

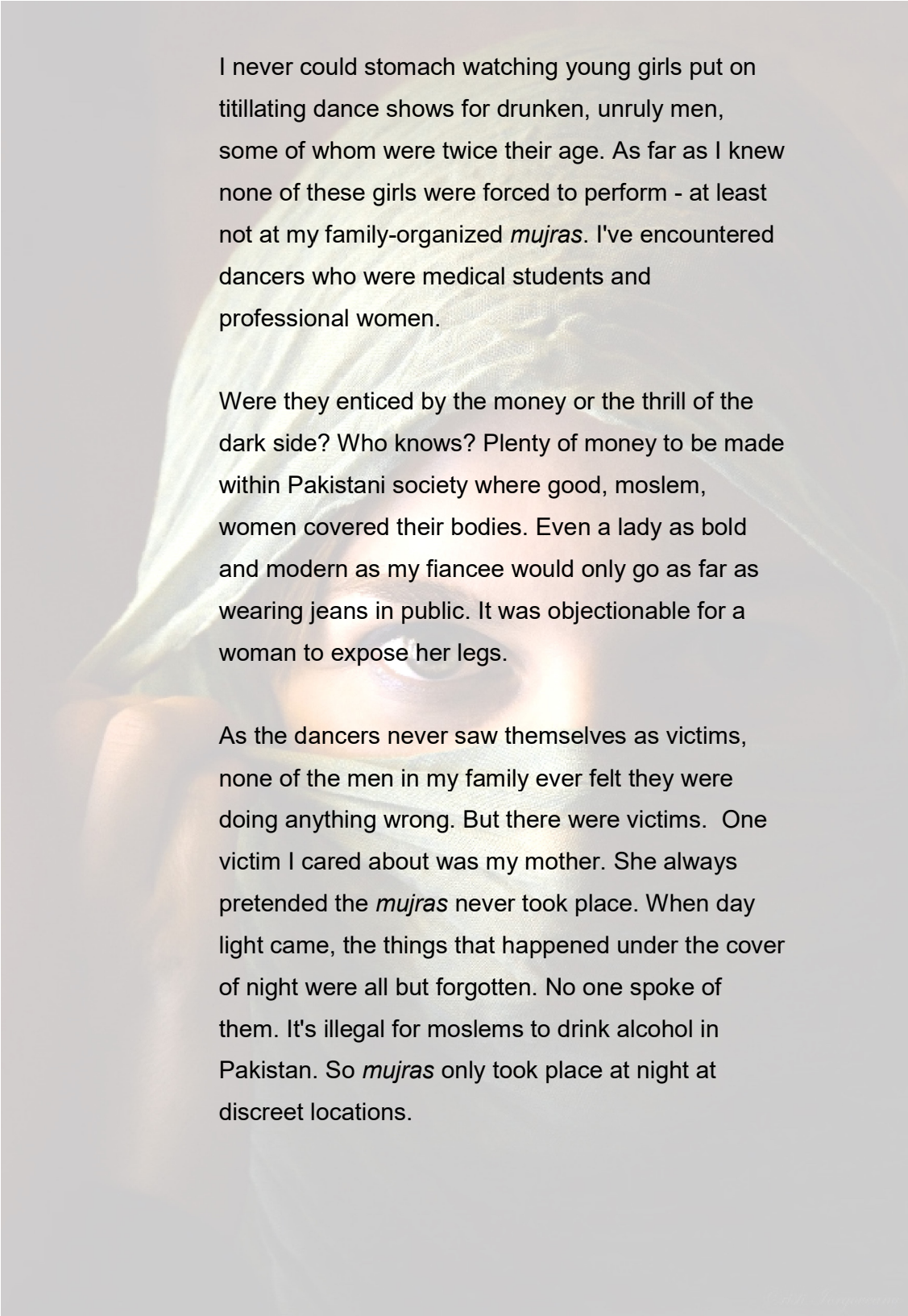




Behind The Veil

Gregarious laughter and belches saturated the air with the smell of alcohol in the cabaret-furnished room. Twenty men were milling around a colourful carpet for the *mujra* to commemorate this stag party.

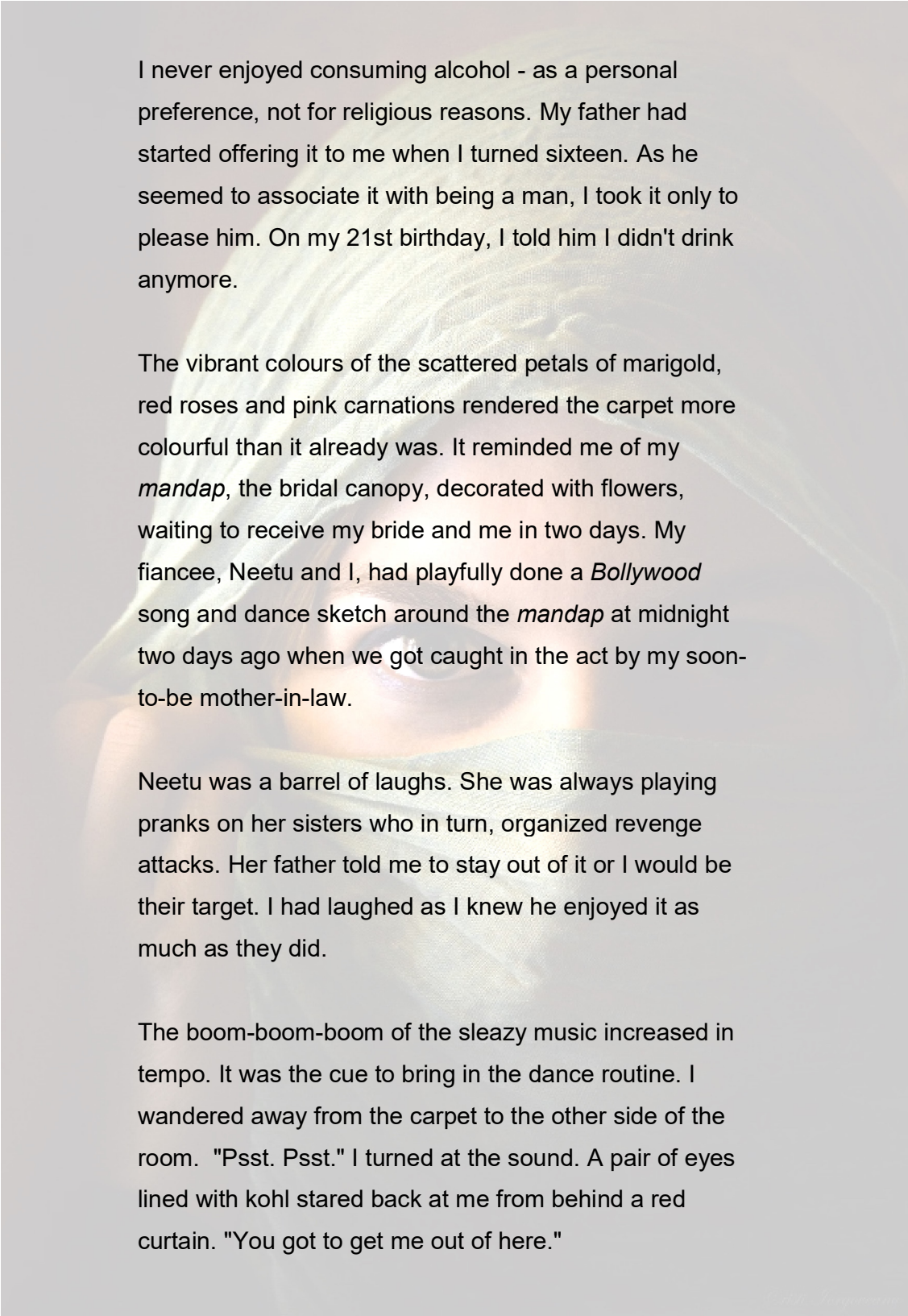
Since I started working, four years ago, I stopped attending the *mujras* organized by my father and relatives. I doubt I would have been invited to this one if I were not the bridegroom. I now sat on a bar stool, sharing a round table with my father and Uncle Roshan, dreading the moment the dancer should come out to ply her wares.



I never could stomach watching young girls put on titillating dance shows for drunken, unruly men, some of whom were twice their age. As far as I knew none of these girls were forced to perform - at least not at my family-organized *mujras*. I've encountered dancers who were medical students and professional women.

Were they enticed by the money or the thrill of the dark side? Who knows? Plenty of money to be made within Pakistani society where good, moslem, women covered their bodies. Even a lady as bold and modern as my fiancée would only go as far as wearing jeans in public. It was objectionable for a woman to expose her legs.

As the dancers never saw themselves as victims, none of the men in my family ever felt they were doing anything wrong. But there were victims. One victim I cared about was my mother. She always pretended the *mujras* never took place. When day light came, the things that happened under the cover of night were all but forgotten. No one spoke of them. It's illegal for moslems to drink alcohol in Pakistan. So *mujras* only took place at night at discreet locations.



I never enjoyed consuming alcohol - as a personal preference, not for religious reasons. My father had started offering it to me when I turned sixteen. As he seemed to associate it with being a man, I took it only to please him. On my 21st birthday, I told him I didn't drink anymore.

The vibrant colours of the scattered petals of marigold, red roses and pink carnations rendered the carpet more colourful than it already was. It reminded me of my *mandap*, the bridal canopy, decorated with flowers, waiting to receive my bride and me in two days. My fiancée, Neetu and I, had playfully done a *Bollywood* song and dance sketch around the *mandap* at midnight two days ago when we got caught in the act by my soon-to-be mother-in-law.

Neetu was a barrel of laughs. She was always playing pranks on her sisters who in turn, organized revenge attacks. Her father told me to stay out of it or I would be their target. I had laughed as I knew he enjoyed it as much as they did.

The boom-boom-boom of the sleazy music increased in tempo. It was the cue to bring in the dance routine. I wandered away from the carpet to the other side of the room. "Psst. Psst." I turned at the sound. A pair of eyes lined with kohl stared back at me from behind a red curtain. "You got to get me out of here."



I was taken aback.

"They did pay a lot of money to see your dance," I whispered back.

A hand now stuck out of the curtain to latch onto my wrist, and I admired how delicate it was, adorned with henna. Her bangles jingled when it gave my forearm a good shake. "That was before I saw what I had to wear. And it's not good."

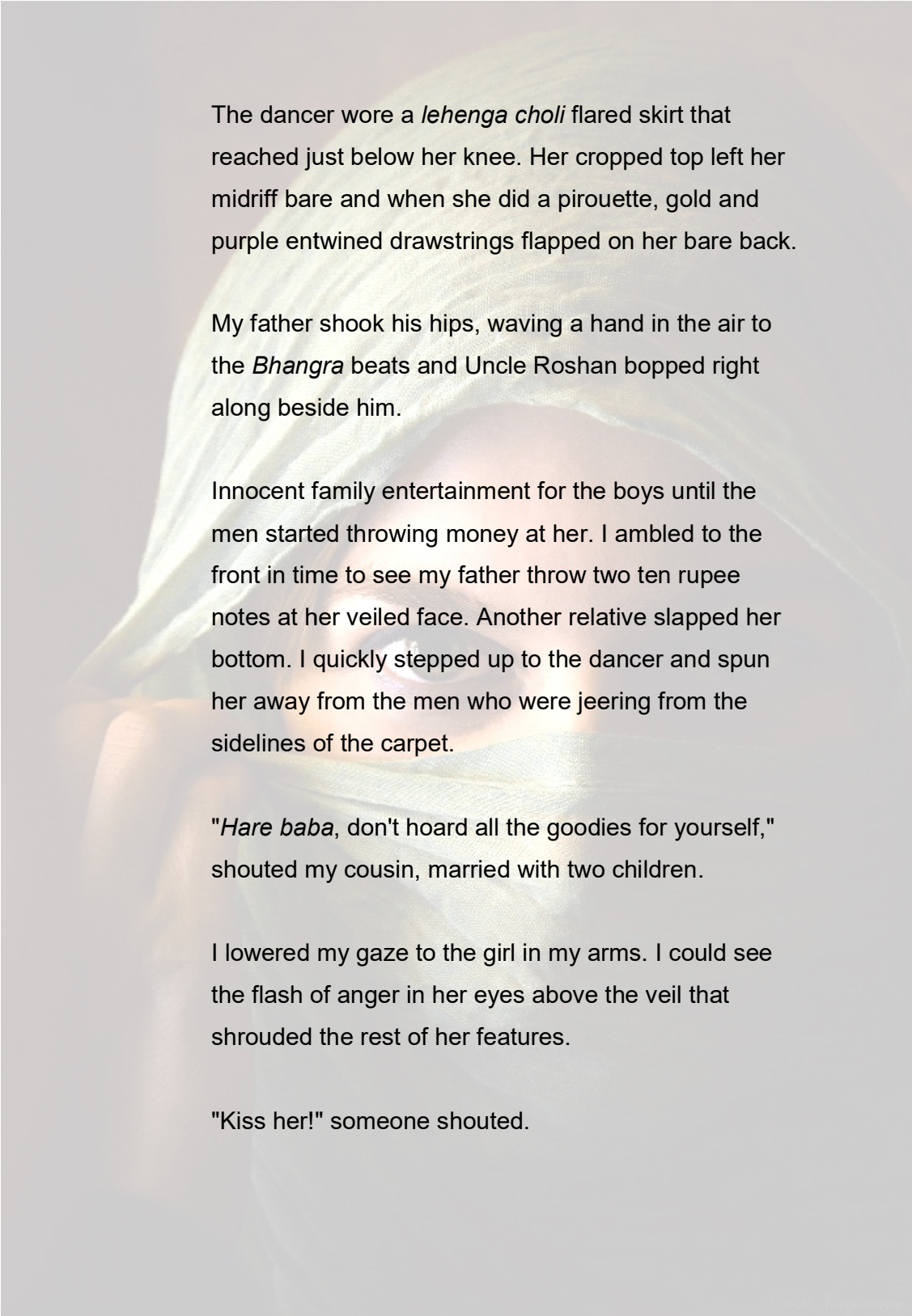
The music bellowed and so did the men. The hand on my wrist slipped away and bangles clinked wildly as I heard the muffled sounds of protest.

I watched two matronly women escort the dancer to the colourful carpet. Her henna-painted feet crushed the torn flowers on the carpet as she started to dance.

"Why is she wearing a veil?" someone shouted.

"Take it off!" another shouted.

"Be patient, it will come off in due time," one of the matronly women shouted back as she left the room with her companion. The men laughed and made lewd remarks.



The dancer wore a *lehenga choli* flared skirt that reached just below her knee. Her cropped top left her midriff bare and when she did a pirouette, gold and purple entwined drawstrings flapped on her bare back.

My father shook his hips, waving a hand in the air to the *Bhangra* beats and Uncle Roshan bopped right along beside him.

Innocent family entertainment for the boys until the men started throwing money at her. I ambled to the front in time to see my father throw two ten rupee notes at her veiled face. Another relative slapped her bottom. I quickly stepped up to the dancer and spun her away from the men who were jeering from the sidelines of the carpet.

"*Hare baba*, don't hoard all the goodies for yourself," shouted my cousin, married with two children.

I lowered my gaze to the girl in my arms. I could see the flash of anger in her eyes above the veil that shrouded the rest of her features.

"Kiss her!" someone shouted.



"That should get rid of the veil!" yelled another.

"Kiss her! Are you a boy or a man?"

I wanted to bolt out of the room. My stomach churned just as it did when I was 10-years-old, watching my dad and uncles grope two young girls at yet another *mujra* organized for yet another family get-together. At that time, I resisted calling out to my mother in the other room to come and get me because I wanted to be a man.

Through the years, getting through the *mujras* never got easier. Now, the excuse to hold this one was for me. At 25-years-old, I still dutifully obeyed my elders. I kissed her forehead and fumbled with the veil. Her hand covered mine as she helped me unfasten the veil. I felt the squeeze of assurance on my hand before we both let go of the veil. It fell away from her face. The men gasped. The music stopped, and the whole room fell silent.

I watched my father sober up very quickly. He called out, "*Hare bethi*, what game is this?"

"*Bethi!* That's right, papa. Daughter. She's someone's daughter, someone's sister and soon to be someone's wife. Mine."



Uncle Roshan began laughing sheepishly. "Kids. kids. Always playing pranks. Enough, Rahul. *Bus hey na*. Neetu, your father will surely hear about this."

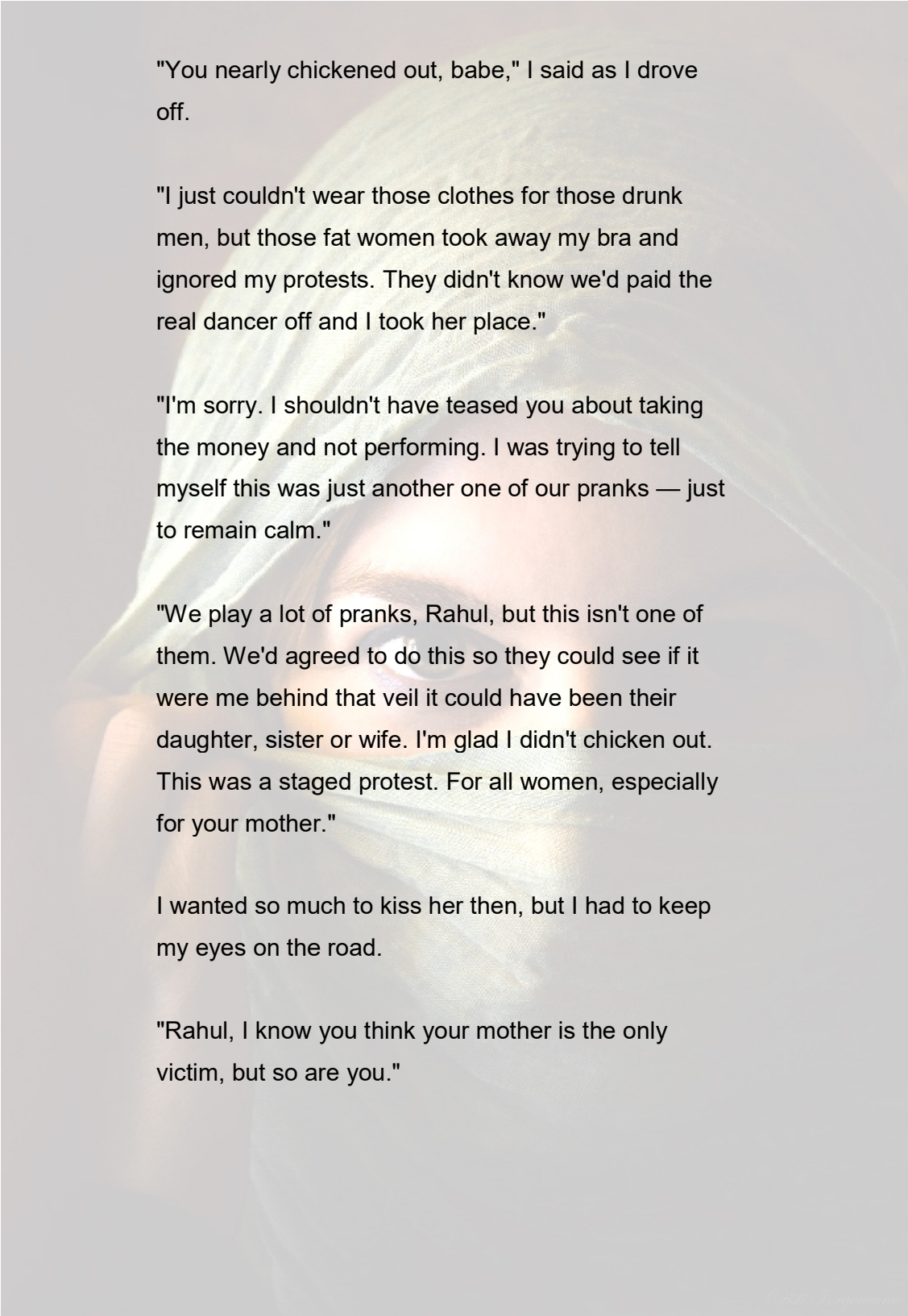
"Do you see my father-in-law here, *chachaa*? He respects his wife and daughters too much to be attending *mujras*." I chastised Uncle Roshan.

"Rahul!" My father's voice thundered.

"*Muje maaf karo, sahib*," Neetu apologised to my father, bringing her fingertips to the front of her eyes, almost touching her forehead in the traditional *adab*, moslem greeting as she bent forward, then quickly straightened up, grabbed my hand and ran across the room.

Before we left, Neetu turned to look back. "By the way, my husband is the only real man in this room because he respects women and cherishes his wife."

This time, I grabbed her hand to run off. I didn't want to provoke them anymore than we already had. It didn't take long to reach my car and we quickly got in.



"You nearly chickened out, babe," I said as I drove off.

"I just couldn't wear those clothes for those drunk men, but those fat women took away my bra and ignored my protests. They didn't know we'd paid the real dancer off and I took her place."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have teased you about taking the money and not performing. I was trying to tell myself this was just another one of our pranks — just to remain calm."

"We play a lot of pranks, Rahul, but this isn't one of them. We'd agreed to do this so they could see if it were me behind that veil it could have been their daughter, sister or wife. I'm glad I didn't chicken out. This was a staged protest. For all women, especially for your mother."

I wanted so much to kiss her then, but I had to keep my eyes on the road.

"Rahul, I know you think your mother is the only victim, but so are you."

"Not anymore, my darling. When you said 'my husband is the only real man in this room', something snapped inside me and set me free. I needed to hear that." I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it. "I promise to love, cherish and protect you all the days of my life."

