

Baby Born

by *Tanjil Rashid*

At Whipps Cross, we waited for that first scan. A TV in the waiting room was showing burnt, bleeding limbs, and a professional rival of mine in kevlar was interviewing a doctor in a white coat. Behind him children were crying and coughing, some on stretchers, some on the floor. There were no beds. I looked at the PFI-shiny hospital around me, some children were there too, in a soft-play area, all their limbs intact.

I couldn't bear to look back at the TV, but my eyes still had the flayed skin in view, as if some of the phosphate had blazed through the screen and seared a gory watermark into my mind's eye. I recalled the histrionic social media catchphrase: 'My eyes are burning!!'. A response to something you can't 'unsee', some ghastly crime, like a celebrity's outré hairstyle. But those kids, those kids knew what it was to have burning eyes.

I focused on Zara, the sight of her, like a muslin cloth, wiping my vision clean. She was wearing her hair long at the time, and seemed at that moment to resemble someone once very close to me, someone long-haired, someone other than herself. I could not place it.

We were led to the examination room, where Zara's body would be placed under scrutiny. I made some observations myself. She now had freckles like waterlilies on her cheeks; they were invisible a few weeks ago. In fact, her whole face had become simultaneously tawnier and brighter, as if moonlit in the dark. Her hair had started to ripen into thin, silver vines. Then it hit me.

'Ma,' I whispered, involuntarily.

'What was that?' said Zara.

I thought better of revealing my Freudian vision.

'That's what we'll call you: "ma", *mum* is just way too white.'

'Yeah, "ma", it's kind of amphibious. Bangla, but no one would know it.'

I slid my hand away from Zara when the young, Asian radiographer in bright pink scrubs came in.

'Mrs Sarkar?' she asked.

'Ms,' Zara corrected her.

The radiographer rolled up Zara's top and placed tissue-paper underneath to protect it from the gel she subsequently spread across her stomach. It took a while to find the baby.

'Basically madam,' the radiographer explained, 'sound-waves egressing from inside the womb get jammed within this gel and herefrom is formed the imaging. Hence it is known as ultrasound.'

A 'photograph' captured not in light but sound; astonishing. Out of that cosmic muddle of the visual and the aural, an image zapped onto the monitor, an image of a new being, swirling inside Zara's still-flat belly. It was otherworldly, like looking through a telescope and discovering a mysterious white firmament in a primal sea of black. We were given a print-out, a snapshot of life itself being constellated.

Zara said something to the radiographer about 'the embryo'.

'You mean our baby,' I interjected.

'Well, at 6 weeks, it's an embryo.'

'But it's also our baby.'

'More of a pre-baby.'

The radiographer laughed.

'Doctor sahib,' I asked, 'is that right? A pre-baby? That's it?'

'Scientifically,' she said, 'that is all, yes.'

'But this is the fruit of my loins! The rich fruit of my loins!'

Afterwards, Zara and I stopped at the nearby Curve Garden for a cold drink. She had a raspberry lemonade. It was hot. A mournful white blossom drooped off the branches of some late-flowering trees; the leaves had already fallen off others. We were last there in the spring and now, in late summer, the colour was flowing out of the garden, like blood from a blushing face.

A surprisingly trenchant debate then ensued about whether the radiographer was Indian or Pakistani, in the middle of which Zara pointed out she wasn't a doctor at all.

'I know,' I said. 'In fact, technically, she's a sonographer.'

'So why did you call her doctor sahib? She's no doctor nor is she, as a woman, a sahib.'

'It was a playful courtesy.'

Zara said that was a form of false humility, as if I was posing as a peasant who'd walked into a hospital without knowing the difference between doctors and radiographers. She had an intense sensitivity to such social gradations. It was the haughtiness of being well-born, coupled with a Marxist commitment to class consciousness.

'Isn't all politeness based on false humility?'

'So what was all that stuff about your loins?'

Then I realised. She thought I had been a little too flirtatious with the radiographer.

'Is this all because you'd like me to call you doctor sahib?' I deflected. 'Fine, once you pass your viva, I will.'

She smiled. Her smile always rippled like water into her cheeks. It absolved me. Feeling a great closeness to her, I came clean about the way her maternity had manifested itself so strangely, in that fuzzy resemblance of my mother. She placed her hand on mine.

'I was obviously not saying, you know, earlier, that...'

'No, obviously.'

'I mean, of course it's a baby, of course it is,' said Zara. 'It just freaks the hell out of me to think that. Doesn't it freak you out?'

It did.

It seemed that day we were in perfect agreement. Earlier that afternoon we had both looked through the eyepiece of that great ultrasonic telescope, that instrument of prophecy, and seen, if not light years, then eight months into the future, a star shooting into life.



After the baby was born – let me correct that: after *I* gave birth to the baby. Let's be clear who did most of the work, now. Isn't it strange we always talk about birth in the passive voice? As if there wasn't a woman there literally busting a gut? Well, after the baby was born, I felt like the map of my life now had clear contours. I could see clearly this place called the future. I was headed there, with Usama and the baby. The baby would make sure we'd keep on going, make sure the journey never ended, that we wouldn't get to the edge and capsiz into the void.

With Usama, it was different. He seemed to veer off course, unsure of his identity, as soon as the baby was born. I mean, *literally*, as soon as. There we were in the delivery suite – that's what they called it, presumably to make the whole messy business seem glamorous and relaxing, as if it were the kind of place you'd classily check into and they'd give you aromatherapy and a pedicure. The nurse gave him the scissors to cut the cord – I found this weird, as if a child, like a hospital or school, required a ribbon-cutting ceremony. I resented that the dad got the honour of inaugurating the child, as if a mother's strenuous labour was not ceremony enough. Anyway, as he pressed the scissors, Usama said, really spookily: 'strand-entwined cable of all flesh.' And then, as if in a trance, he kept muttering to himself, 'the cords of all link bank, the cords of all link bank.' What the actual fuck?

It was James Joyce. I hadn't read *Ulysses* since Usama made me read it at college, so I had to look up the lines later for clarity:

The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh. That is why mystic monks. Will you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos. Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one.

Well, that explained a lot. Not kidding, it did. The last bit, beginning with 'Hello', well, that's a telephone connection, to the Garden of Eden ('Edenville', geddit?), and the telephone cord is likened to the umbilical cord, 'the cable of all flesh'. 'Omphalos' is what the Greeks called the navel, and in their myths, the world had a navel at its centre. So it's this image of an unbroken thread stretching back from modernity all the way back to the origin of the world and the first man. Now, how

could the first man have an umbilical cord, unless he came out of a womb? And wouldn't that make God a woman? They never think about that! But at any rate, Usama was clearly very taken with this sense of the baby tying him back to the mystical past.

That must have been why he then took hold of the baby and started shouting, '*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*', alarming the nurses and probably sending a few women into labour. He wasn't, so far as I could see, wearing a suicide vest, but he might easily have exploded those newborn eardrums. He was howling into them what I eventually realised, behind his rusty pronunciation, was the *azan*, the call to prayer. No one had told me about this tradition; my own family would have considered it a custom of illiterate peasants.

Usama had never previously been interested in stuff like that. I spoke to him about it afterwards. He pressed me on whether I knew what my first words were.

'Not the first words you spoke,' he said, 'but the first words you *heard*?'

Who could remember that?

'You don't? *Allahu Akbar* – God is great. Baba recited it into my ears as soon as I was born, and his father before him, and his before him, and so on. So I had to as well. Surely it was the same with you?'

I doubted it was. Dad, the Tariq Ali of dentistry? And Mum, though she remains very spiritual, raised me to despise all that misogynist mumbo-jumbo from the mullahs. Usama was similar. That's why they all got on so well. He never prayed or fasted, always bullied his brother, the imam. So what the hell was he doing with this mystic monk act?



The day after we had become parents, Zara and I found ourselves in our study at something like 3am, trying to come up with a name for our still-anonymous baby. He was sleeping in a cradle in the corner, placed there to shield him from the blare of boisterous aunts. But our relatives had all departed now, and the Facetime calls from Zara's people in Bangladesh had calmed down. I was amazed by the physical and verbal energy Zara seemed to retain so soon after a whole, plump human had been plucked out of her, her great gourd of a stomach still bearing witness to that transformative act.

The way she talked about the baby revealed an immediate, instinctive ability to relate to him as an individual. There she sat, firing off names which, to

her mind, obviously captured some aspect of the boy. Earlier, on a Skype with her sister in Sydney, she'd even exclaimed: 'My God, such a Paki, right?'

None of this made sense. The baby felt like something of an abstraction to me. It looked like every other newborn I had seen, a little extra-terrestrial – more alien than Asian – with that dark, umbilical stump encrusted, like a jewel, in the middle of its belly (its omphalos). I'd gaze into it and sometimes it would seem like a superfluous genital, at other times like the black stone in the Holy Kaaba. Such were the strange thoughts the baby seemed to instantiate for me. It had the quality of a symbol, rather than a person, and to become a person it – he – needed a name. The choice of the name had therefore a sublime importance – an anointment of personhood.

I ranged around the bookshelves trying to summon up memories of all the things that had mattered to me. The books stood there like dusty old mirrors, reflecting back to me who I was, and somewhere inside them, I felt, was who my child would be. At one point, I found myself annotating the *Chambers Dictionary of Literary Characters*, prompting mockery from Zara.

She laid down some rules.

'No countries or cities or vegetables or fruits,' she said.

She was thinking of her cousins with the rhyming names, Helen and Melon.

'Naming after people, real or imagined, is fine,' she continued, 'but no footballers, no rappers.'

How could I object?

'Above all, it should be a normal name. Nothing weird, nothing that would get the kid bullied or singled out.'

But all the normal names she bandied about agitated me. 'Theo', 'Lucas', and – heaven forbid – 'Christopher'? They were Christian names. To my surprise, the thought of my son going round with a name like that was a provocation. How could Zara countenance this?

It was how it went in her family. Her parents had carefully picked ambiguous names that passed in both the cultures their children were raised in: Adam, Nina, Zara (they pronounced it 'Jara', somewhat thwarting their intentions). It was an elegant workaround, which I was also considering. But I recoiled from the duplicity.

A name is a destiny. Zara's life had been simpler than mine, yes, because of her family's wealth and connections, but also, I think, because she could be the same as everyone else without much effort at all. No one scrutinises a Zara, no one wonders where a Zara has come from. A Zara can go to the pub, or to Oxford, without being challenged by the curiosity of others, without thinking to herself, 'people with my name aren't supposed to be in pubs,' and 'in 1000 years, not one person with my name has ever studied here'. My daily life, however, was branded with the self-consciousness from which her parents so wisely freed her.

What, then, was my problem with assimilation?

It was my life's work, after all. I had changed my accent, lost my faith, become – like every culturally insecure person – a wine connoisseur. I had changed everything... but the name. Only to find this was what everyone else saw in me all the same. I contended with a universal calumny, my namesake the most infamous Muslim in the world since the 'false prophet' of Arabia himself (who, for good measure, was also in my name.) At work, though more interested in the arts, I only ever got gigs on shows with an ethnoreligious focus, largely because of my name. And now, even though I'm a terrible journalist, it's my name that keeps me in the business. *Usama Mohammed, BBC News.*

'I'd like to give him an Islamic name,' I said, even as I acknowledged to myself what a nuisance it had been to have one.

Zara was surprised.

'Sure, I wouldn't rule it out,' she said.

'Why not?'

'I didn't say, *not*, I said if I liked one, like aesthetically, I'd be up for it.'

But I knew she had the aversion of her class towards such names. Overtly Islamic names were for yokels and fanatics.

'What you call a *normal name* is just an English name, a Christian name, isn't it?' I said.

'Don't be silly,' said Zara. 'If I liked the sound of a Muslim name, I'll consider it. You haven't suggested any yet.'

'Because I know you'll say no.'

She didn't dispute this.

'I've got nothing against them, they just don't occur to me, they don't reflect my lived experience,' she said. 'I wasn't brought up around all these Mohammeds and Abduls.'

All these Mohammeds?

'You may have chosen not to be one,' I said. 'But I am still a Mohammed. And I can't change that.'



That night I was in and out of sleep, and so was Usama. The baby was restive. Trying to put the baby to sleep was like wrestling with a much smaller, weaker opponent, who nevertheless through guile and craftiness managed to defeat you. Usama managed it though. It was beautiful to see him cradling the baby, melodiously humming 'Allah, Allah', an old lullaby that even my mother must have used. It didn't come naturally to me,

but it reminded me pleasantly of long summers in our haveli in Dhaka, and Bwa, the ayah, nursing my little cousins, the very same lullaby on her lips.

The baby wasn't keen on sleep, on shutting his eyes to the new world around him. He had Usama's large, circular eyes, eyes like rolling wheels that journeyed swiftly around the room.

As I struggled to sleep, I'd close my eyes and open them and then imagine I was seeing everything around me for the first time, you know, seeing each thing in a new way. So the black telephone – the landline – on the bedside table was a cat, crouching, and the piled-up papers of my thesis became a wintry Alpine landscape. But my baby knew nothing of cats, or of mountains. No metaphor could capture the bald originality of a baby's vision.

A little after sunrise, I was awoken by what I thought was the baby bawling away again. But he was peaceful. Usama wasn't in the bedroom, and downstairs I heard... whooping? I went to see what was up. Usama was standing on the sofa (how many times had I told him not to do that?) smoking his cigarillos (and not to do that?), with CNN on the box and him shouting at it.

'Fuck you! Fuuuuuck you, *ya ibn kalb, ya ibn sharmuta*. That's what you get, that's what you get for killing babies.'

Speaking on the TV, alongside rolling footage of missiles being launched, was the botoxed face of the free world, that weird, almost-criminal hair splayed above it like a dead, blonde ferret. He was dawdling through the syllables... *Even be-yoo-di-ful babies were cruelly murdered in this very bar-bar-ic attack. No child of God should ever suffer such horror. I ordered a targeted multi-ary strike on the airfield in Syria from where the chemical attack was launched...* 'Bashar al-Assad, you're fired,' shouted Usama.

Though I didn't hear it myself, this must have been the moment when Usama swore his stupid, unforgivable vow, to name our son after that revolting fascist, the worst president in history.

'Happened a few hours ago,' Usama said, noticing me. 'A fifth of Assad's airforce wiped out.'

'Oh my God,' I said.

'More than that *total pussy* Obama ever did, all cos of that *complete quisling*, that CUNT Ed Miliband.'

'"Pussy"? That word only makes me think of the sex pest in the Oval Office who grabs them. Have you forgotten that? There's also such a thing as international law.'

'Ohhhh, international law. Where was international law when Assad...'

I didn't have time for his Oxford Union juvenilia.

'Shhh. Now come back to bed. I can't sleep without the sound of your snoring.'

It was true. It was hard to sleep without Usama snoring in the background. The absence of noise is as disruptive as noise itself. I totally got how the baby slept better surrounded by the clamour of white noise streamed from YouTube, which recreated the experience of being inside the womb – *my* womb, even. Listening to those noises,

the sound of my own womb, put me in mind of being inside it, that is, me inside my own actual womb, like in an amniotic bubble bath: another of the freaky reveries I had during those long nights. All were, I think, an attempt to empathise with my baby, at least I noted it as such in that bullshit post-natal diary I got given in the support pack, full of moronic quotes from Michelle Obama, wife of 'that pussy'. I had never heard such toxic masculinity in Usama before. Where was it coming from?

The snoring was gone, again, and I awoke. Now it was midday, and Usama wasn't there again. I called for him. No answer. He must have run out for more of those disgusting cigarillos.

But when he returned, he was in a smelly, unwashed old kurta and pyjama trousers. It was hilarious. He'd been to the mosque for Friday prayers.

'I see you're in mufti.'

'Yeah, well, I thought...I know, this is weird.'

It was. Usama scrupulously avoided praying, even on Eid. He and Dad would mock all the mullahs at family gatherings, to the point where I thought they overdid it, especially with Usama's brother, the imam.

'Aww, I get it, you're having a spiritual awakening. What fun.'

Men, like little boys with their dinosaurs and football stickers, have these phases. I thought that was all it was. In the years we were together, there were many. At college, he became an ardent Wagnerian, and on his year abroad in Syria, he started collecting rocks with ancient graffiti inscriptions, but the worst – worse even than his transformation into a wine bore after I came into some money – was the tiresome obsession with Napoleon. (It coincided, not insignificantly, with a period of erectile dysfunction.)

'So I've sorted out the *aqiqah*,' he said.

The what?

'You know, the sacrifice of the goat on the seventh day,' he explained.

'Oh, of course. The-sacrifice-of-the-goat-on-the-seventh-day. Duh! That thing, that totally normal thing.'

'What's wrong with feeding hungry people in Syria?'

'Well, it's just all very Biblical.'

'Qur'anic,' he corrected me.

I didn't get it. I remember being in Bangladesh on Eid, and seeing the open sewers by the sides of the road flushed red with the blood of cattle slaughtered as an offering to God. So much blood because the halal butcher slits the throat and pours every gleaming drop of blood out. Usama, a cultured guy, a brilliant Oxford grad, was regressing into that atavistic, blood-governed world, of blood money and blood libels and blood feuds. Why are they always out for blood? Saddam Hussein, I once read, gave up twenty pints of his own blood to a scribe to write out the Qur'an *in blood*. It was bound with his *own* skin. As if that would impress God! Not content with the blood of goats, of innocent Jews, of dishonourable women, they then find themselves

baying for the blood of their own little girls and boys: guess what his next suggestion was?

'Now it's also a *sunnah*, customary...'

'I know what a *sunnah* is.'

'...on the seventh day, for a boy to be circumcised.'

Now my blood, boiling.

'Absolutely not. No way you're cutting up my baby.'

'It would be a doctor, not me.'

'It's genital mutilation.'

'FGM? You must be joking. This doesn't stop orgasms, you might have noticed that. It's hygienic, Americans all get snipped. More to the point, every boy in my family has had it done since time immemorial, my father, my grandfather, going all the way back to the Prophet's cousin Jafar. Even farther back actually, all the way to Abraham. I mean, how can my son be the first, in something like TEN THOUSAND YEARS NOT TO...'

I'd heard enough.

'Yes, yes, yes. The foreskins of all link back.'

One giant fucking daisy chain of foreskins.'



Dr Aziz's assistant, a girl in a Calvin Klein hijab, took me through the medical history and consent paperwork in the waiting room of his clinic. She occasionally cooed at the baby in the pram. The section on the mother I filled out to the best of my knowledge.

'My wife's sorry she couldn't be here,' I said. 'Lot of family engagements at the moment.'

She didn't ask any further questions, and led us all into what she called, a little pompously, 'our operating theatre.'

Dr Aziz, bespectacled, tall, bearded, emerged from behind a screen. As the assistant briefed him, I stripped the boy naked, as per her instruction. Then the baby cried faintly as he was bound by Dr Aziz's large, capable hands onto a plastic tray moulded to the shape of a baby – so much more comfortable than the hard rock at Sinai to which Abraham had bound his sons. The doctor conducted himself with real grace. He had clearly done this thousands of times. I surveyed the array of specialist tools sparkling on the table. This was not the crude act I had imagined it to be. Was it sadism to wish it were? If only Zara had seen what a state-of-the-art procedure the boy was getting.

Dr Aziz gently rubbed the anaesthetic cream over the genitalia, before injecting a painkiller into the delicate skin around there.

'It had long been thought unnecessary to anaesthetise newborns,' the doctor said. 'After all, they would not remember the pain. But I don't want your boy to feel a thing.'

I thanked the doctor.

He sensed my nervousness and made some conversation.

'Beautiful boy.'

'Thanks.'

'Why did you choose the name Alamgir? Have you named him after the great emperor?'

'That's right.'

It was not quite true. I had named him after a more recent potentate. The previous night I came up with a solution to the problem plaguing me ever since I made my promise. I had sworn on the Qur'an to name my son after the President. But I could not, after all that fuss over choosing an Islamic name, call my son Donald. Zara would no doubt rather the boy were called Adolf.

But then I had a brainwave. We say 'Peter the Great', when of course the Czar was really 'Pyotr'. The French call our King James 'Roi Jacques'. Did 'Donald' not have its equivalents too? In Gaelic, it meant one who 'wields' the world, which had an exact, literal translation in the Arabo-Persian 'Alamgir', an impeccably Islamic name. I had completed the form at the registry that very morning. Baby Alamgir was now official.

'My wife, she's very squeamish,' I said. 'That's why she's not here.'

Dr Aziz's expert hands softened the boy's cries with a gentle caress. He then rolled out a sheet of large, sky-blue tissue paper to cover the baby below the waist, nicking a small hole in it, to slide through the object of the operation. It was so tiny, so impossible to think it could be subjected to something as cumbersome, as gross, as surgery.

'Your wife's squeamish. Not you?' asked Dr Aziz.

I nodded. I could not leave my son. My heartbeat quickened. When Dr Aziz picked up his operating scissors, I fantasised about stealing the boy away.

The scissors furrowed around the skin, then suddenly ripped into them. Blood sprang forth. A redness crawled across the paper towel like some menacing creature lurking beneath. I yelped. The blood was gushing out. When the towel was drenched, the doctor removed it, revealing the boy's legs and partly his stomach, all now dyed a light, pinkish red. I could not speak for my heart pounding, my head light, a ringing in my ears, and a half-imagined, half-remembered pain descended into my own nether region. The doctor proceeded. He placed down a metal clamp, shaped like a bell, then ground it round – excruciating to watch, utterly, utterly excruciating – and the boy cried as a piece of him was torn away, the pain numbed, but the flow of blood unstemmed.

So had we all bled. The clangour in my ears became

sharper, louder. I struggled to make out some words. The doctor had said, '*Larka mussalman hai*.' The kid's a Muslim. Now there was no changing that. That was the whole point of the mad, marriage-ending compulsion. The boy was marked now with the ancient scar of his people. It could not be removed, because no act of removal could itself be removed. The scar, therefore, was invincible; Islam, therefore, immortal. Do as you please, disobey all the stupid rules, keep none of the foolish customs, believe nothing at all, change your name, change who you think you are, all this you may do, but you will in your very flesh be forever Muslim.

That is how it must be. That is how it will be.

Because the world will never forget you are a Muslim, never forgive your being one. I did not believe; the world did not believe me. The Bosnians, they thought they were the same as their neighbours; their neighbours did not accept it. They were told, 'No, you're Muslims', before perishing, in the camps. This way, then, you'll never let your guard down. When they come for us, as they did in Srebrenica, in Shatila, in Chechnya, in the Crusades, in Andalusia, when they come for us, as come they will, they will know us by our permanent, carnal insignia. But what they don't count on, what those filthy pigs don't count on is that you will know yourself by it too, my boy. That gives strength. Identity is strength. Now there is no escape, no quarter given, no compromise made. Down there lies real manhood, a manhood like no other, a testament that cannot be surrendered, and so you will never, ever, ever surrender. You will die, my dear, sweet child, my beautiful, beautiful boy, you will die just as you were born: a true son of Abraham, a congregant of the *qibla*, intractably, blessedly, accursedly a Muslim. *Amin*.

