

Pigs Is Pigs and Eggs Is Eggs

The ashen clouds had rolled up from over the Ribble Valley and now they hung motionless over Blackburn. I studied the sky from the window of my surgery, then walked back to my desk with slow steps. The mellow light from the table lamp reassured me, the translucent lampshade casting a warm amber glow on the open pages of *The Lancet*. No patients waited outside. I had retreated to the surgery to catch up with my reading.

The door opened with a slight creak and my little daughter Hasina stuck her head through. Again. My house was close to my surgery and Hasina sometimes dropped in unchaperoned, though we had told her time and again not to. She paid no heed, and her mother couldn't stop her. Today she lit the room as no lamp could, and I beckoned her in without a look or word of reprimand. She was Daddy's girl, after all. She bounced up to my desk with flip-flop skips, her sleek black braids swinging behind her.

"We had another rehearsal today, Daddy. I grabbed a red ribbon, Suzy grabbed a blue ribbon, Jill got the yellow one, and we went round and round. I snatched the yellow ribbon from Jill, and Suzy snatched the red one, and we went *round and round*. Then we exchanged ribbons again—"

Hasina took a few deep gulps of air and plunged back into the fray, skipping from one leg to the other. She was out of breath again, and this time when she spoke, she simply said, "So will you come to the dance, Daddy?"

"Maybe I will." I smiled at her indulgently.

"And maybe you won't." Her face crumpled like a used glove. "Daddy, you're always busy."

"Don't be too sure, Hasina *beti*. Perhaps your mum will come too."

Hasina rolled her eyes. "Mum? Nattering with the other parents and teachers? That'll be the day!"

"So how was your rehearsal? Better than the previous one?"

"Brill!" Hasina's face widened with her smile. "Today we didn't just hop around with the ribbons. We danced—you know, proper steps."

"And forming a braid like your hair, huh, *beti*?"

"Yes! But when the pole is wrapped, it's much prettier. So many colors. Daddy, come to the dance. You're always busy."

On each of her visits to the surgery, she gave me a hard time, chiding me about the papers and medical journals piled up on the floor around my desk, scolding me for not cleaning my white mug, whose inside had turned a rich nutty brown, caramelized by endless refills of coffee, and for not coming home on time. She always found a new way to upbraid me for ignoring the events at her school. Now she did it again: “Only little girls dance around a maypole, Daddy. I may not be chosen again. You have got to come this year.”

Hasina’s mother, my wife Asma, found any reason to avoid going to our daughter’s school. Although we had lived for many years in England, she had never mastered English and felt inadequate on school visits. Indeed, she felt inadequate in a variety of situations. Once, as we boarded an aircraft for a holiday in Pakistan, Asma had said “aisle” to the flight steward, a cheerful, silver-haired man. Only she had meticulously pronounced every letter, and it came out sounding like “arsehole”! The man turned scarlet, shocked to be hailed this way by a demure, conservatively dressed Muslim woman when his only crime had been to try to help her to her seat. It took months before Asma mustered the courage to utter another English word.

Hasina’s teacher was a kind lady. I sensed that Asma liked her. The teacher, Mrs. Willis, would speak to us, not at us, slowly and punctiliously, and never tired of repeating herself. She listened carefully, no trace of impatience or amusement on her face, while Asma spoke to her, halting and nervous, in broken English that inevitably crumbled and gave way, sometimes to Urdu, sometimes to silence.

Mrs. Willis would smile in encouragement and then wait for me to translate the Urdu. She would cock her head to one side while her reply was translated back to Asma. If Mrs. Willis felt the translation did not seem quite right (I was never sure whether she actually understood a little Urdu or reached her conclusions by gauging Asma’s reactions), she repeated her point.

The school system baffled Asma. She did not understand the curriculum—that was part of the problem. When Mrs. Willis said the students would go on field trips so as to better understand English history, I’d have the devil of a time trying to get this across to Asma. She asked endless questions, and I’d stumble through the answers. Did you do this as a schoolboy in this country? Asma would ask. No, we didn’t go on such trips during my schooldays in the 1950s, I’d tell her. Now, thirty years later, Mrs. Willis took her students once or twice a term to explore ruined castles and wander across ancient battlefields. These arguments

with Asma dragged on far too long for my liking. I could not blame Mrs. Willis for considering me an ineffective translator and, I suspect, a henpecked husband.

I knew Asma was not fluent in English when I married her, but I had expected her to learn. Like me, she was born in Pakistan. I assumed she would adapt to life in England the way I had. I was wrong. On many nights, I was overcome by silent agitation, unable to sleep, wondering whether I'd made the right decision. Would she have been happier living in Rawalpindi or Karachi with another man but in the familiar environs of the land of her birth? I mostly ended up blaming myself, and sometimes, my parents.

My parents came to England like cattle, after World War II when unskilled labor was in short supply. The English, only too familiar with being waited upon by the natives of their colonies, imported hands by the shipload. Dad and Mum were janitors, doing their best to scrub dirty basins that leaked and fix toilets that didn't flush in rundown buildings in London.

When recruiters from the cotton mills in Lancashire swooped down on the impoverished Asian workers in London and spoke glowingly about how their lives would improve if they moved north, my father signed up immediately. So did many of his friends. They were shepherded to Bolton and Blackburn. Bolton had been home to Samuel Crompton, inventor of the "spinning mule." The wool industry had sustained Lancashire until the Englishmen posted to India learned the technique of spinning cotton into yarn from the accomplished weavers there and started the cotton industry in England. Crompton mechanized spinning and weaving, galvanized the mills, and made Lancashire the Dixie of England. But machines still needed people to run them, and my parents and their friends became the new spinning mules.

Cotton was brought in from the colonies—the plantations in the West Indies, and Georgia and the Carolinas, and Bengal. In Lancashire it was spun into cloth and sold at exorbitant rates to people in the same colonies. Mahatma Gandhi led a protest against this, urging Indians to use their own spinning wheels. If my father and his friends were aware of this, they didn't care. They were preoccupied with surviving in this damp and not too friendly land.

In Blackburn, my parents lived in a hovel more dilapidated than the buildings they had cleaned in London. The recruiters had promised them a different planet with its own moon and stars, but now they were brusquely told they weren't eligible for a council house, and all

the estate agents sneered at them. And Blackburn shocked them—they knew people smoked cigarettes and *bidis*, but they had not realized an entire town could smoke. Stack after stack of chimneys belched sooty black plumes that wafted over cramped terraced houses.

My father bought one of those houses—“with pumping heart and shaking knees,” as he put it. He took a short-term, high-interest loan (no bank would give anything else to an Asian wog) and then rented out a portion of the house to be able to pay back the loan. We shared our home with a Gujarati family from India whose surname was Malik. Although they were Muslims like us, they spoke another language and observed different customs, and it added up to an uneasy coexistence.

Even as a young boy, I knew my parents did not lead happy lives. Our dingy home stank of suppressed desires. The wooden doors were rotted at their bottoms, the stained and faded wallpaper had peeled off from the corners in many rooms, while slimy moss stealthily crept up the red bricks on the exterior walls. I remember it was always damp and cold, and in the winters frightfully so, and we all crowded in the kitchen where it was relatively warm because either my mum or Mrs. Malik was cooking. Just for the warmth, I'd put up with the pungent vapors of cut onions or roasting red chilies that made my eyes smart. But others had the same idea, and the kitchen was full of people and babble that wore down the congeniality until it became threadbare.

The worst feature of the building was the lack of an indoor toilet. We went to a sort of hut-like thing at the back of the house—the “shithouse,” I called it—surrounded by brambles and weeds. The shithouse gave me two of my strongest childhood memories: my most humiliating moment, and also my sweetest. There was the time I hopped around in tense urgency while Mr. Malik was rooted in the shithouse, leafing through an ancient Gujarati magazine that he'd read a hundred times while he noisily rasped out an old Hindi film tune through the gaps in his front teeth. Finally, I soiled my underwear and my thighs.

And there was the time when I stepped out of the shithouse and faced Rukhsana, the Malik daughter, who was a couple of years older than I was. My fly was half-undone, and I hastily stumbled backward into the suddenly welcome shadows of the shithouse. Rukhsana followed me, grabbed me, and maneuvered my lips to hers. We clutched and groped and passionately kissed, her hand exploring my crotch, the electric sensations surmounting the lingering aroma of our families' excreta. I knew she experienced the same vibrant thrills that made my skin tingle all over in some strange, random, rapid sequence.

Maybe it was coincidence, but shortly afterward, my parents shipped me off to Pakistan for the rest of my schooling. England was technologically advanced but morally bankrupt, my father pronounced, a jurist delivering a *fatwa*. I wondered if a neighbor with nothing better to do than peep out of a back window had noted Rukhsana and I cloistered together in the shithouse and had reported that to my father.

So I went to live with my uncle and aunt in Pakistan and attend the local high school, and then go on to medical college. My parents regularly sent some of their hard-earned wages for my tuition and upkeep, but it wasn't quite enough and my uncle had to chip in. I twisted with guilt, as my uncle had also put up most of the money for my father's ticket to England. It was Uncle's way of saying, Brother, I wish you well, and may you live long and prosper. Now my stay further cost my uncle. He didn't give the slightest indication that this was a bother. But it did put my parents and me under an unwritten obligation.

Toward the end of my medical education, my uncle almost shyly proposed that I consider marrying a girl his family knew well. They lived in a village, and the girl was not highly educated, but "she has a sweet face, she would be a good wife for you, make your home a delight to come back to after a hard day's work."

What objections might come from my parents if I presented Rukhsana as an alternative to the village girl? I already knew what they would be. Yes, she's Muslim, but her family is from *India*, not Pakistan—and moreover, she is three years, one month, and twenty-one days older than you. As though these were insurmountable barriers! But then, how well did I really know Rukhsana? She was the only one in the Malik clan anywhere close to friendly with me, but then she was friendly with all of the neighborhood children. Looking back, I realized she couldn't have seduced all the boys in their shithouses, but I did not think her doing so with me singled me out in any special way. She had taken an opportune moment. My parents were emphatic that I should marry a girl from Pakistan and not somebody from England, even if she had South Asian ancestry. Then, this weighty, unwritten obligation to my uncle. Finally, I bowed to my uncle's choice, and Asma became my wife.

Whenever I could manage it, usually a couple of times a week, I stopped by The Lamb and the Lion. Asma glowered at me or her face would crumple when she knew I was headed there. I told her I drank only orange juice or Coca-Cola, though the local brew was my favorite, and I sometimes tucked into a serving of piping-hot shepherd's pie or a tasty, garnished Scotch egg. Asma still disapproved of my spending time at

a drinking hole, a house of ill repute. I patiently pointed out that this was where the locals gathered, and I, as their physician and guardian of their health, had to drop by and get to know them to better do my job. Any excuse for a pint of bitter. The truth was, I could seldom spend all evening at the pub and consequently struck up few acquaintanceships. Those who spoke to me tended to finagle informal consultations.

Sometimes the conversation turned to how South Asian immigrants had transformed the face of Britain. At The Lamb and the Lion, such talk took the form of teasing banter, and I played along. One had to live and let live, so why inflame passions? It spoiled the taste of the ale. But with chaps like Stuart Hynd or Geoff Stockdale, the discussion could get serious.

“The cotton mills went downhill from the time you Indians marched over in battalions.” Something like this from Geoff or Stuart would set the parley into motion.

“Ah, but did we come on our own, or were we brought here?” I’d reply spiritedly, pointing to the spiky rain spattering the pavement outside, hoping they’d understand that so many Asians would not have come to this bleak land on their own. “You blokes weren’t willing to work nights. But for us, you’d have gone downhill much earlier.”

I thought of my father as I spoke these words. He’d been as much a pioneer as Columbus or Magellan or da Gama, the men deified in the history books. He had been reviled, cursed at, spat at, shouted at, yet he was a frontier settler of sorts who left his native land to buckle down here amid the dampness of nature and men, and now I had a nice house and a decent practice in the Ribble Valley. After my mum’s passing, I tried hard to persuade my dad to move in with us, but he clung to his old terraced house in Blackburn as though it were his ancestral manor in Pakistan. He doted on his granddaughter, flesh of his flesh, not troubled in the least that Hasina did not care about the old country. I enticed him with this bait: he could be with Hasina round the clock in our home. It didn’t work.

The men in the pub looked at me with skepticism. But I hadn’t lied to them. The mill owners made heavy investments in machinery and wanted to keep the mills humming by sunlight as well as moonlight to maintain profits. English workers would not work the night shifts, so the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis took over, and the factory walls that once rang with curt English now thrummed with the singsong cadences and guttural shouts of Urdu, Bengali, and Hindi.

In addition to the rain, the new immigrants had to get used to galoshes, mackintoshes, and Wellingtons. When it poured and they

reported late to work, stumbling in their ill-fitting raincoats and tripping over their Wellies and blaming their lateness on the weather, their supervisor would continuously bark at them: “Come along, you bug-gers, we can’t be waiting all bloody day while you bumble along, arse over elbow. And as for that piss from the sky, your jobs depend on it. Didn’t ya bloody know that? Makes the cotton fibers clump and stay clumped even when you spin them. So don’t whinge—nobody gets owt for nowt—and now get to work.”

And they worked. But many things changed in the three decades after the war. Britain no longer ruled the waves. Cotton could be manufactured more cheaply elsewhere in the world. One by one, the mills of Blackburn, and Bolton, and Manchester fell ominously silent. The lively, prosperous mill towns broke up into communal scrap heaps. They were the bedsores of England.

We sometimes crossed the border into West Yorkshire to visit Asma’s brother Khalid and his family. They lived in a squalid part of Bradford, grime and graffiti on the walls, litter on the roads where mangy dogs and stray kids ran around. Khalid, squirming in his stagnant pool in Pakistan like a tadpole that couldn’t grow, had bawled to come to England, and I, prodded by Asma, had finally sponsored him.

Khalid was brash and brazen in his house but slunk about in public with his tail between his legs. His command of English was only a notch better than Asma’s. He had no employable skills worth mentioning, and he came to England at a time when, with the collapse of the cotton mills, many of the children of the old Asian mill workers were out of a job. I tried telling him this, but he thought I was being a spiteful killjoy.

Khalid worked as a driver in a private minicab service operated by other Pakistanis. A few people—brothers, relatives, friends—would club their resources and start a small business, a fish-and-chips shop, a curry takeaway joint, or if they had the funds, maybe a convenience store or a restaurant. Minicab drivers put in long hours for a few pounds and stray pennies and risked racially motivated muggings when they drove late. But Khalid was a proud man and a stubborn one. Working in the kitchen of a restaurant was a menial job, as was waiting on tables. So a minicab driver he remained, but he’d send glowing accounts of the good life in England to his jealous cousins in Pakistan.

He made caustic remarks about me to his wife and to Asma within my hearing to provoke me. “*Hakim vakim*, doctor-phoctor! How often does he remember he got his medical degree in *Lahore*, not London?” And this, in his strained English: “Eggs is eggs and pigs is pigs, but he

a pig trying to be egg.” When he said things like this, I looked at Asma, expecting her to defend me. She wouldn’t. She wrapped herself in neutrality, not realizing such a cloak didn’t exist, that it simply rendered her naked to my eyes. By not supporting her husband, she sided with her brother. I didn’t care for this at all. What more did she expect me to do for him? I had brought him to England. He needed to stand on his own legs. What did he want? A job in a hospital? A bank loan to start a business? Didn’t he know why he wouldn’t get either?

Khalid and I got into a blazing argument once about the local rally to pressure the National Health Service to remove copies of the Bible from hospital wards on the grounds that “some communities” found the practice offensive.

“What are the protestors thinking, Khalid *bhai*?” I asked my brother-in-law. “Anything that steers people toward religion would help.”

I looked to him for concurrence. If there was one thing that he and I agreed upon, it was that the British were notoriously non-religious. Most shops were closed on Sundays by law, but church pews remained so empty that one wondered why the government forced the shops to observe the Sabbath or why the ministers even bothered holding church services. Anyone with a shred of religion had boarded a ship called the *Mayflower* and sailed away to the land now known as America. Yet Elizabeth II, as the British monarch, was not just the head of state but head of the church too, and held the title Defender of the Faith. Did she know, I wondered, that the only people of faith left in her realm were we, the Queen’s Muslims?

Khalid instead addressed Asma in a crisp, cold voice: “Did you hear that? Educate your husband. He doesn’t believe that the Koran is the final revelation of God, that it replaces the Talmud, the Torah, and the New Testament.”

Asma and Khalid’s wife eyed me like I was an infidel.

Khalid wished to recreate Pakistan all around him. I balked at visiting his house. Asma often went by herself, but she had never learned to drive a car and made laborious and time-consuming trips by train. She wanted me to drive us to Khalid’s more frequently.

“Family! Family is everything!” Asma was weak in English, but she could scream in Urdu. “*Zara suniye!* How I wish we lived in the same town, if not in the same house.”

I’d cave in, and we would drive to Bradford. I couldn’t bundle my relatives, heap them in a corner of the room like I did with my journals. I had to deal with the patchwork quilt that our family was. Hasina got along handsomely with Khalid’s son, Parvez, who was her age. We had

different feelings about this: Asma and Khalid's wife felt the friendship was good for Parvez, I thought it was bad for Hasina, and Khalid was sure it was dangerous for Parvez. While Khalid's wife gossiped with Asma in the kitchen, I sat on the sofa, forcing an exchange of words with Khalid, longing to dash back to Lancashire, drop into The Lamb and the Lion, and down a pint of foaming Thwaites ale.

There was a pleasant side. I'd bundle Hasina and Parvez into the car and we would visit places around Bradford. We went to Haworth, to the parsonage where Emily and Charlotte Brontë grew up and wrote their timeless novels. Sometimes we climbed, laughing and puffing, to a vantage point atop a grassy knoll and gazed at the panoramic spread of the Yorkshire dales, rolling green hills dotted with clumps of trees, the sun playing hide-and-seek with the clouds. Everything was green, so green. Green was the color of Islam, and no country was greener than England. *This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle, this seat of Mars, this other Eden, demi-paradise.... Against the envy of less happier lands.... This happy breed of men, this little world. This England.*

"I'm the May Queen this year!"

"You're not. Are you really?" My eyebrows arched into question marks, my wide pupils forming the dots.

"Yes, I am. Mrs. Willis chose me."

Mrs. Willis. The kind teacher. The caring teacher. What praise had I to offer to the Mrs. Willises of the world? What praise *could* I offer? Thanks to Mrs. Willis, Hasina would set foot on the moon, the lovely moon, the crescent moon, and just like Armstrong said, it was one small step for a girl but a giant leap for all of us. As far as I knew, an Asian girl had never been May Queen at the school. It was always a white English girl. Hasina, the May Queen of this year's dance. It had been a hard struggle.

My father died eighteen months ago on a wet November day. Today, as I walked to my car at the Blackburn Royal Infirmary, my heart turned as bleak as the landscape. All the trees lining the wall of the parking lot were bereft of their leaves, the red brick buildings defiled by trails of water and slime, the sky savagely bruised by the fading light. In the summer when the sun shone on the green foliage that overflowed from every tree, the emerald shades vivid against the red brick facade, the building looked sprightly and inviting—if such a thing could be said of any hospital.

In the prime of his life, Dad used to lift me high in the air and I'd shriek, seeing the vultures circling in the sky with my tender body held

aloft as an offering. I'd turn my head, see my father's strong muscles bulge, and I would be lowered to the ground, still shrieking. During his last days, my father had wilted and shrunk, and I'm sure if the friends of his youth had seen him, they never would have recognized him. And now, with water wriggling down my neck, I thought of my father in the celestial realms of Allah, where the days were perennially fair and bright. I thought of the legacy he left us, of his unspoken hope that we should not let him down but build on the foundation he'd laid.

"I'm the May Queen this year!"

My pulse raced. I wished my father had lived to witness the maypole dance and reflect on where we had come from and where we were now. I thought of Rukhsana, who now worked for the BBC World Service and went on assignments all over the globe, and had renamed herself Roxanna. But Hasina had no need to change her name to be selected as the May Queen.

No, my father was not around to witness this. But I would make it a point to attend the show, the coronation. I'd carve out the time. Hasina was closer to me than to her mother. She was more comfortable speaking English than Urdu. I'd be there for her. I would take Asma with me—and Parvez, from the next generation of inheritors, even if I had to wake up in the wee hours and drive up to Bradford to get him. Hasina would be shocked and, I hoped, intensely pleased.

The ribbons around the maypole were brightly colored, more fluorescent than pastel, streaming down from the knob on the top. Were the girls livelier than the music, or was the music livelier than the girls? It was hard to tell. Some of the girls stood up and held their ribbons high, while the others knelt, holding their ribbons low. Some girls skipped this way and others that way, weaving in and out, and the ribbons began forming a kaleidoscopic braid around the clunky wooden pole.

The girls wore flowing dresses of pink satin with little floral crowns on their heads that matched the big wreath of flowers on top of the maypole. As I expected, the May Queen wore the grandest dress of all—a flowing affair of pure white, the skirt having elaborate pleats with flowers pinned down their length—and an impressive crown of bright yellow blossoms. She was a pretty girl, one of those English types with rosy cheeks and flaxen hair.

Somewhere in the back stood Hasina. One of the many handmaidens of the May Queen, I suppose. She held a white wicker basket overflowing with bluebells and daffodils. She did not hold a ribbon.

I tried hard to catch her eye but failed, and then I realized she had seen us and was consciously avoiding looking in our direction. She had seen her father who had never previously bothered to come to her school, her mother who avoided coming because she could only stutter in English, and her cousin—good Lord, what was he doing here?

Over these past few days, I had become buoyant, borne gently aloft to some new, subtle height. But I was merely spindrift from a tall wave, and I saw a rocky beach beneath me. As the music picked up and the girls started another dance, I reached out to Asma and squeezed her hand.