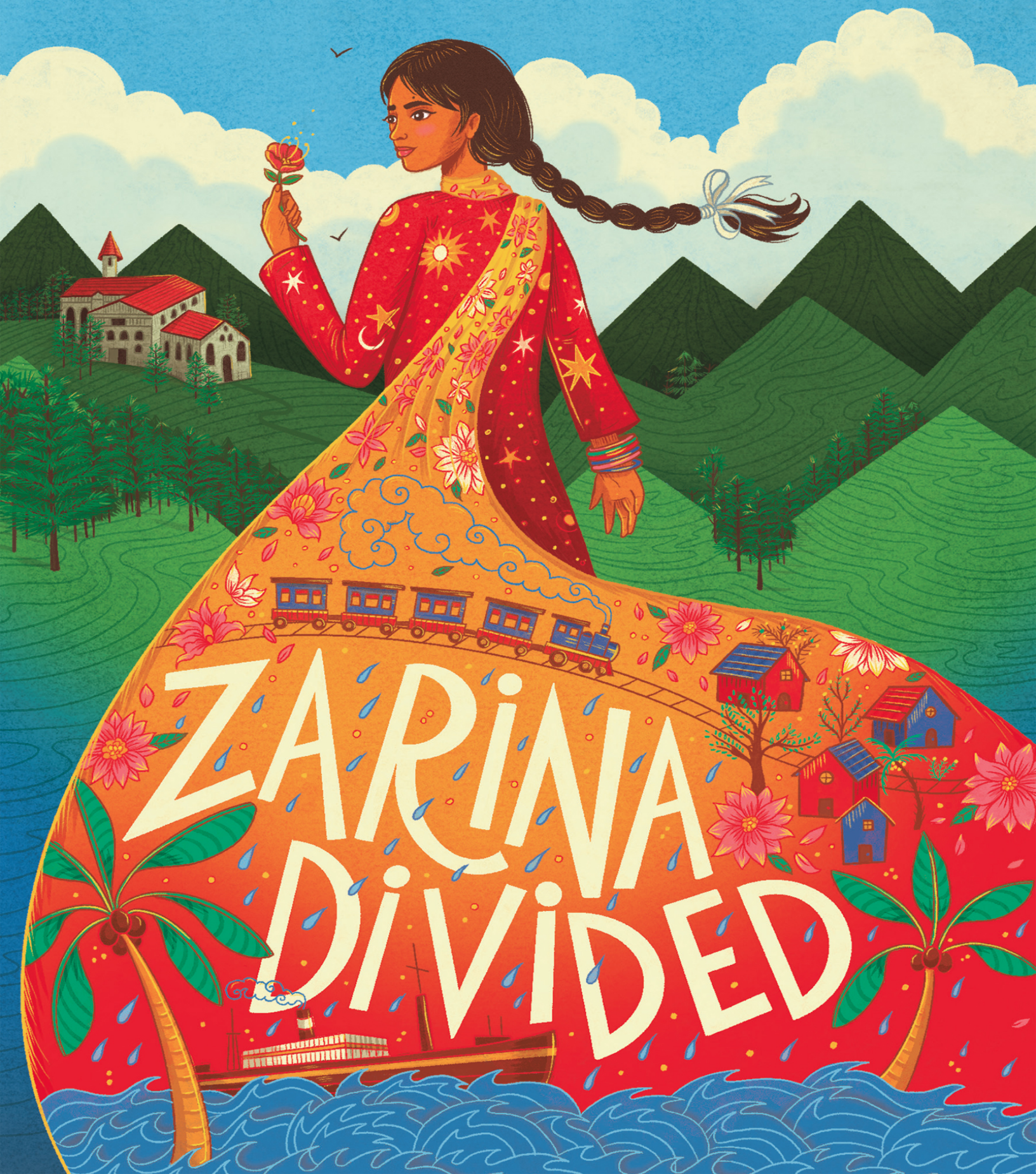


Award-winning author of *Unsettled*  
**REEM FARUQI**





REEM FARUQI

# ZARINA Divided

**HARPER**

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## Dedication



For my grandmother Nana, Zarina Zakaria, for sharing her stories, always.

In loving memory of Muna Zakaria.

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# **Part 1**

## **Poona, India, 1947**







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## Zarina

I almost wasn't born.

My father, Abajan,  
first married another woman,  
who stayed married to him  
for three days  
(or seventy-two hours).

When she left him,  
rumors spread  
quicker than the flooding of monsoon rain.

*He can't have children.*

*He must have done something bad.*

*He must be really horrible.*

His name became sullied  
like mud under buffalo hooves,  
all churned up.

So Abajan went to another village.  
He wore his best suit,  
with a marigold in the buttonhole,  
and asked for my mother's hand in marriage.  
When she approved, her family said yes.

When my eldest brother, Wahab, was born,  
they made sure the whole town knew  
(his first wife's family especially),  
and then he went on to have my brother Qadir,  
then me,  
then my brother Adil.

Abajan's name  
became untarnished again,  
clean like the foam of the sea.

When my brothers and I were born,  
high we were held  
on the sweaty shoulders of men  
and paraded through the town.

That's how I came into being.

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## Home Is

Sprawling gardens  
Motia flowers in clay pots  
Dahlias wide as dinner plates  
Clothes drying paper-stiff on the clothesline  
Coconut trees reaching for the sky  
Gul mohar flowers dripping orange in bloom.

Mummy tells me that  
when I was young,  
but old enough to know better,  
the chawkidar, or watchman, Mahesh was taking  
a chai break with the mali, or gardener, Irfan,  
and out I slipped,  
like water through fingers,  
past the iron gates  
and onto the main road.

Mummy was upstairs  
sipping chai  
when she had a feeling  
something wasn't right.  
She uncurled her delicate fingers  
around her teacup handle  
and put her chai down

(still steaming).

My brothers were playing  
cricket in the garden,  
cousins too.

When she didn't see me there,  
she ran onto the road  
and saw me getting ready to cross it.

Mummy mashed her bony fingers into my arm,  
no longer delicate,  
and held me close.  
She scooped me up  
when I burst into tears.

*You're not going anywhere!*

Now, when the radio is loud  
and uncertainty smolders in the air,  
she tells me *that* story  
and reminds me to stay close.  
Tells me: *We're not going anywhere.*



## **The Sellers Beyond the Garden Walls**

Tonga wala

Horses' hooves clap sandy dust down the road, taking you from here to there.

Chai wala

Milky cardamom-scented steamy cups of bliss.

Samosa wala

Airy triangles of spice that bite your tongue back when you bite into them.

Sabzi wala

The loudest seller always yelling how fresh his red onions are.

Reay Market

A real store with walls and a roof that sells the best melted toffees.

Phal wala

Spotted brown bananas that reach from my fourth knuckle to my fingertip.

Anything and everything you want  
in Poona, India,  
in 1947  
is here.



## My Father's Walks

Since I was born, we've always had  
a mali (gardener) named Irfan,  
a chawkidar (watchman) named Mahesh,  
an ayah (nanny) named Khushboo,  
and a khansama (cook) named Basheer.

Our mali, Irfan,  
plants  
carnations,  
dahlias,  
marigolds,  
and more.

My father, Abajan, holds my hand,  
calls me Khubani Begum  
(Madame Apricot)  
because my cheeks  
are round and the color of apricots.

*Do you know my favorite verse from the Quran?*

Abajan continues.

*Did you know in Surah Nuh,  
it says:*

*"Your Lord will increase you in wealth and children,  
and bestow on you gardens and rivers."*



*We've got almost all the children,  
and the garden . . .  
But no river yet . . .*

Abajan tells my brothers to follow  
as he walks around the garden  
and gives us some seeds to press  
deep into the soil.

Abajan holds his arms out  
before scooping his hand  
lightly into the soil.  
*To own land  
is to be blessed.*

*Did you know this house  
was your great-great grandfather's?  
And it will be yours one day—  
Zarina, Wahab,  
Qadir, and Adil.  
Inshallah.*



## My Brothers

I have three brothers,  
Wahab, Qadir, and Adil.  
There are no girls  
except me  
(for now).

Qadir is like me—  
he asks too many questions,  
most of them at the wrong time,  
and eats the food that we don't finish.

Adil glues himself to me,  
follows me when Qadir and Wahab ignore him,  
and wants me to push him on the swing outside  
a l l the time.

Wahab is the oldest brother, the nicest one.  
If we're in trouble,  
Wahab is the one  
who looks out for all of us,  
the one who will put down  
whatever he's doing.

Wahab is the one who comes running—

Breathless.  
*What happened?*



## MY MOTHER

My mother is tiny.  
I am taller than her by nine centimeters,  
and my hands are  
two fingertip lines longer than hers.  
Her gold bangles don't go over my wrists—  
instead, they hug the fleshy part of my palms.

My feet are flat,  
sturdy, too,  
and when I walk,  
you hear me coming,  
unlike Mummy.  
My mother's feet  
are arched (a sign of beauty),  
and her toenails  
are spacious  
and perfect.

I am eleven,  
and she is twenty-eight.

Although she is shorter, if you were to put us on a scale,  
she would weigh more—

because she is becoming melon round again  
but not yet ripe.

I hope this time  
it will be a girl,  
like me.



## PIECES OF US

As tiny as Mummy is,  
Abajan, my father, is tall  
with wide shoulders  
that you can hang off.  
Abajan prefers Western clothes,  
like the ones British people wear.  
Tailored collared shirts,  
slacks with creases ironed into them,  
instead of Indian clothes:  
kameezes that play with the air  
and drawstring shalwars that stretch      w      i      d      e.

In between my eyebrows  
is a small black bump,  
and when I frown,  
which happens a lot,  
it disappears.



An almost perfect sphere,  
a mole.  
To others it's an imperfection,  
but to me,  
it makes me  
me.

Wahab is fifteen.  
His skin is pink,  
not brown like ours,  
and in the sun, he burns the most.  
His eyes are round just like Mummy's.

His face is most like Mummy's, too,  
which makes him lucky.  
Adil, the youngest, is seven.  
He has crooked hair,  
and crooked teeth  
that take the place of baby teeth.

Qadir is thirteen.  
He has a dark birthmark,  
a splotch on his chin.  
The aunties tell him to wipe it,  
but nothing happens when he does.



## MUMMY'S STOMACH

Is always covered,  
wrapped in yards of fabric.  
In the long afternoons,  
she cocoons herself away  
to take naps.

At lunchtime,  
while we eat mutton  
that falls off the bone,  
roasted chicken  
turned golden in turmeric salan,  
Mummy reaches for bland khichri.

Abajan says,  
*Let your mother rest.*  
*She's incubating!*  
We try,  
but we don't always succeed.



## **BLIND MAN'S BLUFF**

My favorite game  
is hide-and-seek  
while blindfolded.

When Mummy and the adults nap,  
my brothers and cousins whisper,  
*Let's Play.*

If I'm it,  
I grab a cotton dupatta  
and wrap it around my head  
over and over  
until I can't see through the soft layers.

Living in a boy house,  
things get rough.  
My brothers spin me  
three times,  
then run and hide.

Not everyone is quiet;  
usually there is a rumble of laughter  
that escapes someone's throat.

I wobble around,  
reach my arms out  
until I grab someone—  
or even better,  
knock them over.

Mummy sees our bruises  
and bumps.  
*I told you not to play that game—  
it's dangerous  
and uncivilized.  
Play something else,  
for God's sake!*

We nod,  
but we don't listen.



## MY HOME

Is at 1152 Main Street.

A bungalow with twelve rooms  
in a double line,  
six rooms on each side:  
drawing room  
dining room  
bedrooms  
kitchen  
storeroom  
bathrooms.

A verandah wraps around it,  
hugging my home tightly.  
But the best part  
is the back of the garden,  
over the compost heap.

Even though the smells  
of rotting banana peels,  
overripe mango flesh,  
and cracked eggshells  
sting our noses,  
we        don't        care.

A rope swing

with strings like snakes  
tied to a coconut tree  
invites us to jump on  
over and over.

When Wahab and Qadir  
want to play cricket instead,  
it is just Adil and me.  
I always have to push him.  
*No fun!*

But after school,  
my two best friends,  
Jahana and Geeta  
come by.  
They don't mind  
pushing Adil  
over and over.

On the swing,  
we swing high and higher  
into the blue

h  
g  
i

so h we can see over the walls of the garden.

When we were little,  
Basheer would push us with so much strength,  
if we let go,  
we would probably fly over the wall.

But we held on tighter and tighter  
as we soared higher and higher  
and yelled  
one word  
over and over again—  
*More!*

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## Now

We are too big  
to be pushed by Basheer,  
and all he does  
is listen to the news on the radio.  
Eyes glazed,  
mouth pinched,  
while shaping  
useless balls of dough.

(The grown-ups are too anxious to eat.)



## MY FATHER'S HABIT

He walks into the garden,  
usually straight to the bobbing circles  
of pink carnations.  
He chooses the freshest one,  
cuts it gently,  
puts it in a tiny jar of water,



and places it in the fridge.

He threads it in his buttonhole  
for work at the Muslim League,  
where he is recognized by many.  
There he wears polished black shoes  
and gets his own shiny desk  
(where I can see my reflection).

He does this  
Every                      Single                      Day.



## A SIGHT TO SEE

On Eid days,  
there is no school.  
We Muslims celebrate the sliver of the new moon,  
the bittersweet end of Ramadan.

Abajan marches ahead,  
swinging his arms,  
while he walks us to the masjid.  
All four of us—  
three brothers  
and me.

My brothers in slippery sherwanis,

me in my best kurta pajama,  
and as we march through the street,  
all the non-Muslim shopkeepers stand  
and salute my father.

We are a sight to see.



## COCONUT TOFFEE

Mummy doesn't need to cook  
because we have Basheer,  
but when she craves something sweet,  
she wanders into the kitchen.  
She grinds green cardamom pods,  
shreds white coconut,  
mixes in creamy milai,  
coarse sugar,  
and two drops of red food coloring.  
Then bakes it in the oven,  
making the whole house smell like home.

Mummy slices it into squares,  
and even though Mummy  
makes two trays of it,  
it gets finished at teatime. Every  
single  
time.

Whenever Mummy makes coconut toffee,  
Jahana and Geeta are always there.



## **MY SISTERS**

Jahana has sisters that are all grown up,  
eyes rimmed with kajal,  
noses pierced with rings,  
arms burdened with bangles,  
          married  
                    and moved away.

Geeta has no brothers or sisters—  
it's just her.

Jahana and Geeta and me  
have decided  
since Primary Class one,  
that we will be each other's sisters.



## **AT BEDTIME**

I ask Mummy to read

from our book of fairy tales,  
but Mummy says she would prefer  
to tell us stories instead.

Mummy tells us about  
the Prophet Musa  
and how his mother  
put him in a basket  
in the river  
and just let him go.  
Can you imagine?  
But not to worry,  
he and his mother reunited,  
and when he finally escaped from the Pharaoh,  
the seas parted.  
A miracle!

She tells us about  
Prophet Yunus, too,  
and how a whale swallowed him in one gulp.  
How Allah heard his prayer  
from the depths of the sea,  
from the belly of the whale,  
and forgave him.  
Allah let him go.  
A miracle!

She tells about Prophet Muhammad,  
who lost so much,  
but met the angel Jibril  
and saw the moon split  
into two.  
A miracle!

*So many miracles around us.  
No need for fairy tales!*

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## My Hair

Mummy unknots my hair  
and sighs at each tangle  
(it's a lot of sighing).  
She douses it with coconut oil  
(I hate the smell),  
then pulls  
        pulls  
                pulls  
                        a comb through it.

At the back of my neck and shoulders,  
Mummy drapes a handkerchief,  
so the oil doesn't darken my cotton kurta.

I wish Mummy would let me do my hair  
like Jahana:  
one easy ponytail  
with an Alice band on top.

Instead, Mummy braids my hair  
so tight,  
too tight,  
so that when I turn my head  
even a millimeter,

it hurts.

Mummy braids my hair  
with white ribbons  
(always white),  
before finally letting me go play  
(even though she says I'm too old to "play").

*Why can't you be like Farida?* she says.  
Farida who lives next door,  
who is the same age (eleven)  
but already acts like an auntie.

Mummy wishes I'd invite Farida over  
when Jahana and Geeta come.  
I tried once,  
but Farida said swinging was for babies.

Sometimes when we swing so high,  
flying over the compost heap  
higher than even the fruit flies,  
we can see the whole town of Poona  
from over the wall.  
I see Farida watching us,  
and her face  
looks stained with regret.



**LATELY**



As Geeta swings,  
Jahana and I flick papery peels  
off pine nuts,  
nibble on the sweet white ovals  
while we wait our turn.

When we swing,  
we peek over the garden wall.  
But Farida isn't there looking at us  
with eyes like spears,  
and there are less people  
on the roads.  
The sabzi wala  
doesn't yell as loud anymore.

Shops have windows shuttered,  
the smell of smoke lingers in the air  
(stronger than the smell  
of the rotting compost heap),  
and the silence makes me want to yell  
at the top of my lungs.

### *WHAT IS GOING ON?*

The radio is always on.  
Full Volume.  
Abajan and my uncles  
are always listening,  
but now  
Mummy and the aunts listen too.

The words are full of countries and leaders.  
Excitement and fear.

Words such as  
*New Country,*  
*Pakistan.*  
*Old Country,*  
*India.*

*Great Britain*  
and the names of leaders such as  
*Quaid-e-Azam*  
*Gandhi-Ji*  
*Nehru*  
and *Jinnah Zindabad!*  
blast through our home.

Sometimes after we've been sent to the garden,  
we sneak back  
into the drawing room  
to sample snacks we get for chai.  
We hear them  
lower the radio  
and change the subject.  
But our ears are better than they think.



## **WHAT I UNDERSTAND**

There is talk of our land  
being split into two—

t       o       r       n

One Pakistan

One India

broken in half

Just like that . . .

Is that even allowed?

I am happy in Poona, India,  
but if the land is divided—

if Pakistan is made  
for Muslims

and India is made  
for Hindus—

Will I have to go?  
Will Geeta have to go?  
I'm Muslim,  
and I know Abajan  
is **obsessed**  
with Pakistan.  
Abajan's good friend  
is Muhammad Ali Jinnah,  
whose nickname is Quaid-e-Azam, which means Great Leader.  
But I don't think he's so great.

As soon as India gains independence  
from the British and they leave,  
we are free to do what we want.

Jinnah wants two separate countries,  
one for Hindus,  
one for Muslims.

He thinks we are too different  
to live next to each other.

In religion (we go to the masjid, they go to the temple).  
The food we eat (we eat beef, Hindus don't).  
How we behave (we celebrate different holidays).

Abajan agrees,  
thinks a country for Muslims is a great idea.  
A place where Muslim voices will be heard  
in a new place called Pakistan,  
the Land of the Pure.

I think we are fine just as we are.

I don't want to lose

my home,  
my friends,  
my school,

everything that is m i n e.

But Abajan disagrees,  
tells me to concentrate on my studies  
and not to worry.

But at school,  
it's hard to concentrate.  
The girls at school  
whisper all the time now.

*Are you going?*  
*Are you staying?*

Mrs. Nizami has to pause her lessons

and tell us,

*Focus on your work, please.*

Until she stops saying *please*  
and just gives us a look.

I wonder, when Mummy tells the story  
of how she plucked me off the road  
and cooed, *You're not going anywhere.*  
*We're not going anywhere . . .*  
would she still say that now?



## **ABAJAN**

My father loves politics.  
He works for the Muslim League.  
He leaves at Fajr time  
before the crows caw loudest  
and comes back for chai break at Asr time  
when the koel bird coos loudest.  
Then he walks back to work  
and comes home at Maghrib time,  
sunset,  
when the crows are settling down.

At Maghrib namaz time,  
Abajan gathers us in the garden  
to pray.  
The breeze blows my cotton dupatta

up and around me  
like a cozy cocoon.  
I don't want to leave.

At namaz time,  
I hear Abajan praying loudly  
that Pakistan comes into being.  
Prays for peace in both  
our New Country and Old Country.

Before,  
Abajan would whisper  
his duas.  
Now  
he bends his head,  
holds his palms up and  
prays loudly.

Would Abajan give up  
all of this  
for his dreams of Pakistan?

Are whispers  
churning into  
reality?



## Pyari Jan's Wedding

Abajan's little sister  
(my aunt),  
who he calls *Pyari Jan*, or *Loved One*,  
is getting married in our garden.

As the sky blends from dusky blue to black,  
the radio is finally turned off,  
and men scurry around  
stringing up t-w-i-n-k-l-i-n-g lights,  
spreading tablecloths on tables,  
tugging up a big white tent.

Abajan tells the workers  
Khushboo, Irfan, Basheer, and Mahesh  
they are invited, too;  
that they must come  
and bring their families.

Khushboo irons my green and gold silk clothes  
and Mummy takes out new ribbons for my braids.  
Finally, a new color: green!  
When I am all dressed up and show Khushboo  
with a laughing twirl,  
she gasps and says,

*You'll be better looking than Pyari Jan, the bride!*

Abajan tells my brothers and me  
that we will have two **big** guests of honor,  
Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah  
and his sister Fatima Jinnah,  
the famous leaders trying to create the new country,  
Pakistan.

We must greet them with *Salam*,  
offer them ice-cold drinks  
and the best snacks,  
make sure their plates are never empty.

The laughing twirling feeling I had  
is gone.  
I wish my father didn't like politics,  
and that he didn't invite them.  
So that just for today I wouldn't have to think  
about Pakistan.

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## Wedding

My aunt Pyari Jan  
shines in ruby red, dripping gold,  
and I sit as close as I can,  
so I may watch and admire.

But when Mummy offers me  
two glasses of sherbet  
to serve the guests of honor  
and nudges me to say *Salam*  
to Fatima Jinnah  
and Quaid-e-Azam,  
my mole disappears  
as my eyebrows smash together  
in a frown.

If Pakistan comes into being,  
then we probably won't get to stay here,  
in Poona.  
We will have to leave our bungalow  
and move west to Pakistan.  
But I like home too much.

I notice my brothers smile big.  
Adil's crooked teeth shine

as they say *Salam* to them—  
they don't understand.

When Mummy gives me a look,  
I take the sherbets from her,  
erase the frown from my face,  
and replace it with a too-big smile.

Mummy turns to greet a guest,  
and I quickly gulp one glass of sherbet.  
Icy pink frothy sweetness  
that tastes of roses and guilt.  
I pour the other one behind a plant.

I don't smile when I say *Salam* to them,  
and I make sure not to offer them anything.

I don't owe them anything.



## After the Wedding

The t-w-i-n-k-l-i-n-g lights are taken down,  
the garden becomes as it once was,  
and the radio is turned back on  
for the news  
at Full Volume.



## MRS. NIZAMI'S GIFT

As each day goes by,  
fewer and fewer girls come to school.  
Mrs. Nizami pauses our lessons,  
tells us she's sure we already know  
that our country is changing.  
The British are drawing a crooked line  
down the middle of the land.  
We are finally gaining independence  
from the British.

Two countries will be created—

Pakistan in the west

India in the east.

I interrupt—

*Why couldn't they leave us alone?*

*Who let them rule over us?*

*Who will take over now?*

But Mrs. Nizami continues,

*I am praying for all of us.*

*I don't care if you are*

*Hindu*

*Muslim*

*Sikh*

*Christian.*

*Whatever faith you are,*

*we are all the same:*

*Human.*

I peek at Jahana who is Muslim  
and Geeta who is Hindu,  
see their ponytail and braids nod  
at the same time as mine.

Mrs. Nizami tells us,

*There is talk of school closing,*

*but until I'm sure,*

*I'm going to show up every day,  
not to worry.*

She digs through her satchel,  
takes out a papery package,  
unwraps it,

and stands in the middle of the room.

She walks slowly to each desk.

*Open your hands, please!*

She lays a pencil into our eager palms.

My fingers curl around my pencil.

So light.

So thin.

Brand-new

(not a hand-me-down).

Best of all:

Mine.

But wait,

is this Mrs. Nizami's way  
of saying goodbye?

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## Our Differences

We all look the same  
in shades of brown,  
but if you look closer,

Muslim men may wear a topi on their head.

Sikh men may wear a turban wrapped around their head.

Hindu women may wear a bindi on their forehead.

Muslim women may wear a hijab over their hair.

But almost all women wear a dupatta  
covering their heads.

You can notice differences  
if you look really close,  
which lately everyone  
seems to be doing.

I wonder, if we took a walk on Eid again  
would the non-Muslim shopkeepers  
still salute my father?



## After-School Swing Chats

It's Geeta's turn—  
she's flying over the compost heap,  
her legs a straight line.  
Bend—straight—bend—  
straight again.

Jahana whispers to me  
so Geeta can't hear:  
*We're leaving for Pakistan soon.*  
*If you stay back like Geeta,*  
*you're Hindu.*

Anger rises in me,  
like a paratha puffing up with steam.

I yell  
*Didn't you hear Mrs. Nizami?*  
My hands push Jahana into the compost heap,  
into old melon rinds  
and squelchy tea bags.  
I leave them both  
and run inside.



## **IF I STAY,**

I'm not Hindu.

I'm still Muslim.

Why does it matter?

Just because I'm Muslim

doesn't mean I have to leave!

Right?



## **ABAJAN'S GUIDANCE**

Whenever I lose my temper,

Abajan knows.

Even though he doesn't know about

me pushing Jahana,

he sees my flushed face,

hears my stomping feet,

sees my eyebrows pulled together so tight

that my mole disappears.



*Khobani Begum,  
When you are in control of your emotions,  
you are in control of yourself.*

I nod,  
but I don't listen.



## **SCHOOL**

At school the next day,  
I keep my eyes on Mrs. Nizami,  
her big bun,  
her maroon and pink clothes.

I sit with Geeta,  
don't apologize to Jahana,  
and she doesn't come by to swing.  
(Neither does Geeta.  
I'm not sure why.)

Swinging isn't as fun  
when you're all by yourself,  
and all you can see  
is a dented compost heap  
(Jahana's dent is still there)  
and a disappearing town.



## JAHANA'S NEW HAIRSTYLE

I should have known  
something was wrong  
when Jahana came by  
the next afternoon after school  
with a different hairstyle.

Usually, Jahana's mother  
ties her hair in a thick ponytail  
that she wears with an Alice band.  
But this time, her hair  
was oiled and braided  
just like mine.

I grabbed her hand  
like everything was okay again.  
*Let's go to the back of the garden  
and swing.*

Jahana shook her head slightly  
and winced.  
(Probably because her braids were too tight.)

*I'm not mad at you anymore. I'm sorry.  
Let's swing!*

I pull her to the swings  
harder,  
but she speaks quietly,  
her voice a watery whisper.

*I leave tonight . . .  
I came to say goodbye.*

I drop her hand.  
Let out a gasp.  
She pulls me back for a hug.  
*Are you sure you're leaving?  
Do you have to go?*

Jahana nods.

I tell her to wait.  
I run inside  
and grab a handful of pine nuts—  
her favorite—  
and drop them into her pocket.

Usually, we have so many words,  
we don't stop talking.  
But now our words  
come in threes.

*Don't forget me.*

*How could I?*



## My Neighborhood

Now the sabzi wala doesn't even bother to yell.  
Before, the roads would bustle—  
everyone's voice a melodious chorus;  
loud yells of goods for sale.  
Taaza Taaza Sabzi! (Fresh, Fresh Vegetables!)  
Meetha Meetha Phal (Sweet, Sweet Fruit!)  
Bhes Ka Doodh! (Buffalo Milk!)

Now the roads are quiet.  
Our mali, Irfan, doesn't come  
to water our plants anymore.  
I care for the flowers now.  
Only Khushboo, our ayah,  
Mahesh the chawkidar,  
and Basheer the cook are here.

Because of riots,  
the sky swirls,  
a black burning cloud.



## Homework

Even though the days are changing,  
Mrs. Nizami still gives us homework,  
which my mind welcomes.  
As I read,  
there is a word I don't know.  
I take my book to Mummy,  
who is ironing saris.

*Mummy, what does this say?*  
Mummy leans closer to my book,  
scrunches her eyebrows together.  
*I'm busy right now,*  
*why don't you ask Wahab?*  
I sigh Mummy's name,  
stretch it out in a groan,  
before stomping over to Wahab.  
(I think this is Mummy's way  
of making Wahab use his brain.)



## Maresh's Arms

Our chawkidar, Maresh, is tall  
like a tree,  
taller than anyone in our bungalow,  
the thinnest of us all.

When I was four years old  
and he would take a break from  
guarding the curly iron gate,  
watching the bustling streets,  
he would throw me up  
in the milky blue sky.

So high,  
higher than I was ever thrown—  
then catch me in his branch arms,  
before returning me  
down into green again,  
the garden.



## Too Big

Now I am too big  
to be thrown into the sky,  
and Mahesh is too busy  
watching the streets,  
looking for danger.



## KHUSHBOO'S HANDS

My ayah Khushboo's skin is dark brown,  
her hands rougher than Mummy's and mine.  
The black kajal under her eyes  
is always thick and smudged,  
unlike Mummy's kajal,  
which cradles the inside of  
her round eyes.

On the back verandah,  
near the servants' quarters,  
Khushboo takes our dirty clothes,

white detergent powder,  
and a big blue bucket.  
She puts her lined hands together  
and scrubs.

When I bend over to help her,  
she doesn't stop me  
like she usually does.  
Instead, she says,  
*With the world changing so fast  
it might be good to learn.*

I am too afraid to ask her  
m o r e.

Instead, we slap clothes on the tile  
and wring out water  
before hanging clothes on the line.

My hands instantly feel rougher,  
like Khushboo's.





## Ironing

Khusbhoo shows me the heavy iron,  
closes my fingers  
around the handle,  
and glides it over the steamy cloth.  
For Abajan's handkerchiefs,  
she shows me how to press the iron in the center  
and iron outward,  
then to soak the handkerchief  
in drops of sun.

Ironing  
feels like art.  
I study the patterns  
of kurtas and shalwars,  
clothes as soft as  
petals of a rose.



## Sweeping

After a day of work,  
Khushboo hands me the jharoo.

Instead of her cleaning,  
she shows me how to squat low,  
sweep the floor  
until the crumbs  
and swollen grains of rice,  
the sticky evidence of a busy day,  
are wiped clean—  
erased.

I puff up with pride  
when Khushboo says  
“*Shabash!*”  
(Well done!)



## Khushboo's Day Off

On Friday, she goes to visit her family across town.  
When Khushboo returns,  
she always holds out a crumply paper bag  
and a big smile.  
She brings my brothers and me hard-boiled sweets  
and extra-melted toffees.  
My taste buds gloat  
when she returns.



## THIS FRIDAY

Our chawkidar, Mahesh, scans the streets,  
says there are people rioting nearby,  
that the stories he's heard  
shouldn't be repeated around us.

He whispers to Khushboo,  
and even though I try to hear,  
I can't.

On Friday, Khushboo stays in the servants' quarters,  
doesn't go to visit her family across town,  
doesn't bring us toffees either.



## ADIL'S WAY OF SWINGING

Today, it is just me and Adil  
swinging alone  
because Jahana's moved away,  
and Geeta's mother  
doesn't think it's safe  
to go anywhere,  
not even school.

Without the girls here,  
Adil wants to swing  
without sharing.

The difference  
with Jahana and Geeta swinging

is that Adil will swing high.  
We used to hold tight  
at the highest point,  
but Adil lets go and

s

r

a

o  
s over the compost heap  
landing just in front of squishy orange peels  
and buzzing flies.  
His laugh,  
little chuckles that tickle me,  
makes me laugh too.



## OVER THE WALL

When it's my turn to swing  
over the wall,  
I spy Geeta and her mother  
walking to the phal wala,  
returning with a bunch of spotted bananas.  
Even from my swing  
I can tell they are too soft,  
already yellowy brown.

I wonder if Geeta is telling the truth.

Is her mother not letting her come over  
because we're Muslim?



## MUMMY'S HEALTH

Khushboo tends to Mummy  
the way mosquitoes tend to sweaty skin:  
constant.

Before it was just Abajan telling her to rest,  
now it's Khushboo too.

Khushboo presses cool handkerchiefs to her  
forehead  
palms  
even the soles of her feet.

Before, Mummy's naps were short,  
now Mummy's naps  
s t r e t c h long.

Even Wahab tells us to play quieter,  
to not disturb Mummy.

My anger bubbles.  
I tell Wahab to stop acting like a grown-up,  
but instead of fighting back,  
disappointment clouds his forehead,  
which makes me feel worse.

I wonder if I should feel more worried about Mummy too.



## MUMMY'S EYES

A tendril of worry  
threads through my ribs  
when I see Mummy's eyes circled and sunken in.  
Mummy's always had dark circles;  
me too.

It's just the way we were born.  
But they look awfully dark lately,  
and her normally rosy skin  
is moonlight pale.  
When I ask Wahab  
if Mummy's fine,  
he talks to me as if I'm much younger.  
Says, *Yes, she just needs to rest.*

I resolve to be extra good.  
That day, Adil, Quadir, and I play extra quiet.



## GEETA'S HOUSE

Wahab was right,

Mummy just needed rest!

Today, Mummy wanders into the kitchen,  
measuring sugary ingredients.

She tells me I can invite Geeta.

I call out to Geeta—

*Come today at teatime,*

*Mummy's making coconut toffee!*

But Geeta doesn't smile.

Her eyebrows pull together.

Her mouth puffs out.

She says, *Stop calling me.*

*We aren't friends anymore!*

*You're Muslim*

*and I'm Hindu.*

*We're too different.*

*You don't belong here  
anymore.*

When my face twists,  
she bends over,  
picks up a rock,  
and throws it at me.

*Geeta, what are you saying?*

*It's me, Zarina.*

*It's you, Geeta.*

*Sisters.*

Geeta bends over,  
picks up another rock,  
throws it at me harder.  
I have no words left.



No more friends  
or sisters.

Is this what it feels like  
to be a stranger  
at home?



## HOME

Khushboo  
sees my face,  
the blood dripping down my arms,  
and she pulls me in for a hug.

*What happened?*

Through angry sobs  
I tell her about Geeta.

Khushboo puts one hand on my shoulder,  
the other on my chin.  
*Look at me.*

*I'm Hindu,  
and we are family.  
No Matter What.*

*That girl has gone mad  
like the rest of them.  
She's probably just repeating  
what her mummy and father told her.  
It has nothing to do with you.  
People in this country are forgetting  
that we've played together,  
eaten together.*

*It just means you and me  
get to eat more of your Mummy's toffee.  
And we will.*

Khushboo folds her arms,  
making me smile.  
She cleans my arm,  
re-braids the ropes of my hair,  
and pats my head.  
She pushes my shoulders back  
before sending me  
to the kitchen.



## Teatime

Mummy knows Jahana has left already.  
She asks where Geeta is.

I don't want Mummy to worry.  
I look down at the floor and say,  
*Geeta's not feeling well today.*

Mummy looks at my face.  
Maybe she sees my eyes,  
puffy and rimmed in red,  
but doesn't say anything,  
just nods  
before she slices me  
a bigger piece of mithai.



## School

There is talk of riots,  
where angry extremist people  
tangle together into a mob,  
walk around Poona  
breaking and looting things,  
harming and killing people.

Before, Poona was peaceful  
and we all lived together  
side by side,  
neighbor to neighbor,  
no matter what faith we were.

Now there is a frenzy of people,  
once friends,  
churned into enemies.  
Abajan and Mummy  
say we can't go to school anymore.

Adil and Qadir cheer.  
Wahab is quiet like me.  
I wish I could have  
properly said goodbye

to Mrs. Nizami.



## DECISIONS

When Abajan decides  
that we will go to Pakistan,  
the air in the room changes,  
goes flat,  
the way soda  
swallows up fizz.

*We will leave in two weeks*, he says.  
In the meantime, Abajan puts  
the loopy Islamic calligraphy  
that hangs on our door  
away in a trunk.

*We don't want to get anyone angry right now.*



## Musical Chairs

When all my classmates were in school  
(and Geeta was actually talking to me),  
we used to have the best birthday parties.  
Mummy would take a tinkly glass  
and a heavy metal spoon,  
clanging it round and round for music.  
When it would stop,  
we would scramble for a chair  
before we were out.

Now, because India is splitting  
in two,

we are packing bags,  
scrambling around the same way.  
Muslims swapping places with Hindus,  
Hindus swapping places with Muslims,  
and we don't even know if there are chairs.

Angry voices take the place of music.



## Pockets

Abajan takes out train tickets,  
counts out rupees,  
then folds them all back  
into a crackly brown envelope.

Mummy lays out her wedding jewelry  
and counts pieces,  
matches earring to earring,  
bangle to bangle,  
anklet to anklet,  
before wrapping them in a cloth bag  
and stuffing them into her sari blouse.  
My brothers and I are told to pack,  
but it's really hard to figure out what to take  
when all you have is one cloth bag to fill.  
At least I have two weeks to figure it out.

One thing I know I will take:  
Mrs. Nizami's pencil.



## Blind Man's Buff

We aren't packing furniture,  
so we push it all to the middle of the room.  
Khushboo helps Mummy  
turn tangly drawers  
into empty shells  
while Mummy decides what to pack.

With the furniture moved,  
there's even more space  
to play.

Adil is a smart hider,  
Wahab is a quiet hider,  
but Qadir and I—  
our laughter drips from our mouths.

Even when Qadir and I  
are blindfolded,  
stumbling around,  
we're still **loud**.  
We can't help it.

We play when the adults are awake,



eager for our last chance.  
Usually, Mummy would scold us,  
but this time,  
she and Khushboo  
exchange smiles  
and let us play



## TICKETS

On the dining room table,  
I count train tickets  
and ask the question:  
*Where's Khushboo's ticket?*

When Abajan  
doesn't answer right away  
and Mummy's face folds,  
I run out of the house  
past the verandah  
around the back  
to the servants' quarters.  
I throw my arms around Khushboo  
and let the tears come.

Khushboo pats my round cheeks.  
She tells me, *I'm Hindu.*  
*I should stay here.*

I say,  
*No one will even know you're Hindu.*  
*You can pretend to be Muslim.*  
*Come with us instead!*

*People will know, she says.*  
*They have a way of knowing.*  
*I don't have the right papers*  
*or the right name.*  
*It's not safe for you*  
*if I come with you.*  
*And what about my own children?*

When I don't answer,  
she cups my chin.  
*You just help your mummy*  
*with your brothers.*  
*You know how to wash clothes now,*  
*how to sweep the floor.*  
*Be helpful.*

*Soon, we can visit each other*  
*and who knows, maybe you'll have*  
*a baby sister by then.*

*We have a little time together still.*  
*We can spend all day together.*  
*Okay? Theek-he?*



# THAT NIGHT

At dinner, I am eating palak aloo  
and rice,  
my favorite meal.  
My fingers are slippery from ghee.

While I lick my fingers,  
I think of all the things  
Khushboo and I can do together  
in these last two weeks,  
when suddenly  
there is a knock on the door.  
At first,  
soft  
loud  
louder.

There are the voices of men  
that sound like animals.  
The knocks on the door  
turn into pounds.

Smoke and fear  
that I've been smelling  
from                f                a                r                away  
are right outside our door.

Abajan whispers to us,  
*Go to the back of the house.*

Qadir pops one last aloo in his mouth.  
Abajan glares at him.  
The chawkidar Mahesh  
rushes in from the back.

*It's a mob  
looking for Muslims!  
Hide in the servants' quarters.  
Hide! Quick!*  
We rush to the servants' quarters  
while Mahesh waits inside the house.

In Khushboo's room, we  
sit shoulder to shoulder,  
heel to heel,  
until we reach the crackly walls.  
Abajan and Mummy pray silently,  
recite duas for protection  
and the ayat-ul-kursi.  
We hear:

*Let us in  
Otherwise, we will burn the house!*

Mahesh tells us he'll open the door  
and hides the dishes from dinner.  
He tells them he's Hindu,  
that the Muslim family has already gone.  
The faces of the men,  
brown just like ours,  
are young and eager,  
hungry to hurt others.  
When they hear Mahesh's news,

they pinch into disappointment.  
But first, they come in,  
dig their hands into the aloo palak,  
grab Mummy's jewelry.

*Tell the family if they ever come back  
we'll be ready for them . . . they say.*

They look at Mahesh,  
see his tree height.  
*Come join us!*  
*We are attacking the Muslims!*  
*They don't belong here anymore!*

Mahesh shakes his head  
and holds out his hands,  
lets out a dry laugh  
that isn't the laugh he usually has.

*Not today, some other time.*



## That Night

Abajan tells us we can't wait anymore.

We

Must

Leave

**Tonight.**

My tongue twists with protests:

*But I haven't packed.*

*But I need more time with Khushboo.*

*But it isn't fair . . .*

But the look on Abajan's face  
makes me swallow my protests  
into a knot in my throat.



## With Us

Basheer is Muslim.  
It's not safe for him to stay.  
In his straw bag,  
he packs  
    spices  
    pistachios  
    roti  
    rice  
    daal.

Khushboo and Mahesh are Hindu.  
They are going to stay.  
But Khushboo's kajal  
drips down her face.



## Keys

Abajan and Mahesh  
exchange a handshake  
that turns into a hug.

Abajan keeps an extra set of keys  
pierced by a cold circle of metal.  
*For when we come back to visit.*  
*Inshallah.*



## IN MY BAG

Two extra outfits.  
One pencil from Mrs. Nizami.  
Khushboo's address on a slip of paper.  
A handful of carnations.





## My Father

isn't wearing  
a fresh carnation  
in his buttonhole.



## GARDEN

Before I leave  
I do a farewell sajdah  
in the garden,  
thanking God for His blessings.  
I bend down,  
press my forehead to the ground,  
sniff the earth,  
and try to remember  
the scent of home.

I tear off more carnations  
to give to Abajan  
tomorrow.



## TRAIN STATION

Chaos



## LEAVING PIECES OF MY HEART BEHIND

Ladies hold babies on their hips,  
belongings on their head.

The air smells electric with  
sweat  
body odor  
nerves.

Men pull sacks over their shoulders.  
My brothers and I hold  
my father and mother  
tight.

Mummy says,  
*Hold on to your brothers.*

Abajan fumbles with tickets  
before putting them away—  
no one is looking at tickets.

In the dark,  
my eyes squint.  
I gasp.  
On tops of the trains  
sit a flood of people.



## NOWHERE TO SIT

Inside the train are people.  
On top of the train are people.  
E v e r y w h e r e p  
eople.  
Is there even space for us?  
There is barely space to walk.  
To move.  
To breathe.



## WHAT THERE IS SPACE FOR

Pushing



## **BOARDING**

There is not enough space for our family.  
People are pushing  
and pulling family members  
through the crowd.

Abajan points  
to a train compartment.  
*Let's try.*  
But when we get closer,  
there are people on the seats,  
under the seats—  
no space at all.



## **DON'T GIVE UP**

Abajan tries again,  
pulling us to another dark compartment.  
No space.

In the next compartment,  
a friend from the Muslim League  
yells to Abajan,  
*There's Space Here!*  
He waves waves waves.

This time, there is barely enough space,  
but Abajan squeezes us in.  
Me, Wahab, Qadir, Basheer,  
Mummy, Abajan.  
My heart  
drops,  
sinks.  
Mummy's voice  
becomes an animal howl.

*Where's Adil?*



## **IN THAT MOMENT**

My face is  
painted in guilt,  
swirled with sweat.  
I was supposed  
to hold his hand.  
The train whistle pierces the air.  
Abajan runs to the window,  
climbs out,

and leaves the train.

Voice hoarse,

he shrieks for Adil.

Adil!

Adil!

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*



## The Train

Another piercing whistle.

Mummy prays in whispers,  
but my thoughts cry.

*What if we leave them both,  
Adil and Abajan?*



## A FEW MINUTES LATER

Abajan rushes back onto the train,  
Adil in his arms.

He hands him to Mummy.

*I saw him crying, he says.*

*A Hindu woman was holding him up,  
asking people who he belonged to.*

*If it wasn't for her,  
we wouldn't have found him . . .*

*Alhamduillah.*

Mummy folds Adil onto her lap.

Abajan is back on the train.  
Relief.



## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

On the train,  
it's dark and hazy.  
The whistle pierces the air  
once       twice       three times  
as the train chugs along slowly.  
My eyes pinch into a squint  
to keep out the dusty air.  
All around me families are holding on  
to belongings,  
to each other.  
Their eyes  
urgent,  
begging.  
*Will we be okay?*  
*What will become of us?*





## Bathroom

Mummy made us go before we left,  
but I didn't know when I'd next drink water,  
so I drank and drank  
and now I really need to go.

I call out to Mummy.  
I want to ask  
if there is a bathroom  
on the train,  
but Mummy doesn't hear me.  
Nobody does.

My bladder squeezes  
my body.  
Hard.  
Harder.  
Until I can't hold it in anymore.



## Embarrassment

Seeps all over me  
as my shalwar feels  
damp,  
warm,  
horribly cold.

The lady sitting next to me  
on the floor of the train,  
must feel something.  
She turns and  
scrunches her nose,  
shifts a few centimeters to the right,  
even though there is  
nowhere to go.



## Stops

At different train station stops,  
some families  
heave their belongings and babies  
up onto their backs,  
keeping their eyes down  
as they leave  
our compartment.

Which means, for us,  
just a little more space now.



## SUDDEN STOP

We are not at a passenger train station  
when the train  
Inhales  
Exhales  
Sputters  
Stops.



## **DANGER**

There are men,  
Sharp men with  
    Daggers  
    Spears  
    Guns.

They push their way  
into train compartments  
like ants to sugar.

I wait for the bites  
to come.



## **Fear**

When  
the  
muscles  
in  
your

b

a

c

k

get  
really  
still.



## Assistant Station Manager

Sitting at the front of our compartment,  
he springs up from his seat,  
flings open the door to a bathroom,  
gestures to us to hurry inside.

Once we are inside,  
he nods at us once,  
then locks the door tight.

Even though no one has told us,  
we all know to stay *SILENT*,  
even Adil.

Over the beating of my heart,  
I hear the sharp men  
ask where the Muslims are.

The station manager responds  
in a voice  
sugar slow and sure.

*No Muslims here.*  
*They left already.*



## INSIDE THE BATHROOM

I didn't know that this train had a bathroom.  
Minutes ago, I wished for one.

Now that we are in the bathroom,  
in the darkness,  
there is no space,  
we are all pinned to each other,  
and I can't wait to get out.

The bathroom smells of  
unflushed toilet,  
and I must be adding to the stench.

Shame.



## **From the Next Compartment**

The sounds I hear  
are those I never ever  
want to hear again.



## **BATHROOM REFLECTIONS**

Even though I am squashed in the bathroom,  
I realize hiding here  
with my family  
and another Muslim family  
may be saving my life.  
In the sweaty stinky darkness,  
tears run down my face.  
I taste salt  
and the bitterness of fear.





## When the Men Leave

The train starts moving again,  
the rhythm of hope.  
We hear the lock of the bathroom  
pulled back.

My swollen eyes wince  
with gratitude into the light.

All three of my brothers' eyes are red  
and tear-stained too.

In Abajan's eyes,  
I see relief.  
Abajan hugs the station manager,  
thanks him  
once                      twice                      three times.  
The station manager nods again  
and tells Abajan, *I have a family too.*



## Train Station

When we finally reach Bombay,  
my shalwar is still wet and smelly,  
but in the black of night  
no one notices.

A sour stench attacks our noses  
when we shuffle off the train,  
so slow        so        s        l        o        w  
I wonder why so many people  
are sleeping.  
But Mummy gasps,  
puts the flesh of her palms  
over Adil's and my eye sockets,  
but it's too late.  
I see blood and bodies everywhere.  
Is this what death smells like?



## Deathly Silence

*On the train,  
there was killing,  
so much killing,  
whispers Abajan.*

When we turn,  
no one is sitting on the top of the train anymore.  
No one is coming off the train,  
except the people from our compartment.  
Loud noises are replaced by too-still silence.

The platform is slippery,  
and when I look at the bottoms of my sandals,  
they're stained red.



## Reality

I've heard the words

Looting

Rioting

Killing

before.

But now that I've seen it,

terror threads through

each of my ribs

and lungs.

I can't breathe.



## WE ALL LOOK THE SAME

All shades of brown,

yet because of what we believe

or don't believe,

people are being killed.





## Out of the Station

Underneath the bruised sky,  
Abajan instructs me to  
take a deep breath of air,  
deep  
    deep  
        deeper.



## APPLES AND MILK

On the street,  
Sikh families greet us,  
holding out their hands.  
When we reach out,  
they place  
crunchy red apples  
and warm cups of milk  
into our hands.  
*For the survivors.*  
Mummy's eyes drizzle.

I drink my milk in three gulps,  
crunch my apple to the core,  
tuck the teardrop-shaped seeds  
into my bag  
for later.



## NEW PLAN

*We are most certainly not  
getting back on the trains,  
Abajan says as he points to the horizon.  
We'll take a ship to Pakistan instead.*

Anticipation floats in my heart.  
A ship has to be better.

On the streets,  
even though I haven't walked much,  
my feet feel as heavy as elephant legs.  
Mummy lays a chadar on the ground.  
Even though the ground is hard and hostile,  
we collapse on it and sleep.  
Everyone except Abajan, who keeps watch.



## THE NEXT MORNING

A rooster caws.  
The ground shudders.  
People walk around us.  
Mummy's face is creased.  
The hair on my brothers' heads sticks up.  
I wonder what I must look like.  
Abajan's beard has gray hairs,  
something I never noticed before,  
and his buttonhole is lonely.  
I reach into my bag  
to give Abajan a carnation.  
But carnations without water  
are all shriveled  
                    wilted  
                            dead.  
(But I keep them.)  
What more can I lose?





## Usually for Breakfast

We eat Basheer's anday ka qeema—  
minced spicy egg.  
Poori,  
gleaming with oil, the puffier the better.  
Halva,  
soft sweetness that lingers on your tongue.

But we are not near a kitchen,  
on a roadside instead.

Abajan reaches into his pockets,  
digs out rupees,  
and buys us dry roti.

I'm surprised how good roti can be.



## **The Shirala**

Printed on the side of a ship.  
We follow Abajan  
toward the glistening harbor.  
After being on the train,  
being outside  
in fresh air  
feels like a hug for my eyes.



## **TICKETS**

Abajan is worried that tickets are sold out,  
that there will be no space,  
but Abajan sees a man  
who no longer wants to go on the ship.  
He holds out his tickets to Abajan.  
When Abajan's hungry fingers graze the tickets,  
the man yanks them back.  
*They're for sale.*  
*How much can you give?*

Abajan and the man bargain  
until finally, Abajan  
has the tickets.  
Safe,  
nestled  
in his palm.



## **SHOCK**

When Abajan turns the tickets over,  
he sees black ink  
stamp marks on them.  
The tickets are used.



## Now What?

Abajan turns to scold the man  
to get our money back,  
but in the crowd of people  
the man is a shrinking dot.  
Disappeared.

Qadir says,  
*Maybe they won't look at our tickets  
like they did on the train.*  
Normally, if Qadir spoke up,  
interrupting Abajan at an important time,  
he would furrow his eyebrows.

But this time,  
he looks at Qadir.  
*You may be right.*



## Boarding

The *Shirala*  
leaves later in the day,  
but Abajan thinks we should try to board  
while there's space.

Wahab and Qadir walk ahead.  
Adil sits  
on Abajan's shoulders  
so we don't lose him  
this time.  
Mummy holds my hand.

Mummy's hand  
feels so small  
as she squeezes my hand twice.  
Sometimes I used to feel sad  
that her bangles wouldn't fit me,  
but now as I lead Mummy,  
I feel **big** and proud.



## Tickets

There really isn't a line,  
just families and people  
trying to get ahead of one another.

Basheer hands us pistachios to keep  
our hands and mouths busy.  
I wish Mrs. Nizami was here  
to give everyone *the look*—  
listen  
get back in line.



## SHIP

We are finally on board  
the *Shirala*,  
on the top of the deck.  
The boat hasn't left yet.  
Adil, Wahab, and Qadir and I play tag,  
and Mummy, Abajan, and Basheer

lay down a chadar  
with our bags spread out,  
marking our territory.



## SQUAT

In minutes,  
the top of the ship  
fills up.  
Mummy's face creases  
as she calls out to us,  
her voice weak.  
When we slink back to our chadar,  
other families are sitting on it,  
and there is only space  
for us to squat.



## Overpacked

The *Shirala* doesn't leave  
until more families board.  
Abajan looks  
at the workers on the ship,  
opens his mouth,  
closes it again.

When you finally have a spot,  
you remember what it was like  
to not have a spot . . .  
How can you turn families away?



## HOPE FLOATS

The ship finally leaves  
and we are on the ocean,  
not land anymore.  
My hope starts to rise  
with the waves.





## SEASICK

As the ship lurches  
from one side  
to the other,  
my stomach feels  
like it's been punched  
inside and out.



## MUMMY

Her belly is bigger now,  
and I don't think the baby inside  
likes being  
pushed one way,  
then another.  
Mummy throws up  
more than once.



## A PINCH

There is a lady nearby  
who sees Mummy throw up  
again and again.

From her bag,  
she pulls out a lemon,  
a knife,  
a smile.

Slices the lemon,  
passes a sliver to Mummy  
and to whoever is sick.

For the children,  
a pinch of sugar.  
Something so small,  
but it makes me feel better  
in an instant.



## Amid the Wails

Crying children,  
crying women,  
moaning fathers,  
reeking of vomit,  
the ship crashes us around.  
We are packed ankle to ankle,  
shoulder to shoulder.  
Every wave  
feels like a bruise.



## SUNSET

The ocean slurps up the sun,  
egg yolk and all.

I wait for lights to turn on,  
but there are none.



## Ship at Night

No space

Crying

Darkness.

There are so many of us together,  
but it doesn't help.

When there's so much despair,  
all you feel is alone.



**WHAT THE SEA AND MY TEARS HAVE IN  
COMMON:**

Salt



## Questions

Adil and Qadir ask  
the question  
that's on the tip of my tongue:  
*Are we there yet?*

Wahab asks,  
*How much longer?*

Mummy is too sick to answer.  
Abajan is too busy with Mummy.

Basheer whispers,  
raises his hands to the sky.  
*There's still two more days to go.*  
*God hears the traveler's prayer.*  
*Pray.*



## Sunlight

I never knew I could be  
so relieved to see  
daylight.

When the sun wakes up again,  
the sky is painted—  
pinks, oranges, and yellows.

*Subhanallah, says Abajan.*

*Glory be to God.*

*Keep your tongue moist  
with the remembrance of your Lord.*

*Notice, even when it is our worst day,  
there is still beauty.*



## A Temporary Peace

Squatting hurts,  
especially when minutes  
turn into hours.  
I ease my bottom  
down to sit.  
Temporary Peace.



## FOOD AND DRINK

Basheer monitors our  
sips of water,  
bites of pistachios,  
pieces of roti.

Food that we eat  
quickly,  
quietly,  
that we only share  
with the family closest to us.

After what seems like an eternity,  
the horizon changes  
from water  
to a gray line.

# Land!



## DESTINATION

When our boat cradles land,  
we stand up  
all wobbly and weak.  
Our first steps  
are like a new calf  
that has never walked before.  
We are sore.  
So sore.  
Peeking at Abajan  
whose face has pinches that stay put,  
whose skin is now pale  
the color of milky tea,  
instead of his usual brown  
tea with a few drops of milk  
makes me feel worse.





## MY FATHER

Abajan used to have  
polished cheeks,  
polished shoes,  
a polished desk.

Now he looks  
dusty and dull  
as he sinks to his knees,  
grazes his fingers to the ground,  
grasping nothing but air.

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## On the Ground

Abajan places  
    his forehead  
    palms  
    knees  
on the ground,  
curls his toes,  
and prays.

As Abajan prays,  
I watch his tears polish the dirt.

I don't recognize this man.  
I don't recognize this country.

# **Part 2**

## **Karachi, Pakistan**





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## Pakistani Soil

I want to pray, too,  
but I'm still mad we're here.

I can't think of praying.  
When I look back at the water,  
it is stained red,  
and there are bodies  
floating in the sea.

Off the ship,  
Wahab, Qadir, and Adil  
normally would be running around,  
but Qadir's and Adil's faces  
are pale as dirt hugs their skin.

Dirt hugs Wahab's skin, too,  
but his skin is no longer pink.  
It is red,  
sunburned.

Mummy's face  
is the palest of all,  
the color of a lemon seed.



## UNDER A NEW SKY

In Karachi,  
the weather is dry, dusty, and hot.  
Grime from the journey  
coats my cheeks,  
    my hair,  
    my tongue.  
I already miss the breeziness of Poona,  
especially the garden  
and swinging into the cool, milky blue sky.

The British may have given us a new country,  
but they took away  
our hope,  
our sky.





## Abajan's Plan

Abajan walks around  
with purpose  
while we shuffle,  
shadows in his orbit.  
*Hurry, Khubani Begum!*  
he says,  
even though my cheeks  
are no longer apricot round  
or pink.

We have to stand in a line  
to get an allotment of a house.  
We show the inspector  
where we want to live,  
and if he approves it  
it's ours.  
We get ration cards too.



## Abajan Is Optimistic

But I notice he says  
house not home.  
As Abajan stands in line,  
I see that his beard droops,

and there is even more gray in it.  
There is one big problem:  
the line is n e v e r - e n d i n g.



## IN LINE

The line snakes long  
through the dusty, hot streets.  
We are hungry, and Abajan  
tells us to wait  
on the side of a road,  
underneath a w i d e date palm tree,  
while he and Wahab scout houses nearby.  
Basheer gives us dry roti,

but I'm tired of plain bread,  
bland and boring.  
Looking at Mummy's face,  
I push my grumbles away.

After a whole day is gone,  
the sun has dissolved,  
but  
the line has not.

Abajan and Wahab return,  
their faces shadowy.  
But Abajan says,  
*I think I found a place.*  
*Now we just need it approved . . .*

When we are finally at the front of the line,  
Abajan shows the inspector the house,  
and it gets approved.



## Not a House

It's two rooms squished together,  
a bathroom with standing room,  
a kitchen all squished up.

Our bungalow had so much space,  
twelve rooms,  
six bathrooms,  
a verandah that wrapped around  
and hugged our home tightly.  
And most importantly,  
a garden.

This place is dark,  
the ceilings are low,  
the walls peel with flaky plaster.

There's no garden.

That isn't the only problem.  
There is already someone living here,  
someone who the house belongs to already—a Sikh lady.  
Abajan tells us we are figuring it all out.  
In the meantime, we need to share a room,  
and more families will probably come tonight

to share the place.

Mummy tells us,  
*When there's space in your heart,  
there's space to accommodate.*

There must be no space in my heart.



## HOME

Poona was home.  
This place, Karachi, isn't.  
It never will be.

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## Abajan's New Look

Abajan has a tiny cupboard.  
In there, he folds away his Western clothes,  
hangs them on a high shelf.  
Swaps them for simple shalwar kameezes  
made of jute,  
rough beige cloth churned by local farmers.

After our journey,  
where death lurked  
all the way  
from Poona to Karachi,  
a journey  
we wouldn't have taken  
if the British hadn't interfered,  
I understand  
why Abajan would want a break  
from British clothes.  
Now when the breeze blows,  
Abajan's kameezes f l y.  
When I hug Abajan,  
I feel the roughness of the jute cloth,  
a new memory  
of a hug.



## BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

Even though the space in the house  
is all sucked up,  
my brothers still want to play.

We wrap a dusty dupatta  
around our eyes  
as we wobble, topple, and try to run  
(but there's no space),  
try to find each other.

Mummy's lips twist in displeasure,  
but Abajan puts his hand on Mummy's shoulder.  
*Go Rest.*



## Crowded Quarters

Another family comes to stay in the other room.  
And we are not allowed to use the kitchen  
because the Sikh lady says  
loudly enough for us to hear,  
*This is MY house.*  
*And I'm not*  
*going anywhere.*

I remember how Mummy used to tell me  
*You're not going anywhere,*  
and it feels like an old memory.

When Basheer tries to enter the kitchen,  
the Sikh lady roars,  
*I'll break both your legs*  
*if you come in!*

Basheer ends up  
going to the corner street,  
buying us food there.  
I used to always want  
street food.  
But after a few days of it,



I miss Basheer's home food.



## WHISPERS

I hear my parents' whispers  
when they are supposed to be asleep.  
I don't catch all the words they are saying,  
but I do hear the guilt  
in their voices.

*Taking over her house . . .*

*It's not right!*

*What choice do we have?*

*They took our house too . . .*

*All of this is a mess!*

*May God have Mercy on us All.*



## House

The Sikh lady avoids us,  
and we avoid her.  
But one day,  
there are yells  
and sharp things  
and knocks on the door.  
I can't believe this is happening  
a       g       a       i       n.

Mummy runs to alert the Sikh lady  
who stands in one spot  
and won't stop shaking  
like a leaf in a storm.  
Mummy tells her to hide in the bathroom.

*Lock the door!*  
*Don't come out*  
*unless I tell you!*

This time, we have no Mahesh,  
but we all huddle in one room  
while Abajan deals with the mob.  
Abajan only opens the door  
when they threaten to burn the house down.

When he opens the door,  
there are the faces of angry Muslims.  
*We know she's in there.*  
*The Sikh lady!*  
*Give her to us!*

Abajan puts up his hands,  
speaks softly,  
which makes them get quieter.  
*She left yesterday.*

The faces of the mob change  
into disappointment  
as they charge away  
to find someone else.



## Rupi

The Sikh lady  
tells us she is going to leave.  
She thanks us for saving her life.  
The rope of her braid,  
wild and undone  
during the mob's threat,  
is now neatly pulled back  
and ropelike again.

Rupi packs a small bag,  
leaves with only her belongings.  
Tells us the fridge is ours to keep,  
that Basheer can finally use the kitchen.

Before leaving,  
she hugs the women.  
Lingers by Mummy  
and puts her hand on Mummy's belly,  
tells her she will pray for us.

Abajan gives her a slip of paper  
with our address in Poona.  
*If you need a place to stay  
and Mahesh is still there,*

*tell him we sent you.*



## **CARNATION**

In the empty fridge  
left by the Sikh lady Rupī,  
there is now a tiny jar  
and a flower of my father's.



## **BLIND MAN'S BLUFF AGAIN**

With home food in our stomachs—  
chicken salan and laddoo,  
white fluffy rice—  
we are coated with glee.

When the adults nap,  
*Let's play . . .*  
Adil goes first  
and barely finds us.  
He finally bumps into Qadir  
*Thump!*

gives in,  
pulls the dupatta down,  
peeks,  
and finds us easily.

When it's my turn,  
I wrap my eyes  
extra,  
reach my arms out  
and scramble around.

As I reach my arms out  
and push,  
I hear a laugh,  
a shriek.  
I find Qadir first.

I have almost found Wahab;  
my laughing fingers push hard  
when I knock the next figure over.  
But instead of a giggle,  
I hear a quiet yelp.

When I remove my dupatta,  
I am afraid,  
so afraid.



**ON THE FLOOR**

Mummy's in a ball,  
a liquid ring of red around her.  
Mummy who shouldn't be on the floor.  
Mummy who wasn't supposed to be there.

My mouth drops open.  
My hands quiver.  
Wahab comes running.  
*What happened?*  
Abajan lifts her up.  
*Go call a doctor!*

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## No One Hears Me

I'm so sorry . . .  
so so sorry . . .



## DOCTOR'S ORDERS

After the accident,  
I feel spears of silent glares.  
Accusation  
from everyone,  
even Adil.

The doctor says  
Mummy has placenta previa.  
The baby is like the kernel of a pistachio,  
Mummy's uterus the shell.  
If Mummy doesn't rest,  
the kernel may split from the shell,  
and because it's not time yet  
the baby may die.



Worry clogs my mind.



## **BED REST**

The doctor pushes up his glasses,  
tells Mummy  
she needs to go on bed rest.  
She has to stay in bed from day to night  
and keep her feet up.  
The journey made her very tired,  
but rest will help her feel better.

The doctor looks around at Abajan,  
Wahab, Qadir, Adil, and me,  
tells us to let our mother rest.

But I feel like everything is my fault.  
When he looks at me,  
I am not imagining it  
when he pushes his glasses up more.  
My eyes shift to the floor.



# BEFORE VS. NOW

Before, on Mummy's good days, she was  
unpacking trunks,  
cleaning dishes,  
making coconut toffee,  
walking from one room to another.

Now every day is a bad day,  
and she lies in bed.

All  
because  
of  
me.

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## Rest

Mummy's belly swells bigger,  
but her eyes have grown smaller.  
Dimmer.  
Before, Mummy's eyes blazed  
round like the sun.  
Now they are the weak flame  
of a candle that's almost burned out.

When the afternoons stretch into evenings,  
I take coconut oil  
and rub her hair,  
then her feet,  
between and around  
each toe.

I buy her favorite sandalwood soap  
from the corner store,  
that reminds her of home in Poona.

*Is it enough? I wonder.  
Does she know I'm sorry?*



## Our New School in Karachi

Is run by nuns from Goa.  
Mrs. Nizami,  
once my teacher  
in Poona,  
is now replaced by  
Sister Catherine.

Geeta and Jahana  
replaced by so many girls.  
Even though Geeta was mean,  
I still miss her.

Before, we were two girls to a table.  
Now we are squished—  
four girls to a table.

Before, I would raise my hand,  
answer the teacher.  
But now my hand feels  
heavy,  
my mind feels  
s       l       o       w.

Instead of focusing,

I let the chatter and the chaos

drown me.



## ONE HUNDRED RUPEES

In our building,  
there is talk of a boarding school,  
of mountains in Murree  
of better education,  
of hot meals for all children,  
and so much s p a c e to run.  
All you need is one hundred rupees.  
My brothers want to run  
in gardens,  
to play again.

I want to run, too,  
but I have to stay with Mummy.  
She needs me.



## SCHOOL IN KARACHI

I want to focus on what  
Sister Catherine is saying—  
but my mind is still chugging away,  
thinking about the bloody trains.  
My mind is churning like a seasick ship;  
my mind is anywhere  
but here.



## **BOARDING SCHOOL**

has sprawling cricket fields,  
six sports teams,  
all my brothers talk about  
and yearn for.  
After Mummy's accident,  
Bushra, a girl down the street,  
comes by to take care of Mummy  
in the too-tight afternoons.  
I know it's because  
I don't take good enough care.

I hurt her instead.



# NUISANCE

Here, in this new house  
(not home),  
I am a nuisance.

Sometimes, I think  
it would be better  
if I was gone.

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## Packing

My brothers are oblivious.

I want to shake them,  
ask them  
how all three of them  
can leave me.

What will I do  
without Adil,  
without Qadir,  
without Wahab?



## THE NEW GIRL

The name Bushra means Good News,  
but in my mind,  
she means Bad News.  
Bushra sprays herself in  
ithar that smells of fake roses,



that coaxes my nose into sneezes.

The name Khushboo means Fragrance.  
Even though Khushboo was outside  
scrubbing laundry and pots  
while sweat coated her face,  
I much preferred the way she smelled  
and looked.



## **WHEN BUSHRA IS OVER**

Her eyes linger on me—  
they question  
and accuse.  
And when someone sees her looking at me,  
she forces her lips upward  
and turns them into a smile.

A prickle of an idea  
becomes a waterfall.

I should leave too.



## Mummy's Room

Inside Mummy's cramped room,  
the smell of her sandalwood soap lingers.  
I sit beside her,  
hold her hand.

Her eyes flicker open  
and when she looks at me,  
the corner of her lips  
lift up.

Now is a good time to ask . . .



## THE QUESTION

*Mummy,*  
*Can I go to boarding school too?*  
Mummy's smile **fades**.  
*Are you mad, Zarina?*  
*You're not going anywhere.*

*Don't you remember  
our journey?  
What we did  
to stay together?*

*We just got off a train  
and a ship,  
and survived it.  
How can you think of leaving?*

*But Wahab, Qadir, and Adil are leaving . . .*

*Mummy snaps,  
Wahab, Qadir, and Adil  
are not eleven-year-old girls  
traveling alone.  
They are boys  
traveling together.*

*My mole disappears as I smash my eyebrows together.*

*We wouldn't send a girl alone.  
It's not safe.  
Have some common sense.*

*My chest tightens.  
I drop Mummy's hand  
and walk out of her room.*



## IN MY ROOM

According to Mummy,  
I must not have common sense.  
According to me,  
I must have just the right kind of sense.

I know what I need to do.

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## My Father's Study

On the door, I knock.  
Abajan is bent over his forms  
and papers,  
a fountain pen  
with dark blue ink,  
rupees counted  
and stacked,  
a pipe  
and tobacco.

*Yes, Zarina?*

The words loosen  
from my tongue.  
*I want to go to boarding school too.*

He inhales smoke  
from his pipe,  
exhales,  
stares at me.  
Abajan tugs at his beard.  
*Hmm.*  
*Sometimes you can be a little rash.*  
*Are you sure?*

Abajan has talked to me about my temper before,  
told me that when I control my emotions,  
I am in control.  
So that's what I do.  
I make my face nod,  
my eyebrows rise  
push my shoulders back,  
and say,  
y e s.

Even though I'm not sure.  
Not sure at all.

What I am sure about  
is that I am a nuisance to Mummy,  
a dangerous one.

Abajan tugs his beard again.

*This is a **big** tep.*

*I need time  
to think,  
to consult with the family.*



## **WHAT I HEAR IN MY MIND:**

I'm not a good daughter.

Good daughters  
stay.

Good daughters don't  
l e a v e.

But I will.



## PROGRESS REPORT

When it comes the next day  
in an envelope  
the color of my skin,  
Sister Catherine's report of me  
isn't very good.

*I know Zarina has potential.  
However, right now,  
it is hard to get through to her.*

*Failure to thrive.*



# WORDS

Those three words  
*Failure to thrive*  
propel Abajan  
to write a petition  
for my uncles  
and my mother  
to sign.

A form to let me go.

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## My Heart

Wobbles

Drips

Drops

Sinks

when I see Mummy's name.

Mummy is not going to be happy.



## PETITION

A piece of paper  
where everyone has to sign,  
to say I can go  
to boarding school.

Because I am a girl  
traveling alone  
without my brothers,

without my family,  
and it's simply not done.  
Abajan consults with his two brothers  
who live nearby.

I need signatures from  
the uncles,  
my father,  
my mother,  
and me.

Like Mummy, Abajan worries  
about sending a girl so young  
(even though I am eleven)  
so f a r away  
on her own.

The uncles  
say it is a good idea  
to get a good education,  
better than here.

Karachi is too crowded.  
Murree is better.  
They sign quickly—  
My father thinks,  
pulls the gray of his beard.  
Thinks some more,  
rubs his hair.  
Thinks some more,  
smokes his pipe.  
Thinks some more,  
then finally signs.



## MUMMY'S ROOM

Mummy thinks I have forgotten my question:

*Can I go to boarding school?*

When I bring her milky tea  
still steaming,  
she smiles,  
tries to sit up in her bed.

When she asks how school was,  
I say, *Good*,  
but it's not.

My hands shake  
when I show her the form.  
Mummy rubs her eyes,  
asks me to read it out loud.

*Mummy, this is a form—  
a family petition  
Abajan made,  
allowing me to go to boarding school . . .*

Mummy's face closes.



## SECOND TRY

Mummy looks at my face—  
sits up this time,  
shakes her head,  
gives me a look  
sharp and pointy.  
She grips my hands tight, too tight.

I remember the way she gripped me  
when I was little,  
when I ran away and tried to cross the street.  
The way she whispered,  
her voice a song.  
*You're not going anywhere . . .*



## MUMMY'S TWO-WORD RESPONSE

*Absolutely Not.*



## MUMMY CONTINUES

*Didn't you hear what I said to you before?  
How can you still be thinking of going?*

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## My Response

I want to explain  
how I won't be alone.  
I will have a teacher named Ms. Henson take me  
to boarding school in Murree by train,  
my new school, St. Denys',  
along with other girls  
coming from different parts of Pakistan.  
I want to explain  
how Abajan has allowed me.  
How here,  
I struggle in school.

But when I see my mother's face like that—  
Her voice  
    a flat line.  
Her eyes  
    dimmer than ever.  
My voice rusts.

I want my mother to hug me,  
to say *Don't Leave*.  
*What will I do without you?*  
But she doesn't.

Instead, her silence  
is a slap  
and my voice  
is pouty  
and bitter  
like the salt of the sea.

I argue back.  
*Abajan says*  
*I just need a majority of signatures*  
*and then I can go.*

This time, what I read  
in my mother's face:  
sadness.



## Anger

My mother's sadness is a flickering match,  
but my anger smolders,  
burning my sadness away.



## SILENT TREATMENT

Now Mummy doesn't ask  
how my day at school was  
or how I'm doing today.  
All her words to me,  
once a gushing well,  
are now dried up.





## Trunk

It's official.  
I'm leaving . . .

I'm given a trunk too.

The packing list for girls  
is longer than the list  
for boys.  
It's more complicated,  
and I struggle to find  
what I need.  
Mummy would know what to do.  
But without Mummy's approval  
and help,  
I am stuck.

Until Abajan  
knocks on the door  
of the Parsi woman next to us.  
Parinaaz Auntie  
is a tailor,  
and Abajan holds out the list.  
*Please see to Zarina;  
get her what she needs.*



## PINAFORES

I am measured shoulder to shoulder,  
waist all the way round,  
arm to arm,  
and length from the top of my shoulder to  
just above my knee.

*I'll add some extra material,  
an inch or two,  
fold it in for now.*

*You're sure to grow,  
and that material can be taken out,  
to make it longer for you  
at a later time.*

A few days later,  
Parinaaz Auntie  
knocks on the door,  
hands me a bundle of clothes.

Cloth now transformed into pinafores.



## REFLECTION

In the mirror,  
my pinafores invite me closer.  
Make me look  
Smart  
Sensible  
Proper.

My fingers brush the new fabric,  
thicker than my air-flimsy kurtas.  
These clothes are  
stronger  
warmer  
for mountain weather.

I want to show Mummy  
my new pinafores.  
But I don't want to see her mouth  
twist in disapproval,  
see her face close even more.



## **ADIL'S REACTION**

Adil whoops with joy  
when I tell him I am going to boarding school, too,  
but he groans with despair  
when I tell him my boarding school is different from his,  
that my school is for girls and his for boys.



## DINNER

Abajan tells my brothers and me  
what to expect  
when we go to boarding school,  
but there is so much  
we don't know.

*Your teachers will be British.*

I've seen British people before  
in Poona.

They always seemed relaxed,  
unrushed,  
whereas the brown people  
were always  
running around them,  
answering their every need.

For them, we were trained to  
Serve.

To be their good little  
Servants.



## IN MY TRUNK

I've folded the pinafores the best I can  
shoulder to shoulder,  
along with a warm woolly cardigan,  
a rubbery red hot-water bottle,  
and thick socks that Abajan bought  
for my brothers and me.  
Even though my brothers are leaving, too,  
Mummy talks to them.  
For me, Mummy's words are dry.



## SECRET VISITOR

I've just closed my trunk,  
prayed my Isha namaz  
while lying in bed,  
when I see Mummy  
waddle into my room  
to my trunk.  
Mummy, who isn't supposed to be walking,  
who's supposed to be on bed rest.

I open my mouth to ask  
but quickly close it.

Mummy places dozens of

square cloths into the trunk,  
bends awkwardly to get the pinafores.  
Mummy turns to look to me.  
She puts her cool palms  
on my damp forehead,  
says the prayer for protection  
I'm supposed to recite every night.  
Ayat-ul-kursi.

I want to ask her what the cloths are for  
and where she's taking my pinafores.  
Instead, I pretend I'm asleep,  
breathing heavily.



## **WHILE I TRY TO SLEEP**

I hear the hiss of the iron,  
the spit of steam,  
a sigh and prayer from Mummy.

The iron moves  
back and forth,  
forth and back,  
and at the end

Mummy refolds the pinafores  
way better than I would have,  
places them back into the trunk,

and waddles away to her room  
as secretly as she can.



## **I REALIZE**

Even though Mummy isn't speaking to me,  
her actions hint at a  
monsoon of love.



## **ON WE TRUDGE**

The day we leave,  
Bushra makes us  
boiled eggs.  
And when I push my fork into the white,  
orangey gold seeps out.  
I think of Khushboo  
and how much I miss her,  
how I wish she was here.  
I think of how I'll miss Mummy and Abajan,  
and my brothers,  
and I can't take a bite.

My stomach clenches.



## GOODBYE TO MY BROTHERS

My brothers leave with Abajan first  
on a different train,  
for a school for boys.

My train ride to my new school,  
St. Denys',  
leaves three hours later.  
We will study from October to December,  
all the way to winter break.  
And when we return,  
the baby will hopefully have arrived.  
With my brothers gone,  
the house is quiet.

Too Quiet.

And when I knock on Mummy's door,  
I sit with her  
while she lies still,  
too still.

She doesn't wish me a safe trip  
or mention my new pinafore.  
Instead, her eyes muddy with sadness,  
and her lip corners point down  
When Abajan comes to get me,  
she squeezes my hand



once        twice.  
No more.



## TRAIN PLATFORM

Abajan holds my luggage  
as we walk to the train platform  
to meet a teacher chaperone  
from my new school.

Ms. Henson stands tall,  
her skin the color of samosa pastry  
before it gets dipped  
in scorching hot oil.

Her lips and eyes  
smile when they see me.  
She introduces me to her two daughters,  
Mavis and Iris,  
and her three nephews and nieces.

Abajan hands over  
an envelope,  
a crackle of paper—  
my school forms,  
one hundred rupees,  
and my trunk.

When I think of the pinafores  
in my trunk,  
folded and ironed by Mummy,  
my throat tightens.

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## New Beginnings

Iris and Mavis  
look at me,  
blink pause blink,  
mouths open close open  
before their words slip out.  
*How old are you?*

My throat  
untightens  
when I see  
their friendly faces.

Maybe they will be like  
Jahana  
and Geeta.  
New friends.

Conversation flows  
gentle and easy  
like water.



## First Steps without Family

When I step onto the train,  
I brace myself  
for the stench and sounds.  
But this train ride is better  
than the last one—  
different.

This train doesn't have  
people hanging on top of it,  
people squatting on the floors,  
their eyes desperate for  
Help.

This time I smell sweet peanuts  
roasted paan  
corn  
something else delicious.

I see sellers swinging  
silver tiffin boxes,  
yelling a chorus  
about fresh, hot breakfast.  
*Paratha, Anday, Cholay!*

Ms. Henson's fingers  
circle my arm,  
lead me to a seat,  
my  
    own  
        seat!

After boarding the train,  
Ms. Henson says,  
*I'll return momentarily,*  
and I remember how Adil got lost  
and the frenzy of emotion,  
but Ms. Henson is calm and returns  
after stopping by the roasted-peanut seller.  
She gives us hot roasted peanuts  
wrapped up in newspaper cones,  
and my heart  
and my hands  
feel warmer.



## One Last Wave

Through the window,  
I peer down  
and wave at Abajan.  
My nose feels like  
someone is pinching it,  
and my eyes sting.

I make my arms  
    my hands  
        my fingers  
            wave until my whole arm  
                is sore.

I wave so hard,  
peanuts sprinkle   d  
                    o  
                    w  
                    n  
out the window.



## On the Train

I want to be friends  
with Iris and Mavis,  
but they fall asleep  
right after eating their peanuts.

While they sleep,  
my eyes glaze  
as I think of my family.

My eyes drip  
when I think of Mummy.  
Her disappointment in me  
makes my eyes sting more.  
Maybe leaving was a huge mistake.

My cheeks feel cold from tears,  
but my heart feels colder.  
Soot from the train  
powders my cheeks.  
My heart swells big,  
my eyes swell small,  
and my nose won't stop running.  
The train finally  
lulls me to sleep.



## LAHORE

Ms. Henson wakes us up and  
hands us off to Ms. Donaldson.  
Before I have time to realize  
what is going on,  
Ms. Henson walks off  
and says goodbye.  
Iris and Mavis  
cry soft  
then loud.

Ms. Donaldson  
pats Iris and Mavis  
one shoulder at a time,  
says, *It'll get better,*  
*another batch of children is coming,*  
*how exciting!*  
But Iris and Mavis  
don't look excited.

*After we get our final batch of students,*  
*we will board the train,*  
*this time to Pindi,*  
*then to Murree*  
*to St. Denys'.*



Twenty more girls,  
some that look like me,  
brown;  
some that look like Iris and Mavis,  
white,  
join us.

Annoyance curls my fingertips  
when Iris and Mavis  
don't stop crying loudly,  
but when I look up,  
there is a girl  
who looks at me,  
then looks at them,  
and back at me again,  
and the anger

s  
t  
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a w a y.

Instead, a smile tickles my lips  
as I swallow a gulp of laughter.



**DAPHNE**

*I'm Daphne Drinkwater,  
Yes, that really is my last name!  
What's your name?  
And who are they?*

Daphne lifts a shoulder toward Iris and Mavis,  
                    leans in  
like we are already friends.

I, Zarina Hassan, waste no time.  
I tell her everything.

Daphne has hair the same color as mine,  
but has eyes colored like a dark blue sky  
before the sun goes down.  
My skin is beige,  
hers pink.  
While my hair is rooted tight in a braid,  
hers wraps loose around her face,  
two letter C's,  
parentheses cupping each cheek.  
No eyebrows that I can see,  
hidden under her fringe.  
Behind her glasses,  
she has laughing eyes.  
When she smiles,  
her whole face changes.

I didn't know  
a smile could do that.



## Daphne's Clothes

If Khushboo were here,  
she would like Daphne Drinkwater.  
Khushboo said clothes wear you,  
or you wear them.

Even though we are all wearing pinafores,  
Daphne is the one  
who wears her clothes  
to the fullest.

She stands out.



## SHOWER

After the train ride to Pindi,  
many of the girls' faces  
are still swollen from crying quietly,  
from saying goodbye.  
Without a mirror,

I know I must look the same.

Ms. Donaldson claps her hands  
and calls us over.

*I have something to cheer you up!*

She leads us to the boardinghouse  
next to the station.

*We are going to take a quick stop here,  
eat some delicious breakfast,  
take a hot shower.*

On the table,  
my mouth wakes up to see  
eggs boiled just right,  
jam chilled in a bowl,  
butter the shape of a rose.

After washing the grime off  
our fingers,  
we dig in.



## Showers

After the dusty journey.  
we wash off all our tears,  
all the soot,  
and change into clean clothes.

The water is hot,  
delicious on my skin.  
My skin welcomes the heat,  
doesn't want to go anywhere.  
Wants to stay right here,  
but Ms. Donaldson sings, *It's time!*

And out we clatter.

# **Part 3**

## **Murree, Pakistan**







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## Murree

There is a **big** bus  
and my heart lifts.  
I've never been on a bus before.

I feel clean,  
comfortable,  
warm.



## FEAR

The driver  
is a Sikh man,  
and every few minutes,  
he takes his hands off the wheel,  
scratches his head,  
adjusts his turban.  
When he does this,  
my stomach clenches

into a big knot.  
But Daphne thinks it's funny,  
giggles through the long, windy journey.  
Daphne's giggles make me feel  
a little  
Better.



## **WINDY ROADS**

The bus twists and turns  
on impossibly thin roads.

Ms. Donaldson says if we feel sick  
to lean out the window.

Most of us started out so clean,  
but maybe we are too full now.  
I feel fine at first,  
but when the road twists  
just so,  
I feel like I am back on the ship.  
A river in my stomach  
surges up to my throat.  
I lean out the window  
and let it out.

My new pinafore is spattered  
with a few drops that didn't make it.

I no longer feel clean,  
or comfortable,  
or warm.

Iris and Mavis  
inch f a r away from me.

Even though we can't see her eyebrows frown,  
Daphne gives them a look  
that makes them stop moving,  
and pats my arm instead.

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## St. Denys'

The school gates  
are opened by a chawkidar  
who is called Ashraf Lala.  
A man who keeps watch  
and doesn't smile,  
just nods at us  
in greeting.

When we finally get off the bus  
and trudge indoors,  
my legs are wobbly.

The school is warm.  
Tall pointy red roofs,  
white bricks  
layered with green vines  
that stretch to the sky  
and seem to glow.  
*Welcome.*

I hope I will like this new place.



## Table

A long table is  
spread with golden rolls of bread  
and something that looks like soup.

After we've washed up,  
we are told it's chicken stew,  
something I've never had before.

The chicken pieces float  
in broth, inviting me closer.  
There are carrots,  
more red than orange,  
green peas  
bobbing up and down.

The bread roll  
is not like flat naan,  
blackened and thin.  
But instead it's round.  
Fat.  
A slight crunch,  
and the butter leaves my tongue  
slippery and wanting  
More.



## AFTER DINNER

As a treat, a syrupy brown treacle.  
Gur ka sheera.  
The sugar crystals flirt with my tongue.  
I wonder if my brothers are having  
the same food as me.  
I wish Mummy and Abajan  
could have tried this food too.

But when I think of Mummy,  
my throat clenches,  
my stomach closes.  
I don't feel hungry  
anymore.



## Matron

After food,  
we are showed our room,  
a big rectangle.  
In it are nestled two rows of five beds.  
Each of us gets a thin bed.  
Me, Iris, Mavis, Sidra, Zaibunnisa,  
Daphne, Zuleikha, Fatima, Joanne, and Tahira.

Even though we are all tired,  
excitement thrums in the air  
when we greet each other,  
and I am glad to see the faces of  
new friends.

A little chair next to each bed  
and a wooden box on the wall  
for each girl.

Opposite a narrow wooden closet  
stands a shelf to put our pinafores.  
My bed is right next to  
Daphne's,  
and we exchange a knowing smile.



What I like about Daphne  
is that even though I just met her today,  
it feels like I've known her a long time.

But when Sidra sees me smile at Daphne,  
and Daphne smile at me,  
her eyes narrow.

A lady with short hair  
that rolls up in curls  
that hug her forehead and ears  
looms over us in a white apron  
and tells us to call her Matron.

Matron says tomorrow  
she will show us where  
and how to fold our clothes.  
She sniffs when she says  
some of us have had  
too much help  
our whole lives.  
She shakes her head so hard  
her curls jiggle.

I miss Khushboo,  
but want to tell Matron  
that I help too.  
Matron says:  
*Here we will do our own chores  
and take care of our own selves.*

She says every day we will need to polish our shoes.  
*First, dust the shoes outside,*

*then take two scrubbing brushes  
and polish each shoe until it shines.  
You'll do this tomorrow!*

Next, she hands us each a plastic comb,  
shows us how to brush our hair.

*This, you'll do now!*

*One hundred strokes every night  
will make your hair smooth,  
glossy,  
healthy.*

I brush the knots of my hair out,  
turn my river of hair  
into black rushing water.

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## Lights Out

Matron tells us,  
*No talking!*  
*No whispering!*  
and from my bed  
we hear howls from outside.  
I shiver,  
recite ayat-ul-kursi the way Mummy did  
for protection.  
Iris and Mavis snuffle.

Matron coos,  
*It's just jackals!*  
*They can't get to you,*  
*you're safe and snug,*  
*and high up in the hills.*  
*Go to sleep, Chickies!*

And somehow  
we all do.



## Morning

Now that it's morning,  
a wake-up bell rings,  
pushing all my sleep away.

Daphne rubs her eyes  
and doesn't look like herself  
until she puts her glasses back on.  
The glasses look like  
they're for someone older,  
but on her they look  
sophisticated  
and just right.

*I can't see much without them,*  
she whispers,  
her voice a scratchy song.

Matron marches in  
and pulls the curtains back.  
*Wake up, girls!*  
Outside I see the tops of the mountains,  
tall green trees,

and my eyes want to drink in more sights.

Matron taps me on the shoulder.

*There'll be more time to look soon;  
the view never gets old . . .*



## OUR ROOM

Matron tells us it's time  
to unpack our trunks.

*Get organized.*

The small wooden box  
on the wall by our bed  
welcomes our toothbrush,  
toothpaste, and soap.

Outside each dorm,  
we each have a long, tall cupboard,  
not too        w        i        d        e.  
Skinny.

Here, we hang our extra sweaters,  
*Sunday's Best*—our fancier clothes.

For me, it is the thick serge cotton dress  
with a removable white collar that drips in lace,  
made by my tailor neighbor, Parinaaz Auntie.

I line up my extra shoes and slippers too.  
Stand back to admire.

My outfits and shoes wait  
for their next adventures.



## THE CLOTHS

The cloths that Mummy packed  
I don't understand. I hold them out to Matron.

Matron hums,  
*The sanitary pads,  
those go in your closet  
by the toilet paper  
and extra shampoo.  
I'm here to help with that  
if you need me.*  
I want to ask more  
but just nod instead.  
When all the trunks  
have been stowed away  
and our clothes hung up  
and folded,  
sunlight splashes in,  
winking at us,  
and the room invites us to linger.

But Matron calls,  
*Hurry down for breakfast!*

The smell of  
something unfamiliar  
yet sweet  
floats  
above the big bowl  
on the table.

*Porridge!*  
*Here's sugar*  
*and cinnamon.*

*I'm Miss Melloy*  
*and I'm in charge of food.*  
*You're to eat all that's in your bowls,*  
*because after that*  
*there's no snacks*  
*until lunchtime.*

As she looks around at us,  
her mouth is a line  
but her eyes smile.

The brown of my eyes  
and the blue of Daphne's  
grow round  
as we nod.

We begin to eat.



# PORRIDGE

Warm

Mushy

Soft

White

Blobs.

But once you open your mouth,  
it's sweet and  
actually not so bad.



# NATURE WALK

Ms. Delia tells us:

*Tomorrow we will start science lessons.*

*Today we will go for a nature walk,  
explore and see what's around us.*

Since before we left our home in Poona,  
I can't remember the last time  
I went on a walk  
*for fun.*

My socked feet tingle  
in anticipation.

After we're cocooned



in cardigans,  
we set off!

I've never been in such air before.  
It feels like someone  
is pressing a glass of  
cold sherbet  
to my forehead,  
cheeks, and nose.

My nose crinkles  
in happiness.

*The trees smell different!*  
*Pine, says Ms. Delia.*

But around them is a scorching smell.

When I ask what it is,  
Ms. Delia's green eyes cloud.  
She says weeks ago,  
during the India and Pakistan Partition  
when people left their homes,  
they didn't want anyone else to live there,  
so they set fire to them.

I think of Abajan's keys  
to our Poona house,  
and how he still keeps them  
in his pocket.  
I can't imagine him  
holding a burning flame  
to our home.

Ms. Delia sighs.  
*Let's go to the top . . .*



## **DAPHNE**

is younger than Iris and Mavis  
and me by a year,  
but acts older  
and calmer,  
which I like.

I like that Daphne can giggle  
and relax  
even on a scary bus ride.

When we go on nature walks  
and Ms. Delia tells us to find a partner,  
Daphne's eyes and mine meet.  
We link our arms together.



## The Top

Clear green grass,  
no scorched smell.  
I sip in the silence.  
Wildflowers colored  
yellow                      orange                      pink  
dance and dot the meadow.  
In such beauty,  
my eyes hesitate to blink.



## ARMS

Mavis loops Iris  
who loops Tahira  
who loops Zaibunnisa  
who loops Daphne  
who loops mine  
and yells, *RUN!*  
Before I know it,

g  
n  
i  
y  
l  
f  
we are



## DAILY CHORES

Sweep the floor.

Keep the dorm tidy:

Beds must be made promptly  
after we are no longer in them.

And at night  
gather a shoe brush,  
dust press scrub  
to polish shoes  
until they shine  
right back at you.

Things that Khushboo would do  
while I would chatter chatter chatter to her.

When the broom is in my hand  
and my mind focused on the floor,  
I don't mind.

In fact, I feel useful.



## SIDRA'S GRUMBLES

I have been staying far away from Sidra  
on purpose  
because I don't like  
how her eyes narrow at me,  
or how her mouth pinches.  
I know it is not me imagining it.

I didn't come here to be a servant,  
grumbles Sidra,  
who is squatting by her shoes.

My reply is quick.  
*We're not cleaning other people's shoes,  
just our own.*

Sidra's eyebrows go down,  
her eyes sharpen.  
She glances at Daphne  
who is in the other room.  
*You need to stick  
to your kind of people.*

I open my mouth,  
but this time my reply doesn't come.

I turn away  
but then turn back.  
Sidra hisses,  
*My brother said* Never trust the British.  
*Because of them,*  
*we are in this mess.*

I remember in Poona  
how Abajan would change the way he talked  
when the British were around  
and how he would stand smaller.

My mouth moves  
before my thoughts.  
I confide to Sidra,  
*I remember how brown people*  
*were always their good little servants,*  
*how the British didn't have to lift a finger.*

*Exactly!* answers Sidra.

*But Daphne and the others,*  
*they're not like that.*  
*We're learning*  
*and doing chores*  
*side by side.*  
*We're not serving anyone*  
*but ourselves.*

Sidra's eyes narrow again.



## What I Notice

Sidra ignores me,  
sticks to “her kind” of people.  
People that look like her,  
Brown.  
Or that believe like her,  
Muslim.

Sidra talks to Zaibunnisa, Zuleikha, Fatima, and Tahira,  
she treats them like best friends,  
but everyone else and me especially,  
she treats like enemies.

She rarely talks to the girls who don’t look like her,  
White.  
Or that aren’t her faith,  
Christian.  
With Daphne, Joanne, Iris, or Mavis,  
if she does talk to them,  
her voice is ice.

I wish she would give them a chance.



## When Jackals Howl

It is always at night.  
To me it is the sound of sadness,  
the sound of missing someone.  
It keeps me awake.  
The sound reminds me of Mummy  
and the baby, who hopefully is tucked inside  
its shell inside her,  
waiting waiting waiting  
to be born.

I pray that Mummy  
and the baby  
stay healthy,  
alive,  
enveloped in Allah's mercy.

When the jackals howl outside,  
I remember Matron's words,  
that we're safe.  
But sometimes it doesn't feel like it's  
enough.  
In the cloak of darkness,  
I slip out of bed,  
unroll my janamaz



out of my trunk,  
nestle it in the corner,  
and pray Isha namaz.  
Then finally glide into  
sleep's embrace.



## SUNDAY MORNINGS

Ms. White tells us  
on Sundays we will write letters  
and collect mail from the post office.  
Since we have only just started school,  
none of us have letters yet.

She passes out navy-blue ink bottles,  
fountain pens,  
and shows us where to write  
    our addresses  
        our thoughts  
            our signatures.

I address my letter to Abajan and Mummy,  
tell them how fresh the air is here,  
how the chill in the air  
feels like a friend.

I end my letter  
asking how Mummy is feeling.

Guilt  
coats  
my  
ink.



## SUNDAY EVENINGS

Church for all the girls.  
On Sundays, Matron tells us to dress up  
in *Sunday's Best*.  
She tells me to wear my navy serge dress  
with the removable white lacy collar,  
and once I return, to hang the collar back up  
to keep it clean for next Sunday.  
I wonder if Abajan knows that  
I am going to chapel.

In Poona, India,  
the students were all faiths:  
Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsees, and more.  
Here in boarding school,  
in Murree, Pakistan,  
there are no Hindu, Sikh, or Parsee students,  
just Christians who stayed,  
and Muslims who moved here,  
living together.  
I wonder why Hindus and Muslims couldn't  
keep living together like neighbors,

why things couldn't  
stay the way they were.

I'm not a Christian.  
I'm Muslim,  
but I really like the sounds  
and rhythm of the hymns.

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## After Chapel

When dusk falls,  
we walk back to school.  
Two in a line.

Me and Daphne.  
Daphne and me.  
Together always.

On one side of us  
bearers are holding lanterns.  
On the other side of the road,  
tiny twinkles tempt us closer.

Fireflies!

Daphne and I  
open our handkerchiefs,  
capture fireflies,  
absorb their twinkling  
glow.

In the air,  
there is a nibble of cold  
that later turns into a bite.

After Chapel, we get steamy soup  
and buns with something dark brown  
and sweet:  
raisins.

I've never had buns  
with raisins in them before—  
a treat!



## **NEXT SUNDAY**

Mail!

Hope is  
a crackly envelope  
with your father's writing  
in inky loops.



## Abajan's Letter

Abajan writes back,  
not Mummy,  
and my heart drops a little.  
Abajan says Mummy is fine  
but still on bed rest,  
slowly improving.

He says Wahab, Qadir, and Adil  
are liking their school,  
but their letters are much shorter  
and messier.

A smile twitches my lips.



## In the Envelope

There is        m        o        r        e.

Abajan says,  
*A letter from Khushboo came for you.*  
*I'm enclosing it . . .*

*Dear Zarina,*  
*My daughter Prerna is writing this while I dictate.*  
*Are you taking good care of your mummy? Are you helping her with the*  
*house? It's almost time for the baby, right?*  
*Are you taking good care of YOU?*  
*Fondly Forever and Ever,*  
*Khushboo*

I think of Mummy.  
My smile **fades**.



## Writing Back

I tell Khushboo my new address.  
I confess how I was supposed  
to take care of Mummy  
but instead, I hurt her.  
How I left for Murree for boarding school.  
How I'm doing chores here.  
I tell her how much I miss her,  
that when I think of her,  
it feels like a sweet and salty pain.



## LESSONS

Hygiene by Matron,  
science by Ms. Delia,  
math by Ms. Simmons,  
history by Ms. Donaldson,  
English (my favorite!) by Ms. White.





## First Day of History Class

Ms. Donaldson says it's important  
to study history.  
History is learning  
about the past,  
so that we avoid  
making the same mistakes  
in the future.

I wonder if one day  
in the future  
people will look back  
at the Partition.  
Where India was torn to pieces,  
and amid all the killing and bloodshed,  
Pakistan was made,  
and see it as a **big** mistake.



## Gray Ladies

In Karachi, my school was run by nuns,  
but here my school is run by the “Gray Ladies.”  
All the teachers wear gray dresses,  
but they don’t wear scarves like the nuns.  
Sometimes all the gray  
makes me nervous.

I love the colors that Mummy wears,  
that Khushboo wore,  
that Mrs. Nizami wore too.  
Mustard and turquoise,  
eggplant and ripe green pepper,  
reds and oranges,  
a kaleidoscope of color.



## First Day of Math Class

Ms. Simmons  
writes out plenty of sums  
on the chalkboard,  
and we are to copy them and begin  
adding and solving for the correct answer.  
I haven't done math in a while  
and my mind works        s        l        o        w        e        r  
to calculate totals.

I worry Ms. Simmons  
will get mad if we don't finish,  
but her voice is sugar.  
*I know you all just came on a long journey.*  
*Today I'm just seeing what level you are at.*  
*Some sums may be easy for you,*  
*some hard.*  
*Just try your best.*

I exhale and begin.



## Math Class

When we review answers,  
we all learn quickly that  
Sidra is the smartest.  
When she gets an answer right,  
she looks at me  
with biting eyes.

When Ms. Simmons isn't looking,  
she holds her nose  
and sticks her tongue out.

But in front of Ms. Simmons,  
she would never dare do such a thing.  
I know Sidra is the type of person  
who teachers will love and coo over.  
But I don't.



## First Day of English Class

Ms. White asks us to write our names clearly  
and to introduce ourselves through our writing.  
We write about our journey all the way from Murree  
to our school, St. Denys'.

I open my satchel  
and pull out my favorite pencil,  
the one given to me by Mrs. Nizami.  
I let the writing clear my mind.

Ms. White tells us to pay attention to details  
that others may not notice,  
writes *Unusual Details* on the board  
and underlines it two times.

She gives us each a journal.  
Brand-new!  
I lift the journal to my nose,  
inhale the paper smell  
that reminds me of freshly baked bread.  
She tells us this is for keeping our  
unusual details.



## MY FAVORITE THING SO FAR

Nature walks  
with Ms. Delia  
where we loop arms with a partner  
(mine is always Daphne!)  
and climb hills  
while the wind kisses our hair.

In my pockets,  
chestnuts gather.  
I love the clicking of a new collection.

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## Unusual Details

In my journal, I write about  
the way the pine trees look,  
like skinny bald men.  
The way chestnuts in my palm  
feel better than coins,  
and the howl of jackals in the night  
that sound like they're missing someone . . .

The pages invite me to write more.



## A TIME TO HUM

At night,  
Daphne is sweeping,  
and even though Sidra and I  
are both polishing shoes,  
I sit far from her.  
Sidra gives me a look,  
then glances at Daphne,  
holds her nose

and rolls her eyes.

She stings me again  
with her words.

*You need to stick  
to your kind of people.*

When I look at Daphne,  
even though I can't see her eyebrows  
I know they must be facing down  
like her shoulders and lips.

I remember my temper in Poona  
and how quick  
I was,  
I am,  
to anger.

Sidra sees our faces,  
smirks,  
and starts humming  
as she polishes.  
Anger rises in me again  
and I am a paratha puffing up with steam.

I am proud of myself  
for not pushing Sidra.  
Instead,  
I lean over,  
pull her shoes from her hands,  
and fling them into the hallway.

Sidra's mouth pops open.  
Shock.



My words rush out in a river.  
*You're not better than anyone else.*  
*You need to give people a chance*  
*whether they look like you*  
*or not,*  
*whether they act like you*  
*or not.*  
*We are all the same kind of people,*  
*HUMAN.*

Daphne does the smile  
that changes her face,  
and her eyes dance.  
I grab Daphne's hand  
and hum as we walk away.



## CLASS

Our whole school has only one hundred pupils,  
which is much better than our school in Karachi,  
which had        t        r        i        p        l        e.

Here there is        s        p        a        c        e        to think.  
Each class has twelve pupils,  
and each of us gets our own desk.  
The teachers here pay attention to you,  
know your name,  
and if you make a mistake,  
they take out their red pencil

(how I hate the red pencil!),  
draw a line across your page,  
and you have to redo your work  
after class.

In the beginning,  
I get lots of red lines.  
After a while,  
I get a lot less.  
My paper and I breathe in  
the white spaces.



## **HOMESICK**

Even though I am doing better in lessons,  
I still miss Abajan, Mummy, Wahab, Qadir, Adil,  
my Poona bungalow,  
Jahana and Geeta,  
and Khushboo.

So one day at teatime,  
when Miss Melloy pauses cooking  
and wipes her hands on her apron,  
and says I have a visitor,  
I'm surprised.

In Murree, I'm far away from everyone.  
The closest people around are my brothers,  
but their boarding school is a ten-kilometer walk

down the hills,  
much too far to come visit.  
I tighten my braids  
and clatter down the stairs.

## Wahab!

Wahab,  
the one who always checks on us  
when we're in trouble.  
The eldest.  
Maybe that makes him the most caring?

Wahab is the one who will check on me,  
whether I'm home  
or away from home.

Wahab pants, out of breath,  
Says, *I only have ten minutes,*  
*I have to get back before dark!*

*How far did you walk?*

*Not sure, but I started early in the morning.*  
*Qadir and Adil wanted to come,*  
*but I was worried they wouldn't keep up.*  
*These hills are hard to walk up!*  
Miss Melloy brings Wahab  
a big slice of bread  
that's generously slathered  
with butter.

In ten minutes, Wahab catches his breath

chews  
    swallows  
        chews  
            his bread  
while I tell him stories of  
the other girls.  
How I miss family.  
How I feel bad about Mummy.

Wahab stops eating.  
*Mummy wasn't well to begin with.*  
*She needed to rest.*  
*You didn't do anything wrong.*  
*Sometimes bad things happen.*

Wahab's words feel like  
the mountain air,  
fresh and calming,  
cool like rose-flavored sherbet  
coating my tongue.  
Home feels like a big brother  
checking on you,  
even if it is only for ten minutes.



## POCKET MONEY

Each week we get two annas.  
The best part of pocket money  
is Charlie.

Charlie is the sweet seller  
who comes by on Friday afternoons  
with a trunk made of tin.  
When Charlie smiles,  
his mouth has holes  
instead of teeth,  
kind of like Adil.

Maybe Charlie lost his teeth  
because he ate too many sweets?  
But that doesn't stop us from buying them.  
Anticipation coats our minds  
and tongues  
when Charlie comes by.

Inside his trunk  
is every unimaginable candy.

Sweetmeats like  
    candied fruits that lick your tongue,  
    sugary nuts that crunch your teeth,  
    powdered cakes that float, sweet pockets of air.  
Perfection!



## DAY'S RHYTHMS

S     l     o     w     l     y             s     l     o     w  
  l     y  
the sadness

that I had  
feels less heavy,  
sucks me in less.

Now my mind is busy with  
never-ending meadows,  
deliciously chilly mountain walks,  
lessons where I actually have my own desk,  
not squished four to a table meant for one.  
My mind is no longer chugging on bloody trains.  
Instead, my mind is here.  
Present.  
Now.



## **WHEN I USED TO THINK OF HOME**

I missed Poona,  
our garden,  
our bungalow.  
Khushboo, Geeta, Jahana,  
and my family at teatime  
when we were  
once at peace.

Before,  
home was my house,  
my everything.



## **Now, When I Think of Home**

My heart settles on my  
parents,  
Mummy and Abajan,  
my brothers,  
Wahab, Qadir, Adil.

Now,  
home is my family  
no matter where they are—  
Pakistan, India,  
or in between.

Lately, that feels enough for me.



## **UNDER THE APRICOT TREE**

One day, Ashraf Lala,  
the chawkidar who guards the school gates,  
leaves the gates,

walks under the apricot trees,  
and studies the leaves and fruits.

Ashraf Lala gathers a woolen shawl  
and calls us over  
to pull the shawl tight.

Ashraf Lala nods at us when we're ready,  
wraps his sunbaked hands  
around the tree  
*shakes.*

Ashraf Lala doesn't usually smile,  
but when apricots sprinkle down on us  
and we shriek with laughter,  
I can see all his teeth,  
even the ones in the back.





## Apricots

Velvety  
sweet  
soft  
tart  
juice  
licks  
my  
chin.

Bliss.



## NAGGING THOUGHTS

When the mail comes on Sundays,  
the letters are always from Abajan,  
not Mummy.

*Is Mummy still mad at me?*  
I want to ask Abajan,

but whenever I

p

l

u

n

g

e

my fountain pen into  
the inky blue,  
hold my pen  
poised to ask,  
I put it down.

Fear.



## **KHUSHBOO'S LETTER**

Khushboo writes back—

*Dear Zarina,*

*I know you better than you know yourself, and I know you would never hurt anyone on purpose. Accidents happen. Since your mummy's pregnancy, she was not doing well for a while now. And the journey must have been long and hard on her.*

*Fondly Forever,*

*Khushboo*

Never is underlined twice.  
I exhale my last breath of guilt away.



## **MS. DELIA**

On our nature walks,  
Ms. Delia hands us seeds for flowers,  
tiny British pink daisies  
that she brought by ship  
that are supposed to do well in winter.

Ms. Delia's eyes match  
the leaves on the trees,  
and the blades of grass.  
Maybe that's why she likes gardening?

Ms. Delia gathers us around  
in a small circle.  
*Remember, you must care for your plant  
and water its roots  
in order for it to bloom.*

*And in real life, too,  
for you to bloom,  
you must take care of yourselves,  
water your roots.*



## LETTERS TO AND FROM ABAJAN

I write to Abajan and Mummy,  
tell them about planting  
tiny British pink daisies,  
tart yet sweet apricots,  
and how I miss them.

Underneath my words  
are layers of  
prayers  
hopes  
dreams.

I hope that Mummy  
is like the Mummy in Poona,  
strong and healthy,  
eyes blazing fierce  
like the sun.

Abajan tells me  
he's glad I am enjoying myself  
and Mummy is glad  
I'm doing so well.

As my ink evaporates,  
so does my guilt.

In the pockets

of my heart:  
Relief.



## MY OLD SELF

I remember the Zarina in Poona,  
the one who my friends would go to,  
the leader of friends.

On Ms. Delia's nature walk,  
my arms are linked with Daphne,  
and I spot Sidra  
walking alone.

Instead of seeing Sidra's angry eyes,  
I see sadness.

The new Zarina  
wants to be kinder,  
softer,  
without a temper.

I keep my arm looped in Daphne's,  
run to Sidra,  
and before she can protest,  
I loop her arm in, too,  
and run.

She releases the tiniest

of smiles.

y.

l

f

Together, we

*[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)*



## Matron's Observation

It's not just me,  
but in the last couple of months  
since we arrived in October,  
a lot of the girls  
are growing  
taller  
longer  
stronger.



## FIRESIDE EVENINGS

Matron calls us to her  
and shows us how to unhem our pinafores,  
make our clothes a couple of inches longer.  
*Room to grow*  
*and thrive, Chickies!*



## Bathroom

Normally  
I don't linger,  
but this time  
something isn't right.



## MATRON

Embarrassment  
flames my cheeks into fire.  
When I tell Matron  
about the red,  
she pats my back hard,  
making her curls jiggle.  
*Congratulations, Chickie.*  
*You're turning into a woman!*  
Matron leads me to the closet,  
takes out the large flannel cloth squares  
that Mummy packed for me.



Matron quickly counts them.  
*Four dozen, perfect! Labeled too.*  
*Thanks to your mum, I'm sure.*  
I nod,  
my words all gone.

Matron shows me how to  
fold the cloth into a pad,  
how it goes taped around our waist,  
two pins holding the pad into place.

I absorb all the information  
and nod as Matron speaks,  
even though I don't understand everything  
yet.

Once Matron gives me privacy  
and leaves the room,  
I set up my pad.

But all I can think is:  
*Did Mummy know*  
*I would grow up*  
*and turn into a woman*  
*without her?*



## Daphne

Since I tell Mummy nothing,  
I tell Daphne everything.

Behind her glasses,  
Daphne's eyes and mouth  
circle  
before she says,  
*My mother told me about  
periods,  
but I hope I don't get mine  
for a long time.  
At least you were well prepared!  
I was wondering what those  
square cloths were for . . .*

*Me too!*



## Letter to Abajan

I want to tell my parents  
how I'm working on my temper,  
how instead of choppy  
summer waves,  
I'm the tide  
on a gentle  
winter day.

I want to tell Mummy  
how I'm growing,  
about how I'm changing,  
and so much more.  
But I'm not sure how to tell her  
what I want to tell her.

So I say nothing.

I wish she could  
understand  
all that I'm trying to say  
in the spaces of my lines.



## Next Letter from Abajan

*Mummy sends her love.*

Four words that give me courage.



### THIS TIME

I take a deep breath and scribble,  
*Abajan,*  
*Can Mummy write me a letter?*



### NEXT LETTER

Abajan writes.  
*Mummy didn't learn how to read*

*or write yet,  
but we are hoping when you get back,  
you can change that.*

*I'm sending a message from Mummy.  
Mummy wants you to know  
she is feeling better,  
and that the doctor has cleared her for walks.  
Maybe just a month and a half of her pregnancy left,  
and two months until you come home  
to meet your new baby sibling.*

At the bottom of the letter,  
the writing is unfamiliar,  
looks worse than Adil's writing  
but makes me hug the paper  
close  
to my beating heart.

M u M m Y



## Disbelief

Shock swirls in my stomach.  
I can't believe Mummy  
never told me she didn't know  
how to read  
or write!

All those times I'd asked  
for homework help,  
she said to *Ask Wahab*.  
I thought she was trying  
to get Wahab  
to use his brain—  
**but she didn't know  
how to read.**

All those times  
I'd asked her to read from fairy tales  
or a bedtime story,  
she said she preferred prophet stories,  
**she didn't know  
how to read.**

The anger that I had for her  
melts into  
tendrils of tenderness.



## BRITISH PINK DAISIES

From deep in the soil,  
the sky and sun  
have coaxed  
tiny stems  
that

h

c

a

e

r  
for  
the sky.

Success!



## Ramadan

When Abajan writes that  
Ramadan is approaching,  
I feel the worry loop my stomach tight.  
I'm not home  
with my family.  
Here, mealtimes are different, unlike  
Basheer's meals for sehri and iftar.  
How am I supposed to fast?



## SOLUTION

On the first day of Ramadan,  
I've made my decision.  
I tell my Muslim friends  
that I am going downstairs  
to eat Sehri.  
Sidra (who talks to the other girls now,  
not just the ones who look like her),  
Zaibunnisa, Tahira, and Zulekiha



join me.

We wake up early,  
creep and creak down the stairs  
to eat our breakfast before dawn.

In the cupboard,  
I quietly reach  
for bread;  
Tahira grabs the butter.  
Sidra a knife.  
We could toast the bread  
brown and crisp,  
but we don't want to make too much noise.

Still, we are caught.



## **MATRON**

Matron peeps her head around the door,  
and Tahira giggles to see curlers  
dotted in Matron's hair.

*A little late for a midnight feast?*  
Matron's voice  
comes out roughly.

*Off to bed, all of you!*

Silence shadows Sidra, Zaibunnisa,  
Tahira, and Zuleikha—  
they look at me.

*NOW!*  
commands Matron.

My shoulders droop  
as we scurry up the stairs.



**NO**

Back in bed,  
I shake my head,  
swing my legs out.

The Zarina I was before  
would say something.  
The Zarina I am now  
will too.

My flat feet  
plant strong and sturdy  
onto the wooden floor.

*I'm going back.*  
Zaibunnisa, Tahira, and Zuleikha

look afraid.  
Sidra smiles the slightest of smiles.

This time,  
I don't care  
if I creak  
or clatter down the stairs.

Matron rubs the sleep from her eyes  
when she sees me,  
and her mouth slashes down.

I explain to Matron  
how it's the month of Ramadan,  
how we fast from before sunrise  
to sunset,  
how when the slip of a moon  
becomes fat and full  
and thin again,  
it'll be Eid.  
But for now,  
we must fast.



## **MATRON'S RESPONSE**

The curtain of anger  
lifts from Matron's face  
and understanding settles into her

mouth and eyes.

Matron's voice  
becomes gentle waves  
on the seashore.

*I know Ashraf Lala  
and some of the Muslim workers are fasting.  
I didn't even think of the students!  
I'll talk to Miss Melloy  
to make sure you get a proper breakfast,  
hot and filling,  
and a nourishing dinner too.*

*Thank you!*

Matron starts slicing bread.  
*You better hurry and start eating!  
Call the others!*

Sidra, Zaibunnisa, Tahira, and Zuleikha,  
who are peeping from upstairs,  
creep back down for breakfast.

When they smile, my lips turn up too.  
Friendship smiles are contagious.



# HOW THINGS CHANGE

Now we no longer go to chapel.  
Instead, we have a little prayer room  
with colorful janamaz on the floor  
for us to pray and read Quran.  
The worry in my stomach  
unloops, relaxes.

Now in the early mornings,  
before dawn has threaded its way  
through the blackness of night,  
Matron delivers a steaming flask of tea  
for the ten of us Muslim girls,  
boiled eggs with golden gleaming yolks,  
and perfectly browned toasted bread and butter.

And at sunset,  
for iftar,  
we aren't just given regular dinner,  
we get what the staff gets:  
bigger servings of salty dal  
with spices that tickle my tongue,  
gur ka sheera,  
sweetness that coats my lips,  
frothy glasses made just for us,  
icy rooh-afza sherbet  
where every sip tastes like  
I'm kissing a rose.



## Chores

The best part about Ramadan  
is being excused from extra chores.  
All we have to do is  
keep our own room clean.  
Matron tells us to keep our energy up,  
not to worry  
about polishing shoes.



## ASSEMBLY

At assembly, the girls  
chatter and buzz.  
There is a new teacher,  
and from afar I can see  
that she is not wearing gray.  
Instead, she wears dark maroon and light pink.  
Her hair is dark and pulled back  
in a big bun.  
My eyes like her already.



## NEW TEACHER

When the new teacher turns,  
I gasp.

Can it be?



## A HUG

I open up my satchel,  
grab my special pencil,  
leave my spot in line,  
run up to her,  
and hold it out.

*Mrs. Nizami?*

Mrs. Nizami's eyes get really big  
and she blink blink blinks,  
making her eyes the slightest bit shiny.

Hugging her feels like  
memory.

*I thought I'd never see you again!*



## **BACK IN LINE**

Mrs. Nizami asks me about my parents  
and my brothers,  
says she wants to hear about my journey  
and Geeta and Jahana, too,  
to tell her everything at teatime.

She smiles and says,  
*Now, get back in line!*

Trust Mrs. Nizami to *always* sound like a teacher.

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## Teatime

I tell Mrs. Nizami everything—  
about our l o n g journey,  
about how Mummy's not well,  
about how I accidentally pushed her over  
while playing blind man's bluff.  
I tell her how Mummy didn't want me to leave,  
an eleven-year-old girl all by herself,  
after we were finally trying to settle.

Mrs. Nizami's voice  
is the gentle steam  
rising from her cup of chai.

*Leaving is hard. I know your mother must miss you.  
How proud she will be to see how much you've learned,  
how much you are thriving.*

I tell Mrs. Nizami  
how Jahana left,  
and how even though Geeta  
was mean at the end,  
I still miss her.

Mrs. Nizami says,

*Geeta will regret her actions.  
I'm sure if not now,  
then for the rest of her life.*

Mrs. Nizami takes another tiny sip of her chai.  
*Regret has a tricky way  
of sneaking up on you . . .  
Just make sure you practice kindness  
to people of all faiths,  
and knowing you, Zarina,  
you always will,  
inshallah.*



## **QURAN CLASS**

During the time we would go to chapel,  
Mrs. Nizami joins us in the prayer room  
for Quran class.  
Inside I am all mixed up,  
because I miss the hymns  
and the sunlight-stained-glass windows  
of the chapel.

But in the prayer room, Mrs. Nizami  
sits on the floor,  
turns toward us,  
and talks to us  
like we're grown-ups.

*Let's Begin...*



## RECITATION TIME

When Mrs. Nizami recites Quran,  
the air in the room changes.

She starts out soft then **louder**.

We hold our breath,  
stop whispering  
and actually listen,  
drinking in the words.

I want to learn  
the melody of the Quran,  
the way she reads  
without stopping and stumbling,  
like flowing water.

When she's done,  
the air is still and too-quiet.

*How did you do that?*  
asks Tahira.

*Tajweed, the science of recitation,*  
smiles Mrs. Nizami.

*Here, I'll teach you when to  
lengthen and shorten letters,*

*how to control your breath,  
how to read the Quran better and fluently.*

*Ready?*

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## Tarawi

Instead of polishing shoes at night,  
we gather together  
to pray tarawi,  
the extra prayer  
performed on Ramadan nights.  
Under the milky moon  
Zaibunnisa, Tahira, Zuleikha, Sidra,  
and I gather together  
and pray.

Mrs. Nizami stands in the middle.  
We stand  
shoulder to shoulder  
heel to heel.

Mrs. Nizami leads us in prayer,  
recites Quran surahs out loud,  
and sometimes so softly,  
that we stand even closer.



## Prayer Time

After prayer time,  
I lift my hands  
and cup them together,  
place them side to side.

I hold them up  
so if a pearl were to drop  
into the palms of my hands,  
I would catch it,  
hold it close.

I pray for Mummy to stay well,  
for her to be pleased with me,  
for the baby inside to live  
a healthy and l o n g life.

I hope my prayers are answered,  
luminous and with ease,  
like the gliding of a pearl.



## Winter

The nibble of cold  
that turned into a bite  
makes us wear mittens,  
even in class!

It is harder to hold  
Mrs. Nizami's pencil,  
but I make sure to grip harder.

I'm not used to such cold,  
and my nose is always pink.  
Abajan used to call me Khubani Begum  
because of my pink cheeks,  
but now what would he call me,  
with my pink nose?



## White Hills

One day, the world is strangely quiet.  
The breakfast bell  
doesn't go off but  
instead, Matron comes in.  
*Wake up, Chickies,*  
*and look outside!*  
*It's snowing!*

This wakes us up  
much faster than the breakfast bell.  
Daphne fumbles for her glasses, dropping them twice  
before giggling and grasping for air  
until I plunk them onto her nose.  
Then we are grabbing our dressing gowns,  
running to the window  
seeing the land  
once green,  
now clean and white,  
white and clean.  
I've never seen snow before.

*A Snow Day today.*  
*The first day of snow*  
*is a snow day for the students.*



*But after tomorrow,  
back to lessons,  
mind you!*

Daphne and I are the first ones outside.  
Over our bloomers,  
we wear stockings,  
knitted leg warmers,  
woolly mittens,  
flannel shirts,  
thick shawls,  
and coats.

All you can see are my eyes and Daphne's glasses,  
and when I blink,  
snowflakes fluff my eyelashes,  
soft and freezing.

When I pull down my scarf  
and blow out,  
I feel like Abajan  
smoking his pipe,  
as I watch vapor curl in the air.

The air smells like toast,  
and the other girls and I  
make a big snowman;  
even Ms. White and Mrs. Nizami join in  
and give us a scarf for our snowman to wear.

And even though the weather  
feels like icy glass on my skin,  
being outside with my friends

in the snow  
is the best thing ever.



## **HOT-WATER BOTTLE**

Mine is red and rubbery  
and has my name labeled on it.  
Each day we are  
to put our hot-water bottles  
in a **big** box,  
and in the night the bottle is returned  
full of delicious warmth  
that you never want to go away.  
I wish the warmth would last forever.



## **SUNDAY MAIL**

There are mail delays because of the snow,  
and now the snow has turned to slippery ice.  
Without mail from home,  
even though there are girls around me,  
I suddenly feel alone.



## SOMETIMES

The ice is cruel and hard,  
not soft like welcoming powdery snow,  
and I miss the warmth of Poona.  
But when we do finally get the mail,  
(finally!)  
Abajan writes that Karachi winters aren't bad at all.  
He tells me winter break is coming,  
and I will see them soon inshallah.

The cold weather means  
it's time for winter holidays,  
which means I'll see my family again.

This makes the cold weather feel  
just a little  
warmer.



## EXAMS

The bad thing about winter

is exams.

Ms. White and Mrs. Nizami  
and the other teachers  
have us finish our assignments  
and study extra during teatime.  
Words and numbers clog my brain.

It feels like we will  
never ever  
get a break.



## **SURPRISE WEEK**

After a week of studying  
and preparing for exams,  
the weather suddenly melts into mildness.

Ms. White walks to the front of the classroom and  
folds her arms  
and books  
closed.

*Follow me.*

Ms. White opens up the doors to outside,  
and her mouth is a small smile

that turns big.

She turns to tell us

it is time for a b r e a k.

Instead of studies,  
we will go outside,  
go for long walks  
and play.

*Let your brains breathe!*

Iris and Mavis complain:  
they want to keep studying  
until the very last day,  
but  
Ms. White tells us,  
*You've studied all you can.*  
*Fresh air will be good for you.*

Oh, and it is!



## Eid

When the month of Ramadan ends,  
it's time to celebrate Eid!

We still have a couple of weeks  
of school left,  
until we finally  
go  
Home.

Home I've learned  
isn't so much a place,  
but more where the people are.

But first, we get packages of mail  
from our parents  
for Eid.

Sweet ladoos wrapped in foil,  
an armful of glass bangles,  
and some of us even get  
a new silk shalwar kameez  
wrapped in crinkly paper.  
For gifts, we make sure each girl  
has a nibble of laddoo,  
a tinkly bangle on their wrist,

and a hug while we say *Eid Mubarak!*

On Eid morning  
when the bells ring,  
we are excused from classes  
and allowed a break from our pinafores,  
and the other girls  
admire our clothes.

Daphne's fingers trace the silky cuffs of my kurtas.  
She coos,  
*Your clothes are so much better  
than our plain old pinafores!*  
Now that I'm back in my shalwar kameez,  
I feel the same.

Ms. White takes a photograph  
of the Muslim girls celebrating Eid.  
When Tahira scrunches up her nose  
and sticks out her tongue,  
laughter escapes our throats,  
turning our photo  
into a memorable  
story.



## **GIFTS FOR HOME**

From Charlie the sweet seller,

I buy extra sweets for three people  
I'm sure have grown:  
Wahab, Qadir, and Adil.  
(I know Wahab certainly has!)

From Matron, I've learned to knit,  
and for my new baby sibling,  
I have a hat  
made out of the palest yellow wool  
that my fingers want to kiss  
over and over again.

For Mummy, I have a woolly warm shawl  
that feels like a hug,  
and for Abajan, a new pen,  
waiting to be used.





## Sunday Mail

*The baby is here!*  
writes Abajan.  
*You have a sister!*  
*She came a little early,*  
*but is okay.*  
*She's drinking bhes ka doodh*  
*(buffalo milk) to fatten her up.*  
*Her name is Shireen,*  
*which means Dear or Sweet,*  
*and that she is.*

*I have a sister!*  
I tell all the girls around me,  
*I have a sister!*  
*A baby sister!*  
Joanne cheers, *What's her name?*  
*Her name is Shireen!*  
*She's sweet like the meaning of her name!*

The girls swirl around me,  
congratulate me,  
tell me I'm so lucky.

*You'll be like us!*

cheer Iris and Mavis.



## TEATIME

Matron yells,  
*Zarina, you have a visitor!*  
And I know it must be Wahab,  
and this time he's out of breath,  
but not because of the hills,  
but because he's excited.

In his red mittens,  
he waves a letter.

*Mummy had the baby! Her name is Shireen!*  
*I know! I know!*

A woolly, wintery hug.

In addition to the usual bread and butter  
and a cup of steaming tea  
with dollops of golden honey  
and swirls of creamy milk  
that Miss Melloy gives us,  
Matron puts out  
chocolate biscuits  
with a drop of icing in the middle!

*Good times must be celebrated!*



## **HOMEWARD BOUND**

Before we go home,  
I write a letter telling Khushboo  
the baby is a girl,  
and that I will write more once I am **home**.  
There is a flurry of packing,  
cleaning, and packing  
again.

Matron oversees our trunks to  
make sure each item is folded just so;  
otherwise we have to do it again.  
*If you don't have time to do it right,  
then you must have time  
to do it over again, Chickies!*

Iris and Mavis can't sit still,  
can't fold correctly,  
and Matron makes sure  
they refold their clothes  
until she is **f i n a l l y**  
satisfied.

My heart dances  
when we get on the bus

that is going to wind down the road.

This time, Daphne warned me,  
and I had a **lighter** breakfast.

The bus windows are wide open  
in case anyone gets sick.

This time,  
I am ready!

Anticipation winds inside me  
like the twisty roads.

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## Train Platform

When I see the trains,  
my heart drops.  
It reminds me of the bloody trains.  
But then Daphne takes my hand,  
Sidra gives a gentle push,  
says, *Let's go, Zarina!*  
I take a deep breath,  
remember this is a different time,  
a better time,  
a time to go home.

# **Part 4**

## **Karachi, Pakistan**







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## Train Whistle

Back in Karachi,  
my heart drums loudly,  
louder than the chugging of trains.

On the platform,  
I scan with my eyes  
to see if I recognize  
familiar faces.

My heart drops,  
then lifts again.  
*Abajan!*  
My father runs up to me.  
*Khubani Begum!*

Lifts me                      p  
   u  
twirls me,  
puts me d  
   o  
   w  
   n.

*Oof, you have grown.*  
*How am I supposed to lift such a big person?*

Abajan takes my trunk,  
thanks Ms. Henson,  
while I say goodbye to my friends  
until next semester.

We are walking to the car  
when I hear them first  
before I see them.  
And when I turn my head,  
my mouth is already smiling.

Wahab, Qadir, and Adil  
jump out from behind a pillar.  
*Surprise!*

*We just came home too.*  
It is nice to finally see Wahab  
for more than ten minutes.  
Qadir and Adil all look so much taller,  
but thankfully I am still taller  
than Adil.  
*Mummy's home with your sister.*  
Abajan puts his hand on my shoulder.  
*Let's go home.*



## THE SURPRISE HOUSE

The house I left

isn't the same house I come back to.  
Abajan explains how they found a new house  
that was for sale, that would fit us all better.

In the old house,  
trunks that took up twice as much space  
look half the size here.

The older house was squished,  
but this one's verandah welcomes me  
with its warm and w i d e walls  
splashed in sunlight.

The Karachi weather is warmer,  
much warmer than Murree,  
and I loosen my shawl  
as I look around and  
search for Mummy.

By a new wooden door  
hangs a clothes line.  
On it, Mummy's saris  
sway in the breeze  
and next to them,

t  
a  
o  
l  
the tiniest of baby clothes f too.

My chest tightens.  
I am so close to seeing Mummy.

Underneath the clothes line,  
my fingers brush her clothes,  
my nose tastes her familiar sandalwood soap.

The thought of being close to her,  
of seeing her again  
*finally*,  
makes my words  
knot in my throat.  
Tears cradle my lashes.



## HOME

As Abajan pushes the wooden door  
wide open,  
I hold my breath.  
When I left Mummy,  
she wasn't really talking to me.

This time, Mummy hovers in the kitchen,  
her toenails even and spacious,  
her feet arched,  
her hair a fat braid.  
It flows  
from underneath her dupatta  
with motia flowers threaded in.

The smell of coconut toffee cooks on the stove.

I absorb the moment of observing her  
before she turns,  
sees me.

My words unknot  
into a tangly sob.  
*I'm so sorry for leaving.*  
*I'm so sorry for pushing.*  
*I'm so sorry for . . .*

My words dissolve  
as Mummy pulls me tighter,  
folds myself into her.  
Mummy's hands  
are firm again  
as she straightens me up  
rib by rib.  
Her eyes flash strong like the sun.  
Her voice strong.  
*Nonsense.*

By seeing her  
so well  
back to how she normally is,  
my relief unfurls  
my tension away.  
Mummy's fingers drink my tears  
while my fingers drink hers.  
Her face changes,  
opens  
into the biggest smile I've seen.

*Zarina,*

*how I've missed you.  
You've become a young woman!  
I'm SO proud of you  
for learning,  
for getting an education  
no matter what.  
You must teach me everything!*

*I sniffle nod sniffle.  
When I hug Mummy,  
I notice that  
this time I'm even taller  
than I was before.*

*Mummy looks up at me.  
I can't believe how big you've become.  
Do you want to meet your baby sister?*



## Shelloo

In the corner of the room is  
a tiny bundle  
that Mummy holds out  
to my brothers and me.  
Her skin so perfect,  
so pale,  
so pink.

I think of Ms. White's unusual details  
and study her,  
really study her.  
She looks like the inside of a shell.

Mummy's face the moon,  
Shireen's face a shell,  
my face warm and glowing  
like the sun.

I chuckle.  
*She looks like a shell.*  
*She's so delicate!*  
*We needed a nickname for her.*  
*How's Shelloo?* asks Abajan.  
and that's how Shelloo came into being.





## ABAJAN

*Come see your room.  
You can share with your sister,  
and your brothers are on their own.  
How does that suit you?*

*(I love the word  
sister.)*

*In my room,  
everything is laid out  
perfectly and spaciouly.*

*I nod  
and smile.  
Just fine.*



## Big Guest

After I unpacked  
and gave everyone my gifts,  
Mummy and Abajan tell me  
we are to have a Big Guest  
at teatime,  
and they will need me to help entertain  
any children that come.

My heart droops a little.  
I remember the last Big Guest:  
the leaders of Pakistan  
and their rose sherbet.

But instead,  
I grab the jharoo,  
flatten my feet,  
bend my knees,  
squat low,  
and start sweeping the floor.

Mummy's braid nods in approval.



## Teatime

A knock on the door.  
The Big Guest is here.  
I'm sent to open the door  
and I gasp to see the familiar ponytail  
topped by an Alice band.

I am knocked off the front step  
into a big hug.  
*Jahana!*  
*Zarina!*

*You're here too?*  
*Yes, I'm here!*

*You made it!*  
*I missed you!*

Our words are happy,  
even though they  
are still in threes.



## Jahana's Journey

She came by trains,  
not ship,  
and on her trains  
there was no killing,  
but there were lots of mobs.

Her father  
ran into my father  
at the bazaar.

I tell her about Mrs. Nizami,  
Daphne, and St. Denys' boarding school.  
Jahana says she wants to come too.

We talk and talk and talk  
and still  
always  
there is                    m           o           r           e           to say.

We talk about Geeta,  
how we miss her,  
how we wish things were different.  
Jahana looks at me,  
and when I look at her,

I know what she is going to say,  
the way best friends do.

*She still lives in her original home.  
Same address.*

I tear a page out of Ms. White's journal  
*Let's start writing.*

Jahana huddles close as we write.

*Dear Geeta . . .*



## **A NEW GARDEN**

After Jahana's family leaves  
amid promises to return,  
Abajan says,  
*It's been a while,  
let's go for a family walk,  
and I'll show you your new garden  
hidden at the back of the house.  
You haven't seen it yet.*

In Mummy's arms,  
Shelloo is held close and gentle,  
gentle and close.

Mummy sways while I unwrap her blanket  
to kiss Shelloo's ten tiny toes.

Our new garden is a smaller square,  
not a **huge** rectangle like in Poona,  
and it is okay.

*Do you know my favorite verse from the Quran?*

Wahab and Adil nod  
and Qadir and I say,  
*How could we forget?*

Abajan ignores us.  
*Did you know in Surah Nuh,*  
*it says:*  
*Your Lord will increase you in wealth and children*  
*and bestow on you gardens and rivers?*

*We've got all the children*  
*and the garden . . .*  
*And check out our river!*

Abajan points to a part of the garden  
I didn't see before,  
veiled by trees  
at the very back.  
A hill connected to a path  
by the tiniest of bridges.

Underneath the bridge  
is a dark green circle pond

with four fat gleaming orange fish.

The beauty swallows our words.

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## Our Words Come Back

When Abajan points  
to two palm trees  
in a different corner of the garden  
underneath which dangles a swing,  
my brothers and I start to fight over it.

This time, our swing doesn't

d

a

n

g

l

e

over the compost heap,  
but instead over fat clay pots of motia flowers.

When you swing high,  
the scent is bliss.





## New Favorite Spot

Under the milky blue sky,  
surrounded by my family's melody,  
I lie by the pond  
on dusty clay bricks,  
hug my journal,  
and dip my fingers  
into the dark wet green.

I coax my hair  
from its braids  
into tendrils  
that unfurl  
like the vines around me.

I lift my eyes,  
look up  
with the plants,  
and swoon for  
the sun and sky.



## Seeds

Abajan calls us back,  
hands out seeds,  
shows us where to press them  
deep into the soil.

I remember  
the teardrop-shaped apple seeds  
I kept after the trains,  
run to get them,  
and hand them to Abajan,  
and we push those under the soil  
to plant them as well.  
New Hope.

*As you know, to own land  
is to be blessed.  
This new country.  
This new house.  
This new garden.  
This new river—  
fine, pond!—  
is yours  
and will continue to be yours.  
Inshallah.*

Abajan turns,  
rests his hand on my shoulder.  
Pinned to his jute shalwar kameez,  
his buttonhole carnation,  
white, ribboned in pink,  
twinkles at me.  
*Khubani Begum,*  
Welcome home.

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## Recipes

### **Rose Sherbet Beverage**

#### Ingredients

4 tablespoons rooh-afza (rose-flavored) syrup

1 cup chilled milk or ice-cold water

Mix the rooh-afza into the chilled milk or ice-cold water. Enjoy on a hot summer day!

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## Author's Note

When I researched the partition, I learned the partition of India was one of the bloodiest upheavals in human history and was the largest mass migration of the twentieth century. Over the course of a year, an estimated fifteen million people crossed borders that were drawn up in a rush by the British Empire.

I dove into research and relied on the memories of my grandmothers for many of the anecdotes for this story. This is a work of historical fiction. Many of the anecdotes are fiction, yet a few are not, and whatever was fiction, I imagined and filled in the gaps as best as I could and took creative liberties. Any faults are mine alone!

Just like Abajan, my grandmother's father's first wife stayed married to him for only three days, left him, and spread rumors making it hard for him to remarry, but when he met his new wife (who was to become Zarina's mother), they stayed happily married for the rest of their lives.

My maternal grandmother, Zarina, left India when she was a little girl by ship. She doesn't remember her ship ride, except for the name of the ship, the *Shirala*. When I researched partition journeys via ship, they were quite traumatizing, so it is no wonder that she blocked it out.

My grandmother Zarina does remember how beautiful and huge her garden was in Poona, India, and how the dahlias were the size of dinner plates. She remembers the beautiful weather in Poona and how Karachi felt harsh in comparison—too hot, too dry, and too crowded.

After they'd moved to Karachi, Pakistan, my grandmother's brothers and her went to boarding school for one hundred rupees, a fee that is tiny today and equivalent to \$1.20!

When my grandmother said she wanted to go, too, her father drew up a petition for her. Everyone signed and gave their approval except for her

own mother. She understood what the petition said from what she was told, but refused to give her approval for Zarina to go. My grandmother's mother (Mummy!) was deeply upset and frustrated that my grandmother wanted to leave and didn't talk to her while she was in boarding school at St. Denys'. It took my grandmother Zarina a lot of courage to leave her new home in Karachi once she had finally made it there. She was sad to upset her mother, but grew to love her experience at St. Denys'. When Zarina's mother saw that Zarina was thriving at school, she felt better and grew to not only accept, but also support Zarina's decision.

Like Mummy, my grandmother's mother couldn't read or write, but learned a little later in life. Zarina's eldest brother would visit her from his boarding school when he could, though he couldn't stay long, because of the long walk. The walk was too long for the younger brother.

During Ramadan, accommodations were made for the Muslim students, and Matron delivered a hot flask of tea, boiled eggs, and more to the Muslim girls in the morning and they were excused from chores.

Also, a week before their exams, the girls were made to stop studying and go outside to play for a few days, something I wish we did more of in these days!

My grandmother Zarina actually did nickname her little sister, Shireen—Shelloo—because her premature skin was so pink and delicate like a shell.

Zarina did have good friends named Daphne, Iris, and Mavis, and her favorite teacher at boarding school was Ms. White. They stayed in touch years after my grandmother left the school. There really was a Charlie who sold sweets for many years at St. Denys'.

My grandmother Zarina's father was a well-dressed politician and did wear a flower (he had a fondness for carnations!) daily in his buttonhole. Mohammed Ali Jinnah and his sister Fatima Jinnah, the leaders of Pakistan, attended my paternal grandparents' wedding and were famous guests in attendance.

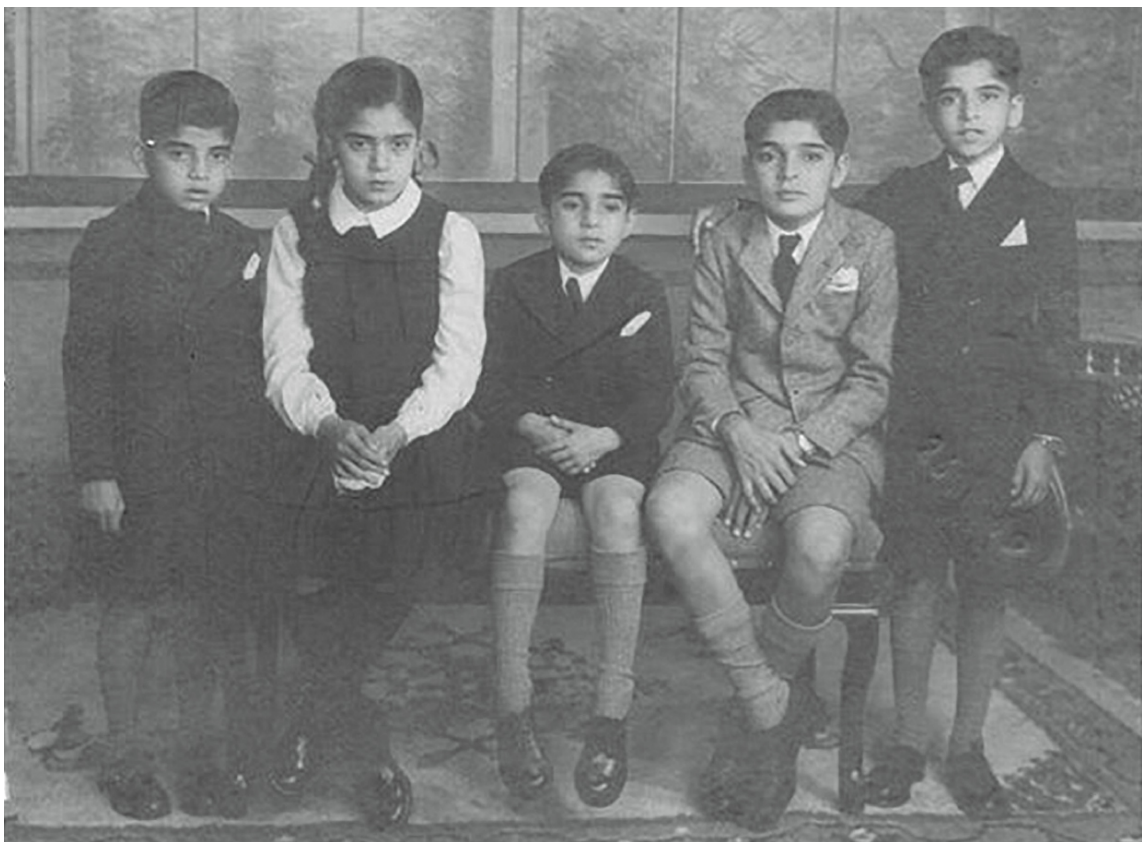
My paternal grandmother, Maryam Faruqi, did live at 1152 Main Street and used to walk in Poona with her family on Eid, where the non-Muslim shopkeepers did actually salute her father. Maryam did board the trains from India to Karachi, and they were termed "blood trains" or "ghost trains" because there was so much bloodshed during the traumatic journey, which led to many passengers never arriving alive to their final destination.

Also, the house that my paternal grandparents were allotted and settled in Karachi already had a Sikh lady living in it who did yell at them. If they or their cook, Basheer (his actual name!), tried to enter the kitchen, she said she would break their legs. One day when a mob came, my grandparents protected her. Grateful, she said she had never seen such Muslims, and then left.

My grandmother Zarina remembers her beautiful walks in Murree in the hills, but remembers the smell of smoke while she walked. The people who left during partition time were bitterly angry and had set fires to their own houses so no one else could use them.

I also wondered how the situation in Pakistan and India was with British people ruling. My grandmother said that the Pakistani and Indian people were used to serving them, to being their “good little servants.” I made sure to weave that into the story.

I hope that Zarina’s story inspires you, that we learn from our mistakes, that we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past, and that we study history in order to do better in our future.



*Zarina, her brothers Abdul Kader and Abdul Wahab, and cousins all ready for boarding school.  
Photo courtesy of Reem Faruqi. Used with permission from Zarina Zakaria (1949).*

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Reader, it is because of you that I write. *Thank you* for picking up this book and for reading with me so far. I do so appreciate you and your kind reviews. I hope you'll stay with me for more.

(Extra credit: If your teacher or librarian handed you this book, please thank them from me!)

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## Glossary

**Abajan:** endearing term for father

**Alhamdoillah:** Arabic phrase that means “praise be to God”

**anday:** eggs

**anday ka qeema:** minced spicy scrambled eggs

**Asr:** the afternoon prayer recited by Muslims

**ayah:** nanny

**ayat-ul-kursi:** verse from the Quran recited by Muslims for protection

**begum:** title of respect for a Muslim woman of high rank, the English equivalent of Lady or Dame

**bhes ka doodh:** buffalo milk

**bindi:** a decorative circular mark in the middle of the forehead, traditionally red, worn by Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and Buddhist women and occasionally men

**chadar:** a cloth used as a head covering, veil, or shawl by South Asian women

**chai wala:** tea seller

**chawkidar:** watchman

**cholay:** chickpeas

**daal:** dish made from cooked lentils and spices, common in South Asian cuisine

**duas:** invocations to Allah in Muslim

**dupatta:** shawl-like scarf worn by women in South Asia

**Fajr:** the dawn prayer recited by Muslims

**ghee:** clarified butter from buffalo or cow milk used extensively in South Asian cooking

**gul mohar:** tropical tree with vibrant orange blossoms whose scientific name is *Delonix regia*

**gur ka sheera:** sweet pudding made with brown sugar, ghee, and semolina

**iftar:** a meal Muslims eat at sunset during Ramadan to open the day's fast

**inshallah:** Arabic expression for "God willing"

**Isha:** the evening prayer recited by Muslims

**ithar:** perfume

**janamaz:** Islamic prayer mat

**jharoo:** traditional broom made of grass that one typically squats to use when sweeping

**Jinnah Zindabad:** Urdu expression for "Long live Jinnah (the name of a Pakistani leader)"

**kajal:** powdery black eyeliner

**kameez:** long tunic-like upper garment worn by men and women in South Asia.

**khansama:** a male cook

**khichri:** dish made from rice, lentils, and spices in South Asian cuisine

**khubani:** apricot

**koel:** a large cuckoo bird that lives in Asia, Australia, and the Pacific with a loud, distinctive call

**laado:** tomato curry

**ladoo:** a deep-fried spherical sweet made from flour, ghee, and sugar

**Lala:** respectful term for elder brother

**Maghrib:** the sunset prayer recited by Muslims

**mali:** gardener

**meetha meetha phal:** expression for sweet, sweet lime

**milai:** cream

**naan:** leavened, oven-baked flatbread found in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India

**namaz:** prayer

**paan:** Indian after-dinner treat made from betel leaves

**paratha:** unleavened layered flatbread made with flour, salt, water, and ghee found in Indian subcontinent cuisine

**phal wala:** fruit seller

**poori:** an Indian bread made with flat rounds of dough that puff up when deep fried.

**Ramadan:** month in which Muslims observe a strict fast from dawn until sunset

**rooh-afza:** refreshing rose-flavored syrup often diluted with water, milk, or ice that is a summertime favorite in India and Pakistan

**roti:** unleavened round flatbread in Southeast Asia

**sabzi wala:** vegetable seller

**sajdah:** kneeling and bowing to God that is part of the Muslim daily prayers

**salan:** curry

**samosa:** a fried or baked South Asian pastry with a savory filling, such as spiced potatoes, onions, peas, meat, or lentils

**samosa wala:** samosa seller

**sehri:** the morning meal Muslims eat before sunrise during Ramadan

**shabash:** phrase for “well done” or “bravo”

**shalwar:** loose, pajama-like pants worn by men and women in Pakistan

**sherwani:** long-sleeved outer coat worn by men in South Asia on formal occasions

**Subhanallah:** Arabic phrase for “Glory be to God”

**Surah Nuh:** the seventy-first chapter of the Quran that is about the prophet Noah

**taaza taaza sabzi:** Urdu expression for fresh, fresh vegetables

**tonga wala:** seller of a ride on a two-wheeled horse carriage

**topi:** cap or hat

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## Photo Gallery



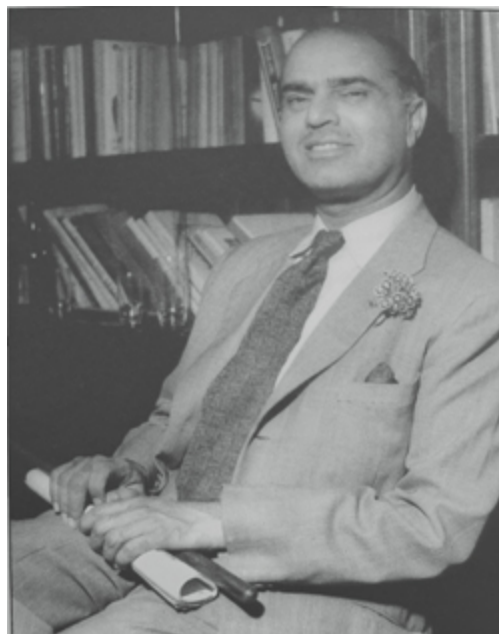
*Ms. White and students at St. Denys'; Zarina not pictured.*

*Photo courtesy of Reem Faruqi. Used with permission from Zarina Zakaria (ca. 1955).*



*My great grandfather Ahmed E. H. Jaffer on a Pakistani postage stamp. The stamp was issued by Pakistan Post Office in Islamabad on his birthday on August 9, 2000.*

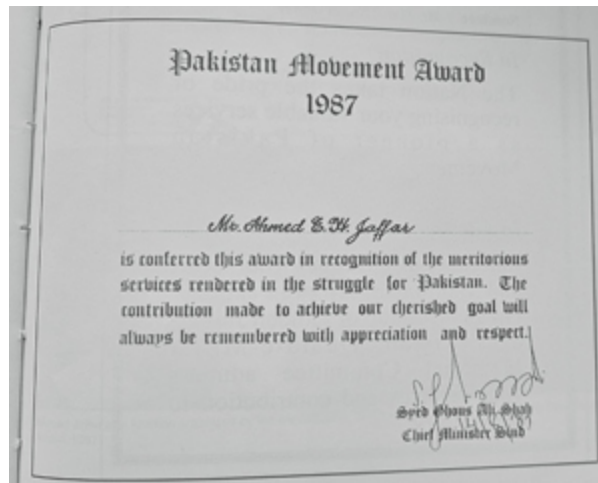
*Photo courtesy of Reem Faruqi. Used with permission from Abdul Wahab Jaffer.*





*My great grandfather Ahmed E. H. Jaffer with a carnation in his pocket.*

*Photo courtesy of Reem Faruqi. Used with permission from Abdul Wahab Jaffer (ca. 1949).*



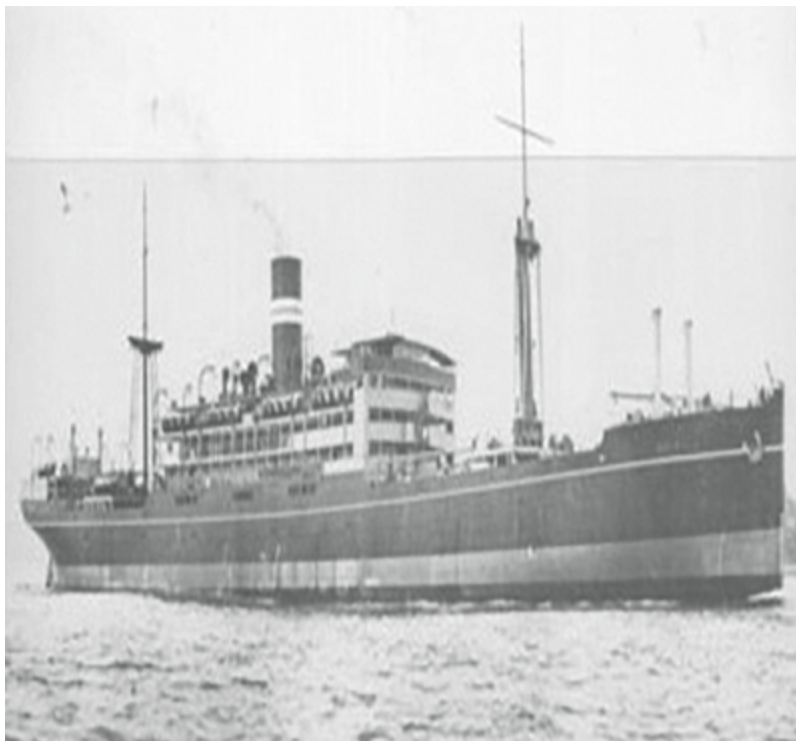
*My great grandfather Ahmed Jaffer was recognized by the Government of Pakistan for his contribution in the making of Pakistan.*

*Photo courtesy of Reem Faruqi. Used with permission from Abdul Wahab Jaffer (1987).*



*Digital rendering of St. Denys'.*

*Art by Darakhshan Uzair. Used with permission from Darakhshan Uzair.*



*The Shirala, which we believe Zarina boarded.*



*St. Denys' today.*

*Photo courtesy of St. Denys'. Used with permission from St. Denys'.*

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## Resources

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