. That would be as bad as being a silent observer, which is pretty much what you’re going to be.”

“Damned if we do, damned if we don’t,” Walter threw up his hands.

“It’s the price you pay.”

“For what?”

“For privilege.”

“What privilege!” Walter’s face filled with blood, as did his eyes. His voice thundered around the room.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Helen. “I’m not going to sit around knowing what we know and not say anything.”

“You heard me wrong,” said Truman. “I never said anything about not saying anything. Say all you want. Say exactly what you want. Just know to curb your expectation when the time comes.”

“I wonder if Schanberg thinks like that every time he finds his way back into town,” said Walter. “How many times did they throw him out again?”

“Getting sassy with me won’t get your rocks off, I hate to tell you,” Truman drained his glass. “Write the story, and leave it right there on that table. But if I really wanted to give you sound advice, against my own better judgment, I’d tell you to think seriously about going back. But I’ll take my hypocrisy only as far as I can stomach it from others, which isn’t saying much. You’re not Schanberg...”

“Thanks a lot...”

“You’re not, and even he knows there’s a price with every word he puts out there that falls on the heads of people he doesn’t and he never will ever know. You see what I’m telling you?”

“Sam, maybe we should do this on our own,” said Helen.

“You really think you’re going to get your little tear-jerker about this speck in the world while Vietnam is serving up fresh body bags every night, good luck.”

“I don’t get it, do you or don’t you want us to write about what’s happening?”  
Walter asked.

Sam Truman grinned, “What the hell kind of Republican do you call yourself?”

“I’m going to pour myself a drink,” Walter went to the liquor tray.

“I’ll have one too,” said Helen. She lit a cigarette.

Walter poured two glasses and brought the bottle over to Truman. His glass refilled, Truman softened his tone, as a stern teacher understanding that his lesson had hit home.

“Just for my curiosity,” he said, “have you been, how should I say, embargoed from the *Star*?”

“Not exactly,” Walter circled the ice-cubes in his drink, and sipped. “Well, any story from here will be.”

“Assholes,” Helen said, releasing smoke.

“You can’t really blame them, can you?” said Truman. “Newspapers and their reputations aren’t what they used to be. Top of that one war is about enough to bring home the ugliness night after night. Americans have never been comfortable with too much reality. I’ll tell you, it’s going to sink your profession in the not too far off future. People are going to want easy little packaged bursts of hype, they’ll shout about it while it’s still fresh in their tiny little heads, and move on to the next installment.”

“You really think that’s the future of American journalism,” Walter said, despondently, and poured himself another drink.

“I can see it,” said Helen.

“There’s a bright side,” said Truman.

Walter laughed loudly. “Tell, do tell.”

“You don’t have generals sending boots into your newsroom and picking you off.”

“There’s consolation,” Walter sat down next to Helen. “You know, you’re right. I’d by lying if I said I didn’t have the same feelings about our story. Well, she had it first. Sometimes I can’t tell which gut feeling I have is worth acting on until she has it too.”

“Whatever you’re going to write,” Truman tipped back his head and poured the whiskey down his throat, eyes closed in bliss, “write it well and write it fast. I can’t promise my situation with any certainty these days.” He straightened to his feet, showing no indication that he had just put away four pegs of whiskey back to back. He rubbed his eyes, yawned, patted his cheeks. “Get some sleep, kids.”

“I don’t know that’s something he knew how to do,” Walter said, after Truman left.

“Do you think we are just as culpable?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“We’re the ones supporting Yahya’s army with arms.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. Let’s not forget the Commies up there in Mother Russia waiting to gobble up whatever they can sink their fangs into. Hello, Vietnam, remember?”

“So, you’re fine with American tanks mowing down people in the streets?”

“Tanks don’t mow people down, Helen, they need people in them to drive them, and those people need orders to act on. You want to place culpability, put it on Yahya and Bhutto, and weasels like that Captain Shaukat. Frankly, I don’t care for Sam’s digs on everything being on America’s part to do and undo. What’s the rest of the world, got no responsibility? We can’t go policing every maniac and lunatic that crawls out of the woodwork, and it’s people like him that make it impossible to do anything that’s worth it

because they'll bitch no matter what happens. You ever wondered what his deal really is? He's your parents' old pal."

"I don't know what you mean, but you're sitting in his house."

"Whatever. I'm just sick and tired of hearing blame all one way."

"Walt, I didn't say anything about blame one way or another. I'm saying, knowing what we know I can't not feel like my hands are dirty too. It's a feeling."

"And so what," Walter stood up impatiently, and walked toward the liquor tray, "guilt is pushing our hands into writing these stories, like confessionals?"

"Maybe. It makes sense."

"You'll never get anything done wallowing in guilt," Walter took a swig out of the bottle.

"But it needs to be felt, at some point, by someone."

"I'm not going to make excuses for where I'm from or what I believe." He sat back down, and wound his arm around her waist. She resisted when he tried to pull her close.

"I'm tired," Helen said.

"Why are you mad at me? What did I do?"

"I'm not mad at you."

"Maybe Sam's right. Maybe we should go back."

"Suit yourself."

"Okay...so, that means what exactly. Even if I go, you're staying back?"

"It means, Walt, that I don't know right this minute that I want to think about going back."

Walter leaned back, pressed his thumb and finger to his eyes. After Helen left, he leafed through their notes, tried to scratch out a draft, and gave up.

In the bedroom he found Helen reading.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said.

“I was thinking,” said Walter, “I think we should leave.”

“Really?”

“Not the country, leave here, go back to the hotel.”

“What changed your mind? And please don’t say it’s because you think,” she lowered her voice, “Sam is a Communist. It’s not even funny as a joke. He’s...”

“Calm down. I don’t think that. I just want us to be able to do the work we do our way, and as long as he’s willing to help, which we need right now if anything we’re working on is going to get out of the country, I want to take advantage.”

Helen gave him a short, sharp look out of the corner of her eye.

“I prefer not to think of it like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Taking advantage.”

“I didn’t mean it...I didn’t mean it the way you’re reading it. I know he had a thing, real bad, for your mom back in the day, but that’s not your problem.”

Helen closed her book, dropped it on the floor, and sunk under the covers.

“Besides,” Walter added, “he volunteered his help. Sounds like he’s the one with an agenda to be there for you.” After several silent seconds, he called her name. “Okay, well, good night.”



The training was well managed, and the recruits and mostly peasant volunteers as disciplined as career soldiers. None of them had arrived with more than t-shirt, tank-tops, and lungis on their persons, wearing what they owned, not carrying excess baggage. When given weapons they accepted them with the somber veteran's disaffection. They waited until told what to do next, which pleased Kader Siddiki. Whether they knew anything about their de facto leader, whose gave his name to their faction, they listened to and obeyed him without pause. Siddiki was not a condescending man. At first sight he gave the impression of a bully. He was loud and sure. But when he addressed the recruits he spoke with the humility of being not just their equal but subordinate. Hearing him, Rounak understood it was because he wanted each newcomer, every recruit, to feel like a leader.

“Is that really the best way to train?” Ranjan said.

“What bright ideas do you have?” said Rounak.

The women were encouraged to go to a different camp, for women, but Rounak and Mitali insisted they were more valuable here. They lobbied for Anju to remain, as well. Siddiki immediately found their stubbornness constructive. He made examples of them and warned against treating the women any differently. Any man doing so would answer to him.

They ate in batches, and after lunch, they separated into tactical training. Much of it involved shooting, crawling, and learning ways of concealment for the purpose of

ambushes. At this point, with the few weapons they had, ambush was their front line strategy. Through ambush they had gathered most of the guns and ammunition they had so far. The terrain was theirs for the owning. The heat first, and now the rains had blundered the wills of the many of the soldiers. It was not as though the Baluchis and the Punjabis were unaccustomed to the climate. They were poorly trained to fight in them. To think strategically before worrying how they would make it from one end of a field to the other without sinking in mud, weighed down by gear. And then, just as they would figure out a way to manage, winds would howl, tear through the land with the fury of mad ghosts, cold and stabbing through the layers of uniform. Therefore, the best approach was to pick them off, on land, and water, using the terrain and the weather as allies.

That night, they were going to raid a troop transport truck and a shipment of ammunition aboard a boat bound for Sadarghat port in Dhaka. Rounak had volunteered to take charge of some of the weapons once they captured them, and store them at her house, her father's warehouse, and Ranjan said they could take some to keep with the Chowdhurys, certain they would be willing to hide them.

When it came to the question of killing, with the exception of exchanging fire if a skirmish broke out, Siddiki had no specific orders. If Pak soldiers were shot as a message, as warning, as prevention against recovering and returning to avenge the attack on them, so much the better. Siddiki left it at that.

"He's a cold, brilliant bastard," Khoka blew smoke, laughing softly under his breath. "I can't imagine how he is when he's really mad."

By the light of the moon groups of them could be seen in outline, arranged in the way the missions had been delegated. The only sounds were feet squishing mud, and

every so often the ripple of a disturbed puddle. Dilip was on his haunches, smoking, the only one among them who was skeptical about the goals of the mission. His idea, which had been forbidden by Rounak to reach the ear of Siddiki, was to launch an attack just to kill. A dozen, two-dozen Pak soldiers massacred and made examples of. Strew their bodies from the edge of the countryside to the city limits of Dhaka, which was not far.

Rounak told him, “If you want to be a maniac, go defect and join the savages instead of fighting them. That’s not what Kader bhai wants Bengalis to do.”

Before sunrise both missions were successfully executed. The weapons amassed from the boat was a massive load. Siddiki was elated, but one would not know his emotions for better or worse as he took inventory while light streaked the eastern horizon.

Rounak and her group had disarmed the transport truck without much trouble, except for the death of a Pak soldier that had tried to run. The soldiers were lined up and told to wait while their truck was emptied of its supplies, and then set on fire. Using explosives was counted out as an option as it would be too conspicuous and alert Pak nearby Pak units. As the work of scouring out the truck continued the Pak soldier shouted profanities, kicked at Dilip, and ran into the nearby tree line. Dilip went after him. In less than ten seconds a scream rose and was immediately snuffed out. Dilip walked back out grinning, which no one saw in the darkness.

Siddiki wanted to work fast, as far as getting the weapons to a safe haven. They waited for nightfall before moving out in separate directions, until they would meet here again at the time agreed upon.

“So? How does it feel?” Khoka asked Dilip once they had parted ways with the rest of unit.

Dilip stared at him without inflection, a hard, dead stare that gave Khoka his answer. Ranjan too was curious. But instead of asking the same question again, or altering the words, which he guessed would yield a similar response, he offered Dilip a smoke. Dilip accepted.

There was a bright moon out again, and around them the fields were a large pool of ink tinted blue in the spread of moonlight. They kept to the path in a single file, from time to time taking possession of the gunnysack in which they were transporting the rifles and ammunitions to relive the previous carrier. When it was Anju’s turn, she clutched the sack to her chest, refusing to part with it when her time was up. The others laughed.

“Always the quiet ones,” said Ranjan.

“We captured more weapons than those others and we get the lesser share,” said Khoka. “For all the talk of Kader bhai about fairness, that’s not really fair, is it?”

“Is it?” he repeated when no one offered a reply. “Bastard hierarchy everywhere. Even where it’s supposed to be equal. All talk.”

At the front of the line Rounak halted. It caused the line to bunch up, bumping into each other. Someone’s foot got stepped on and a yelp cut through the night. From an unknown direction a fox responded in kind.

Rounak went down the line. When she reached Khoka she stopped.

“Keep your mouth shut when no one has given it reason to talk,” she told him.

“My sister, we all know who reigns here,” said Khoka. “That doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t have our own wills. Or do we?”

Rounak said no more and headed back to her place at the front.

In the time since he was last at the Chowdhury house Hakim Patwari had left Dhaka to visit with relatives in Khulna. He brought back grim accounts of the situation in the countryside and villages. His relatives were fine, as they were in Khulna proper where one could keep a low profile and be largely ignored by authorities. Outlying rural areas were not so fortunate. Burnings and mass killings of entire communities were taking place. The army had launched a campaign of terror the same as had happened in Dhaka, and more. The sun rose on smoldering huts, scorched earth, and deserted lands. Patwari told them that a resistance movement was sprouting its head here and there, but nothing substantial. From what he had learned it was the initiative of young men and women in a number of villages that were saving lives, as they were volunteering to aid the army as they came through. Under that guise they spread word so that villagers could clear out before attacks. Their warnings to the villagers were given under auspices of telling them of the army's approach and to fully cooperate with them when they arrived.

Two young boys, sixteen and fourteen, from Patwari's relatives' home, had left to join the resistance. There was hue and cry in the family, and in the end, with Patwari's counsel, acceptance. Patwari met with a school friend who was now a prominent local politician, and pro-Pakistani. There was no need to ask after speaking with the man for a few minutes that he was on the take from the army and local authorities. Without antagonizing him, for the sake of his relatives, Patwari mentioned in passing his own disdain for the Bengali uprising, which did the trick. The politician spoke freely. He told

Patwari of his knowledge of the boys before Patwari mentioned it, and added a lookout for them was in effect. He was sanctimonious about the fact that two boys from his own district had leagued with miscreants and that he would not stand for infamy to fall on him because of them. They would be rooted out. The boys' parents begged Patwari to do more, but there was nothing else he could do.

Kamruzzaman and Zubeida were surprised at the mention of these relatives for the first time in all the years they had known Patwari. They knew his immediate family, his parents were long dead, two of three brothers had also passed away, one sister lived with her family in Dhaka, and with her Patwari had had no contact since their parents' deaths. Patwari shrugged, and mentioned that they were through his mother's side of the family. His parents had helped them as far back as he could remember, in return for support, and financial assistance, Patwari's family had received before he was born. Such debts, he chuckled, went so far back as to become part of the blood. In his parents' absence, Patwari was carrying on the tradition.

Imtiaz joined the conversation upon entering the living room to call home. One look at Patwari's expression gave him the update on the paperwork of the Dhanmondi house. Also, once Imtiaz listened to the tail end of Patwari recounting his relatives' situation, asking about business matters felt insensitive.

Before Patwari left he told Imtiaz, "I wish I could give you good news. All we can do is wait."

Kamruzzaman said, "Would you consider something? Why don't you take the money, in cash, and whenever things get settled with the transfer of the house you can pay me back against it?"

Both Zubeida and Imtiaz were surprised by the suggestion.

“Mamma, that’s very generous, but I fear that will be adding one more layer to things that are already complicated.”

“It’s not the same as taking money from your brother-in-law,” said Kamruzzaman. “If that’s your fear. Me and your Mammi, we won’t hound you in the middle of the night like misers for payback.”

“That’s not my fear. I just think giving things a proper chance will turn out better, Mamma. That’s all.”

“Good, then,” Kamruzzaman said, as though Imtiaz had accepted his offer. “Suit yourself.” Pain still ruled him when he moved, and he winced when he sat down or stood up. He had refused to consult a doctor. The family physician that had served them since Murad and Minhaz were born, an army doctor that Kamruzzaman had known since his first days in the civil service, had moved away to Karachi. After him, Kamruzzaman had not taken on a new physician, what with the boys gone, and his and Zubeida’s needs, when they arose, treated well enough at PG Hospital or the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

“Mammi...” Imtiaz began, after Kamruzzaman left.

“Don’t worry,” Zubeida said, “he wants to be able to do something.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed him when I first got here. I said things...”

“Whatever you said I’m sure it needed to be said. It’s true. This matter should have been resolved long ago. It’s not your fault, it’s not his fault. These things can take up lifetimes.”

“He needs to see a doctor.”



“That will not happen.”

Imtiaz wondered what Lubna would do if it were him. She was not fond of doctors any more than the next person, but had Imtiaz been in pain, she would say nothing, force him into a situation where he could not turn back without creating a scene, and get him treated.

“Lubna?” he said, as soon as the phone was answered, without knowing who had answered.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Stuck here. I have no news. Nothing that’s worth mentioning.”

Lubna’s long silence unnerved him. It meant she had unwelcome news of her own.

“Bhai was here.”

Imtiaz felt his stomach turn and sink.

“And? What did he say?” he asked.

Another moment passed before Lubna’s reply. “You really want to know?”

“I have some idea. Just tell me my son and daughter were out of earshot when their uncle tore apart their father’s name and reputation.”

“They were in school.”

“Oh. The teachers...? The walkout, I mean.”

“They’re back.”

“How many times did your brother remind you of your life’s mistake this time?”

“He said,” Lubna deflected the sarcasm as always, “that he thinks you should come back soon, and the two of you should meet in person and make a plan...”

“A plan? Lubna, he said I should come back, on his demand, and meet with him, which will be a one-way meeting where instead of insulting me through my wife he’ll do it to my face. Is he a sadist, your brother?”

“I’m only saying what he told me.”

“Lubna, for once would it kill you to stand up for me. Are you that terrified of a man? He’s just a man, like a hundred other men, and Lubna? He’s a bully.”

“Okay, fine, then I have nothing more to talk about now.”

“God! You listen to him tear me apart, but two words I say against him and you can’t stand it!”

“Next week the children’s summer holiday starts,” Lubna veered the conversation again. “You’re not going to be here, no?”

“What do you think, Lubna? I’m biding my time here to avoid...” he stopped. The stab of a headache touched the center of his forehead.

“I’m only saying it,” said Lubna, “because the children, they understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That you’re working, and it will take time.”

“You told them that or they said it themselves?”

“They’re children. What more can you expect.”

“Can I expect you to keep their uncle from poisoning their ears against their father?”

Lubna’s breathing became audible. “I have to go.”

“God forbid I speak against your sacred brother,” Imtiaz said, as spitefully as he could make his tone, but heard it only trickle out petulantly.

“Finish your business and then come back, when you’re satisfied,” said Lubna.

“No one will think you’re any less for doing it.”

Intiaz’s hand was still buzzing from slamming down the receiver as he reached for the liquor cabinet.

He was close to sleep, when the raised voice of Hashmat Alimuddin, for a split second, jarred him awake. Immediately, as though he had been shushed, Hashmat fell silent. Imtiaz appreciated that his room was so close to the servants' quarters' courtyard, for at times like this, the best way to induce exhaustion was by getting worked up through a squabble between the household staff. That was why, Imtiaz thought, going out the rear porch, they slept so well and soundly through the night. Their grievances, anxieties, travails and complaints were sufficiently vented and left out on the field, as athletes would say. Sleep was blissfully what was left.

Before Imtiaz had fully entered the courtyard, Hashmat enlisted his help.

“Ask him, see what he has to say,” said Hashmat taking Imtiaz by the arm and leading him to a wicker stool. Around a kerosene lantern were seated Mokaddas, Huda Mia, Amir, and Shonali, cradling Sufiya, who was in the final stages of falling asleep.

“Leave him out of it,” said Mokaddas. “Baba? You want some hot milk with molasses to help you sleep?”

“No, kaka, I wanted to get some air,” said Imtiaz.

“I’m going to ask the opinion of an intelligent man,” Hashmat picked up his cane stool with great drama and place it facing Imtiaz, who had yet to take a seat. “Sit, sit.”

“I’m not so intelligent,” said Imtiaz.

“At least more than these two buffoons you have good sense. These two idiots,” Hashmat pointed at his daughter and son-in-law, “want to spit on the bounty that

Chowdhury shahib and memshahib have lavished on them and go live with me. Tell me, what kind of good sense does that make?"

"Why?" said Imtiaz.

"Because I'm a feeble old fool, is what they think," said Hashmat.

"Oho, keep your voice down, old man," said Mokaddas.

"They have the blessings that people like them would kill for, and do they show some signs of intelligence about it? No. God forbid, they should!"

"Baba, instead of being so dramatic, why don't you just tell the truth," said Shonali.

"I will slap the disrespect out of your mouth, girl, if you dare one more word," said Hashmat.

"Why did you come here then?" said Amir.

"Son, you are my son-in-law, and I want to respect you. Don't put me in a situation where I have to abandon civility. Your job is to be a husband and a father, and make sure your wife knows good sense."

"Baba, I have enough good sense and I can keep check on it myself just fine," said Shonali. "If you want to go, then go. I will not beg you, neither will my husband, or shahib and memshahib. Spare everyone the dramatics. For God's sake."

"Sounds like a party in here," Anshuman snickered, as he walked past.

"You hear this?" Hashmat turned to Imtiaz. "My own daughter..."

"Baba, no one knows what you are trying to say," said Shonali. "We have been sitting here listening to you for an hour. What is it that you're trying to tell us?"

Sufiya started awake from a disturbing dream, made swallowing noises, and sank into twitching sleep again.

“I will leave,” said Hashmat. “Tomorrow morning I will go to the station, get the first available train out.”

“You don’t have to do that,” said Amir.

“I don’t? My own daughter refuses to understand me, and spits in my face in front of the whole world. I don’t have to leave?”

“Baba, God made the rest of humanity and then He made you,” Shonali, exasperated, went inside to put Sufiya to bed. “What do you want? For us to be at your feet all day long?” She said, coming back out. “Who asked you to come here in the first place, Baba? I’m glad you came, but what did you expect?”

By the glow of the kerosene lamp Hashmat’s expression was of a powerful, intimidating figure undone in less time than he had do understand what had caused his fall.

Imtiaz was taken aback by Shonali’s energy. She had emerged out of the room after putting her daughter to bed as though a new fire had touched her while inside. The center of the argument was impossible to return to. If Imtiaz asked, he was sure he would be inundated by variations. Mokaddas, while sitting there as a judge of sorts, a mediator, was as perplexed as Imtiaz. Huda Mia, somewhere deep within the folds of his liquor high, had a smirk on his lips. Next to him on the ground was his spade.

“Allah, why did You make me see these days!” Hashmat lamented. “I came, you ungrateful girl, to give you your dues.”

“Did I ask for it, Baba? Did I tell you I wanted it?”

“Enough,” Mokaddas said, without determination, and so it slipped away unheard.

“What would you like us to do?” Amir asked his father-in-law.

Hashmat waved him off. “What can you do? This is the plight of old age. When you have nothing left, and you have given your life to work and children and saving for your child, and all you get in return are spits and insults, what can you do?”

“Baba...”

“Don’t talk to me.”

Imtiaz was curious now. He wanted to know what was going on with Hashmat. He had not given him much thought, and since their exchange on the train, heard or absorbed little of what he had to say. If he could he would take him aside and ask. But that was unlikely. Hashmat sat for a long time staring into the flickering thumb of flame in the belly of the lamp. When he spoke at last, nothing he said came to Imtiaz as a surprise.

“I’m ruined,” said Hashmat, to no one in particular.

“Ruined? Baba, what do you mean?” said Shonali.

“Ruined means ruined. What else do you think I mean? I’m here because I have nothing. I’m out on the streets.”

“Baba, what are you saying? Please tell us properly,” said Amir.

“I am telling you,” said Hashmat. A tremor went through his voice. “Last month I sold the house. I took what I could get, and that was just enough to pay off the back rent on the store’s lease. After everything I still owe money to the moneylender, which I have no way of paying.”

“Where have you been staying? For one month?” Amir asked.

“Baba, why did you say nothing about this all this time?” said Shonali. “I thought you said the store was paid off years ago.”

“It was,” Hashmat sniffled. “And then I took loans against it when for your marriage expenses. And then when your mother died, I took more loans for her burial, the plot. The only things I didn’t have the heart to sell were the jewelry I brought with me.”

“Sell them, get rid of them,” Shonali said. “I have no use for them.”

“They are all that’s left of family heritage,” said Hashmat.

“Your daughter is right,” said Imtiaz. Heads and eyes turned to him as if he had just walked in, shouting.

“Since the beginning of the year,” Hashmat went on, without acknowledging Imtiaz, “I have been staying in my house as a tenant. I begged the new owners to let me stay. Begged. To stay in the house that my father built. He let me. With the condition that I pay him for the month and another, for the work that he had to postpone. Let that all go.”

“Why didn’t you say something before?” said Amir.

“About what?” Hashmat looked defensively at his son-in-law.

“My father and mother never wanted a dowry,” Amir said.

“You will understand these things when it’s your daughter’s time to get married.”

“I had five sisters,” Huda Mia said. “All older than me. By the time my father was ruined getting them married he had nothing to give me. He told me to leave the house and find my own fortunes. You see what a rich man I’ve become.” To amplify his point he raised his spade above his head, shook it like a trophy, and set it back down.

Hashmat was the first to break out laughing. His laughter sent a round of confused expressions from face to face, until Imtiaz joined him. Amir piped in, nervously at first,



and then full throated. Mokaddas, too, guffawed, and then insisted they keep quiet. Shonali pressed her hand to her forehead, shaking her head.

“You should ask Mamma and Mammi for help,” Imtiaz told Hashmat.

“If I had any reason left for pride I would protest,” said Hashmat, “but I’m holding my hat in my hand. If Chowdhury shahib will listen, I will ask.”

“Imtiaz? Mokaddas?”

All heads turned toward the back porch of the house. Mokaddas popped to his feet at the sound of his name being called by the lady of the house, and Imtiaz too answered his aunt’s summons.

“What’s happening out there?” Zubeida asked. “I went to your room to check on you and you weren’t there. Then I heard...why is there so much noise out there?”

“It’s nothing,” Mokaddas shook his head. He hustled to the entrance of the courtyard, but the gathering had already disbanded.

“Mammi, I couldn’t sleep, so I stepped out for some air.”

“This hot, humid air?”

“It’s not so bad with some company.”

Zubeida smelled the liquor on him, and smiled. “I’m glad you’re enjoying your uncle’s reserves.”

Imtiaz did not get it at first, and then spread a shy grin. “Sorry, Mammi, I had just a little bit after talking with Lubna.”

“That’s fine,” she gave his cheek a pat. “Your wife can rest assure that having a drink is the worst kind of trouble you’re getting into here. Go, sleep.”

Guilt poked at Imtiaz at his aunt’s words.

She had covered up the keyhole. Yet, he kept straining his tired eye as if it could penetrate the fiber and see her, in the position on the bed he just as easily could imagine. The scent of her perfume, and scotch, seemed to be leaking out through the keyhole. Shaukat knocked again, gently. Without making his tone too childishly coaxing he tried to be kind. Fumes were rising inside his head. His temples were beating like batwings. His house, the entire cantonment, was like a spectral presence around him, a gleeful audience fat and contented on decadent food and sweets and ready for entertainment of the cheapest kind: a domestic row.

Behind him stood the servant with the spare keys. Shaukat refused to use it unless he heard something break, or worse, whatever that could be. No matter how he ultimately took that option the result would be disastrous.

Whether the servant was there or not would scarce matter to his wife. Umbreen had been drinking all night. She had called her father, railed at him, cut her mother down to tears. Shaukat came home to the report of this scene. When he called them, his father-in-law's cavernous silence said it all, their shame creeping in over the line like odorless poison gas. You do what you feel is necessary, his father-in-law had said, less than ten minutes ago.

Ten more minutes passed before Shaukat could bear it no longer. He stepped aside for the servant. Inside, the room was pungent with ripe clothes, and the putrescence of vomit. Umbreen could be proper in the most insalubrious situations. Getting sick from

drinking was not new to her. But no matter where or when it happened, she came out of it clean. She would be gone, and then she would be back, her face a little damp, which could be chalked up to heat, from nature or from the alcohol, the natural rouge of her cheeks enlivened, which was never a problem.

As vividly as he remembered the first time he had puked at the academy when some of the senior cadets had stolen the drill instructor's liquor and fed it to the juniors on pain of blaming them for the theft, Shaukat saw his wife's form on the bed exactly as he had pictured it would be. She could be asleep, she could be watching him like a cat. Before going closer, Shaukat declared aloud that he was going to turn on the light.

Umbreen was unconscious. Her skin was sodden. Vomit streaked the front of her dress, and it had trickled down the sides of her mouth and gotten in her hair, where it clung, hardened, in clumps. She was breathing, but it was faint. Her face was an ashen blue.

She would be fine. Alcohol poisoning. Shaukat spoke with the attending doctor at the hospital, a thin, young resident, sleep-deprived and acting around Shaukat like a petty thief in fear of his life. He assured Shaukat that she would be fine, after a few nights rest, and plenty of fluids in her system. He then made some remarks about the terrible state of affairs in the country, how he and his wife and children feared every day that their home would be attacked by miscreants. It was not the first time Shaukat had heard the term. Miscreant was thrown around often, by senior officers. It had been offered offhandedly by a few, and soon became the term of choice to define Bengali insurgents. Shaukat thanked the resident, who clearly had more he wanted to share.

“Umbreen,” he spoke softly, holding a glass of lime-water to her mouth, “please take this.”

Her eyes fluttered. She moaned, in defiance. Her weakness was so great it made her skin transparent. Shaukat could see the blue network of veins tracking up and down her arms. She mumbled something indecipherable. Shaukat set down the glass on the nightstand.

“Umbreen, I have to go now. If you can hear me, good, if not...I have to go.”

The servant was left with instructions to check on her every thirty minutes until she was fully awake, and to make sure she was drinking water.

He came close to confiding in Pervez Shahbaz. Seeing him distraught Shahbaz joked if Shaukat’s wife had left him, and Shaukat responded with grim eyes, as they got ready to go on a nightlong mission to clear out a village couple hours outside the city limits on the banks of the Buriganga.

“She didn’t *really* leave you, did she?” Shahbaz laughed, adding a touch of seriousness. “Because if she did, you need to forget it for now,” he said, more seriously.

“No, sir. My wife is fine.”

“All wives are fine when they keep their mouths shut,” Shahbaz clapped Shaukat’s back, laughing and offering him a cigarette. “Hey, I never told you something.”

Shaukat waited, and when Shahbaz counter-waited for him to ask, he said, “Sir?”

“Back in March. At the University. You were possessed all of a sudden. When you pulled out your pistol. My God, we all thought you’d turn on us next,” Shahbaz guffawed like a proud father boasting about his son.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Sorry? Are you mad? I thought with that pretty face and quiet voice you left your balls at home when you left in the morning. No, Captain Shaukat, you made many men envious that night. Me included.”

Shaukat was struck by this revelation.

“Don’t look so surprised,” said Shahbaz. “We’re Punjabis. Without us there would be no army, there would be no government. Punjabis and Pathans, we rule the roost, remember that. And if you had any doubts, Captain, about your superiority, know now, this moment, from me, that we are the better race. Killing these Bengali kaffirs we’re doing holy work. I’m not a religious man, but I believe in hierarchy of blood as I believe in chain of command. So, take holy as you will, I mean the actual work, like you did, pulling the trigger.”

Shahbaz shifted uneasily. They were in the back seat of the jeep, with the driver taking the vehicle at breakneck speed, interspersed with sudden jarring stops when the road became bumpy. And that happened often. Shahbaz opened his mouth to speak and was interrupted by the jeep crashing into a pothole, the impact raising it momentarily off the ground. They rose and fell on the creaking springs of the seat.

“What the fuck, drive properly!” Shahbaz yelled at the driver.

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Goddamn land! As I was saying,” Shahbaz returned to Shaukat, “good work. But from now on, wait for my order. I don’t mean that to pull rank, and I don’t mean it lightly. You understand, I’m sure.”

“Yes, sir,” Shaukat replied.

The interminable drive ended. Shaukat checked his watch. They had been on the backbreaking journey for two hours. When the jeep stopped, Shaukat better understood and empathized with Shahbaz's discomfort. A buzz, like the low, sustained hum of current, drifted through his lower back. His buttocks were throbbing. But when he reached for the door handle, Shahbaz told him they were staying inside for the time being.

Soldiers poured out of the backs of the two transport trucks and, moonlit like crawling ants, dispersed into Hariharpara.

"Havens everywhere," Shahbaz said, under his breath. And then he looked to Shaukat. "See that warehouse? Used to belong to Pakistan National Oil."

He looked ahead. The jeep's headlights were spread on the water. Fishing boats were moored along the shore, rocking with the undulating water like comforting hands were swaying babies to sleep. Shaukat had rolled down his window, and the night was so silent that the silence had a disconcerting hum. The air was filled with it, as if terrified of it, and so, keeping still. The heat and the humidity, the very depth of night were not reasons for the stillness, but the hush was created out of an undoing of nature itself.

"Nothing proper can last in this pit of hell," Shahbaz said, gazing at the looming outline of the warehouse against the moonlit sky. "Good men, good leaders, good graces, all burn and destruct here. What need is there of a place like this on earth? Of the people that are just as toxic? Right?"

He was out of the jeep. Shaukat followed. Behind the jeep the two transport trucks were shut off, dead in place like giant dead bugs. Shaukat wondered where the soldiers had gone, and why their activities were not provoking noise. Hariharpara was being cleared, he understood. Shahbaz had told him nothing, and Shaukat was confident that an

actual operational order for the mission did not exist. As they walked he looked over his shoulder, to find that their driver had switched off the headlights. The darkness was thick enough to grab. The moon had been overshadowed by a clump of clouds.

Shaukat covered his nose, and swallowed against his rising gorge. Shahbaz snickered, walking around the echo chamber of the warehouse like it was his home. Oil fumes wafted out of the walls, rose off the ground, hung from the ceiling. Burnt diesel and gas odors were mixed with the deep, unbearable stench of human waste. Shaukat wanted to ask, but decided against it, because the moment his curiosity stoked him he heard Shahbaz, about ten feet away from him, clear his throat. “It’s perfect, isn’t it, Captain Shaukat?”

Shahbaz’s laughter banged and volleyed around the musky warehouse. “Muktis.”

“Sir?”

Shahbaz had led him to a corner of the warehouse where the stench was unbearable. Shaukat gagged. A flashlight beam fell on a pile of about a dozen men, in t-shirts and lungis. They had been deliberately made into a pile despite there being more than enough room to spread them out. Which would denote offering them some level of dignity. The idea was the opposite.

“They were caught yesterday,” Shahbaz said. He was untouched by the tremendous odor that was all but slamming Shaukat face first on the ground. It was the thought of touching that fetid floor that made Shaukat steel himself. “Bastards think they’re Che Geuvaras. They were going to blow up a convoy. You see? That’s what this place is for now. If we’re going to make a graveyard out of this bloody land we have to catch the right ones first, and then work our way outward.”

Shaukat's head was reeling too ruinously for him to make sense of the logic. He accepted it, doubled over, hearing Shahbaz's cackling laugh bouncing against the ceiling.

"Good god, old chap, you'd think you never smelled a rotting corpse!" Laughing, Shahbaz grabbed Shaukat's wrist and led him out of the warehouse.

The noise Shaukat had wondered about hit him as soon as the door was pushed open. Shrieks, screams so unlike anything that could rise out of humans, tore the once terrifically calm night air, as though the bounds that nature had placed on itself were smashed open and filled with the din.

With the ripe smell of decaying death out of his way, Shaukat was immediately challenged on another sensory level. He stood blinded by arc lights several of them directed at the water. A few paces ahead of him Shahbaz's profile was drawn against an arc light, a distended mass but erect and sure. His hands moved like waving sticks as he brought out and lit a cigarette. Shaukat saw his head turn in his direction. He was too blinded to see Shahbaz's face.

The soldiers were shouting at the terrified villagers to clump into groups, nudging and poking and directing them with the butts of their rifles and the backs and fronts of their hands, the toes of their boots, and when they did, the soldiers wound ropes around them until the villagers were tied together like straws, wriggling against each other.

"Watch this, Captain," said Shahbaz.

The soldiers pushed the first group of tied up villagers onto one of the fishing boats. It was an awkward, harried endeavor that the soldiers did not, could not, properly coordinate. A couple of them tripped and fell. They took their anger out on the villagers,



slapping and kicking them, and finally were able to dump them into the boat. One soldier then untied the boat and gave it a push with his foot.

Shaukat took a deep breath, which was at last easy to do again, and followed Shahbaz to get closer to the shoreline, where the soldiers were readying in lines and getting their rifles locked and loaded. The arc lights had turned the oily dark of the waters into a whitewash of glare. In the glare the boat inched out without bearing, with no paddles or rudders directing its course.

The soldiers fired their rifles at the floating boat. Shaukat was startled at the first round of shots. Their echoes resounded farther that Shaukat realized he had the power to be able to hear. The soldiers reloaded and fired, reloaded and fired. With the repeated rounds of gunfire, the screams went through levels, until the last throat was struck and silenced.

Shahbaz went up to the line of soldiers as the next group of villagers was being tied up. He told two of the soldiers to hand him one rifle, and give one to Shaukat. The soldiers loaded the weapons, and held them for the officers.

“Captain,” said Shahbaz.

Shaukat took the rifle. It had been years since he had held an Enfield. The thing was bulky, a relic from another age. The wood felt coarse and battered. When he touched the trigger rust scraped off on his finger. How the rifles were working at all was a wonder.

The villagers were jostled onto the next boat. Out in the distance, Shaukat saw the previous boat sailing away for the other end side of the river with its dead cargo like a ghost ship. On Shahbaz’s cue a soldier waded the next boat out. Shahbaz pointed the rifle, and fired. After three more shots, he looked over at Shaukat.

“Captain,” he said. And went back to shooting.

Shaukat aimed. The target was the mass on the boat, some of whom were already dead from Shahbaz’s bullets. Shaukat spotted a woman squirming and convulsing from a shot to her throat. Next to her a man’s torso was blasted open, like buckshot had entered it. Shaukat aimed for the woman’s head, touched the trigger, and pulled. He missed her. The shot went past the tied up villagers and plunked into the water. He loaded and fired again. The woman was now in a fit, slow death taking its time with her. Shaukat missed a second time. It seemed the rest of the villagers had been taken care of by Shahbaz’s bullets.

“It’s done,” said Shahbaz.

“Sir, may I use your rifle?”

“What for?”

“Sir, please. Permission to use your rifle.”

“They’re the same bloody rifle, Captain.”

“Sir. Please.”

Shahbaz looked at Shaukat, trying to read his expression, looked out at the boat, and back at Shaukat.

“You are a strange man, Captain Shaukat. It’s not the rifle that’s bugged. It’s you who has grown soft and fallen out of training.” He pushed the rifle at Shaukat’s chest.

Shaukat loaded it and aimed. But down past the iron sights, he was unable to locate the dying woman. The boat had turned and gone farther away. There was no way of getting to her.

For the next half hour, Shaukat kept the rifle and discharged it at the boats. The soldiers joined him at one point out of the need for something to do as both their officer's in charge seemed to be in another world.

The stream of villagers seemed endless. Shahbaz had stopped, but was standing a few paces behind Shaukat. Do something, Here was Shaukat, doing something.

Shahbaz was not in the presence of a wet-behind-the-ear, rumble-bellied, green graduate fresh off the field of the passing out ceremony at the academy. Captain Fazal Shaukat was a loyal officer serving his country. The country that hearkened for him, as it had for his father before him, and his father's father before that. The Shaukat name was older than Pakistan. It had been present at the birth of Pakistan. It had witnessed the bloody delivery, and been uprooted from its generations-old home that was overtaken by Hindus.

His grandfather had gone mad. A man of guile, physical grace and strength, pride that could outlast empires, Shaukat had seen him shrivel into a prune after his brain had been eaten by paranoia. The man saw Hindus crawling out of the corners of his home, and he saw them dangling from the sky, like snakes, waiting to fall on him, slither down his body in search of the first open region of skin to bite. Hindu sickles had disemboweled two of his grandfather's brothers, Shaukat learned years later from his father. They had been sleeping, and woke up struggling to stuff their innards back inside their bodies. The pain traveled up Shaukat's arm from his cramped hand at the trigger, but Shaukat pushed against it.

A soldier told Shaukat at last that reloading again was pointless. There were no more villagers left.

Shaukat dropped the rifle and walked back to the jeep.

“Here,” Shahbaz offered him his pack of cigarettes. “Saala!” he shook his head and bristled with laughter.

Umbreen was asleep when Shaukat walked in the bedroom. The servant’s report was that nothing had changed. She had been asleep the whole time. Shaukat leaned close to her face, where he heard her faint but steady breathing. Under her eyelids her eyeballs were moving laterally, fast, as though trying to keep up with images and information at a frustrating pace. Her name formed in his mind, but he held back from calling it. Soon the room was crammed with an odor Shaukat understood was wafting off him. Gunpowder and jasmine, he recalled the jasmine in the air by the riverside. Sweat and cigarettes. He sat next to Umbreen on the bed and wished he could tell her what had happened.

By lunchtime Judge Mubarak had heard of six cases that gotten sentences of death. All six were young Bengali men, and the judge knew that three of the six judges in the appellate division were Bihari. The remaining three were made up of two West Pakistanis and one Bengali. Judge Mubarak knew the Bengali judge, a mild-voiced, myopic gentleman, in the true sense, of whom it was impossible to believe that he was once a feared barrister, vociferously pro-capital punishment, anti-labor and union, moderate on free speech depending on if it transgressed what he considered were sacred national symbols of order and law. Pushing into his mid-eighties, that judge was now more actively seen as a figurehead. His mind was clear, his wits sharp, but his hearing, along with his eyes, was dimmed. But when he was made fully cognizant of a given case, his final judgment was as incisively delivered as it had been in his heyday. Which was what mattered in the end, as Judge Mubarak saw it, especially now.

Of late it had become an exercise in restraint to keep from polishing off a bottle of brandy with lunch. The rest of his day would swim along so much more fluently. His guilt would not have to be hung on another case of domestic abuse that somehow made it to his desk, or a charge of tax evasion that he knew would go nowhere as payoffs would see to the closure of that matter.

On this morning, Judge Mubarak had read the appeal of two young Bengali men charged with setting explosives to a power plant, with intent to kill. The latter charge was being contested on the grounds that no such intent existed, and that the men had

specifically carried out their operation at night, long after the plant closed, and had additionally scared off the night watchman with only threats of death. The defendants had declared in their statements that the night watchman was a fellow Bengali whom they would never harm. Had the case gone to another judge, there would have been a judgment by now. The young men would be sentenced to hanging. And soon enough, Judge Mubarak would be under pressure to give his verdict. If he gave them a prison sentence, none would in the estimation of to his hawkish colleagues be long enough, including a sentence of life imprisonment. A death sentence would add to the tide the judge wanted to resist. Let them go, with a stern warning and a probationary period.

Judge Mubarak could hear it, the laughter and the ridicule when it became known that that had been his judgment. Not to mention the rebukes and the glares, more shunning than he had been receiving for several years now from fellow Bihari judges as well as a host of others united in a pact against him for being pro-Bengali, which was different from anti-Pakistani, but he could, as it were, tell that to the judges. Bengal was Suleiman Mubarak's home by any other name.

Perhaps, Judge Mubarak thought, lighting his pipe, it was time to retire.

One of the oldest bearers at the club, in years and time in service, Golam Rasool, had been there since the first days of Dhaka Club. He had seen Suleiman Mubarak as a young man, coming to the club with his father. As the judge aged, Golam Rasool seemed paused in the refined, gilt-haired repose of the same sage-like years as Judge Mubarak remembered him being in when they first met.

Golam Rasool brought the judge's tea after lunch, no matter how much the judge insisted that Rasool should join him at the table and not shame him by being his server.

“No shame in doing what I do,” was Golam Rasool’s customary reply, as customarily as Judge Mubarak made his offer time after time.

Judge Mubarak sipped his tea, feeling his lunch unsettle in his stomach. He had eaten hurriedly. He was hungry, but did not have the patience to draw out the meal, mostly because he wanted to avoid the rush of people that would enter the dining room and hold him up longer than it would take to him to finish eating and leave.

Golam Rasool’s way was to stand aside and not speak. Unless spoken to. And it was Judge Mubarak’s way, especially in times of stress, to speak first. Today, however, the judge was too weary to even think. His tea grew cold. He sat as deeply ensconced in the chair as he could, his head leaned against the high back of the chair, his scalp in the back absorbing the cool of the leather. He puffed deeply of his pipe. Going too fast made him lightheaded, so he set it down. The hint of stale smoke hung in the room, which, in the evening hours became the card room with bridge games played with concentration and devotion at multiple tables. During the day it was unused. The staff did not devote much time to keeping it fresh, until it was time to prepare it for the evening’s card games that went late into the night.

When Judge Mubarak opened his eyes, having drifted off, Golam Rasool was there with a new, hot cup of tea, asking him if he wanted something more, stronger.

“I’m fine,” Judge Mubarak sat up.

“Your father went through the same anguish when something troubled him about work,” said Golam Rasool. “You look just like him with your troubles.”

“He faced them better.”

“He would sit right there, too.”

“I know.”

“For hours. And then he would get up, with a grin on his face from here to the moon. He solved whatever it was that was worrying him.”

“I remember, vaguely, when he came home later. He would be a changed man.”

“That told me that whatever it was that was worrying him was smaller than he thought it was. Like a man worth his mettle, he defeated it.”

“Where is everyone?” Judge Mubarak asked. It had occurred to him when he first came to the club today that the number of staff was noticeably thin. Even on the slowest days during Ramzan, the club would be fully staffed. By Iftaar time the fasters would be seated in groups, breaking fast and holding court, busy flocks of bearers, with little time to attend to their own religious observation, attending to their every need.

“They’re gone. To fight.” Golam Rasool’s answer was ready and swift.

“Fight?” the judge turned around. The old bearer was up against a wall, his hands clasped behind him, unnecessarily subservient. Old habit of attending on British officers, and then on the local membership that appropriated the ways of the imperialists. It made the judge’s head want to explode ten different ways. The oppressed and the exploited were always the ones absorbing guilt, making room for it on their person, in their blood, perpetually telling themselves that it was and forever would be their responsibility to assuage the guilt of the damned.

“Fight, yes,” Golam Rasool repeated.

“Fight what?”

“The army. They threw down their uniforms and their trays and they said they’ll be back once they’ve freed the country.”



“Where on earth are they going?” the judge asked.

“No telling. You want more tea?”

“No.” Judge Mubarak stood up. He offered Golam Rasool money, which, as always, he refused.

“I want to ask you something,” said the judge.

Golam Rasool lowered his head and waited. Once again, the habits that would go with the man to his grave, so hammered had they been into the response mechanisms of his biology.

“Two young boys, just the like ones that used to work here,” Judge Mubarak said, “could be hanged for an offense if I pass the sentence of death. Or they will sit in jail, which, honestly, might be just as bad as death.” Something occurred to him. “I guess they were fighting, too. You know? Like the boys that left their jobs here.

Golam Rasool nodded. “Mukti Bahini.”

Judge Mubarak had heard the term tossed around pejoratively among other judges and military officers.

“Have they killed anyone?” Golam Rasool asked.

“No. They were in fact very careful not to.”

“So. They destroyed manmade property,” said Golam Rasool.

“More or less, yes.”

“Is losing their young lives a worthy punishment for that?”

“They should be punished, yes,” said the judge. “People cannot go around terrorizing and being destructive and not be held accountable.”

Golam Rasool's old head, with its dozen wispy hairs pasted down with coconut oil over a glistening pate, bobbed as though the information from the judge was being weighed in there on scales.

"Then give them the punishment they deserve," he said. "As God would punish man according to his deeds."

"No," said the judge. "That is nonsense. If God's law was the law of the courts there would be chaos. I never took you for such a devoted man."

"Without His laws there would be no courts. Call it what you want. What I know I know."

For the first time ever Judge Mubarak despised what had come out of the old man's brain. Golam Rasool's eyes were clear as a winter morning with cloudless skies, but his mind and his heart were sunk in that murk of piety and surrender that would cling on as long as life beat in him.

"Your law is supposed to keep the people safe," said Golam Rasool. "And that is all a simple man like me will ever understand about it. Keep them safe. If your conscience accepts your decision, God will be pleased."

That was the way to be, thought the judge, entering his chambers and reluctantly grasping at the case file that he wanted to throw out the window, find peace, or at least finality enough to call it making peace, as did old Golam Rasool, in the ways his life had been directed and set. Aspirations meant nothing to him. One morning he would not wake up, there in his quarters at the club, and his peaceful, sleeping face would be covered. A moulvi would utter prayers and he would be buried. In the meantime, complications were

a thing of a past so far back that they had long ago unhinged from memory and ceased being relevant.

Judge Mubarak had read the case file fifteen times. On a pad he made a mark for each reading. Sitting down, he added a sixteenth mark, before he even started.

The power plant was closed to begin with. Operations had been at a standstill since the March crackdown.

The public prosecutor assigned to them was choking on the contempt he had toward his clients. He made no bones about it. To a procedural question Judge Mubarak had asked, he was forthright with his frustration. He was, he said, one of a thousand defense lawyers scraping to make a living. If they wanted a softy with a heart for charity they could have found him. And then the man moved to the most unmotivated deposition Judge Mubarak had heard in his career.

A glimmer of hope fell on the case, in favor of the defendants, when their respective testimonies matched, after they were interrogated separately, twice, by the police and then by their lawyer. On this point the defense lawyer could not be lackadaisical or imperfect. Judge Mubarak hammered him, perplexed by the man's defiance, thinking that a threat of holding him in contempt would do little more than incite a complacent shrug. At the end of recounting the testimonies, the defense lawyer added that the boys were as honest as he had seen, and there was no indication in his judgment that they had planned a fabrication. The amount of details involved would be too strenuous to keep in check. He said, the defendants were too "simple of mind" for such complex maneuvers. Judge Mubarak wanted to challenge the statement, but one

look at the defender's expression changed his mind. The man was ready to feed his clients to the dogs, if it took that to be rid of them.

Judge Mubarak gave them sixty-days, to buy himself more time. The defense lawyer scowled so fiercely the judge thought he would leap over the bench and sink his teeth into his jugular. The boys, when told of their sentence, began howling. Two bailiffs slapped their faces and cuffed them before they quieted down. One of them, evidently the smarter one, whispered to the defense lawyer. Judge Mubarak granted permission to hear him.

The boy said he and his companion were conscientious, God-fearing Muslims. They would never harm another human being that did not harm them or their families. Their intent, again, was not to kill, but to send fear. At this point the defense lawyer held up a hand for him to stop.

Judge Mubarak pushed the file aside and closed his eyes. He massaged his temples with the tips of his fingers. If he did not deliver a sentence of death, he would be seen as being soft on miscreants, on terrorism. It was not a heart attack, but his chest tightened. And it would not loosen until he made up his mind. Even then the grip of his decision would keep on him its stranglehold. He wished the boys had killed someone.

He wrote on the pad next to the case file, "laughable." Cases like this he was always ready to throw out. For those with political motives they were gold mines. It did not matter that the main subjects of the case were as politically, or otherwise, insignificant as they could be. Judge Mubarak breathed deeply. The tightness in his chest slowly let up.

He took the file home with him. On the way he told his driver to go by the power plant. According to the statement given by the arresting constable the damage was done to the front of the building, near the entrance. It was of “a big, loud, and violent nature,” the report quoted the constable. With the headlights shining on the area where the attack had been targeted, Judge Mubarak saw no more than the smoky-dark powder of weak, low-grade explosives brushed on the side of the gated entrance. He noted his observation, and told the driver to go home.

Long after midnight, his eyes burning, his neck barking with spasms, Judge Mubarak let out a breath of relief. He sat back in his study chair wondering if the smile on his face resembled the smile Golam Rasool used to see on the face of his father after his worries had left him.

He woke up as refreshed as he remembered feeling in recent times, an hour before first light. He wanted to pore over the decision he had penned, which had allowed such peaceful sleep to take over him, uninterrupted, until his alarm rang. For all intents and purposes the case could be, should be, dismissed. On lack of evidence alone it was asking to be a pot of poisoned broth. The defendants would do their time. The case would be reviewed at the end of their sentence of sixty days, the defendants heard, and if their conduct showed remorse, they would be released on a probationary period. If someone had a problem with that they could raise their objections bring it to Suleiman Mubarak.

There was a knock at the study door. His servant announced that the judge had a visitor. Judge Mubarak went out to the verandah, where the man was waiting. He was rangy, with a tuft of hair gathered at the very top of his hair with oil. His shirt hung on

him like it would on hangers. His pants were a smidgen short and exposed his think ankles. On his feet were the loafers often worn by imams. He looked as though it had been weeks since he had eaten a meal to its end. The judge told the servant to bring him water and tea.

He introduced himself as Dilip. He waited, as if he were giving the judge time to recognize him. Judge Mubarak said nothing, and asked him to sit at one of the cane chairs. Dilip, out of respect, said that he was fine standing. He drank the water, and left the tea untouched.

“Kamruzzaman Chowdhury shahib, he is a good friend of yours,” Dilip said, flicking out his tongue and licking his lips to a shine.

Judge Mubarak kept silent, but gave Dilip the impression that his statement was not false.

“He was good to me and my friends recently,” Dilip continued. “He and begum shahib let them stay at their house, eat their salt.” He kept his eyes lowered, out of respect. His voice was determined. “Shahib, I’m here because I know those two boys’ lives are in your hands.”

Judge Mubarak grew uncomfortable. He wanted to shout at his watchman for letting this man in. Just what the judge needed, young thugs coming to his house to shake him down on behalf of their comrades.

“What boys?” said Judge Mubarak.

Dilip looked at him suspiciously for a second, and reverted his gaze to the ground. “Shahib, the boys had no plans to harm or kill anyone. I swear on my dead parents’ souls. I will vouch for them, and so will other people. They don’t belong in jail.”

“Tell me something,” said Judge Mubarak.

Dilip stared in silence.

Judge Mubarak said, “What makes you think you and these other people, what makes you think your word will count now? Where were you when they were arrested? And, one more thing, who gave them such a lame-brained idea?”

Dilip cast a repentant glance at the judge. “We told them not to anything stupid, shahib.”

“Well, that advice went nowhere, did it?”

“Shahib, we want to free our country. I am a Bengali, shahib, and a Hindu. These murderers are killing us because they say we’re infidels, and sympathizers with India. This is my country shahib. I will kill a hundred of them every day if I have to.”

“You don’t move me with this talk,” said Judge Mubarak. Dilip gave no reaction. “I commend your spirit, but this sort of zealotry makes you no different than the people you want to fight. My country, your country, my land, your land, what will you do when you have this freedom? Have you thought about it? What plans do you have to keep working for the country you want to free? Are you going to keep blowing up places and making people fearful, keeping your own lives in danger? Who will belong here and who will not? Do you think of things like that?”

“Shahib, I beg forgiveness for coming like this to your home. But those boys, they are children. They have no sense.”

“They don’t, you’re right. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Dilip's eyes moved slowly, like searchlights waiting to fall on their target, until they met the judge's. "No, shahib, I'm indebted for your time and generosity." He refused the offer of food, pressed his hands together in respect, and bowed away.

It was as though someone had seen his good spirits, could not stand it, and reached inside him to destroy it with one crushing squeeze. Judge Mubarak alternated between back in his quandary with the two boys and being furious with Kamruzzaman Chowdhury.

Sam Truman's phone call broke his spell.

"Judge, I don't have to look at you to know you woke up on the wrong side of the wrong bed in a different house," Truman's smoky voice chuckled. "Should I call back?"

"No, please, sorry. It's been a..."

"No need to say it. I'll call back another time."

"Sam, it's fine."

"Okay, well, you know the kids?"

"What kids?"

"The two geniuses, Helen and her loudmouth half, finally had enough of me. I'm not crazy about them going back to the hotel. I was wondering, coming as close as I ever will to being a parent, if they could impose on you for a bit."

"Well, of course. Are you going somewhere? Sam, you're not leaving Dhaka, are you?"

"I think that's the saddest any human has ever sounded at the thought of my leaving," Truman let out a gruff, tired laugh. "You'll be first to know."



Judge Mubarak sighed, wishing there would be some news to restore the good spirits in which he had woken up.

“Judge? You sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, yes. And yes, of course, they can stay here as long as they want.”

“Good luck with that kindness,” Truman chuckled. “No, they’re good kids. Just have it in their pointed heads to change the world. They’ll learn.”

“Should I send a car for them?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do all that.”

“Very well. I will leave instructions here, they’ll be taken care of.”

“Hey, Solly, chin up. I’ll talk to you soon. And thanks for being foolish.”

Judge Mubarak laughed. Since the dinner party for Hamid Shaukat’s son he had had no occasion for a gathering at the house. For a time, especially since his appointment to the High Court, it was a regular occurrence, which quickly ran its course, and after a respite felt good to do again. Being social had always been cyclical for him. Between work and socializing when people and their presence became a trial to endure, he called put a moratorium on the one he was able to control. There were unexpected calls, always, and it went with his status, but in all when Judge Mubarak felt the need for reclusion he acted on it. Helen and her husband’s company was just the right size. Americans could be counted on to be reclusive, unlike Bengalis, who would enter through any door, literally and figuratively, if it stood open, anyone’s business that could be overheard or eavesdropped. Privacy had no meaning. There was something charming about it, the differences. Still, Kipling’s imperialist rhyme was not the way to rationalize the distinction. Indeed, East was East, and West was West, but the twain was forever meeting,

however acrimoniously, no matter how tilted the meetings were to the rapacious profit of one side.

There was room yet for the judge's day to sink lower, plunge deep into the earth, be buried, awaiting him at work.

Upon arriving at his chambers he found his two young clerks grim-faced, biting their lower lips identically, looking as scared as children that had been caught cheating, and set aside by their teacher to be handled by their parents' wrath.

Judge Mubarak did not ask them what had them so disturbed. He handed the case file to Nahid, the female clerk, and left her open-mouthed as he hurried behind his desk, where he wished he could duck under and be forgotten.

"Sir," Nahid said, coming forward. The male clerk followed a few paces behind her. "Aftab and I have been trying to reach you for the last hour."

After speaking with Sam Truman Judge Mubarak had left the phone off the hook.

"We were getting concerned, sir," Aftab added.

"Concerned?" Judge Mubarak looked up.

"Sir, something has happened, and we didn't know if you knew or... where you were..."

"Nahid, I've never known you to be a stutterer, so please, get to the point."

"Sir, there was an incident. These two, sir," Nahid held the case file forward, "they were found dead in their cells about thirty minutes ago."

Blood shot to the judge's temples. They began thumping like drums, sending the tender waves of a headache to the center. By the looks on the faces of the clerks his

expression must have altered to either fierce or shocked, because both of them had turned pale. From their faces the blood drained out.

“Suicide,” said Nahid, anticipating the bit of information the judge could naturally want.

“The bodies have been taken to the Medical College Hospital, sir,” said Aftab.

“Let’s go,” said Judge Mubarak.

The two defendants, nineteen year-old boys, were unrecognizable. Aftab gasped at the sight, and Nahid covered her eyes. Their faces were lumps of purple clotted blood, the eyes pounded shut. The mouths were swollen so thick their lips looked as though they had been injected with fluids to make them fuller. One of the boys had a streak of blood leaked out of his ear and crusted to a flaky black. The attending doctor asked if they wanted to see the rest of the bodies, for the judge had asked only to be shown the faces.

“No,” said Judge Mubarak. “Doctor, I have to ask.”

The exhausted doctor blinked his bloodshot eyes and nodded.

“Do you believe this is suicide?”

“If it is suicide,” the doctor replied, “then these young men must have had a special affinity for extreme pain. I don’t mean that to be sarcastic. These men died of severe internal hemorrhaging. And that could only be brought on by repeated, tremendous force applied to their bodies from head to foot.”

On the drive back to the High Court Aftab said, “Bastards! We should file a lawsuit. Sorry, sir, forgive my language, but this is criminal.”

“Whom will you sue?” the judge asked.

“We can start with the prison...and...that bastard...sorry...that lawyer, where has he been?”

Aftab slowly realized that the judge’s question was rhetorical, and he saw Nahid was already aware of it.

“This is the reason this bloody country should be blown to pieces,” Aftab grumbled. “Law and order, law and order. When the time comes it’s the same old crooked tactics.”

“Aftab...” Nahid said, with a warning note.

“Sorry. Sorry, sir.”

Judge Mubarak wished he still had the righteous indignation of the young.

They had just finished dinner when the phone rang. Mokaddas answered it and came back to tell Imtiaz it was his wife. The cook reported with a smile that Lubna asked him how he was and that she keeps him in her thoughts.

“Lubna?”

He could hear her panting.

“Lubna, what is it? Are the children okay?”

“Bhai,” she said the word like a one-word answer.

“So? It’s his house. Where are you? Did you go back home? Why did you go back home?”

“We didn’t.”

“Lubna, for God’s sake, will you stop making me ask and just say what happened.”

“I’ve never seen him like this. He was a raging lunatic.” Imtiaz could tell how difficult it was for his wife to speak of her brother in terms she would rather puncture her skull to vanquish than even think.

“Did he say or do anything to the children, Lubna?”

“No. He raved at me for an hour. About you.”

“What did I do to him now? From this far away?”

“He says,” her voice caught, and she cleared her throat, “that you’ve left us, that you’re using excuses to stay away from responsibilities.”

Imtiaz wanted to reach in through the phone and shake the good sense back into his wife. She sounded as naïve as a child brainwashed, fed lies, and turned on her family and friends with the vengeance of an adult.

“Lubna...”

“Don’t lecture me. I cannot listen to anymore shouting.”

“I didn’t say anything, and I won’t. Just tell me, what does he want? Did he say?”

“He wants,” Lubna exhaled, “he wants us to go to you. He wants us to send us there, be there with you, and come back together whenever you’re done.”

“Lubna, I’m doing everything in my power to maintain respect for a man that has not shown me a day’s decency since the first day he met me. Your brother is a madman. He’s bent upon endangering your lives because of his ego and his complete lack of sympathy for anyone but himself.”

“Then what are me and the children doing here? More than three months now?”

“So, Lubna, what exactly is the point of telling me this? What would *you* like for me to do? Tell me, I’ll do it.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing. You believe the lies your brother is feeding you?”

“Don’t say that.”

“No, of course not. Your saintly brother never lies.”

“Finish things and then come.” Lubna spoke with new finality. “I don’t want you here being miserable. I don’t want this affecting the children. What you need to finish, finish. Let my brother be my problem.”

“If only it was that simple, Lubna.”

A long silence followed. Imtiaz heard footsteps stalk by the window of the living room. Anshuman was beginning his night watch. Kamruzzaman and Zubeida had retired to the bedroom. The faint static of Kamruzzaman's transistor radio faded in and out. He was down to three stations, one primary, and two alternatives. The Free Bangla Radio was on top. The Voice of America and BBC brought views of what the world knew, what it thought it knew, and what it in return reported that was not known in the Subcontinent because of the army's obstruction.

He knocked on his aunt and uncle's door. Immediately, Zubeida noticed the distress that had swallowed his demeanor, which was fine earlier at dinner.

"How are they?" Zubeida asked.

"Who?" Imtiaz stood distractedly at the door. "Oh. Lubna, the kids. They're okay."

Kamruzzaman had given up on the radio, and was trying to read through an article in a newspaper, while holding it under the bedside lamp for proper light. His glasses were almost down at the tip of his nose, making him wrinkle his forehead and squint myopically.

"Come in, sit," Zubeida gestured at the cane chair in one corner.

"Her brother..." Imtiaz sat down heavily, "wants them out of the house sounds like."

"Hell with this," Kamruzzaman threw the paper on the ground, took off his glasses and tossed them on the nightstand. "That sounds just like him," he said to Imtiaz.

"What do you want to do?" Zubeida asked.

“I don’t know,” said Imtiaz. “If I go back, I won’t hear the end of it, and he’s enough of a mad man to sue me for everything I have, and everything I don’t have. I feel like a fugitive. Hiding away from my family, and at a time like this.”

“Tell them to come here. Lubna and your children, they can come stay here.”

“What nonsense,” Kamruzzaman muttered. Zubeida ignored him.

“That’s too dangerous,” said Imtiaz.

“Her brother, he knows people, they can help him.”

“Mammi, the last thing I want to do is go more into a hole with that man.”

“Just get rest now,” Zubeida said. “Whatever will happen will happen in good time. Here, you are home.”

Home, Imtiaz thought, lying in the dark. That was all one could do. Get home, be home, make a home where there was none. And that home, no matter how long it had been home, was subject constantly to being undone, more than it was to staying, unchanged, unaffected, in place.

Even Hell, as a concept, a fictional stead, was more permanent than home.

End of Part II



### PART III: THE YEAR OF THE VULTURES

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Once upon a time a philosopher-poet had a dream. It was not a dream as dreams are, neither of night or day, of sleep or distracted waking. It was a dream shrouded in the philosopher's gauzy meditations, and kindled by the fire of the poet's pen. In this dream, the philosopher-poet traveled the streets and lived in the ecstasy of the good life of the believer. He was led by the holy book to understand his place in a wayward world gone blind with the rage that builds out of oppression. The place was as pure as the philosopher-poet's dream. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the philosopher-poet, did not live to see Pakistan realized, but he inspired a follower. Once the fervent warrior for Hindu-Muslim unity and one united India, the follower quickly shed his life's message for one he felt more suited to his political aims, to achieving power. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's quest to fulfill Iqbal's dream, the nation that would come to be, a right and a destiny, cut from and out of the fabric he wanted once to keep intact, Pakistan, proved more perfidious than the beautiful endgame of the most lucid dreams.

Having liberated India's Muslims toward their sacred homeland, the Liberator was stuck cradling a place at once disjoint and out of state. In the summer of 1947, blood soaked into the rich soil of Punjab and Bengal. Out of Lahore were uprooted Hindus and Sikhs, hounded and thrown out of their ancestral lands, when they were not butchered by the incoming Muslim hordes. In Amritsar Muslims beleaguered imams, at a loss to understand why, carried skulls in boxes. From Calcutta Muslim families went east into

the second wing of the new state of Pakistan, away from the marauding Hindu mobs, into friendly territory. Hindus from Noakhali and Khulna, Comilla and Jessore, fled to West Bengal, to the safety of India. The dream of Pakistan was a fractured bone, pulsing with blood from the flesh in-between, faulty from inception. Jinnah wanted one Pakistan, he got two. There in the west, from Karachi on the Arabian Sea to the Northwest Frontier Province nudging the Himalayan ranges was West Pakistan. Across one thousand miles of India, in the Ganges Delta, Bengal stood with the name of East Pakistan. Because Bengalis, East Bengalis, had been roused to chant for the new state, it was more than just Jinnah and the Muslim League that renamed East Bengal as East Pakistan.

These matters were hiccups of history. Anyone with the most superficial understanding of the ways of states and nations could grasp that blunders in the path to their making were grist for the mill. Over time, even the crudest situation arrived at stasis, no matter how brutal the inner life continued to be. Jinnah was aware of the mess on his hands, and, with his lungs chewed on by consumption like a flesh by piranha fish, he arrived in Dhaka in 1948 to brandish a monumental speech, to an audience that had initially given him a king's reception.

Zubeida Chowdhury, when she recalled that March day, could not help but allow her heart to break at the sight that was the Qaid-i-Azam. He was haggard as a rag doll, converted from his lifelong practice of tailored English suits to a humble sherwani, hand-woven Karakul cap on his skeletal head, eloquent, wheezy, and laboring through each word as if razors instead of blood cells were moving in his lungs. And there he stood, tall and stolid, waving his righteous finger, jabbing at heaven with it, proclaiming that Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan.

That was the day it started, Zubeida believed. “We never imagined it would become like that in such a short time,” she said.

Out on the verandah, they were relishing the cool respite from the heat brought on by gale winds, and a downpour that had only trickled off for a few hours, to return with the vengeance of furious gods. Imtiaz was trying to hide his inebriation, allowing the winds to soothe his aching head. He was not a drunk. It was the first drink he had allowed himself in over two weeks, since his last conversation with Lubna. He had not called back, and she had not called him. It was good. A period of grace, downtime, a moment to breathe elaborately, and not dive back into unstoppable dynamics.

As Zubeida spoke, they watched the corner of the lawn where Mitali and Ranjan were now taking turns with one of Huda Mia’s shovels, to the gardener’s great consternation, and digging a hole. Rounak, Dilip, Khoka, and Anju surrounded them, all having taken turns with the shovel. The hole was about three feet deep, but they wanted it to be deeper. The shovel shucked the ground with a thick, dull thump, and heaped clumps of soil came up in its flattened cradle that were being collected in a mound next to the hole, which looked itself like a grave. On the ground nearby were two gunnysacks with the weapons to be buried.

“Mamma doesn’t like this one bit, does he?” said Imtiaz.

“Most things your Mamma likes he doesn’t talk about anymore,” Zubeida replied. “He won’t say it, but had these kids gone to Mubarak bhai instead of coming here, your Mamma would be the first one to take a personal slight.”

Anju lifted the gunnysacks and entered the hole. It was distressing to see her jump in, as if she was readying to be buried alive by a group of executioners. The rest stood around the lip of the hole giving Anju instructions on how to lay down the sacks and seal them first with blankets they tossed in. A short distance away Huda Mia continued watching.

“They must be doing alright,” said Imtiaz. “That’s a good amount of guns and ammunition. Maybe we judged them wrong.”

Once the sacks were in place, the work resumed to fill the hole. By the time ever bit of soil was returned to cover it up, the area looked untouched. Ranjan tamped it down with the head of the shovel.

“How long will they keep them there?” said Imtiaz.

“As long as they need,” Zubeida answered.

The fighters were making their way back to the verandah. Huda Mia stood over the sight, gazing at it with the heartbreak of a farmer whose land had just been desecrated beyond repair by marauding landlords. He sank down to his haunches and began working around the edge of the hole, smoothing the ground.

Later, seated on the verandah, the six of them variously on the ground and the steps, Rounak recounted the ambushes.

“We started slow. By we I mean Kader bhai and all of his people, which includes us. The first good attack was on one Pak outpost. Sixteen of them killed. We needed it, all of us, whether we were part of it or not, to bolster our confidence. And it did. The next one was much bigger, the one that gave us the weapons we now have. It was a boat full of arms and ammunition, headed for North Bengal. Sten guns, light machine guns, mortars, everything.”

“And we got none of that,” Dilip spat.

“Doesn’t matter,” Rounak said, forcefully. “What matters is what was done, and the message it sent. One hundred. That was how many, at least, Pak soldiers were killed on board the boat. The fire they set to it blazed for days. There was some leftover ammunition that went up in the blaze. A small sacrifice, I guess, to send a loud signal.”

“It won’t be long, Khalamma,” said Ranjan. “The way we took those Paks, the stories will be giving the rest of them nightmares. And we will strike again.”

“What if there’s a raid?” said Imtiaz.

“Raid?” said Rounak. “We have some stored at my family’s house too, and at my father’s warehouse. But we have to be careful. Keeping it all in one place is not safe.”

“Yes, raid. You can be careful all you want, but they’re happening. You don’t believe me, ask anyone. Maybe you people have been out of the city too long to know.”

From the living room came whooshes and bleeps of the Grundig’s dial being manipulated. Kamruzzaman had moved on to the bigger radio after his transistor had ceased altogether receiving the stations he listened to. It was old and done its time valiantly, lived through abuse when Murad and Minhaz were young and dropped it more

times than it should have endured and held together and functioned afterward. But this evening, even the Grundig was being difficult. Kamruzzaman grumbled, and gave up.

“We know,” Ranjan said.

“What do you know, you know nothing,” Kamruzzaman entered the verandah.

The fighters shuffled and stumbled to their feet. “You stole a bunch of weapons, so what? Is that all you think it takes to fight?”

“It takes more, much more,” said Rounak, her tone lined with resentment. “We know. Let’s go. Khalamma, if there is any problem, you call my house. We won’t keep the things here long.”

Zubeida nodded her implicit support. “Eat before you go. Mokaddas will have food for you. Go to the kitchen.”

They checked with each other. Hunger was reigning in their bellies. The journey back from the country had been long, at times halted for close to two hours, to make sure they were not caught. It took two full days of travel to reach the city. In that time they had barely eaten, picking at the leftovers they had brought from where they had camped with Siddiki’s other units. Even at Rounak’s house they worked in a rush to get part of the weapons stowed. At the mention of a hot meal not one face held an expression of resistance.

“Which one of you went to see the judge?” Kamruzzaman asked.

“I did,” Dilip answered.

“And?” said Kamruzzaman.

“He can’t do anything, sir.”

“That’s what he said?”

“Sir, that is what he said.”

This struck Kamruzzaman. Suleiman Mubarak was unable to wield power in the very halls where he was master. His wining and dining the elite of the military and civilian factions were superficial moments lost to the past. Here was reality. In time of war all definitions, assumptions, and notions became upended and suspended.

“Actually, sir,” said Rounak.

“Shut your mouth,” Dilip hissed. “I told you it’s not your problem.”

“Sir,” Rounak continued, as though he had not spoken, “those two boys...”

“Big mouth,” said Dilip, glaring at Rounak.

“Let her speak,” said Kamruzzaman. “What happened?”

“Sir, those two boys were found dead in their cells.”

“Dead? What the hell happened?”

“No one knows,” said Rounak.

“They should not have pulled their damn fool stunt to begin with. See what lies in store for you people if you act like schoolchildren thinking you’re playing a game?”

“Sir, no one is playing a game,” said Dilip.

“So tell me then, your big serious plans?” said Kamruzzaman.

“Kader bhai is leading us, and he makes the plans,” said Dilip. “We follow. We do as he says.”

“Petty ambushes and stolen weapons? That is your Kader bhai’s leadership?”

Behind his words, Kamruzzaman’s breathing was growing labored. His hand, as if on a lifeline and will of its own, began groping for the pocket of his pyjamas. “Do you know what will happen when your pathetic effort gets crushed? Do you?”

Silence. The faces of the fighters were stoic, their expression wan. Imtiaz was having no trouble taking joy in the grilling his uncle was handing out. Zubeida was on the verge of stopping her husband, when his hand fished out the inhaler.

“Do you?” Kamruzzaman repeated, as the small burst of comfort entered his lungs. “Let me tell you what will happen. The army will go from house to house, up and down the country, one by one killing every man, woman, and child until there is not one soul left alive in your failed Bangladesh. Then you can rejoice from your unknown mass graves all you want.”

“Keep quiet,” Zubeida told her husband. “You all, go. Go eat.”

After the fighters left, Kamruzzaman sat distractedly.

“That fellow, Hashmat,” he said, “has he said anything to you?”

“About what?” Zubeida asked.

“He mopes around day and night,” said Kamruzzaman. “Obviously there is some trouble following him around.”

“There is,” said Imtiaz. “He didn’t want to bother you with it.”

“Let me guess,” Kamruzzaman frowned, “money.”

“It’s more than just that,” said Imtiaz.

“What more does he want?” said Kamruzzaman. “As it is he has been staying here without a thought to going back home. What is he here for?”

“Maybe he can ask you himself.”

“Nonsense. I don’t have time to listen to sob stories. These country people, that’s all they bring with them to tell.”



“It doesn’t have to be decided this very moment,” said Zubeida. “He is not bothering anyone. Let him stay a little longer with his daughter and grandchild.”

A coughing fit attacked Kamruzzaman as soon as he tried to speak. Zubeida called for water.

“Memshahib, I will get it,” Shonali answered from the living room, where she was cleaning.

Kamruzzaman’s chest heaved from waves of dry coughs. He hacked, but nothing formed in his throat to come out. Shonali entered with the glass of water. After drinking it, Kamruzzaman panted for a full minute, coughed some more, and drained the water.

“You, wait a minute,” he told Shonali. His voice was raw, and the words sputtered out in segments. “What is the matter with your father?”

Shonali shot a look at Imtiaz. Imtiaz felt as though he had been outed as a liar, untrustworthy with confidence, a terrible helper.

“Ji, shahib, do you want I should call him?” said Shonali.

“No, I’m asking you.”

“Shahib, I don’t know what to answer.”

“You don’t know what to answer? Are you an imbecile?”

“Shahib, I will go get him.”

“No. I don’t want to talk to him.” Kamruzzaman held his breath to halt the onslaught of another pharyngeal revolt. “If he needs something he should ask. A man his age should have more sense than puttering around his daughter and son-in-law waiting for people to read his mind. Go, go from here.”

Shonali stood puzzled and embarrassed until, behind Kamruzzaman's back, Zubeida nodded her reassurance that there was nothing to worry about and tipped her head for her to go.

Without a word Kamruzzaman went inside, almost limping out of the verandah. Zubeida, Imtiaz could tell, wanted to assist him, hold him, stand next to him, but she knew his pride would not allow it, and she would not allow her needs to injure what was left of his pride. This was not the man Imtiaz had heard about from his mother, and his father, and not the one-time defiant rabble rouser and resister, along with his wife, and the countless women and men they helped, colluded with, and protected against the mad reason of murder.

"Mammi," Imtiaz slid his chair close to Zubeida, and lowered his voice. "What is happening with him?"

Zubeida cast her eyes at her hands folded on her lap. "He wants his sons to be here."

"So he should tell them to come here, he is their father."

"He will not do it."

"What's the point of all that pride?"

In her silence Imtiaz read her anguish, coursing steadily, underneath layers of patience accumulated with the sheer force of will. She wanted to crack. If she did, Imtiaz thought, a foundation would collapse. Without her, Kamruzzaman would last as long as the next illness or devilment of spirit. To be that dependent on another human being was a terrifying, hell for the one on whom such a burden was cast.

“I don’t know,” said Zubeida.

“Mammi, have you tried talking to them? At least to Minhaz?”

“Minhaz is worse than his brother,” said Zubeida. “At least Murad once in a while stands up. But Minhaz will go jump in the ocean if his wife sheds one tear.”

“Then they need to stand up.” He sounded silly, and he heard it as soon as he spoke.

“They’re grown men. If they do something or don’t do something, they should know the consequences. Now, you tell me. Why do you drink so much? I’m not asking to be intrusive. I’m just wondering.”

“It makes nothing easier. Only the next day extremely difficult.”

“Murad, too. Drinks all the time.”

“Just for a few hours, the world quiets down.” He asked, “Do you think this movement, this Mukti Bahini, will achieve what they think is possible?”

“I pray for them,” said Zubeida. “At least hey have the season on their side.” She checked the sky. The rain had abated, but kept its intention written in the winds to return. In the distance, from the direction of the university campus, came thunder growls. A dull, white glow spoke of the sun’s forbidden presence behind banks of rainclouds.

“Baba,” Shonali had waited until her father had finished his prayers.

“Come in, come in. Here, give me your head.” Hashmat spread prayers over his daughter’s head, kissed it, and rolled up his prayer mat. He placed at the head of his bed, next to the pillow. Shonali had brought him a cup of tea, which he took from her, and proceeded to pour the tea onto the saucer in installments, taking contented sips in between. “What is it? Why is your face so dark?”

“Baba, shahib wants to know how much longer you are staying?” Shonali said, more easily than she had expected. The darkness that her father had mentioned on her leaped onto his features.

“He does,” said Hashmat, “I’m sure he does.” He lowered the cup and saucer to the floor. “I will tell him myself.” He waved her away.

Shonali closed the door behind her, and went next door where Amir, lying on his back on the bed, was rocking Sufiya on his shins, the child laying on her stomach with her chin nestled between the knobs of her father’s knees, clutching his hand and giggling each time he bounced her upward and down again.

“Will you talk to my father?” she asked Amir. “Are you listening? I said, will you talk to my father?”

“Talk to him about what?” said Amir, laughing along with his daughter.

“Put her down and listen to me,” said Shonali. “Shahib said he wants to know how long my father is here to stay.”

“Then he should go tell him,” said Amir.

“Stop this,” said Shonali, plucking Sufiya off her father’s legs.

“What do you want me say to him? I’m not the master of this house. Shahib wants to know, then shahib will be the one talking to him.”

“Why does he want my father to leave?” Shonali said, indignantly. “I work in this house, you work in this house. Is it because he is another mouth to feed? Do they think about that while those other strangers are sitting out there eating as often as they want?”

“Those people are more than just strangers, woman. They’re freedom fighters, fighting with their lives, for me, for you, for all of us.”

“Okay? So? They’re suddenly more important than my father? And don’t break my heart with that fighting for me talk. No one has to fight for me.”

“Two words I can’t say to you without you turning them upside down and beating me with them.”

“Then talk to him.”

“Who?”

“Who, I just said who.”

“Don’t eat my head, I beg you. If your father has something to talk about with the big man then that is how it’s going to be.” He lit a beedi and pulled luxuriously on it.

“These days and nights, cooped up in here like this, has me filled with energy I need to let out.” The look he gave his wife caused the heat to invade her face. She looked at their daughter, whom Amir had lowered to the ground and who was now picking at a spot of eczema on her father’s ankle. Amir moved away her hand, flicked the beedi out the window, and raised her again. “I think it’s time for her to have a playmate.”

“You think,” Shonali controlled her impulse to give in to the idea. “I come here to have you talk to my poor father, and your man’s mind goes diving into the drain.”

Woman, it’s in the drain if my mind goes diving into thoughts of whores and bad women I can pick up on the streets. You are my wife. My mind is reaching for heaven.”

“God help heaven with that kind of rubbish getting in,” said Shonali, yanking Sufiya off the ground by an arm. “I have to feed her.”

Amir egged her on, “And leave her father unfed, slowly, slowly dying,” he croaked dramatically.

“With that kind of energy,” Shonali chided, “this poor child will not have a brother soon.” She grasped Sufiya against her and went out of the room, leaving Amir tittering and lighting another beedi.

Before dawn Hashmat Alimuddin blinked awake from dreams that he could no longer endure. He laid waiting for the muezzin’s song. His troubled heart had fluttered all night. The sound of his daughter’s voice speaking on behalf of the master of the house, he believed, was a ruse. She wanted him gone. He had become a liability. A source of shame. As well he should be. His mind must have left his sense of dignity broken-kneed, tottering on the verge of complete collapse, for him to fly out of his misery into the peace of her life with her husband and child. The child, whom Hashmat had barely seen since her birth, was a balm to his ruined and fledgling heart. But it was every man’s lot to know his place. And Hashmat Alimuddin had forgotten his. He could lie to the world, to his family, to himself even, wear his pride like a sore, too sensitive for anyone’s touch, and untouchable to one and all. Inside, where the waves of blood tried to feed his fighting

heart, he knew better. In there, in that fraught, lightless chamber roamed only the unheard sighs of loss.

He peeled the blanket off him, a layer of unwanted skin, and reached for the window shutter. The fragrance of rain-fed earth leaked into the room. Rain was drumming on the roof. It brought respite from the heat that held on in the space between downpours. As he watched, the swatch of navy blue sky above the jagged line of the jackfruit tree turned slate-gray with the dimmed rising of the sun. Waterlogged birds woke to swoop down on fresh worms. Crows, cawing deadly doom, must be battling with snakes in their nests. Life, Hashmat thought, constantly beating, constantly fighting to make it through another cycle of existence.

He swung his legs over the side, the cool, dampish ground chilling his soles. Next door, his daughter and her family were still asleep. Downstairs, the cook and the gardener would be stirring in their rooms soon. The watchman was likely in his makeshift dwelling awaiting the end of watch. If Hashmat made a lot of noise with his morning ablutions, he would not be able to leave as he wanted to. He could, he thought, conspire easily with the watchman to keep quiet, let him pass.

God would forgive one day's compulsion. Hashmat gathered his belongings, and crept down the stairs of the servants' quarters, his shoes hooked onto two fingers. Once he was downstairs, he slipped his feet into them. The soles were already wet, the water seeping in through the socks. When he reached the gate, he peeked inside the watchman's shed. Anshuman looked asleep, but as soon as Hashmat's face penetrated his space at the threshold of the door, he perked up. A kerosene lantern sat on the ground next to his chair, virtually new and unused. On a table laid a glinting silver flashlight, a sawed off staff that

was half a nightstick, keys looped through a metal ring, a jug of water at the halfway mark, and a copper cup. Leaning against the wall was a portrait of Ganesh, sitting atop a lotus bowl of yellow, wrapped in a bright salmon-colored dhooti, against a clear sky of ocean boat blue.

Before Hashmat could offer a greeting Anshuman said, “So, you’re off,” and picked up the ring of keys. He unlocked the cutout with the care of a surgeon, slid the bolt, and drew it open. “Have a safe journey.” Behind Hashmat, the watchman closed the gate with as much stealth and care as he had opened it. Not a word more, not about the rain, not how he would reach his destination, not a syllable more than was necessary. The man’s reserves were too spent with his night’s calls of warning to revive for regular conversation.

The signal of the azaan about to be sung knocked and squealed over the loudspeakers. The muezzin began. Hashmat Alimuddin raised his umbrella, mumbled prayers, reinstating his plea for forgiveness just this once. God understood duress. His mercy was boundless. To the pious it was there in abundance, as long as He was not taken for a fool, His goodness trifled with and exploited. Hashmat woke a rickshaw puller from sleep, and, as the man cursed him for an old goat who had nothing better to do at that early hour, felt his head reel at the stench of liquor and rotten gums on his breath. The offer of extra money Hashmat made summarily appeased the man into congeniality. Not much longer, Hashmat played in his mind the thought, would he be a burden to family or strangers. His mistake was leaving his lot to begin with. At his age not to know the consequences of defying fate made him a wretch, to others and to himself. A good final kick was what he needed.



The jewelry that was meant to be his daughter's birthright would have to find a newer line of inheritance. If it landed in the right hands, perhaps it would be spared the humiliation of being melted down. Hashmat's heart bucked and shrank. The generations of mothers and daughters of his bloodline whose hands had touched the precious metals, left their invisible memories, had landed in the hands of an inept keeper. And it was on the way to be further squandered to save a failure.

Moneylenders were God's scourges. They were forbidden to be dealt with by the pious Muslim. Hashmat Alimuddin heard the crash inside him of his faith falling deep into a cavern of ruin, where, once it had disintegrated there would be left created the crater into which the rest of him would go tumbling in to never rise again.

Getting off the rickshaw, Hashmat's knees buckled. He steadied himself against the rickety frame of the rickshaw, heard the rickshaw puller say something about his health, his pallor, before he was counting the man's money and handing it to him. He waited at the entrance to Kamalapur Station for his bearing to return, and for the rising din in his ears to subside. The constriction in his throat made him pull at the loose collar of his kurta. Holding his umbrella over his head, he pushed himself to scurry out of the rain, and then reach for a breath.

Drums beat in his temples, sending the vibrations to his ears. He saw the ticket counter. In the window the clerk was excavating his ear with a pinky finger. He drew out the finger with its dagger-point nail, regarded it like a policeman checking a piece of evidence, and wiped the finger on part of him that was hidden from view. Hashmat noticed the man see him, and turn his eyes. He did not want to deal with Hashmat, or seemingly anyone, at such an early hour, or at all. If Hashmat went up to his window the

man would shout him away. One more place in the world where Hashmat Alimuddin was not wanted, was a pariah. He hungered for air, and the more energetically he gulped for it the less it entered him. His collar was strangling him. He hooked a finger and pulled, but there was no more room for it to give or loosen. The ticket clerk took on a visage of worry. He was looking at Hashmat again, who was ten feet or so away from his window. Hashmat saw his oiled hair glistening under the light inside his booth, his trimmed mustache drawn over his mouth with finesse, the open collar of his khaki shirt through which was visible a paper-white undershirt, the top of a pen protruding from a breast pocket. The ticket window slanted. Hashmat thought he had wavered in his feet. When he tried to adjust his head, he found that it was straight. And now he was looking up at the ceiling, where along the rafters pigeons were patrolling, flapping wings, and leaking guano without regard for human troubles or decorum. Although, Hashmat wanted to laugh as his vision clouded over, not too many humans in this city had much more decorum than idiot pigeons when they squatted by the roadside or freely ran their water into the municipal buffet of clogged drains. A head poked into his vision. It was the ticket clerk.

He came to to multiple calls. Uncle? Chacha? Hours had passed, or days, but he was not that out of his mind. The only thing different was his location. He felt a wall against his back, its grainy texture and tepid temperature pressing against the fabric of his kurta. In his chest a repression still existed, like a foot bearing down on the spot over his heart. Through the continued blur in his vision he tried to make out the collection of faces, aware that they were strangers. That much he could discern. Children giggled and pointed. Baggage handlers stopped to gawk until shouts from their temporary patrons startled

them back to earning their pay. A policeman stood behind the small knot of people, but was doing less than the ticket clerk, who had taken the lead in aiding Hashmat. A twinge of cold sparked against his lip. The ticket clerk was speaking in a soothing tone, holding the stainless steel mug, inviting Hashmat to take the water.

The drumming in his temples and ears had subsided to a distant low thumping. Hashmat touched his heart and understood that it was the turmoil there that had the drumbeats percolating throughout him. He had had this encounter before. Back then he was younger, his heart slightly tougher. His temper too was a galvanizing force. But the two of them together, a weakened heart in collusion with a tinderbox temper, was all a man his age needed for self-slaughter. The water coursed down his gullet, warm and unsettling. He pushed away the cup, and he reached for his pocket, out of which he brought out his wallet.

“Narayanganj,” he said, hoping the ticket clerk would get to work posthaste.

“Uncle, you need to rest,” said the clerk. “Not be on a train in your condition.”

“But I...I have to...”

“Are you alone, Uncle?”

Hashmat saw the policeman waving at and scolding the gathered people to move on.

Then the policeman left the scene.

“Yes,” said Hashmat.

“How long have you been in Dhaka?” the clerk asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Hashmat tried to push up with his hands against the ground.

“Uncle, please. Stop moving around. Where did you stay?”

Hashmat wanted to tear out his tongue before giving an answer.

“Uncle,” the clerk said, “you can’t sit here and you can’t get on a train.”

“What do you think, I’ll die? What do you care?”

“Yes. Maybe. You could. But I can’t let you be here on the platform.”

“Sell me a ticket then. To Narayanganj.”

“Then I will have your death on my head if something happens to you on the way,”

the clerk straightened to full posture.

Hashmat made the effort to stand again, and this time found purchase in his legs.

When the clerk tried to assist him he brushed him off.

“I can carry my own weight,” he said. “And two of you!”

On the ride back to the Chowdhury house Hashmat planned his strategy to save face. It has been a couple of hours since he left, and by now Shonali would have caused a small uproar. If not in full detail, Kamruzzaman and Mrs. Chowdhury would be aware that something was awry. He could, Hashmat thought, just tell them he went to market early, before the crowds flocked in. There was the watchman, too, but something told Hashmat that Anshuman could be relied on to not bother himself over the frugal troubles of others.

“Back already?” said Anshuman, opening the cutout.

“Oh, no trains today to Narayanganj until much later,” Hashmat tossed out as he shuffled in with his head lowered.

“Bloody fool trains,” said the watchman.

“True, brother, so true,” said Hashmat. “Nothing is reliable anymore.”

He found Shonali feeding Sufiya. He stood in silence at the door, his heart pulsing in his temples without the former urgency of its drumming beats. He could see better, but

his head was light, a balloon moored to his shoulders and neck. He set down his bag and took one step inside. Shonali made no acknowledgment of her father, and Sufiya, as if she was trying to let her mother know someone important had entered the room, kept pointing at her grandfather. Hashmat retracted his steps, lifted his bag, and went next to door to his room, where he laid on the bed wondering how much more insignificant he could get.

The rain drummed on, and on, and on. For the last two and a half hours Shaukat was in the same position against the headboard listening to the rain as a prisoner in solitary confinement would be condemned to endless darkness and deprivation. He had kept a distance of several months from liquor, but days of constant downpour twisted his nerves so fiercely that a double scotch became the only antidote. He permitted himself one at the end of the day. Out of his uniform, sitting in the dark of the bedroom, listening to the crash and thrum of the season, like his house was under assault. By then Umbreen was in bed. Therein lay one redeeming point about the deplorable weather: for his wife it was a jolt to the heart.

Since recovering from her brush with alcohol poisoning, Umbreen had, without saying so, quit drinking. Shaukat had not seen her touch a drop going on three weeks. She slept heavily at night and got rattled by dreams. There were times during her waking hours when he would see an expression come over her face that begged for excavation, like rich troves of information were suddenly wanting to come forth, but needed a nudge. Shaukat never asked. Umbreen never told.

She was reading again, even if not at the rate she used to during her university days, anywhere from two to three books a week, in addition to coursework. Authors and thinkers whose names Shaukat would not deign to pronounce. He had mutely, and with just enough attention, accepted his patchwork degree made up of history and military studies, which did not exist as a departmental discipline but was accepted as an exception

in the case of the son of Justice Hamid Shaukat. Reading anything more than orders and official documents ended for him that day.

Before his wife left for the evening, he was curious about the sudden frequency of her going to gatherings arranged by army officers' wives. He knew that she had reached out to some of the officers' wives, and they had welcomed her. At first he encouraged it, felt a sense of relief that she would finally have a reason to get out of the house.

Nonetheless, Shaukat was skeptical about their reasons for being so open, because he was one of the junior officers, and these hens, he knew, liked nothing more than to draw into their coop a fresh, vulnerable new entrant to their yard, and peck her senseless for information about her personal life to nourish their bottomless thirst for gossip. Most army officers hated their wives. They would rather be in battle, or ambushed by bandit guerilla miscreants than listen to their squawking. A newly arrived officer and his young wife, with no children, would rouse the women to ecstasies. It was sad. These women were pathetic, and it was a nightmare to think of Umbreen turning into one of them someday. And children. They had no had that discussion in months. Not since they came to Dhaka. Neither of them could be blamed for the distraction. But Umbreen would rather swallow ground glass than touch the topic, more and more, at all. Not only touch, but she had grown so infuriated at the subject more than once the last few times Shaukat broached it that she refused to get pregnant, and threatened to abort it if she did.

“Hearts and minds?” Shaukat said, when Umbreen told him what the women were trying to do at their meetings. “What hearts and minds? Whose hearts and minds? Law-breakers? Traitors?”

Umbreen placed earrings in her ears, brushed her hair in sweeping strokes, sat down at the dressing table stool, and slipped on her chappals. She had put on the emerald green Dhakai jamdane sari imprinted with white vines sprouting leaves and flowers, with a crimson blouse, that she had bought soon after they arrived in Dhaka.

“Umbreen?” He waited over a minute. Umbreen went on applying final touches to her makeup, staring at the mirror, and deciding in the end to switch out the earrings, three more times. Shaukat got up. “What the hell sort of affair is this? Umbreen, answer me,” his jaws clenched. Inside his head Shaukat heard his teeth grind.

Umbreen lifted her purse and headed out. Shaukat waited, to see if she would return. Several moments later came the sound of car doors opening and closing. The engine revved. Shaukat turned off the bedroom light.

Two more drinks after she left had pulled Shaukat into a deep sleep. He started awake when a blinding flash intruded on the claustrophobic dream in which he was stuck in the warehouse at Hariharpara. He was laying on a pile of corpses that rose high enough to kiss the roof. His face was pressed against the ceiling, crushing his nose, emptying out his lungs of breath. There was a sudden explosion, cracking open the ceiling, releasing Shaukat’s nose. He woke on his side, his head pillowed under an arm with his nose pressed against his forearm.

It was as though Umbreen had not left. He checked his wristwatch, a little after ten. She had been gone for three hours. The soft throbbing in his temples made his head feel ten times its weight.



“Where have you been?” he asked, thickly, weakly propping himself up against the headboard. His glass had tipped over next to him on the bed. “God, Umbreen, what is the *matter*? Have you lost your voice? Forgotten how to speak? It’s almost ten-thirty at night, where the hell were you?”

Umbreen took off her chappals, undid her earrings and set them inside a small purple velvet jewelry box on the dressing table. Before undressing, she went and stood at the foot of the bed facing her husband.

“What do you think?” she asked, touching a necklace around her neck.

“What is it?” Shaukat said, squinting. “Is it new?”

“It is new, yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It’s a gift.”

“From?”

“Major Shahbaz’s wife. She said the two of you know each other.”

“So what if we do? She’s in this group, too?”

“How much do you know him?”

“What sort of question is that? I know him like I know a hundred other officers.”

He could not stop staring at the necklace, more so in the light of knowing it was from Pervez Shahbaz’s wife. “Is Mrs. Shahbaz Hindu?”

“She’s your colleagues wife. You should know.”

“Major Shahbaz is a senior officer, and we don’t talk about our wives and their jewelry collection when we’re working.”

Umbreen let out a chirping laugh. “Is there a law that only Hindu women can wear a Mangal Sutra?”

“They *are* the ones that wear them,” said Shaukat, too defensively. Umbreen went back to the dressing table. She gazed admiringly at the necklace, a gift that was slowly growing on her, enchanting her gradually.

“Her grandmother,” she said, “converted when she married her grandfather. It’s a family heirloom. I think that’s lovely.”

“And she just gave it to you? Something so valuable to her?”

“I admired it, and she offered it.” Her head whipped around at him. “I didn’t steal it!”

“I didn’t say you did. Umbreen, I’m happy to see that you’re feeling better.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Umbreen said, as serenely as though she had thanked him for his concern.

“I just said...”

“I heard you, and I don’t like your tone. I’m not here to be a pawn in your politics and boot-licking your way to the top. You and your cronies, you’re a bunch of killers. Don’t you dare take a high ground with me. If I knew this is what you’re coming here to do...”

“Umbreen, mind your tongue and keep your voice down.”

“Or else what? You’re going to lock me up? Torture me? Treat me like a *miscreant*?”

“Your mind, Umbreen, is out of control.” Shaukat swung his legs to the ground, but his head hurt too much and felt light and dizzy. “If you knew, what would you do?”

Tell your father? Divorce me? Blackmail me? How much worse could you make things for me than you already have?"

"You are a disgrace." Umbreen began unwinding the sari. When it was off, she unbuttoned the blouse, and together placed both on the bed in a pile. She was as lithe as the first time Shaukat saw her without clothes. A paunch had settled into her lower abdomen, which now slumped over the hem of her petticoat. Without knowing it was there no one would guess it existed when they saw her, even in the fitted shalwar kameezes she wore. Umbreen was untroubled by it. As she walked around, it jiggled with each step. Her breasts were small, cupped into her bra like pears, creating no cleavage.

"What else did the saintly Mrs. Shahbaz the sadhu tell you? Or any one of those other *chudails* that have nothing better to do than hate their own lives and celebrate other people's misery?"

"Must feel good to be such a good judge of everyone." Umbreen slipped on her shalwar-kameez that she wore to bed, went to the bathroom, and started running the water in the sink.

"Judge? I'm not judging...Umbreen," Shaukat swayed to his feet and went to the bathroom door. "I'm not judging anyone. I know these people better than you. These women..."

"And what about you?" Umbreen cut the water and began dabbing her face dry with a towel. "Night after night you've come home, since we came here, smelling – the whole house, my God, I want to vomit every time I breathe in here anymore – smelling of blood. You thought I'm too drunk to notice. What sort of orders are you following?"

Shaukat pivoted and scrambled back toward the bed. He sat at the foot of the bed and began putting on his socks and shoes. Umbreen stood over him.

“Tell me,” she said, “since you want to judge one and all. What orders are you following? Order to kill? Orders not to stop your soldiers from raping and kidnapping Bengali women?”

Shaukat sprang to his feet, one shoe dangling from his hand, the other untied, with his foot in it.

“Bloody bitch, you think you own me?”

“How many people have you killed, Fazal? Have you raped women? Did you watch your soldiers rape them?”

The shoe dropped from his hand.

“You are a drunkard and a slut.” Shaukat’s trembling had him spent in seconds. He sank onto the bed. Umbreen’s clenched fist hovered next to his head, inches away. She wanted to ask him how many lowered heads he had looked at in the same position, at his feet, begging for mercy, before sending bullets into them. Part of her wished she had not gone tonight, so she would not have heard the other wives’ horror-stricken accounts of what they knew their husbands were doing.

One woman had heard in detail of what her husband did, day in and day out, night after night, taking glee in his self-appointed responsibility for kidnapping Bengali women for the pleasure of fellow officers. She did not hear where exactly, but there were places around the city that had been turned into brothels. Mrs. Shahbaz confided that her husband told her about rounding up Mukti Bahini fighters “like fish in a net,” and executing them. Of villages being cleansed of infidels. That was when, both because it

caught her eye, and also because she could hear no more, Umbreen admired the Mangal Sutra.

“All the material we have, and nowhere for it to go,” said Helen, late one afternoon, as she and Walter drove with Judge Mubarak for tea at the Chowdhury house.

“I bet you the army will have a few suggestions where they’d like us to put them,” Walter chuckled.

“This is the kind of thing we need to get out there,” Helen insisted, familiar with the case of the boys, which Judge Mubarak had asked them to leave alone for the time being. He had in fact, since mentioning it to them, wished he had not.

“Did Sam say he can’t help you anymore at all?” Judge Mubarak asked.

“Walter? You want to answer that one?”

Walter frowned at his wife. “Don’t put it all on me. Look,” his neck strained, and the passenger seat springs chimed their discontent as he shifted around to address Judge Mubarak, “last time we were at Sam’s place he pretty much told us a couple white kids from America writing about their righteous indignation about war in the Third World was the last thing the Third World needed more of. Am I right, Helen? I am, that’s exactly what he said. I have no idea when he’ll pull another rabbit out of his ass with that guy. I’m just surprised they haven’t kicked him out of the consulate for his mouth. The man doesn’t have one good thing to say about U.S. policy, let alone about the U.S. *period*, anywhere, under any circumstances. If it wasn’t for Helen and her family ties. I’ll just say there’s enough of that crap that I can listen to. I get it. Huge blunders have been made,

and they keep getting made. But really, you want to be a representative of your country, for crying out loud, have one or two things once in a while to say in its favor.”

“Sam and my father, and my mother, have hated Nixon from the first day they saw his face,” said Helen.

“I’m not talking about just Nixon,” Walter said, irritated. “Nixon isn’t the beginning and the end of the country.”

“He’s the president,” said Judge Mubarak. “He’s the face of the country. Whoever else there is, it’s his name and his face that follow the decisions made by your country.”

“What about Yahya? What about Bhutto? What about the hundred other *West Pakistani* generals that are behind what’s happening daily here, in *your* country. Are they taking direct orders from Richard Nixon? Is Kissinger signing their operational orders?”

“I understand what you’re saying, and I agree,” said Judge Mubarak. “I’m sure Yahya and Bhutto are not complaining about the arms and ammunitions Mr. Nixon is providing the army. That does concern me.”

“Judge, with all due respect, aren’t these generals friends of yours? Or am I wrong to recall that Helen met them herself at your house not one week before they went apeshit on your people.”

“Walt,” said Helen.

“No, your husband makes a sound point,” said Judge Mubarak, wistfully lowering his head.

“Sorry,” Walter turned back around and faced forward.

For the second time in as many weeks Huda Mia's consternation was raised over the desecration of his beloved, toiled-after lawn. With his spade dangling from his dirt-caked hand, he stood by, under orders from the mistress of the house not to intervene, and watched the young fighters young people that had brought the sacks with the guns and bullets, once again desecrate a portion of his domain.

Imtiaz heard the gate open and saw Judge Mubarak's yellow Fiat rev up the driveway to the carport. Judge Mubarak was bringing the American woman Imtiaz had met at the judge's house and her husband over for tea. He wondered if they were aware of the activities they would happen upon. The fighters had returned sooner than expected, with more seized weapons. This time they were all there. Mitali, Ranjan, Rounak, Dilip, Khoka, and Anju. Along with the guns and ammunition they had buried the first time round, they were moving the entire cache to the Dhanmondi house. It was a safer bet to keep them there. Kamruzzaman agreed, as did Zubeida, and, after much grumbling, Hakim Patwari had no choice but to come around and warm reluctantly to an idea he openly called lunacy. If they were caught transporting the weapons, Patwari said, they would be shot on the spot. To that Dilip replied to let them do their work and not worry about it. Imtiaz left weapons-burial site, Huda Mia's forlorn state, and the vigorously working fighters, and went toward the house.

It had been a while since he met Helen, and Imtiaz was struck by how young she was. In the smoke and crowd of the party at the judge's house, and in the fatigue of his journey, Imtiaz had barely taken a steady look at her. He was on her side of the car as he walked up to the carport, and Helen, extending one leg out carefully to brace her exit,



smiled as appreciatively as someone had ever smiled at Imtiaz as soon as she was on both feet.

“Hi,” she said, holding out her hand. Imtiaz wavered for a step back, and then took two forward thinking she wanted to embrace. Foolishly, he offered both his hands in return, until Helen flinched, wondering what he was doing. The result was a handshake that was as awkward as if it was happening between two rivals after a long, bloody, and misunderstood fight. “It’s very nice to see you again.”

Behind her the space filled with a human mountain. Walter Munsen’s ponderous head popped out of the car like a heavy balloon that still knew its purpose was not to be moored to the ground but to soar for the heavens, as the rest of him stretched to its full, meat-packed length. He rose out of his wife’s shoulder, squinting at the sun, his face angered with heat into a lobster red. Sweat stains splotched his white shirt. His gray slacks were as loose as pyjamas. From head to foot he gave the appearance of former military man turned outdoorsman that had left home dressed like hippie. The cropped blonde hair on the square of his head looked newly groomed.

“Hello,” Imtiaz said. “Welcome to our house.”

Helen turned to find Walter. “This is my husband, Walter Munsen.”

“How you doing?” Walter’s arm jutted like a projectile from around Helen. It crushed Imtiaz’s hand. “What’s going on over there?” Walter shaded his eyes with the visor of an immense hand, shooting a hound’s curiosity at the corner of the lawn.

“Young man, how are you?” he said to Imtiaz.

“Hello, sir, I’m fine, thank you. Mamma and Mammi are inside, waiting for you. For all of you.” As he spoke, Mokaddas appeared on the verandah. Judge Mubarak also

found his attention waver over to the activity on the lawn. Unlike the inquisitiveness that had perked up Walter, Judge Mubarak's features became stricken. Imtiaz could tell that it was only for the sake of the guests he had brought that the judge kept quiet. He greeted Mokaddas, and was shown inside to the living room.

Walter was making a measured progress in the direction of the digging. Imtiaz, still taken by Helen, which he was unsure how to define or manage, watched her, hoping she would make the first move to rein in her husband.

"Are they doing what I think they're doing?" said Walter. Imtiaz turned, as if the scene were being brought to his attention for the first time. Looking at it, he did get the sense for a fleeting moment that it was happening elsewhere. Huda Mia was honoring his instructions from Zubeida and keeping his distance, while the fighters were engaged in a low but vigorous debate.

Helen exchanged a look with Imtiaz as if to say, I'm also a bit curious, what *is* going on over there? Instead of the hoped for intervention, Imtiaz now had two seekers eager to sate their curiosity, as Helen joined Walter.

"Are these guys doing what I think they're doing?" Walter mumbled, as he neared the fighters. Imtiaz and Helen were within hearing distance, but neither said anything.

"Ho-ly shit."

Behind them, unseen, Hakim Patwari appeared on the verandah. He rushed down the steps, stumbling on the last one and hurtling forward several steps before catching himself. Judge Mubarak's driver offered a helping hand. Patwari shunned him and went around the car toward the lawn.

"Hello, excuse me?" Patwari called.

Walter, Imtiaz, and Helen turned at this voice. The fighters, Huda Mia gave a cursory glance. His bright orange shirt reflected the sun and stunned Walter's eyes at first. The cuffs of his khaki trousers were folded well above his ankles so as to be untouched by the waterlogged streets.

"Come inside, please," Patwari almost implored. "Chowdhury shahib and Madam are waiting for you. Please. It's very hot out here. There are refreshments inside."

Helen stopped, as did Imtiaz, but Walter kept taking one unhurried step after another, the shovels of his feet inside the brown leather loafers, scuffed and frayed around the edges, flattening the grass as he went along like tractor wheels.

"Please come inside," Patwari repeated, halting next to Helen and Imtiaz, looking to her for help. Imtiaz gave him a feeble shrug.

"I will, in a minute," said Walter. "Hi, good afternoon," he approached the fighters. "Can I come closer?"

Rounak checked him, head to foot. Ranjan paused shoveling earth into the ditch. The rest of them were seated nearby, wiping their faces, taking drinks of water from a metal pitcher they were passing around.

"My name is Walter."

"He should leave them alone," Patwari told Helen.

"I'm sorry. Walt, let's go inside. Come on."

"Patwari shahib, it's fine," said Imtiaz. "I'll bring them in."

"Your uncle and aunt," Patwari shook his head with extreme irritation, "I just don't know..." He paused, recognized the futility of trying to further intercede, and back headed toward the house, waving him off, waving off the entire situation.

Ranjan Das stepped forward. He shook Walter's big hand with as much energy as he could muster, making a negligible stir in Walter's obelisk frame.

"I'll tell you what we do," said Ranjan.

"Where did you get all that?" Walter asked, pointing a thumb at the sacks that had been exhumed. Anju was poring over them with the stealth of suspicion that they had been tampered with.

Ranjan laughed proudly. "From the enemy. Took it right out of their hands, and all they could do was stand there and watch us walk away with them. These Pak bastards, they're the dumbest oafs when you deal with them close up. The Punjabis, the Baluchis, especially the Baluchi's, big dumb oxen with the brains to go with it. They only know how to be killers. Up here," he tapped his temple, "there's nothing."

"Really?"

"The operation was more complicated," Ranjan said, thoughtfully. "Some of it is from an ambushed boat that was then set on fire. But we, all of us here, were also part of a land attack. That's where we also got the weapons."

Helen and Imtiaz were on either side of Walter now.

"Looks like you're bringing them out, are you planning on using them soon?"

Before Ranjan could answer, which he was happily getting ready to, Rounak stepped in.

"Why are you so interested?" she demanded. "You're foreigners. Stay out of our business."

"I'm Helen."

Rounak glanced down at it and left Helen's extended hand to float in front of her until Helen retreated it.

"What is it that you're wanting to do here?" said Rounak.

"Why don't you treat guests with some respect?" said Ranjan.

"We came here with the judge," said Helen. "You know Judge Mubarak?"

The judge's name thrust Dilip to his feet.

"That judge," he said, "is a bastard and a criminal."

"What are you talking about? Do you know what you are saying?" said Imtiaz.

"Judge Mubarak is one of my uncle and aunt's dearest friends. Watch your mouth when you talk. Don't forget where you are."

"What happened?" Helen asked.

"Judge pissed him off, that's what happened," said Walter. "What'd he do?"

Dilip picked up a shovel and began tamping down the earth they were filling the hole with, accompanying Huda Mia, who had finally fallen on the task out of sheer anxiety.

"So, where exactly did you get these weapons from?" said Walter. "I mean, where, exactly?"

"Never mind about that," Rounak told him, just as Ranjan was grinning and brimming with pride to make his reply. "You people have nothing better to do? Poking around in business that is not yours. Everywhere you go, you make trouble. Do you think we're a bunch of savages here, waiting around for your mercy?"

"Here we go again," Walter mumbled, feeling his jaws tighten. "What is that we've done that's so horrible? My wife and me, we're journalists. We're reporting on

what's happening here. Because the world doesn't know. Because the army doesn't want the world to know. But you do, right? What you're doing? You want it to be known, right?"

"Who do you think you are?" Dilip thumped down the shovel. Sweat rained down his forehead. His shirt looked as though he had been struck by a downpour.

"They want to help," Ranjan insisted. "Let's at least listen."

Mitali walked over and lifted the shovel. Dilip stepped away. After a quick glance at Rounak, he went to the water pitcher and took a long drink, draining the pitcher. Anju had been staring at the scene without making any movements.

Rounak's gaze bore into Walter. In the blistering heat, she was untouched by sweat. Her hair was combed to a thin layer on her scalp like a coating of paint, parted down the middle, and yanked into a bun. The sari she wore was wound around her as fittingly as a bandage, its chess pattern creating an optical illusion that at times made her seem either nearer or farther than she was.

"The world will know," Ranjan said, in a note of grandeur.

"Not likely," said Walter. "All they know is what the army tells them, which is nothing. And when there *is* something, you can bet it's not your side of the story."

"We know that," said Mitali.

"Walt, let's go inside," said Helen.

"I – we, want to write about your mission," Walter said.

"Mission?" said Rounak, her eyes narrowing. "If you want to write stories, go write stories for your own people, to them out of their ignorance. Teach them there's more to the world than their great America. Tell them of the mistakes their terrific

country has made. You people think we can't function without your charity, without your wisdom. Such wise people you are, you don't know the first thing about minding your own business. You want to teach the world about your Christopher Columbus and leave out the massacre he brought to the real people of America. We're supposed to bow to your greatness? Greatness that you stole, and enslaved people to build your country?

"I don't..."

"You don't what?" Rounak snapped. "You don't agree? You want to deny your own history? Haven't you done enough of that?"

"If I'm supposed to apologize for slavery here, I doubt that's going to have any effect on anyone, let alone the Martial Law administration that makes the laws here."

"Your laws are made to benefit only people like you. Don't lecture me about what laws are in my country."

A crumpling, cracking noise that was like heavy rubber boots being jostled inside a metal bucket distracted them. Huda Mia, with Dilip's help, folded the tarp that was used to cover the hole, jammed it under his arm, and trotted off with it to be rid of the unholy thing forever.

Zubeida called Imtiaz's name from the verandah. The sound of mercy being at last thrown down, Imtiaz thought, and asked Walter and Helen to go inside with him.

"Let's go, Walt," Helen tugged his sleeve. "I'm sorry," she said to Rounak and the rest. "Sorry we interrupted your work."

Rounak turned away, kneeling down to take stock of the weapons with Mitali and Anju. During this time Khoka had gone around to the back of the house to use the servants' latrine, and came around the corner of the carport just as Imtiaz was taking the

guests inside. As they passed him confused looks were exchanged, and Khoka, after acknowledging Imtiaz, kept walking toward his companions.



The living room was somber with tension. Seeing the three of them enter Kamruzzaman rose from the sofa. Judge Mubarak kept his seat. The tension, it was clear, had to do with whatever words had passed between Kamruzzaman and Mubarak. Patwari was seated at the chair next to the telephone. Zubeida was not there.

“Welcome,” Kamruzzaman said. “Please, come. Sit.”

“Where’s Mammi?” Imtiaz asked.

Kamruzzaman answered generally, “I believe my wife is seeing to dinner. I hope you’ll be able to join us.”

Helen looked to Judge Mubarak.

“You can stay,” he said, “but I can’t. I will send the car back.”

“There’s all this food here already, and they look sinfully untouched,” Walter grinned. “You’re telling me there’s more, who am I to say no sitting in a man’s living room. Thank you, yes, we’ll stay. I’m already starved.”

The windows facing the lawn were open. The fighters were still in conference. Something occurred to Imtiaz that had not yet been important enough to pay any mind. The better option was to let it pass, but after what had just happened he felt obliged to bring it up, even if only to offer a roundabout apology for Walter getting the treatment that he had.

“How are they moving those things back and forth?” he asked.

“Let them worry about that,” Kamruzzaman said.

“That is not a bunch to mess with. No, sir.”

“A lot of trouble is what they are,” Judge Mubarak grumbled. Patwari sent a look of quiet camaraderie his way. “Which I wish would be kept where it belongs. Chowdhury shahib, I wish you had not sent that boy to my house. It was irresponsible and negligent.”

“Was that about the boys that you told us about, in jail?” said Helen.

“I was not the one that told him to go knocking on your door,” said Kamruzzaman, “Judge shahib, it was my wife. Take it up with her, for the hundredth time.”

“I’m only being careful,” Judge Mubarak said. “What happened to those boys is deplorable. But at a time like this, Chowdhury shahib, these young kids and their activities, they cannot find my doorstep.”

“Then you can accept my apologies, and stay for dinner,” Zubeida stood at the door. “How is your book going?” she asked Helen.

Helen giggled. A fleck of samosa crust loosened from the corner of her mouth.

“It’s going nowhere,” she replied, going to Zubeida. She offered an embrace, which took Zubeida slightly by surprise. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“If you didn’t distract yourself with our troubles here and concentrated on your work, it would go far in no time,” said Zubeida. “Now, stop spoiling your appetite with this junk. Dinner will be ready in half an hour.”

Judge Mubarak begged off dinner, no matter how much Zubeida insisted. He left with the promise of sending the car to pick up Helen and Walter, but Kamruzzaman made the counter-offer of providing transportation, which the judge accepted without qualms.

“I was not the one that sent that boy to his home,” Kamruzzaman reconfirmed.

They sat down to dinner, for which Patwari had stayed.

“He’s been really torn up over that case,” said Helen. “But I don’t think that’s all that has him worried.”

“You two are staying with him now, that should do him some good,” said Kamruzzaman.

“It’s our good fortune that he was there,” said Helen. “If it hadn’t been for Sam and the judge, we’d be on a plane long time ago. You remember that young Captain? Shaukat? He was at the judge’s party the first time we met? He showed up, at the hotel, the day after the crackdown in March, with soldiers and trucks and just herded out the press people, us included,” said Helen.

“I’ll put money on it to see if that guy makes it to Major,” Walter said, through a mouthful of food. “He’s kind of an idiot. I mean, we told him we weren’t press, we work at the U.S. consulate, gave him Sam’s info, and next thing, we’re being escorted to the consulate by his men. Any other officer in his place would have made the calls himself. He’d have a bone in his teeth. This guy, he’s a clown. Which makes him all the more dangerous.”

Imtiaz recalled the scene he had intruded upon at the judge’s house between the captain and his wife.

“His wife was a bit peculiar,” said Zubeida. “Was she drunk? She looked half dazed and unable to speak.”

“I wish I’d been there,” Walter forked a piece of chapatti wrapped around a sliver of meat and stuffed it into his mouth. “Helen told me who was there. Did the judge know

at the time that the uniforms eating his food and drinking his liquor were here planning the crackdown?”

“I was sitting right across from them,” said Helen.

“Whom are you talking about?” Kamruzzaman set down his glass of water.

Walter stopped mid chew. “I – er...” He turned to Helen on his right. “Didn’t you say Raza and Pirzada and Akbar Khan were all there?” In his quest to find a friendly face, Walter met Patwari’s eyes across from him. Patwari had been so quiet that his presence at the table had become an afterthought.

“I remember who was there,” said Kamruzzaman. “I remember well, but what do you mean by planning the crackdown? Who was there at Suleiman’s house that had anything to do with it?”

Walter set down his fork and knife. He straightened up and leaned back in his chair. “I was just mentioning something that we heard said at the consulate. Our friend...Sam...it’s not official information or anything...”

“Who? Who are these people at your consulate?” Kamruzzaman demanded.

Walter turned once more, sheepishly, to his wife for support.

“Listening to them talk you’d think no one ever their country as much they did,” said Zubeida.

“That’s true,” said Helen. “There was that other gentleman, I don’t remember his name, sitting next to them, that was not at all pleased with what he heard and said so.”

“What else does your consulate know?” Kamruzzaman grilled Walter.

“Mr. Chowdhury, I wasn’t speaking officially,” said Walter. “Our friend, the judge’s friend, Sam, was the one who told us. Who’s the other one Sam was talking

about?" Walter asked Helen, but went on without waiting for her to respond. "Farman, was it? It wasn't Tikka. Sam makes clear every time he mentions that name to add 'Butcher of Baluchistan,' or his hunger for kebabs." The attempted joke fell flat.

"Farman was there, the one with the glasses that came by and said hello," said Helen.

"Farman is a friend of the judge," said Zubeida. "I think he was the one that helped with getting all the curfew passes."

It might as well have done him no good, Imtiaz thought, going back to his first day, his first hour in Dhaka, driving back with Amir from the train station. And then when his uncle nearly died at the checkpoint, it had almost done them no good, again.

"But really," said Walter, "these guys are patsies. They're company men. And Yahya's the one that needs to go, and take Bhutto with him."

"Go? Where is he going to go?" said Kamruzzaman.

"I meant go as in it's..." Walter took a sip of water. "If those guys out there, those young kids, have their way, then Yahya and his generals and Bhutto *will* be gone. That's what I'm saying."

"It's remarkable," Kamruzzaman said, "how you people think you have things figured out everywhere just by setting foot there. Maybe if your friend at the consulate is such an expert on Pakistani politics and military affairs he should recommend himself to the national intelligence services and put his mouth where he bets his money. Isn't that the saying?"

"Put his money where his mouth is," said Walter, "is the saying."

Kamruzzaman pushed his chair back and stood up. "Excuse me."

Patwari felt it disrespectful to continue being at the table, and also excused himself.

“Looks like I’m batting three-hundred today,” said Walter. “Mrs. Chowdhury, I’m sorry if I was offensive. I just...”

“Don’t let my husband upset you. Please, finish your food.”

After picking at the remaining morsels on their plates, dinner was over. Zubeida did not look pleased as she went to check on Kamruzzaman, and Imtiaz asked Walter and Helen if they would like to take a walk around the property.

The evening was warm, a little more bearable than had been the morning and afternoon. A low, infrequent breeze offered no relief as it rose and fell. The gravel driveway was caked into hardened clumps of mud, rutted with tire tracks that were pooled with water. Random drizzles poured down from the jackfruit trees when the branches were stirred. At the far end of the driveway, by the main gates, Patwari was smoking and talking to Anshuman.

“Man, I’m sorry,” Walter told Imtiaz. “I just can’t say the right thing today.”

“To my uncle one can hardly say the right thing any day of the week. He used to be different. He is the sort of man that does not do well with not having a purpose, you know. Retirement was the worst thing that happened to him.” Which was not altogether true. Imtiaz decided to steer clear of bringing up the Chowdhury sons.

“Those pictures in the living room,” said Helen. “Are they their children?”

Since the Grundig had been moved the storage room the framed pictures of Murad, Minhaz, and their wives had been transferred to the low bookshelf next to the telephone table.

“Two sons,” Imtiaz replied. “And their wives. They live in Karachi.”

Helen pulled on her cigarette nearly burning it down to the filter at one go. Walter, induced to curiosity by the low chatter of conversation from the servants’ quarters’ courtyard, had broken from them to get closer to it.

“Must be hard, especially now,” said Helen. “Do I remember correctly, you live in Chittagong?”

“Yes. But the longer I stay here the more it feels like I’ve not lived anywhere else.”

“What about your wife? And children?”

“They’re staying with her brother. They’re fine. I came here thinking I would stay a week, maybe two. Here I am, and the business I came for is held up God knows for how long.”

“We’ve been here since January. I have no idea what the hell we’re doing, but we know we’d be restless and miserable if we just got up and left tomorrow.” She flung her cigarette with an expert flick of the finger. It made an arc, shooting in a clean projectile over the boundary wall. “I know how this looks to you,” she leaned past Imtiaz’s shoulder to look at Walter, who had walked up to the entrance to the servants’ quarters’ courtyard.

“What do you mean?”

“Us, a couple of clueless, dopey white Americans trying to sound like we know something. Our self-satisfying indignation. Callousness as soon as we open our mouths. I don’t know, where should I stop? You know?”

“You look very sad. That night at Judge Mubarak’s house you were happy. You looked so excited to be there. Was it because you thought your trip here would be different?”

“No, it’s because I was drunk,” Helen laughed nervously, a rising, falling scale that stopped abruptly. Her face went red.

“I think you were sincere. Without sincerity you couldn’t be a writer.”

“Writers are liars, didn’t you know?” She let out a full-throated laugh. “Would you?” she offered Imtiaz a cigarette.

“But what you and Walter want to write *is* the truth,” said Imtiaz, flaring his nostrils to release smoke.

“I’m not so sure,” Helen looked skeptically at the back of her husband. “Whose truth?”

“Yours. That’s the only truth you can tell, right?”

Helen was interrupted before she could speak by the rise of volume in the conversation from the servants’ quarters’ courtyard. She and Imtiaz moved the fifty or so paces closer. Walter was covering the small doorway. Helen touched his shoulders, and he stepped aside.

Ranjan and Mitali were flinging furious words at each other.

“...you’re not the only one risking everything...”

“...no one is special! Stop lecturing me all the time...”



“...and no one is forcing you, Ranjan, you can go back anytime...”

“...don't you dare say that to me...”

“...go to hell...”

“...don't tell me what to do...”

Ranjan, already on his feet, kicked at his plate and water cup. The others were going on with their meals. The argument for them could have been taking place on the radio. No one looked up at either Mitali or Ranjan. While it was going on Dilip finished eating and went to the tube well to wash his hands. Next to Anju, between her and Rounak, lay the sack with the weapons. As the argument reached its pinnacle, Khoka wiped off the past of the dal and rice on his plate with sweeps of his hand, slurping each serving loudly. He then went to the tube well and whispered in Dilip's ear.

“What else do you want to tell me?” Ranjan demanded.

Mitali continued with her meal.

Dilip and Khoka walked together toward Ranjan. As Ranjan stood ready to take Mitali in a fight if she chose to take the bait, he was panting like a wronged little boy on the school playground, his rage rushing through his heart with every breath, and no one there to pay it any mind. Dilip and Khoka grabbed an arm each and pulled him away.

On the way out they knocked into Walter, who apologized and moved out of the way. Ranjan protested, and Dilip and Khoka started laughing.

“Save it, palwanji, save it,” they teased, “save it for your marriage bed.”

Down at the main gate, Patwari and Anshuman were still talking. Dilip and Khoka headed in their direction with Ranjan, and a few steps later, Ranjan laughed at

something they said, and soon they were gathered at the gate smoking and exchanging jokes. Patwari was amused by them, and quickly broke away.

In the courtyard the women gathered up the plates and cups. Rounak told Anju to take them back to the kitchen. Mitali lifted the weapons sacks; there were two larger ones that held the rifles and automatic weapons, and a smaller one with the ammunition. Her body drooped from the weight from the shoulders down to her knees. Even her head bowed slightly. But she stood erect, glad to have the burden. She saw the audience at the doorway, and as Anju made her way out to the kitchen, Mitali followed her out.

“Hurry up, we have to get going soon,” Rounak told them. Her eyes met Walter’s. “Did you see enough to write about,” she said, and then saw Helen and Imtiaz. “Are we doing everything right,” she approached them.

“I’m very sorry about earlier,” said Walter.

“Sorry, yes. The American way out of everything.” She pushed past them.

“So, they were storing the weapons here?” said Helen. They were on the verandah.

“Yes, but they’re moving them today, because it’s not safe,” said Imtiaz. “My uncle and aunt are extremely generous people, but there’s a better place for them to store the things.”

“Where?” Walter asked.

“Well, it happens to be the reason I came to Dhaka in the first place.”

The fighters came to the bottom of the steps, ready to leave.

“Are you going?” asked Imtiaz.

“Just want to tell Khalamma and Chowdhury shahib,” said Rounak.

“I’ll tell them,” Imtiaz went inside.

When he returned Zubeida and Patwari were with him.

“Are you all sure you’ll be okay?” Zubeida asked, going down the steps. Patwari stood at the top.

“What’s not to fine, Khalamma. Inshallah,” said Rounak.

“Patwari shahib will meet you there.”

Begrudgingly, Hakim Patwari nodded.

“Once you get there, wait for him,” said Zubeida. “Don’t do anything by yourselves to get into the house.”

Walter was ready to jump out of his seat with anticipation.

“They’re just going to carry those things through the city streets?” he whispered to Imtiaz and Helen.

Imtiaz shook his head. “From the little I heard earlier when they were talking to my aunt, the weapons are going in the car with Mr. Patwari and Amir, the driver. And the rest of them will meet them at the other house.” He added, after a pause, “I know, it’s a rather horrible plans. But any plan will horrible. Those weapons have to leave this house, though. Please, don’t ask me anymore. None of it makes head or tails, I know.”

“Where is the other house,” Helen asked.

“Dhanmondi.”

“Are you going?” Walter asked Imtiaz.

“I...was...no...”

“Let’s go.”

Zubeida was finished speaking with the fighters, and came back up the steps.

“About my husband earlier,” she addressed Helen and Walter, “don’t be upset. He can be much worse, and it’s not personal.”

“We were stopped, a while ago, at that checkpoint by PG Hospital,” said Imtiaz. “My uncle was beaten pretty badly by the soldier there.”

Zubeida gave Imtiaz a look. She said to the guests, “Stay as long as you wish. When you’re ready the car will take you home.”

“I thought the car was taking...” Imtiaz motioned with his head at the steps.

“Oh,” Zubeida touched her chin, “I forgot.”

“We’ll just go now, with the car, and get dropped off, you know, whenever,” Walter sprung to his feet, tipping back the cane chair. “Sorry.”

“No, no,” Zubeida protested. “You’re our guests. You cannot be put at risk. Better you stay here until they get back.”

“Really, we’ll be fine,” said Walter. “Right, Helen?” He looked imploringly at his wife. “It’s going to be for the story we’re working on.”

Imtiaz found it funny that Walter was trying to convince Zubeida like a child.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he said.

“You do?” said Zubeida.

“I’ll go with them. I haven’t seen the house since the first visit. Let’s see if it’s even still there.”

“It’s there,” said Patwari, suddenly, turning heads, not finding the humor.

The car hummed around the house and stopped under the carport. Sounds came up of the springing open, and the sacks of weapons being loaded in. Thumps and

bumping ensued, as well as subdued chatter among the fighters. As it went on, Kamruzzaman entered the verandah.

“Are you all leaving?” he asked.

“They want to go with them, to the house,” Zubeida replied.

Kamruzzaman was unfazed by this either way.

“I apologize,” he told Helen and Walter, “for earlier. Please do come again before you leave Dhaka.”

“Thank you,” said Helen.

“Please, Mr. Chowdhury, I’m the one that should be sorry,” said Walter.

“Thank you for having us, and for dinner,” Helen added.

“Just be back soon,” Zubeida instructed Imtiaz. “Don’t sit around there any longer than you need to.”

“If you get stopped,” Kamruzzaman began, “just be careful.”

In the car Imtiaz reminded them that there was no way of getting around the PG Hospital checkpoint. If something happened, they had to have a plan.

“Well,” said Walter, twisting around in the front seat, grinning, “my wife and I will claim diplomatic immunity, and tell them you’re our guests.”

Patwari’s head bowed, shaking. “What a rubbish plan,” he said, quietly. “Your uncle and aunt,” he said to Imtiaz, “are the best people I know, but even the best people can be certifiably mad.”

“We can’t turn back now,” said Imtiaz.

As they approached the checkpoint Imtiaz grew tense. He tried to meet Amir's eyes in the rearview mirror but the angle prevented him. Walter had been whistling the same tune over and over again since they left the house, and it was wearing out Imtiaz's patience. He glanced a few times at Helen, seated on the other end of the backseat, with Patwari huddled between them, staring out the window. Seeing the checkpoint she too leaned forward.

“Okay,” Walter's whistling dived down the scales to silence, “here we go.”

The checkpoint was crowded with soldiers, at least a dozen. Next to the checkpoint a transport truck and a jeep were parked side by side. A fat officer was pacing near the passenger side of the jeep, smoking and waving his arms as he yelled at the soldiers. Even from a distance they could tell the officer was overheated, overworked, and many years out of shape for keeping up with the strains of his duties.

Imtiaz remembered the soldier with the sickle-shaped scar, wondering if he was among them up there.

Seeing the car approach the officer's frustration doubled. Amir slowed down to a stop, and waited to be ushered up to the checkpoint.

“God help us,” Patwari mumbled.

“If that one from last time is there, the one that beat up...”

“A little reunion of assholes,” said Walter.

“We should just turn back,” said Patwari.

“That’s going to make it worse,” said Helen.

It was the officer that waved them forward, in the same motion flinging the cigarette from his fingers.

He wanted none of his soldiers to approach the car. Instead, he waved his arms about for them to form a cordon around it. He stopped, his eyes blinked, at the sight of Walter in the front seat. Imtiaz thought he had to be somewhat myopic to miss a man of Walter’s size in a car that was barely big enough for him. The officer rerouted from going to the driver’s side to the passenger side. Walter rolled his window all the way down.

Up close the officer’s uniform was comically small on his. Folds of his flesh pushed against the fabric, little lumps of flesh alive inside him wanting to leap out. His forehead was creased under the visor cap that was half a size under what his head seemed to require. Sweat patches blotched various parts of the uniform. The medals hung dismally over one breast like tossed away toy replicas hastily pinned on. Two soldiers flanked him from behind.

“Hi, awful day to be outdoors, isn’t it?” said Walter, extending his arm. The officer considered it like a weapon being offered to use at his pleasure. He nodded at it.

“American?” said the officer.

“Yes sir. I’m Walter Munsen. Me and my wife are with the U.S. Consulate.”

The officer was not impressed by the information, and, rather, huffed under his breath. He looked in the back seat, first at Helen, and then at Imtiaz and Patwari.

“Who are these people?” he asked.

“Our guests,” said Walter. “Guests of the consulate, actually.”

On his side Imtiaz's window was covered by the presence of a soldier, who stood just far enough for his face to be visible under his helmet. Imtiaz searched hard. He thought he saw the scar and then changed his mind, and looked closely again. What looked from his angle like a dash of shoe polish gradually took shape. It was the sickle. His name played on the tip of Imtiaz's tongue, it was distinct.

Bismillah.

The rear of the car sunk. A bump preceded it, signaling that a rifle butt had descended on it. Bismillah leaned down and looked from Imtiaz to Amir in the front seat, at Patwari in the middle, and at Helen, then turned his attention on the soldier at the trunk.

"Stop breathing on me," the officer yelled at one of the soldiers behind him. "Go stand over there, away from me. Now you're all curious. Other times this place is a whorehouse, people come and go as they please, and leave things fucked. Even a whorehouse is managed better." He covered his face with a hand fat to bursting point to wipe off the sweat with a downward swipe. "The thing is," he said, shaking the sweat off his hand, "we're having to be extra careful. These goddamn Muktis are a goddamn blight. Day by day they're getting more audacious. No respect for human life. No respect for law and order." His face twisted in suspicion. "American Consulate. You're going the wrong way to get there."

"We're not going to the consulate, Captain. I said me and my wife work there."

"Oh. Doing what?"

"Nothing that'll make much sense to you," Helen replied from the back seat. Her window was down. "Consulate business, Captain. You know we can't talk about it. Just



like you can't talk about your orders and protocols. And, to be honest, we're the lowest of the low. Nothing we do is of much importance."

"Then why can't you talk about it?"

"Can you tell us details of what you were telling your men before we came up?"

Helen asked.

The officer laughed. His belly jiggled like it was throbbing in preparation to come undone from his frame.

"These sons of monkeys?" he said. "Madam, what I tell them is laughable even to monkeys. You'd laugh if I told you. You'll think I'm an imbecile. Which is what these idiots are sometimes."

"Then what is this?" Patwari demanded.

The officer's head lowered and pushed close to Helen's to get a better look at Patwari. A mighty waft of pyorrhea choked her. She pulled back and clasped her mouth.

"You're wasting our time telling us about what incompetent fools your soldiers are. No need to tell us. We can see it just fine."

"We're trying to do our job," the officer said, resentfully. "These Mukti bandits are murderers. We only want our citizens to be safe. If that makes us look like tyrants sometimes it's the price of safety, law and order.

"We have curfew passes," said Imtiaz, leaning over Patwari.

The officer went on without paying him any mind. "It's the same people that were rabble rousing and breaking the law all year. Goddamn agitators. Especially the students. You'd think we got them all, but no, Bungalees. God made a people! Creeping and crawling out of corners, breeding like cockroaches. And now they're banded together.

Now they ambush our soldiers, and they steal guns and supplies. Would you feel safe with such riffraff armed with military weapons? Just trampling the streets unseen at all hours?" He sighed, heavily, before straightening up with sudden rigidity. "Be mindful," he said, moving his visor down and placing it properly on his crown. "If we're not vigilant every criminal miscreant will take to the street. It'll be anarchy. Good day." He motioned for the checkpoint's arm to be raised.

Clouds were forming, coinciding with the setting of the sun as they reached the house. Amir drove the car around to the back of the house and pulled it into one of three garages. There was no sign of the fighters.

Letting out a whistle as he climbed out, Walter scanned the house top to bottom.

“Who belongs to this castle?”

“It was actually given to my mother,” said Imtiaz.

“By whom? Ali Khan?”

“You’ll change your mind if you see it in proper light,” Imtiaz chuckled.

“How old is it?” said Helen. “My God, it’s huge.”

“Old enough that it needs a lifetime of work to make somewhat new again,”

Imtiaz said. As he said this, he stood back and looked at the house. Before, on his one previous visit, he had not taken pains to see the structure, let it enter his eyes and be how and what it really was, because he was caught up so frantically in possessing it and going back to reclaiming his life at home. The house was a dismal fortress. The wilted, browned, desolate vegetation surrounding it added to the atmosphere of gloom. Imtiaz remembered his uncle telling Amir how the grounds would need to be cleaned up, but that the months separating those plans from now were as deep as Imtiaz’s wish to not have taken the cover off this potential savior, because as inheritances were bound to at some point, this was one too cracked open the heart in ways that would otherwise go against the impulses of the heart to be fair. “Patwari shahib, do you have the keys.

There was a sudden flurry of thumps around the grounds. Feet dropping with cautious heft on grassy earth. Patwari's hand froze at his pocket making him appear in the middle of drawing a gun. Imtiaz followed the sounds to the front of the house, and when he was in the narrow walkway between the house and the boundary wall, he gasped. The air flew out of his lungs as someone rammed into him.

“Sorry sir.”

Ranjan Das was taking steps backward.

“It's very dark,” Ranjan said.

It was peculiarly dark around the property. Ranjan was right. The sun was still out, though overshadowed by rain heads in the west where it was on its eventual slow sink. There were no lights on on the property.

“What the hell are you doing, Ranjan?”

“Sir, we were waiting to hear your car come in before entering ourselves.”

“And you forgot how to use the main gate?”

“No, sir, but we're all here.”

They unloaded the sacks out of the trunk. Deliberations ensued as to where they would be buried. Patwari stood by letting his silent disapproval be known louder than any vocal opposition. Imtiaz suggested they take to the farthest corner of the ground in the back where the grand trunk of an old banyan spread out ten feet across. It was taller than the house. Knotty vines hung down from top to ground level nearly fifty feet in length. A grown man or woman could swing by them Tarzan-like.

Amir joined the fighters as they made their way to the banyan, joining in their conversation like one of them. They seemed not to mind, and Amir embraced the

opportunity. Walter too trailed behind, at a safe distance, especially from Rounak. Digging began as soon as they reached the banyan, with Khoka and Dilip breaking ground.

“Shit,” Dilip said, “are we gravediggers or fighters.”

“This is a skill too,” Khoka said, laughing, “good for burying the bastards we kill.”

“Let them rot out in the open,” said Dilip. “Like they let us Bengalis die and rot in the streets.”

Anju unwrapped the weapons out of the sacks, and wiped them with a cloth rag. Mitali and Rounak checked to make sure the mechanisms were functioning, that springs and coils and bolts and triggers were in proper working condition. It was all Walter could do to control himself as he watched. The weapons were carefully wrapped in the gunnysacks and one by one handed to Dilip, Khoka, and Ranjan to be placed in the freshly dug hole. Walter went close enough to see the sacks lowered. It gave him the chill of seeing bodies being interred in makeshift graves. The six sacks laid down satisfactorily, Ranjan took the shovel from Dilip to cover the hole back up. Anju grabbed Khoka’s shovel. She wielded it like a battle-axe. To one side stood Patwari as an undesignated monitor.

Walter went around to the front of the house and up the verandah steps, through the foyer, into the living where Imtiaz and Helen were talking.

“Smells like a crypt in here,” Walter said. “Man, those kids out there are no joke. What was that fat slob at the checkpoint gabbling about? What’s a Mooktee?”

“Mukti Bahini,” Imtiaz said, “means freedom brigade.”

“Like the Vietcong,” said Helen.

“Oh, whoa, wait a minute, Vietcong is not a freedom brigade,” said Walter.

“From who’s point of view?” Helen said.

“You’ve been around Sam too much, Helen. Come on. VC is bunch of Communist thugs! Murderers. What’re you talking about these guys are like VC.”

“Miscreants?” Helen said.

“No, wait a minute, don’t use words that have no meaning from one place to another.”

“She’s not too mistaken,” said Imtiaz. “There is a lot of solidarity here and in West Bengal with the Communist North Vietnamese fighters. I don’t know much, but this is something I’ve heard with my own ears. My brother-in-law loves to bark his anti-Bengali, anti-Communist, anti-everything that doesn’t agree with his worldview. He’s a bit of a demagogue, but the man knows what he’s talking about. The Naxalites actually have a chant: Banglar arek nam/VietNam, VietNam,” he said in Bangla. “Bengal’s other name/VietNam, VietNam. It’s the “Nam” that rhymes, which in Bangla is the word for name.”

“But you all aren’t making a Communist insurrection,” said Walter. “There’s a huge difference between solidarity and actually going Red. That’s not what Mujib wants, it’s not what he’s ever said.”

“The Vietcong wants the U.S. out of Vietnam, plain and simple,” said Helen. “It’s an occupying force and they want them out. That’s the same thing as here.”

“The U.S. is more than just an occupying force, Helen, come on...”

“What, Walter? Come on, what? What’re we, saving them from the communist evil. We’ve been there for almost ten years and how much Communism have we killed and delivered them from evil?”

Walter looked from his wife to Imtiaz, exasperated. “Helen, you can’t possibly think it’s just okay for us to let the Commies keep taking over wherever they want. The world’s going to fall one after another like dominoes, and then, we’ll end up with nukes pointed at us from every goddamn corner of the planet because we went too soft on the Reds right when we should’ve sent them packing to hell.”

“Okay, Joe McCarthy,” Helen shook her head.

“I’m not Joe McCarthy,” Walter grew petulant, “I’m...all I said was things aren’t as simple as that. There’s a huge difference between what those guys out there are trying to do and what VC is doing *to their own people* mind you, those are the folks that are getting fucked on a far regular basis.”

Imtiaz said, “I’ve never in my life met a married couple like you two.”

“I don’t know what we are some days,” said Helen.

“Right. As long as I’m wrong, we’re good to go,” said Walter.

For a while the distant grumble of thunder was the only recurring sound. The air flowing in through the door and the windows Imtiaz had opened was flecked with drops of water. The smell of sodden earth and wet leaves tempered the musky odor inside.

“Are they part of a larger group?” Helen asked.

“They were trained by a man named Kader Siddiki,” Imtiaz said. “He’s the one they take orders from. As far as how many different groups there are, who knows, probably many.”

“How do you feel about all this?”

“I was against it. My uncle and aunt are old time...revolutionaries. I guess that’s one word for it.”

Walter reacted to this with a snort.

“Don’t mind him,” Helen said. “You and I and those guys out there, your aunt, uncle, Mr. Patwari, we’re all damnable Communists. Please, go ahead.”

Once Imtiaz was done laughing at this, he went on.

“I thought these people were leeches,” he said. “Feeding off my uncle and aunt, their generosity, putting them right in the mouth of danger. But you see for yourself how committed they are. I don’t know to what. I mean, I do, but really what outcome they think is waiting for them, who knows. I think they’re misguided.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Helen said.

“Perhaps.”

“They know exactly what they’re doing? They know what they’re committed to. I don’t think they’re misguided at all.”

“I just wonder what if what they’re trying to do comes to nothing,” Imtiaz said.

“A bunch of kids against an army. From a logical standpoint is what I’m thinking.”

“Not spoken like a true patriot,” Walter said,

“There’s a difference, Walter, between being a patriot and running behind every slogan and flag that’s being waved in the name of country. Slogans are easy to shout. Guns can be fired by anyone. What’s going to happen with a few stolen rifles and bullets? What’re they going to do if a crackdown like March happens again? If there’s



war, real war? A few rifles and sticks and stones? People have done that already, not to good results.”

“You know, Sam, our friend at the consulate mentioned India,” Walter said.

“They’re getting frisky over there.”

“What else is new,” said Imtiaz. “India and Pakistan, two brothers of the same mother that can’t stand each other, but that also can’t live without hating each other.”

“You sure you’re a banker?” Walter laughed, clapping Imtiaz on the back.

“I’m not much of that for now either,” Imtiaz said.

“Sam was talking about refugees, villagers, going into West Bengal,” Helen said.

“I guess that’s where your work comes in, right?” said Imtiaz.

“If only it was that easy,” Walter said.

Imtiaz let something turn over in his head. “That explains why they’re working mostly in the villages. My God, what the hell is happening out there...we can’t even imagine.”

“Well, they can’t be in the city,” Walter said, “not with the strategy they have, which is fine for the village, but here, no.”

Patwari bustled in, “Okay, time to go.”

“They’re done,” Imtiaz asked.

“Yes, yes, the keys were rattling in Patwari’s clutch ready to be used. “One stupid idea after another,” he grumbled walking back out.

“What else do you need right now?” Imtiaz asked the fighters outside.

“We’ll get what we want when we need it,” Rounak answered.

Imtiaz asked Patwari, “Do they have keys? How are they going to...”

Rounak repeated, “We’ll get what we want when we need it.”

“That one gal never says a word,” Walter said once they were in the car. “I wouldn’t want to get on her cranky side. The silent ones are the ones you got to watch out for.”

Patwari asked to be dropped off at home. After seeing him to his building, they went to Judge Mubarak’s house. By then both Helen and Walter’s minds were steeped in the angle their story would take, and Helen mentioned it before getting out of the car.

“What you said back at the house,” she said, “you were right.”

“Which part?” Imtiaz asked.

“About where our work comes in.”

Walter perked up. “You see, my man? There are times in this marriage when we come together,” he gave a wink and held out his hand. “Listen, we’re going to see Sam next week sometime, once we have this story written. Come with us. It’ll be a treat for you, I promise.”

Imtiaz shrugged, why not.

“Be careful getting back, ‘guests of the U.S. consulate,” Walter climbed out laughing.

But that was not as easy as being joked away. As they neared the checkpoint, Amir said, “When they were with us it was fine. Now only we have the passes, that’s it.”

The number of soldiers had reduced, and fortunately the fat officer was still there. At the checkpoint, Amir offered his and Imtiaz’s passes. Imtiaz noticed that it was not Bismillah in charge of checking them. The fat officer was sitting on an upturned crate,

smoking, still miserably uncomfortable, but as opposed to earlier chatting with two soldiers jovially.

“Step out,” said the soldier.

“Excuse me,” Imitaz said, “please get your officer, he knows who we are. We were just here.”

The soldier looked reluctantly at the officer, then down at the passes. He fixed the strap of his rifle on his shoulder, and pressed his forearm to his forehead under his helmet to soak up sweat.

“Here. Go.”

The shambling, unshaven, curly-locked red-haired man in the embroidered purple silk smoking jacket adorned with snaking dragons breathing fire etched into the fabric in gold, was far from the image Imtiaz had expected. An official of the U.S. consulate, even at home, had drawn a different portrait in his mind. More clean-cut, if that was one way of covering it.

Samuel Truman was hung-over. He was posing no veneer of being otherwise. He told them he had taken time off from his full-time duties as attaché to do what was anyone's guess. Helen did not know him to be a vacationing man. As it was, his lifestyle was one continual jaunt around the globe, interspersed with work. Since she was a child, and Truman had joined the foreign service, Helen had heard of at least a dozen new countries where he had been stationed or visited. When she was younger it was on that point that she wished her mother had fallen as hard for Sam as Sam had for her.

A lot of whiskey was involved in this self-imposed downtime. The rest was conjecture. Helen and Walter had often wondered, more so recently, as to the scope of Truman's designation of "attaché" in the consulate. They would never know, they could not ask, and if they did, they would be shunned. The best path to take was the one that he had been offering them with as much leeway as he was – let him be an emissary of the freedom of the press.

Swirling an antacid in a highball glass, the bubbles fizzing, activating the goodness but not fast enough for him, Truman entered the living room with pained

joviality. He could not fake anything, least of all a headache of monumental proportions, nor could he not delight in seeing Helen and Walter, and Imtiaz, and look forward to another quiet day of drinking. Without ceremony he dropped into his preferred chair, a cushioned, Louis XIV throne, the once resplendent-red of it faded from miles and miles of travel, storage, climate change, and use. Behind chair was a floor lamp, its shade looming over him like a hand reaching down to engulf his head. Next to the chair on a circular table, not much taller than a footstool was a stack of paperbacks – Zane Grey westerns, Graham Greene, a couple of erotica, and one that stood out from the genres of the rest, Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*. Imtiaz took inventory of the man and his reading list with, the way he filled the room as soon as he entered, all of him and what he carried all the time as part of that, with a touch of envy. It seemed that at the same time as Imtiaz eyes were taking account of the titles, Walter’s attention went there too.

“Sam, really?” Walter said. “Westerns and spy novels? That’s your idea of information?” He chuckled. “You base your criticism of U.S. foreign policy, while being one of its reps, by reading...that.”

“Don’t be elitist,” said Truman. “There’s that *Guns of August* one there. It’s painful as root canal, and I’ve had a root canal. And that Greene fellow, he’s decent. And U.S. foreign policy is doing fine impaling itself at every step without a manual.”

On the floor next to the small table stood the empty Jamison bottle. It did not bother Truman for a moment that the bottle was in plain sight, and a new guest to his house could form opinions. That was what they were, opinions. They needed no help forming. They happened. And, Sam Truman thought, they were all rot.

“Worry about my reading habit later,” Truman said. “What’s on your minds?”

Walter jumped right into explaining the angle of their story. Their encounter with the six fighters, the exchange they had had, the weapons, hiding them, all of it.

“The Mukti Bahini,” Truman said, assessing the words as he said them like a discovery. “Freedom fighters, brigades. From the little I know they’re mostly all over the countryside. So, who exactly are these six pups you’re telling about? And the man they’re being trained by and working for?”

“They’re not pups,” Helen said. “And the man’s name is Siddiki,” she quickly consulted her notes, “Kader Siddiki.”

“So, they ambushed a few ramshackle units and got themselves some guns,” Truman huffed, draining the glass of bubbling antacid at last. “They’ll blow up a bridge or two, take a transport truck, and maybe shoot a few soldier while they’re at it for trophies. Then what?” He set down his glass on top of the books, and pointed at Imtiaz. “What do you think?”

Imtiaz took a moment to realize he had been addressed. “Me?”

“These two are outsiders. I am an outsider. What do you think?”

“I didn’t trust them at first. My aunt especially refused to see them as other than honest and dependable. They’re her former students. My uncle also has his doubts. But I have to say, there’s something about them, their commitment, their courage...”

“Okay, let me stop you right there before you make my headache worse,” Truman held up both hands, palms out. “Just tell me what you really think.”

“Come on, Sam,” Helen said.

“Mr. Truman,” said Imtiaz.

“Sam.”

“I’m a bank clerk, give or take, it doesn’t matter what my position is, I’m a clerk. What I think and what actually is are two separate worlds. You might be outsiders, but I myself have never been one for causes and fights. My uncle and aunt, they’re the people to ask. And Judge Mubarak.”

“Old man Solomon, yes,” Truman yawned. His eyebrow arched, “bank clerk, where?”

“United. In Chittagong.”

“In town for business?”

“Sort of, yes.”

“He’s waiting on an inheritance,” Walter blurted, to Imtiaz’s chagrin, which Imtiaz could not hide as he gave Walter a disturbed sideways glance.

“Well, I hope you get it and get the hell out of here,” Truman said. “Though, I don’t imagine things are any rosier down where you are.”

“No,” Imtiaz said. “It’s...the process is a bit complicated.”

“And it’s none of either of your business,” Helen added.

Truman stretched luxuriously, rubbed his eyes, and patted his stomach. “I’m starved. Join me for lunch.”

At the dining table, Truman deviated into talking about his cook, whom he had found after auditioning a total of six candidates. The winning candidate was once one of many khanshamas to the Nawab family of Dhaka, a cheerful, energetic, octogenarian with sun-leathered skin, bulbous eyes, stringy hair pushed back on a square skull that expanded outward making the forehead an almost perfect rectangle, who came out to

meet the guests as a matter of age old protocol, to hear how his creations were being relished, and bowed quietly at the praise his work received.

Imtiaz marveled at the range of dishes, most of which he was used to seeing at special occasions, very special occasions, weddings, Eid, formal dinners. On an ordinary afternoon, for lunch, he was presented here with everything from Nargisi kofta to chicken korma, vegetable pulao, Mughlai parathas, beef kababs, a rich raita with mint and dill, and for dessert, a choice between traditional rashamalai and kheer. The rice pudding had become one of Walter's personal favorites.

"If all this looks shamefully decadent to you, good," Truman said. "Let this suffice for your bleeding hearts: whatever food doesn't get eaten is delivered to a local orphanage that my cook used to volunteer for, after his services to the royal family. So, please. Eat, guilt free. We're not war profiteers here, you can rest easy."

Helen laughed. Truman set down his knife and fork.

"You see that? That's the laugh of discomfort," he said.

"No," Helen took a sip of water, "it's the laugh of laughing at the way you sound."

"Did you know," Truman looked to Imtiaz, "this young lady here is an heiress herself to a not too shabby pot of inheritance."

"Okay, that's enough," said Helen.

"That's right, man," said Walter, "I married into money. How's that for bringing home the bacon like a man."

"Okay," Helen insisted.

Truman paid her no mind. "Mrs. O'Leary, before she was Mrs. O'Leary, was Miss Taylor..."



“Sam, really, enough,” said Helen.

“What’s the matter?” said Walter. “It’s your family history.”

“If I want to talk about my family I can do it myself,” Helen’s laughter was gone. Her cheeks filled with blood.

“Taylor as in Zachary Taylor, president number twelve of the United States of America,” Truman went on. “Landed gentry. Slave owners. That second part is what’s making her so furious right now.”

Imtiaz looked across the table at Helen.

“It’s not your fault,” said Walter. “It’s not your mom’s fault. It’s just a messed up fact. It’s history.”

“This is true,” Imtiaz said.

“Well, long story short, the Civil War caused rifts in the family over slavery, and the split took some of them north, into Lincoln Republican territory, anti-slavery folks, and there they ended up staying for the long haul. So, my dear,” he patted Helen’s trembling hand, “you can find some peace in the fact that your mother, and you, are the descendants of the ones that, okay, they took their share of the family fortunes, you had to be smart now, but the ones that cut off from the slave-owning branch.”

“You really think I’m supposed to find comfort in that?” Helen said.

“No. But it’s the only end to that story there is,” said Truman. “And your mother has given away most of what she inherited to every cause and scholarship and Negro college fund she could find. She’s given to the NAACP...”

“Yes, in other words, my family has done everything possible to assuage its white guilt,” said Helen. “Is that the moral of the story, Sam?”

“Well, mine isn’t exactly exempt, either,” said Walter. “That’s why when that gal, Rounak, handed me my American history lesson on a silver platter, I had nothing.”

“The moral of the story, my dear, is that there is no assuaging any guilt. Because guilt is wasted time and wasted energy. Here you are going on six months in this country, on the other end of the globe, on what? Your own life’s savings? His shining career at the *Star*?”

“Thanks,” Walter said.

“I already gave you that talk, about bringing your worldly Western sentimentality to the problems of the East, because there’s a line of thinking that’s never happened. What I’m telling you now, whether you hate it or hate it some more after that, is no matter what you do, what you say, how you say it, what you write, how you tell the world of your good deeds, you can’t forget what you’re standing on, and what’s allowing you to do it. You can accept it, or deny it, but you can’t do both. Here the lesson ends.

“Now,” he resumed his meal, “let’s talk about getting that story out, and any others you’re going to hand me.”

“Because I feel so inspired after that ‘lesson’,” Helen said.

“Let’s just move on, okay,” said Walter. “This is important. I don’t give a damn how it looks. We’re doing it.”

“How’s living at old Solomon’s working out?” Truman asked. “Sorry again, I had to kick you out, but,” he paused before taking a mouthful of food, “truth is, I have to be all over the place very soon.”

“That means...what...?” said Walter.

“That means I couldn’t have you two hanging around here playing house, and you weren’t going back to the hotel to be picked up again, and then toss my name around as your boss. Fine you did when you did.”

“Sam?” said Helen.

“Yes.”

“What exactly is your official designation?”

“Lowly attaché, my dear,” Truman quickly replied. “Don’t stress out your brain cells making up conspiracies. I’m not CIA, I wouldn’t touch those buffoons with all the flagpoles in America laid down end to end from one coast to the other and back. Attaché, my dear, lowly servant of my country’s government, a paltry excuse for a living.”

After lunch Truman excused himself to make phone calls to arrange a getaway that he revealed was at the heart of this vacation. Walter and Helen decided they were going to finish a draft of the story and leave it with him today.

While they worked in the living room, Imtiaz went through the paperback absentmindedly, the silence filled only with the scratching of Helen and Walter’s writing and the occasional flips of the pages of the novels.

“He’s quite the character,” Imtiaz said, when he saw the two writers take a short break to compare each other’s work.

“Understatement, my friend,” Walter said, without moving his eyes from what he was reading.

“Sorry you had to sit through that nonsense,” said Helen.

“I should be the one saying sorry to you,” said Imtiaz.

“Why?” Helen looked up. “The whole situation is sorry. Sam doesn’t know when to stop sometimes. It’s the liberty he feels he can take with me because he and my mother have their little history, which isn’t really history, but at this point, they’ve known each other longer than my parents have been married.”

“He sees you like his daughter,” said Imtiaz.

“My God, that man for a father-in-law,” Walter said, scratching something out vigorously. He handed his sheet to Helen and she gave hers to him. Their heads dipped again, and stayed that way for the next half hour.

Sitting in Truman’s Louis XIV Imtiaz began feeling the lethargy of a stomach full of rich foods.

He started awake when Truman shambled into the room, blaring his announcement that his vacation plans had been “nuked,” but he was still going to “get away on Uncle Sam’s dollar.”

“India!” he announced, with the vigor of an explorer. “But,” he stressed, “you people, better keep the seal on it. Comprene?”

While he was talking Helen finished her part of the draft, and the story, she and Walter agreed, was done.

“Great,” said Truman, giving it a cursory glance. “Go ahead and decipher this chicken-scratch on the typewriter and leave it on the desk. Just remember, everything that’s going out of this country is being ripped apart, sometimes literally, by State, when they’re not intercepted by the army first. In other words, I’m a man not a magician. A lowly messenger.”

“We did two versions,” said Helen, “we’ll leave both for you.”

A snatch of mingled odors punched Shaukat in the nose. In one corner of the warehouse an arc lamp had been set up, trained on the three men Shaukat saw bound by their wrists and tied to a rafter in the ceiling being thrashed by Maj. Pervez Shahbaz's boots. Shahbaz's demands of them volleyed in distorted versions of the original words in the dank, fetid air.

"I have all night, and all day, and the night after that," Shahbaz panted. "All of you Mukti vermin will be exterminated, so help me God."

A crack followed as he swung a wooden police stick into one man's ribcage. And then there were two more splintering sounds when the other two received the same. The men howled. The howls died down immediately into weak whimpers. There was not much breath or life left in them.

"Beg my forgiveness," Shahbaz bellowed, "and then tell me where the rest of you mongrels are. I might spare you kaffirs a dog's death." He took steps back, and waited.

The men went on sputtering. Groans escaped involuntarily as their bodies shook with pain spasms, and blood from split skin on their faces, arms, torsos, and legs leaked to the ground. Shahbaz had not yet noticed Shaukat, standing about six feet away to his left. Shahbaz was sweaty, his uniform shirt un-tucked and unbuttoned, the white undershirt soaked through with sweat and splattered with blood. When he finally turned to Shaukat, abruptly, Shaukat saw his eyes were thick with rage and exhaustion. Bags

hung below them, pouches of a deathly gray distended with the detritus of his entire being.

Shaukat could not think of the strange ways in which their wives had been commiserating, conspiring even, about which he would wager Shahbaz knew nothing. He was not the kind of man to listen to his wife. And if she started telling him of her business and interactions with other women, she would promptly be put in her place. Even if she slammed down her resolve, as had Umbreen.

“Here,” Shahbaz said, and Shaukat saw the stick eject out of Shahbaz’s grip and launch at him. Shaukat barely caught it.

“Sir?”

“Do your job.”

Shaukat considered the order, looked at the stick, and remembered what he had come in to report.

“Sir, none of the ones outside are talking,” he said.

“Tells you what a shit job you’re doing, doesn’t it, Captain Shaukat?” Shahbaz hurled himself at the prisoners, landing on them with punches and kicks, setting them screaming again. “For God’s bloody goddamned sake, man, take some bloody initiative,” Shahbaz squeezed out the words in a teeth-gritted whisper as he went past Shaukat. He was almost to the door when he was stilled by three sharp reports that echoed around the warehouse, bounced off the walls, and plugged his hearing for several seconds. The echoes died down in a gradual fade. Shaukat dropped the stick. It clattered and rolled away. He re-holstered his pistol. As he walked toward the door Shahbaz saw over his shoulder the splatter of blood on the water-stained wall behind the prisoners.

“We have to get the information first,” Shahbaz said. Shaukat kept walking.

The darkness outside was lanced with two beams from the headlights of a transport truck, directed at the side of the warehouse along which were huddled a dozen Bengali men, supervised at gunpoint by as many soldiers. Flares of lightning broke the deep black of the night sky. The Buriganga River was a heaving, sloshing mass, lapping at its shores with occasional crashes. Out of the heat of the night winds rose, filled with moisture, ready to blend with more rain. Shaukat went and stood facing the Bengali men. He opened his mouth to speak, and paused. Shahbaz, who had hustled into position next to him, addressed the men.

“You’re all fools,” Shahbaz’s voice cracked. “On top of being traitors and killers, fools are what you are, just like your brothers in crime inside. Want to see what happened to them? No? I didn’t think so.”

The Bengali men stood shoulder to shoulder, unflinching in the face of the guns or Shahbaz’s intimidation.

“These bastards think they’re so fearless,” Shahbaz bellowed in Shaukat’s ear, for no reason but to be loud. There were no sounds to drown him out. He was the senior-most man there. Shaukat took a step away from the blast in his ear. “You’re not!” Shahbaz bellowed. The bleary-eyed prisoners stood unblinking. Shaukat knew at that moment that Shahbaz was shouting the shout of defeat. He was not getting the reaction he wanted, because there was no reaction that these young men felt obliged to give. Fear included. They had done their job, and stood ready for whatever came next. People in that state of resolve, Shaukat knew, could be shouted at endlessly. The only thing confirmed

would be the defeat of the one shouting. “You have one, one final chance. If you cooperate, we can talk about...”

One of the Bengali men rushed a soldier. Shaukat felt the wind on his face. The impact shot the breath out of the soldier, and the two of them tumbled backward. The tussle was fierce, but only for a matter of seconds. A gasp flew up from the huddled mass, which no one from either side cared to enter. The soldier drew his bayonet out of the prisoner, followed by a rippling gurgle. Shaukat looked down and saw the blade just as it retreated from the prisoner’s throat.

“Hell with the rest of them,” Shahbaz said, and walked away.

Shaukat looked after him. Lighting a cigarette, Shahbaz climbed into a jeep. Shaukat could not yet tell if he was going to drive off. He waited. Shahbaz looked as though he had leaned back in the driver’s seat. Plumes of smoke drifted out of the jeep. The soldiers had to have orders, Shaukat was aware, and there was only one to give.

The soldiers formed a firing squad on Shaukat’s order, waited for the officer to be clear of the scene as they had been ordered, and emptied their rifles at the prisoners.

“Sir? Wasn’t this night a complete waste?” Shaukat said.

Shahbaz had been watching closely the soldiers dumping the bodies into the river. The ones from inside were brought out and also thrown in.

“Fifteen Mutktis a waste?” Shahbaz said. “Nights like this are what we need.”

“I understand, sir, but...if we got information first and then got rid of them, that would be better.”



“You want to keep telling what’s better and what’s not?” Shahbaz’s head turned slowly.

“No sir, of course not.”

“Did you know that in a nuclear holocaust the only living survivors would be cockroaches?”

“I didn’t know this, sir.”

“Don’t believe, find out for yourself, but it’s true. The determined, nasty little bastards will survive it all. That’s what these Muktis are. That’s what their race is. They’re nasty little bastards, meant to be crushed, but you can’t get rid of them if you think they’ll just go away, disappear, die on their own. Only thing, it’s good that these Bengalis are flesh and blood humans, and those we can get rid of.”

Shaukat allowed the convoluted analogy to sink in. Offered a cigarette, he accepted it with a quick glance at Shahbaz. Shahbaz’s attention was still pinned on the soldiers’ activities. Shaukat lit his cigarette and felt the wave of the momentary release wash over him.

“Look at them,” said Shahbaz, “they’re like children.” It took Shaukat a second look in the direction of Shahbaz’s remark to understand that he was talking about the soldiers. “Children with too much pent up energy. Give them a cause, and give them God, they’ll happily let it all out.”

Another tangled analogy that Shaukat mulled and allowed his brain to weave through.

Shahbaz stretched, let out an audible yawn. “I want to sleep, for a week straight. Saala...” he tossed another cigarette into his mouth and lit it. “I know of your father, Shaukat. Hamid Shaukat, he’s a sort of legend, isn’t he.”

Shaukat stirred uneasily in his seat.

“What a life you could’ve had,” Shahbaz said, “and you pick this. I know it was you, *you chose* to be here. There’s a thing around neck, Shaukat, and it’s heavy. Be mindful that it doesn’t bend you so low that you lose sight of what’s at the top. Hold your head up high, Captain. Whatever it is you’re here to prove, forget it, let it go. No one is interested. I’m not interested, and I don’t need it. Petulant sons of powerful fathers never impressed me. My father was a truck driver. Owned his company that he built with his own sweat and tears. I’m not getting sentimental, I’m telling you facts. Sentiments have no place next to facts.” He paused to pull on his cigarette. Up ahead, the soldiers, done with their corpse-disposal duties, were flocking around like restless pigeons. The Sikhs that he did business with set fire to it the night before they left Lahore in '47. Do you know what that did to my father?”

A soft rain had started. Like tapping fingers it drummed the roof of the jeep. Shahbaz leaned out the window, shouted orders for them to move. He started the jeep and told his driver to ride in one of the two transport trucks.

“My father,” Shahbaz continued, driving, “stood in the middle of the ash heap that was his life's work closed his mouth around the barrel of the gun that he kept to protect his family with. They found him next morning smoldering with the ruins.” The rain had intensified. It was thrashing on the windshield, obscuring visibility, but Shahbaz drove on without being affected. “What would you say if I told you my wife is Hindu? Not by

blood. Would you believe me?” He pressed the gas, the windshield wipers in a fierce battle against the downpour, and the jeep forded through section of flooded road winging the water to the sides. Behind them the headlights of a transport trucks had rain-scarred halo around them. “It’s true. Mind you, it’s not by blood,” he repeated, almost apologetically. “But my wife, she reveres her heritage, from both sides.”

For the rest of the drive Shahbaz was silent. He ran the jeep through the sheets of rain like a battering ram. Every so often the trucks fell back, but they were on the heels of the jeep when Shahbaz finally brought it to a stop.

Shaukat looked out his side at the unlit three-storey building. He could not recognize the part of town they were in, which for the time being was not high on his list of priorities. He wanted to be done, as he thought they were, and be home. Out of uniform, washing off the stench of blood and death.

Shahbaz put the jeer in neutral and left it running. A sign, partially ruined, arced over the black hole of the gateless entrance. Rusty, gnarled hinges up and down the sides of the entrance told of a gate that was once attached to them. Shaukat could make out the faint remnants of Bengali writing on the sign. A gust of wind blew, rocking the jeep, shoving sheets of rain past it. Doors opened and banged close, and soldiers sprung out of the trucks behind them like bursts of water out of a leaking gorge. Shaukat understood where they were.

“If you told me, Captain Shaukat, that we're ridding Pakistan of Hindus, I would dismiss you from my command on the spot. My father never accepted himself as a Pakistani. He was a Lahori first, a Muslim, and an Indian. But these blokes,” he thumbed in the direction of the building where the soldiers had disappeared, “they're illiterate goat-

herders and sheep-fuckers. Baluchi degenerates. They know their stomachs, their cocks, and their God. General Tikka was right to butcher them. If I earned the name 'Butcher of Baluchistan' I'd wear it like a medal. You tell them Allah's will has been wronged by infidels, they'll eat the flesh that belongs to the man or woman that defiled Islam. As long as they keep believing that, Pakistan will be in safe keeping with us." He waited, and then said, "It's rather uncomplicated when you bring it down to basics. Human nature is such. Only people make it complex with their arrogance."

Women, picked up from villages, were kept in barracks and in abandoned buildings around the city, former offices, schools, government agencies. Shaukat had heard stories of mass rapes, of suicides. Nausea coiled around him and swayed him, and Shaukat gripped the door handle.

"Captain Shaukat?"

"Sir...what are we doing here?"

Shahbaz flicked his cigarette into the rain. A spray of water snuck in when he rolled down the window, more than was necessary. "From an existentialist perspective?" he smirked.

"Why are we here...right now?"

"Captain Shaukat, it's unhealthy for a young man to not have a sense of humor."

Lighting another one, he said, "Would you like to go see for yourself?" He turned the key, and the jeep grumbled off. "Let's go."

Shahbaz pushed the door out against the beating rain and wind. Without being a direct order, it was implicit that Shaukat was to follow. An order would make it worse, Shaukat thought, as he shuddered and took the first battery of rain. His boots squelched

into the mud. Staggering in Shahbaz's footsteps, Shaukat saw the miserable glow of a dim bulb pooling out of an open doorway, toward which Shahbaz was headed. He quick-footed behind him.

A horrible odor grabbed him like a hand in the filthy hallway. Shaukat gagged, covered his nose and mouth, with the sensation that he had swallowed some part of the source of the odor, and pushed down the hallway.

He heard muted sounds around him. Sounds half-formed, malformed, and kept from being fully formed. Belt buckles clicked, the leather slapped the ground. Boots, too, thumping recklessly, tossed around with the abandon of men in their bedrooms after a long day stuck in them. Ahead, he followed the martial taps of the Shahbaz's boots, which led him up a flight of stairs, past a gaping window through which rain and wind spat viciously, onto the second floor where suddenly the din of activity amplified.

Human voices, men and women, indecipherably not in agreement. Umbreen's accusations joined the globs of chatter colliding in Shaukat's hearing.

"Sir..." Shaukat croaked, the ability to speak clawing downward in his throat. He stopped, while in his vision Shahbaz reduced in size and blurred. Laughter pranced down the hallway at Shaukat. He turned.

The stairs on the way down wanted never to end. Shaukat hobbled down, sometimes two at a time, stumbling once, his ankle turning violently but recovering. The broken window once again spewed windy rain, though it felt less drastic. The stairs were, infuriatingly, sadistically, multiplying. Shaukat cursed them out, aloud, and his desperation returned in echoes.

He knew he had reached the end and re-entered the first hallway when the stench invaded his nose again. What could possibly be so horrendous, short of decomposing bodies somewhere in the building, or soldiers lining the hallway with excrement and all the other waste their bodies expelled, along with those of the women held captive. Umbreen...was his final half-committed thought as he found himself outside, expelled from the building's bowels. Sloshing through the lake of water and mud that was the courtyard, Shaukat leaped for the jeep when it was within reach.

Umbreen stirred awake at the noises, but sleep held fast. She trailed off three times before the unease with which each successive wave of sleep came forced her to sit up. Light in the room was streaming in from streetlamps through the curtained windows above the bed. Next to her the bed was made as perfectly as though it were a separate piece of furniture. There were bright flashes that exploded behind her closed eyelids. She now knew that they were the headlights of the jeep pulling in, and the voices that followed, one of them, belonging to her husband.

She walked out to the living room, and from there followed the trail of shed parts of her husband's work life toward the other end of the house. The footprints made a meandering trail out of the living room. In one corner of the living room were his shoes, placed carefully, standing at attention, giving the impression that their owner had vaporized while still wearing them. They were fat with mud. They looked like blocks of stone that had been poorly chiseled into the shape of feet that were meant to be human. Caked, crusted mud had dried and broken off in tiny bits, surrounding the shoes like dead flies. His uniform was placed in order from visor cap to socks, arranged down the

hallway toward the guest room like stepping-stones. Umbreen reached the door, where, on the floor, was a tray laden with food long grown cold on a plate covered with a cloth napkin. The scent of clotted curry and spiced yogurt lingered at the threshold, dying while giving off its final gusts of trying to be enticing.

She tried the door. It was not locked. Inside, there were no sounds besides the whirr of the ceiling fan. Instead of calling his name, Umbreen pressed the door inward. The door moaned on its hinges, a sleeping, gratefully forgotten inhabitant of the house being awakened for no conceivable reason. The guest room had been set up by the former occupants of the house, a colonel, his wife, and three daughters, who had fled Dhaka the day after Yahya Khan came to power in '69. The colonel had been a devotee of Ayub Khan, and, even though had received every assurance that he would be respected in the new regime, did not trust Yahya, openly despised the new president and Chief Martial Law Administrator. When Fazal and Umbreen Shaukat moved in, they barely took note of the room, and had not had cause to open it to guests. On the wall above the bed was a burgundy wooden placard inlaid with "Allah" in Arabic filled in in gold. Beneath it, on the bed, naked, sprawled as though he had been punched into unconsciousness, Umbreen found her husband.

She got in next to him. Shaukat mumbled, his head rotated from side to side like it was trying to shed or wipe away what was playing behind his eyelids, the gruel of dreams that tormented him for another hour before he awoke. Umbreen had covered him. She knew he would feel self-conscious if he woke up to find himself exposed. She had lain awake, watching the perfect revolutions of the ceiling fan, and hearing the house stir into the day's activities. Outside there was the rain, incessant, bombarding the land in leagues

deployed by an angry heaven - that was how she felt about monsoon, not just the rains, but the season itself. She knew the season well, knew what it meant to people in Punjab, and here in Bengal. That it was a relief and cause for celebration as much as it turned vicious within days of arrival, drowning streets, seeping through pores of the skin into the blood.

His eyelids fluttered, but did not fully open. Umbreen watched them, as she restrained from deciphering the odor wafting off him. Not from a specific region of his body, and not body odor. She had an idea what it was, and she also understood, without knowing exactly, that it was something else she smelled, as well. A raw, pungent marker on the skin of a foray into a place that held on, refused to unclasp its digging grip, which was at the same time as subtly threatening as a wink.

For fifteen more minutes she watched him have little tremors. His limbs under the sheet jerked and shook. Many times her hand rose to touch him. She left it suspended inches above him before taking it back. She thought he was running a fever. But his skin, naturally gave off more heat, a quality she had been drawn to immediately the first time they spoke on campus, finding themselves sandwiched next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, between friends, trying with failing effort not to be seen touching, as their respective friends made it increasingly difficult to evade the eventuality. It was a brisk November afternoon. Cardigans and shawls, a sun pleasantly warm. Umbreen Ghazi had felt a spot of damp develop on the side of her neck, and she was not dressed to excess to ward off the cold. She preferred the milder season over the torturous heat - which made no sense, because here she was in the worst place to hate heat. And he with his near phobia of rain. Some decisions made no sense, and people made them, and those with



them, on their side, went along, all parties convincing themselves there was great merit in it.

He made a move. Before she knew what it was his arm was around her hips pulling her in.

“Umbreen...it’s true...you were right...but not me...you have to believe...” he faded again for several minutes, once more waking with a start. He sprang up, causing Umbreen to let out a sharp yelp. She would not be surprised if he had lost his mind.

Contrarily, Shaukat was clear, eloquent. He described to his wife the house of horrors he was led into. The details he remembered stunned even him, as they left his wife wondering if he had hallucinated the whole thing. She did not interrupt him, or mention her doubts. And soon, she began believing every word.

After he returned to the jeep, Shaukat said he thought his brains would bleed out of his eyes and nose and ears, so strong had been the battery to his senses inside the building. Within moments, it appeared to him, Shahbaz was next to him. The senior officer laughed for a long time, smoking, rubbing his belly as if he had just had a hefty, satisfying meal. He told Shaukat what a fool he was for missing out. That conscience was as big a bastard as a hard prick. Shaukat recalled the exact words, in a night Shahbaz had filled with strange turns of phrases.

Shahbaz’s taunts hardened. They turned into dares, which also did not work on Shaukat, shivering as he was in the passenger seat. Shahbaz then ordered Shaukat to go inside. Do his part. Keep the respect of the soldiers, as did Shahbaz, above the bounds of rank. Shaukat begged him, told him he would do anything else, just not what he was

being told right then. He had a wife, he told Shahbaz, at which Shahbaz laughed, spat, and patted Shaukat's cheek. The horrendous odor from inside was on his hand.

And then the soldiers were streaming out of the building. There was some commotion, and the platoon leaders assigned men to stay back, guard the place. The previous guards were overdue for relief. Though, Shaukat wondered, what could possibly be tiresome about that particular assignment. The trucks growled to life, headlights pushed the dark aside, and Shahbaz turned the ignition of the jeep.

"I thought he was taking me somewhere to shoot me," Shaukat said. "The way he was laughing one moment and shouting threats the next. He's lost his mind."

She did not ask what he was going to do. She let him shiver, sweat, tear up, recoil, return to her. The room turned purple from the cloud-covered light of the sun filtering through the lace curtains (also a leftover from the previous occupants).

"Do you want to sleep some more?" Umbreen asked.

"I have to go," Shaukat replied, vaguely. He dragged the sheets off the bed with him to keep his nakedness covered. At the door he bellowed for the servant, more powerfully than Umbreen thought he the strength for. He ordered a new set of uniforms to be set out, and breakfast to be served.

He ate like a man set free after years in captivity with gruel to survive on. Throughout the meal he did not say another word to his wife. When he was done, he told her simply that she should return the Mangal Sutra, adding, before he walked out, that it was more than just a family heirloom for its owner.

He never told her the story about Pervez Shahbaz's father.

Golam Rasool had been standing at his usual spot for thirty minutes, in silence, since bringing the judge a fresh cup of tea, a snifter of brandy no more than a shot, and a clean ashtray. Judge Mubarak relit his pipe. What he really wanted to do was shut his eyes for a few minutes while he waited for Sam Truman. Instead, he suddenly sat up, as if administered a shock. He craned his neck. Laughing to himself, he thought that Golam Rasool would rather keep standing there, never speaking a word unless spoken to first, than find a way to use his time better. Judge Mubarak wanted to show him that he minded such disregard Golam Rasool had for himself, his day. The judge also bore in mind how arrogant that would sound. If on no other count but on the one of age. Golam Rasool was old enough to be his grandfather. He could also not bring himself to dismiss the old bearer because he was the one man in the world around whom Judge Mubarak could abandon his daily cares, his nightly stresses, being a judge, and comfortably close his eyes.

Jolted out of a dream, Judge Mubarak saw the pipe trapped between his thumb and forefinger, thin coils of smoke snaking upward from the bowl. He rubbed his eyes and stretched. Five minutes of good sleep was all that he was getting at a time these days. It felt better than the sleep that fought with the wheels of his mind, incessantly turning, until sleep finally arrived so distraught and tense that it was more comforting to stay awake.

“Have more people left?” he asked Golam Rasool.

“Three more this month,” the bearer promptly answered.

“My God, where are these kids going?”

“A better place, they think.”

“And you?”

“Me? I’m a dead man waiting for the rest of me to catch up, baba. Wherever I am I’m the same.”

Judge Mubarak cleared his throat. “Sorry I fell asleep.”

“It’s good for you,” said Golam Rasool. “Do you know, my father lived to be hundred and five years old.”

The old bearer’s flights of ruminative fancy and nostalgia were Judge Mubarak’s favorite. Over the decades he had know him, Golam Rasool’s father, and various other family members, had been as multifariously endowed with characteristics, lives, personal histories, and adventures, as characters in the most fantastically outlandish tall tales.

“I didn’t know that,” Judge Mubarak said, hiding his pleasure.

“Long time he lived. And not one day in his life did he deprive himself of every bad habit, smoking drinking, whenever his heart desired. Of course, in those times, for a man in his station there were no such things as bad habits. They were just things you did. Modern times makes more things good and bad than people care to know, I think. People just want to do what they want to do.”

“There is something to be said for it, yes.”

“Harvest season...” Golam Rasool began.

“Will you please come here where I can see you,” said Judge Mubarak.

Golam Rasool appeared in the judge's vision slowly, tentatively, hands clasped at his back like a professor.

"Go ahead," Judge Mubarak said. "Harvest season..."

"Yes, harvest season, especially when the yield was good, and the landlords were sated, my father would stay up night after night for a week, ten days, two weeks, with his brothers and the villagers, drinking, eating, going to women. He worked and lived like that for a century. Through the worst times to be a tenant farmer. For both the shahibs and the landlords." He stopped, considered his train of thought, and lit up from connecting with it again. "No matter what he did, every day of his long life, his stomach empty or full, he found a spot of shade, and he slept. One hour. He got whipped and kicked when he was found by the landlord's thugs. He took it, and went back to sleeping just the same the next day. On the good days, when he got his rest, he walked home from the fields, ten miles one way, in his bare feet, smiling, fresh blood pumping in his cheeks. He was, baba, fair as a shahib. Memshahibs thought he was abandoned as a child by some English family. So," Golam Rasool had ended up directly across from the judge at the tall window, now shuttered to keep out the afternoon sun, a dark outline, slightly stooped, cased in a full-body halo by the borders of sunlight drawn between the shutters and the window frame, "there you have it, my father's secret."

Judge Mubarak was holding back laughter. It was difficult with Golam Rasool standing directly in front of him, even if the old man's frequent squints at everything he looked at with the most nominal amount of concentration told a tale of longstanding myopia. He had never worn glasses, and most likely never would. What with the penumbral lighting of the room, it was unlikely Golam Rasool could read the grin on the

judge's face. Still, for good measure, Judge Mubarak covered his mouth under guise of pulling on his pipe, which had gone out.

Golam Rasool's longer tales had this way of ending abruptly, after meandering through details with great affinity. A big end awaited was the impression they drew. A conclusion larger than the tale itself. And then the end happened as though he was suddenly out of time. And the big conclusion was that they invariably had the tinge of a moral lesson he expected the listener to take away.

"It's a great secret," Judge Mubarak said. "Did he share it with anyone else in the village? Just imagine, if every man stopped work in the middle of the day to take a nap what that would do to the landlords and their profits? That's an uprising no one would know what to do with."

Golam Rasool's bronchial guffaws filled the room. They stopped, as abruptly as his tale, at the knocks on the door. He sprang to answer it.

Behind him Judge Mubarak heard the exchange in English between Golam Rasool and Sam Truman, initiated by the bearer. Truman slurred his small talk, to which Golam Rasool's replies were a series of affirming chuckles.

Truman heaved himself over to the identical chair across from Judge Mubarak, seemingly with more effort than the act required, dropping into the chair like deadweight. The watery whiskey in the glass in his hands sloshed over the rim and a couple of drops landed on his pants.

The judge knew Samuel Truman to be a hybrid of as many personalities as the characters in Golam Rasool's stories were eccentric. And yet, the way Truman was today was unlike any other time Judge Mubarak had seen him in their three-year acquaintance.

Truman was dressed like young men Judge Mubarak met in his England days that professed to being actors, more than they were ever looking for or being in acting gigs, pouring their energies instead into raving at the death, the murder, of the arts in a feckless, money-hungry, warmongering, greed-fed broth of slowly dying humanity. The way they derided the arts and the theater and film, blaming mediocre taste, dead imagination, and stale charlatans calling themselves directors that had little more brain power than a corpse – because if they did, they would cast every one of those angry bearers of the true torch of art and allow their light to reignite a wasteland – anyone would think they wanted every artist sent away in trainloads to gulags to be worked to death.

Truman had on a fitted navy blue turtleneck that accentuated his paunch. They were tucked into a wrinkled pair of black slacks, over which was a gray sport coat. The black Oxfords were the best-maintained part of the ensemble, shining with new polish, as if they had been taken from another man's feet. Bright red socks peeked out between the cuffs of the slacks and the shoes. His red hair of curls and coils was patted down one side with a heavy helping of pomade.

“What are you staring at?” Truman asked.

“What. Nothing,” Judge Mubarak laughed. “Just remembering...old days.”

Truman pursed his lips and gave the judge a scrutinizing once-over.

“You're a strange man, Solly.”

“I'm aware, which is why we make good company for each other.” Judge Mubarak held the fire to his pipe. “How is vacation going?”

“I'm on vacation, that's all I care about,” Truman held up his glass in a toast.

“And you look overdue for one.” He gulped the drink in one swig, smacked his lips, and

brought out a pack of Pall Malls. “So, how are the kids adding to your already gigantic headache, otherwise known as your life.”

Judge Mubarak laughed, “My headaches would be far more bearable if they did have something to do with my daily life, my friend. The kids are very well-behaved, indeed.”

“You understand I didn’t just dump them on you, right.” Truman’s interrogatives were less interrogatives and more confirmation of what he was leading the other person to further confirm. “It’s just, if they ever got an inkling of what I really do, that would be the end of me, and them.”

“Say no more, it’s quite lovely having them there,” Judge Mubarak said.

Truman took a long pull and exhaled tiredly. “Why is it that in three years you’ve not once asked what it is I do no matter how many hints I’ve dropped. Anyone else in your place would have been white on me like I’m a rice kernel.”

“Sam, as a lawyer and a judge I only seek information pertinent to a situation.”

“Blah, blah, okay, now that that load of horse-crap is out of your mouth, talk like a real human.”

Judge Mubarak said, “It’s true, my friend. I’ve given you the same answer for three years. Just as I cannot discuss cases with you, I’m aware you are not able to talk at length about your business. As far as the kids, I’ve not said anything to them to give them any indication other than what they know of you, and I won’t. I think they’re doing good, and you helping them achieve it is also a good thing. The rest...too much information can be a hindrance, too.”



“The way things are going, Solly, I’m not long for this city, or this country, whichever comes out in the end.” Truman dug his chin into his hands and leaned his elbows on his knees. The cigarette, almost down to the filter, dangled in a corner of his mouth. “I’m just a messenger,” he said. Judge Mubarak sensed the self-placatory desperation in his tone, but he knew it was not a cue for lip-service shows of understanding. “A messengers that’s gotten so deep in the message that I might as well upend the whole goddamn thing.” Another silence followed. Truman dashed the cigarette in the ashtray. “Anyway you get in with Uncle Sam, it’s a racket. And I see it from the worst vantage.”

Judge Mubarak had never given thought to Sam Truman being any more than what he always claimed, an attaché, though specifically of what designation was never made clear, and a lowly messenger.

“Solly, did I ever tell you that Helen’s mother and I almost ended up together?”

“I knew you were close with her family,” Judge Mubarak said.

“John O’Leary and I became pals the day we met in seventh grade. Before even either of us had a girl, could even talk to a girl without our guts melting out our asses.” Segueing into the next digression that touched his thoughts he said, “What about you, Solly? No love, no marriage. What happened there?”

Judge Mubarak puffed intently, actually giving the question more consideration than he ever had. It had been years, at least two decades, since someone had made this specific inquiry. His mother was alive then. Had she been here now she would have swooped in with a litany of complaints against her sworn bachelor son. But a sworn bachelor was far from what Suleiman Mubarak was.

“Almost,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“In England, I almost married.”

Truman sighed, “The secrets that stay with us.”

“It’s not a secret,” said the judge. “My mother and father knew. I told them when I got back. She was a girl from Manchester, daughter of a union organizer. Came to London to study economics at the London School of Economics. That was no small feat for a woman back then, even in Britain.”

“The First World, first in who-knows-what, backward in all else that matter.”

“It’s an old story, Sam, no reason to get into it,” Judge Mubarak’s tone dipped. He set down the pipe, and took up the snifter of brandy. The tea had long ago grown cold. He went on, as though he could let it go, “She became pregnant.”

Truman let out a whistle.

“I didn’t know,” Judge Mubarak said. “And...well...”

“She never told you,” Truman added.

Judge Mubarak sent the brandy down his throat, held the glass at his mouth for a few seconds before setting it down.

“No,” he said. “I was horrible to her when I found out. Threatened to tell everyone, her parents, her town, everyone.”

“Well, who could blame you.”

“No, it would’ve been awful if I did. Because when I calmed down she told me that she was told by doctors when she was much younger that childbearing would kill her, I wanted to bury my stupid head in the sand. The way I shouted at that poor girl, for a

week, day and night, called her all sorts of terrible names. She was not the kind of girl to do something hasty, and I knew she wanted children. When we spoke about it she would steer the conversation away saying things like, 'all in good time,' and I let it be, because we both had a lot to get done before starting a family. She would've told me, I know, eventually. So, my friend, that is the sum of that old tale."

Truman leaned back, blinked his eyes and rubbed them. "Best I did was get into a fistfight with John O'Leary over his future wife."

Judge Mubarak's mouth stretched, enshrouded in his beard, and he laughed. Truman joined him. Both men felt the relief of the moment and allowed it to lighten the air.

"You had a duel," said Judge Mubarak. "How romantic."

"We just pounded each other until we were both weeping like little girls. I guess the future Mrs. O'Leary, Marilyn, picked the guy she felt most sorry for. I don't know. But it wasn't me. So. To heal my sad pathetic heart, I left town for college, and I've not lived where I was born ever again. Went back for a few nights when I was best man and John and Marilyn's wedding. That's it. There's cheap drama for you. All sentiment and no substance.

"Solly, seriously, though," Truman went on, the slur from earlier creeping back into his speech, but not taking the edge off his seriousness, "I don't think you should've taken the kids to see those fighters. It's all they can do to keep their wits together since they met them. And now they're writing about them, which I, keeping my word to them, am passing on to my press contacts back in the States."

“Sam, hold on a minute. I did no such thing. I took them to meet my friend Kamruzzaman Chowdhury and Mrs. Chowdhury. I had no idea those troublemakers were going to be there. I would have kept Helen and Walter away if I did. It was too late by the time we were out of the car. Walter, it was he that started it. I could see that Helen didn’t want any part of it. Maybe I was wrong about that.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” said Truman. “Helen, when she thinks for herself, is three times the brain than her husband. Walter’s a good boy, he’s a bit of an idiot in some regards, but he’s Republican, voted for Nixon, thinks America fights wars to make the world a better place. Don’t look at me, that’s what the kid believes, in those exact words. You can’t do much with that combination.”

“I won’t say anything unless they say they want to leave,” Judge Mubarak said.

“Suit yourself,” said Truman, pushing to his feet. “I need to get more drunk. I wanted to see you because I’m going to be taking off soon.”

“Where? When?”

“Don’t know, but it’s looming. Sorry this had to be rushed like this. I’d’ve wined and dined and taken you around town in a horse and carriage if there was time. I told the kids I’m going to India, for this extended vacation, and that probably is where the winds are going to send my sail. It’s the only way I’m useful in this neck of the woods anymore.”

Judge Mubarak stood. “My friend, I hope you stay in touch.” Their hands clasped in a tight shake.

“I will, Judge. Meantime, for the sake of the God you bow to, stay, the fuck, out of trouble.”

Zubeida could hear the girl. For the last half hour, as Shonali did her work, her whispered outbursts grew increasingly vigorous. They escaped her every few seconds. Snatches of frustration and anger that Zubeida knew well enough had nothing to do with her menial, routine chores. Sufiya, tagging along with her mother, got lightly smacked on the cheek a few times for adding to her mother's distress. She wept, got scolded, and quietly went back to being a child. Zubeida called her from the verandah as Shonali passed the windows behind her on her way to the living room.

In a wicker basket at between her feet Zubeida was dropping chopped sections of squash, onions, and potatoes for a catfish curry she was going to prepare for Kamruzzaman, who had woken up dizzy and was unable to lift his head off the pillow from a sudden spell of nausea, and a light fever.

“What is it, what's the matter?” Zubeida asked, shaving the skin off a potato.

“Ji, memshahib, with what?”

Sufiya tottered over to the basket and her curious hand went in.

“Get back here,” Shonali commanded. Sufiya ignored it.

“What are you huffing about out there. Shahib is feeling unwell, didn't you hear me tell you earlier? If something is wrong, tell me. Zubeida removed Sufiya's hand out of way to pick up another potato. The child took this message and moved back from the basket. She went behind her mother as though a stranger had smiled at her. “Does this

have something to do with your father? Speak your mind. You've been here long enough to know how things work."

Shonali's eyes lowered. "Shahib wants him to go, I know. A father staying at his daughter's husband's house for more than a few days is bad enough. He's been here for months, at the house where his daughter and son-in-law work."

Zubeida dropped the partially cut potato in the basket. She set down the paring knife on the ground next to the basket and straightened up. Her back was stiff. She massaged her love handles with both hands.

"He wants no such thing," she told Shonali. "I heard him myself. Your father. He has problems, and if he came here with them on his mind, he should have said so long ago." Zubeida kept to herself that she had heard Hashmat Alimuddin the night he professed his dire situation. "What's the matter with him?" she still asked Shonali.

Shonali considered the question with a quick glance at Zubeida. Sufiya had been tugging at the end of her sari's achol, and, in one swift motion, she pulled the child up and planted her on her hip. She landed a hard pat on her cheek that sent Sufiya's head burrowing with shame and tears into her mother's neck.

"Memshahib, he's in a very bad place, that's all I know."

Zubeida knew she knew more, but did not press the matter. She also understood the rock of pride and the hard place of admitting weakness to a daughter, to her husband, to an audience of strangers.

"Tell him to come see me. I'm going to be in the kitchen." Zubeida lifted the wicker basket and stood up. "From now on, remember, whatever is happening around this

house, I know of it. I see it, I hear it, and what I don't know won't stay unknown to me for long. Understand?"

Shonali nodded.

Hashmat Alimuddin stopped at the entrance to the kitchen off the rear verandah. Zubeida stirred the pot of broth with the vegetables she had cut and prepared readying it for the catfish that Mokaddas was slicing into small pieces, with the bone in, the way Kamruzzaman liked it. Seeing Hashmat she told Mokaddas to add the fish when it was ready and keep an eye on the pot. She ushered Hashmat into the dining room.

She took a seat and waited for him to speak. Hashmat, on his end, waited to be asked. The impasse was cut short by Zubeida giving him a nod, a cue that he could speak at will.

"Memshahib, I tried to leave," Hashmat said. "I know I've overstayed my welcome, but..."

"You stay as long as you wish. Has anyone told you otherwise?"

Hashmat shook his head.

"Good then. That's settled. Your daughter's mind can be at rest, let her know. She's carrying your guilt around with her like a curse. What I want to know is," Zubeida shifted her tone, adding to it an almost inquisitional edge, "what or who is going to follow you here."

"Memshahib, on my granddaughter I swear to you I will bring no danger or shame to your home."

Keeping his face down, his eyes lowered, was not guaranteeing Hashmat Alimuddin the reserves to keep from breaking down. To facilitate his wounded pride Zubeida kept her attention split between their conversation and the kitchen, as if Mokaddas, at the first opportunity, would scamper out with the catfish curry.

Hashmat said, "Allah is my witness, memshahib, I tried to leave. Ask your night guard, he saw me. I fainted at the train station. The clerk refused to sell me a ticket." As a side note he added, "At least some young people still respect elders these days."

"When was this?" Zubeida asked.

"No father wants to be a burden on his daughter and son-in-law," Hashmat said, without answering her directly. "The thing is, memshahib, I owe moneylenders."

"A devout man like you."

"Memshahib, it's my curse, yes, but God doesn't have the worries He tests us humans with."

"That's not a very just God, is it," Zubeida said. It made Hashmat look up.

"Only thing of worth I have is the jewelry that I wanted to give my daughter. It's her birthright. Even then, they're not enough to cover what I owe. When I go back they'll put me in jail."

Imtiaz had been hearing snatches of the conversation from his room. He came out and stood in the hallway, out of sight from them.

"With all this trouble going on it's good you stayed back," Zubeida said. "How much?"

Hashmat grew uneasy, so much so that he seemed trapped in his own skin, wishing to leap out.



“Just tell me,” said Zubeida. “If people don’t know they can’t offer help.”

“Ten thousand...” Hashmat hesitated, “...will allow me to come to an understanding. If I add the jewelry...”

“Keep the jewelry,” said Zubeida. “Keep it for now. Don’t make hasty decisions you might regret.” She stood. “I’ll tell Patwari shahib. Leave my husband out of this. Anything else you want to say, say it to me.”

“God bless you, memshahib.”

Imtiaz snuck back to his room. Zubeida went to the kitchen to attend to the catfish curry, and Hashmat, with a substantial lease on his predicament, quietly retired to the servants’ quarters.

“What the hell do you mean no one is home? Where are they?” Imtiaz pressed the receiver to his ear with one hand, the other one clutching a glass of whiskey. He lowered his voice when he realized he had just been loud enough to be heard all the way in the kitchen. “Did they go out?”

On the other end, Burhaan, the old servant was not going to be bullied. It infuriated Imtiaz even more. He knew the old man, a severe, grizzled fellow with paper white hair and beard, a permanently deep, low growl for a voice that moved out of its monotone for no man or woman or situation, who assumed his authority from decades of service under Lubna’s father, having joined the family before the children were born. Riaz Mirza inherited him from his parents, and with the old man his ways that had tried the patience even of the senior Mirza.

“My wife and children? Where are they?” Imtiaz asked. He tried to soften his tone, but reconsidered it, instead heightening the menace with which he spoke the second part of the question.

Burhaan refused to offer details. The rehearsed answer he repeated was that Riaz Mirza would contact Imtiaz when Riaz Mirza felt it was necessary. It would, Burhaan added, be soon, according to his boss.

“So,” Imtiaz saw that he was shaking with anger, and he set the glass down before it burst in his grip, “if dacoits broke in and killed everyone and you were the only one living, you wouldn’t tell me? Or call the police?”

The old man made an animal sound in lieu of words.

“Sir’s orders,” Burhaan confirmed, righteously making it clear that between Imtiaz’s petulance and his, Burhaan’s, respect for his employer’s instructions, Imtiaz was the one with the imbecilic rationale.

Imtiaz held back the urge to slam the receiver. He tossed it at the cradle instead, and it knocked his glass of whiskey to the ground. Fortunately, for the carpet, the glass did not shatter, and Imtiaz brushed it off and refilled it from the liquor cabinet.

While it was still dark out, two hours before Zubeida and Mokaddas would wake up and get the household moving through another day, Imtiaz threw the covers off him. More than worry over his family Imtiaz had spent the night plotting scenarios of taking action against old Burhaan. He thought of him as gatekeeper/spy/bodyguard/closest confidant of Riaz Mirza, whom he wanted to pounce, beat hell out of, and hold hostage until the he broke down. Exhaustion, and the whiskey, had Imtiaz going over the scenario over and over until he dozed off. Upon waking, it was the first thought he had. Sitting on the edge of the bed, listening to his temples drum against the sides of his head, Imtiaz laughed to himself. Burhaan quite likely could overpower Imtiaz in less than three moves. And James Bond was not the real world.

“What do you mean ‘soon’?” Kamruzzaman, heartened by the supper of the night before, sipped his third cup of tea, after a breakfast of scrambled eggs and chapattis.

“They didn’t leave an address or number where they were going?” Zubeida asked.

“Nothing,” said Imtiaz, picking at his plate of eggs.

“Those people,” Kamruzzaman huffed. “My God, their egos. The things they think they can do.”

“Mamma, Riaz bhai is a different case altogether than his father and mother. As long as I’ve know them they’ve never been anything like him.”

“What do you know,” Kamruzzaman said, preparing to launch into the deeds of the Mirza clan, a litany of nefarious doings that landed the family comfortably in their seat of privilege and power.

“I know enough, Mamma,” said Imtiaz.

“And there’s no need to hash those old, forgotten times that no one cares about anymore,” Zubeida added.

Imtiaz pushed his chair back. “I’m going to call the house, see if they’re back,” he said, vaguely.

He called three times, successively, without setting down the receiver between calls. There could be a problem with the phone line, he thought, before dialing the number to his own house, which had started feeling like an unknown series of digits he had found in his memory, woken up with after a long sleep. But the phone rang on. It was not a busy signal. Which meant that the house was locked up, and the servants had no access to the phone.

He called the home of Lubna’s parents. He was amazed that it took as long as it did to occur to him to try them, and shook his head at his own stupidity as he waited for the phone to be answered on the other end.

“Hello?” Imtiaz heard the weary voice of his father-in-law, with the crisp English finesse pulling either end of the way he said the word.

“Abba, it’s me, Imitaz.”

“Imtiaz, son, how are you?” the senior Mirza said, almost as a secondary thought in place of a first, which he had forgot. “How are things in Dhaka?” He asked, after a short pause, pressing the question like it was his original thought suddenly come back to him.

“Not good, Abba. How is Amma? How are you?”

Daulat Mirza sighed. “She’s well,” he said, formally.

“Abba, did Lubna and the children come there? With Riaz bhai.”

“No,” Mirza said, promptly.

“Do you know where they are? They were staying with Riaz bhai, and now I don’t know where they are. Burhaan isn’t telling me anything because he was told not to.”

“His mother,” said Daulat Mirza, and Imtiaz understood he meant his wife, “is in need of her blood pressure medication, and he won’t let me get near my own money. My knees hurt so bad that I wake up feeling like they’ve been shot with bullets.”

“Yes, Abba,” said Imtiaz. “Do you know where Riaz bhai could be?”

Daulat Mirza’s phlegm-soaked chuckle played in Imtiaz’s ear like marbles in a tin cup.

“Son, you are asking the prisoner if he knows the thoughts of the judge deciding his fate.”

“Who is it?”

Imtiaz heard his mother-in-law’s inquiry as fleeting as a bird chirp in the background.

Daulat Mirza said, “If you hear from him, tell him what I said.”

“I will, Abba.”

At dawn Imtiaz woke to taps on the window shutters. He had had a second peg of scotch before lying down, and lost track of when his thoughts pooled into sleep. His watch said just after five. He ignored the sound and turned to his side and drew up the covers. His back and neck were stiff from sleeping on his back through the night. After a pause, the taps sounded again, more deliberate, even impatient. They went on steadily, more than a dozen times, stopped, and resumed.

Anshuman saluted as soon as Imtiaz opened the shutter.

“Forgive, baba, for waking you, but there is a car here, at the gate.”

“Anshu-da, what do you want me to do about it? Who is it?”

Anshuman tapped his nightstick against the side of his leg, as though searching for the best way to present his message.

“Baba,” he said, throwing a glance toward the front of the house, “it’s your wife and children.”

From a distance they looked like smoke rising from recently burnt out bonfires. A hundred of them that had raged simultaneously within a few miles' radius. Thick black columns as deeply dark as the most forbiddingly dark night. Around them the sky shone in cerulean blue grace, in a period of respite before the impending battalion of clouds at the horizon moved in. Rain could already be seen at the edge of the world, where the sky dipped and, in a gesture of humility and respect, touched the earth. From the edge of the scorched field of rice paddies, whose stalks, broken at the spine, hung dead when they were not singed against the earth, the two commanders of the raid watched their troops set fire to the village, and stack bodies in piles for the scavenger birds. Without official decree or order, that was the plan. The soldiers were left to do as they pleased.

“Do you know, Captain Shaukat, what we are?” Major Pervez Shahbaz dug in his ear, made a scratching sound in his throat, and pulled out his finger, which he then inspected with the scrutiny of a surgeon. “We’re on our own.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That doesn’t concern you?”

“Sir, should it?”

“Do you know that your orders never specifically attached you to my company? Come to think of it, did you even have orders? Orders you saw, that you read with your own eyes?”

“Does that make a difference now, sir?”

“No,” Shahbaz exhaled and poked a pinky into his other ear. “I guess it doesn’t. Son of Hamid Shaukat, what have you ever needed to be written down for it to be yours? Or not be somewhere you don’t want to be.”

“Sir,” Shaukat made fists and kept them on his thighs, “I asked to be here. Specifically.”

“Shit,” Shahbaz throttled his finger inside his ear. He checked the excavated results and wiped the finger on his pants. “Do you know what I mean by we’re on our own?”

“No, sir, I don’t.” A group of ten young Bengali men had been left alive. Shaukat saw the soldiers kicking and slapping them. Shahbaz’s one instruction had been to round up suspected Muktis or those that could be part of the Muktis, and not kill them without extracting information. Hearing him, Shaukat had thought about that futile exercise, guessing it would yield exactly the same results as it did the last time at the warehouse. No information, zero leads, and the captives shot.

“General Farman is a good man, you know. One of the finest soldiers I’ve come across in my career.” Shahbaz searched his pockets until he located the crumpled mass of his cigarette pack buried in a back pocket, containing two nearly crushed cigarettes. “Fuck,” he said, picking one out and straightening it. He offered the other to Shaukat. “And the sad fact is, no one sees that. Least of all Yahya Khan. So, Captain Shaukat, it’s up to us, that are under his command, to make sure we do his name and his devotion to duty justice. Do you understand? We are on our own, to do as we please, but what we do reflects all the way up the ranks. And a man like General Farman, he knows, he will



know, when the time comes, who did his duty and who brought him shame. You understand me, Captain Shaukat?"

"Sir, I think we should go."

Shahbaz looked where Shaukat's attention was riveted. The two men left the jeep and began the short trek through the mud. Shaukat's stomach convulsed. Seeing the soldiers coming out of one of the huts, tugging at their belts, rearranging ammunition pouches, resetting helmets, from which cries and shrieks had long ago been subdued down to muffled moans, Shaukat held his breath to let the nausea pass. Shahbaz had gone ahead. The Bengali men were holding their ground against the soldiers. Shahbaz told the soldiers to stop. He spoke to the men, in a way that revived Shaukat's nausea because of its calmness.

"Who went through here warning the villagers? We came on a mission of mercy. We brought food, and medical supplies. You don't want your village to have good things? You would rather give refuge to criminals like the Mukhtis? What sort of men are you? You see what happened because of your defiance? This is your fault. You can seek forgiveness for it, but there is no forgiveness. You have betrayed, and you have killed, your own people."

Shahbaz continued with his fabrications, even as soldiers, in groups, entered and exited the hut. Shaukat stepped up to the door. The blood stench and odors of effluvia pushed at him like a hand when he got near.

"Captain Shaukat, come here. Tell them. Tell them we're here only on a mission of mercy. Tell them their defiance will keep being their destruction. Tell them."

The men's eyes, dead as the paddy fields that they once tended and worked, iced Shaukat's spine.

"Captain Shaukat, we're losing daylight and getting old, don't be shy. Speak." A match scraped on its box, flame flared. The pungent odors of burning fields and huts and flesh did nothing to hold back the fragrance of cigarette smoke cutting in among them, subtle and winding, as Shahbaz relit the last of his mangled cigarette that had gone out.

"Sir," Shaukat acknowledged. Surrounding the men he was addressing were soldiers awaiting orders. "What the major said," Shaukat announced, "is false. Down to the last word. Every syllable, untrue. The major is a man of honesty and integrity. A man of principle. A man who would not lie to subordinates, equals, or superiors. But he lied to you."

"If you were planning on losing your mind, I wish you would have given me some notice," Shahbaz hissed through clenched jaws.

Shaukat ignored him. "He lied to you because you are not fit to be told the truth. You know why? Because you made it so. You made yourselves unfit for the truth by not speaking the truth to him. To us."

On the verge of flinging Shaukat aside, Shahbaz's hand paused before grabbing him.

"If you had the decency, so would we," Shaukat, as relaxed as a general on the battlefield, energizing his troops to die for him, for country, for every nefarious motive hammered into their heads in the name of patriotism, expounded. His hands, clasped at his back, fluttered their fingers every few seconds. "You did not, and we will not. We have no desire to offer you food or medicine or assistance. You know why?"

Behind him Shaukat heard a gasp of impatience out of Shahbaz.

“Because you are kaffirs,” Shaukat said, pronouncing it as a sentence. “This is a village of Hindus, and Hindus cannot be trusted to be truthful to anyone but themselves. You see? That is the difference between God-fearing men and men who bow before idols for protection, and to preserve their greed. Your Ganesh? Protector of what? Liars? Lakshmi? What does she bring? Wealth? When do you people bow to humility?”

“Hold on, Captain,” Shahbaz mumbled.

“Never. You never capitulate. You never conceded to a power higher than what you see in your painted statues. God is higher than that. And because you bring him down to your level, he smites you. Leaves you for the liars and heathens that you are.”

“Captain Shaukat...”

“Sir?” Shaukat broke from the hum that was going through him like a current from his speech. The soldiers were entranced. The serum of his words had penetrated a layer of consciousness that they were not used to being stimulated. Even the Baluchis that did not understand Shaukat’s Urdu, were spellbound. At the mention of God’s name, Allah, they stirred, wondering what they were supposed to do. They had been told they were going in to rid a Hindu village of its treasonous kaffirs. They were briefed that Hindu insurrection in Pakistan was getting worse and more dangerous every day. The Muktis, they were told, were Hindu Bengalis that refused to acknowledge Pakistan’s sanctity and so were conniving with India, that snake-pit of the world’s infidels, to destroy her. And, they were told, it was the villages where the infidel Muktis were spreading their poison. Many of the soldiers had wondered why they saw mosques more than they found temples in a land of kaffirs. They kept their curiosities silent. They obeyed the orders of their superiors that said the countryside had to be burned, razed

down to its last kaffir, their women, their children, so new ones would not sprout where their predecessors' blood lay spilled.

“Enough, don't you think?” said Shahbaz.

“Sir,” Shaukat went to him, and lowered his voice, “enough? Until when?”

“Enough with the Hindu stuff, I mean.”

A nerve had been struck. Shaukat glimpsed the resentment in Shahbaz's twitching eyes.

“Sir, if you say so,” said Shaukat.

“Wait. Before you go on a shooting spree again. Leave something for them to do,” Shahbaz nodded at the waiting soldiers. There were ones that had chosen not to go into the hut with the women. They had watched in disgust the conduct of their comrades. Punjabis that parroted what their commanding officers said, in Punjabi, about the lowliness of the Bungalalees, about their unclean women, and their refusal to accept the Holy Qur'an. Base mongrels were the Bungalalees, not fit to live, should not be allowed to stay alive. And then they had broken in silence when the muezzin's call spread skyward. Shahbaz went past Shaukat and gave the soldiers surrounding the Bengali men orders to shoot them. To another group he shouted orders to burn down the hut.

“Shaukat,” Shahbaz ambled up to him, “if you ever get snide with me again I will put you up on charges of insubordination, after I make mashed eggplant of your testicles. Understood?”

The first whine zoomed along somewhere behind them, a narrow, focused, hissing bolt of sound that ended with a splintering crack. It was a huge mosquito with its target so fully invested in that nothing could provoke it otherwise or break its intent away. The

endpoint was the head of a soldier that was dousing the hut with gasoline. Shahbaz and Shaukat turned in unison, their necks snapping like two paddy stalks, the moment the soldier's head disappeared in a crimson spray.

Shaukat saw Shahbaz's eyes enlarge as he had never seen human eyes take on proportions. Frozen in place, Shahbaz began leaking down his pants. The fluid darkened, staining the khaki-tan insides of his thighs. It was not blood. Shaukat grabbed his collar and threw him to the ground.

More bullets zipped out of invisible sources, making sacks one after another out of the soldiers who were shooting back at emptiness while screaming fear and pain. The gathered young men had dissipated. Some of them collected the women out of the hut, the ones still alive, and blended into the landscape.

A tree fell on Shaukat, and he pushed it aside, feeling the deadweight roll off him as callously as a sleeping man-child. Shahbaz was huddled into a fetus calling on God. Or calling on something. Shaukat could not understand, even with Shahbaz's lips moving less than six inches from his eyes.

The shootout lasted a day, an hour, a week. Branches picked off by bullets thrashed to the ground. Shaukat stayed where he was on the ground, and he saw that Shahbaz had lost ability to move, not as an act of will. The more Shaukat tried to avoid it the more his eyes fell on the stain down Shahbaz's pants. It had now turned into a flattened log, jagged at the edges, and Shahbaz was oblivious of it. In a second of white terror Shaukat saw Shahbaz stare at him as if he was facing death, that look that the dying assume just before transferring sides, and Shahbaz called for his mother.

They were tugged by their collars. Shahbaz howled. His anguish jumped for the

trees, bounced around from treetop to treetop, and away into the trilling winds that were bringing in the storm. Along his back Shaukat felt the bumpy, clustered mud, rolling like wheels laid down to support the journey. He could find nothing discernible when he searched for the faces of their, he believed at this point, saviors. He heard one of them say, Sir, it's okay. The other one repeated it to Shahbaz.

Hauled off the ground they were lugged into the back of a transport truck like bags of rice. Shaukat's head hit the metal floor. The ringing drowned out the world for several minutes. He saw the rush of the soldiers to keep them protected, thinking how well they had been trained. Punjabi or Baluchi? They worked silently, in the midst of the gunfire still going on. Mukti snipers. Shaukat could not stay in the back of the truck. He staggered to his hands and knees. One of the soldiers said he had no business going back out. Most of the unit had been killed or maimed. The ones not yet dead would be dead soon. Shaukat saw Shahbaz curled up in a corner, clumped into a ball, a shadowy mass, shivering, through trembling lips calling on every entity, divine and living, that he had been taught throughout his life to beg for mercy in times of trouble.

The truck grumbled. A roar shook it from underneath, and they were moving. Shaukat could no longer differentiate between gunshots and the ghostly echoes of gunshots stuck in a loop in his aching head. On the side of his forehead, just before it sloped down to his temple, there was a low pulsing of pain. A bump told him he was right to feel the pain where he did. As the truck shambled through mud, lurching right and left with every few yards it went forward, Shaukat clamped his hand over his nose to block the sharp stench coming from Shahbaz's direction.

The hastened flight of the truck took a long time to fade out of hearing. Rainclouds had moved in, darkening the clear sky and sunlight that had allowed them to strike as many targets as possible as soon as they had begun firing. It was a shame they did not get the officers. What was more was the surprise that officers would be out so openly in a village knowing full well the possibilities of the countryside being flecked with Mukti units. But therein lay their arrogance. Pak officers did not accept Muktis as being more than guerrilla bandits.

When they approached the area where the soldiers had fallen, the hut left abandoned, and the group of men that had ran into hiding with the survivors of the hut, they ransacked the dead soldiers for ammunition, killed the living ones moaning from shot out kneecaps and exploded livers, gathered rifles, automatics, and sub-machine guns, pocketed grenades, and found themselves rooted in place at the devastation that was there before their attack.

Death smelled to heaven. Next to the hut, on a bamboo pole for tying goats, was a man, hands hogtied to at his back, head slumped forward. He looked as though he were staring in shock at the sight of his own innards sliced open and hanging out of him. Beside him were two children, a boy and a girl, headless, cut down in mid-escape. The fields around them were littered with corpses. In other villages they had seen canine units rove through the massacre, the dogs sniffing at the dead bodies as though if they were determined post-mortem to have been Mukti fighters they would be shot through one more time for that crime.

Ranjan Das mumbled a prayer. Dilip, Khoka, and Anju were collecting the weapons and ammunition into gunnysacks. Rounak and Mitali had gone inside the hut,

and come out sputtering indecipherably.

“They don’t need to be killed,” said Rounak, “castrated is what they should be.”



“Your brother is a piece of work. Does he feel better now? Having shown everyone his reach and power?”

“All you had to say was go back.”

“Lubna, you think I’m someone that I’m not. What kind of man tells his wife and children to go back? In the middle of then night, when they’ve been carted away by... Can I get some credit, just once in a while?”

“Just keep your voice down.”

Imtiaz shifted to his side and tucked one arm, folded at the elbow, as a pillow under his head. On a separate bed moved down from the second floor and fitted with sheets that were brought out from Zubeida's almirah were Tina and Timur. One of them was snoring. Imtiaz tried to tell which of his children would be the bane of their spouse’s nighttime rest.

“I had a feeling, when I spoke to the servant, that he was up to something,” Imtiaz whispered. “Your brother is a stubborn, unreasonable man, Lubna. You know it. Don’t try to argue against it now.”

“He had to go to Karachi, it was urgent.”

“I’m sure it was. And what about your parents now?” He did not mention the phone call them.”

“We’re not here to stay for good, Imtiaz.”

“Things might not work out with the house.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“You’ll have your job.”

“And your brother will never let me forget until I pay him back.” After a pause, which Imtiaz spent trying harder to discern which of his children was the snorer, he said, “My job? I’ll be lucky if they don’t throw me out by my collar when I try to go back.”

“Do you want to go back, Imtiaz? Do you really want to go back?”

“Lubna, what’s the alternative? Staying a bonded slave to your brother?”

“My brother is not the most horrible man, and yes, he can help you.”

Imtiaz felt the bed shake under him. The tremor was his anger flaring, shooting palpitations through his heart.

“What sort of an irresponsible, narcissistic man bundles his own sister and children into a car in the middle of the night, in these times, and sends them on a journey across the country?”

“You’re forgetting, Imtiaz, that bhai was in a second car, as were others.”

“Right,” Imtiaz exhaled, and laid on his back.

“Would it have been good if we did?”

“Lubna...for God’s sake...”

There was movement on the second bed. The legs creaked, and blankets got tossed around, rearranged, and a sleepy-mouthed tiff passed between brother and sister before they settled again into heavy breathing slumber.

“At least he spared me the scene of cutting me down in front my uncle and aunt,”

said Imtiaz.

“Imtiaz, whenever it happens, if we want to keep on going...”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Lower your voice.”

“Lubna, what...are you...going on about...?”

“I will, I *have*, looked past everything. All of it. For the children. But if your pride is so precious, then you have to decide which to put first. House or no house. I will deal with my brother.”

“So...not only am I going to be cut down from taking care of my responsibility, I'll have the rest of my life to be indebted to a man who thinks I'm less than a low class peon.”

“If he was such a misguided, terrible man, Imtiaz, my brother wouldn't have taken a second look your way, as a brother-in-law, or as a man. What would you feel for the man that betrayed your sister?”

“I see. This is your way of getting back at me through him. What other righteous notions have you picked up from him?”

“My brother should be the least of your worries.”

The bed rocked with Lubna's movements. She wanted no more to talk. Imtiaz knew the cues, the wordless suggestions. Her temper was unlike his. It was not even temper, let alone anger. It was a beating heart of its own that she could box up. And while inside it kept beating, throbbing, until it resumed its state of reckoning with the world. It simmered, and spoke a language of its own that the agitation of other humans did not

communicate with. It drove Imtiaz out of his skin with frustration.

He had seen the papers, but paid them no mind. Stories in the newspaper were no better than gossip. He had heard his father on the subject since he was a boy. Hamid Shaukat read the daily papers as exhaustively as if he were a scientist digging for evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses. When Fazal Shaukat asked his father why the determined and time-consuming reading just so he could discredit the news, Hamid Shaukat replied, it was just so he could *credibly* discredit the news. You had to know something well, Hamid Shaukat told his son, to call it out for being inauthentic when it was. Otherwise, ignorance was ignorance, no matter what someone was trying to confirm or debunk. Captain Fazal Shaukat remembered his father's dictum, until he recognized the two names in the byline.

Outside Judge Mubarak's gate, Shaukat received more scrutiny than his last visit. The guard recognized him, and Shaukat noted the nervousness of the guard as he asked Shaukat what his business was before closing the gate to go inside with Shaukat's message to the judge. It was after eleven. The night was balmy. Pockets of humidity rose in between gusts of storm-cold winds. The season was endless. That was monsoon. It was not a weather pattern that swept through each year on appointed months. It was not summer, it was not winter. Monsoon was a force that defied being known as other than what it was, and so staunch was its belief in itself that the mere thought of calling it by another name was picked up in its slow-brewing power to be unleashed eventually as reminder and confirmation.

From their second floor window, Walter Munsen looked out past the front lawn at

the gate, holding the curtain aside just enough to make room for the box of his head.

“You’re not going to believe this,” he said. “Turn that lamp off.”

Helen joined him. The headlights of the jeep were on, picking up points of rain in its glare shooting at the ground like metallic pencils.

“Three guesses who that could be,” said Walter.

“What the hell is he doing here?”

“I don’t want to find out.”

“I do.”

“What if it’s not him?”

“Walt, I don’t care who it is, I want to know what’s going on.”

The gate opened, and the guard motioned like an overwhelmed traffic cop for Shaukat’s jeep to enter.

Judge Mubarak was not entirely surprised. Not much caught him off guard these days. He greeted Shaukat in the living room, asked him if he would like a late supper, to which Shaukat’s reply was curt, thank-less, no.

“Very well,” said Judge Mubarak. “Whatever you’re here for, if it has to do with your last visit, I still can’t offer any help.”

Shaukat’s stare burned into the ground at the judge’s feet. “Sir, I’m perplexed, above all.”

“As are many people these days,” Judge Mubarak said, dismissively.

“That may be,” said Shaukat, “but from you I didn’t expect lies.”

“Young man, with due respect to your uniform, you’re sitting in my house and calling me a liar?”

“Sir, I’m not calling you liar. I said, you lied to me.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I’m not calling you liar, sir, but you did lie to me.”

“I see. I’ve been a judge longer than you’ve been alive, and you’ll tell me the difference between an accusation and an inference.” He touched the flame of his match to the pipe bowl, instigating an immediate cloud of smoke from the fresh tobacco.

Shaukat held up the newspaper he had clutched under his arm. “Walter Munsen and Helen O’Leary.”

“Yes?”

“Last time you had no idea where they were, or, for that matter, who they were or what they did.”

“Looks like you’ve found out the truth by yourself,” said Judge Mubarak.

“Freedom of the press. American citizens certainly have that to be proud of. Don’t you think?”

Shaukat lowered the paper and gave it a glance as if to make sure what he was showing the judge to make his point did not, as he was speaking, alter its appearance on the sheet. He dropped the paper next to him on the sofa.

“Sir, I’m just disappointed,” Shaukat said, despondent, a betrayed parent producing somewhat exaggerated disbelief at a child’s negligible transgression. He grew still. He listened with complete attention for several seconds. “Who else is in the house? Besides your servants?”

“Captain Shaukat, I’ve offered you the courtesy of not turning you back from the gate. I’ve invited you, at this hour, to bring your concerns to me, concerns which I’m still confounded by. My offers of civility are running thin. I’m an old man and it’s late, and I have an early morning tomorrow...”

“Excuse me, sorry to interrupt...”

Judge Mubarak and Shaukat turned. Helen was holding the door to the living room half open. Behind her was Walter, his prickly head of hair sticking up over his wife’s.

“I thought I heard my name,” said Helen.

“I know I heard mine,” Walter added.

“If I knew you had house guests,” said Shaukat, rising, “I would have brought a gift. Miss O’Leary, Mr. Munsen, you’ve been busy,” he made a pass with his hand over the paper. “What more is the army doing that you would like to take issue with?”

“How about everything?” said Helen. Walter pushed the door from behind her, and they were inside.

“I knew I should have been more stern that day,” Shaukat pursed his lips and added a low chuckle. “You two were so noble, and so confident. Unlike any of the others. You were sincere. And I had to honor your connection to the consulate of your country, which, it turns out, was false. So. Lies. More lies. Dishearteningly more lies.” He picked up the paper, scanned it, shook his head, and dropped it on the floor. “You really think there’s an honorable movement of freedom loving people seeking their emancipation from tyranny? Did I get that quote right? Rather highhanded language, but you’re the writers. I’m just a soldier. My mind is too simple to understand these comparisons.”

“People are being run out of their homes,” said Walter. “They’re going over the border into India, millions of them. You want to tell me that that’s all made up? Americans, the British, Australians, the whole world except you and your generals are seeing it happen, and what, we’re supposed to take *your* word over the word of real people?”

“I see,” Shaukat clasped his hands at his back. He checked Judge Mubarak, whose face was downcast. “Sir, I wish you would have just leveled with me,” he told the judge.

“Now what?” said Helen. “If you had your way, Captain, what would you do?”

“Is that supposed to be a challenge, Miss O’Leary? And how is it that as a married woman you don’t take your husband’s name?”

“Would you like me to show you my branding?” Helen’s cheeks grew flush.

“Why do you feel the need to be uncivil? I’m expressing my curiosity. I’m as modern as the next man. But I also respect tradition. You Americans seem to think traditions are bad, if you honor any tradition at all, that is. Whatever the world does one way, you have to do different. Is it rebellion? Individuality? Which I also know you have a fascination with that I’ll never understand. Or is it just plain lack of any tradition that you can call your own? Have I said something funny?”

Walter had started laughing. “Tradition,” he snorted, “yep, I see you’re up to your ears in it.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” Judge Mubarak stood, with clear intent to end the scene that had far exceeded his patience.

“Sir, a man of yours status...” said Shaukat, his eyes locked with Walter’s, “...you’re a very generous man. I would be more careful.” He made a dramatic show of



collecting his cap, the newspaper from the floor, and meeting every face in the room before his exit. “There was one other thing,” he tapped the paper on a palm, “you mention here a prominent family here in Dhaka that is, as you say, like many other prominent Bungaalee families, in favor of the Muktis. This is not news. These miscreants are thriving on leeching off good people, and good people are falling for their banditry. But I must say it’s the first and only direct connection I have personally been aware of with anyone I know. Sir,” he said to Judge Mubarak, “I believe I met them once, here.”

Walter dropped in a chair, slumped over, his face diving into his hands. Outside, Shaukat’s jeep growled into the falling rain, and the tires hissed down the driveway. “Shit. I thought we gave Sam the new draft.”

“What are you talking about?” Judge Mubarak’s forehead was beaded with sweat. “What was he talking about? What did you put in your articles?”

“We...had two drafts of the same piece, and in one of them we talked about the support for the Mukti...we took it out and wrote a new draft, without it, but I guess...I mean, we gave Sam both the drafts...I guess we didn’t think to tell him, specifically...”

“You guess?” said the judge. “You people don’t check your work?”

“We did...I thought...” Helen stammered.

“Tell me, for God’s sake, that you didn’t mention names,” said Judge Mubarak.

“No,” Walter exhaled. “No, we didn’t.” He waited, checking the judge to gauge his temper. “Not their real name.”

Helen, in the middle of lighting a cigarette, uttered a small gasp. She was hoping Walter’s honesty would show, in an exceptional moment such as now, a hint of restraint.

“What name did you invent?” Judge Mubarak demanded.

“It’s not so much the name as...” Walter sought support from Helen. “Not so much the name as, well, other details.”

“We mentioned that the family, this particular family, has been active in politics. That...it’s the home of a former civil servant,” said Helen. “God, I’m so sorry. We should have been...that was in the first draft, remember, Walt? I guess we just thought Sam would use his judgment...use the second, more polished one...”

“That was extremely reckless and irresponsible,” said the judge.

“Feel free to kick us out on our asses,” Walter, shrunken-faced and scared as a boy, was wringing his hands. “Anytime.”

“We were...this is so lame...we were trying to help, I thought...” said Helen. “Goddamnit,” smoke chugged out of her nose and mouth, “I knew there was something in the first draft...”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Judge Mubarak said.

“What do you think will happen?” Helen asked. “Should we call, or go and tell the Chowdhurys?”

“Tell them what?”

“I don’t know.” Helen sat down. “I don’t know. Maybe we should have left when we were being thrown out. Not cause all this trouble, for you, for them. God, I feel awful.”

“There’s not much else to do at this point,” said the judge.

“I can’t believe Sam didn’t check and double check...” Walter said, bouncing a clenched fist on his knee. “He saw both drafts...”

“We didn’t tell him which one to use,” said Helen. “God, that was stupid!”

Nightly, after dinner, Tina had begun following Kamruzzaman to the storage room, keeping her curiosity in check, and disappearing as he went inside and closed the door. She then perked her ears to the whine and shuffle of sounds from inside, a compendium of ghouls sitting down for their mysterious ritual conference. She knew it was the radio. She had peeked in one afternoon and seen the floor model pushed against the far wall, the chair expectantly empty next to it, and shrank back at the musty oldness of the room's odor. There were no windows. One single bulb dangled from the ceiling, which she guessed was not sufficient light even in that cramped space. She thought people listened to radios in their bedrooms, and servants held the tiny transistor ones to their ears after their chores were done and they had a chance to get off their feet. The peculiar habit of the man she and her brother were calling Dada for the last three weeks had her re-questioning the endless peculiarities of grownups.

He went in, made a fuss over how he sat in the chair, like it was a person's lap that he insisted had to relent to his demand to provide the ideal comfort, bent his head reverentially before the mass of the radio, and touched the dial with the delicacy of handling an egg that he wanted never to shatter.

One night, after a chat session that lasted an hour after dinner had ended, the food on their hands and plate crusted and congealed, and Timur nodding off in his chair, Tina washed her hands and soft-footed her way to the storage room. Inside, Dada was going rolling the dial, speeding through the channels that offered him nothing more than dead

air. Tina had missed the business with the chair, which she found most engaging, but had settled for listening in on the broadcast in English. In the dining room there were sounds of the old cook clearing the table, taking dishes and plates into the kitchen, the clang and tinkle filling the gaps of silence that the nights fell into with impatience. The night watchman, who had scared the tears out of Timur every night the first week they were here with his shouts, brought Tina comfort. The young driver and his young wife, their little daughter that Tina thought was old enough to be saying real words, were more charming than any servant Tina had known in her home. She had heard her new Dadi tell her mother that the woman was going to have another child. And the gardener, forever digging and planting around the grounds, was a sprite, a bouncing, scurrying wood nymph, who had created and looked after the most colorful garden she had seen. There was the other old man, the one that looked like an imam and was sad as a gravedigger, because, Tina imagined, gravediggers had to be saddest people that lived, condemned to the saddest job that could be thought up for a living human being to do.

“Come in here.” Tina’s reverie ended, and she realized she had been standing at the opening of the door through which she had been spotted. “Come, come inside. You stand out there every night, come. Listen to this. You’ll learn something.”

The bulb was brighter and more powerful than Tina had expected. In its glare the room became a blinding white. The dankness of the room had been replaced by a pungent, hot smell radiating from the mosquito coil behind Dada’s chair. The orange tip of the coil glowed like a diseased eye, releasing wisps of smoke, waiting to get healed. Tina despised the things. They were intrusive, nauseating, and drew mosquitoes in more than keeping them away. She stepped inside and kept close to the door, and suddenly the rest

of the house faded. There was only this corner of it, this carved out box that otherwise had no use, not even as a storeroom anymore. For the first time since they were hurried out of her uncle's house in Chittagong, Tina felt comfortable. She could see why Dada chose to be here by himself every night.

The volume was low. A man's droning voice was reporting the news with such seeming reluctance that Tina wondered what he would rather be doing. The news was the most boring thing even invented, it was true. Adult fascination with it was as odd as anything else that was part of being adult, the more boring, it seemed, the better.

“What’s your favorite subject?” Kamruzzaman asked. “In school? What do you like studying the best?”

“History,” Tina squeaked out. “Science, also.”

“Good. And your brother? He seems like a bit of an idiot.”

Tina was shocked. No one had called her or her brother names, not even their father at his most inflamed.

“Is he?” Kamruzzaman asked.

“No.”

“Okay. Good.”

“He likes football,” said Tina.

“Since when is that a subject?”

“It’s not, I know,” Tina felt the need to defend her family. “What was your favorite subject?”

“None of them. I hated school. My sons, your uncles, they were good students.”

“Where are they? Are they ones in the photos in the living room?”

“Yes, that’s them.”

Tina heard her mother call her name. It seemed to come from a hundred miles away, through the rumble of thunder and the hiss of rain on the ground, tramping through mud, and barely reaching her ears.

“I have to go,” she said.

“Go.”

“My brother is a good boy. Like your sons are good boys.”

“Listen. You need to know what’s happening. You’re young, but you’re not a child. Information in life is what you need, and you’re never too young to start getting it. Information and knowledge. But it’s up to you. No one is going to care one day whether you know something or not. You know it or you don’t. Your choice.”

Zubeida and Lubna spent long hours at times, late in the evening, after dinner, talking. After leaving Kamruzzaman, Tina went to the bedroom she shared with her parents. Timur was asleep. The women's conversation stopped when Tina entered.

“Where have you been?” Lubna asked.

“Listening to the radio,” Tina replied.

“Radio?”

“With Dada.”

“Why were you bothering him?”

“I’m sure it was your Mamma that told her to listen and not her,” said Zubeida.

“Go change and get ready for bed,” Lubna told her.

She heard them from the bathroom talking as freely and as engaged as two lifelong friends reuniting after decades. Tina took more time than was needed, so she

could listen without having to pretend to be asleep. The discussion was of the uncles, Dada and Dadi's sons in the photographs, and their wives, who did not sound like good people, even though Dadi was trying her best to not speak ill of them.

Later, Tina got into bed and lay watching her mother brushing her voluptuous, shiny hair that trailed down her back like a waterfall. Imtiaz and Lubna hardly exchanged words during the day, but spent most of the night whispering in bed. They were never tired in the morning from lack of sleep.

“Ammu, why don't Dada and Dadi's sons stay here with them?” Tina asked.

“Because they don't like them,” Lubna answered. She always gave her children the truth. It was tedious to make up answers to children's questions, which they saw through better than adults could construct lies. “Their wives, they don't like Dada and Dadi, and the sons obey their wives' wishes.”

Timur was snoring. Tina gave his shoulder a nudge.

“I never want to get married,” said Tina.

“Don't worry about that. That should be the least of your worries.”

“I want to go back to Chittagong, to our flat.”

“We will,” said Lubna.

Imtiaz poured two fingers' length of scotch at the liquor cabinet and came back out to the verandah. Gusts of wind were gaining more power, accumulating into cohesive gales. Lubna agreed with her daughter. She too wanted to be back home. The way things had gone from one way of being to what they were now felt like a train that would never stop. If it did it would be because it smashed into barrier and blew into pieces. She

wanted her thoughts to leap out of her head and enter her husband's, but all her silent presence managed to do was alert him, make him hide the glass of scotch under his chair.

She sat on the cane sofa. The wind picked up, raised its voice, and pulled in the rain until it was directly over the house. The carport light flickered, upsetting a crowd of moths that fluttered, went frantic, and settled down again in a panic of claiming seats in a round of musical chairs. Anshuman appeared carrying an umbrella. He strained his neck for longer than was necessary checking the light. In his other hand was his flashlight. He did not see or take note of Lubna and Imtiaz on the verandah. The light threatened going off a few more times, and Anshuman waited before it steadied again. His shoes slurped in the mud as he walked away.

Imtiaz brought out his glass knowing well enough that hiding it from his wife was as dumb as telling her he did not drink alcohol. He moved to the sofa, finished the drink in a few measured sips, not enjoying the burn as he usually did when it seared down his throat and chest. She took his hand off his lap, where it was dangling over a knee, and clasped it in hers. Imtiaz sensed the movement in its stillness, the cue for him to move. He looked at her. Lubna stood up, his hand secure in hers. Imtiaz followed. The children were in the room. Like two teenagers with nowhere to go to unleash on each other their respective hormones, they stood still. The house was suddenly a place where they were lost. It was hostile territory. They could get caught. The trouble would be endless, the least of which would not be the shame they would bring on their respective families. Even their thoughts, such as ones like this, were synchronized. In the dark they strangled laughter, and Imtiaz gave her hand a tug.

Mosquitoes had gotten in, despite the endless coils burned through the day and



evening, into the night. Their whine was in a chorus in the living room. Lubna was convulsing with laughter as they plodded with their hands and knees to get into a mutually suitable position on the sofa. Underneath them the springs sang their responses, twanging and creaking. She moved her face away when his came near, because of the blasts of alcohol fumes his increasingly harried breath delivered. It made him laugh, which he stifled, so that his stomach jiggled like a fat man's against hers.

They crept into the bedroom, and Lubna immediately got into bed, as if she was covered in shameful, telltale evidence. Imtiaz determined the snoring to be his son's. When he went by their bed, Timur was almost hanging off his side, marbles in his throat trying to eject with every breath. Tina brushed his hand away from her forehead with the defensive attention of being awake. She then gave her brother's back a thump with the heel of her hand, and the room fell quiet.

Hakim Patwari, asked to come to the house by Kamruzzaman, brought with him news of carnage in the countryside. The two boys that had left the home of his relatives to join the resistance, had recently been delivered to the family, cut up in pieces, bagged up, and dumped at the gate of their house. The junior army officers that led the units through villages, contracted the nightly raids of homes in towns and cities out to local police, and the local police accepted bribes, at times extorting them, in return for leaving alone homes and families that they knew were able to pay them off. Patwari's relatives were in a position to meet the demands of the police, but the two boys had been on a wanted list for allegedly being part of an ambush and killing three soldiers. They were, Patwari said, put on the list circumstantially. Whether any others had been captured or killed in relation to the ambush was unknown, and beside the point. The army had their score partially settled.

Patwari spoke with a latent resentment, his eyes downcast, almost as though he could not stand to look at Kamruzzaman or Zubeida, and Imtiaz, too, for their impulsive and reckless support of the fighters. They ate lunch, and then Zubeida took him aside to tell him about Hashmat. It further exacerbated Patwari's already disheveled mood. His jaws rippled as he listened to Zubeida, but in the end nodded, including agreeing to keep the matter out of Kamruzzaman's radar.

Hearing the news, Hashmat Alimuddin was infused with enthusiasm. He rushed out to get sweets, using the ruse that it was on account of his daughter expecting her

second child. He made his special paan for the entire household, including the children, leaving out in their portions the extra dose of jarda he had stuffed into the ones for the adults, and that evening begged permission of Mokaddas to cook dinner.

“What's the matter with him?” Kamruzzaman asked.

“Nothing,” said Zubeida. “He’s a happy grandfather, and he’s showing his appreciation.”

“Kick it this way, with the side of your foot.” Amir placed the football in the center of the lawn, facing the goal zone between two bricks placed on the ground. He trotted back for the run up, struck the ball as he had instructed Timur, and sent it on a perfect arc for a few seconds until it dropped and bounced where it was targeted.

“Goal!” Timur shouted. On the side, Sufiya echoed his pleasure. Amir exchanged glances with Shonali. Timur retrieved the ball and set it on the same spot as Amir.

“Okay, remember the technique,” said Amir. “It’s everything.”

“Stop lecturing him and let him take the shot,” Shonali scolded playfully.

“You see?” Amir told Timur. “This is why women aren’t athletes. Too impatient.”

“I can kick you when it counts, you’ll see my technique,” said Shonali.

Timur duplicated Amir’s moves, step-by-step, and kicked. His foot swept over the ball, grazing it every so slightly, and the force of the kick swinging his leg upward and taking him off his feet.

“Let’s try again,” said Amir. He saw Huda Mia staring thoughtfully at the corner of the lawn where the hole had been dug for the weapons, a shock he would likely never recover from, and called to him. “Kaka, we need a goalie. Come, be our goalie.”

“Forget you and your game,” Huda Mia said, walking away.

“Kaka, yes, be our goalie!” Timur clapped. “It’ll be more fun!”

Huda Mia turned to Timur. “For you, little baba, okay, I will.”

Timur carefully set the ball in place again. His gaze swept over the verandah, and there he saw his father watching him, as seriously as his father had concentrated on any of his activities. A tightness gathered in his young chest, full of confidence and self-flattery. With his father was his mother, also watching, as were the driver’s pretty wife and noisy little daughter. The world, Timur believed, was waiting for him to succeed. Up ahead, the gardener was grinning, his nearly toothless mouth a miniature goal post. Timur controlled laughter at the thought of ramming the football through the poor man’s frail mouth, but he also noticed that he was standing there seriously, not taking his temporary duty in life as goalkeeper as a joke. Timur walked backward. He could take his time. When athletes did what their fans wanted them to do they did with a sense of leisure. There was no hurry. Time was theirs to rule over, time that the fans had given them to use at will, as long as in return they received the satisfaction of feeling as much like gods as they believed their idols to be. Timur stopped at the edge of a flowerbed. Amir was at a midpoint between him and the ball with his arms on his hips, mouth pressed worriedly, a touch of mockery around his eyes. Timur thought how dark Amir was compared to his wife, whose skin was a hundred times fairer than Timur’s mother’s. She and her friends talked about ways of making their skin fairer often, and they applied excessive amounts of powder to make it happen. They looked at those times like scary, bemused, grotesquely gratified monsters whose faces could peel off any moment and crumble to the floor.

Timur saw the ball, the audience. The heat was making his palms sweaty. He wiped them on his shorts. Behind the gardener/goalie, over the oily sheen of his dome, were three sunflowers, bright eyes of yellow in a stunned stare directly at Timur. Crows were going endlessly hoarse in the jackfruit trees. A single koel bird was singing somewhere on Timur's left. The sun had dipped behind the top of the jackfruit trees. Timur revved up and sprinted at the ball.

The banging started as soon as Timur's foot, in the correct poise as Amir had shown him, touched the ball. He stopped. The ball did not make it more than a few inches forward. Footsteps scurried behind him. In a blur everyone, his audience, his father and his mother, Amir, his pretty wife, their noisy daughter, the gardener/goalie disbanded. His hand was in Amir's being led to the house. Up on the verandah he saw his mother's mouth working but heard nor understood the words she was speaking. Behind him, past the carport, down the long gravel driveway all the way to the front gate, he heard the massive horn of a truck trumpeting menacingly, as they did on the roads bullying their way through smaller vehicles and pedestrians.

Pervez Shahbaz talked of them as though they were his invention. As he spoke on his tone went from inventor to parent, albeit a parent that considered his children were created for practical use. Workhorses that had no other purpose in life but to be inserted into the machinery, a new cog, to keep the larger mechanism moving. At that point he took a turn into condescension. He was a step-parent that had married a woman with children he could not stand and was slowly growing to hate. But he likewise saw their use. He made the best of a situation that would not be unsuitable to him for much longer. He

trailed off and fell silent. For several minutes he watched the scene before them.

The rally was at Chowkbazaar. About a hundred men stood listening to two people, a greasy-haired man in his thirties wearing a black long-sleeve shirt and khaki pants, and a mullah with hennaed beard that was a neon orange. Green and white, crescent and star-hearted flags waved on bamboo poles, limp in the windless heat of the afternoon. Shahbaz had filled the jeep with smoke. Shaukat's eyes were teary, the insides of his nose experiencing a slow burn, his throat making him want to reach in with a finger and scratch. He asked for a cigarette, which Shahbaz gave him and held a match for him to light.

"I understand our wives have grown quite chummy," said Shahbaz. It was the first time since the village mission that Shaukat was seeing him. Shahbaz had made no reference to that day. "That's good. Don't you think? These idle women? They need something to keep their little minds busy. Otherwise, they make our lives miserable." He laughed, snorted, and throttled his throat to collect the mucous in his mouth. After he spat it out the window, a speck of dangling spit hung from his lower lip.

"I don't know, sir," said Shaukat. "I'm sure my wife admires your wife."

"Hah! Just as you admire me."

Shahbaz said, "I've never been ashamed, Shaukat. Never. Of anything I've done, anyway I've behaved, nothing. I've not made excuses for my humanity or my flaws. That's not the way a soldier is supposed to think, right? We're trained to hold ourselves to higher standards."

A series of shouts erupted in the assembly. Pakistan! Zindabad! Pakistan!  
Zindabad! Pakistan! Zindabad!

“If we don’t,” said Shahbaz, “what good are we? There’s nothing else in this world we’re made for doing. Is there?”

“Sir, my concern has been growing,” Shaukat said.

“What about?”

“Mukti presence, here in the city.”

“That’s not new news.”

“I know, sir. I mean specifically. Muktis being aided, sir.”

“You have specific information?”

“I do.”

“Not that,” Shahbaz snorted, “it has to be.”

“Can we make a stop, sir, before we head to the warehouse?”

Shahbaz turned halfway and gave Shaukat an angled glance. Shaukat was Doing Something. That was all Shaukat could think about, despite sitting next to the man, his superior, that had come undone from within in the face of battle.

“Yes,” said Shahbaz. “We’re not going to the warehouse. These monkeys you see out here, they’re Bungaaalees, but they want to support Pakistan. That Maulana over there, he’s their organizer. General Farman himself is the man he answers to. Do you know what they call themselves?” Shahbaz wanted to laugh, but suddenly did not find the information he was about to give Shaukat, funny. “Al-Badr. Lofty minded bastards, don’t you think?”

“Can they be trusted, sir?”

“I’ve seen them...at work...Maulana saab over there looks like a fat lecher, but he can wield a butcher’s knife.”

“Sir?”

“Not for halal purposes, Captain,” Shahbaz let out the laughter he had held back earlier, “he clean cut off a man’s head, I swear on my dead mother and father, I saw it with my eyes. Can they be trusted? To do more of that? I think so. For the time being.” He rolled down the window and gestured at the mullah.

Cheeks plump with paan, smiling teeth as rotten as sodden wood, the mullah, jiggling all over and soaked through with sweat, bounded up to the jeep. He stood panting at Shahbaz’s window, a slavering mutt excited for a treat.

“This one, too,” Shahbaz told Shaukat, “a loyal defender of Pakistan, and Islam,” he snickered. “Maulana saab,” he said, rolling down the window, and releasing a cloudburst of cigarette smoke into the mullah’s face. Eyes, weighted down with pouches, blinked, valiantly trying to endure the discomfort. “Sounds like an energized bunch.”

“Saab, they’re only waiting for the order,” the mullah’s face tightened, stretching the smile end to end.

“Good. This is Captain Shaukat. Captain Shaukat, Maulana Gafoor. Maulana saab, he’ll be giving the orders today, under my authority.”

“Saab, Allah preserve Pakistan, and every one of you, her children and defenders.”

“Looks like your boys are getting restless,” said Shaukat. “Get them loaded into both the trucks.”

“Where are we going?” Gafoor asked.

“Maulana saab, with all due respect to your learning and authority, do what you’re told and keep your mouth shut.”

Gafoor, taken aback, looked to Shaukat, and back at Shahbaz. “Of course, Major



saab.” He went hobbling back to the rally, waving his hands, issuing commands. The ordered lines of the group broke up. The men filed past the jeep, cautiously eyeing the occupants.

Strains of daylight still clung to the west, ebbing behind streaks of clouds. Over the river were more clouds, thick, grey, portentous rain-heads making their slow, patient approach.

“Why this family?” Shahbaz asked.

“Sir?”

“This family, why them? There are a hundred houses in this city we can go to, probably find something. Kamruzzaman Chowdhury is a well-known man, so is his wife.”

“It doesn’t get more obvious than them, sir,” said Shaukat. His stomach was in knots thinking about his first encounter with the Chowdhurys, the audacity of the American couple, the maddening reminder of falling for their lies instead of throwing them out of the country.

“I have to say, Captain Shaukat, you’ve come far in a very short time. If only more officers caught on as fast as you did. Your father’s influence and power doesn’t seem to have affected you as much as I thought. I really did think you were a pansy, a fruit that didn’t know how to hold himself properly outside daddy’s pocket, but you changed my perception. I, on the other hand, have done some soul searching. I know you saw me in the state that you did that day, in the ambush. Many men would make excuses. Say they were this or that, try to cover their fear and its uncontrollable results. But me...Let me ask you: What do you think I should do about it? Be embarrassed? Try to regain your respect?”

“I haven’t thought about that, sir.”

“Okay, Captain,” Shaukat's mouth twisted up in an angled smile, “your graciousness is appreciated. Just know that it’s not something you’re going to carry around in your pocket like ammunition. Tell anyone whatever you feel will like, tell them the truth. I won’t hide my head, or be beholden to your or anyone.”

“Yes sir.”

Instead of peace more agitation came over Shahbaz. He fidgeted through the rest of the drive, gripping the wheel in white-knuckled resentment. Shaukat heard his teeth grinding.

Led by the jeep the convoy, including two transport trucks, rumbled up the driveway. The jeep pulled under the carport, the trucks were brought to a stop along the driveway, their engines cut. The horn and banging at the gate brought out Zubeida, and behind her Kamruzzaman. From the kitchen and servants’ quarters Mokaddas and Hashmat Alimuddin appeared just as the Al-Badr men were dismounting the trucks. Behind them scuttled along Huda Mia. Amir had taken Shonali and Sufiya and started toward the servants’ quarters, where they met Hashmat and Mokaddas halfway. Shaukat stepped out of the passenger side, and saw at the top of the verandah steps Imtiaz, Zubeida, Kamruzzaman, and a woman next to Imtiaz he did not recognize. Two children were shoved behind them and sent indoors.

“Mr. Chowdhury, good evening,” Shaukat said. “Mrs. Chowdhury,” he made a bow with his head.

“What do you people want?” Kamruzzaman asked.

“Apologies for disrupting your evening like this,” said Shaukat.

“Apologies? Who are all these people with you? What do you want?”

“Mr. Chowdhury, please, sir, we’re on a routine patrol.” Shaukat was on the first step.

Behind him he heard Shahbaz’s door open and shut. Shahbaz lit a cigarette, its fragrance suddenly overwhelming, reaching Shaukat in its first exhale with the force of a hand against his face.

“Patrol, here?” said Zubeida. “What do you think we’re doing here?”

“Mrs. Chowdhury, the thing is, we’re bound to do things like this, things that aren’t easy, especially when it comes to respectable people like yourselves. But these Mukti Bahini miscreants,” Shaukat shook his head with eyes downcast, and clucked his tongue, “they’re making everything so difficult that no one is safe.”

A face peeked out from behind the woman next to Imtiaz. The boy’s curious eyes looked Shaukat up and down, hovering at his belt on the side where his holstered pistol hung.

“Young man, what’s your name?” Shaukat asked.

Timur was silenced with his mouth open by his mother. She hissed at him, and his face disappeared.

“We feel just fine and safe here,” said Zubeida. “Mukti Bahini or no.” Zubeida went down a couple of steps. “But you and your men are not satisfied with that, are you? You think we’re doing something illegal here? We’re harboring these miscreants, as you call them? Is that what you think?”

“Mrs. Chowdhury...”

“Don’t patronize me in my own house. You want to search my house, go ahead.

Go. But you will not harass my household, and you will not disrespect my guests.” She picked up Maulana Gafoor talking to the Al-Badr men in Bangla. “Maulana shahib, what sort of duty are you fulfilling? Is this God’s design for you and your day of judgment?”

“Memsaab,” Gafoor replied, in Urdu, which was stilted and punctured with Bangla insinuations, “We are all His servants.” Without a beat he received scorching looks from Shaukat and Shahbaz simultaneously that shut him up for the rest of the time.

An argument flared up around the corner from the carport where the trucks were parked. Shaukat went down toward it. Shahbaz was scoping the perimeter of the lawn, veering close to where the hole had been dug, which had been rained over since then and was a hump of mud, a distention on the back of the lawn as odd as a misshapen body. Imtiaz recognized the voices involved in the row, and he went down the steps.

Amir was scuffling with one of the Al-Badr men. He had Amir’s collar in his grip, and Amir’s hand was clamped on his neck. On Amir’s side Hashmat and Mokaddas were making feeble attempts to pry him loose. They were easily outnumbered by the support behind the Al-Badr man.

“What’s the matter here?” Shaukat asked. “Let him go!” He shouted at the Al-Badr man. Nearby, Maulana Gafoor had the expression of seeing his own death in the face, and stood at a cautious distance, ready to bolt if necessary. Close by was Anshuman, nightstick prudently belted, and on the ready without being a distraction.

“We have to search back there,” said the Al-Badr man.

“My wife and child are in the servants’ quarters, no one else,” said Amir. “No one is going in there to scare or trespass on them.”

“Your employers are being peaceful,” said Shaukat, “why are you causing

trouble?”

“He’s telling he truth,” said Imtiaz.

“Mind your business,” Shahbaz told Imtiaz.

“I am minding my business. My wife and children are here. My uncle and aunt are distressed. Everyone in the house is here at your beck and call, being cooperative. What else do you want? What do you think we’re doing here?”

“Imtiaz,” Zubeida said, walking up to them, “They’re here to do their job. Let them.” She turned to Shaukat, “Keep your goons out of my house. You treat my house and my family with respect, and we will all be respectful of you.”

“Mrs. Chowdhury,” Shaukat’s voice lowered, “this is a bad day, when we have to do this. If you think this brings me joy, it doesn’t. You, me, us, we’re not the creators of this situation. But it’s good people that have to suffer the consequences of things done by the dregs of society.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” said Zubeida.

Shaukat exchanged looks with Shahbaz. He ordered the Al-Badr men to get in the trucks. Maulana Gafoor’s mouth opened but the words died before they sprung out. Kamruzzaman made his way down from the verandah and stood next to his wife.

“Mrs. Chowdhury, maybe you don’t,” said Shaukat, “and maybe you do. I don’t know. I can only take the word of a respectable woman like yourself. It’s just that on top of the Muktis and their criminal activities, there are other,” he paused, “elements also that make an already difficult job even more complicated. Foreigners, you know. The good ones, the ones that want to help, it’s never those ones that go out of their way to make themselves available. It’s the snooping ones poking their noses where they don’t belong.”

Imtiaz had not seen or heard from Helen and Walter since dropping them off at Judge Mubarak's house, and he wondered what they had done, because they were the only foreigners that could be linked to the Chowdhury house.

Around them there was a sudden emptiness now. The absence of the crowd that had descended on the house left a sense of abandonment, and in the midst of the members of the household, Shaukat and Shahbaz were by themselves.

"Foreigners?" said Kamruzzaman. "Who? Those American kids that came here with Mubarak?"

"So, you do know them?" said Shaukat.

"So what?"

"Mr. Chowdhury, I urge you to be careful whom you open your doors to," said Shaukat. He gave Shahbaz a nod, which Shahbaz missed until Shaukat went past him toward the jeep.

"Are any of your servants Hindus?" Shahbaz asked. Shaukat stopped, and he turned, unhappily at the question, to understand what Shahbaz was up to.

"What business is that of yours?" said Zubeida.

"Sir, we're done," said Shaukat.

Ignoring him, Shahbaz pressed on. "They're the silent troublemakers."

"And you people? You people are paragons of Islam?" said Kamruzzaman.

"If our enemies laughing at us makes you happier than helping us defend our country and religion, Chowdhury saab, then who needs to be a paragon, and who to be watched out for." Shaukat had moved in close to him, and Shahbaz's anger rose, not at the Chowdhurys but at the way Shaukat had taken a small measure of authority given him,

to excess.

Shahbaz was on the passenger side, having told Shaukat to drive. He sat as uneasily as if he were on nails. One fist kept thumping into the palm of the other hand. He brought out a cigarette three times and three times pushed it back into its box. The box of 555s glittered gold in Shaukat's peripheral vision. Night was falling fast, and Shaukat's eyesight was not the best for driving in the dark. Large parts of the city were without street lighting. He knew where he was going from memory, and from his knowledge of the location of the small two-room building in Mirpur that had of late become a regular destination.

"Stop the jeep," Shahbaz said.

"Sir?"

"Right here, stop it."

The trucks following them screeched their brakes as the jeep edged the side of the road and came to a halt.

"Get out," Shahbaz told Shaukat. Outside, Shahbaz screamed at the trucks' drivers to cut their headlights. A drizzle had begun, and it was quickly gathering force. Shahbaz got close to Shaukat's face, and in the dark Shaukat could only smell Shahbaz's breath of cigarettes and an empty stomach. Shahbaz moved back. And then a hot pain seared up and down the insides of Shaukat's legs. He doubled over when the pain struck his abdomen. Shahbaz was reared up and ready to kick again, and in a last second move Shaukat dodged it. He tripped on his foot and fell on his side. His pistol and holster dug into his hipbone. He heard the grunt of frustration, and rolled blindly to his right to get away. The next kick clipped his elbow, and the next one following immediately pushed

the wind out of his lungs.

While he waited, Shaukat heard the scratch and blaze of a match. In the momentary burst of flame Shahbaz's face became encased in a golden half-circle.

“Stand up,” Shahbaz commanded.

Shaukat, gripping his side, and gritting through the throbbing between his legs, pushed to his feet and fell against the front of the jeep.

“Know your place, Captain Shaukat. I've never been impressed by who you are and where you come from. As long as you're around me, you'll remember your place.” He pushed the dead cigarette into the mud with his shoe. “Let's go.”

At Mirpur the one-story, two-room building emitted screams through the night, into the day, and into nightfall again. Shaukat hobbled in behind Shahbaz, the throbbing in his groin dull and heavy, like a block of cement had been tied to his testicles. Breathing hurt, which he suspected was a bruised rib. If it had been broken the pain would have been fiercer.

The trucks had emptied out. The Al-Badr men filed into the two rooms, and they were heard in their disheveled, forced Urdu interrogating the captives. Maulana Gafoor kept close to Shaukat and Shahbaz, flicking his eyes at them for signs of being put to work with a direct order.

Mingled with the odors of sweat, blood, and waste, was a deep, digging smell that Shaukat knew well. Dogs. His family had had an armada of Dobermans when his grandfather was alive. But Dobermans lived as whimsically as their biology, and over the years, as his grandfather aged and his temper mellowed, so did his choice in breeds. Near



the end of his life he was satisfied with two German Shepherds, which Shaukat inherited unwillingly. As the scent of the hounds took over the closed quarters, so did their howls.

“Cuttia - Canine units,” said Shahbaz, as if he was bringing Shaukat out of stupor. “What we humans miss these creatures find. Captain Shaukat, are you not feeling well?”

Shaukat noted the smirk in Shahbaz’s tone that he could not see in the lighting that had been touched by the filth of the place.

“I’m fine, sir.”

“Good. Maulana Saab, if by morning you get nothing out of these ones, get rid of them. We need to keep things moving.”

“Major Saab, you leave it to me,” Gafoor gnawed on the attention afforded him.

Shaukat felt the rush. He hurried to the open door, in time to thrust his head out and let his insides shoot out his guts. After emptying out, and several dry heaves, his head was reeling, and the pain in his groin had subsided. His rib was alive with pain, pulsing with the beats of his heart. He heard Shahbaz laughing, and then a scream, behind it, cut off by gunfire.

He went to the jeep, disobeying Shahbaz’s orders to return at once.

Umbreen’s hair was wet. She was asleep, and started awake at the first sound of Shaukat walking in. She allowed him to hover around the bedroom, like a stranger, bashed on the head and left to meander, until he found the edge of the bed. When she brought her face close to his, his arm reached around her shoulders to find support. That was when his hand touched the damp curtain of hair spread down her back.

“I don’t want to be here anymore. You don’t either,” she said.

His hand searched the area of her neck. She took his hand and set it down.

“I returned it,” she told him.

The two soldiers at the checkpoint stopped the vegetable seller and his wife. One soldier smacked the basket of vegetables from the man's head and slapped him. His wife shrieked. The second soldier pounded her stomach with his boot. The woman, frail and bony, flew back, nearly two feet. She crashed to the ground and rolled like a log, her sari unwinding like a bolt of green cloth with each revolution. The man began begging for her life. His hands were together in front of his face, and he was in tears. The soldier wrenched his ear, slapped him three times, and kicked the back of his knees. He pulled him up by his hair and warned that he would shoot him if he did not stand erect and do as he was told. Nearby, the man's wife was clutching her stomach and clawing the ground with her fingers.

The man was ordered to untie and lower his lungi. As he took the command, the soldier held his semi-automatic to the man's head, in case he disobeyed more than once. But the vegetable seller pulled the knot of his lungi and began lowering it. The soldier stopped him, and called over his companion. Together they looked down, both their semi-automatics pointing at the vegetable seller's genitals. They told the vegetable seller to understand how fortunate he was that he was cut. That he was a Muslim. The vegetable seller wept gratefully. But it was not over. He was ordered to recite the Qalma.

The vegetable seller was illiterate. Except for a few years of religious schooling when he was a child, he had not seen the inside of a classroom. His wife read the Qur'an, he told them. She had finished it more than once. She was a God-fearing woman, and she

taught their children to read the Qur'an. The soldiers looked together at the woman, who was looking at them fearfully, but ready to push herself to her and her husband's rescue. The soldier, though, wanted the man to recite. The vegetable seller fell to their feet and begged forgiveness.

Two bursts from the semi-automatics sounded in the early dusk. The vegetable seller was prone and still where he had been at the soldiers' feet. His wife was doubled over, her head snapped forward.

Two bicycles that had been leaned along a wall of PG Hospital started moving. On it were two riders each. They were covered head to waist in shawls, with their faces covered up to the nose. It was difficult to tell that two of the four riders were women, unless one came close enough to see the minute differences in their features.

Without talking the two sets of riders communicated, brought their bicycles to a stop, and laid them on the ground. Beneath the blankets covering them head to foot were rifles slung around their shoulders and pasted to their bodies. The soldiers were sitting on their haunches over the bodies of the vegetable seller and his wife. Their conference seemed tense. They had no idea now what to do next. As Muslims they were bound to give the dead a proper burial. But to think that these men, that had been killing civilians where they saw them, cared about proper burial rites and religious adherence was to misalign their reasons for killing. The four shrouded figures crept up on the soldiers, and when the soldiers gasped and began fumbling with their weapons it was too late.

One rifle came out from behind the blanket, like a single leg of an entertainer emerging from a curtained stage. The trigger clicked, and the soldier's head exploded. The tall, broad-shouldered body bucked at the knee and fell to its side. The second soldier

shrieked. In a rush of defensive options clicking in his brain faster than his hands could act, he started tugging at the handle of a knife sheathed in his belt. His semi-automatic thumped against his chest, like a hand vying for his attention, wanting to give him the very thing he needed. The face behind the blanket that looked at the soldier marked the sickle shaped scar on the soldier's face, the rifle the face held jutted under the soldier's chin. The helmet blew off, went rocketing upward.

The foursome would bury the vegetable seller and his wife. They knew the soldiers would be taken care of.

Riaz Mirza, back from Karachi, brought news that in West Pakistan the war was virtually unknown. His contacts knew more than most people, but said nothing. They feared retaliation. Then there was India where more trouble was brewing and being manipulated by Indira Gandhi. If Bengalis really cared about country and freedom, Riaz Mirza said, they would quickly start turning their attention to the refugees streaming into West Bengal. He had seen pictures of the hollow faces, the bloated stomachs of the children, the raped women who could not hide their trauma but clamped their mouths and hearts shut.

Imtiaz was not interested in listening to his brother-in-law's feigned heartbreak. He knew Riaz Mirza to be callous, overbearing, and ungenerous. He had shown up in the middle of the day, unannounced, been invited to lunch by Zubeida, and half an hour had not passed since he took his last bite that his initial conscientiousness subsided. He became the man Imtiaz had known since day one, bug-eyed with self-interest, shaming Imtiaz with his scorching gaze.

"You can forget your job," said Riaz Mirza. "Any man that thinks lollygagging away from his work for months without notice will earn him praises and promotions is a buffoon. He doesn't deserve a job. Wait. Make excuses all you want. I'm not interested. Living like this with your uncle and aunt," his protruding forehead was beaded with sweat pearls, "careless with your debts. And you want to blame war?"

"Bhai, if you're done, you should leave," said Lubna.

“Leave? You’re not going home? You want to encourage this charade?”

“My children and my husband are here. I’ll be with them for as long as necessary.”

“Let me tell you something,” Riaz Mirza rose, puffing his cheeks, “Indians are planning on bombing this city to hell. I know these things because I deal with people, out there, in the world where things like this are discussed and decided.”

“As for what he owes you,” said Lubna, barreling over her brother’s bullying, “you’ll be paid.”

“Oh?” Riaz Mirza scowled at his sister. “With what? His salary? The lavish savings he has stored away? You seem to forget I know exactly how much your husband has at his disposal. If I were you I wouldn’t feel so confident of it.”

“Lower your voice, this is not your house,” Lubna told him. “You will get every last bit of your money.”

“Since when are you swimming in money?”

Imtiaz was privy to Lubna’s next attack. It was a wily bit of maneuvering that he had never thought would enter her calculations. When she had told him of it he wanted to fall at her feet, be forgiven everything, which was not going to happen.

“My dowry,” said Lubna.

“What?” Riaz Mirza’s mouth fell open. “Are you mad? You want to drag our parents into your husband’s mess?”

“My parents never accepted a dowry,” said Imtiaz.

“That’s rich!” said Mirza. “Was this your brilliant idea, then?”

“Bhai, I think you should go,” said Lubna. “We’re guests here, and you’re our guest. Mamma and Mammi have shown their generosity. Show them some respect.”

“I will be at Purbani hotel,” Riaz Mirza said, “for the night. If you come to your senses by morning...”

Never had Imtiaz seen his brother-in-law shaking in the grip of such defeat. And Lubna, she too was a different woman with him.

“You were in such a rush to bring us here, and now...”

“I’m thinking of our parents,” said Riaz Mirza.

“They can think for themselves.”

“You’re all mad, lost your little minds!” Mirza’s large head shook on his shoulders like a loose attachment.

“Bhai, have a safe journey home.”

If Riaz Mirza were wearing armor, he would look like a battered, ruined, and soon to be executed warrior general standing in the midst of the battlefield up to his knees in the corpses of his fallen men.

“That’s it, then?” he said.

“Abbu and Ammu need money,” said Lubna. “I don’t want to hear again that they’re not getting it whenever they need it.”

“Are you giving *me* orders?”

“See it however you want to, Bhai.”

“You’ve lost your mind, Lubna. Because of...of...” he glared at Imtiaz.

Imtiaz looked past him. Following his eyes Riaz Mirza turned his head.

“How are your parents?” Kamruzzaman asked, standing in the doorway.

“They...” Riaz Mirza began.



“Give them my regards. And don’t stand here in my house and shout at my nephew and his wife. Don’t spit on the welcome given you.”

Behind Kamruzzaman Zubeida appeared, as did Tina and Timur, stirred from their afternoon nap by the rising voices.

“Chowdhury shahib, I was not...”

“Whatever you were or were not doing,” Kamruzzaman said, “it’s done. Now you should go.”

Riaz Mirza looked to Lubna, to Imtiaz. Blood warmed his cheeks at the sight of his niece and nephew.

“Lubna,” he said, “I looked after you, after our parents, by myself. With everything I had.”

“Don’t leave like this,” Zubeida came forward.

“How else should I leave?”

The car starting and fading out of the carport down the driveway was the next sound in the wake of Riaz Mirza’s exit.

Hashmat Alimuddin made plans to go to Narayanganj for no longer than a few days. As soon as his business with the moneylenders was resolved, he would be back, and then stay with his daughter and her family for as long as need be. The jewelry, he decided, was neither for the moneylenders or to sell for a price that was as good as throwing them in the river. If Shonali had no desire to keep them, he would use it, when the time was better, to put toward a house for them. In the meantime, it would stay with him, and, while he was gone on his short trip, with Shonali.

Shonali put Sufiya to bed, and lay next to her listening to her father prepare for his journey. His movements were smaller than she had known them throughout her life. He moved with purpose even when there was no purpose but to take a step with all the deliberate force in his legs. Now she heard the patter of mouse feet, long silences, and great care taken to keep the noise at a minimum. Shonali was going to stay awake as long as she had to, until her father was done, and then check on him. Amir's mouth was open and fluttering each time he exhaled, the hint of a snore waiting to flourish. Before it could, he turned on his side.

She had nodded off, and awoke to complete silence. Her daughter and husband had entered a deep, synchronized breathing pattern. Next door, her father's movements had stopped. Shonali peeled off the bed. It must be late, she thought, so late that morning was close. Nausea hovered in her stomach, like the child inside was rubbing its palms and creating it. Her head felt light, and she waited a moment to catch herself before knocking

on her father's door.

He must be praying, she thought, earlier than usual, so he could be on his way to the train station. Five minutes later, Shonali knocked again, lightly, with the tips of her fingers barely tucked into the making of a fist. There was a crack in the door, and through it she heard no sounds.

She called to him in a whisper. Inside, she saw his bag packed, his prayer mat rolled up on top of it, and the covered pan carrier beside them on the ground. She entered slowly, taking care not to see her father in a state she would be ashamed of and he would be ashamed of, to find him on his back, the blanket pulled up to his neck under his beard. Shonali went no further.

The moulvi came with a group of men that washed and prepared the body for burial. Part of the money that Zubeida had given Hashmat went toward the funeral and the plot at Azimpur graveyard. In the late afternoon they were detained by the rain, which lasted an hour. The moulvi grew agitated. He kept looking at the sky and grumbling that the deceased had to be buried as soon as the rain abated, until Kamruzzaman told him he and his men could go if they chose. There was not a shortage of moulvis. The moulvi bowed, apologized, saying his time and service were at the beck and call of Kamruzzaman and his house, that he was only concerned for what was best for the deceased, and went and sat in a corner of the verandah with his men.

Two hours later, the body was loaded onto the truck. Imtiaz, Mokaddas, and Huda Mia rode with the body, and Amir drove Kamruzzaman, Zubeida, Lubna, Shonali, Sufiya, and Tina and Timur in the car.

The ground was wet, but the gravediggers were used to working it under a variety of conditions. Not to be able to dig a grave in Bengal during monsoon would destroy their livelihoods for a bulk of the year. The head groundskeeper, Nannu, greeted Kamruzzaman and Zubeida, telling them how thankful he was to hear that the news of death from their home was not one of theirs. The indelicacy of the remark fell on Shonali's stone-faced silence and broke tears out of her eyes, which she directed with anger at the groundskeeper. Imtiaz waited outside with Lubna and the children, and after much haggling to want to see the burial shouted Tina down into crying quietly in the back seat of the car. Timur, Imtiaz saw, had a stricken look, a film of terror descended over his face as he stared at the graveyard.

“How ill was he?” Amir said. “He tried to leave that one time before and came back. We don't know what happened even.”

Shonali was feeding Sufiya. Her dazed expression was mirrored on the child, who took each bite her mother fed her without qualms.

“Why would he not tell us?” Amir sat up, irritated. “He's in the best place a man could be for asking for help, and he says nothing. Bloody moneylenders. Dacoits and thieves. Why he went into dealing with them, with all his experience and years...damn fool thing to do.”

“Will you let his soul rest for one minute?” said Shonali. She cried in her privacy, knowing well enough that her father would admonish open shows of emotion. Her voice was thick, mucous-packed, and she did nothing to clear it.

“I want to know something,” said Amir, after letting a few minutes pass. “Where did he suddenly come up with the money?” He did not come off as suspicious as he

wanted to be, because he recalled the scene that served as his answer. “Never mind.” He lay on the bed, and lit a beedi. “We should give the jewelry to shahib and memshahib for repayment for everything they’ve done. How many people would take on the expenses of burying their driver’s father-in-law in this town? Do you know? Not many, let me tell you. Did you hear me?”

Shonali dropped the plate. It clanged on the ground. Sufiya shrieked. Shonali picked her up and went downstairs.

Suleiman Mubarak came down from his study. It was early morning, and he had spent the night there, reading. Stuck in his mind now was a monologue from Shakespeare. Clarence, imprisoned, recounting the miserable night he spent, his dreams drowned in prescient images of his own death brought on by his brother Richard Gloucester. He heard Helen and Walter leaving, and then heard the car come back. He munched on a piece of toast, drank two cups of tea, and checked the newspapers. The only items he could stomach were weather reports. November had ended, and with it, a prolonged monsoon. The nip in the air in the early hours of the day, and then again at night, were the judge's favorite times of the year. Both were clouded over now.

Several of his colleagues had, for lack of a better word or one with less of a taste of guilt on it, fled. Bihari ones that felt the ring close in around them. They told him to do the same. But the judge cringed at the thought of calling on people's decency especially when that decency was put in a bind. He hated the thought of leaving his home, deserting it and his staff. It appeared that the Mukti Bahini had suffered enough blows, and few negligible victories, not counting the spate of attacks on soldiers in the city, to be driven back. Only a matter of time remained before the army, once and for all, ended the conflict.

Yet, there was India. All over the news. India, gearing up, increasingly weighed down by the refugees, and needing to act.

Judge Mubarak wondered where Helen and Walter went in the mornings

anymore. Sam Truman was no longer in Dhaka, which would leave the couple with neither reason nor a contact to visit the U.S. Consulate. He was going to call the consulate, just in case. They owed him no explanations for their comings and goings, but the judge felt a measure of responsibility. At the very least he should know their whereabouts for safety and emergency purposes. He lit his pipe, and leaned over the stack of mail and newspapers. On top was an envelope, without postage, a kind that he recognized as being from his supplies, with his name handwritten across it. Before opening it the judge had a touch of apprehension.

The note read, in Helen's careful longhand: "I wish we didn't have to leave this way, but we've caused you enough trouble. We will stay the next few nights at the Purbani Hotel, and be on a plane to Karachi at the first opportunity. Sam is helping to arrange a flight. Please be safe. We can't thank you enough for your generosity. I wish we had left under different circumstances. When things are better, and I hope they will be soon, we will be eager to our meeting again. Until then, with gratitude and our warmest wishes, Helen and Walter."

The judge found the formal quality of the note odd. There was a touch of the Victorian in its tone, something he did not expect, but was not altogether surprised to find in Helen, not so much Walter, after he re-read the letter three more times. His driver confirmed that he had taken them to Purbani, and shook his head when asked if anyone had met them there. Judge Mubarak was more perplexed with his own growing suspicions. They would have no reason to lie to him. They told him where they were and where they were going and why. He needed to let the matter lie.

He heard the phone ring in the hallway, and the servant told him it was

Kamruzzaman. Judge Mubarak took the call, reluctantly.

“I wanted to tell you that a hell of a lot of trouble followed you and those Americans to my house,” Kamruzzaman’s icy tone cackled over the line.

“I apologize,” said the judge.

“What sort of trouble are they bringing you, have you any idea?”

“I’m not concerned. If there is something I can do...”

“Don’t. Your doing something has done more damage than good. I’m sorry to say. The people you involve yourself with, it is not my business, and I don’t care to meddle in the affairs of other people, but for God’s sake keep them away from my house.”

Judge Mubarak waited for more, and he was still holding on to the receiver when the line went dead.

Less than ten minutes later the phone rang a second time.

Sam Truman spoke from another planet, the line choked with static. “They’ll be fine...” he said, before the judge could speak a word, “...keep your chin up and head down...you know...I mean...?...if you saw what I saw...the camps...the refugees...”

Judge Mubarak could only guess that Sam Truman was in India. That was what he was doing with his vacation.

“...but here’s the deal...” Truman went on, “...it won’t be long now...something...” the static gushed over the line, drowned him out for ten seconds, before cracking again to let in fragments of speech. “...you know what I mean?”

“You were gone just then,” said the judge.

“What...?”

“I said I wasn’t able to hear you at all.”



“...yeah, well, old you-know-who that hates you people more than he hates himself...I don't know...where...the son-of-a-bitch...gets the authority...hold on a sec...” the line rang off, and immediately jolted back on, clear as though Truman had popped up from the ground next to the judge. “Goddamn monkey moves you have to do to get a proper line from this hellhole.”

“Are you in India?” Judge Mubarak asked.

“Maybe, or maybe not, in a place called Delhi,” Truman chuckled. “I'm sure you've heard of it. Listen, I don't know how much you heard before, but the Seventh Fleet, *USS Enterprise*, I think Nixon's gone off the rails, but what else is new. The Seventh Fleet is geared up at the Bay of Bengal. Listen to me when I say this, and believe what I say: there is a war, a bigger one, a real war, headed your way. Sorry if I sound dramatic, but there you have it. Now, what do you want to do?”

“I'm not sure what you mean?”

“Do you want to stay there,” Truman spoke one word at a time slowly, “or would you...”

“I'm staying here, in my home.”

“That's what I thought.” The line threatened going back to static. “You know, this goddamn racket, country, nation, who gives a damn in the end. We've been trying to get our sorry asses around it for two hundred years, and it's not fared well for all of us, not all of us. You ask me, we've gone backwards. How else do we end up with Nixon? And it's just going to get sorrier, not better. There you go. There's my expertise after twenty years in the business. But you know, I get it. I'd be a mad son-of-a-bitch too if I was chased by a tank every time I stepped out to go to the store.” He let out a long breath as

though he had been holding it in for days. “Take care of yourself. Oh, by the way, I’m trying to get the kids on a flight as soon as possible to the States, but even my great influence over Uncle Sam isn’t making it happen soon enough. I think they’re putting up at Purbani. Helen told me they left your place.”

“Yes,” Judge Mubarak looked down at the note.

“Well,” Truman said, “I’ll check back in again.”

“Be well, my friend.”

“You, too, Judge.”

Rounak, Dilip, Mitali, and Ranjan interred the new weapons at the Dhanmondi house. The two semi-automatics were the best score yet. There was enough ammunition for them to boot. They had all but stripped the two soldiers at the checkpoint of their uniforms, and at the last second had placed their helmets over their blasted heads.

“The respect these bastards would never give a Bengali life,” Ranjan said, covering the faces instead of stomping what was left of them as he had wished.

The cool November night was nipping at their noses, and when they sniffled they breathed in the air acrid with gunpowder. Huddled on the backyard of the house their conversation was hushed. General Osmani had taken command of the Mukti Bahini, and the Indians were bringing in their air force.

“We have to keep things in check,” said Ranjan. “These aren’t Mahatma Gandhis that are helping us out. They have their motives, and if those weren’t being served, they wouldn’t turn to take a second look at the mass graves made by the army.”

“Your political advice is better off not mentioned,” said Mitali.

“He has a point,” said Rounak. “Why the hell does India care if it didn’t serve their own purpose? All they want to do is humiliate Pakistan. Indira Gandhi is no saint. She’ll bleed her own children if it’s the only kind of blood that fattened her power.”

“What do you want then?” said Dilip. “For us all to be hanged? Shot?”

“Hell with this doom and gloom,” said Ranjan. “I want to feel good. Don’t sit there and tell me we’ve been doing what we’ve been doing for nothing. I won’t hear it.”

He walked away toward the front of the house. Bats were flitting in the branches. Behind clouds with sharp, jagged edges drawn against the boot night the moon spread its luminescence.

The list was less than what Pervez Shahbaz was hoping for, but would have to suffice. Maulana Gafoor looked on anxiously. The living room of his house had never seen as esteemed company as now sat there in the person of Major Shahbaz and Captain Shaukat.

Outside, three transport trucks with soldiers and Al-Badr recruits were waiting to move out. The war had been going on for two weeks, and Gafoor, as much as he was excited, read the harried messages strewn on the face of Shahbaz, which told him that if an end not as desirable as was hoped for was at hand it would be reached without complete defeat. And so, Gafoor had taken his task of creating as final a list as possible seriously. Phantom itches bothered his back, as though a legion of hounds were after him, letting him get ahead just enough to keep the chase exciting, their hot breath prickling his skin.

Shaukat read the list. It was a massive task. Over two hundred people. He had no definite idea of how much time they had. More units would be helping them, but there was no telling what to expect of them as far as their timeline and orders. The list got snatched from his fingers, and Shahbaz was on his feet.

The brick quarry at Rayerbazaar was a maw in the ground, open and silent. In the quiet of the night the army trucks barreled up to it, their cargo shouted out of the backs by soldiers. The blindfolded men, drunk on sleep, many of them shirtless, stumbled out, and

got shoved with the tips of bayonets to the lip of the quarry. Shaukat as unsure who was issuing orders to fire, and after a while no one was. The firing happened at will. Shahbaz ran up and down the lines of bound and blindfolded men. It was unclear what exactly he was trying to accomplish, as the soldiers proficiently, and without regard for authority, went through the rounded up prisoners. In the mouth of the quarry below the bodies rolled on top of each other.

When the first explosions began, they were certain it would open up the earth. The house was locked down. Kamruzzaman was in the storage room trying to tune in to any station, without luck. Zubeida was with Imtiaz, Lubna, and the children, in their room. The rest of the household was in the kitchen, except Anshuman, who refused to leave his post. Inside his shed, he lit a candle and placed it at the feet of Ganesh. Without fail he made his rounds, sending his calls out to ward off thieves and intruders.

Judge Mubarak had gone to bed with a headache. He had read and re-read Clarence's final speech, his eulogy to himself, without fully understanding what need was being satisfied inside him with each reading. The jets careened in the skies, and the world shuddered.

The power went out. Helen and Walter had eaten a late dinner and gone up to their room, there to continue waiting for Sam Truman's call. When they came outside two days later, the sky was obstructed by the smoke rising from the rubble of the city.

All morning the silence had been unnerving. Amir stepped out to use the latrine, and fill a bucket with water, and he was stopped in his tracks. A faint shout came to his ears. It was not so much the shouting than what was being shouted that froze him. He looked down the driveway. Anshuman had heard it too, and stepped out of his shed. Amir dropped the bucket and ran to the front. He and Anshuman listened, giving each other identical befuddled looks.

“Joy Bangla!” A burst of machine gun fire, and then, again, “Joy Bangla!”

Amir sprinted back inside and roused the house. He went up to the third floor, out onto the balcony, and looked in the direction of the calls, which had now grown louder, along with the sounds of gunfire.

“Joy Bangla!”

The trucks roared one after another, crammed with bodies shouting the chant in unison at times and broken into a thousand hoarse voices at others. Rifles and their bayonets outlined the sky, hundreds of them, waving alongside flags of Bangladesh, bobbed up down, swayed, shot bullets into the sky.

When they passed the Chowdhury house, Rounak, Mitali, Ranjan, Dilip, Khoka, and Anju looked simultaneously and saw the small crack in the gate, and the head of the watchman peering out. Next to the gate laid the corpse of a woman. Ahead of them was the truck carrying Kader Siddiki, and behind them the rest of the convoy. The engines

and the gunshots, and the “Joy Bangla” chants, clamored, and they saw, trickling out onto the streets disbelieving faces, which changed rapidly, and joined in.

Golam Rasool scrambled across the street from Dhaka Club carrying the table, accompanied by one other bearer following with the chairs. The general were waiting, not impatiently, chatting, occasionally laughing in a way that made it seem they were embarrassed at finding mirth in the midst of what they were about to do. Arora's turban nodded at something Niazi said, and what Arora said in response made the two men shake hands and clap each other on the shoulder. Golam Rasool arrived with the table and waited for permission to set it down. Captain Shaukat moved out of the way to make room for the table and chairs. Since Rayerbazaar he had not heard from Shahbaz. He told Umbreen he had to be here, and then they were going to make arrangements to leave Dhaka, for good.

Golam Rasool positioned the table, and one visor-capped army officer began laying papers on it. The other bearer placed the chairs, and Jagjit Singh Arora and Amir Abdullah Niazi, surrounded by other generals and officers and civilians, with Bangladesh flags whipping in the crowd, sat down to sign the document of surrender.

He heard the row in the hallway downstairs, and called down. Then it sounded to him like crying. He went down the stairs, still in his pajamas, not expecting to see the three men standing over his weeping cook, who had been slapped and kicked into a fetal position.

Judge Mubarak looked for signs of his guard. The three figures, armed with machine guns, faced the judge, and, one of them, became familiar. It was the one that had come to see him about the two dead boys.

“He hasn’t done anything to you,” said the judge. “He’s my cook.”

Dilip said, “You Bihari crooks have been killing us for too long. You don’t belong here.”

Judge Mubarak felt his feet, bare, push into the ground, like roots underneath them were holding them place, seizing with relentless strength, ready to fight whatever pull was exerted on them to tear them out and take him with it.

The gun was shaking in the hands of the boy pointing it at him, but not out of fear or lack of skill.

Dilip’s rage was in his arms and in his hands. He could not control the tremors, as they throttled down to his trigger finger, and then, his whole body shook once again in the familiar bursting quake of the machine gun.

Judge Mubarak heard his cook wail, and then he was off his feet. Raindrops with the force of a swarm of angry hornets entered him, cool on contact, boring into his flesh



with heat. He had stood at the edge of the quarry and seen the corpses, disemboweled, shot, and the crowds gathered to watch with him, holding handkerchiefs and hands over their noses and mouths. Helen and Walter were there too, not yet able to make it out of the country.

The man had the hide of a buffalo, thought Dilip. His cartridge had emptied out, and the judge, still alive, was gasping for air, seated on the stairs. He snatched the machine gun from his companion, aimed, and fired. The judge's body convulsed. Dilip stopped before he emptied this cartridge. Suleiman Mubarak slumped forward.

Rounak, Mitali, and Ranjan stood by the open gates of Maulana Gafoor's house. Wind swept through the empty house, banging shutters and moaning. He had fled. But Siddiki had ordered a roundup of every Al-Badr fighter and bayoneted several of them in public gatherings. The Biharis too were being dealt with, especially the judges and the court officials.

They fired rounds at open windows, at a flickering light bulb in the verandah, and when they stopped, the wind kept moving through the house.

The children were excited. A train ride was two days away. They were packed and set to go home, after months, and there was a sadness too, because Dada and Dadi's house had offered opportunities their strictly run household did not. The servants here were also better, and it felt like a big family. Tina had not seen Dada go into the storage room since the nights of the explosions, and when she went to the door she saw that it was padlocked. The radio had been moved out into the living room, and pictures frames with the sons of Dada and Dadi arranged on top of it. Timur begged and pleaded for Amir and Huda Mia to play football with him, and he finally managed a decent kick. The ball shot into the goal area, but was blocked with remarkable agility by the old gardener.

Kamruzzaman held his head in his hands. The phone calls could not have been more welcome and abhorred at the same time, coming within hours of each other. Minhaz was coming to Dhaka, and possibly bringing Murad. Zubeida controlled her excitement, and Kamruzzaman asked for both of them if their sons were bringing their wives.

“Abbu,” Minhaz sighed, “no, they're not coming.”

The news of Judge Mubarak's killing fell on the house as resoundingly as had the bombs that had incapacitated the Pakistan army. It remained until the morning of Imtiaz and his family's departure.

“I wish I had seen the house at least,” said Lubna. They were settled in their compartment and waiting for the journey to begin. Out the window they could see

Kamruzzaman and Zubeida, who were in intermittent conversation with Tina and Timur, telling them they should come back and visit their old Dada and Dadi soon. Patwari hung to one side. Amir held his daughter by the hand, and next to him his wife, beginning to show more and more every day, made Lubna wonder what her friends would say if they saw Shonali's blooming, glowing skin.

“It will be there,” said Imtiaz. “My uncle is too sentimental to do anything with it but leave it to languish as it has all these years. Listen to that.” The train whistle blew. “What a miracle, it's leaving on time.” With a sudden lunge forward and then back, and forward again, the train moved out of Kamalapur Station.

The End

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

OUT OF EAST PAKISTAN: POSTCOLONIAL COLONY

BANGLADESH AS CASE STUDY OF THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE AND

POSTCOLONIAL NATION-STATE FROM COLONIZED EAST PAKISTAN TO

INDEPENDENCE THROUGH THE LIBERATION WAR OF 1971

OVERVIEW

I propose in this critical analysis that from 1947 to 1971 Bangladesh, known during that period as East Pakistan, was a colony of West Pakistan, present-day Pakistan. Because of this the case of Bangladesh and its independence through the Liberation War of 1971 belongs in the postcolonial narrative of independence from colonial rule. Independent Bangladesh went through decolonization and assumed its role as a sovereign state as well as of a postcolonial nation-state. For twenty-four years East Pakistan existed as a postcolonial colony, with the independence and emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state at once ending the postcolonial period of colonization, as well as coming into being as a postcolonial nation-state – two concepts and definitions of the same entity with wholly different contexts. It is this last definition of Bangladesh, that of postcolonial nation-state, that is the crux of my argument, and why I make the proposition that the case of Bangladesh merits entrance into postcolonial discourses as a legitimate study in postcolonial nation-state-making. Also, as Bangladesh exists today, the People's

Republic of Bangladesh, it is a sovereign state, and so it is important to clarify that I when I give it the status of postcolonial nation-state I am doing so in direct connection with and through the currency of the term as it exists in postcolonial discourse.

The East Pakistan era from 1947-1971, and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 have yet to be incorporated as an event to be studied with equal focus as the culmination of almost a quarter century of colonization in the aftermath of British rule in the Indian Subcontinent. Even as British rule in the Indian Subcontinent had ended, the East Bengalis, by way of becoming East Pakistanis, remained under control of a dominant, Urdu-speaking West Pakistani elite.

Colonial rule, I argue, did not fully end with independence from Britain, and was restarted for East Bengalis as second-class citizens of East Pakistan. The Bangladesh Liberation war was arguably unique in the series of independence struggles in the twentieth century in the sense that it was fought for two reasons: for Bangladesh, the sovereign state, and for Bengali identity, regardless of territorial allegiance or belonging. This adds to the complexity of its place in postcolonial discourse in that the conflict and struggle were for more than to end the reign of a colonial power; it was equally in resistance to the danger posed to an identity that transcended nation, sovereignty, and any other territorial designations. It is worthwhile to mention here another important point of this analysis: that as Bangladesh emerged a sovereign state at the end of the Liberation War of 1971, I propose that it simultaneously bore the marks of a postcolonial state in the light of the circumstances it had undergone since 1947 as East Pakistan, and furthermore continued as a postcolonial nation-state given its lineage rooted in Bengali language and

identity that crystallized after 1970 into the quest for a nation-state. This will be explored in more detail in the section devoted to the topic.

Although this critical analysis is in conjunction with the larger component of my dissertation project, my novel entitled *In the Time of the Others*, my purpose is to allow it stand alone on its own merits, as well. It is important to make this distinction clear at the outset because there are a number of theoretical elements integral to this analysis that will be presented in far greater detail than they are more subtly weaved into the fictional narrative. Among these major elements are: nation, the nation-state, country, and the postcolonial state and postcolonial nation-state. Clear distinctions among each of these definers is a crucial part of this work; and because the fundamental purpose of this work is in the direct realm of postcolonial theory, literature, and discourse, the aforementioned major elements must be bifurcated into their Western/European provenance and their roles in colonial rule and postcolonial practical application in non-Western/non-European regions. Their use cannot be conflated. One cannot stand in for the other, whether in the case of identifying European countries, the sovereign states of postcolonial Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the Caribbean, or the sovereign nation-state of Bangladesh, which then further has to be seen under an entirely different context when labeled as a postcolonial nation-state.

The novel *In the Time of the Others* operates on a different but not altogether separate level. The novel is fiction, and this text is non-fiction. These classifications mark their currency as texts belonging in different sections of the library. My purpose is to see them as companion documents that engage with a topic through varying lenses. The novel, set during the Bangladesh Liberation War, first tells a fictional story with the

backdrop of actual events. It inserts fictional characters, sometimes based on or composites of real people, into recorded instances that actually took place. Through the scope of the fiction and the canvas of the novel, *In the Time of the Others*, then takes on suggesting the underlying themes of freedom, independence, and nation-making via the story and the lives of its characters. The critical analysis, which I like to think of as a companion text, undertakes the task of theoretically framing the novel's concerns. Ideally, the two texts could be read independent of each other, but when read together would, within their parameters as texts, raise the same issues and work toward the same conclusions.

The next consideration in a project such as this is history, as it has already been established that the novel is set in the backdrop of true events. I am not a historian, nor is the novel, for one, supposed to be a "historical text." The events of the novel are culled from first-hand accounts, eyewitness recordings of episodes before, during, leading up to, and after the Bangladesh Liberation War, and peer-reviewed literature produced by scholars specializing in the topic and the Indian Subcontinent in general. The primary texts are a mix of works done by historians, social scientists, political scientists, journalists, and participants in the Liberation War. Therefore, I am writing a novel and a critical text as a writer and scholar concerned with the specific period and the series of events that led to the establishment of Bangladesh, between 1947 and 1971.

History, to put it plainly, is not only stories and accounts of things that happened in the past. In fact, this is about an incorrect a definition as can be. A closer summation would name history as being an academic discipline that uses words and artifacts from the past, taking them as evidence toward interpreting said past. Given this, let me set

down here how this definition of presenting history lends itself to my work: the words and artifacts, in this case books, scholarship, first-hand accounts, and journalism, that I have gathered, I have done so, first, for the sake of creating (or recreating) in the novel the world and time of the events that create the backdrop. Assuming the role of a set designer, I have built the environment on the stage in which the story will play out. Secondly, I have interpreted, to the extent that the actions of the novel require, specific events beyond what I learned from the literature. For example, accounts exist of “brothels” being set up by the Pakistan army around Dhaka where Bengali women were held captive, and sexually assaulted “for pleasure.” Keeping in mind the veracity of this account, I created a fictional scene in which two Pakistan army officers visit one such location. Such a scene may not have happened exactly as my narrative presents; a compendium of such scenes could have taken place, with acts that were alike, but never exactly the same, nor including the same ranks of officers. My interpretation, based on the words and artifacts before me, served the novel’s fidelity to true events without being “historical.”

Facts are given due diligence where and when necessary, but they are never altered, that is to say, speculations happen strictly on the fictional side of the narrative, and the fictional world and its happenings take place in a time whose events are factual. Thus, the specific events are creations of my imagination, based on similar factual accounts, and under no circumstances altered to fit the fiction they are informing. When I describe a scene of ambush by the Bengali freedom brigade known as the Mukti Bahini, the fictional version is informed by accounts of real ambushes; beyond that the people and the component parts of the scene are entirely works of my imagination. Likewise,



with the nature of the Pakistani army's actions during the war: numerous accounts of real events inform the fiction, with the fictional accounts being my creation.

Finally, my goal is to create a comparative, interdisciplinary bridge between creative storytelling and critical thinking. For me these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Writing, as an act, as a way of interpreting, organizing information, giving structure to narrative, and being a constant portal of discovery demands as much thoroughness and discipline as scholarship, of any kind, in any field. Being able specifically to enter my novel in the burgeoning environment of fiction about the Bangladesh Liberation War is one major part of this goal. A writer is driven by his/her compulsion to tell stories and to make sense out of information s/he finds wanting for order – a process that is in constant flux rather than being a push toward a definitive end. Likewise, while fiction can take liberties, whether with form, structure, presentation, content in ways that the reader understands is a contract between the author and them, critical scholarship is bound by stricter parameters. This critical analysis is as much an act of writing and interpreting as it is a text held to the standards of scholarship that are different than the discourse on fiction and the novel by which the writing of fiction and novels are informed.

As my writing of *In the Time of the Others* was motivated and informed by personal experience first and foremost, I will provide two sets of circumstances on a personal level that kept that motivation fueled. The first has to do with the understanding of history, beyond facts, and it ties in with this parallel working definition.

There is a part in the novel where the character of Riaz Mirza mentions upon returning from a trip to Karachi that people in West Pakistan barely knew what was happening in East Pakistan, let alone having any awareness that a systematic campaign of extermination was being waged by the government against Bengalis. This came out of an eyewitness account related by an uncle, who, shortly after Operation Searchlight, left Dhaka. En route to the United States, in Karachi he had the same experience as Mirza. Life was going on. The difference between the reality on the ground in Dhaka and Karachi, West Pakistan entire, was night and day.

The larger implications of this disconnect played out throughout the war, and beyond it, reaching far into my generation, on both sides. Born and raised for the first fifteen years of my life in Dhaka, I, like every other Bangladeshi boy and girl I knew, went to school with, grew up with the legacy of the Liberation War instilled in us. When we moved to Chicago, and I met a large contingent of Pakistani students in high school there, some of my first and dearest friends to this day, I saw the other side. My friends and classmates had no idea of the atrocities of 1971. On top of their ignorance they disputed what I presented as facts. When I told them that I had family members who were alive that could vouch for what I was telling them as eyewitnesses they silently dismissed my indignation. There was no getting past the barriers that had been set up in front of them. For years after the war Pakistan's government washed over the full scope of the nine-month conflict over Bangladesh, ultimately leaving generations after it with the impression that it was secession and betrayal perpetrated by Mujib and the Bengalis.

Of course, erasure is not the invention of the Pakistan army. It is as old as written human history. It has acted as a bulwark, for example, in the writing of American history

since 1492. Generations of American schoolchildren learned of Columbus sailing the ocean blue, and not of the crimes against humanity he and his men committed in the New World. Slavery, the backbone of the American republic, and the foundation of capitalism, seldom got more than a paragraph in textbooks. Therefore, as I grew older, and my understanding of “constructs” strengthened, so did my angst over Pakistanis’ all-pervasive ignorance about the Liberation War soften.

Another instance brought home to me a different perspective. For as long as I had been hearing stories of the Liberation War, which was more or less since birth, there was also a tragic event that I refused to accept as anything but one more episode in the service of justice. One of my maternal grandfather’s close friends was killed by the Mukti Bahini shortly after the end of the war. Known as Ali Yusuf Uncle in the family, he was sought out for being “Bihari,” and therefore targeted as an enemy of Bangladesh, even though he was Bengali. For years I refused to accept that the very heroes that ended the brutal regime of the Pakistan army could themselves become a force of terror. Until I accepted that there is no such thing as an absolute hero anymore than there are absolute truths – both being recipes for disaster. This does not, however, lessen by any means my immense respect for and pride in the countless volunteers from around the country that became the liberation force that outmaneuvered the Pakistan army, and set the stage for its final defeat. This was a simple learning lesson. One that age, experience, and understanding nuance, the myriad complexities of any given issue, and critical thinking seasoned for stronger reflection. What is more, it allowed for the heightening of that crucial element in any fiction – conflict. I was the richer for finally accepting the episode for the unfortunate event that it was, for my family, and in and of itself.

A SHORT BACKGROUND OF EVENTS AND *IN THE TIME OF THE OTHERS*:  
FROM BRITISH RULE TO PARTITION, THE EAST PAKISTAN ERA,  
AND THE MOVE TOWARD BANGLADESH

On August 14, 1947 the new state of Pakistan came into being. A day later, British rule in the Indian Subcontinent, also known as the Raj, was over. The Subcontinent was divided, and Partition created a sovereign state for the millions of Muslims that felt they could not live as equal citizens in Hindu-majority India. Muslims being in a majority in two different regions of the Subcontinent approximately one thousand miles apart, the new state of Pakistan was established with two “wings”: East Pakistan (formerly known as Bengal and East Bengal), and West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan). Twenty-four years later East Pakistan would enter a bloody revolution and nine-month war to gain independence as Bangladesh.

The point at which one may choose to pinpoint the beginning of British presence and colonial rule in the Subcontinent may vary, and altogether differ.<sup>1</sup> The two seminal events that connect directly with growing concerns of imperial designs happened exactly one hundred years apart: the uprising mobilized by Nawab Mirza Muhammad Shiraj-ud-Daula of Bengal against Robert Clive and the East India Company in 1757, which ended with the Battle of Plassey and the Nawab’s defeat, imprisonment, and

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<sup>1</sup> John Mildenhall (1560-1614) arrived in India in 1599 and styled himself as the ambassador of the East India Company.

William Hawkins (1560-1613) came to the court of the emperor Jahangir and rendered null and void the position of Mildenhall because Mildenhall, Hawkins claimed, was not sponsored by the East India Company.

execution; and the Mutiny of 1857, which, by the following year, was violently suppressed, and led to the British Crown decommissioning the East India Company and overtaking administration of the Subcontinent – thereby, reluctantly or not, formally establishing British rule in the Indian Subcontinent. The Mutiny – variously known as the Sepoy Rebellion, the Indian Revolt<sup>2</sup>, and called by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (a.k.a Veer Savarkar) The First Indian War of Independence in his book *The History of the War of Independence* (1909). From the vantage of independence and decolonization, what the Battle of Plassey ignited, and the Mutiny revitalized, came full circle in August 1947.

On March 21, 1948 Muhammad Ali Jinnah made the following declaration in a speech given at a civic event at the Ramna Racecourse Maidan in Dhaka:

But let me make it clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead [you] is merely the enemy of Pakistan. Without one state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. Look at the history of other countries. Therefore so far as the state language is concerned, Pakistan's language should be Urdu. (Ahmad, ed. 243-258; online).

Therefore, as much as there was a majority among East Bengalis that supported joining Pakistan, the disparities that would define the conflicts between the East and the West wings became evident almost immediately. There were exacerbating circumstances that further stoked these conflicts, chief among them being Bengali representation in the national legislature. Rose and Sisson provide a summary of the makeup of the civil service and military branches of government at the time of Partition and shortly thereafter:

For Bengalis, whose numbers in the civil service and the military were severely limited, representation in the national legislature was extremely

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Indian Revolt." *New-York Daily Tribune*, September 16, 1857. Online.

important. Of some 101 Muslims members of the Indian Civil Service and Indian Police Service at the time of partition, for example, only 18 had been from Bengal, and 35 had been from areas that became part of West Pakistan, with the others coming from areas that had remained part of India. A total of 95 of the 101 had opted for Pakistan, thus making the Bengali members of the successor national administrative service in Pakistan a distinct minority (Rose, Sisson 10).

As a further exhaustive account of the breakdown, Rose and Sisson offer these statistics:

By the mid 1950s, 51 of 741 top civil servants were Bengali, none in the rank of secretary; 3 of 41 joint secretaries were Bengali; 10 out of 133 deputy secretaries. On the military side: in 1955, 1 brigadier, 1 colonel, and 2 lieutenant colonels out of 308 “of equivalent or higher rank.” They add, “As late as 1963 only 5 percent of the officer corps of the Pakistani army and 7 percent of the other ranks were Bengali. In the air force, Bengalis constituted 17 percent of commissioned officers and 30 percent of other ranks, and in the navy they constituted 10 percent of the commissioned officers and 20 percent of other ranks” (Rose, Sisson 10).

The Bangladesh Liberation War arguably began on the day of Jinnah’s declaration. Four years later, on February 21, 1952 students would take to the streets of Dhaka, East Pakistan in peaceful demonstrations for Bengali to remain the uncontested, untrammelled language of Bengal. Even at that point, it bears noting, that East Bengalis were not rallying for an independent state. Their concern was the language. Bengali, as a language and the heart of Bengali culture, was the prime concern, which I will address later. The demonstrations would eventually be fired upon by police, leaving six young men dead. The day came to be commemorated as Language Martyr’s Day. As the policies of West Pakistan unfolded over the next two decades, it would become evident that the slight against Bengali was just the beginning.

In the intervening years between the Language Movement and the assumption of power by Field Marshal Ayub Khan in 1958, a number of notable, if feeble, attempts

were made to place greater significance to East Pakistan in the workings of the central government. One of these was Ayub Khan's initiative in 1962 to make Islamabad the executive center of government, with Dhaka being the legislative, second capital of Pakistan. Whether intended or not, "second" devolved into a slowly unraveling portent casting its shadow over the fraught nature of the relationship between the two wings of Pakistan as the Sixties reached its end. Ayub Khan's inability to navigate a compromise between West and East Pakistani demands of equal representation, and the mandates of constitutional law – a matter that would continue to harangue relations between the wings until the bitter end – led him to throw up his hands in the end, reportedly saying, "The politicians are all swine and won't listen to me."

On March 25, 1969 Ayub Khan ordered General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan to impose martial law and assume power. Yahya Khan's two year-tenure would lead up to the Bangladesh Liberation War, worsened by two events that took place in East Pakistan between November and December 1970. On November 8, a cyclone hit the southern coast of East Pakistan, rising out of the Bay of Bengal, and leaving in its wake half a million people dead. Yahya Khan's lukewarm regard for the devastation, compounded by the faster arrival of British and American aid over assistance from the government seat in West Pakistan, further disillusioned and angered Bengalis in East Pakistan.

The second event, which had been delayed by the first, was Yahya Khan's promised general elections in December. The Awami League in East Pakistan, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a landslide victory over Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party. "When the final list was tabulated, the Awami League had won 167 out of 169 seats. In West Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's newly created People's Party won 81

of the 138 seats. Logically, therefore, the next prime minister was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman” (Payne 11).

Still, all hands did not point toward war. In fact, while demonstrations and anti-military protests had been longstanding in East Pakistan, under Sheikh Mujib’s leadership, and promises from Yahya Khan of an amicable, mutually agreed upon and beneficial arrangement (in spite of the democratic electoral mandate long past being given its due diligence), all-out war had not been part of a Bengali strategy. Not, that is, as an offensive measure.

March 25, 1971 changed the game. After another round of talks went nowhere, Bhutto and Yahya Khan retired to West Pakistan, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman held his ground in Dhaka. Until later that night when he was placed under arrest and flown to Lyallpur in West Pakistan to be imprisoned; and on the ground in Dhaka, Yahya Khan ordered a crackdown in East Pakistan, and unleashed Operation Searchlight, that launched the ensuing nine-months of terror by the Pakistan army on Bengali civilians, leading to all-out war in the final months and weeks of the year, and the emergence of independent Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

The series of events that led to first the formation of Pakistan and thereby of East Pakistan in the region known first as Bengal, then as East Bengal, are summarized above not as exhaustive accounts but to provide a manageable glance at the complex journey of the Indian Subcontinent from one pivotal moment in time to another. In the search for connections between events anywhere in the world, the search can arguably be endless. When considering the eventual glide of the Subcontinent toward its independence from colonial rule in 1947, the backward trace of steps for me needed to stop at the moment



when the first official interaction took place between the future colonizers and colonized. On the same note, while I do not recount within the narrative of the novel some four hundred years of events to reach the point at which the novel's immediate action begins, at the beginning of parts two and three I offer introductory notes that lays down the basic precedents out of which the action about to play out emerge. In the case of part two I highlight that Islam had been in Bengal since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and that during the Liberation War of 1971, part of the Pakistan army's campaign against Bengalis was to accuse them, and the Mukti Bahini, of being "Hindu sympathizers" and Indian (and therefore Hindu) agents. As part three opens I refer to the poet and philosopher Allama Muhammad Iqbal and the early visions of a separate and sovereign Pakistan and place it against the imminent fracture of that Promised Land.

The scope of *In the Time of the Others* was supposed to cover the time from immediately before the Liberation War to its counterpart on the other side. The bulk of the story would take place during the nine months of the conflict. I had settled on this timeframe even before I had a manageable grasp of how the novel would proceed. That process worked itself out through the numerous drafts, years, and research. For the purposes of a purely critical approach that would situate the novel and its subject within a particular theoretical discourse as well as a specific tradition of writing, a more comprehensive approach was necessary. This critical analysis is the rehearsal of that approach.

IDENTITY AS CATALYST:  
BENGALI NATIONALISM  
TO  
BANGLADESHI SOVEREIGNTY

It may seem counter-intuitive to say that what became the movement toward and the liberation war for Bangladesh did not begin with the same ends in mind. Bangladesh, specifically, was not a concept, term, or nation-state concept at the start of the East Pakistan era. In 1948, when Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared Urdu to be the state language of Pakistan the implied threat for East Pakistan's Bengalis was to their identity as Bengalis. The consequent movement that became in 1952 the Language Movement solidified around preservation of the Bengali language and through it Bengali identity. In "The Rift Within an Imagined Community: Understanding Nationalism(s) in Bangladesh, Ishtiaq Hossain and Mahmud Hassan Khan, propose that "Bangali nationalism is a natural manifestation while Bangladeshi nationalism is an imposed one" (Hossain, Hassan 326). They add,

The rationale for such is based upon the fact that these were formed at two different times, within the context of different historical and social forces. Bangali nationalism developed largely due to Pakistani colonial attitude towards Bangalis in the post-1947 era. Bangla was never thought to be a '*desh*' (an independent country) before the election of 1970 or even before 7 March 1971 (Hossain, Hassan 326-327).

The connection here to identity is immediate. Bengali identity, and then Bangladeshi identity became the two foundational moments in the history of the region

between the first partition of Bengal in 1905, the Partition of 1947 and the absorbing of Bengal into Pakistan as East Pakistan, and the Liberation War that created Bangladesh as an independent sovereign state in 1971. “Thus,” add Hossain and Hassan, “national ideology and imagined national community are both constructed concepts, done at different times to serve different historical and political purposes. However, because these terms are constructed, they cannot be belittled as people are prepared to face any risk to establish these national identities” (Hossain, Hassan 325).

What I have called “postcolonial colonialism,” Hossain and Hassan term “internal colonialism,” when speaking of the post-1947 East Pakistan era. In that time, which in their estimation lasts until after the Liberation War, beyond the 1975 military coup that established the government of President Ziaur Rahman, the rift between Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism was defined. This is a remarkably clarifying explanation, one that holds to account with great urgency the need in the region of Bengal first to assert its identity in the face of state-sanctioned threats (Jinnah’s declaration of Urdu as the state language of Pakistan), and in the growing tensions between East and West Pakistan following the general elections of 1970. Once more, presenting at length Hossain and Hassan’s assessment is worthwhile:

Bangladesh went through the process of decolonization twice: first in 1947 when it won its independence from the British as the eastern province of Pakistan, and again in 1971, when it achieved its independence from the ‘internal colonialism’ of Pakistan. Thus, the process of decolonization and through it, the formation of national consciousness (in Bengal) happened in two different ways. National consciousness as such is explained as an attitude with responsibility, which develops into a bond or feeling of solidarity. In 1947, the basis of solidarity was religion, but in 1971 the basis of harmony was racial unity based on all the people of its territory, regardless of their religious faiths. People fought for a Bangali identity. Bangali nationalism is based on the ‘ethno-linguistic’ and ‘ethno-cultural’ characteristics and most certainly, during the war of independence, these

served to unite the people living in the territory called Bengal (officially known as East Pakistan) (Hossain, Hassan 327).

It is noteworthy, especially, that religion, which once united Bengalis in joining Pakistan, cropped up again, albeit in different form, to find its way into the constitution of independent Bangladesh as a foundational tenet. Bengali identity, as a whole then, could not, would not exist outside religious parameters in post-independence Bangladesh, no matter that the language, Bengali/Bangla, continues to be the unifier, as well as the symbolic signifier of the Bengali peoples and the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Identity, wedded to place and used as the basis for sovereignty, sovereign statehood, and being further complicated by senses of nationality, is arguably more fodder for eventual conflict and confusion than unity and cohesion. This is an important point to elaborate within the context of this section (as later a more explicit section will be fully devoted to nation (nationality), the nation-state, the sovereign state, the postcolonial state, and the post-colonial nation-state as introduced in the overview).

Bengal identity was tied to the region known as Bengal long before the arrival of Islam, the Mughal conquests, and the British Raj. The argument can be made that a "Bengali nation" existed without the definition of nation holding any currency for the region or its inhabitants as it was later transported to the area from Europe and hastily applied to yield results as effectively as they had in the development of the European nation-state.

In *Beginning Postcolonialism* John McLeod<sup>3</sup> offers:

Nations are not like trees or plants: they are not naturally occurring phenomena. Yet the nation has become one of the most important modes of social and political organization in the modern world and these days we perhaps assume that nations are simply 'just there.' Most commentators

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<sup>3</sup> Not the same as Prof. John McLeod (History, University of Louisville) serving on this dissertation committee.

agree that the idea of the nation is Western in origin. It emerged with the growth of Western capitalism and industrialization and was a fundamental component of imperialist expansion. It is almost second nature these days to map the world as a collective of different nations, each separated from the other by a border. But borders between nations do not happen by accident. They are constructed, crossed, defended and (in too many tragic cases) bloodily contested by warring groups of people. It is important that we come to think about nations fundamentally as fabrications (McLeod 61).

The importance of this distinction here between identity and nation and nationality is summed in the ending sentence of the quote: “It is important that we come to think about nations fundamentally as fabrications,” because Bengali identity never needed a sense of nationality for validation. Just as the “desh” in Bangladesh was a much later add-on with the realization that East Pakistan’s Bengalis were ultimately fighting for more than autonomy while retaining their existence as citizens of the state of Pakistan, Bengali identity made the split into Bangladeshi nationality in the years following the Liberation War of 1971.

None of this is not to say that identity and identifying with a place or a country, claiming the layperson’s definition of nationality as identity, is bad practice. Claiming that I’m Bangladeshi *and* Bengali, carries much pride for me. I’m fine with it stopping at that. Scarcely do I feel the need to emphasize that I’m a Bengali or Bangladeshi *Muslim*, unless a conversation leads that way. Even then, it is a far away second to the fact that I’m Bangladeshi and Bengali. The immediate second is my pride in the city of my birth, Dhaka, its four hundred year old history from Mughal outpost to impossibly crowded metropolis the very heart and soul of my short fiction projects. As it now stands, however, a major part of the narrative of being Bangladeshi *is* entwined with religion, with Islam. If history is the bearer of pasts that never become past and that past, according to William

Faulkner is always with us, then the specter of East Pakistan turning East Bengal into a Muslim majority wing of Pakistan cannot and will not be entirely shed. On that count, I believe that it should not be.

But what, I, or one, might ask or wonder, does identity feel like deep within? What do people really think when they think of where they belong or who they are day and night? One constant feeling, if there can be such a thing when it comes to identity, that attaches them without doubts to one place, one allegiance, one language, way of thinking, believing, living? Amin Maalouf offers some valuable insights to the very question he confronted, “But what you feel, deep down inside?” His thoughts:

For a long time I found this oft-repeated question amusing, but it no longer makes me smile. It seems to reflect a view of humanity which, though it is widespread, is also in my opinion dangerous. It presupposes that ‘deep down inside’ everyone is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of ‘fundamental truth’ about each individual, an ‘essence’ determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter. As if the rest, all the rest – a person’s whole journey through time as a free agent; the beliefs he acquires in the course of that journey; his own individual tastes, sensibilities and affinities; in short his life itself – counted for nothing. And when, as happens so often nowadays, our contemporaries are exhorted to ‘assert their identity,’ they are meant to seek within themselves that same alleged fundamental allegiance, which is often religious, national, racial or ethnic, and having located it they are supposed to flaunt it proudly in the face of others (Maalouf 2-3).

There are some key words and phrases in this passage – fundamental truth, essence, and of course, religion, national, racial, and ethnic allegiances – that often come with charged notions of creating the Other. In opposition to these strong allegiances, those that do not meet the criteria are marginalized, often reviled. In present-day United States and Europe, these sentiments are dangerously high. Maalouf’s assessment brings easily to mind notions of a “pure race,” of religious extremism, and intolerance for those

that do not fit such categorical constructions. In post-independent Bangladesh, immediately following the war, the backlash against Biharis was a devastating example. The reasons for the backlash may have been attached, even if nominally, to the racism Bengalis felt at the hands of establishment Biharis – judges, institutional figures of authority – and thus legitimized in validating vengeance, justice served, revenge exacted.

As a final point here it is noteworthy to acknowledge, especially, that religion, which once united Bengalis in joining Pakistan, cropped up again, albeit in different form, to find its way into the constitution of independent Bangladesh as a foundational tenet. Bengali identity, as a whole then, could not, would not exist outside religious parameters in post-independence Bangladesh, no matter that the language, Bengali/Bangla, continues to be the unifier, as well as the symbolic signifier of the Bengali peoples and the sovereign state of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

When writing *In the Time of the Others*, these considerations ran on a parallel track alongside keeping in mind that the novel had to be a novel first. Woven within the fabric of the narrative had to be assessments of identity. Without becoming a didactic manifesto, destroyed of its value as a work of fiction, the novel still had to tackle the very issues that were behind its conception – Bengali identity and the eventualities that shaped the emergence of Bangladesh, both as the name for the new sovereign state where that identity would be preserved and flourish, and the war that brought about its creation. What began as a movement for the preservation of an identity defined largely by language became, in the short period of less than two decades, the groundwork for the establishment of a new state. When that series of events is linked to my proposal here, it

holds Bangladesh in the light of being a postcolonial nation-state, given its emergence and liberation out of a period of colonization under West Pakistani rule.



ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL:  
THE EUROPEAN NATION, AND NATIONALITY, NATIONALISM, AND  
THE PROBLEM OF TRANSFERENCE

In the previous section I touched briefly on the definition of nation through John McLeod's clarifying language calling it specifically Western – a term I much prefer to switch out with European in my work as colonization and postcolonial are both tied to specifically to European powers' (Britain) conquest of the Subcontinent. In this section I will delve further into the central theoretical works in European scholarship that have provided the further necessary language to interpret the meaning of nation, the development of the European nation-state, and the transportation of the nation-state paradigm to the Subcontinent as one among a multitude of colonizing tools that proved slightly better than disastrous at the outset. When states were formed at the end of colonial rule, they were not the nation-states Europe had known. Sovereign states they were, but of a different ilk, with a range of complex issues to work through, primarily because of the ravages of empire. The end result brought forth the postcolonial state, which was the product of the end of colonization, independence, and decolonization.

To begin with, then, Renan offers the beginnings of a working definition of nation, which I will quote here at some length, keeping in mind the time in which he was writing this, and of the systems he uses as examples, in order not to absorb them wholesale to be applied universally, while still accepting their relevance:

Antiquity did not know them [nations]: Egypt, China, and ancient Chaldea were in no sense nations. They were herds led by a child of the Sun or of the Sky. They were no Egyptian citizens, no more than there were Chinese ones. Classical antiquity had its republics and its municipal kingdoms, its confederations of local republics, its empires; it hardly had a nation in the sense that we understand it. Athens, Sparta, Sidon, and Tyr were small centers of admirable patriotism but they were cities with relatively restrained territory. Prior to their absorption into the Roman Empire, Gaul, Spain, and Italy were assemblages of peoples, often comprising leagues between themselves but without central institutions or dynasties. The Assyrian, Persian, and Alexandrine Empires also did not constitute fatherlands. There were never any Assyrian patriots; the Persian Empire was one great fief. Not a single nation finds its origins in Alexander's colossal adventure, otherwise so rich in consequences for the general history of civilization (Renan 2).

A nation, therefore, is not the same thing as a country or a nation-state, both of which are political units. Building on McLeod's earlier definition further, it is more suitable to identify nations as social units, a group of people finding enough common grounds among themselves so as to be able to define everyone else as Others. Such social units could arguably be said to make up the population of more or less every country the world over, including Bangladesh. The various indigenous peoples of Bangladesh are a social unit outside of the bounds of the majority population of the country, which identifies as Muslim. Being the third largest Muslim country in the world, Bangladesh is considered by many of its citizens as being a Muslim-majority state, themselves its and, therefore, an Islamic entity. As a matter of countering this mindset, I, personally, do not accept this notion, in which I am not alone. On this point, even the Constitution of Bangladesh troubles me, which, on November 4, 1972 established the People's Republic of Bangladesh with the following:

Pledging that the high ideals of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, nationalism, democracy and socialism meaning economic and social justice, which inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in the war for national independence, shall be fundamental principles of the Constitution;

Further pledging that it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realize through the democratic process to socialist society, free from exploitation- a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens (*Constitution of the PRB*, ISN).

Further in, in article 2A a “state religion” is established with the allowance that “other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in the Republic” (*Constitution of the PRB*, ISN). I quoted these sections at length in striving to create a certain difference between what a constitution foresees, and what happens once the various apparatuses of the state (a separate concept altogether) come into play. In the case of Bangladesh a significant amount came into play, including the abrogation of the Constitution during General H.M. Ershad’s military regime. That said, it is interesting to note that, even though Bangladesh was fought for in a brutal conflict and established as the sovereign state of the Bangla language and Bengali peoples of all stripes, “Almighty Allah” is given due diligence and Islam made the state religion. This is a startling point to consider in the light of the overt campaign of the Pakistan army to target Hindu Bengalis. I admit my own surprise at and reservation against this aspect of the Constitution.

Ernest Gellner’s offerings on both the nation and the state that brings the definitions out of the shadows of antiquity into phenomena with moving parts, and problematic political vehicles. Gellner mobilized both terms together and separately, giving nationalism the status of a political principle, primarily, declaring, “which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (Gellner 1). What he

contends further along might arguably be attached directly to one aspect of the Bangladesh Liberation War, for starters:

Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind (Gellner 1, italics original).

He goes on to add that when this principle is specifically violated by rulers of a political unit “other than that of the majority of the ruled, this, for nationalists, constitutes, a quite outstandingly intolerable breach of political propriety” (Gellner 1). There is more than one way that this applies to the case of Bangladesh going back to the first stirrings of Bengali nationalism following Jinnah’s 1948 declaration. The Bengali sense about being Bengali was never in doubt anymore than fears existed of Bengali language, culture, and identity being under any threat. As a principle, then, being Bengali was undisputed, a given as much as was, for instance, religious affiliation. Even though political, civic, and community leaders from across divides, religious, ethnic, linguistic, were united in a common cause against colonial rule, respective attachments to traditions were intact. And so, being Bengali was seen as intrinsically part and parcel of life and reality in the Subcontinent. When this ingrained and entrenched sentiment was violated it aroused immediate anger, which sparked, literally, a movement “actuated by a sentiment of this kind.”

Of course, the reason for the backlash against the Bihari community had nothing directly to do with the Constitution. I go so far as to say it had nothing to do with it. The strain of xenophobic nationalism (one of the ugliest forms taken by social units), however, that gripped the newly established state was partly a product of a trauma whose worst

manifestation was unleashing on innocent civilians the same brutality that it had experienced from an outside force. And here is where Gellner becomes applicable again:

Nationalism tends to treat itself as a manifest and self-evident principle, accessible as such to all men, and violated only through some perverse blindness, when in fact it owes its plausibility and compelling nature only to a very special set of circumstances, which do indeed obtain now, but which were alien to most of humanity and history. It preaches and defends continuity, but owes everything to a decisive and unutterably profound break in human history. It preaches and defends cultural diversity, when in fact it imposes homogeneity both inside and, to a lesser degree, between political units. Its self-image and its true nature are inversely related, with an ironic neatness seldom equaled even by other successful ideologies (Gellner 125).

Benedict Anderson's well-known proposition sets into motion the problem that must arguably be faced when trying to encapsulate nation into a "form," as though it could be a tangible, physical incarnation of allegiance. In keeping with and further elucidating McLeod's definition, and building on the concept of the nation being a social unit, Anderson states, "In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 5). He adds, "It is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (Anderson 6). He further argues, "Nation, nationality, nationalism - all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze. In contrast to the

immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meager” (Anderson 3).

Perhaps this “conspicuously meager” existence of “plausible theory” toward concrete definitions of nation, nationality, and nationalism, explains their mass application in incorrect terms the world over. The “immense influence nationalism has exerted on the modern world” truly cannot be denied. Another way of reading this is that the numerous instances of the exertion of nationalism on the modern world, in its specific European meaning, created further complications when transferred to and transposed onto regions of the world where it was an alien concept and ontologically absent, through colonization. This is not to say that conflicts over territory, identity, community never existed in pre European colonial societies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. It would in fact be negligent to make such a claim, if not outright false. Once activated, however disastrously, in the colonized spaces, the ramifications were incontrovertible, even if creating nation-states out of those colonized spaces in the European model ultimately proved unsustainable. In this examination Bangladesh makes an entrance on multiple levels, from being a name, an identifier that did not exist at the time of the first stirrings of a Bengali movement shortly after Partition in 1947, to becoming a sovereign state whose citizens claimed Bangladeshi as their nationality.

Eric Hobsbawm’s argument that nation depends upon the invention of national traditions through the repetition of specific symbols or icons may be attributed en masse to many nations, just as it might seem an obvious act to do so. Whether this is because human beings as cultural units, tribal associations, or agents of communal association are naturally drawn to the need for distinct identities not as individuals but as individuals in a

defined whole, is one way I connect Hobsbawm's argument to mine. By Hobsbawm's notion of the nation, Bengali's of East Pakistan certainly called on specific Bengali traditions that united them against the Urdu-speaking, predominantly West Pakistani "elite." Of these, the Bengali language itself was the chief symbol and icon, the repetition of which had created a Bengali identity long before the British Raj, and certainly before Pakistan became a consideration.

Hobsbawm offers Homi Bhabha metaphor as a stepping stone toward building on the definition of nation, which Bhabha incorporates thus: "Metaphor, as the etymology of the word suggest, transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the 'middle passage,' or the central European steppes, across those distances, and cultural differences, that span the imagined community of the nation-people. Borrowing from Hobsbawm and elaborating further, Bhabha adds further dimensions to "the invention of national traditions" with this:

The discourse of nationalism is not my main concern. In some ways it is the historical certainty and settled nature of that term against which I am attempting to write of the Western nation as an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the *locality* of culture. This locality is more *around* temporality than *about* historicity: a form of living that is more complex than 'community'; more complex than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than *patrie*; more rhetorical than the reason of State; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centered than the citizen; more collective than 'the subject'; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism (Bhabha 140).

The nation, as it applies to Bangladesh in my work, is ultimately a product of colonization in a period that followed a more "traditional" era of colonial rule. In the years between 1947 and 1971, Bengali identity in East Bengal/East Pakistan, indeed began awakening to a consciousness that was "a form of living that is more complex than

community,” “more complex than ‘society,” “more connotative than country.” Under these circumstances, with a more contextually established sense of nation the word and the concept may be applied to the case of the emergence of Bangladesh. In other words, for these circumstances to be effectively argued, Bangladesh would have to be held as a nation (social unit) instead of a nation-state.

Umut Ozkirimli offers a further insightful reading of Renan’s definition of nation and nationalism:

In short, race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography, and military necessity were not among the ingredients which constituted a nation; a common heroic past, great leaders and true glory were. Another, very important, ingredient was ‘collective forgetting’: forgetting then, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation. What Renan wanted, then, was to affirm ‘the primacy of politics and shared history in the genesis and character of nations.’ (Ozkirimli 36).

Ozkirimli further emphasizes the definition of nation and nationalism by highlighting the works of Gellner, A.D. Smith, E.H. Carr, and others, to stress, very importantly, the need to separate “state” from “nation.” He quotes Virginia Tilley as noting that “most arguments in academia could be resolved if people would first take the time to define their terms” (Ozkirimli 57; Tilley 497). Going on, Ozkirimli incorporates Walker Connor’s suggestions to further clarify the difference between state and nation on a definitional level when he states that Connor “answers this question by pointing to the widespread misuse of the key terms, in particular the ‘interutilization’ of the words ‘state’ and ‘nation’ (Ozkirimli 57; Connor 92).

The validity of inserting Bangladesh’s East Pakistan period as a case study in postcolonial nation-state-making gains further ground when seen through the practical



and applicable lens of the above complex theoretical assertions. As part of Pakistan, East Bengal gained the status of being a sovereign state as East Pakistan. Before its postcolonial colonial status became evident under West Pakistani rule, it can be said that as part of the whole of the state of Pakistan, East Pakistan had come out of colonial rule. The postcolonial colonial status produced the need, once again, to examine even more fully what independence from British had really produced. For East Pakistan's Bengalis it had produced a different set of needs that necessitated decolonization, in the same way that the process of decolonization had to sweep through the Indian Subcontinent en masse coming out of the Raj. By the time Bangladesh was uttered after the 1970 general elections and solidified on March 7, 1971 by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in his historic speech, and the movement for Bengali identity had coalesced into a call for a separate state to home this identity, Bengalis of East Pakistan were effectively calling for an end to colonial rule. Regional autonomy was no longer enough. The demand rose for a complete break, liberation, and independence. This complicated fracturing of identity that gets wedded to the formation of states and nation-states, inaccurately called then a nation, is explored by Partha Chatterjee, taking into account the fundamental role of religion specifically in the case of the Indian Subcontinent:

The idea that "Indian nationalism" is synonymous with "Hindu nationalism" is not the vestige of some premodern religious conception. It is an entirely modern, rationalist, and historicist idea. Like other modern ideologies, it allows for a central role of the state in the modernization of society and strongly defends the state's unity and sovereignty. Its appeal is not religious but political. In this sense, the framework of its reasoning is entirely secular.

In fact, the notion of "Hindu-ness" in this historical conception cannot be, and does not need to be, defined by any religious criteria at all. There are no specific beliefs or practices that characterize this "Hindu," and the many doctrinal and sectarian differences among Hindus are irrelevant to its concept. Indeed, even such anti-Vedic and anti-

Brahmanical religions as Buddhism and Jainism count here as Hindu. Similarly, people outside the Brahmanical religion and outside caste society are also claimed as part of the Hindu jati. But clearly excluded from this jati are religions like Christianity and Islam. (Chatterjee 110).

The emerging narrative here, in the case of both Bangladesh and India, is that one nation – the social unit - exists tied to the majority community, and a second one that includes (after excluding) the Other(s). There is no overt Othering of Hindus in Bangladesh or Muslims in India, but both communities live knowing “their place,” and are even recognized as minorities within and outside both countries. Chatterjee, once more:

What, we may ask, is the place of those inhabitants of India who are excluded from this nation? There are several answers suggested in this historiography. One, which assumes the centrality of the modern state in the life of the nation, is frankly majoritarian. The majority “community” is Hindu; the others are minorities. State policy must therefore reflect this preponderance, and the minorities must accept the leadership and protection of the majority. This view, which today is being propagated with such vehemence in postcolonial India by Hindu-extremist politics, actually originated more than a hundred years ago, at the same time Indian nationalism was born (Chatterjee 110).

Bangladesh has been written about and spoken of as having been “created” or “emerged.” Both words carry enough weight to warrant a treatise of their own. The reason I note it is that at the end of the nine-month Liberation War (and here the word “liberation” adds yet another connotation) Bangladesh “emerged” independent. The new sovereign state was “created.” Whereas in the case of India a “place” already existed that was India/the Indian Subcontinent through subsequent conquests in its history, down to the British Raj, Bengal was a region within the Subcontinent long before an independent Bangladesh was the cause. To further highlight this intricate set of suggestions evoked by the word nation, the heft carried around by the term nationalism, especially as it

eventually applied to Bengali nationalism toward the creation of Bangladesh, I find Laura Chrisman's offering useful:

Many postcolonial scholars have followed Benedict Anderson's characterization of nationalism as a constitutively paradoxical formation. The paradox arises from the historical rupture of capitalist modernity. Nationalism is the product of modern, secular consciousness; it views the emergence of nations as part of the forward march of history. At the same time, nationalism's imagined community stretches back to antiquity; the nation's identity and credibility depend upon the assertion of unbroken cultural tradition. Nationalism is thus the paradoxical expression of a historical and cultural rupture that must assert itself as a historical continuity (Chrisman 186).

By the time the independent state of Bangladesh emerged and was solidified as the People's Republic of Bangladesh by the Constitution, it was negotiating the balance between what it was, a sovereign state, a home for the Bengalis of the region that had suffered oppression under colonial rule, and the need for further instilling its existence as a social unit of people that identified uniformly as citizens of one nation, the social unit. As Hossain and Hassan have proposed, this need manifested itself after 1975 when Bengali identity was split into Bangladeshi identity. This added the dimension of Bangladesh's being a nation-state per the European model, but also in its own right if we further split Bangla and Desh, the first to signify the nation-centered social unit, and Desh, the Bangla word for country or land, to embody the state.

Taken as a whole, then, Bangladesh espouses, along with the host of others, including India and Pakistan, the elements of the postcolonial nation-state, whose historical continuity with regards to being a place of Bengali identity had endured a cultural rupture by West Pakistani rule, and the necessity for the assertion of that

historical continuity produced the paradox of its new status of a (postcolonial) nation-state.

## BANGLADESH:

### POSTCOLONIAL STATE – POSTCOLONIAL NATION-STATE

The previous section set down the definitions of nation, nationalism, nationality, and state in the European context. As I mentioned earlier, I am wary of using Western as a catchall term when what I am pointing to is European precedence and Eurocentric outlooks. I am equally cautious about using Eastern to stand in for the parts of the world outside of European designation. East-West, Occidental-Oriental are the constructs against which much of my work and philosophy are geared. That said, a frame still needs to be set down, or, at the very least, used, for the presentation of the theoretical works this section is concerned with that challenge the European/Eurocentric paradigm. Therefore, just as “native” or “savage” were definitions to be found in writings in English, and French, for peoples and communities those powers were colonizing and must so be kept in mind lest they become neutralized terms to be deployed without context, it is important to contextualize the counter scholarship coming from former colonies as attempting to provide its own language within the parameters set down through centuries of domination over not just the East or the Orient, but of a vast swathe containing multitudes of languages, cultures, communities, religions, and civilizations. On this last note, I use civilization not as, again, by its European definition, as in it was the quest of colonization to “civilize” the “natives” and the “savages,” to bring to them European/Anglo-Saxon civilization as a saving grace, but to mean that entire civilizations that had existed, and were still in

existence, at the time of foreign conquests. The postcolonial nation-state, then, is a necessary amalgamation of the European imports of nation, nationalism, nationality, and the state contextualized through the realities that were consequences of forcing those concepts in places where they were unknown, unsuitable, and finally required tumultuous upheaval to be actualized.

One way of looking at the postcolonial state is that it is a product of resistance, rebellion (of any sort), liberation movements, conflict - whether all-out war, as in the case of Bangladesh, or the case of India in which the actual end of the British Raj did not come about as a consequence of official war being declared on it by the various actors and organizations of the independence movement – independence, and decolonization. This not meant to be an exact or an exhaustive list of circumstances, but more as a guideline toward creating a template following which evidence can be supplied to validate these claims. In other words, from the vantage of the colonized, the subjects that have written about colonization, decolonization, and the making of the postcolonial state, the view is markedly different from their European predecessors and colonizers.

Even a word like rebellion can, and I feel, ought to, be read from the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized. The former would see it as an unlawful act, an affront to rules, and possibly criminal. For the colonized subject it is an act toward ending injustice, oppression, in turn unlawful encroachment of others' lands, a necessary tool of emancipation, gaining human rights, reclaiming lost markers of pre-colonial existence, and establishing sovereignty. Therefore, the postcolonial state must be taken as a construction as much as nation or history, open to interpretation and not readily applicable to one and to all situation – both of which will be used in context by the

scholars whose works have been pivotal in exploring the being and nature of the postcolonial state.

Because Bengali identity – without the addition of religion for starters - was the catalyst toward the establishment of the eventual birth of Bangladesh, it is important to see its formation through intellectual discourse as a major first stepping-stone. Part of intellectual considerations is issues of language, culture, even religion. The first two, as far as Bengali identity was concerned going back to the intellectuals, writers, poets scholars, and journalists whose works became pivotal to the Indian nationalist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were givens. Religion entered the scene as major consideration in the Indian nationalist/independence movement much later, albeit with overwhelming and devastating effects. Thus, one of the beginnings of the postcolonial state is rooted in intellectuals marking out the parameters that need to be defended and upheld. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes:

It has been remarked that this passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men, hot-headed and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people (Fanon 2).

While writing about Algeria in the throes of French colonialism, Fanon offers a frame, an intellectual perspective through which many other colonial instances may be viewed, while keeping in mind the exactness of his language as it pertained to the case of Algeria first.

As an exercise in the case study that is the center of this work, inserting Bengali identity and culture and the perils they faced from West Pakistan-mandated edicts, e.g. Jinnah's declaration of Urdu as Pakistan's only state language, into Fanon's frame might yield a reading, an interpretation, like this: What Fanon calls "national culture" existed among Bengalis long before Pakistan. Fanon's "colonial era" translates, in the context of this work, to what I call the "postcolonial colonial" era between 1947 and 1971 that held East Bengal under the rule of West Pakistan as East Pakistan. Of course, Fanon's use of "Western" is in the same context as that of McLeod's, which I have opted out for the more specific signifier of European. Still, the model works effectively, because it was very much a sense of anxiety among a class of Bengali elites and intellectuals after 1947 that provided the fuel for the Language Movement of 1952. Eventually, that anxiety would crop up among the Bengali intellectuals of East Pakistan in the Yahya Khan era between 1969 and 1971, leading to the killings of some two hundred of them by the Pakistan army between December 14 and 16, 1971.

The risk was, if not of being swamped necessarily, of having Bengali identity and culture altogether erased from being part of the state. This was summarized about with as much surgical precision as can be in Yahya Khan's infamous words: "Kill three million of them and the rest will eat out of our hands." The violence implied, and carried out, in and by Yahya Khan's words created the armed conflict that became the Bangladesh Liberation War, creating in the end a postcolonial state, while also establishing the independent state of Bangladesh, that had for twenty-four years been colonized, risen in anti-colonial protest, achieved independence, and entered the process of decolonization. Amilcar Cabral provides a concise summary in *Resistance and Decolonization*:



The armed liberation struggle requires the mobilization and organization of a significant majority of the population, the political and moral unity of the various social classes, the efficient use of modern arms and of other means of war, the progressive liquidation of the remnants of tribal mentality, and the rejection of social and religious rules and taboos which inhibit development of the struggle (gerontocracies, nepotism, social inferiority of women, rites and practices which are incompatible with the rational and national character of the struggle, etc.)...Consider these features inherent in an armed liberation struggle; the practice of democracy, of criticism and self-criticism, the increasing responsibility of populations for the direction of their lives, literacy work, creation of schools and health services, training of cadres from peasant and worker backgrounds – and many other achievements (Cabral 54-55).

Finally, Fanon makes the point that the native intellectuals' final realization is the "danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people," and for this reason, "hot-headed and with anger in their hearts, relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people." This last part applies differently to the case of the immediate post-1947 Bengali movement and the Bangladesh movement in 1970 and 1971, through to the end of the Liberation War.

Fanon offers another perspective, this one having to do with the double-edged sword of resisting colonial definitions and expectations of the colonized while still keeping in view the reasons behind the definitions and expectations existing. He writes:

No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men...It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes.

When trying to unpack the hugely complex bag of issues behind the formation of the postcolonial state, this statement offers a way of navigating information. If independence and decolonization were indeed the start of a new beginning, of the Third

World's taking a direct hand in starting a new history of Man, then first, conventions need to be broken, status quos challenged, and perceptions revisited and rearranged. This does not mean the cancellation of the circumstances that led to these needs, that is, what has happened cannot be denied or undone. At best it must be acknowledged in order to be confronted, and where necessary, discredited and made right. A case in point was the narrative that the independence of Bangladesh was the betrayal of East Pakistan. Former governor of East Pakistan and the man whose signature is on the official surrender document of the Pakistan army at the end of the Liberation War, General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, wrote a book entitled *The Betrayal of East Pakistan*. A new history, therefore, had to be claimed by the independent state of Bangladesh for which secession was the last option against annihilation and the war fought for liberation.

Fanon's call for a new history to be written links nicely with Dipesh Chakrabarty's theses in *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty stresses the need first to understand how history has been defined specifically by European colonial powers and it is that definition by which colonized subjects manage their own expectations. Put another way, before colonized subjects can think about writing their own history, they needed to meet certain standards of "being civilized," and until then it behooved them to wait.

Fanon's "new history of Man" would never get off the ground adhering to these rules.

Chakrabarty writes:

Historicism – and even the modern, European idea of history – one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying "not yet" to somebody else. Consider the classic liberal but historicist essays by John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty" and "On Representative Government," both of which proclaimed self-rule as the highest form of government and yet argued against giving Indians or Africans self-rule on the grounds that were indeed historicist. According to Mill, Indian or Africans were *not yet* civilized enough to rule

themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task. Mill's historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other "rude" nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination, Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. Acquiring a historical consciousness, acquiring the public spirit that Mill thought absolutely necessary for the art of self-government, was also to learn this art of waiting. This waiting was the realization of the "not yet" of historicism. (Chakrabarty 8).

"Somebody's way of saying 'not yet' to somebody else" alludes to a power dynamic, particularly from the perspective of the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This will be further elaborated upon in a different section. For now, let it suffice that conquest and colonization are at their most overtly basic levels exercises of power. The knowledge that is generated as a result of the structures and constructs created by the implementation by force and wielding of that power is equally, if not more, forceful. That is, if physical violence is visited upon one entity by another for the sake of conquering, subjugating, and ruling, the intellectual dimension of that encroachment and domination goes even deeper. Edward Said's definition of the colonized Other as being the white European colonizer's opposite in every way included skin color along with other physically visible attributes, as much as it contained knowledge as the medium through which the definitions were validated and perpetuated. With this in mind, the "not yet civilized" would be kept in that belief intellectually as well as physically, with their "not yet" term limit in the waiting room seeing no foreseeable end in sight. Here, among many, is one arguable reason anti-colonial uprisings may see their first stirrings.

At no point leading up to Partition and the creation of Pakistan was there a notion of Bangladesh remotely present. However “uncivilized” West Pakistani military and civilian elites found their Bengali counterparts, the thought of Bangladesh was as unreal as Pakistan being a Hindu state. But where the “not yet” does become applicable is after the 1970 general elections, in the light of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s victory, and Yahya Khan and Z.A. Bhutto’s refusal to accept the results. In the protracted fight that followed the elections, leading up to the March 1971 crackdown in Dhaka, the message was clearly “not yet,” or “not at all,” relegating Mujib to the “imaginary waiting room of history.”

The colonized space and the colonial subject must, therefore, be beholden to, when not under the complete domination of, their subjugators even as they push for independence. Fanon makes this point when he makes the dual case that the “prodigious” European theses have to be regarded while simultaneously keeping check that Europe’s crimes do not fall by the wayside. In *The Nation and its Fragments* Partha Chatterjee distills this concept with good effect, including in this observation, or objection, as he terms it, Anderson’s “imagined community,” in essence grouping him with the overarching European worldview imposed on the non-European mind.

I have one central objection to Anderson’s argument. If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized (Chatterjee 5).

I have included this quote here as opposed to the previous section alongside Anderson because of the final point it makes about “our imaginations” remaining forever colonized. Along with the beginning of the quote that addresses “nationalisms in the rest of the world” that have to choose their “imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms made available to them by Europe and the Americas,” both ideas bookend the topics of the next section: the novel, writing the postcolonial nation, - not the state or the nation-state in this case because of the complexities discussed before when speaking of nation, and those complexities being case in point for the writing it - and the shift of authorial authority over a distinct form inherited from the colonial power and appropriating it, its language included, into the postcolonial literary tradition.

Bangladesh, having emerged out of the brutal nine-month war against the army of Pakistan, had the scars and the complicated beginnings of every postcolonial nation-state that came into being in Asia and Africa following the end of World War II. Even the post-independence period was fraught with further internal complications of governance resulting in political assassinations and coups, corruption, instability, a second military regime under Lt. Gen. H.M. Ershad (1983-1990), and a precarious return to democracy in the new century. Give the earlier examination here of Bangladesh ultimately becoming the goal of the liberation struggle after 1970, as opposed to the post-1947 movement for the preservation of Bengali language and identity, the very reason that Bangladesh fits the definition of postcolonial nation-state is embedded in the two elements that make up its name.

Before ending this section I want to include Tamara Sivanandan’s chapter entitled “Anticolonialism, national liberation, and postcolonial nation formation” in *The*

*Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* because it addresses the fundamental issues that are part of this work, as well as making a specific exclusion that is further the crux of my argument. I will approach this text in more of a roundabout way than taking it from beginning to end.

Sivanandan opens the sub-section “Decolonization and the forging of postcolonial nation-states” using Aijaz Ahmad’s “suggestive periodization for the emergence of large numbers of sovereign states through anticolonial movements in the twentieth century” (Sivanandan 54). The periodizations are: “a first phase, occupying the twenty years just after the Second World War, when states acquired independence under the leadership of their respective national bourgeoisie (some radical, others conservative) within the broad context of “modernization” and integration within the capitalist world system; and a second phase, occupying the period from 1965 to 1975, dominated by wars of national liberation that had a distinctly socialist bearing, despite the possibilities for successful socialist construction being limited due to the ‘level of prior economic development and the scale of imperialist devastations’” (Sivanandan 54-55; Ahmad 30). She goes on to name the states that gained independence within the parameters of both phases, as part of the second phase naming “Vietnam and Laos in Indochina, and the Lusophone African colonies of Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau. If one extended Ahmad’s second phase beyond 1975 somewhat, one could also include Zimbabwe (which gained independence in 1980).

Keeping in mind that this is not an exhaustive list, nor is meant to be, it still arrested my attention that Bangladesh was not considered; and while Ahmad’s assertions cannot be applied to Bangladesh wholesale, on a broad canvas the emergence of

Bangladesh as a nation-state under the circumstances it did by going through a liberation struggle against West Pakistani colonization added to it the statuses of postcolonial state and post-colonial nation-state. The key lies in understanding Sivanandam's thesis of defining colonialism in this work as only European colonialism. Conditions that followed the end of European colonialism she specifically situates as a separate, albeit connected, entity. In fact, when I apply that part to my thesis the East Pakistan era of postcolonial colonialism what that period meant for Bengalis of East Pakistan is what she brings out through the works of Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and, once more, Aijaz Ahmed. Reflecting some fifteen years after Tanzania's independence Nyerere believed that:

Most of Africa is now free from colonial rule...I know that we were right in our united demand for freedom from colonial rule. I know that we are right to support the demand for political freedom which is still being made by the peoples of southern Africa, without being deflected by considerations of what might come after. Our mistake was not in our demand for freedom; it was in the assumption that freedom – real freedom – would necessarily and with little trouble follow liberation from alien rule.

When Bengalis stood united with Muhammad Ali Jinnah's call for a separate Pakistan they were also united against their "demand for freedom from colonial rule." An argument can be made that the demand for the end of British rule and a second one for the establishment of a Muslim state may be further broken down into separate movements. But I will stress the unity behind the movement toward ending British colonial rule as *the* sole purpose of one and all in the Subcontinent, first. Subsequently, with the establishment of the state of Pakistan, Bengalis of East Pakistan quickly learned that "real freedom" was a farther cry than the end of colonial rule had promised. With that in mind, they had not made a mistake in demanding freedom from colonial rule by adding their defiance taking places across the land and those that did had also not made a

mistake by standing in support of the creation of Pakistan. Their mistake, per se, was one that cannot be called a mistake – not forecasting Jinnah’s Urdu-centric state apparatus, and the rising colonial attitude of West Pakistan that grew into official policy through a martial law regime. Ultimately, between the quest first for regional autonomy, while remaining part of Pakistan, and the final push toward a complete break, East Pakistan’s colonial status underwent the Liberation War of 1971 that gained it independence as well as the three-tiered condition of sovereign state, postcolonial state, and postcolonial nation-state. While the first was its official status, the second two are determined through my analysis here.

As I mentioned earlier that I was going to engage with Sivanandan’s text in a roundabout way, so I concentrate now on her assessments of nation and nationalism, which differ from, and challenge, the earlier discussed inheritance of the terms. One of the important points she sets down is to contextualize nation and nationalism as they occur specifically in conjunction with decolonization. “Progress,” she writes, “towards decolonization was not uniform across the different colonies; in all cases, however, anticolonial nationalism played a tremendous part, and it remained a vital component of colonial and postcolonial politics until about the mid-1970s” (Sivanandan 45). A key differentiation to note here is *anticolonial nationalism* as opposed to nationalism on its own as a stand-in for an independent state or nation-state, a fundamental difference that is integral to this analysis. Edward Said offers her a hand of support when he writes, “It is a historical fact that nationalism – restoration of community, assertion of identity, emergence of new cultural practices - as a mobilized political force instigated and then advanced the struggle against Western domination everywhere in the non-European



world. It is no more useful to oppose that than to oppose Newton's discovery of gravity" (Said 218). Hence, nationalism, coming out of the nation's suggestion of a social unit align with community, identity, new cultural practices, which is altogether different from the creation of the state or nation-state.

One last part of Sivanandan's engagement with nation and nationalism that pushed directly back against what in this analysis has been called their European provenance is worth quoting at length:

Some historians and political scientists (Hobsbawm among them) have conceived of nationalism as an essentially European movement and philosophy, and inappropriate for Third-World countries which were either not ready for it or undeserving of it. These commentators have by and large been quite insensitive to the particular use made of nationalism by anticolonial forces, to its use, in other words, as a *defensive* ideology which served to united resistance movements against empire. It could be, too, that the Euro-American recoil from nationalism has in part been *due* to its successful use by nationalist movements in the developing world *against* Europe. For it is striking that whereas during the period of "high" colonialism Western spokespeople were perfectly happy to license its ideologies as the legitimate ones for consumption by colonized societies, these ideologies are suddenly deemed unsuitable for export in the *anti* colonial moment (Sivanandan 46).

Loosely interpreted, nationalism is given currency only when it impressed by the colonizer, and so by the side wielding power, but is delegitimized the moment there is a change in the dynamics of that power. It is permissible for the colonizer to invade, plunder, and rule at will, but when their own strategies are turned on them, they are rendered either unsuitable or, at best, relegated to waiting room of history to the status of "not yet."

THE ENGLISH NOVEL AS FORM, ITS POSTCOLONIAL INHERITORS,  
AND THE MANY FACETS OF WRITING THE POSTCOLONIAL NATION

A fundamental distinction requires immediate establishment at the outset of this section. Until now the definitions of nation, nation-state, sovereign state, the postcolonial state and the postcolonial nation-state have been applied by the best available concrete terms in which they survive in the discourse and scholarship within the of both postcolonial studies and history. The suggestion in the title of this section to “the postcolonial *nation*” is not an accident or oversight, because here my purpose is to investigate it as it pertains to the *writing* of it, specifically writing the postcolonial nation in and through fiction.

If we consider the base line definition of nation or nations as social units then writing about it aligns with the practice of fiction as first a space in which words are collected for the formation of a common narrative. This narrative may have disparate parts addressing different elements of the whole, but in the end it is the gathering of all those elements around the story at the center as its shared common concern that unites them. Therefore, writing the postcolonial nation in fiction is different from writing *about* the postcolonial state and the postcolonial nation-state as political units. Finally, I want to set down here that part of this section is going to be devoted specifically to the postcolonial nation and women, as it applies to the writing of the postcolonial nation. In other words, when nations and nationalism are spoken of and written about, in the context

of anticolonial movements as discussed in the previous section via Tamara Sivanandan's chapter, it is arguably often that both are given male attribution.

The literary heritage of Bengal, the entire region, is one of its most revered traditions. The world knows Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) more than any other Bengali writer and intellectual, but Bengali letters had been at the forefront of both literary output and what became the nationalist movement for independence in the Subcontinent since at least the late nineteenth century. From stalwarts like Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) - between whom were written everything from the epic poem to novels, plays, copious amounts of journalism and what today would be considered in U.S. journalism long-form non-fiction that addresses political, social, religious, and various other current events related commentary - to Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's (1876-1938) impressive body of work, the poetry of Jibananda Das (1899-1954) that spoke of the lush beauty of Bengal, and the contribution of Bangladesh's national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) to every genre from poetry, song, ghazals fashioned after Persian verse and Sufi traditions, and novels, there is no shortage of literary tomes by which to track the rich trove of Bengali writing.

My purpose in this section is to draw the difference between the specific form of the novel from the way it was understood and written by the abovementioned writers and the specific English novel that came to the Subcontinent with British colonial rule and became one of the most influential and appropriated imports by authors whose works establish the watershed moments of postcolonial literature and fiction. It also my purpose to situate my novel *In the Time of the Others* within this paradigm on three fronts: 1) As a work of fiction that undertakes the vast, complex, and necessary task of writing the

postcolonial nation, and 2) of aligning it with the novels that have, since the beginning of the 1980s, created the space of the postcolonial English novel written by authors from or linked with the Indian Subcontinent, and 3) to have it join as well as intervene in the ranks of novels being written in English specifically about the Bangladesh Liberation War in recent years by Bangladeshi authors.

Before continuing, a note about the meaning of form as I deploy it. By form I mean the novel being the mode of presentation, the best, most ideal way of narration, as opposed to the aesthetic currency of form. By formal approach, then, I suggest specifically that the novel has been the most accessible and accessed medium of postcolonial writers, notably in the area of fiction.

In *The Postcolonial Novel* Richard J. Lane offers a foundational definition of the postcolonial novel in English that sets forth and addresses the complexities contained within that genre. His approach points to the theoretical ways in which the postcolonial novel “engendered a rethinking of Europe and North America” (Lane 1). He continues:

This is not to argue that such a rethinking is necessarily the most important – or the only – consequence of the publication of these particular novels; rather, it is merely *one* of the outcomes of postcolonial literary production, albeit a decisive one for those involved in the criticism of literary texts. Subsequently, the critical discourse used here is tied in with and in many cases traced ‘back’ to its literary precursors, rather than the literary texts being presented here as mere ‘examples’ of theoretical concepts. Such a tracing is (it is hoped) not done too naively, i.e., it is achieved with an awareness of Nietzsche’s, Foucault’s and Said’s work on ‘genealogy’ and ‘beginnings’ – that is to say, an awareness that the metaphysical “origin” is privileged, mythical and transcendent, asserting a point of universal truth, whereas the secular “beginning” is contingent, ceaselessly reexamined (and re-begun), restructuring and animating new ways of conceiving the world (Lane 1).

Applying this concept of “restructuring and animating new ways of conceiving the world” come across to me as another way considering an adage familiar to fiction writers that writing is discovering. Even taking it in the context of Lane’s application it affords currency to the act of writing fiction itself, which is not necessarily always about telling “new” stories, and rather more often than that is considering *new ways* of telling stories. In the case of the postcolonial novel in English, this is precisely what happened and more. Writing *In the Time of the Others* was my way of seeing the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 that was separate from other representations of it in fiction and non-fiction, journalism, or personal accounts. Seen another way, for example, in relation to the definition of history as discussed earlier, fiction is an interpretative exercise, of navigating information and giving the order that best fits the purposes and goals of the writer. The distinction of one being “made up” and the other working in facts is of course crucial, but not in a way to completely separate one from the other. For my novel I interpreted a historical event through the lens of another medium. But I do not call it a “historical novel” or a “novel of history,” in the sense of drawing out absolute definitions of both fiction and history. It is a work of fiction that takes place at a moment in time recorded in words and artifacts from the past as evidence in creating the situational narrative of the fictional story.

To further apply Lane’s language to my novel, I will say that while universal truths were not my focus, truths were. The truths of the events that create the backdrop of the novel were more than mere setting. They form the backbone of the novel and inform the narrative in specific terms. It is specifically a novel that takes places during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, thereby being affected in its entirety by that specific

event, and in turn making its conception of it. The novel specifically undertakes the job of addressing issues of identity, nationality, freedom, and independence, being Bengali and/or East Pakistani, and then assuming the citizenship of a new sovereign state of Bangladesh – all of this in the context of the period in East Pakistan in 1971 when each of the above concerns had deliberate, specific meanings.

Keeping closer to Lane's literal assessments of the postcolonial novel as it applies to novels written after the end of *European* colonization, it becomes specifically important to not lose sight of "genealogy" and "beginnings," because the English novel in the Subcontinent took a distinct view of its colonial subject as the Other, creating the space – or the long space as Peter Hitchcock aptly called it – for the subject to shift the narrative paradigm.

That the English novel being written by writers from former colonies has arguably been one of the most fertile grounds for letters in the postcolonial literary tradition is a notable achievement. Hitchcock has fittingly called the novel in the case of postcolonial fiction "the long space." In this long space the postcolonial fiction writer appropriates English while resisting it, linguistically, and in the area of works written in English by authors whose works define the colonial gaze when it comes to portrayals of the "native," by returning not only the gaze, but also a "new English" that is fused with "native inflections." What Mary Louis Pratt has aptly called the contact zone, where colonizer and colonized intersect to create an irreversible state of co-mingling, an amalgamation brought forth of oppression, acceptance, equal give-and-take that, despite decolonization and independence, continues to haunt both traditions.

The development of the postcolonial English novel in the Subcontinent happened under political resistance against British rule, in one way eventually mirroring what happened as part of independence and decolonization. I mean by this that the contact zone had been created, and no amount of nationalistic pride or scorn for the former colonial masters would undo it. Thus, as with, for example, technological advances, brought to the Subcontinent and developed there at horrendous costs to local populations, the legal framework that to this day sets the precedents for jurisprudence in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, so too the literature of the region was forever touched, as it in return unalterably touched that of Britain. The resistance that eventually led to independence made its way into the literary environment some four decades later. Once more, the contributions of the colonizer were being used to show them their flawed sense of superiority, racially, and literarily.

Edward Said, writing of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* in *Culture and Imperialism*,

notes:

We must read the novel as a the realization of a great cumulative process, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century is reaching its last major moment before Indian independence: on the one hand, surveillance and control over India; on the other, love for and fascinated attention to its every detail. The overlap between the political hold of the one and the aesthetic and psychological pleasure of the other is made possible by British imperialism itself; Kipling understood this, yet many of his latter readers refuse to accept this troubling, even embarrassing truth. And it was not just Kipling's recognition of British imperialism in general, but imperialism at that specific moment in its history, when it had almost lost sight of the unfolding dynamics of a human and secular truth: the truth that India had existed before the Europeans arrived, that control was seized by a European power, and that Indian resistance to that power would inevitably struggle out from under British subjugation.

In reading *Kim* today we can watch a great artist in a sense blinded by his own insights about India, confusing the realities that he saw with such color and ingenuity with the notion that they were permanent and

essential. Kipling takes from the novel form qualities that he tries to bend to this basically obfuscatory end (Said 162).

There is much in these observations to pick apart, and the section in its entirety suggests connections that I find immediately compelling. Specifically, the bridge created between political upheaval leading to independence, the increasingly waning state of British rule, the denial of the colonizer, and most importantly the form through which the colonial mind is trying to grasp onto an eventuality that cannot be fought – the novel. In a way, the way the English language and the English novel would come to be appropriated by writers of former colonies seemed as much a far-fetched idea as did independence, even if an underlying acceptance, however much it was overtly denied, was sustained as long as possible. That independence and decolonization would come to pass was all but executed by the time Britain emerged devastated out of World War II, in no shape to go on maintaining an empire. Similarly, that out of the contact zone created over some two centuries of conquest and colonization, both colonized and colonizer would come out changed, mutually affected for better and for worse, manifested in the area of culture, in the zone of literature, as the English language was deployed against its bearers with undeniable success.

This suggests a sense of urgency, both from the perspective of gaining independence and of acquiring a voice to speak what has been suppressed and needs to be told. On the second point a connection between the need for telling and form converge. Taken together with the movement toward independence the platform emerges, which is then used to deploy the perspectives that have been subdued, and in many cases erased, by the ravages wrought by conquest and colonial rule. After decolonization, this new



platform is case in point of the contact zone, for inside it flourishes the long-silenced narrative of the “native,” and from there the “native” can begin turning around the gaze that has held him/her in negative light, and contempt. Ultimately, the form that this has most effectively taken in postcolonial fiction is the long space of the novel, and in the language of the colonizer.

If writing and fiction are as much acts of imagined existence and continuity as the nation and nationality then their confluence arguably creates the ideal zone for “writing the nation”, particularly the postcolonial nation. In “Dissemination” provides insights taking from Anderson and Hobsbawm the characteristics they offer toward defining the nation in writing it, further adding:

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation* (Bhabha 146).

This idea of the “splitting” is pivotal to *writing the nation*, specifically, as opposed to, say, chronicling the history of a nation, or recounting events that would make up a “pedagogical,” “repetitious” representing of facts already known, or even newly uncovered. Let me add to this by bringing in consciousness, so as to suggest a split consciousness, an awareness on more levels than one of writing and writing *about* nation, and the postcolonial nation. To use my own project as an example, while my novel uses the factual occurrence, the history of the Bangladesh Liberation War as backdrop, I am splitting, so to speak, from recounting a “pedagogical,” “repetitious” presentation of facts (e.g. writing the emergence of the *state* of Bangladesh). I am inventing a nation that was

supposed *to have been* the reason for and result of that war, and imagining a trajectory from the point of decolonization from East Pakistan's "postcolonial colonial" status under West Pakistani rule, from the vantage of an emigrant who also knew a Bangladesh at birth and childhood that no longer exists. In this regard, writing the nation as Bhabha defines it is a remarkable operating tool.

Contributing to the relevance of the novel in postcolonial writing, a form thought during colonial rule to be the sole jurisdiction of European imperial powers, especially British and French, Elleke Boehmer offers enlightening insights to the form's appropriation by colonized subjects. In this regard it is the gaze of the European, so long practiced upon the "native" that it returned in kind once the writings from colonized peoples began manifesting the overweening rage (Fanon) built up in them. Added to that is Boehmer's observations about the language of the former colonial subject that also becomes a "taking" from the colonizer; that is, turning, along with the gaze, the very tongue by which the colonizer ruled and oppressed. She writes, "The crux of post-colonial debates about cultural authenticity, hybridity, and resistance is most prominently drawn at the point of language choice. This, alongside recovery of history, was one of the issues of greatest significance in the nationalist writing of independence, and a key source in the effort to define identity" (Boehmer 207). Herein is captured the very concerns that bring together history, appropriation, identity, imagination, and writing in singular acts of creation to imagine the postcolonial nation of fiction. As much as it is real, in writing the postcolonial nation occupies a specific state "conceptual ambivalence" that allows it to become a site for imagination and writing.

Robert Fraser states:

Nowhere has the continuing debate as to the identity of postcolonial nations been carried on with more energy than in the novel. As an art form, the novel rose to peculiar prominence in the eras of resistance and nation-building; in the subsequent phases of internal dissent and transculturalism it has retained its power. The reason has much to do with a perennial fascination with who or what the citizen of a post-colonial state should consider himself or herself to be; a question which seems to suit the scale, diversity and focus of novels particularly well (Fraser 31).

Fraser titles the chapter from where this quote is taken “Inscribing the Nation,” calling to mind Bhabha’s *writing the nation*. It is not merely a coincidence or matter of chance that both phrases allude to an act of setting down by hand in pen and ink, or some other form of recording words to paper or screen, that ultimately gives shape to a distinct version of a precise imagination enabled and empowered by very specific traditions. He continues:

It is perhaps inevitable that, the postcolonial novel having played so large a part in defining the nation, it should also assume a prominent part in those phases of cultural history in which the spirit of the nation is either contradicted or superseded. Following independence the critical gaze once trained unflatteringly on the *imperium* redirects itself towards a succession of national governments. The resulting process of internal dissent proceeds across a wide front, and embraces many genres: government reports, administrative blueprints; diplomatic interventions; proclamations; edicts. At its most finely articulated point it merges into, and finds expression in, the products of the literary imagination: in drama, to some extent in poetry, but most strikingly in fiction (Fraser 33).

In the case of the issue of language and the form being brought up, Frederic Jameson’s “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” provides one way of looking at the intervention of the so-called Third World via literature. Jameson brings to light the “Third World”-“First World” dichotomy, which is in itself problematic, which he further complicates by discussing a canon, as established by the “First World.” “The third world novel,” Jameson argues, “will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or

Joyce; what is more damaging than that, perhaps is its tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development and to cause us to conclude that ‘they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson’ (Jameson 65). As is the case, Jameson later articulates his reasons for using “Third World” as a term to highlight literatures that are in “various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first world cultural imperialism (Jameson 68). I agree with this line of argument, and further add that when it comes to writing a novel, as I am, about the topic that I am, it is impossible for me to imagine that it is only for the consumption of the group/nation/community/people/country that the work represents. Here, Jameson’s invocation of cultural imperialism is an accurate point of reference, because my novel is in English, and its audiences will be largely made up of a mix of Western and Bangladeshi readers; of the latter, a certain educated, privileged group in a socioeconomic status will arguably have better access to it, especially in Bangladesh, where a culture of capitalist hegemony keeps in perpetual working order the means by which huge economic disparities and deplorable poverty reign.

Timothy Brennan points to the fact that fiction from so-called Third World – a phrase for which I have little patience, but will tolerate here to enter his argument into this text, which makes valid assumptions, and also understand in the scheme of the First, Second, and Third World paradigm– regions after World War II use nation and nationalism in more pronounced ways. Before sending his statements, no matter how valid, into the exceptions voiced by Chatterjee with regard to the currency of “imagined” being already issued from the European perspective, I will give it some space.

The nation is precisely what Foucault called a ‘discursive formation’ – not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure

which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering the lack of. 'Uses' here should be understood both in a personal, craftsmanlike sense, where nationalism is a trope for such things as 'belonging', 'bordering', and 'commitment'. But it should also be understood as the *institutional* uses of fiction in nationalist movements themselves (Brennan 170).

Of the many ways that this can be unpacked, I will take the stance of taking to task its Eurocentric worldview. This is not to say that I necessarily disagree with it entirely, but if I hearken back to Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation about the waiting room of history, and Partha Chatterjee's challenge to the "imagined community" of Anderson by placing the "imagined" within Eurocentric assumptions, then to hold Brennan accountable for assuming the Third World political structure exists in either being consciously built or a product of the Third World writer's sense of its lacking, is valid. Using Foucault, Brennan positions his argument deep within the theoretical purview of thought (Foucault's) which links it eventually to the European Age of Enlightenment. Therefore, the "discursive formation" is there, a vessel of European thought available for the thought and works of the Other to strain through and "become." It is the exit of the Other from the waiting room of history *with permission* from the colonizer's perspective. Let us return to Jameson again for a moment in order to encapsulate this Eurocentric approach when looking at so-called Third World fiction:

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. (Jameson 68).

Needless to say that in many ways both Jameson and Brennan are hinting at, in their own ways, and through a broader more general reading of their words, the

underlying role of identity. In that case, Helen Tiffin offers a bridge between the two, especially considering their shared Eurocentric views:

Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridized, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity. Decolonization is a process, not arrival; it invokes an ongoing dialectic between hegemonic centrist systems and peripheral subversion of them; between European or British discourses and their post-colonial dis/mantling. Since it is not possible to create or recreate national or regional formations wholly independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise, it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position with (and between) two worlds; to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world (Tiffin 95).

Here are assumptions more palatable than strict codes of European ontology and epistemology that create the perpetual waiting room of history for colonized peoples and cultures. Discourse was never part of pursuit. Colonizers did not ask permission to plunder, steal, oppress, and then impose alien ways of life on unsuspecting locals. There were no contracts, per se, that gave permission to the British, beyond the operations of the East India Company, to reign in the Indian Subcontinent, let alone make it part of the Empire. Colonized zones did not have say on what exports arrived within their bounds that would forever alter and influence how the peoples and cultures within them were portrayed, spoken of, and defined. So with the English novel, which at first became one of the primary sub-zones of colonial mapping of the “native” and his/her attributes – as a human being, as subject, and then as the Other – and then, after independence, offered post-colonial subjects the medium through which it could finally begin investigating, among other things, the ravages of colonial domination and exploitation. Identity was among colonization’s most savaged casualties.

As Tiffin points out, the postcolonial identity is one that is “inevitably hybridized.” Just as being colonized did not come with a “yes” or “no” option, neither did being left with the “third space” identity in the contact zone that could never again be reversed or undone. Within this existence, nation, nationality, and identity are irrevocably bound up, so that even to criticize and outright denounce colonial rule one must first allow colonization to take center stage, and then get relegated to the shadows of history. This means that colonization will forever lurk, will haunt, and it will define up to great extents the autonomy of the postcolonial imagination. Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan are not only tied to each other geographically, culturally, religiously, and linguistically, even if not wholly or in one broad stroke, but certainly by common grounds of colonization. True, this is a well-established fact rehearsed here not as groundbreaking information, but is nonetheless important to point out since, in postcolonial periods for each country, the search for identity has been anything but common. The case of Bengali identity and the eventual fight for independent Bangladesh chart a markedly different arc than India’s quest for democratic ideals and reform post independence, and Pakistan’s ongoing internal clashes among ancient tribal customs, right-wing Islam, and pro-Western, secular leanings.

Identity, as it applies to this section, differs from the previous discussion of it in the context of Bengali identity as the catalyst behind the movement against threats to it spurred by Jinnah’s 1948 declaration. Here, identity is in the context of writing, and specifically writing the postcolonial novel, which has as one of its central themes across authors, countries, and continents the issue of reclaiming lost identities, and all that that identity might include. Also to be noted is the fact that (re)writing the English novel from

the perspective of the colonized, the writer of the postcolonial nation has much on her/his hands to “undo,” or at the very least, challenge. Images of the “native” have to be both undone and reclaimed. This image was the product quite literally of how the colonizer saw, looked upon, and thus formed the appearance of the “native” through a vision that held as the standard one template for the “civilized European” – and specifically in the Subcontinent the white Englishman - against which the colonized would be measured. Hence, the Gaze, as briefly mentioned earlier, first impressed by the colonizer, then turned around by the colonized – a crucial marker of the postcolonial novel written in English by writers from former colonies.

The look and the phenomenology of perception as explored respectively by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are then strained through Jacques Lacan to arrive at the Gaze, the manifestation that defined best the colonial formation of the image of the colonizer. Sartre’s definition is rooted in the acquiring of a mode other than direct knowledge of the Other via “the look,” which he summarizes in *Being and Nothingness* thus: “In short, if the other is to be a probably object and not a dream of an object, then his object-ness must of necessity refer not to an original solitude beyond any reach, but to a fundamental connection in which the Other is manifested in some way other than through the knowledge which I have of him” (Sartre 340). Merleau-Ponty identifies a fundamental “reversibility” in vision making the body both the subject and the object. “I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the center of subjectivity” (Merleau-Ponty 403). Lacan, taking Merleau-Ponty’s model, adds the dimension that the possibility of being observed is always primary. This makes the dynamics a subject-object split at all times,



regardless of the “reversibility” of the seeing and the seen. “The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing. This all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows” (Lacan 75). Phil Lee further summarizes Lacan’s substantiation of the gaze thus:

The gaze alienates subjects from themselves by causing the subject to identify with itself as the *objet a*, the object of the drives, thus desiring scopophilic satisfaction. Yet, in constructing the human subject as this *objet a*, the gaze denies the subject its full subjectivity. The subject is reduced to being the object of desire and, in identifying with this object, it becomes alienated from itself (Lee 67).

Through Fanon and Bhabha, this application of the Lacanian gaze becomes a crucial aspect of postcolonial discourse, and thus directly relevant to the undoing of the image of the colonized as objectified by the colonizer in postcolonial fiction and writing. Fanon writes, “What is often called the black soul is a white man’s artefact” (Fanon 16). Homi Bhabha adds, “This transference speaks otherwise. It reveals the deep psychic uncertainty of the colonial relation itself: its split representations stage the division of body and soul that enacts the artifice of identity, a division that cuts across the fragile skin – black and white – of individual and social authority” (Bhabha 44). Three conditions underlie what Bhabha calls the “process of understanding.” They are: “To exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus”; “The very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting”; and “The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (Bhabha 44-45).

These points, especially Bhabha's conditions, bring to the fore the question of the authority of the postcolonial writer. By authority I mean here not necessarily which writer has the right to work in the genre or discipline known as postcolonial literature, but more which writer understands the complexities of working within it, which will then manifest in her/his work. To be clear, there are no "guidelines" or "tests" to "become" a writer authorized to produce works that may be deemed worthy of being categorized as postcolonial literature. It is more a sense of being able to confront the norms set down by colonial rule and by so doing push back, return the Gaze, and realize that the process is "always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image."

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 is considered a watershed moment in postcolonial fiction and literature. As a Bombay-born, British-educated expatriate from India, raised in a secular Muslim family, Rushdie embodies some of the core complexities of a colonial past, a present full of intersections, and a constant striving to keep intact a sound sense of identity. All of it, and more, are channeled into the narrator, Saleem Sinai, and the thousand other children born across India at midnight on August 15, 1947. In Rushdie's fictional recreation of India's independence from colonial rule and the new republic's first decades of existence and growth the postcolonial *nation* is put to the test of holding together as both a social unit and a political reality. In the more abstract world of fiction the nation (social unit) and the state (political unit) collide with and confront each other. This crossroad that the novel continually travels is one of its key achievements both as a text embodying the elements

of postcolonial literary concerns and of making use of the form of the English novel's long space.

The novel with which Rushdie followed up the success of *Midnight's Children* is, on a literary plane, a quintessential postcolonial work of fiction and novel. *The Satanic Verses* was written when Rushdie was still able to visit his native India, and roam around his beloved birthplace of Bombay – I will use Bombay instead of Mumbai to stay faithful to the name of the city as it is in the novel, and in Rushdie's recollections – long before Khomeini's fatwa and the so-called "Rushdie Affair." Therefore, the longing for home that Rushdie channels through his two protagonists is not one of the forced exile, but of a former resident of a city and country returned after decades to find both realms irrevocably altered. In this sense his lament is not the same as that of an exile who fears for his life upon return to his homeland, nor of the Joycean type that takes a stand against an Ireland whose political and social tides are turning in ways with which he simply cannot reconcile toward a middle ground.

As much as the country and the city are changed, so are the returning natives. Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, the two Bombay-born actors whose adventures and misadventures unspool in dreamscapes and transmogrifications, left their homeland as young men as immigrants to England, the same as their creator who left Bombay at the age of thirteen to go study in England. But the London in which Chamcha has become a successful voice-over artist for some of British entertainment's most beloved characters is rife with racism. It is the age of Margaret Thatcher, and immigrant-bashing reigns as much as the Draconian policies of the Iron Lady. Farishta, a once-famous actor in the Indian film industry in Bombay, vanishes one day at the height of his fame, and reappears

for a brief stint in England. The two men meet, as the novel begins, aboard the Bostan 420 flight headed into London explodes in mid-air at the hands of Sikh hijackers calling for a separate state of their own, Khalistan. Many versions of nation are simultaneously at play here, but my concern is with the imagined home, a recreated Bombay that eventually forms in the minds of Chamcha and Farishta. What spurs this shared imagined communion between the two are: their realization that Britain will never accept them as their own, no matter how English they sound, act, behave, or willingly assimilate with, and their return to Bombay where they are no longer natives, but Anglicized expatriates with not enough “brown” left in them.

Rushdie goes deep into the territory of country, (as felt through national affiliation to common practices, and the evolving state apparatus of the postcolonial state) identity, homeland, and the clash of the two searches, on the other side of which may lie discovery or disillusionment; the discovery *of* disillusionment. In the journey, Farishta buys fully and completely into his dream delirium of being a prophet-savior until he is brought “out” of his habitation of an unreal world, and Chamcha, after transmogrifying into a half goat half man manifestation of his worst insecurities, and being brutalized by racist British immigration officials and police, both men accept the permanent loss of identity and homeland. Fiction allowed Rushdie to reclaim his lost, and understand home and nation in ways that transcended political statehood and opportunistic nationalistic allegiances, in the form of religious fundamentalism or purist ideals of a homogenous land. These last two points Rushdie showed in his critical portrayal of the stance of the Hindu organization the Rashtriya Swayamaksevak Sangh (RSS) and their dreams of “Ram Rajya,” a convoluted manifestation of India based on their idyllic utopia mirroring the time of

Lord Ram; in the character of the imam that is living in hiding in London under police protection, and Mirza Saeed Akhtar, the richest merchant and citizen of the fictional village of Titlipur, whose wife, battling cancer, is inspired by a young girl named Ayesha to lead the entire village on a death-defying foot-march to the Arabian Sea to claim an idealized place of belonging that no amount of wealth can offer her. Everywhere there is angst, as there is angst in every sentence in postcolonial fictions that reach endlessly and enduringly to capture an ultimately lost center where their reason for existence is etched. Which is all the more reason writing is the way, and fiction the form, by which to build the imagined communion with that place.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* is a poignant and poetic love letter to a home lost by the perfidious machinations of colonial rulers and the resulting circumstances that created the hard place of staying alive and the rock of abandoning the only place where that life had meaning. A Parsi family feels in Lahore feels the threat of the Subcontinent's partition nipping at their heels. As Parsis, they are neither Muslim nor Hindu nor Sikh, and the central family of the novel is friendly with all three communities. As Lahore goes to the new state of Pakistan, the birthplace of Sikhism is no longer a hospitable place for its adherents as communal riots erupt, and three communities embark on a bloodletting against each other.

The narrator, eight-year-old Lenny, is a precocious young girl, but being eight is confused, disheartened, and terrified by the unraveling of her once-idyllic life. That life was filled with afternoons at the park with her beloved ayah, in the company of the ice-candy man, a Hindu, a Muslim elder who is both servant and caretaker of Lenny's family's home, and a handsome young masseuse whose fondness for Lenny's ayah leads

to terrible consequences for them both. Sidhwa's profound love for Lahore is replete in every sentence. Also evident is her connection to an India that no longer exists, and in large part "died" in the horrendous bloodshed that followed Partition. To recall that time before the madness, before neighbor turned on neighbor, friend against friend, is part of the journey of the imagination as it revisits a lost homeland. The moment of Partition marked for the Indian Subcontinent exactly the beginning of decolonization, embodying the violence that Fanon asserts is part of the process. Communal rioting began in Punjab and Bengal long before independence and Partition, and so, once more keeping in line with Fanon's argument, the violence pre-empting the departure of the colonizer and the violence following their flight, the clash between Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities embodied it to the letter. The result was the creation of a homeland for the millions of the Subcontinent's Muslims, and the loss of homelands for over a million people forced to flee. For Lenny, the Lahore she once knew would never again be, and through her, Sidhwa imagines a nation that can only exist in her imagination.

Adib Khan's *Seasonal Greetings* (1995) uses the Bangladesh Liberation War as the point of departure in telling the story of its protagonist, Iqbal Chaudhary, who leaves home – East Pakistan, future Bangladesh - in the midst of war to begin life anew in Australia. He returns eighteen years later with his Australian wife and their young daughter to a country that is new to him. Chaudhary laments in the novel, "There are occasions when I regret my exposure to the diversity of cultural radiation which has bleached my individuality. I think I know how a travelling performer might feel in his private moments. Effortlessly I can slip into cultural roles." Chaudhary's sense of displacement is further increased when his wife decides she wants a trial separation.

Khan's commentary, through Chaudhary, gathers the dually crushing feelings of alienation in the place of one's birth as well as the land they have adopted as home.

Authors whose works have lent to, and arguably contributed to, the creation of the postcolonial novel in English, and as a specific form in which writers of the Subcontinent have flourished, include Anita Desai, Ruth Jhabvala, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Chandra, Monica Ali, Tahmima Anam, Daniyal Mueenuddin, Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid, K. Anis Ahmed, and an ever-growing list of names covering the expanse of land that includes Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. The novels of Hari Kunzru, namely his first, *The Impressionist*, are case in point of the flexibility with which writers whose roots in some form are tied to the Subcontinent, are constantly investigating the long space of the novel and through it charting the tumultuous, dynamic, and evolving narrative of the postcolonial world – as postcolonial nation, postcolonial state, and postcolonial nation-state, from the abstract to the specific.

My intention in writing *In the Time of the Others* was to situate it alongside these authors' works, as well as to carve out its own place with regards to the specific view it expresses by making the Bangladesh Liberation War its backdrop. While the story is of Imtiaz Khan's rather small quest of acquiring an inheritance left him by his late mother in the care of her brother, the immediacy of unraveling events in Dhaka have a direct affect on both his situation and its outcome. From the southern port city of Chittagong, Imtiaz has felt the growing movement taking shape in Dhaka against the West Pakistani military regime to be a distant reality. That changes within days of his arrival in Dhaka to become, for months, the only reality in which he is engulfed.

My further goal was to go deeper into some fundamental questions, which have been discussed so far in this analysis as critical and theoretical exercises. In a novel, the story must take precedence, as much as relevant themes must find their way into the narrative's central concerns through and by the elements of storytelling. I mean by this that investigating identity, nationality, political status, citizenship is all part of the novel seen through the complex interaction of the characters. Judge Suleiman Mubarak is a Dhaka-born and bred Bengali, but considered and "outsider" because of his Bihari heritage. Bengalis are also East Pakistani, a designation that ultimately becomes unacceptable as that Bengaliness, the Bengali identity, *being* Bengali, is made the chief reason for their oppression and ultimate destruction.

The arrival of Bangladesh at the point of independence and sovereignty is, as I present it, also a moment of coming out of colonial rule under West Pakistan. Herein lies the aspect of my novel, as well as this critical analysis that places it in theoretical context that separates it from others so far written touching on the Bangladesh Liberation War. While Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* also uses the war as its backdrop, and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* has as one of its underlying plotlines the relationship of the war to one of his main character's back story, neither of them address the issue of Bangladesh as a postcolonial state and postcolonial nation-state because that was not their primary concern. My work fills that void, and integral one that has and is often alluded to but not explored through and in fiction.

Bringing my goals and motivation behind writing my novel also leads me to the final part of this section: the importance of the connection of the postcolonial nation and gender on both theoretical levels and the relevance it has on the writing of fiction in the



postcolonial tradition. The relationship between the postcolonial nation – for edification once more that here I mean the postcolonial nation as seen as an abstract social unit in postcolonial fiction, and not the postcolonial state – and women cannot be ignored. It would, in fact, leave a gaping void in any narrative within postcolonial literature.

Approximately 200,000 women were raped/raped and murdered during the Bangladesh Liberation War. This was not an accident, nor collateral damage. Bengali women were targeted as “zones” of carrying out the violence against Bengali identity en masse, of defiling, owning, and destroying it along with the land. Another way of looking at this is that postcolonial nations and their relationship to women have been given primary currency and relevance by patriarchal assumptions. While, as John McLeod points out, “The metaphorical association between woman, mother and nation is familiar to many nationalist discourses where the nation has frequently been depicted iconically as female” (McLeod 75) he adds, “Nationalism is very frequently a *gendered* discourse. It traffics in representations of men and women which serve to reinforce patriarchal inequalities between them. Nationalist representations have been in danger of perpetuating disempowering representations of women in once-colonized countries” (McLeod 75-76).

One point on which I had made an early determination is to include somehow the brutality visited on Bengali women by soldiers of the Pakistan army during the Liberation War. The way to do this in a way that would serve the overall narrative and stand out as a specific event in and of itself was the task I had to negotiate. While the assault on women raged around the region, in cities, towns, and villages, my idea was to show a concentrated example that at once captured the act as both a specific assault on women and an act of war. As a novelist my first job is arguably to write the novel, tell the story,

and make sure the events connect from one to the next in a way that is relevant to the work as a whole. Therefore, tackling the problematic theme of gender and the postcolonial nation, of women as objects on whom the war is enacted with as much savagery as it is on the land and the people en masse poses challenges beyond the scope of a fictional work. I agree that this last point is debatable, but I want to set down here that as a writer of fiction, and the writer of this particular novel I wanted to bring up and bring out first and foremost issues I had not encountered in other fictional accounts using the backdrop of the Liberation War. To an extent, leaving the door open to criticism and discussion is as important as the various ways in which individual readers will process the novel itself.

In *Stories of Women: Gender and narrative in the postcolonial nation* Boehmer writes:

Nationalism, which has been so fundamental to the decolonization process around the world, bears a clear mark for gender, and this gender marking, rather than being referred to a monolithic or transhistorical concept of patriarchy, can be explained as a specific historical development of power defined by sexual difference. Without this marking for gender, it is well nigh impossible to conceive of the modern nation. Whether we look at its iconography, its administrative structures or its policies, the new postcolonial nation is historically a male-constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as bearers of tradition (Boehmer 22).

Here Boehmer offers both a problem and a criticism, both of which are useful when taking into account writing the postcolonial nation in fiction and avoiding that male-constructed space, thereby relegating women as symbols or totems and bearers of tradition. Women were at the forefront of the Bangladesh Liberation War, as activists, demonstrators, and freedom fighters. These facts made my job as a novelist easy in the

sense that I had material from which to construct the factually informed fiction of my novel. In the group of the freedom fighters that is at the center of my narrative, women play a pivotal role of fighting for the space that is going to become Bangladesh. Therefore, connecting that to my proposal of Bangladesh gaining independence as a postcolonial nation (state and nation-state on the political side of the definition) the direct hand of women as creators of that space is immediately and demonstrably relevant.

Another, and more specifically urgent, way of examining this is to consider representation. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raises fundamental questions that lead to the investigation of representation. As Deepika Bahri points out in her contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, “Feminism in/and postcolonialism,” “The lament rose from her [Chakravorty’s] realization that the subaltern in general, and the ‘historically muted subject of the subaltern woman’ in particular, was inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent” (Bahri 199; Chakravorty 295). Bahri adds:

“Spivak’s various meditations on the female subaltern have spawned a series of critiques and responses that raise certain central questions in any discussion of feminism in/and postcolonialism: ‘Who can speak and for whom?’ ‘Who listens?’ ‘How does one represent the self and others?’ Such questions point to heated issues concerning representation and essentialism; the relationship between the First-World intellectual and the Third-World object of scrutiny; the embattled and conflicted position of the Third-World intellectual within the West (Bahri 199).

Bahri’s theoretical framework applies to my novel, and to postcolonial writing about women and the nation/postcolonial nation through the questions she poses, chief among whom for me is “Who can speak and for whom?” The others are equally important, but I am separating this one because as a writer of fiction, a *male* writer of

fiction, I need to be accountable for who indeed I am speaking for. From the point of view of writing fiction, I am speaking for the story. As part of the story, its plot, and its narrative intent and goals, I am creating a world in which human beings, women and men, are in existence. They represent the existence of human beings living in the actual world. The difference is that I am consciously giving them lives, motives, conflicts, and even resolutions to conflicts that serve the story, and through it *their* stories. The question may be posed which story comes first, which one gets primary focus? The answer that I will pose is that they are simultaneous, in rank and importance. Without one the other will have little or no currency in the novel. The characters “happen” to the work of fiction just as much the arc of the story “happens” to them, and *because* of them and their choices.

Bahri makes another point that is an essential part of my work as a writer, specifically a fiction writer working in a genre that still poses and faces issues of “mainstreaming” the works it encompasses. To clarify, these are the exact words I am referring to with regards to the problematic concerns involved in “heated issues concerning representation and essentialism; the relationship between the First-World intellectual and the Third-World object of scrutiny; the embattled and conflicted position of the Third-World intellectual within the West.” In my case, the case of a writer of fiction, “intellectual” connotes more than just an academic or scholar working within only the critical discipline.

Nayanika Mookherjee’s essay “Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh” complements Bahri’s proposals within the frame of this critical analysis. Mookherjee with the claim that “The ideology of woman as mother is a dominant and symbolic imagery through which the

position of the woman becomes visible in national projects. It becomes crucial for national mobilization processes” (Mookherjee 88). Transferred to *In the Time of the Others*, this applies in the sense of women being both guardians of the land that is given their imagery, in the role of freedom fighters, as well as victims, like the land, to the brutalities of warfare. Both are integral parts of the “national mobilization process.” Beyond this statement, Mookherjee goes on to pose some key question that renders problematic these connections of “using motherhood as the dominant image through which women are symbolized in the nationalist project” with regards to women who are not part of that “maternal mould.” She asks, “Does the nationalist project make its public, symbolic space available only to women with specific subjectivities?” The immediate answer she provides is this:

These questions may be best answered by analyzing the processes of gendering that are drawn upon to secure ‘political motherhood.’ Focusing not just on manhood and womanhood but on the processes through which gender roles are embodied enables us to understand the contradictions inherent in the fraught relationship between gender and nation (Mookherjee 88).

From the vantage of writing the postcolonial nation these considerations serve as a bulwark against one-dimensional representations. In other words, in the case of fiction, scenes of mass rape of women by marauding soldiers may create dramatic effect, but the larger issue of the “fraught relationship between gender and nation” may not be immediately clear. For a fiction writer to navigate this fine line between storytelling and didacticism, I believe, is a worthwhile challenge. I do accept Mookherjee’s idea of the “symbolic imagery through which the position of the woman becomes visible in national projects” in the sense of that imagery offering crucial, immediate urgency to the national project that the Pakistan army was bent upon destroying. By raping women by the

thousands, while simultaneously burning the and pillaging the land the fraught relationship between gender and nation were conflated in the Pakistan army's approach of "neutralizing" one by destroying the other. The scene in *In the Time of the Others* where the two army officers visit the "brothel," one playing the willing host, the other the discombobulated tag-along, shows Bengali women kidnapped, taken over, and acted upon, the same as colonial rule, which begins with conquest, and moves on to domination, captivity, and plunder.

I believe that any and all act of writing is an exercise in intellectual rigor, and so, writing within the field and the genre of fiction, not just postcolonial fiction, requires a constant awareness of the environment. Much of it has to do with the market, rather unfortunately, but as a writer living and working in the United States, this aspect cannot be ignored. This adds a different dimension to the Third-World intellectual within the West, because even though fiction considered to be from or about or aligned with the so-called Third World has a substantial niche in the U.S. market, it still needs to be framed into a "mainstream" mode to be accessible to "mainstream" readers. These considerations drive the publisher's motives, which are ultimately tied to investment in a book project and what it will yield. I make this point here because writing the postcolonial novel for a readership that is not learned in postcolonial literary theory, that is, giving them a novel as just a novel without requiring them to understand how to theorize or talk about it only with theoretical language, is the aim of bringing *In the Time of the Others* to mass audience, across the board. My authority as the writer will come through in how I represent, in the specific case of this portion of this section, Bengali women at specific time during a specific event, intellectually straddling the complexities mentioned by

Boehmer and Spivak and Bahri, as well as pulling down distinctions of First-World/Third World binaries in the service of telling a human story.

## CONCLUSION

The crucial role and place of writing in the colonial past of the Indian Subcontinent and its emergence as a postcolonial zone cannot be understated. The intervention of the case of Bangladesh as a postcolonial state and postcolonial nation-state as a political unit, then Bangladesh the postcolonial nation as a written product of postcolonial fiction earns legitimacy the same way that the colonial Subcontinent was captured (pun intended) in colonial era writing and literature, which went on to provide the form (the novel) and content to spur the establishment of the postcolonial novel.

Elleke Boehmer writes:

At its height the British Empire was a vast communications network, a global sprawl of hubris, the world map flushed pink. It was pictured as a machine and yet also as a muddle; it was the Royal Navy and Queen Victoria, and the One Race and One Flag. But it was also represented by texts. Present-day readers, anyway, experience Empire textually, through the medium of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and periodicals, travel writings, scraps of doggerel. Yet Empire was itself, at least in part, a textual exercise. The colonial officer filing a report on affairs in his district, British readers of newspapers and advertisements of the day, administrators who consulted Islamic and Hindu sacred texts to establish a legal system for British India: they too understood colonization by way of text. The Empire in its heyday was conceived and maintained in an array of writings – political treatises, diaries, acts and edicts, administrative records and gazetteers, missionaries' reports, notebooks, memoirs, popular verse, government briefs, letters 'home' and letters back to settlers. The triple-decker novel and the best-selling adventure tale, both definitive Victorian genres, were infused with imperial ideas of race pride and national prowess (Boehmer 13)



True that there was no shortage of imperial ideas of race pride and national prowess in the Victorian novel and other forms of writing produced in that era. The works of Jane Austen have embedded in them the accepted knowledge of empire and how it is benefitting from its various colonial enterprises, from the Subcontinent to the Caribbean. This is especially true in the case of *Mansfield Park*. A transfer to the Bank of India is a way out of Britain for Dickensian upper class socialites, as much as Australia is there as a given, its ownership by its colonial rulers never in dispute in *Great Expectations*. The Nobel Prize-winning bodies of works of Rudyard Kipling and Winston Churchill are the epitome of the greatness of empire and the imperial mission. In Kipling's case his notion of the "white man's burden" as pointed to in his poem of the same name is often misrepresented. The poem's subject was U.S. presence in the Philippines, and had naught to do with British colonial rule in the Indian Subcontinent. Nonetheless, while Kipling's deep regard for the land of his birth (he was born in present-day Mumbai, India) is manifest in his body of work, he was never outwardly or overtly against the idea of British colonial rule or its imperial grandeur.

I appreciate especially the "triple-decker novel and the best-selling adventure tale" as forms through which the colonial representation of the colonized land became a virtual reality. It might seem far-fetched to use a technology-infused term like virtual reality to speak of a time when no such thing existed as we know it today, but a British reader sitting in London and reading any of the triple-decker novels or best-selling adventure tales would be left with images and places and people summoned through words, and a landscape left to the powers of the mind to be constructed, which, of course, is still one of the great pleasures of reading. But considering it from the perspective of race pride and

national prowess, the reality created in the mind of the British reader in London of the place colonized by her/his country would be one guided solely by the powers of domination; that is, a reality other than what the Indian Subcontinent looked like in actuality, and one that accommodated the conception of the colonial mind at a distance rather than provide it an honest rendering, as best as possible through words only. Therefore, a virtual reality, a reality made up of reordering actuality, calling a space something other than its name, attaching signifiers to it for which language must be invented or reorganized, exercising ownership over land, peoples, and cultures: colonization, empire.

Writing, therefore, was at the inception of empire, and writing became the natural vessel of postcolonial movements to reclaim narratives that had been subdued or altogether erased, written out. Everything mode of writing from speeches to poetry to pamphlets, journals, and newspapers, pushed forward the cause of “home rule” in the Indian Subcontinent, long before the end of British rule. In the postcolonial era, writers bridled the power of the novel, which once, as Boehmer stated, was the medium of race pride and national prowess, to undo the narrative of Empire, to reinvigorate lost stories, or to tell stories of the “native” land in opposition to the negative portrayals upheld by the colonizer for centuries. Appropriating the English novel was a direct form of resistance, an uprising of voices that had been held down and at the same time mis-presented and misrepresented. Writing the nation, writing stories, writing representations of peoples and cultures was a natural extension and combination of the form of the English novel and the postcolonial surge of voices became a natural practice. By the beginning of the eighth decade of the twentieth century, the contact zone-created third space had come alive. In it

English, the language, was taken as much to task as had the British Empire taken its colonial spaces to extreme trials, against which it had to persevere or perish.

Appropriation now went the other way. The co-mingling of English and Englishmen with the “native” and the “native” languages of the Indian Subcontinent showed the unalterable, irreversible bond that was created. Postcolonial fiction took on the task of putting Empire on trial by its own methods.

In these contexts writing about Bangladesh, the Liberation War, and the postcolonial nation status of the political state/nation-state of Bangladesh, has a long way to go. I do not mean in this as a lament, but am rather heartened by the space that remains to be filled, even as it is being filled with a burgeoning body of work by Bangladeshi authors writing in English. While fiction is on a path that I see producing eminent works, on the critical end the case of the Bangladesh Liberation War and independent Bangladesh deserve, and require, much more attention. A recent critical work on the topic of the Liberation War was Sharmila Bose’s *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (2011). Here is a good example of her approach and proposal in it:

Pakistani discussions on 1971 are full of bitter recriminations, mostly with regard to losing to India, with deafening silence from the majority of those who had served in East Pakistan. The Bangladeshi refrain, by contrast, plays volubly and melodramatically on the theme of Pakistani ‘villains’ and Bengali ‘victims,’ often with scant regard for factual accuracy or analytical sophistication. The material from all parties to the conflict is relentlessly partisan, with the Bangladeshi ones infused with a deep sense of grievance that their suffering has not been given due acknowledgment in the world. Yet, in spite of the passage of three decades, Bangladeshis collectively failed to produce well-researched, documented and thoughtful histories of 1971 which might influence world opinion with any degree of credibility (Bose 5).

My immediate reaction to this was antipathy. While I reserve wholesale acceptance of her assessment, what I do concede is the need for “well-researched, documented histories” of the Liberation War. One cannot divorce recrimination or what Bose calls “melodramatic” from the topic altogether, but for the production of studies that would first and foremost treat the topic as a scholarly endeavor, objective distance is absolutely paramount. Factual accuracy is problematic because the facts have so long been tapered to fit the perspective of the teller: for example, the pervasive sense that I have encountered among Indians being that India “liberated” Bangladesh, or “gave” Bangladesh its independence, with little or no acknowledgment of the alliance in the final weeks of 1971 between the Mukti Bahini, Bengali officers that had defected from the armed forces of Pakistan, and Indian forces. Therefore, factual accuracy must account for *all* relevant facts from a neutral perspective, being concerned neither with whose contribution was more, whose less, and which side gets the lion’s share of accolades.

*In the Time of the Others* was an exercise in grappling with a complex, often mystifying, and always disturbing account of an event in twentieth century world history that deserves as much attention as the century’s other great and tragic moments. Writing it allowed me untangle the chaos and the romance that had lived in my head and in my heart since the first stories of the Liberation War I inherited from my parents. Examining East Pakistan as a colonial era expanded possibilities for me with the subject beyond the arena of fiction. It is at once an end and a beginning, and at the best of times I can hope for it to be a continual process of discovery.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### SUMMARY OF QUALIFICATIONS

- Ph.D. in Humanities – Fiction and Postcolonial Studies
- Undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and English Literature
- Two years experience working in the journalism field as reporter and editor
- Graduate degree (Master of Arts) in Humanities with concentration on Fiction, Post Colonial Studies, and Literature
- Published writer of short fiction
- Motivated, disciplined, and creative in writing endeavors with current, publishable work.
- Widely read and studied in American and British Literature (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century), proficiency with classical texts (Shakespeare), South Asian works written in English.

### SUMMARY OF SKILLS

- Proficient in the genre of literary fiction, Post Colonial studies, cross-cultural narratives. Particularly familiar with Diaspora writing and literature from South Asia (Bangladesh, India).
- Fluent in Bengali (Speak, read, and write); Language proficiency passed in Spanish for graduate work, with emphasis on Spanish to English translation.
- Proficient with MLA style.
- Editing
- Proofreading
- Working knowledge of interacting with editors and publishers

## PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

### EDUCATION

**Ph.D.**, in Humanities - University of Louisville: Department of Comparative Humanities (Public Arts and Letters, Fiction, Postcolonial Studies). Dissertation comprising creative and critical theoretical components: A novel entitled *In the Time of the Others*; Critical Analysis

theorizing the novel and its subject entitled “Postcolonial Colony: Bangladesh As A Case Study of the Postcolonial State and Postcolonial Nation-State from Colonized East Pakistan to Independence Through the Liberation War of 1971.”

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**M.A.**, University of Louisville (May 2013) Humanities (Fiction and Postcolonial Studies)

**B.A.**, University of Illinois at Chicago (December 1998) English – Creative Writing

### **DIRECTED STUDY PROJECT: THESIS (toward completion of M.A.)**

#### **Land, Belonging, Home: Identity, Transformation, and the Imaginary Homeland in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses***

Director: Dr. Annette Allen

Advisors: Dr. Simona Bertacco, Dr. Matthew Biberman

Abstract Summary: In *The Satanic Verses* (1989) Salman Rushdie uses his two protagonists to examine how the homeland of birth is permanently lost, and may be revisited by reimagining it through creativity, namely fiction. Within the framework of Post Colonial Studies, exile narratives rank high. The concept of the “Other” as defined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) is a pivotal point of reference as the two characters in Rushdie’s novel, both natives of India, traverse their shifting identities and the meaning of “home” after becoming British citizens. Rushdie’s fiction, entrenched in the narrative of the Diaspora, and seminal in its place within Post Colonial Studies in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, strives to bridge the gap between the lost and the re-imagined homeland.

### **PUBLICATIONS (Fiction)**

- **“Running the Show”** Elsewhere Lit (*Literary Journal*) Winter/Spring 2017
- **“Changing Hands”** WinningWriters.com (*Literary Online Journal*) Honorable Mention in the Tom Howard/John H. Reid Fiction & Essay Contest, Fall 2016
- **“Holy Magic”** Cha: An Asian Literary Magazine (*Literary Journal*) Fall 2016
- **“This Is the Way the World Ends”** Open Road Review (*Literary Journal*) Summer 2016
- **“Dual Income”** The East Bay Review (*Literary Journal*) Summer 2015
- **“Adulteress”** The Roanoke Review (*Literary Journal*) Spring 2015
- **“The Forced Witness”** The Milo Review (*Literary Journal*) Spring 2015
- **“The Mutineer”** The Copperfield Review (*Literary Journal*) Spring 2015

- “**Morning Kill**” I-70 Review (*Literary Journal*) Fall 2015
- “**Mr. Ranjan’s Student**” Eastlit Journal (*Literary Journal*), March 2015
- “**The Applicant**,” China Grove (*Literary Journal*) August 2013
- “**The Tutor**,” 94 Creations (*Literary Journal*), Chicago, IL, May 2007
- “**I Love You, Too**,” Farmhouse Magazine (*Online Literary Journal*) June 2007
- **Various reportage**, India Tribune (*Weekly*), Chicago, IL Mar. 2002-Oct. 2003

#### **AWARDS & RECOGNITION**

- Tom Howard/John H. Reid Fiction & Essay Contest: Honorable Mention 2016
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#### **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

##### **University of Louisville – Graduate Teaching Assistant** Fall 2016-Spring 2017

- Instruction in course titled “World Literature after 1700” as part of Humanities credit for non-majors (Spring 2017)
- Instruction in course titled “Cultures of America” as part of Humanities credit in diversity for non majors (Fall 2016)
- Use literature (fiction, drama, non-fiction, poetry) to instruct on cultural influences America: Native American, African American, Asian-American.
- Use assignments based on readings, and critical writing projects, to gauge students’ understanding of and engagement with material

##### **University of Louisville – Graduate Teaching Assistant** Fall 2015-Spring 2016

- Instruction in course titled “Creativity and the Arts”
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##### **Ivy Tech Community College/Clarksville High School** Winter/Spring 2015

- Instruction in dual credit course for Honors High School Seniors
- Instruction in Argument and Persuasion, Critical Analysis, Thinking, and Writing
- Aristotelian, Toulmin, Inductive, Deductive models of argument
- Instruction in discussing assigned articles on topics of current relevance and ongoing debates
- In class writing assignments based on prompts
- Develop, draft, and produce multiple drafts of term paper based on Argument and Persuasion
- Evaluate through mid-term and final exam the progress of students
- Maintain grades on Blackboard
- Report all progress and grades to Ivy Tech Community College point of contact

##### **Sullivan College of Technology and Design**

Winter/Spring 2015

- English Fundamentals Core Course
- Instruction on the reading and discussion of contemporary literature (short story and the novel)

- Instruction on producing written work based on multiple drafts, reviews, and instructor feedback
- Regular in-class reading and writing assignments based on assigned short stories
- Maintain progress and grades of students and report directly to Dean

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

Louisville Literary Arts, Board Member  
The Bardstown Theater

March 2017-Present  
Jan. 2011-Present

**REFERENCES**

Available Upon Request