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# The News at His Back

*An Excerpt from Thinner than Skin*

GHAFOOR SAT IN A CAFÉ many miles north of the lake, in a town called Gilgit. He was taking his time appraising the two men from Xinjiang Province. He was a tradesman; he knew nothing was free. But the choice he faced now was different. The men did not have fingers and toes, at least not all of them. Studying their hands, he calculated the sum of their words.

They described to him, in minute detail, China's plan to raze the old city of Kashgar. They had brought photographs as evidence of their pain: cobblestone alleys, labyrinthine in design, as interconnected as ancient trade routes. Spectacular mosques, also to be razed. On the walls of one mosque hung a poster forbidding individual pilgrimages to Mecca. The men also had images of abandoned Internet cafés, after the freeze by the government last year, ensuring the complete isolation of their fight. The cleanup meted out to protesters involved a different kind of freeze. They were hosed with ice water, in winter. The lucky few, like the two men beside him, were freed without fingers and toes.

Their isolation must end. He could help, could he not?

The men had brought what he wanted. It lay in a box on their table in the low-lit café, close to their hands. Inside the box lay a gift for the woman to whom he had sent a blue feather, days earlier. An impossible choice. There was a proverb down in the valley where he had once made his home. *Neither dry in the sun nor wet in the rain.* How was he to get himself out of this difficulty?

One man had palms like soft leather cups, wrinkled and worn. The right thumb and little finger were missing, but on the left hand, only the middle finger was gone. This man was asking why the hands had reacted asymmetrically. Had he curled each differently each time they hosed him? Had he left one finger more exposed? He wanted to know also if it would have been easier to adjust if both hands had suffered the same fate. Because, now, he found he could do absolutely nothing with the left hand, even though it still retained a thumb. "The left hand uses the right as an image of itself, but it has lost this mirror. It cannot learn."

“It could have been worse,” said the other man, who had only lost his toes. And he did a trick, making all but one of his fingers disappear. He held it up. The two men chuckled. They kept their shoes on.

Ghafoor kept appraising them, trying to place them from four summers ago, on one of his trips to Central Asia.

He had stopped in Kashgar for a few days, where he traded, among other things, leather for jade. The Chinese military were parked in the province for the month, to parade military hardware through the heart of the city. In the sky droned circles of fighter jets. On the ground trooped 100,000 boots, several dozen tanks, armored personnel vehicles, and camouflaged trucks. He had never seen so many uniforms before. He had never seen so many weapons. He had never seen so many planes. The chief of general staff of the People’s Liberation Army was also present, along with more generals than he had seen even at one of Pakistan’s military parades. It took longer than it ought to have to find the trader he was to meet, and when he did, he learned the reason for the display. It would show the Uighurs of Xinjiang that ethnic separatism under the banner of East Turkestan and religious freedom and the Turkic tongue would never be tolerated. This was not East Turkestan. It was China.

Ghafoor spent the week listening to the army’s threats with one ear, and the bustle of the city’s main bazaar with the other. There were many Pakistani merchants here, all buying joggers, socks, track suits with English writing, and the Pakistani housewife’s favorite convenience: plastic buckets. He met a Uighur who, after striking a deal for 4,000 pairs of socks, had closed shop for two months while feeding a family of twelve. He ate kebabs skewered on bicycle spokes. He bantered with peddlers who told him a joke that, in subsequent years, would grow slightly stale. (“What was the first thing Neil Armstrong saw when he landed on the moon . . . ?”) He watched more currency exchange more hands in more tongues than even down in Gilgit. For, though Uighurs were proud of their Turkic heritage, for commerce, accommodations must be made. When currency was converted, so was language. The best clients were “Soviets” from Central Asia and Russia. If treated right, a Soviet could help a man close shop for *three* months. Ghafoor learned a little Russian himself, a skill that proved especially useful with the many Kazakh traders living in Xinjiang, men with whom he would travel to Ghulja on the border, forging direct links with artisans high in the Kazakh steppe.

But that was to happen later. Four summers ago, despite the windows he sensed were opening for him, Ghafoor was unsettled by the tanks and

trucks occupying the city, and by the Han migrants being brought in from outside the province. They would pave the cobbled roads that cut through Old Kashgar, and force native Kashgaris to leave. He knew what it was to be forced out, to roam from field to field as though you were an *upal* in a buffalo's ass. It was partly for this reason that he had chosen to leave the valley of his birth. Better to choose, than to be forced. But the native Kashgaris were not choosing to leave, even when the cobbles beneath their feet were smashed, even when, for every donkey cart that sold *polu* and kebabs, there were two that sold liquor and pork. So he watched a history evanesce, alleys that once chimed with horsebells now clattering with cranes, mazes of mud-brick courtyards being flattened like naan, while, nearby, a colossal statue of Mao remained unshaken. "This is our al-Quds," an old man whose family had fled the previous year told him. "I will never leave." And when he added, "Will you help us?" Ghafoor had replied, "Of course." But his eye, saturated with the grief of those he knew he could not help—he had not even been able to help his own people, though God knows he had tried—this saturated eye began to wander.

By the end of the week, Ghafoor had a mound of Kazakh, Chinese, and American currency in his purse, and the news at his back. He was vaguely aware of what it said. An East Turkestan separatist had been arrested in Pakistan. He had confessed to being the ringleader of a group planning attacks on China's twelve new highway projects, each of which would cut through Xinjiang to connect China with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and ultimately, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Turkey. Upon his arrest, he publicly spat on the generous compensation Kashgaris would receive for resettlement. He spat also on the compensation for the herders whose nearby grazing grounds would be paved.

By the end of that same year, Ghafoor was far from Kashgar and Chinese tanks and Han donkey carts and the man to whom he had promised aid. The news was still at his back, and it could still be heard. The East Turkestan separatist had been executed.

HIS BROTHER WAS NOW SITTING opposite Ghafoor, without toes, and with a box. Ah—Ghafoor had not been able to place him, but the man now came out with his name! He need not have shown Ghafoor the photographs of those lovely mosques that would soon be razed. Of course Ghafoor had seen them, with his own eyes, before moving on from Kashgar into Kazakhstan. He had seen the military parade double

in might, the fighter jets that spewed ribbons of white smoke into a sky that would not wear its natural color again for weeks. But by then, Ghafoor did not really care. Somewhere between the kebabs on bicycle spokes and the Chinese yuan in his pockets—or perhaps between the military tanks and an old man’s defiance—he had fallen in love with a girl so white she could be a ribbon herself. She certainly weaved around him like one, her face a smooth oval, her lips small and pink, and with just the tiniest smile lurking at one corner. In one of those labyrinthine alleys in a photograph in a soft leather palm, he had followed her, over the remaining cobblestones and into a doorway and up a staircase and behind a madrasah where her father was preaching, and on, into another doorway, up another staircase, through a window patterned with green tiles that took his breath away, on, past the blue and white vase standing on a pillar that was surely a work of angels. And there she pulled him into a room high above the minarets that seemed to point at the fighter jets, cursing them to hell. And she weaved around him again.

They met there each day, in a room in a sky in which birds had not flown for longer than anyone could say. They simply sat, the nightingales and the doves, the eagles and even the grayleg geese, on the eaves of houses and the domes of mosques, waiting for the planes to stop their din, waiting to be swept by the breezes that had also stopped, waiting, waiting, for the People’s Liberation Army to look somewhere else, because it was getting late, soon, many of them would have to migrate south, including to Kaghan Valley, where he, the tall man with the sideburns and the belt on the floor, had once made his home. But in the meantime, while they waited, at least they had the advantage of a bird’s-eye view of the lovers who met each day in that room.

She wanted him to stay but he could not stay. He told her he had goods to trade in the steppe. He promised he would be back. He said her thigh was like the inside of a dove’s wing, silken smooth and silken white, and outside, the doves shifted and almost cooed. He was getting good at getting naked faster than her old man could climb one-third of the way up the stairs. Another third, and he had already had his fill. The final third, they had both dressed, and parted. By the time the midday prayer sounded from all the mosques—even the heavenly call from a hundred majestic minarets could not rival the din of the fighter jets, though not for want of trying; many muezzins lost their voices permanently that summer—the man with the sideburns and the girl with the feather-smooth thighs were nowhere to be seen.

And now, four summers later, the two Uighurs had brought him what he asked. He opened the box. Two flowers, still fresh. The choice he faced was not easy, but it was worth trying to avoid. He paid them generously and stood up to leave. They laughed, reminding him that though he might prefer otherwise, their business was not over.

He sat back down.

AFTER LEAVING THE GIRL in Kashgar, his world had kept opening. He traded in the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Almaty, traveling up the Oxus River and deep into the steppe, developing a special kinship with those who built the goods he sold in the markets. It was here the land spoke to him most, in a region that lay high in the north of what was now Kazakhstan, though to the nomads with whom he was to spend the next three summers, all of Central Asia was one land, divided not into states but into mountain and steppe, desert and oasis. The steppe nomads made him feel he was looking back in time—*his* time. It was the strangest sensation, the first day he was invited to break bread with them. It was as though a mountain inside him were melting, leaving him naked and cleansed, entirely in his own skin, the skin he used to inhabit in the valley of his youth, before he had to leave (he had not *entirely* chosen to leave; he had been sent away, banished, almost, even if he did prefer to think otherwise), before he had to don a thousand different skins. In the steppe he was undisguised, unwary, unwanted.

He found that the Turkic nomads shared an uncanny likeness to his own community: love of horses, hospitality to guests, and, most of all, a worshipful knowledge of the primacy of movement. The men had lush beards and liked their trees to look the same; they did not fell that which gave them life. Even some of their festivals were the same. They observed Nauroz, the first day of spring, by cleansing their homes with burning juniper branches, smoking out the vices of the previous year, a ritual now done in secret down in Kaghan, by a woman who, when she was a child, had licked honey from his fingers and danced to his flute. (The memory always made him smile.) The steppe nomads loved music too, bowed string things that made them kick. He was glad he had his flute. They sang as much as they prayed, and talked twice as much. They had their own shamans, those who could escort a soul back to a body, and those who could escort due justice back to a crime. They were born with a long ear and a memory as old as the Oxus. So was he. There was nothing said in his presence that he did not carry deep in his chest to the

next yurt, the next town, the next valley. But he held it there. He did not talk. He merely listened, loyal to everyone who showed him only kindness. Their stories were his stories. Their enemies were his enemies. And their women, well.

Only a few weeks after leaving the girl with the feather-white thighs, Ghafoor found himself drinking milk from the arms of another. They had a peculiar diet, up here. It was the hardest thing for him to grow accustomed to. The worst thing he ever ate was a bowl of thick string made of something vaguely the consistency of rice, though the duck, also new to him, did make it easier to swallow, and the mare's milk made it easier still. He had never milked even a buffalo before—a sign that he was never a very good herder, even when he was one—but one day he saw her doing it, stroking the udder of a visibly pregnant mare, a girl who was not slight and not oval-faced, but who had the most perfect round arms, and who showed him how. *Press like this.*

Over the course of the summer he followed her through highland pastures the way he had, not too long ago, followed another through cobblestone labyrinths. An audience of eagles and hawks dipped and twirled in a sky free of fighter jets. Looking up from beneath him in the grass, she spoke a name of God that was older than Allah. *Tengri*. *Tengri*, he repeated, drinking her smell. He was getting better at getting naked faster than the milk still warm on her flesh could ferment. *Tengri*, she whispered again and again in his ear. *It means the endless hemisphere of the sky.*

There was some movement that even a free woman did not consider free. This time, before he could leave for the market towns, he was told to bid for her hand, which he did. He won the hand but before he could marry her, he had to win at two additional tasks. The first was assembling their home. A yurt was more luxurious than any Gujjar tent, and entirely sacred. It was a replica of *the endless hemisphere of the sky* and putting it together was an act of creation. His bride-to-be needed to know that he could create. After many tries, he eventually succeeded. Their yurt was a bright, plush home, with each aspect, she told him, representing a part of the human body. The walls were thighs, the smoke hole the eye, and the interior lattice frame with the ribbed plates that he gazed upon each night from beneath her, the womb. The second task was not divine, though, much to her amusement, he did not realize this till much later, when it ceased being a prerequisite to their marriage. It was a game in which he waited on a sandy outcrop on a horse till she rode up to him, at which point, he could chase after her. If he caught up with her, he could kiss her. If he failed, she

could whip him. The game even had a name, *kʏz kuu*, the kissing game. He never did win, even before she took pity and married him.

To their yurt and their games he returned, wherever he went, and for however long. She could weave the finest rugs ever seen, a skill that flowed in her blood for more generations than he could name, for which he fetched a handsome price, keeping her family well fed. He did not need to return to Pakistan very often for leather or other goods. He no longer found much use for jade.

Yet, lately, something was pulling him back, something that had not pulled him for a while. The comforts of the yurt had begun to ache. The duck no longer tasted sweet. Mare milk was rather sour when compared with buffalo milk. And the truth was, though it delighted her, *kʏz kuu* exhausted him. Perhaps it was time for a visit. So he had sent the blue feather to the girl of the valley of his youth, smiling to himself as he recalled her amazement the first time he left her a sign in the cave. Their cave. And he sent word to all those he had met in his many years as a suitcase trader, a long, long network of associates who were Uzbek and Tajik, Afghan and Uighur, men with a long, long ear and a memory as wide as the Li River that flowed from Kazakhstan all the way into Xinjiang. He told them he needed something rare, very rare. Something he could give to someone from his past, something no one had ever thought to give before, the best surprise they could think of, and the most beautiful, and the most short-lived. For he was not staying long in Pakistan. It should last only as long as his trip. But it must be exceptionally radiant, silken, and sweet. In short, it must be *rare*.

And then he left.

From the open grassland of the steppe he eventually descended into the town of Almaty, and from there to Bishkek, swinging west into Tashkent—he had once told her their cave led all the way to Tashkent, he recalled, his step buoyant—repeating what he had already asked, and the answer was always the same. No, they had not found anything that rare but they would keep searching. It was July, the time of year when nomads all over Asia have moved from their winter homes into summer pastures, and he knew it would be the same for Maryam and her family. *Maryam*. He had not spoken her name for some time. She had always loved this time of year, away from the plains, high in the grazing grounds around Lake Saiful Maluk. Perhaps she was thinking of him, at just this moment. Perhaps she was missing his version of the song about the prince, the princess, and the jealous jinn.

From Tashkent he descended into the Fergana Valley, and now he was getting close. He was approaching the passes through the Pamir and Karakoram ranges he knew so well he could have made the trek in his sleep, and he might have, but for one event that required him to remain fully awake.

It was this event that had tipped off these men.

It happened in Andijan, where he had stopped for just the day. The city Genghis Khan had burned seven hundred years ago, and that his grandson later rebuilt. The city where the Khan's most famous descendant, Emperor Babar, founder of the Mughal Dynasty, was born. The city where his most profitable clients now lived.

Ghafoor had arranged to meet his client in Babar Square. As he approached the square, he recognized the man, but the man was not alone. Beside him was a Uighur from Xinjiang. Ever since leaving Kashgar, four summers ago, in haste, Ghafoor had been avoiding the Uighur community as much as he could, which, given his business, was not always possible. His strategy was to always approach a Kashgari, in particular, from the side. He did not want to be recognized as the foreign merchant who broke his promise to a local girl. Repercussions could be—well, how would they be down in Kaghan? But this day, perhaps it was his excitement at nearing the mountain passes so familiar to him, or perhaps it was the way the sunlight fell on the statue of Babar's horse, whatever the reason, when both men greeted Ghafoor, they seemed amiable enough, and he relaxed. The Uzbek examined the rugs Ghafoor had brought, nodding appreciatively while promising, "God willing, we will find the just rate." When both men invited him to lunch at a crowded teahouse, he agreed.

He regretted it almost immediately.

How were the women up there, in the steppe, the Uighur—who, it turned out, was from Kashgar—wanted to know.

"Well," answered Ghafoor, scooping handfuls of *palov* with his fingers. "The women are well." At the table next to him, he heard a European refer to the rice dish as *pilaff*, the Kashgari at his table refer to it as *polu*, and of course, were he in Pakistan, he would hear it called *pilau*. It was piled high with mutton seasoned with herbs rather than spices and though he was now used to the difference, he ate with two tongues, one that did all the work while the other dreamed of flavors it did not touch.

"So you are married, then?" continued the Uighur, who preferred to sip black tea without milk or sugar rather than eat. "To a Muslim?"

"Yes," he shifted in his seat. The Muslim of the steppe, he knew, was

too animist for the Muslim of the town, and the Muslim of the town, for the Soviets and the Chinese, was just too Muslim.

“How many wives?” said the man, now lighting a pipe.

“One.” Ghafoor licked a spoon of yogurt, thinking, *They like their yogurt sour here.*

A silence ensued, as deliberate as the slow burn of his pipe. The other man ordered a bottle of vodka, and, when it arrived, he began to talk. He spoke of the Andijan Massacre, two months earlier. Police had shot into a crowd of men, women, and children pressed together in Babar Square to protest the arrest of several businessmen. This was the same square in which their forefathers had fought Russian forces. They were not about to acquiesce to a president who behaved like a twenty-first-century tsar. More than 10,000 people came out in support of the prisoners. The Uzbek army blocked all routes to Babar Square with armored personnel vehicles and tanks. “Then everyone began to panic,” said the Uzbek. “We heard the *whit whit whit* of steel blades over our heads. At the exact moment when I looked up, the shooting began. It was like 1898 all over again, only now they shot at us from the sky. We found the graves later. Fresh ones. Thousands of them. Even children.”

The Uighur listened. When the Uzbek was finished, he began to talk. More native Kashgaris had been forced out of their city as China’s plan to develop Kashgar fortified. China had put more Uighur organizations on the terrorist list, convincing the international community to do the same. There were even Uighurs in Guantánamo Bay, handed over to America by Pakistan. The two men traded tales of injustice till long after the sunlight had slid off the statue of Babar’s horse.

At last the Uzbek concluded, “We thought we were free, but now our own president works against us. Jailing those who are strong, shooting those who are weak!”

At which point, the Uighur turned to Ghafoor (causing him to wonder later if every detail of this afternoon had been rehearsed), “*Your* country does the same. Why does it make friends with China? Why does it let China build highways and ports through the lands of its own people? Do you think it will make men like you rich?”

Ghafoor had stopped eating some time ago; the vodka he guzzled. He did not know how to explain that it had been a while, a very long while indeed, since he felt he had a country. Perhaps the last time was even before he had a single hair on his cheek. He had tried to fight for it, once, this country that had never been his, as though by fighting for

it, he might earn it, but this had only resulted in his own people telling him to leave. He now belonged to the steppe. Even if he still carried his past in his shins.

“We herders have a very different fate,” said the Uighur, ordering a fresh pot of tea. “We may wear better clothes than those who still spend their lives looking for a field that welcomes them, but we will never stop wandering. Will we? *Even when we have an obligation to stay.*” The last words were spoken with the pipe clenched between his teeth.

Outside the teahouse, in the distance, Ghafoor could now barely see the statue of Babar on his horse. What he would give to call the horse to himself at that moment. Or call his wife. He could ride away with her. They could play *kыз куу*.

“You say nothing, my friend? You must know that wherever men like us go, we are treated the same. Uighur businessmen, Kazakh cattle breeders, Gujjar buffalo herders. The same. Your in-laws do not speak of it? All the men who have passed through their land, as though they had the right? Taking anything they please. Giving nothing in return. Taking, even, their women.”

The Uzbek was laughing. “Enough! The day is closing and the stars begin to call!” He picked up the rugs and tossed too few bills on the table. Then he left.

“You will help us,” the Uighur patted Ghafoor on the back. It was not a question.

The next day, Ghafoor was sent a message. That something he was looking for, which must be rare, very rare, that surprise that no one had ever thought to give—how had he put it? Yes, the most beautiful and the most short-lived—it would be waiting for him next week, in Gilgit, in northern Pakistan.

Before leaving Andijan, he caught sight of something twinkling just behind the ghostly statue of Babar’s horse. It was even brighter than moonlight, and so he must follow it, a silvery cape of gauze draped around the shoulders of a woman in a gaily colored skirt. She had wide hips that pulled him to that portion of Babar Theater that still lay charred from the riots two months ago. Someone had started the fire before the army began firing on the protesters, but no one knew who, or why. The theater was black and crumbling and doves did not walk, nestle, or wait here, nor did hawks draw somersaults in the endless hemisphere of the sky. Here, there was no sky. Only broken walls and tattered curtains and cigarette stubs. She was older than he had thought and missing teeth.

Why had he followed her at all? Perhaps to find himself getting better at getting naked faster than the ashes beneath them could turn to dust.

HE HELD THE BOX in his hands. Two flowers, still fresh. As fresh as the memory of those who had brought them. “They are what you wanted. Rare, radiant, sweet. And they will last only as long as you do.” This was said by the man without toes but with all his fingers. He was the brother of the man who had been executed four years ago because Pakistan had given him away. The man without toes and without a few fingers was the brother of the girl Ghafoor had dishonored.

The box fit exactly in Ghafoor’s hand, from wrist to middle finger. It was two-tiered, divided by a wooden plank. The flowers lay on top, on a white satin cushion. From beneath the plank escaped streams of packing material, but he was told not to look further. He was only to carry it. There would be other deliveries—the two men exchanged looks—after which, he must come back here, with news for them.

Ghafoor paused. They were not alone in the café. The Pakistanis milling around were mostly Shia, but even the Sunnis made him cringe. All of them spoke the word *Gujjar* with disdain. There were Kashmiris here, too, some with wretched stories of Indian prisons. The Kashmiris seldom insulted him. Outside military convoys patrolled the muddy roads. He thought briefly that if the men with the box gave him trouble, perhaps in another country, the men in uniform might help. Then he remembered the military parade in Kashgar and the Uzbek army’s massacre of civilians in Andijan, and he decided he had nowhere to run.

He could hear a Turkic tongue being spoken several tables away. He caught the word *cehennem*. Hell. *Jahannum* in Urdu. And in Gujri? What did it matter, since it was barely his language anymore? No Soviet worth his salt would do business in Ghafoor’s native tongue. But then, who would?

The men had ordered food and the food now arrived, plates of mutton korma spiced the way he had been craving just a week ago, *pilau* piled high with peas—smaller peas than in the steppe but so much more flavorful—and kebabs skewered not on bicycle spokes but on *skewers*. The newspaper wrapped around the naan was in a script that was strangely familiar. Cyrillic. His wife could read it and had tried to teach him how, but he had failed as surely as at *kyz kuu*. He had not expected to see Cyrillic in Pakistan. But nothing surprised him now. What was it the Uighur in Andijan had said? *Herders have a very different fate. We may*

*wear better clothes than those who still spend their lives looking for a field that welcomes them, but we will never stop wandering.*

Why was every mountain town the loneliest place in the world? Everyone here was scarred. Everyone here was in flight. Everyone was a passing flower in a dangerous box.

The men complimented the food, while insisting their kebabs tasted better. They attempted a joke. "What was the first thing Neil Armstrong saw when he landed on the moon?"

Not this again, thought Ghafoor.

"Two Uighurs trying to sell him grilled kebabs!"

It was not even funny, this joke they repeated as often as their prayers.

In a moment of defiance he pushed the box toward them. "I must know what it is before I agree to carry it."

The men refused.

"Then my answer is no."

"We know you have done much worse. And that you have unfinished business."

Was he about to trade his life for two flowers?

"And you must know we can also do worse," they added.

What? Without hands and feet? Ghafoor was about to blurt, but then he paused.

The man without right finger or thumb was scooping food perfectly into his lips, without even trickling grease over those palms of soft brown leather. Watching those hands, Ghafoor was suddenly visited by a memory that had never visited him before. How could it have lived inside him all this time?

It was a memory of Maryam's brother, Adil, whose true friend he had once been. The two boys were at the edge of Lake Saiful Maluk, talking about Maryam without really talking about her. Ghafoor was frightened of losing his friend by admitting he had been pursuing her with music and honey. So they talked about music without talking about honey. Her brother played his drum, Ghafoor played his flute, and while they paid attention only to each other, Maryam had arrived, cautiously, standing shyly behind a tree. A butterfly flit between all three of them, a yellow swallowtail with a shimmer of purple spots at the edge of two serrated wings. Maryam followed it with her eyes the entire time the boys played music. When it landed on her shoulder, she laughed, stroking it gently with her thumb. Her brother stopped playing and told her to leave. She did. The butterfly flew away. Ghafoor put away his flute and began to

walk down the hill toward his cluster of tents. He did not want it to show, but he had not liked the way Adil had told her to leave. He was descending the hill when her brother caught up with him at a run, cupping something in his hands. The two boys faced each other. Adil opened his hands very slightly and Ghafoor leaned forward to find the butterfly pulsing inside. He reflexively extended his own hands. Then he began to feel the wings beat against his own flesh. For the longest time the two boys stood there, the hands of the brother in the hands of the friend, the hands of the friend in the hands of the brother, and there had been a silent agreement between them: her brother was passing her to him.

And what had he done instead?

The flowers in the box were the exact yellow shade of the butterfly, with the exact wingspan, and exact sheen. The man with the leather palms shut the lid of the box, and closed a half-fist around it. He extended both palms toward Ghafoor and Ghafoor cupped them in his.