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In Other Rooms, Other Wonders

By Daniyal Mueenuddin

Husna needed a job. She stole up the long drive to the Lahore house of the retired civil servant and landlord K. K. Harouni, bearing in her little lacquered fingers a letter of introduction from, of all people, his estranged first wife. The butler, knowing that Husna served the old Begum Harouni in an indefinite capacity, somewhere between maidservant and companion, did not seat her in the living room. Instead he put her in the office of the secretary, who every afternoon took down in shorthand a few pages of Mr. Harouni's memoirs, cautiously titled *Perhaps This Happened*.

Ushered into the living room by the secretary after a quarter of an hour, Husna gazed around her, as petitioners do, more tense than curious, taking in the worn gold brocade on the sofa, a large Chinese painting of horsemen over the rosewood mantel. Her attention was drawn to ranks of black-and-white photographs in silver frames, hunters wearing shooting caps posed with strings of birds or piles of game, several of women in saris, their hair piled high in the style of the fifties, one in riding breeches, with an oversized dedication in looping script. To the side stood a photo of Harouni in a receiving line shaking the hand of a youthful Jawaharlal Nehru.

The door opened, and Mr. Harouni walked in, a mild look on his handsome golden face. Placing a file on the table in front of him, the secretary flipped through the pages and showed the old man where to sign, murmuring, "Begum Sahiba has sent this young miss with a letter, sir."

Although he had an excellent memory, and knew the lineage of all the old Lahore families, K.K. allowed Husna to explain in detail her relation to him, which derived from his grandmother on his mother's side. The senior branch of the family consolidated its lands and amassed power under the British, who made use of the landowning gentry to govern. Husna's family, a cadet branch, had not so much fallen into poverty as failed to rise. Her grandfather had still owned thirty or forty shops in the Lahore Old City, but these were sold off before the prices increased, when Lahore grew in the 1950s and 1960s. Encouraged by K.K., given tea and cakes, Husna forgot herself, falling into the common, rich Punjabi of the inner city. She told with great emphasis a story about her mother, who remembered having

fallen and broken her teeth on the steps leading into the courtyard of a lost family home, which were tall and broad to accommodate the enormous tread of a riding elephant, emblematic of the family's status.

Husna was silent for a moment, then narrowed her eyes, collected herself. "In this world some families rise and some fall," she said, suddenly cold rather than postulant. "And now I've come to you for help. I'm poor and need a job. Even Begum Harouni agrees that I should have a profession. My father can give me nothing, he's weak and has lost his connections. Everyone says I should marry, but I won't."

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Outside the drawing room, overlooking a side patio, a gardener switched on yard lights, illuminating a cemented swimming pool half filled with rainwater and leaves. A servant came in with an armful of wood, threw it with a crash into the fireplace, then took a bottle of kerosene and poured a liberal splash. He threw in a match and the fire roared up. For a minute he sat on his haunches by the fire, grave before this immemorial mystery, then broke the spell, rose, and left the room.

A car drove into the long circular driveway, and a brushed-looking elderly couple entered the room. Coming up and kissing Harouni on the cheek, the woman said in a husky voice, "Hello, darling." The man, gray beside his brightly dressed companion, mustache trimmed, waited to one side.

"Hello, Riffat," said Harouni, kissing her on the top of the head and then going over to the wall and pressing a bell. "Will you have a drink, Husky?"

The man glanced at his wife. "I'll have a small whiskey."

The woman eyed Husna, as if pricing her, and Husna shrank into herself. She hadn't been prepared for this. The visitor wore a pinkish *kurta*, too young for her but certainly very expensive, finely printed with a silver design.

"This is Husna," said K.K. to the woman, who had taken a seat on the sofa beside the young girl. "Husna will graduate soon and is looking for a teaching position."

"How interesting," said the woman, her voice confiding and smoky.

They had been speaking in English, and Husna exposed her poor accent, saying, "It is very good to meet you."

Two servants carried in a tea trolley and placed it before the newcomer, and Rafik, the butler who had seated Husna in the secretary's office, brought two whiskeys on a small silver tray.

"Cheers," said Husky, taking a sip and very slightly smacking his lips. "How nice to have a fire."

Riffat Begum poured out tea, offering a cup to Husna. The conversation wandered, and Riffat looked meaningfully at Husna once or twice. When she went out in society with Begum Harouni, Husna was not a guest, not even really a presence, but a recourse for the old lady, to fetch and carry, to stay beside her so that the begum would not be left sitting alone. Unable now to meet the occasion, Husna followed the conversation from face to face, sinking, the skin around her mouth taut as if frozen. Abruptly she stood up, catching a foot on the tea trolley, rattling the cups and saucers.

“Thank you, Uncle, for your help and your kind advice,” she said, although K.K. had given her no advice whatsoever. She meant this as an opening to him, at least as a reproach.

“Let me have the car drop you.” He followed Husna out into the verandah, while the driver brought the car. “First of all, you need to develop some skills,” he said. “Why don’t you learn to type? Come tomorrow and I’ll arrange for Shah Sahib to give you lessons.”

As she got in the car he gave her a fatherly kiss on the cheek.

When he returned to the living room, Riffat raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. “Naughty naughty,” she said, exhaling a cloud of cigarette smoke.

K.K. took a sip of whiskey. “At my age, my dear, she’s in no danger.” Husna came every few days for typing lessons. She would sit in the dark little office off the living room, inconveniencing Shah Sahib, the secretary, who could not continue his own work till she had abandoned her weak efforts. He tried to show her the correct technique, but she refused to learn, and insisted upon typing by hunt and peck, getting through her daily half page as quickly as possible. One of the servants would bring her a cup of mixed tea, which she drank with Shah Sahib, who also at that time received two slices of grilled cheese toast, a treat that made his stomach growl, and one that he ensured by being of service to the cook, passing his bills without question.

K. K. Harouni, who had been a polo and tennis player until he suffered a heart attack seven years earlier, took a walk morning and evening, totaling exactly four miles each day. Usually he went from end to end of the serpentine back garden, but a few days after Husna began her lessons, a winter rain wet the grass. Mildly enjoying the break in routine, that evening he walked on the brick-paved front driveway, looping around a circular lawn and through a carport in which a misplaced glass chandelier cast a friendly yellow light.

At dusk he heard a rickshaw enter the drive and park at the far end, next to the gatekeeper’s shelter, its two-stroke engine crackling. After a moment a figure stepped from the door of the secretary’s office and tripped rapidly down toward the gate. Lengthening his stride, K.K. came up behind her.

“Hello, Husna,” he said.

She stopped and turned. As before, she wore too much makeup and clothes too bright. She held her large white purse on a long chain over one shoulder, and had covered her hair with a *dupatta*. “Hello, Uncle,” she said, her face involuntarily stretching into a broad smile.

“You’re very cheerful. And how are your lessons?”

“Thank you, Uncle,” she said.

“Why don’t you walk with me?”

“My ride is waiting.” She spoke timidly, for she felt ashamed to be seen taking a rickshaw, which only poor people used.

“Tell him to go, and later the driver can take you.”

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They began walking, Husna taking two strides to every one of his, clicking along in her heels. Her feet began to hurt, and whenever they came to a puddle he would step aside and allow her to go first, so that she had to hurry awkwardly in front of him.

“Those shoes aren’t good for walking,” he said, looking at her from behind as she skirted a puddle. “Your feet are hurting, aren’t they?”

“No, it’s fine, really it is.” She didn’t want to lose this chance of his company.

“Why don’t you take them off. Don’t be shy, there’s no one here.”

“You’re joking with me, Uncle.”

Hesitating for a moment, she reached down and undid the straps, her hand tentatively on his shoulder.

When they came to the next puddle, he stopped, amused. “And now that you’re barefoot, let’s see you jump over the puddle.”

Quickening, she glanced at him sideways, still a girl at twenty, still playing tag with her cousins in the courtyard of her parents’ home; and yet now aware of men’s eyes flickering over her as she walked through the lanes of the Old City.

He took her hand and swung it. “One, two, three, over you go!”

She hesitated for moment, refusing the jump, then leapt, landing just at the edge and splashing.

“Try again, the second one!” he urged, and she jumped the next puddle, clearing it with a bump, then turning to face him, laughing.

“Well done! I’ve had ponies that couldn’t do as well.”

“Now you *are* joking with me.”

Rafik came out to the drive and reported a telephone call from K.K.’s youngest daughter, Sarwat, who was married to a tremendously wealthy industrialist and

lived in Karachi. He went inside, walking unhurriedly, and Husna sat down in one of the chairs placed in the verandah for the petitioners who came each morning, asking the old man for letters to government officials or asking for work on his farms.

Rafik stood next to her, relaxed, looking out into the night. He glanced at her bare feet but made no comment.

“So, Husna Bibi,” he said, “how are the good people over at Begum Sahib’s house? How is Chacha Latif?”

Chacha Latif played the corresponding role of butler in the house of K.K.’s estranged wife, and Rafik maintained cordial relations with him. As a matter of comity they kept each other informed of household gossip.

Understanding this oblique reference to the fact that Chacha Latif treated her with little ceremony, as an equal, Husna sweetly replied, “He’s well, Uncle, thank you.”

“Give him my regards, young lady,” said Rafik, settling the matter.

K. K. Harouni came out and resumed walking with Husna. Finishing two measured miles, twenty rounds, he invited her to dinner, asking for it on a trolley in the living room, which would be less intimidating for her.

As she rode home in the back seat of K.K.’s large if old car, looking at the back of the chauffeur’s immense head, Husna’s complex thoughts ran along several lines. Given to fits of crushing gray lassitude and then to sunny, almost hysterical moments, she had always believed she would escape the gloominess of her parents’ house in an unfashionable part of the city. She would escape the bare concrete steps, layered with dust, leading up into rooms without windows, the walls painted bright glossy colors, as if to make up for the gloom, the television covered with an embroidered cloth. She had spoiled herself with daydreams, until her parents were afraid of her moods. She despised them for living so much in the past, retelling the stories of their grandparents’ land and money, and yet at the same time she felt entitled to rejoin that world and felt aggrieved for being excluded from it. Her pride took the form of stubbornness—like others who rise above their station, she refused to accept her present status. Taking service in an ambiguous position with Begum Harouni had been the greatest concession she ever made to her mediocre prospects, and having made this concession increased her determination to rise, although she had no idea how to go about it.

Husna knew that she could never hope to marry or attract a young man from one of the rich established families. Wearing clothes just better than those of a maidservant, she saw them from a distance at the weddings to which she accompanied Begum Harouni. At that time, in the 1980s, the old barons still dominated the government, the prime minister a huge feudal landowner. Their sons, at least

the quick ones, the adapted ones, became ministers at thirty, immaculate, blowing through dull parties, making an appearance, familiar with their elders, on their way to somewhere else, cool rooms where ice and alcohol glowed on the table, those rooms where deals were made; as she imagined them blowing through foreign airports, at ease in European cities that she read about. She would even have sought a place in the demimonde of singers and film actresses, bright and dangerous creatures from poor backgrounds—no upper-class woman would dream of entering those professions—but she had neither talent nor beauty. Only determination and cunning distinguished her, invisible qualities.

The chauffeur, knowing without being told that Husna would not wish to be seen coming home late at night in the old man's car, dropped her just inside the gate of the house in fashionable Gulberg. K.K. gave this house to his wife when finally and uncharacteristically he made a firm decision and told her she must leave. Unable to keep Harouni's attention, barely out of *purdah*, she had tried amulets, philters, spells—he joked to his friends that she would end up poisoning him by accident. But one day she came into the verandah off his bedroom, where he and a lady friend were having tea and innocently playing rummy. A woman with a sharp temper, she stood humped and spitting in Punjabi, "Leave my house, leave my husband alone, you witch!" And Harouni's friend, a convent-schooled society woman who barely spoke Punjabi and had only a vague idea who this lady might be, kept asking, "But what's she saying, K.K.? Should I leave?" He had not, however, divorced his wife, having no intention of remarrying and no desire to humiliate her. Old Begum Harouni thereafter lived in a state of suspended equilibrium, hoping to be recalled to her husband's side. She would naturally have been furious to learn that Husna had just eaten dinner alone with K.K.

Husna cautiously walked up the straight, long drive, bordered with bougainvillea and jasmine. She went to the back, where the servants lay in a courtyard under blankets, and slipped through the open kitchen door, through the filthy kitchen, which smelled of garlic and curry, and into the heavily carpeted dining room. Over the fireplace, which had not been lit in years, she saw her face in a mirror. The irregularity of her features, her straight, dry hair, her small mouth, all caused her to cringe inwardly and suddenly to feel vulnerable, to feel the stupidity of a few remembered comments that escaped her that evening. She felt the immensity of her encounter with K. K. Harouni. The old lady didn't wake when Husna crept in, but almost at dawn called her, saying she couldn't sleep, and told the young girl to massage her legs.

Husna continued going for lessons, and thrice in the first weeks walked with K.K., who then sent her home in the car. She tried to limit these encounters, fearing that Begum Harouni would discover the growing relationship and would send her

away, back to her parents. On the days when she allowed herself to see him, Husna would sit in the office after the secretary left, beside a window that overlooked the long garden where K.K. walked. She didn't read, but sat at the desk surrounded by books both in English and Urdu, her chin resting on her hands. She did not even plan, but floated through images.

Seeing a girl her age stepping from a large new car in Liberty Market, among the expensive shops, or glittering in a pair of diamond drops at a wedding, Husna's mind would hang on these symbols of wealth, not letting go for hours. She sensed that all this might come to her through Harouni, if she became his mistress. In the Old City where she grew up, the neighborhood pointed with shaming fingers at women from less than respectable families who were kept by merchants. The eyes of these creatures glided over the crowd as they rode on *tongas*, emerging untouched from dark streets where sewage flowed in the drain, prominent as targets in brightest red silk, lipstick, gold. Husna's mother ground out remarks of the price to be paid, broken relations with family, broken old age.

The young girl's fear of Harouni had dissipated, and she let herself be seen, critical, quick-witted, sensual, and slightly crude. Not despite but because of his sophistication, he found her manner piquant. She behaved and spoke unlike the women he normally met, for she had always inhabited an indefinite space, neither rich nor poor, neither servant nor begum, in a city where the very concept of a middle class still found expression only in a few households, managers of foreign banks and of the big industrial concerns, sugar and textiles and steel. As a boy Harouni slept with maidservants; lost his virginity to one of them at fourteen. Husna evoked those ripe first encounters.

Six weeks after Husna's first walk with K.K., Begum Harouni announced a pilgrimage to the holy places, in order to perform the *hajj*. Husna decided that evening to bring the begum's impending departure into the conversation, before guests came and interrupted them. She had begun to understand the management of the old man, how to introduce subjects.

When he entered the living room for afternoon tea, K.K. heard the typewriter clacking in the background. It stopped, and then Husna knocked, opened the door, showed her head without entering.

"Come in, my dear."

Her cultivation of the butler Rafik had progressed, to the point that, without being asked, he included an extra cup on the tea trolley. She drew herself forward and made K.K.'s tea exactly as he liked it. A boy passed a plate of biscuits, while Rafik stood back on his heels by the door.

"When I'm here," said Husna, "everything is so nice and everyone is pleasant. These biscuits, the tea. Shah Sahib tries so hard to teach me the typing, though

I can't seem to learn." She held out her hands and spread the fingers in front of him, like a cat stretching. "My hands are so tiny, I can't reach the keys. But then all of me is small."

She wore a fitted *kurta*, showing the cleft of her breasts, which jutted out from her muscular youthful torso. Their eyes met; they both saw the joke, and he allowed himself a tight-lipped smile, his normally placid expression becoming knowing and avid.

"That's what I've been telling you about," purred Husna, putting her hand on his arm. "Your crocodile smile, the one I like."

After pausing for a moment to clear the air, she lowered her eyes and said in a meek voice, "But soon I won't be able to come here. The begum is going on *hajj*, so I'll have to be in charge of her house."

"Not *hajj* again!" said K.K. "It's becoming a vice with her. But darling, don't be ridiculous. If she's away you can come even more regularly."

"When the begum is gone they don't cook any food at all, just the servants' food. I go sometimes into the bazaar to eat. And Begum Sahiba doesn't like me to use the electricity."

"You poor thing," said K.K. "And you ask so little."

Husna's eyes became moist. "Yesterday Begum Sahiba had gone out when I got back to the house, and she had locked all the doors and taken the keys with her. I stood under the trees in front for three hours. And if I eat anything from the refrigerator she becomes angry at me. And when she's gone on *hajj* the servants will take liberties, they make jokes and want me to sit with them. She won't leave me any money." She wiped her eyes with her *dupatta*, head cast down. "When Begum Sahiba is harsh, what can I do?"

"Come, little one," said K.K., patting the sofa next to him. "Come sit here. Don't cry." K. K. Harouni avoided unpleasantness at all costs, for he lived in a world as measured and as concentric as that of the Sun King at Versailles. He did not like to see her cry, because it upset him. She stepped out around the tea table, wiping a tear with one arm, and then slipped into the place next to him and nestled under his arm, still tearful, but now muffling her face in his sweater. He stroked her hair.

"Now stop," he said. "Why don't you come stay here while the begum is on *hajj*? I'll have them fix up the rooms in the annex."

Husna looked out from under her eyelashes and smiled weakly. "Oh, I would like that too much. Then I could keep you company when you're alone and make your tea for you. And I would practice typing every day for a long time. And I'll study for the M.A. exams."

K.K. cared nothing for what his wife or the servants thought. He ordered the annex to be prepared, a suite of rooms built over garages at the far side of the compound. The rooms had been refurbished several years earlier, when important guests from India came for a long stay, and so Husna would live in better quarters than ever before in her life, with uninterrupted supplies of good food, servants who more or less did her bidding, and occasional use of the car. To Husna it felt like a validation, almost like revenge, and yet with the bitterness of triumph after humiliation.

Husna simply disappeared from the house in Gulberg. Begum Harouni learned of her departure from the servants. The old lady stormed in to see her husband but found him impervious to her outrage.

“I’ll never take that little . . . *thing* back into my house,” said Begum Harouni. “Imagine! I picked her from the dirt, from nothing, and I fed and clothed her.”

“It reflects well upon you, my dear,” responded K.K. placidly.

Husna brought over her shabby luggage to the house on Danepur Lane, a brown suitcase bulging and strapped. She had clothes and shoes, not much else, arriving in a rickshaw, the facts soon communicated through the house among the snickering community, washermen, drivers, sweepers, household servants. After Begum Harouni had gone on the pilgrimage Husna asked K.K. for the use of the car, and went back to the house. At first the butler, Chacha Latif, would not let her in, but Husna raised her voice and became abusive, and the servant, knowing that she might later be in a position to injure him, let her do what she wanted. All the closets had been locked, but she found a few of her things, a pile of Indian movie magazines, a little dish with an image of the Eiffel Tower that her grandfather brought home from a European tour in the 1920s. When she went out, she found K.K.’s driver speaking with Chacha Latif.

“What does he say?” said Husna to the driver as they returned along Jail Road, driving in and out of shadow under flame-of-the-forest trees planted a hundred years ago.

“Nothing, Bibi,” said Samundar Khan.

“Nothing? Not anything at all?” replied Husna, speaking in sharp Punjabi. And then, leaning back in the seat, patronizingly, “You drivers are always the clever ones.”

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A week after she moved into the annex, Husna slept with K. K. Harouni. He had visitors for lunch, a State Bank governor, another old civil service friend, and his cousin, the retired General Karim, along with their wives. They took lunch in the

room known as “the White Verandah,” shaded by a pipul tree and overlooking a little side garden. Already, in early April, the ceiling fans barely kept the room cool. Husna remained in the annex, reading a dull and badly printed history of the Sikh Wars, in which K.K.’s ancestors fought, then set it aside. Though she wanted to make herself interesting to the old man, reading serious books, she never finished what she began, instead lapsing into daydreams or reading secondhand fashion magazines that she bought from a used book stall. A servant boy brought her a tray of food, the same food that the cook served to K.K. and his guests.

From her perch in the rooms above the garage Husna watched the guests emerge into the portico, continue speaking to Harouni for what seemed to her an interminable period, then drive away. Soon afterward, a servant came to ask Husna if she would join Harouni for green tea in the garden. She walked past the formal dining room and along a corridor hung with darkened portraits of his ancestors and with photographs of him and his family in the first half of the century. She felt intimidated by this house, by its heavy gloomy air, which contrasted with K.K.’s light manner, and looked almost uncomprehendingly upon the strange and numerous objects scattered about, the ivory scabbard of a Chinese sword, a carved walnut love seat from Kashmir, numerous brass and copper figurines of Hindu gods. The house smelled of dusty carpets and disinfectant and wood polish. K.K. sat under a tree in an old railway chair, with two cups of green tea on a table. She took one and sat down.

“Hello, girl,” he said, pleased to see her, fed and mellow. “How lovely it is.” Old trees were scattered around the receding lawn, creating areas of shade where the grass wouldn’t grow. A row of mulberry trees just ripening at the far end attracted sugar-heavy bees, which sipped the purple berries hanging from the branches and littering the ground. Overhead, in the bleached sky, kites and vultures wheeled at a great height on the afternoon thermals, as if the sky itself were slowly turning.

Draining the tea, he said, “Well, my dear, it’s time for my rest.”

“Let me massage you, Uncle,” she suggested, blushing. Though her ambition always tolled in the background, she had come to respect him genuinely, his unstudied fairness, his gaiety, his integrity and openness, plain and light and valuable as a metal unknown in her world. She wanted to keep her part of the bargain, and had only herself to give. It hurt her that it was so little; she imagined that her body, her virtue, meant almost nothing to her.

She followed him into his bedroom. Rafik had already closed the curtains and laid out his pajamas.

“You needn’t wake me,” he said to Rafik, who stood by the door and who knew very well the routine to be observed on such an afternoon.

Of course she was a virgin, and that touched him. Letting him do exactly as he wanted, throughout she wore a look in her eyes that he misunderstood as surprise and shyness, and later identified with moods that verged on madness—sequences of perplexity and focus in her eyes, expressing her hooded rage to get what she wanted. She had expected this to be as simple as the signing of a check, a payment. Instead, for a moment the romantic girl awoke, who would have accepted another man, one her own age, from her own station.

Goodbye to the life she would never have, a life she despised, economies that she would never make as she cooked and kept house for a clerking husband in the Old City, one of the boys who might have accepted her hand. She and that husband might have gone away, might have moved out to the new suburbs of Lahore—the ones out past Model Town, grids of streets laid out in wheat fields or untended orchards, no houses yet built. The moment with K. K. meant a great deal to her, but not in the way that he understood it—without meaning to, she had given herself completely. She could pretend later to be a virgin; or someone would take her even knowing she wasn't. A marriage could always be arranged, it was always a bargain, a deal. But she knew then that she wouldn't have another man, because any man after this would have to be a compromise, a salary man.

Late in the afternoon she put on her clothes, languid and shy in her movements, and slipped away to the annex. This nap became their routine.

When he had no guests, K.K. ate lunch with Husna. Rafik served the food with care, the dishes on from the left, off from the right, the napkins starched and arranged like a fan by the plate. In May now the air-conditioning had been turned on. In this room, the coolest in the house, Husna felt most intimidated. She sat at his right, at the far end of the long table that could seat eighteen, and spoke little. Over the past month she had learned which utensils to use, but still did not use them gracefully. K.K. chewed his food exactly ten times before swallowing.

As Rafik brought in a cheese soufflé one afternoon, a car drove into the portico behind K.K. He had his back to the window and did not turn. They heard the creaking of the carved swinging doors, taken from K.K.'s ancestral home in the Old City, and then the visitor, a middle-aged woman, pushed into the dining room.

"Hello, Daddy," she said. "Isn't this cozy!" She had a tinkling laugh which, while it did not seem entirely genuine, by its musicality caused the hearer to join her in a heightened response, like a painting that one knows to be good, although unmoved by it.

K.K. rose, seeming suddenly frail and old next to her vivid personality, and kissed his youngest daughter on the forehead.

"Hello, darling. When did you get in?"

“Just now, on the eleven o’clock flight. I’m here because Pinky’s daughter got secretly engaged. Don’t ask!”

They sat down, including Husna, who had also risen.

“This is Husna,” said K.K., “Mian Nasiruddin’s daughter.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Sarwat maliciously, looking not at Husna’s face but at her person, hunched across the table. “I met her at Mummy’s.”

Rafik brought in a mat and laid a place for Sarwat. “Good lord, Rafik,” she commented, rearranging the cutlery, “you’re getting even fatter.”

Sarwat settled back into her chair. She wore an understated tan sari, a gold watch, several unusual rings, a star sapphire and a Burmese pigeon-blood ruby. Her salt-and-pepper hair, worn up in a high chignon, lengthened her still beautiful face; and her slender manicured body suggested lotions and expensive soaps, a hairdresser and a masseuse, idleness and ease. In all she looked rich and sleek and voluptuous. Even at fifty she still had admirers, and it had become a convention among the circle in which she moved to speak of her lovely gray eyes.

“I am very glad to meet you,” said Husna. “I have heard so much about you.” Her head had sunk into her shoulders.

Sarwat looked down at the girl with a wolfish grin, almost spoke, then turned to her father. “You look well, Daddy.”

He had resumed eating, and with his mouth full, raised a fork, as if to say, You can see for yourself.

“Tell me, what do you know about the Talpur boy, the son of Bilqis Talpur? Mumtaz went off and got engaged to him, and Pinky’s absolutely livid. That’s why she called me here. I can only stay for a minute, I told her I’d be at her house just after lunch.”

K.K., who took these matters seriously, put down his fork. “I spent time with his grandfather when I was posted to Leiah. The old man had a bit of a temper, and of course you know about the father. You should speak to Wali, the boy was at Aitchison with him, a year before or a year after.”

Husna broke in. “He is very handsome.”

Sarwat looked at her in amazement, as if the furniture had spoken. “Tell me about the land,” she said to her father.

“It’s good land, on the river. The family used to hold a big parcel near the city, and that would be enormously valuable.” He looked at her, raising a warning eyebrow. “But then they say that Adnan spent the last thirty years drinking it away.”

Finishing the meal, they rose to have green tea in the living room.

As they stood, Sarwat said to Husna, “I’d like to be alone with my father, please,” and then proceeded through the door without waiting for a reply.

K.K. followed her into the living room. Sarwat sat down on a sofa and tucked her

feet under herself, leaning against a large pillow. "Really, Daddy," she began. "I can imagine keeping her around, but to sit and have lunch with her, that's too much. You're becoming eccentric, you really are."

"She comes from a good family," said K.K. "Her great-grandfather owned more land than yours. But for a few twists of fate she might be in your place, and we might be living still in the Old City."

"But we're not," said Sarwat. "That's the point, we're not." She tried another tack. "And what can you possibly find to say to her? Sheherezad told me she came for tea the other day, and that this unfortunate little thing sat without saying a word, just listening, like a frog in the corner. It's indecent."

"She too would have wished for your advantages, my dear, your schools and clothes and friends and property."

"Please, Daddy. I doubt if this is a humanitarian mission."

"And I'm lonely, Sarwat. You're in Karachi, Kamila is in New York, and Rehana hasn't even spoken with me in ten years. My friends are dying off or don't go out anymore. She keeps me company. She's no genius, if you like, but she can play cards and so on. Why don't you spend more time in Lahore? You have a lovely house here, friends here. I would much prefer to see you than her, but you're not available."

"What about Riffat or one of your other old girlfriends? Why choose someone like this, she's neither pretty nor presentable."

"At my age, what I need is companionship, and Husna can give that to me. Riffat can only come for tea or for a few hours, but Husna is here whenever I need her."

They sat back in silence, neither satisfied with the other. After a few moments, Sarwat put down her cup. "Daddy, I must go. I'll come this evening. Please, at least tell her not to come out when I'm here."

That afternoon when Husna entered his room, summoned from the annex, K.K. felt abashed, creating a tightness in his face and causing his mouth to become dry. Irresistibly drawn to the one subject that he wished to avoid, he said, "It's wonderful to see Sarwat. I hope you and she will get to know each other." He had been sitting on the edge of the bed, and now he rolled over, tucked himself under the sheet, and put a black mask over his eyes, to screen out the light.

Snarling, her face contorted, she exploded. "She's mean and rude. She treated me like dirt." Husna's seething voice broke, out of control, pouring from her. "Why don't you get her to come live in the annex and to play cards with you and make your tea?"

“I can’t have you speak like this,” said K.K., removing the mask, face drawn and imposing. “You’re upsetting me.” He spoke in a measured voice. “You’ve upset me.”

“I’m leaving this house,” she said, standing up on the bed, looking down at him. “I gave you everything I had, but you give me nothing in return. I have feelings too, I’m human. She made me feel like dirt, and you didn’t say anything to stop her.” She began to cry hysterically, still standing on the bed, and when he sat up and tried to touch her leg she shrieked and stepped back. “Even the servants here treat me as if I’m nothing. When I ask for things they tell me that they don’t have time. I have to crawl even in front of them. Yesterday Hassan swore at me.”

“I’ll speak with him,” said K.K. “Now stop. You know the doctor’s orders. Do you want me to have another heart attack?”

She saw that she dare push him no further, and so gradually became quiet. Lying down on the bed, she wouldn’t get under the covers, but held herself rigidly beside him.

When K.K. woke Husna said, “Talk to Hassan now. I won’t stand the servants’ treatment of me anymore.” Knowing she couldn’t at this point win the larger battle, against Sarwat, she wanted at least to consolidate her smaller gains. She insisted that K.K. speak to Hassan in front of her, though he would have preferred not to humiliate the old servant.

The grizzled cook stood with his shoes off, having left them at the door, and with his lambskin hat clutched in his hand. He looked down at the floor, at his splayed bare feet planted on the polished rosewood parquet.

“Bibi says that yesterday you swore at her.”

Husna had been waiting for some concrete provocation and had pounced when Hassan, in his habitual foul temper, called her a bitch under his breath.

“Yes sir,” said the old cook. “I mean no sir.”

“Well, Hassan, did you or didn’t you?”

“No sir.”

Husna became shrill, which injured her cause. “I asked him not to put chilies in the omelet, and he swore at me. Ask the sweepress, she heard.”

Hassan looked at her squarely. “You and the sweepress.”

“You can go,” said Harouni, not raising his voice.

When Hassan had left, Harouni said to Rafik, who had been impassively watching this performance, “See that this doesn’t happen anymore.”

Husna gloated from the sidelines. Rafik responded without expression, “Yes, Mian Sahib.” He paused. “Shah Sahib is here. Should I send him into the living room?”

While she knew that now at least the old servants would be decided against her, Husna felt she could afford their ill will, for her position in the household grew stronger daily. The attitude of the servants changed after Rafik gave them the word. Only a few, the old ones, covered their insolence with glacial politeness, while the younger became either servile or friendly to the point of taking liberties, thinking thereby to win her favor.

Husna began to enjoy the advantages of her new position. The secretary, Shah Sahib, handled the household accounts, writing up all the expenses in a complicated double-entry bookkeeping system, so complicated in fact that K.K. couldn't and wouldn't take the trouble to understand it. For years the books had been larded with excessive expenses. The drivers, Hassan the cook, all of the others except Rafik, lavishly inflated the bills they submitted. After Husna had a few times complained of not having money, of wearing torn clothes and broken-heeled shoes, K.K. instructed that she should be given a tiny allowance. In old age he had become tightfisted, although the household hemorrhaged money, and he spent two or three hundred thousand rupees a month without knowing where it went. Shah Sahib soon enlisted Husna in his system, since he didn't want her to begin making inquiries, as women in a household have a tendency to do; and so her allowance monthly grew larger and larger, inflated in various ingenious ways.

She had the use of a car, bought herself clothes, even small bits of gold jewelry. In her rooms she kept one, then two locked steel trunks, which she filled with everything from raw silk to electric sandwich makers. She would come to K.K. with some special request, wanting to buy something, and he would ultimately agree. She wheedled, petted him, became frosty, became nice. Giving in, he would be unable to look her in the eye, himself embarrassed. She said to him, speaking plainly, "Scratch a man and find a boy."

A few of K.K.'s old gentleman friends, mild landowners with courtly Punjabi manners, came to the decision that they had no reason for isolating the young girl. They called her "daughter" and looked forward to her lively, flirtatious company. Among this group, who now in old age constituted K.K.'s closest friends, he had always been the fast one, the sportsman and lover. They envied him the possession of Husna, while at the same time being slightly relieved on reaching their lugubrious houses after a few hours in her company. Her striving wore on them. She flattered them, asked about their harmless projects—a Union of Punjabi Landowners, a pipe-dream society for tort reform—and so wielded them into a circle, with herself at the center. She teased them, sitting at Harouni's side during bridge games, and would try to peek at his opponents' cards. Playing rummy for small stakes with whoever was dummy in the bridge game, she cheated, and when caught laughed and denied it.

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The air conditioner in the annex didn't work properly, and on that pretext Husna moved into a study adjoining the master bedroom, with communicating doors. This new proximity proved at times inconvenient for Husna, because it exposed her use of sleeping pills to K.K., who strongly disapproved. For several years she had found it difficult to sleep at night. Her mind raced during episodes of hysteria, when she barely could govern herself, and so she had developed a dependency on sleeping pills, which were available from the pharmacies without any prescription. Occasionally, desiring complete oblivion, she would take a double dose—it was almost a game with her, a flirtation with the dangers of the pills. She did not sleep the night with K.K., but invariably at some point withdrew to her own room, saying that his tossing movements disturbed her. Sometimes in the morning, when she had taken a stronger dose, she didn't answer when the servant knocked at her door, and then K.K. would himself come and shake her, wearing his pajamas and an old silk robe. He would look down at her sleeping face, in repose and therefore cleansed of all ambition and anxiety and spite, qualities that he forgave her because he felt that the conditions into which he had thrust her brought them out. Seeing her there, he sometimes thought that he loved her, loved her brightness in these last years of his life, when he had become so lonely. Old General Hadayatullah, the retired chief medical officer of the army, had told K.K. that his heart might at any moment carry him away. K.K. feared death with all the terror of a perfectly rational man, who took no comfort in religion, and knew death to be his final end. He wanted so much to live!

Gradually Husna would wake, late in the morning, and K.K. would hurry to her room.

“Suppose something happened to me in the night?” he asked, as she sipped her tea, lying in bed, her face drained and pale. She looked prettiest then, emerging from drugged sleep, erased.

She would cry and ask him not to speak of such things, and at those moments he felt that she too genuinely loved him, something that he often doubted, despite her professions of love. He craved her presence and reproached himself with a phrase that he once repeated even to her: *Too old to be roused by pleasure, I seek pain.*

In August the monsoon broke. The rains came up from India, sweeping the Himalayas, filling the rivers of the Punjab, pouring down water on the Hindu Kush and on the plain that extends from the Khyber to Karachi. In the gardens outside

K.K.'s room, crows sat in the dripping branches of ancient trees, bedraggled, and the lawns filled with water.

One night the bell in the servants' quarters rang, and Rafik rose, dressed, and hurried to K.K.'s room. The master sat up in bed, in the glare of the single light.

"Something's wrong," he said. "My pulse is racing. Wake Husna."

Husna came into the room, wiping her face, adjusting her clothes.

"What is it, Uncle?"

"Telephone General Hadayatullah. It's my chest."

K.K. sat in the bed, scared, his face thin and worn, and distracted himself with meaningless banter, falling into Husna's mode of speech, which had become for them a private language.

"So, Bibi, for a while you won't be plucking me clean at rummy. Or they'll give me bedrest, we'll play even more, and soon you'll have salted away a nice fat dowry." In the past he would have found this kind of joking in poor taste. He had begun teasing her, saying that she was seeking a young husband—leaving him—and almost convincing himself that she was. In fact, as he mimicked her brassy manners and slang, saying in joke what couldn't be said outright, she steadily drew him onto her own ground, where she could engage and control him so much more effectively.

Servants had crowded into the hallway outside the room, perhaps twenty of them, barefoot and speaking in whispers, coming into the house by ones or twos as they learned that something had happened to the master.

The general swept in, a tall anglicized officer, his trimmed mustache and even the cut of his slightly military clothes reflecting purpose. Rafik, who knew the general well, brought a stool. Administering an ECG on a portable machine, the general took the tape to the light, and said, "Go immediately to Mayo Hospital. Carry him out in a chair." He very precisely clicked shut the lid of the machine and put the tape away in the pocket of his vest, wearing a thoughtful expression.

For a moment Husna and K.K. looked at each other, his face lined and grave, hers puffy with sleep. For the first time he thought of her as a grown-up, as a woman; and for the first time she thought of him as a lover, sick and possibly dying. All the servants, the gardeners, the chauffeurs, the junior ones who saw K.K. only from a distance, wanted to help carry the chair through the corridors of the house, where only a few lights burned, throwing shadows. K.K. sat impassively on the chair, raised above the crowd, then lowered at the doors, like an awkward king, a king onstage.

As Husna prepared to get into the car, the general stopped her. "You need to be here. People will be coming to ask about him. He's probably going to be all right, but you should call Sarwat and the others. Kamila should come back from New

York. Have them call Rehana also.” Rehana, the middle child, had broken with K.K. when he separated from his wife. Husna began to cry, shaking, and he stood back and looked at her shrewdly. “Don’t, this isn’t about you. Prepare yourself now. Remember who you are.”

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By midmorning people had begun to call at the house, friends of the family, for in Lahore word traveled quickly. Husna received them, sitting in the living room. She had dressed up too much, wearing an embroidered black *kurta*. Several of the guests asked pointedly about the daughters.

Sarwat had ordered that a car wait at the airport and meet each flight from Karachi, as she would get a seat as quickly as possible. Just before lunch she came through the door into the living room, narrowing her eyes. An elderly couple, who had been sitting with Husna, stood up.

“What’s happened?” she asked, addressing Husna. “What are you doing here? Where’s Daddy?”

Husna explained. The old couple quickly took their leave.

“Please,” said Sarwat, “this is a time for family. I’ve asked my cousin Bilqis to come here and receive people. Go up to your room and stay there.”

Husna didn’t dare tell Sarwat that she had moved next to the master bedroom. A servant turned on the air conditioner in the annex, and all day Husna stayed there, sitting on a chair and looking down through the window at callers arriving and leaving. Hassan sent up some food, but she didn’t eat. She knew she would not be allowed to attend K.K. at the hospital.

In the middle of the night she fell asleep, still sitting in the chair by the window. Suddenly waking in the morning, she looked down on the driveway jammed with cars, the line of them running all the way out to the massive gates of the compound. Not even putting on a head scarf, she ran down the stairs and into the servants’ area. Rafik sat on a chair sobbing unnaturally, as if racked with coughing, his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. She saw very distinctly the old man’s bare head, bowed down, the gray thin hairs, the scalp. She knew, of course, that K.K. had died. Two other servants, young ones new to the house, sat uncertainly on their haunches nearby. They looked at her with curiosity, but said nothing. She turned, her eyes filling with tears, and walked out and up into the annex, into the cooled rooms overlooking the driveway, shaded by tree branches. She lay down on the bed, her feelings concentrated at the forefront of her mind like an immensely weighted black point, incomprehensible. She felt afraid to cry aloud, to draw attention.

In Islam a body must be buried as soon as possible, ideally before nightfall. When Husna emerged from her bedroom and looked again out onto the drive, she saw men putting up a tent, where the male guests would sit to mourn during the *jenaza*. The women would sit inside the house with the body. Among the things that she had not carried over to her room in the main house, Husna found a suit of clothing that she brought with her when she came into the household, a cheap *shalvar* and *kurta*, with a simple white head scarf. Wearing this costume, she entered the packed living room. The body of K. K. Harouni lay on the floor, wrapped in a white cloth, his jaw bound closed with a white bandage, the knot tied jauntily near one ear. His dentures had been lost, and so his cheeks had caved in. His body had shrunken, lying among rose petals scattered there by the servants. Sarwat stood up from her place at the head of the corpse, touched Husna on the head with both hands, but said nothing. Husna went to the back of the room and sat down as far away as possible from K.K.'s old wife, who was telling a rosary, a stunned expression on her face. All sorts of women had come, women from all phases of K.K.'s life, and kept arriving, clicking under the portico and through the front vestibule in high heels, spilling out into other rooms. From various places soft or loud sobbing would break out and then subside, as is the custom. Two society women sat uncomfortably on the floor next to Husna, whispering, gossiping, and she heard one say to the other in English, "Oh, isn't that *delicious*."

Of course you don't care, thought Husna, who wouldn't cry in front of them. She felt that only she truly cared, that she had lost more than all the others.

And yet she wanted to be like them, they were what she had lost.

For the next two days Husna stayed in the annex, without once going out. People came day and night to condole with Sarwat and Kamila. Rehana, the estranged third daughter, had arrived from Paris, where she taught some esoteric form of Islamic women's studies—but she pointedly stayed with her mother rather than at K.K.'s house. Husna felt that they had forgotten her, and she wanted to be forgotten, to stay here alone in these rooms, with rush mats on the floor, bits of scavenged furniture, and an air conditioner that almost kept the apartment cool, that dribbled water onto the pavement below. On the third day a servant came, early in the morning, before there were any callers, to say that the sisters wished to speak with her. They waited for her in the living room, all three wearing saris, relaxed, Kamila sitting with her feet curled under her on a sofa, Rehana and Sarwat in high-backed chairs.

They got straight to the point, Kamila, as the eldest, speaking.

"My father allowed you to live in this house. However, he would not have wanted you to stay here. Tomorrow afternoon the car will be available to take you wherever you wish to be taken. I suppose you'll go to your father's house. There will be no discussion on the subject." She settled back, finished with the problem.

Husna, who had taken a seat halfway through this monologue, though she had not been invited to do so, looked down at the floor. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Did Uncle say anything about me before . . . before . . . ?”

Sarwat broke in. “No,” she replied with finality. “There was and is nothing for you.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” said Husna.

Kamila softened. “Look, whatever you had with my father is gone now. If you took care of him in these past months, you were rewarded. You’re young, you’ll find other things. You think that you’ll never heal, but you will, sooner than you think. Go on, go back to the annex.”

Now Husna stood. She had reached the bottom, her pride arose, her sense of wanting to be dignified now, to accept the inevitable. For her, dignity and pride and memory would be all and everything from this moment forward. “I have no power. You are important people, and I’m nothing, and my family is nothing. I have to obey.” The finality of this rang true, the absence of appeal, countering their dismissal of her.

Just as she approached the door, Rehana called to her. “There’s one other thing. They tell us you have a number of trunks in your room. We will not ask what you have in them. You may take those with you. But nothing else.”

Reaching the annex, staggered, Husna sat on the side of the bed and buried her face in her hands. She had hoped that Rehana, the foreign one, the aggrieved one, would take her side—yet it was she who pronounced the harshest words. At the end their estrangements were less than their contempt for her. They had closed up against her—family, blood. She tried to tell herself that she had gone to the sisters hoping for nothing, with nothing in her heart but sadness at the death of their father, who had loved her. She should have said something cold, should have refused their last insulting offer.

“For him I should have said, ‘I came with nothing, I leave with nothing. I leave with the clothes on my back. I served your father, when you were far away. The shame be on your heads.’”

But she could not afford even this gesture. The next day two men loaded the trunks onto a horse-drawn cart and carried them away to the Old City.

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