

salt and saffron

kamila shamsie



'Lively, playful, provocative.' Anita Desai

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Kamila Shamsie

BLOOMSBURY

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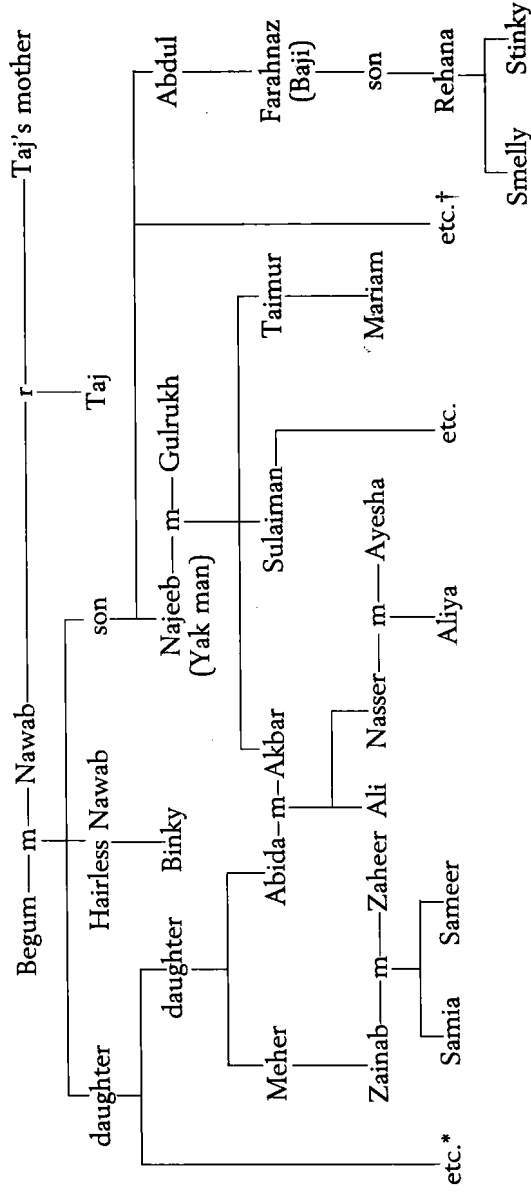
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*For Victoria Hobbs and Alexandra Pringle*

# THE HOUSE OF DARD-E-DIL

(showing those characters who appear in this story)



\*Great-Aunt One-Liner, Booby, Usman related to Aliya through this line

†Starched Aunts, Mousy Cousin, Bachelor Uncle related to Aliya through this line

All right, don't scoff, mock or disbelieve: we live in mortal fear of not-quite-twins.

Of course, reduce all stories to their basic elements and you'll see all families are possessed of prejudice – that alternative name for 'fear'. The only thing that makes us stand apart is our particular choice of . . . I want to say 'bugaboo'. I often want to say 'bugaboo'. It's a word that demands to be said out loud, particularly among bilingual Pakistanis who recognize its resemblance to 'baghal boo' or 'armpit odour', but its meaning 'object of baseless terror' makes it misleading in this conversation. Nothing baseless in our terror; we have five hundred years of empirical evidence on which to base our fear of not-quite-twins. Ours has always been a scientific family, that way. So I suppose we are unusual. Because, though we are like all families in the almost religious fervour of our prejudices, all the other families we know can point to nothing but stereotype, ignorance and jealousy of their own privilege as a basis for those prejudices and, I'll admit, our contrasting historicity has always made us feel superior.

One of my earliest memories is of Dadi cackling when

she heard the news of Hussain Asif's marriage to Natasha Shah. 'Shia Muhajir marries Sunni Sindhi! How will the bigots react? Disown your own kind, or accept the enemy! Ming-ling! Ring-a-ling!' Of course, no multi-culti appreciation of marrying across both sect and ethnicity lay at the root of my grandmother's words. She merely wanted all other family biases confounded and challenged so that she could hold up her head and say, 'We of the royal family of Dard-e-Dil have always held true to our family fears.' No marriages, conversions or redistributions of wealth can change that. Not-quite-twins are not-quite-twins; no way around that. Oh, they may escape undetected for a time, but ultimately they are incapable of disguise, incapable of escaping the category into which they are born, incapable of causing our family anything but pain. I know. I've read the histories.

Confused? Would you rather I changed the topic to yak milk production?

## Chapter One

Yak's milk is green. But, of course, I never got round to telling my fellow passengers that choice tidbit. It takes more than a Nepalese ox to distract attention away from my family. And the occupant of the aisle seat across from me was so grateful for my high-volume chatter – which replaced the usual boredom and non-recycled air of the transatlantic economy-class cabin with murder, war, jealousy, and rapidly reversing fortune – that he pulled my luggage off the conveyor belt at Heathrow while I was still stuck in the immigration line, waiting for a turbaned Sikh who dropped his aitches to finish scrutinizing my Pakistani passport.

'Here,' aisle seat said in an American accent, when I finally zigzagged my way to the conveyor belt through luggage trolleys, unknown languages and a hysterical Nordic man who had just been informed that his baggage had been mysteriously rerouted to Nicaragua. 'I figured this was yours. Any others?'

I wanted to say, Where are you from? You look Pakistani now that you've removed your baseball cap, though on the plane I assumed you were a tanned, possibly multi-racial,

American. But instead I shook my head, no, and hoisted my grey suitcase with its Gemini zodiac sticker on to a trolley. Aisle seat said I should go ahead, he was still waiting for his second suitcase, no point in me hanging around. He was just being polite, of course – that much was obvious by the pauses between words and the way his eyes darted around the terminal building to register his distaste for the surroundings – but at that moment I really didn't have the energy that the laws of reciprocal courtesy required so I just nodded and thanked him. We hugged goodbye (his initiative, but I saw no reason to resist) and when I turned to go he said, 'Hey, Aliya. How much of it is true?'

I smiled. 'A good storyteller never tells.'

I walked a few steps away and then turned back. My body had just begun to register the feel of his arms around me. What would my grandmother say if she knew I'd been hugging strange men in airports? He was facing away from me, staring at the leather flaps at the end of the conveyor belt through which the luggage emerged, so I could continue to look at him and regret that I'd spent so much time on the plane chattering to anyone who cared to listen (two girls had even sat cross-legged in the aisle, listening to my stories until the flight attendant shooed them away and then hung around herself, a pot of coffee cooling in her hand). If I'd been a little less intent on entertaining everyone maybe I would have leant over the aisle and talked, actually talked, to him. He knew all my family stories – all, except the most important one – and I didn't even know his name. I moved towards him, then felt absurd and walked away.

I stepped out into London. Filled my lungs with the 6 a.m. air of summer and slowly, in the lingering manner in

which you might peel off a bandage in order to prolong the joy of seeing skin where last there was exposed flesh, I exhaled all residues of aeroplanes and airports from my system. I could have spread my arms wide and spun in tiptoed circles with the joy of *terra firma* and familiar breezes, but it seemed more expedient to flag down the nearest taxi instead.

'Where are you coming from?' the cabbie asked, after we had been driving in silence long enough for me to adjust the 'cultural expectations' knob in my brain from 'America: chatty' to 'England: not'.

'America,' I replied.

'But you're not American,' he said, in a tone which seemed to imply that I might not be aware of this fact.

'No, I'm Pakistani.'

'Ball tamperers,' he muttered. Even if he was merely talking about the not-so-long-ago cricket controversy between our two countries, that wasn't polite. I responded with silence. Not the kind of silence with which my cousin, Mariam, filled her days, but rather the silence of my grandmother, which was meant to inform those who received it of the lowliness of their stature. Dadi always accompanied those silences with an upward tilt of her head, as though she were posing for the head of a coin. Strange how, in remove, single gestures can be all that remain to us of people who once inhabited the daily to-and-fros of our lives. In Massachusetts it was the memory of that tilted head which kept me from writing to Dadi. I suppose the tilt encapsulated for me the way Dadi behaved about Mariam Apa.

The cabbie pulled up to my St. John's Wood destination – after what seemed an unnecessary detour via Lord's – and

I tipped him a more than generous amount. (That was another Dadi trick for making the lowly feel lower, but it didn't seem to produce the desired effect.) I waited for him to drive away before sitting down on my suitcase in the tiny parking lot of Palmer House. Halfway to home, and not just geographically. There, two floors up, the red brick with its starburst of cracks, where the tenant of Flat 121 had slammed down a hammer and yelled at my cousins and me, 'If you don't stop that singing it'll be your heads next.' And there, behind the fence, the garbage bin in which I had hidden amongst green cans during a game of hide-and-seek, where curiosity taught me the taste of beer and my father, on finding me, taught me the meaning of 'backwash', embellishing details sufficiently to engender in me an unshakable paranoia regarding shared drinks. Oh, and up, between the white lace curtains of Flat 77, my cousin Samia staring down at me.

'What are you up to, Ailment?' she shouted. 'Have you gone mental?'

'No, just sentimental,' I said, and rolled my suitcase to the front door.

Upstairs, Samia flung her arms around me and pulled me into the flat. 'Look at you, you America-return! Graduated and all! Can't believe it's been five years since.' She held me at arm's length and scrutinized me. For a moment I felt as though I were a child again and she was the oh-so-cool elder cousin whose opinion mattered so much to me that I would go out of my way to annoy her just so that she wouldn't detect my devotion. 'You're looking so . . . I mean, so! Swear to God. When your mother told me you had cut your hair, I wasn't sure your face could bear the attention, but it can. It really can.'

'Thanks, and you look quite ugly,' I said, irritated at myself for feeling so grateful for that non-compliment. I glanced around at the new decor with its Bukhara rug and paisleyed floor-cushions and Mughal miniatures. Samia, it appeared, had become one of those *desis* who drink Pepsi in Pakistan and *lassi* in London.

'You lie so well, everyone will know we're related,' Samia said, handing me a mug of tea. She didn't add, No one would know it by looking at us, though that was true enough. She had the angular features, prominent clavicle and straight black hair of Dadi and my father, a throwback to the Rajput princess who was so beautiful that one of my ancestors from the Dard-e-Dil royal family abducted her and dragged her to a battlefield, hoping that her face would seduce enemy soldiers into dropping their swords and rushing for paper to compose *ghazals* of devotion. The plan might have worked had it not been that the princess, outraged that common soldiers were to look upon her, slashed her face with her fingernails before the battle began. My ancestor was so overcome by her proud courage that he married her, and went on to win the battle anyway.

Somehow, that story seemed quite romantic when I was fifteen.

Needless to say, I do not look like the Rajput princess. Which doesn't bother me much, though I really would have liked a prominent clavicle. Family members use words like 'agreeable' and 'pleasant' regarding my features, and go on so much about the beauty mark (no one ever says 'mole') on my cheek that it's obvious that's my only redeeming feature. My 'bedroom eyes' also attract much comment, but let's be frank, they only make me look like Garfield.

I have the unfortunate habit of looking very focussed when I am in fact distracted; a tendency that is a great asset in most classrooms, but has often landed me in trouble elsewhere. I suppose while my mind wandered down ancestral paths my eyes must have been fixed on some aspect of the flat's new decor, because Samia said, 'Look, Aloo, I know this has always been your home away from, so it must be just a little bizarre to think I've taken it over, but really, truly, I'm only here doing research for a few months.'

'Oh, please, Samia, you're such a moron sometimes. It's family property.'

'Yes, but—'

'Please,' I said. 'Can we avoid the tangle of family rights and privileges for just a few more seconds?'

Samia grinned. 'Yes. Good. Top Ten remark. I was just leading up to telling you that you're stuck in the spare bedroom.'

'No hass. It's where I always sleep when I stay here with my parents.'

'Yes, but there are new tenants next door, and their bedroom shares a wall with yours. They're newly-weds. The walls might shake a little. Speaking of which . . .'

'Yes?'

Samia raised an eyebrow at me. 'I just thought I'd generously provide you with a lead-in to any goosy gossip in your life,' she said.

'I think you're confusing my life with yours.'

'No goose?'

'Well, maybe a gander or two. Nothing worth mentioning.' What a thing to say about all the boys at college I had liked enough to consider liking even more. They were all

brimming with rage against the world's injustices, those boys. All of them. So how could I tell them the story I would have to tell them if there was to be anything approaching intimacy between us? I learnt many things at college, but the only art I perfected was the art of stepping away with a shrug.

'Hunh.' Samia fiddled with the heart-shaped pendant around her neck, but I wasn't about to sit through an exhaustive – or should I say, exhausting – account of her romantic entanglements, so I just sipped my tea and frowned at the calcium spot on my thumb nail.

'Oh, well. Good flight?'

I shrugged. 'I kept the galleries entertained with stories about the family.'

Samia rolled her tongue under her upper lip. With relatives, even those you haven't seen for many years, as I hadn't seen Samia since I was seventeen and she twenty-one, you can recognize what their expressions hide because someone you know well – in this case, my father – has exactly the same manner of concealment.

'No,' I said, skimming my palm on the underside of the mug before setting it down, and then wiping my palm vigorously on my jeans. 'Not that story. I take it you've heard some melodramatic family version of how I reacted to all that stuff four years ago.'

Samia tugged my earlobe. 'I wanted to come back home, you know. Mainly because of you. But between summer jobs and research and other stuff . . .'

'Like Jack, short for John.'

'Yeah, that loser.' We fell silent for a moment and then Samia said, 'Have you ever asked yourself why you don't tell that story?'

'*Uf tobah!* You're a historian not a psychologist, Samo.' I stood up and dragged my suitcase into the spare bedroom, pushing away my cousin's hand when she tried to help me. It was happening already. Five minutes with a relative and I was becoming a moody cow. Moo-dy cow. Well, that's all right. Still a shred of humour remaining.

'So, how long before you head off to the homeland?' Samia asked, following me into the bathroom.

'Tomorrow morning. You didn't read the e-mail I sent, did you?' I yanked my shirt over my head and tossed it at Samia.

'Not with any kind of obsessive attention to detail.'

I turned on the shower. The rest of Samia's reply was punctured by the needles of water that tattooed my body, so her words became indistinct and all that remained was the lilt and tempo of her voice, which could have been the lilt and tempo of any of my female relatives except one. I was not showering, I was carrying out a ritual, a ritual of arrival in London, and part of the ritual was to miss Mariam Apa, which I did, but the other part of the ritual was to imagine what she was doing, right now, and that I couldn't do. My imagination could accommodate aliens and miracles and the taste of certain men's sweat, but not that.

I turned off the shower and said, 'I don't tell that story, because it still doesn't have an ending.'

## Chapter Two

'Is yaks' milk really green?' I asked Samia, settling down to my second mug of tea.

She shrugged and pulled my wet hair to check that it squeaked. 'That's really so not important.'

Which is the closest she's ever come to conceding ignorance. Fact is, I'm sure no one in the family knows any more than she or I do on the subject. But we all know that my great-grandfather's declaration, on 28 February 1920, that he had just heard yaks' milk was green and, therefore, he felt impelled to inform his cousin, the Nawab, he was giving up his courtier's life in order to become a scientist and study yak milk production, was what jolted my great-grandmother into premature labour.

Taj, the midwife, was summoned. A woman whose veins stood up a centimetre from the backs of her hands, Taj had delivered every member of my family born in Dard-e-Dil since 1872. By the time my great-grandfather was envisioning all the honours he would receive for investigating lactose colouration Taj was so shrunken and wrinkled that rumour had it she was regressing into babyhood and was