





that summer. On Iman's advice he'd abandoned post-graduate research, but now had a two-year contract teaching in the modern languages department of a university. On the other hand, his relationship with his now-divorced woman friend was now in perilous depths. Mona was always jealous, imagining non-existent rivals, particularly after he'd been too friendly for a season with a young—and unmarried—visiting scholar and he'd even, fleetingly, contemplated marriage. That Ayla had soon told him she was on the rebound from someone else was hardly, Mona thought, of any consequence. Fantasy betrayals were as bad as the real thing. Of course Sameer, too, had been on the rebound from a relationship that was moving very fast in no direction.

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'Sameer?'

He heard Iman's voice on the phone on a sunny morning in April, after six months of silence. He was recovering from one of Mona's worst onslaughts on his job, his stories, his friendships and his moral integrity.

'Iman, where the hell have you been?'

'Karachi! Didn't you ever get the card with my address?'

'(What, where, when, why ... )'

'Don't ask any questions. Just meet me in that new cafe by the canal.'

'But ...'

'I flew in last night. With Yasir.'

'Yasir?'

'Yes, Yasir! He *is* my husband, you know? We're back together again. Don't ask any more questions. Just get yourself over to La Ville for a cappuccino.'

Iman, in those days, was always, notoriously, late. Sameer stood, waiting about fifteen or twenty minutes, for her blue car to drive down Blomfield Road. The cafe was closed. It was a sunny Monday.

Then she was there.

'Yes', she said as they sat over sandwiches and Perriers in a stained-glass and stucco pub they found a minute's walk away, 'I went back to Yasir. You know we never really did divorce. He followed me to Karachi...'

‘What’s with the Karachi story? You were happy as a lark in Hong Kong last time we talked...’

‘Hong Kong gets lonely for a single person especially if you aren’t part of an expat set. I didn’t really get on well with the Cantonese. Talk about closed circles. I’d go off to Beijing because I love the people there but the language problem’s even worse. I couldn’t cope with the food: I picked up a bug and was sick all the time. I went back to Hong Kong and it was freezing. The sea looked like glass, as if at any moment it might break. Then Desmond—my editor, you’ll remember him—rang me and said there was an office opening in Karachi. I could go there on a longish assignment. I leapt at the chance. Our house there in Clifton was lying empty. It’s beautiful, just by the sea, one of those sandy spots where you can still see the sea in fact, and it never gets too hot because of the sea breezes.

‘Karachi’s fun after London, your phone always ringing, someone inviting you out every day. We were euphoric about having a woman ruling after ten years of seeing that ogre in power. The new regime had things under control, even if you could feel the tension, like a time bomb, under the surface, with policemen under the surface, and people saying it wasn’t really safe to drive around alone as I did. Half the time I was too tired to go out anyway, writing reports and articles and virtually running the office, but it’s nice to know there’s something to do whenever you want to. And the weather... after so many years of rain I’d started hearing dripping water in my sleep. I almost enjoyed the humidity and the heat. I have lots of friends there from my Grammar School days—many of them are married now, some divorced. They’d drag me out to hotels for dinner or to their homes. I never knew there were so many picnic spots a few miles away from the city. Have you been inland to see those lakes and hidden creeks? The pollution in Karachi’s bad, but out there it’s as clean as Africa.

‘Everyone was always trying to pair me off, get me married. Men call you all the time. And you know me, I’m spontaneous enough, I love having men as friends, but I’m cautious too. Some of those men are ready for a fling with their best friend’s wife or their wife’s best friend ... they call you when their wives are off shopping in Singapore or Manhattan, and you have to learn to be busy all the time. The only problem is, when you brush them off, they look out for you in public places or the front seat of a car with any man, eligible or not, and the next minute you’re either about to be married, or stealing your best friend’s husband. But not everyone’s like that. Take Kashif...’

‘How in hell do you expect me to know who Kashif is without yet another of your long asides, Iman? You were going to tell me about Yasir. How did he track you down? I was convinced that half the reason you were running away from London was to get him off your back. Don’t you remember all those midnight calls after which you’d ring me at 2 in the morning? And the time he followed us from Knightsbridge and we found him parked outside your garage half asleep...’

‘God, you’ve got a great memory for embarrassing moments. But you know it wasn’t always like that. He can be good company sometimes, generous, and he can make me laugh. You know what the real reason is? I married him just after my twenty-first birthday. At twenty-three I had my first abortion when he said we couldn’t afford a baby because he was thinking of moving us to Harvard so he could do his MBA. And he’d promised to get me back into my post-grad work too. Anyway, after that time and the miscarriage I had later I’ve always thought, if I have a baby, it has to be his. That’s the reason. Now’s the time. I’m thirty.’

‘When he started ringing me up in Karachi—don’t ask how he found my number, a friend told me he’d started getting so drunk and weeping so desperately that he couldn’t bear not to give it to him—when he started ringing me up every night, would you believe ... I felt sorry for him? And he was so far away ... I could just sense his anguish, and the old tenderness came back, you know how lovely his voice can be when he’s like that.’

It had taken him, she told Sameer, nine months to break down the door of her reserve. One day she found flowers at her door, then again, and on the third day they were attached to a lyric in his handwriting and a compact disc of ‘I Will Always Love You’—the Dolly Parton version she loved.

‘He was in Karachi’, Iman said. ‘He’d found an excuse, and come after me, all the way. I saw him for lunch, then a week or so later for dinner. He started off on the old stuff again, and I said I didn’t want to go back, only forward. He said he’d give me time, as much time as I wanted, to make up my mind. Then he went off to see his family in ‘Pindi and Faisalabad. When he came back he asked me for a fresh start, to live with him again. It was the first night of a new decade. Like the first time he’d asked me to spend my life with him. And I said yes.’

But Iman and Yasir stayed together only till the end of the next year. She didn't get pregnant; he found himself in trouble over a phony deal with a Greek and a credit card scam. When Iman told him to stay where he was (in Nicosia, if Sameer remembers rightly) and not bother coming back, Yasir cleared out all the money from their depos

the Nile I'd say nonsense, the source of the Nile was already there, how can some colonial have discovered it? Of course I didn't discover you. Just like the source of the Nile, you were already there.'

But she never once tried to re-establish literary connections or fish for a commission, preferring to write quiet reports for specialist journals, on slavery, human rights and international trade: and, always, Africa.

More often than not, now, they'd leave parties early, to dine in one of their old South East Asian haunts in Maida Vale, or look for a new place for Laksa and Indonesian noodles. Sometimes, after a gruelling session at Birkbeck, she'd come and pick him up from wherever he was, and they'd go somewhere to walk by water and look at swans: Windsor, Marlowe, or just Hyde Park. (Over the years, Iman and Sameer, they've seen swans at every hour of the evening, even in rain and chilly autumn. This summer they've befriended a black swan they saw once preening its wings with its vermilion beak as the sun set in the river.)

But their hearts were heavier than they'd been six years ago. Then she'd hidden her hurt behind the smoke screen of literary chat, while he'd still been excited enough by the call of a vocation to live for tomorrow. If they fell short of cash they'd walk around in Chinatown for hours, then end up pooling their remaining money to make up five or ten pounds for a homeless black man they'd anal





‘Tiny white birds you see at night? I don’t know, I left Karachi before I ever had a chance to see birds on the beach at night, and anyway you know I’m not an ornithologist. Now tell me about those friends of yours at the restaurant.’

‘Niaz directs films for TV, smart soaps with a moral. Kashif’s a friend of both of ours. He left a message on my machine for me to meet him there, then he didn’t show up. Have you ever thought of writing a teleserial, or a play, Sameer? I bet you could do it and then I’ll give it to Niaz.’

‘Oh, so it was Niaz you wanted me to meet. To peddle my wares to him.’

Sameer had tried for a crusty tone, but he was laughing. Iman slipped her cool hand into his.

‘No, silly, I didn’t even know he was going to be there. But listen. Seriously. Why don’t you write for him?’

‘I love Karachi tv soaps. I’d die to write one. But they want family dramas, feuds, marriages, breakups—I couldn’t write such stories.’

‘I’ve got great ideas. I’ll tell you one.’

‘Over coffee? There’s a chill breeze blowing.’

‘I first met Kashif when I’d just gone back to Karachi in ’89. I was quite lonely, and as I said men around could be predatory, particularly if they knew I was divorced. I’d met him even before I got engaged to Yasir, but I never got to know him. This time I met him at a coffee shop with friends, and though he didn’t say much to me I liked him immediately. You remember that story you wrote, about a man with very blue eyes? That’s what I immediately thought of when I saw Kashif, that he looked like one of these blue-eyed devils you write about. But he wasn’t a devil at all. He’s from a respectable, middle class family, Kashmiri like mine, but soon someone told me he was in trouble over a girl, or rather that he’d got involved with a girl his parents didn’t approve of. Then, because I drove around all over Karachi on my own, I’d keep running into him. When he asked me to have a croissant and coffee with him at the Pearl Continental, I didn’t see how there could be any harm.

‘That’s when he told me about Sania. He’d started seeing her when he was eighteen—their parents were friends, even distantly related—and by the time they were in their twenties they were engaged. But recently things had gone terribly wrong. Their fathers had fought, then their mothers; it may have been over dowry, or a promise he believed his father may have made

to Sania's, to help him out with his flagging garment business. Sania and he had begun to grow apart, but they'd decided to give it time, until, suddenly, Sania's father just toppled over one night because a paper had printed the news that he was bankrupt, and five days later his heart stopped beating. Sania blamed Kashif's family for his death and now she was working at a travel agency to support her mother, a younger brother and a sister. He'd offered to help, financially, but she'd accused him of trying to offload his responsibilities and then cried, saying he wanted to abandon her.

'Then I remembered: I'd met Sania. Once. She was attractive, in a florid Punjabi manner. What came back to me vividly, though, wasn't the way she looked: it was the weird story she'd been telling. She said she'd gone to see a psychic because she was suffering from a chronic stomach ailment which made her bleed and bleed and she'd been told that an old, jealous woman had put the evil eye on her. The psychic gave Sania some coloured powder which he told her to bake in a little bun with some white flour and place that on the highest wall for the birds to eat, every day at sunrise, for a week. Sania said she baked the buns with the powder every day and placed them on the wall but they just lay drying there in the harsh sunlight, the birds wouldn't touch them and she kept getting sicker and sicker. She was convinced that her future mother-in-law had cast the evil eye on her, so that she'd die of the blood she was losing and Kashif would be free to marry another, richer girl. She said what Kashif's family had against hers was that they hadn't been able to give him the money to go to Harvard for further education. On the last day of that week Sania baked the last batch of buns with all the powder she had left. Soon she saw, from the window, a swarm of crows descending. Later in the day she went out to see: there were many dead crows, some on the wall, some on the dusty ground below. She screamed and ran to get the sweeper to take them away to the garbage dump. The next day she simply stopped bleeding.'

'Kashif and I became friends,' Iman said in the Soho coffee bar they'd found open, as she lit up one of Sameer's cigarettes. 'At first we'd meet during the day, for coffee or a snack, or just go shopping for curios together, me for the Clifton house, he for his restaurants in London. Most often, we'd talk on the phone: he'd usually call at night. It became a habit. I'd come home in time for his call. I couldn't sleep when I missed it. That's when Yasir had started calling too; once Kashif called and I said Oh, Yasir, because I'd just told him to get off the line; so I was

forced to pour it all out to him, about Yasir,

‘He was asking me to wait. I knew I’d be all right with him. After all these years, he’d made me feel something again, something fragile, but there. I didn’t answer. I didn’t make plans. That’s where we left it. I knew he’d call me the next day. He didn’t. I tried his mobile number. No answer. I didn’t hear from him for three days.

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‘On the fourth day,’ Iman said, in her car, ‘he showed up at my door. It was Christmas, ’89. I’d made plans for that evening with a couple of friends visiting from Bangkok. He wouldn’t come inside. He looked—devastated. He said, we have to talk, Iman. I can’t remember what I said to him about that evening’s plans, or whether I asked him where he’d been all these days, but I knew I had to go with him, wherever he took me, however far away.

‘He drove in silence for more than two hours. I don’t even know if he drove past the airport into Sindh or by the sea to Baluchistan. I know the landscape changed colour, became redder and rockier, and I thought for a moment I was back in East Africa.

‘He stopped the jeep at an unforgettable place: rugged, austere, but beautiful. It made me think of those lines from the Surah of the Benificent: How many of His wonders will you deny? On the banks of a deep, deep creek in which silver water flowed there were tufts of tall grass and yellow flowers that looked like dahlias nestling in the sparse green. Dragonflies darted here and there. One of those places that make you realise how small you are in the scheme of things.

‘We got out and walked. I’m not going to try to remember his words. Nor the reasons he gave. He had to marry Sania. Just had to. His parents, furious, were saying they’d disown him. His brothers were boycotting the wedding. He didn’t know what to do. But he couldn’t let Sania down. He was marrying her on the second day of the New Year.

‘Don’t marry her, I said, and I didn’t register his response, till I understood what he was saying.

‘I need a sister to stand by me, Kashif said. Someone to lead the wedding procession, welcome the bride, dance and sing. Will you play my sister on the day of my wedding?’

‘I can’t remember what I said, but I knew I’d do it for him, even if my feet hurt while I danced. I looked at a kite or an eagle wheeling overhead: I hoped Kashif’s small white birds didn’t come here to get eaten, and I thought, I’m going to say yes to Yasir when he comes back on New Year’s Eve, and next year, perhaps, I’ll have a baby.’



At 1 am on the 21st of May 2000 Sameer rang Iman to tell her he was finally in the middle of writing her story.

‘Not a soap opera, he said, ‘but I’ve made you the heroine of a tale. And I hope you don’t expect me to have all the facts right.’

She said: ‘A story, don’t you think, is as real as the reader makes it?’

But there were things Sameer still wanted to know. He asked if she ever found out what the little white birds were called that she’d seen at the seaside in Karachi, and what the name of the lake was that she walked by near her house in Kampala.

‘Lake Victoria,’ Iman said. ‘Funny you should ask. I walked there to see the last sunset of the century and I thought of birds, and of the places I’d been to with Kashif, the rocks of the beach at night and the reddish-ochre of the creek. At Lake Victoria there are gulls and you can sometimes see flamingos. And crested cranes. I saw a crested crane that night I was there. Would you believe it was dancing? One foot forward, one foot back, head high then dipping, by the shores of the lake. The sun was about to go down and the lake was the colour of jade. And my mind travelled back ten years to Kashif’s wedding night. How I danced. There she was, in front of me, Sania in her transparent yellow wedding veil, she muttered something to her bridegroom when she saw me come up, like a sister would do, to take some ransom money from his pocket, and she said, what’s this woman doing here? But I didn’t care. I joined the dancing girls on the floor. Some sang and others beat the wedding drums. My hands in the air, my feet hit the ground. I thought of seas and lakes, and birds on their shores, and how next year I might have a baby, and I danced.’