

Escape on Ferozpur Road

By Saadia Zahra Gardezi

It is Monday. I try to tell you about my escape.

My grandmother's house is built on the corner of one of the busiest streets of Lahore. Nights that I spend here are often sleepless as she likes to leave lights on throughout the house. I try to find simple and effective ways to escape. So I stand in my mother's former bedroom and look out her window onto the street. It's 3 am. I stare out at the trucks rolling by on Ferozpur Road. I put my hands onto the windowpane and feel the vibrations of this grand causeway. For a few seconds, my mind hears Lahore's diabetic frequency.

There's an epidemic in the city. I try to speak of the common *Lahori* and not all countrymen for reasons I don't know. We *Lahori's* are addicted to our cellular phones. The poorer we are, the more phone calls we seem to receive and the more we get to hear the happiest Indian songs when we answer the phone. It's not about telecom being cheap or frivolous entertainment that peasants and princes are glued to cellular chips; it's all about the momentary fragmented escape. So call me, my ringtone is Lahore's song.

It has been four days since anyone has called me. No five actually. It's 3 am; the new day is here. Since the 27th of September I have sent a total of eight text messages. I also went to a wedding, where I made small talk about clothes, the weather and the dreadful sugar crisis gripping the stores of Lahore. Today, I'll have tea at noon with some of my mother's friends. I hope they talk about sugar as well. My dialogue is well-rehearsed.

I also need to talk to someone I might never meet; it relaxes me, there is no pressure... Hello instant web messenger. How have you been today? What is your favorite flavor? Strawberry? Mine too. Such lies.

It is Monday. I stare at cement carrying trucks at night. It is Tuesday. I lie in my driveway at 10 pm and try to see the stars through the November haze that grips Lahore and makes it hard to breathe. It is Wednesday. I stare at the progress bar of my download manager, watching the download speed change the time left, second by second. It is Thursday. I close my economics textbook, wait for 4 am to happen when I'm sure everyone's asleep and light up in my bathroom with the

exhaust fan on. It is Friday. I come back from a family dinner and try not to think about why the boy I like couldn't like me back and think about him for two hours while listening to the music we used to listen to: Nusrat Fateh Ali's duet with Eddie Vedder and soundtracks to American shows. It is Saturday. I have my period; I have an excuse to mope. I sit in the dark and fantasize about dying, hospitals, and anorexia. It is Sunday. My baby sister falls asleep in my bed, and I stare at her for an hour, marvelling at how tiny the pores of her skin are.

Mornings are hard. We eat at night, we dance at night, we sleep at night, we meet at night, we stay at home because we are conservative at night, we get high at night, we sit with ourselves and get to know ourselves at night. Daytime comes, and I take three exams in one day. It was morning when my aunt bled to death in the hospital. My cook, bless his *ghee*-laden soul, slipped on a *paratha* and broke his hip. It was high noon when my best friend's boyfriend decided to drown in his own bath tub. Do you ever remember Lahore being bombed in the middle of the night?

There is a story in here somewhere; I am trying to say what I need to say. Lahore, I love you. But let me escape for more than just a few moments at a time.

Nirala is closing down. *Nirala* had the best sweets I have ever had.

He has stopped talking to me; he is never online anymore. He also had the best sweets I have ever had. It should be a crime to make a *Lahori* so used to something and then take it away. I replace *mithai* with chocolate. I'll replace all the *hes* with a husband. It is the wedding season; those who can't choose, wait to be chosen. It is most perverse. This is not the story I want to tell. It would be self-defeating. Like the cramped supermarkets, the decadence of the drawing rooms, the fake accents and millions of rupees spent sending you to Georgetown and me to St. Andrews, the *Karachite* making fun of you, the rude beggars of the posh Defense Housing Authority where the military has sold its land to civilians, the security barriers off *Sherpao* bridge, the seven overlapping *aazans* five times a day, the children on the street without shoes, the obnoxious empty towering buildings sprinkled all over you, the men on the street scratching themselves nonchalantly, the bus driver spitting out the window onto your feet, the officers gone for Friday prayers while you wait for two hours, the extra tuition fees to make up for the inadequacy of schools. Survival in the face of defeat. Yet, Lahore is vibrant, historical, rich and blessed by the Sufis. I need to escape to my bathroom to have a smoke. I am not a smoker.

In Lahore for 21 years, I have never touched the *Minar-e-Pakistan* monument. As a child I was awestruck by it, reading about it in Urdu and in Pakistan Studies textbooks. Then one day, on the way to Islamabad, I drove past it. It was small and out of place--a colonized columnar minaret. It symbolized escape, but

it was conflicted and trapped. A planned coincidence that it stands there, like a concrete dandelion, symbol of our freedom. They soon built a better escape out of Lahore, so I don't have to see the monument again. It's a highway that ignores everything on the sides.

So I go blind. I refuse. I stop thinking about *mithai* at *Eid*. I turn off the Wi-Fi. No one calls anyway. I delete any nostalgia producing music. I stop comparing *Minar-e-Pakistan* to *Data Darbar* mosque's magnificence. I stop listening to the man with a beard, on nine channels of cable television. I stop listening to the 25 anchormen all telling me Lahore is burning. I nod my head at whatever my mother says. I am left with myself, and I have no way to get away from me.

It is Monday again. I try to tell you about my escape.