

We Move



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Gurnaik Johal



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For my parents and grandparents

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Arrival

—

THE MAN WAS HERE ABOUT THE CAR. Chetan knew this day would come, but he'd allowed himself to hope. They both looked at the empty drive.

'My wife,' Chetan said, not sure when Aanshi would be back. 'We just needed a few things.'

It occurred to him to ask for proof that the man knew Divya. The man nodded and pulled a small picture out of his wallet. Chetan recognised the photo; he and Aanshi had seen it when stalking Divya on Facebook. It showed the couple on holiday, kissing in front of the pyramids. Chetan invited him in, and the man carefully put the photo back into his wallet.

Chetan took him into the kitchen, the front room a mess. The man asked questions about Divya that Chetan had imagined the police asking. When did she drop the car off? How long did she stay? Were there any signs that something was wrong?

But there'd been no investigation. She wasn't technically missing.

'We were at work when she arrived,' Chetan said, offering the man a seat. 'She posted the keys through the door. We'd agreed that I'd pick her up when she landed the next Sunday.'

Living this close to the airport, friends were always using their drive. Some relatives only seemed to visit for the parking space. 'Why don't you get a car?' they'd say, as if the idea had never crossed Chetan and Aanshi's minds. They got around fine as it was, riding the same bus in opposite directions for work. Cars only lost value. Plus, there was Aanshi's whole environment thing.

'Point being,' Chetan said to the man, 'it really wasn't a problem saying yes to another person, even if we'd never met.'

Divya was the sister of a good friend, and in Chetan's book, that meant something.

Chetan had driven Divya's car to the airport on the Sunday her return flight was due. He arrived at the short-stay pick up and

texted her. He waited long enough that he was ushered on. He made a loop and pulled up a second time. He phoned her but didn't get through. He was told to move again and resigned himself to paying for parking.

Inside Arrivals, he found her flight on the boards. It had landed in good time.

There was nowhere to sit. He looked around, matching the people waiting with the people arriving. She still hadn't answered any of his texts. He phoned her sister, Anu.

'Says it landed fine.'

'I don't get it.'

'Maybe she missed the flight?'

'But why wouldn't she tell you?'

'Her phone could have died. She might have lost it.'

He waited until the next flight from Athens landed and left. The final figure on the parking you wouldn't believe. He drove home in a right mood. When he arrived, Aanshi was on the phone to Anu. Divya's fiancé had received a message: 'I'm just not ready.'

Days passed, the car out front.

'Was probably cold feet.'

'Or she's run off with someone.'

'What if she's escaping something? Committed a crime.'

'Maybe she's an undercover spy.'

'What if she's been, like, kidnapped?'

They called Anu again to ask her if there was any news of her sister.

The next Saturday, they did their food shop. Normally, they'd take the bus, but the car was just sitting there. Aanshi drove and Chetan put the radio on. God, how long since they'd listened to the radio? At the supermarket, he picked one of the big trolleys. They walked around with the same list they brought every week. But they were no longer limited to what they could carry.

ARRIVAL

'Let's go wild.'

'I love you like this.'

They were home in record time.

They didn't touch the car again all week. What would happen if Divya turned up out of the blue and it was gone? They spent the evenings cooking lavish meals and ate in front of an old sitcom they were watching for the first time. They froze the leftovers, wanting something new each night.

On the weekend, they decided to go to IKEA, a nightmare on the bus. While Chetan hummed along to the radio, Aanshi went through the glove box. She put on a pair of glasses that must have been Divya's.

'They suit you.'

'I always wanted glasses. I used to lie at the opticians.'

He'd heard this one before.

'I don't know how they knew I was faking. It never worked.'

They got a space right by the entrance. Usually, they split up to cover more ground and met at the checkout, where they'd veto each other's choices. But this time they stuck together. He didn't even need to persuade her on the plates. And when she found an office chair that was just perfect, he didn't look at the price. They loaded everything into the car and assembled it all that night.

Another week passed with no news of Divya. Aanshi settled on the story that she'd found someone. Chetan on the story that she was running from something.

He beat the dust off their picnic blanket and put it in the boot. She wanted to drive. He blew on the coffee until it was the temperature she liked, and then held the thermos out for her to take sips on quieter stretches. They sang along to whatever was playing on Magic.

They'd been meaning to visit Windsor for years. Someone took

their photo in front of the castle. They wandered around a park and cleared a patch of grass for their picnic.

‘Did you ever play conkers as a kid?’ Aanshi said, putting a few in her bag. ‘I’ll show you when we get home. We used to have these huge tournaments at school.’

‘You’ve never told me that before.’

‘I wasn’t any good. We started putting bets on the games and they got banned.’

She rested on his chest after lunch and they stayed like that, doing nothing. It was calming to feel the weight of her on him, this whole other human.

That week, he drove her to the care home in the mornings and picked her up when school finished. In the car, they discussed their students and patients. Chetan was almost grateful for the traffic.

They made plans to drive down to the coast. They were supposed to leave tomorrow. But here was the man about the car. The man who was supposed to marry Divya.

Chetan didn’t know what to say. He listened to the TV playing in the front room. He made tea and arranged some biscuits on one of the new plates, which felt a ridiculous thing to do as soon as he put it down on the table.

‘We filled up the tank,’ he said.

He needed somewhere to look and turned to the window, setting his eyes on the two conkers from Windsor hardening in the sun. They hadn’t got around to playing with them yet. He thought he saw the car pass outside and imagined Aanshi deciding to drive away. He imagined a sitcom in which he and the man formed an unlikely friendship – the two of them, bonded by abandonment, helping one another rebuild their lives.

Aanshi pulled up. She turned the engine off but stayed in the driver’s seat, hands on the wheel. How rare to see her without her seeing him, to get a glimpse of the person she was beyond him.

ARRIVAL

'Here she is,' he said, finally.

It wasn't until the man stepped outside that Aanshi moved. She opened her door, confused about the stranger who had emerged from their house. The man explained, and she fidgeted with the keyring. She handed him the keys, apologising, and joined Chetan in the doorway. They watched the car go. He didn't ask her why she wasn't carrying anything, why there were no shopping bags. He didn't need to know.

She took some leftovers from the freezer to thaw. Chetan ate a biscuit, ruining his little pattern. There was laughter from the other room. He turned off the TV.

'What was he like?' she said.

'Nice enough. Not much of a talker.'

'Wonder what he did to make her leave.'

'If we're being honest, he was punching.'

'Coming from you.'

He drew her in, laughing. 'If you left me, where would you go?'

'Nowhere far. Maybe Mum's.'

'The whole world open to you and you go to your mother's?'

'I'd be sad. And you?'

'Somewhere with a beach. A desert island would be perfect. I think if I left you, I'd want to leave everything.'

She sat at the computer and put some music on. They paid for train tickets to Brighton – you wouldn't believe how much – and then sorted dinner. The kuzhambu they made last week came out in a slab in the pan. They stood together as it cooked, watching it become liquid again.

'Tomorrow,' she said, 'I want you to act like you've just met me.'

'Like I'm sixteen?'

'I want you to ask if the seat next to me is free and then work up the courage to talk to me. You'll say that you've never been to Brighton, and I'll agree to show you around. You'll buy lunch and I'll buy dinner.'

WE MOVE

'Will I be myself?'

She looked at him, a whole other person.

'Yes.'

The Red River



If I were a penman and could write a fine hand
I'd write my love a letter from this foreign land
I'd send it by the water just for to let her know
That I think of Pretty Saro wherever I go.

'Pretty Saro' (Roud 417)

21 October 1972

'CHAK LA!' ONKAR SAID, slamming down his winning hand.

'Quiet, will you,' Balwant said, picking up his cards. 'If the landlady hears.'

It had been a decade since they had last played, back in Jalandhar when Onkar was a boy and Balwant, his oldest cousin, was leaving for England. Now here they were in London, reunited, and Onkar was three games up.

Balwant shuffled. He'd replaced two missing cards with carefully torn pieces of paper, seven of hearts, queen of clubs.

'I'm out of practice,' Balwant said. 'If this was Solitaire, different story.'

Onkar lit a cigarette on the tealight – their one small gesture to Diwali. He leant out of the window to smoke, taking in the view. Balwant had described the area in his letters, detailed the shops and the people and the clothes and the music and the food and the buildings. But the reality didn't match the vivid pictures his words had conjured; it wasn't that Balwant was lying or exaggerating, there was just so much space between all those things. All Onkar could see now was an empty street. He'd read in *The Times* that most of the universe and almost everything in it was made up of emptiness, that you could condense the human race to the size of a sugar cube. A light turned on in a room across the road. Letting out a long breath, he watched a man walk into the room, pick up something and walk out, leaving the light on.

He put his cigarette out – the seventh one he'd ever smoked. He wondered at what point he'd lose count. When he landed yesterday, several oceans between him and his mother, the first thing he did was buy a pack of cigarettes. He picked the brand at random and tucked the little box into his rolled-up t-shirt sleeve, like he'd seen in the movies.

Back at the table, he ran his hand over the wood. This was where Balwant had written all those letters. Most of the time they were to his wife, his mother, or his son, but there would often be little asides for Onkar. Like a few months ago, he'd asked if Onkar could take his son to the cinema for him to watch a film he'd seen recently in Southall. The boy had babbled away the whole walk home, talking about his dad as if he were some god, invisible, all-powerful. Onkar got engaged to Renu a few weeks later, and it was decided that he'd move to England before the wedding. He made a mental pact not to turn out like his old cousin; he'd be with Renu soon.

Balwant dealt one final round and they played in silence. Onkar won and Balwant went to sleep. Left at the table, Onkar tried to write his first letter to Renu. What to say? Maybe he should wait until he had real news, until he'd gone to the Labour Exchange and got a job. He started to write a sentence and looked up. He stared at the tealight, thinking back to the first time they met, at Renu's house, and how the power had cut out. He caught her eye in the dark while she went looking for candles, a slight smile neither of their parents would see. Once the candles were lit, their parents talked. He and Renu both picked the Parle-G over the barfi. She took the smallest bites. She fiddled with her kara, clockwise and anti-clockwise, and it reflected shapes onto the dark ceiling.

He rolled up his failed letter and lit the edge of the paper on the dying tealight. The paper burned for a few seconds before he blew it out. Then there was a shrieking sound. Balwant sprang out of bed.

'The bloody alarm! Out of my way, will you.'

He rushed over to a plastic box in the ceiling and waved his

hands underneath it. Onkar could hear movement downstairs, the landlady. He opened and closed the window over and over, so that, to someone passing outside who might happen to look up, it looked like a small struggling wing.

4 March 1978

Fifteen minutes after she'd landed, it still felt like Renu was gaining height. Her stomach was agitated with excitement. Onkar was probably already here, somewhere in the airport. He'd written that he'd be wearing a red tie. She wondered what they'd talk about first – the flight? She tried to think of something intelligent to say about it. Onkar was an intelligent man – when her family had visited his, there were two different newspapers on the table. She imagined him reading the news in the mornings, saying intelligent things about politicians. On the plane, she'd read the paper three times, trying to memorise different stories in case they came up in conversation. She could talk about the Internal Settlement in Rhodesia. She could talk about the plans for the Panama Canal. The world seemed so big in the papers, but it felt a lot smaller now. Renu was here, on the other side of the planet, in the same amount of time it had taken her masi to travel from her pindh to Jalandhar to see her off. Masi had brought a little dog-eared book about marriage that she showed to Renu when her mother left the room. There were diagrams of what to do at night. Renu couldn't help but laugh.

'I'm serious,' Masi said. 'You do this one and you'll have a long, happy marriage.'

'Masi!'

'Especially with all this time. It's important.'

Her mother returned and Masi hid the book.

Renu wondered if she should hug Onkar when she saw him, or if they needed to wait until after the wedding.

The officer finally called her forward.

'I'm here to get married,' Renu said, when he asked about her plans.

'Look a little old to be getting married,' the officer said. 'When's the wedding?'

'Saturday.'

'I'm going to need you to wait here.'

He left his booth, and she checked her hair in her reflection. Looking down, she spotted a split end. Concentrating, she pulled on both strands until one broke off.

The officer returned with a man in a white coat. 'To ensure the validity of your story, we'll need to undergo some tests.'

Renu wasn't sure of validity or undergo. 'I'm sorry, I don't exactly understand.'

'Course not.' He sighed. 'Look, we get all sorts calling themselves fiancées. So, there's a procedure. Few medical tests. No time at all.'

'Medical tests?' she said. She looked at the man in the white coat. 'With him?'

15 August 1976

The bed was Onkar's from seven. Balwant and Sanjeev had it during the day, both working nights. He showered, ate his porridge and showered again. He covered himself in soap three times. Under the water, he thought of Renu. He imagined her in the shower. He couldn't fully remember her face; it had been so long. He waited for his erection to die down before heading to the bedroom.

The heat was unbearable. Sanjeev and Balwant were sleeping without the duvet, and they seemed oddly exposed on the bed – Sanjeev, so tall, curled up like a child, Balwant with both his hands on his stomach. Onkar boasted about getting the bed to himself, but sometimes seeing them together, he was almost jealous.

Balwant was losing his hair, always leaving grey strands on the pillow that Onkar would have to shake off. Sanjeev's hair had

already grown out into an unkempt mess. When he'd arrived a few months ago, Balwant and Onkar had cut it for him, not wanting him to go through the embarrassment of the barber's. It was easier this way, they'd explained, having heard stories about the warehouse where he'd landed a job.

'Come on. Up.'

'Ugh,' Balwant said. 'You stink.' Sanjeev woke. 'Seriously, you smell disgusting.'

Balwant made caps for soap dispensers. Sanjeev loaded lorries. Onkar worked the gutting spot at a slaughterhouse. This morning, he'd squeezed the unformed shit out of the intestines of not one but two pigs.

'I've showered twice.'

'And you make the whole room smell.'

'It can't go on.'

'If either of you can get me a job, I'll happily quit.'

'I could try and get you some industrial-grade soap.'

'You could start wearing perfume.'

'You two will be late for work.'

They wouldn't get up. Onkar lay down between them and they jumped out.

He tried and failed to go to sleep. The moment from last week played and replayed in his mind. He'd sliced a cow open and a baby fell out. Onkar had a reputation with the foreman for not losing his nerve like the others and didn't want to squander it. He'd picked up the foetus – it was so light – and tossed it into the discard skip. It had eyes. He tried to think of something else, and focussed on the idea of Renu, which was increasingly abstract, a play of light on the ceiling. It had been a while since he'd written to her.

He woke to the smell of incense. That day, he had to cover for someone who'd quit, and spent hours slitting throats, blood spraying up the tiled walls and running in rivers across the floor, where it bloated the old drains. He timed himself while chopping, trying

to calculate the amount of money he was earning per head by dividing his wage packet. He thought about the house prices he'd circled in the paper. How many bricks made a house? He took a guess, calculated the number of heads per brick. He kept going, head after head, brick after brick, comforted in the knowledge that, with each passing moment, he was a little closer to Renu.

4 March 1978

The man in the white coat smiled. There was a spot of dried blood on his chin. His breath was heavy. Renu always expected doctors to be healthy. They arrived in a small medical room.

'What do you call them, are they trousers?' he said. 'Can you take them off?'

'Excuse me?'

He did a lot of talking. Renu didn't know every word. It felt like they might not let her through, might send her back. She thought of Onkar. She thought of Saturday. She took off her clothes.

After putting on a pair of blue gloves, he squeezed something onto a bit of cotton and glanced at her. She turned all her energy into holding her body perfectly still. She thought of Rhodesia. She thought of Panama. She didn't blink. She didn't make a sound.

The doctor inserted two fingers into her vagina.

She watched a bead of sweat slowly run down his neck. Her fists were clenched so tight that, when it was finally over, and she opened them, she could see the indents her nails had left, all in a line on her palm, like waves. She had to take her bra off for an X-ray. She lay on a bed and the machine moved over her. It was another test for signs of previous pregnancy.

Finally, she could put her clothes back on. He left her in the room and got the results that would determine whether or not she was a virgin. She wondered if the machine could tell him that she'd kissed another man two years ago. It had been months without a letter from Onkar, and she'd thought he'd abandoned her. She

imagined him with a British wife in a big house, laughing at the idea of her waiting miles away. It was the man who delivered her father's medication. She'd seen him every fortnight for years. Spending all day tending to her deteriorating father, the sight of the man, smiling at the door – she was only human. In that moment of weakness, she didn't think about Onkar, didn't even care that the man was from a different caste, there was only the space between them, closing in. She imagined the doctor ringing Onkar to tell him she was unfaithful. She'd be returned, arriving in that empty house a disgrace.

The doctor opened the door and took her back to the officer.

'She's good to go.'

'You've got three months. Understand?'

She walked off, joining the crowd heading down the hall. Seeing the exit, she stopped. People continued passing around her. She fixed her chunni, brushed off a fallen strand of hair from her shoulder. She picked up her suitcase and stood as straight as she could before walking into Arrivals. She held her head up and began to smile, because, with every step she took, she was a step closer to Onkar.

*

Onkar didn't know what to do with his hands. He should have left the flowers at home. He'd bought a vase at the market, and new sheets, and a little ceramic dolphin. She'd told him, in one of her letters, how she thought she'd spotted a river dolphin in the Sutlej at sunset, but when she got a little closer, she realised it was a bin bag.

In her most recent letter, she sent him a shopping list – she wanted to cook for him when she arrived. He'd gone to Fruits of Paradise and stocked up. It was the biggest shop he'd done in years. He'd dropped the food off at his house – *his house!* – and went down the Broadway with Balwant and Sanjeev to buy a suit. It was only when Onkar took his clothes off to get measured and saw himself in the dusty mirror that he realised how much weight he'd lost.

He tried to put his left hand in his pocket, but it was still sewn shut. He broke the seam open with his fingers, realising he should have cut his nails. It was clear that everyone from the Indian flight had already come out, there were only goreh walking through the gates. Where was she? She said in her letter that she'd be wearing a yellow chunni. She might have already passed through, neither of them recognising one another. Maybe she was waiting outside at the taxi rank thinking he'd stood her up. He thought about going to look but was scared that in the minute he was gone, she'd arrive. So he paced around the hall, glancing up at the pigeons in the rafters. He counted the number of people coming through the gate. They had likely come off the flight from Canada. He estimated the number of miles it was to Toronto, and then multiplied that by the number of passengers. He tried to estimate the square footage of the room. The number of builders who had worked on the site times the wage they likely earned times the time it took to build.

He spotted a glimpse of yellow in the crowd. Renu. He tightened his grip on the flowers. They walked towards each other. He stretched out his arms, overcome with joy, and held her tight. He buried his face into her shoulder; there was a slight chemical smell of what must have been shampoo. He tried to make sure he didn't cry. When her grip on him loosened, he finally let go, and they laughed. He gave her the flowers and picked up her suitcase. He wanted to hold her hand but didn't want to embarrass her. They walked to the bus stop, and he asked about the flight.

'I read this really interesting piece about the situation in Rhodesia.'

'Oh really,' he said, trying to remember where Rhodesia was. 'Crazy times we're living in.'

They got on the bus, and she continued talking in Punjabi. He could feel people staring.

'Look,' he said, gently. 'It's better that we're not so loud.'

'Oh.'

'It's not you. It's just here people like quiet.'

She looked out the window. He listened to people chatting behind them. After a few stops, he opened his palm for her to hold.

24 May 1980

'Heads for bride,' Renu said. 'Tails for groom.'

Renu flipped the coin as Onkar parked the car. 'Okay, we're on the girl's side.'

They came up with their characters. Today, Renu had three children and Onkar owned a car dealership. She was an heiress, distantly related to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and he had studied at Oxford University. Today, they'd been married eight years.

It was the third wedding they'd gate-crashed together, but the thrill was yet to wear off. They walked right in.

The tables were covered with paper sheets, like hospital beds. The family was clearly cheap: off-brand mixers and a DJ instead of a band. They took the table by the toilets, hoping they'd be left alone. Renu looked around for any customers that might recognise them. Onkar poured her a drink when no one was looking, and she quickly filled the glass with cola. She rested her foot against his. Unfortunately, a family joined them, hell-bent on talking. Renu sipped away as they got Onkar going.

When the starters arrived, they were talking about Thatcher. Which meant a conversation about unemployment, which meant Onkar gesturing with a half-eaten spring roll.

'They don't have jobs because they don't want to work.'

'It's lazy people, this country.'

The man started talking about 'the Pakistanis and the Blacks'. Renu watched Onkar nod, finishing his spring roll and starting another. He never stopped eating. Renu took a sip, thinking about how, when there were Black people in their butcher shop, Onkar would appear and stand with her by the till. Normally, you couldn't get him out of the back. Renu would be the one to go back and forth, 'Sirloin, darling. Lamb chop, darling.'

‘They come here and want everything on a plate.’

The happy couple finally arrived, and everyone stood and clapped. The music began and Renu adjusted her chair to watch the dance floor.

Onkar and the man went to the open bar. The man’s wife started to talk.

‘Do you have any of your own?’ she asked, nodding at her kids, playing with their food.

‘Three,’ Renu lied. ‘Two boys and a girl.’

‘Are they here?’

‘I left them with their nanny,’ she said, using her telephone voice. ‘It’s nice for me and my husband to get a night out once in a while.’

The dholki arrived, cutting their conversation off, and the bhangra began. Only a few women went up to dance, and they were split from the men as if they were at the Gurdwara. Onkar reappeared, offering his hand.

‘Dance, darling?’

She could feel people watching and she loved it. It didn’t matter at all what they thought, no one here knew them. They were the only couple on the dance floor. She held Onkar’s hand and he twirled her around. The disco ball was taped in place. Christmas tinsel, foil streamers. It was a scene straight from her daydreams, those long years of waiting, Onkar turning from reality to fiction in her head. And now here they were, together, and nothing felt real. Look at him, arms outstretched, grinning in multi-coloured light. See him move.

They were escorted out by the bride’s brothers and found their car blocked in on all sides. They were in hysterics. Onkar managed to fit his arm through the half-open window to reach his cigarettes.

He carried her heels while they walked home. There was a specific thrill in being barefoot on the pavement. It felt like she was walking through Southall naked.

4 March 1978

Arriving at the house, their house, Onkar gave Renu the keys.

‘I want you to do it.’

She unlocked the door for the first time.

‘Our door,’ he said. ‘Our hallway, our kitchen.’

He watched her run her hands over different surfaces. There was a burn mark on one of her knuckles he hadn’t noticed before, or hadn’t heard about, or had forgotten. The ingredients she’d requested were out on the counter.

‘You don’t have to start straight away,’ he said, as she looked through the drawers for a knife. ‘Let’s relax.’

‘It’s okay. You need a good meal,’ she said. So she’d noticed. His skinniness probably repulsed her. ‘I’ve wanted to do this a long time,’ she said.

She started to cut the onions and he took the chicken out of the fridge. She gave him a look.

How had he forgotten her vegetarian parents? ‘We don’t have to,’ he said.

‘No, if you eat it, I’ll eat it. You have it often?’

He hadn’t eaten any meat for months, saving up for the house and the flight. When he’d realised how much he could save, he started to fast every other day, almost enjoying the feeling of hunger, of putting something bigger before him. It made him feel like he was in control. He’d quit smoking. Hadn’t had a drop in over a year. He wasn’t going to be like the others, lazy, going nowhere, ending the week with as much as they started with. They’d come to the slaughterhouse smelling of alcohol, of money down the drain. But today, he’d wanted something to mark the occasion. And in his new suit, he’d gone down to his friend’s butcher shop and asked for their best bird.

She tentatively took her first bite.

‘You won’t burst into flames.’

They ate in silence and listened to the neighbours argue. The

walls were thin. Onkar had got so used to being able to prepare exactly what he was going to say to her in their letters that it was hard to spark a spontaneous conversation. He kept editing himself in his head and ended up saying nothing.

She wouldn't let him near the washing up. He wanted to touch her, to wipe away the suds that had splashed up her forearm. She'd taken off her kara to do the dishes, and he picked it up, spinning it round and round.

She took the longest shower. Onkar sat by the bathroom door, listening to the sound of the water. He calculated how many hours were left until 11.30 on Saturday morning, when they were booked in at the Gurdwara. How many minutes, how many seconds. The water finally stopped and he got up. Downstairs, he paced the kitchen, listening to the sounds of her above. He washed his face with cold water, wiped down the counter. The place was spotless. Balwant and Sanjeev had come over last night and the three of them had cleaned and cleaned.

'So, how will it work?' Sanjeev had said, on his knees, polishing the floor. 'You know, will you wait?'

'Quiet,' Balwant said.

'Of course. It's only a few days. It's been years, I can do a few days.'

'Have you done it before?' Sanjeev said.

Onkar squeezed the water out of a cloth.

'You talk too much,' Balwant said. 'Pass the bleach, will you.'

Renu came down, fully dressed.

'Tea?' she said.

Her hair was an even deeper black wet. It darkened the colour of her chunni around her shoulders.

'Actually,' he said, after a pause. 'I'm tired.'

'Oh.'

'You must be, too. With time difference.'

She was very still. He took her hand and led her upstairs. He could feel her bones. He had a sudden thought that if he tried, he could break them just by squeezing.

She sat on the edge of the bed and didn't move. He opened the window and leant against the sill, the evening breeze cooling his back. She was looking down at her lap.

Weren't they, essentially, already married? For all intents and purposes, they'd been husband and wife for years.

She finally met his gaze. She looked cold.

He shut the window and sat next to her. He slowly put his arm around her, and she relaxed, resting her damp head on his shoulder. They lowered back onto the bed. He wished he'd taken off his suit jacket, but he didn't want to move – she seemed so calm. Her breathing steadied and he assumed she'd fallen asleep. He looked up at the light that was still on, that would still be on when he woke in the morning, in his new suit and his polished shoes.

23 October 1984

The day before Renu and Onkar opened their second butcher shop, they went to the Gurdwara. Karan sat with his dad but walked over to join Renu after a few minutes. He played with the end of her chunni. His jooora was already askew. He was almost four.

'Shush,' she said, fixing his hair. 'Go and sit with your dad.'

'Why's the man shouting?' he whispered, looking up at the front.

There was a series of speeches about the worsening situation in Delhi. They were talking about Operation Blue Star. They were talking about Khalistan. Normally on Diwali, there was just kirtan. But since the summer, everything was politics.

'Sit with your dad.'

Renu had been hoping that they could just do a quick matha tekna and get out. There was so much work still to do for the opening. But the speeches continued, and she could see Onkar

across the hall, hands crossed on his large stomach, getting riled up with the rest of them. When she started to listen herself, she felt a burning anger. She wished there was some way to act, something she could do.

The speech ended and the speaker took a deep breath before roaring out a jaikara: 'Jo bole so nihal!' *Whoever utters shall be fulfilled.*

The entire congregation shouted back. 'Sat sri akal!' *God is truth.*

'Jo bole so nihal!'

Renu screamed back with everyone else. 'Sat sri akal!'

'Jo bole so nihal!'

She thought of the images they'd seen on the news. 'Sat sri akal!'

'Jo bole so nihal!'

Turning off the TV when Karan was in the room. 'Sat sri akal!'

Someone in the crowd did the next jaikara. 'Jo bole so nihal!'

The letter her mother sent. 'Sat sri akal!'

Someone else took the lead. 'Jo bole so nihal!'

It was freeing to make so much noise. 'Sat sri akal!'

Renu had never thought of doing a jaikara before, but something came over her that day. She raised her fist in the air and shouted, the loudest her voice had risen since she'd arrived in London all those years ago. 'Jo bole so nihal!' she screamed.

The entire Gurdwara answered her. 'Sat sri akal!'

Onkar's friends came over for dinner and brought their kids. Renu, in the kitchen with the other women, watched the children play in the garden, an extra sugar cube in her tea. The men disappeared for a while and returned with fireworks. Celebrating didn't feel right to Renu, with everything going on, but Karan was so excited. They all headed out to the garden. The men lit rocket after rocket, each explosion a shock. Renu could hear the kids in the neighbouring gardens shouting. They were one of the earliest households in the area to get started, but after a few minutes, you could hear and see other fireworks going off across Southall. Smoke filled the night air, and the sound of fire multiplied. Bright reds and yellows. Karan

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wanted to light one, and Renu took him to the end of the garden and placed the rocket in the pile they'd made with surplus bricks. Holding his blue gloves, she helped him light the match. She held it to the fuse, and it took, starting to fizz. She picked him up and ran back towards the house. They heard the hiss and then the high-pitched squeal, looking up to see the most glorious display of light. Karan screamed; his voice drowned out by the explosion. How happy she was that he could be so loud, that he would never know quietness like she had.