

The Glimmer

by

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PART ONE

She felt her brain glimmer as it always did before she lost it.

Found yourself Gula had said from behind her hippocampus when she had been whisked into the inner spaces of her mind in those early days. Zoya had smiled her bright smile at her in cheerful confirmation of her sister's mental wisdom. Gula was always foremost in telling it like it was. When Zainab and the rest of the world were trying to make it right, make it all normal, Gula would put a spanner in the works ... tell the truth. In a strange way, having the truth set free, always made Zainab feel better. Of course she never articulated out loud all this straight talk that was strewn more and more in her neural pathways by Gula. But she was secretly relieved that there was someone else to reassure her that she wasn't alone .. that she wasn't mad.

Gula and her little sister Zoya lived inside. In Zainab's mind.

Zainab put away the ironing, deliberately, slowly and then sat down and began to rock back and forth gently, almost imperceptibly. She stared at the switch on the wall; she needed to focus on something to let the episode pass. She had to let it wash over her gently and without her full participation. She had things to do.

Today she couldn't walk around the house with the glimmer. That only made it brighter, and when she roamed the house in its throes, she walked also into the furthest spaces of her mind where she would then be lost for hours at a time. What were fleeting moments of rest and relief within, were protracted hours of a psychotic episode outside. It was a balancing act that she had performed for the last fourteen months, never mastering it, always just scraping by. On the outside.

She kept her eyes glued to the wall switch. Gradually its innocuous cream colour filled with texture, kinetic layers and a myriad other hues in the snow white to clotted cream spectrum. She absorbed the details as she slowly stilled her mind.

When she could see fluid little fragments of the silver-grey railing, she knew she could relax; she was at the waning end of her episode. The railing was always there - stretching behind her, in front of her and alongside her; not always visible, but always reachable. Even at the throbbing, pulsing heart of her Glimmer, she knew that as long as she could keep her grip on it she could find her way out; get back to real life. The railing shimmered hazily, insubstantially now as it moved in and out of her sight ... her mind. She concentrated. After a while, it slowly forged itself into an unbroken, glinting beacon guiding her back into the real world.

It had taken half an hour of concerted effort to wrest herself away from Zoya's pleading voice and Gula's requests to look at her needlework: her brain stitching. She made lovely patterns. Sometimes she cross-stitched when the world outside was not so ferocious, and then Zainab could sense in the faintest of tones, what was happening outside; she would remain hidden and protected but Gula's weave would let in little speckles of outside light and with them silent, fuzzy, slow-moving images that made Zainab think of how old sepia-toned movies without sound might have been like.

At other times, Gula would do a precise filling stitch to block out everything from the outside. Sometimes she would hem when Zainab was feeling especially anxious about having left something important undone before being whisked in; would then gently neaten the frayed edges of Zainab's mind, tucking away her anxiety in horizontal spaces that were 0.75 inches wide. Zainab would watch the hypnotic action of the needle going in and out, in and out, in and out in Gula's deft hands, and she would feel better.

Sometimes, however, Gula would rip it all apart. Zainab hated that but Gula said it was necessary sometimes to restart. To forget and begin again. Sometimes Zainab did forget and was able to begin again. At other times, she remembered and the new stitches Gula put in felt like lancing pin pricks in her body. Tridents of pain would poke at her head and her chest throughout the rest of the day.

She had things to do. It was Zain's Parent-Teacher Meeting today. She had to get ready and look the part in less than an hour.

"How did the parent teacher meeting go", asked Tariq when they were all sitting around the dinner table that night.

"It was alright. Zain is doing generally well" said Zainab smiling at her eight year old from across the table.

Zain shifted uncomfortably in his seat but he was grateful for this little lie by his mother. A white lie because he was having problems only with Urdu and Islamiyat. White lies were not as bad as ... cloudy lies. He smiled at this turn of phrase that had suddenly popped into his mind. He was sure he had come up with something new. He would ask his teacher, Miss Malik tomorrow.

"Did you go with the driver?"

"Yes ... yes I went with the driver. We even stopped at Burger King for lunch".

Zainab looked again at her son who was now smiling widely. She smiled back at him. These moments were so precious when she was in the same room, in the same time and space with her son. He had seen her emotionally disappear from his world a few times, *like hiding in a cloud* he had once said to her. She had explained to him as best as she could that her mind worked differently and sometimes she needed to shut down on the outside so she could rest. Most people went to sleep to rest. This was like her sleep. He had listened quietly and had then turned his face away. He was too young to understand what was happening, Zainab had reasoned with herself. She needed to be around him more when she was ... herself and less when she was gripped in the bewildering throes of an episode. Over the past year, Zain had become even more quiet and withdrawn.

Zainab had been a teacher at one of the leading schools in the city. She had

taught the grade five curriculum for over ten years before resigning just over a year ago, in the wake of her first glimmer. Unfamiliar with the two people who occupied that new world and unversed in the fluid tapestry of her mind, she had been afraid and anxious as she had walked into it that first time. Outwardly she had just zoned out.

The damn stress nowadays can do that. Go home darling, the other teachers had said.

Take some time out, the principal had suggested.

You need to slow down, the doctor had ordered.

And so she had complied on all fronts. She had gone home, tendered in her resignation as a teacher and focused on being a housewife. She was also given a rainbow of pills to take every day. Beautiful little things, with deceptive intentions. They were supposed to make her feel better, to relax her highly-strung nerves. But they just made her numb, emotionless. She didn't even want to look at Zain when she was in their deadening hold.

So, three months in, armed also with a better understanding that the Glimmer was not her mind's version of a wasteland for loonies but her secret refuge, she had just stopped taking them. Her world – worlds – had changed. With time and the subtle machinations of her mind, reality had become a shifting concept as the Glimmer became more and more substantial, burgeoning with a constant stream of experiences as she was whisked back and forth. She had no command over the forces that buffeted her in and out of her two worlds. She had only learnt through sheer necessity, to sometimes control the amount of time she was pulled away from the world where she was a mother. Zain still needed her.

PART TWO

Marrya:

I met Zainab after almost fifteen years. We hadn't seen each other since school. We had been good friends growing up. Then my family and I moved to Canada and we somehow lost touch. I saw her that day when I went to pick my daughter up from Mrs. Abad's Academy. Her son, Zain is in the same school. We recognised each other instantly. It was a warm reunion. There was none of the awkwardness of long absences and radio silences. We easily picked up from where we had left off a decade and a half ago. She was glowing.

Zainab:

I saw Marrya like an apparition. I was feeling a familiar tingle in the tips of my fingers and in the space behind my eyes - something was about to happen. She had smiled so widely and come up to me. We had hugged. I held on to her, trying to steady myself, to focus on something, to let the feeling pass quickly, unobtrusively. She had tears in her eyes. Why was she crying? I didn't know why she was crying. I knew I should be concerned, I should ask her why. But I had to stop my mind from picking me up and whisking me away. Not there, not at that time. So I hugged her again.

Outside, I kept focusing on the hug and on Marrya. Inside, I held on with both hands to the railing so that I wouldn't be swept up in the current that was coursing through me. I don't know how long I held her like that, but the episode passed. I could feel thermal waves undulating on my face and my chest, enfolding me in their warmth. I was back in control.

Marrya had been my best friend in school.

Marrya:

We met up a few times after that first encounter at our children's school. She was the same ... and also different. There was a serenity about her but there was also a wildness in her eyes sometimes. She would get agitated and then very still. Almost like there was something going on, on the inside. Like a battle ... maybe a conversation with herself. I wasn't sure. Until Zainab talked to me. We were sitting in her home catching up on old times with a couple of hours to spare before picking up the children from school. I noticed her odd look then. One moment she was laughing and then ... she held onto my arms, with that feral look in her eyes. She said she was having an episode. I looked at her not entirely understanding but somehow knowing that I needed to reassure her. So I nodded, encouraging her to talk. To tell me what was happening. She was dazed and confused for almost an hour. And incoherent. I tried to have her sip some water but she said she'd drown. I wanted to take her to the hospital, a clinic, but she shook her head. No! No! I'll tell you. I'll tell you. Wait, I'll tell you. It took forty-five minutes before she was herself again. I held her in my arms and she remained there quietly.

She then looked at me through calm, bright eyes. I could tell she was lucid, peaceful again. She then told me about her Glimmer.

Zainab:

I finally told Marrya about the Glimmer. I needed to tell someone and she was there with me again when I was ... swept up. She seemed to understand ... but in the way that normal people empathise with the handicapped: her face was sheathed in lines of concern and her kindness was effusive. I'm not being sarcastic. I was grateful to her for listening to me. For letting me talk. It was my first time talking of my inner self ... my inner world, and the words were not coming easily. I was fumbling but she was listening. And I was grateful for that.

Like a dirty disease, the Glimmer ... my Glimmer had stayed hidden, vilified

and excluded for so long that it had begun to fester, spilling a dreary pall over my lucid days ... hours. Someone else now knew and in some strange way I had this sense that it was essential – for Zain – that Marrya knew. I also felt a lightness of being; a headiness almost that my Glimmer had, through my words, found its way out. I was swept up again but in the real-life throes of relief and joy.

I laughed.

I hope Marrya doesn't think I'm crazy. I'm really hoping she doesn't. I didn't tell her about Zoya and Gula. Time enough for that. She asked me why I wasn't taking the medication and whether I believed in the mystic healing of Sufi saints. I think she was satisfied with my responses. I've re-found a friend.

Marrya:

I was torn. Between my promise of secrecy to Zainab and the instinctive obligation I felt to let someone else know. I wanted to tell Asif, Zainab's husband but I'd only ever met him once and he was out of town a lot. I wondered if he was aware of Zainab's episodes; if he'd witnessed them ... I wasn't sure. Then I thought of talking to Zainab's mother, Arifa aunty. She had always been a fragile, bird-like creature and from what Zainab had said, her delicate constitution had not fared well with time. She had moved to the UK to live with her sister when the latter had got widowed. That was a year ago. I had to think ... I had to think about who to let in on Zainab's state of well-being ... her state of mind.

Was Zainab going crazy? Was she losing her mind? Did insanity run in her family? What about Zain? These thoughts now regularly ran headlong into me in my waking hours.

Zainab:

It was so quick. The van had come careening into our car. There was an

explosion in my head. I felt a tidal wave carrying me away from the scene in front of me; away from the collision. I tried to concentrate on the steering wheel to regain control but everything was slipping away. Then I'd seen Zain lying there unblinking ... dead?! I had screamed then. Again and again. To hold onto him; to hold onto myself.

Marrya:

Then the accident happened. Zainab and Zain were in the car. Zain had broken his arm but he was alright. Zainab had hit her head and had been brought to the hospital, disoriented and confused.

I hugged Zain and told him everything would be alright. He was sitting with his father on the sofa outside Zainab's room in the hospital.

Zainab had sustained a severe concussion Arif had said. She was dazed but awake. A concussion - something in the pit of my stomach turned. I was afraid.

I walked in.

Zainab:

I was in a garden. It was shimmering in the late afternoon sunlight. I was sitting in a rocking chair.

How did I get into a rocking chair?

Something was not right ...

Zain!

Where was Zain? How was Zain? I felt for the cold, hard surface of the railing; I couldn't see it but I felt it. I needed to get back.

I saw Marrya. She was faded, shadowy, her outline coming in and out of my sight. I grabbed her arm; I had to know before she disappeared. Before I disappeared.

Where is Zain?

He's fine, she said

He's fine I said. He's fine ... he is fine ... he is alright.

I breathed. I relaxed.

I lost my hold on the railing.

Marrya:

Zainab was looking straight up at the ceiling when I walked into the room. I called to her but she didn't move. I went up to her and looked into her eyes. There was that wild look again. I felt my own heart beating wildly. I felt nauseous.

Where is Zain, she asked. I told her he was alright, that he was sitting outside with his father. After that she became calm. Stuporous.

I held her hand.

She finally closed her eyes and slept.

Zainab:

Zoya - *You're ok Mama. You're ok.*

Gula - *You're fine. Breathe*

I was sitting in a garden. It was shimmering in the late afternoon sunlight. My favourite time of the day. The light was falling in beautiful undulating patterns on the grass: golden whorls and paisleys, fluttering tendrils and fronds played hide and seek with one another. All Gula's exquisite handiwork. There was the sound of birds as they rallied themselves for one last forage before getting into their safe little spaces for the night. I was sitting in a rocking chair. I breathed. I smiled.

Gula - *And here's a steaming mug of tea - Tea Tang, Hillcrest, your favourite. And a book of short stories, with a little bit of the real, and a bit of the surreal. Just like you like them.*

Zoya, eyes shining - *read one out loud!*

I grinned. It was perfect.

Something had happened.... but it was alright now ... I couldn't remember anymore ... but it was alright.

I was tired but I was so happy. I smiled at little Zoya and put her in my lap. Tomorrow we'll read. I kissed her little head as she leaned back on my chest. I put my own head back.

I finally closed my eyes and slept.