a girl like that

tanaz bhathena

Farrar Straus Giroux · New York

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark
First edition, 2018
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiercereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bhathena, Tanaz, author.
Title: A girl like that / Tanaz Bhathena.
Description: First Edition. | New York : Farrar Straus Giroux, 2018. | Summary: In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, sixteen-year-old half-Hindu/half-Parsi Zarin Wadia is the class trouble-maker and top subject for the school rumor blogs, regularly leaving class to smoke cigarettes in cars with boys, but she also desperately wants to grow up and move out of her aunt and uncle's house, perhaps realizing too late that Porus, another non-Muslim Indian who risks deportation but remains devoted to Zarin, could help her escape.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017011020 (print) | LCCN 2017033224 (ebook) | ISBN 9780374305451 (ebook) | ISBN 9780374305444 (hardcover)
Subjects: LCSH: East Indians—Saudi Arabia—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: East Indians—Saudi Arabia—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. | Rape—Fiction. | Bullying—Fiction. | Religion—Fiction. | High schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Jiddah (Saudi Arabia)—Fiction. | Saudi Arabia—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.B5324 (ebook) | LCC PZ7.1.B5324 Gi 2018 (print) | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017011020

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To my parents and my late grandparents,
with gratitude and love

PROLOGUE

Zarin

THE WAILS MASI LET OUT WERE SO HEART-wrenching, you would think I was her only daughter lying dead before her instead of the parasite from her sister's womb, as she had once called me. She should have been a professional funeral crier. Porus's mother knelt in a pool of his dark blood and joined Masi in a cacophonic duet. Masa was more somber. He dabbed his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, took deep breaths, and tried to compose himself. The officer in charge of the accident scene told Masa that our corpses would be kept in a local morgue till arrangements for the funerals were made.

His loud voice floated upward to where Porus and I now hovered, a few meters above the wreckage on the Al-Harameen

Expressway in Jeddah—completely dead, yet not entirely gone.

We stared at the scene below: Porus's smoking Nissan crumpled like a Pepsi can, the green-and-white squad cars, a flashing Red Crescent ambulance, the Saudi police in their long-sleeved khaki uniforms with black berets, our mourning families. The police had blocked off several kilometers of the highway shoulder and most of the right lane with bright orange construction cones. The area around the car was marked with yellow tape.

It had taken them an hour to remove our bodies from the Nissan, and even that had been fairly messy. There was blood everywhere. Blood that smelled like metal and gushed from our bodies like springs. Blood that had splattered across the windshield, and pooled on the floor of the car. A tire that had somehow come loose during the accident lay a few feet away, coated with the same dark, gleaming liquid.

"Aunt," I heard Masi tell the police officer in English when he asked her how she was related to me. "Mother's sister."

Masi gare de phansi, I used to taunt her in Gujarati when alive. My aunt who would strangle me with a noose. Strangulation and suffocation were common ways of getting rid of unwanted children in India, the country where I was born. Quick and easy fixes for daughters who were supposed to be sons, for orphans like me who were foisted upon reluctant

relatives. Once, on a vacation in Mumbai, I heard the Dog Lady tell Masi that there were rare occasions when very rich families paid their maids to do the job. Strong, limber women from slums like Char Chaali who used pillows or sometimes their own hands to snuff out the life of a newborn.

Masi's hands were shaking now. A side effect of the pills my uncle made her take for her "sleeping problem," as he liked to call it. With Masi, everything was a side effect. Tears, mood swings, the beatings she gave me over the years, the raging fits she sometimes threw when I did something that reminded her of my dead mother, or worse, my dead father.

A few feet away, Masa stood talking to another police officer—a short and potbellied man who was gesturing wildly in the air. We were not Saudis or Muslims, so I knew that neither Porus nor I would be buried here. Expatriates who died in the Kingdom were shipped back to their home countries for funeral rites. There were procedures to be followed, paperwork to be taken care of at the morgue and the Indian Consulate. Rites before the last rites.

But it was obvious to me, even from up here, that the potbellied officer wasn't talking about paperwork. He pointed toward our bodies, shouting in a mix of English and Arabic. If I moved a little closer, like Porus had, I could probably hear everything he was saying. But I didn't need to. From the context of the scenario it wasn't that difficult to guess the reason

for the police officer's displeasure. Few infractions riled up the authorities in Saudi Arabia more than a girl voluntarily seeking out the company of a boy, especially one who wasn't her brother or husband.

"I will miss my mother," Porus told me softly.

I did not reply. I didn't think I would miss anyone, really. Perhaps I would miss Masa for the times he had been remotely sane: the few instances when he spoke his mind in spite of Masi's constant henpecking. But I tried to forget Masi as a matter of convenience. I wasn't exactly Mother Teresa during the short span of my earthly existence, so there was no guarantee that I would spend my afterlife on a stretch of white heavenly sand. Why rack up more unpleasant memories if I ended up going to hell?

A police officer removed my school ID card from my ripped handbag. I saw him glance at my name and copy it down in his notebook: *Zarin Wadia. Female. Age 16. Student. Car accident*. If my English teacher, Khan Madam, was there, she would have added more: *Bright student. Debating aficionado. Troublemaker. Disturbed*.

The officer lifted an edge of the white shroud and compared my face to the photo on my ID. It was one of those few pictures where a photographer had managed to capture me smiling, a curl of black hair peeking out from behind my scarf, the hair partly veiling my left eye. Masa said the photo made me

look like my mother during her teens. This was not a surprise. For as long as I could remember, people had told me I was my mother's mirror image. A replica of dark curls, fair skin, and brown eyes, right down to the beauty mark on my upper lip.

I did not remember my mother that much. Sometimes I could recall the soft hum of a lullaby, the cool press of a glass bangle on my cheek, the smoky fragrance of sandalwood and *loban* from a fire temple. Memories that were few and far between, never more than flashes of sensation. I could often recall with more clarity the first day I grew aware of my mother's absence. A hollow, nearly tangible silence in a warm room. Dust motes dancing in a stream of light from the window. November 28, 2002. The autumn of my fourth birthday. It was the week after my mother died—of cancer, they said, even though I knew it wasn't.

It was also the day a neighbor escorted me from my mother's quiet two-room flat in downtown Mumbai to the north of the city, to the one-room flat owned by my maternal aunt and uncle in Cama Parsi Colony. Masa liked the idea of having me around, since Masi couldn't have kids. She, on the other hand, was furious.

"Watch the chalk!" she snapped the moment we entered the flat. "*Khodai*, look at what this girl has done."

I looked down at where she was pointing—at the chalk designs she'd made on the tiles by the flat's threshold. White

fish with delicate scales and red eyes surrounding a banner that now said *G . . . ck—Good Luck*, as I discovered later on. *Good Luck* with my shoe printed in its center, powdery pink creases blurring out most of the *Good* and the *Luck*.

"All these years I've lived my life in shame because of my sister," she told Masa that night when she thought I was asleep. "At least marrying you took me away from that and shut up those horrible gossips at the Parsi Panchayat."

I didn't have much status in the world—bastard orphans usually did not—and everyone in Cama colony was quick to remind me about that, even after Masa adopted me and gave me a surname to fill in the blank left by my father.

"You don't know how lucky you are, child," said Masi's neighbor, also known to the colony kids as the Dog Lady, a woman who always smelled of 4711 Original Eau de Cologne and Pomeranian sweat. "So many children in your state usually end up on the streets! Or worse."

A month after I moved into Masa and Masi's flat, my father's lawyer managed to track me down. It was through the lawyer that Masi found out about my father's will and bank account.

"How much is in the account?" The lawyer had repeated Masi's question. "Around fifteen lakh rupees, madam. The girl's guardians are in charge of this account till she turns twenty-one."

"Thank goodness she's here with us," Masi told Masa when

the lawyer left. "Who knows what would have happened to that money if she'd fallen into the wrong hands?"

Two years later, Masa accepted a new job—assistant plant manager for a meatpacking factory in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He said we needed a fresh start.

And, for a time, we had it. In Jeddah, with its shimmery coastline, giant roundabouts, and brightly lit malls. Where the air was hot and dense and somehow always smelled of the sea.

During our first week here, Masa had taken us to Balad, the city's historic center, on a friend's recommendation. "It will be like traveling back in time," the friend had said. And it was. If the glittering lights and skyscrapers of the Red Sea coast were the city's ornaments, then Balad was Jeddah's ancient, beating heart, its narrow streets linked to the main shopping square like arteries. The smell of roasted coffee and salt lingered in the air like perfume: at the souk, where men chewed *miswak* and hawked everything from ropes of gold jewelry to leather sandals; between alleys of abandoned old Hijazi homes, where veiled women with hennaed fingernails peddled potato chips, candy, and toys. We returned home at night, carrying bits of the old city back with us in plastic bags filled with roasted almonds and Turkish delight, in the green-glass bottle of jasmine attar Masa had bought for Masi from a local perfumery. The next day, however, Masi had complained about the smell

of the perfume giving her a headache and tossed the bottle into the trash. It was the sort of happy day that had never happened again.

Now, my life having ended, I watched the police officer continue to interrogate Masa, while Masi watched him from a few feet away, her face pinched with worry. The look on her face reminded me of that Syrian boy from the Red Sea Mall. The one with the curly black hair, the hooked nose, and the scar over his left eyebrow. He was the first guy I'd ever gone out with after he'd thrown me his number, scribbled on a crumpled bit of notebook paper, from behind one of those fake, overly tall palm trees inside the mall. He was also the first guy I'd skipped school for, even though I never really had a crush on him. We'd spent most of the date driving in his car, nervously looking around for the religious police. There had hardly been any conversation; his English was bad, my Arabic even worse. We'd kept smiling at each other, until even smiling became awkward. I still remembered the end of the date: the way he whipped his head around to make sure the coast was clear, the slight furrow in his forehead, the quick, nervous kiss on my cheek. I was fourteen at the time.

Next to me, Porus let out a sigh. He was getting depressed and heavy. I could feel myself being pulled down with him. I had a very bad feeling that if we floated back down, we would be shackled to the scene of the accident forever.

"Let it go, Porus," I said. "We can't return. We must move on."

I took hold of his hand.

When I was nine, a high priest at the fire temple next to Cama colony in Mumbai made us write a description of what we thought happened after we died. Even though I knew that the exercise was pointless (no one in our summer theology class at the fire temple ever had the right answers to the priest's questions), I found myself writing out two pages. It was a fun change from the endless finger snapping to ward off satanic spirits and the droning monotone of prayer that formed the background noise of most of my vacations to India.

I wrote of souls the way I imagined them, featherlight and invisible, floating upward through a layer of clouds that looked like flat white cotton, but felt cool, misty, and very wet. By the time the souls would get through the cloud covering, their earthly clothes would be soaked with moisture. Then they would pass through a sunny, heated zone that smelled like toast, and then another cold, wet layer. Hot and cold, cold and hot, until the air thinned and the sky darkened from light blue to navy to black.

I wrote of outer space. Stars everywhere in diamond pinpricks. Bright white fire crackling in the tails of the comets. Meteors falling in showers of red, orange, and blue. Colorful

planets revolving around fiery suns. The souls would continue ascending through this vast, glittering space for a very long time until they reached utter darkness and their heads brushed against something that felt like a ceiling: a delicate, thinly veined membrane that tore easily with a poke of a finger. Beyond that membrane lay heaven or hell, depending on how the souls had behaved on earth.

The priest gathered our papers and skimmed through the descriptions. "Some of you have good imaginations," he said. "But this isn't what really happens."

Zoroastrian death, he explained, was followed by a journey that began three days later, at the foot of a silvery bridge arching up into a brightness that blinded the eyes. The bridge, called the Chinvat, had to be crossed by every soul three days after death.

As I grew older, I liked to think of the bridge as the Walk of Fame or of Shame. Your fate lay in the Hallowed Brightness Up Above or the Dark Abyss Down Below. If you had sinned too much, the bridge would become blade thin and you'd fall into the Abyss, but without the eternal damnation that plagued so many monotheistic religions. For Zoroastrians, there was only a temporary hell, somewhat like the Jewish and Roman Catholic concepts of purgatory.

I thought the concept of the Chinvat itself was unique to Zoroastrians until I turned twelve, when Mishal Al-Abdulaziz,

the meanest girl in Qala Academy, informed me about a similar bridge in Islam called As-Sirat, or the Bridge of Hell.

There were times over the years when I found the whole process of arguing with Mishal over this subject futile. After all, Mishal's true knowledge of what happened after death extended to corpses in boxes and rectangular graves. Similarly, mine was limited to shrouded bodies being carried up a set of stairs by pallbearers—bodies that would end up as entrées in a meal for the vultures circling the Towers of Silence on Malabar Hill in Mumbai.

Emergency lights flashed below: a new van had arrived at the scene of our accident. Two men in white uniforms emerged with a stretcher, probably to carry our bodies to a morgue. Porus didn't seem to notice. He continued staring at his mother—the only one who, apart from my uncle, seemed to be shedding real tears.

Porus

THE SKY IN JEDDAH WAS BLUEBRIGHT. LIKE the sari Mamma wore to my *navjote* eleven years ago, blue and yellow like my father's matching tie. Down below, dust gathered: the dust of traffic, the dust of people, our bodies turning to dust like the Christians, burning to ash like the Hindus, while the policemen in their dusty uniforms hovered over our bodies like vultures from a Zoroastrian Tower of Silence.

It would have been normal for Zarin to make some smart-ass comment by now—something about the way her *masi* was blowing her nose, or maybe about how uncomfortable she seemed to be making the policemen with her constant crying. But nothing was normal today. I could feel Zarin floating next

to me in total silence. Her hair, which used to curl like smoke, was all smoke now. Smoke and fire.

"Girlfriend?" The police officer pointed at our bodies as he shouted at Zarin's uncle. Zarin's undamaged cell phone glinted silver in his hand. "Boyfriend?"

I wondered now if he had called our families to the scene of the accident specifically to ask this question instead of telling them to come directly to the morgue. My boss, Hamza, once told me that the police sometimes made examples of people for breaking the laws against dating. *Khilwa*, Hamza had called the offense, followed by a diatribe about how nothing good ever came out of a boy and a girl going out alone without supervision. But what could they do to us now that we were dead?

I watched Zarin's *masa* open his *iqama* to the photo page. "Please sir," he pleaded. "Please look at her. She was a child . . . a young girl . . ."

It was painful to hear him. Even though we weren't related, Zarin's *masa* had still treated me like a son when I first met him. "Call me Rusi Uncle, my boy. Or just Rusi, if you feel like it," he'd said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'm not so old yet."

Not as old as today, when it looked like the years had crept up on him in a matter of hours. If he could hear me, I would have told him that pleading with this particular officer wouldn't work. I could tell from the sneer on the officer's fat face, from

the way he held his clipboard—almost lazily, as if nothing anyone said mattered anymore now that he'd come to his own conclusion about the situation. Though most police interrogations were fairly reasonable ("One hour max, *ya habibi*, and then they let you go," my boss had told me), there were times when they could make your life miserable.

"Girlfriend?" The officer was bellowing now, and pointing at the area where a tow truck flashed orange, hooking itself to the smoking heap of metal and plastic that used to be my old car. "Boyfriend?"

"Sister!" Rusi Uncle shouted back. "Brother!"

Behind the policeman, a black GMC stood ready, the round gold seal of the Saudi religious police painted on its doors. Two men waited nearby, their beards long, their short white *thobe*s exposing bony ankles, their noses wrinkled against the combined smells of sweat, exhaust fumes, metal, and blood.

The job of the religious police, who were locally referred to as *muttawe'en* or the Hai'a, was to enforce Sharia law—from raiding shops for selling contraband like pork and alcohol to asking women to cover their heads in public places—though they needed to be with the city police to make any actual arrests. The mark of a *muttawa* was usually the absence of an *egal*, the round black cord that most Saudi men wore on their heads, over a red-and-white-checkered *shemagh*.

"When you see one, run in the opposite direction," Zarin had said. "Unless, of course, you want to get stuck in a prison cell for being seen with me."

She'd succeeded in scaring me with this comment a couple of times, until I realized that the men she was pointing to at the mall weren't religious policemen, but civilians out and about with their families.

"You should have seen your face!" she had said, laughing. "Porus, even if he *was* a real *muttawa*, he wouldn't start chasing us the second he saw us together!"

The religious policemen at the scene of our accident were, however, the real deal. I could see it by the careful way they were scrutinizing our families, the casual authority with which one of them finally walked up to the policeman interrogating Rusi Uncle and murmured in his ear.

Somewhere in the distance, beyond the GMC, within the flat expanse of dusty palm trees, streetlights, glass skyscrapers, and apartment buildings, lay Aziziyah, and Zarin's school, Qala Academy, where the whole nightmare had begun.

A sheen of moisture coated the police officer's face. He tapped a pencil against his clipboard and then, with a sigh, scribbled something down.

"Why different surname?" He pointed behind Rusi Uncle, where Khorshed Aunty and my mother were crying, their arms wrapped around each other. "You have two wife?"

Rusi Uncle went red and started swearing in a way I had never seen before, calling the policeman all sorts of names in Hindi. Names that could have him arrested and tossed into a deportation center if the policeman understood him. Khorshed Aunty screamed his name.

The police officer's hands balled into fists. The sun shifted slightly and for a moment I thought, *This is it: Rusi Uncle is done for.* Then, finally: "*Khallas!*" The officer clipped his pencil back onto the board. "Go!" he spat out. "GO!"

I let out a breath I had not known I was holding and watched Zarin's aunt and uncle help my mother back into their car. I watched as my mother continued to stare at me, or what remained of me: the bigger of two human-shaped stains on the tarmac.

I am so sorry, Mamma, I wanted to tell her. I did not want to leave you alone. Not like this. I did not even know how this accident had happened in the first place.

"Let it go, Porus," Zarin said, as if sensing my thoughts. "We can't return. We must move on."

She took my hand, her fingers sliding into the gaps between mine, something she had never done voluntarily when we were both alive.

Something inside me unclenched. I watched the *muttawa* follow the policeman who had been interrogating Zarin's uncle, both of them speaking in rapid-fire Arabic.

"What do you think they're saying?" I asked Zarin, who knew some of the language.

She let out an irritated sigh. "I'm not listening, Porus. They're talking too fast for me in any case, and I don't want to know what they're saying. I don't want to go back there."

"I'm sorry," I said. She had reasons enough—reasons aplenty, really—for not wanting to return. I hesitated for a second and then squeezed her hand gently; it was surprisingly soft and smooth—or did it feel that way because I was dead?

"You have tough hands." She sounded surprised.

So it *was* soft.

"Yeah. But I thought you already knew that. From my job and all."

"I thought you worked behind the counter."

"There are many things behind the counter. Like a loading dock and delivery trucks."

Now I knew she was smiling even though I could not look into her face. Not directly. There was something bright around her that prevented me from seeing her clearly. But we could feel each other's reactions. We could touch. It was strange.

We were holding hands now the way my father and I had on my sixth birthday. Palm to palm, fingers laced together like two people afraid of tipping over and falling into the Arabian Sea—me more so than Pappa, whose hand I had clung to as he guided me into a fisherman's boat near the ferry wharf in

Mumbai. "Careful, now," he had said as the boat rocked under my feet. "Careful when you step inside."

I gripped his hand even tighter and tried to steady myself, hoping I wouldn't tumble overboard in my excitement. "It will be special," Pappa had promised the day before. "A glimpse of heaven, right in the middle of the sea."

Overhead the sky was thick with clouds. Rain, the fisherman predicted before murmuring a prayer to the goddess and pushing off.

In the daytime, we saw clouds floating over the growing slum onshore, over women washing clothes and utensils in the stagnant pools while children bathed nearby, their dark skins covered with a fine watery film. The fishermen, by then, were already at sea, their painted boats and trawlers bobbing somewhere in the middle of an undulating blue. When the fishing season was hard, they picked up passengers like Pappa and me for a bit of extra money, taking us into the middle of the sea whenever we wanted, sometimes into waters that were so black we could barely see anything except for the faint gold glimmer of the city lights on the water close to the shore.

"Mad," Mamma had called them and Pappa. "Utterly mad."

I recalled her words in the darkness, amid the sounds of Pappa's breaths and the crush of the fisherman's paddle against the water. Moments later, however, the paddling stopped.

"Now we wait," Pappa said. The fisherman lit a match and brought it close to his face, lighting a *beedi* that he first offered to Pappa, who refused.

It had been another half hour before the first rays cast orange into the sky and then yellow before the sun finally rose, as round as a peach and glowing. The dark water turned pale and translucent, tiny sea creatures shimmering gold underneath. "This is what I have dreamed of, my son, what I've always wanted to show to your mother," Pappa had told me. "This is what heaven will look like after we die."

A year later, when we went out to sea again, the boat began to sink midway, forcing us to swim back ashore, a skill Pappa had had since he was a boy, but I'd never learned. Water, I discovered then, could go into your mouth and your ears. Could burn your throat like fire when it finally came out of you. Pappa had had to pull me back to shore with him. After CPR, our first stop was at the hospital to make sure I was okay. It was the closest I'd ever come to seeing heaven firsthand. My mother had been furious.

"Stop!" Zarin commanded. "You're doing it again!"

"Doing what?"

"Weighing us down."

And now I could see that we were closer to the ground, closer to the voices that were louder than before, to the crush of the Jeddah traffic below, vehicles snaking around my old car

and the police, their hoods gleaming in the afternoon sun. If I wanted, I could get close enough to touch the shapes of the people standing below, the faint trail of moisture on my mother's cheeks.

Zarin squeezed my hand hard and we floated up once more. "Do you want us to be stuck there forever?"

"As long as I'm with you, it doesn't matter," I said, and could instantly feel her roll her eyes.

"You scared me," she said.

Not as much as she'd scared me when she went out with those assholes over the past year.

"Did you swear in your head?" she asked me suddenly.

"How did you know?"

"I don't know. I could . . . I don't know, feel your hostility, I guess. I never heard you swear before . . . or technically even now."

Of course she hadn't. After Pappa's death I had become quite adept at hiding my anger from the people I loved. Though I had the feeling that Zarin did see, or maybe hear, me bash in that one guy until he saw the sun and the moon and a few stars. I wasn't too sure. Our one and only conversation about it had not gone too well.

Here and now, however, the boys in her past no longer seemed to matter.

"A gentleman doesn't swear in front of a lady," I recited in

perfect English, some line I'd heard somewhere, now popping out of me as if it had been waiting for this very moment.

She laughed and I felt myself growing lighter.

English was not my first language. I rarely spoke in English with Zarin, normally preferring to use Gujarati, the language of instruction of my old school in Mumbai—a language I was certain to have better command of when talking to Zarin, who with a single look could still sometimes leave me fumbling for words.

Below us, my mother was now praying. I could tell from the way her lips were moving. When someone died, a simple Ashem Vohu would suffice, she had told me once, though I never understood why even that was needed. "Who understands prayers anyway?" Zarin had always said, and I had agreed with her. Especially when they were spoken in a language that few priests back in India could translate.

It was Zarin who had told me the story of the three wise men from the Bible—how they were actually Zoroastrian priests, who the Christians called the magi.

"No one at school would believe me if I told them this," she'd said with a laugh. "Except maybe Mishal. But she'd pretend ignorance to spite me."

"How do you know this?" I'd asked her, awed.

"How do you not?" she'd teased back. "I'm not even technically Zoroastrian and I still do!"

Having a Hindu father meant that Zarin was permanently barred by the fire temples in India from being inducted into the Zoroastrian faith. Though Zarin liked to pretend indifference about this fact, I knew it bothered her. Between the two of us, it was always Zarin who knew more about Zoroastrianism, who had spent hours reading up on it during trips back to Mumbai. I, on the other hand, was no longer sure if I believed in God, especially after my father died.

"My mother wanted me to become a priest, you know," I said now. "She came from a priestly family."

"A priest?" Zarin sounded interested. "Well, why didn't you?"

"Pappa was from a nonpriestly family. So I couldn't." I still remembered the look on my mother's face, the disappointment she couldn't quite hide.

Zarin squeezed my hand again, but this time in reassurance.

There were things I still wanted to tell Zarin: things we'd never had the chance to talk about, things I had told her before but she'd ignored. But we were now fading—or was the light growing brighter?—and I could no longer remember what they were.

"I'm going to hell, aren't I?" Zarin asked me suddenly.

And then I remembered everything again, bit by bit, my memory jogged not by Zarin's voice, but by the fear I heard

behind it—an emotion she'd expressed in front of me once before, on that nightmare day when everything went wrong.

Memories, Pappa had said, can be like splinters, digging into you when you least expect them to, holding tight and sharp the way wood did when it slid under a fingernail.

I felt Zarin's fingers tighten around my hand.

"I'm not letting you go," I said.

Mishal

THE DAY AFTER SHE DIED, I CALLED THE number again.

"Hello?" The woman at the other end had a voice hoarse from crying.

I did not speak. Did not breathe. It was something I'd learned to do during those blank calls, in the early practice sessions years ago—before Caller ID became nearly as commonplace as a Happy Meal—when I would prank Father's second wife, Jawahir, who by her very existence had turned my mother into a basket case.

The number I'd dialed now did not appear to have Caller ID. Or if it did, Zarin Wadia had never confronted me about it—never bothered asking about the blank calls I had made

to her in the past. A silence that in itself seemed uncharacteristic of her. Zarin had been a loner, but she had never exactly been quiet about the things that pissed her off. I knew that firsthand.

". . . trailer . . . accident . . . highway . . ." My left ear tuned into the words floating faintly up the stairs to my room; Abdullah was watching the news again on Channel 2.

My right ear, however, was still focused on the woman over the phone, whose breaths were growing quicker now, impatient. I could almost feel them on my skin.

"Who is this?" Her voice was louder. "What do you want?"

Deviant, they called her at school, I wanted to say. A girl who stood out the day she first came to the academy. A square peg in a round hole.

I wanted to tell the woman about that time in Class II. The time we found out about Zarin lying about having parents. How her face had turned red like a poppy when I confronted her. *Shame, shame*, my friends and I had chanted whenever she'd stepped out on the playground after that. *Shame, shame, poppy shame*.

I wanted to tell the woman about that time in Class IX, when I first smelled the cigarettes on her. When she stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry, spraying my face with her spit. "I'll report you for this," I told her. And I had. Though by then, she hadn't seemed to care.

My fingers brushed the name and number scribbled on the photocopied page of the class phone list. Careless strokes, uneven in weight, some characters darker than others. She put a dash through her sevens and through the *Z* in her name. The same number, year after year, ever since she first showed up in Class II with her short hair and weird brown leggings, no new cell number added, even though I knew that she'd started carrying around an ancient flip phone sometime last year.

I wrapped the phone cord tight around my fingers.

It was nothing, I wanted to tell the woman. Just a bunch of girls saying crappy things, sharing crappy pictures on Facebook and Twitter. Stuff like this happened all the time at school. Zarin knew that. She had to have known that! She used to laugh at the rumors before. *Pea brained*, she used to call anyone who believed them. How could we have known that she would try to run away?

I opened my mouth to speak.

"Mishal?" Abdullah called up to me. "Where are you?"

I hung up instantly, heart pounding. I cursed my brother for his voice—that loud Sports Captain voice he used to bark marching orders to the Qala Academy boys during Sports Day presentations—a voice that must surely have penetrated the woman's ear on the other end of the phone as it had mine.

"Come down here!" he shouted. "They're showing the news about your friend."

The same news they'd announced this morning at a special assembly held on the school grounds. The headmistress made a speech, the teachers dabbed at their eyes with the edges of their saris or *dupatta*s, prayers were recited, and everyone observed the obligatory Two Minutes of Silence for the Dead. Seconds after the assembly was complete, however, everyone around me burst into whispers about the details.

Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un! Ya Allah, what a tragedy!

Tragedy, my foot. It was probably her fault, with all those cigarettes she smoked. One of them probably set the car on fire!

How can you say such things about someone who died?

What? What are you guys talking about? The headmistress said it was a crash in the assembly. Like the wheel came off the car she was in or some—

Forget about that—was she with that deli boy again?

On my Tumblr account, random anonymous tippers were going wild with even more theories, forcing me to post the following message when I got back home from school:

> You have been asking a lot of questions about a certain Class XI student (you all know who she *was*). I understand that you have your own theories and honestly I appreciate the asks and tips you guys send me. But I am NO LONGER going to post anything else about this person on Tumblr as I don't think it's fair to her or her family.

POSTED 2 HOURS AGO BY **BLUENIQAB**, 45 NOTES
#seriously #anonymous #ily #but let's not speak ill of the dead okay #blue's announcements #QA gossip

On Zarin's Facebook page (one she rarely used, from the looks of her twelve-person friend list) there was a lone status update dating back to October 13, 2010: *so this is facebook? looks boring*. She hadn't even bothered putting up a profile picture. Her timeline, set to Public, had a slew of messages: some from our classmates, but most from strangers, their sentiments ranging from *Ding dong, the witch is dead* to *May your soul rest in peace*. My own message, one I'd typed out and erased several times before hitting Enter, had been a short *R.I.P.* and nothing else.

I sat on my bed and opened my Physics textbook. *My* friend, Abdullah called her, as if I was the only one who'd known her, as if she was a complete stranger to him.

"Mishal?"

"I'm studying!" I shouted back. "I have a test tomorrow!"

He fell silent. The days when he and I would run into each other's rooms without knocking and drag the other out to watch something we'd seen on TV were long gone. In those days, Father lived with us on the weekends, playing games with Abdullah and me, sometimes even coaxing Mother to join us.

Of the two of us, Abdullah resembled Mother the most, with his wide mouth, his fair skin tanned by the Jeddah sun,

and the black hair that curled around his head. Mother's hair, on the other hand, was long; in her days as a student of classical music in India, she had often left it loose. "It was the first thing people noticed about me," she said. "My hair, which hung to my hips."

Hair that she had, after marrying my Saudi father, to tie up in braids and cover with scarves, never to be seen again by other men. "I didn't mind," she said when I asked her about it. "Your father married me against the wishes of his family, you know. They didn't want him marrying a woman who wasn't Saudi, even if she was a Muslim. I was very lucky."

In the room next to mine, I heard the faint hum of Mother's old CD player: a classical song I recognized from my childhood. When she was younger, my mother had played the *sarangi*, a stringed boxlike instrument that she'd brought with her from Lucknow to Jeddah after marriage. An instrument that she did not relinquish even after marrying my father, much to the general disapproval of his family. "I've already given up far too much," she said.

She turned to her instrument more and more after Father married Jawahir, often growing frustrated by the lack of interest Abdullah and I showed in her music, not understanding that it was an alien language we both resented, a language that, to us, had had some mysterious hand in separating our parents into two houses. "Feel it, Mishal!" she would cry out

in those days, often taking my hand and placing it over my heart. "Here, Mishal. Feel the music *here*."

She noticed neither my grades nor Abdullah's prolonged absences from home, a fact that Abdullah took full advantage of once Father bought him his first car, a GMC that he drove around in with his friends, sometimes not returning for two or three days.

At school, girls were often surprised to find out that Abdullah was my brother, which to me wasn't that surprising. While my brother had inherited my mother's looks, I had inherited my father's, my skin as dark as his even though I did my best to keep out of the sun, my eyes large and protruding in a face that was much too long and thin.

"Your brother is *so* hot!" my classmates would gush whenever they got the chance. They hoped I would play matchmaker to their Bollywood dreams and give them a happy ending with a guy they'd stalked on Facebook and at the annual school fair that brought the boys and girls of Qala Academy out of their segregated buildings and into the enormous boys'-section parking lot.

Unlike the academy's girls' section in Aziziyah, where the courtyard was enclosed by four white buildings, leaving the school buses to line up outside the gates, the boys' section's parking lot remained open to the public and functioned as a soccer field during the school year. On fair days, it was the

only plot of land the school administration considered large (and therefore safe) enough to accommodate hormonal males and females at the same time without pissing off the parents or the religious police.

"He snorts Pepsi through his nose," I would tell some of these giggly girls, most times getting the grossed-out reaction I'd been hoping for—a *yuck!* or an *eww!* followed by an end to an irritating conversation. My brother chose his own girls, as far as I knew from snooping through his texts or from eavesdropping on the conversations he had with the friends he sometimes invited over to our house. He had a preference, I wanted to tell them, for blondes with big boobs.

The girls, of course, did not know this. They did not know of the magazine I'd come across in Abdullah's room when I was thirteen, or what he'd told me when he saw me flipping through it, part fascinated, part horrified.

Instead, they called me names behind my back. Some even called me jealous, thinking that my feelings for Abdullah were more than sisterly: "She probably wants to keep him to herself."

But no one had the courage to say those words to my face. Not only were they intimidated by my sharp tongue, they wanted my friendship for the information I provided to them—the gossip, the scandals, the stories I knew about everyone in school.

Except for Zarin, of course. The only girl Abdullah had ever asked me about, probably because she'd completely

ignored him at the school fair when she was fifteen. The girl everyone in school would now discuss for ages for being found with a boy—evidence, they would call it, for the rumors that had been circulating around her. Zarin, a girl as scandalous in death as she had been in life, the memory of her etched into my skin like the bite she'd marked me with when we were both seven, in the courtyard behind the school bookstore.

My hand automatically went to my arm and rubbed at it even though the marks had long since faded.

The fight had begun with an innocent question spurred by that morning's Social Studies lesson: "What are you? Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Jew?"

I had posed the question to the girls during break—or at least to the ones who weren't chasing one another, skipping rope, or playing hopscotch in a chalk-drawn grid on the tarmac.

Muslim, Muslim, Hindu, Muslim.

Christian, Muslim, Christian, Muslim.

"Zoroastrian," Zarin said.

"There's no such thing."

"There is." Lines appeared on the skin over her brows, reminding me of the pictures I'd seen of the Hindu men the teacher had shown us in class—three pale skin-colored streaks on a forehead that was now pink with anger.

"Come on," I said, irritated by the sound of a word I'd never heard before, a word that to me sounded like something Zarin

had made up out of the sheer boredom of having no friends in class. "You don't have to lie to us. What are you? Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Jew?"

"I'm not lying." Her dusty black Mary Janes scraped the ground as she got to her feet. Her knees, darker than the rest of her legs, were bruised, red blots and scratches slowly turning purple from the fights she sometimes got into with the girls in the classroom beside ours.

I felt myself growing stiff, even though outwardly my voice showed no change. "Well, you told us you had parents too. But you don't. You live with your aunt and uncle."

"I'm not *lying*," she said, snarling the last word.

"You are too," I insisted loudly, in an effort to be heard over the general din on the playground. "You don't have parents and you don't have a religion either."

In fact, my voice was so loud that many of the girls playing nearby had fallen silent and stopped their game-play to watch Zarin's reaction.

And what a reaction she gave them.

Before I realized what was happening, she caught hold of my arm and sank her teeth into it. We rolled in the courtyard, bit, pulled, scratched, and screamed, until a teacher yanked us apart and called us a pair of hooligans.

Of course, Zarin wasn't lying about her religion, and my mother told me as much when I came home that afternoon.

"You learn this now, Mishal," Mother scolded, "while there is still time. Tomorrow you will go and say sorry to that girl."

Yet, though I filed away this fact on Zoroastrianism for future reference, I had no intention of apologizing to Zarin. She did not apologize to me either. Instead, we always tried to top each other in the classes we liked best, though I'd never beaten Zarin in English and she'd never beaten me in Arabic. When not competing in the classroom, we competed outside of it, usually on the school bus we both took home, our battles limited to taunts and name-calling.

I stared at the page in my textbook: *Consider the motion of a car along a straight line . . .*

From the mosque outside my window, the *muezzin* sang a call for the *isha* prayer.

Downstairs, Abdullah switched the channel to *The X Factor Arabia*. On another night, I might have shouted at him for turning up the volume so loud. I might even have unrolled my mat and prayed. But I couldn't study anyway. And I was not sure if any of my prayers would be accepted after the things I'd done. I tossed my book aside.

In the room next to mine, Mother had begun another song. Quiet plucks of the strings that were slow at first and then quick. Staccato notes, I think she called them. Rapid little jabs to the heart.