A Golden Age

Tahmima Anam

Published by John Murray

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

March 1959

Prologue

Dear Husband,
I lost our children today.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Lahore!' Maya said.

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

'When will we come back?'

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

'I don't want to.'

Rehana bit down on her tongue. 'You have to go,' she said. 'Go and be brave. You can fly your kite, beta, and I will see it, all the way from Lahore. It's a special kite. You have to be very good. Very good and very brave. Only the bravest children get windy

days. And one day it will be so windy you will fly all the way back to me. You don't believe me? Wait and see.'

Dear Husband,
Our children are no longer our children.

How would she begin to tell him?

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

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

Rehana held the round palms of her children.

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

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

'Maya, you too.'

My children are no longer my children.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lahore, the garden city with new roads and perfect buildings. It was a thousand miles away on the other side of India. Faiz was her husband's elder brother. He was a barrister, and very rich. His wife was tall, pouty-lipped and barren. She looked hungrily at the children.

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

Faiz told the judge about *Cleopatra*. Rehana had taken the children to see *Cleopatra*. Was *Cleopatra* a suitable film for young children? She saw the judge picturing Elizabeth Taylor's breasts. And then Faiz told the story about the coin. That eight years ago Iqbal had been presented with a proposal of marriage to one Rehana Ali of Calcutta, a young woman from an aristocratic family whose father had lost an immense fortune to bad counsel and even worse luck. Iqbal was already thirty-six; he had a successful insurance business – why not marry? Why not indeed. He had tossed a coin, glanced quickly at the result and gone to sleep. The next morning he sent a message to say he agreed.

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

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

And there she was, a widow, nothing to recommend her, no family near by. Her parents were dead; her three sisters lived in Karachi. That was when Faiz and Parveen had offered to take the children. Rehana could see them during the holidays. 'Just for a few years,' Parveen said, 'Give you time to recover.' As though it were an illness, something curable, like what was happening to the country.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rehana began again.

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

them. Who would not want them? They are the spitting image of you.

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

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

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

In the days that followed, people came to see her: Iqbal's business acquaintances; old men claiming to be friends of her father; distant relatives with wagging, so-sorry tongues; her gin-rummy friends from the Dhaka Gymkhana Club; even the lawyer. Grief

tourists, Rehana thought, and pretended not to hear them scratching at the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Next time, Silvi, OK?'

'If they ever come back. OK.'

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

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

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

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

My dearest children, how I miss you.

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

She was going to get them back soon.

The world was still a generally friendly place.

Silvi had not forgotten them.

The neighbourhood was exactly as it had always been.

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

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

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

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

It was Maya's fourth birthday, and Iqbal's new Vauxhall had just arrived from England. It was on a special consignment of fifty cars brought to Dhaka from the Vauxhall factory in Wandsworth, London, in 1957. Iqbal had seen an advertisement that told him about the smart new car with the restyled radiator and the winding handles. There was a photograph. He fell in love with the car: the smooth curves, the side-view mirrors that jutted out of the frame. He imagined driving it into their garage, a big ribbon tied around the top, the horn blaring. But when it arrived, he was too nervous to drive the car and decided to leave it in the hands of a driver he

hired for the purpose, an ex-employee of the British Consul-General who had driven His Excellency's Rolls-Royce and was an expert behind the wheel. His name was Kamal. It was Kamal who was driving the Vauxhall the day Maya waved to her father from the window of the Tejgaon–Phulbaria rail carriage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the end Sohail piled sullenly into the car, with Iqbal following. It was tight, with all four of them in the back. Maya's

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

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

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

'What's that?'

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

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