

CHAPTER ONE

MYMENSINGH DISTRICT, EAST PAKISTAN,
1967

An hour and forty-five minutes before Nazneen's life began – began as it would proceed for quite some time, that is to say uncertainly – her mother Rupban felt an iron fist squeeze her belly. Rupban squatted on a low three-legged stool outside the kitchen hut. She was plucking a chicken because Hamid's cousins had arrived from Jessore and there would be a feast. 'Cheepy-cheepy, you are old and stringy,' she said, calling the bird by name as she always did, 'but I would like to eat you, indigestion or no indigestion. And tomorrow I will have only boiled rice, no parathas.'

She pulled some more feathers and watched them float around her toes. 'Aaah,' she said. 'Aaaah. Aaaah.' Things occurred to her. For seven months she had been ripening, like a mango on a tree. Only seven months. She put those things that had occurred to her aside. For a while, an hour and a half, though she did not know it, until the men came in from the fields trailing dust and slapping their stomachs, Rupban clutched Cheepy-cheepy's limp and bony neck and said only *coming, coming* to all enquiries about the bird. The shadows of the children playing marbles and

thumping each other grew long and spiky. The scent of fried cumin and cardamom drifted over the compound. The goats bleated high and thin. Rupban screamed white heat, red blood.

Hamid ran from the latrine, although his business was unfinished. He ran across the vegetable plot, past the towers of rice stalk taller than the tallest building, over the dirt track that bounded the village, back to the compound and grabbed a club to kill the man who was killing his wife. He knew it was her. Who else could break glass with one screech? Rupban was in the sleeping quarters. The bed was unrolled, though she was still standing. With one hand she held Mumtaz's shoulder, with the other a half-plucked chicken.

Mumtaz waved Hamid away. 'Go. Get Banesa. Are you waiting for a rickshaw? Go on, use your legs.'

Banesa picked up Nazneen by an ankle and blew disparagingly through her gums over the tiny blue body. 'She will not take even one breath. Some people, who think too much about how to save a few takas, do not call a midwife.' She shook her hairless, wrinkled head. Banesa claimed to be one hundred and twenty years old, and had made this claim consistently for the past decade or so. Since no one in the village remembered her birth, and since Banesa was more desiccated than an old coconut, no one cared to dispute it. She claimed, too, one thousand babies of which only three were cripples, two were mutants (a hermaphrodite and a humpback), one a stillbirth and another a monkey-lizard-hybrid-sin-against-God-that-was-buried-alive-in-the-faraway-forest-and-the-mother-sent-hence-to-who-cares-where. Nazneen, though dead, could not be counted among these failures, having been born shortly before Banesa creaked inside the hut.

'See your daughter,' Banesa said to Rupban. 'Perfect everywhere. All she lacked was someone to ease her path to this world.' She looked at Cheepy-cheepy lying

next to the bereaved mother and hollowed her cheeks; a hungry look widened her eyes slightly although they were practically buried in crinkles. It was many months since she had tasted meat, now that two young girls (she should have strangled them at birth) had set up in competition.

'Let me wash and dress her for the burial,' said Banesa. 'Of course I offer my service free. Maybe just that chicken there for my trouble. I see it is old and stringy.'

'Let me hold her,' said Nazneen's aunt, Mumtaz, who was crying.

'I thought it was indigestion,' said Rupban, also beginning to cry.

Mumtaz took hold of Nazneen, who was still dangling by the ankle, and felt the small, slick torso slide through her fingers to plop with a yowl onto the bloodstained mattress. A yowl! A cry! Rupban scooped her up and named her before she could die nameless again.

Banesa made little explosions with her lips. She used the corner of her yellowing sari to wipe some spittle from her chin. 'This is called a death rattle,' she explained. The three women put their faces close to the child. Nazneen flailed her arms and yelled, as if she could see this terrifying sight. She began to lose the blueness and turned slowly to brown and purple. 'God has called her back to earth,' said Banesa, with a look of disgust.

Mumtaz, who was beginning to doubt Banesa's original diagnosis, said, 'Well, didn't He just send her to us a few minutes ago? Do you think He changes His mind every second?'

Banesa mumbled beneath her breath. She put her hand over Nazneen's chest, her twisted fingers like the roots of an old tree that had worked their way above ground. 'The baby lives but she is weak. There are two routes you can follow,' she said, addressing herself solely to Rupban. 'Take her to the city, to a hospital.'

They will put wires on her and give medicines. This is very expensive. You will have to sell your jewellery. Or you can just see what Fate will do.' She turned a little to Mumtaz to include her now, and then back to Rupban. 'Of course, Fate will decide everything in the end, whatever route you follow.'

'We will take her to the city,' said Mumtaz, red patches of defiance rising on her cheeks.

But Rupban, who could not stop crying, held her daughter to her breast and shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'we must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate. That way, she will be stronger.'

'Good, then it is settled,' said Banesa. She hovered for a moment or two because she was hungry enough, almost, to eat the baby but after a look from Mumtaz she shuffled away back to her hovel.

Hamid came to look at Nazneen. She was wrapped in cheesecloth and laid on an old jute sack on top of the bedroll. Her eyes were closed and puffed as though she had taken two hard punches.

'A girl,' said Rupban.

'I know. Never mind,' said Hamid. 'What can you do?' And he went away again.

Mumtaz came in with a tin plate of rice, dal and chicken curry.

'She doesn't feed,' Rupban told her. 'She doesn't know what to do. Probably it is her Fate to starve to death.'

Mumtaz rolled her eyes. 'She'll feed in the morning. Now you eat. Or you are destined to die of hunger too.' She smiled at her sister-in-law's small sad face, all her features lined up, as ever, to mourn for everything that had passed and all that would come to pass.

But Nazneen did not feed in the morning. Nor the next day. The day after she turned her face away from the nipple and made gagging noises. Rupban, who was

famous for crying, couldn't keep up with the demand for tears. People came: aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, nephews, nieces, in-laws, village women and Banesa. The midwife dragged her bent feet across the hard mud floor of the hut and peered at the infant. 'I have heard of one child who would not feed from the mother but was suckled by a goat.' She smiled and showed her black gums. 'Of course, that was not one of *my* babies.'

Hamid came once or twice, but at night he slept outside on a choki. On the fifth day, when Rupban in spite of herself was beginning to wish that Fate would hurry and make up its mind, Nazneen clamped her mouth around the nipple so that a thousand red-hot needles ran through Rupban's breast and made her cry out for pain and for the relief of a good and patient woman.

As Nazneen grew she heard many times this story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. It was because of her mother's wise decision that Nazneen lived to become the wide-faced, watchful girl that she was. Fighting against one's Fate can weaken the blood. Sometimes, or perhaps most times, it can be fatal. Not once did Nazneen question the logic of the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. Indeed she was grateful for her mother's quiet courage, her tearful stoicism that was almost daily in evidence. Hamid said – he always looked away as he spoke – your mother is naturally a saint. She comes from a family of saints. So when Rupban advised her to be still in her heart and mind, to accept the Grace of God, to treat life with the same indifference with which it would treat her, Nazneen listened closely with her large head tilted back and her cheeks slack with equanimity.

She was a comically solemn child.

'How is my precious? Still glad you came back to life?' said Mumtaz when she had not seen her for a couple of days.

'I have no complaints or regrets to tell you,' said Nazneen. 'I tell everything to God.'

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle and challenge. So that when, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye.

Her sister Hasina, born only three days after Banesa passed away (one hundred and twenty years old then and for evermore), listened to no one. At the age of sixteen when her beauty was becoming almost unbearable to own or even to look at, she eloped to Khulna with the nephew of the saw-mill owner. Hamid ground his teeth and an axe besides. For sixteen hot days and cool nights he sat between the two lemon trees that marked the entrance to the compound. For that time his only occupation was throwing stones at the piebald dogs that scavenged in the dump just beyond, and cursing his whore-pig daughter whose head would be severed the moment she came crawling back. Those nights, Nazneen lay awake listening to the rattling of the corrugated tin roof, starting at the owl calls that no longer sounded like owls but more like a girl felled by an axe on the back of her neck. Hasina did not come. Hamid went back to supervising the labourers in the paddy fields. But for a couple of thrashings given on only the slightest of provocation, you would not know he had lost a daughter.

Soon after, when her father asked if she would like to see a photograph of the man she would marry the following month, Nazneen shook her head and replied, 'Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma.' But

as she turned to go she noticed, without meaning to, where her father put the photograph.

She just happened to see it. These things happen. She carried the image around in her mind as she walked beneath the banyans with her cousins. The man she would marry was old. At least forty years old. He had a face like a frog. They would marry and he would take her back to England with him. She looked across the fields, glittering green and gold in the brief evening light. In the distance a hawk circled and fell like a stone, came up again and flew against the sky until it shrank to nothing. There was a hut in the middle of the paddy. It looked wrong: embarrassed, sliding down at one side, trying to hide. The tornado that had flattened half the neighbouring village had selected this hut to be saved, but had relocated it. In the village they were still burying their dead and looking for bodies. Dark spots moved through the far fields. Men, doing whatever they could in this world.

TOWER HAMLETS, LONDON, 1985

Nazneen waved at the tattoo lady. The tattoo lady was always there when Nazneen looked out across the dead grass and broken paving stones to the block opposite. Most of the flats that closed three sides of a square had net curtains and the life behind was all shapes and shadows. But the tattoo lady had no curtains at all. Morning and afternoon she sat with her big thighs spilling over the sides of her chair, tipping forward to drop ash in a bowl, tipping back to slug from her can. She drank now, and tossed the can out of the window.

It was the middle of the day. Nazneen had finished the housework. Soon she would start preparing the evening meal, but for a while she would let the time pass. It was hot and the sun fell flat on the metal window frames and glared off the glass. A red and gold

sari hung out of a top-floor flat in Rosemead block. A baby's bib and miniature dungarees lower down. The sign screwed to the brickwork was in stiff English capitals and the curlicues beneath were Bengali. No dumping. No parking. No ball games. Two old men in white panjabi-pyjama and skullcaps walked along the path, slowly, as if they did not want to go where they were going. A thin brown dog sniffed along to the middle of the grass and defecated. The breeze on Nazneen's face was thick with the smell from the overflowing communal bins.

Six months now since she'd been sent away to London. Every morning before she opened her eyes she thought, *if I were the wishing type, I know what I would wish*. And then she opened her eyes and saw Chanu's puffy face on the pillow next to her, his lips parted indignantly even as he slept. She saw the pink dressing table with the curly-sided mirror, and the monstrous black wardrobe that claimed most of the room. Was it cheating? To think, *I know what I would wish?* Was it not the same as making the wish? If she knew what the wish would be, then somewhere in her heart she had already made it.

The tattoo lady waved back at Nazneen. She scratched her arms, her shoulders, the accessible portions of her buttocks. She yawned and lit a cigarette. At least two thirds of the flesh on show was covered in ink. Nazneen had never been close enough (never closer than this, never further) to decipher the designs. Chanu said the tattoo lady was Hell's Angel, which upset Nazneen. She thought the tattoos might be flowers, or birds. They were ugly and they made the tattoo lady more ugly than was necessary, but the tattoo lady clearly did not care. Every time Nazneen saw her she wore the same look of boredom and detachment. Such a state was sought by the sadhus who walked in rags through the Muslim villages, indifferent to the kindness of strangers, the unkind sun.

Nazneen thought sometimes of going downstairs, crossing the yard and climbing the Rosemead stairwell to the fourth floor. She might have to knock on a few doors before the tattoo lady answered. She would take something, an offering of samosas or bhajis, and the tattoo lady would smile and Nazneen would smile and perhaps they would sit together by the window and let the time pass more easily. She thought of it but she would not go. Strangers would answer if she knocked on the wrong door. The tattoo lady might be angry at an unwanted interruption. It was clear she did not like to leave her chair. And even if she wasn't angry, what would be the point? Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day.

She should be getting on with the evening meal. The lamb curry was prepared. She had made it last night with tomatoes and new potatoes. There was chicken saved in the freezer from the last time Dr Azad had been invited but had cancelled at the last minute. There was still the dal to make, and the vegetable dishes, the spices to grind, the rice to wash, and the sauce to prepare for the fish that Chanu would bring this evening. She would rinse the glasses and rub them with newspaper to make them shine. The tablecloth had some spots to be scrubbed out. What if it went wrong? The rice might stick. She might over-salt the dal. Chanu might forget the fish.

It was only dinner. One dinner. One guest.

She left the window open. Standing on the sofa to reach, she picked up the Holy Qur'an from the high shelf that Chanu, under duress, had specially built. She made her intention as fervently as possible, seeking refuge from Satan with fists clenched and fingernails digging into her palms. Then she selected a page at random and began to read.

To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. We exhort you, as We have exhorted those to whom the Book was given before you, to fear God. If

you deny Him, know that to God belongs all that the heavens and earth contain. God is self-sufficient and worthy of praise.

The words calmed her stomach and she was pleased. Even Dr Azad was nothing as to God. To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. She said it over a few times, aloud. She was composed. Nothing could bother her. Only God, if he chose to. Chanu might flap about and squawk because Dr Azad was coming for dinner. Let him flap. To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. How would it sound in Arabic? More lovely even than in Bengali, she supposed, for those were the actual Words of God.

She closed the book and looked around the room to check it was tidy enough. Chanu's books and papers were stacked beneath the table. They would have to be moved or Dr Azad would not be able to get his feet in. The rugs, which she had held out of the window earlier and beaten with a wooden spoon, needed to be put down again. There were three rugs: red and orange, green and purple, brown and blue. The carpet was yellow with a green leaf design. One hundred per cent nylon and, Chanu said, very hard-wearing. The sofa and chairs were the colour of dried cow dung, which was a practical colour. They had little sheaths of plastic on the headrests to protect them from Chanu's hair oil. There was a lot of furniture, more than Nazneen had seen in one room before. Even if you took all the furniture in the compound, from every auntie and uncle's ghar, it would not match up to this one room. There was a low table with a glass centre and orange plastic legs, three little wooden tables that stacked together, the big table they used for the evening meal, a bookcase, a corner cupboard, a rack for newspapers, a trolley filled with files and folders, the sofa and armchairs, two footstools, six dining chairs and a showcase. The walls were papered in yellow with brown squares and circles lining neatly

up and down. Nobody in Gouripur had anything like it. It made her proud. Her father was the second wealthiest man in the village and he never had anything like it. He had made a good marriage for her. There were plates on the wall, attached by hooks and wires, which were not for eating from but only for display. Some were rimmed in gold paint. 'Gold leaf', Chanu called it. His certificates were framed and mixed with the plates. She had everything here. All these beautiful things.

She put the Qur'an back in its place. Next to it lay the most Holy Book wrapped inside a cloth covering: the Qur'an in Arabic. She touched her fingers to the cloth.

Nazneen stared at the glass showcase stuffed with pottery animals, china figures and plastic fruits. Each one had to be dusted. She wondered how the dust got in and where it came from. All of it belonged to God. She wondered what He wanted with clay tigers, trinkets and dust.

And then, because she had let her mind drift and become uncentred again, she began to recite in her head from the Holy Qur'an one of the suras she had learned in school. She did not know what the words meant but the rhythm of them soothed her. Her breath came from down in her stomach. In and out. Smooth. Silent. Nazneen fell asleep on the sofa. She looked out across jade-green rice fields and swam in the cool dark lake. She walked arm-in-arm to school with Hasina, and skipped part of the way and fell and they dusted their knees with their hands. And the mynah birds called from the trees, and the goats fretted by, and the big sad water buffaloes passed like a funeral. And heaven, which was above, was wide and empty and the land stretched out ahead and she could see to the very end of it, where the earth smudged the sky in a dark blue line.

When she woke it was almost four o'clock. She rushed

to the kitchen and began chopping onions with the sleep still in her eyes so that it was not long before she cut her finger, a deep cut to the left index, just below the nail. She turned on the cold tap and held her hand beneath it. What was Hasina doing? This thought came to her all the time. *What is she doing right now?* It was not even a thought. It was a feeling, a stab in the lungs. Only God alone knew when she would see her again.

It worried her that Hasina kicked against fate. No good could come of it. Not a single person could say so. But then if you really looked into it, thought about it more deeply, how could you be sure that Hasina was not simply following her fate? If fate cannot be changed, no matter how you struggle against it, then perhaps Hasina was fated to run away with Malek. Maybe she struggled against *that*, and *that* was what she could not alter. Oh, you think it would be simple, having made the decision long, long ago, to be at the beck and call of fate, but how to know which way it is calling you? And there was each and every day to be got through. If Chanu came home this evening and found the place untidy and the spices not even ground, could she put her hands like so and say, don't ask me why nothing is prepared, it was not I who decided it, it was fate. A wife could reasonably be beaten for a lesser offence.

Chanu had not beaten her yet. He showed no signs of wanting to beat her. In fact he was kind and gentle. Even so, it was foolish to assume he would never beat her. He thought she was a 'good worker' (she had overheard him on the telephone). He would be shocked if she lapsed.

'She is an unspoilt girl. From the village.'

She had got up one night to fetch a glass of water. It was one week since they married. She had gone to bed and he was still up, talking on the telephone as she stood outside the door.

'No,' said Chanu. 'I would not say so. Not beautiful,

but not so ugly either. The face is broad, big forehead. Eyes are a bit too close together.'

Nazneen put her hand up to her head. It was true. The forehead was large. But she had never thought of her eyes being too close.

'Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied. Perhaps when she gets older she'll grow a beard on her chin but now she is only eighteen. And a blind uncle is better than no uncle. I waited too long to get a wife.'

Narrow hips! You could wish for such a fault, Nazneen said to herself, thinking of the rolls of fat that hung low from Chanu's stomach. It would be possible to tuck all your hundred pens and pencils under those rolls and keep them safe and tight. You could stuff a book or two up there as well. If your spindle legs could take the weight.

'What's more, she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can't put my files in order, because she has no English. I don't complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.'

Chanu went on talking but Nazneen crept away, back to bed. A blind uncle is better than no uncle. Her husband had a proverb for everything. Any wife is better than no wife. Something is better than nothing. What had she imagined? That he was in love with her? That he was grateful because she, young and graceful, had accepted him? That in sacrificing herself to him, she was owed something? Yes. Yes. She realized in a stinging rush she had imagined all these things. Such a foolish girl. Such high notions. What self-regard.

The bleeding seemed to have stopped. Nazneen turned off the tap and wrapped a piece of kitchen roll around her finger. Who had Chanu been talking to that day? Perhaps it was a call from Bangladesh, a relative who did not come to the wedding. Perhaps it was Dr Azad.

Tonight he would see for himself the big forehead and too-close-together eyes. Blood spotted through from the cut. She discarded the kitchen roll and watched the red drops fall on the silver sink. The drops slid together like mercury and rolled down the drain. How long would it take to empty her finger of blood, drop by drop? How long for the arm? And for the body, an entire body? What she missed most was people. Not any people in particular (apart, of course, from Hasina) but just people. If she put her ear to the wall she could hear sounds. The television on. Coughing. Sometimes the lavatory flushing. Someone upstairs scraping a chair. A shouting match below. Everyone in their boxes, counting their possessions. In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her.

Nazneen examined her finger. The bleeding had stopped again. Random thoughts came now. She would speak to Chanu about another sari. Abba had not said goodbye. She thought he would come in the morning, before they went to Dhaka, to the airport. But when she rose, he had already gone to the fields. Was it because he cared too much or because he cared too little? She needed more furniture polish. And bleach for the lavatory. Would Chanu want his corns cut again tonight? What was Hasina doing?

She went to the bedroom and opened the wardrobe. The letter was in a shoebox at the bottom. She sat on the bed to read it with her feet almost touching the black lacquered doors. Sometimes she dreamed the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard.

*Our cousin Ahmed have given me your address
praise God. I hear of marriage and pray many*

*time on your wedding day I pray now also. I pray
your husband is good man. You will write and
telling all things to me.*

*I so happy now. I almost scared. Hardly dare
opening my eye. Why it is? What is bringing fear?
God not putting me on earth only to suffer. I know
this always even when days bringing no light.*

*Maleks uncle have got for him First Class job in
railway company. This uncle very High Up at
railway. Malek go out early in morning and
coming back late late. He not knowing much
about trains and such like but he say too also that
do not matter. What matter is being smart.
Nobody smarter than my husband.*

*Can you believe? We live in block of flat is
three storey high. Our place have two room. No
veranda but I go up on roof. There is brown stone
floor it cool your feet. We have bed with metal
spring a cabinet and two chairs in bedroom. I fold
saris and put in box under bed. In living room we
has three cane chair a rug one stool (Malek like to
put feet on) a crate is only temporary before we
getting table. Also paraffin stove I keep under
shawl for making tidy. My pot and pans is keep
inside the crate. Hardly any cockroach only one
maybe two I see time to time.*

*Even we have nothing I happy. We have love.
Love is happiness. Sometime I feel to run and
jump like goat. This is how we do on way to
school. But not much room for running here and I
sixteen year old and married woman.*

*Everything good between us now. I do not let
my tongue make trouble for it as my husband say.
Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean
she can say what she like. If women understand-
ing this no one will beat. Malek have First Class
job. I pray for son. I pray Maleks mother forgive
the 'crime' of our marriage. It will come. Time
comes she love me like daughter. If I wrong she is*

not true mother for mother love every part of son. Now I part of him. If Amma alive you think she forgive this thing Abba cannot? Sometime I think yes she do that. Many time I think no and then I angry and also too sad.

Sister I think of you every day and send love. I send respect to husband. Now you have address you will write and tell all thing about London. It make me tremble you so far away. You remember those story we hear as children begin like this. 'Once there was prince who lived in far off land seven seas and thirteen rivers away.' That is how I think of you. But as princess.

We see each other before long time pass and we as little girls again.

Someone was knocking on the front door of the flat. Nazneen opened it a crack, with the chain on, then closed it while she slid the chain off and opened it wide.

'No one is saying it to his face,' Mrs Islam was telling Razia Iqbal, 'but everyone is saying it behind his back. I don't like that kind of gossip.'

Nazneen exchanged salaams with her visitors and went to make tea.

Mrs Islam folded handkerchiefs, leaning over from the sofa to the low table and tucking them up the bobbled sleeves of her cardigan.

'Spreading rumours is our national pastime,' said Razia. 'That's not to say it is a good thing. Most of the time there's not a shred of truth in it.' She gave a sideways look at Nazneen, who was setting down the tea things. 'What is it they are saying this time? If I hear it from someone else I can set them straight about everything.'

'Well,' said Mrs Islam slowly. She settled back against the brown upholstery. Her sleeves bulged and bagged. She had carpet slippers on over black socks. Nazneen looked through the glass at the centre of the

table and watched Mrs Islam's feet twitch with an excitement that her face did not betray. 'You have to bear in mind she had no children. This is after twelve years of marriage.'

'Yes, that is so,' said Razia. 'It is the worst thing, for any woman.'

'And at sixteen floors up, if you decide to jump, then there's the end to it.' Mrs Islam extracted a handkerchief and wiped away a little sweat from her hairline. Just looking at her made Nazneen feel unbearably hot.

'There's no chance of ending up a vegetable, if you jump from that high,' agreed Razia. She accepted a cup from Nazneen and held it in her man-size hands. She wore black lace-up shoes, wide and thick-soled. It was the sari that looked strange on her. 'But of course it was an accident. Why say otherwise?'

'A terrible accident,' said Mrs Islam. 'But everyone is whispering behind the husband's back.'

Nazneen sipped her tea. It was ten past five and all she had done was chop two onions. She had not heard about the accident. Chanu had mentioned nothing. She wanted to know who this woman was who died so terribly. She formed some questions in her mind, phrased and rephrased them.

'It is a shame,' said Razia. She smiled at Nazneen. Nazneen thought Razia did not look as though she really thought so. When she smiled she looked deeply amused although her mouth turned up only slightly to indicate pity rather than laughter. She had a long nose and narrow eyes that always looked at you from an angle, never straight on, so that she seemed perpetually to be evaluating if not mocking you.

Mrs Islam made a noise signalling that it was, indeed, a shame. She took a fresh handkerchief and blew her nose. After a decent interval she said, 'Did you hear about Jorina?'

'I hear this and that,' said Razia, as if no news about Jorina could possibly interest her.

'And what do you say to it?'

'That depends,' said Razia, looking down her nose at her tea, 'on what particular thing you mean.'

'I don't tell anything that isn't known already. You can hardly keep it a secret when you begin going out to work.'

Nazneen saw that Razia looked up sharply. Razia did not know the things that Mrs Islam knew. Mrs Islam knew everything about everybody. She had been in London for nearly thirty years and if you were a Bangladeshi here, what could you keep secret from her? Mrs Islam was the first person who called on Nazneen, in those first few days when her head was still spinning and the days were all dreams and real life came to her only at night, when she slept. Mrs Islam was deemed by Chanu to be 'respectable'. Not many people were 'respectable' enough to call or be called upon. 'You see,' said Chanu when he explained this for the first time, 'most of our people here are Sylhetis. They all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village. Most of them have jumped ship. That's how they come. They have menial jobs on the ship, doing donkey work, or they stow away like little rats in the hold.' He cleared his throat and spoke to the back of the room so that Nazneen turned her head to see who it was he was addressing. 'And when they jump ship and scuttle over here, then in a sense they are home again. And you see, to a white person, we are all the same: dirty little monkeys all in the same monkey clan. But these people are peasants. Uneducated. Illiterate. Close-minded. Without ambition.' He sat back and stroked his belly. 'I don't look down on them, but what can you do? If a man has only ever driven a rickshaw and never in his life held a book in his hand, then what can you expect from him?'

Nazneen wondered about Mrs Islam. If she knew

everybody's business then she must mix with everybody, peasant or not. And still she was respectable.

'Going out to work?' Razia said to Mrs Islam. 'What has happened to Jorina's husband?'

'Nothing has happened to Jorina's husband,' said Mrs Islam. Nazneen admired the way the words left her mouth, like bullets. It was too late now to ask about the woman who fell from the sixteenth floor.

'Her husband is still working,' said Razia, as if she were the provider of the information.

'The husband is working but still she cannot fill her stomach. In Bangladesh one salary can feed twelve, but Jorina cannot fill her stomach.'

'Where is she going? To the garment factory?'

'Mixing with all sorts: Turkish, English, Jewish. All sorts. I am not old-fashioned,' said Mrs Islam. 'I don't wear burkha. I keep purdah in my mind, which is the most important thing. Plus I have cardigans and anoraks and a scarf for my head. But if you mix with all these people, even if they are good people, you have to give up your culture to accept theirs. That's how it is.'

'Poor Jorina,' said Razia. 'Can you imagine?' she said to Nazneen, who could not.

They talked on and Nazneen made more tea and answered some queries about herself and about her husband, and wondered all the while about supper and the impossibility of mentioning anything to her guests, who must be made welcome.

'Dr Azad knows Mr Dalloway,' Chanu had explained to her. 'He has influence. If he puts in a word for me, the promotion will be automatic. That's how it works. Make sure you fry the spices properly, and cut the meat into big pieces. I don't want small pieces of meat this evening.'

Nazneen asked after Razia's children, a boy and a girl, five and three, who were playing at an auntie's house. She made enquiries about Mrs Islam's arthritic hip, and Mrs Islam made some noises to indicate that

indeed the hip was troubling her a great deal but it was nothing she could mention, being in fact a stoic. And then, just when her anxiety about supper was beginning to make her chest hurt, her guests stood up to leave and Nazneen rushed to open the door, feeling rude as she stood by it, waiting for them to go.

CHAPTER TWO

Dr Azad was a small, precise man who, contrary to the Bengali custom, spoke at a level only one quarter of a decibel above a whisper. Anyone who wished to hear what he was saying was obliged to lean in towards him, so that all evening Chanu gave the appearance of hanging on his every word.

'Come,' said Dr Azad, when Nazneen was hovering behind the table ready to serve. 'Come and sit down with us.'

'My wife is very shy.' Chanu smiled and motioned with his head for her to be seated.

'This week I saw two of our young men in a very sorry state,' said the doctor. 'I told them straight, this is your choice: stop drinking alcohol now, or by Eid your liver will be finished. Ten years ago this would be unthinkable. Two in one week! But now our children are copying what they see here, going to the pub, to nightclubs. Or drinking at home in their bedrooms where their parents think they are perfectly safe. The problem is our community is not properly educated about these things.' Dr Azad drank a glass of water down in one long draught and poured himself another. 'I always drink two glasses before starting the meal.' He drank the second glass. 'Good. Now I will not overeat.'

'Eat! Eat!' said Chanu. 'Water is good for cleansing the system, but food is also essential.' He scooped up