

ONE

‘Have you,’ he cried in a dreadful voice, ‘have you ever suffered?’
G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday*

The Pakistani qawwali trio, the Lal Shahbazz brothers, had reached a sort of climax when Shehzad stepped into the kitchen. He could tell from the expression on his father’s face, a rapturous grin of ecstasy that spread from ear to ear. The imam’s hands were raised in anticipation – he was holding an invisible baton.

Even though his father was wearing headphones – an expensive, cordless Bose set that Shehzad had brought back from London – the voices of the trio were audible, a thin, discreet wail, as if coming from some far-off place in the night. The lush resonance of the composition struck Shehzad forcefully. Drawn by some invisible force, he strained his ears to catch it.

He could hear the joyous blend of the music, the driving, pounding beats of the tabla, dholak and pakhwa. The soaring tari, a form of ritualised handclapping, beat rhythmically to the music. The delicate twang of a sitar struggled to keep pace. It was a live recording and the ecstatic, fevered audience whooped and hollered in the background.

Shehzad felt a sharp pang in his chest, slightly to the left from the middle, where he imagined his heart to be. The song, ‘Midnight’, was about the betrayal of a love. It was a wailing lament to loss, hurt, and anguish. A prince finds his wife in a midnight tryst with a stranger in the garden. It was *their* love garden that they’d planned and worked on together over the years. The stranger was even sitting in his spot on their love seat.

How could she do that, how? He howls in anguish at the moon, pleading for divine retribution, threatening death and destruction to her lover and all his family.

Shehzad knew the song well. It was a favourite of Habib's, one that he played often in his upstairs flat in Green Lanes in London. Unlike the imam's CD, Habib's recording was an old, scratchy record, an original that was reissued by Decca Pakistan in 1963. The cover was strategically placed on the mantelpiece in Habib's grimy living room. It was a yellowing picture of the youthful, unsmiling brothers sitting cross-legged on a ragged Baluchi carpet, surrounded by heavy Victorian furniture, no doubt from the days of the Raj.

He gagged, trying to keep down the vomit that was threatening to rise. Oddly enough it was not the music that caused it. It was the smell. To be precise, the music triggered the smell, and it was the smell that caused him to grip his stomach and almost double up in pain. Habib's carpet squished into his sight. *Didn't he ever wash that damned carpet?*

But it was the other smell that made him want to scream, the scent of crushed damask roses that Aurakzai used so liberally on himself.

There was always the scream. Somehow, it never came out. He did not know what to do with the scream. He wanted to do *something* with it, let it out, kill it, vanquish it. But nothing happened. Nothing ever happened. It stayed there, somewhere deep inside him. He wanted desperately to misplace the scream, as one would misplace a pen, or a coin, and never find it again.

'Midnight' was the last song on the brothers' live album, *Memories*, recorded at the Kandy bioscope in Hyderabad in 1948. It was a contentious song, its meaning and significance arousing fierce debate over the years. Not just a simple love song, the loyal fans argued vociferously. Was not its title an all too obvious reference to Partition, when Pakistan was born at the stroke of midnight on 14 August 1947? Was it not about the loss, anguish and betrayal experienced by the millions so cruelly wrenched from their homes on both sides?

The Lal Shahbazz brothers consistently denied it, but with knowing twinkles in their eyes, stoking the embers of a forty-year-old controversy. Whether they played in the dusty halls of Islamabad or at the Royal Albert in London their gnomic response was always the same.

No comment. No comment. Please.

'It's going to make you deaf, dad,' Shehzad said in the direction of the faded armchair in which his father was seated.

'What did you say?' Imam Shadhili removed the headphones and