



TAHMIMA ANAM



The  
Good Muslim



'Stunning'  
*Independent*

'Intimate and epic'  
*Metro*

'Exquisite'  
*Sunday Telegraph*



# *The Good Muslim*

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A Novel

**Tahmima Anam**



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# Dedication

*for Roland Lamb*

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# *Prologue*

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1971  
December

Eight days after the end of the war, Sohail Haque stands in a field of dying mustard. The petals of the mustard flower, dried to dust, tickle his nose and remind him of the scent of meat, which he has not tasted in several months. Underfoot, the grasses spit and cry; overhead, the heavy-lidded eye of a midwinter sun. He has been walking for days, following the grey ribbon of road that leads south, towards the city. In one abandoned village after another, he has eaten banana leaves and drunk from ponds, kissing their surfaces, filtering moss through his teeth. On the third day, a farmer told him that the war was over.

Now, on his way home, he turns the name of the country around on his tongue. *Bangladesh*.

In the distance, he sees a smudge against the flat.

A barracks. He circles the perimeter, his hand tight and moist around the handle of his rifle. No sound, no movement. He draws closer, walking low, his body at ease with the postures of soldiering, haunches ready to spring, eyes darting to the edges of the vista, the finger hooked, ready. But this building is abandoned.

The retreating army has left its traces. He smells tobacco on the furniture; he sees their uniforms hanging on the washing line. He finds their plates, stacked neatly in a corner, their shoes, pointing away from Mecca. He sees their prayer mats. He smells them, soap and chalk and shoe polish.

On the bathroom wall someone has written 'Punjab Meri Ma' – *Punjab, my mother*. How these soldiers must have hated Bengal, he thinks, hated the way their feet sank into the mud, the way the air closed around them like the hand of a criminal, the mosquitoes, the ceaseless pelt of rain, the food that left them weak, shitting, dehydrated.

Now Sohail wonders if he should have reserved a little pity for these men. He feels the tug of an earlier self, a still-soft self: geographer, not guerrilla. In this mood of clemency he decides to lie down on one of the bunks with a half-smoked cigarette. It is the softer self who leads him to explore the room behind the munitions store, who slides open the heavy metal door, who palms the wall, searching for a light switch – who is met with a sight that will continue to suck the breath out of him for a lifetime to come.

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## **Book One**

*All that is in the Heavens and on Earth*



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1984  
February

It would not have been possible to go home if Silvi hadn't died. Maya's thoughts rested for a moment on this fact as she settled herself on the wooden bench in the third-class carriage, balancing on her lap the sum of all her worldly possessions: a small rucksack containing two saris, a kameez, a pair of trainers, a doctor's case with a stetho and, for her mother, a young mango tree. The tree had been difficult to wrap; it was heavier than it looked and bulged awkwardly where the roots were packed in soil. 'Tree won't live,' the farmer who sold it to her said. 'Rajshahi tree, it belongs in Rajshahi.'

An old lady with a tiffin carrier slid into the space beside her. She stared for a moment at Maya, then clamped the tiffin carrier between her knees, pulled out a string of prayer beads and began to mutter the Kalma under her breath.

La Ilaha Illallah, Muhammad ur Rasul Allah.

Of course it would survive. There was an empty patch at the western edge of the garden, and if anyone could coax mangoes out of that tree it would be Ammoo. But seven long years had passed – she couldn't even be sure the patch was still empty.

A group of young men entered the compartment. Immediately they began to laugh and smoke, passing around a box of matches and a packet of Star cigarettes. Maya resisted the urge to scold them and instead pressed her face to the horizontal bars on the open window, gazing at the litter-strewn tracks, the station platform where boys were selling peanuts and cold drinks, and beyond to the scattered patches of green where the groves of mango stood. She would miss it. The two-room house she had rented now stood empty, its rough concrete floor swept and washed. And the verandah where she had seen her patients, that too had been cleared, the examination table, the small stand on which she kept her equipment, the wooden chair on which she draped her white jacket at the end of the day, ballpoint clicked shut in its pocket.

It had started with a few handfuls of mud. She told herself the wind must have tossed a coconut or piece of wood against the walls of her house. For three days she ignored the sound.

On the fourth night, the laugh. Unmistakable, escaping between the fingers of someone holding a palm over his mouth. A young man's laugh, nervous and girlish.

She ran outside and peered into the darkness, but she couldn't see anything. There is nothing darker than a moonless night in Rajshahi.

It had ended, months later, with the glint of a knife. She remembered it now: a gentle motion like the lick of a cat, the bright line of it; and the flash of white that caught her eye, the hem of a long robe floating just shy of a man's ankles as he slipped out of the room and disappeared. Her hand went to her throat, to the scar that still stood there, black and angry, but he hadn't cut her, only laid his knife on her: it was a way of saying that they had unfinished business, and that he could reappear at any moment to end the story.

Yes, she would miss it. Nazia and the house and the mangoes and the path around the pond. But the cat's lick of that knife, and the scar on her neck, meant she might never return.

Just before the train pushed off, a couple with two small children occupied the bench opposite. The mother held one of the children on her lap, while the other, older, squeezed into the space between her parents. The mother smiled shyly; Maya guessed it was her first time on a train – nose pin gleaming, pair of thin gold bangles on her wrists, her fortune.

Really, it was no tragedy her brother's wife had died. The prospect of facing Silvi – sanctimonious, her face packed tightly into the burkha she hadn't been seen without since the war – was largely what had kept Maya from her home. There was, of course, also her brother, Sohail. And Ammoo, who had abandoned her to her rage – her rage and the deep, driving smell of burning books, a scent that had never left her during the seven years she had gone missing. The train made its way through Rajshahi, and then into Natore, the landscape remaining flat and dry, the smells of the paddy mingling with the mustard plants that shone yellow, the burning cakes of dung.

The old woman opened her tiffin carrier, releasing the aroma of dal and fried cauliflower. The family opposite followed suit, unwrapping their bread and bhaji. Maya felt a tap of hunger; she had neglected to pack anything for the journey. The mother carefully tore her bread into tiny pieces and placed them in the baby's mouth. She passed the rest of the food to her husband, avoiding his eye as he took the newspaper-wrapped package from her.

The older girl was refusing to eat, tugging at her mother's elbow and shaking her head. Maya rooted around in her bag and emerged with two tamarind sweets. She offered one to the girl, who stood up, climbed into Maya's lap and took the sweet from her outstretched hand. The mother protested, but Maya waved her away. 'It's all right,' she said. The girl pulled her knees up against her chest and fell asleep. Maya must have slept too, because when she opened her eyes the girl was heavy in her arms and the train was just outside Bahadurabad Ghat. She felt a nudge on her shoulder. The old woman was pointing to her tiffin carrier, which held half a slice of bread and a smear of rice pudding.

'Eat,' she said, pinching Maya's cheek; 'you're too skinny. Who's going to marry you?'

At Bahadurabad, Maya boarded the ferry. It was afternoon now, and the sun danced on the wide expanse of river. She waved her ticket at the ferryman and pushed her way to the deck, where she was the only woman who chose to sit in the full glare of the sun. The Padma lapped at the ferry, gentle, hiding the force of its current. She munched on a packet of biscuits, trying to remember if this was the same boat that had brought her to Rajshahi. That one had a strange name. 'Hey,' she called out to a young boy in a uniform. 'What's the name of this boat?'

'Padma.'

It must have been a different boat. That journey, running away from home, seemed a lifetime ago. She had turned to her old friend Sultana. They had volunteered together at the refugee camps during the war, Sultana shocking everyone by driving the supply truck herself. Maya always remembered what Sultana had told her that long summer before independence: that she dreamed of going home after the war, not to the city, but back to her father's village. 'I want to feel the earth pulling at my feet,' she had said. After the book burning, when Maya had decided there was nothing to do but leave, she had telephoned, asking if she might come to stay. Sultana told Maya

she had recently married a boy she had known since childhood, a doctor. Together they worked at a clinic in Tangail; she could come; they could use her help.

She had stayed for three months, but Tangail was too close to Dhaka. Every day Maya stared at the buses shuttling towards the city, daring herself to climb aboard one and go home. And Sultana and her husband were newly married. Maya caught them kissing in the kitchen, their mouths open, his hands in her hair.

She left, wandered around the country on trains, ferries and rickshaws, finally arriving at the medical college hospital in Rajshahi town. She volunteered again, and then applied to finish her

internship. After two years at the hospital, she was given permission to start a clinic of her own. It was Nazia who had given her the idea, Nazia who had come all the way to town on the back of a rickshaw van, her baby stuck in the breech position. Impossible, Maya argued, for the women to travel all the way to the hospital to give birth. Too many babies were dying.

Somewhere along the way she had decided to become a lady doctor instead of a surgeon. She had seen how the women's faces changed when she entered the chamber, relaxing their grip on the examining table. At the time she told herself it was a practical matter. Anyone could become a surgeon, but a doctor for women, a doctor who could deliver their babies and stitch their wounds afterwards and teach them about birth control—that is what they needed. She didn't think of the debt she was repaying, that each of the babies she brought into the world might someday be counted against the babies that had died, by her hand, after the war.

They had never had a clinic in the village. Nazia spread the word, describing how Maya had saved her and her baby from certain death, how she had ordered the nurses about at the hospital, how expertly she had inserted the needle into her arm. That year, before the monsoon, Maya taught everyone in the village how to make oral-rehydration fluid: a handful of molasses, a pinch of salt, a jug of boiled water. And they passed that season without a single dead child. By the following year, when she succeeded in petitioning the district to build them a tube well, she believed she had won their hearts.

Nazia and Masud had another child. They named her Maya.

It was dark by the time the ferry reached the dock at Jaggannathganj. Maya checked her watch, wondering if it was too late to catch the last train. The tree was heavy in her arms, the branches pricking her shoulder. She decided to try; it would be difficult to find a hotel here, and they would ask her questions: why she was travelling alone, why she didn't have a man with her, a husband, a father.

At the station she saw the old woman from the train, her tiffin carrier open. Maya went over and waved, strangely elated at the sight of her. The woman beckoned her closer.

'Eat, eat,' she said.

'Grandmother,' Maya said, 'how is it your tiffin carrier is always full?'

The woman smiled, revealing a set of tiny, betel-stained teeth. Maya dipped a piece of bread into the curry she offered, suddenly famished.

Hours later, in the molten dark of night, the overnight train pulled into the station, and Maya helped the old woman on board. Five hours to Dhaka, she whispered to herself, reciting the names of the stations: Sirajganj, Mymensingh, Gafargaon. Only five more hours.

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Maya thought she might be overcome at the sight of Dhaka. She imagined the waves of nostalgia that would coast over her, forcing her to remind herself of the necessity of the last seven years away. She imagined emerging into the cool February afternoon, clouds moving fast overhead, and remembering everything about her old life – all the days she had spent at the university, the rickshaw rides to Ramna Park, Modhumita Cinema and the Racecourse, regretting the spare years in the country. But, as she stepped out of Kamalapur Station, she saw that everything was loud and crude, as though someone had reached over and raised the volume. It smelled of people and garbage and soot. She saw how tall everything had grown – some buildings reached five or six storeys – and how her rickshaw-puller struggled to weave through the thicket of cars on Mirpur Road, horns blaring impatiently; and she saw signs of the Dictator everywhere, graffiti on the walls declaring him the 'General of Our Hearts' and

the 'Saviour of Bangladesh', posters of him ten, twenty feet tall, with his high forehead, his thin, satisfied moustache.

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An hour later Maya was standing in front of the house of her childhood, Number 25, clutching her rucksack and wondering what she would find within.

Her eyes adjusted to the new contours of the building. The decline was far worse than she had imagined. Here, grey streaks across its back, where the drainpipe had leaked; there, the slow sinking of its foundations, as if the house were being returned to the earth; and, above, the collection of shacks that made up the first floor, built by her brother out of a mixture of brick and tin and jute, making it appear as though an entire village had fallen from the sky and landed on the rooftop.

She had loved this house once. It was the only place where she could conjure up the memory of her father – his elbows on the dining table, his footsteps on the verandah. Sliding off his chappals and raising his feet on to the bed. The smell of his tweed suit on a humid day. And lodged into the bone of this house was every thought and hope and bewildered fantasy she had ever harboured about her life, about the war she had fought and won, about the woman and man she had imagined she and her brother would become; but after it was all over, the killing and the truce and the redrawing of the border, he had gone one way, and she another. And she had foreseen none of it.

There is no time to linger, she told herself. Pull up your socks and go inside.

Everything was quiet and shining. The wooden arms on the sofa gleamed. The tiny brass chandelier was polished, the lace runner on the table starched and fixed perfectly in its place. Cushions with pointy edges. It came back to her, the way her mother always kept the house, as though a guest might arrive at any moment and run her finger along the windowsill, checking for dust.

The house was modest: three rooms set out in a row, connected by a verandah that faced the garden. At the far end, a kitchen with its own small porch. This was where she headed now, sure she would find her mother bent over the stove or washing the breakfast plates.

Instead, she found the kitchen packed with women. They wore long black burkhas and squatted over the grinding stone, the sink, the stove. Maya hovered at the entrance, wondering for a moment if she had strayed into the wrong house. She stood the tree up against a wall and set down her bag.

'Hello?'

One of the women rose to greet her. Maya couldn't make out her features beneath the loose black cloth. 'As-Salaam Alaikum,' she said.

'Walaikum As-Salaam.'

The woman reached over and held Maya's hand. 'We mourn our sister,' she said, then turned around and returned to her task, peeling cucumbers over a bowl of water. Maya stood and watched her for what felt like a long time. No one else spoke or addressed her. She picked up her things and left the kitchen. Where was Ammoo? The urge to see her became acute. Maya bent over the sink in the bathroom and splashed a few handfuls of water on her face. She retied her hair, practising the moment she would set eyes on her mother. When she emerged, someone was waiting for her in the corridor. 'It's time,' she said, and led Maya to the living room.

The burkha-clad women were busy rearranging the room. They pushed the sofa against the wall, lifted up the dining table and leaned it on its side. A photograph of her father was turned upside down. The watercolour painting Sohail had done of Maya when she was seven, her ribbons red and yellow, was covered with a pillowcase. As the muezzin began the call to prayer, they sped up, spreading white cloths on the carpet, lighting incense and filling a long silver container with rosewater. Finally, they pinned a sheet across the room, dividing it in half.

Someone pushed Maya through the sheet and into the back of the room. 'Please cover yourself,' she said.

Maya grabbed the woman's elbow. 'Where is my mother, do you know?'

The woman shook her head.

'Rehana Haque. This is her house.'

The woman pulled Maya close, her grip tight. 'Doa koro, apa,' she said. *Pray, sister.*

She could go out and look for her mother. Maybe she was at the Ladies' Club, or visiting a friend.

She might be at the graveyard, putting flowers on Abboo's grave. But the room was too crowded now for Maya to leave. The women seemed to have multiplied, taking every inch of space on the carpet.

They leaned against each other and held hands. Maya packed herself tightly against the wall. She heard the men shuffle in, shadow puppets on the sheet, their capped heads crowding the tableau. A

man separated from the group and positioned himself in the centre of the room. He cleared his throat and began in a high, nasal voice: *Alhamdulillah hi rabbil al-ameen. Praise be to God, cherisher and sustainer of all worlds.* As he uttered this sentence, Maya saw her mother slip through the curtain. The

breath stopped in her throat. She wanted to call out. She waved her arms. 'Ma!' she shout-whispered.

Rehana looked this way and that. The Huzoor raised his voice. Ammoo fixed her gaze on Maya and stood still for a moment, her hands moving to her face. Maya felt a burning in her eyes and at the back

of her throat. Another seven years passed. Then, a whisper of a smile. Ammoo stepped through the crowd, her arms outstretched, and before she knew it Maya was in the cloud of her, the coconuts in her

hair, the ginger in her fingertips. 'When did you come?' she whispered. All the years between them, trapped in the amber of her voice.

'Just now. What's going on?'

'Milaad for Silvi.'

Of course. Silvi would have been buried within hours of her death, but this was her Qul-khani, the prayer to mark the third day of her passing.

Seven months into her exile, Maya had written to her mother. *I am not angry, she had begun. But I cannot come home.*

For almost a year Ammoo had not replied. Those months had felt endless, as she rehearsed in her mind the furious words her mother might say, wondering if the silence would go on forever, willing her own letter back. But when it arrived, Ammoo's letter was packed with news, updates about the house, the neighbours, the garden. She showed no anger, but she didn't ask Maya to return. And that was how they corresponded, exchanging elaborate pleasantries, long passages about the weather, telling each other everything and nothing.

The Huzoor continued his sermon. Now the women were moving back and forth to the rhythm of his words. It occurred to Maya that when her father died there would have been a similar scene, men in white caps, the air scented with rosewater. She stole a glance at her mother. Ammoo was wiping tears with the back of her hand. She looked the same, exactly the same.

The Huzoor began to talk about Silvi. How pious she was, how good. How devoted to her faith. Sitting among these mourners, none of whom were crying because as Muslims they were instructed to mourn with modesty, Maya wondered how she could have kept away for so long – from this house, and this city, and this mother and this brother. Even though she had been the one to choose her exile, was as though a thick skin had formed over it, and it appeared to her now as a mystery. On the other side of this curtain was her brother, newly widowed, and his son, Zaid. She thought of meeting him, of the beard that must be thick on his chin, and she remembered how much she had loved him, how fiercely she had needed him to be like her, how she had turned away when he had leaned towards God, taken it personally, as though he had done it to offend her.

When Ammoo closed her eyes and began to recite the final prayer, Maya looked closer at her.

Maybe she looked a little older. Dark bruise shapes under her eyes, a line on her forehead. But it was only when her mother turned around after everyone had said Ameen, when she turned around with wet cheeks and smiled again, that Maya noticed one of her teeth missing at the back of her mouth. Then the years opened up and took shape – the shape of that molar, craggy and smooth, big and small, a chasm.

Maya had told Nazia about the mud, about the laugh. Nazia was indignant. ‘Those thugs,’ she said, fanning herself. ‘If this one turns out to be a boy I’m going to lock him up and only let him out for school.’

It had never been hotter. No one could remember a sari drying so fast on the washing line, the chillies thinning to husks in the field. The pond had begun to shrink back, and there was talk of a threat to the mangoes. ‘I know,’ Maya said. ‘Let’s go swimming. It’s hot enough to drive anyone mad.’

‘Really? We can do that?’

A beat. There were rules about pregnant women, about where they could bathe, but Maya brushed them aside; no one believed those things any more. She had been lecturing them for years now, about science and superstition and their rights. ‘Why not?’ she said to Nazia. She would remember it later, the moment of pause before she said yes, but on that day all she could think about was the water, its green coolness easing the lash of that summer.

They sat on the steps leading down to the pond, their feet submerged. Nazia lowered herself in and dipped her head under water. ‘Subhan Allah,’ she cried, ‘thanks be to God for such a thing!’

‘If my wife wants to cool her feet,’ Masud declared, ‘no one can stop her.’

The men of the village had appeared in front of his house, shaking their heads. A pregnant woman in the pond? It was too much.

They huddled around the cooking fire that night, Maya and Nazia, fanning the bits of wood until they flared high over the pot.

‘What a fuss,’ Nazia said. ‘I hear they’re having a meeting.’

‘Ignore them,’ Maya said. ‘Main thing is Masud is a good man. They’ll tire themselves out eventually.’ She didn’t tell her friend that she had heard the boys at her window again, that she had slept the night before with the windows shut, the heat-clotted air stopping her breath.

After the Milaad the women passed around dishes of food and Ammoo began playing the hostess, encouraging everyone to eat. Someone offered Maya a plate but she refused, her tongue heavy in her mouth. She was suddenly overcome with weariness, and she considered slipping into Sohail’s old room and putting her head down for a few minutes. No one would notice. She closed her eyes. She heard people shuffle around her. Her head kept slipping sideways and when she opened her eyes the room was empty.

She found Ammoo in the kitchen.

‘Ma?’

‘Oh, you’re up. I didn’t want to wake you.’

Her lids were heavy. She took a few steps, faltered. Ammoo led her to the sofa. She wanted to talk to Ammoo, tell her about Nazia and the mud they threw at her window. And the lashes. She wanted to tell her about the lashes. But it was one thing for Ammoo to smile at her, to greet her tenderly, and another for the years to fall behind them. She collapsed on the sofa, struggling to keep her eyes open. ‘I have to tell you something.’

‘How did you come?’

‘The train, the ferry, the train.’

‘You must be tired. Lie down for a bit.’

She felt herself nodding off again. ‘I brought you a tree.’

‘I’ll wake you up; it’s only three now.’

She pulled her eyes open. There was a brown box against the wall. She hadn’t seen it before – the upstairs women had covered it with a tablecloth. ‘When did you get that?’ she asked, stumbling to her feet and examining it.

Ammoo’s face brightened. ‘A little gift to myself.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I saved and saved. Took me two years of leftover rent. There’s a German man living in the big house now, always pays the rent on time. You haven’t seen *Magnum, P.I.*?’

‘There’s no television in Rajshahi.’

Ammoo’s eyes widened in mock horror. ‘That’s very sad.’

They laughed. Ammoo sounded so cheerful she almost erased the loneliness of it, waiting with a plate on her lap for the BTV news at eight.

Maya lay her head on the cool pillow. Just for a moment, she thought, then I’ll give Ammoo the mango tree and explain everything. She slept. Through the shutters she glimpsed the tiger stripes of sunset, and later Ammoo came in to cover her with a blanket. She heard the muezzin marking the end of the day. A whisper in her ear: did she want something to eat? She curled her hand around her mother’s knee. No. Later, a cat slipped into the room and lay across her feet. She felt the quick heartbeat, the warmth radiating out of the little body.

She dreamed of Rajshahi.

In her dream it is the pineapple field that marks the end of everything. There is one day when she is as fierce and impenetrable as winter fog, walking around the village with the stetho wrapped proudly around her neck. No chains of gold; she is a doctor. Early that morning she saved a mother and a pair of twin boys, performing the emergency C-section herself, the cutting and stitching in perfect rhythm, her hands sinking deep into the shared womb. And, although she reminded the family they should have loved the babies just as well had they been girls, she enjoyed the tight embraces of the women, the relief; she munched on the triangle of wrapped betel leaf they offered her. Now she is striding through the village and on to the dirt path that leads to the road that leads into town. Her arms are swinging, January wind pinching at her face, and she is passing the pond, where she waves to the boy who lost a brother to snakebite last year (too late, that day), and she ducks under a pair of mango trees and decides to take a shortcut through the pineapple patch. A few steps in, and the sun is high, the field looks wider now than she had thought, but she is not the sort of person to turn around, so she lifts her sari above her ankles and treads delicately, avoiding the sharp thorns of the pineapple plants. She is tempted to peel back the leaves and check for a ripe joldugi, but she knows it is not the season. Still, the air is sweet and bee-heavy, and when she has reached the end of the field she lowers the hem of her sari and continues, humming a nursery rhyme she was taught by little Maya the night before. And then she sees the meeting. A dozen men in a circle. Masud stands in the middle. ‘It’s the doctor,’ he says; ‘she’s the cause of all the trouble.’

Maya woke up to darkness. She was dressed in one of Ammoo’s salwaar-kameezes, worn through at the elbows and smelling strongly of soap. By habit, she fingered the scab on her neck. A hard pellet, it refused to budge as she picked at its edges. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and went to find her mother. Ammoo was in bed, running a plastic comb through her hair.

‘I thought you might sleep all night.’

Maya ducked under the mosquito net and climbed in beside her. 'I didn't realise how tired I was.'

Rehana parted her hair down the middle, creating a perfectly straight seam, and began to braid one side. The ritual brought Maya back to all those mornings before school, getting up ten minutes before Sohail so that her hair could be oiled, plaited and ribboned. She thought of her brother now, holding her hand as they walked through the school gates.

'Tell me about Sohail.' In all the letters they had exchanged, Ammoo had said so little about him – only that he had moved upstairs, that his wife had delivered a son, that she saw hardly anything of them, so busy were they with their religion.

Ammoo picked up the comb again and began to tell her. They called themselves Tablighi Jamaat. *The Congregation of Islam*. Silvi had held meetings upstairs, preaching to the women about everything there was to know about being a Muslim. God, men, morality. Purdah and sex. The life of the Prophet. His wives, Ayesha and Khadija and Zaynab. The raising of children. How to be one of the faithful. And Sohail had his own group of followers at the mosque; many men had been led to the way of deer – the way of submission – under his direction. They brought their friends, their errant sons, and Sohail told them what to believe and how to live. He was considered a holy man.

'They have twenty, thirty people living there. And almost a hundred during the day. I lost count.' They had moved upstairs soon after Maya left. Started out with the brick room in front, then added the outside staircase so they could come and go without disturbing her. Then the tin rooms, the toilet, the kitchen.

'How did she die?'

'She had jaundice. They didn't notice until it was too late.'

She thought of Silvi's skin turning yellow, her eyes the colour of yolks. 'And Bhaiya?'

'For him, it is the afterlife that matters.'

'Things will change now', Maya said, 'without Silvi.'

'Maybe,' Ammoo replied, sounding uncertain. 'Come, let me comb your hair.'

Maya moved closer to her mother, but instead of sitting in front of her she put her head down on Ammoo's lap. Ammoo smoothed her hand across her forehead. 'I can hardly believe it,' she said.

Maya's eyes began to burn. The words rose up in her throat. Ammoo was running her fingers through her hair now, gently massaging her scalp.

'What's this?' She peered down, brushing the hair from Maya's neck.

'It's nothing, just a cut.'

'On your throat?'

'It's a long story, Ammoo.' She sat up, pulled the hair around her neck.

'Tell me.'

The punishment was one hundred and one lashes. Masud came back from the meeting and spat the words at his wife. 'One hundred and one,' he said. 'That's what you deserve.'

Maya stood between Nazia and her husband. 'For what?'

'For lying about the child. He's not mine.'

It's not a curse, she had told them, it's Down's syndrome. The child will be different, he'll have problems, but he'll survive, I can show you how to care for him.

He looks like a Chink, Masud had said. Look at his flat nose – did you fuck a Chinese, wife, is that what you did?

He went to the meeting. He told the men. They said they had known something was wrong, known since that day she and the doctor lady had gone swimming in the pond.

That Chink is not my baby. Lyingcheatingwhoreofawife.

The punishment was one hundred and one lashes.



One, shaped like a question mark, where the whip has curled around her calf.

Raise the sari!

---

Whore!

At the end, when Maya was the only one still watching, miscounting, thinking it was already one hundred and one when it was only one hundred, she approached her friend, and the whip caught her on its way up, nicked her, the bite of a hungry insect, making her swallow the word she was about to utter. *Shesh. Finished.* She had spoken too soon. Instead of a word, she was marked by the whip, her hand rushing to the place on her neck where it had touched her and returning with blood. And was that a smile in the man's eye? The one who was only following orders, protecting the village, the name of the village.

She found Nazia in the hospital. 'Please go,' Nazia said. 'I am tired.' She was lying on her stomach, legs swaddled. Maya touched her foot, black and hard, and she flinched. 'Leave me,' Nazia pleaded.

She wanted to witness the skin closing over Nazia's wound. She wanted to stay until the marks faded, until they were almost invisible – thin, worm-like tracks that would dance across her legs. She would stand up and they would begin to resist. They would go to the police, they would break up the meetings. But Nazia said no and her black foot said no and Maya realised she would have to leave the wound open, leave the village with her protests still urgent, still angry.

She was wondering where to go next when the telegram arrived. The Hill Tracts, maybe, or the north. She traced her finger around the map of Bangladesh, up the blue arteries, the Jamuna, the Meghna, reading aloud the names of the towns, Mymensingh, Pabna, Kushtia. She was sitting under the jackfruit tree outside her house, munching on a bowl of sour jaam, when the postman stopped and swung a leg over his bicycle. She offered him a piece of fruit, and he declined, looking at his feet. Then he said, 'Daktar, someone in your family has died.'

It was the only thing she feared. She flung the bowl aside and grabbed the postman's shoulders, feeling him shrink from the intimacy of the gesture, from the purple stain her fingers would leave on his shirt.

'Is it my mother? Tell me quick.' She closed her eyes, as if he was about to hit her.

'I don't know, I can't read English.'

She snatched it from him and tore it open. Silvi. Silvi was dead.

That night, she dreamed of her mother wrapped in a white shroud, her nostrils stuffed with cotton. In the morning she began to pack her things. By dying, Silvi had declared a truce. It was time to go home.

No one came to say goodbye.

The house was changed, but it had survived. And she had made it, two train rides and a ferry across the country, and she was laying her head on her mother's lap, and there was nothing to do now but remember all the times they had returned to this house, she and her brother, to find everything was the same and not the same, to find their mother waiting, waiting.

---

1972  
February

The war ended and all the ugly and beautiful things were uglier and more beautiful. The Great Leader Mujib returned from exile and began printing the new currency and renaming all the buildings. Those who had sided with the enemy hid out, afraid of the back-from-war boys who had surrendered their guns but couldn't stop thinking about revenge. The women wore marigolds in their hair and smelled coconut oil, and the refugees drifting back from India clutched the cindered husks of their village homes and raised stakes on empty graves.

It was a winter of return, mothers waiting at home, preparing elaborate meals with the leftover war rations, straining their eyes to the road, jumping at the slightest sound. Inevitably, the moment of homecoming did not happen in the way they imagined, with the young boy returning to a fragrant house, rice on the table, everyone washed and smiling. No, it usually happened when she was at the market for a leg of mutton or looking for the lost pair of clothes pegs in the grass, and the boy would appear, dishevelled and with new depths in his eyes, new sorrows etched into him, and when she saw him it would be like birthing him all over again, checking he had all his fingers and toes, wondering if he would survive this new world. And the boy-soldier, quiet, his thoughts turning to ordinary pleasures, the feel of his mother's cotton sari worn down to its threads, and the shape of her hand on his forehead, and the smell of her, like lemons, puncturing every other sensation.

But Sohail did not return. December ended, then January. Rehana and Maya told stories of his return, of the light and pleasant things they would do. Ice cream and spring chicken. Maybe they would take a trip to the tea gardens, or to Cox's Bazaar. He had always wanted to see the brown tides of the Bay of Bengal.

When the moment arrived, Maya and Ammoo were at the Women's Rehabilitation Centre, where they had both signed up as volunteers. That day they returned to find him already home, sitting comfortably in the living room with a newspaper, as if he had been there all along.

He wore a red shirt and a dirty lungi. His face was obscured by the dark grey grizzle of a beard. 'I'm sorry,' he said, looking back and forth at them both. 'I meant to shave.' They smiled at one another and then Maya embraced him and held on for as long as she could, surprised by the fragrance of earth in his hair.

That night they took the lamp and settled themselves in the garden. Rehana slipped a mosquito coil under Sohail's chair, and the three of them pushed close to one another, huddling against the February chill.

'What took you so long?' she asked. 'The other boys have been coming in for weeks now.'

Sohail didn't explain. Smoke from the mosquito coil reached up and caressed them, pungent. He made a gesture with his left hand, which told them he was tired. Maya and Ammoo had been staring at him the whole evening; perhaps he was weary of being looked at.

They fell into silence. All the words seemed too small. The crickets raised their voices, the frogs. Maya thought about the other times they'd sat there. In winter they sometimes put their plates on the

laps and ate breakfast and watched the fog curl back. Her father had wanted this garden, this porch that protruded into it. Two months before he died, he had planted a row of tomatoes, bending over the ground himself, sprinkling seeds, folding earth over the cleft. He died before they sprouted, and in the spring, when the plants released their buds of green, it was Ammoo who watered them, shooed away the crows. Years later, when the garden was shortened to make space for the big house, she rescued one or two tomato plants, migrating them to the smaller vegetable patch she had staked out in front of the bungalow, but they didn't survive the move; their stalks crisped and turned to dust. Maya had found her among them once, holding the bones of the plant, disbelieving.

'What will we do now, I wonder?' Sohail asked.

'Hasn't she told you?' Ammoo said. 'Maya's going to be a doctor. Look after me in my old age.'

Maya blushed, secretly proud of herself for choosing medicine. A noble way to serve the new country. 'The university will open soon,' she said.

'Back to school for us.' Sohail appeared unhappy at the prospect of returning to university, of answering yes sir, present sir, in the roll call. 'What kind of doctor will you be?' He pointed to himself. 'Arms and legs? Eyes and ears? Heart?' He laughed, as though she couldn't possibly be trusted with anyone's heart.

'Surgery,' she said.

He clapped his hands together. 'Vah. Perfect, brilliant. Dr Sheherezade Haque Maya, sewer of wounds, extractor of tumours.'

'How long does it take?' Ammoo asked.

'Stitcher of arteries.'

'Six years.'

'Maybe you'll be married then.'

Maya bristled. 'So? I can't be a doctor if I'm married?'

'I was just saying, a lot can change.'

'Where will you be, Ammoo,' Sohail said, 'in six years?'

She turned her face upwards, to where the moon would be if there were a moon. Blanketed in darkness, they couldn't see her expression when she said, 'Only God knows. All this time I was just wanting your safe return, that's all.'

'Bhaiya?' Maya asked Sohail.

'Six years? No way. I don't know.'

'Married?'

'Can't say. It seems like a rather optimistic thing to do.'

'You've always been an optimist.'

He sighed, sank back into his chair. 'I'm not sure any more.' They knew what he was thinking. Ever since they could remember, Sohail had been in love with the girl who lived in the house across the road. Her name was Silvi. When the war broke out, her mother had married her off to an army officer. The officer had been killed, and now Silvi was a widow; she was still next door, perhaps waiting for the day Sohail would return and knock on her door.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

'She's probably still in mourning,' Ammoo said.

And they left it at that.

That night on the porch, with her brother back from war, Maya believed their waiting days were over. She watched her mother spread her prayer mat, face west and thank God for his return, imagining the future rolling out in front of them, as flat and endless and predictable as the Delta. How wrong she had been.

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1984  
February

Maya couldn't sleep. She waited until the first breath of morning, pulled on her trainers, wrapped a shawl around her head and headed into the fog. In Rajshahi she had devised an early-morning route: around the pond, cutting across her neighbour's sesame field, circumventing the mosque, past the road that led into town, and back again at her door before the end of the dawn prayer. Now she decided to make for Dhanmondi Lake via the back roads. Shrouded in mist, asleep, the city resembled the one she remembered, the whitewashed houses, laundry dancing on balconies, the wide, hushed streets.

She circled Dhanmondi Lake, noting that the trees had aged and the path around the lake had narrowed. A clutch of boats were tied together, with a sign that said TEN TAKA ONE HOUR. She stopped, leaned against a tree, her breath whistling in her throat. She'd been running hard, harder than she had realised. She squatted by the tree for a few moments. The dark lake was the colour of limes. She pushed off again, aware now of the sounds that began the day, people leaning out of their windows and clearing their throats into the grass, the tinkle of rickshaws, shops winding open their shutters. She ran across Mirpur Road, now studded with a trickle of cars. Then she turned a corner, and found herself in front of the graveyard where her father was buried.

She looked around. The caretaker was absent, the gate unlocked. She slipped inside. The graveyard looked smaller, with buildings crowded around on all sides. What would it be like, she wondered, to have your window opening on to those small rectangles of death, watching flowers placed and prayers said and people crying, telling your children every night there were no such things as ghosts. Maybe they didn't care. The city was running out of space, she had read in the newspaper that arrived in Rajshahi a day late; it was growing fast and soon they would have to build further and further away. Perhaps this is why the Dictator had decreed that no more than five people could assemble together at once. Because the city was too crowded, it was important to spread out.

Visiting the graveyard was a family ritual. Her mother had kept her father's plot tidy all these years, a hedge around its perimeter, the stone polished. Maya didn't know what to do; she had never come on her own before. She remembered the speeches her mother had made in the presence of this grave, the questions she had asked, the apologies, the regrets. She squatted next to the gravestone and placed her palm on its surface. *Hello, absent father.*

When she returned to the bungalow, Maya found a group of women at the foot of the stairs. At first glance, they appeared to be the women from the night before, but when she approached she noticed their faces were uncovered, and they were speaking rapidly to one another in a foreign language. Maya asked in English if she could assist them. Without introducing themselves, they embraced her one by one and kissed her on both cheeks. In broken English, they explained that they were French missionaries. The Forashi Jamaat. Maya examined them closely. They wore soft leather shoes under their robes, light traces of varnish on their fingernails, and they had about them the air of tourists – hesitant, their fingers twisted around the handles of their suitcases and rucksacks. One of them was waving a tiny paper flag wrapped around a toothpick.

After a brief discussion, the women began to climb the narrow staircase one by one, ducking into the room at the top. Maya followed them up. Inside was a rectangular room that was crammed tight with people, the air spiced and heavy. A large woman at the front was speaking, her face exposed but circled in a black headscarf. She nodded at the new arrivals and continued her speech. 'Our Sister Rehnema', she said, referring to Silvi by her Islamic name, 'has recently passed away. May her soul rest in peace.'

'Ameen,' the women agreed.

'But her work must continue. The Wednesday taleem will go on. And the jamaat missions from our sisters and brothers in foreign lands will also continue. Remember, this life is but a drop in the ocean of time; the hereafter is eternal, every moment is an age, infinite.'

Nods and murmurs of assent travelled through the room.

'We welcome our sisters from France.' Now the others turned to the French women and greeted them enthusiastically, touching their faces and fingering the material of their burkhas. The French women mingled, opening their bags and distributing gifts. A box of chocolates was passed around. The woman giving the speech began to circulate, embracing the visitors, speaking to them in a mixture of Bengali, Arabic and sign language. Then she sat down again and began to recite a passage in Arabic, gesturing with plump, graceful hands.

I should slip out before anyone notices, Maya thought. She left the scene reluctantly, her curiosity unquenched. On her way down the stairs she crashed into a boy carrying a bucket. Water splashed her sandals and doused the bottom of her salwaar. 'Watch out, kid,' she said, brushing past him.

'Hello!' he called out. 'How are you madam?'

'Hello,' she said, turning around.

The boy looked her up and down and laughed out loud, revealing a mouth of misshapen teeth. He had unusually light eyes, almost grey, and a fine, delicate nose. But everything else about him suggested poverty: his too-short pyjamas, and the way he treated his lips, rubbing them roughly with the back of his hand.

'Why are you laughing?' Maya asked.

He pointed to her clothes, her trainers. 'You look funny.'

She was about to wave goodbye when it occurred to her that he might know where Sohail was. Who had they called him? Huzoor.

'Hey, you know where the Huzoor is?'

He shrugged. Then he opened his mouth and laughed again. 'But you can't see him. Pordah, don't you know?'

'Never mind about that. Is he here?'

The boy released the handle of his bucket. 'No, he's gone. Did you see the French ladies?' he said.

'Yes, I did.'

'Last month we had the Russian jamaat. I can talk in Russian.'

'What can you say?'

He fired off a few foreign-sounding words.

'What does it mean?'

'Peace,' he said, bending his knees and jumping high, 'peace shanti peace. I know it in Spanish too. And he uttered another string of gibberish.

'Do you have a book?'

He landed on his heels, rocked back and forth. 'No books. Only my head,' he said, pointing a finger at his temple.

'I have to go now,' Maya said.

'Goodbye. Khoda Hafez. Au revoir!' he called out. The French women must have been here before

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a flattened samosa. 'For you,' he said.

'No, you have it. I'm not hungry.'

---

He bit off one end of the triangle. 'Okay, ta-ta-bye-bye.'

Ammoo was in the kitchen. The servant Rehana had hired a few years ago was standing over the sink washing the pots from last night's dinner.

'Maya, this is Sufia.' Taller than Maya by at least six inches, the woman came close, smiled and placed a large hand on her shoulder.

'I know all about you,' Sufia said. She looked her up and down. Maya saw her thinking, so this is the daughter who won't come home. Looks like a peasant. Cheap salwaar-kameez, not even starched. Long hair, yes, but what skin, burned all dark by the sun. She kept smiling and patting her heavily.

'I was running,' Maya said. 'I went to the graveyard.'

Ammoo nodded. Then she came close and put her hand on Maya's cheek. 'I am so happy.'

Maya was happy too. The warmth of it spread through her. She wanted to say it, to tell her mother she was home now, that she was staying put, but she couldn't. It wouldn't be true. When Ammoo took the samosas out of the frying pan, she remembered Nazia's children, how they would save up their E money and buy samosas in town, sharing one, arguing over who had been given the bigger half.

'Where is Sohail?'

'He came to see me this morning,' Ammoo said. 'He asked me to tell you he sends his love.'

Love? Was that the word he had used? 'Did he say when he's coming back?'

'Not for a few weeks.'

Sufia began to grind turmeric with a giant stone shaped like a rolling pin. She passed the stone back and forth over the turmeric bulb, smashing it into a rough paste, and then went over it again and again until it turned smooth, darkening to the colour of crushed marigolds. 'Always coming and going,' she said, scooping the turmeric on to a plate and starting the whole process again with a handful of garlic. 'Coming and going.'

'It's like the United Nations up there. They weren't even speaking Bangla.'

'They come from all over the world,' Ammoo said, pouring more oil into her pan.

'Because of Sohail and Silvi?'

'That's what they do – they go from country to country, like missionaries.'

As a boy Sohail had attended a Jesuit school called St Gregory's. Maya had visited him once on Games Day. The priests were dressed in long linen gowns with strings tied around their waists. An egg-and-spoon race. These were the images that came to mind when Ammoo said missionaries, not the cinnamon-scented women upstairs.

Ammoo lifted something out of the frying pan. 'You want a samosa?'

The thought came rushing into Maya's mind. Grey eyes. About the right age. 'Was that Sohail's son I just saw upstairs?'

'If he was carrying a bucket, that's the one,' Sufia said, turning now to a pile of lavender-skinned onions.

'But he looks . . . Ammoo, did you see him?'

Ammoo put down her spatula and gathered the samosas on to a plate. 'Yes, beta, I know. I was going to talk to you about it this morning.'

'And?'

'And', Sufia interjected, 'there's nothing to be done. Boy runs around like a ruffian; that's how they want it.'

'Doesn't he go to school?'

'Sometimes they read the Book with him,' Ammoo said.

‘And you just let them?’

Rehana passed the plate of samosas to Maya. Maya saw a great weariness in her mother’s gesture. She saw that, whatever was happening upstairs, Ammoo had decided to ignore it. She was no longer the protective, panicky mother she had once been. If Sohail wanted to burn his books, if he wanted to throw away his furniture and unscrew the light sockets and piss into a hole in the ground, so be it. Once she had given everything for her children. Now she was in retreat from them, passively accepting whatever it was they chose to do: turning to God, running away, refusing to send their children to school. There was nothing of the struggle left in her any more.

It was then Maya realised the years had been far, far longer for her mother.

‘He’s not my son,’ Ammoo said simply. ‘And he’s not yours. We do what we can, but you have to remember that.’

Maya remembered something else. The tree. She fetched it from Sohail’s room and presented it to her mother. ‘From Rajshahi,’ she said simply, knowing Ammoo would realise at once it was a prized mango tree, and that, if it survived the winter, it would yield the tart, complicated fruit that could be found nowhere else.

His name was Muhammad Zaid bin Haque. A long name for a small boy. The next day Maya kept her eye on the staircase, and as soon as she caught the shape of him she rushed outside and stood in his way. ‘Zaid, remember me?’

He shook his head, then, seeing her face fall, he said, ‘Ha ha, I fooled you!’

‘So you’re a joker and a linguist?’

‘What’s a linguist?’

‘Someone who knows a lot of languages. I know some languages too. How about I teach you a few things?’

He held up the bucket, empty. ‘I have to go,’ he said, running to the tap.

Later, he knocked on the door. ‘Do you want to play Ludo?’ he said, slipping off his sandals and stepping into her room.

‘Okay. You have a board?’

He unfolded a sheet of paper. On it, someone had attempted a crude reproduction of a Ludo board, the square boxes crisscrossing each other and filled in with a blue pencil.

Zaid produced a handful of stones. ‘White ones are yours,’ he said. ‘Black are mine.’

‘Where did you get this?’

‘My ammoo made it for me.’

‘Really?’ Maya said, wondering if he wanted to talk about his mother, dead less than a week now. ‘You played Ludo with her?’

He nodded vigorously. ‘Every day.’

He produced a single die. ‘You roll first,’ Maya said.

Six. ‘Chokka!’ he announced, moving his stone across the sheet.

‘Zaid,’ Maya said, rolling a three, ‘do you go to school?’

‘No,’ he said, blowing on the dice. ‘But I’m going.’

‘When?’

‘Next year. Ammoo promised.’

‘Do you know you have to wear a uniform to school?’

‘Pant-shirt?’

‘Yes, pant-shirt.’

He grinned. ‘I know.’

‘Your father might not allow it.’

He rolled a four. 'I ate you!'

'I think you skipped one.'

---

'No, it was a four.' He moved the stone back. 'One-two-three-four. See?'

She was quite sure he had been five places behind. She let it go, losing to him quickly, and as soon as the game was over he folded the paper, tucked it under his arm, like a surveyor carrying his plans, and disappeared.

Zaid came and went. Maya sometimes found him squatting in the flowerbeds, picking insects out of the weeds. His Bangla was coarse, his consonants slurred. And his body was a mess. A rash that peppered his skin caused him to scratch and bleed. There was a line of small indentations on his forearm, dirt in every crease and ripple of him. He was six but looked about four, his wrists and ankles narrow, brittle. He wore identical, pale blue kurtas that were too small or too big, and a cap on his head, pushed back so that it circled his head like a crown.

\*

Maya was reluctant to leave the house. In the morning she jogged around the lake, and sometimes, when Ammoo asked, she walked over to the shop at the top of the road and bought a few things. She had written three letters to Nazia, pleading with her to stay in touch, offering to send money if she needed anything. She had tried to ring once, at the post office in town, leaving a message, saying she would ring back three days later at exactly the same hour. Three days later the man at the post office said he had spread the word, but no one had come to receive her telephone call.

She rang again the following week. The man was polite. He didn't know if Nazia had returned from the hospital. Maya remembered him: he was the one who had delivered her telegram.

'Are you well?' she asked him.

'Yes, apa, but my daughter is ill.'

Why did this give her pleasure? Was it that the villagers would get sick, now that she was not there to look after them? 'Will you tell her I rang?' she said, skipping over the catch in her voice.

'I will tell her, apa.'

'Thank you.'

'The joldugi will be sweet this year, apa.'

She would miss the pineapples, he was saying, and perhaps they would miss her.

\*

'Zaid, I'm going to the vegetable man. Do you want to come?'

'Wait,' he said, holding up his hand. He bounded up the stairs, returning a few minutes later with a crumpled piece of paper.

Maya took it from him. 'Let me see that.'

A shopping list from upstairs.

Okra, it said. Potatoes. One gourd.

They set off down the road. 'Where are your shoes?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno.' Skipping lightly over the hot road. She steered him towards the shade.

Turning a corner, they came upon a large building with open windows.

*Two twos are four, three twos are six, four twos are eight.*

Zaid, holding the shopping note, stood frozen.



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