

**Paula
Robinson**

Mangla Lake

The painting makes me want to go back to Pakistan. I imagine myself at Ramkot Fort, watching the moonlight on Mangla Lake and—

Someone walks in front of me, obscuring my view. I blink, aware of dissonant sounds around me. Voices, competing. Laughter, forced. I was one of the first to arrive, but now half of Manhattan seems to be at the opening of *Kashmir Revisited*.

I focus on the painting again. I can almost feel those stone ramparts weathered by centuries. The darkness of the water draws me, promising something. A way to forget. To drift back—

“Khalid has such amazing talent,” a man’s voice says close beside me. The accent is English, the words clipped.

I’m not in the mood for small talk. I go over to the painting’s wall label. Squint at it.

“It’s called *Midnight of My Passing Years*.” He’s standing behind me. Not too close, at least.

“You’re Inkie Black, aren’t you?”

I flinch. It sounds ridiculous, a name chosen in a drunken stupor. Which, of course, it was.

“Your *Roomscapes* exhibition last year was intriguing.”

I turn and look at a stranger in a charcoal, tailored suit. He is monochromatic like the painting: his shirt black, his hair streaked with grey.

“I purchased *Bedroom in Lahore* at your exhibition. On behalf of a client.”

It was my first piece. The one I’d promised myself never to sell.

“Who’s your client?” I ask, trying to keep my tone even.

“Excuse me,” he calls to a waitress carrying a tray. “Thank you so much,” he



Suleman Aqeel Khilji was born in Quetta and lives in Lahore. Suleman was one of the students selected for a student exchange program to the Ecole des Beaux Art, Paris, where he was awarded a medal for outstanding achievement. He also obtained a distinction in painting from the National College of the Arts, Lahore, in 2011. In 2016 Suleman was awarded the Vasl Single Artist Residency in collaboration with the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi. In 2016, he took part in Murree Museum Artist’s Residency. He has been displaying his work across Pakistan and internationally. His works are part of collections such as Como Museum of Art, Lahore, Developments in Literacy (DIL) Foundation, New York, and the Luciano Benetton Collection. Currently, he is member of the permanent faculty at NCA, Lahore.

takes two flutes of Champagne, offers me one.

I shake my head.

“My client liked *Bedroom in Lahore*’s simplicity compared to your more recent work.”

I remember painting that salvage window bright turquoise. Draping a sheer *dupatta* inside the glass panes like a curtain half-pulled. Developing that photograph, mounting it in the box I’d built. Most of all, I remember stepping back. Gazing through a window at a man sleeping in tussled sheets, his arm above his head.

“My client and I are keen to see what you’re working on now.” The Englishman takes a card from his jacket pocket, hands it to me.

“Nothing. I stopped after that show.”

“What a great pity.”

I finger a lime green splotch on my jeans. In my rush to paint the guest room wall earlier, I didn’t bother to mask the edges, so the colour lapped onto the two adjacent walls and cornice. Perhaps that neon wall is the start of a new mixed-media—

“Did you know Khalid named this painting after a line from Parveen Shakir’s poem, *I’m Happy to Remain a Butterfly*?”

It’s one of my favourites, but I’m not about to tell him that.

“You were mesmerised for a good forty minutes. Khalid will be—”

“Is he *here*?” I wish suddenly that I owned a pair of heels. That I hadn’t stopped wearing makeup. That I’d worn anything other than this washed-out t-shirt that’s one size too big. My short hair could probably use a brush, if not a wash. I cut it myself these days.

“No, he can’t abide these events—even in Lahore. He’s such a private person.” The Englishman raises his chin, his attention drawn to something over my shoulder. He nods, glances back at me and says quickly, “Well, it’s been a pleasure, Miss Black. Do give me a ring sometime.” Before I can answer, he disappears into the crowd.

I wonder for a moment if I’ve imagined the entire conversation. I’ve been known to do that. Then I feel the thick, white card in my palm. I run my thumb over the engraved script but I can’t make out the tiny letters without my reading glasses. I dig through my rucksack and find their case. It’s empty, as usual. I shake the bag hard in frustration. My fingers grope around inside until

they close over one of the lenses. When I put my glasses on, there’s a cloudy imprint that I don’t wipe off. The front of the business card has two lines:

J. Hughes
+92 (0)42 9558167

Ninety-two: the country code for Pakistan. I turn the card over, expecting a website and email. It’s blank.

The day has been hot for mid-April and the air smells of smog, the way it does in summer. I wander through Madison Square Park, trying not to think about the painting. I head north towards the lights of the Empire State. Over my left shoulder, the prow of the Flatiron Building looks set to overtake me in the growing dusk. The French call this time of day *l’heure bleue*. The blue hour. I love taking pictures in its magical light. I pause by the South Fountain and watch a teenager in a purple anorak toss a coin in.

She reminds me of myself in Pakistan, that summer before starting my BFA. How naive I was with my ponytail and rucksack. My guidebook and Nikon. My pale skin that fascinated everyone—except him. His eyes touched me, but not his hands. Not at first.

I met him at Lake Mangla, the artist with the soulful eyes. He seemed to belong to another time, his paintbrush turning every scene into something mystical. He loved the folklore of his homeland and added an ephemeral detail to each painting—a clue for the enlightened to discover. That’s what I was looking for at the exhibition. Only, this time, it eluded me.

He used to recite Parveen Shakir’s poetry to me, his voice mellifluous as I lay curled beside him. Months later—alone and wrapped up against the New York winter—I studied the translations from Urdu, learnt her poems by heart.

What if he named his painting *for me*? What if *that’s* the clue?

I laugh out loud. It’s been how many years now? Thirty? He probably doesn’t even remember me. Yet another American tourist, charmed by his manners, the sparsity of his words.

You’re like Ramkot Fort, Uncle!” The term of respect in Pakistani English was meant as a playful taunt.

“Am I that old and crumbling?”

“No, just remote and beautiful. A tourist attraction.”

He raised an eyebrow and picked up his paintbrush.

I slipped the *kameez* he'd bought me over my head and lay naked on the floor cushions, but he didn't look up from his easel.

I feel myself receding like a wave now, back to him. I remind myself of Parveen Shakir's poem:

*Why should I lose what years have
gained:
my life of freedom, my free mind?
I know if I ever fell into his hands
he'd swiftly turn me into a housefly.
Confined to the walls of his desires*

I still dream of him. I wake, convinced I'm by his side. When I hear the orchestra of New York outside my window, I try to go back to sleep, to my dream of him—Not that I ever can.

The only cure for the emptiness is to start a new art piece, just as I did on my return from Lahore with my suitcase full of brightly coloured and patterned mementoes of our days together. The body of my work as an artist has been creating spaces where he and I are still together. I don't know what other people see in my Roomscares framed by a vintage window or door (an artist obsessed with Pakistan perhaps?). To me, they're views from the street into the life we could have shared.

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Miles's purr is loud in my ear, his whiskers tickling my cheek. When I don't stir, he jumps on top of me, kneading his front paws, his claws like thorns on my bare arm.

I push him off, sit up and wince. My head aches and I'm still in yesterday's clothes. The smell of burnt toast makes me feel queasy.

Bill comes in and hands me a mug of black coffee. "I didn't want to wake you when I got in last night. It was late."

It's not the first time I've slept in the guest room. Twenty years of marriage. Need I say more?

"What's that all about?" Bill points to the lime green wall, garish in this light. An empty bottle of Merlot is lying on the wood floor beside an open tin of white paint with a paintbrush submerged in it. The wall has a wavering line of white letters, set off-centre. It looks like a child's first attempts at writing.

Bill reads slowly: "I don't wish to say: "There he is." What does that mean?"

"It's a line from a poem."

"Hmm." Bill isn't interested in poetry. In fact, anything that can't be put in a spreadsheet, doesn't interest him. Sometimes I wonder why we're together. Then I remember: he was the antidote. Grounded and reliable. "Does what it says on the tin," was how I described him to my parents. There are no surprises with Bill and, for the longest time, I've liked that. After Khalid's exhibition, I'm not so sure.

"See you later, babe," Bill kisses the top of my head. "I'll pick up Chinese on my way home. The usual?" He doesn't wait for an answer.

I drink my coffee and go back to sleep.

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Am I dreaming it, or is my phone ringing?

I answer, my voice groggy.

"Miss Black? It's Mr Hughes. We met yesterday at Khalid's exhibition. He asked me to call. He'd like to meet today if you're available?"

"I thought you said he wasn't in New York?"

"He would like to see you."

"Why?"

"He didn't say."

"How did you get my number?"

"From your website. Which is lovely, by the way."

The meeting is set for three at Birch Coffee on Twenty-seventh Street. I chose it because I like its bare brick walls and vintage ceiling tiles painted black. The crystal chandelier that lights the lending-library's floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in one corner.

I order a double espresso, choose a hardback at random and find two stools by the window. I sit with my chin in my hands and watch New Yorkers rushing past. A kid in a stroller stares back at me with intense eyes. I look away and polish my lenses on my skirt. Read the first page of the novel, but it doesn't

hold my attention. I take out my phone and browse the internet.

“Good afternoon.” Hearing his voice startles me.

Everything around me attenuates. It feels as if we’re alone in this coffee shop.

I study his face. The only hint he’s about to turn seventy is the deepening of his expression lines. Otherwise, he has remained upright and slender.

“Hello, Uncle.”

He smiles. “What have you been up to, Aunty?” I’ve gained weight, lines and sagging skin. Did I really expect him not to notice?

I’ve rehearsed what to say. I’m married now. A successful artist. Happy in Manhattan.

“Have you visited Pakistan?”

“No.”

It’s too entwined with memories of him. Of us.

His mother has passed, along with one of his sisters, he says. His sons are grown men, taller than him.

“Grandchildren now. The circle of life.”

My life seems like a straight line without so much as a wiggle.

“And your wife?” Did I say that out loud? A few years after I left Lahore, he married an English aristocrat: nineteen (my age when we met) and beautiful. At best, I was cute and buxom in my youth. His bride liked cricket and attended all his matches—unlike me who’d tried to convince him that baseball was the better game. And, of course, she enjoyed afternoon tea and cucumber sandwiches. I couldn’t get out of bed without my mug of ol’ Joe.

I would have given everything up (the Yankees and coffee included) to be with him. “I have to marry a girl from Pakistan,” he said. “It’s expected.” So what changed? Did he fall in love with the English rose? Or her family’s money? His career certainly took off after their wedding—

Mustn’t be catty, I remind myself.

“I don’t have kids,” I volunteer. During our last argument, I threw a ceramic jug at him, swore I’d never have a child if it weren’t his. Youthful hysterics turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Probably for the best, as I would have been a terrible mother. Perhaps he knew this—

A woman tries to sit on the stool next to me.

“It’s taken!” I object, putting my hand on the seat.

“Really? You got an invisible friend?” She lowers herself with a sigh, spilling coffee in her saucer and narrowly missing my hand as I pull away.

“Bitch!” I throw my phone in my bag and leave. My stilettos are too tight and I’m walking like a duck. I bought them—along with my red dress—to make myself feel sexy again.

In my bag, Khalid’s voice is muffled. I take the phone out, pause the video I’ve been watching. It’s one of the rare interviews he’s given recently.

I cross the street and study Birch Coffee’s facade from different angles. Once I’m satisfied, I remove my shoes and reach for my Nikon. The pavement feels rough underfoot, but I like it. It’s grounding. I raise the viewfinder to my eye and zoom in. The fat woman is still sitting in the window, holding her coffee cup with both hands. When I’m back in my studio later, I’ll Photoshop her out of the scene. Replace her with the profile of a man turned towards his companion in a red—

There’s shouting coming from somewhere up the street. An old woman in tattered clothing is hobbling in my direction, waving her fist and swearing at everyone she passes.

Am I crazy like her? I ask myself.

No. I’m an artist. Inspired by a dream this morning of a phone call from Mr Hughes. It sparked an idea for my next Roomscape. In the coffee shop, I was developing it in my imagination. Now I’m implementing it.

Will I call Mr Hughes at some point?

Ask if Khalid was the one who bought *Bedroom in Lahore*?

Has he followed my career and life, the way I have his?

Do I really want to know?

The old woman is drawing closer. She’s heckling pedestrians who hurry past, their eyes fixed on the sidewalk, their phones, something straight ahead—anything to avoid looking at her.

When she is within a few feet of me, I meet her gaze and ask gently: “May I buy you a cup of coffee and a sandwich, Aunty?”