RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti

Mohammed Hanif

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About the Book

The patients of the Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments are looking for a miracle, and Alice Bhatti is looking for a job.

Alice is a candidate for the position of junior nurse, grade 4. It is only a few weeks since her release from Borstal. She has returned to her childhood home in the French Colony, where her father, recently retired from his position as chief janitor, continues as part-time healer, and full-time headache for the local church. It seems she has inherited some of his gift. With guidance from the working nurse's manual, and some tricks she picked up in prison, Alice brings succour to the thousands of patients littering the hospital's corridors and concrete courtyard. In the process she attracts the attention of a lovesick patient, Teddy Bunt, apprentice to the nefarious 'Gentleman Squad' of the Karachi police. They fall in love; Teddy with sudden violence, Alice with cautious optimism. Their love is unexpected, but the consequences are not.

Alice soon finds that her new life is built on foundations as unstable as those of her home. A Catholic snubbed by other Catholics, who are in turn hated by everyone around them, she is also put at risk by her husband, who does two things that no member of the Gentlemen Squad has ever done – fall in love with a working girl, and allow a potentially dangerous suspect to get away. Can Teddy and Alice ever live in peace? Can two people make a life together without

destroying the very thing that united them? It seems unlikely, but then Alice Bhatti is no ordinary nurse…

Filled with wit, colour and pathos, *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a glorious story of second chances, thwarted ambitions and love in unlikely places, set in the febrile streets of downtown Karachi. It is the remarkable new novel from the author of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*.

About the Author

Mohammed Hanif was born in Okara, Pakistan, in 1965. He graduated from Pakistan Air Force Academy as Pilot Officer, but subsequently left to pursue a career in journalism. He has written plays for the stage and BBC radio, and his film *The Long Night* has been shown at film festivals around the world. His first novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Novel in 2008.

ALSO BY MOHAMMED HANIF

A Case of Exploding Mangoes

For Hassan Dars
1968–2011

هر ماڻهو ۾ چور نچي ٿو
هرماڻهو ۾ مور نچي ٿو

In every man dances a thief
In every man dances a peacock

MOHAMMED HANIF

OUR LADY OF ALICE BHATTI

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

ONE

LESS THAN THREE minutes in front of the interview panel and Alice Bhatti knows in her heart that she is not likely to get the job advertised as Replacement Junior Nurse, Grade 4. A sharp tingling in the back of her neck warns her that not getting the job might not even be the worst thing that could happen here. No questions have been asked yet, but she knows that all the preparation – her starched white uniform, the new file, a faint smudge of mud-brown lipstick, breathing exercises she has done to control her jumpy heart, even the banana she ate on the bus to stop her stomach from rumbling – all seems like wasted investment, halal money down the haram drain, as her father Joseph Bhatti had put it. 'These Muslas will make you clean their shit and then complain that you stink,' he had said. 'And our own brothers at the Sacred? They will educate you and then ask you why you stink.'

She has been in this room before but is dreading the prospect of sitting down on a chair and talking. She has always stood here and taken her orders: *Have you cleaned the floor, Alice? Why have you not cleaned the floor? Who do you think will clean that blood on the floor, Alice? Your father?*

The room is a monument to pharmaceutical merchandising: the orange wall clock from GlaxoSmithKline, the calendar with blonde models in various stages of migraine from Pfizer Pain Management Systems, the box of pink tissues promising Dry Days, Dry Nights. The ornamented gold-framed verse from the Quran

exhorting the virtues of cleanliness carries the logo of Ciba-Geigy: a housefly in its death throes.

Alice Bhatti wonders if she can put in a request to be interviewed while standing. She shifts on her feet and tries to become invisible by clutching the file to her chest. The file contains nothing except a copy of her job application. She doesn't get the opportunity to ask anything as the interview panel is too busy debating the cost-benefit ratio for patients on pacemakers. They are at the end of a heated argument and everyone wants to get the last word in. She doesn't really understand what they are talking about, only wonders why she was called in if all they were going to talk about was electricity generators, ventilators, running costs and heartless relatives of the deceased arriving from Toronto or Dubai, brandishing their grief to save some dollars or dirhams, refusing to pay up, holding ambulance drivers hostage, demanding compensation.

She has an odd sensation of overhearing a conversation that she is *meant* to overhear. She thinks maybe this conversation is part of the recruitment exercise; she'll be asked her views later and she should pay attention. The head of the orthopaedic unit only brings up words like 'professionalism' and 'Canadian immigration' when he is angry. Ortho Sir is very angry by now. 'I am a professional.' He pulls out a pink tissue from the Dry Nights box and pats the bald patch on his head. The grey diamond-shaped mark on his forehead is a testament to his five-times-a-day prayer routine, but his designer goatee belongs in some kafir fantasy. 'My job is to cure people, to cure them at the worst of times. I don't decide when someone is going to die. He does.' He raises his forefinger towards the ceiling. Alice Bhatti looks at the ceiling fan in confusion: *Put Your Faith in Philips*, it says.

If the relatives of the deceased are in Dubai and Toronto, she wonders, then what is the deceased doing in this death hole otherwise known as the Sacred Heart

Hospital for All Ailments. *Rights of admission reserved*, it says in three languages on the signboard at the entrance. *Enter at your peril*, someone has scrawled under it, summing up the customers' sentiments. *Leave your firearms and faith at the gate*, says another sign under a small wooden cross, slightly askew and not painted in a long time, in the hope that people will forget that it's a Catholic establishment. This is not the kind of gate where anybody leaves anything, this is not the kind of place where people forget where you come from.

Senior Sister Hina Alvi sits on the interview panel with a paan tucked in the right side of her mouth, her tongue occasionally licking the crimson juice before it can become a dribble. This well-timed anticipatory lick will remain her main contribution to the proceedings. Alice Bhatti doesn't need an advanced nursing degree to know that Sister Hina doesn't like her. The only consolation is that there isn't much that Sister Hina Alvi does like. Alice smiles at her in the futile hope of winning her over. Nothing. She looks at her terrifying poise, the imperceptible movement of her jaw, the crimson lips, and her eyes that seem to be taking part in the discussion, and realises that Senior Sister Alvi's feelings towards her are slightly stronger than indifference: she hasn't yet decided whether this Alice woman even exists or not. Dr Jamus Pereira, the chief medical officer of the hospital, is Alice Bhatti's only hope on this panel; he is the CMO for no reason other than the fact that he inherited the Sacred from his father, and he inherited it because of his inability to say no. But who can say no to a dying father who is pressing the family bible into your hands?

He sits with his fist under his chin and seems to be wondering how long before Ortho Sir will start healing multiple fractures with the power of his principled stance.

Alice looks at him and realises that if Dr Jamus Pereira is your best hope in this world, you'd better abandon all hope.

‘And what do you want?’ Ortho Sir looks at her as if she is a child trying to interrupt a grown-up conversation.

‘A and E vacancy.’ Dr Pereira speaks before Alice Bhatti can turn and run. ‘Please have a seat, Alice.’

Normally Alice finds Dr Pereira’s politeness irritating – *Sir, if you don’t mind, I would like to inform you that the gentleman you accompanied to this hospital at the time of his admission has breathed his last*. She always thinks his struggle to bring order to this world through the practice of good manners is a bit pointless. But she likes every word of it now. She likes the fact that he has called her Alice. It implies acceptance, professional fellowship, even intimacy, an innocent type of intimacy. She likes the way he has uttered the word ‘seat’.

She also realises that when you start feeling gratitude to people for asking you to sit down, you are obviously not at the top of your game.

‘How many candidates have we got?’ Ortho Sir looks at his watch impatiently. He is on a break from being a humble professional. This usually happens when underlings are around. In private he can make his superiors feel like little gods. When he is brazen and publicly rude, the network of veins on his bald head swells up and you can see them turning green with anguish, like an alien realising it’s not going home for a long time. That the earth has run out of the fuel that his spaceship relies on.

‘Only the lonely,’ Dr Pereira says, looking optimistically at both his colleagues. Senior Sister Alvi curls her lip in a smile that seems to suggest that she knows the con, has heard the joke before, but is too far above all of this to bother.

‘Then why do we have to go through this?’ Ortho Sir pushes the file away and looks at Alice Bhatti.

Alice Bhatti looks at a lizard on the wall, desperately willing it to move, as if its movement will affect the movement of her stars.

‘Procedures,’ says Dr Pereira. ‘And if my colleagues here have objections, we don’t have to, we can advertise externally. But there are not many qualified candidates with experience. Privates snap them up. Or they go to Dubai or Toronto.’ There was a time when he could assert his authority and claim that the hospital was built by *my* father and named after *our* Holy Mother so why should anybody have a problem hiring a nurse who happens to be Catholic? Now he must stay polite and humble in all his little battles.

‘All the good ones go to Dubai and Toronto.’ Ortho Sir is mild now – and mean, having fully exposed the inherent inefficiency of the system. He has just received his Canadian visa and it has given him more confidence than those twenty-five years of setting bones in an operating theatre, even more than his two trips to Mecca. Spiritually, he always reminds his colleagues, he feels much more settled now; he quotes from the Hadith, which says something about knowledge and having to go to China. Nobody reminds him that Toronto is not in China. Not yet.

Senior Sister Hina Alvi looks at them with contempt, as if they have stepped over some invisible boundary of good taste, as if words like ‘procedure’, ‘vacancy’ and ‘candidate’ are vulgar and shouldn’t be used in front of ladies. She does all of this with a little twitch of her upper lip and a pat on her steel hair.

Senior Sister Hina Alvi has thirty-five years of bedside experience, she has worked through riots and massacres and saved the life of a foreign minister’s wife. She knows about these things. Alice Bhatti is always surprised how Senior Sister can get the world to obey her with the movement of an eyebrow.

Alice Bhatti first sits on the edge of the chair, feels dizzy, then fears that the chair might slip from under her and she will end up sprawled on the floor with her legs splayed in the air. She moves back in the chair, the chair squeaks and she puts the file in her lap, then picks it up and clasps it to

her chest. Then realising that she is making a spectacle of herself, she puts it back in her lap and thrusts her hands under her thighs, to stop them from trembling.

‘So are you Alice or are you Bhatti?’ Sir Ortho believes that this country can only progress if people start spelling out their middle names, tucking in their shirts and paying his full fees in advance.

‘Both. That is my name.’ Alice Bhatti feels silly having to explain her name. There might be things in the application she has embellished, but her name is not one of them.

‘I am surprised that you are trying to hide basic information. Your full name is Alice Joseph Bhatti. Are you ashamed of your father’s name? Now Bhatti is a respectable clan from Punjab and I am sure the Josephs are a respectable lot from wherever they are from. Let me tell you something: my father was a schoolteacher and went to teach in a school on his bicycle for thirty-five years. Same route. Same bicycle. Am I ashamed of him now? No, that bicycle is parked in my garage, along with my Camry. So that my kids can see it and learn. Do I hide it from the world? No.’

Dr Pereira’s administrative intervention comes in the form of a polite cough, the clearing of an already clear throat and his fingers playing a half-remembered jazz beat on the table. He was practising his drums with the Hawks Bay Kittens the night his father called him and before breathing his last handed him the Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments. ‘The application form doesn’t have provision for middle names, and Bhattis are pretty much everywhere, in every religion, so if we can start the—’

‘So, Miss Alice Joseph Bhatti, why should we give you this job?’ Ortho Sir asks her without looking up and starts scribbling furiously in his file. The bicycle-riding-schoolteacher’s son has come this far in life because he knows when to move on.

Senior Sister Hina Alvi looks at her with a beatific smile, as if already forgiving her for all the mistakes she'll make in the rest of her brief and miraculous career. Dr Pereira sends her silent messages: *Praise Our Lord Yassoo, now don't let me down, child, not in front of these Muslas*. Short, to-the-point interventionist prayers are Dr Pereira's other management tool besides good manners.

This is simple. Alice Bhatti knows the answer. She has rehearsed it in front of the mirror. But now she needs water. Her heart beats in her parched throat. A strange croak comes out of her mouth, a voice that surprises her, the voice of a baby frog complaining about being too small for this world. She notices, for the first time in her life, that the lizard has four feet.

'I have qualifications …' She realises that she has forgotten the rest of her answer. She decides to carry on recklessly, like a pedestrian caught in the middle of a fast lane who decides that if they close their eyes and rush forward they will end up safe on the other side. It all comes out in a jumble. Accident assessment. Paediatric management. First-aid course: FA second division. Serving patients and humanity. Taking care of the sick and dying. Experience in TB ward before it was closed down. Personal setbacks. Difficult patient-and-doctor relationships. Maternity ward internship. Flexiworking.

Having spoken for one whole minute without fainting, Alice Bhatti takes a deep breath and realises that she has just blurted out everything she was supposed to say over the course of the entire interview.

An ambulance siren sings in the distance, and the ceiling fan suddenly picks up speed. Her dupatta flares in a gust of wind and the faces of the three people sitting in front of her blur into a crowd, a crowd that is headed for a pre-planned lynching somewhere else but decides to first warm up on a stray dog. The ambulance siren comes very close and Alice remembers a dream she had the previous

night. She is in an ambulance, the ambulance is a ball of fire, it's rushing *away* from the Sacred. She had been puzzled in her dream. An ambulance on fire she can understand. What was she doing in the ambulance? Why was her face covered in ice cubes? Why was the ambulance rushing away from the hospital?

'According to the modern principles of nursing and the patient-carer relationship …'

'Did you say you worked in Accidents?' Sir Ortho cuts her short, then pats the alien on his head. 'Oh. Of course. Sure you worked in Accidents. Didn't we have a little accident there? How could I forget?' Alice Bhatti cannot believe that Ortho Sir would remember her face. She remembers his face, though. She remembers a bucket and a mop and a river of blood on the floor. She remembers him tripping over her mop.

It seemed half the city had shot itself in the stomach and spilled its guts over the A&E floor during the shift that she worked as a replacement paramedic.

'Since when does mopping floors count as A and E experience?' Ortho Sir mime-mops a floor with his hands. 'Pereira sahib, if today I work here as a sweeper and tomorrow turn up with an FRCS degree hanging around my neck, will you hire me as Head of Orthopaedics?'

Dr Pereira, a third-generation physician, shakes his head, not in denial but in despair. He is too polite to point out that not all Christians are sweepers. He also fears the retort: 'But all sweepers are Christians.' If Alice Bhatti didn't want this job so badly, if she hadn't stretched the gap between her nursing-school years and her first house job to cover the fourteen months that she spent in the Borstal Jail for Women and Children, she could have told him what her mother had told many a man in her life: if I shove that mop up your arse, you will walk around like a peacock. Instead she ignores Ortho Sir and glances at the boy sitting in the corner, scribbling away, a peon pretending to be a poet,

taking notes as if he is taking down minutes in a board meeting, as if he understands anything. As if he could write a straight sentence. She doesn't really mind the scribbling – after all, that is his job – but she doesn't want Noor to be here. Not today.

Later, people will say that they shouldn't have given her this job – any job – that they should have imposed strict patient–carer separation, that she should have stuck to her own and married in her own religion (there are obviously those who will say that she was not the marrying type to begin with), that she should not have carried that Gillette razor in her uniform pocket. Some will say that marriages made at sea always end up in disappointment, others will just mutter that there is something called modesty and will argue for a redesign of the paramedics' uniform. Someone else will say that this hospital has been around for 107 years and its main purpose is to save lives, not suck cocks in VIP rooms. Tongues will wag and pens will do their moral forensics, but that will come much later.

Here, seated in front of the interview panel, Alice looks at the lizard and is surprised to notice that its front feet have five toes. Fourteen months of staring at lizards on the Borstal walls, Alice Bhatti berates herself, and I never noticed they have five toes. It'll be a miracle if I get this job.

Senior Sister Hina Alvi chimes in with her betel-nut-soaked voice. 'Dears, we have to use work-experience girls sometimes. Otherwise how would we manage?'

She manages to give both words – 'girls' and 'experience' – a whole new context.

Ortho Sir moves forward in his chair, clasps his hands, and fixes his eyes on the file in front of him. The alien on

his head seems to have decided to make this planet his home.

‘Postnatal care?’ His eyes are level with Alice Bhatti’s breasts. ‘Inverted nipples. How do you deal with them? Should you deal with them? Have you any personal experiences to share?’ Ortho Sir rolls his tongue around his gums as if there might be nipples stuck between his teeth.

Lewd gestures, whispered suggestions, uninvited hands on her bottom are all part of Alice Bhatti’s daily existence. She has a whole doctrine perfected over the years to deal with all of that, but there is something about this parched tongue tracing circles around the receding grey gums that makes her shudder. It is in this moment that Alice Bhatti realises that even if she gets this job, she might end up castrating someone. Or at least gouging a pair of eyes. Or slashing a tongue. Or pulling up those gums with pliers to cover the shame of the naked teeth.

She looks up at the lizard again. It has moved but it isn’t going anywhere. It stays stuck to the wall like an emblem that has forgotten its purpose.

Alice Bhatti had woken up that morning to the sound of Joseph Bhatti sawing a large wooden beam he had brought home last night. That was the only thing he had brought home all month, and he was now busy cutting it into a cross as big as an electric pole. She had woken up thinking she’d better get this job.

But she hadn’t woken up thinking of a tongue going around, licking imaginary nipples. Has she missed something about the gesture? Is she overreacting?

As she walks out of the room at the end of the interview, she stops by the boy, Noor, who is still scribbling. He lifts his eyes to acknowledge her presence for the first time. ‘Is your mother dead yet?’ she asks with the indifference of someone who has just flunked a job interview. Then she lowers her voice to a whisper. ‘There is a police van outside. I hope they are not here for you.’

TWO

‘IF THERE IS one thing I have learnt about our hospitals it is this: when these doctors get drunk, they suddenly remember their principles, their stupid oath … what is it called? That Hippo-something.’ Inspector Malangi puts an arm around Teddy Butt’s shoulders. ‘Even doctors who work in this slaughterhouse. You would think the mornings are a safe bet. But look at us now. We are being fed medical ethics for breakfast.’ His hand traces the immense bulging shoulder that won Teddy Butt the title of Junior Mr Faisalabad three years ago.

Like most people in local governance, Inspector Malangi knows that an arm around someone’s shoulder is the first step towards law enforcement. His battered blue police Hilux is parked close to the steps that lead to the A&E of the Sacred, a handcuffed man lies face down in the cabin, and three members of his team with rusting Kalashnikovs slung on their shoulders are leaning against the vehicle. Inspector Malangi seems unsure of all that he has learnt in thirty-six years of policing this city. With his walrus moustache and sunken eyes he could pass as a high-school headmaster, but with three stars on the shoulder of his black cotton shirt, his low-slung police belt and an ancient Beretta in his side holster, nobody is likely to mistake him for anyone except the head of the G Squad trying to finish his shift and go home. The Beretta is only decorative, though. He has drawn it sometimes and fired it close to people’s ears when they were not paying attention. But otherwise every time he has had to use a weapon himself he has felt that he has failed at his job.

He walks towards the rows of concrete flowerpots, leaning on Teddy's shoulder as if trying to physically convey to him the burdens of his duty. 'You may not wear this uniform.' He fingers the epaulette on his black police shirt. 'But now you are a member of this family. You may think, what kind of family am I stuck with? But then everyone says that about their family. You may not love your family, but as far as I know, this is the only family you have got.' The concrete flowerpots are full of dried-up twigs and discarded medicine bottles and the occasional sprouting syringe. The whole abandoned gardening effort looks like somebody's good intentions got corrupted on the way. Inspector Malangi breaks a twig and starts poking his ear with such concentration it seems he is digging for an answer deep inside.

Teddy Butt is attentive and solid on his feet. When Inspector Malangi puts an arm around your shoulder this early in the morning and declares you a family member, you have to feel and behave like a loyal family member.

'So I have got a criminal but no crime that I can prove right now. Or at least that's what that whatsisname medico-legal Malick thinks. Did anyone tell him what happened in Garden East? When he is sober, you can get him to sign his own mother's post-mortem report. The bastard never looks at anything before signing, but half a bottle of Murree Millennium in his stomach and he is telling me I need some evidence, that suspicions of sabotage and intents of mass murder can't be proved in a medical lab. I have got Abu Zar in handcuffs but I can't keep him because a drunk Choohra doctor suddenly decides that he is not going to play God any more. What does he want me to do? Shoot myself in the head and then ask for a certificate that this fellow has hurt me in the line of duty? For three months we have been looking for the man responsible for the Garden East attack and I know it's him.' Inspector Malangi gestures towards

the back of the van, and the man there moans like a dying animal.

Teddy Butt looks towards the tiny office adjacent to the Accidents and Emergencies department. A battered ambulance is parked outside, with its driver asleep with his head on the steering wheel. The board outside the medico-legal's office reads, *No arms or ammunition allowed inside the duty doctor's office*. Teddy stares at the tiny shack as if sizing up an enemy bunker.

'Why don't we book him for drinking?' he says. He likes saying 'we'. It makes him feel as if he is the one putting handcuffs on a renegade doctor who will not cooperate with the law this early in the morning. It makes him feel an integral part of the family.

'Yes, we can book him for half a dozen things. Do you even know how much a bottle of Millennium costs? How can he afford Millennium on his salary? Probably steals and sells kidneys. OK, Teddy, say we book him for that, what if his replacement doesn't drink but still has principles? Look, his shift ends in half an hour. And then you'll have to deal with Auntie Hina Alvi and, trust me, she has more principles than I have pubic hair. She has probably got a cock too. That woman scares me.'

Teddy Butt is not sure if he is supposed to laugh, so he chuckles as if clearing his throat. He is new to the squad, an honorary member, and is still learning the rules. He squeezes his empty hand into a fist and starts lifting imaginary dumbbells. He does this in cases of extreme darkness. When he did it last, he had gone to meet Inspector Malangi hoping to find work as an informer. He had taken a box of sweets with him but had found himself in a lock-up with half a dozen starving addicts in extreme withdrawal.

The Gentlemen's Squad is a group of like-minded police officers, not really an entity commissioned by any law-enforcing authority. The name of the unit doesn't exist on

any official register, on letterheads or websites. There are no annual audits or medals for bravery; it does not hold press conferences to unveil the criminals it catches or kills, or more often catches and then kills. It is a group of gentlemen who, not given to any flights of literary imagination, have decided to call themselves the Gentlemen's Squad. It is a crew of reformed rapists (*I have got three grown-up daughters now, you know*), torturers (*it's a science, not an art*), sharpshooters (*monkeys really, as we spend half our lives perched on rooftops and trees*) and generally the kind of investigators who can recognise a criminal by looking at the way he blows his nose or turns a street corner. They have survived together for such a long time because they believe in giving each other space, they come together for a good cause like they have today, and then disperse to pursue their own personal lives.

'You know I don't like taking work home. The kids are preparing for their exams,' says Inspector Malangi. 'At my age I have to sit with them and do maths revision. Why don't you help out and get us something broken that'll look good to the medico-legal so that we can have this hero to ourselves for a few days? And then I'll get him to confess to Garden East and all the others that he has been planning.' Inspector Malangi pulls out a rusted Kalashnikov with a solid wooden butt, empties its magazine, then on second thoughts removes the magazine, puts it in his pocket and throws the rifle at Teddy. 'Something small will do. Just get me a thumb. Let's throw a bone to the dog and go home.'

Teddy Butt knows that this is not a suggestion, not even an order, just an expectation, how a father would expect to be addressed as father or abba or daddy by his sons.

'Here I go and here I come back.' Teddy snaps his forefinger and thumb before running off, not realising that this might be the last time he'll be able to snap his fingers, to produce that reassuring, consider-it-done sound.

Teddy runs past some patients sleeping on the steps, curses a sweeper who is raising clouds of dust in the corridor and finds Noor where he expected to find him, at his mother Zainab's bedside, massaging her feet gently and with dedication, as if a good foot massage was the only cure for the three types of cancer that Zainab is suffering from. Teddy gets his vitamins from Noor; sometimes before his competitions he gets a free IV drip to give his body that extra sheen that judges seem to love. Teddy believes that since Noor has learnt the art of making friends in jails, he would do anything for a friend.

Noor sees Teddy running towards him with a gun, tucks his mother's feet under the blanket and meets him at the door. Teddy knows that Noor doesn't like to conduct their transactions in front of his mother, so he speaks in an urgent whisper. 'I need a thumb, and I need it now.' He shoves the gun into Noors hands, as if handing over a receipt for a faulty purchase and demanding a refund. They both start walking down the corridor that leads to the back of the A&E, stepping over at least three people sleeping on the floor, stirring in their dreams.

'It's too early in the day. I am sitting in on an interview. I am on a short break, just came out to have a look at Zainab. I have to write lots of notes,' Noor mumbles, in the hope that he won't be asked to do something time-consuming. Or nasty.

'It's all your friend's fault. Inspector Malangi has got this guy Abu Zar in the back of the van. Very dangerous. But he is insisting that he hasn't done anything. You don't know these people; it'll take us at least a few days before we can make him talk. But your Dr Malick won't give us a certificate saying that this man injured one of us. Imagine, Dr Malick wants proof. When he gets drunk, he becomes all principled.' Noor stops to wheel a stretcher out of the way, but Teddy keeps talking, as if giving the context, pinning the blame, underlining the flaws in the system will

somehow reduce the pain, or at least justify it, make it worth his while.

‘Where are his principles when he is signing blank post-mortem reports? Inspector Malangi comes to ask for a piece of paper and suddenly he remembers his principles? Should we let an attacker go just because he hasn’t attacked us yet? We can nail Dr Malick for that Millennium bottle in his office. Do you even know how much a bottle of Millennium costs? We can nail him for how he gets the money for that bottle. What does he sell, a kidney for a litre bottle? We have got death certificates where he has written “cause of death – renal failure” when the renal has been shot to bits, when the renal doesn’t even exist any more. It’s because of him that I need a thumb and I need it now. Because after his shift we’ll have to deal with your Auntie Hina Alvi, and she has more principles than a man has hair. We can nail her too, but right now I need a thumb.’ Teddy laughs a hollow laugh. Noor stays sullen.

They reach an electricity pole and stop. They both know what to do next. Noor is in a hurry to get back to give Zainab her medication and then rush to the interview. Teddy has his family’s expectations to fulfil. They look up simultaneously towards the top of the pole, where a number of kites, perched on the electric wires, are waking up from their slumber and looking down at them suspiciously. Then both Noor and Teddy glance around to check if anyone is watching them. To their mutual dismay, nobody is.

‘Will it hurt a lot?’ Teddy asks, as if it has just occurred to him that what they are about to do is something that might involve some physical discomfort. Noor sighs, as if he can’t understand why people keep asking the same question. He lives in a world where people want their share of pain measured, labelled, packaged, with its ingredients identified in plain language. They want it to come with an expiry date and a guarantee that there is this and no more.