From *They Call Me the Wolf*

(*De kaller meg ulven*)

by Zeshan Shakar

Published by Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS, Oslo 2022

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Translation made with support from NORLA

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Our house is one of those that was built just a few years ago on the site of an old apple orchard, trees and redcurrant bushes ripped up at the roots and the plot flattened before two new-build homes were erected and the lawn turf rolled out. It has three floors; all the rooms' ceilings are free of coving and everything is painted in 'harmony grey', including the outside. The sanded walls, parquet and kitchen cabinets all still give off a faintly new smell. At the viewing I overheard a couple tell the estate agent they thought it might be a little too 'modern' and 'artificial'. Although the agent replied that there was 'scope to make it your own', they still didn't add their names to the list of interested buyers. I don't know what they were after, if they were looking for a house that reminded them of their grandmothers', with teak furniture and lace curtains.

The colour of the house makes the windows appear extra warm and yellow in the dusk. Upstairs, in one of the bedrooms, Mariam sleeps in her nightie with unicorns on it. The nightlight I turned on when I put her to bed shines through the thin curtains.

Downstairs, in the basement with its own front door, the lights are off. It's an open-plan space with a wardrobe in one corner, and an office chair and a desk I work at when I'm not in the office. On the desk stands a 32-inch monitor and a chrome replica of the Minar-e-Pakistan. It used to stand on top of the TV in the old apartment I lived in with my parents, in Dalen. My father left it behind when he moved out.

In the living room on the ground floor, all the lights are on. Ada is sitting on the sofa watching Netflix as she eats wholemeal crispbreads topped with low-fat cheese and sliced pepper. If I stand on tiptoe, I can see the top of her head and the uppermost part of the screen, the intro to the series we usually watch.

'How long are you planning on staying with your dad?' she asked before I left.

I couldn't give her an exact answer.

She cast a glance at the TV, then at me.

'I mean, I don't know whether I'll be able to resist…' she said, making as if to reach for the remote control, smiling. I'm usually the one who ends up a few episodes ahead of her, despite the fact we have a kind of deal that we're supposed to watch the show together.

'Just watch it,' I replied, throwing out my hand in a generous gesture.

I'll catch up with her eventually.

Across the road from our house there's an apartment block, one of those they built when the very first satellite cities appeared. It's nowhere close to being as big as the blocks built ten years later, further away in Dalen. It has just three floors, in addition to a loft containing storage spaces under the sloping ceiling. The lawn in front of the building is a kind of no man's land – no plants, no benches, no trees. The block stands there like a border guard, erect and steady, while a few light snowflakes, the year's first, are cast around in the air. The block seems to stare at our house and at the houses behind it, row upon row of them separated only by gardens and narrow, pavement-less streets. That was probably where the people who came to the viewing would have preferred to live, in the streets and the area the estate agent chose to highlight in the ad, which didn't mention that the house is right on the edge of that area. That it borders on the area of apartment blocks with an entirely different name – an area that, while it admittedly doesn't conjure up quite as many negative associations as the name Dalen, still might be enough to scare off potential buyers. Something that also meant the price we ended up paying for the house was half a million less than it could have been.

At the viewing, the estate agent said to me:

'Well, I'm sure many people probably want something just that little bit further in,' as if she wanted to beat me to the punch. 'But this property does belong to the same school catchment area.'

'No, it's not ideal,' I replied, not wanting to tell her what I thought – that in fact I couldn't imagine anything more ideal than being right there with Ada and Mariam, with the houses and apartment blocks on either side of us.

It scares me a little, the house, when I stand and look at it as I'm doing now. Ada and Mariam seem so far away. I stand here, alone, outside, and it feels necessary that I'm here, that I have to make sure that the panelling doesn't crack, that the tiles don't blow off the roof and water doesn't seep into the cellar or erode away the foundations. I've seen it before – how things crack, fall to pieces, disappear.

I start to walk. The street has been made narrower by the cars parked along one side – they belong to the people in the apartments who don't have a parking space in the shared garage. The sharp headlamps of a car flare up further down at the street corner. The vehicle drives towards me, but it doesn't seem to be about to park. It continues up the road, down towards the other houses, the houses with garages that I know all contain similar cars, stately with ski boxes on their roofs or bike racks at the rear. I follow the car with my eyes. The driver turns and looks straight at me, then averts his gaze and disappears out of sight. I get this feeling, a sense of unease, simultaneously tingling and expectant, and I think what I so often think: he has more than me. Maybe he's come into a big inheritance. I think about what he'll be able to give his children. About what I would have been able to give my child. That I need more.

I don't know what it's like to not think this way.

They call me the wolf. My mates, I mean – they've called me that for many years.

I don't know whether it's because the wolf is native to both the countries my parents are from, whether my friends even thought about the fact that there are wolves in Pakistan, too, not just flea-infested stray dogs.

I don't know whether it's because they think I'm rootless, always on the move, like a wolf hunting its prey for hours, days, over many tens of kilometres, wading through the snow in the forest on an empty stomach on the search for its next meal.

Or maybe it's because Lupus is a constellation that lies between Centaurus and Scorpius. As far as I know, none of them were members of the *Bokklubbens Barn* children's book club, nor did their mothers sit and read *Heroes and Monsters of the Firmament* to them at bedtime. Maybe it's because I was greedy, like on the summer nights we scraped together our money and sat with the pizza box open on a bench in Dalen, and they would exclaim: 'You really do eat a lot, bro.'

My mother likes to tell people about how the kindergarten said she needed to teach me moderation. I ate so much that there wasn't enough left for the other children.

There's only a week left until he leaves. The flight will travel from Oslo to Lahore, where one of my cousins will be waiting for him in the arrivals hall. The sun will have risen, but the blue sky will be hiding behind a thin, yellowish-grey veil of smog. He'll smell the soft fruit that's sold from the stalls, the red-hot tea that is served in paper cups, the already sweaty men who'll offer to carry his suitcase for a few rupees. An hour-and-a-half's drive later he'll step out of the car in Faisalabad, just a few kilometres beyond the city centre, feel the packed earth beneath his feet and hear the racket of rickshaws and motorbikes that rev and bump through the streets in the neighbourhood where not a centimetre is redundant, the houses erected wall-to-wall, none of them the same but all of them similar, brick, concrete, different materials sometimes used from level to level, where the quality of the uppermost floors reveals the level of the owner's wealth when the extension was added. There are green, red and blue metal gates that open out onto the street, above them are plaques with quotations from the Koran, there are flat roofs at various heights, some looking down on their neighbours, others looking up at them. The building he's about to enter isn't the tallest. Nor the shortest. The gate is grey and a little rusty at the bottom. It's the same gate he closed behind him when he left. It's the same house, with another floor added.

He has no return ticket.

We've hardly spoken about it since he booked the flight. I haven't asked him much about it either, as if I haven't quite believed that he's going back for good.

When I called him just now to say that I'd come and help him pack up the apartment – if he's going to move, we really ought to get started – he let my words hang in mid-air for a while before picking them up.

'Challo, it's okay, come,' he replied. Then he added: 'Can you bring my stories?'

My car is in the workshop. It needs a service – they're going to replace the brake pads and discs, the window wipers. I pull the hood of my black anorak over my head, tug the zipper up to my chin and walk towards the subway station. The snowflakes are coming faster now, have got bigger.

I take the subway down to the city centre, and before I change to the line that will carry me onwards, far out to the east, I walk out of the station. The rush of people outside has begun to diminish, but crowds still accumulate whenever there's a red man at a crossing. I follow a long street straight uphill, and the distance between the crossings increases. I know this part of the city – not as well as Dalen, but I know the old apartment buildings with four or

five floors that surround me, most of them grey or made of brick. I think about everything they don't have, ornaments above the entrances and windows, French balconies, little lawns with decorative shrubbery lining the ground floor where nothing happens – just lawns framed by small fences, no more than half-a-metre high. The apartment buildings here don't have anything like that. They're so called 'wolf buildings', like the one my mother grew up in, I wouldn't have to walk for more than a few more minutes to find myself standing outside her old gate. I could rattle the wrought iron and peer into a sand-coloured rear courtyard; glance at the corner where Mrs Eliassen used to bury fish in the snowdrifts in winter so it would keep. I could walk into the stairwell and up the creaking steps and open the door to the cupboard-like room where the toilet was. Shivers travel through my body as I think of naked thighs against a freezing cold toilet seat.

I know that at its end, the long street I've turned onto bends ninety degrees, and that if I were to follow it for ten minutes more I'd reach the place where a building was razed to the ground many years ago. A building with warped floorboards and rats that scrabbled around beneath them, wind that howled through the gaps in the windows, drains blocked by the thousands of tiny hairs from the shaving of five men with coarse beards, and by the grease from the hands of those who worked in the restaurants. The man who owned the apartment was the first landlord my father called who didn't hang up or say it straight out – 'No, we don't want the likes of you' – when he heard his strongly accented English.

There were so many Pakistanis on the streets here that the area became known as 'Little Karachi', even though hardly any of them came from Karachi, or even from Sindh. Almost all of them were from Punjab, like him.

I continue up the street and see my destination: the kiosk on the corner, just where the street bends. In the summer, boxes of Pakistani mangoes are usually stacked on top of each other outside it. 'Honey mango. Export quality'. My father always says that we get better mangoes here in 'Nar-vey' than the ones they eat in Pakistan. I've never understood whether he intends this as a boast or a complaint.

There are no boxes here now. Just a grille on the window through which light filters onto the street. A bell rings when I open the door. A Pakistani man sits on a stool behind the till. His hair is grizzled, thin, I've seen him many times over many years. He stares at his phone and doesn't look up at me, even though the kiosk is empty except for a young, Norwegian couple. The woman pushes a pram back and forth as they peer at the spices in the racks.

The ‘stories’ my father wants are in a stand next to the till. A kind of Pakistani version of the cheap paperbacks that can be found in the magazine racks of the major Norwegian supermarkets. I walk over and pick up the one at the front. There’s an image of a solitary woman on the cover. They sometimes feature men, too, often in one of the top or bottom corners, holding a pistol or wearing big, dark sunglasses, but most often it’s just the woman. Like this one. Her gaze is directed at something beyond the edge of the cover, a longing look, her chin lifted a little. She has wavy black hair beneath a dupatta that covers no more than the back of her head, long eyelashes, pale, almost-white skin and red lipstick. The background is dark green. The front cover – which is actually the back cover, it always takes me a few seconds before I adapt to the fact that the book is bound from the back and everything starts from the right – is full of words I can’t read, I understand only some of the letters with their triangular-shaped dots. Rounded, but also full of sharp edges that seem to cut against the woman’s soft face.

The man behind the till has put down his phone and is looking at me.

‘Is this the latest one?’ I ask.

He nods, and continues to look at me. I wonder whether he remembers me, the dark-haired but light-skinned boy who used to sit in the car and stare into the shop as he waited for his father. Or maybe he’s just wondering why I – a Turk, an Albanian, a Greek, an Iranian, but most certainly not a Pakistani – am interested in these stories.

He’s about to say something, but is interrupted by the Norwegian couple who have now found the coriander seeds they were looking for, along with two cans of chickpeas. I take the paperback and stand behind them in the queue. The man asks them whether they’d like a bag, but both of them shake their heads, smiling, and the woman takes a shopping net from her jacket pocket. As they leave they say goodbye in chorus, as if they’re on their way home from a dinner hosted by a couple they know.

The man lifts a hand to them before he turns to me. I set the paperback on the narrow counter. He looks at me again. Tries a sentence in Urdu.

‘Yeh aap ke liye he?’

Almost imperceptibly I tilt my head from side to side, a gesture that could be an answer to anything. But it’s not enough – there was a question I haven’t answered. He waits. I’m about to say in Norwegian that the paperback is for my father, but I catch myself – it will only lead to more questions. Oh, your father is Pakistani? What’s his name? Where in Pakistan is he from? When did he come here? Where does he work? What’s he doing now? Why don’t you speak Urdu?

‘It’s for someone I know,’ I say.

‘Pakistani?’ He smiles.

I make the same little head movement again. It does the job this time.

Out on the street there are footprints in the slush and long, thin lines left by the wheels of the pram. I see the couple further down the street. The man is pushing the pram now and they’re talking about something, there’s a naturalness about them, about the way they act on the streets here. These are their streets. Not mine. I know that.

The paperback is soft enough for me to bend it and stuff it into my jacket pocket, in the shape of a bridge. I continue to watch the couple. They turn onto a side street. I follow their tracks. First into the same street, where the tracks left by the pram and two pairs of feet take another sharp turn towards a gateway. I pass it and continue on down the street. In a short time I’ll be back on the wider roads, can already hear the gruff engines of the buses and the urgent beeping of the traffic lights.

On the corner that intersects with the main street there’s a pub. I follow the pavement up to the entrance. A bicyclist with studded tyres swishes past me, the slush spraying up into his rear mudguard. A group of what looks like students are looking confusedly around for someone, something, like insects around a street lamp. There are a couple of metal tables and chairs outside the pub but they’re covered in wet snow, and the heater that hangs above one of the tables is switched off. One of the students tries the door. It’s locked. She throws her arms wide and walks back to the others.

It was here that my parents met for the first time. This was where my father went on Saturday nights. This was the door that was open to him.

The students saunter away. I peer through the windows – it’s dark inside the pub, and hard to see properly. I have to move even closer to see the outlines of tables and chairs. Un-upholstered chairs, nothing but bare wood, but a longed-for place to sit after the shift at the factory where my father assembled so many batteries that one of the Norwegian workers approached him, furious, and said in broken English: ‘You, listen here. Not so fast. We other look dumb. Understand?’ My father understood, but couldn’t do anything about it. He worked so the boss would pat him on the back, not the other workers. They weren’t the ones who had the power to determine whether he would keep his job and his work permit. Nor were they the ones who put the banknotes in the envelope every month, the ones he exchanged for rupees after shoving a few of them into his pocket. He was one of them – the working class people who sat in the pub every Saturday, cheering and hollering – but with an add-on, he was a

member of the *immigrant* working class, as he sat there with his buddy and a bottle of cola and tried to get the attention of the few young women who came in.

He can't only ever have bombed in his attempts. There were women before my mother. At least one.

'I saw her on the street once, my God, she was so ugly,' my mother has said. She herself never went to the pub, never went clubbing. She didn't even drink alcohol – never has done. She was twenty-four years old, bought the newspaper in the morning and the afternoon, had a little four-year-old girl at home and an asshole of an ex-husband. She went to the pub that one night because her friends had been nagging her about getting out more.

She says he tried to chat her up by buying her a beer. He'd learned, he admitted later, that it was easier to get a place at the Norwegian girls' table if you went over there with an extra beer in your hand.

'I don't drink, but thanks anyway,' she said. But he got his place at the table all the same. He stood there beside her, speaking English. She asked and he answered – ever more surprised at just how long his answers could be without her seeming to lose interest. Didn't realise at the time that she got just as much out of it as he did, that she was what he once called a 'Thor Heyerdahl-type of Norwegian' – her gaze open, outward-looking, beyond the borders of Norway. He got to stand there and talk about his journey. About the countries he passed on the bus, about Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan – above all he spoke about Pakistan, Faisalabad, about the plan to walk in his father's footsteps, his hardly begun studies at a railway engineering college before his father's unexpected stroke and death. And while their friends had run out of small talk, cola and beer they continued to chatter away, him standing and she sitting, until her friend pulled the strap of her bag onto her shoulder and said: 'We're leaving now.'

That was how it began. Right here.

They pursue me. I pursue them.

The snowflakes melt as they hit the ground and form puddles that are splashed up onto the pavements as the buses drive past me. I'm at the subway station. The sliding doors open. A heavy, mouldy smell wafts towards me. The whine of a train leaving the station reverberates from wall to wall down the narrow walkway. I have to take the line that stretches eastwards along the entire south side of Dalen, all the way to where the terrain flattens out between the hillsides. I check the platform notice board. My train will be here in two minutes.

Through the window I see the first station in Dalen. The back of an industrial building stretches the entire length of the platform.

My phone vibrates faintly, and I look at the display. It's a message from Ada.

I'm going to watch one more episode. Smiley face, shrug emoji.

I respond with the emoji with a slanted straight line for a mouth.

No spoilers, I promise, she replies, along with the emoji with zipped up lips.

The train features bright white fluorescent ceiling lights, a waiting room on wheels that someone is always leaving, but most people stay seated for a long time now. Almost no new passengers step aboard. On the seat furthest from me along the row of four sits a woman holding her phone flat in front of her mouth, the loudspeaker on. She's speaking to another woman. Two boys with school bags sit on the row of four seats opposite talking loudly about football, I catch the names Modrić and Benzema, but nothing more. The train is full of the sounds of Dalen. I take the little white box from my jacket pocket – I have AirPods with noise cancellation.

I open Spotify and scroll down the library. Tap play. A single tone, a hint of a melody, and then I feel the heat spread from my fingertips and up into my arms, across my chest and throat and into my face, until my ears are red-hot around the white air pods. *Time is illmatic, keep static like wool fabric*. I want to feel this, want to be warmed up, want to fight the impulse to squirm in my seat at everything that comes streaming towards me, far too intense for me to be able to sit completely still. I need to listen to precisely *this* music, the music I hardly ever play anymore. I rarely put it on when driving in the car with Ada and Mariam, or even when I drive to places alone or do the washing up in the evenings. I put it on when I'm in Dalen, because I want to save it. If I listen to it in places other than right here it will be tainted by those new places, and slowly but surely be supplanted.

Over the loudspeaker there's no longer the voice of someone with a Pakistani accent, but that of a Mexican woman who announces that the satellite city is the next station. I only just hear her through the AirPods, and when the boys in front of me get up, I see my reflection in the window. I remain seated, still, and yet again the heat shoots up through my body. It's the longest living image I have of myself – it's so clear, the unclear reflection in the window of the subway train. I'm framed by the dark outside, by the light inside the carriage. My face is in poor resolution. The white hairs, of which there are so many among the stubble of my beard and at my temples, become invisible. I look swarthier. Look more like I used to. The

blue jeans. The white trainers with the red Nike logo. The black anorak, almost like a hoodie. I could be anyone at all in Dalen. Here, I'm nobody. I'm everyone.

I jump up from the seat and make it through the train doors just as they're about to close.

The platform consists of rough, grey flagstones; my feet move in time with the feet in front of me. Rhythmic echoes through the covered station. At the steps leading up from the platform people automatically veer to the left, to cut the corner when they get to the top. I move to the right – a few extra metres to walk, but clear passage. To the left there'll be a queue, chests bumping into backs, rucksacks. I'll make it to the top before them. I don't know whether anyone else here thinks of it like this.

At the top of the stairs I stop and look at the wall in front of me. There used to be the faces of children from all over the world here, a mural that stretched from edge to edge, from flagstone to ceiling, painted in vivid colours. Now there's just ordinary drawings. Of houses, apartment blocks, bicycles, cars, football nets. The satellite city's name is given in one corner. Everything has been painted in soft, pale colours, as if the brushes were soaked in too much water. It feels as if they've taken away what we are, what we were. This could be anywhere – the paintings look like those that hang on the wall in Mariam's kindergarten. I can't quite conjure up her image, she's out of place here, like when you suddenly bump into a colleague outside of work.

'Excuse me,' someone says behind me. I turn. It's the boys who were sitting opposite me on the train. They smile briefly, both of them. I'm in their way, so take a step to one side and let them pass before I follow them out of the station.

The temperature outside reminds me of the valley climate. Cold spots. I hesitate – it takes me a fraction of a second to override the habit of continuing to the left, towards the apartment we once lived in, all three of us. I walk to the right and follow a street that runs beneath some birch trees, their naked branches dripping, droplets drumming on the hood of my anorak. Behind the trees is a block of terraced houses that slopes upwards over seven floors, and then another. I continue on between the blocks, surrounded by them on both sides, a valley in 'the Valley' – Dalen – a river delta full of streams, people spreading out on the narrow paths that lead to each of the blocks. The streets are left fallow. The terraced blocks continue, some of them with small patches of asphalt that link them together, covered in a thin layer of snow, and there's a sign attached to the wall of one of them which states: 'No ball games'.

Eventually, the blocks stand aside. I've reached a main road now and the long, narrow bridge that crosses it, the street lamps at either end turning the snow yellow. The middle of the bridge is in complete darkness. I feel a tingling in my feet. I've reached Morninglight bridge.

It reminds me of the bridge I would have reached had I taken a left out of the subway station. The one my mother and I walked over so many hundreds of times. As we did on the day after she had read *Mio, My Son* to me. I wanted to run across the bridge as if we were riding the horse Miramis – she Jum-Jum, and I Mio.

'Come on,' I said.

'You go ahead and run,' she answered.

'But you're Jum-Jum.'

'I can't run.'

I pestered her. Tugged on her jacket.

'I can't run,' she repeated, loosening my grip.

'But everybody can run.'

As I said this, I realised that although I had seen her hurry, I had never seen her run.

'Why can't you run?' I asked.

'My head,' she replied. 'You run.'

I look about me. The streets are still deserted. A car drives under the bridge, its wheels spinning in the slippery conditions, but it crawls on. I wait until its taillights are completely out of sight. Then I plant one foot against the ground, twisting the tip of my shoe until it has contact with the asphalt, and push off. I sprint. My breath burns in my throat after just a few seconds, my shoes sending the slush up my legs, up my back, and I'm almost in the middle, at the very darkest part – I'm invisible, I'm an idiot, running. I laugh at myself but can't stop running, don't want to. I jog the last few metres over to the other side, gasping for breath. Then I see his apartment block. It's a massive, grey mountain. As if it has risen there and pushed the other blocks aside. A ten-floor mountain, with balconies of reddish-orange plexiglass.

At their prettiest they look like mountain birch in autumn. At their ugliest they just look like cracked sheets of plastic.

There's a large panel of doorbells beside the entrance. Next to them is a plaque with the street address and the logo of the local municipality. A council block. Next to one of the doorbells is my surname. Capital letters behind more cracked plastic. Some of the other doorbells have pieces of tape over them on which surnames are written in ballpoint pen. One

has a name written straight onto the plastic in thick, red marker; one has been burned with a lighter, one of its corners a congealed drop. Some of the doorbells lack names.

I think of the estate agent again, about what she said when I asked who had bought the neighbouring house, which was sold a few days before ours. She didn't know. 'It was my colleague who sold it,' she said, then smiled reassuringly. 'But not just anyone is able to buy in this price range, of course, so I'm sure they're decent people.'

I push on my name. When I lift my finger the button remains stuck, before it slowly moves back up again. I wait. It's quiet. In the distance I can hear something that sounds like a snowplough – in a few minutes it will reach this apartment block. His block. What will be left of him in a week's time? A doorbell without a name, or with another name. No doors I can open in Dalen with my surname on them. No physical traces left.

Is he just going to leave? Like my mother did, just leave.

I press the doorbell again, hold it in for longer this time.

He answers.

'Hello?'

'As-salamu aleykum' I say.

The door gives out a little click.

The light in the stairwell isn't as yellow as it used to be – they installed new fluorescent lights in the ceiling a few years ago. Now everything looks more transparent. Beige walls. Grey linoleum on the floor – it smells of plastic, mixed with the faint whiff of *salan* that hangs in the air. He was carrying a pizza box from a takeaway place down in the city the first time he brought me here. The building was still so new to him that he struggled to find the right key when he let us into the stairwell. In the mailbox was a welcome letter from the municipality. *Guidelines for tenants of council properties*. He fumbled with the keys for the mailbox, too. He didn't want to take the lift – even though I had pressed the button to call it, even though it was three floors up and he was carrying the pizza. I later understood that it was in the lift that the used syringes were most often discarded, but everything else I saw. The handprint on the stairwell wall, the long, thin fingers dragged downwards, brown, like shit. I heard the barking, as if from a dog, before I saw the man with long, stringy hair, his hairy stomach bulging out from beneath a too-small T-shirt. He stared at us as he barked, his eyes nothing but glass. He looked straight through us. Still my father greeted him, greeted him as if he knew him, as if he wanted to make him normal.

The fluorescent lights buzz. I take the lift. No syringes. There are more families with young children here than there used to be. Ten years ago a whole load of two-room

apartments were combined to make larger ones. They'll soon be knocking down the walls between even more of them.

‘Ass-alamu aleykum, wa rahmatullahi, wa barakathu.’

This is something he’s started doing lately, using the entire greeting. As if he wants to greet me properly now, seeing as he soon might not be able to see me so often.

‘Wa aleykum assalam,’ I reply.

‘Everything okay?’ he asks. He’s never spoken much Urdu to me.

‘Yes.’

He puts a hand to my cheek. His palm is soft. It’s many years since he carried anything heavy. He gives me a strict look, smiling a little, too.

‘Oeh, so few clothes?’

He’s standing in the doorway wearing a string vest and shalwar. I point at my anorak.

‘Wind- and waterproof.’

‘You need a hat, too,’ he replies, sighing. ‘Young people – always like that.’

Young people. Neither of us is young anymore. I hang up my jacket and take his paperback from the pocket.

‘Just put it on the table,’ he says in his usual mix of English and Norwegian.

He’s just going to take a quick shower, then he’ll be right with me.

I go into the living room, sit down on the sofa and put the paperback on the coffee table. There’s a plate there with crumbs from what I know will have been slice of toast with strawberry jam. A glass of apple juice stands beside it, almost empty. Behind that lies his phone. The screen is illuminated with a WhatsApp notification, from a family chat group. I take out my own phone and see that I have the same one. It’s the birthday of the daughter of one of my cousins. He’s posted a photo of them in a restaurant, with balloons and cake. Many comments have been made on the photo already.

Happy birthday, I write in English, followed by a cake emoji. Then I add *mashallah* and a heart.

I look at the names of the members of the group, their profile pictures in small icons beside the messages. Sisters, a younger brother, sisters- and brothers-in-law, nieces, nephews. Several of them have been to Europe, and a couple of them live here, but none of them have ever visited my father in this apartment. I haven’t wanted to ask him why he’s never invited any of them. When they video chat on WhatsApp all they see is a poor-resolution image of one of his walls. I’m the only one who sees all the rest.

Instead, he sends money. Always has done. Bricks for the extension to the house over there, contributions to doctor's bills, wedding costs.

I saw the amount the last time I helped him with his online banking. In my head it was always more.

Sometimes I might send something, too, through him. *Qurbani*, mostly, or if he asks whether I can contribute to something else. He doesn't ask often.

On the table next to his phone is the opened letter. It's been there for a long time now. I pick it up and pull it out of the ripped-open envelope. The logo of the local council is in the upper right-hand corner. I know what it says, but I read it anyway.

Notice of termination of rental contract for your current property.

They write that fighting childhood poverty and contributing to good, safe living conditions for children is a political priority. That all remaining two-room apartments in the block will be converted into three- and four-room apartments.

This means that residents without children will be relocated to other units within the municipality. In relocating these residents, an individual assessment has been made to ensure an appropriate living situation for the person in question. You will be relocated to:

A street address is given in a different font than that of the rest of the letter. Somewhere outside Dalen. Another apartment block with beige wall panelling, narrower than his, a few floors lower – I Googled the address the first time he showed me the letter. By then it was already many weeks since he'd received it.

'Huh? What kind of crap is this?' I asked as I scanned the lines. I sounded like my mother.

He didn't respond.

'You've lived here for what, twenty years? And now they're going to send you to some place in the city you've never lived before?'

'I'm not going to live at that other place,' he said. He was so blunt that it irritated me. How can you just say that, I thought. How can you just think that somebody will sort this out for you, not care that the deadline for lodging a complaint has passed.

'You should have shown me this sooner,' I said to him. 'Now it'll be hard to complain.' I paused for a moment. 'I can call the housing office tomorrow.'

'You don't need to,' he said in English.

'Why not?' I looked at him. 'They can't just send you off to…'

‘You don’t need to,’ he repeated. ‘I’m not going to stay here in Nar-vey. I’m moving to Pakistan.’

The next week he went to a travel agency down in the city and booked a one-way ticket to Lahore.

His plan is to come back some time around May each year and stay for the summer – it’s too hot in Pakistan then, and he’ll be able to visit us. Or at least, that’s what he says.

I set the letter on my knees. Take out my phone again and turn on the camera, then hold it over the name of the caseworker and tap the round button. Then I return the letter to the envelope, and the envelope to the table.

I look around. He doesn’t seem to have packed very much. There are two cardboard boxes set next to one of the living room walls, but both are empty. On the wall above them I see myself in an A4-sized photograph. I’m fifteen years old, still brown after the summer, a chain my father bought in Pakistan hanging over my grey sweater, thin and made of gold, a little medallion featuring scripture from the Koran dangling from it. On my head I’m wearing a black cap with the Orlando Magic logo.

The TV is on, but I’ve hardly noticed it. He always has it on. Three men are sitting on a panel on a Pakistani news channel, discussing something. He used to watch the Norwegian news, too, but now it’s only me who tells him about what’s happening in Norway. He only ever watches the news to do with Pakistan. As if he’s specialising, stepping up his training – nobody will know more about Pakistan than he does. I lower the volume a few notches. Hear the water hitting the floor in the bathroom. He hacks – long, gurgling hacks, as if he’s coughing up mucus from way down in his diaphragm. Like the news channels, this is just another of the apartment’s familiar sounds.

I get up from the sofa, take two steps, and stand in the middle of the living room. Take two steps more and open the door to his bedroom. A bed. A TV in there, too. The curtain rail fell down long ago, so he’s stapled the curtains to the window frame. I told him I could hang a new one for him, but he said that it was fine as it was, he always kept the curtains drawn anyway. There’s a cardboard box in here, too. Also empty. A pile of boxes that are still flat-packed stands against the wall. A green suitcase lies on the floor – that’s where his clothes will go, his toiletries. All the rest, the little that doesn’t end up in the rubbish, will soon be put into a container that will travel by sea back the way he came, while he takes a plane across. This time he won’t meet the shepherd in Anatolia, the one he told me about when I was small.

‘We’re in the middle of nowhere. The bus stops. The whole road is full of sheep. Full! The driver beeps his horn. Many times. But the sheep just stand there. People start getting

impatient. The driver gets out, and after a while a shepherd comes. They talk. The driver gets back on the bus. He goes from person to person, asking us for tobacco. He gets as many as three packs of cigarettes. When he reaches us, I ask: "Why?" The driver points at the sheep.'

'Goats like tobacco. Maybe sheep do, too,' my mother said. My father shook his head and clucked his tongue.

'No. After he gets the cigarettes, the shepherd puts one in his mouth and the rest of the packets in his pocket. Then he lights the cigarette, shouts something or other, and all the sheep start to walk out of the road.'

I can't remember ever having seen him laugh so loudly or so long at anything else.

He told me the same story many years later. When he came to why the shepherd wanted the tobacco, he gave me a questioning look.

'As payment to herd away the sheep, a kind of toll,' I said.

He smiled – satisfied, but surprised. As if he hadn't realised that his stories are also mine.

I give the empty cardboard box in the bedroom a gentle kick. Go back into the living room. What's he taking with him? The photograph of me? The television? The microwave full of *salan* flecks that currently stands in the kitchen?

'That's it?' the woman I spoke to at the dispatch office said when I called a few days ago to estimate the volume. 'Then I think it's better that you buy into someone else's container, rather than having your own. What you have won't even fill a fifth of a container.'

What was I supposed to say to that?

He came here with more than the suitcase, but not much more.

I stand there in the middle of the living room. The rooms are so tiny. The apartment is so small. I can stretch out my arms and almost touch the wall on one side and the balcony door on the other. I think about Mariam, how she often comes running in here and trawls the apartment as if for the first time. In just a few seconds she covers every square metre, then gives Ada and me a look that says: 'Oh yeah, that was all of it.'

The air is heavy, stagnant. I take a few steps and pull the balcony door aside. A cool breeze pushes past me and into the apartment. I step out onto the balcony. There's melted snow on the floor; I walk where the snowflakes are yet to fall, the concrete cold against the soles of my feet. I inch past the satellite dish that still occupies the best place on the balcony. Its cable has been pulled out – it's some years since he stopped using it, he has a Dreambox

now. IPTV. In the summer, he sometimes uses the satellite dish as a laundry rack for hanging wet towels out to dry.

In front of me are apartment blocks; the same to the left. To the right is the flank of the valley, stretching upwards. Forest and apartment blocks, almost invisible in the dark, the snow on the treetops and the roofs offering only a vague hint of them. The windows appear to float freely, shining.

In Pakistan, a wedding lasts three days. And before that the process will have gone on for weeks. Rishta, dholki, mehndi, the dhol that plays while people dance bhangra with their fingers in the air, banknotes that are thrown at the groom, niqah, the bride and groom who say qubool three times, baraat, dowries, doors that are blocked to the groom's family because in order to enter a sum of money or a song is required, huge buffets, the bride's family who steal one of the groom's shoes, more money to get it back, rukhsati, when the bride leaves the premises with a Koran over her head, and she cries, and her family cries because she goes home with her husband's family, walima, the last day.

In Norway it's all engagement rings and stag and hen parties. There's the priest at the church, the bride dressed in white, bridesmaids all wearing the same dress. There's rice thrown at the bride and groom, a three course dinner, cutlery tapped against glasses, speeches made, the bride and groom dancing the waltz.

My mother and father did neither of these things. They were married at the courthouse, with my sisters, my grandparents and a Pakistani friend of my father's and his Norwegian wife as the only guests. Then they ate dinner at an Italian restaurant. It makes sense that they moved to the satellite city. A place that hadn't existed before: in the city, and yet not entirely in the city. Created by Gerhardsen's iron will and OBOS's diggers, who connected the city developments and the landscape in the east, the forests and fields. They felled trees, removed livestock, drove over potatoes and oats and pressed everything into hard blocks. The phrase 'satellite city' made people happy, workers who moved from cramped, rundown inner-city flats to airy apartments with indoor toilets and separate laundry rooms, people who came to the city from around the country and were able live in a reasonably priced property, who leaned out of their windows on the eighth floor and shouted to their kids in dialects from Finnmark and Hordaland.

When my mother and father moved in the satellite city was still young, growing, the stairwell doors thrown open to the world – to people like my father. Those who had moved into the same inner-city flats the workers had left and made the same move to the satellite city, filling the stairwells with shouts in Punjabi and Turkish. My mother often stood at the window and looked at the high-rise block opposite ours as she pointed at different apartments. I would stand on tiptoe, in order to properly see.

'On the top floor lives a family who fled Iran. Him down there, in the bottommost corner, he claims he was a commander with the Tamil Tigers. The people who live there, in

the middle, they're Kurds, if I'm not mistaken.' On countless nights I looked out of the window before going to bed, when their ceiling lamps shone through the thin curtains, and stared straight at the massive moustache of Abdullah Öcalan in the huge picture they had hung on the wall.

I remember her face, the roll of the eyes, her sneer when she held up a newspaper to me and showed me a photograph of a politician. I don't know who it was, but he was mature and wore glasses, and the article was about something to do with the cramped and poor living conditions for immigrants in the satellite city. Triumphant, she had said: 'You know, *he's* the one who comes from humble origins. Here we have the whole world.'

I remember how proud I was, of us who had everything.

Maybe I'm reading too much into it. Their reasons for moving to Dalen were likely just as much to do with the fact that it was all they could afford.

I don't know how my father saw the place during those first years. His relationship to the area stretched from the apartment block we lived in and the couple-of-hundred-metres down to the shared garage, where he parked his white delivery van. Six days a week he would walk that road at five-thirty in the morning, so he could stop by the wholesaler and pick out cucumbers, apples, cabbages – whatever was on offer or in season and which he could sell in the greengrocer's he ran in another part of the city. At nine in the evening he would walk back the same way, after I was asleep. Only on Saturdays was I awake when he came home, because on Saturdays the shop shut at six. I would stand on the narrow windowsill in my pyjamas while my mother stood behind me and kept hold of me, her hands reassuring on my hips as I stared at the gap between the block opposite us and the forest next to it. The low sun and long shadows in the summer – I was so close to the window that I could hear the twittering of birds and humming of grasshoppers, saw the utter darkness in winter when the gap became all that existed, until the figure of my father would appear without warning, crunching steps in the snow, his face tilted up towards my silhouette, his breath visible on the frosty air. Carrier bags in his hands, knotted and blue, no logo, bags from immigrant-run groceries that always contained the same: two grilled chickens in aluminium foil, a loaf of white bread and a bar of chocolate for me. I got to eat a few bites of the chicken with a slice of the bread, to dip it in the golden-orange drops of oil that ran from the chicken and down onto the plate. And the chocolate – I would wolf it down before my mother forced me to brush my teeth and go to bed. On Sundays he slept. I would stand in the doorway, see his face which lay in profile on the pillow, the duvet pulled all the way up to his ear. Hear the heavy snoring, as if it were a giant who lay resting there, smelled the odour of sleep that filled the

room while my mother whispered that I had to leave him be. Later in the morning he would get up, sit in his armchair in the living room and read the newspaper until lunch. My mother would chop iceberg lettuce, cucumber and tomato and sprinkle sweetcorn over it, before ripping what was left of the chicken into pieces and mixing it all together. She'd scoop great spoonfuls of sour cream onto her plate. My father would too, along with drops of Tabasco sauce. I would take neither.

It doesn't really matter what he thinks of this place now.

When my mother sold our old apartment in Dalen, she told us that the family who bought it had said we didn't need to clean it – they were going to completely renovate it anyway.

I really didn't understand what was so wrong with it.

Now I feel ashamed that we didn't leave something nicer behind.

When I moved into my student accommodation, the room contained a pile of things that had been left behind by a girl who'd had to move out in a hurry. The Foundation for Student Life let me keep what I wanted from it – they were just happy to not have to clear out the room themselves, and I was happy to have found a place to live. There was a bed, a chest of drawers, a tall wardrobe, a standard lamp, a small dining table that also acted as a nightstand. Curtains that were open, white, the same colour as most of the furniture. On the windowsill were two scented candles on a small dish, one vanilla, one apple and cinnamon. The type of scented candles that cost twenty kroner at IKEA. I can still smell them, the sense of calm they provided. I remember how smooth the wall was against my palm, how my hand slid across it without resistance, didn't bump along it as it had along the rough textured wallpaper in Dalen. How the birch trees swayed slightly down on the ground outside the window, the view across the city, the fjord.

All I took with me was my clothes, bedding and the Minar-e-Pakistan. I hung my clothes in the wardrobe, set the Minar-e-Pakistan on the windowsill and made the bed with the bedding with its brown, faded flower pattern. I sat on the bed and leaned back against the wall. It was a nice room, which felt like it was mine. Even if the Minar-e-Pakistan blocked a little of the view, and the old textile smell from the bedding dampened the scent of vanilla, apple and cinnamon.

A week after Ada and I moved into our house, when the boxes were all finally unpacked, the newspaper removed from around glasses and cups and the new plants set in

their pots, we sat on the sofa. Her head leant against my shoulder, her hair across my throat and chest, my hand on her knee, our feet on the coffee table. Mariam took unsteady steps across the new parquet floor and studied the stack of empty boxes, a mountain, perhaps considering whether she was brave enough to climb it. Ada looked at me and said: ‘Just look at what we’ve achieved.’ She kissed me on the cheek, a rasping sound from my stubble against her lips. Then she gave me a look that said we could relax now, and I smiled at her, as if at myself, and pretended that I was completely at ease.

When I think of those earliest years in Dalen, we have money. Or at least I don't remember us wanting for anything.

My mother hasn't worked for as long as I've been alive. A few years after she had my sister, when she was alone, the pains began. Lightning jolts that shot from her wrists and up into her neck. Intense headaches that settled across her forehead and refused to loosen their grasp for several days. Exhaustion. Vomiting.

'The price of being a single mother,' the first doctor said.

'You're probably just worn out, try to relax a little,' said the next.

'But who else is going to make sure my daughter has something to eat?' she asked. The doctor didn't answer.

'Migraines,' said the next doctor, and gave her painkillers.

'Tendinitis,' said the next, and gave her stronger painkillers.

'Tense muscles in your neck,' said the next, and told her to see a physiotherapist.

'Are you going to pay for it? Do know how much it costs?' she asked. The doctor didn't answer.

The last doctor was a woman. She listened to what my mother had to say, nodding attentively, and said:

'Everything you're describing fits a diagnosis of fibromyalgia.'

Fibromyalgia – it was a strange word, an illness that isn't even a proper illness, it's a collection of symptoms. She was healthy, but full of signs that she wasn't. The symptoms were there all the time, mostly invisible, kept in check because she had learned what she mustn't do. *Don't carry anything heavy. Don't become too out of breath. Don't get too stressed out.*

I remember the days in the dark room, her voice that came from in there. My name. Faint and whispered through the closed door. I would open it a crack and see her lying there, her head just visible above the duvet. The yellow bucket beside the bed. The smell of vomit. I always stayed standing in the doorway, never went in. The tiny gleam of light made her turn her head, her voice far away: 'I'm staying in bed with a bad head today.'

I didn't need to hear any more. I made my own sandwiches. Walked silently when I passed her room. Waited.

It wasn't just the doctors who didn't understand.

One day, when I was at kindergarten, she came hurrying through the gate. I was sitting on one of the swings but she didn't come over, just waved to me before she hurried on. Thirty seconds later she came out with my things, my rain jacket hanging over her shoulder. The zip on my little bag was open, and she closed it as she walked.

'Come on,' she waved, walking straight towards the gate. I wanted to keep swinging. I wanted her to look at me, to see the speed with which I had learned to swing back and forth. So high that I lay flat in the air, my back parallel to the ground, before the swing dropped down and arced up on the other side, me with my face down and my belly in line with the ground and that feeling of plunging, rushing towards the sand below me, only to swing up again at the last moment.

She shouted again, telling me to come. I shouted back that she had to come and see. Her steps were long and quick, her voice hissing.

'Come here. Now.'

I stood on the swing. Rose up, then plunged back down.

'Look!'

I moved one leg to stand with my feet apart, one on each side of the tyre.

'Yes, wow,' she said. She smiled for a second. 'Now come on.'

But I wanted to go even higher, even faster. I bent my knees, bracing myself against the tyre.

The swing was suddenly stock still. She had grabbed one of the chains from which the old tyre was suspended, the pendulum motion rippling through her arm. I was cast forward and landed in the sand. One of the kindergarten assistants came running, but my mother waved her away, smiling: 'It's okay.' She crouched down and brushed the sand from my clothes. 'Now come on, up you get.'

On the way home I had to run to keep up with her.

'Why are you walking so fast?' I asked.

'An appointment with an office,' she replied, speaking quickly and mostly to herself. 'They're so peculiar, you have to call exactly when they tell you to. Just when the kindergarten is closing and I'm supposed to be making dinner.'

She hurried up the stairs and asked me to take off my coat while she put the telephone receiver between her chin and shoulder and looked up the number in the notebook next to the phone. She stood there like that for a long time, straight-backed, a ballpoint pen between her first two fingers.

'Yes, hello, I was told to call…'

‘No, he asked me to call…’

‘But that’s…’

‘Look, I have kids to take care of, dinner to cook. I can’t just keep on…’

‘Okay. Bye.’

She hung up. Put her hands on her hips and looked at me. ‘They say he’s left for the day already. Couldn’t wait. They want *me* to be precise to the millimetre, but he couldn’t wait a couple of minutes? I mean… You’ll have to try again at the same time tomorrow, they said. Is it really so hard for *him* to call *me*?’

I didn’t understand.

‘We’re having fish fingers today,’ she said.

The next day she was in bed with a bad head again.

There were victories, too. Like when a caseworker at the social security office admitted a mistake and acknowledged just how inflexible the system was. Or when another praised her and said: ‘You really do have a keep-on-hanging-in-there attitude, don’t you?’ But no major breakthroughs.

Some of the victories, however, were more significant. I remember her standing in the middle of the living room with a letter in her hands, exclaiming: ‘The people at the office, they’ve finally listened to me!’ I remember it because it was the first time she smiled as she said *the office*. While I ate slices of bread and jam, she said the words *permanent disability benefit*.

‘What does that mean?’ I asked.

‘That I won’t have to bug the office so much to get money.’

That sounded good.

‘They ought to backdate my payments for all the time I’ve spent on this,’ she said. ‘I told them, but oh no, I should be satisfied with what I have, they said.’

The next day, when my father came home with the grilled chicken, the loaf of bread and the bar of chocolate and I was still up, he wanted to order pizza. To celebrate the permanent disability benefit.

‘But we have the chicken,’ she protested.

‘I know, I know.’

‘And I haven’t been given any more money,’ she continued. But she smiled weakly when she added: ‘Anyway, the pizza will take at least an hour, and by then it’ll be late.’

‘I know, I know,’ he repeated, then turned his eyes on me.

I stood there, eating the bar of chocolate. Looked at him, then at my mother.

‘He can stay up a little longer,’ he said.

She didn’t reply, just tilted her head ever so slightly in the direction of the hallway. It was all I needed. I ran out there, lifted the seat of the little bench beside the telephone and peered down into the cavity, which smelled like the library. Two fat telephone books. And the glossy leaflets we otherwise only used on New Year’s Eve. MacAndrew’s Pizza. I ran back into the living room but didn’t want to let them hold the leaflet – they had to stand and look over my shoulder as I read it letter by letter. Then I went back to the telephone with my mother and heard her say the number of the pizza, the one with beef, onion and pepper, a one-

and-a-half litre bottle of cola, the name of our street and the number on the stairwell, which floor we lived on.

'Then we'll wait, that's fine,' she said.

I sat on the sofa and waited. My eyelids were heavy, causing the images on the TV to be slowly dragged outwards, two women in colourful sequined blazers singing into microphones, their heads bobbing in and out of the narrow image. I looked at my parents, each sitting in their own armchair, ordinary, mundane. She was half watching the TV, half focused on patching the knees of my tracksuit bottoms. He wasn't paying attention at all, just sat hidden behind the *Aftenposten*.

The sound of the intercom got me to my feet. I ran out into the hallway, jumped up at the receiver and got a good enough grip on it that I managed to knock it off the hook. It dangled from its coiled cable while a voice said: 'MacAndrews Pizza'.

Downstairs, the door opened and closed. Calm footsteps at the very bottom of the stairs. Calm footsteps behind me. My father set a hand on my shoulder.

'First floor now,' he said. Our hallway shone out into the grey, stone-clad stairwell like a torch. We listened for the footsteps together, his fingers gently massaging me.

There was the smell of yeast and melted cheese. When the pizza delivery boy pulled the box out of the heatproof bag the smell became even stronger, irresistible, and I reached out a hand to grab the pizza. The pizza delivery boy handed me the bag containing the bottle of cola. My father opened his wallet, the brown leather worn from being folded. He leafed through it, but stopped between two fifties. I ran into the living room with the cola, put it down so I would have both hands free and ran back to the door, holding out my hand for the pizza again. They laughed at me, both of them.

I ate seven slices of pizza and drank two glasses of cola. 'You're going to get a stomach ache,' my mother said.

I did. I was sent to bed, but I couldn't sleep. My belly bulged, cramps shooting through it in all directions. I lay on my back, breathing heavily, panting and burping.

He takes forever in the shower. I look at the cardboard boxes against the wall, wanting to get started with the packing, but probably ought to wait for him. Who knows, maybe he has a plan as to what should be packed, a carefully prepared inventory.

Finally he opens the bathroom door. Just half way, to let out the steam before he shaves. In the living room it smells of shampoo, and in the long mirror in the hallway right in front of the bathroom I can see him in there, along with the cream wall with its exposed pipes reaching up towards the ceiling. We had those kinds of pipes in the bathroom, too – ones that ran along the wall on top of the flowered wallpaper that was worn at the joints, the petals torn to pieces. I could touch the pipes while I sat on the toilet, but had to lean so far down that I almost tipped over. I used to feel the cold pipe first – the cold came immediately, and I'd withdraw my hand. Wait a little. Put my hand on the hot pipe. It would take a few seconds before I felt the heat and I'd withdraw my hand again. I'd dangle my legs. Put my hand on both pipes at the same time. It was just big enough, fingertips on the ice-cold metal, palm on the burning hot. One second. Two seconds.

He's still wearing his shalwar, but has exchanged the string vest for a flannel shirt. His thin hair is combed back, and his chappals slap against his heels as he walks past me and over to the kitchen cabinets. Slowly – not as if he's tired, just calm, as if nothing that has taken place over the past twenty-five years has meant that he needs to hurry. It's so long ago now that it's hard for me to imagine that he used to be quicker. He smiles as he takes out a half full bag of Twist chocolates, tips the contents into a bowl and sets it on the coffee table in front of me. These are the sweets he always has ready if Mariam comes to visit. There won't be any left for her. Soon he won't see her for more than a couple of months of the year anyway. When we visit him together he's always just as happy, almost surprised, every time he receives a quiet 'wa aleykum assalam' in reply when he greets her. Maybe he thought I wouldn't teach her such things. In much the same way, Mariam is almost surprised each time he says: 'Ekh second,' goes over to the kitchen and pulls out the bag of Twist. She smiles, but doesn't dare go across to him, waits until he comes with the bowl. He asks her a few questions about kindergarten and she replies between mouthfuls, mentioning names like Oliver and Maja, and he nods as if he knows them, too. She might tell him about the tracks in the snow they discovered the last time they went on a walk through the forest. Maybe it was just a cat, but it *could* have been a lynx, too. He continues to smile and nod but he's already withdrawn, as if into himself. As if Mariam dissolves, becoming no more than a low-

resolution mass of lip-smacking sounds, and his gaze is drawn towards one of us adults, or to the TV and the news.

He sits down on the sofa and picks up the paperback I've put on the table. Flicks through a few pages before he sets it back down. Turns his gaze to the TV. Still the same panel debate. The camera zooms in on one of the men, who holds up a finger as a warning.

'Look at those people…' he sighs. 'Pakistan is so lucky to have Imran Khan as prime minister now.'

He looks at me. I nod.

'Imran Khan has the right… mentality. He has a European understanding and a Pakistani understanding. And he isn't corrupt.'

I eat another chocolate. Look at him. He continues to shake his head at what the panel participants are saying. Engrossed. As if the Pakistan he sees on TV is closer to the real Pakistan than the Pakistan that's waiting for him and his moving boxes. For many years now, Pakistan has mostly been just sounds and images on a screen. He's got used to it, is maybe even happy that that's how it is. If he really wants to move, why has he waited so long?

Who knows what he wants.

I get up and go over to one of the boxes.

'What do you want putting in here?' I ask.

'Well,' he replies.

'Pictures?'

He looks up at me.

'Okay.'

I take the photograph of myself down from the wall; it leaves behind a pale rectangle. I stand it on its edge in the box. On the TV bench there's a small photo of him, maybe five by seven centimetres in size. I go over to it, blocking the view of the TV, but whatever. In the photo he's young, his hair hanging thickly down to his shoulders. He's leaning against a wall wearing bellbottoms, a suede jacket and an unbuttoned shirt with a huge collar. He's looking straight into the camera. Smiling faintly. Posing. This is how he wants to be seen, and I get it. He looks good.

'Can I have this?' I ask.

His grey-black brows pinch together.

'It doesn't matter,' I say. I take my phone from my trouser pocket and take a photo of the photo. The screen flashes quickly, and he becomes a tiny rectangle down in one corner before he disappears.

The last picture he has hanging on the wall is the largest. It's a portrait of a man with brownish grey skin, clean-cut features and a karakul on his head. The background was once black but is now faded, grey, in some places almost beige. The man has kept an eye on me from when I was born. He hung on the wall in the apartment we all lived in together, and then he hung on the wall here.

Once, when I was five or six years old, my father pointed to the picture and asked me:

'What's his name?'

'I don't know,' I answered.

'Come on. Guess. I'll give you twenty kroner – no, fifty kroner – if you guess right.'

Fifty kroner was an entire banknote. Never in my life had I had my own banknote.

'So think,' he said, smiling.

I thought. There wasn't anything to think about. I didn't know.

'I've told you once before.' He was still smiling, but not as much. He stared at me, waiting, and I didn't understand. The prize was probably offered because he thought I didn't know the answer, but he was looking at me as if I should.

'I don't know,' I repeated.

He smacked his lips and shook his head.

'Try. I've told you once before.'

I couldn't remember.

'Muhammad,' I mumbled. It was the only thing that occurred to me.

'Oh, ho, ho,' he exclaimed, slapping a hand against his thigh. 'Very close.' He leaned forward. 'Muhammad…'

I didn't have anything more.

'Muhammad Ali Jinnah,' he said finally. 'Qaid-e-Azam. Founder of Pakistan.'

I nodded. Now I was the one who looked at him, waiting. I deserved a prize for having been so close. Ten kroner, at least.

He gave me nothing.

I take down the picture – this one leaves behind a faded rectangle, too. A steel wire hangs loosely across the back of the frame. A crooked screw remains in the wall. It looks as if I could screw it out with my fingers. I take hold of it.

'Just leave it,' he says.

I turn the screw.

'Oeh, just leave it!'

He looks irritated, and I feel the same. At his tone – at the fact that it is this kind of thing, a loose screw in the wall, that he wants to leave behind.

'Let the local council do it,' he says, shaking his head. 'I'm tired of them. So many rules. Can't do this, can't do that.'

I don't know what he's complaining about. He was allowed to put up his satellite dish on the balcony, even though the council prohibited 'permanent installations', thought it would appear 'unattractive', and considered the ordinary selection of terrestrial channels 'satisfactory for most residents'. He was allowed, not because my mother cared about satellite TV, but most likely because she cared about him, and about the local council being so inflexible. She went over there and told them that the least they could do after having placed a man with a minor child who came over for regular visits in a block full of social cases was to let the man watch TV programmes from the country he grew up in. He received a letter telling him that he could put up a satellite dish as long as it was free-standing and didn't 'encroach on the building's structure in any way'.

What else has the municipality stopped him from doing? Buying his own apartment? Instead of renting he could have applied for a loan from the Norwegian State Housing Bank years ago when the property prices were lower, when he was younger and had enough years left to live that the bank would have thought him able to pay it off. He could have had that. Back then I was too young to really understand the system, and my mother was long gone, but he could have done it himself. The apartment would have been paid off by now. He could have sold it. Left it behind as an inheritance. He could have made choices. He could have done something.

I'm breathing heavily, and know that he can hear it.

'Okay, fine,' I say, letting go of the screw. He says nothing.

I lift the picture from the floor.

'Muhammad Ali Jinnah,' I say out loud, thinking about what I didn't know years ago. What I know now. 'You owe me fifty kroner.'

He gives me a questioning look.

'I'm just kidding,' I say.

He looks at the picture.

'Just think…' he starts, and I know where he's going with this. He pauses, and runs a hand through his hair. It slips quickly through it, like the hand of someone who's used to having lots of hair, used to feeling the strands twist through his fingers.

‘You know, it’s the soul of the entire Indian sub-continent…’ He makes a fist at the top of his chest and pulls his hand away, as if he’s hauling out his insides. ‘It will be free.’

The country once freed itself from Pangea and drifted across the sea, he says. When it finally hit land again, it nestled between the sea in the south, the Himalayas, Karakorum and the Hindu Kush in the north, the desert in the west and the mangrove forest in the east. Just think of everyone throughout history who went there but was thrown out in the end. Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, the Arabs, the Persians, the Portuguese, Dutch, British.

It also sounds a bit like they were constantly subjected to the rule of others.

He’s got to the liberation from the British now, the breaking away from the world’s greatest empire, when Muhammad Ali Jinnah saved us from the dominance of both the British and the Hindus. His voice drops in volume, becomes deeper.

‘Just think, Jinnah had tuberculosis during the entire battle for freedom. Very sick. He knew he would soon die. But he didn’t break.’

Jinnah didn’t let the British or the Hindus see the weakness in him. He continued to fight for a separate Muslim state while millions of people were transported in boats to the fronts in Europe, North Africa and Asia, to fight in the Queen’s name. Their resources and bodies tipped the fortunes of war in favour of the British, and when the war was over and the British sank exhausted to their knees, Jinnah took a last deep breath and stayed standing. He didn’t exhale again until he had acquired us our country.

This is where he wants to get to – to August 1947. When Mountbatten and the British are drinking their last cups of tea with rich cow’s milk in Shimla, Kolkata and Karachi, and the subcontinent is divided into three – Pakistan in the west and east, India in the middle. When too many forces are unleashed all at once, and everything ruptures in deep furrows. Dada and Dadi were on the wrong side of one of these rifts, in India. Ash and dust covered their feet and swirled up in small clouds with every step they took. They carried sheets and duvet covers they had ripped from the beds in haste and bound into bundles, which hung from their shoulders by thin straps. In them were a few items of clothing, a little water, saucepans, a paraffin lamp, a small can of oil, a bag of rice, a handful of lentils, a little flour, some onions, a few dried spices, a knife and a Koran. Beside them walked my two oldest aunts, just four or five years old, and when they could walk no further Dada carried them on his arm for as long as he could. My father wasn’t even a year old, constantly on Dadi’s arm. She held him close to her body, his face hidden by a dupatta to shield him from the dust and dampen the noise. He’d been crying since they left home. He howled on the buffalo cart they took, where they sat squeezed against one another with a dozen or so other people on the flatbed. He

wasn't lulled to sleep by the constant shaking of the stiff wheels against the dirt road, was still crying when they had to get out of the cart and continue on foot because conditions on the road up ahead were poor and the wheels constantly got stuck.

At first they had been unsure whether they would go, torn between Jinnah's promises of what awaited them in the new country and the life they had where they were. A house. A job Dada was proud of on the railway, the most well-run transport system in the country. Designed by the British and made by Indian workers, in order to be able to transport valuable resources out of the country as efficiently as possible. The railway wasn't going to disappear even if the British did. It was stable, safe. But then Dadi had staggered in and said that her cousin, with her own eyes, had seen a neighbourhood just kilometres away from theirs set on fire. A few days later Dada heard about a similar incident, now even closer, along with detailed descriptions of what had happened to the men and women who hadn't managed to flee in time.

Dada had insisted that they take the train to the new Pakistan. It was faster, and the faster they got there, the safer they would be. But Dadi had heard several rumours. 'The train is the most dangerous of all,' she said, and refused to set a foot on board.

They shuffled through the dust, just a few kilometres remaining until they reached the new country. Surrounded by fields that were flat and endless, interrupted only by neem trees and small villages with clay houses. On the horizon they saw columns of black smoke rising, like charred tree trunks reaching for the sky from the green fields. The path they walked on cut a straight line between the fields, straight towards the columns. There was no other way. As they approached the smoke the burning, hot air became greyer; the leaves of the neem trees that lined the road were covered in ash. They squeezed their eyes shut, but still they stung. My aunts clung to Dadi and Dada. My father cried more loudly. The smoke thickened around them, they could see no more of the path than just a few metres up ahead, until the sun shone through the tiny gaps in the smoke for just a moment. The ground before them glinted with metal. It was train tracks.

Hesitant, they walked on. Then they stopped. They could hear voices a short distance away, aggressive, triumphant. My father continued to cry. The voices came closer; the smoke that surrounded them smelled of burnt hair. Dadi stuffed her dupatta into my father's mouth and grabbed one of my aunts, while Dada grabbed the other. They ran – didn't know where, just ran and tried to make their footsteps silent, to force the bundles containing the saucepans not to rattle, ran through clouds of ash and dust. When they stopped, gasping for breath, they were standing far out in a field. The earth was cracked, ruptured, green stalks sticking up all

the way to their knees. The dust around them settled. They saw it now – the outline of the train in the smoke, and the crowd of men that poured out of it, bearing knives and torches.

They lay down among the low plants. My father continued to cry. Dadi pressed his face to her chest. Dada held his arms over my aunts and repeated the surahs al-Falaq and an-Nas. Until the men finally disappeared into the smoke again.

They got to their feet and continued diagonally across the fields without knowing where they were going, tramping across the dry earth, looking about them, every tiny patch of clothing and skin covered in ash and dust.

'Then comes the wind,' he says. He exhales, for a long time, as if he has seven summers in his body.

'A lovely, warm wind. It's unbelievable, but on my parents' name, I remember what it felt like.'

The wind cleared the air. Their skin. They could breathe. See. My father thrashed his arms about, wanting to get out from under the dupatta. Wide-eyed, he looked at the green leaves on the trees. The blue sky. At all the dirt, all that had burned, that had been blown away for the new, pure country, for Pakistan. He had stopped crying.

I wonder how much ash is still behind his eyes.

I say what I usually say.

'Just think if you'd taken the train…'

He nods, slowly.

'Yes, just think,' he replies. Then he mumbles: 'Alhamidulilah.'

I think about how my mother would have responded to such a question.

Well everyone would have died, and you would never have been born, would you?

'Can I have this picture?' I ask him, placing my hands around the top of the frame, my fingers atop Jinnah's karakul.

'Do you want it?'

'Yes.'

'It's a bit old. I can buy you a new one in Pakistan and bring it here.'

'No, this one is good.'

He looks at me, a corner of his mouth drawing upwards.

'Of course, just take it.'

I often don't know what he expects of me.

I take Jinnah out into the hallway and set him beside my shoes and jacket before I return to the sofa. My father leans back. He looks satisfied, as if we've finished packing

already. He holds the bowl of Twist chocolates out to me, and I take the last one. Banana flavour.

‘I’ll order pisa,’ he says as he sets the empty bowl on the table. He still can’t say it properly. He’ll never learn how.

I check my watch. I need to eat.

‘Okay,’ I reply. I take the menu from the shelf beneath the coffee table and read out the number of the pizza place while he types it into his phone. I smile at him, at how far away from him he holds the phone, the way he has to stretch out his arm to its full length to tap in the numbers with his index finger.

‘Hello. A number nine. Tandoori pisa. For pick-up.’

[End of chapter]

