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Note about the story

Nazneen comes from a small village in Bangladesh called Gouripur. This story is about how she changes and grows after getting married and going to live in England.

Nazneen was born in 1967, when Bangladesh was still called East Pakistan. Bangladesh became its own country in 1971. Nazneen's sister, Hasina, moves to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Nazneen and Hasina are **Muslim***, like most people in Bangladesh. This means they follow the religion of **Islam**. Some **Bengali** words are used in this book. *Abba* means father and *Amma* means mother.

Nazneen and her family live in a real place in East London called Tower Hamlets. Tower Hamlets has the largest Bangladeshi **community** in England. The most famous street there is Brick Lane. It has lots of shops and many people visit its **curry** restaurants. But it is not a rich area. Many people live in big **blocks** of flats, which are grouped together into **estates**. There are sometimes problems of violence, stealing and **drug** use in these areas. Sometimes the violence is connected to **racism**.

Before-reading questions

- 1 Many people from Bangladesh are Muslims. Are these sentences *true* or *false*?
 - a The special book for this religion is called the Qur'an.
 - b It is important for Muslims to pray every day.
 - c All Muslim women must cover their faces when they go out.

*Definitions of words in **bold** can be found in the glossary on pages 108–112.

CHAPTER ONE Gouripur, East Pakistan, 1967

Rupban was sitting outside the **store hut** and preparing a chicken when she felt a terrible pain in her stomach. She screamed. Hamid heard her and ran all the way home. He knew it was his wife. Who else could scream like that?

At home, he saw Rupban with his sister, Mumtaz. Mumtaz waved Hamid away. "Get Banesa. What are you waiting for?"

Banesa was the oldest woman in the village. She helped women give birth, and Rupban was seven months **pregnant**. But she came moments too late. She picked up Nazneen's small blue body and shook her head.

"I thought it was stomach ache," said Rupban, and began to cry.

Mumtaz tried to take Nazneen, but the small body dropped through her fingers and fell on to the bed. The baby started crying.

Banesa spoke. "The baby lives but she is weak. You could take her to a hospital in the city, which is very expensive. Or you can wait and see what **fate** will do."

"We'll take her to the city," said Mumtaz.

"No," said Rupban. "We must not fight fate. If she lives or if she dies, I accept it. My child will be stronger if she does not use her energy to fight fate."

Later, Hamid came to look at Nazneen.

"A girl," said Rupban.

CHAPTER TWO

Tower Hamlets, London, 1985

“Never mind,” said Hamid. And he went away again.

“The baby won’t feed,” Rupban told Mumtaz. “It is probably her fate to die.”

“She’ll feed in the morning,” said Mumtaz. But Nazneen did not feed in the morning, or the next day, or the day after that. Rupban was beginning to wish that fate would hurry up. But on the fifth day, Nazneen suddenly began to feed.

As Nazneen grew, she often heard the story of How You Were Left To Your Fate. She never questioned accepting fate. She saw the example in her mother, who suffered without complaining every day until the day she died.

Nazneen’s sister, Hasina, was very different. She listened to no one. At the age of 16, when she was already almost too beautiful, she ran away with the nephew of a factory owner. Hamid was extremely angry. For weeks, he sat waiting for her, ready to cut off her head. But Hasina did not come back.

Soon after, Nazneen’s father asked if she would like to see a photograph of the man she was going to marry next month. Nazneen shook her head and replied, “Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma was.”

But she noticed where her father put the photo, and later she looked at it. The man was at least 40 years old. He was ugly. And he was going to take her to live in England with him.

Nazneen had been in London for six months and did not know many people. She was too afraid to try and talk to people, and she could not speak English anyway. She spent her days alone, doing housework and cooking. But that evening, Dr Azad was coming for dinner. “Dr Azad knows my manager, Mr Dalloway,” her husband, Chanu, had explained. “So he could help me get the **promotion**.”

Nazneen was nervous because she had lots of things to do and she knew the dinner was important to her husband. But then she fell asleep on the sofa. She dreamed about walking to school arm-in-arm with Hasina past green rice fields. When she woke it was almost four o’clock. If Chanu came home and found the flat untidy and the food not ready, would he beat her? No. He was kind and gentle. But did he love her?

One night, a week after they married, she had heard him talking on the telephone about her.

“She’s not beautiful. But any wife is better than no wife. And she’s only eighteen, and good at cleaning and cooking. A girl from the village: totally **unspoiled**.”

Nazneen had felt stupid for ever imagining that he loved her.

She missed people. In eighteen years, she had hardly ever been alone until she came to London. She missed her sister. She reread Hasina’s last letter.

I heard about your marriage and I pray your husband is a good man.

I am so happy now. Malek's uncle has got him a very good job in a railway company. Malek knows little about trains but he is smart. Nobody is smarter than my husband.

Although we have nothing, I am happy. Sometimes I want to run and jump. But I am 16 years old and a married woman.

Everything is good between my husband and me now. I don't let my tongue make trouble any more. If women understand this, no one will beat them.

Sister, I think of you every day and send love.

Someone knocked on the front door of the flat. It was Mrs Islam and Razia Iqbal, some neighbours from the **estate** who had welcomed her when she first arrived. Mrs Islam had been in London for nearly thirty years and knew all the Bangladeshi **community** in Tower Hamlets.

Nazneen said hello and made them some tea. Then Mrs Islam started talking about a woman who had fallen from one of the tall **blocks** of flats.

"Remember she had no children," said Mrs Islam. "After twelve years of marriage. And if you decide to jump from the sixteenth floor, then that's the end."

"Yes," said Razia. "But it was an accident."

"A terrible accident," said Mrs Islam. "But everyone is talking about it."

Nazneen was worried. It was ten past five and she still had not started preparing the dinner for Dr Azad.

Mrs Islam was still **gossiping**. "What do you think about Jorina?"

"What do you mean?" said Razia.

"Well, you can't keep it a secret when you are going out to work."

They continued talking for a long time. Nazneen was feeling ill with worry when, finally, her guests stood up to leave. She opened the door and waited for them to go so she could start cooking.

She worked fast and managed to prepare everything for Chanu and his guest just in time. She brought the men their food, then sat down and listened to their conversation.

"This week I saw two of our young men with terrible **alcohol** problems," said Dr Azad. "They copy what they see here, going to the pub, drinking."

Chanu was eating noisily with his fingers. He said, "I agree with you. But these things won't happen to my children. We will go back to Bangladesh before they get **spoiled**."

"Everyone thinks that. But most people never save enough money to go back," said Dr Azad. His white shirt was perfect. Chanu's shirt had a yellow mark where food had fallen.

Chanu **coughed**. "Things are beginning to go well for me now. If I get the promotion, then many things are possible."