

Pye Dog

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[Published in the journal Five Chapters as Pariah Dog (September 15-19, 2014)]

No one in any of the stores actually saw the dog get run over. Kamal vaguely heard the car screech-thudding away but didn't pay attention. He was focused on picking out the caked dirt from between his toes. The highway was on higher ground than the shops and he was oblivious to the burnt-caramel dog sprawled on the street, its guts spilling out like some unquenchable secret.

A while later he noticed some street-kids swarm onto the road, their subdued shouts rousing him enough to go and investigate. He spotted the slumped brown form from a distance, the boys hunched around it, poking and prodding. Kamal vaguely knew them all, he had seen them—boys and dog—sniffing around the dumpsters.

By then the boys had dragged the dog to the side of the road. Kamal could see blood pooled in the middle of the road, bright on the yellow lines. There were russet drag marks on the dark tar leading to where they hunkered down by the dog and small globs of matter spotted the uneven red of the spilled blood. Kamal swore under his breath. They should have left it there, so the next overloaded truck or bus whooshing by finished the job. How long could the damn dog live?

The dog's stomach, surprisingly, had not ruptured. It had probably been a small car, not heavy enough to kill the dog. What it had done, however, was to squeeze the torso enough for the dog's bowels to pop out through the buttohole.

Kamal stood on the other side of the fallen body as the boys straightened up. They were smaller than he was, the youngest of them almost a head shorter. They resembled each other in their uncared-for look: scabby, sore-filled arms and legs, snot-dribbled faces, dressed in rags, string, bent safety pins. One of them had long greasy hair, scrunched at the base of his head in a ponytail. Ponytail took a step towards Kamal. "That's our dog," said the boy. The stick in his hand tapped the earth near the dog's head.

Kamal looked at him without flinching. "That's nobody's dog. Don't try bullshit me."

The stick stopped tapping and began drawing long, slow arcs in the yellow dust. "We brought it here," he said.

"Yeah? Well then, help me take it farther," said Kamal. The boy seemed to be thinking about it and looked back at his friends, as if trying to gauge from their reaction what his should be. "What were you going to do with it?" Kamal asked. There was a still, drawn-breath quality to the early afternoon sun, as evening waited to jump in. Before the boy could answer Kamal, the dog moaned, the sound almost human in despair.

Kamal knew kids that age. He didn't want to give him too much time to think. "We could go down to the store and get a sack or something. Roll the dog onto it, and we're in business, we just pull it along."

One of the other boys spat on the ground. "I'm not going around pulling no damn dog."

The dog moaned again. Its eyes were filmed over, a milky opaque gaze hiding the usual serene brown. Ponytail stared at the dog uncertainly and then at Kamal. Kamal's voice was barely above a whisper. "You've brought it this far. We can save it."

Ponytail kept his eyes on the dog as he spoke to his friend. "You were happy enough pulling it along. You don't want more, buzz off then."

“Oi, you playing nursemaid to that dog? What’ll you do once you get it down there? Suck its titties?”

Ponytail looked up. “Don’t you smacktalk me, you *chudir bhai*.”

Kamal bent down and picked up a rock. He stood still, arm slack against his side, hand close-fisting the rock. He was older than them, bigger. He worked in the store which gave him clout. But there were three of them and no one else around.

Before it could go any further, the third boy spoke, “Come *on*, leave him!” He tugged at his friend. “He always been crazy—leave him to the dog!” The boy resisted, and then turned on his heel. “Johir and his doggy mamma, titty sucking lickly fucking,” he screamed in a falsetto and the two of them ran off, screech-birding their way down the slope, through the gate, into the campus.

Kamal and Johir looked at each other, and the boy threw down his stick. Kamal opened his fist, letting the rock thud softly onto the ground. The dog had begun to shake uncontrollably. It tried to bark, but all that came out was a guttural gurgle, as if its very voice was in the grip of some great malady.

Kamal threw out, “Wait there,” to Johir and ran towards the store. He grabbed a used sack from the back, and a plastic tray. Johir was on the ground beside the dog when Kamal panted back. He sat beside Johir, and pulled out the lime green plastic tray from under his arm. Carefully they spread the sack beside it. Kamal lifted the red and pink fleshy tubes snake-coiled on the road and placed them carefully on the plastic tray. The blood had already begun to clot, ruby jam seeded with dirt. The dog’s gut felt heavy and squishy as he lifted it, the body unwieldy. As they pushed and tugged, the sacking kept getting shoved away. Johir held the sack down on the ground while Kamal pushed the dog onto it.

The two of them grabbed onto parallel corners of the sacking and began pulling. It was easy enough with the two of them. The dog was silent, the steady quiver of its body broken now and then by a strong juddering that ran through it as if trying to survive in deep winter.

“You taking it to the store? Will the boss let you keep it?”

They had almost reached the storefront. Their passage had cut an uneven trail on the dirt behind them, as if some giant snail were making its way home. Kamal felt thankful the store was set away from the other shops and this was the lazy part of the day—there was no one to see what they were doing. He hadn’t thought of Forid *mama*’s reaction to the dog before this, so far he had been operating on an instinct that only allowed him the planning of the next few minutes.

“I don’t know,” he said to Johir. “I’ll have to try.”

Forid had hired Kamal to work at Modern Departmental Enterprise three months to the day the dog got run over. That very morning he had given Kamal a raise. His wife’s brother sent Kamal to him; so far he had not been disappointed. The raise was deserved and he knew how desperately Kamal needed it.

Modern was separated from the other stores in the Gate One line by the gate itself. Gate One, the main entrance to the campus, rose black and imposing and was the only gate diligently painted every year. The black metal shone: the marker for the black tar road of the outside world to stop and the red brick pathways of the campus to begin.

The secure promise of the gate was broken by the half-built wall that stemmed from it. The wall extended about twenty feet on either side of the gate, and then there was just grass and vegetation and the occasional pile of eroded bricks. The bamboo, wood and tin frames of the stores clung to the wall desperately, the wall’s stability holding them up until the temporary

frames could be transformed into something sturdier. Forid's store had been one of the first to build side walls in cement as solid and gray as the main wall.

Of the shops bordering the campus entrances, Gate One stores were more lucrative. Gate Two was near the student halls and Gate Three at the far south side of the campus near the Third and Fourth Class employee housing. Gate One was only a block away from the teacher-officer residences, and the Gate One stores stocked higher-end groceries. Modern was the only store on campus which sold goods people could do without quite well.

At first Forid had stocked almost the same things as all the other Gate One stores; gradually he introduced 'luxury' items. Made-in-China stamped teddy bears and dolls; Tibet pomade jars; perfumed coconut oil; cheap makeup; the cheapest of costume jewelry; ashtray-photo frame-penholder-in-one ceramic ornaments. The *Khalammas* wouldn't do their fancy shopping at his store; they went to the city twenty miles away. But it was the servants who mostly came by to pick up groceries, and the girls always lingered at his store a few minutes.

The store would not have been possible without the help of his former employer, the Science Dean. The Dean's wife had insisted that not only should Forid be found a job (as was the custom for longstanding boy-servants), but he also be loaned the capital for business. The Dean often liked to pronounce on how Forid was a successful experiment in vertical mobility.

Kamal and Johir had decided to put the dog furthest from the gate-side, behind the outer wall of the store, a half-built extension of which jutted out. On tiptoes, Johir could barely see over the wall. It was near enough to where Kamal stood behind the counter that he could take two steps and see the dog at any moment, yet cloistered enough to keep the dog hidden from the customers.

Forid usually popped in briefly during lunchtime to check up on everything and then again, finally, after 5pm, when he had finished his day as Peon at the Registrar's office. Usually, he would already be at work by the time Kamal picked up the shop-keys from Forid's wife.

Kamal gazed at the growing darkness as he mechanically wiped down the already clean counter. In his mind he was trying to phrase how best to broach the subject to Forid mama. He was a nice guy and treated Kamal well. But what if he got pissed off? What if he said to get rid of the dog? What if he took away the extra money he had promised Kamal?

Kamal couldn't afford to lose this job. His grandmother had done the best she could after his parents died, even sending him to school for several years. But this year they ran out of luck: she lost her job in the kitchen at the women's hall, foxes took the one egg-laying chicken, and the roof—the thatch rain-rotten to the rafters—caved in. The only way to make ends meet was for him to work. For now, they were barely scraping by between her piecemeal jobs of sewing, quilting, day-laboring, and his wages.

Johir had run home soon after they had settled the dog in. He had to stand in line at the communal tubewell for drinking water before his mother got home. They had cleaned the dog as best they could with a low whimpering accompanying all their actions. Johir had brought an armful of marigold leaves and the two of them crushed them in their hands, their palms staining green with the juices. Carefully, they applied the mush around the anus of the dog and the other small nicks in its skin.

Kamal had placed an earthen plate with raised sides near the dog's head, in case it got thirsty. The dog followed their every movement with its eyes. Johir sat beside him. "It's okay, we'll make you better." He curled his fist around its snout. "You see that snout? How sharp and

pointed it is? This mutt has Sarail blood. My granddad used to work as a *darwan* for a big family, they used to keep Sarails to guard the grounds. They can be pretty ferocious.”

Kamal didn’t know anything about dogs. The dog seemed even less responsive than before and he wondered whether they were just messing about making it harder for the creature to die. He remembered his grandfather, bedsores eating away the skin all across his back and sides, calling to anyone within earshot to end his misery. He had died eventually. But not before they had sold off the only piece of jewelry his grandmother had ever owned, her tiny gold nose-pin, to pay for medical expenses.

He walked to the wall and peeked. The dog had fallen asleep soon after Johir had left. Kamal made sure it was only sleep by placing his hand on its neck every now and then.

“Hey, Kamailla,” a voice barked at him. “What are you doing there?”

Kamal hurried back behind the counter and pulled out a Mirinda from the fridge. “Nothing, sir. What else can I get for you today?”

The Doctor was a regular customer. He would stop by the store at the end of his brisk evening walk, mopping the sweat pouring off himself with a green checkered handkerchief. His other hand hefted his heavy brass-headed mahogany walking stick. Kamal had heard many stories about that stick on his visits to the medical center for his grandmother’s medication. Often times the doctor would give Kamal the medicine for free—he got so many samples—along with colorful strips of various vitamins.

The daily walks did not seem to be doing his cotton-filled sack of a paunch any good, but it ensured a daily sale for Modern. The doctor’s regular purchase of soda was accompanied by various sundries. Every week he would complain that Forid should expand to selling fresh

vegetables so he didn't have to walk to the end of the stores to reach the vegetable vendors. Forid would merely smile and say, "Your blessings, sir, that's all I need."

The doctor sat down in one of the chairs lined up along the narrow space in front of the counter and gulped the bright orange drink. "I think we need lentils again, I don't know what that woman does with them. Probably boils them with her tea and drinks them by the gallon. I only have half a bowl at dinner, I know how much protein's good for me. Bag two kilos, will you?"

Kamal busied himself with the order as the doctor tried to remember what else his wife had told him to buy. A low keening arose from behind the wall. "There's a dog howling nearby," the doctor commented.

Kamal hurriedly pulled at the ball of string hanging from the ceiling and tied up the brown paper bag. "Sir, do you want a polythene bag? Anything else?"

The doctor stood up. "Wait a minute, that sounds strange. Is that a dog or what?" Before Kamal could say anything he walked to the wall. Kamal stood motionless, unsure of what to do. "What the hell is this?" The doctor looked back at him. "Don't just stand there, bring some light."

The doctor's recovery from surprise, demand for an explanation and subsequent curious examination did not take long. "Oh, I've seen this before. It's rectal prolapse, happens all the time." Kamal's uncomprehending stare made the doctor attempt to explain in layman's terms, "Its large intestine, okay, its *bowels* have come out of its butt."

"Will it die?"

"Possibly. Maybe not. I don't know. What do I know about dogs' bowels?"

Kamal hesitated before asking, "Sir, would you give some medicine for him?"

The doctor's brow creased. "*Ei chhemra*, what, you think I got a medical degree from the best school in the country to treat pye dogs?"

Kamal focused on the soft rise and fall of the dog's stomach. The doctor still had the flashlight Kamal had given him feebly lighting up the dog's torso and despite the gore, darkly maroon in the shadows, he felt a resilient warmth flowing towards them. "It's also Allah's creature, sir. Shouldn't we..."

"Well, your tongue has certainly grown!" The doctor snapped the flashlight off and gestured with it toward the shop. "Get my stuff together, you little *matobbor*. What has your Allah ever done for me that I should take care of His creatures?"

Kamal slipped behind the counter again. The doctor told him to bag a kilo of rice and two of potatoes. Kamal wondered whether he should point out that he always bought five kilos of rice at a time.

"So what did you do to clean it up?" The doctor's belligerence lessened as Kamal explained. "Did you use boiled water to clean it?" He nodded approvingly at Kamal's answers. "Iodine. You need iodine. And then you'll need a topical antibiotic. So it doesn't get infected. I think there's some Fucidin in my office. This'll need a lower dose, a dog weighs less than a person." He glared at Kamal. "Don't ask me how you're supposed to give it medicine. That's not my headache."

Kamal grinned, and swallowed the grin immediately as Forid walked in.

The doctor wasted no time. "So Forid, I hear you're opening a veterinary clinic here?"

Forid smiled uncertainly, used to the doctor's strange jokes. Kamal looked at the doctor pleadingly and he relented.

“Kamal should come by tomorrow morning to pick up an antibiotic for the dog. I also told him...”

“Dog?”

The doctor looked at Kamal and shrugged. “Well, Kamal?”

Kamal began explaining breathlessly what had happened and if Forid mama let the dog stay just for a few days until it got better and Kamal would keep it clean as best he could. Before Forid could say anything, the doctor held up his walking stick. “It might be just a street dog, Forid, but I have it on good authority that it’s also one of Allah’s creatures. You shall gain much *sowab* for sheltering it in time of need.”

Kamal had dreaded the moment the doctor would leave. Forid was by nature a quiet man and he couldn’t gauge what he was thinking. “Mama, shall I get you your tea?” he asked timidly. Forid nodded silently and pulled the daily ledger towards him. But when Kamal returned, carefully balancing the covered cup in his hand, Forid was standing at the wall contemplating the sleeping dog.

“Are you sure it’s not dead?” he asked. Kamal put the cup on top of the wall and waited. The dog moaned in its troubled sleep. “What if roaches come at night? Or jackals? There’s blood there, Kamal, it’s all out in the open.”

Kamal didn’t know how to answer. It was a stray dog after all. It was used to the streets. If it couldn’t push through the dark of night clinging only to luck and the vital force of life, what business did it have living anymore?

Later, when everyone knew about the dog and repeatedly told Forid why this was such a bad idea (dogs are dirty; it might die right in front of his store; it might attract more dogs; that

boy Kamal thought he could do as he pleased; that other boy hung around here all the time, and who was he anyway?), Forid surprised himself with the calmness that never seemed to leave him. He didn't touch the dog himself. But every afternoon he would stand by the wall and the dog would be curiously silent, even its usual movement stilled for the few seconds he came to visit.

He accepted Johir's presence as an unfailing and additional mark of the dog's existence. Johir would come and go throughout the day, but come the evening, he would be there, ready to run off for Forid's tea, piping hot and thickly milky, as soon as he walked up to the bone-bare wall.

It was over a week after that first day that they became certain the dog would not die. By then the boys had named it: Makku. It seemed a silly name to Forid, a word that meant nothing. The doctor would take a look at the dog almost every evening when he came for his soda. He had considered getting Kamal and Johir to shave the wound area and decided against it, showed the kids how to keep the wound clean, apply the antibiotic ointment, the right doses for pills and powders. Forid joked to the boys that Makku was probably getting the most and the best medical attention in the history of the campus.

The boys shadowed the doctor every second. The doctor would reach for his soda on the wall and find Johir near his elbow holding it up. He would park his things somewhere—on the wall, on the counter—and find Kamal had folded his handkerchief neatly beside his groceries for the day, his walking stick leaning against the chair. Forid would ask every other day whether Kamal should deliver the groceries to his house and be roundly scolded (“What, you think I'm too old and weak to carry a bag of onions myself?”).

Doctor Sir would lumber off after downing his Mirinda and Forid would sit at the counter with his second cup of tea, examining the ledger while Kamal filled him in on the day's happenings. He was proud of how quickly he had made a go of the store and thoughts of expansion were constant in his mind. He was slowly paying off his debt to Dean Sir and soon it would really be his store. It would be *his*.

That evening the doctor examined Makku longer than usual. Then he asked Kamal for a polythene bag. He slid his hand into the opening of the bag and scrunged it shut mid-arm. With the makeshift glove he lifted the dog's protruding intestine, and moved it this way and that, trying to gauge something. Makku had grown used to being handled and made no protest. He sat with his head resting on its front paws, ears flopping in a dispirited manner.

"It's going back," Doctor Sir finally pronounced. At first they didn't understand what he meant. Perhaps in their minds Makku's extra-appendaged condition was so entrenched they couldn't see beyond it.

"He's going to live?" Johir asked cautiously.

"Of course, it'll live," the doctor said. "People get this sort of thing and live, why should a dog be any different?"

Kamal bent to get a better look. Makku sensed his nearness and looked toward him barking softly. He could see no difference but to him it sounded as if the dog's bark had become louder and steadier, as if some essence that had been leaking away had finally stopped and was returning full force.

The doctor had told already them what to expect. The trick was to not let it get infected. If they could manage that for a few weeks, the body would start to heal itself. Life insists on

taking control, he had said, we're nothing more than quacks, riding on the coattails of nature's remedy for what befalls us.

Kamal had understood none of it apart from this: they would do their damndest and hope.

Once he could see for sure that the dog's gut was indeed retracting, inch by inch every day, as if the old moon-witch sat inside Makku's belly with her eternal loom winching it inwards, Kamal began toying with the idea of rigging up a cart-type thing with cardboard boxes to help Makku walk. But it was unnecessary; two more weeks and Makku stood up, tottery and uncertain, balancing improperly, but up. It was only for a while, and he couldn't take more than two steps at a time. Kamal was the only one who was there when it happened and he celebrated by buying an extra piece of chicken in the rice-lentil-vegetable lunch he had begun to share every day with Johir.

Before Forid could respond to Mijan's accusation, Kamal said, "Mama, don't you think it'll bring bad luck to the business for us to kick out Makku?"

Forid looked at Kamal through narrowed eyes. The kid had spunk; he'd need it to survive this world. He turned to Mijan and said, "I don't see how it concerns any of you guys. My store is way over here, slam on the other side of the gate. That dog, how exactly is it driving away your customers? They can't even see it."

"They don't need to. We all know this place, everyone knows you have a diseased dog there," Mijan tried to argue.

"He's not diseased," Johir piped up.

"*Ei haramjada chhemra*, you stay quiet. Why are you butting in? Do you belong here?" Mijan almost spat at the boy.

His vehemence silenced the three of them for a few seconds. Forid said quietly, “He’s right though. The dog’s *not* diseased. And it’s getting better, the doctor said so.”

“And the other thing, these street-dirt kids. This one,” Mijan gestured with his chin towards Kamal, “brings in all kinds, feeding them and whatnot. Do you know what they get up to? They’re all thieves, every single one. Will you pay our losses when they paw our stuff?”

Kamal protested. “But Johir never...”

Forid raised his hand to calm everyone down but was interrupted by another voice that cut through it all. “Well, Forid, I hear you’re keeping a dog here?”

Forid was surprised. The *khalammas* usually sent servants to pick up whatever they needed. The Dean’s wife was accompanied by a young boy carrying a fabric bag. Forid knew what was in the bag: a couple of balls of brightly colored yarn, knitting needles, a carved silver box containing *khalamma*’s *paan* leaves and condiments for her addiction. The *paan* had turned her teeth a peculiar orange-brown and the tobacco leaf she added to her concoction had killed her taste buds so she required extra spice in everything. Although there weren’t too many customers for it, Forid stocked a few bottles of the *naga marich* pickle just for her.

He stepped into the shop and said, “You didn’t have to come, *khalamma*, I’ll deliver whatever you need...” Mijan had slunk away, leaving Forid grateful for her intrusion.

Khalamma nodded. “I know. No, I came to see the dog. Your sir was saying all its insides are hanging out and it still lives. I thought I’d stop by. You’ve been feeding it? Where is it?”

Forid shrugged. “It’s not me *khalamma*, it’s that boy, stubborn as a tortoise. We keep it outside, I can show you if you want. It doesn’t look as bad now. Doctor Sir is advising us and giving medicine. The insides have started going back in. I think we saved it this time around—we’re sending Azrael back empty-handed.”

Khalamma said, “I want to see it. But Forid, you shouldn’t talk like that. Whether a living creature survives or not, you have nothing to do with it. What power do you have? It’s all Allah’s will, never forget. And don’t talk about Azrael *fereshta* like that either, he’s Allah’s messenger. Be respectful.”

Forid bowed his head and said nothing. As she stepped out of the store, *khalamma* picked up the pleats of her pale blue cotton sari to keep them away from any possible pollution and waited. “Well? Show me.”

Forid walked her to the corner. Makku was asleep, its ears flicking now and then. Johir had been sitting beside the dog, but had retreated to the darkness when he heard them. *Khalamma* bent down to get a better look at the dog. It was hard for her, she had grown increasingly heavy-bodied through the years. The bag-bearing boy sidled near the protruding entrails and squatted on the ground.

“Don’t touch it, you idiot,” *khalamma* said. “It’s unclean. You’re bound to touch something of mine afterwards.”

The boy grinned but said nothing. Forid said, “Kamal takes good care of it, *khalamma*. Doctor Sir said the way to keep it from not getting infections was to keep it clean. He’s doing his best.”

Khalamma straightened up with a soft grunt and said, “Don’t talk like an idiot, Forid. It’s a dog, of course, it’s unclean. The Holy Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) said it’s unclean, so it’s unclean. It doesn’t matter how many times you wash it.”

Forid wasn’t sure exactly where the Holy Prophet had said this so stayed silent. Not that even if he had known he would have disputed the fact. One did not argue with *khalamma*.

“How long are you going to keep it? Keeping a dog on the premises where you stock eatables is unseemly.” *Khalamma* pondered her own pronouncement as she gazed at the supine figure.

Kamal said, “But Doctor Sir said...”

“What do doctors know?” she dismissed all medical knowledge with a wave of her hand. “And you, stay quiet. I’m talking to Forid. Forid, haven’t you taught him any manners? Barely as old as my right knee, but thinks he can have opinions.”

Forid shot a look at Kamal and apologized to *khalamma*. The dog had begun to push the front half of his body up with his front paws for the past few days. Its head turned this way and that as they talked, awake now and tuned to the sound of known voices.

“Forid!” *Khalamma* said. “Something’s moving there! Another dog!”

Johir stepped forward from the darkness, a half-eaten bun in his hand. It wasn’t only his lunch Kamal shared with him. “Arrey!” said *Khalamma*. “Where did this *chhemra* spring from?”

Forid explained Johir’s role in Makku’s rescue. *Khalamma* looked him up and down and nodded approvingly while instructing Forid to make sure the boy cleaned himself up because he looked dirtier than the dog. Johir stood where the light met the night’s shadow and ventured no closer.

“Do you go to school?” she asked him. “Who do you live with?” Johir shook his head and said nothing.

“His mother works for Alim Sir’s house,” Forid supplied.

“Hashi’s son,” *Khalamma* said, looking at Johir with a new interest. “What do you do all day? Run about being a nuisance, yes? And stealing fruit off the trees.” She shook her head.

“Poor Hashi’s busy feeding all your mouths, she has no time to discipline you.”

Johir said, “I used to go to school. *Amma* said she’ll send me to school again, but right now she can’t buy me all the things for school.”

“I’m sure she will.” *Khalamma* nodded at Forid. “Hashi’s a hard worker. Poor thing, that husband of hers, gave her five children and then just upped and left. Well, what can be done, that’s what poor people do.” *Khalamma* headed off, the boy with the bag in tow. She had a dinner and a nice chat to attend to.

“*Amma* said we’d starve before she let my sister work in anyone’s house,” said Johir. It was Friday afternoon and Forid was still dressed in his one good *panjabi* and white trousers worn for the *Jumma* prayer. Some Fridays Forid’s wife would cook an improved diet—*polao* instead of rice, a handful of shrimp in a thick red sauce, sometimes chicken. One week’s chicken would reappear the next week in leftover odds and ends: skin pieces, neck, wingtips, feet, hot and spicy in potatoes and eggplant. She would send a container of food for Kamal sometimes; enough these days for both Kamal and Johir.

The two boys were busy sucking on bones and licking the last of the chicken gravy off their tin plates as Forid watched. “*Amma* said she work for a family when she was my age and they didn’t give her enough food and they hit her. She said...”

“It’s not so bad,” said Forid in his tranquil manner. “It depends on the family, I was lucky I guess. There are some bad *maliks*, but most of them are nice.” He looked around him. “Look at how they set me up.”

Makku was sitting nearby, waiting patiently for the boys to finish. He knew the bones would soon be coming his way. He had begun to take a few tottering steps now and then. He didn’t seem to be hurting much anymore, and the protruding segment of gut seemed more a

dangling annoyance than a wound. Kamal had left a little shred of chicken on his piece. He threw it toward Makku managing to land it just out of reach of his jaws. The dog pushed himself up on his front legs then pulled his hindquarters forward. Just a little bit. He ran his pink tongue over the tiny bone before settling in to chomp on it.

“*You* were lucky, mama,” Kamal said. “But don’t you remember that girl from Nalki? And then those two other girls who were pushed off the roof?”

“Yeah! And this other girl in our neighborhood...”

Forid listened with half an ear. There were extreme cases, of course, but, no, beyond a slap on the cheek now and then—and only when he deserved it—*khalamma* had not hit him. And he had never gone hungry in that house.

When they were done Kamal and Johir stacked all the dishes to wash up. The dog followed them to the slope leading to the calm waters of the pond. Most of the water’s surface was covered in water-lettuce and water-hyacinth, the lush green occasionally broken by the golden-hearted light purple of the flowers. The pungent odor of the foliage invaded their nostrils, the very air in thrall to the green. Kamal recalled his agriculture science class in his last year of school: the water-hyacinth is a non-native plant that has invaded the water-bodies of Bengal due to their free floating nature and prolific reproduction capacity. However, efforts are being made to make good and productive use of the water-hyacinth. The flowers were pretty though. But then flowers always were.

Johir stayed by the pond with Makku while Kamal took back the plates and aluminum tiffin box and stacked them neatly in a polythene bag. He would carry them home for Forid after they closed shop for the night. They would walk part of the way home together most nights, until

Forid's path turned away from his. But Fridays he walked with Forid to his gate, carrying the boxes and the small bundle of groceries Forid took home every week.

Forid was talking to the Science Dean who had just arrived. Kamal's low-voiced "*Salamaleikum*, sir," went unnoticed as the Dean questioned Forid about the business. "Well, it's good to know you're using my money wisely," said the Dean. "I said yes because your *Khalamma* wanted you to have this, but I wasn't sure you were mature enough to take care of all these matters."

Forid murmured, "Your blessings, sir, that's all I need."

The Dean peered at the shelves behind him and his brow creased. "Forid, I don't think you should stock these makeup type things here."

The Dean had said this before. But Forid and Kamal both knew the business was doing well mostly because of these items.

"You'll have all these young girls loitering here for no reason. And then the boys will follow. That's not the kind of environment we want." Forid's usual response to such comments was to keep quiet and nod. The Dean only came in now and then anyway. *Khalamma* would send her servant for groceries and when Dean Sir wanted an update on the store, the servant would make another trip, this time to get Forid.

The Dean was prevented from further comment by Forid. "You needn't have walked all this way from the mosque, sir, why didn't you send that *chhemra*?"

"Don't talk about that ungrateful *haramjada*," the Dean voice rose uncharacteristically. "He's run away. Just ran off in the middle of the day. Did we treat him badly? You know us, it's not as if we're like other employers, beating or mistreating them in anyway." He shook his head, "They're too clever for their own good these days."

Forid made sympathetic noises.

“I don’t understand why he wants to go back to the village, his father barely managed to feed them all once a day.”

Forid said, “I guess he missed his family.”

The Dean snorted. “Family? When we hired him, his father begged me for a onetime lump payment, saying money and regular meals was compensation enough for that boy. Because we’re generous people we didn’t agree. And anyway, he might’ve come back later accusing us of not paying wages, you can’t trust poor people over money. These people don’t have family feelings.” Forid remained silent as the Dean Sir went on, “You know how hard it is to find good help these days, Forid. It’s your *khalamma*’s fault actually. She has no idea how to treat servants, she’s too lax. Not all of them are like you. She lets them climb on top of her head and then can’t control them.”

“Sir, I was meaning to take this bottle of pickle for *khalamma*,” Forid said. “Maybe I should come around this afternoon, after she’s done with her nap.”

But several days went by before Forid stopped in to see *khalamma*. It wasn’t a long visit, as they never were, for Forid was usually there to run some errand. Yet when he returned to Modern he had lost his usual repose. As if he had swallowed some bitter fruit, his nostrils flared, the sides of his mouth turned slightly downwards. In a while the bitter rose within him and he could contain it no longer. He told Kamal pointblank: *khalamma* wanted Johir to come and work in their house. She had approached Johir’s mother, who had refused. Hashi was unwilling to let any of her children work as house-servants, she wanted her children with her.

Khalamma felt affronted. Trying to protect a daughter she understood. There was always a risk of what a girl might get herself into. But a boy? Why would Hashi not grab at the opportunity to give Johir to her? Didn't they see Forid and his good fortune? And people should also consider how hard it was on her, at her age she couldn't be expected to maintain this household by herself. So now, it was up to Forid: he was responsible for bringing Johir to her and cajoling the mother into agreeing.

"They'll never agree," Kamal said. "Why should they?"

That was a question Forid had no answer to. "But don't you think he'll be better off?" Kamal looked at him and then looked away, without saying anything. Forid felt helpless before Kamal's gaze—this boy knew more than he had ever understood. Or let himself understand.

The silence between them continued like a ball of yarn dropped on a slope, growing smaller the longer it unwound. Forid walked to the wall—the dog was not there. Makku had regained mobility and was gradually increasing the boundaries of his rediscovery of the area. But Makku was usually here at this time, when Forid came. Johir wasn't here either; where was Forid's tea? Kamal should have gotten it by now. Was he paying the boy to take care of that damn dog?

Kamal spoke suddenly. "Johir hasn't been here all day. Maybe his mother told him not to come here anymore." Forid realized he didn't even know where Johir lived. But why was he even wondering about that? What was that boy to him?

Kamal asked, "What did you say to *khalamma*?"

Forid was saved from answering as a bark sounded from behind the wall. Makku was back. He had figured out the rules of his world and never entered the store. When Makku wanted

one of them he barked from behind the wall; if impatient, he trotted to the entrance and bark. But he never came in. Makku knew the boundaries.

Kamal called and Makku came to this side, twisting to lick his hands as he rubbed him all over. “Bad Makku dog, where were you? You’ve missed your pills.”

The antibiotics were over, but the doctor had prescribed a new one for a week because the few inches still hanging from his butt looked redder than usual. Kamal put the pill bottle on the counter and brought out a small piece of cream-bun. That’s how he and Johir made Makku take his pills—they crushed it and then kneaded the powder into a milk-sogged piece of the bun.

Forid felt mesmerized by Kamal’s movements and watched as if his eyes could sense the very ripples in the air. The Dean’s voice from behind took him by surprise. “Forid, have you taken care of your *khallamma*’s request? We need someone quick, I can’t be traipsing here, ferrying groceries at my age.”

Forid felt Kamal’s eyes on him as a frantic scrambling arose in his head. Various answers scrabbled for a foothold and then plunged into unformed thought. Makku had retreated behind the wall and they could hear him make snuffling noises.

“But they don’t want to,” he said finally. “Hashi and Johir don’t want to.” It seemed strange to him that this crystal-clear answer had evaded him a few hours ago.

“Don’t want to?” The Dean repeated as if mouthing a language that sat heavy on his tongue. His brows creased as he noticed what Kamal was doing. “You’re buying drugs for that beast, is that how you’re using my money? You’re rich enough to do charity for animals now? Bighearted, eh? Well, then, make a donation to the orphanage, I won’t mind. But stop this nonsense. Get rid of that damn animal, Forid, I’m warning you.”

Before Forid could say anything, Kamal broke in. “He’s not spending anything. Doctor Sir gives us free drugs for Makku.”

The Dean looked at Kamal fully for the first time. “Is that so?” He said slowly. “You *have* learned your way around, haven’t you.” Forid wasn’t sure which one of them the Dean was talking to.

“Sir,” he said. “It’s almost better, it can walk. But it’s used to being here now. I rickshawed it to the other side of campus this week, it keeps coming back.”

“Then take it farther. Farther enough so that it *can’t* find its way back.”

Forid looked at the Dean’s fingers tapping out a steady staccato on his chipped countertop. He didn’t understand. There were many strays around the campus. Why was this one making the Dean angry?

“But, sir...”

The tapping stopped. “I’m warning you, Forid. This is too much.”

“I’ll find a boy for you,” Kamal said suddenly. “I’ll find a young boy, not too clever. So he doesn’t run away. He’ll take care of the cooking and the rest of the household. Until then I’ll come in the mornings to get the shopping list and bring the groceries back by afternoon. You won’t have to come here anymore.”

It was probably the longest speech Kamal had ever made. Neither of the men said anything to the boy. Kamal spoke up again. “You won’t need to come here. You won’t have to see the dog.”

The Dean turned towards Kamal, but before he could say anything, Forid held up a piece of paper. “It’s the shopping list from the house, sir. I brought it from *khalamma*.” He put it down

on the counter, between them. “I’ll take all the things home to *khalamma* in a little bit, sir. You don’t have to worry about it, you can finish your walk.”

The Dean looked from one to the other, as they stood side by side behind the counter. Forid had grown up in the Dean’s household; for years and years Forid had seen him first thing in the morning when he carried in the hot water for the Dean’s morning shave. He had been the last person to see the Dean at night when he went to his room to put up the mosquito net. But they had never exchanged many words. Servants were the women’s business anyway.

The Dean brought out his wallet and stood clasping it in both hands as if he didn’t know what to do with it. He ran a tab for them but the Dean could never remember to pay it off monthly, and Forid never asked. The last time Forid had been paid must have been several months ago. “How much do we owe you, Forid?” he asked. “Look in your books. I keep forgetting.” The Dean turned to look at the unfinished wall. The grey was now covered with uneven splotches of paint. Those boys must have been monkeying around, Forid thought. “I keep forgetting,” said the Dean. “I guess I’m getting old.”

Forid said, “It doesn’t matter, sir. I’ll look it up. I can settle my accounts with you later. It’s getting late; it’s time you went home.”

The night felt quieter than usual as Forid looked out into the darkness. Kamal was bustling about, readying everything to close shop. There were times that took up space in one’s life in a way that could never be repaired. After leaving home to come to work at the house, he had seen his mother twice, perhaps three times, before she had died. By the time the news had reached him, she had been buried two weeks, his father already on the lookout for a replacement wife.

He had come to this campus when he was eight. He had been one of the lucky ones—*Khalamma* and Dean Sir were both kind, generous people. *Khalamma* had even taken the trouble to teach him to read and write. And when sir had caught him trying to read advertisements in the newspaper, he had sent Forid to school. None of the other servants he knew had gone to school. He couldn't be enrolled in the university school, of course, because that was for the children of university staff and who wanted their child sitting next to a servant? So Forid rode the public buses to an out-of-town NGO school which allowed him to attend at Sir's request. And he had completed the nine years of schooling that allowed him his job now. He had had a good life so far, hadn't he? Perhaps it was now time to look at different kinds of luck.

He turned to Kamal and said, "I'm going to make this store bigger. I've applied to extend a fence and awning over that wall. We'll sell tea and snacks. We don't have any of those this side of town. It'll do well, I know it will. Maybe Johir can help bus the tables. He'd have to be here on time, regularly. I'll pay him a wage." The night air was heavy with the scent of jasmine. Forid thought of the saying that jasmine at nighttime drew snakes. He had always wondered about that, were the snakes too drawn to the delicate beauty of the tiny blooms?

"I'll ask him tomorrow," Kamal said.

Kamal stood with his back to the store, his eyes towards the east. It was much too early for them to consider opening the store. Forid mama had called at his house before the sun had risen and made him come down here with him. Kamal didn't understand why, but he felt content to stand by him, watching the dawn cut through the swathe of darkness like a knife.

With the retreat of night, the glorious green spread in front of them like driven desire. The bunch of keys hung from Kamal's hand clinking against his thigh. His body felt weightless; as if a breeze light enough to ruffle the grass would be enough to lift him to the skies.

Forid said nothing and Kamal didn't ask. Makku had woken up, and hobbled over to stand by their side. The wet nose snuffled against Kamal's palm now and then, quick and sweet. The sunlight was growing stronger, everything around them limned and glowing, the very air sharply white. The day lay ahead of them.