Karachi: Taqwacore

In the plane bathroom, I shove the book as deep as I can in the minuscule trash receptacle. The man sitting beside me made me paranoid.

" Maybe you get in trouble with that," he had said.

I'm on an Etihad flight from Abu Dhabi to Karachi at 2:30am. It's disorienting to spend two days on a plane, and then arrive on an unfamiliar continent in the dead of night.

Immigration is simple. No one gives my bags a second glance. I could have packed a whole suitcase full of *Taqwacore*. Or Bibles. Or drugs and weapons. (Except that no one brings drugs and weapons to Karachi, because they're already in plentiful supply. Alcohol, that's a different story...)

I do find it odd that so many Pakistanis are loading baggage carts with water; huge, shrink-wrapped plastic jugs. I know there are disputes with India over Indus River rights, but is the situation dire enough to bring your own water? (Soon I'd see people burning tires in the street for lack of water. But that isn't what these jugs are about.)

There's a big white sign with my name, a car sent by the newspaper, and suddenly, a man. With what looks like an Uzi. (Ok, so maybe that's just from bad action flicks, and it probably isn't an Uzi and possibly, it's something Chinese. But it's definitely something automatic. And it also looks really old.)

Gori, welcome to YOUR movie.

I step outside and the air feels like a blow dryer blast, and then I get in the car.

The guard locks the doors, and we drive through Karachi.

It's a jumble of food stands, smears of neon, buses like shrines. Kinda faded and gorgeous, like a '70s film. Even at 2 am, everything seems sun-faded and retro.

Everyone's in loose cotton, and the young guys have shaggy hair and drive these square-shaped vans that look like '70s Nissans. The entire ride to the guest house, I pretend I'm in some B-movie from pre-theocratic Iran or communist Afghanistan.

The next day, on my way to the office, a woman named Sonia calls in to the driver's favorite radio show.

"Women should remain proper. That's what suits them. Women with spiked heels give womenkind a bad name," she says. Then she requests J-Lo's "On the Floor."

The white sky makes everything seem drained, but Karachi tries to compensate. There are garish colors everywhere—on billboards that advertise fancy, gold-lined salwar kameez made out of something called "lawn" that people are crazy for, on the women swathed in day-glow cheap cotton, their dupattas flung casually over their heads, on the mural-covered, icon-dangling jingle buses.

Makeshift villages sprout on the side of bustling roads in this city of 20 million. Sheets are strung for privacy, men wash with buckets and lounge on charpoys, entire herds of goat are tended on the dusty shoulders.

We stop at lights and beggars tap my window, women with children, or maimed people or sometimes children alone. The worst are the maimed children. I've been warned that this is a racket, that some people deliberately harm their children so they'll make more begging. Sometimes the tappers sell strings of fragrant white jasmine, which a friend buys for me and tells me to hang over my air conditioner and my whole bedroom will smell sweet.

On my first day at the office, I learn that the water is Zamzam. When Abraham's infant son, Ishmael, cried for water and kicked at the desert ground, water gushed out. Zamzam is mineral-rich and healing, and the people with jugs were bringing it back from Mecca.

I'll also learn that the imagined portrayal of Muslim punk rockers, invented by a white dude from a racist family, who fled upstate New York to study at a Pakistani madrasa, was coveted contraband—impossible to get, the one dog-eared copy someone

brought back from vacation making incessant newsroom rounds. I will regret leaving it in the airplane bathroom.

I met a couple from Lahore on the plane. He still has a bullet in his hip from his last visit to Karachi and no idea who'd shot him or why. He thought it was probably random street violence.

I was warned by another Pakistani, a BP employee living in Chicago, to keep my mobile close. "They tap on your shoulder with a gun, you turn around, and they hold out their hand," he said.

When I volunteer this at work, everyone is like, "That won't happen, that's never happened to me," and then one guy says sheepishly, "Actually, that happened to me."

Many of my coworkers are women in their early 20's. They wear traditional clothes and cover their heads or wear shameers cut so low they show cleavage, or they wear scoop neck tees and incredibly tight jeans. Some are married, but most are not, though they seem to be biding their time till they get married. Many have been educated in the UK or the US, or at local westernized schools. All of them live with their parents or their husband's parents.

One coworker scrolls through wire photos of the aftermath of a bazaar bombing in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, which targeted a chief and member of a Sunni political party, JUI-F, but killed 13 civilians.

The pictures are too gory to publish. He stops on a picture of a guy with a bloody hole in his face, where just a moment ago, he had an eye.

"It doesn't even register anymore," he says. "It should, but it doesn't."

I've been reading about the daily blasts for months, a supplement to my diet of Pakistani media, to prep me for this trip. My coworker is right. At first I was horrified. Now I just think, oh another one, but it's far from where I'll be.

I ask the rest of the web room staff, and they say the blasts seem far to them, too. It's a coping mechanism. If you want to live your life, you can't tiptoe around, constantly paranoid about how fragile it all is.

But your life is fragile. And blasts and drones and wars and poverty make life cheap.

Over the next few months, I'll get used to the paramilitary federal police who patrol the streets with automatic weapons and shoot an unarmed 18-year-old at close range, which is captured by a bystander's cell phone. I won't even notice when my driver pauses at gates and pops the trunk and hood, so that guards can check for bombs.

BBQ Tonight will be bombed the afternoon after my friends and I have dinner there. Forty people at T2F, a progressive event space and coffee-house I frequent, will be mugged by two armed and masked men who say "Thank you, guys," in perfect English as they leave.

I'll befriend an Afghani teen who lives in a Taliban-controlled neighborhood, cover a school-bus bombing, be interviewed by ISI and tracked by Military Intelligence, and be put under house arrest in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. I'll flatten myself in doorways to avoid the bullets I hear but don't see, in the long, hot weeks of political riots. I'll watch live footage of hundreds of men and boys protesting in Karachi streets, shouting "Death to America" after Osama Bin Laden is killed.

But the woman covering the event for my paper will write that mostly these were poor people, hungry people, people who were bribed to march with free biscuits and juice provided by fundo mullahs.

And I'll drink Parsi beer and boot-legged liquor and attend birthday parties with DJs and dancing. I'll sit cross-legged on a carpet in the muggy, open-air of Boat Basin, and eat greasy halal barbecue in the wee hours of morning, surrounded by brightly-lit spits of roasting meat. I'll swim in a western-suit in my friend's family's rooftop pool and naked under the full moon in the Indian Ocean, after a house party on French Beach. I'll fuck men and a woman. I'll paint my eyes with kohl and dress in borrowed finery, gorge on kulfi and watch Bollywood-style dances at a wedding held in a beautifully-lit, private courtyard.

I'll work long hours, drinking coffee and eating paratha smeared with Nutella, and after, smoke shisha and chat with friends, at the breezy Roadside Cafe—bright during the day and atmospheric at night, owned by a friend who makes furniture. His father is a famous sculptor, and he'll sneak me into his house late one night, so I can see the art.

I'll jog the campus and sports fields at the American School with one friend, and start practicing yoga, taught by another, at T2F and sometimes behind tall walls in her backyard.

Some mornings, I'll awaken before dawn when the local mosque issues the call to prayer. But my favorite is hearing the evening *adhan* during those backyard yoga classes, or from my friend B.'s family balcony, overlooking a big, open park. The sky turns orange and the sustained, chant issues forth—a haunting, otherworldly music, from a building of worship where, technically, music is forbidden.

By the time I leave, I will understand so much less and a little more about the subcontinent, but I will firmly know this much: Pakistan is a place rich with contradiction.

Karachi: the face of Levi's

The "face of Levi's Pakistan" sprawls across Adnan's bed, and she is in fact wearing Levis (dark wash with plenty of spandex), and we aren't even in public. (Her contract gives Levi's rights to her image, her biography and her voice. She receives a clothing stipend and is expected to wear Levi's to appropriate public events.)

Her brows knit under schoolgirl bangs, as she scribbles on a scrap of paper and vigorously clicks the pen open and shut. She's working out figures for her first solo show and trying to convince CityFM89 to join as sponsors. Levis has already committed to covering a third of her budget. Each time her phone rings, she dashes to the bathroom to take the call without distraction.

“I want to make sure the musicians get paid. There’s the cost of sound, there’s printing posters and tickets and renting a venue.” Zoe ticks it off on her fingers.

It’s easy to be a pop-star in this forever-developing nation, where the rich people I’ve met are richer than the richest Americans I know, with entire household staffs to cook, clean and drive their cars, while the rest of the country (at least in urban areas) shit in open sewers, protest for drinking water, forgo electricity and are educated in madrasas, if at all (and if they’re male).

It’s easy to be a pop-star in Pakistan, if your family is wealthy and progressive and especially if you’re female and attractive, even if you don’t write your own songs or play instruments, although Zoe does both, sort of. But just putting yourself out there is edgy enough.

It seems like all of my friends here are famous. They’re actors and filmmakers, authors and radio personalities, models and pop stars. And they all have western educations and parents with fat bankrolls, which is necessary in a country where the closest thing to a record contract is an appearance on Coke Studio (a TV series featuring live performances, akin to playing the Tonight Show, minus Jimmy Fallon). And ironically (but unintentionally so), big western corporations are synonymous with hip and underground.

Zoe is spoiled, like everyone else I know here (she studied musical theater in upstate New York), but she’s also earnest, kind and a religious minority, in a country where that really, really matters. Basically, she’s an anti-diva.

She prefers driving herself to taking a driver, even at night, when she speeds through, rather than stopping, at lights. (Stopping is too dangerous to risk.) When I’m bored and stuck inside, because there are riots (there are always riots), and the newspaper is more concerned with protecting me (and themselves) than letting me cover anything real, Zoe sends Omar over with chocolate and DVDs.

She does yoga or jogs daily. Jogging in Karachi means making rings around a park while someone, usually a driver, hangs out for your protection, or making rings around

the playing field at the Karachi American School during off hours, because there are guards and a border wall.

Her idea of relaxing is trading her Levi's for a floral muumuu and cleaning her room. At night, she smokes her friends out on her family's roof, where the air feels soft on bare shoulders, and you can gaze over Clifton Beach into the Arabian Sea, the largest and most romantic of all of Karachi's open sewers.

Zoe reminds me of my friend Rachel. Rachel with her "fuck you, I'm crunk" attitude, Rachel with her huge boobs, tiny waist and flat ass in thrifted tees and stolen $300 jeans. Driving around Memphis, me riding shotgun in her 17-year-old Camry, the windows down, bare feet on the dash, Stereolab or The Make Up muscling through busted speakers.

Zoe is Rachel before New York and LA, before scientology and motherhood. She is Rachel of the crack-out days, the girl who, in a former millennium, traipsed through a midtown mansion the first night we met, collecting shampoos and detergents from bedrooms and kitchens, mixing them together in the gigantic master tub.

As the bubbles built and spilt on the floor, she ripped off her clothes *and* her leg, with no warning or explanation. Then she said to me, "You coming in?"

Both Rachel and Zoe breach taboos, not out of any academic analysis but simply because they're living on their own terms.

Rachel with her who-cares-I-got-one-leg-I'll-stare-you-down-haters posturing, the ballsy 15-year-old who left her wealthy but emotionally abusive father and her Church of Christ childhood to move into her classmate's family's guest/sewing/drumset room. (That classmate became my first boyfriend, which is how I met Rachel. At 18, I would begin many nights in that room, before creeping down the hall to Wes's bed as his family slept.)

And Zoe, with her willingness to straddle a motor bike in music videos (you never see women doing this on the actual streets of Karachi), her pursuit of her own career, her

independence and lack of concern for her singleness, a major stigma in Karachi, at our age.

It's about who I am with them, how they both came along in times when I've had nothing but time.

Rachel and I were enrolled in colleges (six hours apart), but we never actually went to classes, which was why we were free to float around Memphis (in between our two colleges), playing hide and seek in the Pink Palace, getting stoned by the river, crawling on hands and knees along the foot-wide catwalk that ran under the Mississippi River bridge, until her childhood neighbor fell into the churning river and died, and we stopped going there.

Zoe is busy when she's planning a show or shooting an ad spread, but often her life is dominated by her part-time gig with the Coke Studio house band and an array of social engagements—day parties at French Beach (where rich Pakistanis swim in western spandex and drink beer), night parties at Adnan's apartment (her ex, as well as the DP for Coke Studios and for all her dreamily-filtered, editing-gimmicky music videos), and garden parties behind rich people's boundary walls (dancing, wine, cupcake stations and once, BBC reporters, to show Pakistan isn't all Sharia Law and tented women).

And since I've basically quit going to the newspaper, I'm free to accompany her and Omar (her best friend and sometimes bandmate, killing time before entering my same grad program in New York) to the drive-in juice bar, or the exhibit of Karachi's first street artist, Asim Butt, who committed suicide last year, or for an evening meal on Burns Road, where you sit on rugs on wooden platforms or on plastic discount-mart patio chairs, swathed in savory, meaty smells and surrounded by goat, beef and whole chickens rotating on spits, everything lit by glowing signs for fast, delicious street food.

Zoe and Omar have been my salvation. They take care of each other, and they take care of me. They are the most freedom I've felt here, where I'm assigned drivers and surrounded by guards, at my house, my friends' houses, at the malls and restaurants, where the streets are full of militarized cops, where I'm forbidden by my employer to take public transportation (I sometimes take an auto-rickshaw anyway, but never a public bus).

On the streets of Saddar, we are alone, with no guards or drivers. We walk single file on the crowded sidewalks, among the crumbling, multi-story, second-wave art decos (erected in the '40s, by architects who studied in Bombay), choking on the blue smoke from buses, our conversation drowned by our coughs, and a cacophony of honking and male voices.

We duck into claustrophobic closet-shops with western style jeans, leggings and folded salwars. Vendors' wares tumble from the sidewalk to the street—secondhand Western shoes, cheap plastic sandals, household goods, cosmetics and toys.

I'm never afraid, not about my big camera, not about anything. That's the ironic part.

On the streets in Karachi, children stare but men glance away. Cat-calling doesn't exist. Maybe because they're determined to keep purdah for me, despite my refusal to do so. Maybe because they're too disgusted by my kaffir status to meet my eye. Maybe because, in Saddar, there are no women on the streets, and no men know how to react to us. So they just don't react.

No women but Zoe and me. And neither of us are covered.

Karachi: like James Cameron

Everyone here lives like James Cameron, but A. really lives like James Cameron. (And I know how James Cameron lives, because I've been to his house twice. The first time, I didn't know where I was at. The second time, I was hired to be his children's nanny.)

I met A. at dinner at an Italian restaurant called Pompeii. It was low-lit and high-priced, with a tree growing in the middle of the softly glowing dining room. The food was the most recognizable my western palate had encountered, a month into Karachi.

My friend Z. invited me out with a few of her friends. They hadn't had a chance to get to the bootlegger, or we would have had wine. I didn't mind. I was coming off a week of food poisoning and kitchari.

Z. is tomboyishly adorable. Petite with shining hair, sans makeup but plenty of lip-gloss, she's always in jeans or leggings and an oversized button-down. She was the first girl I met here who drives herself, rather than being constantly chauffeured by a driver, and she does randomly awesome things, like perfume her room with the Jasmine bracelets teenagers sell at intersections (she sticks them between the slats of her AC), fix computers, and sets up Saturday softball games.

She's the one who told me that when I joked with my turbo-talking boss—"What are you, on coke?"—that I probably freaked him out, because actually, he is on coke and has been to rehab multiple times.

It was a completely innocent mistake on my part. But anyhow, this is not about Z..
We met three of her friends at Pompeii that night. They were dolled up and seeped in privilege, as the Pakistani girls in my impromptu social circle often are. But two of them seemed as pragmatic and down to earth as Z..

Then there was A..

A. has high cheekbones and an amazing mass of soft, heavy hair that she piles on top of her head in a messy-chic bun. Her skin is perfect. Her make-up dutifully accomplishes the there-but-bare thing; her eyebrows are perfectly shaped. She's been in Karachi five years. I'm not sure what her father does, but something that makes him obscene amounts of money.
A. was born in Saudi Arabia, where her mother had to call her father's office to send over a driver each time she ran out of milk; attended elementary in Switzerland, where she developed an affinity for skiing and setting perfect nine-course tables; high school in Dubai, where she met the evangelical children of engineers from Texas and marveled at how self-regulated they were, how much more conservative than her Muslim friends; and fashion college in Canada. She says she's exactly the same person at 29 that she was at 17 and that three of her closest friends have family names that top the Forbes 400 list.

A. does nothing but sunbathe, work out and design clothes for herself and her mother, which her personal tailor then makes. Sometimes she goes to the fabric market herself. Often she sends one of "the boys." It's important to note that the boys are actually

men, but they might as well be accessories—a host of drivers, guards and gofers that rich people collect here, like handbags.

I secretly suspect A.'s bored.

When I mention needing clothes, she coolly but quickly offers to accompany me to the fabric market, so we meet again a few days later.

We visit an air conditioned fabric boutique inside an upscale mall. A. has the shopkeeper pull out bolt after bolt of the sheerest, softest silk. She drapes a gorgeous gold piece halter-style around my neck, explaining how it would fall as a summer dress.

I watch in the full-length mirror. I look like I'm going to prom. I will never have an occasion to wear the $2,000 dress we can make me for a mere $100. Not to mention that $100 is pretty much all I can spend.

I'm hedging on the price, and she can tell, so we head next door to the fabric market proper, and as A. blazes a trail through bolts of chiffon, silk and lawn. I follow and point and watch yards of fabric being ripped and bagged. As I clutch the sticky plastic handles and hand over 500rps, I wonder if I'm buying my vision or hers.

A. speaks authoritatively and abrasively to the shopkeepers, bargaining them down in rapid Urdu, then turning to me in rapid English to report the final sum, and then always, unfailingly and unsmilingly, thanking them before we move on.

A. is what books call "well-bred," which for some reason always makes me think of poodles. But she isn't anything like a poodle. Maybe more of a perfectly designed robot.
We buy purple linen, which the shopkeeper says is exactly what Armani uses, and A. is convinced it's true. A. thinks I should make a shirtdress. I'm fascinated by the variations in the weave, the way it's subtly thinner in places, but you could never call it patchy. A. tells me never to machine wash it.

Then we buy some floral printed chiffon with golden accents. I picture something Grecian, loose all around but slightly cinched at the waist, maybe a scoop neck,

sleeveless but with wide shoulders. She's describing something fitted to the waist, cowl necked and flared. We may have different aesthetics.

We buy gingham silk, lace trim, dark lawn for a traditional kurta. A. passes all the packages to her guard to carry.

The air in the fabric market is oppressive and still. A shopkeeper offers water. I refuse, not sure where it's coming from. A few minutes later, he reappears and hands A. an icy, sealed bottle of Nestle. I wish I hadn't refused.

At her house later, at a monstrous estate behind a border fence (like most of the homes I visit, but bigger), I'm checking out the art. A.'s house is like a private gallery, and all of the walls have paintings of women.

There are women in tribal dress, clustered around a supine woman on a bed. There's a single woman lounging in an armchair. There's a group of women on a couch, leaning on each other. There are women sprawled on blankets and women with babies. There's even a topless woman and another woman with a kurta that dips open all the way down her back, almost to her ass.

"That's Iqbal Hussain. My father 'sponsored' him," A. says. "All of those women are prostitutes in Lahore."

A. tells me Iqbal Hussain is famous and wealthy now, but when he was just starting out, the poor progeny of a sex worker, her father bought a lot of his work.

We sit in A.'s personal living room, a small space separate from her family's living space, and eat finger sandwiches made of cream cheese and organic chicken.

Her bedroom suite is a three room affair. The first room has two gigantic closets and her bed. The second has another sitting space and four closets. The third room is a large bath.
These closets are shallow but long (two take up full walls each), and some of them have multiple levels of hanging rods. The clothes are organized. There's an entire closet of eastern formal wear for weddings and charity benefits. There's another closet for more

casual eastern wear. There’s a closet for kurtas and button downs, a section of European and American designer jeans. Tomorrow A. leaves for a trip to London, simply to buy new clothes for a wedding.

Anna talks about money constantly and unapologetically. When I tell her the closets make me think of reality TV, "The Simple Life" maybe, she’s offended and says, “The most dignified people I know are my grandparents’ servants. They’re in their 90’s and only own a few outfits, but they carry themselves with respect.”

She says suffering is all about perspective and argues that the time she couldn’t buy $25 shoes (she was in university and fighting with her parents, so they held out that month's stipend) was as upsetting for her as it would be for a poor person who wanted a new pair of plastic sandals that they couldn’t afford.

A. argues, but she always remains polite, always says thank you. One doesn’t get chummy with A.. In fact, she rarely smiles. Or at least, she rarely smiles spontaneously. When she smiles, it’s a polite gesture, part of the overall performance.

Before I leave, A. lends me a black linen kurta for my trip up north, because I’m worried about not being able to do laundry and not having enough clothes to not reek the whole trip.
Once A.’s gone and before I go, Z. and I are with a big group of people I don’t know at the Korean restaurant in Clifton (which is simply called Korean Restaurant), a dive with immediate cramp-inducing food that we frequent only because they serve beer to anyone, without checking identity cards to make sure they’re non-Muslim first.

“What’s the deal with A.?” I ask Z..

“What do you mean?”

“She’s nice and super polite, but she seems so mechanical. Like she never shows any true emotion."
Z. drains the rest of her beer, from the only brewery in the country, the Parsi-owned Murree Brewery, established in 1860. (Someone told me the beer is processed with formaldehyde, but I can’t be sure.)

“You know where A. is right now?” she asks.

“London. Just because she needs clothes for a wedding. Because an entire closet full of formalwear isn’t enough.”

“So that’s what she told you?" Z. laughs. "A.’s been involved in a secret love affair for pretty much a decade.”

“What?” I’m kind of flabbergasted. I can’t picture imperturbable A. wanting anything she can’t have or buy.

“She met him in the UK, and he’s Parsi and lives in India. Her parents don’t know, I don’t know why. I think she thinks they’d disapprove, because he’s Indian. Or maybe because he’s Parsi…Once I asked if he was married, and she got all annoyed and extra polite, you know. Like she does. Anyhow, they meet up a few times a year in London.”

I take a sip of my own Murree and suddenly feel sad for the rich girl who has it all, including the Pakistani citizenship that precludes her from following her lover to India or him from following her here, and the "secular" father who's financial situation she flaunts, who supported the burgeoning career of the painter with prostitutes for muses, but who may not be willing to support his daughter’s relationship with a man on the “wrong” side of Partition. If that's even what it's about.

Or may he just wouldn’t support his daughter’s relationship with a man with a wife and three kids in Delhi. Either way, sucks to be A. and stuck in Karachi, even if you have the money to fly to London just to fuck (when your parents believe you're shopping).

But it sucks worse to be poor and stuck in Karachi, to need a pair of cheap plastic sandals that you can't afford.

Sindh: flood camp

The first thing I notice is the dirt; soft, fine dirt, several inches thick. It packs beneath our tires, enveloping the car in giant puffs, settling on the windows and obstructing our view. As we step out, our feet sink.

Then there are the children, two at first: an adolescent girl with shiny black hair and a shy smile, clutching a chubby baby to her hip.

Then there are five, then a dozen. They ignore B., unpacking her filming equipment from the trunk, and cluster around me, offering tiny, sticky handshakes and vying for position in front of my camera lens.

When we play back the series of shots, they form a circle around the LCD screen, giggling bashfully. Soon they grow more bold, pointing to themselves to request pictures, making faces, posing with their friends or alternatively shoving each other out of the frame.

Sometimes I try to whip the camera around and clandestinely shoot over their heads, but it's impossible to get candid shots. *Cest la' vie.* They're adorable, they're hamming it up, and there's so many of them. No way is any move I make going unnoticed.

A slight girl in a tie-dyed dupatta approaches B. with an outstretched hand and a grin of recognition.

She's Miriam, and she's 18. She was about to sit for her matrix exams before the flood displaced 20 million Pakistanis. Now she teaches the children at the camp school, a walled in area with a swing-set and play fort.

Miriam leads us to her family's living space. Like the school, the plot is delineated with brown clay walls, but living spaces have blankets strung across the entrance for privacy. Inside, there's a cook fire in a corner, a line for drying clothes, a collection of plastic water jugs and a few cots. A few plots have one-room houses made of the same clay bricks, but nine months after the flood, most people still live in tents.

In the space that Miriam shares with her parents, grandmother and six siblings, there are a couple of tents.

With a bit of encouragement, the women disappear into the shade and returned with beautiful hand-embroidered clothes. They spread them on a cot for B. and I to admire. My hand moves towards a soft crème-colored cotton with purple embroidery. It's still on the loom.
The women are proud of their handiwork. They make a bit of cash tailoring for their extended families, outside of the camp.

The women cluck at B. and me, our plain garments. Miriam's grandmother, a sassy lady with high cheekbones and orange, henna-dyed hair, grabs one of my sleeves and pantomimes ripping it up.

Somewhere there's a plaintive cat meowing. In the corner, a toddler squats on his haunches, intent at banging a metal spike into the ground.
The grandmother is as dramatic as the children. She strikes poses: a large basket balanced on a hip, firewood lifted dramatically overhead, an exaggerated gesture while ladling the milk and boiling water.

A ripped plastic chair is brought out for me, and Miriam's 14-year-old cousin visiting from Karachi, tentatively tries out her English.

"Your name?" she asks.

"Cheree," I tell her.

"Shar-ree," she repeats slowly.

"Yours?" I ask.

Rashmi, in grade 8, but we can't get much beyond that.

Everyone clusters in the cooking corner as the grandmother distributes chai in a variety of mugs. Even the toddler gets a mug.

My camera is passed around, and a few of the slight teenage girls experiment with shooting.
The women joke in a jumble of Urdu and Sindhi, as the grandma tosses her hair and primps for the camera. They want copies of the pictures on a jump drive. Obviously, these women are more technologically savvy than their circumstances would lead one to assume.

"You are surprised to see that we are happy," Miriam says. "We are flood refugees, but we have everything we need here. The government has helped a lot."

Before we leave, we visit the home of an elder and Sufi mystic.

On the walk over, we pass some men building a latrine. They cluster around a square hole, roughly the size of a cot. A man inside the hole is busy with a shovel.

The elder has one of the few houses, rather than a tent. We slip off our shoes and sit cross-legged on a small blanket on the ground (the Sufi way is the ground, not chairs, because humility), and his wife puts on water for chai. Then she brings the jug around.

We hold our hands just beyond the blanket, and she pours a bit of water over them, rinsing away dust. There's no running water here. It all has to be carried by hand from a well. A dish of lentils and some gummy bread is placed in front of us. I can feel the grit of the dust between my teeth, but I like the texture and the undercooked quality of the bread.
We're pied pipers. Our parade of children arrange themselves on a brick platform just beyond the blanket. At first they whisper among themselves, but as the elder begins to speak, they grow respectfully quiet.

His voice is melodic and hypnotizing. His gestures are expressive, and his posture—feet drawn to his haunches, knees perpendicular to his body—is basically a yogic squat.

I have no idea how old he is. He seems both ancient and ageless. As the sky darkens, he breaks into a song, weaving a tale of the creation of the earth, the journey of the saints and the divine spark within every being that has life.

I think of Dionysius, of Babylonia, of the Buddha. Everything is energy and we are just conduits. Our memories are myth and vessel and form.

I am intent on the rhythm of his voice. I lean towards him, forgetting the children, his wife, the brick walls, the camp.

It's just the three of us on this blanket: the wandering gori and the girl from Karachi, who has climbed the highest mountains, broken so many taboos, whose body I've recently been traveling on plundered nights, and this man making this divinity incarnate. We are the whole world. We are the mountaintop his voice is creating.

I glance up, admire the full moon reflecting off purple clouds. Suddenly the blanket seems small and adrift, and we are specks.

I can't believe I'm here, in this land without light, this land of moonglow and magic. The sun sets completely, and we get up to leave.

B. makes all the polite gestures, refusing dinner, clasping hands, and I flip through some pics for the kids and briefly wonder what everyone does without electricity. Tell stories maybe. Sleep. Fuck.

There is controversy here, where they say they're happy, in this place that they say they want to stay. Controversy over flood victims living off the government when maybe they could go home, controversy over debts and exploitative feudal landowners (the camps allow rare escape), controversy over setting up a new, permanent haven in this desert of dust. And the deeper you dig, the more conflicted the story of this group, in particular, as well as the story, in general.

("They don't want to go home. The camps are getting too permanent. They want to keep living off of government money," one wealthy auntie grumbled last week, when I visited a friend at her family's home.)

But then, this is Pakistan—a heady cocktail of magic, controversy and contradiction.

Karachi: Shrine

Her name is Shazia and she comes from Hyderabad. She calls me over to ask if I'm doing research. I tell her I'm in the city as a journalist, but in the shrine as a tourist. She's wary at first, but then she rewards my smile with her own, and soon she is spilling her guts.

This is the third day she comes to this shrine, and she'll be back tomorrow. She has "many helping hands, many helping hands," but they're not able to handle her problems, she says. She didn't ask to be born, so it's Allah's responsibility to help her. And I am a guest in her country, so it's her responsibility to help me.

She takes a crumpled, half-finished packet of biscuits from her purse. I gnaw on one, mostly out of politeness. It's slightly sweet, stale and seedy. She looks like Bjork in a hijab. She hugs her knees to her chest. She must be tiny. I am 5 feet flat and, sitting cross-legged, I have to slump to be eye to eye with her.

She comes to be near the people who are close to God, she says. But I should really be careful and heed the advice of the girl from Texas, the one just here, who told me to dress in salwar kameez and cover my head. And—she fixes me in her gaze—trust no one. "You see me sitting here alone? I don't trust any Pakistanis, but especially not any men."

She seems so set against trusting man that I wonder what he did to her, and if that's why she's here. She's unmarried and seems too devout for anything to have been consensual. There's a scar in her nose where a ring used to be. That ring traditionally means virginity, but I'm not sure if that's still the assumption…and she doesn't share details, so I should quit assuming.

She works for the government, but every 10 days or so she goes home to Hyderabad. I think she's collecting data, or maybe she's still a student—sometimes she speaks so softly, it's difficult to understand. Her bare feet are small and pale, paler than her face. She seems so earnest and fragile.

"You weren't frightened to come here?" she asks.

I'm not sure if she means Pakistan or the shrine. I feel the shrine swaying, nearly imperceptibly beneath us. I've felt this way since I came in, but Karachi doesn't have earthquakes. I think it's the knowledge that this place has already been bombed twice, that it could easily be bombed again.

Another woman moves near, as if to eavesdrop on our conversation. Everybody everywhere is curious about me. So then Shazia speaks even more softly. She asks what my name means—I say "beloved, in French"—and tells me that Shazia means "rare, unique."

The woman's two tots run back and forth, ignoring her fervent efforts to shush them.

Women and men pray separately here. The women are mostly in burqas, some of them veiled. But a few even have bare heads. They take prayer books from the shelf, press their backs against the walls, furrow their brows in concentration. The primary saint of this shrine is supposed to be Muhammad's brother, or someone important in the lineage.

"He protects the city from the sea," Shazia tells me. "Every time there's a storm, we pray that he will keep Karachi safe." So far, so good. Even last year's floods devastated rural Sindh but left Karachi intact.

A family friend is in the hospital and Shazia hasn't told him she's in town, though at some point today she will visit him.

"But if he knew I came here, he would want to know what troubles me," she explains.

This girl, hunched over with the weight of what? She can't be older than 21.

Fatima, the girl from Texas, is an engineering student who came for her wedding, even though her immediate family lives in the States. Her palms still bear the mendhi of a bride. In prayer she bows and rises rhythmically, explaining to me that she came here last year too, and that some people from Denmark came here for healing and that it worked, even though they weren't Muslim.

The people file past the red shroud, hands open in supplication—women on one side, men in the other. The old man in the prayer cap spreads the rose petals and directs the crowd. All of this takes place under an elaborate, glittering ceiling. I think of stars, I think of Nefer—didn't she say her grandfather is buried here? But the only graves I see are those of the saints.

My driver is waiting in the co-ed area. I step out of the women's room and follow him down the stairs to retrieve our shoes.

Karachi: Seaview

Just spent weeks traveling the Hindu Kush, traipsing along the world's ceiling, but now I'm back. It's a balmy night, the air once again soft on my bare arms like a caress. I missed this place, with the unwashed masses and fragrant camel dung. Thousands of clamped shells strew across soggy sand, crunching like something living underfoot (because they are? I think maybe), keeping company amongst trash and rotting garbage, half-visible in the cold glow from carts— ice-cream, deep-fried puri, laser-kite vendors. Plastic as fluid, lapping my ankles, practically organic, it's so melded with the ocean. Roll after roll of eerie white rhythm—how visceral this place, roses and jasmine to disguise the immediateness of wafting life, the charred remains of roasted corn. Women in burquas, women in shalwar kameez, wet to the knees, happily trailing dupattas. The wind. The bikes. The stadium lights flickering with power surges. In the barely-there fluorescence, the shells glow like lunar terrain, but it seems artificial. A Hollywood set from the '50's. The beginning of summer in Karachi. Heady, dirty, whimsical, real. Gori, welcome home.