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LEVEL

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CHAPTER ONE
Gouripur, East Pakistan, 1967

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’ll take her to the city,” said Mumtaz.

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

Later, Hamid came to look at Nazneen.

“A girl,” said Rupban.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

Tower Hamlets, London, 1985

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” said Razia. “But it was an accident.”

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

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When Nazneen is 18, she marries a much older man and moves from Bangladesh to England to be with her husband. But Brick Lane in London is very different from Nazneen's village, and she speaks no English. Nazneen must try to look after her family and get used to a new, and very strange, country.

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S	Pre-A1	400-600	350
1	A1	1,000-1,600	550
2	A1+	3,000-5,000	700
3	A2	7,000-10,000	1,000
4	A2+	11,000-14,000	1,200
5	B1	15,000-18,000	1,600
6	B1+	18,000-22,000	2,000
7	B2	22,000-26,000	2,500

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