Summary

In the capital, where our Queen lives, there are two universities.

Notes

(The source work is here and is only 4,000 words, so you might like to read that first.)

‘The Virtuous City’ is the translated name of al-Madīna al-Fāḍila, by al-Fārābī, one of the first texts to deal with what constitutes a utopian society.

My heartfelt thanks to julychildren, who prevented me from making about seven different fools of myself, though I may have made more since the last draft.

See the end of the work for more notes.

THE FIRST TIME Suhela Mullick takes any notice of Amrita Karim she has just mixed up Varāhamihira and Mahāvīra and Amrita has raised her hand and put her right. Suhela is cleverest in the class and almost certainly knows which is which but she maintains her superiority as though she will be shot if bested, which means that she answers in haste, which is a practise that inevitably leads to mistakes. Amrita has been observing this, for the two months they have been at school, but has not been observed. When the exam results are put up her name is usually second to Suhela’s, but she suspects correctly that Suhela checks to see that her name is at the top and doesn’t read further. Now from across the room Suhela’s gaze is like the point of a dagger beneath her chin:
look up. She fiercens her face and looks. Suhela’s stare is the stare of a tiger which has had its kill interfered with. Amrita has never actually seen a living tiger but this is no impediment to her imagination.

The year is 1291 A.H. and Amrita, Suhela, and twenty-seven others are the top class in the new Girls’ Intensive Preparatory #32, their local outpost of the national experiment. They are the same age as the new Queen and devoted to her with a love which they joke self-consciously amongst themselves is just this side of idolatry. They are conscious of their good fortune. They have been chosen, within two years of what is the first formal education most of them have ever had they will be expected to catch up to. Boys the same age who have been tutored all their lives. ‘But it is not difficult,’ remarked the Queen, when she visited their school in turn, ‘for anyone who really wishes to do a thing to do it better than one who does it simply because it is expected and convenient. So for you, who each have requested and work hard for your place, I am sure it will be easy.’ She speaks to them outdoors, on a clear morning, with a quiet wind alternately shirring and stilling the water of the rice flats. The building of the school hasn’t yet lost its clean vegetal smell of sawn bamboo. The girls could not stand straighter.

Four months. When they are given written tests Suhela continues to finish first as though in a footrace, often bearing down so hard on the tin nib of her pen that it breaks. When she comes back to her seat she has a rather wicked and aggressively private smile. Amrita takes a long time over her equations, her essays, rarely handing them in until the time is called. The piece of slate on the wall at the front of the room that bears the name of the pupil with best marks alternates week to week, KARIM, MULLICK, MULLICK, KARIM, KARIM.

Behind the school, one evening, peering at the plot of land where they are studying genetics in plants, Amrita cannot tell at once whether the girl who is on weeding duty that day is the one she wants. All the girls in the Intensives wear the same clothes, which is meant to give them a feeling of solidarity, like men in armies, Amrita has heard: an intensely plain shalwar kameez set in a dusty dun-rose colour, intentionally drab, which they are disallowed from embroidering. The girls call these uniforms ‘our sacks’, with varying degrees of affection. The plainness is meant to level them, like the proscription on jewelry, but what it largely does is to separate them into the categories of those who look beautiful, or expensive, no matter what they wear, and those who no matter what they wear do not. She comes round to the other side of the plot. Suhela has a streak of some sort of sauce down her front and she has neglected to put down a mat to kneel on before starting her weeding and her hair has slipped out of its braid, and she looks, muddy-kneed, like minor royalty. Amrita, whose clothes are spotless, feels like a squat servant, as, born ten or a hundred years back, she would have been. Well, they are all equal in the Girls’ Intensive, and before Allah, she thinks to herself, not for the first or last time.

‘I think we can be useful to each other,’ she says, her first words to Suhela.

Suhela tears a snippet of hypericum out of the earth.

‘You don’t know everything,’ says Amrita, ‘and I don’t know everything.’

‘You certainly haven’t told me anything yet that I don’t know,’ says Suhela.

Amrita, standing, is briefly aware of how easy it would be to put her knee on Suhela’s back and push her face into the mud. ‘You haven’t given me the opportunity. Listen. I want one of the Khayyám Scholarships. So do you. There’s no reason we can’t both have one.’

‘Except probability,’ says Suhela, looking up at her, not discourteously now. Amrita sees what she means; there are to be one hundred of the Khayyám Scholarships, for the entire kingdom,
when the first wave of Intensive Preparatory girls is seventeen, and graduates.

‘We aren’t going to throw dice for them,’ says Amrita, watching for, then watching, a fine flicker of interest, like light, cross Suhela’s face. ‘Probability doesn’t come into it. If we were to do a joint proposal –’

‘Is that allowed?’

‘It’s not prohibited,’ says Amrita, pulling out one of the mats and shaking the insects off, and sitting down. ‘If we both worked on the same thing – and it was clever enough – I know you don’t like me, that’s useful, it means you’ll be hard on me. But if we started now, before nearly everybody else, we would have a kind of body of evidence, that we had been interested, that we were good at cooperating, as scientists must. And it gives us each someone to check the other’s work.’ The new electric lights have come on overhead, extravagantly early. She had only meant to sit but her hands were restless; to her own irritation she finds she is helping Suhela weed the plot.

‘There must be many girls thinking that two brains are twice as clever.’

‘All the more reason. I don’t know that they’re wrong.’

‘I don’t think,’ says Suhela, ‘that this would be useful, I don’t think you have the same sort of plans as I do, I don’t think it would work.’

They realise, at the same moment, that they are reaching for the same last tall stalk, and Amrita in a flash seizes it from under the slower hand, snaps it, rises and tosses it into Suhela’s lap.

‘How would you know?’ she says, and walks away.

1313, early autumn. The flood barriers along the Padma River are holding up well. Amrita takes a few days out to visit the main gate, anonymously, without notice. It has been an odd irony that neither she nor Suhela was involved in their construction, when their experiments and models for storm-surge gates earned them one of the six double Khayyám ever awarded: but they have both been very busy, in the years that followed.

It is a satisfaction to look back to the days when there were only two women’s universities in all the country, and those two disorganised and small, though certainly determined. Amrita, travelling light, leans with closed eyes on the bulwark of the monotram as it slows and the press of the air against her face changes from the steady rush to a fickle, sari-catching wind. When she came to Nusaybah University she had had little more than she could carry over her shoulder, hardly more than she carries now. The tower had not even been built then: for the first two years they had had to use the laboratories of a men’s university, at night. The monotram has finally drawn level with the platform, eighteen guz above the ground. This train would not exist or function without Nusaybah or the neighboring Razia University, though the Ministry of Transportation will not acknowledge the debt.

She stands on the bank at Khumarkali in the fitful rain, admires the tremendous span and strength of the thing, realises it is beyond her immediate comprehension, feels briefly ridiculous, and goes home. It was not her project at all, though her closest friend, a hydraulics engineer named Chaitali who can intermittently be coaxed to teach at Nusaybah, was one of its main designers, and it has nothing in it that she could not understand if she put her mind to it. But she has been working
at something else, for nearly ten years, and has had no attention to spare outside of it.

When she returns to the capital she finds that in her absence the coolant systems in the engines of the balloon have been repaired, and that they are finally to the stage of testing the optimal length for the flexible portion of the pipes, and that in the course of two nights away her mailbasket has accumulated seventeen envelopes, thirteen stamped VERY URGENT. President of the University is meant to be a ceremonial position. It is not. She understands now why Suhela was appointed; no one would dare send her frivolous letters, out of fear of being made to eat them.

‘Can you imagine Suhela as an administrator?’ she asks Chaitali, who has come by her rooms that evening to find her still sorting through the intra-university mail.

‘Straight out of the Arthashastra,’ says Chaitali, who knew her in undergrad at Razia.

‘What do you bet that she has spies?’

‘Maybe I am one of them,’ says Chaitali, raising her eyebrows.

‘The fraudulent disciple! With a knife at your ankle. No, it doesn’t bear thinking of. But – no, really,’ says Amrita, scanning a paper in disbelief, ‘this is marked VERY URGENT, and it is to tell me that there’s a leak in the roof of Choudhury’s office. I wish people would use the system properly.’

‘That used to be my office,’ says Chaitali. ‘It’s leaked for six years. I can assure you it would only become urgent if she were tied up in a vat under it, for another six or seven years.’

Amrita is still laughing about this when she opens the last of the notes – which bears no stamp – glances at it, and puts it in a drawer, without comment. She has by now gotten several covert letters, an earlier one of which claimed to be from the Prime Minister himself, about building gunports into the balloon, and turning it over to the army. She had sent a brief, oblique inquiry to the Queen’s council, at that one, and received a curt and careful reply instructing her to continue the work and let the military mind its own affairs. There is constant rumor about the invasion of Andhra Pradesh by its former trading-partner, constant murmur and worry, constant unexplained relocations of troops. She had had to wait through the departure of three trains to return, as the first two had been full of soldiers. Amrita minds her own affairs, but she is less and less at ease.

Robert Jennings is relieved, coming over the hill, to see that his intuition was correct, and that the other four hundred of his men are indeed better put to use back towards Balasore. He had thought that most of the native resistance must have been put down by now, there were boys with sticks and stones in the last battle, it almost gave one pause: but you can never tell with these devils, you think you’ve got them all and then thousands more pour out of some crack in the earth. This, though, is clearly mop-up, it doesn’t even look like there will be combat: there’s only this fan-shape of women – almost all of them young, solemn; offerings, perhaps – and some queer tall machines, not, he agrees with his men in low voices, machines of war. Tribute, he guesses; they know the game’s up. After some conferring he begins to move in to accept it, very ceremoniously, the way they like. There is a beautiful, dusky woman at the front of the fan-shape, smiling at him, beckoning. Her lips move, her eyes half-close. He canter closer, smiling back, very near, to survey what he has won, and from the nearest machine a bolt of blue-white light leaps for his eyes and devours them in a hiss, blazes through his oily brain and breaks his skull, and rises, lingering,
elegant, into the sky, in a pillar of fire.

All of the university students have been warned not to look while this thing happens; but most of them have gone on looking as the man approached, unable to glance away. The majority of the people on the plain are arc-blind for nearly two minutes. There is total confusion on the invading side, exponentially more so for the terror of their horses; the commander’s horse, its back badly burned, has thrown off his body and galloped away, and the rest are trying to follow. Several of the foreigners’ guns go off. There are shouts in their pinched guttural language, but also a woman’s scream. Amrita, who had early put the heels of her hands against her eyes and pressed – victory or death but let it be one of those and let it be quick – opens her eyes at the scream, which seemed very near her, and which she finds to have come from one of her own students, Nilufer, with a bullet in her arm, which has broken the bone and torn an artery. ‘If you can see,’ she shouts, ‘come to me!’ and at her familiar voice, several other students struggle towards her, and help her maneuver Nilufer onto one of the electric carts that carried the machines to the field. Around them stray invaders are blundering blindly into their line, trying to flee, and for these they are ready. Even flash-struck or squinting it’s not difficult to feel for a moustache and get the cord round the throat. This is not battle as it is in poems, as some of these girls in mourning imagined it would be, not vengeful, not noble, only efficient, which will have to suffice. In the official record of this event there will be no mention of it. It is like catching a rat in the storeroom, you do not need to say what happens next.

Amrita, occupied during this time with stabilising Nilufer, realises abruptly that it is quiet, and that someone is tugging at her shoulder and indicating: down the field Suhela is still standing beside her generator, which she ought to have the sense not to be anywhere near. Her students are ringed round her at a distance, hesitating. Amrita has no idea what she is supposed to do about this, but she crosses the field to find out, stepping hard on the face of a dead foreigner in honour of her father, almost as an afterthought.

There is blood on Suhela’s teeth and for an instant Amrita thinks she has been shot. Almost at once she sees that it is only that her bitten lips have cracked – many of their faces are a little scorched in the backlash heat – but in that instant her heart is struck, like a hanging bell. If you were dead I would be: If you were dead I would: she is unable to complete this, as the ringing fades. Suhela is a constant, like the acceleration of gravity or the speed of light. It is not possible to take her out.

At close range she can be seen to be shaking, a hard tight focused trembling, not confined to the hands. She looks close to resonant frequency. Amrita wants to, somehow, by touching her with one finger perhaps, strike her unconscious, into some kind of healing sleep. If the engine is approaching critical speed you shut it off. She is staring at the burnt exposed bone of the dead invader, still steaming or smoking, into the eyesocket of his charred face.

‘Don’t look at that,’ says Amrita, reflexively, then ‘Can you see? Do you know what you’re looking at?’

‘I should have killed them,’ says Suhela. If it were not so quiet now Amrita would not be able to hear her. She can hear all about them the kingfishers calling in the early evening, like falling stars. Nilufer’s blood is drying on her hands. ‘I should have killed all of them. I should have been making guns, artillery, all this time, I should have taken the offer from the army. I should have been ready. What a damned waste to damage the generator like that and only kill a few of them. Oh, what an idiot I am, they are going to go back to their general, and they are going to come back, millions of them, I should have – ’

‘If they come back,’ says Amrita, ‘you can kill them then. Don’t look at that. If you are
looking. Are you? Can you? Tell me you can see. How many –

‘Seven,’ says Suhela, ‘do you think I’m an idiot, I covered my eyes.’

‘Good,’ says Amrita, reassured that she has restored Suhela to asperity. ‘Good, come on, come with me. We need to speak to the Queen.’

A few years after the institution of mardana, there begins to show up in editorials, in pamphlets, in common conversation, the idea that for women to go to bed with each other is the most exquisite expression of friendship, is finer and cleaner than intercourse with men, does not constitute adultery as it cannot result in impregnation, and so on. Amrita imagines cynically and correctly that in some places where men are dominant the same must be said of the union of males, but when Chaitali asks her she doesn’t say no, although Chaitali has to proposition her twice, Amrita having missed it initially. Amrita feels, at times, like a ceramic marble rolling about among a tableful of magnets.

She did not expect to like it, but she likes the scent of spikenard in Chaitali’s hair, and she likes the nails of Chaitali’s warm hands scratching in a gentle intent way along her back, and she likes the quiet after, when she feels as though she has dissolved or diffused, and does not know where her body lies. In the morning she has condensed back into her own self again, and doesn’t like the feeling of another person in the bed, whom one is obliged to keep still beside so as not to wake up: but on the balance, she won’t say no, when Chaitali asks. It does not occur to her to be jealous of the other partners she knows her friend to have, as she wishes her joy without wishing necessarily to be obliged to provide it, and jealousy is anyway a vice for men.

She cannot approve, however, of the intrigues which form in her own university, between faculty and students especially. It destroys objectivity, it is like wine, which nothing will convince her is useful or necessary, despite the interpretation of the surah currently in vogue which forbids it only to the hot-headed sex. Accordingly she is irritated with herself when she finds that she must put in a conscious effort to treat one of her students the same as the others, a chemist by the name of Barnali. It is so easy to confuse form with function, and it is a disservice to Barnali, whose interest in the composition of the sky would already merit close attention. But she has the kind of beauty that demands analogy, beauty that must, Amrita thinks, be terribly inconvenient. Beauty that distracts. Amrita herself should not like to be compared to a flower or a fruit, an animal or a bird, and she turns this problem over sometimes in her mind, what Barnali’s beauty is like: if she solves it, she can forget it, and go on to something else. This is how her mind works: turn the thing over, turn it over, pry, catch at its seam, pry, crack it apart, work the kernel out and pick up the next. After she decides that Barnali’s beauty is like an electric light in glass – the slenderness of the brightening and dimming filament, the clarity and fineness of its casing, the perfected minimalism – she ceases to be distracted, or attracted. Once categorised, the thing is safe.

She has quite forgotten the well-concealed nervousness she used to have around Barnali when three years later she invites her to supper, part congratulations on completion of her graduate degree, part advisory meeting. She would like Barnali to continue her work at Nusaybah, though she has been careful not to say so, to see what Barnali herself will propose. She and the board are considering the construction of machines that can go much further up into the atmosphere than human beings, to gather data while aloft. The expense of this – even for Nusaybah, which runs on the national treasury, but which also runs entirely on scholarships – is prohibitive enough that Amrita hasn’t made up her mind as to whether or not to begin this program, and the number of
researchers she will have who will actually use it is a deciding factor. She knows that Razia University has approached Barnali as well, but not what they have offered her.

It is winter, and the air in the evenings is cool. Amrita puts on her table one of the new electric braziers, with its caged and glowing coils, which keeps gathering strength for a sententious hum and then settling down again, ticking. Barnali arrives a few moments early, and even Amrita notices that she has composed herself as an aesthetic object, which she does not usually bother to do: there is a touch of surma traced round her eyes, and her glossy black hair loose on her shoulders. Standing in the slant of the sunset with a nervous colour in her cheeks she is like warmth given human shape: copper, garnet, coal and ember, palash-flower, rosy gold. Amrita notices, as it is not possible not to, but does not assume that this is directed at herself personally. It is not for hours, after the meal, when they are sitting drinking tea in the room that faces out from the tower and she has begun to ask increasingly precise questions about research objectives that, as though to silence her, Barnali leans in and kisses her, the heat of the tea held on her lips.

Amrita, her mouth unmoving below this kiss, draws back, disappointed to be used in this fashion, to be thought susceptible, which she now remembers she almost was. But she is a good teacher, and tries to temper this, as she speaks, though this is like the dreams she has where she is supposed to give a speech to a crowd and has forgotten about what.

‘Please don’t. That’s not – how one does things. Not how – anything gets done. At least with me. And you don’t need to, I suppose it must be a temptation, when one has – that coin to spend, but you – it’s a kind of counterfeit – you simply don’t need to, it’s a waste, it’s – limited, it doesn’t last. While your mind, which is quite enough, will.’

End with praise, when one reprimands, thinks Amrita, very conscious of her mouth.

Barnali has looked down, through this, and looks up now in cold taut distress (Amrita’s mind touches on the trapped vacuum in the glass bulb) to say, ‘You think that’s what it was, you think this is about the sub-orbitals, you think I would try to – buy you – like that, you think that is what I want. Horrible. I don’t – that wasn’t it, but I don’t expect you to believe it.’ The tendons in the backs of her hands stand out pale as bone.

‘What was it, then?’ says Amrita, genuinely puzzled, not meaning to be cruel, though she can see at once that this was.

‘You,’ says Barnali, quiet in the quiet room. ‘You. That’s all. For years. Your face, in that light. All the things you know. Which I have – ruined my relation to. But that was all.’

Amrita does not think of herself as beautiful, and she is not, when looking, without interest, at a mirror: a short stocky woman, beak-nosed, thin-lipped, pockmarked along the jaw. She has looked more or less like this since she was seven, thirty-five years ago, and for almost as long has not minded, as she has always known with a private impatience, mostly haughty, a little wistful, that beauty is not what she is for. But she is unaware, never having seen it from the outside, of her face when she is talking about anticipating and redirecting cyclones, about tides and rivers in the sky, about the recent discovery that stars form in the same way that raindrops do. When she paces about before her small class thinking aloud she is lit up with love for knowledge, Barnali has thought, like a lamp. Like the palm-oil lamps on pillars which used to warn ships of shore, she thinks now, conscious that this is a bit overdone, but unable not to think it. The light I ought to have steered by, never tried to come near.

‘Oh,’ says Amrita, startled, and, ‘Oh, my dear, I am sorry.’ And then, ‘You haven’t ruined anything, it’s all right, sit down.’
‘I would rather not,’ says Barnali, in the doorway, very flushed and bright-eyed, very fixedly steady, very beautiful, ‘I will write up my complete proposal, you’ll have it within the week,’ and, very steady, very quickly, goes out.

Amrita approves the proposal, restraining herself from adding another apology in her note. Out of sheer embarrassment, Barnali accepts the fellowship at Razia, which is probably not coincidentally beginning a sub-orbitals program, and Amrita does not see her again. For one reason and another it will be close to six years before Nusaybah formally begins its own research in astrodynamics, and although they both will eventually share the same launch facility with two other universities up in the Chattagram Hills, Razia will always be considered the more advanced on the subject; Amrita, who is generally immune to politics, is always a little annoyed by this.

She sends congratulations many times over the years, as Barnali’s discoveries are published, but never receives any reply.

As a woman of importance in Naaridesh reaches her mid-thirties she begins to receive more, and more serious, offers of husbands than ever before, with endless sly allusions to the classical perfection of the union of a woman of forty with a man of twenty-five. This marriage market begins in earnest in 1316, when the boys who were just barely too young for the Battle of Kaliganj are just barely old enough to be married; their relatives, of course, say that they are all beautiful, docile, virginal and virile, ready to begin raising long lines of daughters in well-swept homes. Portraits are printed up and chaperoned meetings are arranged with the country’s most eminent women, including Amrita, who is surprised, then amused, then frankly alarmed, to find that she is considered an excellent match. She is not looking to be matched, with a young man or an old one. She likes her insulated, isolated life, her luxurious set of rooms at the top of Nusaybah. She doesn’t need a husband to order her household, as she is tidy by nature and prefers taking meals in restaurants or from street vendors, and considering the scarcity of males it is moreover considered bad form to take a husband when one has no intention of children, which she does not. Sometimes her students, when they have known her for years, venture the informality of calling her Ammu, and sometimes, archly but affectionately, when she nags or chastises them, they call her Amma. It is a joke, and not a joke. She does think of the best ones as her heirs, though she would not admit it.

After turning down seven or eight offers and nearly losing her temper with one ruthless old matchmaker who keeps trying to show her indecent collodions, she publicly declares herself out of the running. She is surprised to hear, a year or so later, that Suhela has married, and later, although it is only logical, still more surprised to hear that she is pregnant. The currents of gossip that vibrate between the two universities, faster than radar, courier, acoustic telegraph, or light, let her know when Suhela has gone into labour, a thought that makes Amrita uneasy; the Queen’s own midwife and surgeon have been sent to attend her, and it is very rare for women to die in childbirth these days; but it is a process which is a permanent mystery to her, which no amount of reading can change.

She hears, the next morning, that it was a quick birth, and both mother and infant are safe and well and resting, and she is very glad: but she hears, with a pang of sympathetic disappointment, that the baby was only a boy.

She doesn’t see the mother or the child for half a year, until they attend the same infrastructure-planning meeting, on where to put the next electrical station. Suhela has the baby in a sling, sleeping against her chest, which is not unusual, except that sons are usually left to be
raised by the men of the house. Most women bring their daughters to work until they are too large to be carried about, and many continue to do so until the daughters are old enough to go to school; every building has a section set apart for these daughters, where they can be left with a minder if they are driving a mother mad with their crying or if she needs to do something like operate on a patient.

During the midday break in the conference Amrita walks over to where Suhela is sitting bent over some papers, eating fried fish with one hand and making notes with the other. The baby is now in a basket on the table, covered loosely with fine shawls, murmuring to itself and turning its plump hands back and forth in the air as though to admire the change in colour from back to front. Amrita stares at it, wishing she could surreptitiously lift the shawls and napkin. The baby looks back, black-eyed, alert, glimmering here and there with points of crystal-pure baby saliva, probably beautiful. Amrita is not confident in her ability to tell one baby from the next. She is certain she heard that Suhela had a son. ‘Yes, I did,’ says Suhela, not looking up.

Amrita, who hasn’t said a word, bites her tongue.

‘Have a son. He’s a son. Quite true.’

Amrita opens her mouth, closes it, and says, not insincerely, ‘Congratulations.’ She wonders whether Suhela will have more children, as women with nothing but sons usually do.

‘No,’ says Suhela.

‘No?’ says Amrita, wondering whether congratulations had been a mistake.

‘I’m not going to try again,’ says Suhela, sharply. ‘I wanted a child and I have got one. He may be a son, but he is Suhela Mullick’s son. I expect he will be good for something,’ and, noticing or assuming that Amrita is staring, says ‘It’s been six months. I’ve learnt this conversation.’

‘Not from me,’ says Amrita. ‘Congratulations, on your child.’ She turns away, blinking. Eventually, she thinks, one of them will stop having the last word, when they are dead.

There are in the year 1330 a quarter of a million girls of seventeen in Naaridesh, and twenty-one universities. The two in the capital – referred to by grandiose national chroniclers as the Twin Lights, which gets on both their nerves – are the oldest and best, for everything, especially for science. Each receives nearly fifty thousand undergraduate admissions applications every year, and each accepts, of these, exactly one thousand. This is an acceptance rate of two to three percent. ‘It should not surprise you,’ goes a line in Razia’s pamphlet that Amrita suspects Suhela of having written herself, ‘if you are not admitted’.

In the year 1330, a very clever mathematics student from a riverside town, with good chances, is surprised, or was. She has exempted herself permanently from having to be anything in the present tense. She has hanged herself, from a tree, in the middle of the night, the night she received the two rejections. She put her dupatta over her entire head, inside the noose, so that no one should see her strangled face: and she left a note, of awful seventeen-year-old clarity.

Amrita herself looks all night through the administrative office but cannot find the girl’s application, learning in the morning that like all of the rejections it has already been destroyed.
This is, almost certainly, not the first time this has happened, but it is the first time anyone has left a note about it, or the first time such a note has got into the news. There is a call for the presidents of the universities to have a conference with the press, give speeches, do something. On the appointed date Amrita, who feels very old, sits backstage for nearly three hours before it is time to go out into the small audience hall. She thinks she ought to speak to Suhela – compare notes – but Suhela isn’t there and can’t be reached. She still hasn’t arrived when Amrita, who as a result spends most of her speech wondering whether she will turn up, goes onstage. Amrita speaks passably, even movingly, she thinks, about the Battle of Kaliganj, about never despairing, about how persevering with calm courage must be the national characteristic of Naaridesh. After she answers the few short, absurd questions – certainly one can reapply but the odds remain the same; yes, more than half of her graduate students come from other schools – she goes to sit in the front with the principals of the other universities, none of whom will meet her eye, and observes with relief that the presenter is beginning to announce Suhela Mullick, President of Razia University.

Suhela’s speech is shorter and given rather fast, difficult to transcribe, thinks Amrita, who had thoughtfully put in pauses. It is not general, but painfully specific. She does, at least, stop short of outright disrespect towards the dead girl, to whom she is clearly speaking as though she were alive, and could be bullied out of dying. Towards the end she appears to broaden her audience, but she is not kinder for addressing the living.

‘If there’s anything you ought to learn from this it is that that is not how a scientist behaves. You must be prepared for your work not to turn out, and you can’t mix up your work with your own self, you must keep them separate. You must know that most of what you do will be a failure on its first try. You must understand that you’re not going to get what you want, you’re not going to be able to help, you won’t accomplish anything that can be put at once into practical use, most of the time. If you don’t understand this you are no good to us.’

It is not the speech that anyone was expecting. It is not, actually, a speech that the media can use. The reporters stare at each other and begin clamoring for interview questions, for an explanation, for anything. One shouts the question of what Suhela Begum, national hero, can know about failure. A fair question, thinks Amrita, trying to find her; she had stopped and left the stage before anyone realised she had finished speaking. She leaves the reporters to assemble something heartening out of their transcripts and slips backstage, where Suhela has already gathered her things and is striding towards one of the small unofficial exits.

‘You are heartless,’ says Amrita, not harshly, almost experimentally, as she passes.

‘I am right,’ snaps Suhela, hollow-eyed, not slowing.

1335. Three male students are accepted to Naaridesh universities, two privately tutored sons of high-ranking officials at small colleges along the coast, and Salim Mullick, pre-med, at Nusaybah. There are protests on the streets of the capital; Amrita hears that there is a faculty strike at one of the other universities, but it doesn’t last. It is the young women, the ones who have lived under Queen Rokheya’s reign all their lives, whose support for the decision carries it. The politicians’ children, unsurprisingly, got in through deceit and spectacle: they had submitted their applications under female names, and one of them had gone to an interview in a sari. Salim had sent in his application plainly, as though it were quite natural. They would have recognised him, anyway, as over the years most of the professors in the capital have watched him
grow up, flitting soft-footed behind his mother through the halls of Razia, or beside her at
conferences, never speaking until spoken to. Amrita knows him by sight: slight and sharp-elbowed,
immaculately serious, his kurta and shalwar nothing a woman might not wear. There is a family
resemblance which, with the application of a dose of arrogance to his face, would become
immediately apparent.

There is, not unreasonably, some murmuring that this is nepotism, which it is, and is not. If he
were a girl his qualifications would not be in question; he has apparently been doing
microbiological research from the age of nine. The prevailing theory at Nusaybah is that one of
these days he is going to forget himself and yawn, and they will glimpse in his gullet a blinking
light from his circuit-board. It cannot be easy to be Suhela’s child.

Suhela herself came to consult with Amrita before he sent in his application, to ask her
permission, which Amrita had not expected. She had to think it over for a long time, but at last
thought: what is one for, when one has a mind, but to use it? What good would it do anyone, not to
let him.

‘He knows that if he were to say the least thing to a girl, anything that could be construed as
improper, that would be the end of it? Or if he began some sort of fight. As men do. And I think he
would have to take care to keep his face clean-shaven, so as not to present a distraction. And
someone must escort him to classes, and see him back every day, he couldn’t possibly live here.’

‘Of course,’ says Suhela, audibly refraining from snapping, leaning back in the creaking chair
in Amrita’s office. ‘Yes, of course he knows.’ The shadow of a twelve-pointed star from the
window screen sharpens and blurs on her cheek, clouds passing over the sun. There is a sudden
bright scattering of voices from the north garden, floors below, and laughter. She is silent a long
while.

‘Do you think this is – a thing that can be done?’ she says, surprising Amrita again. ‘Do you
think it can hold?”

‘I think we can try,’ says Amrita, not certain.

Amrita spends most of the year 1343 far from home, in the newly independent Republic of
Masqat. Seven university teams of faculty and students have come to learn by doing, in assisting
this fledgling country in becoming fully self-sufficient, and innumerable civil servants. The Queen
herself visited through Muharram, to the extreme discomfiture of her guards – the Republic is
under constant threat from the Trucial States and the Ingrej – but has now safely returned. All has
gone as well as it can, under the embargo, through the submarine scare, through the explosion in
the copper mine; there is not a single life lost, conditions are seen to improve, it is all real and
useful work, as one prays to be given: but by Shawwal, Amrita is exhausted. She is used to heat,
but not heat of this intensity, and it is pitilessly dry. She has been reading and writing Arabic since
she could read and write, but the sound of the language is different here, and she cannot seem to
pick up the correct accent, so that she must repeat everything three or four times and sometimes, at
a loss, write it down. She wants her own familiar apartments in the Nusaybah tower, she wants to
lie on a blanket under the lichu tree in Chaitali’s garden, she wants to go back to her research on
thermal wind, she is too old for this, she thinks crossly, knowing full well that she is not.

Eventually it is the day before departure, three months later than nearly everyone else. The two
teams from Razia and Nusaybah have been overseeing the construction of the vacuum towers that use sun-heat and salt to pull water from the air, a curious problem to consider for women from a land with more water than they often want. The collection of water from the air is, of course, Amrita’s specialty, or her most famous one, and the application of sun-heat is Suhela’s, and so they have been here in an official, almost ostentatious capacity, a public-relations venture as much as anything: but it was Suhela who figured out what had been causing the trouble with the vacuum chamber, and Amrita who had found that the concentration of brine could be adjusted to a more efficient level, so they are spared from feeling ornamental, a thing they both dread. After several hitches, the first tower is operational, and they have been remaining merely in case of any problems, for a precautionary week.

The week is up, and in any case the Masqati engineers know what they are doing, and there is a general cheerful, worn-out sort of celebratory mood among the university delegations. Amrita, never having left her own country, had not known before this how travellers become informal, far from home. In the tall conference room at the top of the National Parliament they have been doing more or less nothing all day, like some pack of men: ten cups of dried-lemon tea drunk for every line they write down. Finally, in the late afternoon, the meeting, which has ostensibly been about the number of meteorites that the Republic will allow to be taken back to Naaridesh for study, is dismissed, and the women go out to look around the city one last time, and to pack up for the aerostat journey on the morrow.

Amrita, who spent most of the meeting lost in thought, has remained in a reverie as the room empties, and when she looks up she thinks at first she is alone. By this hour, the room is lit wholly by reflected light, including the bright shimmer flung up from the flat sheet of water in the grand fountain before the Parliament – a display of wealth that tiles of gold could not equal, in this parched land – which shifts and glitters, and gives the chamber the diffused, unsteady light of some vision or dream. So when she glances up at last, and sees Suhela still seated at the far end of the table, near the southern row of high open windows, it is like seeing her in a vision, or for some first, fated time. Amrita knows the face, but has to study it, to be sure.

She is sitting with her arm along the back of her chair, looking out over the city, with her face turned to the breeze which draws near and turns away, draws near and turns away. The colour of her eyes has leached, or bleached, with age, turning tawny, like the eyes of a kal pencha. There are white hairs in her black brows, as in Amrita’s own. She has a look on her face that Amrita can’t initially read, as she has not seen this before, either: an absence of impatience, is the best she knows how to define it. It is not a smile, but it is near to. It is the sort of look one has when content and alone, and Amrita for a moment thinks she is intruding, but she realises she has been in Suhela’s line of sight, all the while. And so when she has gotten up, mildly stiffly, and is walking out, in no hurry, she pauses; and like some action in a vision or dream, for the first time, reaches out and strokes her hand along Suhela’s face.

Suhela catches her hand, quick as electricity, and grips, and then gentles, and holds: and the speckled skin over her cheekbone, hot and thin, presses against Amrita’s fingers, and her eyes close. Amrita stands with the casing of the finest mind of Naaridesh resting in her hand, like a reactor in an eggshell. She has wanted to do this for perhaps fifty-one years. She could not have, before now, done this, at any time in the last fifty-one years.

When, at the end of a long moment, she draws her hand out of Suhela’s, she steps forward and bends to where her fingertips had rested, and presses her lips lightly, lightly to that same place, near the calm closed eye. She goes out of the room without a sound, but she lets the soft leather sole of her shoe tap on the top stair, and the steps after that, as a sort of courtesy. There are wide warm bars of amber light on the stairs, cool bars of blue. When she walks out into the blazing sun with her face turned up she hardly minds it, she could stay another month, a year, if there were a need.
She was not this light-hearted as a girl, with all her life’s work before her. It is not the last word.

End Notes

My life when young was like a flower—a flower that loosens a petal or two from her abundance and never feels the loss when the spring breeze comes to beg at her door.

Now at the end of youth my life is like a fruit, having nothing to spare, and waiting to offer herself completely with her full burden of sweetness.

(Rabindranath Tagore, probably inevitably.)

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