

(Fiction) JAVERI

The Walls

786 is the number of times she looks at her phone. 417, the number of times she stares vacantly out of the window. 398, the number of times she rests her forehead against us, 218 the number of times she runs her palms over us, feeling us, pressing against our flat, firm bodies as if she herself was malleable, sinking into the floor as if she was melting. What is she doing? We have never seen her stay inside for such a long stretch of time. Not since she painted us red. 10 days ago. A dark brooding red, that we loath. We miss the white. It's paleness extending us into the ceiling and threading down into the beige carpet on the floor. The calming white presenting a future of possibilities before us as we stood tall and erect, holding up the ceiling, little pictures framed in black, decorating us. Now we stand, as if in darkness. Stoically still. Prosaic and silent.

We pass the time by making lists.

Things that can change suddenly: luck, weather, minds...

119 times she walks up to the front door, puts her hand on the knob and then turns back. 2078 the number of times she turns on the tv and listens to the news, her expression ranging between horror, fascination and then a final resignation. Her shoulders slump, her pupils dilate, her voice is hollow as she picks up the phone and dials.

We listen, our ears invisible. But mostly she is quiet. Sometimes she dials a number and listens to the man's voice saying he can't come to the phone right now. Sometimes she calls takeaways and says hello, then hangs up before the voice at the other end can reply. She sits holding the phone in her hands, staring vacantly at it as if it held the answer to some ancient mystery. She hasn't eaten for days.

Every now and then she stirs. 86 times, she gets up, as if to leave. Then she looks around at us. And settles down, her eyes fixed on the door. As if any minute now, he will walk in.

We watch the door with her. We never leave, we try to assure her. We always stay inside the house. It's our job, you see. The house would come crashing down if we left. But what is stopping her from leaving? She doesn't seem ill.

In the night, she is restless. There is a loud crash. Something is broken. She turns on the light and we see shards of glass everywhere, the fragments reflected in the mirror. We count the pieces and begin a new list.

Things that can be broken: mirrors, news, promises, marriages, hearts...

In the morning she walks right into us. Her coffee spills on us. We do not flinch. We watch the hot liquid traverse across our bodies, staining us, marking us like territories on a map. We had once held a map of the world with lines running all across it, marking borders, defining countries and now we felt as if someone had marked us. Divided us into two halves. There was a before the stain half and an after the stain half underneath. We absorb it within us like we always have. We say nothing.

After a while she approaches us apologetically. She holds a wet cloth in her hands and wipes us gently. She vacuums the floor, throws up wilting plants, sweeps away a dead spider. We start another list.

Things that can die: languages, plants, people....

1472 the number of times the phone rings and she doesn't pick up. Often her voice comes on, 'Thank you for your message. If you are calling to condole Dr. Ali's death please know I have received your message, even if I don't ring you back.'

The voices that leave a message are mostly heavy, strained and full of pauses, as if they don't know what to say. 'We are so sorry for your loss.' 'Hope you are ok.' 'Are you still in quarantine.' 'Will you have a funeral for him' 'Did they let you see him before they buried him. Call me.'

We count 1472. On 1473, she picks up the phone. The loud and piercing howl that comes out of her sounds primal and angry. We struggle to contain it. But it escapes outside us. Her cries get louder and louder. We stop trying to hold the noise in.

'They didn't let me touch him,' she says. 'They didn't let me fucking touch my husband's dead body,' she screams. 'I couldn't say goodbye.' Her voice falls to a whisper. 'He was a doctor. He wasn't even sick. He was trying to help the sick.' She repeats this nine times.

'They didn't give him the right gear.' She says this only once.

The rest of the days that we hold her within us, she mourns continuously. Often, we find her lying on the floor staring up at the ceiling. Sometimes she throws things at us. It hurts us. But we stand by her.

21 times she hurls his photo at us. 111 times she beats us with her fists. 19 times she slaps her palms against us, shouting his name. 6 times she sinks to the floor and yells, I miss you.

Sometimes we miss him too. We miss his voice. His out of tune singing in the shower. We miss him coming home every evening and shouting, hello home, to us. We miss him too. But then we remind ourselves of the things we don't miss about him.

We start a new list.

Things we don't miss: Mistrust, misbehavior, misuse...

19, the number of times he wanted to knock us down to make an open plan kitchen. 101 the number of times he hammered nails into us. 11 the number of times he attached shelves onto us. 78 the number of times she touches those shelves and cries.

We don't have to hold those shelves up anymore, we think. We loosen our hold and a book comes crashing down.

She picks it up. A photo has fallen out. It is a photo of them together. She takes it as a sign.

'Are you there?' she calls out. 'Ali, talk to me,' she whispers.

There is no sound except the sound of the wind. We loosen our hold a bit more and the shelf comes crashing down. There are books, papers and nails strewn all over the room.

In the morning she is still sitting there. When the phone rings for the 1474th time, she slams the back of her head against us, and begins to cry.

We see her shake her head slowly and then say to herself. 'Must pull myself together.' We didn't know she had come apart. She looks the same to us.

We note it down.

Things that can fall apart: shelves, jigsaws, self-assembly furniture, lives...

The next day, she pulls out his clothes and stuffs them into black plastic bags. Halfway through she collapses onto the heap. She spends the night smelling his shirts, rubbing them against her skin, inhaling a scent that we cannot smell. Two days later she arranges them into piles, his socks, his ties, his blue hospital gown, his white medical coat. She leaves his shoes in the cupboard.

She gathers all his papers and lights a fire in the sink. She leaves his books untouched.

Things that get left behind: toothbrushes, books, names, homes, families...

On the 28th day, she walks out without a goodbye. The door shuts behind her with a loud thud and then there is a sudden silence. For a second there is an unfamiliar feel to the empty house. And then everything is the same. But can anything ever be the same again? We settle down to wait and begin a new list.

Things that can never be the same again: economies, recipes, feelings, people....

(Creative non-fiction)

Confessions of a Serial Migrant - an essay in first paragraphs*Home is a feeling*

I think of myself as a serial migrant, with a whirlpool of maps under my carbon footprint. I collect homes in my memory, adding each new place to an album of sights, smells, textures, and climates. Each place blurring the idea of home even more. For my parents, 'home' was an ancestral town they left behind in India after Partition. For my children, 'home' is a button on their Apple devices that they press to access their digital lives. My parents' generation talked about the idea of home with an infectious nostalgia—my children think of it as a transitory concept, a technical detail. They are at home with technology. They Facetime friends across continents, bonding over video games as if they were in the same room. Physicality is a minor detail for them. Unlike my parents, who cherished the odd letter that passed through the stringent borders and reminisced about the '*watan ki mitti*', the smell of home soil as they turned the aerogram over and over in their hands, my children don't find distances a matter of inconvenience. As long as they have a good Wifi connection. I am somewhere in between. Neither at home in the past, like my parents, nor in the future like my children; suspended somewhere in the middle trying to figure out what home means to someone whose identity has slowly eroded with each move. In this age of mass displacement there are many like me who feel at home in a country in which they are temporary residents, but are like strangers in the land of their birth. It makes me wonder why we think of home as a static concept. Home, if anything, is a metaphor for familiarity, comfort, and acceptance. Home is a mug of hot chocolate on a cold snowy day, a steadying hand when you feel unsure, the scent of your mother's headscarf, a big warm hug, even if it is from a stranger.

Home is a memory

The sky is the same everywhere. The same cosmic blue decorated with puffs of white clouds, generous and giving, full of shade on some days, harsh and blinding, without cloud cover, on others. Sometimes, I think that places don't change, people do. In the city of my birth, Karachi, I grew up in a rambling old bungalow with an ancient mango tree that provided shade to a vast

courtyard in the harshest of summer days. The house even had a little brick well. It was idyllic and rustic in the midst of the urban chaos of Karachi. My mother cherished it. But I grew up watching *Fraser* and *Friends*, longing for a home where I could be like the characters on television. Long before I knew about cultural imperialism, and about internalising whiteness, I imagined myself walking through cosmopolitan streets, no one stopping me to tell me girls don't do this or behave like that. I was tasting freedom through the television screen. Later, as a young immigrant bride, when I did move to the UK I realised that freedom is never free. The streets of London were also about survival, albeit of a different kind. Sexism was replaced by racism and in the UK, I struggled to come to terms with the new identity bestowed upon me. I was on display. The idea of freedom, just an illusion. However, I soon found that as someone who was not visibly Muslim or South Asian, I was free to pick and choose parts of myself on display. Yet there was a nagging sense that this was not natural. If power was handed down to you, was it really yours to begin with? I began to question the patronising politics of identity and belonging. I hesitated to call London home. If home accepted you conditionally, if loyalties were split along the lines of 'good' Muslim and 'bad' Muslim, oppressed woman of colour or liberated secular one, then were you really allowed to feel at home?

My idea of home transformed into something even more complex when we moved back to Pakistan. I could no longer be restrained by four walls and my body ached to walk free on the streets, an act often unsafe for women in Karachi. Home was no longer the romanticised nostalgia I had indulged in, of the shaded gardens and afternoon siestas. Instead it was a place where women had limited access to public spaces, the infrastructure strained and groaning under a burgeoning urban population. But was it the city that had changed or was it me who was no longer the same person? I find myself asking: is home then a 'planted' memory?

Home is a piece of paper

Is home the country on your passport or the space inside your heart? During the pandemic, many of us who had taken the freedom to travel for granted began to question the idea of home. One European colleague who had deep ties with New York City, having lived and taught there for decades, found that he could no longer enter the US unless he was a national. One American colleague realised that she could no longer access her property in France without citizenship, as borders were closed to everyone except citizens. For the first time ever at immigration, the officer told me that as a dual national it was better to travel on my Pakistani passport than on the British one, as people from Britain were restricted from travelling during

Europe's raging siege under the virus. The idea of home was suddenly reduced to a piece of paper. Is home more than just your citizenship? Or is home what your passport says it is? But what about those who, like my students in the Gulf, are born in countries that don't grant them citizenship? Or those migrants who are deported after decades on foreign soil just because they don't have the right papers. All those children who grow up without any connection to the land of their ancestors, can't even speak the language or identify with their cultural heritage, yet are denied citizenship in the country where they learn to speak and think—where is home for them? Home is where the 'home office' decides it is.

Home is a person

Was home then made up of people and not of places? Is home the company we keep, not a physical space that we inhabit? I remember sitting with friends once, exchanging anecdotes and laughing over a shared meal, thinking that perhaps home is made up of the people in our lives. Each person who comes into our life makes a little home inside us for a while. They stay with us, their words influence us, grow within us. Sometimes, they leave a bad taste in the mouth and that memory is difficult to rinse out. Sometimes they scar us, and like homes that collapse or flood and damage our belongings, these people, too, leave stains of trauma on our minds and bodies. They make us wary of future relationships, of trusting new homes to make within other people. But eventually every experience makes us grow and expands our idea of comfort. Home, perhaps, is the sense of being at ease, of feeling at home—*with someone*.

Home is a language

You know that fuzzy sensation as if you've been embraced when you hear someone speak in your language? That sudden feeling that you are in a place where everybody knows your name? The other day I was in a Zoom meeting when the person I was talking to excused herself for a few minutes. Forgetting to mute herself she started talking to her daughter in Urdu. The sound of the language was so sweet, it felt as if I had taken a bite of gulab jamun and my mouth was flooded with sweetness. I felt such a surge of joy, as if I had come home after a long hard day. Again I was struck by the idea that a few words of my mother tongue in a foreign country could make me feel so at home. Yet in Pakistan, surrounded by the language, I had never felt that way. There is something about distance that makes a language that is not dominant, envelope you in familiarity. Perhaps, language is home. A home that is transportable. A home that you

can take with you, find in others through shared songs, poetry and dialogue. On the campus where I teach, I sometimes see Indian, Pakistani, Nepali and Bangladeshi students huddled together, bonding over Bollywood films or Coke Studio soundtracks, all borders and boundaries of ethnicity and religion forgotten. Or Arab students from different parts of the Middle East listening to the latest Arabic popsongs. The very idea of nation states eradicated, as they bond in the intimate embrace of a language that makes them feel at home in each other's company. Home, then, is a song you know the lyrics to.

Home as a question

'And where is home?' This is a question I dread being asked not just because I genuinely don't know any more but because often the real question behind it is 'Why are you here?' After living abroad for more than two decades, I feel the very idea of belonging is paradoxical. What does it mean when you feel at home in a place that is not your home? For a serial migrant like me, a woman who has spent more time outside the land of her birth than inside it, the concept of home has changed drastically with each subsequent migration. Each place I have lived in and called home, whether it is a location or a structure, has altered me in some way. It has taken a part of me as well as attached a part of itself to me. It has made me question my beliefs and my loyalties. But like Sindbad, migrants too dream of adventure only to yearn for familiarity. Work took me to the Gulf, and here I found the coming together of the social freedom of the West with the cultural heritage of the East, and it felt like a home-coming. Yet the temporariness of my stay here, and the fact that this is a country where you can stay only as long as you are useful, makes me reluctant to call it home. There is always a question at the back of mind: where will I go next? Home then is a journey—with no particular destination.

Home is a taste

Sometimes I think home resides within the foods of our childhood. Both home and food are like blankets of comfort. They make us feel safe, content, fulfilled. Salted caramel ice-cream takes me back to summer afternoons in Washington. The melting taste of Lindt chocolates in my mouth transports me to my home in London. Falafel wraps make me recall each and every tingling detail of our flat in Beirut, above a falafel shop. The fragrance of basmati rice infused with cardamom and red chilli pepper instantly transports me back to Karachi, no matter which part of the world I'm eating it in. Whenever I bite into succulent biryani chicken, spice tingling

the roof of my mouth, I feel at home. It can be in London's Tooting, Dubai's deira or New York's Jackson Heights, desi food always makes me feel welcome. Maybe that's why whenever we travel after a while we long for the taste of home, making long trips to South Asian neighbourhoods for desi foods. Is home, then, just a flavour?

Home is a smell

One of the first things that struck me when I moved to Abu Dhabi was the absence of smells. The streets were so clean, the buildings so sterile, the garbage so neatly tucked away and disposed of. South Asian migrant labourers working away, 24/7 like invisible muscles to keep the city shining. No lingering odour in the air. Just a faint smell of disinfectant that would soon fade like the echoes of a whisper. In the absence of any natural smells, the scents of people became even more heightened, and each time an Emirati person would pass by engulfed in Oud cologne, I would imagine myself personifying them into the image of the city. I imagined Abu Dhabi to be a white-robed man in a cloud of Oud, his smile welcoming yet forbidding, much like the clean and sterile city. One you could admire but were afraid to inhabit. And so, in the absence of smells in the city, the scents of past homes became more pronounced in my mind. In the mornings, it is the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Sitting on a small wooden table in a café, the coffee mug becomes my home. I breath it in, the welcoming scent of coffee beans, earthy, smooth, the steam rises from the cup and I think the smell of coffee is the same wherever you go. It enfolds your senses in its warmth. You feel wanted. Understood. You wrap your palms around its forgiving exterior. Sometimes it's porcelain, sometimes styrofoam. Whatever the texture, whatever the temperature, it always hugs you back. It makes you feel at home. Is home then the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the pungent odour of fried onions, the fresh scent of cut grass? Or is home the smell of your mother's chadar, of your father's cigar, or the scent of wet earth after the rain in the courtyard of my Karachi house? But home is also the laundry-like scent of fresh white snow in Washington, the smell of slightly charred grass and barbqs on the streets of London, the tantalising trails of kebabs on charcoal, or the harsh smell of rotting garbage on the side streets of Karachi, the unbearable stench of uncleaned gutters, even the smell of blood in Beirut... inhale, exhale, breathe.

Home is a quest

Home is a journey, a search, a pursuit. But for what? For a memory to be mourned or a desire to be pursued? In this era of exile and immigration, when very few of us have the luxury of spending our lives in one place, where can serial migrants like myself house their fragmented selves? Each move, every migration, splits us further like a jigsaw puzzle with a thousand pieces, our loyalties divided, our memories scattered. Today, I live and work in the Gulf, but the journey to independence, financial and emotional, has been long and hard. I was born in Pakistan, lived in Britain, the US, and UAE, not by choice, but by chance. Each country built me up a little and broke me down a bit. Slightly chipped, a bit chiselled. After migration, motherhood, divorce and self-actualisation I find myself thinking: is home the place where I learnt to speak, or the place that silenced me? Is it where I found myself or the place where I lost myself? The place that gave me roots or the one that gave me wings? I am a person who feels like a stranger at home and at home in a place that is strange to me. Is home then just a concept that is as transient in this world of serial migrations and technological evolutions, as it is elusive?

Home is a search for the self. And for me, home is my writing. A place I don't need any visas to visit, no tickets, no plane fare, only an imagination. The blank page is where I truly feel at home. Home, then, is what we write it to be.

Home is a story we tell ourselves.

Select stories from **Hijabistan** (Harper Collins, 2018) *Dramatized ethnographies*

Coach Annie

At first I was a curiosity, a nuance, then a nuisance, an irritation, a problem and finally a thing of hate. They say when people start to hate you, it's because they are afraid of you. Afraid of your power. Well, I was getting plenty of hate. Did that make me powerful?

I suppose so.

I'd always been the odd one out in our little Yorkshire town. The Paki girl with the headscarf and the spots. In that order, believe it or not. It should have been the other way around. The spots came first. Angry red dots that decorated my face like a Christmas tree. My mother made me scrape my oily skin with wire mesh and wash my face with hard soap, every day – but that only made it worse. My face became dry and scaly like the skin of a desert lizard. The eczema spread to my scalp and, slowly but surely, my hair began to fall off.

I was the only daughter amidst four sons, and my mother could not bear the shame. That's when the headscarf came into the picture. One day, she approached me with a beautiful pink cloth and wrapped it around my bald head, tucking the ends under my chin. The look of joy in her eyes was unforgettable. I too felt as if I had finally validated my femininity to her.

She made it out to be a religious thing, bragging to our neighbours about how devout her little girl was, and somewhere along the way, I began to believe it too. I took my hijab very seriously, even if not my prayers. I suppose, at that point, I just preferred the cloth to a wig. Believe me, wearing a wig is a bit of a challenge when you're just eight. Having a piece of cloth wrapped around my head was a lot easier than juggling a mop of hair when the biggest

thrill in life was running senseless in the backyard with my brothers, mum shouting that we're the devil's lot. No one listened to her. Even back then.

Sometimes I wondered if she was invisible, for, despite her shrill voice, people had a habit of walking off while she was talking. And she loved to talk. Those days, it was about my hijab. She couldn't gloat enough about how we were all going to heaven thanks to her virtuous daughter, how proud she was of me for wearing the hijab and embracing God's will, of my big, big sacrifice. I usually stared blankly while she babbled away, wondering how slapping a piece of cloth on one's head could guarantee free entry into the pearly gates. And why she didn't wear one herself if it was, indeed, so special.

To be fair, she tried. But Mum couldn't bring herself to wear one regularly, though she covered her head loosely with a shawl when she stepped out. Too much trouble, she'd say, buying me beautiful silk scarves to tie around my head instead. But I preferred her tea cloths to the fancy embroidered ones she got for me from Bradford. I just couldn't handle the silky material she preferred. It skidded all over. The plain, coarse, skull-hugging hijab suited me. Snug and neat along my bony skull, slipping on like a balaclava, and staying there. It sure stopped our nosy Pakistani neighbours from speculating what sins my mother had committed for baldness to befall me.

I think we all assumed it would be a temporary thing. But my hair never grew back. Instead, the hijab grew on me. It became an extension of me. A part of me. It kept me grounded. Reminded me that God was watching out for me. I was no longer just the odd-looking girl with the wrong skin, wrong colour, wrong hair. Instead, I was that Muslim girl.

People left me alone. And believe me, it suited me just fine.

Did it get lonely? Yes, it did. But that was okay because I had four younger brothers to take up all my time. I was happy to play football in the yard with them when we weren't all fighting and trying to kill each other.

Fast forward to my teen years and I found myself being offered a government grant to go to university to study sports therapy. Part of the deal was that for six months prior, I had to work with the community youth with whatever task was assigned to me, be it teaching or coaching or care-giving. My only hesitation was that it meant getting out there and helping strangers. Usually troubled ones. It meant interaction. And I was scared. I was used to hiding away, melting into the scenery, avoiding socialization at all costs. Having an overprotective mother helped. My life was just school and home. I rarely went out. I couldn't ever remember talking to a stranger.

'This is your chance to get an education. Grab it,' my brothers told me and, not for the first time, I wondered why they were so different from my shy and reticent father whose world, like mine, was the factory and home.

'Give it a try,' my brothers urged. 'People would give an arm and a leg to get a full scholarship.'

So I went ahead and signed up, waiting for my first assignment.

I'd been tossing a ball around in the community centre one chilly January morning when one of the bosses stepped out, asking for a volunteer. I watched curiously as the suited man said in a high-pitched, anxious voice that he needed someone to coach a team. I should have known by the tremble in his voice that this was no little league. I offered myself, and the sacrificial cow that I was, the gods were satiated.

I still don't know if God was trying to help me or kill me. All I know is that he was testing me. First day on the pitch and I found myself trying to tell a bunch of towering Geordie lads with learning difficulties, that I was there to coach them. There was a fair bit of laughter and I saw myself through their eyes. A five feet two inches Asian girl with a headscarf. Not exactly cutting the stereotypical cult figure of a macho coach with a gut, slapping his thighs and yelling, 'Come on'. The shock was mutual, for I had expected young boys, not six-feet-tall,

gigantic lads with special needs. But while I hid my fear, they made their feelings crystal clear.

They didn't say anything; no, those lads didn't. But on the pitch, the anger and the fury at

being told what to do by a wee little lass in a hijab came out. They

fell on me, kicked me, pushed me, roughed me up.

All part of the game. I can't complain.

Someone once told me that part of winning was showing up. So I showed up day in and day out. My bruises got deeper, my bones cracked some more, one swollen eye stopped opening all the way. I took it on the chin. Like a sport.

It became a kind of joke. But then I was used to jokes. On me, that is.

The joke is on me. Like my headscarf, it was part of me. Chin up, I'd tell myself and march out into the field, my mother yelling at me that I should forget uni- shuni and go see a doctor to get my head checked, and that I should get a normal job at the supermarket checkout like all the other Asian girls my age.

Sometimes, even my brothers winced when they saw my injuries.

'There are easier ways to kill yourself,' my younger brother said to me one day, as he carried me off the field after a particularly gruelling match. But I shook my head.

'I love sports,' I managed to say between the blood oozing from my mouth. 'I love the field.' The attempts to accidentally yank off the headscarf were many, though none was successful. I always wondered what they expected to find. The roughest guy in my team was the smallest lad on the pitch, and he was usually the one doing the headlocks. The biggest guy, his brother, usually went for my whistle. Gio and Sacha. They were simple guys with a black-and-white view of the world, sure that everything bad had to do with my kind. So sure that sometimes even my own faith shook.

It was around then that 7/7 happened. I went home and cried my lashless eyes out. It seemed so senseless. But I guess violence made the world go around. It was like night and

day, I often thought. Where there is love, there is hate. And if hate is power, then perhaps this was a struggle between the love of power and the power of love.

I would soon find out.

Six weeks down, I was nearly done with my coaching credits when a player tripped me. I broke my ankle. Sadly, it didn't break my spirit. I showed up, crutch and all. Faith can make you do a lot of illogical things, but sometimes it can also give you the strength to push ahead.

I showed up, ready for more abuse. But something changed that day.

'Man, Annie, there ain't no stopping you, is there?' One of the players said, cracking a smile.

I shook my head. Truth was, I didn't know any better. There was nothing else out there for me. Off the field, I was the bald, eczema-ridden, Muslim fundo. On the field, I was fire. It fired me up, football.

'Why don't you play professional?' the same player asked me later that day.

I smiled and pointed to my headscarf. 'They don't allow professional footballers to wear a hijab.'

He tugged at it playfully. 'It can't mean that much to you. Not worth giving up your dream.'

My heart did a little jump and I stepped back. This little tug felt more brutal than all the shoves and kicks the lads had landed. I realized then that my hijab did mean something to me. It wasn't just a cover to hide my scanty hairline. It defined me, it was part of me.

That night, I stood in front of the mirror without my hijab. I wore a baseball cap on my head. 'Go Arsenal,' I shouted. The person in the mirror mimicked me. I didn't know who she was.

Last day of coaching, I had a surprise waiting for me. I had been offered a paid position that I could take up along with college.

I was sure the team would make a fuss, but the biggest shock was that I found out that the lads wanted me to stay on. Somehow, something had changed. I had been accepted. These big strong lads who struggled with reading and writing had understood something I could never have expressed in words. Gathering around me in a circle, they told me to ‘go on and take it’.

And I did. To this day, I’m not sure if it was my coaching that made them change their minds or my stubbornness. But, just like that, everything changed.

Something healed inside me that day.

It was as if all the broken bones had joined together and the scrapes and cuts had healed. As if someone had placed a cold press on a bruise. Later that week, six new lads went on to join the team and I braced myself for a repeat. But the first day the mocking came, it was none other than Sacha and Gio who stood up for me and said, ‘Leave her alone. She’s alright, our Coach Annie is.’

Needless to say, it set the tone.

I found myself looking in the mirror again that night. My skull-tight black hijab almost blending into my dark skin scarred with small cuts and scarlet-hued bruises. This time, I recognized the girl in the mirror for who she really was. And it was a relief. I felt easy. My joints felt loose. I was no longer the spotty Muslim girl in a headscarf.

Instead, I was Coach Annie.

The Urge

It all began the day they put the all-encompassing dark garment on me. It was a passage to womanhood, they said. Now that I was older, I must wear a hijab. And an abaya too. I must be good. A good Muslim. A good, Muslim, woman.

I had just turned thirteen.

‘Here.’ They held it out to me as if it were a prize. And perhaps it was. I tried on the patterned headscarf and the long, black, cloak-like garment that covered me like a tent.

I felt hidden.

‘You are lucky,’ Amma told me later that day. ‘Nowadays, girls in Pakistan get away with so much. In our days, it was a baggy shuttlecock burkha thrown over our heads, with just a few tiny holes to peer through. And then, before we could even learn to walk without tripping on the hem, we were packed off to the husband’s house.’

I fingered the silky material of the abaya. It was smooth, like the chocolates an uncle had once brought us from Jeddah.

Amma seemed to be thinking the same thoughts, for she said, ‘Do you remember that beautiful silky material your uncle got from Saudi?’

I nodded, though only the sweets had remained stuck in my memory.

‘I had it made from that material only.’

‘Oh.’ I don’t know why, but I felt a sudden hunger. The smoothness of the fabric was sensuous. It seemed as if it really did have chocolates woven into its texture. I had a sudden urge to taste it.

I put it in my mouth.

‘Chi! Acting like a baby,’ Amma snatched it from my mouth. ‘Why I wasted such a fine cloth on you, only Allha knows.’ Shaking her head, she made her way to the kitchen.

I thought back to the TV show where I’d heard some short-haired women, who looked like boys, tch- tching at the Saudis for not letting women drive.

‘Amma,’ I said, but she was already at the stove. ‘Amma,’ I called out, ‘Did you know that they don’t let women drive in Saudi.’

‘Why do you care?’ she shouted back. ‘And where did you hear it anyway? Have you been to Saudi? Don’t let women drive! One less chore it is for us women, if you ask me!’

Not that we have a car, I thought, checking the deep pockets of the abaya. I held it up against the light and thought a few metal buttons on the edge would definitely do. I got out Amma’s sewing box and began sewing an assortment of different coloured buttons along the edge. I worked quickly, secretly, keeping one eye on the doorway, should Amma make a sudden reappearance. But I knew it would be a while before she left the stove. She cooked with great concentration and as a result, Amma’s food always tasted exactly the same.

Was that a good thing? I found myself wondering for the second time that day.

‘You are not watching that vulgar bollywood song and dance with the volume down, are you?’ Amma called out from the kitchen. I pricked my finger at the sudden sound of her voice. ‘If your uncle catches you, both you and I will get a good thrashing.’

‘No,’ I said, the thought of my uncle’s relentless slaps blinding my thoughts. ‘No. I ... I’m just admiring my new hijab.’ I watched as the blood from my finger seeped onto the abaya, then disappeared into its inky blackness. I wondered if it would stain but, no, the dark material seemed to absorb everything inside it. Very carefully, I put the hijab on my head the way Amma had taught me, then wrapped myself in the long, dark hold of the abaya.

Something shifted.

I looked up to see a lizard on the wall, staring unblinkingly at me.

‘It’s still me,’ I whispered. It seemed unconvinced, so I ran inside for a quick look. In the small, scratched, rusted mirror hung high on the bedroom wall, I stared at my reflection. Someone else stared back at me. Not a girl of thirteen, but a dark, mysterious woman. This was someone else, I thought.

This was a woman.

At first, I enjoyed the freedom the hijab offered. Inside the tent-like abaya, I could be scratching my crotch or unbutton the annoying bra I was forced to wear. Nobody could tell. It was, in some ways, like travelling in your own private marquee. I felt sheltered. Nobody told me not to fidget or to sit still, nobody said good girls don’t pick their noses or scratch their bums, because nobody could tell what I was up to in there. I often wondered if all women did this. How sorry I felt for the menfolk, whose freedom I had envied so much previously. They stood there in the hot sun, so exposed, so raw, so open, doing their business with everyone watching. So many times I had seen men standing on the sidewalk, scratching their crotch in full view of the public or squatting shamelessly on the sidewalks, their limp penis in their hand as they finished peeing. I used to envy their freedom to do what they liked, when they liked, no worries as to who might be watching. Now I pitied them. Poor deprived souls, I thought.

But then, like most things that one gets used to, this too got boring. I began to miss my colourful clothes. I missed stealing glances at my reflection in shop mirrors and the thrill of getting compliments. There was no longer any point in trying out new hairstyles or haircuts. Even brushing my hair seemed pointless, for there was no one to see it. No one to compliment or to complain – nobody to notice me at all. I could go out in rags for all I cared; it hardly mattered unless I was going somewhere I could take off my camouflage and stand out.

And that was rare. Even at weddings, unless they were segregated, I had to wear the cumbersome garment.

It was a woman's fate, I was told. Make the best of it, I was ordered.

I had heard somewhere that necessity is the mother of invention. In my case, it was the aunt. I tried inventing new games to make life in purdah interesting, and young Aunt, my uncle's new wife, a girl just six years older than me, joined in. We often played dress-up with her still-new wedding clothes, putting on what little make-up and jewels she had, for a make-believe wedding. We loved make-up, but Uncle called it the devil's opium, throwing away any cosmetics he found on our person.

'Good girls don't dirty their faces,' he warned us, smoothing his long black beard as he quoted some ominous Arabic verse or the other.

But nobody knew what his Arabic verses meant so we did what we had to behind his back.

Once, in a departmental store, Aunt and I saw a red lipstick. It was fire engine red, too beautiful to pass up. It beckoned me, called out to me, urged me to pick it up. I could imagine my aunt's reaction if I asked her to buy it for me. She had never worn such a bright colour in her life. But that is not what would stop her. The bigger never-been-done-before factor here was that we'd never bought anything from this store. It wasn't just the fact that she had no money; even if she did, it was the feeling of guilt – as if we weren't supposed to be there. To be honest, I'm not sure how she even wrangled the permission. Or why. She brought me here on Sundays when Uncle took the whole family to the promenade for a stroll. I never found out how she persuaded him to let us go. She always insisted that he drop us off here, taking me along as an escort, and my younger brother as guardian. She was still childless, you see, and my mother, with six children to look after, was only too happy to have a few off her plate. But I digress, my youngish aunt, with whom my much older uncle was totally besotted, would somehow convince him to drop us off at the mall by the sea and here, under the bright lights

and loud store music, we'd browse the colourful merchandise, dawdling in the fairness creams section, marvelling at the whitening potions and, of course, staring in fascination at the Revlon Red counter – knowing fully well that we could never afford any of it.

It was not the first time I had gaped at the red lipstick, marvelling at its power of transformation as the ugly sales girl tried it on. Nor was it the first time the thought of stealing it had occurred to me. But earlier, there had been no opportunity. A girl of eleven, with no handbag and only her slim kurta-pyjama, has nothing but a fist to hide things in. But a girl in a hijab has much more opportunity.

And so, that day, I gave in to the urge. And why not? I asked myself. The hijab is a garment that implies purity. Who would think of looking under it? What security guard would risk frisking a girl wearing such a holy garment? Why would such a girl steal? Would you?

That night, I took it out of the folds of my long abaya and there it gleamed, the red devil. I felt seduced. Fire-engine siren, it read. I giggled and stayed longer than usual in the bathroom I shared with my family of ten, my brothers threatening to break down the door if I didn't come out soon. When I finally emerged, Amma and Aunt averted their eyes, but after dinner, they sat me down.

I wondered if some telltale red sign had remained on my mouth despite the vigorous scrubbing. Did they know?

My mother cleared her throat while my aunt looked uncomfortable, adjusting her headscarf nervously. Finally, Amma pressed a small book of holy verses into my hands.

'Beti,' she said, 'when a girl reaches puberty, the body is not the only thing that needs sheltering. It is not just the appearance that must be hidden from preying eyes. One must protect the mind as well. If you ...' her voice trailed off. Aunt looked shiftily from side to side,

looking more and more uncomfortable as Amma's face took on a stoic look and her voice acquired the tone of a martyr.

'Look,' Amma said in a low, pleading tone, 'if you get the urge ... the urge to ... oh you will know what I mean ... you know if you feel you must remain longer in the bathroom...'

So, this was what it was about. Did she really think that sharing a room with my five siblings and sexually overactive parents had not taught me anything? Besides, the girls at the madrasa had already told me about it, some of us even discussing techniques, debating whether one finger or two fingers were more effective.

I decided to play the game.

'Amma, I will say my prayers when the need arises. Thank you.' I bowed my head like a dutiful daughter. They looked visibly relieved.

I ran out of the room, my fingers touching the reassuring presence of the fire-engine red, then travelling south as I wondered, Did they really start that late?

The urge, I noticed with time, could appear in many forms at different places and disguises. My urges were not physical, as my mother and aunt had feared, but material. Soon, I found it was harder and harder not to give in to them. If I spotted a juicy red apple, my hands itched to grab it and hide it in the folds of my abaya. If I saw Uncle's keys, I just couldn't stop myself from tucking them into my hijab, if for nothing else than to see his face twist into rage as he hunted desperately for them.

But as I grew older, the urge began to manifest itself in different ways. Every time I saw Indian film stars on cable TV, I wanted to look like them.

'As long as you do your fashion inside your hijab,' Aunt, who seemed to experience the same urges, warned me. She taught me how to. It became a secret game between us. We cut off the sleeves of our old shirts and pretended to be wearing western dresses under our abayas. We giggled at the thought that nobody knew how immodestly we were dressed

underneath. One day I saw a bollywood film where the actress sang and danced wearing a one-shouldered dress and I too had an uncontrollable urge to tear away my own sleeve. Aunt stopped me, instead snipping away the whole shoulder of an old kameez, making it a one-strap dress like the kind the Indian actress had worn. I made her try it on, too.

She resisted at first, but finally gave in. When she stepped out from behind the curtain we used for changing, she looked different. Her heavy breasts bulged against the ill-fitting, lopsided neckline, her face contorted with shyness. I took out the red lipstick and coloured her lips.

‘There,’ I said. ‘Smile,’ I commanded, and she smiled. ‘Walk.’ ‘Turn.’ Before I knew it, she was making poses and pretending to do the catwalk like those tall, tall models on TV. We laughed and we laughed, and finally we collapsed on the floor. Suddenly, I stopped laughing and looked at her. Something passed between us in that moment. I reached out and touched her breasts. She didn’t shy away. I let my hand explore her skin, a strange urge inside driving us closer.

Perhaps it would have led to something more, but just then, my uncle came home. We froze at the sound of his keys and, before we could cover ourselves, he was in the doorway, taking in the butchered garments, the red-stained lips, and finally my hand on her breast.

‘Get out,’ he ordered.

That night, her face matched the violet of her dress. But what could anyone do. It was her fate.

I was not allowed to enter Aunt’s room again. Uncle called her a bad influence. All outings alone with her were banned. Slowly, the family visits to the seaside also came to a stop. The city’s situation, the bomb blasts and the shootings made it impossible to step out. And even when things got better, it was only as far as down the lane to a cousin’s home and back that I was allowed to venture. My outings were curbed more and more with each passing birthday.

Finally, on my fifteenth birthday, I was imprisoned in the house. A suitable match was being sought and I was to be married soon. Till then, I was expected to bide my time learning the art of cooking and the craft of sewing. Both things bored me to tears.

If I protested, my mother and aunt would tell me to be patient. 'It's a woman's fate,' they would say in unison, like a pair of parrots. 'Once you are married, you can do what you want.'

Looking at their wistful pinched faces, I doubted it, but I consoled myself with the fact that my fate would be different. I always found a way, you see.

In the coming days, the smell of fried onions dominated my senses, needles pricked my thumbs, the scraping of meat made me nauseous, and the cumbersome peeling of potatoes made me scream. When it all got too much, I knew I had to find a way out. And that was when I found a new game.

This time, the urge was the strongest it had ever been. I began to feel as if it were my master and I had no choice but to obey. I should've known that this meant trouble.

That afternoon, when everyone was asleep, I crept out to the little balcony overlooking our narrow lane. There was nobody about, except the shopkeeper opposite fanning himself with a newspaper, his pedestal fan turning slowly, miserably, airlessly. I walked up to the edge and looked down, hoping and praying that he wouldn't look up.

He did.

Before I could stop the urge, I lifted my abaya and flashed him. The shock on his face was enough to make me tremble in my skin. I covered myself quickly and ran inside, panting as if I had been chased. I was shaking. I couldn't stop. What would happen now? I had exposed myself to him. What if the man complained to my uncle? What if he went to the police? What if I was stoned to death? Thrown out for being a bad girl?

I was still trembling as I cowered in a corner of the kitchen, when my mother called out to me, ‘Girl, get the afternoon tea ready. Your uncle and father will be here soon.’

Quickly, I composed myself and, putting on proper clothes under my hijab, I busied myself in the kitchen. And that is when I noticed it – we were out of sugar.

‘Go with your little brother and get it on credit from across the street,’ mother shouted. Precisely what I had feared.

I shivered, shouting back, ‘Why can’t he get it himself? He’s almost four now!’

But Amma shook her head. ‘He can’t cross the road. Those cursed motorcycles come so fast down the alley. Just go, na. As it is, you’ve got your full cover on.’ My hands and feet felt dead cold and my ears were buzzing as I stepped out of our tiny house. Holding my brother’s hand, I led him to the shop across the road.

‘Half kilo sugar,’ he said in his little squeak of a voice. I looked up to see if the shopkeeper was leering at me but he seemed to be avoiding my gaze. He’s embarrassed, I thought to myself, my face reddening with shame. And then, as I took the pen to sign the credit note, I felt him brush his hand against mine. I felt him linger a second too long. Something hot flashed between my legs. The top of my spine shivered. ‘Let’s go’, my little brother tugged at my sleeve and we left. But, as filmy as it sounds, my heart remained behind.

From that day on, it became a ritual. Sometimes a leg, sometimes a breast, or a wrist, even a flash of my buttocks. We waited eagerly for the afternoons when I would go up to the roof and tease him with my urges. I lived in constant fear and I lived in constant

excitement. At times, I couldn’t tell what was greater – the risk of being found out or the satisfaction of giving in to my impulses. It was as if I had invented my own world where I made the rules. I was the queen and I was the slave. It was the best of feelings, it was the worst of them. Whatever it was, it was a high.

And then, as it often happens in the love stories on cable, mine too ended abruptly. It should have been a happy ending, for once caught, thankfully not naked, making eye contact with each other, my mother put two and two together and forced the shopkeeper to propose. He was fourteen years older than me and already married, but I didn't mind. He was after all my first love, my only love.

We were married soon enough, to the joy of my siblings who finally got some space in our overcrowded house. He put me in a separate one-room quarter, away from the prying eyes of his first family – something I cherished at first, till the loneliness set in. But like with the hijab and the abaya, the novelty soon wore off. Everything that he had desired about me turned to fear. I think he was constantly haunted by the fear that I'd flash someone else. But how could I confide this shameful confession to anyone?

The hijab was not enough for him. He made me wrap a large chadder over my hijab and abaya. He got me to swear that I would always wear a bra and a vest. Even in the sweltering hot Karachi summers, I had to don a man's vest under my clothes, and leggings under my shalwar, lest I kicked my legs and someone saw my ankles.

But mere clothes are not enough when one's mind is insecure. The body must not only be covered up, it must be locked up.

And so he began to lock me up every morning when he left the house. Soon, the windows were boarded up too, the stairway to the roof barred and door padlocked from outside. The cable was cut off. The phone disconnected.

My mother said, 'He loves you too much. He doesn't want any other man to cast eyes on you.'

Or a woman, I thought, or a bird, a worm, an ant... It was in this airless darkness that my nameless daughter was born. I had no phone to ring for help. No window or balcony off

which I could shout out my agony. No doorway I could run through. I lay there withering in pain, shuddering, shivering, praying to Allah for mercy.

When he finally returned home and found me lying in a pool of blood and vomit, he rushed out to get the midwife, remembering, even in this emergency, to lock the front door.

I delivered on the floor. The old midwife took the hijab I had torn off my head during labour and folded it into a triangle. Tenderly, she tucked the baby in and swaddled her tight. I was handed the parcel as if it was something repugnant.

‘The first one doesn’t matter,’ the toothless old lady mumbled, encouraging me to put her to my breast. ‘But the second-born must be a boy. Remember, a boy is a provider. A boy will bring you status. A girl is a liability.’

‘A girl,’ I said, the wonder in my voice making the little thing open her eyes a notch.

‘Put her to your breast,’ the old woman said as she wiped the soiled floor on her haunches.

I held the baby tightly. Just born and already wrapped in a hijab, I thought with a smile. A thing to be hidden from the rest of the world – a man’s honour but not his pride.

I held her tight.

I still don’t know if I did it consciously. All I know is that the urge consumed me. The next thing I knew, the old lady was screaming, trying to pry the baby out of my hands. I had squeezed the cloth around her too tight. She was turning blue.

‘Let go,’ I could hear the woman scream. ‘Let her go,’ she shouted as I held on harder, squeezing the hijab tight around her little body till I heard her tender bones snap.

She didn’t even cry.

The voices faded. And I felt as if someone had turned off the volume on the cable. I could see the midwife’s lips moving. My husband behind her. Their faces angry, their fists balled. They seemed to be moving in slow motion.

‘It was her fate,’ I said as the baby’s neck flopped to one side.

I pulled the hijab over her tiny mouth and nostrils.

The urge, you see, was much too strong.

