

Chapter 1 - Amar

It took only a tap, a ting, or the note of a sinewy chord to make Amar remember the music and the moment he had first heard it. As the years passed and he grew out of boyhood, it was the music that remained; echoing, haunting, a companion informing his daily existence. The music rested in his memory, perhaps also in his nerves and his muscle, passed down through his blood across the ages.

Amar had been in the music store, on the lookout for a new turntable to keep by his bed. He had a growing collection of vinyls, and dreamed of afternoons wasted, lying in bed, submerged in the rhythms of his life – his parents’ old Bollywood singles and LPs of British rock, next to his own European dance and East Coast hip hop. Now he had a new addition – his grandfather’s old record. An old ghazal, a devotional love poem, put to classical sitar and vocalized by a woman with a voice of nectar. Amar had no utter clue what any of it meant.

It was the memory he clung to in moments of anxiety and desperation, like hanging off a cliff, and he found solace in it lest his grip fail. It was the memory that livened his soul, for reasons he did not quite know, but suspected because it was the first time he fell in love.

He remembered the first time he’d heard it, in the dead still house, forgetting he wasn’t alone. From upstairs he heard the crisp voice of the woman through crackling static. Her serenade floated down and he ran up towards it. In the bare bedroom that had been set up for him, his grandfather sat on the bed, hands clasped between his legs, head nodding down. On the dresser sat an ancient golden record player, the kind that Amar had

only seen in movies that took place in World War Two, with the big megaphone that looked like a tuba horn. From here, the woman sang, her voice jumping out of the crevices and indentations the record had picked up over time. Amar imagined she probably had flowers in her hair, and a red sari. He could make out tabla drums in the background. The silent house became a temple, and the song a religious meditation:

Dhinak-dhinak-dha-dha-dha

Dhinak-dhinak-dha-dha-dha

His grandfather had played the record once a day, everyday, until he'd passed away. The day after, while the rest of his family was at the funeral, Amar had crept into the room and snuck it from the closet.

In the back end of the music store, he found someone already using the floor model decks— tall, lanky, with cropped dark hair and rough stubble. No practice today, Amar thought. But he kept watching, as this imposter, like him, was doing more than curiously fooling around. His hands moved with intent and finesse, eyes fiercely darting from table to mixer to counter and back.

His mixes reverberated through the store. They were on point, long cross-fades that he teased and stretched for so long in single harmony Amar forgot they were two separate tracks entirely. Then the other guy noticed him.

They exchanged names – Amar, Erfan.

Erfan spat at the floor model. “Hand-me-down crap,” he said. “You need the latest gear to tear a place up.”

“I always thought it was the right choice in music makes the difference.”

“Music’s easy. Just give people the shit they want to hear. The trick is mixing well. Do you DJ?”

“No, but it sounds fun.”

He chewed on his words. He’d always entertained the old, romantic notion of sharing his coveted private treasures time and again, to virgin ears that had yet to experience what he cherished. The stuff that went unknown, unappreciated, and unheard. But he’d never spun at a party before, never stood in a dark dingy basement switching cassette tapes and CDs in a boom box while passing glasses of jungle juice, or hauled crates of dusty records into a dive bar and asked for three hours of playtime. But he’d got of to a good start with this guy, and wanted to keep the conversation on.

They got drinks and got to talking shop. Erfan was Persian, which put him culturally diametrical to Amar. It intrigued him. Dress, customs, it all felt uncanny and alien at the same time. Choice words in the mother tongue were so alike yet not. Staple foods they’d been raised on, like the *pulao* rice in Hindi, became *polo* in Farsi. They drank more and talked more, about music. They mused possible fusion of musical styles from both of their backgrounds, already centuries linked by expanding civilizations, wars, the Silk Road. Amar was old school – the dusty smell of vinyls, simple bass beats and throwback classics. Erfan was cutting edge, he wanted electronica and trance and house – whatever that was – the electronic buzzes and beeps chopped into melody.

His father owned Xenos, the most popular club in the city. Amar had only heard of it from all of the radio ads, which unequivocally named it the *only* place to be on a

Friday night, and any place else was a waste of time. And why not? It was *on* the radio. So many nights Amar listened to the feed, wondering how at one moment the radio host said it was at capacity, and the next urged people to come down as soon as they could. He listened to the birthday shout-outs, the shrieks of girls in tight dresses, and most of all, those moments when the DJ dropped a new track. Even though he wasn't there, Amar felt the energy in the club drain and rise anew, keeping the party going long after he fell asleep.

“It can't really be like that,” Amar said. “Not all the time.”

“You want to bet?” Erfan asked. “Have you ever been out to the clubs?”

Amar had been a few times to one, Jungle, a dance hall in the seedy part of town, made to induce a faux Jamaican vacation – fake palm leaves, a tiki awning on the bar, a Damien Marley poster on the wall. His old childhood friend, George, was now the resident DJ. It was the first time he'd seen a DJ who wasn't some robotic figure locked away in a high box, but someone he knew, spinning and bouncing, mastering the music and the people on the dance floor. With each new beat he mixed, they responded with their bodies.

“That fool is the chutney version of me,” Erfan said. He was interested only in upper-class establishments that demanded trendy clothing, polished shoes, and clean shaves. Places where drinks cost twice as much than everywhere else. Amar admitted, their allure was more tempting.

Erfan said he was close to getting a gig at Xenos. The trick was convincing his father, who at any cost was not going to hand a job over to his son. “The thought of

nepotism makes his blood curdle,” Erfan said, “like he’s embarrassed he even had kids or something.” The notion made Amar cave inside. But he continued. “What better job is there? You walk in. You take a shot. You spin. Girls flash their tits at you. You go home. The club is where it’s at man. Don’t waste time in bars or basements.”

At some point, in listening to Erfan, and imagining himself at the decks, he’d silently agreed, *let’s be DJs*.

They put together some money and bought low-grade, secondhand equipment. Amar could only muster a few hundred, but Erfan had a money reserve somewhere, somehow, despite being jobless. He shouldered most of the cost.

They cut together a mixtape, stripping lyrics of the songs they loved from childhood against backbeats of contemporary chart toppers. It was rough, low quality, made from pirate software and a cheap computerized turntable. But out of it they created Farsi raps, bhangra hip-hop, afro-salsa, and techno-jazz, if such things existed.

It didn’t skyrocket to heights of fame, but it got enough notice to get booked to a multicultural show at the community college. There, trapped in a university rec hall with a hundred and fifty students, they started and ended in total disaster. The *boos* went louder than the speakers. The audience’s looks reminded Amar of the way his vegetarian family would look at butchers in the grocery store. Faces upturned, tongues stuck out; like a wretched act of cold-blooded murder. People swarmed around them like wasps, leafing through their CDs and playlists. Between the criticisms and frustrated fist-waves, he and Erfan botched mix after mix.

“We were playing these crappy outdated tracks,” Erfan had said afterwards.
“They sucked back then and they aren’t classics now. And we just picked them at random; they made no sense strung together.”

At that moment, he dictated they had to learn from pros.

Chapter 2 – Jayant

The hallway of the third floor on the east wing of the Ahmedabad municipal building was entirely empty, save for one cleaning man who was mopping the floor at the far end from where Jayant was sitting. He had an appointment with the Head Litigator of Estate Affairs. Today was his first day as the junior attorney. The cleaning man was humming an old melody as he washed the floor with a wet rag and a bucket of soapy water. Jayant heard the buzz of numerous fans from the offices surrounding him, with the occasional splash of water. Beyond that, everything was still and silent. There was still half an hour until he was due to arrive and his destination was only twenty yards away.

It was 1947. He had just returned from abroad in London, away for three years training in English Law. When he'd returned to his home, there an Indian constitution had been fortified. His lifetime's work, his parents' over-joy, his town's celebration, the commendable letters from his mentors, the twilight hours at books – all rendered useless. Now he wasn't even sure what laws he could defend. The papers everyday threatened to throw the young country upside down into a political and social upheaval. Different political groups sprouted everyday, waxing didactic beyond the reason of the national Congress.

The bright sunlight was pouring in through the windows at both ends, and also spilled from the cracked doors of the offices, engulfing him in a golden brown haze, and his sense of depth evaded him. From this one bench, the hallway seemed to stretch on forever. The cleaning man now stopped humming and sang his tune with an arbitrary sequence of “ahs” and “ohs.” He didn't seem to take notice of Jayant.

Somewhere down the hall a large stack of papers fell, followed by a sharp curse, and then the creak of a chair, followed by a sigh of exasperation.

Drops of water tickled his feet, and Jayant saw the cleaning man on the floor beside the bench, wiping away. "Pardon, sahib," he said, and went on singing. Jayant got up from the bench, and without warning his head was overcome with a strong dizziness. He lost his balance and accidentally kicked the other man, who didn't say anything, and went on wiping. Jayant shut his eyes for a moment and shook his head, and then rested it against the wall. He sat back down and tried to compose himself.

He began deliberating what he was doing here, what series of choices had brought him to walk into this courthouse on this damned hot day. Father had wanted him to take over the family's farm in Somnath. No, of course not, he thought. I was never going to toil in the sun all day. Jayant instead spent his maturing years seeking careers that would take him to the big city. He had worked hard in school, to pass his exams and make good relations with his professors. He had even sat on cases in Magistrate's Court. He asked himself, *did you even enjoy it in the first place?*

Upon returning to India his parents ambushed him with a plethora of marriage proposals. Families with wealthy dowries heard of the law student returning from England who had bright futures ahead of him in the magistrate, who would enforce property rights and tax laws, who would argue when untouchables walk into Brahmin businesses. He would be a judge of the district by his thirties, enough to provide a wife and four lovely young daughters.

But Jayant's time in Britain let him experience courting proper. Between his days apprenticing at the High Court of Justice and studying for practical exams, he sat at the benches in St. James' Park, where he enjoyed reading the poetry of Tagore, Tennyson, and his favorite, the Sufi mystic Amir Khusrau. There he saw couples out on picnic. They all looked unwed, a jarring sensation for Jayant, who was set to marry an unknown, parentally chosen girl upon his return to India. English men had to work to be with a woman, buying expensive gifts and caressing hands and reciting lovely Byron. He thought of an appropriate Khusrau line, one of his favorites:

What shall I do, for no one gets his fill of gazing upon your beautiful cheek.

The elderly man next to him elbowed his side and said, "They're trying so hard to get up those skirts, but you wonder who is wooing whom?" He cackled, revealing a row of disheveled teeth. Jayant looked back down at his book, trying not to stare too hard, remembering his light-wheatish skin and his place in this country.

When he returned home, he'd learned he'd been set up with a temperamental, if somewhat charming, young woman named Uma. She'd come from a small village outside the city, and had she not been a revered elder's daughter, his parents would have never considered her for his match. She knew how fortunate she was to be out of the dead-end hamlet, a place not unlike the outskirts of Somnath. But Jayant had known, the moment she entered their new apartment, snubbed making aloo paratha, and demanded a cook, that she was only with him to encroach into a society she otherwise had no access to.

When he opened his eyes the world seemed upright again. He still heard the cleaning man whistling at the end of the hall, but it faded out.

“Do you know where I can get a glass of water?” Jayant asked. The man kept singing. Jayant cleared his throat loudly, and in reply, the cleaner sang louder.

Never mind then, he resolved. He started walking down the hallway towards office 21A. As he got closer, he noticed that the door was almost shut, cracked only about an inch or so. Jayant took the last few paces very quietly, and then stood outside with a soft, controlled breath. He angled himself with the crack and peeked inside.

A man sat at the desk with a cloth covering the top half of his face, panting against the heat and fanning himself with court papers. His wig sat on his table, the fine white hairs spiraling out of their neat comb. Jayant backed away from the crack and looked at his watch. Still twelve minutes early. He wondered if younger lawyers were required to wear the hideous wig. Perhaps that’s one rule different for India, especially in this damned heat. Indian men look silly with white hair, tucked away in a braid, with a black ribbon. His first motion in court after gaining some prominence will be to abolish the practice of wigs.

He repositioned himself squarely in front of the door, and tapped on it three times. Inside, the chair creaked sharply. The door opened, and the man stood there silently with half-open, disinterested eyes. He had put his wig on hastily, and it sat crooked on a head that was too small for it. In fact, he was a good foot shorter than Jayant, with a unibrow and thin lips that pursed around his mouth even though it was now gapingly open.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Mister Bharatlal Dinkarbhai Prasad?”

“B.D. Prasad,” he spat, correcting him, and stuck a hand through the door.

“Sir, my name is Jayantilal Bakshi. I am supposed to start apprenticeship under you today.”

B.D. Prasad reached his head out of the doorway and looked up and down the hall, as if he wanted to make sure no one had seen him. “Get inside,” he whispered, and ushered Jayant into the office.

Inside, the humidity had built up from the shuttered windows, and immediately weighted Jayant down into the rocking seat.

“Hey, get back up,” B.D. barked from behind, “I didn’t tell you to sit.”

Jayant got on his feet, and held his briefcase straight at to his side. B.D. reclined back into his chair and looked at him silently, chewing on moist air. He picked up a few sheets of typewritten paper and fanned himself. Jayant saw the damp stains of sweaty fingers on them, the illegible ink smearing across the page.

“So, what do you want to do?”

Jayant cleared his throat and said, “I want to represent my fellow Indian citizens to make sure they get a fair –”

“*Na, na, bhaisahb*. Right now, what do you want to do? Have you eaten? You want some tea?”

“I’m fine, thank you. I came because I thought the case was starting at two o’clock, and I was told to come here – ”

“Who?” B.D.’s eyes became inquisitive. His chair creaked as he sat on its edge. “Who told you?”

“No one. It was written on my letter of summons. Here, let me show you.”

“Oh.” B.D. leaned back, and the chair creaked again. “No, no, let it go, they always say things like that. It doesn’t matter, anyway. I’m not going to court today. Sit down will you, it’s bloody hot.”

They sat without a word for a few moments – Prasad fanning himself, Jayant trying to keep his tongue moist with few drops of saliva, should he be asked more questions. This was an interview, or was it not?

A fly began buzzing around the room. B.D. Prasad’s eyes followed it, from the window, to the bookshelf, to the framed civil oath on the wall. Finally, it landed on the desk. He slowly rolled the paper, and with a quick *whack* brought it down on the insect. For a quick moment his eyes softened with some satisfaction and glee, and then went back to their indifference. He looked up at Jayant.

Jayant wasn’t sure how to react. This man must have a reason for not going to court. He must know what he’s doing. He has been in this profession for years.

“Yes, it’s too hot. Forget the courthouse, it’s on the other side of the Square. We’re not going all the way over there. Are you sure you don’t want anything?”

“Well, if I could get a glass of water.”

B.D. Prasad went to the window and put his face against the bars, yelling down below for two glasses of water. He sat back down, and the two men shared silence until a boy came to the door with a pitcher and steel cups. Jayant offered to pour both, and forced himself to wait, until Prasad sipped first. But the man sat, unflinching, staring off at the ceiling as if he was deciding how to classify the shade of white painted on the wall.

“Are you married?” he asked. “Kids?”

“Yes, twins in fact. Buy-one-get-one.”

“Good!” Prasad laughed. “Wife and kids is the sign of a good, stable man. I like having stable men in the office, more productive. They hang around here more often in order to escape their families.”

Jayant forced a laugh to appease his new boss. It came out awkwardly. After a moment, Prasad tapped his chair and once again said, “Good!” and room the fell silent again.

“So, you will keep the judge waiting?” Jayant asked.

“No, he will probably leave as soon as he realizes I am not there,” he said as he took off his wig. “Actually, he may not come himself.”

B.D. slurped his water down. Jayant took his, and strained himself to take patient gulps.

“So, Mister.”

“Bakshi.”

“Bakshibhai, you can just go home, or we can sit here and chat, drink, and then go home.”

Jayant put his briefcase on the floor and poured himself another glass of water. B.D.’s lightened for the first time since he came in. “Wonderful. Now tell me why you want to be a lawyer.”

Chapter 3 – Khusrau

The caravan had traveled from Delhi, skirting the rolling hills that were in spring bloom with daffodils and marigolds down their sides, and entering the Thar desert across Rajasthan. The palanquin bearers' feet moved slower in the heat, crushing the dry, yellowed grass. At midday, the sun was high above, and beat down on their heads. Without a cloud in the sky, it was too bright to look up.

In the palanquin, Amir Khusrau parted his curtain and peeked out: the farmers' women flanked the caravan along the roadside, carrying large clay pots above their heads. The *chink* of their ankle bracelets gave tune to their walk. Their saris were rustic and plain, lacking the jewels or vibrant dye colors that the courtesans of Delhi paraded in. Khusrau watched as the palanquin came past the women, and saw them drift into the ditch beside the road, making room for him. He peered at one woman, whose sari had an intricate floral design. A few words spurred in his mind. As he peered at her, trying to glimpse her veiled face through *ghoonghat*, he saw only a face of disdain.

Khusrau shut the curtain, startled. He had never been looked at this way. It was the look that royals give to their servants, Hindus to untouchables, man to a mongrel dog. Khusrau twisted his mustache and caressed his beard. In his hand, the composition pages crackled. They had gone limp from traveling in the humidity. Once they crossed into the desert they turned dry and stiff and became color of unwashed teeth and bodily secretions. It was a defamation of the great words that I've written upon them, Khusrau thought. He again heard the ankle bracelets of the women with the gourds, and remembered a passage he had recorded recently into his book:

The creaking chain of Majnun is the orchestra of lovers.

To appreciate its music is quite beyond the ears of the wise.

Not his own, he reflected despondently. Another phrase intended for inspiration but instead borrowed and hacked, from his own mentor and friend Nizami. He'd tried writing his own opus of the old Leyli and Majnun tale, without success. Such simplicity in Nizami's words, such apparent connection between idea and metaphor.

Khusrau shut his composition book and tied the binding thread across it severely. He was frustrated. He had observed in futility as his notebook, scrawled all over with miscellaneous stanzas, crude drawings, and small edicts, slowly petered out into more and more blank space. Where had the love, the magic, and mystery gone?

For many months now, it had evaded him entirely.

His whole life was a pursuit of recording the verve and motions of love and friendship, of longing and embrace. Since he was a young man, stanzas had flowed from his mind effortlessly. He could synthesize the pains, the trials, the torture of man's heart in such few, short, precise words. Oh, the joy of words! It was like climbing the mountains or fighting the thousand armies of old fables. But even more, it was the puzzle that Khusrau enjoyed. The shifting and arrangement of pieces, like a perfect set of teeth, the ridges and contours of top and bottom biting down and chewing, savoring, and swallowing the words.

The local Nawaabs and Sardars commissioned his couplets. Khusrau gained attention in town squares and noble circles. Very soon, he found himself in the court of

the Sultan Khilji. Khusrau came into the Sultan's good graces for his pen, and his wanton for words was unquenchable.

The Sultan enjoyed a poem with his morning tea. He saw it as a nice coda to the morning prayer, and a stimulation for the rest of the day. After dinner, he was particularly fond of ghazals, the short refrains drawn out through eloquent rhythm. "It brings pleasant dreams," the Sultan said. Khusrau was not short of material: the edicts of Princes and Nawaabs from court, or the bedroom closet gossip of servants, or the aphorisms and intriguing phrases he overheard in the marketplace, became a wellspring of subjects and emotions, inscribed onto Khusrau's page like firebrand.

At the same time, the Sultan also developed a thirst for the territories to the west. Within his first years on the throne, he had placed his uncle's head on a pike and brought the entire Delhi kingdom under his rule. Now, he wanted to expand his power out to the sea. War campaigns spread across the Hind, as messengers returned to the court with dispatched of victories over bloody battlefields. Fields spread with severed limbs. Chariot wheels caked with drying flesh. The golden hilts, stained red.

Hearing this the Sultan would affirm, thank God, and ask Khusrau to follow up with his saccharine couplet.

But Khusrau had no words for these moments. When he tried, jagged syllables tore at each other. After a while Khusrau would not have a couplet or a poem prepared for tea, or dinner. He would try and get by by reciting something old and tired that he hoped the Sultan would not remember. When he tried to improvise, the rhythm would

topple like a horse that lost its gallop and fell to the ground. Soon, Khusrau was admonished for not being, as his liege put it, “calling the hummingbirds in my head.”

Rather than cut him loose, the Sultan spared no luxury to make Khusrau as comfortable as possible to continue composing. He was placed in a new bungalow near the palace, and given court-appointed servants. His wife and children were showered with jewelry and gifts. In such opulence, Khusrau admitted he could think easier and clearer. But still, he faltered and brought incomplete pages.

A courtesan was brought to court. Her name was Sunita. Her voice was deep, but melodious like nightingales. She would play sitar and help elevate his simple couplets to dance under the adorned palace ceiling. Khusrau had thought of his words as stones skipping across a pond, leaving ripples in the water that eventually disappeared. *But with music!* They did not ripple, instead soared into the air, giving chase to the birds and insects all the way to heaven.

It gutted him inside. The poet’s words should be their own melody. Khusrau would fume after Sunita’s performances. He would stay out late, drink, and curse the beguiling beauty. He would wake late in the morning, lost in a daze, body drenched in sweat. Delhi would already be in a commotion outside his veranda. Before he used to walk through the streets before dawn, as the stall keepers had just started displaying their wares. He took a shortcut through the bazaar to take in the ripe fruit baskets and vibrant social discussion that ignited the day. But now, after a brief stale breakfast and his wife’s haranguing, the carriage fetched him to the palace without delay. More couplets, more music.

It was Sunita's music that made him want to come to Somnath. The Sultan's campaign had brought him to the temple, the religious sentinel that overlooked the sea towards the rest of the world.

Khusrau saw the monumental temple formalize ahead in the distance. A spire of smoke rose from the top of its dome. Small embers were alive around the stone walls, charring it ashen grey. It had been desecrated, its holy men slashed. To kill men of God was indeed the edge of the world, Khusrau thought. Whatever was beyond that was a subject no melody could sweeten. In this rubble, he'd find his new language.

The bearers set the palanquin down. Khusrau felt the ground thud up against his bottom. As he stepped out, the bearers had already unloaded his few belongings; writing materials, paper, clothes, and a few rations. They'd reminded him if he ran out, he could seek the priests' wares. They won't need them anymore. Khusrau started to walk toward the temple ruin, but the bearers stopped him. He must take off his sandals, they said, to remain respectful. The sand burned under his feet as he took small steps to the rubble.

It still stood with a weathered grandeur. The sandstone walls were crumbling bit by bit with each moment that passed, withering away like an old sleeping giant. The shattered pieces were scattered about in chaotic beauty. Stone mistresses lay in the dirt face first, their feet sticking out in the air; mighty pillars broken into sections; the headless body of a lion still stood proud at the gateway. He passed between two erect pillars reaching out for the sky, capped down by a heavy awning. A great stair led up and inside, but he could only see an abyss, hollow and pitch black despite the glorious sunlight.

He felt an ominous presence in the wind, making him feel unwelcome and chastened. The Hindus worshipped the elements as a God. They saw Him in all living creatures, from bird to serpent, from rat to mosquito. They saw a harmony in nature. His Sufi skin, meanwhile, scorched against grain and dry air.

Khusrau walked around the dome, taking in a great epic carved into the wall. The king mightily charged at his enemies with an army behind, ready to take blade to body for their highness. Flames engulfed the warriors, horses cried in agony, and a woman entered the battlefield, her caring maternal hands softening the pain of death. At the far end of the wall, the great king is laid to rest on a slab, carried by eight men to his funeral pyre. Khusrau knew the real battle that raged here was not as noble or idyllic. He felt nausea.

Behind the temple, under its large cast shadow, was the cliff overlooking the ocean. Khusrau looked over, crashes and tumbles of the waves below calling back up to him. A misty sea breeze kissed his face, and he felt a little more at ease.

“Do you know what lies at the other side of the sea?”

Khusrau slowly turned to meet the voice, and found a small wiry man nestling himself against the pillars. He wore a white loincloth and nothing else, his skin milky white with a slight blush of red around the extremities. He was completely bald save for a lock of amber-brown hair that grew from the top of his scalp, and tipped over down the back of his head. His lips were carnation pink, almost like a woman’s.

“I don’t know,” Khusrau replied.

The Priest resettled his loin, draping over his shoulder. He picked indifferently at a marigold, ripping each orange petal one by one and tossing them aside.

“Are you going to tell me?” Khusrau asked.

“I didn’t say I knew,” the man said. “I was simply asking you.”

He hummed a tune, and after a few bars switched to whistle. Khusrau recognized it was a devotional song. This was the last priest of the temple. By the time he had finished whistling, the marigold had become barren, and he tossed the bud without direction into the sand.