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Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come from the outside—the ones you remember and blame things on... don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be a good man again.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Crack-Up'

I ask my vagrant heart: 'Where is there to go now?'  
No one belongs to anyone at this hour. Forget it.  
No one will receive you at this hour. Let it go.  
Where can you possibly go now?

— Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 'The Hour of Faithlessness'

This is how it should be done/  
This style is identical to none.

— Eric B. & Rakim, 'You Got Soul'

## ONE

We'd become Japs, Jews Niggers. We weren't before. We fancied ourselves boulevardiers, raconteurs, renaissance men, AC, Jimbo, and me. We were self-invented and self-made and certain we had our fingers on the pulse of the great global dialectic. We surveyed the *Times* and the *Post* and other treatises of mainstream discourse on a daily basis, consulted the *Voice* weekly, and often leafed through other publications with more discriminating audiences such as *Tight* or *Big Butt*. Save Jimbo, who wasn't a big reader, we had read the Russians, the postcolonial canon, but had been taken by the brash, boisterous voices of contemporary American fiction; we watched nature documentaries when we watched TV, and variety shows on Telemundo, and generally did not follow sports except when Pakistan played India in cricket or the Knicks made a playoff run; we

listened to Nusrat and the new generation of native rockers, as well as old-school gangsta rap, so much so that we were known to spontaneously break into *Straight outta Compton, crazy motherfucker named Ice Cube / From a gang called Niggaz With Attitude* but were underwhelmed by hip-hop's hegemony (though Jimbo was known to defend Eminem's trimetric compositions and drew comparisons between hip-hop's internal rhythms and the beat of Kurdish marching bands). And we slumped in secret cantons of Central Park, avoided the meatpacking district, often dined in Jackson Heights; weren't rich but weren't poor (possessing, for instance, extravagant footwear but no real estate); weren't frum but avoided pork—me on principle and Jimbo because of habit—though AC's vigorous atheism allowed him extensive culinary latitude; and drank everywhere, some more than others, celebrating ourselves with vodka on the rocks or Wild Turkey with water (and I'd discovered beer in June) among the company of women, black, Oriental, and denizens of the Caucasian nation alike.

Though we shared a common denominator and were told half-jokingly, *Oh, all you Pakistanis are alike*, we weren't the same, AC, Jimbo, and me. AC—a cryptonym, short in part for Ali Chaudhry—was a charming rogue, an intellectual dandy, a man of theatrical presence. Striding into a room sporting his signature pencil-thin mustache, one-button velour smoking jacket, and ankle-high rattlesnake-skins, he demanded attention, an audience. He'd comb his brilliantined mane back and flatten it with wide palms. He'd raise his arm, reveal a nicotine-stained grin, and roar, 'Let the revelry commence!' then march up to you, hand extended, declaiming, 'There you are, chum! We need to talk immediately!' Of us three, he was the only immigrant. While he lived day to day in a rent-stabilized railway apartment in Hell's Kitchen and subbed at a Bronx middle school, his elder sister had emigrated in '81—at the tail end of the first wave of Pakistani immigrants—and enjoyed spectacular success. A decade later she sponsored AC's green card. A small, no-bullshit lady, Mini Auntie worked at the pediatric ward at Beth Israel on East 87th, lived in a brownstone around the corner, and financed AC's on-and-off-again doctorate and studied debauchery.

Jamshed Khan, known universally as Jimbo, was a different cat altogether, a gentle, moon-faced man-mountain with kinky dreadlocks and a Semitic nose which, according to AC, affirmed anthropological speculation that Pathans are the Lost Tribe of Israel. Not that such grand themes moved or motivated Jimbo. Propped against a wall like a benign, overstuffed scarecrow, he'd keep to himself, but at a late juncture he would grab you by the arm to articulate the conversation he'd been having in his head. Jimbo was known to converse in malapropisms and portmanteaus, his deliberate locutions characterized by irregular inflexion of voice, by rhyme if not rationale. On the face of it, he was a space cadet, but we knew he knew what was what. Unlike AC or me, he had a steady girlfriend and, as a DJ slash producer, a vocation with certain cachet. But if his career trajectory opened doors in the city, it estranged him from his septuagenarian father, a retired foreman settled in Jersey City for a quarter of a century. In that time he'd raised a son and a daughter and several notable edifices on either side of the Hudson. Born and bred in Jersey, Jimbo was a bonafide American.

As for me, they called me Chuck and it stuck. I was growing up but thought I was grown-up, was and remain not so tall, lean, angular, like my late father, have brown hair, tin-tinted eyes, and a sharp nose, 'like an eaglet,' my mother liked to say. I'd arrived in New York from Karachi four years earlier to attend college, which I completed swimmingly in three, and, though I was the only expatriate among us, liked to believe I'd since claimed the city and the city had claimed me.

The turn of the century had been epic, and we were easy then, and on every other Monday night you'd see us at Tja!, this bar-restaurant-and-lounge populated by local Scandinavian scenesters and sundry expatriates as well as socialites, arrivistes, homosexuals, metrosexuals, and a smattering of has-been and wannabe models. Located on the periphery of Tribeca, Tja! seldom drew passers-by or hoi polloi, perhaps because there were no gilded ropes circumscribing the entrance, no bouncers or surly transvestites maintaining vigil outside. It was hush-hush, invitation by wink and word of mouth. We'd got word that summer when my gay friend Lawrence né Larry introduced us to a pair of lesbian party promoters who called themselves Blond and Blonder, and ever since the beau monde included a Pakistani contingent comprising Jimbo, AC, and me.

Soon Jimbo a.k.a. DJ Jumbolaya was spinning there, and when I'd arrive, he'd already be in the booth, svelte in a very Kung Fu Fighting tracksuit, swaying from side to side, hand cupped around ear, pudgy fingertips smoothing vinyl like it was chapati. Starting down-tempo with, say, a track from a cooing Portuguese lounge singer, he'd then kick it with some thumping Senegalese pop, seamlessly, effortlessly, as if the latter were an organic extension of the former. DJ Jumbolaya distilled the post-disco-proto-house-neo-soul canon in his compositions. His credo was: *Is All Good*.

When I'd slide next to him and pay respect—high five, chest bump, that kind of thing—he'd say something like 'Dude, you've come to sip martinis and look pretty 'cause you're a preena, a lova, a prophet, a dreamer,' and when I'd ask what he was having, he'd say *whatever*, so I'd order a couple of cocktails from Jon the bartender, who would have his shirt unbuttoned to his navel and made drinks for us on the house. He told me he'd served in the French Foreign Legion as a chef and, recognizing me to be a man of the world, would relate news ('you hear about the latest Mai-Mai offensive?'), dispense proprietary advice ('it's best to run hot water over a razor before shaving as the metal expands'), and discuss matters of aesthetics ('that one, yeah, the one that's looking at me, she's got what's called a callipygian rump'). Leaning on the bar, drink in hand, I'd suck it all in.

Friends would show up in ones and twos, characters we knew from Tja! and here and there. There was Roger, a towering sommelier originally from Castle Hill, who'd taken classes in conversational Urdu because, he'd say, 'I dig your women.' Once he asked, 'You think they'd make with a brother? What do I gotta do, man? Recite Faiz?' And Ari, a curator at a Chelsea art gallery who cultivated a late Elvis bouffant, had this great story about his first day at P.S. 247 when he found himself in Dodgeball Alley at lunch: 'So, like, the black kids, and the white kids, they separated

into teams, like it was 1951 or something, and there was this pencil-neck Chink and a bunch of sorry-looking Spics, and me, the Jewboy. We didn't know which side to join, and like nobody wanted us, so we banded together like the Last of the Mo's. And sure, we got our asses kicked pretty bad the first day, but man, after a couple of weeks, they were black and blue.'

By and by and arm in arm, Blond and Blonder circulated, making small talk and grand gestures—'Like those shoes!' 'Canapé for everyone!' Sometimes Jimbo's girlfriend made an appearance. A natty, masculine woman with a belly and waddle, she hailed from East Coast aristocracy, sipped berry Bellinis, no cassis, and moved with a hipster crowd— what's called an urban tribe—comprising acolytes. We all loved her and called her the Duck.

On occasion, when I'd find a girl perched on a distant barstool, legs crossed, hair wafting the scent of apple shampoo, I'd say, 'Ciao ciao, baby.' It wasn't a pickup line, just something I muttered when I was drunk. The last time we'd been at Tja!, a girl with mermaid eyes and a pronounced Latin lisp had actually responded to my tender advance with a staccato laugh. 'Next week,' she'd said before being tugged away, 'jou 'n me tan-go!' There was, I believed, great promise in the phrase, in the 'proverbial tango.'

Typically, however, I'd await AC's advent, his heavy hand on my shoulder. All bang, no whimper, he'd chat, chant, dance burlesquely, flirt amiably, and I'd stand beside him, nodding, grinning, reveling in the sense of spectacle. Once he burst in with bloodshot eyes, bellowing,

*I rise at eleven,  
I dine about two,  
I get drunk before sev'n;  
And the next thing I do,  
I send for my whore, when for fear of a clap,  
I spend in her hand, and I spew in her lap!*

Conversations paused, a glass or two dropped, and everybody looked at each other—Jimbo at me, Blond at Blonder—like gobsmacked kids at a magic show. Then there was spontaneous and resounding applause. Bowing impressively, AC went about playing the part of the said poet, spewing, spending, and all. With him, the night always promised picaresque momentum. Jimbo would join us after he was done serving up curried riddims, and we'd palaver and drink some more, then close the place down, only to return the week after, or the week after next.

At the time we didn't think that there was more to it than the mere sense of spectacle. We were content in celebrating ourselves and our city with libation. It was later that we realized that we'd been on common ground then, on terra firma. Later we also realized that we hadn't been putting on some sort of show for others, for somebody else. No, we were protagonists in a narrative that required coherence for our own selfish motivations and exigencies...

[...]

From *In this Time, In this Country*

I was ensconced at Thomas & Thomas one afternoon, absentmindedly surveying the lettering on the spines of shelved tomes when a lean, elderly gentleman strode in dressed a woolen three piece suit, and demanded a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* at the register. Although he wore a knit skullcap, his wan complexion – like the delicate flesh of our bekti – and orotund pronunciation suggested he was an Englishman, which was curious, because Englishmen had become a dwindling species since the Raj. When he persisted in learned, labored Urdu – “toom samajta hai?” the boy behind the register shook his head like Man Friday. Surveying the shelves with one open eye, the gentleman grimaced then produced a kerchief to pat his creased forehead. “Sala,” he muttered from under his beaked nose and whiskers, “jahil,” before turning to walk out.

But before he could leave I called out, “This way, sir.” I could have located any volume in the store. It wasn’t because I had formally studied history or philosophy or literature. I hadn’t. I studied Communication, a discipline so new and nebulous that neither instructor nor student could articulate a cogent thought about it. In other times, I might have joined the restive, unemployed, or marginally employed youth of the city, known to move in packs on motorcycles with detached mufflers, but since the coup, there had been a renaissance in the media industry, an irony never quite reconciled by discourse. In time, MTV set up shop, a cross-dresser hosted a talk show, and politicians were held accountable on primetime (“*Un ki patloon utar dee*,” some would say). And in due course, I was snapped up by a startup channel and put to work procuring images, mostly from the internet, that corresponded to international news. Once in a while, during a strike or the monsoon, I was called upon to write a bulletin. Later, I would become a television personality in my own right, but at the time, a year and half into my career, I was frustrated by the long hours and general lack of stimulation and whenever I had a free afternoon I would return to my childhood haunt and ways. I had practically grown up at Thomas & Thomas; I lived upstairs.

As I guided the gentleman to *Robinson Crusoe*, negotiating shelves spaced too closely together, he asked whether I had read the novel. I nodded. I had read it a decade earlier, perched tenuously on a stack of *Life* magazines which eventually toppled over. “Well, young man,” he intoned, “what do you make of it?”

“It was okay,” I blurted, adding, “it was nice,” in a poor attempt to recover.

“Okay?” he repeated like a schoolmaster. “Nice?”

“I suppose I could elaborate.”

When the ostensible Englishman nodded emphatically, I told him that I found the novel stylistically archaic and dramatically somewhat flat but its role in the formal

development of the novel, not to mention its philosophic implications, made it worthwhile. As he considered my response, considered me – and he did not speak or move for a full a minute – I avoided his teal-eyed gaze. Locking my fingers over the pit of my stomach, I scrutinized my feet and inhaled the balm of damp pages and unopened books.

Finally, he pronounced: “We should discuss this matter over a cup of tea.” Grabbing me by the elbow, he tugged me out into the weak sunshine, and hailed a passing rickshaw. “I live around the corner,” he mentioned as we negotiated rush hour traffic.

But he didn’t live around the corner. The rickshaw deposited us curbside off Bandar Road, across the street from the fancifully named Abraham Lincoln Ayurvedic Clinic and adjacent to the landmark Capri cinema. It was the outer periphery of the old Parsi Colony. “We’re here,” my host announced. I surveyed the environs, nonplussed: there was a vacant plot behind us bordered by a boundary wall and a narrow lane, apparently a one way; angry crows picked at a heap of rubbish halfway down.

“Would you be so kind as to pay the rickshawallah?” I did as I was told. The charge wasn’t much: thirty, maybe forty rupees. When I turned, my companion was bounding down the street with the pace and line of a fast bowler. As I scuttled after him, my eye happened to catch a verse of doggerel rendered in calligraphic graffiti against the side of a building: *Kash mera dil patang hota...* Then I lost sight of the man. Put differently, he vanished. There was no way he could have reached the end – the road stretched for a good furlong – even at his impressive stride. Perhaps, I mused, he leapt into an open manhole. Only when I reached the garbage mound, I heard a voice calling, like a hawker’s. Then I noticed a V-shaped crack cleaving the wall. Climbing in, I found myself in a vast plot overrun with rushes and slumped fronds. Relics lay scattered amid the growth: a fractured dining chair, a bent umbrella, and what I guessed was a bidet.

At the arid far end rose a double storied bungalow daubed, it would seem, by a dirty mustard varnish. It was one of those colonial sandstones that could be found in monochrome shots in the pages of lost publications such as the *Civil & Military Gazette*, featuring pillars and jutting latticed balconies and striated arched doorways. I had always thought such edifices had long been abandoned, under litigation or the purview of the land mafia. I was wrong. Avoiding a depleted flowerbed marked by broken bricks, I approached the place, warily. A weathered sign, fixed to a hollow metal pole, read:

NO TRESPASSI  
VIOLATORS WILL BE SHO  
SURVIVORS WILL BE SHOT AGA

My host emerged from inside after a few moments, purposefully brushing his trousers, before offering an extended hand. “You can call me Skinner, Mr. Skinner.”

While Skinner arranged tea – I could smell a gas burner (and, I believed, wet spinach leaves) – I sat cross-legged and still on an armchair in the darkened

belvedere. The curtains were heavy and drawn and at least one of the three French windows was boarded up. Although the place was remarkable in many ways – the tiled floor beneath my feet was engraved with quatrefoils, there was a copula overhead – the novelty of the ambience, the relict air, gave way to a tickling sense of unease. The sign warning trespassers had been a bit much (although I supposed, it might have been a joke); and somewhere in the house, a dog bark riotously (but then, dogs bark). It was when I spotted the pistol on the mantle amid the haberdashery – a smooth, whale gray, old fashioned contraption – that I felt a bead of sweat trickle down the side of my ribs.

“*You aren’t a thief, are you?*”

Startled, I sat up like I had been slapped across the nape. “No, *sir!*”

Skinner had presumably been observing me for some time, tray in hand. Setting it down, he said, “That’s a Mauser, if you’re wondering” – I wasn’t – “a C96.” Picking it up by the hilt, a bulbous thing, he aimed it at arm’s length from my head. “It’s German manufactured, he continued, “Churchill carried one, and Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence.”

Leaning to one side, I nodded vigorously.

“Please,” he added, waving the thing in the air, “have a cup of tea. It will get cold. I’m sorry but I don’t believe I can offer you any biscuits.”

“Oh,” I blurted, immediately helping myself to a cup of black tea, “that’s okay. I’m not that fond of biscuits anyway.”

Putting the pistol away, (shoving it really, between his right thigh and the arm of divan) Skinner remarked, “But you’re fond of literature.” I nodded again. “Conversing with you,” he said, “is an exercise in pulling teeth.”

“Well,” I should have said, “you were pointing the Mauser at me,” but of course didn’t. And then the dog howled, causing me to jump. “Oh, don’t you mind him,” Skinner remarked. “The variety is not known for its civility. That’s his nature. You see, there are several varieties of dogs that have been reared to hunt game – not fowl, pheasant or hare – but big game, dangerous game. In the East, there’s the *tossa*, in the West, all manner of hounds. There was even a Latin breed once, known as the Dog of Cordoba, a breed so vicious, so beastly, that the sexes tore each other apart in a matter of generations. In this part of the world, in this country, there’s the Bully Kuta. It’s a remarkable specimen. It can, entirely on its own, hunt bear, kill wild boar. I keep one as a watchdog. In this time, in this country, one requires a watchdog.”

“And a Mauser?” I blurted.

“And a Mauser,” Skinner repeated with a grim smile.

“What, may I ask, are you doing here, sir?”

“What am I doing here?” he repeated leaning forward. “What are you doing here? This is my city, my country. I was here before this country *was* this country. And I’m not going anywhere. Mark my words: I will die here. I won’t die happy but I will die here, in this godforsaken place. It was wonderful once – I can tell you stories, stories that would make your jaw drop – but now it’s gone to the dogs.”

I nodded gravely even if I didn't comprehend his claim on the city but then we all have our own myths: my people claimed to be amongst the oldest denizens of the Subcontinent. They also claimed the city as their own even if a cursory excavation reveals solid Parsi and Hindu foundations. Of course, I didn't say anything. I didn't say much at all. I just listened as Skinner held forth on subjects ranging from the ecology of the region to WWII armaments in the manner of a scholar. Admittedly, I was fascinated by the trenchant, irascible old gora, possibly mad as a hatter, holed up in Saddar for more than a half century,

Over the next several hours, I managed to glean that he had been employed by the railways in a senior managerial capacity and, consequently, interestingly, was present at the filming of *Bhawani Junction*; that he was a widower, which I found unexpected because he didn't strike me as the marrying sort, and a bridge player. I also got the sense that he was a respected man once, a known man, a man about town: he spoke of "cabaret nights" at Le Gourmet, afterhours at the Excelsior, of places and times beyond my ken. And of course, he spoke of reading, especially, "in this time." *Robinson Crusoe*, however, was not discussed.

When I realized it was late, it was very late. The room had become dark and cold. The barking had long ceased. "I'm sorry, sir," I began, "I must beg your leave."

"Leave?" he repeated in higher pitch. "You can't just leave. You must stay for supper."

"I am honored by your invitation, sir, but I'm afraid –"

"You should be afraid, young man," he growled standing up, looming almost. The Mauser slid into the seat. "Savages scour the streets at this time." Lowering his voice, as if commencing a ghost story, he continued, "They will be chop you up into tiny pieces. They will feed you to the dogs."

The drama, the sentiment was silly, misplaced. I would often dine at Student Biryani at one in the morning, go for paan or soda at two. Admittedly, there were some tricky stretches – heroin addicts languished in the park behind the Salvation Army headquarters – but marauding bands of killers had never been a feature of the neighborhood. Besides, it wasn't even eleven then. When I causally swatted the air, Skinner grabbed me by the wrist and as if preparing to deliver a kiss, swung into me. "You think you know," he whispered, "but you don't. You are an innocent, a virgin, are you not?"

For a moment, I had the dreamlike sensation of being unable to aspirate. Somehow, however, I managed to summon an appeal: "Would you please free my wrist, sir? You're hurting me."

Skinner considered the request by exposing his yellowing teeth. I could smell his breath. It reeked of wet spinach leaves. And as suddenly as he had ensnared me, he released me, mumbling "I am just concerned about your safety, young man." Taking a step back, mechanically, like a cripple, he added, "After all, you are my guest."

"You are too kind –"



“You could sleep here. The guest room is comfortable and spacious if somewhat untidy – the dog spends the evening there. But you would be safe here. You’re safe with me.”

“I would have availed of the invitation, sir, I really would, but I’m tired, and I’ve work in the morning, at the crack of dawn actually.” That was true. Then for some reason, I added, “But I’ll return.”

“When? When will you return?”

“Soon, sir, very soon.”

When he let me out, I hurried through brush and night; I didn’t stop, look back, wave. It was as if the Bully Kuta was after me.