

nipples. Behind her a door slammed. She reached the stairwell and cantered down. The overhead light was fierce; she could feel its faint heat even as the concrete cold crept into her toes. The stairs gave off a tang of urine. She bunched the skirts of her sari with one hand and took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle against an unforgiving ridge. She caught the stair rail and did not fall but clung to the side for a moment, then continued down, stamping as if the pain was just a cramp to be marched out.

Outside, small patches of mist bearded the lamp-posts and a gang of pigeons turned weary circles on the grass like prisoners in an exercise yard. A woman hurried past with a small child in her arms. The child screamed and kicked its legs against the kidnapper. The woman produced a plastic rattle with which to gag her victim. Nazneen pulled the end of her sari over her hair. At the main road she looked both ways, and then went left. Two men were dragging furniture out of a junk shop to display on the pavement. One of them went inside and came out again with a wheelchair. He tied a chain around it and padlocked it to an armchair as if arranging a three-legged furniture race. Nazneen changed her mind and turned around. She walked until she reached the big crossroads and waited at the kerb while the traffic roared from one direction and then the next. Twice she stepped into the road and drew back again. To get to the other side of the street without being hit by a car was like walking out in the monsoon and hoping to dodge the raindrops. A space opened up before her. God is great, said Nazneen under her breath. She ran.

A horn blared like an ancient muezzin, ululating painfully, stretching his vocal cords to the limit. She stopped and the car swerved. Another car skidded to a halt in front of her and the driver got out and began to shout. She ran again and turned into a side street, then off again to the right onto Brick Lane. She had been

here a few times with Chanu, later in the day when the restaurants smelled of fresh boiled rice and old fried fat and the waiters with their tight black trousers stood in doorways holding out menus and smiles. But now the waiters were at home asleep, or awake being waited on themselves by wives who only served and were not served in return except with board and lodging and the provision of children whom they also, naturally, waited upon. And the streets were stacked with rubbish, entire kingdoms of rubbish piled high as fortresses with only the border skirmishes of plastic bottles and grease-stained cardboard to separate them. A man looked up at some scaffolding with an intent, almost ardent, expression as if his love might be at the top, cowering on the high planks or the dark slate roof. A pair of schoolchildren, pale as rice and loud as peacocks, cut over the road and hurtled down a side street, galloping with joy or else with terror. Otherwise, Brick Lane was deserted. Nazneen stopped by some film posters pasted in waves over a metal siding. The hero and heroine peered at each other with epic hunger. The scarlet of her lips matched the bandanna tied around his forehead. A sprinkling of sweat highlighted the contour of his biceps. The kohl around her eyes made them smoke with passion. Some invisible force was keeping them (only inches) apart. The type at the foot of the poster said: *The world could not stop their love.*

[Nazneen walked. She walked to the end of Brick Lane and turned right. Four blocks down she crossed the road (she waited next to a woman and stepped out with her, like a calf with its mother) and took a side street. She turned down the first right, and then went left. From there she took every second right and every second left until she realized she was leaving herself a trail. Then she turned off at random, began to run, limped for a while to save her ankle, and thought she had come in a circle. The buildings seemed familiar. She sensed rather than saw, because she had

taken care not to notice. But now she slowed down and looked around her. She looked up at a building as she passed. It was constructed almost entirely of glass, with a few thin rivets of steel holding it together. The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out. Inside, on a raised dais, a woman behind a glass desk crossed and uncrossed her thin legs. She wedged a telephone receiver between her ear and shoulder and chewed on a fingernail. Nazneen craned her head back and saw that the glass above became dark as a night pond. The building was without end. Above, somewhere, it crushed the clouds. The next building and the one opposite were white stone palaces. There were steps up to the entrances and colonnades across the front. Men in dark suits trotted briskly up and down the steps, in pairs or in threes. They barked to each other and nodded sombrely. Sometimes one clapped a hand on his companion's shoulder and Nazneen saw that this was not for reassurance, but for emphasis. Every person who brushed past her on the pavement, every back she saw, was on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan: to get a promotion today, to be exactly on time for an appointment, to buy a newspaper with the right coins so that the exchange was swift and seamless, to walk without wasting a second and to reach the roadside just as the lights turned red. Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear – or was it excitement? – passed through her legs.

But they were not aware of her. In the next instant she knew it. They could not see her any more than she could see God. They knew that she existed (just as she knew that He existed) but unless she did something, waved a gun, halted the traffic, they would not see her. She enjoyed this thought. She began to scrutinize. She stared at the long, thin faces, the pointy chins. The

women had strange hair. It puffed up around their heads, pumped up like a snake's hood. They pressed their lips together and narrowed their eyes as though they were angry at something they had heard, or at the wind for messing their hair. A woman in a long red coat stopped and took a notebook from her bag. She consulted the pages. The coat was the colour of a bride's sari. It was long and heavy with gold buttons that matched the chain on her bag. Her shiny black shoes had big gold buckles. Her clothes were rich. Solid. They were armour, and her ringed fingers weapons. Nazneen pulled at her cardigan. She was cold. Her fingertips burned with cold. The woman looked up and saw Nazneen staring. She smiled, like she was smiling at someone who had tried and totally failed to grasp the situation.

No longer invisible, Nazneen walked faster and looked only at what she had to see to walk without falling or colliding. It occurred to her that she had, without meaning to, compared herself to God. This thought distressed her so much that tears came into her eyes and she banged into a man whose briefcase swung against her knee like a mallet. She recited in her head her favourite sura.

By the light of day, and by the dark of night, your Lord has not forsaken you, nor does He abhor you.

The life to come holds a richer prize for you than this present life. You shall be gratified with what your Lord will give you.

Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?

Did He not find you in error and guide you?

Did He not find you poor and enrich you? ┘

But the pain in her knee and her hands and her ankle destroyed the verses. *Proclaim the goodness of your Lord. Proclaim the goodness of your Lord.*

There was a patch of green surrounded by black railings, and in the middle two wooden benches. In this city, a bit of grass was something to be guarded, fenced

They made room on the sofa, and patted the cushion where she should sit. Nazneen looked at the couple on the television screen, the false smiles, the made-up faces, the demented illusion of freedom chasing around their enclosure. Turn it off, she said.

Mrs Islam came, billowing Ralgex Heat Spray and self-pity. "Take it," said Nazneen, stuffing ten-pound notes into her hand. "Take everything. The righteous get their rewards." But she shrank a little under the hard black eyes.

She began to spend time at the window, as she had in those first few months in London, when it was still possible to look out across the dead grass and concrete and see nothing but jade-green fields, unable to imagine that the years would rub them away. Now she saw only the flats, piles of people loaded one on top of the other, a vast dump of people rotting away under a mean strip of sky, too small to reflect all those souls. She lowered the net curtain and watched the groups of boys who drove endlessly around the estate, even on the parts where cars were not supposed to go. There were faces she did not recognize. They got out of their cars and approached other cars. They formed in fours and fives and got back in their cars. They carried an air of violence with them, like a sort of breeding, good or bad, without ever displaying it. Sometimes she saw Tariq. He walked with his head down, and he did not get in the cars.

Razia came round and sat with her. "He says I should be grateful. He didn't take my bride's gold."

"Did he go to the doctor yet?"

Razia clamped her legs together and stiffened her back. She spoke in a whisper. "If the boy does not want to give up the drugs, that is his choice." It was a poor imitation. She lit up a cigarette and two smoke ropes hung from her nostrils. "The doctor has the English disease," she said. "If I have to lock him in his room then that is what I will do."

She smoked intensively, barely releasing the

cigarette from her lip between drags. "I saw the boy - the middleman. He was coming down the stairwell."

A familiar heat began to kindle at the back of Nazneen's neck. It crept up around to her cheeks and flushed down her spine. "Yes," she said, "he was here." And she tingled with shame, a kind of pins-and-needles of the soul, roused again after a crooked sleep.

Feeling returned to her slowly, like blood beginning to circulate. Anxiety, which had been unable to bite through the blanket of her depression, began to maul and chew. An eternity in hell, she told herself. That is already done. She drew no comfort. Is there not a life to get through first? She thought she had been sharp with the children, and fussed over them until even Bibi pulled away. Chanu's corns had flourished. She sliced and scraped. His toenails had begun to curl over the ends of his toes. She clipped them. Chanu said, "She is feeling better," and presented his nasal hair for grooming.

She realized that the little bit of money she had put aside to send to Hasina had been used up for the payments to Mrs Islam. She returned to her sewing and worked until her eyes swam. Chanu had said he would make a plan for Hasina, but had never mentioned her again. Hasina had gone the way of all his plans. Nazneen bent to her work, all her concentration for that moment pulled into a buttonhole.

Chanu slammed through the door as if he would take it off its hinges. This man, who would not sit if he could lie, would not stand if he could lean, moved faster than Nazneen had ever before witnessed.

"Quick. Be quick!" he shouts. "Put on the television."

He rages around the room looking for the remote control, passing the television several times. Eventually, he switches it on by pressing the button below the screen. "Oh God," he says. "The world has gone mad."

Nazneen glances over at the screen. The television

shows a tall building against a blue sky. She looks at her husband.

'This is the start of the madness,' says Chanu. He holds on to his stomach as if he is afraid that someone may snatch it away.

Nazneen moves closer. A thick bundle of black smoke is hanging outside the tower. It looks too heavy to hang there. An aeroplane comes in slow motion from the corner of the screen. It appears to be flying at the level of the buildings. Nazneen thinks she had better get on with her work.

'Oh God,' shouts Chanu.

Nazneen sits down on the sofa, her hand on the shiny patch where Chanu's hair oil has mixed with the fabric. The scene plays over. Chanu squats on his haunches with his stomach between his knees and his arms wrapped around both. The television has enslaved him. He rocks around in a state of fearful excitement.

The aeroplane comes again. The television shows it again and again.

Nazneen leans forward, straining to comprehend. She works herself to the edge of the sofa. The words and phrases repeat and she begins to grasp them. Chanu covers his face with his hands and looks through his fingers. Nazneen realizes she has leaned so far forward she is doubled up. She straightens herself. She thinks she has understood but she also thinks she must be mistaken.

The scene switches. 'The Pentagon,' says Chanu. 'Do you know what it is? It's the *Pentagon*.'

The plane comes again and again. Nazneen and Chanu fall under its spell.

Now they see smoke: a pillar of smoke, collapsing. Nazneen and Chanu rise. They stay on their feet as they watch it a second, a third time. The image is at once mesmerizing and impenetrable; the more it plays the more obscure it becomes until Nazneen feels she must shake herself out of a trance. Chanu limbers up

his shoulders, holds out his arms and circles them. He blows hard. He says nothing.

When a knock comes at the door Chanu seems not to hear it. Nazneen lets Nazma in and asks her to sit down.

'I'm not staying,' says Nazma, and stands in the middle of the room. 'My husband's cousin's brother-in-law went to New York.' After a silence she says, 'But now he is in Boston.'

Nazma is defined by roundness. It is not only her head that is ball-shaped. She is made up of a series of balls, some larger than others, none of them small. Even her arms are circular, like the arms that Bibi draws on her snowmen.

Nazneen looks over her neighbour's shoulder, at the screen.

'Anyway,' says Nazma, as if Nazneen has been detaining her. 'Anyway, I came to ask if you would mind the children tomorrow after school.'

Nazneen agrees. On her way out, Nazma runs her hand over the sewing machine. 'Still getting plenty of work?'

The glint in her eye makes Nazneen's stomach somersault.

The children come home and they all watch together. It is hard to keep looking at the television and it is impossible to look away. Shahana starts to ask questions but Chanu flaps his arm to keep her quiet. He has taken up his squatting position once again, part reverence, part subjugation. The girls sit on either side of Nazneen and they too become enthralled.

The room grows dark and nobody has moved. 'You will see what happens now,' says Chanu. Shahana kicks off her shoes and settles back in the sofa. Bibi winds a strand of hair around her finger and inserts another strand into her mouth. It feels to Nazneen as though they have survived something together, as a family. She goes into the kitchen to heat up some dal and boil a kettle for the rice. She turns the light on and

has to shield her eyes for a moment. When she returns to the sitting room there is something new to see. A small figure leaning out of a window; high up, maybe a hundred floors in the air, he reaches out and he cannot be saved. Another figure jumps and at that moment it seems to Nazneen that hope and despair are nothing against the world and what it holds and what it holds for you.

That night she dreams of Gouripur. She stands at the edge of the village and looks out over the light-slaked fields, at the dark spots moving in the distance: men, doing what little they can.

A pinch of New York dust blew across the ocean and settled on the Dogwood Estate. Sorupa's daughter was the first, but not the only one. Walking in the street, on her way to college, she had her hijab pulled off. Razia wore her Union Jack sweatshirt and it was spat on. 'Now you see what will happen,' said Chanu. 'Backlash.' He entangled himself with newspapers and began to mutter and mumble. He no longer spoke to his audience.

Nazneen went to buy ghee and chapatti flour. Four men leaned over the counter, studying a paper so closely that when they looked up she almost expected their eyeballs to be smudged with newsprint.

'It's very serious,' said the eldest, and the rest looked grave.

Nazneen thought, my husband should come here and discuss with these men. He is too alone with his thoughts.

The old man ran his fingertips along the newspaper as if he were reading by touch. '*The strike is planned for later next month.*'

There was a general sucking of teeth.

'What can we shopkeepers do?'

'We are at their mercy.'

'Yes, if they don't collect the rubbish the whole of Brick Lane is going to stink like an elephant's arse.'

But Chanu thought nothing of striking binmen. He

worked long hours and he spent the rest of his time watching the news or reading in the newspapers of the air strikes planned against Afghanistan. 'It's time to go,' he told no one in particular and hitched up his stomach, girding himself for action. 'Any day, any moment, life can end. There's been enough planning.'

One day he began counting money. He held a pile of notes and sat blinking at it for a long time. 'Wife, my wife,' he said, 'a wife does not keep anything from her husband.'

Nazneen stroked his head briefly. Two hairs came away in her hand. She went to the kitchen, to the cupboard under the sink and opened the Tupperware box.

'We just need a little bit more,' said Chanu. 'Enough will be enough, and we will not need any more than that.'

He called the girls and Shahana revived her deep interest in the carpet. Bibi clenched her fists in concentration.

'From time to time, I have tried to teach you a little bit of something here and there.' Shahana groaned. Chanu let it pass. 'Maybe you don't remember any of these things. It doesn't matter. Let it go.' His face, Nazneen saw, was unusually calm. 'But I will teach you something now that you will not be able to forget, even if you try.' He paused for a moment, and Nazneen thought he would clear his throat. But his throat was already clear. 'There was a painter from Mymensingh. His name was Zainul Abedin. His work was shown all over the world and received many high accolades. Now this man did not paint vases full of flowers or high society portraits. His subject was the common people of Bangladesh. He showed life as it was. And he showed death. Just as it was.'

Shahana lifted her head. She was wearing her new jeans. Chanu had stopped objecting to the tightness of her old jeans. The new ones were baggier than a pair of rice sacks, and she had cut the ends off and worked on them so that they frayed in exactly the right way.

'What about recorded music?' said the musician.

'That's banned as well.'

'Don't we have a Spiritual Leader here? Let's ask him what the Qur'an has to say.'

The Spiritual Leader was located. The Secretary stepped down to confer with him. The Spiritual Leader had put on a considerable amount of weight in a few months. The little conference on sharia did not interfere with his consumption of a very large, lavishly glazed pastry.

'It's settled,' announced the Secretary on his return to the stage. 'All banned.'

'Man!' said the musician.

'Move on. Move on,' urged the Secretary.

The musician stood up. He still wore his strange fingerless gloves. Maybe he didn't burn himself, thought Nazneen. Maybe he has some kind of skin disease.

'If everyone's going to sit there and tell me I'm un-Islamic, then I ain't staying.'

'Sit down,' said Karim. 'It's all right. We'll talk about music later. Now, I've got a list of the local estates here and I want two organizers for every estate . . .'

From the corner of the stage, a figure materialized.

Karim hesitated.

'Don't let me stop you,' said the Questioner.

'You're not,' said Karim.

'I've just got something to show people, when you're finished.'

The audience emitted a low noise, like a pan of boiling water.

'Show it then,' Karim ordered.

'Well,' said the Questioner. 'If you say so.' He reached into the lining of his jacket and took out a scroll of papers. He unrolled the sheets, rolled them up the other way and did his best to make them hang flat. He held them against his chest so that only a blank page showed. 'Our Chairman is a man of peace. I am also a man of peace. Islam is a peaceful religion. But what do

you do if someone comes to fight you? Do you run away?

'A few weeks ago, persons unknown launched an attack on American soil. Innocent people were killed. Civilians. Men, women and children. The world wept and sent money. Now, America is taking her revenge and our brothers are being killed. Their children die with them. They are not any more or less innocent. But the world does not mourn them.'

He turned his sheaf of papers round and held it out, gripping both top and bottom to prevent it from curling. The photograph showed a tiny girl dressed in rags, her leg blown off at the knee. 'Some collateral damage,' said the Questioner.

He showed the next photo.

'This is a just war.' The boy was no more than six or seven.

He rolled the pictures up and put them away. 'Our Chairman says we must show our strength. What he means is we must walk together down the street. We mustn't do more than that.'

'What shall we do, then?' called someone from the audience. The crowd rumbled a bit, as if the last words had been stolen from the tips of their tongues.

The Questioner shrugged. He put his hands in his pockets. 'The most powerful nation on this planet attacks one of the most ravaged countries in the world. We are fit young men. There are no chains tying us to these walls. With a little planning, a little effort, we can cross continents.' He shrugged again. 'What can we do?'

Nazneen looked at Chanu. He had his head bowed. His cheeks hung like empty purses.

The black man, the Multicultural Liaison Officer, got to his feet. 'I been reading up,' he began. He blew hard to signify just how much effort this had cost him. 'I been reading up, and it seems that being a Muslim brings many heavy responsibilities. Not just the praying, and laying off drinks and laying off bacon and women and laying off every other manner of thing. It

also has it written in the Qur'an that every Muslim should work towards one, unified Islamic state across the world. It is written, Khilafah is fard.' He thumped a huge hand against the snowy expanse of robe that covered his great chest. 'Now, what are we all doing about that?'

'Good question, brother,' said the Questioner.

Karim stepped in front of him. 'Listen to me. Let's not get distracted—'

A couple of seats to the right of Chanu, a girl jumped up and shouted over him. The sharp lines of her hijab emphasized the fine bones of her cheeks. 'According to United Nations statistics, there was another big tragedy on September eleventh. On that day thirty-five thousand children also died through hunger.' The girl looked straight at Karim as she spoke. Karim folded his arms. He looked straight back at her. The girl was barely out of her teens. She had large, long-lashed eyes, not too close together. The dark headscarf framed her forehead to perfection. 'What do we know about this tragedy?' the girl continued. She looked down at the piece of paper in her hand. 'Victims: thirty-five thousand. Location: the poorest countries in the world. Special news reports: none. Appeals for the victims and their families: none. Messages from Heads of State: none. Candlelight vigils: none. Minutes' silence: none. Calls for the perpetrators to be called to justice . . .' The girl looked up. Her face grew flushed with emotion. 'None.' She sat down quickly.

Karim let his gaze travel over the audience. He saw Nazneen, and Chanu with his head bent, and for a brief moment his eyebrows knitted together.

Nazneen wondered how he would look at her if she jumped up now and began to make a speech.

'How many were Muslims?' called a voice from the front of the hall. It was a woman's voice, emanating from somewhere in the region of the burkhas. 'How many of the thirty-five thousand were Muslims?'

What does it matter? thought Nazneen. Those

who were not Muslims, would they be any less dead?

'People, people, let's get around to our business.' Karim paced up and down across the front of the stage. His elbow knocked against the Questioner, but Karim appeared not to notice. 'Out there, right now, are people who are twisted with hatred for us and for Islam. They are planning to march right on our doorsteps, and we are not going to let them get away with it. Let's show the Lion Hearts that Bangla Town is defended. Tigers will take on Lions any day of the week.' He strode over to the Secretary and procured a sheet of paper from the clipboard. 'Right. The list of estates. We need volunteers for organizers. First one: Berners Estate.'

Over on the right-hand side of the aisle, two lads rose to their feet. 'That's ours.'

Immediately, three boys jumped up on the opposite side of the aisle. 'It's ours, and you know it.'

'It doesn't belong to you.'

'Come here and say that.'

'You come here.'

The boys regarded each other with distinct and yet lazy menace, as if they knew there was much more in the way of menacing to be done and they did not wish to exhaust themselves.

'In here,' said Karim, 'and out there, as Bengal Tigers, that's the only group we belong to. Get it? No one owns any estate. Leave everything else out of it. OK?' He looked from one group to the other. 'OK, lads?'

Karim assigned people to the estates. He issued instructions for canvassing, targets to be met, reports to be filed, dates for the organizers to convene, plans for stewarding the march itself. He kept up a constant flow of talk, and all the time he talked he moved about the stage, filling it with his personality. Nobody objected to his allocated role. He eased each one into a slot, with a 'You'll be good at this, Khaled,' or 'This is just made for you, Monzur.' 'The Women's Committee I'm putting in charge of the banners.']

'Well. It's all right then.'

The line crackled conveniently. Their voices echoed down the wire. It was difficult to talk.

One time she asked him, 'Is it how you expected? Is it what you wanted?'

White noise filled the earpiece, like a gale caught in the telephone. Then the line cleared.

'The English have a saying: you can't step into the same river twice. Do you know it? Do you know what it means?'

She knew.

Another time he called and said, 'I've seen her.'

'Hasina!'

'The family she is with is respectable-type family. But it would be better if she had her own living accommodation.'

'How did she seem?'

'She seemed . . .' Chanu paused. 'Unbroken.'

'What did she say? How did she look?'

'We must send some money. Will you send to her?'

The first wage that Razia paid was not much. All month they ate rice and dal, rice and dal. And at the end of the month there was five pounds left to send to Hasina. Next month there was more.

Nazneen put down her pen. It was not working. She was not ready. She had thought it would be a matter of trying. Now she realized that the work would come later. First she had to imagine.

A new song came on the radio.

Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeellll

A woman's voice, half singing, half screeching.

You know you make me wanna shout

She went to the radio and turned it up. The singer jumped off her cliff of expectation and cavorted in an ecstatic sea.

Nazneen moved her head to the song. Her hips went side to side. She tapped her right foot, then the other. She raised her arms and moved her chest. The music broke in waves over her entire body.

She waved her arms, threw back her head and danced around the table. *Shout!* She sang along, filling her lungs from the bottom, letting it all go loose, feeling her hair shake out down her neck and around her shoulders, abandoning her feet to the rhythm, threading her hips through the air. She swooped down and tucked her sari up into the band of her underskirt. *Shout!*

Nazneen put her hands on her waist and kicked her legs high. She turned and kicked, turned and kicked, jumped and kicked and her foot went over her head.

The phone rang. Nazneen ran to the radio and switched it off.

'Hello.' She was panting.

'What's wrong?' It was Chanu.

'No. Nothing. Just running for the phone.'

'Your sister has vanished.'

Nazneen's chest hurt. She pushed it with her hand. 'Oh, God, what has happened?'

'Her employer came to see me. She has vanished with the cook. They have run away together.'

'Oh,' said Nazneen. 'I thought something terrible . . .'

'Something terrible *has* happened. The cook is only a young boy. How soon before he gets tired of her? Remember what happened the last time.'

The line was clear but Chanu, out of emotion or force of habit, shouted.

'When did she leave?'

'A week or two ago. I don't know. There was hell to pay with the employer. Good cooks don't grow on trees, as he kept reminding me.'

'Did you see him, the cook? What was he like?'

'Don't expect me to go chasing after her. There's

more to this soap business than meets the eye. I can't go running around all over the town on your wild-goose chase.'

Nazneen imagined him nursing his belly.

'I know,' she said.

'Why did she do it? Why does she do these things?'

Nazneen glanced down and was surprised to see her legs. 'Because,' she said, 'she isn't going to give up.'

Chanu was quiet. The line played a static tune.

'I've been thinking,' said Chanu. 'Maybe you could come for a holiday, you and the girls.'

'What about school?'

'Oh,' he said and was very casual about it, 'oh, come whenever it's possible.'

'Yes,' she told him. 'We'd like that.'

The miles did not matter. She saw him beam. His eyes disappeared in crinkles. His cheeks were ready to burst. His voice, when it came, was unsteady. 'I'd like that too. That is the thing I'd like most in the world.'

'Where are we going?' Nazneen asked again. 'Give me a clue.'

They were on the bus, heading towards Liverpool Street. That was all she knew.

'A clue. A clue,' said Razia, with her best sideways look.

'No,' cried Shahana. 'Stop it.'

'It's a surprise,' Bibi explained, with the patience of angels.

'I'll guess, then. We're going to the zoo.'

'No.'

'The cinema.'

'No.'

'The fair. The circus. The end of the earth.'

'No more guessing,' said Shahana. She took a Tupperware box out of her bag and lifted the lid. She had made the sandwiches herself, cream cheese spread with mango pickle. 'There's two each. Who wants one now?'

Shahana and Bibi had half a sandwich each.

The conductor came upstairs and told them theirs was the next stop.

As they got off the bus, the girls took hold of Nazneen's hands. 'Close your eyes,' they told her.

She obeyed.

They tugged her hands. 'Come on. Walk.'

She opened her eyes.

'Walk with your eyes closed.'

She felt the breeze against her skin, the warmth of the sun against her eyelids, the hair that tickled her cheek. As she walked she was aware of each step, testing out the mechanics of her legs.

'We're here,' said Bibi.

'Hush,' said Shahana. Her hand covered Nazneen's eyes. 'Tie your scarf around, Bibi, or she'll cheat.'

'I hope you don't expect too much of me,' said Razia. 'Remember I'm an old lady. Old and arthritic.'

'Hush,' said Shahana. 'You'll give it away.'

The girls guided Nazneen along with one hand on hers and the other in the small of her back. Nazneen heard voices, the ones that passed her and the ones that melted far away. She heard music played on strings and piped from on high. There were thuds too, like boots having the mud knocked off them. And a faint whooshing that came and went like the wind in a tunnel.

'Where are we?'

'You sit here with Razia. We'll organize everything.'

'Shall I peep?' she said to Razia, when she could tell that the girls had gone.

'You could try,' said Razia, 'but then I'll have to poke your bloody eyes out.'

Nazneen rested her arms on the table. She could smell fried food, old leather, the warm, used smell of air that has been in countless nostrils, a hint of talcum powder, furniture polish and the sharp skin of limes. She breathed deeply. It was the furniture polish that smelled of limes.

'We're ready. We're ready,' said Bibi.

They stood her up and turned her round. Shahana untied the knot at the back of her head.

'Go on. Open them.'

She opened her eyes.

In front of her was a huge white circle, bounded by four-foot-high boards. Glinting, dazzling, enchanting ice. She looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colours that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath. A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs.

'Here are your boots, Amma.'

Nazneen turned round. To get on the ice physically – it hardly seemed to matter. In her mind she was already there.

She said, 'But you can't skate in a sari.'

Razia was already lacing her boots. 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like.'

THE END

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