LOONEY KA TABADLA

(with apologies to Sa'adat Hassan Manto)

BINA SHAH

The year was 2050, and it was one of those fine winter mornings only found in South Asia: the air as thin and crisp as peanut brittle, the hesitantly blue sky overlaid with wisps of cloud, like heaven's cotton candy. A pair of doves cooed in the Ashok trees lining the road, their happy *hoo-hoo-hoo* punctuating the gentle hum of traffic. Electric cars and rickshaws criss-crossed the streets in an orderly fashion and in the distance a high-speed train punched its way from Lahore to New Delhi right on time.

At the Ganda Singh Wala border crossing, border agents stood together, heads bent, whispering in the small rectangular area between the gates demarcating neutral territory. Their identical tablets, their uniform dark suits and their Ray-Ban 6000 sunglasses made it hard to distinguish the Indians from the Pakistanis, but the Pakistanis usually sported small Pakistani flag pins on their lapels and the Indians wore Indian flag pins on theirs. The pins doubled as small transmitters; every once in a while, an agent tapped their collarbone and spoke urgently into their chest.

The people watching on both sides of the gate chewed on popcorn, ice cream, roasted *chilghozey*. They'd been waiting for hours; the special ceremony was supposed to have taken place at 5 a.m., and it was now close to 9 a.m. Children jumped up and down the stone bleachers, oohing and aahing at the soldiers who stood tall and resolute, their turbans bristling above stony faces heavy with facial hair.

The braver ones approached the biggest soldier and stood a few feet away, holding hands and gazing at him with the open-mouthed awe they might have reserved for a jinn or a levitating swami. When he turned and glared in their direction, they ran back to their parents, screaming and giggling all the way.

The soldier hefted his rifle a little higher on his shoulder and twirled his moustache at their retreating backs. The gleam in his coal black eyes suggested that he enjoyed playing the bogeyman. It was a harmless game to break the

monotony of standing around for hours in a tight uniform and boots in the cold, wishing he were still at home in bed with his buxom wife. The women of the Punjab were known for their welcoming bodies, and he would rather have been proving the rumours true than protecting the country.

The local barber, who charged the Pakistanis handsomely to keep their beards bushy, made it a point to attend the ceremony to drum up more business. Today, he'd risen early for the special occasion, and was busy pointing out his handiwork to the crowds: 'See that moustache? I told him to grow the ends and wax them upwards like that. And look at that one – his hair was falling out because his turban was too tight. I massaged his head with my special mixture of *sarson ka tel*, pharma boosters and herbs from my mother's garden, and now he's hairier than a Sri Lankan bride.'

Good-natured laughter from both sides of the border bubbled up like a freshly opened fizzy drink. The barber grinned at his own joke, displaying nicotine-stained teeth. 'Here, have a sample. I'm at Chak 226, right next to the railway station. Come and see me – you won't be disappointed!'

In the cordoned-off enclosure where the Indian and Pakistani journalists mingled, the hubbub grew louder each time a border agent scurried from the neutral zone to the bunkers and back. Both the Indian and Pakistani bunkers were prefabricated containers with tinted windows that lay low and squat on the dusty ground, 50 metres on either side of the border. Each prisoner was inside his respective bunker, but nobody knew anything about their identities or the crimes for which they were being handed over today.

The journalists had already prepared their copy in their heads, ready to be sent back to hungry newsrooms in New Delhi and Islamabad: they were witnessing a historical moment. The first handover under the new Tabadla Scheme had been agreed on by both countries after months of consultation, dialogue and Track Two diplomacy. With the South Asian Disarmament Treaty nearing its fifth year, the diminished threat of nuclear war had seen a correlated rise in development in the entire region. Poverty had been replaced by prosperity, misogyny by modernity, and children were no longer dying because the money for textbooks wasn't going into maintaining vast nuclear arsenals.

Right now, the combined economies of the Indo-Pak Trade Corridor were stronger than any other economy in the world, beating all the predictions of growth that the forecasters had made for the last five years. Anyone who had supported the beleaguered Aman ki Asha Movement of the early twenty-first century was now being hailed as a visionary.

Politicians and pundits claimed that they had been in favour of peace all along, even when past news clips showed them shouting for nuclear war against the neighbouring country, the images unnaturally bright on the quaint HD channels from the previous generation's technological 'revolution'. On the eve of what nearly became the third Kashmir War in 2045, both Russia and China had stepped in to defuse the crisis. The two nations had finally engineered a new era of peace.

Occasionally, though, some former news personality or disgraced religious leader would try to pull a social media stunt, rallying a few disgruntled and displaced villagers to shout slogans against India or Pakistan in front of a defunct Press Club in some godforsaken town in Balochistan or Bihar. They never stopped trying to capitalize on the leftover feelings of hostility, paranoia and resentment that lingered in pockets of both nations, although they were no longer allowed to spew their rhetoric on any of the news channels or in print.

Deprived of revenue streams and national and diasporic audiences, the frequency of these incidents had dwindled, but the governments of India and Pakistan still had to address the question of what they were to do with the occasional lunatic who threatened the stability of the new relationship between the two countries. After all, both states had witnessed, at the turn of the century, how fringe movements could grow into mainstream terror outfits.

Nobody in the press quite knew who had come up with the Tabadla Scheme – they were keeping that secret, as they did with all important schemes. But in the previous week all official channels in both India and Pakistan had announced the scheme on the 9 p.m. news, Standard Subcontinental Time.

IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN NATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY, THE GOVERNMENTS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN ANNOUNCE THAT ANYONE ENGAGING IN ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRAVENE THE PEACE AND ORDER AGREEMENT OF 2047 WILL BE ELIGIBLE FOR PARTICIPATION IN A JOINT TABADLA SCHEME. THIS SCHEME INVOLVES THE EXCHANGE OF PEACE AND ORDER OFFENDERS (POOS) IN AN ATTEMPT TO PROVIDE THEM WITH SOCIAL RE-EDUCATION AND MENTAL REHABILITATION IN A HUMANE AND MERCIFUL MANNER. APPROPRIATE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS HAVE BEEN CONSULTED DURING THE DESIGN OF THIS PROGRAMME AND POOS WILL BE MONITORED THROUGHOUT THE REHABILITATION PROCESS. CITIZENS MAY SEND THEIR FEEDBACK THROUGH THE SUBCONTINENTAL GOOD GOVERNANCE APP ON THEIR MOBILE DEVICES.

JAI HIND/PAKISTAN ZINDABAD!

It was announced that the first exchange would take place on 1 January at the recently reopened Ganda Singh Wala–Hussainiwala border. Unlike Wagah, the Ganda Singh Wala border symbolized new beginnings, and was a gentler, more conciliatory ceremony for today's times. Strategic, too: the exchange would not take place too close to the capital of India in case anything went wrong the first time. The government of Pakistan could be blamed far too easily for a false-flag operation.

Citizens of both India and Pakistan were immensely proud when their nations were declared the joint winners of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2048. A proposal to turn Kashmir into a biodiversity theme park, with revenues from opening up the attractions to tourists shared equally by both countries, had solved the Kashmir problem once and for all. Kashmiris, including those who had left in 1990, were offered stock in the theme park; its IPO hit a record high and was bought by a combination of billionaire Chinese and Russian oligarchs. The land itself was a 999-year freehold and would be returned to the Kashmiri people in the year 3046. Future generations would be so enriched by the scheme's financial returns that they would think it foolish to dismantle it by then.

Buoyed by the Nobel, the two governments amassed so much goodwill that any other scheme they presented to the public was accepted without question. The press came up with a nickname for the Tabadla Scheme: the POO exchange programme. They wrote clever headlines like 'Anti-POO: Governments Unite to Clean Up' and 'Let's Hear it for a POO-free South Asia!' Columnists opined that the scheme heralded the beginning of the Subcontinental Enlightenment; VIP invitations for the ceremony were given to those journalists who showed rapturous support for the scheme since its inception.

On 1 January, journalists descended upon the sleepy town of Hussainiwala on the Indian side, Ganda Singh Wala on the Pakistani side. They shone their holographic press passes at the banks of security scanners; teenage volunteers handed them visors and old-fashioned paper flags meant to invoke nostalgia. As the journalists moved through the security cordons, they called out to one another in excitement and recognition. For once, Indian and Pakistani journalists were allowed to sit together in a communal press arena.

The ordinary public, restricted to their side of the border, filed through a slow turnstile and submitted themselves to a full-body molecular scan to make sure nobody was carrying undeclared weapons or epidemic diseases. Sikhs were allowed to keep their kirpans – the weapon enjoyed special status in both countries – as long as they were made of blunt steel

and were not the recently released razor-sharp models reinforced with laser cutters.

The sun rose, clearing away the darkness of the night. Newly illuminated, the people of India and Pakistan glanced at one another curiously. Despite the easing of tensions, they still felt loyal only to their own territories. They had just begun to get used to the idea that they were not sworn enemies any longer. Still, at any moment, someone could violate the Peace and Order Agreement, setting back progress by decades.

Now, it was time to set the wheels into motion, to see if the government had anticipated every possible outcome of the Tabadla Scheme. The analysis of its success or failure would keep the news channels going for an entire year.

A metallic chime sounded from loudspeakers high above them, bringing everyone to attention. One Pakistani and one Indian woman military officer walked out into the middle of the road and stood together in front of a podium set up with a microphone. Dressed in uniforms of beige saris, olive green sweaters and caps – the Pakistani's a green beret with a red plume, the Indian's a red beret with a green plume – they radiated energy and strength. The crowds on both sides fell quiet and waited for them to speak.

The Indian officer went first. 'Today, 1 January 2050, has been declared a day of harmony by both our governments, who have agreed to enact an extraordinary exchange programme between our nations.' She stepped back to allow her counterpart to come forward.

The Pakistani officer cleared her throat, leaned her face toward the microphone, then intoned, 'Bismillah hir Rahman Nir Rahim...' At this, the Indian audience eyed the Pakistanis, and the Pakistanis eyed the Indians. Somewhere in the enclosure, a baby let out a stuttering colicky wail.

'Today, we will exchange two prisoners who have been found guilty of offences under the Peace and Order Agreement. Pakistan has agreed to take the Indian prisoner, and India to take the Pakistani one, for a year's rigorous rehabilitation. If they are able to redeem themselves in the eyes of society during this time, both prisoners will be repatriated at this spot one year from now.'

Speaking in unison, the two officers called out, in Urdu and Hindi respectively, 'Bring out the prisoner!'

The Pakistanis locked their eyes on the bunker on their side of the border while the Indians did the same on theirs. If they had been chameleons, they could have swivelled one eye to each side to gawk simultaneously at the sight of a cloaked man being bundled out of the Pakistani side and a hooded one

being assisted out of the Indian bunker. Instead, they had to satisfy themselves with switching repeatedly from one side to the other, as if watching a tennis match. Nobody wanted to miss a moment of this spectacle – who knew if they would even be alive the following year to see it happen again?

Both prisoners were brought to the middle of the road, where the sari-clad officers waited to read their crimes out. The soldiers on either side of the Pakistani man waited for the officer's signal. She nodded, and they pulled the cloak off his body. The audience gasped as one; the man's entire body was covered in dynamite sticks with wires springing out in all directions.

'It's a –' a woman in the audience started to scream, but the Pakistani officer held up her white-gloved hand, demanding silence. Trained to obey any figure of authority, the crowds immediately stopped talking and held their collective breath, waiting for the bomb to detonate and blow them all to smithereens.

'Calm down please!' said the officer, her voice ringing out confidently. 'And don't worry – this is not a real bomb. This man, Ahmed Sufyan, is wearing a fake suicide vest. He has been found guilty of violating the Peace and Order Agreement by making and posting a video of himself dying in battle like a martyr.'

The accused man slumped to the ground. The crowds gasped. Some of the Pakistanis remembered seeing the man's photograph on their social media, and the ones who had 'liked' the stunt, or even sent it on to their own networks, wondered queasily if they had been monitored for doing so. People began to sweat from both the rising tension and the day's increasing temperature.

Next, the Indian soldiers pulled the hood off the head of the man who had for so long stood, shivering, on the Indian side. A mop of thick, dark hair fell on to the man's eyes, casting a shadow on his face. The sharp-eyed among the Indian crowd strained to get a good look, murmuring to themselves, 'Is it *him*? It *can't* be. But it looks *just* like him. What do you think?'

The Indian officer took the mic. 'This man, Tulwar Akash Suri, is accused of attacking innocent guests on his talk show, calling them traitors, and telling them to go to Pakistan – as if that were a punishment for their imagined crimes.' The man twitched as the crowd on both sides buzzed and the loud cawing of a murder of crows which had landed in the Ashok trees chased the doves away.

'Well, Mr Suri,' continued the officer. 'You will now get a taste of the medicine you have been prescribing to others so gleefully for so many years. You are going to be sent to Pakistan for one year.'

'And you, Mr Sufyan,' chimed in the Pakistani officer, 'are going to India for the same period of time. Let's see what they make of you over there.'

Ahmed Sufyan dropped to his knees. 'Mercy! Mercy!' he moaned. 'They'll tear me to pieces!' The soldiers accompanying him pulled him back up to his feet.

The Pakistani officer rapped out, 'On the contrary! Our Indian friends have promised to take very good care of you. You will not be harmed – not a single hair on your head.'

Sufyan's hand instinctively went up to touch his thick bouffant. Even on the morning of his sentencing, he'd taken pains to sculpt it carefully with mousse and gel, hiding his receding hairline. Since he had arrived in Karachi six years ago, he had built a seven-million-strong following on social media by posting pictures and videos of himself in various military outfits, pretending to die in the line of duty in ever-more dramatic and bloody ways each week. Right now, he couldn't stand the thought of all eyes in the arena focusing on the small bald spot that had begun to develop on the crown of his head.

He'd started off as a normal middle-class guy, working in a hair salon, where he'd learned to style and gel his hair to magnificent heights. From there, he'd crossed over into the world of modelling, appearing on the catwalks during Pakistan's Fashion Weeks. He'd even bagged a role as the star of a television drama in which he cheated on his wife with a modern 'city' girl and slapped both of them daily.

The dramas were a hit with the older generation, who longed for the days when you could hit a woman freely and expect no repercussions from law enforcers. These days, you could barely even look at a woman before she whipped out her mobile phone and called the police to cart you off to jail. You'd be fined and have to wear an electronic ankle tag to mark you out as a harasser – there was no dignity in that. But Ahmed Sufyan stood for the old-fashioned masculinity which could not be controlled or bound by rules and conventions.

He was testosterone on legs and an avowed patriot. Sufyan spoke for all the men hiding their true nature behind a patina of meekness and a gentle demeanour. He became a bodybuilder (and cultivated a steroid habit too). He had spearheaded the urban military fashion scene, appearing on all the fashion blogs and social media influencer feeds. It was against the law to impersonate military personnel, but Ahmed Sufyan had made it clear that he was only expressing his admiration for the armed forces. After the television dramas came films, and Ahmed Sufyan rocketed into the stratosphere, appearing in television ads, promotions for luxury cars and tourism campaigns. His appearance fee

rose to the lakhs and would have surpassed a crore if the momentum had continued. If he had not made this one mistake.

Was that a pleased look on the Pakistani officer's face, watching coolly as Ahmed Sufyan put his hands together and begged for clemency? This latest exploit would raise his social media followers to 10 million. It would remind them of the good old days when brave martyrs daringly crossed the Line of Control, attacked the enemy and sent themselves to heaven. It might even inspire a few youngsters to do the same thing, peace or no peace.

Sufyan berated himself for failing to read the national mood correctly, for not realizing that the old tricks wouldn't work, that the times had changed. Instead of more followers, he'd first earned himself a visit from the police, then the Special Branch, and, finally, this public humiliation, this sadistic torture, a situation worse than a death sentence.

He took a deep breath and projected his voice, hoping it would reach the microphone and echo out to the Pakistani audience. Their cheers would drown out his sobs, and they would refuse to allow him to be sent over to the enemy. They would rally around their social media king, they would overwhelm the guards, bear him aloft on their shoulders and take him safely back to Karachi. The authorities would have to bow to the will of the people.

'I refuse to set foot in enemy territory. Hang me and got it over with!'

But the microphone had already been switched off, and his brave words simply died away in the breeze. The Pakistani officer smiled and said, in a voice just loud enough for Ahmed Sufyan to hear, 'You will have to meet the very people whom you have been portraying as demons, and find out if you've been telling the truth about them. For your sake, let's hope what you put out were lies. But if you were lying, then you were misleading your own people, and *that* is a crime the state takes very seriously.'

The Indian officer turned to the male accused. 'Do you have anything to say, Mr Suri?'

Suri puffed up, for it was indeed he, the famed television anchor who made a name for himself calling the not-so-powerful to account every night on his highly rated television news show, 'The Truth with Tulwar Suri'. For him, recognition was the strongest drug. He was always invited to elite parties, the VIP enclosures at both the Nehru and the Indira Gandhi stadiums. He owned several houses in Alibaug. His children went to school every day in a solar-powered Maybach 12 escorted by several police mobiles. He had the prime minister's private mobile number on his contacts list.

When it was first aired, his show was sound and balanced, featuring guests from both sides of the political spectrum who were given equal time to speak. Then, a few years before the Third Kashmir War, he realized that balance and fairness could only earn him respectability, but he wanted much more than that – he wanted superstardom. He wanted to be bigger than Amitabh Bachchan. When people heard his name he wanted them to think of the best of the best, of the United Nations, of the International Space Station.

Night after night, Suri invited guests on his show and shouted them down, berating them for their lack of patriotism, their tendencies toward treason. It was clear that he believed his opinions mattered more than his guests' expertise – unless, of course, they agreed with him and became mere props to support his theories.

And for the ones who dared to disagree, he had the same refrain: 'Go to Pakistan! Go to Pakistan!' On the screen, his slogan was matched by a visual of the Pakistani flag that went up in flames. The tag line became so popular that even school children shouted 'Go to Pakistan!' at each other when fighting in the playground. When Suri heard this, he (reportedly) smiled and said, 'I am influencing generations. What could be more powerful than that?'

The result was that every audience member felt they were the star of their own action movie, ostensibly titled *India vs. Pakistan*, at the end of which India always came out on top. As viewers tuned in by the million, Suri built an audience of nearly a billion people for his show, and every night he earned millions in advertising revenue. His media house soared to the top of the industry. He appeared on the cover of *Bloomberg*, *Forbes* and *Fortune 500*; CNN Business did a profile on him; *Architectural Digest* featured his 7-million-dollar house in south Mumbai.

But after the signing of the Disarmament Treaty, the stabilization of the Kashmir issue and the establishment of the Indo–Pak trade corridor, Suri had received a personal visit from the chief secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in the Indian government. Over a cup of tea, the secretary had informed Suri that he needed to tone down his show, adopt a more conciliatory approach. Maybe he could do a series that explored the benefits of peace for both countries? The experts had predicted that the economy would grow as never before. Why not call some economists, a banker or two, on the programme to discuss it? Even the minister might be made available for a special edition of 'The Truth with Tulwar Suri'.

But Tulwar Suri had scoffed at the chief secretary. He had even scoffed at the minister. He knew the India–Pakistan peace pact was a conspiracy designed to

fool the people. True to his proclamations, Tulwar Suri would continue to tell the truth, no matter what the cost. He continued with his shows and produced a special web series, meant only for subscribers, in which he expounded for an extra hour on Pakistan's perfidy and why India had made a mistake in trusting Pakistan. It was the one lesson he intended to drum into every man, woman and child in India, peace or no peace: You can never trust Pakistan.

Then, one day, there was a knock on the door. Everyone in South Asia knew to be afraid of that knock. It meant that the party had come to an end. Perhaps the Pakistanis were more finely attuned to that knock than Indians, but Tulwar Suri had overlooked the fact that the knock could sound on his door. And now, here he was, shivering in the January cold before hundreds of Pakistanis who jeered at him from across the border and seemed ready to tear him to shreds.

The border. He glanced at the white line that marked the division between the countries. It was a remarkably innocuous stretch of land, the same trees and greenery, the same sky above, the same ground below. Yet, on one side lay India, on the other Pakistan. He shuddered when he realized that if they took down all the flags, covered up the writing, and silenced the mosques on one side and the temple bells on the other, there would be no way to tell in which country he stood.

He tried to stare down the Indian officer reading out the charges against him. How mockingly she looked down her nose at him (and it wasn't even an attractive nose)! She was nothing more than a jumped-up secretary whom someone had decided to put in a uniform and call an officer. Oh, he had all the respect in the world for the Indian armed forces, but Tulwar Singh never spoke for himself, he spoke for the nation! He was a servant of the nation more than these petty bureaucrats, pencil pushers, all... Thoughts of how he had been treated since he had been taken into custody – a cramped, cold jail cell, no mobile phone, terrible food – flooded his mind. But the stress of experiencing all of this was nothing compared to the humiliation it brought on. As soon as he got out of here, he decided, he would run an expose on political harassment by the military. He'd have the notice of this woman's resignation flashed on his show for the next six months.

'Do you have anything to say, Mr Suri?' repeated the officer.

The sentences jostled in Suri's brain, pushing and shoving for space until something snapped in his mind. The only thing that came out of his mouth was a shriek, amplified by the microphone. 'GO TO PAKISTAAAAAAAAAAAAN' echoed around both sides of the border, causing everyone's heads to snap up. A

horrified silence ensued and then a wail of feedback from a misplaced speaker too close to the microphone deafened everyone. The crows screamed, the dogs resumed barking and infants everywhere began to cry, louder than ever.

The Indian officer, whose glasses had been knocked off her face by the sheer decibel level he'd unleashed, pushed them back up her nose. She cast another disapproving glance down her nostrils at Suri, who was quivering with indignation. 'We hear you loud and clear, Mr Suri.' She nodded crisply at her Pakistani counterpart. 'With your permission, Lieutenant Shazia.'

'Absolutely, Lieutenant Deepika.'

The two officers saluted each other, and then each took their prisoner by the arm and marched them forward to a small blue gate set in the low wall spanning the narrow width of the border crossing. The crowd leaned forward as the officers pressed their palms to the electronic pad on their respective sides at the same time. With a smooth hum, the gate unlocked on both sides, and slid back. The open space between the two countries was only three feet across, but in that moment it encompassed the entire world.

It had been agreed upon that both prisoners would cross at the same time. There was a moment of comedy when Ahmed Sufyan and Tulwar Suri stood stock still and stared at each other, tossing their heads and scratching the ground like two bulls ready to charge.

'They're not going to move,' hissed someone in the crowd on the Indian side.

'He won't let Suri through,' said someone on the Pakistani side. 'Defending Pakistan against the enemy.'

Sniggers and chuckles arose at this. Hostilities between the two nations had ceased years ago: it was now a period in the history of the two countries, taught in schools, etched on commemorative plaques, one that found mention in a charter at the United Nations. But it appeared that people like Suri and Ahmed preferred to live in a time warp when peace between the two countries was unimaginable. They needed to be re-educated for their own good and for the sake of everyone around them.

As if by magic, a doctor in a white coat, stethoscope around his neck, appeared suddenly at the crossing. The crowd gaped. What was going on? Was the stress too much for Suri, who had a known heart condition? One of the real-time tickers on his show routinely measured his blood pressure as he raged at a particularly difficult guest. The higher it got, the more the audiences tuned in to see if he might have a heart attack while his show was on air. And now – was he finally going to collapse?

The doctor whispered in the ears of both the Indian and Pakistani officers. An usher signalled to the crowd and the watching press that there was one last announcement to be made.

The Pakistani officer spoke as the two offenders shifted and squirmed under the watchful eyes of the crowd. 'The authorities have just confirmed that both Ahmed Sufyan and Tulwar Akash Suri are suffering from a mental condition that has caused both of them to be victims of delusional thoughts. They believe we are still living in the previous era of hostility between our two great nations. This is a kind of post-traumatic fugue that requires treatment, therapy and medication. Authorities on both sides have graciously agreed to provide this treatment free of charge to the two men, who will from now on be referred to not as prisoners but as patients.'

At this, the audience fell silent, trying to understand what it meant. Trauma? Fugue? They had never heard these strange words before. '*Dimagh ki kamzori*' went the whispers on the Indian side. '*Zeini bimari*,' whispered the Pakistanis. The officers were impatient to get things underway, and the soldiers roused the crowd into cheers as the brass bands struck up a spirited tune. The whispers died away as Pakistanis and Indians sang a song common to the people on both sides of the border.

The audience remarked that for such a short man, Suri was remarkably broad. Perhaps it was the special panels he'd had sown into his jacket? Or perhaps the authorities had taken pity on him and allowed him to wear a bulletproof vest as a special concession to his particular form of paranoia? And Ahmed Sufyan! Look how he shrank away from the doctor's syringe. If he would only relax and allow the doctor to give him one of those fancy tranquilizers, he could unclench his fists and loosen his jaw. He looked as if he might still explode, if not by detonation then by the force of his own fury.

Finally, injected and subdued, gently and easily slipping into an agreeable fog, the two patients managed to make it through the crossing at the same time. Sufyan wobbled, his bones turned to rubber. Suri squared his shoulders and stuck out his arms, trying to look bigger than he was. They staggered across the border at the same time, Suri into Pakistan and Sufyan into India. The crowd burst into applause.

As they passed each other, Suri eyed Sufyan, Sufyan eyed Suri, and a silent promise passed between the two of them. Sufyan knew he would appear on Suri's television show in a year's time, when they were both free of their imprisonment. Suri knew his ratings would surpass all ratings in the history of television, the cheques would pile up, his bank account would overflow

like the Sutlej in flood. The future lay in televised reconciliation: peace as a product, manufactured for the masses.

The two were led into waiting ambulances that sped away to the best mental facilities each country had to offer. Indian and Pakistani officers saluted each other, shook hands and marched back to their bunkers. The flags fluttered in the wind, the dogs and crows sang a triumphant chorus. Even babies, soothed, offered gap-toothed smiles to their parents.

'That's it: the exchange is now complete,' a firm voice rang out over the loudspeakers. 'Go home, everyone. Thank you for witnessing the Tabadla ceremony this morning. Pakistan Zindabad! Jai Hind!'

As the crowd began to file out of the ground, and journalists faced cameras, excitedly describing what had just taken place, someone in the crowd shouted, '*Pagal ka tabadla*!' Even as the microphones picked up the unfortunate phrase and broadcast it live across both nations, the man who had unwittingly christened the event was quickly hushed by his wife, who urged him not to be so cruel. Everyone else, murmuring in agreement, went home to tell the rest that they had truly missed out on something special, something they would tell their children about for generations to come – and the Tabadla Scheme came to be known forever more as the Looney Exchange.

PALEY'S WATCH

ANIL MENON

The American Spirit found the artifact in the Gulf of Alaska, about 50 miles off the coastline, not too far from the port at Sitka. It'd been dredged up by a trawler pod, set for halibut. Paley, one of the fishermen, spotted the object sparkling against the blood-black deck, and the men gathered at the Brit's triumphant shout.

It was a set of nested funnels. Each conical layer sparkled with what appeared to be moving dots of light. The artifact was about the size of a can of soup, but its weight kept changing, making the thing feel uncomfortably alive. Like holding a cat. The men quickly returned the artifact to Paley.

At first, they thought it was junk from one of the many cruise ships that plied the area, but even junk is *something*. This looked like nothing they had seen before. They had a college boy in their midst, one Tommy Kumagai, and they got the 19-year-old to take a look.

'Hey, that's Dini's surface!' said Tommy.

'No, it ain't,' growled Paley. 'It's mine. I found it.'

'Relax, Paley. I meant it looks like Dini's Surface – it's a topological manifold.'

'A topless *what*?' asked the captain, eyeing the curious crew. At his glare, they all returned to work except for Paley.

'Manifold, a surface with smooth curvature. Like those sculptures with those weird holes and lumps. If you know the curvature of a manifold, you know everything about it. A sphere has constant positive curvature. That's what makes it a sphere. A Dini's Surface is a pseudosphere; it has constant negative curvature. If you draw a triangle –'

'Thanks, professor.' Paley spat on the deck. 'So it's just a toy, innit?' The Liverpuddlian expat looked ready to throw it back into the ocean.

Tommy hesitated. 'Dunno, Paley. Doesn't look like it's been made for giggles. Might be valuable. Never laid eyes on nuthin' like it.'