



Reflections

Sain Sucha

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SHORT STORIES

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CONTENTS

ZAFRAN SAFFRON	7
BUT...	19
CRUEL	27
(IM) MORAL	41
THIRSTY LIPS	51
SPOOKY	59
WET	67
KHALIFA SHAFIQ	79
DUST	92
CHAIR	102
MIRAGE	114
HONOUR	127
A PAIR OF BLACK SHOES	130
APPREHENSION	135
REDEMPTION	143
RAINBOW	160

Dedicated
to the memories of
Saeed Anjum
(1946 - 2000)
and
Bukhsh Lyallpuri
(1931 - 2002)

—

two torchbearers
who devoted their lives
to fight against the darkness of
oppression and dictatorship

ZAFRAN SAFFRON

It has been a nice summer. No, not just nice, but a wonderful summer. Actually, it had arrived late by almost three weeks; still, once it came it had stayed on. The sun shone brilliantly, the wind had been easy-going, and with an increment of rain at almost regular intervals, the vegetation lavishly flaunted about a dozen nuances of the green in nature. And now, September had come. The days no longer dwarfed the nights the way they had done during the June to August stretch, but the sun still showed its muscles to the encroaching darkness that lay in waiting for the arrival of October to start its yearly assault.

Had Mrs Aina Petterson looked out of her window she would have seen at least three gangs of children engaged in play in the abundant greenery that hid behind the Yellow Houses at Smedjevägen and Häggviksvägen junction. Three gangs because they were formed after their ages. The youngest children in the sandbox were accompanied by their parents; the under-ten group had occupied the swings and slides, while the over-ten gang played their own version of hide and seek.

But Mrs Petterson seldom looked out of her window, nor had she observed the late arrival and now the slow departure of the summer. In her flat on the fifth floor, the curtains were always drawn because the light hurt the eyes of Mr Lars Petterson who was confined to his bed for the last eight years. Although she and her husband were about the same age, Mr Petterson's body, as a result of the load that he had carried at the railway shed, had given in long before her and now she had to bear the burden of both of their lives. She was a frail lady, who had just crossed the eighty-border. Mr Petterson had arrived in this world two years earlier. Neither of them was certain who would be the first to abandon the other, but odds were slightly against Mr Petterson that he would be the one to suffer loneliness.

Behind the drawn curtains, other than the two faint lights, the only thing that shone in the big room was the television screen. Actually, their participation in the virtual reality far exceeded the contact they had with the reality that existed in the world outside their flat. Mr Petterson, and subsequently Mrs Petterson, missed no film that nine different channels offered them. His favourite movies were all those with James Bond, and those in which Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Will Smith always saved the

world or USA in the last few minutes of the film. They had bought a video recorder from the Expert shop and she had recorded several of these movies for him.

Otherwise, Mr Petterson had been a rather quiet man all his life and with the passage of time he had become quieter. Therefore, his communication with his wife was primarily confined to different kind of gestures and grunts that rose above the sound from the television. Only occasionally, he would say a few words that always surprised Mrs Petterson that he could still speak. Ever since he had fallen off the bed, while Mrs Petterson had indulged in once a week bath and stayed on the floor until she had come out and found him missing on the bed, he had refused to be left alone even for a short while. Twice a week came a girl from the social bureau and did some quick cleaning, and shopping of the essentials for them. And only once a month Mrs Petterson left the flat to go to the post office in the Sollentuna Centrum to pay the bills and get some cash. On each occasion, before she left the flat she tucked the cushions on both sides of her husband to make certain that he would be there on the bed when she returned.

She liked to go to the post office on the first Tuesday of the month, because experience had taught

her that very few people went to the Sollentuna Centrum on that day. One would have thought that this once a month Tuesdays was a day of freedom for her and she might avail herself a few moments for personal needs, but that she never did. Because of her Lutheran upbringing her inner call for duty subdued all other feelings her mind might harbour.

As usual, she went to the post office on the first Tuesday in September. She conducted her affairs and was back to Häggvik within an hour. She entered the lift when it reached the bottom floor and accidentally pressed the button for the fourth floor. When she came out of the lift, she was overwhelmed by the spicy smell of the newly baked bread. Hidden strings of the memory from the bygone times drew her to the door on the left. Outside the door she closed her eyes and stood there silently. Her grandmother's face flashed on the screen of her mind and then she saw her grandma bending down to take out the small buns from the oven. She extended her hand to receive one. She heard a soft sound and opened her eyes. The door was ajar and a woman who wore a strange black dress and had a white scarf on her head looked at her questioningly. Mrs Petterson did not know what to do or say. She felt like a little girl caught for eavesdropping. She stepped back and said something

to the woman in the black. She showed no response; probably she did not understand Swedish. Mrs Petterson pointed towards her nostrils and quickly inhaled twice to indicate that she was there because of that smell.

“Ah!” the old woman exclaimed and added, “Zafran.”

Mrs Petterson also smiled, nodded twice and said, “Saffron.”

Then she turned and went towards the staircase. As she reached the fifth floor she looked downwards and saw the woman in the black dress still standing there. Mrs Petterson once again smiled and nodded, and then went up to her door, unlocked it and went in.

She took off her shoes and went straight to her husband to check if everything was all right. He slightly turned his head and stared at her. He always showed his annoyance on her return from the outside world that distracted her from her duties to him. Then his eyes returned to his television. Mrs Petterson was on her way to the kitchen when someone rang their bell. Both of them were startled. Their social help came only on Mondays and Thursdays. Therefore, somebody calling upon them on a Tuesday was entirely out of order. They looked

at each other and then she hesitantly went to the door. Very reluctantly, she opened it. The woman from downstairs was standing there. She had a plate in her hand that contained a dish made of yellow rice and something on it. She handed over the plate to Mrs Petterson, said "Zafran", turned around and went downstairs.

Mrs Petterson stood there spellbound. The spicy aroma from the plate invaded her nose but she was not aware of that onslaught. She was trying to remember when the last time someone had offered her anything was.

"Who was it?" she heard her husband ask.

Yes, who was it? She had no answer; or rather, she had no answer that he would understand. She looked at him and shook her head to indicate that it was a wrong call by someone, and then went to the kitchen. She sat there for a while and looked at that strange mixture. She recognised the main ingredients as rice, meat, peas, carrots, and then a sauce whose constituents remained beyond her. She took a fork and tasted a little bit of meat. It was cooked quite tender. Then she tried a little rice and a bit more, and then she suddenly realised that more than half of the plate was empty. She hurriedly put the fork on the table, waited for a few seconds, picked up the fork

again and emptied the plate. After that she served her husband his usual lunch and sat down beside his bed.

That was the first time in years Mrs Petterson has fallen into sleep while she watched television with Mr Petterson.

The next day Mrs Petterson did an unusual thing. When Mr Petterson was taking his nap in the afternoon, she slipped out very gently and went to the small grocery shop in Häggvik Centrum. There she bought a thin packet of saffron, some yeast and white flour. Then she entered her flat very quietly, went to the kitchen, closed its door and started working.

Mr Petterson was having a nightmare in which he was caught stealing his favourite buns by his father, and was about to yell for his mother to come and help him when he was brought to reality by his wife's hand. Drenched in sweat he looked at her horridly. The whole room had a strangely familiar smell. She calmed him and then helped him with tea, and small bits of yellow buns.

"Is it already December?" he asked in a surprised voice.

She shook her head in negation and said, "No, but I have made them for you."

Then she went back to the kitchen, picked up the plate that was left by the lady downstairs and now had six newly baked buns in it. She did not ring the bell but knocked at the door on the fourth floor. The door was opened by the same woman. She still wore the same black dress. Mrs Petterson smiled and handed over the plate to her and said, "Saffron."

The woman in the black bowed gently and took the plate. Both of them kept on looking at each other. Nothing was said, but everything was conveyed. The smiles grew deeper on their faces and then the door was opened fully and the host stepped aside. An invisible hand softly pushed Mrs Petterson into that apartment. The room was sparsely furnished - a large carpet covered the floor, two chairs by one wall, and a three-seat sofa on the other wall. Facing the sofa, across the main table, a large television sat on a small but sturdy table. A somewhat stout and aged man wearing a fez occupied a corner of the sofa. He looked at them, smiled, nodded and said, "Salaam!"

Mrs Petterson nodded back.

On the television screen a woman with elegant attire sang in a foreign language. The words remained alien to Mrs Petterson ears but she liked the singer's voice.

“Feroze,” said the lady in the black and pointed towards the singer.

Mrs Petterson showed her appreciation by smiling more widely and then she remembered her husband. She pointed towards the man on the sofa and then upwards to the ceiling hoping that the other woman would understand and turned around to leave. The lady in the black closed the door after she had gone.

It was Saturday afternoon when there was a gentle knock on the door. When the old lady opened her door, she found Mrs Petterson neatly dressed, with well-combed hair standing there.

“Coffee,” uttered Mrs Petterson and pointed towards her door.

The woman retreated to her husband, talked to him, and they came out together and followed Mrs Petterson. They were almost in the middle of the room when Mr Petterson observed them.

“Good Lord! Where did you find these Martians?” he exclaimed.

Mrs Petterson smiled and said to the husband, “Relax Lars, they are our neighbours.”

And before Lars could comment upon that revelation, she asked the couple to take the chairs beside her husband’s bed. The man went straight to Lars, carefully lifted first his head and then the rest of

his upper body. His wife put a pair of pillows behind him. Then both of them sat down on the chairs. Lars was still trying to sort out the new changes in his life when Mrs Petterson entered the room pushing a trolley with cups, a large pot of coffee and some slices of yellow bread on a plate. She poured the coffee, served it to the guests and then instead of feeding it to her husband as she usually did she placed his cup and the plate with the sweet bread on the table beside him. Three faces looked at Lars. Rather awkwardly, his hand protruded and got hold of the cup and saucer. He kept staring at the cup, steadied his hands and then took a sip. He lifted his eyes and found three smiling faces looking at him. He smiled back. Then he picked up a piece of the yellow bread and brought it close to his nose. Two voices said "Zafran," and the third uttered "Saffron."

"Saffron!" said he and balanced the equation.

The coffee was consumed silently but in unison. When that was over the man from downstairs took out a videocassette from his gown, showed it to Lars and said "Feroze."

"What?"

"Feroze," answered the man.

In sheer amazement, Lars watched the fat man as he got up from the chair, went to the video machine,

put it on, inserted the cassette, switched the channel to AV and pressed the button on the remote control to play it.

By that time, Lars had also prepared himself for all eventualities, and for the next hour or so in the midst of clapping hands he heard the soulful songs and saw the gracious gesticulation of Feroze in awe and with tearful eyes. It was only when he started snoring that his companions realised that he had fallen asleep. The man very softly got up from his chair, stopped the player and took out the cassette. Then he and his wife bowed to Mrs Petterson, who accompanied them to the door.

Nothing happened for the next two days, but on Tuesday evening when they were watching the television there was a knock on the door. As Mrs Petterson went towards the door she glanced at Lars. He had raised himself and sat on his bed combing his hair. When the guests arrived and took their seats beside him, he pointed towards the screen. On it there was a scene in which a skyscraper was burning ferociously, and then appeared a huge aeroplane and crashed into another tall building behind it.

“Fantastic new film ... from America,” Lars told them.

“James Bond?” asked the Fez in a heavily accented voice.

“No,” answered Lars, pondered for a short while and then mentioned some names.

By the look on his face the man did not recognise those actors. “Hero?” he gestured with his hand as well – he seemed to be curious to learn who played the good guy in the film.

Lars shook his head in negation.

Apparently, for Mr Petterson, the film had no heroes, only villains and their victims!

BUT...

Hakim Sahib's radiant face reflected more of the rays of the setting sun than his inner feelings. He cast his look around in his usual arrogant manner and bestowed a smile to all those who might be watching him; then his fingers, quite subconsciously, started running his rosary back-wards. The growing darkness on the wall across the road had warned him about the departing day and the encroaching night.

During the blink of his eyes he looked at the old man whose arrival had shaken his whole world up and down.

Some thirty-six years ago, despite his dark complexion, short height and pitch black hair, Hakim Fazal Ullah Khan, after he had taken his degree in Greco-Indo medicine and at the occasion of his move from a city to that small town, had ascribed his ancestry to those horse riding robbers from the north who used to descend from the mountains and had raped his home-land and great grand-mothers over centuries. It was remarkable that the more he talked with his patients about the atrocities of his assumed ancestors the more fame he got as being the pole bearer of those men who never leave anyone untouched. Were his name's banner raised only on

the erected pole of fame outside his house, it would have waved so impressively, but the state of affairs inside his home was rather floppy - though, according to Hakim Sahib, Allah had given him everything, he was dealt a bad hand by Eros. There could not have been any doubts about his masculinity as far as his mental aptitude was concerned; but only he, Roshan Begum and his other wives knew that after some pitched battles in the early years of his marital life his body has opted for an attitude where it no longer arose to the occasion as demanded by his mind. It is obvious that in the case of a clash between the body and the mind of an able person the mind would always prevail ... which means that his fame might not reach the heights he wished for inside his house, but it had to stand high for the people in the street out there! Furthermore, what a disgrace it was to his medical competence that all those of his prescriptions which had helped many others to raise their heads proudly were, one after the other, completely useless against his own collapse.

Then came the marvellous day when Roshan Begum whispered an advice into his ear that helped him settle his problem in three different ways - he could keep up the holy tradition, his fame as a doctor increased among friends and acquaintances, and

most important of all – those who once upon a time abducted the mothers of others were now obliged to send their daughters for sale. Thus, Hakim Sahib every second year rather respectfully divorced one of his three wives under Roshan Begum and married a new one with great pomp and show. Moreover, to maintain his reputation he always bought his wife from the progeny of the blond-haired robbers across the border.

This practice of his had reached such fame that he could not even remember that after Roshan Begum which of his wives were selected by him. The daughter sellers would, before the end of the second year, themselves contact Roshan Begum with the pictures of their daughters and their prices; and after the conclusion of the deal she would personally hand over the new bride to Hakim Sahib on the nuptial night.

Hakim Sahib had also arranged his house according to his current need. Facing the main street, he had his reception and dispensary, beside it was the narrow door which opened into the passage leading to the room of Roshan Begum. Behind the dispensary, there was a large room used by Hakim Sahib for his mid-day rest. Attached to the restroom was a smaller bedroom where he would receive

Roshan Begum and his other wives; and behind that were the quarters that were occupied by his spouses. Actually other than Roshan Begum, Hakim Sahib did not remember the name of any other of his wives; because he met them only for short intervals and in the rather dim light. Besides, to hold someone's hand Hakim Sahib did not need to know her name - for him the fast throbbing of a woman's pulse indicated merely that she was about to get feverish!

This layout of the house was actually prescribed by Roshan Begum. And Hakim Sahib had also accepted her design, except one thing - the full-size mirror in his bedroom. No, there was nothing wrong with the mirror itself, but he did not like what that mirror always showed him. The whole town had accepted him as Khan Sahib, in the newspapers his advertisement came as Hakim Fazal Ullah Khan, even Roshan Begum addressed him as Khan Sahib; then why that small piece of glass fitted in the wooden frame always put him face to face with a being who under no circumstance could have been a legitimate or illegitimate offspring of those notorious robbers from the Hindu Kush mountains! Therefore, after the removal of the mirror from the chamber he had fitted there the imagination of some painter as well as the manifestation of the coveted image in his

heart - if the sword-bearing horse rider in the painting was not really one of his forefathers then what? His forefathers ought to have descended from him!

Although Hakim Sahib's body had deprived him of the intimacy of his wives, yet he was proud of being the master of Roshan Begum's fate. And he had done his best to keep her happy. That is why when about a year ago, on her return from her parental village, she had asked him to take the hand of Naseem he had agreed to it readily.

"Khan Sahib, this time I have brought you someone that even you will be astonished!" Roshan Begum had said to him with such fervour in her eyes that he immediately took some tranquillising pills after she left him lest he gets overexcited.

Truly speaking, since the day Naseem arrived the whole house had livened up.

The very first time Hakim Sahib met Naseem in the bedroom she had appeared to be very innocent, shy and reserved; and when he had held her hand and squeezed it gently sweat broke out of her and she had avoided his caress. Thanks to Roshan Begum who had intervened saying, "Take it easy, Naseem has not been acclimatised yet!" Then she had pulled

her away, while Hakim Sahib was left merely with a faint memory of her touch in his hands.

And then the whole character of the harem changed. The place where once only Roshan Begum's commands and every now and then some subdued laughter was heard was suddenly filled with lively chatter and mirthful giggles, the resonance of which would reach not only Hakim Sahib's restroom but sometimes travel all the way to his reception. Hakim Sahib, who until recently could identify only Roshan Begum's voice, had started to recognise his other wives by their laughter. Still, he failed to comprehend why he never heard Naseem. In any case, even if Naseem was not loud-mouthed then she must have been a busy tongue because from the giggles of his other wives it was obvious that frolics were played.

In the next few months, Hakim Sahib did his best to coax Naseem to open her mouth, but it felt that in his presence she simple lost her ability to speak. Dead silent, with her hand in his, she would sit there shy and timid. Hakim Sahib both liked and disliked her attitude. Each time Roshan Begum referring to Naseem's inexperience would redeem her from his hands. Hakim Sahib always consented to Roshan Begum, yet his desire was incensed to see Naseem

talk in his presence and say something witty so that he could also share the mysterious delight of his spouses, at least from a distance.

Time passed on, and Hakim Sahib kept on living quasi-happily on the fame he had gained outside his home. Then one day when an old man told him that he had come from the village of Roshan Begum, Hakim Sahib offered him first a drink made of pomegranate's juice and then asked him to relax for a while in his restroom. The old man thanked him for his hospitality and added that he needed no rest, but he would like another favour from him. Hakim Sahib referring to his patients told him to wait for a while so that he could give him full attention. By chance, Roshan Begum had gone shopping for clothes that afternoon and could not attend to the guest from her village.

Hakim Sahib closed his reception a bit earlier that evening and after treating the old man with kebabs from the nearby shop asked the guest what he could do for him. The old man said that last year Roshan Begum after telling Naseem's parents that the period to bear hardships in that house was over and it was about time Naseem should attend to other openings in life had brought Naseem with her to this town.

"Correct," answered Hakim Sahib.

“But after that we have received no news of Naseem’s whereabouts.”

“Whereabouts? If Roshan Begum brought Naseem here from your village then Naseem must be with her. What is it that you want to know?”

“Naseem is the only child his parents have. Obviously, after not hearing from him over a year, they are worried about him. What they want to know about their son ...”

“You meant to say *their daughter!*” Hakim Sahib interrupted the old man.

“No, Hakim Sahib. I said their son. I am the local barber in that village and I had circumcised Naseem¹ myself when he was a child. He is somewhat slender in his appearance and, therefore, looks a bit feminine; otherwise, he was very naughty and a perfect copycat as a young boy. In his youth, he happened to cut his tongue with scissors while playing with them and has difficulty in speaking properly, else ...”

The old man kept on talking but Hakim Fazal Ullah Khan had subconsciously started to run his rosary backwards – he had grasped that the reason for the high spirits of his wives was not Naseem’s use of his loose tongue but ...

¹ Naseem -- morning breeze. As a name it is used by both men and women.

CRUEL

I do not know if he had a colourful personality as well, but he was definitely dressed up colourfully – his dark blue suit was accompanied by a green necktie, red shirt and white moccasins; a bright yellow handkerchief glared at me from his suit's breast pocket. Smoked glasses in his spectacles, thick dark blond eyebrows and golden hair along with his pink complexion added two hues to the seven of a rainbow.

I wanted to address him as Mr Rainbow, but then I took a measure of his size and let silence prevail over my curiosity. Apparently, he was a cheerful being – whenever the lady on the stage, under the pressure of good etiquette, used a softie instead of an appropriate word he would explain its real meaning by a thunderous laugh. In those days, Star Hotel in Sollentuna was hosting a large gathering of bird-lovers who had come to discuss *Parrots and Humans*. That particular day we participated in *The Sexual life of Parrots in South America*. Suddenly it occurred to me that he was not challenging any rainbow, but was determined to beat the Macaws of Brazil.

At the completion of the session, we sat down for coffee. I had been so mesmerised by his personality that my mind had failed to register the precious words of knowledge catered to us from the stage at the end of the lecture. That is why when he suddenly addressed me I was taken short.

“The lady was mixing up Brazilian Aras with other species of Macaws!”

“How could that be possible?” without knowing the number or type of those possibilities I showed my doubt.

“An Ara’s ‘mouth-to-mouth’ play with his lady-bird is so gentle and loving; the kind of neck-breaking our lecturer mentioned is more in the character of parrots from Ecuador,” adding a strong element of complaint to his tone he answered.

I was in deep trouble, because my knowledge of the members of *psittaci* was confined to some simple facts that given a free choice they would rather be flying in the open sky than be confined to a cage as a victim of human love, that they learn to speak quicker if Spanish pepper is given to them immediately before a linguistic crash course session, and those human beings who reach the seats of power quickly learn to change their eyes in the manner of parrots.

Honestly speaking I was not in Star Hotel for the sake of South American parrots at all; but sought a human female bird that would prefer my den in Häggvik to the bills of real parrots in Brazil and after accepting my invitation for late night snacks she would go home after sharing a breakfast with me in the morning!

He still stared at me waiting for an answer.

“Isn’t it possible that parrots living around a border might have some common habits?” considering the dual allegiance of many border dwellers I threw a dice.

“But there is no common border between Brazil and Ecuador!” his tone now carried an overdose of surprise in it.

I cursed my grasp of geography and promised myself that next time I attend a similar conference I should cast a good eye on the world map. “Dear Sir! What can one say about these birds! A couple of wing beats and they are here, and a couple more and they are there. It’s quite probable that the parrots our lecturer mentioned might have Brazilian nationality and Ecuadorian citizenship!” keeping in mind the modern attitudes towards immigration I gave him a reply which I was certain would make him ponder over the political consciousness of parrots.

He kept his head still as if he was trying to absorb the gist of my latest remark. Suddenly he extended his hand towards me saying, "How rude am I! I haven't even introduced myself ... I am called Ingemar."

I gave my hand in his huge paw and told him my name, and on the return of my fingers inspected them thoroughly if all of them were still functioning. Against my expectations, but quite in line with the manners of Aras, his way of shaking hands was rather gentle. For a while we sat there discussing the sexual personalities, habits and manners of parrots – he spoke and I listened. I was going to ask him if he had compiled some instruction book similar to 'Kama Sutra' for the indulgence of our feathery friends when he suddenly broke the conversation, pulled out a golden box from his inside pocket and after opening it offered me a cigarette. I thanked him saying, that it was enough with atmospheric pollution for my lungs, I did not add to it willingly.

"That does not make it easy," he muttered.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's obvious you would not carry any matches! How would I light my cigarette then?"

"Why don't you carry your own matches or a lighter?" I continued my questioning.

“Mother wouldn’t let me. I may have cigarettes on me but not matches!”

What a strange man – “Mother wouldn’t let me” were his words. I looked at him carefully – in no way he could be less than forty, and he required his mother’s permission to carry matches!

My prolonged silence opened his lips. “I can’t see, that’s why my mother would not let me light my own cigarette.”

I was certain I had picked up all his words and understood them; yet, I failed to comprehend their meanings as a whole.

“What do you mean you can’t see? You are sitting here doing everything perfectly well!” even to me my remark seemed odd but that is what I had said.

A smile broke on his face, “I know normally people do not notice that I am blind; not until I need to take something from their hands directly.”

“But you are sitting there drinking your coffee without least difficulty. You pick up your cap, and put it back as well as I do!”

“Yes! I know their whereabouts by the small sounds that they make. When eyes do not fulfil their function then ears and nose are a blind man’s greatest friends.”

For a long stretch we two, along with our discussion on parrots, also talked about the peculiarities of sight-hindered persons. During the conversation, I learnt that although he was an expert on parrots he had never seen one - all his knowledge was recorded in his head out of various audio books. Soon I realised that I had taken on a living encyclopaedia. In the next hour or so not only did I learn about the personal preferences and deviations of parrots but knew in details about their marital problems and pleasures. When the evening tried to give us a slip he asked me if I would follow him home and appreciate further brain damage. Actually, he was not the answer to my real pursuit but as an old hand at cards I knew that I would not be getting a better deal that night; so, I accepted his offer. He lived alone, not so far away in Edsberg.

The taxi rank from Star Hotel over Aniara Square was quite close. We caught one from Taxi Stockholm that took us to Lodvägen in no time. When we came out of the taxi, I tried to hold his hand to lead him. He released one of his thunderous laughs and told me he required no assistance. He knew every centimetre in that area.

He had no sight but in no way he appeared blind. With great confidence and an elegant stride he

walked a step ahead of me and reached the main entrance to his building. He opened the door and invited me to step in saying, "I live on the sixth floor, we better take the lift."

We had just entered the lift when a rather fragile, old lady also came in and addressing Ingemar said, "Where have you been till this late?"

Her voice resembled the screech of a pointed stone drawn against the breast of a rusted tin plate.

"I mm ... mmm ... moth ... mum mother whe ... wh ... when ... when did you come?" Ingemar - a few moments earlier a learned, confident, elegant and full of laughter man - was now trembling.

"What is this ma ... mmm ... mmm ... babble? How many times have I not told you not to bring strangers home!" the old woman lifted her eyes from Ingemar and threw a suspicious look at me.

Ingemar, transformed from a two-meter tall giant to a moulded wax dwarf by a pair of sentences of that aged woman, turned his sightless eyes towards me and said, "I ... I haven't asked anyone to come with me ... no one mother!"

For how long has he been listening to that voice - a dispassionate, frightening and tormenting voice!

I looked hatefully at that gruesome mother who had demolished her blind son's ego right before my eyes, and he had defended himself by lying to her.

I wished I could have torn the skin of her body by wet whipping after tying her naked to a cactus tree on a glowing hot desert sand!

The ghastly woman must have felt the heat of emotions on my face, and understood its probable cause. That is why she said, "If you feel so close to him then take him with you!"

I looked at Ingemar again. In great confusion, he was searching for the buttons in the lift - buttons that he would have found with no difficulty in the absence of his mother; but now even after reaching those his fingers would go astray.

"Do you want him?" she cast him a scornful look and asked me.

My eyes were locked on the old woman when she simply diffused in the air. In her place stood a girl of eighteen or nineteen holding a baby in her arms. The baby was crying. In the background, I could see an old town and smoke rising from some huge chimneys. She pointed towards the child with her eyes and asked me, "Would you like to take him away?"

"What?"

“You can have him,” she brought the child towards me.

“Who is he?” I enquired.

“My son,” was her short reply.

“Don’t you care for him?”

“Oh yes, very much,” she answered me as she kissed him on his cheek.

“Then, why are you giving him away to me?”

“It’s so difficult with him. He cries all the time, and on my own I get exhausted.”

“Doesn’t he have a father?”

“He has.” she nodded.

“Then why are you alone. Doesn’t he help you?”

“He works in a steel mill. When he returns home late at night, he is so tired that he would not know the difference between cats and dogs. To overcome his fatigue he takes a few cans of beer so that he might fall asleep for a while. He ...” suddenly she stopped talking.

“Then what?” I want her to continue.

After a few moments hesitation she added, “Often he does not fall asleep himself, only the goodness in him slumbers. And when the goodness in a person slumbers then the evil wakes up and show its temper. He even hits him!”

“Hits this small baby! Why”

“He cries all the time. Look here,” she had started to raise the garment from the baby’s back when she stopped abruptly. She looked around to see if anyone else was watching us, then pulled the dress further up. On the baby’s buttocks was the dark imprint of an adult’s palm.

For the first time I looked at the face of that innocent victim. Tears floated in his blue eyes but he smiled as he saw me. I extended a finger towards him, hoping he would try to grasp it; but he paid no attention to my finger.

“He can’t take your finger.”

“Why not?”

“He can’t see.”

“Who told you that? He just smiled when he saw me!”

“All children smile as a natural reflex,” the girl said to me from behind a cloud of rising sorrow on her face. “The doctors told us after they had examined his eyes thoroughly.”

“And your husband spans his blind son so hard that he gets blue marks!” I looked at the dark imprint closely and exclaimed.

“And me as well,” she added that after a sob.

I lifted my eyes from the child to the girl with golden hair, supple honey filled lips and an angelic

face. There was so much pain in her eyes that I could bear them no more. To break the intensity of that pain I blinked.

I shouldn't have done so. That girl disappeared. Instead, a middle-aged woman turned up there. There was a strange hard look on her face. A few steps farther away stood a rather stout young man slowly swaying to some beat that only he could hear through the earphones he was wearing. He had a white stick in his right hand.

"You may have him if you like!" the woman looked straight into my eyes as she addressed me. Her voice sounded familiar. I studied her face intensely. It was the same girl, but it appeared as if the callous hands of time had scratched her face with their pointed nails while they slapped her time and again, during her long journey in life. Around her eyes and lips, her life story was etched as deep furrows. From the brown dusty bush on her head hung white asps that had sucked all the vital juices of her youth from her neck and cheeks. The scorching blasts of enflamed desires had burnt her once honey-filled lips and now only parched, thick-skinned flesh blocked her mouth.

"You still don't like him?" I asked her awed.

“Like? This swine who has consumed my whole life, and you ask me if I *like* him!” She said to me in a voice that was loaded with vitriol.

“Then why have you carried him with you for the last twenty years?” I questioned her quite annoyed.

“For the others.” This time she almost whispered to me.

“For the others?”

“Yes! For the OTHERS. They told me I was his mother; I should give him motherly tenderness. It was my *duty* to sacrifice my happiness, it was his *right* to claim my love!” with that declaration she laughed in such a way that a wave of chill went right through me. “Listen mister! When it drizzles late at night, and embers of passion start smouldering in all of the body; when every intake of air fuels the inner furnace and every exhale of breath leaves a few more thorns on the tongue – when every muscle of one’s being starts aching, then anyone who just asks for sacrifice and demand rights is a detestable being. In those moments when my being longed for a tender touch I quenched his thirst by giving him my juice from my breasts. When I asked his father for a loving embrace that bastard responded by kicking me away; how could I truly love him?”

“Does he still beat you?”

“Ha, ... ha ...ha, ” she laughed; “no, not now! Now he beats no one. One day when he was raving mad, he came face to face with Death. Death slapped him only once and he lay there on the floor looking at me ... his tongue sticking out and strange sounds emitting from his throat. I fetched a glass of water and put it on the table just out of his reach, and then stood there listening to his death song. The bastard expired there rubbing his heels on the floor; but damn it if I gave him a drop to drink!” She was now bursting with laughter.

“But what possible fault the child could have in your dispute with your man. He is grown up now, must be a good company to you!”

“What company! The whole day, as if he were a parrot, he goes around repeating the nonsense from the whole world. Who is how old, or large or small. Which animal lives where, what it eats and how? If he wants a glass of water he calls me, but the way to a music concert at the other end of town he can find himself. Look at him, that elephantine monster does not even look like my child!”

I looked at the boy. He was now totally given to a wild rhythm. Lost in his dance he started to edge towards the road. Some large vehicles were coming

from the other direction. Suddenly I heard the screech from that tin plate. "INGEMAR!"

The dancing boy went pale and fear glued him to the spot he was standing upon. His lips were tightly pressed and he waited for the next command from his mother.

I blinked and then looked at Ingemar in the lift - Pale, glued to his place, his lips tightly pressed he waited for the next command from his mother.

"If you are so fond of him you can take him with you!" the old woman said to me in the same hard tone.

My head bowed, I came out of the lift. Those two remained in it.

Before the door of the lift could shut, I turned my head and looked at her again.

Cruel, wasn't she cruel - Life!

(IM) MORAL

Rohi wanted to step right in front of the mirror and slap her face twice – how many time had she promised herself to not to put her spectacles on the wash basin?

She dried her face with the towel and then bent down to pick up her glasses. One of the arms of the glasses and the broken right lens stayed on the floor. Rohi closed her eyes and after taking a deep breath tried to convince herself that somehow she would manage without her glasses until Saturday. Although her eyes were not wet any longer, she saw everything hazy, and she knew that this haze would persist with her until she gets new glasses.

And that meant more expense, new cash and its acquisition.

The tonga driver's words echoed in her ears. Only day before yesterday he had said, "Bibi Ji, the end of the month is quite near. We require at least three clients on Friday."

Rohi took a couple of steps and peeked through the window. Through the leaves of the pipal tree she saw a faint contour of the horse and the carriage. Rehmet was punctual as usual. Hurriedly she poured herself a glass of cool water from the bottle in the

fridge, and then thought of that week's expenditure while she brushed her hair – apartment's rent, college fee, payment for the new glasses, Rehmet's commission and cash for the fuel for her body's engine. After brushing her hair she put on the burqa, which further reduced her depth of vision. However, she was not worried – in her profession, affairs were conducted at a very close range, and often it felt better to receive the hard facts in the dark than openly face the naked reality in daylight!

Rehmet cleansed his throat when he saw her coming down, and tipped the horse to get ready for the occasion. The horse knew that special cough; thus, it also neighed to show its alertness, raised its head and stood ready.

Rohi mounted the tonga without uttering a word, occupied the back seat, gave a quick look to Rehmet and smiled. Rehmet answered her smile with his own, and then he winked at her to show his appreciation of her looks.

The tonga started rolling towards that section of the town where strangers sought other strangers for only temporary intimacy and affection by engaging in bouts of purchased joy; where, out of breath, sweating bodies, wrestled with each other to the rhythm of currency notes.

Normally she did not go out for the hunt before the evening, but at the end of the month when the customers felt temporarily elated at the reception of their salaries, she stalked them in the afternoon as well. The experienced had taught her that in an ordinary week it sufficed with twice-a-week labour, but in the last week of the month three days toil was needed to provide her with a reasonable income to cover her need.

The arrangement between the two of them was strictly formal! Neither Rehmet had ever climbed her stairs, nor did Rohi ever invite him to come up. The relation and business between them had its roots in the day when Rohi, on her way home from the college, discovered that her purse contained less cash than she needed to pay his bill. Rehmet saw her anxious face and consoled her by saying that she need not worry. He had driven her home several times and knew that she lived alone. He also added quite discreetly that if the shortage in her purse was, instead of being a temporary problem, a long-term affliction then even that could be resolved. It was the first time for Rohi that a tonga-driver had addressed her directly; but, she had heard about them from some of her friends who had their carriage of life pulled by the assistance of those tonga-drivers who

often stood outside their college. Under the circumstances, her curiosity led her to ask Rehmet certain questions. His answers left no doubt in her mind that, at least for the time being, as far as her need for “bread, clothing and shelter” was concerned she would do much better to depend upon him than to expect anything from the utterly corrupt politicians of the country. Furthermore, Rehmet confided that he was already assisting some other students from her college to overcome the economic problems that stood in the way of their studies.

The next day Rehmet showed her the room that Rohi in the future would be sharing with some other professional sisters. That was the first and last time that Rehmet, after saying her that he had never offered a fruit to anyone else that he did not like himself, tasted her; and also introduced her to the ups and downs of her new carrier. After that introductory activity they reached an agreement that in the future their relationship would be purely business. That room was allotted to three ladies who used it on different days of the week. Although Rehmet helped all three of them, they were not involved in each other affairs - in fact, they did not even know one another.

Rehmet had explained to Rohi that it was not an ordinary house of pleasure, where one would sit and receive the clients. That's why her mode of hunting, hiding behind the veil of her burqa, was a much effective way to lure the quarry; and where her prey were given the impression of being the predators.

According to their arrangement, it was Rohi who attracted the drones, but Rehmet was the one who set the rates and closed the deals. However, Rohi had kept the final reception of the dough in her hands.

Ghalib, with a gentle push of his lips, sent her a flying kiss, and looked at the bare hand that had broken out of the prison of the black burqa and now played in the lap of the prisoner. It seemed that one of the fingers left its companions and asked him to come nearer. After a brief hesitation he increased his pressure on the pedal of the hired bicycle and tried to cut the distance between himself and that finger. It was not the right time to pursue, because keeping in mind the coming night's affairs most of the participants were probably resting. Still, the presence of crispy currency notes in his pockets had induced a volcanic feeling in his blood vessels and he was longing for an eruption. Besides, after the purchase of goods in Lahore he had to return to Kasoor the same evening to participate in the local fair. He also

wanted to visit his sister Rehana before leaving the town.

All Rohi could see across her veil was a sort of blurred screen. Suddenly the events of her life started rolling on the screen. She was nine when her mother had deserted her in this world. She and her two brothers were brought up by her father, Haji Baba, who was also the Imam in the local mosque. About three years after the departure of her mother, one dark night in December Haji Baba had come to her bed whispering, "It's awfully cold tonight." After he had finished with Rohi he had gone to the mosque for the repentance of his folly; while Rohi, who was still too young to comprehend the unusual behaviour of her father, had become aware that how prickly a woman's life could be! Thereafter, Haji Baba, according to his want, continued to seek warmth in the winter and relief from the summer heat in Rohi's body. Rohi did not have any confidant with whom she could share her grief, that is why she kept on bearing that awful burden silently. That spell was broken when one morning one of her brothers showed surprise on seeing his father come out of Rohi's room. "Rohi is not feeling well. I was taking her temperature," Haji Baba had said to his son. And when her brother glanced into Rohi's room she

actually did not look too well. The boy turned and first looked at his father and then at Rohi; his lips did not protest but the number of question marks in his eyes remained there. That day, during the rest, Rohi told everything to her teacher in the school. The woman was wise – instead of raising a storm, she took Rohi directly to the Headmistress. The Headmistress listened to Rohi in detail and after grasping the situation she met Haji Baba in the presence of Rohi’s teacher and told him that from that day onwards Haji Baba would seek repentance for his previous sins only; otherwise, long before the doomsday he should pay for his deeds in this world. During all that speech Haji Baba had looked only once in the Headmistress’ eyes and saw the live fire from the hell burning there. When the woman finished her sermon he went down on his knees and asked for forgiveness, and added that he would leave the house and permanently move to a habitat in the mosque.

Three years later Rohi passed her Matriculation examination with distinction. Her Headmistress secured her a scholarship and she was sent to Lahore for further studies. The girl was intelligent and hard working. She showed good results and progressed to the university. On the other side, along with the flight

of time Haji Baba had left this world, while her brothers were busy with their own affairs.

Rohi was totally absorbed in watching the film of her life when she became conscious of the shadow that was following her tonga for some time. It was settled between her and Rehmet that she would not share the secrets of her body with every stranger; rather she would only accept those exploiters who, before they surveyed her depths, at least satisfied her eyes if not her mind. But today, in the absence of her spectacles, she was having difficulty in deciding if the man riding the bicycle would raise or lower her temperature. Thus, she decided to depend upon Rehmet's taste. She caught the eye of the enthusiast by her dancing fingers and to increase her appeal she pulled her dress up a bit to scratch her bare leg.

Ghalib was not much for poetry, but at that very instant he wanted to loudly eulogise his Lord's creations. In the hot sun the flash of the naked leg had hit him like lightning. He was not a novice in that game and knew whom he should approach to gain access to those legs. The tension in his muscles propelled the bicycle faster, and after passing by those dancing fingers he cast an eye at the contact manager. Rehmet, who was also an old hand, was already waiting. He smiled at Ghalib and then

winked as well. Some meters further on, he stopped the tonga under the Banyan tree and asked Ghalib for matches to light his cigarette. Behind the smoke wall they settled the rate. On his return to the tonga he said to Rohi jokingly, "Bibi Ji, this hunter believes he is out for a real kill!" and then he signalled the horse to resume the journey.

Thirty meters behind them, Ghalib, without any apparent link to that tonga, was pulled in that direction by the powerful strings of her attraction.

At the destination, Rohi stepped off the tonga, climbed the stairs, went to her room, and started with her makeup. She knew that her client would come up exactly after ten minutes. In the mirror instead of her sharp features she could only see a diffused image of herself. Calmly she arranged herself. Then she pulled the window's curtain slightly to increase the inflow of the fresh air without letting in any undesirable light in there. It was her habit that she always had her back to the door when her clients entered the room, and her sudden turn and greetings had a dazzling effect upon them. She was much more striking than what they might have expected, and they just stood there stunned by her beauty.

Rohi heard when the door was opened and closed. The footsteps stopped behind her. With a lascivious

smile on her face, she turned towards the shadowy character that waited for her charisma. As always absolute silence occupied the room, and then someone stuttered in a shocked voice, "Rehana, what are you doing in this place?"

It took Rohi some moments to recognise the voice, and then with a dry throat she asked, "Brother, what ... what are you doing in a place like this?"

Out of that haze in the room protruded two strong hands and took hold of her neck. That day Rohi lost her breath only once.

The next day the newspapers, upholding the norms of the society, carried the headline:

"An immoral sister gets killed by her moral brother in Lahore"

THIRSTY LIPS

Mr Adam was getting exhausted – physically and spiritually.

He had now been kneeling for some time, but words would not come to his lips. He knew they were there – they must be there in his mind as abstract ideas – still the ideas refused to take specific form and transform into identifiable, meaningful words.

He was not out to formulate something extraordinary – he just wanted to pray.

He had read in the newspapers and, also, seen on the television how the Allied Forces had conducted eight thousand sorties in the first seven days of the war, and thrown their explosive load on the city where the dictator had his headquarters and refuge.

He had never considered himself to be a wizard with numbers, but he was not slow either. A simple calculation with the help of a pencil and paper, and without the use of a calculator, had told him that the combined operation of about two thousand war-planes, over a period of one week and several raids a day simply meant a hell of a lot of bombs on the damned city which was the target of the wrath of the united nations of the world.

He would not call himself a non-believer. On the other hand, he was not exactly a believer either. It just happened that in the half century that he had spent on the planet earth he never seemed to have seen a shade of the grace and magnanimity of the great Shepherd about whom he had heard in his youth, nor had he witnessed any trustworthy protection for His flock whenever misery struck them. Still, he could recall many distinguished sources who so vehemently talked about His eminence.

It wasn't so that he had not been searching. He did search, although he never was quite sure what he had searched for. He had read quite a number of books on the origin and the nature of the Absolute Being, who was said to be behind all happenings. And he had not been limited in his pursuit. He had read widely – scriptures from the East and West, even the sacred books of the savage Indians of the Americas and the cannibals of Africa.

And now when he had felt like praying, he felt awkward.

No! It was not the case that he felt short of compassion or eloquence. His problem was that he did not know who should be the receiver of his blessings. It couldn't have been the dictator himself – not a man who, if the information was correct,

committed his first murder before he put the shaving blade to his face, and since then had continued to kill anyone who displeased him and also had the misfortune to come within his or his followers grasp. He definitely would not pray for his own President – another man who had reached his high office after being in charge of the biggest organised assassination agency of the world, and had dedicated his life in the tradition of his recent predecessors to the plunder and extortion of his fellow beings far and near. And obviously, he had no sympathy for those awful petrosheikhs who, by depleting the mother earth of its vital juices, lived in fabulous affluence, while the majority of their neighbours lacked the oil to keep a stove burning. Nor would he pray for their neighbouring squatters who for the last forty-three years had been assaulting the natives and suddenly found themselves under fire.

Yet, he wanted to pray because he knew great atrocities were being committed. One could not bomb a city, with four and a half million people, day and night for over a week without hurting a host of its dwellers – mostly innocent and sometimes not so innocent.

He wanted to pray for the innocents – those at home and abroad. People who were so stunningly

plain that they accepted the noble causes given to them by their totally ignoble leaders on their face value, and wasted lives on both sides without ever really knowing the reasons that initiated the intrigue of their manipulators.

And he wanted to pray because he could feel the pain – the waves of pain.

He recalled the day when he had followed his uncle for a deer hunt. That was a long time ago, but he could even today see the moose standing under the tree. It was early dawn when they had sighted it. Through the binoculars he could see its eyes, the fine forehead bearing the horns, and how the hot breath condensed in the chilly morning wind when it left its nostrils. His uncle had lifted the gun, aimed and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the beast on its breast, but before its collapse it kept on standing there for several long moments without any apparent distress. Only its eyes had changed. The way a stone thrown on the still water of a lake on a moonlit night makes an obscene noise when it hits its silvery chest and sends turbulent waves all around, he felt that the bullet did the same and the waves of pain emanated from the eyes of the stag and enveloped everything. For a moment he had thought that he would drown in an ocean of passion. When the feeling was over, he

looked at the ugly, fat man standing beside him who had just robbed a magnificent animal of its life by a single squeeze of his finger. Tears had clouded his eyes and he had returned home full of remorse.

Today again he had the same feeling of envelopment by pain; and he had the urgent need to do something to appease the pain – his own and that of others.

That is why he had knelt down to pray.

When no words came to him, he straightened up and took a couple of steps backwards. He stood there for a few moments, then slowly lowered himself to the floor, crossed his legs and sat in the lotus position. If he could not win over pain by saying words then he would do so by creating a void. He sat there for a while and waited for the emptiness to come. He waited and waited, but nothing happened. Suddenly he realised that the reason no emptiness came to him was that there was nothing in his mind that he could clear; except the data from his work, and the pulsating feeling of pain.

He knew he was a simple man, and he also believed he was a good man. Ever since he had finished his studies he had worked in the same establishment, designing the products manufactured by them. He was ingenious in finding solutions to the

problems that arose as the time passed and new products were developed. He was regularly promoted for his good work and appreciated by his employers. He paid his taxes and always minded his own business. He could not remember ever hurting anybody; although he kept a gun in his drawer – a gun that he had inherited from his father. And the old man had told him, “Son! Do not keep a gun in your house unless it is loaded, because that is the only time a gun is a gun.” He had taken that advice all the way, and a step further – he never even put on the safety device ... just in case.

Tranquillity evaded him – neither concentration brought soothing words to his lips, nor did meditation erase the pain from his mind.

He was getting agitated. He had to do something – if he could not help the innocent passively by praying for them, then he must redeem them by actively working against the evil.

Calmly he raised himself from the floor, put on the long grey coat and went straight to the drawer. He took out the gun and put his hand with the gun held in it in the outer pocket. With a defiant look on his face, he moved towards the main door of the apartment.

As he turned to switch off the light, he was startled to see the man in the hall.

He knew that man. He had known him for years – middle-aged, medium height, slim and with quite a bit of grey on his temples. He was a researcher in a nearby ordnance factory. He specialised in the development of the long-distance missiles. He belonged to the batch of young people who in the early sixties had joined the pioneers who had extracted the secrets from the captured German scientists after the Second World War; and employed the knowledge obtained from the Germans for the production of weapons in their country. There was no major ballistic missile in the national arsenal that did not owe some of its destructive potential to that man.

And now the rain of those missiles drowned the innocents in a flood of metal, stone and sand that gushed forth every time they hit their targets.

There was no doubt in his mind that the man in the hall mirror was profoundly evil.

With a steady hand he took the gun out of his pocket, put it in the mouth of the man in the mirror, squeezed the trigger and shot himself.

An instant before Mr Adam's head jerked violently he remembered the moose, his uncle, one good man

who had never hurt anyone and paid his taxes, and the evil one who had designed deadly weapons all his adult life.

Still, no words came to his lips. As he sank downwards he made a final effort and got his feet into almost a lotus position, and then he passed into the big void.

SPOOKY

The storm always started in Anjum's stomach; thereafter, it would make a brief stay in her chest after inducing convolutions in her whole body, a big smile blossomed on her face and eventually came the wind gushing out of her mouth in the form of a loud chuckle. That was her victory cry!

That day too she was to defeat Swifty in the last ten meters of the race.

At the start of the competition, Swifty always led the race. Swifty was obviously swift; and then Anjum was one of those competitors who, instead of leading a race in the beginning, prefer to be the first at the finish. That is why whenever the starter's gun was fired she positioned herself in the second place, about three meters behind Swifty. As they reached the midpoint she would bend down a bit and adjust her balance on the skis, and began cutting the distance between Swifty and herself. Just after the midpoint lay the most difficult part of the slope – first came a slight bump and then a sharp curve towards the right. That was her favourite spot! She knew that because of Swifty's lightweight she always had it difficult to regain her speed on the snow when they

passed the bump. After the curve, whenever Swifty glanced at her right she saw the ghostlike Anjum encroaching upon her. There Swifty tried to accelerate by the use of her sticks, and that was her big slip. To strike the ground she had to straighten up a bit and expose herself to more air resistance, and that did not do her any good. Thereafter Swifty could do whatever she liked, but she always lost.

Actually, Anjum had these instructions from her teacher in Quetta that just after passing a bend the avoidance of the use of sticks was advisable. At that stage, minimum possible air resistance and correct balancing of the weight on the skis were more important. And this advice paid her off every time.

After the race, Swifty and Anjum always shook hands, and looked into each other eyes. Both pairs conveyed the same message - see you next time!

Dr. Millner read the laboratory report of the old lady, shrugged his shoulders and said to Shahid, "Can't grasp anything. All is the way it ought to be, yet your mother complains of persistent fatigue."

"She has been complaining for a while now. Sometimes she can't even get up."

Subconsciously doctor's eyes returned to the paper in his hand - perhaps he had read some word or figure wrong, but that was not so. "Do you take her

out for some walk? Perhaps some fresh air and light exercise be beneficial for her.”

“And how should I? If only she would leave the house. We have done our best that she should accompany us at least during the summer, but she says that at ninety-one she has already seen all that is there to see. She just wants to rest. We live on the eighth floor, thus fresh air abounds as soon as we open the windows, but taking her out is almost impossible. Don’t know what she does the whole day long by her window!”

“Then make her walk forty to fifty steps within your apartment. Her muscles would get some exercise! I am prescribing these vitamins tablets; they might help.” With that, the doctor tried to terminate the conversation.

“But it’s not only her fatigue. Sometimes she loses her breath too. My wife is so worried.”

“Her laboratory reports show nothing alarming. Besides, you ought to spare her from the distressing news. At her age other than worrying what else can she do? And worrying is not good for anyone at any age!”

Shahid knew that any further discussion with doctor Millner was a sheer wastage of time. Thus, he took the prescription, thanked him and went to the

chemist shop. For the last two years he was caught between his wife and the doctor. On seeing his mother's condition his wife sent him to the doctor, and the doctor sent him home with empty words of comfort; only his mother seemed free from all distress.

On Tuesday Anjum was waiting for Shorty at the racetrack. She enjoyed defeating Shorty - it was his habit that after losing the race he always looked at the sole of his shoes as if he expected to find chewing gum stuck to it. When he did not find anything he went around shaking his head, apparently to get rid of his feeling of defeat. But what was the use of shaking his head when Anjum walked around him with her hands on her hips looking haughty? Other kids also scrutinised Anjum enviously; who despite being a girl was a better athlete among them.

They were also quite perplexed about the way she had landed among them. None of them knew who she was, where did she come from and what was her address. She just stood there one day in her tracksuit and after winning the race felt like a thorn in everyone's eyes. Which gang of kids likes that a complete stranger should come among them, crush the very best of them and then just walk away from there? The next day as well she was the last one to

turn up on the track. She won both of the races and simply disappeared again. The kids gave her the nickname Spooky.

That continued for some days - Spooky quietly came to the sports field, won over other children and went away; only the smile on her face and her boisterous laughter at the moment of victory stayed on in the mind of others. Then one day they all learnt the reason for her behaviour. Spooky could not speak Swedish, and that was why she avoided staying there. But soon she managed to speak some broken Swedish. In the meanwhile, some of the children had accepted her natural competence; yet, there were some who resented her presence.

Anjum was a really good all-rounder, but she excelled in sprinting and football during the summer, while in the winter downhill skiing was her favourite sport. Her performance in football and athletics was not such a bitter pill to swallow, but her prominence in the downhill racing was too much for her indigenous rivals; yet, it was also adored by the immigrant children. Thus, her very appearance on the playing field or at the hilltop created a sensation among other competitors. Time moved on and Anjum learnt reasonably good Swedish in the next two years. She enjoyed narrating fantastic stories

about her deserted homeland to other curious children. The ingredients of her stories were so well spiced that all the children loved them, and had begun to exchange greetings with her, except one girl - Swifty had never talked to her. Nevertheless, there was not any rudeness in her attitude either; just a sort of distance that is kept by rivals, but in a worthy manner.

It was Sunday. Razia has invited home some lady friends. Shahid had planned it for weeks that he would take their three children to the Royal Park for open-air skating. First Razia dressed the children carefully so that they would not freeze on the rink; then she handed over Shahid a large thermos with warm chocolate and meat sandwiches insisting that he must feed the children after two hours of skating. For a moment the thought flashed in Shahid's mind that he should ask his mother to accompany them, but he already knew her reply; therefore, he kept quiet. From the garage he drove the car to the front door and began loading various items for the day, and then he seated the children and put on their safety belts. He was about to drive away when he saw Razia running out of the door in great distress. She shouted to Shahid, "Come, something is wrong with Mum!"

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Strange sounds are coming from her room, and the door is locked from inside.

Shahid told the kids to sit in the car calmly; then he and Razia rushed to the elevator. It was the first time Shahid discovered how heavy the elevator’s door was, and it consumed full twelve seconds to reach the eighth floor. The moment he entered his apartment he dashed straight to his mother’s room. When he tried to open its door he realised that it was locked from inside. Weird voices were coming from inside that room. He fetched the reserve key, opened the lock and almost broke into the room. His mother had taken an odd posture – she was stooping by the large window breathing heavily. On her face she wore her grandson’s dark sunglasses, and in her right hand she held her walking stick with which she would touch the floor every now and then. Suddenly she bent forwards as if she was about to fall. Shahid yelled at her, “Mum, hold on I’m coming!”

His mother looked at Shahid and then with the shaking of her head tried to tell him to stay where he was. Then she hit the floor again with her stick and turned towards the window. Shahid thought that she was falling, thus he rushed and lifted her up in his arms. Her ninety-one years old body resisted the lift

but it was just helpless in the grasp of her young son. Very gently, Shahid carried his mother to her bed and laid her on it. When he caught her eyes there was an annoyance in them. He also thought that she shook her head to tell him that his interference was not appreciated.

After laying his mother on the bed, he went to the window to pick up her walking stick. It was then that he saw the snow-covered hill and some children on it, who were competing in a downhill race. An agile blond girl with perfect balance on her skis led other children and swiftly came down the slope.

Shahid turned his head and watched his mother. Anjum sat on her bed and from the window looked at the same girl with covetous eyes; and she kept on staring out there till all the children came down to the endpoint.

Then Anjum brought her eyes towards her son – both complaint and affection sat in there. How could she tell him that because of his lifting off Anjum from that hill, for the first time ever, Swifty had succeeded in beating the master skier of them all – Spooky!

WET

She looked at the remaining wine in her glass, and also realised she was wet.

“Another bastard!” she had thought. “How could he ... how could he do this to me?”

Cautiously she took a few steps to the rear of the room. Away from his sight; hopefully, out of his range. “Through the translucent wall of the cigarette smoke he would not be able to cast his net of charm over me,” she told herself. Some kind soul offered her freshly poured the chilled wine. Oblivious of the philanthropist’s identity she took hold of the glass with the effervescent water from grapes. Condensation had thrown an opaque screen between her eyes and the sparkling drink. Before she put her lips to the glass, she slowly protruded her tongue and felt its thin rim. Her nostrils caught the aroma of the bubbling Champagne. She wondered if his teeth would feel that way, or if his breath had the same fruity flavour. Gently she sucked in the fluid. “No, no! Nobody’s lips could have this salty, sweetish taste,” she told herself and, while dreaming, let a generous smile manifest itself on her face.

“You always this happy?”

She bid the smile to disappear from her face, pulled on a protective mask of instant intellectualism on it, narrowed her eyes a bit, and slanting her head a little, she almost growled, "What if I am?"

He studied her stance for a short while and observed, "No, you are not. You were."

"What am I not, and what was I?" she asked.

"Happy!"

She closed her eyes to meditate upon his cryptic assertion.

"Listen mister!" without opening her eyes she addressed him, mellowing the growl to a softer tone, "What I feel is..."

"Are you feeling alright?" She heard a feminine voice ask her.

She opened her eyes. He wasn't there any longer. Instead, a somewhat amused Barbara was watching her intensely.

"Where did he go?"

"Who?"

"The character who was talking to me."

"There wasn't anyone talking to you. You were talking to someone who wasn't here." Barbara corrected her.

"Is it true?" she threw out a string of giggles, raised her shoulders and added, "Well! I better find

out where he is then." With that, she moved away from Barbara.

"Real bastards!" She cursed them all. "Never there when it is time to be there."

She looked in his direction. He had taken exactly the same pose and position that he had before he had spoken to her. "A real slippery type!" She warned herself. "Imagine, while conversing with four or five persons he slips away from there, disrupts my dream, and before anyone notices his absence he returns as if he never left the place." But she knew he had. She had not only heard his voice but also felt the weight of his shadow upon her. And his musk.

The muscles inside her thighs had an involuntary contraction.

She swallowed a mouthful of the cold drink, and slowly let it trickle down her throat. "That bloody Newton probably knew all about apples and grapes in their natural form, but nothing about them after they got squashed. Must have been a teetotaller," she thought. "His law of gravity does not apply to the liquors, at least not those which come out of grapes, have tiny bubbles in them and spring out of iced bottles, all frothing and fuming. Instead of going down they always rush up to my head." She laughed

audibly when she thought of another thing that defied not only gravitational pull but also Newton's Law of Inertia. "That little, anarchistic thing could abandon 'its state of rest', raise its head and, without any regard for some straight path, jump about wildly just by pure thought. No external force was required. A live instance of interplay between metaphysics and physio-dynamics." Still shaking with laughter, she terminated her engagement with philosophical speculations.

Suddenly she saw the wine on her hand, which had spilt over from her glass by her convulsions of merriment. Without bothering to see if anyone took notice of her personal involvement in the metaphysical processes and its result on her body, she turned around and went to the kitchen to wash her hand.

She always avoided the bathrooms when she attended gatherings with those who, while standing on unsteady legs, could not shoot straight. "Filthy idiots! Why can't they sit down when they unload themselves? In this way at least they would know which one is the lavatory and which one is the wash-basin."

In the kitchen-sink she let the lukewarm water run over her hand for a while. It had a soothing effect.

Slowly she raised the fingers of the other hand from the stem of the glass onto the bowl containing the champagne and felt the chill. She felt suspended between hot and cold, positive and negative, attraction and repulsion.

“No, not repulsion!” she reflected. “Weary! Yes, just weary of them,” she decided.

“And why shouldn’t I be weary of them?” She asked herself.

Then quite abruptly, she put the glass down, washed both hands, turned off the tap, dried her hands, picked up the glass and returned to the party.

Twelve long years she had spent with one Burden. Twelve years of subservience — intellectual, emotional, economic and social. She had looked after him, his parents, his house, his clothes, and books, and...but never a word of gratitude from him. All was expected of her, by him. They weren't married, so she did not have to play his wife; but the rest of it was there — the cook, the cleaner, the charmer and the geisha. Both of them belonged to the tribe of ‘the people of the pen’; yet, while he produced freely; she, after attending to other important things in their lives, had so little spare time left to relax and compose her own thought. He wasn't the first man in her life; and probably not the last; but surely, he was

the burden she had carried the longest. Yet, he was not a bad guy; no worse than any other she had known. So, she had reached a simple conclusion – they were all lousy.

Ever since she had made her break with him she had avoided the Burdens. “I don’t want any connection with them; definitely not a firm one,” she had decided; and regretted her decision the second which followed. “If anything I like in them, then it is the firmness of their connection,” she reminded herself. “Ah, we shall see!” She told her alter ego.

Then, for quite a while, she had kept herself aloof. She attended no large gatherings at the homes of others, or arranged any at her place. She had maintained the verbal channels of human relations through the telephone cord. For the satisfaction of her creative part, occasional slashes by the pen provided her the opportunities to erupt her emotions on the white sheet; and that brought some relief to her mind. It was taking longer time for her to regain her composure as an independent person than she had expected. She was not happy with the existing circumstances; but she did not feel exploited. And that felt good. Good enough to keep her away from them.

And then Eva had called her one day. “No, no and no.” She had said, “It is New Year’s Eve, you have to come. No old faces, no Chewing gums to stick themselves upon you, and definitely no Burdens. Completely new set of people. All fresh and lively.”

“Why the hell not!” She eventually said to Eva, “If worse comes to worse, I will knee the bastard and show him the fireworks long before midnight.”

“Excellent! Just put on a long dress, and some soft padding on your knees.” was Eva’s advice.

She had let a long dress engulf her up to her neck, but the soft padding part she did not take seriously. She deliberately chose a dress that showed her cleavage; and then put on a long-chained necklace that had an implement that looked like a nutcracker hanging in it.

“Whoever tries to peek into the valley would see the damn thing first and keep the distance; unless he wants to be registered as a reserve contralto at the Opera.” She reassured herself.

With that, she had gone to her first big night out in two years.

Eva was right. No ‘old relations’ were there. And rather crowded it was – almost forty persons in the living room. She recognised a few female faces but the members of the opposite gender were all new. “I

wonder where she finds them?" she had asked herself. "Just as well! Probably saves her friends a lot of chasing."

She had felt him soon after she had settled down in the smoky atmosphere. She did not like it. She had come there to kill the lingering year, not to embrace the coming one with feelings for anyone. She could only see his profile – nothing special. Ordinary face, and ordinary height. Yet he made his presence felt. Probably the way he moved his hands and kept his head slightly angled. She turned her head and studied the rest of the gathering. Lots of interesting prospects, if she were looking for one. She wasn't. She momentarily caught his eyes in the windowpane, blinked and looked in another direction. "Was he looking at me?" she pondered. "Why not, everyone is looking at everyone." Telling herself that she went for her second glass of Eva's special cocktail. Taking into account of its spirit content Eva had baptised it as 'Monk's Delight' – a concoction made of a mixture of soda water, sugar, essence of rum, and mint flavour, all well shaken and then used to dilute 95% alcohol, which Eva could borrow, permanently, from the chemical laboratory she was working for. By the time she looked at the ceiling through the bottom of her glass she was starting to get a sense of liberation

she hadn't had for a long time. To steady her legs and add something more filling to her belly she went to the table with sandwiches and salads, and made herself a nice plate.

A number of people said to her a number of things and she gave them a number of short replies. She did not remember much, because she was not listening to remember. Whenever a horde of sounds entered her ears she responded by releasing an army of words from her mouth. And that was that. No fore or after to any conversation. "I wonder if I am becoming an absolute instantionalist?" she thought. "An instantionalist - a person of the moment, just for that moment! Now this is nice new 'ist' I have found," she complimented herself.

"A few more drinks and I could lay out a new theory of existence!" she added to her inebriated self-esteem.

And so the evening had slowly crawled towards the instant when corks shoot out of the bottles, champagne gushes forth and finds its way to the empty glasses and waiting mouths. The instant when everyone wishes everyone else a happy new year, optimistically hoping that the good fortune would come to him or her the same night with a bang. Some enthusiasts kissed her on her cheeks, and she kissed

them back with such a passionless affection that they must have immediately remembered their favourite grandmothers. After a short period of heightened activity the jubilation subsided, and people once again returned to the groups which they had formed earlier.

After she had come out of the kitchen, she socialised a little by briefly attending different gatherings in the room. She was not sure if she had moved towards him, or he towards her, or they towards each other. She could not see him but knew that he stood with his back to her back. His heat permeated through their fabrics and spread all over her being. She wished that instead of wine her glass were full of ice bits. She needed something more substantial to satisfy her need. Each of her breath was like a blast of desert wind that dried her tongue with every passing second. Around her stood five other persons, totally engrossed in some important discussion. He too was surrounded by a few who argued equally spiritedly. She tried to listen to the speaker in her group. Sounds entered her ears but would not change into comprehensible expressions. Just a lot of words that remained disjointed and incoherent. She tried to catch the conversation from his party, and very slowly crept backwards.

Suddenly she felt the touch of his rump against hers; first very tenderly, but then more firmly as she continued to move backwards. Her heart beat like bongo drums. "Damn you! You must have felt me too. Why don't you move away?" She cursed him as she closed her eyes and tried to control her respiration. He must have straightened up a little because she felt his thigh touch hers; simultaneously his elbow brushed against her side. "Must you carry razors on your elbows?" She asked him silently. She received no answer. "Insensitive beast!" she thought as she gently swayed against him. He held his ground, while she sensed the muscular contraction again, and the volcanic pressure rising in her. Somebody put on the music. Rather unexpectedly, he turned towards her and said, "Shall we dance?" She wanted to shake her head to say no, but the stupid thing wouldn't move horizontally. Instead, it jerked twice, vertically. They both moved towards each other. Their glasses collided and she saw the champagne from his glass run down her dress.

"I am sorry for my clumsiness," he said apologetically and asked, "Did I make you wet?"

She nodded in affirmation.

He said in a friendly tone, "Let's go to the kitchen and get some paper towels, I could help you dry yourself."

"There is no need for you to come," she answered, and added politely, "I prefer to do it on my own."

Then, she left him standing there, and went to the bathroom.

KHALIFA SHAFIQ

Thirty years was a long period, yet I was certain that despite a lot of change Khalifa² Shafiq would look the same as he always did – how could he change! Ever since I had opened my eyes and started recognising people, one face that had left a permanent impression in my memory was that of Khalifa.

That day all the people were seated in a circle in our veranda. After making me drink a large glass of a green, sweet-bitter beverage my father sat down on the floor holding me securely in both arms. Khalifa Shafiq had an open razor in his right hand; and, at that moment, whatever he held in his left hand, I am certain, he would be reluctant to hold it today! He looked at me, a smile broke on his face, the razor flashed, sudden pain exploded between my loins and all at once everybody was saying, “Congratulations, congratulations!” And that very instant the face of Khalifa Shafiq became an everlasting part of my memory.

² Khalifa -- Arabic word meaning Caliph. It is also used for a barber in Urdu, because people bow their heads to him as well. Barbers, besides doing their normal job, also perform circumcisions in Pakistan.

The instant he saw me the same smile re-appeared on his face. I stumbled a bit, and then heard him exclaim, "Is it you Baboo Ji ? Have they offered you the presidency of our country?"

"Presidency of the country!"

"Why not? You live abroad, probably drink a little, obviously, you speak foreign languages; and then what could be amiss? A letter of recommendation! That you could have secured somewhere and then just come here and occupy the Chair."

"A letter of recommendation does not suffice ... to sit on that Chair one requires many other abilities too."

"What are you saying, sir?" an aged man squatting on the wooden platform said to me, "Whoever issues that letter of recommendation, would also provide you with detailed instructions for the use of that chair, written in permanent ink. Besides, it would also be accompanied with a number of capable advisers and guides, along with a variety of 'aids' programmes. Your job would be to merely follow the instructions that are prescribed on the back of that letter of recommendation."

Before I could answer him Khalifa Shafiq interrupted, "Baba Ji, let Baboo feel³ the atmosphere over here, before he decides if he would sit in the sun or the shadow."

Thereafter, he stepped out in the street, opened his arms and embraced me. He looked at my face affectionately for some moments and then asked, "When did you come?"

"Day before yesterday."

"Are you feeling well?"

"I am grateful to Life!"

The smile deepened around his eyes. He nodded a few times, pondering on my answer and said, "We had heard that you changed your path. Waleed Sahib was furious, but I said to him that a change in the path does not necessarily mean that you had also changed your destination. You are a product of this soil and that would always be your identity, whenever you say something it would carry its scent."

"Tell me, how come you recognised me?" I asked Khalifa.

"Baboo Ji, what are you saying! I have known you since the day you were born. Even if I were to turn

³ Baboo ji -- a manner of address meant for a person who is dressed in Western clothes and or belonging to an upper class.

blind and you passed by me, I would recognise you by the sound of your steps.”

Before I could speak further Khalifa took hold of my left arm and said, “Come in, you can’t be in all that hurry that we must stand out here and converse.”

“I am in no hurry at all. Actually, like always, I have come to you for a shave.”

Khalifa proceeded to open the door of the shop and I entered it. Thirty years must have elapsed outside that shop, but in there if time had not stood still then it had merely crept. The same three barber’s chairs, the same old wooden sofa by the wall, Khalifa’s room at the far end and the leather chair in it. Between the first two chairs were two wash basins for hair, and above them hung the two ancient, golden-frame mirrors containing thousands of old memories in their depth. I wondered that had I known some magical words then on their utterance how many faces would have emerged on the surface of those mirrors. Familiar calendars and posters hung on the walls of the shop. But one thing was missing – the posters of Treet blade that always hung on top of those mirrors were not there any longer. In their place hung a picture of a tyre-sole boot that reminded me of the police station in Choona Mundi, where

they were known to have a huge tyre-sole boot and on which it was inscribed "Darling, where did you spend the night"⁴. The thieves were asked to read it loud before they were given a beating for confession.

A couple of men seated in those chairs were looking curiously at Khalifa and me. The first chair was occupied by a bulky person whose head was in the care of a young man, while a rather frail man sat in the second chair and waited for Khalifa's return. I did not recognise any of the three.

Khalifa offered me his leather chair, while he started to brush the face of that man with the shaving cream.

"I came walking all the way from Choongi, but did not see any familiar face," I tried to continue the conversation.

"How could you! Those who were older than you have taken permanent residence in the Miani Sahib's graveyard, your own age group left the country with you, and the children who have grown up you do not recognise. How long ago did you leave?"

"Thirty-three years."

"Then!" Khalifa turned his head and looked at me. His eyes were simultaneously replete with complain, sorrow, recollection and affection. "Everyone gone!

⁴ Translation of a Punjabi song: "Chun kithey goozari uoo raat way".

Some left this world, other left the country and the remaining have gone from this mohalla⁵. That's why I hardly leave this shop. Here everything is the way it had always been, while out there it is all new. I feel so uncomfortable to go out – unfamiliar faces, strange people. I don't know how I saw you, because I seldom look outwards!"

The face of the person in the chair was by then covered with foam. Khalifa opened the razor, sharpened it a few times on the leather belt, and then with an expert hand tried to shave the man's face with a single stroke. Perhaps, because of me, he was not fully concentrated; there came a sob from that man and a red tinge spread on his cheek.

"How come you are here?" After he had apologised to the customer, Khalifa asked me without turning his face.

"What shall I say ... call it a coincidence. I am doing re-search on a deadly disease in Sweden. I met Dr. Sajjad in an international conference. We started talking and there I learnt that the same disease abounded in our mohalla as well. I was much shocked; but, then I thought why not conduct an investigation on the spot; I might find some unusual clue."

⁵ Mohalla -- a specific area of a town.

“What is this sickness called?”

All the eyes now looked at me.

“Aids!” I replied.

The customer moaned again, Khalifa did not say anything but his eyes told me to speak no more. The other two persons showed no interest.

After that, for some time, there was fought a pitched battle between silence, the chirping scissors and rasping sound of the razor blade. And that rivalry continued until both customers paid their bills and left the shop. Suddenly only naked silence started dancing in the shop and we all observed it spellbound.

“You could also take the lunch break,” Khalifa said to the boy, and he went out quietly.

“This Aids has frightened a lot of people here,” Khalifa resumed the conversation.

“Is it really so bad in this area?”

“You could say that. Actually, I do not understand our people. Everyone knows that this disease spreads through the sexual intercourse, but there isn’t anyone here who speaks the truth.”

Khalifa’s claim wasn’t fully correct, because Aids’ virus is passed on not only during the sexual intercourse but also through any medium where a sick person’s blood gets transfused to a healthy

person. Still, I was much impressed by Khalifa's knowledge. To know so much about a new and deadly disease was quite an achievement for a person who never left his shop.

"What was this comment by you about "not anyone speaking the truth"?"

"No one confesses that when, where and with whom they performed their immoral act. These germs must have come from somewhere! All are dying slowly, caged in their rooms. However much they try to hide, the news gets out sooner or later. Actually, a lot of these so-called morally strict families had their names soiled too. People I had known for ages simply disappeared, and when I saw them again after months they looked like ghosts." He looked at me with a concerned, questioning expression on his face.

"Well, come here. I might as well shave you while we talk," he said that, turning the chair towards me.

I got up from my seat but before sitting in that chair I asked him, "Why have you hung here this poster with boots?"

Khalifa laughed loudly and said, "Ever since I opened this shop this spot was reserved to mirror the conditions of that era. When the English were here I hung a poster of 7 O'clock safety blades; at

independence I changed it to that of Treet blade; when Ayub Khan was in power I put on dancing horses; while during Yahya's reign I hung here a poster showing a rifle and a bottle of whisky; thereafter came Bhutto, first I put up a picture with two burning candles but later on I changes it with a circus advertisement. Then came Zia's era – from then onwards I have had these boots here. Zia got blasted away but his evil-spirit still haunts this land and will do so for quite a while. During the reigns of Benazeer and Sharif I tried my best to get hold of some picture of horse traders but did not find a single reliable face that I could display here. As a matter of fact this poster with tyre-sole boots had been rather useful to me!"

"Useful?"

"Yes sir, all kind of people come in here with lots of funny ideas. In the days of Bhutto, when there was so much emphasis on personal liberty, some crazy persons turned up here and insisted that I should make some other arrangements – they did not like to bow their heads before me. I had to explain it to them that I could not cut and then wash their hair if they were to sit upright. My chairs could only be bent forwards or backwards; and it was better for them to bend their head than lift their legs before me. Thanks

goodness they understood the implication of my advice!”

“But what these boots got to do with that?”

“Since the day I have posted these boots here no one complains. People enter my shop, cast a look on these boots⁶, bow their heads and sit silently in the chairs.” An amused smile clung to Khalifa’s face.

He took a step, put a towel over that poster, and said, “All right come now!”

My very settling down in that chair sunk me into old memories. Deep in the arms of that chair was buried the caress of so many different hands – Daud, Gulzar, Sikander, Yakoob, Biloo, Nunna ... we had all sat in that chair. The mist of bygone times made my eyes wet.

“What are you remembering, Baboo Ji?” Shafiq stood on one side and looked at the rise and fall of old memories on my face.

I nodded and smiled to him – what else could I have done!

“Baboo Ji, whole of our nation has contracted Aids!” He said to me after a short while.

“The whole nation?”

⁶ In India and Pakistan to be beaten by a shoe, especially one's own shoe, is considered to be a big disgrace.

“Yes Baboo, the whole nation – mental Aids! You said that it was a deadly disease. We are all dying. A collective death! No one has a friend any longer, there are no mates left. There was a time we all wove beautiful dreams ... there were expectations. But now only salty water wants to run from my eyes! How long one could go on only dreaming? The elders were lucky – they died. But the children, who are grown up today, they have never received anything else but lies. Here, instead of loving one another they were told to hate; in place of true worship they were taught to perform fake rituals; humane feeling were discarded for inhuman behaviour and moral uprightness was trampled upon by unethical knaves. Our leaders start their days by praising God, then they go on begging for alms from Arabs and western nations in the name of their country and people; and if they get something the major part of it goes straight in their own pockets! Our army, whose real function is to provide security to our nation, has for years been involved in narcotics and is poisoning the youth in the whole world. What else could afflict our nation except collective death?”

“So much bitterness, Khalifa Ji? You used to be so optimistic. For me, like God, you have always existed and always will.”

“Don’t curse me in this way. This long age is itself a punishment. After what my eyes have seen, sometimes I think I would have been better blind. You knew my sons?”

“Knew?”

“Yes Baboo ... knew! Both of them died in Aids. Could I ever think they were to indulge in such immorality? Now their wives are also dying. How one could lead others to enlightenment when there is so much darkness in one’s own home? You are an expert on Aids; tell me what should I have done?”

Khalifa cleaned my face with a warm, wet towel and then began to rub the shaving cream on it with a brush.

“How do ordinary people react to Aids?”

“How should they? All are worried about themselves. Other than their brothers and sister who else would come close to the sick. Even they help them reluctantly. But I shall tell you one thing – I have never kept any difference.”

I looked at Khalifa questioningly.

“Whosoever comes here I treat them equally. It does not matter if one belongs to the working class or the gentry, they all sit in the same chair, bow their head to the same boots, and are shaved by the same razor. And this razor of mine never cares for any one!

It shows its edge whenever it feels furious. Can't say whose blood was mixed with whom by my razor!"

Khalifa Shafiq had put down the brush and was sharpening the razor on the leather belt. I felt acid in my stomach.

"The person who was sitting in this chair before me, did he have..."

"That was Adil Sahib. A very decent person actually, but I don't know under what circumstances he fell for bad company. He is almost on his last legs."

Khalifa was now testing the razor edge on his thumb. I got up from the chair and quickly took off the protective apron. By the time he turned and looked at me I was almost out of his shop.

"What's the matter? Aren't you feeling well?" he shouted.

"So far I am," I also shouted while running away from him. "But if your razor succeeded mixing Adil's blood with mine then I would not be feeling well for all that long," I said to him as an expert on Aids.

DUST

It was about three in the night. In its full might, the magnanimous Sun bestowed its soothing warmth to the valleys that had opened their wet and verdant bosoms to receive the comforting rays. Yesterday it had rained the whole day. That is why we had decided that we would start our journey after the heavens had shed all of their tears and felt relieved. To tell you the truth in Norway the difference between the day and night is not all that well marked during the high summer. Around Oslo the Sun retires for a short while around eleven in the evening and after forty winks or so returns to its heavenly spot and spends rest of the day glaring at this window on Earth like an obsessed lover. Probably after shaking off its thick winter blanket the burden of even two or three hours of darkness is rather laborious to it!

We were on our way from Oslo to Drammen.

Saeed's brother Rafiq had thrown us an invitation only a couple of days earlier that if we, after our nightly bouts of intellectual wrestling, felt like changing the taste in our mouths then he would arrange for a breakfast-at-dawn consisting of *halva*,

puri and *chickpea curry* ⁷. I am not sure how serious he was with his invitation but the eagerness we displayed in accepting it must have made him certain that his words were taken seriously. Actually Istaqlal ud-Din Yad Sahib had suggested tonight that we ought to tell Rafiq that it would suffice with only halva and puri; considering there wasn't much dust in Norway, there was no point in making chickpea curry, because it would never have the taste that develops in Pakistan at various bus and lorry terminals. But I had immediately pleaded against his suggestion by asserting that his stay in Scandinavia was limited to only two days while mine stretched over thirty years; thus, whatever status chickpeas curry might have for other persons to me is was the same as manna.

The coastal road to Drammen that Saeed had chosen was about sixty kilometres long from Oslo. It is a magnificently beautiful path etched on the breasts of mighty mountains by the Norwegians. Saeed, Dr. Nasir, Istaqlal Sahib and I were coasting to the destination halva-puri in the spacious car. Dwarfing us, on one side of the road stood arrogant, lofty mountains; while on the other thick walls of pine-trees tried their best to veil the astonishing

⁷ A much liked breakfast meal in northern India and Pakistan.

beauty of blue waters far below, as if their eyeing by some strangers would soil their honour. Still, every now and then, the Datsun provided us with a glance of those green and blue fairies dancing behind the trees, but before we could catch an eyeful of them they disappeared again. To be honest, if we wanted we could have stopped the car at any appropriate spot and enjoy the whole spectacle to our heart's satisfaction, but the pleasure we drew out of that hide-and-seek play was far more ingratiating than a stand-and-glare show.

We had all come to Oslo to participate in a Mushaira⁸. Dr. Nasir and I were from Stockholm. Saeed belonged to Oslo, and was our private host. Istaqlal ud-Din Yad Sahib had come from Faisalabad, Pakistan. His poetry besides its euphonious gratification also contained an ocean of stimulating thoughts; thus, long after the received applause during the recitation his imagery haunted the minds of the listeners and enticed them to further reflection.

In his poem Babary Mosque, without criticising different religions, he bashed at the egotistical principals of various faiths; and, instead, praised humanism and humanistic ethics. That poem was much liked.

⁸ A poetry session.

After the mushaira the guest poets were invited to a dinner party. In Scandinavia it has become a tradition for certain South Asian intellectuals that the poets from Denmark, Norway and Sweden are invited for only a quick and brief encounter, and once the proceedings of the mushaira are over no further contact is maintained with them. Keeping up that tradition Dr. Nasir and I were not invited to the dinner. Thus, we also missed the opportunity of meeting the poets who had come from India and Pakistan. But later on, when Istaqlal Sahib pretending to go to another important meeting left his host's house we 'abducted' him in a friendly manner. He too was overjoyed, because despite that long journey from Pakistan his hosts had granted him only one day's stay in Norway after the mushaira. That is why when we told him that we really intend to drive to Drammen the next morning he showed his approval by releasing a thunderous burst of laughter.

Instead of wasting that night by sleeping, we offered Istaqlal Sahib a rather healthy glass of water in which we had poured ample quantity of whisky, just to add it some colour. And when that colour left the water and started manifesting itself on Istaqlal Sahib's cheeks, we told him that he should consider us captive to his recitation until three in the morning.

And what a night it was! He invited us to join him in his chariot of words, jerked the reins off his tongue and then took us on an unforgettable trip of amazing thoughts and fabulous expressions. At quarter to three, Saeed suggested that it was about time that we rested the tongue and started the car.

We reached Rafiq's restaurant shortly after four-thirty. The breakfast was being prepared. We sent blessing upon the cook who, after the nightshift and a few hours sleep, now stood by the boiling oil. The moment he saw us he assailed the dough balls – he slapped them hard a few time, molested them under the roller, took them for a plunge in the blistering oil, pulled them out, let the fat drain off and then pushed them towards us. Halva and chickpea curry were already served on the table in heated bowls. Rafiq had placed large restaurant plates beside them. Saeed, Dr. Nasir and I got up hurriedly, filled our plates with halva, puris and curry and then returned to our seats. Istaqlal also went there. He put the halva in his plate, took a spoon and looked for a while on the curry, put the spoon back, picked up two puris and returned to the chair opposite mine.

“What's the matter Yad Sahib, don't you like the chickpea curry?” Dr. Nasir bent forward from his chair and asked him.

Istaqlal remained silent for a short while and then said, "I like it, but...." He abruptly left the sentence incomplete.

"If you think that its taste would be unfamiliar to you then I could add some dust to it?" I asked jokingly.

"No, the dust I care for is not accessible here!" A strange smiled danced on Istaqal's face.

Nasir, Saeed and Rafiq fell into some other discussion.

Istaqlal and I, silently but ravenously, attacked our plates. To change the taste, along with the puri sometimes I catered only halva, at times the curry, and then sometimes a mixture of the two to my teeth. Istaqal Sahib, apparently lost in some deep thoughts, intensely watched my manner of eating. Suddenly some words from his poem Babary Mosque returned to my mind, and at the same time certain figures from the last night's adventure arose in my memory. Quite subconsciously, I got up from my chair, went to the kitchen and found a small deep plate, put some chickpea curry in it, placed it in front of Istaqal Sahib and asked him, "Would you accept this curry now?"

Acute panic flooded the eyes of Istaqal ud Din Yad Sahib, but after seeing compassion in my eyes and a friendly look on my face his fear also mellowed

into a smile. He nodded his head in consent and then took a spoonful from that plate.

“Do you belong to those two thousand anonymous inhabitants⁹ of Layalpur¹⁰ who have lived there for the last forty-six years, yet they are invisible to all others?”

“Not invisible but nameless! And we have lived there much, much longer than forty-six years, although today we are not counted anywhere – neither during the plebiscite nor among the Muslims.”

“What kind of life is it then where not even your existence is acknowledged? Why did you stay on in that country?” I asked him.

“We have not stayed on in any country dear Mushtaq! We are merely clinging to the breast of our Mother Earth whose dust is made of the ashes of our ancestors, and from whose womb we are all born.”

“Even if that Earth today thirsts for your blood?”

“Thirsts! Who thirsts? Our body is a produce of that earth, and to that earth it should return. Actually, Mother Earth has never asked for our blood; it is shed

⁹ According to Ahmed Ghazali's book Sandal Bar, page 109, the Hindu population of Faisalabad Division is about 6000 persons. Published by Ferozsons, first edition.

¹⁰ Faisalabad's old name.

by those narrow-minded persons who consider the earth as mere soil and do business out of it, sometimes by putting up a barrier here and at others by drawing a boundary over there. Mother Earth is so very old, and on its chest has grown up so many cultures and nations. Mother Earth is never angry with its children; it is the children who fight among themselves – one wins, another loses! The winners sometimes draw boundaries on the earth, and then they change its name. But a change of name does not mean that Mother Earth has changed itself, nor does it differentiate between its children in a way that it would accept one and reject the other. That's why at the time of partition¹¹ many of our elders, on both sides of the political division, decided that instead of losing their identity after becoming homeless, it was better to stay where they were and become nameless. Therefore, they cut off the external world after shutting the doors to their homes and hearts. Today millions of people on both sides of the border, in order to stay close to their ancestral homes, have consented to spend a life of anonymity. Thus, when we move around outside our homes we perform all the obligations of our country of domicile, but when

¹¹ 1947, when The British India was devided into Bharat and Pakistan. Bharat calls itself India in English.

we retreat to our homes then we continue to retain our old faith, memories and traditions.” Istaqlal ud-Din Yad told me the secret of his life.

“But why keep this chasm between obligations and traditions? Why did you not accept an entirely new identity along with the change of your name?”

“Mushtaq Ji, obligations are imposed upon a person; whereas, traditions are maintained by dedication. Obligations are discharged by the mind; a tradition is fulfilled by the heart. The mind has it comparatively easy to accept or reject new thoughts; while the colourful impression etched deep in our hearts, even if the fade, only lose a certain shade with the passage of time — they never disappear completely. As far as changing the identity with a new name is concerned, for the majority of people anywhere a name merely provides a worldly or legal identity, it conveys no spiritual essence. Though certain chosen names may also reveal a person’s inner feelings. Keeping in our mind the worldly demands we have put on some sort of safety covering for our beings by adopting new names, but that hasn’t changed our true selfdom. Thus, by eating halva and puri from the same plate we follow the way of our present country, but the old tradition of

this land says that fried and curried items are served and consumed in separate utensils!”

“It doesn’t matter how dusty all these obligations and traditions have become?” I could not restrain myself from asking this question.

“If a person venerates his home then even its dust feels sacred; otherwise, out of sheer need one could dwell anywhere!” Istaqlal-ud-Din Yad, while taking a spoonful from his chickpea curry, slapped me, a vagabond son of his Mother Earth, gently with his words.

THE CHAIR

The door opened a bit when I pressed the bell button for the second time. In the beginning she had only curiosity in her eyes, but after listening to my words that curiosity changed first into surprise, then disbelief and finally spontaneous joy in such a way as if a victimised wife were given the happy news of her husband's death, with the added information that the deceased had left her not only a substantial insurance policy but also recommended the personal services of his young secretary to her.

"Is it true?"

"Yes," was my short reply.

A little bit of joy trickled out of her eyes, and after imparting pinkish hue to her cheeks it spread around her lips. Then she opened her rosy petals and showed me her set of sparkling white pearls.

"You are Jamila's..." After recognising me she had just said that when a masculine voice reached us, "Who is it?"

"He, he is here," she said that and went in.

It took some time before an elderly man, bearing three pens in his shirt's pocket and four teeth in his mouth, came towards me quite enthusiastically.

“Well, well, well! We knew that one of these days you should come.”

“I apologise, in case you had to wait long,” before his enthusiasm on my arrival would fade by the chill of his waiting I tried to add some warmth to it by saying appropriate words.

“It does not matter, son; it does not matter at all. I knew that that day is not all that far when it should also ring in our house. But why are you standing out there? Come in!” He opened the gate and invited me in.

I entered the courtyard. There were still some patches of wet on the newly washed floor. In one corner stood two Jasmine bushes and imbued fragrance to the atmosphere. I was about to place my bag on the floor when the old man said, “It’s better if you go straight in.”

“Daughter! Lead him to the main hall. I shall come soon.”

Without uttering a word she pulled me with her smile. I crossed the yard and followed her to that room.

The main hall was quite large – at least forty square meters! Three walls of the room were provided with big windows. All the three windows had fine metal mesh fitted into them that, without

obstructing the vision, successfully hindered all mosquitoes and other insects from intruding in. Behind the white curtains I could see the sliding doors. In other words - in the evening every vagabond puff of fresh air was invited to wander through that room without check, but curious insects could only peek in there; and if sometime the rain would turn unfriendly then on closing of the windows all it could do was to bang its head on those doors! On the fourth wall, between two hanging swords, I found a portrait of an extremely solemn face staring at me. With a quick change of my feet, I turned my back towards him. An expansive corner sofa spread its arms on two walls of the room, and awaited the arrival of guests. A walnut round table sat resolutely on the carpet in the middle of the room; while four bookshelves flaunted their disinterest for a non-literary person like me. Between the bookshelves stood a desk neatly arranged with pens, paper and other utilities.

But I saw no chair in that room.

“Where would you like me to set the plug?” I looked straight in her eyes and asked.

“I don’t know.” While blushing she also added, “I am rather naive in such matters. I shall call upon my...”

“You need not call upon me, here I am,” her father entered the room and addressed me, “Look mister, before we do anything practical we must clear up a couple of things.”

“Please, go ahead,” I replied him smiling.

“Who has recommended you to come here?”

“What?”

“Somebody must have directed you here. Was it Ansari Sahib, Faridi Sahib or Khan Baba?”

“No sir, I haven’t come here on anyone’s recommendation. Actually...”

“What is happening then? Do we have drinkable water again? Let’s talk openly so that there are no misunderstandings when it is time to settle the final accounts.”

“There is no settling of accounts. Now...”

“How is that possible? In this land its costs at least a hundred to shake hands with the peon of an influential officer, and if one needs to buy off a judge of the Supreme Court then it has to be a signed blank check – the amount is filled in by the judge depending upon the magnitude of his breach of law. The higher the rank of an office bearer the larger is the sum he charges for his corruption and debasement! And you would like me to believe that you have come here after drinking a glass of sheer honesty?”

I looked at her helplessly, and begged for her intervention with my eyes. Compassion and mischief wrestled upon her face – compassion won.

“Dad, there must be still some honourable¹² people left in the world, if...”

“Of course... In this world, yes! But I was talking about here, where one could be called honourable only by name; but if you were to look at his deeds, he could pick up a locomotive engine and put it in his pocket, and by the time his hand comes out of that pocket the publicly owned steel engine has already been converted into a private gold ring.”

Three pens and four teeth surveyed me suspiciously for a while, and then added, “It scares me to deal with people who look straight. Mister, once the prices are settled at least one knows that how much one would lose to get something. You are standing here as a messenger of peace; what would we do if you were to turn out as the devil’s disciple!”

“Then excuse me, I have no other proof with me.” I said to him annoyed, picked up my tool bag and turned towards the door.

“Wait a minute, wait! You have come after such a long wait, why are you in such a hurry to leave? I was merely trying to clear up the atmosphere to

¹² In the Urdu story the word Sharif is used. Sharif means honourable.

avoid the complications later on." Expediency had taken the place of suspicion in old man's eyes. Then he asked his daughter, "What did he say to you?"

"He asked me where he should set the plug," she lowered her eyes and replied him.

Quite subconsciously, I looked at the shoes of her dear father. To my relief, and probably to his disappointment, he was wearing only thin slippers. And I loved it when he, sensing the sensitive situation, said, "Is it something you should ask us? You are the expert. Tell us your choice so that we could ponder upon it."

"Am I the first person who has come to your house to fix the connection, or has there been someone here before me?"

"This is our home, but the house is not ours," the old man corrected me, and added, "No, no one has come here before you, although we have been waiting for some time now. You are the first person who has come here for this purpose."

I searched the walls and saw some sockets by the entrance door. I wanted to inspect them closely; therefore, I asked him, "Could I get something to sit there?"

"What?"

"Do you have any chair?" I explained.

“No mister, we have no chair in our home.” I was told abruptly.

“Why not?” I also asked that abruptly.

“A chair is a rather risky think to have. If some comes to one’s home, settles down in a chair and then refuses to get up, then what can one do?”

“And what about this huge sofa?” I enquired.

“A sofa is never a problem. If an ill-mannered person would not get up, then there is always ample place to sit beside him. And that’s that.” The old man looked like wisdom itself, but I did not grasp anything.

He saw my perplexity and said, “Dear boy, do not take it personally, but we have had such bitter experiences that we decided to burn all our chairs.” Then he went to the front windows and looked around to check if anyone was eavesdropping. When he felt secure he added, “You see the big mansion opposite us, there lives a lady who was rather close to us. Some years back we had chosen her to lead a major societal organisation. Once during emergency circumstances she invited the younger son of Chief Abraham to preside. How shall I say? Once he settled down in the president’s chair, it was impossible for the organisers to make him leave that. Besides, he was supported by the largest army of gangsters in the

country. Eventually, an even bigger representative of the gangsters came and forced him to leave. She was already mentally much disturbed, because a few years earlier her father's chair was also confiscated by the chief of the same gang. That chief was also a tyrant. Not only did he occupy that chair but also, after some sort of mock show, had the elected owner of that chair executed by having him hurt by his own people, and then put the whole blame on a drug addict that he had pulled the strings. Even that chief had to be blasted out of that chair after some explosively febrile activity by his own gang at a very high level. It's obvious that all that left a demoralising effect on her mind. To tell you the truth she never recovered completely from the shock of her father's mode of exit. She always behaves as if she considers herself imperfect or ineffective unless she gets her father's name clear of all the accusations piled against him. We feel so sorry for her - I have heard that in her student days she had an open mind and a talented mouth, but now she is a mere shadow of her old self that avoids the limelight and is hiding in dark alleys. It is said that she is currently at odds with her family too, nor do they accept her as a member of their clan. Their whole life revolves around that chair. Sometimes it feels that the whole thing is just a show,

and we are merely the spectators who are given that performance which is considered appropriate by the manipulators. It is possible that the death of her father affected her in such a way that a part of her mind is permanently damaged, or that she ran into a bad relationship with some money lord who now has a hold over her. It is also feasible that the same old army of gangsters still has influence over her. Whatever the case may be the surrounding around us are not peaceful, and all this trouble because of a chair! A chair that was intended to provide a seat for the people who would guide the nation towards progress; not to become a sort of item that would be considered private property by certain persons or families."

I stood there quite nonplussed. Actually, I felt rather uneasy because I did not have any clue what all that had to do with me.

She must have felt my unease, and said to her father, "Dad, why are you telling him all that? He just asked you for a seat to perform his task. What possible interest he could have that how distinguished our dear lady had been, but now the only purpose of her life is to somehow repossess that chair. Why are you disclosing your personal life to a..."

“Whom else should I talk to? All the load that I carry in my heart, it has to be released sometime. And in our society, a man can weep freely only on two occasions – out in the open along with the clouds when they shed their own tears or in front of a stranger! Try sharing a single grief with a relative and you will get a whole dozen of them back.”

The old man looked at me as if he had just woken up from an interrupted dream. “Excuse me sir, I don't know why my tongue dropped its guard today; otherwise I keep it well under control. To tell you the truth you reminded me of the time when I had come to this land carrying a bag like yours. Then this newly born country seemed so full of prospects. But time showed that the grass in the neighbour's lawn looks neat and clean only from a distance. A closer scrutiny disclosed that all grasses contain such weeds that must be removed regularly; otherwise, they slowly replace the soft grass and turn the whole field inhospitable. We made the mistake that while certain destructive minds were setting up thorny bushes around us we sat under the shade of a few leafy trees and dreamt of a contended life. We should have uprooted those injurious growths there and then, and instead planted fruit and flower trees. Anyhow, after a lot of labour and toil when I succeeded in

establishing a connection, the luck did not stand by me and that connection was cut short by death. Ever since then my daughter and I have lived on our own. Therefore, when she told me today that you were asking her where to set the plug I had a short circuit in my temper. It felt as if my fuse should blow. In fact at this age I should be prepared to show a suitable artisan the appropriate place to set a connection. Besides, ever since people have started moving to and fro from the Middle East new connections are laid in almost every house. Obviously our turn also had to come one day, and if we could do the whole thing legally correct as well then what more is to be desired?"

With his little finger he slowly massaged the middle of his forehead, took a deep breath and asked me, "Have you made your choice?"

"Sir, that choice I had made a long time ago. That's why I asked you for a chair to sit on it and calmly make arrangement for setting up of the connection."

A faint smile was dancing on his face when he said, "Son, to put up that connection you shouldn't have come here alone. It is a very responsible task. To me you look a bit naive! You should ask a couple of experienced persons to accompany you who could advise you that after you decide where to make the

connection, but before you put up the plug, which wires must be drawn and how to connect them. When we are all in agreement and have signed the contract then you could go ahead and set the plug.”

Instead of engaging myself in further nonsense with him I picked up my bag quietly and went outwards. She came after me and as I passed the outer door said, “Don't forget to come back soon. I have waited long enough for this call, and it is about time that it should ring in my home. Besides, when you return there will be a chair waiting for you!”

MIRAGE

During the summer holidays the park by Norr Mälarstrand was our favourite place for recreation – we would sit or lie there for hours staring at the town hall across the lake. From that distance there wasn't much worthy of spectacle in that building; but the grey water chest provided a perfect background for that swarm of bare, warm and breathing breasts on the green grassy carpet, which were exposed to the soothing sun by hundreds of local and tourist girls for the gentle message by the wind and a coat of tan by the solar brushes.

All that provided such a heavenly ambience that whenever Haji Sahib visited Sweden he would coax us to be there rather early at that spot saying – Boys, we ought to get there in time to take advantage of the morning dew and the greenery that is so soothing for us. Later on there is always a crowd and strange, obnoxious people hurt the eyes! By obnoxious people he meant those tall, athletic Swedes who sat merrily with their wives or girl friends, but would appear as burden on the grass and as thorns in the path of other stalking males. If all that had belonged to the era of the Big Boss he would have sent away all these young men to some holy war, and after temporarily

cancelling the marriage ceremony declare the area by Rålamshov Park his harem. But this Swedish society had come a long way from that kind of sexual craving where even a glimpse of a desirable female behind a curtain was considered to be so volcanic that the spectator had no other choice but to rush home to erupt his lava! Over here accepting the basic contention that “it is my heart, my body and, therefore, my choice” only that person was considered an agreeable mate who was accepted both by mind and heart. On the other hand, in Haji Sahib’s homeland fantastic tales were concocted about an assumed heaven and a set of commands issued from there which sanctified the legal rape of countless obedient, shy girls by total strangers during their nuptial night.

Haji himself was adamant that he did not come to the park for the satisfaction of his eyes, but to appease his heart – those rounded shivering pairs of breasts reminded him of the marble doom of Taj Mahal. While we always suspected that he sat there with eyes closed to fantasise all those beautiful maidens he would cohabit with in the paradise who were to be allotted to him for his refrain from pleasure on this earth.

Haji Sahib had come to Sweden to visit his newly divorced son a few years ago after his bypass operation. "I had heard a lot about these shameless people, thus I thought that I might as well cast a look at them before I reach the end of my journey." That is how he had introduced himself to us. He was a rather odd character - the thick beard on his face accorded him a sort of elderly grace; yet, the twinkle in his eyes allocated him a youthful look. It was not easy to determine if it was a playboy hiding himself behind a mask of hair, or an old man who was still nurturing desires from his younger days!

Still, there was no doubt that after the visual intimacy with these shameless people Haji did his best to delay the departure to his final journey, and to prolong the duration of his observations. Thus, he followed the instructions of his doctor meticulously - slept well, kept his diet, took the medicines promptly and for a change of air regularly came to Sweden in June. In Sweden it is traditionally said that it's May if the trees start to dress and the girls undress; In June the trees get covered while the maidens lie bare; in July there is less of warm sand and more of hot flesh by the lakes and the sea; and in August both the foliage and the naked bodies begin to show the copper tan. However, all that is true only if the

mighty Sun agrees to visit them during these months; otherwise, fruitless trees and the cave dwellers enviously look at birds and aeroplane, carrying their friends, on their way to distant sunny spots.

It was one of those sunny days when the Creator of this universe might have wanted to abandon the heaven and that of His creation who squats up there praying and begging for his mercy and instead, after giving them a slip, dash down to Earth to be among those who sit here fully exposed to his scrutiny and with challenging eyes! Such a fabulous variety of His creation was sitting and lying around us that words of prayer - O' Lord! Let there be a sand storm that afflicts all the weaving machines of the world, or at least bestow manna upon the workers of these machine and give them courage for a long-term strike - all the time played upon our lips. Even Haji Sahib, who normally kept his boat of beliefs afloat in that ocean of nudity by unrestrained strokes of his verbosity on the undulating waves of those naked chests, was more inclined towards praising his God than blaming the Devil. Only Waseem was in low spirits. On our insistence he disclosed that after last night's splendid show of the closing of the Olympic Games he had gone into a depression.

“This time we did not have a single athlete who made it beyond the qualifying rounds! Nations consisting of only four or five millions people had sent more than two hundred participants, and we with a crowd of hundred thirty millions dispatched only thirty persons of which merely fourteen were competitors and the rest spectators, and who looked like a bunch of mourners bearing the green flag.”

“Dear Waseem, let there sometime competition be held according to our tradition, and then you would be able to boast about our performance, “Arshad Jamal said in his resonant voice.

“Which are those competitions?” I asked anxiously.

“Competitions where one shows his back or crawls upon the knees before others, Sain! We excel in such games for centuries. Have you ever closely studied our grand, steel-breasted men? Their very presence evokes awe among others, but the very moment someone turns up with a whip in his hand, they all stand there like tame dogs with their tail between their legs. So obedient to their masters that on their command they would commit any atrocity. And it does not matter if their victims are from the others or among their own; on a single wink of an eye they would molest any person, especially their own kind.

And do you know why it is so?" I had never seen Arshad in such mood. Rage manifested itself as foam round his mouth.

"Why?" I whispered uncontrollably.

"The lack of human dignity and integrity! Our whole nation is its own negation – the very soil that feeds us we consider it inferior to an arid, infertile desert; the womb that carries us we accord it to someone we rate as only a second grade human being; the chronicles of our culture that nourished our beings over millenniums we declare them false against foreign myths. What we ought to have done was to till that land with our love that provides us sustenance, revere the womb that brings us to this world, and propagate those positive elements of our culture that still forms the backbone of our heritage. There are people who consider our youth inferior to animals and for their own pleasure do not refrain from having these children trampled upon by their camels, enforce our daughters to be their mistresses, and treat our young men worse than the slaves of antiquity; while we are willing to offer our whole cities just to protect a few houses of these people, and sacrifice scores of our sons to save the lives of our exploiters; then, tell me, for which country, nation or flag should our youth compete against others? They

must also have something that instils them with personal esteem to keep their head high! You...”

“Arshad, what’s the matter with you? Look at your left and your right! We are sitting in the Garden of Eden; why all this heartache?”

“Sain Ji, looking at this Garden of Eden gives me heartache! No, not this garden itself, but the thought of its absence in our society. You know that the very same women who are lying here exist in our garden too; but, whereas we coerce them to cover themselves from their top to toe, they lie here naked totally without fear; and every despot who considers it to be his divine right to mistreat them over there, does not have the courage to address them even loudly over here. Our great Amir-ul-Momenin¹³, after veiling all these miracles of Mother Nature in our country used to carry a begging bowl and sit at the feet of Margaret Thatcher, also known as Iron balls Maggie, and plead for alms and leftovers from arms. I shall tell you why all these haughty men over there who compel our women to be on their knees, themselves kneel before the western women, may she be an office clerk or a Prime Minister. The reason is that over here the difference between a man and a woman is now, more

¹³ Amir-ul-Momenin -- the leader of the pious. A title that was given to Zia ul Haq in Pakista.

or less, confined to the bed; outside their beds they belong to a nation of nine million independent persons and despite their low number own the third largest land mass in Western Europe. And they also strive to do their best to look after each other in an organised manner. I do not claim that this society has attained total human equality; but they are not only going in that direction but are quite close to it. Although you do find some racists and other troublemakers even here. Their administrative officers are not considered as rulers but public servants. Our bastard rulers are the offspring of those traitors who in their time sided with the foreign occupiers against their own people. People who proudly used to say " Yes Sir", "No my Lord", "Yes Madam", "His Excellency" and "My Honour", and in return for their servility were awarded the titles of Khan Bahadur, Jageerdar Sahib and Sain Wadeera, are actually impostors dedicated to anti-people schemes. How could persons who received treason in their heritage be sincerely pro-people in their deeds?

Thereafter silence prevailed for a while. When Arshad Jamal's agitation subsided a bit he said to Waseem, "Waseem dear! There is saying that if a boy is born among the eunuchs then they trample him to death."

“They kiss him to death”, I immediately corrected Arshad.

“No Sain Ji, that is true for physically different and over-excited eunuchs; I was talking about nations whose members appear apparently normal but are intellectually castrated.”

“You are rather hard in your accusation,” Haji Sahib tried to re-collect his attention from various tips of attraction and looked at Arshad.

“And why shouldn’t I be? How many nations gained independence after the Second World War? Cast a look on recent history... Bharat, China, Israel, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, Korea and Vietnam are all those Asian countries that achieved independence along with us or soon afterwards. Today all these nations are a long way ahead of us in industrial and economical race. These nations have different religions, languages and cultures; but have one thing in common – they struggled themselves for their independence, fought for it and gained a country. That’s why they are proud of their land, language, culture and nationality and they esteem them highly. No lawyer from Bombay fought for them; nor did any martyr from the eastern provinces, Bihar or eastern Punjab died for them! In our case others spoke for us, fought and

died. We lit the lamp of our history from the burning houses of other people, where instead of oil the blood from millions of innocent souls was consumed; and without risking their own skin the landlords and chiefs in our country suddenly had the fifth or sixth largest congregation of simpletons in the world under their control. They used Mullahs¹⁴ to apprehend their intellect and after taking them on circuitous tour on the twisty paths of the legends from the past have completely distorted their minds turning them into merely beasts of burden. Haji Sahib! Our country was achieved as a haven where Muslims would no longer be persecuted, we should have the rule of Most Merciful and Most Benevolent¹⁵, and instead of caste and class there would be egalitarianism and human equality. It wasn't created to allow for those villains who, hiding behind khaki uniforms or long beards, would mistreat everyone else in the name of Islam. Tell me! You come and sit here daily among these almost nude women; have you ever seen anyone being dishonoured or raped? Contrary to that all our women, may they be veiled

¹⁴ Mullah -- A Muslim priest; although priesthood as an institution in Islam is not commended.

¹⁵ Two predicates associated with Allah.

under a burqa¹⁶ or wear just a stole, are visually raped and harassed at every step they take by the lustful eyes in our society. So my question is – Where do we have shamelessness and vulgarity, here or there?”

Haji Sahib whose attention was more directed towards the bare skin than Arshad’s outburst was rather up set by his direct question. He caressed his beard for a while and said, “Arshad, while you were letting off your steam you overlooked one important thing – all these games and competitions are pastimes for the rich nations, may they take place in a city of America or on a beach in Sweden. You have declared disrobing on the beach as human equality. The craze for nudity and the feeling of independence are two different thoughts. For our women personal liberty is in no way the same as personal nudity. As a matter of fact despite their similarity of physical form the women of the west and east are intellectually two completely different beings. To consider them the same is merely a mirage that...”

Arshad cut off Haji abruptly and said, “You are evading the issue. I am not preaching for nudity. My insistence is upon our freedom of choice in sharing our body, mind, labour and love. Perhaps you are not

¹⁶ An outer garment worn by Muslim women to cover their bodies.

aware that what you consider as their craze for nudity is actually a natural need for the Swedes. In this cold, icy land one hardly gets two months of warm sunshine that permits leisurely sitting in it. And it does not matter which God we bow to, all informed people know that our life depends upon the sun. Everything in our world grows and bears fruit because of the solar energy. The residents of these cold countries are obliged to take sun-bath to promote their health, otherwise their body defence..."

Arshad suddenly stopped in the middle of the sentence. Haji's eyes were focused somewhere else. Our curiosity disclosed that he was staring at a pair of live bronze statues - two girls, while talking to each other, made their way through the maze of bodies on the grass and came towards us. A boy near us called after them and they turned in his direction. On reaching there, they put their bags on the grass, took out two towels and spread them there. One of them sat down directly, while the other first took off her jeans and then released her body off her blouse and brassier and gave herself a bath rich in fresh air. I am not sure if it was the tip of her breast or her body heat that made the sun duck a bit. Then came a frivolous puff of wind and turned over a corner of

her towel. As she bent down to correct it, her eyes met that of Haji Sahib. An innocent, charming smile arose on her face and she said to him in Swedish, "Hello, grand dad!"

After some moments of extreme perplexity a similar smile also arose on Haji Sahib's face and he nodded to her. That girl lied down beside her friends.

"Haji Ji, who is this sunflower?" escaped from Arshad's mouth.

Haji hesitated for a while and then answered, "Today... today she is the daughter of my ex-daughter-in-law... she lives with her."

"Daughter of your ex-daughter-in-law? Did Margaret have a child from a previous marriage?" Arshad continued.

"No!" Was the short answer.

"Then, when does this "daughter of your ex-daughter-in-law" becomes daughter of your son and your grand daughter?"

"Whenever she comes home to us and wear eastern clothes along with a stole," Haji's reply was barely audible.

HONOUR*

The old woman was about fifty; but she was so lean that it appeared as if hunger, stretched over many decades, had eaten her from inside. Her upper torso was covered with a stained, once white, sheet; while her lower half carried a rather torn, green wrap-around short skirt on which smears of dried brown-red blood would still show every now and then. While drifting, she suddenly stood still when she saw a heap of fruit-skin in front of the office of The State Bank. After hesitating a few moments she went straight to the heap, bent down and started searching in it. Her sudden bending down in that manner made her behinds completely bare.

An indignant passer-by said to her, "What's the matter with you woman, don't you feel ashamed? Haven't you got two rupees to secure needle and thread to at least repair your skirt?"

"I had them Mister! But to lessen the nation's burden I donated them to our government for their 'Pay the debt, amend our land' scheme."

"That's nice, but you ought to have cared about you honour first."

"Cared? I do not have a care in the world! The whole daylong I stroll through quarters with

magnificent villas and feel elated; I have also heard that our rich have bought splendid palaces abroad for our appreciation. A walk through Kebab-Square completely lulls my daily need for aromatic aromas. If only you knew how all those, beautiful clothes long to touch my body when I walk through the Antalkali Bazaar! In addition, half an hour resting outside the verdant Jinnah Garden and its lush vegetation fills my eyes with soothing green. Besides, why should I, who has two sub-marines, dozens of naval vessels, several hundred jet-aeroplanes, thousands of tanks and more than half a million able-bodied soldiers to defend me, worry about my honour being soiled!”

After that, in order to bring some temporary relief to her rebellious stomach, she bent down again to search for some left over pulp in the heap of discarded fruit-skins.

Her nakedness from behind brought tears to the eyes of some of her well-wishers, the rest of the world kept on laughing on that spectacle!

* Keeping in mind a Punjabi saying:
Naked is our head, bare our arse

Still, we are the best in the universe

(Utton thulyoañ nungay aañ
Jehan koloañ chungay aañ.)

A PAIR OF BLACK SHOES

Thursday, 17 November. 1994. 09.10 a.m.

Birger Jarlsgatan X Kungstensgatan.

The flashing blue lights had caught my eyes first. It must be an ambulance or a police car! I had thought; but then I turned into Rådmanngatan to fetch my passenger at Hotel Birger Jarl. Yet, something continued to bother me – there were just far too many lights that had left their impression on my retina.

I found no passenger outside the hotel. I waited there far less than I ought to have done and then moved on into Kungstensgatan, towards the flashing lights. I saw three policemen, two police cars and an ambulance as I came nearer to the spot where a small number of spectators had gathered and were looking at the two stretchers. As I came closer I looked again at the policemen and the ambulance attendants. They were not doing anything; just stood there, staring in the space at nothing, as if they were not even there. Almost mesmerised by the flood of flashing lights, mummified official and a dazed crowd I slowly drove into Birger Jarlsgatan and then stood still behind the SL-bus that blocked the road.

It was then I saw the bicycle and a small briefcase that stood unaccompanied on the pavement, the

small green car that was parked obliquely, and the bus standing a few meters farther away. The bus had its hazard lights on. Between the two police cars, ambulance, bicycle, the green car and the bus lay the reason why everyone stood there inert. There was not anything they could do now! On one of the two stretchers I saw nothing; while on the other a reddish, onion-scale coloured blanket covered someone whose mode of reference was permanently changed by Death – from "I am" he had become "He was". I was certain he was dead, although the whole body was covered by the blanket, except the pair of black shoes, pointing vertically. At the other end of the stretcher, where the head was, only a stain of red marked the road, and a few centimetres away there was a mass of white and pink which I first thought to be vomit, but then realised that it was brains smeared with blood.

I recognised neither the bicycle nor the briefcase, and only a few of my acquaintances ride bicycles; yet, something troubled my mind. The bus in front of me had driven away but I merely crept with my car. How much I had wished that a gust of wind would come and lift the blanket only momentarily to give me a glimpse of something recognisable! I needed some indication – a view of his face, colour of his hair ... anything – to ascertain I did not know him. Then I

became aware of the reason for my discomfort – almost everyone I know has a pair of black shoes, similar to those which protruded from that blanket on the stretcher, and were the only source of identity that a human being lay under that blanket.

I do not know how long I lingered there. It could have not been very long, though it felt like eons. It was policeman's stare that made me move. He had not said anything to me. I presume the expression on my face must have conveyed to him the anxiety within me. We had just looked at each other blankly, and then I drove away.

Time passed on. Radio Stockholm kept on warning people about possible traffic jam on Birger Jarlsgatan in its half-hourly traffic report. At 10 O'clock, the radio said that they were temporarily closing down the traffic on Birger Jarlsgatan to do a cleaning job after an accident.

It was then it started – the suffocation. No pain, nor any other discomfort – just a simple rigidity of the chest muscles, followed by a feeling that the air had condensed to a thick cloud. It must have been that eventually reality had taken its grip on me. In my work I see a lot of misery, and am quite used to the unexpected; still, every now and then the unexpected is far more severe than the mind would

accept it. It had happened to me the day Estonia had gone down. Early in the morning I had seen the headlines in Dagens Nyheter about a ship sinking with over eight hundred persons and had put the newspaper away pretending that nothing had happened. It felt ridiculous to believe that such a tragedy could happen so near home. That eight hundred people could drown in our own swimming pool – the Baltic Sea. Such kind of bad news belonged to place far away, where it sufficed to show human sympathy without ever feeling a personal loss. Only later on, much later on, when the radio kept on blasting that Estonia had actually sunk, and people entering my taxi, instead of saying something, kept on avoiding to meet my eyes, as if they were ashamed of simply being alive, the reality, which I had tried to bury in my subconscious, tore off its white shroud and clawed at my cognisance. Then the same suffocating feeling had come and stayed with me for a number of days.

I tried to concentrate on my driving for the rest of the day, but the mind would not cooperate. It kept on wondering whom it was who no longer existed. Was there a little girl somewhere who had asked her father to bring her a bar of candy when he would return home! Was there a boy who would wait in

vain this evening to tell his father how well he had done in a test at school? On the other hand, perhaps the victim was not a family man at all – one of those oddballs who never marry and visit their aged mother once a year on Christmas Eve to dine with her. Would there be an old lady this Christmas Eve sitting alone across a table looking at a vacant chair, filled only with invisible grief and throbbing sorrow. Or ... or ... so many ORs.

Only yesterday a lady passenger of mine had exclaimed loudly “Oh! We were close to having a vacant apartment in the city”, when a cyclist on the road had suddenly changed direction and almost hit my taxi. We had both laughed heartily at her remark.

And now when there probably was a vacant apartment, a bed no one would sleep into, or a chair left empty, it was not funny any longer. The comic of a possible situation was washed away by the mighty tragic wave of a real event.

It is late now, but I do not dare to go to sleep.

I am afraid I might dream – of a pair of black shoes, pointing vertically.

Sain Sucha

Friday, 18 November. 1994.

01.20 a.m.

Sollentuna.

APPREHENSION

It were not their eyes that resembled, but the pupils in their eyes – pupils which in fervour of emotion or acute fear always reduce almost to a spot.

The first pair of eyes belonged to the girl who held a flag in one hand and a newspaper in the other, and in the celebration of the successful atomic test released a cry of joy for an assumed victory; the other eyes were that of Sewada.

My first meeting with Sewada took place in a cultural show. Only a few days earlier she had come to Sweden with a group of Japanese students, and in that evening's program demonstrated how to make and serve tea. The Japanese tea is consumed almost cold, but the flames from Sewada's smile had ignited the feelings in my mind and now they smouldered there slowly. When the formalities were over the gathering broke into small groups and chitchat started. With skilful manoeuvring of my feet and using my left shoulder to edge out the opponents I gradually made my way to the source of my palpitation and then occupied the seat beside her. There the conversation took place in that variety of English which the Britons always find hard to understand, but by the free interpretation of the

speaker's pitch coupled with the vivid imagination of the listeners it was completely comprehensible to the people from other parts of the world. Sewada instructed a lady on the importance of pouring tea in a correct way. As all the Ls were missing in her speech the listener, in spite of generous stretching of her imagination, had enormous difficulty in grasping her meanings. I took advantage of the situation and after filling the gaps left by the absence of Ls explained the contents to that lady.

“How come you understood my English?”

“My karate teacher helped me!”

“What?”

“He used to speak the same kind of English as you do.”

Some of the smile spilled from her eyes and spread on her face, but she remained quiet.

“But after tuition of six months he spoke it clearly, I added.”

“And who was his tutor?”

“I!”

The shine in her eyes deepened for a second, but she did not say anything further.

“Why don't you ask him for help!” The angelic lady gave words to my secret wish, and I blessed her silently for a thousand times.

Sewada looked at me again. This time there was also a question along with that shine in her eyes.

“Quite happily!” I replied to her unsaid question.

In the next few months first she learnt about the English tongue from me, and then we tasted each other's tongue. When our flavours were approved mutually, the proceeding moved ahead. Obviously, she was totally different from all those earnest, courageous damsels who had helped me in the last few years to get rid of my eastern shyness and initiated me into the holds and falls of the western mode of bed wrestling. That is why that urgency of happenings, which is almost an integral part of the new relationships in the modern world, where the apprehension that whatever is to be done must be now otherwise one would miss the chance forever, was missing in our relationship.

On the other hand that day was also to come when to our two souls the nearness of all other earthly bodies was felt undesirable – we had unplugged the telephone, and to restrain the interference of uninvited friends the main door of the apartment was locked from inside. In the course of our need a chicken, along with a bottle of claret, was consumed ravenously. Then the heat inside our bodies made our clothing redundant. When nothing else remained

between the two of us I put my lips on Sewada's and gently touched her body. I felt as if my hands caressed a silken skin.

But what were those lumps under the silken skin? I did not comprehend anything.

I looked at Sewada quite perplexed.

Suddenly waves of fear broke out in her loving eyes and flooded everything. Sewada looked like a refugee who had just crossed a border and heard a harsh, unfriendly voice challenge her trespassing. Hurriedly she pulled the bed sheet over her bare body and drew herself to a corner on the bed. Those wide-open pupils in her eyes were now hardly visible. She attempted to say something but her lips just trembled a few times. I was so shocked by that change in her that I merely glared at her like a fool. Sewada lowered her eyes and then took a few deep breaths. When she addressed me again her voice had a new tone.

“Forgive me Mushy, I think I was so overwhelmed by our love for each other that I had forgotten who I was!”

“Who are you? I asked her.”

After the silence of a few moments she said, “I am a child of that nation who is still being punished for

the doings of our ancestors and the barbarity of the Allied nations.”

I remained silent.

My prolonged silence made her speak again, “I was born about two hundred kilometres from Nagasaki. You are aware of Nagasaki’s past?” Sewada looked at me straight. I nodded in affirmation.

“Everyone knows that thousands of people died within minutes of the detonation of the atom bomb, and many thousands died in the years to come. But how many know this today that we are still dying – by rotting inside our bodies. And will continue to die – tomorrow, day after tomorrow, and the day after ... in decades to come ... perhaps for several hundred years to come. Because no one really knows which changes have taken place in our chromosomes. When our bodies would repair themselves from the damage caused by the nuclear radiation. You know about the economic progress of Japan, but I am that regression of the Japanese people that is alive but dead!”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why!” Sewada looked at me astonished. Don’t you know what these lumps in my body are?

This time I shook my head in negation.

“Mushy! These lumps are cancerous tumours. In me, and in hundred of thousands other young persons whose parents were exposed to the radiation of the atom bomb during the Second World War. Not only I carry these lumps in my body, but they would be there in my children’s bodies and probably their children’s bodies too. What do you think Mushy? Would you like to have children with me?” Thick tears ran on Sewada’s cheeks.

I had just opened my mouth to answer her when she cut me short.

“Don’t say anything. I do not want to listen to your answer, because in the flow of your feeling you might say “Yes”; but I would never agree to give birth to a living dead!”

She kept on speaking after that, but all that could have been said had already been said!

We kept on meeting each other after that incident.

Time passed on. No, no! Actually time had stopped for both of us; only the clock had kept on running.

Then one day when I came home I found on the table a brief letter and the keys to my flat. Sewada had written - Mushy, I am going back to Japan because I know that only there my soul would find its peace. Those few months with you are the finest

memories of my short life. I am thankful that you did not try to give me some false hope or attempt to bind me in a relationship against my wish. I know I shall die in a few months. This life limited to only twenty-two years is rather short, but I have thousand of my Japanese sisters who did not even live for twenty years. I apologise if I ever hurt you. From you I have only received affection and tenderness. Before I bid goodbye I would make a request - If in the future you ever get an opportunity then you must raise your voice against the nuclear weapons. Sayonara!

Sewada

Years passed by. Decades vanished. The truth is that today I have only a faint recollection of Sewada's face. Nevertheless, there is an impression that is permanently etched in my memory - her fear-filled eyes.

And today I had seen two eyes which reminded me of her - completely different face, and different eye shape; but with the same intensity of feelings as she had.

And I was wondering - does this young lady know that the source of her jubilation is in reality a deadly threat not only to her but to her coming generations too? Is that day far away when a misanthrope ruler, dictator, general, fool or an

intellectual – an evil being – would for his personal motive, pretending to honour his flag or excusing to defend his nation, create such circumstances that after the explosion of atomic bombs the surviving girls from the land of Ravi-Chanab and Gunga-Jumna would run away from their beloved ones because, instead of carrying a mother's love, they have cancerous sores in their breasts? Would one day all the lovers in the subcontinent get a letter from each sweetheart in which they are told that their girls have gone away, far away, to mourn the death of their yet unborn babies?

Would from that day onwards every day look like the doomsday?

REDEMPTION

The first time I saw Baba Churanji Lal he was seated behind my father on his motor bike. Like a statue – his eyes containing an ocean of pain, his breathing completely inaudible, not a flicker in his eyelashes or a tremor on his lips – he kept on sitting there dead still even after the bike's engine was cut off. My father had held his hand and helped him across the road to the wooden plank outside Rashid's shop. Then a short conversation took place between Rashid and my father, and Baba Churanji Lal became a resident of Temple Road. Dad never told us who Baba¹⁷ was, where he came from and why. And to ask Dad about anything that he did not want us to know was completely out of question; because in our home although the name of Allah was considered supreme, yet the words of my father were always the final commands.

Actually we did not even know his name. Only as hearsay we had learnt that he had come from India and was very hurt. He was only about forty but somehow people started calling him Baba Churanji Lal. In those days a great number of people were

¹⁷ A title given to old men.

moving about. The news was that daily trains full of human corpses were sent to Lahore Station by the Sikhs from across the border, and every now and then woke up a living soul among those heaps of dead bodies. And from the kind of atrocities those living dead described it appeared that in the future only the followers of Kali would dye their clothes red in Gunga and Jumna, but no pilgrim could ever bathe in those bloody waters to purify his body or soul. That is why the moving in of Baba Churanji Lal in Rashid's shop caused no great surprise. That's another thing that the very first night of his arrival we were all given the fright of our life - the whole day long Baba Churanji Lal sat inert outside Rashid's shop, but when the night settled down and the pale light-bulb in Mheede's tea-shop cast ridiculous threats to the overwhelming darkness, then suddenly it had felt as if a thousand tortured souls from hell had cried in unison behind the doors of Rashid's shop. My mother had dropped the glass of water she held in her hands and grandma had held me tight in her embrace. After that someone, for hours, cursed the whole world, its dwellers, their mothers, sisters and daughter in a language that no decent person would find its words in any dictionary, yet every

man, woman and child knew exactly what those words meant.

That night perished. From its grey ashes arose a brilliant sun. In stark daylight, still quite scared, I looked at that man from our window. He sat outside the shop with a bowed head and stayed there the whole day in the same posture. On my father's order I placed a plate containing some food and bread near him, which he never touched. In the evening I took another plate of food to him and while putting it there hurriedly I had muttered, "Baba Ji, you must eat something, you must!"

After the passage of a few days Baba Churanji Lal had started to interlace chairs at Rashid's Shop. He must have been an expert on that job, because in his nimble fingers the bamboo and cane sticks would lose their stripes the way a mistress, after a prolonged separation, longs in her lover's embrace to be relieved of her outer coverings. His fingers holding thin cane stripes would dance on the surface of the wooden frame, and gradually emerged a fine seat in that place. For me to see him weave was like watching a magician at work and I would observe him for long spells.

I had, so far, never seen him talk to anyone.

The whole day long Baba Churanji Lal interlaced the chairs, but at night when he shut himself behind the shop's doors and darkness would settle down in the town to spend the night, then a storm of profanity would rise from that shop's and drench the whole area. If anybody in our part of the town had the notion that one could compose absolute profanities only in Punjabi then just in a few days they were all thoroughly acquainted with this previously unknown treasure of Urdu etiquette. That perfectly silent figure in daylight would, in the cover of night's veil, establish such filthy and profane relations with the cruel of our world that in the words of my grandma, "Dear boy! Anyone who has seen his sons killed right before his eyes, and whose daughters had been abducted by the Sikhs cannot be accused of using sordid language. It is not Baba who says these words, but the ghost of rage and vengeance howls in him." How grandma learnt about all those details no one knew anything; but there was no doubt that a ghost screamed from the mouth of Baba Churanji Lal - because in his voice, after the words had conveyed all of their meanings, there remained a snarl and pain which would trespass the boundaries of cognition and spread its dread in the subconscious. I am certain that if Baba Churanji Lal's voice did not carry that

rage and bitterness in it he would have told to move on from Rashid's shop; but his swearing was considered to be a collective reaction and protest against the atrocities committed during that partition of 1947 that no one even asked him why he abused the whole world.

And how anyone could have asked him anything – he had never uttered a single word in the daylight! Still, there circulated lots of stories about his identity and from where in India he had come; yet, the plain truth was that he had come on my father's motorbike, and my father had not told anything to anyone about Baba.

Time elapsed. I grew older and Baba Churanji Lal became old, but one thing that did not change was his nightly outburst of profanities.

Then one night when darkness covered the town with his sheath of black the people around Temple Road must have waited that any moment Baba's scream would slice through that overwhelming stillness and put up hell of a fight with the warriors of gloom. The whole night I turned sides in my bed waiting in vain for that battle, and early in the morning I asked Rashid about Baba's health.

“What can happen to Baba’s health? He has such a furnace of hate burning in him that not even germs dare come close to him!”

“Then why was it so quiet last night?” I asked anxiously.

“He went away from here.”

“Went away!”

“Yes sir, a new police officer has been posted here and he told Baba to pack his things and then moved him to the shantytown near Icchra.”

I wanted so badly to ask my father for the return of Baba, but as usual could not convey to him my feelings. My father did not show any surprise on the disappearance of Baba. It was quite probable that the police officer had moved Baba on my father's recommendation!

Baba went away, but his memory stayed with me. How many times had I not wished to ask him where had he come from, what had happened to him, who were those who ...! In those years I had sat close to him innumerable times and he had continued to weave his chairs quite oblivious of my presence. Had I inquired, he might have answered! But even during that quietness there flew a stream of communication between us. Without any confirmation I can say that he liked that I sat by him. For his stranded soul I was

like a ship which every now and then invited him to sail away from that isle of isolation. It is another thing that he never accepted my invitation.

Then one day I also went away ... not towards Icchra, but a long distance away from it ... towards London. From London I moved on towards here and there, and then finally settled in Sweden.

Years rushed by. Press and TV invited us to the spectacle of enflamed children from Vietnam, and headless bodies from Congo. From Cambodia came pictures of fields littered with bare human skeletons, while legions of Iraqi youth were buried alive by the UN peace forces. And from Bosnia came hordes of orphan children as refugees.

Whenever, wherever I heard a painful story it somehow rekindled the faded memory of Baba Churanji Lal.

During this period, I had also succeeded in getting a job as a doctor after I had studied psychiatry from various teachers and books. Once when I was on night duty I was to meet a patient from Bosnia. When I reached the hospital I went straight to the nurse on duty to learn something about that patient. "He does not say a word. Just sits there with his head bowed." Karin told me.

"He must have said something?"

“Not a word. The only change perceptible in him is the variable flow of tears from his eyes.”

In the observation room an old man was posing to be a statue. I tried to communicate with him in different ways but he kept on sitting there with a bowed head. After a while, I gave up and left him alone with a hope that he might decide to communicate on his own. In the adjacent room Karin and I were talking about different patients when a horrid scream came from the other room. Karin dropped the file from her hand and I had wished grandma were there to hide me in her embrace.

My face must have looked rather pale because Karin asked me, “Are you feeling well, doctor?”

I pulled a forced smile on my face, and hurriedly went to the other room where the old man cursed the world in his screams. In his hand he held a photograph, which showed about seven people lying on the floor, who were reclaimed by their Creator - though from the blood on their bodies it appeared that they had not accepted that reunion willingly, but someone had forced them to it against their wish.

The nurses put the old man to sleep by giving him an injection; but who were to put Baba Churanji Lal to sleep who had woken up in my memory!

The picture in the hand of the victim from Bosnia had to some extent told me what had happened to him; but who knew something about the pictures in the mind of that victim from India.

Sleeplessness of a couple of nights sent me back to Lahore after years. The first few days were spent in the obligatory socialisation. Then I went to the place where all the information from Mozang from the last fifty years could have been safely stored - Mheede's Teashop.

Yahqoo recognised me with the very first glance. We embraced each other and then spent next few minutes holding hands, watching each other with tearful eyes. Our lips moved after our hearts were satisfied - I learnt that nearly all my friends who had played kabbadi and cricket with me on Temple Road had either died, left town or were in jail for some crime. Without asking me Yahqoo made my favourite tea and served it with butter and bun. After some loose talk I asked Yahqoo, "Do you remember Baba Churanji Lal, where is his grave?"

"Grave of that crazy one! He must stop breathing first before he gets a grave."

"Is he still alive?" the words rushed from my tongue.

“Must be about ninety, but he still comes here every now and then for a cup of tea.”

“Know anything what had happened to him?”

“If he were to speak then one could know. He speaks only at night, and even that from behind the hut’s curtain. And that what he says I am certain you still remember it!”

“Still in the same manner?”

“Worse than that!” answered Yahqoo.

“Does he still live in the same hut?”

“Yes, among the same huts, but not in the same place.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Brother! When the people with money run short of space, then they occupy the land in the shanty areas and push the poor a bit further away from the town.”

“Where does he live now?”

“Beyond Icchra, on the other side of Model Town there is a shantytown. I have heard he lives there. As no one ever writes these people a letter they do not have a postal address. But if you were to go there at night it will be easier for you to locate his hut.”

“Baba’s voice would draw me to it!” I remarked.

That night I hired a taxi to reach that area. As I stepped out of the car I told the driver to wait for me.

“Sir, if you don't mind I would rather accompany you! It is not a safe place,” he said that while he looked around quite worriedly.

We left the car by the roadside. I was still measuring the degree of pollution in the atmosphere, when I heard a particular tone replete with dirty language. My feet took the direction of that voice. We stopped just outside the hut. Baba Churanji Lal was dedicated to defiling the virtue of everyone's mother; sisters; elders and youth from the past, present and coming generations. Although the passage of time had added an audible tremble to his timbre; yet, the daily chanting of profanities had also made his delivery so perfect that each obscenity spread its own vile resonance in the listener's ears. I looked around to fix the location of that hut, and then turned towards the taxi. The taxi driver and I silently entered the car and seated us; but instead of starting the engine he sat there still for a while and then said to me, “Sir, if all you wanted was to listen to this filth then why travel so far to this slum. We could have gone to the town centre ... the whole public swears at our politicians, whether they lick Madam Bhutto's feet or tickle her opponent Butt Sahib's balls, in the same language.”

I did not answer him; although I was certain that the reason for public's outburst must be as genuine as Baba's hurt – a couple of days wandering in the city had taught me a lot!

The next day it was very pleasant. I reached Baba Churanji Lal's hut about ten. Completely grey hair and a mass of wrinkles on a skeleton sat on a mat in the sun outside the hut. I placed myself about a metre from him in my old peculiar posture. Some curious children looked at us with smiling eyes. Noise abounded around us, but between we two only silence prevailed.

“You have also added silver strands to your hair!” After about fifty years I heard Baba's voice in broad daylight.

I looked at him in sheer amazement.

“Don't be surprised that I recognised you Ghugoo Mian, no one else has ever sat close to me in the same manner as you do.” Baba had addressed me in my nickname from my childhood.

I remained quiet, but it appeared that he was reading my thoughts, and said, “Today you have not come here to see me weave a chair?” His water-filled eyes studied me thoroughly.

“Baba Ji¹⁸ ...”

“Say Baba Churanji Lal ... you are the one who gave me that name.” Baba disclosed my heart’s secret to me.

“Baba Ji!” This time I had added reverence to my tone.

“Yes?”

“Since my childhood I have carried a bundle of questions in my mind, and only you can help me get rid of it”

A prolonged silence enveloped us. He must have been deciding how much he would speak that day! Then he took a deep breath, nodded a few times and said, “All right, go ahead.”

“Who are you, where did you come from and what had happened to you?”

“If you were to ask me these questions one by one then maybe I would give you more satisfactory answers.”

“Tell me all that you remember ...”

“My memory is that treasure which I have never shared with anyone else! So ask me, I remember everything.”

“Where in India did you come from?”

“India! I did not come from India.”

¹⁸ Addition to a name showing respect.

“What ...???”

“I did not come from India. I used to live in a part of Lahore called Ram Ghurrh.”

Thousand and one questions jumped in my mind, but not a single one would come to my tongue!

“Why have you become so quiet, Ghugoo Mian?”

“Who told you my name was Ghugoo?”

“Krishan.”

“Krishan?”

“Yes, Krishan. Don’t you remember Krishan? He used to take you to school on his bicycle every morning.”

In my memory developed a faint picture of a shadow on a cycle. Behind that shadow sat a much smaller shadow. The smaller shadow could have been me!

“I am Krishan’s father.” A voice tried to relieve me from the clutches of old memories.

“What happened to Krishan?” At random, question had started to flow from me.

“He was sacrificed!”

“Sacrificed to whom, Baba Ji?”

“To the good Lord. The good Lord gives us life; He is the one who claims it!”

“How come?”

“I have some vague recollection. It was so noisy that day ... there was a crowd in front of our house and so many strange voices filled the air. My younger son, Mohan, and I were standing in the midst of a crowd when Inspector Sahib came there on his motorbike, with Krishan sitting behind him. “Hurry up; I have come to fetch you!” He had said as soon as he saw Mohan and me.”

“Where will you take them Inspector Sahib, now they will stay here forever!” a thunderous voice had roared.

Then they pulled away Krishan from the motorbike. Mohan was also pushed down.

“These boys are our own!” Inspector Sahib had shouted at them.

“If you are such a sympathetic soul then go across the border and show you sympathy for those who have the same names as we, Inspector!”

“Finish these Hindus!” Another voice had roared.

“These boys are our own!” Inspector Sahib had yelled again but his voice was overwhelmed by much louder cries.

“Krishan and Mohan were slain before your eyes?”

“Must have been! Probably my ears heard them cry and eyes saw all that, but my memory has no clear picture of it. I was totally mesmerised by the

figure in the white dress – his face brilliant, eyes full of sparkle and a steel dagger shining in his hand! It felt as if Lord Shiva had come down to us disguised as a villain with an army of mercenaries. How He raised his hand with the dagger, then the hand struck downwards, a soft thud would come and crimson drops added more colour to His attire. It appeared as if it rained blood. How with each thud, blood splashed and the lustre of his eyes increased. How glittering white were his teeth! I have never understood why Lord Shiva and his companions shouted “Allah Akbar!” and “Ali Haider”¹⁹. I did not understand it that day either!”

Baba was suddenly lost in a world from the past.

“Didn’t my father do anything?” I tried to bring Baba back to the present.

“What could Inspector Ji do? There was one knife on his throat and the other pointing towards his ribs. His lips were trembling but no sound would come out of them.”

“Then?”

“Then what, that was that! When everything turned red the people started to disappear. “Why don’t you accept me as sacrifice, O’ Lord? You have

¹⁹ Outcries by Muslims during a fight or a strenuous situation. Lexical meaning are Allah is great and Ali is brave (lion).

accepted both of my sons, why not me?" I had begged."

Suddenly someone had kicked at my ribs and said, "We are leaving you alive, you old bastard, so that you may go across Wahga border and tell the bloody Indians that they are not dealing with helpless women!"

Thereafter, Inspector Sahib on his motorbike and I on my knees were left there.

After a while Inspector Sahib came off his bike and said to me, "Ram Das, leave these unfortunate ones here and come with me to my part of Lahore."

"Why would I like to live now? Why did they not sacrifice me?" I had asked weeping.

After a short silence he had said, "The only reason I can think of is that only you can redeem us now, Ram Das."

"Your redemption in my hands, Inspector Sahib! Do you want me to pray for all of you?" Still on my knees I had asked him.

"No, Ram Das, the time for praying is over!"

Then he had lowered his eyes and whispered, "As long as you breathe, wherever you live, curse us. Damn us all!"

RAINBOW

Outside it was so pitch dark that even cats must have been longing for some moonlight.

Lying there on the bed she brought her both palms near her face and tried to see them but she saw nothing; until they came so close to her that she could feel their warmth on her cheeks. Then she gently touched one arm with the fingers of the other and slowly moved them to and fro. Heat waves went right through her whole body, and then feeling shy she hid her face with both hands. "Would he touch me the same way?" Suddenly, quite embarrassed, she looked around in the room to see if someone was watching her. Then she burst into laughter on her own embarrassment. She was all by herself in that room, and even if someone else were there then what that person would see in that total darkness! Once again, those waves enveloped her. And after that the very thought of his nearness induced an intoxication in her being; every fibre in her body was now aching tenderly.

In that state of inebriation she saw violets swaying by the riverside. How, whenever harsh wind would assail them, they laid themselves on the ground and after the wind had consumed her strength they lifted

their heads, paused for a moment, as if to see if a new assault was on its way, and then resumed their dance. I would also be like them! She told herself. If he ever showed temper I would take the character of violets and let the storm pass over, and when his temper subsides I would, like these flowers, mellow his heart. Suddenly she had the urge to rush out and lay herself among the violets, when the lightning struck and she woke up from her dreaming. She started to count so that she would know the proximity of the lightning clouds by the sound of thunder. When no thunder came she felt relieved that those clouds were not that dangerous.

In a short while, it will be dawn, she thought. With that the blackbird's song and images of newly showered blueberries dancing to the puffs of playful wind arose in her mind. How she loved the indigo! And this indigo colour flashes only during these rainy months, and what kind of spectacle accompanies it – blackbird calls from here, while cuckoo replies her from there; if the pouring rain reminds of Malhar²⁰, then water drops falling from the leaves imitate tabla drums; here one serves a glass of orange squash, there one sits and slowly sucks

²⁰ Malhar -- a musical composition, raga, associated with the rainy season in India.

juice from a mango! Suddenly she realised that her mouth watered. Thinking of mangoes she had been sucking her own tongue, or was it his tongue! That very thought almost choked her. Very slowly she removed the cold sweat from her forehead with her palm, and then tried to catch her breath.

How deep blue is the sky during monsoons! It appears as if after it has been washed someone dipped it in an azure bath and just before spreading it for drying scattered millions of tiny twinkling pearls on it. But today neither one could see the blue sheet nor those tiny pearls; only a blanket of thick, dark clouds. Yet, if she were to go to the river later on she could watch the kingfisher diving for the fish. But how would she go out today? She heard her own laughter. Quickly she put her hand on her mouth. If mother heard me in the adjacent room what would she say? She asked herself. The same as always: "O' girlie, don't indulge in sweet-dreaming when awake, else you will have nightmares when you sleep." Then she had a good laugh at her mother, and afterwards whispered, "Mum, if I stopped day-dreaming then that explosion which pacifies me in the blue hour, followed by this sweet-ache in whole of my body, would never come!"

No, no! The reign of the blue hour is over. Soon her friends would come, and they would sit in the swing under the lush green mango and Jaman trees. How verdant is our courtyard; and all those chirping green parrots. She had never really made up her mind if she hated or loved those parrots. There was no doubt that she intensely disliked their nibbling at the fruits, and the wastage. And those monsters with their green plumage were totally invisible in those leafy trees. Only their non-stop teen-teen disclosed their presence. But if they were to disappear for a day or two for whatever reason, then the overwhelming silence also cast an unbearable stillness all around! She was still enjoying her imaginary swing rides when it occurred to her that she would not be able to go out to the courtyard. Forget about these swings, it's time to bid farewell to the greenery of this house and join him in the open fields.

And immediately her eyes were filled with yellow sheets of rape opening in the green fields. This image had come with such intensity that she could smell the mustard flowers in her nostrils; then, she turned her head and looked at the thick curtain covering the window. In that darkness she saw no curtain, but she knew exactly where it was - three steps straight ahead from the right side of her bed and the curtain

would have been in her hand. But what is the point in pulling it away now? She continued her soliloquy. The clouds must break and sun arise so that its yellow morning-rays would bathe all its worshipers. She had also been wearing yellow clothes since yesterday! I wonder what colour are his clothes today? Men do not dress in yellow, and those who do they never touch a virgin's hand! No, no! He mustn't wear yellow, it is enough that I do. On the other hand, a garland of marigolds would sure add to his attire. Her whole room now filled with the fragrance of marigolds. Am I going crazy? She asked herself. Sometimes I smell mustard flowers and now it is marigolds! And the truth is that I am still enclosed in my room. Let us wash first, and then I would also use a flower-band in my hair.

Perhaps the rain had abated, because suddenly the water music from outside subsided a bit. Look, she addressed the clouds, this evening they are going to add sendur²¹ to my hair, so be careful! If you do any mischief then I would have you so badly beaten by grandfather's stick that you would have to flee behind the mountains to shed your tears over there. On her head she found the partition of her hair with

²¹ Sendur -- Minium or red lead used by married women Hindu women in the partition of their hair.

her finger and felt the bare skin underneath. After today it shall be no longer brown! As long as her husband lives she would wear orange-red powder in that partition. And how she had wished that she would wear it forever! She knew that she would not be able to see the henna's orange coloured flowers on her palms, that is why she let the palms embrace her face and the flowers kissed her. In a few moments only her hands turned burning hot, but she did not remove them. "These hands are not mine, but his!" How could she take them away?

She was certain that her smouldering cheeks were now red like tulips. She was breathing fast. Those burning puffs from her inside escaped her lips and began to overwhelm her whole being. She tried to wet her lips with her tongue; but how could a dry tongue add comfort to the parched flesh? She swept her tongue on her lips again. Her panting was also playing havoc with her chest. She felt as if she was wearing her younger sister's blouse and if she did not control that storm the buttons from that blouse would fly away. With great effort she lifted her hands and placed them on her stomach to pacify the storm inside her; but she felt as if someone had lifted glowing embers from her cheeks and placed them

near her loins. All around her, in and outside her body, it was burning. Everywhere it was red!

Then she thought that her bed had started to swirl – slowly everything else also began to spin... violets left their stalks and fastened into the indigo plants ... the sky bent down and swept those plants in her blue sheet ... all at once green twigs and leaves broke through that blue and were laden with yellow flowers in no time. How quickly everything was happening! Her muscles were pulled hard and waves of some turbulent sea undulated inside her. Desperately she bit her under lip to turn the tide of emotions; but it was no longer in her power to the stem that flood. She thought she was falling off a mountain. At the feet of the mountain she saw a furious orange river. She held the bed with both hands to avoid drowning. She pressed her lips so hard that she believed crimson blood would spurt out of them. Everything was now spinning. Violets, hibiscus flowers, sweet peas, mustard flowers, sunflowers, roses, safflowers, tulips and only goodness knows what other kind of flowers and bushes were whirling around her ... whirls, and more whirls.

Then, a cry, almost a loud sob, broke out of her lips. Then more sobs ... first violent, then gentle ...

turning into whispers ... and more whispers! She was completely wet now ... as if she had just taken a swim in the ocean of desire! Then all around her things quietened down, slowly coming to a standstill. The darkness in her was gone. It was bright everywhere... pure radiance... and how absolutely white it was!

Reflections

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