March 1959

Prologue

Dear Husband,
I lost our children today.

Outside the courthouse Rehana bought two kites, one red and one blue, from Khan Brothers Variety Store and Confectioners. The man behind the counter wrapped them up in brown paper and jute ribbon. Rehana tucked the packets under her arm and hailed a rickshaw. As she was climbing in, she saw the lawyer running towards her.

'Mrs Haque, I am very sorry.' He sounded sincere.

Rehana couldn't bring herself to say it was all right.

'You must find some money. That is the only way. Find some money, and then we will try again. These bastards don't move without a little grease.'

Money. Rehana stepped into the rickshaw and lifted the hood over her head. 'Dhanmondi,' she said, her voice in a thin quiver. 'Road Number 5.'

When she got home, the children were sitting together on the sofa with their knees lined up. Maya's feet hovered above the floor. Sohail was looking down at his palms and counting the very small lines. He saw Rehana and smiled but did not rise from his chair, or call out, as Maya did, 'Ammoo! Why were you so long?'

Rehana had decided it would not be wise to cry in front of the children, so she had done her crying in the rickshaw, in sobs that caused her to hold on to the narrow frame of the seat and open her mouth in a loud, wailing O. The rickshaw-puller had turned around and asked, as if he was genuinely concerned, whether she would like to stop for a glass of water. Rehana had never tasted roadside water. She refused him mutely, wondering if he had children, a thought that made her lean her head against the side of the rickshaw hood and knock repeatedly in time to the bumps on the road. Now, confronted with the sight of them, she fought the pinch in her jaw and the acrid taste that flooded her mouth. She fought the fierce stinging of her eyes, the closing of her throat. She fought all of these as she handed them the wrapped-up, triangular packets.

'Thank you, Ammoo jaan,' Maya said, ripping into hers. Sohail did not open his. He rested it on his lap and stroked the brown paper.

'You are going to live with Faiz Chacha,' Rehana said evenly. 'In Lahore.'

'Lahore!' Maya said.

'I'm so sorry,' Rehana said to her son.

'When will we come back?'

'Soon, I promise.' Pray to God, she wanted to say. 'They are coming for you on Thursday.'

'I don't want to.'

Rehana bit down on her tongue. 'You have to go,' she said. 'Go and be brave. You can fly your kite, beta, and I will see it, all the way from Lahore. It's a special kite. You have to be very good. Very good and very brave. Only the bravest children get windy days. And one day it will be so windy you will fly all the way back to me. You don't believe me? Wait and see.'

Dear Husband,
Our children are no longer our children.

How would she begin to tell him?

She got back into the rickshaw with the children. 'Azimpur Koborstan,' she said.

The graveyard was dotted with dusk mourners. They tossed flowers on the wet pelts of grass that grew over their loved ones. In the next row a man with a white cap cried into his hands. Beside him, an old woman clutched a spray of bokul.

Rehana held the round palms of her children.

'Say goodbye to your father,' she said, pointing to Iqbal's grave.

Sohail raised his fingers to his face. 'La-ill'ahah Ill'allah.'

'Maya, you too.'

My children are no longer my children.

The judge said Rehana had not properly coped with the death of her husband. She was too young to take care of the children on her own. She had not taught them the proper lessons about Jannat and the afterlife.

Maya chased a butterfly into the next row. Rehana seized her elbow. 'Say goodbye to your father.'

'Goodbye, Abboo,' Maya said, her eyes liquid, moving with the butterfly.

'Mrs Haque,' the judge had asked, 'what would your husband want?'

He would want them to be safe, she had said. Yes, he would want them to be safe.

Faiz had said, 'It's not safe here, milord. Martial law, strikes, people on the streets – not safe. That is why my wife and I want to take the children to Lahore.'

Lahore, the garden city with new roads and perfect buildings. It was a thousand miles away on the other side of India. Faiz was her husband's elder brother. He was a barrister, and very

rich. His wife was tall, pouty-lipped and barren. She looked hungrily at the children.

Faiz had never liked Rehana. It had something to do with Iqbal's devotion to her. Leaving her slippers outside the bathroom door when she went to bathe. Pressing her feet with olive oil. Speaking only in gentle tones. Everyone noticed; Faiz would say, *Brother, you are spoiling your wife*, and Mrs Chowdhury, who lived opposite their house in Dhanmondi, would sigh and declare, *Your husband is a saint*.

Faiz told the story about the coin. That eight years ago Iqbal had been presented with a proposal of marriage to one Rehana Ali of Calcutta, a young woman from an aristocratic family whose father had lost an immense fortune to bad counsel and even worse luck. Iqbal was already thirty-six; he had a successful insurance business – why not marry? Why not indeed. He had tossed a coin, glanced quickly at the result and gone to sleep. The next morning he sent a message to say he agreed.

Rehana had never believed this story, because Iqbal was not the type to gamble. He was an insurance man; he dealt in security. The avoidance of accident. The sidestepping of consequence. Perhaps he had been different before he married. Perhaps that was why Faiz was upset. His brother was no longer his brother.

She should have burned some chillies and circled them over his head. Or slaughtered a goat, at the very least. But she hadn't done either, and so he had died, sinking to his knees in front of the house one January day, his walking stick rolling into the gutter, his hand over his waistcoat searching for the pocket watch, as though he wanted to record the hour of his leaving her. 'Maf kar do,' he whispered to her. *Forgive me.*

And there she was, a widow, nothing to recommend her, no family near by. Her parents were dead; her three sisters lived in Karachi. That was when Faiz and Parveen had offered to take the children. Rehana could see them during the holidays. 'Just

for a few years,' Parveen said, 'Give you time to recover.' As though it were an illness, something curable, like what was happening to the country.

When Rehana refused, Faiz and Parveen had taken the matter to court.

'Milord,' Faiz said to the judge, 'Mrs Haque is distressed; she needs her rest. We are thinking only of the children.'

She had married a man she had not expected to love; loved a man she had not expected to lose; lived a life of moderation, a life of few surprises. She had asked her father to find her a husband with little ambition. Someone whose fortunes had nowhere to go.

It was getting dark; the gravestone shadows lapped at their feet.

'Ammoo, I'm hungry,' Maya said.

Rehana had thought to bring a packet of glucose biscuits. 'Here,' she said, peeling away the pink wrapper.

Sohail stood statue-still and stared into his father's grave. 'Let's go home,' he said.

'Just a few minutes.' She hadn't finished explaining it to Iqbal. 'Why don't you see if you can get those kites up?'

The children drifted to an empty field at the edge of the graveyard, unwinding the spools of thread attached to their kites.

Rehana began again.

Dear Husband,
I have given up the only thing you left me. When the judge asked me if I knew for certain whether I would be able to care for them, I could not bring myself to say yes. I was mute, and in my silence he saw my hesitation. That is why he gave them away. It was me; my fault. No other's. I don't blame your brother for wanting them. Who would not want them? They are the spitting image of you.

After the verdict, in that hot room with the dust-furred ceiling fans, the black shine of velvet benches, the tattered grey wig of the judge, she had fallen to her knees. She had not been able to convince anyone that even though she was poor, and friendless in this town and the only thing left to her was a wild, untamed plot of land so recently reclaimed from the paddy she had to burn the insects that marched on to her small bungalow porch every morning when she woke to pray, she could still be a mother to her children. She had not explained to the children where exactly their father had gone, and she had let them stay home from school, but she could still be their mother; she would find a way to overcome her grief, her poverty, her youth; she would find a way to love them all alone. But no one had believed her, and in a few weeks they would travel across the continent, and she didn't know when she would ever see them again.

Faiz and Parveen took the children to Lahore a few days later on Pakistan International Airlines Flight 010. Rehana watched them leave from an airport window made foggy by hair oil and goodbye fingerprints. She waved a small wave, wondering when the world would stop ending. Maya and Sohail, their kites tucked under their arms, fastened their seatbelts and sailed gracefully into the sky, crossing the flooded delta below.

The next day Parveen called to say they had arrived safely, but Rehana could hear very little aside from the crackle of the long-distance line, and the cultivated, genteel laugh that conveyed both confidence and an awkward regret.

In the days that followed, people came to see her: Iqbal's business acquaintances; old men claiming to be friends of her father; distant relatives with wagging, so-sorry tongues; her gin-rummy friends from the Dhaka Gymkhana Club; even the lawyer. Grief tourists, Rehana thought, and pretended not to hear them scratching at the door.

All but Mrs Chowdhury, who came dragging a sad, tearful daughter. She held Rehana in the rolling fat of her arms and scolded her daughter for sulking.

'Silvi, it's not the end of the world. They'll be back.' And then she turned to Rehana. 'At least you had a few good years. My bastard husband left me when I couldn't give him a son. Took one look at this one, and I never saw him again.'

Rehana sat immobile, staring into the garden. Mrs Chowdhury finally said, 'We should let the poor girl rest.'

Silvi idled behind the kitchen door. 'Nine years old!' Mrs Chowdhury cried out. 'Too old to sulk, too young to be heartbroken. What, you think no boy will ever ask to marry you again?'

'Let her stay,' Rehana said; 'we can eat together.' She tried to imagine what she might feed the child. She hadn't been shopping. There was just a weak, watery dal and some bitter gourd.

'You said we would see *Roman Holiday*.'

'Next time, Silvi, OK?'

'If they ever come back. OK.'

She left. Rehana didn't see her to the door.

Rehana watched the days go by. She began letters to Sohail and Maya:

The mangoes will be perfect this year. It has been hot and raining at all the right times. I can already smell the tree.

She threw that one away. She also threw away the one that began:

My dearest children, how I miss you.

She wrote cheerful, newsy letters. The children should not be confused. They should know these important facts:

She was going to get them back soon.

The world was still a generally friendly place.

Silvi had not forgotten them.

The neighbourhood was exactly as it had always been.

Her memories of the children were scrambled and vague. The more she clutched at them, the more distant they became. She tried to stick to facts: Maya's favourite colour is blue, Sohail's is red. Sohail has a small scar on his chin, just below the ridge. She had teased him and said, 'This is a scar only your wife will see, because she will stand just beneath you and look up,' and he had said, very seriously, 'What if she is a very tall girl?'

Her son had a sense of humour. No, he was completely unfunny. He barely ever smiled. Which was it?

She took comfort in telling them apart. She remembered which was the loud, demanding child, which the quiet, watchful one. The one who sang to birds to see if they would sing back. The one whose fingernails she had to check, because she liked the taste of mud. The one who caught chills, whether the day was cold or fiercely hot. The one who sucked red juice from the tiny flowers of the ixora bush. The one who spoke; the one who wouldn't; the one who loved Clark Gable; the one who loved Dilip Kumar, and stray dogs, and crows that landed on the gate with sharp, clicking talons, and milk-rice, and Baby ice-cream.

And she couldn't get off her mind all the times Iqbal had fretted over them, making them wear sweaters when it wasn't even cold, having the doctor visit every month to put his ear to their little chests, holding hands on busy roads and empty roads – *just in case, just in case, just in case*. And then there was that train journey that they almost didn't take.

It was Maya's fourth birthday, and Iqbal's new Vauxhall had just arrived from England. It was on a special consignment of fifty cars brought to Dhaka from the Vauxhall factory in Wandsworth, London, in 1957. Iqbal had seen an advertisement that told him about the smart new car with the restyled radiator and the winding handles. There was a photograph. He fell in love with the car: the smooth curves, the side-view mirrors that

jutted out of the frame. He imagined driving it into their garage, a big ribbon tied around the top, the horn blaring. But when it arrived, he was too nervous to drive the car and decided to leave it in the hands of a driver he hired for the purpose, an ex-employee of the British Consul-General who had driven His Excellency's Rolls-Royce and was an expert behind the wheel. His name was Kamal. It was Kamal who was driving the Vauxhall the day Maya waved to her father from the window of the Tejgaon–Phulbaria rail carriage.

As a special birthday treat for Maya, they had decided to take a train ride between a new station on the fringes of the city and Phulbaria Central; tracks had just been opened, and it was now a short trip from the brightly painted station built by a hopeful government to the crumbling colonial building that housed the old carriages of the Raj. It was to be their very first train ride.

On the appointed day Rehana made kabab rolls and Iqbal counted clouds, hoping to declare an incoming storm and cancel the whole affair. But there was only a cool October breeze and a scattering of lacy, translucent threads in the sky. Kamal started the car and opened the doors for them. Iqbal instructed everyone to sit in the back. Maya entered first, in her birthday dress, which Rehana had sewn of pale blue satin. There was a netted petticoat, which made the dress puff out at an unlikely angle. Blue ribbons were fastened to her hair, and she had managed to convince Rehana to dab her mouth with the lightest frost of pink lipstick; this she attempted to safeguard by keeping her lips held in a stiff pout. Rehana settled into the car, balancing the food on her lap, and motioned for Iqbal and Sohail to hurry up. But they were having some sort of argument outside.

'Abboo, there's no space at the back.'

'You can't sit in front, it's too dangerous.'

'Oof, Abboo, I'm not a baby any more!' Sohail stomped a foot on the ground.

'Accidents can happen, doesn't matter if you are big boy or small. Accident doesn't discriminate.'

Rehana rolled down the window. 'Sohail, do as your abboo says.'

In the end Sohail piled sullenly into the car, with Iqbal following. It was tight, with all four of them in the back. Maya's dress swelled out in front of her like a small blue high-tide. Iqbal's white sharkskin suit was getting crumpled. Really, Rehana thought, he should have just let the poor boy sit in front with the driver. It was so hot. She rolled down the window defiantly and motioned for Sohail to do the same on his side. Maya's ribbons lapped gently in the breeze.

By the time they had reached Tejgaon, Iqbal had begun to worry about the journey again. If they were stuck on the train, how would anyone know? What if Kamal was late in arriving at the station? He mentally calculated the odds of this happening. As Kamal drove them up to the Tejgaon Station, he had an idea.

'Rehana, you go with the children. I have decided to stay.'

'What's that?'

'I will stay in the car with Kamal. We'll drive beside the train. That way, if anything happens, you can just leave the train and ride in the car.' Ingenious!

So that is what they did. She remembered it clearly: the man in the car, his family on the train, the train carriage on the new rail line and the new foreign car on the adjacent road, the taste of kabab rolls and lemonade lingering lazily on their tongues, and her husband, beaming to himself, satisfied at last that no harm would come to his family, because he, Iqbal, had made absolutely sure.

March 1971

Shona with her back to the sun

Every year, Rehana held a party at Road 5 to mark the day she had returned to Dhaka with the children. She saved her meat rations and made biryani. She rented chairs and called the jilapi-wallah to fry the hot, looping sweets in the garden. There was a red-and-yellow tent in case of rain, lemonade in case of heat, cucumber salad, spicy yoghurt. The guests were always the same: her neighbour Mrs Chowdhury and her daughter Silvi; her tenants, the Senguptas, and their son, Mithun; and Mrs Rahman and Mrs Akram, better known as the gin-rummy ladies.

So, on the first morning of March, as on the first morning of every March for a decade, Rehana rose before dawn and slipped into the garden. She shivered a little and rubbed her elbows as she made her way across the lawn. Winter still lingered on the leaves and in the wisps of fog that rolled over the delta and hung low over the bungalow.

She dipped her fingers into the rosebush, heavy with dew, and plucked a flower. She held it in her hand as she wandered through the rest of the garden, ducking between the wall-hugging jasmine and the hibiscus, crossing the tiny vegetable patch that was giving them the last of the season's cauliflower, zigzagging past the mango tree, the lemon tree, the shouting-green banana tree.

She looked up at the building that would slowly, over the course of the day, cast a long shadow over her little bungalow. *Shona*. She could still hear Mrs Chowdhury telling her to build the new house at the back of her property. 'Such a big plot,' she'd said, peering out of the window; 'you can't even see the boundary it's so far away. You don't need all that space.'

'Should I sell it?'

Mrs Chowdhury snapped her tongue. 'Na, don't sell it.'

'Then what?'

'Build another house.'

'What would I do with another house?'

'Rent, my dear. Rent it out.'

Now there were two gates, two driveways, two houses. The new driveway was a narrow passage that opened into the back of Rehana's plot. On the plot stood the house she had built to save her children. It towered above the bungalow, its two white-washed storeys overlooking the smaller house. Like the bungalow, it had been built with its back to the sun. The house was nearly ten years old now, and a little faded. Ten monsoons had softened its edges and drawn meandering, old-age seams into the walls. But every day, as Rehana woke for the dawn Azaan, or when she went to put the washing in the garden, or when, after bathing, she fanned out her long hair on the back of a veranda chair, Rehana looked at the house with pride and a little ache. It was there to remind her of what she had lost, and what she had won. And how much the victory had cost. That is why she had named it *Shona*, gold. It wasn't just because of what it had taken to build the house, but for all the precious things she wanted never to lose again.

Rehana turned back to the bungalow and entered the drawing room. She ran her palm across the flat fur of the velvet sofa, the dimpled wood of the dining table. The scratched, loved, faded whitewash of the veranda wall.

She unfurled her prayer mat, pointed it westwards and sank to her knees.

This was the start of the ritual: wake before sunrise, feel her way around the house; pray; wake the children.

They were not children any more. She had to keep reminding herself of this fact. At nineteen and seventeen, they were almost grown up. She clung greedily to the *almost*, but she knew it would not last long, this hovering, flirting with adulthood. Already they were beings apart, fast on their way to shedding the fierce, hungry mother-need.

Rehana lifted the mosquito net and nudged Maya's shoulder. 'Wake up, jaan,' she said. 'It's our anniversary!'

She went to Sohail's room and knocked, but he was already awake. 'For you,' she said, holding out the rose.

While the children took turns in the bath, Rehana ironed their new clothes. This year she had chosen an egg-blue sari for herself and a blue georgette with yellow polka dots for Maya. For Sohail there was a brown kurta-pyjama. She had embroidered the purple flowers on the collar herself.

'Ammoo,' Maya said, 'I have to go to campus after the party – I can't wear this.'

'I'm sure your activist friends won't mind if you don't wear white for one day.'

'You wouldn't understand,' she retorted, tucking the sari under her elbow anyway.

After they had all bathed and put on their new clothes, the children took turns touching Rehana's feet. 'God bless you,' she said, hugging them tightly, their strong, tanned arms around her neck almost beyond her imagination.

They were both taller than her. Maya had passed Rehana by a few inches, and Sohail was a full head and shoulders above them both; Rehana was often reminded of the moment she'd met Iqbal, hunched over the wedding dais, how he had towered

over her like a thunder cloud. But in fact Sohail had grown to resemble Rehana. He was pale and had her small nose and her slightly crooked teeth; his hair was fashioned into a wave at the top of his head, the crest threatening to tip over his eyelids. Sometimes, like today, he wore kurta-pyjamas, but usually he was seen in more fashionable attire: tight, long-collared shirts and even tighter trousers that hung over his shoes and drew tracks in the dust.

It was Maya who looked more like her father. She had his chestnut skin and deep-set eyes that made her look serious even when she was trying to say something funny or make a joke – which rarely happened – but Rehana had often seen her friends pause and look at each other, wondering whether to laugh.

They took two rickshaws. Maya and Sohail climbed into the first and Rehana followed. She liked being behind them, watching their shoulders knocking through the rolled-up flap on the back of the rickshaw.

She hadn't seen her own sisters for years now. Marzia had come to Dhaka a few years after the children's return. She had brought photos of her own children, plump twin boys with big faces and windswept hair. She kept talking about the smell of salt in the Karachi streets, and the burned taste of kababs on Clifton Beach, and, even though she devoured Rehana's dimer halwa and swallowed the sweet Dhaka air with relish, she kept asking, again and again, why Rehana hadn't gone to live in Karachi when her husband had died. 'Everyone is there,' she'd said. 'Your whole family.'

When they parted at the airport Rehana had felt empty; she wanted to long for Marzia to stay, to cry and beg to be taken with her, but in the end she was just relieved to see her go. Marzia had behaved as though Rehana had betrayed them all; she had said things like, 'Your Urdu is not as good as it used to be; must be all that Bengali you're speaking.' She had pronounced it *Bungali*. And when she had referred to the

servants at her house, she had said, 'Yes, we're very lucky, we have two *Bungalis*; Rokeya only has one and it's never enough, you know, the houses out there are so big.'

Still, there wasn't a day that went by that Rehana didn't think of them, out there in the sprawling, parched western wing of their country. She held them to her by a loose bit of feeling, not fully connected, not entirely severed. She wrote them letters. *Dear sisters*, she would begin. She never finished one; she never sent one. She kept the letters in a biscuit tin under her bed, beside the winter blankets and the dried rice balls.

The rickshaws crossed Road 5 and made their way through Mirpur Road, blue-black and newly paved. The shops nudging the road were beginning to open, their shutters rattling up, the shopkeepers clearing their noses in the outside gutters.

A sign above the graveyard said WOMEN NO ADMITTANCE. Beside it, the caretaker leaned his elbow on a new length of wooden fencing painted a dull yellow and already smattered with flecks of mud. He gave Rehana a salaam and said, 'Hot day.' She nodded and gave him five annas. They wove through the gravestones. As she passed them, Rehana recognized old friends and noted a few new arrivals.

There was a man who had been visiting his wife every day for forty-three years. She had died, it was rumoured, in childbirth. The man was very old now, but he made the unsteady walk to his wife's grave, laid down a small square of pati and sat facing her for hours at a time. So Rehana had always considered herself the second-most devoted mourner at the graveyard. She had never met the man, but once, after he'd left, she had approached his wife's grave. BEGUM HAKIM ULLAH HOSSAIN, the headstone read, WIFE AND MOTHER.

Over the years Rehana had made sure Iqbal's was one of the best-tended squares in the graveyard. She began by doing what everyone else did: laying roses on his gravestone. But every time

she came back to find the sight of the rotten flowers, she felt she had somehow betrayed him. She didn't want to see dead things when she came to visit. So she planted a few seeds around the edge of the plot, and a few weeks later the tiny white jasmine flowers appeared, casting themselves resolutely upwards, as though pointing the way. Rehana came back regularly with her trowel and her watering can, trimming and perfecting the little white border.

Now she stood at the foot of Iqbal's grave, facing the headstone that said, in black letters, MUHAMMAD IQBAL HAQUE. Sohail was on her left, Maya on her right. They cupped their hands and held them up.

This was the part when her throat always tightened.

My dear Husband, she began. Here are your two grown children. Mahshallah, it is the tenth year of their return.

Your son is now nineteen. Your daughter is seventeen. They are healthy and obedient.

Last time I was here I told you about the elections. Right now we are waiting for Mujib to be declared Prime Minister. There have been many delays. Your children are waiting for the government to change. Inshallah, once that happens they will be able to return to their studies.

She paused, took a deep breath. Steadied herself.

There was so much more she could say. I still miss you every day. Why did you leave me all alone. Why.

But she didn't. If he was listening he would know it all anyway.

She pressed her palms to her face. Goodbye, Husband.

When she looked up, Rehana saw Sohail brush a few tears from his cheek. Maya was stroking the headstone. Then she bent down and kissed it at the top, where the dome was highest.

They returned to the bungalow to get ready for the guests. Maya dusted the drawing-room furniture, and Sohail helped the decorators to put up the tent in the garden. Rehana had made

the biryani the night before, layering the ingredients and sealing the pot with flour paste. It had taken six or seven hours to cook; now she peeled back the seal, lifted the lid, and mixed up the layers of meat, potato and rice so that they were evenly distributed.

She counted out the plates. There would be about twenty people altogether. She was always nervous before this party; since she'd stopped going to the Gymkhana Club, it was one of the few times a year she saw her friends.

They had understood her absence from the club after Iqbal's death. They came to her instead; Mrs Rahman, Rehana remembered, often brought cake. Hard, inedible cake that would sit brick-like on the dining table, collecting flies and scraps of dust. Mrs Chowdhury brought Silvi. And Mrs Akram, the youngest of them, skirted awkwardly around her, brushing the stink of bad fortune from the air with a flapping hand-fan.

After the children came back, there was, the gin-rummy ladies said, no reason for Rehana to stay away. So she tried once, a few months after she returned from Lahore, to revive the old group.

Mrs Chowdhury had been in a particularly festive mood that day, a smile playing in her eyes. 'I have a surprise!' she said to Rehana. Rehana had ignored her. Must be a new sweetshop she'd discovered. Best laddoos in town, she could almost hear her say. She felt awkward and nervous; it was hot inside, and the fans pulsing from the ceiling didn't seem to be doing much good. She had been to the club many times before, but suddenly it was all very strange, and she was a little annoyed with Mrs Chowdhury for appearing so cheerful.

The square card table was decorated with flower-patterned tiles. The names of the flowers were written underneath with a curling, feminine hand. Bougainvillea, they declared. English Rose. Daffodil.

Rehana had sat facing a row of yellow tulips. Across from her, Mrs Chowdhury was perched between the asters and the lilacs. Mrs Rahman shuffled over a row of dahlias. Mrs Akram made up the fourth, reapplying her lipstick in a thin sliver of mirror.

'OK,' Mrs Rahman said to Rehana. 'Cut.'

Rehana divided the stack in two. Mrs Rahman shuffled again, raising her arm high and bringing it down again with a slap.

'Face cards ten, low ace, as usual,' she said, tossing cards to the four corners of the table.

There was a knock. A waiter wearing a coat that used to be white came in with a tray of teacups and a plate of biscuits. 'Finally,' Mrs Chowdhury giggled. 'Just leave it here. No need to pour. Go. *Go*.' She lifted her bag from where it sat on the floor and pulled out a small silver flask. She unscrewed the top and tipped its tea-coloured contents into the four cups. She topped up the cups with real tea. Then like a chemist, she added milk. 'There we are!' she said with a flourish.

'What is it?' Mrs Akram asked, looking up from her mirror.

'Whisky, you idiot,' Mrs Rahman said.

'What's the matter with you – drink. God knows we deserve it.'

Rehana saw Mrs Rahman trying to catch her eye. No one moved; Mrs Chowdhury sighed and lifted a cup from the tray. 'All right, then, as you wish.' She looked up at the ceiling with its furry cornice. 'I just thought Rehana needed a little mischief. After all, she won't get married!'

This last statement caused Mrs Akram to giggle. She did it nervously, in muffled, half-snorting bursts, with a hand over her mouth.

Rehana could smell the sugary aroma of the whisky rising from the cups. 'All right,' she said. 'I'll have one.'

'Really?' Mrs Chowdhury almost squealed with joy.

'Yes, sure. I've tried it before.' Iqbal had once given her a

taste. He'd held the glass to her mouth, withdrawing it as soon as the liquid touched her lips. It was like a feverish kiss. She picked up the teacup now and sipped tentatively. The others saw her doing it and followed, smiling into their cups. Mrs Chowdhury gulped hers down and clapped.

They began to play. Rehana won the first game with four aces and a suite of hearts. Mrs Rahman won the second, and at the end of the third Mrs Chowdhury said, 'RUMMY!' but there was a four missing in her row of spades. She said it didn't matter, she'd brought the whisky, that had to count for something. Then Mrs Akram, who had to use two hands to hold up all of her cards, said, 'But it's still a mystery, no, why our Rehana here refuses to choose a bridegroom?'

Rehana thought Mrs Chowdhury would come to her defence, but she said, 'It's true, Rehana, we are always worried about you – what's the matter?'

Rehana found they were all pointing their faces at her with fixed, devouring stares. The whisky flooded into her stomach at that moment, as Rehana realized she no longer had the energy to laugh it off and be cheerful; she didn't want to blush and bite her lip and pretend to be coy. The truth was, she had no intention of remarrying. There was that one time she had considered it, before she'd built Shona. But ever since the children had returned, the urge to be loved in that way had disappeared from her altogether. It was too risky. It could too easily go wrong. And the thought that some man might be cruel to her children was enough to make the bile rise in her throat.

She didn't say any of this to the gin-rummy ladies. She just stopped attending the card parties. She complained of a headache, and then Maya caught the chicken pox, and so of course Sohail had to have it too, and soon they stopped asking altogether. By then Mrs Sengupta had taken her place at the table. Rehana tried to ignore her certainty that they were muttering about her refusal to marry and her general aloofness as they

tossed the cards to the middle of the table and sipped their whisky-studded tea. She knew she must seem strange and remote to them. That they must wonder what was wrong. But even if she tried to explain it to them she knew they could never understand. It had never happened to anyone else.

Mrs Chowdhury arrived first. From the kitchen Rehana heard her twisting the latch on the gate. 'Maya, keep an eye on the biryani,' she said, and hurried to the front door.

'Sweeten your tongue, Rehana,' Mrs Chowdhury said, squeezing through the doorway, 'I have some news!' She held out a box of laddoos. A tall man in a military uniform followed her in. Behind him was Mrs Chowdhury's daughter, Silvi, overdressed for the occasion in a ropy gold necklace and a pair of ruby earrings.

Mrs Chowdhury waved towards the uniformed man. 'My son-in-law!' she giggled, causing a ripple through her neck, her chin and her bottom lip. She stuffed a piece of laddoo into Rehana's mouth.

'Really – oh.' The laddoo was like a lump of candy; it travelled coldly down Rehana's throat. 'You told me you were accepting proposals, but I didn't know things would happen so quickly.' She swallowed and tried to smile. 'Congratulations.'

'Well – they're not engaged yet. But I wanted you to be the first to know.'

The uniformed man greeted her. 'As-Salaam Alaikum.' His mouth was rubber-band tight. Just above was the neatly sewn scar of a cleft lip.

'Walaikum As-Salaam,' Rehana replied. 'Please, come in, sit down.' She didn't quite know what to say next, so settled on more pleasantries. 'I'm very glad you could come.'

'Silvi, you sit here,' Mrs Chowdhury instructed, 'and jamai-babu, you sit beside her.'

Silvi and the uniformed man did as they were told.

'The boy came over last week,' Mrs Chowdhury whispered, 'with his mother and his aunt. Very handsome, don't you think? Doesn't talk very much, but then I was thinking, that is just perfect for my shy Silvi. They're two of a kind – and he's a lieutenant!' She tittered and the ripples returned, spreading to her cheeks.

Just as Rehana was trying to think of how she would break the news to Sohail, the Senguptas crossed the garden and knocked on the drawing-room window. Their son Mithun was in tow, dragging his feet in the grass.

'Hello – it's us.'

'Come in, come in,' Rehana said, grateful for the distraction.

Mrs Sengupta was wearing a peacock-blue sari and a sleeveless blouse that showed off her gleaming, ebony shoulders. Taller than her husband by at least three inches, she took advantage of her height by mounting a pair of platform heels and cutting her hair short so that it revealed the ridged length of her neck, which was adorned with a heavy gold mangalsutra, the ornament that identified her as married, and Hindu, and rich. Her husband, by contrast, was a squat man with tiny, wringing hands.

'Mithun, would you like some lemonade?' Rehana asked, turning her attention to the boy.

Mithun put a hot hand on Rehana's wrist. 'Tea, please. I have a headache.'

'I don't think you're allowed tea, beta.'

'No – that's right,' his mother said. 'What's got into you?'

'You said it was a *special occasion*.'

'True,' Rehana said. 'It is a special occasion. How about an orange cola?' She left to get the drinks while Mrs Chowdhury repeated her news to the Senguptas.

Sohail and Maya were slicing cucumbers in the kitchen.

Rehana's only thought was to get Sohail out of the house. She couldn't think beyond that; eventually he would have to

return, but she just needed time to come up with a way to tell him the news first, to somehow soften the blow. 'Sohail,' she said, 'I need you to pick up some sweets from Alauddin.'

'Aren't we having jilapi?'

She cleared her throat and attempted to sound bossy. 'I don't think it'll be enough – you know how people like a little something sweet after biryani.'

'It's all the way on the other side of town – I'll be at least an hour.'

'Don't worry, people will stay all afternoon. You'll be back in time.' She gave him a few notes. 'Take a rickshaw,' she said. He turned towards the drawing room, more irritated than suspicious. 'No, go out through the back or you'll be held up for hours if Mrs Chowdhury gets hold of you.' She watched him guiltily as he shrugged and ducked out of the kitchen.

Maya could not be duped. 'What's going on, Ammoo?' She sat squatting behind the curved blade of the boti, her polka-dot sari wound around her ankles.

Rehana peered out of the kitchen window to make sure Sohail was out of earshot. 'Silvi's getting married.'

'*What?*'

'I know. It's all of a sudden. I knew Mrs Chowdhury was looking for a boy, but they've hardly met.'

'And Silvi agreed?' Maya jabbed aggressively at her cucumber.

Rehana nodded.

'God. My poor brother. What should we do?'

'I don't know. Just make sure he doesn't bump into them when he comes back.'

In the drawing room Rehana found that Mrs Rahman and Mrs Akram had already arrived. The two went everywhere together, and always without their husbands or their children, wearing fugitive looks and sighing about escaping from home. Rehana was happy to see the room filling up; it made her resist the urge

to stare at Silvi and her fiancé. And now there was the food to distract them all.

'Lunch is ready,' she announced, setting the heavy tray of biryani on the table. The guests made their way across the room as Rehana filled up the plates and passed them around.

'A wedding in the neighbourhood,' Mrs Akram said; 'you must be the first – what fun we'll have!'

Rehana piled on the biryani. 'Let me take your plate, Mr Sengupta. You must have some more.' Rehana had prepared a special vegetarian dish for the Senguptas.

'Enough! Your tenants will be eating you out of house and home,' he protested, putting his hand over his plate.

'It's been ten years,' Rehana said. 'Time you stopped calling yourselves tenants.' She made for the kitchen to replenish the biryani.

Rehana found Silvi lingering in the corridor. 'It's really good this year, khala-moni.' She always addressed Rehana as khala-moni, as though Mrs Chowdhury and Rehana were real sisters. Silvi still had a pale, ashen complexion, though the pallor suited her; without it, her light eyes might have been eclipsed, but, as it was, they reflected the sun and shone like bright, chalky pinpoints.

'Thank you – I made it in such a hurry.' Rehana's eyes lingered on Silvi, searching for an answer to the question she couldn't bring herself to ask.

'I wouldn't have guessed – it's delicious. You make the best biryani in Dhaka.'

Rehana nodded, accepting the compliment. Silvi glanced down at herself and straightened her necklace.

There was a long silence. 'So. You're getting married,' Rehana said finally. She tried to sound cheerful.

'Yes, I …' Silvi stammered, 'well, my mother was worried. I don't like her to worry. She has high blood pressure, you know.'

'Well, she looks very pleased,' Rehana said. She cupped Silvi's

cheek, felt it yielding under her fingers. 'You've made her very happy.'

Sohail arrived with the sweets after the guests had collapsed under the shade of the tent. Rehana tried to intercept him at the gate, but she was carrying a handful of plates and Mrs Chowdhury got to him first.

'Sohail!' Mrs Chowdhury grabbed Sohail's arm. 'Where have you been? I have news. Silvi's getting married!'

Rehana saw Sohail brushing the hair back from his forehead with raking fingers. His other hand, holding the sweets box, rocked back and forth.

'Come, come, you must meet him. Sabeer, this is Mrs Haque's son, Sohail. A very old friend of Silvi – they were inseparable as children – Sohail, baba, this is Lieutenant Sabeer Mustafa.'

'Welcome to the family,' Sohail said.

'Thank you,' Sabeer replied, standing up and straightening his uniform.

'Sohail, jaan, will you help me with these plates?' Rehana attempted to hand him the stack.

'Well,' he said, ignoring her, 'I've just got tickets to tomorrow's cricket match. Pakistan vs England MCC.' He fanned out the tickets and waved them in the air. 'Who wants to come? Lieutenant, will you join us?'

'No, I'm afraid I'm on duty tomorrow,' Sabeer said.

'Silvi? Will you?' Sohail pointed the tickets at her.

'I don't think so,' Mrs Chowdhury said, jumping in. 'We have a lot of preparations to make.'

'I'll come,' Mrs Sengupta said cheerfully. 'Your mother will come too, won't you, Rehana?'

'I'll come as well. I'm afraid there's no room for you after all, Silvi,' Maya said pointedly. 'Another time perhaps.'

There was a long silence as Maya and Rehana finished clearing the rest of the plates. Rehana was hoping someone would begin

a conversation, something to change the subject, but no one was saying anything. Mrs Rahman and Mrs Akram passed around the box of sweets. Finally Mr Sengupta brought up everyone's favourite topic: the election.

'How are things on the student front, Sohail?' he asked.

'It's uncertain, Uncle,' Sohail replied, his eyes darting around the garden. 'It's been two months since Mujib won the election. They should have convened the national assembly by now and made him Prime Minister, but they keep delaying. Some of the students are urging Mujib to take more drastic action.' He suddenly looked weary; his shirtsleeves were crumpled, as though someone had grabbed his arms and pulled him into a tight embrace.

'Drastic action?'

'He should declare independence.'

'But he's won the election – surely now his demands will be met?' Mr Sengupta said.

'Yes,' Sohail said. 'But they've postponed the assembly too many times.'

Sohail looked as if he were about to start speechifying again. Rehana felt her face growing hot.

'Mujib is a canny politician,' Mrs Rahman interjected. 'He must know something we don't.'

'Perhaps there's still a chance for diplomacy,' Mr Sengupta said.

'Diplomacy? Forgive me, Chacha. You think Bhutto and Yahya want diplomacy?'

Sohail seemed on the point of turning away from the conversation when Sabeer raised his hand. 'You think we can make it as our own country?' he asked. Rehana wondered if Sohail would take the bait.

He did. 'If you knew anything about the country you would know that West Pakistan is bleeding us out. We earn most of the foreign exchange. We grow the rice, we make the jute, and

yet we get nothing – no schools, no hospitals, no army. We can't even speak our own bloody language!'

Rehana waited for Sabeer to say something, something aggressive and blunt; his military training would have taught him that, but he turned away instead, fingering the buttons on his uniform.

'Cyclone, young fellow,' Mr Sengupta interrupted, attempting to make peace. 'Nature. We live in a low-lying delta. And we have bad luck.'

'Starvation is not caused by God. It is caused by irresponsible governments.' Sohail rolled and unrolled the sleeve of his kurta. Rehana wondered if he was going to go on talking about the country's fortunes, the jute money, the cyclone. But he looked as though he'd run out of air. 'What we have here is an emergency,' he said in a tired voice. 'There is no possibility of reconciliation now. Mujib should have declared independence.'

Rehana had ordered two crates of orange cola, which she hurriedly passed around. She had to get the party back on course. The guests gratefully accepted the drinks and began to sip. They clinked the small glass bottles and smiled hesitantly into their straws. Their saris and kurtas flapped in the sugary March breeze, and the evening regained its still feeling, like the heavy pause before a mighty thunderclap.

The gin-rummy ladies offered to help Rehana put away the biryani. She wasn't sure she wanted the company, but they insisted, and she was too tired to protest.

'You didn't do a very good job of finishing the food,' Rehana complained, examining the trays of rice. 'I'll have to send all of this to the mosque.'

'You might make up a packet for me,' Mrs Chowdhury said. 'You know how much I love it the next day.'

'I've already put some aside for you,' Rehana said, presenting her with a cardboard box. She saw Mrs Chowdhury

eyeing it for size, calculating the number of meals she might make of it.

'There's still a lot left over.' Perhaps she hadn't done such a good job with the biryani this year after all.

'Just invite a few of Sohail's friends to dinner,' Mrs Rahman said. 'I'm sure they'll have no trouble finishing up the lot.'

'You know, I had no idea he was so involved in student politics,' Mrs Akram said, sorting through the glasses and the empty bottles of soda.

'He isn't,' Rehana replied, heaving a pile of plates into the washbasin. 'He's been trying to stay out of it.' She picked up the top plate and began to circulate a sponge around its rim.

'Sounded quite heated to me,' Mrs Rahman said.

'Well, you know, he's young and full of ideas.' Rehana felt a bit defensive. It was always difficult for the rest of them to understand: Mrs Akram's children were still in school, Mrs Rahman's three children had all married sensibly, and Silvi hardly strayed out of her mother's grasp. Her own children seemed a little out of control by comparison. 'It's just in the air – all this talk about delaying the assembly – the students are getting nervous, they're worried the elections won't be honoured.'

'He sounds quite involved to me,' Mrs Rahman insisted. 'And your Maya is in the Chattra League, no?'

Mrs Chowdhury decided to come to Rehana's rescue. 'What she's saying is – why doesn't the boy waste his time chasing girls instead!'

The kitchen suddenly grew quiet.

Rehana turned around and caught Mrs Chowdhury's eye. 'What?' she said. 'What?'

No one replied. Rehana realized they were making a space for her to say something. She opened her mouth and tried, but she couldn't think of the right sequence of words.

Mrs Rahman broke the silence. 'Are you the last to know?' she said.