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Three weddings and a funeral

A hundred beats

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Thirty six hours in a car across Sindh, a voyage in five acts.

Introduction/Act one: Sindh is stiflingly hot, somewhere around 50 degrees in the midday sun. At a tollbooth in Petaro the man handing out chits to travelling cars eats the blue receipts he has no more use for and waves the cars along. There are lopsided lorries grunting underneath the weight of the grain they're transporting, families on motorcycles pushing through the warm wind as fast as they can, and at one point a pick up truck full of furniture. There are cupboards and shelves perfectly laid out and four men are lazing around on the items feeling quite at home in the middle of nowhere. One man sleeps on the couch and another sits at the kitchen table reading the newspaper.

I am in the back of a car with my family, on our way to Dadu for a wedding -- the first of many we are to attend in the next several hours. Mir Ali smells of cinnamon and nutmeg and is demanding stories to fill the long hours of our journey. My mother and I are listening to books on tape and Zulfikar is reading his Pakistan Studies textbook. It is going to be a long drive.

Act two: Dadu is spread across much of Upper Sindh. It is a town speckled with sunflower fields that appear this time of year. The walls of the villages we pass are covered on one side with graffiti that reads 'Fight Polio' and on the other with posters of Hizbollah's secretary general Syed Hasan Nasrallah. Nasrallah has quite a following in Dadu, as odd as that might seem. There are posters bearing his image outside stores and by residential windows and it makes me feel pleased to see an unusual suspect staring out at me from a political poster. In one village in Dadu -- there are so many -- the residents have placed a billiard table out on the street and three boys who can barely reach the height of their cue sticks knock back a game or two.

I recognise the wedding party as we approach it. We are led inside a large shamiana and seated on a stage. The married couple are safely ensconced somewhere else, this function is for the visiting guests who've come to felicitate the union. On the stage my brothers get pagris tied around their heads. I almost feel like they are getting married.

Marriage rites in Sindh are largely borrowed from Hindu customs. There is an easy blend of Hindu and Muslim cultures here and nowhere is that more obvious than at a wedding. There is the chawwal tradition -- the proper names are lost on me, let's pretend these are fitting ones -- as the rukhsati ends and the bride leaves her house, she throws a fistful of rice behind her to ensure that her home has sustenance and good fortune to sustain it now that its daughter has left. There is the doodh tradition when a bowl of cloudy milk is placed before the betrothed couple. The bowl contains a ring that both bride and groom have to find with one hand fishing about the

milk. Legend says that whoever finds the ring first retains the upper hand in the marriage. The funniest and most charming tradition has to be the laoun which is done before the rukhsati. The bride and groom are seated opposite each other and seven happily married men and another seven happily wedded women approach the couple and take turns at (softly) banging their heads together an odd number of times to bless them. Widows, due to typical Hindu superstition, are not encouraged to participate. They're as bad luck as you can get when it comes to Sindhi wedding rituals. I don't suppose happily unmarried people are very lucky either.

Act three: Another four hours and a sandstorm later, the second wedding commences. The newlyweds are feted by the sound of bagpipes -- which Pakistan is the second largest producer of, after Scotland -- and by rose petals thrown at their feet. There is music and dancing and while Mir Ali is quite content to stay and party on, we must beg leave.

Act four: It is at the third wedding, in a day filled with an unusual amount of festivities and merry making that things start to take a downturn. The bride is beautiful and blushing throughout the reception and the groom is attentive and kind, balancing his plate atop his knee so that his wife could share his food. Their family is warm and their utter joy at the union is infectious. But it is while we eat that we hear the news of the Charsadda bomb. Being on the road for so many hours means that we haven't seen the news so it comes as quite a shock to hear of the interior minister's near assassination. My mother asks about the size of the bomb, she speaks in kilos not body count, and it is then that someone tells us Sherpao's son has been injured. "He has his uncle's name" my mother says to herself and goes silent.

The news of death pervades the space of our trip and it is without irony that we realise our last stop before heading home to Karachi is a funeral.

Act five: Finality. That is the horrible thing about suicide. There's no opportunity for last chances or for fortunes to be reversed. The rate of male suicides outnumbers that of female suicides in almost all nations. According to Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid (LHRLA), in the first six months of 2004 alone there were 1,160 suicides reported in Pakistan. Attempted suicides for that period veered close to another thousand. Pakistan being an Islamic country, where the act of taking one's life is a criminal offence that is punished with a year's jail time, information on suicide and suicide awareness is hard to come by. Numbers are also scarce, even though a quick glance at any newspaper offers a daily toll; not surprisingly, many families avoid the stigma or taboo of suicide, and potential criminal charges, by claiming 'accidental deaths'. Most of those who commit suicide in Pakistan are between the ages of eight and 25. Eight years young and done with life, what a statistic. A. was 18. He was the eldest out of three children and was still a teenager when he decided that he'd had enough. He drank poison, most likely insecticide as he was a farmer, and died. His family spoke about him and the manner of his death with no shame, suicide is common around these areas. A. was not alone in feeling that hope was a luxury he could never afford. He was too young to have found no solace in the future, but this is the poverty of life in our country.

When we said our condolence prayers even Mir Ali kept silent and bowed his head mimicking the grownups around him.