

South of Somewhere

Sufyan should have arrived half an hour earlier, but there were red lights. It was early autumn so he had miscalculated how many people would be on their way home before the sunset, and by the time he pulled into the masjid parking lot, he had waited under one red light for every letter of his father's name.

The part of the musallah where the men removed their shoes smelled lactonic and rosy from incense, which he was told by the secretary was the doing of a man everyone referred to as Brother Shahid, whose office sat towards the back of the masjid, accessible only by way of walking through the main prayer hall. He would have to weave his way through the congregants to find him. Though not officially responsible for masjid aesthetics, Shahid, who was also a part-time chemistry teacher for his cousins, took it upon himself to buy in bulk the same incense used in Delhi temples and scattered the sticks to compensate for odd and unused corners. When attendees complained about the incense's potency, the story goes that Shahid had suggested perhaps it was better to be overwhelmed by the incense than the smell of the attendees themselves. As he made his way, Sufyan could see a slim man with large hands looming over his desk and picking at his hair. The speakers crackled static and the muezzin announced that Asr prayers would be shortly, followed by a janazah.

Shahid's right hand found the softest part of his scalp where, with enough tender pressure, the skin gave away its protective surface and the offending fingernail soon felt wetness. A vinous, metallic scent radiated from the spot, made heady by his body's warmth. He was still pressing when a figure entered the edge of his vision, indistinct at first, then gradually demanding shape. He knew to expect a young man in his office after a phone call with the deceased man's secretary and then another with his wife who had no questions other than if

the young man had arrived. Shahid was struck by the resemblance between him and the wrapped body. The description he was given by the deceased man's wife was accurate, and the young man seemed to have his father's face down to the last feature. It was only when he was up close that Shahid noticed his mouth was different.

Asalamualaikum. Are you here to see...

He gestured broadly in the direction of the room where the body was waiting. He realized he was pointing carelessly, as though towards a pile of melons, and a warmth spread across his face. The young man was also flushed and seemed to have run in from somewhere. He blinked very slowly, breathing heavily while chewing on his lower lip.

Yes, hello.

Something about him was distracting Shahid and it made him uneasy. He lowered his gaze.

We've been waiting for a loved one to arrive, he mumbled. This is a hasty matter.

The congregation had swelled to almost full capacity and Shahid could see the waves of bodies merging with one another, clambering to claim their spots. Fathers pulled at their sons' shirts and stood them tall. He was usually heartened by the somber emotion he saw at janazahs but today there was no one crying. The deceased man's wife had said not to expect any family members. She had let out a little laugh as she said this, an act that shocked him almost caused him to end their phone call. Shahid caught the glint of an earring when Sufyan also turned his head to also regard the congregation, and felt the sudden pulse of a headache coming on. He placed a hand on his widow's peak, hoping his irritation and curiosity would simmer.

Can I see my father?, Sufyan croaked.

The day before, after his first conversation with the deceased man's wife, Shahid had cleared his afternoon and waited. He was meant to guide her son through the washing of the body as the final ablution required a particular attention and Shahid felt the gravity of it settle in his chest as it always did. He had been told to remain close to the young man, to keep him steady and to anticipate confusion or collapse. She said her son would not know what to say or which prayer to begin with. But the young man who stood with him in the ghusl room was composed in a way he had not been instructed to expect. Shahid regretted passing on his work to prepare himself for someone unformed by grief.

He waited for a question or a surge of feeling that would require intervention, but none came. In three strides the young man was beside his father, his hand finding the barren white of his face, smoothing the fine hairs Shahid had brushed aside while drying and wrapping the body.

My father, an island.

Shahid did not hear him at first. Sufyan repeated himself more clearly, saying he could never reach his father. He said it without emphasis, as if stating a fact long settled.

He did not wait for Shahid to respond. Instead, Shahid watched Sufyan bend down and murmur against his father's forehead, his words indistinct. He placed his damp mouth on the rigor mortis and closed his eyes. Shahid felt a strange hesitation, uncertain whether he was permitted to intrude on a display of love so unguarded and exacting. The young man lifted his hand to his own lips and then to his father's throat, standing only when his legs began to tremble beneath him.

The air around them seemed to cool all at once, sending a shiver up Shahid's arms. The prayer hall seemed as far away as God did these days, a recurring thought he would only momentarily entertain. But if he had managed to do something correctly, if he had earned the

right to be present for a tenderness like this, then perhaps he was not as unregarded as he sometimes believed.

The muezzin called for the congregation to stand so the two men made their way to the prayer hall where Sufyan was pulled into the first line. Thirty lines of men and women who did know his family raised their hands to their ears, placed them on their chests, touched their foreheads to the earth and asked God for his journey onwards to be peaceful. They thought of the people they had buried and would bury, and wondered, somewhere between the third and fourth supplication, who would stand for them. Who amongst their loved ones would crop rows on the plush carpet and cry when they left? Sufyan thought of his sister and Shahid inexplicably thought of Sufyan.

When the prayers ended, Sufyan did not wait for Brother Shahid to find him, the men around him to shake his hand, or for the imam to begin a khutbah on life after this one. He brushed past everyone without bothering to put on his shoes before he began running towards the exit. One foot in front of the other, over and over again, till he struck a rhythm not unlike a heartbeat. Under his feet the pavement stung raw so he ran faster into the far depths of the vehicular maze till he finally reached his own.

Except for the sound of homeward geese and Sufyan releasing breakfast all over his shoes, the parking lot was silent.

•

He tried to assemble the reasons he disliked his father, but they refused to line up in any convincing order. He wished his sister would answer her phone so he could ask her instead. She loved their parents in a way he understood was only possible for a firstborn, and the patient, almost pathetic way she had waited for their father's approval used to unsettle him. It

made Sufyan pity her, though he suspected that pity was a form of distance he relied on. She seemed not to recognize, or perhaps refused to acknowledge, that there were no consistent goalposts with their father. Those erected were moved arbitrarily or erased altogether.

His stomach tightened and he called her once more, then again, before finally disconnecting his phone. He steered the car toward his father's apartment in the city center where the doorman greeted him by name and took him upstairs without a single question.

•

There was an unexpected mustiness in the flat trailed by an acrid scent coming from the kitchen. It was unclear to him when his father had last been inside the apartment, and whether the final day of his occupation felt any different to all the other days before it. The detritus of his life lay haphazardly on every surface.

A family of fruitflies descended on him as soon as he entered the kitchen. Sufyan waved his hands, but they united around him, landing on his face and fighting to enter his mouth as he opened cabinets and touched their contents. Neatly arranged bottles of aachaar, crystallized honey, an assortment of off-brand medicines, a pile of airplane snacks. A single mug containing a pruney teabag sat next to the microwave. He was most surprised by the expensive spices, a purchase likely made by his father's secretary. She had fussed over Sufyan the first time they had met, repeatedly touching his shoulder as his father watched. When she asked if he would like to accompany her to go shopping for his father next week, he lied and said yes. Later that evening he boarded the train for school and would not speak to her again until a year later when she would call him sobbing.

Evening had blanketed the apartment and from where he stood he could see the edges of his father's living room had softened. The small clusters of clean laundry someone had neglected to put away blurred in the darkness. He reached for a lamp, wincing slightly as the room

came into focus. There were boxes lining the walls as well as the coffee table's perimeter. Psychology books from his father's practice had been removed from their shelves and stacked next to their designated receptacle. He began sifting through the boxes nearest to him and almost broke into laughter when he found the china plates.

His mother had claimed the dinnerware had been part of her mother's dowry and thus too valuable for daily use, so the set sat untouched for decades inside of an armoire and eventually outlived the woman it had been intended for. One day his father decided to look up its actual value and declared in a voice meant to carry, that his mother-in-law had been a stupid woman.

No one expected a response but one came quick and unfaltering. The siblings had never heard their mother speak to him like that before, in a voice so uncontained and clear, as though from the top of a minaret. They would not hear it like that again.

Sufyan assumed she had taken the plates with her when she fled. He began counting.

His father had scribbled an address on the boxes that would direct them to an unfamiliar house in Karachi. He kept pace with the clinks as his fingers moved against the cold porcelain and the disks stacked at the edge of his palm. Enough to hold the food of a six-person family. He counted them again. Outside, the sun completed its descent, leaving Sufyan to stare at the address in renewed shadow. Perhaps if he stared long enough, it would make sense to him. The lamp hummed soft and low, casting gold over the dust drifting upwards from his father's belongings, and beyond its modest halo the room lay still and untouched. He leaned towards a second lamp and paused with his hand hovering over the switch. The thought of seeing too much made him sit again. He decided to navigate by feel and made his way slowly towards the bedroom, socked feet padding softly on the dusty floors.

*

In the early days of apartment life, his father had commented on the floors with pride. He remarked at the way the chevron pattern stacked on itself and seemed especially pleased with how so few people had inhabited the apartment before him. The floors are practically new, he had said. Along with his father, Sufyan allowed himself to be swayed by the manna of new beginnings. There was something intoxicating about the idea that one could stand where so few had stood before and on that fertile ground create something that was entirely their own. He imagined that his father felt, for perhaps the first time, what life as an unburdened young man may have been. A home with rooms only he would occupy. A kitchen where he could make tea for himself, where he would be answerable to no one, not even his patients. He allowed himself to imagine the apartment the way his father likely saw it, and the patina of his father's life—dust, trinkets left behind by his secretary, laundry—took on a different lustre.

As he fumbled toward the bedroom, the apartment's only noisy floorboard creaked beneath him, just outside the guest bathroom. He had noticed it years earlier, during one of the first dinners his father hosted for him, when he had slipped away to call his sister. That night he arrived early and came upon his father's secretary in the kitchen, moving between stove and fridge, slicing, simmering, tasting as she went. He watched her longer than he meant to. When his father appeared and introduced them, Sufyan looked away and decided not to wonder.

The creak returned weeks later at another dinner, sharper than the rest. Over his first serving, father took to admonishing decisions no one could undo so Sufyan took himself to the bathroom, ribs tightening as he sat on the toilet, head in his hands, interrupted only by the body's simplest demand. He reached under the sink for toilet paper and found instead

women's razors, a dopp kit crowded with things no man his father's age would keep.

Gardenia lotions. Emergency contraceptives. Hair curlers.

He texted his sister and asked if she had spoken to their father in the last two weeks. Her acknowledgement and denial came almost immediately. He asked if he should press their father about Pakistan and received another no. Finally, he asked if she could see their father, and if she couldn't, whether he might take the train up to meet her instead. He imagined them at the window table in Mother's Dumplings, her across from him, mixing black vinegar and sesame oil in a bowl, tugging his earlobe the way she used to. He wanted an entire afternoon of being told not to worry and the promise of lamb shu mai.

Several minutes passed without an answer before he washed his hands and returned to the table. He paused outside the bathroom to check his phone again, listening to the sounds from the bedroom. Muffled music, then laughter, high and tinkling. The floorboard sounded beneath his foot, and the laughter stopped.

His father's continued admonitions were continually punctuated with an absurd number of dishes for two people: a whole chicken roasted in ghee and crushed coriander; chopped eggplant simmered with onions and tomatoes; long rice cooked in a beef stock so gelatinous it made the mouth sticky; green baby mangoes pickled in mustard oil; yogurt stirred with tempered cumin and whole chilies. His secretary would beam as she placed down each dish and wait for a few seconds to receive her thanks. The image of her hunched over the stove, steam pinning her mousy hair to her scalp as she cooked with such diligence, had made Sufyan's stomach turn.

*

It felt right to him that he also navigate the bedroom using only what the city several stories below could offer in the way of light. He felt his way towards the bed, hands grasping onto the frame as he settled himself on the sheets. He laughed at the absurdity of his father having kept his marital bed—that dark oak ship where no one, not even his parents, had sought refuge.

Sufyan moved aside the bills and invoices that his father had slept on presumably in the last nights of his life. The surface was littered with envelopes, most of them unopened, and he dug his toes underneath the blanket of paper and spread his arms as he reclined onto the mattress. There were no sounds in the room, not from a clock, not even from the ambient hum of a machine. He thought of all the dead fathers in the world and how many of their children missed them. How difficult of a thing it must be to be a father, he thought. To contribute to the act of creation, witness and despair at its violence, and still find yourself incapable of apologizing for it. For the rest of your life to be shaped by that unattainable apology, only to have it mutate over time into a cruelty of its own. To be a lighthouse with no shore.

He lay very still, trying to make out the shapes in the dim, willing himself to relax. But the weight in the air did not lift. It pressed down from every angle, heavy and unyielding, filling the space around him. His father, an island. His size, his presence, the sheer force of his moods—they had left their mark on everything Sufyan remembered. Though sometimes those memories came in fragments, he was able to recall the most salient of them: conversations where words spilled unchecked, moments in public where irritations and half-formed thoughts were displayed openly. He knew his father was more than these things, but still the clearest images of him were shaped by the sharp edges of his shortcomings.

Sometimes another side of him appeared and his father put forth queries about Sufyan's life that made it seem, however briefly, that they had it in them to start over. The urge to reach forward would swell within Sufyan only to be subdued by the harshness of his father's curiosity.

The sheets pressed against his sides as the mattress softened beneath him, and he sank deeper into the memory of sitting slack-jawed, waiting for engagement that came only in measured doses. Moustache and mouth glistening after several helpings of food, fatigue finally creeping in around the edges of inquiry. All the questions, all the asking, and still nothing for him.

He knew the evening had slipped into its most consuming darkness, though there was nothing in the room to indicate how many hours were left until he was allowed to start the clock again. His eyelids fell and he sensed sleep was around the corner, but wanted to indulge the fantasy of a version of his family's life that was, at one point, possible. He thought absently of Shahid and wondered why a man just a few years older than him was running the masjid. It was true that his mother did not need to return to Karachi, or that his father could have kept their family home. If he called the masjid tomorrow to apologize for his sudden departure, would Shahid answer the phone? He could have spared his sister his misplaced anger and held her instead. He made a note to apologize to her, apologize to Shahid, and to ask both where the incense, and Shahid, were from.

A faint vibration trembled against his thigh. He pulled the phone out just far enough to see the name on the screen, a brief flare of white in the dark. *Masjid*. For a moment he imagined the incense again, the way it clung to the musallah walls, and the way it had followed him out without his noticing. The phone buzzed once more, a small, persistent thing, then stilled. He let it go dark in his hand and set it facedown among the scattered envelopes, where it disappeared into the paper hush.

The quiet thickened and settled in layers, and his hand drifted again toward the phone to send his sister a message, asking if they could speak tomorrow. He wanted to wait for her response before putting it away, but his body betrayed him. Several stories below, the city rang its disjointed symphony, each unexplored life brushing with the next, everyone and everything in flux. A reluctant tranquility washed over him as he realized that no one knew where he was and that, for the first time in his life, he was truly alone. Sufyan pulled the covers over his eyes and waited for morning. He dreamt fast and intense, mostly of nothing.