

AMAR (2008)

It took only a tap, a ting, or a note of that sinewy chord to make Amar remember the music and the moment he had first heard it. 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 revived his soul, for reasons he didn't quite know, but suspected because it reminded him of the first time he fell in love.

He'd woken with a curious mix of freedom and despair that morning, his body melted into the mattress from a long night, the first major part of his final year of college. It was a feeling that nagged at him, put his body off of its normal rhythms and asked him to bury himself back into his covers. He turned his head and dug his nose into the collar of the shirt he crashed into bed with to catch a whiff of Kiran's perfume.

He checked his phone to confirm that it was, yes – still morning, just shy of noon. The light barely snuck into his room, darkened by a thick black-out curtain his parents had protested against, and for awhile traipsed into his room and pulled back when they thought he had been under the covers long enough, but once the money had started to roll in, the incursions had subsided. He turned in his bed, the duvet tightening around his body, and reached for his phone on the nightstand, the glow scratching at his eyes, as he caught up on the bevy of notifications and messages that had piled in throughout the night.

Her message was still left unread in his messages, right at the top:

Message from Kiran: [I'm sorry if I sprung that news on you last night. I do care for you and hope we can...]

He left it unread. It was Saturday morning, in the fall of his final year of college, the day of his final Kulture Dhamaka. Each year, following the Indian Student Association's yearly cultural talent show, they rented out the some dingy club in Baltimore that still had enough business sense for decent uplighting for the campus' Brown kids to pile in, after an evening performing for their parents in the campus auditorium, dressed in their best Desi threads saved from weddings and birthdays prior, and performed a lineup of dances, songs, and routines to show off how much they retained the culture from home.

This year however, AZADI had scored the DJing gig. He'd started it with his friend Erfan, an Iranian kid who he'd crossed paths with in the race to spin as many house parties as they could find, on and off campus, enjoying the cache that came from being stuck in a dark corner while the rest of his friends knocked back shots and rubbed bare arms against each other in a play for consumed desires.

He'd spent most of college scared and stifled by it all, a scattered impulse of wanting something new, something unknown than what he'd known growing up in his small suburb, channeled from one party of Gujarati aunts and uncles to another. When sophomore year came around, he decided, no more kids who only knew English or had never eaten a curry. He wasn't quite sure what a curry was himself. He had to make himself known. He was fascinated to learn there was such a thing as a South Asian frat.

Brown world was small, with everyone picking chips off the cookie, avoiding any relation and hounding any acquaintance. He went to join the fusion dance team, but found out he couldn't dance. He went to the study sessions in the library, but found out no one else was taking the bullshit electives he was. He wanted to join the Indian frat, but he worried he didn't like baggy clothing enough.

He found his place at the college radio station. It had been a steady hit since he started it late freshman year, having stumbled into the studios while looking for a quiet corner, paralyzed the options of cliques across campus he knew but was not quite in enough to hang with. Week after week, he hosted a show of Desi songs – Bollywood, Punjabi, underground, throwbacks – whatever he found and liked after a late night downloading binge on Limewire, and imagined those same cliques in corners of the library, lecture hall, dorm rooms, desiring to know who was this maestro ping-ponging their hearts, bringing the dishoom: a Dev Anand, a Shah Rukh, an Amitabh off in his quiet corner.

After a year of building his music collection, Amar had built up enough of a following on campus to start showing up to frat houses, ISA events, birthday parties, name it, lugging his laptop, decks, mixer, and a lone speaker. He'd be beckoned by a friend of a friend, someone looking to cash in on social cache by telling everyone they knew a cool DJ, and hovered near the decks all night crestfallen, waiting for the quiet boy to hop on the mic with some MC call outs. But Amar stayed silent, head down, in the mix. He cared little of what they thought of him. It was an act of simple piety. No one cared if you were there to make a statement. The easy way to money was to learn the expectations, and see them fit. It was the difference between indifference and not, the total silence of glowing fandom versus raves of Best DJ EVER!!! in his texts the next day.

Erfan saw there was too another boy who spent all of his time in the student union, who sat at the far end next to the popcorn machine and the bathroom, unable to find any academic niche, who put on a set of huge earphones and tucked his head back, closed his eyes, and sat for hours listening to music, loud enough to hear from across the small corner, in between explosive kernels and gurgling flushes, the fantasy FYE in the boy's cans. But everything was in low syncopated bass beat, steady and uniform, and Erfan watched the boy, brown skinned and soft cheeked, hardly with any stress of exams or tests, bob his head ever so slightly.

Amar, the poor thing, he never had a chance. He'd been as primed for this moment as Erfan had been, haunted by phantom songs since his early years, melodies that had imprinted into his brain matter despite him not knowing names, titles, years, lyrics. He claimed his father had been a failed musician, a man who had lived as legend, a life of bands and international tours, playing for Presidents and Shahs and Premiers, who'd had, according to who you talk to, the best selling cassette in whatever town, in the community, or the state was at question. What was certain, was that Amar trusted it because other people said so, and because both of their parents had put it all aside to come to the States, where they did in fact become the mythical, humble working class immigrants, their wealth placed in suitcases and boxes packed with their histories in photos, gold jewelry heirlooms, and saris that were never worn as much as they'd been threaded to. They started trading music, and then experimenting with creating mixes on their computer. When the time was right, Erfan went in for the small nudge over the precipice – "maybe we could do this."

And so AZADI was born.

Outside his door he could hear the morning routine, the one that violently woke him after every night out, the cacophony of sounds that came with such vigor and intensity that he assumed it had to be on purpose. From the early hours when his mother would begin her prayers into the kitchen cabinet, where the assortment of holy idols had been set up with diyas, ghee-dipped wicks, and incense and ringing bells that would waft into his room and tickle him awake. She would do one for God, and another for her brother, whose photo hung beside Mata ji. Amar had never known him. He'd died in a long ago war, another man frozen in his twenties.

Then her cooking for the day began, in reverse order: it was always dinner that started first -- so that there would be less to do for her when she got back from her shift -- then lunch, and finally breakfast, so at least one meal could be eaten fresh. Three simultaneous meals meant the whir of a mixer, the whistle of the pressure cooker, the clanging of pots and the hammering of ladles, and eventually, one of these snapped him awake from the dreams he chased into the night.

He slithered into a chair at the kitchen table. His mother was at the stove, her hair in a plastic shower cap because the people at work talked about how she smelled when she walked by. A spoon clangs in the pan, crackling with the hot oil disintegrating some type of root vegetable. Something dry and green-tasting, something Amar had no joy in eating but knew it was coming tonight. His mother's dishes had increasingly gotten simple and fickle since his college had worn on. There was no time to make two meals.

His father flipped through the paper as vapor lifted from a cup of chai, untouched.

"Finally you're up," he says. "When did you get in?"

"Not too late, Papa."

"I went to the bathroom in the middle of the night. At that time it was two-thirty. You weren't here then."

"Okay, okay."

He liked his way through the obligatory Facebook pics, requests for tags and the comments reminding him, yes, he was there. The photos had a musty film over them from the lingering smoke of several hookahs and weed rolls, confusing the cameras and giving them all piercing red eyes. Rik doing the dougie in the backyard, the smiley face made of crushed pot, the guy no one knew sleeping off the night on the hood of someone else's car. A few of him, a few of Kiran. None of them together.

They had been together through most of college. It took him a year of moonlighting the campus Desi scene, spinning house parties and volunteering to play for Diwali parties, Eid parties, birthdays, graduations, anywhere he might find her, Kiran, who never missed a function where she could take the stage. The music would be the thing, the seductive *rasa* he knew she wouldn't be able to give up savoring. Soon after the texts, he invited her to a hookah bar. Over a pipe they made out, tasting mint smoke on each other's breath. But once their lips had smacked and tongues waggled, upon and around each other, the tastes had changed. They said nothing about it, until the day after, when she messaged him on Facebook to remark that she didn't know they were already connected as friends.

Behind, the spoon clangs in the pan, crackling with the hot oil disintegrating some type of root vegetable. Something dry and green-tasting, something Amar had no joy in eating but knew it was coming tonight. Under the kitchen table, Amar kept pressing away at his phone.

"Are you guys coming tonight?"

"Your mother has to work, beta," His father said. "And I'll be getting back late tonight."

"But dad, come on. We're DJing the event, Erfan and me. It's a big deal for us."

"Is he your only friend?" his mother asked. "All this time, you only tell me about these Arab boys on campus. Would we meet any of your Indian friends someday, I hope?"

"He's Persian."

"Whatever."

"AZADI's doing pretty well. When we graduate, we could really make it something big. Make a career."

"You know if you want to get a job, there are better things to do. How much can they pay you for that *dhin-chak dhin-chak* anyway?"

“A lot.”

“You put it away once you graduate, nai? Time for a real job, then.”

His eyes were on shots of Kiran’s two friends, Gita and Richa. Pratik and Rik, showing off their jackets with their fraternity names emblazoned on the back, “COBRA” and “SILK.” There were faces he recognized, and some he didn’t -- all the campus’ Desi kids had come out: the Indian kids, the Pakistani kids, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan, the ones who had land to claim and the ones who fell under the label all the same.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“Here,” his father said, handing the paper. “Look at this.”

A video of a couple fighting outside a car at the all-night kabob shop, the one that had knocked into his on the way out of the packed lot. What were their names? The guy, short with slicked back hair, his taller girlfriend enveloping him in her arms until he calmed down. Neither was in a place to exchange information. Several texts requests to DJ parties. Always, the people who wanted to be in the rolodex.

“I’m not going to find a job in there.”

A spoon clanged in the pan, crackling with the hot oil disintegrating some type of root vegetable. “Don’t disrespect your father. If you’re not going to look now, then when?”

Amar humored them, leafing through. Electrician, bookkeeper, customer service. “There’s still time,” he said.

“Yes, yes, time, always time. That’s all you young people think. When there is going to be money, though? Soon you will have to help out here, Amar.”

“Amar, are you listening to me?”

“Would it be so much to give a ring?” his father said.

“I don’t want to wake you up.”

“But it’s just one phone call, nai? Just wait till you are a parent, then you will know.”

What kind of job is this, they said when he first started spinning. They worried about drugs, gangsters, fistfights, the scenes from films they used to build their knowledge of the world over experience. He explained many times the prestige of the job; he wears nice clothes, has a bodyguard (a favorable term over bouncer) all night, and drinking on the job was against the rules.

His mother turns from the stove. “We never did this kind of thing when we were young. We didn’t even get to go out like this, and if we did, it was back home by evening. Our parents knew where we were. And now look, even after they’ve gone, we still can’t escape their nazar.”

His mother’s distaste for anything involving her father left him in a curious spot, one of supposition and unknowing. There was no taking sides on a family battlefield. Perhaps this is what all people are meant to do when they become older. Everyone is always a rebel against their family.

It had always been this way, even when he was growing up. Before, it was the phone calls to India, sporadic and momentous, requiring scheduling and anticipating days in advance with comments like, *Remember to call Jayant. Hope he picks up this time. If he died, how will we know? Maybe that's how he wants it.*

It’s after the call finished that the comments got worse. *Sick man. Cruel man. Why would he be like this? Doesn't he know what we are under here?*

The kindest thing he ever did was leaving. The worst was coming back.

“Mom okay, calm down. It’s just a box.”

That morning, a bundle wrapped in a bundle of layers and layers of plastic was deposited at the ground floor of their apartment building. It was presaged a week prior, with the tiniest fanfare, a letter from a lawyer in Ahmedabad offering the news that his grandfather Jayantilal Baxi had his accounts closed down, his remains cared for, and his soul sent to God. Of his estate, there was little left of any significance to the lawyers and accountants. The rest was all to be sent to America.

His mother finally turned the stove off, stirred the pan and clanged the spoon one more time, before wiping her fingers and turning around.

“Just a box, just a box. If it is just a box, you can keep it then.”

“I’ll look, okay?!”

“Don’t get angry. Don’t get angry.”

His mother slammed the spoon. “Just like his grandfather. Always stubborn.”

Throughout his life, the subject of his grandfather had not come of often, but always with great issue. His mother would receive word of his deteriorating condition, to which she would shrug and sigh, calling him a degenerate who had abandoned his family, saying there was no reason she should care now. There were no outbursts, no shouting matches, no sharpened daggers of emotional guilt. Instead, Amar felt a current of pain, of what it was unclear, that clung to the air like sweat from the brow, too afraid, too constrained, too anxious to drop.

“Sometimes I think his hand has passed over you.”

From the bits and pieces he’d assembled, a lifetime of audible scraps from scornful asides, he knew this much: he’d washed out of a promising legal career and with it, the nest egg Amar’s grandmother, mother, and the unknown brother had needed for them to build their own life. A man too whimsical to hear the dirge of his own fortunes. If only they hadn’t left India, they’d said, would Amar have stayed on the right track. Engineer, doctor. Instead he was a fourth-year senior about to be a fifth, his major shifted three times before settling on, of all things, sociology. He liked how people thought, how cultures wrought, and for that, only because he thought it might give him an edge behind the decks.

“He was always incredibly shrewd about his own things,” his mother said. “Never considered the value of anything beyond how it made him feel. He would take out insurance on a fountain pen if it wrote a color that made him happy.”

After cleaning up the table, he helped his father haul the package up, step by step, grabbing a handle on either side. A classic trunk, lacquered a dry burnt red, with dings and scratches and shorn off corners, held together by worn, cracked leather straps, the kind that Shaan or Dev Anand would lug into a new home, hat-in-hand, grinning at the parents of his bride-to-be. Until then, such care was given only to more heirlooms; gold pendant, gold necklace, gold bangles. Adornments his grandmother had worn once on their wedding day, and perhaps never after that. They moved it during the day while she was still at her shift at the bank, and with nowhere else in the small apartment for such an unusable artifact, it went in Amar’s room.

“Your mom will be awake all night,” his father said, “cursing the damn thing if it’s in our bedroom. Leave it here for now. When I get back from work, we will figure out how to dispose of it.”

“Dispose of it?”

“Yes. I suppose we could do that right now, na? Doesn’t feel right somehow.”

He spent the rest of the day in his room, trying not to mind the package and working on the mix for Kiran’s fusion dance performance.

Kiran had been the catch – he knew because freshman year Indian Students Association had a mehendi nite to kick off the year and she had fetched the most votes for eligible bachelorette. Amar didn't have the money to bid with, and nothing much else to show for it. His first year on campus had been a perpetual freefall crushing on every Desi girl he saw. The taxonomy *femme desidus*, their signature features: blue eye shadow, parted bangs, gold nose or earring, but never both together. the girls that every guy would talk about and wonder why none of them wanted to date them. Girls he'd seen in classes, on Facebook, on aimless wanderings through dorm halls, the diversity of sizes and shapes and hair styles and acceptable levels of makeup of Brown girls, sudden Pygmalions who explored their femininity away from the watchful eyes of parents. The crushes multiplied with each classroom, each more alluring than the next, each an instant Nescafe powder, deep and sweetened, warming.

Practice had gone on late last night. They had secured the stale basement of a dorm hall, the musty wet stink of the carpet masking the sweat of three hours of practice for their routine, backpacks and plastic bags with a change of clothes piled on the side. As the year started, she'd begun avoiding him on campus. But he'd done their mix the year before, and so the arrangement was already set. Kiran was not someone to shy from things she needed.

As she stood in pose, she exhaled in despair at the five girls who stood behind Richa and Gita, who stood behind her, who would be taking over the Sapna fusion dance team at the end of the year. Richa, with a long and cumbersome body she tried to hide in loose fitting clothes. Gita, smaller and ornamented with noserings and a necklace that weighed her neck forward. None of which seemed to muster up to Kiran's standard. She had high standards of course, but that was Kiran, expecting promptness and professionalism, always aware of the eyes of the world on her work. Kiran, whose hair caught red accents, either by genes or dye he wasn't sure, but she was right for him otherwise: right height, right nose, right complexion, hued but reflective. She was at the center after all, and this would be the last living imprint she would leave on the world that had given her the whole identity.

"Hold, hold!" Kiran clapped back to the girls. "I need formation. Did you even look at the video? I recorded every single move."

"The change over is too quick," one girl complained. "I have to get across the stage in three beats." She pointed at Amar, on his ass on the floor in the corner, watching music videos on YouTube.

"We need a break in the middle," Kiran said. "Can you re-edit the track? Amar, look at me." She strode over to where he sat and clapped her hands in his face. "Can you re-edit the track?"

"With what?"

"With, I don't know. Avanshi says more beats to make it across the stage."

"I heard her. That's the beat that it is."

"Maybe you can slow it down or something," Avanshi said.

"That's the song you wanted. I can't change the song."

"Then what do the rest of us do?" Richa said. "Just stand frozen like snowmen?"

They took a break, heading to the rusted fountain to take sips with pursed lips as close as they dared to get them. Some of the girls glowered at Amar, the boyfriend who had the full protection of the dance choreographer, a courtier under the queen.

That's when she decided to break the news, as she filled a water bottle. *I don't know why you have to be so difficult you act like you hate being here like this is some kind of death sentence,*

"I'm just trying to make you look good, baby."

"Make them look good. That's not too much to ask, *na*?"

"Na." He hated these little affectations, these Indian-isms she'd adopted because culture was no currency. For Kiran, life up until that college had been one of the few anonymous Desi girls at junior high, hitting the dean's list and leading the international club despite not having been outside of the country since she was six, when her parents had taken her to India for a distant cousin's wedding. But she had those Asiatic features and the domineering eyes of watchful parents, and though she knew she was pretty she knew it was a valued trait not to be wasted on the all-American archetypes who ranked in the yearbook superlatives. Like the rest of her ilk, she majored in reinvention when she got to the campus, a Facebook profile away from the drooling brown boys who had never seen a girl like the ones their mothers wished for them to marry, wearing fresh make-up and dressing enough to reveal a shoulder or two.

She said she felt that they were already moving in different directions, and that pathway would continue to diverge after graduation. She was headed to med school, where she wouldn't know until the next semester, while he had no prospects planned. He hoped tonight could win her back. She'd see finally, in the perch of a club, what hot shit he was.

He undressed, and dug through the hamper for the button-down Kiran said she liked, the navy one with the small white diamonds. The shirt had a bit of the stink of sweat in it, but luckily none of the pungency from the frying garlic or rye. He'd plug his iPod into the sound system and blast it while squeezing two pumps of the Armani cologne spray into the air and walking through it, doing a little twirl and dance. He'd comb his hair back, making sure that his bangs covered the small, bare spot that had started to form at his head, then shake it all back to a mess, and do it again. He'd lip sync his way through half of another song before.

JAYANT (1938)

Before Jayant had left for law school so many eons ago, before India had birthed itself as Mother, Jayant was merely concerned with his upcoming first battle of examinations, the first of a long war. After the barrier of informative but useless class lessons, he was caught firmly in the pull of memorizing and regurgitating case studies in essay after essay.

These were the pseudo-legends that Jayant had heard on the law school campus, way back then, in between classes when he and his friends would sit under the trees, alleviating sweat from the heat and the lesson. It was during dinner at the canteen some weeks before final exams, between mouthfuls of over-spiced curried potato and stale roti bread, where he again heard murmurs of the sinful rituals that took place outside the walls. Students from the higher classes, those only months away from achieving their law or medical degrees, or certificates in sociology or Sanskrit, made no secret that this was how they spent their nights.

“Three beedis for ten annas!” said his friend Motu.

“Swill booze that gets you drunk in just a few sips!” said his friend Sanjay.

“And oh, the women!” said both.

Jayant was teased and tingled by these notions but never assumed that they would ever resort to going to these places. As newly minted bachelors, they knew little about the world beyond what was administered from their parents. The professors meanwhile had been adamant that classes required hard study, and the hostel supervisor kept a strict watch once the curfew hour passed.

When the exams were finished, and Jayant, Sanjay, and Motu shirked their curfews and parent’s insistence to abide by them, and walked into the cantonment square, taking in the sounds and sights; the drums and flutes of untalented musicians, the ornate floral patterns of the courtesan’s saris.

The few leftover coins they had been given for food and textbooks were spent on the most inebriating drink they could find. Usually it would be a few glasses of bhang, but tonight they had enough to put together to buy a cheap bottle of whisky. They took it to the side of the Sabarmati River and finished off as much as they could, discussing Natal Bihari’s forest of ear hairs, and the deviant things Mr. and Mrs. Chancellor did in private life. They discussed what law they would specialize in, how much dowry they were worth for marriage, how many children they planned to have, how many boys and how many girls, and in which order. Motu revealed his parents meant to marry him off to his cousin as soon as he finished his degree, and he admitted he was clueless at what to do on the wedding night. The other two had very little to offer. None had ever held lasting affection for any woman, aside from the heroines they saw on filmscreens.

The whisky soon emptied, and Motu passed out. Jayant felt Sanjay tug his arm, asking to go to the square. In a daze, he got up with help, and stumbled behind Sanjay, rambling in slur, “Drinking, dice, women...pernicious love of pleasure...”

Jayant looked at a crowd gathered at the south wall, on which the opposite side Jayant knew stood the prison cells of thieves, murderers, and disobedient sepoy.

They had all gathered for a show. British officers, daringly unafraid of the native arts, would always take up the front. Sometimes they would bring their wives or other courted White maidens, seat them on folding wooden chairs, and laugh when they shuddered and asked if they were going to be robbed by a bandit in the dark alleyways.

Sanjay was angered by how they always took the front row view. They would come early and stand in front, and being considerably larger than most Indian men, would block the view of

anyone behind. Once a young Sikh tried to push his way to the front, but a soldier brought a horsewhip down onto his face, and with one lash the creed had been established.

Instead, Sanjay pointed to the stair leading up to the cantonment's parapet. The soldier who usually stood there had migrated down to the show crowd.

"Come on," said Sanjay, and tugged at Jayant's arm.

The words of his teachers throbbed at his brain. Disembodied Bihari spoke to him: "Fraternizing with the enemy? What would Gandhi say? How would Sardar Patel feel, if he saw you with a whiskey bottle?"

Jayant disagreed. "Don't risk it, Sanjay."

A flute rang up from behind the sea of mongrels, and they became louder and more excited. A tabla came alive in staccato beats, like firecrackers exploding inside a clay pot.

Dhak-dhin-dhin-dhak-dhin-dhin-dhak-dhin-dhin-dhadak-dha-dhadak-dha.

The crowd whooped and whistled. One man clapped giddily, and some chuckled with glee. Jayant looked at their backs; day laborers, their unwashed hair and dirt-sodden clothes rubbing against each other.

"Arey, wah!" they cried. "She is something!"

Jayant tried to pry through, sneaking under the larger men and climbing over shorter ones. He bumped into a British officer and said, "excuse me," but the man didn't allow him to pass, and shoved him back. Jayant fell onto the man behind him, who shoved him as well, and he was back outside.

Sanjay stood at the foot of the stair, his eyes large and glancing upward. Jayant met him and they raced up the flight. They crouched behind the stone railing, peered down, and watched:

She was a nautch dancer. Her tiny figure was dwarfed against the grand wall. Her deep black locks were pulled back into braids. The many wide folds of her sari, with intricate cross-hatching of golden threads and small colored beads, compressed around her firm thighs like an accordion. Her face was away from him, but Jayant saw the look on her audience's faces, filled with the relish and savor of sweet chutney.

A soft strum of the sitar her right foot began tapping, and then her left. The tabla once again joined in symphony with her arms, as they lashed out with the fury of the goddess Mata Durga. The tabla beat grew in pace, and she moved faster. Each step with precision and exactness, the tact gestures of her hands unfolding her story – some religious history, an epic battle or the tutelage of a swami, worlds colliding and relationships torn.

Suddenly she whipped around, and the beat resounded with fire and intensity. Her ankle bracelets jingled and added melody. Her arms swayed from left to right, inviting each man into her performance, and they swooned towards her. Her eyes scanned the group, and winked at the officers. She spun and looked up at Jayant hovering above, smiling. He looked down at her from his cold parapet, and suddenly the throng of peddlers and merchants and soldiers and beggars melted away, and he seemed to be the only soul in existence.

Her body twisted like a coiling cobra and she gracefully trotted back and forth across the stage, still looking up at him, her eyes reaching across the darkness. Each blink, each clash of her eyelashes seemed to evaporate from her face and waft into the air, floating over the bazaar, above the stalls and rotting vegetables, past the cart of marigolds and incense, kissing Jayant on his cheek.

Meanwhile, Sanjay had climbed over the railing and was now walking along the precipice. He positioned himself on the ledge, and looked down not at the nautch girl, but two officers sitting in chairs. Jayant moved toward the head of the stair, waiting.

“Hey, duffer!” Jayant whispered. “Come on, come down!”

“Chup!” Sanjay hissed. Quiet. He attempted to put his finger on top of his lips but instead poked his left eye, and swore. He loosened the buttons on his pants and let them drop. Jayant averted his eyes, but he heard the steady stream pour between Sanjay’s legs, and he heard the shrieks of a white lady below, the bellows of her man partner, and then the clack of his boots as he ran around to the stair. Jayant heard the boots pass him, hissing “nigger bastard,” and make his way up to Sanjay, who laughed like an ass as his bare parts hung in sight for the crowd below.

The tabla stopped.

Jayant turned in time to see Sanjay dragged down the stairs by a burly man with a mustache. Another, bald and with even more girth, stood at the bottom, grabbed Sanjay and held him back. The crowd turned their attention from the nautch girl toward the corner in front of the stair. The burly man took out a stiff wooden baton, and stabbed it into Sanjay’s gut.

Jayant shut his eyes intensely, hoping what he had just seen was a whisky-induced hallucination. When he opened them, he was looking directly at the nautch girl, who returned his gaze. She’s wondering what I’m doing up here, like a coward, while my friend is beaten. Sanjay cried again below. Jayant heard *dhak-dhin-dhak-dhin* in his mind.

Then, seized by the curse of heroics instilled in his studies, his film stars, and his hormones, he leapt from the parapet onto the burly man.

But his impact was futile, and he rolled off the man’s back onto the ground next to Sanjay.

The *dhak-dhin* turned into a *thwack*, as the baton came down hard into Jayant’s stomach, and he curled like an infant. Another *thwack* came hard onto his knee, and the pain was so sharp and great he could not muster a sound to show it.

He was beaten with five good, hard swings from a wooden baton.

The British men, satisfied, left him on the ground and took their lady companions away.

Jayant looked at Sanjay, who lay beside him, clutching his stomach.

Jayant looked at the crowd, who shook their heads at his idiocy. Doesn’t this duffer know what is okay?

And Jayant looked at the nautch girl, her body heaving from the dance, eyes full of pity for the stupid boy. His head vibrating from drink and pain, Jayant could make out bare syllables from her voice. With each however, he only heard the beauty and soul possible in some other world, in his past or future, with the heavens and stars all revolving around this Goddess.

The music ramped up again. The crowd had averted their attention back to the nautch dance. Sanjay chuckled to himself, still in the stupor and naked waist-down. For him, the moment of terror had passed without any affection. This was the new India they were meant to usher in, Jayant thought, as the mores of brotherhood slip and drip through the night, along with the puffs of tobacco smoke.

KHUSRO (1285)

Can I begin the story in a happy memory? The years have not been kind, the earth toiled and overturned every season, with new, empty promises of rejuvenation, no sprouting buds or bulbs, but instead another head, another body, falls into the holes left behind.

Let me take you back to Multan as it was in my youth, a vibrant city of two horizons, looking out East and West, inviting all into Hindustan and its treasures. Though I was not a natural born, I arrived in the city in the party of Khan Muhammad, son of Sultan, who'd taken me into India's womb...no, it's beating heart, in the Dilli palace. He had heard of my poetry and wanted me to see a city of the new world – all about there were Hindustanis, Turks, Persians, Arabs. Scholars, traders, craftsmen. We had tumbled into life's vestibule, peering into a deeper cavern of rooms and chambers each with its own secrets.

I was bade for the courts at a young age, a vigor that was noticed first by the housemaid, then by mother following father, and after his death we were taken into our grandfather's home, just down this street. I choose not to follow it now, but my mind traipses down the street, in those days quaint and quiet, an abode for great men with little to consume their time other than sweet meats and sweet thoughts, a perfect environment for a young boy to indulge in larger passions. This city, the bosom that nurtured me toward my first divan, just as grandfather died and as I completed my first divan. But by his grace did I gain entry to the courts where they marveled at this youthful intelligence, a nectar that dripped down my gullet and still feeds me today.

Those were joyous times. The Khan himself was a vibrant fellow. He was a man of war, but I had seen battle myself having served in the army for some time, before my poetry rose me out of the ranks and back to civilian life. Of this there is little to say, only that title and commendation are easy planks to walk across from one station in life to the next. But no matter. Khan Muhammad found a kinship in this, and had me saddled along to bring my wares to the Multan.

But do not think reader, I have not seen the scars violent men have put on this earth. As kings are murdered and deposed, in the order of their successor's choosing. I clung to my pen, retaining my place with eulogy after eulogy, a sword to a dead man's heart, signature of my allegiance. Still my palm can feel the handle of a saber, the drops of blood that ran across the hilt and dripped and mingled with the sweat of a man too afraid of marching further with each new army, each new conquest.

I have always been afraid. It's fear that calls me towards the next couplet, the next divan, however much I might deny it. The phrases that delight the Sultans are curious saplings grown from thick, ornery roots, feasting on the trickles of sweat, of blood, of love and passion and loss. It was only after Multan, after losing my beloved Prince Muhammad, that fear could not guide me towards new pages.

The days turned nefarious in Multan, the sky holding its clouds high above our heads but never quite leveling its hand upon our cheeks with rain. It holds them there, disciplined, quiet, keeping us in a morose fearful state, however this may just be your own thinking, Khusro.

Muhammad-din has been killed, the regiment officer reported to you, and it is time to pack up the battalion's encampment and head back to Dilli. You've been in your depression since the news came so sudden this morning, or was it yesterday? The night has stretched interminably, though

this is the one saving grace of your new rattled state of mind. It is better to live in this untamed field between citadels, far from civilization on either end, lost in poppies and dried grass, the earth which will soon devour Muhammad's body. What will happen to his face, that rich silken face, ripened with the glow of a prince's upbringing, the beckoned hands of servants and ladies in waiting, your sweet Muhammad, who beckoned you himself to this city? He told you so much of the vibrant culture it offered? When you arrived you were welcomed by Hindustanis, Turks, Persians, Arabs. Scholars, traders, craftsmen. Your peers in skill and scholarship, willing to spend those late nights over wine and dance to discuss life's true questions of being and super being, of Earth and Allah. These topics bored Muhammad so, but oh he would sit with you and abide for those few treasured moments before returning back to his quarters where more carnal pleasures were waiting.

Oh Muhammad, you cry - we had tumbled into life's vestibule, peering into a deeper cavern of rooms and chambers each with its own secrets. He was young and eager to please, caught between you and his father, who had great designs on him, and he in turn for himself. There were lands to conquer and people to bring into the folds of the Empire. And there, you would be to see it all, a companion of war, a Krishna to Arjun, disposing small baubles of wisdom, what wisdom you could claim, for him practice. To restrain his disciplined blade before it befell the throats and bellies of what small prey it could find in the edges of Hindustan.

Some years go by and the Sultans change. When you arrived back from Multan, how you wept in the Qutb Shah's arms, the both of you for his bludgeoned son! How he held your cheeks asking if your capture had not been too savage, and if it had been, what a siege would be awaiting the Mongols next time. There was an endearment beyond your pay and a measure of compassion beyond your heart.

Then Jalaluddin, the poor man who ascended the throne just as his beard had taken full body, shocked into ivory white. What bloodlust or zeal for conquering he had was behind him. Instead he sent his nephew, younger and more virile, stricken with the ailment of not loving war as did his fathers and brothers.

It was then that Auliya's maidan offered some peace, finally. The quiet green, so far outside beloved Dilli, gave my space to think. He spoke of God being one above all, and we as mere vessels to communicate his energy. Only again to have him question my resolve, to shake the sapling loose with his teachings of higher worthiness. He asked, could you do it Khusrau? Could you find your way to give up the adoration they place on you, and pass it on to his holiness? Could I, Auliya? When Muhammad only found his wrath from the arms of another disciple?

No, this is not a happy memory after all. With enough time, they rarely stay that way. We mustn't think too deeply, only richly. Savor the moments, for the story itself will not be kind to you.