

Untitled

The day that I get back to Karachi, I am greeted with gusts of hot, sticky air, the debilitating condition of Jinnah International Airport and my dad in his uniform black shorts and tee. For a second, I scan the crowd for my mother and sisters but shrug off that momentary sinking feeling by reminding myself that it's 3 AM and that there is school to worry about and a life that doesn't revolve around when I enter and exit the city. The Karachi lights blink at me almost half-heartedly, different from the way they beckoned me from when I was up in the aeroplane, counting every last, aching minute until arrival. I see metaphors in everything, in the discarded paper plates strewn outside the airport, in the green fairy lights that drape the airport building as if a wedding garland, in my dad's sleepy eyes as he pulls me towards him and hugs me. Being an aspiring writer means I analyze and over-analyze the world around me and forget where the line between the two is drawn. I tell myself overthinking means there is always more material to create, more things to write about, more ideas to make art about. Most days, however, I want to switch my brain off, stop myself from the weird, fucked up pleasure of searching for signs in everything I see, signs of destruction and endings and wreckage. On the way home, we pass by a small Suzuki van that is blaring out pro-PTI songs. The truck holds more men than it seems to be able to support, looks as though it will get weighed down any second, crack under pressure, let the wheels roll off into the distance. But the truck stays intact and the men stay put and they sway along to the music, holding posters with Imran Khan's face plastered on it, shouting and screaming into the full night. Karachi really never does sleep.

'Elections on the 25th of July, huh?' Abba says while looking back over the passenger seat so he can reverse the car.

'Yeah. A long, long time away.' I say as I angle the A.C duct towards my face. My shirt, saturated with sweat, clings to my body and the mixture of the heat and the odd airport smell is too much for me to physically bear. I avoid getting into political confrontations with my family the first few days we meet because I know these arguments will only end up in me being exhausted and them being angry. So I veer away from the topic of Imran Khan and his boyishly good looks (the unfortunate focus of nationwide news broadcasters) and his sickly sweet appreciation for motherhood and simultaneous disregard of feminism. I veer away from such things. For now. For now, I tell myself.

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When I get home and everyone is asleep, the first thing I do is sink into a crate of mangoes. I peel off the yellow skin with a knife, licking it before I throw it in the trash to savor every last bit of juice, scrape off every last bit of fruit flesh with my teeth. Once the mango is peeled, I cut it into uneven cubes (my brother, if he was there, would have argued about the 'correct' way to eat a mango. He would've insisted that I ditch the knife and squash the mango straight with my bare hands and dig right in. He would have picked up the perfect *langra*, ripe and sunny, smelling like warm, fertile earth. I consider eating it like him for a fleeting moment but the moment is too far gone. The mango has been severed). I then save the mango pit for last so that I can scoop out the fleshiest, most flavorful part right at the end. Mango juice trickles down my arm and stains my mouth. I know that the sweet, almost floral fragrance will linger on my skin long after I have thrown out all remnants of the mango. I look forward to this.

When I'm on my fourth mango (I tell myself the 22 hour flight has made me hungry for home and nutrition in the form of carbs, that this ravenousness for mangoes is warranted), I look up at the time and it's 5:08 AM. Light is slowly creeping in through the blinds, illuminating my mother's cherished money plants, creating blue-tinted pools of light on the dining table. A

picture of the five of us framed on the wall hangs slightly awry and my hands are too stained to go get up and fix it. It's from my sister's clown-themed, fifth birthday party, the one where my mom forced us all to wear white shirts punctuated with bright polka dots. Wide, bright, camera smiles.

I remember reading on the Internet once about how South Asian families sit together on the dining table and make mango-eating a ceremonious, familial event. How they pass a tray full of ripe, cut-up mango slices around the table, picking one at every turn until the tray is empty. *Not this South Asian family*, I smile to myself. But the solitude grows on me for now. In this moment, things are good and pure and still.

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In the mornings, we have breakfast together. Abba's special French toast dipped in honey with cinnamon sprinkled over the top, Amma's omelette that she has to scrape off the skillet because the edges always burn, my poor attempt at a round desi ghee paratha. One time, because she's feeling special, Amma brings over a plate of fresh baklava that she bought from a small, local bakery. I pick apart the layers of pastry until the syrup sticks to my fingers, until the baklava no longer retains its own shape. A sweet, gooey mess. Then I eat it slowly in its unassembled form, the pastry melting in my mouth as if it were cotton candy.

Some days we eat silently and some days the room is swell with voices; there are heated debates on who gets the car and who stays at home and who drops off the laundry at the laundromat down the road. Sometimes someone will chime in with a story about the previous day, how they nearly fainted from the heat or how they found a cockroach inching towards them in the kitchen and let out a small scream or how exasperated they got when the intercom refused to work no matter the many different ways one held the receiver. Most

mornings I feel groggy until the chai washes over my body, jolts my brain awake and brings me some needed clarity. If there's one thing we all make differently, it is our chai. I like mine like Abba likes his: made only with milk, left on the stove for at least fifteen minutes so that it thickens gorgeously, inundated with tea leaves so that it strong and dark. Abba puts at least three heaped tablespoons of sugar in his own mug (he claims adding in the sugar directly to the pot will introduce a hint of bitterness, a taste only he seems to be able to detect) and I leave mine as it is. This is the only stage at which we differ in our chai-making process. My mother and sister, on the other hand, prefer the microwave, tea bag variety. Their chai is watery, thinned down, crisp tasting. It only takes a mere thirty seconds.

One Tuesday, when I am on the way to my friend's birthday party, Amma stops me before I can get into the car, eyeing my deep-necked, pink ribbed shirt that is tucked into my formal black dress pants. I give her a confused look, even though I know she is showing contempt towards my fitted outfit, the way it hugs the contours of my body, the way it carelessly, daringly transgresses her set expectations. She only looks at me with narrowed eyes, not moving her gaze for even a split-second while her mouth forms a tight-lipped grimace. This is the look that most scares me. I remember joking about this with her once, asking her 'How do you do it, Ma? Teach me your ways so I can fight the patriarchy with just that one look,' evoking only a small laugh from her, which meant that this topic was off-limits, that talking about that kind of anger would somehow mitigate its effect when it was needed.

'Har cheez ka mazaq banado tum bus. Kitni baar hum ne iss hi cheez ke baarey mein baat kari hai, Saira? ('Make everything into a joke, why don't you? How many times have we had this same conversation, Saira?'), she says now with anger lacing her voice, her gaze intact. She does not have to refer to what is bothering her or what she is so disgruntled about. She

expects that I will understand, that she does not really have to directly address anything at all. Sometimes, this is how we talk.

I shrug my shoulders and look nervously at the floor because all I want to do so desperately is avoid her piercing, drilling eyes. She silently pulls out a small white dupatta from her bag and hands it to me quickly, never letting her expression drop. It is as if she has been prepared for this. My first thought is to think of a noose (bright red, for some reason) and my second thought is that I am being too dramatic, that it could be worse.

Later, when I return home from the birthday party, things start to make more sense. I can hear the indistinct noise of the TV from the living room even though it is past midnight and I can see that Abba's wallet rests on the dining table (instead of on his own dresser inside, where it should be). These are my first clues. When I see the mismatched plates on the dining table—the floral one from the set that Aunty Lubna gifted to us with the grey one from the set my mom picked out on her own at Ikea—I know that my dad has had food alone. Nothing irks my mom more than contrasting plates when she has organized them so carefully in the kitchen cabinet, making it easy to keep them apart and distinct. Suddenly, it all makes sense: my mom's irritated mood all day, her snapping at my outfit, her silent treatment towards me in the car. Of course they had a fight. Why else would my mother feel the need to exercise her power over the only people she can? *Ah fuck*, I think to myself. *The patriarchy always finds a way to bite me in the ass.*

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I don't know if it's the loud bang of the door or the slow whimpering after that wakes me up from deep, consuming slumber. It could also be just my body's natural intuition (one that I

have come to rely upon), telling me that something is amiss. Deeply amiss. I stretch my legs and my anklet comes unclasped, getting lost somewhere in the folds of my pink shalwar (my mother hates that I can sleep in anything and everything, especially this new outfit embellished with gold *kaam* and laced with black satin: clothes too royal to spend more than a couple of stiff hours in). I fish around for it in the dark, slipping my hand under and over the blanket, only to grasp at nothing. I decide to look for it in the morning instead.

I get up and fumble to the door, putting my ear against the teakwood. I feel my ears strain, feel my body tighten. I brace myself. Even though I'm monitoring my breathing lest I make a sound, any sound and even though I'm focusing all my energy into what is taking place in the living room, I can't fully make out what my parents are saying. Strands of conversation reach me through the distance, foggy and muffled.

'I don't understand why we keep fighting over the same issues.'

'Maybe, if you-'

'No, stop it, Abbas. I'm sick of this blaming all the time.'

Silence.

Someone pours out a glass of water. I hear something drop to the floor.

'Oh, fuck.'

'You can't let out all your anger on her, she's barely eight. It isn't right. I know you're having issues with work, Abbas, I get it-'

'No, you don't.'

'Here we go again.'

'Don't talk to me like that.'

A longer silence. I imagine someone is glaring at the other. I imagine distance and stiffness. I imagine my mother's face, the way it contorts when she is feeling both anger and

inundating, flooding sadness. I have this sudden urge to go hug her, to wrap my arms around her. I can't remember the last time I did.

'You get too angry, Abbas. Too angry.' Her voice is quivering, it sounds as though I am hearing her through a static-filled telephone line, as if she is speaking from someplace very very far away.

There is the sound of chairs shuffling, of more stifled, indistinct talking. Every once in awhile, this is punctuated by a loud, stern 'No' or another sort of strong negation. I hear the exasperated thud of a glass on the table. I think of the blue tablecloth with the orange paisleys printed all across it and it getting soaked with water. Images of the whole house flooding suddenly float through my head. In my mind, the framed picture of us in the living room floats at the very top while everything else drowns at the bottom. Clown smiles. Ha ha.

I strain my ears harder. I don't know why I yearn to hear anything at all, despite knowing that nothing will make any sense at all. Words like 'selfish' and 'sick' and 'money' float through the air. I imagine these words as large, glistening bubbles, hanging over all our heads like a canopy. I think of what it would take to burst them, maybe a little prick here, a little nudge there. But the bubbles keep slipping away, too far to reach and to grasp. I imagine them sliding through my hands, gliding, slithering, falling. It's like fumbling around in the dark, under the covers, for something that no longer is.

I wake up the next morning, groggy and stiff. I'm curled up against the door, my hand still cupped to my ear. I imagine this to be some kind of fetal position and here, in this moment, I am reminded so much of my own childishness.

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The next few days, silence hangs over us like an overbearing cloud. One night, conversation on the dinner table is cold and awkward; it feels like stale bread and cool, bitter tea.

‘Saira, can you pass me the daal?’

I hand over the *pateela* to Abba.

The daal is piping hot and smooth. I scoop some with a piece of roti but it still manages to burn my hand. My mother reaches over for some salt and sprinkles some over her plate. My sister and I eye each other. All I can hear is the chewing of the chapati and the slurping of the daal. Even though the windows are open, I feel claustrophobic. The Karachi air is surprisingly cool and breezy and smells slightly salty like the sea.

My parents avoid each other’s gaze despite sitting next to each other and even their hand movements are guarded and constrained. I know that they are calculating each other’s moves, only reaching for the roti and daal when they know there is sufficient food on the other’s plate. I think of how exhausting these mind games must be, how much simpler it would be to just talk. But I can feel the heavy weight of unsaid words pressing on all our shoulders, even as we wipe our plates clean. Even though the roti is airy and pillowy soft, it gets stuck between my throat. Still, I know that my mother has only cooked this moong and masoor daal concoction because she knows it his favourite. I wonder if he realizes this.

Probably not.

‘Saira, can you take Hamna out for her dance class tomorrow? It’s at 5.’

I hear a noise from Abba, something between a snort and a sneer.

I look down at my plate.

‘Yes,’ I say, through a mouthful of daal. I pray that it is mostly inaudible.

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The birthday hat that rests atop my head is slightly tilted and my mother reaches across the table to fix it.

'There. Perfect. Make sure you serve the food to the younger kids first, okay?'

'Okay, Ma. Don't stress.'

The birthday cake sits royally on the table, decked with candles and studded with tiny pink flowers. It smells warm, like vanilla and cocoa. I imagine that when it's sliced open, fudge will ooze out and drip down the sides.

My five year old sister is excitedly running across the room with her friends. There are sharp screeches and the kind of frenzy and fervor that can only exist in this room, with 20 something five year olds let loose. Mothers sit together on the sides, cups of tea in their hands, exchanging simple conversation. Briefly, there is some wailing and a communal 'shush' follows after. Birthday music blares from the speakers and Barney songs are met with an especially resounding response. Someone trips over a chair and my mom scurries over, tending to the child's sudden outburst. I exhale deeply.

My mother really wants this to be a success. She has put her heart and soul into the decorations, picked out the balloons, hired someone to craft the most perfect, fluffy cotton candy sticks. The children congregate around the machine, watching, mesmerized. I can't help but notice either. I watch as the most stunning, crystallized pieces of sugar morph into a pink cloud. Unable to resist, I ask the cotton candy man for one stick, please. I let the sugar dissolve on my tongue. Just as easily as it was created, it is gone. Magic.

When Abba arrives in his polka dot suit, there are hoots and laughter. He is grinning, obviously pleased with the attention. He can't help but be a little bit shy though. My mother

walks across the room and puts her hand in his, laughing. Her own polka dotted kameez is flying in the wind, free.

Later, when the cake is being cut, my parents stand on either side of my sister. People are singing 'Happy Birthday' and my sister stands there in the midst of it all, beaming. My parents both hold her hand as she holds the knife and lets it glide across the cake. To my surprise and dismay, there is no fudge oozing out. Instead, the knife is sticky with chocolate. My mother helps cut the cake into more, somewhat even slices. Then plates are passed around. I get the slice with too few sprinkles and my mouth is stained with cream and chocolate. I feel like a kid. Within minutes, the cake is finished, devoured, eaten up.

Towards the end of the ceremony, someone suggests we get a family picture taken. My brother's name is shouted across the room, my sisters are fetched, I am lurking somewhere nearby. My parents stand in the middle, smiles plastered on their faces. Only my mother looks slightly tired. I am standing next to my dad, his arm across my shoulder. Next to my mother is my brother, taller than her, smiling his shy, awkward camera smile. My sisters sit in front of us, trying to stifle their giggles.

Flash.

When the picture is later printed out, Abba jokes that it looks as though we all belong to the circus. As though my parents are the master trainers, us their apprentices, at once ready to do their bidding. My youngest sister says she wants to be the main star, the primary character. We start calling the picture 'The Circus Photograph.' Everytime I look at it, I feel as though I smell a little bit of warm cocoa and fireplace vanilla, reaching into my nostrils from somewhere very very far away.

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In the Karachi heat, I have frenzied, feverish dreams.

Because of the annual 'loadshedding' (a term that I have grown up with, a term that gets thrown around in conversation on the dinner table and slides into speeches made by prominent political figures), the nights are sometimes without electricity. For a few moments before the generator kicks in, it is pitch-black and quiet. We can hear our hearts thud, someone's exasperated 'Abey yaar' cuts sharp through the silence, then there is the engineered 'vroom' of a generator and some of the lights come back on. The fan whirrs at a slower speed and we toss and turn in our beds.

Sweat trickles down my face and the pillows are damp. Still, I cling onto my blanket—a childhood practice hard to let go of. When I am finally sleepy enough, the heat stops mattering and I slide into soft, easy sleep.

But the dreams are more vivid than I ever remember them being. There is an undercurrent of rage to them and shades of red make the insides of my eyelids their home. One time, I dream about being inside a white Suzuki tumbling into the ocean. In my dream, I fall. It's almost as if I can physically feel the phenomenon, as if my body is quite literally untethered, as if the ground beneath me has somehow inconspicuously dissolved.

In one especially jarring dream, mangoes take centre stage. My family is seated on the table and the silence is grating even in my imagination. My mother whips out a knife and starts carving into the mangoes in front of her, tight-lipped, not saying anything. The mango skin slithers down on the blue plate placed on the table; fleshless, clean, void of any fruit. All of us robotically pick one slice up but before the plate can be emptied, Abba abruptly gets up and walks away. In the distance, I hear the tap water running.

In the morning, I wake up in sweats.

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One July morning, I wake up to Amma cooking up an elaborate feast. In the kitchen, she is stirring two pots. In one, mutton is stewing slowly with some haldi, elaichi, chilli powder and saffron. In the other, she is boiling potatoes for what will be the chilli-speckled stuffing for *aalo parathas*. In the oven rests a round dish with a biscuit crumb base and when it has baked sufficiently so that it is beautifully golden, I know that Amma will pour her special citrusy-sweet lemon meringue on it, as she has done millions of times before. The kitchen smells unlike any one food and its fragrance can only really be characterized as warm; from the heat of the spices and of the pie. As my mother stands stirring and shaking and sprinkling, the indistinct smell of the food wafts through the entirety of the house. When I ask her why she is making all this food, she only offers me a sad smile.

It is only when we are all seated together for breakfast and one of the chairs is glaringly empty that I start to worry. I would have attributed it to Abba's early work shift or some other odd errand that he had to run but something feels different. I look at questioningly at my mother but her eyes do not give.

'Where's Abba?'

My mother's eyes twitch. 'Oh, he had some work.' She waves her hand dismissively.

'Do you want the raita with the paratha? I put in the fresh tomatoes from Aunty Naila's farm. She just sent them in this morning. What a pure soul, no? She always sends us something. Remind me to send something back. Maybe we can make our coffee cake on the weekend.'

'Jee, just some.'

When she is pouring the raita on my plate, her hand hovers above it for a second. She looks at me as if about to say something, then stops.

For the entirety of the meal, she engages in small talk. As we nibble on our food, my siblings and I answer her questions about schedules and the incoming school year and summer camps. By the time our plates have been scraped clean, my mother's food remains untouched and her spoon remains unturned. I give her another long look. I can see that she is mustering all energy within her to ignore it.

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When we're finished and as my siblings and I get up to clear the table, my mother interjects.

'Choro, Saira and I will do it today. You guys go wash your hands.'

When it is just my mother and I, my mother closes the door behind us. She sighs. It is the kind of sigh that emerges from deep inside her lungs, as if she is exhaling every perturbing thought out of her body, trying to cleanse it of worry.

'He left.'

Silence.

'What do you mean? Who left?'

'You know what I mean, Saira.' There are creases on her face that seem permanent, as though they can never be erased, no matter how hard one tries.

Silence, this time longer.

Then.

'When?' My voice is uncharacteristically low.

'Last night. I don't know what happened. It just...it just got out of hand. He says he has left for good. He just...he just..his stuff is packed. I don't know, I don't know. Oh God.

Saira..Saira, *ab kia/what now?*' Her voice is dramatically soft, almost a whisper. It is laced with

panic and with confusion and suddenly, I feel too old. I have never heard my mother sound like this. I'm not sure I'm ready to.

My mind is whirring and a pang of actual physical pain flashes through my head. I hug my mother's trembling body and mumble 'It's alright, Ma, it's alright,' rocking her to and fro, to and fro.

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Outside, gunshots fire. I can hear excited voices and large, incoherent noises that echo on the roads. It is midnight and even as some parts of the cities turn to sleep, cars blare on the roads as if the day has just begun. Distant music sounds. Someone chants 'Jiye Bhutto Jiye Bhutto' (Long Live Bhutto) and then there is an exaggerated 'boo' in response. Tomorrow, voters (mostly men but an increasing number of women) will flood the polling stations. Inked thumbs will decide the country's fate. Or so it is believed.