

Foreign-Returned

Sadia Shepard

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In Connecticut, Hassan shared a desk with a woman—a girl, really. Later, this would be what he remembered most about the job, long after the inconvenience of his morning commute, the banality of his days spent making spreadsheets, and the mediocrity of the cafeteria had faded from memory. He would remember Hina the way he saw her on her first day. The crunched, focused expression on her small, sharp face as she claimed her half of the desk, a purse over one arm and a duffelbag over the other, a light sheen of perspiration on her upper lip, a dark-gray head scarf wound tightly around her head and fixed above her right ear with a long, silver pin.

Hina nodded at Hassan in greeting and then took a brass-colored nameplate out of her purse, placing it carefully on her side of the desk. It was the kind of thing you might order from a mall kiosk that specialized in monogrammed gifts.

“My name is Hina Bhati,” she said, pointing at the nameplate, in case he hadn’t noticed it.

“Yes, I see that,” Hassan said.

Hassan had been at the bank eight weeks. Long enough to know that there was a slow way he could take from the men’s room back to his cubicle, a route that killed off three minutes of the work day. Long enough to learn that casual Fridays meant khakis, not jeans. Long enough to feel that the two-person, T-shaped desk he’d been assigned to was his alone. Hina Bhati looked to be in her early twenties, at least seven or eight years younger than he was. Why on earth were they sharing a desk?

Hina had an accounting degree from sunny Albany, he learned from the diploma she hung on the wall next to her computer, tapping a tiny nail into the plaster with a miniature,

purse-size hammer. On her desk she arranged a tissue box with a crocheted cover, a small, iridescent vase with three silk flowers, and a sturdy, expensive-looking ballpoint pen. She put several computer manuals on the floor and stood on top of them to reach the high shelf above her desk where she placed her Quran, swaddled in a maroon velvet cover and decorated with multicolored ribbons. Once her belongings were in order, she tucked an imaginary hair inside her scarf and raised the height of her chair until her feet didn’t touch the floor. She swung her heels back and forth as she talked, as a child might.

“So,” she began, fixing him with a flat stare, “we might as well get to know each other. Where are you from and how long have you been at the bank?”

He could guess from Hina’s accent that she had grown up in the States, and from her features, her coloring, and her name that she was likely Pakistani. Was this, he wondered, why they had been assigned the same desk? The two Pakistanis? The thought irked him. He could already tell how little they had in common.

Working in Stamford hadn’t been part of Hassan’s original plan. When he first came to the U.S., he had worked as a senior analyst at Citigroup in New York, a job he had held for seven months before being laid off, after which he’d had to scramble to get a new position before the grace period on his H-1B ran out. In a few months, the Americans would elect a new President, and the news was filled with talk of Muslims—which ones you could trust, which ones should be registered or accounted for. He felt lucky to have found the position in Stamford, even though it had meant a pay cut and a relocation.

He didn't mention any of this to Hina. Instead, he told her that he and his wife, Sara, were originally from Karachi and loved the peace and quiet they had found in Connecticut.

Hina told him that she was from Albany but her parents were from Gujranwala, Pakistan. She had travelled to her ancestral home only once, as a teen-ager. Gujranwala struck Hassan as the kind of second-tier industrial city you visited only if you had a specific reason. He had gone there once for a cricket match with his college team. "What did you think of it?" Hassan asked, amused at the thought of Hina attempting to navigate Gujranwala's crowded streets. She seemed to shiver slightly at the memory, as if trying to shake off the dust even now.

"It made me grateful to have grown up in America," she said.

"You should visit Karachi sometime," Hassan said. "I think you'd enjoy it."

"That doesn't seem likely," Hina said, crinkling up her nose. "The State Department has a Travel Warning for Pakistan now. My father says that we're much better off here."

She reached under the desk and pulled a prayer rug from her bag. She explained that she had arranged with Tom, their team leader, to offer her daily prayers in the conference room on the eleventh floor. "Where do you keep your rug?" she asked.

Hassan shrugged. "I don't," he said. "I mean, not here." Back home, his religious practice had been limited to an annual trip to the masjid for Eid, but it hardly seemed necessary to explain this to Hina. Prayer was a personal matter, in his opinion. Best avoided in the workplace.

Hassan and Sara lived just outside Stamford in a two-bedroom apartment with wall-to-wall carpeting and a faintly musty smell. It cost about half what they'd been paying in Murray Hill, but there was little else to recommend it. The modern furniture they'd bought in New York was all wrong

here. Tall, decorative vases that had once flanked their entryway now huddled like conspirators in the hall. When Sara talked about returning to Manhattan, Hassan nodded. He had a one-year contract at RBS, and he knew he'd be lucky to extend it. It was unlikely that they'd move back to the city anytime soon. But he didn't want to upset her. In New York, there had been places for Sara to walk to, to explore. In Stamford, the only place she could reach on foot was a small, deserted park.

Most evenings, Hassan returned from work to find Sara in their bedroom, riding her exercise bike and watching CNN. Even in the sweatpants and baggy T-shirts she wore in the apartment, even in her glasses, even fifteen pounds heavier than she had been on their wedding day, three years ago, Sara was still a beautiful woman. She had been the most sought-after girl of his youth. True, this was perhaps not the America she had signed up for. But it was still America.

"What have you been up to today?" Hassan asked, retrieving an empty coffee mug from the floor. Around Sara's bike was a sea of miscellany: piles of papers, coasters, binders, souvenir mugs, tangled Christmas lights.

"Unpacking," Sara said, her eyes glassy, focused on the television. Hassan found the election coverage repetitive and tiresome—these windbag candidates were just like the ones back home, he argued—but Sara had become fixated. Instead of looking into grad school, she spent her days tracking every scandal, every erroneous theory, even though she couldn't vote.

During her second week in the office, Hina suggested that she and Hassan review each other's work for errors, sharing files, before forwarding them to Tom. They were working on a prospective buyout, a deal to purchase a toll road in Indiana. Some days Tom had them running financial models; other days he had them prepare his presentations for weekly meetings. Hassan was annoyed that, apart from a group e-mail chain, he and Hina had almost no contact with the other analysts working

on the deal. But Hina didn't mind. She told Hassan that she liked to think of herself as Tom's secret weapon.

"Well, he has two secret weapons, then," Hassan suggested. "Me and you."

"Perhaps," Hina said, as if she didn't quite agree.

Hassan made occasional mistakes and Hina caught them. But Hina's work was meticulous. And she was fast.

"Watch out, Hassan! She's unstoppable!" Tom said as he passed their desk, chuckling to himself.

Tom's compliments made Hina blush and squirm with pleasure. "Don't worry," she told Hassan one afternoon. "I know you're concerned that I'm smarter and faster than you, but that's not it."

"That's not what?" Hassan asked, bristling. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's just that I have greater attention to detail, that's all," Hina said. "It may be because of the way that I was taught in school. Instead of using rote memorization, we were taught cognitive problem solving. My father says that's the real advantage of an American education."

It was difficult not to snap at Hina when she said things like this. Hassan tried to compose a witty response, but he couldn't come up with anything fast enough. He excused himself and walked to the kitchen to get some coffee. From that point onward, Hassan forwarded Hina's work to Tom without checking it, spending the time he'd saved following cricket matches on his smartphone.

That evening over dinner, Hassan did his best impression of Hina for Sara.

"You see, that's why American Pakistanis like me are superior to Pakistani Pakistanis like you," he said, making his eyes wide and his voice high. He put a dinner napkin on his head to simulate Hina's headscarf, making Sara laugh.

"But there must be something interesting or valuable about

her, Hassan," Sara said. "Otherwise, how did she get the job?"

Hassan said that no, Hina was deathly boring. She was a typical American hijabi. All high and mighty.

Every Sunday that summer, Sara and Hassan put on their best weekend clothes—bright blouses and capri pants for her, polo shirts and pressed khakis for him—and went to the Ahmeds' house, in Darien. Mona and Ali Ahmed were originally from Lahore, friends of friends back home. They had the assurance of people who had spent two comfortable decades on the East Coast: a wide circle of acquaintances, membership at a local golf club, a time-share in Naples, Florida. Ali Ahmed was a pediatric gastroenterologist. Mona organized charity events for the Islamic Center in Stamford. Every weekend, they hosted an open house, a back-yard party where Pakistani families dropped by with their kids and ate lunch by the pool.

The Ahmeds' house was a big white Colonial with green shutters, framed by carefully landscaped shrubs and trees. There was a semicircular driveway and a four-car garage with a guest apartment above it. "This is what I imagined Connecticut would look like," Sara said the first time they drove up to the house, her eyes opening wider with admiration. Hassan instinctively tried to find fault with the house. He knew that it might be years, a decade even, before they could afford a place like this. But it was grand, Hassan had to admit. Like a house in a movie about a family with a lovable dog.

The Ahmeds' three sons—seven, nine, and twelve—were always dressed in matching outfits, their hair combed and gelled to one side. The boys were consistently charming and well behaved, salaaming each guest on arrival and shaking hands, then promptly disappearing to play on their own. "Those kids are so impressive," Sara murmured. "I don't know how Mona does it."

The female guests each contributed a dish covered in plastic wrap—fresh shami kebabs, fruit salad, homemade samosas—

which they took to the kitchen when they arrived so that they could gossip with Mona. Sara told Hassan that, as the ladies unwrapped the dishes, Mona made each one feel as if she alone were the most important woman at the party. She touched their sleeves. She complimented them on their haircuts. Sara admired Mona—her impeccable taste, how quickly she connected with other women—but she also sensed that the parties were a kind of audition. For what, she told Hassan, she wasn't sure.

Outside in the yard, the husbands hovered around a large Weber grill, keeping Ali company while he grilled chicken tikkas. Funny, wasn't it, Hassan had remarked to Sara after their first visit, how in America these men were so proud of their barbecuing skills, a task none of them would have taken on back home. But Hassan looked up to Ali. The easy way he interacted with his guests, his salt-and-pepper hair always in place. Hassan noticed that Ali rarely offered his own opinions, instead encouraging other people to talk about themselves. People said that he was an excellent doctor.

On the fourth Sunday in June, Ali clapped Hassan on the back and passed him the grill tongs. "H-man," he said, "you think you can take care of this while I go for a swim?"

"Definitely," Hassan said, smiling. He turned to the grill, squeezing the points of the tongs together in one hand and staring at a platter of raw chicken legs. He wished that he hadn't been the one tapped for this task. He had never cooked anything more elaborate than a fried egg.

Abid, a heavyset banker in his late forties, sat drinking a beer next to the grill, watching Hassan with interest. "You should see the look on your face, bro. You'd think he just asked you to deliver a baby. You want me to do it for you?"

"No, I got it, thanks," Hassan said, waving the smoke away from his eyes.

"What did you say you do at RBS, by the way?" Abid asked, pulling his seat closer and offering Hassan a drink.

Hassan described the buyout that he and Hina were working on, trying to sound knowledgeable about infrastructure in Indiana. He hoped that Abid would assume he was higher up in the pecking order of his group than he really was. The trouble was that he found it difficult, while explaining his job and drinking a beer, to stay focused on the chicken. How was he supposed to know when the meat was done?

When lunch was served, it was clear that much of the chicken was burned on the outside and raw in the middle. Ali told Hassan not to worry. He placed the most undercooked pieces back on the grill, covering them, and urged the guests to start eating the rest of the meal. Mona looked annoyed.

"Dude, Hassan's trying to kill us," Abid joked.

Hassan glared at him. Sara kicked Hassan's shin under the table. Hassan bit into a drumstick that was clearly too pink near the bone.

"You'll get sick, sweetheart," Sara said to him under her breath, passing him a napkin. "Don't eat that."

"It's fine, don't be silly," Hassan said, tearing off a piece of raw chicken with his teeth. "Not bad at all."

Sundays gave Hassan and Sara a sense that Connecticut held possibility, that they were on a trajectory. True, Ali and Mona inhabited entire worlds that Hassan and Sara never entered. The club where Ali played golf with other doctors, for one. The Islamic Center, where Mona did her volunteering, a place that held little interest for either of them. But at the pool parties Hassan and Sara felt a sense of rightness. On Sundays, they felt closest to the people they wanted to be.

Hassan and Sara could never reciprocate the Ahmeds' hospitality. The thought of inviting the Ahmeds over to their small, shabby apartment felt ludicrous. So each Sunday they chatted with Ali and Mona and the other guests for a few moments of real connection and went home feeling unsatisfied.

Until one Sunday in August, when Sara told a lie.

Hassan could tell that she hadn't planned to do it. After lunch, Mona asked her about their current living situation, what they would do when they had a baby, if they'd need to move to a bigger place. Sara mentioned that they were living in a two-bedroom apartment near the office, and Hassan saw Mona frown slightly. But, Sara added quickly, they had their eye on a four-bedroom Victorian in Newfield. They had recently put in an offer on the place, she continued, but then the owner had backed out of the sale. His adult daughter thought she might want the house after all.

"That must be so frustrating," Mona said, fixing her large, kohl-rimmed eyes on Sara with sympathy. "And what do you think about all this, Hassan?"

"Right, yes," Hassan murmured, faltering. "I mean, yes, it's annoying."

"Oh, we'll find something else," Sara said, her voice confident, pulling Mona's attention back to her. "I know just what I want."

Hassan watched Sara conjure up a house with her elegant, long-fingered hands. She used words that he didn't know she knew. Cornice. Eave. Gable. He saw Mona looking at Sara, smiling at her more. At the end of the day, Mona handed her a tote bag full of paint chips and fabric swatches left over from her most recent redecoration, pointing to the sage greens and dove grays that she liked best.

On the drive back to their apartment, Sara examined the samples, rubbing the soft fabrics between her thumb and forefinger. She said the names of the paint colors aloud: Misty Morning Dew. Sandy Ridge. Brookside Moss. Hassan chose his words carefully. He didn't want to upset his wife, but as he spoke he found irritation creeping into his voice. Now, he said, they'd have to talk about their imaginary house hunt every Sunday. Yes, of course he wanted those things, too. But Sara's lie had made him feel foolish. He was only a few months into

his contract. They were a far cry from a four-bedroom Victorian.

Sara looked out the window, the stack of binders in her lap.

"Oh, I know all that," she said.

"Then why?" Hassan asked. "Why did you say those things?"

"Because," Sara said, her voice becoming small, "I can tell what she thinks of us." "What does she think of us?" Hassan asked, surprised to find that he cared.

"She thinks we're . . . ordinary," Sara said.

Hassan started to interject: What was wrong, he wanted to argue, with being ordinary? With fitting in? But then he stopped himself. In Karachi, Hassan and Sara had grown up in their grandfathers' houses. Their families had histories that were understood by their friends, shared by their neighbors. In Connecticut, they were interchangeable. Inconsequential. He was just another analyst. She was just another wife.

Their friendship with the Ahmeds lasted the twelve weeks of summer. Then, on Labor Day, while they were eating lunch, Mona informed Hassan and Sara that she wouldn't be having the weekly pool party anymore. Now that the school year was starting, she planned to host a multicultural book club instead. Each week, the group would read a book from a different culture and discuss it over lunch.

"There will be two Irish: they are called the Foleys. A Jewish surgeon and his wife. A Korean and some South Indians."

"Sara and I could be the Pakistanis," Hassan suggested, smiling.

"Oh, but I'm afraid that's us," Mona said, shaking her head with sympathy. "Ali and I are the Pakistanis in the group."

Without the weekly trips to Darien, Hassan and Sara's routine felt unevenly weighted, off-kilter. They spent Sundays at the Stamford Town Center mall, looking at kitchen appliances and clothes that they didn't need. They went out for Chinese food. They drank flavored lattes. They took a scenic

drive to look at fall leaves.

“What’s all the fuss about?” Hassan asked, squinting out the window as Sara drove north on I-95. “I mean, they’re leaves.”

Every morning, Hassan watched Sara take her temperature and enter the data into an app on her phone. She made fertility charts, looking for fluctuations and patterns. She spent hours exchanging anonymous messages with other women trying to conceive. But still no baby.

One Monday morning in October, Hina came to work with new pins on her parka. She explained to Hassan that she had spent the weekend canvassing in Pennsylvania with her women’s group. She had a serious look on her face, and Hassan wondered, with a vague sense of dread, if she planned to give him a lecture on the virtues of American democracy. He was surprised when she asked if she could tell him about her trip.

“I know we’re not . . . friends,” Hina said, taking her seat and folding her hands in her lap. “But I feel distracted by what happened. Perhaps if I talk about it I can put it out of my mind.”

“Be my guest,” Hassan said, closing his browser, his interest piqued.

Hina described her trip. She explained how her group had started the day registering new voters at a shopping center. Then the group had broken into pairs. Hina and another girl, Saima, were given a list of names and addresses of registered Democrats in a residential neighborhood about five miles from the mall. There, they went door to door. It was the middle of the afternoon and most people weren’t home. The neighborhood looked very much like the one in which Hina had grown up. There were ranch homes. Minivans in the driveways. American flags. It felt familiar.

After they had covered a few blocks, a large white sedan passed the girls and then circled back, pulling up alongside them. There were three boys in the car. They were wearing basketball jerseys. Were they lost? one of them asked. Did they

need directions? Hina thanked the young man and explained that they were spending the afternoon canvassing, talking to registered Democrats. Were they registered to vote? she asked. Did they live in the area? The boy in the passenger seat was the talker of the group. His light hair was shaved on the sides and spiked on top. They were from this neighborhood, he said. They were all registered to vote. They would love to talk further with Hina and her friend. Why not get in the car and they could go for a drive? Then they could talk more comfortably.

Hina said that they’d be happy to discuss the issues right where they were. The blond boy persisted, asking if the girls couldn’t get in the car because it was against their religion? No, it wasn’t like that, Hina explained. It was just that they had work to do. Did they not trust him? the young man wanted to know. Hadn’t he been friendly to them, even though he supported the other candidate? Yes, he had been friendly, Hina said. Then they should shake hands, he said. They should shake hands as a gesture of friendship. To show that they could agree to disagree. The boy offered Hina his hand.

Hina took the boy’s hand and he grinned at her. Just then his friend tapped the accelerator and the car lurched forward. She could hear the boys laughing as she stumbled. She shouted at the boy to let her hand go, but he held on. Then the car moved again. Her arm snapped back as she fell, landing on the pavement with a thud. She heard Saima shouting at the receding car. Hina lay on the ground, staring at the sky. Her arm felt sore, but it was nothing, really—she was more startled than injured. What bothered her was that she had touched that boy. She hated that she had fallen for the prank. Once she had calmed down, she and Saima went to the local police station.

“What did the police say?” Hassan asked, leaning across the desk. He made an effort to look unaffected, but he felt furious on Hina’s behalf.

“The officer said that if he had a dollar for every time

someone behaved badly he'd be rich. That was it. It's just—" Hina's voice broke. She cleared her throat. "It's just that I wish I had told those guys off."

Hassan had never heard Hina swear. He watched her switch on her monitor and open her purse, remove her phone, her notebook, and her pen, and place them in a neat row next to her keyboard. Hassan could see that telling him her story had made Hina feel more in control. But it left him agitated. For the rest of the day, he found himself looking over at Hina, studying her small, round shoulders. He had spent his entire life in Pakistan as part of the majority. What would it feel like, he wondered, to consider America home?

In November, Hassan and Sara found themselves trying to explain the election results to their families in Karachi. Yes, they said, it was true that a handful of states had the power to determine the winner. Yes, a candidate could win the most votes and still not become President. In that case, Hassan's mother said, the Americans were even more foolish than she'd thought. At least in Pakistan, she said, they hadn't chosen their own dictators.

One afternoon, Hassan toggled between numbers in a spreadsheet and bullets and graphs on a presentation, unsure of what to work on next. The hours between lunch and dinner stretched out in front of him like an interminable sentence. On the other side of the desk, Hina looked deeply engrossed in her work, her face inches from her monitor. She was reading traffic studies, prepping for a meeting in which she'd most likely not even be called on. This was the difference, he realized, between Sara and Hina. Sara would talk about graduate school for another year and probably not do anything about it. Hina would have been halfway to a degree by now.

"You have exciting plans for Thanksgiving, Hina?" Hassan asked. He assumed she'd be heading back to Albany. The dutiful daughter.

Hina didn't look up from her monitor. "Well, my friend Mona Ahmed wants me to join her family in Florida, but I'm not sure if I will or not," she said.

Hearing the name spoken aloud gave Hassan an odd feeling in his stomach. "How do you know Mona?" he asked.

"From the Islamic Center," Hina explained. "She's kind to me. I'm fond of her children." Hassan suddenly couldn't stand those Ahmed brats. Their precious matching shirts and haircuts.

"You babysit for them?" Hassan asked.

"No," Hina said, drawing herself upright in her chair. "We're friends. Mona and I are in the same women's group. We canvassed together. And I'm in her multicultural book club."

That evening, Hassan told Sara what he'd learned.

"How could you not realize that she's known them all this time?" she asked, exasperated. She was sitting on the floor of their bedroom folding laundry, stacking socks and underwear into little piles. "You sit across from her all day."

"It's not as if we compare social calendars," Hassan said. He sat down on their bed, looking at the mound of laundry. But he had wondered the same thing. How could he not have known?

A week later, Hassan got home from work to find that Sara had set the table with crystal wineglasses, yellow supermarket roses, and cloth napkins. She was wearing a long diaphanous tunic over slim pants, her hair blow-dried straight and her eyes painted a dark, smoky blue. Hassan hadn't seen her dressed this way in ages.

"You didn't need to go to all this trouble," he said, gesturing around at the clean apartment. "I mean, it's only Hina." He had resisted the idea of inviting her, but Sara had insisted on it.

"Don't be silly," Sara said. "We have to be hospitable."

In the dim light of their apartment, Hina seemed softer. Instead of the boxy jackets and long skirts she wore to work, she had come dressed in a maroon shalwar kameez and a matching headscarf. Her outfit looked freshly ironed.

"Such a pleasure to meet you, finally!" Sara said, kissing Hina on both cheeks and showing her to the couch.

Hassan asked Hina if she'd read the latest report on a toll-road project about to be scrapped by lawmakers in Texas. "Might be something we should be aware of," he said, calling up the article on his phone so that he could read it aloud.

"Hassan," Sara said, rolling her eyes for Hina's benefit and handing her a glass of fresh orange juice, "don't be a bore. I want to hear about Hina's family."

Hina rested the glass in her lap and smiled cautiously at Sara. Her father, she told them, had come from the Punjab with the help of his older brother. He had settled first in Michigan, then in upstate New York. Hina had three younger sisters and one brother. She was the first college graduate in her family.

"Isn't that lovely," Sara said, turning to Hassan.

He nodded, his smile tight. It was slightly embarrassing, watching Sara try to ingratiate herself with Hina.

"And Hassan tells me you know Mona and Ali Ahmed?" Sara said. "Yes," Hina said. "Mona has been a mentor to me." "Isn't that wonderful. Mona is a dear friend." "I didn't realize that," Hina said.

"Well, we've been so busy this fall," Sara said. "That's probably why we haven't seen you at the Ahmeds."

"Of course," Hina said.

Sara excused herself to finish preparing the meal and Hassan turned on their large 'at-screen TV, taking a seat next to Hina. It was strange, he realized, that he had sat across from Hina all these months but had never sat beside her. They were only a few inches apart on the couch. He could smell her scent, something musky and floral and not altogether unpleasant.

At the dinner table, Hina took a portion of vegetables and salad but didn't touch the main course, a thick rib-eye steak.

"Have some steak, Hina," Sara said, holding out a piece toward Hina's plate. "It's a good cut." Hassan knew that the

meat had been expensive, the most impressive American dish that Sara could think of.

"Thank you, but I only eat halal," Hina said, piercing a roasted potato with her fork and chewing it methodically.

Hassan worried for a moment that Sara might try to pass the meat off as halal, when he knew that she'd bought it at the Fairway Market in Stamford, where she bought all their food.

Sara paused, frowning slightly, and then slid half the steak onto her own plate, more than she could possibly eat, passing the rest to Hassan.

"Hina," Sara said, adopting a serious face, "Tell me more about your women's group. I'm looking to deepen my faith."

In early December, an invitation arrived in Hassan's inbox. The Ahmeds were having a holiday party at their home, an open house from 4 to 8 p.m. He clicked on the invitation twice, watching the shiny snowflakes and fat metallic orbs rotate. Were they on the Ahmeds' official guest list? Or was this a test?

Hassan was curious if Hina had received the invitation.

"I'm not sure if I'm going yet," she said. "I mean, I like the Ahmeds, but they serve alcohol, and that bothers me."

"What's the big deal?" Hassan asked. "I mean, it's not like anyone is forcing you to drink it."

"I don't think you understand," Hina said, tipping her head to one side and giving him a long look.

"Understand what?" Hassan asked.

"What it means to stick to your principles," Hina said.

The exterior of the Ahmeds' house was decorated with small white lights, a bright constellation of electric points that gave the place a kind of glow.

Inside there were real pine boughs that let off a fresh, wintry smell. There was food piled on every table—selections of fresh cookies dusted in powdered sugar and platters of crackers, cheese, and fruit. In the dining room, Hassan spotted Hina and waved to her. She was more dressed up than he'd seen her

before, in a long, emerald-green shalwar kameez and matching headscarf. What's more, he whispered to Sara, there was something different about her face. "That's called makeup, Hassan," Sara said, refilling her wineglass. "Who knows? Maybe she's getting set up with someone tonight."

Sara went to the kitchen to find Mona, and Hassan went in search of Ali. He found him in the library, a small, wood-paneled room thick with cigar smoke. A group of men were in the midst of what looked like an animated discussion. Ali seemed pleased to see him, as if no time had elapsed since the summer. "Help yourself, Hassan," he said, waving him in and telling him to shut the door behind him. Hassan grabbed a glass from the tray and settled into a leather chair. He nodded to Abid, who nodded back.

"Look, there's no question," Abid said to the group. "This Administration will be good for business." Several of the others speculated on how their investment portfolios might be positively affected by fewer regulations. Hassan began to feel nervous that Ali or Abid or one of the other men might ask him about his own investments. He had none. Not yet.

Several of the men had gone to school together in Lahore. Others had known each other at Boston University. There were jokes that Hassan didn't understand, references to Web sites that he didn't read. He didn't have much to contribute to the conversation. He drank four Scotches in a row. When he stood up, he realized that he was drunk.

Hassan excused himself and weaved through rooms, looking for Sara. Where was she? Suddenly he found himself wondering what he was doing here. Who were all these people?

He couldn't find Sara, but he spotted Hina through a doorway. She sat wedged on a couch between two older Pakistani women, who were laughing. Hina looked miserable, as if she had gone along with a joke that she now regretted.

"Come on, Hina," Hassan heard one of the women say. "I

want to introduce you to my nephew in London. Just take it off so I can snap your picture and send it to him. I won't post it anywhere, I promise."

"You'd be pretty without the scarf," the other woman said.

He made his way to the kitchen, where Sara was huddled with Mona by the stove.

"Sweetheart!" Sara said, extending one hand in the air like a punctuation mark. The Scotch made him feel as if the party were moving in slow motion. "Mona and I are getting caught up. I'm telling her about how we had to fire the contractor on our new place and move into a temporary apartment...."

Hassan could see that Sara's eyes were bright with her lies, that she was trying to give him a message to play along. Walking toward her, he felt something bubbling up inside him, a well of anger about to erupt. Just once, he thought, just once he should say out loud that his wife was full of it.

"Sara," he began, "we both know . . ." His finger was pointed at her as if they were in a schoolyard, but now he hesitated, stumbling to find his words. He saw the whiteness of Sara's eyes around her pupils, her stare suddenly narrowed and mean. His wife could be frightening when she wanted to be.

Just then, he heard someone lurch into the room, and he turned to see Hina standing in the doorway, her bulky parka bunched under one arm.

"Mona, I'm sorry, but I have to go home," she announced. "I feel sick and I have to go home. Right now."

Mona went to Hina and put an arm around her shoulder.

"Wouldn't you rather sleep over?" she asked kindly. "It's raining now. You can take the yellow guest room. I can lend you a nightgown."

"Yes, that's a good idea, Hina," Sara added in a soothing tone of voice, joining Mona. "Let us take care of you."

But Hina said that she would prefer to sleep in her own bed. She had already called a cab. She pulled her parka on over her

outfit and walked toward the front door.

"Hassan, you'll go with Hina, yes," Mona asked, a directive instead of a question. She handed him a large umbrella from a stand near the back door. "Make sure she gets home all right."

Sara stood next to Mona like a sentinel. "Go, sweetheart," she said. "Be a gentleman and don't trouble yourself with anything here." She smiled at him, an old smile that told him that she would fix things with the Ahmeds, she would fix things in Connecticut, she would forget what he had almost said. All that he was required to do was deliver Hina home safely.

Outside, Hina stood facing the driveway, trying to take shelter underneath a pine tree, shielding herself from what had become sleeting rain. Hassan joined her there, offering her part of the dry space under the umbrella.

"They said the cab would be ten minutes, but that was twenty minutes ago," she said, sounding very small. "I feel like I might throw up. I should never have let those women take my picture."

"I can drop you," Hassan said. "Mona asked me to."

"No," Hina said, refusing to look at him. "You've been drinking and I don't want to get in your car."

It was not an unreasonable point, actually. He probably shouldn't drive.

When the cab arrived, Hassan got in after Hina. "I'll make sure you get home O.K.," he said.

Hina pulled up a map on her phone and gave directions to the driver, then she leaned her head against the window, her shoulders slumped. When they arrived at her building, Hina handed the driver two twenty-dollar bills and got out of the cab quickly, waving goodnight and not waiting for her change.

As she walked up her front steps, Hassan noticed her chunky black purse, forgotten on the seat next to him. He grabbed it and scrambled out of the cab.

"Hina," he called out, waving the purse in his right hand.

The cab took off, and Hassan ran after the car, slipping in the slush, but the driver didn't stop. Hassan walked back to Hina's doorstep, panting with the effort.

"Your purse," he said, holding it out to her. She took it, looking grateful.

"You can come up and call another cab if you want," she said. "It's pretty cold out."

As they walked up the long, narrow staircase to her apartment Hassan was conscious of the silence. It felt strangely intimate to watch Hina put her key in the lock and push the door open, to step into the personal space where she slept and ate. It had been a long time since he'd been invited into a woman's apartment alone.

The apartment was dark. The street lamps outside lit the edges of the room, and Hassan looked around, trying to find an object to focus on.

On one wall of the living room hung what looked like a velveteen poster of the Kaaba at Mecca; on the other was a Matisse landscape mounted on foam board.

Hina began to breathe deeply, her shoulders rising and falling with the effort. Hassan wondered if she was crying. Then she stepped over to him, looking up. She was standing less than a foot from Hassan, the toes of her boots nearly touching his.

"My parents wanted me to be educated. To be like educated Pakistanis," she said, her voice a low hiss. "But I see you, and you're all so confused and selfish. None of you are any better than my father."

Hina put a hand over her mouth and stifled an awkward sound, something between a cry and a moan. In the darkness of the room, he could just make out the whites of her eyes in the light from the street. Hina was right, he thought. All the people at the party were hypocrites. Including his wife.

Hina reached up with her left hand and pulled out the long pin that kept her headscarf fastened. With her right, she tugged

on the cloth, letting it fall to her shoulders. Her hair was cut in layers around her face and her eyes looked large.

As she straightened her shoulders and held his gaze, Hassan felt two thoughts compete for his attention: one, that he should excuse himself and go home immediately, and the other, that he couldn't leave, that he was somehow rooted to the floor. Hassan and Hina stood there facing each other for what felt like minutes. A car pulled up outside and he could hear a man and a woman laughing, snatches of music playing through the car window. Hina stood still, the pin in her hand. For a brief, terrible moment, Hassan wondered if she was going to do something with it. He felt the thud of his heart in his ears, as if he'd been running. Then she turned abruptly and disappeared behind a door. He heard the sound of water in the bathroom.

Before he could imagine any other possibility, Hassan hurried down the stairs. The streets were empty, the only sound a garbage truck doing its nightly rounds. Thank God, he repeated to himself as he walked. Thank God he hadn't done anything stupid.

At work on Monday, Hina's face was tight, her lips a thin line. Hassan slid a cup of coffee and a doughnut across the desk.

"I didn't know which kind you like," he said, "so I got glazed. I hope that's all right."

Hina reached for the coffee and took a small sip. "Thank you," she said.

"Did you recover O.K. from the party?" Hassan asked. It seemed awkward not to acknowledge the strangeness of the evening, the abruptness of the way they had parted, but Hina winced.

"I behaved wrongly," she said. "I shouldn't have been around people who were drinking. I shouldn't have been alone with you in my apartment. And I shouldn't have removed my headscarf."

"But nothing happened," Hassan said, leaning forward in

his chair. "Hina, we didn't do anything."

"But we could have," she said, turning toward the wall, as if she couldn't bear to look at his face. "That's the problem."

Then a curious thing happened. Something that he could not have predicted. Hina pulled her chair closer and laid her palms flat on the top of the desk. She began to speak in a low, even tone that couldn't be overheard if one of their co-workers walked by. She told him about her childhood in Albany. About how, when her three younger sisters and brother were small, it was Hina who took care of them while her father finished the night shift in his store and her mother worked at the hospital. Every evening, she braided her sisters' hair and every morning she made an assembly line of omelets, dicing green chilies and onions and tomatoes. Hina was shy at school and didn't make friends easily. At home, she liked to pretend that the children were hers, to raise as she liked.

Then, shortly after her twentieth birthday, her father told her that some family friends from Delaware were coming to meet her. It was obvious to Hina what this meant. Her prospective husband was well dressed, deferential to her parents, inquisitive about her interests. He was ten years older than she was, an estate lawyer with teeth so bright she wondered if he'd had them whitened. When they were given time alone to talk, she watched him drink his tea and tried to imagine a life with him. She tried to picture sleeping next to him, having his child. There was nothing wrong with him, and yet she couldn't shake the fact that he was not what she wanted.

"When I refused him," Hina said, "my parents and I stopped speaking to one another. They said that I had embarrassed them. That I was throwing away the best chance I'd get. I moved into a campus apartment with two girls I knew from the Muslim Students Association. I finished my degree in two years." Hina crossed her arms, looking almost defiant. "I send my parents money occasionally. Through my sister. I want them

to be comfortable. But the truth is that I have not seen them in five years. Inshallah, my contract here will be extended next summer," she added. "I want to make senior analyst by the time I'm twenty-five. Then go for my M.B.A. After that, I'll be on track to make V.P. and buy a house. Then my siblings can come and live with me. I'm not interested in marriage. I want to make a life that I choose."

Hina sat back, smoothing her scarf and looking calmer. Hassan had always been aware that he might lack the qualities essential for success in America, but it had never seemed as evident to him as it did now.

In the days after this conversation, he and Hina skirted around each other, reluctant to be left alone together. Two weeks later, Hina was promoted to a managerial position in the firm's fund business and moved to a different floor.

When Hassan returned from winter vacation he found that the other half of the desk was empty. All that remained was a small hole in the wall where Hina's diploma had once hung.

Now that they are back in Karachi, Hassan and Sara joke that they are "foreign-returned," a designation that their U.K.-educated uncles still put on their business cards, as if it denoted membership to an exclusive club. They sit in Sara's parents' kitchen drinking tea and talking about their time in the U.S., trading theories about why Hassan's contract wasn't renewed. True, it might have been his performance review. But it could also have been his name. Or his nationality. Or his visa status. Either way, no one in Karachi blames them for wanting out of the new America.

Hassan will look for work soon, but first, he tells Sara, he wants to reacclimate. It takes two hours to read the papers cover to cover. The local news feels almost comforting in its sameness: a litany of power outages, corruption scandals, society parties. The international news is filled with talk of war. By the time he finishes, it is almost time to think about lunch.

Always, when they speak of Connecticut, it seems as if the best part of the story hasn't happened yet. It's then that Hassan thinks of the Ahmeds. Ali, helping the kids with their homework while Mona fixes dinner. Ali and Mona debating whom to invite to their next party. Hassan tries to imagine the guest list. Strange how quickly the names and faces are receding—blurring together into one large, homogenous pool.

Mostly when he imagines life in America he thinks of the house that Sara wanted: a white clapboard Colonial with green shutters. He sees dusk falling on the freshly shovelled driveway, the lights blinking on one by one. But he doesn't see Sara in the house, or the children that they plan to have. Rather, he sees another man's children, Hina's siblings: three girls and a boy. They are poring over textbooks at the dining-room table or playing Ping-Pong in the basement. They look content in their kingdom, padding around the carpets in their socks.