

SHEBA KARIM

Qiyamat

My mother's driving makes me carsick. Ever since my father's accident, her foot goes back and forth between the accelerator and the brake pedal like a lover who can't make up her mind. "How was the train?" she asks me.

"The man sitting across from me asked me if I was Muslim."

"And what did you say?"

"I said no." This is a lie. When he questioned me, I got up and walked down the aisle to another seat, ending that conversation but beginning another in my head. No, I am not Muslim. What are you, then? I am Sabeen Maqsood, a girl who hated her father, and now he is gone, and I have a hole in my heart where my hatred was. Qul! Speak! What does that make you, then? What does that make me? Guilt-ridden, hormone-driven, a whore who fears submission. What more is there to say?

My mother turns into a shopping plaza and drives toward an empty area of the parking lot. "Where are you going?" I ask. She slams on the brakes. "Bismillah!" I cry, my hand against the dashboard, braced for impact even though we were only going fifteen miles a hour in the first place and there was nothing to crash into.

She smiles. "See? And you say you aren't Muslim."

"Habit is different than faith."

She shakes her head. "Not so different," she says.

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There is something amiss in our house, and I realize it is because my mother has moved the worn, brown leather chair that my father read Quran in most nights. He was a small man with a small voice, but when he read Quran, his off-key recitation followed us down hallways, through closed doors. I'd be relieving myself on the toilet and I'd hear it, and I wouldn't be able to go anymore. "When that man reads Quran I bet even Allah covers his ears," I told Shoaib once. Shoaib, who never questioned the rightness of the path even if he didn't always follow it himself, said, "Would it kill you to have some respect for your own patria?"

"You mean patriarch," I replied. I had little respect for my father. He was religious and boring, he distanced himself from me when I grew breasts, his eyes were cartoonishly big underneath his thick glasses, he couldn't tell a joke to save his life.

My mother walks into the room. "What are you thinking?" she asks, cupping my waist with her hand, like she's going to lead me somewhere.

"Why did you move Abba's chair?" I ask.

"I had a dream the other night. Your father came and told me to move his chair into the sunlight."

My mother retired from her pediatric practice a few months before my father's accident, and, when he died, I expected her to remain in bed, paralyzed by grief. Instead, she joined a knitting club, volunteered to teach a class at the Islamic school my father helped found, took up painting. From where I'm standing, I can see her easel through the window, right in the middle of the deck that faces the woods out back.

"Are you ever going to paint anything but these woods?" I ask her.

"These are his woods," she says in Urdu. "I won't stop painting till I'm able to paint it just right." Her hand shifts from my waist to my shoulder. "Listen," she says. "I need to ask you a favor."

I can't remember the last time my mother has asked me for a favor. "Ma, I can't move home," I tell her.

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"I don't want you to move home," my mother says. "I'm fine alone."

"What is it, then?"

She rises. "First we cook, then we'll talk." She goes to the kitchen and I step out onto the deck. The canvas resting on the easel is dotted with swirling green trees. I wish I could run inside it, find my father. Maybe, if the two of us are not human, if we are just two blobs of primary colors, we will finally be able to understand each other. Green and Yellow make blue. A wound is healed, in abstract.



When I was young my father read to me at night. He'd knock softly on my door, as if I might be asleep, even though we both knew I was waiting for him. From the foot of my bed, he read the stories of the Prophets, Yunus in the belly of the whale, Ayub who continued to praise Allah even after his family was crushed by a falling roof and his body became infested with ulcers, Zakariya who was sawed in half. When I learned one by heart I'd tell it to my father, who tapped his hand against his thigh as if my stories were a kind of music. At the end, he'd say, "Tonight you have made your father very proud," and pull a lollipop out of his kurta pocket, the kind that last for an hour. I got a different flavor for each prophet, and I kept them in my bottom nightstand drawer. For some reason, it felt wrong to eat them.

To my father, Islam was not just a religion but the context by which he viewed everything, a final filter for his senses. Rivers and mountains were not beautiful, they were beautiful by the glory of Allah; my mother's food was not delicious, it was delicious by the grace of Allah. My father had few friends, dreaded making small talk. If his conversations didn't begin with religion, they ended with it. "Excellent work," he said when I told him I won the math bowl in sixth grade. "But also remember that Prophet Muhammad said the best competition is in doing good deeds."

Once he tried to institute nightly Quranic discussion; first, he explained, he'd read a sura from the Quran to us, translate it, and then together we would analyze it. But listening to the Quran was not like listening to stories of Prophets, there was no easily digestible narrative involving violence, or miracles,

or intrigue, just words we didn't understand. In the middle of the sura Shoaib began to poke me in the back, and before it finished we were on the ground, fighting. "Enough," my father cried. He rarely raised his voice so when he did we listened. "I once knew a little boy," he told us. "This boy could sit still with me and watch birds for hours. Why can't you see the virtue of stillness?"

"Where is this little boy now?" I asked.

My father looked down at the Quran in his lap. "He died."

"Probably died of boredom," Shoaib said, and started chasing me down the hall.

From then on my father decided to enforce religion with frequent reminders, delivered in his quiet voice but firm in their message. Almost every day he reminded Shoaib and me of the two angels that stayed with you from birth until death, one over your left shoulder, one over your right. The one on your right recorded all of your good deeds, the one on your left recorded all of your bad ones, and on the Day of Judgment, they would present Allah with their detailed record of your life. "I cannot watch you all of the time, but remember that the angels are writing down everything," he'd say, pointing at our shoulders with his index fingers. It was meant to be a gentle gesture, but it looked like he was aiming guns at the angels, and, whenever he did it, I imagined them shielding their faces with their wings.



My mother and I are eating the lamb pasanda we've just cooked. "Have you spoken to Shoaib?" my mother asks. I am the one who named my brother Shoaib, after a prophet whose story was boring but whose name I had always liked.

"A few weeks ago."

My mother doesn't ask me to call him more often; she knows that we are not like that, Shoaib and I, that we don't contact each other unless necessary. She smooths back her hair. As a child I helped her braid it, twisting the thick strands together all the way down to the base of her spine. Now her hair is becoming less and less, tiny patches of pinkish scalp visible beneath the black and white.

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"You know what I was thinking about the other day?" she says. "Remember when one of my patients gave me those rum balls for Christmas and you ate three of them and got drunk?"

"More like dizzy and sick," I correct her.

"And your father got so mad. 'You think she would have the good sense to warn us what was in them,' he said. You know what I did that night? I snuck downstairs and ate a rum ball because I wanted to see what it tasted like. It was so awful I spit it right out." When my mother laughs, her eyebrows arch like she's surprised, like the laughter has snuck up on her. I didn't notice this until recently, just like I didn't notice that she has hair on her big toes but not the others, that she hesitates before pressing the play button on the answering machine.

"Of course you didn't tell Abba," I say.

"It was one of the only things I never told him," she says. She is lucky, for having said everything she wanted to say. She reaches over and takes my hand. "I still get calls once in a while. Given your reputation, they're mostly divorced, but some of them seem nice."

"No." I know my mother will not ask, so I tell her. "Because I don't want to, not because I'm with someone."

She makes no effort to hide her relief. "You should think about it. It's very hard to be alone."

"But you're alone, and you seem happy enough."

"Do I? So this is happiness then, to live by yourself, to see your children twice a month?"

"But Abba used to be so controlling," I say.

"Controlling?" She shakes her head. "Your father never made me do something I didn't want to do."

"He never let me do anything I wanted to do."

"That's because everything you wanted to do was un-Islamic," she says. "And where did it get you, all of this rebelliousness? Has it brought you happiness?"

I don't talk to my mother about my feelings, but she knows I'm unhappy, that at night I stare at the brick wall that faces

the window of my studio apartment and think that tomorrow I will proceed forward, I will quit my paralegal job and apply to grad school, I will plan a trip somewhere, I will move to an apartment where you can see the sky, I will visit my father's grave, and then the morning comes and I'm greeted by the same brick wall, it's immobility a taunting reminder of my own.

She gets up, washes her hands at the sink, dries them carefully with a towel. "There is something I have to tell you," she says. "About your father."



In middle school I started to question everything. Why would the Quran, the unaltered word of Allah, say it was permissible for a man to beat his wife (lightly) with his fists? Why was the testimony of a man worth that of two women? None of the answers I received, from my father or the teachers of religion class at the mosque—that beating lightly meant hardly touching the woman at all, or that the verse was improperly translated, or that women's testimony was worth less because women were more emotional and thus more likely to forget details—satisfied me. My faith started to crack, and then puberty blew it apart. At fifteen, I began to masturbate, to fantasies of being kidnapped by men of ill repute, pirates or escaped convicts, their lips swollen with lust. I'd cry half-heartedly for Allah to save me, but it was no use, they'd take my virginity, and my father couldn't get upset because it wasn't my fault.

This was the same year I altered my skirt. The uniform of the all-girls private high school I attended was a plaid skirt of mid-calf length, but all of the students hemmed their skirts so that they hit well above the knee. I had two skirts, and changed into the short one as soon as I got to school. Other than this baring of skin and my nightly ministrations, my waking life remained chaste; I went to school, I came home, I stayed in and studied, but my father somehow knew. He started to leave gifts in my room, a gold pendant with the word Allah in Arabic, treatises on the Prophet's way of life. I would catch him eyeing me during dinner, trying to read me, to gauge the strength of my faith, his pupils the size of dimes underneath his glasses.

"Is there something on my face?" I asked him one night.

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“Sabeen, don’t be rude,” my mother said. We all stopped eating except Shoaib, who refused to get involved in any conflict that didn’t concern him directly.

“Tell him to stop looking at me like that, like he thinks I’ve got some kind of mark,” I said.

“What are you saying?” my mother asked.

“She’s only sensing my concern,” my father said. “But I have faith in my daughter. She knows Right and Wrong.” My father always phrased it like this, as if Right and Wrong were good friends of mine. The month before I had decided they were lovers and given them a theme song. Right and Wrong. Bang a gong. Get it on.



The spring of my senior year, I fell for James Poplock. He liked me because I laughed at all of the appropriate moments during his stories about his summer antics at the Jersey shore, and I liked that he had so many stories. James went to the all-boys prep down the road and we made out in his car before school whenever we could. He tasted like talcum powder and cigarettes. I hadn’t planned to go much further than that, until one day my friend Rachel told me she was having people over for a Friday happy hour, and offered me her guest room if I could weasel my way into attending. I told my parents I was working on a history presentation with Rachel that constituted one third of our final grade and would be home by eight. Rachel bought me my first set of proper lingerie, a dark purple lacy bra and matching underwear.

Rachel’s guest room had burnt orange shag carpet that I squeezed between my toes for courage as I took off my shirt. My father walked into the room just as James was about to kiss me, both of his hands squeezing my breasts. He stood in the doorway, his giant eyes blinking rapidly, as if he hoped that would make James disappear.

“Your nana died. Your mother's upset,” he said. “Get dressed.”

James bolted, my father stepping aside to let him pass. I couldn’t remember where I had stashed my change of clothes, so I reached for my school uniform. As I dressed my father pressed his palms against the wall like it was he who had just

been caught, not I. We left the room together. The music was off and Rachel was at the bottom of the stairs, the entire sequence of events apparent in her stricken expression. She had lied, said I wasn't there, but somehow he had known, had sensed my sin, and she could not stop him.

On the ride home I felt nauseous, dizzy, but I tightened my body, kept still. "How did Nana die?" I asked.

"At his home in Rawalpindi," my father said. "In his sleep. Very peaceful."

Neither of us spoke after that. I prepared my possible defenses. He pressured me into it. I promise to be good. I promise to pray five times a day. Just please let me go to Columbia.

But when we reached home, he didn't turn off the engine. I thought that maybe, he'd let it go, he'd allow us both to forget what had happened, on the tacit understanding that I would never, ever do it again. Besides, how could he even speak of it? My father was incapable of verbalizing anything related to sex. "I'm sorry," I said.

He said nothing, only stared ahead with this strange intensity, like there was a divine message written on the windshield. I waited for a second, then ran into the house and up to my room to change into jeans. I imagined him sitting in the garage, inhaling carbon monoxide, trying to forget. But even then, though I felt bad about disappointing him, I didn't feel bad about what I had done. I knew I would do it again, and again, and again. If my father had tried to see inside me then, he would have found more desire than regret. He would have found Wrong humping Right. He would have found me disgusting.

I heard my father downstairs, calling for my mother. My mother came in first, pale face, red eyes, and I remembered that her father had just died. My father was behind her, clenching and unclenching his jaw, his hands pulling at the sides of his pants, stretching out the fabric.

"What did you do?" my mother asked.

"Unbutton her shirt," my father commanded. "I want you to see who your daughter really is."

"Mustafa," my mother said.

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“Do as I'm telling you. Unbutton it.”

My mother sat down next to me, hiding my body from view. I tried to make eye contact with her to so it'd be easier, but she didn't lift her gaze, and instead focused on her fingers undoing my shirt. My mother kept her nails clean and short and wore white cotton undergarments. She'd never understand a penchant for purple lace. My mother's fingers were trembling, and when they accidentally brushed my skin she recoiled like she had been burnt. After the third button I couldn't take it anymore. I pushed her aside and pulled my shirt over my head.

My mother hid her face with her hands. My father's eyes had grown so grotesquely large under his glasses the veins in them looked as if they were about to split open.

“Here I am,” I said. “Get a good look?”

My father yelled something I couldn't understand. He rushed over to me, shoving my mother out of the way when she tried to block him. I put my arms over my face, but instead of slapping me he grabbed the center of my bra and ripped it off. I backed into the corner of my bed, my hands flattening my breasts.

“You are no better than a prostitute!” he screamed, waving his fist in the air like a mad despot, the bra crushed inside it. “No better than a whore!” Then he bent over and spit on my face. I thought I was screaming, but no sound was emerging from my mouth. My father crumpled, the bra pressed to his forehead like a garish handkerchief. The despot, defeated, ruined.

My mother embraced him and I pulled the blanket over my bare chest. I had somehow won this round, but it was miserable victory. I had broken my father's heart, I had forever tarnished myself in his eyes, I had pissed on all of our happy memories. My father's saliva had trickled down to the edge of my chin and I wiped it off with my naked shoulder.

"I hate you," I told him. "I've always hated you."



"You want to tell me something about Abba?" I repeat. It will no doubt be some reminder of how much he loved me, something to add to the nocturnal ferociousness of my guilt.

"I'm too old to battle," my mother says. "I need you to be generous."

"As if you ever battled," I say. "You were practically Abba's cheering squad."

"Would you like me to tell you or not?" she asks. Her jaw has tensed, but it doesn't matter. My mother has neither bark nor bite. I nod. "Before our marriage was arranged, your father was married to someone else," she says. "To an American woman. Someone he met in graduate school."

"Abba? Married to a white woman? I don't understand."

"They were together for two years, but it was too difficult, to be with someone from another culture. There was a child," she says.

"What? Are you saying—"

My mother smiles, shakes her head. "It's nothing like that. It was her son, from someone else. But your father was very fond of him."

"When did he tell you this?"

"A long time ago. It was hard for him to talk about it. He had made a mistake, learned a painful lesson, and he didn't like to think about that time of his life."

"So instead he lied to us?" Who are you, then? I am a girl whose father was a liar, a fake, a fraud.

"Sabeen," my mother says. "Your father did what he thought would be best for you, always. He loved you very much."

But it's not his love that I've spent years questioning. It's mine.



My final semester of college, on my last visit home before my father died, I told my parents about my boyfriend Krish. "I love him," I said.

"You know we can't accept this," my father said. I waited for him to say more, perhaps bring up the Day of Judgment, but he backed into his chair, as if his leather throne might give him more authority.

“I’m not a Muslim anymore. I’m going to convert,” I said. “I’m becoming Ba’hai. We both are.” This was not true, but it struck me as a nice religion to choose, peace-loving, no stringent rules.

My father winced, put his arm over his face like my words had blinded him. “Do you mean this?”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought,” I said. “I don’t believe in Islam, and Krish and I are going to get married after we graduate.” We had no plans to marry, but I said it anyway, to convey the seriousness of my intent.

“I don’t think you should come back to this house,” my father said. “Not until you have regained your iman.” He said this like it was a temporary lapse, as if I had simply lost my faith at a poker game and could easily win it back. There was no anger, just a matter-of-fact statement of conditions. Behind him, my mother nodded, but I could tell she was worried. Though she agreed with my father’s general principles, she didn’t have his will. She would continue to speak to me, call and ask me to reconsider.

“Remember my words,” my father continued. “At first it may seem simple, that you are proving your parents wrong, but slowly, it will come—the misunderstandings, the confusion, the disagreements, until it has spread like a cancer, and your only hope for happiness is a return to your family, your culture, your religion. Those are the things that support a marriage, not youthful love. That is all I have to say to you.”

The next morning Shoaib dropped me off at the train station. Since becoming a collegiate squash champion a few months before, he had started to lecture me. “Why did you have to tell them this now?” he said. “It’s not like you’re marrying this guy tomorrow. Couldn’t you wait?”

“Why should I lie?” I said.

“What if they refuse to pay for grad school?” he asked.

“I’ll take out loans,” I said. I had an answer for everything, back then.



I’ve been cleaning the kitchen table for so long it’s practically shining. The more I think of my father’s secret, the harder I

wipe, as if I just clean enough I might see them, my father and the family he hid from me, reflected in the glass.

My mother takes the paper towels away from me. "Why don't you say anything?"

"What were they like?"

"Who?"

"The wife and kid, who else?"

"We never discussed it. He didn't like to talk of it, and I respected that."

My mother, the all-passive, the all-respectful. Her husband has a secret past and she lets it be. I'd swing it around my head, dig my nails into it until it bled. "Don't you think that was hypocritical?"

"No," she says. "I think it was human."

But isn't it also human to want to kiss a boy, to hold his hand? To get drunk, to dance with abandon? My mother will tell me this is different, that my father didn't violate his religion when he married a Christian woman, that his actions caused pain only to himself. "You still haven't told me what the favor is," I say.

"Oh, yes, the favor," she says, like it is some distant relative she had forgotten. "Before the accident, your father ran into a colleague from graduate school, someone who had known him during his first marriage. From this colleague, you father found out that his first wife had ovarian cancer. One day in the mail, there was a card. Your father had sent it to the boy but it had been returned by the post office. I put it away and forget about it and last week I found it again." She opens one of the kitchen drawers and pulls out an envelope. "I thought I'd give it to you to mail. You might be able to find the boy's information through the computer, right? I put it a new envelope, with a stamp."

"Why didn't you just give it to Shoaib?" I ask. "He wouldn't even have asked any questions."

"Because I thought it would be better for you to do it."

"What does it say?"

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"I don't know. It felt wrong to read it. But I'm sure he's sending his condolences for his mother," my mother says.

"Why not just send it to her, then?"

She shakes her head. "I don't think it ended well with Pamela." Pamela. The First Wife.

The card is sealed, and the name Gavin Michaud is written across it in my mother's neat cursive. But when I try to take it from her, she grips it harder. "Promise me you won't read it, either," she says.

"I won't," I say, and she lets go.

On the train I think about opening it, but I can't bring myself to do it, to betray my parent's trust yet again. I wonder what my father would write to a boy who was now a man, whose existence he never publicly acknowledged. To Gavin, whose mother may be dying. It seems like another life when your mother and I were married, but, when I heard of her illness, I remembered many of the happy times we had together. I wish her a full recovery, and I hope you are well, also. Remember when we used to watch birds together? Neither of my children takes any interest in nature, but you always understood the beauty of God's creations. I hold the card up. I try angling it in different directions against the light, but it's no use; I can't see inside.



After my father's funeral, my mother and I sat in the women's section of the mosque, surrounded by aunties: my relatives, my mother's friends. My mother cried and cried, and I kept my arm around her, stiff. The aunties sat cross legged, open Qurans in their laps, and whispered about me. They thought I couldn't hear them, but in fact that was all I could hear, their words echoing inside my skull. The aunties who did not know of the estrangement between my father and me whispered, "Look at Sabeen, she is acting so strong." She is strong, she is strong. The aunties who did know of our estrangement whispered, "Look at Sabeen, she is feeling regret." She feels regret, she feels regret. I stared down at the backs of my hands, saw tiny dark spots on my skin I had never noticed before. Look at Sabeen, she is growing old. She grows old, she grows old.



When I get back there's a voicemail from Krish. Just checking in, he says. We broke up a year after graduation, though I never told my parents this. I started dating him because he was cute and half-black, half-Indian, and thus extra forbidden. It was doomed from the beginning, and I see now that love motivated by rebellion is like a hollow cane, easy to brandish and easily breakable. I brandished it as long as I could, then snapped it in two.

I delete the message and turn on my computer. It takes me ten seconds to find Gavin Michaud on the Internet. He hosts an open mic night every Thursday at a bar in Brooklyn. There's even a picture of him, brown hair pulled back in a pony tail and bright blue eyes. Now that I know what he looks like, I can imagine him as a child, and for the rest of the week, in the shower, on my way to work, before I fall asleep at night, I conjure up scenes from my father's past life. My father who has married a white person lives like a white person, throwing around a baseball with Gavin in the backyard, making hotdogs on the grill and blueberry pancakes for breakfast, embracing his wife in broad daylight, with Gavin tucked in between them. He does not even look like my father. The glasses are gone; he has contacts and is clean-shaven, he wears bell bottoms and aviator sunglasses, he never mentions Allah. He is finishing his thesis so he spends a lot of time in the study, writing, and Pamela, who is a little chunky but pretty, kisses him on the head when she delivers his cups of tea.

In most of what I imagine, they are happy. Gavin and my father watch birds and afterward Gavin draws them with color pencils. The three of them sing songs. I don't know when it all starts to go wrong. Maybe Pamela cooks bacon one day and my father yells at her. Maybe his mother comes to visit and whispers poison in his ear. Maybe it is Pamela who becomes distant, maybe my father stops wearing his contacts and she can't stand the sight of his giant eyes. But slowly things start to change, and my father turns from Pamela to Allah, and from Allah to us, but I stick with the beginning, when things were still good, because I could have a conversation with this blueberry pancakes and baseball man, I could make him understand.

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One night, I insert myself into the scene. He is hard at work, scribbling notes in margins, and I appear, hovering over his desk, cross-legged like a genie. He drops his pen in surprise. "I am your unborn daughter," I tell him. "I will do things you don't approve of. You'll even spit on me, once. I'll tell you I hate you but I won't really mean it."

"It's all right," he says. "You're young, young people never listen to their elders—look at me. My parents didn't want me to marry a white woman, but I did anyway. I understand." We hug, but then he pulls back and looks at me. "But you don't look like you could be Pamela's and my daughter," he says. I don't respond. He realizes the future. I disappear.



The summer after he spat on me, my father's bird watching became an everyday activity. Even my father didn't like birds that much, and my mother told Shoaib to follow him, see what it was he really did amidst those trees. "He sits on a stump," Shoaib reported. "He holds onto the binoculars with both hands but he never lifts them from his neck. And he just looks at the ground, not the sky."

My father walked in behind us. "It's called tafakkuur," he said. "It means to reflect on something deeply, in great detail. Please allow me this time alone." As if we would ever refuse him. I assumed my father was reflecting on the Day of Judgment, preparing diligently for his first chance at a dialogue with Allah. He had started asking us at dinner, "When you hear Allah's voice saying Qul! on the Day of Judgment, what will you tell Him?" My mother and Shoaib humored him with their responses, but I refused. It was a stupid question. At that point, what would there be left to say?

My father forgave me for James Poplock after he returned from one of these tafakkur sessions. I was eating waffles in the kitchen. There had been a sudden downpour outside and he was wet, his nose red from the cold, his thinning hair matted to one side, his glasses fogged. He looked like a homeless man who had wandered into somebody's house. I wanted to enjoy this, but couldn't. It was easier to hate him when he didn't look so weak.

"The hawks will be migrating soon," he said.

"How exciting for you."

"I forgive you," he said. "But it is Allah's forgiveness that is most important."

"Well, if Allah is really all-forgiving, all-merciful, I'll be just fine," I said, turning my back to him.

Maybe, in offering me this forgiveness, he had considered his own secret past, realized that we all make mistakes. Maybe, if he had been honest, we could have found a piece of common ground, however small. But this possibility could only exist through the rosy tint of retrospect. If my father had actually told me the truth then, I would have used it against him. I would have flung it in his face every time we fought. And whatever common ground we might have found, it would never have been enough to overcome our differences of belief.

And yet. "I should have said something," I say aloud. I'm speaking to the left angel, whose pen is always poised. I used to talk to both of them all the time. I'd say good morning, explain my philosophy, rationalize my behavior, tell them I was a good person and that was what mattered, or that it was okay that I stole candy from Melanie's desk because she was mean and deserved it. Of course I knew it wouldn't make a difference to them what I said; they were beyond influence, these solemn-faced record keepers. In high school I started ignoring them all together, denied their existence, labeled them a metaphor, a scare tactic. Call it guilt, call it madness, but since my father's death, I have begun to sense their movements above me, invisible depressions in the air caused by their footsteps. Sometimes I feel their gaze, the assessment of my thoughts by their piercing, all-seeing eyes. Sometimes I swear I can smell them, a strange musk of leather and sandalwood. Sometimes, I can hear them scribbling.



I arrive an hour before the open mic is supposed to start. It's a dive, the kind of place where you hope for the best when you open the door to the bathroom. I take a seat at the empty side of the bar. There's a couple at the other end, playing with their cell phones, and an old man in the middle, reading a book bound in brown leather, the same color as my father's chair. It's a sign. Gavin is behind the bar. He's cut his hair

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short, but there's no mistaking his eyes. They're much lighter than his picture, almost clear. I like them even more; surely these kind of eyes will be able to see a long way backwards.

"What can I get you?" he asks, tossing a dish cloth over his shoulder.

"A Guinness," I say. I don't even like beer, but for some reason I want Gavin to think I'm the kind of girl who drinks beer, who hangs out in places like these.

"I haven't seen you here before, have I?" he asks as he pours.

I shake my head. "I hear the open mic here is good."

"Depends on the night," Gavin says. He sets the beer down in front of me. I'm too nervous to begin the script I've prepared. "I'm Gavin," he says.

"Sabeen." Gavin nods, and I offer him my hand. I want to feel the hand that once touched my father. It's rough against my skin and gives nothing away. Gavin is looking at me. He has a long neck and long fingers. He looks like someone who'd play a trombone. If my father had gotten with Pamela earlier, Gavin could have been his son. I would be his half-sister.

"Are you sure you haven't been in here before?" Gavin says. "Something about you seems familiar."

I have my father's square jaw, and the same deep indent in the middle of his upper lip. Gavin must remember. "My full name is Sabeen Maqsood. My father is Mustafa Maqsood." I wait, for the flash of recognition, the sudden flood of memories.

"Who?" he says.

"Mustafa Maqsood. He was married to your mother, a long time ago."

He nods. "Oh, okay," he says. "My mother had a picture of the two of them. You have the same eyes as him, right?"

"No, I don't. I have his chin."

"Maybe." Gavin shrugs. "I barely remember. So, what brings you here? I'm guessing you didn't come for the open mic night."

"I came to see you," I say.

"Well, now you're seeing me. What can I do for you?"

I take the card out of my purse. "I found this in his drawer. I guess when he sent it to you it got returned, so I put it in a new envelope and decided to deliver it personally."

Gavin looks at the back and front of the envelope, but he doesn't open it like I'd hoped. "Thanks," he says. "Though I can't imagine why he'd want to get in touch after so long."

"He always remembered you fondly." Except for the part where he pretended that you never existed. I wonder if Gavin would take offense if he knew how my father had tried to erase him from his history. "And someone told him about your mother's illness, and I think he wanted to send his condolences." Gavin doesn't respond. "How is your mother?"

"She passed away," he says.

"I'm sorry."

"How's your father?"

"He's dead, too." When I say this I smile, because it is weirdly funny, that here is a stranger who could have been my brother, and now the people that connect us are both dead.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he says. I'm still smiling and he takes a step back like he thinks I might be crazy, and I do feel a little crazy, like I just might start crying and pulling my hair and begging him to please tell me stories of the father I never had. I force an appropriate expression, sympathy and empathy and sanity. "It sucks, doesn't it, having a parent die? Makes you feel so fucking old," he says.

"Could I ask you something?" I say. "Do you remember anything about him?"

"I was only four when they split up, so no, not really. Before first grade everything is pretty much a blank." He looks at the card again.

I wish I could pick him up, hold him upside down and shake him until memories of my father come tumbling out. "But you must remember something, anything?"

"Let's see." He stretches his neck as he thinks. "I do remember that he liked birds. And, actually, there was some

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jazz song he used to listen to a lot, I think. Yeah. He liked jazz. Also, my mother used to make some Indian dessert once in a while and I think he taught her how to make it. But other than that, I don't know," he says. "My mother and him were married for less than two years. I was so young."

"Did she ever tell you anything about him?"

"She never talked about him much."

"Do you know why they split up?"

"I think my mother cheated on him," he says. "She cheated on her next husband too, so please don't take it personally."

"Is that all she said?" I ask. Gavin purses his lips, his lips that are long and thin like his fingers, lips that must have once kissed my father. He shakes his head and I'm sure there is something more, but he won't tell me, because it is something bad, and he is too kind to say it. But whatever it is, I doubt it is too detailed. His mother seems to have erased my father as he erased her. "Do you remember which jazz song he liked?"

"No," Gavin says. "You know, I didn't start listening to jazz until I was a teenager, but now I wonder if it might have been because of your father, he used to play that song when I was so young, and that must have made it part of my psyche, you know? And now I play trumpet in a jazz band, and I bet I've got him to thank."

Another customer arrives, takes a seat next to the old man in the middle. Gavin signals to him with his index finger. "I have to get back to work," he says, "but here's a flyer for my next show." I thank him and leave. It seems an unfair exchange, a handwritten card from my father for a flyer for his band, but you can't blame people for what they're unable to remember. How much should you blame them, then, for what they chose to forget?

The used cd store in Greenwich Village is empty except for the woman behind the register. I start browsing the jazz section. But I know nothing about jazz, and I don't know what my father would have listened to. He only played religious music in the car, Quranic recitations or qawwali music or songs praising Prophet Muhammad. Did he like

mainstream jazz? Duke Ellington? Or were his tastes more obscure?

"Are you all right?" the woman asks me. She's left the register and is standing right next to me, and I realize there are tears in my eyes.

"I'm not sure what to get," I tell her. "I have no idea what my father would have liked."

She selects seven cds that she says is a good sampling of the genre. At home, I put one in and pace around my apartment as I listen. I cannot sense my father in these notes. By the end of the first cd, I've realized it's no use. I won't find him in this music. It occurs to me then that Gavin might have been lying, that my father never even listened to jazz. But I play the cds anyway, all seven, in honor of the father I didn't know, who was once in love with a white woman, who carried his secrets in silence, like heavy, hidden tumors in his heart. Tomorrow, I will visit his grave. I will pray for him, and when the voices say Qul! I will speak.

