

## *Dhaba*

The best age for slaughter is above fifteen. Usually they have some curves, some meat on them by then—the younger ones are too stickly-bony. Karalika knows that the Farm restaurant customers like fat. It is difficult to slaughter in the heat, the flies are everywhere, and they will lay their eggs inside the girls if you do not sell them quickly. Thankfully garlic, onion, chili, and turmeric cover a bit of rot, Kara thinks as she begins to slice the child's neck.

Outside, reddish brown mounds of dried mud radiate heat as the afternoon settles into dusk. This time of night, the air outside is still and heavy. Tiny tornadoes of children twirl, faster and faster, outside their homes before dinner, giggles echoing between the bamboo and tarp of their tents. Mouthfuls of dust are kicked up by the wheels of the 4x4s of *Angrezi* NGO workers, racing through narrow, uneven roads to the main artery heading north, away from their clinics, food distribution points, interviews and surveys, rushing to get to their beachside cottages and hotels in the nearby *farangi*-town before the curfew. No one in, no one out of the Farm, after dark.

“Best if they haven’t eaten in some time,” Kara tells Pallavi. “Much easier to gut them; the belly has important meat too.” Before her first kill, Kara had felt guilty. She had fed the trembling girl a rich and delicious last meal, after coaxing the girl to tell her favorites—*aloo gobi*, *saag paneer*, and *moong daal*—but dissection later was a mess, intestines full and flopping around the small bamboo hut, contents in various stages of digestion.

Compassion is messy. She never made that mistake again.

A spray of blood slaps the wall as Kara cuts between the young girl's collarbone and chin, one uninterrupted, deep cut from ear to ear. Pallavi can see the sparkle of her spine, as her head rolls off her body. No scream passes her lips, thanks to the *burfi* made of sweet milk and opium paste. The girls jump at the chance to have sweets, so rare on the Farm. Sometimes the opium does not work, and they noisily vomit and choke in a fountain of blood, froth and spittle—but mostly, Kara gets the dose right. Mostly.

Kara and Pallavi unwrap the motionless girl from her sari—red with small gold and silver sparkles for the farm's men who like to pretend they can afford a wife after returning from the forests or the farms, bent and broken, after a long day of work cutting trees or harvesting rice for the Commander. Or, work making *Angrezi* clothes and shoes in the factories.

Kara proudly oversees Pallavi's every move, Pallavi, who worships her mother above all else—an ideal heir to her throne on the Farm. In the corner by the blue tarp door that flutters with every passing gust, the saris that are not too blood-stained are tossed hastily, one on top of the other. Blood, vomit, or shit-stained saris (or those torn when, occasionally, the girls are awake enough to fight) rise in a rainbow pile on the floor next to the carcasses of their previous owners, who are neatly sliced into cuts ready for the pots next door. If not for the remnants of woman awkwardly positioned on the speckled mud floor, the room might look like a sari shop in the Farm's central market. Saris of all shades, faded to other shades by the sun, dotted with sparkling plastic mirrors hugged tightly by brightly colored thread at their edges. Each tiny mirror reflects the warped faces of corpses lying on the floor of the hut, wide-eyed and still. Once, Kara had tried to sell saris directly from the slaughterhouse, but no one wanted to buy them from her.

*Koi nehi*, Kara says. I'll sell these to the market stalls, and they will sell them again, and at a markup that will bring me

more profit. But she hadn't offloaded her saris to the market for a few weeks now. Not with the Resident Coordinator visiting the Farm Commander. Too many *Angrezi* eyes. It is not safe. So, the pile of clean saris rises to kiss the blue tarp ceiling, marked "Regional Farm Authority" in white.

Kara puts down her paring knife, gets the larger machete. She hacks through the remaining neck bones and skin, liberating the girl's head from her body, praying the customers next door won't hear the banging of metal against the mud floor of the hut. She wraps the head in black plastic to bury it at the edge of the Farm, with the others.

Past the kitchen, Kara and Pallavi hear various accents cry, "This curry is incredible!"

"Delicious!"

A chorus of *Angrezi*'s sing the praises of the chef, emphatically nodding their blond, sweaty wisps over their bright red-and-blue-eyed faces, and impossibly white tee-shirts triple-drenched in sweat over grey-green khakis. So many pockets—Kara has always wondered, what are all of those pockets for? Pallavi once asked one of them if this pocket/khaki uniform was required of all *Angrezis*, even non-NGO non-RFA workers? Did they wear this at dinners at home, with their families in the US/UK/Denmark/New Zealand?

Kara walks to the doorway leading to the restaurant and peels the cloth door back. She watches the *Angrezi* fat rolling over their belts as they bend forward over crossed legs towards their plates. They eat our girls and go for jogs through the Farm in their indecent black tight-things to lose weight. All that jiggling white and pink flesh. What a shame we can't cut their fat off them and serve it back to them, she thinks. Kara had initially placed *yellow and pink* plastic chairs in the open thatched restaurant next to the slaughterhouse but ultimately found the *Angrezis* enjoyed sitting on the floor. They told her that it felt more "authentic."

“Quick Pallavi, we must do this quietly and quickly. I did not expect this shipment today, and the *Angrezis* are too close.” Kara walks past her other daughter, Edha, into the restaurant and turns up the radio to drown out any cries and thuds from bodies in the slaughterhouse. *Wahe guru wahe guru wahe guru jeeeee....* she returns to Pallavi.

Pallavi is skeletal, without a single curve at fourteen, and at first seemed to be the most fragile of Kara’s children. Always hanging on Kara’s salwar. Whining. Snotty. Forever wiping her nose on Kara’s kameez. This brought Kara unfathomable joy. No man would ever want Pallavi. She would always be hers.

As Kara sits on the floor, Pallavi hugs each leg with her strong, bony arms, first the right leg, then the left. Kara cuts into and digs around each hip joint. Then the arms, into the shoulder joint, first left, then right. How like large chickens people are, Kara thinks. Pallavi pulls a small gold bangle from the left arm and puts it on her own wrist. It clinks against the others.

“Where did she come from?” Pallavi asks.

“Bhaiya Sameer.”

Bhaiya returns to the Farm once every few months, as do many of the suppliers—but he takes girls with him, so many girls. And occasionally, boys. With black shirts and golden chains on their dark broad, warm and furry chests perched atop perfectly round, protuberant bellies, girls jump to work for him and his men, daydreaming of black and white, clean uniforms as maids, or maybe massaging a rich man who would then fall in love, first with their massages, then with their souls. Some know they will be sold for sex and don’t care. It would be better than the Farm, they reason.

When they become too old or cause trouble, Sameer gives them their last smoke or drink (or both) and sends them to Karalika.

“We won’t have time to deal with her middle, we can do that tomorrow. ”

Kara and Pallavi wrap the torso in black plastic and tie it tight to hide the rusty smell of blood, mixed with the oniony odor of sweat and *thadka* that fills the room. Kara has to at least pretend to hide the girls—though regular meat deliveries to the Farm Commander and his officers keep them quiet.

Pallavi holds the woman's lower leg as Kara begins to skin from the top of the freshly dissected bloody thigh, slicing down to the knee, in one uninterrupted, final cut.