Welcome to Paradise

Welcome to Paradise

Twinkle Khanna

juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
C-I-128, First Floor, Sangam Vihar, Near Holi Chowk,
New Delhi 110080, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2023

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

P-ISBN: 9789353451882
E-ISBN: 9789353451899

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or to actual incidents is purely coincidental.

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, Noida

Printed at Thomson Press India Ltd

For Nani,
who can't read this book because she is dead
and may not have bothered to if she were alive.
We miss her.

Contents

The Man from the Garage

The cotton in Amma's nostrils matches the white in her hair. 'One should always be tip-top, Huma,' her mother would say when teased about dyeing her hair every two weeks. She would not want people to see her like this. Huma lights the incense sticks in her hand and places the holders around the refrigerated case that contains her mother's body.

The doorbell of their cramped apartment has been ringing all morning. This time, her brother is standing in the doorway. Huma had not been sure if Adil had received her messages from the hospital, if he was even in Mumbai. Her brother burrows his face into Huma's shoulder. Snot and tears rubbing against the thin cotton of her kurta.

'Huma, I can't believe she is gone. At least you all got a chance to talk to Amma, to say goodbye,' he says.

Chance. As if luck favoured Huma and she had won a lottery. Huma's eyes dart over him. It's an old habit. She takes in the eyes that always seem half closed. In the few photographs of the family together, Adil often looks as if he has blinked just as the flashbulbs have gone off. His curly hair, like the coils in a spring mattress, is flattened with water. He smells of sweat, musty clothes and something astringent – a hospital ward mixed with a boys' locker room.

Huma doesn't ask her brother why he has not returned her calls or where he has been. In the last three years, she has seen him less than half a dozen times. Adil follows her into the living room. He shrugs off his brown backpack and squats beside Amma's body.

Her mother's feet are pointed towards Huma. Small and delicate, they were the same size as hers. Each time Huma bought a new pair of shoes, Amma would ask, 'Are they comfortable?' Depending on the answer, Amma would slip them on. Huma can still

see her walking across the room, kaftan flapping, her bent torso leading the way as she shuffled ahead in Huma's shoes.

Loss feels like the needle of a sewing machine – piercing through and lifting rhythmically; forgotten for a few moments, it slams down again. The salty Mumbai air heavy in Huma's lungs, as if it were liquid, going down the wrong pipe.

Huma had read about software programs that can mimic the departed. A facsimile of features, tones, frequently used sentences. She imagines feeding it videos – the one where Amma is handing Adil kheer with the smile she reserved for him. Or punching in memories – the time Raju, the cleaner, opened the bathroom door accidentally. Amma in a shower cap, enraged, stood there naked, yelling. Instead of covering herself with a towel, she started jumping up and down on the spot, as if there was an invisible skipping rope below her. Screaming at the boy. 'You want to see me, right? Have you seen enough?'

Huma wonders which version of Amma the program would generate.

She bends next to Adil. The white roots. Huma has bought her daughter a salwar kameez for the

funeral, but Sara refuses to change out of her jeans. She will use Sara's dupatta. Drape it around Amma's face so the cowl covers her hair.

After an hour of serving tea to relatives she doesn't recognize, Sara is hiding in Huma's room with her cousin Saurabh. He is telling her about the time when Nani had picked them up from school. She had come to fetch them in her old jeep. 'She took off before I could even close the door. One leg was still out and then your grandmother said, "Hold on tight because I don't like using the brake or the horn!"' He laughs when he tells her this. She looks at his teeth. Even, white, all intact. She had punched him in the face once, in fourth or fifth grade. Broken a molar. She had been suspended from school. She can't recall what they fought about, just her arguing with her mother that it was a milk tooth and it would come back, and her mother locking her in a dark bathroom. It was Nani who opened the door and smuggled in ice cream to console her.

Her mother enters the room, her frizzy hair pulled into a bun and anchored with a pencil. 'That salwar kameez I got you, it's in my cupboard. I need the dupatta from that set right away,' Huma says.

Sara nods and adjusts her body, implying she is about to stand up, only to plop down when Huma turns towards the living room as someone calls out to her.

Sara had arrived last night from Mussoorie. At her boarding school, the seniors were allowed to keep their mobile phones, but seventh graders like her were only handed their phones on Sundays. Yesterday, despite it being a Thursday, she was given hers. Huma's voice had sounded hoarse as she said that Nani had passed away. It had started with a headache, her mother explained. They put her in an MRI machine and her grandmother got frightened because it was built like a coffin. She vomited. Choked on her vomit and that was it; it went into her lungs.

Now, Nani is lying flat on her back in the middle of the living room in what she feared the most, a coffin, a glass one, where they continue refilling ice to keep her body from decomposing. So that all the

people, who didn't come to see her grandmother when she was alive, have a chance to see her when she is dead.

In one corner of Huma's living room, uncles, aunts, cousins are debating over what to do with Amma's body. This is not a traditional approach, but her religious legacy is not what they consider regular either. Amma was born into an Ismaili Muslim family. Huma's father, who loved his sweet dal and his puja room with the silver idols that he polished every week, agreed to a conversion ceremony to placate Amma's parents. He was a funny man, her father. On Tuesdays, he would go to the temple and on Fridays he accompanied Amma to the jamaatkhana. To the people who questioned his all-encompassing beliefs, he would say, 'Religion is like a tree – it doesn't matter which one you choose to sleep under; they all provide shade.'

Huma remembers asking him, 'Daddy, tell the truth – you copied this tree bit from your Osho book, right?'

'Like me, my dialogues are also all original,' he had replied in Gujarati. When he passed away, he was cremated at the Shivaji Park Cemetery just as he had wished and without any of the fuss accompanying her mother's funeral.

In the noisy living room, the extended family has divided itself into two factions.

Team Crematorium, led by Padma Ben, Huma's father's sister, claims that, like Huma's father, Amma must also be cremated.

Team Cemetery includes the relatives from Amma's side. They argue that since she had spent her entire life following the Ismaili faith, she should be buried.

Murad, Amma's geriatric nephew, is holding court. He had once locked up his mother in her flat because she would not sign some legal documents. Each day, he would lower a basket with lunch and dinner from his apartment to his mother's bedroom window a floor below.

When Huma heard about the incident, she told Amma, 'That is terrible on Murad's part! He could have at least sent her breakfast too.'

Amma had looked at Huma with a blank

expression on her face before letting out a guttural laugh. 'Good joke, Huma,' she recalls her mother saying.

People don't remember commonplace things. They remember first times and rare occasions. Amma's compliments were seldom tossed in Huma's direction.

She watches them bicker, Padma Ben and Murad. *Burn*. *Bury*. Two words that differ by a single letter. She looks at her brother sitting beside Amma's body, ignoring the cacophony. She forgot about the dupatta. Sara. That girl, does she ever listen! Huma gets back on her feet and goes to her room. Sara and Saurabh are playing a game on Huma's iPad.

'Sara, what is wrong with you? I asked you to get that dupatta!'

'Your cupboard is locked,' her daughter says, 'What am I supposed to do? Break it down?'

Her mother tells her the keys are in the bedside drawer. Sara unlocks the cupboard and gets the dupatta. She is about to cross the living room to hand it to Huma when she sees *him*. His blue T-shirt and

brown backpack stand out in a sea of white shirts and saris. *The man from the garage*.

It was during the summer break, a week after they moved in with her grandmother, when she discovered that someone was living in the garage at the other end of the compound.

The family would leave him food on an old oil drum outside the garage. One afternoon, Nani asked if she could lend him her comic books. Sara didn't know old people read comics too and he was at least thirty. But Nani insisted that Adil loved Superman and the X-Men.

Sara's comic books came back with bookmarks. These were not the slim, cardboard strips with cheery quotations. They were squares of silver foil. Burnt in places. Charcoal holes scattered across the shiny sheets. Her mother would examine the pieces of charred foil before throwing them away.

One monsoon, he went away with a Dr Mehta for a few weeks. When he returned, he moved into their apartment. As her Nani said, he did love comics. He told her he collected them. 'Marvel and DC both,' he said. Rare comics and first editions. He had stored them in cartons. One on top of the other, till they

touched the ceiling. When she asked him where they were, he said, 'Sold them.'

He fixed a table tennis net across their yellow laminated dining table. After school, she would throw down her bag and challenge him to matches. He always won. This was before he started disappearing. He would be missing for a day or two and, on his return, he would sleep. Twelve to fourteen hours at a stretch.

The first time he hit her, she was asking Nani about clean towels. He charged up to her and said, 'Don't talk to my mother like this.'

Sara was wondering what she had said when he slapped her again. 'You bitch!' Sara called him. It was a term she had heard her mother use. She wasn't sure what it meant then but had known it was a bad word. She took off in fright, sprinting till she reached the end of the lane before realizing she didn't have any shoes on. Their watchman hurried down the lane and took her back home. Nani made her promise not to tell her mother. She said Huma didn't need more stress. Sara didn't tell her mother. Not even when her mother asked her why instead of Adil Uncle she had started referring to him as 'the man from the garage'.

One afternoon, when Sara was finishing her homework, she saw him heading towards the door with a camera in his hand. A toaster, a pair of earrings and a silver bowl had all gone missing recently.

Sara rushed after him, shouting, 'That is not yours!'

Curly hair tumbling over his forehead, he turned languidly towards her. Sara was ten by then, the tallest in her class, but he still loomed over her.

'You can't take it; you have to ask my mother first,' she said.

There was an instantaneous shift, as if someone had pulled his face in diametric directions. His eyebrows arched and his mouth stretched till Sara could see his lower teeth. He went into the kitchen and emerged with a large, grey-flecked grinding stone in his hand.

'Say sorry right now,' he said, raising the stone, levelling it with her jaw. She ran. Around the pillars of the living room, into her grandmother's bedroom where she was sitting with her embroidery hoop. Sara's hands were surprisingly steady as she locked the door. He began striking it with the grinding stone repeatedly. The door broke.

Nani pushed her against the wall, shielding Sara's body with her own as he stood before them.

'Say sorry right now! You think you are so smart! Let's see what happens to your head when I smash it.'

'Say it,' her grandmother whispered. Sara could feel the warmth of Nani's body against her chest, the dampness from the mouldy wall against her back. She shook her head.

Then she thought of what he had said. Smart. It was not the first time someone had used that term for her. Even amid overpowering fear, there was a flash of vanity. She imagined her head crushed. A dent as large as the stone on one side.

'Say it,' her grandmother repeated. Sara could feel her trembling. Her sour breath on Sara's face as Nani turned in her direction.

He swung the stone towards them. It hit her grandmother on the head. Sara sat on the floor, piss running down her leg.

'Sorry,' Sara said to the man who should have never been allowed to leave the garage.

Adil's head is bent as he adjusts the sheet over Amma's body, his hair spiralling over his face. Huma wants him to look up so that she can examine his pupils in the sunlight. She fights the urge to push up his long-sleeved T-shirt to check for track marks. When she first started seeing bruises on his arm, he told her he had developed diabetes.

When they had discussed Adil's addiction, she never told Amma that on all the occasions she had called his friends and driven around the city looking for him, she didn't blame him. She blamed Amma.

From the time they were kids, Amma had always taken Adil's side. After the drugs started, she remained in denial, giving him money repeatedly. When he returned Sara's comics with burnt foil stuck in the pages, Amma refused to believe he was back on heroin. Even when their helper told Huma that Adil had hit Amma, her mother, with a bandage wrapped around her head, insisted that she had slipped in the shower.

Sometimes Huma resented the attention, the love Amma reserved for Adil. Was it because he was the coveted son? Or does a mother always look out for her weaker child?

In their twenties, she had gone with him on a drive to look for his dealer. By then he had begun to talk about his habit, though he always said, 'I am not addicted, I am just dependent; there is a difference.'

As they drove through narrow lanes, he told her that it had started when he had taken the painkillers Amma had left in the drawer after her knee surgery. 'I took one and I never wanted that feeling to go.'

For a time, he had been a functioning user. He had a job in one of their uncle's steel factories and a girlfriend from the neighbouring building. This was before he started missing work, telling people he had been in car accidents when he wouldn't show up and, eventually, disappearing for months at a time. He would clean up but always go back to using. The withdrawal, he told her, felt like having food poisoning, malaria and fractured bones all at the same time.

Murad is using the living room couch as a podium as he drones on about taxes. He now claims that if he had a gun he would shoot all the ministers. His wife

replies, 'The bullets would only hit me because you can't see properly, can you? All your life just giving big talks!'

He then directs his attention towards Adil. 'I know the mukhi at the Andheri jamaatkhana. I will call and tell him you are coming. You fix everything with him. With you, there is no problem, but I am warning you, Huma won't be allowed inside the jamaatkhana for your mother's prayer meetings.' Murad taps Huma on the back. 'Once you marry non-Ismailis, outsiders, the way you have, even if you are divorced from him now, we can't allow you in.'

Padma Ben immediately shuffles over to Murad and says, 'Who are you calling outsiders? You people are the outsiders! This is Hindustan – our country! There are many Muslim countries, you can go there. Go to the Gulf, go to Pakistan, who is stopping you?'

There was a time when both sides of Huma's family would gather to celebrate holidays together.

Then along came the burning train. In their Gujarat. Mobs went on a rampage. Over a thousand people were killed in the communal riots. The

aftermath transformed the dynamics within her family as well.

Huma feels a hand on her shoulder. Sara is standing by her side, her eyebrows pushed into a frown, holding a dupatta in her hand.

The man from the garage still has a dirty neck. Sara remembers watching Nani once clean his neck with a soapy washcloth and then use a cotton pad soaked in cologne to remove the accumulated dirt.

'How big Sara has become!' he says now and pinches her cheek.

Sara is used to people pinching her cheeks. The older relatives do it to all the kids. But when the man from the garage takes her flesh between his thumb and forefinger, kneading it for a moment, there is pain. Sara moves her head swiftly and sinks her teeth into his palm. He jerks his hand back, but she doesn't let go. Digging her teeth harder into his flesh. Till her mother yanks her away. She can see the indents of her teeth, a red semicircle on his hand.

Sara runs to her room and locks herself in. The

moment between the time he put his hand on her cheek and her biting him is dark. Maybe it has just become a habit – attacking before she gets attacked. The instant before she swings her arm or pushes her nails into someone's face is always blank, as if it didn't happen. Or like when she was reading *The Graveyard Book* and from page twenty-five she had gone to page twenty-nine, without realizing that the library book was missing a few pages.

Huma can sense neighbours, friends, all the relatives staring at her, at her brother, at her daughter rushing to her room. The crazy Shroffs. How many stories about Huma's family these people must have gathered over the years? Commiserating when her brother was again in rehab or when she returned home, divorced, with a child. And now they will talk about her daughter. The bite will not be forgotten. It will be discussed later when they are in their own homes. All secretly relieved that their children are better than the Shroffs.

She can see the marks on Adil's hand. It doesn't

leave her mind, the way Sara turned in his direction. Her teeth clamping down. Like the zombies in the movies Sara likes watching. They had seen the *Resident Evil* series together and Sara would keep pointing out plot holes. 'How can this be the scientist's flashback? She is not in the room, so how can they show what the zombie is doing inside?'

'Who are you and what are you?' Huma had asked her daughter, amazed at Sara's intelligence. All of thirteen and aware of perspectives.

'A future employee of Rotten Tomatoes,' Sara had replied with a broad smile.

She thought sending Sara to boarding school would change things, but her violent streak has not disappeared. Huma decides she will take Sara to a shrink and even those babas who brush people's heads with brooms to banish evil spirits. She will try everything. From medicine to miracles. But she will not do what Amma did. Huma will not let her child turn into a monster.

She can't talk to Sara now. She will do it once all these people leave. The extended family, after watching the matinee performance of 'The Crazy Shroffs' have gone back to their squabbling. The

discussion has now deteriorated to which religion is superior based on which section eats beef and who eats pork. Murad finally brings up circumcision; he says, 'It is much more hygienic than what Hindus do.' This leaves Padma Ben speechless.

Huma wonders if her father would have found the whole episode amusing. His dead wife lying three feet away and the extended family quarrelling over pigs and penises.

It's been an hour since her brother left to meet the mukhi. Someone has ordered samosas and the family is sitting around the dining table as if they have dropped by for a Sunday meal. While chomping on his second samosa, Murad gets a call from the mukhi. 'Adil has not reached the jamaatkhana and they can't wait for him any longer,' he tells Huma with the phone clamped to his ear.

She imagines the sun cutting across the sky till it disappears into the west and Amma's body still lying in the middle of the living room.

'We have to go to the jamaatkhana ourselves, Murad Bhai, and sort this out. I want to be there for Amma's prayers.' Then Huma goads him with, 'Padma Ben is already talking to her pandit ji to come for the last rites at the Santacruz crematorium.'

On their way to the jamaatkhana, she breaks a red light and bribes the traffic cop with a hundred-rupee note. Huma drives away as Murad insists that it's too much and the policeman should give them fifty rupees back as change. She follows his directions till they reach a white building at the end of a dusty street.

The mukhi, a soft-spoken man, hears her out and says, 'We would not do this usually, but I remember hearing good things about your father. It is rare for a man to change his religion to his wife's. We can only allow you inside the jamaatkhana though, if you are willing to reconvert.'

Huma is asked to pay a small donation. She is then led to a table where she kneels on the ground as the mukhi's wife sprinkles water on her face. Huma is handed a white candy like she is a child waiting at the dentist's. She is moved to another low table, where

a bearded man with a smattering of prayers informs Huma that her reconversion is complete. She is an Ismaili once again.

The van carrying her grandmother's body enters the cemetery gates. They lift her on to a stretcher and deposit her in a closed chamber attached to the pavilion. One family member is allowed inside to witness the body being prepared. Nobody volunteers.

Sara looks at her creased and rumpled mother standing at the other end of the pavilion. She wants to hold Huma's hand but is scared. Before leaving for the jamaatkhana, Huma had come to her room and said that Padma Ben would take Sara to the cemetery.

Sara tried talking to her mother. 'I didn't mean to do it, Ma. I got angry and it just happened.'

'You know, it's not just chickenpox and flu; uncontrollable anger is also a kind of illness. It can be fixed. But we will talk about this later,' Huma replied.

Sara doesn't look at it as an illness. She thinks it's

more like a full tube of toothpaste which squirts out with the smallest push, more than you intended and all over the sink.

In the crowded pavilion, an elderly aunt in a floral sari presses against Sara. She plugs a religious jukebox into a switchboard in front of Sara's chair. It has a picture of the Aga Khan that lights up and plays high-pitched chants. She then turns to Sara and says, 'Don't tell anybody, but when I went to pay my respects, I took some of your grandmother's hair. I will give you a few strands. You can put it inside a locket.'

When they open the chamber doors, Nani is lying on a raised marble platform in the middle of the room. People start moving around the platform, touching her grandmother's feet, crying, throwing flowers.

'It's difficult to lose a loved one, but she is in a better place now,' a man sitting behind her says. Lose. Like her Nani is a T-shirt that didn't come back from the laundry.

Standing on one side of the pavilion, Huma spots Sara sitting in a plastic chair and talking to a sari-clad relative. Sara should offer the elderly woman her chair, but her daughter doesn't move and is instead making strange faces at the old woman.

Amma's body is brought out. Huma touches her mother's hand. In all these years she has rarely seen Amma's hands lying still. She was always knitting, folding clothes, writing duas in lined notebooks. She squeezes her mother's stiff fingers and steps out to call her brother again. He doesn't answer. They are going to pick up the bier with Amma's body and take it to the burial spot. Heads covered, women are meant to watch from a distance. A son, the firstborn, must lead the way. In lieu of a son, the task is handed to the closest male relative. Daughters are not involved in these arrangements.

Cousins, uncles, family friends are now lifting the bier. Huma pushes her way to the front, hunching at first and then straightening when she finds a place for her shoulder under Amma's bier. Someone tries to stop her and she screams. They leave her alone. The crazy Shroffs. She walks with the men, chanting