

Jadwat was correct. Nafisa smiled to be reminded of the discrepancy. She had no mysteries. Even Jadwat, Jadwat the fool, knew who she was. The large room on the ground floor had belonged to her son almost twenty years earlier, a span of time so great that surely it could not apply to her own existence.

Nafisa felt she must have slept through these twenty years. Her understanding had not caught up with them. Her son's long absence, his experiences in San Francisco and around the world, were facts she hadn't accommodated. She was slow, she knew, to work out what happened around her. Others were rapid.

We will put you down in Shakeer's room, Nafisa frequently said to a guest. It was all she could do not to add: He won't mind. He wasn't around to mind. Her son travelled a good deal, to take photographs for *National Geographic* and other photo magazines.

Shakeer had aspirations to be a photographer in his own right, but his choice of subjects was curious, and even outdated. When she visited him in California he had an exhibition in a Santa Monica gallery comprised of portraits of holy men in Benares, Varanasi. She had seen something similar in a gallery in Knightsbridge when Harold Wilson was still in office.

But you really could never tell with Shakeer. Nafisa sometimes identified something irrelevant in his character. It caused her pain to see it, to see anything imperfect in her son or husband or brother. Shakeer had been talking about writing a novel for years. Yet, like her, he couldn't read more than a few pages at a time without developing a headache. To the best of her knowledge he had never actually set down a word of his proposed novel on an actual piece of paper ...

Nafisa's mind contained several casements. One looked out on her husband, another upon her brother Nawaz, one on Shakeer. Whatever else was occupying her attention on the outside she continued to watch them in her imagination. Indeed it was a defining fact of her consciousness. This glow, this subtle stony light from magic windows, pervaded her experience.

On certain nights Nafisa woke to recall that, in her dream, she had been gazing at her son. It wasn't necessary to speak a word to him. Nor was it necessary, in the dream, that he acknowledge her presence.

Weeks went by without her chatting to Sharky, particularly when he was on assignment in places like Papua New Guinea and Antananarivo, but she was as close to him as if he were sleeping downstairs in his room.

So it didn't make that great a difference if Sharky was physically present in the house. He had never really been gone. Nothing was lost. Nothing had changed.