# Doing the House
## August 1957

When the postman sped up the dwindling rise from the bottom of the driveway to the top on his new motor scooter, he noticed Five Queen's Road and the slope on which it stood had sunk, the way old people curve and shrink as the burdens of their lives become too heavy to shoulder. In the doorway, he handed Amir Shah the crumpled telegram he had secretly read at Lahore's main post office at dawn that morning. Amir Shah slipped his right hand into the side pocket of his white kurta. In one swift motion, he retrieved his reading glasses and money at the same time, as if he'd learned long ago to do without his useless index finger, permanently bent into his palm. The postman, unashamed to stare, watched Amir Shah learn that his daughter-in-law was expected at Five Queen's Road. Pocketing Amir Shah's tip, he returned to his scooter and descended the shrunken hill, happily picking up speed as he wove through a winding settlement of makeshift car shops lining the driveway. The postman sat tall in his teardrop-shaped seat. He would never live in a house as big as Amir Shah's and his children would not travel abroad to study, but at least his family would never contend with a foreign daughter-in-law. Above all, he thought, turning into the congested road, god was merciful. Pulling away, his wheels spun Lahore's dust into a fog, the crumbling yellow house behind him vanishing in his rearview mirror as it was in life.

Amir Shah read and reread the telegram addressed to his son.

Yunis, who had lived at Five Queen's Road for enough years he was virtually family, retrieved coins that had fallen from Amir Shah's pocket. It was unusual for Amir Shah to receive a telegram. Years earlier, before Partition, when Yunis had worked for the Englishman who had built the once grand house, telegrams were a common occurrence at Five Queen's Road. They were delivered in long envelopes with fancy lettering and a waxed seal which crumbled when opened. Those were the days when terraces of perennials were carved into the lawn and blooming flowerbeds were watered like clockwork at dawn and dusk each day. Five Queen's Road was not what it had once been. Now, when Yunis closed his eyes at night, the racket of noise and smells had him sometimes imagining he lived in the street rather than in a house. But no burst of exhaust fumes or thunder of pounding steel from the car shops in the lawn could ever make Yunis long for life with the Englishman again.

Amir Shah pulled his glasses from his face and folded the telegram into thirds before slipping it back into the envelope.

'Get Javid,' he said to Yunis.

Javid, Amir Shah's son, was in the kitchen, an outdoor space covered with a corrugated tin roof, supervising the instalment of a new gas stove. He urged the workmen to place the stove against the farthest wall, but they did as they wished when he left to attend to the interruption.

Javid hurried to Amir Shah, who remained standing in the foyer where the postman had given him the telegram. Amir Shah, thirty or forty years older than his son, stood tall even in the high archway of the door, his loose kurta hiding an astonishingly lean build. Pulling aside the curtains dividing one common room from another, Javid, a grown man by anyone's standards, came into his father's view. Officially, he was only visiting his father's house, having left home for studies abroad years earlier. But recently in his father's presence he sometimes felt himself still a child, running at his father's first

call, half expecting to be berated for a chore not well done or a trespass only just discovered. One evening, not too long ago, when Amir Shah called for Javid from across the house, Javid accepted that his father, a man of few words, was speaking more loudly than ever before. His father's newfound habit had the effect of making people in his presence jump to attention even more quickly and use their own voices more harshly. Javid had made a note to himself not to do this, and when he made his way to his father he stopped himself from shouting that he was on his way.

Without giving Javid the telegram, Amir Shah announced the news.

'Your wife,' he said, barely glancing at Javid, 'will be arriving next month.'

'She's telephoned?' Javid inquired.

'Written,' Amir Shah declared, leaving Javid to silently wonder in what form the news he had been waiting for had reached Five Queen's Road.

'Thank you, Abaji,' Javid said with a wide smile, as if his father were responsible for the date, his wife, or both.

Later that night, Yunis mentioned the telegram, but could not tell Javid what was written in it. Javid would not ask his father and, in the lonely nights before she joined him from Amsterdam, he wondered exactly what she had said.

Amir Shah had never done so much as brush the crumbs near his plate from the dinner table. But when news reached him of his daughter-in-law's impending arrival, he began noticing the mess near his plate and everyone else's. During dinner one night a few days after the arrival of the telegram, he swept fallen rice from the tablecloth into his hand. Not particular about table manners until

then, he made certain he did not drink while he had food in his mouth and made a conscious effort not to chew with his mouth even slightly open. When his hunger was partially satisfied, he shifted attention from himself to his surroundings.

Although he had been widowed when his children were young, his wife's absence remained substantial to him and when he surveyed the dining room he did so pretending that he was looking through her eyes. There were cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling and floor alike, the long chain from which ceiling fan hung was rusted, the oversize clock on the mantelpiece was cracked and cheap, the plastic lace tablecloth was torn, the velvet cushions on the chairs were stained, the simple plates from which they ate were chipped, and the large armoire which hid a doorway in the dining room had not been dusted or oiled in years. Amir Shah had lived in Five Queen's Road since the summer of Partition, a good ten years, and it suddenly surprised him that in all that time he had never had occasion to notice any of this.

In the midst of idle chatter around the long, oval table crowded with people, Amir Shah pounded his glass on the table so hard the water emptied in every direction.

'Do the house,' he exclaimed, as though he had issued the command and been ignored.

Yunis, caught in the middle of putting a hot and bubbling chapatti on Amir Shah's side plate, wiped water from his face. The room grew still, neither Javid nor his sister, Rubina, nor their friends said anything. After a few minutes in which people dared only to finish chewing what was already in their mouths, Javid broke the silence by feebly asking Yunis to bring a fresh chapatti for Amir Shah.

'Juldi,' Javid said more firmly when Yunis hesitated, as if his father—who was helping himself to rice and chicken masala— was in a hurry for the bread.

After the water was sponged from the plastic tablecloth and Amir

Shah left the table to drink his milky tea on the brick patio, Javid translated the command.

'The house needs order,' he said softly. 'Isn't it so?' he asked, gesturing in no particular direction.

Javid bore little resemblance to his father. He was stocky, which had helped him do well on his college boxing team. 'You see, we have an important guest arriving soon. It's our job to make her as comfortable as possible. Just look. Rubina, when was the last time the house was painted anyway? The cracked windowpanes replaced? The carpets washed?'

Rubina, who was forever resentful that in the place of her dead mother she was considered the caretaker of a house she did not like, ignored his questions.

'This house is good enough for us,' she said, feeling brave. 'Shouldn't it be good enough for her?' she inquired, amazing herself with her insolence.

Javid ignored her. His sister had been unreasonable during his entire three-month stay, angry at his choice of bride (as if he really would have ever married her childhood friend as she'd wished!). As children, they had been close and conspired together. He recalled purchasing her oil paints from the bazaar and helping roll her canvasses and stow them underneath his bed so Amir Shah would not discover further evidence of a forbidden interest. Likewise, Rubina had made up excuses for Javid's night-time absences when he was out later than he should have been in parts of Lahore his father would not hear of him visiting. But that was a long time ago. Before he had left for his studies, before she had married herself and before her husband had suffered a motorcycle accident that left him blind and her bitter.

'Why not start with this room?' Javid proposed, the practical side that served him well as an engineer surfacing. 'Let's paint it.'

As Javid and Zafar, Rubina's husband, made plans and enlisted

Yunis's help, Rubina stood and cleared the table. She reached for her husband's cutlery more roughly than she should have and a plate crashed to the floor.

'Yunis!' she called, exasperated.

Rubina was Amir Shah's only daughter, the one girl to live in her father's house and for years that had served her well. As a child, Amir Shah made exceptions for her behaviour ('She's a girl,' he'd console Javid when she bothered him) and bought her pretty frocks for holidays. But in the last years of her schooling, Amir Shah began to take a slightly different view of her. She ought to study more, he thought, and dabble less in her art. She ought to speak less in the presence of adults, and learn how to sew. She ought to be more concerned with her own grooming than with the flowers she tried to grow in a cracked pot outside the front door. It was very simple, Amir Shah thought. She needed to start becoming the woman she would spend the rest of her life being.

For her part, Rubina tried to make allowances for her father, given how long he had been widowed and, especially, how fondly he still recalled her mother when she could not have had a memory of her, but she had lost patience some time late in her teenage years. She had never expressly told her father this, but at about the same time she started to take off her burqa at college and hide it in a bush where it stayed until she set forth for home, she felt she deserved to have some say in the course her life would take. She exercised her new confidence and after refusing several marriage proposals eventually agreed to marry a man, an accountant, who she expected would take her abroad on foreign postings. Things had not worked out the way she had hoped. Nonetheless, she rationalized to herself, she had a college degree, she was married, she was about to bring a child into the world; all in all, and at minimum, she deserved the respect of her father and brother. Leaning to one side to gather pieces of the broken plate scattered across the dirty floor of the

dining room, she furiously wanted to remind everyone still sitting at the table that she was not hired help. But then Yunis kneeled down to help her and her complaints seemed shallow.

Yunis, officially the sweeper in the house, but also the stand-in for everything from gardener to cook, worked the hardest to obey Amir Shah. In the coming weeks, he shook the carpets, rolled them into tight logs and carried them on to the bricked patio. He washed them with a brush and a bucket of water, used a leaking garden hose to rinse them and hung them over bushes to dry. He scrubbed the floors of the house, filled the holes in the roof and hurt his back doing whatever could be done to salvage the garden of Five Queen's Road. With a garden trowel that had not been used in years, he dug borders to outline a few barren flower beds, not because they were worthy but because of a vague loyalty to what had once been. He shook brown and withered leaves from lavender and jasmine bushes dried and burned by the sun so that when the new guest appeared at Five Queen's Road she might think the bushes empty rather than dead.

Yunis was joined in his work by the frenzy of a family determined to make something of what was left of the house. Instead of retreating to his room with a pot of tea after a day's work at the courts, Amir Shah stood on a stepladder and took down curtains he had never noticed, while Javid stood below suggesting his father allow him to do the heavy work.

'No,' Amir Shah said too loudly to his son.

Javid did not loosen his grip on the stepladder. Both men coughed when the panels of heavy silk curtains dropped to the ground in plumes of dust. Javid silently tried to calculate the precise age of his stubborn father. He knew that his father was born in the previous

century, only a few years before the new one started, but as always he was unable to remember the exact date.

With Rubina glaring at him, Javid carried buckets of paint into the house with a hired crew of young men to help him transform the spotted walls of Five Queen's Road into something more presentable for his wife. He chose a shade of grey because he incorrectly remembered that when he set foot inside the house for the first time the walls were slate grey and he thought it wisest to try and return it to that colour. Rubina, exercising authority in matters of aesthetics, had him return the buckets of paint.

'You want the house to look like a factory? Graveyard? Who paints their walls grey?' Javid, surprised at the outburst, waited. 'And, you're foreign educated!' she exclaimed, before they both laughed and she got her way with white walls.

After the peeling walls were scraped and painted and the broken windowpanes were replaced in the long, rectangular windows near the high ceilings, the interior of the house was transformed. Birds which had liked to nest in the cracks of the open windows found other homes and the spiders that wove webs from one blade of the ceiling fan to the next overnight did not tumble to the table at the flick of a switch. Rather than preparing Five Queen's Road for her brother's wife, Rubina preferred to pretend that the old house was being rejuvenated for the child she was carrying. She stopped reading newspapers to her husband in the morning and evening, and overlooked the fact that she had once thought it imperative that Zafar's see-cane, as she called it, be polished every night. Instead, she spent all her time rearranging new dishes and cutlery in the polished dining room display case, purchasing towels and tablecloths in the Lahore bazaars and visiting fabric stores to buy bolts of fabric for herself and her baby—and when she remembered, selections for her foreign sister-in-law.

Amir Shah was a private man. In his work as a barrister, few people knew how he might present his case until he appeared in court. Moments before he was due to speak, he sifted through the notes and reports prepared by his staff. He would rise when the judge called on him and present the material so clearly and meticulously that often the judge was persuaded that there was no truth except the one he spoke. At home, with the same meticulousness, he had trained himself, as Javid would eventually tell his wife, out of the family. He had spent so much time away from home working to secure his career and his family's livelihood that he hardly knew the people who sat around his dining table every night. But as far as he was concerned, he made a solid living for his family, and put a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs. He had done what life and God required and never imagined otherwise. Although time passed, he grew older and evidence gathered before his eyes, he remained unprepared for the eventuality that his family would one day exhaust its need for him.

This thought had first occurred to him when Javid approached him four years earlier, a thick packet of papers in one of his hands, and a look on his face that Amir Shah did not recognize. Javid opened the packet on the dining table when everyone else had left and gave Amir Shah the news. He had been selected to receive a Rotary scholarship to study in America. Not only would his graduate studies be paid, but among the papers was an airplane ticket for Javid's journey. When Amir Shah held the ticket between his fingers, gently turning one delicate page after the other, noticing how his son's name was misspelled on each of them, he briefly considered throwing the ticket across the room, crumpling the packet before him and forbidding his twenty-three-year-old son from beginning a new life beyond the boundaries of his country. Instead, he said the next thing that came to mind.

'Why not England?'

They both knew the answer to that question. England was Javid's first choice. But Javid had not received enough funding to go along with university acceptances. Nothing, at any rate, compared to the offer spread out in the documents laid on the table in the dining room of Amir Shah's house.

'So . . . so . . . generous,' Javid answered, in a stuttered, clipped manner to which he frequently succumbed in the company of his father.

The second time Amir Shah had discovered his son's need for him evaporating was when Javid—across the miles—informed him of his wish to marry a foreign woman. Although Javid asked for permission, the question itself needed little qualification. His son had found what he imagined to be happiness on the shores of a distant country, in the form of a woman who did not speak his language or, Amir Shah feared, eat his food. It was a harsh observation, Amir Shah sometimes cynically thought, on Javid's dissolving need for his own country and his own family—his flesh and blood. It saddened Amir Shah, and in the long drama of back and forth letters in which Javid believed his father needed more convincing before acquiescing to the marriage, all Amir Shah needed was time to adjust to the way things would be. Amir Shah, whose work made him adept at sizing up adversaries and friends alike, was forced to consider the possibility that his son, who had never struck him as a particularly strong man, might be exactly that. Or, less generously, that his son's flirtation with a different country, a strange woman and a life beyond his father's reach was foolhardy nonsense that he would soon outgrow. In every light, Amir Shah accepted that Javid's deliberate choice in a bride was a comment on him. It was the only time Amir Shah's grief for his dead wife was outweighed by anger towards her. If Javid's mother had still been alive, he believed Javid would never have fanned out the packet of papers on the dining room table and, with a delicate

airplane ticket in the pocket of a new jacket, boarded an airplane to leave Pakistan.

But by the time Amir Shah received the telegram, all of this was in the past. Presently, Amir Shah had one concern: mending Five Queen's Road. It was a vast undertaking, growing all the greater once the rush of work on the house began and for every deficiency that was fixed, more emerged. Two weeks before his foreign daughter-in-law was to arrive, Amir Shah stood in the one bathroom of the house, shaving his greying beard under the single light bulb hanging from a wire above a blurred mirror. The bathroom was a dark, gloomy rectangle. The floor was concrete and what passed for a bathing stall in one corner was a space where the floor jutted into a concrete half wall. A rusted drain sat on the dangerously slippery floor of the bathing stall. At the other end of the bathroom was a shuttered window and bolted door, neither of which had been used in years. Amir Shah contemplated that if he were able to unlock the door and walk through it, he would be standing in the top of the driveway. Over the years, the bathroom had become Amir Shah's least favourite part of Five Queen's Road, all because of the maddening whims of a neighbour who had lost his mind. With this thought, Amir Shah peered through the thick metal screen of the dirty window and cracks in the shutters, and found his neighbour lingering in the early morning light waiting to launch a tirade at Amir Shah as he had done every day for years. As always, Amir Shah wasted as little energy as he could on a person who had made it his mission to rob him of his peace and property the same.

'Ooloo ka patha,' Amir Shah shouted to the window, cursing the pettiness of the man who had had the nerve to turn down his recent offer to paint the exterior of the entire house, including the neighbour's portion, at no expense to him at all.

Amir Shah rubbed his shaving brush into a lather on a flat soap dish before dabbing it on to his face. In the opposite corner of the

room was the flush toilet Amir Shah had been amazed to discover in the house years earlier when he first moved in. But the toilet was still a floor latrine and, with a start that caused his razor to slip and cut his face, Amir Shah knew what he had to do.

Instead of returning home after work that evening, Amir Shah met Yunis at the corner of a Lahore side street and together they took a tonga to the bazaar. He selected the first bathroom tiles he thought would do and a modern porcelain toilet bowl with a black seat. The storekeepers packed the tiles in newspaper and cardboard boxes and piled the heavy purchases on the tonga while the tonga wallah argued that the load was too heavy for his horse. The next day, Yunis threw a bag of cement over his shoulder and began carrying it up the driveway of Five Queen's Road. One of the car shop owners, the eldest in the settlement that had taken residence in the once grand lawn of the house, offered to help. He gave Yunis a lift in a sputtering car that was little more than a rusted frame on wheels propelled by a faulty transmission jammed in reverse gear. By the time they got to the top of the driveway, where Amir Shah stood waiting, the car pointed the wrong way up the hill and was masked by thick exhaust fumes that rose in a tunnel cloud to hide the striking purple bougainvillea draped over Amir Shah's entrance. The day after that, a new water heater (a cylinder almost as tall as Amir Shah) was delivered to Five Queen's Road. That night, while everyone else slept, Amir Shah and Yunis redid the old bathroom. On their knees and at eye level, Amir Shah and Yunis worked so closely side by side that their shalwars touched as they covered the room in an odd, backwards crouch. By the end of the night, Amir Shah's jet black hair was grey with splatters of cement and the imposing barrister seemed a man like any other spreading wet cement on to the bathroom floor with a trowel and pressing pink and sometimes flowered tiles neatly into it.

When Rubina awoke to use the bathroom, she was greeted by a

padlocked hasp and told to do her morning ablutions elsewhere, as if in the crumbling house in which they lived another bathroom might miraculously appear. Hours later, when the cement had set and Rubina saw the lengths to which her father had gone to make his daughter-in-law comfortable, she was shamed. A barrister like her father should not be reduced to sitting on his knees and setting tiles into the floor for anyone, much less a foreign daughter-in-law. Furthermore, bathroom details, including toilets and baths, were better left to others.

'Yunis,' Rubina exclaimed.

'You'd like tea?' he asked as he came near.

'I would like it,' Rubina said fiercely when he stood in front of her, 'if you did your job and my father didn't do yours.'

One half of the double doors to the bathroom stood open, and Yunis and Rubina both looked towards it. Even in the dark shadows of the unlit space, the pink tiles were bright and the sharp smell of new paint washed the room clean.

Rubina turned away from Yunis, his feet stained with a dull chalk of dried cement.

'Yes,' Yunis replied to her back, gently pulling closed the newly sanded bathroom door. 'Now you'd like tea?'

Rubina failed to answer, admiring their work and considering contemplating the generic flowers on the pink tiles.