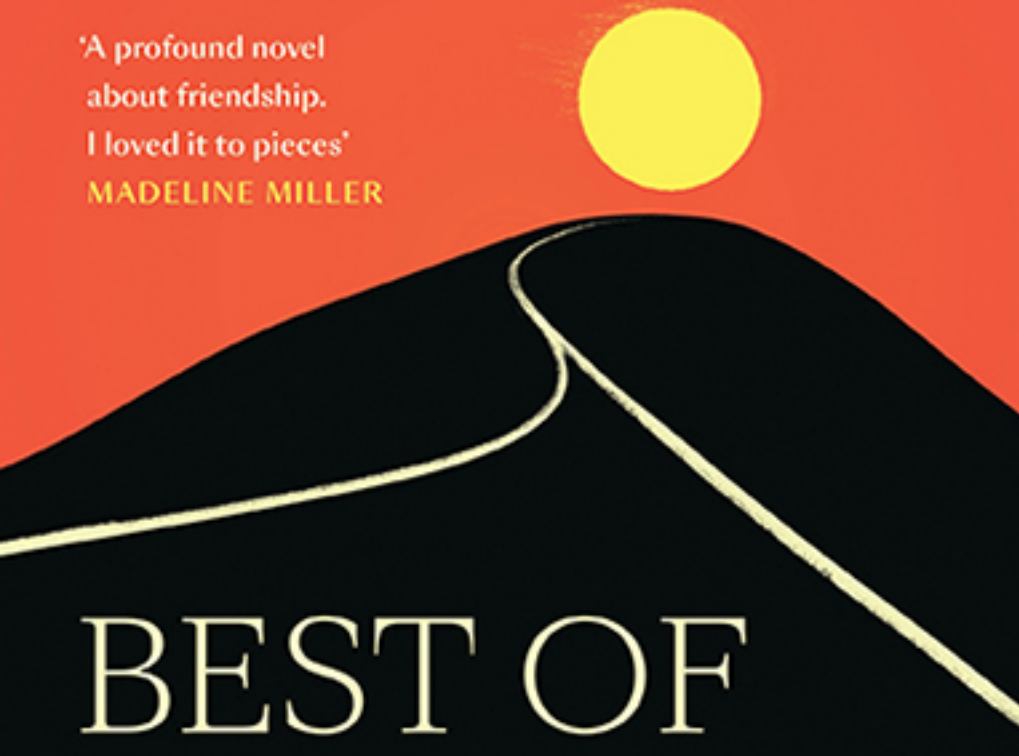
WINNER OF THE WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION

KAMILA SHAMSIE

'A profound novel about friendship. I loved it to pieces'
MADELINE MILLER



BEST OF FRIENDS

BLOOMSBURY

KARACHI
1988

SUMMER

First day back at school. The sky heavy with monsoon clouds, the schoolyard clustered with students within striding distance of shelter: the kikar trees planted along the boundary wall or the neem tree partway up the path from gate to school building; the many bougainvillaea-framed doorways carved into the building's yellow-stone facade; the area of the playing field beneath the jutting balconies on the first and second floors. Only a few boys, with daring to prove, roamed the most exposed parts of the yard, shirtsleeves rolled up, hands in pockets. Zahra, standing beside the archway that housed the brass bell, was using her height to look over the heads of all the girls and most of the boys, searching.

The school day hadn't officially started yet, but students in grey and white uniforms were already resettling into their formations from the previous term. The cool kids. The thuggish boys. The couples. The judgemental girls. The invisible boys. Zahra had invented these categories after watching a string of teen-centred Hollywood movies on pirated videos, but it did little to make up for the inadequacy of Karachi school life. Without detention, how could there be *The Breakfast*

Club? Without a school prom, how could there be *Pretty in Pink*? Without the freedom required to make truancy possible, how could there be *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? But the one area where the failure was that of the movies, not of Karachi, was when it came to friendship – it was almost always a subplot to romance, never the heart of a story. Except *The Outsiders*, but that was boys, which meant it was really about how girls caused trouble and led to fights and burning buildings and death.

From where she stood, Zahra had a clear view of the school gate. For most of the day, buses and rickshaws and vans and other ageing vehicles clogged up the streets of Saddar, perhaps heading to Empress Market or the electronics stores that populated the area, but twice a weekday, sleek air-conditioned cars joined in the melee to ferry students to and from the most prestigious of Karachi's schools.

There she was. The Mercedes, sleekest of sleeks, drove right up to the gate and Maryam stepped out and walked into the school grounds. A different Maryam, a different walk. The plumpness that had been on her face seemed to have descended elsewhere over the course of the summer, though it was hard to know exactly what was going on beneath the sack-like grey kameez she was wearing. Maryam stopped to say something to one of the older boys, and as they were talking tugged at her kameez with what was clearly meant to be an absent-minded air. The fabric pulled taut over new breasts, a new waist. The older boy kept on speaking to her as though nothing had happened but when she walked past him, heading to Zahra, he turned to observe her all the way down the length of the path.

Other things had changed too. The wavy shoulder-length hair was artfully tousled rather than wild, the

messy eyebrows reshaped into two curved lines. But the smile was the same old Maryam smile that greeted Zahra every time Maryam returned from her family's summer trips to London. And her outstretched hand held a cassette that was always her belated birthday present to her best friend – a mix tape that she had recorded off the radio, with the best of the London charts.

'Do you see what's happened to me?' she said.

'Is it your mother or your tailor who's having difficulty accepting it?' Zahra said, gesturing to the kameez.

'Hard to say. Master Sahib stitches what he thinks my mother wants. Mother says he's easily offended; we can't go back and say it's all wrong or he'll stop doing our clothes and he's the only one to get my sari blouses right.'

'Adulthood is so complicated.'

They smiled at each other, confident of the futures ahead of them in which they'd never face such petty dilemmas. They had barely moved on to swapping notes about the summer apart when Saba approached, with that smile of hers as if she was holding some forbidden delight in her mouth that she was willing neither to swallow nor to reveal. They knew all of each other's smiles, the three girls; at fourteen, they were ten years into what might loosely be called friendship, though Zahra had once looked up from a dictionary to inform Maryam that what the two of them had with each other was friendship, and what they had with the other six girls and twenty-two boys in class was merely 'propinquity' – a relationship based on physical proximity. 'If you moved to Alaska tomorrow, we'd still be best friends for the rest of our lives,' she had told Maryam, who was the only person in the world towards whom Zahra displayed extravagant feelings.

Now there was Saba, standing in front of them, allowing them to cajole her into giving up the secret which she had just heard from her aunt – Mrs Hilal, the biology teacher, to the rest of them. The school's bomb alarm was going to be complemented with a riot alarm. There would be drills throughout the term to ensure the students didn't confuse the first with the second. You wouldn't want 700 students evacuating the building when they were supposed to be inside with doors and windows firmly shut. The school had never known either bombs or riots, but Saba conveyed the news of the anticipated disaster, and the possible mix-up over alarms, with relish.

'My parents are going to get even more hysterical if they hear that,' Maryam said, dragging out the word 'even'. 'The day we got back from London they hired armed guards for our house because all these expats over there kept telling them how dangerous Karachi is. Give me dangerous and keep your boiled cabbage, Londoners. Now no one can come indoors without having to go through some ridiculous procedure of guards calling up the house to make sure they're acceptable, and if someone's on the phone and they can't get through then one of the guards has to run inside – not that they ever run, it's the slowest crawl. You don't worry, Zahra. I gave them a picture of you and said if anyone tries to stop you from entering I'll have them fired.'

'Lucky,' Zahra said, and Maryam grinned. She liked nothing better than to be compared to Lucky Santangelo, heroine of the Jackie Collins novels, composed in equal parts of courage, ruthlessness and loyalty. Saba made a little face and Zahra recognised this expression too: it was the one that said Saba didn't see why Maryam continued to be best friends with Zahra and share private

jokes with her when Saba, like Maryam, belonged to that subgroup of students whose parents were part of the 'social set' and who went abroad for their summer holidays and swam at the same private members' club.

'Maybe it's a good idea for the school to have some kind of plan in case the worst happens,' Zahra said, glancing towards the high boundary walls, shards of glass embedded at the top to prevent anyone from climbing over. Last summer, car bombs had killed more than seventy people in Saddar – not far from this school, one of the explosions shattering all the windows of the shop where Zahra and her mother had been buying new school uniforms the previous week. For days after, she'd imagined pieces of glass piercing her throat and eyes. Maryam had been in London and when she'd returned she'd said, 'That was awful; thank god it was during the school holidays,' as if to suggest that no one they knew could have been anywhere around Saddar at such a time of year.

The school bell rang, sending them to the playing field, where ragged columns of students had started to form. The soil was damp from yesterday's rain, and there was one large puddle in the middle of the field, into which some of the rowdier Class 9 boys were stomping to try to splash any girls walking past.

Maryam wasn't the only one in their class to have changed over the summer. There were boys who were taller, other girls who were curvier; this boy had finally shaved off the nest of caterpillars above his lip, that girl had replaced glasses with contact lenses. The only change in Zahra was an added inch of height; beyond that, she was still skinny with poker-straight hair, which her mother cut to just above her shoulders. But something felt different in everyone in their year, however much their

outward appearances might have remained unchanged. There was more step in their step than before. They were conscious they were in Class 10 now, old enough for the younger students to look up to them, and also at that stage where familiarity could start to replace deference in their relationship with the A-level students.

School assembly had been cancelled to get everyone indoors as fast as possible as the clouds turned even darker, so they made their way straight up to their new classroom with its thick walls of seaweed green and its wooden desks freshly painted a revolting pink-brown. Maryam and Zahra found two seats together, separated from other desks in the row by an aisle, and Zahra told Maryam about the highlight of her summer, which had been a sighting of all the members of Vital Signs walking out of a house in Phase 5, near that intersection where the man with bougainvillaea behind his ears used to direct traffic. Her father was driving and refused to slow down, let alone stop so she could look at them a little longer. *Just because some boys record a pop song doesn't mean you have the right to start treating them like zoo animals*, he'd said.

'But still. You saw them. That's so cool. It might even be cooler than seeing a pop star in London,' Maryam said, having seen Paul Young strolling through Hyde Park one summer. This was clearly a serious topic that they would return to later, when they had the time to pick through it forensically – did an internationally famous pop star in the city where you spent your holiday outweigh homegrown national sensations hanging out not far from your own neighbourhood?

'I learnt a new Italian word this summer,' Maryam said, resting her elbow on the top of Zahra's chair and leaning towards her. 'Zia. It means "aunt". Also

slang for –' she lowered her voice, as she should have done before making light of the name of the dictator '– homosexual. Can you imagine, every time the Italian ambassador meets General Zia he must be thinking –'

'Maryam!'

Zahra glanced around to see if anyone showed signs of having heard. She didn't think that any of their classmates were from families that supported the president, but it was an unspoken matter, and assumptions were dangerous.

'Don't be paranoid,' Maryam said. She lowered her face towards the hole cut into the desk which served as a pen holder, as if speaking into a mic. 'GHQ, do you want to know what we all think of Wordsworth's "Daffodils"? Off with their sprightly heads!'

The boy sitting behind them – Babar – strode to the front of the class. Picking up a piece of chalk, he scrawled on the blackboard *DON'T WORRY IT'S ONLY EVERYTHIN*

A teacher's voice sliced off the 'G' he was about to write. 'Mr Razzaq, it's best you sit at your desk and don't parade trousers from a bygone era, don't you think?'

Babar was still for a moment, then reached up and ran his fingers through his thick hair, squared his shoulders and turned with a cocky smile. If he'd had a leather jacket, he would have flipped up the collar. He sauntered back to his chair, sat down.

'*My* older brother's school uniform goes to our cook's children,' Saba said loudly.

Zahra pivoted to face Saba, who had found a seat across the aisle from Babar. 'Saba, he's not going to like you if you insult him any more than he did when you wrote him love poems.'

An *Ohhhhhhh!*, building in volume, went round the class until the teacher cut it short by starting to take

attendance. Saba wept into her exercise book. Zahra reached into her schoolbag for a tissue, leaned back in her chair, rapped on Babar's knee and passed him the tissue under the desk.

'Is there supposed to be something written on this?' he whispered a few moments later.

Zahra turned around. He'd unfolded the tissue and was holding it like a letter, thumb and forefinger gripping either side. 'She shouldn't have said that, but you can be the nice guy,' she said.

'Miss, do you want me to take my trousers off?' Babar called out, which made all the students laugh, including Saba, and rendered the tissue unnecessary.

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DON'T WORRY IT'S ONLY EVERYTHIN

Zahra approached the words on the board when everyone had left the classroom. There was a dot of chalk where Babar had intended to start the 'G' before the teacher had interrupted. Until now they had all been students together, taking the same classes, learning or failing to learn the same things, easily able to recover from a bad set of exams brought on by a bout of illness or a cricket series that ate into revision time. But today was the start of the O-level course, and how well or badly you fared in the exams that waited two years down the line would determine the life-altering matter of which American or British university would want you another two years after that. In Zahra's case, it wouldn't be enough to be wanted; she'd have to be wanted enough to qualify for a scholarship in Britain or financial aid in America. She was equally drawn to both countries – the grandeur of Oxbridge, the glamour of

Ivy League – but knew she'd prefer the word 'scholarship' attached to her than 'financial aid'.

'How important are the O-level marks, really?' Babar had asked a young teacher – freshly graduated from Columbia in New York – at the end of the previous year, and the teacher had replied, *Don't worry, it's only everything*.

Zahra found a piece of chalk and wrote in the 'G', trying to make it slope forward just as Babar's letters did so it wouldn't look out of place. At a laugh behind her, she turned. Maryam, leaning against the doorframe.

'Always tidying up for everyone,' Maryam said.

'Thought you'd gone to the computer lab already.' Zahra tossed the chalk on to the teacher's desk and deliberately allowed it to roll off the edge.

'We go together as far as we can,' said Maryam, linking her arm through Zahra's as they left the classroom.

Maryam was going to Computer Science; Zahra to Chemistry. With the start of the O-level course they'd all had to choose which subjects to take, and so the separation of paths had begun. Zahra would have preferred Computer Science to Chemistry, but the former was a newly introduced subject and there was some taint of a fad to it; universities might not take it as seriously as the more established subjects, one of her teachers had warned. Maryam didn't stop to consider what universities took seriously or even how well she did in her O-level exams because she knew her parents' money would pave the way into some university or other and she didn't care too much which one it was. It was this casual attitude to academics that separated Maryam from most of her classmates, more than the money and social status that eclipsed almost all of them, even in this

school known for its connection to the elite. Everyone else – whether Babar or Saba or Zahra – could recite like cricket stats which students in past years had been to Harvard, to Princeton, to Yale, and what their O-level results and SAT scores had been. But for Maryam, university was just an interruption before she could take over the family business. The only future that mattered to her was the one that would unfold in Karachi, a city to which Zahra had no intention of returning once she'd left it. But that was a separation of paths beyond any Zahra was willing to contemplate right now as they walked, arms still linked, down the stairs and along the corridor, greeting other students they hadn't seen all summer.

'So, now people are going to think you're the one who likes Babar,' Maryam said.

'Do you think Babar thinks it?'

'Probably. You touched his knee.'

'So knobbly.'

An A-level boy walked towards them saying, 'Look who's grown this summer.' Zahra was accustomed to comments about her height, and it took a moment to see where the boy's eyes had actually landed. His name was Hammad; he was one of the 'thuggish boys', known to have friends beyond the school walls who were either criminals or headed in that direction. Rumour placed a gun in the glove compartment of his car.

Zahra made a noise of disgust and walked on, pulling Maryam along with her, hoping she'd done so in a manner that would make an observer say they both 'swept past him'. But there were only a few feet to sweep before she reached the Chemistry classroom and had to say goodbye to Maryam. As she made her way towards an empty desk, ignoring Babar waving his hand to indicate the place next

to him, she heard one pair of footsteps in the corridor slow down and another speed up.

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It had been happening since last year without anyone but Maryam and her tailor taking much notice, but London had accelerated it. All that chocolate and ice cream and fast food had settled in unexpected places, and brought with it the discomfort of underwired bras and a body that felt unknown. For a while, in London, she thought she had lost the ability to judge her own dimensions, which was why her breasts kept bumping into strangers, until she realised it was almost never women with whom she was making the unexpected contact. Once understood, she didn't know how she felt about it. Sometimes she wanted to cry, other times she was triumphant.

It was purely humiliating, though, to overhear her father tell her mother that she needed to go to Oxford Street and buy their daughter an entirely new wardrobe because all her clothes looked 'indecent'. So out went her favourite shirts – the Madonna one, the tiger with diamanté eyes one, the nautical striped one. The new shirts were looser fitting and without images or ornamentation that might draw people's eyes to her chest. It made little difference to the men bumping into her on the Tube, or to that friend of her parents who'd started squeezing her shoulders affectionately and pulling her close the way her 'uncles' had always done, but never him.

The previous summer in London, she had imagined visibility was what she wanted. In Karachi, men stared if you were a girl; it was something to which she was accustomed and shared with every other girl in the city.

In London, people looked through you. The contrast was disquieting. *Notice me, notice me, notice me*, she'd chanted internally when walking down the streets. And now, wish granted, she had passed into a new category of person, her relationship to the world around her altered. At the same time, everything seemed to carry on as it always had.

There was no one in London she could talk to about this. A significant number of her parents' Karachi friends decamped to flats in Mayfair and Kensington and Knightsbridge for the summer with their children, none of whom were old enough for Maryam to want to spend time with. She was entrusted with babysitting when all the parents went out for dinner or to a movie and had used the increased responsibility to argue her way into greater independence. During the plentiful daytime hours she was allowed to head out of the Mayfair flat with her Walkman, drifting in the direction of Hyde Park or towards the music store in Piccadilly Circus. Sometimes she made it as far as Trafalgar Square, where she watched boys and girls her own age laughing together while trying unsuccessfully to climb on to the backs of the bronze lions that surrounded Nelson's Column.

As the summer wore on, she increasingly fell into the routine of walking to the Trocadero by Leicester Square, where she'd learnt to ignore the dispiriting air of a place where teenagers should be having fun but no one was, and instead focused on the turning racks near the entrance, which displayed postcards of Hollywood actors and Top Ten singers. Here, Tom Cruise in a white vest and blue jeans looking the kind of sad that only needed a girl's smile to make him happy; there, the women of Bananarama staring straight into the camera

as if to say, 'Impress us if you can.' Then back down Piccadilly, where the cost of everything made no sense when you translated it into rupees, which didn't stop her parents and their friends from buying biscuits from Fortnum & Mason, coffee-table books about Islamic architecture and vintage cars from Hatchards. Maryam rarely entered any of the shops, and when she did, it was only briefly. The previous summer she'd mentioned to her parents how helpful shop assistants in London were, repeatedly asking, 'Can I help you with anything?' Her parents informed her that was the English way of saying, 'Buy something or leave.' She had been embarrassed not to have realised that. Back in Karachi, she'd prided herself on her skill at reading subtexts.

From Piccadilly she made her way into Green Park, where she sat beneath a favourite tree and spent a very long time writing a postcard to Zahra, thinking through each sentence carefully so that everything that had been most important in the preceding twenty-four hours could fit on to the back of the card. She used the entire space, including the lines reserved for the address, knowing that Pakistan's postal system made it useless to actually mail the letters, so she would simply take them to Karachi at the end of the summer and hand them over to Zahra all in one go.

But on the last day in London, she picked up one of the postcards and read the lines *I was wearing a denim shirt and I undid the top two buttons when I saw a group of boys, a couple of them really cute. I could feel them looking at me after I walked past but I didn't look back because I want them to look at me but I don't know what I want after that*. She put all the postcards into a black rubbish bag, pulled empty juice cartons and packaging for fish fingers out of the kitchen bin and threw

them on top of the postcards, tied the bag securely and took it out to the large bins on the landing.

Only on that first day of school, during break time, watching Zahra reach over the heads of students standing in front of her to pay the man in the tuck shop for two bottles of Coke and two packets of chilli chips, did it all make sense. There had always been a joke at the heart of their friendship, a gag that appeared first at the visual level before revealing itself to run through many layers. Now there was Zahra all straight lines and Maryam all curves, adding another element to their study in contrasts.

'Thanks, Stan,' she said, taking her Coke and chilli-chip packet from Zahra.

'Welcome, Ollie.'

She wondered if Zahra shared this feeling of completeness when they were together that could surely only be possible when you'd been best friends with someone since the age of four and your character had been defined by the other. She suspected not. There were things Zahra wanted from the world that Maryam didn't understand – things she found in books and in her own mind which sometimes wandered far away from Maryam into places she rarely talked about because she knew Maryam couldn't follow her there. When Zahra did say things like, 'Do you think everyone has a purpose in life or do we invent purpose to stop feeling irrelevant?' Maryam never knew how to answer. She didn't know which part of the question made less sense to her – 'purpose' or 'irrelevant'. She had tried to come up with an answer, something to do with wanting to expand her family's business into the international market, and Zahra had frowned and said, 'That's ambition, not purpose.'

They wandered into the front yard, noticing how the departure of the previous year's second-year A-level students had altered the configuration of things. The area around the flagpole where the most dazzling of the second-year students had lounged during break last year was now occupied by two smaller groups of Class 11 students; the new group of dazzling second-years had marked the stone archway under the bell as their territory for the year. Maryam heard her name called out and took Zahra's elbow to steer her towards the flower beds near the music-room entrance, where several of their friends had claimed a spot, some sitting on the low whitewashed borders of the flower beds while others stood, half in conversation with their seated friends and half bantering with whoever was walking past. It was humid and close, the rain clouds no longer a threat but a tease.

Zahra sat, Maryam stood. A standing Zahra towered over everyone else; seated, she was half a head taller than the girls beside her, though some of the boys were finally catching up. She'd once said to Maryam, in her matter-of-fact way, that she thought her personality would have been different if she were a few inches shorter. She simply didn't fit among the girls who leaned their heads together to gossip among themselves. But really there was no question of not fitting; they'd all been friends so long. After her two months in London, caught between children and adults, Maryam wanted to embrace everyone around her for how easily conversation flowed, how lightly they teased one another, how entirely at home she felt. Babar came to join the group and Maryam said, 'Parade clothes from a bygone era! Parade!' and Babar marched back and forth, turning the march into a gyrating dance, the girls clapping out a

beat and the boys calling out 'Oye oye oye' in time, so that the joke was entirely on the teacher for her choice of expression. Babar inclined his head in Maryam's direction, thanking her for finding a way between the awkwardness of pretending that classroom exchange hadn't happened and the embarrassment of saying something sympathetic. She didn't require any thanks or even acknowledgement; she was filled with the satisfaction of being with a group of people and knowing the words and tone that would produce exactly the effect you wanted. This is what was meant by 'belonging' and 'home', words she understood in the way that Zahra understood 'purpose' and 'irrelevant'.

Hammad walked across her line of sight, and her thoughts shifted to what other effects she could produce.

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On Wednesdays, Zahra came home with Maryam and her two younger sisters. 'Home' to Maryam was a single-storeyed house in Old Clifton, set behind high boundary walls and now with armed guards stationed at the gate. It lacked all the potential for playing with the downstairs neighbours' dog and sneaking down to the sea, which existed in Zahra's flat in Sea View, though Zahra showed little interest in either. This routine had started when Zahra's father took on a TV role as anchor of a cricket show – he had to be at the studio on Wednesday afternoons, so he couldn't pick Zahra up as he otherwise had been doing since her mother was elevated from class teacher at Zahra's school to principal of a newly opened school.

Maryam still missed Mrs Ali, as she was in school – Aunty Shehnaz outside of it. There had always been a

brightness to those few seconds of the day when the understated elegance of Mrs Ali crossed paths with Maryam and greeted her with the smile of Aunty Shehnaz. Every other teacher regarded Maryam as brilliant Zahra's slightly inexplicable best friend, a middling student whose parents bought her cashmere sweaters in London for the winter uniform when everyone else, including those who drove around in Pajeros, did just fine with the local cotton-polyester ones. She knew they scorned her for this because Saba had informed her that her aunt, Mrs Hilal, said the staffroom had been wondering if Maryam was allergic to polyester. Maryam, like every other student in school, allowed her mother to choose her school clothes without thinking too much about it, but that conversation with Saba made clear that even the smallest of decisions shouldn't be left to either of her parents.

On this particular Wednesday, a social crisis had detonated in Maryam's household, and the girls arrived home to find Maryam's mother on the phone instructing her husband to come home from the office right away because there were things to discuss.

Things to discuss meant it was too sensitive for a phone call, not so much because everyone knew that the intelligence services were always listening in but because crossed lines meant that someone you knew might end up eavesdropping on your call though they'd intended only to call their mother to ask her to remind them how so-and-so was related to so-and-so. Ever since Maryam's mother had found herself on a crossed line with her cousin's husband speaking to his previously unsuspected mistress, she'd refused to say anything on the phone that she wouldn't happily shout across the aisles of Agha's Supermarket.

Maryam's father pretended there was work keeping him in the office, but really it was Maryam's grandfather who ran the family business, which provided luxury leather products to the rich of Pakistan. Maryam's father merely had an office with his name on it in which he spent his days solving crosswords, approving products that had already met his father's exacting standards, and occasionally having meetings with someone important to the company who needed to feel appreciated. Maryam's father made everyone feel appreciated, and knowing the ubiquity of his appreciation didn't stop anyone – other than his immediate family – from being won over by his ability in this regard.

So, lunch was delayed until Maryam's father returned home. Zahra and Maryam made their way through the long, painting-lined hallway where a clumsy sketch of a cow, drawn by Maryam's father when he was at Oxford, hung among Sadequain and Chughtai and Gulgee and Naqsh. The paintings gave way to a cluster of photographs of Maryam's mother's antecedents in all their aristocratic pomp; their unimpeachable class allowed the cow drawing to be amusing rather than a crass symbol of the wealth that had made the art collection possible. Maryam found it mortifying.

The hallway led to Maryam's bedroom, where Maryam shooed out her sisters, closing the door behind her. The central air conditioning made the faintest of hums, the marble floor cool beneath thin socks when they kicked off their shoes. Maryam told Zahra to choose the music, and got on to her knees on her double bed to plant a kiss on the mouth of George Michael, who was hanging on her wall in his 'Last Christmas' incarnation.

'Your turn,' she said.