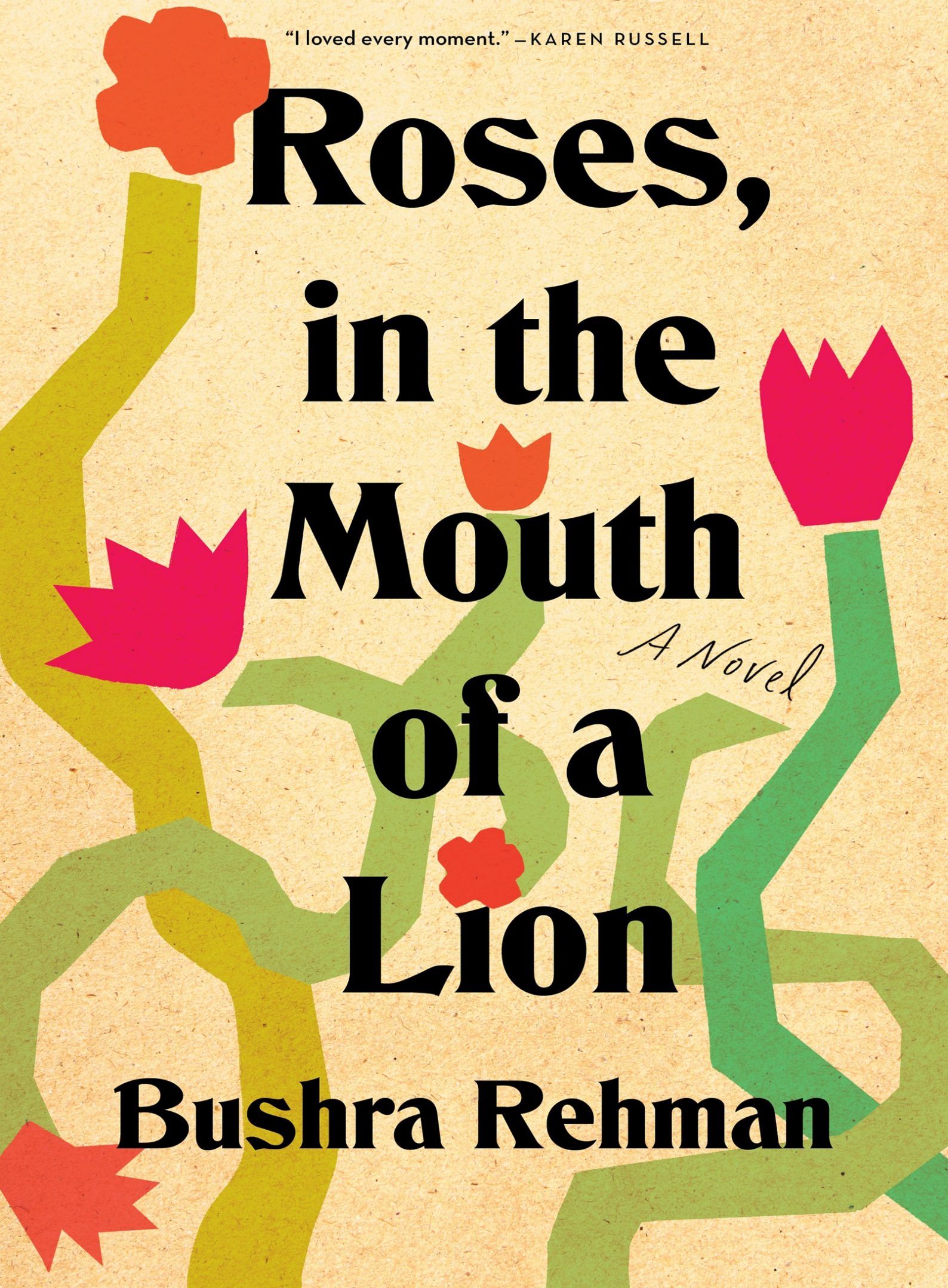
"I loved every moment." —KAREN RUSSELL

Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion

A Novel

Bushra Rehman



ROSES, in the MOUTH OF A LION

Bushra Rehman

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For Rosina

BOOK ONE

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CORONA

Corona, I'm talking about a little village perched under the number 7 train in Queens between Junction Boulevard and 111th Street. I'm talking about the Lemon Ice King, Spaghetti Park, and P.S. 19. The Corona F. Scott Fitzgerald called the valley of ashes as the Great Gatsby drove past it on his night of carousal, but what me and my own know as home. And we didn't know about any valley of ashes because by then it had been topped off by our houses. You know, the kind made from brick this tan color no self-respecting brick would be at all. That's Corona.

And you know the song by Paul Simon? The one where he says, "*Goodbye to Rosie, the queen of Corona. Seein' me and Julio down by the schoolyard…*"

Well, at first, I couldn't believe it was Corona he was singing about, because why would Paul Simon be singing about Corona? I didn't see many white people there unless they were policemen or firemen, and I didn't think Paul Simon had ever been one of those. Then I saw these pictures of him standing in front of one of those tan brick homes. What I thought was a lie was true.

★ ★ ★

I once knew a Julio too. We didn't hang out down by the schoolyard like Paul Simon must have with his Julio. We didn't hang out anywhere at all, but I loved him the way you only could when you were a child. Julio had beauty marks all over, as if it wasn't obvious to everyone how he looked. He carried his body like fire, matchstick, rope.

All the girls in school showed off for Julio, cursing and fighting. In Corona, girls learned early to flash skin, flirt, chew gum, and play games to bring the boys down to their knees, even though it usually ended up the other way around.

But I was not one of them. My mother didn't let me wear skirts,

especially the short kind the other girls wore with their hairless legs and fearless way of flicking their hips. I watched them flirt with Julio, my back against the brick wall.

Julio was my next-door neighbor, and we were in the same fifth-grade class in school. We walked the same way home. Not together, of course. He walked ahead of me with his friends, who'd be whooping and laughing, pulling roses out whenever they went past this house that had so many roses they grew up and over, through the fence like they were some kind of convicts trying to scale the walls.

The Korean grandmother who lived there always stood in the yard as soon as the school bell rang and waved her stick and screamed at us, so we wouldn't pull out every last one. But Julio always managed to steal a rose. He was quick and thin. All the other boys rallied around him. He'd leap to the top of the fence, grab a rose, then fall back on the pack of boys, pushing them nearly into the street, partly from the impact and partly for the joy of it. Then he'd shake the hair out of his eyes and laugh.

★ ★ ★

One day, the Korean grandmother wasn't waiting inside the fence, yelling like she usually was. She was hiding behind a car across the street, and when Julio and his friends came around, she was right behind them. She grabbed Julio by one of his skinny arms and pulled him into the garden. "Bad boy!" She shook him. "Tell me where you live!"

Julio's friends stopped. Their hands were still pushed through the gaps in the fence. This was new. They didn't know whether to run away or run in. They stood like statues, waiting for someone to do or say something to make things normal.

Julio was the one who did. He pulled back with all his thin weight and said to her face, "I don't need to tell you where I live, you—"

The grandmother stopped. Her mouth opened, but what she wanted to say, she couldn't. Julio's and my eyes met, and I felt the thread of our shame pulse through me, a burning flame.

Just then, one of Julio's friends picked up a beer can from the street and threw it at her. He missed, but the next thing I knew, there was a howl and a rush. All the boys started picking up litter and glass bottles and throwing them.

The grandmother’s fingers lost their grip, and when she ran into the house, the boys ran into the garden and started pulling roses off the branches. All of them: the tea lemon, the hot pink, the deep red, the little ones with flecks of gold in their skin. The thorns tore through their fingers, but they didn’t let it stop them. It was their first time in the garden, and now it was theirs.

By this time, all the kids who walked home that way, and even some who didn’t, had stopped to see what was happening. Unable to pull away, I stood with my face pressed against the chain links.

Then I saw Julio. His arms were full of tattered roses. He looked like a crown prince as he walked out of the garden, and started throwing flowers at the children who were too scared to run in. When he saw me, he stopped. For a second, I could see he didn’t trust me not to tell.

Then he smiled, the first time he had ever really smiled at me. He picked out a rose. It was hot pink, stiff, just beginning to open.

“Here,” he said, and threw the rose at my feet.

SKIN

It had poured rain and thundered all day like a hot summer storm should, and when I opened the door to my friends Saima and Lucy's house, the metal corners tugged on the grapevines, and cooled-down rain, which had pooled on the leaves, showered down on me, and wet my salwar kameez.

Lucy lived below Saima, and Saima lived above Lucy, and they both lived next to Shahnaaz, the neighborhood bully. I lived down the street, but in the summers, I spent all my time at Saima's and Lucy's. The grapevines lived everywhere, acting like they were trees. They grew when our mothers called us in to eat. They grew when we played in the back lot acting like junglees. They grew at night when we were asleep, and in the mornings, Lucy and Saima had to push against the doorjambs, pull and twist the doorknobs to get anywhere they needed to be.

The biggest argument Saima and Shahnaaz always had was whose grapevines they really were. They were rooted in Shahnaaz's yard, but the vines with their baby hair twists swung over the fence and knelt down and touched the ground on Saima's side of the fence.

I always sat with Saima on the red vinyl sofa her mother had put under the grapevines. All over Corona there were sofas like this, growing like mushrooms: yellow, red, orange, brown. Who could get rid of a sofa after paying so much?

★ ★ ★

I'd known Saima since she and I were born, and even before, because our fathers had been best friends in Pakistan. They'd met at Peshawar University and had come to America together with their tight-fitting British suits, curly dark hair, and sunglasses. In Pakistan, they'd been scientists and worn white lab coats, but in Corona, they worked in stores. Now Saima's father wore tight pants and shiny shirts while he sold radios, VCRs, and illegal copies of Bollywood movies. My father wore his lab

coat as a butcher at his Gosht Dukan: Corona Halal Meats. Whenever I visited him, his coat would be covered with blood.

Lucy's father was from the Dominican Republic. He worked so many jobs, Lucy couldn't keep track. He had a belly that hung out of his shirt and black curly hair all over his chest. When he was home, he sat under the grapevines, drinking. He'd learned how to make wine from the Italian neighbors, and on his days off, he drank homemade wine and yelled at us when we popped the sour green grapes into our mouths.

"Hey! You! Get away from my grapes!"

After it rained was the best because Lucy's father stayed inside watching TV. Then we pulled on the vines like hair and felt the rain run down our cheeks, soak our clothes, our salwar kameez. It always felt cold, sweet, and green, the air around us thick liquid, about to burst like a sneeze.

★ ★ ★

One afternoon, Shahnaaz was poking around in the old abandoned garage that had come with her house. Her family didn't have a car, so the garage was left to pile up with junk. It was the kind of place stray cats had babies. The kind of place rats lived. The kind of place you wouldn't go into by yourself, unless you thought you were a badass the way Shahnaaz did.

Our main way of getting money for candy was to look under the sofa cushions. There the loose change that leaked out of our fathers' and uncles' pockets slipped down and collected into secret pools of pennies, nickels, and dimes. Shahnaaz's brother, Amir, had just moved an old sofa into the garage, and she thought she'd find undiscovered treasure, but when she lifted the cushion, it wasn't George Washington's head or even Abraham Lincoln's she saw. It was a woman in a glossy magazine, her nipples pink and round as quarters, her mouth wide open, her head thrown back, nothing on her body but a thin sheet draped over her legs.

Shahnaaz didn't say this, but I'm sure her eyes popped. None of us had breasts, but Shahnaaz always acted like she did, pushing her chest out whenever we walked around the block. She thought she was the prettiest, and the only reason we agreed was because her brother was older and said he'd beat us up if we said she wasn't.

When Shahnaaz came up to the fence, Saima and I were sitting under

the grapevines, pooling our cushion change. Lucy had gone to Top Tomato with her mother, and it would be a while till she got back. Every so often, Saima and I reached up and pulled down a handful of grapes. When we saw Shahnaaz, we weren't happy.

"Whatcha doing?"

"None of your business." Saima had less patience for Shahnaaz than I did.

"Oh yeah? Well, maybe it is my business because you're eating my grapes."

We rolled our eyes and ignored her, but she kept talking. "Well, what I found in the garage is none of your business either."

I tried to be tough. "So what then?"

It was useless. A few minutes later, I was sneezing from the dust in the garage, and Saima was trying to find a place to sit that wasn't covered with rat pee. Shahnaaz pulled out the magazines, and Saima's and my mouths dropped open. There were naked men and women in all sorts of positions. Some of them were doing everyday things like eating breakfast, just naked. One woman was spread out on a car.

"This is gross," Saima said with disgust, but she kept looking. I did too. I couldn't stop myself from flipping through the pages. I kept the tips of my fingers on the edges though, so I didn't have to touch the skin. Whenever I accidentally did, I could feel my fingers burning.

There was one lady I couldn't stop looking at. She was the only one who wasn't blonde. She was small with dark brown hair and brownish skin. Her body was thin, and she was sprawled out asleep on a bed, completely naked. Her eyebrows were wrinkled, and her hair was messy. There was brown hair, curly and thick, between her legs, brown hair thick underneath her arms, places where my skin was still as smooth as a baby's. The picture must have been taken by someone standing over her. She looked like she was sleeping and having a very bad dream.

"Are they your brother's?" Saima was the first to ask.

"No! My brother would never look at something like this. It's—"

"Guna," I said. It's what we learned from our mothers, who taught us the long lists of what was Guna and what wasn't. It was Guna to listen to music. Guna to talk to boys. Guna to cut our hair. Guna to miss any of our prayers: Fajr, Zohar, Asr, Maghrib, Isha. It was most definitely Guna to take off our clothes, lie on top of a car, and let people take pictures.

When my mother saw people in our neighborhood walking around wearing almost nothing, she always said, “They don’t know any better. But you do. You think it’s hot now? When you go to Hell, demons will take torches and set fire to all the places you left your skin naked. And as much as you scream and cry, or say please, please, Allah forgive me, Allah will say, ‘You didn’t listen to me when you were alive, why should I listen to you when you’re dead?’ But Allah is merciful, and when the demons have burned you enough, He’ll forgive you, give you new skin, and bring you up to Heaven.”

“But how long until I could go to Heaven?” I’d say, trying to push the images of demons out of my mind.

“In Hell, every day is an eternity,” my mother would say, then leave me to go clean.

“We have to burn them.” Shahnaaz’s voice echoed the voice in my head. “Saima, does your mother have matches?”

Saima looked up at the windows of her house. We could all hear her mother screaming at her younger brother, Ziyad. “I don’t want to go home. My mother won’t let me come back out.”

Shahnaaz turned to me. “Razia, go ask the man at the store.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the favorite.”

It was true. The bodega owner always gave me free candy when my mother sent me there to get milk. The bodega was strange. The front windows were full of dish detergent, Ajax, Raid, and Mr. Clean, but the back shelves were barely stocked with anything. At some point, the owner must have realized he could carry dairy and get milk cheap for his family. He always said I was his best milk customer, even though I never saw anyone else buying milk there.

★ ★ ★

When I walked in, the bell rang loud and frantic, and the smell of wet cardboard hit me in the face. Inside, it was ten different shades of dark. A gray cat sat in the corner licking herself. Gold teeth flashed in the dim light and I saw the owner at the front counter, cleaning his fingernails with a match. His friend, the man with the black mustache, was next to him. They were laughing low.

The door slammed behind me and everyone looked up. “Ah, look who it is,” the owner said. “My girlfriend!”

The man with the black mustache grinned. He was missing a number of front teeth. He must not have had enough money to replace them with gold.

“Could I please have a pack of matches?”

The owner leaned over the counter and looked down at me. “Baby, what you want matches for?”

I bit my tongue and lied. “They’re for my father.”

He smiled and passed them over the counter. I grabbed the pack, barely looking at him, said thank you, and ran out the door.

When I got back, Saima and Shahnaaz were pulling a metal garbage can into the back alley next to the railroad tracks. We’d had fire safety training in school, so we knew we had to be careful not to get caught.

We threw all the magazines in, but Shahnaaz insisted that she had to light the first match, since she’d found the magazines.

“But I’m the one who went to get them!”

“Yeah, but you’d have nothing to burn if I hadn’t found them.”

She was right. I looked inside the garbage can and saw my woman with brown hair still laid out on the bed. I wondered how she had ended up that way. My mother always told me it only took one step off the right path to start your downfall. Maybe one step like lying about matches.

“There’s only one straight path,” my mother would say, “and you need to pray to Allah you stay on it. It’s the right path that looks difficult. All the others tempt you, but at the end of each one, there is a trapdoor that drops you into a burning, red-hot pit of fire filled with demons.”

“But how do you know if you’re walking the right path or the wrong path?”

“Listen to what I tell you,” my mother would say, then leave me to go clean.

“Fine. You can light the first match,” I said. “Stupidhead,” I mumbled under my breath.

Shahnaaz struck the match against the flint and dropped it quickly into the garbage can. We all stepped back, thinking it was going to explode. But the magazines were thick and glossy, and the garbage can was damp. We watched as the flame burned, lowered, and then flickered away. Shahnaaz lit match after match, but each one flickered and went out.

“You have to get more matches.” Shahnaaz acted annoyed, as if it was my fault she didn’t know how to start a fire.

I didn’t argue this time. I wanted the magazines to burn. I ran all the way to the bodega thinking of the woman in the garbage can. Where had she gone wrong? I thought of how easy it was to want to sleep instead of pray at dawn, to want to eat during Ramzaan. I thought of the boys I wanted to kiss: Julio, Phillip, Osman. Is that how it had started for her?

When I got back to the bodega, the owner was alone and this time he looked angry. The gray cat was still in the corner licking herself.

“Could I please have another pack of matches?”

He gave me a look. “Hey, what are you doing with these matches?”

“They’re for my father,” I lied again.

Something crossed his face. “Tell your father he’s got to come here himself if he wants matches.” Then he looked guilty. He’d never said no to anything I asked for before. “Here.” He passed the matches and a square caramel over the counter. “Your favorite.”

It was my turn to feel guilty. I couldn’t believe how easily lying came to me. I thanked him and ran back to the alley behind Saima’s house.

“This time I want to light it,” I said. When Shahnaaz opened her mouth to argue, I cut her off. “We can’t get any more matches, and you don’t know how to light them.”

Saima laughed and Shahnaaz gave her a look, but she stepped back. I walked up to the garbage can and looked down at my woman. Her mouth looked soft and sad. I struck the match and held it to the whole pack, until it became one big flame, a fireball in my hands.

I dropped it right on her. The flame kept and started burning a hole through the center. It turned into a hundred flames shooting up from the silver metal. We could barely see the orange, yellow, and blue of them in the light.

The smoke rose, and the fire reached higher and higher. The woman’s skin began to submit, relent. The bed she was on, her sad eyebrows drawn together, her mouth melted away. Her body was being covered with smoke, and I knew her spirit was being lifted so she could fly clothed in fire all the way to Heaven.

THE OLD ITALIAN

Saima's house was crammed up next to the train tracks, and every time a train passed, it blasted through, blowing garbage and letting its long, wild siren fill the air. The houses were all by the railroad tracks like this:

railroadtracksrailroadtracksrailroadtracksrailroadtracksrailroadtrack

Saima's house	Shahnaaz's house
Lucy's house	Old Italian's house

When Saima and I ran outside, a train was just passing. The sound of her brother, Ziyad, crying was behind us, and we saw that Lucy and Shahnaaz were already hanging out under the grapevines. Ziyad was crying because his mother was forcing tablespoons of hot chili powder into his mouth. Saima's mother was always punishing them. Her methods were extreme even for our families, who believed in discipline.

It was hot hot hot. Lucy was sitting on a milk crate snapping gum and flipping her long, dark hair. She was wearing short shorts. Her belly was chubby as cake and pushed through her T-shirt. Shahnaaz was lying out flat, hogging the entire sofa under the grapevines. When she saw us, she got up. I could hear her skin unsticking from the red vinyl.

"I'm bored," Shahnaaz said.

"I'm bored too," Lucy said, snapping her gum.

"I'm bored three," Saima said. "Move over." She pushed Shahnaaz to the side.

"Whadda you want to do?" Shahnaaz asked. She must have been too hot to start a fight.

"We could go get some ices," I suggested.

"Anybody got money?" Lucy looked around, but we all shook our heads no. We were too young to work and our families didn't give allowances.

We heard the sound of Ziyad, now screaming, from one floor up.

Saima and I looked at each other quickly, then looked away.

"You know when Amir crashed his bike into the fence?" Shahnaaz asked, ignoring Ziyad's cries.

"Yeah, so?" None of us liked Shahnaaz's bully big brother.

"So, stupid, there's a hole and we can look into the Old Italian's yard."

The Old Italian's yard was a field of sunflowers. He had started planting them years ago, cramming seeds next to each other, until the sunflowers grew so close, so tall, we could see them crowning their heads over the fence.

On summer days, the Old Italian wandered through his garden, a floating head among the sunflowers. But mostly he leaned out from his second-floor window and smoked his pipe, letting his belly hang out, scowling at the changes in the neighborhood: the new halal meat stores and Dominican mothers pushing wheelie carts.

Our neighborhood was a hand-me-down from the Italians. In the early days, gangs of Italian boys had roamed the streets attacking Pakistani boys they found alone in the playground or coming home from masjid. The more our families moved in, the more their families moved out. Now only the older Italians were left behind. They sat on their stoops with milky-white skin and let the sun drip over them or hid behind doorways with stacks of old newspapers and cold salads. They watched us all the time, frowning.

They'd spent a generation planting and creating gardens out of the hard rock soil of Queens. When mostly Italians had lived in Corona, hydrangeas and roses had grown. Cherry trees and magnolias had burst from the ground. But in our hands, these same gardens filled up with weeds, old sofas, and rusty cars.

Saima reached over her head and snapped some grapes off the vine. There were a few that had turned purple and sweet. She jumped up. "Let's go."

We were all experts at climbing fences. Once there had been a gate that separated the yards, but it had rusted shut, so we always had to climb. In a few minutes, we'd gotten into Shahnaaz's yard and were pushing against each other to press our eyes to the crack, a broken knot in the fence the size of a fist.

Up close, the Old Italian was a giant. There were puffs of white hair around his smooth, bald head. His face was sunburnt, cracked. The knees

of his pants were worn from bending down in the dirt. He poured water and it caught the light. The sunflowers stiffened and straightened. The light moved through the flowers like lions set loose in Queens.

Lucy was the first to see the small shoebox at his feet. “Whadda you think’s in that box?” she whispered, pressing her body against the fence.

“Maybe a dead baby,” Saima said.

“Don’t be stupid. It’s a shoebox. He’s probably got some old shoes in it. And stop hogging already.” Shahnaaz pulled us out of the way.

“It could be a really small baby,” Lucy insisted, shooting Shahnaaz a dirty look. She dusted off her legs. I could see that the hair on her legs had gotten longer and darker. Mine had too, but I always kept my legs covered.

All of a sudden, Saima screamed and pushed back so fast we fell over. The Old Italian’s eye was pressed into the crack, looking at us. Just as quick as it had come, it disappeared.

Saima’s salwar had gotten dirt on it, and she tried to rub it off. I knew her mother wouldn’t be happy cleaning another dirty salwar. “Great idea, Shahnaaz.”

Shahnaaz straightened her skinny body up. “Whatever. I’m not scared of him. Let him come.”

“Oh yeah? What would you do?” Lucy asked.

Before she could answer, the Old Italian appeared before us. He moved slow with a limp. His pants were blue, splattered with paint, his belly big, as if he was pregnant. He held a shoebox out to us and said with a thick accent, “Hallo.” It was the first time he’d ever spoken to us.

“Hello,” we mumbled, shy all of a sudden.

We gathered around the box, and this time we didn’t push. It was lined with newspaper, and in the center, there was a gray kitten. She was so tiny, she could’ve fit in my palm. Her fur puffed up all around her like a dusty halo.

We looked up at the Old Italian, becoming mute with the kitten so close. I’d never seen a kitten in real life, only on Scholastic posters we couldn’t afford to buy. I reached out to feel her softness. She was as gray as the clouds on a thundery day, as the balls of dust that settled under the furniture in Saima’s house.

When I touched her, a spark of electricity flew through my fingers. The world around me came into focus. I saw the chain links of the fence, the weeds that grew up and everywhere. Everything compared to the kitten felt

harsh, dirty, covered with bad graffiti.

"You wan' her?"

"Oh yes, yes, yes." Our words tumbled all over each other.

He grunted, relieved we'd finally spoken.

Then, just like that, he became uncomfortable. He placed the box down under the grapevines and walked out, around the fence, back to his garden.

Like a pressure cooker bursting, everyone started talking at once.

"Stop touching her!"

"You stop touching her!"

Soon we were all fighting.

"You're scaring her!" Lucy yelled.

The kitten jumped and began to shiver.

I turned to Lucy. "Can you bring milk?" Only Lucy could go into her fridge without her mother yelling.

Lucy hesitated, but then said, "Only if one of you comes with me."

Saima and Shahnaaz looked at me. Our mothers wouldn't let us into anyone's house who wasn't Pakistani, but I lived two blocks away, so my mother was the least likely to find out.

We climbed the fence back to Saima and Lucy's side. My salwar snagged on the chain link and almost ripped, but I quickly untangled myself.

Inside Lucy's house, everything was different than I imagined. The way Saima's mother described it, I would have thought there were fountains of beer and drugs everywhere. I didn't know what drugs looked like, though, so while Lucy went into the kitchen, I looked around, searching for something that might be drugs.

There was an old table fan going in the living room, orange sofas with plastic, a TV with aluminum foil on the antenna, books, newspapers, and shoes scattered around a brown carpet. It could have been anyone's house. I followed Lucy into the kitchen and saw they even had the same fridge as Saima. When Lucy opened it, there was beer inside, and for some reason, I felt better.

"We better hurry. My mother's still in the bedroom putting her face on."

Before I could ask what that meant, I heard her mother call out, "Lucy?"

Lucy didn't answer, but she should've because just then her mother

came in. Her hair was in pink curlers and her makeup was half-on, half-off. Lucy was just about to pour some milk into a cracked cereal bowl. Her mother smiled at me, then looked at Lucy and said something in Spanish. Lucy started talking to her mother in a hurried way.

From Lucy's hands, the way she moved them, I could tell she was telling her mother about the kitten. Her mother's smile got tighter and tighter, then finally snapped and fell apart. Lucy looked at me and I knew it was time to leave.

When we walked out, she carried the bowl carefully. There was just a little milk her mother had let her bring out. I climbed over the fence first. Lucy passed the bowl to me, then climbed over, concentrating on how to get her bare legs over the fence.

I decided not to ask what her mother had said. Even with Saima and Ziyad's mother, I never asked. She was always screaming at them in Pashto.

When we got back to Shahnaaz's yard, Saima and Shahnaaz were still playing with the kitten. Saima was saying "Meow" over and over, trying to speak in the kitten's language.

There wasn't enough room in the shoebox for the bowl. Everyone else was too scared to do it, so I lifted the kitten out of the box. I could feel her small bones in my palms. I put her under the grapevines. We watched as she explored the dirt and sticks scattered about. The kitten was still shivering, but when we put the milk next to her, her pink tongue came out like a snail.

I don't know how the whole day passed, but we couldn't feel the heat anymore. Saima, Shahnaaz, and I wanted to give her a Muslim name, but Lucy wanted to give her a Catholic name like Maria. We finally settled on Maria Perez Parvez Mirza, but since that was too long we just called her Miss Kitten.

We decided Lucy had to beg her mother to keep Miss Kitten. It had to be Lucy because we were Muslim and Muslims didn't have pets. Lucy looked doubtful, but she said she'd ask.

★ ★ ★

The next morning, I was up early. After I ate nashta, my mother let me go to Saima's. When I got there, Lucy was under the grapevines. The front of