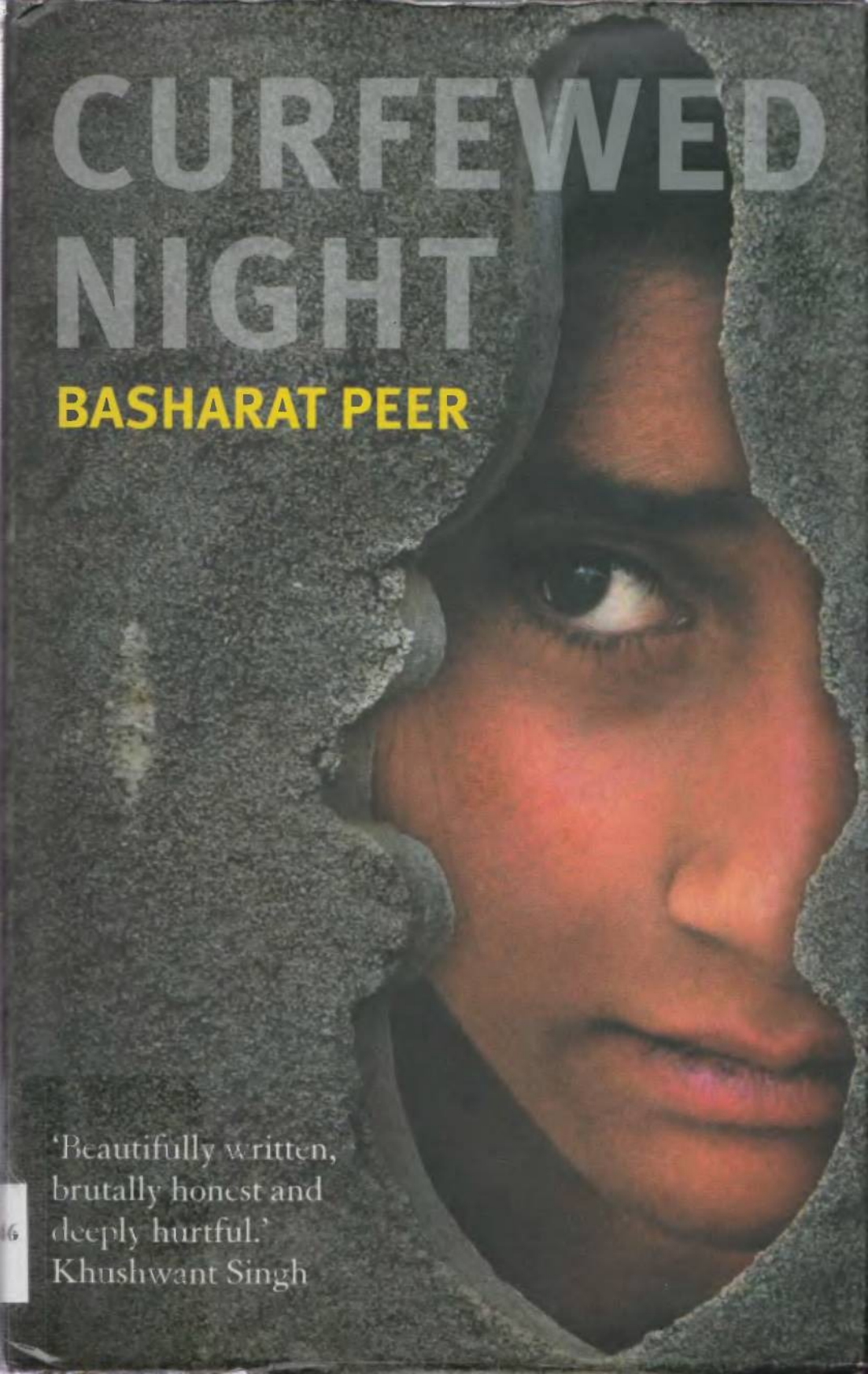
CURFEWED NIGHT

BASHARAT PEER



'Beautifully written, brutally honest and deeply hurtful.'
Khushwant Singh

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In the memory of the boys who couldn't come home

For
my parents,
Hameeda Parveen and Ghulam Ahmad Peer,
and for baba,
Mohamad Ahsan Sheikh

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*

Chapter One

I was born in winter in Kashmir. My village in the southern district of Anantnag sat on the wedge of a mountain range. Paddy fields, green in early summer and golden by autumn, surrounded the cluster of mud and brick houses. In winter, snow slid slowly from our roof and fell on our lawns with a thud. My younger brother Wajahat and I made snowmen using pieces of charcoal for their eyes. And when our mother was busy with some household chore and grandfather was away, we rushed to the roof, broke icicles off it, mixed them with a concoction of milk and sugar stolen from the kitchen, and ate our homemade ice creams. We would often slide down the slope of the hill overlooking our neighbourhood or play cricket on the frozen waters of a pond near the hill. We risked being scolded or beaten by grandfather, the school headmaster, on the way back home. And if he passed by our winter cricket pitch he expressed his preference of textbooks over cricket through his dreaded shout, 'You good for nothings!' At his familiar bark the cricket players would scatter in all directions and disappear. School headmasters were feared like military and paramilitary men are, not just by their grandchildren but by every single child in the village.

On winter afternoons, grandfather joined the men of our neighbourhood sitting on the storefronts warming themselves with kangris, our mobile firepots, gossiping or talking about how that year's snowfall would affect the mustard crop in the spring. After the muezzin gave the call for afternoon prayers, they left the shopfronts, fed the cattle at home, prayed at the neighbourhood mosque, and returned to the storefronts to talk.

Spring was the season of green mountains and meadows, blushing snow and an expanse of yellow mustard flowers in the fields around our village. On Radio Kashmir, they played songs in Kashmiri celebrating the flowers in the meadows and the nightingales on willow branches. My favourite song ended with the refrain: 'And the nightingale sings to the flowers: Our land is a garden!' When we had to harvest a crop, our neighbours and friends would send someone to help; when it was their turn we would reciprocate. You never needed to make a formal request weeks in advance. Somebody always turned up. During the farming season, Akhoon, the mullah, who refused to believe that Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon, complained about the thinning attendance at our neighbourhood mosque. I struggled to hold back my laughter when the villagers, anxious to get back to farming, coughed during the prayers to make him finish faster. He compromised by reading shorter chapters from the Quran and then turning up at the fields to collect a seasonal donation—his fee for leading the prayers at the mosque.

In summer, after the mustard was reaped, we planted rice seedlings. On weekdays, before we left for school, my brother and I took samovars of kahwa, the sweet brew of saffron, almonds, and cinnamon, to the labourers working in our fields. On weekends, I would help grandfather and other men carry sacks of seedlings from the nurseries; my mother, aunts, and other neighbourhood women bent in rows in the well-watered fields, planted and sang. Grandfather would always keep an eye on a farmer whose holdings bordered our farms. We would see him walking towards the fields and grandfather would turn to me, 'So whom do you see?' 'I see the Mongoose,' I would reply. And we would laugh. A short, wiry man with a much wrinkled face, Mongoose specialised in diverting water to his fields, or grazing the sides of our terraced fields to push the wedge further and increase his landholdings by a few

inches—things that would lead to arguments. But Mongoose, grandfather, and all other villagers worried about the clouds and the rainfall. Untimely rain could spoil the crop. If there were clouds on the northern horizon, they said, there would be rain. And around sunset if they saw streaks of scarlet in the sky, they said, 'There has been a murder somewhere. When a man is killed, the sky turns red.'

Over more cups of kahwa, the grain stalks were threshed in autumn. Grains were stored in wooden barns and haystacks rose like mini-mountains in the threshing fields, around which the children played hide and seek. And the apples in our orchards would be ready to be plucked, graded, packed into boxes of thin willow planks, and sold to an apple merchant. Village children stole apples; my brother and I would alternate as lookouts after school. Few stole from our orchard; they were too scared of my grandfather. 'If they steal apples today, tomorrow they will rob a bank. These boys will grow up to be like Janak Singh,' grandfather would say. Many years ago, Janak Singh, a man from a neighbouring village had killed a guard while robbing a bank. He was arrested and sent to prison for fourteen years. Nobody had killed a man in our area for decades.

On the way back from school I would often stare from the bus window at Janak Singh's thatch-roofed house as if seeing it once again would reveal some secret. My house—a three-floor rectangle of red bricks and varnished wood covered by a cone of tin sheets—faced the same road, a mile ahead of Janak Singh's. I would stand on the steps and watch the tourist buses passing by. The multi-coloured buses carried visitors from distant cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and Delhi; and also many angrez—the word for the British, and our only word for westerners. The angrez were interesting; some had very long hair and some shaved their heads. They rode big motorbikes and at times were half-naked. I had asked a

neighbour who worked in a hotel, 'Why do the angrez travel and we do not?' 'Because they are angrez and we are not,' he said. But I worked it out. They had to travel to see Kashmir; we lived there and did not need to travel. We waved at them; they waved back.

Father had bought me an American comic book dictionary, which taught words using stories of Superman, Batman, Robin, and Flash, the scientist who controlled electricity. I would often read it by the jaundiced light of our kerosene lantern and think if Flash lived in Kashmir, we could have asked him to fix our errant power supply. I preferred reading the comics to the sums my grandfather wanted me to master. They added new stories to the collection of Persian and Kashmiri legends I heard from my grandmother and our servant Akram—legends such as the tale of the commoner Farhaad's unrequited love for Shireen, the queen of Persia, who agreed to a rendezvous if he would dig a stream of milk from a mountain to her palace.

My family ate dinner together in our kitchen-cum-drawing room, sitting around a long yellow sheet laid out on the floor, verses of Urdu and Farsi poetry extolling the beauty of hospitality painted in black along its borders. Dinner often began with grandfather leaning against a cushion in the centre of the room, then turning to my mother: 'Hama, looks like your mother will starve us today.' Grandmother would stop puffing her hookah and say, 'I was thinking of evening prayers. But anyway, let me feed you first.' And she would amble towards her wooden seat near the earthen hearth above which our tin-plated copper plates and bowls sat on various shelves. Mother would put aside her knitting kit or the papers of her students and briskly move to arrange the plates and bowls near grandmother's throne. Wajahat would half-heartedly bring out the long yellow sheet and I would fill a jar with water and get the bowl for washing hands. 'Call the

girls,' mother would say and I would go upstairs to announce to my aunts that dinner was ready.

Two of my younger aunts—Tasleema and Rubeena—still lived with us; the others were married but visited often with their kids and husbands. Tasleema, the geek, always poured over thick chemistry and zoology texts or prepared some speech for her college debating society, practising her hand gestures in front of a mirror. Rubeena didn't care much about textbooks but had great interest in women's magazines, detective fiction, and Bollywood songs that always played at a low volume on her transistor, strategically placed by her side, to be switched off quickly if she heard someone climbing the stairs. We would form a circle with grandfather as its nucleus and eat. Almost every time we cooked meat or chicken, he would cut a portion of his share and place it on my plate, and tell Tasleema to bring a glass of milk for Akram, who would be visibly tired after a long day of work at the orchards or the fields.

We would gather in the morning around a samovar of burgundy coloured salty milk tea and then grandfather and mother left to teach and my aunts, my brother and I left for our colleges and schools. My school, a crumbling wooden building in the neighbouring small town of Mattan, was named Lyceum after Plato's academy. Saturdays meant quizzes, debates and essay competitions. Once I got the first prize—three carbon pencils and two notebooks wrapped in pink paper—for writing about the hazards of a nuclear war. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were just names to memorise for a quiz, as were the strange names of those bombs—Little Boy and Fat Man. I concerned myself with learning to ride a bicycle, with playing cricket for my school team, grabbing my share of fireen, a sweet pudding of almonds, raisins, milk, and sooji topped by poppy seeds, served during a break in the nightlong prayers at our mosque before Eid, or trying to stretch the pre-dawn eating time limit during Ramadan.

We woke up much before dawn during Ramadan. Grandmother and mother heated the food and the traditional salty tea. Grandfather read the Quran; Wajahat and I yawned till we ate. We ate quickly because you had to stop eating after you heard the call for prayers. Often we would take a few more bites after the azaan, peeping out of the kitchen window and turning back to say, 'You still can't see the hair on your forearm without artificial light.' The expression dated back to the times when there were no watches. People determined daybreak by looking at their arms. If they could see the hair on their forearms, they decided it was dawn and would stop eating. Despite Japanese electronic watches, the tradition came in handy when you were trying to gulp down some more tea or eat another morsel. Grandfather, who ate little, would repeat his much-heard lecture on the purpose of fasting: 'We fast to understand what hunger means and to learn to be kind to the poor.'

Towards the end of Ramadan, the talk about the meaning of fasting would lessen; and my brother and I would grow excited about the festival of Eid. On the twenty ninth evening of fasting, everyone searched the sky with great hope for the silver sliver of a new crescent announcing the end of fasting and confirming Eid the next morning. But the orange sun seemed to slide behind the jagged mountain peaks with great reluctance, as if it was being imprisoned for the night. All the neighbourhood children would stand in the courtyard of our house staring at the horizon, as it changed from shades of red and orange to a darker blue. We looked and shouted at each other, 'You saw it?' 'Not yet.' Soon we would run up the stairs of our houses, continuing our search from the windows, our shouts growing louder as we moved from the first floor to the second to the third. If the crescent remained evasive, my brother and I would scuttle back to the kitchen, where grandfather would be

jumping from one radio station to the other hoping for reports of crescent spotting.

Every morning of Eid, mother would prepare kahwa. My brother and I followed father and grandfather to a clearing on the slope of the mountain, overlooking the village shaded by walnut trees which served as Eidgah, the ceremonial village ground for Eid prayers twice a year, and marked as such by an arched pulpit in a western corner from where the imam led the prayers and read his sermon. We met relatives and friends on the way. Everybody dressed in new clothes and seemed happy. Some twenty horizontal prayer lines would be formed on jute mats brought from our mosque. The prayers lasted only a few minutes but a very long sermon followed. The preacher gave the same sermon every year and my friends and I would look for ways of slipping away. Our parents, relatives, and neighbours gave us Eidyaneh, pocket money to spend on toys and crackers.

Young men and adolescents from our village would hire a bus, go to Heaven cinema in neighbouring Anantnag town, and watch the latest Bollywood film. I wasn't allowed to join them, but after they returned I was riveted by their detailed retelling of the movie. I would populate their stories with the faces from movie posters. The canvases, covered in bright reds, yellows, greens, and browns, hung from electricity poles by the roadside or were ferried around the village once a week on a tonga while an announcer standing beside the tongawallah dramatically proclaimed the release of a new movie from a megaphone. Every poster was a collage of hyper-theatrical expressions: an angry hero in a green shirt and blue trousers, a pistol in hand and a rivulet of blood dripping from his face; a woman in a red sari tied to a pole with thick ropes, her locks falling on her agonised face; the luxuriously moustached villain in a golden suit smoking a pipe or smiling a treacherous smile.

I would spend most evenings doing my homework. I remember, one evening, being distracted by the strains of a Bollywood song coming from our neighbour's house. I tried to focus on the sums but the answers kept going wrong. Grandfather slapped me and left the room; it was expected, a routine. Every schoolboy got a few canes and slaps for not doing his homework properly. Grandfather tried to ensure that no music was played in our house; anything that he considered un-Islamic was forbidden. Mohammed Iqbal, the great Urdu poet and philosopher of Kashmiri ancestry who had studied philosophy in Munich, was influenced by Nietzsche, and propagated the ideal of Superman-like Muslim youth, was welcome. Bollywood actresses dancing around trees, singing songs of love and longing could lead to bad grades, and worse: a weakened faith. Once I did not come first in class and hid under my father's bed to escape a beating. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child,' grandfather loved to say. He spent about two hours every evening giving me lessons, checking my notebooks, smiling if I lived up to his expectations, scolding me if I failed. He wanted me to be like his best student: my father.

Grandfather was teaching in a high school in a neighbouring village when he noticed an eighth grade student. Ahmad was the brightest in the school, and also one of the poorest—an orphan who was being raised by his quite poor cousins, who wore ill-fitting hand-me-downs and torn bathroom sleepers instead of unaffordable shoes. Grandfather felt that with a good education and family support Ahmad could go far, and he would often mention him to his wife. 'Go, talk to his family. We can support him,' she told her young husband. And thus my grandfather became a mentor and a de facto father to the young Ahmad. Ahmad taught at a private school while in college; after graduation he got a high school teacher's job like my grandfather. Then, some of my grandfather's friends had

an idea: they knew of a suitable boy for his eldest daughter, Hameeda, who too had graduated from college and become a teacher. Ahmad and Hameeda had known each other since school. They were married. A year later, he qualified for the competitive selection test for the Kashmir Civil Service and was appointed a magistrate. And then I was born, their first son. Father's job kept him away most of the time.

On most Saturday evenings throughout my childhood in the mid eighties, a blue Willys jeep would drive to my village in southern Kashmir. It would follow the black, ribbon-like road dividing vast expanses of paddy and mustard fields in a small valley guarded by the mighty Himalayas. Two or three floor mud and brick houses with tin and thatch roofs faced the road. A few were brightly painted and most were naked brick; dust and time had coloured their rough timber windows and doors a deep brown. A ground level room in every third house had been converted into a shop. Villagers who routinely sat on the wooden shopfronts to gossip, talk politics and cricket would wave at the jeep. A not-so-tall man in his early thirties, almost always wearing a suit, a matching tie, and brown Bata shoes would raise his right hand in greeting. If you saw him up close, you could see his deep brown eyes, straight nose, plump pink cheeks, and beginnings of a belly. The Willys would slowly come to a halt in a village square, not far from a blue and green milestone that bore the name of our village: Seer, 0 kilometres.

Father would step out near a modest, naked brick house next to a grocery store and a pharmacy. People at the shopfronts would say, 'Peer Sahib is here.' They would rise from their seats and a chorus of greetings and hands would welcome him home. The first hand father shook was that of my grandfather, whose face would blush with pride. I would run towards father and grab the piles of books, newspapers, and office files he carried. Father would sit in his usual corner

in our drawing room, facing the road. I would run to baker next to the pharmacy and get fresh local bread. Mother would bring a boiling samovar of tea, noon chai, the pinkish, salty Kashmiri tea.

Father would tell me stories from the papers and encourage me to read newsmagazines, answering my questions over more cups of tea. In one of those sessions he told me that he wanted me to join the Indian Civil Service when I grew up. It was a professional exam, tougher than the provincial Kashmir Civil Service, which led to higher positions in the bureaucracy than my father had gotten. 'He didn't have the resources and time that you will have,' mother said. Father began preparing me, bringing me children's books about politics, history, and English literature, books like Lamb's *Shakespeare* or *One Hundred Great Lives*. We would read them together every time father came home. One of his heroes was Abraham Lincoln and he talked a lot about how Lincoln read by street light and how through his hard work and honesty Lincoln became the president of America. In a few years we had made the transition to spending Sundays reading *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.

In 1988, when I was eleven, father sent me to a government-run, subsidised boarding school in Aishmuqam, a small town five miles from my village. I was bad in sports and spent long happy hours in the library reading Stevenson, Dickens, Kipling, and Defoe. I got to see less and less of father as he had been transferred to Srinagar, the Kashmiri capital. But when we were home together, we took our usual places and father taught me poetry. He would recite a few verses from a poem and say, 'If you explain the meaning you will get two rupees.' That was a lot of pocket money and I tried hard.

A year later, in December 1989, I returned home for my winter holidays, hoping to join father for the winter

vacations in Srinagar. A week later, a group of armed young Kashmiris led by a twenty one year old political activist, Yasin Malik, kidnapped the daughter of the Indian home minister. Malik and his comrades demanded the release of their jailed friends. After negotiations the Indian government gave in. People cheered for the young guerrillas. Despite the rather sleepy existence of our village and my ignorance about the political history of Kashmir I had a sense of the alienation and resentment most Kashmiri Muslims felt and had against Indian rule. We did not relate to the symbols of Indian nationalism—the flag, the national anthem, the cricket team. We followed every cricket match India and Pakistan played but we never cheered for the Indian team. If India played Pakistan, we supported Pakistan; if India played the West Indies, we supported the West Indies; if India played England, we supported England.

In 1987, India and Pakistan were playing each other in the finals of a very popular cricket tournament in the United Arab Emirates. On the day of the match, the atmosphere in the bus I took home from my school was charged. Men, women, and children—some standing in the aisle and others on seats—huddled around radio sets, straining to catch every word of the commentary. Pakistan was chasing a difficult score set by India and the number of balls it could play was running out fast. I stood in a corner behind the driver's seat and watched the driver push harder on the accelerator and continually take a hand off the wheel to raise the volume of the transistor on his dashboard. Everybody wanted to get home for the final phase of the match. Every time Javed Miandad, the short, stocky Pakistani batsman, missed a ball, the bus erupted in a chorus of swearing. Every time he hit the ball and scored a run, the passengers let out loud exclamations of joy.

The bus stopped in the tiny market near my house. Excited crowds had gathered at the pharmacy and the butcher's shop near my house. The match was about to end. Abu, the old butcher, was biting his lips. I rushed to drop my school bag off at home. In our drawing room, my grandfather, my aunts, and my mother sat in a circle around the radio. Grandmother sat facing Mecca on a prayer mat, seeking divine help for the Pakistani team. Outside, Abu the butcher was biting his lips. The commentator on the radio said, 'Pakistan needs three runs on one ball to win this match. Chetan Sharma will be bowling to Javed Miandad from the pavilion end of the stadium.' I ran outside; the crowd was tense, silent. Abu's hands fell to his sides. 'There is no chance. Just no chance!' Then he seized his radio set and smashed it on the road. We watched the broken pieces of the radio scatter and then gathered around Amin, the pharmacist, and his radio set. Chetan Sharma, the Indian bowler, was about to bowl the last, deciding ball of the match to the Pakistani batsman, Miandad. The commentator told us that Miandad was scanning the cricket field, deciding where to hit the ball when it reached him. That he bowed westward towards Mecca in prayer. That he rose from the ground and faced Sharma, who was running towards the wickets. Sharma was close to the wickets and a tense Miandad faced him. The stadium was silent. Sharma threw the ball. It was a full toss. Miandad swung his bat. Almost everyone stepped back and waited. Silence. Amin pushed the sleeves of his shirt up to the elbows, Abu continued biting his lips, and I boxed my left palm with my right fist. The commentator shouted: 'It is a six! Pakistan has won the match. They have scored three more runs than required.' People hugged each other, jumped around, and shouted over the din of the celebratory crackers.

Kashmir was the largest of the approximately five hundred princely states under British sovereignty as of 1947. It was

predominantly Muslim but ruled by a Hindu maharaja, Hari Singh; the popular leader, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, preferred India to Pakistan and an independent Kashmir to both. When India was violently partitioned in 1947, both Singh and Sheikh Abdullah sought time before deciding Kashmir's fate. In October 1947, however, tribesmen from the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, supported by the Pakistani army, invaded Kashmir, forcing their hand; Singh decided to join India, and Sheikh Abdullah, who was a friend of the new Indian Prime Minister, Nehru, supported him. In January 1949, the fighting stopped after the UN intervened. The UN endorsed a plebiscite for Kashmiris to determine which country they wanted to belong to and created a ceasefire line. It still divides Kashmir into Pakistan-controlled and India-controlled parts, and is now known as the Line of Control (LoC).

The agreement of accession that Hari Singh signed with India in October 1947 gave Kashmir great autonomy. India controlled only defence, foreign affairs and telecommunications. Kashmir had its own constitution and flag; the heads of its local government were called the president and the prime minister. Gradually, this autonomy disappeared. In 1953, India jailed Sheikh Abdullah, who was now Kashmir's prime minister, after he implemented a radical land reform and gave a speech suggesting the possibility of an independent Kashmir. In the following decades India installed puppet rulers, eroded the legal status of Kashmiri autonomy, and ignored the democratic rights of Kashmiris. Sheikh remained in jail for around twenty years; when he was released, he signed a compromise with the Indian government where he gave up the demand for the plebiscite that the UN had recommended. Sheikh spent the remaining years of his life in power, and the period (also of my childhood) was relatively peaceful. In 1987, five years after Sheikh's death, the Indian government rigged state elections, arresting opposition candidates and terrorising their supporters.

Yasin Malik, who led the militants of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, had been one of those arrested and tortured by polling agents. Malik and his friends found immense popular support. The bottled up resentment against Indian rule and the treatment of Kashmiris erupted like a volcano. The young guerrillas challenging India were seen as heroes—most of them had received training between early 1988 and late 1989, and they had in turn secretly trained many more within Kashmir. In the next two months, the Indian government responded ruthlessly. Hundreds were killed and arrested after Indian troops opened fire on pro-independence Kashmiri protesters. It was January 1990; I was thirteen.

The war of my adolescence had started. Today I fail to remember the beginnings. I fail to remember who told me about aazadi, who told me about militants, who told me it had begun. I fail to remember the date, the name, the place, the image that announced the war of my adolescence, a war that continues. Time and again I look back and try to cull out from memory that moment which was to change everything I had been and would be.

The night of 20th January was a long and sad night. Before dinner, my family gathered as usual around the radio for the evening news on BBC World Service. Two days earlier, Jagmohan, an Indian bureaucrat infamous for his hatred of Muslims, had been appointed governor of Jammu and Kashmir. From his palatial residence on the slope of the hill bordering Dal Lake, he gave orders to crush the incipient rebellion. Throughout the night of 19th January, paramilitary men slammed doors in Srinagar and dragged out young men. By morning hundreds had been arrested; curfew was imposed. Kashmiris poured out onto the streets in thousands and shouted slogans of freedom from India.

One protest began from a southern Srinagar area where my parents now live, passed the city centre, Lal Chowk, and marched through the nearby Maisuma district towards the shrine of a revered Sufi saint a few miles ahead. Protesters were crossing the dilapidated wooden Gawkadal Bridge in Maisuma when the Indian paramilitary, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), opened fire. More than fifty people were killed. It was the first massacre in the Kashmir Valley. As the news sank in, we all wept. The massacre had occurred a few hundred metres from my father's office. Mother was certain he would be safe. 'He wouldn't leave for office on a tense day like that. He will be fine,' she said. 'And he will never go near a procession,' grandfather added. But there was no way to get the same assurance from father, hearing his voice for a few minutes. There were no phones in our village. Grandfather walked out of the room onto the lawn; we followed him. Our neighbours had come out as well. We looked at each other. Nobody said much. Later that night I lay in my bed imagining the massacre in Srinagar.

Kashmiri mornings are full of activity. I would wake up to the banging of utensils in the kitchen; the sounds of chickens running around in the courtyard after grandmother let them out of their coop; one or the other of our neighbours herding their cattle out to take them to graze on the mountainside; the brisk footfalls and chatter of village women passing by on their way back from the forest, carrying bundles of fir and pine branches they gathered for timber; repeated honking of the first bus leaving the village calling passengers; the newsreader's words in a wooden, static baritone floating from our black Philips transistor on a windowsill in the kitchen.

But the village was unusually silent that morning. Hasan, the neighbourhood baker, who entertained customers with his wisecracks as we waited for him to pull out fresh lawasa

from the oven, looked sullen, slapped round loaves of dough inside the oven with a ferocity I had never seen in him. He stared at the flames leaping out of the oven, turned towards me and said, 'Those murderers will burn in a fire far brighter than this. I cried when I heard it on the radio last night.'

The shops did not open and buses did not leave the village. There was no way to reach father. The District Post Office in Anantnag, which had a public telephone, was closed. Villagers stood around on the sidewalks, by shopfronts, and on the road passing through the village, repeating how they heard the news on the radio. I felt anger spread. A young man raised a slogan.

'Hum kya chahte?'

'Aazadi!'

(We want?

Freedom!)

He repeated and we repeated after him: 'We want?' 'Freedom!'

The protest gathered momentum. Voices that were reluctant and low in the beginning became firm and loud. Old and young women appeared in the windows of the houses we passed by. New chants were created and improvised. A young man raised an arm towards a group of women watching the procession from a communal tap and shouted, 'Our mothers demand!' The crowd responded: 'Aazadi!' He repeated: 'Our sisters demand!' The crowd: 'Aazadi!' A rush of adrenaline shot through me and I marched ahead of my friends and joined the leaders of the procession. Somebody, who was carrying his young son on his shoulder, shouted: 'Our children demand!' 'Aazadi' resonated through the village.

By February 1990, Kashmir was in the midst of a full-blown rebellion against India. News on the radio became the news of defiance and death. Protests followed killings and killings followed protests. News came from Srinagar that

hundreds of thousands of people had marched to pray for independence at the shrine of the patron saint of Kashmir, Nooruddin Rishi, in a town an hour away from Srinagar. All over Kashmir, similar marches to the shrines of Sufi saints were launched. Another day I joined a procession to the shrine of a much-revered Sufi saint, Zain Shah Sahib, at Aishmuqam near my school. A few young men wearing white cotton shrouds led us. They seemed to be in a trance, whirling like dervishes, singing pro-independence songs. I walked behind them, repeating their words in complete wonder. Men, women, and children stood on the sidewalks, offered food and beverages, and showered flower petals and shireen, round, white balls of boiled sugar and rice, on us, a practice followed in shrines and at wedding ceremonies.

The crowd itself was a human jumble. The contractor who carried whisky in a petrol can and the uptight lawyer who would wait for passers-by to greet him, the tailor who entertained the idle youth in his shop with tall stories while poking away on his sewing machine and the chemist who would fall asleep behind the counter, the old fox who bragged of his connections with Congress politicians in Delhi, and the unemployed graduate who had appointed himself the English-language commentator for the village cricket team's matches, the Salafi revivalist who sold plastic shoes and the communist basket weaver with a Stalin moustache, all marched together, their voices joining in a resounding cry for freedom. Amid the collision of bodies, holding of hands, interlocking of eyes in affirmation and confirmation, the merging of a thousand voices, I had ceased to be a shy, bookish boy hunched by the expectations of my family. I wasn't scared of being scolded any more; I felt a part of something much bigger, unknowingly making a journey from I to We. I let myself go, fly with the crowd. *Aazadi!* Throughout the winter, almost every Kashmiri man was a

Farhaad, ready to dig a stream of milk from the mountains for a rendezvous with his Shireen: freedom!

'War till Victory' was graffitied everywhere in Kashmir; it was painted alongside another slogan: 'Self-determination is Our Birthright!' The Indian government seemed to have deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to crush the rebellion. Almost every day the soldiers patrolled our village, walking in a mixture of nervousness and aggression their fingers close to the triggers of their automatic and semi-automatic machine guns. Military and paramilitary camps sprouted up in almost every small town and village.

It became harder for father to visit home on weekends. He stopped travelling by his official vehicle, as that would make him conspicuous. The journey from his office in Srinagar to our village, once a lovely two hour ride through an enchanting landscape, had become a risky, life-threatening affair. Almost every time he came home, it took him around five hours. On a lucky day his bus would only be stopped every fifteen minutes at a military checkpost, he and other passengers made to stand in a queue, their raised hands holding an identity card and anything they carried—books and files in father's case. After a body search he would walk half a mile away from the checkpost and wait in another queue for the bus to arrive. On various other days he had close shaves but he didn't tell me about those experiences for a long time. Only recently he talked about a day when he stepped out of his office and was startled by sudden gunfire. He went back into the compound and saw a burning passenger bus rush down the street. And then he and his colleagues, mostly Kashmir government bureaucrats, found themselves facing a group of Indian soldiers pointing their guns at them. Being mid-level officers saved them. Another day on the way to catch a bus home, a grenade explosion was followed by intense gunfire and people ran wherever they could find a place to

hide. Father and a friend of his found themselves lying on the dusty floor of a tea shop.

That winter began my political education. It took the form of acronyms: JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front), JKSLF (Jammu and Kashmir Students Liberation Front), BSF (Border Security Force), CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force). To go with these I learned new phrases: frisking, crackdown, bunker, search, identity card, arrest and torture. That winter, too, busloads of Kashmiri youth went to border towns and crossed over to Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir for arms training. They returned as militants carrying Kalashnikovs, hand grenades, light machine guns, and rocket launchers issued by Pakistan.

My friends were talking about a novel, *Pahadoon ka Beta*, about a young Afghan boy who fought the Russians. I wanted to read it and found a copy with a cousin towards the end of my winter vacation. It was a slim paperback, with a green cover featuring a boy with a gun. It read like a Frederick Forsyth thriller. Ali, its young protagonist, was both James Bond and Rambo. He seemed to have destroyed hundreds of Russian tanks, undertaken espionage missions within Russia, and I think even rescued his father from a Russian prison.

And there was a movie everybody wanted to watch: Arab-American filmmaker Moustapha Akkad's *Lion of the Desert*. Father had bought a black and white television set but we didn't have a video cassette player. One of our neighbours had one and his son promised to let me watch *Lion of the Desert* on it if I could get a copy of the film. I couldn't find it. But one day I heard the men sitting on a shopfront near my house talk about it. Rashid, a bus driver, who often ferried passengers in his bus from Anantnag to the capital, was talking about watching *Lion of the Desert* many years ago. He had seen it at the Regal Talkies in Srinagar city centre, Lal Chowk. He narrated the story of Omar Mukhtar, an ageing

Chapter Two

It was the longest, the most eventful winter in Kashmir, a season that still remains. The last two months had changed Kashmir in profound ways. On the first day of school as I sat in the classroom, I was struck by some empty chairs. I felt a little numb, unsure how to process the absences. My classmates returned my absent-minded stares. 'They have left,' someone said. The words exploded like a tracer, dazzling the whitewashed walls of the classroom, the bare blackboard, the varnished wooden surfaces of the desks where the ones who were absent and the ones who were present had scribbled their initials in a suggestive romantic arithmetic. And then our eyes were fixed on those empty chairs for a long time. Five of our Kashmiri Pandit classmates were not there. Along with killing hundreds of pro-India Muslims ranging from political activists to suspected informers for Indian intelligence, the militants killed hundreds of Pandits on similar grounds, or without a reason. The deaths had scared the Pandits and thousands, including my classmates and their families, had left the Valley by March 1990 for Jammu, Delhi, and various other Indian cities and towns.

Our maths teacher walked in and a half-empty class started. Slowly, we grew used to the empty chairs and the talk was of the war outside. In the lunch break between maths and English class, my friends and I shared stories of militancy. We began drawing maps of Kashmir on our school notebooks and painted slogans like 'War till Victory' and 'Self-determination is Our Birthright' on the school walls. Someone would have seen a militant and he would tell us how the militant styled his hair, what clothes and shoes he wore, and how many days he said it would take for freedom.

The best story was about the magical Kalashnikov. Made in Russia, a gift from Pakistan, it was known to have powers greater than Aladdin's lamp. 'It is as small as a hand and shoots two hundred bullets.' 'No! It is as long as a cricket bat and fires fifty bullets in a minute.' 'My brother touched a Kalashnikov, he says it is very light. He told mother that he wanted to become a militant. She cried, and father slapped him.' Pervez told me there were many militants in his village and they wore beautiful green uniforms. One afternoon, we were on the football field when a militant passed by. Even our snooty games teacher went up to him, smiled, and shook hands. Encouraged, we gathered around. 'Can we see your gun, please?' Pervez said. He was the centre forward, beaming in his blue tracksuit, and he could not resist asking. The militant took off his loose pheran and showed us his gun. 'We call it Kalashnikov and Indians call it AK-47,' the militant said. We were enraptured and clapped in delight. From then on we all carried our cricket bats inside our pherans, in imitation and preparation.

The next morning before the school assembly, the seniors told us not to chant the Indian national anthem. 'We are Kashmiris and now we are fighting for independence. We cannot go on chanting the Indian songs, even if the principal might like us to.' At the assembly, the students refused to chant the Indian anthem. Our teachers, who would routinely answer disobedience with corporal punishment, remained silent. Nobody threatened to dismiss us from the school; they knew our world had changed and so had the rules governing it. The school principal, a short, bald man from Rajasthan, who promoted laughter therapy, was not laughing. 'If you don't want to sing it, we can't force you to. Singing a song does not mean much, if you don't believe in the words you speak,' he spoke in a grave voice. Then he talked about the Indian freedom struggle against the British and how the students who had joined it had paid the highest price.

Outside our small world, there were endless series of gun battles between the soldiers and the rebels, grenades were lobbed, and mines were exploded—death, fear, and anger had taken over Kashmir. By the summer of 1990, thousands of young Kashmiri men crossed the Line of Control, for arms training in the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir. When they returned as militants, they were heroes—people wanted to talk to them, touch them, hear their stories, and invite them for a feast. Many more were trained locally, in apple orchards and meadows—earning them the nickname dragud, or meadow. Like almost every teenager, I wanted to join them. Fighting and dying for freedom was much desired, like the first kiss on adolescent lips.

A year later, in the autumn of 1991, when I was fourteen, I walked with four boys from my dorm to a nearby village looking for guerrillas. We saw a group of young men dressed in fatigues, assault rifles slung on their shoulders coming from the other side of the road. They were tall, and seemed the most glamorous of men; we were awestruck. The white badges on their green military uniforms read: JKLF. Standing there in our white and grey school uniforms, I blurted out, 'We want to join you.' The commander, a lean youth with a stubble, laughed. 'Go home and grow up, kids!' the commander said, in a stern voice. I was furious and pressed our point. 'If you do not take us with you, we will join HM.' Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a new militant group, was an ideological rival of the JKLF and supported the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan. The guerrillas burst into laughter. We continued our meek protests as they left.

We returned to our dorm sulking, talking about a better way to join.

We could talk to the Students Liberation Front (SLF), the student wing of the JKLF. Some of the JKLF and SLF guerrillas had begun staying in our dorm. They would join us

for a game of volleyball, their guns lying casually on the grass by the volleyball court. Or they would be sitting on the dorm verandah cleaning Kalashnikovs as I left for classes. A small, curious crowd would grow around them. One of them, who was barely eighteen, let me hold a Kalashnikov. I felt its cold, steel barrel, ran my fingers on its banana-shaped magazine of bullets, posed with its aluminium butt pressed against my right shoulder. It felt fascinating! But then he took it back the next minute and asked me to move on. Though hardly in their early twenties and only some six or seven years older than us, they treated us like small children.

To make things worse, one of the commanders was from my village. He was about six feet tall, had a broad forehead and curly hair. A jovial man, he had three daughters, and used to work as a plumber in the hotels at nearby tourist resort, Pahalgam. The villagers called him Tonga because he seemed as tall as a horse carriage. He was a lovable rogue and the stories of his adventures were often told on the village shopfronts. During the tourist season in Pahalgam he was in great demand. He would fiddle with the water supply pipes and insert blockages that stopped the water supply to hotel rooms. The desperate hoteliers would then pay him the desired price for fixing things. But the tourists stopped coming to Kashmir after the winter of 1990, the hotels shut down, and Tonga joined the JKLF. Now, some village boys called him Rambo. Every time I would see Tonga he would ask about my family and tell me to study harder. 'I will ask your teachers how you are doing.' And, 'Say my greetings to Peer sahib and Masterji.'

My friends and I didn't give up hope of finding a way to go for arms training. Groups of boys left for arms training every other day. We needed to find a commander who didn't know our families and would let us join a group; also money for the bus fare to the border towns, winter clothes, and good

shoes. 'We need to get Duck Back shoes. They are good for the snow,' I said. Father had bought me a pair; they had a fur lining and a thick rubber outer and sole. We planned to try our luck again.

A few days later, we were interrupted in class by a knock on the door.

The teacher went out and returned to tell me my uncle was here, and that I should leave the class to meet him. A bank manager, in his early thirties, my uncle was the fashion icon for most children in my family. I admired his baggy jeans and checked shirts, and his hairstyle, somewhat like John Travolta in *Grease*, and the indescribable accent of his English, which he had picked up during his friendship with some German tourists.

I shouted a loud greeting and we hugged. He was carrying a bag and I promptly volunteered to carry it. 'That is our lunch! You mother made chicken for us.' He threw an arm around my shoulder. 'Let's go to your room and eat.' The thought of homecooked chicken after the bland lentils and rice that dominated our hostel menu filled me with great joy. My room was small, bare except for two beds, two small bookracks, and two cupboards for clothes. I spread a cotton sheet on my bed and we began to eat. Uncle seemed to stop between morsels to watch me devour the pieces of chicken. 'I am hungry,' I protested. He laughed but something seemed wrong. 'Everything fine at home?' I asked. 'Yes. All well.' We resumed our meal and I asked, 'Why didn't you go to the bank today?' 'Nothing! I was talking to your father last night and then thought I should come and save you from the lentils.' I laughed. We finished eating and sat near a rose bed in the lawn.

We talked about my studies. He said my father dreamt of seeing me in the civil service. 'Your father struggled very hard to get where he has reached.' He repeated the much-

told story of how my grandfather supported my father as a poor orphan and how despite little resources father worked hard to qualify for the civil services examination and became a bureaucrat. 'He has great hopes for you. But I know you will do us proud,' he said. 'I met your school principal and he had great things to say about you.' I shook my head. Uncle stared at the school buildings for a long time. 'You will be done here in two years.' 'Yes. 1993.' 'You know what, you must go to Delhi.' He went on to paint a romantic picture of the colleges and universities in New Delhi. 'You would have a great time there. Your father and I were talking about it last night.' I shook my head again. Yes. Maybe.

'How is Baba?' I asked about grandfather. 'He is getting older by the day. And he misses you a lot.' And after a pause, 'You should come home for a few days. He will be happy.' The thought of home made me jump. 'Yes. But you will have to talk to my teachers.' He already had. Unsuspecting, I quickly packed my bags and a few minutes later, we were walking to the nearest bus stand. A scrawl of graffiti on the wall of a house nearby read: 'War Till Victory—JKLF' 'So that is the group you want to join,' my uncle said, smiling. I was startled. 'KLF? Me?' I denied everything. He shook his head slowly. 'We know all about it,' and he told me about the meeting waiting for me at home.

The bus passed conical haystacks standing in empty paddies, almost golden in the autumn sun. It crossed a small bridge and entered my village, which seemed pretty much the same. The bus stopped near the neighbourhood pharmacy and I grew a bit stiff, dreading the encounter at home. Standing by the white and green milestone at the bus stop, I took in my house—the house with the green windows stacked with five others in a row on the right side of the road. The shopkeepers and the hangers-on were at their usual places. It felt like standing on a familiar stage, facing a

familiar audience. I shouted greetings at people on the left side of the road and shook hands along the storefronts on our side. Anxious about what awaited me at home, I turned my greetings a little more elaborate at every stop: the baker's, the pharmacy, the butcher's shop, the tailor's store, and finally, a hop across the road to hug grandmother's white-haired cousin, Saifuddin, who had been watching me from his grocery since I had stepped off the bus.

When I finally arrived at home, grandfather made me sit next to him. Uncle, grandmother, and mother formed a semicircle around him. I was silent, unsure what to say and asked for tea. Mother had already poured me a cup from the samovar. I circled the pinkish flowers embossed on the white porcelain cup in between sips to avoid the awkwardness and the question-filled air. 'Hama, you remember his first day of school,' grandfather turned to mother. She looked up with a forced smile. 'Yes! I had dressed him in a white shirt and grey shorts and his red necktie. And then you took him along.' Grandfather seemed to stare into a distant time for a long moment and then he laughed a bit. 'I dropped you at your school and went to teach at my school. You had cried and shouted so much that an hour later, your teacher brought you to my office.' 'Most children cry,' I said. 'But children don't fly!' he laughed and the others joined. The joke was on me. And he repeated the stale story of how, inspired by my Superman comics, I once jumped from the first floor window. My younger brother had helped me tie my pheran like a cape. I broke my right arm. This roundabout build-up to the real question irritated me. I was getting angry and thinking of walking out. They could see it. Mother looked at me for a long time and said nothing. And then, grandfather fixed his watery green eyes on me. 'How do you think this old man can deal with your death?' he said. His words hit me like the burst of a water cannon.

I had nothing to say and stared at the carpet. Suddenly, I had this image of myself lying dead on a wooden board on our lawn, surrounded by our neighbours and relatives. Someone was throwing water at my fainted mother's face and father was holding the board, his head buried in his arms, his shoulders shaking. 'You don't live long in a war, son,' grandfather's words brought me back. The dreaded headmaster—who prided himself on the fact that nobody dared light a cigarette or raise his voice in his presence—had tears in his eyes.

The muezzin's voice came from the mosque loudspeaker, calling the faithful to afternoon prayers. Mother adjusted her casually worn headscarf and grandfather rose to leave for the prayers. 'Are you coming along?' he asked uncle and me, though he knew the answer. 'Let's finish the tea,' uncle said. Grandfather left. The tension eased somewhat. And then mother took over. 'Think about your father! He is coming all the way from Srinagar, only because he is worried about you. God knows what could happen on the way.' The poplar lined highway he travelled through lovely saffron fields and visions of high, icy mountains, I was reminded, now had military convoys rumbling along to camps, checkposts and patrols, and militants firing rocket-propelled grenades at them. 'I will keep an eye on the buses,' I said and walked out.

I had been talking to a few neighbourhood men for an hour when father got off a bus, wearing one of his blue suits and carrying a bundle of books. We all stood up; I reflexively rushed to get his books and files. A chorus of greetings followed. 'How are you?' 'I am well.' 'How are things in the city?' 'Quite bad!' 'Hope the journey was fine? The highway has become very dangerous.' 'Thank God, it was alright. Yes, too many checkposts.' Father seemed tired but calm, betraying no emotion or anxiety.

A few minutes later, we took our usual places at home and another round of tea followed. Father sorted his books and picked up a commentary on the Quran in English. 'You must read it. You will understand religion and improve your English. You must also read the Bible, which is a very good way to improve your language skills.' Father went around in circles, talking about the story of Ishmael and Isaac, and connected their story to the obligation of children towards their parents. 'You need the permission of your parents, even if you want to be a KLF commander,' he said, in a half-serious voice. He made it easy, somehow. 'I know,' I replied. 'Especially, if you are fourteen.' He smiled. 'That is four years short of the voting age.' I heard him and said nothing. He looked directly at me and said, 'I won't stop you.' I couldn't hide my astonishment. 'I won't stop you,' he repeated, and after a pause continued: 'But maybe you should read and think about it for a few years and then decide for yourself. At that point I will not say that you should or should not join any group.'

This seemed reasonable. I found myself nodding in agreement. He continued. 'From what I have read I can tell you that any movement that seeks a separate country takes a very long time. It took India many decades to get freedom from the British. The Tibetans have been asking for independence from China for more than thirty years now. Czechoslovakia has its freedom now, but it was already a country. And even that took a long time.' He continued to argue that rebellions were long affairs, led by educated men. 'Nehru and Gandhi studied law in England and were both very good writers. You have seen their books in our library. Vaclav Havel is a very big writer. The Dalai Lama has read a lot and can teach so many things to people. None of them used guns but they changed history. If you want to do something for Kashmir, I would say you should read.' A few days later, as I was leaving to go back to school, my mother took off her headscarf and laid it

at my feet. 'Please don't try that again,' she said and hugged me. I stayed in the classroom.

But the conflict had intensified. Fear and chaos ruled Kashmir. Almost every person knew someone who had joined the militants or had been arrested, tortured or beaten by the troops. Fathers wished they had daughters instead of sons. Sons were killed every day. Mothers prayed for the safety of their daughters. People dreaded knocks on their doors at night. Men and women who left home for the day's work were not sure they would return; thousands did not. Graveyards began to spring up everywhere and marketplaces were scarred with charred buildings. And people seemed always talked about the border and crossing the border; it had become an obsession, an invisible presence. 'Border! Line of Control!' I would mutter to myself.

This always reminded me of Zainab, an old woman in our village. Father had told me she was very beautiful when she was young and sang and danced at all weddings. Then her husband crossed the border, went to Pakistan, and never returned. She stopped dancing. She lived to raise her daughter, whom she had named Gul. Zainab was aggressive, forceful, a fighter. Her daughter was a student at the high school where my mother taught. Occasionally mother talked about Gul's absent father and her voice would always be low and somewhat sad.

School was quiet, mundane. Breakfast. Classes. Lunch. Classes. Football. Cricket. Homework. The guerrillas would still visit and stay at our dorm, and occasionally join us for a game of football. Familiarity had somewhat shorn them of their glamour. Shabnam, a second cousin of mine, a year senior to me at school, was one of the finest volleyball players in the school team. I began taking volleyball lessons from him and spent more time on the field trying to perfect a serve and a smash. He had learnt his cricket and volleyball from his

older brother, Tariq, who had recently finished college. Every time I visited them with my father, I would see Tariq playing cricket in the enormous cricket ground near their house, and Shabnam hanging out on the sidelines.

My father was very attached to their father, Rahman, his oldest cousin, who had raised him after his parents died very young. Rahman Uncle was a police officer, a tall, dark man with big black eyes, who told tall tales of his long stint as a bodyguard of Kashmir's greatest leader and prime minister, Sheikh Abdullah. He ironed his uniform immaculately and polished his brown police boots till they shone. He had recently retired and in his civilian days dressed in a faint resemblance to the seventies double-breasted suits and Fez caps that Sheikh Abdullah wore. 'You should be an all-rounder. Be the best in the classroom and be the best in the playground,' he would often tell me. 'Remember that the son of a lion is always a cub!' He would walk to the cricket ground occasionally to see Tariq play. 'Tariq would look good as a police officer,' he often said.

Tariq had graduated in mathematics and chemistry, but he was more of a sportsman. He saw me as a bookworm and entertained himself by asking me random questions: How many astronauts were on board Apollo 13? What is an F-16? What is the symbol for sulphuric acid? I knew all the answers; Shabnam didn't care much about such things. But he could answer all the cricket questions: Who has made the largest number of runs in one-day cricket? Which is the largest cricket ground in the world?

With Shabnam's help I was now swaggering a bit on the school volleyball field. One day, just before a game, I saw him walking out of the dorm with his bags. He wasn't quite his jovial self. 'What is wrong?' I asked. Shabnam dropped his bag on the lawn; his face was pale. 'Tariq has gone across the border!' We had the understanding that crossing the border

to become a guerrilla meant being killed while crossing, on the way back, or a little later. Shabnam went home. A few days later I went to visit him and his parents. Tariq had left suddenly without telling anyone. Rahman Uncle sat, chain-smoking his hookah. He seemed to have aged in a few days. 'When I was in the police nobody in my jurisdiction dared disobey me. My son has crossed the border without even telling me.' I had never seen him cry.

Back at school, when he returned, Shabnam talked a lot about Tariq, who had reached an arms training camp in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. He eagerly expected his brother's return. In his hostel room Shabnam listened to the Muzaffarabad based Sadaa-e-Hurriyat (Voice of Freedom) Radio. Every evening the separatist radio ran a much-awaited show of songs interspersed with propaganda and messages from listeners. When a militant in training wanted to let his family know how he was, he requested a song, and a message was played along with it. The messages were like this: 'Amit Kumar from Lajpat Nagar likes the programme and requests this song be played'. His family and relatives heard the message and knew he was safe.

Shabnam and I were sitting on a bench outside our dorm. He had brought out his black Philips radio and we listened to the songs and messages. The show's hosts were notorious for their over the top rhetoric. One of the hosts, who called himself Malik, would prophesise about Kashmir getting independence in a week and how he would travel across the border from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir to Indian-ruled Kashmir and drink kahwa at Jehangir Hotel, a prominent hotel in Srinagar, the next Friday. Listening to the programme was full of tense moments; we heard familiar names. But there was no message from Tariq. Every day Shabnam listened for a message from his older brother; every day he hoped for news and fended off rumours: 'Tariq was arrested on the

border.' 'Someone said he was killed on his way back.' 'A boy from Pulwama who returned met him in a training camp.' Every time someone from a neighbouring village returned after completing his training, Shabnam or one of my other cousins visited his family seeking news of Tariq.

One day after dinner, Shabnam was lying on his bed, holding the radio like a pillow and listening to the show. I was talking to his roommate. The usual songs and messages played: 'The Daughters of Srinagar! The Brave Daughters of Srinagar! A few minutes of messages and another song: Wake up! The morning is here! Martyr's blood has bloomed! The flags of victory are flying! Wake up! The morning is here!' The hosts' voices droned a litany of names and addresses; I continued talking. And then a sudden, loud thump startled Shabnam's roommate and me; he had jumped off the bed and stood a few feet away, holding the radio in his left hand. 'It is Tariq!' Shabnam was shouting. 'It is Tariq! Basharat, he really is alive! It said, "Tariq Peer from Salia, Islamabad likes the show and requests this song." 'Raise the volume! Raise the volume!' I exclaimed, wanting the radio. The moment had passed. 'The Morning is Here' pierced the silent room. Shabnam went home the next morning to give the news. They had been listening to the show too.

Around a year after he had crossed the border, Tariq returned home. Friends, relatives, and neighbours descended on Rahman Uncle's old, decrepit house. I couldn't find a place to take off my shoes as I tried getting into the room where Tariq was sitting. The verandah and the corridor had turned into a multi-coloured jumble of sandals, loafers and sneakers. I walked into the large, trapezium-shaped room, which was dark green and black and brown. A new floral rug had been laid out; men, women, and children sat against cushions along the walls. Shabnam poured kahwa from a gleaming tin-plated copper samovar into the porcelain cups

placed in front of every guest; another boy carrying a wicker basket served chochevaer, a sort of mini poppy seed bagel, fresh from the local bakery. A hundred eyes were focused on a single face: Tariq sitting on a velvet-covered cushion, the one used for Kashmiri grooms. 'Mubarak huv!' 'Mubarak huv!' Congratulations! Congratulations! Every new guest shouted from the gate. 'Shukr khodayus, Sahee slamat vot!' (Thank God you made it back safe!) Men shook his hand and hugged him. Women hugged him and smothered his forehead with kisses. 'Miyon Nabi thayinay vaareh!' (May my Prophet protect you!)

Rahman Uncle sat next to his son in silent resignation. I walked up to Tariq and hugged him. 'You have grown taller!' he said. I smiled. 'You have grown thinner,' I replied. His round face seemed sunken; he had cut his long, curly hair short, like a soldier, but his big, black eyes retained their familiar spark. He looked neat in a white kurta pajama, almost like a groom. My eyes wandered to his fatal bride, the Kalashnikov, hidden under a thick green sports jacket by his side. Outside, for around a mile, various neighbourhood boys strained their eyes and ears for unwanted signs of military vehicles.

The militant son talked; the retired police officer father listened. So did the room full of people, as if Tariq was Marco Polo bringing tidings of a new world. He told us about his journey to Pakistan and back. He and his friends had taken a bus for Srinagar. A point man from the militant group they were joining waited for them at the crowded Batamaloo bus station in southern Srinagar. There they boarded a bus for the north Kashmir town of Baramulla. The bus was full of employees returning home after work. The driver played Bollywood songs and the passengers talked about the militant movement. Some passengers seemed to recognise Tariq and his friends as boys out to cross the border and smiled at them. On the road from Srinagar to Baramulla, there were

neither checkpoints nor military and patrols. Indian military presence in Kashmir was just about to increase exponentially. They spent the night in Baramulla at a stranger's house with two more groups of young men wanting to cross the border. Next morning the three groups boarded a bus to Kupwara, the town closest to the LoC. The ticket collector refused to accept the fare from them.

Kupwara teemed with young men and boys from every part of Kashmir waiting to cross the border. Tariq and his friends were introduced to a man who was to take them across the mountains. Men like him were referred to as 'guides' They were often natives of the border villages who knew the terrain well. Wearing Duck Back rubber shoes, carrying rucksacks full of clothes and food, the boys left Kupwara in a truck. By evening, they reached the village of Trehgam, a few miles from the LoC. They waited at a hideout till night fell. In the darkness they followed their guide. They climbed ridges, crawled past bunkers of the Indian troops, climbed again throughout the night. The guide had instructed them not to light a cigarette or litter the wrappers of the biscuits they carried. Burning cigarette tips could invite fire if noticed by a soldier's binocular; biscuit wrappers in the jungle could expose the route they took. They held hands and walked in silence. Dawn came and they hid in the bush, behind the fir and pine trees growing on the mountains forming the border. They passed the day, apprehensive of being spotted by Indian troops. Night fell. They trekked again till the last Indian checkpost. It was still dark when they crawled beneath the Indian post overlooking them and reached the Pakistani post on the other side. The next day Tariq was in the capital of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, Muzaffarabad. He was taken to an arms training camp run by Pakistani military. For six months he trained in using small arms, landmines, rockets, and propelled grenades.

Tariq wandered around in Pakistan for a while, waiting for his turn before returning home a year later. 'They have Indian movies there,' he suddenly said. 'I watched some. And you can buy the cassettes for all new songs.' A collective expression of surprise followed for the next few minutes. Shabnam and I looked at each other and smiled.

A few minutes later, someone asked about the journey back across the mountainous border. 'The snow was melting, but still there was a lot of it.' He was bolder on his way back; every guerrilla in his group carried a bag full of ammunition and a Kalashnikov. The trek back was three days long. The ammunition bags were heavy. 'Whoever was tired would lighten the bags. We buried food packages and some bullet magazines in the snow,' Tariq said. Thousands had passed the snows since his journey to Pakistan a year ago. He saw the evidence of their encounters with the Indian troops on the way: skeletons lying under the fir trees; a pair of shoes lying by a rock. They almost got killed when they came face to face with a group of boys crossing over from Srinagar. They were dressed in military fatigues, as was the fashion amongst the militants. Tariq and his group thought they were Indian soldiers. Their guides whistled—a code signalling the other they were on the same side. The Srinagar group guide responded; the boys shook hands and moved on.

Tariq and his friends had also had an encounter with real Indian paramilitaries near the border town of Kupwara. 'Three boys of our group were killed,' he said. 'One of them was from Kupwara. He would have been home in half an hour.' The mood changed and the room was filled with exhortations: 'Life and death are in the hands of Almighty God.' 'Those who die for the truth always live.' 'Thank God! You got home safe.' 'My Prophet will protect you!' A bullet had grazed Tariq's leg though, tearing a hole in his trousers. Later, Shabnam showed me Tariq's bullet-torn trousers, like it was a trophy.

Visitors kept arriving, among them an emaciated woman in a loose floral pheran. She stood a few feet from Tariq, staring at his face for a long time. He rose from his seat and hugged her. Someone introduced her as hailing from a neighbouring village. Her son had crossed the border for arms training. She had been told he was killed while crossing back. Families whose sons died while crossing the LoC, from where bodies cannot be recovered, held funerals in absentia. People offered funeral prayers with an empty coffin or without a coffin. Her family had had such a funeral for her son; but she had not reconciled herself to the news of his death. She sat in front of Tariq and held his hands. 'Tariq, my dear, my son, they told me he was martyred on the border!' The room fell silent; every eye stopped on her sad, grieving face. 'My heart doesn't agree. Tariq, my dear, tell me they are lying. Tell me you saw my rose! You were there too. You must have seen my rose!' Tariq held her in an embrace, comforting her like she was a child. 'Yes, I saw him. He is waiting to cross back. He is waiting for his turn.' I am unsure whether he told her the truth or he was placating her. She kissed his forehead again and again, and broke down. 'My son will come home,' she repeated.

Homecomings for militants were shortlived. Tariq visited home, hurriedly, and stealthily. Soldiers often knocked at their door, looking for him, beating his father, his brothers, seeking information about him, telling them to ask him to surrender. I saw my cousin for the last time in August 1992, a few hundred metres from my uncle's house on a plateau that served twice a year as the venue for ceremonial Eid prayers, and for the rest of the time as a cricket ground. His younger brother, Shabnam and I were there together. August 14 and August 15 are the Pakistani and Indian independence days. Pro-Pakistan militants held celebratory parades on August 14 and a day later, the Indian Independence Day was

declared a 'Black Day' On August 15, traffic stops, shops close, schools shut down, identity checks by Indian troops increase and life freezes. In the capital, Srinagar, however, pro-India politicians who form the local state government herd groups of their supporters and force government schools to gather contingents of schoolchildren in a cricket ground guarded by hundreds of Indian paramilitaries. Then the politicians hoist the Indian flag. Outside the stadium, the streets remain empty.

On August 14, 1992, Shabnam and I watched Tariq and other guerrillas celebrate the Pakistani Independence Day in the Eid prayer cum cricket ground. Thousands had gathered in the ground for the spectacle. We sneaked through the crowd to the front row for a better view. Militant leaders made fiery speeches in favour of Pakistan and raised separatist slogans. We stared at the militants in their green uniforms holding their rifles. They performed military stunts and sang battle songs to a clapping audience. A militant leader raised the Pakistani flag after the songs. His men fired into the air with their Kalashnikovs. Then someone said the army was coming that way and the gathering vaporised. A year after I saw Tariq at this parade, soldiers stopped knocking on his parents' door. They had killed him in a raid on his hideout.

Homecomings were fraught with danger. The fighting had changed the meaning of distance. I went home almost every weekend from my school. The black sliver of the road made its way through a stoic expanse of rice and mustard fields, willow groves, grand Iranian maple or chinar trees, along a flamboyant stream, and the huddled houses of a few small villages. But the six mile ride in a local bus was dangerous. Military and paramilitary trucks drove on the same road throughout the day, carrying supplies between various camps or going on raids in the villages. Guerrillas hiding in the

fields by the road would often fire at convoys or detonate landmines planted in the road. Soldiers would retaliate after such attacks, firing in all directions, and beating anyone they could lay their hands on.

One weekend, on my way home, I was standing in the aisle near the driver as all seats had been occupied. Kashmiri buses are like noisy cafés; almost everyone knows everyone and voices of varying pitches fill the vehicle. The driver played a Bollywood song, its melancholic lyrics floating over the din. A mile into the journey, a paramilitary convoy overtook our bus and hovered just ahead of us. Soldiers had realised that driving close to a civilian bus would keep guerrillas from attacking them. Suddenly the voices in the bus were lowered; the driver turned off the music. Anxiety filled the bus. Our driver began praying feverishly. 'God, I have three small children, please don't make them orphans today. Please get us safely to our homes today.' We drove in silence, waiting. The minutes passed and the paramilitary convoy gathered speed. Our driver slowed down and the distance between us grew. We were in a village called Siligam, midway between my school and my house, when I heard a loud explosion. The driver slammed the brakes and in the distance we saw a paramilitary truck skid off the road and land in the fields. I was taking in the sight when I heard a barrage of bullets—the lighter sounds of Kalashnikovs; the heavier, retaliatory bursts of LMGs. The driver swung the bus around and sped back as fast he could. Everyone crouched under their seats.

I sat on the floor of the bus, gripping a seat. The roar of the engine seemed to rise over the sound of bullets being fired. I buried my head in my knees and closed my eyes. Though we were driving away from the battle, I began listing the guns that could still hit us. I feared that we might still be in the killing range of an LMG. A little while later, the driver stopped the bus. I raised my head and stood up in a quick,

involuntary motion. Two men hugged the driver. 'You saved our life,' another man said and shook his hand. An old man broke down and began to cry. A woman patted his back and consoled him. I smiled at everyone around me. We got off the bus and drank from a roadside stream. The driver and a few other men smoked cigarettes.

We had begun the drive back to the bus yard in the village of Aishmuqam near my school, when we saw a speeding convoy of paramilitary trucks coming towards us. The convoy stopped and so did we. Armed soldiers circled the bus and an angry paramilitary officer ordered us out. We stood in a queue on the road. I was close to the door and was the first one to get down. I was in my school uniform and carried a school bag. The officer raised his gun like a baton. I waited to be hit by the weapon but failed to remove my eyes from his. He lowered the gun and pushed me with his other hand. I knew he was going to shoot me. But then he grabbed my arm and shouted, 'You are from the school near our camp. I see you pass by every day. Now get out of here.' He let us go. As we arrived at the bus yard a crowd gathered around the bus.

Two hours later, another bus arrived and its driver told me, 'You were lucky that no soldier was killed by the landmine. The road is open now but they have begun a crackdown in the surrounding villages.' Fifteen minutes later we passed the spot where the landmine had gone off. I saw no soldiers, no military trucks. I saw the willow trees lining the road, the paddy fields, the tin roofs of a village beyond the fields, and a large crater on the right corner of the road carved out by the explosion. We drove past a few villages where the shops had been closed and the streets were empty except for patrolling paramilitary soldiers. Fortunately they let our bus pass.

A few weeks later, I was home again. That weekend we expected father to visit from his office in Srinagar. Srinagar

was wracked with violence and every day we heard reports of scores of deaths there on BBC World Service radio. The solemn voice of Yusuf Jameel, the BBC's Srinagar correspondent, and his words rang through our radios every evening: 'I am hearing the sound of gunfire.' The fatal sound of bullets would play on the radio for a few seconds, and Jameel's stoic voice would follow, 'Yet another unidentified body has been found in the river Jhelum in Srinagar.' A few years later, a bomb was exploded in his office, most suspect by the Indian army; Jameel survived but another journalist was killed. He almost lost his voice and went off the air.

Father was supposed to come home in the evening, and late in the afternoon mother sent me to get lamb chops. I stepped out of the house and saw mother's grand-uncle, the white-haired Saifuddin, sitting by his grocery counter, fanning himself with a handmade fan, and scanning the market. He didn't do much business but knew everything that happened in the neighbourhood as he spent most of his time watching who went into which house and who had a visitor, following up with very inquisitive questions. He waved at me and an expected question followed, 'Today is Saturday! Is Peer sahib coming home.' 'Yes, he should be here soon.' I replied. 'I only asked because I haven't seen Masterji [my grandfather] at the butcher's shop yet. He usually buys meat by this time on a Saturday. I was wondering if everything is fine. God knows, this is a dangerous time.' I assured him that grandfather was busy with some chore and I was buying the meat. I walked towards the butcher and the few neighbourhood men hanging about the pharmacy and the tailor's shop called out. They were already laughing. 'How was the interview?' 'Oh! The usual. He hadn't seen grandfather buying meat yet.' Everybody laughed. Abu, the butcher, was looking our way, smiling. 'This neighbourhood wouldn't be the same without Saifuddin. At least he asks

about everyone.' He began cutting lamb chops for me, instructing me along the way about the parts grandfather would ask for. And then, 'Masterji must have gone to check the apple orchard? Or the fields.' 'No, he is home, fixing some electrical stuff.'

Then I saw a group of young men with guns standing near the bus stop. Tonga, the tall JKLF man from our village, was with them. A small crowd of villagers had gathered around Tonga and they seemed to be arguing about something. Abu and I looked at each other. 'God knows what Tonga is up to,' he sighed. I rushed to find out. Tonga and his cohorts were planning to attack a convoy of Indian troops supposed to pass by our village. The villagers were trying to persuade them against it. They were addressing Tonga by his real name. 'Mohiuddin sahib, you are our son, you are from our own village. You have to stop this attack.' 'Mohiuddin sahib, you know what the soldiers do after an attack. Do you want your own village burnt?' 'Have you forgotten we have young daughters? Do you want soldiers to barge into our homes? Have the fear of God, this is your own village!'

Tonga moved away from his sullen comrades to explain himself to the villagers. 'I know! I know! I swear by my mother I can't do anything. Every time my commanders plan an action here, I fight with them. Don't I know? My old mother lives here, my three daughters live here.' Hasan, the baker, held Tonga's hands. 'Please! Do something.' Abu joined in, 'Mohiuddin dear, please. You can save the village. Please.' Even old Saifuddin left his perch and came up to him. 'Mohiuddin sahib, you are my son. Rahet, your mother, is like my sister. Remember that! And look at my white hair and white beard! Where will I run?' Tonga held his hands. 'You are like my father and I am like your son. But I can't stop it today. Please, close the shops and leave! Please, we don't have much time.'

The villagers gave up after a point. The shopkeepers pulled down their shutters; I ran home. 'Mummy, JKLF people are outside. They are going to attack a convoy,' I shouted. 'Tonga is there too, but he can't stop his commander. We have to run.' Everybody panicked. Mother folded the sleeves of her pheran and asked everyone to shut up. She was getting into schoolteacher mode and everyone listened to her. She hid her sisters' jewellery, which was kept in our house. Grandfather got a bag full of the family's academic degrees, professional documents, cash, and passbooks. We were ready to leave through the other door, facing the lawn and the vegetable garden. Then mother suddenly said, 'What about the books?' We looked at each other.

Father had built his library over years, each book had his name and a book number on the first page in either his scrawly handwriting or in mother's much neater letters. I had spent long hours in his library. There were the great Russian writers in thick People's Publishing House hardbacks that were sold in the mobile bookshops run by the Communist Party of India; there were American and European novelists in slim paperbacks; there were great Urdu writers like Premchand, Manto, Ghalib, Iqbal and Faiz. And there were histories, law books, commentaries on religion and politics in South Asia. The most beautiful of my father's books was *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*—a thick edition, leather bound, with gold-tinted pages. His books were the books of a self-taught man, books that had shaped him, helped him build his life, that made him stand out when he talked about worlds and ideas that few men in our world could talk about. Touching their spines, running my fingers along their fonts, feeling the smoothness of their paper, and being mesmerised by their stories, made me feel closer to father and share his connection to a magical world.

We had to leave the books in the house. And father was supposed to arrive home soon. Grandmother kept looking towards the door facing the road. 'Sahib will be here anytime,' she repeated. Father usually arrived before sunset as the government had imposed curfew after sunset and travelling at night could be fatal. 'God will keep him safe. There is nothing you can do by staring at the door,' mother shouted at her and locked the door. Our neighbours were standing on their lawn with a few bags. 'Now what are we staring at!' grandfather roared and we began walking away. Soon our walk turned into a run. I hoped that father would hear about the attack and stay away; I hoped that nobody killed in the attack and the soldiers would not set our house on fire. There wasn't anything valuable in the house besides a black and white television set, a Japanese radio, and my Polaroid camera, which father had bought for me when he went for the Hajj in 1987.

Our village was emptying fast and almost everyone seemed to be running towards Numbul, the neighbouring village. It lay across some paddy fields and Lidder, our local stream, a tributary of the river Jhelum. The blue-green waters of the Lidder rushing through the fields bubbled and frolicked over the pebbles and stones. The wild grass grew by the stream; the willows swayed; and the paddies were ripening. The stoic arches of the mountains watched us from a distance. In the open sky above us, crows and eagles wandered and whirled. Indifferent. They continued with their own seasons, blind to ours.

We were half a kilometre from the river when the first bullet was fired. Some tried running faster, others lay in the fields. Every few seconds, we heard the crackle of bullets. Kalashnikovs used by the militants sounded different from the machine guns and other rifles used by the soldiers. My neighbour's son Manzoor tried to tell from the sounds who

was shooting. 'It's a different sound. Now the military is firing back. The militants seem to have stopped firing.' His normally calm father slapped him.

The guns were still booming when we reached Numbul. Every door there was open to welcome us. I do not know whose house we rushed into. We were ushered into a room. Some more people from our village were already there, sitting silently along the wall, with their half empty cups of tea. As my entire family followed grandfather into the room, two young men stood up and offered him and grandmother their place; another took the cushion he was leaning against and placed it against the wall for grandfather. 'This is not a time for formality,' grandfather protested. Tea followed. The faint sound of gunfire still reached us. Nobody said much.

After a while, I saw grandfather and a few others step outside. I followed them. We were looking in the direction of our village; there wasn't much you could see except for the distant treetops, a few minarets, and the village mountain. Nobody said so but we were searching the horizon for signs of flames and smoke. Gunpowder doesn't take long to burn a village. I saw nothing but a slowly darkening sky. And I imagined people stopping a local bus in a neighbouring village, telling the driver about the attack, and turning it back. I imagined father holding his newspapers and office files, getting off the bus, and staying with some acquaintance. But I also failed to ignore thoughts like the bus going forward towards our village or getting caught in crossfire. I fully understood, for the first time, how he was making dangerous journeys week after week to see us. Tears overwhelmed me.

The guns fell silent sometime later. We stayed in Numbul that night with kind strangers. The next morning the entire village started back, anxious and edgy. Our home was there, untouched! I realised what the three-storey brick house meant to me. I had always taken it for granted. But it was home, my

only home. I rushed into our courtyard. Father was standing on the verandah. 'I heard about it in on the way and stayed in Islamabad at Mohammad Amin's place,' he said casually. I shook his hand. My younger brother told him that he had seen me crying. Father pretended not to hear him. We went around checking each room facing the road for signs of damage. A few bullets were stuck in the ceiling in father's room and some more in two other rooms. Grandfather pulled out the cartridges with pliers. We looked at them for a few moments, and then threw them away.

Yet some of the old routines continued, unaffected by war. By late afternoon, father was sitting in his usual corner in our drawing room, a few books and a boiling samovar of tea by his side. My brother and I sat facing him. Every now and then, a friend or a relative would drop by and the tales of the night past were recounted. In between these tellings, father began reciting a verse or two and turned to my brother and me; 'Whoever explains this will get five rupees.'

Chapter Three

Over the next few months there were numerous crackdowns in my village and the neighbouring villages. More military camps were being set up in Kashmir. Military vehicles, armed soldiers, machine guns poking out of sandbag bunkers were everywhere; death and fear became routine like going to school, playing cricket and football. At times we forgot about the war around us; at times we could not. In the summer of 1992, my aunt was pregnant and mother constantly worried about a militant attack or a crackdown in our village. 'What will we do if something happens?' she often mumbled to herself. One June afternoon, my aunt's labour pains began. Her husband, my grandfather, and my mother talked about moving her to the hospital in Anantnag. But there was a general strike, hartal, that day in protest against something; there were so many days of hartals that one couldn't even keep track of what the hartal was about. The shops were closed, there was no traffic, and the neighbourhood boys played cricket with a tennis ball on the road. Grandfather found one of the two private taxi drivers in our village, a tall, bald man called Dilawar Khan. Just as they were ready to leave, an acquaintance from a nearby village arrived on his scooter and told them to wait.

Militants had attacked a military convoy near the hospital in Anantnag and a severe gun battle was going on. My aunt was in much pain and my mother tried to calm her, while her husband walked in and out of the house nervously, and grandfather prayed. I tried calling our friends and relatives who lived near the hospital but the phones didn't work. After a while, we could not wait any further. Mother and uncle sat with my aunt in the back seat of the taxi. 'Masterji, she is my

daughter too. Even if they have brought out tanks I will get her to the hospital,' Dilawar told grandfather. Grandfather sat on the front seat with him and they left for the hospital. Almost everyone from our neighbourhood had assembled to see them off. After they left we stood by the roadside for a long time. Three hours later, Dilawar pulled up outside our house. 'It is a boy!' he shouted. I shook his hand. 'Was she alright on the way?' 'Yes, yes, she was fine. I drove really fast. And at the checkposts, I called every soldier "Major sahib" and told them the girl was about to give birth. After all, even they are human beings. We got there on time.' I said something lame by way of thanking him. 'She is like my own daughter,' he smiled. 'It is a beautiful boy!'

One autumn day a few months later, I was with a few friends in the small market near my house. A patrol of soldiers walked in and suddenly our hands went to our pockets, for our identity cards. A soldier stopping near you meant trouble. It meant an identity check, a possible beating or a visit to the nearest army camp. Or he might simply order you to carry a bag of supplies to his camp. Soldiers forcing civilians to work for them was common.

The soldier who walked towards my friends and I only wanted to purchase batteries for his radio. I directed him to the shop of Bashir Lala, my mother's second cousin, a good-natured simpleton, somewhat famous in the extended family for his cowardice, at whose expense we often sought a laugh. The town nearest to our village is officially named Anantnag but the locals mostly refer to it by its traditional name, Islamabad—though the soldiers would beat anyone who used Islamabad, as it is also the name of the Pakistani capital. One day Bashir was visiting relatives in Anantnag. He had been reminding himself to say Anantnag and not Islamabad if a soldier asked where he was headed. His bus was stopped at a checkpost outside the town and a soldier

demanded: 'Where are you going?' Bashir forgot his rehearsed answer, saying 'Islamabad' The soldier's baton stung his left arm and memory returned. 'Anantnag, sir! Anantnag, not Islamabad.' It was rumoured that Bashir took the next bus home and visited neither Anantnag nor Islamabad for the next few months.

The soldier took the few steps to Bashir's shop. I saw Bashir rise from his wooden seat, walk to the stairs leading to the shop, sweating and shivering. He addressed the soldier, 'What have I done, sir? Do not believe these idiots, they have no other work but to tease me. I am their father's age and still they scare me. I am only a small shopkeeper.' The soldier laughed and asked for batteries. Bashir fumbled through the few wooden shelves of his shop, found nothing, and apologised again. 'You should keep batteries here,' the soldier said. 'What brand, sir?'

The soldier moved on to another shop. Bashir watched the column of soldiers till they disappeared. Only then did he dare to shout: 'You swine! You joke with me! You dogs!' He kept shouting at us. Then he hid his head between his knees, covered it with his hands and broke down. 'Why do you do this to me? I have a heart problem and these guns terrify me. Yes, I am a coward. But I don't want to die; I have two daughters. I have to marry them off before I die.' He held his round, bald head and cried, 'You too! And you are my sister's son.' I never played a joke on Bashir again.

I understood his fear better, later, during the winter vacations. I was taking science and maths tuitions in the morning from a teacher in our village. I hated waking up early on winter mornings in Kashmir. It was hardest to make it to my tutor's house the morning after Pakistan Television screened 'clean' versions of various Hollywood classics. The reception on our television was bad and my brother and I spent hours adjusting the antenna. I carried the antenna

attached to a wooden staff from our roof, to the lawn, to the cowshed, rotating it slowly in all directions. My brother would run between the drawing room and my position breathlessly to report the progress. Sometimes the TV would catch the images but the sound would be blurred; sometimes we could get clear sound and figures would appear on the TV screen as if on the negative of an old black and white photograph. Eventually we found the right place for the antenna and the image and sound would synch.

One night my younger brother and I watched *The Three Musketeers*. War or peace, one couldn't let a chance to watch a movie slip by. Grandfather did not mind our watching 'English' movies since it was a chance to improve our English language skills. I had lowered the volume to a bare minimum, lit a night lamp, and closed the curtains to avoid attracting any attention. Outside, the curfewed night lay in its silence like a man waiting in ambush. *The Three Musketeers* fought, frolicked, and entertained us for a while. Then the rumble of military trucks outside blurred their duels. We switched off the TV and peeped through the curtains; the headlights of the trucks lit up the empty road and the surrounding houses. After the convoy had passed, there was silence and above us all, an indifferent moon reclining over the clouds.

Morning came abruptly with a loud announcement over the mosque's public announcement system: 'Asalam-u-alikum! This is an urgent announcement. The army has cordoned off the village. Every man and boy has to assemble in the hospital lawns by six. It is a crackdown. Every house will be searched. The women can stay at home.' Gul Khan, the farmer, who lived in a hut of sun-baked bricks next to the mosque and gave the call for prayer, repeated the announcement several times. Few responded to his early morning calls for prayer. But the announcement of the crackdown seemed to give his voice a new power. Within minutes my family had gathered in

the kitchen. After a quick breakfast, grandfather, father, my brother, and I stepped outside on the road. Small groups of men and boys from our neighbourhood were already standing by the closed storefronts.

A small crowd of freshly washed faces began a reluctant journey through the empty market towards the hospital compound. The light mustard sun half hidden behind the mountains touched the tin roofs of the houses. We walked in the misty light between rows of soldiers in greenish metal helmets cradling assault rifles and machine guns, past the forlorn shops. The women had been ordered to stay at home; mother and aunts would soon be opening the doors of every room and every cupboard for the soldiers looking for militants, guns, or ammunition. Kashmir was rife with stories of soldiers misbehaving with women during crackdowns. And many angry thoughts ran through my mind. I followed father. Soldiers barked at us to walk faster. We obeyed. Another group asked us to pull out our identity cards and raise our hands. Within seconds a long queue formed at the hospital gate. Two parallel lines of raised hands, the right hand holding firm the proof of identity, a few inches higher than the empty left hand. There was no distinction between the farmhand and the judge, just one man behind the other.

I entered the hospital compound; several hundred men were sitting on the cold, bare hospital lawns that had a few blades of grass left. Father, grandfather, my brother and I sat with a group of our neighbours. A military officer ordered visiting relatives and guests to stand in a separate group away from the residents of the village. Then they were ordered to walk in a queue past an armoured car. Each man was asked to stop near the window and show his face to the masked mukhbir, a Kashmiri man who had become a collaborator and identified militants and their supporters.

Some mukhbirs were suspected militants who had been beaten into submission. Some mukhbirs were volunteers who worked for money. Some mukhbirs had joined the troops to seek revenge on militants for the killing of a family member. Some time ago, militants had taken an alleged mukhbir to the canal running along the mountain towering over our village, and shot him. They had thrown the injured man into the canal and left him to die. Fortunately, the injured man, who turned out to be an unemployed former student of my grandfather from a neighbouring village, survived. Two bullets had hit him near his neck but the canal's cold water had coagulated his blood and saved him.

Over the next few hours we were told to form queues and walk past the mukhbir. If he raised his hand, the soldiers pounced upon him and took him away for interrogation. My turn came. I stood facing the cat whose eyes stared at me from behind his black mask. My heart galloped but I tried not to look nervous. He waited for a moment and asked me to move on. But Manzoor, my neighbour's sixteen year old son, was taken away for interrogation. His father had earlier run a hotel at a nearby tourist resort. After the fighting began and the tourists stopped coming to Kashmir, they had locked the hotel. His father opened a grocery shop after modifying a room on the ground floor of their house. Manzoor went to school but on the frequent days of hartals against an arrest, arson, or custodial killing by the soldiers, when schools remained closed he manned the shop. He was a gregarious and talkative teenager. Occasionally the militants passing by would stop to buy something from his shop or simply sit and talk to the people there. Manzoor loved the attention he received and flaunted his position of being able to talk to many commanders. The army seemed to have heard.

I returned to my place on the lawns and sat near father and grandfather, who were consoling Manzoor's distraught

father. Then two soldiers came towards us. 'Is someone called Basharat Peer here? He is a ninth class student.' They had the name of my school. I stood up. 'Come with us,' one said. 'But... I am a student,' I tried protesting. 'We know. We just need you to identify somebody,' the soldier said curtly. They walked towards the doctor's residence turned interrogation centre. I followed them, not turning back to see how my father or grandfather were reacting. We entered the three room building. I had been there many times to see the doctor, who was a family friend. I was told to sit in the doctor's storeroom and the soldiers slammed the doors behind me.

The room was empty and had a single window facing the village mountain. I stood near the window and stared at the door. It was a plain wooden door, painted in the regulation bluish-green of hospital buildings. I looked at my watch. I turned to the window and looked at the mountain, at the pine trees standing in bright morning light, at the rough track skirting up the slope to the canal, and at the lone, old hut in the clearing beside the canal. I looked at my watch again and turned towards the door. It stood still, wooden. I sat down on the floor and stared at the door. I was somewhat numb. The anticipation of interrogation is worse than the interrogation.

Then suddenly, loud cries and shrieks from the rooms next door startled me. Over and over I heard the words 'Khodayo bachaav' (Save me, God!) and 'Nahin pata, sir!' (I don't know, sir!). They were torturing the men and the boys who were taken away after the mukhbir had pointed them out. I thought of Manzoor but couldn't tell from the shrieks if he too was being tortured. How would his thin-as-a-reed body endure anything? And I thought of the boy from my school I was to identify. Who could it be? I muttered all the prayers I had ever known. The door stood still. I stared at the dusty, bare floor and waited. The shrieks continued, with

brief intervals of silence. Around two hours later the door opened violently. Two soldiers stood there, with their guns pointed at me. I stood up. Was it my turn to shout the words I had been hearing. I was stiff, scared, and staring into their faces. But they did not hit me or take me to the other rooms. One of them began questioning me.

'What is your name?'

'Basharat, sir!'

'Full name?'

'Basharat Ahmad Peer, sir!'

'Father's name?'

'Ghulam Ahmad Peer, sir!'

'What does he do?'

'Government officer, sir!' And quickly adding for effect, hoping it might help, 'Kashmir Administrative Service officer, sir!'

But he didn't seem to hear me.

'Where in the village do you live?'

'Down the road, sir! Next to the pharmacy.'

I continued looking at him and then briefly at the other soldier. But their stern, impassive faces gave away nothing.

And then suddenly, 'Which group are you with? KLF or HM?'

'With nobody, sir! I am a student.'

He paused and looked at me. 'Everyone says he is a student.'

'How many of your friends are with them?'

'None of my friends, sir! They are all students.' I took out my student identity card from my shirt pocket and presented it. He scanned it, turned it around, and returned it. 'Where are the weapons?'

'I have no weapons, sir! I am a student.'

'Come on, tell us. You know we have other ways of finding out.'

'I know, sir! But I am only a student!' I pleaded.

'Think harder. I will come back in a few minutes,' said the interrogator, and left.

The other soldier stood there in silence. I tried to persuade him that I was merely a student. 'Talk to the officer when he returns,' he said and maintained his frightening silence. After a while, the interrogator returned and asked the same questions again. I had the same answer: 'I am a student.' 'Alright,' he said, 'I know you are a student.' He seemed to soften a bit. He asked me about a student from my school, a friend, who was still enrolled but didn't come to school much. I answered quickly and gave my friend's father's name, profession, and the name of their village. I also mentioned that he had relatives in our village. He had been visiting his relatives and had been arrested in the crackdown. They had wanted to crosscheck his identity. The interrogator looked at me for a moment and said, 'Alright! You can leave.'

I thanked him profusely and walked out of the storeroom to join my group. I could feel hundreds of curious, sympathetic eyes on my face. I became very self-conscious, took measured steps, and tried to smile. Father and grandfather rose from the ground and walked towards me. I hugged them. 'Did they beat you, commander-in-chief?' Father tried mixing humour with concern. Grandfather's eyes were moist; he threw an arm around my shoulder and said nothing. After a while Manzoor was released; he was limping. Later, when the crackdown was lifted, my friend from school was released as well. He came limping towards me. We hugged. I asked him to come home. 'I have to get home. Thanks! You saved me today.' I watched him go, his cinnamon-coloured checked shirt disappearing in the crowd. I never saw him again. A few years later, I heard that he had joined the JKLF and was killed in a gun battle.

The day passed in a flurry of visits to the houses of men and boys who had been arrested. Manzoor had bruises all over his body from the beatings. His father forbade him from manning the grocery shop. Back home my family talked about the traces of moustache and beard that had begun to grow on my face. The soldiers were particularly suspicious of anyone with any kind of facial hair. Some of the older men of the village, including Manzoor's father, who used to dye their hair black, had stopped dyeing it. Grey hair, a certificate of ageing, made you less of a suspect for the soldiers. 'This bit of beard is not good for you,' father said. 'You should shave.'

Grandfather smiled. Mother laughed. I felt very shy. Father brought his shaving kit. 'Come, I will teach you. It is easy.' I had always watched father shave. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror; he stood near me. I rinsed my face with water and put some of his Old Spice shaving cream on a brush. 'Move the brush slowly in circles on the skin,' father said. Soon my face disappeared in white lather. The entire family was by now watching me. After a minute father gave me his Gillette razor. 'Glide it, slowly. Don't press hard or you will cut yourself.' I managed to shave.

Chapter Four

One afternoon, a couple of months before the crackdown, I saw a convoy of military trucks drive on the dirt track connecting our school to the village of Aishmuqam. I walked towards the row of willows and poplars near the aluminium fence of the school to get a clearer view. The trucks screeched their brakes and came to a halt at the gate of my school. The soldiers were moving in; though there was a camp only a mile away in the state high school building in Aishmuqam. They set to work fast. In a few hours the trucks had been unloaded and the few empty buildings—the complex was owned by the Geological Survey of India but they had shut the offices down soon after the fighting started and our Indian education ministry-run school rented some of the buildings, moving in from a small private building nearby—in the compound were turned into a military camp.

Over the next few days, they built watchtowers and sandbag bunkers along the school fence. Scores of machine gun nozzles and stern looking soldiers stared from the rectangular firing slats of the bunkers, draped with wire mesh aimed at deflecting potential grenades. Soon we had new rules to follow. Parts of the school complex, including half of the main school building, became out of bounds. We had to carry identity cards on us and show them every time we entered or left school. A sign ordering visitors to prove their identity came up near the checkpoint on the school gate. Visitors wrote their names, addresses, and other details in a register, and entered the school after a body search by the soldiers.

The soldiers never bothered us. We went to our classes, played football and cricket, and in our part of the campus, continued talking about what everyone else was talking

about in Kashmir: the war. Though we feigned to be utterly apolitical if a soldier spoke to us. The soldiers set about their work of 'area domination'—patrolling the road passing by the school, leaving early in the morning for crackdowns in neighbouring villages. In a few weeks, my schoolmates and I became used to the sight of military trucks returning from raids and crackdowns with arrested militants and suspected militants—young men tied with ropes being taken into the part of the school building occupied by the military. At night, in our rooms we would hear the cries of the prisoners being tortured. Small crowds of students would gather outside, speculating about the forms of torture our uniformed neighbours were employing. At times, we talked about ways we could help the prisoners escape, knowing well we would never do so.

The military camp and its operations were an invitation for a guerrilla attack. We, uneasily, expected the inevitable. Yet most of us hoped that the militants would not attack our part of the campus. After all, many militants had stayed the night in our dorms and eaten in our dining hall. The soldiers too seemed to have the possibility of an attack on their mind and told our teachers to restrict us to our dorms after sunset. One evening I was sitting in my room after dinner talking to my cousin and now roommate, Shabnam; the electricity had gone out and I had lit a candle. A sudden bang! And then another—the sound of a Kalashnikov, like a much amplified version of throwing a hard plastic cricket ball against a concrete wall. Rapid, continuous bursts followed. 'Kalashnikov!' I shouted the obvious. And then the louder, retaliatory bursts of LMGs positioned in the bunkers along the school boundary. 'That is an LMG burst!' I snuffed out the candle and we squatted under our windowsill. We listened to the varying sounds of gunfire, and I continued trying to tell the make of the gun being fired from the sounds we heard—Kalashnikov, self loading rifle, LMG. There was an

element of adventure, thrill. But within a few minutes the gunfire turned very intense and the excitement melted into fear. Shabnam whispered the prayer from the Quran Muslims read in the face of danger. I repeated the prayer known as Aayat-ul-Kursi or the Verse of the Throne, after him:

> Allah! There is no God but He—the living, the self-subsisting, the eternal. Neither slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things, in the heavens and on earth. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth. And He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. For He is Supreme (in glory).

And then our eyes were drawn to the window. The row of green-roofed, white-walled cottages housing the girls, our wide cricket field and the apricot and poplar trees forming a sort of a border between us, the asbestos sheet garage for the school bus, the white cotton net hanging from the poles of the volleyball court, and the mountains in the distance, were shining in a lovely white light. The rough music of gunfire played on but I was indifferent to it. A boom would sound and a sun would rise, exploding in a blinding flash of light. I stood in a daze by the window and stared at the sky: a thousand small suns seemed to have bloomed.

The attack on the school rattled my family; they got me permission to leave the dorm and commute from home. Mother talked about moving me to my brother Wajahat's school in Anantnag but that wasn't much safer. And most schools remained closed almost all the time. One day it was a protest against an arrest or a killing of an arrested person in an interrogation centre; another day it was a gun battle or a crackdown. The troops continued setting up camps in school buildings; militants burnt down many others they feared might be converted into military camps. And going to

school was fraught with danger, pretty much like every kind of travel. Wajahat came quite close to it one day. He had been playing snakes and ladders with a friend in the back row of their mathematics class, when they heard heavy gunfire. The shots were being fired in the market close to their school. Their teacher decided to carry on and finished his lecture ten minutes later. Wajahat and his friends were both scared and excited. He told me that a lot of his friends would get very excited on hearing gunfire. Then after a two hour lull in the firing, they were allowed to leave the school, which had been closed for the day.

The school gate was opened and the students pushed each other to get out first. They stepped out to see an army battle tank positioned in front of the gate. The soldiers on the tank asked the students to run and waved them away. Wajahat and his friends ran through the empty market towards a bus stand a mile away. Tense soldiers patrolled the road. Wajahat reached a footwear showroom run by a friend of our father's whom everyone called Good Luck. He heard a strange, mechanical sound and turned around to find a tank moving slowly behind him. He was alone on the road and scared. He began walking faster on the footpath and the tank rode parallel to him on the main road. The barrel of its gun was rotating, pointing at him and then pointing away. 'I thought the soldiers would fire a shell at me. Then I saw the machine gun mounted on the tank and thought they were more likely to shoot me with a bullet,' Wajahat told me. The tank stopped and he stopped. The tank commander shouted at him, 'Run! Or do you want to die?' He ran.

Parents saw getting their children out of Kashmir as the solution. The rich were sending their children to Europe and North America; the middle and the lower middle class chose all sorts of colleges and universities in Indian cities and towns from Bangalore to Balia. Most students were going to medical

and engineering schools; physics, chemistry, and biochemistry were also popular. In August 1993, when I had passed my tenth grade exams, grandfather accompanied me to Aligarh Muslim University, three hours from Delhi. I was supposed to study physics, mathematics and chemistry for two years at a school run by the university, then join the college there and graduate in a social sciences subject that helped fetch good marks in the civil services exam. My brother would follow two years later. When I left home with grandfather, my family members, relatives and neighbours stood outside our house for the farewell. We walked towards a taxi with a bag and a beige VIP suitcase. I didn't feel sad or troubled. I did not know how long it would take to return home. Every departure ever since has been a continuation of that moment.

The state transport bus struggled on the narrow highway along the mountain ridges that overlooks deep gorges and connects Kashmir to the Indian plains. The bus halted halfway for lunch at a highway market. It was full of eateries that were called hotels and had strange names. Hindu Hotel. Sikh Hotel. Muslim Hotel. We ate at the Muslim Hotel.

After a day's journey we arrived at the nearest railway station in Jammu. I had never been on a train before. There were and still are no trains in Kashmir. An orange sun was setting over barren plains as we entered the red brick railway station. Coolies in khaki shirts, trousers, and red overalls buzzed about us. The platform spilled with people—enthusiastic youth, heavily made up middle-aged women, their husbands carrying polythene bags and briefcases, relatives seeing them off. Hawkers with tin flasks of lukewarm tea and coffee ran towards every potential customer and shouted the obvious: 'Chai garam!'. A nasal voice speaking in broken English blared out of a railway megaphone. It regretted the inconvenience caused to the passengers by a train delayed for ten hours. Ten hours. Inconvenience regretted.

Our maroon train rolled in and we got into our compartment. Grandfather told me that the train had various kinds of compartments. The most expensive ones were air-conditioned and only the rich could afford them, then came the slightly less expensive first class compartments, and then the sleeper-class, which was what we could afford. The sleeper class was an over-crowded oven. Each section of the compartment had three berths facing each others and two others across the aisle. We took our two reserved seats and a few minutes later I began my first train journey.

Everything—from the railway station to the train berths to the people around us—was different. I was uneasy, awkward, and conscious of my ignorance of simple things like closing a train window or unfolding a berth. And the weather was brutal: hot and humid. My face burnt and my sweat-drenched shirt stuck to my back. Grandfather's lips were so dry that I could see a layer of salt on them. But the heat became a little more bearable as the Shalimar Express left the station. 'You can drink tea on the train and the cup will not shake,' a friend had told me once. I did and he was right.

A few hours into the journey, as the Shalimar Express arrived in Punjab, two soldiers entered my compartment. Like me, the soldiers had made a twelve hour journey through the high mountains to the railway station in Jammu. Ahead of us was a fourteen hour train ride to New Delhi. The soldiers smiled and dropped their bags in the aisle. 'Will you please make room for us?' one of them asked a middle-aged man reading a newsmagazine. 'We are going home after a year in Kashmir and don't have any reservations.' The man was unmoved. The soldier repeated his request, and as I squirmed in my seat, another passenger pointed at the floor of the dirty aisle and said, 'You may sit there.' I was stunned. Grandfather and I looked at each other. Unlike people in Kashmir, our north Indian fellow passengers

had no reason to be scared of the soldiers: they ordered them around and the soldiers obeyed. After a while the ticket examiner arrived. He wore a white shirt, a black coat and trousers, and a steel badge near his coat pocket with his name and the inscription 'Travelling Ticket Examiner' 'What are you doing here?' he barked at the soldiers. 'Sir, there is no room in other compartments. Sir! Please adjust us somewhere,' they pleaded. He asked the soldiers to leave the coach and began to walk away. They followed him. A few minutes later they returned and installed themselves on the floor. 'How much did he charge you?' someone asked. 'Fifty rupees each.' My co-passengers laughed and chatted about corruption. 'This is India,' declared the man with the newsmagazine.

We reached Delhi in the morning and by late afternoon, we were approaching the small town of Aligarh. I saw slum-like clusters of houses, grey industrial areas, vast empty fields, and more slums and villages where women in saris dried piles of mud cakes in the sun by the railway track. Two and a half hours later, we walked out of the red brick railway station building in Aligarh. Outside the station, there were no taxis or local buses but there were hundreds of cycle rickshaws pedalled by emaciated men. Grandfather was reluctant to be pulled by another human being. But it was too hot to walk the two miles to the university and we took a rickshaw. We felt guilty sitting in the rickshaw, pedalled by a poor man pushing hard against the load of his two passengers and their bags. 'There is terrible poverty here,' grandfather said. He paid the rickshaw puller twice the fare. The poverty in Kashmir wasn't as desperate.

We met some Kashmiri students at the university, who helped me with admissions. The university was overcrowded and there was no room in the dorms. But my new Kashmiri friends took me to their hostel and made some space for me.

One of my friends and I saw grandfather off at the railway station the next day. I was sad to see him go, but also excited to be in a new place with new friends. Things began well: I walked out of the railway station with my friend to watch my first Bollywood movie in a theatre. Aazadi!

On my first day I walked towards the school building with books and expectations. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had founded the university in 1920 to provide modern education to Muslims. It had once been known as the Oxford of the East. But it had fallen on bad times and was dying, like most provincial universities in India. It was no real aazadi from the misery of Kashmir. The political context of the university made things worse: it is one of the foremost institutions of Indian Muslims and their anxiety and frustration about their position within India was palpable. I had heard about the sectarian violence and tensions in north India but it had remained a distant abstraction, previously.

In December 1992, about a year before I joined my school in Aligarh, an extremist Hindu mob had demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, a few hundred kilometres from Aligarh. The Hindu right led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) argued that the mosque had been built after demolishing an ancient temple. They wanted to construct a Ram temple on the site of the demolished mosque. The demolition triggered religious violence throughout India and thousands were killed. Hilal, a Kashmiri friend at my new school, had witnessed the violence. Two days after the demolition of the medieval mosque, Hilal and ten other Kashmiri students took a train from Aligarh to Delhi, where they planned to catch a bus for Kashmir. Karsevaks, the Hindu right activists who had demolished the mosque in Ayodhya, were travelling on the same train. They wore regulation saffron headbands and carried saffron-painted crowbars, tridents, and daggers.

The karsevaks asked the students their names and places of residence. 'Most students gave their real names and said that they were from Kashmir,' Hilal told me. Then, he saw frenzied groups of karsevaks calling them 'Kashmiri Muslim terrorists' and attacking them with crowbars and daggers. Hilal heard screams and realised the karsevaks were pushing the injured students off the running train. Then a group of karsevaks approached him and asked his name. His surname, Bhat, is common to both Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir. 'I am a Hindu. My name is Praveen Bhat. My father's name is Badrinath Bhat,' Hilal lied. He feared they might want to check his identity card or, worse, ask him to drop his trousers and see whether he had a foreskin or not. Rioters often did that. Fortunately, the group seemed to be in a hurry and let him go. He wanted to jump off the train at the next stop but saw a mob on the platform running after another Kashmiri student, Rafiq Sofi, an undergraduate chemistry student. Hilal hoped his friends in the other compartments had survived.

The train reached Delhi two hours later. Hilal and another boy waited outside the Delhi railway station for the others. They met some but many were missing. Later, Hilal learnt that his friend and fellow ninth grade student Farhat Razak had been stabbed to death, his body found on the railway tracks by the police. Another student, Javed Andrabi, was missing for a month. Reports of an unidentified body found on the railway tracks near a town half an hour from Aligarh reached the university. People who had collected and buried his body had saved his trousers. Andrabi's brother was thus able to confirm the dead boy as his brother; the tailor's label on the dead man's trousers gave the name of the Andrabi family tailor and town in Kashmir.

Yet despite their insecurity and despair in an India witnessing the rise of Hindu nationalism, most of my Indian Muslim friends seemed quite patriotic. They disagreed with

the Kashmiri ideas of secession from India and saw the secession of a Muslim-majority Kashmir from India as bound to make life worse for India's Muslims. Whenever a cricket match was screened in the television room of our hostel, my Indian Muslim friends cheered, sang, and rooted for the Indian cricket team. The Kashmiris cheered for Sri Lanka or whoever else was on the opposite team.

The rhythms of student life and the confusions and longings of early youth kept us busy. After two final years of high school, I joined college in the autumn of 1995 to study political science, sociology, and English literature. No teacher ever bothered to connect the textbooks in terms of the social and political upheavals outside the classroom. They read out passages of a text in the classroom and made the students take notes, which they could learn by rote to write answers in the examinations. I preferred the English literature classes. The teacher who taught us Hemingway spoke in a mixture of Hindi and English which, Hilal told me, was called Hinglish. Few students attended classes and of those who did, fewer were able to speak or write a proper sentence in English. Student politicians strutted around with henchmen carrying country-made revolvers. Every other week there were shootings on campus and rival gangs would beat up members of other gangs. When the student politicians were not scuffling with rivals, they nourished dreams of making it in Indian politics.

I mostly hung out with other Kashmiri students. We shared stories of our experiences of the war back home. A boy from Srinagar talked about learning to play bridge and chess during days and nights of curfew. A boy from a northern Kashmir town talked about hiding in a storeroom for hours with his family after the Indian soldiers came under attack in his town. Somebody talked about the boredom of having to stay inside the house after sunset, and it reminded someone else of the

orders from the Indian troops that anyone stepping out of the house at night should carry a lantern or a torch, and that reminded others of incidents when people were killed after the troops mistook them for militants at night. Someone told a story about a madman who used to walk around his town at night and was shot by a patrol. Phone calls home and visits during the summer and winter holidays made us hear and see more of such tragedies year after year. One of those days, on a visit to a friend in the nearby town of Bijbehara I had stopped near a graveyard where scores of protesters, killed after the paramilitary had fired on a procession, were buried. The age of the dead on most tombstones was eighteen.

I returned to my college in Aligarh. It was uninspiring , except for the well-stacked university library. I heard echoes of Kashmir in the pages of Hemingway, Orwell, Dostoevsky and Turgenev, among others. I wondered if one could write like that about Kashmir but kept the thought to myself. I was not going to be the bureaucrat my family wanted me to be. Aligarh didn't seem to have much to offer me. I had seen reports of book launches, film festivals and theatre workshops in Delhi papers. I called mother and told her about my unwillingness to prepare for the civil services examination. 'Your father always wanted you to make it to the civil services.' Arguments and discussions continued for several months. We arrived at a compromise. I could train as a lawyer, prepare for the civil services, and write in my spare time. After some time I ended up at the law school in Delhi University. It was a way to be in Delhi and explore possibilities for writing, and my brother was already studying German literature at another university there.

Chapter Five

On my first day in the city, I walked through Connaught Place, an elegant circular arcade in the centre of New Delhi. I was overwhelmed. The buildings seemed too big; the roads too busy. It was a scorching June day; there was no breeze, no shade. Diesel buses left clouds of smoke. But I had a sense of freedom, a feeling that I could teach myself what I needed to learn. I spent most of my first year at the law school reading literature and works of journalism. Delhi had numerous libraries and a fabulous used books bazaar on Sundays. In mid 2000 I left law school and soon found my first job with a news site. After my very first week, with some lessons from my editors, I was sent out to cover Delhi. I tried, failed, tried again, and began learning to survive as a reporter.

My reporting job required me to travel a lot through the city and I was losing my patience with the crowded Delhi buses. After I had received my first salary I bought an old motorcycle from a colleague. 'You have to be quick. It is breaking news,' my news editor would shout. Delhi was about running faster than everyone else. I often thought of Ruskin Bond when I stopped my motorcycle at a traffic light. 'In Delhi you are either the first or you are lost,' Bond wrote. I did not want to be lost. As the traffic lights turned green I would release the clutch, wind the accelerator to the maximum, and shoot ahead of the crowd.

I lived in a garret on the roof of a south Delhi house, a mile away from my office. After work, when I was not reading, I hung out with friends at a university near my rented room. The university was and remains one of the few politically tolerant spaces in New Delhi. Delhi Police, whose emblem reads 'With you, for you, always', had over the years earned

a reputation for fake 'encounters' with Kashmiri 'terrorists' I understood why I had been sent to a decaying, provisional Muslim university and not to a college in Delhi.

Slowly, I learnt to like Delhi. I was learning to write and had better access to books and people interested in writing than I had ever had. I was also getting to understand the various Indias that existed, Indias that I liked and cared about, Indias that were unlike the militaristic power it seemed in Kashmir. India had opened its economy in the early nineties. Round the clock channels broadcast news and the number of magazines was growing. Young anchors and reporters asked victims of tragedies questions like 'So how does it feel?' in faux American accents. The newly moneyed capital of India began to pride itself on its special DJ nights, malls featuring Levi's showrooms and Nokia outlets. Thousands of Toyotas ferried call centre executives for night shifts at suburban BPO offices, among them a flatmate of mine, a boy from a small southern Indian town, who had been told to jettison his Indian name. He would tell me about his job and act out his calls: 'Hi! This is Jack Smith calling from JC Penney!'

The old India and its power structures did not disappear. My neighbourhood was full of students from small towns and villages of India, living very austere lives and preparing for the 'competition' or the 'civils'— the Indian Civil Service examination. They dredged through tedious manuals and textbooks for four, five, even six years, fortifying themselves with cheap Old Monk rum and staring at the white washed ceilings of claustrophobic rooms; dreaming of sitting behind the chair of a district magistrate, being surrounded by armed guards, servants, drivers all obsequiously jumping to attention at your every whim, a bungalow, a white Ambassador car with a siren and a flashing red light, and in a few years holding the power to administer to an entire district—often with hundreds of villages and more than a million people in them.

And in the heart of Delhi, near Jantar Mantar, I saw almost every day groups of India's powerless—people sitting on the footpaths with cloth banners or cardboard placards seeking official attention for their woes, for the injustices they lived with. India was grotesque and fascinating.

Delhi was beginning to be a second home. Maybe a city feels like home when you know there will be a person or two who will come to the airport, to the railway station to greet you, when you know there are people you want to meet as you arrive in a city. I might have forgotten Kashmir—it might have turned into a place I visited every two or three months—but I could not. Kashmir was the text and subtext of my professional, personal and social worlds in Delhi. Kashmir was the almost daily death count in the newspapers. I hoped that I would never have to read names of people I loved the most in those reports of death in Kashmir.

One day I almost ran out of luck. I was covering Delhi courts for the news portal I worked for. On 14 May 2001, the London-based Indian business tycoons, the Hinduja brothers, were being tried in India for their alleged involvement in the Bofors scam. The hearings were held in a north Delhi court complex, Tis Hazari. It was a very hot day. I began to sweat the minute I stepped outdoors. My editor asked me to take a cab instead of my rickety motorcycle, and the air-conditioning in the car made the prospect of going to the court appealing. An hour later, the driver parked outside the monstrous concrete court complex. I walked in to find the familiar crowd of reporters whiling away time with cups of tea and the retelling of court reporter jokes. The hearing began around half past one in the afternoon after two hours of waiting in the heat.

I found a place near the witness box where two of the Hinduja brothers stood in their grey suits and square seventies style spectacles, sweating under the leisurely, noisy motions

of an antique ceiling fan. A reporter joked about equality under law, how the ill-paid reporters and billionaire Hindujas sweated under the same fan. As the case proceeded a vague sadness overcame me. I was restless, indifferent to the trial. I tried taking notes and failed. I felt breathless and decided to leave. Fifteen minutes later, I made my way through the crowd of reporters and snuck out of the courtroom.

My office was in a crowded shopping complex dominated by huge Benetton, Reebok, and Adidas stores. A TGIF bar stood next to a new multiplex. A small independent book store was almost hidden in this glitter of billboards and the nonchalant noise of Delhi's rich kids. I walked past the bookstore, checked the new books in the display, and took the stairs to my office on the top floor. 'How was the story, Basharat?' Ramesh, an editor and mentor asked, the moment I entered the office. I told him how I'd had to walk out. 'Don't worry. Maybe it is the goddamn heat.'

Ramesh fidgeted with some files. I sat on my desk to check my email. Ramesh turned to me and put a hand on my shoulder. He seemed disturbed, trying hard to be composed. 'There was a call for you from Mukhtar (the Srinagar reporter). Please call him back urgently.' Something was clearly wrong.

I dialled the number. Mukhtar picked up the phone on the second ring. He made some small talk about my work. And then. 'Basharat, your parents were travelling back from a wedding at your uncle's village. There was a mine blast on the road. Thank God, they are safe! I just spoke to them. Please call them.'

Parents. Mine blast. Safe. I registered the words and held the receiver. Ramesh stood in silence. 'They are safe.' Parents. Mine blast. Safe. The words hit me as if someone had punched my heart. I sat on the office floor and rested my head against a stack of newspapers. I broke down. My colleagues stood around me, silent, sad. I gathered myself in a few minutes

and called home. My cousin picked up the phone and hearing my voice began crying on the phone. 'Anya! Give the phone to Daddy!' I shouted. My father and I talked for a long time. 'You should go home,' Ramesh said, and offered to buy me an air ticket. There were no flights till the next morning; I had to take the overnight bus. 'I have to tell my brother first.' Wajahat's university was a few minutes from my office. Ramesh hugged me and I left.

I walked towards my rust-coloured Kawasaki motorcycle parked in a long line of scooters and motorcycles, and turned the gas and the ignition on. I tried to kick-start but nothing happened. I kicked again and the machine whined. I tried harder; the old engine groaned to life briefly. I felt I would fall; my hands were shaking and my legs felt very weak, as if some giant syringe had sucked every ounce of blood out of me. I struggled with putting the motorcycle back on the stand and holding my helmet in my lap, sat on a cemented parking divider, smoking, thinking how to tell Wajahat.

Throughout the ride to his university images of my parents came to my mind: leaving a hospital with an arm in a cast and getting a bottle of Campa Cola and a Five Star chocolate from father; walking with him to Royal Book Seller near his office and buying Batman comics; drinking tea and talking poetry at home; receiving a seven page letter from him on publishing my first story in a Delhi newspaper. And mother: staying awake throughout the nights I had fever; finding a packet of cigarettes in my trousers when I was home from college and keeping my secret; insisting I wear proper clothes, making half-serious enquiries about marriage after I began working.

I stopped at the open-air café near Wajahat's dorm. I lived across the road from the university and often met him and a few other friends there. Scores of small groups of boys and girls sat along the road and on small blocks of concrete along

the slope of the café. Many more stood in a line waiting for tea and snacks at the café counter and the tiny cigarette and betel nut shop next to it. Some more hung about the public phone booth. My brother was sitting with his friends closer to the café counter. I took slow, sad steps, past groups of students immersed in loud, passionate discussions about politics, casually laughing, and flirting.

Wajahat and his friends sat in a circle; half-empty paper cups lay on a small block of stone in the middle and smoke rose from a few cigarettes. Wajahat held a small cotton towel in his left hand. His long, wavy hair was soaked in sweat. He always had a small towel on hand to keep sweat from dripping onto his contact lenses. He saw me from a distance and said something; his friends laughed. They often made light-hearted comments comparing the manual labour of my reporting job to their critical readings of Hegel and Kant in the air-conditioned library. 'Mr Reporter, what's up?' Wajahat grinned.

I said nothing and took a moment to fortify myself. 'We have to call home.' My voice was uneven, shaky. His face stiffened and he stood up. 'What? What happened?' His eyes turned grave, apprehensive. His friends circled us. 'Mummy and Daddy were coming back from a wedding at Salia. There was a mine blast on the road. It was very close. But they are safe. They are home.' Wajahat sat down. 'I just spoke to them. They are fine. They are home.' I repeated. I held him. 'We should call them now.' I put my arm around his shoulder and pushed him into the café phone booth. 'Are they alright?' he continued asking and I repeated, 'I just spoke to them. They are home and they are fine.'

We walked into the tiny, glass-doored cubicle in the phone booth from where one could make 'long-distance' calls. A plastic mini fan hanging from a wall whirled in vain against the blistering May heat. Wajahat held the door ajar and I dialled

home. The phone began to ring. I gave him the receiver and stood behind him, my hand on his shoulder. He talked on the phone as if in a daze, oblivious to the voluble, gay voices outside, indifferent to the stain of sweat spreading across the back of his light blue T-shirt. When we hung up we embraced.

'We have to go home,' he said. 'Yes. We have to,' I replied. Wajahat had an exam in a few days. 'I will go now,' I said decisively. 'And you will come after your exam.' He was silent, thinking, tears welling up in his eyes. 'I will come with you.' He said. 'I will drop the exam.' 'No! You can't. They are fine. They are safe. You will come after the exam.' He was very attached to mother. 'Let's talk to Mummy again. If she says yes, you can come.' 'You know she won't let me.' 'Let's call,' I insisted. Mother and father insisted that he write his exam. I took an overnight bus to Jammu, a flight from there to Srinagar, and a cab home from the airport. I remember nothing else.

The cab stopped outside the house. Many cars were parked along the road; I stood there for a moment, looking at our house, at the mountains in the distance, seeking assurance in the familiar. I walked in. Father was surrounded by friends, relatives, and neighbours, on the lawn. A samovar and a few trays bearing cups and plates full of bread and cakes lay around. Mother was standing next to him. I was suddenly tired with the relief of being able to see them again. Grateful that I didn't have to walk into a house without them. I felt no anger—that came much later, after weeks. I walked towards them and silence fell on the group. Father smiled from a distance and rose from his place; mother remained where she was. I walked up to her and hugged her. What could I say? What do you say when your parents nearly get killed? I said nothing. And what do they say when a son who is not around comes home? We said nothing. Mother asked about

Wajahat's preparation for the examination. Father asked about my journey. We shook hands. We always shook hands whenever I came home, never comfortable with displays of affection. Then we looked at each other and hugged. There was no need to say anything.

We drank some tea. 'You must take a shower and change,' father said. 'Later.' I sat with them, drinking tea, saying nothing much. 'It was a miracle,' father said. They had been at a relative's daughter's wedding at Rahman uncle's village, three miles from our ancestral home. The ceremonies were over by one and after lunch they had left in the car with two of my cousins. The car moved out of the village and they travelled on a narrow dirt road, running past clusters of houses built on a plateau on their right. 'I saw these two young men sitting on the plateau across the stream. They were looking at us,' father said. 'Your mother pointed at one of them. He had something like a calculator in his hand.'

The car slowed down. 'We were crossing a concrete water pipe running through the road.' Then there was a loud explosion. 'It was like a strong blast of air lifting the car in the air. The force of the blast pushed the car onto the rising ground on the right. Bricks and stones torn from the road fell on the car roof. We hit the ground but thankfully it didn't overturn.' For the next few minutes they lay huddled, father told me, waiting for possible gunfire. The calculator-like thing father had seen was a detonator; the two young men across the stream had planted the mine inside the water pipe. Luckily, they had forgotten to block one end of the pipe. The force of the explosion veered off towards the unblocked end of the pipe. The car was merely tossed in the other direction. Everyone escaped with minor bruises. Physics had saved my family. 'But why you?' I asked him. He had no answers. I heard him repeating the same question on the phone. 'Did I... ? Did I... ? Did I... ?' Militants had

been killing pro-India politicians, police, or anybody whom they perceived as working against them. But civil servants like my father, whose job was to look after daily administration, were rarely targeted.

Over the next few days, friends and relatives brought pieces of news and the name of the man who had convinced the militants to kill my father. He was a man with political ambition, a man my father and my family had known for a long time. I shall call him Iago. A month before the attack, he had met my father in his office. Father was the head of administration for the district and had to decide various disputes between organisations and individuals. One of Iago's rivals, a man with political ambition, had applied in my father's office for a certain permit. Iago wanted the permission denied to his rival. Father told Iago that legally his rival had the right to be granted that permission. 'But you can skirt around that if you want. It is a little known law,' Iago told father. Father disagreed and Iago left, sullen.

Iago is the characteristic ambitious operator from a conflict zone, flirting with pro-India groups in the day, feeding, sheltering, donating money to the separatist, anti-India militant groups by night. One of the commanders in the biggest militant group operating in the area, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, was from Iago's village. While the militant was on the run, Iago had invested well in supporting his family. After his meeting with my father, Iago sent word to the militant commander through one of his men: 'Peer is dangerous for you. He is working hard to ensure that village level elections go smoothly.' Militant groups had called for a boycott of all sorts of elections—village level, district level, state level—which they saw as an exercise which strengthened Indian rule in Kashmir.

Iago's men convinced them that if the militant boycott of the village elections was to work well, they had to get my

father out of the way. A month later the landmine went off. In the weeks following the attack on my parents, hundreds of people visited our house and the phone never stopped ringing. Iago did not call. Much later, I bumped into him on the street. He shook my hand, complained that I did not visit his family, and asked about father's wellbeing, said many complimentary things about him. I kept up the pretence, smiled back, and asked about his family.

When I returned to my job in Delhi I called my parents almost every day. I had somehow come to believe that my family would always be safe. I mentioned this to my father during a phone conversation. We had talked earlier about people dying but never talked about death per se. 'I too had this faith that we will be fine and survive it all. Maybe people don't really believe that they can be killed or come close to death,' father said. I knew he was scared and living with a great degree of fear. He hardly travelled anywhere.

It troubled me because I had seen fear and paranoia destroy my grandfather's younger brother, Nabi. A blue-eyed man with salt and pepper hair, Nabi did small time road repair jobs on contract for the local government, and was known in the family for his non-existent business sense. At times he waited for his payments for years; at times he never got paid and lost money. In the summer of 1998, he got a contract to work on a road in his village. He had outwitted a rival contractor and promptly set to work. One evening he got home after a long day's work at the construction site. His wife wanted to serve dinner. He asked her to wait; he wanted to help their daughter to milk their cow. Nabi carried a steel bucket, his daughter, Mubeena, carried a kerosene lantern and they walked towards the cowshed. 'Ghulam Nabi?' a stern voice shot out of the darkness and stopped them.

In the faint lantern light they saw three militants pointing guns at them. 'We have received complaints against you,' one

said. 'You are still working for the National Conference.' The allegation of working for a pro-India party amounted to being called a collaborator. 'You have to come with us,' another shouted. Nabi stammered in his defence. Mubeena was quick to realise that if her father went with the militants he might not return. She turned off the lantern and flung it into a militant's face and pushed her father to run. Taken by surprise the militants took time to react. Nabi and Mubeena jumped through their vegetable garden, climbed a low fence and hid inside a neighbour's house. Frustrated, the militants fired a few shots in the air and banged at Nabi's door. His brother's family lived in the same house. Realising what had happened they raised a cry; their neighbours rushed out. The militants fled. Nabi and Mubeena were moved to another relative's house for the night.

Early next morning a car stopped outside our house. Nabi stayed there for almost a year, refusing to move out of the house for the first few months. Every time someone knocked on the door or the phone rang, he jumped. 'I feel they are looking for me. I hear the phone bell and it seems they have traced me and are calling me,' Nabi told me once, when I was trying to reassure him of his safety. At times he looked at my parents suspiciously. If they had a private conversation in their room, he thought they were conspiring against him.

My last meeting with him at my grandfather's house shocked me. Four years had passed since the militants had come for him. After dinner he wanted water for the anti-depression drugs he took. I brought him water and asked about his health now. 'I am fine. I rule my entire area now. Both the army and the militants seek my permission before they do anything. They see my white beard and know I have a direct connection with God.' I nodded and let him rest. His hair and beard had turned white; his blue eyes still had a paranoid look about them, as if someone was watching him.

I continued calling my parents from Delhi frequently. They had found immense support from family, friends, and colleagues. But the residues of fear remained. Father got transferred to a new job in the relatively calmer capital. For a few years afterwards he stopped visiting our relatives in the villages and travelled outside Srinagar only when necessary.

Chapter Six

In the winter of 2001, I was in a meeting with my editors. The air around the conference table was charged with the excitement of a newsroom meeting. Reporters were throwing up ideas: scoops, big interviews, detailed stories on complex subjects. Editors argued back, agreeing, disagreeing. Performances were being evaluated; decisions taken about assignments. Economy. Elections. Environment. Urban Politics. And Kashmir! I had worked as a police reporter and a court reporter; I filled in for fashion shows and had even written about game shows—anything my editors had asked for. After work I obsessively read about armed conflicts. I was training myself for the one story I wanted to tell the most: Kashmir. And then my editor said, 'Basharat! You are going to Kashmir.' It was hundred times the rush of graduation, I was tossing my hat far, far into the air. My excitement dwarfed my experience and competence. I was going home as a reporter; I could take the stories of Kashmir to the world.

I flew home from Delhi in the last week of November. Kashmir was cold and grey. I stayed with my parents but had little time for them. I was twenty four, restless, and oblivious to the cold. It turned dark by five in the evening and the working day ended. Checkposts, searchlights, and fear owned the night. The short days frustrated me. Emailing the dispatches to my editors wasn't easy. Srinagar had one decent internet café; scores of reporters waited there every day to access email. The government was suspicious of the reach of the internet and the users had to provide their names, addresses, and phone numbers to the café manager. Every day I talked to my journalist friends: ideas, contacts, discussions. Newsrooms in Kashmir were busy and every paper hung a

chart in the office that read: SITUATION. The situation chart had the phone numbers of the Kashmir police control and a reporter was on duty to check the day's death toll.

It was also a few months after September 11 and every newspaper and magazine wanted to explain what made a man a suicide bomber. There had been some suicide bombings in Kashmir; the first more than two years earlier by Afaq Shah, a Kashmiri boy from Srinagar. On an April afternoon in 1999, three days before his Seventeeth birthday, he had blown up an explosive-laden car at the gate of the Indian army headquarters in Kashmir. I was to write about him.

I took an auto rickshaw to the lower middle class neighbourhood of Khanyar to meet Afaq's family. His mother, a housewife in her fifties, opened the door of their modest house and invited me in. His father, a schoolteacher, was away.

We sat in their kitchen. 'He wanted to be a doctor,' she said, and showed me pictures of her son posing in a bright, white apron and a stethoscope. 'He was a quiet, shy boy.' Unknown to his parents, Afaq had come under the influence of operatives of a pan-Islamic militant group, indoctrinated in the idea of jihad and martyrdom, and agreed to be a suicide bomber. Three hours after he blew himself up, police arrived at her door with the news. 'He didn't even know how to ride a bicycle,' she said. Afaq had driven the explosive-laden car into the military compound. 'He did not even tell me. I would have hugged him before he left,' she said. She did not cry. 'I am not the only mother in Kashmir to lose a son.' For her other unemployed son she wanted a job. 'Can you do something?' She walked with me to the graveyard where Afaq was buried. Around fifty marble tombstones of men killed during the conflict filled a small patch of land a few hundred metres from their house. The white marble tombstones had the names and ages of the

dead engraved on them. Most of them had died between the ages of seventeen and twenty four.

Other markers of violence and death were scattered around me. A few days later, I met Maqbool Sheikh in a rundown house in a Srinagar locality. In his late forties, slightly plump, a paramedic at the police hospital in Srinagar, Maqbool was the only autopsy expert at the police hospital in Srinagar, where most of the people killed in and around Srinagar were brought. He had sliced open and stitched together more than 12,000 bodies of men, women and children since the armed conflict had begun in Kashmir. His eyes had the look of eternal grief. Twenty five years ago, when he had got this job with the state medical department, Maqbool had considered himself lucky. 'Only yesterday after work I took some fruits for my daughter. She dropped the packet and shrieked that my clothes stank of blood.'

Children born just before or after the armed rebellion had become far too intimate with war and fear. My cousin, who was born in the early nineties on a day a gun battle was raging outside the hospital, played a game called 'army-militant'. I watched him join his friends, carrying wooden guns and broken plastic balls stuffed with cloth meant to be hand grenades. They broke into groups and took combat positions. A child shouted 'fire' and the game began. They enacted the bloody drama that unfolded around them. But when it snowed and the guns turned quiet, he and his friends still made snowmen, using charcoal pieces for eyes. He had got an identity card made for himself and told me he never went anywhere without it. Then, he asked for my identity card. Out of laziness, I told him I did not have one on me. 'You do not have an identity card!' He was surprised. 'Why? Don't you have police or army in Delhi?'

Writing about such violence-stained lives was painful but the writing partially liberated me. A few years earlier, a

young army captain posted near our village had harassed my grandfather because the old man was not carrying an identity card outside his house. I was angry then and couldn't do anything about it. As a reporter, at least I could write now.

Three weeks went by very quickly. They shredded my euphoria about being home as a reporter. Listening to people talk about death, fear and humiliation was hard. It made me angry and sad. It made me cry. But I had to come back, spend more time in Kashmir. Nothing that I could write about in Delhi seemed more pressing, more urgent. But I had to return to my job there to be able to return here. I went to say goodbye to my grandfather and spend a night with him in the village.

Winter means heavy snowfall, a slower pace of life, and therefore less blood spilled in Kashmir. Grandfather was looking forward to the relative peace of the colder months, along with flu and frostbite. We were leisurely drinking tea and talking, indifferent to the television news droning on. And suddenly, the anchor's voice turned shrill and loud. 'Terrorists have attacked the parliament!' We were startled by a chaotic barrage of images on the screen: the sirens of police cars, soldiers and policemen running, ducking, and firing at the terrorists in military fatigues running inside the parliament building, smoke rising from exploding tear gas shells, the resounding echoes of their gunfire, the body of a dead terrorist on the stairs of the parliament building, and a little later, the shaken legislators being led out. We immediately feared that a war might erupt between India and Pakistan. 'This winter the snow will turn red,' grandfather sighed.

The details of the attack became clearer by the end of the day. In the morning legislators had gathered in the domed central hall of the circular, colonnaded building of the Indian parliament, a majestic presence in the heart of New Delhi. They were arguing angrily about the involvement

of the Indian defence minister in an arms scandal. White Ambassador cars were lining up on the concourse. At about 11:30, policemen at the main parliament gate saw a white Ambassador approaching, with five men inside. It appeared to have the necessary entry pass on the windshield; they stepped aside. The car accelerated as it moved past the red sandstone wall of the parliament building. The next moment it had collided with one of the cars in the motorcade of the Indian vice president, who was expected to emerge from the parliament at any moment. As policemen ran towards the Ambassador, its doors opened. Five men with guns started firing at the police. They scattered into the parliament's large grounds, before anyone could retaliate. The speaker abruptly adjourned proceedings in the debating chamber. Emergency messages crackled across police radios: terrorists had attacked the parliament. More police and paramilitaries were urgently summoned. A fierce battle was fought outside the building. Inside, around 200 trapped and terrified legislators listened for half an hour to gunfire and grenade explosions. By noon, it was all over. The five armed men had been killed. Eight policemen and a gardener were also dead.

In the days following the attack, hostility rose as India ordered half a million soldiers to the India–Pakistan border. On TV, analysts talked about a nuclear war; newsmagazines calculated the extent of devastation Indian and Pakistani nuclear bombs were capable of. Kashmir was debating whether India or Pakistan would go to war or not. A lot of people wanted a war; 'It will be better than dying slowly every day.'

Indian and Pakistani gunners were continuously firing mortar shells at the villages along the India–Pakistan border and the LoC. I left for the India–Pakistan border in the southern province of Jammu to write about the villagers displaced by this shelling. One early morning, a photojournalist and I drove to Banglar, a village on the border; we drove on

an empty road, passing deserted villages. Families of refugees lived in tents and school buildings in various towns near the border. Many were in hospitals with legs and arms torn by shrapnel. Thousands of Indian soldiers were already on the border and hundreds of their olive green trucks were headed that way. The soldiers struck battle-ready poses for the photographer.

Banglar was a few dozen bare huts and houses among fields of wheat, mustard and wild grass. The border was simply a barbe wire fence, abandoned fields full of landmines, wild grass and silhouettes of bunkers. We met the few men who had stayed behind to guard and feed their cattle. We took pictures of destroyed houses. A villager, like the other, was telling me how they were tired of the cross-border shelling every time relations between India and Pakistan became embittered. 'They should fight a war now and settle it. We are tired of dying every day,' he sighed. As we spoke near his destroyed house, the shelling began again. I could hear the hiss of a mortar going over our heads and falling a few hundred yards away. The villager rushed us into a cowshed. We sat on cow dung for the next hour, praying, hoping to get out alive. Then the shelling stopped for a minute. The photographer, five villagers and I ran faster than we ever had. In the evening, I boarded a train for Delhi from the nearest railway station.

Delhi had changed after the attack on the parliament. The usually indifferent residents of the city scanned every stranger's face. I was looking for a place to stay at the time and I met around a dozen people who had advertised in a local daily, for a tenant for a two room flat. Mr Sengupta, a lawyer, was happy to know that I was comfortable with arranging the whitewashing and repairing the broken electric switches. In his living room full of law journals and imitations of Indian miniature paintings, we talked about the rent, my

work and my income. He patted his Dachshund pup as he spoke. 'So, your parents are posted in Kashmir?' he asked. 'They live there; we are Kashmiris,' I said. 'I studied here and work here.' He turned pale. 'Oh! You are a Kashmiri. A Kashmiri Muslim.' Mr Sengupta was a lawyer. He asked me to call him the next day. 'You are like our own son. But my daughter called and a friend of hers has to stay in Delhi. We will have to keep her. I cannot rent out the flat.' I had heard similar lines before.

A few months passed and I still couldn't find an apartment. I spent nights on my friends' couches. The armies were still on the borders, war clouds were still hovering. Naresh Chandra, an elderly property agent with a slight build and a slighter moustache, was sympathetic. 'They do not understand. All five fingers are not the same. You are a Kashmiri but you are not what they think of you,' he said, adding, 'Sikhs could not rent an apartment for ten years after the 1984 riots.' Another month passed. The generosity of my friends was heartwarming, but I could feel that the city was changing for me. In newspaper advertisements, police warned against possible attacks by Kashmiri militants. Security checks and barriers outside theatres, railway stations and markets added to the paranoia. I was scared of saying I was a Kashmiri. But people could tell from my long nose and pale complexion that I was one. I carried my press card with me all the time. Even then I avoided busy markets and entertainment complexes.

Someone suggested an address in a Muslim ghetto at the other end of the city. Muslims in Delhi lived mostly in the squalor of the old city near the Red Fort or in the overcrowded, dingy Okhla area in the southern corner of the city. It was hard for them to rent or buy a place in the mostly Hindu middle class or upper middle class areas. The Muslim ghettoes in Delhi seemed like an extension of my Muslim university in Aligarh. I resisted going there. HSBC and Citibank, which

had hundreds of branches, refused to entertain requests for a personal loan from these parts of Old Delhi or Okhla; even Pizza Hut would not deliver a pizza there.

Leaving Delhi seemed a reasonable option. Then a property dealer I had met called. 'I have an old, lonely lady who wants a paying guest.' It meant getting in by ten at night, sharing the bathroom with her, and having no guests. But did I have a choice? As we entered her apartment, a frail woman in her seventies was talking on the phone. I could hear her. She was speaking in Kashmiri—my mother tongue. Mrs Kaul was a Kashmir Pandit who had moved to Delhi with her husband some forty years ago. 'Where are you from?' she asked in Hindi.

I answered in Kashmiri and told her that I was a journalist, that my mother was a schoolteacher, that my father was a bureaucrat, that my brother studied German at the university close to her house. 'My husband was a bureaucrat like your father,' she smiled and talked about some of her relatives who were bureaucrats in the Kashmir government. My parents happened to know them. 'You are a journalist. You write in English. That is very good.' She offered me a seat in her bare drawing room; pictures of her husband and Kashmiri Hindu deities hung on the walls. 'Shall I make us some tea?' she said. I paid the rent and the advance to the property dealer; there was no contract to sign. 'He is from a good family. He will be like my own son,' she turned to the property dealer.

I fought my tears; after months of suspicion I was being welcomed and treated with respect. 'Go and get your bags,' she said. I returned with my bags in an hour and she showed me my room. Over an empty bed hung a big picture of Ganesha. 'Shall I take it off?' she asked. It stayed.

Chapter Seven

Living in Delhi as a Kashmiri Muslim had become even more difficult after the attack on the Indian parliament despite the warmth and generosity of my colleagues and friends. The Indian government believed that the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed had attacked the Indian parliament; these groups had been operating mostly in Kashmir. Hardliners inside and outside the Hindu right, the BJP, claimed that December 13 was India's 9/11. They demanded that Indian soldiers cross the LoC and attack the terrorist camps in the part of Kashmir held by Pakistan. Leading the hardliners was the Indian home minister, LK Advani, who had engineered the rise to power of the BJP in the nineties.

Within hours of the attack on the parliament, the Delhi police claimed to have recovered from the body of 'Mohammed', allegedly a Pakistani terrorist killed in the parliament complex, a mobile phone, three SIM cards and some telephone numbers. Two days later, they arrested three Kashmiri men and a pregnant housewife, and charged them with 'conspiring in the attack on the parliament'. The police claimed that the telephone numbers found on Mohammed had led them to the Kashmiris. The first to be arrested, on the 15th of December, was a thirty two year old Delhi University Arabic lecturer, Syed Abdul Rahman Geelani. The police said they had picked him up outside his rented house in north Delhi. The news of his arrest shocked me.

I had met Geelani one evening in autumn 1999, at Delhi University, when I was studying there. A mutual acquaintance from Kashmir introduced us. A short, soft-spoken, handsome man, Geelani told me that he had left Kashmir before the insurgency began. He had studied in other parts of India

before joining Delhi University in the early nineties. He seemed happy to see me at the university and lamented the collapse of the educational system in Kashmir. 'Delhi will teach you a lot and open your horizons,' he said. 'Here, the bigger world opens to you. Work hard.' Geelani talked a lot about his teaching job. I thought he spoke with the pride of a small-town boy who had worked his way to the faculty of a prestigious university. We walked to the hostel cafeteria for tea. His easygoing manner contrasted with the nervousness that I had seen in many other young Kashmiris in Delhi. When we talked about Kashmir, he showed none of the raw passion or emotion that most Kashmiris do. He seemed to have accepted Delhi as his world. I saw Geelani occasionally on campus after that, but our acquaintance did not progress beyond the usual pleasantries. I was busy in my own world, trying to be a journalist.

In Srinagar, the police arrested two other Kashmiri men: Mohammed Afzal, who had joined a Kashmiri militant group in the early nineties, then laid down his arms and apparently started a business, and Shaukat Guru, his businessman cousin. They lived in Delhi, but had left for the Valley on the day of the attack. The police also arrested Afshan Guru, Shaukat's wife. All three arrested men were from Baramulla; they lived in the same area in Delhi and knew each other. They were booked under a draconian anti-terrorism ordinance, Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO), introduced a month after the September 11 attacks, by the BJP government. In March 2002, three months after the attack on the Indian parliament, the ordinance became a law—the Prevention of Terrorism Act, (POTA) 2002. Indian opposition parties and civil rights groups such as Amnesty International opposed it, but the global 'war against terror' took its toll on civil liberties in India as ruthlessly as it did elsewhere in the world.

The arrested men were interrogated. The police claimed that Afzal, the main accused, had confessed to his involvement. Rajbir Singh, the assistant commissioner in the anti-terrorism cell of the Delhi Police, invited television crews to record Afzal's public confession, which was then broadcast across India. A tall, sturdy man with rugged features, Singh had risen from being a lowly sub-inspector to his present prestigious position in just a few years. His role in six separate killings of alleged terrorists and gangsters has provoked endless questioning by sections of the Indian media. Singh was already under a cloud when the home ministry, under Advani, appointed him to head the investigation into the attack on the Indian parliament. It was under Singh's direction that Geelani was arrested.

Soon after Geelani's arrest in winter 2001, I travelled to his hometown, Baramulla, to interview his relatives. His mother, a widow, was inarticulate with grief. His father-in-law, Habibullah, a retired schoolteacher, could not believe that his son-in-law, a university lecturer and a father of two, could be involved in an act of terrorism. Despite his grief and shock, Habibullah had a dignified air about him. He told me that hundreds of townsfolk had gathered outside his house to express their support and their faith in Geelani's innocence. They wanted to demonstrate against the arrest. But he stopped them. He feared that demonstrations, as they typically did in Kashmir, would lead to anti-India sloganeering, which would anger the government and damage the chances of his son-in-law's release.

I then sought out Geelani's younger brother Bismillah, who lived in Delhi with Geelani's wife and children. Bismillah told me that he had visited his brother a week after his arrest, where he was living in a cage-like room in a Delhi Police interrogation centre. Geelani was limping, had wounds on his ankles; nylon ropes tied around his wrists had left blue

marks. Bismillah had brought him some food, but the police torture had left Geelani without the appetite or energy to eat. The brothers met again a week later, this time in jail. Bismillah found out that Geelani was in solitary confinement and was denied access to books, paper or the jail library. Criminals in the jail looked upon him as a terrorist and an anti-national, and had assaulted him several times. Around that time, university officials suspended Geelani from his teaching job.

In May 2002, the police filed a charge sheet against him. At the same time, his landlord evicted his wife and children, who had to find refuge in a Muslim ghetto in another part of the city. It was not until July that Geelani's trial could begin. The trial proceeded not under the usual Indian law, but under the controversial POTA. Amnesty International questioned whether a free trial was possible under POTA, especially in the case of the accused teacher. The Indian law ministry appointed Shiv Narayan Dhingra as a special judge. Dhingra had specialised in cases of terrorism and had earned the nickname 'The hanging judge'

I was assigned to report on the trial. Policemen with automatic rifles guarded the courtroom; they checked my identity card and frisked me before allowing me inside. I had expected a crowd of reporters at what seemed to me the most high profile legal case in India, but was surprised to see very few there. Policemen, both in uniform and plain-clothed, occupied most of the chairs, along with the lawyers in black gowns. Geelani stood in the dock with the other accused. I thought of our first meeting at Delhi University in 1999. He now stood before me, accused of conspiring in the attack on the Indian parliament that had almost triggered a nuclear war between India and Pakistan. I couldn't stop looking at Geelani, at his handcuffs and at the three armed policemen watching him. Over the next few months, I kept going back to the trial to cover the main hearings. Each time Geelani

stood in the dock with the same serene expression on his face. I often wondered why he appeared so unfazed.

Perhaps he was given hope by the Indian intellectuals who believed that he was innocent and had come together under the banner of the All India Defence Committee for Syed Abdul Rahman Geelani. Many teachers and journalists had written letters of protest to the chief justice. There was initially no criminal lawyer ready to defend him in court. Finally, Seema Gulati, a well-known, much sought-after criminal lawyer, agreed. Her high fees were paid by contributions from university teachers, lawyers and civil rights activists.

The prosecution presented the evidence against Geelani. It said that he had received a call on his mobile phone on December 14, 2001, from Kashmir, in which he had supported the previous day's attack on the parliament. This two and a half minute telephone conversation in Kashmiri with his younger brother was the main evidence against him. The police had had it translated by a semiliterate Kashmiri youth, Rashid Ali, who worked as a fruit vendor in north Delhi. The incriminating evidence in the call, according to the police translation, is this:

> Caller: 'What is this you have done in Delhi?' Receiver (the accused teacher, Geelani): 'This was necessary.'

The conversation, police said, revealed the role of the teacher in the conspiracy to attack the parliament. Geelani's lawyer, Seema Gulati, produced two respected Kashmiris as defence witnesses: Sampath Prakash was a veteran trade union leader from Srinagar, and Sanjay Kak, a well-known filmmaker. The witnesses maintained that the call was an innocent conversation between two brothers which had been mistranslated. Kak's translation of the same conversation was markedly different from the police version.

Caller (accused teacher's brother): 'What's happened?' Receiver (Geelani): 'What? In Delhi?' Caller: 'What's happened? In Delhi?' Receiver: (noise, laughter) 'By God!'

Giving evidence in court, Kak said, 'The Kashmiri equivalent of "What's happened?" is "Yeh kya korua" ' This is a broad expression used in all kinds of circumstances, such as when a child spills a glass of milk or when there is snowfall or a marital dispute. Geelani's brother had called simply to get a syllabus and a prospectus. Kak translated that portion of the call as:

Receiver (accused teacher): 'Tell me what you want?' Caller (his brother): 'Syllabus and prospectus.'

During the cross-examination, Ali, the police translator, admitted that he could not understand English; he was also shaky in Hindi, the language into which he had translated the call. Geelani's brother Bismillah and father-in-law Habibullah normally sat in the courtroom with gloomy faces. That day, I saw them smile. Testimonies by independent witnesses seemed to tilt the balance in favour of Geelani's innocence. One day a fellow reporter, Shams Tahir Khan, who works for Aaj Tak, a popular Hindi language Indian news channel, took the stand. He had been one of the TV reporters invited by Singh, the Delhi Police officer, to record the confession of the main accused, Mohammed Afzal, after his arrest. The full version of the video-recorded interview was played in the courtroom. Afzal was seen saying that Geelani was a professor and that he, Afzal, 'never shared any of this [terrorism-related] information with him' Khan told the court that Assistant Commissioner Singh had requested the media not to relay that part of the interview. Geelani, his

relatives and his lawyer seemed more relieved; their smiles were broader.

Other days revealed other flaws in the case against Geelani. By November, the witnesses had testified, the accused had given their statements, and the final arguments in the case began. The Delhi High Court had ordered that Geelani's handcuffs be taken off. Armed policemen still filled the courtroom. Barring a few reporters though the media continued to ignore the trial.

The prosecution argued for Geelani's conviction for conspiring in the attack on the Indian parliament. The grounds were that he had supported the attack while talking on the phone; he knew the other accused; his phone number was found on their phones; he had received calls from one of the accused on the day of the attack. Geelani did not deny knowing the co-accused and speaking to them on the phone.

Geelani's father-in-law, Habibullah, had come from Kashmir to Delhi to follow the case. He sat in the courtroom lost in his thoughts. On December 16, when the judge was to deliver the verdict, Habibullah did not come to the court. Instead, led by Singh, personnel from the Delhi Police's anti-terrorism wing, who had arrested Geelani and conducted the investigation, filled the courtroom. The policemen, who were usually unshaven and shabbily clothed, were dressed in expensive suits, with matching neckties. They would look good in the newspaper photographs tomorrow, I thought. The courtroom was for once crowded with reporters. I stood close to the judge's table, hoping to hear every word of the verdict. It was very humid. A reporter shouted at an attendant to switch on the air conditioner. It did not work. A reporter standing behind me placed his notebook on my back for support as he took notes.

Judge Dhingra walked in. There was a long silence in the courtroom. Nobody moved while he pronounced the

verdict. He held the accused, Geelani, guilty of 'conspiracy to attack the parliament, wage war against the Government of India, murder and grievous hurt' The other two men were also found guilty. Geelani remained silent. I kept looking at him. He seemed to see me but his eyes said nothing. My mind wandered off to another Kashmiri who had been executed in Delhi in 1984—Maqbool Bhat, the founder of the armed struggle in Kashmir. Even today, Bhat's execution fuels an anti-India rage in many Kashmiris. As an adolescent in Kashmir, I had seen posters remembering Bhat's 'martyrdom' pasted on the wooden electricity poles that dot roadsides in the Valley. Would Geelani end up as a commemorative poster on a wooden electricity pole?

Two days after the verdict, Judge Dhingra sentenced Geelani to death, along with the co-accused Kashmiris, Mohammed Afzal and Shaukat Guru. Geelani was stoic and sought the judge's permission to speak to journalists. Soon afterwards, policemen whisked the three convicted men towards prison lorries, as television crews jostled for close-ups. Geelani managed to say, 'Without justice, there will be no democracy. It is Indian democracy that is under threat.' His younger brother, Bismillah, watched him being taken away and burst into tears. In Baramulla, hundreds of protesters burst out onto the streets as the news of Geelani's sentencing spread.

India's most respected lawyer and former federal law minister, Ram Jethmalani agreed to defend Geelani in the higher courts without payment—prompting activists of the Hindu extremist Shiv Sena to burn his effigy as a 'traitor' and threaten him with 'consequences' if he honoured his promise. Jethmalani stood his ground. He filed an appeal against Geelani's conviction in the Delhi High Court. Its judges began their hearings in April 2003. More hearings and

arguments followed. If Judge Dhingra's order was upheld, Geelani would be hung.

In October 2003 the high court pronounced its verdict. Geelani was acquitted of all the charges against him. He was free. He is back at his college, teaching.

Chapter Eight

I had begun to seriously think about returning to Kashmir during Geelani's trial. I turned often to Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. Except for his poems there were few literary responses from Kashmir that evoked the fear, the tension, the anger and the hopelessness of our experience. Shahid had died of cancer in 2001 in New York. Yet he spoke from the black lettering:

> Let me cry out,
> say it as I can.
> I write on that void:
> Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir,
> Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire,
> Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir
> Or Cauchemar in a sea of stories?
> Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kasmir, Kerseymere?

I shared some stories with a few friends in Delhi, but I could never say everything. I would find myself stopping in the middle of a sentence, choked, rendered inarticulate by memory. The telling, even in the shade of intimacy, was painful. There was also a sense of shame that overcame me every time I walked into a bookstore. People from almost every conflict zone had told their stories: Palestinians, Israelis, Bosnians, Kurds, Tibetans, Lebanese, East Germans, Africans, East Timorese, and many more. I felt the absence of our own telling, the unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience, from the bookshelves, as vividly as the absence of a beloved—the empty chair staring at you across the table in a coffee shop, the vacant seat in a theatre playing a movie she would

have laughed through, the email with an idiosyncratic title that did not arrive in the inbox. The memories and stories of Kashmir that I had carried with me like my VIP suitcase could fade away. I had to find the words to save memory from the callous varnish of time. I knew I had to write. And to write, I also had to return and revisit the people and places that had haunted me for years.

But I had to choose between my job and the idea of returning home. My abysmal savings campaigned hard for my job; my impulsive heart voted for home. One afternoon one of my editors called me to discuss possible story ideas. I found myself telling him I was going to resign. He offered me a raise. He was a good man I loved to work with. But I was going home. I was going to Kashmir. My editor wished me luck; that night I did not set my alarm clock.

I spent the next few weeks buying books: books I badly wanted to read, books I had heard about, and books I had never heard about. Discussions and difficult goodbyes followed. A quick look at my savings had ruled out the possibility of flying to Kashmir. A bus was affordable. The setting sun lit the sandstone domes and minarets of the Red Fort. Local buses and cars screeched by; cargo-laden rickshaws pulled by sunburnt, sweat-drenched men negotiated their way. The auto rickshaw driver stopped by a row of tin shacks with gaudy travel operator signs running parallel to the ramparts of the fort. Touts pounced upon weary passengers. They acted with such ferocity that I wondered whether they thought of their potbellied bosses sitting behind the wooden desks of travel offices as incarnations of Mughal emperors.

I ignored the touts, lit a cigarette and took slow, deliberate puffs while scanning the signboards. 'Are you a Kashmiri?' a wiry man with dishevelled curly hair and a beak-like nose asked. I smiled back. Both his nose and his question were very Kashmiri. The question, asked in the Kashmiri language, was

not meant to be a question; it was more of a greeting. It is a question a Kashmiri asks another Kashmiri in any situation, in any corner of the world the moment he realises the other person is from Kashmir. I have often answered and asked this question. It comes with an informal smile and a barrage of questions aimed at placing you in Kashmir. And you often have to be ready for an interview.

Ramesh was a Hindu from Budgam district in central Kashmir. His family had migrated to Delhi in the early nineties. He lived in a slum in south Delhi. I had been there as a reporter. It was a shabby municipal building, which had lain abandoned for years before the Delhi government settled the Kashmiri Pandit migrants there. Tattered curtains, tied with nylon strings to nails in the walls, served as partitions demarcating the space for a dozen or so families living there. The curtain-walled rooms, spacious for one person, sheltered families of five to six. Outside the building, women had erected makeshift kitchens in the courtyard. Stench from the community toilets could not be kept at bay.

Ramesh complained about the heat in Delhi. I could not tell him I knew where he lived. He missed his village in Kashmir; his eyes spoke of the shady willows, the crystal-clear streams and the apple orchards where he had grown up. 'You are lucky, you are going home,' he said. The touts were lurking around, eyeing potential customers. They seemed to remind him of something; he was not at ease. 'Are you alright?' 'Yes. We got talking and I forgot about work.' 'You work here?' 'Yes. I earn a commission for every passenger I take to the travel agency,' he said in a lowered voice. He had approached me hoping to get me to buy a ticket from his agency. I looked at his now sombre face. 'I want a ticket to Srinagar. Let us get it.' Ramesh got me the ticket for an Air-Cooled Deluxe Coach. The bus would arrive in ten minutes and leave in half an hour. I sat on a wooden bench outside

his travel agency. We shook hands and he left in search of passengers. I watched his lean frame move slowly towards the main road. He looked for potential passengers. He waved at incoming rickshaws, accosted people with travel bags. And then he disappeared into the crowd.

A battered white bus came after half an hour. The traffic outside had lessened; a dark night covered Delhi and street lights rose like artificial moons. We needed five more passengers before the bus could move, so I got out of the bus and strolled about. I was worried about how my family would react to my decision to quit my job and my vague plans of travelling around and writing. I went over various versions of how I would tell my father about my plans to travel in Kashmir, revisit places and people from my past, and write about them. Young men in Kashmir did not wish to become writers. You found a job and worked towards getting a better one, getting a car, getting married, and living in your house with your wife. And I had my own fear to deal with. Maybe I was making a mistake? Maybe I should have waited for some more time and prepared myself better? The bus eventually took off. It would be a long ride—twenty seven hours.

I woke up quite late in the morning. By late afternoon, the bus had dragged itself on the serpentine highway running through high mountains towards the valley of Kashmir. We were about to enter the Valley. Indian army trucks, with nets thrown over their roofs and backs, began passing by regularly. Soldiers in camouflage and bulletproof jackets and caps patrolled the road; their rifles pointed aggressively at some unseen enemy. Waving the barrel of his assault rifle, a soldier ordered us to stop and the bus stopped. A passenger jeered: 'Welcome to Kashmir!'

We were at the Banihal tunnel, which had been bored through the mountain by Swiss engineers in 1953, crossing which you see the valley of Kashmir. Two soldiers boarded the

bus and began checking our luggage; the passengers walked in a queue towards a bunker serving as a security checkpost. One by one the passengers entered the checkpost, their hands raised above the shoulders. The soldiers stared at our identity cards and frisked us. There was a strange familiarity with this ritual. It was oppressive and intimate at the same time. In some perverse way, it did signal reaching home. The bus entered the two mile long misty tunnel, which was barely lit by sodium lamps. The groans of the engine and the song of the tyres echoed against the dark, rocky walls. Ten minutes seemed very long. Then suddenly, the tunnel opening appeared as a blinding semicircle of light.

I opened the window, rose on my toes, and popped my head out: Kashmir! And there she was: the bluest of skies cradled a glacier of clouds over the browns, greens, and blues of the peaks of million-inch Himalayas. The bus swerved around a bend and she was a wide valley spreading out in the gentle, soothing green of paddy fields towards a lighter brown-green arc of mountains. The breeze healed me of the Indian summer. I stretched my neck and my eyes wandered over the mountain peaks, seeking the range I had grown up with. I saw the mountains that hid my village and the taller, bluer range near my school. The metalled road fell like a black ribbon towards the valley; tall, elegant poplars by the roadside and shorter, greener willows along the wedges of the paddies stood in neat rows like schoolchildren welcoming me home, as the bus passed village after village with small tin-roofed brick and wood houses. The dying sun glinted on the roof of a village mosque, shopkeepers pulled down their shutters, bus conductors shouted names of villages and called their residents for the journey home, and children waved at the faces half-glimpsed through a bus window.

An hour and a half later, I was entering Srinagar. Modern Srinagar begins with the largest military camp in Kashmir:

Badami Bagh, the garden of almonds, on the highway connecting Srinagar to the southern province of Jammu. It lies facing a shabby market of tea stalls and tailoring and grocery shops, surrounded by high concrete walls, rows of iron barricades, sandbag bunkers, and alert soldiers in bulletproof jackets.

Along the highway stood a row of military vehicles; a little ahead, three stray dogs and a bull fought over the right to sniff the rubbish and look for leftovers. The dogs barked at the bull; the bull swayed his horns at them. The sun had set, the shops were closed and soldiers patrolled the roads. From the city centre, Lal Chowk, I boarded an auto rickshaw. The driver switched on a bulb that cast a bright yellow light over both the driver and the passenger. You always switched on that light so that the soldiers could see you. We drove through empty roads and streets, stopped at checkposts, I showed my identity card and opened my bags. The auto rickshaw crawled on through streets without streetlights; faint glows of candles and kerosene lamps lit the houses. Stray dogs barked and whined as I entered my father's house.

Over dinner my father asked, 'So what are you reporting on this time?' I looked up from my plate and for a moment said nothing. I had rehearsed the answer to this question through my journey. But none of those answers seemed very convincing. I had to find a better story. Over the next few weeks, I introduced the idea of book writing to him. We had recently got an internet connection and in the process of teaching him to surf, I took him on a virtual tour of various literary magazines and journals. 'They make much more sense than the newspapers,' father pronounced. But he was stunned when I told him one evening, 'That is what I want to try. I want to write about our life and society like this. In fact, I have quit my job to do just that.' He stared at the computer screen displaying an interview with Ryszard

Kapuscinski. Father asked me to shut down the computer. 'It is quite late now.' He walked slowly out of my room. He would have to explain this to our nosy relatives and his friends; why his grown-up son did not go to an office or have a regular job like most people his age.

I spent my first few days catching up with old friends. One of those days, we received an invitation for a wedding. As usual, the words on the card read 'Marriages are made in heaven; they are only celebrated on earth' Ashraf, a neighbour's son in my ancestral village, was getting married. He had been a tall, skinny boy when we played cricket in the neighbourhood threshing field as children. Now he assisted a contractor who built parapets, roads and bridges. 'He personally dropped the card here. You have to go,' mother said.

It had been many years since I had stayed in my grandfather's home, in our village. First my studies, later work, had kept me away. After the mine blast, my parents had moved to Srinagar, and I usually stayed there during my visits to the Valley.

I caught the bus to Anantnag the next day. The road from Anantnag town to my village reminded me of the pictures of Kosovo. The government, in a bid to widen the road to offer better facilities to tourists visiting Pahalgam, the hill station a few hours ahead, had demolished most houses on both sides of the road. Multi-coloured marble tiles, which had once decorated kitchens and bathroom walls, now stared at me through the hollows made by strokes of the government bulldozers. My village seemed to have changed a lot; new houses had come up in the fields outside the village. The new house my grandfather had built was one of them. But our mountains were the same and the hum of the stream beyond the fields brought back the sounds of my childhood. I spent my first evening walking leisurely amidst our fields and apple orchards, watching them change shades as the sun moved farther west. Here I had learned

to speak, walk, read, write, run, swear and play. Here I slept my best sleep.

I woke up late the next morning. In a replay of the scenes from my childhood, grandfather knocked at the door of my room and asked me to wake up. His tone had changed from a scary shout to a mellow whisper. After a round of noon chai, we set out for our old neighbourhood. 'Ashraf is now earning a decent sum; so his family decided to get him married,' grandfather said. I remained silent. We reached the narrow alley leading to Ashraf's house. The old house of mud bricks and a thatched roof was decorated with miniature lights in green, yellow and red plastic covers. A shimmering white tent stood in the courtyard.

Ashraf sat on a chair amidst a crowd of women and children. He looked elegant in a collared kurta pajama, over which he wore a black vest. Ashraf spotted me standing in a corner. He rose from his seat; we met with a hug and a laugh. 'So you are getting married today!' I laughed. He smiled and said, 'One has to marry sooner or later.' He held my hand and took me towards his seat. 'I am very happy you came. It has been a long time.' I sat next to Ashraf on a chair someone brought in a hurry. The girls sang at a high pitch. Boys with pimply faces shaved with much care kept finding excuses to stand around the groom and steal glances at the girls. Busy-looking men in loose, collared kurta pyjamas shouted orders, which went mostly unheard. Ashraf had to get a haircut before leaving for the bride's house; the local barber arrived with his kit. As the barber set to work, I left to meet the elders.

Behind the house, a narrow alley had been converted into a makeshift kitchen. Food was cooked in copper pots resting on a bonfire lit between two brick rows. The elders had settled themselves in chairs to supervise and chat. My old neighbours and relatives had been permanent characters in

my world once. There was Ashraf's father, Khazer, a short, wiry man who always wore a skullcap to hide his bald head and would give me a piece of jaggery whenever I went to their house. Ashraf's old uncle, Amjad, who always looked like he was about to die and used to ask children to thump his back to relieve him of his backache. I had often hit him a bit too hard, running away before he could hit me with his equally aged cane.

Amongst the young men also helping out was Nisar, a childhood friend. A bald man sat on a pategih, a mat woven from hay, puffing a hookah: Bashir, our neighbourhood grocer, at whose expense I had had some insensitive laughs as a teenager in the early days of the conflict. I watched him from a distance. I was happy to see him after many years; happy to see he had survived. He almost jumped from his seat when I greeted him: 'God! You have grown up, really grown up!' He hugged me and shook my hand repeatedly. We sat together and he told me about his daughter's marriage. 'You did not come for Alia's marriage,' he sounded hurt. 'I was in Delhi, tied up with work,' I told him. He asked about my life and work; I gave the standard answers. But something worried me; his manner had changed. He used the formal language and reverential manner we used for guests. I went on to meet Khazer, Amjad, Nissar and others. I had expected the old informality and tried being my old self. But they too treated me like a guest. Khazer told me to sit in a room reserved for guests. When I volunteered to do some chores, Amjad stopped me. Nissar, who had never left the village for other places, carried plates and served the guests. The chores that neighbourhood youth helped with were not for me now.

I had spent very little time in the village for more than a decade now; I had been away in different places and lived a different life. But I was one of them. Every time I filled a form with a section asking for a permanent address, I wrote: Seer

Hamdan, Anantnag, Kashmir. Though bad with numbers, I never forgot the postal code of my ancestral village. I could not forget the village post office with its smoke billowing out of the rusted tin pipe of a bukhari, its dusty maroon billboard, and the khaki-clad postal clerks. And Ramji, our postman, who I thought had been born old, with his uncombed salt and pepper hair falling on his wrinkled face, his shoulders drooping over a wiry frame.

In the morning, he repaired cooking stoves near the bus stop; in the afternoon, he went around the village on his bicycle, hanging his jute bag on his left shoulder, ringing the bell and stopping wherever he had to deliver a letter. The village children ran after him shouting in a chorus, 'Is there a letter for me, Ramji?' until he was irritated and chased us away. The letters Ramji delivered had no house numbers, no street names. They had your name, your father's name and the name of the village. Ramji knew everyone; the letters reached their addressees. I do not get any mail at that address anymore. But whenever I fill out a form, the faces of that lost world beckon me.

Till the mid eighties, nobody had a telephone; a couple of families used to have a TV. People often gathered at Gani Hajji, the tongawallah's house, to watch TV. He had been to Mecca for Hajj, and brought back a black and white set. Almost everybody with some weight assembled at Hajji's house. The TV used to be in a ground floor room and you could see it through a window. Till our families got TV sets in the later part of the eighties, Aafaiz, a friend, and I often climbed on each other's shoulders to get a view of the TV through the window.

Radio told us the news and newspapers were rare. Then, news had different meanings. News did not mean the daily body count that it became after 1990. News was not about self-determination, sovereignty or terrorism; about summits,

strategies and geopolitics; about fundamentalism, tolerance, and secularism. News was made in places nobody from our village had been to. News was not about us. I remember returning home one day with a copy of *The Times of India* from Anantnag. Before I could get home and get down to reading my paper, a bunch of village elders, who idled at a shop near our house called me over. I had to show them the newspaper; they gaped at the printed words and the newspaper pictures. Since it was an English paper, I was asked to read it out and translate as well. More than a decade has passed since that day in the mid eighties. The elders have grown older; the children are young men. Amjad and Khazer uncle still gossip at the same shop with other men. Newspapers come regularly to our village. Every rooftop boasts of a TV antenna. There are three cable TV operators in the village, offering fifty TV channels including BBC, CNN and seven other Indian news channels for ninety rupees per month. People watch the news, read the newspapers. News is about us too now. Aafaiz, my friend from the days when there was only one TV in the entire village, runs a cable network.

Night fell and, after dinner, Ashraf was brought into the tent. It was the night of henna: maenziraat. Women and girls circled him, sang the traditional wedding songs. His mother applied henna to his smallest finger; friends and relatives took pictures with the groom. I decided against sleep; this was an occasion for Kashmiri songs to be sung with fervour to the beats of a tumbaknaer, an earthen, drum-like instrument covered with goatskin on one end, which the women beat deftly. The tent boomed with the voices of women and girls in shiny, embroidered clothes singing a Kashmiri classic:

Hooreh chayyih wanwaan nooreh mahraazo
Aakho shahreq sheerazo aakho shahrekih sheerazo.

(Houris sing for the angel-faced groom
He is the jewel of the city.)

An hour later, some teenagers brought two speakers and a CD player into the tent. Most of them wore fake versions of Calvin Klein, Lee and Levi's jeans and T-shirts. Two boys with gym-pumped bodies in acrylic shirts saying 'Hero' and 'Sporty' set up the system. Loud blasts of Hindi film music drowned out the traditional songs. A few old women protested. Girls blushed with happiness and formed a circle around the boys, who danced to a Bollywood hit. Slowly, the women moved closer and watched, with awe, the boys gyrating self-consciously to the Hindi songs. The loud music, mediocre lyrics and Bollywood dance moves had conquered the traditional celebration.

In the morning, Ashraf's father told me to sit with the men who were to accompany Ashraf to the bride's house, where the nikah, the signing of the wedding contract between the bride and the groom with two witnesses on each side, was to be held. Wazawaan, the traditional Kashmiri cuisine of thirty six varieties of meat, followed the nikah. It was meant only for close relatives and special guests. I wandered for a while through the lanes, catching glimpses of my past everywhere until I found myself in the courtyard of a double-storeyed, tin-roofed house. There were no children on its lawn; there was no cow with black spots on its white hide tied to a peg in a corner, thoughtfully chewing grass. Nor did a blue bicycle lie next to the cowshed. Its cemented boundary wall was new to my eyes. And the woman curiously eyeing me from the kitchen window was a stranger. 'Who are you looking for?' she asked. I did not know what to say. I was looking for myself; the house she now owned was the house I'd been born in. It was the home whose memories I had carried with me along with a VIP suitcase when I left Kashmir for the

first time. Thirteen years later, I was standing in the same courtyard, looking at the same house. It was my eternal home in thought, transferred by an ownership deed to the woman questioning me. 'Who are you looking for?' she asked again. 'For Ashraf's house.' She gave me directions for somewhere else and closed the window.

Ashraf was preparing to leave for his bride's house. He wore a light brown suit, brown leather shoes and white headgear embroidered with silken threads. Two marigold garlands and three garlands of ten rupee notes hung around his neck. The men and women who were to accompany him were all hanging around in the courtyard. I joined them. There was the usual talk about who would be the next groom, about how, after the fighting began, average marriage age in Kashmir had gone up from the mid twenties to the early thirties. Ashraf was thirty two; his bride thirty. Delays in education and difficulties in finding work kept pushing the wedding dates back, much to the annoyance of impatient parents and grandparents. It had become especially worrisome for girls' parents; most of the dead in the fighting were young men, and further, thousands of young men had deforming injuries, depressions, and non-existent careers.

Women and girls formed a circle, held hands and sang. They moved back and forth, tapped their feet on the ground, shook their heads, raised and lowered their voices. It was an old custom practised before the groom left for the bride's house; grooms left for the bride's place after the sunset and returned after a late dinner. Kashmiris had discarded that centuries-old tradition after the evening of May 16, 1990, when Indian paramilitaries fired upon a marriage party and raped the bride.

Chapter Nine

In old pictures, Srinagar is elegant; latticed houses, mosques, and temples admiring each other from the banks of the river Jhelum; people strolling on the seven wooden bridges spanning it, wandering into old bazaars selling spices, lovingly embroidered shawls and carpets, and samovars with intricate engravings, or stepping with a prayer and an expectation into a medieval shrine flaunting verses from the Quran and poems of mystics on windows and façades, and the gentle greens and blues of papier mâché interiors. But elegance is granted little space in an age of wars. Those wooden bridges have either collapsed or were murdered. Their skeletons remain, in the shadow of new arcs of concrete.

My parents live near the left bank of the Jhelum, a short walk from the eighth bridge, built later and named Zero Bridge. Lal Chowk, the city centre, is right across from the river. I walked past the three neighbourhood bunkers, an ATM machine, a mosque, grocers, chemists and stationery shops before reaching the river bank. Half-dried clothing hung from nylon ropes tied to the masts of white and caramel houseboats waiting for visitors. A few eagles flew over majestic chinar trees towering over the other bank, circled over Zero Bridge and flew higher, even higher than the bluish-green mountains drawing a border in the city's east. An old boatman sat in a shikara, holding a rough willow branch he used as an oar, waiting for passengers. He urged me to sit towards his end of the boat, to leave room for others. I walked with a sense of dread over the decaying planks of timber, through which water was seeping in. The boatman switched on the radio he carried and pushed the boat into the river with a thrust of the willow branch against

the bank. The passengers clutched the sides of the boat. A song floated over the tense silence.

A few minutes later, we reached the other bank, paid a rupee each, and, after showing our identity cards to a group of soldiers patrolling the river bank, walked over to the city centre. Lal Chowk is a busy avenue of sixties-style buildings. Hawkers selling cheap copies of branded shoes and electronic gadgets spilled over the footpaths and carpet shops hung rugs and shawls and made competing claims that they had great works of Kashmiri craftsmanship. Small mobs pounced on newsstands to buy newspapers, and bawdy Bollywood lyrics blared from various shops selling pirated videos and CDs. Indian soldiers patrolled the road and looked around like weathercocks. I was suddenly struck by the name painted on an armoured military truck parked by the roadside. I had seen such names before but never paid much attention. The Hindi letters that few Kashmiris can read, read: 'Mahakaal'—literally, great death, and one of the names of Shiva.

I walked past Mahakaal to one of the more reliable internet cafés, housed in an old commercial complex. Near the entrance, a crowd of young and old men stood at a mobile dhaba, drinking tea. Cement flaked off the walls of the building and dark stairs led to the internet café. I entered a brightly lit room. Wooden cubicles hugged the garish walls. The young manager and a girl wearing a thick coat of lipstick sat behind a wooden counter. 'Sexy Lady' played from an invisible speaker. The cabins had two chairs each and planks of teakwood hid the occupants from view, revealing only their feet: sneakers, sandals; sneakers, sandals; sneakers, sandals. Young couples bought an hour of privacy for thirty rupees. I barely managed to send a single email after half an hour when the connection went. Nobody complained. I thought of my first visit to the café in 2001, soon after it had opened.

The government had ordered that for 'security reasons' every user had to show an identity card and provide his address before using publicly available internet. At least, that had been done away with now.

Outside, the number of cars on the roads had increased. One could barely drive through Lal Chowk without being caught in a traffic jam. Everyone talked about the abundance of easy personal loans and the huge amounts of money both India and Pakistan had pumped into Kashmir to win loyalties—the war economy. The only institution that had thrived in Kashmir throughout the conflict was the bank. Walking around in Srinagar, I would find myself facing a billboard announcing yet another licensee for a stockbroker in Bombay or Delhi. A lot of money was being invested in shares and stocks. On my return I met Ayaar, an old friend from college. A mechanical engineer by training and a detective fiction fanatic, he had turned to stock brokerage after three years of unemployment. We walked to his office in one of the many newly built, monstrously ugly malls in Srinagar. A billboard announced the office. We walked into a damp, half-lit room with bare walls; he checked three flickering monitors. He seemed content with his work. Soon after the customary round of tea, he tried to persuade me to invest in stocks.

After a few minutes two young men walked in. 'We want to invest in shares,' one said, 'but have no idea how it works.' In a moment, my friend metamorphosed into a stockbroker. He pulled up two chairs, sent his office boy to fetch tea for the guests, grabbed a few brochures and earnestly began to explain the business to the clueless youth. Fifteen minutes later, he was back at the flickering monitor with another round of explanations. He pointed out the stocks rising and falling, which the blue chip stocks were, and told them stories about the man who made a 100,000 rupees in five hours. 'You keep your eyes open, look for the clues and this is where you will

make money,' Ayaar preached to the converts. The share bazaar seemed like detective fiction: the right clues led to the gold mine. Stocks and shares were words from a language foreign to me: the language of Wall Street, of Bombay, of corporate India. It was here along with the armoured cars, funerals, hartals, fear, and despair. Srinagar built memorials for its disappeared young and also shopping malls with gaudy glass façades.

I slowly settled down in my parents' house, arranging my books and placing my desk and computer by a window with a view of chinar and mulberry trees. Parrots, sparrows, and eagles flew in and out of the trees into a clear, blue sky. It was autumn: the season of golden chinar leaves falling on dried grass, on footpaths, on people walking around. I was happy to be here and spend my afternoons talking to friends in coffee shops near Lal Chowk. Srinagar is also a greeting, an encounter with a confidant on every street. It is not providing contexts and chronologies to my stories and not explaining the details and the meanings. It is conveying more in a single spoken phrase than in paragraphs and pages in my borrowed, adopted languages. It is talking endlessly about our shared past, not so much the remote historical past, but the recent past—of the fairytale childhood of the eighties and of the horror of the nineties. It was the pull of those memories that had drawn me back to Kashmir and it was this recent past that I wanted to write about. But Kashmir is older than our memory, older than the memories we have inherited.

As a schoolboy in the mid eighties, I had visited Pari Mahal—the Palace of the Fairies—built in the seventeenth century by the liberal Mughal prince Dara Shikoh. Dara Shikoh preferred scholarship to statecraft, inviting many learned men to his palace to translate texts of Hindu philosophy, religion and literature into Persian and Arabic. My father told me these stories over and over because he wanted me to see Pari Mahal

as a place of multiple religious traditions. But, as a child, I was keener to pose with my classmates for group pictures, play hide and seek on the ramparts, or watch the palace—strung, appropriately, with fairy lights—shimmer at night.

On a September evening, after showing a visitor's permit and a security check, I returned to Pari Mahal, cresting one of the peaks of the Zabarvan mountains in the east of Srinagar. Its massive walls of rough stone decorated with arches led to domed chambers, a pattern that was repeated on its gardened terraces. Below it the luxurious greens. of a forest and an expansive golf course, where politicians, bureaucrats, police and military officers, guarded by scores of armed guards, played and socialised on a turf of imported American grass which reached out to Dal Lake, the achingly beautiful chameleon changing its shades as light played tricks on its unruffled water. Tourists took photos of the sun rolling towards the quiet, graceful mountains ahead. Near the entrance, two chambers enclosed by granite arches had been converted into barracks and a mess hall. A soldier was busy cooking over a wood fire, and a few others played carom. Behind them in the dome-shaped, dimly lit chamber, automatic rifles rested on charpoys. A little further into the palace, on a higher terrace, a sentry with an automatic rifle stood in a sandbagged watchtower. Pari Mahal had become the world's most beautiful paramilitary camp.

I began retracing my visits to the other monuments of Kashmir. I thought of the library of Islamia College, the oldest college in Srinagar, which was burnt down in a battle, along with many rare manuscripts, including a 1400 year old Quran handwritten by Usman, the third Caliph of Islam. The 600 year old shrine of Nuruddin Rishi, the patron Sufi saint of Kashmir, was destroyed in another gun battle between Indian troops and militants. Hindu temples and Buddhist

stupas were dying from neglect, and misuse, as much victims of the conflict as people.

The great emperor Ashoka, whose empire covered most of South Asia, founded Srinagari (the City of Wealth) around 250 BC on the outskirts of what is modern Srinagar. After the bloody battle of Kalinga, Ashoka renounced violence, became a Buddhist, and dedicated his life to promoting the religion's teachings. It was from the seminaries of Kashmir patronised by Ashoka that missionaries spread Buddhism to China and Japan. In 1905, a team of archaeologists led by Daya Ram Sahni, then chief archaeologist of Kashmir, excavated remains of stupas and found Buddhist idols and images of Hindu gods on the mountainside of Pandrethan. Most of those artefacts are stored at the Sri Pratap Singh Museum, the only museum in Srinagar, which is a short walk from Zero Bridge. Coils of barbed wire lay in front of the tiny gate to the crumbling museum building; soldiers manned a bunker nearby. In the dusty hall, the caretakers gossiped behind a wooden reception counter. They stared at me, the lone visitor, as if I had walked into their living room.

After the awkwardness melted away, I met Mohammed Iqbal, a middle-aged local archaeologist who, despite the conflict, continues to publish booklets about the ancient monuments of Kashmir. The main hall was filled with sculptures from Pandrethan. Iqbal stopped near a glass box containing two freestanding statues. One, a greenish-grey granite idol, portrays the Buddha after he renounced the world. His face is broken, but he meditates on. 'Look at his half-closed, Mongoloid eyes and high eyebrows. That is the Gandharan style, which was highly influenced by the Greek tradition,' Iqbal said as he looked at the idol with a smile. He then turned my attention to a black granite statue that depicted the birth of the Buddha as Prince Siddhartha to Queen Maya. Maya, wearing a jewelled crown, two necklaces and an ornate

armband, sits under a tree clutching a branch with one hand and supported by her similarly adorned sister on the other side. 'It is not a mere statue, it is a story,' explained Iqbal. 'Queen Maya, pregnant with Buddha, goes into labour in a forest in Lumbini, on the way to her father's house. In a moment of agony, she clutches a branch of a tree and is supported by her sister.' The facial features of Maya and her sister are Mongoloid, like those of Buddha. 'The ornamentation was the influence of the Maurya and Gupta sculpture of India; the facial features were determined by the Gandharan school. The combination of these two styles was what made the Kashmir school,' Iqbal explained.

Further into the museum, we came across a massive granite sculpture of the Hindu god Shiva, excavated near Pandrethan. It dates to the third century, after Kashmir had reverted to Hinduism. Although the religion had changed, the Buddhist influence was very vivid—Shiva here looks like Buddha, except with a third eye on the forehead. Many more statues of Buddha, his disciples, and various Hindu gods and goddesses lined the museum hall. Iqbal believed much could be found if the Pandrethan excavations were resumed. But that wasn't likely to happen. 'After the monarchy ended and the maharaja acceded to India in 1947, the military established their headquarters in the Pandrethan area. After that, because of security reasons, no excavations were allowed there. Things became worse after the conflict and I haven't been able to visit the Pandrethan sites that fall under the military camp.'

I left the museum to visit the site where some of these statues had been excavated, a mile south of the military headquarters. I walked past the military camp and its propaganda billboards with pictures of smiling, self-conscious soldiers pouring water for old Kashmiri men or showing affection to Kashmiri children. Beneath the pictures, the words: 'Love transcends all barriers'. A little ahead, I found the village—a small market

with signboards for soft drinks and potato chips and a cluster of shabby, brick and cement houses stretching across the plain to the mountains beyond. There were no sites to visit—they still fall under military control—but I was curious whether the villagers knew anything about Ashoka's Srinagar. Two old men vaguely remembered excavations decades ago, but they hadn't heard of Ashoka or his city.

When I was a child, my father told me stories of the Fourth World Buddhist Council, which was held in Kashmir in the second century under the rule of the learned Gandharan Buddhist king Kanishka. Every now and then someone claims to have found the true location of the council, but most believe it was held near the ancient Garden of Harwan on the northwestern fringe of Srinagar. On a family excursion to the garden—which is lined with waterways and shaded by towering chinar trees—my father had pointed to the hillock above and told me it was where the council was believed to have gathered. I went there a few days after visiting the Srinagar museum. A signboard, 'Buddhist Sites', guided me to a terraced area where, in 1905, archaeologists found a stupa, prayer hall, and living quarters. In the centre of the site are the remains of the stupa. I stared at its stone base and two concentric squares of roughly polished stones covered with wild grass. It was hard to imagine what it might have looked like. To the left, were four fallen stonewalls covered with moss. 'That was a vihara, where the monks met,' said Mohammed Khazer, an elderly caretaker who worked for the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which maintains the site. According to Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang, more than 5000 monks had come together to debate and discuss the faith.

In the museum, I had seen the artefacts from Harwan. They bore no relation to the Buddhist council, but were fine examples of Gandharan artwork—terracotta tiles with floral

motifs, an Indo-Greek-looking man running after a deer with a spear, a woman wearing delicate earrings walking with a pitcher on her head, and a husband and wife in conversation on a balcony. The ruins at Harwan hardly seemed a tourist attraction. 'Earlier, tourists from Japan and even America would come here,' Khazer said, 'but nobody came here after the fighting began.' Despite the conflict, which devastated Khazer's home village, he continued to spend his days at the site. The task of guarding the monuments had been left to watchmen like Khazer after the ASI had moved its office from Srinagar to Jammu. Next to the central ruins, Khazer showed me a recently built wall of polished pebbles interspersed with rough rocks. 'The viharas and the stupas were all built like this around the first century. Now some of our archaeologists are trying to create replicas using the same material,' he said. But there was no other sign of restoration work. The night before a poet frienwd had written in an email: 'Lovers leave debris like civilisations do.' I looked at the debris of the stupa and thought, 'Civilisations leave debris like lovers do.'

Back in Srinagar, I visited the Akhund Mullah mosque that the enlightened Dara Shikoh had built for his teacher on the slope of Hari Parbat hill in central Srinagar and found parts of the complex taken over by squatters. The blue limestone walls of the square edifice were giving way. Its domed roof was falling apart. Some arched windows were gone, replaced by ugly imitations. Hordes of pigeons flew in and out of the holes in the roof; a lonely brass lock hung from its door. A Turkish bath next to the mosque had been converted into a gymnasium by the neighbourhood youth and posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger graced its walls.

Srinagar is a medieval city dying in a modern war. It is empty streets, locked shops, angry soldiers and boys with stones. It is several thousand military bunkers, four golf courses,

and three bookshops. It is wily politicians repeating their lies about war and peace to television cameras and small crowds gathered by the promise of an elusive job or a daily fee of a few hundred rupees. It is stopping at sidewalks and traffic lights when the convoys of rulers and their patrons in armoured cars, secured by machine guns, rumble on broken roads. It is staring back or looking away, resigned. Srinagar is never winning and never being defeated.

Srinagar newspapers regularly carry obituaries of dead rebels with young, sombre faces along with elegies for the smiling, ageing men in expensive suits who guard the gates of privilege. Some print headlines announcing deaths in red. Some run a box on the front page giving the daily, updated statistics of the dead. Srinagar is being in a coffee shop, in an office, outside a college, crossing a bridge and feeling, touching, breathing history, politics, and war, in unmarked signs and landmarks. It is seeing a bridge, a clearing, a nondescript building and knowing that men fell here, that a boy was tortured there.

As a reporter, I had the chance to meet Merajuddin, a veteran Kashmiri news photographer, who looked the part in his photographer's jacket. Merajuddin always wore dark sunglasses after he had lost his left eye while taking pictures of a gun battle; a splinter from a hand grenade had hit him. I once asked him how he had dealt with the violence he encountered as a photographer. He spoke like a man who had seen it all. 'I cried like a child when the protesters were massacred at Gawkadal Bridge. Nothing I saw after that made me cry.' I remembered sitting with my family in my village and hearing the news of the Gawkadal massacre on radio. Most eyes staring at the black radio set were moist. The next afternoon I had walked with the young and old, men and women, boys and girls of my village shouting slogans in protest against the massacre. I had been too young to

understand how brutal brutality could be. But as I grew up and began to understand, the memory stayed with me, haunting me over the years.

Gawkadal is a few hundred yards from Lal Chowk. One afternoon, as I was crossing Lal Chowk, a crowd of girls in bright white uniforms emerged from the gates of the nearby women's college, causing a stir amidst the clusters of boys loitering around like awkward clones of pop stars. It was the only moment when you saw so many Kashmiri women, who always prefer bright pinks, reds, blues, and greens, wearing white. The boys in a rainbow of T-shirts and regulation denims seemed awestruck. Seeing them reminded me of a recent cartoon in a local newspaper that had depicted a boy holding a begging bowl outside the women's college. It was a scene that repeated itself every afternoon outside every college and school in Kashmir. Though a largely patriarchal society, Kashmir put a premium on educating its girls, and they were doing well, winning places in every competitive test—be it the medical colleges, the engineering colleges, the much sought-after research degrees in law, journalism, biochemistry and computer sciences at Kashmir university, or elsewhere. On graduating, they were taking their deserved places in the workforce—as teachers, bank managers, doctors, professors, lawyers, journalists and architects. It was something I always took for granted, growing up surrounded by mother's five sisters, each of whom got their master's in the humanities and trained further as teachers before joining various schools and colleges.

Barely a few hundred metres from this lovely chaos is the Maisuma area—a stronghold of the pro-independence JKLF. Newspapers call it the Gaza Strip of Kashmir. Maisuma is a crowded bazaar and the smell from the cinnamon and cardamom piled on shopfronts in jute sacks wafts across the street. The other smell of Maisuma is the smell of

burning tyres and tear gas when the shops close and people protest against arrests and custodial killings. The Gawkadal Bridge had fallen like the protesters of January 1990. The skeleton remained: two dilapidated pillars standing in a canal full of filth.

On the other side of the bridge was a bunker and outside the bunker were two soldiers. A hawker sold bananas on a wooden cart nearby; two men stood next to the cart eating hungrily. I asked them about the massacre. One of them, a man in his mid thirties, whose paunch struggled against his cheap blue sweatshirt, said, 'I was in that demonstration.' He tossed a banana peel into the muddy canal and told me the place had been under curfew for three days; soldiers had cordoned off the massacre site with barbed wire; and armoured vehicles were positioned on all lanes. Paramilitaries had offered the residents pulses and bread during the curfew. 'But we refused to take their food. Our mothers told us to wear shoes and leave for Pakistan for [arms] training,' he said. He picked up another banana and said, 'After the massacre, I carried fifteen bodies to the mosque. Their eyes were open; I closed their eyes with my own hands. I will take you to the mosque and show you where we laid the bodies. I will show you the pictures of the bodies and you can meet the women whose men were killed. But I cannot talk like this. You should bring a TV camera, record my interview and show it on Aaj Tak.' I stared at him and protested that I did not have a TV camera. He insisted. 'Get a camera and come before Monday; I have work on Monday. Ask anyone about Babloo Painter and they will bring you to me. I am world famous here.'

An hour later, over coffee I narrated my encounter with the 'world famous Babloo Painter' to some friends. A friend remembered an engineer who had survived the massacre. 'I think he was with the water works department,' he said.

Phone calls to the local water works department got me nowhere. I was keen to meet the engineer who had survived Gawkadal. A week later, I got a call from my friend. I was helping my ten year old cousin browse the internet. We had barely managed to open a few pages with the painfully slow dial-up network connection when the phone rang. 'Basharat, that engineer lives close to your house. His name is Farooq Wani. Take down his number.' Farooq Wani was home when I called. 'I live in Green Lane, Rajbagh. Come over, we will have tea,' he said.

Green Lane was a mile away from my house; an upper middle class road lined with a row of red brick mansions with conical Kashmiri roofs. A girl watered flower beds outside the engineer's house. She directed me towards the drawing room. A plump, forty-something man with bluish eyes and light brown hair, wearing a dark blue suit opened the door. 'I am Farooq,' he smiled and shook my hand. Walnut wood-carved chairs and tables rested on a carpet. Papier-mâché figures sat lightly on the shelves of cupboards. Farooq and I sat facing each other.

In January 1990 he had been an assistant engineer in the state government, responsible for the management of the water supply to various parts of Srinagar. He had gone on 'essential services duty' on January 19 and left home in the morning with his official curfew pass. Paramilitary men stopped him a few times on his way to work; he showed his curfew pass, they let him go. After making water supply arrangements, he walked towards Maisuma to visit an uncle living there. 'We had heard of the house to house searches and arrests there. I was worried about my uncle's family and decided to visit them.' Near Lal Chowk, he saw a procession marching towards Maisuma. 'I followed the procession. We reached Gowkadal. Tense paramilitary men stood along the way pointing their guns towards the protesters.'

Farooq paused, drank some water, and pushed a bell. A servant brought tea, local bread and harisa, a lamb delicacy cooked slowly in copper pots with cardamom, cinnamon and saffron till it becomes paste-like. 'My uncle lived on the other side of the bridge. I planned to leave the procession on reaching his house. The protesters were angry, shouting fiery slogans at the top of their voices,' he said. CRPF men stood on the bridge. Protesters shouted slogans for freedom. Amidst the sloganeering, Farooq heard a burst of gunfire. Bullets tore the procession apart; people shouted, fell, and shouted again. He jumped onto a footpath and lay flat on the ground. 'Bullets whizzed past my ears. The bridge was covered with bodies and blood. CRPF men continued firing. I saw more people falling, closed my eyes, and pretended to be dead.'

Farooq curled himself up in the chair, leaving his slippers on the carpet. I was not eating any more; Farooq had left his tea. Memory drowned out the smell of harisa; the elegant carpets and ornate furniture faded away. Farooq was not here in his drawing room talking to me. He was on the bridge pretending to be dead. He heard wails and a gunshot every few seconds. Paramilitary men walked around the bridge. He saw an officer walking from body to body, checking whether anyone was alive. 'I lay still and from the corner of my eye saw him firing more bullets every time he found a sign of life in an injured man.' Farooq waited for the soldiers to leave. It was getting harder to pretend to be dead. Where he lay, someone had dropped a kangri, the firepot Kashmiris carry around in winter. Embers of charcoal from the firepot were scattered on the sidewalk. His cheek was burning from their heat. Slowly he turned his face to avoid the burn. The murderous officer saw him turn. 'This bastard is alive,' Farooq heard him shout. The officer ran towards him, kicked him, and a volley of bullets pierced through his body. He lost consciousness.

A police truck came. The bodies were put in the truck; the police put Farooq in too. The truck moved to the police control room—it was to become the site where Kashmiris would go to collect bodies of their kin in the days to come. Inside the truck, Farooq regained consciousness and lay still. The truck stopped at the police hospital two miles from Gawkadal. As the policemen at the hospital began taking out the bodies, he cried out, 'I am alive!' The policemen, all Kashmiris, hugged him. They were carrying him away when a teenager, whose clothes and face were drenched in blood, jumped out of the pile of bodies. The boy ran his hands on his body and cried, 'I got no bullets. I got no bullets. I am alive.' He stood still for a moment and suddenly ran out of the police control room building.

Farooq was hospitalised. His family heard he was alive a day later. 'They thought I was dead.' Months later he recovered and resumed work as an engineer. 'God gave me a new life that day; I thank him and live every moment. I often think of that boy running from the police hospital. Memories like that disturb me. But I was not the only one; there are hundreds like me.' We had another round of kahwa and continued talking about Kashmir for a while. Farooq was wondering if the conflict would ever be resolved, what could be a possible way out for a just and lasting peace. It was a question most Kashmiris, like Farooq and me, talked about. None of us knew the answer. Then his phone rang. One of his subordinates was calling from his office; Farooq gave him complicated technical directions on the phone. As he spoke, with the intense focus of a professional, it was hard to imagine the same man had survived one of the most appalling massacres in Kashmir. In a corner was a golf kit; he was a member of Srinagar's posh golf club.

At home, my ten year old cousin was waiting for me to help her with a school essay. 'Whom did you go to meet?'

Iffat asked me, the moment I walked in. 'A friend of mine,' I said. 'What does he do?' 'He is an engineer.' 'Why did you go to see him?' Her questions could be endless and I suggested that we should work on her school essay. After helping her with the essay I sat alone in my room thinking about Farooq, about Babloo Painter and Gawkadal.

The memory of the massacre of Gawkadal is tied up with the memory of a series of other massacres. In the winter of 1990 Srinagar was the city of protests, the city of massacres. Militants joined the Indian forces in a display of brutality. Mushir-ul-Hasan, the vice chancellor of Kashmir University, was kidnapped and killed after the Indian government refused to accept the militants' demands for the release of hostages. Prominent Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims seen as siding with India were the next target. On May 21, 1990 militants from Hizbul Mujahideen, the pro-Pakistan militant group, assassinated the head priest of Srinagar, Maulvi Farooq, a controversial politician. A procession of mourners began from his house in the northern part of Srinagar.

Near a hundred year old school in central Srinagar established by Maulvi Farooq's father to educate Kashmir's Muslims, paramilitary forces fired at the slain priest's funeral procession. Bullets pierced the coffin; pallbearers and mourners fell. About a hundred men were slain. Their blood-soaked shoes lay on the road after the bodies were carried away. People forgot the head priest's assassination; anger rose against India. His eighteen year old son, Omar Farooq, who was sworn in as the head priest, appealed to the world leaders to help Kashmir seek self-determination. The firing on the mourners and the image of their blood-soaked shoes found their way into poetry and paintings.

Many of the mourners were buried at a new graveyard that had come up near Eidgah, the traditional Eid prayer ground

of Srinagar. For centuries, Kashmiris had buried the dead in neighbourhood graveyards. Family members gave the dead person a bath, clothed him/her in a white cotton shroud, and took the body to the neighbourhood graveyard for funeral prayers. But the men who were killed by the Indian forces after the rebellion were no ordinary dead. They were seen as martyrs for the cause of freedom. They were not given a bath, nor were they clothed in white cotton shrouds. 'Martyrs do not need baths and shrouds.' I had heard this saying often since the winter of 1990. They were mostly buried at the newly built graveyard on the western edge of Srinagar, known as Martyrs' Graveyard. I had been there as a reporter after every newsworthy assassination or on the anniversaries of the day when the mourners and the head priest were slain. But I had been there first in the mid nineties with my friend Shan, who lives nearby.

Bordering Shan's crowded neighbourhood of old, balconied, multi-storey timber and brick houses is a wide, grassy playground where local boys play cricket and horses and stray cows graze. I revisited the place now, with Shan. In a corner, the graveyard is a neatly walled square with an arched entrance announcing: Kashmir Martyrs' Graveyard. Inscribed on the gate are the words: 'Lest You Forget We Have Given Our Today for Tomorrow of Yours' In his adolescence, Shan sat on the nearby shopfronts and watched bodies being brought to the graveyard, and journalists running around with notebooks and cameras. We crossed the iron grille graveyard gate and walked on the cobbled footpaths running between the graves and the defiant reds and violets of roses and irises.

Hundreds lay buried in neat rows, each grave marked with a white, rectangular marble tombstone with a green border engraved with the names of the dead and the exhortation 'Only God Remains!' Many of the names on the tombstones

were familiar: Maulvi Farooq, the head priest; Ishfaq Majeed, commander of the JKLF to whose name was added the prefix 'His Excellency' There was a grave for Maqbool Bhat, the founder of the JKLF, who was hanged and buried in Delhi's Tihar jail in the early eighties. On his tombstone were the words: 'The grave waits for him' And there were unknown men and women from all parts of Kashmir. In a grave, two children—four and five years old—were buried together. Most graves mentioned the generic names of the killers: police, army, security forces, as if they too were to be immortalised like their victims. In a corner, were a few empty graves.

Hasan, the old keeper of the graveyard, told us the graves had been dug in anticipation of the brisk death toll in the early nineties. Hasan lived nearby and had run a small business previously. His sons had taken over the business after he developed a cardiac problem. Then the fighting began; he visited the graveyard often to pray for the dead. 'I found peace sitting amongst the martyrs. Some years later, I volunteered to look after their graves. Now this is my life.' Hasan believed, like most traditional Muslims, that martyrs live after their death, and their graves are scented gardens. 'Once it rained hard and some graves were damaged. Nothing remains in an ordinary grave after a month but earth. But not with the martyrs, their bodies do not decompose. In a grave, I saw the hair of a martyr. It was as if he was was sleeping. From every grave I repaired, there rose a heavenly scent, the scent of the martyrs,' Hasan said. I might have had a sceptical look on my face. 'Son, you are too young to understand this but I have experienced it,' he said.

The tale of Kashmiri rebellions, their brutal suppression by the rulers, and honouring the dead as martyrs, is an old one. In Srinagar, people still visit the graves of men who stood up to rulers and were killed for their defiance centuries ago.

There is another Martyrs' Graveyard, where the men who were killed by the forces of the Dogra ruler of Kashmir, Hari Singh, in 1931, are buried. Kashmir had various foreign rulers after she lost her independence to the Mughal emperors of Delhi in the late sixteenth century. In the mid eighteenth century, the Mughals lost Kashmir to the armies of an Afghan warrior, Ahmad Shah Abdali. In the early nineteenth century, the Sikhs, led by Ranjit Singh, defeated the Afghans and took Kashmir. Sikh rule was as oppressive as Afghan rule. By the 1840s, the Sikh empire was crumbling.

The British declared war on the Sikhs in 1846. Many Sikh commanders crossed over to the British side. But the defection that was to have consequences for Kashmir was that of Gulab Singh, a Hindu chieftain of Jammu. He had worked his way to become a general in Ranjit Singh's army. Gulab Singh promised to help the British and stayed away from battle in 1846. The Sikhs lost. Gulab Singh got his reward. The British sold Kashmir to him for seventy five lakh rupees. To recover the price he paid the British, Gulab Singh pounced on every penny he found, and promoted begaar, forced labour.

A few sympathetic voices were heard against the sale of Kashmir and the plight of its people under the rule of Gulab Singh and his descendants. Some years ago in a library in Delhi, I came across a tiny book printed in London, titled *Cashmeer Misgovernment* by Robert Thorpe, but his book told me nothing about his own life. On a visit home, I found an edition of Thorpe's book edited by a Srinagar-based historian in my father's library. The historian had added some details about Thorpe's life. The story began when R Thorpe, a lieutenant colonel in the British army, was travelling through Kashmir in the early nineteenth century. While staying with a local landlord he met and fell in love with the landlord's daughter Amiran. Thorpe and Amiran were married and

left for England. Robert Thorpe was born to them in the year 1833.

In his early youth, Thorpe left England to visit his mother's birthplace; he found Kashmiris living like slaves under Gulab Singh's son, Pratap Singh. He gathered first-hand accounts of ruthless taxation and the deaths of forced labourers due to starvation, exertion, and cold, and published his account as *Cashmeer Misgovernment.* Thorpe described the condition of men taken for forced labour thus:

> None save those who have seen such, can fully realise those horrors. Patiently the Kashmiris toil onwards through the drifting snow. Many encourage each other with words of hope. They might reach the other side in safety. But strength departs and the wind paralyses the sinews. Slowly the conviction fastens upon them, that they shall never quit those frightful solitudes, never see again their homes or those who dwelt there, waiting for their return, far off in the sunny vale of Kashmir.

Pratap Singh, the ruler, planned to silence him. One winter morning in 1868, Thorpe was walking towards the Shankaracharya hill in Srinagar. Singh's men attacked him with daggers. The brave writer fell and died there. He was buried in a Christian cemetery behind Lal Chowk.

Young boys and girls from two convent schools make a racket in the street leading to the cemetery today. Tibetans who sought refuge in Kashmir in the sixties sell shoes and clothes on the sidewalks. I saw the inscription 'Christian Cemetery' on a small iron gate as I walked in. Inside, three men sat on a stone pavement. I asked them about Robert Thorpe's grave; they had never heard of him. 'The graves here are of local converts,' a thickset man said. Then, he pointed towards the far end of the cemetery. 'You will see graves of important

British sahibs and memsahibs there.' Weeds grew around the limestone and marble stones on the graves; majestic chinar and pine trees shaded the terraced cemetery. The thickset man joined me and asked me to translate the epitaphs written in English for him. Every time he realised a grave was a hundred years old, he cried out loud, 'Nothing lasts! We all have to return to Him! He was and only He will be! We all have to return to Him!' I could not find Thorpe anywhere.

I was reading an epitaph when he suddenly shook me by my shoulder and asked me for fifty rupees. 'I will show you a very important grave. Many people come to see it and take pictures.' He ushered me towards an old tomb; time had turned the limestone grave black. Weeds, wild grass, and twigs covered the slab. 'Do you know anything about him?' I asked the man. He stood, smiled an obsequious smile. 'No! But he is a very important man.' I removed the twigs and grass and scrubbed the mud off the slab. The modest carving on the stone read:

ROBERT THORPE
AGED 30 YEARS
22 NOVEMBER 1868
VERITAS
HE GAVE HIS LIFE FOR KASHMIR.

Srinagar is a city of bunkers. Of the world's cities, it has the highest military presence. But Srinagar is also a city of absences. It has lost its nights to a decade and a half of curfews, and de facto curfews. It has lost its theatres. Regal, Shiraz, Neelam, Broadway—magical names I longed for throughout my childhood. They were closed before I had grown up enough to walk to a ticket counter on my own, to watch a bad Hindi movie. Srinagar has also lost its multi-religious character, with the migration of the Kashmiri

Pandits in the early nineties. My Pandit landlady in Delhi always talked about visiting her old home in Srinagar. I did not know where her house was but I could visit the area where she had lived: Habbakadal, central Srinagar. One afternoon I walked into a coffee shop near the dilapidated Habbakadal Bridge, the third bridge on the Jhelum River as it moves through Srinagar. A child worked behind the counter and a teenager in an Adidas T-shirt manned the sales counter. His father owned the shop. I asked him about any places of interest in Habbakadal. 'There is nothing to see here. It is a ruin. Go down the road and you will see some burnt houses,' he shrugged.

I was about to leave when an elderly man came in. The boy swiftly threw his cigarette away. 'He is my father.' He jumped off his chair. The father sat behind the sales counter and watched people pass by. I asked him about the area. 'Turn left and the second building from my shop is an ancient Hindu temple,' he said. I walked up to the temple door and stopped. The temple complex now housed a paramilitary camp. Fortified bunkers along the wall hid the temple from sight; I saw the tin roof of the temple and a brass spire. A grey painted iron sheet was attached to a sandbag bunker. On it bold black graffiti read 'India is Great!' An Indian flag hung from a mast tied to a bunker.

On the bridge—used only by pedestrians—a group of old men sat in the pleasant afternoon sun. I sat near them looking at the old wooden houses along the riverbank. On a ghat women washed clothes and children ran up and down the stairs leading to the ghat. One of the old men, Abdul Razaq, pointed to the crumbling old houses along the riverbank and said, 'Most of them are Pandit houses. Pandits left and now they are abandoned,' he said and cupped his right cheek with his right palm. His eyes wandered over their decaying wooden windows and shingle roofs covered in neglect and

dust. Mrs Kaul would have lived in one such house not very far from where I stood. On the left bank, the brassplate roof of an ancient temple reflected the mild sun. 'It is Raghunath temple, one of the best temples here.'

I walked down a stone-paved street sneaking between rows of new concrete buildings and old wooden houses. The ground floors of the houses had been converted into shops and the shopkeepers sat lazily behind their wooden counters. In a crumbling building with a burnt top floor and roof, a shop announced: 'New Generation Choice—Latest Bollywood and Hollywood VCDs and DVDs' The street turned into a narrow alley. I asked a pony-tailed little girl where the Raghunath temple was. She ran ahead, beckoning me to follow her and stopped near a broken wall.

I climbed over the broken wall and jumped onto a garbage dump inside the temple courtyard. Stray dogs camping inside the temple barked at me. The brass plates of the roof had fallen apart and exposed the baked bricks of the temple. Reeds and wild bushes had invaded the courtyard and the stairs leading into the prayer room. Walking through a triple-arched gallery, I entered the prayer room. It was filled with cobwebs, pigeon shit and a gloomy silence. Naked bricks stared at me; I walked over pieces of their plaster scattered on the floor. The Hindu deity's idol had gone missing from the podium like the Pandits. A horde of pigeons flew into the prayer hall, fluttered around, and flew out into the dusk over the river Jhelum and the city.

Two shabbily dressed young men stood in the courtyard of the temple. They were startled to see me. They were smoking pot. Refugees from sanity had found shelter in the abandoned temple. After introductions, they warmed up and offered me a drag. I refused. 'Okay. But tell me why did you come here?' one asked. 'I saw the temple roof from a distance and was curious to take a look.' He took a drag from the joint

and looked at the temple. 'When I was a child, it used to be crowded with people. The Pandits sang bhajans all evening. Then they left. Now only djinns live here.' The setting sun shone meekly in the darkening waters of the Jhelum. On the way back, I passed through Lal Chowk and crossed the Jhelum again. The dark roads and the gloomy river seemed to be mourning lost gods and worshippers.

I found myself thinking of Hari Parbat, a hill that towers over central Srinagar and is associated with the legend of the creation of Kashmir. In prehistoric times there was a vast lake known as Satisar, after Shiva's wife Parvati, also called Sati. In the lake lived a demon who laid waste the whole country around Satisar. Kashyapa, the sage, witnessed this destruction and prayed to the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva to rid the place of the demon. The demon escaped under water each time the gods attacked him. Then Vishnu assumed the form of a boar and struck the mountains surrounding the lake. Where he struck, a pass opened and water drained out. (The present north Kashmir town of Baramulla is believed to be the place where Vishnu struck the mountains.) The demon escaped to lower ground near central Srinagar. Shiva's wife, Parvati, assumed the form of a mynah and dropped a pebble on him. The pebble became a mountain and killed the demon. Kashmiris believe that mountain is Hari Parbat.

A steep, narrow alley leads up to Hari Parbat from a market in central Srinagar. Midway stands a famed Sufi shrine. Hari Parbat rises above the shrine in its solid barrenness, crowned by the massive beige walls of a fort built by a medieval Afghan ruler. One afternoon, I climbed higher towards the fort; a temple dedicated to Parvati stands there. Two old men chatted beside the track I followed. I asked them about the gate of the fort. 'The gate is there. But where are you going?' one asked. 'To the fort, I want to see the temple,' I replied. He looked at the other man and they sighed. 'Don't you know,

it is a camp.' I looked at the fort walls and saw the barrel of a gun pointing out from an opening in the fort wall. 'There used to be a temple, a mosque, a pond and few apricot trees there,' he added, 'Now it is all military.'

Srinagar is also about being hidden from view, disappearing. Absences and their reminders stand at every other street. Every now and then I would walk past a small park shaded by thick chinars and notice a circle of women and men with white headbands and placards in the park. I would stop at times but often simply walk past with an air of resignation. Between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by the military, paramilitary, and the police. Newspapers routinely refer to the missing men as 'disappeared persons', and their waiting wives are the 'half-widows' The government has refused to set up a commission of enquiry into the disappearances and claims that the missing citizens of Kashmir have joined militant groups and crossed for arms training to Pakistan. Many Kashmiris believe the 'disappeared' men were killed in custody and cremated in mass graves. Wives of many such men have given up hope and tried to move on. Others are obsessively fighting for justice, hoping their loved ones will return. The men and women in the park were the parents and wives of the missing men. Dirty wars seem to have a way of bringing mothers to city squares.

Several years ago, I happened to meet Noora, a seventy year old woman, in her run-down house near Lal Chowk. Her shopkeeper son had stepped out to join his cricket team at the Polo Ground, a nearby cricket ground. Her neighbours saw a few BSF jeeps stop outside their house, near Ghanta Ghar, an old watchtower whose clock had stopped moving. The paramilitaries grabbed him, pushed him into the back of a jeep, and drove away. He had been missing for eight years when I met her in her dimly lit kitchen. 'For a few years, my

daughters and I went to every police station, every military camp, every politician we could. Everybody had a 'No' for us. Then I had to marry my two daughters. I couldn't keep dragging them to camps and police stations with me. People talk.' Her wrinkled face showed little emotion; she seemed tired of repeating her story and getting nowhere. 'Many journalists came and interviewed me. Even some angrez came and promised they will write about my son. But my son has not come back.'

Neither has the son of Parveena Ahangar. Parveena, whose sixteen year old, speech-impaired son, Javed, was taken away from their house in 1990 during a raid by the army. A housewife in her forties, she, along with a lawyer, Pervez Imroz, formed the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons to campaign and fight cases in the courts. One day she is consoling and strategising with relatives of other disappeared youth, helping them with legal advice and charity schools for children, another she is at the Srinagar airport catching a flight to talk in a seminar, and yet another, she repeats her story and her sad brown eyes hold back tears in an auditorium elsewhere. Every time I have met her, there is a new woman with her whose husband or son has gone missing. She is a mother to them all, holding them, consoling them, scolding them, egging them on. Old, bearded men talk to her with reverence, as if she is a saint. Young, rakish men sit on bare ground, their heads lowered, and listen to her. Reporters see her walking past and stop to greet her, ask if there is something that needs to be written about. Few are regarded with more respect and love in Srinagar than Parveena. Her courage, her grief turns starker because it is so very well known. An entire generation of reporters in Srinagar seems to have come of age writing about these disappearances. And a hundred times has the stoic, patient Parveena spread out the court

files and pictures of her son and the other disappeared youth on a rug in her drawing room.

I remember sitting on that rug in her house, barely a year old reporter, taking notes, asking earnest questions, and naively believing that telling her story well might bring her son back. The government had offered her monetary compensation (around one lakh rupees) if she accepted that her son was killed in unknown circumstances in the conflict. 'I will not sell my son for any amount,' she told me. The numbers of the missing have come down since Parveena began her battle, but the disappearances have not stopped. Every time the police and the military announce to the media that an unidentified body has been found, Parveena gets nervous phone calls from the relatives of other missing men. The few times the government exhumes a body and decides to do a DNA test, yet another bout of anxiety returns. 'You never know who it will be. One can hope as long as you have not seen the body or the grave.'

That pain and longing often reminds Kashmiris of an old story. On the Srinagar–Jammu highway, about six miles outside the city, a signboard reads: World's Best Saffron Grows Here. Past the beds of violet saffron flowers, a dirt path leads to the village of Chandhara, the village of Zoon or Habba Khatoon, a sixteenth century poetess and singer. Despite her talents and refinement, Zoon was married off to a peasant, who insisted that she devote herself to household chores and working in the fields. Zoon sang her songs as she tilled and planted.

The ruler of Kashmir at the time was Yusuf Shah Chak, a prince fond of poetry and music. One day he was passing by the fields near Chandhara when he saw and heard Zoon singing in the fields. Yusuf Shah fell for her. Historians have competing stories about their romance and marriage, but in

Kashmiri folklore, the peasant girl became Queen Habba Khatoon, spent joyous days and nights with her husband in pleasure gardens, wrote poetry, refined her singing and composed classical music inspired by Yusuf Shah's court, full of musicians and singers.

But they were caught in the whirligig of imperial politics. Akbar, the Mughal emperor of Delhi, invaded Kashmir in December 1585. Yusuf considered resistance futile but his army fought and stopped the Mughal march. Fearing an eventual defeat, Yusuf agreed to visit the court of the Mughal emperor for peace talks, where he accepted Mughal sovereignty. Kashmir lost its independence. Akbar imprisoned Yusuf and a year later sent him to Bihar as a petty Mughal official, where he died in anonymity a few years later. Habba Khatoon roamed through the villages of Kashmir, singing songs of separation, yearning to be reunited with her beloved. Yusuf died alone in faraway Bihar.

Despite his cowardice, Yusuf Shah's imprisonment and betrayal by Akbar has become a metaphor for the relationship between Delhi and Srinagar. In a literary history of Kashmir, I found a picture of Yusuf Shah's grave in the village of Biswak in Nalanda district of Bihar. Mohammed Yusuf Taing, a Kashmiri writer and cultural critic, had been there in the early eighties with Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah. I met him in Srinagar in his study lined with books. 'A generation has passed since someone visited his grave,' his voice quivered with emotion. A week later, I called the old writer and sought directions for the Bihar village where Yusuf Shah was buried.

Some time after meeting Taing, I left Srinagar for Delhi and from there boarded a night train for Patna. In the morning, I took a taxi from Patna and drove out into the countryside. We passed tiny mud houses with hay roofs scattered amidst vast stretches of fields, obstinate bullock carts unimpressed

by cars, overtook buses with commuters sitting gaily on their roofs. I dozed off till the driver woke me up in a tiny market in the small town of Islampur. A group of men in checked sarongs and kurtas drank lassi on wooden benches outside a sweets shop. Hari, a young man, volunteered to accompany me. 'The Kashmiri saint's tomb is near Biswak where I live,' he explained. 'It used to be a Muslim village called Kashmiri Chak but after Partition, the people migrated to Pakistan.' We followed a dirt track into sugarcane fields. A few miles on, Hari asked the driver to stop. A banyan tree towered over a mound of bricks, partly covered with vegetation. We were there. On a raised piece of land with a fallen brick boundary was a tomb. It had no plaques, no inscriptions, and no names. Sunburnt wind rustled through the sugarcane; an old man passed by wearily pedalling a bicycle. I sat there for a while looking at the featureless grave of Yusuf Shah Chak, after whom Kashmir was never free.

Chapter Ten

Prague had protested and won; Berlin had protested and won; Kashmiris too had believed that our protests would win Kashmir its freedom. The early nineties were a naive, heady time. But Kashmiri demonstrations faded out after the massacres of protesters. I often think the conflict might not have turned so fatal if India had allowed those peaceful demonstrations. Maybe those demonstrations and not the armed militancy would have become the dominant aspect of politics in Kashmir, maybe Indians and Kashmiris could have talked and thousands of deaths might have been avoided. But that did not happen. Instead, firing on protesters, arrests, disappearances, custodial killings, kidnappings, assassinations, and torture dominated Kashmir. In a prose poem, Agha Shahid Ali wrote:

> The doctor who treated a sixteen year old boy
> Recently released from an interrogation centre asked,
> 'Why didn't the fortune tellers predict
> The lines in his palms would be cut by a knife?'

I had come close to being the boy in Shahid's poem, one day in the winter of 1992, when there was a military crackdown on our village. I remember the cries of the boys, including my neighbour's son Manzoor, who were being tortured in the rooms next to mine. In November, a few days after Ramadan I crossed Zero Bridge and continued past the old Radio Kashmir building on a rather quiet road. Old buses waited outside the elite Burn Hall boys school; supplicants with applications hung around the dropgates of government ministers' much-guarded mansions; and the leafless chinar branches hung over

empty stands of the cricket stadium. I crossed another road and found myself facing a colonial mansion painted blue and white. A plaque on its gate read: United Nations Military Observer Group for India and Pakistan. The old mansion and the UN mission both seemed hapless reminders of a lost time. The architecture of the mansion was a dying style, which blended the Kashmiri use of woodwork with British sensibilities; the UN resolutions on Kashmir, recommending a plebiscite, lived as hollow quotations in books and journals. A short walk from the UN office, Gupkar Road is a well-bunkered and well-patrolled neighbourhood. Senior politicians, bureaucrats, and intelligence operatives live here in lovely houses with high, ugly walls and stern guards. Gupkar is our Green Zone. The road turns towards Grand Palace, the palace of Hari Singh, the last monarch of Kashmir. During the nineties, most people dreaded Gupkar Road. It was the road to Papa-2.

Papa-2 was the most infamous torture centre run by the Indian forces in Kashmir. Originally, it was a large mansion built by Hari Singh, which was later converted into a guesthouse and known as the Fairview Guest House. Hundreds who were taken to Papa-2 did not return. Those who returned were wrecks. The detention cum torture centre was closed down in the late nineties. A top government official got the Papa-2 building renovated and turned it into his residence. Before moving in, the Oxford-educated officer called priests of all religions to pray there and exorcise what might have been the 'ghosts' of the people killed there during interrogation.

I managed to get permission to visit and was supposed to be interested in architecture. After an identity check, I walked past well-tended flowerbeds leading up to the porch. Apple and apricot trees grew in a corner of the lawn. The pine-clad ridge of the Zabarvan hill rose gently behind the mansion with a white façade and a red roof. The politician

was not home. One of his men welcomed me to a wood-panelled reception room, with three phones, a fax machine, and a desktop computer. We began our tour of the house. My guide, a local young man my age, walked in silence through the rooms. I looked at the chairs, the tables, the ceilings, and the whitewashed walls. Soft, honey-hued curtains hung on the windows of the politician's bedroom on the first floor. A brown bedspread covered his bed; paperbacks and hardbacks on law and literature filled the bookracks. My guide drew the curtains from the windows and clear, bright light fell on the mementos and awards resting on the shelves. Verses from the Quran woven into a carpet hung from a wall and a painting by the famous Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma adorned the other wall. My guide was silent. Finally he spoke, 'This was Papa-2, brother! This was Papa-2.'

An hour later, I was in the city centre, Lal Chowk, talking to two friends about my visit. I had to meet people who had survived Papa-2. At the same time, I dreaded the idea. 'Where can I find someone who has been at Papa-2?' I asked my friend. 'Ask anyone on the street. Half of Kashmir has been there.' 'Or just walk up to Maisuma and you will find ten guys on the street who have been there.' I walked past the soldiers and policemen towards the JKLF office in nearby Maisuma. A group of young men stood outside the nondescript building. 'Papa-2?' A brief silence followed. They asked each other: 'Were you there?' 'No. I was in Rajasthan.' 'No. I was at Kot Balwal.' 'No. I was at Gogoland.' 'No. I was in Ranchi.' Names pouring out in their young voices formed a whole geography of Indian prisons. Then: 'Sayeed was at Papa-2.' 'Irfan was there.' 'And Irshad was at Papa-2.' 'Shafi was there too.' In less than five minutes, I had six names. 'Shafi will be home now,' said Abid, one of the men. 'Let us go.' We walked through narrow, musty lanes, past old, modest houses whose roofs seemed to lean

into an embrace to keep the weak winter sun out. Old men gave blank stares from shopfronts; younger men stood in twos and threes, lazily shuffling a bit to make room for a cyclist or an autorickshaw.

Abid stopped to greet a few men on the way. He asked them whether they had been at Papa-2. Some talked about their friends who had been there; others talked about other jails and torture chambers. Finally, Abid stopped near a rather decrepit, two floor house. He knocked. A woman's voice asked, 'Who is it?'

'Abid here. Is Shafi around?'

'He is at the mosque,' the voice shouted back. 'Wait there; he shall be back any moment.'

A few minutes later, we saw a tall, frail, bespectacled man in his early thirties limping towards us with the help of a wooden staff. He shouted a happy greeting to Abid. They talked for a while; Abid introduced me and left. Shafi pushed open the door and led me in. We climbed up creaking wooden stairs and entered a neat room with a layer of cheap green distemper on its mud walls. The floral designs on the rug on the floor were worn out. In a corner, a bedspread covered a stack of bedding; there were no wardrobes. Shafi pulled two pillows from the stack, adjusted them as cushions against the wall and asked me to sit. In another corner a short, plump, dark woman sat near a kerosene stove. On the wooden shelves on the wall facing her were a few cups, plates and utensils. 'She is my wife,' Shafi said. I greeted her. She muttered a welcome and pulled down a curtain partitioning the makeshift kitchen from the drawing room part of the room. Shafi asked for tea, adding, 'Do not put sugar. He will take as much he likes.' His eyes seemed to disappear behind the thick glasses. His cheeks were deeply hollowed but his hair was still brown and curly. Shafi lit a cigarette, bent towards me, and said, 'I was at Papa-2 for seven months.'

In 1990, like most other boys, Shafi had decided to join a militant group. JKLF was the most influential and charismatic group in his part of Srinagar, and he joined its student wing. His war with India began: attacking patrols of Indian soldiers, moving with guns from one hideout to the next, and evading arrest in crackdowns became his routine. Shafi was nineteen. 'We thought Kashmir would be free in a year or two,' he recalled. Instead, he was arrested by a paramilitary patrol. After initial interrogation at a camp in Srinagar, he was sent to the Kot Balwal and Talab Tilloo jails in the Jammu province. Two years later, he was released. Back home, he met his comrades again. 'I began working for the movement again.'

One day in the autumn of 1992, a local boy collaborating with the BSF spotted him. 'I knew him. He had become a BSF informer and pointed me out. I was not carrying any weapons and was arrested.' Shafi's wife called from behind the yellow curtain. 'The tea is ready.' He rose, brought a tray full of biscuits, two cups and a flask. He began pouring tea but fumbled with the cups, squinting. I volunteered and he let me. I kept his cup next to him and he again touched it slowly as if assuring himself of its presence. 'They kept me in the local BSF camp for a week before shifting me to Papa-2.' At the camp, he was interrogated, beaten with fists, feet, batons, guns. They wanted information about his group; they wanted his weapons. He did not tell me whether he gave the information and the weapons. It is hard to ask or answer that question if you are a Kashmiri.

Shafi was moved to Papa-2. 'It was hell,' he said, fumbling now to find the cigarette burning to an ashen finger on the ashtray. He was thrown into a room crowded with twenty men. The floor was bare. Smears of blood blemished the whitewashed walls. Every man had a coarse, black blanket for bedding. The blankets were full of lice. 'We called them lice blankets,' Shafi laughed. A corner of the room was their

toilet. The prisoners defecated and urinated into polythene bags in that corner; they then threw the bags into a dustbin. Every time a man had to use the 'toilet', two others held a blanket like a curtain to give him some privacy. Others stared at the floor. Shafi and his fellow prisoners slept laid out like rows of corpses. Throughout the night, people woke up shouting, cursing the lice, trying to sleep again, only to be woken up by the next man battling the vermin. Some managed to sleep, though the lights were never switched off. 'During the interrogation, I was made to stare at very bright bulbs. Even in our room, the light burnt my eyes. I craved darkness.' Darkness came. 'I began losing my eyesight there. I can barely see now despite my glasses.'

After his release from the prison, doctors prescribed a surgical operation to restore his sight. 'Why didn't you have the surgery?' Shafi smiled. 'I cannot afford the cost.' He could not find work anywhere. In summer, he sold second-hand garments on a wooden cart in Lal Chowk, in winter he followed his brother to Calcutta hawking Kashmiri shawls on a commission. His family wanted him to get married and begin a new life. They went around looking for a girl for him. But nobody would marry Shafi, a man shattered by his militant days, prison, and non-existent job prospects. His brother knew a Muslim family in a Calcutta slum, though. They had a squint-eyed girl, whom nobody would marry. Her family was happy to marry her off to Shafi. Now she was there behind the curtain, asking whether we wanted more tea. 'She is pregnant and I have to take her to Calcutta for the birth.' He sounded tense.

Shafi lived off a thousand rupees that Yasin Malik, the JKLF chief, gave him every month. 'I did ask other leaders for help. I said that I am here because I spent my youth for the movement but I was disappointed.' Some separatist leaders asked him for proof of his being a militant, of his

jail days. 'They live in big houses and drive big cars bought from the money that came for the movement. But they are not willing to help those who destroyed their lives for the cause.' His face contorted with anger; he took long, hard puffs from his cigarette. 'I never went to them after that. None of the leaders except Yasin had to go through what the boys [arrested militants] endured. They cannot even imagine what being tortured is like.' He drank the last gulp of tea and lit another cigarette. I thought of the separatist leaders giving statements to crowds of journalists in their mansion-like houses; I thought of their security guards from Indian paramilitary forces and the Kashmir police; I thought of their white Ambassador cars, the preferred vehicles of Indian politicians and bureaucrats, making them look like mirror images of their ideological rivals in the state. They spoke of the sacrifices of the people of Kashmir; they spoke of the struggle for freedom. Shafi had believed in them and felt let down by them. The contrast in his and their lives was stark. He held my hand, and repeated, 'They cannot even imagine what being tortured is like.'

He wanted me to know. 'They made you sit on a chair, tied you with ropes. One soldier held your neck, two others pulled your legs in different directions, and three more rolled a heavy concrete roller over your legs. They asked questions and if you didn't answer, they burnt you with cigarettes.' He paused for a while and as if suddenly remembering something said, 'The worst part was the psychological torture. They would make us say Jai Hind every morning and evening. They beat you if you refused. It was very hard but everyone said it except Master Ahsan Dar [a top commander of Hizbul Mujahideen].' Then he stopped abruptly. 'I cannot talk about it. It makes me crazy.'

He said I should meet Ansar, another former militant who had been in Papa-2. Ansar would talk about the torture and

what it did to people. I was unsure whether I should meet Ansar. I feared being a voyeur. Was I scared of facing it, of having to write about it later? I spent the next few days arguing with myself before leaving to meet Ansar. I met him at his brother's grocery shop near the grand mosque in downtown Srinagar. We sat in a small, poorly lit room in his house behind the roadside shop. Ansar was a robust, moustached man in a beige shalwar kameez. He had joined a separatist organisation called People's League in the mid eighties and became one of the earlier members of its militant wing. One day, he was visiting his parents when the BSF raided his house and arrested him. 'They had information that I was there. Someone in my neighbourhood was the informer.' He talked about various prisons he had been in. 'And Papa-2?' I asked.

'How can I forget it? Not even stray cows would eat the food they threw at us there.' He passed a plate of plum cake to me. 'That place destroyed most people who were there. You do not live a normal life after that torture. It scars you forever.' He lit a cigarette and talked about his experience. 'They beat us up with guns, staffs, hands. But that was nothing.' His voice had no emotion and he talked as if he was reading from a manual. 'They took you out to the lawn outside the building. You were asked to remove all your clothes, even your underwear. They tied you to a long wooden ladder and placed it near a ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chilli powder. They raised the ladder like a seesaw and pushed your head into the ditch. It could go on for an hour, half an hour depending on their mood.'

'It was the beginning. At times, they would not undress you but tie you to the ladder. You almost felt relieved until they tied your pants near the ankles and put mice inside.' He paused for a while, poured more tea and said, 'Or they burnt your arms and legs with cigarette butts and kerosene stoves used for welding. They burn your flesh till you speak.' He

rolled up his right sleeve and pushed it a little beyond the elbow. An uneven dark brown patch of flesh sat in an ugly contrast against his pale skin. 'They tied copper wire around your arms and gave high voltage shocks. Every hair on your body stood up. But the worst was when they inserted the copper wire into my penis and gave electric shocks. They did it with most boys. It destroyed many lives. Many could not marry after that.'

After his release, Ansar took treatment for urinary tract infections and some other disorders he did not mention. 'I was not ready to marry. But my family supported me in a big way. I agreed to marry only after I was treated for a year and a half. Thank God, now I have a daughter and run my small business.' After leaving Ansar, I kept thinking about his words; 'They did it with most boys. It destroyed many lives; many could not marry after that.' The attacks on their masculinity had left them vulnerable even after the prison sentence was over. I tried to write about Papa-2 but failed. I stared at my computer screen, typed and deleted a few words, and switched it off.

A forgotten memory returned. A few years ago, I had briefly met a teacher from my middle school when the conflict erupted. Now I didn't even remember the full name of the teacher. His family name was Khatana and he had taught us Urdu poetry. I was passionate about Urdu poetry, attended all his classes, and was indeed his favourite student. But I left that school, left Kashmir, and forgot all about him. Meeting him after almost a decade, I had asked him about his family, his work. He was teaching in a different school and had not married. During a raid on his village, he had been arrested and tortured. 'The bastards destroyed me. I have had three unsuccessful operations on my testicles. So no chance of a marriage really,' he told me. I wonder why at that moment I failed to understand the import of what he had told me.

I wanted to meet him and called friends to ask about him. Nobody seemed to know where he was.

A few days later, I called Shahid, a doctor friend at Srinagar's premier medical institute, Sher-e-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences, and talked to him about Ansar. 'We have had hundreds of cases here. Those electric shocks led to impotence in many, and many lost their kidneys,' he said. Shahid, a short, jolly man, had grown up in a south Kashmir village. On weekends, he drove up to his ancestral village and spent his Sundays treating the villagers for a nominal fee. 'I am going home on Sunday. If you can come along, I will introduce you to someone with the same problem.' On Sunday morning, I set out with Shahid to his village to meet his cousin, Hussein, who after being tortured in detention thought he was impotent and refused to marry. 'The problem is that he is not ready to meet a doctor. He does not even talk to me,' Shahid told me as we drove from Srinagar towards the south Kashmir town of Bijbehara. We turned onto a dirt track near the town and for half an hour passed through clusters of mud and brick houses, groves of walnut and willow trees, and fields. Vapour rose from the frost-covered fields warmed by the bright morning sun. 'The sun is so rejuvenating,' Shahid said in his physician's manner.

A hand-painted Red Cross sign hanging from a roadside shack with his name misspelled announced Shahid's clinic. It was barely nine in the morning and a crowd of patients was already waiting for him. Hussein, his cousin, was there. Hussein had gentle eyes and a subdued manner. We sat on an empty shopfront in the sun. I offered him a cigarette, which he reluctantly accepted. Hussein seemed to have surrendered to fate. I struggled to find the right words. Sexuality is rarely discussed in our culture. Impotence was harder to talk about. I began telling him about Shafi, Ansar, Papa-2 and

the medical correction of torture-imposed disorders. He listened in silence, for the most part expressionless.

Finally, he began to talk about his experience. He was in the first year of college when the armed militancy began in 1990. He was the eldest son of a teacher and had four siblings. One day, he left home with a group of thirteen other young men. After spending three days in Baramulla, they boarded a truck and drove towards the town of Kupwara near the LoC. Halfway from Kupwara, a patrol of the BSF stopped them. Their guide sat with the driver in the front seat; Hussein and his friends sat on the bare floor on the back. They had agreed to pose as construction labourers if the troops stopped them. But they were arrested and taken to a nearby paramilitary camp.

In the morning, Hussein and his group mates were taken into tiny tin sheds lit by bright electric lamps for interrogation. 'I was asked to undress, be naked. The first time I resisted, I was beaten, undressed forcibly and tied to a chair. Then they tied copper wire to my arms and gave me electric shocks. I could not even scream. They had stuffed my mouth with a ball of cloth. I thought I would die. They would suddenly stop, take the cloth out and ask questions. I fainted a few times. They brought me back to my senses and inserted a copper wire into my penis. Then they switched on the electricity.' Most of them broke after two days of torture. 'You cannot bear pain beyond a point. Everybody talks,' Hussein said. 'We admitted we were going for arms training and were shifted to jails in Srinagar after two weeks.' He added as an afterthought, 'Maybe I should have admitted straightaway. Life might have been different.'

I closed my eyes for a moment, and then looked away, onto the road and the patients waiting for their turn at Shahid's clinic. An old man walked up to us and asked me whether I was a doctor. 'No, sir. I am only the doctor's friend.' The old man told me about his high blood pressure problem because

of 'the situation' and left. Hussein and I walked down the road leading out of the village through the fields. There was no traffic. Hussein walked slowly, lost in thought. We sat on a parapet by the road. Hussein lit his cigarette and resumed the story. 'I can't tell you about the pain one feels when they give the electric shocks. I thought I would die. At times I think every shock lasted a minute or two, at times it seemed an hour,' he said.

After his interrogators threw him back in his cell, Hussein kept losing consciousness. 'At least during the blackouts, I felt no pain.' He was bleeding when he urinated, his penis had swollen and pain crawled up it like a leech. When he was moved to the detention centre at Srinagar, an infection had set in and he saw pus and blood in his urine. There was no medical aid for weeks. 'Then a Sikh paramilitary officer asked me about my condition. I told him what had happened. He was an angel; he got me some medicine, cotton and Dettol antiseptic lotion. That helped a lot.' It made me think of what Ansar and Shafi told me about different interrogators: 'Some were sadists and some were decent men.' They had both remembered the first names of the 'good' and 'bad' interrogators, names like Ravi, Nishant, Anand, names like my friends in Delhi had. Hussein was silent again. I asked him whether he knew the Sikh officer's name or had been able to maintain contact. 'Unfortunately, I do not know his name. I did not see him after a few weeks. I think he was transferred.'

Hussein was released from jail after two years. A year later, he began running a small business and started dealing in carpets and shawls. His family insisted he marry; he refused. He thought he was impotent. One day, he decided to tell his family. He had not spoken about it to anyone. That night he did not sleep till he heard the morning call to prayer. 'I went to the mosque, prayed, and broke down while asking God

for help. Only He knew what I had been through.' Walking back home from the mosque, he felt stronger and decided to talk to his brother-in-law, a schoolteacher. His brother-in-law advised that they should meet a doctor. 'For a year, I went to various doctors at Anantnag district hospital; they wrote a long list of medicines but it did not help much.' Shahid wanted to take him to the Medical Institute at Srinagar. Hussein was not comfortable talking to Shahid. He refused to meet any more doctors, spent his days running a small grocery and praying at the village mosque.

His family gave up till another crisis arrived—his younger brothers were getting married. In families like Hussein's, a younger brother does not marry before the elder one. Hussein's father, brother-in-law and uncles tried to convince him again. The village was talking about it: 'Why isn't their elder son getting married when the younger ones are? Is something wrong with him? They say something happened to him in the jail?' He insisted his younger siblings go ahead with their lives. They did. Hussein plays with their kids now. 'It is hard at times. But I simply do not think of a life with someone.' Hussein's voice could not hide his longing.

We walked back to the clinic. I turned to him and said, 'Hussein, you will be alright. Your condition is curable.' I told Hussein about Ansar's marriage and his three year old daughter; I told him about the corrective urological surgeries I had read about, about the drugs, about psychiatric counselling, about him being a brave man, about faith, about Prophet Mohammed saying that hopelessness is a sin. We reached the clinic and entered Shahid's mud-walled, bare-floored clinic. We waited till the patient he was examining left. I turned to Hussein, urging him to talk to his doctor cousin. 'You will be alright, Hussein. Talk to him. He can help you.' He looked into my eyes and smiled, 'I will. Thanks.' We shook hands and I walked out of the clinic.

Chapter Eleven

Winter was setting in. The last leaf had fallen from the mulberry tree outside my window and the clouds were a dull, wintry grey. Srinagar seemed to have shrunk, turned more introspective, like a middle-aged man noticing yet another shock of grey hair in the morning mirror. The desolation outside reflected the desolation inside. I spent my afternoons reading and tried to write in the evenings. But I had no distance from the experiences I was trying to process and shape in words. I sulked, turned irritable, and had pointless arguments with friends. I called Shahid. We met in our favourite café near the city centre. 'This is common among people who come into contact with trauma victims,' Shahid said and suggested I should try not to write for a few weeks. 'That won't help. I have to finally get back to writing it down.'

'Then remember that people like you and me are a privileged minority in Kashmir. Our backgrounds have shielded us from a lot. We have been able to get an education and build a career. We can get out of here whenever we want to.' He paused and said, 'Didn't you leave?' Shahid had never left Kashmir. He had studied at the medical college in Srinagar. His remark felt like an allegation. 'I came back, Shahid. I did not forget anything when I was away. I came back to write about Kashmir,' I shouted. 'Then face it! Don't run away every time you hear stories that depress you,' he retorted. We smoked our cigarettes and drank our coffee without any words. After a few minutes, he stubbed his cigarette and said, 'I am sorry. I know it is hard. I couldn't even get Hussein to speak to me about his problems. I am the doctor here. But I was talking as a friend.'

We ordered more coffee and Shahid continued to talk. 'It happens to everyone who has strong attachments to this place. When I was posted in the emergency ward, they used to bring scores of injured every day. At times, we were able to save them. At times, they died on the operation table. I used to cry in my room after every such death. It affected my work. I wanted to be transferred and talked to a senior doctor about it. He told me that we must know that we can't save everyone and yet we must try to be better doctors.' Shahid had faced his fear and continued to work in the emergency ward. I had to confront my own ghosts.

I walked back home thinking once again about people I had failed to write about, places I postponed visiting because I feared it would be painful. My first thought was about Mubeena Ghani. In May 1990, a few hours after her marriage, she had been raped by a group of Indian paramilitary soldiers. I had heard about her while I was in school. Later, in college I read short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto, the greatest chronicler of violence in the subcontinent. Manto wrote a series of very powerful sketches about the sectarian violence that followed the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. In a story 'Khol do' (Open up) he talks about a father finding his daughter in a hospital ward a few days after she goes missing during the sectarian violence. The doctor in the ward asks the father to open a window for his daughter. When she hears the doctor's phrase, 'khol do', the daughter drops her pants. She has been repeatedly raped and associates the phrase 'khol do' (open up) with the rapist's command to undress. Manto's short story brought back memories of Kashmir.

In the spring of 2002, I travelled to Kashmir on a reporting trip from Delhi. One day, after I had filed my news reports, I went in search of Mubeena. I found out that she and her husband Rashid Sheikh lived in the village of Chawalgam,

an hour away from my village. The next morning I took a taxi to Chawalgam. We left Anantnag, drove further south through scores of villages, sought directions a few times, and, an hour later, reached the village. In the village market, shops hung placards advertising Coke and Parle biscuits. A shopkeeper directed me up a narrow alley, which ended with a bakery. The baker was kneading dough in a wide wooden tub. 'Where does Rashid Malik live?' I asked.

The baker stopped and without taking his hands off the dough said, 'Do you mean the one whose bride was raped? Are you from the press?' He pointed to a hut-like house of unbaked bricks and wood. Rusted barbed wire nailed to poles of willow branches formed its boundary. Polythene sheets took the place of window glass and haystacks placed on rough timber lofts formed the roof. A brown cow was tied in the courtyard corner and a child played with twigs on the stairs. I stood outside the house; the child continued playing with the twigs. I felt like an eavesdropper and wondered whether I should return and leave them undisturbed. I was debating the thought when a haggard-looking man appeared.

Shadows circled his sunken eyes, stubble with dashes of white covered his sallow cheeks, and his shirt hung loose on his bony shoulders. 'I am Rashid. The shopkeepers told me a journalist was looking for me. Please come home.' He led me to his house. The mud walls of the house were cracked and the bare bricks exposed. A patchwork blanket covered the floor in the drawing room which had no furniture. His son, the child playing with the twigs, left to call Mubeena from the fields where she was working. I talked to Rashid till Mubeena came. Her pale skin seemed to hang lifelessly on her oval face; the skin on her hands was cracked, her brown eyes were reluctant and apprehensive. She wore a battered pheran and brought tea and biscuits for me. Rashid was apologetic for not being able to offer me anything better.

Mubeena poured tea for me in a cracked porcelain cup and they told me their story.

On the evening of May 16, 1990, Rashid Malik had a haircut and dressed in a white suit and an embroidered turban. The village girls sang marriage songs. In their songs, the groom was a prince and his bride a princess prettier than the moon. His family hired a photographer to take pictures of the marriage ceremony. One of those pictures shows Rashid leaving for his bride's house. His dark brown eyes gleam in his ruddy face. His wide shoulders and muscular chest fill the jacket. A row of sparkling teeth shines beneath his thick black moustache. Another picture shows him sitting on the front seat of the bus hired to take him, his friends and relatives to the bride's, Mubeena's, house in Hiller village, five miles away. The bus left at nine in the evening. Half an hour later, Rashid sat on a velvet-covered seat in his bride's house. A mullah arrived and the nikah was performed. Three times the mullah asked Rashid if he was willing to marry Mubeena of his free will. Three times he asked Mubeena if she was willing to marry Rashid of her free will. Both agreed and became husband and wife. The families celebrated and the feast was served. An hour later, Rashid prepared to leave with his bride. More songs were sung. Then, suddenly, they heard gunfire.

Rashid's in-laws believed it was militants firing in the air. Those days, militants would order people not to sing marriage songs or have lavish feasts as it was a 'time of sacrifice' Rashid and his relatives insisted on leaving. The bride's family was worried and asked them to stay put. They argued about the wisdom of travelling five miles at that time of night. The groom's side prevailed, boarded the bus and left with the bride. Rashid's elder brother, who works for the Indian Railway Police Force, sat next to him, carefully holding a piece of paper: a travel permission slip acquired from an army colonel posted nearby. Those were the days of

night curfews in Kashmir. Every man moving around after dusk needed a curfew pass. In the morning, Rashid and his family had debated the timing of departure for the bride's house. He was apprehensive of leaving after dusk. 'These are dangerous times,' he told his family. But his father and other relatives reminded him of the tradition: the marriage procession left only after dusk and it had been that way for centuries. After all, they had permission from the army. Rashid gave in. The bus moved slowly on the dirt track that led to the groom's village.

Two kilometres on, Rashid, who sat on the front seat next to the driver, saw a CRPF vehicle. The bus stopped and his brother showed the CRPF men the permission slip. They let them go and the marriage party proceeded. A few miles ahead, at a crossing in Hakoorah village, Rashid and his companions saw soldiers from another paramilitary force, the BSF. The bus stopped again. The BSF personnel ran towards it. A BSF man shouted at the driver to switch off the bus headlights. Darkness fell on the road and a few miniature decorative bulbs that glowed in their green plastic covers lighted the bus.

Rashid, his companions and his bride shivered in their seats. He did not know that the BSF men had an hour ago come across a patrol party of the CRPF. Both sets of paramilitary had mistaken each other for militants and exchanged fire. His brother rose from his seat, permission slip in one hand, and opened the door with his other hand. He moved towards a BSF officer to show him the piece of paper. The BSF men did not even look at the slip. Rashid saw two of them grab his brother by the neck and drag him to the roadside, where they began beating him. He wanted to protest or beg for mercy but his feet failed him. He saw the BSF men circle the bus; he looked over his shoulder at his bride. She huddled in her seat with the bridesmaid; he wanted to rush to her. But then there was gunfire.

The BSF men poured bullets into the bus. Rashid threw off his turban and ducked under his seat like all the others. The next moment he felt something grazing his shoulder and a cry rose from the next seat. The bullet grazing his shoulder had hit his cousin, Sabzaar, in the arm. Another volley of bullets pierced the tin body of the bus and his cousin Asadullah's chest, leaving him dead. Rashid was yet to realise what had happened to his cousin, when he was hit in the back; doctors later found five bullets there. Three bullets hit Mubeena in her shoulder, back, and hips. No more bullets were fired at the bus after fifteen minutes. The BSF officer ordered the passengers to get out of the bus; a round of mass beating followed. Rashid fell on the road and lost consciousness. Mubeena stood along with her bridesmaid and others by the roadside. She was bleeding, when a group of soldiers dragged her and the chambermaid to the mustard fields beside the road. An unknown number of BSF men raped the two injured women. 'I could not even remember how many they were. I had lost my senses,' Mubeena said.

Another group of BSF personnel led by a senior officer reached the place then. They took the injured men and women to a hospital in Anantnag. The next morning the state government officials reached the hospital and noted the statements of Rashid, Mubeena and the other injured. The district administration head awarded them relief from the state exchequer: Rs 3000 each. They refused. Separatist leaders visited them in the hospital and later in their village, where they addressed the villagers and urged them to stand by the couple. Rashid was shifted to a better hospital in Srinagar, five bullets still in his back.

The doctors gave him a choice: live with the bullets in your body or risk a surgery that can take your mobility. He decided against the surgery, and returned home, determined to begin

his life anew. A hostile silence greeted Rashid and Mubeena on their return. For Rashid's family and the villagers, Mubeena was a bad omen: the cause of a misfortune, which took one life and injured ten. Her in-laws rejected her. But Mubeena's parents and some friends stood by the couple. Rashid could not work for a year; the couple lived on help provided by Mubeena's parents. He wanted to sell his share in the family property. His family denied him even that.

A year later, Mubeena gave birth to a son; the child died in a few weeks. She was suicidal. Rashid begged her to live, to be stronger. Leaving his trauma behind, he took up work as a carpenter, when there was work. On other days, Rashid was a manual labourer, carrying bricks, ploughing fields, harvesting crops. Working. Mubeena pitched in; she stitched, tailored, worked on the village farms as help, braving taunts thrown by her in-laws, neighbours, and village folk. At the village tap, waiting in the queue for water, she lowered her head. On the streets of the village, she moved like smoke, trying to be invisible. The smallest altercation would become a reminder of her trauma. 'Aren't you the bride who was raped? Aren't you the one who brought ill-luck?' The village had nicknames for them. 'They call us "Crossfire Bride" and "Crossfire Groom",' Mubeena told me.

An enquiry was ordered; some paramilitary soldiers were suspended. New personnel took their place: soldiers who did not recognise Rashid and Mubeena. But she still shivers at the sight of a uniform. That night lingers around her like a ghost, refusing to be exorcised.

Mubeena poured tea for me and wiped her tears with her scarf. Rashid was silent. I stared at a faded design of flowers on the patchwork blanket we sat on. Their daughter came in and relieved us of that difficult silence. She wore a white and blue uniform and carried a satchel. She rushed to Mubeena and sat on her lap. The girl was a fourth grader at

a local school. She showed me her notebooks. In her English notebook, she had written about her aim in life: she wanted to be a doctor. Rashid and Mubeena smiled and looked at her with pride. I looked out of the window; a wind rustled the willows behind the house, the polythene sheet nailed to the bare window panels flapped. Rashid and Mubeena walked me to the door. Rashid held his daughter's hand and their son clung to Mubeena. They waved and smiled.

Some time after meeting them, I came across a poem by a Kashmiri poet, Farooq Nazaki:

> Mothers wash the bloodstained apparel of grooms
> On stream banks,
> Bridal wear burns to ash,
> Bridesmaids cry
> And the Jhelum flows.

But I failed to get myself to write about Mubeena and Rashid. I had failed also to visit the village of Kunanposhpora, the village in the northern Kupwara district where the Indian army raped more than twenty women in 1990. It had become a symbol, a metaphor, a memory like Srebrenica. In early December, I travelled to Kupwara, three hours from Srinagar. I planned to finally visit Kunanposhpora.

Majestic mountains and miles of lush, green paddy fields surround the town of Kupwara. Its beautiful surroundings heighten the squalor of the town. The shared taxi I boarded in Srinagar stopped in a vast, unpaved bus yard that mark the beginnings of the town. Two rows of concrete, cramped and ugly blocks of shops form the main market. Eateries displaying potato wafer packets and bottles of Pepsi stand next to motor mechanic shops smelling of petrol. I saw an army checkpost and the barrel of a machine gun poking out

of it. A signboard hanging on the checkpost read: Town Commander Kupwara. The military presence around the town justified the title.

Then, I heard a boy, in clothes blackened with grease, shout, 'Kunanposhpora' A green and yellow painted bus revved up its engine. Kunanposhpora was twenty minutes and four rupees away. An old man with a scraggy beard, wearing a peasant's embroidered cap, tied two long iron rods to the roof of the bus. Three women sat on the seat behind the driver. A plump girl in a yellow dress with green bangles on her wrists jumped restlessly in the aisle, chewed gum and blew bubbles. The bus conductor shouted 'Kunanposhpora' The driver revved up the engine again. A couple continued their whispers. Two schoolboys in white shirts and black trousers jumped onto the bus. The bus began to leave. I watched it go and thought of Rashid, Mubeena and their daughter who wanted to be a doctor.

I sat in a run-down teashop, smoking, thinking. But I couldn't be alone for too long. Shabir, an effeminate young man, introduced himself as a poet, and asked me what I was doing in Kupwara. I told him I'd found escape in journalism. 'I thought so. I could tell from your bag, your notebooks. Most journalists dress like you do,' said Shabir. He loved watching the news and had ideas for me. 'I can take you to some places you might like to write about,' he said. 'Where?' 'The first news I can give you is about a graveyard here. Most people buried there are the boys who were killed in encounters with the army on the border,' he said. The LoC ran through many mountains towering over the villages bordering Kupwara town. Shabir told me that after every encounter, the bodies of the youth trying to cross over to Pakistan for arms training or returning from there were handed over by the Indian army to the local police and then buried in the graveyard to which he was referring. 'Because nobody knows the names of the

dead, the locals who manage the graveyard have marked them with numbers. Every tombstone gives the date of death and marks the grave as No 21, No 23,' he explained. 'What was the latest number you saw there?' I asked him. 'I think it was 200 and something.' 'I will go there soon,' I thanked Shabir. I was tired and boarded a taxi headed for Srinagar. I wanted to be home.

Chapter Twelve

Mubeena and Rashid had lived through brutality and ostracism, yet they had made a home, were bringing up their children, and dreaming of seeing their daughter as a doctor some day. Parveena had moved on from being an anonymous housewife to a celebrated crusader for justice. And tortured, broken men like Ansar had built new lives. Hussein had begun the process of discussing his problems with his doctor cousin Shahid, and I had finally been able to write about people, places, and subjects I had run away from. In those tales, shadowed by death and loss, there were also feats of resilience and fortitude. Despite everything, people survived. Yet how many could really move on?

It was early February. Winter was refusing to wear out, the mountains were still frozen ash. My shoulders no longer felt the weight of multiple layers of sweaters and a thick woollen pheran. The beige weed frames of the kangris we carried all winter, even to our beds (having learned the art of sneaking a kangri under the quilt, positioning it a few inches from the stomach and not letting it fall throughout the night), had turned a dark brown from long hours of intimacy with our hands. The soles of my shoes had taken the colour of mud despite the daily violence of a shoe brush. And morning breath still imitated my cigarettes. Father wore his black Jinnah cap and brown overcoat to work; mother was mostly home, her school closed for a two and half month long winter break. She suggested that we visit a cousin of my father who was back from his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Most Kashmiri Muslims look forward to the pilgrimage to Mecca for years. People go to work, build houses, educate their children, marry them off and when their 'worldly'

duties are taken care of, they take their savings, walk to the government office that issues Hajj forms and buy the tickets for Mecca. Travelling to Mecca is the only travelling most Kashmiri Muslims do. The pilgrimage is mandatory for every Muslim when he or she can afford to make it. My uncle too was done with his 'worldly duties' when he and his wife left for Mecca. Now they were back and their journey accorded them a new status: Hajjis. Kashmiri tradition requires that friends and relatives pay a visit to newly returned Hajjis. The conflict, however, had limited mobility and extended families met only on unavoidable social occasions like engagements, weddings, hospital visits, or funerals. 'Your father can't come, so you have to,' my mother said. I couldn't refuse.

Father had visited my uncle and his family regularly before, despite the strong presence of Indian troops and militants around my uncle's village. But he had stopped after the landmine attack. My parents still live with fear. Some time ago, we were in his car when the driver drove over an empty tetra packet of a mango drink lying on the road. As children we had jumped over those empty packets to make them burst like crackers. This packet burst as well, as the car drove over it. My father ducked under the seat, his hand covering his head. 'Daddy, it's a Frooti pack,' I said slowly. He eased back in his seat and was silent. 'You know after that mine blast...' He was right. I remember during my early days outside Kashmir, my Kashmiri friends and I would jump and run if an auto-rickshaw or car burst a tyre. I still do.

I had seen my father's helplessness another day when we heard news of the death of an old aunt of his. She too lived in a village close to my uncle's and father had not been able to visit her during the last phase of her illness. 'She was very kind to me when I was a child. She always took care of me, more than any relative I had,' father told me. 'But I couldn't even visit her when she was dying.'

Mother and I boarded a local bus to visit my uncle's village. I was excited to meet many of my relatives whom I hadn't seen for years. The bus left our village, ambled along the slope of our mountains, and a mile ahead stopped for an identity check at one of the two military camps bordering our village. Two very young soldiers in flak jackets stood at the checkpoint, daintily dangling their Kalashnikovs. They asked us to walk. We walked. A hundred metres and a soldier shouted, 'Stop.' We stopped. Nobody was frisked. No bags were searched. We boarded the bus and moved towards the village. I wondered at the absurdity of these instructions. They served no purpose, even looking at things from a soldier's perspective. It felt like a video game. The soldier moves his finger; buses stop, people form queues, walk, stop, board and leave. Another vehicle reaches the checkpoint and the game repeats itself at every checkpoint across Kashmir.

The absurd exercise reminded me of 'The New Disease', a short story by Kashmiri writer Akhter Mohiuddin, who died in 2001. His son-in-law was killed in a militant attack on a bank in a hospital complex where he worked, and then his younger son, returning home from work, was killed in retaliatory firing by the military after it came under militant attack. In protest against military and police excesses, Akhter had returned the Padma Shri, one of the highest civilian awards, which the Indian government had given him for his service to literature. He wrote like Babel, had similar intimacy with war, power, and fear, and dedicated his last book to 'young men who were murdered at unknown places' Like Babel was.

In 'The New Disease', a man waits for a long time, as if in a queue, before entering his own house. And then turns away and leaves in another direction. His family takes him to a doctor. The doctor says, 'Ever since frisking has been introduced, a new disease has come up. Some people need to be frisked every time they see a gate; others frisk

themselves.' He prescribes a 'body search' every time he reaches a gate. The family follows the prescription and the man's condition improves.

An elderly man in a blue suit sitting in front of me, turned around and said, 'What was the point of that? They just want to assert their presence, tell us they rule this place.' The bus moved towards my uncle's village. There were no more checkposts on the way but the dreaded memory of the landmine attack on my parents was returning. We were travelling on the same road where my parents were almost killed. I could see mother turning stiff. We remained silent and kept looking out of the bus window. A few minutes later, we reached the exact place where the landmine had gone off. The bus crossed the water pipe laid in the road in which the mine had been planted. Ordinary Kashmiri brick houses flanked the road and groups of villagers sat lazily outside their homes, staring artlessly at the passengers in the bus. I saw those people but mother seemed to see the man she had seen pressing the remote control of the landmine three years before. She pointed towards a group of villagers and said, 'That was where they [militants] sat with the remote control.' I bit my lips. We ended the rest of our journey in silence.

Muddy lanes run between mud and brick houses circled by leafless walnut trees in the village of Panzmulla, where Rahman uncle lives. On the way to his house, we exchanged greetings with acquaintances and relatives returning from the customary visit. A tall, tanned man, he sat on a carpet, surrounded by men and women listening to his stories of Mecca. Young girls and boys served kahwa in tin-plated samovars. The visitors sipped the kahwa and heard the tales of faith. Uncle would have been offended, ordinarily, if my father hadn't visited him after his return from the pilgrimage. Instead, the moment my mother and I had walked into his house, he had hugged

me and said, 'How unfortunate are these times that Ghulam Ahmad can't even come to see me today!'

Groups of visitors arrived and uncle rose from his seat to greet each one. Every visitor was offered a glass of Aab-e-Zam Zam, water from Mecca's spring of Zam Zam, believed to have healing powers. They all asked the same questions about his experiences in Mecca. Yes, the traffic moves on the right side of the road there; yes, there are people of every colour and country, wearing the same white, cotton robes. Yes, the shops are very big and full of all kinds of expensive things. Yes, you are mesmerised when you first see the Qaaba. Uncle seemed to be getting tired of repeating himself. The muezzin's call for prayer rescued him and he left for the mosque. Mother joined a group of relatives and was soon engrossed in conversation. She was talking spiritedly and laughing at jokes. I watched her from a distance and was glad to see her happy.

Soon after the attack on my parents, I had found a statute book containing the rules for compensation lying on my father's bookshelf.

> In the exercise of the powers conferred by section 124 of the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir, the Governor, [the Indian government representative ruling Kashmir at the moment since between 1990 and 1996 Kashmir had no elected government and was ruled directly by New Delhi] is pleased to make the rules, namely, the Jammu and Kashmir (Compassionate Appointment) Rules, 1994. These rules shall apply to the compassionate appointments of a person who is a family member of:
>
> *1) A government employee who dies in harness other than due to militancy related action.*

2) A government employee who dies as a result of militancy related action (or due to enemy action on the Line of Actual Control/ International Border within the state of Jammu and Kashmir) and is not involved in militancy related activities.
3) A civilian who dies as a result of militancy related action (or due to enemy action on the Line of Actual Control/ International Border within the state of Jammu and Kashmir) not involved in militancy related activities and total income from all sources does not exceed Rs 3500/- per month as assessed by the Revenue Officer not below the rank of an Assistant Commissioner.

I obsessed about the attack on my parents in the months following it. What could have happened if the militants had blocked both ends of the pipe? What would have happened if my parents had died in that mine blast? At night, I would fantasise about avenging them and the instigators. Then I would return to the real world and think of my old grandparents, my aunts, my cousins, who still lived in and near my village. I thought of the shelves full of my father's books and my own writerly aspirations. Most families accepted the killings of their kin with frustrated resignation and struggled to continue with their lives. Under the Kashmir government rules, a family member of any innocent person killed in the conflict in Kashmir was given a low-level government job and the family paid 100,000 rupees as compensation. In the early years of the conflict, most people refused to accept such compensation deeming it unethical. But life is harsher and more complex than ideas of resistance. With time, people opened old files and began thinking of making their lives a little easier even if that had to be done by accepting the official price of life. Maybe I would have applied for the monetary compensation and the job. I had seen that happen before in my own extended family while I was still at college.

One afternoon, while I sat in our kitchen and talked to my mother, there was a knock on the door. Bashir, her cousin who lived in a village an hour away, stood at the entrance. He looked distraught and held the door for support. Between sobs, he said slowly, 'They killed Gulzar. The army killed him last night, blew him up with a mine.' We stepped back in shock. Gulzar was a cousin to both my mother and Bashir. Two of my cousins, an aunt, and my grandparents rushed into the kitchen. Grandfather held Bashir in his arms and stoically said the prayers Muslims say when someone dies: Ina Lilahi Wa Ina Ilahi Rajioon (Whatever comes from God, returns to Him). His wrinkled face hardened with pain, tears filled his blue eyes.

An image of Gulzar flashed in front of my eyes: a frail boy of fifteen years standing in the courtyard of his house, the beginnings of a moustache turning his upper lip a shade darker than his pink face. His hair was short and spiky and he held a cricket bat. Half an hour later, my family left for his funeral in his village. Somebody had to remain at home for it was—and is—unsafe to leave your house unattended. I would be depressed for days after a funeral, so I volunteered to stay back home.

Gulzar's village had grown distant because it was located close to a massive army camp and the area was more volatile than our own. As I thought of my family going there for the funeral, I could not help thinking of the endless frisking and identification parades they would have to go through while crossing the camp. I was thankful they had a car. Visiting the place in a local bus was a nightmare. A mini stampede would follow after you crossed the checkposts. People would run towards the bus in frenzy, pushing, elbowing each other in a bid to grab a seat in the eternally overcrowded vehicle.

The next morning my family returned tired, worn out, and grieving. Gulzar had been a class twelve student at the local

high school. The new academic session had just begun and the senior students were expected to 'rag' the newcomers. One day, Gulzar and his friends 'ragged' a newcomer by forcing him to walk up to a girl and propose to her. The newcomer, a shy boy, reluctantly walked up to the girl and did what he had been told to do. The girl retorted sarcastically and humiliated him. The boy left the school at the end of the day and went home to his parents. He turned out to be the son of an army officer. Gulzar came back home that afternoon like every other day and forgot about teasing the army officer's son.

The following evening, an army patrol surrounded his house. They asked for him, searched the house, and found nothing. Then they took him to the cowshed whose first floor was used to store firewood and the ploughs, shovels and sickles that the family used in their fields. Ten minutes later, his parents and brothers heard a blast. The cowshed fell apart. The soldiers had detonated a mine, which killed Gulzar. They claimed he was a militant and had mistakenly blasted the mine after identifying it. His death changed our relationship with Gulzar's family. My parents, grandparents, aunts and cousins visited them every other day. Mother took his younger sister under her wing, enrolled her into a school near our home. She stayed with our family till she graduated recently from the local women's college.

After Gulzar's death, nobody talked about getting justice, fighting in a court to get punishment for soldiers who killed Gulzar. Those things happen elsewhere, in countries where the law is implemented; in Kashmir, you try to save the living from further trouble. The extended family talked instead about getting compensation for Gulzar's family and getting his unemployed elder brother Ayub a job. For months, we could not get a certificate from the army attesting that Gulzar was not a militant. We petitioned India's National Human Rights Commission and after some time, the No Objection Certificate

was received. The fact that our family had connections in the local government expedited the process. Ayub got a job in the Rural Development Department and was married a year later. Daily life went on. Gulzar is rarely mentioned at home in conversation. But he remains an invisible presence.

The schools opened after the winter break. March mornings were marked by the shouts of children marching past our house. The soldiers at our neighbourhood bunkers seemed to smile a little. The newspapers would soon carry the standard annual story about snow melting on the LoC and the increase in militants trying to cross over from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir to Indian-controlled Kashmir.

The dreaded neighbourhood barber, who took two hours to cut my hair while he smoked and gossiped, stood outside Bombay Hair Dresser, stretching his arms. He had a lush, visual imagination. After a mine blast earlier in the winter, targeted at the armoured cars near his shop, he grabbed my arm, 'The glass panes shattered and it was very, very loud. I thought I was dead. Then, in a fleeting moment, I saw the angel of death, holding a notebook. It had names of the dead in it. My name wasn't there! Then, I lit a cigarette. I knew I would be fine.' I shook my head and praised God and Prophet Mohammed. Then, after a while, I asked him. 'Was the death register in English or Urdu?' 'Urdu, of course! You know I can't read English.' I had stepped out to buy coffee from the grocer next to his shop and caught his eye. 'Your hair is all haywire,' he shouted. 'Tomorrow! You better have some good stories to tell,' I shouted back.

Stories! There are no good stories in Kashmir. There are only difficult, ambiguous, and unresolved stories. I often heard stories about what happened to families whose kin died in the conflict and who did not have the relative financial comfort and connections that made moving on easier for people like Gulzar's family. I had heard many stories about

families seeking compensation for their dead children, visiting government offices for months, and being entangled for years in the red tape delaying the compensation. One of those stories was about Shameema, a woman in a village not very far from my own. 'You must meet her,' said the friend who told me about her.

Shameema lived in the village of Larkipora, around thirty kilometres south of my village. Larkipora was a huddle of houses and serene fields, its tragedies hidden from the casual visitor. I walked up a lane that led to a gate of corrugated iron sheets nailed over rough timber. Beyond the gate, a thin, sharp-nosed woman in a faded orange pheran sat on the cobbled verandah of her house. She was bent over a wicker basket full of haakh, local a spinach-like, leafy vegetable. A child sitting next to her pulled at her sleeve and pointed in my direction. She kept the vegetable basket aside and rose from her seat. She looked at me for a long time before saying, 'Sit here, son. I am Shameema.'

I sat on the cobblestone verandah facing her. A thirteen year old boy sat in the other corner of the rectangular veranda, next to a hookah lying beside the younger boy. Shameema's sister-in-law joined us. The women sat behind baskets full of vegetables. Shameema held a long leaf of haakh, tore a portion and said, 'It was May 11, 2001.' I was struck how most people remembered the exact dates of the most horrifying events in their lives. I also remembered the date my parents survived the mine blast—May 14, 2001, three days later. 'I had cooked tomatoes and rice and was waiting for Shafi for lunch.'

Shafi, her seventeen year old son, was a class ten student at the government school at Qabamarg, a nearby village famous for a Sufi saint's shrine. 'Yes, the school is exactly near the shrine,' she replied, when I mentioned the shrine. Her other son, Bilal, was in class nine and her husband, Majid,

worked as a farmer and sold cheap dry fruits at a bus stand in Anantnag. On the morning of May 11, 2001 Shafi went for lessons in physics and chemistry to two different teachers in two neighbouring villages despite his father wanting help at his Anantnag stall. He returned around noon. 'I asked him to have lunch. He asked me to wait till he had brought firewood from the nearby saw mill.' Twenty minutes later, Shafi was back with a cart full of firewood. Shameema pointed at a patch of ground near the stairs where a child stood eating a banana and said, 'That was where he kept the firewood,' she sighed. 'Then he left for the mosque for the Friday prayers.'

'I met him near the roadside mosque,' a male voice said. I had failed to notice a young man in a brown shirt and loose jeans sitting on the edge of the verandah. He turned out to be Shafi's friend Mushtaq. 'We were five of us, including his brother Bilal, when Shafi joined us. We did not pray, we sat under a chinar tree by the road and talked.' A gunfight had started between the militants and the Indian army at Qabamarg village, near Shafi's school. 'We talked about the encounter and thought the school could be burnt. Then we saw some army trucks come from far off in the distance.' The boys left and walked quickly into the lane leading towards their houses. They took the lane, with an open sewer half-blocked with bricks, that I had taken to visit Shameema's house. The army trucks stopped and went after the boys. Mushtaq and another boy ran fastest and escaped. The four other boys were caught and taken away. Villagers saw the army men throw the boys into the trucks and head back towards Qabamarg, where the fighting was happening.

Shameema had been sitting on the same veranda, again cleaning some vegetables for dinner. Her neighbours came running and told her the army had taken Shafi and Bilal. In a matter of minutes, the mothers and sisters of the boys gathered near her house. They began running towards

Qabamarg along a track that connected the two villages through mustard fields. Soldiers circled the fields outside the village. They tried stopping the women; the women pushed and shouted back. Shameema raised her head now and looked at the distant sky and said, 'God gave me courage that day. I fought with every soldier who tried to stop me. Normally, you are scared of soldiers, but I did not stop that day till I reached the house where the encounter was going on.' She had seen soldiers and ikhwanis (renegade militants working for the Indian forces) all around. They were firing at a single storey house. In the courtyard of the building next to it, she saw the arrested boys. 'I saw Bilal from a distance but Shafi was missing,' she said, pausing for a few seconds. She sighed, asked her younger son to bring her some water. He ran inside and came out in a moment with a copper tumbler full of water. Shameema drank, put down the tumbler, and pushed the vegetable basket away as if she was preparing for a battle. 'I ran towards Bilal, grabbed him by an arm and began walking away with him.' Bilal hugged her and said that the soldiers had sent Shafi inside the militants' house with a mine in his hands.

A soldier hit Shameema on her arm with the butt of his gun and pulled Bilal towards him. She shouted at the soldier and grabbed Bilal's hand. He said, 'Let me go, mother. They must have already killed Shafi, let me die too.' The soldier pulled harder and began walking away with Bilal. Shameema stood frozen, watching. The soldier thrust a mine in Bilal's hands and pushed him towards the house. The gunfire was still on. 'Something seized my heart as I saw Bilal's shivering hands holding the mine. His legs were giving way and he was falling to the ground.' Shameema took another gulp from the copper tumbler, wiped sweat from her forehead and said, 'I lunged ahead and threw myself on Bilal.' She took the mine from her son's hands and held him in her arms. Three

soldiers and an officer circled them, asking her to leave her son. She faced the officer, holding the tiffin-shaped mine, and told him to leave her son and let her take it into the house. 'I held onto the mine and asked the officer to blow me up.' He remained silent; she shouted again. 'Then he ordered the soldiers to let us go. I held Bilal. As we walked away I saw them push an old man towards the house with the mine in his hands.'

That night they did not sleep. She held Bilal in her arms and they cried for Shafi. Her husband, who had stayed in Anantnag after hearing about the encounter, reached home in the morning. Neighbours told him that his son had been killed. Three days after Shafi was buried, they held the final mourning ceremony. For three days, as was the custom, no food was cooked in their house; their neighbours cooked for them. On the fourth day, they cooked for their neighbours, and invited the village mullah to offer prayers for Shafi's salvation. 'We cooked the meal on the firewood Shafi had brought the last time he came home,' Shameema said, wiping her tears.

A wail rose from the other corner of the verandah. Her thirteen year old son was crying. She hugged and patted him and consoled him saying I was here to help with Bilal's job. Then she lit the hookah and gave it to him, as if it was a feeder. He puffed violently and stared at me. Shameema told me he was psychologically disturbed. He had been in the same school as Shafi and would run from his classroom to cry outside the house where Shafi was killed. His condition had worsened and he refused to go to school. Then, he began smoking. 'I took him to Aishmuqam to the shrine of Zain Shah Sahib. He has been better since I prayed there. But every time Shafi is mentioned, he is agitated. Which mother would pass a hookah to her son? But I have to, it calms him down.'

After the mourning period was over, Shameema and her family had begun to fight the wars of their daily life. Bilal

resumed school, she did the household chores, and Majid, her husband, took a bus every morning to sell sweets in the town. A month later, one of their educated neighbours told them about their right to be compensated monetarily as well as with a job. Majid and Bilal made the required applications, and ran between the police stations and the office of the district administrative head, the deputy commissioner, where the case for compensation is processed. Since June 2001, Bilal and Majid have become weekly presences at the deputy commissioner's office. The clerks processing the compassionate appointments cases have the standard answer: 'Come next week. Your turn has not come yet.' The next week they hear about a non-existent ban on such compensatory jobs. 'Last month, the clerk told Majid our serial number is 400; this week he said it is 600,' Shameema told me. 'Why don't you meet Majid? He will be on the pavement at the Achabal bus stand in Anantnag near a fruit shop. You can ask any shopkeeper there and they will tell you where he is. He knows more about the case.'

I promised to meet him and began to take my leave. She walked with me till we crossed the wood and tin gate opening onto the lane. She stopped and stared at me with blank, teary eyes. 'Throughout our conversation I have wanted to tell you something,' she said. I hoped there was not some other horror that had befallen her family. She held my hands and said, 'You don't know, son. But you look exactly like my Shafi. If he was alive today, you would pass off for twins.' I did not know how to respond. I dragged my feet through the lane till I reached the main road. On the other side of the road, I saw a tall chinar tree swaying its branches in the mild wind. Under its shade, Shafi had chatted with his friends for the last time.

I saw a bus approaching and waved it down. It passed along the shaded road and moved out of the village. I rested my head against the back seat and closed my eyes. Around an hour later, we reached the Anantnag bus yard, where

Majid sold sweets. Dust blew around, buses and cars honked. Hawkers shouted the prices of their wares, villagers carrying groceries in coloured polythene bags ran around looking for the buses leaving for their spacious, beautiful villages, and a group of bored-looking paramilitary men in bulletproof jackets stood on the pavements holding their assault rifles. A shopkeeper selling fruits from a shop jutting onto a pavement knew Majid. 'Where is his shop?' I asked. He smiled and pointed to a tiny corner of the pavement between his and the next shop. I saw a wicker basket full of seemnih, a pink, candy-like local sweet I loved as a child, raised on a pile of bricks. The grey-haired man with sunken cheeks, wearing a beige pheran, was almost invisible behind it. I walked up to him and said, 'Are you Majid?' He rose from the jute mat he sat on and said, 'How many grams, sir?'

I could not muster the courage to disturb his world again. I walked towards the deputy commissioner's office to meet a man who once had the charge of 'cases' relating to compensation death. A short walk took me to the gates of the office complex, in the area named Lal Chowk, in an unimaginative imitation of the eponymous Srinagar city centre. This was the heart of Anantnag town—a jumble of houses and shops thrown together, open sewers full of filth, noisy hawkers, honking buses, and whistling policemen. It was somewhat like the sad, small towns of northern India. Past the checkposts and metal detectors, the office complex was a set of barrack-like buildings, with windows painted in a dull blue that was used only in government buildings. It was the local seat of power, the administrative unit inherited from the colonial civil service. Groups of impatient supplicants, small time lawyers, village politicians and elders hovering around for audiences and favours, and the carnivorous foot soldiers of bureaucracy searching for prey to bolster their meagre official salaries spilled over

the lawns. The hurried, hectic sound of hustle and barter filled the place.

Inside, liveried peons shouted the names of supplicants who had been granted audiences with various officers. I walked through a dark corridor to meet the man who might know about Shameema's 'relief case' I had known him for many years. Piles of tattered cardboard cover files lay on his decrepit wooden table. Similar files covered with dust were stacked away on racks behind his chair. Four more people sat behind tables like his, covered with stacks of files, typing on antique Remington typewriters. He smiled as he saw me looking at the typewriters and files. He had seen me as a kid and was both amused and disappointed to see me not as a bureaucrat like my father but as a writer interested in 'random, unimportant people'

'What happens is that first they have to get a First Information Report lodged in a police station and get certificates from the police saying that the person killed was not a militant. So they pay anything from Rs 5000 to Rs 10,000 to the policemen who would not otherwise give the report. Then the cases come here to the relief section in the DC office. We have to make the file move.' He paused to smoke. 'The file does not move by itself from one table to another. Nor does the typist type an order for free. The senior officers are to be convinced and given their share too. All this takes time and money. Out of the relief money of one lakh, the applicant has to spend 25-30,000 rupees. Otherwise, he will waste years visiting offices. Once he pays that, we ensure that his name in the compensation job list goes up and things move fast.' He sounded like an automaton.

Chapter Thirteen

Shameema and Majid, who had lost a son, were wading through painfully slow bureaucratic procedures to find a job for their other son, and didn't have enough resources to pay the medical bills for the treatment of their younger son with psychological disorders. All they seemed to have was each other and faith. Hussein, my friend Shahid's cousin, who refused to marry after he was tortured, prayed regularly to find the strength to deal with his predicament. I had seen my own parents credit God for saving their lives and increase their prayers after they survived the mine blast. Even the doctors at the crowded psychiatric hospitals recommended a reliance on faith, my doctor friend Shahid told me. God and his saints seemed to have become the psychiatrists with the largest practice in Kashmir; faith was essentially a support system.

That was how it had been. In my childhood and adolescence, I had no self-consciousness about Islam—it was just there, a part of our life, like my village, my neighbourhood, my family and the books on my father's shelves. Our neighbourhood mosque was a place I visited with most of my friends on Fridays, and, occasionally, in the evenings for prayer. Along with the ritual of prayer, there was a sense of community, a joyous banter and an ease with which religion was practised. We were all neighbours who went to the same baker, the same doctor, and the same grocer. Our mosque was a modest two floor building, a few hundred yards from my house on the banks of a small stream that went through the village. Children would swim in the stream for hours; village women would wash clothes and utensils on the bank or yaarehbal (literally, the place where friends meet) and gossip for hours together.

When the muezzin gave the call for prayer, the women would look for their headscarves and wear them till the prayer was over, then return to their talk.

Handwoven grass mats softened by years of use covered the mosque floor and a few dim electric bulbs cast a pale light on the walls, which were covered by a fading green distemper. An arched recess in the prayer hall marked the space for the imam to lead the prayers, facing west, towards Mecca. Next to the prayer hall was the hamaam, a small room with a limestone floor heated by burning a few logs of wood in the basement. Gul Khan, the tiny farmer who lived next to the mosque and gave the call for prayer, often went from door to door reminding villagers to contribute to the upkeep of the mosque. In the winter, men often sat in the hamaam and discussed village affairs, religion, and politics. It was the warmest place in the village.

The imam read the same sermon in Arabic every Friday. I knew where the names of the Prophets Mohammed, Eesa, Moosa, and Ibrahim (Abraham) would appear. I never understood what the sermon meant. We always walked back home from the mosque with relatives and friends. It was usual to prepare a big samovar of tea after the Friday prayers and gather around it for hours. In those conversations, we would often retell a joke about a Kashmiri villager who went to Mecca for the Hajj. He stayed in a hotel, and the hotel manager got irritated with him at some point and began shouting at him in Arabic. The villager knew Arabic as the language of prayer and responded, 'Aameen'.

I could put many faces to that hypothetical villager in Mecca from our mosque. A group of old men would sit in the warm hamaam, half asleep. It was the closest to central heating you got in my village. I often suppressed laughter on seeing them jolt out of their reveries, as Gul Khan shouted the call for prayer. After the prayers, they would settle into a

quasi-musical recital of darood, the praises of the Prophet and saints, in Persian and Kashmiri, rocking themselves back and forth as they spoke the revered, familiar words. My friends and I never really remembered the darood but we would play along, sit cross-legged, rock our bodies and call out 'Ya Allah' in chorus, after the old men. Everyone in the mosque smiled when Saifuddin, my mother's grand-uncle, would stand in the mosque after Eid prayers and say, 'O God! Please bless those who fasted for you throughout the month of Ramadan. O Merciful God! Please forgive and bless those too who ignored your orders and did not fast in the month of Ramadan.' We knew that Saifuddin never fasted and would slip behind a curtain in his shop for lunch every afternoon during Ramadan.

In the late eighties, a college teacher leading a Salafist group became active in my village and they set up a separate mosque. Most of the members of the group were lower middle class, had college degrees and low-rung government jobs. They revolted against the way Islam had been practised over centuries in Kashmir—a mixture of text and tradition. None of them was a trained Islamic scholar but they were enthusiastic readers of the translations of various Urdu commentaries on the Quran and the Hadith. They wanted to shear the local traditions created in the long process of conversion from a Hindu past to Islam. They even introduced differences in appearance: they folded their trousers an inch above the ankles, grew their beards long, and prayed slightly differently. They saw themselves sort of as social reformers, saving the peasants from the mumbo-jumbo and exploitation of the priestly class—the maulvis and the pirs. A friend described it as, 'The maulvi's son's motorcycle does not run on petrol. It runs on the blood of the villagers.' Grandfather, who was always critical of the maulvis and pirs, left our neighbourhood mosque and began praying at the new revivalist mosque, three houses from ours.

I went to the Salafist mosque for Friday prayers a few times, but found them dry and strict. I was not comfortable with their intense, self-conscious piety, and certainty about being on the right path. They were dismissive and contemptuous of the not-so-faithful. They endlessly debated correct Arabic pronunciation and the sin of mispronouncing the verses of the Quran and the Hadith. Another of their obsessions was the right length of beard: three inches or four inches; one fistful or two fistfuls. The village children called the leader of the revivalists 'Goat'

Fortunately, grandfather never let his affiliation with the revivalists affect his friendships. He maintained his relations both with the Muslim villagers who opposed the revivalists and his Hindu friends. His friendship with Bhaskarnath, with whom he taught for many years in a high school, continued. And his preference for buying groceries and chatting for a long time at the shop of Somnath, one of the few Hindus in our village, never changed.

There was a consciousness of religious identities and differences in political opinions. Many Muslims and Hindus would keep separate cups and plates in their homes for the visitors of the other faith. In our house though, there were no separate cups or plates for Bhaskarnath or Somnath. We ate together. I might have been ten when I attended a Hindu marriage. I wore black trousers, a black and white checked shirt, and combed my hair after taming it with mustard oil. Grandfather dressed in his favourite tweed jacket, shaved carefully, and applied liberal doses of Old Spice aftershave. Bhaskarnath's younger brother was getting married in a nearby small town. We sat in a carpeted room full of guests. Lunch was served in small steel plates—a mixture of vegetables and lamb dishes. It was different from the Muslim wedding feasts where four people eat together in a tin-plated copper plate, the vegetables are minimal, and the lamb dishes spicier and

numerous. Somebody who sat next to me asked, 'So you eat at Hindu homes?' Then somebody took pictures and later gave us copies. I have one of those in my album: grandfather is talking to Bhaskarnath; I am holding a morsel of food in my right hand and staring at the camera.

But after the rebellion against India, along with the stories from the political history of Kashmir, militant groups used Islam for mobilisation; images from Islamic history had been borrowed and words like martyrdom and jihad were thrown around. By 1993–94, Islamist militant groups had gained the upper hand in the separatist militancy and Kashmiri nationalist groups like pro-independence JKLF had become defunct, surrendered, and adopted the politics of non-violent protest. Pakistan was key to that, being as resolutely against the idea of an independent Kashmir as was India.

Pakistan turned towards its old-time supporter in Kashmir: the Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu and Kashmir, a right wing politico-religious organisation which had had a very small presence in Kashmir since the early fifties. Maulana Sayid Abu Ala Mawdudi, a journalist, founded the Jamaat in Lahore in 1941; Mawdudi hoped to establish an Islamic state and saw reforming individuals, being morally upright, and strict adherence to Islamic convictions as the way to his goal. The Jamaat reached Kashmir around a decade later, and tried to expand its influence by running schools, holding regular cadre meetings, extensively distributing pamphlets and cheaply printed books written by Mawdudi. It remained close-knit, cadre-based, and grew in its self-righteousness, certainty, and political ambition, common to such right wing politico-religious groups.

Jamaat contested state elections in the late sixties, hoping that its continuous criticism of the great Kashmiri leader Sheikh Abdullah's party, the National Conference, for its failure to get a plebiscite held in Kashmir, would convert into

votes. But it never got more than three or four seats out of the seventy seats in the Kashmir assembly. Though most Kashmiri Muslims were disillusioned with India and had sympathies for Pakistan, they did not take very kindly to the Jamaat. In 1979, when Pakistani dictator Zia-ul-Haq hung the socialist Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was liked by Kashmiri Muslims, Jamaat supporters were attacked by mobs in Kashmir and their houses burnt. Grandfather saw the angry villagers throwing copies of the Quran into a bonfire in the road near our house. 'I tried to stop them but they wouldn't listen and said that it was a Jamaat-e-Islami Quran.'

But in the early nineties, the Jamaat reasserted itself after its militant wing, Hizbul Mujahideen, was founded. Jamaat men suddenly became all-powerful because of their influence in the militant group, which had immense support from Pakistan and sought Kashmir's accession to the country. I remember a Jamaat man from my village who ran a drugstore. He used to be a polite, quiet man till the early nineties. But something changed around 1992. He did not walk; he swaggered. He had become the type. You can tell a Jamaat member from his self-conscious bearing, his eyes blazing with certainty, an air of possessing some hidden, conspiratorial knowledge, and his short regulation beard. There is also the cult-like devotion to the ideas of Mawdudi, whose few books are the major source of his ideas. People from all shades of the political spectrum had used Islam in Kashmir for political gains but nobody emphasised its place in the Kashmiri polity as much as the Jamaat. In the early nineties, they had regular meetings called ijtimas, where their workers would try to convince young men to join the Hizbul Mujahideen.

I remember sitting at a shopfront outside my house one day at that time. The Jamaat chemist from my village was walking by. I said the customary greeting and he leapt to attention, addressing me in an elaborate, earnest litany, asking

about my family, my studies, talking about his hopes that I would be engrossed in the study of deen, religion. Then, his tone turned conspiratorial, as if he was sharing the best-kept secret with me. He threw a brotherly arm around my shoulder and urging me to walk a little away from the crowd near the shopfront, said, 'We need boys like you. You should come to our ijtima.' But he never brought it up again when I replied, 'I will come with your son.'

Many Kashmiris credit the rise of a brutal counter-insurgent group, Ikhwan-ul-Muslimoon (Muslim Brotherhood), in the mid nineties, to the excesses of Jamaat men and the Hizbul Mujahideen. Commonly known as ikhwanis, these men were armed by the Indian government and given a 'free hand'—immunity from prosecution against their crimes. The ikhwanis knew both the separatist militant groups and Kashmiri society, and that knowledge made them ruthlessly effective counter-insurgents. They tortured and killed like modern day Mongols. Ikhwan was armed and funded by the Indian army, and went on a rampage, killing, maiming, harassing anyone they thought to be sympathetic to the Jamaat specifically and the separatists in general.

I once met the son of Kuka Parrey, the ruthless founder of Ikhwan. Parrey used to operate mostly in Baramulla. By the time I met his son, separatist militants had already killed Parrey. His son told me that Parrey, who used to be a small time folk singer, had been a supporter of the separatist movement and celebrated the young Kashmiris crossing the LoC for arms training in the early nineties by writing and singing a song: 'Shahzaad Lukh Draayih Azad Kashmir' (The Princes Are Marching to Azad Kashmir). Parrey's son told me that his father collaborated with the Indian army only after a Jamaat member insulted and slapped him. Parrey and his counter-insurgent group were so despised by Kashmiris that when the militants had killed him, his family did not

have the nerve to bury him in the village graveyard. Leaving Parrey's fortress-like house, guarded by scores of armed paramilitaries, I saw a grilled enclosure in a far corner of its grassy lawn—it was Parrey's grave. His son told me that the Jamaat man who had led his father to become a counter-insurgent, had now changed sides and worked as an informer with a paramilitary force.

Since the late nineties, the Jamaat has tried to distance itself from militant groups, partly because hundreds of its members were arrested and killed by the Indian troops and many more during the campaign against it by Ikhwan counter-insurgents. The Jamaat continues to be a minority in Kashmir. If it ever goes to polls again in Kashmir, I suspect it won't find any support beyond its traditional base or manage to win more than the three seats it won in the sixties.

The majority of Kashmiri Muslims continue to follow an unorthodox Islam. In fact, in many ways Kashmiri society has opened up in the last decade and a half. Thousands of Kashmiri boys and girls left in the early nineties to study in Indian cities and towns, and to universities and colleges in North America, Europe, and Russia. I was one of them. My friends, too, were part of that wave. Most of us have returned to Kashmir now as educated professionals. Our long journeys that brought us in contact with varied ethnicities and religions, urban lifestyles, film and media of various sorts changed us. While we were gone, another revolution was taking place all over South Asia, including Kashmir: cable television. Throughout the conflict, as mobility was reduced Kashmiris stayed indoors, watching thousands of hours of television—mostly Hindi movies, song-and-dance shows, and news. Similarly, the spread of the internet and cyber cafés was another push toward opening up society.

But there have been fringe efforts to impose a Saudi-style Islamic code in Kashmir, although they invariably fail. In the

mostly agrarian society of Kashmir, men and women have worked together in fields and orchards, and though women would wear headscarves, the practice of the veil never really took off. It simply didn't work. Even in non-agricultural and urban settings, like schools, offices, colleges, and universities, only a small number of Kashmiri women chose to wear the veil. There were a few failed attempts at imposing the veil on women, especially by a puritanical Islamist women's group Dukhtaran-e-Millat (Daughters of the Muslim Community), headed by a woman, Asiya Andrabi, who is not known for much else. I had not heard about her for more than a decade. Then suddenly, one summer day in 2004, she resurfaced in the public sphere. I had gone to my preferred cyber café in Lal Chowk, Srinagar. The café manager seemed distraught and resigned; the doors of most wooden cubicles had been pulled off their hinges. 'Asiya Andrabi and her women were here,' he said.

She and her activists had begun harassing young couples catching a few moments of intimacy in the claustrophobic cabins of internet cafés or sharing lunch in dimly lit restaurants. In newspaper photographs, Andrabi looked like a female Zorro, a veiled woman raising fists covered in white gloves. Much later, I managed to meet her in her Srinagar house; she was barely four and a half feet tall and covered in her signature veil from head to toe. She told me she had become a born again Muslim in 1986, a time when she had been feeling depressed and thwarted because her family forbade her from pursuing postgraduate studies in biochemistry in Pune. Frustrated ambition is a dangerous thing.

She had begun her activism soon after college in 1987 by painting over the actresses in Bollywood film posters that were put up every week in Srinagar and elsewhere in the Valley. She also agitated for separate seats for women on crowded buses. Later, she had joined an Arabic and Islamic studies programme

at Kashmir University. She talked about her well-educated and upper middle class family. I was struck by hundreds of books, including Chomsky, Said, and a copy of the *Bhagvad Gita* on the multiple bookracks in her drawing room.

In the early nineties, Andrabi had married a commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen, who had been in prison for years. She considered it an honour to be married to a militant despite the accompanying hardships and had named her son Mohammed bin Qasim, after the medieval Arab general who conquered India. As we spoke that afternoon, Andrabi lamented the spread of cable television and conceded that very few Kashmiri women had followed her.

Imposing puritanical interpretations of Islam continued to fail in Kashmir. On a visit to my ancestral home, one of my cousins told me about the eldest son of the leader ('Goat') of the Salafi group in our village. The boy, in his teens, studied with my cousin. It was common knowledge that the man had brought up his children in an ultra puritanical manner. They had obeyed for years, but the boys had grown up and were rebelling now. 'He is a joke in the school. He runs after girls, speeds his car, and we call him Rainbow,' said my cousin, of the Goat's eldest son. I was struck by the nickname 'Rainbow' and asked him what he meant. 'He colours his hair in different colours every week. One day he has black hair, the other day it is red or greenish.' The boy's rebellion was inevitable.

I remembered how, in my childhood, his father and his group campaigned against prayers at shrines as they believed that making the saint an intermediary between creator and creation was un-Islamic. The village had so fiercely opposed them that they had had to hide in friends' houses, lest a mob set upon them. The Salafi teacher and his cohorts didn't seem to understand that a shrine wasn't merely a spiritual centre, but a club, a space for social gatherings and festivities, and a site of business as well.

The shrine closest to my house was in the village of Aishmuqam, near my old boarding school. One early April afternoon, I took a bus to Aishmuqam. A family friend, Kallu, ran a textile shop in the small bazaar near the bus yard. A road climbed from the bazaar through the village, spread out on clearings, on the slope to the shrine cresting the hill. Before I could begin my trek, I saw Kallu sitting on a wooden platform in his shop in an elegant Nehru jacket and a Jinnah cap. 'Where have you been all this time?' His familiar high-pitched voice was reassuring. Two of his front teeth were missing; his face had wrinkled. I narrated the highlights of my absent years: college, university and journalism. 'And what about marriage?' They always ask you that. Razia, his daughter and Altaf, his son, were married and ran a school. His own business had been bad since the fighting began. 'But thank God everyone in the family is safe. In these times, every day is a gift.' Two men sat beside me in the shop on wooden chairs. They nodded in agreement. 'There are no guarantees,' one said. 'True,' the other added. 'This morning, the troops killed a boy from Pulwama; his body is lying at the police station,' Kallu said. 'A policeman came to buy cloth for his shroud. The army said he was a militant. But who knows?' He turned to the shrine atop the hill and lifted his hands in prayer. 'O! Saint Zainuddin! Be our mediator with the Almighty! Ask Him to take pity on this people! Ask Him to forgive our sins! You are amongst His dear ones!'

I wanted to lighten the atmosphere and reminded him of an old story that made Kallu laugh. One of the names Muslims use for God is Noor (the divine light) and a white-bearded, pink-faced old mullah from the Aishmuqam mosque was also known as Noor. As a child, I had once accompanied my grandfather and Kallu to the grand mosque for Friday prayers. My little religious education had taught me that a mosque was the house of God. Noor, the mullah, was delivering a

sermon. I thought he must be God. After the prayers, I saw Noor walking the same road; I was surprised and asked Kallu, 'Why is God walking the same road as us?'

'You were all of six then. Those were very happy days. Your grandfather and I told the story to our friends and poor Noor was embarrassed.' He smiled and said, 'That "God" of yours is dead.'

Allah-o-Akbar! Ashadu An La Ilaha Illalah!
(God is great! There is no God but God!)

The words calling Muslims for afternoon prayers descended, mist-like, from the shrine over the tin rooftops dotting the hill. The smell of fresh bread in the wicker baskets of bakeries and sacks of spices on the shopfronts surrounded me as I climbed the steep rocky stairway to the shrine. Every spring people gathered here for an annual fair celebrating the end of winter and the beginning of the sowing season. Hundreds of men, women, and children would light torches (twigs of pine tied to a willow staff) and stand humbly near the fortress-like perimeter and in the cobbled courtyard of the shrine. The arched wooden gate of the shrine inlaid with calligraphy, the latticed windows, and the pagoda-like green roof supported by ornate pillars and crowned by a brass spire would glow in the bright yellow of the torches.

Devotees still packed the cobbled courtyard. I leaned for a while over the low boundary wall, taking in the rushing Lidder stream, the yellow miles of mustard flowers, the roofs and villages miniaturised by distance and a dark brown arc of the Himalayas. Buddha thought Kashmir was an ideal location for meditation. Every hillock had a shrine and every spring had a temple. It seemed easy to be a believer here. I turned back towards the courtyard and watched a scraggy-bearded barber sharpen his razor on a

stone. A young couple and an older woman holding a baby watched him. The old woman helped the barber tie a white cotton sheet round the baby's neck. A child's first haircut according to Kashmiri Muslim tradition is performed at a shrine. The barber massaged the light brown wisps of baby's hair with warm water from an aluminium bowl. The baby cried, the old woman lulled the child to silence, the young parents fidgeted. The barber shaved off the baby's hair. The father gathered the wisps of hair in a handkerchief. The mother took a bowl full of tehr, turmeric-coloured spiced rice, and distributed it amongst the devotees, who blessed the child.

I followed the family inside the shrine. The keepers of the shrine, the babas, sat on wooden platforms behind brass trays full of coins. The family donated generously, placing a note or two for each baba, who all blessed the child. The interior of the shrine is an ancient cave with modern modifications. Women in bright floral prints prayed on one side of a greenish marble platform and more babas sought donations on the other. A strong stone pillar supported the cave roof. The baba sitting there shouted, 'It is Mehboob-e-Alam's pillar. Those who lean against it are relieved of their problems. Make a donation here and lean on the pillar, young man. Your worries will go away.'

I walked towards the end of the cave where a low, narrow opening led to a tiny chamber where the saint used to pray. An elderly man came out of the opening; two young girls followed him. They bent their backs and walked backwards. The devout do not turn their back towards the saint's place. An earthen lamp was lit near the opening. Devotees dipped their fingers into an oil-filled, palm-shaped hole in the rock and rubbed them on their foreheads. 'It will heal your diseases and solve your problems,' an old, turbaned baba sang. I crawled into the saint's chamber. A green, silken sheet covered his

grave. Eight devotees stood in two rows facing the tomb. A baba prayed for a while and moved from devotee to devotee with his brass tray. 'Leave big notes on the tray, the saint will take care of you.' I left, a little dejected by the domination of commerce over solitude and gravitas.

As I walked down the stairs to the bus stop, I heard someone calling me. The short, wiry young man's face seemed familiar. 'We were in the same school. I am Mubashir.' He ran a drugstore nearby. I sat on a rough bench facing the bare wooden desk where he sat at, on a plastic chair. Second rate antacid and cough syrup bottles and paper bags of tablets for sundry ailments sat on the rough timber shelves along the mud walls. Floral paper covered the ceiling of wooden beams and a dim bulb gave the shop a jaundiced look. Mubashir left to fetch tea. I watched him cross the street; he limped. We talked about our lives after school and Mubashir told me that he had never finished college.

Mubashir's father had been sick in the winter of 1997 The local hospital was closed. The nineteen year old ran to a chemist near Kallu's shop. He was waiting for his turn when he saw an ikhwani counter-insurgent walk towards the shop. Mubashir felt uneasy as he watched the ikhwani loiter. 'I wondered who was going to get into trouble,' he smiled. Separatist militants hated the ikhwanis and there was bound to be a skirmish if he was spotted. Mubashir wanted to get the medicine for his father and leave.

The queue moved slowly. The ikhwani stood near Mubashir, looked around, made small talk, and juggled a hand grenade like a cricket ball. Mubashir shouted at the chemist to move faster. Nothing happened. He waited. And then he heard an explosion and everything went dark. Six hours later, he regained his senses on a hospital bed in Srinagar. The grenade had slipped from the renegade's hand, fallen on the road, and exploded. The renegade died instantly.

Scores of splinters had pierced through Mubashir's legs. For three months, doctors operated and nursed him. He returned home in a wheelchair and left it after two years, with a limp. His treatment cost the family a fortune. When his father retired from his low-rung government job Mubashir had to support the family. His degree did not guarantee a job and he knew no influential men. He dropped out of college and set up his drugstore, which fetched a little money. Every day, he sat on his blue plastic chair behind the bare wooden desk, waiting for patients to buy medicines and dreaming of what could have been possible.

I left his shop and began my descent to the bus yard. He joined me, dragging his legs from one cobbled step to another. I dissuaded him. He paused, turned back and said, 'Basharat! It is hard to say, but can you help me find a job? Help me out of this hell.' It was hard to answer that question. Yet if I saw hope, it was in education. 'I will talk to my friends but you will have to complete your degree. Without your degree there is no hope.' He agreed. 'I will call you once I finish my degree. With Zain Shah's blessings, something might work out.' His eyes had a faint glimmer of hope. We parted. His words accompanied me home. I thought of his hopelessness, his clinging onto straws of faith.

People seemed to need faith; people seemed to need miracles. A week later, I was at my Srinagar home talking about it to a poet friend who made his money by producing unwatchable programmes for state television. 'No. In these times, it has become the support system for the rich, the famous and the unknown poor. People have no hopes from the government or any politicians. They turn to the shrines, to the Prophet and to God.' He told me about one of the most distinguished poets of Kashmir, Professor Rashid Nazaki, who had immersed himself in faith after a personal tragedy during the mid nineties. 'He left public

life and lives, retired, in his ancestral village in Bandipora,' my friend said.

The small town of Bandipora is around a hundred kilometres from Srinagar in Baramulla district, close to the LoC. Half an hour outside Srinagar, the road to Bandipora runs along the Jhelum for miles as the river goes north to cross over to Pakistan and then the Arabian Sea. Canopies of willow branches shade the road till it rises onto a plateau occupied by a military camp. Gazing over a mulberry garden on my right, I was entranced by the sight of a lake. 'It is the Manasbal Lake,' a fellow passenger told me. On the clear, blue water, two yellow shikaras moved gracefully. The road rose towards the hills in the distance. We rushed past apple and almond orchards and the glittering tin roofs of houses. In a village, a handpainted billboard read 'Muskaan Beauty Parlour'

A family with two energetic children sat behind me. Their mother prodded them to 'behave properly' Excited by the breeze blowing in through the lowered windows, the boys launched into a nursery rhyme about the light and cold breeze. A checkpost announced Bandipora. An armoured car was parked nearby and columns of soldiers stood along the road. The taxi stopped. The boys in the back seat shouted, 'Dishkiaon, Dishkiaon!' in their shrill voices. They used their curled hands as imaginary guns. 'Dishkiaon, Dishkiaon!' They imitated the sound effects that accompany gunfire in most Hindi movies. The central market in the town was crowded, though not dirty like most other small-town markets in Kashmir. The faces of Indian soldiers were the only faces of outsiders one could see.

Until the 1930s, if you had walked around the same market, every fourth person you would have passed would have been from one or the other great medieval cities of central Asia. The journey from Bandipora to the cities of central Asia,

by medieval modes of horse and mule, took a few weeks. Kashmir's cultural interaction with the cities of Samarkand, Bokhara, and Kashgar was rich and intense.

Rashid Nazki, the poet, lived in a single storey house with a cedar tree outside it. A boy led me in. The poet huddled under a shawl in a small room. He had deep, black eyes shining out of his sculpted, sunken face. 'You must be the one coming from Srinagar,' he said, pushing a cushion towards me. Offering a guest a cushion to lean against instead of a bare wall is a local gesture of respect. He stretched his legs and leaning back on his cushion, puffed at his cigarette with shivering, fragile fingers. 'I am an old man living away from the world. What brings you here?' My friend had introduced me as a journalist and the poet expected a questionnaire on his thoughts on the conflict in Kashmir.

He was both surprised and relieved that I had no such questions for him. 'These are difficult times and journalists ask questions that one can answer but cannot afford to,' he said a little irritated. 'I just wanted to meet you,' I said. A boy in his early teens walked in and asked whether Professor Nazki would have lunch. 'You are joining me for lunch,' the poet commanded. He took a hundred rupee note from his pocket and handed it over to the boy. 'Get some lamb and tell your mother to fry it. The guest will eat with me.' 'He is my grandson,' he told me. He asked me to tell him stories about my travels. I told stories; he commented and smoked, and commented and smoked. Food arrived: rice, lamb, and beans. The poet piled my plate with pieces of lamb. 'You are a young man and you need to eat.' I would eat this over two days. After lunch, we talked about poetry. 'What do you think of the poetry written in Kashmiri after the conflict?' I asked. 'A lot has been written. The younger generation talks about the conflict directly. Some fine poems have been written. In English, there is Agha Shahid Ali's work.'

Professor Nazki was silent again. 'Shahid was a very fine boy. He used to walk like a drunken man. His father is my friend and I told him once, "Shahid is not well." But he believed it was just a poet's way of being. Soon after that, they detected his tumour. His death was a great loss. Kashmir needs poets like him, but who can evade death?' The old poet moved himself to a more erect posture. 'Shahid wrote political poetry but he did not compromise on technique. Most political poetry is like free verse. The polemics remain and the poetry dies.' I asked him about his own poetry. His poems were in a mystical vein and had won him various awards. I asked him whether there were any English translations. 'Yes, they have been translated into Urdu. Someone from Delhi has translated my poems into English. The translator never sought my permission; he did not even send me a copy.' He had not written much since 1990. I did not have to ask him why. 'I lost half of my family in a grenade blast and stopped writing after that.' I dreaded this moment and bowed my head in silence. The poet narrated his story in a calm voice.

One afternoon in 1990, when he had been teaching at the University of Kashmir, news came that a bomb had exploded near his house. He rushed from the university to Bandipora. That morning, a militant had been loitering in the lane beside the poet's house. He planned to throw a grenade at a column of soldiers passing by. Afraid of retaliation from the soldiers, the poet's two sons went out to persuade the militant to throw it elsewhere, away from the residential area. He was adamant; so were they. Their mother joined them. Some time during the argument, which might have seen much swaying of arms and pointing of fingers to make a point in Kashmiri fashion, the militant accidentally pressed the pin that sets off a hand grenade. The poet reached home. The grenade blast had killed the militant, his sons, and his wife. 'I was in a coma of sorts for the next eight years. I did

not write a single poem. Every time I picked up a pen, my fingers trembled.' He had no courts to turn to for his loss. 'I complained to Prophet Mohammed. I sent my prayers and plaints to his court.' He overcame his loss with his love for the Prophet. 'I devoted my time to translating a biography of the Prophet.' He was alive again; his eyes sparkled as he talked of his work. 'You will feel the Prophet's breath when you read the book. I have used the stream of consciousness.' I remember one of his lines:

> I asked the dervish sitting on the pavement
> How far is the world from here?

Nooruddin Rishi is the patron saint of Kashmir. He was mentored by Lalleshwari, a Brahmin woman, who after much suffering at the hands of her in-laws rebelled and became a mystic, preaching oneness of God and arguing against the ancient Hindu caste system. As a child, Nooruddin had been sent to a local mullah but he refused to read beyond the first Arabic alphabet, Alif (One). His teacher asked why; he had answered, 'There is one God and I need not know beyond Alif.' In his youth, he renounced the world and prayed in a cave for twelve years. Some time after his cave worship, Nooruddin met Mir Mohammed Hamdani, an Iranian Sufi. Mohammed was the son of the great Sufi and scholar Syed Mir Ali, who arrived in Kashmir in the fourteenth century and attracted Kashmiris to Islam, and is popularly known as Shah-e-Hamadan (The King of Hamadan). Before his return and death in the central Asian town of Khatlan, Shah Hamadan had willed his infant son Mohammed to travel throughout the world in search of learning. After many journeys, the young Mohammed Hamdani arrived in Kashmir and resumed the missionary and scholarly work of his father.

Hamdani taught Nooruddin Rishi the intricacies of Islam and the life of the Prophet Mohammed. The discussions of the two men convinced Nooruddin to focus on social reform rather than renunciation. He travelled throughout Kashmir, talking to people in their own language. His interpretation of Islam was rooted in the local traditions and culture; the masses understood him better than the Iranian and central Asian Sufis who had brought Islam to Kashmir. He was critical of the orthodox Muslim priests and Brahmins for reducing religion to empty rituals, turning it into a means of self-promotion and fuelling hatred amongst the followers of Hinduism and Islam:

Poring over books they become strangers to their
own selves.
Like donkeys whose backs are laden with books.
The Mullah is happy with gifts and feasts,
The old Pandit searches for a young virgin wife.

Under Nooruddin's influence, the majority of Kashmiris became Muslims, although the conversion to Islam had begun in the early fourteenth century after Rinchana, a Tibetan prince, became the ruler of Kashmir. To consolidate his position, Buddhist Rinchana decided to convert to Hinduism. But the Brahmin priests refused to convert him, unsure which caste Rinchana would have. His Muslim friend and adviser, Shah Mir, told him about Islam. Rinchana went to sleep in his palace on the banks of river Jhelum and woke up to hear the Muslim call for prayer. On the river bank facing the palace, a Persian Sufi, Bulbul Shah, was offering morning prayers. Rinchana rode across the river to meet Bulbul Shah, who answered his questions. Islam had no caste; men were equal. Conversion was simply saying, 'There is no god but God and Mohammed is His messenger'. Rinchana

converted to Islam, patronised the saint, and ruled generously for three years.

Shah Mir, his friend, won the battle for succession after Rinchana's death. Amongst the successors of Shah Mir, two men are remembered the most: Sikander, a fanatic, and Zainulabideen, a liberal. Sikander banned music, wine and dancing, and is accused of destroying many Hindu temples of Kashmir near the end of the fourteenth century. Kashmiris remember the reign of the liberal king Zainulabideen from 1420 to 1490 as the golden age. People still refer to him as Bud Shah (The Great King). He built colleges and offered generous grants to the students and scholars of logic and grammar. He invited master craftsmen and artisans from central Asian cities, who taught Kashmiris the fine arts of papier-mâché and carpet weaving. He ended the persecution of Hindus and revived theatre and music. Bud Shah was one of the pallbearers in the funeral procession of Nooruddin Rishi, who was buried in the town of Chrar, an hour's drive west of Srinagar, where he had spent the last years of his life. A shrine built there in his memory became one of the holiest places in Kashmir. I had not been to the patron saint's shrine since my childhood. I remembered it as an elegant wooden shrine like the one in Aishmuqam, but bigger and with more impressive calligraphic designs on its ornate wooden windows, arches, and ceilings.

I remember following the news with great urgency in May of 1995, when the Indian army besieged the township of Chrar. Militants, led by a Pakistani, Mast Gul, were hiding in Chrar town as snow had made their mountainous hideouts uninhabitable. A battle raged in the town and soon it was on fire; 2500 houses were burnt; scores of civilians were killed. The army took the battle to the shrine complex where the militants were hiding. The fighting that followed burnt down the shrine. Six hundred years of history were destroyed in

a day. Kashmiris mourned and marched towards the gutted shrine. Soldiers arrested them, even fired on the protesters. Mast Gul and his men broke the army cordon and escaped. Kashmiris blamed the Indian army for firing mortars at the shrine and destroying it; the army and the Indian government blamed the Pakistani militants, arguing that they destroyed the shrine to save themselves.

On a bright May afternoon, I was on my way from Srinagar to the shrine at Chrar. Half an hour later, the taxi left behind the city and the denser villages beyond it. We drove through fields, climbed a plateau, and passed some checkpoints. Nine years after the destruction of the shrine, Chrar seemed like a newly built town. The jeep stopped outside the new, government-built shrine. It was a white cemented building. Its varnished wooden window frames were shaped in clumsy arches in a half-hearted imitation of the originals. The galvanised tin sheets mocked the memory of the old shingles. I stood in the taxi stand staring at the new shrine. An aged couple walked out; they walked backwards in reverence. They stopped near me, their lips moving in loud prayer: 'O Sultan of saints! Be kind to us, be kind to our children. Save them from storms and fires, save them as you have saved them till now.' I turned to them; they had tears in their eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

Islam in Kashmir had borrowed elements from Hindu and Buddhist pasts; the Hindus in turn had been influenced by Muslim practices. In my childhood, nobody raised an eyebrow if a Hindu woman walked to a Muslim shrine to seek the blessings of a saint. The religious divide was visible only on the days India and Pakistan played cricket. Muslims supported the Pakistani cricket team; the Pandits were for India. Yet the tensions, which were partly class-based, never simmered into sectarian violence. But things fell apart after the eruption of armed conflict. The separatist militants had no tolerance for dissent. Along with killing hundreds of Muslim pro-India political activists and suspected informers for Indian intelligence, they killed a few hundred Pandits on similar grounds or without any reason at all. The murders sent a wave of fear through the community, and more than a hundred thousand Pandits left Kashmir after March 1990. The affluent moved to the houses they had in Jammu, Delhi and various Indian cities. But a vast majority could only find shelter in the squalor of refugee camps and rented rooms in Jammu and Delhi.

Despite the ensuing bitterness both Muslims and Pandits tried to maintain their personal relationships. My father had stayed in touch with his Pandit friends and visited them in Jammu and Delhi whenever he was there. Living in various cities of India, the Pandits hoped to be able to return home some day. Even those who were too old to return and begin life anew, like my seventy five year old landlady, pined for the homes they had left behind. Most Pandit houses had been abandoned or burnt during the conflict; the temple complexes had been taken over by the military and paramilitary.

During my childhood, I had visited temples with my Pandit friends, mostly the ancient Martand sun temple near my village. I remembered, on a visit to the Martand temple, my Pandit friend Vinod telling me authoritatively about the temple being built by the Pandavas, the five heroes of the *Mahabharata*. The five brothers had defeated their hundred villainous cousins, the Kaurvas, with help from Krishna. Vinod told me that the massive boulders of the temple were lifted to their position by the giant-like Pandava brother, Bhima. Our school principal corrected us. 'Lalitaditya, one of the greatest kings of Kashmir, built the temple.' Muktapida Lalitaditya had ruled Kashmir from the end of the seventh century to the mid eighth century and is believed to have conquered a lot of India, Iran and Central Asia.

Would the Martand sun temple too be a garrison? Or would some teacher still be telling his students about its place in the history of Kashmir? I left Srinagar again for my ancestral village, spent a day with my grandparents, and headed for Martand. I took a bus from the busy town square in Mattan, three miles from my village and the site of my first school Lyceum, for the Martand temple. It followed the same winding road, going up a plateau, that I had taken years ago on school excursions. The barren mountains, the bad roads, the muddy lanes of the villages surrounding Martand hadn't changed in twenty years. The bluish limestone temple stood like a wrinkled patriarch. Most of the colonnaded wall, stretching from the entrance to form a square around the temple, had collapsed. Inside the temple chamber wild grass and weeds grew. The memory of my school excursion with Vinod was still vivid. The temple complex had seemed colossal to our eyes then. It felt diminished now.

I walked back and waited by the desolate roadside for a bus. I missed Vinod. I had not seen him since the conflict had erupted. I had been twelve when I had left Lyceum for

boarding school; his family had migrated to the southern province of Jammu like thousands of other Pandits, who felt threatened by the separatist militants. After the migration of the Pandits, as I have mentioned already, half the chairs in my classroom had become empty. In a few months, my classmates and I had become used to the empty chairs. Kashmir was exploding and we were preoccupied with our own survival. But whenever I thought of the migration of the Pandits, I thought of Vinod. He was a plump boy with cheeks so red I thought he wore make-up. After school, we would usually rush to bathe in a temple complex spring nearby. We would try to scare each other by shouting 'snake' from the bank of the spring. We also loved to explore a cluster of caves cut into a hill near our school. He believed that if we kept going in the dark tunnel inside the cave, we would reach China. Scared by the darkness inside, we never ventured beyond a few feet on our mythical 'passage to China'. I can't remember why he wanted to reach China. But I remember learning to cycle on his red Atlas bicycle on the road leading to the caves.

There were no signs of the bus on the road outside the Martand temple. I walked the few kilometres to Mattan. Vinod had lived nearby. From a roundabout, I saw people walking down the lane leading to his village. I followed. A mile ahead, a dirt track ran across paddy fields to a grove of walnut trees near his house. Men and women worked in the fields and children rode down the dirt lane on bicycles like the one Vinod used to have. The Pandit houses of the village stood apart in their desolation. An old lock hung on the door and cobwebs decorated the closed windows of his house.

The next morning, I visited our old school, hoping to meet our principal, Kantroo. A freshly painted signboard hanging on the school read: Lyceum Public School. The school building looked the same. There were new faces in the same grey shorts and white shirts. I knocked on the

principal's door. A middle-aged man in a casual shirt and jeans opened it. I introduced myself and asked for Kantroo. He offered me a seat and said, 'I am the principal'. He sat on my old teacher's chair. I was reluctant to accept him where he was. 'Mr Kantroo migrated to Jammu in 2002.' The new principal knew where in Jammu my teacher lived but did not have his phone number.

Jammu, a small city, with brutal summers, had become the refuge for most Kashmiri Pandits. But I was reluctant to make the journey. I was nervous at the prospect of seeing my teacher and my childhood friend as refugees. I had seen my parents cry when their Pandit friends migrated. I did not understand what was happening. A decade later, I did. Some years ago, I was in Jammu as a reporter visiting the migrant camps. On the outskirts of the city, surrounded by desolate land full of wild bushes, I reached a cluster of one room brick huts stacked together in long claustrophobic rows. 'Nobody cares about us,' a teenager told me. He did not speak like a Kashmiri. And he hated Muslims. I could not muster the courage to tell him I was one. I told him I was a Punjabi from Delhi. I walked around, trying to locate the people from my part of Kashmir. A fifty-something man in a white kurta pyjama appeared out of a narrow lane. I asked him if he knew anyone from Anantnag. He looked at me carefully. 'Are you from there?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'Where in Anantnag?' 'Seer,' I said. 'You are from Seer! Whose son are you?'

I gave my father's and my grandfather's names. In my part of the world, you are always your father's son, your grandfather's grandson. His eyes lit up. He laughed, abused me fondly, and hugged me. Before I could ask him who he was, he grabbed my arm, told me to keep my mouth shut and follow him. We walked through the dirty, cramped lanes running between rows of camp houses for a minute or so. He stopped outside a shabby hut, where a frail woman was

washing clothes. 'Get up, Gowri!' he said. 'Hug him! He is your son!' She didn't recognise me; nor I her. We hugged with a sort of tentative reluctance. 'She is your father's sister,' the man told me. I stood there completely perplexed. My father had never had a sister. I was stunned when the woman said, 'Is he Ammul's son?' Ammul is my father's childhood nickname, which hardly anyone outside the family knows. She looked at me again, held me in her arms and cried. Her husband sat on the ground and broke down. My eyes were wet. Gowri abandoned her half-washed clothes in a bucket near the communal tap. We walked into their one room hut. A bed took up most of the space in the room. In a corner was a tiny kitchenette. Gowri moved a few utensils, made room to squat before a small gas stove and brewed tea.

Over tea we talked for two hours about Kashmir and our lives there before the armed conflict. They had lived in a neighbouring village near my uncle's house, where my father had spent his childhood and adolescence. In his early twenties he worked as a teacher in Pulwama. Gowri had also got a job in the same village. Her parents worried about her travelling alone back and forth every day. 'They allowed me to join there only after they knew your father would take me along,' she said. In the evening, I called my father and told him about the meeting. He was silent on the phone for a long time. I think I heard him cry. Then as if he was talking to himself, he said, 'Those were great days, son. Her family was like my own. I did all the chores when she and Avatar were getting married. I have not seen her for years. Tell her I will.'

On the walls hung clothes and pictures of Shiva, Rama, Krishna and Saraswati. I was about to leave when a young girl walked in almost unnoticed. She had Gowri's face and Avatar's black eyes minus the wrinkles and the grief. We were introduced. I made small talk about her school. She sat on the edge of the bed uneasily, her school bag on her lap. Sweat

rolled down her forehead like teardrops. August is a time of miserable heat in Jammu. But I had become oblivious to the heat upon meeting Gowri and Avatar. I felt my shirt sticking to my back despite the whining ceiling fan overhead. The girl turned to her mother with a pleading glance. Gowri asked Avatar and me to take a walk outside. The girl had to change. She was thirteen. There was no other room. There were no prospects of a bigger house in sight for them and the girl was growing up. How long could she sleep on a mattress on the floor beside the bed her parents occupied? What meaning would the words like drawing room, study, bedroom or balcony have for her? How would she relate to the stories of the people living in houses that she would meet in her books? Maybe her parents would try to explain. They once lived in a house that had rooms with different names.

Now, with the journey to Jammu to meet Vinod and our teacher ahead of me, I was scared at the prospect of what I might find. I continued thinking about the time they had had to leave Kashmir, and their journey to Jammu. I had only been able to understand the pain of leaving home after my many departures from Kashmir, as a student, as a journalist on a visit from Delhi. But my departures were voluntary—at times to get better education, at times for work. I always left with the knowledge that I could come back whenever I wanted. Yet every time I booked a ticket, packed my bags, and left for the bus stand or the airport, left Kashmir, I felt as if an iron hand had taken me in its grip and pulled me from my soil. I always fought back tears, as my car moved out of Srinagar, past the bunkers, the edgy soldiers standing behind machine guns, the pedestrians being frisked at every checkpoint, displaying their identity cards. I would be in a daze when I passed through the wooden Srinagar airport gate fitted with a metal detector and the soldiers there checked

my bags and body, making sure that I carried no explosives. I would walk around aimlessly in the gloomy waiting hall with its wood-panelled walls, deserted papier-mâché and pashmina stalls, and a replica of a houseboat serving as a café.

On boarding the flight to Delhi, I would strain my neck staring out of the window as the plane rose and took off after a violent sprint on the runway: the receding houses growing smaller every moment, the paddies turning into neat green squares marked by their wedges, the metalled roads connecting villages shrinking into black lines, and, in a few minutes, Kashmir appearing as a pristine, serene bowl framed by proud, flamboyant snow peaks, coquettish clouds choosing new shapes every moment, and, above it all, the brilliant blue sky.

I knew I was coming back, unlike Vinod or our teacher Kantroo. Confronted with all these thoughts, I delayed my journey to Jammu to meet my old teacher and my childhood friend. Finally, one morning, I boarded a jeep in Anantnag and after eight hours on a mountainous highway reached Jammu. The next morning I called a few acquaintances from my hotel room enquiring about my teacher. They could not help. The government telephone enquiry gives phone numbers, but it barely works. I called; no response. Another call; no response. On the fifth call, the computerised telephone exchange recording said, 'We are pleased to receive your call. Your call is very important to us. Our operators will soon assist you.' 'Soon' meant waiting for five long minutes before the phone disconnected. I was used to it. But that was an impatient morning.

I paced around the room and called again. The phone beeped and I heard a man's voice, a real operator. 'Can I have Chaman Lal Kantroo's number? He lives in Amphalla.' I heard the sound of fingers typing the name on a keyboard. 'Take down the number.' I stared at the phone number on my

writing pad, pulled myself together and punched the number in. His wife answered the phone. She remembered me; I could talk to my teacher if I called after ten minutes. I did and he picked up the phone. His voice was hoarse, tired. He did not seem well. 'Can I come to see you, sir? 'Get here before ten,' he said, 'I have an appointment with my doctor at 10.30.' He coughed and gave me directions. It was 9.30.

I rushed out onto the road and grabbed an auto rickshaw. The driver sped through bazaars, crossed a few flyovers, shot up a slope, turned into a lane and stopped. We were at the landmark, a jail, in fifteen minutes. I sought directions for a local writer's white bungalow. A narrow, empty lane took me there. A vegetable seller pointed out the house. From the writer's house, I had to take the first lane on the left; my teacher lived in its first house. It was a run-down, yellow-painted brick house. The doorbell did not work. I knocked. A girl opened the door. 'I do not know any Kantroos. There is a Kashmiri Pandit family living on the top floor. That might be them.' She disappeared behind a curtained room on the ground floor.

A steep stair led to the rooftop. Behind a curtain of clothes hanging on a nylon rope was a garret. 'Come in, Basharat,' Mr Kantroo called out. He sat on a bed by the lone window of the room. We shook hands and he asked me to sit with him on the bed. I looked at him for long; he had aged since the time I had last seen him in our school office. His cheeks had sunk deeply, his hair was almost white, and his black moustache was missing. His eyebrows were still bushy and black; his eyes were still deep brown, but seemed to have lost their verve. I saw in them resignation and fatigue. I did not want to see that. He broke the silence, asking me about my life and work, about other students in my class. I answered, running my eyes over a blue plastic bowl, a razor and a cup of shaving cream lying on a newspaper in front of him. Some

were doctors, some were biochemists, some were lawyers, some were engineers, and some were dead. Paint flaked from the walls and the fan overhead moved noisily. I wanted to ask him what had forced him to leave Kashmir twelve years after the conflict started. I remembered the new school principal talking about a 'problem he had' I could not ask.

His wife, who had helped him run the school, joined us. We talked about Kashmir. I had forgotten my teacher was a poet too. The answers to my unanswered questions could be found in his poetry. When I was about to leave, I asked him about his writing. 'I am not writing much nowadays. I did write when I was in Kashmir. A collection of poems was published in 2002.' His eyes sparkled again. 'But it is not with the booksellers. I could not accept their terms. Mostly friends and acquaintances come and take a copy.' 'You cannot hide them,' I protested. He smiled a smile indifferent to publishing advances. 'Turn around and pick a copy from the shelf.' I held a lean, hardbound monograph in my hands. The cover read *Eternal Sin.* I left my poet-teacher.

Near the jail building I noticed an empty teastall. I found a seat in a corner. Hastily, I opened the book dedicated to the 'non-beings of the world' I turned a page; the teastall owner brought me a glass full of tea. I read the poem 'Innocuous Innocent' describing a dying man:

A bloodstained label
Stuck to his lapel
Reads: In...
Does it mean 'Indian, Informer, Intruder, Insurgent?'
It bewilders to make it read 'Innocuous Innocent.'

I saw the dead: Prem Nath Bhat, my father's friend and a bright Pandit lawyer of Anantnag, shot by militants before he could argue; Abdul Sattar Ranjoor, a leftist poet from

Kulgam town, slain before he could write a dissenting poem; Zahoor Dalal, a shopkeeper on an evening walk thrust into a police van, shot, and dressed in the camouflage of an intruder/insurgent. Few journalists rushing back and forth in taxis, typing on their battered computer terminals the words 'Innocuous Innocent'. Another poem was titled 'Handcuffed Wishes' I remembered our last conversation in his school office in Kashmir. 'People talk about nothing but death. Talk about life, talk about books.' I had found my answers in his verse. I left the teastall and walked amidst heavy traffic, indifferent to the world, holding the book in a close grip.

I called the telephone enquiry again. Kantroo had told me Vinod's family lived in a place called Palora. I asked for his father and got the number. His mother told me he worked in Delhi. Vinod had trained as an engineer and worked for an air conditioning company. His mother vaguely knew the name. Somehow, after all these years of going our separate ways and failing to keep in touch I was impatient. I googled the company; it threw up an address in south Delhi's Vasant Vihar area. I looked at the computer screen in disbelief. It was a block away from my office. We had worked a block away from each other and never met. Maybe we had not recognised our adult faces. I wondered how many times we had passed each other along with a thousand other office workers. I loved Delhi for the anonymity it provides; I also hated it for that very quality.

Back in Srinagar, one afternoon, I walked into my usual cyber café. I waited on a gaudy sofa for my turn. A remixed version of the latest Bollywood hit blared from an invisible speaker. I tried reading a few-days-old newspaper lying on a table. A young man with black hair parted sideways over his narrow forehead walked in. He seemed vaguely familiar. We looked at each other in a moment of knowing and not knowing.

Vikas! I had last seen him as a small boy standing next to Vinod in an old school photograph from Lyceum, our childhood school. Vikas and I had competed for the attentions of a classmate of ours in a childhood romance that never happened. Vikas too had migrated with his family to Jammu in the early nineties. We had lost touch. He was a sales manager for a pharmaceutical company, and he was in Srinagar to make an assessment of their sales. He was staying in a hotel on Dal Lake. 'You have to come home, Vicky! To hell with the hotel!' I told him. 'I am leaving in two hours. Have an afternoon flight to catch, just dropped in to shoot a mail to my office.' We talked about our families. Neither of us mentioned anything about the conflict; we were simply two friends meeting after almost fifteen years. He asked me about our Muslim friends; I asked him about our Pandit friends. We had lost touch with most. We shared a cigarette, taking puffs after one another, and laughed about things from our childhood.

An hour later, I walked past Polo View towards Zero Bridge, beyond which I lived. Srinagar, the city of bunkers, which used to be the city of seven bridges. Strains of a song playing on a radio escaped from a solitary bunker near the bridge. A lonely-looking soldier stood behind a machine gun. The setting sun shone in the green water of Jhelum. Its last rays reddened the horizon. I thought of my grandmother telling me as a child, 'When an innocent man is killed, the sky turns red.' An innocent man had died in Kashmir almost every day after that winter.

Chapter Fifteen

Two words had remained omnipresent in my journeys. Whether it was at a feast or a funeral, a visit to a destroyed shrine or a redeemed torture chamber, a story about a stranger or about my own life, a poem or a painting, two words always made their presence felt: militants and soldiers. They had shadowed every life I wrote about including my own. Yet they remained ghost-like presences. Newspapers mention the number of people they kill and the numbers they die in. My friends in Delhi often asked me who they were, what they were like. I asked myself the same question. I too had wanted to carry a gun, fight, kill and die. Some people I knew in my adolescence had crossed the line, carried a gun, fought a battle, killed and died. Some had survived the war. I think of the beginnings again and again: the winter of 1990 and the thousands of Kashmiri boys making journeys across the LoC. I remember my own failed attempt, the emotional discussions at home, and grandfather telling me, 'You don't live long in a war, son'. I often try to imagine the life I would have led if I had embraced the gun. Tariq, my cousin, and Pervez, my friend, who became militants, were both dead.

I had recently visited Tariq's family. Twelve years after Tariq's death, I walked with Shabnam to the same playground where we had last seen Tariq. The playground was empty; the cheering crowds of August 1992 had melted away; the militants were dead. Shabnam talked about his career. There was a girl. He wanted to marry her; their parents opposed the relationship. Things had turned bitter after he had dropped her off outside her college on his bike. One of her relatives complained to their parents about his 'waywardness' Now they met clandestinely at a friend's place. He had spoken to his

father about marrying her and wanted him to take a proposal to her parents. His father had talked about family honour, about marrying his children into 'respectable' families, about the girl's family being nouveau riche. My cousin had asked friends and relatives to convince his father; the old man was rigid, unshakeable.

Shabnam had broken the unwritten rule: he had talked about his dead brother. Families who lost someone in the conflict rarely talked about the dead. He confronted his father and said the most painful words: 'Tariq would not have turned to the gun if you had allowed him to marry the girl he liked.' Now, he regretted his words. His father had wrapped himself in a brooding silence since he had mentioned Tariq. 'What should I do? I feel terrible for mentioning Tariq and yet I cannot leave her. Should I elope and marry in a civil court or should I give up?' The wars of nations and the wars of the heart mean pain, longing, and tears.

Before Tariq joined the militants, he was an ordinary student, mostly busy with his cricket team. His transition reminded me of Asif, a school friend, who had joined the militants for a few years, before returning to civilian life. I had not seen him since our school days in the early nineties. I remembered posing for group pictures with Asif in front of our school. I leafed through my photo album and found a photograph from our school days. In the picture, I am fifteen and standing with Asif in a garden in front of our boarding school. We lived in the same hostel and played for the same volleyball team.

Asif had been a dandy. I envied him the female attention and his accessories, like Kamachi shoes. Kamachis were Russian sports shoes that militants had made fashionable. Kashmiri teenagers in the early nineties did not imitate Che Guevara and Malcolm X; militants walking the ramp of war determined the fashion trends. Militants wore Kamachi shoes

and boys wanted Kamachi shoes. Militants replaced the stones in their rings with pistol bullets and boys replaced the stones in their rings with pistol bullets. A range of militaristic jewellery became fashionable. The Sufi tradition of wearing an amulet was improvised upon. To the string holding the amulet was added a Kalashnikov cartridge. Asif had Kamachi shoes, a bullet ring, and a cartridge amulet. He was cool.

I left Srinagar in early August for Anantnag, where I boarded a bus for Asif's village further south. I wasn't sure whether he would be there; I didn't even have his phone number. The bus passed through scores of Kashmiri villages and stopped an hour later at a military checkpost near Asif's village. I followed the routine of raising my hands, showing my identification, talking about coming from Srinagar to visit a family friend. The bodily frisking, the proof of identity, the rude questions, which had seemed humiliating earlier were routine now, like brushing your teeth. The soldiers let us pass; the bus moved on and stopped in the village square. I walked through the bus yard to a grocery dangling a Coke billboard with a life-size picture of Aishwarya Rai.

Two boys idling at the shopfront volunteered to show me Asif's house. We jostled along a labyrinth of lanes and reached the entrance of a mansion with two wooden balconies. One of the boys rushed in and returned with a lean, fifty-something, balding man wearing a Nehru jacket.

'Is Asif around?' I asked.

'Who are you?' he asked, surveying me keenly.

I introduced myself. He warmed up and welcomed me into the house. 'I am sorry, I was not sure who it was,' he said. 'One has to be careful.' We sat in a carpeted drawing room. A picture of Mecca and a cheap print of wild horses hung on a wall. Asif was visiting an uncle at the other end of the village. There were no phones in the village. His father sent the two boys to call him. 'We got a phone booth for the

whole village last year,' he said with a sigh, 'but that does not work any more.'

'What happened?'

'The militants thought it could be used to inform the army about their whereabouts, so they blasted the house where it was installed. The house was damaged and half the family was killed. Nobody even thought about it after that.' Asif's village and the adjoining village were known to have a strong military and militant presence. People lived there obeying either the soldiers or the militants. I remembered Asif's father was a lawyer, and to keep up the conversation, asked him about his practice. 'Well! I visit the court occasionally. My heart was never in law. I make my money from my apple orchards.' He paused and then added wearily, 'I always dreamt of politics. I wanted to contest elections, be a politician. That remains my sole ambition.'

'Have you joined any political party?'

'You think I want to die?' he laughed. He had been in the ruling National Conference until 1989. After the militancy began, he published his resignation in local newspapers like most other activists of pro-India political parties. Public resignations saved many lives. Asif's father gave up his political ambitions and stuck to apple farming.

'Basharat,' an eager voice came from the door. I turned around to find a sturdy young man, with short hair and big black eyes set in a chiselled face. 'Where have you been all these years?' Asif cried. We hugged. I would meet old friends after a decade and never feel I had been away. His father left us alone to talk. Asif spoke slowly, carefully, and seemed to forget his sentences halfway. He had begun a master's degree at the university in Srinagar, lived in the university hostel, and visited his parents once a month. He attended classes and read his textbooks. 'There is not much to do after classes,' he said, 'I generally sit by the lake or stay in my room.'

He drank his tea and looked at me, as if he was debating whether or not to tell me something. I was there to ask him about himself, about his militant life. But I couldn't ask that question; it felt wrong, very wrong to be even meeting an old friend because I was keen to understand his militant experience. After a while, he began talking about his life after school. He had gone back to his village and joined a local college. Surrounded by brown, barren mountains, his village had become a militant stronghold. Militants would parade in the open, slinging assault rifles from their shoulders, hanging hand grenades from their belts. Indian troops stayed away most of the time. There was no television, no telephone, not even a hospital or proper municipal services. Militants stayed with the locals and ate at their houses.

Asif got to know some militant commanders, who impressed and influenced him. One day, he left home and joined his militant friends. At various hideouts, he learned to use an assault rifle, throw a hand grenade, blast a landmine and plan a guerrilla operation. He roamed from one village to the other with his comrades-in-arms. I tried hard to picture Asif in fatigues, carrying deadly weapons—and using them. He had been a militant for two years.

'What was it like?' I finally asked him.

'Scary,' he replied. 'My battalion treated me very well. We moved around together and were generally quite happy being the way we were. But it hurt me when we had to move from village to village, seeking shelter and food. People welcomed us in their houses. But at times, I felt that people hosted and fed us because they were scared. I felt unwelcome, almost like an armed beggar. I had grown up in luxury and my parents had bought me everything I asked them for. Then I was a militant, sleeping in a house whose owner was scared that the army might come there, who smiled at me and wished we would leave. I could not sleep and I missed my family.'

Asif found it hard to talk about those days. I had an urge to ask him if he had killed anyone. But I was scared to ask. Instead, I asked him about his leaving the militant group. 'One day our commander told us that we had to attack an army convoy. I picked up my Kalashnikov. We were about to leave and I began shivering. I was too scared and death seemed so real. I left soon after that. My commanders were kind enough to let me go.' We left his house, walked to the bus yard, bought two Cokes from the shop with the Aishwarya Rai poster. Asif loved Aishwarya and watched all her films. I found her mechanical and told him so. The talk lightened the atmosphere. We were boys again. Asif talked about graduating from the local university and trying for higher education in Delhi or some other Indian city. I voted for Delhi. 'It is the best Indian city for a student. You find good teachers and wonderful libraries. You must try Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University.' He agreed.

'It must be fun being there.'

'It can be great.'

He had a mischievous smile on his face. 'Tell me something?'

'What?' I was curious.

'Did you go to a discotheque in Delhi? Did you dance with girls?'

I told him about my awkward attempts. We shook hands. I hopped onto a bus which was gliding out of the yard. Asif turned into the lane leading to his house. I watched him from the bus window. My grandfather had been right when he had told me, 'You don't live very long in a war, son!' Pervez was dead, Tariq was dead, and so were thousands of other young Kashmiris. I was happy for Asif, happy that he had survived and returned home.

I reached Anantnag after sunset. The town was deserted, the shops were closed and groups of commuters huddled

together in the bus yard. After a few long minutes, an auto rickshaw stopped and the driver yelled the name of an area near my village. In half an hour, I was knocking at the iron gate of my house. There was silence for a few minutes. Then my grandfather asked, 'Who is it?' 'It is Basharat, Baba!' The door opened. I shook hands with grandfather and two of my cousins standing behind him like bodyguards. They had been unsure of who could be at the door.

After dinner, I sat on a small balcony of the house overlooking the road, beyond which paddy fields spread for miles to reach the arc of mountains. A half moon cast a faint white light on the village. I heard the murmurs of the stream passing by. I sat on a chair, plonked my feet on another and stretched myself a bit. My thoughts drifted to Asif and his militant days again. He had talked about missing the comforts of home as a militant. I understood him. He could fight battles and win wars as a militant but he couldn't look at a half moon and plonk his feet on a chair on the balcony of his house. He couldn't have argued about changing the TV channel with his fourteen year old cousin and resisted his grandmother's coercion to feed him food enough for three people. Being a militant wasn't only about getting arms training and fighting, it was also about being excluded from the joys of life.

Being a militant was also about the near certainty of arrest, torture, death, and killing. Graveyards, named and nameless, have become part of this landscape. Would Asif too have ended up in a named or a nameless grave, like Pervez and Tariq? Would he too have killed? The Kashmiri militants who died fighting the Indian troops were carried like heroes in funeral processions and their comrades-in-arms saluted them with guns. Some of them even became mythical figures. But they were dead. And so were the men they had killed. And that was the only absolute truth. People went home after the

funerals and the slogans and continued their lives till the next funeral and the next round of slogans.

I had witnessed this in the early nineties and saw it again in the spring of 2004, on a visit to my old friend Hilal's house. Hilal lived in a village south of Anantnag along the highway leading from Srinagar to the Indian plains. We had been in the same class at college, had lived in the same hostel, and had misspent our early youth together. We had stayed in touch. Hilal had curly hair and restless blue eyes. He usually wore a T-shirt and jeans over his tall, wiry frame. He had worked as a journalist for some time after college, but had given it up after things turned nasty. Recently, he had returned to study sociology at the university in Srinagar. He seemed only a slightly older version of our college days, always walking around with a bag of books. He had also been infamous for not returning the books he had borrowed; I had called to remind him of some books he owed me. 'Alright, come over in the morning and take your books,' he said. The next morning, I waited in Anantnag, near the Srinagar–Jammu highway, to catch a bus for Hilal's village. A bunch of office workers waited along with me. For around half an hour, there was no sign of a bus. We speculated about the reasons for the delay and hoped it was not a general strike. Beside the highway, a row of motels came to life, a regiment of soldiers patrolled up and down, students walked to a college nearby, and a policeman stood on a roundabout with no traffic to redirect. A truck screeched its brakes near the bus stop. Twenty or so shabbily dressed men jumped out and stood near the roundabout. I heard the cry 'Allah-o-Akbar' and turned around. Their defiant posturing against an unseen adversary seemed the beginning of a protest. They persisted with shouting 'Allah-o-Akbar'

The workers at the motels, the shopkeepers, the office-goers and the students eyed them in anticipation. The policeman

was nervous and my comrades-in-waiting whispered: 'Has someone been arrested?' A wiry youth carrying a bunch of sticks soaked them in petrol and lit them with a matchstick. He passed on a burning stick to each of his fellow sloganeers. They held the burning sticks like Olympic torches and moved in a circle chanting, 'It is darkness everywhere.' The policeman tried to stop them; they persisted. The soldiers approached and the torchbearers froze. The policeman talked to the soldiers, grabbed a baton and joined the determined soldiers in a baton charge on our protesters. They ran where their feet took them. The burning sticks fell around the roundabout. The policeman and the soldiers crushed the feeble fire with their heavy leather boots. Bystanders watched; some smiled. Later, I asked the policeman about the protesters. 'They are from some backward village and have no electricity. So they have come to disrupt traffic on the highway to force the government to consider their demands.'

Hilal came to pick me up on his motorcycle. The buses were off the roads; the army had killed a militant commander in a nearby village. A strike had been called in solidarity. We turned onto a dirt track meandering away from the highway through fields. There was no other vehicle on the road for miles. The villages seemed asleep. The road entered Hilal's village and we noticed a long line of trucks full of agitated men, women, and children. Hilal told me the slain militant commander belonged to a village two miles from his. The trucks were ferrying mourners to join his funeral procession. We parked the motorcycle, and were watching the mourners when some local boys asked whether we wanted to go for the funeral. 'The trucks are going there. You can get on board.'

We were unsure how safe this would be but decided to go for it and soon we were on the road. As we approached the village, we began to see an unending stream of trucks and cars. Old and young, men, women and children were

moving at a frenzied pace towards the slain commander's home. We covered the two miles in half an hour. We parked the motorcycle and followed a growing crowd. I saw a wave of heads form the crests and troughs of hurrying humanity. People stood on the mud walls bordering the lane, on the verandahs of their houses, on the wooden rice barns, on cowsheds, and some youngsters watched the scene from tree branches. And we heard pro-freedom slogans:

Hum kya chahte? Aazadi!
(We want? Freedom!)

The commander's home was a bare house with maroon, distempered brick walls. His body was being taken to the graveyard. I jumped onto a mud wall and saw a body covered with a green, silken shawl lying on a cot: Arif Khan, the south Kashmir commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen. The cot floated over the heads; bodies jostled and hands stretched out to carry it. The wave became a flood, as if invigorated by the sight of the dead man. I looked at the faces around me. They were unlike the hired protesters ferried in buses from villages by political parties to impress the TV crews in Srinagar parks. Some cried, some held back tears, and some burned with anger. Many brushed their hands over the shroud and then rubbed their palms over their foreheads and chests. It is a ritual Kashmiris follow at Sufi shrines, where people rub their hands over the stairs leading to the saint's grave or the cloth covering the saint's grave. The procession moved forward with more slogans:

Arif tere khoon se, inquilab aayega!
(Arif your blood will bring revolution!)
Ae zaalimo! Ae jaabiro! Kashmir hamara chod do!
(O tyrants! O tormentors! Quit our Kashmir!)

Arif se poocho! Arif kahta hai! Aazadi!
(Ask Arif! He says: freedom!)

The pallbearers passed by where I stood on the mud wall. I peered hard to catch a glimpse of the slain militant. When he died, Khan was in his early thirties, a short, lean man whose balding head gave an elongated look to his face. I saw his lifeless, half-open black eyes and an unwashed mark of clotted blood on his forehead. I saw the grey shirt he wore when he died. The procession moved on. A young man climbed onto the wall holding a black leather shoe and shouted, 'Whose shoe is it?' A boy who had lost his shoes turned around, looked at the shoe, and said it was not his.

I joined the funeral procession and a little ahead I heard someone singing. It felt like a chorus of female voices singing traditional marriage songs, which seemed to be rising above the fervour of men's slogans. It was. A group of around fifty girls and women followed the procession. I stepped away from the crowd, waited for the women and walked behind them. Some adjusted their headscarves, some let them fall, singing:

Shaheedo mubarak! Shaheedo mubarak!
(Congratulations martyr! You have earned martyrdom!)

The tune reminded me of a song girls sang in my village on the eve of Eid. Outside the graveyard, comrades of the slain commander were affirming the longevity of their organisation after his death. A group of militants in their early twenties raised their Kalashnikovs and black Chinese pistols in the air and saluted the dead man with intermittent volleys of bullets piercing the azure sky. A moustached man with a pistol shouted a Kashmiri militant version of 'The king is dead; long live the king': 'Zinda hai HM!' (Hizbul

Mujahideen lives!). Militants and mourners shouted back in chorus, 'Zinda hai!' (It lives!).

A group of men circled the grave dug out for Khan. Fresh, moist soil was piled around the pit. The pallbearers laid the cot carrying him near the grave. More people had arrived to join the funeral and wanted to see his face before he was buried. Mourners argued and the burial was delayed. The wooden graveyard gate creaked against the mass of people trying to push it open. I tried getting out by climbing over the fence. Men and women were pulling and pushing it.

I had barely managed to jump over the fence and was pushing my way out, when a tiny, middle-aged woman caught me by the collar and shouted, 'Listen to me.' Her face, shining with sweat, almost matched the shade of her bright pink pheran. 'He was born here, but he grew up, he fought, and he died in my village. I have walked ten miles with a hundred people to get here. Tell them, they cannot bury him till we see his face.' I told her the burial had been delayed. She hugged me and the next moment charged at the graveyard fence, which was giving way. I pushed my way out of the procession. I took off my jacket, washed my face, and drank from a roadside tap. I rested for a while at a shopfront. It seemed like a day borrowed from the early nineties, when such funerals were held almost everywhere, almost every day.

An old man standing by the shopfront scanned me; I could see his eyes registering my denim jacket, my corduroy trousers, my satchel, and my notebook. 'You are not from these parts?' I gave him the name of my village. He did not take me for a mourner. 'What really brought you here?' 'I am a journalist,' I replied. The old man blurted the word with disdain and shouted, 'Where are the TV wallahs? Go back and tell them what happened here! Tell them this is what they should show live.'

Hilal waited beyond the mile-long row of vehicles. He seemed exhausted by the experience; I was. We left for his village. Reclining on cushions in his room, boosted by a good cup of coffee, we slowly recovered from the dizzy fervour of the funeral. Hilal saw the world like a student of sociology. He talked about the class composition of the funeral gathering: 'lower middle classes' and 'peasantry' Fascinated by the role myths and legends play in a society like Kashmir's, he narrated the myths he had heard about Arif Khan at the funeral. 'Some people said he would change costumes and escape detection by the army. One day, he was a shepherd herding cattle on the highway, the other, he was a Gujar nomad, dressed in a waistcoat and turban, riding a horse past an army patrol in a village.'

The nature of the separatist militancy in Kashmir had changed. The pro-Pakistan Hizbul Mujahideen dominated the pro-independence JKLF by 1994. By the mid nineties, the Pakistani pan-Islamist Lashkar-e-Toiba and, later, Jaish-e-Mohammed, became more prominent presences. The Pakistani Islamist militants mostly kept to themselves and did not mingle with the population like the Kashmiri militants. Lashkar and Jaish believed in suicide bombings, which the Kashmiri militants had avoided. I had never seen a Lashkar or Jaish man except on TV or in the newspaper pictures, which showed the dead militants being dragged by soldiers after a suicide attack on a military camp. Much of the reportage described them as either the poor or the orphans of the Afghan war, raised in madrasas, and then pushed into Kashmir by their handlers in the Pakistani army and intelligence. Their report cards were filled with the bodies of people they killed: ranging from random civilians to chosen political activists to suspected informers to policemen and soldiers.

I had a sense of Kashmiri militants; I knew their contexts, could place them on a social map. A lot of them were killed,

like my cousin Tariq; a lot of them left arms and returned to quiet civilian lives, like my school friend Asif; many played all sides, trying to get what they could out of the confusion of the conflict, like Yusuf had.

I knew Yusuf from my childhood. I have seven vivid memories of his various lives.

1987: Yusuf was a constable in the local police. As his pastime, he hovered around Heaven, the only theatre in Anantnag, getting a bunch of tickets, and selling them for a quick profit to the hordes thronging for matinee shows.

1991: Yusuf had returned after spending four months in a militant training camp in Pakistan. I saw him on the road outside my house. He wore an expensive leather jacket over blue jeans and a white shirt, a shining silver pistol jutting out of his trousers. 'Is Masterji home?' he said, asking about my grandfather, who had at some point taught him too, like thousands of others. He sat on a sofa in our drawing room and putting on an air of gravity told grandfather, 'Masterji, you are like a father to me. If anyone gives you any trouble, tell him you are Azad Khan's [Yusuf's new name] teacher.' Then he put the pistol on the table and had some tea and biscuits. Grandfather made some small talk and then reluctantly asked, 'You were in the police and already knew how to use guns. Then why did you go to Pakistan?' Yusuf laughed. 'Just to see Pakistan! And, then, it is like a certificate, a degree that you are a real militant! Otherwise, people wouldn't take me seriously.'

1995: I saw Yusuf again, in Anantnag, outside a counter-insurgent camp. Being a separatist militant was too dangerous. Death seemed close and he had changed sides, living under the protection and patronage of the Indian army.

1996: After six years of direct rule from Delhi, India decided to hold local elections in Kashmir. The election was a joke.

Almost nobody voted. The counter-insurgents contested. The few people who were dragged by the soldiers to polling booths voted against the counter-insurgents. Yusuf had sensed the mood and left the counter-insurgents. Militants had issued threats against electoral candidates; the Indian government promised them official housing, bulletproof cars, and armed police constables and paramilitary soldiers as bodyguards. Yusuf seized the moment, joined a small time political party, which never won a seat. He obviously lost the elections. I was home for holidays from college. My father was posted in Anantnag, as the Additional Deputy Commissioner, the second most senior administrator of the district. He stayed in a housing complex, where only senior government officers and politicians lived. I saw Yusuf leaning against a bulletproof jeep a few houses from my father's residence. He seemed healthier and more prosperous.

2003: Whatever happened in Kashmir, people like Yusuf, and there are a lot of them, found ways of 'doing well'. I had flown from Delhi to report on the grim massacre of Kashmiri Hindus in the village of Nadimarg. The place was reeling with pain, the wails of survivors, the traces of the massacre brought tears to every eye. All major Indian politicians, including then Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani, the Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, and her daughter Priyanka were there. Sonia Gandhi was talking to a few survivors. Priyanka stood beside her, stately, composed, in a sari, commandos forming a circle around the mother and the daughter. A tall man in a Congress politician's regulation white kurta pajama and Nehru jacket walked up to Priyanka Gandhi. They spoke for a bit. The princess speaking slowly; the sycophant, at his obsequious best, listening. Then, Yusuf turned around; his face was glowing with that brief moment of intimacy with the most powerful daughter in Asia, a woman whose word could take him far in politics.

June 2004: I was walking in the Srinagar city centre. A fancy car stopped next to me and someone called out my name. Yusuf stepped out of the car and hugged me. 'I hear you have become a big journalist. But you shall not forget me! Write something about me too.' 'Yes, I will. One day,' I promised. I had to rush somewhere and missed his offer of coffee.

September 2004: I was home, reading a local newspaper. The headline read: 'Militants' broad daylight strike in Anantnag: Cong leader, PSO gunned down'.

> Excelsior Special Correspondent
> SRINAGAR, Sept 29: In a daredevil strike, militants today gunned down Congress party's vice president for Anantnag, Mohammad Yusuf Bhat alias Yusuf Mattan, alongwith his Personal Security Officer (PSO) at Rishi Bazar of Anantnag. Informed sources in south Kashmir told the EXCELSIOR that Congress leader Mohammad Yusuf Bhat alias Yusuf Mattan S/o Mohammad Shaban Bhat R/o Mattan, parked his Qualis at Rishi Bazar, Anantnag town, and strolled towards a shop at 0855 hours today. He asked his PSO, Constable Mohammad Ashraf to stay behind in the car. Suddenly, two to three militants appeared and they fired on both in point blank range. Both, the mainstream political leader as well as his PSO, were rushed to District Hospital where they were declared brought dead. Later in the day, Bhat was laid to rest at his ancestral graveyard in Mattan.

Even Yusuf had not gotten out alive. I had come to believe he could play his cards, that he would survive, that we would meet again.

I was curious to meet some Pakistani militants operating in Kashmir. Friends suggested visiting the small town of Shopian in south Kashmir. Bill Clinton once called Kashmir the most dangerous place on earth. Kashmiris call Shopian the most dangerous place. The town has a heavy presence of both Indian troops and Pakistani and Kashmiri militants fighting them. Some years back at a university in Delhi I had met Ahmed, an engineering student from Shopian. We became friends and spent many nights in my hostel room smoking, drinking coffee and talking about literature. He seemed to fancy himself as Howard Roark, Ayn Rand's protagonist in her novel, *The Fountainhead.* He repeated Rand's theme throughout the night. 'Ego! Basharat, Ego is the fountainhead of man's progress. A man should be like Howard Roark, committed to excellence and undeterred by circumstances.' His deep brown eyes shone and his voice quivered with excitement every time he repeated those lines. His hands rose and fell like hammers hitting imaginary nails as he spoke.

I did not have his address; it seemed unlikely I would find such an ambitious guy in that drowsy, dangerous town. I called a common friend in Srinagar, who gave me his home number. He was not sure whether Ahmed was there. A woman received the call and told me he worked in town, in a bank. The road to Shopian ran like a black streak through cone-roofed brick and wood houses. The usual Kashmiri landscape of fields, trees, and military camps separated the villages. Beyond them were mountains, bald and forested, brown and green. The driver of the shared taxi was a grim-looking man and drove at a self-destructive speed. A folk singer whined on the car stereo: 'O Magician! Which arrow have you pierced my heart with?'

Two hours after leaving Srinagar, our jeep stopped in the dusty market in Shopian. The market—two parallel rows

of garment shops, grocers, booksellers, chemists and tea stalls—was the typical Kashmiri small town market. Jeeps and buses waited for passengers; villagers carrying grocery and apple pesticides for their orchards hung around. Soldiers with rifles slung over their shoulders patrolled the road. Drinking tea in a kiosk at the taxi stand, I remembered a winter holiday spent here with my parents in the mid eighties, when my father worked here. I thought of his copies of *Reader's Digest* which I had read eagerly; a light green, lawn tennis ball my brother and I used to play cricket; and the legend narrated by my father and his friends: the romance of a prince, Nagirai, and a princess, Heemal, believed to have lived here in ancient times. Two springs on the outskirts of the town were named after them.

The driver was still around, waiting for passengers. I asked him about the springs of Heemal and Nagirai. 'I have spent many hours by the springs. I will take you there.' His face lit up. We headed back on the same road, out of the town. He stopped the car the moment we had left the clutter of the town behind and entered a grove of willows. He walked off the road and pointed to a chinar tree. 'That is the spring of Nagirai.' Under a young chinar was a tiny, loop-shaped spring. Crimson leaves covered the spring. A heap of apple branches lay beside it.

Beside the chinar, the local Academy of Art and Culture had erected a memorial. An inscription on a bluish stone cemented into the memorial façade read:

> 'A milestone in our cultural inheritance, this spring of Heemal transports us to a hoary past when the clash of Naga (earliest snake-worshipping inhabitants of Kashmir) and Aryan cultures was taking place in this beautiful valley. A Naga prince, Nagirai, attracted and courted Heemal, the daughter of an Aryan lord. Thus

the folktale of Heemal and Nagirai got inscribed in collective memory and was transmitted from generation to generation. This legend carries in itself many mysteries of our national existence and is fragrant with the touch of local soil.'

The basin of a vast river, now dried to a trickle, rose towards a hill. 'The spring of Heemal lies near that hill,' Hasan the driver said. We drove further on the road leading out of the town. 'Nagirai's spring is sacred. We still see snakes come and go into it. Last year, three soldiers killed a snake at Nagirai's spring. Three days later, those soldiers were killed in a mine blast.' He spoke reverentially. The ancient Hindu reverence towards the snake gods seemed to live on despite the conversion of most Kashmiris to Islam. Hasan's belief that the soldiers' death was divine punishment for killing the snakes at the sacred spring seemed to be the latest addition to the myths rising around the romance of Heemal and Nagirai. He looked straight onto the road and drove in silence.

A few miles ahead, the road skirted onto a dirt path going up the hill. The hilltop housed a huge army camp. Hasan stopped the car half a mile before the camp and asked me to walk. 'The passengers are supposed to walk.' I went up to the gates, where the soldiers frisked me and checked my identity card.

'What business do you have here?' a soldier shouted.

'I have to visit the spring beyond your camp.'

'Spring?' His tone was both sarcastic and sceptical.

I guessed he was from Punjab, famous for a similar legendary romance of Heer and Ranjha. 'The spring here belongs to the memory of the Heer of Kashmir. Her story is to Kashmir what Heer–Ranjha's is to Punjab.' I replied. He drew his head back, weighed my words, and smiled. 'I have been here for a long time but I never knew this. Go ahead!

Visit your Heer!' Beyond the last gate of the camp, Hasan had parked the car by a willow grove. He pointed to another chinar tree down the slope. 'That is the spring of Heemal.'

A rectangular concrete wall shaped the spring. A boy bent over the wall and stirred the moss-covered water with a twig. He looked up and stopped stirring the water. I asked him about the spring. 'It is Heemal's spring. The world knows it. She was the princess of Kashmir and loved Nagirai, who was the prince.' He said this in a voice that was trying to be authoritative. Then he paused for a moment and asked, 'Isn't that why you have come here?'

On the way back, I walked to Ahmed's bank. A blue and white signboard announced the presence of the bank on the ground floor of a newly built, square, featureless brick house in a lane bridging out of the market. Howard Roark would not have approved of its architecture. A wooden counter with cheap, brown mica sheets nailed to it stretched like a border between the customers and the bank employees. Behind the counter, five men sat on wooden chairs, heads bent over thick registers or voucher slips. A short, bearded man and a tall, veiled woman argued with a clerk. The clerk, a tall man with deep brown eyes and high cheekbones, was waving his hands in the air, as if hammering some imaginary nail. I watched him for a long moment and did not want to recognise him as Ahmed. 'Basharat!' Ahmed jumped from his chair. 'How the hell did you get here? I cannot believe this!'

He took leave from his officer and we almost ran out onto the street, laughing, backslapping. We headed for his home at the other end of town. It was a neat brick and stone façade house overlooking a lawn beyond which spread an apple orchard. We sat in Ahmed's room, smoked cigarettes over cups of tea and exchanged stories. He had returned home two years ago for a vacation, and found his parents leading lives of loneliness and fear. An only child, he decided to stay.

There was no job for his qualifications in town. A clerk's job in the local branch of a bank came up six months later. For months he struggled with himself, hoped to return to his dreams. Delhi and dreams faded. Ahmed had fallen in love with a local girl who studied literature at the local college. 'She is like me. She too loves literature and dreams. She too has taken up a job in a local school because of her family.' He paused for a moment and staring at the white painted wall said, 'She is from our world.' He did not raise his hands in the air to hammer an imaginary nail. 'Our world,' I thought.

Ahmed opened a window. Its frame seemed to organise the view of the garden below, the apple orchard and the hump of a hill rising in the distance. We looked through the window for a moment and saw his wiry, ageing mother and stooped father sitting on the lawn. He looked at them engrossed in their conversation. 'This is my truth. Howard Roark was an illusion.' His words came slowly and he closed the window again. We did not talk about the conflict. We were trying to relive the old days. We talked about books and writers. I was carrying a copy of *Homage to Catalonia* with me and gave it to him. 'You will find Kashmir in its pages,' I said.

Then the sound of brisk footsteps made us look out of the window. We saw a group of young men with guns walking down the alley beside his house. Ahmed told me they were Pakistani militants. 'They must be going to some hideout,' he said. I asked him if he had met one. He told me three of them had knocked on his door one night. He and his parents had to serve them dinner after one of the militants pushed his father in the chest with a gun. He hadn't gone beyond nervous small talk and, after dinner, the militants had left. 'They were in their early twenties, carried their guns, sleek satellite phones and laptops.'

I was about to ask Ahmed about the possibility of meeting one of these men when he told me a story that was doing the

rounds in Shopian. Pirated VCDs of a Salman Khan film had reached the local video shop. Khan played a roguish, small-town college student, and the story of his self-destructive love titled *Tere Naam* was one of the biggest hits of the year. Its soundtrack was a rage in Kashmir. Every other youngster was getting his hair done like Khan; the haircut became famous as the *Tere Naam* style. In Shopian, a nineteen year old Pakistani militant, a member of Jaish-e-Mohammed, bought a copy of the video. A few days later, he ordered a local barber to trim his beard and cut his hair in '*Tere Naam* style' Over the next few weeks, the militant hovered outside the local women's college, staring wistfully at the girl he had fallen for. 'He wants to marry her and take her back to Pakistan. But her parents are against it. I saw him a few times in the local market. He is completely lovestruck, and the entire town calls him Tere Naam,' Ahmed said.

The day was dying; the lawn, the orchards, and the hill were turning into dark outlines of their former selves. As if the intruding darkness reminded him of a chore, Ahmed suddenly rose from his place. He lit a candle, closed the window, and drew the curtains. He pulled two black blankets from a cupboard, threw them over the curtains, and switched on the light. 'Why the blankets?' I asked. 'To ensure that nobody looking at the windows from outside can tell we are awake, we do that in every room after dusk,' he said. 'We have no streetlights and do not switch on lights at the entrance or in the courtyard.' Bright lights provoked the soldiers to barge in and check the house for militants. Bright lights led the militants to choose your house as their shelter for the night. You lived with the dread of a fatal gun battle. Hundreds of homes were destroyed in encounters between soldiers and militants; hundreds of people were arrested, tortured, and jailed by soldiers for housing militants. People hoped not to hear a knock at their door in the evening. The drone of a

passing vehicle or the sound of footsteps outside your home was enough to make you and your family shiver. How many deep breaths had we taken after seemingly threatening sounds died into the night and nobody knocked?

I had experienced that fear only a few days before I travelled to Ahmed's town. One evening, Salaam, our cook, came rushing into the room. He is a thin, balding guy, obsessed with the radio. My father was busy with his office files in the next room. Salaam was breathing heavily and motioned me to be silent. 'Somebody has come into the drawing room.' A door opens from our kitchen into the drawing room. Salaam tried opening that door and felt someone was pushing it back. In the past, if you were superstitious, you had blamed things like this on ghosts. Rational people looked for rational explanations. Today, the first thought that comes to mind is of unidentified gunmen.

Salaam believed that the person who had entered our drawing room could mean harm. We decided not to disturb my father and deal with it on our own. We tiptoed into the kitchen. Salaam locked the door leading to the stairs going from the ground to the first floor. We stood staring at the door hiding the intruder. Then we pressed our ears to the wood to listen for any signs of movement. We heard silence and stray dogs barking on the road. We moved away from the door, decided in whispers to find a weapon, and go into the room. The weapon was a problem; we managed to find a kitchen knife. Being bigger and older, I grabbed it; Salaam stood behind me holding a kitchen fork like a dagger. I tried to hide my shivering hand from Salaam, who was trying equally hard to look brave. We were scared but ready to put up a fight. The moment to charge at an unseen enemy came. We kicked the door open and rushed into the room. A kitchen knife and a fork rose at a murderous angle, seeking blood. We looked around. The sofa was empty, the chairs

were empty, only the bookrack was there. The intruder was nowhere. A corner of the carpet had upturned near the door. It had got stuck in the door and wedged it. We saw it at the same moment and looked at each other, threw our weapons on the floor, and laughed.

The prospects were not humorous in Ahmed's town where people, like in many other places in Kashmir, lived with intense fear. I imagined his ageing parents huddled alone in their kitchen all those years when Ahmed was away and saw why he had stayed. In that moment, I came to respect him more than ever; he had done better than Howard Roark. I turned towards him with a respectful gaze as he silently puffed on his cigarette and stared at the designs of the carpet on which we sat. Lighting another cigarette, he looked at me with the expression of an aged, tired man. 'It is killing me.' The fighting had destroyed whatever work culture there was in Kashmir. In his town, there were no libraries and no bookshops. People wanted to be safe and nothing more.

Ahmed spoke of the fear of seeing his house as the rubble of an encounter. Even if no militants or soldiers barged in, he expected it. Ahmed's family, friends and townsfolk talked of nothing other than the conflict. 'My parents worked all their life to save enough to build this house. An hour long battle can turn it to charcoal and rubble.' 'Why don't you leave? You can go to any big city and make a career. Why don't you return to Delhi?' I had no other words. He wanted to leave, but could not leave his parents. Even if he left, many sons would have to stay. It was close to midnight. Ahmed removed the blankets and the curtains from the windows. 'It is safe now. There is no movement at this time.' The town was wrapped in darkness; the dark blue sky and silver stars were quiet.

I couldn't bring myself to ask Ahmed to risk himself and introduce me to some Pakistani militants but the visit to

Shopian heightened my awareness of life in a heavily militarised society. On my way back to Srinagar, I passed Indian military and paramilitary vehicles and camps every few minutes. India has more than half a million soldiers in Kashmir. Armoured cars and soldiers patrolling roads or manning checkposts have become as much a part of the landscape as the chinars and willows. I knew the soldiers were mostly the rural and urban poor of India, who stood outside the military and paramilitary recruitment centres in long lines, hoping to get the dangerous and absurdly low-paying job of a soldier. I remember reports of a growing shortage of officers in the army as the Indian economy got better, but never any reports of shortage of soldiers. The poor are numerous! But beyond their olive or khaki uniforms, stiff faces, curt commands, and threatening guns, I knew nothing of their lives, about them as people. The only words we spoke to each other were the despised litanies of an identity check. Being a Kashmiri, it was also unwise to have a real conversation with a soldier. Some conversations can have consequences.

A few days before August 15, the Indian Independence Day, the soldiers, expecting more militant attacks, turned more aggressive, and frisking and identity checks increased. I stayed home in Srinagar and thought about the soldiers I had come across. I thought of the two soldiers who had interrogated me in the crackdown on our village. I thought of the young paramilitary officer posted near my school, who had let me go when I was headed home in a local bus and a paramilitary convoy my bus was following came under attack.

I remembered another soldier I had a chance meeting with in June 2004. After parliamentary elections, the BJP had been thrown out of power and the Congress, supported by the left parties, came to power. The newspapers and TV channels screamed the results in big headlines and shrill voices. I was at Lal Chowk to meet a journalist friend, Amir. The election

results would fill the pages of his Delhi-based newspaper for the rest of the week. There would be no space for the news from Kashmir, and he was taking it easy. We had a coffee and talked about whatever we were reading. He had a book I wanted to read and we left for his office to fetch it. Heaps of newspapers were stacked on dusty tables in the office. Cigarette butts filled an ashtray. Smoke hung in the air. Some journalist friends dropped in and the conversation shifted to news. 'It is peaceful today; no news yet.'

Then suddenly the door was thrown open. 'May I come in?' We turned towards the entrance. A soldier in a bullet-proof jacket, slinging an AK 47 over his shoulder, marched in, as Amir said, 'Yes.' A leaner, meeker subordinate followed the first man. 'I came to check on you,' the soldier told Amir. The soldier had stopped Amir in the morning on the way to his office. Amir had shown him his identity card. The soldier had talked about the need to check suspicious-looking people and had asked Amir about a nick on his face, which had come from a shaving razor. Amir had felt insulted and had asked him to speak to his officers, who knew Amir as a journalist. The soldier had let him off. Now, seeing the soldier walk into his office irritated Amir. 'Didn't you see my identity card in the morning?' he asked. 'I did. But we still have to check anyone who is suspicious looking. I am here to confirm whether your identity card was a real one.' 'You should know how to spot a suspicious-looking person,' Amir raised his voice. 'You should know the difference between a grocery and a newspaper office.'

This seemed to have no effect on the soldier. He walked around haughtily and turning to Amir said, 'You should know I can enter any place any time. It is my job.' Amir pulled out his telephone directory, called a senior officer from the soldier's force, and explained the situation. The officer summoned the soldier on the phone. He kept muttering

'Nothing, sir' and walked off. Amir told me the senior officer had apologised for the soldier's conduct and had promised to send an officer to look into the matter. Two more reporters from other news organisations dropped in. The senior most reporter advised Amir not to take words like 'esteem' and 'dignity' seriously. Coffee and conversation followed for the next half an hour.

Then, there was a knock on the door. An officer in combat dress followed by around ten soldiers walked in. He asked the soldiers to leave; they stood at the gate. Then, he walked briskly to the corner of the room, where we sat. He was a tall, muscular man with small brown eyes shining beneath the visor of his cap. Pointing a finger at each of us, he asked in a single breath, 'What is your name? What do you do? Journalist? Which newspaper?' We gave our introductions; he gave none. Someone offered him a chair. He sat and told us that he was there to look into the matter. He seemed angry. 'You guys can see my rank and read my name on my uniform. I am an officer and not a civilian who needs an introduction. And still when I walked in here, you did not show me the respect an officer deserves. Nobody stood up from his chair. Nobody spoke with respect.' We looked at each other. He stared at us. An awkward silence fell. One of Amir's colleagues tried to pacify him, and offered him tea and cigarettes. He refused, saying he did not drink tea and did not smoke.

A series of explanations began. 'We did not mean disrespect.' 'We have great professional relations with your force and regard it highly.' 'We did not get time to treat you with due respect as you abruptly asked for our introductions.' Five journalists representing reputed Delhi-based organisations were obsequiously trying to explain themselves. I remained silent. The explanations and mild arguments went on for half an hour. The officer mentioned that he belonged to a counter-insurgent unit which we knew

specialised in encounters. It seemed to be a veiled threat. The officer sank into a chair, spread his legs and tossed his cap on the table. His surname helped me place him as being from Haryana. I asked him if he was from there. 'How could you guess that?' he replied. 'I lived in Delhi and had many friends from your caste.'

The power of the caste system was evident in his first smile. He showed signs of relaxation and turned towards me. I talked about my friends from my Delhi University days. He was from Delhi University too. 'I was in the law faculty, where were you?' I asked. He had been in a college next to mine. I talked about the university, about the college festivals, the hangouts, the rivalries, the girls' hostel nearby, almost everything that one misses about university life. He seemed to have transformed into a Delhi University alumnus and forgotten he was an Indian paramilitary officer posted in Kashmir. His language changed as he spoke about the Jawahar Book Store where we had both bought cheap photocopies of text and reference books, of Kamla Nagar market, where students hung out after college, of Majnu ka Tila, where Tibetan refugees sold cheap clothes and beer. 'Give me a fag, man! And get me some tea,' he smiled. We had tea and smoked. He apologised; the room full of journalists apologised back. Peace was made. As he began to leave, he said, 'I was a different man before I joined the force and came to Kashmir.'

I thought about his instant switch upon being reminded of his civilian life, his excitement about student days, and his admission of being a 'different man before joining the force' He didn't seem very different from my former militant friend, Asif, who wanted to know about discotheques and girls. Yet young men like them, on different sides of the military divide, had killed and died after they chose to become militants and soldiers. Hundreds like them died every year. Those who had

survived seemed to have buried and cremated the individuals they had once been.

I hoped that some day they could cease being part of processes that reduced individuals to suspects or military targets, shorn of all human complexity; processes that left them with bare nomenclatures like militants, soldiers, paramilitaries. I hoped that some day they could return to their homes where they could sit on balconies, or argue with their cousins about changing channels. I hoped that some day the war they were fighting and the reasons for its existence would disappear like footsteps on winter snow in my childhood.

Epilogue

The car drove slowly towards the Srinagar airport. I was leaving again, carrying with me the furniture for a new life and a new room I had yet to find—clothes, books, and memories. We drove out of the city, past bunkers, soldiers, guns, loops of barbed wire, pedestrians raising hands and identity cards; honking cars and local buses; boys and girls in uniform outside schools; competing posters of politicians making promises that politicians make; shopkeepers yawning behind counters and unsold things; past houses of friends and strangers, and then, the much-barricaded airport complex gate. After a few metal detectors and body searches, I walked into the decrepit waiting hall.

The journey was not over; it will never be. The sky has been red, the days fear-filled, and the nights curfewed since 1990. In that season, I was fourteen and enthralled by the heady slogans of freedom, by tales of dangerous treks through border snows, by the naive hope of a new world about to be born. I left Kashmir, grew up, found and quit a job. I came back. I heard and remembered stories of brutality, courage, love, hatred, faith, loss, and even hope. Both Kashmir and I had changed. The heady, rebellious Kashmir I left as a teenager was now a land of brutalised, exhausted, and uncertain people. I was now in my late twenties, already old. The conflict might leave the streets, but it might not leave the soul.

Mini-tractors carried the luggage to the plane on the tarmac. Workers in blue overalls began loading the bags and briefcases. The certainty of departure pierced me. I knew I would return, leave, return, leave, and return again. The plane took off after a violent sprint on the runway. Houses grew smaller, paddies turned into neat green squares, metalled

roads connecting villages shrank into black lines, and the coquettish clouds took new shapes. I turned away from the window. The poet had lied about paradise.

Delhi too hadn't changed much. The landlords still said, 'You are like our own son. Give us a call on Sunday.' And friends said, 'Stay with us!' I began writing and rewriting in a rented room in a slum-like area populated by students. I worked at a news magazine during the day and began writing and rewriting Kashmir at night. Newspapers in Srinagar continued printing some headlines in red. And people were talking about the bus. India and Pakistan had begun a peace process with little progress over a year. Now they had agreed to open a bus service between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad. After fifty eight years, a bus would cross the LoC and divided families would be allowed to visit each other. 'Historic' and 'hope' became much used words.

In the first week of April 2005, I returned home, to report. Manmohan Singh and Pervez Musharaf shook hands on billboards in Srinagar. Kashmiris debated the difference the trans-LoC bus would make. Some equated it with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Some were more restrained and saw it as a step forward in resolving the Kashmir dispute. Some militant groups saw it as a distraction from the real resolution of the dispute and threatened to attack the bus. Reporters looked for people who had families on the other side of the LoC, for people who had crossed the LoC, for people who had seen the LoC, for people who had thought about the LoC.

I was talking to some people in a coffee shop near Lal Chowk, when gunfire slashed the air. Militants opposing the bus had launched a suicide attack at the nearby Tourist Reception Centre building, adjacent to a cricket stadium from where the bus would be flagged off the next day. Vans carrying television crews rushed in like wailing ambulances. Paramilitaries and police cordoned off the green-painted

building that housed many offices. A gun battle followed, and in a few minutes, the wooden Tourist Centre was burning.

I hid behind a police vehicle across the road from the burning building, with a group of reporters. Bursts of gunfire made us duck to the ground. A few minutes later, an elderly man in a brown suit jumped out of a window of the building and ran across the road. A reporter reached out and brought him to our group. Mohammed Ashraf, a manager of an airline, had been working out of the Tourist Reception Centre for years. He watched the dark smoke, the hellish flames, and pieces of burnt office files rise above the crumbling roof of his office. 'I need to call my family,' he said. 'No! I need to call Atta, first,' he added, almost immediately. His colleague, Atta, was trapped inside. An American correspondent gave him her phone. Ashraf dialled and dialled again but the phone networks were jammed. He stayed with us for a long time, and watched the building crumble and hordes of pigeons circle it from a distance.

The next morning, on my way to the cricket stadium to watch the inaugural ceremony, I passed the burnt Tourist Reception Centre. Piles of charcoal, ash and rubble rested on its stony plinth. Leftovers of its charred columns were still smouldering. I walked ahead, past the stiff soldiers. In the cricket stadium, a police band played a Kashmiri folk song made famous by its Bollywood version. It drizzled. Manmohan Singh made a speech and thanked Pervez Musharraf for making the bus service possible. Singh waved a blue flag and the Srinagar–Muzaffarabad bus drove out of the stadium amidst applause from the modest crowd, strengthened by the presence of a few hundred recruits from the local police in civvies, whose regulation haircuts betrayed their true identities.

The bus drove towards the LoC, 140 kilometres north of Srinagar. A caravan of journalists followed it. I was going to

the border, to the LoC. We drove past hundreds of helmets and guns and climbed many mountains. We saw the Jhelum, a hundred feet wide, mighty and green, roaring through the mountains despite the two countries controlling its banks, announcing its freedom. And then, after all these years I saw it: the Line of Control. A loopy, razor wire fence snaked through wild bushes and greens of rather barren mountain, past a few mud houses. This razor wire, this mountain was the Line of Control. Two girls playing outside a tiny mud house on the other bank waved at us. We waved back.

Passengers on the bus were to cross the LoC at Kaman Post, a military post, where Indian and Pakistani soldiers faced each other across from the two banks of a stream. The bridge over the stream at Kaman Post had been destroyed in 1948 during the first Indo-Pak war. Now, with the peace process, the burnt Kaman Bridge had been rebuilt. Indians had wanted to paint it in the colours of the Indian flag; Pakistanis had objected. They agreed on white, the colour of peace, and rechristened the bridge Peace Bridge. On the Peace Bridge too, control seemed to be the key word despite the India–Pakistan bonhomie. An Indian army officer told me that two thirds of the Peace Bridge was Indian and the other one third Pakistani. This two third Indian and one third Pakistani bridge was the line of control; the shallow stream passing under it was the line of control. By the evening thirty nine Kashmiris from both sides of the divide had walked across the bridge, after fifty eight years in the history of Indian and Pakistan, and fifty eight years after the division of Kashmir in 1947.

Sharief Hussein Bukhari was one of those men. In his early sixties, a beak-nosed man with soft eyes, wearing a light blue shalwar kameez, he walked in a daze as he crossed the bridge from the Pakistan-controlled part into the India-controlled part, where he was born. He was returning home for the first

time after 1950. Crossing the LoC had haunted him throughout the five decades he spent in Pakistan, as a student, a lawyer, a Lahore High Court judge and now a professor of law. His two sisters and a brother had stayed in his ancestral north Kashmir village when he trekked with his father across the LoC as a fifteen year old. For years, he neither received nor sent any letters home. There were no phone calls either. He communicated through his dreams. 'I would dream of my school, of the apricot and the apple trees in our courtyard. I would dream of the house I was born in and of the journey back home,' he said. The crossing had become unattainable even in his dreams. 'In my dreams I would be arrested at the LoC and turned back,' he said.

That failure of the subconscious was the border. The line of control did not run through 576 kilometres of militarised mountains. It ran through our souls, our hearts, and our minds. It ran through everything a Kashmiri, an Indian, and a Pakistani said, wrote, and did. It ran through the fingers of editors writing newspaper and magazine editorials, it ran through the eyes of reporters, it ran through the reels of Bollywood coming to life in dark theatres, it ran through conversations in coffee shops and TV screens showing cricket matches, it ran through families and dinner talk, it ran through the whispers of lovers. And it ran through our grief, our anger, our tears, and our silences.

Hundreds of villagers had gathered at the Reception Centre for the visitors from Pakistan-controlled Kashmir at Salamabad village, half an hour from the Peace Bridge as you drive back towards Srinagar. Schoolchildren dressed in traditional costumes, who had waited throughout the day for the bus to arrive, welcomed it dancing to Hindi film songs. A young man rushed towards Bukhari. Bukhari didn't recognise the excited youth. 'I am Showket, your sister's son,' said the young man. 'I am sorry, son. I didn't even get to see a picture

of yours all these years,' Bukhari said. Their moist eyes were the line of control.

The buses carrying the passengers from Muzaffarabad travelled under a drizzling grey sky to Srinagar. It is a road that has been deserted after dusk for a decade and a half. I watched thousands of women, men, and children stand along the much soldiered road, waving hands and umbrellas, welcoming the ones who had stepped across the line. There was no fear that evening. There were only hands reaching out of the bus windows, waving in the air, as if each wave would erase the lines of control. I raised my hand and waved.

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A note on the author

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