

Ayesha Muzaffar

JINNISTAN

Scary stories to tell over chai



Chapter 1

3 Men, 3 Stories

The grains of Karachi's muddy sand feel like home as they slide between Yawar's toes. He often comes to the beach after Maghrib time, when the cool summer-time breeze has replaced the scent of camels and their urine; when the colorful clothing of women with wailing children hanging on their waists has been replaced by a clearer, calmer, and colorless view of the night.

Cities apart, Mehmood rubs his beard and orders a diet Pepsi with his medium-rare beef steak and baked potatoes. He dips his finger into the hummus sauce and plays with it. The texture is gritty, and his frown makes it obvious that he likes his dips smoother, just like his *ami* used to make them. His second wife, sitting across him, sighs. All she has ever wanted in life was a man's undivided attention and *bhaiyya's* kebabs for lunch, and today, she has none.

Jinnistan

Sandwiched between Lahore and Karachi, in the city of *darbars* and sohan halwa, Naveed sits in front of his autistic son, visually explaining the shapes of clouds, waiting for him to chuckle every time he waves his hands in a circular motion. “Biryani!” says his son. “*Nahin,*” replies Naveed. “Clouds. *Badal, betay. Badal.*”

“Biryani!” giggles his son.

This is the story of three men; three men with different lives, different solutions, but the same problem—jinnns.

❶

Yawar wasn't always like this; he didn't skip family dinners with aunty Parveen's *khandaan* to enjoy a quiet night at the beach by himself. As far as Yawar could recall, he never liked the beach—at least not till some months ago.

Aunty Parveen did not mind. Yawar had been in her *nazar* for the longest time, and she was utterly delighted to have him engaged to her daughter, Mahzaeb. Mahzaeb, too, was on cloud nine knowing that she'd be getting married to the cousin everyone had secretly wanted to get hitched to. She had never talked directly to Yawar because she felt that it was her shyness that he very much approved of, *warna* the other cousins were bold and *nangi pungi*.

It was true that Yawar was not inclined towards his other cousins, but it was also true that he had no interest in Mahzaeb. It wasn't because they had grown up calling each

other *bhai bhen*, but because Yawar felt that he was already married.

Yawar had always been interested in physics and its laws. He explained life through that particular science, and he believed that nothing fell outside its numerical boundaries. So, when his *dadi ama* claimed to talk to jinns, he laughed. He sat massaging the tips of her wrinkled, *khajoor*-like feet, and heard stories about how a jinn lived in his *dado's* room. On one occasion, he was explicitly told not to play with his Bob the Builder toy truck in the corner of the room because the jinn lived there. When *dadi ama* wasn't home, Yawar sat in that corner and played there for hours.

He witnessed something very fascinating; when he rolled the truck towards the corner, it sped sideways, like somebody was throwing it away. After the truck would land on its top, Yawar would examine its tires. Almost always, they were burning hot. So, Yawar took it upon himself to study that corner. After analyzing it for days, Yawar came across a faulty wire that had been let loose behind the curtains; because of the current passing through it, it charged anything metallic thrown its way. And so, the young man concluded that his *dadi's* jinn was, in fact, roaming electricity.

When Yawar was at NUST, his professor relayed an account he had with an energy disguised as a human and told the class that jinns were actually energy, and that they very much existed. Yawar guffawed. He told sir Suleman that he was mistaken, for energies were anything but human, and

jinn they certainly were not. He wrote his thesis on how kinetic energy could turn into sound energy and motion energy, and finally, any energy the brain perceived, but it was not anything supernatural. To Yawar, what could not yet be explained by science would be put into the realms of parapsychology, for it was the easiest alternative, one that did not require hard work.

One night, when Yawar's mama, *ami* Najma, congratulated the family on her son's *baat paki* ceremony, Yawar crept outside. The roads were closed due to Imran Khan's protests, and due to a container blocking the entrance of the main road, he ended up at the beach in the middle of the night. There was a couple there, holding hands, very much in love, and Yawar rolled his eyes. To him, love was like jinns – explainable by science. Perhaps it was a chemical reaction – the same kind as the dopamine rush he felt when studying nuclear fission – that people termed 'love'.

In an hour, the voices outside had reduced to indistinct murmurs, the couple had left, and Yawar stood in the farthest corner of the beach, examining the water circle around his toes. A honk-like sound disrupted his thoughts, and he examined the roaring waves through a bird's eye view. *Honk*. There it was again, louder this time. After five long minutes, Yawar saw a wooden boat wash up on the shore a little distance away.

It's the middle of the night. The waves are ruthless. How have they spared this boat and its owner? Yawar contemplated as he

ran towards the boat. Upon reaching it, he saw a woman lying inside, her figure now loosely hugged by the moist sand. The woman appeared to be ill, for she lay lifelessly on the wooden plank. Her face was covered by a thick layer of silky, straight hair that shone under the October moonlight.

“*Suniye?*” Yawar blurted out. He didn’t know what to say. A part of him was thinking about the honking sound; there was no machinery on the wooden boat. The other part wanted to wake the woman up, but he concluded that she might be dead and that he could get in trouble. He had seen enough CID to know better.

“*Suniye jee,*” he repeated with more gusto. Yawar rocked the boat. Well, at least he tried rocking it. The weight of the petite woman was heavier than the gigantic bottle of Nestlé that his *ama* made him place on the dispenser. Ever since he was a child, Yawar had always thought a lot, which was his most pressing problem. As a young boy, he’d calculate the pros and cons of consuming the grape ice-lolly, and the orange one.

He thought about running away from the scene, but then he thought that abandoning the lady would be inhumane. He thought a lot. “Hello, *jee?*”

Yawar placed his hand on the woman’s head. Her hair was drenched, and she was cold. He took off his jacket and placed it on top of her. Yawar sat there, looking at the moon and then his jacket, and then at the moon again.

Slowly, he slid the jacket enough to catch a glimpse of

her face, now that the moon hung right above them. He then brushed the hair off her face using the back of his hand.

Yawar gulped. The lady was unlike any woman he had seen before, and as a child, he had seen many Bollywood movies with *ama*; none of the women had appealed to him. Her radiant face appeared to be lit up like a lamp. Her features weren't South Asian. The nose was round, and her tiny lips painted the color of *anaar* were covered in water drops. He wondered if she was Chinese or Japanese. Her face was too oval to be Korean.

"Excuse me?" he said. The nervousness made Yawar's toes tickle. He placed his hand on her cheek, banishing the patches of dirt from the beauty tantamount to the brightest in a kingdom of stars. *A star. Sitara—that's what she is*, he wondered.

Yawar sat there, peacefully, *chaunkri maar kay*. He smiled to himself and waited. He waited for what seemed like an hour that drudged by as slowly and laboriously as the boat. And then, he saw the lady fidget. At that exact time, his phone started to vibrate.

Yawar quickly declined the call. It was not him being disrespectful; it was just that the lady in front of him lay so peacefully that he did not want to wake her up this way. So, he decided that his *ama* could wait.

The woman was young, though deciphering even her roundabout age would be a challenge—her face was too ethnically ambiguous. Her small, sea-green eyes followed

Yawar's the moment she opened them. At once, the silence between them gave Yawar immense pleasure, as if looking into her eyes had been his life-long dream. She collected herself ever so gently, like the owner of a precious necklace does when it breaks, and the beads scatter across the floor. It was when she lifted her upper body from the floor that Yawar noticed her feet were twisted-turned backwards—and yet, he thought that those, too, were indeed beautiful.

“Hello. My name is Yawar. I—I saw that you had—” Yawar spoke in his finest accent, the language of *angraez*, for he was sure that they did not share their descent, and the little clothing she wore suggested that she hadn't been nestled in Pakistan either.

“*Adaab.*” She opened her mouth, and words just flew out of it, like Lahori car drivers running across each other, in four different directions, instinctively aware of the way. “*Adaab, Yawar Sahab.*”

She knew Yawar's name, and she smiled when she said it. Her little lips parted, and deep-set, even little dimples formed under both her cheeks, running perpendicular to her laugh lines. She was an early birthday present.

And so, that night, under the stars and the tranquility of the sky, Yawar and the girl conversed for hours. She told him that she wasn't human and that he ought to be afraid—but Yawar wasn't. She told him that she was what he might call a siren—*been wali aurat*, an entity that his chapters could not explain. Yawar liked how straightforward she was, how

Jinnistan

there was no small talk or brushing over the edges between them. Everything was out on the table, and not once did he question how she knew so much about him. He just sat there, listening to her tell him tales of sinking ships, leading captains astray, seducing men to surrender their body to ruthless waves, and how well she could sing.

She sang. She honked. Yawar watched in amusement. She could sound like the wind, like his *abba's* downtrodden car—but most beautifully. She could sound like the sizzling sound of his *phupho's* poori from the previous night being reheated on the stove, and even like his *phupho* herself. She was a star—a *sitara*.

She told him that she could kill him, that just like the *dayans* living on the land, she was a *makhlook* of God, and she could very much kill him.

Yawar had mild urges to say *Bismillah*. He knew the *kalmas*. But he didn't want her to leave, and she, the cunning, gorgeous creature of the sea, could sense it.

And so, they both made love. And she whispered in his ear that on the Day of Judgment, he'd burn in the deepest depths of hell if he did so, but Yawar engaged. He had never felt such a connection before. Mesmerized by her beauty, Yawar did not measure his doings by science and its facts for the first time in his life.

Yawar returned home with the biggest grin plastered across his face at Fajar time. He could see men crowding in the masjid and the occurrence of the prayer, but he could not

hear the words of God. He tried to. He went inside and told them all to speak louder, but his ears had become deaf to the sayings of the Lord.

And now, married to Mahzaeb, Yawar often sits at the farthest corner of the beach, waiting for a boat to wash up against the shore. He does so, not to make love to the maiden, but because it has been twelve years since he last heard a holy recitation, and pus oozes out of his starved-out ear canals every time he strains too hard in attempts to listen.

2

Mehmood loved Bibi Bakhtawar. He loved how she made the perfect square parathas, and how she always forgot to send him lunch at his shop in Liberty market. He loved how she tried out the entire stock at Khaadi before buying a single *shalwar* to go with an old suit. He loved how she drooled on her pillow at night. He loved her double chin, and that one hair that grew out of the mole under her cheek. He loved how when his *bhabhi* went for facials, Bakhtawar stayed home and applied *ubtan*, because she believed in Zubaida *apa kay totkay*. Mehmood loved her. Bakhtawar was his *jaan*. And so, when she died during childbirth on a hot summer afternoon, Mehmood was devastated.

They had a baby girl. Mehmood and his Bakhto. They hadn't known the gender before, and both of them had wanted a *nanni pari*. Mehmood held the child in his arms

and wept. She looked just like his Bakhto. The resemblance was uncanny, because of which from that day onwards, Mehmood found it near impossible to look at his daughter. Mehmood was a good man; he believed that he was, and so, he remarried within a month—not because he wanted to, but because little Saniya needed a mother.

Nagma and Mehmood shared no intimacy, and Mehmood had made clear to her that there was a possibility that he would never love her. But the house was hers, and all his money was hers, and he would never cheat on her. He could never come to love her. At first, Nagma thought that looking after Saniya would help win Mehmood over, but it didn't, and neither did getting dolled up with her *jhumkas*. Her *dadi's* traditional chaawal recipe that had been fool-proof at winning over husbands' affections since her great grandmother's time did not work either.

Mehmood occasionally took Nagma and Saniya to dinners. He loved food, and then again, he was a good man. Years passed, and Nagma grew fond of Saniya. Her little toes grew into big ones, and she started to walk and run; her chuckles turned into mama *naja*, and her straight, silky hair curled up into short waves. And at the end of the day, it seemed it was only Nagma and Saniya, and their happiness.

When Saniya turned nine, Mehmood took up a project-based job and left for Gujrat. At night, when Saniya missed her papa, not knowing what real fathers were like, she wept. Their house was out of Slanty, Saniya's favorite snack, and

there was no light to microwave the child a Betty Crocker mug treat. So, Nagma decided to take her stepdaughter out for a breath of fresh air. It was pouring, and the little one excitedly put on her eye-popping, neon yellow rain suit which came with adorable black boots. Nagma's heart melted. She promised herself that she'd raise Mehmood's daughter like her own. They told the driver to stay in the house, for they were just going for a stroll in the park. Saniya jumped in every puddle she could find, and not once did Nagma stop her. Her attention towards her doting stepdaughter was disrupted by the whispering winds almost tingling the insides of her ear lobes. She often imagined that the strong winds carried with themselves creatures, and it was those things that made the whooshing sounds, for they did not want people to leave their houses. She never did like the wind; it was just the piercing raindrops that soothed her.

Nagma sat on the bench and let Saniya run around the swings. She told her to not go too far and that they'd leave in ten minutes. And so, with those instructions, Saniya jumped from one wet slide to the next. That rainy night, Nagma and Saniya were the only two in the park. The other people were inside their houses, with their windows shut tight and drapes hung loose. The other people also had caring husbands.

After some time, Nagma noticed that Saniya was on a seesaw, high in the air. It was too dark for her to make out her stepdaughter's expressions but she thought that she was stuck, and that she might be weeping. There was no one

holding her up, no one on the other side of the seesaw – just air, and the air could not be heavier than chubby little Saniya. *The jhoola must be broken.*

Nagma walked towards the child and asked her if she should take her off the swing.

“Beta, yeh aisay nae letay. Ap tou uper hi hou gae ho. Yeh uper jata hai. Phir neechay jata hai. Aao main utaroun,” Nagma insisted. But the child wanted to be stranded in the air. She shook her head.

“Mujhe pata hai, mama. Wou jaan booch kar mujhe uper rakh raha hai, mama,” the child uttered. Nagma stared at the swing in disbelief. She had read a fair amount of child psychology, and she knew that children tended to make characters in situations they did not quite comprehend. *Ab aik bachhi kou main kya physics kay laws samjhaoun.*

And just then, in front of Nagma’s eyes, the seesaw started to move up and down—up and down. The wind brushed through the strands of Saniya’s curls as she guffawed in delight. Saniya’s legs were spread in front of her, not making any movement, but the swing itself swung her up, and then brought her down. Before Nagma could register what was happening, the movement of the seesaw accelerated greatly. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down.

“Ma—aa—ma—ama *j-jjj—ee!*” Horrified, Nagma grasped her daughter from behind and dropped her to the ground. Her silk *dupatta* was caught in the seesaw which was aggressively going up and down, and Najma ran towards the

house without her belonging, with Saniya clutched against her chest.

Saniya wasn't bruised, but she began to sob profusely, just as she was doing so before the incident had taken place. Nagma ordered food for her, and tucked her in bed soon after. Nagma stayed up all night herself.

The next morning, she went to open the door for the guard and the house help. She hadn't forgotten about last night's occurrence but at that point, she just wanted to rid the house of the dust and catch up on some sleep. Rubina, the maid, when stepping inside, handed a roughly wrapped cloth to Najma.

"*Yeh kya hai?*" she asked.

"*Baji, gate say atka huwa tha apka laal dupatta. Maine jaldi say pakar liya takay ur na jaye. Raat ko hawa ki waja say...*"

Najma examined the *dupatta*. It was the one that she had left hanging on the seesaw in the nearby park. For a minute, she stood looking at it, not knowing what to do. Then, she told Rubina to wash it with the rest of the clothes.

The wind could not have delivered my cloth across the road, across three turns, to my house. It couldn't have.

Days passed and Nagma's mind relaxed. She forgot the happening like one forgets any other bad dream. On Sunday, Mehmood came back and greeted his wife and daughter. He was in a good mood and since such a mood was hardly expected, Nagma smiled and sat down with him.

The *azaan* could be heard inside the house and just as

soon as it started, Mehmood got up and told his family that he's taking them for breakfast. It was noon, and they decided to walk towards the naan channay joint. This was the first time they were having something that didn't cost 10,000 rupees. Mehmood had always been reluctant to try desi dishes from street vendors, and Nagma thought that Gujrat's winds had done him good. It was also the very first time that Mehmood held his wife's hand whilst they walked alongside the road. Perhaps her absence had made him grow fond of her.

They ordered *nashta* and talked about Nagma. They talked about the storm, and about Saniya's education. And just then, the driver called Nagma. Thinking that it might be regarding Rubina wanting to skip work and go home early, she picked up. She would have never picked up anyone's phone during such a delightful morning.

"*Baji? Sahab ghar aa gae hain. Pooch rahe hain kay ap kahan hai aur Saniya bibi kahan hain. Guseh main hain, baji,*" Rubina said. Confused and angry, Nagma told the driver to put '*sahab*' on the phone.

"Nagma. *Yeh kya mazaak hai?* Where are you, and where is my daughter? I deliberately told you not to leave the house without Kamran driving you guys. Come home at once!"

Nagma placed the phone on the wooden table and looked in front of her. There sat Mehmood, grinning, with his eyes a pale and feverish yellow, not blinking. They widened by the second.