Noor

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THE
PUBLISHING
LABORATORY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA WILMINGTON

five

Noor was five when she began to paint her dreams.

In the early Islamabad morning, Sajida stood in front of the full-length mirror in the corner of her bedroom, applying eyeliner and lipstick, watching Noor in the reflection. Had she been standing, Noor would have reached Sajida's thigh. Noor was losing some of her baby fat and although she would always be round, she appeared to have shed the extra bracelets around her knees and wrists. At five (and earlier than her brothers), she'd already lost baby teeth, the curved gaps quickly filled with bone-white teeth too big for her mouth. Crouched over her drawing and her orange bucket of sharpened crayons and pencils, the angle of Noor's back reminded Sajida of her husband, Hussein. As much as Sajida once loved him, she thought it unjust that her daughter, forsaken by her father, should have any physical likeness to him at all.

Noor, focused as neither of her brothers ever seemed to be, drew quickly and deliberately, her hand slipping from her paper and marking the bedsheets. Before Sajida pinned her hair and sprayed her

favorite cologne on her neck, Noor had covered the bed with pictures.

Sajida was more lenient with Noor than with the other two children. Not only because of Noor's condition (the names, the ever-changing diagnoses of her mental state irrelevant, Sajida believed, to her beloved but different child), but because she'd learned that marks on bedsheets could be washed away, there was always more paper to be had, and certainly, the peace of mind gained from a few uninterrupted moments was worth whatever mischief Noor came up with to fill them.

Sajida collected the pictures strewn around Noor, hardly paying attention to what covered them.

"Look," Noor demanded.

Without looking, Sajida murmured, "Bee-uu-tee-ful."

Attuned to lapses of insincerity more than the boys, Noor made her demand again.

"Look," she repeated until Sajida sat on the bed, her freshly ironed dupatta wrinkling under her weight.

"Show Ammi what you drew."

Noor took the stack from Sajida's hands and shuffled them. The first thing Sajida noticed was that all the pictures, except for a few scribbles here and there, were identical. It wasn't, however, until Noor pointed to the sharply outlined shape which curved at each end and inquired, "What's this?" that Sajida suddenly recognized the shape. It was the staple of a previous life she'd lived on the edge of a sea, a different country now, miles away.

"I don't know," Sajida said, keeping what she saw, the boat, to herself. "What did you mean to draw?"

"Noor is not mean," Noor said, alarmed.

"Of course not. What did you want to draw?"

"Don't call names in the house," Noor answered, mimicking Sajida's frequent reprimands to her sons, unable to let go of the insult she suspected her mother of directing towards her.

"This is . . . fish in a boat," Noor finally said, intentionally smudging one of the surprisingly clean drawings with her fingertips. "Fishboat."

Sajida took the drawings from Noor and saw that she was right. Sajida recognized the similarity of her daughter's word, "fishboat," with "fisherman's boat," a word she'd heard used many, many years before in a different language—Bengali—which she'd long since lost. In this other life, Sajida's younger brother or sister (she could no longer remember which) had used it to describe the boat her father and uncles used in their daily work to bring home fish from the Bay of Bengal.

Sajida reached for a pencil and printed Noor's word, "fishboat," in the corner of the drawing. Noor wasn't much interested in shaping letters or even identifying them yet, but she enjoyed the certainty of Sajida's printed captions. Sajida wrote slowly and meticulously, each letter the same size as the one which preceded it. She felt a vague sense of anticipation, as if with the unexpected familiarity of a memory that wasn't her own, Noor was launching mother and daughter on a journey yet to be named. Sajida hung Noor's drawing in its place on the courtyard wall. Over the next few weeks, Noor drew the fishboat scene over and over again, sometimes a dozen times in one day, until it was filled with great detail.

Then one night Noor had a dream of a tree with two fingers that rose into the heavens, a boat drenched in silver nets perched in the shadowed crook in between. Upon waking, Noor rushed from her bed into the bathtub. While others in the house slept, she scrubbed and scrubbed her feet, because the grains of sand between her toes tickled when she walked. She had difficulty reaching the foot of her stiff leg. She tied two washcloths together, hooked them around her sole, and rubbed back and forth.

"It was a dream!" Sajida said when she awoke to Noor's frantic trips to the bathroom. But try as she might, she couldn't make her daughter understand that dreams, in all their magnificence, despite

the taste of salt and texture of sliding sand, were not real.

"Hear it!" Noor answered, pretending to run into the ebb and flow of imaginary waves.

An hour later, the boat in Noor's latest drawing was brimming with dead and rotting fish. Sajida stumbled on the drawing on her way to the kitchen. She missed a step and leaned into the wall, as if it was required to keep her upright. More astonishing than the exactness of Noor's rendering was the startling truth that Sajida was again staring at the dead, rotting fish in silver fishing nets that she had seen as a child wound around a tree.

When Sajida could finally speak again, she asked Noor where she had taken the idea for the drawing. Noor's capacity for language lagged behind her age by some years. But her response was immediate.

"From my head, Ammi." Pinching closed her nose, coating her voice with more of a nasal hum than was her habit, she added, "Smell the fish?"

Sajida nodded.

"Dreams," Sajida was explaining to Noor, "They're pretend."

Sajida was making it up as she went along, never having had to explain the difference between reality and dreams to her boys. They'd known about it from the beginning, a miracle similar to their ability to distinguish sounds of Land Rovers from taxis and minibuses.

"I like dreams," Noor offered.

"Of course. Sometimes you can go places you wouldn't otherwise," Sajida answered. "Like the sea. I couldn't take you to the sea. But you went there in your dream!"

"Why you won't take me?"

"I don't like it."

"Why?"

"Big. Loud. I like the ground better."

"When you were a snake-girl, Ammi. On the tree. You scared?" Noor asked softly.

Because Sajida had been wrapped like a snake in the tree and plastered with mud near rotting fish in torn nets, she understood Noor's question. Staring at her daughter, she wondered why Noor had omitted this detail in her careful pictures. In the gallery of pictures that hung from the walls of the house, there was no place to hang pictures such as these. Where would they go, anyway, Sajida wondered. With *m*'s for memories? Or *p*'s for past life?

"No," Sajida lied softly, "I wasn't scared." But she felt a shade of fear when she lied, as if the past and present of her life were shifting course, and were—inexplicably—rushing towards each other.

When Noor was no longer a child, and the family's stories had been woven into knots and tangles, Noor brought up the drawing of the cyclone, her omission of Sajida in a tree.

"Didn't want to. Draw you scared," she said, as if she'd known the truth all along. "You're my Mamma."

Noor brought the cyclone back for Sajida. Sajida, then, had been the same age as Noor. She lived within walking distance of a sea full of fish on the shores of what was once East Pakistan but had since become Bangladesh.

All except Sajida's father had slept deeply that night. Before the cyclone, he was riding the sea in his boat. He prayed for a large enough catch in the dangling fishing nets so that when the sun rose again he might earn respite from the water. Miles away, in a tiny village a few minutes' walk from the coast, Sajida's mother put her six children to sleep after dinner to the soft patter of rain on their matted rooftop. In between their bedrolls, puddles sprang like islands

from the carefully swept ground. In the land of East Pakistan, as much water as earth, Sajida liked to climb the only hill and watch the water recede. The young child knew the places her father's fishing boat could reach when waters were high: the paved road in the distance, the bicycle shop where rickshaws, bicycles, and car tires were patched, and beyond, the low-lying bridge swept away with the rain of the season.

By the time her mother awoke, the new baby already in her arms, it was not possible to distinguish the sound of the wind from the noise of the sea. Astonished, as always, at how soundly her children slept, her feet searched the ground for her plastic sandals. She found her voice and startled her children awake with her shouts. With one hand, she reached for her black sewing machine and when she set it on the small wooden crate, the only furniture in her home, the wheel next to the faded gold letters that spelled S-i-n-g-e-r spun back and forth like it did when one of her children played with it.

No one thought to run. Their lives were conditioned by the force and speed of water on their flat, flat land, and they knew they didn't stand a chance. Once out of their house, the children—including the thirteen-year-old boy who'd recently begun to resent looking at his mother when she spoke to him—tried to cling to her clothes. The smallest ones cried, frightened by the unearthly roar that sent thunderclap shivers into the ground they stood on. Her mother passed the lone acacia tree which in drier months blossomed in tight yellow flowers that her girls threaded and braided into garlands. While others in the village scrambled onto the roofs of their feeble houses with the help of bamboo ladders and each other, she pulled her children toward the road in the distance where she knew a single metal pole was cemented into the ground. In a flash of lightning, she found the pole. Before instructing the older children to spread their arms around the pole, she kneeled down to secure the younger children and gave Sajida the baby, warning her, Sajida would forever remember, to be careful.

After the worst of the water had receded, when Sajida was found alone, her body and clothes torn and battered by the fury of the sea, no one knew how long she had been there. She did not make a sound when the relief workers approached.

In striking distance, their legs knee-deep in the mud and water that ravaged the roots of the only two trees to be seen for miles, it was not any easier for them to trust what their eyes revealed. An old, splintered tree with a trunk no wider than one of the men's waists held, in the fork of its twisted branches, an unscathed fishing boat. The name, printed in black and in English, graced the sides: *Freedom*, bold and deliberate, as if it had been painted in oils the previous day. The tree carried the boat like a trophy, thrusting it into the sky as if each inch of branch had grown for this purpose alone. It was after the men accepted what they saw that the stench became overwhelming. The boat's silver fishing nets, filled with rotten fish the color of brown bleeding into black, hung from the tall tree. The nets shimmered in the gleaming sun like a lace curtain.

Two pink men made white by the sun. By the time Sajida saw the approaching men through her tearing eyes, she'd been hugging the tree with her body for so long it seemed to be doing it on its own. It was only because her body had joined the tree that they had such difficulty extracting her. She wanted to help, to make a sound, but her limbs, like her throat, refused.

One of the men touched her. The girl's skin, nothing like bark, gave way like that of the fresh corpses he had lifted, carried, and set aside. The girl's body was wrapped around the branch as tightly as a snake's, and when they found her head by the trunk, facing the sky, they did not expect to find life. But the soft, weak breaths drawn between her swollen lips and tongue suggested otherwise. The two men, first flabbergasted by the reminder of life in one tree and now by the existence of it in the other, used all their strength to pry loose the girl. They took turns carrying her, a meager child whose bones at

the ankles and wrists jutted from sores on her body as if her insides were spilling out.

With mud in their boots and an almost-dead girl in their arms, the two men somehow managed to find land that did not sink beneath their feet. As they carried her to dry land, her head near one of their armpits and then another, Sajida smelled their skin, traces of unfamiliar soap and sweat made sweet because of it.

In the relief camp, piled with blankets, her body shook all night. In her nightmares, she heard her mother's voice rising from the bottom of the sea. At first her mother had spoken the simplest and most common of daily reminders: *move the hair from your eyes, take your thumb from your mouth, take the laundry bundle to the river.* After a few nights, Sajida was addressed like an adult in her communications with her dead mother. *You make shalwars,* Sajida was told, in anticipation of the place in which she would spend the rest of her life, *by cutting the cloth in two arm's-lengths, exaggerating the width of the man's legs, and sewing the seams on the inside before stitching the cuff's border for decoration.* Sajida was tempted to believe that her days were dreams and her nights, spent in the company of her mother's clear voice, were not.

Noor squeezed her last "fishboat" on the wall, in between "fan" and "farmer." The difference with this drawing was that when Noor passed it, she held her nose as if her fishboat brought its stench into the courtyard of her grandfather's house.

Some days later, Sajida awoke to a picture on her pillowcase. She saw an animal, *a buffalo?*, grotesquely bloated, his head that of a different, more kindly beast. As in Noor's very first pictures, every inch

of the paper was covered with color. This time it was brown, exactly the right brown-black of the mud after the cyclone, and the buffalo sank in it. Sitting up, Sajida lifted Noor's work from the pillowcase. In Noor's drawing, Sajida saw a young girl, clothes ripped from her, clumps of hair plastered to her forehead and her neck. Her small hand disappeared into the buffalo's monstrous body. In the corner of the drawing, there was an outline of a baby. *The longest of lashes*, Sajida noted, eyes drawn perfectly closed. The recognition of this detail more than any other made Sajida's hands go cold.

When Sajida had her boys, she would sometimes hold on to them *for dear life!* (as Hussein would say), overwhelmed by the memory of the baby Noor had drawn. After their bodies outgrew their need for her, she'd find the boys in the courtyard or sitting at the table doing their homework and wrap her arms around them and squeeze as if her life depended on it.

Sajida's mother had handed Sajida her baby brother. There were so many children, and only one pole. Then the sea was before them, in a wall so high Sajida could not tell the bottom from the top. Light, all of it, lanterns, flashlights, candles, fires, lightning, vanished, and the blackness was a hole of dizziness and terror. The wave lifted Sajida from her feet more easily than her father could sweep his children into his arms. The pole slipped from her grasp as if it had never been there, but she held first the baby and then her breath, the way she'd learned from her eldest brother when they'd jumped in water to keep them cool. She was thrown so high, so far, so deep, the baby was wrenched from her arms. Flailing, her hands struck something solid. She dug into the hardness while her body, desperate for air, was swallowed by the sea. When she awoke she was holding on to a dead buffalo. Swollen, floating like a boat.

Except for the baby, Sajida's recollections were scattered.

Her mother's last "Bismillah." Broken into pieces and thrown back by a wall of water. *Freedom*. Her eyes trained on the sea for

the shape of her father's boat, his silhouette at the edge of it. The camp, old men, voices without strength or inflection. Imagining bits of her mother floating through dark valleys near the ocean floor, scraping rocks and shells in the pit of the sea's belly where sound, like light, did not reach. Dreams filled with demons and gods who were equally cruel. Later (*but how much later?*), she'd kept herself steady on the side of a road, one palm flat in the air, the other on her knee, as a makeshift chair of a man's arms lifted her from one place to another.

Sajida didn't remember all the details, the rhythm of the story, how it ran one way and then another and then back again, like water rushing about. Hearing her daughter scratch on her drawing tablet at the other side of the room, Sajida blinked and studied the drawing: the eyelashes, long and curled as she was certain they had been. Noor, she thought, this child, so sweet and magical, born not of this world, but of another.

For years, Sajida and Noor slept together in Sajida's marriage bed, a king-sized bed the family carpenter had built for her. It had a high headboard with several panels of woodwork, rows of intricately carved flower buds that blossomed from one panel to the next. She'd gone to the bazaar by herself to order the bed. The carpenter gave her a cup of tea, and while she sipped the sugary mixture he sketched examples for her on the faded newsprint of old dailies. She wasn't keen on big furniture, but it seemed natural to her that her marriage bed should be an exception. She toyed with the idea of posts and canopies, footboards and odd, pull-out night tables she'd seen in a home decorating magazine. Then the carpenter transformed a thick piece

of wood with his chisel into a lily before her very eyes. She lifted it from the carpenter's hands and held it near her nose, half expecting it to exude the fresh, after-rain smell she loved so much.

When Hussein moved out of her bed (and their life) onto a mattress in another room, she stopped thinking of her bed in the same way. The flowers were simply the headboard against which she lay while she nursed and rocked her daughter to sleep. Later, when Noor no longer required her embrace to sleep, the headboard, now useless, was virtually forgotten. But Sajida became increasingly mindful of the parameters of the bed and she wondered how a bed that was large, even for two adults, could be so cramped. Her nights were interrupted by Noor's restless dreams in which the child traveled from the foot of the bed back up and from one side to the next, without regard for her mother's presence. Often, Sajida's side was bruised where Noor's legs, the strong one and the weak one, left their marks on her.

But the day after Noor left a drawing on Sajida's pillow, and through what Sajida could only attribute to a miracle, Noor was overcome with a newfound and urgent need for privacy.

"*Noor ka bister*," Noor said one morning, pointing at Sajida's marriage bed and making it her own. "Where is Ammi's bed?" she continued, holding her hands up, as if another bed, her mother's, might suddenly appear.

It took Sajida a moment to respond, unprepared that after all these years she was being released by her daughter, if only for a few hours each night.

"I'll fetch another bed," she finally said, gently lowering Noor's hands to her side. "My bed is coming."

Sajida did not think twice about relinquishing her bed. She poked her head in the storerooms near the servant's quarters and from the second one retrieved a single bed. The cot was nothing but woven jute loosely strung on a simple frame, but Sajida was not interested in the specifics. The servants forced the bed behind a divider

of faded velvet curtains into the tight space of the dressing room, a narrow, dark alcove of sorts that had never been put to proper use. Sajida took to the itchy cot in the claustrophobic room, as Nanijaan would have said, like a fish in water. Sajida loved her child, utterly and completely, but the fact was that Noor had encroached on her nights even before she was born.

Alone, Sajida slept more deeply than ever, night after night surrendering to a deep slumber filled with dreams that had beginnings and endings. She no longer rose with the light of the day as she had her whole life, even when her children were infants and her nights were exhausting hours of rocking and feeding. Instead, Sajida slept through dawn in the darkness of her alcove. Sometimes, she was awakened by Noor. Noor would draw open the discolored curtains in an impatient rush, and the clatter of the metal rings running over the rusting curtain rod delivered Sajida into the next day.

Once in a while, with streaming sunlight behind Noor, the disheveled girl, in a rumpled dress she'd refused to exchange for nightclothes, appeared more a vision than a child. On those mornings, Sajida marveled at the God who'd made this special child her own.

Ali came across Noor's drawing while he was tidying some newspapers in the lounge. It was caught between the morning and afternoon dailies, a burst of energy tucked in black newsprint. On principle, Ali liked anything Noor drew, although he was partial to the foods she managed to illustrate so exactly he sometimes found himself with an appetite after looking at them.

The drawing Ali held in his hands was slightly different from what Noor usually drew. It lacked a caption from Sajida: no "storm" or "rain" or any other description. More importantly, the brown-

black of the background, the images of torn, upside-down trees and shattered boats, were drawn from an odd perspective, as if from above rather than *inside* the scene. Yet there was a special mist of gray that ran across the picture—so certainly, Ali knew at first glance, that of East Pakistan's monsoons. The contradiction that struck Ali was that one had to be inside the rain, feel it beat down steadily to know the color, the length of the sheets. Nothing less would do. He knew this unequivocally. Now, whenever the monsoons arrived, planting a roar inside his head, he lay awake in his bed recalling the symmetry of falling sheets of rain, the pounding of the drops, the sinking mud.

Ali thought of the last monsoon season in Islamabad and remembered, with a start, how he and Noor had stood in the middle of the courtyard one suffocatingly hot day when the skies emptied with rain and steam rose like smoke from the fine marble slab and the red bricks of the house. The two of them danced and slipped on the drowning marble, celebrating like poor, unclothed children in the alleys of a Rawalpindi bazaar before Sajida put a stop to their fun.

Was it gray like that? Ali tried to recall, suddenly able to smell the mud and rain, months later, on a day in April when the sky held nothing but a brilliant sun.

The drawing stayed with Ali, and he finally understood where it belonged: with the *c*'s for cyclone. Late at night, lying in bed with a sheet pulled to his chin, hands next to his sides, palms flat, ready, as had been his habit in the army, he recalled what he'd seen.

From above, in the airplane, there was no question. East Pakistan was beautiful. Lush and green the way West Pakistan never was, even during the monsoons. Snaking rivers and endless tributaries flowing like life itself through the rich fields. The earth so fertile it hardly needed seeds. The land is black like the people, *someone had said,* only not as lazy.

Noor

The flight lasted hours. It circled around the tip of India and, when the plane couldn't land in Dhaka because of the fighting, back down again to wait in Sri Lanka. Twenty-one hours later, again morning, it landed in Dhaka. Dried mud was preserved in the most unlikely of places—tops of trees, airplane hangars, tin roofs of the barracks. Who hadn't heard about the cyclone? East Pakistan, it was said, always and forever unlucky in the mouth of the Bay of Bengal.

By the time I got there, the bloated buffaloes had long since fed the crows and the flies. Carcasses crumbled across the land. The air was heavy, but not with rain. Everything, living or not, seemed alive with hate. The roads, the trees, the bicycles, the bharis. The first night, walking the streets of Dhaka looking for miscreants, I scarcely dared to breathe. Within hours, I was gulping at the air greedily, as if, already then, to prove I was still alive.

Come back home, Auntie had said. But right then, it was so far away, it might have been another world. If it existed at all.

Did you know that?

Sitting in his armchair, glancing at the newspaper headlines, Ali heard Noor dragging her bucket of supplies across the brick path in the courtyard. Along with the slight limp of her once-broken leg, keeping her bare, flat feet inside the rectangles of the bricks, never on the lines, resulted in slow going. Some minutes later, she presented herself in front of Ali for her morning embrace in a freshly starched dress while the cook readied her plate. Noor was in a cucumber stage, and for the second time that day, the cook had scraped out the seeds and carved what remained into identically sized triangles. The cyclone lay on the cocktail table, next to the cucumbers.

"See?" Noor asked, picking it up.

"My *artiste*," Ali said, and although he was sitting, he attempted

a waist bow. Noor squealed with delight.

"Bow to the queen!" she exclaimed, standing, the ruffles on her frock suddenly appearing regal.

"Kya?" Ali said, asking Noor to identify the animal she'd drawn.

"Buffalo," Noor said. "Fat."

"Fat, indeed!" Ali said.

Noor picked up the salt shaker. She unscrewed the cap, took out a pinch of salt, and sprinkled it on the tens of tiny triangles on her plate.

"You've seen a buffalo?" Noor asked.

Ali studied the drawing, looking beyond the mist. He looked at it from different angles, tilting the paper this way and that, examining the animal, eyes bulging, *gone maybe*, the head small compared to the immense belly. *Fat and stiff. Dead.*

Startled at the details of the drawing, he looked from the buffalo to his granddaughter.

"You've seen a buffalo like this?" Noor asked again.

He let a few minutes pass.

"People like this," Ali said so softly he wasn't sure Noor heard him above the crunch of the cucumbers.