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Excerpt from *A Woman Like Her: The Short Life of Qandeel Baloch*

**Prologue**

She is eight or nine years old when it happens.

She is inside a room with baked-mud walls, a mud floor. There is little of beauty in this room. Everything is functional, everything is shared, the overwhelming colour is of the beige walls. But there is a television, and she moves and writhes her body like a woman on this television. She doesn't have the woman's curves, but she sways her girlish hips in time with her anyway.

She longs to be outside. But she has been punished and must stay indoors. "What is wrong with you?" her mother had asked as she plucked her from the scrum of boys she had tried to play with. It is hot in the room. She wishes she could be swimming in the canal outside her home, and thinks of the cool slip of water against her skin, how each stroke of her arms and the furious pumping of her feet stirs a rush of mud. She could barely ever see in that brown gloom. The grit stung her eyes and coated her hair and left her skin with a wash of fine silt. Above, the sky would be cloudless, the sun a gold coin. It is a different world under the water. Just imagine, she thinks, if I could glide to the furthest reaches of the canal, past the fields, swoosh into the greater surge of the river and swim right out of this village. For now, however, the whole world comes to her, streaming into her home through a big bowl-shaped satellite dish in the courtyard.

She puckers her unpainted mouth. She doesn't know what the woman on the television yearns for, but she wants whatever it is. She knows the words to all these songs and she loves to sing, mouthing each word, her face twisted with the longing, the pleading. Ten years from now, the songs she will love, the ones she'll sing into her phone and then play back and share with the whole world (or whoever is out there, listening to her sing at night when she is alone in her home and can't sleep) will sound the same.

There's someone in the doorway. Her older brother is leaning against the frame of the door, watching her dance. She wants him to be proud. To marvel at the way she imitates the woman on the screen. He'll tell her parents and they'll stroke her hair and tell her she's more beautiful than any of the women on television. They'll plead with her to do a little dance for them. No, not just

them, but for anyone who comes to the house. They'll turn on the music and give visitors a glimpse of just how she sashays and sways and knows all the words to every song. Just one, they'll cajole, just sing one verse for us. Our little nightingale. Let us hear that sweet voice. Do you know how far you'll go with a voice like that?

She puts everything she's got into that dance for her brother. He's the one who named her when she was born. She loves to watch him as he stands in the courtyard of their home, scowling, scissoring the air with his swift karate kicks. She tries to do it just like him. When he's not there, she sneaks into his room and tries on his shirts and pants and looks at herself in the mirror, the cuffed hems of the trousers falling fatly around her ankles. He strides towards her and she beams. She looks up at him in anticipation, thinks of how he'll retell this moment to their parents . . . and that's when he knocks the breath right out of her.

Her cheek smarts, she stumbles to the side, bright motes before her eyes. He raises his warm open palm once more, but she sees it coming this time, feels the gasp of air as his hand rushes towards her and she scrambles away. He is shouting and their mother runs into the room. Will she think of this moment, years later, when she dances in—no, not in, but for—a huddle of men at a wedding, when her fingers brush the rupee notes that these men shower on her? The papers will caress her feet. She will tread on them. The bridegroom, drunk with happiness or actually drunk, will sway. Someone will

fire an AK-47 in the air, and the rat-a-tat will startle her just a little. She will be sweating in her tight black jeans and T-shirt. A scarf, fringed with small shiny discs, will feel too snug tied around her waist. Or is that someone's arm? (Later, she would swear that she hated that sort of thing. She would never do that. She didn't even know those kinds of dances.)

Is that what her brother had pictured, what he had feared, when he saw her dancing in that room? Will her mother remember that day when she walks back into the same room more than a decade later with small knots of journalists, their cameras slung around their necks, dark blooms of

sweat on their shirts in the July heat? The journalists will hear about the time the girl's brother slapped her when he saw her dancing.

By then, hundreds of thousands of people will have seen her dance. They will have seen her pull the white bathrobe she stole from a five-star hotel down over her shoulders. It'll slip to her hips, a single knot holding it together at her waist. In that lime-green slip of a bikini, she'll caress her breasts and trace the curve of her stomach. "This was just the trailer," she will tell these people. "Do you want to see more?"

### The Baloch Family

It takes a little over two hours to drive from Multan, a city in southern Punjab, to the village of Shah Sadar Din. After many checkpoints, where officers shake down the young men on motorbikes, some riding two or three at a time, their thin arms curled around each other's waists, you'll see a silty brown river snaking past men lounging on charpoys by its banks. On the way, if you admire the fields of sugarcane, each stalk taller than a man, your driver, a local who has played under the green sway of these plants as a child, will scoff. The *ganna* is short this year because there has been little water. He has seen these plants soar to fifteen feet. On the side of the road men and women stand by smoking steel vats, stirring a muddy treacle, folding crushed almonds and dried fruit into the soupy folds of the molasses. They sell packets of this liquid sugar along the highway.

You'll drive past a thicket of short, squat mango trees, *sufaidas* (Eucalyptus) that are chopped for firewood, and date trees that in five or six months will yield bundles of silky-skinned fruit the size of a baby. The grass here is the brightest malachite. It is impossible to know where the sky ends and the azure, cloud-filled pools of water in the fields begin.

A thermal power station with lazy puffs of smoke curling from its cooling towers powers the entire region. Great swoops of cable arc from one pylon to the next, each tower a child's line drawing of a robot standing astride our puny world. Within an hour of leaving Multan, you will reach the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Housing Complex and its accompanying hospital, donated to the people here by the Turkish government after their homes were washed away during the floods of 2010. In the distance smoke plumes from brick kilns, where men, women, and children spend their entire lives on their knees under the sun, cooling, patting, stacking, and packing red bricks that are sent across the country. They will never leave this burning land, always thousands of rupees short of freeing themselves from their debts to the kilns' owners.

Beyond the kilns, white canopies hover inches above the ground, protecting a swathe of GM crops. You'll pass warehouses, built better than most homes here, filled with the government's wheat reserves. And then you'll see the blaze of the mustard fields. If you have spent your life in a city, you will struggle to remember seeing a yellow so bright, a yellow like the neon gleam of a McDonald's sign in the night, like a New York taxi washed clean by the rain. After this, you arrive in the city of Dera

Ghazi Khan and it will feel as though that mustard field is the last thing of beauty you will see for some time.

You will abruptly realize that no women feature in any of the advertisements on the billboards. It is the first time you have seen only men in ads for washing powder. You'll see women on the streets, but

never their faces. Many of them wear what looks like a black ski mask with slits for their eyes under their hijab. The others wear a burqa that makes you feel naked under your *dupatta*. The burqa's fabric falls from a skullcap fitted to the woman's head. A thin funnel rises from this cap. The burqa has no slits for the eyes. The funnel allows air into the burqa so the women do not suffocate. If you have ever been caught in a dust storm, you'll understand how these women see the world. When you stare at them, your contact in Dera Ghazi Khan, a journalist, tells you about a place not too far from here where the tribal belt of Balochistan province starts, where he says the women are not given any shoes. When you don't understand, he explains impatiently, 'If you're not wearing shoes and you walk outside, where will your eyes remain? You'll never look up— never look at any man— if you're scared of where your naked foot might fall when you leave your home.'

Less than an hour away from Dera Ghazi Khan, you speed past fish farms and a smashed tractor—five people dead, and no ambulance for miles—then pass a board that welcomes you to the village of Shah Sadar Din. Qandeel Baloch was born here.

In July 2016, the villagers watched as reporters from all over— not just from Pakistan, but from abroad, from the BBC, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*—turned up in Shah Sadar Din to cover the story of Qandeel Baloch. It was a great time to be a local reporter. If you weren't covering the story, you were working as a fixer, an interpreter, a driver . . . the possibilities were endless. The local journalists took the visiting reporters to Shah Sadar Din over and over again. Everyone wanted to see where Qandeel came from. The villagers couldn't understand it. "My friend, you have come here for nothing," a man said to one of the reporters. "Strange people, coming here just like that." What did he mean? the reporter asked. "We have a tradition here that every second or fourth day some girl is killed and thrown in the river. You media guys are creating hype for nothing." A girl could be stuffed into a gunny sack or the kind of bag used to carry wheat or sugarcane and the bag could be filled with stones. The bag would sink to the bottom of the river. The girl would stay there, buried under the stones.

When I meet Qandeel's parents, three months have passed since the day she died. Any meeting with them must now be organised through a man named Safdar Shah, who introduces himself over the phone as their lawyer. A few days earlier, Qandeel's parents had told a reporter they have been forced to beg for food in Shah Sadar Din, where they returned after they were evicted from their house in Multan.<sup>i</sup> While their daughter was alive, they divided their time between Shah Sadar Din and Multan, and Qandeel paid the 10,000 rupees' rent for this house every month. Without her, they could not afford the rent. But Shah says the meeting will take place at the house in Multan, where Qandeel was murdered, and not in Shah Sadar Din. "It's no problem at all," he says airily. "Just don't come to the village. People here aren't happy about all the reporters who have been coming to meet the parents."

It takes around twenty-five minutes to travel from Multan's city center to Qandeel's home. We pass through the cantonment area and drive past the army club with its fat white onion domes and buildings whose walls bear neat lines of portraits of young men. The photographs change from grainy black and white—soldiers who died long enough ago to have roads named after them and paragraphs devoted to them in textbooks—to rosy-cheeked technicolour. These are pictures of shaheeds (martyrs)—men who have died in the line of duty for their country. Everything is perfectly ordered, from the manicured grass outside the city's only McDonald's to the separate line for donkeys and cyclists at the checkpoints to get in and out of the cantonment. Just past the last checkpoint, we pass the sprawling skeleton of a building under construction, the new garrison library, which boasts enough space for 200,000 books, and then banks and a line of schools with names like Blossom Valley and Bloomfield.

Further on, as the road narrows and deteriorates, there are fewer women. Men crowd the vegetable carts and fruit stands and linger at shops selling household supplies, shoes and clothes. There are signs indicating a textile mill. Dung cakes slapped on the low red-brick walls of houses grow warm in the November sunlight. As we near the Karachi Hotel neighbourhood, the buildings thin out. The area is

home to many who have come to the city from villages across Punjab seeking work. Small houses, narrow, one or two storeys high, constructed by landowners who rent them out for five to ten thousand rupees a month, are squeezed together on patches of land.

Someone is building a house just a few steps from the one that Qandeel rented for her parents. The scrub has been cleared, and the foundations reveal a simple, cramped layout: a kitchen, two rooms and what will probably be a bathroom. It is quiet, with the houses at some distance from the road. There are no squalling cars, no shrieking children playing in the street, no shops around the corner, no gurgle of water in open gutters. It does not have the familiar smells: there is no scent of sewage, no waft of food simmering on a stove, no piles of chicken fat, vegetable skins or cores of fruit festering in heaps on the side of the street. It seems to be deserted.

Safdar Shah's white car stands at the end of the lane, just before the sharp right turn to Qandeel's house. Only one of the four houses here is occupied. A woman emerges from it and narrows her eyes at us. "Media?" she asks. I nod, yes. "Do you have a card? Any phone number?" She takes my business card, and it disappears down the front of her shirt, probably tucked away with loose change and bits of paper with prayers scribbled on them. "Never know when you guys might come handy, right?" she says as she walks off.

Shah waits at the door to Qandeel's house. He wears a starched black *shalwar kameez* that puffs around him and rustles when he moves. His shoes have been scrubbed to a dull glow down to their pointed tips. He probably slicked down his hair this morning, but it has buffeted into wispy clouds. His light skin is flushed pink in the heat and his moustache is a jet black straight from a bottle. He looks like the kind of man who, if you ask him his age, will coyly reply, "How old do you think I am?"

"I know more about her than they could ever tell you," he says right away, as though picking up the thread of our earlier conversation on the phone. "Did I tell you I am a Syed? [A Syed is a Muslim who claims to be descended from the Prophet Muhammad's family.] We don't lie, you see."

Inside, Qandeel's father, eighty-year-old Muhammad Azeem, perches on a black imitation-leather sofa, his legs, stick-thin within the loose folds of a dhoti, pulled close to his chest. He absently strokes the puckered nub of flesh where one leg abruptly ends. He lost his foot six months ago when a car ran over it. "The daughter came here to have his leg fixed," Shah explains. "She came to Multan on the second day of Eid and she planned to get his treatment done and then fly back to Karachi. She said she was going to leave for India after that."

Qandeel's mother, Anwar bibi, looks like she is in her fifties. She is small, the hard rise of her collarbones under her kameez hinting at a thin frame. She sits on the edge of one of the two charpoy in the room. Her feet dangle inches above the floor.

Shah drives Azeem and Anwar bibi here from Shah Sadar Din when he needs them to meet a reporter or appear on a talk show. He brushes off a query about Anwar bibi's claim that she and her husband have been forced out of this house. The landlord doesn't mind if they stay here for some time for free, he explains, and anyway they now have around 100,000–150,000 rupees in donations from human rights groups and sympathizers.

I try to gauge Shah's relationship with Qandeel's parents but it's not clear how he helps them or what he does as their lawyer since they are represented by the district prosecutor in their daughter's murder case. "I go everywhere with them," he explains as he sits on the charpoy next to Anwar bibi. "I mean, they refuse to go anywhere without me. They tell me, 'If you go, we'll go with you.' Even if it's for their son's bail hearing. You see, we have known each other's families for generations. We have been together for eight generations. Our fathers were friends and their women come and go from our house. We Syeds don't usually go to other people's houses [I assume he means people who aren't as well off as his family] but we went to theirs. The one time Azeem had to go somewhere without me, he started weeping in the car. I asked him, 'Uncle, why are you crying?' Do you know what he said?"

Azeem is quiet. He does not tell us what he said.

Shah continues, "He told me, 'Safdar, promise me you won't leave me!' So I swore, 'As long as I am alive, I'll never leave your side.'" He points to Azeem. "You see, they have cell phones; people can call them, but nobody ever understands what they say."

While Anwar bibi seems to understand and speak some Urdu, Azeem responds only in Siraiki. He tends to mumble, his words gummy and sloshing and often unintelligible when he cries, which is frequently and in small bursts.

Shah says he is the family's *pir* (spiritual leader). In rural areas across Pakistan, particularly in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab, pirs offer everything from religious intercession to dispute resolution among their followers, known as *mureed*. In southern Punjab, where Azeem's family lives, many political parties turn to pirs—usually landed, wealthier residents of small towns and villages—in order to secure the votes of their followers. "I help them because we are all from the same village. Our lands border each other, and they are my mureed," Shah says. "Azeem Khan is my mureed. His children are my mureed, and their children and so on."

Both Azeem and Anwar bibi only stare at the television as Shah makes these statements. They watched their daughter on that screen in a handful of television dramas and morning show appearances. She would call them to let them know what channel and what time she would be on. "In those moments, while we were waiting to see Qandeel, life would feel great," Azeem says. As a child, she had told them she wanted to be a star. And now that she was singing, dancing and acting, they were happy for her.

Shah sighs. "She didn't talk to them for years. Didn't talk to the father for three years." "I supported her," Azeem pipes up. "I used to send her money."

Shah continues as if he hasn't heard him, "Didn't talk to the mother for six years." "She would call us sometimes," Anwar bibi says quietly.

"Oh she just ended all relations with them," Shah says. "She thought they wouldn't like what she was doing. She said she would never look back."

Qandeel's six brothers knew about the television shows she was on, and they didn't like it. "Tell her we never want to see her again," one of them told Anwar bibi. Qandeel had two sisters, and when she returned to Shah Sadar Din for her younger sister Shehnaz's wedding around 2010 her parents tearfully welcomed her home but said she couldn't stay. "Leave, or your brothers will pick a fight with us," Anwar bibi told her daughter.

Qandeel's neighbour in Shah Sadar Din remembers a night, perhaps during that visit, when Qandeel appeared at his house out of breath. Her brother Arif had a pistol and was threatening to kill her. "I had no idea what had happened," he recalls. "Qandeel had come there with a driver and she took off. After she left the village, her parents had told us all she was working at some mill." She did not want to come back to Shah Sadar Din after that. She found this house in Multan and told her parents that she would meet them there once a year.

"Our sons, their wives and children didn't bother with us after that, and we didn't bother with them," Anwar bibi says. "Our daughter took care of us and no one else paid us any attention. We didn't know much about what she did, and we didn't really understand it. She travelled to Malaysia, Sharjah, Dubai, and South Africa, but we had no clue why. What she's doing, what she's not doing—we didn't bother asking. It was her life."

By June 2016 they were alarmed. Their daughter's face and voice seemed to be on TV almost every week. These were not appearances that she called to tell them about. "We saw these photos on the news," Anwar bibi says. "They said Qandeel did an interview with a cleric. There were photographs of her sitting on his lap. Wearing his cap. Every day those pictures were shown on every channel. Over and over again." While Anwar bibi and Azeem were in Multan for a visit, they found out that some people were taking photos of their home in Shah Sadar Din.

“These *kameenay* [bastard] mullahs,” sputters Azeem. “Those bearded men,” Shah suggests.

“Those bloody bearded ones!” Azeem continues. “They asked people, ‘Who is Qandeel? Where is she from? What do you know about her?’”

Qandeel was worried. “Don’t think badly of me,” she told her father. “I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m just fighting with someone.”

Anwar bibi scolded her daughter. She didn’t want her to do any interviews or talk about the cleric.

“These people are bigger than you,” she remembers saying. “Don’t meet these people who are above your stature,” she cautioned. Remember where you come from. Whose daughter you are.

A few days later, in the last week of June 2016, everyone found out who she was, where she came from and her father’s name. She had been married and had a son. Stills of her passport and national identity card, with her real name, “Fouzia,” were shown on the news. When news broke that Qandeel Baloch was really Fouzia Azeem of Shah Sadar Din, Waseem refused to leave his home. People were coming to the mobile phone shop he owned in the village with their phones. “Can you download your sister’s latest videos on this for me?” they’d ask, sniggering. When Waseem’s friends came to his house to enquire about him, why he hadn’t been out drinking with them, why he wasn’t coming to the hookah pani (shisha) spot any more, he told his mother to say he wasn’t in.

Up until this point Waseem had kept in contact with his sister. “Whatever he asked her for, she gave him,” Shah claims. “If he said he wanted a mobile phone that cost 80,000 rupees, she bought it for him. If he asked for one lakh [100,000] rupees, she sent it to him. She did everything for him and her sisters. When Shehnaz got married, she sent a truck loaded with things for the new bride, including an air conditioner.’

“How did she make enough money to buy all those things?” I ask. “Allah provides,” Azeem interjected.

When the media revealed her real name and pictures of her passport and identity card appeared on TV and online, Qandeel called from Karachi. “I want to come home,” she told her mother. Then she vacillated, changed her mind. She would send them money for Eid. She didn’t want to leave Karachi. A week later, she said she would come. “She said, ‘I am so tired, I am so worried,’” Shah prompts.

“I am tired, I am worried,” Anwar bibi repeats.

“I am tired of this life ...”

“I am tired of this life. I want some peace.”

When she finally did come to the house in Multan, Qandeel was perpetually on the phone. Azeem heard her talking to someone one day. “What have I done for you to hound me like this?” she snapped. “Why are you after me? What have I ever done to Pakistan? Why do you keep calling me?” “These media people hounded her,” Anwar bibi says. “They just wouldn’t stop. Hounded her beyond all limits.”

It didn’t stop even after she died. Reporters and camera crews followed her parents to Shah Sadar Din for the funeral. Azeem didn’t attend but insists that there were hundreds of thousands of people there on the day. However, photographs and video footage of the funeral show just a few people: relatives, villagers, curious bystanders. Qandeel’s body was covered and laid on a charpoy. A cleric stood before her, raised his palms to his ears and led the congregation, four rows deep behind him, in prayer. Shah stood right behind the cleric. “I handled all the arrangements,” says Shah. “Azeem wasn’t even there for the funeral. I was. He told everyone, “Shah *sahib* will be there. I don’t have the strength to come.”

After the prayers Shah approached one of the reporters who had come to the village for the funeral. “You should interview me,” Shah told him. “I know just what is going on here.” His interview ran as breaking news that day. And since then Shah has stayed in touch with that reporter and others, providing them with nuggets of information and updates as the case progresses. He glues news clippings of his interviews or stories featuring his quotes or photographs into a thick oblong notebook, the kind that schoolchildren use.

“The media got her killed,” Shah says with a sigh. “She just wanted to be famous. She wanted to make a name for herself. She wanted people to know that Qandeel exists. I once asked her, and we used to speak practically every day you know, if she knew why people spoke badly of her. They are jealous of you, I told Qandeel. They are jealous of your fame.”

I don’t get to find out if Azeem and Anwar bibi really believe this. The most they will talk about for now is their memory of the morning that they found Qandeel’s body. The last thing Azeem remembers from the night before was how sleepy he felt when he lay down on his charpoy on the roof of the house, where he and his wife slept during the summer. “I woke up in the morning and my head was spinning,” he says. Their son would later confess that he had spiked their glasses of milk with a sedative the night before.

“I was the first to wake up,” Anwar bibi says. “I felt like my body was numb. I couldn’t see very clearly. I held my hand against the wall for support and tried to go downstairs. I remember sitting on the stairs every few steps because I could not stand. The sun was out by this time and it was quite hot. I was sweating a lot and I thought that I might be feeling unwell because I had been lying in the sun for too long. I washed my face. I didn’t feel like I could cook breakfast, so when the servant who worked at our house arrived, I gave her some money and told her to buy some food from the market. I called out to Qandeel. I said her breakfast was ready. I called her three or four times, but there was no answer. I opened the door to her room and saw her lying there on the charpoy.”

With Shah deftly steering the conversation, Anwar bibi and Azeem’s explanation for why Waseem killed Qandeel comes out as a muddled version of the story that has been told, retold and then untold over the last few months. A month before we meet, Anwar bibi and Azeem were interviewed on a talk show about their daughter.<sup>ii</sup> They said that Qandeel was scared of her brothers and feared their reaction to the kind of work that she was doing. Azeem told a reporter that his daughter had confided in him about this, saying, “Baba, sometimes I feel my younger brother wants to kill me.”<sup>iii</sup>

Azeem explains that his daughter tried to placate Waseem. She said she had arranged for him to marry the daughter of a woman who used to come to her parents’ house to give her massages and to oil her hair. But Waseem wasn’t interested in getting married; he wanted his sister to stop the work she was doing. Anwar bibi says her daughter asked for a year, just one year, to cash in on her sudden fame. Qandeel promised her brother she would then leave show business.

When Waseem came to his parents’ home in Multan in July 2016 while Qandeel was visiting from Karachi, Anwar bibi tried to send him back to Shah Sadar Din because Qandeel pleaded with her to do so. She gave him 20,000 rupees. He left, but returned three days later. Azeem then told his son that he wanted him to represent the family at their neighbour’s funeral because he could not walk without assistance. Waseem agreed, and it was decided that he would stay the night in Multan.

Azeem and Anwar bibi had no idea about Waseem’s plan for that night—that he had arranged for his cousin Haq Nawaz to come to the house later to help him kill Qandeel. They claim that Waseem and Haq Nawaz stole 200,000 rupees and some jewellery from Qandeel after they killed her<sup>iv</sup> and pocketed 40,000 rupees belonging to Azeem before leaving the house in Multan that night. Anwar bibi and Azeem say that the moment they saw their daughter’s lifeless body, they knew without a doubt that Waseem had killed her, and when the time came to file an official report, that is exactly what Azeem told the police. Later, Azeem would tell a reporter from the BBC that he had felt unwell and out of sorts from the effects of the sedative Waseem had given him and could barely remember what he had told the police. He claimed the police called him back to the station several times to amend his initial statement. Sometimes they would suggest what he should write down.

Today, they speak proudly of their daughter to me. They insist on calling her “Qandeel,” the name she chose for herself, and not “Fouzia,” the name they gave her. She is a *shehnsah* (a queen), the one whose name will always be remembered, the one who became famous, a brave-hearted girl who was a tomboy and loved to swim, ride bikes, run six miles at a time, and do karate. She was intelligent, far

more than their other children, bringing home prizes for her work in school and becoming class monitor. She danced at the slightest hint of a tune. She was not naughty but knew how to stand up for herself. She beat up a man who teased her sister but was not cut out for hard work like harvesting, milking cows, cleaning, and cooking like the other women in the village. When she came to Multan for ten days at a time, she liked to sleep for much of the day. She liked to be fashionable. She loved children and spoiled them. She cried for her son when she lost custody of him.

“And now that she is gone, you must think of that child,” Shah interrupts. “Don’t say things like that,” Anwar bibi replies. “I don’t want that child,” Azeem says, scowling.

“You need to get that child somehow,” Shah tells them. “He is her *nishaani* [memory].”

A few weeks after she died, Qandeel’s landlord in Karachi sent her parents a notice to collect her things and pay a few months of outstanding rent. The letter had the address of her apartment, and her parents finally found out where she had been living in Karachi. Azeem and Anwar bibi travelled there with Safdar Shah. ‘This sofa you’re sitting on?’ Shah says, pointing. “Qandeel’s. That table. Qandeel’s. Want to see the rest?” Her clothes, wispy silk shirts, jeans and soft chiffon tunics, fill a steel cupboard in one room. In another—the room where Anwar bibi says she walked in that morning in July to find her daughter unresponsive, a cloth thrown over her face—a bright red and yellow suitcase lies on the floor, more clothes bursting out of it. A worn-out cotton robe from a hotel, a pink lace top, a royal-blue shirt, a leather jacket, tights, a black and blue scarf threaded with silver. The floral-patterned stole that she wrapped around her bare shoulders in one of her last television interviews.

“We brought back forty-five pairs of shoes with us!” Shah crows. “There was a great big cupboard outside one of the three rooms in her flat,” he says. “It was so big, we couldn’t move it. It was filled with her things. We asked the landlord if we could just leave it there. He refused. He said he would throw it out. So we tied ropes around it and tried to lower it downstairs. The rope slipped from our hands. That cupboard of hers fell. It smashed into bits and pieces.”

Anwar bibi comes into her daughter’s room and sits on one of the sofas brought back from Karachi. Sometimes Qandeel would take selfies as she lay back on those sofas, bored and alone in her apartment. Anwar bibi watches Shah rifle through the suitcase. “We brought back a truck full of stuff,” he says, tugging at the tangled clothes. “Sofas, a fridge. Her bed.” The same bed on which she made most of her videos. Where she writhed and sang love songs and feigned a headache and promised a striptease and wept as she asked, “Why do you guys hate me so much?” That bed is now in Shah Sadar Din.

Anwar bibi buries her face in her palms.

Shah looks at her. “She gets a little crazy sometimes,” he says.

It is the first time in our conversation that Anwar bibi has cried. “I feel so strange in here,” she says. “My heart feels so sad. I feel suffocated. I feel helpless. We are helpless. When I see her things, I feel this way. People say to me now that she was good. They praise her now. If they had praised her then, she would not have left this world. She would not have angered her brothers. But what crime did my daughter commit? She was innocent. They killed an innocent. I feel sad for her and I feel worried for my son.”

This is the most that she will say during our conversation. Shah looks around the room. “Do you know what we can do with all these things?” he asks. “These clothes, these shoes—they’re of no use to these people. Where we live, no one wears these kinds of things. Do you think people would buy this stuff?”

In a corner, the top of a small fridge is covered with a smattering of junk: Mr White Smokers Toothpaste, with the end cut off to squeeze every last bit of paste from the tube, a small bottle of



mustard oil, a scrubbing brush for nails, Comfort Morning Fresh fabric softener, a yoghurt and cucumber face wash for oily skin, a card for a twenty-four-hour taxi service in Karachi, a toothbrush, and what looks like a bar of pure gold. Shah's eye falls on this and he picks it up to examine it. He shakes it. It is a powder compact, its red and black embossed YSL logo slightly chipped. It is almost empty, with just a ground-down shimmering square of flesh-coloured dust.

Shah grins. "Here you go," he says, thrusting the compact into my hand. "Something for you to remember her by. Take it. It'll be *Qandeel ki nishaani* (a memory of Qandeel)."

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<sup>i</sup> Gishkori, Zahid. "After Qandeel." *News on Sunday*, 2 October 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Co6RamOxDa4>

<sup>iii</sup> Gishkori, "After Qandeel."

<sup>iv</sup> Birmani, Tariq Saeed. "Troubling times for Qandeel Baloch's parents." *Dawn*, 4 October 2016.

### 'People say this is no job for a woman'

She is seventeen and he is her mother's cousin. She writes him letters, confessing her love for him. The words turn the mottled brown of old blood – her blood – as the years go by. On their wedding day she is led into a room filled with family and friends and seated beside him. A woman fastens something to his wrist. He dips his head forward as a garland of pink and cream flowers is hung around his neck. He feels the heft of a gold watch, the cool metallic press of a ring slipped on to his finger. His arm presses against hers and someone arranges the gauzy puff of her dupatta around her. They never hold hands. She stares at a spot on the floor. Someone takes a photograph.

More than a decade later, when the reporters find him, he will show them this photograph and tell them about the letters. They will look at the picture of the happy couple and think that for a girl marrying a man she loved so much, she sure does look miserable. But then again, what kind of shameless woman grins on her wedding day? Would she have smiled if she had known that this photograph would later be seen by thousands of people?

*There is no love marriage. My parents forcibly married me to him.*

*That's it.*

It isn't long after the wedding that she comes home weeping, and tells her parents about the cigarettes stubbed out on her skin, of the electric shocks that tremble in her body, the threats of throwing acid in her face. 'He hates me because I am beautiful and he is not,' she says. 'I am young and he is not. He hates me.' He would not let her visit them or meet her brothers. 'Something is wrong with this man. He wants to kill me.'

Every time, her mother takes her back to her husband's home. 'We are Baloch,' Anwar bibi scolds her daughter as they make their way back to Kot Addu, an hour away from Shah Sadar Din, 'and Baloch do not believe in running away like this. His home is your home now.' Anwar bibi knows what the people in the village would tell her child: 'He can beat you. He can break your body with sticks. He can set you on fire. Whatever he does, you have to stay there. That's it.'

Anwar bibi would finally see the burn marks when she bathed her daughter's body and wrapped her in a shroud on the day of her funeral. Even then she told the blonde woman who came to interview her the same thing she had told her dead child all those years ago.

Months pass. The girl feels no joy when the baby comes. They think she will settle down now that she is a mother.

*I was married against my will. Any child born in that marriage is not mine, it's his.*

You have a son, her husband snaps at her. What more do you want? But even six months later, even after she has grown to love the little boy, the answers to her husband's question continue to beat within her.

I want to go back to school, she thinks when her husband strikes her. I want to leave this place, she repeats when she knows that she will go to the nearest city, Dera Ghazi Khan, and not back to her parents' home. I want to get a job, she reminds herself as she waits in the dark to hear her husband's snores the night she runs away. I want to stand on my own two feet, she pleads as she clutches her child and waits at the gates of the women's shelter in May 2009.

*Main iss liye paida nahin hui thi ke kissi mard ki jooti bun ke rahoon.* [I wasn't born to be worth less than some man's shoe.]

'Name?' asks the woman sitting behind a glass-topped desk inside the Darul Aman, the government shelter home for women.

She gives her real name. The name her brother had chosen for her when she was born: 'Fouzia Azeem.'

'And his?'

She looks down at the baby nestled against her. She will never forget the misery she felt the day she learned she was having that man's child. And then the love that held her so tightly within its grasp that she endured months with a man she called an animal, just for this little boy.

'Mishal.'

A few days later, she is transferred to a shelter in the city of Multan. 'My parents keep coming here for me,' she had told the officials at the shelter in Dera Ghazi Khan. 'They just want me to go back to my husband. I'm in danger here.' From the car window, she sees men and women squatting on the footpath outside a mosque in front of the Multan shelter. Some of the women cradle children in their dupattas. They sit there for days, refusing to leave without the woman they have come to claim. 'She will run off with someone else if she stays here,' the men argue with the shelter's guards when they tell them to go away. 'We do not accept this,' the women chime in. While they wait, they watch the female guards saunter to a kiosk at the corner to buy crisps, candy and fizzy drinks for the women behind the gates. There are rumours the guards keep a close eye on the women inside so they can sniff out the most desperate. 'We have a pretty, new one with us this week,' the guards then whisper to landlords and politicians in the city. The women are not allowed to leave the shelter, but on some nights, with a thick enough wad of notes in the right hands, the gates are unlocked. At least, that's what everyone says about this place.

Every day women pound at the gates, pleading to be let inside, and they are led to Fatima's office. She has been in charge of the shelter for only a year, but she learned one thing very early on: 'The women who end up here are the rebellious ones.' But this place has a way of weakening that spirit. Perhaps it is the din of wailing children – and sometimes their mothers – that makes women want to return to whatever it was they escaped. Maybe this place makes them realize they aren't all that special. Once your eyes get used to how dark it is inside – windows are a risk – you will see that there are two kinds of women here: those who want to marry someone of their own choice and those who want a divorce. And no one can stay here forever.

Some women crack in two days. Better the devil you know, they say. Some women believe their father's or brother's or husband's earnest promises. After they leave, Fatima gets updates on them. They have locked her in the house. They have cut off her legs. They have killed her.

The new girl does not seem to be in any hurry to leave. Her parents travel for hours from their village to see her. She doesn't want to talk to them. She has no interest in any of the classes –

religious lectures, handicrafts, stitching and embroidery – intended to keep the women busy. She fusses over her child and trails through the corridors crooning to herself. Sometimes she takes requests, and then the sweet strains of a love song slip under the cracks of the door to Fatima's office, silencing for just a few seconds the whine of complaints from the women who crowd around her desk like siblings snitching on each other.

At any given time Fatima is responsible for up to forty women at the shelter, and she would have forgotten all about the new girl, were it not for the day she gives her baby away. Fouzia says the boy is sick. She is terrified he will die.

*If anything happens to him, God forbid, they will do a case on me. I had no choice.*

'What kind of mother are you?' Fatima asks with disgust when Fouzia returns to the shelter after meeting her family, her arms empty. The boy is no longer hers. She doesn't seem to register a word Fatima is saying.

'Just try and meet him [the child],' her husband had said. 'See what I do to you if you even try.'

*What have I done? Will my boy ever know his mother's name?*

Fouzia doesn't weep, she doesn't talk back or walk off as Fatima berates her.

*I thought when my child is older, he'll understand, he'll see the environment there in the village and feel that his mother was right, that she did what was right.*

Maybe she has some fantasy for herself, Fatima thinks. She imagines herself living in a beautiful house, a rich woman with the world at her fingertips. Maybe she is one of the educated ones. They think they are very modern. I am an educated girl, these girls say when Fatima asks them why they ran away from their homes. I don't belong there.

'Why did you do this?' she asks Fouzia.

Even years later, she has not forgotten the girl's reply.

'I need to make my own life,' she says. 'Whatever I want to do, I cannot do it with a child hanging on to me. I'll become helpless.'

The child could live with his grandparents. Maybe his father will want him.

Fatima tries to argue with her. 'But your parents could help you ...'

Fouzia will have none of it. 'No. They will not listen to me, and I will not listen to them.

They should let me live my life.'

They sit in silence for a moment.

'You don't know what I have planned,' Fouzia says as she rises from her chair. 'Just let me do whatever I need to.'

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You need a good memory to remember the faces of all the women who come in just one day to the Faisal Movers bus depot seeking work. Subhan isn't likely to remember a face. He scarcely ever looks up from his phone when he sits across from the hostess applicants or their fathers, brothers or husbands. So when reporters and officials turn up in his office in July 2016 to ask him about a woman named Fouzia, he gives them the same answer over and over: 'These girls stay with us sometimes for two weeks and sometimes for two months. How can I be expected to keep tabs on each one?'

Every girl is the same. He repeats mechanically the requirements for the position as they strain to hear him above the crackle of the loudspeaker every time the announcer presses her lips too close to the mike – Is she kissing it or trying to eat it? Subhan grumbles – to rattle off a string of departure times. Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Sahiwal, Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Faisalabad, Hyderabad, Quetta, Bahawalpur, Rajanpur. With a belch of black smoke and a smack on the rump from the ticket inspector, the buses roll out of the depot and across the country every half-hour, all day and all night.

'Education?' Subhan asks the prospective hostesses. 'Matric,' they reply. Some lie. Others have Master's degrees. These ones weep when he says he has nothing administrative for them. It is hostessing or nothing. He knows they won't refuse. 'It's better than having nothing,' some of them say, sniffing.

'Age? You need to be above twenty.'

Most of them lie again.

'Do you want to be paid daily or monthly?' The answer tells him how desperate the girl is. Those who opt for daily pay have promised themselves this is just a quick stopover until something better comes along. They need the money to tide them over.

Hostesses welcome passengers on board the bus, recite the safr ki dua (prayer for safe journeys) and serve water, cold drinks and cardboard containers of biryani or sandwiches halfway through the journey. They earn a few hundred rupees for each trip, and some women clock up several trips a day to earn a bit extra. In 2016 the company announced that if a hostess did thirty trips in a month, she would get a 2,000-rupee bonus. It doesn't sound like much, but every rupee counts for these women. If any of the rival companies offer them even 100 rupees extra, they will leave.

The hostesses travel across Pakistan – a measure of freedom they would not have had otherwise – but Subhan knows the job isn't ideal. The girls who come here have no other choice. They don't have fathers or they have brothers who do nothing.

If a woman gets the job, Subhan dispatches her to a nondescript two-storey building outside the depot. The only male allowed inside it is a young boy who delivers cups of tea, cigarettes and greasy fast food to the hostesses. They take quick naps between trips or stay the night there, sleeping on thin foam mattresses thrown on the floor, stripping down to tight white T-shirts that they wear tucked into the shalwars that the company issues them. A new girl is pointed in the direction of the hostess in charge. Naseem has been here since 2002. It has taken her more than a decade to work her way out of the buses, to the ticket counter and finally into this air-conditioned office with her own computer. She pairs new hostesses with older ones for the first three or four trips, until the girl is confident enough to do the announcements and manage passengers on her own.

Naseem believes she can weed out the ones who will cause her trouble and spot those who will learn to step nimbly away from the hands that cup their bottoms or the fingers that 'accidentally' caress their breasts as they hand out the food boxes to passengers. 'Men observe the women to see what they're like,' Naseem warns new hostesses. 'They will treat you accordingly.'

She doesn't care what the women do in their own time. She just doesn't want to hear about it. 'People say this is no job for a woman,' she likes to say. 'They say we become bad in this line of work. But the ones who are already spoiled are bad even in their homes.'

If a new girl knows what is good for her, she will nod her head vigorously at this point.

\*

He doesn't immediately recognize her when he first glimpses her. Could it be ...? he wonders, squinting to see the girl's face in the bright afternoon sunlight. Traffic snarls around the chowk (intersection) and his bus is nowhere in sight. He calls out her name. She turns, startled. Who knows her name here?

When he gets back to the shelter, he goes straight to Fatima's office.

'Guess who I met today?' he asks. 'Fouzia. Remember, the girl with the baby? The one who used to sing for us?'

They had all wondered what had become of her.

'How was she?'

Aslam pauses before answering the question. 'Ma'am, she ... I think she ...' He fumbles for an answer.

'What?' Fatima is impatient.

'Ma'am I think she's doing something wrong ...' He trails off.

'Like what?'

'I think she's working on stage as an actress.'

'Stage? Did she tell you that?'

'Ma'am, she didn't have to. You know how these women ... how they dress. A bit bright and gaudy.'

He turns to leave. 'Ma'am, if I'm honest, it did not feel good to meet her. She was standing at Ghoora Chowk all alone. Dressed like that. I asked if I could help her with anything, if there was any help I could offer. She told me she was leaving Multan. She said, "Now I'm going to go much further than this."'

\*

It is 2011. She lives in Islamabad now. She meets a man who goes by the name Mec

– a snappy little nickname he coined for himself as media event coordinator – and everyone tells her she needs to work with him if she wants to make it in the industry, if she really does want to become the singer she’s dreamed of becoming for years. They meet in her friend’s office and she waits quietly, watching his face as her friend plays a naat, a religious hymn she has sung for him. The phone isn’t the best, and she thinks the recording makes her voice sound tinny.

He doesn’t look too impressed.

‘Mec sir?’ she interrupts the naat. ‘Sir, listen to my naat, please. Let me sing for you.’

Years later, he loves to recount this moment. He imitates her. He remembers looking across the table in that office of the marketing company where she worked and thinking how this woman from Multan who wears a hijab wants to enter showbiz? Yes! He would insist to everyone who asked about her once she became famous. She was a scarfian! A hijab waali [woman who wears the hijab]! ‘She came to the city from the village,’ he would remind them. ‘She couldn’t become bold all of a sudden.’

She has a good face. There’s a bit of ‘innocency’, he notes. And the voice isn’t bad. Maybe she could land a couple of morning shows during Ramzaan (Ramadan) with these naats.

‘Will you do ramp walks?’ he asks.

She pauses. ‘Whatever you say, Mec sir.’

The girl wants it bad. He doesn’t want to seem too eager. ‘OK,’ he says. He agrees to work with her. She beams. ‘Don’t be so happy, my dear. You’re a bit overweight,’ he remarks. That takes the smile right off her face. But it’s OK, he reassures her; even the fatties can be worked on. ‘You just need to have an artist within you.’

It is the first time anyone has ever acknowledged that, yes, she has an artist within her. No one, not her family, not the man she married and left had believed in her. She had then fallen in love with a man she had met here in Islamabad, but even he had not supported her decision to stand on her own two feet. ‘I don’t want you to get into showbiz,’ he had pleaded with her. He thought she was doing it for the money. ‘Don’t worry about money. What do you want? A house? I’ll get you a house. A car? What more do you want?’

What she wanted was to be a star. She left him.

Now that she had Mec on her side, the only thing holding her back was ‘Fouzia’. If she wanted to be a star, she needed a star’s name. A new name for a new life.

‘Candy?’

No, that didn’t work.

‘QB?’

There was a popular singer who went by that, and she didn’t want to share a name.

*My childhood crush once gave me a name. It’s the name everyone knows me by. Q – queen*



*A – appealing  
N – naughty D  
– dazzling E –  
elegant  
E – exquisite L  
– lovely  
Qandeel.*

But Qandeel who?

*Qandeel from Shah Sadar Din, a girl who belongs to the Baloch Ma'arah tribe.*

Qandeel Baloch.

Yes.

That works. Qandeel. It's a beautiful name. What does it mean?

*Qandeel ka matlab hai roshni. Qandeel means 'the light.'*

[...]