ABAAN ZAIDI

In the Light of the Crescent Moon

The morning will start as usual for Firoz Uncle.

He will do his morning salt gargle, his fifty sit-ups and fifty press-ups, his fifty stretches to touch his brown and wrinkled toes, as he has done for the last forty years. He will put on his smart black waistcoat and clean black chappals, carefully doing the clasp so his foot will not slip. He will take the lunch tiffin from his wife, kissing her cheek briefly as he patiently listens to her repeated instructions to be careful, be safe.

He will take the morning bus to the train station and sit as usual on the roof, packed as ever but now filled with a different clientele: people clutching ratty bags, sacks of belongings balanced on heads, children hanging off the side railings in a demented conga line. A fight will break out next to Firoz Uncle, who will avert his eyes and try not to look as the Muslim man shouts, gets angry, and attempts to throw the Sikh man off the roof.

He will reach the train station perfectly on time, missing the last rung as he descends from the roof and lands with a dusty thud. He will wade through the sea of people, lifting his arms high above his head as he tries to navigate his way between the closely packed bodies. Officials will stop him, ask to see papers, take his money instead. They will direct him to a camp, the tents poking up into the air like uncooked samosa and he will explain that the people he is waiting for have not arrived yet, they are coming on the next train. The guard will slap his shoulder, making Firoz Uncle wince, and say *Thank God for that, brother,* point him to the platform, and

take more money. He will wait for an hour, two, three, before finally asking a guard where the train is. The guard will shrug, lifting an eyebrow as Firoz Uncle once more takes the shrinking wad of notes from his breast pocket.

He will sit next to an old woman, her skin blackened by years of outdoor labour, hair orange from the henna dye as she waits, her scarf shielding her face from the scorching sun. They will sit on this bench, Firoz Uncle and the old woman, sit and watch as more crowds stumble in, as angry-looking men pace calling for Amna, for Ayesha, for Maryam, for Seema, for Noor. They will watch as the anger turns to concern, the concern turns to shock as they call and call and no one answers. They will sit and watch as dawn turns to dusk, the sound of mosquitoes whining in the dark mingling with the shouts of the men. They will watch as movement on the platform ceases, the men stop their calling, the women and children huddle down for a night of hunger and cold.

Firoz Uncle will leave then, abandoning the old woman who will still be sitting on her bench, watching the stilled platform as he makes his way towards the bus.

He will alight at his usual stop, make his way up the paan-stained staircase to the small flat, shake his head at his wife who drops the plate she is holding, her sob muffled by the shatter of broken china. He will shut the door of the living room, with its pillows and sheets, and say *Tomorrow. They will come tomorrow.* He will go to bed and hear his wife crying, reach out an arm to comfort her, retract it again as he turns over onto his side.

The next morning Firoz Uncle will do his salt gargle, his press-ups and sit-ups, his stretches. He will take the tiffin from his wife, whose eyes are still red and puffy. He will take the bus from his usual stop but this time he will sit inside, squashed amongst the passengers, his nose clogging with the Brylcreem and hair oil of a motor salesman from outside Pindi. Firoz Uncle will not mind, even though the motor salesman's hair oil is greasy and he continuously talks about the girlfriend he is collecting from the train station, shoving her faded photograph into Firoz Uncle's face, because Firoz Uncle's hunch was correct and today no one is thrown off the bus.

He will alight at the train station where the sea of people has doubled, tripled. He will wade once more, reach into his breast pocket and gingerly peel off one note, for he does not have much left now. He will look for his bench and the old lady with the henna-orange hair, but both are gone. Instead, Firoz Uncle squats on the ground next to a child with flies in her eyes and mucus on her cheek who stares at him as she cries. Firoz Uncle will sit there all day, sipping water carefully from his flask, giving half his tiffin to the small child who finally stops crying long enough to eat a bite of roti and daal. Firoz Uncle will sit there until the sun sets, until the people lie down to sleep, until the guards leave, but still there is no train.

The next morning, it is not until Firoz Uncle reaches the station that he will realise he has forgotten to do his exercises.

It will not be until three o'clock, as Firoz Uncle carefully feeds some roti to the crying girl, who is still there and whose mother can't be found, that a cry goes up from the platform. It will not be until Firoz Uncle stands up, craning his neck, eyes straining against the sun, that he will see a train slowly pulling in, black smoke spurting into the air. Firoz Uncle will smile, he will pass a handkerchief over his forehead, he will pick up the crying child and he will join the crowds as they rush towards the train. He will dodge outstretched hands, photographs, scarves, as he tries to get to a window. He will hear his voice shout with the others as his throat becomes hoarse. He will realise she is not at this window, her family are not there, and he will try to move, try to find another window, but he will be trapped. He will hold the crying child aloft like a beacon and try to move down the train until he finds a door. He will lean against the door and find that it is open; he will dodge inside, quickly, shutting it behind him lest the whole platform rushes onto the train.

Inside, the train will be quiet. It will be so quiet that Firoz Uncle will wonder if he is on the right train, the train bringing Muslim refugees from Delhi. He is about to go back onto the platform and find a station master when he will see a hand. It is a lady's hand, with two red bangles, and it is lying on the floor of the train. Instinctively shielding the crying child, Firoz Uncle will take one step closer. The

hand is lying by a seat, the henna swirled on the palm still dark and fresh, the blood from its severed wrist staining the ground like rust. Firoz Uncle will feel dizzy. He will turn around, he will want to get off the train because now he will feel that something is very, very, wrong, when he sees another hand. This hand is attached to an arm, but that will not make Firoz Uncle feel better. For this body will be slumped on a seat, shawl flung across her face as her dead hands cradle two small children, blood from their slit throats splattering their pale tunics like ink. Blindly, Firoz Uncle will stumble forward, backward, anywhere to get away from these bodies but his legs will trip and he will find himself stumbling over another body. This one of a child, a small girl like the crying child in his arms and she will look peaceful, so peaceful Firoz Uncle will think maybe she has fallen asleep on the floor of the train until he realises that she has no head. Then Firoz Uncle will scream, grabbing a door handle and pulling-pushing until it opens. Until it lets him back onto the platform out of this nightmare but the door leads to another carriage and this one is worse for here there are bodies piled up on the seats, their severed limbs tossed on the ground like chunks of leftover bread. They will all be women; all women and children for no one else is on this train, this train that was deemed so secure and safe.

Firoz Uncle will turn his head and retch; the smell of his vomit mingling with the smell of decay and death. The crying child will start again, shrieking as she points at something behind him, and Firoz Uncle will turn and he too will shriek because what he sees is a severed head, a head still with plaits and ribbons and small golden earrings but with no nose, with deep gouges on her cheeks, with a small stump poking out from her bloodied lips. Firoz Uncle will scream, he will scramble to the side, he will find a window and push with all the strength of forty years of sit-ups and press-ups and he will call to the platform, his words disjointed, his throat hoarse, his eyes frenzied. A cry will go up from the platform, a rush will be made for the door and suddenly the train will be full of people and the smell of decay will be joined by the stench of sweat and fear and horror. Firoz Uncle will not be the only man who will retch. He will not be the only man whose tears will spill unchecked onto his tunic. Firoz Uncle will hold the crying child and sob. He will try and get

off the train because he has seen enough, now. He has seen enough to understand that they are never coming; they are never going to arrive. And he will find the door blocked by a man standing in front of the head with the golden earrings and the man will be screaming and he will recognise the motor salesman from Pindi, the faded photograph slipping from his fingers as he screams and screams.

Firoz Uncle will step off the train and run. He will run past the guards, shaken out of their idleness as they run onto the train and telephone superiors who will sit at desks on the other end of the line and sigh and say, *This was bound to happen, what did we expect? We attack a train, they attack a train. There is nothing to be done.*

He will run past the refugee tents; past the man with a loudspeaker who will be trying to herd groups of huddled figures into groups based on their name, their religion, their place of origin. He will run past another man who will be standing on a box, a long list in his hand as he calls out names, names of people who were due to arrive but have not, and Firoz Uncle will recognise his niece on that list. He will hear the names of her children but he will not stop running. He will not catch the bus from his usual stop even though the driver is idling, expecting him. He will run onto the dusty road, dodging a donkey cart that is being hauled not by a donkey but by two men, their eyes dark and silent as they strain to pull the cart full of the broken shards of their previous lives. He will run behind the cart and see the women sitting in the back of it, three women whose kohl-rimmed eyes and henna-patterned hands remind him of the women in the train and he will want to scream and retch and cry, but he will do none of those things.

He will continue running up the stairs of his building. He will not jump over the paan stain as he usually does but run through it, because now he will think *what harm could a paan stain do?* He will burst through his front door and into his small apartment, where his wife will be making aloo-palak and bhindi because that is his niece's favourite food and she will stop in astonishment and stare at the crying child in her husband's arms and then she will understand and she too will cry, the okra burning in the pot on the stove as she forgets to turn down the flame.

Later that night they will take up the bedding from the living

room and Firoz Uncle's wife will pack it away in the chest by their bed. She will climb into bed where her husband is lying with his face to the ceiling and his eyes closed but she knows he is not asleep. She will tuck the blanket further around the crying child, whom she has fed and cleaned and clothed in a tunic she has borrowed from Mrs Bhutt downstairs. She will crawl into bed and Firoz Uncle will feel the weight of the straw bed frame shift and he will reach out his arm across the crying child and hold his wife's hand, and he will feel the tears once more soaking down his sunken cheeks and into his pillow. And Firoz Uncle will not sleep though he will clench his eyes and hold his breath but he will see the faces from the train, the henna hands with a bangle but no wrist, the motor salesman from Pindi on his knees as he screams like Firoz Uncle has never heard a man scream before.

He will catch the bus the next day, and the next day, and the day after that but every day the scene that greets him at the train station will be the same. Some refugees will stumble onto the platform from their packed trains as the man with the list tries to herd them into tents but he cannot control them all and they will run, some into the arms of relatives who have been waiting like Firoz Uncle in the heat and the stench, others simply wherever their legs will take them as long as it is far away from all the things they have seen. But more trains will arrive empty; more trains will arrive silent and still and people know, now, what these trains are. They know what is inside and a collective keen will begin from the platform as mothers wail for the daughters they will never see, the husbands for the wives they will never touch.

Firoz Uncle will listen to the wireless in Mrs Bhutt's kitchen as the riots spread and the death toll rises to one, two, three million. He will listen as Dickie Mountbatten, stuttering, unsure, declares the independence of India from the British Empire. He will listen as Mohammed Ali Jinnah declares in a strong voice the birth of his new country of Pakistan *on this day, the 14th August 1947*. He will listen to Mahatma Gandhi's silence as he says nothing. He will watch as his building fills with refugees, Muslims forced from Delhi and Chandigarh; watch as they mix with those from Hyderabad,

Lucknow, Calcutta, those seduced by the siren calls of a peaceful new land free from pain. And he will see countless funerals; funerals where there is no body because one had never been found, and he will see children on the streets whose parents are lost and whose names no one knows as they beg for money, for food, for shelter, for kindness.

Firoz Uncle will buy another padlock for his door at night and lock it three times. He will forbid anyone from going outside after 3 p.m., and he and his wife and the crying child will sit inside with the curtains drawn and listen as shouts rent the air and blood pools on the streets. He will sit and Firoz Uncle will wonder bitterly if it was all worth it, this independence, this new country. He will wonder if he will ever feel peace again and he will hold the crying child tight and tell her not to worry for he will look after her.

But all that is yet to come.

For now, Firoz Uncle lies in bed with his wife. He is pleased; he has gone to the bazaar and bought extra sheets; he has visited the bank and taken out money for bribes. He has checked with the station master the time of the train. There is nothing to do but wait.

For tomorrow they will come, Firoz Uncle thinks, *and everything will be alright*.