

THE WHEREABOUTS OF MY LIFE

One year ago—

Standing on the pavement in front of the old house on Race Course Road, I was cramped with qualms.

Was it really Zaid's house?

Would he choose to recognise me from college? Or would he simply refuse to recall me!

What was the agenda of the meeting, other than his moist eyes?

How lame would that sound when I'd ask if he has some grief to spare?

It was a humid August evening and without the breeze, gravity had swelled. My eyes searched for a typical Karachi urchin who loved trying out his patchy knowledge of a locality on needy women to lead them astray. But none of that sort was in sight. In the distance, the homeward-bound vehicles were sliding colourfully down the Clifton Bridge, a giant slide sans any thrills, only ending up deposited meekly into the vehicular cesspool on the road beside me. That spectacle was reaffirming the sadistic rules Karachi bound its citizens with; rules that arrested free spirit, rules that turned day's progress illusory by sunset, rules preventing working men from returning to their families in daylight. As the

piled-up motorists started to ogle me, I remembered another Karachi diktat: womankind must keep walking to stay a matter of safe routine. Standing still made one the object of prying eyes. Karachi in this way made a 'law-abiding' citizen out of even the most rebellious of individuals.

Luckily, a dark-skinned youth emerged from the decrepit house. As he neared, I noticed that his face bore an amazing likeness to Amitabh Bachchan, Bollywood's action hero of the time, and the youth's self-conscious swagger suggested he was trying to make it a way of life. As he was about to pass me, I gestured to him to stop and pointed towards the decaying mansion.

'Beta, do you know who lives in that old house?'

Staying silent, the boy bowed his head in slow motion and when he jerked it up, an oversized grin was plastered over his face. The dripping grin went on unabated as if his jaws were permanently stuck and unless treated he might have to wear this forced grin even at funerals.

'Excuse me, son, if you are not going to reply then at least step aside.' This time my tone was a tad impolite.

'Who have you come to meet, miss?' Unlike the overstated smile, his voice was puny for an Amitabh wannabe.

On hearing Zaid's name, he kept shaking his head as if suggesting that men with such ordinary names had no chance of finding a residence in Clifton. Then abruptly the roadside impersonator conjured up another movie pose through which most of his grin flitted into his eyes, making me wish I could conjure up something similar to extricate pains clogged inside. Tilting his neck to complete the pose he said, 'Only Mr Waris Ahmad lives over there in the Kothi, in the rented room. You can buy his detective books from Delhi Colony's Book Depot.'

I shook my hand in disappointment. If Zaid was not a resident of the place then why was he visiting the house so religiously in the evenings? I had been stalking him for the last couple of weeks and he had mostly ended up entering these decrepit premises after leaving office.

Nevertheless, the information on the tenant imparted by the juvenile impersonator appeared instinctively helpful to my cause of meeting Zaid. Even if he did not live there, a meeting with him still seemed possible in those quiet ruins behind the tired old trees.

Despite thanking him, the boy stood his ground and voluntarily introduced himself. 'People call me Raju,' he said in the vernacular of movies. Then shyly he dished out a business proposition.

'*Maan* washes clothes for the surrounding apartments. Over at the backyard, we have a tap full of municipal water. Do you live nearby?'

'I—I, live far away.' The words came out more like a dishonest recollection.

Having clearly run out of poses, Raju trudged away finally, disappearing soon into the smog of a passing minibus like a phantom. Always the beast devouring time, Karachi at times created ripples in space-time that made its scenes change abruptly like a badly edited film, making apparitions out of everyday people, amnesia out of nostalgia.

Whatever information had fallen in my lap needed to be put to use. Reading a couple of the resident writer's books could arm me with a credible pretext to knock at his door disguised as his fan and sneak in for the desired meeting with Zaid—the frequent visitor to the house. Thanks to Raju, I knew exactly where to buy the tenant's novels.

It had been a while since we were together at college, Zaid and I, strangers even back then. Earning his instant recognition after such a long gap was not guaranteed and thus accosting him indirectly through the resident made some sense. Once formalities and pretence were out of the way, however, I really needed to sit with Zaid to learn more about the public pain that he was treating so much as his private property.

Neighbouring the affluent Clifton, Delhi Colony, a migrant locality, was like a tiny, landlocked country, complete with a distinct periphery and a uniform *paan*-chewing culture. Its post office was the size of our kitchen, its hospital too small to handle birth and death concurrently, and its winding marketplace long enough for families with budgeted cravings. The bazaar's alleys cleverly led shopkeepers back to their cramped houses for siestas, enabling them to quietly circumvent one of Karachi's iron rules of early return to families. The relatively affluent Clifton residents often clogged the narrow road of the market with their cars for availing cheap bargains in groceries and meat. Belonging to the tricky upper middle class, they could never relish their luxuries unless they bought their groceries cheap.

After squeezing the Beetle between two pushcarts, I got off in front of the Book Depot—the sole bookshop of Delhi Colony. Behind the glossy magazines that hung on unequal strings over the counter, two teen twins wearing thick glasses stood attentively, appearing to be credible salesmen of books. They pointed in tandem towards the wooden stand on the pavement when I mentioned crime fiction to them. Using

pavements as shop extensions was culturally sanctioned in this cramped market.

Sitting on my haunches before the bookstand, I was relieved to find a whole shelf dedicated to the novels authored by Waris Ahmad—the name mentioned by the juvenile imitator. ‘Inspector Rab Nawaz series’ was printed on top of all the titles, announcing upfront the name and occupation of the protagonist. The writer seemed more popular and prolific than what the house’s grim state had implied.

That body of work, seemingly light in literature, needed to be read at least partially if I were to earn a cup of tea from the writer. The author’s photo on the novels’ backs showed a man in his mid thirties with shifty eyes; or perhaps a narcissist posing in front of the mirror. Reading people’s eyes always handed me multiple answers that made nailing down a person beyond me. A slight shudder inside whispered that no amount of preparation for that man would be enough though.

To the twins’ utter shock, I emptied the wooden bookstand and even bought a young customer a colour pencil set for which he was counting and recounting his change ever since I had arrived. This spot charity was rare for someone like me who considered herself beyond kindness.

Reading nineteen novels, all quick reads, seemed a week’s job or two at most. Devouring just ten could also prove sufficient to obtain rudimentary insight into the writer’s work. After all, he was just the means. Eulogising him a bit and mentioning a few apt references from his stories could suffice to prolong my stay till Zaid arrived at the scene of his customary visit. Diagonal reading (apart from memorising books) was once my whimsical pastime to finish off the most insufferable of books.

Now I needed to dust it off for employing it towards a more consequential use.

Not much diagonal reading was needed to finish all nineteen novels within two weeks. The narrative was straightforward, lacking in descriptions. Inspector Rab Nawaz, the intelligent hero, routinely solved cases of crime and murder and once in a while also foiled anti-state conspiracies. More than the stories, I developed an interest in the characters' private lives about which the writer wrote in a miserly fashion. The portrait of the inspector that emerged in my mind was that of a smug man who did not attend to his home adequately on the pretext of fighting crime, leaving his ever-smiling wife in a state of constant waiting. In my view, the smile was foisted on her by the maker to exhibit her subcontinental pride for being a devoted, lonely housewife of a conscientious hero who preferred duty over family. Her fulfilment centred on meeting her husband's need for meals and coffee when he was home, a possible reflection of the parochial mindset of the author. The inspector often came home as a surprise, at odd hours, but spoke nothing beyond the icy Islamic greetings as if they had always met in clothes. The writer was no feminist and most certainly not a lover either. The only traits I could glean from the writings were those of a misogynist.

Inspector Rab Nawaz's associate Gulab Khan, a potential backstabber, was always late when it came to helping his boss and once even fired 'mistakenly' at him. I liked the threat he lent to the overall narrative; a looming, intimate betrayal. My mind quickly added shaggy hair and luscious eyes to his visualised visage.

The inspector's good son Shehbaz was a wisecrack as well as a karate black-belter who was good at sniffing out mysteries as well as then letting them be snatched by papa who required them for his egoistic survival. The inspector's brainy daughter Shermeen was a whiz kid, specialising in locating the last jigsaw pieces, and hence saving papa's face. It seemed the siblings had no school to attend to and no puberty to contend with, and lived only to keep papa away from mom as far as possible. Perhaps they were saving papa from her famished heart or mom from his feudal strains.

Waris' writing had convincing plots if no sentiment. A cache of suspense was cleverly planted at chapters' end to keep the anxious reader gnawing at the story. Loopholes were forgivable for the most part. After finishing each novel, I studied afresh the writer's photo at the back; his thick eyebrows, the equally mulish cheek-mole, the know-it-all forehead furrows, the bright eyes, and finally the suggestion of a smile. He was firming up into a difficult individual who was befriended after close scrutiny. Finally, I felt, I was getting good at understanding eyes.

As I'd find out later, I was brazenly wrong in all of my pre-assessments about the man in the photo.

Reading those nineteen books one after another turned me into an insider of the inspector's house. I began observing things that didn't cross the writer's mind or did but were conveniently ignored. For example, only I could notice Mrs Nawaz painting desolate metaphors like a dining table laid out for one or an autumn tree in a lush landscape. I wished some day she was caught redhanded in this mood by her creator, compelling him to defer thrillers and pen serialised domestic romances as his catharsis.

I was done with reading and ready to visit the old Kothi, feeling well prepared, as well as fake and deceptive.