Husna needed a job. She stole up the long drive to the Lahore house of the retired civil servant and landlord K. K. Harouni, bearing in her lacquered fingers a letter of introduction from, of all people, his estranged wife. The butler, knowing that Husna served the old Begum Harouni in an indefinite capacity, somewhere between maidservant and companion, did not seat her in the living room. Instead, he put her in the office of the secretary, Shah Sahib, who every afternoon took down in shorthand a few pages of Mr. Harouni’s memoirs, cautiously titled “Perhaps This Happened.”

Ushered into the living room by the secretary after a quarter of an hour, Husna gazed around her, as petitioners do, more tense than curious, taking in the worn gold brocade on the sofa, a large Chinese painting of horsemen over the rosewood mantel. Her attention was drawn to ranks of
black-and-white photographs in silver frames—hunters in shooting caps, posing with strings of birds or piles of game; women in saris, their hair piled high in the style of the fifties, one in riding breeches, with an oversized dedication in looping script. To one side stood a photo of a youthful Harouni in a receiving line shaking the hand of Jawaharlal Nehru.

The door opened, and Mr. Harouni walked in, a mild look on his handsome golden face. Placing a file on the table in front of him, Shah Sahib flipped through the pages and showed the old man where to sign, murmuring, “Begum Sahib has sent this young miss with a letter, sir.”

Although he had an excellent memory, and knew the lineage of all the old Lahore families, K.K. allowed Husna to explain in detail her relationship to him, which derived from his grandmother on his mother’s side. The senior branch of the family had consolidated its lands and amassed power under the British. Husna’s family, a cadet branch, had not so much fallen into poverty as failed to rise. At one time, her grandfather had owned thirty or forty shops in the Old City, but these had been sold off more than thirty years ago, before Lahore grew, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, and prices increased. Encouraged by K.K., given tea and cakes, Husna forgot herself, falling into the common, rich Punjabi of the inner city. She told with great emphasis a story about her mother, who remembered falling and breaking her teeth on the steps leading into the courtyard of a lost family home, steps that were tall and broad to accommodate the enormous tread of a riding elephant.

Finishing the tale, Husna was silent for a moment, then narrowed her eyes, collecting herself. “In this world, some families rise and some fall,” she said. “And now I’ve come to you for help. I’m poor and need a job. Even Begum Harouni agrees that I should have a profession. My father can give me nothing—he’s weak and has lost his connections. Everyone says I should marry, but I won’t.”

Outside the living room, which overlooked a side patio, a gardener switched on the yard lights, illuminating a concrete swimming pool half filled with rainwater and leaves. A servant entered the room with an armload of wood, threw it with a crash into the fireplace, then took a bottle of kerosene and poured a liberal splash. He tossed in a match, and the fire roared up. For a moment, he rested on his haunches by the fire, grave before this immemorial mystery, then rose, breaking the spell, and left the room.

A car drove up the circular driveway. A few minutes later, an elderly couple entered the room. Kissing Harouni on the cheek, the woman said in a smoky voice, “Hello, darling.” The man, gray

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/12/01/in-other-rooms-other-wonders
beside his brightly dressed companion, his mustache trimmed, waited to one side.

“Hello, Riffat,” Harouni said, kissing her on the top of her head and then going over to the wall and pressing a bell. “Will you have a drink, Husky?”

The man glanced at his wife. “I’ll have a small whiskey.”

The visitor wore a pinkish kurta, too young for her but certainly very expensive, finely printed with a silver design. She eyed Husna, as if pricing her.

“This is Husna,” K.K. said to the woman, who had taken a seat on the sofa beside the girl. “Husna has recently graduated and is looking to find some useful work.”

“How interesting,” the woman said.

They had been speaking in English, and Husna exposed her poor accent, saying, “It is very good to meet you.”

Two servants carried in a tea trolley and placed it before the newcomer. The butler, Rafik, brought two whiskies on a small silver tray.

“Cheers,” Husky said, taking a sip and very slightly smacking his lips. “How nice to have a fire.”

Riffat Begum poured out tea, offering to refill Husna’s cup. The conversation wandered, and Riffat looked meaningfully at Husna once or twice. When she went out in society with Begum Harouni, Husna was not a guest, not even really a presence, but a recourse for the old lady, to fetch and carry, to stay beside her so that the begum would not be left alone. Unable now to meet the occasion, Husna followed the conversation from face to face, the skin around her mouth taut, as if frozen. Abruptly, she stood up, catching a foot on the tea trolley.

“Thank you, Uncle, for your help and your kind advice,” she said, although K.K. had given her no advice whatsoever. She meant this as an opening to him, at least as a reproach.

“Let me have the car drop you.” He followed Husna onto the veranda while the driver brought the car. “First of all, you need to develop some skills,” he said. “Why don’t you learn to type? Come tomorrow, and I’ll arrange for Shah Sahib to give you lessons.”

As she got in the car, he gave her a fatherly kiss on the cheek.
When he returned to the living room, Riffat raised an eyebrow and pursed her lips. “Naughty, naughty,” she said, exhaling a cloud of cigarette smoke.

K.K. took a sip of whiskey. “At my age, my dear, she’s in no danger.”

Husna came every few days for typing lessons. She would sit in the dark office off the living room, inconveniencing Shah Sahib, who could not continue his own work until she had abandoned her weak efforts. He tried to show her the correct technique, but she refused to learn, and insisted upon typing by hunt and peck, getting through her half page as quickly as possible. One of the servants would bring her a cup of tea, which she drank with Shah Sahib, who also at that time received two slices of grilled-cheese toast, a treat that made his stomach growl, and one that he insured by being of service to the cook, passing his bills without question.

K. K. Harouni, who had been a polo and tennis player until he suffered a heart attack, seven years earlier, took a walk morning and evening, totalling exactly four miles each day. Usually, he went from one end of the serpentine back garden to the other, but a few days after Husna began her lessons a winter rain wet the grass. Vaguely diverted by the break in routine, that evening he walked on the brick-paved front driveway instead, looping around the circular lawn and through a carport in which a misplaced glass chandelier cast a friendly yellow light.

At dusk, he heard a rickshaw enter the drive and park at the far end, next to the gatekeeper’s shelter, its two-stroke engine crackling. After a moment, a figure stepped from the door of the secretary’s office and tripped rapidly down toward the gate. Lengthening his stride, K.K. came up behind her.

“Hello, Husna,” he said.

She stopped and turned. As she had the first day, she wore too much makeup and clothes that were too bright. She carried her large white purse on a long chain over one shoulder, and had covered her hair with a dupatta. “Hello, Uncle,” she said, her face involuntarily stretching into a broad smile.

“You’re very cheerful. And how are your lessons?”

“Thank you, Uncle,” she said.

“Why don’t you walk with me?”
“My ride is waiting.” She spoke timidly, for she felt ashamed to be seen taking a rickshaw, which only the lower classes used.

“Tell him to go, and later the driver can take you.”

They began walking, Husna taking two strides to every one of his, clicking along in her heels. Her feet began to hurt, and whenever they came to a puddle he would step aside and allow her to go first, so that she had to hurry awkwardly in front of him.

“Those shoes aren’t good for walking,” he said, looking at her from behind as she skirted a puddle. “Your feet are hurting, aren’t they?”

“No, it’s fine, really it is.” She didn’t want to lose this chance of his company.

“Why don’t you take them off? Don’t be shy, there’s no one here.”

“You’re joking with me, Uncle.”

Hesitating for a moment, she reached down and undid the straps, her hand resting tentatively on his shoulder.

When they came to the next puddle, he stopped, amused. “And now that you’re barefoot let’s see you jump over the puddle.”

Quickening, she glanced at him sideways, still a girl at twenty, still playing tag with her cousins in the courtyard of her parents’ home, and yet aware of men’s eyes flickering over her as she walked through the lanes of the Old City.

He took her hand and swung it. “One, two, three—over you go!”

She leaped, landing just at the edge and splashing.

“Try again, the next one!” he urged, and she jumped, clearing the puddle, then turned to face him, laughing.

“Well done! I’ve had ponies that couldn’t do as well.”

“Now you are joking with me.”
Rafik came out of the house and reported a telephone call from K.K.’s youngest daughter, Sarwat, who was married to a tremendously wealthy industrialist and lived in Karachi. K.K. went inside, walking unhurriedly, and Husna sat down in one of the chairs placed on the veranda for the petitioners who came each morning, asking the old man for letters to government officials or for work on his farms.

Rafik stood next to her, relaxed, looking out into the night. He glanced at her bare feet but made no comment.

“So, Husna Bibi,” he said, “how are the good people over at Bari Begum Sahib’s house? How is Chacha Latif?”

Chacha Latif played the corresponding role of butler in the house of K.K.’s estranged wife, and Rafik maintained cordial relations with him. As a matter of comity, they kept each other informed of household gossip.

Understanding this oblique reference to the fact that Chacha Latif treated her with little ceremony, as an equal, Husna sweetly replied, “He’s well, Uncle, thank you.”

Riding home in K.K.’s large, if old, car, looking at the back of the chauffeur’s immense head, Husna let her complex thoughts drift along several lines. Given to fits of crushing gray lassitude and then to brimming moments that approached hysteria, in the latter moods she knew that she would escape the gloominess of her parents’ house. She would escape the bare concrete steps, layered with dust, that led up into rooms without windows, the walls painted lurid, glossy colors, as if to make up for the dreariness, the television covered with an embroidered cloth. She had spoiled herself with daydreams, until her parents were afraid of her moods. She despised them for living so much in the past, for retelling the stories of their grandparents’ land and money, and yet at the same time she felt entitled to rejoin that world and nursed a grievance at being excluded from it, except as a paid companion to an old woman. Taking service in an ambiguous position with Begum Harouni was the greatest concession she had ever made to her mediocre prospects, and making this concession had only increased her determination to rise, although she had no idea how to go about it.

Husna knew that she could never hope to attract or marry a young man from one of the rich established families. Wearing clothes only slightly better than those of a maidservant, she saw from a distance the young men at the weddings to which she accompanied Begum Harouni. At that time,
the old barons still dominated the government, the Prime Minister a huge feudal landowner. Their sons, at least the quick ones, the adapted ones, became ministers at thirty, immaculate, familiar with their elders, blowing through dull parties, on their way to somewhere else, to cool rooms where ice and alcohol glowed on the table, rooms where deals were made; she imagined them gliding through foreign airports, at ease in the European cities that she only read about. She would even have sought a place in the demimonde of singers and film actresses, bright and dangerous creatures from poor backgrounds, but she had neither talent nor beauty. Only determination and cunning distinguished her, invisible qualities.

The chauffeur, knowing without being told that Husna would not wish to be seen going home late at night in the old man’s car, dropped her just inside the gate of the house in fashionable Gulberg. K.K. had given this house to his wife when, finally and uncharacteristically, he made a firm decision and told her she had to leave. She had been married by arrangement to K.K., her first cousin, at seventeen, and had soon been eclipsed as he moved into the larger world of the Indian Civil Service, a world defined by English mores and manners. Unable to keep Harouni’s attention, barely out of purdah, Begum Harouni had tried amulets, philtres, spells—he joked to his friends that she would end up poisoning him by accident. But one day she came onto the veranda, where he was having tea with a lady friend and innocently playing rummy. She stood, her back humped, spitting in Punjabi, “Leave my house, leave my husband alone, you witch!” And Harouni’s friend, a convent-schooled society woman who barely spoke Punjabi and had only a vague idea who this old lady might be, kept asking, “But what’s she saying, K.K.? Should I leave?” He had not, however, divorced his wife, having no intention of remarrying and no desire to humiliate her. Old Begum Harouni thereafter lived in a state of suspended equilibrium, hoping to be recalled to her husband’s side.

Husna cautiously walked up the straight, long drive, bordered with bougainvillea and jasmine. She went to the back, where the servants lay under blankets in the courtyard, and slipped through an open door, through the filthy kitchen, which smelled of garlic and curry, and into the heavily carpeted dining room. Over the fireplace, which had not been lit in years, she saw her face in a mirror. The irregularity of her features, her straight, dry hair, her small mouth, all caused her to cringe inwardly and suddenly to feel vulnerable. She felt the immensity of her encounter with K. K. Harouni. The old lady didn’t wake, but just before dawn she called Husna, saying that she couldn’t sleep, and told the girl to massage her legs.

Husna continued going for lessons, and thrice in the next weeks walked with K.K., who then sent her home in the car. She tried to limit these encounters, fearing that Begum Harouni
would discover the growing relationship and send her away, back to her parents. On the days when she allowed herself to see him, Husna would stay in the office after the secretary left, gazing out of a window that overlooked the long garden where K.K. walked. She didn't read, but sat at the desk surrounded by books in both English and Urdu, her chin resting on her hands. She did not even plan but floated through images, for she did not plan her movements.

Whenever she saw a girl her age stepping from a large new car among the expensive shops in Liberty Market, or glittering in a pair of diamond drops at a wedding, Husna's mind would hang like a swaying fruit on these symbols of wealth, not letting go for hours. She sensed that all this might come to her through Harouni, if she were to become his mistress. In the Old City, where she grew up, the neighborhood pointed with shaming fingers at women from less than respectable families who were kept by merchants. The eyes of these creatures glided over the crowd as they rode on tongas, emerging untouched from dark streets where sewage flowed in the uncovered gutters, as prominent as targets in brightest-red silk, lipstick, gold. Husna's mother ground out remarks about the price to be paid: broken family relations, broken old age.

The girl's fear of Harouni had dissipated, and she began to let herself be seen as she was—critical, quick-witted, sensual, and slightly crude. Not despite but because of his sophistication, he found her manner piquant. She did not behave or speak in the way of the women he normally met, for she had always inhabited an indefinite space, neither rich nor poor, neither servant nor begum, in a city where the very concept of a middle class still found expression in only a few households, among managers of banks and of big industrial concerns—sugar and textiles and steel. As a boy, Harouni had slept with maidservants, lost his virginity to one of them at fourteen. Husna evoked those ripe first encounters.

Six weeks after Husna's initial walk with K.K., Begum Harouni announced a pilgrimage to the Holy Places, in order to perform the *umrah*. Husna decided to bring the begum's impending departure into the conversation with Harouni that afternoon, before any guests arrived and interrupted them.

When Rafik brought afternoon tea into the living room, K.K. could hear the typewriter clacking in the background. It stopped, and then Husna knocked. She opened the door, showing her head without entering.

“Come in, my dear.”
Husna's cultivation of Rak had progressed to the point where he included an extra cup on the tea trolley. She drew herself forward and made K.K.'s tea exactly as he liked it. A boy passed a plate of biscuits, while Rak stood back on his heels by the door.

“When I'm here,” Husna said, “everything is so nice and everyone is pleasant. These biscuits, the tea. Shah Sahib tries so hard to teach me the typing, though I can't seem to learn.” She held out her hands and spread her fingers in front of him, like a cat stretching. “My hands are so tiny, I can't reach the keys. But then all of me is small.”

She wore a tight kurta, showing the cleft of her breasts, which jutted out from her muscular youthful torso. Their eyes met; they both saw the joke, and he allowed himself a tight-lipped smile, his composed expression becoming avid and boyish.

“That's what I've been telling you about,” Husna purred, putting her hand on his arm. “Your crocodile smile, the one I like.”

After pausing for a moment, she lowered her eyes and said in a meek voice, “But soon I won't be able to come here. The begum is going on umrah, so I'll have to be in charge of her house.”

“Not umrah again!” K.K. said. “It's becoming a vice with her. But, darling, don't be ridiculous. If she's away, you can come even more regularly.”

“When the begum is gone, they don't cook any food at all, just the servants' food. I sometimes go into the bazaar to eat. And Begum Sahib doesn't like me to use the electricity.”

“You poor thing,” K.K. said. “And you ask so little.”

Husna's eyes became moist. “Yesterday, Begum Sahib had gone out when I got back to the house, and she had locked all the doors and taken the keys with her. I stood under the trees in front for three hours. And if I eat anything from the refrigerator she becomes angry at me. And when she's gone on umrah the servants will take liberties—they'll make jokes and want me to sit with them. She won't leave me any money.” She wiped her eyes with her dupatta, head cast down. “When Begum Sahib is harsh, what can I do?”

“Come, little one,” K.K. said, patting the sofa next to him. “Come sit here. Don't cry.” K. K. Harouni avoided unpleasantness at all costs, for he lived in a world as measured and as concentric as that of the Sun King at Versailles. He did not like to see her cry, because it upset him. She slipped under his arm, still tearful but muffling her face in his sweater. He stroked her hair.
“Now, stop,” he said. “Why don’t you come stay here while the begum is on umrah? I’ll have them fix up the rooms in the annex.”

Husna looked out from under her eyelashes and smiled weakly. “Oh, I would like that too much. Then I could keep you company when you’re alone and make your tea for you. And I would practice typing every day for a long time.”

K.K. cared nothing for what his wife or the servants thought. He ordered the servants to prepare the annex, a suite of rooms built over some garages at the far side of the compound. The rooms had been refurbished several years earlier, when important guests from India had come for a long stay, and so Husna would live in better quarters than ever before in her life, with uninterrupted supplies of good food, servants who more or less did her bidding, and the occasional use of a car. To Husna it felt like a validation, almost like revenge, and yet with the bitterness of triumph after humiliation.

She simply disappeared from the house in Gulberg. Begum Harouni learned of her departure from the servants. The old lady stormed over to see her husband but found him impervious to her outrage.

“I’ll never take that little . . . thing back into my house,” Begum Harouni said. “Imagine! I picked her from the dirt, from nothing, and I fed and clothed her.”

“It reflects well upon you, my dear,” K.K. responded placidly.

Husna brought her shabby luggage to the house on Aikman Road, a brown suitcase, bulging and strapped. She had clothes and shoes, not much else, had arrived in a rickshaw—the facts soon transmitted through the house by the snickering community of washermen, drivers, sweepers, household servants. After Begum Harouni had gone on the pilgrimage, Husna asked K.K. for the use of the car and went back to the old lady’s house. At first, Chacha Latif would not let her in, but Husna raised her voice and became abusive, and the butler, knowing that she might later be in a position to injure him, let her do what she wanted. All the closets had been locked, but she found a few of her things—a pile of Indian movie magazines, a little dish with an image of the Eiffel Tower that her grandfather had brought home from a European tour in the nineteen-twenties. When she went out, she discovered K.K.’s driver speaking with Chacha Latif.

“What does he say?” Husna said to the driver as they returned along Aikman Road, driving in and out of the shade cast by flame-of-the-forest trees planted a hundred years ago.
“Nothing, Bibi,” the driver said.

“Nothing? Not anything at all?” Husna replied, speaking in sharp Punjabi. And then, leaning back in the seat, she added, “You drivers are always the clever ones.”

A week after she moved into the annex, Husna slept with K. K. Harouni. He had visitors for lunch, an old Civil Service friend, a retired State Bank governor, and his cousin the retired General Karim, along with their wives. They ate in the room known as the black veranda, its French doors shaded by a pipal tree and overlooking a side garden. Already, in early April, the ceiling fans barely kept the room cool. Husna remained in the annex, trying to read a dull and badly printed history of the Sikh Wars, in which K.K.’s ancestors had fought. Though she wanted to make herself interesting to the old man by reading serious books, she never finished what she began, lapsing instead into daydreams or turning to old fashion magazines that she bought from a secondhand-book stall. A servant boy brought her a tray of food, the same food that the cook was serving to K.K. and his guests.

From her perch in the rooms above the garage, Husna watched the guests emerge into the portico and continue speaking to Harouni for what seemed an interminable period before driving away. Soon afterward, a servant came to ask Husna if she would join Harouni for tea in the garden. She walked past the formal dining room and along a corridor hung with darkened portraits of his ancestors. She felt intimidated by this house, by its heavy gloomy air, which contrasted with K.K.’s easy manner, and she looked almost uncomprehendingly upon the strange objects scattered about—the ivory scabbard of a Chinese sword, a carved walnut loveseat from Kashmir, numerous brass and copper figurines of Hindu gods. The house smelled of dusty carpets and disinfectant and wood polish. K.K. was sitting under a tree in a railway chair, with two cups of tea on a table.

“Hello, girl,” he said, pleased to see her, fed and mellow. “How lovely it is.” Old trees were scattered around the receding lawn, creating areas of shade where the grass wouldn’t grow. A row of mulberry trees just ripening at the far end attracted sugar-sipping bees with their purple berries hanging from branches and littering the ground. In the bleached sky, kites and vultures wheeled at a great height on the afternoon thermals, as if the sky itself were slowly turning.

Draining the tea, he said, “Well, my dear, it’s time for my rest.”

“Let me massage you, Uncle,” she suggested, blushing. Though her ambition always tolled in the background, she had come to respect him, for his unstudied fairness, his gaiety, his integrity and
openness, which was as plain and light and valuable as a metal unknown in her world. She wanted to keep her part of the bargain, and had only herself to give. It hurt her that it was so little; she imagined that her body, her virtue meant almost nothing to her.

She followed him into his bedroom. Rafik had already closed the curtains and laid out K.K.’s pajamas.

“You needn't wake me,” he said to Rafik, who stood by the door and who knew very well the routine to be observed on such an afternoon.

Of course she was a virgin, and that touched him. Letting him do exactly as he wanted, she wore a look in her eyes that he mistook for surprise and shyness, and later identified with moods that verged on madness—sequences of perplexity and focus, expressing a hooded rage. She had expected this to be as simple as the signing of a check, a payment. Instead, for a moment the romantic girl awoke, one who might have accepted another man, a man her own age, from her own station.

Goodbye to the life she would never have, economies that she would never make as she cooked and kept house for a clerking husband in the Old City; goodbye to the boys who might have accepted her hand. She might have gone away with that young husband, might have moved out to the new suburbs of Lahore—the ones by the airport, their grids of streets laid out in wheat fields or untended orchards, no houses yet built. The moment meant a great deal to her, but not in the way that Harouni understood it. Without meaning to, she had given herself completely. She could pretend later to be a virgin—or someone might take her even knowing that she wasn't. Marriages could always be arranged, it was always a bargain, a deal. But she knew then that she wouldn't have another man, because any man after this would have to be a compromise, a salary man.

When he had no guests, K.K. ate lunch with Husna. Rafik served with care, offering the dishes from the left, removing plates from the right, the napkins starched and arranged like fans by the plates. Now, in May, the air-conditioning had been turned on. In the dining room, the coolest room in the house, Husna felt the most intimidated. She sat at K.K.’s right, at the end of the long table that could seat eighteen, and spoke little. She had learned which utensils to use, but still did not use them gracefully. K.K. chewed his food exactly ten times before swallowing.

One afternoon, as Rafik brought in a cheese soufflé, a car drove up to the house. K.K. had his back to the window and did not turn. They heard the creaking of the carved swinging doors, taken from
K.K.’s ancestral home in the Old City, and then the visitor, a middle-aged woman, pushed into the dining room.

“Hello, Daddy,” she said. “Isn’t this cozy!” She had a tinkling laugh, which, while it did not seem entirely genuine, had a musicality that caused the hearer to join her in a heightened response, like a painting that one knows to be good, although one is unmoved by it.

K.K. rose, seeming suddenly frail and old, and kissed his youngest daughter, Sarwat, on the forehead.

“Hello, darling. When did you get in?”

“Just now, on the eleven-o’clock flight. I’m here because Pinky’s daughter got secretly engaged. Don’t ask!”

They sat down, and so did Husna, who had also risen.

“This is Husna,” K.K. said, “Mian Nasiruddin’s daughter.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Sarwat said maliciously, looking not at Husna’s face but at her body. “I met her at Mummy’s.”

Rafik brought in a mat and laid a place for Sarwat. “Good Lord, Rafik,” she commented, rearranging the cutlery. “You’re getting even fatter.”

Sarwat settled back into her chair. She wore an understated tan sari, a gold watch, and several unusual rings—a star sapphire and a Burmese pigeon-blood ruby. Her salt-and-pepper hair, arranged in a high chignon, lengthened her still beautiful face; and her slender groomed body suggested lotions and expensive soaps, a hairdresser and a masseuse, idleness and ease. Even at fifty, she had admirers, and it had become a convention among the circle in which she moved to speak of her lovely gray eyes.

“I am very glad to see you again,” Husna said.

Sarwat looked down at the girl with a wolfish grin, almost spoke, then turned to her father. “You look well, Daddy.”

He had resumed eating and, with his mouth full, raised a fork, as if to say, You can see for yourself.
“Tell me, what do you know about the Talpur boy, the son of Bilqis Talpur? Mumtaz went off and got engaged to him, and Pinky’s absolutely livid. That’s why she called me here. I can only stay for a minute—I told her I’d be at her house just after lunch.”

K.K., who took these matters seriously, put down his fork. “I spent time with his grandfather when I was posted to Layyah. The old man had a bit of a temper, and of course you know about the father. You should speak to Wali—the boy was at Aitchison with him, a year before or a year after.”

Husna broke in. “He is very handsome.”

Sarwat looked at her in amazement, as if the furniture had spoken. “Tell me about the land,” she said to her father.

“It’s good land, on the river. The family used to hold a big parcel near the city, and that would be enormously valuable.” He looked at her, raising a warning eyebrow. “But then they say that Jano spent the last thirty years drinking it away.”

Finishing the meal, they rose to have green tea in the living room.

As they stood, Sarwat said to Husna, “I’d like to be alone with my father, please.”

K. followed Sarwat into the living room. She sat down on a sofa and tucked her feet under her, leaning against a large pillow. “Really, Daddy,” she began. “I can imagine keeping her around, but to sit and have lunch with her, that’s too much. You’re becoming eccentric, you really are.”

“She comes from a good family,” K.K. said. “Her great-grandfather owned more land than yours. But for a few twists of fate, she might be in your place, and we might be living still in the Old City.”

“But we’re not,” Sarwat said. “That’s the point, we’re not.” She tried another tack. “And what can you possibly find to say to her? Sheherezad told me she came for tea the other day, and this unfortunate little thing sat without saying a word, just listening, like a frog in the corner. It’s indecent.”

“She, too, would have wished for your advantages, my dear, your schools and clothes and friends and property.”

“Please, Daddy. I doubt if this is a humanitarian mission.”
“And I’m lonely, Sarwat. You’re in Karachi, Kamila is in New York, and Rehana has barely spoken to me in all the ten years that your mother’s been living apart. My friends are dying off or don’t go out anymore. She keeps me company. She’s no genius, if you like, but she can play cards and so on. Why don’t you spend more time in Lahore? You have a lovely house here, and friends. I would much prefer to see you than her, but you’re not here.”

“What about Riffat or one of your other old girlfriends? Why choose someone like this? She’s neither pretty nor presentable.”

“At my age, what I need is companionship, and Husna can give that to me. Riffat can only come for tea or for a few hours, but Husna is here whenever I need her.”

They sat in silence, neither satisfied with the other. After a few moments, Sarwat put down her cup. “Daddy, I must go. I’ll come this evening. Please, at least tell her not to come out when I’m here.”

That afternoon, when Husna entered his room, summoned from the annex, K.K. felt abashed. Irresistibly drawn to the one subject that he wished to avoid, he said, “It’s wonderful to see Sarwat. I hope you and she will get to know each other.” He had been sitting on the edge of the bed, and now he rolled over, tucked himself under the sheet, and put a black mask over his eyes, to screen out the light.

Snarling, her face contorted, Husna exploded. “She’s mean and rude and a nasty old stick besides. Why don’t you get her to come live in the annex and play cards with you and make your tea?”

“I can’t have you speaking like this,” K.K. said, removing the mask, his face drawn and imposing. “You’re upsetting me.” He spoke in a measured voice. “You’ve upset me.”

“I’m leaving this house,” she said, standing up on the bed, looking down at him. “I gave you everything I had, but you give me nothing in return. I have feelings, too. I’m human. She made me feel like dirt, and you didn’t say anything to stop her.” She began to cry hysterically, and when he sat up and tried to touch her leg she shrieked and stepped back. “Even the servants here treat me as if I’m nothing. When I ask for things, they tell me that they don’t have time. I have to crawl even in front of them. Yesterday, Hassan swore at me.” Husna had been waiting for some concrete provocation and had pounced when Hassan, in his habitual foul temper, called her a bitch under his breath.
“I’ll speak with him,” K.K. said. “Now, stop. You know the doctor’s orders. Do you want me to have another heart attack?”

She dared push him no further, and so gradually became quiet. She lay down on the bed, though she wouldn't get under the covers.

When K.K. woke, Husna said, “Talk to Hassan now. I won’t stand the servants’ treatment of me anymore.” Knowing she couldn’t yet win the larger battle against Sarwat, she wanted at least to consolidate her smaller gains. She insisted that K.K. speak to Hassan in front of her, though he would have preferred not to humiliate the old servant.

The grizzled cook stood with his shoes off, having left them at the door, and with his lambskin hat clutched in his hand. He looked down at the floor, at his splayed bare feet planted on the polished rosewood parquet. Rafik waited by the door.

“Bibi says that yesterday you swore at her.”

“Yes, sir,” the old cook said. “I mean, no, sir.”

“Well Hassan, did you or didn’t you?”

“No, sir.”

Husna became shrill. “I asked him not to put chilies in the omelette, and he swore at me. Ask the sweeperess, she heard.”

Hassan looked at her squarely. “You and the sweeperess together.”

“You can go,” Harouni said, not raising his voice.

When Hassan had left, Harouni said to Rafik, who had been impassively watching this performance, “See that this doesn’t happen anymore.”

While she knew that now the servants would be decided against her, Husna felt she could afford their ill will, for her position in the household was growing stronger daily. The attitude of the servants changed after Rafik gave them the word. Only a few, the old ones, covered their insolence with glacial politeness, while the younger ones became either servile or friendly to the point of taking liberties, thinking thereby to win her favor.
Husna began to enjoy the advantages of her new position. The secretary, Shah Sahib, handled the household accounts, writing up all the expenses in a complicated double-entry bookkeeping system, so complicated, in fact, that K.K. couldn't and wouldn't take the trouble to understand it. For years, the books had been larded with excessive expenses. The drivers, Hassan, Rafik, all those who handled money, lavishly inflated the bills that they submitted. After Husna had a few times complained of not having money, of wearing torn clothes and broken-heeled shoes, K.K. instructed that she be given a tiny allowance. In old age he had become tightfisted, although the household hemorrhaged money, and he spent two or three hundred thousand rupees a month without knowing where it went. Shah Sahib soon enlisted Husna in his system, since he didn't want her to begin making inquiries, and so her allowance grew larger and larger each month, inflated in various ingenious ways.

She bought herself clothes, even small bits of gold jewelry. In her rooms she kept one and then two locked steel trunks, which she filled with everything from raw silk to electric sandwich-makers. She would come to K.K. with some special request, wanting to buy something, and he would ultimately agree. She wheedled, petted him, became frosty, became nice. Giving in, he would be unable to look her in the eye. She said to him, speaking plainly, “Scratch a man and find a boy.”

A few of K.K.’s old gentleman friends, retired and retiring landowners with courtly Punjabi manners, came to the decision that they had no reason to isolate the girl. They called her “daughter” and looked forward to her lively, flirtatious company. Among this group, who in old age constituted K.K.’s closest friends, he had always been the fast one, the sportsman and the lover. They envied him the possession of Husna, while at the same time being mildly relieved on returning to their lugubrious homes after a few hours in her company. Her striving wore on them. She attered them, asked about their harmless projects—a Union of Punjabi Landowners, a pipe-dream society for tort reform—and so wielded them into a circle, with herself at the center. She teased them; sitting by Harouni’s side during bridge games, she would try to peek at his opponents’ cards. Playing rummy for small stakes with whoever was the dummy in the bridge game, she cheated, and, when caught, laughed and denied it.

The air-conditioner in the annex didn’t work properly, and on that pretext Husna moved into a study adjoining the master bedroom. She did not stay the entire night with K.K., but invariably withdrew to her own room, saying that his tossing disturbed her. Once in her own room, she would take sleeping pills, occasionally a double dose—a game that she played against herself,
sinking almost too far into sleep. In the morning, sometimes she didn't answer when the servant knocked at her door, and then K.K. would himself come and shake her, wearing his pajamas and an old silk robe. He would look down at her sleeping face, cleansed of all ambition and anxiety and spite, qualities that he forgave her because he felt that the conditions into which he had thrust her drew them out. Seeing her asleep, he sometimes thought that he loved her, loved her brightness in these last years of his life, when he had become so lonely. General Hadayatullah, the retired chief medical officer of the Army, had told K.K. that his heart might carry him away at any moment. K.K. feared death with the terror of a perfectly rational man who took no comfort in religion and knew death to be his final end. He wanted so much to live!

Gradually, Husna would wake.

“Suppose something happened to me in the night?” K.K. would ask as she sipped her tea, lying in bed, her face drained and pale. She looked prettiest then, emerging from her drugged sleep, erased.

She would cry and ask him not to speak of such things, and at those moments he felt that she, too, genuinely loved him, something that he often doubted, despite her professions of love. He craved her presence and reproached himself with a phrase that he once even repeated to her: Too old to be roused by pleasure, I seek pain.

In August, the monsoons broke. The rains came up from India, washing the Himalayas, filling the rivers of the Punjab, pouring down water on the Hindu Kush and on the plain that extends from the Khyber to Karachi. In the gardens outside K.K.’s room, crows sat bedraggled in the dripping branches of ancient trees, and the lawns filled with water.

One night, the bell in the servants’ quarters rang, and Rafik rose, dressed, and hurried to K.K.’s room. The master sat up in bed, in the glare of the single light.

“Something’s wrong,” he said. “My pulse is racing. Wake Husna.”

Husna came into the room, wiping her face, adjusting her clothes.

“What is it, Uncle?”

“Telephone General Hadayatullah. It’s my chest.”
K.K. sat in bed, scared, his face thin and worn, and distracted himself with meaningless banter, falling into Husna’s mode of speech, which had become for them a private language.

“So, Bibi, for a while you won’t be plucking me clean at rummy. Or they’ll give me bed rest, and we’ll play even more, and soon you’ll have salted away a nice fat dowry.” In the past he would have found this kind of joking in poor taste. He had begun teasing her, saying that she was seeking a young husband—leaving him—and almost convincing himself that she was. In fact, as he mimicked her brassy manners and her slang, saying in jest what couldn’t be said outright, she steadily drew him onto her own ground, where she could engage and control him so much more effectively.

Servants had crowded into the hallway outside the master bedroom, perhaps twenty of them, barefoot and speaking in whispers, having come into the house by ones or twos as they learned that something had happened to K.K.

The General swept in, a tall Anglicized officer, his trimmed mustache and the severe cut of his clothes reflecting a sense of purpose. Rafik, who knew the General well, brought a stool. The General administered an EKG on a portable machine, took the tape to the light, and said, “Go immediately to Mayo Hospital. Carry him out in a chair.” He clicked shut the lid of the machine and put the tape away in his vest pocket.

For a moment, Husna and K.K. looked at each other, his face lined and grave, hers puffy with sleep. For the first time, he thought of her as a grownup, as a woman; and for the first time she thought of him as a lover, sick and possibly dying.

All the servants, the gardeners, the chauffeurs, the junior ones who normally saw K.K. only from a distance, wanted to help carry the chair through the corridors of the house, where just a few lights burned, piercing the shadows. K.K. sat impassively on the chair, raised above the crowd, then lowered at the doors, like an awkward king, a king onstage.

As Husna prepared to get into the car, the General stopped her. “You need to be here,” he said. “People will be coming to ask about him. He’s probably going to be all right, but you should call Sarwat and the others. Kamila should come back from New York. Have them call Rehana also.” Husna began to cry, shaking, and the General stood back and looked at her shrewdly. “Don’t,” he said. “This isn’t about you. Prepare yourself now. Remember who you are.”
By midmorning, people had begun to call at the house, for in Lahore word travelled quickly. Husna received them, sitting in the living room. She had dressed up too much, wearing an embroidered white kurta. Several of the guests asked about Sarwat.

Sarwat had ordered that a car be waiting at the airport to meet each flight from Karachi, as she would get a seat as quickly as possible. Just before lunch, she entered the living room. An elderly couple who had been sitting with Husna stood up.

“What’s happened?” Sarwat asked. “What are you doing here? Where’s Daddy?”

The old couple quickly took their leave as Husna explained.

“Please,” Sarwat said, “this is a time for family. I’ve asked my cousin Hafiza to come here and receive people. Go up to your room and stay there.”

Husna didn’t dare tell Sarwat that she had moved next to the master bedroom. A servant turned on the air-conditioner in the annex, and Husna remained there all day, watching through the window as callers arrived and left. Hassan sent up some food, but she didn’t eat. She knew she would not be allowed to attend K.K. at the hospital.

In the middle of the night, she fell asleep, still sitting in the chair by the window. Waking in the morning, she looked down at the driveway jammed with cars. Without even picking up a dupatta, she ran down the stairs and into the servants’ area. Rafik sat on a chair sobbing unnaturally, as if racked with coughing, his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. She saw very distinctly the old man’s bare head, bowed down, the gray thin hairs, the scalp. She knew, of course, that K.K. had died. Two other servants, young ones new to the house, sat uncertainly on their haunches. They looked at her with curiosity, but said nothing. She turned, her eyes filling with tears, and walked back to the annex. She lay down on the bed, her feelings concentrated at the forefront of her mind like an immensely weighted black point, incomprehensible.

When Husna emerged from her bedroom and looked again at the drive, she saw men putting up a tent, where the male guests would mourn during the janazah. The women would sit inside the house with the body. She unlocked one of her massive trunks and removed a suit of clothing that she had brought with her when she came into the household, a cheap shalwar and kurta, with a simple white dupatta. Wearing this costume, she entered the living room. The body of K. K. Harouni lay on the floor, wrapped in a white cloth, his jaw bound closed with a white
bandage, the knot tied jauntily near one ear. His dentures had been lost, and his cheeks had caved in. His body had shrunk, lying among rose petals scattered by the servants. Sarwat rose from her place at the head of the corpse, touched Husna on the head with both hands, but said nothing. Husna went to the back of the room and sat down as far away as possible from K.K.’s old wife, who was telling the rosary, a stunned expression on her face. All sorts of women had come, women from all phases of K.K.’s life, and more kept arriving, clicking through the front vestibule in high heels, spilling out into other rooms. From various places, soft or loud sobbing would break out and then subside. Two society women sat uncomfortably on the floor next to Husna, whispering, gossiping, and she heard one say to the other in English, “Oh, isn’t that delicious.”

Of course you don’t care, thought Husna, who wouldn’t cry in front of them. She felt that only she cared, that she had lost more than all the others.

And yet she wanted to be like them—they were what she had lost.

For the next two days, Husna stayed in the annex, without once going out. People came day and night to offer condolences to Sarwat and Kamila. Rehana had arrived from Paris, where she taught some esoteric form of women’s studies, but she stayed with her mother rather than at K.K.’s house. Husna felt that they had forgotten her, and she wanted to be forgotten, to stay here alone in these rooms, with their rush mats, their pieces of scavenged furniture, and an air-conditioner that almost kept the apartment cool, dribbling water onto the pavement below. On the third day, a servant came, early in the morning, before there were any callers, to say that the sisters wished to speak with her. They were waiting for Husna in the living room, all three wearing saris, relaxed, Kamila sitting with her feet curled under her on a sofa, Rehana and Sarwat in high-backed chairs.

They got straight to the point, Kamila, as the eldest, speaking.

“My father allowed you to live in this house. However, he would not have wanted you to stay here. Tomorrow afternoon, the car will be available to take you wherever you wish to be taken. I suppose you’ll go to your father’s house.” She settled back, finished with the problem.

Husna, who had taken a seat half-way through this monologue, although she had not been invited to do so, looked down at the floor. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“Did Uncle say anything about me before . . . before . . .?”
Sarwat broke in. “No,” she replied with finality. “There was and is nothing for you.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Husna said.

Kamila softened. “Look, whatever you had with my father is gone now. If you took care of him in these past months, you were rewarded. You’re young, you’ll find other things. You think that you’ll never heal, but you will, sooner than you think.”

Now Husna stood. She had reached the bottom, and her pride arose, her sense of wanting to be dignified, to accept the inevitable.

Just as she reached the door, Rehana called to her: “There’s one other thing. They tell me you have a number of trunks in your room. I will not ask what you have in them. You may take those with you. But nothing else.”

Reaching the annex, Husna sat on the bed and buried her face in her hands. She had hoped that Rehana, the foreign one, the aggrieved one, would take her side—yet it was she who had pronounced the harshest words. In the end, their estrangements were less important than their contempt for her. They had closed up against her—family, blood. She tried to tell herself that she had gone to the sisters hoping for nothing, with nothing in her heart but sadness at the death of their father, who had loved her. She should have said something cold, should have refused their last insulting offer.

“For him I should have said, ‘I came with nothing, I leave with nothing. I leave with the clothes on my back. I served your father, when you were far away. The shame be on your heads.’ ”

But she could not afford even this gesture. The next day, two men loaded the trunks onto a horse-drawn cart and carried them away to the Old City.

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