

ONE

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The goblets slipped out of their hands and clattered against the marble floor. The brothers, their hands shaking, had dropped their drinks at the same time. Ali clasped his hands and closed his eyes before praying, as panic raced like molten lead through his heart.

The loud clang shattered the smug poise around Cuckoo's Den.

A tourist, who was sipping beer at a window table staring at the magnificent Badshahi Mosque, shrieked in fright. In the distance, a murder of crows, perched atop the minarets of the authentic specimen of Mughal architecture, abruptly rose in flight against the evening sky. The city of Lahore glared back at the culprits through the arched windows of the restaurant, unsympathetic and cold.

All eyes turned towards the twins.

Ali opened his eyes to see Karim staring at him. An ominous air, as if an impending disaster were waiting to strike, gripped them both.

It settled in their separate worlds, yet held them together in a mutual fear of misfortune. They had been unable to prevent the change that had come upon them over the years – it had espoused a shape, size, and meaning of its own.

At the opposite table, a flabby woman in a sari, busy gossiping with her friends, suddenly turned mute. She gaped at the commotion, as if she had lost her voice. After a few seconds of stunned silence, the woman could not take it anymore. Flouting all discretion and good judgement, she craned her neck to gawk at Ali and Karim, waiting for their next move.

As curious and impatient as she was, the woman still failed to grasp the source of their adversity. Their flustered, apologetic faces indicated embarrassment, and a sliver of shame at having attracted undue attention towards themselves.

“I wonder what’s going on over there,” she whispered very audibly to her friend.

The other woman cast a sly look at the brothers and sniffed, “Oh, don’t be silly; I’m sure it was just an accident.”

But the woman was not sure; she kept staring at the brothers, unable to understand the root of her own curiosity. She sighed deeply, and finally gave up with a toss of her long, open hair. Her attention to the chaos triggered by a couple of miserable strangers had run its course, and she did not care anymore.

For Karim and Ali, however, the sudden, loud crash, bits of glass strewn on the floor around their feet, their awkwardness – it was all a bad omen which threatened to taint and override the purpose for which they had come together after all these years. They were afraid, and the fear grew intimate and wild.

They kept gazing at the sharp white shards of glass bathed in a

puddle of blood-red liquid, like bodies after a riot. They sat frozen, unsure as to whether they should reach out and clean it all up.

A few minutes passed like this. The brothers tried to take solace in the protection of their silent prayers; it could erase the uncertainty and the bad fortune that they feared would contaminate their journey ahead.

Something was about to change. A new possibility which had always seemed so remote was now beckoning the brothers.

Ali and Karim could not let themselves be dissuaded by fear from the road they had chosen: reconciliation with their past, and with each other. They wanted to reclaim for themselves the moments of happiness that had been clouded over in their memories by the pain of separation.

Where had these differences come from? Whose design was it to keep them apart? Were they to blame themselves for not having tried hard enough?

These were questions with no answers.

A whiff of perfume teased them, and they immediately looked up – Karim first, Ali seconds later. A tall, broad-shouldered young woman in faded blue jeans and a white top had walked into the restaurant, her hennaed hair fluttering mildly in the rush of wind from the outside. The brothers caught each other looking at her in admiration, and grinned – Ali first, Karim seconds later.

The fortunate interruption had dissolved their apprehension for a few moments. But they still did not know what it was that they were looking forward to.

A waiter hurried towards them and began to pick up the broken glass.

“Don’t worry, sir,” he said politely, “I will clean this mess in no time.”

They watched the man expertly dustpan the broken glass and stuff it into a garbage can filled with stained napkins, crumpled wrappers and straws that had been beaten slender. The waiter hoisted the can against his waist and rushed away.

There were things – it was now dawning on them – precious and sacred, that could not be salvaged from the past very easily.

And yet, Karim could sense that if they were to waste the one chance they had to emerge from the sadness of their past, the guilt of having done nothing would haunt them for all their lives to come. Ali, perhaps, was wondering about the same thing. He turned to his brother looking for a little support, some reassurance.

Karim, he noticed, was looking straight into his face, filling him with a sense of uneasiness instead of comfort, releasing a whole new wave of insecurity between the two of them.

Unable to endure his brother’s glare, Ali closed his eyes, in the hope that darkness would insulate him against more pain. Instead, a scary image loomed before him, bizarre memories from another day – an old house immersed in hate, violence, mistrust... without love. The scene unnerved him and he opened his eyes, feeling the borders between himself and Karim blur under the weight of a common past.

“Did it strike you too, Ali?” Karim asked.

As soon as the words left his mouth, the absurdity of his own question disturbed him; it seemed empty and meaningless.

“What?” his brother asked, clueless, a little puzzled.

Has something gone wrong again? Karim looked away. *Can this*

moment never be fully understood? Are the possibilities too overwhelming? Or is it all pointless?

The long separation with his brother, Karim thought, had been like a reverie, a period of lapse and loss with an underlying sense of undefined pain. He was sure this was the time for action, to set out to recover their past. *Does Ali think the same way?* He was not sure. He thought of the house, their childhood days, their grandfather's obstinacy and aloofness, the searing tension underneath the barely smooth surface. Returning to all that, he knew, would not be easy.

He gazed again at his brother, thinking about the long road they were to travel together.

"What?" Ali asked again.

"Did you not notice anything?"

"Karim..." Ali stopped, knowing it was futile to start this conversation with his brother right now. The doubts, the debris from the past had not yet been cleared.

A strange numbness took hold of Karim's body. Or was it sadness at the thought of returning to the old house? He breathed deeply. Their old place and the memories of their days in it were beckoning him.

"Yes," Karim turned to his brother.

The day, however, seemed jinxed. A waiter carrying a tray of glasses to their table tripped. All their contents – the juice, lassi, Coke, cocoa – spilled all around the floor. A little girl giggled from her table. Looking harassed, the manager hurried on to the scene.

Is this place under some kind of spell? Karim looked out the window at the lawns outside, then at the Mughal mosque. *Why are these things*

happening today? Should we not go ahead with this? Should we rethink?

Frozen in fear, Karim and Ali did not move for a few seconds. Then, they paid their bill, gave one final look towards the frightened waiter recovering from his fall, and within moments were out of the restaurant and hurrying towards their car. They both wanted to move swiftly away from this abode of unusual, disturbing signs that seemed determined to haunt their journey.

Karim took the wheel, and Ali the passenger seat, and they drove along the road of inevitable circumstances towards their destiny.

Trapped within the confines of the car, they had a measure of the sadness that had hung over their life for a long time. Their closeness only stressed their distance. The two brothers, meeting for the first time in twenty years, had very little to ask each other. They sat in silence.

Karim momentarily looked out his window, absorbing the noises and fleeting images of Lahore before embarking upon the long ride. The red evening sky announced twilight, a time for prayer and homecoming.

Uneasy with a brother who looked exactly like him but was still someone he had hardly known for most of his life, Ali drummed his fingers on his mobile phone in a rhythm that Karim found annoying. *He wouldn't ask, so I must. I need to, I have to.* Karim, looking not at his brother but at the road ahead of them, addressed Ali.

"Do you ever regret what happened all those years ago, Ali?" he asked, trying to push away the frost that had settled between them over a long stretch of time.

"Some things are very difficult to explain," Ali said, looking blankly at the skyline.

Karim started the car, not satisfied with the response. "I guess you can't be forced to explain anything," he said, with a hint of irritation in his voice.

We don't owe each other any explanation. Or do we?

Karim, dissuaded by his brother's indifference, gave up for now. Silently, he reversed the car towards the main road.

They were to leave Lahore that night and drive to Karachi – the city which had been the backdrop of their miserable childhood.

For the first ten years of their lives, Karim and Ali had lived with their grandfather in an old-fashioned, spacious house in the madly crowded neighbourhood of Muslimabad. Strangely, both brothers had no recollection of life in that rundown area. In fact, whenever they tried to remember their childhood days in Karachi, nothing extraordinary came to mind. It was unremarkable territory – a place neither explored nor fondly remembered. Once they had left the house, they never missed it. All they remembered was that it still existed in that bustling, crazy city, and they blamed its lunacy for their choice of dislocation. Perhaps it had been the only buoy of certainty in their otherwise uncertain lives. Today, when they heard of terrorism and sectarian violence which had grasped the city and become part of its daily order of things, they viewed Karachi with a mix of bewilderment and fear.

Sheikh, the cook at their house in Karachi, once told them of a time in his own youth when the city had been part of India. "It was a big country, very big – you could go thousands of miles in any direction without any end in sight..."

The idea that their city was once part of another country completely baffled them; there was no one who could tell them about their country's history from the time when it had not been a country. At least until Ma came along. What they did know was that their

grandfather, Hanif Khan, had spent years grappling with the deep sense of loss which followed what they had heard the elders refer to as Partition. Since then, the old man had fought his own war against the emptiness which overtook him. The brothers wanted to ask him about these things, to know more about how he had lived, everything he had seen during those mad days of hacking one country from another, but they were kept away from him.

“He needs his privacy,” Sheikh told them sternly.

Karim eventually came to detest their Nana for being so indifferent towards them. Nana’s detachment had drawn a deep line between him and the boys, and Karim wanted to stay away from him. He learnt to respect his grandfather’s solitude. But not Ali.

In his clumsy curiosity, Ali could not stay away from Hanif, seeking constantly to be near him, around him. He felt that he had to be loyal to his Nana. He would often defend him against Karim’s accusations.

Nevertheless, it was only after Ma was installed as their governess that they began to learn more about the city’s past, its sounds and flavours. According to Ma, Karachi was a part of pre-Partition India, until Mr. Jinnah decided that there should be a separate country for Muslims where they could live with dignity. He struggled to achieve this dream; and the British, before going back to their cold little island, divided into two parts the tropical India of long monsoon, elephants, and peacocks. One suddenly became two – India and Pakistan.

These bits and snatches of history more often than not left Karim and Ali confused and full of questions; they were like overheard pieces of neighbourhood gossip about some or the other memsahib’s scandal, full of irrelevant details.

“Did it not hurt to divide India?” Karim asked Ma.

“Why should it have?” Ma replied. “It was necessary. Muslims had no religious freedom in India, and the British had ruled over us for too long.”

Karim still did not understand.

“But couldn’t they have their freedom without breaking away?” Karim asked.

Ma preferred silence to attempting answers to such questions, as she herself was among the many who had suffered at the hands of a despotic regime given to exploiting women in the name of religion. Hopes that the new country, carved out of the old, would be a just, fair place were dashed. The child’s innocuous questions troubled her; she had seen the darker side of life, and had somehow emerged, broken but alive. All she wanted now was to be able to live out the rest of her life in peace. The past with its repression and vindictiveness still haunted her. Communicating such concerns would have been dangerous in the long years of General Zia’s dictatorship. People’s voices had been stifled; women were particularly at the receiving end of the notorious regime, targeted and tortured, all in the name of religion and nationhood.

Yet, unable to hedge Karim’s persistent questions, fuelled by her own need to say what she felt she knew, Ma sometimes talked about it – with hesitation, a little vaguely.

“Perhaps the Muslims needed an excuse to break the country,” she said indifferently.

Ma taught Karim that sometimes there were good reasons to justify a separation. All one had to do was find one, even if it could not justify the end.

Whenever their Nana went to the university to teach, Sheikh made it a point to switch on the TV in the living room and let the

children watch a Bollywood movie. Amitabh Bachchan's *Shaan* was his favourite. While Ali enjoyed the lazy afternoons, Karim was intrigued by the cook's adoration of a lanky Indian actor.

"Why do you like Amitabh so much?" Karim asked Sheikh. "Isn't he from India?"

Sheikh smiled and kissed Karim's forehead.

"So what if he's from India? I am a Big B fan!" Sheikh laughed flaunting his familiarity with the film-world lingo. *Big B!*

"But he's not part of us, Sheikh," Karim tried to argue. "India is not a part of us!"

Sheikh embraced Karim. "We rarely get to choose what can be a part of us. India is not a part of me, but its people still mean something to me. I was born in an India that wasn't divided by religion. Somehow, I've always felt as if a part of me was taken away when Pakistan was created. The pain has numbed over the years. Life teaches you to accept your loss, and not forget things just because you do not possess them anymore." Sheikh sighed, turning nostalgic.

Karim tried to absorb what Sheikh had just said. It struck him that any form of separation, however violent, could not hurt you if you managed to walk away with your memories intact. Sheikh, meanwhile, hummed his favourite song from *Shaan*:

*Pyar karne wale, pyar karte hain, shaan se
Jeete hain shaan se
Marte hain shaan se*

Sheikh danced, following the beat with his foot.

Those who love, they love with pride

*They live with pride
And they die with pride*

Karim laughed. The lyrics swung inside him, swirled in his head. The foot-tapping number eased his restlessness, letting him know that there was always a way to overcome the pain of separation.

Sheikh also told the twins that their grandmother was an English memsahib. They were intrigued by this fact and asked for the lady's photographs. But Sheikh wrung his hands and said that was impossible. When she left him, their Nana removed all photographs and stashed them away in one corner of his room.

For them, Nana was a custodian of the past. Of all the old secrets. But although they were often tempted to ask him questions about the past, something held them back.

Nana could not be disturbed. Secrets – pushed away into the dark crevices – were not to be unpacked; they were not to be tampered with since the past could not be redesigned, dressed up to suit their taste.

Whenever the past was tapped, tinkered with, something went awry. The past had a way of drawing even with its tormentors.



The twins were now returning to the world of old secrets with the memory of terrifying discord. They had left the house separately; they were now going back together, driving along the highway from Lahore. Although Nana had been dead for several years, the uncertainty of being back in the house still filled them with apprehension. After a long gap, Karim wondered if they were entering the old house with the same understanding and attachment for each other that had come under the grave threat of conflict all those years ago. Perhaps he was

hoping that the changed circumstances would be of some help to them.

During the years the brothers stayed apart, Karim secretly longed for the connection they once shared. Nothing would have made him happier than to reunite with Ali.

As the car windows were rolled down, fresh air drifted in, carrying childhood memories that invaded their minds: the lush green garden, their lessons with Ma, their learning of Bollywood's legends and scandals from Sheikh, and their curiosity about the fortified loneliness of Nana surged in as reminders of how close they had once been. Yet, all those memories issued from the same instance in time – the day when the nature of their relationship was carelessly distorted. It seemed as if they had no tangible existence prior to it, but had, instead, been shaped by its cruelty.