

MY SISTERS MADE OF LIGHT



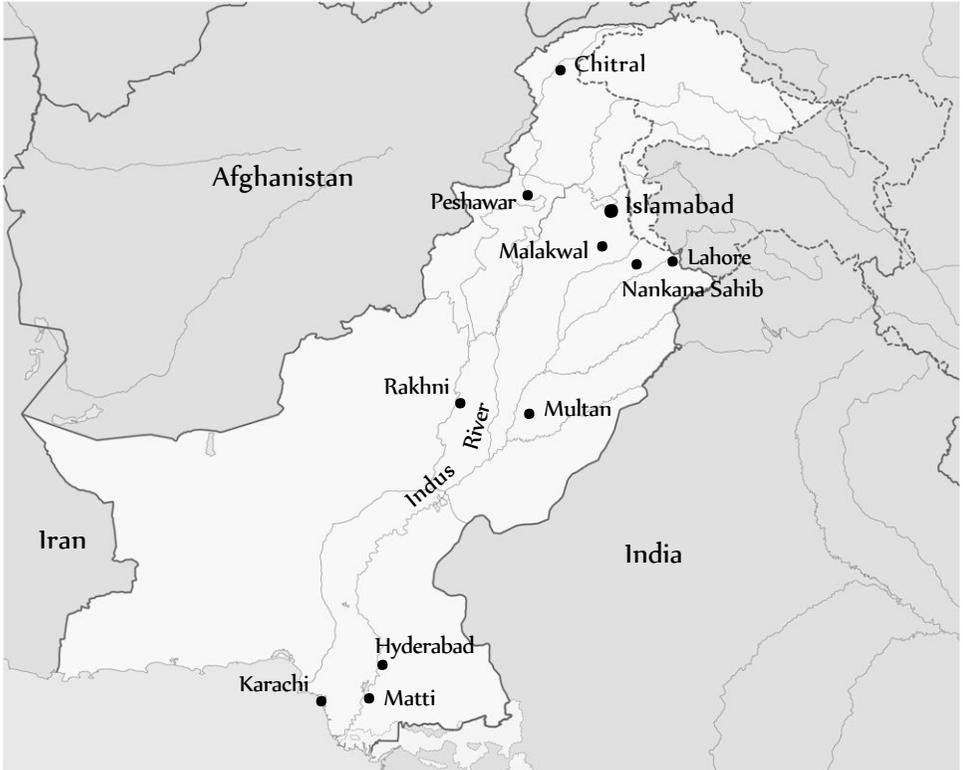
**MY SISTERS**  
**MADE OF LIGHT**

**JACQUELINE ST. JOAN**

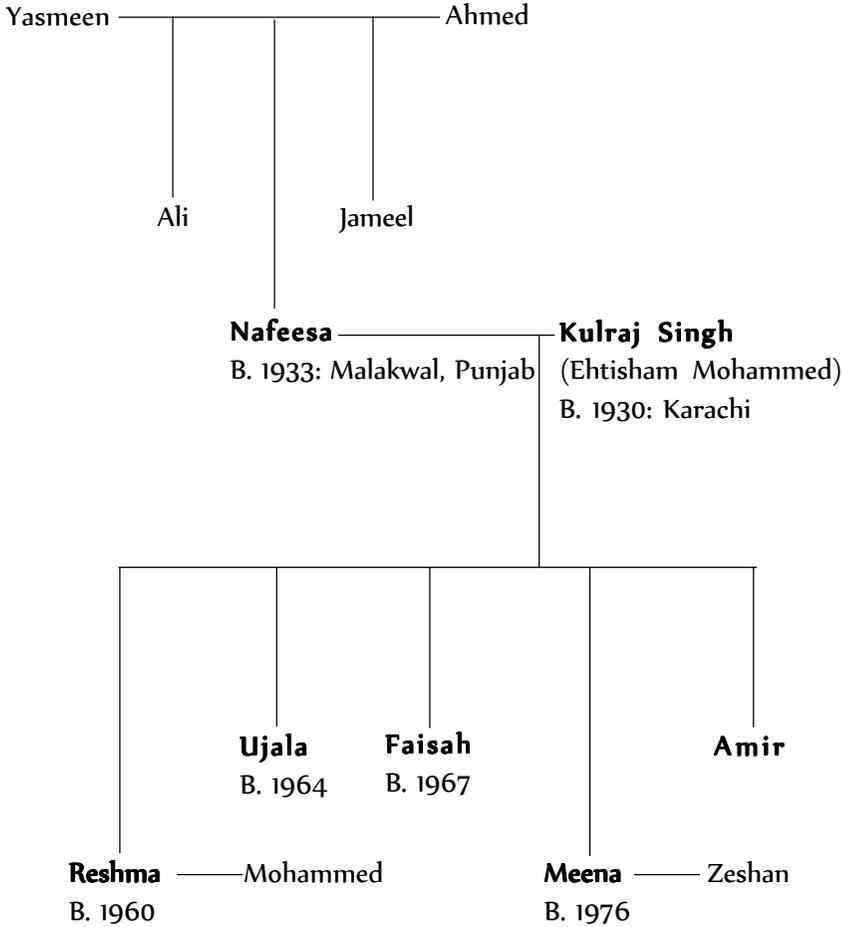
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*This book is dedicated to Samantha, Elizabeth, and Nico  
—and all our children made of light.*

# Map of Pakistan



# Family Tree



## ADAILA PRISON, 1996

**P**rison is freedom. Outside? *That* is prison to me.” Meena drew the newborn close inside her shawl. “Here my daughter and I are safe.”

Ujala was dreaming about Meena again. She could hear a voice calling, whispering, coaxing her to open her eyes.

“Ujala,” it sang. “Uji.”

It was a woman’s voice. Perhaps her mother was leaning next to her ear and would soon touch her arm, kiss her hairline. Or was she only dreaming of a voice? Ujala willed her mind to stay put, waiting for the speaker to reveal herself.

“Your friends in high places must feel sorry for you,” the voice said, and Ujala awakened to a shadow looming. “To my office,” demanded Rahima Mai, the Women’s Prison supervisor. Ujala heard the turnkey unlock her cell and saw the back of a wrapped figure moving away, far down the corridor.

“Yes, Madam,” she replied, rising from her string bed. Her shoulder blades were wooden planks ramming the soft tissues of her neck. But Ujala was pleased, excited by this abrupt shift in the prison’s endless routines. Jabril Kazzaz must have pulled some strings, she thought, hurrying behind Rahima Mai. As Ujala padded forward, she glimpsed a bare foot wiggling its toes through the bars of a cell

they passed. Next, the muffle of someone clearing her throat. Then, a scraping noise.

“Silence!” Rahima Mai shouted, and the clatter ceased. Ujala faced the vestibule door while Rahima Mai tightened her mouth and fingered the pocket of her polyester uniform. She found the key and slotted it into the lock. “Straight away,” she said, poking a finger between Ujala’s shoulder blades, “and keep moving.”

To Ujala walking was a joy—to be able to move her legs and hips again was like floating. She had been in Adaila Prison for six weeks, and for four of them she had been confined to solitary.

A month earlier Rahima Mai had announced Ujala’s reassignment to a solitary cell. “Your fame has created a security risk in the open detention area,” she had insisted, tapping the end of her pencil against the desk blotter. Her voice softened and she backtracked. “Of course, solitary rooming is not a punishment, but merely”—she searched for the right word—“an administrative precaution for your protection.”

Ujala had wanted to argue. *Those women are no risk to me, nor am I a risk to them.* But, she thought, there is no point disagreeing with a bureaucrat who has made up her mind.

“Stop there!” said Rahima Mai, and Ujala halted in front of another closed door. Its cardboard sign read WOMEN’S ADMINISTRATION. OFFICIAL CLEARANCE REQUIRED. Rahima Mai placed her index finger on the intercom button and leaned her considerable weight onto it. “Rahima Mai and Resident Number 482,” she announced to the box. She twisted her face toward the ceiling camera, and a barrage of squawk and static emitted an indiscernible reply. A bolt withdrew from its chamber, and the door clanked open.

“Push it!” Rahima Mai ordered, and Ujala pressed her open palms against the sticky, metal grate. She could smell Rahima Mai’s armpits as she passed ahead of her. Ujala stepped over the concrete threshold and looked around.

On the wall behind a large gunmetal desk, someone had tacked up the usual framed photo of clear-eyed President Jinnah in his lambswool cap. On either side of the photo were hand-printed posters: A CLEAN MIND IN A CLEAN BODY: CLEANSE WITH PRAYER AND WATER. The desktop

held a telephone, an adding machine, and a Royal typewriter, along with remnants of carbon paper. An adjacent table was covered with thousands of index cards. Attached to one wall was a row of hooks on which shawls, broom handles, and plastic shopping bags dangled. A green filing cabinet with a long face stood in the corner. Its bottom drawer jutted out.

Ujala heard the swivel chair groan as Rahima Mai settled into it.

“My office,” Rahima Mai said with a sigh. Somewhere between those two words and her sigh, Rahima Mai had inhaled and exhaled into a personal tone, the first human interaction Ujala could count for the week.

Ujala thought that Rahima Mai was not a bad-looking woman. The prison supervisor looked solid under the polyester prison garb: a worn blue shalwar kameez—the loose pajama-style pants and overshirt worn throughout Pakistan—and matching dupatta—the veil that covered her head and breasts. Rahima Mai’s cheeks dominated her long face, and the lines around her mouth suggested sadness or, perhaps, resignation. The circles beneath her eyes darkened under the overhead tube lights.

“We will be spending a lot of time together now,” said Rahima Mai. “I have my orders. We can no longer keep you in confinement, nor can we put you back into the general population.” She curled her mouth and looked into Ujala’s eyes. “So! You will be spending your days right here—with me.”

“Yes, Madam,” Ujala said, looking down. She tried to disguise her thrill at release from solitary. The supervisor continued describing her plan.

“Yes, this may work out quite well. We are educated people, you and I,” she said, thereby elevating her social class to Ujala’s. “Just imagine how expensive it is to operate this reformatory.” Rahima Mai never used words like *prison*, or *guard*, or *inmate*. Instead, it was *reformatory*, or *staff aide*, or *resident*. “Just think of the costs of staff and repairmen, food, waste removal, uniforms. The list is endless.” She gestured toward the adding machine tape that was spilling onto the floor. “With so little help from the central office, how can we afford medicines, school supplies, and sewing materials for the girls?”

“Yes, Madam,” said Ujala. She wondered where Rahima Mai’s thoughts were taking them.

Suddenly there were two raps on the door and a sergeant-guard entered. The guards wore short dupattas as a safety precaution. Years before, a guard had been found hanging on a clothesline pole from her own dupatta. The guard handed Rahima Mai a folded paper, they nodded to one another, and the guard reversed direction in military fashion and left the office.

“So,” Rahima Mai said, “if we can’t afford the basics, how can we afford the office assistance we need?” She looked as though she expected Ujala to reply. “Hmmm?”

“I don’t know how you could,” Ujala agreed. She dared not let Rahima Mai know how she craved the work assignment, for fear it would become a pleasure to be confiscated.

“So that is where you come in. If you can read, you can file. If you can add and subtract, you can do bookkeeping. If you can write, you can answer the phone and take messages.”

“Yes, Madam,” Ujala replied, curtseying, facing the floor.

From Sundays through Thursdays, Ujala worked like a good servant, with reverence and thrift. In her cell on Fridays she wrote letters and, for part of the day, met visitors. She dreaded Saturday’s fruitless hours. Within weeks she had organized the files and bookkeeping into an efficient system. Sometimes she wanted to go further than the assignments she was given. She would have liked to tackle budget reports and problems that Rahima Mai seemed unable to manage. But she did not. She stayed at her station. She was a small, low-flying shadow that Rahima Mai began to believe was her own. When Rahima Mai was tired, Ujala would pour her a cup of tea. If her neck ached, Ujala would massage it.

One day Rahima Mai reached beneath her desk and pulled out a pile of folded clothes. With one hand flat on top and one hand underneath, she pushed the stack toward Ujala.

“My mending,” she said and laughed out loud for the first time. She was in a generous mood. “Carry your own cup tomorrow, and you may have tea as well,” she said, blowing on the steaming

surface. They sat in plastic chairs with a low table between them. “This is how my husband and I used to make the transition from work to home. With a nice cup.”

This was the first time Rahima Mai had mentioned her husband. Ujala passed the plastic sugar bowl across the table and folded her hands in her lap. As usual, she was silent, but her heart was quickening, as if it were anticipating something. What is it? she asked herself. Suddenly Rahima Mai reached for her and her fingers squeezed Ujala’s chin, lifting it, forcing her to look directly into the supervisor’s face.

“Explain this to me,” she said. Her voice had dropped into a lower tone. She cleared her throat. “I was reviewing your file the other day.” She let go Ujala’s chin.

Again Ujala’s heart began to race.

“A long way from Clifton to Adaila, my dear, isn’t it?” Ujala could not read Rahima Mai’s attitude. Was it contempt? Curiosity? Cruelty? Ujala remained silent as Rahima Mai continued. “The file explained your arrest and the complaint against you, but it did not tell me what I really want to know.” Then Ujala heard a flat bitterness enter Rahima Mai’s voice as she posed her question: “How did a thirty-one-year-old, unmarried, upper-class girl like you end up in Adaila Prison anyway?”

It was a question Ujala had asked herself often, a question that caused her usual sharp focus to fade, her memories to blur into the people, places, and years of her past. She could never recall a coherent version of events—only moments. The day her mother died and she became the family’s new mother. The day Yusuf left forever. Bilqis on fire. Khanum on the train. Taslima in a pool of blood. Chanda dancing. The women she had rescued, or failed to rescue, over the years—the ones who helped Ujala discover who she was. Or was that discovery of herself, as her father would say, simply the hand of God, pushing her out into the traffic? She was uncertain, but no longer demurring.

“I don’t know exactly how I ended up h—”

“Yes, you do,” Rahima Mai interrupted, then waited for Ujala’s response. “We all know how we ended up here.”

Ujala squirmed.

“The way one thing leads to another, it is difficult to know where anything begins,” said Ujala.

“Then begin in the middle. It doesn’t matter. We both know where the story ends up, don’t we?” Now Rahima Mai was both taunting her and making a request, but she was patient. She was used to getting her way inside these prison walls. And, thought Rahima Mai, here is an interesting girl for a change, somebody new, somebody to talk to. There was no question Ujala would tell her what she wanted to know. So she waited.

Suddenly, Ujala’s dark eyes widened. She inhaled and faced Rahima Mai.

“You are right,” she said. For the first time, Ujala matched Rahima Mai’s gaze. “It is a long way from Clifton to here. The story ends in Adaila Prison, but it starts in the famous suburb of Karachi. It begins in Clifton.

“Karachi was a city filled with concrete and constant motion. Traffic was heavy and dominated life at all hours. The presence of the Arabian Sea did little to slow people down; it was another commodity, a vehicle, a field. There were always industrial odors hanging in the air to overpower the scent of orange blossoms that smothered the courtyards of Clifton. In Clifton our courtyard was filled with bougainvillea and jasmine, and the air always was sweet. Our childhood was like that, too—my brother, my sisters, and I—we lived wrapped in the shawl of our parents’ love.

“Until eleven years ago—when our mother died, when the shawl dropped open and the family scattered.” Ujala hesitated, recalling the changes in her life that the death of Ammi had meant. “Ammi’s soul flew to heaven, to be with her parents—they were on the Lahori train during the Partition. She lost her entire family. She was the only one to survive.”

Ujala continued, “My younger sister, Faisah—she entered law school in Lahore. Once Ammi was gone and we were grown, my father wanted the simple life of an observant Sikh. He took the twins, Meena and Amir, with him to Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of his root guru.”

Rahima Mai’s brow lifted.

“Yes. My father is a Sikh,” said Ujala, matter-of-factly. “My

oldest sister's life changed the least. By then Reshma was married. She remained in Karachi with her sons and her husband—Reshma is quite a scholar in her own right. My father wanted me to go with him and the children to Punjab, of course, but I had a different idea. And I needed his permission.”



“I have been asked to be a traveling teacher-trainer,” I told Abbu one night. We were on the upstairs verandah, reading the newspaper together, the way he and Ammi had often done. “With the Women’s Aid Society,” I said, nonchalantly.

He rattled the newspaper down into his lap with force.

“Traveling? Alone? Women do not travel alone in Pakistan.” He sounded stern—not at all like himself. I continued speaking as if what I was asking was nothing unusual.

“Perhaps I can make a contribution to the education of women, Abbu. I will live with groups of women teachers in each place. And I will visit you often. I promise.” I smoothed the front of my kameez and looked into his eyes. “Please say yes.”

He looked as if I had slapped his face.

“You are begging?” he asked, sounding little disgusted.

“It is my life.”

I watched the skin on his face drop into the hollow between his cheekbones, and I waited. I knew it was best to wait. In a matter of seconds, he had let his fear shrivel up and blow away. I had seen him do it many times. Suddenly his eyes lit up.

“Yes,” he said with certainty. “Of course. Your mother prepared that path for you.”

My mother was one of the founders of the organization I eventually worked for—WASP, the Women’s Aid Society of Pakistan. At that age—I was only nineteen—I felt unprepared to teach. I had no training in how to run a school. I’d done only a little informal teaching with a friend. Later I learned a great deal about teaching women and girls. We worked on basic Urdu—both reading and writing. Eventually we added computer training, micro-credit projects, and even legal assistance. It was a productive,

creative time. Many families opened their doors and took me in. I became Baji Ujala—everyone's older sister—wherever I went. But it was when I discovered a truly godforsaken place—the desert of interior Sindh—that I began to feel deep inside of me the forces that eventually led me here to Adaila Prison.

How slowly life moved in the heat of Sindh! Even at daybreak, milk buffaloes sought out the thin shade of a kikar tree. The boys with their sticks poked the beasts' hides to get them up. It was still early in the day, and the worst was yet to come. By midmorning smoke was the only thing moving in the sky. By midday brick particles stung our lungs. By evening the place smelled like it was on fire.

The kilns' smokestacks were as plentiful as minarets. During the merciless dry season, the children worked from dawn to dusk, scooping the mud with ungloved hands, then patting the dampened clay into identical steel molds, each one labeled with the landlord's logo. During the winter months, when school was open, we helped those same small hands with their tiny fingernails trace letters and numerals—hands without even a pocket to protect them.

The children were paid less than a rupee for each brick, but they preferred making bricks to lugging loads of onions from the field. Their families owed the company store, not only their own debt, but also the debt of their grandparents that they had inherited, plus interest, plus fines, plus, plus, plus. There was no end to the debt, so the people became virtual slaves. They had to get permission to leave the work site or be beaten or jailed. The headman would yell, "Bend over. Let your children witness your beating."

Only the headman could afford a brick house for himself. The villagers, on the other hand, collected dung, shaped it into patties, and slapped them onto the sides of rocks. The dung pies baked all day to be used for constructing homes or for cooking fuel. The grandmothers would spend their days scavenging and, if they were lucky, they would find a few sticks of wood. Sometimes a home would have a small kerosene cook stove . . . *kerosene* . . . the smell of it, the cold tin cans sloshing. Ugh! It makes my stomach sting just thinking of what kerosene can do.

You know in Sindh carnivals still travel from town to town, the

way ancient caravans journeyed with poets, musicians, and clowns. Two years ago—was it only two years ago?—when the carnival arrived in Matli from Karachi, I recognized one of the girls. It was Bilqis—a Christian girl—whose father had been a teacher in Clifton. Bilqis had been just five years old when I left Karachi ten years earlier. I remembered her well because her father left her in my care one time when her mother was ill.

Bilqis had been a skinny thing, but strong, and she loved to climb.

“See, Baji?” she smiled up at me with bright eyes. Her arms were suspended like vines from the branch of a young neem tree. “I am part monkey.”

I had to laugh. “Which part?” I asked.

“The lively part,” she replied without hesitation.

“The banana part,” I said, playing with her.

“The curling tail part,” she continued swinging, trying to touch the top leaves of the tree.

“The long arms part,” I said, smiling. She liked that. I wondered if she could keep up with me.

“The monkey sounds part,” she said. “Woo. Woo.” I tried to think of what to say next.

“The funny face part,” I said, and Bilqis stopped swinging. Tears formed in the inner corners of her eyes. I had hurt her feelings.

“My face is not funny!” she said.

“Did I say funny?” I asked her. “I meant the *sunny* face part.” A wide smile spread over her face. “Sunny face.”

“Oh,” she replied, not quite sure what had just happened. “Sunny face!”

Early one evening, Bilqis and I hastened to the local school so she could climb on the jungle gym there. It was the hour when women are supposed to be at home. So I wrapped her in a blanket and carried her like she was my baby. We hurried along the street to avoid anyone questioning our being unescorted. When we turned the corner into the wide-open field, Bilqis peered out of the blanket. The silent streets were deserted.

“Are we in a story?” she asked. I looked around at the dry ground, the empty windows, and perfect light. She was right—the scene looked like a picture from a storybook. It was eerie.

“What do you think?” I asked, putting her down. I wanted a glimpse of what she was thinking—how a child tries to distinguish what is real from what is imagined.

“I don’t know,” she said. Bilqis handed me the blanket, grabbed hold of the sliding board, and clambered to the top. Her bare feet squeaked against the metal surface. “But I think I know how the story ends,” she said.

“How?” I asked. “How does it end?”

“Nobody knows,” she laughed. “Nobody ever knows how the story ends.” She reached the top, twisted her torso and slid down, landing by my feet.

“Not even a monkey like you?” I asked. “Tell me how the story ends,” I pleaded. I bent over and looked her in the eye. She turned away. I had ruined the moment with my probing. I wanted to know too much, more than she could tell me.

“I told you, Baji, I don’t know. Nobody knows.”

A policeman passed the schoolyard, and the light changed.

So I remembered Bilqis well ten years later when she visited her grandmother in Matli, where I was teaching in interior Sindh. She was turning fifteen, and the teachers wanted to give her a birthday party.

“Bilqis!” I said when I opened the door to her and her auntie. But when she felt my enthusiasm, she lowered her eyes and withdrew into her dupatta.

“Salaam, Madam,” she said formally. She did not remember me.

“Salaam,” I replied, “Not Madam. Call me Baji Ujala.” I put my hands on her head, and she stretched up to kiss my cheeks.

“How beautifully she carries herself,” one of the teachers remarked. You know, Sindh is not like Karachi or Lahore. A Sindhi girl rarely leaves the house, so on the rare occasions when she does, she doesn’t know how to interact naturally. But Bilqis knew the social graces—how to introduce herself to others, how to sit

comfortably and engage in small talk, and even how to tell a few jokes. With a tambourine and bells, she performed traditional folk dances for the teachers. Then, the next day, while I was overseeing spelling exercises in the courtyard, the carnival manager drove in, blasting the horn of his old truck. It was quite a noise and drew me to the gate.

“Is the world on fire or something, Shams?” I called to him, not hiding my annoyance that he was interrupting the girls’ lessons.

“Yes, Madam,” he said, “The world *is* on fire. It is Bilqis. She has been burned. She needs you at the hospital. You know the nurses there.”

“Burned? She’s been burned?”

I left at once and climbed into his truck. I brought along the young boy sweeper to sit between us. Shams hesitated and drew a breath before he ground the truck’s gears into their rightful places.

“They say the stove burst,” he said, squeezing the corners of his mouth to let me know he doubted the stove had actually burst.

Someone had set Bilqis alight!

Outside the clinic, I inhaled the stink of burned flesh. Inside, Bilqis lay wincing. Her whole body was an open wound. The outside edges of her arms were blackened and peeling. Her torso was covered with one thin layer of gauze, its slight weight keeping her skin attached to her organs. Her eyes, and many of her teeth, had been entirely burned out.

I had to lean into the wall to keep from fainting. The nurses took scissors to the loose flesh on Bilqis’ leg, where the skin hung in defeat, like a torn flag. They snipped close to the raw pulp of her blood vessels and bones.

I pulled a folding chair up next to the bed. I wanted to comfort her, but how?

“Who did this to you?” I whispered, and an awful sound erupted from her mouth. I could not understand what she said. Her upper lip was missing. Then she called out again with what must have been all of her strength.

“Allah!” she cried, but she was looking at me. A sound cracked from deep inside her, “K-k-kill-e-eee.”

She was begging me to kill her. In her eyes I was the merciful

God who could stop her suffering. Even now, recalling that scene, I feel nauseous. The moment shines in my memory, as if from a great distance. My soul was plummeting and groundless. Eventually, when Bilqis fell into unconsciousness, the nurse spoke to me.

“This is not a burn unit, Baji Ujala. The child’s blood cannot move the drugs efficiently. If an infection sets in—and it will—she will not live more than a few days.”

I prayed her agony would not last that long.

“How did this happen?” I demanded.

The nurse shook her head.

“They say a kerosene stove blew up while she was making tea,” she said. I wanted her to tell me what she knew. I caught her glance and held it. We stood in that clean moment until finally she said, “Ask someone else. I have to live here.”

I went looking for Shams. It was time for Zuhr, midday prayers. He was with a small group of men, prostrating on their rugs. I felt a fire smoldering in my brain as I watched them lined up like that. How can they pray five times a day and be indifferent to this girl? When I saw Shams folding his prayer cloth, my mind’s embers caught fire and I shouted out.

“Shams, Shams, why do stoves burst only on women? Do men not also light stoves?” I asked the question to all of them, to the crows on the wires, and to the glare of the sun. I did not care who heard me. I was on fire.

“Don’t say it out loud, Madam,” Shams said, pulling me aside.

“I knew Bilqis’ family,” I said, my voice as loud as ever. “Her oldest sister was in my class—among the few Christians who could afford the convent school.” I lowered my voice. “I know the grandmother, too, and I know this was no accident. I have been inside that house. They have no kerosene stove there.”

“You are right, Madam,” Shams said. “The elders say her uncle heard a rumor that she is pregnant. He tied her to a bed, poured kerosene from a can, lit a match and locked the door.” Shams choked. He could hardly speak and neither could I. Finally he said, “It was an honor crime. No one could rescue her. No one even tried.”

“No one even tried!” I was horrified. “Do they not love their

daughters, Shams? Do they not worry when they are sick? Are they not happy when their daughters are happy?" I still shiver when I recall his reply.

"Yes," he said. "They love their girls, but who does not love his honor more?" Shams turned his back to me. I was naive in those days. I argued with him.

"Not everyone loves their honor more," I said. "My father is not like that. He loves his children more than anything." Shams looked at me over his shoulder.

"But did you ever break any of your father's rules?" he asked, and doubt tore into me with its probe. Who knows what would happen if I did break his rules? I had never tried.

I could see that Shams was eager to leave, but I begged him to go to the police.

"Police are no friends of women, especially Christian women," he said. "They look the other way, or attack women who complain."

"But we have to do something. You're a man. Come with me. We'll make them listen to us."

The long look on Shams' face told me that we would not be able to make them listen. It was hopeless. A woman's word would never match that of a man. Shams was only an itinerant entertainer who came to this village once a year. He was unknown both to the civil authorities and to the bradari, the local council whose word was law. I watched Shams' dry lips split with his final words.

"We will stay in our camp until Bilqis' parents arrive from Karachi," he said. "Or until she dies. Then we have to move on. I have others I am also responsible for. And this could mean trouble."

How heavy my body felt, as we stood there in the heat of midday, abandoned by any benevolent power whatsoever.

"Then I'll go to the police alone," I said, as if I were threatening him. He kept sifting through the belongings in the bed of his truck. "And, Shams," I said. "What do I tell the other women about the men who pray five times a day? What do I say about that? Where are they when we need them? What can we do?"

The whites of his eyes reddened and their corners creased. When he spoke, his voice was angry.

“How should I know?” he bellowed. “Tell them we pray because we don’t know what to do either. Because the men on the prayer mats are afraid, too.”

I returned to the infirmary where the sharp odors of death were baking. Bilqis faded in and out of consciousness, moaning. Her grandmother stood by the window blocking the blinding sunlight. With a straight back, wrapped and veiled entirely in black, she shaded Bilqis. I closed my eyes to the sounds of whimpering and the clicking of the grandmother’s beads. The old woman hummed a missionary’s lullaby:

*Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra*  
*Too-ra-loo-ra-li*  
*Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra*  
*Hush now, don't you cry*

Minutes after Bilqis died, the ground shook. Officials said the earthquake registered 6.0 on the Richter scale. Poets would have said that fire itself rebelled against its use in destroying beautiful Bilqis. People gathered first at one house, and then at the next, to rebuild their mud huts that had collapsed in the upheaval. They soon forgot the gossip about Bilqis. But I was unable to forget. When I smelled breakfast steaming, the spices stung my nostrils like needles. When I heard the rooster crowing, I held the palm of my hand over one ear and turned the other to the pillow. I was haunted by the demand that I speak, but I was afraid—afraid of backfire at me, the school, the other teachers and students. If I registered a formal complaint, what proof did I have? If the police arrested Bilqis’ uncle, would the women in his family be jailed along with him? Would they have money for a bribe? There was just no telling how the sands might shift in such a storm.

Finally, I decided not to involve anyone else from the school. I would go for condolences and talk with Bilqis’ grandmother about filing a complaint herself. I would assure her that I could