



Lahore, Pakistan – 2012 – Funeral

THE FUNERAL LOOKS LIKE IT WILL BE SURPRISINGLY WELL attended. Zamir sits in the Lahore house, struggling with the speech he has to give. Mika cannot attend at short notice, and she points out that she saw their father just a few days before, when he was still alive; she does not think he would be that concerned whether she turns up now he is dead. She will not, she says, go out of her way for him. He supposes that she has made a private vow not to let her father's wayward actions disrupt her life, not to let him get away with it, whatever it is, even on this day of all days, the day that he will be wrapped and scented and go into the ground.

'Say he died in Paris,' Mika tells him on the phone. 'He'd have preferred to have died in Paris.'

'But that's not what happened,' protests Zamir. 'It's not the truth. And what I really wanted to say was—'

'No one cares about the truth,' interrupts Mika, with the

directness reserved for siblings and spouses. Her voice echoes oddly over the long-distance line, so it seems as though she is interrupting herself as well as him, and she pauses between sentences, allowing herself to finish, before she carries on. ‘He certainly didn’t. He cared about telling a good story. A ripping yarn.’ And then she adds, ‘And say it was a heart attack. It’s more romantic, isn’t it? A heart breaking in Paris. A bit more poetic than a stroke in a budget hotel on the south-west coast.’

‘Any other tips?’ he asks, with heavy sarcasm. He is beginning to think that Mika is feeling guilty for her absence. Why else would she bother him so much on the actual day, interfering with the arrangements, nagging him about his speech; perhaps by making him busy at the funeral, she feels busy and involved herself, privately, if not publicly. When she first called him that morning, he was sure she had been crying; her voice had sounded hoarse, and she had defensively blamed it on a cold before he had even thought to comment on it.

‘Just one more,’ says Mika promptly, as though she had been waiting to be asked. ‘Shakespeare’s Sonnet Twenty-Nine. If you can’t think of anything else. I think it might have amused him, a little.’

When she finally hangs up, he looks at the blank page in front of him, and the pen in his hand. He hears his toddler, Boo, playing in the next room. The children’s DVD he picked out for Boo to watch has an irritating, high-pitched arrangement of classical music; it sounds electronic and plucked on gut, all at once. He has no idea what he is meant to write. Just write the truth, he tells himself. Just write anything. He makes a hesitant start. My father’s name was . . . my father’s name was . . . Well, the truth is that he had many names. He made his home in many places. He casually abandoned careers, families, wives. He made and lost fortunes carelessly. He was charming, and he was liked, but he wasn’t always admired, or envied. His decline was

frightening. He never raised his hand in anger, never felt grief, never told us that he loved us. He got away with it all, right until the end. And he is remembered, with anger, and grief. And love. Always love. It turns out that he is still getting away with it, even now.

‘Abbu, can you fix it?’ calls Boo from the doorway in his mother’s Punjabi, his chunky legs very brown against white linen shorts. Zamir doesn’t register what has been said at first – his own Punjabi isn’t very good, he is still learning – and so his son repeats himself impatiently in English, adding pointedly, ‘Look, it’s broked.’

Zamir looks at the Stickle Brick car pulled in two in his son’s hands, and corrects him automatically: ‘You mean, it’s broken, Munchkin.’

‘I said that,’ insists his son. ‘It’s broked.’ Zamir takes the car, and slots the bricks back together. He is about to reach for his handkerchief, to wipe away the snot that seems to be permanently smeared on his son’s upper lip, when Boo snatches the car back from him and stalks off stockily into the next room, without a thank-you or a goodbye, letting the door swing shut behind him. It reminds Zamir eerily of the times he was transferring money to his father, and how he too would hang up without a thank-you or a goodbye, sometimes when he was still mid-sentence. He feels guiltily relieved that his son shares no other traits with his paternal grandfather – that the child has neither charm nor appealing good looks. Zamir suddenly feels like a child himself, just as he did when he first heard the news of his father’s death, broken to him with bumbling uncertainty by Mika, who had been called by the staff of the cheap hotel where his father had been staying. ‘They say that he’s gone, disappeared. They kept saying “*Il est disparu*”,’ she had reported. ‘Dan says that could mean he’s passed away, but I think it’s more likely that he’s just done a runner.’ Her French

had not been good enough to fully comprehend the circumstances, and a nervous laugh had been threaded inappropriately through her voice, as though she refused to believe the worst could have happened, and was certain that their father was simply up to his usual tricks. Even when Mika's husband had called the hotel manager back, and cleared up the ambiguity of the kindly meant euphemism, Zamir hadn't believed it either; right up until the body arrived, and then he looked his father in the face and realised that it was him after all. That there was no last joke to be played on them, that he really hadn't burdened a corpse with all his debts and gone skipping off into the wilderness. At the sight of his father's slack face, the muscles pulled to the side, his pitifully thin body, Zamir did something he hadn't done since he was very young. He had dropped to his knees, and prayed. And then he had buried his head in the pillow of his arms on the floor of the mosque that had received the casket, and cried out loud.

'Abbu,' trills Boo from the next room. 'It's broked again.'

Zamir sighs. 'I'll come in a minute, Munchkin,' he calls back. Jilli is still out, spending the morning with her own ailing parents; she has more pressing concerns. She seems to be in agreement with Mika; to her mind, the living outrank the dead. He knows that she is probably right, but still his head sinks to the desk, his back hunched in defeat. He wishes he could hide somewhere, under the table, behind the curtain. He wants to cry again, to shout out loud, *My Daddy's Dead, don't you understand, my Daddy's Dead*. He wants to blame his briefly absent wife and all-too-present son for not understanding this, but at the same time he doubts the sincerity of his sorrow, just as all those years ago, as his mother had perceptively pointed out, he had doubted the sincerity of his anger. He suspects that he is simply feeling sorry for himself.

'Abbu! Ab-bu!' shouts Boo, practically howling now. 'I said

it's broked again. You need to fix it! Now! Now! Now!' He sounds more distressed over his Stickle Brick toy than anyone else seems to be over his recently deceased grandfather. A man he never met. A man who died writing a letter, which covered three pages of hotel stationery, in which he had minutely listed all his names and addresses for the last eighty-one years, all the homes, hotels and rented rooms, all the characters he had created, moved about like pawns on a chessboard, and somehow outlived. *Sunny Karam, 18 Garden Walk, Gulberg, Lahore, Pakistan, 1931*. The map of his life laid out for someone else to plot on a chart, a story for someone else to write. *Mike Cram, Carlton-Rose Hotel, Sahara Road, Las Vegas, USA, 1956*. Zamir has kept the letter in a clean transparent file; he has studied it, again and again, for some sort of clue, for inspiration, a hidden code in these waves of changing names, the dates set against exotic addresses. *Mehmet Khan, 5 Hamad El Sheikh, Cairo, Egypt, 1965*. As though it is a puzzle, a treasure hunt, and that it might somehow lead him to the real letter, buried in a steel box under an X, a last will and testament, the proper story, completed with a final declaration of love. *Miguel Caram, Hotel Costas, 21 Avenida Del Agua, Marbella, Spain, 1989*. Isn't there anything else you had to say to me? Isn't there anything else, thinks Zamir, that you had to say at all? *Mikhail Lee, Flat 147, The Highview, Victoria Avenue, Hong Kong, 2001*. The letter is unfinished, but Zamir has written his father's last address on a Post-it note, and stuck it to the plastic sleeve of the file. His father had made a habit of never telling his children his current address. *Maqil Karam, Hotel Leval, 92 Rue du Charpentier, Biarritz, France, 2012*.

'I'm coming,' Zamir calls out wearily to Boo. He and Jilli spoil their son. They try not to, but they can't help it. They reward his frequent tantrums with cuddles and treats, they instinctively say yes rather than no to anything he asks.

They want this boy to be happy, to give him the golden childhood that Zamir once imagined, and Jilli once had, but the more they give him, they more they give in to him, the less happy he seems to be. This is the only truth that is left. Zamir is a grown man, with a child of his own, and his father has gone and left him again, without saying goodbye. The funeral will just be a funeral, and everyone will play their expected parts. And then there will be another evening and another morning. There will be today, tomorrow and the day after that. His valediction will just be words, and will be forgotten as soon as they are said. Perhaps Mika is right; perhaps he should just say that his father died of a heart attack in Paris; perhaps he should read out a sonnet.

His name is being called again, plaintively, almost angrily by his son. He is an ordinary man, but at least he is needed. To protect and provide. To mend broken things. He has a wife and a child to do this for; he has an identity, he has a place on this planet. He should be happy with what he already has, and let this be enough. ‘I’m coming,’ he calls out once more, dropping his pen and letting it roll across the paper. He goes to the door, which gleams briefly around the edges, as if illuminated. He knows that there is light on the other side.