

THROUGH MY EYES
series editor Lyn White

Hasina

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To the real Hasina,
who fled for her life to
the Myanmar/Bangladesh border



Myanmar is often still referred to by its former name, Burma. In this book, we use Burma to refer to the country prior to 1989. We use Myanmar to refer to the country after 1989. We use Burmese and Myanmar to refer to peoples and language of Myanmar throughout this story.



BHUTAN

INDIA

BANGLADESH



KACHIN

SAGAING

CHINA

MYANMAR

CHIN

SHAN

MANDALAY

LAOS

Teknadaung*
(Hasina's Town)

RAKHINE

Sittwe

MAGWE

KAYAH

BAGO

Bay of Bengal

YANGON

KAYIN

AYEYARWADY

MON

THAILAND

Andaman Sea

Gulf of Thailand



*The town of Teknadaung is fictional



Chapter 1



Hasina has never heard anything like this strange sound coming from the sky. *Tocata tocata tocata*. It reminds her of her mother's old sewing machine. But instead of coming from another room, it is coming from above.

She stands in the middle of her family's vegetable garden, blinking her dark eyes against the November sun, looking for the source of that sound.

Tocata tocata tocata.

The sound has distracted her from a particularly juicy geometry problem. She was pulled to the window of her home schoolroom and then out of the door and into the garden, the length of the right-angled triangle's hypotenuse left unsolved on the desk behind her.

Hasina isn't the only one drawn by the sound. Araf, her six-year-old brother, was the first outside, racing ahead of everyone. In fact, all the pupils at her Aunt Rukiah's makeshift homeschool – Tara from the end of

her road, Aman and Rosie from the next street over – are staring upwards, while the ducks and geese that roam the garden rush about their legs. All of them have left the madrassa, the schoolroom with its shady thatch roof and woven bamboo walls that catch every breeze, to stand out here in the blistering sun. Even Aunt Rukiah has been lured outside.

‘What is it, Hina?’ Araf demands. ‘Is it nagars?’

Hasina smiles.

‘No, Araf,’ scoffs their cousin Ghadiya as she limps towards them, the last one out of the madrassa. ‘It is not dragons. Dragons are not real.’

‘Are too,’ Araf mutters under his breath.

‘Maybe it is a plane?’ guesses wide-eyed Tara, fourteen years old like Hasina.

Hasina has heard the planes flying over her town of Teknadaung twice a week, from Sittwe, the capital. No plane has ever sounded like this.

‘No,’ Ghadiya corrects Tara. Ghadiya is just thirteen, but her tone is superior. ‘Not a plane either.’

Tocata tocata tocata. Like a needle going in and out of the cloth. A sewing machine in the sky. Except Hasina hasn’t heard a sewing machine for nearly four years, not since the electricity was cut. Now her mother only sews by hand.

Hasina holds up her hand to shade her eyes against the late morning sun. That is when she sees them pop into view from the north. Eight bird-like creatures.

‘There!’ Hasina cries, pointing towards the eight dots. ‘I see them.’

‘Where?’ shouts Araf. ‘*Where?*’

Hasina pulls him around in front of her and, bending low, rests her arm on her little brother’s shoulder. She makes a square shape with both her hands, framing the eight birds. ‘Look along my arm.’

Araf does, pointing his own fingers too. ‘I see them,’ he squeals. ‘I see the – the birds?’

‘No, not birds either.’ Ghadiya’s voice is wary now.

‘What are they then?’ Araf demands.

‘Helicopters,’ Ghadiya says. It sounds like a warning.

Hasina shoots her cousin a surprised glance. Even though Ghadiya and Aunt Rukiah have lived with Hasina’s family for years now, there are still things about Ghadiya that Hasina doesn’t know. How does she recognise these dots as helicopters?

‘Mama ...’ Ghadiya’s voice is a little wobbly, and Hasina sees that her face is pale. ‘Helicopters.’ She limps over to stand close by Aunt Rukiah, who puts an arm around her shoulders.

Hasina swings her gaze back to the eight dots, which are growing larger and larger. They are coming from over the Arakan mountains that wall off Rakhine from the rest of Myanmar. They seem to be headed south towards the ocean, the big turquoise Bay of Bengal. Why would they head out over the water? Is there a cyclone coming? When Hasina was little, Cyclone Nargis flattened parts of Teknadaung. She remembers how the terrifying winds howled and the sky went dark. But this morning the sky is clear.

‘*Toca toca toca,*’ Araf shouts, imitating the sound.

‘Time to go back inside, everyone.’ Aunt Rukiah’s voice has an edge of fear to it.

But none of them move. Hasina doesn’t think she *can* move. The birds are too mesmerising. It’s the sound they make, the rhythm of it. Their metallic gleam. Araf is right. They are like the nagar, the mythological dragons from her grandmother’s stories.

A nagar comes whenever the world is about to change. Is the world about to change?

And just as this thought rises in Hasina’s brain, the eight birds do another strange thing. Something Hasina has never seen birds do before, except one: the hawk.

The birds turn sharply and suddenly. They do this as one, keeping their formation the whole time. Sunlight flashes from their rotors as they change direction. They are not heading for the ocean anymore. Instead, they are heading directly for Teknadaung. In fact, it feels like they are coming straight for Eight Quarters, her neighbourhood. For Third Mile Street. Her street.

And instead of flying high, they are dropping low. All eight birds move in perfect unison. All of them swoop like the hawk does when it takes a mouse.

Are they coming for *her*?

Closer and closer. Louder and louder. They don’t sound like sewing machines anymore. They sound like a cyclone roaring onto land. The rhythmic *toca toca toca* becomes a *wop wop wop* so loud, so strong, that Hasina can feel it like she can feel her heart pounding inside her body.

Suddenly, Ghadiya screams, ‘Mama, they’re green. They’re Sit Tat.’

Sit Tat. The name for the Myanmar Army. A word to send chills down the spine.

‘Inside!’ Aunt Rukiah roars, her voice jagged with panic. ‘Now!’

Tara, Aman and Rosie turn and race for the madrassa. Aunt Rukiah sweeps Ghadiya under one arm and Araf under the other and drags them inside. The ducks and geese scatter.

But Hasina cannot move.

Hasina wants to run too. She wants to take shelter before the helicopters reach her house. But the sound pins her to the ground, the *wop wop wop* pressing down on her. She is paralysed like the mouse when it feels the shadow of the hawk’s wing.

‘Hasina, run. *Run!*’

Closer and closer, lower and lower the helicopters come. Her head feels like it will burst with the din. Each sweep of the rotors surges in her chest. She clamps her hands over her ears. Around her, the air begins to swirl.

From inside the madrassa, Araf and Ghadiya are still calling to her. She sees their mouths opening and closing. *Run*, they are shouting, *run!*

But she can’t.

And just as she is sure she will be crushed by those massive rotors, the image of an empty soccer net pops into her head. And into the net flies a soccer ball. Right into the back corner.

A perfect shot.

Hasina has made exactly such shots herself ... lined them up almost without looking. Imagined the ball into

the net so that all she had to do was be part of the movement, swing her foot to the ball and the ball into space.

Doors are rectangular, just like a soccer net.

And now she knows what she must do. Aim, shoot and hope.

The first of the birds nose low over the garden as Hasina finds her legs again. Dust stings her eyes as she half-runs, half-scrambles, then launches herself towards the madrassa door, helicopters thundering overhead.



Chapter 2



‘Hasina! What were you thinking?’

Hasina’s breath comes in rough gasps. She is flat on her belly, arms spread in front of her. Every bit of her aches from smashing into the hard-packed dirt floor. Outside, the helicopters continue to clatter past.

‘I said *run*.’ Aunt Rukiah’s face is furious as she pulls her niece from the ground. ‘Why didn’t you run?’

How can she explain the way the *wop wop wop* pinned her to the ground when she doesn’t understand it herself? ‘I’m sorry, Aunty.’

Aunt Rukiah’s hands shake as she brushes the dirt from Hasina’s bazu and htamein, cotton top and wrap-around skirt. ‘You don’t mess with Sit Tat.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You don’t know what they are capable of.’ Her aunt’s harsh tone sounds closer to tearful now. ‘I know what they are capable of.’

Hasina has heard Rukiah’s stories before. They begin

with Sit Tat or Buddhist thugs or crooked police. They end abruptly with her aunt sobbing or ranting.

‘I’m so sorry, maja-fu.’

Aunt Rukiah pauses at the respectful term. The anger melts from her face as she tidies Hasina’s long wavy hair back into a plait. ‘I am glad you are safe. Don’t scare me like that again.’

Aunt Rukiah and Ghadiya fled from the south of Rakhine province during the riots four years ago. Hasina doesn’t really understand what the riots were about, just that the Buddhist Arakanese were angry with her people. All she knows is that when Aunt Rukiah, her maja-fu or father’s sister, and Ghadiya came, it was without possessions. Almost everything they owned had been left behind. They came on foot, despite Ghadiya’s limp, an injury from when she was born. They came without permits. Unlike any other of the groups who live in Rakhine – such as the Arakanese – Rohingya aren’t allowed national registration cards and need special permits to travel. Worst of all, they came without Ghadiya’s father, Rashid.

Hasina’s cousin and aunt rarely speak about what they saw on that terrible journey. Or how they were separated from Uncle Rashid. But Hasina has her suspicions. She shares her bedroom with her cousin and has heard Ghadiya’s nightmares, how her cousin calls out about men pounding at the door, and waves rising. Was it on that dangerous journey that Ghadiya learned about helicopters?

The madrassa is dark after the intensity of the light

outside, and Hasina still feels her eyes adjusting. Araf is at the window with the others, watching the helicopters pass. Ghadiya stands alone in the shadows of the room, her amber eyes wide in her round face as she listens to the sounds from the sky. Hasina can see the fingers of her right hand moving, as if she is counting the birds going past. Or maybe she is just willing them to go back over the mountains.

In her grandmother's stories, those rugged hills, covered with thick, emerald forest full of tigers and elephants, divide Rakhine from the rest of the country, so it feels like a land all of its own. Long ago, this was the kingdom of Arakan, an enchanted land according to her grandmother. Many of the people who live here feel it ought to be a kingdom once again, separate from Myanmar. Some of them, the Arakanese Army, are prepared to fight for this kingdom.

The Rohingya, Hasina's people, have also lived here for hundreds of years. That is the thing about this country, Hasina thinks; there are so many different types of people – Rohingya, Arakanese, Burmese, Mro, Shan, Kayan, to name just a few.

But these birds are not part of any enchanted tale.

'Heliwopters,' shouts Araf. 'Wop wop wop wop wop.'

Tara turns from the window. 'Are they going away, Saya?' she asks, using the respectful term for teacher.

Aunt Rukiah's face is still pale. 'I am not sure, Tara.'

'Saya, will we be able to go home soon?' asks Rosie.

School was usually over after Dhurh, the second

prayers of the day just before lunch. *It must be well past Dhurh now*, Hasina thinks.

At least the *wop wop wop* is definitely fading.

‘They’re gone,’ Ghadiya announces to everyone, suddenly pushing away from her dark corner. She limps close to her mother and takes her by the hand. ‘And they won’t be back, Mama.’

Her cousin seems very sure about the helicopters leaving. Hasina watches the way her aunt’s face softens with relief, how she nods to Ghadiya as if they are equals rather than mother and daughter. As if some secret knowledge is passing between them. If Ghadiya says the birds have gone, then as far as Aunt Rukiah is concerned, they have gone.

Hasina knows only too well that the violence four years ago touched every Rohingya family in Rakhine State. Cousins, uncles, grandchildren had to run away and were now scattered across the world. Many boarded leaky boats to Malaysia and Australia, and some have never been heard from again. Maybe they had died when those leaky boats capsized at sea. Others slipped overland across the border into Thailand, hoping they wouldn’t be caught by army patrols or police. Others ended up in the internal displacement camps at Sittwe, Rakhine’s capital. Others, like her aunt and cousin, travelled secretly to family in the north.

Even families like hers, here in the north where the Rohingya are in the majority, have been affected by the conflict her aunt calls the Arakanese War. First, the electricity, water and gas were cut off. Then schools

were closed or started charging such high fees to Muslims that even rich families could not afford to send their children any longer.

The violence has touched her family in other ways too. The changes in Hasina's own mother, Nurzamal, for example. Hasina remembers when she was little how her mother used to laugh, her large dark eyes dancing with light. She even recalls her mother stopping on their way to the family paddy field so that Hasina could practise dribbling her soccer ball on the open area by the Farak River. Now, Nurzamal is obsessed about doing things the *right* way. First, it was 'don't play soccer'. Then it was 'Hasina, be more modest. There are rules for Rohingya girls'. As if following rules more closely was the only way to keep safe. Even though all around them, it seemed the rules kept changing. And the more they changed, the less her mother seemed to want to hold Hasina or brush her hair or just laugh with her. Lately, Nurzamal has been talking about finding a husband for Hasina, someone to take care of her. To Hasina's relief, her grandmother Asmah refuses to even consider such a plan, although this makes Hasina sad too – it hurts to see her mother and her grandmother disagree.

Aunt Rukiah lets go of Ghadiya's hand. She turns to Tara, Aman and Rosie. 'School is over. It is safe to go home now.' The three girls hastily gather up their books and head for the door. 'Just make sure you finish your geometry before tomorrow,' Aunt Rukiah calls after them.

Hasina follows her friends into the garden. 'Bye.' She

waves. 'Goodbye,' Tara calls back as she dashes through the gate.

Hasina squints up into the blue. The eight helicopters are dots on the opposite horizon now, well past the Farak River that divides Teknadaung in two. She has to listen hard to hear that *toca toca toca*. She cannot help but wonder where they are heading. She steps further out into the garden for a better view when a sharp voice makes her jump.

'Hasina! Back inside at once.' Nurzamal hurries from the kitchen, which is separate from the main house, and across the yard towards the madrassa. Her face is stern.

'Yes, Mama,' Hasina replies.

She turns and follows her mother into the madrassa.

'Mama,' Araf shouts, hurtling towards Nurzamal, who gathers him into her arms. Hasina's heart falls. How she would love to be gathered up in her mother's arms again, to breathe in her scent of kohl and clove and sandalwood.

'Did you hear the helicopters, Mama?' Araf asks, squirming in Nurzamal's arms as he waves his arms like a helicopter and squeals 'wop,wop,wop'.

'I did, my love. They came just before Dhurh.'

The azan, call to prayer, for Dhurh used to float across the fields from the mohzeem but the police closed the town mosque a few months ago. The call to prayer now comes from the handsome wall clock Ibrahim, Hasina's father, brought home for his wife. It hangs just outside their bedroom. The clock's call would have come while the helicopters were overhead.

‘Did you miss your prayers?’ Nurzamal asks her son.

For a moment, Araf looks like he might cry. He adores his mother and fears disappointing her.

‘We all missed Dhurh,’ Aunt Rukiah explains. ‘The helicopters were so loud. We can make it up later.’

Nurzamal does not reply, and Hasina knows her mother can’t help but feel that Aunt Rukiah and Ghadiya brought bad times with them. Seeing her mother and aunt side by side, Hasina is struck, as she often is, by how different they are – and not just in the way they think. Her mother’s eyes are large and round, her nose straight, with a pronounced bridge; her skin is tea-coloured, with roses in her cheeks, and her lush eyebrows meet in the middle. All of these mark her as a Rohingya. And Rohingyas are not wanted in the land once known as Burma, and now known as Myanmar.

Her aunt on the other hand, who is also Rohingya, has a flat nose, and folded eyelids. Like Hasina’s father, Ibrahim, and grandmother Asmah, Aunt Rukiah’s skin is fair. In the bazaar no one would look at Aunt Rukiah twice without her numal, the headscarf that she wears in public as a polite Muslim woman. She could easily pass for Arakanese or even Myanmar.

Nurzamal gently prises Araf from her lap and stands up. ‘Hasina, your father’s lunch is ready. You will take it to him at the bazaar. You are already late.’

‘But I still need to finish my geometry problem ...’

Hasina regrets her words almost as soon as they are out of her mouth. Nurzamal would prefer she went to a religious school rather than study maths and history and

geography in her aunt's madrassa. Yet Hasina suspects that her mother would have loved the chance to study herself; would still love the chance to read books and discuss ideas and think about the world.

Nurzamal's face tightens with anger. 'We've already missed prayers. You want your father to miss lunch as well?'

'No, Mama.' Hasina hadn't meant that.

As the eldest child in the family and without an older brother, Hasina had more responsibilities than other Muslim girls. Rohingya men usually do the shopping and take trips outside the home. If Hasina had an older brother, he would be taking his father's lunch to him.

'Can I go to the bazaar too, Mama?' Araf begs.

Araf loves the bazaar. He loves the family shop, where there are toy soldiers to play with. He loves his friends, the boys from neighbouring stalls. But most of all, Araf loves the television set up at the entranceway. It is the only TV in all of Teknadaung, and sometimes it shows cartoons!

'Please, Mama, please please pleeeaaazze!'

Whoa, Hasina thinks. For someone of just six, Araf is as deafening as any helicopter.

Nurzamal smiles; how Hasina loves to see her mother smile. Ever since Araf had fever a few years ago, Nurzamal has paid him extra attention. He is also a funny kid, dark like his mother, but with a knack for making people laugh. Both these things make him precious to Nurzamal. When she replies, her tone is unusually soft. 'Of course. Someone needs to protect

your sister. Hasina, you may take Araf. Now, go quickly to your bedroom and fetch your numal.'

Hasina doesn't wear a numal indoors, but her mother insisted that she do so outside as soon as she turned thirteen. It is dignified, modest and polite.

'You get your numal too, Ghadiya,' Araf commands. 'I will protect you as well.'

Hasina sees a look pass between her mother and aunt. Although this house was Aunt Rukiah's home when she was a young girl, both she and Ghadiya are officially 'foreigners' to the district – and illegal. Every trip out of the house risks arrest by police, heavy fines, bribes or worse. Ghadiya isn't allowed to go out much.

'No, Araf, Ghadiya is staying here,' Aunt Rukiah says gently.

Ghadiya's face falls, and Hasina feels sorry for her cousin. Ghadiya might be bossy, she might like to show off, but having to stay home all the time must be pretty boring.

'Ghadiya, we can finish your geometry,' Aunt Rukiah soothes. Ghadiya makes a face.

'Or you can come out and help me in the kitchen,' Nurzamal offers. Despite everything, she is fond of her niece.

'Kitchen,' Ghadiya says happily. Lunch is late and Nurzamal's kitchen is the best place to be when hungry.



Chapter 3



Hurrying to fetch her numal, Hasina dashes down the hall that runs alongside the madrassa and into the central part of the house. She loves her house made of thatch and wood and brick – a real patchwork, unique in Third Mile, where most houses are made of bamboo or wood. She skids past the wooden wall of Araf’s room, then past the handsome clock outside her parents’ room.

Hasina breathes a sigh of contentment as she reaches her own beloved room. It is in the new part of the house, where the woven bamboo walls are perfect for the heat. There are two beds in the room, covered with identical striped bedspreads. Her grandmother, Dadi Asmah, jokes that the invisible line between Hasina’s and Ghadiya’s halves of the room is like the Farak River, dividing Teknadaung, for Hasina is tidy and her cousin very untidy.

Hasina pulls her headscarf from the chest of drawers. On her bedside table is a book in English, a few more in Burmese, and a notebook in which she likes to work out

her thoughts. On the wall behind her bed is a poster of Sun Wen, the Chinese soccer star, in mid-air, the ball at the edge of her foot. Beside this is a poster of the mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani. An old, worn soccer ball sits in pride of place on a shelf.

Ghadiya's side of the room is a disaster zone. On the wall, three posters: one of the Burmese popstar Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, one of the pop group The Four and the third a map of Malaysia where her father, Uncle Rashid, is. Her clothes, htamein and T-shirts, and bazu blouses she likes, litter the unmade bed. One object, however, is always neatly placed on the shelf – Ghadiya's tattered and faded orange cotton bag, a lawl ait from Shan state. It is the only thing that came with her from the south. Hasina has never seen her use it. As for what Ghadiya keeps inside, that is a secret. Hasina had a peek once, but the bag was empty.

Hasina quickly mixes a little water with thanaka, the sweet-smelling powder that everyone wears as sun protection in Myanmar, that she keeps in a jar on her dressing table. Sometimes Hasina paints thanaka onto her face in a leaf shape; other times, as a flower. But today, she hurriedly draws squarish patches on her cheeks with an old toothbrush – every female in Myanmar has a thousand uses for old toothbrushes and Hasina keeps several on her table. She checks herself in the mirror – a slender girl with long, wavy hair, dark eyes, skin tone halfway between that of her mother and aunt. Like her aunt, she can pass for Myanmar. Sometimes she wonders if her mother sends her to the bazaar to

avoid the humiliating calls of 'kalama' or black scum. The word makes Hasina burn with shame. She snatches up her orange and purple numal, and drapes it over her hair, tucking the ends around her neck, framing her face, before dashing from her room.

There is one small thing she wants to do before she heads out to the bazaar. Hasina's bare feet skid swiftly back along the hallway past her parents' room, and past the brick walls that mark the passage to her Aunt Rukiah's room and her grandmother's beside it.

Dadi Asmah is as old as the house and the house is as old as Dadi Asmah. She has lived here all her life except for a few years at university in Sittwe. 'This house,' Dadi Asmah likes to say, 'is like this country. Lots of rooms, all different, but one house. Burma – lots of religions, lots of ethnic groups, lots of languages, all different, but still one country.'

Dadi Asmah looks a bit like her house – a mix of styles and races and dress. Her face is dominated by a hawk-like nose, but her eyes are gentle and she is inclined to smile rather than frown. She wears long blouses, like the Indian kameez, with Myanmar-style htamein or longyi, the wraparound skirt everyone wears. She prefers Myanmar-style sandals too. Her favourite head-gear is not a numal, but instead an ancient pith helmet she found in the bazaar long ago, left behind by some colonial gentleman. In the cool weather, Dadi Asmah loves a cricket cap.

Dadi Asmah's room has plastered walls, and pink, English-style curtains pulled to screen out the harsh

sunlight. Against a wall is a wooden bureau, where Dadi Asmah keeps her box of jewellery and her clothes. On top of the bureau are her photograph albums, a gramophone, and records. In a blue tin in the corner are Danish biscuits, brought out for very special occasions. Dadi Asmah loves biscuits and, truth be told, she is quite plump as a result.

Ghadiya loves playing with Asmah's jewellery. Araf loves the biscuit tin and gramophone records with their scratchy, tinny music. For Hasina, most delightful is the bookshelf. Books in Burmese, English, Urdu and Bengali. Storybooks and atlases. History and biology. Hasina has loved to pore over these since she was a wee girl.

It is one of these same books that Asmah is reading, reclining on her bed.

'Dadi?' Hasina calls out softly, using the affectionate Rohingya term. 'Dadi?'

Asmah drops the book onto her chest. Her large dark eyes peer over a pair of ancient reading glasses, held together with tape, now sliding down her nose. Asmah's black and grey streaked hair is piled up on top of her head and held with a clip. She smiles at Hasina. 'My dear, please come in.'

Hasina sits at the end of her grandmother's bed. This is her favourite spot in the whole world. She feels safe, more herself, when she is near her grandmother.

'Did you hear the birds, Dadi?'

'Yes, I heard them. But they did not sound like birds to me. Machines, perhaps.'

‘Ghadiya says they’re called helicopters. Araf is calling them wop wops.’

Asmah smiles and levers herself up into a sitting position, her back leaning against the wall.

‘Wop wops is a good name.’

‘He thought they were nagars.’ Princes of the ocean – dragons that could fly through the air and swim through earth as if it were water.

‘I first saw helicopters when I was a young woman. There was a war in Bengal then. They terrified me.’

‘What do they mean, Dadi?’

Her grandmother quotes the old saying. “‘Kalaa ma naing Yakhine-meh – if you want to learn how to keep the blacks in their place, go to Rakhine.” If I were a superstitious woman, I would call them nagars too, for dragons breathe fire.’

Hasina feels a spike of fear at her grandmother’s words.

‘But you say you do not believe in such superstitions, Dadi.’

Her grandmother shakes her head ‘No. But those stories have power – that is why people believe them.’ She changes the subject. ‘Are you taking your father his lunch?’

Hasina smiles. Her grandmother knows that she often takes her father his lunch and shares it with him. But the question is part of a ritual between her and Dadi Asmah.

‘Yes, Dadi.’

‘Then you will need this.’ Asmah reaches in under her kameez and unpins something from inside. She

hands it to Hasina: a fifty-kyat note. ‘Buy yourself something nice.’

Hasina hasn’t the heart to tell her grandmother that these days you can’t buy a thing for fifty kyats.



Hasina adjusts her numal before shoving her feet into her sandals and crosses the yard to the kitchen.

The wooden kitchen is low and dark and sizzling with heat. It smells good. Wood burns in three stone braziers. Cast-iron pots bubble on top, one with fish curry, another with rice. On the third, a metal deshi cooking pot cools. The air is tangy with fish, coriander, ginger and turmeric, the sweetness of rice, the sting of onion and the perfume of wood smoke. An earthenware chatty pot, full of cool water for drinking, sits on a stand in one corner. On the square kitchen table lies a suri, a wide-bladed chopping knife. Oranges are piled in a bowl, and a bunch of bananas hangs from a cord slung from one side of the kitchen roof to the other. If you want to eat one, all you have to do is jump for it. Ghadiya and Araf are eating bananas now. Hasina hasn’t eaten since early this morning and her belly gurgles.

Nurzamal hands Hasina her father’s lunch, packed in tiffin carriers – three round metal containers stacked one on top of another, and held together with a handle. Hasina knows that inside will be massor salon, fish curry, made with onion, ginger and garlic. Maybe a sweet-sour rice cake, rice with some dhal and lots of gravy, plus potato and greens and Kalarlay-brand special spice

mix – her mother’s secret ingredient. Hasina’s mouth waters.

‘Go straight to your father, Hasina,’ her mother commands. ‘Take the road, speak to no one.’

‘Are you ready, Araf?’ Hasina asks her little brother.

‘Wop wop wop wop.’