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# Curfewed Night

A Frontline Memoir of Life, Love and War in Kashmir

Written by Basharat Peer

Published by HarperPress

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# CURFEWED NIGHT

A Frontline Memoir of Life, Love  
and War in Kashmir

BASHARAT PEER



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The names and characteristics of some individuals have been changed.

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# 1 Fragile Fairyland

I was born in winter in Kashmir. My village in the southern district of Anantnag sat on the wedge of a mountain range. Paddy fields, green in early summer and golden by autumn, surrounded the cluster of mud-and-brick houses. In winter, snow slid slowly from our roof and fell on our lawns with a thud. My younger brother and I made snowmen using pieces of charcoal for their eyes. And when our mother was busy with some household chore and Grandfather was away, we rushed to the roof, broke icicles off it, mixed them with a concoction of milk and sugar stolen from the kitchen, and ate our homemade ice creams. We would often slide down the slope of the hill overlooking our neighborhood or play cricket on the frozen waters of a pond. We risked being scolded or beaten by Grandfather, the school headmaster. And if he passed by our winter cricket pitch, he expressed his preference of textbooks over cricket through his dreaded shout: “You good-for-nothings!” At his familiar bark, the cricket players would scatter in all directions and disappear. School headmasters were feared like military and paramilitary men are, not just by their grandchildren but by every single child in the village.

On winter afternoons, Grandfather joined the men of our neighborhood sitting at the storefronts warming themselves with *kangris*, our mobile fire pots, gossiping or talking about how that year’s snowfall would affect the mustard crop in the spring. After the *muezzin* gave the

call for afternoon prayers, they left the shop fronts, fed the cattle at home, prayed at the neighborhood mosque, and returned to the storefronts to talk.

Spring was the season of green mountains and meadows, blushing snow and the expanse of yellow mustard flowers in the fields around our village. On Radio Kashmir, they played songs in Kashmiri celebrating the flowers in the meadows and the nightingales on willow branches. My favorite song ended with the refrain: “And the nightingale sings to the flowers: Our land is a garden!” When we had to harvest a crop, our neighbors and friends would send someone to help; when it was their turn, we would reciprocate. You never needed to make a formal request weeks in advance. Somebody always turned up.

During the farming season, Akhoon, the mullah who refused to believe that Neil Armstrong had landed on the moon, complained about the thinning attendance at our neighborhood mosque. I struggled to hold back my laughter when the villagers eager to get back to farming coughed during the prayers to make him finish faster. He compromised by reading shorter chapters from the Quran. Later in the day he would turn up at the fields to collect a seasonal donation—his fee for leading the prayers at the mosque.

In summer, after the mustard was reaped, we planted rice seedlings. On weekdays before we left for school, my brother and I took samovars of *kahwa*, the sweet brew of saffron, almonds, and cinnamon, to the laborers working in our fields. On weekends, I would help carry sacks of seedlings from the nurseries; Mother, my aunts, and other neighborhood women bent in rows in the well-watered fields, planted, and sang.

Grandfather kept an eye on a farmer whose holdings bordered our farms. We would see him walking toward the fields, and Grandfather would turn to me: “So, whom do you see?” “I see Mongoose,” I would reply. And we would laugh. A short, wiry man with a wrinkled face, Mongoose specialized in things that led to arguments—diverting water to his fields or scraping the sides of our fields with a shovel to increase his holdings by a few inches.

Mongoose, Grandfather, and all the other villagers worried about the

clouds and the rainfall. Untimely rain could spoil the crop. If there were clouds on the northern horizon, they said, there would be rain. And around sunset, if they saw streaks of scarlet in the sky, they said, "There has been a murder somewhere. When a man is killed, the sky turns red."

Over more cups of *kahwa*, the rice stalks were threshed in autumn. Grains were stored in wooden barns, and haystacks rose like mini-mountains in the threshing fields, around which the children played hide-and-seek. The apples in our orchards would be ready to be plucked, graded, packed into boxes of thin willow planks, and sold to a merchant. Village children stole apples; my brother and I would alternate as lookouts after school. Few stole from our orchard; they were too scared of my grandfather. "If they steal apples today, tomorrow they will rob a bank. These boys will grow up to be like Janak Singh," Grandfather would say. Many years ago, Janak Singh, a man from a neighboring village, had killed a guard while robbing a bank. He had been arrested and sent to prison for fourteen years. Nobody had killed a man in our area before or since.

On the way home from school on those mid-eighties afternoons, I would often stare from the bus window at Janak Singh's thatch-roofed house as if seeing it once again would reveal some secret. My house, a three-floor rectangle of red bricks and varnished wood covered by a cone of tin sheets, was just a mile up the road. I would stand on the steps and watch the tourist buses passing by. The multicolored buses carried visitors from distant cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and Delhi; and also many *angrez*—the word for the British and our only word for Westerners. The *angrez* were interesting; some had very long hair, and some shaved their heads. They rode big motorbikes and at times were half naked. We waved at them; they waved back. I had asked a neighbor who worked in a hotel, "Why do the *angrez* travel and we do not?" "Because they are *angrez* and we are not," he said. But I worked it out. They had to travel to see Kashmir.

Father had bought me an American comic book dictionary, which taught words using stories of Superman, Batman and Robin, and Flash. I would often read it by the jaundiced light of our kerosene lantern and think that if Flash lived in Kashmir, we could have asked him to fix our errant power supply. I preferred reading the comics to the sums my

grandfather wanted me to master. They added new stories to the collection of Persian and Kashmiri legends I heard from my grandmother and our servant Akram—legends such as the tale of Farhad’s love for Shirin. Akram always began the story by saying, “It is said that once upon a time in Iran, there was a most beautiful queen called Shirin . . .” The young sculptor Farhad was enamored of her and loitered around, seeking a glance of Shirin. Over time Shirin began to develop a liking for him. Her husband, King Khusro, was furious, and his advisers suggested a plan to be rid of Farhad: They told Farhad that Shirin would be his if he could dig a canal from a distant Behistun mountain to the palace. Shirin told Farhad about his impossible task and the artist-lover set off for the mountains with his spade. Farhad toiled alone for years, molding the mountains, crying out the name of his beloved, sculpting Shirin’s face on the rocks along the canal.

Farhad had survived the impossible task, and the canal was nearing completion. King Khusro was worried by the thought of keeping his promise and letting his wife marry another man, a commoner. His advisers had a plan: An old woman should be sent to the mountains to tell Farhad that Shirin was dead. It would break Farhad’s resolve and make him leave the canal unfinished. Farhad was toiling away when an old woman arrived, crying, choking on her words. “Mother, why do you cry?” he asked. “I cry for a dead beauty,” she said. “And I cry for you, brave man!” “For me?” a surprised Farhad asked. “You have cut the mountains, brave man! But your beloved, the beautiful Shirin, is dead!” Farhad struck himself with his spade and fell, his last cry resounding through the mountains: Shirin!

My family ate dinner together in our kitchen-cum-drawing room, sitting around a long yellow sheet laid out on the floor, verses of Urdu and Farsi poetry extolling the beauty of hospitality painted in black along its borders. Dinner often began with Grandfather leaning against a cushion in the center of the room and turning to my mother: “Hama, looks like your mother will starve us today.” Grandmother would stop puffing her hookah and say, “I was thinking of evening prayers. But anyway, let me feed you first.” And she would amble toward her wooden

seat near the earthen hearth above which our tin-plated copper plates and bowls sat on various shelves. Mother would leave aside her knitting kit or the papers of her students and briskly move to arrange the plates and bowls near Grandmother's throne. I would fill a jar with water and get the bowl for washing hands. "Call the girls," mother would say, and I would go upstairs to announce to my aunts that dinner was ready.

Two of my younger aunts—Tasleema and Rubeena—lived with us; the others were married but visited often with their kids and husbands. Tasleema, the geek, was always poring over thick chemistry and zoology texts or preparing some speech for her college debating society and practicing her hand gestures in front of a mirror. Rubeena didn't care much about textbooks but had great interest in women's magazines, detective fiction, and Bollywood songs, which always played at a low volume on her transistor, strategically placed by her side, to be switched off quickly if she heard someone climbing the stairs.

We would form a circle with Grandfather at its center and eat. Almost every time we cooked meat or chicken, he would cut a portion of his share and place it on my plate and tell Tasleema to bring a glass of milk for Akram, who would be visibly tired after a long day of work at the orchards or the fields.

In the morning, we would gather around a samovar of pink salty milk tea, and then Grandfather and Mother would leave to teach, and my aunts, my brother, and I would leave for our colleges and schools. My school, a crumbling wooden building in the neighboring small town of Matan, was named Lyceum after Plato's academy. Saturdays meant quizzes, debates, and essay competitions. Once I got the first prize—three carbon pencils and two notebooks wrapped in pink paper—for writing about the hazards of a nuclear war. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were just names to memorize for a quiz, as were the strange names of those bombs—Little Boy and Fat Man. I concerned myself with learning to ride a bicycle, playing cricket for my school team, grabbing my share of *freen* (a sweet pudding of almonds, raisins, milk, and semolina topped by poppy seeds and served during a break in the nightlong prayers at our mosque before Eid), or trying to stretch the predawn eating limit during Ramadan.

We woke up long before dawn during Ramadan. Grandmother and Mother heated the food and the traditional salty tea. Grandfather read the Quran; my younger brother, Wajahat, and I yawned till we ate. We ate quickly because you had to stop eating after you heard the call for prayers. Often we would take a few more bites after the *azaan*, the call for prayer, peeping out of the kitchen window and turning back to say, "You still can't see the hair on your forearm without artificial light." The expression dated back to the times when there were no watches. People determined daybreak by looking at their arms. If they could see the hair on their forearms, they decided it was dawn and stopped eating. Despite Japanese electronic watches, the tradition came in handy when you were trying to gulp down some more tea or eat another morsel. Grandfather, who ate little, would remind us of the purpose of fasting: "To understand what hunger means and to learn to be kind to the poor."

Toward the end of Ramadan, the talk about the meanings of fasting would lessen, and my brother and I would grow excited about the festival of Eid. On the twenty-ninth evening, everyone searched the sky with great hope for the silver sliver of a new crescent announcing the end of fasting. But the orange sun seemed to slide behind the jagged mountain peaks with great reluctance, as if it were being imprisoned for the night. All the neighborhood children would stand in the courtyard of our house staring at the horizon as it changed from shades of red and orange to a dark blue. We looked and shouted at each other, "You saw it?" "Not yet." Soon we would run up the stairs of our houses, continuing our search from the windows; our shouts grew louder as we moved from the first floor to the second to the third. If the crescent remained evasive, my brother and I would scuttle back to the kitchen, where Grandfather would be jumping from one radio station to the other, hoping for reports of crescent spotting.

Every morning on Eid, Mother would prepare *kahwa*. My brother and I followed Father and Grandfather to a clearing on the slope of the mountain overlooking the village shaded by walnut trees, which served as Eidgah, the ceremonial village ground for Eid prayers twice a year, and marked as such by an arched pulpit in a western corner from where the

imam led the prayers and read his sermon. We met relatives and friends on the way. Everybody dressed in new clothes and smiled broadly. We sat in long rows on jute mats brought from our mosque. The prayers lasted only a few minutes, but a very long sermon followed. The preacher gave the same sermon every year, and my friends and I would look for ways of slipping away. Our parents, relatives, and neighbors gave us *Eidyaneh*, or pocket money, to spend on toys and crackers.

Young men and adolescents from our village would hire a bus and go to the Heaven cinema in the neighboring town, Anantnag, and watch the latest Bollywood film. I wasn't allowed to join them, but after they returned, I was riveted by their detailed retelling of the movie. I would populate their stories with the faces from movie posters. The canvases, covered in bright reds, yellows, greens, and browns, hung from electric poles by the roadside or were ferried around the village once a week on a *tonga*, a horse carriage, while an announcer standing beside the *tonga wallah*, the carriage driver, dramatically proclaimed the release of a new movie from a megaphone. Every poster was a collage of hypertheatrical expressions: an angry hero in a green shirt and blue trousers, with a pistol in hand and a rivulet of blood dripping from his face; a woman in a red sari tied to a pole with thick ropes, her locks falling over her agonized face; the luxuriously mustached villain in a golden suit, smoking a pipe or smiling a treacherous smile.

I would spend most evenings doing my homework. One evening I was distracted by the strains of a Bollywood song coming from our neighbor's house. I hunched over my notebooks, but the music made my body restless, eager to break away. I tried to focus on the sums, but the answers kept going wrong. Grandfather slapped me and left the room. Every schoolboy got a few canings and slaps for not doing the homework properly. Grandfather tried to ensure that no music was played in our house; anything that he considered un-Islamic was forbidden. Strict interpretations of Islam do consider music—except at a wedding—un-Islamic. Mohammed Iqbal, the great Urdu poet and philosopher of Kashmiri ancestry who had studied philosophy in Munich, was influenced by Nietzsche, and propagated the ideal of superman-like Muslim

youth, was welcome. Bollywood actresses dancing around trees, singing songs of love and longing, could lead to bad grades and worse: a weakened faith. Once I did not come first in class and hid under my father's bed to escape a beating. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," Grandfather loved to say. He spent about two hours every evening giving me lessons, checking my notebooks, smiling if I lived up to his expectations, scolding me if I failed. He wanted me to be like his best student: my father.

In the late-1960s, Grandfather was teaching in a high school in a neighboring village when he noticed an eighth-grade student. Ahmad was the brightest in the school and also one of the poorest—an orphan being raised by his cousins, who wore ill-fitting hand-me-downs and wore torn bathroom slippers instead of shoes. Grandfather felt that with a good education and family support, Ahmad could go far, and he would often mention him to my grandmother. "Go, talk to his family. We can support him," she told her young husband. And thus my grandfather became a mentor and a *de facto* father to young Ahmad.

Ahmad taught at a private school while in college; after graduation he got a high school teacher's job, like my grandfather. Then some of my grandfather's friends suggested that he should marry Ahmad to his eldest daughter, Hameeda, who also had graduated from college and become a teacher. Ahmad and Hameeda had known each other since school. They agreed to the proposal and were married. A year later, Ahmad qualified for the competitive selection test for the Kashmir civil service and was appointed a magistrate. And then I was born, their first son, in the winter of 1977. Father's postings in various towns across Kashmir kept him away most of the time.

On most Saturday evenings throughout my childhood in the mid-eighties, a blue Willys jeep would drive to my village in southern Kashmir. It would follow the black ribbonlike road dividing vast expanses of paddy and mustard fields in a small valley guarded by the mighty Himalayas. Two- and three-floor mud-and-brick houses with tin and thatch roofs faced the road. Most were naked brick, and though a few were

brightly painted, dust and time had colored their rough timber windows and doors a deep brown. A ground-level room in every third house had been converted into a shop. Villagers sat in the wooden storefronts gossiping, talking politics and cricket, waving at the jeep. A not-so-tall man in his early thirties, almost always wearing a suit, a matching tie, and brown Bata shoes, would raise his right hand in greeting. He had deep brown eyes, a straight nose, plump pink cheeks, and the beginnings of a belly. The Willys would slowly come to a halt in a village square, not far from a blue-and-green milestone that gave the name of our village: SEER, 0 KILOMETERS.

Father would step out of the jeep and walk toward us, past a grocery store and a pharmacy. People at the storefronts would say, “Peer Sahib is here.” They would rise from their seats, and a chorus of greetings and hands would welcome him home. The first hand Father shook was that of my grandfather, who would blush with pride. I would run toward Father and grab the piles of books, newspapers, and office files he carried. He would sit in his usual corner in our drawing room, facing the road. I would run to the baker next to the pharmacy and get fresh bread. Mother would bring a boiling samovar of *noon chai*, the salty pinkish Kashmiri tea.

Father would tell me stories from the papers and encourage me to read the newsmagazines, answering my questions over more cups of tea. In one of those sessions, he told me that he wanted me to join the Indian civil service when I grew up. It had a professional exam tougher than that of the provincial Kashmir civil service, which led to higher positions in the bureaucracy than my father’s. “He didn’t have the resources and time that you will have,” Mother said. Father began preparing me, bringing me children’s books about politics, history, and English literature, books such as *Tales from Charles and Mary Lamb’s Shakespeare* or *One Hundred Great Lives*. We would read them together every time Father came home. One of his heroes was Abraham Lincoln, and he talked a lot about how Lincoln read by candlelight and, through his hard work and hon-

esty, became the president of America. In a few years we had made the transition to spending Sundays reading *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.

Despite the apparent tranquillity of our lives, I was beginning to get a vague sense of the troubled politics of Kashmir. In 1986 India and Pakistan were playing each other in the finals of a cricket tournament in the United Arab Emirates. On the day of the match, the atmosphere on the bus I took home from school was charged. Men, women, and children—some standing in the aisle and others on seats—huddled around radios, straining to catch every word of the commentary. Pakistan was chasing a difficult score set by India, and the number of balls they could play was running out fast. I stood in a corner behind the driver's seat and watched the driver push harder on the accelerator and continually take a hand off the wheel to raise the volume of the transistor on the dashboard. Everybody wanted to get home for the final phase of the match. Every time Javed Miandad, the Pakistani batsman, missed a ball, the bus erupted in a chorus of swearing. Every time he hit the ball and scored a run, we let out loud exclamations of joy.

The bus stopped in the tiny market near my house. Excited crowds had gathered at the pharmacy and the butcher's shop. The match was about to end. Abu, the old butcher, was biting his lips. I rushed to drop my school bag at home. In our drawing room, my grandfather, my aunts, and my mother sat in a circle around the radio. Grandmother faced Mecca on a prayer mat, seeking divine help for the Pakistani team. I dashed outside and heard the radio commentator say, "Pakistan needs three runs on one ball to win this match. Chetan Sharma will be bowling to Javed Miandad from the pavilion end of the stadium." The crowd was silent, tense. Abu's hands fell at his sides. "There is no chance. Just no chance!" He seized his radio and smashed it on the road. We watched the pieces scatter, and then we gathered around the pharmacist's radio. Chetan Sharma, the Indian bowler, was about to bowl the last deciding ball of the match to the Pakistani batsman, Miandad. The commentator told us that Miandad was scanning the field, deciding where to hit the ball when it reached him. Then he bowed west toward Mecca in prayer. He rose from the

ground and faced Sharma, who was running toward the wickets. Sharma was close to the wickets, and a tense Miandad faced him. The stadium was silent. Sharma threw the ball. It was a full toss. Miandad swung his bat. Almost everyone stepped back and waited. Silence. Amin pushed his shirtsleeves up to the elbows; Abu continued biting his lips; and I boxed my left palm with my right fist. The commentator shouted, "It is a six! Pakistan has won the match. They have scored three more runs than required." People hugged, jumped around, and shouted over the din of the celebratory firecrackers.

Kashmir was the largest of the approximately five hundred princely states under British sovereignty as of 1947. Kashmir was predominantly Muslim but ruled by a Hindu maharaja, Hari Singh; the popular leader, Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, preferred India to Pakistan and an independent Kashmir to both. When India was violently partitioned in 1947, both Singh and Sheikh Abdullah sought time before deciding Kashmir's fate. In October 1947, however, tribesmen from the northwest frontier province of Pakistan, supported by the Pakistani army, invaded Kashmir, forcing their hand. Singh decided to join India, and Sheikh Abdullah, who was a friend of the new Indian prime minister, Nehru, supported him. In January 1949 the fighting stopped after the UN intervened. The UN endorsed a plebiscite for Kashmiris to determine which country they wanted to belong to, and created a cease-fire line. The line still divides Kashmir into Pakistan-controlled and India-controlled parts, and it is now known as the Line of Control (LoC).

The agreement of accession that Hari Singh signed with India in October 1947 gave Kashmir great autonomy. India controlled only defense, foreign affairs, and telecommunications. Kashmir had its own constitution and flag; the heads of its local government were called the president and the prime minister. Gradually, this autonomy disappeared. In 1953 India jailed Sheikh Abdullah, who was then Kashmir's prime minister, after he implemented a radical land reform and gave a speech suggesting the possibility of an independent Kashmir. In the following decades,

India installed puppet rulers, eroded the legal status of Kashmiri autonomy, and ignored the democratic rights of the Kashmiris. Sheikh Abdullah remained in jail for around seventeen years; when he was released, he signed a compromise with the Indian government in which he gave up the demand for the plebiscite that the UN had recommended. He spent the remaining years of his life in power, and the period (also of my childhood) was relatively peaceful. In 1987, five years after his death, the Indian government rigged state elections, arresting opposition candidates and terrorizing their supporters.

In the summer of 1988, a year after the troubled elections—when I was eleven—Father sent me to a government-run subsidized boarding school in Aishmuqam, a small town five miles from my village. I was bad at sports and spent long happy hours in the library reading Stevenson, Dickens, Kipling, and Defoe. I saw less and less of Father, as he had been transferred to Srinagar, the Kashmiri capital. But when we were home together, we took our usual places, and Father taught me poetry. He would recite a few verses from a poem and say, “If you explain the meaning, you will get two rupees.” It was a lot of pocket money, and I tried hard.

In December 1989 I returned home for my winter holidays, hoping to join Father for the winter vacations in Srinagar. A week later, a group of armed young Kashmiris, led by a twenty-one-year-old named Yasin Malik, kidnapped the daughter of the federal Indian home minister. Malik and his comrades demanded the release of their jailed friends. After negotiations, the Indian government gave in. People cheered for the young guerrillas.

Yasin Malik, who led the militants of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), had been one of the polling agents arrested and tortured after the rigged elections of 1987. The bottled-up resentment against Indian rule and the treatment of Kashmiris erupted like a volcano. The young guerrillas led by Malik and his friends, challenging India, were seen as heroes—most of them had received training in Pakistani camps between early 1988 and late 1989, and they had in turn secretly trained many more within Kashmir. In the next two months,

the Indian government responded ruthlessly. Hundreds were killed and arrested after Indian troops opened fire on pro-independence Kashmiri protesters. It was January 1990. I was thirteen.

The war of my adolescence had started. Today I fail to remember the beginnings. I fail to remember who told me about *aazadi*, or freedom, who told me about militants, who told me it had begun. I fail to remember the date, the name, the place, the image that announced the war—a war that continues still. Time and again I look back and try to cull from memory the moment that was to change everything I had been and would be.

The night of January 20, 1990, was long and sad. Before dinner, my family gathered as usual around the radio for the evening news on BBC World Service. Two days earlier, Jagmohan, an Indian bureaucrat infamous for his hatred of Muslims, had been appointed the governor of Jammu and Kashmir. He gave orders to crush the incipient rebellion. Throughout the night of January 19, Indian paramilitary men slammed doors in Srinagar and dragged out young men. By morning hundreds had been arrested; curfew was imposed. Kashmiris poured out onto the streets in thousands and shouted slogans of freedom from India.

One protest began from a southern Srinagar area where my parents now live, passed the city center, Lal Chowk, and marched through the nearby Maisuma district toward the shrine of a revered Sufi saint a few miles ahead. Protesters were crossing the dilapidated wooden Gawkadal Bridge in Maisuma when the Indian paramilitary, the Central Reserve Police Force, opened fire. More than fifty people were killed. It was the first massacre in the Kashmir valley. As the news sank in, we all wept. The massacre had occurred a few hundred meters from my father's office. Mother was certain he would be safe. "He wouldn't have gone to work on a tense day like that. He will be fine," she said. "And he would never go near a procession," Grandfather added. But there was no way to get the same assurance from Father by hearing his voice for a few minutes: There were no phones in our village. Grandfather walked out of

the room onto the lawn; we followed him. Our neighbors had come out as well. We looked at one another. Nobody said much. Later that night I lay in my bed imagining the massacre in Srinagar.

Kashmiri mornings are full of activity. I would wake up to the banging of utensils in the kitchen; the sounds of chickens running around in the courtyard after Grandmother let them out of their coop; one or another of our neighbors herding their cattle out to graze on the mountainside; the brisk footfalls and chatter of village women passing by on their way back from the forest, carrying bundles of fir and pine branches they'd gathered for timber; the repeated honking of the first bus leaving the village calling passengers; the newsreader's words in a flat monotone floating from our black Phillips radio on a windowsill in the kitchen.

The village was unusually silent that morning. Hasan, the neighborhood baker who always made wisecracks as we waited for him to bake fresh *lawasa*, looked sullen as he slapped round loaves of dough with ferocity. He stared at the flames leaping out of the oven, turned toward me, and said, "Those murderers will burn in a fire far brighter than this. I cried when I heard it on the radio last night."

The shops did not open, and the buses did not leave the village. There was no way to reach Father. Like most people in Kashmir, we relied on the public phone at the district post office in the nearby town of Anantnag. But the post office would be closed because of the protests. Father had called a friend in Anantnag, who visited us the next day with the news of his safety. Villagers stood around repeating how they'd heard the news on the radio. I felt anger spread in me. A young man raised a slogan: HUM KYA CHAHE? AAZADI! (We want? Freedom!) He repeated, and we repeated after him: We want? Freedom!

The protest gathered momentum. Voices that were reluctant and low in the beginning became firm and loud. The crowd began a slow but spirited march along the main street of the village. Old and young women appeared at the windows of the houses. New chants were created and improvised. A young man raised an arm toward a group of women watching the procession from a communal tap and shouted, "Our mothers demand!" The crowd responded: *Azadi!* He repeated: "Our sisters

demand!” The crowd: *Aazadi!* A rush of adrenaline shot through me, and I marched ahead of my friends and joined the leaders of the procession. Somebody who was carrying his young son on his shoulders shouted: “Our children demand!” *Aazadi!*

By February 1990 Kashmir was in the midst of a full-blown rebellion against India. Every evening we heard the news of more protests and deaths on the BBC World Service radio. Protests followed killings, and killings followed protests. News came from Srinagar that hundreds of thousands of people had marched to pray for independence at the shrine of the patron saint of Kashmir, Nooruddin Rishi, in a town an hour away from Srinagar. All over Kashmir, similar marches to the shrines of Sufi saints were launched. Another day I joined a procession to the shrine of a much-revered Sufi saint, Zain Shah Sahib, at Aishmuqam, near my school. A few young men led us wearing white cotton shrouds. They seemed to be in a trance, whirling like dervishes, singing pro-independence songs. I walked behind them, repeating their words in complete wonder. Men, women, and children stood on the sidewalks, offering food and beverages and showering flower petals and *shireen*—round white balls of boiled sugar and rice—on us, a practice held in shrines and at wedding ceremonies.

The crowd itself was a human jumble. The contractor who carried whiskey in a petrol can and the uptight lawyer who waited for passersby to greet him, the tailor who entertained the idle youth in his shop with tall stories while prodding away on his sewing machine and the chemist who would fall asleep behind the counter, the old fox who bragged of his connections with congressional politicians in Delhi and the unemployed graduate who had appointed himself the English-language commentator for the village cricket team’s matches, the Salafi revivalist who sold plastic shoes and the Communist basket weaver with Stalin mustache all marched together, their voices joining in a resounding cry for freedom. Amid the collision of bodies, the holding of hands, the interlocking of eyes in affirmation and confirmation, the merging of a thousand voices, I had ceased to be a shy, bookish boy hunched by the expectations of my family. I wasn’t scared of being scolded anymore; I

felt a part of something much bigger. I let myself go fly with the crowd. *Aazadi!* Throughout the winter, almost every Kashmiri man was a Farhad, ready to mold the mountains for his Shirin: freedom!

WAR TILL VICTORY was graffitied everywhere in Kashmir; it was painted alongside another slogan: SELF-DETERMINATION IS OUR BIRTHRIGHT! The Indian government seemed to have deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to crush the rebellion. Almost every day the soldiers patrolled our village in a mixture of aggression and nervousness, their fingers close to the triggers of their automatic and semiautomatic machine guns. Military and paramilitary camps sprouted up in almost every small town and village.

It became harder for Father to visit home on weekends. He stopped traveling in his official vehicle, as that made him conspicuous. The journey from his office in Srinagar to our village, once a lovely two-hour ride, had become a risky, life-threatening affair. Almost every time he came home, it took him around five hours. On a lucky day, his bus would be stopped only every fifteen minutes, and at each military check post, he and other passengers would be made to stand in a queue, holding an identity card and anything else they carried. After a body search, Father would walk half a mile from the check post and wait in another queue for the bus to arrive. On various other days, he barely escaped getting killed.

Father worked in a colonial castlelike office compound a few minutes from the city center, Lal Chowk, and the adjacent Maisuma area, the home of JKLF commander Yasin Malik. Gun battles between the JKLF guerrillas and the Indian soldiers, and hand grenades exploding near the paramilitary bunkers and patrols, were becoming a routine near Father's office.

One afternoon he stepped out of his office compound with a few colleagues, a group of middle-aged bureaucrats in suits and neckties carrying office files. They crossed the military check post outside their office gate and began walking toward Lal Chowk to catch buses home. Suddenly, the shopkeepers by the road jumped from their counters, pulled down the shutters, and began to run. Rapid bursts of gunfire resounded

in the alleys behind the office; louder explosions came from Lal Chowk. As a burning passenger bus rushed down the street, Father and his colleagues stood in a huddle close to the massive stone-and-brick pillars of the office gate, waiting for the gunfire to stop.

A stern bark from the road startled them. “Hands up!” A group of angry Indian paramilitaries stood across the narrow road, their guns raised at Father’s group. Some policemen guarding the office compound stepped forward and shouted at the soldiers, “Don’t shoot! They are government officers! They work here!”

A week later, Father and a friend of his were walking toward Lal Chowk after work when a grenade exploded across the street. They wanted to rush back to the office, but heavy gunfire seemed to come from all directions. Father and his friend ran toward a roadside tea stall. His friend slipped and fell into a manhole. Father dragged him out, and they hid in the tea shop, under wooden tables. They lay on the dusty, mud floor for a long time.

That winter began my political education. It took the form of acronyms: JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front), JKSLF (Jammu and Kashmir Students Liberation Front), BSF (Border Security Force), CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force). I learned new phrases: *frisking*, *crackdown*, *bunker*, *search*, *identity card*, *arrest*, and *torture*. That winter, too, busloads of Kashmiri youth went to border towns and crossed over to Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir for arms training. They returned as militants carrying Kalashnikovs, hand grenades, light machine guns, and rocket launchers issued by Pakistan.

My friends were talking about a novel, *Pahadoon Ka Beta*, the story of a young Afghan boy who fought the Russians. I wanted to read it and found a copy with a cousin toward the end of my winter vacation. It was a slim paperback, with a green cover featuring a boy with a gun. It read like a Frederick Forsyth thriller. Ali, its young protagonist, was both James Bond and Rambo. He seemed to have destroyed hundreds of Russian tanks, undertaken espionage missions within Russia, and even rescued his father from a Russian prison. Its charm and fame seemed to lie in its obvious romanticizing of a guerrilla fighter at a time when almost

every young person in Kashmir wanted to either be a guerrilla fighter or get to know one.

And there was a movie everybody wanted to watch: Arab-American filmmaker Mustafa Akkad's *Lion of the Desert*. Father had bought a black-and-white television set, but we didn't have a video cassette player. One of our neighbors had one, and his son promised to let me watch *Lion of the Desert* if I could get a copy of the film. I couldn't find it. But one day I heard the men sitting at a shop front near my house talk about it. Rashid, a bus driver who often ferried passengers from Anantnag to Srinagar, was talking about having seen *Lion of the Desert* many years ago. He had watched it at the Regal Talkies in Lal Chowk. He narrated the story of Omar Mukhtar, an aging Libyan tribal chief who fought the occupying Italian army of Mussolini till he was arrested and hanged. "He was fair and tall and had a short white beard," Rashid described Mukhtar, played by Anthony Quinn. "After the Italians arrest him, the Italian commander asks him to organize the surrender of his men. Omar Mukhtar is old and in chains but he tells the Italian general that they will never surrender, that the Italians have no right to be in Libya, that no nation has a right to occupy another nation. The Italians hang Omar Mukhtar."

Those animated conversations at the shop fronts would come to a sudden halt every time we saw a column of soldiers or a convoy of trucks and armored cars pass by. The Indian government seemed to have deployed hundreds of thousands of troops to crush the rebellion. Morning to evening, the soldiers patrolled the road through our village. They walked in long lines on both sides of the road in uniforms and bullet-proof helmets, their fingers close to their triggers. Some of them carried big cylindrical guns that fired mortars. Every time we saw a soldier with a mortar gun, someone would talk about how the soldiers used the mortar guns to burn houses wherever they came under attack from the militants. Rashid talked about a town called Handwara, near the border, that was burned by Indian troops. "They throw gunpowder over the houses and then fire mortars, and an entire village is burned in an hour."

Military and paramilitary camps sprouted up in almost every small town and village. A camp was set up near my village, too: Sandbags for-

tified its windows and doors, coils of barbed wire formed a boundary around the camp, empty liquor bottles hung from the barbed wire, and grim-looking soldiers who stood in the sandbag bunkers along the fence held on to their machine guns. Every pedestrian and automobile had to stop a hundred meters from the camp; people had to raise their hands and walk in a queue to a bunker, where a soldier frisked them and checked identity cards. No farmer, shopkeeper, or artisan had official papers except for maybe a ration card with his address and the names of family members written on it. Only the few men like my father or grandfather who worked for the local government had state identification cards.

My school was closed for the winter holidays till March. I bought an identity card from our neighborhood stationery store. The shopkeeper had bought a big bundle of identity cards from a dealer in the nearby town of Anantnag. He boasted that the identity cards he sold worked best with soldiers. They said INDIAN IDENTITY CARD and had an impression of the Indian emblem: a pillar with four lions on four sides, a wheel, and a pair of oxen on its base. I got my identity card signed and stamped by the local magistrate and promptly pulled it out whenever I was stopped by soldiers on the street or was walking past one of their numerous check posts. It became a part of me.

In our mosque, after prayers and before the recitation of *darood*—a song praising the Prophet Muhammad—people made spontaneous speeches and shouted slogans of *aazadi*. I specifically asked God to give us freedom by the next year. But there were also moments of frivolity. One day a young man from our village who worked in Srinagar gave a speech at the mosque. He grabbed the microphone and shouted in Arabic, “*Kabiran kabira!*” The slogan meant “Who is the greatest?” But no one understood. None of us spoke Arabic. He shouted again, and again there was silence—then the adolescents in the last row, the backbenchers of faith, began to laugh. Embarrassed, the young man explained that in reply to the slogan we were supposed to shout, “*Allah-o-Akbar!*” (God is great). He shouted again, “*Kabiran kabira!*” He was answered with a hesitant, awkward “*Allah-o-Akbar.*” For about a year after, we teased him.