

# **KARACHI VICE**

**LIFE AND DEATH IN  
A DIVIDED CITY**

**SAMIRA SHACKLE**

 **MELVILLE HOUSE**  
BROOKLYN • LONDON

**KARACHI VICE: LIFE AND DEATH IN A DIVIDED CITY**

First Melville House publication August 2021

First published in Great Britain by Granta Books, 2021

Copyright © Samira Shackle, 2021

Maps copyright © John Gilkes, 2021

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN: 9-781-61219-942-9

ISBN: 9-781-61219-943-6 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021937674

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

## SAFDAR

I was used to experiencing Karachi through the windows of a car, but not at such high speed. I was sitting in the passenger seat of an ambulance, siren blaring, clinging on tight as we lurched between lanes of traffic. The driver, Safdar, shouted through the loudspeaker attached to the vehicle, warning people to get out of the way. ‘Son of a bitch – are you blind?’ he yelled at a lorry driver; ‘Hey you, long beard, move!’ at a hapless pedestrian. We screeched to a halt outside an apartment block where a gas canister had exploded. Safdar ran inside. It was late 2016, December’s cool breeze blowing through the streets, and I was in Karachi to research a story on the city’s ambulance drivers. Safdar was my guide. He seemed to know every inch of Karachi, possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of the urban sprawl that I still struggled to navigate.

Safdar emanates an electric energy: he is constantly in motion. His boss introduced him to me, sarcastically, as ‘our most polite driver’. He talks a million miles a minute, cracking jokes, jumping around to act out his stories, but dropping everything – leaving a drink half drunk, a story half told – if someone requires his help. Nothing is more urgent than getting to people in need. As we got to know each other, I learned that there was good reason for this: he had suffered the torture of waiting for help and being too poor to have other options.

When Safdar described his brother's prolonged sickness back in 2002, it did not surprise me to hear that what he had hated the most wasn't seeing his brother's pain or his mother's worry, although both were bad enough. It was the waiting. Minutes stretched into hours then into days as they waited in Karachi's Civil Hospital, a colonial-era building of weathered sandstone, its archways and circular turrets incongruous against the backdrop of exhaust fumes and honking traffic from the main road that ran alongside it. They waited to see the doctors with what felt like a hundred other patients. Ageing fans fitted on high ceilings struggled to move the still, humid air around the wards and corridors. When people tried to jump the queue and grab the attention of a passing doctor, a flash of injustice would overwhelm Safdar and he felt obliged to intervene. When the rage came over him, he was barely aware of what he was saying. Luckily, his outbursts usually passed as quickly as they arose.

His brother Adil was the reason they were there. His left leg was atrophied by polio, which meant he couldn't walk. Adil had contracted the illness as an infant and its effects had worsened over the years, so that now he couldn't bend his leg even when he sat down. When he prayed, when he used the bathroom, it remained straight, the knee joint locked in paralysis. The family had tried for years to manage Adil's slow deterioration, until there was no option but to submit to the doctors and the repeated surgery they recommended. Adil was in terrible pain, so bad that sometimes he momentarily lost his vision and cried out, his hands flailing for support.

The waiting did not end when they got to see a doctor. Some of the worst hours were when Adil was in the operating theatre. Safdar, his sister Amna and their mother would sit outside the hospital because there was no space to wait inside the already overcrowded building. Raised pavements ran alongside the roads in the dusty hospital compound. The women would jostle for a space to sit on

the ground, together with the relatives of other sick patients who had come from all over the city. But Safdar preferred to pace back and forth, imagining he was doing something.

‘Why don’t you sit down?’ his sister would ask.

‘I am allergic to sitting still,’ he would snap, unable to articulate the truth: that if he sat down, the worry might totally overwhelm him.

During that year of hospital appointments, Safdar began to recognize the other families who returned as often as they did. He’d see familiar faces in the crowd of dark hair and brightly coloured clothes, and wonder if they, like him, were consumed by a gnawing anxiety that the treatment for their loved one might not work. Even when the people were so tightly packed that it was hard to find a space to sit, Safdar did not resent the other families for adding to the wait. Instead, as he looked at them, he wondered what their stories were, who they were waiting for. Although he was only nineteen and didn’t have a single qualification, he found himself wishing he could do something to ease this collective pain and make it so that poor people didn’t have to wait so long for everything.

It was Safdar who communicated with the doctors when Adil was having surgery. His mother spoke the Pashto dialect of the village, and her Urdu – Pakistan’s lingua franca and the main language of Karachi – was rudimentary at best. Although they spoke Pashto at home, Safdar could effortlessly move between the two. He was respectful in Pashto, the language of his parents. When he switched into Urdu, he cursed and joked like a born and bred Karachiite, with none of the telltale signs of being Pashtun – the distinctive accent or mixing up of genders – which could result in discrimination or worse. But though the doctors explained the procedures to him, Safdar had only a loose understanding of what they were doing. He had to put his faith in them. Just as Adil’s illness was God’s will, so God would decide whether the treatment would work.

When Adil came out of surgery, the next wait was for an ambulance to take them home. There was no way Adil could be crammed into a rickshaw for the long drive back to Landhi, an industrial area where they lived in the shadow of oil tankers, in a makeshift cluster of houses sandwiched between a truck stop and a loading bay. It was a forty-five-minute drive on a good day, and when it came to the traffic, good days were few and far between. Adil would come out of surgery stoical but dazed, visibly in pain as the anaesthetic wore off, with his stiff leg encased in plaster and a metal cage designed to keep it straight while it healed. There were no state ambulances, only those provided by the Edhi Foundation.

Although many aid organizations existed around the city, everyone knew the Edhi Foundation was the one that the poor could truly rely on. It filled many of the holes left by the state, providing free or low-cost services, including ambulances. It was a squeeze to fit the whole family into one of these small Suzuki Bolan minivans. Adil would lie on the stretcher, with Safdar perched on the side next to him, while Amna and their mother would take the small bench seat on the other side. But here at least Adil could be comfortable. The fee was fixed at fifty rupees (25p),\* which they could just about afford. Sometimes, they left the house with only a hundred rupees for the whole day. It covered the ambulance to the hospital and back, and nothing in between. When the waiting went on for too long and darkness began to fall, Safdar would find himself irritable with hunger, his mouth dry with thirst, trying to hide it from his mother because he knew they did not have money to fritter away on snacks. Sometimes he would see her clenching and unclenching her fist

---

\* Due to a credit crisis and an International Monetary Fund bailout, the Pakistani currency has rapidly lost value against the dollar and pound since 2017, so conversions can offer only an approximation of meaningful purchasing power.

around the crumpled fifty-rupee note that would get them home, scrunched up with the paper ticket bearing a number – their position in the queue for the ambulance. The whole family would keep their eyes and ears open for an Edhi driver – easily identifiable by their loose, bright red T-shirts – shouting out their number. Sometimes there would be people screaming in pain as their relatives begged the ambulance driver to take them instead. The drivers always stuck to the system, though, and ushered Safdar, Adil and the family into the back of the vehicle. Every time they drove away, Safdar felt overwhelmed by the scale of the need.

They had been living with Adil's illness for many years. It had struck before they moved to Karachi, when Adil was two. In the village, they had called it *burra bukhar* (big fever). He suffered high temperatures, headaches, shivers, vomiting, skin so tender he yelped when he was touched. He was in bed for over a week, sticky and hot, screaming with a pain he didn't have the words to describe. The adults in the village talked anxiously about what was wrong. Most thought it was typhoid. A few people mentioned polio, but for Adil and Safdar's parents, the idea was too much to bear. Typhoid was nasty but familiar; people had it, people recovered. There was no doctor in the vicinity, no hospital for miles, and so the family decided to deal with Adil's sickness at home. They kept him hydrated and tried to get him to eat, watching anxiously as he squirmed in bed and bawled with discomfort. The closest medical facility was in Peshawar, the big city, and given the distance and the state of the roads, it would take hours to get there, not to mention money that they didn't have. As the days passed, their mother grew more and more worried. She started to think about how to get together funds for the journey to Peshawar. But then, slowly, miraculously, the recovery started. Adil began to sleep peacefully instead of thrashing around, sweaty and fitful. He ate small bites of rice and dhal and soon he was running around with

the other children again. Before long, however, it became clear that something wasn't right. While playing, Adil would be seized with such intense pain in his joints that he would scream out and his vision would blur. Sometimes his leg buckled under him.

Though Karachi was all Safdar could really recall of his childhood, sometimes he had flashes of a life before, a sensory memory of the village thousands of miles away in the north-western corner of Pakistan where he was born. Fresh mountain streams gurgling over pebbles. The taste of an orange plucked straight from a tree. An icy chill in the air slicing through clothing and hitting the skin, totally different from Karachi's warm sea breeze. They had all been family there. Safdar's paternal grandmother, *Dadi*, was one of five sisters who lived in the village with their children and their children's children. There were almost a hundred of them clustered in these houses on the side of a mountain. *Dadi's* house was actually built into the hills, the courtyard and sections of the wall shaped from the rock. The land was fertile and green, while babbling brooks provided *meetha pani* (sweet water). But it was remote and work opportunities were few and far between. The children weren't aware that another life existed, but most of the adults lived under the shadow of perpetual anxiety about how to cover their basic costs. Safdar's father left for long spells of time, seeking work around the country. When he found a job in Karachi, thousands of miles away, it was decided. The family packed all the possessions they could carry and got on a bus, becoming tiny drops in the wave of migration of hundreds of thousands of Pashtuns to Karachi. The journey took more than twenty-four hours. They travelled over the bumpy, barely constructed mountain roads that surrounded their village. The children rocked around in their seats as the bus stopped and started, getting steadily more crowded as passengers were picked up along the way. The ride got slightly smoother as they hit the highway. Night fell. Dawn came. The landscape changed. The



lush mountains of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan's north-western province, gave way to the flat greenery of the Punjab, and then to the starkly barren terracotta of Sindh, punctuated by occasional bursts of lush green agricultural land. Eventually they entered the densely knotted streets of Karachi. There were more people here than Safdar had ever seen.

They made their home in Landhi, out where the trucks stopped. The roads there were lined with low, thorny trees rising up from the heaps of trash amassed between the many petrol pumps that populated the area. On all sides of the main road were vehicles that threw up clouds of dust as they drove over the unevenly tarmacked surface: cylindrical tankers, diggers, rickshaws, brightly coloured trucks daubed with elaborate patterns in an art form that had developed over the years into a competition between truck drivers. Safdar's father had a job as a nightwatchman, standing guard over one of the many depots where tankers and trucks were deposited overnight on stopovers between different parts of Pakistan. The work suited him; he valued the independence. 'Getting a Pashtun to follow instructions is like getting a camel to sit in a rickshaw,' he once joked, alluding to the commonly held view that men from their ethnic background preferred jobs that allowed a level of freedom, working as drivers and guards rather than in factories or as house servants. Occasionally, he'd take a second job during the daytime hours, to bring in some extra money. He had a stint at a towel factory, working for 400 rupees a month. He didn't much like these jobs and the restrictions they involved. 'A lion cannot be caged,' he would say.

Behind the main road that cut through Landhi was a dense mass of houses and stores, a maze-like warren of streets where hole-in-the-wall shops that looked like cement caves sold jalebis – swirls of deep-fried batter seared in vats of oil and coated in syrup – or hot, fresh naan from a makeshift tandoor oven. Stalls stocked cheaply

packaged sweets and household goods like lentils, rice and cleaning products. An old man tended a butcher's stall, swatting flies away from the row of pale pink chicken breasts that glistened in the heat. At first, the family lived in a single room – the parents, Safdar, Adil, Amna and a growing number of siblings. By the time Adil was having his surgery in 2002, there would be seven of them. As the family grew and the rent went up, they moved around Landhi too many times to keep track.

While most of the people in the streets that surrounded their house were Pashtun like them, Landhi as a whole was divided. Other parts were mostly occupied by Mohajirs, the Urdu-speaking people who had migrated from India at the time of Partition and settled in Karachi. After years of discrimination by more established ethnic groups – the Sindhis, indigenous to this province, and Punjabis, who made up the majority in Pakistan – the Mohajirs had formed a political party, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, headed by a young firebrand called Altaf Hussain. Although they had only recently been migrants themselves, many Mohajirs did not like the influx of newcomers from northern Pakistan. When Safdar's family moved there in the early 1990s, Landhi was already one of the battlegrounds of a rapidly spiralling and intensely violent turf war between Mohajirs and Pashtuns.

The first few years after they moved to Karachi were the worst for Safdar's family, because they didn't know anyone and lacked the security that comes with being part of a pack. 'You know, they're killing Pashtuns, so don't let your kids out too much,' he heard a neighbour tell his mother. 'Don't let them out at all if you can avoid it.' They stayed inside after that, cooped up in their single room, playing and bickering and listening in on the discussions of the adults, leaving only to go to school. Gradually, his parents got to know everyone who lived nearby. Meanwhile, one by one, their

relatives from the village began to make the journey south. Before long, there were more relatives in Karachi than in the village, like scattered fragments reassembling into a whole.

They were no longer strangers in the city, but the risks remained. At night, when Safdar's father was out at work, watching over the trucks, his mother sometimes stayed awake, her soft round face contorted with tension, heavy bags under her blue eyes. Death felt very close in those days, each morning bringing stories of someone shot down as they went about their daily business. More often than not, the TV news or the papers would say they were party workers, even if everyone knew that the murdered person had had no involvement in politics. Safdar's father took the back alleys when he walked over to the depot for his shifts, avoiding the main roads where he might be visible to a passing gunman. He had the pale skin common to Pashtuns, and even after years in Karachi, his Urdu was halting and hesitant, the Pashto accent obvious. Safdar picked up on his mother's fear, but could not conceive of the idea that his father might seriously be under threat. Everyone knew that Pashtun men had the courage of lions and Safdar was certain that his father was the bravest of them all. Perhaps that was why the Mohajirs didn't like them, he reasoned with himself. Perhaps they knew that if they allowed the Pashtuns to get too comfortable, they would dominate everything.

During the long, sticky days stuck inside, time took on a hazy consistency, formless hours punctuated only by mealtimes and prayers. More often than not the small TV with its bulbous glass front was set to the news on the state-owned PTV, which broadcast grim details of 'the Karachi situation'. When the army was sent in to restore order in 1992, Safdar was nine. He was captivated by the vision of these brave men in uniform, their tanks rolling in across the city that he now thought of as his own. Safdar began

standing to attention when the army came on screen, practising his salute and making Adil do the same, even when he protested. Safdar vowed that one day he would wear that uniform and serve his country too.

By the time Adil was having surgery at the age of seventeen – six times over the course of a year – Safdar’s dream of joining the army felt very far away. He had stopped going to school in the fifth grade, when he was around ten, because his parents could no longer pay the fees for the local low-cost private school. The nearest government school was further afield and the journey was too risky. This, combined with long gaps in schooling caused by the move from the village and the conflict in Karachi, meant that Safdar could barely read or write. He’d heard from friends that you had to sit a written exam to enter the army and so he pushed the thought of his impossible dream from his mind. He still felt a surge of pride and longing when he saw those brave men in their uniforms on his TV screen, but their life was not for him. One day, as Safdar paced around Civil Hospital, Adil’s bone doctor asked him what he was going to do with his life. ‘Some day I’ll do something important,’ Safdar replied. ‘I don’t know how yet, but I will serve the people so much that they will remember me. I promise you that.’ The doctor told Safdar he would hold him to his promise.

Through that protracted period, there was one constant: the Edhi drivers, manoeuvring through the crowds, scooping people up and taking them to and from the hospital. One day, as Safdar and his mother waited outside, a group of Edhi ambulances pulled up, sirens blaring, and screeched to a halt. The ambulance drivers moved fast, carrying bloodied bodies into the emergency room, some people screaming, others unsettlingly still. There had been a bomb blast in the city. Safdar watched, horrified but unable to turn away. He was transfixed, not by the gruesome injuries, but by the drivers, wearing the red shirts with the white logo of the Edhi Foundation.

They moved efficiently and with purpose, like well-oiled cogs in a machine designed expressly to save people. That was when he knew the answer to the doctor's question.

The handwritten sign reading DRIVERS WANTED – APPLY NOW was permanently displayed above the kiosk at the Edhi Foundation's main office in Saddar, Karachi's old commercial district. It didn't take Safdar long to get there from Civil Hospital, travelling along the weathered tarmac of the city's jugular vein, Muhammad Ali Jinnah Road. In this area, battered colonial buildings with ravaged plasterwork and rusting metal window grilles have been repurposed as cheap cafes and all-purpose stores. Brightly printed signs, advertising Pepsi or electronics shops, are strung up below faded painted balustrades on old brick buildings in various states of disrepair. Vestiges of former colonial grandeur are visible everywhere. The part of Saddar where the office is situated is commonly known as Tower, after Merewether Tower, which is opposite the Edhi depot. This elegantly carved clock tower, a memorial for Sir William Merewether, the commissioner of Sindh from 1867 to 1877, stands tall at the intersection of two of Karachi's busiest roads. Once the bells on top of the tower rang on the hour. Now they are silent, coated in the dust kicked up by the roaring traffic, surrounded by a street symphony of honking horns, revving motorbike engines and vendors loudly hawking their wares.

The Edhi building sprawls along the pavement. When Safdar arrived that day, he saw an office fronted by a hole-in-the-wall kiosk where people could drop off donations, ask for work or request an ambulance. It was next to a glass-fronted control room where the Edhi staff manning the phones were just about visible. On the pavement in front of the office, rusting corrugated-iron sheets had been erected to provide shade for the people waiting outside or for drivers on breaks. Beneath this awning was a stone crib where

mothers could leave unwanted babies, safe in the knowledge that the Edhi Foundation would care for them in one of their orphanages. Abdul Sattar Edhi, the great humanitarian who had come from India at Partition, had founded this organization from nothing at a time when the newly formed state of Pakistan was struggling under the weight of its growing population's needs. Starting with a single kiosk providing medicines in 1951, Edhi had rapidly expanded his work through donations from ordinary people. He had been there to help the poor when no one else would. Even now he sometimes sat under the awning with a begging bowl to solicit donations. Safdar admired the fact that he was not like other prominent people who lost their moral compass once they became successful. Despite his huge fame and the size of his foundation, which now spanned all of Pakistan, Edhi cared only about serving the common man. He still had the humility to sit cross-legged in the dirt, alongside the beggars and drug addicts, to encourage people to donate.

There was no sight of Edhi that day. Under the shade of the awning, a few ambulance drivers sat on stools, drinking chai and chewing paan – chopped areca nut coated in tobacco and wrapped in a betel leaf. The nut has a mild stimulant effect and is popular with drivers required to stay awake for long spells. Other drivers were napping inside their ambulances between shifts, languidly draped on narrow stretchers. Safdar nodded a greeting and walked over to the office. When he hammered on the front desk to attract attention, the manager on duty, Muhammad Liaquat, looked up.

'I want to be an ambulance driver,' Safdar said loudly, leaning his thin, wiry frame towards the metal grille to make sure he could be heard over the roaring traffic behind him.

Liaquat gestured for him to come in and Safdar walked round to the office's large, open door. It was dark inside, at least compared with the bleaching sunlight outside, which was so bright it made

everything look overexposed and washed out. The air was humid and four electric fans whirred loudly, pointing at different parts of the room. This was a former colonial building with high ceilings and the manager, Anwar Kazmi, liked to remark that the British clearly hadn't been thinking of the Karachi heat when they built these excessively tall rooms. Kazmi was an old friend of Edhi's. The two men had bonded in their youth over their shared Marxist politics. Eventually, Edhi had convinced Kazmi that the revolution was not coming to Pakistan any time soon, so the best way to serve the people was to join him at the foundation.

'Can you drive?' Liaquat asked Safdar.

Safdar nodded. He didn't have a licence, of course, but that was a small detail.

'We'll need your national ID card and your driving licence, and then we can sign you up.'

'It's no problem,' said Safdar. His mind raced, trying to work out how to obtain these documents.

'It's very tough work,' Liaquat continued. 'It's easy to start, but not so easy to stay.'

Safdar puffed out his chest. 'Try me.'

It took several months to sort out the paperwork. First came the national ID card, the document that proved his citizenship and got him access to the world of formal employment. Then he had to gather money to buy a driving licence. Safdar had driven cars on visits to the village and was confident he knew what he was doing. His parents were unconvinced by his prospective new job, though: the pay was low and the risks were high.

'You could earn more money elsewhere,' his mother told him.

'Yes, but I need to earn virtue,' Safdar replied. 'I'll be earning my way into heaven.'

When Safdar returned to the Edhi office with his newly issued ID

card and driving licence, Liaqat looked surprised to see him – but, Safdar thought, pleased too. Liaqat briefed him: as the only ambulance service in all of Karachi, they had to prioritize. They split calls into emergencies and non-emergencies. Emergencies were gunshot wounds, explosions, fires and collapsing buildings. Non-emergencies were people like Adil who had to get home after surgery, or go to hospital for an appointment. ‘It’s easy to sign up, but tough to stay,’ Liaqat repeated. Safdar nodded, taking it all in.

On his first day, Safdar was assigned to work with a senior ambulance driver who would show him the ropes. Everyone called this driver Chiri Babu, or Bird Man, because he rarely sat still, hopping from place to place like a sparrow. One minute he would be sitting down and chatting, the next fixing his vehicle and the next at the chai stall. Chiri Babu loved to dance, shaking his shoulders and clicking his fingers whenever he heard even the hint of a tune. Safdar, whose exaggerated facial expressions and gesticulating hands gave the impression of movement even when he was sitting still, immediately liked his mentor.

It didn’t take long for a phone call to come in on that first day. The body of a drug addict had been discovered near Kakri Ground in Lyari. Chiri Babu darted to his ambulance and Safdar followed, jumping into the passenger seat. Safdar had never dealt with a dead body before and had never been to Lyari, an area of the city notorious for gang violence. But there was no time to feel nervous. Chiri Babu drove fast, weaving in and out through lanes of traffic, past Karachi’s port and into the dense web of streets and tightly packed apartment buildings that made up Lyari, a sprawling slum at the very heart of Karachi. As this was a poor area, there were fewer cars, the streets populated instead by motorbikes and rickshaws. The enormity of the city hit Safdar afresh. All these unfamiliar streets, occupied by different shades of the same conflict that had coloured his childhood.



He wondered how he would ever navigate such neighbourhoods alone. The ambulance pulled up by Kakri Ground, a large sports stadium where football and boxing matches took place, though it was also used for political rallies. Everyone knew, Chiri Babu told Safdar as he parked, that gangs and political parties liked to dump bodies in gunny bags – large hessian sacks generally used for grain – around the arena.

The smell hit Safdar as soon as he stepped out of the ambulance. The body had clearly been there for some time. A cloud of flies formed a buzzing halo and a teeming heap of maggots crawled over every visible part of flesh. The man's salwar kameez was drenched with fluids, the face rotting so the bone was partially exposed. Chiri Babu did not seem bothered. He walked over to the body as if it was the most natural thing in the world, scoping out the best way to lift it onto his stretcher. Trying to control his horror, Safdar followed. The smell filled his nostrils and a violent nausea rose in his chest. It was all too much. He sped away from the body and vomited onto the street. Chiri Babu heard the sound of his retching and walked over.

'Where do you think you are going?' he demanded.

'I'm sorry,' Safdar said weakly. 'I don't think I can manage. This body is in a really bad state.'

Chiri Babu's slap was sharp, leaving a hot sting on Safdar's face.

'What do you see over there? It is a human being,' Chiri Babu said. 'And what are you? You are a human being too.'

Safdar was silent.

'We need to lift this body together. It has to be taken away. So you get over there and help me.'

With that, Chiri Babu walked to the ambulance to get the plastic body bag out. Safdar took a deep breath and followed.

They went back to the body and put it into the bag so that the fluids didn't leak all over the ambulance, then lifted it onto a

stretcher. Safdar had to look away from the squirming, glistening maggots, feeling vomit rising. He clenched his teeth. His pride wouldn't allow him to throw up again. They placed the stretcher inside the ambulance and drove back to the office. Although the body was encased in a bag, this did nothing to prevent the stench of death from filling the vehicle. Safdar opened the window, leaning his face out and inhaling the familiar smell of exhaust fumes from the passing cars.

Chiri Babu began to laugh. 'I don't know what all this fuss is about,' he said. 'The body doesn't even smell.'

Safdar looked at him in disbelief. Either Chiri Babu's nose didn't work or he had become impervious to death and decay.

The three days of training that followed seemed peaceful by comparison. There were driving lessons, which Safdar was silently relieved about given his inexperience behind the wheel. But these were no ordinary driving lessons. Safdar was taught how to weave the small ambulances in and out of traffic, and about the importance of being constantly aware of other drivers to avoid causing accidents. He was shown the location of all the major government hospitals, so that he would know where to take patients in a hurry. The mental map he had of his city changed shape, becoming a web of trouble spots all spinning out from the central locus of government hospitals. He learned how to identify life-threatening injuries, how to lift patients without causing harm, how to hold a badly injured body together until they reached the hospital. These were basic ambulances, equipped only with a stretcher, an oxygen tank and sometimes bandages. They were not set up to provide pre-hospital medical care, only to get people to the correct facility as quickly as possible while minimizing damage on the way.

The main thing, Safdar realized, was that he had done it. He might have vomited in the street and been slapped on the face like

a child, but he had done the seemingly impossible and picked up a rotting corpse, got it to the mortuary and seen the death logged by the police. Anything was possible after that. He saw other young men who had trained with him drop out after a week or two. But the satisfaction Safdar felt when he collected someone and took them to the hospital, helping a family like his own, was like nothing he had ever experienced before. Even if he was drinking or eating when a non-emergency call came in – a routine transfer of a patient from hospital to home – he would drop the naan from his fingers onto the plate of dhal and rush to the ambulance. His colleagues laughed at him, this eager new guy who treated the most mundane cases like emergencies. But all Safdar cared about was making sure that the family who was calling for help didn't have to wait any longer than necessary.

Karachi was Safdar's city, the place where he had spent most of his childhood, but becoming an ambulance driver highlighted how limited his geography had been. The knot of streets he was driving through had appeared to him like a tangled ball of wool: incomprehensible. At first he felt a twinge of anxiety when he had to go into any unfamiliar area, particularly those whose names he recognized from the news. Lyari, Malir, Kiamari – all were known for gangs, drugs and violence. It wasn't just that he didn't know the streets themselves – where to turn left or right – but that he didn't know the dynamics that operated there. Perhaps this was how his parents had felt, moving into the centre of a battleground without any understanding of where the real danger lay. Over the months, the tangled ball of wool unknotted into neat strands, as Safdar developed an understanding not only of how the highways, streets and weaving back alleys connected, but also of people's loyalties and where the risks were.

Safdar knew he was doing the work that God had intended him to do. Everyone respected the Edhi Foundation and he detected a quiet appreciation of his graft among his neighbours and friends. His family was more difficult to persuade. He grew used to batting away their questions about his safety.

By the time I met Safdar in 2016, he had been an ambulance driver for over a decade and his answers to these questions were well practised. As we careered around Karachi at alarming speed, I looked in vain for a seat belt and asked if he worried about road safety.

‘It’s not that common for ambulance drivers to have accidents,’ he told me. ‘When we do, it is usually the public’s fault.’

‘What about gunfights or explosions?’ I asked. ‘Don’t you think about your safety then?’

‘I have never been afraid,’ Safdar replied, with characteristic swagger. ‘I will only be scared when my soul is being taken out of my body.’

Despite his nonchalance, his mother still worried. ‘What kind of job is this, where you have to deal with dead bodies all day?’ she often asked.

On the evenings when he arrived home with bloodstained clothes, it was hard to argue with her. She took the regulation red T-shirt and rinsed the rust-coloured blood splatters until the basin of water turned murky pink.

‘The situation in the city is not good,’ she would say, scrubbing at his clothes. ‘Why do you have to go to all these unsafe places?’

Looking at his mother’s anxious face, Safdar’s mind was flooded by childhood memories of her pacing the room while waiting for his father to come home from work.

‘I need prayers, *Amma* [mother],’ he would say, too tired to fight. ‘And I need your prayers most of all. Please pray for me.’

He had no intention of quitting. The level of need in Karachi had

overwhelmed Safdar while Adil was having his surgery. Now that he was confronted daily with the violence and the poverty, there was no way he could step back. Safdar's job might not have paid particularly well, but it brought in some income to the household. His father still worked as a nightwatchman at the same truck depot, a job he would ultimately hold for forty years, and his salary increased only incrementally. Safdar's two youngest siblings, Fatima and Nadir, were getting close to school age, and Safdar was determined that they would make it all the way through to graduation.

Adil's treatment had dragged out over the course of a year, but it had been successful. Although he still had to walk with a crutch, a large wooden contraption that rested under his shoulder, his leg could bend and the pain was vastly improved. Where Safdar was impulsive and quick to anger, Adil was gentle and methodical. When he was fixing things, he was consumed by a total focus which shut out the constant low-level chaos of the house. A few years after Safdar had started work at the ambulance service, Adil got a job in the local market, repairing computers and mobile phones. Safdar – the eldest son – and their father sat him down and told him that the family did not need his earnings. Whatever he earned was his to keep. Safdar felt strongly that his brother, who was already so disadvantaged by his disability, should not have to take on the responsibility of caring for the family too. When he saw his brother set off for work, crutch under his arm, a wave of pride came over Safdar. Truly, Pashtun men were lions.

The ambulance drivers' shifts were long – typically eighteen, twenty-four or thirty-six hours – but that didn't matter, because the Edhi Foundation had become Safdar's second family. They would sit in the office under peeling paintwork, the fans whirring and moving the air around the room, drinking chai and smoking cigarettes as they idly chatted. On long breaks, some drivers napped, but Safdar

didn't like the idea of lying on the stretcher. He took up chewing paan, enjoying the faint buzz it sent around his body.

Edhi, the head of the foundation, was usually in the office. In his free moments he was often immersed in conversation with his friend and colleague Kazmi. Their words about Lenin and the proletariat washed over Safdar, but he ached with admiration for this man who had started something from nothing. Edhi did not act like a high and mighty boss. He sat down with the drivers to eat, even though they were of a lower social status than he was. The foundation employed hundreds of drivers, but Edhi knew each one personally. He knew, for instance, that Chiri Babu was an excellent dancer and often asked him to perform a traditional Baloch dance. He would clap along for rhythm, cheering his appreciation. Edhi laughed easily, which was lucky given Safdar's penchant for practical jokes. Sometimes, egged on by Safdar, the drivers would take the small packets of nuts that Edhi liked to snack on and replace them with pebbles, or hide his hat.

'Yo, *Maulana* [a term of respect for someone pious or learned], what's up!' Safdar would yell when his boss arrived at the office.

Edhi would turn to Kazmi and say, 'Safdar is here. Take him away.'

It gave Safdar a warm sense of belonging.

In the mid-2000s, gang warfare in Lyari had erupted. After a certain time of night, Edhi drivers were not allowed to go to the areas worst affected by the violence. There was a high risk that it was a trap – that the drivers would be robbed, their vehicles stolen. Sometimes if a call came in from Lyari or Malir after 11 p.m., Safdar argued back, insisting that he knew the way and would drive quickly, and that it wasn't fair to make patients wait until morning. But this was one rule the foundation wouldn't bend.

After his first few call-outs, Safdar no longer worried about the sight of dead bodies. He got used to assessing a corpse's state

dispassionately, thinking fast about how to solve the problem of lifting and transferring it with minimal damage. The first time he collected a dead body from Lyari on his own, without Chiri Babu's guidance, he concentrated hard on the physical navigation – driving through the knotted skein of streets, the apartment buildings packed so tightly that his vehicle could barely pass between them. He was collecting a victim of the gang war, a young-looking man pocked with bullets, his face frozen in an expression of horror, turning blue around the lips. Safdar lifted the corpse, put it in a shroud and transferred it onto the heavy metal-framed stretcher. He got back into the driver's seat and prepared to drive away. There was a banging at the window. A man pointed a gun at Safdar's face.

'Who are you?' he demanded. 'Where do you think you're taking this body? Is this your relative?'

Safdar spoke quickly, explaining he was only an ambulance driver and he had a responsibility to collect bodies.

'Whose side are you on?' the man demanded, but he lowered his gun and let Safdar pass.

Safdar drove quickly, his heart pumping. To his family, Safdar insisted that he was not afraid, that these no-good gangsters were as bad as terrorists. These cowards hiding behind their illegally procured guns were lower than the dirt on his shoe. He was not afraid. He was never afraid. But when his bosses said that he could not answer call-outs to Lyari in the middle of the night, he no longer argued back.