

Welcome to Khyber Agency

Annum Shah

The heat is always the first thing he notices waking up in Pakistan. Musty and oppressive, his clothes cling to his skin despite the fan, and he pops his joints back into place after spending the night on a futon next to his cousin. They decided to stay back in Peshawar for a few extra days, while the rest of the family made their way to Mansehra and Abbottabad before the flight home to the cold Canadian calm.

Already he can hear sounds typical to mornings in Pakistan—a donkey braying in the empty lot across the house, the beginning of the morning commute, kids playing cricket in the streets. The *adhaan*, or call to prayer, croons out from the local mosque, letting him know how early he’s woken up. Life here doesn’t seem to revolve around a clock like it does back in Canada, and he finds the perpetual noise comforting—a steady indication of life.

Their day remains largely unplanned, as always. Mornings in Pakistan are slow, without the pressure of school and work. They take their time getting ready, eating an elaborate breakfast; savouring tea and biscuits over idle talk. The morning bleeds into the afternoon, the call to prayer ringing out once again, indicating the closure of shops and the beginning of an afternoon siesta. They make their way to the bazaar closer to sunset, when the markets are beginning to fill with the evening crowd, starting their day at night to avoid the blistering heat.

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The bazaar is typical to Pakistan, but Peshawar has always had its own flavour. A massive tent covers the tables, and vendors sell anything from housewares and clothing to army surplus material of dubious origin. The dwindling light of the sun softens the bustle of bazaar as they weave through endless alleys, trying to find hidden gems to take back home.

Safwan lets his hands run over loose fabrics, brightly coloured silks and cottons, over the hand-woven kachines, their warm wool meant to keep out the harsh winters of northern Pakistan. The chemical scent of clothes-dye mixes with that of corn cooked in sand, the heady scent making his head spin momentarily. Shopkeepers beckon him with promises of luxurious goods—best in the land!—and he smiles at the ones that call him bahisaab, a word that speaks to their brotherly bond, while also reminding him of his position as superior—saab, sir. It feels foreign being addressed with that type of respect; no word in English has the same intonation—“Yakeen karein memsahiba, believe me ma’am, you won’t find better quality than this. I guarantee,” the shopkeeper is telling his mother.

The power splutters, flashes, and finally dies out while they’re looking for housewares, his mother bartering with the shopkeeper, while his little sister tries on rings at adjacent stalls, the chooriyan on her wrists clinking amidst the din. There’s a collective groan as the market goes dark, and Safwan hears his sister call out, afraid in the sudden night.

“Bahi? Bahi, where are you?”

He thinks it’s a bit pointless for her to be calling out with “brother,” in a market where anyone would respond to the term. Safwan finds her hiding at a jewelry stall, her tense face illuminated

by the soft glow of candles. He scolds her for the inconvenience she caused, and brings her back to the stall they were originally at. The shopkeeper has put up a small gas lantern and insists they sit down for a cup of Kashmiri chai, showing off the “fine china” he’s trying to sell. The tea is sweet and reassuring under the starry sky. The lights may go out every few hours, the bazaars are crowded, and the heat a constant, but Safwan feels at home in the dusty landscape.

As they head home that night, Safwan notices a sign, an unimpressive and simple *Welcome to Khyber Agency, keep to the left*, hidden from view by rickshaws and busses piled with people. He points it out to his cousin Alim.

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The next day, Alim and Safwan wake early for one last trip to the bazaar. They wander past the wares quicker than yesterday. This time Alim points out the sign *Welcome to Khyber Agency, keep to the left*. Welcome to no-man’s land, enter at your own risk. The bazaars across the border couldn’t be that different, they reasoned. He and Alim cross into Khyber Agency, the promise of adventure circumventing any sense of self-preservation they have. The Agency is a tribal area, technically administered by the government of Pakistan but they know that police have no jurisdiction there, and that no one would come to their rescue should something happen.

Still, they make their way across, no questions asked by the guards, no papers needed.

Safwan feels his pulse increase slightly as they take in the Khyber Agency bazaars in front of them. Where Peshawar is

pulsing with life—women shopping, kids playing, shop vendors yelling—Khyber Agency is somber, no women in sight, no bright tapestries or signs, clearly disconnected from the rest of Pakistan.

He's struck especially by the lack of women ten feet across the border. It's hard to tell whether it's deliberate or not, but Safwan thinks maybe there just isn't a reason for them to be there. He sees an image of his little sister calling out *bahi* on this side of the border, lost and afraid. Her call to help forgotten in the distant hills that surround them.

They pass shop after shop selling illicit goods: cars, guns, food, and clothing. Army goods, likely stolen, line the shops. Hidden away, for those who are looking, drugs—opium and heroin as available as *gol gappai* and *jalebian* in Peshawar. Khyber Agency is a hub for smuggled goods, stored, sold or traded by men, shops and merchants making no move to hide their bootlegged goods.

They pass a sales-lot full of cars, hidden away from the Peshawar border enough to not raise suspicion. It's obvious to him that the cars are stolen because of their different models, mostly large Jeeps suited to the terrain line the rows, interspersed with smaller makes.

Not your average Toyota dealer, Safwan thinks, brain trying for levity.

The bazaar lacks the seedy feeling of black market trade—everything here is done out in the open—making it even more dangerous for a couple of obvious foreigners. It dawns on Safwan that if they were killed here no one would come for them. Safwan wipes his sweaty palms on his pants, mind cycling through the few words of Pashto he knows—“help” isn't one of them.

Within a few feet, the world has changed.

Both boys, boisterous ten feet across the border, are now quiet, taking in the atmosphere as they pass a large shop full of guns. It's evident that it's just a matter of walking in and purchasing, no questions asked. As Safwan peers in further, he notices a bearded man with an AK-47 strapped to his shoulder, looking at them and picking up his cellphone. Safwan panics, all desire to sightsee now gone. He grabs Alim's shoulder, motioning for him to move. They rush back towards the Pakistan border, breaking into a run as they get closer.

As he crosses back, he notices the sign again, *Welcome to Khyber Agency*. Across the street, a young kid, his little sister's age, takes a picture of the sign. His faded blue jeans remind Safwan of the teenagers that hover in the park across from his house back in Canada, calling him, "paki" under their breaths as he walks with eyes lowered. The guard at the border is immediately at attention as the boy's flash goes off, clutching his black hat as he runs after the kid in his khaki pants, yelling "no pictures!" while brandishing his cane.

He tries to feel at home again.