



Hard Country

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WHEN A PIPE BOMB sheared open a crowded street and killed their father, Abbas flew to Pakistan and Tariq stayed home. Though he didn't admit it, Tariq was scared of Pakistan and what he saw on the news, so he skipped the flight his brother already paid for. When Abbas landed in Islamabad, he called and said he understood. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I told everybody that you're sick. Stomach virus. In the hospital shaking like a shitting dog."

Abbas was caretaker; Tariq was fuckup. He wasn't working. Not at the moment anyway. It hadn't been too long since his last paycheck, but he was stacking up so many jobs on his resume that he couldn't keep straight which was last. From week to week it was something different: catering, landscaping, bartending. For a few months he was on a fence construction crew. The jobs were rarely scheduled, which suited Tariq. Instead, they found a lot of work driving the work trucks around neighborhoods in and around Hamtramck or closer south towards Detroit and the residential streets in the Cass Corridor. They scouted homes with fences badly in need of repair. Most of their money they made cleaning and pressure washing fences, reinforcing, fixing, or replacing damaged rails, repairing leans, excavating buried rot. After some time, Tariq was promoted to Crew Leader. Two weeks later when customers complained that Tariq was raising prices over the company quote, he was fired. There was no telling how much was stolen, so they let him keep what he skimmed, but he was blacklisted from working construction in the city. His

boss heavily implied that if he ever came around, Tariq's knees would meet the business end of a nail gun.

"There was a political rally that day," Abbas said. "Where Dad was. Why would he have been there?"

Tariq's apartment was thick with heat, and the air conditioner wasn't working anymore—air ran through the vents for a few minutes before puffing out an unidentified rancid odor. He unclasped the window locks and lifted the window, hoping for a breeze to kick in. "Mom said he was shopping. Picking up dinner."

"When he saw how busy it was, he could have gone somewhere else." He sorted through the mail on the counter, discarding bill notices in the wastebasket and saving the credit card offers to go through later.

"Anyway, it's fucking hot over here," Abbas said. "Hotter than a well digger's ass. Something wrong with the weather over here. No wonder people go crazy and blow up street markets. Their brains must be melting. Seriously, Tariq, somebody told me it was a-hundred-and-fifteen degrees yesterday."

"How are the girls?" Tariq was glad his brother changed the subject, and he hoped by switching the track of their conversation again, they would quit talking about Dad. He wondered if Dad was disappointed that he wasn't there.

"Who knows? I never want to leave the house."

Over the next few days, Tariq and Abbas traded e-mails. Abbas sent pictures and relayed messages from uncles, aunts, and cousins who were disappointed he couldn't make it. Folded into their regret was barely concealed accusation—*Your dad wished to be buried by his two sons... If you can't get out of work, maybe you will have time for us if we come visit you... We're all so sad you couldn't choose to be here.* Some of the hostility, Tariq assumed came through only in translation. When the family called, the phone passed from one to another, their conversations usually lighthearted, full of exuberant exclamations that they loved and missed him. The speaker on Tariq's phone sputtered with their hollering like rapid gunfire.

His tone took on the flavor of obsession. He went to the house where Dad had been living and upstairs, he found boxes of Dad's belongings. Old journals, mostly in Urdu but a few faded passages in English were legible enough toward

the back. In the most recent diaries, Dad wrote about the day-to-day. Abbas found crossed out grocery and *to-do* lists and descriptions of the evening walks he went on with his brother. “There isn’t a lot here,” Abbas said. “He doesn’t say much except for how the weather is turning cooler and how different the streets look.”

“Not all diaries have clues.” Tariq wanted to say that they didn’t know Dad then, and wouldn’t know him anymore, but he knew his brother was hurting. Even after the worst kinds of things pass, the reverberations keep wounds from healing, so Tariq listened to him read through the accounts of days leading up to the marketplace explosion. Abbas hoped to exhume from the text some detail that would have on that day placed their dad near that rally.

It was a good question; their dad wasn’t one for crowds, especially of the political sort. Like most expats, he had soured on the corrupted politicians that fed off of Pakistan. Abbas’s correspondence only briefly flagged from his investigation to ask Tariq how things were going for him before swinging back toward the explosion, and soon enough, Abbas wound himself into a quiet and inspective knot. The last message Tariq received ended “Brother, Pakistan is a hard country.” Radio silence since. When Abbas failed to show up to any more family dinners, Tariq sold a few possessions and purchased a plane ticket for Pakistan.

Tariq Raza didn’t know Pakistan. He went from shop to shop in Jinnah Super Market unfolding and pointing to a piece of paper, asking if anybody had seen the man in the picture. By the time he reached the last store in the block of commercial units he’d been crisscrossing for the past hour, the picture was worn along the creases. He went to the counter and signaled to the man behind the counter. He didn’t know Urdu, so he spoke in English save a few peppered keywords and phrases.

“Seen him? This man? Shareef aadmi. Bhai,” he said, pointing to the picture and back toward himself. “Bhai. My brother.” He wasn’t following. A mother—her two boys pinching her shirtwaist to hold on—recognized Tariq as an outsider. She took the picture from his hands.

“Twins,” she said. “You’re looking for your brother.”

Tariq nodded to her. Outside, families shopping or stopping for dinner

passed by the storefront window, sidestepping the teenagers who congregated in markets like this across the city away from their disapproving parents in order to mingle and pair off boy with girl until the remaining were abandoned and left to make their own way either as a group or alone. Tariq remembered nights like these back in Detroit, meeting girls for coney and passing flasks of whiskey or rum poached from their parents' bar carts. Even then, Tariq's brother wasn't swept up in the energy and hormones of those nights in the city. Abbas concerned himself with more stately matters than when he was going to next get laid.

Meanwhile, the woman assisting Tariq spoke voluminously, and although Tariq could not follow a word of it, he imagined her crafting a story of her own, embellishing in order to make a point. If it worked, he didn't mind. When she finished, she wiped spittle from the corner of her mouth and put the same hand to Tariq's back, guiding him forward.

"So he can see you, dear."

The store man looked to Tariq's face, studied him, and Tariq waited to see the mystery vanish and memory replace it—neurons firing, recalling a living image from a day or two previous. When he shook his head, Tariq moved to the next block of shops and the next and the next.

Wandering through Jinnah Supermarket, Tariq heard the echoing takatak song of cleavers dicing meat and onions and chilies on steel pans as large as dinner tables. Plump older women, seasoned from decades of managing the house and small armies of servants, cooks, drivers, and maids all with myriad excuses to take a few days off from their duties, haggled aggressively with tailors over the price of cloth bolts. They spit prices at each other, taking offense at the gall of one to lowball the other, until they landed on something that appeased both their pocketbooks. Tariq's cousin and guide to the country, Rehan, pushed his way against the flow of foot traffic toward Tariq, his arms raised in futility.

"Nothing," he said. "Most people asked if I meant you, the ghora with the paper picture who can't speak Urdu."

"Did you leave a picture with the police?" Tariq asked.

"Yaar, you don't want them finding Abbas. They can smell American. Smells like money. Would have been better to butcher that American accent from both of you the moment you learned English. Taught you Urdu like good Pakistani

butchas, but your father...inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un. Listen, the police would throw him in the ground and up the reward, blaming terrorist cells. Better off not telling them anything.”

Like a badly sticking engine valve, this point of contention kept threatening to muck up their search. Tariq knew better than to keep pressing the issue, but every few days, he brought it up again. The police were organized and could send out a report or fax the picture to stations around the country. Most of his family thought it best not to involve them or anybody who worked for the government. In Pakistan, suspicion followed around anybody in power especially now that reports were surfacing that a rival political party was responsible for the attack. The simultaneity of Pakistan's dependence on deeply rooted institutions of power and the people's natural resistance to anybody associated with them sapped the energy from Tariq if he thought about it for too long. It added to his growing hopelessness of ever finding his brother. Whenever Tariq talked with his family about the police, it spurred rants from both older and younger generations—“Those bhanchood with batons,” they shouted—airing out a dirty laundry list of their crimes from arresting women on trumped up charges of infidelity, rigging elections, pulling judges out of courts, stealing from the poor until devolving, as it often did, for some reason into a tirade against the United States. Given long enough thread, everything wound back up in the lap of Uncle Sam. When talk around the dinner table turned this corner, Tariq edged away from his seat, feeling with certainty that his white skin was glowing as though he'd turned radioactive, a target for blame.

“We'll move to the next market,” Rehan said. “On our way back, we'll stop at the mithai and flower shops.”

They found Rehan's motorcycle parked with a dozen identical red and black Honda CBX bikes, testing each one with a key until it turned and the headlight clicked on. Tariq was suspicious of the little bikes at first and worried about its weight capacity until he saw men transporting entire families on them, the kids packed onto the front nearest to the handlebars, nestled against their father's chest. If there were more kids who couldn't fit on the front, they saddled onto the back, wrapping their arms around him like a seatbelt. The wife rode on the back not holding on to anyone or anything. She simply was. These motorcycle families weaved in and out of traffic, went over sidewalks at their convenience, and avoided every traffic rule that Tariq had ever known. It was

the quickest and cheapest way of transportation if you didn't count the flying coffins, the large public buses decorated in calligraphy, bright floral design, and reflective mirrors that roared down roads like motorized Chinese New Year Dragons. Once or twice a week, one tipped over and killed a handful of passengers who had been packed on top of each other like lunchmeat. The drivers were notoriously reckless, relishing sharp turns at high speeds. Everybody in Pakistan, it seemed, was hurtling toward ruin.

The next market was more of the same. Shopkeepers shook their heads. Tariq and Rehan moved on. When it got late, they crossed the street for food at a roadside stand and watched the stores close behind metal gates and padlocks. The air was cool and dry at night compared to the hot stickiness of the daytime. This must have been the same turning weather that Tariq's father noted in his diaries when he went on his evening walks. Around them, night-blooming jasmine opened its petals, and the breeze carried the perfume around them. It was peaceful for a time as they ate nihari and marrowbones with warm roti. After drinking what was left of the stew, Tariq looked for a trashcan. Rehan took the paper bowl and plate from his hand, crumpled and tossed them into the street.

"The smaller places will be closed. Flower shops don't stay open this late unless somebody is dead," he said. "We'll start again tomorrow."

When they came home, Rehan's sons were waiting at the door. Rehan scooped them up, one in each arm, and carried them to the living room. Since arriving in Pakistan, Tariq had been staying with Rehan and his wife, Rubina. He slept on one of the couches in the living room. Rehan had two young sons, both of whom slept in the room next to Tariq's. Some nights, when they got home late, and Tariq was exhausted from a day in the heat and not finding anything, he'd collapse on the sofa. One of the boys would wake up from the sound and open the door to the bathroom connecting their two rooms. The tube light flickered on, casting its pale blue light just beyond the doorway to the living room where Tariq lay. He heard the boy's bare feet slap against the tile and a stream of urine hit the water and slow to a trickle that pattered onto the porcelain seat and then the floor. Tariq slept very little. He checked his e-mail, re-read his messages with Abbas, turned on the television and watched the news, read through his e-mail again, checked the spam folder, and fell asleep moments before the sun rose. He slept through the adhan for Fajr but woke up for Zohur. In an e-mail, Abbas called the adhan the Muslim rooster.

“It crackles over the mosque’s loudspeakers and doesn’t quit until you’re up,” he said. As boys, they didn’t pray unless it was Ramadan or family was visiting. Neither Abbas nor Tariq knew how to pray. They stood shoulder to shoulder trying to get the other in trouble by making them laugh during the quietest parts. In some of the last e-mails, Abbas said he was learning Urdu and Arabic. He was even beginning to learn how to pray.

Rubina poked her head in and asked if they would like dinner.

“We had nihari,” Rehan said, “on the side of the road. Tariq’s first. I had to treat him.”

She laughed and said, “Of course. Treating Tariq. You suffered through it, ahan?”

“What can I do?”

Tariq enjoyed their banter. The show and playfulness of it. They spoke in English to make him comfortable, and the boys tried teaching Tariq basic Urdu, but he couldn’t hold together a single sentence. He learned a few words one night and by the next day, he forgot how they strung together, and the whole operation fell apart. Learning a second language for Tariq was like trying to hold water in cupped hands. To their credit, the boys did not give up, recognizing the import of the matter and solemnly taking on the responsibility of teaching their uncle Urdu.

They hopped up on the sofa. Hassan, the older, and Hussan, the younger, each took their places besides Tariq. They placed their Urdu school book on his lap and continued last night’s lesson.

“*Baad. After. Bacha. Boy. Bhai.*”

“Brother,” Tariq said.

Rehan turned the television on, feebly attempting to drown out the instruction. Hassan and Hussan went on reading words to Tariq and translating them. When they didn’t know the English, they asked their father. The vocabulary lesson faded and the boys shuffled to bed. Rubina went to bed soon after and left Rehan and Tariq watching news reports on BBC. Rehan went to the kitchen and came back with two glass bottles. He drank only when his wife was asleep. She didn’t like it, but she tolerated it so long as she didn’t see it. He usually had two. Three at the most. They were special ordered from the Murree brewery on the mountain. Rehan had been able to buy a forged license that allowed him to purchase and keep alcohol. He paid some people off. That was

the way, he said. You pay off a clerk and they run some copies and pass it up the ladder. You pay the next person up and up and up and up until you get to the man you need. There's always somebody willing to be bought. Rehan kept the beer behind the Coke bottles in the fridge. With Tariq around, Rehan bought a bigger case.

They opened the bottles slowly not wanting to be so brazen, knowing that Rubina could hear from the other room the air escaping the bottle. They clinked their bottles together softly and sat back watching the news.

"We'll find him, *yaar*. Pakistan is not such a big place. Nowhere to hide," Rehan said.

Tariq didn't believe him. He scrolled through his e-mail, but was repeatedly drawn to a map of Pakistan he had open in another browser window. The cities were a small fraction of the country. To the north, there was open mountain range vast enough for giants to hide. Pakistan was wild, untamed. If you went a few miles outside of Islamabad, Karachi, or Lahore—the major cities—you could hide as long as you wanted to and never be found. Before coming to Pakistan, Tariq heard a rumor about an American traveler on his way to India being snatched off the streets and taken to a basement in the middle of nowhere. Months later, a video surfaced of him tied to a chair, crying for his mother. Off-camera, somebody swung a large machete that tore off the young American's head. Tariq never watched the video, but lately his imagination has replaced the unknown tourist with an image of his brother, tied up and pleading, but nobody is listening.

"Nothing from the embassy," Tariq says, looking up from his laptop and ignoring the map with names he'll never recognize, places he'll never know. Mingora, Nowshera, Mardan, Allai. "Anything in the newspapers?" Tariq asked.

"The newspapers here don't report news. They write stories. Better stories than Thomas Clancy." Rehan kept stacks of airport novels on his bookshelves. He owned nearly every book by Cussler, Crichton, King, and Grisham, but his favorite was Jeffery Archer. Tariq saw in these books the reason Rehan had jumped at the chance to host his cousin and go on a wild goose chase for Abbas. Of course, they were family, and Rehan was dedicated to finding his other cousin, but he cottoned to the adventure of the matter more readily than anybody else in the family. They were all worried, sure, but they reminded Tariq that Abbas was always venturing out on his own, exploring the country,

not wanting to be a tourist and be shown around. *He'll come back, yaar. He just hasn't been home in so long, he wants to see what he's been missing.* Rehan wasn't as sure as the rest of them, but he was also more attached to his American cousins than anybody else in the family was. This was the last place Abbas stayed before disappearing.

They drained their beers and Tariq grabbed two more from the kitchen. When he came back, the news program had switched over to a Pakistani drama. Rehan narrated the action to Tariq for a while until he became too engrossed in what was going on to continue translating. They quickly finished their second beers, and Rehan got thirds. Tariq liked the drinking company. Before too long, they put away six apiece, and Rehan was mapping out their strategy for the next few days.

"You're almost outta here, so we need to kick this into high gear," he said. He picked out a small glossy square of paper from the table beside his chair and unfolded it onto the coffee table. It was a map of Islamabad. With a black marker, he circled different areas. The city was divided into sectors and zones like it had been mapped out on a boardgame, Battleship. G-6, F-8, I-10. A through I: north-south; 1-17: east-west. Rehan jumped up, said "Hold on" and ran out of the room. When he came back, he sprinkled a handful of colored push-pins onto the table. Rehan muttered to himself while pinning different sectors.

"Ahan, ahan," he repeated.

Tariq was losing faith and focus. Two weeks of light drinking and his tolerance was way down. His head felt heavy, but he was trying to stay awake and listen. He heard Rehan mention something about combing the city tomorrow, maybe checking Rawalpindi. They'd find Abbas tomorrow. "Easy peasy."

Tariq woke up with a crick in his neck and slumped in his chair. Rehan was no longer in the room and neither were the twelve bottles from last night. Tariq tongued the beer residue coating the inside of his lip and tried to crack his neck. Rubina was dusting and picking up the mess from the night before. It occurred to Tariq that she probably tossed the bottles out each morning. When she saw that Tariq was awake, she stopped cleaning.

"I didn't want to wake you too early for breakfast, but Nusrat can cook you an omelette if you like?"

“No, no, I slept in. He shouldn’t have to stop what he’s doing for me. I’ll make toast and coffee,” he said.

She left for a few minutes and came back with buttered toast and a cup of milky tea. He sipped it slowly. “Tea is better on the stomach,” she said. “Coffee fries the brain.” Tariq enjoyed these simple breakfasts. Back home, he usually scrounged for leftovers or whatever his roommates left unguarded in the fridge. The tea cleared out his cobwebs, and he opened his laptop and logged into his e-mail.

Brother, Pakistan is a hard country.

Rubina remained in the room, cleaning, although she was dusting over a table she had already cleaned. She turned back to Tariq and said, “I think you should go to the police.” Before Tariq could answer she continued, “I know how Rehan feels. I know what he says about Pakistan. I know what he’s told you about the police. He parrots what everybody says. What your father used to say. You know, when he was here, all he could talk about was how Pakistan made a hard turn looking for the future but ended up in the dark ages. He wasn’t sure if they could pull themselves out of it. I think that’s why he wanted to be here. Anyway, Rehan took all the doom and gloom from your father but none of his hope—”

She closed the door and continued, but Tariq’s eyes were pulled back toward the last words his brother had sent him.

Brother, Pakistan is a hard country.

Rubina was talking to him, but Tariq couldn’t concentrate. He read the line over and over, read their correspondence in reverse, as though rewinding a movie from the end to the beginning. Abba’s e-mails looped away from their leitmotif of question and suspicion to descriptions of Abbas’s first days in Pakistan, ruminations on the blanketing heat and callous poverty, illustrations of family he’d forgotten but remembered after days of prodding his memory, the unplumbed depths of food he’d consumed at force from long-forgotten aunts whom he wasn’t even sure he was related to, and finally Tariq was reading the infrequent messages they exchanged before Abbas left for Pakistan, before news of their father came. The breezy chitchat between brothers, interspersed with mutual longing to see more of each other, promises made but not kept. Tariq wondered if this was his brother broadcasting unfulfilled needs that he began seeking in Pakistan. Maybe this led him out the door, leaving no note or

word to anyone. Looking at the thread of their conversations over the last few months, in order, Tariq saw his brother preoccupied with their father's death and the problems of a home he never knew. *Pakistan is a hard country*. In his e-mails, Tariq's aloof questions about food and pretty girls went unanswered. At the end, Abbas wrote to himself, journaling. Until that last line directed at him. *Brother, Pakistan is a hard country*.

He interrupted Rubina. "Did Abbas know why my father was here?"

"I don't know why he was at that rally because he hated politics and the politicians. Said they were burning Pakistan to the ground and taking what they could before it was reduced to ash and rubble. But he wanted to be here and do something. He had a saying that he picked up from America. 'Tired of sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing.' I'm sure people mentioned it. Your father had an interesting way of being pessimistically inspiring. Abbas knew that."

"Do I need to worry about the police?" he asked.

"If he's out there, they'll find him. It's the only thing left," she said. The map was still on the coffee table. She took out the push pins. "This," she said, folding the map back into a small square before tucking it beneath a chair cushion, "won't help you find him."

When Rehan woke up, the late-afternoon sun had already burned off the cool from the night before. Tariq heard him from the next room over. Rehan was slow going, trudging through the motions of getting ready. He showered and shaved but emerged from the bathroom looking worse. He hadn't fully toweled off, and his thin periwinkle shirt stuck to his back and shoulders in dark splotches. A forgotten nub of shaving cream capped his right earlobe. He sat down next to Tariq and fished his phone from his pocket, waggling it in front of them. "Somebody called," he said. "Over and over, ringing, I almost threw the damn phone against the wall."

Tariq wanted to throw his cousin against the wall. Instead, he waited and tried to breathe.

"He didn't tell me much. Asked if I was the one looking for an American."

"What did you tell him?"

"That he must be mistaken. 'How'd you get this number?' I don't know any Americans. Playing it easy. Fast and loose."

Tariq was at a loss for words. He stared at his cousin, trying to figure out what the fuck was happening. His bearings spun wildly. He thought he was going to collapse in the living room, in a country where nobody knew him and he couldn't tell anybody who he was or what he was doing there.

"Easy, yaar. You look pale. I told him I might know an interested party, but I'd need more than just a phone call." Rehan put his hand on Tariq's shoulder and squeezed. "Pappu-jan, you need to relax. We're going to find him."

They had directions to a man who knew more. Rehan decided it would be better to take the car this time, so he unlocked the garage and backed the rusting Daewoo out of the driveway. It took a little push to get going, and Tariq had to run alongside the car, pry open the door, and fling himself into the passenger seat, but once the car hit the main thoroughfare, Tariq felt at ease for the first time since he'd landed. He didn't recognize the area they were driving through, but he knew he was seeing another side to the city. In an e-mail, Abbas had described Pakistan as two worlds that were layered over one another in such a way that it was hard to see past the first unless you looked for it yourself. He called Tariq one night to talk about it. Tariq was up earlier than usual, scraping out the last bit of crystallized honey to spackle over his buttered toast. He answered the phone and listened to his brother describe the tent city where women washed plates and clothes in the same water that irrigated the makeshift toilets downstream, which were really holes dug out of the ground. Still pools of water pitted the ground like acne scars and festered with mosquito eggs that hatched and overran the camp with typhoid. Tariq felt, in the car with Rehan, that he was coming up on the same tent city that Abbas had seen. He was retracing his brother's steps. This was the closest he'd come to finding him.

"This is it. He told me about this place."

"This place? Your brother never came here."

"Maybe he went on his own. He wanted to see the real Pakistan."

Rehan shook his head and said, "This isn't Pakistan."

They parked on the other side of the street, away from the median where the tents were sandwiched together, and got out. Tariq followed Rehan, who walked ahead scanning the nondescript hovels they passed. What he was looking for he didn't say, and Tariq didn't feel like pursuing it with him. There was a cold shiver that bristled between them for a moment in the car, and they both fell quiet. Tariq hadn't meant to insult his cousin, but he felt it was better to

leave it alone for the time being. He simply followed and kept his head down.

Though he forewent Western wear—his jeans and T-shirts—for some of his cousin's clothes, a few beggars tagged him as a foreigner and followed on his heels, tapping his shoulder and holding a hand out for money. Before too long, Tariq was carrying in his wake a tail of followers. They passed several children with deformed heads or legs twisted out of formation, unable to keep up with the others. Tariq hesitated, searching his pockets for some loose change or a couple of bills, but Rehan had doubled back, sensing his cousin's heartstrings being tugged, and pushed him forward. "They mutilate them when they're young," he said, "and sell them to beg from rich Americans with soft hearts." Tariq opened his wallet and dumped what was inside on the ground, and the clamoring pack hung back and tore at the ground.

Rehan slowed and stopped at a tent with no distinguishing marks from those surrounding it. He reached into the flap and held it out, letting the light in and exposing the living quarters as easily as he would tear into a piece of ripened fruit. A man was huddled in the dark, counting beads on a necklace and whispering to himself. At the light, he recoiled and held up his hand to shield his eyes. His beard grew in thick grey coils like springs in a machine. For a second, Tariq thought it was his brother, aged heavily by the beating sun and the heavy squalor. Rehan produced a piece of paper—the photograph—and handed it to the man, who shook his head and turned away, counting the beads louder now. Rehan threw the piece of paper to the floor and hooked the old man by the armpits and dragged him out of the tent, arguing with him on his way back to the car.

Tariq waited for a police officer to stop them or one of the neighbors to keep Rehan from dragging this man away from his home. The beggars returned and were shouting now, but whether it was for more money or for them to leave them alone, Tariq couldn't understand. They were pressing on them now, and it became clear that they did in fact want Tariq and Rehan to leave and let go of the man. From beneath his shirt and tucked into his belt, Rehan un-holstered a silver pistol. It was diminutively sized, but it pushed the crowd back. It failed however to quiet them, but Rehan cleared a path to the car and pushed the man into the backseat, climbing in next to him.

"Drive," he said, shutting the door and tossing the keys into the front seat.

Tariq settled into the driver's seat and fumbled with the keys. He half-expected the beggars to bombard the car with their bodies and threaten to topple

it over unless the old man was set free, but nobody came. They just watched until Tariq got the car started and even when they were miles away from the tent city, Tariq thought he saw them in the rearview mirror, following them at a steady clip.

He didn't know where he was going, and even if he wanted to go somewhere, he wouldn't know how. The city was as strange to him as their present circumstance. In the backseat, the old man and Rehan sat next to each other in silence. Rehan leaned forward to speak in Tariq's ear. "This kuti isn't saying a word," he said. "We better drop him."

They drove until they found a taxi port. Rehan shoved something in the man's pocket and booted him from the backseat, shouting after his retreating back.

"What did you give him?"

Rehan buckled his seatbelt and turned to Tariq. "What do you mean?"

"You gave him something. Before you kicked him out of the car. What did you give him?"

"Some cab fare, yaar. You can't leave an old man on the side of the road."

"Can I see the gun?"

"Kya? What?"

"The gun. Let me see the gun."

"Sure, yaar. Just a prop gun," he said. "Something to scare them with."

The whole day was nothing more than a prop gun. A staged rescue. A scene from one of Rehan's books. Show him they were doing something. Rehan held out the toy gun. Tariq took it and chucked it out the window.

They stopped at the house for lunch, and Rehan was slow getting ready to leave. Tariq was frustrated with his cousin, knowing it would be a few hours before they went back out. Rawalpindi was out of the question. They could barely make it to the outlying villages before nightfall. Before heading out, Tariq needed to make more copies of the missing-person poster, but he needed Rehan to take him to the store, to speak for him. He was helpless. The enormity of the situation cast a long shadow over him. Family for most of Tariq's life was a convenience that required little maintenance and almost no effort on his part to hold onto, but in less than a year, he let both his father and brother slip to the edge of his awareness, and now he was too late to bring them back. The bell at the gate rang.

Tariq entertained a *deus ex machina*: Abbas standing outside the gate, his hair mussed and grimy from several weeks' travel and eyes alight with answers—everything he'd been seeking and more. The boys ran to the window and let loose a whiny shriek of cheer and ran shouting, "Reechh! Reechh!" Tariq didn't need to know Urdu to know what Hassan and Hussan were so excited about. A lightly built and slender-limbed black bear gazed over the lip of the gate and sniffed at the air. Through the gaps in the gate, Tariq spotted a small man, shaking a rattle.

Rehan went to the door and peered out. "Reechh, cousin," he said. "Dancing bears. Common in the villages where they believe in such things, but it's nothing more than entertainment in the city. I promised to take the boys out for a look, but ah, you might find it a little...unpalatable. Is that the word? Cruel."

"What do they believe in the villages?"

"That bears cures illnesses, frighten off bad spirits. If a child is sick, they put it on the bear's back for good health. The kind of nonsense that takes root in villages."

He followed Rehan and Hassan and Hussan out into the street where the bear foraged under logs and bushes along the roadside. Now that he was closer, he noticed the bear was muzzled with a leather strap and that a thick rope was threaded from the base of its snout through its right nostril as a means of controlling it. The bearman continued shaking his rattle and pulled the rope, forcing the bear on its hind legs, exposing its chest and a V-shaped tuft of white hair. He continued pulling on the rope and the bear jiggled back and forth, tossing his head. Hearing the rattle call, the audience grew. The bear's snout was scarred over, the skin flayed off beneath the muzzle. Its teeth were filed flat or completely removed. Flies landed in the bear's matted fur or buzzed over the nostrils crusty with dried blood. It strafed and bowed and twisted in circles. Rehan tossed money into a collection bucket.

"This is sick," he said.

"You're right," Rehan said. "Awful how they treat the cubs."

"You brought your kids."

"What do you want me to say? This man needs to feed his children even though I morally disagree with him. But he doesn't have the comfort to consider morality like you and I. This is all he knows. It's a hard life. Pappu-jan, I know this. You're right. This is the real Pakistan, ahan? and here, there's a lot of ugly."

“Why did my dad come here?”

“*Yaar*, your dad thought he could fix something that’s been broken since the beginning. People came to Pakistan on burning trains. Did you know that? The Hindus torched the trains. Whole families incinerated. This country’s been burning for a long time. He wanted to believe that politics could work here. The only politics we see are bombs in the street. Simple as that, *yaar*. I wished he hadn’t gone, but there it is. No solving that mystery. Some half-wit with a Quran in his hands blew him up. Pakistan killed your dad and took your brother.”

He led his boys by their hands back to the house. Tariq didn’t follow him, instead following the street until he was on the main road. The hot asphalt burned the heels of his feet. He kept going until he saw a police officer. “Station,” he said. He said it slower. Sta-tion.

“Poliss?”

“Yes. My Bhai is missing. Mera bhai gone,” he said.

The man was round bellied with lips like a trout and a thick brush of a mustache. His face was oily and sweat dripped down his sideburns. He sized Tariq up and down and said, “American?”

“Yes, American. I have plenty of money.” Tariq took out handfuls of rupees in different colors. He wasn’t used to the currency. The officer waved his hand away and said, “Nahin, nahin. No, no.”

Tariq pressed the bills into the officer’s hand but was refused. “Help me,” he said.

The officer walked away, turned back and waved Tariq forward to follow him. They walked away from the street and into a park. Every few minutes, he turned back to check on Tariq. A group of young boys played cricket in an open clearing. The bat cracked loudly, and the officer scanned the sky, looking for the ball. It thudded a few feet from them, but the officer ignored it. They came to a police station, but instead of stopping, they kept going. The noise of the park receded, and Tariq realized they were alone, surrounded by trees and brush. The officer held his hand out this time. When Tariq didn’t move, the officer swung and caught Tariq in the eye with the flat of his palm. Before he knew what happened, Tariq was knocked over. The officer turned out Tariq’s pockets and took everything. He left Tariq bruised, crying, and shaking.

He wiped his face on a torn sleeve and got up slowly. It hurt to breathe,

so he limped toward the sound of the boys playing cricket and cheering. The police station was empty. He found the street and the officer stood at the same corner, sweat dripping down his fat neck and staining his shirt collar. Tariq picked up a large rock. The weight of it in his hand felt good.

When he left his post, he followed the same route he had taken Tariq on earlier. He followed the police officer past the cricket field and past the empty police station. They passed the area where Tariq had been taken by surprise. There was a stray note on the ground which the officer bent over to pick up. They walked until the sun fell. The night jasmine bloomed and the temperature began falling. The officer stopped at a grocer in a small market and left with several bags and a candy bar. A mile later, they came to a village. The houses were made of brick, clay, and mud with thatched roofs. A few skinny goats wandered through. They passed wheelbarrows with wheat and grass piled high. They came to a home, and Tariq kept his distance. Two boys came to the doorway, and the officer roared in delight, picking them up and placed one on each shoulder. A woman came and kissed him on the cheek. He handed her the grocery bags, and she flashed him a grateful smile. The officer put the children down and sat on a bare cot in the front yard. He took out the candy bar from the grocer, and snapped it evenly in two. Tariq squeezed the hard stone in his hand, pressing it into his skin and pushing the blood out until he felt a prickling numbness in his fingers and palms. He knew his brother was gone, that this is what he'd seen over and over in this country, and it was too damn much because there was beauty here, but it was surrounded by pain and desperation, and everybody was clawing over one another. Maybe Abbas couldn't take it anymore, so he fled, not turning around because he couldn't bear to tell anybody what he'd seen. That he'd seen this.