

WHEN

Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine

Jhumpa Lahiri

In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of **ascertaining** the life or death of his family. His name was Mr. Pirzada,¹ and he came from Dacca,² now the capital of Bangladesh, but then a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for **autonomy** from the ruling regime in the west. In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. . . . By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died. In Dacca Mr. Pirzada had a three-story home, a lectureship in botany³ at the university, a wife
10 of twenty years, and seven daughters between the ages of six and sixteen whose names all began with the letter A. “Their mother’s idea,” he explained one day, producing from his wallet a black-and-white picture of seven girls at a picnic, their braids tied with ribbons, sitting cross-legged in a row, eating chicken curry off of banana leaves. “How am I to distinguish? Ayesha, Amira, Amina, Aziza, you see the difficulty.”

Each week Mr. Pirzada wrote letters to his wife, and sent comic books to each of his seven daughters, but the postal system, along with most everything else in Dacca, had collapsed, and he had not heard a word of them in over six months. Mr. Pirzada, meanwhile, was in America for the year, for he had
20 been awarded a grant from the government of Pakistan to study the foliage of New England. In spring and summer he had gathered data in Vermont and Maine, and in autumn he moved to a university north of Boston, where we lived, to write a short book about his discoveries. The grant was a great honor, but when converted into dollars it was not generous. As a result, Mr. Pirzada lived in a room in a graduate dormitory, and did not own a proper stove or a television set. And so he came to our house to eat dinner and watch the evening news. **A**

ascertain (ăs'ər-tān') *v.*
to discover with certainty

autonomy (ô-tŏn'ə-mē) *n.*
freedom; independence

ANALYZE VISUALS

In what way does the photograph help establish the **setting**?

A DRAW CONCLUSIONS

What details in lines 8–27 tell how Mr. Pirzada’s life in New England is different from his life in Dacca?

1. **Pirzada:** (pēr-ză'də).

2. **Dacca:** (dăk'ə).

3. **botany** (bŏt'n-ē): the science or study of plants.