Class of 1969. There is for me something very special about my first group of students at the Labasa Secondary School, unforgettable, like the first kiss, the first dizzying puff of a cigarette or the first taste of beer. The students seemed innocent and full of promise, and I was fresh out of college. A cultural desert, my Viti Levu friends had said about Labasa, a dry, dusty, one-street sugar town, at the edge of everything, A haven for misfits and missionaries, someone else had remarked. But scholarship boys like me had no say about where we were posted. At least, the school had a fine reputation, and I saw my time there as a limited sentence, a starting point for an eventual career in the Education Department, hopefully as an Inspector of Schools. In the end, I remained at Labasa Secondary for only one year. What a year it turned out to be.

I have often wondered where my students are now. They were such a likeable lot, respectful of teachers and full of earnest ambition. I remember them well: Satish, Mahend, Liaquat, Vinod, Radha, Sambhu, Mustafa. Some of them went on to university, but many left

Kismet

The bond between us
Is chimerical surely
Yet I cannot break it.

W.H. Auden, 'You'
school midstream to join government service, the local bank or the field staff of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. And the girls: so deferential and delectable in their neat white dresses. They had such magical names: Gyan, Daya, Maya, Naz, Saira, Sushila, Feroza, Priya. The boys were at school to prepare for jobs but most of the girls, or their parents, had a good marriage and a secure domestic life uppermost in their minds. If husbands agreed, a minor career as a bank officer or as a typist might be possible, but no more. Such a waste, I always thought, beautiful promise lost forever to children, husbands and mindless domesticity.

Of all the girls, Mumtaz stood out for me. I fell in love with her the moment I set eyes on her. Love at first sight, you could say. Something about her marked her out as special, proclaiming rare defiance and playfulness. Darker skinned and taller than most, she had an exquisitely chiselled face: liquid brown eyes, sad and haunting, sensuous, well-formed lips, and long, dark, wavy hair. She was smart but erratic, often daydreaming and invariably late with homework, the first one out of the room at recess and lunch and the last one in. She was the leader of the pack who promised adventure to her friends. Yet, there was also a hint of sadness about her that seemed to hide a deeper pain. It was that curious mixture of daring and sadness, of pain and playfulness — or play acting — that I found most attractive. I looked forward to my morning class, knowing that Mumtaz would be there, in the last row, sitting neatly behind the wooden desk, pony-tailed. I used to miss her whenever she was absent. I did not know if she had any boyfriends. Probably not, for Labasa was notorious as a murderous place where cane knives had lopped off a few unsuspecting lovers’ heads. I did not want to find out.

My feelings for Mumtaz grew with time, causing heartache and anguish I had not experienced before, did not know was possible. Whenever we met in the corridor, I felt self-conscious and awkward. Mumtaz would avert her eyes, smile and say, ‘Good morning, Mr Akash’. A few paces down, the girls would break out into a giggle.
Once or twice, I caught them looking back at me teasingly. Was I making my feelings that obvious, I sometimes wondered, anxious and vaguely embarrassed, but also helpless. I often wondered whether Mumtaz understood how much I was in love with her. Hopeful signs came at the end of the first term. I detected a change in Mumtaz. Now, she would often be the first one at her desk and the last one to leave. A few times I caught her looking straight into my eyes, unblinking, searching. Not a word passed between us, just silent glances, perhaps suggesting a deeper longing. Whatever it was, it was delicious.

In the second term, I began to look for opportunities to be alone with Mumtaz. Knowing that my colleagues preferred the Staff Room at lunch, where they talked, ate, smoked and played cards, to library duties at the same hour, I volunteered to fill in for them. Typical of me, they thought, the earnest, studious 'professor'. I played along. In return, they shouted me drinks and drove me around to weddings and parties on weekends. Mumtaz followed me to the library, often the only one, with a novel or an exercise book in hand. I felt immensely happy to be alone with her. We communicated to each other through an awkward smile. I relished the joyful anxieties of these surreptitious moments together. Mumtaz was an avid reader of Mills and Boon. Once or twice she asked me if I approved of her taste. Did I like romantic stories? I did, I replied, but not Mills and Boon!

That year we 'did' Wuthering Heights for the School Certificate. That book remains one my favourites to this day, its haunting tale resonating with twists and turns in my own life. Sometimes, I imagined myself as Heathcliff, plagued by a deep inner turmoil and a fierce, raging love for a woman he could never have, but who never gave up trying. I roamed the windswept moors in my mind as I paced the room. Mumtaz seemed genuinely intrigued by the novel. How could a woman know the deepest feelings of a man's heart, she once asked. A good question to which I still don't have an answer. Was it ever possible to love someone so madly? Heathcliff's madness of the
heart defied description. ‘The heart has a mind of its own,’ I replied, fending off further questions. ‘Does the mind have a heart of its own, too, Sir?’ she asked, not missing a beat. Her quickness surprised and pleased me.

One day during library duty, I asked Mumtaz whether she liked music. She did, especially songs played over the radio late at night: *Farmaish*, Requests, and *Bhoole Bhikhre Nagme*, ‘Songs of Yesteryear’. Songs by Rafi, Talat and, of course, Lata Mangeshkar. I knew these programs, which featured sad romantic songs that often tore at the heart in the unlit stillness of the night. As you listened to the names of people requesting sad numbers, you realised just how many lonely hearts were out there. Mumtaz sometimes asked if I shared her taste. When I mentioned something about reality, she interrupted me abruptly. ‘Love is not about reality, Sir. It is about dreams, even impossible dreams. When the hope of true love burns bright, all difficulties dissolve.’ Probably a mangled quote from something she had read somewhere. Why wasn’t I like the other teachers, playful, relaxed? Why did I read so much? What secrets did I hope to discover from books? Some questions have no answers. ‘Kismet,’ I replied, fate, and left it at that.

From songs to films. Mumtaz, like most girls of her age, was intensely curious about them. What did Waheeda Rahman look like on screen? And Dilip Kumar? What was that much-talked about film *Admi* all about? And the tragic triangular love story *Sangam*? Indian films are long and syrupy, their plots mindless, meandering, but that was the only entertainment available in town. So one day I asked her whether she would like to see a movie with me. Mumtaz shot a glance that needed no answer. And then she turned her head away towards the window. ‘Oh, you need not worry about that. There will be something for you in the book I am lending you.’ I meant a five dollar note for her bus fare and the movie ticket. Mumtaz remained silent. After a long pause she said, ‘They wouldn’t allow me to come to town on Saturday alone.’ Her family, she meant. ‘Good girls’ stayed home and helped with housework. ‘Then bring your mother along.’ ‘Thank
you, Sir,' Mumtaz smiled as she sprinted out of the library. Mother or no mother, all I wanted was to be with Mumtaz.

We usually went to the morning matinee at one of the town's two theatres, the Majestic and the Elite, such improbable names for this rustic place. I would stand discreetly near the entrance, taking the seat next to Mumtaz just when the lights were beginning to be dimmed. All week, I lived for this moment of darkened bliss: the songs, the casual touching of hands, the soft sighs, the gentle, rhythmic tapping of the floor, a smiling glance, sweet squeeze of the forearm. With time, we got more adventurous. Mumtaz would send her mother to the vegetable market while she escaped to the municipal library next to the river near the fire station. Except she never went there. Instead, we sneaked behind the building to the huge tree on the bank of the river. There, sitting against the knotted trunk, with our backs to the world, we talked about everything and nothing, the way people in love do, revelling in the feeling of gradually increasing affection between the two of us.

Teacher-student love affairs are not common, I know, and rarely condoned by society. They are seen as unnatural, immoral, a breach of some unspoken understanding and trust. Teachers not only teach but are also expected to act as the guardians and enforcers of society's morals. They are substitute parents. I knew what was expected of me, but there was nothing I could do about how I felt about Mumtaz. The head has no control over matters of the heart. I was also aware of another hurdle, religion. In Labasa, Hindus and Muslims never inter-married. Even Sanatanis and Arya Samajis, orthodox and reformist sects of Hinduism, North Indians and South Indians rarely intermarried, because of ancient prejudices about colour and caste. The Hindu–Muslim relationship, however, was beyond contemplation. How this hardening of attitude came about, despite the common levelling experience of indenture and later village life, was beyond me. The line drawn in the sand was firm, not to be crossed. But I was not daunted by these difficulties. I knew that at the end of the year, or soon afterwards, come what may, I would marry Mumtaz.
Towards the end of the second term, just before the school break, Mumtaz asked to see me for a couple of hours on the weekend. I didn’t ask why, but borrowed Krishna’s battered old blue Falcon and waited for her at the river end of the market. Then we drove across the Vunika flats towards Malau, the nearest picnic spot to the town, once pristine but now made filthy from the smoke and sawdust from the timber mills. We walked gingerly on the pebbles, holding hands for the first time. Mumtaz was quieter than usual, as we sat at the edge of the jetty, legs dangling, casting bits and pieces of wood into the water below. ‘I am afraid, Mr Akash,’ she said at long last. ‘About you and me and the future. About us together.’ ‘Nothing to be afraid of,’ I said, waiting for more. ‘Jab Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya,’ I somewhat flippantly quoted a favourite Lata song, ‘Why be afraid of being in love.’ ‘Chup Chup Ahen Bharna Kya,’ ‘Why sigh in silence?’ Mumtaz was unimpressed.

‘You don’t understand, Sir, I am a Muslim.’ I did. ‘But what’s that got to do with you and me,’ I said, struggling not to betray my emotion too much, vaguely sensing what was coming. Looking into the distance, Mumtaz replied, ‘My brothers will kill me rather than let me marry a Hindu. You don’t know them, Sir. My own mother will disown me. That’s the worst thing that can happen to a daughter. We have a saying in our language that the road to heaven is through service to one’s mother. No one will come to our Milad and Daras, invite us to Eid. No Salaam Dua, no place at the mosque. We will be treated worse than lepers.’

Mumtaz had chosen her words carefully. Having thought about all this for a long time, she was now confronting the truth. Trapped and helpless, she spoke with a touching earnestness. Words failed me. After a long silence, all I managed was, ‘Love should have nothing to do with one’s faith.’ ‘I know, I know,’ Mumtaz mumbled. ‘But life is not like that, is it, Sir?’ She meant with her family. ‘They will never understand. You should meet my brothers,’ she continued, and I got the hint of terror and violence. Big and burly, they guarded their sister like bull terriers, threatening to smash anyone’s head who dared as much as look in the
direction of their compound. Mumtaz herself was frequently beaten for looking towards the road when men, even neighbours, passed by.

‘Sir, will you do nikah with me?’ Mumtaz pleaded. Without that Muslim ceremony, the marriage would be ‘haram’, impure, cursed. The children would be outcasts. Poverty had already put the family on the fringe; marriage to a non-Muslim would put them beyond the pale. I knew that family honour, especially the chastity of unmarried girls, weighed heavily with the rural folk of Labasa, and was the reason for many headless or mutilated bodies floating in the Qawa river. But I had to be true to myself. I am not a religious person in the ordinary, temple-going sense. Spiritual yes, but not religious. One’s faith was a private matter, and God should not police matters of the heart. I would never ask Mumtaz to change her faith. Mumtaz burst into tears as she leaned on my shoulders. She said she often prayed for Allah’s guidance, beseeching Him to see things her way. ‘Wasn’t I [Akash], too, God’s son?’ she would ask. Didn’t her father always say ‘Ram-Rahim, All the Same?’ ‘Ya Khuda,’ she said despairingly.

I was too drained for words as we drove back to Labasa, riddled with doubt, confused. Was I being stubborn? I was angry, too, angry at the world for erecting and policing barriers that compartmentalised us into our racial and religious identities, that negated our common humanity. Why does one have to choose between one’s faith and one’s love? Before she left the car, Mumtaz handed me a small brown envelope. ‘Goodbye, Mr Akash,’ she said quietly, as she disappeared into the dusty market crowd. I was afraid to open the envelope straight away. When I did at night in bed, I found ruled note paper containing the lines of a haunting Rafi song:

Who dur ke musafir, ham ko bhi saath lele, ham rahe gaye akele
Tu ne jo de diya gam, be maut mar gaye ham,
Charo taraf lage hain udasiyon ke mele
Ham ko bhi swath lele, ham rahe gaye akele.
The words and the emotions they conjure are untranslatable. The singer is pleading with her beloved to take her away with him to some faraway place, away from all the cares of the world. He is her everything. Without him, her world is engulfed in unbearable sadness, unendurable. I felt immensely helpless and uncomfortable throughout that long, drizzly night, torn and pulled in different directions.

A few days later, I received a call from Nausori saying that Ramu kaka had died. I had to go and decided to combine my trip with the coming term holidays. I wanted to tell Mumtaz about my plans, but how? I did not know her address. I also remembered Mumtaz's brothers and what they might do to me if they found out. I would be back soon, I thought, and Mumtaz would understand.

I returned three weeks later, expecting to find Mumtaz at the Saturday matinee. She was not there. I would see her on Monday, I told myself. It turned out to be some Monday. I knew the moment I entered the school compound that something was not right. Colleagues avoided direct eye contact, walking past me with a pretended busyness. Then, when the head boy came to fetch me, I knew it was all over. John Sharan, the principal, shut the door, seated me on a chair in front of his paper-strewn table, and asked me to start from the beginning. How did it start? How long had it been going on? How far had it gone? Did the teachers know about what I was up to? I told him the truth and my desire to marry Mumtaz and to seek another posting somewhere in Viti Levu.

John Sharan exploded after I had finished. I had let him, and the entire school, down, he fumed. How could I? He had such high expectations of me, and I had such a bright future. Why was I so stupid to think that my affair would remain hidden? This was Labasa, not Wellington: everything was everyone's business. I couldn't stay at the school, he said after a long harangue; I had to go, for my own safety. Sooner or later they would come for me with their sharpened cane knives. I told the principal that I will go at the end of the term. I had to leave immediately, he insisted. I resigned from the school but stayed in Labasa for a few months.
I left the principal’s office knowing that my career as a teacher was over. My reputation was damaged beyond repair. Colleagues sympathised. Krishna, my best friend, was distraught at the thought of losing me, but he knew that in Labasa I would not be forgiven or forgotten. He was right; he was from Labasa. But I couldn’t leave without first finding what happened to Mumtaz. My heart cried at the thought of the terrible, merciless beating she must have endured at the hands of her brothers. For all I knew, she might have been murdered to protect the family’s reputation.

I was determined to find out before I finally left Labasa. I even dreamed of plans to take Mumtaz with me. On the pretence of returning her books and papers, I borrowed Krishna’s car again and drove to Tabia, about nine miles out of Labasa. Someone there would know her address because there were so few Muslims in that settlement. When I enquired at Mr Tulsi’s store, people pointed me to Mr Shamsher Ali. He was a man of substance, a big cane grower with a solid iron-roofed house and owner of the village’s only Bedford truck. His Haj skull cap and stylish beard and handsome body belied his 60 years. After a customary cup of sweet black tea, he asked me the usual Indian questions about my parents, where I came from. I lied about myself: I was Krishna, the friend of the disgraced teacher. I began calling him ‘Chacha’, ‘Uncle’. That broke the ice. It is the polite Indian thing to do, to treat older people as relatives. We talked about how Akash had resigned and left the school. Mr Shamsher was surprisingly understanding, saying the government was heartless posting young unmarried men to strange places. As I left, he asked me — instructed, actually, in the old-fashioned village way — to visit him regularly. ‘Treat this as your own home, masterji.’ I readily agreed.

Over the next few weeks, Mumtaz’s story revealed itself. Mahmood, Khalid Hussein’s son, was the one who had spilled the beans. Apparently, Mahmood himself, a Sangam High student, was interested in Mumtaz, and his family had even thought of making a formal proposal to Mr Shamsher. Mumtaz’s indifference to his
assertive overtures had enraged Mahmood, who then told his family about Mumtaz's romantic involvement with me. In no time, the story spread like wildfire, and heads of Muslim families descended on Mr Shamsher to do something about an affair which threatened to bring disrepute to their community. Mr Shamsher had no choice but to act. He saw Mr Rahiman, chairman of the school's Board of Governors. It was Mr Rahiman who told the principal that my resignation was the only acceptable price for peace.

I wanted to know about Mumtaz's family, and this is what Mr Shamsher told me. Mumtaz was the youngest daughter of Mr Ibrahim. A Tamil Muslim married to a Malayali, he had come to Tabia from Ba. Why or when, no one knew, or cared to ask. After a few years, Labasa had turned sour for him. Mr Shamsher took pity and hired him as his field hand, housing him and his family in a rough, rusty lean-to structure at the edge of the farm across the road. Everyone seemed to like Mr Ibrahim. He was not fastidious about his faith. He drank yaqona, smoked and attended Hindu functions. He even sang bhajans, which surprised the village folk. The more I learnt about him, the more I realised that Mumtaz was her father's daughter. Mr Shamsher said that Mr Ibrahim was planning to lease a sugar cane farm in Seaqaqa across the mountain range from Tabia. But one day he died, just like that, of a heart attack, and his family disintegrated. The two boys, never much good, drifted away, leaving Mumtaz and her mother to fend for themselves.

Mr Shamsher decided to 'keep' the family on the side, more out of pity and concern, he said. I believed him. Mumtaz's mother worked as a domestic help, washing clothes, planting rice, minding young children and infants. They got by. Then, things began to change. It was rumoured that Mrs Ibrahim was seeing other men in the village to make ends meet. At first, Mr Shamsher was not forthcoming, only saying things like a poor man's wife being everyone's sister-in-law, fair game for the village men. The gossip about Mumtaz's affair with the Hindu teacher broke the camel's back.
Any affair for an unmarried girl was bad enough, but an affair with a Hindu was unforgivable. ‘But, Chacha, what has religion got to with love?’ I asked. ‘It’s Allah’s will, masterji,’ he said with the authority and conviction of a community leader. ‘Everything has a purpose and a place. People are born in a faith and they must die in it. Giving up one’s faith is a thousand times worse than death.’ Reason has no business interrogating faith, I realised. And Mr Shamsher’s mind was made up anyway. ‘Khandaan ki barbaadi,’ is how Mr Shamsher described the whole thing, disaster for the family. The Ibrahim family had to leave. Mrs Ibrahim pleaded for more time. They had nowhere to go. But Mr Shamsher’s heart had turned to stone.

No one knew precisely where in Ba Mrs Ibrahim had gone to. ‘Udhre kahin gai hai.’ People said, she has gone ‘somewhere around there’. That Christmas holiday — and for several years afterwards — I went to Ba, spending days at the town market next to the river, hoping to find Mumtaz. But to no avail. Once or twice, I was so full of despair that I thought of killing myself, but that would not bring Mumtaz to me. At least alive, I had a chance of one day finding her. That thought kept me going.

I left Labasa vowing never to return to that wretched place. I was not only unemployed, I was unemployable as a teacher. ‘Cradle snatchers’ have no place in the classroom, people said. But my heart had also gone out of teaching, knowing that I would always be looking for Mumtaz among my students, haunted by her memory. I returned to Nausori, broken and dispirited, a social leper, a huge embarrassment, to family and friends. I moved to the town, rented a small room at the back of Makanji and Sons warehouse by the Rewa and took casual jobs as a salesman for Court’s Hardware Store, as a driver for Patel and Company, as a bookkeeper at Burns Philp. To keep my sanity, I attended evening history and literature classes at the University of the South Pacific. And when troubles began in 1987, I applied for a migrant visa to Australia. For reasons that I still do not know, I was successful. I arrived in Australia in 1990 to live in Liverpool.
Liverpool was a natural choice for me. It is a mini-Fiji, with its temples, mosques, churches; its spice and grocery shops, video outlets, fashion houses selling sari and salwar kamiz, restaurants and takeaway joints. A variety of social and cultural organisations, cacophonous and competing with each other for membership and funds, serves the community. Cultural evenings of song, music and dance, the celebration of festivals such as Holi, Diwali and Eid, are regular fare there. Newspapers proliferate, disseminating news about forthcoming events, soliciting contributions for this cause or that, announcing news of deaths, births and marriages. Pettiness and bickering, the bane of our community, are alive and well there, causing fissures and frictions which enliven the mindless suburban life.

The Liverpool shopping centre in the heart of Northumberland Street is my favourite place to gauge the ebb and flow of our community. I go there every Saturday. I see people in bright floral clothes, marvelling at the range of goods displayed in the cheap shop windows, women haggling over the price of gaudy clothes, men bunching up around key street corners, surveying the passing human, especially female, traffic in a quintessentially Fiji way, leering. Keeping up with the Joneses, people compare notes about what they have, what they want to buy: which brand of car or refrigerator or furniture. I also hear sadly of young people on drugs who clog the local court. And I occasionally see boys with knotted hair, trendily torn jeans affecting the Rastafarian gait, and wonder how and why they have lost their way.

I was walking along Northumberland Street one day about a year ago when I saw a figure that looked vaguely familiar. She was assessing a salwar in one of the clothes shops. I instinctively stopped to take a discreet sidelong glance. Could it be Mumtaz? I could not be absolutely certain after the long passage of time. I wanted to find out, but thought it inappropriate at the time. Cultural protocol, even in Australia, discourages directness, especially with Indian women; and I am not exactly the extrovert type. Still, the figure — golden brown
skin, hair stylishly knotted back, a slight flair of the hips from children — remained with me as I headed for my apartment, bringing back memories of a past I had nearly forgotten, the smell and touch of village life, of friends who had dispersed to various corners of the globe, the heartache of Labasa. I knew, as the week went by, that I wanted to find out if it was indeed Mumtaz I had glimpsed.

I returned to Northumberland Street early the following Saturday morning and went straight to the shop where our people go to buy their bhindi, dhal, atta and spices. In the local parlance, it is the shop for all reasons and all seasons. Time flew as I paced the pavement smoking incessantly, feeling slightly awkward and nervous, like a person preparing for an important interview. Then just before midday, she appeared from around the bend and headed inside the shop. It had to be Mumtaz. I followed her, weaving my way through the narrow space between the shelves, pretending to buy things myself. Getting close to her, picking up a packet of dhal, I asked gently, ‘Mumtaz?’ She looked at my eyes for what seemed a very long time. ‘Mr Akash?’ she said tentatively. My smile answered her question as we embraced.

‘It is so good to see you, Sir,’ she said as she pressed my forearm with both her hands. ‘I am no longer your teacher, Mumtaz,’ I said, as we headed to a coffee shop across the street. ‘So just plain Akash will do.’ ‘Playing with words again, are we?’ she shot back laughing. Akash means the sky in Hindi. We talked for hours like two excited children. Mumtaz looked graceful, at ease with herself; conversation came naturally to her. But I was all nerves, stuttering, unable to hold my coffee cup steady. I felt awkward, after the passage of so much time. Obviously Mumtaz was married. Her clothes and stylish manners gave her away. She must have married an European, I reckoned; Indian men would not ‘allow’ their women the freedom Mumtaz evidently enjoyed. I was bursting to find out more, but common sense and courtesy dictated a more delicate approach. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to keep in touch. Mumtaz was genuinely
pleased to see me, I think, but what did she feel? Was the past forgotten? Was her pleasure simply the pleasure of meeting a man who once loved her? Did she, after all these years, recall her Labasa days with the same intense fondness as I did? I was afraid of the answers. Perhaps the past should be allowed to rest in peace. Mumtaz has a new life, I said to myself, and I have my memories. As I returned to my apartment late that day, I resolved not to re-open closed doors.

But my resolve melted when Mumtaz called early the next day inviting me to lunch. She was working as a project assistant in the inner city. ‘And how is Mrs Akash?’ she asked, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. ‘You should have brought her along. I would love to meet that lucky woman.’ ‘There is no Mrs Akash,’ I replied. ‘No? Never?’ ‘Never married,’ I ventured, ‘but I have known a few women, if you must know.’ Mumtaz tilted her head and, with her trademark flutter of the eyelids, said, ‘A pity’. ‘What? Never married or the few casual encounters?’ I asked. ‘Nothing much has changed, has it Mr Akash?’ she said, laughing. It certainly brought back the old memories. Mumtaz herself was married, to an Australian of German descent. But her tone discouraged further probing. She was so pleased she had met me, she kept repeating. She dreaded and despised Indian men, she said emphatically. ‘I haven’t met anyone like you, Mr Akash,’ adding, ‘And I don’t want to anymore, either.’

Over the next few months of regular meetings over coffee and lunch, we re-established the old closeness of the Labasa years. But there was no physical intimacy. Both of us wanted it that way. I wanted to know how she had ended up in Australia, when. Mumtaz deflected my questions. She had come to Australia as a babysitter for her uncle’s children. That sounded unconvincing. I persisted: I wanted to know her true story. ‘That past has a place of its own, sir. It is now, this moment, that matters. And the future.’ But she read my mind, and agreed to talk. ‘Just this once. Promise me never to ask about my past again.’ I did.

Mrs Ibrahim had returned to Ba, to her elder brother’s place, an unwelcome, burdensome stranger. Indian society was like that: once
married, Indian women belonged somewhere else as someone else’s responsibility. Mrs Ibrahim made herself useful as a domestic hand, washing, cleaning, chopping wood, weeding the garden, working in the fields. She didn’t complain; it was her ‘kismet’, fate. But Mumtaz was different. People resented her independence and vibrancy. She was frequently hit for playing soccer with the boys, climbing trees, talking too much or too loudly. She was trouble waiting to happen. So when Mrs Ibrahim became a defacto wife of another man in the village, the uncle wasted little time despatching Mumtaz to a distant relative in the squatter settlement in Waiyevi Lautoka. It was a dreadful place for a young girl, exposed to endless squabbles among neighbours, open promiscuity among her own friends and relatives, scrotum-scratching men groping, making advances, an attempted rape by her own distantly related brother-in-law. Mumtaz somehow managed to escape unharmed.

Mumtaz missed her mother. She was the only constant, loving presence in her life. She was protective of her, instinctively taking over the role of her father, calm, reassuring. The pain of her mother’s complete dependence on an uncaring man, bearing all the taunts and jibes reserved for ‘rakhails’, ‘kept’ women, distressed her. She asked her mother to leave. Together they would be able to make ends meet. She could wash clothes, mind children in the neighbourhood, do anything; at least they would have their dignity intact. And they would have each other. Mrs Ibrahim refused, knowing that there was no other place to go. But for Mumtaz, the hardships and the humiliations only stiffened her resolve. The only solution was to leave this wretched place and migrate with her mother. The happiness of her mother had become an obsession with her. But how? Mumtaz was unskilled.

One day, Ateca, a Fijian friend of hers, mentioned the name of an Australian man she had met who wanted to marry her. She herself was not interested, but Mumtaz might be. She was. A week later, she wrote to the man: ‘Sir, my name is Mumtaz Ibrahim. I am 23 years old. I want to come to Australia. I want to marry an Australian man.'
I will be very happy if you could help. Please write back. I hope you like my photo.’ Frank — short for Frankenstein — a tailor and casual labourer, in his early fifties, liked what he saw. He knew that Mumtaz would make a wonderful trophy for him. Within a few months, he sent the sponsorship papers along with a one-way ticket, but not his own photo. Mumtaz was anxious about the new, strange world ahead of her, but she had little choice. Her mind was made up. She left Fiji, without tears, she said, and without once looking back.

Frank was hardly the man of her dreams, Mumtaz discovered when she met him at Sydney airport. He was old enough to be her father. ‘I locked my heart and threw away the keys,’ she said, tears welling up. But with nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she, too, resigned herself to ‘kismet’. Frank lived on a farm on the fringes of suburban Sydney, making his living as a handyman. He was a man of simple, unsophisticated habits. Shooting rabbits for food and fun was among his weekend hobbies. He guarded his new bride jealously like a hawk, monitoring her every movement. For Mumtaz, her new life was as far removed from rural Fiji as it could be. Everything familiar had disappeared from her life: the festivals, the films, the food, the friends. Once or twice she remembered some other families in the sprawling suburbs of western Sydney who were distantly related, but she was too embarrassed to meet them. Would they want to meet her? And how would Frank react? Probably fly into a rage and abuse her in public. So she spent the next three years on the farm, trapped, vulnerable, dependent. She planted vegetables, cooked, cleaned and occasionally got into fierce fights with Frank’s children, some older than her, who resented her presence among them.

Mumtaz was nothing if not enterprising. She got her Australian passport at the earliest opportunity and, with Frank’s assistance, sponsored her mother. Later other members of the family arrived, through sham marriages to Mumtaz’s Australian friends whose fares she paid to go to Fiji: they got their paid holiday, and her brothers got their visas. Bringing her family to Australia became her obsession for
several years. Her relations with her family had later soured, embroiled in petty jealousies which hurt her deeply but that, Mumtaz said, was another story. One day, after Frank had thrown one of his regular tantrums in a supermarket and left her, almost penniless, to find her own way home, Mumtaz decided that enough was enough. She bought herself a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, which said ‘I am single and I love it’. The words lodged in her mind like a rock.

The next day, she left Frank, not knowing where she would go, but she had to leave him. Frank, full of rage, followed her for several months, threatened to burn down the apartment where she had sought refuge, begged her to return, but for Mumtaz there was no turning back. The end had come. The next few years were hell for her, without employment, without support. The Salvation Army took her in, fed and clothed her and found her casual employment. To this day, she remains grateful to them for helping her in her moment of desperate need when others had looked the other way. After about three years of an aimless anxious life, she met David, an accountant. Seven years later, they were still married.

Happily?’ I couldn’t help asking. ‘What is happiness, Mr Aksah, what is love?’ And then the thrust, ‘I once loved a man whom I could not have, who never bothered to come looking for me.’ If only she knew the truth. David was a good husband, understanding and supportive. She had no reason to complain, she said. Complain? ‘We have had our ups and downs,’ she said. There was nothing wrong with David, but the closeness had gone. The routine of marriage had snuffed out the physical and emotional intimacy of the earlier years. ‘Cross-cultural marriages can be like that,’ I volunteered. ‘All marriages are like that,’ Mumtaz responded emphatically. What she yearned for, spontaneous picnics, dancing on the kitchen floor, all-night parties, were missing. Now she was trapped in a mortgage and a moribund marriage. David was self-contained. He loved his golf and the occasional outing, but not much else. Mumtaz wanted, more than anything else, to recover the lost years of her childhood: Hindi music,
Mr Tulsi's Store

Indian food, social gossip, parties. David did what he could to oblige. He went along to social functions and entertained Mumtaz's family and friends at home, but without understanding or cultural empathy for their way of life.

I realised, as she talked, that despite her modern, westernised appearance — the smoking, the drinking, the expensive clothes, the nightclub scene — Mumtaz was essentially a traditional girl at heart. She told me of her fascination with Hindi movies. Remembering Labasa, that did not surprise me. I had lost interest in them long ago, except in the new wave art films by Shyam Benegal and Mrinal Sen: Nishant, Akrosh, Junoon, Mana than, movies like that. These held no appeal for Mumtaz. She liked the syrupy ones with long drawn-out romantic twists and happy endings. Why? She liked them because they helped her imagine what her life might have been, what she would have liked her life to be. She, too, would have liked a proper wedding, the mehdi on her palms, a big feast, the traditional send-off, the sort of things most village girls dream about. She, too, would have liked to be a dulhan, a bride, in a big family, spoiled, with lots of children and adoring grandparents. She hankered for a world that fate had denied her. It was all a dream in her heart, though, for she knew that, in reality, she had little time for Indian men and the male-dominated values of Indian culture.

Mumtaz's is an improbable story of willpower and survival. I know: I come from a similar background of hardship myself. But for a girl, the ordeal must have been all that more difficult. Mumtaz's journey reminded me of the Indian indentured women, including our own grandmothers, who had rejected violence and poverty and the constant taunts of intolerant in-laws and, shouldering their little bundles, had left for unknown destinations a century ago. Such courage, such determination. Mumtaz having to sleep with a lawyer, from her own community no less, to get visa papers for her family processed, recalled the rampant sexual abuse of Indian women on the plantations by European overseers as well as their Indian subordinates.
I understood perfectly why Mumtaz despised Indian men. Her personal tragedy, she lamented, was that after they had got their visas for Australia, her family had distanced themselves from her, disapproving of her independence and superficially westernised ways. Mumtaz was not bitter, just sad at the way things had turned out, sad that all the personal and financial sacrifices she had made over the years now counted for nought with her family.

‘I am a survivor,’ Mumtaz kept saying. That seemed to have become her motto. I could see her sharply developed survival skills. Her sharp tongue and an incredible ability to think fast on her feet were her handiest instruments. She told me about distantly related married Indian men who rang her for a date, knowing that she was married with a child but assuming that she was — must be — fair game, a loose character, just because she had married an outsider. Most times she would ignore them or quickly change the subject. But when they persisted, she would cut them down sharply. Like the man who, trying his luck, remarked casually to Mumtaz at a wedding reception that she must be a very ‘experienced’ woman, having married a white man, and he would not mind learning from her. ‘Yes, I am experienced,’ Mumtaz replied without missing a beat. ‘I have a good teacher. Send your wife to my husband. He will teach her, and then you can learn from your “experienced” wife all your life!’ I couldn’t hide my amazement at her quickness and my surprise that these things happened here. ‘I come from the gutter,’ Mumtaz said. ‘I understand the gutter mentality.’

Mumtaz was more than a survivor. She had triumphed over life’s petty adversities, and managed to keep her head high amidst all the betrayal and tragedy visited upon her by friends and family. She was a restless soul, though, marooned, desperately wanting to turn the clock back to her adolescence when life had been so full of promise. ‘What might have been: Don’t you think they are the saddest words in the English language?’ she once asked me. I nodded in agreement, as we talked wistfully about the lost years. Life with Mumtaz would not
be easy, I knew, as I got to know her over the months. She was strong-willed, feisty, pig-headed, touchy to the point of rudeness when she felt slighted or challenged. She could be manipulative and vindictive as well. She had an indulgent self-consciousness about her own physical attractiveness, which she flaunted frequently to taunt and torment Indian men whom she thoroughly despised. And her casual attitude to her past marital indiscretions troubled me.

But Mumtaz was also soft of heart, and to friends generous to a fault. She had an infectious zest for life, an innocent exuberance and physical vitality that promised adventure and fun. With her, there wouldn’t be a dull moment. I couldn’t help but be attracted to her once again, fatally, like a moth to a flame. One day during one of our regular meetings in our favourite coffee shop in a quiet corner of Northumberland Street, I asked Mumtaz somewhat diffidently if we had a future together. It was a question that had to be asked. Mumtaz looked away. ‘There is nothing in the world I want more than to be with you for the rest of my life.’ I couldn’t resist asking why. ‘Because you give me my bachpana,’ she said, my youth. With me, she continued, ‘I can imagine myself to be anything: a little girl, a woman, a friend, a soul mate.’ I was what she always imagined her ideal man to be, attentive, non-judgmental, unafraid of her independence. ‘But?’ ‘Reality, Mr Akash,’ Mumtaz said with a tearful smile, recalling our conversation all those years ago. Her commitments and responsibilities to her family. She would move one day, but not now. I knew, too, that despite their present feuds and fights, Mumtaz would one day return to her extended family. She secretly hankered for the imagined emotional closeness of her childhood.

She also did not want to break our relationship hoping it might bear the fruit we both desperately wanted. ‘Can we still be friends in the meantime though?’ Mumtaz asked with a pleading look in her eyes. I looked away with a welling sadness in my heart, knowing how difficult that would be for me. Lovers, or people in love, cannot be just friends. It is a cliché, I know, but it is also true. It would be
impossible to continue a relationship like this without physical intimacy and definite commitment. I was also running out of time. In five or ten years time, I would not be the man I am now. I did not have the heart to tell Mumtaz this, but I had been diagnosed with diabetes, and we all know the havoc that disease can wreak on the human body.

I was overcome by a feeling of betrayal and emptiness, tortured by the thought of having to give up something I had lived for all these years. The prospect of a life with Mumtaz I had imagined for so long was now vanishing before my eyes. How I wished things had turned out differently. Perhaps some things are simply not meant to be. 'Everything has its time and place,' I recalled Mr Shamsher Ali saying all those years ago, as I left the café in the gathering darkness. 'Kismet.'