

A Long Pitch Home



Natalie Dias Lorenzi

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To the new kids in class, and to those who befriend them.

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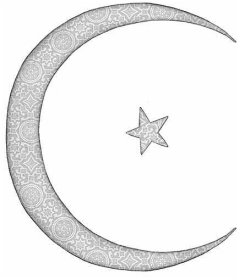
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One

They took my father three days ago, a week before my tenth birthday.

No one knows where he is. Or if they do know, they are not telling me.

Daddo has her own theories. “They took my son because he is the best engineer in all of Karachi—no, in all of Pakistan.”

“Who are *they*?” I ask.

My grandmother frowns as she strips the mango skin from its flesh. I actually feel sorry for the mango.

She does not answer my question, so I keep talking.

“But Daddo, there are a thousand engineers in Karachi. Why couldn’t they—whoever *they* are—get their own engineer instead of taking Baba?”

“Bah.” Daddo scoops up the mango peels and dumps them in the trash. “You are still too young to understand these things, Bilal.”

“Almost-ten-year-olds are not too young to understand these things.”

I hold my breath, waiting for her reaction. I am not supposed to be disrespectful during the month of Ramadan. Or any of the other months, either.

But Daddo doesn't look mad. She just shakes her head and says, “One day you will understand.”

Here is what I understand.

Four days ago I was planning my birthday party with my mother. Ammi called the Pie in the Sky bakery over by Zamzama Park and ordered my favorite cake—chocolate malt with fudge frosting.

The next day my father never came home from work.

I understand nothing.

Ammi has not cooked a thing since my father disappeared. Daddo cooks double of everything to feed the relatives who stream into our apartment every day, waiting for news about my father.

Usually my family is loud, and we talk all at once except when we're laughing. But whoever took my father took our laughter, too. The grown-ups smile whenever I come into the room with my little sister, Hira, who hasn't let me out of her sight since our father disappeared. They clap whenever Humza, my baby brother, toddles over and calls out a nonsense word. But I can see in their eyes that they are scared. Their fear sits on my chest like an elephant.

The adults gather in the living room, where the curtains are drawn against the late-afternoon sun. They stop whispering when I come around the corner, so I catch only snippets of their conversations.

“He should have transferred out of that office.”

“How many times did I tell him not to push the issue?”

“I’ve never trusted Tahir.”

I understand none of it, especially the part about Tahir, the father of my very best friend. He and Baba work together. They have been friends since they were boys, just like Mudassar and me.

When the sun sinks into the sea and the *azaan* sounds from the minarets of the Mubarak Mosque, our prayers do not feel joyful. I kneel on my *janamaz*, touching my forehead to the prayer mat. But when I recite the traditional words, I am really asking Allah to bring Baba home. When it is time to break the fast, no one rushes to the table; they shuffle and murmur and sigh. Daddo brings out the steaming bowls of *gorma*, and the smell of chicken and curry makes my stomach rumble. I feel guilty for being hungry, because who knows if those people who took Baba are letting him eat. Daddo must hear my rumbling belly, because she leans over as she passes the plate of dates and whispers, “Eat, Bilal *jaan*. Worrying is hungry work.”

We mumble an unenthusiastic *Bismillah* in thanks for our food. Maybe Allah heard our prayer, because next we hear the knock at the door. Everyone freezes except for Humza, who stuffs his mouth with fat fistfuls of mushy rice and peas.

Nobody moves because that first knock is just a regular one. But then it comes, Baba’s special knock: two fast raps—pause—another quick knock like a hiccup, followed by two solid thunks.

We burst from our chairs in a blur of movement, our voices exploding with hope and disbelief. Someone’s water glass

clanks over and my chair crashes to the floor, but I do not look back. My legs race down the hall until my palms slam against the front door.

My fingers work the locks as fast as dragonfly wings, and then—*click!*—the last of the locks is free. I pull the door open, and there stands Baba. His suit is wrinkled and his shirt is torn near the pocket, and he must have lost his glasses somewhere along the way. But it's him, all right, and he is home.

“Baba!” I yell. My father smiles and steps inside, then falls to his knees and opens his arms. Hira and I just about knock him over. His cheek has the beginnings of a beard that prickles my own cheek, but I keep my arms tight around him. Everyone surrounds my father, crying and laughing and asking him where he's been. He only shakes his head and takes turns holding us close.

Baba doesn't speak about those three days he was missing from our lives. But two days after his surprise homecoming, he says this: “Bilal, it is high time we leave Pakistan to live with your Hassan Uncle and Noor Auntie in America.”

America? That's on the other side of the world.

Ammi, my siblings, and I will leave in a few days, and Baba will come later. In the meantime, Baba says we can tell no one we are leaving, not even Mudassar. Especially not Mudassar. If Baba and Tahir are no longer friends, does that mean I have lost my best friend, too?



We have two days to pack our things. Not all of our things: only one suitcase each. How can a person fit his whole life into

one suitcase? It is impossible. Ammi says it is hard to decide what to take because we have so many nice things, and for that we should be thankful. But I am not thankful I have to leave my cricket bat behind—the one my teammates signed after we won last season’s Karachi Youth Tournament. I do take my cricket uniform and the photo of Mudassar and me grinning after our final win. I unpin another photo—the one of Baba when he played on Pakistan’s national team. I run my finger along the row of famous faces sitting near Baba—left-arm bowler Waqas Akram, and the team captain, the great Omar Khan. The picture was taken right before Baba injured his knee and couldn’t play in the World Cup. It was the last season he ever played.

The only thing left on my bulletin board is the ticket stub from the Karachi Zebras versus the Peshawar Panthers match—the very first cricket match Baba took me to see. The ticket stub is wedged between the cork and the bulletin board’s frame, and I have to tug a few times to get it out. I leave my cricket helmet. There is so much I cannot take.

Still, I fill my suitcase to bursting, and now our last day in Karachi is here. We are standing in the Jinnah International Airport on July the fourth at four o’clock in the morning. My *baba* tells me this: “Today will be the best day of your life, Bilal.”

I do not say anything, because I am too busy wondering what my father will tell my friends tomorrow afternoon when they come to our door expecting to celebrate my birthday, arms full of presents. I am thinking about how my chocolate malt cake with fudge frosting will be sitting in the refrigerator in the back of the Pie in the Sky bakery. When the baker figures out

no one is coming to get my cake, maybe he will take it home to his own family for their Eid celebration at the end of Ramadan.

My father leans down to look me in the eye, and I blink hard. “Bilal,” he says, “cricket has taught you strength and resilience. To do your best even when things are not easy. To support your teammates.” He swallows, and I wonder if his throat feels tight like mine does. Baba’s eyes don’t leave mine, and his voice is firm when he tells me, “Now it is time to be strong for your mother, your sister, and your brother.”

Losing a cricket match after trying your best for five hours is not the same as moving to America. I do not say this to Baba. Instead I take a shaky breath and blink fast to keep my tears from spilling down my cheeks.

“You will see, Bilal,” he says, his voice gentler now. “Today is the beginning of a new life for us. Not only is today your birthday, but—guess what?” He smiles. “It is America’s birthday, too.”

I nod like this is good news, but how can today be the best day of my life if we are leaving Baba behind? I would give up birthday parties for the rest of my life if only he could come with us now.

Hira tugs on my father’s sleeve. “Baba, why can’t you come to America now, with us?”

“I have to take care of some things at work, *baytee*.” He takes Hira’s hand. “Your uncle will be there to meet you, and I will come as soon as I can. Do not worry.”

I worry anyway.

Humza chews on a cookie as he watches a cart loaded with suitcases roll past. He has no idea we will not see Baba for who knows how long. He has no idea he’s supposed to feel sad. I

wish I could trade places with him. My father kisses the top of Humza's head before pulling Hira and me into one last hug. Then he holds my mother close. She cries enough silent tears to fill the Lyari River. Hira slips her hand into mine, and I gently squeeze it. She is only six. I will be ten by the time this day is over—too old to cry in front of my father. When my mother finally pulls herself from Baba's arms, we walk under the Unaccompanied Women and Children sign for the first time in our lives and head toward the desk where a man is checking passports. He stifles a yawn as he stamps our papers.

When we are through the line, my mother says to look straight ahead and be strong.

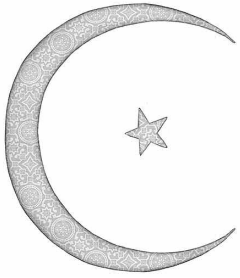
I don't listen. At the last moment, I turn and see Baba, his hand over his mouth and his eyes full of pain. When he sees me, he puts a kiss into that hand and sends it my way. I catch it, like I always do, and pat it onto my heart extra hard, so it will stick. My eyes sting, blurring my last look at Baba before I run to catch up to my mother.

When the plane finally lifts us into the air, I realize I never sent Baba a kiss back. I send one now into the shadows of the sunrise and hope it will travel through the airplane window and find its way to him.

“He will join us soon, Bilal. You will see.”

I nod, still looking out the window as Karachi shrinks into a toy city with blinking lights. *He will join us soon.* I repeat my mother's words in my head over and over, because I want to believe they are true.

My father said that today, the fourth of July, would be the best day of my life. My father is wrong.



TWO

The very first thing Uncle says to me at the airport is, “Happy birthday, Bilal! I can’t believe you are already nine.” I know why he can’t believe I am nine; it is because I am ten. But I do not tell this to Uncle. I think he would be embarrassed not to know the age of his only sister’s son, even though the last time I saw him was back when I was in Class 1, barely six years old. That was just before Uncle moved his family to America, and we stayed in Karachi.

We follow Uncle out to a huge car that he calls *mini*—a minivan. The air feels like Karachi—warm and thick—but the sounds here are different. As we load our suitcases into the van, not one horn honks in this whole gigantic parking lot. It looks funny to see Uncle sitting behind the steering wheel on the left side of the car and Ammi sitting next to him, where the

steering wheel should be. When we start to drive, I can see why Uncle is sitting on the wrong side: everyone drives on the wrong side of the road instead of the left.

Hira peppers Uncle with questions the whole way, but her voice eventually fades from my ears as I take in the scenery rolling past the window.

We zoom along a wide road with four neat lanes. It's nothing like Karachi, where sometimes you can't tell which lane is which because scooters weave between cars, minibuses chug alongside men on bikes, and donkeys pull carts carrying bricks or boxes or sacks of food. The few buses on this American road all look exactly the same; not a single one is decorated with colorful designs, and no fringe hangs from their bumpers. No one rides on top or hangs out of the doors or windows.

Uncle turns into his neighborhood, where the houses are like the cars on the highway—neatly spaced, very big, and mostly the same. I don't see any palm trees, just leafy giants as tall as our apartment building back in Karachi. Each house has its own garden right out front, and most of the cars are parked on small lanes that lead to garages. The one car parked in the wide street is yellow with a rounded roof and hubcaps that look like white flower petals.

Uncle parks in his own lane in front of his garage and says, "Here we are!"

Hira gasps. "This is your *house*, Mamoo?"

Uncle laughs. "It is your house, too, Hira *jaan!*"

Looking at the brick front and six windows of the two-story house, I can't believe only three people live here. Well, now it will be seven. Eight when Baba comes.

Ammi takes in a breath. "What a lovely house, *Bhai jaan!*"

Uncle presses a button that opens the back of the van. “Thank you, *Baji*.”

It is strange to hear my mother call someone *brother* and to hear her called *sister*. I think of her only as Ammi.

We step through the front door, passing a staircase and a living room on the left. Down a hall there is another living room with a brick fireplace, and then a kitchen so big that there are two places to sit—at a round table with six chairs and a high chair for Humza, or on tall stools around a square counter in the center of the kitchen.

The very first thing Auntie says when she greets us is, “Bilal! You must be hungry.” I have always liked Auntie. She looks exactly the same as I remember. When I tell her so, she gives me an extra hug.

Behind her I see yet another room off the kitchen with a fancy table and chairs.

The front door slams and in jogs Jalaal, who towers over Auntie. The very first thing my cousin says to me is, “Hey, little buddy.”

I do not know this English word *buddy*, but I know *little*. Does he think I am so little? Maybe he also thinks I am still nine. Then he slides his hands into his American jeans pockets and switches from English to Urdu to say his second thing, which is this: “Don’t worry—I’ll teach you everything you need to know about living in America.”

I believe him, because he speaks Urdu with an American accent. Then he switches back to English. “Your mom says you’re pretty good with English.”

I shrug and smile. “I like learning the new word,” I answer, so Jalaal can hear for himself.

Jalaal nods. "Nice." He picks up my backpack and switches back to Urdu. "Come on, I'll show you where to put your stuff."

Hira takes my hand. "I want to come, too."

We follow Jalaal up the stairs. Having steps inside the house feels like living in two apartments all at once. Our building in Karachi has a stairwell that goes up all twelve stories, but we only use it when the power is out and the elevator doesn't run.

Jalaal leads us down the hallway. "This is my parents' room." He points through double doors to a room with a bed our whole family could probably fit on. We pass another room. "That's where your mom will stay." A crib for Humza sits next to a double bed that must be for Hira and my mom. But then Jalaal points to yet another door and says, "Hira, this is your room."

"Oh!" She claps in delight and pushes the door all the way open. Light pink walls match the pillows on the bed. A stuffed bear sits on a rocking chair, and Hira's name is spelled out in white letters on one wall.

"Do you like it?" Jalaal waves his hand across the room like a showman. "I painted the walls. I heard you like pink."

Hira beams and throws her arms around Jalaal, then races down the stairs, calling, "Ammi! Come and see!"

Finally we get to the last room. "This is our room, little buddy."

Jalaal's room—my new room—looks like a bedroom from an American show we get on Dish. From the posters that cover the wall near one of the beds, anyone can see Jalaal likes some group called the Nationals. These Nationals must be a sports team—men in uniforms throw a white ball and hit it with a round bat—but it is a sport I have never seen.

Jalaal's trophies stand at attention along two bookcase shelves, with two empty shelves below. Next to each bed is a nightstand topped with a lamp.

Jalaal points at the empty wall above my bed. "You can put up any posters you want."

I do not tell Jalaal I couldn't bring my posters. My mother said posters don't do well in suitcases, so my all-time favorite cricket stars—Omar Khan, Waqas Akram, and Arham Afridi—are still hanging on my wall back home. I look at Jalaal's sports wall and ask, "Does America have any cricket teams?"

Jalaal shakes his head. "Not any professional teams. There're a few local teams. Just adults, though." He shrugs and picks up a ball from his dresser. "Baseball is America's version of cricket. Sort of."

So that is what it's called—*baseball*.

Jalaal tosses the ball a little to my left, and I reach out and snatch it.

"Not bad, little buddy."

There is that phrase again, so I have to ask: "What does *buddy* mean?"

Jalaal smiles. "It means 'friend.'"

I am glad Jalaal thinks of me as his friend, although I am not little. Compared to Jalaal, I guess I am. But I was one of the tallest players on my cricket team this year.

I smile back at Jalaal and say, "I will call you 'big buddy.'"

He laughs, so I think he likes his new nickname.

I pass this baseball from one hand to the other. It's about the same size as a cricket ball, but not as heavy. Instead of two straight lines of stitches around the center, this one has two wavy lines, one like a frown and one like a smile. I look back

at the white, round pillows on the beds and realize they are made to look like baseballs.

Jalaal holds up his hands, palms out, the universal sign for “Throw me the ball.” So I do.

He catches it easily, almost like an afterthought. Plunging a hand into the pile of clothes on his bed, he fishes out a folded piece of padded leather. “Come on—let’s go out back.”

When we get to the bottom of the stairs, Auntie calls out, “I hope you’re hungry!”

My mother turns as Jalaal and I walk past the kitchen. “Wait until you taste the *iftar* feast Auntie has prepared, Bilal! She even has a special birthday surprise for you.”

I smell masala and am relieved that we are having something normal. I have heard Americans eat hot dogs, but I do not want to try those. We don’t eat dog meat in Pakistan.

Jalaal opens the back door, and we step out onto a wooden terrace to the sound of some kind of motor. A man next door pushes the handle of a grass-cutting machine—Jalaal calls it a *lawn mower*. The motor is so loud that Jalaal has to yell: “This way!”

Three steps down from the terrace and we’re standing on a carpet of green grass—not a single patch of dirt or sand. The grass-cutting motor fades as the man pushes the machine from the back of his house to the front.

“Here, put this on.” Jalaal opens the padded leather pouch, and I stare at it.

“What is it?”

Jalaal grins. “A glove. All baseball players wear them out on the field. And the catcher, of course.”

“*The* catcher? There is only one?”

“Yup.”

I frown. In cricket, many players are allowed to catch the ball, not just one.

“Why do the baseball players on the field all wear gloves if only one of them can be the catcher?”

Jalaal tilts his head. “That’s actually a great question.”

I can tell it is not a great question.

Jalaal clears his throat. “The catcher is the one who stands behind the batter—kind of like the wicketkeeper in cricket. Any player on the field can catch the ball; they’re just not called *catchers*.”

“Oh. I understand.”

But I don’t really. It doesn’t make sense—if many players are allowed to catch the ball, then why is only one called *catcher*?

Jalaal slips his left hand into his glove and punches it a few times with his right fist. “You don’t wear a glove for batting, like you do in cricket. It’s only for catching the ball.” He takes off his glove and holds it out. “Try it.”

As soon as I slip my right hand into the glove, Jalaal shakes his head. “No, no—the other hand, like this.” He pulls off the glove, slides it onto my left hand, and puts the ball into my right. “There. Like that.”

I wiggle my fingers, lost in the huge glove. “Actually . . .,” I start. I pull off the glove. “I need to throw with my other hand.”

“Oh—you’re a lefty!”

He says this in English, and I am pleased I know the words. I haven’t heard of *lefty*, but I know *left* and can figure out what he meant.

“Hold on—I think there’s another glove in the garage.”

Jalaal trots off and comes right back with another glove. “This is my buddy’s glove—he’s a lefty, too.”

When I put the lefty glove on my right hand, it still feels funny. All the fingers on the glove are stitched together, so I can’t spread them apart. And the space for fingers is twice as long as my own fingers. Jalaal’s other buddy must be a really big one.

Jalaal jogs over to a spot by the fence and punches his hand into his glove. “Ready! Go ahead—pitch me the ball.”

I look at the soft grass. How is the ball supposed to bounce on grass? Maybe baseballs are specially made for grass bouncing. As a fast bowler in cricket, I’ll need more room for my run-up. I back all the way to the other side of the fence.

It is hard to know how to hold this ball with these crazy, wavy stitches. I place two fingers on the top and my thumb at the bottom, and then I take off across the yard.

Jalaal’s eyes widen as I race toward him. Most kids look this way when I bowl in cricket because they all know I am fast. When I get about halfway across the yard, I wind my arm and throw the ball downward, like I always do. This is when I find out baseballs do not bounce. The ball thuds and rolls toward Jalaal, coming to a pitiful stop at his feet.

Jalaal scoops it up. “I forgot to tell you that a baseball pitch is different from a cricket pitch. There’s no run-up, and it’s not supposed to bounce.”

My shoulders slump, but I try to smile even though this baseball game is not easy to understand.

“Let’s just toss the ball back and forth. We can work on pitching later.”

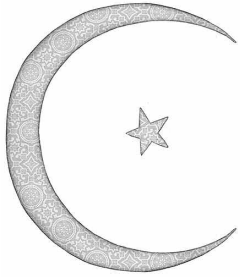
Squinting into the fat, orange sun, I step to the right so

the big tree behind Jalaal blocks some of the light. “Okay. I am ready.”

Jalaal throws the ball overhand like I did, but instead of throwing toward the ground, he launches it to my left.

I know I can catch it.

But when I step to the left out of the tree’s shade, the white ball is swallowed by sunlight. I hold my glove out to where I think the ball must be. I feel the ball before I see it: a weight that slaps the fingertips of my glove, skips over the top, and lands smack on my face. On my left eye, to be exact.



Three

I sit down hard.

“Bilal! Are you okay?”

Jalaal’s voice is getting closer, but I can’t see him because I am holding my eye, with the other one squeezed shut. I do not cry, but maybe that is because I am ten now, not nine. Or maybe it is because I am too stunned. Or maybe when a baseball hits you in the eye, your tears stop working.

I feel Jalaal’s arms lift me from behind, and I am standing again, eyes still shut.

“Can you open that eye?”

The very last thing I want to do in this moment is open my left eye. So I open my right to find Jalaal leaning over, hands propped on his knees, peering into my good eye. He scrunches up his eyebrows.

“And the other one?” He winces. “Can you open it?”

My eye swells, a tender bump already poking into my cupped palm. I slowly remove my hand. Jalaal shakes his head.

“What?” I say, trying to sound brave. “Is it bad?”

Jalaal draws in a deep breath, then puffs his cheeks as he lets the air out. He narrows his eyes and stands up straight, hands on his waist. “I think it just needs some ice. You’ll be fine.”

I don’t feel like I am going to be fine at all. My eye throbs, and the bump is getting even bigger, like I am growing a second head.

I follow Jalaal back inside. When we reach the kitchen, my mother gasps. “Bilal!” She rushes over, holding Humza on one hip, and takes my chin in her hand. “What happened?”

“Lal?” Humza reaches for my face, but Ammi tucks his arm back at his side.

“I was trying to catch the ball, and—”

“It was my fault,” Jalaal cuts in. “A bad throw.” Cold air wafts from the open freezer as Jalaal dumps a handful of ice into a plastic bag.

“Jalaal!” Auntie takes my hand and makes a clucking sound. “The poor child must be exhausted from his trip. He’s in no condition to be playing baseball!”

I realize Hira has also come into the kitchen when I hear her shriek. This does not make me feel any better. She comes up and stands on her toes to inspect my eye. “Does it hurt?”

“Of course it hurts,” my mother answers.

Hira leans in. “Can I touch it?”

“Touch what?” Now my uncle joins the crowd gaping at my eye. He whistles, long and low. “What happened, Bilal?”

Jalaal and I both say, “It was my fault,” at exactly the same time, just as Auntie says, “It was Jalaal’s doing.”

I feel sorry for Jalaal and want to give him a look that says I don't blame him. But by this time my mother is pressing the ice pack onto my eye, and I have to squeeze my good eye shut so I won't cry out like a baby.

"Hold that there, Bilal," my mother says.

Auntie makes a clucking sound again and glances at the clock. "Only seven thirty—another hour until sunset. Are you hungry now, Bilal?"

"No, thank you, Auntie. I can wait." Auntie must think I am fasting for Ramadan, which makes me feel grown-up. I wanted to try fasting this year, but Ammi said to wait for next year.

I don't think I could eat anything now, anyway; my stomach feels like it is bobbing on the Arabian Sea. I look at the clock with my good eye and try to figure out what time it is back home. How can it be seven thirty in the evening when the sun is still in the sky? I hold the ice pack on my eye.

Ammi explains daylight saving time, which stretches the daylight an extra hour in the evenings. I wonder how American Muslims can wait so long to break their fast.

When the sun finally sinks behind the fence, we sit around the kitchen table. After we thank Allah and Auntie for the food, I dig into the *biryani* first. My mother makes an *mmm* sound with the first bite. "What a pleasure to have home-cooked food after those airplane meals," she says.

Hira grins through a mouthful of chicken *jalfrezi*. "Ammi, I'm going to summer camp next week, and I will meet so many friends!"

My mother smiles. "Your auntie told me. That is very kind of your uncle and auntie to send you."

"Camp?" I ask.

“Muslim Girl Scout camp,” Auntie explains. “In the mornings, starting on Monday.”

“Auntie says a Girl Scout learns many things,” Hira says. “Including English.”

Since I am four years older than Hira, I know more English words than she does. Not that I would go to a camp called Girl Scout. But whenever I played cricket against the boys at the International School of Karachi, I understood most of their English words.

“Bilal,” Uncle says, “don’t think we’ve left you out! You’re signed up for summer baseball camp.” He smiles like this is the best news in the world.

I glance at my mother, and although she is smiling, I know she is worried, because she starts fiddling with her wedding ring.

My eye feels as big as a baseball, but I say to my uncle, “Um, thank you, Mamoo. That is very kind of you.”

Uncle waves his fork in my direction. “You are a talented cricket player, Bilal—I know this from your father. I have no doubt you will make him just as proud on the baseball diamond as you do on the cricket pitch.”

“*Inshallah*, Mamoo,” I say. *If Allah wills it.*

But if He doesn’t, that would be okay with me, too.

Jalaal nods through a bite of food, then switches to English. “You’ve got tons of potential, Bilal.”

I am not sure what *potential* means. But if it’s what you need to play baseball, then I am sure I do not have any.

I look at my mother and try to make my one good eye ask, “What about cricket?” but I think she is looking only at my bad eye, because her smile is not quite as wide as it was a minute ago.

After dinner Auntie carries out a cake blazing with ten candles and sets it in front of me. The singing starts, and Hira's voice is the loudest by far. I close my eyes. Everyone probably thinks I am deciding on a wish. But my eyes are not closed for wishing—I already have a wish. My eyes are closed so I can pretend my father is here, singing and clapping along with us.

My birthday gifts are all about baseball—I receive a bat, a ball, and a glove that Uncle says he'll exchange for a lefty glove before baseball camp starts next week. Jalaal gives me a baseball cap exactly like the one he wears—dark blue with a red *W* outlined in white. He says the *W* stands for the Washington Nationals, but the loopy *W* looks like the Arabic writing for Allah. When I ask if this team is blessed by Allah, Jalaal says, "Not since 1924, when they last won the World Series."

"*Shukriya*—thank you to all of you," I say. I know that everyone is trying to make my birthday special. But I want this day to be over. I am thinking of a polite way to say that I just want to go up to bed when a loud pop makes me jump. Humza drops the empty gift box he was playing with and cries. I scoop him up and let him pull my cap off my head. I've heard gunshots in Karachi—sometimes from bad guys, but usually for celebrations like when our neighbor, Mr. Fahd, got married. Auntie and Uncle are grinning, so maybe one of their neighbors just got married, too.

Hira races down the hall and flings open the front door. "Fireworks!" By the time we step outside, she's already running across the lawn toward the street.

"Hira!" Ammi calls, but she does not sound angry. "Wait for us!"

We all help pull chairs from the garage and set them up on

the lawn. Other neighbors do the same as they wave and call, “Happy Fourth!”

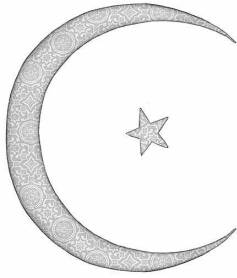
My uncle points off in the distance, where another set of fireworks explodes before shimmering back down to earth. “The local high school puts on a show each year.” He waves at some neighbors sitting in chairs on their lawn. “We’ve got the best view right here!”

Jalaal jogs over to some teenagers who stand in the street. He motions for me to join, but I pretend not to see his invitation as I adjust my chair and sit down. I don’t want to insult Jalaal, or my aunt and uncle, but it feels wrong to act happy today. I don’t want to share my birthday with America; I want to share it with my family—including Baba—and Mudassar and my cricket teammates and my neighbors. I want to play cricket, not baseball. I want to laugh with my friends as we watch tourists try to balance on the camels that strut down Seaview. I want to jog down to the corner shop to buy a samosa instead of floating on a chair in a sea of American houses and lawns and driveways.

To watch Hira, you would think she’s not missing home at all. She has already met a girl her age called Lizzie, and they shout and turn cartwheels after each set of fireworks lights up the inky sky. Humza is happy chasing Hira and Lizzie, falling every two or three steps in the grass and picking himself up again.

My mother pats my hand but does not look at me, and that is when I know her heart feels like mine.

Our hearts want to go home.



Four

My eyes open before the dawn is awake on my first morning in America. From under my sheets I listen to waking-up sounds: creaking floors, soft footfalls, calls of “*Eid Mubarak*—Happy Eid!” For a moment I forget Baba is not here with us. And then weak strains of a muezzin’s call to prayer drift upstairs from the TV. The call to prayer from our mosque’s minarets back in Karachi flows through the streets and floats in through the windows, filling up the room. I wonder if it is prayer time back home.

Jalaal’s alarm goes off—a thunk followed by a cheering crowd. He groans, fumbles for his phone on his nightstand, and silences the roaring fans. He sits up, a smudge in the dark room. He doesn’t speak at first, and I wonder if he’s fallen asleep sitting up. Then he rubs his face. “You awake, little buddy?”

“Yes.” I pull back the sheet and swing my legs over the side of the bed.

Uncle's voice calls softly from the other side of the door: "*Eid Mubarak!*" In he steps, still in pajamas.

"*Eid Mubarak, Baba,*" Jalaal says. They hug three times, then hug me three times. Seeing Uncle's *janamaz* tucked under his arm reminds me to get my own prayer mat from my suitcase.

After doing *wudu*, washing before prayer, we carry our mats downstairs into the living room and lay them out, side by side.

Everything in America is so different from Karachi. But as we recite the *Fajr* prayers, standing, then kneeling, then touching our foreheads to our prayer mats, it feels like home. If I close my eyes, I can imagine Baba right here with us.

The rest of the morning is full of *sames* and *differents*. I sink my teeth into the *sheer khurma*, and it tastes like home. The creamy milk pudding filled with thread-thin noodles, plump raisins, crunchy pistachios, and spicy cardamom is the same. But then, instead of a five-minute walk to our neighborhood mosque filled with faces I've known ever since I can remember, we drive twenty minutes to a mosque crowded with strangers.

I thought being at the mosque would feel familiar, but it does not. Lots of people there don't look like me at all. Baba has told me there are Muslims all over the world, but I am still surprised to see people who look like they come from Africa or China or even America. A thousand happy voices fill the mosque's huge entrance with greetings and laughter, and there is lots of hugging, just like home. Many people are speaking in Urdu, and I overhear some English and Arabic, too. But a few conversations are in languages I have never heard.

Some ladies are dressed like Ammi and Auntie in colorful *shalwar kameez* trousers and long shirts, their heads loosely covered with sparkly *dupatta* scarves. Others wear long dresses

with tighter headscarves that hide all their hair. A few ladies are so covered up that only their eyes show through narrow openings in black cloth. We break off to go to separate prayer rooms—me with Uncle and Jalaal; Ammi and Auntie with Hira and Humza.

After prayers, we go from house to house—each filled with friends of Uncle and Auntie, but they are all strangers to me. At each stop there's more *sheer khurma*—always the same. But nothing is the same.

The part of this day I look forward to most is something that has never been a part of a single Eid celebration—Skyping with my father.



We gather on the living-room carpet at a low table, the computer in the middle where Humza and his sippy cup of juice can't reach the keyboard. Uncle taps some keys, and the computer makes a *boop-BEE-boop* sound. Most of the screen is black, except for a tiny window in the corner showing our faces crowded together in front of the computer. When Hira sees herself, she grins and leans closer, propping her elbows on the table and crowding me out.

“Give your brother some room,” Ammi says.

Usually that would be all the invitation I'd need to elbow my way back in, but I don't want Baba to see my black eye. Ammi says she doesn't want him to worry about us. When Baba sees my eye, he'll worry.

Hira frowns and sits back on the carpet with the rest of us. Humza doesn't even pay attention to the computer until he

hears: “*Asalaam waalaikum*—Hello!” My father’s voice sounds like he’s right here with us, but we still cannot see his face. “How beautiful you all look!” I can hear the smile in his voice, but I want to see it for myself. Humza must want to see Baba’s face, too, because he tries to crawl on top of the table toward the computer.

“*Bhai jaan*, my brother!” Uncle smiles and points to a small icon on our screen, even though I know Baba can’t see it from our side. “Click on the camera—yours has a red line through it.”

A few seconds pass before Baba says, “Ah! It is here. Can you see me now?” The black on the screen fades, replaced by my father’s face. He looks confused, like he’s peering into a deep, endless hole.

We cheer, and that answers Baba’s question.

“I do not know how long the power will be on,” Baba says, and it is only now that I realize the electricity here in America hasn’t gone out yet. Maybe it goes out at night when nobody notices.

Uncle leans in and says, “I will leave you, then, to speak to your lovely family, *Bhai jaan*. *Eid Mubarak*. I only wish you could spend it with us.”

Baba nods but does not speak. Sometimes my heart gets in the way of my words, and I think it is the same for Baba.

Uncle places his right hand over his heart. “Next year.” He smiles. “We will all celebrate together, *inshallah*.” He rises and slips from the room.

Baba reaches for the screen like he’s touching our faces to make sure it’s really us. Humza shrieks and claps his pudgy hands. Baba laughs.

My mother’s eyes shine at this gift of seeing Baba’s face.

“How is life in America? Tell me everything!”

Hira must have only heard the word *everything*, because she tells Baba every single last detail of our first twenty-four hours in America, from the green grass that tickles your bare feet to those furry, bushy-tailed rats—*squirrels*—that run everywhere here in Virginia.

When my mother finally gets a chance to talk, she is quick to praise Uncle and Auntie’s hospitality. Hearing how well we’ve been fed and how comfortable our beds are, my father looks less worried. His face loses some of its lines, and his shoulders relax.

“How was the feast?” Ammi asks.

“We missed you.” Baba’s smile is sad.

It is strange to think that Baba, Daddo, and everyone in Pakistan have already celebrated the end of Ramadan, when our celebration is just starting.

Behind Baba, Daddo pads into the room, wearing her nightdress and carrying a glass of water. Her face breaks into a smile when she sees us.

“Daddo!” Hira cries, waving both hands.

My grandmother leans toward the screen, close enough that I can see the threads of silver woven through her black braid. She sighs. “I made entirely too much *jalebi* for the feast this year.”

Mentioning my favorite dessert is Daddo’s way of saying that she misses me, so I say, “We miss you, too, Daddo.”

She blows us more kisses and then says, “I am putting these weary bones to bed. *Eid Mubarak* to all!”

She pats Baba’s shoulder. “Good night, my son.” He pats Daddo’s hand before she turns and heads to bed. I think of all

the times she told stories to me before bedtime, and I wish she were here with us now.

Hira starts talking again. Listening to her, you'd think we were on vacation, having a great time. Except I am not having a great time. I should be back in our kitchen with Baba right now, sneaking a crunchy crust of a leftover samosa when Daddo isn't looking.

"Bilal?" My father's voice calls through the computer, and I realize now that my mother, Hira, and even Humza are looking at me, waiting. For what, I'm not sure. Did Baba ask me a question? I blink.

"I'm here, Baba." I move closer to the screen. For the past two days, I have been planning out all the things I want to tell Baba, and now I cannot think of a single one.

Hira, who obviously does not share my problem, blurts out, "Guess what, Baba? We saw fireworks, and I met a new friend! Her name is Lizzie."

Baba smiles. "How lucky Lizzie is to have you as a friend."

"And I am going to start Girl Scout camp on Monday. Auntie says I'll get to do swimming and make friendship bracelets and catch butterflies!"

My mother slips her arm around Hira's shoulders. "Let's give Bilal a chance now, *baytee*." She catches my eye and I smile my thanks. Ammi understands that Baba and I need time to talk without little kids around. Holding Humza on one hip, she steers Hira from the room. My sister protests: "But I didn't get to tell him that Girl Scouts go camping!" Her voice fades into the next room, and I turn back to the screen.

Baba leans forward and squints. "Bilal, what happened to your eye?"

I hope my voice sounds light when I say, “Oh, this? It is nothing.” I shrug and force a grin.

“How did you get a black eye?” I hear worry in his voice as lines reappear across his forehead.

“I was playing baseball with Jalaal. Baba, do you know about baseball?” I talk faster and faster, hoping he’ll forget about my eye. “It’s a little bit like cricket. Next week I start baseball camp to learn how to play.”

Baba tilts his head. “I have heard of baseball, but I am afraid I don’t know much about it.”

“That’s okay, Baba. Neither do I.”

Baba smiles. “You are a fine athlete, my son. You will learn this baseball game quickly.”

I nod, but I am not so sure. And I don’t want to waste my Skype time with Baba talking about baseball.

When Baba opens his mouth to say something, I blurt out, “When are you coming?”

Baba’s lips form a straight line. Then he sighs. “As soon as I can, Bilal. I am waiting for a visa—permission from the government.”

“But why did Ammi, Hira, Humza, and I get to come when you have to wait?”

Baba doesn’t speak at first, like he is trying to think of the right words. And then he says, “A friend of mine in the passport office was able to arrange your visas quickly because your mother’s brother already lives in America.”

“So when can you get yours?”

“There is something at work that I must finish first.” Baba takes off his glasses, cleans them with his shirt, and then slips them back on. “And it may take a while.”

I know the “something at work” has to do with Mudassar’s father.

Baba sighs. “Things are complicated right now.”

I am about to say that I am old enough to hear about complicated things when Baba leans toward the screen. “I am sorry about your birthday party, Bilal *jaan*.”

I don’t know if I can get any words out, so I nod for now.

“I called everyone and explained that something came up unexpectedly.”

“Did you call Mudassar, too?” What I really want to ask is if Baba and Mudassar’s father are friends again, and if not, why?

Baba pauses. “Bilal *jaan*, there is something that you must know. Something that I cannot fully explain. Not yet.”

Baba is not talking about my birthday party anymore.

“For now, you can have no contact with Mudassar.”

I stare at the screen. How can such a thing come from Baba’s mouth? “What do you mean? Why, Baba?”

“It will not be forever. His father and I have some things to sort out.”

I want to ask how long I have to wait to talk to Mudassar—a few days? A week? But I can tell from Baba’s tone that this subject is closed.

Instead, I say, “I think I am already forgetting.”

“Forgetting?”

My shoulders slump. “About home. I mean, I remember what everything looks like. But we only just left, and already I am forgetting what home sounds like, what it smells like.”

Baba seems to consider my question. Then his eyes smile. “Today smelled like rain. Loud rain—too much rain! Our first proper monsoon of the season.”

“Did Mrs. Ahmed get her laundry in time?”

Baba nods. “Luckily for my ears, today she remembered.”

I grin. No one ever sees Mrs. Ahmed’s laundry because she puts it out to dry on her balcony directly below ours. But when she forgets to bring it in during monsoon season and the rain soaks it through, even Mr. Ali can hear her shouting nine floors below when he reopens his tea cart after the rain.

My grin fades. “What if I forget everything?”

“You won’t, Bilal *jaan*.”

For the second time in my life, I don’t know if I believe my father.

Then I have an idea. “Stay right here, Baba.”

He laughs. “Where else would I go?”

I race from the room, grab the pad of paper and pencil near the kitchen phone, and then dart back to the computer screen.

I jot something down on the pad and then hold it up.

Baba leans in, adjusts his glasses, and reads my writing:

- The smell of rain during monsoon season
- Mrs. Ahmed’s laundry-screeching voice

I place the pencil and paper on the table, next to the keyboard. “When we talk or write, I will trade you one new thing in America for one Karachi memory. That way, you will know what to expect when you get here, and I will remember everything about Karachi.”

“I like that idea.” Baba nods, and holds up a hand. “Stay right here.”

I laugh. “Where else would I go?”

Baba disappears for a few seconds, and then he’s back in

front of the screen, holding up a notebook and a pen. “I’ve given you one memory—no, two! Now it is your turn.”

How to begin? Everything is new here—I could list a million things. “You told me today smelled like rain. In America, it smells like cut grass. Gardens here have grass carpets called *lawns*, and people like to cut the grass with a machine. And if the cut grass gets on the sidewalk, they blow it away with another machine.”

Baba shakes his head like he can’t believe such a thing. He writes on his paper, then holds it up for me to see:

• *The scent of cut grass*

“I have started my list,” Baba declares. “When I miss you, which is a hundred times a day, I will look at the list and it will feel like I am right there with you.”

I hold up my thumb to the computer’s camera for Baba to see. “In America, a thumb sticking up means something is good. Jalaal told me.” I raise my other thumb and grin. “Your idea is a two-thumbs-up idea.”

I wait to see how Baba reacts, because a thumb up in Pakistan is definitely not the kind of gesture for good ideas. In fact, Mudassar got sent home from school one time when he did this to Yusef, who said Mudassar’s sister smelled like a camel.

Baba’s eyes grow wide, and then he laughs louder and longer than I have heard him laugh for many months. I laugh, too, and soon we are both wiping away tears and catching our breath.

“I don’t recommend you share this new custom with Daddo. Your grandmother would not appreciate the humor

like we do.” Baba picks up his pen. “But I have heard of this American gesture. I am going to write that down.”

My mother’s voice calls from the kitchen. “Bilal, time to let your father go to sleep. It is the middle of the night back home.”

I sigh.

Baba laughs. “Tell your mother I heard that. And she is right. We will talk again tomorrow.”

“Okay. Good night, Baba.”

“Take care of that eye.”

“I will.”

He blows me a kiss, and I catch it and press it on my heart. I blow him one back, and he does the same.

My hand hovers over the touch pad before I guide the cursor to the icon of the red phone, but I don’t want to click it.

Baba must feel the same way, because he says, “On three, okay?”

I nod.

“One, two . . . three.”

I still don’t click on the red phone, but Baba does, because there’s a *booping* sound, and then he’s gone.

The clanking of pots and spoons drifts in from the kitchen, mixed with Ammi and Auntie’s laughter. Usually the feast is my favorite part of Eid, even though we have to dress up. There will be gifts of money for my sister and brother, my cousin, and me. We’ll drink *lassi*, made of sweet yogurt, and eat until our stomachs won’t hold another bite. Then we’ll have dessert.

But today I have already had my favorite part of Eid—Skyping with Baba.