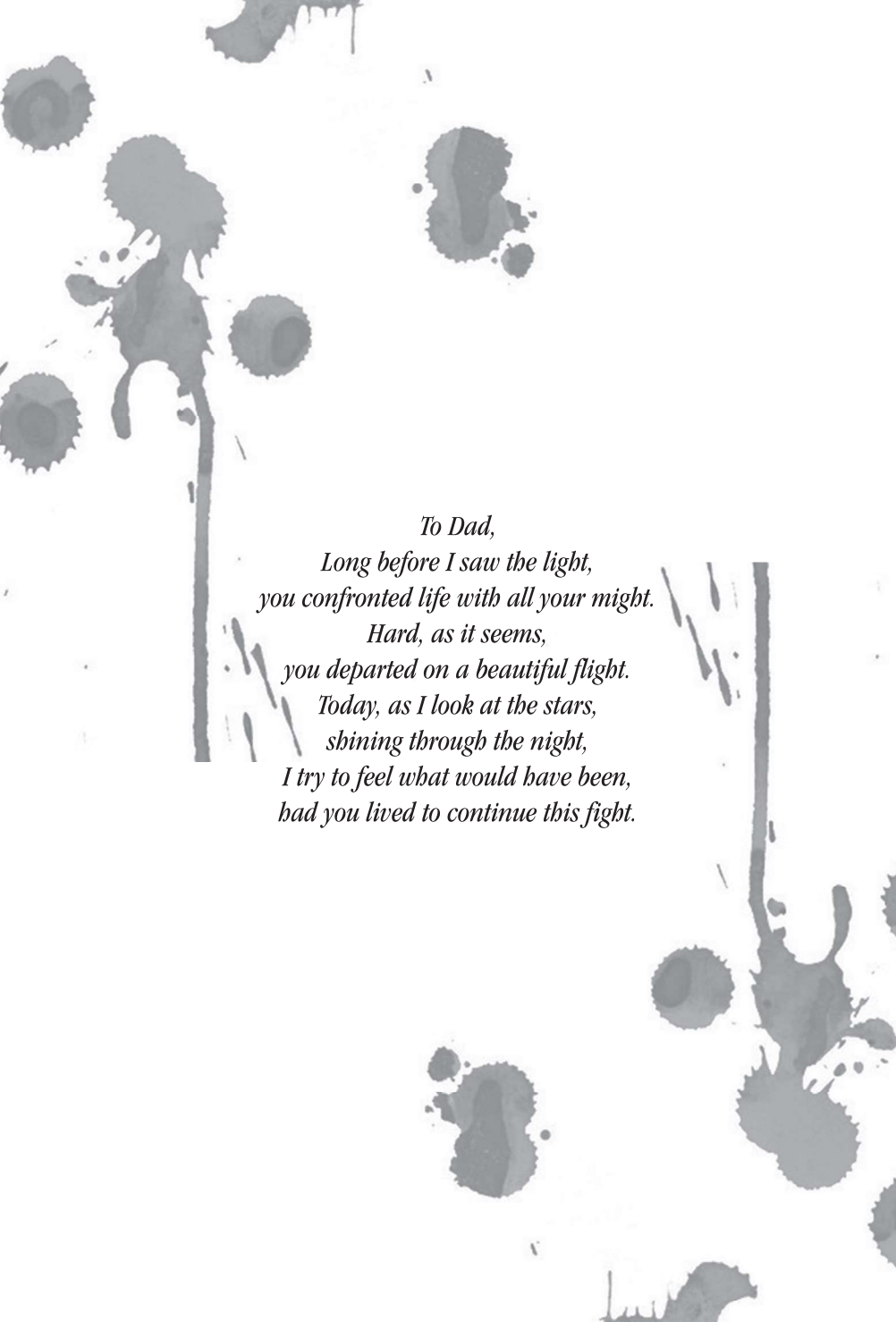


THE STAINED PASHMINA

BIJOY MUNSHI





*To Dad,
Long before I saw the light,
you confronted life with all your might.
Hard, as it seems,
you departed on a beautiful flight.
Today, as I look at the stars,
shining through the night,
I try to feel what would have been,
had you lived to continue this fight.*

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My Birthday

Delhi 2019

In July 2019, on my 29th birthday, I received a write-up with birthday greetings in a PDF on WhatsApp. The number was unknown. I tried to search for the number online, and it showed a name—Yoginder Sharma, Solan. I failed to understand if the content was a piece of imagination or a pivotal truth hidden from me since birth. I wanted to pick up the phone, dial my mother and ask her to verify everything. At the end of the greetings was a message: ‘Hope you recognise this handwriting and want to find out more. Follow the lead.’

Ten years ago, we had received two couriers at our ancestral home, and my mother had asked me not to pay attention to them. They comprised torn pages from a diary in the same handwriting but were about poetry and family. This one was completely different. I started looking for old pictures on my laptop. I wanted to match

the handwriting and make sure it was the same.

The write-up was about the man from whom I had inherited my passion for writing. The man who was snatched from us in a road accident when I was just a year old. It was a cruel game of fate that left my mother hanging onto life by a thread.

Riyaz Dar, my father, was a civil engineer working with a private organisation based in New Delhi. For an avid traveller like him, wandering in the mountains was like oxygen. Almost all the stories that my mother told about him were based on the beauty of the mountains they explored together in their two years of togetherness. His kindness, intellect, simple mannerisms and contentment with life were the major points I heard of as a kid. I was often told that he excelled at his work and was extremely persuasive.

I recollected the story about the terror attack in which my grandfather had lost his life, but I wasn't told about my father killing anyone.

'Why have I received this write-up?' I pondered. 'Was this a fictional piece of writing that he dreamed of publishing, or was this the dangerous path of truth they never let me tread on?' There were questions in my mind, with no one to answer them.

I tried to search for the sender on social networking sites, but he seemed like a ghost. There were no social footprints. The mountains were calling me to unravel the truth.

Before I could overthink, I booked an evening bus to

Solan for the next day. There was no way I could leave this trail unexplored. I knew there would be many dead ends, but I was determined. It took me the whole night and the next morning to get a few contacts to help me in the hill town. Having influential relatives was always a major advantage, but now, I wanted to be as discreet as possible. A few friends helped me with the numbers and addresses of a few individuals in the administration. I thought only people in authority could help, but realised later that help comes from unknown quarters when you are in need.