

*Haven*

**Anisa Mustafa**

I met Nicolas after a disappointing date with Pascal. I had been warned Pascal was 'hard work,' but relished the challenge. Newly single, I needed any antidote to the lingering bitterness in my mouth. There was something enigmatic about Saad's half-French older cousin, who drove a shiny red sports car and disparaged the locals for being so 'provincial.' That much arrogance warranted some curiosity. It turned out, below the bluster there were no hidden depths. After an evening of learning more about the complexities of HR management than I ever needed to know, the ensuing silence was a relief. A few weeks later, at a small gathering in Saad's living room, Pascal strolled in with Nicolas by his side, who he introduced as a friend of a friend from Paris. As Nicolas seemed to have rudimentary English, Pascal started off explaining what was being said but soon got bored.

'I need to pick up some papers from the office, do you guys mind keeping Nicolas company.'

He was already upright, jangling car keys in his hand, which made his request seem more like a directive.

As soon as Pascal left, Nicolas perked up. He started asking questions in halting but passable English, pausing to conjure the correct words when unsure.

'So you and Pascal.....?'

'Yes, cousins. Pascal's Dad is my Mum's brother,' Saad explained in his thick American accent, acquired while studying for his undergraduate degree at UCLA.

'But you both live in here,' Nicolas said pointing to the floor.

Saad chuckled, understanding the Frenchman's confusion.

'Yes, this is my Grandmother's house and we both live here,' he said.

Nicolas was fascinated by the extended family living arrangements, which he compared to last century European aristocrats. The house in Lahore's desirable leafy suburb of Gulberg, was built in the 1950s art deco style popular in post-colonial Pakistan. Spacious rooms with high ceilings and breezy columned verandas at the front and back of the house, gardens and pathways wrapped around it. It was a house big enough to accommodate the discrete lives of different generations of the family. Saad and his parents occupied the east wing, while Pascal's bedroom was on the west wing next to the old matriarch.

Saad had started a small boutique on one side of the house, selling trendy outfits made from hand-loom printed fabrics. After his textile-design degree, Saad had defied convention and better career prospects in America by returning home. It was the mid-1990s, satellite dishes and MTV was new, everything American was the vogue and Saad wanted to sell the dying tradition of hand-printed fabrics to Lahore's haute monde. Luckily, for him and his village craftsmen, his ideas for indigenous revival caught on. I met him when my newspaper sent me to interview him for our fashion pages. We hit it off instantly.

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When Saad was called away to take a phone call on the landline, Nicolas turned to me.

'You and him, you are not...?'

'No, I'm not his sister, cousin, aunty, lover, wife or anything. Just friends.'

He grinned and winked, as if a joke had been shared.

'So, what do you do in Paris?'

He laboriously conveyed what sounded like a degree in art history and a desire to see more of the world before settling into a job. I guessed that he was probably a few years younger than me, in his early twenties. Average height and weight, dark blonde wavy hair, light brown, mischievous eyes. His was not a handsome face, but it radiated warmth and humour. After a while he became curiously attractive. The conversation veered from Paris to things to do in Lahore.

'Not much,' Saad said, hearing the last bit of the exchange. 'This is pretty much it.'

Nicolas blinked in an exaggerated show of puzzlement.

'We might go to a hotel or café later, but yah, getting together like this is the main thing, or sometimes there are dance parties.'

The blinking continued when Nicholas learnt there were no bars or pubs serving alcohol. He had clearly not done his homework very well. The realisation that he might not be able to drink for a month visibly perturbed him. He was slumped in a chair with a perplexed expression when Pascal returned.

'What have you done to him,' he asked with a glint in his eye.

We were all struggling to contain our laughter. To turn up in Pakistan without knowledge of its prohibition laws. Saad explained.

'Shall we put him out of his misery or let him suffer for a bit,' Pascal said.

'Ignore them,' I said. 'Everyone drinks, but only in private houses, not in restaurants or cafes. You can probably get alcohol from one of the big hotels with your French passport. Foreigners are allowed to drink, but not in public.'

Nicolas beamed again and gave me another conspiratorial wink. Clearly a French thing.

Later that night, we ended up at the five-star Pearl Continental Hotel near the old city. This was where all the late-night revellers gathered to wind down after house parties. Nicolas became alert and watchful as Lahore gentry turned up flashing designer labels in their SUVs and Mercedes. He had heard Pakistan was a poor country, yet here he was sipping creamed coffee at Paris prices, in shiny, air-conditioned luxury.

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Over the next month I saw a lot of Nicolas. Pascal had little interest in the uninhibited Frenchman with his feverish lust for everything new. Nicolas' unbridled playfulness seemed to irritate Pascal who cultivated an air of self-assurance and refinement. Everyone else found Nicolas endearing. We were more than happy to show him the delights of Lahore. We took him to the old city to eat authentic street food, a rite of passage followed by a trip to Main Market to get diarrhoea tablets for the ensuing night.

We took him on moonlit boat rides across the River Ravi, to the small island with the Mughal summer pavilion, an experience that delighted him beyond words. We did the circuit of all the late-night hotels and restaurants frequented by the city's cognoscenti. We did the usual tourist trips to the Badshahi Mosque, the museum, the Shalimar and Lawrence Gardens. He wanted to see where Lahoris shopped, so we took him to the bustling, odorous Anarkali market, where Nicolas was thrilled to have his bum pinched twice by male admirers.

A couple of weeks into his stay Nicolas announced he may have to return earlier than planned because the hotel was costing more than he had budgeted for. Saad wouldn't hear of it.

'Move to my place, we have plenty of rooms. Can't let you leave so soon.'

The offer was swiftly accepted. We celebrated, with bootlegged vodka and 7-up on ice, late into the night. Widespread relief. We were as enchanted with Nicolas as he was enamoured with Lahore. He made us laugh with his incessant child-like curiosity about local practices and codes. He kept us on our toes with his outrageous bluntness.

'Do you think that lady is a virgin?' he asked at an engagement party when he saw the betrothed couple on the dance floor.

'Why don't you go and ask,' Saad said.

'Saad, you idiot,' I said, pulling Nicolas back from the challenge.

I think he got off on trying to shock us, as much as we got off on teasing and testing him. To his eyes, the circles we moved in must have appeared so emancipated and westernised, he felt completely at home. Yet there were constant and confounding reminders of his foreignness. Like when people slipped seamlessly from English into Urdu. Like when he wanted to meet Saad's Grandmother to thank her for her hospitality but was told this was out of the question. Grandmother was not in purdah, but it would be inappropriate for Saad's male friends to meet her.

'Can she meet your Grandmother?' he asked, pointing to me.

'Err...yes she probably can, but I don't think she has,' Saad looked at me. I nodded.

Our segregated lives, with generations, classes and genders cleaved into different realms, made little sense to Nicolas, but he did not let this trouble him too much. He was having

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the time of his life, relishing the comforts of Saad's household. Food and refreshments on tap, washed and ironed clothes appearing by magic. His only disappointment was the increasing unlikelihood of fulfilling a fetish to sleep with a 'Muslim' woman. This is one wish none of us felt we could help with. I had no idea how to explain the complex sexual codes of our world, which I knew instinctively but found impossible to explain to an outsider.

When the time finally came for Nicolas to fly back to Paris, Saad invited a few friends over to say farewell. Pascal wandered into the dining room, where everyone was filling their plates with hot and cold snacks. He surveyed the room in bafflement.

'I heard all these voices across the corridor and wondered what was going on. Thanks for my invitation, it must have gotten lost in the post,' Pascal said.

'Oh, I didn't know you were around, didn't you say you were going to Islamabad for a week?'

'That was last month Saad,' Pascal said with a raised eyebrow, not quite grasping how this line of argument was not casting him in a good light.

Nicolas stepped forward and grabbed Pascal's hand energetically, telling him in French something that seemed to placate him. Pascal chatted to Nicolas for five minutes, nibbled at a few crisps and then left with a supercilious look on his face, mumbling something about *some of us having to work for a living*. Later when many of the guests had left, a few of us retired to the room at the front of the house, where Nicolas had been sleeping for the last two weeks.

'What did you say to Pascal,' I asked. Nicolas knew immediately what I was referring to.

'I said, thank you for introducing me to your wonderful family and friends. I will let Cyril know what a kind and generous host you are.'

We all laughed at Pascal's vanity that allowed sarcasm to pass for flattery.

'Your last night in Lahore Nico, we are really going to miss you,' said Saad with a sad face, expressing what we were all feeling.

Nicolas leapt up dramatically and took an exaggerated bow.

We talked and laughed without realising the time, till the night slipped through the streaks of daylight in the dawn sky. When birds began to chirp outside the window, I noticed that Nicolas and I were alone. Tipu and Bunny had left an hour ago and Saad had fallen asleep on the bed. We were on the floor, reclining on cushions with morning light casting a peachy haze. As I turned to look out the window, I heard a shuffle and then suddenly Nicolas was a lot closer. He sat on his haunches gazing down. I waited for him to say something. I was used to his dramatic style.

'I do not want to leave,' he pleaded. 'I want to stay here with you.'

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'Awww... that's so sweet Nico. We will miss you so much you know,' I said, lifting myself to his level. I leaned forward and gave him a hug but as I started to draw back, his arms circled my waist and he placed his lips directly on my mouth. I froze. He pulled back and slumped back on his floor cushion, looking dejectedly at the floor. I laughed.

'It's ok, no harm done,' I said, relieved to see Saad was still fast asleep, gently snoring.

'You don't understand. I am in love with you, I don't want to leave you.'

The words were clear but unfathomable. Why was he saying this? How did he expect me to respond? Was it a joke, a test, an experiment? I was a long way from my last sleep, my faculties were fraying. I stared at the glowing pools of light on the floor. My next move was nothing more than self-consciousness and confusion parading as self-assurance. I kissed him full on his mouth. His lips opened with welcome warmth as our tongues met and circled in a playful game. We fell back on to the cushions, bodies entwined, kissing, exploring, tasting. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, we had virtually lived together this last month. A lovely friendship consecrated with a parting kiss.

Then there was nothing platonic about the kissing which passed from playful to full blown fervour. I felt a surge of blood all over my body when he pressed down, hands and tongues everywhere. A door banged somewhere in the house, startling us both. I pushed Nicolas off and sat up. Saad was still issuing little rumbles of slumber.

I cupped my mouth. Nicolas stared at me with a silly smile on his face. I looked away, unable to work out if he was gloating or shamefaced.

'I'd better go home,' I whispered, pushing myself up to standing.

'Nooooo, you can't go,' he said, gripping my wrist. 'Stay, come to bed with me.'

'What? On that bed, with Saad? A threesome?'

'We can go to Saad's bedroom,' he said.

'Errr... no I'm going to go home,' I said and started looking around for my handbag and shoes.

He got up and followed me to my car, looking forlorn. I patted his cheek, got in my car and drove away. I could see his still figure in my rearview mirror. My head was a storm, thick and foggy, body swamped with adrenaline. Sleep would be challenging.

I drove back to Saad's house the next afternoon, as planned, to join the entourage taking Nicolas to the airport. I felt sure the early morning encounter had been a blip, a natural eruption of emotions around the impending departure and the end of a lovely spring interlude. Nicolas gave no indication anything had changed. I felt a massive wave of relief replace the tight mass in my chest.

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We piled into Tipu's little Suzuki and set off for the airport on the outskirts of the city. Instead of long-stay parking, because it was getting late for the flight, Tipu pulled up into a drop-off bay outside Departures. Everyone hugged Nicolas, said mournful goodbyes and got back in the car. Nicolas watched us drive off with his suitcase beside him and a swarm of porters closing in, to fight over his custom.

The journey back to chez Saad was a lot less animated than the one in the other direction. We were all tired from last night's revelry, but also weighed down by the end of something extraordinary. We understood the intensity with which we had lived in the last month could not be sustained but the prospect of returning to the mundanity of our lives was deflating.

'Do you think we'll ever see him again,' Tipu said after we'd dropped Bunny off at his house.

'I don't know. He loved Lahore, but I think he's the kind of guy that tells all the girls he loves them the most,' Saad said, making us chortle.

'Come in for a cup of tea before you go home,' Saad suggested. I was tired but understood that he didn't want to be alone. We followed him into the room where a few hours earlier Nicolas and I had been rolling around on the floor. Seeing the cushions still scattered on the carpet I blushed and tried to suppress a surge of laughter welling up in my throat. To deflect, I started singing out loud, 'Back to life, back to reality.'

The three of us had barely taken the weight off our feet when a motor rickshaw rattled loudly through the open gate and halted right in front of the window overlooking the driveway. First a suitcase appeared from the back seat and then Nicolas slid out. After payment, the rickshaw turned around and spluttered away through plumes of smoke.

Utterly stunned, we just stared out of the window. Had he forgotten something, like his passport? His flight was at 5:00 pm, it was now 4:00pm, there wasn't enough time for him to get back and make the flight. Saad finally stood up to let Nicolas into the house. A minute later they both returned in fits of laughter.

'What the hell is going on?' I asked.

'You tell me,' Saad said, flopping on the bed, laughter still forcing his shoulders to bounce.

I frowned at Nicolas, he looked back and shrugged.

'He doesn't want to go back and he says it's because of you,' added Saad, with an amused expression. I tried to control my palpitations.

Nicolas dropped into an armchair in the corner of the room, raising his arms in the air in a gesture of resignation. Oh well.

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The next hour or so was spent trying to convince Saad and Tipu that nothing of a romantic or sexual nature had passed between us, apart from the brief fumble at dawn. Saad was keen to stress his lack of stake in the matter. If we wanted to shag, it was nobody else's business but ours.

'I haven't slept with him, Saad,' I pleaded.

'But you want to,' said Nicolas, looking pleased with the effect he was having on everyone. This made me laugh, undoing any credibility remaining in my protestations of innocence.

'Do you guys need to have a chat on your own?' Saad asked. 'I'm going to see what's for dinner.'

Saad was edging his way to the door. Tipu, who was still looking a little glazed, had not caught on. Saad cleared his throat and looked at him expectantly. Tipu sprung up and followed Saad, smiling apologetically. I envied Saad's ease with the situation when my head was a hurricane.

'I'm not sure what we've got to talk about, Nicolas. We kissed, it was nice, but you're leaving.'

This reached him like a kick in the shins. His face fell and he began to stare at the ceiling as if framing his next words required divine intervention. Like an impulsive child, he had obviously not thought things through. His next move confirmed this. He swung out of the chair and knelt on one knee in front of me. I was perched on the edge of the bed. *Oh dear God he wasn't...*

'Come to France with me,' he said, looking resolute, as though he had solved some eternal cosmic puzzle. I was stumped, out of words and ideas. How to reason with an overgrown baby?

'Nicolas this is mad. Ok, let's get real, what are you going to do about getting back to France?'

'I don't know,' he shrugged. He dropped his hands on my thighs, leaning into me. I felt a current run from his hands to my flesh. I should have flung his hands away but I couldn't. He had missed a flight for me. This did not sound like a joke. Unless today was not the day he was meant to fly and all this had been a charade cooked up between him and Saad for a laugh. I dismissed this. Saad wouldn't, and I didn't think Nicolas was devious enough even if Saad might. He really was convinced he had feelings for me. A Muslim-girl novelty crush.

I let him kiss me again, enjoying the softness and fluidity of his mouth moving with mine. It was easy to swim in the lusciousness of his sea, to soar in the sumptuous heights of his sky. I felt like I was spinning in stillness and flowing in the wind. Then, I remembered where we were, the windows open, curious eyes, Grandmother, Pascal, gossip-prone staff. I pulled away and pushed him back, feeling a tug on my heart as soon as the deliciousness disappeared.

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I drove home exhausted. I was thrilled and terrified at the same time, out of my depth but stimulated by this. The next day, a working Sunday, my office phone rang after lunch.

'Hi it's me,' Saad said. 'Someone is desperate to see you. Do you have any plans to swing by later?'

'Not really no,' I replied.

'What's going on with you guys?'

'Saad I have no idea. I am really fond of him but... when is he leaving?'

'He rang the airline this morning, it's going to cost him Rs 5000 to change his ticket to next Saturday. But he is broke,' Saad paused. 'And there's more. I'll fill you in if you come round after work. Please.'

Nicolas was not his usual upbeat self when I arrived. It was the first time I had seen him so glum. He looked like a completely different person, as if reality had stripped away his holiday skin. He had called his mother but she had refused to send him the money to fly back.

This was surprising. Nicolas had told us he was close to his mother, who lived by the sea in the south of France. He lived in a flat she owned and visited occasionally in Paris. She sounded like someone who could afford to help with the fare. Nicolas was averting my gaze so I turned to Saad.

'Do you want to tell her or shall I?' asked Saad.

'I am out of cigarettes, I'm going to walk to the market,' Nicolas replied, giving Saad a nod before leaving.

Saad took a depth breath. Before speaking to his mother, Nicolas had called his long-term, cohabiting girlfriend Marie. Nicolas had told her he had met someone else and wanted to end their relationship. In a fit of rage and tears, Marie had called his mother and told her everything. By the time Nicolas got through, his mother was furious. Deal with your own mess, she had yelled down the phone. Nicolas had said she would eventually forgive him, but this could be months rather than days.

'We need to get him back to Paris don't we, for everyone's sake', I said.

'Did you know he had a girlfriend?'

'Nope, not an iota. Which is funny because he wasn't very shy about his sexual proclivities was he? All that stuff about going down on women on their periods but he forgot to mention the woman he lives with.'

The corners of Saad's mouth were quivering but he looked at me intently as if he needed my permission. I laughed, slowly shaking my head. Saad collapsed into a heap, giggling uncontrollably.

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When Nicolas returned I told him that I would lend him the money if he came with me to the airport to book his flight for next Saturday.

'Will you come with me to Paris?' he said, looking more cheerful.

'I'll think about it,' I said to appease him.

I drove Nicolas to the airport to book his outbound flight. He vowed to return the loan as soon as he got back home. Then we drove to Lawrence Gardens, a little haven in the middle of the traffic-ridden city, to make the most of the last days of cool weather. In a month the city would be a furnace by day and a sauna by night.

I led the way to a small hill in the middle of the park which had a winding path going up through trees to an opening on the top, a private enclave with benches. It was dusky and humid, with a slight breeze brushing away the sun's legacy. Nicolas was keen to explain why he had not mentioned his girlfriend to any of us. They had been together since high school, but after eight years in the relationship Nicolas felt trapped. He was terrified by the prospect of sleeping with the same woman for the rest of his life. He loved Marie but over time she had become more like a sister than a lover. This trip had been about working out what he wanted. Meeting all of us had made Nicolas feel alive again. When he first started to have erotic thoughts (about me), he had not planned to express them. Then they began to turn into something deeper, but he lacked the courage to say anything. Until that last night. Now his heart had opened, he could not stop and the feelings were... He circled his hands over his chest in a gesture that looked like he wanted to throw up. I got the gist.

The more animated he got, the less resistant I became. Words flew out of him like sparks. He would fly out to Paris next week and I would then join him. 'How soon? In a month, two months?' I laughed, rolled my eyes. His excitement was a thick wet paintbrush swishing into focus flourishing possibilities, every stroke erasing doubt and uncertainty. His arm around my shoulder pulled me in, till my head rested on the top of his chest. I thought I could hear the words coming straight up from his stomach, from the very core of him. His plan became not only plausibly plausible but possibly possible.

You don't have to take a flight because it is booked. You don't have to stay because you are there. Nicolas the fool, the clown, may be the wisest of all.

The rest of the week was spent making plans as if they were real. I went from saying I'd think about it, to contemplating dates, jobs, French lessons. The more he kissed me the less outlandish it seemed. All the while passion between us was bubbling to the boil. I wanted to sleep with him now as much as he was aching to get into my pants. The problem was we had nowhere private to unleash all these rampant hormones. I lived with my family and though I sneaked Nicolas into my room one night, the anxiety of being caught dampened desire and we couldn't do it. This was Lahore, I couldn't risk a scandal by booking us into a hotel. Everyone knew everyone and everything.

On Nicolas' last night in Lahore, we went to Tipu's house after a restaurant meal. This time his flight was in the early morning, we had to get him there by 3:00 am. I asked Tipu if Nicolas and I could be alone in his bedroom for an hour before we had to set off. Tipu and Saad agreed to go for a drive.

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Alone at last, we lay on the bed and began to undress. So much pent-up desire pulsed between us, with only an hour for fulfilment. Nicolas was about to get out of his jeans when there was an urgent knock on the door. We froze, hoping it would go away. But the knocks became more insistent. We hastily pulled our clothes back on and I opened the door. It was Saad.

'Tipu's locked his keys in the car,' he said with a grimace.

'Hasn't he got a spare?'

'Nope, the only keys to the car are in the car ignition and it's the car we need to get Nicolas to the airport in.'

I could tell from Saad's panic-stricken face he was wondering if he would ever see the back of Nicolas. The car was in the shadowy driveway, Tipu's figure next to it, hands on his head.

'Does anyone know how to break into a car?' he asked.

'Have you got a metal coat hanger?' Nicolas asked, seeing the car had a manual locking system.

Tipu shuffled off into the house to look for the right kind of clothes hanger and emerged after what felt like an absolute age. The hanger was forced to form a straight line with a hook. We all took turns trying to slide it down through the top of the car window. Half an hour later we were still trying. It seemed hopeless. No one could quite manage to grip the doorknob well enough to pull it up. At this point we were considering the possibility of looking for a taxi to get to Saad's house where my car was parked.

'Guys, guys' Saad said in a slow deliberate drawl. He had wandered round to the other side of the vehicle.

'WHAT?'

'Errr....the window on this side is open and I think I can just about put my arm down and open the lock,' he said.

There was dead silence as the door flung open and Saad leaned across the seat and opened the driver side door.

'For fuck's sake,' I said feeling like the skin of a balloon about to pop. I looked at Nicolas who smiled and shrugged. In a few hours he would be flying away to Paris and this unresolved magnetic force between us would saturate our bodies and metabolise into a toxin. We spent the next half hour sipping tea and nibbling Nice biscuits in Tipu's kitchen. This time we parked in the long stay and walked Nicolas up to departure gate. Saad and Tipu gave him long-faced hugs and then stepped back to give us some space. I patted Nicolas' shoulder but pulled away when he leaned in for more. I was not about to incite a

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riot by violating every rule of public behaviour at an airport full of gaping eyes. After an intense stare he flipped round and walked through the guarded gate, disappearing behind queues of travellers.

In the weeks that followed I decided to move to London, my place of birth. It seemed a good compromise. I could visit Paris, get to know Nicolas and his life there. When I conveyed this over the phone, Nicolas was disappointed by my lack of ambition. I bought a one-way ticket to England, not knowing what I would do for work or accommodation once I got there. I wrote to him from London, with my temporary address and number. No reply. I never saw Nicolas again, nor the money he borrowed from me.

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