

NOW AND THEN

ANUM ASI

Mariam was visiting Adnan's grandmother, waiting for him to return from an errand so that they could go to a wedding together. Dadi, papery and powdered, was dressed in a white cotton house-dress, her ears sticking out from gray hair that ran away from her temples and fruited at the crown of her head, her nose softly cobbled. She fished inside a plastic basket filled with papers while her nurse, Nashmia, stood by her and peeked into the basket with a helpful air.

Mariam sat behind a large cut-glass bowl filled with blocks of watermelon, a small box of juice and a loaf of dense yellow plain-cake encased in brown paper. Dadi watched Mariam peel the oily paper away from the sides of the cake before cutting a piece, but refused to take any herself. Dadi was a skilled chef who had taught herself how to cook out of a sensuous enthusiasm for food. But she barely ate anything nowadays as if rationing out the pleasures of this world in preparation for leaving it. Before she married Adnan, Mariam had never met an elderly person so well taken care of, each need anticipated before it was even expressed, so many people present and ready to help her with every little thing, Nashmia or the cook Ashraf or Adnan's mother. Mariam's mother had lost her parents as a young child and been brought up by a series of distant relatives, most of whom had faded into the past. Mariam's father's parents, her Dadi and Dada, lived with his brother in Hyderabad and, though her father did what he could in terms of visits and monetary help - more, now that his kids were out of school and college - he couldn't prevent them from becoming more and more ground-down as the years passed, flattened and tired by hard lives with little comfort or stability, a tiredness difficult to alleviate even once stability and comfort were more readily available.

"I can't eat too much Dadi, I'm feeling sick," said Mariam, to excuse the tiny sliver of cake she was cutting for herself.

Dadi peered at her. "Oh? Any good news?" she asked.

"No, no," said Mariam. "Nothing like that. It's just a bit hot."

"Oh well," said Dadi, turning back to the basket. "I put your invitations in here yesterday. Nashmia did you take them? You're not supposed to take anything from this basket until I've looked at it." One by one she lifted out papers and put them in a pile on the bed - tradesmen's bills, handwritten receipts for vegetables and meat, flyers for dry-cleaners, homeopaths and AC repairmen left under the windshield wipers of the car which Dadi brought in so that she could inspect them in detail.

Dadi received everyone in this bedroom, family friends, the doctor, young journalists (children of her old colleagues at the ladies' digests she had written for), Ashraf who carried in pans of cut-up vegetables or half-cooked chicken to be inspected. Everything she wanted - almond chikki and popped rice, medicines for her diabetes, one English and one Urdu newspaper daily - was brought to her. A tin trunk at the end of the bed was filled with copies of the magazines in which her stories had been serialized, hundreds of pages of translucent paper stuffed between bright covers. The cupboards were filled with souvenirs from places that Dadi had never been, mugs printed with the names of organizations that some family member had once been associated with, plastic trophies painted gold, most missing a handle or a base, the names and achievements of the owners rubbed out by time, newspapers that featured a distant cousin in one line on page 9, certificates of participation for the egg-and-spoon race or tug-of-war, unending legions of minor commemoration from the distant past.

The invitations to the wedding had been delivered to Dadi by the brother of the bride, a young boy long-legged and casual in sweats but wearing a button-down in formal deference to his errand. Dadi was determined to do her duty, if belatedly, in passing them on to Mariam and Adnan.

The bride and groom were Adnan's friends. As kids they had spent long weekend afternoons at each other's houses playing games of Monopoly and one-tip cricket in the drive-way, calling each other out for being a fumbler or slow-poke. Adnan told Mariam how he never

got tired during these games, never became frustrated or fatigued, no matter how long they played or how hot it was, not until the end of the day when tiredness pinned him pleasantly to bed and sleep. She remembered thinking fondly how typical of him it was, that determined enjoyment followed by dreamless exhaustion.

The cards were finally found and handed over. Ashraf brought a basket of bhindi to show Dadi and was told that he had not cut it up properly on the diagonal. He reminded her that this was how she had told him to do it last time and Dadi held a piece of bhindi between two knobby fingers and peered at it as if it would start relating her earlier instructions back to her. Mariam looked up the bride and groom on Facebook. She knew that she had met them at her own wedding functions and a few dinners with Adnan after, but the longer she looked at their photos the more unsure she was that she recognized them at all. The people she thought she recalled and the figures in the photos started to diverge. She remembered that Adnan had once dated a girl who looked like the increasingly unrecognizable woman in the photos.

In the beginning Adnan and Mariam had been scrupulous about detailing the past, going through boyfriends and girlfriends, lovers and even crushes. Mariam listed hers chronologically and then in order of emotional impact. She withheld the information, also clearly itemized in her mind, about why she had entered each particular relationship. Adnan threw out names and attached memories here and there. He delved into details when he remembered them and forgot others, so that a connection often emerged later at unexpected times - "Oh yeah we had this thing when her boyfriend and her broke up but it was nothing." Actually Mariam couldn't decide if he forgot or deliberately omitted. Her own memory felt so precise, so all-encompassing, down to the feeling she had had the first time a boy passed his hand under her shirt, over her naked back, while they hugged on a bench behind some trees at school, breathless with the fear of the games teacher seeing them, which she could still call up with a shiver, that she couldn't imagine someone just forgetting about kissing somebody. Her memory was so linear, so much like a reel of images, that she was disinclined to believe Adnan's story about his own memory being patchy, of images and snatches of

conversations approaching and receding as if through a fog, unreliable and unpredictable, unable to be accessed at will.

Dadi's room was by the front entrance of the house so that she could see anyone who came or left. There was work being done in the living room, wires that had frayed and blown out the light in one phase. Men were walking back and forth across the empty rectangle that the door cut into the hallway, carrying drills and rolls of wire, a step-stool, a ladder. They stepped past the door quickly for if Dadi caught them she would argue with them over the type of nails (too long and they would scar the walls, too small and they would be ineffective), the smell of the paint, the quality of the cables.

Mariam had attended to their own apartment, hers and Adnan's, with similar energy. Each curtain-rod installed, each tap scrubbed to shining, each plant placed in some choice corner of a room had seemed like an investment in the present. But her excitement had waned over time. Now the thought of having to fix or repair anything, even to loosen the clogs of hair that kept congealing in the shower drain with the long, serrated, orange plastic tool that she kept under the sink for this purpose tired her, the constant war against attrition exhausting.

Adnan came into the room. She had missed him walking into the house past Dadi's door with plastic bags of fruit in each hand. His hair was ruffled and sweat shone on his forehead but his pale blue kurta looked fresh and cool, as did the white pajamas that he had creased sharply, earlier in the day, by pressing down the full weight of his torso on the iron.

"I found you your cards," Dadi told him. "Look, I've given them to Mariam."

Mariam nodded and then, at Dadi's prompting, extracted the cards from her tiny, sequined hand-bag so that Adnan could look at them properly. Dadi made him read both sides, including the photocopied insert with the map to the shaadi hall.

"Thanks Dadi," said Adnan, nodding at the cards, bending over to hug her with one arm resting lightly on her frail shoulders. "Shall we go?" he asked Mariam and Mariam got to her feet on her high heels, shaking out the wrinkles in her long shirt behind her. She picked apart the

bits where the silver zari on her dupatta clutched at the chiffon of her kameez, feeling suddenly very tall and out of place.

At the mehendi, Mariam watched Dania dance. Purple and orange lights swept around her, her hair coming undone, her drink spilling out of her cup and splashing other people with the smell of vodka. Next to Mariam, Adnan shifted from foot to foot in time with the music, clapping along with the people gathered at the edge of the dance floor.

At one point Adnan would have engaged all of the attention that Mariam now gave to Dania. For in the beginning of their relationship she had felt pickled with well-being, not needing to question herself, blind to other people and how they looked at or related to her. It had been a time of total self-belief, a hazy, comfortable glow reflected back to her from Adnan's uncomplicated desire. But now Adnan had become like a house-plant. She checked on him every now and then but mostly he was just there, his outline dimly remembered wherever in the room he happened to be.

Only in moments when she missed the blurry contentment of being admired did Adnan come back into focus. And in those moments he became newly precious again, but as a sort of an amulet or an icon, not a person. She began to look on him as a messenger who had once carried a message crucial to her psyche, to a sense of purpose in the present. But he had forgotten it. Yet there was no one else who had even been told the message let alone remembered it.

At the end of the dance Dania came and found them, loose and laughing, sweat sticking long strands of her hair to her face. Behind her, her date for the wedding, cheeks shaved so clean that they gleamed pink, aggressive goatee, solid sheaf of hair rising into the sky, orange kurta of the bride's side, hovered, waiting for her to get done with them.

"Hey man," said Adnan, friendly as he always was, drawing him into the circle.

"Ahmer," said the guy, lifting his chin at them, "Hey." He looked like the sort of person who worked at his parents' business, ordering around uncles twice his own age, uncles who then went home and shouted

at their own sons, boys just about as old as Ahmer, to fucking make something of their lives. Dania, Adnan and Ahmer began to talk about the YouTube star they had copied a dance routine from, how quickly she had become famous.

"It's different here in Pakistan. You could say we know a lot of people," Dania informed Ahmer, who had apparently recently returned to the city. "It's much harder abroad." All of Dania's opinions became definite as soon as they left her mouth. But Mariam could just as easily imagine her saying the exact opposite thing, complaining how insular everyone in Karachi was, how wonderfully free she felt making friends or connections elsewhere.

In the distance people danced. Dania used Mariam as an example - Mariam's furniture, said Dania, got to be in the news all the time because "it's like the fishbowl is just smaller here."

Mariam wanted to separate herself somehow from the people Dania was lumping her in with. Only for people like you, she wanted to say. But she knew nearly everyone on the floor by name. Someone who had opened a cupcake business that supplied corporate events, Unilever and Morgan Stanley having suddenly discovered a taste for cupcakes loaded with icing and marzipan cut-outs. Someone who made designer training bras in factories that also produced jeans for Zara and t-shirts for Nike. Someone who was rising through the ranks of foreign aid organizations, her salary racking up higher and higher as she produced legions of children's books in Urdu and Sindhi that were checked off against a list of deliverables and then languished in a shuttered room at the Department of Curriculum Planning.

Mariam's friend Tanya danced as part of a group, her dupatta flying around, her khussas lying upside down in the middle of the floor. Mariam wanted to go over and turn the shoes the right way up. Tanya had been the first one to write about Mariam. It had been mid-June, sweltering hot, but Mariam wore a black turtleneck and black pants and perched at the very edge of a chair fashioned out of two curved pieces of neon wood. Tanya asked her to take off her glasses so that Mariam ended up looking muddled and opaque in the photos that the photographer emailed her. She looked okay in print though, her slightly disarrayed

expression attributable to the blurring of ink on the thin paper of the magazine.

Mariam clipped all the articles about herself and kept them in a drawer in the office she had set up in a corner of their living room; she bookmarked each website that mentioned her designs, and printed them out for her folders, and listed each new reference on the website that she maintained for herself.

When the time came to go up to the bride and groom and congratulate them, Mariam handed Adnan the salami envelope and hung back. The bride looked robust and natural in her ghagra, her cheekbones jutting out of her round, alert face. In the car coming over Adnan had filled Mariam in - she was a biologist with a PhD now, worked in a lab in Cambridge, injecting DNA into the brains of albino rats to explore some arcane neuronal circuit. In the lead-up to her wedding she had applied that dedication to barre, HIIT workouts and 10K runs, was driven around with a sweaty ponytail and a large gym bag filled with towels and coconut water from the yoga studio, to Zamzama Park, to the shops, not caring what the aunties at any of those locations thought of her yoga leggings and tank tops, documenting the #bridetobe journey on Instagram.

The groom meanwhile had spent most of his time failing to convince his parents to invite fewer people. Now he leaned back into the large golden sofa surrounded by plumes of tuberoses and gladiolas taking, it seemed, a well-deserved rest. His qulla was lopsided - on purpose? Mariam wondered - and he wore his sherwani as if it was a sweatshirt. His shawl was threaded under his arms and slung over both shoulders in a rakish, relaxed manner, highly studied, Mariam realized, when she saw the large safety pins holding it in place. Both of them half stood up out of the sofa to greet Adnan and Mariam.

Dania rushed onto the stage behind Adnan and Mariam and straight into hugging the bride and groom. She seemed as vital, polished and painted as the bride.

Mariam looked out over the crowd. Dania's mum was sitting by herself in one of the red-rayon-wrapped seats at the back of the rows of chairs arranged around the stage. Her large purse sat on the chair

next to hers, keeping it empty. She balanced a plate on her knees. Her mustard sari was the same one that Mariam had seen her wear to every fancy event, weddings and school plays alike, but the blouse was new, gold, short-sleeved. Like Dania she had one feature that took over her whole face, making it luminous, strange - they shared their large, narrow, heavy-lidded, deepest black eyes, rimmed, identically, with eye-liner and kajal. Mariam would have liked to be the kind of person who, if she didn't feel like engaging, would keep her handbag on the chair next to hers, wear the same sari to everything and look out at the world from behind the comfort of one distinguished, unchanging feature.

When Mariam had first met Adnan, at her first job out of college, she thought he looked old, haggard - he had deep lines that went from his nose to his mouth, his skin was sallow, his hair peppered with gray already, at age twenty two, though his rough, close-cropped beard was still all black. He was skinny and led with his pelvis when he walked, his stiff jeans a size too large sitting low on his hips and making his legs look blocky. He had a habit of perching on the edge of his desk, his feet on his chair, his Dell in his lap. He was friends with everyone, had a nickname for each person, mouse, keera, m. shamalama-ding-dong for the intense kid who loved movies. But as she began to know him, as his jokes and easy manner coalesced opaquely around that first impression, the idea of his being old and haggard blurred and lifted away, became indistinct.

People, when she first met them, often looked as if they were wearing a mask. But after a while their true faces shone out and from then on these true faces, composed not just of their physical features but also their personalities and how others responded to them, dominated, and she almost forgot the earlier impression. Dania too had looked thread-bare, colorless, when she first met her. But once Dania's personality asserted itself, fizzy, and once she saw how others reacted to her, how Dania fielded or made use of those reactions, that initial mask, the feeling of her being shabby, unpolished, fell off, and Dania was enshrined as vital, like one of those Greek heroes who had attractiveness and charisma poured over their shoulders when they needed it, a constant shimmer of energy.

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Back then Mariam had no interest in Adnan but they became friends as the whole office, mostly people just out of college, began to go for halwa puri and beach trips together, pooling money to rent a hut. At one of those trips Mariam rode with Adnan in his dad's car to the beach, Dania tagging along in the back seat. Adnan was still self-consciously listening to Bob Dylan and Dania kept up a steady patter, trying to get him to put her pirated Adele CD in instead. The line of three cars edged along the dusty road trying to find their hut. The sun slanted in through the side window and burned Mariam's arm where it lay on the arm-rest. She kept catching flashes of herself in her new sunglasses in the side-mirror, looking bug-eyed but, she thought, glamorous.

Everything at the hut, the floor, the buckled wicker sofas, the sagging single bed in the bedroom that no one ever used, was gritty with sand and damp, and the peeling, patchy walls were painted a bright fluorescent yellow. The bulb in the bathroom was blown out and there was no water in the taps. A bucket half-filled with water, a layer of sand settled at the bottom, sat with a pink plastic mugga floating inside it. There was no glass in any of the windows and the hot sun flashed off the sea in the distance.

They dumped their bags, their Nestlé water bottles, their Super Crisp and slims and French Cheese Lays, their white cardboard boxes of biryani, on the sandy table in the middle of the room. The others from the office grabbed the booze and the one-and-a-half liter bottle of Pakola and made for the water, eyes squinting against the sun that raked their arms and shoulders with heat. Adnan stayed behind at the table, crumbling a little cube of hash out on to some paper. Dania sat on the edge of one of the wicker sofas, the only person putting on sunblock, smoothing it onto her arms under her white kurta sleeves and on the parts of her calves not covered by her black tights.

Mariam didn't know whether she should stay with Dania or go out with the others, so she hovered as Dania told Adnan about the first time she had gotten high.

"Nothing happened after the first brownie so I tried to act like a hero. I kept eating them. My parents called and my friends had to take

my phone away so I wouldn't pick up. Then I puked in the flowerbeds. With my first real crush too. He had to hold my hair back. It was fucking disgusting." Dania laughed at herself as she said it and Adnan laughed too. Dania making a fool of herself in the past in front of some boy had turned the key to camaraderie.

Mariam had been there as well - she had taken two puffs from a joint. Her heart started racing and she got scared and left, going to her dorm room and falling asleep with a waste basket lined with a plastic bag by her head. Dania had come in early in the morning, after breakfast at the cafeteria, looking fresh and fragrant, the signs of the terrible trip, the vomit on the gaindas, magically erased by a romantic early morning breakfast and walk. "We kissed on the roof of the mosque at dawn!" she had told Mariam.

The surface of the ocean glared, a giant coruscating mirror reflecting the sun's fierce heat. Everybody squinted. Mariam's face grew tight and red; the water evaporated again and again and left streaks of salt around her lips, on her cheeks, by her eyes. She floated with the muscular waves, holding onto a tube, taking care not to float out too far, keeping as much of her body under the water as possible, first facing away from the sun towards the beach, where the others lolled, growing dehydrated from the booze and the heat, and then towards the sun, closing her eyes for as long as she dared. She let the tube go and dipped down so that she was eye level with the waves, spread out her arms and let the water rock her back and forth, bobbing up to breathe then submerging herself again.

Her head felt vacuum-sealed against the world. Her skin, charred by the sun and basted by the sea, felt like a tomato on a spit about to burst. When she couldn't hold her eyes open against the sun any longer she waded out of the water. The waves broke against her body and caught at her ankles.

She joined the others, claiming a corner of their sand-encrusted towel. They were drinking from plastic cups, half lying down, wet, talking away. Mariam's t-shirt and tights stuck to her, gritted through by sand. Adnan, his skinny knees poking out of his parachute shorts, cheap plastic

sunglasses concealing his eyes, was bitching about their boss. Dania lay on her white kurti, arms already browned by the sun in her pink tank-top, elbow propping up her head, listening. According to Adnan, their boss was hitting on a girl in the office.

"He's married, it's disgusting," he said. "To be married and doing that."

"Who's he married to?" asked Dania.

"His shirts are always open down to his navel," said Adnan. "Who does that." He scabbled in the packet of Lays. "Some rich lady. That's what you should do, if you want to be an artist," he said to Mariam.

"Marry rich."

"He was rich to begin with," said Mariam. "How do you think he even knew Alia. She's next-level rich. You don't just get to meet her at your cousin's wedding."

"I want to write about this day!" said Dania, letting her elbow flop straight and rolling flat onto her back. Her underarms looked pale and vulnerable. She dug her heels into the sand and stretched and her feet twisted, floated up by Adnan's calves, grazed them. "This beach. To be here with you people. It's beautiful." She sat up again and looked at Dania, but her glance included Adnan, enshrined him. All three of them glowed within her gaze. "I am having the most wonderful day."

Adnan's Dadi was at the wedding too, sitting in her wheelchair by the stage. Her sari had a wide border, embroidered with silver thread, pulled up flat across her chest up to her neck, then wrapped around her shoulders, the gleaming fabric surrounding her frail body gently like the petals of a huge, stiff paper flower. Her soft, well-moisturized feet in their gray rubber Aerosoft sandals peeked out under the edge of the palloo. She looked remote and preoccupied as she clapped along to the music. Nashmia sat by her, holding Dadi's handbag, a bag, Dadi had told Mariam, that had once belonged to her own mother but, "look how well-preserved it is," she had said, smoothing her hand over the time-softened leather. "I have it oiled every few months."

Mariam sat at a chair behind the two of them, her plate of food on her knees, a bottle of Coke wobbly on the tufted carpet by her foot.

Everyone was crowded onto the dance floor. In the middle of the flashing lights Dania dragged Adnan on. Mariam could see Dania craning her neck, her hand on Adnan's forearm, looking around for Mariam.

Dania lived as though no portion or segment of her life was connected to any other. She had no need or ability to narrativize the arc of her life. All in her life was polyphony, multifarious. At every stage she found expression. At every stage she was created anew, emerging whole into teenager-hood, adulthood, womanhood, propelled out of a mist, spat out by the past, flying out with the wind at her back and landing on one foot, one set of toes followed by the firm flat heel, a running start.

While Mariam constantly delayed herself. Mariam was forever mute. Mariam couldn't help thinking about how things connected to each other. The past and the future folded into the present. Mariam forever looking out of Mariam's eyes.

For all of the past had to be accounted for, all of life had to be maintained - friendship, love, a home. And how? And for what? There was a constant edging at her thoughts, of things that she was supposed to be doing but hadn't, social obligations that she had let slip, family members offended by her absence or lack of a phone call, projects she had yet to complete, things she meant to learn, people she wanted to impress. She sat around, plunged into relics of the past - literature, poetry, obscure artists, her own friends and family - while out there the present destroyed itself and the future was erased.

Mariam was glad when Dania did not find her, when they turned back to the dance floor. Her desires were like an ember banked in ash, glowing, saved for what future date she didn't know. She did not think that they encompassed the two of them, Adnan and Dania. But she also didn't know how to escape this entanglement or in what new direction to point herself.

Adnan was already dancing, or performing his version of it, his fists up by his ears, pounding at something softly invisible, knees bent, feet shuffling from side to side, head bobbing. He herded Dania into the dancing bodies, laughing, his mouth wide open. The light purpled their faces and ran down in a glowing river over Dania's hair. Adnan twirled her, his hand passing over her back, resting lightly for half a second and

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no more. Mariam leaned further back into her chair, tucking her hair behind her ears. The food was hot and the ice-cold Coke leaked condensation down her forearm.