

Chapter 1

It's been like this for four days now. I wake up in the morning to find a nasty, bilious substance churning in my gut. It rises like an upside down vortex through my stomach and chest, reaching for my throat. I push down on it with every bit of resolve my body can muster, but it spirals up undeterred, taunting me, deriding my resistance, flooding my throat, drenching my tongue. Next thing I know, I'm on my knees, bent over a toilet.

And then there's the wave-world. I try to go about my day, flipping through magazines, cooking, standing listlessly on the balcony, and suddenly, without warning, the whole world starts to float like an image projecting itself on a wave and I have to steady it by lying down or leaning on something for support.

I tell Harun after breakfast, while he's getting ready for work.

A blushing little smile curls the corners of my mouth and then fades when Harun fails to notice it, when his eyes stay focused on the mirror, when he doesn't turn his gaze as I describe the nausea, the vomiting, the dizziness. When he doesn't kiss me or throw his arms around me or jump up and down or scream with joy or sweep me off my feet and do the cradle dance.

I first saw the cradle dance at Shipra's. I had dropped by unannounced one morning and through an open door I caught a glimpse of her husband Deepu lifting her off their bed and dancing around the room with her cradled in his arms. Watching the strange scene, I thought the world was a charmed and wonderful place and that I wanted to live in it for a thousand years. When Deepu finally let Shipra down, she pulled me into the room and told me, while he stood watching her, his eyes brimming with joy, that the reason Deepu was so ecstatic was that Shipra had been throwing up a lot lately. Deepu stayed home from work that day to celebrate. I watched the two of them in awe. I loved how they laughed together, leaned on each other, melted into each other.

Harun isn't so inept at a knotting a tie that he can't spare a little of his attention to listen to someone standing right next to him and telling him that she's throwing up while her world is dancing on a wave. I pull myself gingerly out of the tie-knotting theater, and, like any other morning, I pack his lunch. I put two hunks of bread, a couple of hardboiled eggs, and an apple into a silver canteen.

Maybe he didn't hear me.

I walk back up to him. He's done with the tie now and moved on to his shoes. Even though I'd never seen him work his shoelaces with so much attention, I interrupt the apparently intricate process and tell him again about the last four days in my body....

That little smile starts creeping into the corners of my mouth again. Harun misses it, again. When he finishes tying his shoes, I have a thought. I'll bet he's going to surprise me. He's going to grab me by the hand and drag me out of the house and take me for a

drive around the city, screaming with delight with the windows rolled down. He is going to call the office and tell them he can't go in today because it's the happiest day of his life. Or maybe he is just going to cradle me in his arms and dance around this room. After that, he is going to call the rest of the family into the living room and tell them the news. He is going to insist on spending the rest of the day planning, brainstorming baby names, and wondering who the baby would like. Just like Shipra and Deepu.

Harun doesn't do any of this. He picks up his brief bag and canteen and heads for the door. The little smile fades again. But just to make sure he doesn't think that it's just any old garden-variety nausea, I ask him: "you do understand **why** I'm nauseous, right?"

He finally opens his mouth, though not his eyes, which are still half-cast and half on the door.

"There is Metoclopramide in the upstairs cabinet."

I can see Shipra in her cradle, floating along on the wave-world.

"What did you say?" I ask, even now, even after hearing him say "Metoclopramide" because even if I don't quite buy it, I need to feel somehow that he doesn't get it; that it hasn't dawned on him that the nausea could be a symptom of other possibilities. Maybe if I ask the question a second time, he will stop and think about his answer; just maybe, he will think about making a correction to his first answer. It's possible that the second time around, he will ask himself "is there some other advice I can give her besides Metoclopramide" or even "why *is* she getting sick every morning?"

I had to give that possibility a chance by asking "what did you say," even though I heard his answer loud and clear: Metoclopramide.

When Harun goes out of the house, the rule is to follow him to the front door and watch him walk away, down the stairs and out of sight, and then, to deadbolt the door and turn around to face my household. Of course, "my household" is just a figure of speech. It's the household that owns me, not the other way around. I am *Ghorer Bou*, "bride of the house."

It's not that I don't want to call him back. I do. I long to run after him and ask, just one more time "do you really, really not understand what I'm telling you?" But I am not supposed to. It's bad luck. I was given strict instructions about this on my very first day here. So, I strangle my instinct for fear of bad luck and quietly watch him leave. There's nothing unusual about today, after all. It's just Thursday.

I turn around to face the house, like good a little *bou*. There is so much to do. I have to arrange for everyone's breakfast. Roshuni will make the dough, knead it, and roll it out into perfectly adequate rotis, but I absolutely must be the one to stand over the stove and actually roast them. Roshuni is quite capable of finishing the job, of course, but the family feels more comfortable if I do it. *Ghorer bou* is supposed to bring a special

blessing to a family by preparing its meals lovingly with her own two hands. *Lakshmi bou* – as the saying goes. That's what I'm supposed to emulate, Lakshmi, that idealized domesticity channeled by dutiful brides to foster health and prosperity for their husbands' families. That's the theory, anyway.

Then there is the supervising. I have to make the all important decisions about whether to have eggs or a braised vegetable with our rotis. Again, Roshuni could do it. She is an intelligent adult with fine domestic skills. But the pretense of my personal input gives everyone in the family a sense that all is right their world. It keeps them happy and keeping them happy means keeping Harun happy.

I have done everything in my power for the last month and a half – arranging three meals a day for the whole family, keeping the house neat and pretty, picking up after everyone, making sure the laundry is done on time – to make the family happy. For the entire month and a half, my head covering has not slipped once . . . because not seeing it slip makes the family happy and seeing the family happy makes Harun happy.

But today, although it's a Thursday like any other Thursday, and not anything special, and although I can see Roshuni is almost done rolling out the dough for the roti, I walk past the kitchen and go into the bedroom to lie down. I try and fail to stifle a sudden chest-splitting sigh, just like I try and fail every morning to keep down that evil liquid in my innards. Shipra's happy face pops up in my mind's eye.... A hint of envy starts to nest in my heart. What does Shipra have and I don't? What that makes Deepu pick her up and do the cradle dance while Harun's reaction is "Metoclopramide?" Is she smarter, prettier, more accomplished than I am? Does she love better than I do? I'm every bit Shipra's equal – if not her superior – by all standard measures. Even my worst enemy would tell you!

Shipra and I were at school together. She dropped out sophomore year, right before exams. Basically gave up her studies to marry a guy in her class and gradually build up a home, dish by dish, gadget by gadget, bit by bit, like an anthill. But I also married for love. I am also spending all my time and energy to build a home with care and affection. I am also living by my husband's every wish, his every command, every day, every moment – so why this glaring gap in the love and honor that Shipra and I deserve?

Deepu took Shipra to an upscale clinic in Gulshan. His family complained about the extra expense. Take her to the government hospital, they told him. Deepu ignored them. He had heard that the public hospitals are woefully understaffed and overcrowded. Doctors don't see patients on time. They assign the same bed to multiple patients and people end up on rickety old cots and sometimes on blankets on the floor. These may be nothing more than urban myths, but Deepu wasn't about to take any chances, though didn't really have the money.... He borrowed it from friends.

I'd visited Shipra at the clinic once. But it was Deepu I had watched, for the most part. He fussed over every detail of Shipra's care: her medication schedule, her meals, her vitamins. He was constantly at her side, making sure everything was done right. He fed

her and gently stroked her hair and face. He even rubbed his nose on her belly and said things like “I wonder what our little angel is doing in there right now.” If Shipra so much as stirred in mild discomfort Deepu was up and running for a doctor or nurse. And he always brought someone back with him. I remember a parade of doctors and nurses coming in and out of the room to check on Shipra and to reassure Deepu on their way out. “Please try to relax, there’s really nothing to be anxious about.” A pretty nurse winked at Deepu and added “of course it’s perfectly natural for first time fathers to be a little nervous.”

I observed all this from across the room and imagined myself there, having a beautiful child. I imagined holding it close to my heart and gently covering it with kisses.

The substance is churning in my bowels again. I run to the bathroom and kneel. A houseful of people, Harun’s mother, father, two brothers, one sister-in-law, one sister, her husband, and their child – not one of them has any idea that someone in their home is very sick, that she is throwing up and that her world is teetering on a turbulent wave. They have no idea that she might be pregnant – no, not “might be” but probably, almost certainly, she’s pregnant.

I walk out of the bathroom to find Roshuni waiting for me. I can guess why. Everyone is up and showered and looking for breakfast. They want hot rotis fresh off the griddle. And yet, I haven’t been in the kitchen to make sure that this happens smoothly. Roshuni is wondering why. There is “why” in her eyes. But I don’t have to say anything. My face tells her I really don’t want to be in the kitchen right now. She says not to worry, she’ll make the rotis and eggs and take care of everything. She’ll take my place and perform my duties for today.

So I take to my bed again. The sun is quite harsh by now. It’s burning up my backside as I lay on my stomach. But I can’t bring myself to pull the shades... I can’t lose my little sliver of sky.

Everyday, when my chores are done, I sit and look out the window at that little bit of sky. It belongs to me and I belong to it. I’ve often become a little bird and flung myself across its surface. If I shut it out now, in my hour of need, I’ll suffocate. If I shut out my sliver of sky, I will have nothing. No world of my own – not even a tiny bit of a place of my own in this world of others.

The bedroom where Harun and I sleep is connected to a little balcony. It gets great southerly breezes but you can’t see much from there. A corner of my mother-in-law’s rose garden, a roof of a mansion, the sides of several tall apartment buildings – but nothing of the open world out there, nothing to free the eyes from their prison. I prefer the street-side balcony attached to Ranu and Hasan’s room. It opens to a whole other world. Store fronts, people, traffic, interaction, friction: life, beyond what’s prescribed for a bride of the house.

I crave that picture of life. I'd helped myself to it a few times, early in my life as *bou*. My mother-in-law didn't approve. She told me it was unseemly for the bride of a good family to be out in the open, staring at the street. "What would the neighbors say?" And she didn't stop there. She took it upon herself to inform Harun that his new wife seizes every opportunity to stand out on the balcony and gape at people. He was furious. "Do you have any common sense at all, Jhumur?" he snapped. "It seems you're completely oblivious of the fact that you are a bride in this house."

Harun knows very well that he was absolutely wrong on that point. Since I stepped foot in this house I haven't dared to be anything *but* a "bride of this house." I've developed an internal monitor that reminds me constantly to lower my voice to a whisper and never to presume to look anyone in the eye, because this shows humility. A sign of *Lakshmi*.

It's no easy feat, being a *Lakshmi bou*. I have learned this the hard way. On my wedding night I got in trouble for bursting out laughing at the sight of Habib in a top hat doing a crazy eunuch dance. Harun ran over to me from across the room just to give me a stern look and ask why I was "screaming."

"I'm not screaming, I'm laughing."

"That's not how one laughs. People can hear you from the next room."

Odd. That's pretty much how I laughed before I got married and Harun never seemed bothered by it. In fact, it's the same laugh that inspired him to call me "sparkly girl." He had once told me "it's what I love most about you, your deep, infectious laughter." Yet, on our wedding night, he was trying to stamp it out.

"How should I laugh, then?" I asked. He told me I could laugh however I wanted "just not out loud like that – like a man." I had never laughed silently before. It never occurred to me learn. But I've tried to practice it in the last month and a half. Not that there's been much to laugh about lately.

Was my head covered when I was standing on the street-side balcony? Harun wanted to know. I told him, honestly, that I didn't remember. He was shocked. "What will the neighbors say?" He poked the air with his index finger, as if to point to the various houses on our street and asked "do you ever see any *bou* from those families prancing around shamelessly outside? They stay in their homes like proper women. They don't hang out on the balcony displaying themselves to the world."

And that's the way it is around here. A virtuous *bou* is an invisible *bou*. I hardly ever stand on the street-side balcony anymore. Who would have thought that even in this day and age, even in a place like Dhanmondi, people still worry about whether it's decent for other people's daughters-in-law to be out on their balconies. It's not like we're in a crowded apartment house in some congested part of Old Dhaka, where everyone is up in your business and every detail of your daily life is grist for the gossip mill.

"I'm going to Shipra's later," I told Harun about a week after our wedding.

"Shipra's? Why?" He seemed genuinely surprised.

"What do you mean, why? To see her."

"What's there to see?"

I guess he had a point. What's there to "see," indeed? It's just my old friend Shipra. Harun couldn't figure out for the life of him why I had the sudden urge to see Shipra and her baby, whom I had named – Shukh, meaning "joy" – and whom I hadn't seen yet. I was going there to see Shukh. Seemed natural to me.

Harun laughed. "This isn't your old life, Jhumur. Things are different now. It's a whole new life."

"How is it new? It's not like we've morphed into other people. To me, it's the same life it's always been, except I have you closer to me, like an added bonus."

"You don't see any other difference? Your new name, for one? Your address, for another? You are now Mrs. Harun Ur-Rashid. You are now the sister in-law of Hasan, Habib, and Dolon. You're not a downtown girl from Wari anymore. You live in Dhanmondi Residential District. You are a *bou*, in a proper household."

"Oh."

Harun did take me to Shipra's himself a few days later. But he made it painfully clear how busy he was and how much of a hassle it was to make time in his schedule for this. I have learned that marriage has changed more than just my life. It's changed Harun. Before we got married we often spent the whole day roaming the city. Sometimes we would leave Dhaka just to catch a sunset over the Konghso river, or to stroll along some remote country lane. We'd gone to places like Comilla and Netra Kanya, just for the heck of it.

Harun used to tell me he wished he could spend the rest of his life traveling with me. Going to faraway lands, or just taking our usual day trips. He said he wanted to spend life sitting close to me in new and wonderful places. Just us. Just talking. And *talk* he did. About everything under the sun. He often said how everything else – work, family, society – paled in comparison to the joy of my company. Harun couldn't get enough of "us."

"Why is the day so short?" he would ask earnestly when dropping me off. "It would take a day as long as a century for me to get my fill of you."

The day felt short to me too.

And yet, as soon as the wedding was over, he changed his tune completely, with no apparent sense of inconsistency. He now likes to say that work should always come first in a man's life. Work demands focus, dedication. You don't get ahead without it. He went back to work fulltime just three days after our wedding. I felt empty inside. I felt isolated in this new house, among these strangers that were now my "family."

"Can't you take a few more days off?"

"What for?" He frowned. "You know how much money I risk losing every day that I don't work? Of course you don't. You can't even begin to *calculate* the figures I'm talking about. Anyway, why should I sit idly at home? I mean, we're already married aren't we?"

"So... there's nothing left to want from each other, now that we're married?"

"You're right here! I can have you whenever I want – what am I supposed to get all hot and bothered about all the time?"

Yes. He can have me whenever he wants. That's certainly true. But... did having me within reach really take all the thrill out of having me? Was it all about the chase? Maybe so. But I guess, to me, having someone close at hand isn't the same as having them close to your heart. Though I am absolutely within his reach now, I've never felt so distant from him.

Roshuni taps lightly on the door and comes into the room without waiting for my response. Seeing me on my stomach with the sun on my back, she draws the shades, and comes over to me. She whispers softly, "please have some breakfast, Bhabi." The servants all call me "Bhabi," that familiar but respectful address meaning "sister-in-law"; it's just a common custom. But it sounds more genuine coming from her than from any of Harun's siblings.

"I don't want breakfast. I'm sick."

Roshuni draws very close to me and asks to know more. She speaks in a very low voice, clearly meant to avoid being heard by anyone else in the house. I try to interpret the anxiety in her whisper.

Maybe it's about my missing this morning's kitchen duties. Maybe Roshuni has grasped the full gravity of that offense in a way that I haven't and she is being extra cautious to avoid displeasing anyone by her association with the offender.

Or maybe a *bou* just isn't supposed to get sick. Maybe that's an offense in itself. Makes sense. After all, the *bou* is responsible for maintaining a household. After all, if someone else gets sick, it's her job to nurse them back to health. It's absolutely unacceptable for a *bou* to have any ailment herself, physical or emotional. It annoys the family. Certainly

it's no small infraction on the part of a maid to be chatting in such a gentle voice with the source of such enormous annoyance.

Roshuni was once some family's *bou* too, in her youth. She was also required to stay perpetually fresh and trouble-free. She was also forbidden to be ill. She understands the nature of a *bou*'s life in her in-laws' household. It's the same in every class. That's why Roshuni is whispering. That's why her eyes keep darting to the door, making sure there's no witness to her conspiratorial lingering with the *bou* that dared to fall sick, the *bou* that dared to neglect the family's breakfast.

Roshuni thought to pull the shades back to shield my back from the sun. She alone showed an interest in my well being. I don't marvel at her compassion or her soft spot for me. She and I share the daily grind of housework all day, every day. There's a kinship here, despite the symbolic distance in our official positions. There is no real distinction in our relative worth to the household. We both cook. We both clean. Except she gets paid and I don't. She can keep her head uncovered if she chooses and I can't. She is free to leave if she wants and I'm not.

She sits down on the floor next to my bed and brings me up to speed on the day's events. Harun's parents are relaxing after breakfast, Habib went out, Hasan is still sleeping, Ranu is knitting. . . .

"Roshuni, I take it all your work is done since you seem to have time to be in here socializing?" a stern voice inquires. Apparently a mother-in-law isn't obligated to knock before coming into a *bou*'s room.

Roshuni jumps to her feet, scrambles to lift the loose end of my sari over my head, and says she came to call me to breakfast and thought she should sit with me a while when she found me lying sick in bed.

Mother-in-law sits down next to me on the bed and places her palm on my forehead. "You don't have a temperature," she says conclusively, as if there can be no other symptom of illness.

It's well past ten. I'm still in bed. I sense that this makes for an awfully uncouth scene. She accepts my right to not want any breakfast, I'm sure. But I'm less sure that she is willing to excuse my absence from the kitchen at this hour, where I'm needed to supervise preparations for lunch. What vegetable dishes should we have today? Will there be lentils? Meat or fish for the main course? These are arrangements that should already be in progress. I gather she's irked at this lapse in judgment, my second one today.

I look up at her to explain myself. "I don't have a fever... it's just... I have a really bad headache."

"A headache?!"

She has them routinely. It's nothing to take to one's bed over. It goes away if you just splash cold water on your head and face. I'm compelled at this point to drag myself out of bed and head for the bathroom and douse my head with cold water.

She lets out a heavy sigh. It's not for me. It's for Dolon, her *own* daughter. Since Dolon's husband Anis lost his job at a tobacco company, the two of them have moved in here. Harun is trying to help Anis set up his own business. Harun's mother just hopes it works out.... The usual subjects of her obsessive worrying are her two younger sons Hasan and Habib. Neither did very well in school. Habib barely graduated from high school and even though he's enrolled in college, he routinely cuts class, misses exams, and generally displays a complete lack of interest in studying.

Hasan, for his part, displays a complete lack of interest in life generally. He is unsocial, uninvolved, withdrawn. At meal times he quietly finishes whatever is served, never seems to like or dislike anything. He never gets into nor comments on any family matters, whether they are celebrations or squabbles. He has no friends. No apparently favored pastimes. He has no opinion of any kind, as far as anyone can tell. Yet one fine evening a few months ago, this almost dysfunctionally reclusive boy came home with a barely pubescent girl, wrapped haphazardly in a red sari, and said "I married her."

The girl sobbed uncontrollably. She had a white handkerchief that she used alternately to blow her nose and wipe her tear-soaked face. Her smeared lipstick made a big, red, vertical stripe right down her chin. She looked around at everyone with wide, gaping, fearful eyes.

The family was dumbfounded. Their mouths fell open. Their eyes as wide as the little girl's. Who was she? Did Hasan just pick her off the street? A slum? The red light district? Or did he find her in some respectable home. . . did he kidnap her?!

The wide open mouths got wider. The wide open eyes glanced back and forth at each other. The furrowed brows grew deeper and deeper along with the alarm they represented.

Finally, when Hasan started for his bedroom, leading the girl by the hand, his father pounced on him. He pulled him by his hair into the outer parlor. Harun followed them there and slapped Hasan as hard as he could. At this point the girl in the red sari dropped to the floor in a full blown lament. She was practically rolling on the floor and bathed in renewed tears. Her family lives in the Khilgaon Officers' Colony, she managed to tell them, between sobs. She ran away from home with Hasan by her own choice.

All this happened about six months before I married into this household. Roshuni told me. Harun had never mentioned any of it.

Since his marriage Hasan has been talking about going abroad. Whatever this country is fit for, it's certainly not for human habitation, in Hasan's suddenly vociferous opinion.

Every now and then, he startles everyone by bringing home travel brochures and application forms for emigrating to any number of foreign countries. He studies these things intently, keeping his family perpetually suspended between hope and dread.

Habib's view on foreign travel is just the opposite of Hasan's. The outside world has no allure for him. Where else could a guy like him live like an aristocrat? He is the liveliest, most fun-loving member of the family. He has no inclination toward marriage or romance. Too much trouble. He lives for the moment. He prefers meat to fish, chicken to beef – but only the tenderest birds will do. He likes to dance. In the evening he straps on his guitar and sings in a large, throaty voice. He likes to say “once you've felt the music, you can never again bring yourself to settle for the insipid academics and eventual nine-to-five serfdom” that young men of his class are expected to pursue. Life is short. Why not spend it singing and dancing instead of frittering it away in tedium? Habib's attitude toward life is a source of great distress to his parents and even more so to his big brother Harun.

I've become used to my mother-in-law's expressions of anxiety about Hasan and Habib's futures. I'm less prepared for today's trepidation, centered on Anis. But I can guess what role I am being urged to play here. I'm supposed to bring it up to Harun when he's in a particularly good mood. I know it's not really necessary. Harun takes it upon himself to worry about this stuff, constantly. I often find him sitting up at night, chain smoking, deep in thought.

“Hey, what are you thinking so hard about?”

“You won't understand.”

“Try me.”

But he doesn't. Why the hell would you assume I won't understand? I want to ask. I want to shake him. I want to remind him that while I may spend my days in the kitchen, I'm not *really* just like Roshuni. I do have a little more education, a little more exposure to complex thought. . . I was a chemistry major, you know! I want to scream. But I don't go there. I just nudge him.

“Come on. . . tell me, I'll understand.”

But even after I practically plead with him, I see no particular inclination or desire on his part to have me understand him. If I keep pressing him, he says something generic, like, “I need to do something for Anis. I'm trying to figure out if I can set him up in some kind of business.”

“Why not put him to work in your own business?”

“I could. . . we're launching a new line in collaboration with a Korean firm. . . I've been thinking Anis might be just the guy to manage that venture.”

I brought up Hasan and Habib, too, as my mother-in-law has been needling me to do. Harun thought about it for a moment and replied "I might just send *both* of them abroad. Maybe they'll figure out what the hell they want to do with their lives."

So it turns out, just as I was sure it would, that Harun didn't really need me to nag him. His siblings, their wellbeing, their future, etc., are just natural preoccupations for him. In fact, he often has long conversations about these matters with his parents, Dolon, and Anis in the living room. My only function there is to bring them tea and snacks. Yet, my mother-in-law feels the need to broach the subject with me privately. Why? Perhaps she is letting me know how big a problem this really is. Maybe she thinks I don't quite grasp its seriousness and maybe she just wants to get it into my thick skull that it's a very difficult time for Dolon so that I can put my petty ailments into perspective. She probably wants to prevent me from using my influence – the influence she assumes I have – to divert all of Harun's attentions to my own needs and away from his family's. She wants me to get Harun to somehow transform this troubled time in Dolon's life into a happy and prosperous one.

And what about my troubles? Who cares? I don't have a temperature, so I don't have a problem. I have to make my way to the kitchen now.

This household has not just one but two maids. Roshuni and Sokhina. They are both good cooks. Nevertheless, the *bou* is supposed feed the family, I'm told. Especially the husband, I'm told. After all, why should a married man have to eat food cooked by servants? What's the point of being married?

I get up. I forcibly immerse myself and my spinning head in that swill of vapors: raw onions, raw fish, raw garlic.... Roshuni has finished cleaning and cutting up the fish. Shokhina is mixing the spices. The vegetables are already chopped.

The evil substance is welling up like a tidal wave now. Still, I turn on the stove. I heat up some oil in a large skillet. I start browning the onions together with ground cayenne, turmeric, and coriander. And then the fish... the wave is getting much, much worse...

Why would anyone ever prefer my cooking to Roshuni's anyway? She has 25-years of experience. I have a month and a half's. She's a veteran. I'm just a student. *Her* student. What little I do know I learned from her. Her hand is expert. Mine is inept. Yet the family demands what comes out of mine. Does it taste better because my hands are fairer than hers? Because mine are adorned in jewels? Because mine have touched books? Because hers have never put pen to paper? Because Hers have never written a thesis or a lab report? Is that why my hands give food such incomparable flavor?

When Harun comes home from work, he acts just like any other day. It's as if he knows nothing about my nausea and vomiting. He seems perfectly at ease, chatting at dinner about his workday. He tells us about a visit from a Korean client who spoke absolutely no English or Bengali and spoke for an hour in Korean with no apparent concern about

being understood. Harun absolutely must arrange for an interpreter tomorrow. He comments that Korean sounded more like gibberish than a real language. After that, he speculates about whether he should put Anis in touch with the Korean man – with an interpreter, of course. After that, he has a second helping of dinner. After that, he sits on the couch and watches a TV adaptation of a play by Mumtazuddin Ahmed. He laughs out loud at a cameo appearance by the auteur as an absent minded professor.

I watch him watch the play.

I go into the bedroom before the play is over. My head is spinning again.

When Harun comes to bed he doesn't ask why I didn't watch the end of the play. Instead, he starts to praise the surprising comic acting skills of the celebrated playwright.

"I had to turn in early because I have a headache," I volunteer, knowing it was futile to wait to be asked.

"Yeah, I was wondering what was going on."

I sigh one of my inaudible sighs. This is becoming a habit.

Then I sigh again, when he takes off my sari and unceremoniously does his business with my body. Just like any other night. When he's done, he lights a cigarette. "Feels good to relieve the day's fatigue," he says matter-of-factly, letting out a puff of smoke. "The body is at peace."

I am quite certain that Harun didn't plumb the depths of my body to bond with me or to reach for me in anything like love. He used me to release his body's ordinary stresses at the end of an ordinary day.

By the time I get back from washing off the residue of his relief, he has finished smoking and turned over on his side, his back toward me. I lie down next to him. After a long silence I put my hand gently on his back and whisper to him, in timid desperation mixed with a stubbornly tender hope: "you know, I think the nausea... and the head spinning... I think it might mean something."

My only answer is the sound of his snoring.

Chapter 2

I run into the bathroom and throw up violently. Harun tosses aside his toothbrush and grabs me from behind. He steadies me with one arm as I keep throwing up. With his free hand, he holds up a tumbler of water for me to sip in between all the retching.

Afterward, I rest my head on his shoulder, exhausted. I can hardly keep my eyes open. He lays me down on the bed and brings me more water, two Paracetamol, and a Motilon.

“Here, take this.”

“Are you sure this is going to stop the vomiting?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

I take the pills and lie there, but I keep my eyes open. I listen to the sound of Harun showering. I watch him come out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist. I listen to the zip of his trousers and the soft crackle of his starched shirt and the swoosh of his tie as he dresses. I smell the cologne he lightly dabs on his skin. I watch him put on his shoes.

“I really think this is different, Harun.”

“Different, how?”

“I think maybe... a baby?”

“Yeah... I doubt it.”

I stare dumbfounded at his preoccupied face. He’s in a particular hurry this morning. A lot going on at the office. No need to pack his lunch. A colleague is taking him to Kasturi.

I do my usual routine, trailing him to the door and watching him disappear around the corner. Then I fall back into bed. Is it possible that Harun has never heard of morning sickness? He’s thirty-two years old! What kind of person gets to be thirty-two without knowing that pregnant women get morning sickness? I have never known him to be so ignorant about anything. On the contrary, I’ve always known him to be exceptionally clever.

In fact, it took more than a little cunning to get my attention in the first place. It was my final year at the university. I had met him briefly at a music recital in the arts academy. One of many young men one meets at a university – in class, in the commons, at cafés, at cultural events. Naturally, I had no recollection of him. I was pretty startled to get a phone call one evening at home.

“Recognize me?”

“Uh, sorry, I don’t.”

“But you spoke with me the other day.”

"I speak to many people everyday – including complete strangers whose voices I have no reason to recognize. Please have the decency to tell me your name or stop wasting my time."

"What's the point of telling you my name? there are thousands of men named 'Harun' in this country – you probably know at least ten Haruns, I'm sure."

I was trying to figure out if I actually did know ten Haruns. I think I have a distant cousin called Harun. In any case, the man on the phone wasn't anyone I recognized. It was just a deep voice and a persistent will. He seemed to have no plans to get off the phone in the foreseeable future and he certainly had no plans to take "I don't recognize you" for an answer. He stayed on, nudging me gently and joyfully until I remembered.

Before the recital started, a bunch of us were sitting out on the academy greens, singing. All of a sudden this guy none of us knew just came up to us and started talking to me. He had sparkling, sociable eyes. He had on a nice business suit, not at all like the type that usually shows up at these performances wearing local handspun kurta-pajamas, sandals, and a "poetic" yet stern look on their faces, as if they are gathering information for the ministry of culture. This guy looked like he might not even be there for the concert. He was at a tea stand on the sidewalk across from us and had noticed me when I started singing. He just came over and asked to hear more. I was there with Subhas, Arju, Chandana and Nadira. We were all taken aback, but amused. I smiled at the stranger and said "look Mr., I don't know *who* you are ...that you can just walk up to people you've never met and demand encore performances!" The guy, or the *man*, really – he wasn't at all like any of the "guys" that I knew – smiled at me. It was a marvelous smile.

When it was time to go in for the concert he said a slow, reluctant goodbye and then followed us in and found a seat near us, as though he didn't have to – or care to – meet up with any friends of his own. I felt him looking at me throughout the performance. When I was leaving the auditorium, I heard his voice behind me. "You sang much better than anyone on that stage tonight." Chandana poked me in the rib with her right elbow. "I think he's following you! What a creep!"

Being followed by a creep turned out to have one little benefit. Subhas and I had walked all the way to Kakrail, looking for a rickshaw, when a white Toyota stopped in front of us. "Where are you headed? I'll drop you off."

"It's ok, we'll get a rickshaw."

"No, you won't. All the rickshaws are at the stadium. The game just let out."

I tried to get rid of Harun by telling him I am going really far. "Old Dhaka"

"That's perfect. I'm headed in that direction anyway."

I was hesitant, but Subhas practically jumped in the car and pulled me in with him. "Thanks man, we really appreciate this." During the ride it was Subhas who did all the chatting with Harun. They made the usual small talk about the city's mosquito problem and the congestion in Old Dhaka.

But when he dropped us off at Wari, Harun smiled at me and said "I want to hear you sing again." It was less an expression of hope than a declaration of intent, although it was unclear when, where, or how he was going to accomplish his mission.

I was caught completely off guard when he called. I hadn't given him my home number. He hadn't even asked. Not that it was hard to track it down. It's a listed number. He knew my last name from the introductions and my address from dropping me off. But *why*? Why would someone call you at home after such a trivial contact? I would hardly even describe us as acquainted. I didn't think people did this sort of thing outside of the movies. At first, I brushed him off with some excuse. But he called again the next day. And the next.

"What's going on here? Why do you keep calling me?"

"Am I irritating you?"

He wasn't *irritating* me, exactly. But I wasn't entirely comfortable with his pursuit either. I barely knew him. There was nothing really to talk about beyond basic pleasantries and the weather. Harun did try to push the conversation forward, of course. And when I wouldn't budge, he just started telling me about himself. I found out he was an engineer. That he started his own business manufacturing power generators. That his plant is in Sabhar and his office in Motijheel. He lives in Dhanmondi with his parents, his sister and two brothers, a big, happy family.

"You owe me a song."

"How do you figure?"

"I gave you a ride home from the concert."

"So you're trying to collect cab fare."

There was a loud, clanging laughter on the other end of the phone. I didn't think what I said was quite that funny. But it was a sincere laugh. It was disarming.

"We didn't ask you for a ride, as I recall. You offered. In fact, you insisted. If you take it upon yourself to... *impose* your 'help' on people, you should at least do it without strings attached! Self-interested charity is no charity at all!"

My rebuffs and evasions did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm. He called me regularly. Every time, after some obligatory small talk, he asked to hear me sing. I started giving in.

It felt weird singing into the phone, but it was hard to refuse him. I don't know if it was the longing in his deep voice, or the forcefulness of his words, or my own curiosity about where all this was leading, but I couldn't refuse. In time, he began making requests. "Whispers in the Wind!" "So Far Away!" One day he asked me to sing "My Heart Just Won't Listen to Reason."

I had to laugh. "What's troubling your heart these days, why won't it listen to reason?" Harun sighed. "Someone as cruel as you would never understand." I sang a couple of bars from "My Heart."

"Did you see the sky tonight? Looks like a storm. Hey, could you sing 'You Came to Me One Stormy night?'" I sang it for him. But then I asked him if how it was that he expected me to sing at his pleasure all the time. He said nothing. At some point, I started making him sing along. He wasn't very good. But he tried his best. It was stunning how he could listen to me for hours, mesmerized. He never seemed to get enough. "Your voice has magic," he told me.

Even more stunning: he has not asked me to sing even once since we got married. If he ever catches me humming he gives me a look as though my musical habits are somehow news to him. In fact, there's more than a hint of disapproval in that look. No one – certainly none of the honorable elders of my husband's household – is supposed to hear my voice, to have it seep into their consciousness like so much defilement.

I spent most of the first three months of our courtship singing for him. There were two songs I used to sing a lot back then. "Remember, After All" and "The Heart's Desire Fulfilled." It's so naïve, the idea of anyone's heart's desire ever being "fulfilled." I don't believe in stuff like that. I never did. Still, singing the words, repeating the conviction that it was possible, did seem to satisfy some deep longing in my own heart. Maybe fulfillment wasn't so elusive after all. There was indeed a kind of "fulfillment" in my private moments on the phone with Harun. Somehow all our unmet desires were sublimated into a profound consummation through song. At least for me.

"I can't do this anymore," he blurted out one day.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to meet. Face to face."

"And what exactly do you expect *that* would lead to?"

"It doesn't have to lead to anything. I will be satisfied with just your company."

"So there's no satisfaction in what we have now? All the words we've shared? All the songs?"

"No. Words leave you empty unless you look into someone's eyes when you say it."

One day soon after that, we did meet. On the university commons. He picked me up in his white Toyota and took me to his office. I noticed how organized his space was. He even had fresh cut roses on his desk. He took one of them out and tucked it into my hair. He took some petals and scattered it on the seat of a chair and made me sit on it. I sat on my bed of roses, enjoying the cliché – despite its obviousness – for the childlike

adoration with which it was offered. He fussed over me. Did I want tea or a soda? What would I like for lunch? Pizza? A club sandwich? He knew a place where they made the best chicken rolls. . . .

That was the first time I noticed just how beautiful his eyes were. I was a little under their spell.

“I thought you said you wanted to talk. . . into my eyes or something.”

Harun bit his lip, I think to tame the smile that came over him. The smile that lit up his face and touched me deeply. Of course, I was already smitten. Otherwise why would I have followed him this far into his game?

Now Harun's “work comes first.” Back then he would drop work regularly to come meet me outside the chemistry lab. I'd come out of class to find a handsome young man waiting for me with his face lit up in that magic smile, subtle but obvious despite the sunglasses hiding his eyes. How I adored that moment. How I hoped the whole class noticed this gorgeous man waiting for me. I wanted them to see that I wasn't just the brainy student union leader, but also a desirable woman, capable of a real romance with a real man, a grown man, with a serious, successful life out there in the real world beyond our university.

He came to meet me everywhere on campus. He would find me putting up flyers at the student union, hanging out with my friends on the library green, having tea at the canteen, and he would lightly pick me off of the scene and drive away with me in his white Toyota.

I loved it. I loved being in his passenger seat. I loved the way the cigarette hung from his lip as he talked. When he put his hand on mine my hand looked exquisite. I imagined how exciting it must be for him to touch that hand. I became Harun and enjoyed me as he was enjoying me.

We often went off somewhere far from the city. He had a weakness for the remote and the green. So did I. We would cross Buriganga bridge and sit by the Dhaleswari river for hours. It was there that he first told me “I should tell you. This is not my first relationship.”

I couldn't believe it. I'm not his first love? He has sat like this with someone else in some other romantic spot. Maybe even this same spot by this same river. That hand on mine has touched hers in just the same way. He has looked into her eyes and said “I love you” with the same look in his eyes. A little bit of my heart came loose, like a hangnail. I'm not the first. Why is everything so much sweeter the first time?

“But it *is* my first time,” I pouted. My ego was bruised.

I fixed my gaze on a faraway dinghy and ripped out fistfuls of grass as my eyes blurred. After a long moment, I broke the spell of the river's rhythmic sloshing and the deep blue silence that had suddenly stretched out between us, "did you ever bring her here?"

"Many times."

"Was she pretty?"

"She was."

"Did you love her very much?"

"I did."

"Loved her more than me?"

Harun laughed. He pressed my hand gently. His skin felt warm against mine. "Hey, are you pissed at me? Silly girl. She's just an old girlfriend. I loved her then. But I don't anymore! I love *you*."

It was true. He had said nothing unreasonable. I could just as easily have had a prior relationship that hadn't worked out for whatever reason. I could have got over a first love and looked at someone new and thought "this time, I've found what I really want." These things happen. Shipra had had a boyfriend before Deepu. It was a pretty serious relationship. They were together for two years. But she grew tired of his drinking. When ultimatums failed, she left him. She started seeing Deepu not too long after and now they're married. And they're doing just fine.

"Do you think about her a lot?"

"No," he sighed.

"What do you mean? You don't even miss her? You never long for her? You don't feel an ache from her absence?"

"No, I don't," he laughed. I searched his eyes for signs of deception. My eyes were glistening with envy.

"How do you love someone and then just forget them?"

"You just do," he shrugged.

"I guess someday you'll forget me too. You'll sit here with someone else and not even think of me."

"No I won't. It's not the same."

"How is it different?"

"You're a different kind of girl."

"How so? We are both women. We're both human. You loved both of us! What's the difference?"

"She doesn't even compare to you."

"In what way?"

"She was... well she wasn't... a good girl."

"What you mean 'good girl?'"

"It's nothing you'd understand."

I don't remember if I felt any comfort in being compared favorably to this phantom girl from his past even if it was based on something I "wouldn't understand." But I have learned, since then, not to be flattered by easy praise. A man who could so casually disparage an old lover can just as easily scorn a newer one if it serves his purpose. I later told him that his remark about her had been indecent.

"Do you really think I belong with a woman like Lipi? She had no appreciation of the finer things in life. She knew nothing about music or art. All she ever talked about was property and investments. How could I have married someone like that?"

"Who said anything about marrying her? Not everybody's tastes and interests are going to be compatible with yours, I have no quarrel with that. But because her interests weren't the same as yours doesn't mean she wasn't a 'good girl.' The power generator business is totally outside my realm of interests but I don't judge your character based on your being in it."

Harun said nothing more about it. His explanation didn't fully make sense to me but I knew that whatever the real reasons were for his contempt for this woman he had supposedly once loved, my response would have been the same. He judged her, not just as incompatible with him, but as unworthy of him, even while claiming to have loved her when it suited him. I couldn't read whether my words had stirred any feelings of remorse in him. Most likely he just wanted to avoid more friction by letting me have the last word. He let me "win" the argument, which is hardly the same as being persuaded by it.

He took me back to his office after my confession by the river that he was my first love. Everyone else had left for the day. He led me toward his office, cutting through the stillness of deserted hallways. My heart was beating fast. It was a feeling not entirely unmingled with a deep, primal fear. But when we were alone in his office and he had

slammed the door shut behind us and I was confronted with the realization of those fears, they were washed away by desire. My desire. Huge tides of desire. Love.

He kissed me. It was not a delicate kiss. It was more like my lips were a ripe tamarind fruit and he was going to suck the flesh right off of it in one go. It was enough to leave my lips swollen like they'd been subjected to multiple bee stings. This delighted him. He bent over laughing. I covered my mouth with both hands. He pushed them aside and stared adoringly at the little injury he had inflicted on me, the first bit of my body he had intruded on – that anyone had ever intruded on.

“Wow. Your lips are all swollen, just from a little kiss! They are so tender. So fresh. So untouched. No one has ever tasted these lips before!” Harun's eyes were shimmering with a pleasure I'd never seen before. The pleasure of no other man ever having kissed me.

That evening I went straight to bed and turned out the lights. When Ma called me down to dinner, I told her I'd eaten out. I wasn't sure how obvious the hickey on my mouth was, but I wasn't about to sit through dinner with my parents and give them an extended opportunity to notice.

I was so hungry that night. I couldn't sleep at all.

Harun called in the morning and asked me to meet him at his company's Motijheel offices. We had lunch at the Superstar. He spent the whole day with me. The thrill of being the first to kiss me hadn't dimmed at all, apparently. He held me really, really tightly, as if to keep me from running away. He had his grip on a specimen of untainted feminine flesh and he had to have it. He was going to have it. I was a doe in her first spring and the wolf in him was going to devour me, not off-hand like an ordinary scavenge, but with relish, fresh from the hunt.

Suddenly, Harun didn't seem so different from a hundred other guys. He was not my one true friend who would love me without condition. He was just a guy. A guy who could sit by the Dhaleswari, wooing Lipi, Luna, Lisa, and Lima, but would only consider *marrying* a freshly budded girl, green and unscratched.

He asked me to marry him. I had no reason to say no. We saw each other everyday. We started meeting at his friend Shafiq's place in Gulshan. Sitting by the river gets old. And we wanted to get away from the glare of curious eyes. We would have long chats with Shafiq over tea and crackers. Whenever Shafiq left the room for even a second, Harun would plant a quick kiss on me. I took him to my friends' places too. Subhas's, Arju's, Chandana and Nadira's. We spent the most time at Shipra's. Sometimes a bunch of us would go away together. To Madhupur Forest, Shalbon Bihar, the Martyrs' Memorial. Sometimes, if it was on our way, Harun would make a quick stop at one of his factories to take care of things. But he never took me home to Dhanmondi to meet his family. He said he didn't want to make me too “old and familiar” in their eyes. The first time he brought me home would be as his bride.

But we were getting tired of just hanging out at friends' homes. Most of them didn't even have their own places. Except for Shipra, all my friends lived with their parents. So, reluctantly, we took refuge at my house in Wari. Harun wanted privacy, but it wasn't mine to give. My parents, or sometimes Nupur, would come and sit with us while we chatted. Nupur's kid, all covered in mud, would try to climb up Harun's leg. The dog was suspicious of Harun and constantly barked at him. The chickens had the run of the courtyard. We were used to them clucking around in their own droppings, but Harun was overwhelmed by all this. He looked helplessly at me.

"I can't just *talk* anymore," he said one day.

"What would you rather be doing?"

"Groping you."

His words sent shivers through my body. I was at the age when one shivers. I would shiver at the slightest touch of his hand. When driving, he always steered with his right hand and held on to my hand with his left. He even shifted gears with his steering hand so he wouldn't have to let go of mine.

I miss that Harun. I still feel a stirring in my heart and in my body for that Harun. I long for his touch. I long for a ride in his car, hand in hand. These days Harun touches me regularly. He penetrates deep into my flesh every night. But it has none of the deliciousness of that little bit of touch. That was better. That was more. That little bit.

We got married in a hurry. I had promised that he'd be the one I married eventually. But something happened to make us hasten our plans. After my final year at the university, I spent a year with nothing to do. Well, not "nothing." I still had my social life and my political activities. In a way, I was still living my student life, minus the hassle of classes. Harun found my politics mildly amusing.

"What's the use of student unions?" he asked me once.

"What do you mean 'use'?"

"Your party is never going to win an election."

"That's not the point. The idea is to take a stand on your principles. Would you back a candidate just based on electability?"

Harun smiled indulgently. "Student politics are rather becoming on women. . . ."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"like music. . . ."

“What... and men don't do music? I thought *you* liked music!”

Harun dropped the subject.

Despite the lack of privacy, Harun and I spent hours hanging out at my house. We also went out a lot, and stayed out late. One day my father took me aside, sharpened his usually gentle voice as much as possible, and told me “either marry him, or stop seeing him, immediately. I don't want that boy setting foot in this house again, unless he has a serious proposal to make.” I told him I did intend to marry Harun when the time was right.

“And when exactly would that be?” he said indignantly.

“In six months.”

“Why in six months? What will change in six months?” He was incensed. I didn't want to argue with him anymore. Ma also wanted me to let it go. She worried about exciting him too much. His blood pressure was already so high. A few years ago it went through the roof and almost stopped his heart, after the incident with Nupur. Ma didn't want a repeat of that. Neither did I.

I saw Harun that afternoon. I told him “if we really are planning to get married, I think we should go ahead and do it right away.”

I had caught him off guard. I had been the one holding him at bay. Let me graduate first, let's wait until summer, any excuse to push back the date. Finally, he had given me a deadline. Six months. The extra time worked out well for him as well, he had confessed. He needed to “do something about his brothers” before taking on the responsibilities of his own family.

“Six months,” he made me promise, “no more stalling.”

“All right, All right! I'll be all dolled up in red and be your little *bou* in six months!”

“You sure you'll still be interested?”

“What do *you* think?” I teased him.

He didn't answer me. But he restated his resolve on the six month time frame. “I don't want to hear any more excuses. In six months, I'm going to take you home to Dhanmondi. I'll carry you physically if I have to. This is getting ridiculous; all my friends are fathers by now.”

So, I startled him considerably with my newfound urgency. He wondered where it was coming from. I told him “my Baba doesn’t approve of us going on like this. He wants us to get married or stop seeing each other.”

“What don’t you just talk to him?”

“He won’t understand.”

“Of course he will.”

“I don’t think so, Harun.”

“We need time to plan, don’t we? A wedding isn’t something that just *happens*.”

“You *make* it happen. What’s there to plan? You just do it.”

“Ok, what’s going on here? Why this sudden rush?”

“You won’t understand.”

“Explain it to me!”

I didn’t feel like explaining it to him. I just had one thing to say. It was straightforward. “If you want to marry me, do it now. Today, if possible.”

“I thought we had decided on six months from now.”

“I can’t wait for you another six months.”

“What if I absolutely needed to wait six months? What would you do?”

“I don’t know.”

A gloom had come over me. Bit by bit it engulfed Harun as well. But he didn’t make me wait. It took him about seven days to arrange our wedding. It was an informal event, with just our closest family and friends.

I don’t fault Baba for being anxious. A few years ago, Nupur fell in love with a rich young man named Akram. We treated him like family. He dropped by at all hours. He spent entire days just chatting with Nupur. He started calling my parents Ma and Baba. Baba referred to him as “my firstborn.” It was understood that he would marry Nupur. It simply was a matter of doing it. We had discussed wedding plans in great detail. The guest list, the decorations, the entertainment, the menu. Akram wanted fried eggplant and fish in addition to the usual lamb and rice pilaf. He had had curried carp and fried eggplant at his friend Sanjeev’s wedding and liked it so much he had to have it at his own

wedding. I teased him about his low brow wedding menu. "Why not coconut shrimp and boiled mustard greens?" I added. Everyone laughed.

But they never got married. After all this, after five years – of not just romance, but a real, familial relationship – Akram left Nupur. Just like that. It broke Baba's heart.

Ours was never a wealthy household. But we had everything we needed. Baba never felt the desperation some fathers do to marry us off to the first acceptable man that came along. His teacher's salary from a local college was enough to provide us with a modest but comfortable life. He approved of Akram only because he seemed to make Nupur happy, and he seemed to be a good man.

Nupur vowed never to get married after that. But she snapped out of it a few months later when Baba arranged a match for her and asked her to consider it. She said yes. His name is Dulal. He is a good man. Good character. Good job. Nupur found a job too, as a bookkeeper at a bank. She has a degree in Bengali literature, but unfortunately we live in a country where you take the job you get, because holding out for one that uses your talents just means staying unemployed.

Nupur and Dulal are pretty happy. A month after their wedding they took a trip to India together. Now they have a rambunctious little girl.

Baba has had several marriage offers for me as well. He's turned them all down. No doubt because he thought I could do better. No doubt his sudden rage about Harun came out of a distrust of young suitors who woo his daughters instead of approaching him with a respectable proposal. A man's attraction to me wasn't enough. He had to demonstrate his own character by a concrete show of good intention.

Yet, despite wanting to protect me from the kind of insult Nupur had suffered, Baba ended up insulting me himself. I understand why he didn't take Harun's good intentions on faith, but by assuming the worst about Harun, Baba also clearly showed his lack of faith in me, and my judgment.

It was that insult and a deep sense of wounded self-respect that made me decide to hurry up and get married. In the end, although I felt rushed into it before being sure I was ready, I did get a satisfaction from proving to my father that I hadn't spent the previous few months cavorting with a frivolous and dishonorable man.

After moving into my husband's household my life changed abruptly and completely. On my first day, I managed to displease the in-laws by uttering the word "Harun." I was told it was disrespectful to call my husband by name. It's too familiar. I am supposed to be circumspect about the intimacy of the marital relationship and avoid addressing him directly when others are around. I'm supposed to say "listen" or "do you hear me," to get his attention. Harun asked me to indulge his parents. "They're old, they have their ways... couldn't we just humor them?"

It's a hard habit to break, the habit of calling someone by their given name, especially if you've been doing it for as long as you've been acquainted. But I "humored" my new family. Now I find myself calling him "Do You Hear Me" even in private. My tongue doesn't even reach for "Harun." In fact, my tongue has learned to hold itself back from a lot of things. It's a change in me that Harun doesn't seem to mind.

Harun and I don't go anywhere anymore. We don't go out on the town, or take long drives in the country. We don't meet our friends for dinner or tea. Our social life now consists of visiting his relatives. My role in that is to greet the elders by touching their feet and after that to keep my head down and covered and to speak only when spoken to. I wasn't accustomed to touching people's feet. My family is a lot less traditional that way. But Harun informed me that I had to get accustomed to different ways, that marriage changes life.

I bring up the topic of my nausea one more time. I tell him the pills he gave me didn't work.

"That's odd," he said, while changing into his night clothes.

"What's odd is that you won't entertain the possibility that it's something else."

"Like what?" He is at a loss for what else it could be, even though I had spelled it out for him this morning.

"I already *told* you what!" I'm finally out of patience.

"What?"

"A baby. I think it might be a *baby*!"

"You thinking it doesn't make it a fact."

"Ok, so maybe we let a doctor tell us what the 'fact' is!"

"You want to run to the doctor because of a little nausea? You know, that's just your problem, you make such a big deal out of every little thing." He storms off to the dining room, silently eats his dinner and glumly stares at the TV. I sit by the window staring at the world, obscured by the blackness dripping from a big empty sky, with eyes drenched in an even darker blackness, and I listen to the world's emptiness punctuated by the rhythm of my sighs.