

I

2017

She's here.
Hands on her trolley she is walking towards the arrivals exit, towards me. I am standing next to a pillar, the humid city at my back.

She has cut her hair.

A stream of people approaching, blazers draped across their arms, loosening their collars, their ties, putting on their dupattas.

She walks behind them, wearing something green. Her face is set. She tucks a strand of hair behind her left ear. Steady, she does not slouch. This is how she becomes Natasha.

There are two big bags on her trolley.

She stops abruptly when she comes out from behind the glass of the arrivals area, perhaps a result of both the sudden heat and uncertainty. There is trepidation in

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her steps now, looking at the crowd of sweating people waiting impatiently on either side, standing on tiptoe to get a glimpse of their sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers. There is only one way out.

I raise an arm. Natasha acknowledges me with a nod.

She does not speed up her approach. She does not smile.

She is soon as close as can be with her luggage trolley between us. I step around it. She turns away slightly but accepts with a nod the hug I offer. It lingers for a moment, she maybe returns it too. Then we break apart and walk side by side towards the parking area.

“What’s with all the foreigners?” She says, nonchalant but humorless.

“They’re new,” I say. I want to tell her so many things about our city, the one she hasn’t seen for a decade. I want to ask her to look, look. I want her to smell the sea because it is different. I want to tell her that we can walk home, that it is safe to do that now, a little safer, a little bit.

I suppose she already knows all of this. I have not spoken to her in so long.

“Thanks for letting me stay with you,” she says.

I shrug.

“I couldn’t do it alone.”

I press the button on my keyring and my black Corolla lights up. It is new. I wait for her to say something about it,

to make a joke about my sinister ways of the travel agent, but she doesn't even acknowledge it till she's put her bags in the back and taken her seat next to me.

"Where's the other car?" She asks, tracing her fingers over the dashboard.

"I don't know," I say. "It wasn't there at the apartment when I got back. Don't you remember?"

"You never told me."

"We never spoke."

This is the first time we look directly at each other. We quickly turn away.

As I drive, she is looking outside at the new city. She says nothing, but I know she is tracing the curve of the new flyovers, the skyscrapers rising dusty in the distance, the bigger cars, the traffic lights with their brand new countdowns, the women in a Civic to our left, all wearing tank tops. She is looking at the sky just as blue. She is looking for the Rangers that used to line these streets but are no longer there.

It has not rained in a year but the potholes from last year's monsoon still line the edge of the road. Traffic forces me into some of them. The car sways, rattles. Rickshaws and motorcycles whizz and swerve by, yelling at each other.

"Some things never change," I sing.

Natasha nods, still looking out the window.

We reach my apartment in silence. She lets me drag one

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suitcase to the elevator, and then up to my door.

“Isn’t this the same place?” She asks, rotating on the landing.

“The old building was across the street.” I point at a wall.

I push down the handle and open the door.

There is a large TV in the lounge, a big red couch facing it. The kitchen counter is shining because I scrubbed it clean that morning. My shoes line the entrance hall. Beige curtains flutter over the glass door to the balcony.

“It’s the same floor plan,” she says.

“You must be tired,” I say, rolling her suitcase to one of the doors to the right. “You can have this room. Do you want to eat?”

She walks closer and takes the suitcase from me and pushes open the door. There is a double bed inside, a lone chair.

“Thank you,” she says again, entering the room, pulling her bag behind her.

For a moment, I am tempted to follow.

“The rally?” She asks, halting, turning around in the doorway.

“Three days.”

“I made it.” She smiles.

“You made it.” I smile.

“I still think of him,” she says, and all I can do is nod at the floor as I hear a catch in her breath and she apologizes

Zain Saeed

again, then again in Urdu, and shuts the door behind her.

2007

My city broke a decade ago, in 2007.

I was wary of that year from the moment the clock struck twelve, because it was followed not with the bright lights and EDM of most of the world's other New Year midnights, but with a sudden darkness.

The party groaned. For a little while, we were children, back at school, giggling in the powercut dark. We could hear the fireworks going off in the rest of the city, crowning her dusty skies with brightglow shimmer.

Someone sneezed.

"No generators, no generators!" Someone shouted.

A door opened, yellow light streamed in, and we were told to get out.

We squeezed out of the restaurant – converted just for that night into a club, curtained windows, guards at the entrance – as one sweaty whole, screaming at once in euphoria and in anger through the little doorway. We spilled out into my darling city's humid slap and scattered all over the street into whooping, whining, smoking, laughing groups.

I was not alone that night. I need to mention this fact

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because I was, at that stage of my life, not yet a year out of university, accustomed to being terribly alone. My parents had three years ago advanced to their dusty retreats, and for most of those years I had lived most of my days and nights solitary, by electric light.

The exceptions were moments I spent with Billoo, my dear friend. He was with me at the party, so we stood outside together, smoking, covered in sweat. By that point I had known him for 16 of my 22 years. We were each other's childhood imaginary friend made flesh. Where other children cried for their friends when the roads were blocked – a strike, a gun, a bomb, a flood; my city had broken several times before that year too - the two of us rejoiced. Our houses shared a wall. No one had to drive us anywhere. We had a bat, a tennis ball, a football, figurines. We had everything we needed to wait out the sickness of the city.

On that New Year's Eve, we were trying to figure out the ratio of men to women at the party.

"10 to 3?" I said, squinting.

"Where do the rest of them go?" Billoo asked, frowning at the crowd, counting under his breath.

"To your birthday parties," I said, and we clutched our stomachs laughing. Billoo had invited the entire class to his house on his 12th birthday, but only the girls had shown up. The girls and myself. The next day, the growing boys in

class weren't sure whether to laugh at him, or envy him. A year later, all of us fully changed, we inexorably chose the latter – fourteen girls at a birthday party!

“It's strange though,” I said, trying to figure out if there was one more drag in my cigarette, “there's more women at these things every year.”

“This city changes man,” Billoo said, staring dramatically at the sky.

I shrugged, and looked up at the exploding colors.

“Okay,” Billoo suddenly said, then clapped once. “Let's find another party?”

I shook my head. “Work.”

He groaned. “Just go late. You run the place.”

“I am the place.”

“It'll be fine!” He patted my shoulder.

But I was already putting out my cigarette. I kicked it away, shook hands with him, and walked back towards my car, even as Billoo shouted Jogi come back, Jogi this will be a great year, oh the things we will do Jogi!

I walked away, arm raised in goodbye, laughing.

But I had started feeling it somewhere in the middle of that conversation: the loneliness of the city in my stomach. It came and went, felt something like madness, or nausea. In the darkness I felt the dense air, the need to be anywhere else. I felt a sudden nostalgia for the year that had passed and I wished desperately that it could've stayed.

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In hindsight, this reads as premonition.



But I did have work in the morning – that was not a lie.

And in the office the phone rang and kept ringing, people looking for tickets elsewhere, anywhere. Papa was the professional – he'd opened the agency at a time when people actually needed someone to book their adventures for them. I only got to deal with the old and the illiterate, the rich and the lazy, those who hadn't figured out how to use the internet or had forgotten.

My office was a wooden desk and a blue chair with wheels, a big window, and dust. But right outside, some twenty floors below, to the right of the office buildings: there was the beach. The water was brown and white. In the distance it was blue and green. If I stood at my window and turned to my left, the water would change to rising rotten concrete, apartments and offices, gray pipes and windows, further down were little shops and cars and the bustle of the day. The streets themselves were lathered in blackening blood. Entrails of goats and cows were stacked on the sidewalks – the bigger of the two Eids, falling by a whim of the moon on that New Year's Day – bored clotted men squatted over silver trays with butcher's knives, reducing magnificent carcasses to flesh and bone, hurling

them into rattling pots.

What had changed from the year just past? Very little. Two police encounters that morning in the more populated areas of the city. Drugs. The General was still dwindling, threatening yet again to delay the oft-promised elections. The Judge and his sleek mustache - long dormant supreme upholders of our constitution - was still calling the General a dangerous man, a corrupt man, insulting his uniform and the far grayer growth on his military upper-lip, striking a match with the illegitimacy of the dictator's power. I think it was on that day I found out that Bibi - ten years a scarf-clad myth - was considering a return, hinting at a deal with the vulnerable General.

Other than that, not much had changed. The city continued to thrum, and the dying were dead, and the living were busy.

And then I picked up the phone for the thirtieth time that day and it was Billoo, asking me if I knew that the traffic police would never stop you for running a red if you were wearing sunglasses while you did it.

"I'll prove it to you," he said. "Tonight." I laughed for a while.



I'd only been reunited with Billoo for about six months

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at that point.

His family had done what families do: they'd moved. Somewhere in the Emirates, fine sand and metal superstructures. We must've been seventeen then, maybe sixteen. We were men. We parted with nods and handshakes. I cried in my room for days after but did not let anyone see. He'd left me his Batman figurine – he would claim later that it was simply oversight, that he had not meant it as a gesture – and I'd given him a bar of chocolate, told him it had been lying around in my fridge, that no one wanted it, that my mother probably bought it. I had, of course, been saving up for it for months. The shop I got it from was ten miles away.

We did not immediately let each other go. There were weekly emails at first, containing hefty descriptions of the new girls in our classes, of interesting teachers, of the cities we dreamed ourselves living in. A few months later our letters became more sporadic, brief mentions of new songs we'd found. We told each other we'd had sex with people, but did not describe it in much detail.

He wrote to me after my parents' accident. It had been almost a year since I'd last heard from him. He told me to come to him, to leave the city. He said there were better places to live. I did not respond, and like so we were silent for more than two years.

I graduated university in that time. It passed me by, left

a lingering smell of paper and the memory of two halves of an open book, rising like blinders from each side of my nose. I had friends aplenty in my first year, I played a broken guitar to laughter on wet grass, played it till I heard of my parents' passing. Caught in a crossfire, robbers escaping with a measly sum, two policemen dead, one injured. I did not pick up the guitar again.

A lot of the stories people tell of my city involve these acts of men, but that is not the story I want to tell. It was the start of my numbness, an apathy that I soon came to associate with so many in this city. I made an effort to lose all my friends and succeeded. I visited my parents' graves only once, blind drunk, then forgot about where they were. I pushed loneliness as far as it could go, and I was surprised that I did not break.

When I walked into Papa's deserted office for the first time two hours after convocation, it was deserted, of course, desks and chairs covered in three years' worth of dust, my only companions several cockroaches and a blooming family of lizards, each equally unhappy to see me. I took off my tie - I had left the university in some ceremonial daze - and untucked my shirt, and wiped one big desk clean with my jacket. Then I sat down and put up my feet and began going through the diaries and notebooks on the desk, full of blue-scribbled telephone numbers and information, no computers so no passwords, because Papa

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mistrusted anything that claimed to make life easier.

Two hours of that - mixed with constant pangs of memory that brought mini versions of a recent ex floating around on my desk, flipping back her hair - and I broke down, and subsequently found myself on the stairwell, head in hands.

I don't know how long I'd already been there when I smelled a cigarette and looked up to find a massive man in a purple shirt staring at me from the landing below.

"I know," he said, nodding his head very seriously, "I know."

I burst out in laughter - it was him! By god it was him! He offered me a cigarette but I stood up instead and hugged him, and then asked for a lighter. As is the case with the friendships of men, we sang to each other of the last two years. He worked in HR for a multinational company. He had his own apartment, which is unusual for my city, separate from his parents, where he kept big boulders of hash and bootleg alcohol. "Why'd you come back?" I asked him. "When?"

"Three months ago," he said. I realized I didn't hate this city after all.

By the time his half-full pack was empty, we were children again. There were no further questions.

We began meeting up at the beachside park every day after work, smoking and talking of the deteriorating city, and on some days of the city rising, and sometimes of the

boys we'd been and sometimes of the places we would run away to if we could – it didn't have to be the West, we would've taken Cambodia, or Kenya - to escape our semi-halal lives.

I said, "This time together, of course."

"Escape is better with your brother in tow," he said.

We laughed then. We laughed in general.

He'd become fond of conspiracy theories, and would spend hours convincing me of the stake of intelligence agencies in the lives of common people.

"They're dragging out Kashmir for a reason," he'd say, then look dramatically at the receding ocean.

"Zia never died," he'd say.

"Sylvester Stallone is a fictional character," he'd say, and then, unable to control his laughter, would fall off the bench, onto the grass, and finish his cigarette looking up at the skies.

But sometimes, he would smoke too much, and fidget, and scroll incessantly through the news. He would get angry, he would get sad, he would vow to fix things he could not have fixed. I would join in sometimes, making promises to the stars. We chuckled about this, too, mere minutes later.

I think a lot about these phases of his now. I suppose we were both learning to love the city again – Billoo after his return and myself, Lazarus after loneliness – we, midnight

pilgrims to the sea. So I assumed he had it as much as I did, the desire to act, and I had it not at all.



On that New Year's Day he was already sitting in his black Civic as I came out of the office building. He was wearing sunglasses with bright yellow frames, grinned widely as I approached, gave me a royal wave.

As soon as I sat in the car, he lifted and dropped his hand like an axe, the Billoo motion, the one that told you some strange explanation of unnecessary phenomena was on the way. But at least I'd been warned of that day's topic beforehand.

"I'm telling you," he said, one hand on the steering wheel, "sunglasses get you out of anything."

"It's almost dark, dumbass."

"It works at night too," he said, then took a deep breath and was about to drop the clutch when he remembered something, and took his glasses off. "It's Monday, isn't it?"

I nodded.

He smacked his head. "I swore I'd come."

It hit me immediately what he was talking about: some retired airline captain had taken to throwing regular parties on Mondays at his house. The ages of the partygoers varied from suspiciously eighteen to post-middle-age crisis, but

these were decadent affairs, and you could bring alcohol and they would give you mixers. You could drink freely under an open sky for once, and sometimes there would be bands.

I looked at what I was wearing, some jeans and a t-shirt, and then glanced at Billoo, fit for a wedding in a linen blazer and khakis. He was always impeccably dressed.

I shook my head. "I look stupid," I said. "They won't let me in."

Billoo grabbed my shoulder. "You're with me, Jogs. Come on. Escape! To Elsewhereland!"

I was fully aware that there was no arguing his decision, that regardless of what I wanted, he would find a way to convince me that I wanted something else, that is the sort of person he was, the charm he possessed, that had gotten fourteen girls to attend his twelfth birthday. I sank into the passenger seat, thinking the detour would at least distract him from trying out his idea with the sunglasses.

"Fuck it," I said.

He whooped.

Somewhere along the way he turned on the radio, already tuned to the news – a man was rapidly reading out some breaking news about a small bomb in Karimabad.

I shook my head. "The year's just started."

"India did it," Billoo said, narrowing his eyes, and I didn't know, as ever, whether to nod seriously or laugh. "We need

to do something man,” he continued, “like, get people together. Create awareness.”

“Against India?”

“For the city.”

I laughed. “Dressed like you are?”

He shrugged. “I’ll do it one day. I’m warning you. I’m thinking of bringing the captain in on this.”

I shook my head, full of affection. Two drinks in he’d be coming up with ways to build a ladder to the moon, then never as much as mention his grand ideas again. It wasn’t for us, I suppose, the life of the disturbed, the fighters, the ones who cared. We inhabited the periphery of citizen experience, breathed the rarified air of concrete blocks, imagined our futures as distinct from those of the city.

“What happened to legalizing hash?” I teased.

“It’s unofficially legal anyways.”

I snorted.

He harrumphed.

We drove past dark shop signs whooshing by, their colors invisible in the blackness.

The streets were yet whole, and light was inevitable - why wouldn’t we just outlive our fears?



Outside the captain’s there was the usual crowd of

shiny SUVs and sedans, mostly black. A police van was parked not too far from the main gate, maintaining the skewed constitution of the city's elite in its immediate surroundings.

We got out of the car and walked towards the house. Traffic passed us by as usual, there was a dull thump of music from inside.

I had already stepped through the gate when two large arms pushed against my chest from either side. A pair of guards materialized in front of us, both shorter than us but built like baby tanks. They were looking me up and down.

"Who're you?" One asked.

Billoo shoved himself in front of me. He shook their hands. He told them a joke. He told them who he was, how he knew the captain. He talked briefly about the state of the world, the spoilt brats who'd blocked half the road with their terribly parked Land Cruiser. The guards nodded, they slapped each other's backs. A few seconds later they saluted us through.

Once inside, it was clear to me that there would be no band that evening. Blue and green strobes were flashing everywhere, the air had turned to light smoke, heavy with the electronica of the debauched and depraved. A dance floor appeared to our left; fat, balding men in suits with glasses in their hands were gyrating unashamedly behind mildly concerned looking young women.

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Billoo tapped me on the shoulder and marched straight towards the bar in another room. I stood there with my hands in my pockets for a while, watching the scenes on the dance floor.

There was a particular woman in blue who had caught my eye. Her back was turned towards me, but her hair seemed intensely familiar. As if aware of the strange gaze on her back, she turned, and I, immediately and not entirely inconspicuously, darted my eyes towards the uninteresting ceiling and kept them there, locked on the stationary fan.

It was her, of course, my last obsession, Hessa. In a city of 24 million you would consider chance encounters – particularly those with so much meaning – utterly impossible. But my city is different, it is made of bubbles, little pockets of people drawn to each other and sad places.

My hopes for the year diminished considerably at the sight of her. There is not much to our story, other than that we met as she was buying men's deodorant from a store close to the university we both attended. We studied together. She was the first person I made out with, and the only person I wanted to make out with. But she wanted to, in her own words, live a little. And being a man of this place – so far from tradition, yet how do you escape a sinew twisted from birth? – I considered it preposterous, yet could not evict her from the dusty dives of my head.

But she barely noticed me, resumed her gyrations.

I turned away from the dance floor, sweating in my t-shirt. I shimmied around bumbling couples, craning to get a glimpse of the bar and find Billoo.

I spotted a stack of jackets by the stairs and, struck by inspiration, walked over to them, found one in my size and put it on. It smelled vaguely of talcum powder, but I immediately felt like I belonged.

I found Billoo at the bar. He was sitting in a group of people, glass in hand gesticulating wildly.

“Did you hear the story on the BBC?” He was saying, nodding seriously, leaning back in his chair. “The reporter said this country won’t make it. Not with the way we’re doing things.”

“I wish they’d come to one of these parties,” a man in a suit sitting opposite him said. There was much laughter.

Billoo took a large sip. “We just need awareness,” he said. “People need to know that they can hold the government accountable.”

I smiled. The real furies of the city stopped at the borders of our affluent bubbles. All we could do was drown in talk.

Billoo caught my eye then, and motioned me over. I shook my head, mimed a cigarette, and after picking up a clean-looking glass of amber liquid from the counter, made my way out to the lawn.

I sat down on some steps and looked around at the people

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talking on their phones, leaning against the captain's many cars, arguing about something. A woman in a red dress stumbled out from another door, onto the furiously manicured grass.

"Lighter?" She asked, in a deep, reassuring voice.

I offered her mine.

"I hate people," she said, lighting her cigarette.

The conviction in her voice made me laugh. She sat down next to me and I found myself holding my breath.

"Just do something about it already," she said, shaking her head, "just talking and talking and talking."

"Talking?"

She mimicked a shrill, high pitched voice. "We absolutely like, need to like, write to the newspaper. Just go out and do something."

A thin nose, and it turned up at the end. A mess of curly, dark hair.

"Nothing happens anyways," I said, shrugging.

She shook her head, then returned the shrug. "What're you doing here then?"

"Time. There's so much time."

She rolled her eyes. "Alone?"

"No. The large man talking politics in there is my best friend."

"Then why are you out here?"

I couldn't stop myself. "Avoiding my ex."

“Wow,” she said, sighing. “What drama! It’s only the first of Jan. What does she look like?”

“Blue. Did you hear about the bomb?”

“What bomb?”

“My friend thinks India did it. In Karimabad.”

“You want another one?” She asked, pointing at my now empty glass.

I nodded. She jumped up.

“Natasha,” she said, pointing to her chest.

“Jogi.”

“Fitting.” She smirked.

The group at the bar had disbanded, and as I looked for Billoo on the way back with our refills, I found him sitting on one of the couches, next to Hessa, among a pile of handbags and shawls. When Billoo raised an arm to grab my attention, Hessa turned in my direction, and she neither smiled nor nodded.

“Your friend,” Natasha said, poking me on the shoulder.

I turned around immediately, and she followed me outside.

“Ah. Blue!” Natasha said, understanding so many things at once.

Over the course of the next half hour, we talked about each other. She told me about her dreams to become a photographer, she laughed at my mention of the travel agency, then apologized profusely when I told her I wasn’t

joking. We were both Karachi born and raised, never going to go anywhere, never. She asked me what my dream was, and I told her I'd never had one, and that was entirely true. Beyond the childhood passions of flying planes and rockets, I had never considered ambition beyond an office desk. This place does that to young people, at least it used to.

"There must be something," she persisted.

"I wanted to be a singer."

"And now?"

"I guess I really just want to live somewhere else."

"Hate it that much?"

"Only sometimes," I said, surprised at myself.

"I don't think I'll ever want to leave," she said. "It's just. It's terrible, sometimes, I get it, especially if, well, if you have a vagina. But there's something, something else. I don't know. I can't phrase it. There's a reason I'm not a writer." She ended with a laugh.

When Billoo appeared behind me a few minutes later and grabbed my shoulder, semidrunken grin on his face, I felt an unexpected punch of disappointment at having to leave.

"Sorry," I said to her.

"I have to work the party anyways," she said, standing up.

She answered my confused look by putting her hand into a pocket on the side of her dress and taking out a

bundle of brochures. She unfurled one and handed it to me.

“It’s my first exhibition,” she said, “you can bring your friend. No pressure.” She ended with an uncertain smile.

I nodded. “I’ll come,” I said, and she saluted, and walked back into the house, stuffing the rest of the brochures back in her pocket.

Billoo, who had witnessed the entire exchange from right behind me, let out a low whistle.

“What was that?” He said as I walked towards him and we stepped out of the gate.

“You were talking to my ex, bitch,” I said, and he seemed genuinely surprised.

“She didn’t mention you at all,” he said, “I swear.”

I made a non-committal sound. I had stopped feeling the tension of seeing her earlier that night. I got in the car.

“Also,” he said, getting in, putting his arm around my headrest, “you’ve never mentioned her either. What happened?”

“Uni thing. She’s from one of those... communities.”

He nodded knowledgeably. “I assume you couldn’t establish yourself as her cousin?” I laughed. He started up the car.

“That one in the red, though,” he said, beginning to drive, “she was so...”

He suddenly braked very hard.

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He popped open the dash and took out his sunglasses and put them on. I smacked my forehead.

“The proof is nigh!” He shouted, and - goodness knows how - the car turned away from the street unscathed.



We drove around for a while, looking for traffic lights that were working, but it was load shedding hour, and so we couldn't find any. Car lights zoomed towards us from the other side of the road, other lights zoomed past us, and they were the brightest lights. We passed dark lawns cut into the exteriors of houses, their gates rattling with the vibrations from diesel generators, one to a house. The city used to rumble in the fluttering light in those days, and though it always had a calming effect on me - I am afraid of silence, always have been - Billoo did not like being thwarted by the dead traffic lights.

He was shaking his head in frustration when he spotted something and began to point towards it, suddenly beaming: rows of squares of light on the apartment buildings close to the beach, glowing in the distance.

“Light!” He shouted, and so we drove to the sea.

We first heard the little pops after the waves had already appeared to our right. They sounded muffled, inconsequential, and neither of us mentioned them. A

game we used to play with ourselves, a game we played all of that year: convincing our ears that all the gunshots we heard were actually fireworks. I can't remember the exact quality of the sounds that night.

The lights in the apartment buildings went out just as we approached, but it didn't matter, because we had seen a set of traffic lights to our right, changing from yellow to red, and next to it the black outline of a police Hilux. I felt Billoo's car bend under the force of his size 12 shoe as we shot forward. He pushed the sunglasses up the bridge of his nose, manic grin on his face. I braced against the dashboard, even though we were only hurtling towards thin air. If someone were standing on a balcony in one of those apartments, cigarette in hand, the weight of the world blowing away in the smoke, we would've cut an impressive image; the solitary car and its streak of light, taking on the dark of the city.

But something was awry about the image. The lights were red, yes, and the Hilux was there, but it was facing away from the road, pointing at the vast expanse of undeveloped land that stretched all the way from the new apartments to the sea. As we got closer, the lights of the car lit up the silhouettes of people huddled next to the police car. They also illuminated the white ambulance that was idling on the barren ground.

"Don't stop," I said, because I felt the car slow down.

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But Billoo wasn't listening. He had already taken off the sunglasses, and the car was hugging the side of the road, slowing down all the while, till we stopped next to the Hilux.

The men in the huddle turned towards the car as the headlights beamed on them, and they looked at each other, asking with their eyes if someone had ever seen people like us stop at the sign of trouble.

Billoo turned off the engine and got out, myself after him, clenching my fists.

"What happened?" Billoo asked a man who was standing on tiptoe, peering over the throng.

The man turned around and gave him the once-over, frowning. "Bullet," he said finally, then turned back around.

I was happy to stand there with my head hung in respect but Billoo had already begun to shove his way through the crowd, all young men, all wearing shalwar kameez, an overbearing smell of sweat and cigarettes. I followed after him, apologizing to the men in English and getting even more insults because of it.

We finally emerged about a foot away from a hand on the ground. I'd notice the absence of police tape in my city years later.

The hand belonged to nobody we knew, just a man who'd forgotten to shave in the morning, lying as if in repose after a hard day of life. He'd been shot through the head,

and at points on his upper body which made his blue shirt purple. His stubble was caked with dirt on both sides, as if he'd turned in his sleep. His pants were miraculously devoid of blood, and it smelled like he had soiled himself. As I was staring at him, I heard someone retch. Billoo was doubled over next to me, a puddle of vomit in front of him. The spectators around him retreated a few steps, cursing again, making sure we heard them say that we had no business being there, that we did not belong, not us in our jeans and blazers. They would not have found the humor in the fact that I did not even own the jacket I was wearing, that I did not know who it belonged to, that I had forgotten to put it back in the stack at the party.

I put a hand on Billoo's heaving back as three policemen across from us, dressed in their usual black shirts and khaki trousers, shared a joke over cigarettes. The ambulance driver was leaning against the front of the van, scratching his armpit. The crowd grew tired of insulting us, and began to talk animatedly about the kind of gun that must've been used, the party affiliations of the criminals and the victim, the cricket score.

"They're saying he was standing here waiting to cross the street," I heard someone say, "two men came on a motorcycle, shot him, and ran."

I distinctly heard someone bargaining over a packet of peanuts.

The Year of Sound and Heat

But I could not take my mind off the body for too long. There he was, my first dead man in the flesh, thrust out of a news report and at my feet. I felt it then as I felt it the night before: a shift under the city, a rattle in my heart. But I was mostly in shock, confused, thinking I could escape the moment, even though in hindsight it is obvious and clear that my inexorable descent – our descent – began right there, next to the dead man’s fingertips.

The ambulance driver suddenly appeared next to the body, and dumped a bucket of water onto it, and on the bloody patches around - the body’s last memories would’ve been that of a flood - and just like that the man became an immortal part of the city, dye for the soil.

One of the policemen lifted up the man’s legs and flinched at the smell and let them go. The leather Bata shoes of the dead man fell back down on the hard ground with a clack.

The rest of the policemen, cigarettes still in mouths, then approached the body with a black cloth, draped it over, rolled the body in it, and then shouting motherfucking fat fuck lifted it up from either side, carried it over to the back of the ambulance, flung it inside with an almighty heave, and banged the door shut.