The Journey

by
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Poor Raju was having the same dream again. In it, he was once more the boy he had been, aged seven years old.

"Water, water!" he demanded in his child's piping voice, tugging at the man's arm. A hand clamped hard over his mouth, blocking his cries. Desperate for air, his small hands clawed uselessly at the adult fingers. The man tightened his hold, staring ahead in the dark.

Raju sat up in bed, his heart pounding. Drenched with sweat, his muslin nightshirt clung to his body. The last time he had had the same nightmare was three months ago. This time, it would prove an apt beginning to what lay in store for him that day.

When he returned from taking a shower, Raju's eyes fell on the crisply pressed shirt laid out for him on his bed. Love for his mother welling up, he went looking for her in the kitchen where she was making his favourite breakfast of potato parathas.

"Namaste, Mata ji," Raju greeted her, giving her a hug from behind.

'Namaste, my son," Kumari Patel replied, lathering his paratha with extra ghee.

As Raju waited in the dining room, he read the note his father had placed on the table before leaving the house early to open up his chinaware shop.

Dear Raju,

If you have today decided to do what you've long set your mind on doing, Bhagwan will help you. I wish you luck, my dear son. Just remember that we love you very much. We will always love you, my dear son, no matter what happens.

Your loving Pita ji.

His mother entered and placed two hot parathas and dal before him. Normally they sat together to eat. Not today. Too distraught, she hastened back to the kitchen to hide her wet cheeks and leaking eyes.

Kumari Patel stood sobbing over a simmering pot of milky tea. She had tried so hard to be fair about this, reminding herself many times that she should have faith in her son . . . but the jealousy for an unknown woman continued to torment her.

Nervous energy building up in his stomach, Raju dipped chunks of his paratha into the dal bowl. After he had finished eating, he called out to his mother.

Hurriedly dabbing her eyes with the corner of her sari fold before entering the dining room. Kumari paled at the sight of his suitcase. Despite having packed it herself, it symbolised her loss. She kissed Raju hard on his forehead. He, in turn, bent down to respectfully touch her feet. He couldn't leave without uttering the poignant words.

"I love you, Mata ji."

"I love you too, my son. May Bhagwan take care of you and help you succeed in your mission. Have you got the address?" she fussed before hugging him.

"Yes. It's here in my diary." Raju pointed to the hidden pocket in his coat.

Kumari wanted to say more, but stopped herself.

Picking up his suitcase, the young man turned once more and said, "Goodbye, Mother. I will return."

"Goodbye, my Raju," she said quietly. Time would tell if he returned, but she had no right to keep him. She watched from the front doorway, until she lost sight of the taxi. Once inside, she cried as if her heart would break.

At Attari station, Raju took the Samjhauta Express, showing his first-class ticket to Lahore in Pakistan, and settled into his compartment. On the platform, vendors carrying savoury snacks in overflowing baskets stacked on their shoulders hastened to the train windows, chanting, "Garm samosas, garm pakoras." The satsuma and banana sellers energetically vied for the passengers' attention too. Raju waved them away from his window. Five minutes later, the train shrilled into action, speedily puffing its way towards the Wagah border, separating India from Pakistan.

Raju sat thinking of what was ahead of him and about the people he was likely to meet. What would they be like? What would *He* be like? Raju quickly switched his thoughts to *Her*. Would they resemble the blurred shadows in his mind? And how would they react to his arrival on their doorstep?

He then dozed off and was woken by the train coming to a halt at the Wagah border, where customs and immigration clearances took place.

When the train entered Lahore station in Pakistan late in the afternoon, Raju sat up, a tingle of excitement coursing through him. Yet, peering out of the window, he noted that it was a replica of any other Indian station: the same style of buildings, the same bustling atmosphere and ambiance, with vendors keen to sell their goods. People were everywhere, of the same colour as Indians.

In the taxi, Raju gazed out of the window, letting the scenes of midday Lahore city life roll before his eyes. The taxi rode past the imposing Victorian red-brick buildings of the Lahore Museum and the old University of Punjab campus. The driver skilfully manoeuvred his taxi through the traffic jam of motorcycles, rickshaws, trucks, minibuses and cars, to reach the neater lanes of Mall Road heading towards the airport and the army cantonment area, popularly known as 'Kent' by the Lahorites.

The taxi finally came to a halt in a large street lined with modern shopping plazas and villas. Raju, who had been chatting with the driver about cricket, stopped abruptly, his heart thumping.The driver pointed to an elegant two-storey villa with a white and peach tiled facade, and a wrought-iron balcony circling the upper floor.

Raju paid the driver with the Pakistani rupees he had exchanged in Delhi. The taxi disappeared in the midst of late-afternoon traffic with schoolchildren returning home. Unable to slow the rapid beating of his heart, Raju stood with his suitcase by the side of the house, not quite ready to ring the bell beside the imposing gate and meet its inhabitants.

On the other side of the road was a cafe. Raju walked across and ordered a couple of samosas and a cup of tea. Remembering his mother, he had opted for vegetable samosas. As an orthodox Hindu, she forbade the eating of meat in her household. However,

she turned a blind eye to the fact that her son and husband often treated themselves to roast chicken in restaurants.

Raju sat near the window, eyes resting on the house. The muezzin's call to prayers from a local mosque startled him. Some men in the cafe left for their prayers, heading in the direction of the minarets towering behind a row of plazas. Raju's cup of tea remained poised in mid-air, for the gate of the villa had opened and a man of average height had stepped out. Dressed in a traditional white shalwar kameez suit, and with a prayer hat on his head, the man set off in the direction of the mosque. Raju's eyes followed the man until he disappeared around a corner.

Unaware of the interest he had aroused in the young man sitting in the cafe across the street, Sarwar Hussein walked briskly to get into step with his friend, who was keen to sit in the front row of the prayer congregation.

The mosque was full with men sitting in neat rows. Sarwar Hussein took his usual place at the rear end of the prayer congregation. A few minutes later, the prayers ended. Most men departed, to get back to their work, home or business. A few stayed behind, sitting on seats or on the plush carpet, offering their personal du'ah to be heard by their Almighty Allah.

Sarwar Hussein was one of these men, his hands raised in front of him with tears pouring down his weathered brown cheeks. People had stopped asking him why he always ended his prayers with tears. Too reticent and sensible to pry, they left him alone with his sorrow.

Always the first words of Sarwar's personal prayers were, "Forgive me, my Almighty Allah, for I have sinned . . . and in such a way that no man can carry a heavier burden on his

shoulders than the one I've been carrying for the last twenty years."

In the mosque, memories of the past tortured him. There was one scene in particular which he could never get out of his mind – when he had accidentally choked his beloved young son to death!

This was the tragic secret which had eaten away at his soul for the past two decades and made his wife a nervous wreck. Their eldest daughter had been too young to remember. They had fled India with other Muslim refugees in 1947 when India was divided into two parts and Pakistan was founded as a state for Muslims. They had never shared their painful story with their new neighbours and friends in Pakistan.

They now had three children: one daughter from India, and a son and daughter born in Pakistan. Neither parent ever forgot their eldest son, whose body they had left behind in India, without even burying him. His wife, Zarine, never forgave her husband for what happened that night.

With his eyes closed, Sarwar Hussein suppressed a moan as he let the memories from that fatal night haunt him again. Reliving those memories was a daily ritual and a welcome form of punishment.

August 1947

In Kot Badal Khan near the district of Nakodar in India, Zarine sat huddled with her two small children in the rear storeroom of their house. Numb with terror of being attacked by Sikhs or Hindus, she had switched off all the lights and was feverishly chanting *Surah Yasin* verses under her breath.

It was as if the whole world had gone mad. With the famous 'Mountbatten Plan' in place and the 'Radcliffe Line' drawn on the map, India had been carved into two parts, with Pakistan

in the north for the Muslims. Neighbour had turned against neighbour; friend against friend. All in the name of religion. No one was to be trusted. With increasing communal riots, fear and mayhem reigned. A few months earlier, it was an inconceivable thought that something like this could happen in a civilised state. Overnight, millions had been made refugees.

What neither the Indian nor the British decision-makers had anticipated was the fragility of humankind and its easy slide into hatred.

Anger raged. Whole districts – the local malas where Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had lived side by side with shared walls, balconies, animal compounds, courtyards, communal cooking and washing areas – had become no-go areas. Houses and shops were ransacked, looted and set on fire. Muslims and Sikhs in particular were at loggerheads. The Sikhs' animosity towards the Muslims was inflamed by the Khalistan issue. The Muslims had gained Pakistan. What about the Sikhs? They too deserved a state of their own – their Khalistan.

News of people slaughtered on trains coming from and going to Pakistan terrified those fleeing from their homes with their belongings in oxcarts, with the old people carried on makeshift palanquins to the safety of the Delhi Red Fort, the Purana Qila camps.

Anxious friends and local leaders of different religious groups urged their dear ones to save themselves, to forget about their houses, farming land, cotton crops, animals and jobs. There was only one option: to flee to the part designated for them. Muslims headed north to the new state of Pakistan, with Lahore, the old Mughal capital of India, on its side. Hindus from the north, the tribal mountainous Swat region, and from the city of Peshawar, and Sikh Pathans from Punjab, fled south to the Hindu state of India, Hindustan.

The province of Sindh in Pakistan, with its large port of Karachi, became a popular destination for the refugees, the Muhajirs. It was the home city of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who with a group of people had founded the state of Pakistan.

For all those who had fled to Pakistan, an equal number of Muslims remained in India: they headed for Kerala, Lucknow and Hyderabad. This was when the madness of home exchange schemes came into action, with Muslims taking up the abandoned houses of the Hindus, whilst the Hindus were given the vacant Muslim homes. The messy minor details of reciprocity would be dealt with later. If one family's home was bigger than the one they had left behind, they had to make arrangements to pay the difference and vice versa.

When the famous 'Radcliffe Line' was drawn on the map, dividing rivers, towns and cities, people were in a state of utter disbelief. They woke up the following day in either India or Pakistan. With so much at stake, people had at first merely waited, biding their time, crowding around their radio boxes, anxiously listening to the news updates by the hour. After all, it was no trivial matter to abandon one's entire way of life and just flee. From having been thriving businessmen, shop owners, wealthy farmers, government employees, civil servants and respectable members of the community, the people became first fugitives and then refugees – that is, if they reached their destination safely. The Muslims who lived in northern cities like Lahore, Montgomery and Lyallpur congratulated themselves on their good fortune in living in that region. Their Sikh and Hindu neighbours, however, within hours and days had fled with their families to the southern part, leaving behind their beloved homes, belongings and friends. There was heartache, anxiety and chaos.

Sarwar Hussein was one of those who had lagged behind, uncertain whether to leave or stay. His two siblings living in

Nakodar had already left to join some relatives living in Lahore, an obvious destination for his family. But like thousands of other fellow Indians, he was reluctant to believe that he had to leave his home!

However, his Hindu schoolfriend and neighbour, Lal Mehra, seriously brought home the message to him that he was endangering the lives of his young family by staying in India. Zarine's relatives, living in the nearby town of Phillaur, had already fled to the north in the buses provided.

"You're my dear friend, Sarwar ji, and I love you very much, but I can't stop anything happening to you or your family. The situation here is really very bad with the riots, my brother, believe me. You must get out of this region! If I help you, the mob will burn my house down. No one is to be trusted now. You do understand me, Sarwar ji, don't you?"

Yes, Sarwar came to understand that situation well when he went to phone his brother from a local post office late in the evening. His brother had advised him to buy tickets from Phillaur to reach Jullundur railway station and said he would meet them there. On the way back, riding on his bicycle, Sarwar passed the small town of Banga, inhabited by Sikh families. He slipped off the main road and hid behind a tree after witnessing the scene of a young Muslim man being ambushed by a gang of Sikh youngsters. Terrified, Sarwar remained crouched on the ground.

In the scuffle, the young Muslim man knocked one of the Sikh boys to the ground; the boy hit his head on a large stone and died on the spot. In a rage, the others savagely turned on him and one stabbed him in the neck. His cries for help as he bled to death deafened Sarwar's ears. Petrified with fear, Sarwar crept away into the sugar-cane fields. With nausea churning in his stomach, he remained there for hours. His mouth was parched, but he was afraid to drink the pinkish water from the

well near the field, knowing it might be disinfected to stop the spread of cholera.

The incident had taught him that travelling through Banga was not an option for his family now. They couldn't risk being attacked by a mob out for revenge. Heart thudding like a tabla drum, he retrieved his bicycle and stole back home in the darkness of the night, cycling hard and out of breath, constantly peering over his shoulder in case someone was following him.

"Allah Pak," he whispered, "Lal ji was right. If this is the reality of living in India now, then we can't stay another minute. Not that we want to leave. I love this country, my home, the Sutlej River. This is my birthplace. How can I desert my parents in the old cemetery? Abandon my grocery shop, with its stock piled high up to the ceiling? All our savings that I've invested in the goods? But we can't take anything with us, apart from money and gold jewellery. The way things are, we'll be lucky if we manage to leave our area safe and in one piece."

By the time he reached his front veranda porch, he had come to a firm decision. They had 80 kilometres to cover before they reached Lahore, but it would be too dangerous to go there by major roads or by train. Instead, they would travel stealthily through the village fields. Sarwar reckoned this would be the safer route to Jullundur from where his brother had made arrangements to take them by bus. However, he seriously doubted whether they could make it with two young children, and with only one bicycle as the means of transport. There were no taxis, or horse-driven carriages, tongas or the buffalo carts to hire at night-time. How would they manage to walk for hours on foot?

All the lights were out in the Muslim households in his Mahallah; the only lights visible were in Lal Mehra's home and the homes of the three Sikh families. His own dwelling lay in

pitch darkness. Even the courtyard's dim oil lantern was not lit. Pulling off his muffler from around his face, Sarwar softly knocked three times on their front door and waited.

Then he called quietly, "Zarine, it's me."

Immediately the door was pulled open and his wife ushered him in. He sighed with relief. It was so good to be back in the safe haven of his home – but for how long? What if somebody decided to attack them in the middle of this night? Hindu and Sikh neighbours knew which houses belonged to the Muslims; apart from Lal ji, nobody could be trusted any more.

He hastened after his wife into the windowless storeroom at the rear. Zarine switched on the light, and they sat down at each end of the old charpoy, where their two children were sound asleep. There was no need for an anguished debate now; their fearful, silent glances confirmed to both that it was time for action – time to flee. Where Sarwar had witnessed a live killing, Zarine had heard of the carnage on the trains, and fires in the Powadra and Talwan area as well as the shooting of a Muslim family just two streets away. One member of that family had reacted and killed a Sikh man and then fled in the night.

"Did you get the tickets, Sarwar ji?" Zarine anxiously asked, scrutinising her husband's face. There were no more arguments with him to stay put; by now, she was ready to abandon her home and leave empty-handed. Their house, shop and her brother's cotton fields no longer mattered. Only their lives.

"No, Zarine, it's too dangerous to travel by train," he told her. "Terrible things are happening out there. We can take the train from Jullundur." He was reluctant to share the details about what he had witnessed in Banga.

"In that case, what are we going to do then?" she demanded, noting her husband's sweat-beaded forehead and the nervous tic in full action in his left cheek.

"We're leaving tonight, travelling on foot and with the children on my bicycle – and taking very little with us." He let the words sink into her mind.

"What? All that walking – are you joking?" She rose to her feet, agitated and angry.

"It's no joking matter, Zarine! There's no other way," Sarwar explained. "It's too dangerous to go as a family by road; we'll be easy targets. If we go by night it'll be safer so there's no time to lose. Please get your things together and secure your gold jewellery in the large breast pocket of the under-slip that you were showing me last week. Make lots of parathas and take a jar of mango pickle. That should last us for some time. Fill the water bottle and choose some warm clothing for the children, as it will be cold outside. That's all we can take. I will help you, but we must hurry!"

As Zarine set about hastily preparing the dough for the parathas, Sarwar went through the rest of the house, looking for something precious and small enough to carry in his shoulder bag. Common sense prompted that with two children to carry, as well as the required food, they couldn't take much with them. Unlike other families they had no buffalo cart at hand to transport their goods.

"But *everything* here is precious. This is our home!" Sarwar mourned, a sob rising in his throat as he removed his family's sepia photos out of their frames. He could not leave his memories behind; they had to go with them. His mind refused to dwell on the following day when their neighbours would discover they had fled in the night. For how long could Lal ji be expected to safeguard their home from being looted, stripped of everything and left empty for any Hindu or Sikh refugee family from Pakistan to take up abode? He wondered if there would be a similar sort

of house waiting for his family in Pakistan. The government had promised a fair system of exchanging houses and land.

Sarwar wanted to thank his neighbour Lal Mehra in person for his long friendship and love, but he couldn't risk it. Sitting down at his desk where he normally did his business accounts, he dipped his pen in the inkpot and wrote a long note in Hindi. Stepping outside in the darkness, he slid the note under Lal Mehra's front door. By the time his neighbour got to read the note they would be far away.

In the dim lantern-lit kitchen Zarine was busy with the parathas. In the storeroom, Sarwar hunted for his children's warm jumpers in a cupboard. Riaz whimpered as his father coaxed his limp arms into the sleeves.

Zarine handed her husband a bag containing a bundle of hot parathas, a small jar of mango pickle and a water container, then rushed into the adjoining storeroom. Opening her silver trunk with the key hanging from her waist by a nala string, she drew out the cotton pouch containing all her gold jewellery. Everything else of value she left untouched. There was no time or luxury for nostalgic tears as she shut the heavy lid on all her old wedding outfits and special items of her dowry lying in that steel trunk, and locked it. She left a note with their name and which city they were heading for, dearly hoping that the family who came to live in their house would be honest people who would return their belongings.

Married eight years ago, Zarine was devastated at leaving everything behind. Sobbing bitterly, she changed into her under-slip with her pouch of gold jewellery tucked inside. God knew, the gold would be needed in difficult times. She put on a warm cotton shalwar kameez suit, and on top of that she wore her outdoor burqa.

Sarwar Hussein too had changed his clothing. Sorting out his money into different bundles of notes, he strategically placed them around his body with a few precious items such as his children's photographs in different pockets of his Punjabi suit and coat.

"This is it, Zarine," he said tenderly. "Ready to say goodbye to your beloved home?"

As she stared mutely at him, her eyes full of tears, Sarwar Hussein felt duty bound to remind her, "Never mind, my dearest, we'll make another home in Pakistan – a much better one than this. And now we must let the children sleep for as long as they can. I know it's going to be difficult for them. You can sit on the bicycle with them and I'll lead it."

Like thieves in the night, they crept out. Sarwar fastened the padlock of their house. He cradled their sleeping son, with one hand pushing the bike. Zarine carried their two-year-old daughter, Tahira, on her shoulders.

Looking stealthily over his shoulder, Sarwar Hussein led his family out of their area, carefully looking down for potholes. He avoided the main road where he knew ditches had been dug and then covered up with hay and animal fodder to lure an unwary traveller or enemy vehicle to fall into them.

For a couple of hours, Zarine sat on the cycle too, precariously holding onto both her children. When it became too uncomfortable, she got off. Sarwar then hopped on and began to pedal, holding his children and two bags tightly in front of him.

To Zarine's aching legs, the few miles they had covered seemed like hundreds. The backs of her shoes were digging into her heels, making them sore. She begged her husband to stop and rest, but Sarwar insisted that they persevere for another

couple of hours and try to reach the city of Jullundur, where hopefully his brother would be waiting for them.

It was past midnight when Riaz whimpered, waking up in his father's arms "Daddy, why are you carrying me on the cycle?" he asked sleepily. He tried to slip out of his father's arm, gazing up at the night stars. Sarwar gently lifted him down to walk beside him, slowing his own pace. His mother and sister took their turn on the cycle, with his father leading it.

They had walked for half a mile when Riaz began saying that he was hungry.

"Zarine, I think it's time for Riaz to rest and eat something. How about if we take a short break over there?" Sarwar pointed to the bushes at the side of the road.

Zarine was only too glad to comply. She limped towards the bush where she gently laid her sleeping daughter on her shawl spread out on the ground. With Riaz sitting beside him, Sarwar Hussein shared out the food. The parathas and mango pickle had never tasted as good as they did in that strange environment, under the stars.

They were halfway through their meal when the calm silence of the night was interrupted by the sound of male laughter. Zarine and Sarwar froze, the food between their fingers forgotten, fear etched on their faces.

Sarwar peered from a gap between two bushes. To his dismay, it was a group of young turbaned Sikh men, drunk and singing lewd songs. Two of them carried guns. Another two swaggered from side to side, sharing dirty jokes. Cold fear washed over Sarwar's body. The men were drawing nearer.

Unaware of the gravity of the situation, Riaz came up to his father. Tugging at Sarwar's coat sleeve, he demanded in a clear, loud voice: "Water, Daddy, water. I'm thirsty!"

The men heard and turned, cocking their ears in the direction of the bush. Petrified, Sarwar stared down at his son. Riaz was about to repeat the request. Sarwar clamped his hand hard over his son's mouth. Riaz began pulling at his father's arm, but Sarwar remained oblivious to his son's struggle as he watched the men pass right by the bushes where they were hiding.

Sweat was pouring down Sarwar's temples; unaware of his wife's urgent hands clawing at him to pull her son from his vice-like grip. It was only when the men had passed, that he became aware of what he had done. Glancing down in horror, he dropped his hand. Riaz fell to the ground, lifeless.

"Oh, my God, Sarwar ji, what have you done?" Horrified, Zarine knelt beside her son, shaking him and rubbing his cheeks. No sound, no breath came out of Riaz's mouth.

An anguished scream burst through Sarwar's throat, but before it could pierce the night's silence, he strangled it by shoving the end of his woollen muffler into his mouth and biting hard on it. He had killed his son while trying to save their lives, but if his scream was heard by those drunken men, not one but all four of them would be dead.

Kneeling beside his son, Sarwar wept. Zarine too, was sobbing, rocking her son to and fro in her arms, beseeching him to wake up. Around them were the cotton fields. Their little daughter was now wide awake with the sound of her parents' distress. Shivering, she too began to cry in the night's darkness.

Sarwar didn't know for how long they vented their grief and wondered what to do with their dead son. Should they take him with them, or leave him behind and hope that some kind person would bury him? Zarine was out of her mind at the thought of abandoning her son. Sarwar begged her to understand their predicament.

"We have to leave . . . we still have so many miles to travel. How can we carry our son's dead body with us? Please understand, Zarine. Some compassionate soul will find our Riaz and bury him," he appealed to her.

The thought of leaving their son there, however, was too much for Sarwar Hussein. He didn't know where he drew his strength from as he wrapped up his firstborn in Zarine's shawl and placed the limp body on his bicycle.

In the end, he literally had to drag his wife away from the bush area. They stumbled, half-senseless, into the next village. In one home, lights were still on and music was blaring. It could only be the home of a Hindu family, who had no need to fear or flee from their home and were still celebrating. The couple laid Riaz's body outside the door then rang the bell and stepped aside so as not to be seen.

A few minutes later they saw a woman in a silk sari come out and find the child on the doorstep. She removed the shawl from Riaz's face.

"Patel ji, look here! A child . . . sleeping. He's not dead, is he?" She called to her husband who came running to the door and peered over at Riaz. Lifting the child, he took him inside. Riaz's parents watched their son's body being taken into the house.

"Zarine. We won't have to worry about him now," Sarwar comforted her. "The copy of *Surah Yasin* we left with him will tell those people he's a Muslim. They must and should bury him. Let us leave this place now, Zarine."

Inside the house, placing his ear near the child's chest, the woman's husband listened for a heartbeat. Nothing. Pushing the shawl aside, he gently puffed air into the boy's mouth.

Kumari Patel stared in amazement at what her husband was doing. Had he gone crazy? He was now pressing on the child's

ribs and puffing air into his mouth. Then, as if their Bhagwan had heard their prayers, her husband detected a slight heartbeat and jumped back in joy.

"Kumari, the boy is alive!" His wife beamed with happiness, holding out her two hands in prayer to her Bhagwan. "Quickly, let's take him to our doctor." As she tenderly cuddled the child in her arms, her husband went to wake up their driver.

In the doctor's surgery, much to the astonishment of those around him, the boy coughed but remained unconscious. Riaz only came fully awake a day later in Kumari Patel's home. His hands were clawing at his mouth, and he kept saying the words, "Water, Papa, water!" His eyes anxiously sought his parents. Where were they?

Kumari, with no children of her own, rejoiced in her newfound happiness. God had blessed her with a child at last, literally delivered it to her door. She wanted to adopt this blessing of a son, believing that his own parents had abandoned him and therefore had no claim over him. Whether they were in Pakistan or in India, she was not interested in tracing their whereabouts.

It was only many years later that Kumari Patel's conscience bullied her into admitting that they needed to find out about her son's biological family.

When the child Riaz was fully conscious and found himself in a new home with a Hindu family, in his child's mind he deliberately blocked out his own mother, his baby sister, their home – and *Him*, the father who had nearly choked him to death.

Mama and Papa have left me! His young mind struggled to come to terms with what had happened. The last scene he remembered was eating with them in the night amongst the bushes somewhere. Where were they all – and why had they

left him behind? In anguish, he sought solace in the arms of his Hindu foster mother.

By that time, his natural parents had reached their destination. They had first gone to the city of Jullundur where they could not find Sarwar's brother, but managed to get on a bus to the city of Lyallpur's refugee camp in Pakistan. After a few days, their relatives came for them from Lahore.

Sharing their tales of woe as refugees with their loved ones, Sarwar and Zarine omitted to mention how Riaz had died. Instead, they offered a fabricated tale of their son dying of a fever, just before they left their home. As to the burial of their son, they dared not utter a word. It became their shameful secret. Zarine never spoke about it, but neither did she forgive her husband for that terrible night and the loss of their son. In her eyes, he had killed their beloved Riaz and then abandoned him on the doorstep of total strangers.

They settled down in a home vacated by a Hindu family who had fled south to India. Sarwar started a new business with the gold jewellery they had brought with them. Zarine gave birth to two more children in Pakistan, but she never forgot her beloved Riaz. Life went on, but they were always tortured by the thoughts that would never go away. What had happened to their son? Had the family who took his body inside buried their son?

On his way home from the mosque, Sarwar Hussein was unaware of a pair of dark eyes boring holes into his back as he entered his home.

His heart beating wildly, Raju stood up. The hour of reckoning had come. It was time to meet the ones who had deserted him, leaving him for dead. Raju left his suitcase with the cafe owner, as he did not want to put his host off by his luggage. After all,

they didn't know him. And he had no idea whether that man who entered the villa was his father.

Gathering his courage, he pressed the buzzer at the outside gate. A young man led him into the front garden. Was this his brother? Blushing, Raju greeted him, "Assalam-a-Alaikum. Can I meet Sarwar Hussein, please?"

"Walaikum Salam. Please come in." The young man led Raju through the open porch and into their reception room. Asking the guest to be seated, he then went to call his father.

Raju waited apprehensively. It was all so surreal. He had seen dramas of family reunions in Bollywood films starring Amitabh Bachchan or Shahrukh Khan, but had never imagined himself as the protagonist. His eyes glided over the furnishings of the room, which celebrated the Islamic faith of the family, from the woollen tapestry woven with the Al-Kaaba design and the names of the prophets, to the hand-painted glazed plates with verses from the Holy Quran, to the large family portrait in their Ihram clothing taken after they had performed Hajj in Mecca. The high-quality furniture indicated to him that his family had done well for themselves, considering that they had abandoned everything in India and started from scratch.

Just then, he heard a female voice and the sound of approaching footsteps. Raju felt a thrill run down his spine and the hairs on his arms stood up. When a middle-aged woman with greying hair and a silk chador draped over her head entered the room, he gazed at her in wonder, bade her salam and stood up.

"Walaikum Salam, my son," she innocently returned, a greeting she normally used for all young men entering her home.

At the words, 'my son', something leaped in Raju's chest, and his eyes filled.

"Sarwar ji are having their lunch, they'll be with you shortly. Please feel at home." Out of respect for her husband, she always referred to him in the plural.

She was about to leave. Raju stepped forward. This was the moment and he wanted it to be with her only and not *Him*.

"Mother," he uttered softly behind her back.

Puzzled, Zarine turned, her forehead creased with perplexity at the young man's peculiar use of the word 'mother'. Raju poured his soul into his eyes.

"Mother," he repeated with emotion. "I am your son, Riaz."

Zarine stared, as the meaning of his words hammered at her brain. Her mind screamed, *Is this a hoax?* Her Riaz was dead. She began to sway. Raju reached forward to hold her.

"But my Riaz is dead," she whimpered, her eyes huge in her face.

"Yes, Mother, you left me for dead, but I was only unconscious . . . I was alive." He waited for his words to sink in. When they did, she could not contain her utter joy and excitement.

"Sarwar ji, Tahira, Javid, Saira – where are you all? Come here!" Zarine called at the top of her voice from the doorway.

The family came running from different parts of the villa, wondering at the commotion. Her children stared at her in amazement. What had happened to their normally subdued and serene mother?

Pulling Raju into her arms, she hugged and embraced him as if she would never let him go. Her family looked at each other, alarmed at her behaviour. Had she gone out of her mind, to be kissing a total stranger?

Zarine turned to Sarwar Hussein with tears streaming down her cheeks. She sobbed, "Sarwar ji, you'll never have to curse yourself again. Your son is alive! Look!"

As Sarwar Hussein continued to blankly gape at her, Zarine rushed up to him, tapping him on his chest.

"Look, Sarwar ji, our Riaz . . . whom we left behind in India!"

Clutching his chest, Sarwar stumbled out of the room. The doctor had said that shock of any kind was not good for his heart. Seeing this, Tahira, his eldest daughter, rushed to her father. She called for her brother Javid, who ran to her aid. They led their father to a sofa for him to lie down and were about to call the doctor, when Sarwar told them he was fine, just needed a few minutes' quiet. He sat up, the pain in his chest forgotten, and held out his hands in prayer to his Almighty Allah Pak. Later, he would offer his special thanksgiving Nafl prayers.

Sarwar then lay down and fell into a deep sleep of relief and joy. No more would he be tortured by that terrible memory of killing his son and then leaving his body behind. But he was not ready to face his son or talk to him, just yet.

Over the next hour, Zarine forgot her family, so engrossed did she become in her eldest son – her firstborn child lost to her for so long. Her other children looked on with bemusement. Tahira was cynical about her mother's reaction. The man who claimed to be their long-lost brother was a complete stranger, and from another world, India, their arch-enemy, the land from which she and her parents had fled twenty years ago in 1947, in order to save their lives.

Zarine, who was in high spirits, asked Tahira to lay the table for dinner. Holding onto his arm as if he would disappear if she let go, she took Raju around their house. Her other children followed silently behind her. They hadn't quite got used to the idea of acquiring another brother – an older one at that.

In awe, Raju silently moved from room to room. He was struck by the thought that this would have been his home,

living with his two sisters and a brother. Oddly, he felt nothing for them. Even Tahira, his baby sister who was born in India, kindled no feeling. They were, quite simply, strangers. He was acutely aware of his siblings' scepticism, if not outright hostility, regarding his arrival.

At Zarine's request, the dining room was opened up. The large, marble veneered table was soon covered with various dishes – some hurriedly prepared by their cook and his mother. Fried fish was brought in from a local restaurant. Raju began to eat with the others. Zarine watched each and every movement of his, noting that he did not use a spoon for rice. He ate the way they used to in India, scooping rice with their fingers. She had not had time to quiz him about all those years away from them. Nor was she in a hurry to learn about the people with whom he had spent most of his life.

Later, after dinner, while they were sipping hot cups of tea and munching on warm, sweet jalebis, Zarine decided it was time to confront her son's past and hear about the people who were part of his world now. Raju shared everything his adopted parents had told him – about how they had found him on their doorstep and, after discovering that he was still alive, had taken him into their household. They now lived in New Delhi, where he worked as a manager in a reputable publishing firm.

Zarine was eager to know how he had managed to trace them to their home in Pakistan. Raju told her how, as a child, he had mentioned the names of his real parents and that of their neighbour, Lal Mehra, as well as the name of their town. Within the first few weeks his adopted parents had visited that area and discovered that his parents had left for Pakistan.

Later, when Raju was older and determined to discover the whereabouts of his real parents, his adoptive parents went back to his former house and met the neighbours, asking for

information about his parents. Lal Mehra had shown them a letter with a Lahore address that he had received from Sarwar Hussein many years after they had left India. Raju's adoptive parents did not mention anything to Lal Mehra about Raju being Sarwar Hussein's son, but said that an old Indian friend wished to visit Sarwar and his family in Pakistan. Lal Mehra had happily handed over the letter with the address.

"And so with Bhagwan's help I'm here now," Raju ended emotionally.

Zarine's hand froze on the cup she was holding at the mention of the word Bhagwan – the Hindu word for God. Riaz hadn't said Allah but Bhagwan.

Raju caught the uneasy look in her eye. He did not fail to note the change in her demeanour. His steady gaze made hers falter. Surely his mother would accept the fact that he had adopted the religion of his adoptive parents? Did it make that much difference? After all, he was still her son. He had missed out on their lives and they on his. It was a sobering thought. He had embraced the life and faith of his adoptive parents as his own.

He smiled at the thought of his mother, Kumari Patel, waiting for him in Delhi – and missing her all of a sudden, he momentarily forgot the strange woman sitting in front of him, the one who had given birth to him.

Whilst her eldest son tried to get to sleep in the guest bedroom, Zarine stayed awake for a long time thinking about him. The word Bhagwan kept tapping in her head. Bitterly she wept. It was on religious grounds they had fled from her beloved home in India and it was religion now which had crushed her joyous feelings about her son's homecoming.

Zarine was angry with fate, the injustice of it all, and the suffering of her family in having lost Riaz. And all those years her poor Sarwar had tortured himself. Why did those people not try to trace them earlier? Why leave it till his adulthood?

Riaz was not her Riaz, but a stranger. It was the last straw for Zarine to know that her firstborn, for whom her family had excitedly distributed laddoos around in Phillaur on the day of his birth, was now called Raju, and had become a Hindu. Zarine thought of his Hindu mother, wondering what she should feel about her. Was she jealous of her for looking after her son all these years?

Zarine glanced at her husband fast asleep beside her. For once she didn't envy him his sleep. He deserved it. For him nothing else now mattered, only that his Riaz was alive. She prayed for her husband's health and that of her three children. No, not three children but four, she automatically corrected herself.

The next day passed in a flurry of activities for the entire Hussein family. Raju was taken sightseeing, to view Lahore's historical monuments: the Shalimar Gardens, the Gurdwara and the Badshahi mosque, as well as touring the walled city with its many doors, and the Anarkali bazaar. He met some of his Pakistani relatives, who were totally puzzled by his appearance, but happy nevertheless for his family.

Before arriving in Pakistan Raju hadn't given much thought to how long he was going to stay in Lahore. Perhaps a week or a month he had thought, depending on how his visit went. By the third day, however, he began to feel homesick and restless and decided that it was time to return home. He promised his mother Zarine that he would return again soon.

Sadly, Zarine reconciled herself to the fact that her Riaz could never be a permanent member of her household. Raju gave them his Indian address and the telephone number in Delhi, and requested them to visit his other family. Sarwar remained in the background. His guilt kept him there. He lovingly watched his son from a distance, realising that they both, father and son, needed time to bridge that gap between them.

At ten o'clock in the morning of the fourth day, Raju left for Delhi. His family hugged him and saw him off at the Wagah border with mixed emotions. Zarine rained kisses on his face, reluctant to part with him. She did not know how to handle this separation. Subdued, his family returned home, knowing that their lives would never be quite the same. Riaz would always be in their thoughts, but never theirs fully. His two sisters and brother were ambivalent about their sibling's intrusion into their lives. They didn't know whether they felt happy or sad when he left.

Raju's immediate thought as he settled comfortably in his seat on the train was that his life's mission was accomplished. He had discovered his birth family. He still felt no affection for his father, but he had learned from his mother their version of the story, about how petrified they were of the drunken men, and how that had resulted in the tragedy of his being accidentally suffocated.

In Delhi, Kumari Patel was sitting in front of their altar. With her eyes closed, she was praying for her son Raju's well-being. When the outside door creaked, she opened her eyes, surprised. Her husband was supposed to be at a business evening meal.

On catching sight of her son, Kumari flew into his open arms, the folds of her Banarasi sari flying behind her. Raju rested his head on her shoulder, filled with emotion. Finally,

he whispered, "I've come home, Mata ji. Bhagwan has returned your son to your arms."

She heard the joy in his voice. He knew where he belonged. Too overwrought, Kumari didn't reply. Instead she took his face in her hands, showering it with kisses, starting with his forehead and moving down to his chest. When she eventually released him, Raju bent to touch her feet. Joy rippled through Kumari Patel's being. Her dark eyes glowed in her face.

There was a lot to be said, and a lot to be heard, but she would leave it till later. She let go of her son, telling him to bathe and change into his favourite blue kurtha and matching pyjamas. She then returned to the altar and bowed her head for a special prayer, with her hands firmly pressed together in front of her favourite goddess for a long time. She thanked her Bhagwan for her son's return. Four days ago, she had lost hope of holding onto him, mortally afraid that his Pakistani family would keep him with them.

Her Raju called from his room whilst he unpacked the presents from his other family. "Mata ji, you can now call Neeta's parents and tell them to go ahead with our engagement. I now know that I'm ready to marry and start a family of my own, after visiting my other family. And I am going to tell Neeta the truth about where I have been. To Pakistan, not Dubai."

After getting their Indian visa three months later, Sarwar Hussein and Zarine visited Riaz's Indian family. They too arrived by train. He and his parents went to receive them. It was a strange and awkward meeting. But both sides were thankful. Riaz's parents were grateful to his adoptive parents for saving their son's life and for raising him so well, and also for taking the trouble to trace them back to Pakistan. And Raju's adoptive parents were thankful that he had come into their childless life

as their beloved son, and delighted that he had not deserted them to join his biological family.

His parents only stayed for two days. Zarine watched her son and his mother from afar, painfully aware that Kumari adored their Riaz and that he was, indeed, their son. She hugged and kissed him as she left, but gracefully accepted the fact that her Riaz belonged to the other woman. She was simply profoundly glad that he was alive. The regular phone calls continued, and the bonds were gradually deepening between the two families.

Six months passed and Sarwar Hussein and his whole family arrived in Delhi for their Riaz's wedding. It was a first-time visit to India for his siblings; the Indian Hindu wedding was a weird and unique experience for them. Sarwar and Zarine somehow managed to hold onto their composure as they watched their son circle the wedding fire with his bride Neeta, with wedding garlands around their necks. Both of his families were in tears.

However, Kumari Patel and her husband had a surprise for them. They had also invited an Imam to perform the Muslim Nikkah ceremony. After all, their shared son belonged to two faiths. The two mothers stared at one another, delighting in each other's happiness. It was at that moment, watching the tears in the other's eyes, that the two mothers found a deep joy in sharing him.

Riaz for one, Raju for the other.