



THE GREAT COLLISION

Two countries collide in a ferocious battle losing sight of humanity.

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Chapter I

1947. A year of great joy yet a year of great murder. At last the British colonial rulers descended from their great thrones in India and took off; knowing the consequences; knowing the tensions. Knowing the blood which was to paint this land. Little did they know that 1 million people were to die or that this was to be far worse than what they had predicted; worse than they had ever seen; more horrifying than a mass genocide. Perhaps that's why they left; maybe they couldn't take it anymore: the blood, the stench of death conquering all aromatic scents and thoughts of green fields, that savage look of fear. So, I thought. They'd just stepped out from a war zone; their resources stripped away from them. But who knew that what was to follow would build up to a civil war: an ocean, a sea, a pool of blood, of bodies, of tears.

India was slowly nearing the grips of a long summer; I was sitting under a tree saving myself from the sun which never swayed from its position nor lightened its intense glare of heat. Beads of sweat gave birth to trails of sweat which crowded my face, giving way to my growing agitation. The gruelling hours along with the stubborn sun seemed to tease and play with the growing anger within me. My *kurti*₁ was being covered with my sweat as the hours and minutes passed by with monotony. The only entertainment which gave me somewhat joy was my book, which seemed to suppress the boredom that carried its saggy body everywhere, and to everyone, snatching away what little joy they carried on this day of intense, smothering heat.

"*Api*₂, *Api*..." from the distance my younger brother came running out. His hair clinging to his forehead as he called out for me, "*Api*!" he momentarily stopped catching his breath and then continued, "*jaledi under ayaye... wo radio kuper Kuch news arahai*. Come quick. Some news is on the radio."

"What news, *chotu*₃."

"No... *kuch India kah bareh me bolelahai*."

"Husain. Telling me that they are talking about India isn't important. We live in India, *pagal*₄," I laughed at his so-called 'urgent' news.

"*Api*," but then Husain's voice fell to a sudden whisper, "they're talking about a partition." Now he had my attention.

June 1947. It was finalized. The viceroy of India had decided on a divide before they left, a hasty transfer of power from the hands of the British rulers to the Indian leaders of that time. Lord Mountbatten, the viceroy, announced that Britain had accepted that the country was to be divided through religious majorities (a Hindu majority India and a Muslim majority Pakistan). We, my family and I, sat in the living room thinking of what to say. I did not know what to think: was I to be happy or sad? Silence cast a long shadow in the room and soon the heat was no longer intense. Instead the air gripped everyone's collar with tension. I knew that each of our hearts were being strangled by the very thought of this partition. At the time I was oblivious to consequences of such a major decision though. I did not know what to expect; I guess I thought that life would go on as normal.

“Mumma,” I finally spoke.

“Abhe nayhe. Not now, Maha. Take your brother and sister. Go outside.” She said all this with little to no eye contact, with little to no emotion in her voice. She handed me my 1-year-old sister.

“Come on, Husain.” I left the room.

I still remember leaning against the door and hearing concerned murmuring. Now the adults were talking, and we were left with nothing but to think: why such secrecy? What were we missing out on?

Chapter II

We were nearing the doorstep of the start of September. Since the news an overwhelming amount of violence started. Outside the streets were being overtaken with shouting and angry voices. The moral grounds were ripped without a warning and the norms of civilisation were suspended; men were running with sickles, axes and swords killing and mutilating anyone from the opposite faith; there was no mercy, no second thought involved. Even neighbours turned their backs on one another, and a hidden fear swept across every house. We were all stunned and overwhelmed by this turn of events: the uncertainty of what may happen that September, at any second, any minute, any time, was eating away at our every thought.

That day, when my ear stroked the door, voices swarmed my ear. “We know we can’t stay here,” my dad tore the paper of silence down.

I could hear a gentle sob, my mum, “What are we to tell the kids.”

“We tell them how it is.” My uncle replied.

“How?” My aunt stepped in, “they are only kids.”

“Worry about that later, Noor,” I could imagine my grandad’s serious face, with a tide of wrinkles, “We need to leave. We can’t stay here; we all know that.”

“*Api*,” Husain popped out from the corner, looking at me with a blank expression.

“Not now Husain.”

He had a teddy in his hand which my cousin and I had made when we were younger. On that day we were in our house with the din of footsteps, of voices and of continuous rustling radiating from within. my cousins were running up and down the stairs and my aunt, *khala*¹⁹ Noor was walking up telling them off. It was of course a period of festivity for us all as the year had finally touched Eid-UI-Fitr, the end of Ramadan. The women were in the kitchen cooking food and I remember the scents of the meals cuddling the house. The aroma of *byrani*, of *salaan*, of *kheer* and so many more scents intermingling with one another. The men were still at the mosque: they had prayed Eid *salah*⁵ and were probably saying salaam to everyone and greeting them. They had left the house wearing their Eid clothes; my Baba wore a plain white *kurta*⁶ as he did everywhere which annoyed Mumma ever so much:

“Why can’t you buy yourself new *kurtas*,” she’d say whilst she adjusted her *sari*.

“What are you wearing?” my dad would say to her building up to his point.

“My favourite green *sari*⁷.... and jewellery”

“And how much did that cost?” My dad asked whilst he sat on the bed beside me putting on his *chappals*⁸.

“8... *acha*⁹, so this is how you’re going to play huh.”

My dad started laughing and I smiled.

He stood up, standing behind her with his hands behind his back. I could see something glistening in his hands. Mumma was in front of the mirror. She was putting on her earrings.

“I can’t buy myself new kurtas because then I wouldn’t have time to...” his hands went in front of my mom revealing an expensive gold necklace, “buy my beautiful wife this,” he put the necklace on her. It glistened with the growing energy of gaiety in the room. That day was a mix of a euphoria and bliss.

Chapter III

“Api,” Husain’s voice began to tremble, “What’s happening?” His eyes began to glisten with tears like a porcelain doll.

“Husain,” I walked over to him and knelt down so that I could wipe his tears, “Nothing is going to happen to us, I promise,” I said reassuringly.

The voices in the room grew louder and I stared back still kneeling at the door, perplexed. Loud voices ran out of the room like a herd of sheep gone wild until a single, deep voice silenced them all like a shepherd herding his sheep. The door opened and my dad, frowning, came out and turned. He saw me and my brother and I stood up looking at his face. But it did not soften; he walked past us without a word. “Iqbal.” Mumma came out and followed baba calling out his name.

“Husain go to Dilshad *bhai* and stay with him,” I said.

“*Gi*¹⁰, *Api*.” Husain walked away and I watched him go down the stairs.

I followed Mumma’s voice making sure that I was not seen; when I reached my parents’ room, I could see that baba was vexed, whilst Mumma was trying to calm him down. But my dad would not listen instead he continued to shout.

“*chupp*¹¹, Pakeeza, enough.” Baba was looking down with one hand on his hip. He looked up into Mumma’s eyes and said through tears, “*Jaan*¹², what are we going to do?” He sat on the bed and Mumma’s tears started trailing down.

“Babu.” From behind me, Husain ran into the room.

“Husain,” I whispered through gritted teeth. Nevertheless, he ran to baba and threw his arms around his neck, nestling his face into baba’s shoulder weeping gently.

“Maha.” Baba gestured to me; I hadn’t realised that I was still hiding behind the wall with my head poking out. I walked over slowly to him, hands placed together at the front and head lowered. As I approached him, my eyes became glassy with tears and I looked at him. His eyes too were sealed by water. His face was wet with tears and his black moustache slowly moved up as he tried to form a smile. He extended his arm and I fell into them crying on his shoulder. Mumma had her mouth covered silently weeping.

“Husain.” Footsteps were heard down the corridor running. “Hussain.” From the corner swung our oldest cousin Zakir. He stopped with his heavy breath. We all looked up and baba

wiped his tears with his hands. Mumma adjusted her scarf. Husain sat next to baba looking at Zakir *bhai*¹³ with open eyes. From behind Dilshad *bhai* came with a worried look on his face, "Husain, why'd you run away?" said Dilshad.

Zakir looked at Dilshad and said trying to lighten the mood, "oh, Dilshad you couldn't even catch *chotu*. When you have kids, you're probably going to lose them all." We all laughed, "Remind me to tell *Bhabhi*¹⁴, about how responsible you are." Dilshad was blushing and quickly replied, "*Arai*¹⁵, this kid runs so fast. It's practically impossible to catch him." We were all now laughing and for a moment we had forgotten all our troubles.

16th September 1947. The night was our refuge and the moon our torch. "Maha." Baba was gently shaking me. I groaned and rolled over rubbing my eye. "Baba," I groaned. "Yusra wake her up." I had my eyes slightly open and watched as my dad's silhouette left the room. "Maha, get up. It's time."

It's time. The very words that I had been dreading. It is time.

I slowly got up. "Maha," cousin Yusra could see my hands shaking on my lap. She cupped my face in her hands and said, "It's all right. *Inshallah*¹⁶ we will make it out into Pakistan. And then we'll make another doll...for Parinda. Okay?" I nodded smiling though I still felt a ball of uneasiness in my throat.

Through the dark, I could see Mumma's outline. She stood watching and started walking towards Yusra *Apia*¹⁷. She laid her hand on *Apia's* shoulder and kneeled. "*Chanda*¹⁸. I will never let anything happen to you. You are *mera jigger ka tokera*. You are a piece of my heart. Know that."

They both left the room

That day on Eid, my cousin Yusra and I were inseparable. Everything that we did, we did together. Even our bangles called *churia*²⁰ were of the same glittery sky-blue colour. Both of us wore a *gharara*²¹, a gold-coloured long skirt with a *kurti* as a top, both heavily designed with beads and sequins.

"*Apia* come on," I said to Yusra giggling. I was holding her hand and we both were running up the stairs with a ragged cloth which used to be baba's *kurta*.

"Wait," Yusra tugged my arm and forced us to a halt. Through continuous laughter, she whispered, "We need to go someplace quiet and alone."

"Ooh, I know. Come on," I dragged her on. I pulled Yusra into a room and shut the door.

"Whoa, I didn't even know this place existed." We sat down on the floor with the cloth, a needle and thread as well as some of Zakir *bhai's* baby clothes.

That evening Yusra and I sat in the dingy room and sowed ourselves a doll. The sun was settling into the distance as we started tearing the cloth and sowing it together. The last of the sun's rays lightened the dark room. The furniture was covered in white cloth, with a fresh layer of dust settling in. When the sun had hidden itself behind the great moon, we finished stuffing the soon-to-be-doll with the torn-up baby clothes. We giggled as we

finished sowing it. "There," Yusra finally spoke. She held up the doll with pride; this was our creation; made by us. "Wait," I pulled the doll and laid it on my lap. Uncapping the pen, I wrote on the foot of the doll, Yusra and my initials. As an initiation of the doll entering our friendship zone.

Chapter IV

I was sitting in that very room, with the memories prancing around. To think that I would ever have to leave this room with out taking the things which had given birth to some of my happiest memories, struck my heart heavily. Yet I had no choice, so I buried that feeling and left without saying goodbye.

We were all on the bottom floor near the door, except my grandparents who refused to leave this home which held generations of memories. Uncle Jalil and Zakir *bhai* left first and in 10 minutes we were to do the same. There was an eery silence which flooded the room. Everyone's faces were grim as if a death had overcome this house. 8 minutes left. My mother was bare. She wore no *bangles*, no earrings, no necklace, not even her wedding ring. Her face seemed burdened by so many thoughts, but it was so hard to pin down what truly worried her: leaving her parents or being separated from a place which used to be known as home. 5 minutes left. Baba was peeping through the curtained window making sure the streets were not marked by the Hindus. No mobs, no crowds, no din; it was a good sign. 3 minutes. I sat next to Mumma rubbing my hands together with anxiety. The future seemed twice as unpredictable as before as if a million new roads had opened, and as if fate had gone mad jumping with all its crazy energy. I could feel the beads of sweat trembling on my forehead as they had done before.

2 minutes left. "Oh no. No, no, no." Baba left the window and started to usher Mumma and me upstairs; when Mumma asked, "What happened Iqbal? What..." Baba hurriedly added, "Mob. Yusra go upstairs with Husain and them now. And hide. Quick. Quick."

Mumma was holding my baby sister, parinda. Yusra led the way. Husain and I followed, a worried brow growing as the tension and fear lurked about. Mumma took parinda and hid. Yusra took Husain and me. She hid Husain under the bed and I behind the wardrobe in my room: I was thin enough to move behind it though it was a tight squeeze. Shouts and angry voices crowded my ears as footsteps came up the stairs. Yusra glanced back, quickly squeezed my hand and left closing the door, leaving me in the dark in this cramped place. I heard her voice; I heard a deep voice and her screaming as feet were being dragged away. From down below I could hear baba's voice and Dilshad as I imagined Yusra was being dragged away by the menacing men. I covered my ears and closed my eyes, but I could still hear the muffled voices and a scream.

A scream, shouts and bellows then... silence.

I uncovered my ears and dared a look. Then the voices came again, and the footsteps began to ring. But this time they were closer and this time they were every where in the house;

upstairs, downstairs, in the corridor, outside. I closed my eyes again. But I heard a tiny cry: Parinda; I heard Mumma; I heard a loud scream as the little crying ceased to exist. Then again, I heard nothing but deep voices of the men. They were everywhere. Outside my room, footsteps were slowly closing in as a predator would on its prey, like an eagle would on a fish. The door's handle turned, and it swung open, slamming the side of the wardrobe right where I was hidden. My ears homed into nothing but this man's heavy breathing and forceful steps. He walked past the door into my room. I could imagine him looking under my bed, into the adjoining room, into my drawers for valuables. Looking everywhere for anything and anybody. His footsteps neared the wardrobe and as if he expected someone to be hidden in; he waited and laid his big hands onto the handle.

Moments passed. For the first time I could hear my heart beating; I could feel the blood pumping around my body. I held my breath. I held my thoughts. I held everything back for fear that this man would hear everything. The wardrobe shook violently as the doors swung open; I let out a quiet gasp which was drowned by the creaking of the door and the man's brutal search as he threw all my clothes out. He grunted and closed the doors. Yet I could almost feel the great disappointment which arose within him; no one to terrorize; I felt as if at any moment he would let out this feeling and channel it in to a stream of anger; I was afraid that in his great stampede of rage he would push down the wardrobe to find me. To find me and... no, I remember telling myself. My heart was racing against time as this man walked towards the door of my room, he was going to leave. Almost. But he stopped and glanced back: his eyes scanned the room and jumped over the wardrobe and towards where I was hidden. I stood stuck to the wall. My shoulders were tight as a sense of foreboding rained down in the room. I felt a direful feeling beginning to stir in the pit of my stomach. I bit my tongue and held back a desperate scream. I could feel his eyes throwing daggers at me. But I held back the howling of a despondent cub within me. My ears blocked out all dinns of voices until my rapid breathing felt as if it was echoing through the India.

Chapter V

Since the night was young and fresh, little light glanced towards the room. Little light washed over. So, my tiny body was extinguished and banished into the dark. His eyes were veiled from the sight of me and he left the room the same as he had entered. But I did not dare a breath. I waited till all was silent. Seconds, minutes swept by. And only until the voices receded, did I leave my hiding place. Even so, a wave of trepidation kept overlapping in my heart and I felt as if I was drowning.

It was only then did I realise that my tears were flooding my face and that my hands were trembling and that my skin was overtaken by mobs of sweat. I took long shaky breaths as I tried to calm myself.

"Mumma," I tried calling. My voice was dry. "Baba," I tried calling again. My voice was clear. "Husain," I was met by silence. I walked to the room where Parinda and Mumma were hidden. I slowly opened the door and softly called their names.

But when I entered, I was horrified.

Till this day I remember what I saw clearly. It has left a scar, a wound which is cursed to never heal. That day when I walked into the room, Mumma was on the floor; there was no rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, there was no colour on her skin as she lived, there was no life as there was before. My legs wobbled and the scene before me blurred heavily till a curtain of darkness shut my eyes.

August 14th, 2019. 70 years later, here I sit in Pakistan celebrating our independence as I recollect the past, too horrifying to be written on paper and too long to be told by words. 1 million died in this great collision between two religions (Hindus and Muslims) and 10 million people were uprooted from their homes. In 1947, I left everything that I knew as home in India and boarded the '*blood train*'²² to Pakistan. The train which could stop at any minute and be consumed whole by a swarm of remorseless men. I was unsure whether I'd even make it. That feeling can never be forgotten. The memories can never be erased. They are forever engraved in your mind: the scenes of the brutality, where no mercy was shown: the scenes of young girls being dragged away just like our Yusra and abducted and raped: the scenes of villages being torched. Those memories were there to stay. And I remember 70 years later. I remember, the great collision where two countries collided in a ferocious battle, losing sight of humanity.

Glossary:

- 1 kurti – traditional clothing for women
- 2 Api- sister
- 3 chotu- small
- 4 pagal- crazy, silly
- 5 salah- prayer in islam
- 6 kurtas- traditional clothing for men
- 7 sari- a women's garment consisting of a length of cotton or silk elaborately designd and draped across the body
- 8 chappals- slippers, sandals
- 9 acha- oh\yes\okay
- 10 Gi- yes\an expression used when agreeing.
- 11 chupp- quiet, silence
- 12 jaan- my love
- 13 bhai- brother
- 14 bhabhi- sister-in-law
- 15 arai- wait (in this context)
- 16 inshallah- god willing
- 17 apia- sister
- 18 chanda- my moon
- 19 khala- aunt
- 20 churia- bangals

21 gharara- traditional pair of wide-legged trousers that are ruched at the knee to produce a natural flare

22 blood trains- many trains holding refugees which were either going to India or Pakistan were massacred on the way there. So, when the train arrived it was filled with the dead bodies of thousands hence the name blood train.