



## People Want to Live

**Farah Ali**

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Set in Karachi, the fourteen short stories of Farah Ali's stunning and soulful *People Want to Live* are tales of bumpy lives steeped in poverty, bleakness, violence, and despair.

The devastations within interior lives are highlighted in fluid prose; each story has the emotional heft of a novel. In "The Effect of Heat on Poor People," a marriage disintegrates during the worst heat wave in forty years; hope arrives, but is fleeting. In "Heroes," a mother holds onto the fact of her son's drug addiction after his violent death; it is a singular truth amid sorrowful platitudes. Elsewhere, the city's pervasive violence is the backdrop for a man's modest but unattainable ambition to be the driver of a bulletproof bus.

Quieter stories center on people's inability to weather or cushion moments of emotional turmoil. When a son visits his aging parents, the toll of a past episode of his father's abandonment is laid bare. Mental health teeters in the balance as a mother blames herself for her own self-harming depression and neglect of her daughters. And a carer struggles to hold onto his equanimity while empathy contracts in a mental institution. In the happy ending of "Beautiful," an orphan cobbles together a future and a semblance of family life with a rat-catcher.

There are stories told through a peremptory US visa officer, and using the wry jargon of tourist brochures, but even these refuse to exoticize Karachi, which is revealed instead through throwaway details, as of paan-stained corners, as well as within the conversational cadences of friends and married couples. In the short stories of *People Want to Live*, countries and ideologies may demarcate boundaries, but the heart knows none.

ELAINE CHIEW (September / October 2021)

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