

# 1

There is nothing like dream to create the future.  
Utopia today, flesh and blood tomorrow.  
— VICTOR HUGO

## *Diana meets Pervez and the Moosa Kick*

It was a Wednesday afternoon, the 2nd or 3rd of July 1974. Sombre and noteworthy to say the least. An awkward uneasiness hovered over the spottily lit room. Pervez Chiragi, renegade poet, Sufi nonwhirler in exile and soon to be father, noticed Diana McLaren cruise gently into the waiting room of Dr Senecal's clinic at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. She carried a small briefcase and wore a pair of brown-framed glasses low over her nose in a puckish manner. She had on a black skirt and a black blouse, and a burgundy scarf tied fashionably around her neck. Taking a sweeping glance at everyone in the room, she settled down into one of the black vinyl chairs with chrome legs. The gentle hiss of air released from the compression of the foam had a very regal resonance. A perceptible impression had been made. She was not overweight, but Pervez figured she must have been around one hundred and forty pounds and perhaps thirty years old. He himself was hitting forty-eight and becoming a father at this age was no doubt a chancy turn of events. He knew it would make his already unconvincing existence more complicated. Although he was of medium build, he weighed around one hundred and eighty pounds. Curiously enough, he also was in black, sort of, wearing a pair of black cords and a dark shirt. His glasses also hung low on his nose, stylishly of course, but he had bought a pair of string ties that attached to the frame and wrapped around his

neck. That way he could switch out of them when he did not need his bifocals.

Pervez was bothered by the stillness in the room. He was not sure why this bleakness should be allowed to continue. As if this were a memorial service. Had some terrible incident taken place? And people unknown to each other were assembling together to offer condolences? He mumbled an Urdu *shair* to himself in a distracted manner. He had seen it recently in some paper. *Koi patthar se na maaro mere dewane ko . . . advance technology ka zamana hai bomb se uda do saale ko . . . Don't stone my heart, it's the era of advanced technology, so just blow it up with a bomb.*

He felt he was the logical lunatic in the room. Someone who wondered why things should not be turned upside down. This grim silence was unbearable. Something had to be done. Someone needed to explode. A volcano should overflow. People had come here to have babies. Right? To start a new life. Why was everyone dressed in black, for that matter? Who had died? Had anyone, really? *Had mother died?* Were people waiting for a signal to start wailing? He was unsettled and disturbed. He wanted to smile, laugh at the people around him. He was having a baby! Pervez fidgeted with his newspaper. It was the Montreal Urdu weekly, which he always tried to read from one end to the other. For some reason, he could not avoid taking occasional glances at Ms McLaren. There was a notable vivaciousness that leapt out of her in spite of the controlled stateliness.

Nicole, Pervez's wife, who would be giving birth soon, was pallid and so fragile. He could not help comparing. The room was not busy and yet there was the palpable gravity. In another corner, a couple was waiting. The woman was very definitely in her eighth month. She was also wearing black, a long gownlike dress. Her husband sat with his legs crossed and continuously looked sideways at his wife's belly for signs of any movement. Pervez remembered the story about when he was a baby in his mother's womb. He had displayed significant soccer skills in a somewhat tactless and unthinking manner. His mother had fainted as a result and had to be rushed to hospital. He smiled to himself. He remembered every detail.

"*Pucho mut!*" his mother would say. "Don't talk about it! It was such a violent kick! Hai Allah! I think it was your right leg. It just bulged out for a split second. And my tummy stretched and I thought what a monster was inside me! I had to be rushed to the hospital. And *choté*

*nawab bahar nikla*, with his own agenda. The little devil!”

Pervez had liked hearing that story. Especially the “agenda” bit. And also that he had knocked out his mom with a deft right kick. It was said that he had shown the potential of a Stanley Matthews in the womb. Pervez had no clue who this Matthews fellow was. The intense nationalist upbringing under his fiercely patriotic father later induced him to search for a well-known Indian soccer player to be compared with. Eventually he settled for the famous Moosa who played in the Calcutta Indian Football Association League. He reportedly had an explosive half-volley kick and anybody caught at close quarters in the path of the ball would end up with severe midsection trauma for a week. So, whenever his mother would recount this kick-from-the-womb story to visitors, Pervez would end it with a flourish, saying, “And it was like a Moosa half-volley!”

As Pervez sat there, waiting for Dr Senecal to advise him about the imminent arrival of Claude, he could not help noticing that Ms McLaren had pulled out a Bengali newspaper and was reading it. An incredible and strange development, no doubt. But, for the logical lunatic, this was an explosive development. It could not be ignored. Here he was reading a local Urdu paper and she had pulled out a Bengali paper! How uncanny! With traces of reddish-brown hair that sat firmly and very symmetrically on her rather European features, she did not look like a Bengali at all. The room felt darker, and despite the happy little mental excursion he had made into his childhood, Pervez felt that this birthing centre was destined to become a funeral parlour. Everyone was dressed in dark tones and the propriety was that of a dirge.



This was Pervez and Nicole’s first child. They already knew it was going to be a boy. Almost inevitably Claude would be the name—her grandfather had the same name. So far the pregnancy had not exactly been smooth. There had been no untoward complications, but Dr Senecal had in the past months stressed that Nicole’s overall constitution was on the weak side. While both of them had been taking their Lamaze schooling with the utmost seriousness, Pervez was concerned that Nicole would eventually opt for a C-section. He would understand. She was trying her best. She would stare at Pervez as he looked down at her by the bedside. She would look down at her belly and smile. The smile was

tinged with sadness. Her lips were pale and her skin seemed fluorescent. She had been advised bed rest for the last two months of her pregnancy. After spending almost seven weeks at home, she decided to check in with Dr Senecal. The doctor had admitted her immediately. The pallor of her complexion had her worried. A series of tests was being conducted. There, growing inside her was their creation. A Pakistani-Quebecer. Or, another hyphenated Canadian that would become another statistic in Quebec's battle to reverse its declining birth rate.

Nicole had met Pervez while she was working as a clerk in the Federal Immigration Offices on La Gauchetière Street. She had never met a Pakistani at close quarters and was absorbed by his sincerity, tenacity and eagerness as he explained to her what he was fleeing from. After several meetings across the counter like this, when he had to come to present new evidence supplied by his cousin Altaf (the fellow who had maligned him at the age of six by comparing his prebirth soccer skills to those of a certain Englishman named Matthews) he finally invited her to venture beyond the counter and join him for a soup at a nearby Chinese place, on the corner of Dorchester Boulevard. She was enamoured and intrigued by the stories he had to recount, about the way the people of the subcontinent had fought the British in the villages and fields and mountains of India and had not simply scurried around like cowards in the alleys and lanes of the big urban cities like Calcutta and Lucknow.

"It was just not like how Rudyard Kipling had put it. Kipling despised and exoticized and yet secretly cherished the ways of the native. For that matter, neither was it like what that much glorified and shapeless ogre, Winston Churchill had to say. Churchill was arrogant and racist and he simply covered up his overall inferiority complex with erudite sayings. That's all."

Whenever he got a chance to display his anti-British feelings, Pervez never missed the opportunity to bring up these two personalities. His energetic recountings of British oppression attracted Nicole to Pervez enormously. From the initial meet at the Chinese soup bowl place, they went on to Berber, Afghan, Moroccan, and Vietnamese places and of course fearlessly onwards to countless Indian curry joints, along the Main. All these adventures beyond the immigration counter were an exhilarating experience for Nicole. Like a walk in the park on a misty Montreal morning, after spending days in a dank apartment. She had not only stepped out of a certain cocoon she inhabited, but had also

come to know people with an entirely different emotion than what she had been exposed to. Pervez would josh her continuously that there was a world outside rue St-Denis, Ft Lauderdale, and Cancun. Nicole would rebut that she would not be caught dead walking around the insane streets of Karachi with pyjama-clad men toting automatics under their tunics.

“Nicole, I am not saying that Karachi is a great place. How can I say that? It is full of madmen, gangsters, and arse-backward henna-bearded mullahs. Allah forbids that you ever go there! But don’t you think that even my nasal *shairs* are more intelligent and soothing than your Ginette Reno! “She could not resist this last endearing provocation and would climb into his large lap and smother him with kisses.

Following several hearings on his refugee status, Pervez, who was defending his application on his own, decided to pull out all the stops. He felt his was a genuine application and deserved a respectful hearing, as opposed to the countless Pakistani applications that stretched from the absurd to the insidious and on to the totally fraudulent.

“Everyone has a story. If you are not a patient listener, you may make serious mistakes,” Nicole warned him.

Pervez had been a poet, school teacher, and literary nutcase and had opposed the Jamaat-e-Islami fundamentalist party in Pakistan in its attempts to convert primary school curriculum. He had not only opposed them vocally at education board meetings, but he had also had a bout of insanity whereby he had made an attempt to organize the local opposition parties. He even mobilized a women’s group and got some former members of the old and defunct Workers’ Party to put on their dentures and holler in the streets in front of the Jamaat’s office. That was enough provocation for the Jamaat goons. They stormed his one-bedroom apartment and torched it. As a writer of Urdu verse and a high school literature teacher, his only possessions were his poems. As flames licked his papers with a ferocious energy, the goons also tossed some from his third-floor veranda. In no time enterprising rag pickers had snatched them up and converted them into envelopes for selling hot-fried puris and garlicky, boiled potatoes. Two days later, as he sat down in a tea-stall a stretch away from his torched home he was amused to notice that he was eating out of the lines in his poems.

“I have neither learned to love nor to dream of it, but in my every word you find some meaning, while reality suffers pointlessly.” Had he actually written such nonsense? As Urdu couplets go, however, it made

complete sense. A phoney metaphor to start with, followed by a couple of colourful lines and then ending up at an even more confusing metaphor about repressed love. As he waited for his bus in the sweltering heat of a Karachi afternoon, the shawl wrapped around his head could hardly conceal his identity. He stared at the paper pile on the chaiseller's counter and could not help but see more of his writings staring at him, pleading as it were. Help was not at hand. The moment the Jamaat goons had broken into his apartment, and he saw his pages floating down from the balcony, black smoke coming out of the windows, he knew his days as a writer of Urdu couplets in Pakistan were over. He was on the move. Man on the run. His life-long writings were now history. It did not matter. He could easily write more, but not any more in this town.

He had been waiting for almost half an hour, when a group of plain-clothes policemen appeared from nowhere, lifted him up bodily and threw him onto the back of a police Jeep. For the next fifteen days he remained in police custody, no explanations. Pervez was hung upside down from a ceiling fan, as it slowly rotated. As the officer in charge was not really interested in interrogating him, he would send in a Pathan havildar every half-hour to poke a baton, generously coated with chilli powder, into Pervez's arse and then whack him on his buttocks or just squeeze his testicles and twist them around till the testicles appeared on top and the penis at the bottom. Of course, it did not matter really what was up and what was down, being suspended upside down. Pervez would float in and out of consciousness and the psychological consequences of an inverted male organ seemed marginal to his concerns. They would revive him by throwing cold water on his face and then the insertion would start again. Fortunately, one of his colleagues named Reshma from the noncertified Teacher's Union, whose father was some sort of a retired police officer, arranged for Pervez's release, without any record of his detention. He was however told very curtly by the police officer that he would be found dead on the streets of Karachi very soon. That very same week in 1970 Pervez went to Lahore and saw his mother, explained his circumstances, borrowed twenty thousand rupees from cousin Altaf, bid goodbye to Reshma, his long-time platonic lover, and departed for London.

Despite the tension and nervousness he was experiencing waiting for Dr Senecal to come in through those large greenish blue doors, he could not contain his curiosity about the Bengali paper-reading woman who sat across from him, occasionally chewing her nails, elegantly of course.

Finally he got up and went over to her and asked in his nasal voice, "Pardon me Madam, but I have been watching you reading this paper in Bengali and I could not control my curiosity. I know it is very impolite, but where did you learn the language?"

Diana McLaren smiled the most glamorous smile that Pervez had ever encountered and replied, "Oh! Not at all! I have a friend in London, who has been teaching me the language. Do you know Bengali?"

The man who had delivered the Moosa kick from the womb several decades ago now felt a deeper emotion hit him in a resounding manner somewhere between his heart and his midriff.

"It is a beautiful language. I know only a few words," he replied, recovering. "We are here to have our first child. My wife is about to deliver."

Diana understood. Her mind drifted a while. He would be leaving the clinic with a baby. She would be leaving without one.

Pervez went back to his chair, feeling firmly in his heart that no, *mother did not die today*. This was not a funeral. No one got shot in the beach because of the glaring sun. There was reason in life, at least some transient sensibility, and no one needs to feel like a stranger, an outsider, just because the act of birthing can sometimes be so irrational and even mesmerizing. The black dresses in the room had no significance. He was not going to feel like a foreigner. His son, Claude, was on the way any moment and he had just met Diana, a vivacious contrast to the rest of the room. As a poet and soul-stirrer, Pervez had no inclination for the love and devotion aspect of sufism. He simply loved the transient nature of existence. He promptly wrote down on the ragged edges of the newspaper a line ascribed to the Prophet. "Be in this world as if you are a traveller, a passerby, with your clothes and shoes full of dust. Sometimes you sit under the shade of a tree, sometimes you walk in the desert. Be always a passerby, for this is not home."

Diana thought about him, as she drove home that afternoon. Curious, attentive, and warm. That Pervez. Warm and majestic man. She felt she needed to know him more. She had just come back from a momentous trip to India, with a halt in England, where she had gone to research her family history. Pervez seemed like an earthy man, read to

converse, full of energy, and very knowledgeable about the subcontinent. He had voluntarily given his telephone number, told her about the South Asian newspapers in Montreal. “All mainly sari, spice and travel agency sponsored nonsense. No content! But, it is entertainment, believe me!” She had tucked away the telephone number in her purse.

The silk in her hair swirled around in the car breeze.