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The Shadow of the Crescent Moon

Written by Fatima Bhutto

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*The Shadow of the
Crescent Moon*

FATIMA BHUTTO

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The author's retelling of the story of the Greedy King was inspired by reading *Pashtun Tales: From the Pakistan-Afghan Frontier* by Aisha Ahmad and Roger Boase, Saqi Books, 2008. Translations of Pashtun poetry were hard to come by and I scoured the Internet for versions and variants. A lot of the translators and enthusiasts came from blogs, message boards and forums and I am grateful to all those who shared their love of the Pashto language and its poetry. The version of the Nazim Hikmet poem used in the epigraph comes from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dylt3_p4FU

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For Baba
with all my love

For Baba
my soul

My country
I don't have any caps left made back home
Nor any shoes that trod your roads
I've worn out your last shirt quite long ago
It was of Sile cloth
Now you only remain in the whiteness of my hair
Intact in my heart
Now you only remain in the whiteness of my hair
In the lines of my forehead
My country.

Nazim Hikmet

Prologue

In a white house on Sher Hakimullah road eight thirty on Friday morning has come too early.

The bazaar is opening slowly, rearranging its schedule to accommodate Eid's last-minute shoppers. Light drizzle hits the dusty footpaths, carefully, so as not to disturb the shopkeepers pulling up their shutters. The clouds dip low over Mir Ali and, from a distance, the fog makes it seem as though the tanks aren't there at all. On the roofs of the town's buildings, snipers lie in their nests, surrounded by sandbags, their military rain ponchos cold and clammy against their necks, and wait for the day to begin.

Three brothers live under the same roof – a home they share with their widowed mother, who occupies a solitary room on the ground floor, spending her days in the company of a young maid who gives her medicine and homeopathic tonics and twists her long white hair into a single plait every morning.

Two of the brothers are the other occupants of the ground-floor rooms, alongside the family kitchen and a small sitting room. Upstairs, the third brother and his family find their home in disarray as mobile phones beep in lieu of alarm clocks and showers with aged, corroded pipes drip water onto the heads of those who did not remember to fill a bucket the night before. A small cricket bat leans against a bedroom wall, next to a set of plastic cars.

Soggy towels and wet bath mats lie around the bathroom. Socks that stepped in soapy puddles and have to be discarded are strewn on the floor. Muddy footprints of dirty shoes that

stomp through the wet-tiled bathroom leave traces of black rings from room to room.

Fridays are always chaotic in the house on Sher Hakimullah road and this morning difficult decisions have been made. The brothers cannot – will not – it is finally decided after some days of deliberation, pray together on Eid.

In Mir Ali, where religion crept into the town's rocky terrain like the wild flowers that grew quietly where no grass ought to have grown, you chose your mosque carefully. Fridays were no longer about the supplicants; they were about the message delivered to them by faithful translators of the world's clearest religion. In Mir Ali nowadays you were spoilt for choice.

There were the mellow congregations, whose mullahs invoked harmony and goodness amongst mankind. These were the mosques that did not keep their flock for long, only enough time to remind them of their duties as a promised people. The sermons might proffer some elementary guidance in such endeavours, but it was largely a drive-through service.

There were the *jumma namaz* mosques that specialized in distinctive foreign-policy-based diatribes – lashings of rhetoric against great satans and the little men who did their bidding. These mosques yearned for converts to their cause but they lost them in Mir Ali, where people preferred to go to the houses of God that had taught their fathers and grandfathers about justice. There was no greater cause in Mir Ali than justice.

One by one the brothers filter into the kitchen to drink their morning tea. White onions sizzle in a frying pan, sweating from the heat. The brothers arrive to claim their place at the small table, draped with a sticky plastic tablecloth, where the day's first meal will be served – sweet parathas and omelettes

with diced tomatoes, onions and green chillies. The air smells of the pepper being shaken onto the chopped onions, pungent but sweet. The three brothers take their tea without too much sugar but the aged cook, who brews the tea leaves in a blackened saucepan with fresh goat's milk, ignores them and heaps in palmfuls of refined white sugar anyway.

On the occasion of the first day of Eid, the brothers at the morning table speak to each other in a toneless, secretive mumble. Heads bent low, they don't talk as they normally do, with voices that come with secret smiles and banter that falls out of the mouth playfully. This morning there are few teases and no arguments, only the question of how to proceed with the day ahead.

It is too dangerous, too risky, to place all the family together in one mosque that could easily be hit. They no longer know by whom.

'By drugged-up Saudi pubescents trained in the exact extermination of Shias,' ventures Aman Erum, the eldest brother.

'No, it's not just Saudis,' protests Sikandar, the middle of the three, as he looks around the kitchen for his wife. 'Sometimes there's politics behind it, not God.' She is nowhere to be seen. He swallows his sugary tea uncomfortably.

'Yes, yes, sometimes they're pubescents from Afghanistan. Still Sunnis, though,' jokes Aman Erum, folding a paratha into his mouth as he stands up to leave.

'Where are you going?' Sikandar shouts at him. 'We're eating – come back.' He notices, as he speaks, that Hayat, the youngest brother, hasn't lifted his eyes from the blue-and-green-checked pattern of the plastic tablecloth.

He has to go to work, Aman Erum says, to check in before Friday prayers shut the city down for the afternoon. He reminds Sikandar to pass on his business card, newly printed and designed, to a colleague at the hospital.

'*Kha, kha,*' Sikandar says, tucking the crisp white and red import/export rectangle into his wallet.

'Wait, which mosque?' Aman Erum asks, turning round and displaying his mouth, stuffed full of the flaky, buttered bread.

'You're going to Hussain Kamal street *jumat,*' replies Hayat, looking up. Sikandar looks at his younger brother's eyes; they are bloodshot. Hayat has decided where each of them will offer his supplications today. He has barely spoken all morning; this is the first time he has broken his silence. 'You know that,' he says to Aman Erum abruptly.

Aman Erum doesn't look at Hayat. 'Yes, yes,' he mumbles, turning away from his brother. 'I know.' The paratha is chewed and swallowed, a hand raised in farewell, and for a second there is a lull in the siblings' chatter as they adjust to the prospect of praying alone, without each other, for the first time.

And then the noise picks up again, seamlessly. The remaining two brothers rise to greet their aged mother, Zainab, who looks around the kitchen as she sits down at the table. 'Where is Mina?' she asks Sikandar as the brothers shuffle around each other to make space for two more cups of chai before their separate journeys through Mir Ali begin.

09:00

I

Aman Erum sits in the back of a battered yellow Mehran taxi and asks the driver to take him to Pir Roshan road. The elderly driver turns in his seat, its brown fabric ripped along the back, exposing dirty yellow foam. 'That's not the address you gave on the phone,' he says, hoping to renegotiate the fare.

There's a spring digging into Aman Erum's back. He adjusts his body against the broken seat. 'Let's get moving, *kahkah*.'

The taxi's windows are all open, but Aman Erum smells something that bothers him. He can't tell what it is. He looks at the greasy side mirrors, held together with strips of duct tape. It's not the slackened seat belts. Aman Erum tries to roll his window further down, but it's stuck. They drive past walls covered in red and black graffiti, political slogans written in thick cursive script. Boys in packs of four and five wrapped scarves round their faces to shield against winter nights as they painted what patches of Mir Ali were not guarded by the military. *Azadi*, they scrawled: freedom.

It has been months since Aman Erum returned home to Mir Ali after a long time abroad. He never thought he would come back.

Aman Erum's childhood in Mir Ali, as compared to that of his brothers, had been idyllic. As the eldest son he had accompanied Inayat to the mosque to meet with friends and relatives every Friday after closing the family-owned carpet shop for the day. And, every summer, Aman Erum had been the fifth member of his father's annual fishing trip to Chitral.

He would lie awake at night throughout the late winter and

early spring months, the idea of the trip keeping him company and supplanting sleep. His father and his three friends, men who had grown up within walking distance of each other and whose families were now connected by marriage and children, had been going to Chitral for as long as Aman Erum could remember. He had been a small boy when his father first took him along. Their relationship had been so uncomplicated then.

Aman Erum would load up a light-blue pick-up truck with gas cylinders, tarpaulin from which a large tent would be erected for the fishermen, butter, rice, pots and pans, lentils and vegetables wrapped in sheer pink-plastic bags – enough supplies to carry the men through a five-day camp.

He lived for those summer days. Dipping his feet into the cold river in Chitral, watching his snot turn charcoal-black as he breathed in the fumes from the gas lamps and smoky fires – he never wanted to go home. He remembered blowing his mysteriously coloured mucus into thin tissues and playing cards late into the night.

When he was eleven years old, the summer of an especially bountiful fishing trip, Aman Erum fell in love.

She was twelve and he had never seen anyone so beautiful. Samarra.

He hadn't noticed her until the moment she ran in front of him and hurled her arm upwards into the air, sending the cricket ball in her palm crashing into the wicket and forcing Aman Erum out of a game he didn't even know Samarra was playing in.

Samarra wore jeans and played cricket and rode horses and shot pellet guns and did everything and anything she had seen her father do. When Ghazan Afridi brought home a 150cc motorcycle from his auto shop, saying little of its provenance, only that it was Chinese-made and smuggled via Kabul, Samarra learned how to drive it, relegating her father to the

back seat while she tore through traffic, turning corners with the slightest swing of her hips. When Ghazan Afridi went fishing for brown trout in the icy streams of the northern valleys, Samarra held the spotted fish with two fingers hooked into its mouth as it thrashed against the rocks, its gills bursting with fresh air. Samarra never complained; she fought hard and she idolized her father. When Ghazan Afridi brought home Russian assault rifles with wooden hand guards and pistol grips, Samarra sat on the floor, her long legs covered with still unplucked downy hair tucked underneath her, and quietly field-stripped them with her father.

For five days, at the foot of the Hindu Kush's highest peak, Samarra Afridi would be all Aman Erum's. They would sneak out of their fathers' tents at midnight to follow foreigners – tall, sunburned young men with sandy-coloured matted hair hidden under newly bought Chitrali pakol hats – around the local bazaar, which smelled of charcoal, until late into the night. One night as they walked along the Kunar river, Aman Erum slipped, unable to see the path ahead under the ashen moonlight, and cut his hand on the rocks by the bank. Samarra took his hand in hers and squeezed out the blood, the bad blood that would infect his body if not bled out. She dipped Aman Erum's palm into the rushing river to ice it and to stop the bleeding. Before the sun rose, before they had to sneak back to their fathers' tents, Aman Erum and Samarra crawled along the mossy trails on their hands and knees, digging up earthworms for the fishermen's morning excursions.

Ghazan Afridi took the men out on walks and came back with rabbits and small birds they would skin and grill for dinner. He tried to teach Samarra how to cook, but she didn't take to it. Ghazan Afridi couldn't cook either, but never let that get in his way.

When they went back to Mir Ali, abandoning smoky summer bonfires made of cracked twigs and lit with Samarra's cheap plastic lighter, Aman Erum imagined he would lose Samarra to her pack of neighbourhood friends and devoted followers. He had seen the children on their bicycles circling round her home straight from school, still wearing their uniforms. But Samarra left them to their bikes and Aman Erum watched from the window as she walked towards his house.

Samarra never once looked back at the children on the bicycles who called her name, shouting for her to stay with them. She walked straight across the gravel with her head held high, craning her neck to see if it was Aman Erum she spied at the window. When Samarra saw him she smiled, but didn't wave hello. Instead, she walked faster, kicking the pebbles out of her way with every step. Aman Erum could still hear her friends calling out her name.

Samarra stood at his door, her palms pressed against the knitted metal of the screen door, and waited to be invited in. Aman Erum put down his books.

'Salam.'

He didn't know quite what to say. Samarra was his first visitor.

As dusk drew over the shade of the pine trees and Ghazan Afridi called across the street for his daughter to leave her friends and come inside, he found only a gaggle of schoolchildren. None with his daughter's messy hair or spindly arms.

The taxi lurches over speed bumps hastily constructed in the middle of already rutted, unfinished roads. The driver opens the glove compartment and takes out a dirty cloth to wipe the rain off the steering wheel. Aman Erum touches the torn fabric of the back seat. He recognizes the smell. The taxi reeks of petrol. Aman Erum doesn't want to dirty his *shalwar kameez*,

freshly laundered and starched. He doesn't want the cloying, acrid smell hanging off him today. The drizzle falls in through the cracked window, wetting Aman Erum's face. The broken spring digs into his back again.

Aman Erum never made it into the bicycle gang; he was awkward and uncomfortable around other children. Instead, he wrote Samarra poetry, small verses in her geography copy-book in school – a class he now shared with her as he had been promoted a grade above his year – and declared himself lost in love with the twelve-year-old girl whose hair was always messily tied in plaits. Aman Erum lived for the summers when Ghazan Afridi would bring his daughter to Chitral.

But Ghazan Afridi began to take longer trips out of Mir Ali. Samarra had been her father's constant companion, his lode-star, but he left her at home more and more now. Samarra was too old, too much of a woman to accompany him. It was dangerous, he said. Samarra wasn't afraid. She wanted to go with her father anyway. But Ghazan Afridi left Samarra with her mother, Malalai, taking his Chinese-made motorcycle on odysseys he never spoke of afterwards.

'Wait,' he said, pinching the air with his fingers. 'The coming years will bring Pakistan to its knees.' Ghazan Afridi told Samarra to be patient. They were building something big. He drove the motorbike up to Jalalabad one summer, journeying alongside the Kunar, leaving Samarra alone at camp.

Aman Erum didn't have to wait for Samarra to come to him then. There was no interminable hanging around and killing time, sitting, as he had become used to doing, in front of the honeycomb screen door in Mir Ali, listening for the sound of her footsteps on the pebbles outside his house, with books piled on his lap, the weight of them deadening his legs.

'What if we lived here?' Aman Erum asked one midnight outside their fathers' tents. 'What if we just stayed?' For as long

as he could remember he had felt constrained in Mir Ali. He wanted to get out, to be free, to make money, to move without checkpoints and military police poking their red berets into your car and asking for your papers. The other boys of Aman Erum's age didn't seem to feel confined by the country's wild borders; they didn't feel restricted the way he did.

Samarra laughed. Even in the dark, Aman Erum could see the spotty pink of her gums. 'This isn't our home.'

'But we could make it our home. I could be a guide, set up a business. Take travellers through the passes.'

Aman Erum knew about the mountains, he knew how to navigate the forests. Inayat had taught him how to magnetize a needle, rubbing it on wool cut from the sleeve of a sweater for three minutes until his fingers went numb. Inayat would watch as Aman Erum laid the needle on a leaf, making a compass to guide them through the unknown wilderness. His father had taught him maps of the land, drawn from memory and measured in footsteps, not miles. Belonging. Inayat thought his son would find belonging in this cartography of the heart. But Inayat was thinking of a different boy, a much younger son.

Aman Erum was fifteen. He had been dreaming up escape plans since taking his first trip out of Mir Ali many summers before. Chitral was all he knew of Pakistan so far. But he had seen a magazine photo spread on Bahawalpur, its sandstone palaces lit up with fairy lights, its magnificent forts and blue and white shrines. He had read about the port in Karachi, about the ships that sailed there from Greece and Turkey full of cargo, and the highways that connected the green plains of the Punjab. He would go anywhere. He didn't care where, but he didn't want to spend his life in Mir Ali.

'You can't do that.'

Samarra was sixteen.