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Disnarration and the Limits of Confession in Madhuri Vijay's The Far Field

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Abstract

Six years after Riyaz disappears from his village in Kashmir, Shalini sets down an account of the part she played. She can say what she told an army brigadier. Whether keeping silent would have saved Riyaz is a question her account cannot settle. Madhuri Vijay prepares this distinction early in The Far Field, when Shalini wonders how much harm a different childhood allegiance to her parents might have prevented. Drawing on Gerald Prince's account of the disnarrated, Thomas Nagel's work on moral luck, and Hanna Meretoja's narrative ethics, this paper follows the changing uses of conjecture from Bangalore to Kashmir. Amina tells Shalini what usually happens when people answer a soldier's questions. Riyaz considers what he would have done with Shalini's opportunities. On a mountain path, a soldier makes a threat by describing an injury that never occurred. These scenes give unequal weight to the freedom to imagine another outcome and the power to bring one about. By the time Shalini discloses Riyaz's name, she has good reason to question what a soldier's courtesy to her means for her hosts. Her confession is most exact when it recalls how she acquired that knowledge and what she did with it.

Keywords: disnarration, moral luck, narrative ethics, retrospective responsibility.

1. The Claim of a Confession

Six years after a man disappears from his home in Kashmir, Shalini begins to tell his story in Bangalore. Her first causal claim is a modest one. He vanished "in part" because of her. Then the sentence becomes difficult to follow. Shalini includes among the causes of his disappearance both words she uttered and things she says she has found the courage to say only now. When, exactly, did those omissions matter? Something left unsaid in the village might have had consequences for a man still living there. The years in which she kept the story to herself began after he was taken. Her belated willingness to speak brings the two silences together before a reader has any means of deciding what each cost or whom it injured (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1).

The man whose name Shalini initially withholds is Riyaz, the son of Bashir Ahmed, a travelling salesman she knew as a child. We learn first how he stands in relation to her. To read the opening again, having met his family, is to feel how little that acquaintance tells us. Riyaz is Amina's husband and a father. He has wishes for his own life, among them the desire to live somewhere a visitor like Shalini has the leisure to leave. In Kishtwar, where she lodges on her way to find Bashir, another father can date to the day the disappearance of his sixteen-year-old son. Both households have reasons to remember a missing man that precede the Bangalore visitor's need to tell a story about him (Santhosh and Rani 1643; Shanahan 143–47).

Self-accusation can make a speaker seem particularly trustworthy. A reader inclined to doubt Shalini's judgement of other people may credit her with exceptional insight when she turns the same severity on herself. The end of the first chapter tests that impulse. Shalini wonders what she might have prevented had she loved her father more, or her mother less. She names two people to whom she could have felt differently. She leaves unnamed the harm a change of affection might have prevented. The reader has already been told about a disappearance. Few will have forgotten it. The ease with which we complete the sentence is itself one of the dangers

of hearing a confession (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1).

I locate Shalini's clearest failure of judgement in the moment when she gives Brigadier Reddy the name of the man his soldiers have beaten. By then a father in Kishtwar has had to correct her assumption about who took his son. She has also seen a soldier address her on friendly terms and demand proof of another woman's identity. Those encounters gave Shalini reasons for caution before she knew what Reddy would do. They make her decision open to criticism on evidence she herself can supply. A claim that she could have saved Riyaz would require knowledge of the armed men's intentions, their other sources of information, and the decisions they would have made without her. The distance between these judgements is the subject of this paper (Shanahan 144–47; von Essen).

Critics of The Far Field have already asked whose interests Shalini's story can serve. Kukku Xavier reads her eventual withdrawal as a response to unequal citizenship. A visitor accustomed to taking the initiative may need to step aside before people have room to make their own claims (33–36). Esther Daimari and Debajyoti Biswas begin elsewhere, with Bashir's injured body and the practical conditions under which a man who has been found must nevertheless remain hidden (49–52, 54–56). Read together, these accounts suggest a difficulty with attributing the same virtue to everyone who keeps silent. Shalini can retire to Bangalore. Bashir's family has to keep a secret in a house where they intend to go on living. The people waiting for news have still other reasons for deciding when to speak, in whose presence and at what cost.

Leah Rachel von Essen reads Shalini's journey as a criticism of the traveller's expectation that the people she meets will help her come to terms with her loss. She notices how differently the same soldiers behave once they know of Shalini's connection to the brigadier. Daniel Hugh Shanahan, writing about emergency rule, attends to what the narrator only later understands about her meetings with soldiers and with families of the disappeared (142–47). If Shalini can preserve evidence of privileges she took for granted, how much authority should we give the account she makes of them? The answer depends in part on whose imagined alternative we are hearing. Riyaz finds in an imagined life a way of disagreeing with her. A soldier finds in the description of an injury he might have inflicted a means of making her obey. By the time the narrator considers what she might have done, imagining that things went differently has acquired several quite distinct uses.

2. The Disnarrated and the Missing

Gerald Prince calls an event disnarrated when a narrative gives words to something that does not happen in its storyworld (1–3). To wait for someone to speak is an experience one can remember. The speech one awaited may never have been spoken. A narrative can give the experience and its absent object something like equal space in a single sentence. A dream, a wish, an inference proved mistaken, and a thought about an abandoned course of action may all supply material of this kind. The distinction attaches to what a narrative actually specifies. It would be easy to imagine Shalini abandoning her journey on the first day. That possibility belongs to a criticism of her conduct unless someone in the novel entertains it. A reader who proposes a different past has undertaken an experiment of her own.

Other absences call for other descriptions. A conversation can have taken place and gone unnarrated. An incident may also be difficult to tell because a speaker lacks words for it, because an audience would find its subject improper, or because a genre ordinarily passes it over. Robyn Warhol's account of the unnarratable takes such different pressures seriously (220–23). They have to be shown at work. Silence, by itself, does not tell us what has imposed it. Brian Richardson reserves denarration for a narrator's cancellation of something the narrative has already asserted (168–69). To discover that Bashir lives, after hearing otherwise, is principally to discover the circumstances under which one character has had reason to let a visitor believe that he died. His family's earlier concealment remains an event with lasting consequences (Daimari and Biswas 49–52). Nothing about its reality has been revoked.

The imagined life of a villager who wishes he had been born in Bangalore and the unknown life of a boy taken on his way home from school illustrate why the distinctions matter. Riyaz specifies a different birthplace and tells his listener what he would have done with the opportunities it offered him (Santhosh and Rani 1643). Abdul knows the circumstances in which his son was last seen. Where the soldiers took the boy after they made him get into a vehicle remains beyond the family's knowledge (Shanahan 144–45). The removal belongs to what happened. The subsequent uncertainty belongs to those who are still searching. To call

the boy's later life disnarrated would settle precisely what his family needs to find out. Riyaz can give up his imaginary Bangalore at the end of a conversation. Abdul has no comparable freedom to dispose of a question about his son.

Joanne Lipson Freed argues that unrealised events have a peculiar persuasive power because the reader helps to imagine them (200). Once we have supplied a look or an inflection the prose leaves unstated, it can be as vivid in memory as anything asserted on the page. There is a further danger in reading a confession. Someone who hears a friend regret keeping quiet may picture the protest she could have made, someone stopping to listen, perhaps even a rescue. The friend supplied the silence. Quite a lot of the rescue was supplied by the listener. Freed's argument helps to explain how an agreement can develop between reader and narrator about a possibility when neither of them knows what would have come of it. There need be no moment of deliberate deception on either side.

Hanna Meretoja's account of narrative ethics asks whose powers of interpretation are enlarged in the telling. The stories available to a person help determine which ways of living she can recognise as possible. They may also encourage her to press someone else's experience into a pattern whose ending she already knows. Meretoja's account of understanding another person gives weight to the other's power to unsettle the interpretation that makes them intelligible (90, 107–16). Shalini's encounters suggest one practical way to tell the difference. Abdul can answer a question she has put badly. Amina can ask the guest who has come to think herself at home to leave. After Riyaz has been taken, he can no longer interrupt the account that gives him a central place. Her willingness to revisit her actions matters most just when the person best placed to challenge her can no longer speak to her..

3. A Daughter's Share of the Past

The urn Shalini takes from her father is already empty. He has tipped her mother's ashes into a concrete tank and seems at a loss about what to do with the vessel. She snatches it away and drops it on a rubbish pile. The action comes first. Afterwards, in recalling it, she sees something her mother might have done. The resemblance is plausible enough to make a reader hesitate over questioning it. We have already heard how impatient her mother could be with ceremony and with other people's ideas of propriety. Yet she was also a woman who tended a small shrine in the kitchen every morning. Neither detail tells her daughter what her mother would have wanted done with the urn that held her ashes. Her wishes remain her own (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1).

Two people witness what Shalini does with the urn. She can describe the priest's expression, a curious mixture of shock and delight. Of her father she can report only that she waited for him to "bring it up" and that he never did (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1). The phrase leaves the father's tone entirely open. To bring something up need imply neither a quarrel nor a rebuke. A father who disapproved might have kept quiet. So might one who shared his daughter's judgement, or who saw no way to explain why, once the ashes were gone, he had kept hold of the clay. The narrator gives us the outline of an unheld conversation. We supply a father's anger if we turn it into a confrontation. It is among the few moments in the chapter when her father's grief is allowed to escape the family story about the kind of man he is.

The waiter outside a Bangalore restaurant empties a bucket onto the road. The memory of the funeral breaks in, the father still holding the vessel he has emptied. When the street comes into focus again, the waiter has changed his clothes and is going out with two other men. Hearing them laugh, Shalini tenses. The possible affronts run from a look to a catcall to a line from a love song. It takes longer to read the list than it takes the men to cross the road. Her father might bring up the urn tomorrow. These men pass out of her life in a few strides, while the readiness for a fight is something she has already felt (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1). Vijay gets the two episodes close enough for us to see that the unspoken remark at the funeral and the unspoken words of a harasser have quite different claims on the woman who imagines hearing them.

A later teller can put a full stop to the encounter that the woman standing in the street had to anticipate without one. The men's departure settles what they did that evening. It gives us little to go on in judging how much caution a woman in her position could reasonably exercise. This is an elementary point about foresight, yet a reader's willingness to concede it here may weaken once the story moves to Kashmir. Faced with a disastrous outcome, we are apt to read the disaster backwards until it looks as though the person acting must have seen it coming.

Vijay gives us a case with no injury at all in which to notice the difference. Shalini's ability to tell that the men had passed her by came to her a few moments after she needed to decide how to stand and where to look.

When Shalini remembers her mother at prayer, an older voice enters a scene of childhood habit. Flowers are tucked around the deities on the kitchen shelf, the lamp lit, and the woman stands still for a minute. Into the recollection comes a present-tense wish, "I sometimes wish she had" (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1). Its object is more curious than a wish to have prayed beside one's mother. Shalini wishes her mother had insisted that she learn the gods' names or prostrate herself. An instruction, even an unwelcome one, would have answered a question the child could hardly bring herself to ask. Was her company wanted? Her mother had never forbidden her to join. The grown daughter remembers having understood the prohibition anyway. Whether her mother recognised such a prohibition is another matter.

Her mother was perfectly capable of drawing her daughter into a secret. That she also wanted a few minutes alone before the kitchen shrine is part of what makes the remembered wish so moving. The child who had once been a confidante might reasonably expect to be welcome here too. Her father, who had long since given up organised religion, understood the occasion differently. During her devotions he held his familiar objections in check. A small silence was a courtesy. The daughter's wish for an instruction and the father's abstention from a speech do more to distinguish the forms of intimacy available in that household than any general assertion about the mother's power over it. Years later Shalini enters a house where keeping a secret from a guest can be a much more pressing form of care (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1; Daimari and Biswas 49–50).

At the close of the chapter a favourite story of her father's complicates the picture of a daughter always devoted to her mother. At about two, Shalini would cry for him even when he was in the room. Near the end of a disastrous shopping trip her mother had to telephone him. He came, picked up his delighted child and carried her home. His wife followed with the groceries. The story he likes to tell gives him a splendid entrance. Shalini, who was too young to remember the episode on her own terms, has inherited something of his way of telling it. There was a time when she was her father's daughter and a later time when she was her mother's. What she cannot recover is a moment when she chose between them (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1).

The family anecdote issues in one of the most unsettling questions in the chapter. Shalini asks how much "might have been prevented" if she had loved either parent differently (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1). The passive verb leaves the harm unnamed. Even the terms of the bargain shift as she speaks. She might have loved her father more and loved her mother quite as much as before. Yet her second thought makes it sound as though less love for her mother might have spared somebody an injury. A small child's preference for the parent who will pick her up has come to resemble a considered allocation of affection on which other people's futures depend. When Shalini calls such thinking "perilous," the word has some bite (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1). Follow the implied chain of causes far enough backwards and there is very little in a life for which a grieving person could not find herself to blame .

4. Looking for Someone in Kishtwar

The adult who goes to Kashmir is answerable in ways the child in the shop could never have been. Grief may explain where she sets out to go. It explains rather less about what she does with the information people give her when she arrives. Even the time of her decision to go proves elusive. Finding a wooden animal among her mother's things, she recalls a conversation in which her mother claimed to have forgotten Bashir. The object persuades her that the claim was a lie. Many years later she dates her own decision to find him to the joy she felt on recovering the object. The sentence that establishes this turning point carries both a verb of reflection and a modal of inference. For all the force of her remembered joy, she makes what now seems the best guess about when she made up her mind (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 2). That her mother remembered Bashir after all strikes her as certain. She can date another person's attachment with more confidence than she can date a decision of her own.

Long before Shalini sets out, Bashir imagines receiving the family as guests. Asked in Bangalore where he lives, he gives a Bangalore address, a room near Russell Market. Shalini's mother has to ask again before he describes the village in Kashmir where he was born. There is a gentle rebuke in the misunderstanding. She wants to know where he is from, though the room he occupies in her city answers the question she actually asked. Soon they are joking about

whether she would recognise the Himalayas if she saw them and what he might offer her if she arrived at his door. The child watches their faces. When Bashir mentions his son, both adults' faces change. The ticking of the clock becomes audible. Shalini has acquired an invitation without quite understanding the conversation that produced it (Vijay, "Book Excerpt").

Bashir's invitation was something the two adults made together and could withdraw together, with a joke or a change of subject. Shalini later learns from Bashir that he had tried to explain to her mother why she could not come with him (von Essen). The daughter will indeed meet the son, just as the children's meeting had once been imagined in Bangalore. Little else about her visit answers to the terms of the family joke. A woman grieving for her mother arrives alone at a household whose members must decide what it can safely tell a stranger. Shalini herself remembers how little of Bashir's banter she understood as a child. His quick assent to an imagined visit can help explain the route she takes north. It could hardly give her a claim on the family whose hospitality she would need. Even the geographical joke can survive badly in memory. What began as a man's challenge to how people in Bangalore picture Kashmir becomes, for the traveller, one more picture of it she wants to see confirmed.

A man comes back to the room he has yielded to Shalini in Abdul and Zoya Latief's house. He wants his planner. Inside it he keeps a photograph of his brother, which he holds out to her. She compliments the picture. He mentions Bhaderwah, an army camp, and asks whether she has already been there. Shanahan reads the exchange in the light of the practice to which the man has given his time. Relatives of missing people compare where they have been and whose faces they have seen (143–44). Shalini has told her hosts that she is looking for someone. The stranger has accordingly taken her for somebody who might recognise his brother. It scarcely occurs to her that he has brought an inquiry into the room with him.

In Abdul and Zoya's house the picture does work. It can go from hand to hand when the man in it cannot. One relative may supply a date or a location against which another can check a recollection. Shalini's praise is well meant, and it really misses the use to which her answer might have been put. Ather Zia's ethnography of women searching for their disappeared husbands records a political significance in the repeated journeys and public appearances through which relatives keep a claim alive under militarisation (164–75). The traveller who sees in the stranger with the planner someone rather childlike has mistaken who, of the two people in the room, needs instruction. The stranger wants to know whether anyone has seen his brother. Both are looking for someone. Only one of them can afford to miss the distinction.

A similar misunderstanding becomes harder to excuse once Abdul has had the opportunity to answer it. He describes his son Ishfaaq meeting people on the road home from school. Shalini assumes he means militants. Earlier that day a soldier had spoken to her of them. She asks whether Ishfaaq joined them, and Abdul repeats her verb in surprise. Asked who told her the men were militants, she starts to say that Abdul himself has just said so. He interrupts. An army vehicle stopped beside Ishfaaq, and the men made him get in. His family never saw him again (Shanahan 144–45). The trouble comes a moment before the error about who stopped the boy. Shalini takes a word from the soldier and, without noticing the transfer, tries to put it into the mouth of the missing boy's father. Errors of this kind do more than leave a listener poorly informed. They can oblige a man who has already lost a son to explain why he need not also defend the boy against a story he never told.

Later, when Shalini has occasion to trust another military account, she will have Abdul's interruption to remember. He has given her ample reason to question whether an agreeable soldier is a reliable interpreter of what happens to a Kashmiri family. He has also been careful about the limits of his own knowledge. Despite the conflicting reports that have reached the house he can give a date when his son was last seen and the age he had then reached. Shalini remembers telling Abdul that she herself was twenty-four. Only now does she understand what the number meant to him. Ishfaaq would be her age. The thought needs no hypothesis about whether he is alive. What the father has lost beyond question is the chance to see the boy he raised at sixteen come home a man of twenty-four (Shanahan 144–45).

The arithmetic is simple enough for Shalini to do in her head. It is also a limit to what she, or the reader, may say about Ishfaaq. To classify the adult life he might now be leading as an unrealised possibility would pronounce on whether he survived. Abdul can testify to something quite precise without making any such claim. His son reached sixteen in his company. The eight years since have elapsed beyond his sight. Shalini, who was able to give her age as a routine piece of information, has for a moment made those years countable. The discovery belongs in her account even though her account cannot tell us where Ishfaaq spent them. In a paper about

unrealised lives this is perhaps the place where it matters most to resist the temptation to finish a sentence on someone else's behalf.

A later encounter with Stalin, the soldier whose South Indian background had reassured Shalini, makes the disparity between her position and Zoya's hard to overlook. He sees the two women together. He recognises the visitor, then demands Zoya's identity card and challenges its authenticity. As Shanahan observes, the soldier can decide whether the document counts as proof (145–46). For Shalini, recognition has promised the ordinary ease of meeting somebody from a part of the country she knew. Zoya has to produce a document to be recognised in the town where she lives, and even its validity remains at the discretion of the person who requested it. Both women have witnessed the encounter. Only Shalini can leave its consequences behind. Years later, having remembered the soldier's friendly manner, she will also be able to remember exactly how far it extended. There was a second witness in the street whom it did nothing to protect.

5. What Amina Knows about Answering

Amina has a practical question for the visitor who has become her friend. Shalini has seen soldiers questioning people. Has she noticed what happens to the people who answer? Amina describes compliance as a way of getting on with the day. It succeeds "most of the time" (Vijay qtd. in Santhosh and Rani 1644). The qualification matters. Someone with experience of these encounters knows better than to promise safety in return for an answer. She has learned a way of getting past an armed man who wants information and who may, even when he receives it, choose to detain the person who gave it to him. Shalini will have occasion to remember this observation when a senior officer puts a question to her.

Amina speaks in the habitual present. Most people answer, the soldiers usually let them go, and Riyaz stands silent and gets kicked (Santhosh and Rani 1644). The grammar moves between what happens to other people and what happens to the man with whom Amina shares a home. The inference that he would have escaped a particular beating by answering is easy to make. Amina's qualification leaves room for him to have answered and been beaten all the same. A reader who supplies a scene in which a soldier accepts his answer has gone a step beyond what she says. Here the distinction Prince makes has an ethical consequence. Riyaz's failure to speak belongs to the history his wife relates. To imagine that the right words would have secured his release is to give the person under interrogation a power that Amina locates, quite precisely, in the soldiers who decide whether to let him go.

It costs Amina something to explain her husband's conduct to a guest. Elsewhere, the guest admits how little she offered in return. The narrator remembers hearing in her voice an appeal for understanding and sympathy between women. She says that she "denied her both" (Vijay qtd. in Jenkins, question 11). The recognition belongs to the younger woman. The shame extends into the present in which she writes. That last pronoun, both, measures the refusal by what Amina had asked of a friend. The reader may suppose that an answer given in friendship would have improved Amina's situation. Shalini knew what she was withholding. She can be answerable for that refusal without the further indignity of having to invent Amina's reply. Here is an obligation which survives even if one abandons all hope of reconstructing the course of a conversation that never took place. A friend who asks for sympathy has already given a reason to attend to her.

Amina's authority as a witness has its own limits. In exasperation she tells Shalini that Riyaz seems to seek out the soldiers and wants them to beat him (Santhosh and Rani 1644). One can hear in the accusation the cost of waiting for somebody who has again exposed himself to danger. A wife can have excellent grounds to fear what her husband will do and still be mistaken about why he does it. For Shalini to understand Amina is, at a minimum, to give that fear a hearing. Meretoja's distinction between attending to another person's experience and absorbing it into a familiar explanation applies to both people in this conversation (107–16). Amina need not be right about her husband for her complaint to deserve the friendship she asked of Shalini. Riyaz, in turn, has an account of what he wants which he is quite capable of giving for himself.

When Riyaz addresses the visitor, he makes her own birthplace the subject of a conditional. Had he been born in a city such as Bangalore, he tells Shalini, he would have done "the smart thing" and stayed there (Vijay qtd. in Santhosh and Rani 1643). Megha Santhosh and Rani P. L. relate his wish to live elsewhere to his family's experience of violence (1643). Listen, though, to the edge of the remark when addressed to this particular visitor. Shalini was born in just such a city. She had the good fortune he imagines and used it to come to a place he wants to leave. One

need hardly suppose that he knows what life in Bangalore would have made of him. He understands enough about her freedom of movement to challenge what she has made of his home. His teasing claim to know exactly what he would have done is at least partly a judgement on what someone sitting next to him actually did.

Riyaz's wish for another birthplace differs from his eventual plan to go to Bangalore. He can set a time for leaving, ask for assistance, and set out. What he cannot choose is to be the sort of person for whom staying in the city of his birth would have been an obvious course of action. Thomas Nagel calls this exposure to unchosen moral situations circumstantial luck (25–26, 33–34). One person can go a lifetime without facing a test under which a neighbour has repeatedly been found wanting. The concept helps explain why it would be unfair to judge Riyaz by the opportunities open to Shalini. From the other side of the case, however, there is something very regular about who is stopped, who can leave, and whose father is on familiar terms with a brigadier. What counts as luck from an individual's point of view may be the predictable effect of a political arrangement for a whole household. The recurrence of that arrangement is what Shalini has begun to witness for herself.

6. The Soldier's Conditional

A soldier gives Shalini directions on a mountain path. He remarks on how fortunate it was that he recognised her. Had he taken her for a troublemaker, something might have followed. His sentence breaks off at "and then" (Vijay qtd. in Shanahan 145–46). When he resumes, the prospective injury has become something she might have brought on herself. His fingers brush his gun. He tells her to go home. A direct threat would have made him answer for the violence he was threatening. His account of his own good fortune in recognising her allows him to express regret for a possible injury while conceding practically nothing about who would inflict it. One need not decide that he intended to fire. The visible movement of his hand gives the unfinished sentence all the force it needs (Shanahan 145–46).

In the soldier's version, timely recognition has spared Shalini. At dusk, on a path she does not know, what could she do to ensure she would be recognised the next time? Her face appears to have done her service on this occasion. Who gets to decide what the face of an ordinary walker looks like? The word troublemaker puts a prior interpretation of the possible victim into circulation. Anybody shot in error would already have been classified as somebody it was reasonable to fear. Shanahan locates the concealed agent of the hypothetical injury in the soldier's handling of the language of legitimate force (146). The freedom to leave the sentence unfinished belongs here to a man who can make the consequences immediate. It would be an oddly complacent use of Prince's term to file the injury among things that never occurred and fail to notice what did. A woman has been threatened.

Earlier, on the Bangalore street, Shalini supplied the possible threat. The men whose laughter she heard went on their way. On the mountain path it is the armed man who chooses what the woman ought to fear and tells her when to leave. Recognition has briefly protected her. It has also put her in a position to see what the man beside her might consider permissible towards someone else. Her alarm gives us no reason to count her privileged status a fiction. It tells us how unevenly that privilege operates and how much she knows about the distinction by the time she comes under the protection of a senior officer. Her education in the uses of military courtesy has included a threat made while a soldier was doing her the service of showing her the way home.

In the beating that precedes Shalini's departure, Riyaz has told her to stay hidden. She watches the soldiers strike him and stays out of sight. Later she judges that it was cowardice that kept her there (Santhosh and Rani 1644). The word revises her estimate of her own motives. Riyaz's instruction still stands, and obedience to it remains one reason she could have given afterwards. What she disputes is whether that reason describes what moved her at the time. A reader may be tempted to complete the missing scene on her behalf. She might have stepped forward, been recognised as an outsider, protested, secured his release. Only the first act in that imagined sequence would have been hers to undertake. Even had she found the courage she believes she lacked, she could no more have commanded the soldiers' response than Riyaz could.

Shalini has heard much the same word applied to Bashir. He holds himself answerable for how he says he did not fight. Santhosh and Rani trace cowardice through the family and into Shalini's account of herself (1642–44). The echo is worth hearing, especially if one resists the temptation to give both accusations the same force. Bashir's continued survival depends upon

his wife's success at keeping an injured man out of sight. Shalini can return to Bangalore and give her own account of why she kept quiet (Daimari and Biswas 49–52). Two people may judge themselves by the same moral vocabulary after the event. How much it lay in their power to do at the time remains a question about their particular circumstances. Among the things that vocabulary can overlook is the considerable courage of somebody else in the house who helped a man keep out of sight.

Riyaz's name passes into military hands in the course of an attempt to report the soldiers who beat him. Shalini's father, a friend of Brigadier Reddy, has arranged for her to be collected. At the brigadier's side she encounters an unfamiliar deference from men in uniform. Von Essen traces how readily Reddy's courtesy restores the visitor's confidence. Shalini tells him of the assault and the captive boy. When he asks who was beaten, she supplies the name (von Essen). Amina's account of getting past soldiers makes the exchange especially disquieting. In Amina's example, the person who answers a question is also the person who has to wait to learn whether the answer has satisfied the soldier. Shalini answers a question about a man who is elsewhere. She begins by offering evidence about the soldiers and ends by identifying their victim to a commanding officer. Riyaz has had no say in that change of subject.

There were grounds for making a complaint. Soldiers had beaten one man and held a boy captive. An officer in command might have been able to intervene, and silence about an assault also has costs. The harder decision is how much a witness can responsibly disclose about someone who must go on living within reach of the people she reports. Shalini knows something about that reach. In a single encounter Stalin addressed her familiarly and challenged Zoya's identity card. Abdul had to correct her when she repeated a soldier's account of danger back to him. Even the hospitality she now enjoys comes through a father who can ask a brigadier to collect his daughter. Reddy's willingness to help her family offers a poor basis for assuming that he will show Riyaz's family the same consideration. She need hardly have foreseen a particular order by a particular officer to have reasons for pausing over that name (Shanahan 144–47; von Essen).

What does the subsequent disappearance add to a judgement on the disclosure? In discussing resultant luck, Nagel asks us to consider a driver who has neglected the brakes. Whether a child happens to run into the road lies outside the driver's control, yet it changes the kind of judgement the driver must face. There would be something to criticise in the negligence even if nobody crossed the road. A death would furnish the driver with an additional, particular occasion for reproach (28–30). Shalini, too, would have had reason to question her readiness to name Riyaz even if he had come home unharmed. Learning that he has been taken gives the disclosure a lasting place in her life. Here the analogy reaches its limit. The men who take Riyaz can make decisions of their own. To assign them the part of an unforeseen accident would be an extraordinary concession to armed men in a novel so attentive to the language by which they disclaim agency.

For Holly Smith, an appeal to ignorance raises a question about the occasions on which an agent could reasonably have learned better. A person may fail to draw an inference from information already in her possession. The earlier fault also has to bear an intelligible relation to the risk in question (544–51). The case against Shalini need make no extravagant demands on a visitor's knowledge of Kashmir. It can begin with the day Stalin stopped Zoya in the street. By the time Shalini meets Reddy, an officer's willingness to be civil to her has already proved compatible with his institution's capacity to humiliate her hosts. The defect in her judgement has a history that can be dated. Nothing comparably precise could be said against the child who loved her mother. Between the two scenes stands the testimony of people who spoke to Shalini in circumstances under which she was able to listen.

7. The Account from Bangalore

When Shalini telephones from Bangalore, Saleem asks why Riyaz's disappearance can still surprise her. He reminds her of Zoya and Ishfaaq. Someone had gone to the trouble of showing her what a family endures when a man is taken, and she had heard how little the family can do to bring him back. Where Shalini might find a defect in her character, Saleem can name the people from whom she ought to have learned. He also returns the power to act to the people who took Riyaz. They are free to take him where they choose, as Shanahan observes of the exchange (147). A confession encourages us to listen for the first person. One of the sharpest judgements in this one comes when somebody else addresses the narrator as you. The people who offered her a

place to stay have acquired a claim on her attention that persists well beyond the term of the visit.

To whom, then, should a reader credit what happened to Riyaz? Von Essen understands the soldiers to have taken Riyaz on Reddy's orders. Shalini's disclosure and her own avowal of a part in his disappearance give us reason to take the connection seriously. To conclude that withholding his name would have saved him would require quite different evidence. We would need to know what the soldiers already knew about a man they had beaten, what other people could have told them, and what the brigadier would have done. The family is under no obligation to establish any of this in order to object to the use Shalini made of the name. Such a demand would oblige people who cannot discover where Riyaz was taken to prove that he would have stayed safe under conditions none of them experienced.

Telling the story sooner is a different counterfactual from withholding a name. For six years after Riyaz's disappearance, Shalini says, she repeatedly felt the urge to speak. Each time she anticipated that speaking would make no difference (Vijay, Far Field, ch. 1). A prediction of futility can be a remarkably effective way of keeping quiet. It also allows someone to avoid discovering what a listener might ask of her. There are good reasons, though, to hesitate over any simple prescription that she ought to have spoken. Xavier understands her withdrawal as a belated willingness to leave political initiative to others (35–36). Santhosh and Rani attend instead to what her continued silence suggests about the persistence of trauma (1644). Neither the length of the silence nor the sincerity of the eventual confession can tell us whether Riyaz's family would have welcomed her testimony. Silence can spare a family exposure and deprive it of a witness. Which it does will depend in part on whom the witness consults.

The act of speaking now has a different status from those earlier occasions. With the opening conditional about whether she will speak, the reader is already listening. What remains uncertain is the occasion she and her listener are making of it. Will they understand it as a story, as a confession, or as something for which neither has a settled name? In the closing pages Shalini describes herself as "taking no risks" by recounting what happened (Vijay qtd. in Jenkins, question 15). It costs her something to acknowledge what she did. Six years on, she nevertheless enjoys the freedom to choose the form in which she makes it public. The man she is speaking of cannot make the simplest communication to his family about where he is. Her account affords no reciprocal occasion on which he might specify what he would like a visitor to remember of him.

The strongest claim one can make for Shalini's telling may be the opportunity it gives a reader to disagree with her on the strength of what she has preserved. Abdul's correction is audible. Amina's judgement about what usually happens when soldiers question people lets us hear how easily the brigadier obtained an answer from his guest. The hand reaching towards a gun belongs to a particular soldier. In each case someone enters the story whose conduct makes a demand on the reader independent of her judgement. Meretoja's account of the ethics of understanding another person helps explain why an unsparing confession can still do a kind of injustice (107–16). To value Riyaz's life chiefly for the depth of self-knowledge his disappearance brought a woman in Bangalore would be to assign him one more place of her choosing.

As a child Shalini could scarcely have chosen the measure of her love for either parent. Years later she could choose what to do with a name. In the interval a family had taken her in, a father had corrected her, a woman had asked for her sympathy, and an armed man had told her what might happen to someone he failed to recognise. By the time she met the brigadier, she had heard enough to owe Riyaz greater care. That is a judgement her confession makes possible. What would have happened had she withheld his name remains beyond her knowledge. She can say how the name came into her keeping and to whom she gave it. The people who took Riyaz still owe his family an account of where he went.

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