

## **Caged**

By Farrah Yusuf

'One and one make eleven or one and one make two. Depends on what you see.'  
Anum recalled her little sister, Sadia, once telling her, as she stared at the seat number on her flight boarding pass.

Having taken the boldest step of her life, Anum sat curled up in a metal chair in the departure lounge. Her long hair was scraped back in a tight bun, her porcelain face free of make-up and her jumper stretched over her knees. It was now her gaunt cheekbones rather than her deep green eyes which first caught the attention of strangers. She was barely twenty three years old but in some lights looked fifteen and in others thirty. Behind her was the runway of Heathrow's terminal three and in front of her a rainbow of British Pakistani society, all waiting to board flight PK747 London to Lahore. For her, London to *home*.

An announcement had just been made that the flight was going to be delayed by at least an hour. No reason was given but passengers were requested to be patient and remain in the closed lounge. Anum looked around the room, gazing at the faces of her fellow passengers as the announcement rippled through their consciousness. She watched as their expressions moved from straining to hear, to irritation as they absorbed the information. She listened as the murmurs of disapproval rose to a slight quake, culminating in a collective sigh before they went back to their own conversations.

A teenage boy who was sitting near her reached into his rucksack and pulled out a plastic Coke bottle. As he twisted and lifted the lid, Anum stared at the delicate mist of bubbles that emerged from the bottle. As she watched, she remembered the feeling of that soft spray tickling her nose whenever she took her first sip of the fizzy drink. It was always followed by an unmistakable feeling of satisfaction as the rush of sweetness filled her mouth and the cool liquid trickled down her throat. Decades of successful advertising drilled into her subconscious.

Years ago now, on the walk home from school she and her friends would buy Coke bottles from a stall holder on the corner of Moon Market. Over the years the only change to their routine was that their orders went from Coke to Diet Coke. The gaggle of giggling school girls would arrive at the stall day after day, waiting impatiently as the stall holder would line up chilled glass bottles in a row, his scrawny wrists flicking the metal caps off each one with rapid snaps of the bottle key. The slim fluorescent yellow straw he always dunked in would bob to the top, as he handed each girl a bottle. Anum would often cast away the straw and take her first sip quickly, directly from the bottle so she could capture all the bubbles as they fizzed up. After that first gulp, she would savour each cool sip, as they provided her with momentary respite from the stale, searing Lahore air. Rather than savouring the drink, this teenage boy glugged it down in almost one go, before returning his attention to a game on his mobile phone.

As she watched him, it occurred to Anum that she had not eaten today. She had become immune to the hollow feeling and slow growls of her stomach but not to the consequent pounding headaches. She pressed her temples hard attempting to

mimic her Mama but to no avail. Whenever she had a headache as a child, Anum would crawl into her lap and close her eyes as her Mama massaged her forehead. Pressing her warm flat palms down and rocking Anum as she gently rubbed her temples with her fingertips. Anum longed to crawl into her Mama's lap and feel her arms wrapped around her tightly again. It had been fifteen months since she last felt her touch, since she last smelt her. She recalled the moment, just after she passed Lahore airport departure security, when she walked into the glassed passengers only area and looked back to see her family waving goodbye. Even from afar, Anum could see tears glistening in their eyes but wide smiles determinedly plastered on their faces as they waved at her frantically. Both Anum's sisters had hidden their faces behind their grandparents. Just as Anum was about to turn away, she glimpsed Sadia handing their Mama a tissue. In that moment, Anum longed to run back through security and go home again with them but instead she just smiled back and walked on. As the flight took off and the *Bismillah* prayer was played overhead to bless the journey, Anum wrapped the pashmina her Mama had given her around herself tightly. Rather than follow the prayer, Anum lifted the pashmina to her nose, transfixed, it smelt of her Mama, of original Imperial Leather soap. A few months later, on a weekly trip to Tesco with her husband Shehzad, and her saas, Shehzad's mother, she bought a bar of the soap. She never used it. She just kept it snug in its box, in the drawer next to her bed, but from time to time she would sniff it.

Lost in her thoughts, Anum barely noticed as three men entered the lounge and discreetly escorted two young men out with them. She merely saw the young men's backs reflected in the window she was gazing at. Their hair was spiked with gel and over loose fitting cream *shalwaar kameezain*, they both wore dulled navy hooded

sweatshirts with University College London Hockey Team emblazoned in red lettering across the back. She turned to look around. No one else seemed to have noticed. They were all either distracted with asking the cabin crew members who had arrived in the lounge questions about the flight departure or caught in their own bubbles. It occurred to Anum that the three men must be airport security or policemen and that perhaps she should care what was going on but she didn't. She only cared that it was adding precious hours to the moment she would be back in Lahore.

Anum felt a tapping by her chair leg. As she looked down she saw a toddler hitting it as she dragged her ladybird shaped mini trolley up and down the aisle. The little girl's cheeks flushed pink as she tried to straighten the trolley each time it flipped over. Suddenly she stopped by Anum's chair and started lifting the handle of the trolley up and down, again and again, seemingly mesmerised by the motion. Her tight chestnut curls shook as she tugged at the handle. Her eyes lit up and her plump face beamed each time she managed to yank the handle up before releasing it down. Staring at her, Anum wondered if anything gave her as much pleasure as this moment gave the toddler. Anum's eyes scanned the aisle to find the toddler's parents. She skimmed over a group of older men, submerged in a loud debate about the state of Pakistani politics, over the teenage boy's family, until she caught sight of a woman further down the aisle. The young woman had one eye on the toddler and another on a little girl who was enthusiastically colouring in a book. She sat bottle feeding a baby whilst automatically nodding at whatever her husband was concentrating on reading aloud from a newspaper. As Anum was about to turn back to face the window she caught sight of a couple in the next aisle. Anum could just

make out the *henna* on the woman's hands and the glint of gold bangles. Newly-weds.

Anum recoiled. Her best friend had done her wedding *henna*. Kiran had always been good at it. Years of applying *henna* on *chand raat* ready for *Eid* had meant Kiran had mastered the art on the sweaty hands of her little siblings and friends. The week leading up to Anum's wedding had been a whirlwind. On her *henna* party night however, in a marquee overflowing with cascading fairy lights, whilst their friends were doing *bhangra*, their mothers' singing along to the beat of a *dhol* and their neighbours devouring *kulfis*, Kiran and Anum were in their own private bubble. They sat on the stage in an ornate *Mughal* style wooden swing decorated with yellow marigolds to contrast with Anum's bejewelled pistachio *shalwaar kameez*. A raw silk purple cushion between them, on which Anum rested her arms while Kiran drew peacock and mango patterns in *henna* on her hands. They giggled while spinning dreams of what Anum's new life in London with Shehzad would be like until the early hours of the morning. Now, all Anum could do was shudder at the thought of their naivety.

In hindsight, it was almost laughable that Anum's family had not investigated the background of this foreign proposal. Anum's future *saas* was her Mama's childhood friend. Anum's family had all blindly trusted everything she said. No one questioned why after two decades as a stranger she randomly appeared at their home. Offering condolences for the death of Anum's father in a car accident years ago whilst sweating profusely in a way that is reserved for *pardesis*. Claiming she had not returned to Pakistan in years and speaking for hours about wanting to reconnect with

her past, reminiscing with Anum's Mama over their school days. Anum should have paid attention to her expression as she surveyed their grand colonial style house, the way her eyes hovered over the SUVs in the driveway and her lips pursing when she first caught sight of Anum. Instead, a twenty year old Anum ran off to watch a US sitcom with her sisters.

Anum's *saas* appeared for *chai* four times in as many days. Each time the banquet Anum's Mama set out for her grew by at least three dishes. By the fifth day, Anum sent Sadia, to spy on the conversation. A giggling Sadia returned talking about a photograph of a man that their Mama had been analysing closely. That evening, Anum crouched by the stairs listening to her Mama and doting grandfather talk in whispers in the courtyard. They mused over Anum's weak grades, her striking looks and foreign dreams. By midnight they resolved to ask her what she thought. Anum tiptoed back to her room and started Googling images of the London skyline. This stranger could be her passport out of mundane Lahori life, the heat, the electricity cuts and the mosquitoes.

By the time Anum saw Shehzad's photo a few days later she didn't much care what he looked like. An image of a new life had already set roots in her imagination. When Shehzad arrived for their wedding those roots had blossomed into a plant. When her visa arrived six months later the plant had grown leaves. Within weeks of arriving in Luton those leaves began to fall. The first leaves wilted instantly when she arrived at Shehzad's terraced three bedroom house and was shown the room she would share with him. He had emptied half of one of his three wardrobes for her. A peeling poster

of Manchester United players holding a cup and labelled 1999 greeted her every morning.

A few days after she arrived, at her *saas'* request, Shehzad took Anum on a tour of the town he grew up in. The short circuit ended at his shop. The 'IT business' Anum had heard so much about turned out to be a small gadget shop nestled between an open fruit stall and a kebab shop on Bury Park High Street. Posters for reduced international rate calling cards adorned the grimy window. As Shehzad parked, Anum sank down further in her seat, relieved when he said she should stay in the car. A group of young men wearing tight designer jeans, Timberlands and *keffiyeh* scarves tied in loose V shapes around their necks were gathered at the entrance of the shop. As Shehzad approached them, there was a collective cry of *salaams* in an odd but somewhat amusing combination of English, broken Punjabi and twisted Urdu. They gave him bear hugs and shook hands vigorously, as if they didn't see each other every single day.

Anum's attention turned to the rest of the street. Young women, wearing outdated *shalwaar kameezain*, so tight Anum wondered how they could breathe and enough make up to attend their own weddings, walked with their mothers. Somehow they managed to avoid the crates of decaying vegetables that randomly littered the street. They expertly navigated stiletto heels over squashed tomatoes whilst stealing lingering looks at the young men, when their mothers were distracted by haggling with shopkeepers. As Anum surveyed the street her *filmi* and MTV fuelled dreams of newlywed life in London shattered. She bitterly recalled noticing a sign for the local

airport which marketed itself as 'London-Luton'. It was like Pakistan but not like Pakistan. Not like the Pakistan she knew.

Months passed. The initial dinners at peoples' houses that her saas paraded Anum at began to dwindle. Eventually all that was left was day after day of sitting indoors with her saas watching reruns of Pakistani soaps on a sixty inch television, the size of the entire living room wall, whilst cooking and cleaning. Her saas had relegated her to chopping duties when it became evident that Anum could not cook. In Lahore, Anum had only ever made flamboyant desserts when enticed by celebrity TV chefs and aided by hysterical friends.

Anum had tried to make some friends but the Luton born girls seemed puzzled by her. Eventually one told her she was 'too modern' and dressed 'too western' having observed Anum's numerous sleeveless *kamazeein*. After that Anum stopped trying but folded away the clothes she had brought from Lahore in favour of ones she bought on Bury Park High Street. Gradually Anum was able to tune out her saas' eternal monologues about her useless monosyllabic husband and what Mrs Khan next door had done. Slowly Anum stopped using Skype to talk to her family in Lahore, making excuses about the camera being broken. Instead she practised holding her voice and telling her lies before making the weekly call.

Nearly a year passed by. Kareem, Shehzad's younger brother, came home from Manchester University only to state he would be leaving again to work in Sheffield. Anum watched as his father responded with his usual silence, his mother with shrill crying and Shehzad simply continued to Google car alloys.

On Kareem's last night, as Anum helped him pack, while his mother sulked upstairs, Kareem stared at her before eventually whispering, 'I told him not to do it. Not to marry you. Not to pluck you from your life. Coward.'

Kareem paused. 'He has had a girlfriend since school.'

Anum sat down. She knew. She had guessed within months of arriving. The whispers from neighbours and the way Shehzad clutched his mobile when it buzzed. The most piercing sign was the name Julie engraved on the bottom of the watch he only took off to shower. The day Anum found a folded group photograph of him next to a blonde at a Theme Park, she finally had a face to accompany the name scratched in her mind.

Kareem looked at Anum, 'You realised?'

He shook his head. 'Idiot. Couldn't even be discreet.' He mumbled.

'She is a Cambridge graduate.'

Kareem tilted his head as he smirked. 'A Cambridge graduate in love with our Shehzad, who barely scraped through school.'

'Mum always hated her and convinced herself it would pass. It didn't. When she started a 24/7 hot shot city job our Shehzad couldn't stand it. She got a work Blackberry which was always glued to her hand. They sent her abroad a lot and her boss wouldn't give her much notice so she would often cancel on him. Our Shehzad isn't used to that. Eventually I guess she couldn't take the commute on top of her hours and moved to London. He was stuck at the shop. His man child ego couldn't take it. His world is here – he hasn't ever really wanted to leave.'

He paused, before continuing softly, 'Mum named him well, a true prince is our Shehzad. Likes his *roti* on time too much to...' Kareem's words trailed off as he began to slowly click his knuckles.

'Mum has a PhD in chipping at us. I just ignore her but not our Shehzad. It is as if she can smell the right moments to pounce. Whenever he would sulk Mum would be there in his ear, cooing that she would find him a new girl. A beautiful *and* dutiful girl. As if there is a shop you can make orders in.' Kareem rubbed his neck.

'Funny thing is... Mum found you.' He paused.

'I don't know what convinced him. Maybe Mum's tears. Maybe something about your eyes. Hers are green too. I think he told himself he could have both. Have peace. Mum happy *and* a girl.' Kareem looked down.

'She moved back to Luton when she found out. She won't leave him. He won't leave Mum. Mum won't let you go.' Kareem sat back.

'Mum has a stupid thing about Kashmiris.'

Anum's body jerked upright. 'Kashmiri? Pakistani? But Julie...'

Her words were drowned by Kareem's groan.

'Julie?! Stupid Ali G song.'

He snapped. 'No. Her name is Nida.'

The rest of Kareem's words blurred into insignificance as Anum's head began to pound. Unknowingly she had hung the last thread of her sanity on Shehzad's girlfriend being white. Being different to her. Being part of this English world she couldn't understand. With the name Nida something clicked.

It took another three months for Anum to muster the courage to leave and to secretly execute her departure. She used the 'secret emergencies only' money her

grandfather had given her the day she left Lahore which she kept hidden in a sunglasses case.

Finally the day arrived. As Anum's taxi took the motorway towards Heathrow, she called Sadia. Anxiously waiting to hear her little sister's voice but Sadia didn't answer. Anum left a voicemail asking to be picked up at Lahore airport. Saying she would explain later.

Another announcement shook Anum out of her thoughts. 'Boarding will begin in five minutes.' Anum noticed the three men shuffle the two young men in sweatshirts back into the lounge and silently leave. She turned to look around. Again, no one else seemed to have noticed.

Anum had switched her mobile off to conserve the battery but quickly switched it on to see if Sadia had replied. She held her breath as it loaded. Nineteen missed calls and seventeen text messages from Shehzad. She didn't bother opening them, hoping to see Sadia's name appear. Finally it did. Anum opened Sadia's message. 'Told Mama. She heard your voicemail. She thinks no other family will accept you now. She spoke to your saas. They say they'll take you back. Mama says go home. Sorry *Baji*.' Anum gripped the mobile tight.

A voice boomed overhead 'Rows 1-22 please come forward. We are ready to board.' Anum looked at her boarding pass – seat 11C. Her eyes moved between the boarding gate and the departure lounge door.