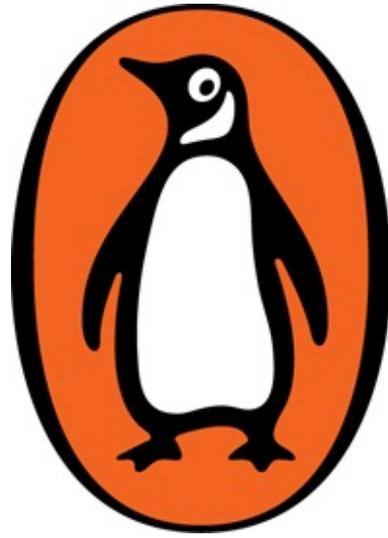


A born storyteller'
NEW
STATESMAN

Bapsi
Sidhwa
Their
Language
of
Love



Bapsi Sidhwa

THEIR LANGUAGE OF LOVE



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*For my son Khodadad Kermani (Koko)
and the childhood years lost to us both*



A Gentlemanly War

It was 1965, and Pakistan and India were at war. The bone of contention was, as always, Kashmir.

The Pakistan army—one seventh the size of the Indian army and beleaguered on more fronts than it could handle—had concentrated on the Kashmir and Sialkot fronts. Within a day of the onset of the war it was rumoured that the Indian forces had crossed the border into Pakistan at Wagah, only sixteen miles from Lahore.

The Indian army had, in fact, advanced to a wide canal inside the border so easily that they had come smack-up against a psychological barrier: they did not believe that Lahore was left virtually unprotected. Certain that a cleverly camouflaged trap was waiting to be sprung—and calculating that a strategic retreat would be disastrously slowed by the narrow bridge across the canal—the Indians had brought their infantry, three-tonners and tanks to a precipitate halt.

The rumour of the Indian army's advance percolated with so much insistence that we guessed it was at least partially true. We were confident though that Lahore, a thriving metropolis of eight million, would never be left unprotected. People like us—perhaps because we belong to a class privileged by some wealth, some education; a class linked by a web of friendship or kinship—often find ourselves in the peripheral swells that edge Pakistan's erratic political shores. This marginal connection is expedient. Affected by every shift in the balance of power, vulnerable to each new ideological nuance, this class cannot afford to be distanced from politics.

Our family owns the only brewery in Pakistan. Soon after Partition in 1947, my father (and later my brother), sensible of the politics of Prohibition in an Islamic country, branched also into bottling fruit juices and the manufacturing of glass. When our ancestral wine shop in Lahore—redolent of liquors, whisky and wine that had leaked into jute sacks—was ordered shut during the stricter Prohibition imposed by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977, it was turned into a sad little affair stocked with toilet paper, pickles and lentils.

Towards the end of his office, beset by the riots engineered by powerful opponents, Mr Bhutto had capitulated on many such issues. Ironically, when the religious and political right had earlier accused him of drinking alcohol, he had roared: ‘Yes, I drink ... I drink whisky—but not the blood of the poor!’ And the adoring masses had swept him to electoral victory on such demagogic declamations.

But to trace the fluctuating history of Prohibition, which has existed since the inception of Pakistan, is to track the incursion of religion in the opportunistic politics of the country. That is not what I aim to do. Rather, I want to trace my tenuous connection with Mr Bhutto—the ambience that surrounded him before the crest of hope in our hearts surged him to power, and not our despair at the loss of hope when he was hanged. I want to give my particular (perhaps flawed) view of events as inferred from the currents that intersected our lives with Pakistan’s history, notably the Seventeen Day War, with the compassion that is integral to the human heart.

I first saw Mr Bhutto at the bar of the elite Punjab Club in Lahore. The son of a feudal lord from Sindh, he already had a reputation as a playboy. From the buzz that circulated about him, one knew that he had political aspirations.

On the evening Mr Bhutto was pointed out to me, he sat in the bar of the Punjab Club, leaning against the counter, facing us. His feet resting on the cross-bar of the stool, a casual arm thrown round a bar-buddy, he formed the centre of a convivial group of eager acquaintances. A lick of dark hair marked his bronzed forehead. In a face slightly flushed with drink, his eyes shone with amber light. Confident, debonair, aware of all the stares drawn to him, he appeared marked for success.

I next saw him, after a lapse of about three years, under entirely different circumstances, at the Brewery Lodge in Rawalpindi. It was during the 1965 War. Mr Bhutto was, by this time, the ‘brilliant’ young Foreign Minister in General Ayub Khan’s Martial Law Cabinet.

General Ayub Khan had requisitioned the Brewery Lodge, our residence in Rawalpindi, for State use when he shifted the capital of Pakistan from Karachi to Islamabad. This was after my father died, during the first Martial Law. That was before the terror inspired by the military rulers had been accommodated by the cosy nepotism and escalating corruption that were to follow. When served with the Requisition Notice, my brother Rustom, who was barely twenty-two and not yet married, discreetly removed himself and his belongings across the narrow strip of road to Vine Cottage, one of the three identical houses reserved for subordinate executives.

In 1965 Islamabad was still a gentle roll of stubby olive brush in the Margalla Hills, a frill at the base of the Himalayas. Constantinos Doxiadis, the Greek city planner, had mapped out Constitution Avenue, the imposing route to the Secretariat. The area to the East was staked out for the Foreign Missions. The design of President House and the

Secretariat were entrusted to the American architect Edward Stone. Construction had already started on lesser government buildings.

In the meantime Rawalpindi—or Pindi, as Islamabad’s twin city is also called—became the interim seat of the Military Government.

The main Brewery bungalow, despite the unassuming ‘Lodge’ ensconced in its name, was a lofty-ceilinged colonial mansion entirely befitting the industrial barons of the British Raj who initially inhabited it.

It was the third day of the war. The theatre of war had shifted south to the Punjab plains. The pounding of shells inside the Pakistan border near Batapur—only eleven miles as the crow flies from our house in Lahore—had turned us into startled insomniacs. Trenches were dug in the back lawn, but the agitated snakes that suddenly glistened in the freshly gouged bunkers were more lethal than the phantom shapes of Indian bombers gliding overhead.

That night we forgot to take our infant daughter Parizad from her cot when the sirens sounded for the third time. Like alert shadows, we sat in wicker chairs on a side lawn in the pin-drop silence. There were no lights even in the congested area around Gulberg Market next to our house. It was only when an airplane suddenly loomed directly above us, its lowering span blotting out the stars that I realized the baby was not with us. With an alarmed cry, mortified by my negligence, I ran into the house to snatch my daughter from her cot.

Six-year-old Feroza was asleep by the time the all-clear siren sounded an hour later and Cyrus and I carried the children inside. The minute his head touched the pillow, Cyrus was snoring. I slept fitfully.

The next morning, as we were having tea on the veranda, I told Cyrus, ‘If you don’t want to go, don’t! I’m taking the children to Pindi.’

‘Have you seen a single bomb?’ asked Cyrus, calmly looking up from the steaming tea he was slurping from his saucer.

‘I’m not hanging around to see bombs drop! The area around the Ravi river has been bombed—that’s enough.’

‘Those are rumours—if you believe all the rumours that are flying about you’ll go mad.’

Cyrus moved his chair to get away from a shaft of early sunlight edging into the veranda. His eyes are sometimes grey, sometimes green, and they cannot abide glare. At such times I appreciate my own brown eyes and the thick fringe of downward-sloping eyelashes that protect them.

‘It’s not the bombs I’m so worried about, Janoo,’ I said, using the endearment instead of his name in order to be more effectively persuasive. ‘Once the bridge across the Ravi goes, we’ll be trapped like rats. We won’t be able to get out of Lahore. Have you thought of what’ll happen once the Indian conscripts occupy the city?’ I said, articulating the terror that was increasingly invading my thoughts. ‘Didn’t you hear the pounding of shells at dawn?’ I asked, and in that instant of quiet, we heard a distant thud and then another.

‘Oh my God! They are so close!’ I cried, my hand flying to my chest. Despite the heat I was cold.

Cyrus got out of his chair to stand behind me. Brushing the hair off my forehead, cupping my raised face in his hands, he lightly kissed my forehead. ‘They won’t dare occupy Lahore,’ he said, with smug conviction. ‘Bill Peterson says an American aircraft carrier is already on its way to the Indian Ocean.’

I looked at my husband in astonishment. Lahore is almost a thousand miles inland. What good would an American ship, miles away in the Indian Ocean, do Lahore? Did he lack imagination so utterly? Hadn’t he realized the havoc an occupying army running amok could wreak? What those armed men would do to the women? To Feroza, who was only six and tall for her age? The thought of victory-drunk thugs laying hands on my daughter was unbearable. I shook my head to banish the horrifying images these thoughts conjured up. ‘A lot of good *that* will do us when the thugs rape us in Lahore!’

I was trembling by now.

‘You think I’d let anyone lay a finger on Feroza or you? On your body?’ His voice vibrated with a hard, protective edge. I knew then that he would lay down his life protecting us—but what would his valour amount to in the face of a swarm of sex-crazed men bent on mayhem? Yet, in the sweep of his eyes and the low timbre of his voice, I had seen myself reflected; and the glow from the strength of his feelings spread a reassuring sensual warmth within me and submerged my doubts.

I never thought of myself as beautiful except when he looked at me like this.

I am shy of appearing in the nude. Yet, after our lovemaking, I sometimes slowly rotate before the mirror and imagine my body voluptuously posed on the centrespread in *Playboy* as Cyrus would have it. Propped up against pillows Cyrus gazes at me in the mirror. Then, even the hated bump on my nose enhances the contours of my cheeks and chin and full mouth and I feel confident of my good looks.

‘It’s been a rather gentlemanly war so far,’ Cyrus said, startling me out of my reverie. ‘Hardly any civilian casualties—only officers and conscripts dying.’

Cyrus poured more tea into his saucer, an inward, dreamy expression on his face.

And it struck me again that Cyrus, and not only Cyrus but all the men I knew, had been more exhilarated by the onset of the war than appalled by it. While we women panicked

and visualized the dreaded scenarios our minds conjured up, the menacing atmosphere was electric with excitement for the men. Cyrus and his friends rushed about forming auxiliary groups, oiling shotguns, swapping know-how and the latest news of the Indian advances on various fronts. They shouted at us to stay indoors, and themselves scrambled aboard rooftops to cheer the careening, bullet-spitting fighter jets duelling in the clear blue sky as if they were cheering along hockey matches between India and Pakistan.

‘I don’t care what your Mr Peterson says. He is American, but he’s not God!’ I snapped. ‘You can find out how gentlemanly they are for yourself!’

The next morning, deprived of sleep and in hyper-drive, I flitted about the house in confusion. What did one take at such moments? What dared one leave behind? No item seemed of preeminent importance; neither was any item unimportant. I couldn’t for the life of me think of what to pack. In my distracted state I made a stack of the handwoven silk saris, shot through with gold zari and shoved them into a suitcase. I packed little that was of any practical use.

The car was already loaded. Parizad’s milk bottle and other paraphernalia were in the carry-cot. A flask of boiled water, secured between packages of omelette sandwiches and roast chicken, sat on the empty front seat. Khan, the driver, his wet hair slicked back, stood by to open the car door. He wore a crisply starched shalwar beneath his fashionably long shirt which hung below his knees.

‘You’ll be back soon, I promise you, Jaan,’ Cyrus said, kissing Feroza and then the baby gurgling in my arms.

‘Look after yourself,’ I said, as sudden tears stung my eyes at the thought of abandoning him to the vicissitudes of the war at our doorstep.

‘Please come with us, Janoo,’ I pleaded, in a last-minute effort to make him come with us. ‘We should be together at a time like this—I can’t leave you alone.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t be alone. I’ll look after myself ... Someone needs to protect the house,’ he said, in an almost comical mix of martyrdom and impatience.

And the Godrej steel safe in our bedroom, I thought. It held, besides my jewellery, his precious stock of smuggled Black Label Scotch whisky.

‘Remember to put my jewellery in the bank,’ I said, leaning out of the window as the car began to move.

Half an hour later our little, furiously tooting Mazda jostled amongst the honking, blaring brigade of cars, trucks, scooter-rickshaws and bullock-carts that jammed Durbar Road. The bridge that spanned the river lay a few miles ahead. As we were inching our way past Data Sahib’s shrine, on an impulse I told the driver to turn into the lane that led to it.

Our families have a long-standing relationship with the Patron Saint of Lahore. I've visited the shrine ever since I can remember, first with my mother and later with Cyrus and the children.

People of all faiths flock to the eleventh-century Sufi saint's shrine from all over Pakistan, and before Partition they came from all over northern India. Even now when Sikh and Hindu pilgrims from across the border in India visit the temples and gurdwaras they left behind when they fled Pakistan during Partition, they never fail to pay their respects to the mystic known for his miraculous power to grant wishes.

The driver got out to buy paper bags filled with rose petals and garlands from the flower-bedecked array of lean-tos lining the path to the shrine entrance and handed them to us as we got out of the car. Leaving the driver in charge of the baby asleep in her carry-cot, hanging on to Feroza, I pushed my way through the unusually large crowd visiting the shrine that day. The dust churned up by tramping feet had spread over the whole area and hung in the air like a mist.

As we approached the huge vats of steaming rice by the parking lot, the thick-set man we usually dealt with spotted us. Roughly shoving away the other salesmen, pulling his stained vest down over his massive stomach, he led us to his stall. He slid back the immense copper lid from a vat of aromatic rice for my inspection. It was three quarters full of lightly browned long-grained rice with a smattering of chickpeas. I nodded my approval and also selected a vat of sweetened yellow rice. Feroza and I stood to one side as a rapidly forming line of beggars and villagers, many of them refugees from the war-torn border, held out their shirt-flaps and veils for the ladled rice.

Covering our heads with our dupatta-shawls, carrying the newspaper bags filled with rose petals, we climbed the steep flight of steps that led to the women's entrance to the inner sanctum. The crowd was immense. It must have occurred to others as well to visit the saint's tomb at a time like this, and the air was charged with the fear of the war and the murmur of prayers and supplication as we pushed our way to the enclosed space that contained the saint's grave. 'Allah is merciful,' a woman sighed and other women echoed her words.

We scattered the rose petals on the green cloth and colourful shawls that covered the mound of the grave. I said a short Zoroastrian prayer for our safe journey and, invoking Sarosh Ejud, the Angel of Success Who Protects Mankind With Effective Weapons, bequeathed Cyrus to his care. I also prayed for the safety of our friends, our city and the millions who dwelt in it.

It was dusk by the time we arrived in Rawalpindi. It had taken us eight hours to cover the 175 miles, a distance we normally travelled in half the time. The area around the Brewery, which was on the outskirts of the city, was observing blackout. With our

headlights off, I felt as if we were creeping through a ghost town. There was hardly any traffic.

Abdul, almost invisible in his khaki guard's uniform, was expecting us. He held a dimly lit kerosene lamp and carefully shading the light with his palm, pushed open the guest house gates with his shoulders. Holding the sleeping baby in my arms and shepherding Feroza before me, I followed the gate-keeper through a spooky, unlit hallway into the room we were to occupy. It was pitch black inside and I instinctively groped along the wall to switch on the light. As the anaemic light from a lone bulb cast shadows on the lime-washed walls, Abdul hissed: 'Madam, switch it off!'

I glanced at the jute sacking which covered the windows. 'The light won't get through that,' I said dismissively, intending to put the old retainer in his place and at the same time quell more histrionics—I was too weary to indulge him.

'They don't like it, Madam,' Abdul said, his tone suitably apologetic and conciliatory as he pointed in what I assumed was the direction of the requisitioned Brewery Lodge, its imposing gates diagonally across from ours. 'It is where General Sahib is staying,' he added by way of explanation, and it dawned on me that the Field Marshal had made the Lodge his residence.

Sure enough, a chorus of gruff voices shouted from across the road: 'Shut the light! Shut the bloody light! Do you want us to be bombed?!'

Shaking his head and ruefully saying, 'The military guards are *that* nit-picky ... they won't tolerate the slightest haze,' he leaned across me to turn off the switch.

I had not packed even our toothbrushes, and the next day I drove frantically around Pindi collecting the items the children and I would require for the next few days. My brother Rustom, I discovered, had gone to Abbotabad to fetch our mother. Sarahbai was visiting friends in the hill-town about 100 miles west of Pindi and, caught unawares by the war, had frantically summoned him to drive her back to Pindi. Everyone wanted to be near their kin if they could.

On the second night of our arrival I was shocked awake by the fearsome thunder of an ear-splitting explosion. The windows and doors of our room rattled and a tremor shot through the brick floor beneath my feet as I sprang up. It felt as if the bomb had exploded quite close, at most a few furlongs away, though later we learned it had fallen in the fields beyond Satellite Town, nine miles to the north. I heard glass splinter and shatter elsewhere in the guest house and the tramp of feet as the guard and the awakened servants began moving about the house and compound. There was a great deal of shouting from the sentry box across the road; orders flying back and forth. Within seconds Abdul was knocking on the door, and as I turned on the flashlight to let him in, there was an eerie whizzing sound followed, after what seemed like an age, by a blinding flare of light and an earth-shaking explosion.

I have turned deaf; I can barely hear the children scream. Feroza has groped her way to me and is clinging to my legs in terror. Holding her close and dragging her weight, I clumsily grope my way to the baby's cot. I am certain the bomb has dropped in our compound or on Vine Cottage next door. Most likely, the Brewery is flattened.

As it happened, the bomb destroyed several houses in Satellite Town, a scant nine miles from our house.

'Is Sethji back?' I shout hysterically, using the appellation the servants use for my brother.

No.

I angrily assume my brother has been seduced by the tranquility of the tree-spangled hills—not to mention the cossetting of Sarahbai's dotting friends—to spend another day in Abbotabad. The leaves must be starting to turn. My brother and my mother should be with us, I think with a proprietary sense of angst. Don't they know we are in Pindi, and Pindi is being bombed? I carry the shrieking baby to my bed, stroking her and Feroza and whispering calming words, soothe them to fitful sleep. Propped up on pillows I sit awake all night long. I must have dozed off because close to dawn I am awakened by another crashing explosion; but this time, thankfully, it seems further away; somewhere in the Margalla hills perhaps.

Cyrus calls the next morning. He sounds exultant and excited, 'So, did you enjoy all the bombing in Pindi?'

I finally let go of the control I have exercised to keep the children and servants calm, and begin to sob. I shake so much I can barely hold the receiver to my ear.

'What's the matter, Jaan? Are you okay?' Cyrus shouts anxiously, his exultancy sapped.

'Yes....' I say.

'Are the children all right?'

'Yes, yes we are all fine!'

'I told you not to go! The Indian jets dropped bombs but not a single bomb exploded in Lahore!'

'Lahore has Data Sahib's protection,' I say, shakily wiping my nose, vaguely thinking of the aggregate of stories I've heard about the saint's miraculous feats in defending our city. These stories are credited to awe-struck Indian fighter pilots, young Hindus and Sikhs who are said to have seen Data Sahib's disembodied hands pluck the plummeting bombs from the air and gentle them to the ground. I had discounted the stories as a frightened populace's wishful fantasy, and attributed the unexploded bombs found near his shrine, which is close to Ravi Bridge, to poor manufacture. There is not all that much difference

between India and Pakistan—the Indians are as capable of producing defective arsenal as the Pakistanis are.

However, right at this moment, in Pindi, I'm credulous.

'I believe the stories,' I say, speaking with conviction into the phone.

'What ...?' says Cyrus, sounding confused.

'I said—the stories about Data Sahib are true! I believe them ... How else can you explain the unexploded bombs near the bridge? Indian bombs can't all be duds!'

'Zareen, what are you talking about?' Cyrus says, unable to follow my thoughts.

'I know what I'm talking about. Their bombs aren't duds! They damn well explode!' I shout. I know I'm sounding garbled and unreasonable and hysterical, but it's all right—I'd be insane not to be hysterical and I trust Cyrus enough to know that.

'Yes, yes,' says Cyrus, trying to soothe me: 'Of course, the bombs aren't duds ... they exploded didn't they ...? Who's with you? Has Rustom returned?'

'He's still in Abottabad!' I catch the whine in my voice but I cannot help it; I begin to cry helplessly.

'Zareen, you'd better come back. I'm coming to fetch you and the girls.'

'Jana, don't you understand?' I say, speaking between my sobs: 'I can handle the bombs, but I can't bear the thought of an occupying army—of soldiers tramping through our house.'

'No one's going to occupy Lahore,' Cyrus says. 'An Armoured Division is at the border guarding the city.'

It is rumoured that the Indian generals have vowed to toast each other with the finest Scotch at their old pre-Partition haunt, the Gymkhana Club in Lahore, within ten days of the start of the war. It is no idle boast. The Indian army, seven times the size of the Pakistan army, better equipped than Pakistan's, can occupy Lahore with the ease of a knife slicing through cake.

Cyrus knows all this as well as I do, and I'm in no mood to reiterate it. 'You can come to Pindi if you like, Janoo,' I say. 'But I'm not going back with you.'

Late in the afternoon I hear the thud of car doors, the scrape of shoes on gravel and the small commotion attendant on the arrival of my mother and Rustom at Vine Cottage. As I pick up the baby and, Feroza in tow, scurry across the small field of young wheat between the houses I am dimly aware of the image I must present—that of the distraught refugee mother with her babies. The servants are carrying their luggage in. I exchange the requisite hugs and resist the impulse to fall sobbing into my mother's arms. My mother is not the type into whose arms a sobbing woman can impulsively fall; at least, not yet: she

mellows with age. In any event, Feroza has staked her claim and is clamouring to be picked up by her grandmother.

‘What took you so long?’ I complain, trying to control my tearful voice. ‘Didn’t you know I was here? Alone with the children? I needed your support.’ I turn to my brother: ‘Did you *have* to spend another day in Abbotabad at a time like this ... enjoying the scenery while we were being bombed?! We could be dead for all you care!’

Sarahbai looks up from bending over Feroza and I notice the deep lines between her eyes. She looks drained, stricken with remorse. I have not seen her react to me this way before and something catches in my heart. She turns her distraught face to Rustom. His face and ears have reddened and he appears contrite and bewildered. ‘I’m sorry ... I didn’t know you were here,’ he mumbles. Our family is not given to emotional outbursts and my uncharacteristic behaviour has disconcerted him. Rustom is the only one in the family who is light-skinned enough to actually turn red. To break the awkwardness my eruption has created, he turns to Feroza and stiffly bends over her: ‘Are you frightened, Feroza?’ he says, gingerly patting her head. ‘You are a big girl now, you mustn’t be frightened.’ He is uneasy around children.

Feroza’s unambiguous, hazel-eyed stare embarrasses him further. I have seen the effect of that stare on my friends; it’s unnerving. ‘Feroza, run into granny’s room and get me a tissue,’ I say, coming to his rescue.

It is the sixth day of the war. The call is out to contribute to the war effort; to donate money, quilts and clothes for the alarming accumulation of war-widows and village refugees.

The newspapers blazon the amounts donated by various businesses, and two days after their return to Pindi, my brother and I escort our mother on a gallant mission of mercy on behalf of the brewery company.

It is all rather stagey. At nine o’clock on a cool September morning we await the Brewery’s ancient Daimler, a coach-like relic with running-boards, and sporting the Daimler’s signature radiator grill. Bequeathed by the Brewery’s British owners, it is hand-cranked to life and chugged out on special occasions such as this. Mother and I climb into its spacious interior, which smells of boot polish and varnish, our incongruous evening-saris rustling and puffing up with the electricity generated by the friction of the leather cushions against our silks. We avoid touching each other because of the tiny shocks delivered by the static.

Up front, in a dark suit, a white handkerchief blooming in his breast pocket, my brother appears to be composed. I can tell, though, from his scarlet ears, the frequency of his bland social smile and faintly abstracted air, that he is already projecting himself into varying scenarios of his imminent meeting with Field Marshal Ayub Khan and generally

nerving himself for the occasion. He has already met him briefly at two State functions, so he has acquired some substance on which to base his imagined scenarios.

The ancient Daimler crunches up the gravel drive and rumbles past the guard standing to stiff attention at our modest gateway. It humps a long-snouted passage across the strip of road that separates Vine Cottage from an imposing pair of gates set in a tall wall and comes to a jolting halt. To one side of the gates is a brass plaque emblazoned: STATE GUEST HOUSE. Topped with jagged glass and strings of barbed wire, the wall surrounds the estate as far as the eye can see. The gates of Vine Cottage and the State Guest House are diagonally across from each other. Had we walked, even accommodating our pace to Sarahbai's totter in her heels, we would have covered the distance in about ten minutes. But, given the significant nature of the occasion, that was out of the question. The services of the Daimler had to be corralled.

A conscript in khaki uniform and red-crested turban detaches himself from a similarly attired group of military guards. Eyeing our antique vehicle with suspicion, the man saunters up to the driver's window and peers in curiously.

Leaning across the driver and clearing his throat, my brother speaks with the brusque authority he has acquired since our father's death: 'Arrey bhai, General Sahib is expecting us,' he says. And, impatient and on edge, with small, assertive waves of his hand, he peremptorily dismisses the sentry and simultaneously directs him to open the gate.

A callow twenty-one at the time our father died, Rustom had to quickly learn certain mannerisms and modes of speech in order to function in a world ruled by the dominant and the assertive; an environment beset by sharks circling to wrest the Brewery from his control at any lack of vigilance or sign of weakness on his part.

The suspicious sentry, impervious to dismissal or compliance, stands his ground before the snout of our odd-looking transport.

'You should have taken your Dodge,' reprimands our mother, primly pursing her mouth and stroking her ear-lobe, a habit she acquires when she is nervous. She is referring to my brother's year-old Dodge.

The Brewery's grey-bearded driver intervenes: 'We come from *there*, brother.' With a turn of head and flick of hand, he indicates Vine Cottage, and establishes our credentials as worthy neighbours. The sentries cannot have helped but notice the Daimler emerge from the gates of Vine Cottage. Even if they rotate duties and have not seen the ancient vehicle before, they are bound to have seen our driver go in and out of Vine Cottage in the Dodge at least twenty times a day.

Tall, good-looking, impeccably attired and sporting stylish Ray-Bans, my brother steps off the running-board of the Daimler into the sunlight. On seeing him emerge in all his glory, a superior officer wearing earphones leans over the railing of the sentry box above the gate-post and barks an indecipherable order to the sentry.

The conscript immediately stands to attention to salute Rustom, and smartly marches off to help the other guards push open the green-painted gates sporting the battalion's embossed brass insignia held within the arch of two crossed scimitars.

I'd never imagined I'd feel such a perfect stranger riding up the once-familiar drive of the Pindi Brewery estate. Lush with the overhang of trees and flowering creepers, expanses of a fine-bladed variety of American grass and tall, trim hedges, the asphalt drive is flanked by a fresh crust of red earth. Swathes of colour blaze from the flower-beds and bougainvillea as we approach the main mansion, its sandstone facade partially covered with ivy. The long summer is almost over, the lucid air fresh with scents of mown grass, magnolias and jasmine.

Sarahbai, Rustom and I are escorted up a short wide flight of curving steps by an impressively good-looking young major with a baton tucked under his arm. His uniform has a lot of gold and red braid on it and also some medals. He conducts us courteously through a sumptuous chamber furnished with ornate desks, stuffed leather chairs and small tables, with ashtrays and tea-cups waiting to be cleared. The years have not dimmed my memory. I exchange involuntary glances with Rustom and Sarahbai as we recognize each familiar detail with a proprietary sense of surprise and nostalgia. Our eyes are shining too brightly perhaps; the young officer glances at us with a mixture of curiosity and bafflement as we drag our steps, clearly wishing to linger.

The diffused light that filters through the stained-glass windows ignites the teak panelling and parquet floors with a mellow glow; the two windows still feature the oval-shaped poetic likenesses of Wordsworth and Shelley, their names spelled out in calligraphic flourish beneath their dated torsos. The gleaming mahogany furniture, thickly carved and embossed with the shapes of long-legged, oval-bodied birds and bulbous fauna, match the artistry on the panels of the two stately doors.

'This way,' the major says, prompting us to follow him.

'This used to be our home,' says Sarahbai, her voice tinged with pride and a bashful tremor.

The major shifts his eyes from her to Rustom, his raised eyebrows respectfully awaiting an elaboration, should there be one.

Rustom looks acutely embarrassed and perturbed. 'It doesn't matter,' he mumbles.

Holding a hand to his heart and slightly bowing, the major ushers us through a stately door into a large oblong room, and directs us to a table that has to be the stretch-limousine of all tables, ambushed on three sides by tall-backed chairs. He pulls out a plush-covered chair for Sarahbai, and then one for me. The maroon pile is worn at the seat. I can't for the life of me recognize the room: either the dimensions have been altered or my memory is failing me. A slightly uneven row of framed watercolours and charcoal sketches hangs to one side. An ornate mirror decorates the wall behind us, reflecting them.

As soon as the major leaves, my brother, too restive to remain seated, walks over to scrutinize the pictures. As he shifts from one painting to the next, I vaguely recognize them. Sketched, I believe, by British artists during the Raj, they were once distributed in various rooms of the Lodge. Such artefacts of the Empire are quite valuable, and I wonder that my brother did not move them when he removed himself; he was probably too naive to appreciate their value at that time.

Mother and I continue to sit, uncomfortable in our finery, as stiff as the straight-backed chairs upon which we sit. We look quite forlorn at the far end of the long table reflected in the mirror.

Her exuberance tamped by the grand dimensions of the room that renders us so inconsequential, and also, I suspect, tempered to suit the occasion, Sarahbai is solemn. At fifty-five she is still beautiful. Her stylishly cropped hair, partially covered by her sari, is naturally dark, her skin velvety. She has never covered her head except to visit the Fire-Temple, and the petit point border pinned to her hair is one of the perplexing manifestations of her transformation from the sexy young Sarah to the regal Sarahbai. It is as if she is testing out new roles more suitable to her station as a wealthy widow; cautiously switching from fetching-lovely to modest matriarch.

Fingers stiff, Sarahbai's hand presses down on the manila envelope she has placed on the table. Her fingers look unexpectedly stubby with her nails clipped. She wears translucent, anaemic-pink nail polish instead of the brighter colours she wore before her transformation.

The cream-coloured envelope is flamboyantly sealed with congealed red wax and stamped with the company's lion logo. Perennially balanced on one graceful paw, while the other three paws and a tufted tail dance in animated suspension, the tiny embossed lion guards the million-rupee cheque.

Mr Bhutto is suddenly in the room. The Foreign Minister looks slight, stoop-shouldered and abstracted. I barely recognize him from the robust and bronzed young man whose genial presence seemed to fill the Punjab Club bar only three years ago.

Hovering close to the door from which he has emerged, his demeanour makes it clear he is in a tearing hurry.

Hastily pushing back our chairs we move precipitately over the Persian rugs to where he stands, the trodden-upon borders of our saris sagging and brushing the floral patterns on the rugs.

His hair is thinner, his face almost grey. The war is taking its toll.

Mr Bhutto smiles. 'The President is busy in a meeting. He's very sorry he cannot see you. He told me specially to convey his salaams ... What can I do for you, Sethi Sahib?'

My brother leans forward with all the ceremony of a courtier at a Mughul Durbar and mumbles something that sounds like a greeting, and then something appropriate about the gift we bear. His left hand hovering near his solar plexus, his right extended palm upwards, he slightly turns to ceremoniously present our mother.

‘Mrs Sethi would like very much to contribute something towards the war effort ...’ he says, leaving the formally begun sentence dangling.

Her deceased husband’s training standing her in good stead, Sarahbai hands the envelope to Mr Bhutto with equal proportions of grace, modesty and gravity. She enunciates as clearly and solemnly as a child at a school presentation: ‘This is our contribution to the President’s War Fund ... May God bless him and crown his efforts with success.’

Mr Bhutto takes the envelope from her hand with as much courtesy as his rushed state and preoccupation can abide. Raising wry eyebrows at the red lions embossed on the wax, he breaks open the seal and examines the cheque.

‘Thank you Mrs Sethi, this is very generous,’ he says with edifying warmth. Turning to my brother and me he thanks us also. Communicating with a subtle movement of his eyes the complicity powerbrokers and politicians share, his smile dissipating the cynicism implicit in his choice of words, Mr Bhutto says to my brother: ‘I’ll bring it to the Big Man’s notice.’

My brother looks disconcerted ... uncertain and hesitant.

To fortify his message Mr Bhutto bobs his head reassuringly, and adds: ‘Rest assured, he will hear of the Pindi Brewery’s contribution.’

Rustom lowers his eyes. The translucent cartilage of his ears has turned a boyish scarlet, and his left hand is still afloat in the vicinity of his solar plexus. When he raises his eyes to Foreign Minister Bhutto his expression conveys a complex amalgam of petition, gratitude and uncertainty.

I can tell he doesn’t trust the Foreign Minister to convey the message of the Brewery’s largesse to the President with due weight—if at all.

His callow lack of sophistication at finding himself in this predicament is transparent. Mr Bhutto also blushes. ‘Don’t worry,’ he says, his knowing, lopsided smile duplicated in the emphasis and inflection of his tone: ‘I will personally tell Field Marshal Ayub Khan of your contribution ... It is very generous.’

I am acutely embarrassed. My brother might have better disguised his disappointment at having to make do with the foreign minister’s, instead of the President’s, presence that he had been led to expect when he made the appointment. His misgiving and uncertainty are palpable. Mr Bhutto, too, could have been more suave.

But they are both terribly young for their station—Rustom in his mid-twenties, Bhutto not yet forty.

The embarrassed foreign minister prepares to dismiss himself. ‘You’ll excuse me,’ he says. He includes me in his polite, cursory glance, and I can feel the twitch in my lips which makes my smile quiver nervously. ‘We’re very busy,’ the minister spreads his hands, almost apologetic. ‘You know how it is these days ...’ He lifts his shoulders in a slight shrug.

‘Of course, sir. Thank you, sir,’ I hear my brother hastily and obsequiously say.

Sarahbai and I, feeble echoes of his manner and words, in unison also address Mr Bhutto’s slightly stooped, rapidly retreating back with our own ‘Thank you’s’.

Later that evening Sarahbai, who is not inclined to abstraction normally, dreamily says, ‘His eyes were like two stars.’

But that was a phenomenon not unknown to my mother. Sarahbai saw the likeness of stars in many eyes.

Of course all this happened before the end of the Seventeen Day War, before our friend Mr Peterson, a very junior officer at the United States Information Service in Lahore, casually told my husband. ‘You can bring Zareen back ... The war will be over in four days.’

He even told Cyrus the terms under which the ceasefire would take place.

Four days later Field Marshal Ayub Khan went on air to declare a ceasefire, stating exactly the terms described by Mr Peterson.

Well ... If not God, the junior American officer was—so far as Pakistan was concerned—a close approximation.

Years have passed since the war. I have a more realistic and perhaps even cynical perspective on the world. Yet I cannot shrug off certain convictions from that time. I think prescience informed their reckless attitude when my husband and his friends scurried aboard rooftops to watch dog-fights; for, as Cyrus said, it was an uncommonly gentlemanly war. There were hardly any civilian casualties. Young captains, colonels, and even brigadiers, died in disproportionate numbers at the borders on both sides instead.

I cannot believe that the Indian Intelligence did not know that the Lahore front was left defenceless. Even the dullest reconnaissance could determine—from the transparency of a flat landscape shaped by squares of wheat fields, mango groves and mud villages—that battalions could not be concealed in that bucolic space.

What then prevented the Indians from occupying Lahore, sparing it the butchery, rape, and looting that were bound to follow?

Going against the cynical logic of war, flying in the face of its brutal ethos, I believe that the underpinnings of this strange miscalculation was an unacknowledged compassion.

The ties between the two countries—between the two halves of the divided Punjab—of friendship, shared languages, neighbourhoods and customs, were palpable in the stories that filtered through, in the miracles that abounded ...

In the toast that so blessedly failed to be drunk at the Gymkhana Club.





Breaking It Up

A brief but fierce deluge that had followed the dust storm the night before had brought respite from the June heat. As it was, holding the letter in her inert fingers—the obscene photograph having already fluttered to the bedroom floor—Zareen found it hard to breathe.

After a while she became conscious of the servants chattering in the kitchen, the cook laying the table for lunch, and as the initial slam of shock wore off slightly, the news, with its tumult of ramification, sank deeper into her sinking heart. With shaking fingers Zareen dialled the number of her husband's office, and, relieved at the thought of transmitting her anguish, began to cry at the sound of his voice.

‘What is it ... What's the matter?’ Cyrus's panicked voice rang in her ears.

Drawing comfort from his concern Zareen blew her nose, and, with a supreme effort of will, choking on her tears, managed to say: ‘I got a letter from Feroza. She wants to marry a non.’

When Cyrus returned home, he found his wife huddled on their bed beneath the slowly rotating and creaking blades of the ceiling fan, her attractive eyes swollen, her elegant nose red.

Cyrus scanned the letter silently. His eyes automatically focused on the significant sentences: Feroza had met a wonderful boy ... Like her he was also very shy ... She had agreed to marry him. She knew they would be very upset—particularly her grandmother—at the thought of her marrying a non-Parsee ... His parents were Jews ... The religious differences did not matter so much in America ... They had decided to resolve the issue by becoming atheists. ‘Please, please, don't be angry, and please try to make Grandmother understand ... I love you all so much—I won't be able to bear it if you don't accept David.’

David had blue eyes and frivolous gold-streaked longish hair. His image in the photograph struck them as actorishly handsome—phony and insincere, if not sinister. But what upset them both most was the pair of over-developed and muscular thighs which—

bursting from a pair of frayed and patched denim shorts—appeared to their fearful eyes to bulge as obscenely as a goat's.

'You'd better go at once,' Cyrus said. 'He can't even afford a decent pair of pants! The bouncer's a fortune hunter—God knows what he's been up to ...'

The last was an allusion to the imagined assault by those hairy thighs on the citadel of their daughter's virtue.

Thus it was that ten days later, after praying one thousand Yathas and five hundred Ashem Vahoos, jet-lagged and duty-bound, Zareen landed at the Denver airport.

She emerged from Customs, groggily steering her luggage, and right away spotted Feroza. Conspicuous in the thick fence of pink faces, Feroza's dusky face glowed with affection and delight at sighting her mother. A little knot of love and happiness formed round Zareen's heart.

Feroza wore a light brown tank-top, and, as she had expected, no make-up. Her plump, well-formed shoulders and arms were chocolate dark with suntan and her body radiated a buxom brown female vitality. But her most striking feature—even at a distance—was her eyes: a luminous yellow-brown, lighter than her skin or the straight hair falling about her shoulders. Zareen held her breath—her daughter was lovely.

And then Feroza was hugging her and taking her travelling bag from her hand. A nondescript young man in long pants and shirt, crowned by an unsparing crew-cut and wearing rimless glasses, smiled awkwardly and picked up her suitcases.

Feroza said, 'Mum, this is David.'

The little radiation of happiness and love in her heart was nudged aside as Zareen assessed her adversary. The photograph had been misleading. David bore little resemblance to the confident, actorishly handsome image. His shy blue eyes blinked with anxiety to be liked behind the unadorned squares of glass.

'How are you, David?' Zareen said, coolly holding out her hand with the three diamond rings. David, divesting himself of the two heavy suitcases, and hastily wiping his hands on his pants, shook it formally. 'Welcome to America,' he said, and then mumbled something indecipherable.

As they followed David to the little Chevette in the parking lot, Feroza whispered, 'He's had his hair cut; he's all dressed up in long pants for your sake.' She gave her mother a hug. Zareen decided to postpone any thinking on the issue till after she'd had a cup of tea. She glanced at the straight-backed, muscular young man walking ahead with a self-conscious spring to his step, and turning to Feroza only said: 'You've become very dark—your grandmother won't like it. You'd better bleach your face before you come home.'

Throughout the drive Zareen talked about family members and addressed herself exclusively to Feroza. David sat quietly in the back with bits of leftover luggage that could not be crammed into the trunk.

When Zareen stopped talking to gape at the massive skyscrapers that had looked so toy-like from the airplane, David started pointing out landmarks:

‘That’s City Hall. That’s the Denver Philharmonic Center. Can you see where all the glass is? Right there ... that’s the best shopping mall around here. That’s the Museum of Contemporary Arts—it has a good show right now ...’

But once they were past the awesome masonry and glass downtown, Zareen continued directing her remarks at Feroza; and subconsciously registered the orderly passage of the wide paved streets, the tidy row of houses, and the glossy leaves on thickly spreading trees.

Feroza turned into a gravel drive, announcing: ‘Here’s where we live.’ And Zareen realized the ‘we’ included David. She cast a startled glance at her daughter, and Feroza quickly added: ‘Four of us share the house, Mum; David stays in the converted garage. Two other girls, Laura and Shirley, share a room. They didn’t want to be in the way when you came ... you’ll see them tomorrow.’

Zareen regarded the house with raised eyebrows. Coming from a part of the world where houses have thirteen-inch thick brick walls and reinforced concrete roofs, her daughter’s dwelling looked like an oblong shack of wood and cardboard set up to be blown away by the huffing-puffing nursery-rhyme wolf.

But once she stepped inside Zareen was pleasantly surprised by the thickly carpeted interior, and fell in love with the large green fridge and matching dish-washer in the spacious kitchen. She touched the shining surfaces of things with delight, appreciating the materials that could be kept clean so easily without the help of servants. She was quite civil to David, but with an inflection that left him a bit breathless and fumbling as both he and Feroza showed off the house.

Feroza made a pot of tea and after a decent interval David left them to talk. Almost at once Feroza asked: ‘Mum, what do you think of him?’ And she was a little crestfallen when her mother said, ‘It’s too early to tell. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.’

The next day, refreshed by her sleep, Zareen launched what she believed was a mild offensive. She lauded the virtues and earning capacities of the three marriageable Parsee boys in Lahore. Their worthy mothers had expressed ardent desires to make Feroza their daughter-in-law.

Feroza kissed her mother fondly and teased: ‘I think I’m too young to settle down with mothers-in-law. Besides,’ she said, indicating with a shift in her tone that she was serious, ‘David’s mother is really quite sweet.’

This gave Zareen the opening she was looking for. ‘You are too precious. We are not going to throw you away on the first riff-raff that comes your way.’

Feroza’s shining eyes lost a part of their lustre.

‘You know what we do when a proposal is received,’ Zareen continued, ignoring the change in her daughter’s regard, but aware that she must be more guarded in her choice of words. ‘We investigate: What is his background? His standard of living? His family connections?’

A well-connected family conferred advantages that smoothed one’s path through life. What did she know of David’s family connections? His antecedents?

‘What do you mean: antecedents?’

‘His ancestry, his khandan.’

‘Don’t be absurd, Mum,’ Feroza said. ‘If you go about talking of people’s pedigrees the Americans will laugh at you.’

Cut to the quick Zareen plucked a tissue from the box on the kitchen table at which they sat. ‘It’s no laughing matter. You’ll be thrown out of the community! You know what happens to Parsee girls who marry out?’ And then, like a magician conjuring up the inevitable rabbit, proclaimed: ‘They become ten times more religious! Take Perin Powri: like most of you girls she never wore her sudra or kusti. You should see her now that she’s married to a ‘non’. She drapes her sari in the Parsee way with her sudra showing, and her kusti tassels dangle at the back! She misses her connection with community matters ... she’d give anything to be allowed into the Fire Temple.’

‘We’re having a civil marriage; a magistrate will marry us,’ Feroza said. ‘That way I can keep my religion if it matters so much to you ... of course, you know, David and I are atheists.’

‘Unitarians!’ Zareen said, wrinkling her nose disparagingly. ‘You talk of it as if it were a religion! My dear, your magistrate’s marriage will make no difference to the priests. They won’t allow you into the Temple.’ Zareen moved her coffee mug to one side and placing her arms on the table, said: ‘Do you know how hurt and worried we all were when we got your letter? Your father and I couldn’t sleep. Your poor grandmother actually fainted! She told me to beg you on her knees not to marry this boy. You know she adores you; she’ll be heartbroken. You won’t be allowed to attend her funeral rites, or mine, or your father’s!’ She picked out the last tissue and wiped her eyes. ‘Do you know how selfish you are ... thinking only of yourself?’

Zareen blew her nose, and addressed herself to what, next to the thought of her daughter’s outcast status, caused her the most agony. ‘It is not just the case of your marrying a boy; the entire family is involved—all our relationships matter.’ She tried to describe how much added prestige, influence and pleasure their interaction with a new

bunch of Parsee in-laws would bring. ‘You are robbing us of a dimension of joy we have a right to expect. What will you bring to the family if you marry this David? But that doesn’t matter so much ... What matters is your life: it will be so dry. Just husband, wife, and maybe a child—rattling like loose stones in America!’

Feroza who had been in the United States almost two years now, had absorbed a new set of values, and a new way of thinking. She despaired of bridging the distance that suddenly yawned between them—of conveying new thoughts and fresh convictions to her mother. ‘You’ll have to look at things in a different way, Mum. It’s a different culture.’

‘And you’ll have to look at it our way: You can’t just toss your heritage aside like that—it’s in your bones!’

Feroza stared at her mother. Her face had become set in a way that recalled to Zareen the determination and hauteur with which her daughter had once slammed doors and shut herself up in rooms and bathrooms.

‘You’ve always been so stubborn!’ Zareen said angrily. ‘You’ve made up your mind to put us through this thing ... You will disgrace the family!’

‘I’m only getting married—if the family wants to feel disgraced, let them!’

Zareen checked herself: she recalled her husband’s sage advice—she must not push her daughter to rebellion.

‘Darling,’ she pleaded, ‘I can’t bear to see you unhappy.’ She buried her face in her arms and began to sob.

Feroza brushed her lips against her mother’s short, sleek hair, and putting her arms round her cried: ‘I don’t know what to do ... Please don’t cry like this ... It’s just that I love him ...’

Zareen reared up as if an exposed nerve in her tooth had been touched. ‘Love? Love? Love comes after marriage! And only if you marry the right man! Don’t think you can be happy by making us all unhappy.’

‘I think I’ve had about all I can take!’ Feroza said, pushing her chair back noisily.

Zareen suddenly felt so wretchedly alone in this faraway country. ‘I should have listened ... I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it’s done to you ... You’ve become an American brat!’

David, who had entered the kitchen at this point to get some cookies, silently withdrew to brood in his book-lined garage.

‘I don’t know how I’ll face the family,’ Zareen cried. ‘I don’t know what my friends will think!’

‘I don’t care a fuck what they think!’

Zareen glared at her daughter open-mouthed, visibly shaken by the crude violence of the language. 'I never thought that I'd live to hear you speak like this!' she said, wagging her head. With affronted dignity she stood up, and walked from the kitchen with the bearing of a much taller woman.

After a while Feroza followed her into the room they shared and hugged her mother. Zareen's pillow was soaked with tears.

'I'm sorry ... I didn't mean that ...' Feroza said, herself weeping. 'I don't know what came over me.'

Chastened by the storm of emotion they had generated, and the unexpected violence of the words exchanged, each called a frightened, silent truce. Neither brought up the subject for the rest of the evening. David had wisely elected to stay out of their way and had left the house. Although made wretched by his absence, Feroza appreciated it: it was best that she be alone with her mother. They talked late into the night of family matters, of Feroza's progress in her studies, and, carefully circling the subject of marriage, each ventured, gingerly, to mention David. Feroza casually threw in something about David when the opportunity presented itself, and Zareen just as casually tossed up a question or two to show she bore him no ill will and was prepared to be objective.

'David has a wonderful road sense,' Feroza said at one point. 'In fact, he'd love to show you around ... he can explain things much better than any guide.'

'That would be nice,' Zareen said carefully, on a note so tentative that Feroza expected her to continue. She looked at her mother with a touch of surprise, when she didn't, and quickly Zareen said, 'But will he be able to find the time?'

'Of course he will. He's planned the weekend for you.'

Feroza had already mentioned how hard David worked. Besides devoting every moment he could spare to his studies, he held two part-time jobs. 'His father can easily pay his fees, but he won't. He feels David must earn his way through university.'

'Quite right,' Zareen said, approving of the parental decision. 'It will teach him to stand on his own two feet.' It was an attitude Parsee fathers would approve of and encourage. If Zareen were to believe all the allusions slipped in by Feroza, David was a genius, a saint and had a brilliant future in computers.

'He seems like such a nice boy,' Zareen said graciously, and Feroza, delighted by this quantum leap in his favour, hummed as she brushed her teeth. She heard Laura and Shirley move unobtrusively in their room. She saw the light that had come on in David's garage, go out. Hugging her mother goodnight, saying, 'And do let the bugs bite!' she laughed so raucously at her own old joke that it infected the small frame house with her joy, and Shirley and Laura, talking softly in their room, suddenly found themselves giggling about the least little thing. David, who was inclined to bouts of gloom and self-

doubt, found the thunderous cloud that had descended on him after his encounter with Zareen—convinced he had made the worst impression possible—lift somewhat. He smiled in the dark and longed to be with Feroza. He hoped she would slip into his room later. But hugging her pillow in the narrow camp cot next to her mother's bed Feroza blew him an invisible kiss and fell peacefully to sleep.

Zareen, who had to cope with a twelve-hour time difference, was wide awake at two o'clock in the morning. She found the quiet in her strange surroundings eerie, and the opaque glow behind the curtains as the night sky reflected the tireless city lights, disorienting. In Lahore, at this hour, the pitch night would be alive with a cacophony of insect and animal noises or with the thump of the watchman's stick or the shrill note of his whistle. And the population explosion in Pakistan having extended itself also to the bird community, some bird disturbed by a sudden light, or by an animal prowling in the trees, was bound to be twittering, some insomniac rooster crowing.

Covering her eyes and her ears with an old silk sari she kept for the purpose, Zareen summoned the imagined presence of her husband, her caring kinsfolk, and filled the emptiness of her second night in America with their resolute and reassuring chatter. Their voices, trapped in the sari, rustled in her ears: 'Our prayers are with you. Be firm. We must not lose our child.'

By the time she drifted off to sleep at about five in the morning Zareen had glimpsed the rudiments of an idea that had the potential to succeed.

Feroza awoke her mother with a cup of tea. 'It's ten o'clock, Mum. We've planned a lovely Saturday for you.'

Zareen was at once wide awake. Refreshed by her sleep, and subconsciously aware of having spent the night in fruitful endeavour, she was in a happier and more adventurous frame of mind. After all she was in America! The New World beckoned.

They breakfasted at McDonalds and lunched at Benihana, where the Japanese chef performed a fierce ballet with his sharp knives. At night Zareen sank her teeth into a thick slice of medium-rare roast beef and shut her eyes the better to savour it. Never had she tasted the natural flavour of meats, fish and vegetables quite this way—always eating them drowned in delectable concoctions of spices at home.

On Sunday—a day as scintillating and balmy as all the days she was to spend in Denver—they drove along winding roads through greenly rolling country to an abandoned mining town that had flourished during the gold rush.

Guiding her tour with enthusiasm, blossoming beneath the admiring yellow gaze of his beloved and the interest shown by the sophisticated woman in a sari, David gave Zareen her first taste of the history of the land. So tied-up and tangled the day before, his tongue became fluent and he brought the Wild West vividly to life. His fumbling movements too were replaced by the surety that was natural to his compact body. And David, who had

despaired in his dark bout of gloom the night before of ever impressing Zareen, was as surprised as she was.

When Feroza, agile in jeans, asked Zareen to climb the steep struts after her into an old steam engine, David tactfully suggested: ‘You’d better not, in that beautiful sari.’

‘At least you have more sense than my daughter,’ Zareen said tartly, and intercepted a look between them—of David’s delight at winning her favour and Feroza’s bemused surprise—and a gesture Zareen was not meant to see: gloating at having scored over Feroza, David cocked a snook, and though Feroza tried to look hurt by the sudden switch in her mother’s allegiance, it was plain to see she was pleased.

Each day the next week Feroza dropped her mother off at one or another of the gleaming shopping malls. To Zareen’s dazzled senses they were pieces of paradise descended from the sky, crammed with all that was most desirable in the world. Shooting off at a tangent she darted between the garment racks and the cosmetics counters—the jewellery, linen, toy, shoe and furniture displays—like a giddy meteorite driven mad by the allure of contending cosmic bodies. Feroza fetched her late in the evening from some designated spot, usually an ice-cream parlour. Eyes glazed by the glory of the goods she had seen and the foods she had tasted, Zareen climbed into the small car with large shopping bags.

The results of her first shopping spree were manifest that very evening. The tops of everything—counters, tables, window sills—sprouted tissue boxes as if she had planted a pastel garden of fragrant Kleenex. She went from tissue box to tissue box plucking tissues with a prodigality that satisfied a deep sensual craving; and chucked them away with an abandon she never thought she could indulge.

Feroza’s dressing table, and bathroom shelves blossomed with a dizzying array of perfume bottles and cosmetics, and the floor level of Feroza’s two long closets rose by at least two feet in a glossy flood of packages containing linen, lamp-shades and gadgets. The hanging spaces were jammed with new blouses, trousers, skirts and jackets.

Feroza discreetly moved her clothes to David’s closet.

Enchanted, Zareen made her daily debut in the kitchen, modelling her new clothes, and was as delighted as a child by the flattering comments from whoever happened to be breakfasting. She spent hours chatting with Laura and Shirley. They ferried her around occasionally when Feroza or David were busy, and she treated them to ice-cream cones, and the junk food she brought home. She bought small gifts for everyone.

David and Feroza, exhilarated by their success, relaxed some of their self-imposed restraints. David held Feroza’s hand; and, glancing at her mother, Feroza permitted it to be held. She rested her head on David’s shoulder when the ride was long, and occasionally hugged him in a sisterly fashion in front of Zareen. Light-headed with delight, David let his hair, and even the stubble on his chin grow. His confidence too blossomed; and with it

the gamin sense of humour that had so touched Zareen in the abandoned mining town when he had gleefully thumbed his nose at Feroza. At such moments, Zareen wished David was Parsee—or that the Zoroastrians permitted conversion to their faith.

Although Shirley and Laura occasionally roamed the house in shorts, David, warned by Feroza, kept his hairy legs modestly concealed. Nosing his way timidly on the surface of another culture, David was entirely guided by Feroza. There were other strictures they prudently continued to observe: neither smoked before Zareen (fire is revered by Zoroastrians), and both were careful not to give the slightest intimation of their more advanced physical intimacies.

And then in the third week of her visit, within three days of each other, arrived a spate of anxious letters from Pakistan recalling Zareen to her mission.

Zareen's sleep became restless. As if prodded by an ominous finger, she sat bolt upright in bed one night, her pulse pounding. She looked at the watch on the side table: it was three o'clock. She felt something was terribly amiss; and with a shock realized Feroza was not in her cot. For the first time Zareen suspected that her daughter probably slept with David. Tying her scarf round her head she began to pray.

Zareen knew what she must do. However useful and appealing David was, however natural to the stimulating and carefree environment, he would deprive her daughter of her faith and her natural element. Like a fish in shallow waters her child would eventually shrivel up.

The next day Feroza and David at once sensed the change in Zareen's mood. They were surprised how fragile their happiness was, how vulnerable they were. Linking Zareen's shift in temper to the bundle of letters that had arrived all together from Pakistan, Feroza wished the mail had been lost. Zareen's face grew more and more solemn as the morning advanced and a little frown appeared between her eyes. Feroza, after a few attempts to rally her mother had failed, became equally solemn. David's misgivings launched their customary attack. Racked by self-loathing and his usual gloomy doubts, he skulked about the garage and the backyard, trying to keep out of everybody's way. There were muffled sounds of an altercation from Laura and Shirley's room. Zareen's ill humour had contaminated the house.

Zareen waited for David to appear in the kitchen. Feeling he was deliberately avoiding her, she strode to the garage door and after ascertaining he was in his room, said, 'David, can you come into the kitchen please? I want to talk to you.'

David's spirits sank lower as he caught that elusive inflection that had so disconcerted him on the day of her arrival. Pulling his legs through his long pants David hurried into the kitchen and sat down before Zareen. She gave him a quick cool smile and dispensing with courtesies said: 'I am most concerned about Feroza. Do you intend to marry her, or are you just having fun?'

David felt the blood rush to his head and cloud his vision. At the same time, his hands meekly lying in his lap, turned numb and cold. 'Of course,' he stammered, 'we want to get married.'

'Please speak for yourself,' Zareen said. 'And let my daughter speak for herself.'

David was too stunned to say anything. He looked at Zareen with an expression of surprise and misery.

'Have you thought about the sacrifice you are demanding of my daughter?'

'I'm not demanding anything ... Feroza does as she pleases—pretty much ...' Then, the slightest edge to his voice, he added: 'She's an adult.'

'An adult? I don't think so,' Zareen said. 'You are both too immature and selfish to qualify as adults ... She doesn't care how much she hurts all of us. I'll tell you something,' Zareen's voice became oracular with foreboding. 'I look into Feroza's future and what do I see? Misery!'

David could not credit his faculties. The transition was too sudden. He could not reconcile the hedonistic shopper, the model swirling girlishly in the kitchen, the enthusiastic tourist and giver of gifts with this aggressive sage frightening him with her doom-booming voice, and a volley of bizarre accusations. 'Could we talk about this later?' he mumbled, tripping over the chair as he got to his feet. 'I'm getting late for classes ...'

'Then go!' Zareen was imperious with scorn. 'But please do think about the sacrifice you are asking of my daughter.'

Feroza, who had retreated to her room and was nervously bracing herself for a quarrel, was not prepared for the ferocity of Zareen's attack—or its dangerous direction—as she marched into the room saying: 'You are both selfish: Thinking of no one else ... And don't think I don't know what you're up to!'

'What am I up to?' At once on her guard, Feroza adopted a haughty tone.

'Ask your conscience that! We have taught you what is wrong and what is right!'

'If you're referring to my virginity, you may relax,' Feroza said attaching umbrage to her haughty voice. 'I'm perhaps the only nineteen-year-old virgin in all America.'

'You were not in your bed at three o'clock this morning! You expect me to believe you?'

'Believe what you want—since you don't trust me!' Feroza said with scathing dignity and stalked out of the room. Zareen followed her furiously. 'Don't you turn your back on me! Look me in the eye!'

They had the house to themselves. In the course of the row, mother and daughter stormed in and out of rooms, raking old quarrels, wrenching open doors and banging them

shut. At the end of an hour, Zareen, trembling with rage and exhaustion, raised her hand threateningly: ‘Don’t think you’re too old to get slapped!’

Feroza moved close to her parent, and caught her hand in a violent gesture of defiance. She stared at Zareen out of savage lynx eyes, her pupils narrowed. Zareen felt she had provoked something dangerous in them both. Tears springing to her eyes she jerked her arm free. She walked to the flimsy entrance door, wrenched it open and stalked out of the house.

Zareen had barely walked a block up the quiet, deserted street when she heard the angry whirr of wheels as Feroza reversed the Chevette out of the drive. A moment later she whizzed past.

Having only two legs to stalk out on, instead of the four wheels on which Feroza had swept by to such dramatic effect, Zareen felt drained and defeated. She turned round slowly and went back to the house.

Zareen sat brooding before the TV, searching her soul. She had acted exactly in a way calculated to push her daughter into the arms of this David. How could she have been so foolish? She was the mother—and yet Feroza had shown more maturity and restraint in her behaviour than she had.

Late in the evening, lying on her bed, Zareen heard Laura and Shirley enter the house. She heard the garage door click: David had returned. Feroza must be with him. Quickly opening a magazine, she waited breathlessly for Feroza. The moments dragged by and she wondered if Feroza would show up at all. She wanted desperately to effect a reconciliation, wipe away the hurt in both their hearts. Feroza did not come. In fact the house was silent, as if it was empty. Tears sprang to Zareen’s eyes and she put the magazine away.

Zareen absently heard the phone ring. A little later Shirley knocked on her open door and shyly, as was her way, said: ‘Feroza called. She asked me to tell you she is spending the night with a friend. She will see you after classes tomorrow.’

She hesitantly stepped into the room. ‘Are you all right? Can I get you anything?’

‘I’m all right dear ...’ Zareen said, her voice thick. ‘Thanks a lot for asking. I’m just a bit tired ... I was waiting for Feroza.’

‘You sound as if you’re heading for a cold,’ Shirley said. ‘Let me get you a glass of warm milk.’

Zareen felt soothed by the attention. She considered Shirley pretty. Shirley had high cheekbones, a small nose and long blond hair. The girls were not a bit like Zareen’s preconceived notions of promiscuous American girls: even if Feroza had made that crack about being the only nineteen-year-old virgin in America. And these pretty girls did not have boys hovering round them—giving their mothers heart attacks.

Zareen stayed home the next day. She sorted out her shopping and packed a suitcase with gifts. It was expected of her—that she should return like a female Santa Claus. She did not see David or either of the girls all day. Feroza returned at about six in the evening, announcing: ‘I’m so hungry!’ She was in high spirits. Zareen turned off the TV and followed her into the kitchen, saying: ‘I’m hungry too. I’ll make us a pora.’

Zareen rinsed a light plastic chopping board and collected the ingredients for the spicy omelette. ‘Only five days to go. By next Tuesday I’ll be in Lahore,’ she remarked, expertly chopping onions and jalapeno peppers.

Feroza looked up from the mail she was reading. ‘Is that all? But you only just got here!’ They could both hear David moving about in the garage.

Zareen sighed heavily and turned to Feroza. Holding the knife, plastered with cilantro and onion, she passed the back of her hand across her forehead in a weary gesture. ‘If you feel you must marry that man ... I have only one request.’

The introduction of the subject was sudden. The capitulation was unexpected. Feroza opened her mouth in an O, and affected a visibly theatrical start. ‘What?’

This is what she loved about Feroza. Even as a child—after the red-faced shouting rages, the surly shut-ins—by the time Feroza emerged from her retreat, all was forgotten and forgiven. She rarely sulked. And even after their epic quarrel the day before, she was not above a little clowning.

‘Get married properly,’ Zareen said. ‘The magistrate’s bit of paper won’t make you feel married. Have a regular wedding ... Don’t deprive us of everything!’

Feroza remained silent and raised questioning eyebrows.

‘If you and David come to Lahore, we will take care of everything.’

‘Don’t you think you might talk to David about it first?’

Zareen shrugged. ‘Then call him.’

David came into the kitchen looking unkempt, unshaven and grim. Feroza noted the gold chain hanging from his neck, the Star of David prominent on his chest. Her mother, by constantly flaunting their religion, had provoked this reaction. The top buttons on his plaid shirt were open, and part of it hung out of his pants. David turned the chair and straddling it, faced Zareen defiantly. Zareen was taken aback by the change in his behaviour and appearance. His breath smelled of beer.

‘Since you two are so determined to get married,’ she said, concealing her nervousness, and striving also to keep her tone light, ‘I want you to grant me a little wish.’

David looked wary. ‘Feroza said you want me to come to Lahore ... to get married?’

‘Oh, not only you ... Your parents, grandparents, uncles. They’ll all be our guests. I want you to have a grand wedding!’

David remained silent and grimly unenthusiastic.

But marriages were the high point in Zareen’s community life—and she was talking about her daughter’s wedding. ‘We’ll have the madasara ceremony first. You will plant a mango; it’s to ensure fertility: “May you have as many children as the tree bears mangoes.” In all ceremonies we mark your foreheads with vermilion, hang garlands round your necks and give you sugar and coconuts—symbols of blessings and good luck.’

David, if anything, looked more wary. Zareen had expected him to at least smile, but his sense of humour had vanished with his courtesy and sensibility. She felt she was seeing him in his true colours; and she remembered her initial reaction to his photograph.

‘After that is done, we break a coconut on your head,’ she said with acid relish.

Feroza laughed. David blinked his eyes and looked profoundly hurt.

‘She’s kidding,’ Feroza said.

‘Then we have the adarnee and engagement. Your family will fill Feroza’s lap with seven saris. Whatever jewellery they plan to give her must be given then. We give our daughters-in-law at least one diamond set. I will give her the diamond and emerald necklace my mother gave me at my wedding.

‘Look, don’t look so worried,’ Zareen said, remarking David’s ghastly pallor and compressed lips. ‘And tell your mother not to worry either—we’ll be like sisters. I’ll help her to choose the saris. We get a good selection in Lahore.’

The more defensive and confused David appeared, the more Zareen felt compelled to talk. Feroza signalled her with her eyes, and when that did not deter her, with gestures of her hands and small amusing protests: ‘Mum, you’ll scare him witless ...’ To David: ‘It’s a lot of fun really!’

‘Of course it’s fun. We’ll give your family clothes: suit-lengths for the men, saris for the women. A gold chain for your mother, a pocket-watch for your father. Look here: If your parents don’t want to do the same, we’ll understand ... But we will fulfil our traditional obligations.’

David was angry. He sat there exuding stubbornness: not mulish balking, but the resistance of an instinct that grasped the significance of the attack. He realized Zareen’s offensive was not personal but communal.

‘We have Jewish customs too; I also belong to an old tradition. My parents are not too happy about the wedding either.’

‘All the better,’ Zareen said promptly. ‘We’ll honour your traditions.’

Zareen felt an exhilarating strength within her, as if something very subtle was directing her brain: a power she could trust but not control.

David felt the subtle force in Zareen undermining everything he stood for: his entire worth as a person. He wasn't sure what it was—perhaps a craftiness older people achieved. His mother would be a better match: he had seen her perform the cultivated rituals of a closed society fending for itself in covert and subliminal ways that were effective, but difficult to pinpoint.

'Next, we come to the wedding ... If there is a wedding,' Zareen said solemnly. 'You'll sit on thrones like royalty, under a canopy of white jasmine. The priests will chant prayers for an hour, and shower you with rice and coconut slivers.'

'I thought you said the priests refused to perform such weddings.' David was sarcastic; a canny prosecutor.

'I know of cases where such marriages have been performed,' Zareen said, as if confessing to knowledge better left concealed. 'That won't make you a Parsee, or solve Feroza's problems with the community, but we'll feel better for it.'

David glanced at Feroza. She looked bewildered, mortified.

'You'll have a wonderful time,' continued Zareen compulsively. 'Every day we'll sing wedding songs, smother you in garlands, and stuff you with sweets.' She talked on and on. 'I can just imagine Feroza in a white Chantilly lace sari with pearls and sequins ...'

David folded his arms on the back of the chair and let his chin rest on them. His eyes glazed over and became glassy.

Laura came into the kitchen in a boyish nightshirt, apologized for interrupting, and withdrew with her cup of coffee.

Zareen said: 'Such decent girls. They don't have boyfriends to distract them from studies ... They seem to know there is a time and place for everything.'

'They don't need boyfriends,' Feroza said complacently. 'They're lesbians.'

Zareen did not immediately register what she heard. She had read the word once or twice in magazines but never heard it pronounced. She became acutely uncomfortable.

'They're lovers,' Feroza said, helpfully.

'But why? They're pretty enough ... They can get droves of boyfriends.'

'They're fed-up. The American boys change their girlfriends every two or three months. Everybody is not like my David. The girls want stable relationships—they can't stand the emotional strain. It takes them months to get over it. As Laura says: "If Shirley gets my juices flowing why should I mess around with boys?" At least they get on with their lives.'

Zareen wanted to throw up. She couldn't tell if Feroza was trying to impress her with her new worldly wisdom or deliberately insulting her. Feroza had been properly brought up to be respectful, sexually innocent and modest. That she could mention such things in her presence shocked Zareen.

Above all Zareen was dismayed at her own innocence: in all the time she had stayed with them she hadn't suspected the truth. What goes-on! Feroza was living with a boy and a couple of lesbians. She wouldn't dare mention it to Cyrus—or anyone. How could she face the disgrace of nurturing a brat who looked her in the eye and brazenly talked about women's juices? She tried not to show how hurt she was.

But Feroza gauged the measure of her pain. Not able to do anything about her mother's attitude the past two days Feroza had helplessly watched David's slowly mounting perplexity, disillusion and anger. And suspecting that Zareen had just destroyed their happiness by her talk about diamonds and saris and superior Parsee ways, Feroza had instinctively hit back. The assaults were too vicious, the hurt too deeply felt, for either to acknowledge her wounds.

Zareen talked abstractedly for a while and then stood up. 'I've kept you long enough, David, you're almost asleep. Well, good night.'

David nodded without looking at her or attempting to sit up. Feroza glanced at him, surprised and reproachful. When Zareen left, David swung himself off the chair and avoiding her anxious and wistful eyes, stretching his back and rubbing his neck, went into his room. Feroza sat at the kitchen table for a long time, her face red and frozen. The tears came slowly.

Zareen placed her purse, a packed canvas carry-all and three bulging shopping bags on the conveyor belt at the airport. After it passed through the screening she collected the hand luggage and turned to look at David and Feroza one last time. David stood in his faded and torn denim shorts, his arms folded, his muscular legs planted like sturdy trees. Standing forlornly by him Feroza looked insecure and uprooted. As Zareen waved and smiled, an ache caught her heart and the stiff muscles in her face trembled. Covering her head with her sari pallu to hide her crumpling face, she quickly turned away.

Once she was airborne Zareen opened her crocodile-skin handbag. Its three sections had three thick wads of tissues. She picked one of each colour and daubed her eyes. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, and gathering fresh tissues held their fragrant softness against her face. Her daughter was resilient—courageous in a way she could never understand ... She would bounce back, just like she always did ...

And so would she, once she was with her family and friends. She needed desperately to be with them—to be assured she had done the right thing.



Ruth and the Hijackers

The pots of ferns Ruth had picked out earlier that morning had just arrived from the nursery. Holding a pot in each hand, the gardener and the cart driver carried the ferns to the rockery. Stepping carefully between the cacti and zinnia plants, Ruth pointed out where each new shrub should go.

It was noon, a time of day that stretched languidly with its promise of lunch served on a trolley outdoors. Afterwards she might lounge in the sun, reading and breathing in the fragrance of mown grass and the profusion of flowers.

Or she might call Shahnaz. If the Brazilian polo team was playing they'd go to the racecourse to watch the semi-finals. Her pulse quickened. Raj Roy might be there. Ruth knew that Parliament was in session and it was a long shot; more a wish than a possibility.

When Bangladesh gained its independence and annexed the Chakma kingdom nestled in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the young Buddhist king had moved to Pakistan. Celebrated and lionized in Pakistan, the charismatic Raja was appointed Ambassador to Brazil. Later, he won a seat in Parliament and was appointed as a Federal Minister for Minorities.

Ruth lost her breath when she first met him. It was at a State banquet in Islamabad. He had looked straight at her, an amber glint of admiration in his slightly tilted eyes and Ruth had felt her legs buckle. Broad-shouldered, regal in his high-necked jacket decorated with royal insignia, Ruth's helpless gaze absorbed an aquiline nose, cleanly etched lips and a firm jaw framed by trim side-burns.

Later that evening he sought her out. Flustered by his attention and the disorientation caused by her rapidly beating heart, Ruth, not knowing how to address him, began by calling him 'Your Highness'.

'My dear, please call me TR—it's short for Raj Tribhuvan Roy.' His British accent and courtly syntax were pleasing. Ruth knew Pakistanis had a penchant for calling people by their initials; but she felt using his initials would pretend to a familiarity she had no right to. She preferred to call him by his name but she kept tripping up on the first name and, to her embarrassment, twice called him Mr Raj Roy. She stammered an apology. 'My dear, you can call me what you like—so long as you keep talking to me.'

Ruth ran into him at other events and soon, taking him at his word, she began calling him Raj. Raj gave Ruth a handsome book in which he traced the historical beginnings of the Chakma kingdom and the circumstances that brought about its demise and his exile. This also ended his glorious year at Brasenose in Oxford. Photographs of splendidly attired, turbaned and bejewelled ancestors and their rambling castles snuggled between hills gave his story ballast and made it vivid. He also traced the advent of Buddhism in his kingdom, and how it was interpreted and practised in Chakma, and explained his personal beliefs.

Ruth was moved by his story. She was touched by the patience with which he answered the naive questions she had about his kingdom and his religion, patiently explaining his views as a practising Buddhist.

Ruth fell in love with him.

Since coming to Lahore Ruth had unexpectedly found herself a bit in love with other men as well, and the discovery of this proclivity in her early forties, disconcerted her. She attributed it to the surfeit of attention she got as a woman and the sexually charged atmosphere a somewhat segregated community created. She had never seen herself as frivolous, let alone promiscuous. Nor had Rick, who accepted her loyalty and love as his due and depended on her level-headed Protestant New England steadfastness. She hadn't expected him to travel as much as he did when they were posted to Pakistan; as head of the South-Asian division of a fertilizer and chemical company he had to travel frequently to India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and other countries in the region. He would return bearing gifts and would be gone in a few days.

The luminous winter sun was directly overhead. The roar of scooter-rickshaws and buses from Airport Road was muted by the flaming thicket of gulmohur and jacaranda trees crowding the compounds of intervening bungalows.

Ruth vaguely registered the far-off drone of an airplane that drifted in and out of her consciousness before it melted into the other noises of the blue day. Chikoo, the dachshund-beagle mix they had inherited from the Altmans, the previous American occupants of the bungalow, decided to shift his attention from the cart-horse parked in the drive to the cart's driver. He dashed forward on his stubby legs and, in a frenzied orgy of growls, attacked the man's muddied, sockless shoes. The cart driver aimed a smart backward kick when Ruth's attention was diverted and Chikoo yelped.

Ruth scowled her displeasure. 'Come here baby ... Come to mama,' she cooed, attempting by her manner to transmit a lesson in compassion towards animals, a quality she found woefully lacking in the general population of Pakistan.

But after licking his kicked rump, *baby* trotted off to once again minister to the rickety ankles of the skeletal mare. The nervous animal shook her head and, snorting into the burlap feedbag hanging from her neck, dispersed a halo of chaff and straw. Then she arched her ragged tail, splayed her feet and let loose an acrid yellow stream.

Chikoo gave a startled yelp and backed off. The gardener swore at the cart driver as if the mare's disgraceful conduct was his fault. The cart driver loosed a stream of Punjabi invective documenting the beast's incestuous liaisons and, waving his ragged shawl, strode across the lawn. He lunged at the mare's bridle but, jerking her neck up in protest, she continued peeing until the swelling rivulet flowed halfway down the cement drive and into the gardenia hedge.

The fur on his neck bristling, Chikoo gingerly sniffed the vapour rising from the liquid. The sweeper, Grace, who had already worked her way up the drive with her spiky reed broom and was languidly raising a small cloud of dust outside the gate, eyed the soiled drive stoically. Grace had four children. Like most poor people in Pakistan she did not know her own age, but Ruth guessed she was around thirty. She had shyly permitted Ruth to drive her to the family-planning clinic where the lady doctor had inserted an IUD in her uterus. That was almost two years ago.

By now the neighbouring servants, attracted by the colourful choice of words and the alarmed cries, were peering over the walls. The bearded cook and Ruth's maid Billo, her frizzy hair and corpulent bosom hastily covered by a shawl, had also emerged to investigate the commotion and add their raised voices to the salvo of reproaches and suggestions. Yanking at the bridle and cursing, the driver turned his creaking cart around. He climbed onto the cart and whipping the animal into a slow, awkward canter, clattered down the drive to park his cart outside the gateway.

Taking care to avoid the rosebushes and pots of chrysanthemums skirting the lawn, the gardener dragged the hose-pipe over the grass and, from a prudent distance, washed the offending liquid into the hedge-trough.

The gardener laid the nozzle in the grass—and in the moment of quiet that followed, Ruth became conscious of the airplane's drone that till then had lurked only on the periphery of her awareness.

The others heard it too. It was suddenly quite loud. Their postures frozen, shading their eyes with their hands, they all looked up into the cloudless sky.

The airplane, appearing lost and rudderless in the blue brilliance of the day, was drifting in an arc that included their house. It melted from view to circle the makeshift airport and moments later it roared up from behind some trees. It was flying lower. It no longer looked so toy-like.

'Hijack!' the cook shouted. 'Ruth Memsahib, Indian jet is hijack!'

Ruth had thought as much.

There was excited chatter in Punjabi and Urdu. Shouts were exchanged with neighbours across the walls. The gardener, cook and cart driver, who had to contend with Chikoo snipping at his heels, ran to the back of the house. Protecting their clothes from the glass

shards encrusted on top, they clambered over the wall and jumped into the Air Force Camp premises. The back of the Camp edged the airport and Ruth guessed that the commandos, jeeps, fire-brigades and ambulances had already scrambled into position along the runways.

Billo and Grace, their swarthy faces lifted to the sky, ambled over to Ruth.

‘Airplane very low, Memsahib,’ observed Billo, shaking her head ominously.

‘Han,’ agreed Ruth. ‘*Jehaz bohot neechay hai.*’

They honed their language skills in this way. Ruth still took Urdu lessons from the elderly tutor she had inherited—together with the servants and the dog—from the Altmans.

Ruth stealthily observed Grace through her sunglasses. Her expression softened. The sweeper, standing a little apart, was absorbed in the events with her customary quiet. Sensing her mistress’s regard she became uncomfortable and Ruth slid her eyes away. At unexpected moments like this, Grace’s loveliness caught at Ruth’s heart. It astonished her that none of her Pakistani friends noticed the exquisite cast of her face unless Ruth pointed it out. She was a sweeper, and as such largely invisible in other respects—her beauty of little consequence except to other sweepers and, if they could lay their hands on her, pimps.

They heard the engine’s snarling wail and seconds later the airplane thundered past over their heads in a low, tightening arc. There was no mistaking it; the way the airplane was circling the airport meant that it was desperately seeking permission to land.

It was the late 1980s. In India the Sikh demand for Khalistan, a separate state in East Punjab, was at its most fervent. Air India planes on domestic flights between Delhi and Amritsar were almost routinely hijacked by Sikh dissidents and the pilots forced to veer off course to fly the short distance—a couple of miles as the crow flies—across the border into Pakistan. This would be the fourth or fifth hijacking and people living close to the airport could at once make out when an Air India flight was in trouble. In the past, the Pakistani authorities, nervous of being implicated in the hijacking, would not allow the plane to land until it was almost out of fuel and the appeals from their Indian counterparts became frantic.

Once one of the planes landed the Sikh dissidents would readily surrender to the Pakistani commandos. They were handcuffed, chained to each other and shunted off to jail to await trial. The Pakistani authorities were at first profusely thanked and then charged with the hijacking. Because of this, the Pakistanis were determined not to allow a hijacked plane to land on any account. ‘Next time we will let it crash,’ they had warned.

The women in the garden could sense the aircraft’s distress. It was making tighter circles and the engine’s roar appeared to have developed a strident whining undertone.

‘For God’s sake let it land,’ breathed Ruth, echoing the prayer in each quickening heart. Billo’s small features had drawn closer together, making her pugnacious face appear even more belligerent. Ruth was surprised to see the line of tears glistening down her slightly pockmarked cheeks.

The noise was deafening. The huge aircraft appeared to almost touch the TV antenna tied to a bamboo pole on their roof; then it banked and perilously sank from view. The women cringed, anticipating the explosion and the plume of flame and smoke that would arise from the crash. A few seconds later they knew from the heightened roar and screeching that the plane had landed. Grace and Billo both made the sign of the cross. Grace and her husband Sadiq attended mass most Sundays at the Catholic church, a ten-minute walk from the house. Billo was Muslim. Her gesture didn’t surprise Ruth who suspected she was a Christian convert to Islam. Such conversions were commonplace—a means to avoid the stigma of untouchability attached to most converts to Christianity. In any event, Billo had the bubbly, confident personality that could embrace all the religions in the world.

‘You want lunch outside, Memsahib?’ asked Billo, wiping the telltale trails of moisture from her face and reverting to what Ruth fondly termed her *managerial mode*.

Ruth nodded: ‘Whenever the cook is back.’

The men would soon return to their duties. The cart driver had yet to be paid. Billo disappeared through the sliding French doors that led into the sitting-room and Grace began unhurriedly to disperse the puddles of water on the drive with her long reed *jharoo*. Shernaz gave Ruth a ride to the polo grounds later that afternoon. In his zeal to further Islamize the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, General Zia had banished the racecourse to the outskirts of the city. The verdant acreage of the abandoned racecourse was converted into a garden with winding brick-paved paths and dramatically lit waterfalls and fountains. But the grassy spaces used by the polo players remained intact, except for the addition of a newly built cement stand for spectators.

Ruth and Shahnaz knew almost everyone. They greeted their friends and acquaintances as they climbed the steps and sidled past them to take their seats. There was no sign of Raj. Ruth was soon caught up in the excitement of the match as the horses’ hooves thundered and the polo-sticks, wielded by sturdy men in jodhpurs and turbans, flailed about raising dust. It was hard to keep track of the ball.

The sun, a cooling, crimson, pollution-enhanced orb, was low in the sky by the time they left. In the fifteen minutes it took to drive to Ruth’s house in the Cantonment it was already dark. Winter or summer, it surprised Ruth how abruptly the sun set in Lahore. At times she felt she could almost see it sink as the horizon consumed it.

Ruth sometimes compared these rapid sunsets to the lingering twilights of her summers in New England. They had seemed like a gift of time—a period of grace in which she

could indulge the activities she most enjoyed—hanging out with friends, flirting with eastern religions, protesting Apartheid and the Vietnam War at various campuses, dancing to rock, and avoiding her mother's calls insisting she return to the church. And after the children came it afforded a precious slice of time—after they were put to bed—in which she could read, listen to music with Rick, or watch TV in an exhausted stupor as she and Rick sipped wine out of the crystal glasses they had received as wedding gifts.

Billo knocked discreetly and without waiting for a summons entered the bedroom. Ruth frowned; Billo knew better than to disturb her when she retreated to her room after lunch. She held the paperback she was reading face down and raised her head from the pillows. Billo walked over to her with an oddly mincing gait and reserved countenance. The formal way her white woollen going-out shawl was draped around her head and torso gave her an alarming dignity. Billo seldom covered her head in the house; not even when they had visitors. Ruth pushed back the pillows and propped herself up against them.

‘Memsaab, he say he must talk to you.’ Her mouth a stern pucker, Billo was cryptic. ‘He not go. You come.’

Billo usually made short work of the beggars, snake-charmers and hawkers who sometimes got through when the gate was not properly bolted. Sometimes she threatened to set the dog on them. If they persisted, she did. If it was a ragged mullah from one of the mosques dotting the Cantonment, asking for donations and handing out tracts and talismans—and these fellows were as persistent as the Jesuits in Boston—Billo would stand at the door and brusquely say, ‘The Sahib and Memsahib are Christian. They give to their own Girja-church. It is not seemly to disturb the sanctity of the house when the Sahib is away and speak to the women like this.’

Alarmed by her choice of words and the accusation of impropriety they implied, threatened by Chikoo's frenzied barking from behind the woman's shalwar, the poor bearded cleric would confusedly lower his head and saunter away.

On one occasion, appalled by Billo's rudeness, Ruth had deliberately invited the man to step into the hall. Billo, clearly infuriated, brusquely signalled her away and slammed the door in the cleric's face. Then she turned to stare sternly at her naive mistress.

‘You could have said the same thing more politely,’ Ruth had defended herself. ‘There is no need to be rude.’

Billo had stared at her mistress for three mute seconds, her head wobbling slightly with frustration and anger. ‘Memsahib, you so little understand our ways!’ she had said with scathing finality and, turning her broad back on her mistress, trudged ahead with a curiously stiff-legged dignity.

Confronted by so much authority, Ruth didn't dare argue. She had felt like a rebuked cub that had put itself in harm's way.

Ruth could hear Chikoo barking fiercely at the entrance door. A whiff of fear emanated from Billo: it was uncharacteristic. ‘Who is it?’ Ruth asked.

‘He say he is police Inspector.’

‘You left a police officer standing in the porch?’ Ruth said, mildly exasperated.

‘Show him into the sitting room.’

‘No. Better you talk outside.’

Billo held out Ruth’s calf-length robe. Ruth—who had initially been infuriated by what she considered Billo’s condescending attitude in frequently correcting her—had learnt enough not to question her judgement on matters of apparel. Her pants and sweater suitably concealed by the robe, Ruth followed the staid, stumpy figure chugging ahead.

Billo opened the entrance door just wide enough to allow her mistress out and keep the dog in. Then she stood guard, bulging ominously through the partially opened door.

The man was not in uniform. He wore a long cream linen shirt over his matching shalwar and stood modestly behind Ruth’s black Buick. He was a strapping, broad-shouldered fellow, well-fed and well-tended, the sheen on his face and exposed skin hinting at a recent almond oil massage: one noticed such things in Pakistan, she thought.

After a brief glance at Ruth, the man politely averted his eyes and maintained a diffident distance. Clearly he was not accustomed to mixing with women socially and certainly not with Western women. To put him at his ease Ruth stepped up to him instead. She did not hold out her hand as she would have when she had first arrived in Pakistan. Ruth was glad she wore her robe: up close he emanated an almost feral air that was mildly disturbing.

‘Yes?’ she said, pleasantly.

‘Madam, you are Ruth Walker?’

‘Yes?’

The man removed a laminated plastic card from his shirt pocket and politely gave it to Ruth. ‘I am sub-inspector Junaid Akhtar from ISI, Cantt. Sector.’

Ruth scanned the information briefly and handed the card back. What was a secret service man doing on her porch?

‘I need to ask you a few questions.’ He spoke better English than she expected. ‘It won’t take long.’

She could tell from his voice and mien that the man was making an effort not to offend or intimidate her. She wasn’t afraid.

‘You had an Indian woman staying in your house as guest?’

The question caught Ruth off guard. The distrust between Pakistan and neighbouring India bordered on paranoia. Ruth disguised her unease by adopting a defiant air. ‘Yes—is

that a crime?’

‘Yes, it is.’ The sub-inspector’s voice took on a subtly menacing edge. ‘Don’t you know foreigners, Indians, are not allowed to stay in the Cantonment? This is a sensitive military area, a restricted area.’

Even as the answer confirmed her misgiving, it shocked her.

‘Oh,’ Ruth said, ‘I didn’t know.’ She felt a little breathless. It occurred to her to say: ‘But aren’t my husband and I foreigners ...?’

He had anticipated her remark and cut in before she completed her sentence. ‘Your landlord took special permission from the Cantt Board when he let his bungalow to Americans. You are okay. Don’t worry.’

It figured. Their landlord was a retired General. The army was in charge of the country and General Zia was Head of State.

Ruth had met the Indian woman, Uma Bhat, at a party and found her lively and fun to be around. The family with whom Uma was staying were suddenly expecting a hoard of relatives from their village and were looking for someone with whom Uma could stay. Uma was to return to Delhi in a couple of days and Ruth had gladly volunteered her hospitality.

‘Didn’t you notice our red Suzuki?’ the man asked. ‘It was parked here all the time.’ He indicated with his chin the space between the Buick and the lawn where the Suzuki had been parked. There was the hint of a swagger in his voice.

For a moment Ruth was bewildered; and then things fell into place. There was a lot of traffic in and out of her house during Uma’s stay. Friends came to pick her up or drop her off at all times of day and night. Ruth had noticed the Suzuki snugly parked by the lawn. Its pristine red coat polished to a gloss, it was clearly visible from the sitting-room. She had assumed it belonged to one of Uma’s friends. Except for that one time when she knew Uma was out and had been vaguely discomfited at its continuing presence on their drive. Ruth was not by nature suspicious and her experiences in Pakistan had given her little cause for mistrust. She had shrugged it off: they must have piled into another car and parked it for the duration.

But she should have been suspicious; she had ignored the repeated red flags its presence had signalled.

Ruth felt a surge of anger and a mortifying sense of violation. Where most tiny, locally assembled Suzuki cars in Lahore are typically white, this one was flagrantly red; and the small car had breached their space and spied on their house. Its showy red colour upset her the most—somehow it represented the brazen audacity of the intrusion.

She wished Rick wasn't travelling. 'My husband is the South Asia manager for Dow Chemicals Fertilizer Company,' she said, grappling for any importance she could muster in efforts to combat the sub-inspector's own air of confidence.

'I know that.'

Of course! She felt foolish.

'Madam, you are in a ladies' club?'

Ruth was taken aback by the change in tack and somewhat relieved. 'Yes,' she said. 'The International Women's Club.' Surely there was no harm in that: the elite of Lahore belonged to it.

'Do you hold office in it?'

'I am on the Executive Committee.'

'Aren't you president?'

'I was, last year.' She didn't like the tricky way he had inserted that. At the same time she felt afraid; he probably knew a lot else about her. She didn't want to antagonize him.

'What activities you all do at the Club?' The sub-inspector didn't bother to conceal his contempt of the activities of an elitist Women's Club. Ruth had come across this brand of chauvinism all over the globe.

'It is a social club but we do volunteer work in orphanages. We work on women's rights issues and help destitute women and their children,' she said, speaking with prim defiance. 'We hold fund-raising events.'

What was she trying to prove? And to whom?

'Who all are on the committee?'

She found herself naming the current president and an impressive list of committee members. They were her friends: she played bridge with them, swam in their pools, watched polo and socialized with them almost every evening at the Punjab or Gymkhana Clubs or at dinner parties at their homes. Was she implicating Shahnaz and Sorriya and Gogo and Tita and Nergis and Nasira? They were savvy, educated women: lawyers and journalists—married to politicians, business tycoons, doctors, feudal lords, CEOs of multinational companies.

'And the other members? Their names?'

'There are over 500 members!' she exclaimed.

'Try,' he said. 'Tell your servant to get pencil-paper and write them down.'

She had all but forgotten Billo's watchful and forbidding presence in the door.

'You've got to be kidding.'

‘I am not *kidding*. Write down whatever names you remember.’

She was in a foreign country. Her husband was in Bombay or Sri Lanka or God knows where. She had brandished the committee members’ names and they hadn’t impressed. Every instinct told her to be cautious.

‘Get me a pen and writing paper,’ she told Billo.

Billo, whose agitation had escalated to a point where her austere covered head wobbled, looked incredulous.

Ruth held her eye.

Her face a mask of suppressed fury and disapproval, Billo let the dog out and slammed the door shut.

Chikoo growled and sniffed at the man’s sandalled feet and sub-inspector Junaid Akhtar took mincing steps backward, fearing the dog’s touch might pollute his clothes before he could offer his Friday Jumah prayers. He knew enough not to kick Chikoo in front of Ruth. He looked down from his great height at the rodent-sized canine as if Chikoo was a Rottweiler. Ruth picked up her agitated pet and tried to calm him, and calm herself.

Billo handed her mistress the pen and notepad and took the dog from her. Without deigning to look at the man, she again positioned her bulk in the door like a protective sentinel.

Placing the lined pad on the Buick’s bonnet Ruth wrote down name after name. Salma, Nishat, Shyma, Tita, Talli, Lubna—they came to her easily because they were no longer difficult foreign names but bore the shapes of friends. The opening lines from Sara Suleri’s memoir, *Meatless Days*, came to her. It was among the books suggested to them at the orientation when they were posted to Pakistan. ‘*Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women.*’ The words had appeared disingenuous and mildly offensive to Ruth. Now, as she named her friends, they rang true. She had discovered the *company of women*! Not that she lacked intimate friends in Houston or Boston or wherever Rick had been posted, but here she had understood a different connection within her own gender. Perhaps it was the segregated nature of Muslim society that dulled the competitive edge and enabled trust—permitted women to derive so much comfort and pleasure from each other’s company.

The sub-inspector was reading over her shoulder from an appropriate distance; he must have lynx eyes. Suddenly he said: ‘What about Shireen?’

Ruth looked up at him puzzled. ‘Shireen?’ Which Shireen was he referring to—she could think of at least three or four.

‘Isn’t Shireen Walid a member of your club?’

Even though Ruth realized that the sardonic edge of contempt verging on hate in his voice was directed not at her but at Shireen Walid, a sprightly woman dedicated to human rights and women's issues, Ruth was offended. 'I don't have the membership list memorized.' Her tone was, for the first time, short. 'She could well be for all I know.'

Shireen, who Ruth guessed to be in her sixties, and her late husband Mazhar were dedicated communists. With her liquid amber eyes and clean-cut Grecian features she still was a strikingly beautiful woman. Ruth had heard that her husband had been jailed often for his fiery editorials in the *Pakistan Times*. Ruth had met their handsome firebrand son, on a brief and almost clandestine visit. He lived in semi-exile in London. Did all this still matter in the late eighties—now that communism was becoming increasingly discredited and irrelevant?

'But you know her?'

'Yes I do.'

'She came to your house to meet the Indian woman?' It was more an assertion than a question.

Ruth didn't know if she had. 'I don't keep track of who visits my house-guests,' she said.

Billo's gruff voice suddenly cut in: 'Memsahib, no need to talk when Sahib not home. Come inside. Tell him, go!'

'My husband is not home,' Ruth said primly, Billo's intervention reminding her of Pakistani proprieties. 'I shouldn't talk to you when there is no man in the house. If you need information, ask my husband.' She looked at her watch. She'd had enough. She turned her back on the man and stepped in through the door Billo held open. Moments like this increased her appreciation of Billo's overbearing and meddling ways. They could hear Chikoo's excited barks and growls as he escorted sub-inspector Junaid Akhtar out of the gate.

Later that afternoon, on the way to the polo grounds, she told Shahnaz about the visit from the Secret Service man, laughing at the rough way Billo had treated him. 'She had him pegged all right—I wouldn't be surprised if Billo was a jail-warden at some point!'

'She probably was. She certainly looks like one.' Shahnaz's pert face darkened. 'He damn well knew you were alone, and he had no business visiting you when Rick was away. These fellows are cowards. You shouldn't countenance them.' She smiled at Ruth to lighten the mood. 'They tried the same thing on us ... Arif has instructed the guards to shoo them away.'

'Shoo them away?' Ruth exclaimed laughing.

'Ya, that's the only way to treat the assholes. Otherwise they'll sit on your head.'

A week later Rick returned from his tour. She had a lot to tell him. She told him about the hijacking of the Air India plane and the airplane's flying in ever tightening circles above their house, about her terror that it wouldn't be permitted to land.

'They would never let it crash,' Rick said. 'It would cause an international crisis.'

His last stop had been in Bangladesh and he had brought her a fine Dacca-silk sari. It was a pity she didn't wear saris. After a while she would give it to one of her friends and Rick would never recognize it. She had given away quite a few. Or she would have Imam Buksh stitch it into a formal skirt and top. Rick would be pleased. The rich pallu end of the hand-woven sari would make a gorgeous stole. The dour, middle-aged tailor circulated among the expatriate women. He brought his hand-cranked sewing machine and other paraphernalia and, sitting cross-legged on a white sheet on Ruth's veranda, worked from the house. It made fittings convenient.

After the hectic round of social activities and the sub-inspector's disturbing visit, Rick's down-to-earth and steadying presence was a relief. She knew, however, if he stayed for more than a month she would be impatient for his next tour. Rick had changed. Always inclined to be New-England reserved, he had become almost chronically sombre. His work and frequent tours didn't leave him the time to make the close connections she did. At parties, when the other men became jovial after a few drinks and put their arms around each other the way Pakistani men were wont, Rick sat around forcing uneasy smiles. She knew he attended the parties for her sake and would have much rather stayed home going through his papers or watching television. Ruth declined many invitations. Even a 'small dinner' meant consorting with a hastily thrown together list of fifteen or twenty guests. They went instead to the homes of close friends for informal, spur-of-the-moment get-togethers where Rick could be more at ease and watch TV if he chose to. Often they stayed home.

Rick laughed at the way Billo had dispatched sub-inspector Junaid Akhtar and at Shahnaz's calling the fellow an asshole.

'I wonder who she picked that up from?' he said, looking playfully at her with a lopsided grin, and Ruth coyly agreed: 'Who else!' She hadn't heard him laugh or seen him so lighthearted in a long time. She hugged him fiercely that night and he responded with an ardour that reminded her of the earlier days of their marriage. Before she drifted off to sleep it occurred to her she hadn't thought of Raj since Rick's arrival—she felt a vague sense of annoyance that she had allowed him to intrude so much upon her thoughts.

Ruth realized how troubled Rick was by the Secret Service man's visit only when he hired an armed, daytime chowkidar to man the gates. Like the night gate-keeper he was a Pashtun tribesman from the maze of mountains bordering Afghanistan. These men were known for their fierce loyalty; everyone they knew employed them as guards. Jungi Khan,

Ruth thought, was the spitting image of Sean Connery, and Rick, after having a closer look at him, agreed.

Jungi Khan was instructed not to permit strange men to disturb Memsahib when Sahib was away.

This caused a crisis as soon as Rick took off on his next tour. Bewildered friends called to ask Ruth if she was all right. The gate-keeper had refused to let their cars in. Holding his gun upright he had saluted smartly and in halting Urdu politely told them: 'Sir, Sahib is out of town.' When asked: 'Is Memsahib in?' he said: 'Memsahib cannot be disturbed when Sahib is away.'

Ruth sensed her friends were more hurt than they let on.

Ruth asked Billo to explain to Jungi Khan that it was all right to let her friends in, even if they were male and not accompanied by any women. She wanted to cover her bases in case Raj showed up unannounced. She liked the idea of leaving her life open. Billo said: 'Tell cook,' and disparagingly added: 'He's fresh off the mountains of Tora Bora. They don't take instructions from women like me.'

Ruth requested her friends to call before coming, a formality rarely observed in Lahore, and took pains to introduce them to Jungi Khan.

Sensible of the code of honour regarding women the haughty tribesmen lived by, her friends understood her predicament. They took to greeting the guard by name. A few of the men even got out of their cars to take both his hands in theirs in the customary Northern Area handshake. After that Jungi Khan would recognize their cars and quietly open the gates.

Rick was touring again. It was March and the balmy days already hinted at the paralyzing heat that would put a stop to most activities by May. Many of their friends would migrate to the hills for the summer or travel to Europe and the USA. Ruth planned to visit her daughter, who was in high school and lived with her mother in Boston. They had not wanted to disrupt their children's education as Rick's company posted him around the world. She would also visit her son who was at West Point.

The chrysanthemums had been removed and the latticework of canes that supported the bank of sweet peas showed between the ripening pods. But the roses and nasturtium bloomed and the scent from them was heady. Lying in the hot sun, revelling in its heat, she was beginning to perspire. At times like this, recalling the endless New England winters, she felt she needed to soak in all the heat she could get. But her body may have had too much of a good thing and her thoughts drifted to the cool, ethereal heights of the mountains to the north, to her and Rick's visits to the mighty Hindu Kush and Karakoram ranges.

At Lake Saif-ul-Malook, at an altitude above 10,000 feet, Ruth was convinced she'd had a mystic experience. She had walked to the other end of the lake when she found herself in the grip of a pleasurable sensation that made her body light and her step sure.

Feeling almost weightless, she walked through the stony beds of the icy rivulets and swift shallow streams in her path, bent towards the glaciers that fed the lake. Free of her earthly self, her essence mingled with sky, stone and water. At 10,000 feet, she was already in the snow. She saw herself walk into the grandeur of the majestic Himalayas and tirelessly on and on.

Ruth faintly registered Rick bellow from the other end of the lake: 'Turn back!' She pressed forward, guided by the sensation that made her body buoyant, her spirit free. 'It's dangerous. Stop!' Why was Rick telling her to stop? She was in her element, safe, her being one with her surroundings.

Rick clung to her arm. He was panting, bowed in an attempt to catch his breath, dragging her down into the snow. She felt an enormous sense of loss as if she was being wrenched from a natural state of bliss in which she belonged.

They had descended a thousand feet to the beautiful little glass and pine-wood cottage they had rented in Naran.

That night, sitting on the shaggy rug before a log fire, leaning back against Rick's legs, she tried to describe to Rick what she had experienced. 'I could have walked on and on—I felt so light—invincible. It was like a calling. I wish you hadn't stopped me.'

'The altitude affected you, don't you think? Made you light-headed?' Rick suggested matter-of-factly.

Ruth shrugged and kept quiet. She didn't want to argue with him, nor with the voices of her mother and grandmother and even her father, sternly rebuking her for sullyng their staunch Protestantism with forbidden beliefs in alien faiths and mysticism. But she knew she wouldn't let these voices diffuse the bliss of the spiritual awakening that was still with her. She saw a dim light from the cottage occupied by the only other tourist couple besides them. She heard the Kunhar river hurtle on its perennial course close by and the rustle of wind in the pines. Smoke from the hovels of the locals and the smell of seared trout mingled with the scent of pine-cones. She was at peace.

In Islamabad, when she told Raj, 'I've been at higher altitudes in the Rockies without feeling like this', the Buddhist validated her experience: 'Rishis, Sufis, Buddhist monks etc. have meditated in these mountains through the ages: the atmosphere is charged.' He smiled at her. 'My dear, I doubt yogis meditated in the Rockies.'

Lying in her deckchair Ruth watched the butterflies drunkenly drift like bits of paper in the still air. Occasionally a bee or an amber wasp buzzed too close and Ruth flapped it away with the neglected *New Yorker* she had intended to dip into.

Wiping his hands on his apron the cook ceremoniously carried the phone around the deckchair. Ruth had heard its faint ring and assumed it was Nasira offering her a ride to the Saigols' dinner. Her husband Javid, too, was out of town. 'Hello,' she said.

A deep male voice said: 'It's me, my dear. How are you?'

'Oh, Raj!' Ruth exclaimed, delighted. 'How wonderful to hear from you! Are you in Lahore?'

'Yes. I've been here a week.'

'A week! And you didn't call me?'

'I've got to earn my living, my dear—I'm not a lady of leisure.'

'So, when does the lady of leisure see the toiling Minorities Minister?' asked Ruth, reflexively adopting Raj's manner of speaking.

'Do you want to see a bunch of fanatics?' he said, coming straight to the point. He knew Ruth would be game for the adventure his words suggested, and her enthusiasm and canny responses could enliven the experience for him.

'Sure,' Ruth said readily. 'I'd love to.'

A previous excursion with Raj had been extraordinary. As Minorities Minister his duties included the welfare of the tiny Sikh community in Pakistan and the management of the unruly hordes of hirsute Sikh pilgrims who poured in their thousands across the border from India to attend numerous religious ceremonies. He had facilitated the restoration of a Sikh temple near Nankana Sahib, a two-hour drive from Lahore, and had taken her to its opening ceremony.

The reception committee, resplendent in blue or white turbans, flowing beards and bejewelled religious daggers, had welcomed them with garlands of roses and silver tinsel. But the celebratory throng of twenty thousand Sikh pilgrims waiting for the minister to cut the ribbon made access to the gold-domed Temple impossible. Ruth had retreated to Raj's Land Rover and with a hand from the driver, climbed onto the jeep's bonnet to watch the proceedings.

After a few muscular but futile attempts to squeeze the minister through, the reception committee abruptly hoisted him clear over their heads. Ruth marvelled as the alarmed dignitary, flower-bedecked and as stiff as a corpse, was transported hand over hand above the turbans of the mob to the temple's entrance.

Raj Tribhuvan Roy had enabled her to see aspects of Pakistan her less venturesome compatriots would never experience.

'I'm meeting them tomorrow,' he said. 'You can come along.'

'Who are the fanatics?' Ruth asked.

‘Sikh hijackers.’

‘Oh!’ Ruth had visited a woman’s prison with the International Women’s Club and had been depressed for weeks. ‘I’m not sure I want to visit a prison.’

‘My dear,’ said Raj, ‘would I take you to a morbid Pakistani prison? You don’t trust my judgement!’

Ruth wasn’t sure if he was offended.

‘Above all men, I trust you!’ she declared factiously.

‘Is that so, my dear?’ Raj’s baritone deepened to an insinuating murmur. ‘I think I’ll have to hold you to that.’

‘Any time,’ Ruth said, maintaining her bantering tone even as a familiar heaviness caught her breath and stilled her body.

‘I’ll pick you up at one o’clock,’ Raj said, smoothly shifting gears to once again sound avuncular. ‘Wear shalwar-kameez and cover your head with a dupatta.’

‘Okay.’ Ruth didn’t trust herself to say more.

There was a brief pause. ‘Be ready at one sharp,’ he instructed and hung up.

Raj Roy was a popular figure. Moderately tall, his eyes betraying his Hill Tract origins, the handsome king was a favourite with the women. As a non-Muslim he got away with a playful familiarity with women that Pakistani men wouldn’t dare. He liked to flaunt the licence afforded him and at dinner parties greeted his hostesses with bear hugs and stood with his arms draped around them. The men, aware he belonged to a less stringent culture, envied and at the same time indulged him.

Ruth was alerted to Raj’s arrival by the impatient battery of horn blasts. She glanced at her watch. It was ‘one sharp’. She had forgotten to inform the gatekeeper and Billo was hastily dispatched to tell Jungi Khan to let the Raja’s car in. She stole a quick look in the mirror. She was appropriately dressed; the simple, beige, raw-cotton shalwar and kameez suited her. Billo had pinned her hair back in a French knot. Ruth covered her head with the long chiffon dupatta and draped the loose ends over each shoulder. The russet print picked out the highlights in her auburn hair and framed her subtly made-up face prettily.

When Ruth emerged from the house Raj was standing with his back to his navy blue Mercedes, admiring the garden. The tinted windows, and the small Pakistan flag attached to the mascot, added to the car’s stately appearance. Raj turned his royal eyes upon Ruth and his open look of admiring appraisal made her blush. He bowed slightly to take the hand she extended. ‘You look well, my dear,’ he murmured, and holding his arm out, barely touching her in the forbidding and watchful presence of the guard and the liveried chauffer, gallantly shepherded her to the sedan. He held the rear door open while she drew her garments in. The driver opened the other door and Raj walked round the car to sit

beside her. The gun slung from his shoulder, Jungi Khan attempted to surreptitiously peer into the tinted darkness of the car. Raj moved closer to the window and lowered the glass halfway. Nodding reassuringly he told Jungi Khan, ‘Brother, open the gate.’

Once they were on the road he directed the driver to take them to Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s samadhi, where the Sikh maharaja was entombed.

As they wafted down the Mall, Ruth removed her sunglasses and looked out of the windows. Shaded by massive peepal and eucalyptus trees, its wide medians ablaze with flowers, the avenue was at its glorious best.

‘Do you know we are on the Grand Trunk Road?’ Raj said, inaccurately. ‘It ran across the width of India, from the Khyber Pass to Calcutta.’

Ruth exclaimed, ‘I didn’t know that!’

‘It’s been grandly renamed *Sharah-e-Quaid-I-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah*, after the founding father of Pakistan. But old names, like old habits, die hard, my dear—we still call it the Mall.’

Ruth’s tentative nods acknowledged only partial knowledge of these facts. She was accustomed to Raj’s didactic delivery, and enjoyed the courtly old-world irony he injected into his remarks. She had absorbed a great deal of history from him.

They drove past the delicate pink sprawl of the British-built High Court and the coppery *Zam-zammah*—the cannon better known as *Kim’s gun*. The traffic increased past the shiny little fighter-jet displayed on the traffic island to commemorate the brief 1971 war, the third Indo-Pak war over Kashmir. This was when East Pakistan, absurdly separated from West Pakistan by a thousand miles of Indian territory at the time of Partition, was finally able to break away and claim independence as Bangladesh.

The Mercedes turned right on Lower Mall and as it honked and nosed its way through the congested glue of scooter-rickshaws, cyclists, bullock-carts, tongas and trucks, Ruth moved nervously to the edge of her seat. A man was frantically herding a small flock of sheep through the dense traffic.

‘Don’t look at the sheep; look at me. I’m better looking,’ said Raj with a wry smile of so little conceit that Ruth turned to him and said, ‘Tell me about the shrine we’re headed for.’

‘Lahore was captured from the Mughals by the Sikh warrior Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1798,’ said Raj. She saw the mischief gather in his eyes as he turned to her and held up a tapered finger. ‘He had only one eye.’

‘Okay,’ Ruth acquiesced, smiling. ‘How did he lose his eye?’

‘One of his wives gouged it out for dallying with a dancing girl. But don’t quote me.’

‘I won’t,’ said Ruth, settling back in her seat, savouring the sudden sense of ease that flooded her. ‘I’m sure he *dallied* with so many, it’s a wonder he didn’t have both eyes

gouged out.'

'Now, now—don't judge him so harshly,' said Raj, turning to her and wagging his finger. 'Maharajas have to patronize dancing girls. It's their duty.'

'Do you?'

'Me? No. But I would, if they looked like you.'

'Stop flirting,' said Ruth lightly, putting on her sunglasses. 'So? How did the Maharaja really lose his eye?'

'Small-pox,' said Raj.

In Pakistan Ruth had become aware of the ravages of the dreaded disease.

'His face was pitted. He was a small man and he limped, but he was a great warrior,' declared Raj. 'After the Maharaja's death the city was swallowed up by the British.'

'And his heirs?'

'They were weak and quarrelsome,' he said dismissively. 'It didn't happen overnight. Lahore was gradually ingested, like the rest of India, to satisfy the British Empire's bo-constrictor-like appetite.'

Ruth's hair prickled at the image he conjured up. She could feel his eyes on her. Her hands slightly unsteady, she lit a cigarette. The driver lowered the front windows a few inches to let out the smoke.

'The Maharaja died in Lahore,' he continued, touched by Ruth's reaction. 'His mausoleum is set in a complex of buildings that covers three acres. His Samadhi covers the spot where he was cremated. It was built by his son, Kharak Singh. We'll be there in a few minutes. It is right opposite the Lahore Fort, close to the Badshahi Mosque.'

Raj's voice poured pleasurably into her ears. She tried not to watch the road as they scraped through the congested traffic and concentrated instead on the small green flag in front as it alternately fluttered and grew limp at their erratic progress. Federal ministers' and judges' cars were permitted to carry flags. Raj allowed it out of its leather sheath only when he was on official duty.

As the billowing marble domes of the Royal Mosque floated into view, the driver glanced at Raj in the rear-view mirror and said something Ruth was too distracted to follow.

'You'd better chuck that out,' Raj said, turning to Ruth and indicating her cigarette. 'Smoking is forbidden to the Sikhs.'

It is as well he did so.

The moment the Sikh gatekeeper opened the gate and shut it behind them their car was ambushed by seven or eight strapping Sikh youths. Most of them had their long hair tied

in untidy knots and only a few wore turbans. They milled about the Mercedes, talking excitedly. Raj lowered the window: 'Let the car through, my friends, I will listen to everything you say once we get through.' Ruth knew he spoke fluent Punjabi. Some of the men caught sight of her and stooped to brashly peer at her through the open slit. Raj raised the darkened window and signalled the driver to go ahead.

Turning to Ruth he said: 'You've had your first look at the hijackers.'

'They seem angry.'

'They're always angry.'

The car picked up speed and began to move. Hitching up their lungis, taking long, lithe strides, the men ran alongside, stroking and patting the Mercedes as if it was a horse. By the time the driver came to a stop before a line of elderly, neatly turbaned Sikhs holding garlands of roses and marigold, the crowd of young men had swelled noticeably. Ruth took in the complex of ancient buildings built around a grassy courtyard. The architecture was a mixture of Mughal and Hindu styles. A few newer structures stood discreetly to one side.

Raj stepped out of the car and good-naturedly saying, 'Let me get through, my friends, let me pass,' tried to shoulder his way around the car.

The older Sikh men, reprimanding the agitated young stalwarts and shoving them aside, pressed forward. Closing ranks and joining their palms they greeted him: 'Saat Sri Akal, Minister Sahib.'

Saying 'Saat Sri Akal,' Raj returned the Sikh greeting and opened the door for Ruth.

The reception committee, taken aback at Ruth's presence, exchanged quick glances. Pleased and flattered that the minister had thought fit to bring his wife, their faces wreathed with smiles, they placed fragrant strings of marigold and roses around Ruth's neck; and removing more garlands from a stick held forth by a grubbily attired, meek little man, placed them around Raj's neck in a fragrant band that covered his chest and rose to his chin. They stood with palms pressed before their flowing grey and white beards murmuring: 'We are honoured you have taken the trouble to grace us with your presence; we are specially honoured you have brought along your begum.'

The slight man holding the depleted stick of garlands was introduced to them. He was the granthi, the priest in charge of the precinct's small Gurdwara temple.

Ruth, blushing furiously at being mistaken for Raj's wife, stood awkwardly beside him. Raj's customary pallor was replaced by a flush and the top of his ears reddened. But before either of them could think to correct the inference they were rudely drawn apart. The men physically tugged Raj away and surrounded him in a heated clamour of what appeared to Ruth to be importunate accusations.

Ruth caught the word 'cigarette' twice. Had they caught the offending reek of smoke off her clothes? Off Raj's? She tried to draw closer to him, alarmed at their fury; until she realized the grievances were directed not at her or Raj but at the grubby, bandy-legged little granthi she glimpsed hovering at the fringe of the excited crowd, the depleted stick of garlands still in his hand.

At what seemed to be the end of their litany of intemperate grouses a tall fellow, his large black eyes flashing, held aloft a solitary weather-beaten cigarette stub. The contentious bunch quieted briefly: 'See? See what we found near the compound wall?!' the man said, his accusation ringed with triumph. The others raised their voices to join his: 'Yes. Look at it! We cannot permit such sacrilege. These are sacred premises! The granthi has permitted smoking!'

The vast complex was surrounded by a ten-foot-high wall, topped by glass shards and Raj knew there was no access to the premises except through the gate which was always locked. The man offered him the cigarette butt.

Raj stretched his lips in a squeamish expression of distaste and shook his head to decline the offer.

'My brothers, if all you can find is a single crushed cigarette butt,' he said, speaking unctuously, 'it can only mean that the holy ground is commendably free of smokers. Instead of blaming the caretakers you should thank them for their vigilance. Anyone could have chucked it over the wall.'

But no, they were having none of it, and the little Sikh priest, his checked lungi outlining his bowlegs, stood accused of permitting desecration of the sacred premises.

'Why aren't the thugs in jail?' Ruth whispered when the quarrelsome band, distracted by some flare-up amongst them, briefly withdrew their attention.

'They have been allowed out to take part in some week-long religious rites at the samadhi. Don't worry; they are confined to the complex.'

'They're dangerous. What if they escape?'

'Where can they go? If they cross the border to India they'll be strung up; their wanted-posters hang in all their police stations. In Lahore, with their long hair, turbans and beards, they'll be spotted right away by the police.'

The crowd grew as the fathers and uncles of the hijackers, their grey hair tied in top-knots, or freshly washed and open to the sun, idly joined the crowd, contributing their own assessment of the crime. Some of them had set up camp in the shrine's precincts for the duration of the trials and some periodically visited their jailed kin from across the border.

In trying to deflect their anger Raj only confused them when he suggested: 'Let the poor fellow alone ... You have a much larger enemy to contend with ... don't you? A loftier

cause!’

Ruth guessed he was obliquely referring to the Sikh demand for a separate state, Khalistan. The hijackings were in fact the mainstay of their strategy to draw attention to their demand. But the cause, for the moment at least, appeared to have been relegated to the background, and the sinister machinations of the hapless granthi were of more immediate concern.

The accusations and recriminations were becoming serious. The granthi, who had so far followed them silently and hitherto pleaded his case with only a hounded look in his anxious eyes, suddenly thrust out his pigeon chest and slapped himself repeatedly with the flat of his hand. ‘So kill me. Put a bullet through me right here,’ he cried out between the loud thumps he was raining on his chest. ‘If I’m a sinner, shoot me for my sins!’

Raj hastily stepped forward and grabbed hold of the man’s flagellating arm. ‘Arrey, baba, no one’s going to kill you,’ he said, holding the man’s arm still and sounding mildly exasperated. ‘They have more important work to do than kill you. They have a larger cause to further ... A more urgent goal ... Don’t you? Don’t you?’ he said addressing the young men.

The Minorities Minister could not very well spell out his thoughts about their more pressing cause—it would create a political crisis and exacerbate the tension with neighbouring India. But his insinuations, which had been accompanied by suggestive movements of his eyes and hands, were lost on these villagers-turned-terrorists. They were unable to see beyond their immediate grievances, and they read in the minister’s attitude towards the granthi only a baffling obstinacy.

The zealots now trotted out a slew of other accusations. They did so tentatively, as if randomly testing the waters of the Minister’s forbearance of the priest’s misdeeds, and ultimately hurled the charge that the granthi not only smoked, but also served meat in the sacred precincts of the vegetarian langar! It was as if God had hurled a thunderbolt!

Primed for action and as predatory and dangerous as a pride of young leopards, the men would have as little compunction in tearing the priest apart as the ferocious cats their prey. As they moved in on him Raj quickly interposed himself between them, and the numerous fathers and uncles stepped forward to drag their enraged kin away. The reception committee of elders hastily escorted Ruth and Raj up some steep steps into the mausoleum.

After the din it was blessedly quiet beneath the square roof, its fluted dome ringed with a design of cobra hoods. A domed marble pavilion, decorated with what Raj described as *pietra aura* work, formed the centre of the sepulchral chamber in which a lotus-shaped marble urn contained the ashes of the Maharaja. Eleven smaller knobbed shapes held the ashes of four queens and seven slave girls. ‘They were dutiful wives,’ an elder who spoke English explained. ‘They flung themselves on his funeral pyre.’

The interior of the chamber was elaborately decorated with frescoes pertaining to Sikh gurus.

They were next escorted to the Gurdwara Dera Sahib. Built in 1619 it was a small shrine dedicated to the memory of the Fifth Guru, Arjan Singh. An elder with two leather straps crisscrossing his chest to hold two curved jewelled daggers, spoke to Ruth in rapid Punjabi and, noticing her bewilderment, the man who spoke English obligingly translated him. ‘Guru Arjan Singh jumped into the Ravi river on 30 May 1606 and forever disappeared into the void.’ He intoned gravely, and Ruth understood that the Fifth Guru had not merely jumped into the river like an ordinary mortal and drowned; some miracle had taken place at this point. She would ask Raj later.

They walked into a chamber and Ruth was relieved to see the maligned granthi in the sanctum where the Granth Sahib rested. The enormous holy book was covered in blue velvet as it awaited the morning and evening prayers. The floor was covered with a red and pink carpet and white pillars rose out of square, ice-cream-pink bases. A gallery with a delicate fence surrounded the room above them, and a smattering of women and children looked down from it at them.

They left the temple and walked past the five-foot-tall plinth upon which the temple stood. The worn, narrow brick, embedded in deeply grooved and depleted clay, showed the platform’s antiquity. ‘This is the oldest part of the temple,’ the English-speaking Sikh explained and pointed to a darkly shadowed space in the foundation plinth a little ahead of them. ‘That is a holy entrance ... it leads to the place from which our Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Singh, disappeared into the river.’ Had he not drawn their attention to it Ruth might have walked past without noticing it. ‘Of course, the river has changed its course,’ the man continued: ‘Every time there is a big flood the Ravi moves further away.’

Ruth glanced at Raj: he looked tired and abstracted. The evening sun was aiming its glare at them and it was blistering hot. A floppy white cloth cap covered Raj’s head: he must carry it in his pocket. It also occurred to her that he was going through the tour for the umpteenth time because of her. She felt a swell of gratitude.

By now they had arrived at the shadowy space the elder had indicated. With most of the supporting brick missing at the top it appeared to have been gouged out of the plinth and looked more like a muddy ingress to a cave. Ruth could make out a narrow passage part of the way before it became engulfed in darkness. It must be cool inside the cave, she thought.

Surrounded by a coterie of elders, Raj had moved ahead. Ruth felt a gnawing curiosity. She knew she should follow them, but an indefinable impulse to know what lay beyond rooted her to the mouth of the cave. And then she felt the pull of something powerful and benign as a subtle strength swelled in her body and provoked her to follow its direction.

Ruth had to stoop to enter, but once she stepped on the earth floor the passage widened and she was able to stand up. A little ahead of her the path seemed to veer to the right; she wasn't sure—the light was too murky. Stepping somewhat hesitantly, she walked up to a sort of landing, from which the path sharply turned and sloped gently down. She stood there. It was blessedly cool and after the glare outside, the diffused light engulfed her with its benevolent serenity. She went down the slope, lightly touching the cool earth walls of the tunnel with her fingers.

Her senses were enhanced—even in the dark she could see clearly: the walls of the tunnel and the roof had a strange translucency that enabled her to see the grit and stones embedded in the mud. Ruth stood before a steep shadow-shrouded staircase that seemed to disappear down and down into a void. She felt no fear, only a sense of lightness. She took her first step, and then another, and with each step the void that appeared to swallow the steps further down filled with a greenish glow which grew brighter and brighter—not a blinding light but a diffused pleasurable brightness, evocative of promise, of expectation. The glow reached out to engulf her and she stepped into that light.

It was not until she became aware of the voice saying 'Memsahib! Memsahib! Stop'—at first distant, and then all too close—that she became conscious of the state of bliss she was being wrenched out of, and her whole body resisted and stretched backwards like rubber.

In an instant she was drenched in an almost unbearable disappointment. As the granthi's hands gripped her she heard Raj's fearful: 'Ruth? Ruth? Are you all right?' And then he had his arm around her and she leaned against him with the lassitude of regret. He half carried her up the steps, lit now by the granthi's flashlight.

When they were ready to leave, the elders once again formed a line, holding their palms pressed together and bowing. The granthi, smiling and swelling with pride, placed an orange 'sarrappa' scarf round their shoulders. It was meant to cover Ruth and the Minorities minister with respect from head to foot. The Sikh stalwarts, surprisingly subdued, hovered in an awed, uneven line. Word had spread that the woman had experienced something mystical in the tunnel. Even that she might have seen their Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan Singh, in a flood of divine light.

'Cat got your tongue?' Raj asked on their way back.

Ruth turned to him on the back seat. Groping for words she tried to explain the regret she had felt at being dredged out of her experience. 'I wasn't conscious of the state of bliss I was in till I'd left it ... I wonder if that's what death is like: the brightness at the end of the tunnel dying people see.'

Raj held her hand. 'That is what we seek: At the end of the cycle of birth and rebirth the eternal divine bliss—Nirvana. That is why we meditate—to lose ourselves in the cosmic soup.'

‘I’ve lost my fear of death,’ Ruth said definitively, startled by the surety of her knowledge. Raj squeezed her hand tight, rubbing her fingers as she leaned against him. He stroked her arm. Conscious of the driver’s presence up front, there was not much else he could do.

Dusk had almost deepened into night as Ruth lightly touched Raj’s proffered hand and stepped out of the Mercedes. ‘Won’t you come in?’ she said to him. They could hear Jungi Khan drawing the gates shut behind them. Raj searched her eyes; she briefly held his gaze, untroubled by what he might see in them.

Billo held the door open to let them in and Ruth asked her to get them coffee.

‘I’d prefer tea,’ Raj said.

After they’d had tea and the maid had cleared the coffee table and retired to her room in the servants’ quarters, Ruth languidly stood up to say: ‘You haven’t been upstairs, have you?’ She glanced at Raj, who lay almost supine on the sofa.

‘No, but I’ve been waiting for the grand tour of the house,’ he replied, sitting up at once.

Ruth led Raj up a stylish flight of wooden slats that ran along the brick dining room wall. At the middle landing, and sharply angled to the left, another flight of steps led to the upstairs hallway. Ruth had not turned on the landing light and in the glow coming from the dining room, she, for an instant, imagined herself in the passage in the cave, except, instead of going down, the steps rose up. Raj was ahead of her. She followed him to the top of the stairs and as he stepped aside to make way for her, pushed open the door to their right. As Raj stepped into the room she suddenly noticed Jungi Khan close behind her on the steps. He slightly bent his head to lower his gaze and, assuming a somewhat deferential posture, remained on the steps—the gun slung on his shoulder.

Ruth blushed. She marvelled at his stealth.

Raj had not seen him. His voice thick, turning towards Ruth, he murmured: ‘Show me the rooms, my dear ...’ and he noticed the guard on the steps, his chiselled profile and still body as if carved from stone. Raj caught a hint of movement beneath his lowered lids and he sensed the dire glint of menace flash a warning. He knew that even if he was to as much as touch Ruth, Jungi Khan would have no compunction about killing him. The guard was honour bound to protect Rick’s possessions.

Acutely conscious of the gatekeeper’s presence on the landing, Ruth led Raj perfunctorily through the two guest bedrooms. Her voice sounded unnaturally loud in her ears.

When they emerged Jungi Khan had his back to them. His shoulders sloping, his neck bent, he was trying to appear servile and inconspicuous but Ruth knew: had she permitted Raj to embrace her, the man would have broken his neck and flung him down the steps.

Moments later, when Ruth saw Raj to his Mercedes, the gatekeeper was already at his post at the gate.

‘Next time, my dear,’ Raj said, unrepentant and amused, ‘let me take you on a tour of my hotel suite. The hotel’s guards are more civilized.’

‘When would that be?’ Ruth said, trying to match his tone but failing.

‘How about, I send the car to fetch you tomorrow evening,’ Raj said. ‘I’m leaving the day after for Islamabad ... To be sworn in as Roving Ambassador at Large.’ Raj conveyed the news of his appointment with his usual disarming humility.

Ruth was taken aback enough to say: ‘When were you going to tell me? One is not appointed Ambassador at Large every day!’

‘After I’d had you to myself for a bit ... If that damned mountain oaf had not felt duty bound to kill me.’

‘He would have, you know,’ Ruth said, her shaky voice revealing the extent of her fear now that the terrifying moment was past.

‘I know,’ Raj said simply.

Ruth twisted her head as if ridding herself of a crick in the neck. ‘You’d better go,’ she said, nodding her head towards the car and stepping back.

‘Will you be all right?’

‘Yes ...’ she said uncertainly, and then noticing Raj’s concerned face added on a firmer note: ‘I’ll be damned if I let that man hang around ... I’ll tell Rick’s office to get rid of him.’

Later that night as she tossed restlessly in bed, she knew her affair with Raj was over. A sense of relief seeped through her. She remembered the merciless gossip that had erupted when it became known that a woman of her acquaintance was having an affair. What was she thinking? Behaviour that might be condoned back home would be unforgivable in this culture; frowned upon even by her closest friends.



Ruth and the Afghan

It was the last day of the polo match. The popular Brazilian team had scored a narrow victory over the team from Nepal to win the finals in a tense match. Ruth, who had politely rooted for the Nepalese but had not much cared who won, was nevertheless disappointed. She spotted Raj in the knot of sympathetic onlookers that had formed around the Nepalese players. She noticed him cut through the throng to the Brazilians to congratulate them and had almost been tempted to join them. She would see him tonight, anyway. The handsome Brazilian captain had accepted the huge silver cup with crossed polo-sticks for handles, and held it aloft to enthusiastic applause.

As she walked down the path leading to the parking lot Ruth's mind drifted to the gala that would take place later that evening at the Punjab Club. It was to bid farewell to the visiting teams. Her friends would be there and the usual anonymous blend of party faces. The teeniest excuse and there's a party, she thought. Didn't this lot get tired of seeing the same faces evening after evening? They'd had a grand shindig to welcome the polo players only a few weeks back.

She was wondering absently what she might wear that evening, when she spotted her driver, already holding the car door open to receive her. Bless his heart, she thought—he always managed to find a conveniently close parking spot.

Once she was home Ruth went into the kitchen to ask if Chikoo had been fed. This was more a ritual than a query—an unconscious means of reclaiming the house from the servants and establishing her domain. At times, yearning to have the house to herself as she had back home in New England, she would dismiss the servants—insist they take the day off. It never quite worked as she hoped. Billo would stalk away miffed that her mistress should have so little need of her. The cook, loath to go home so early, would lock the kitchen door and settle on a charpoy beneath a tree with a hookah, ready to pass the time of day with a game of snakes-and-ladders or a chat with whoever happened by. No matter how she barricaded herself the gardener might decide to trim a hedge outside her bedroom window, or Grace turn up to sweep the drive. And always she would hear their muffled voices talking. Did people anywhere else in the world talk so much?

Telling the cook he could take the evening off, Ruth settled down to watch an old re-run of *Bewitched*. Idly stroking Chikoo as he nestled in her lap she was irked, and at the same time amused, by the eccentricity of the mullah-supervised television censors. At the merest hint of a kiss—even a perfunctory peck-on-the-cheek between Samantha and her husband—the screen became blurred. Cleavage and legs in commercials on CNN were subjected to a similar ambush. Ruth found it ironic that a country with one of the highest birthrates in the world should be so queasy about sex. Her friends kept scraps of muslin at hand; viewed through the fabric they said the images cleared. Ruth had not gotten around to trying this out yet.

Ruth waited for the six o'clock news in English. Ever since her visit to Kabul she liked to keep abreast of events in Afghanistan. The Pakistani newscaster's delicate face, lightly framed by the obligatory chiffon scarf covering her head and shoulders, looked lovelier for it. She did not smile, as her counterparts on CNN and BBC did—it would be considered indecent in the wake of the increasingly puritanical atmosphere during General Zia's regime—akin to flirting with men in the audience. The scarf was mandatory on Pakistan television and symbolized modesty.

It was almost four years since Ruth had accompanied Rick on a business trip to Kabul. Ruth knew that the Afghan king, Zahir Shah, had been deposed by the KGB and the delightfully informal couple, who had invited them to dinner in Kabul, had been forced to flee. After several subsequent unstable regimes, the Russians had placed a man of their choice at the helm of affairs to gain complete control.

There were desultory pockets of resistance by Afghan Mujahedeen. In their intended push through Afghanistan and then Pakistan to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea and on to the Straits of Hormuz, a short span of ocean across from Iran, the Soviet Union finally invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Their plan was to cut through to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan and from there to be in a position to control the Strait. This, Rick had explained, directly threatened American oil interests in the Persian Gulf. The newly elected President Reagan, who Ruth had at first considered dimwitted and later, insane, had proved shrewd and even prescient. Reagan promptly branded the USSR 'Evil Empire', deployed missiles in Europe and bombarded the communist regime with dire ultimatums. In making the Russians believe he was dangerously deranged and reckless of consequences he evidently terrified and eventually pushed them into compliance. Breathtaking rumours circulated through the grapevine of the expatriate American community in Pakistan. Two Texans, Ruth excitedly learnt, had had a hand in influencing President Reagan and directing the action. A stunning Houston socialite, Joanne King Herring, whom Ruth had met briefly at a party when Rick had been posted to Houston, was befriending General Zia-ul-Haq, President of Pakistan, and throwing extravagant parties at her home to introduce the General to the Houston elite. She cultivated the senator from Lubbock, Charlie Wilson, who was on the Arms Appropriation Committee, and got him to direct the flow of weapons to the mujahedeen. Between them and a couple of CIA operatives they made

Reagan aware of what was at stake. Reagan immediately grasped the possibilities inherent in the Afghan resistance and got America fully engaged in their struggle against the Evil Empire. Pakistan, a willing ally at the time, was used as a base to conduct covert military operations of the proxy war and as a conduit to funnel American arms and supplies to the freedom fighters in land-locked Afghanistan.

Ruth was uneasy about her country's motives in supporting the Afghans. If her Pakistani friends realized the expediency of the American involvement they didn't mention it. Except for occasionally calling American Capitalism 'ruthless', or its democratic ideals 'hypocritical' for foisting military dictatorships when it suited them, Ruth had found little anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. Although she agreed with these views, she found herself defending her country's actions as she never would have done at home.

Ruth could hear Billo go in and out of the bedroom as she tidied up, putting away the washing and hanging the ironed shot-silk skirt and top she had decided to wear that evening. Once Ruth left for the Punjab Club Billo would turn down the bedcovers, turn on the electric heater, place the flask of water on the night table and plug in the mosquito repellent. Ruth heard Billo run the bathwater. She stretched her limbs in a gesture of ease and gratitude before getting up from her chair.

Ruth slipped into her long navy skirt and stood before the mirror to adjust the slim straps of her fitted top. She bent to accommodate Billo as the maid hooked up the clasp of her lapis choker, its three deep blue strands separated by delicate strips of gold encrusted with tiny diamonds. The choker enhanced the handsome set of Ruth's tanned shoulders and the matching bracelet on her shapely, lightly freckled arm. Rick had bought the jewellery for her from the Gem Corporation of Pakistan their first Christmas in Lahore.

When she last wore the lapis with the same sleek navy outfit she had on now, Rick had told her she looked better than she had on their first date. The compliment had charmed Ruth, and yet she found herself choosing the outfit tonight with thoughts of Raj eyeing her from across the party. With his love for polo, she guessed he would be there. The affair with Raj had fizzled out after their scary encounter with the night-watchman, and his endless travels now that he was Pakistan's Ambassador at Large. Yet, his absence had left Ruth in quite an ironic state of missing the man who had filled in the holes left by her perpetually travelling husband.

Ruth draped the light pashmina stole around her bare shoulders. She studied her image in the mirror. Her flesh was firm, her stomach flat. Her face had taken on softer, more appealing contours. Her cleavage and the knee-high slit in her skirt were discreet; the tailor had made the outfit out of a sari Rick had brought her from Delhi.

By the time Ruth stepped out into the porch Yussaf, the company chauffeur, had already turned the Buick around in the porch. Rick did not like her to drive at night. Yussaf held

the door open while she settled in. She directed him to the Punjab Club, and told him she would find a ride home. At dinner parties at their friends' houses the chauffeurs were fed from their hosts' kitchens. Later, huddled in blankets against the wintry nights, they slept in their cars. Ruth did not like to keep Yussaf waiting past midnight. When Rick was in town he drove. Tonight, one of her friends, or perhaps Raj, would drive her home.

The party honouring the polo players and the victorious Brazilian team was in full swing. The reception hall was crammed with women in silk saris and shimmering shalwar-kameezes and men in dark suits or woollen sherwanis that came down to their knees. Waiters in white uniforms and crisp turbans were weaving between the guests with trays of fruit juices, sodas and steaming kababs. Ruth automatically switched into 'party mode'. Greeting acquaintances, looking for friends, she moved through the crowd. People had spilled into the back garden and had formed small groups around the coal braziers scattered about the lawn. The temperatures dropped below freezing at night. The grass was covered with coarse handwoven wool rugs, and the garden was enclosed by orange marquees, appliquéd with brilliant swaths of red, blue and green colours.

A cheerful man with a prematurely white head of hair handed Ruth a drink. She often ran into him at parties. She took a sip: Scotch masked in Coke. She didn't like Scotch, but 'thanks', she said, raising her glass, 'great stuff', and moved on. A little later she quietly abandoned the glass on a side table.

A diluted form of Prohibition had always existed in Pakistan but General Zia had recently enforced its laws. Alcohol was no longer sold in club bars and the wine shops were closed. At parties in public places like the Punjab Club, men concealed flasks of smuggled Scotch or vodka in their breast pockets. At dinners at home smuggled alcohol was freely served but there was rarely any wine: smuggling the bulky bottles of wine was unprofitable.

Non-Muslims could buy a limited monthly quota and Christian servants, therefore, were in demand. Grace and Sadiq, who swept the compounds and cleaned the bathrooms of two other bungalows besides the Walkers', divided their monthly quota of booze equally between their Muslim employers. Every month they stood in line with their permits to buy bottles of local beer, gin or brandy from the back rooms of the two five-star hotels licensed to sell alcoholic beverages. Scotch didn't figure in their quota: a bottle cost twice their monthly salary. Bootleggers flourished.

She felt the familiar sly brush of fingertips across her back and turned, smiling, to face the beaming Raj ... They hugged lightly, affectionately brushing cheeks. Raj held her at arm's length to give her an appraising look. The gleam in his eyes flattered her as of old, but the spark it had excited in the past was no longer there and she was glad of it. 'I saw you at the match,' she said. 'You were palling around with the Nepali and Brazilian teams.'

‘Why didn’t you join us, my dear?’ he said, and Ruth smiled to recognize the old caress in his voice. She loved this in him. Though they both recognized that their passion had cooled, the warmth of their friendship remained.

‘What, and have you neglect me while you hung around with players?’

‘My dear, I would have gladly hung around with you instead—you know that!’

‘I know no such thing,’ said Ruth laughing. ‘You’ve neglected me ever since you’ve become Ambassador at Large,’ Ruth pulled a rueful face.

Raj held her face between his palms as he looked deep into her green eyes—the men standing by looked on enviously, aware of the special status Raj enjoyed as a foreigner. ‘As of this moment I’m resigning my appointment,’ he said. ‘I’d never neglect you, my dear—surely you know that!’

‘Oh Raj, I prefer my Roving Ambassador,’ she said laughing. ‘Don’t you dare resign.’

Ruth spotted Sherry and Nasira in the midst of a flirtatious bunch of polo players, and following the movement of her eyes Raj brushed her cheeks with his lips and moved away. Ruth smiled and waved discreetly, but her friends didn’t see her.

As she made her way towards them Ruth glimpsed, between a shifting fence of bodies, an arresting figure. There was something familiar about the person and Ruth edged sideways to have a better look. She recognized him almost at once. The man was transformed. He had lost at least twenty pounds. With his grey beard neatly trimmed and an Afghan cap on his head, the man stood out from the crowd, elegant and debonair. Four years ago, when Rick had introduced them in Kabul, Abdul Abbas had had a fuller, henna-rusty beard and an altogether more rugged and grizzled aspect. Back then, Abbas had been Minister of Trade and Finance, and had held the authority to sanction a sale Rick was negotiating. Rick had found him straightforward and honest. Ruth wondered how true that might still be, after everything that had transpired.

Despite Rick’s praises, it had surprised Ruth when Abdul Abbas invited them to dinner at his home. The two-storey brick structure, with wide balconies and verandas wrapped all around, and rows of doors, was more like a barracks than a home. It could have accommodated enough people to fill a fair-sized hotel, thought Ruth. Later on Abdul Abbas had explained that the rooms were occupied by visiting tribesmen and their families, most of them in some form or another related to him. As the prosperous head of his tribe it was incumbent on him to accommodate the visiting kinsmen.

Abdul Abbas and his wife Nabila, a thickset easygoing woman in her late thirties, received them in the porch of their rambling bungalow. Nabila wore a cardigan over her magenta shalwar-kameez outfit with a matching dupatta draped round her neck. The conflagration of colours so close to her face imparted a dusky glow to her fine features and olive complexion. Ruth had read somewhere that shocking pink was South Asia’s

navy blue. Even in the short time Ruth had spent up North she could tell that the woman, despite her almost black hair, was not Afghan.

They were ushered ceremoniously into the sitting room. A log fire blazed in a gaping, soot-blackened fireplace and Rick and Abdul Abbas, almost reflexively, stationed themselves with their backs to it. Ruth skirted a large coffee table to get to the sofa and abruptly stalled. A brilliantly coloured rooster with turquoise and rust-orange feathers was pecking crumbs off the Persian rug as calmly as if he was in a barnyard. The rooster raised his wattle-crowned head to glare at the intruder in beady-eyed umbrage and took an elegant step back.

‘Will you just look at his majesty!’ said Nabila, chortling, arms akimbo. She had a throaty voice and, what Ruth guessed, could be an East European accent that fell agreeably on their ears. She unwound her scarf and waved it to shoo away the bird. The rooster flapped his jewel-coloured wings and hopped on to the coffee table to squawk his indignation. Their hosts laughed uproariously and Ruth and Rick, infected by their hilarity also guffawed. Humiliated by the onslaught of such noisy merriment, the rooster scurried off between the curtains and Nabila settled on her heels to rub off the smears of white bird-poop from the carpet with a rag.

A goat tethered outside bleated intermittently as they chatted. Compared to the mansions of dignitaries in Pakistan, with their onyx floors and expensive European fittings, the Afghan minister’s house, though bulky, was made from simple brick and mud mortar.

Another log-fire welcomed them in the dining room, where Ruth could barely make out the rafters from the thin haze of smoke that had risen from the fire and clumped at the high ceiling. More smoke seeped in from the kitchen as Nabila popped in and out to help an elderly Afghan cook bring the steaming dishes to the table. The meat and vegetables were simply prepared—a welcome change from the fiery spices and rich curries the Pakistanis favoured. Abdul Abbas said something to the cook in Pashtu. The old man stood in the door to shout at someone they couldn’t see and the goat’s mournful bleating faded in a receding series of protests. ‘Tomorrow,’ Abdul Abbas said, ‘I will introduce you to my village.’ Ruth felt a soft touch in her heart, a feeling of being honoured.

The next day Abdul Abbas drove them through a torturous dirt road to his ancestral mountain village. The men they passed, recognizing the green Land Rover, touched their fingers to their foreheads in solemn salaams. The women—picking fruit, working in fields hewn out of the mountains or just sunning themselves on the flat roof of their mud huts—hid their faces in their shawls and followed the jeep out of shadowed eyes. On the outskirts of Kabul and in the villages, traditional norms continued to prevail.

Trailing a thick tail of dust, they arrived at a clearing. An immense, fortress-shaped dwelling, made from mud and straw, rose above them.

Ruth and Rick were invited to sit on hand-woven rugs spread on a grassy patch outside the fort. The air smelt of pine and wood-smoke. Banked by a cloudless vault of blue sky, the stark mountains faded into the misty distance. The tribesmen, handsome in turbans and beret-like wool caps with rolled rims, laid out fragrant platters of roast chicken, curried goat and rice-pilaf and poured spring-water from frosted steel jugs into thick, smudged glasses. Once they had served the food, the men, careful to maintain a respectful distance from Ruth, sat down to eat with them. They kept their politely lowered gaze averted from her face.

After lunch Ruth was invited to visit the dingy, smoke-filled rooms in the women's portion of the fort. There was segregation between the sexes here. They had no electricity. The chattering women led Ruth up the dark steep staircase, which felt like a narrow tunnel, to the roof, now bathed in the chill glare of the slanting afternoon sun. In the larger view the rooftop afforded her, the distant mountains, dark behind the chain of dun-coloured hills, appeared to be closer. The women clustered around her. The older women, with leathery, prematurely aged faces, screwed up their eyes to peer at her. They stroked the softness of her cashmere sweater with their gnarled hands and pinched the material of her slacks and jacket between their fingers. They clapped and laughed as Ruth drolly tried to converse with them in sign language. Hiding shy smiles in their shawls, the pink-cheeked girls peered at her out of eyes that carried a jewelled spectrum of gold-green colours that seemed to reflect the colours of the setting sun. All at once Ruth felt enveloped by the beauty of her surroundings, by the transformative power of her contact with a culture so unimaginably different from hers.

Encircled by Abdul Abbas's hospitality, Ruth formed an impression of the country. Despite its obvious poverty, Afghanistan was a moderate nation state, reasonably in touch with the times. Some of the women in the cities wore Western-style clothing; many taught in schools and worked in hospitals and government offices. Ruth saw a few tent-like burkhas only in the bazaars. The Soviet presence was discernable, especially in the network of roads and tunnels crisscrossing the country, but their influence appeared benign.

A year after their return to Lahore Rick brought the news that Abdul Abbas had been exiled in the overthrow. He and his family had fled to the United States. Soon, the Khyber Pass was closed to tourist traffic and civilian flights to Kabul, suspended. Ruth was not able to visit Afghanistan again.

Ruth felt a surge of warmth as she meandered her way to Abdul Abbas; his hospitality had made their visit to Afghanistan memorable. When Abdul Abbas noticed her, Ruth extended her hand and said: 'I'm Ruth Walker. Remember me?'

Abdul Abbas recognized her almost at once. He smiled and held her hand in both his. 'Of course, of course, my dear,' he said, 'I'm so happy to see you. And how is your dashing husband?'

That was not a word she'd choose to describe Rick; but for an instant she recalled Rick as a young activist, his thick sun-streaked hair falling to his shoulders, a scant beard downing his cheeks, holding up anti-Apartheid and anti-war banners—yes, the youthful Rick had had an air about him ... his cropped hair was still thick and she wished he was with her at this moment to share in her delight in chancing upon Abdul Abbas—share the pleasure and adventure of their visit to Afghanistan his presence recalled.

Ruth smiled: 'You look quite "dashing" yourself!' With the camel-coloured Afghan coat draped over his broad shoulders and his tidy beard, Abdul Abbas looked well-groomed and classy. She noticed the fine cut of the expensive American suit beneath the coat.

Abdul Abbas introduced Ruth to the two young Americans standing with him. Of late, Ruth had noticed men like them at the larger, more anonymous receptions she was invited to; men so alike they could be clones. Bushy-bearded, brawny-muscled, with dark close-cropped heads and reserved countenance, they hardly looked American—dress them in Afghan attire and even the Afghans wouldn't tell them apart. She had assumed they were undercover operatives, even commandos, and had kept her distance. She had no wish to know them, or, for that matter, what they were up to.

Still, she was here, and she ought to be polite. 'Hi,' Ruth said, briefly holding out her hand to each and forcing an ironic, lopsided smile. She turned back to the Afghan. 'I heard you and Nabila had migrated to America?'

'We had to flee Kabul with only the clothes on our backs,' he said. 'My whole family is there.' Ruth imagined the extended *family* of uncles, aunts, siblings, cousins, and their children, and shook her head in sympathy.

After a moment's pause, Ruth, desperate to lighten the mood quipped, 'Did you take your goats and rooster with you?' She looked at him out of the corner of her eyes, the hint of a smile twitching her lips.

'Only the clothes on our backs, my dear,' said the Afghan, responding to her amusement with a quiet, rueful look.

Ruth blushed. She shouldn't have said that. 'Sorry,' she said, including the young men in her embarrassed glance. 'I didn't mean to be flippant.'

'Please don't upset yourself,' Abdul Abbas said pleasantly, and added: 'We ate the fellow in the end.'

'Oh no,' said Ruth pulling the requisite face, and then asked: 'Where's Nabila?'

'Back in the States. I'm here alone.'

As she and Abdul Abbas chatted, Ruth gradually became aware of how pleased the young Americans were to see her. It disconcerted her. While she talked to Abdul Abbas their disarmed, puppy-eyes lingered on her, soaking in the comfort and familiarity her

presence afforded them. Ruth felt her heart soften. They must miss home. They were so young, almost boys, caught up in war games—acting out their adolescent fantasies and those of older men. Her smiles became warmer, her tone tinged with indulgence as she included them in the conversation. She laughed when they slipped in a humorous remark and, swept by an unexpected wave of tenderness, every now and then she was almost overcome by the urge to touch them.

‘Where do you guys come from?’ she asked.

‘I’m from St. Paul, Minneapolis,’ said John. ‘Bill’s a redneck—from way down under.’

‘You’re from Australia?’ said Ruth, surprised.

‘No ma’am, I’m from Lubbock, Texas,’ drawled Bill, and punched his companion’s arm hard. ‘Don’t pay him no attention, ma’am. He thinks he is a stand-up clown.’

‘Stand-up comedian, you Neanderthal, you rodeo clown,’ said John, pushing Bill back with a series of small thrusts.

‘Ouch, ma’am, that hurts,’ complained Bill, looking at Ruth over John’s shoulder with comical pleading.

Ruth found herself laughing immoderately. It was as if her misgivings, her distaste, were being expelled in the dimly felt guilty rush of relief at having misjudged these boys. They were not the ruthless professional killers she had assumed them to be. They were kids. Bill wrapped his arms around John and clasped him in a tight embrace to stop the shoving. ‘Stop it, you two,’ Ruth said, still laughing as she tried to pry them apart. She might as well have tried to separate conjoined elephants. Their arms felt like truck tyres beneath their dark jackets. ‘That’s enough, boys,’ she said, wondering if they had even noticed her effort.

But acutely sensitive to her touch, Bill and John at once drew apart, and grinning with a touching mixture of apprehension and gratitude placed an arm around each other’s shoulders. Abdul Abbas, standing to one side, looked faintly forlorn.

And from her changed perspective Ruth noticed the two women, kicking up the hems of their swishing saris as they resolutely made their way through the crowd towards them. Ruth composed herself and acknowledged them with a smile. She fervently hoped it was too early for them to be drunk.

Jasmine, a lissome beauty with porcelain skin and thickly fringed cobalt-blue eyes, was married to a minor prince. Her French mother had separated from her Pakistani father when she was barely five and had gone back to live in France. She had had a disturbed childhood between her warring parents and, after the separation, she spent brief freewheeling spells with her mother in France. Their visits ended when her mother discovered her fifteen-year-old daughter in bed with her stepfather. She accused Jasmine of seducing her husband.

Chicks, short and curvaceous, was a divorcee with two small children. Her spherical chocolate face masked in white talcum powder, Chicks sported, like defiant trademarks, two clownish spots of rouge on her cheeks.

‘Too many sourpusses at this goddamn party,’ Chicks declaimed throatily in a recklessly loud and jovial voice as she came up to them. ‘Not fair, you’re hogging all the fun guys,’ she said to Ruth. ‘Mind if we join you?’

‘Sure,’ said Ruth, concealing her misgivings. She could never tell if Chicks was drunk or just acting drunk. She glanced at Abdul Abbas. He was smiling at the women uncertainly but with his customary courtesy. Ruth introduced Chicks and Jasmine to the men.

Repulsed and intimidated by her at first, Ruth had come to appreciate Chicks’s keen intelligence. So long as one wasn’t the target of her jibes, she was fun—in small doses. While Chicks’s outrageous behaviour amused Ruth, she recognized that it cloaked mutiny and a helpless fury.

With her soft, rounded features and lilting Bengali accent, Chicks had looked and sounded different from other Pakistani women, and Ruth had soon picked up her story. Chicks had come from what was then East Pakistan to work in Lahore and had married a local Punjabi man with whom she had two children. He had treated her brutally and she had, after protracted and humiliating court appearances, finally obtained a divorce. She was stranded in Lahore when, after a bloody revolt, East Pakistan, absurdly separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory, declared its independence and became Bangladesh. Chicks belonged to a culture and race that was despised in the aftermath of the break-up of the two wings of Pakistan. Because of the custody terms of her children she found herself trapped in West Pakistan, a place where she didn’t want to be.

The Americans at once engaged the striking newcomers in conversation and Ruth, relieved, turned to Abdul Abbas to ask him where he lived in America.

He explained that he and his family had settled in a sparsely populated area about an hour’s drive from Albuquerque. The brown hills and rugged terrain of New Mexico reminded them of home.

‘You must miss Afghanistan,’ Ruth said.

The sympathy and kindness in her voice brought tears to his eyes.

He nodded: ‘Yes. Very much.’

To give him time to recover, Ruth told their little group about her visit to Afghanistan and of the hospitality Abdul Abbas and his wife had shown them.

‘You wouldn’t recognize Kabul now,’ the Texan drawled. ‘The Soviet tanks have flattened it. There are very few walls left standing.’

She had guessed as much from the images on TV. ‘Do you go there often?’ she asked Bill.

The Texan shrugged: ‘We’re with the US AID program,’ he answered. Devoid of the animation that had enlivened his features just a moment before, his blank face drew Ruth’s scrutiny. She wondered at the stock answer he had provided and more or less guessed the reason for it: although America was a conduit for the arsenal and hardware procured from all over the world that poured into Afghanistan, the Americans were forbidden on Afghan soil. The Americans did not want to provoke Russian sensibility by showing a too blatant support for the Afghan Mujahedeen. This reserve suited the Pakistan government, who did not want their close alliance with the American military to be known.

Abdul Abbas had recovered his composure and to include him in the conversation Ruth said: ‘Tell us—what brings you to Lahore?’

‘I am on my way to Kabul.’

‘Can you get there?’ Ruth said, surprised. ‘I thought the border is closed.’

‘For two years, I’ve longed to be in my country, to breathe its air—to stand on its soil—to kiss its earth,’ he said, the melodrama of his words diluted by the palpable ache of his longing. ‘One way or another I will get there.’

Abdul Abbas had been warned by his clansmen that it was too dangerous for him to visit; they could not assure his protection. As guerrilla fighters, the mujahedeen’s lives and the success of their attacks depended on their agility and speed. His presence would endanger their missions. ‘They are as fleet and surefooted as mountain goats,’ he boasted, and Ruth’s tongue flicked at the savour of the word ‘fleet’: it appeared to fit aptly the quicksilver nature of the war being waged by the mujahedeen against their mightily armoured and lumbering enemy. ‘I was like them when I was younger,’ Abdul Abbas added matter-of-factly.

Abdul Abbas’s clansmen had finally given in to his persistence and agreed to escort him to Kabul. ‘My friends,’ he told Ruth, ‘will see me across the Khyber Pass to a designated village on the other side.’

There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he was alluding to Bill and John, but Ruth knew he meant them. ‘Isn’t it too risky?’ she asked, glancing at the Americans in alarm.

Their faces were noncommittal, their boyishness eclipsed. How quickly they reverted to trained roles.

‘Oh dear,’ said Chicks. ‘What’s this? More sourpusses!’

‘More sour pussies,’ said Jasmine, slurring her words and rolling her huge cobalt eyes at the Americans.

Ruth realized they were both drunk.

Bill and John's faces hardened and turned red. Ruth gauged the steely discipline of their professionalism and turned her face away. This is what had made her keep her distance from men like them—they were trained assassins.

'The mujahedeen will protect me with their lives once I am in Afghanistan,' said Abdul Abbas, choosing to ignore the drunk women.

'My, my! Don't we look constipated?!' purred Chicks, turning inquiringly to Ruth. 'What's wrong with this party?' she asked. And all at once her husky voice, vibrant with amusement, rose to hector the public in general. 'I know what—everyone needs a good dose of castor oil, that's what!' she declared, wagging a rebuking finger at the chattering throng. 'No more booze till you've had your castor oil.'

The few people who recognized Chicks's voice turned with a knowing smile, amused and unperturbed by her antics. Outrageous behaviour was to be expected of Chicks and Jasmine when they were together.

'Don't mind Chicks,' said Ruth. 'She's like this when she's drunk.'

Ignoring the newcomers, the Americans gave Ruth and Abdul Abbas a brief nod, and saying, 'See ya,' slipped into the crowd.

'Oh dear! Look what we've done,' moaned Chicks, clasping her hands and pulling a comically contrite face. 'We've driven the lovely men away.'

'Who cares,' said Jasmine. 'I don't.'

'You're right. Who cares,' said Chicks and turned her attention to Abdul Abbas: 'So, tell me—you were a big-shot in Kabul? A really big, big-shot?'

'Who cares,' said Jasmine. 'I don't.'

'You were a great big, big-shot!' decided Chicks.

'And now he's a great big small-shot,' said Jasmine.

Abdul Abbas stared at the women as if hypnotized. He lowered his gaze and stood helpless.

'A small-shot with a silly goat's beard,' Chicks said. And before Ruth knew what was happening, Chicks's small hand shot out and grasped Abdul Abbas's neatly groomed beard. On tip-toes, she stood braced against him. 'Poor, poor fellow,' she said, wagging his beard. Ruth watched aghast as Chicks's scarlet-tipped probing fingers locked on Abdul Abbas's chin. 'My poor poppet misses his rotten country?' she murmured, shaking the flesh of his chin from side to side. 'His eyes thirst to see it?' her husky, sugary voice mocked. 'His lips long to kiss its soil? My, my!'

Jasmine closed in and as her slender pale fingers got entwined with Chicks's chocolate suppleness the ambushed grey hairs of Abdul Abbas's beard soon stuck out in brittle tufts. Traditional Afghan ways had not prepared Abdul Abbas for an onslaught by women like Chicks and Jasmine. He couldn't be rough with these sophisticated strangers or force their arms away to deflect their attack. It would be inappropriate and cowardly to grapple with these women.

Hissing: 'Stop it, you two! Stop it!' Ruth moved from one to the other trying to pull them away. They proved surprisingly resilient. Engulfing Abdul Abbas with insulting baby talk they simply shrugged and elbowed her away.

Abdul Abbas's arm appeared to grope randomly for a chair behind him as, thrown off balance, he awkwardly staggered backwards. A hand reached out to steady him and he collapsed in a chair hastily positioned there by an alert guest who had been watching the alarming scene. Chicks promptly planted herself on his lap and Jasmine removed his cap.

The women caressed his ears and stroked the stubby hennaed hairs on his shorn head. The few people who were near enough to notice them and hear their giggles and cooing assumed Chicks and Jasmine were indulging the elderly Afghan with their usual buffoonery. Their feckless ferocity had earned Chicks and Jasmine a special dispensation and they got away with behaviour that would be unacceptable in other Pakistani women. This was only partly because of the incorrigible persistence of their misdemeanours. Chicks and Jasmine, the one a Bengali and the other with a European mother, were not considered proper Pakistanis and, as such, their behaviour was condoned and often indulged, even as they were subtly marginalized and slighted. Although the same shortcomings, if she could call it that, applied to Ruth, she had realized that as an American, she had a different stature which reflected her country's might. And her pale blonde looks were too exotic to be marginalized in the same way—in fact, she was treated with deference and lionized.

The little tableau on the chair was abruptly disrupted by the return of burly white presences. It happened very fast. Bill lifted Chicks off Abdul Abbas's lap and held her as if she was a baby while the other grinning special operations clone drew Jasmine to his massive chest in a gentle embrace. As she nestled in his arms he unceremoniously nuzzled his face in her hair. Bill disappeared with Chicks. Thank goodness the young Americans had no compunctions about touching unrelated women, thought Ruth, as John drew up a chair to sit protectively with Abdul Abbas.

Ruth, too embarrassed to face Abdul Abbas after what had just occurred, quietly slipped into the crowd. The fragrance from grilling lamb kebabs and chicken tikkas seeped into the hall from the marquee-enclosed space outside and feeling the need to be with friends, Ruth sought out Nasira and Sherry.

Ruth had a lot to tell Rick when he returned from his tour. She told him about running into Abdul Abbas at the party and the way Jasmine and Chicks had behaved. She was soothed to see Rick's face flush darkly at the outrage.

About a month after Rick's return, when Ruth climbed into bed and settled down to read, Rick casually remarked, 'Abdul Abbas is back from Afghanistan.'

'Oh?' Ruth asked surprised. 'You met him?'

'No,' Rick said. 'But I heard about it. The mujahedeen he was with were trapped and on the run in a narrow gorge ... when the situation became too dangerous for him they tied him to a mule and sent him packing. They do that mostly to save their women and children.'

'You're kidding,' Ruth said, turning to her husband and putting her book aside. 'Tied him to a mule?'

'It's true. No matter what happens to their charges, dead, alive or wounded, the mules are trained to carry them across the border to the refugee camps in Pakistan. They're sure-footed animals; they use routes inaccessible even to the mujahedeen.'

A few days later, Rick was off on another tour. As always, Ruth saw him off at the airport. 'I'll miss you,' Ruth said. 'Please be back soon.'

Rick was taken aback. She was not in the habit of saying such things. He looked at her keenly, and was touched by the look of sadness that etched new lines on her face. 'I love you,' she said and he was concerned to see his normally composed and cheerful wife looking so lost and forlorn.

'Anything I should know about? Are the children all right?' he asked kindly.

'They're fine; don't worry,' she said, moving her eyes away from him. She was suddenly swamped by images of their life together, of the way Rick had stayed awake nights when the children were teething ... and later when they started school he helped nurse them through bouts of flu and frighteningly high fevers—and an almost unending series of colds till they outgrew them.

Her face was flushed and she appeared on the verge of crying. 'You were a good dad,' she said.

'I'll come back as soon as I can, darling,' he said. The gentleness in his voice and his use of an endearment he had all but forgotten the use of, caused the tears brimming in her eyes to slip down her cheeks. She was acutely embarrassed, knowing there were many curious eyes on them. As foreigners they were accustomed to being stared at, but Ruth's flaming face and demeanour was attracting more notice. 'I'm sorry, making a spectacle ...'

'Don't be,' Rick said, handing her his handkerchief. 'I miss you too when I'm away.'

This was news to Ruth and she searched his face.

‘If you feel this way I’ll arrange for us to return home ... I’ll ask to be transferred back.’

‘Don’t do that,’ Ruth said, alarmed. ‘I like it here—I love the adventure you have brought into my life ... only don’t leave me alone so much.’

‘I’ll arrange for Allen to travel more ... he’ll like that.’

Ruth did something she never would have in public—she stepped closer and lay her head on his chest. She was grateful that instead of being embarrassed, Rick placed a protective arm around her.

Eventually, as always, Rick received a new posting, this time to the increasingly important Middle East, and Ruth’s time in Pakistan ended. Even in the years following her departure—through the Middle East, and her eventual return to America—Ruth still felt a strong imprint of her time in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The memories lingered, and she would find herself dwelling on the magnificence of the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram mountains, the highway that followed the old Silk Route along the Indus into China. She would think sometimes of Raj and the ways in which he had enriched her life, of the tunnel beneath the temple where she had transcended herself; and of Abdul Abbas lashed to his mule, escaping across the Afghan border to a refugee camp and back into exile.

In 2001, when those remote areas intruded upon the American consciousness, it was not in any way to give satisfaction. The surreal manifestation of airplanes flying smack into the Twin Towers on 9/11 awakened Americans to a confused awareness of other parts of the world and to the danger lurking in the anger that was boiling at perceived American meddling in the affairs of their countries to advance American interests.

During their tenure in Washington DC, Rick joined the Brookings Institute and Ruth settled into the role of a DC housewife. She joined the Friends of Pakistan Women’s Association, and occasionally forayed into the intricate world of the DC think-tank, with whom Rick often worked as an adviser.

Her and Rick’s continuing interest in Afghanistan took them one day to a think-tank conference earmarked as ‘Prospects for Afghanistan’s Future; Accessing the Outcome of the Afghan Presidential Election’. During the talks, her attention was briefly caught by a clean-shaven man sitting with the panel on the dais: he looked oddly familiar. When he walked up to the mike to speak, she became breathless—engulfed by a feeling of *déjà vu* that transported her to the dinner for the visiting polo team at the Punjab Club in Lahore, when, from a distance, she had glimpsed Abdul Abbas.

This man spoke in fluent English with an American accent and a faint inflection that Ruth recognized as Afghan. It occurred to her that by now Abdul Abbas would be much older than this man at the mike. Confident and assertive, he sounded the panel’s voice of

doom, saying that the US Embassy in Kabul was running around without a plan; that the Taliban held at least 40 per cent of the country and matters were getting worse. When he finished speaking, the crowded hall was so stunned by his pessimistic outlook that there was a moment of dead silence before the applause.

When, after a brief Q&A session, she and Rick walked up to the man, his resemblance to Abdul Abbas was so striking that she was sure he was his son.

He was. His name was Zalmai. After they had introduced themselves, he said: 'My parents mentioned you. They wondered where you were—they would have liked to meet you.'

The use of the past tense alarmed Ruth. She wondered if one or both of them had passed on; they would be old by now.

'How are Abdul Abbas and Nabila?' she inquired hesitantly.

'They're doing okay, considering their age,' said Zalmai. 'Father had a minor stroke, but he is quite recovered.'

'I'm so glad he's well. Is he still in New Mexico?'

'He was able to return to Kabul. But our house there was completely destroyed,' Abdul Abbas's son went on to explain. 'My parents and Abdullah, my oldest brother, returned to reconstruct the house ... after that, they decided to live permanently in Kabul.'

'Has the house been restored? Is it safe?'

'It's looking better than ever ... Yes, Kabul is safe, for the moment at least.'

'They invited us to dinner at the house,' Ruth said. 'We even visited your ancestral fort.'

She became aware that a knot of people had gathered about them, bubbling with impatience to claim Zalmai's attention. Rick glanced at Ruth: 'I think people are waiting to speak to the guest speaker, dear.'

Ruth knew he was right, that she should step back, but she lingered. 'Do you think we could visit them ... go to Kabul again?' she said wistfully, glancing at Rick.

'I suppose we could,' said Rick slowly. Then, as the prospect of revisiting a more adventurous and rewarding period of his life soaked in, he said: 'It's not as if we don't have the time—Abdul Abbas was a dear friend ... I would like to see him and Nabila.'

'I wouldn't advise it,' said Zalmai, becoming suddenly almost curt.

'But you said it's safe,' Ruth said, crestfallen.

'Not for them ... You would put them at risk,' Zalmai said, making no attempt to soften his tone or disguise the bite of impatience that gave his voice a harsh edge. 'If they are seen to be fraternizing with Americans, their lives would be on the line. Despite what we

like to think in this country, the Americans, with their military footprint, are considered occupiers.'

Ruth felt suddenly on the verge of tears.

Zalmai noticed the tears in Ruth's eyes and softened as quickly as he'd been angered. 'Perhaps you can go in a few years,' he said, his kinder tone acknowledging their claim to more consideration as old friends of his parents. 'Once things have settled a bit ...'

He put an arm around her and gave Ruth the kind of affectionate hug one reserves for good friends. He took the hand Rick held out in both of his, in the old Pashtun way Ruth remembered. 'I hope we meet again,' he said with genuine feeling before he turned to the small bunch of people waiting to speak to him.

As they moved away Ruth was glad—at least he had no compunctions about touching unrelated women.

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The Trouble-Easers

It is Friday, the day to remember the angels Behram-Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan.

Crouched in slim-waisted, long-limbed glory, her buoyant bottom solemnly skimming the oblong brick, Mother diligently mops the bedroom floor. She closes all the doors and disappears into the bathroom.

I dawdle on the bed, absently attuned to the sky-blue dazzle of spring outside the window, the shrill trill of distantly wheeling kites, the buzz of servants talking in the kitchen.

The prayer cap slips down my forehead and makes it itch. I become impatient. I wish Mother would get along with the ceremonial story, and not take so long with her preliminary prayers. I hear the swish-swish of the kusti as she whips the sacred-thread, woven out of sixty-four strands of wool, behind her to banish evil. She will tie the thread thrice round her waist, knotting it in the front and in the back, and, so, gird her loins in the service of the Lord.

When Mother emerges from the bathroom—the gauzy scarf covering her head tied in a soft loop beneath her chin, her face pious—the bedroom air smells holy. And she has not even lit the joss-sticks or the fire yet.

I help her spread the durrie on the brick floor, and, on it, a spotless sheet. It is immaculate except for a few holes burnt by errant sparks from previous prayer-fires. Mother places the fire-altar tray, with its portion of sandalwood shavings and frankincense, in the centre of the sheet. Around it she arranges a portrait of our prophet Zarathushtra—one finger raised to remind us of the one and only God—and of the ragged-looking, saint Mushkail-Asaan (literally: Trouble-Easer). A silver bowl containing water, a mirror, chickpeas and jagged lumps of crystallized sugar, complete the arrangements.

I take my place across Mother. Shaded by the scarf, her features acquire sharper definition. The chin, tipped to a dainty point, curves deep. The lips, full, firm, taper from a lavish 'M' in wide wings, their outline etched with the clarity of cut crystal. The soft curve of her cheeks is framed by a jaw as delicately oval as an egg. The hint of remoteness, common to such classically sculpted beauty, is overwhelmed by the exuberance and

innocence that marks her personality. Mother is luscious beyond bearing. My heart beats fast. She does not look at me. I am observing an aspect of her that is too private. A shy and guilty voyeur, I remove my eyes from her face.

We sit cross-legged. Praying under her breath in sibilant whispers, Mother lights the joss-sticks, and arranging the sandalwood in a crisscross pattern atop a thin bed of ashes in the fire-altar, sets it alight with a match-stick. Turning her face slightly to avoid the smoke, she gently fans the sandalwood to start a crackling little fire the size of the palm of my hand. She adds a pinch of frankincense and the room is so filled with smoke and fragrance that I can already feel the presence of the angels. My eyes and my nose water.

At last Mother utters in Gujarati—the language adopted by the Parsees when they came to India—the words that will usher in the story of Pir Khurkain and Mushkail-Asaan.

‘Once upon a time there was a wood-cutter named Pir Khurkain.’

‘Ji-re-ji,’ I respond reverently. Yes ji yes.

I too have a part to play. Each time Mother comes to the end of a sentence I must say, ‘Ji re ji.’ If I fail to respond promptly, Mother peeks into the mirror and quickly says: ‘Yes ji yes,’ to herself, becoming both the teller and the listener, and I am done out of my rightful part.

Right through the ceremony we shell the small golden chickpeas and collect them in a dish. The dark discarded husk floats in the silver bowl. The bowl’s contents will be chastely tipped into a gardenia hedge or a flower-pot later.

As the story progresses my mother’s pure, rich voice picks up the spellbinding rhythm of all great tellers of tales: it is a simple story, simply told.

Once upon a time there was a woodcutter.

‘Yes ji yes.’

Every day he chopped wood and provided for his wife and daughter.

‘Yes ji yes.’

One day his neighbours were cooking liver. The aroma from the frying liver drifted to his house and made his daughter’s mouth water.

‘Yes ji yes.’

The girl wondered, ‘What excuse shall I make to visit their house?’ She decided she would call on them to ask for some fire.

I don’t recall anyone telling me, but I know that everything in the story happened a long time ago, before matches were invented. People lit their fires from a central hut—or a temple—where a fire was kept alive all the time, or they carried it from each other’s hearths.

When the girl went to her neighbours' house to ask them for the fire, they told her that she should take it herself, but no one invited her to partake of the liver.

A little later she went to the neighbours' house again. This time they fetched her the fire, but still no one offered her the liver.

The daughter's craving for the liver grew into a tormenting hunger and she could think of nothing else.

In the evening, when the woodcutter returned to the house, he asked his daughter: 'What is the matter, why are you looking so sad?'

So the girl told her father what had happened: 'The neighbours were cooking liver. The fumes from it drifted to our house and I wanted to taste it so badly that my hunger became unbearable. I went to their house on the pretext of asking for fire. They did not bring me the fire, but asked me to fetch it myself. Thrice I went to their house. The third time I went they had settled down to dinner. This time they fetched me the fire, but no one asked me to stay to dinner. I hankered for the liver, but they did not give me any. That's why I'm so unhappy.'

The woodcutter said, 'Don't worry, child. Tomorrow I will cut a huge stack of wood in the forest and buy you all the liver you desire.'

'Ji-re-ji.'

Pir Khurkain went to the forest to cut wood early the next morning. He chopped the trees until he had gathered a large stack of wood. But when he went to collect it in the evening, there was nothing there because the stack of wood had caught fire and burnt to ashes.

Then Pir Khurkain thought: 'How can I face my wife and daughter empty-handed?' Too ashamed to return to the house, he decided to spend the night in the forest.

The next day the woodcutter cut a bigger stack of wood. But when he went to fetch it later, the wood had again burnt to ashes.

The woodcutter could not bear the thought of returning home without the liver his daughter craved. Again he spent the night in the forest.

Then Pir Khurkain spent the third day cutting and chopping an even larger stack of wood. But when he returned to cart it to the market he found only ashes. Pir Khurkain thought to himself: 'It is three days since I've eaten, but how can I show my face to my wife and daughter empty-handed.' He felt utterly defeated and despondent.

'Yes ji yes.'

The woodcutter waited in the forest till the daylight began to fade. He decided that he would slip into his house after dark, and spend the night concealed in a corner.

When he arrived at his street he sat upon a stone amidst the shadows cast by a banyan tree and waited for the darkness to thicken.

Now it so happened that the angels who relieve our troubles, Behram-Yazad and Trouble-Easer, were out for a stroll in the city that evening. While wandering through the streets they spotted Pir Khurkain slumped dejectedly in the shadows and asked him: 'Why are you out here in the dark? Is anything the matter?'

The woodcutter was too embarrassed to give them a reply and he remained quiet. On their way back they again saw the woodcutter. 'Why are you still here?' they asked. The woodcutter did not know what to say, so he remained silent. Then the angels looked into his saddened heart and said kindly: 'Tell us what is worrying you and we will ease your troubles.'

'Ji-re-ji.'

At this point Mother adds a pinch of frankincense to the fire and holding her palms together and bowing her head, requests the angels to ease her troubles. She kneels and makes a motion with her hands, as if drawing the smoke towards herself, and continues:

'The woodcutter then told them the tale of his misfortunes ...'

Mother proceeds to repeat the story almost from scratch, starting with: 'One day the neighbours were cooking liver—my daughter hankered for some ...'

I can listen to the sad litany of the poor woodcutter's woes a million times and still respond afresh to his grief.

'... then moved to pity by the poor woodcutter's story, the angels Trouble-Easer and Behram-Yazad scooped three fistfuls of sand from the ground and poured it into his lap. "Cherish what we have given you, and keep it safe," they said. "Think of us when your troubles are eased, and distribute some shelled chickpeas and sugar every Friday to remember us by."'

The woodcutter thought: 'What good will this fistful of sand do for me? I will throw it away as soon as they leave.'

But Behram-Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan could read what was going on in his mind, and they said: 'O Pir Khurkain, don't throw away what we have given you. Cherish it and guard it with your life. You will find that each grain of sand is of great value to you. Sell it at a high price, don't sell it short; and remember to remember us.'

'Yes-ji-yes.'

Mother must again place frankincense on the fire. She does so, and using the unctuous tone of the obedient child her trust and troubles have regressed her to, says: 'I will never forget you, O Behram Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan.'

I also add a pinch of frankincense to the fire and piously parrot her words.

‘When the woodcutter returned home,’ Mother continues, ‘his wife and daughter were asleep. He poured the sand into a corner of the kitchen, and huddling against the wall in the darkness, fell fast asleep.

‘When his neighbours set out for work shortly before dawn they noticed that the woodcutter’s rickety house was blazing with light. They shouted: “Wake up, Pir Khurkain, wake up. Your house is on fire.”

‘Only the girl woke up. She was frightened to see the house lit up as if with a thousand lamps. She awakened her father and told him that their house was on fire. The woodcutter said: “Go back to sleep, child, it must be one of our neighbours’ houses that is on fire. What do we own that could possibly burn? We have nothing, and bare mud walls don’t catch fire.”’

Reassured by her father’s presence, and his words, the girl went back to sleep. Now Pir Khurkain got up and saw that the whole house was incandescent with light and unnaturally bright. He went into the kitchen and saw that the sand that he had thrown into a corner of the kitchen had turned into a dazzling heap of diamonds, emeralds, rubies and sapphires.

‘Yes ji yes.’

The woodcutter gathered the gems in the ragged turban he usually wound round his head, and laying his head on it, drifted back into an exhausted sleep.

‘Yes ji yes.’

The next day the woodcutter selected one ruby from the heap and took it to a gem merchant to sell. The jeweller asked him: ‘What should I give you for this? One million rupees or two million?’

Then the woodcutter cried, ‘You are making fun of me—don’t mock me,’ and went to another jeweller.

The other jeweller said: ‘I don’t have enough money to make you an offer for a ruby such as this.’

Then the woodcutter went to the biggest jewel merchant in town. This jeweller said: ‘I do not know how to place a value on a gem as magnificent as this. But here’s what I can do: I’ll make three mounds of gold sovereigns of different sizes. Throw the jewel into the air and whichever mound it falls on will be yours.’

The woodcutter flicked the gem up into the air and it fell on the largest mound of gold.

The woodcutter collected the gold coins and went to the bazaar streets. He bought the liver, and he bought meat, bread, sugar, butter, pickles and all the produce that pleased his eyes and teased his appetite. Then he hired porters, and after helping the men raise the loaded baskets on to their heads, gave them directions to his house. As he took the road

home Pir Khurkain bought a bag full of roasted chickpeas. He evoked the names of Trouble-Easer and Behram-Yazad with gratitude and gave three chickpeas to whoever happened to cross his path.

In the meantime the first lot of porters arrived at the woodcutter's house. They knocked at his door, and when his wife and daughter saw what they had brought, they cried: 'You have come to the wrong house ... Pir Khurkain is a poor fellow, he can never afford such fancy stuff. You have made a mistake.' And they sent the men away.

The porters met Pir Khurkain on the road. When they told him what had happened, Pir Khurkain asked them to return to the house with him. As he walked ahead of them he continued to give three chickpeas to whomever he met.

When his wife saw him return with the porters she cried: 'We are dirt poor ... How can you suddenly afford to buy all this stuff? I'm fearful. I think you must have committed a theft.'

Then the woodcutter told his wife and daughter the story of his meeting with the angels Behram-Yazad and Trouble-Easer and the fistful of sand they had given him. When his wife and daughter heard the story, and remembered the brightness that had lit their house, they finally believed him. They told the porters to bring the provisions he had bought into the house. Then they washed and cooked the liver and opened the jars of pickles and broke the bread and ate till they were replete. The woodcutter's daughter's enormous hunger was at last satisfied and she was completely happy.

'Yes ji yes.'

Some days later the woodcutter heard that his neighbours were going to Mecca to perform Hajj. They invited him to accompany them on the pilgrimage, and he decided to go with them.

It dawns on me only now that Pir Khurkain is Muslim. Zoros don't go for Hajj to Mecca. I have just turned eleven. A touch of unease creeps into my mind. What are Zoroastrian angels doing, messing around with Muslim wood-cutters? I've heard this story countless times and never had this thought before—but being on the threshold of adolescence changes one's perspective somewhat.

'Before he left he made a necklace out of those diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires,' intones Mother, and the hypnotic rhythm of her voice, the momentum of the story, again cast their accustomed spell. Mother's unbounded trust in the efficacy of narrating the woodcutter's story every Friday, accompanied by the ceremonial and solemn distribution of the prescribed three chickpeas, vanquishes my doubts. I am once again immersed in the story.

'... and looping the necklace round his daughter's neck Pir Khurkain said to her: "Daughter, you can build a larger and more splendid mansion than the King's palace with

a single gem from this necklace. But don't ever forget we owe our happiness to the Trouble-Easer and Behram-Yazad. Remember to invoke their names in your prayers every Friday and distribute three pice worth of chickpeas to whoever you meet that day.”

‘And so the woodcutter goes away to Mecca to perform Haj.’

‘Yes ji yes.’

The woodcutter's wife and daughter built a mansion that was larger than the King's palace. They gave lavish parties. The odours of grilling meats mingled with the fragrance of flowers and the house resounded with the sound of laughter and the chatter of new friends. But they did not invoke the names of the angels as promised.

One day it so happened that when the woodcutter's daughter went to the bath-house she found that someone was already bathing inside and the doors were closed. She asked the maid who was waiting outside, ‘Who's in there that you won't allow me in the bath-house? I've never been stopped from entering before.’

The maid told her that the Princess was at her bath.

When the Princess overheard their conversation, she called to the woodcutter's daughter and said, ‘Let us bathe together. After all, you are a woman and I am a woman, so what does it matter?’

When they came out of the bath, the Princess sent for silver platters of pilaf and sweets and invited the wood-cutter's daughter to eat with her.

Pir Khurkain's daughter wondered how she could repay the royal hospitality. She removed a diamond from her necklace and gave it to the Princess.

‘Yes ji yes.’

When she returned to the palace the princess showed the diamond to the King and exclaimed: ‘Father, you are a King, and yet you don't have a single gem among your treasures to compare with the lustre of this diamond given to me by a woodcutter's daughter.’

The King said, ‘Daughter, God has not made all things equal. Some men wear crowns and sit on thrones, some toil and yet exist in poverty. Some live by honour and some by pride, and some have strength and some ill health. One man's fate is not the same as another's.’

Then the Princess and the woodcutter's daughter became best friends.

‘Yes ji yes.’

At this point Mother interrupts the narrative to say, in that childishly unctuous tone she invariably acquires: ‘Even if the woodcutter's daughter forgot to invoke you, O Trouble-Easer, I will never forget to remember you.’ She then arranges more sandalwood on the

fire, which has almost become ashes, and joining her hands and bowing her head, asks for blessings on her house. When she passes her hands over her face, I sit up. The interval is over, the story will continue.

One afternoon the woodcutter's daughter and the Princess came upon a lake in the forest. The Princess said, 'How cool and inviting the water looks. Come, let's swim.'

'It is my misfortune that I don't know how to swim,' the woodcutter's daughter replied. 'But I'll sit by the lake while you enjoy your swim.'

The Princess removed her clothes and, last of all, the diamond necklace that the King had given her. She placed the necklace carefully in a fork between the lower branches of a mango tree, and telling her friend to mind her belongings, slid into the water.

Then Mushkail-Asaan came in the guise of a crow and slipping through the foliage, carried the diamond necklace away in his beak.

When the Princess came out of the water and put on her clothes, she discovered that her necklace was missing.

'Yes ji yes.'

They shook the branches of the tree and searched the underbrush and the ground all around them, but they could not find the necklace.

Then the Princess cried: 'There was no one here but us ... I told you to mind the necklace and now we cannot find it. You say you don't have it, but how can that be ... You must have stolen it.'

The Princess took her complaint to the King. The King questioned the woodcutter's daughter and the King's Vazir questioned her too, but the woodcutter's daughter wept and cried: 'I have not stolen the necklace.'

The King then cast the girl into prison.

'Yes ji yes.'

When she heard that her daughter was in prison, Pir Khurkain's wife ran to the palace gates, crying, 'O King! How can I let my unmarried and chaste daughter stay all alone in prison? Put me in with her!'

So the King cast the woodcutter's wife also into prison. He confiscated their property and all their possessions in lieu of the necklace.

'Yes ji yes.'

On his way back from the pilgrimage to Mecca, the woodcutter was robbed by bandits.

When he arrived at his house he found it in complete darkness and gloom.

The woodcutter ran to his neighbours' houses and knocked on their doors to find out what had happened. His neighbours told him that his daughter had stolen the Princess's necklace, and that the King had cast both his wife and daughter into prison.

Pir Khurkain then ran all the way to the palace and standing before the palace gates, cried: 'O, King! What manner of justice is this? That I, a man, should sit at home, free, while my wife and daughter are in prison?'

The King told him, 'Your daughter stole the Princess's necklace; that is why she's in prison. Your wife did not want her to stay in jail alone, so I put her in too.'

'The woodcutter pleaded, 'O King, I beg you to release them, and to lock me up in their stead.'

The King freed both women and cast Pir Khurkain into prison.

That night Mushkail-Asaan appeared before the woodcutter in a dream: 'I gave you every happiness that your heart desired,' he said. 'Yet you could not remember to pray over a few chickpeas and think of me?'

In his dream the woodcutter wept and cried, 'O Trouble-Easer, forgive me. My daughter is young and heedless. She and my wife have made a terrible mistake.'

And because Pir Khurkain was a truly good man, Trouble-Easer said, 'When you awaken you will be free of your chains. You will also find three coins on your pillow to the right hand side of your head. Send for the chickpeas and sugar with the money, and think of us; we will once again ease your troubles.'

Another break in the story. Another pinch of incense added to the fire, a folding of hands and bowing of heads.

Mother says: 'When you ease other peoples' troubles, O Mushkail-Asaan, ease ours as well.'

Next morning when Pir Khurkain woke up he found the chains that bound his hands and legs had fallen away from him. He looked to the right of where he had laid his head and found the three coins the Trouble-Easer had spoken of. Then Pir Khurkain sat down by the barred prison window and, saying his prayers, waited for someone to come by.

Presently he saw a man hurry past his window. The woodcutter hastily shouted at him to stop, and pleaded with him to bring him three-pice worth of roasted chickpeas.

The passerby was irritable and brusque: 'I have no time to spare. My daughter is getting married, and I am too busy in the hustle-bustle of wedding preparations to get you chickpeas.' Then, saying, 'I'm on my way to buy clothes for the wedding,' he rushed away.

The woodcutter was enraged. He muttered: 'May the news of death replace the hustle and bustle of wedding preparations, and may you need to buy a shroud instead of bridal

garments.'

'The passerby was returning to his house with the new wedding garments when some men rushed up to tell him, 'Your son-in-law has suddenly taken very ill. He's unconscious and on the verge of death. You must hurry and buy clothes for the funeral.'

The passerby turned back and went sorrowfully to buy clothes for his son-in-law's funeral. The woodcutter saw him and again begged him to buy three-pice worth of roasted chickpeas.

Now the grieving passerby went up to the barred window and said, 'Give me the money brother, and I will get you the chickpeas. Earlier I was on my way to buy wedding clothes; now I have news that my son-in-law is deathly ill, and I'm in no great hurry to get burial clothes.'

The passerby brought the woodcutter the roasted chickpeas.

Then the woodcutter blessed him and said, 'May your sorrowing house be filled with joy again.'

Once more the men from his house rushed to catch up with the passerby. 'Your son-in-law has recovered completely,' they cried. 'Go quickly and make arrangements for the wedding.'

The woodcutter prayed over his beads, and recalling his meeting with the Trouble-Easer and Behram-Yazad with gratitude thanked them for the help they had given him. At the same time he handed three peeled chickpeas to whoever passed by his window.

'Yes ji yes.'

The next day the King and the Princess went for a picnic in the forest. They strolled among the trees and after a while sat down on a large rock to rest. Then lo! The diamond necklace fell into the Princess's lap right out of the sky.

'Yes ji yes.'

They looked up and saw a gorgeously plumed peacock fly down from a branch and disappear into the forest. Mushkail-Asaan, in the guise of a peacock, had returned the necklace to the Princess.

The King at once turned to his daughter and thumping her on the back scolded her. 'You have accused an innocent girl of theft! You have committed a very grave injustice.'

The King was distraught; the repentant and distressed Princess was sorry for ever having doubted her friend.

The very next day Pir Khurkain was released from jail with great pomp and celebration. The King took the woodcutter to the palace and said, 'Can you forgive us, O Pir Khurkain? My daughter was mistaken and we have committed a terrible injustice!'

The woodcutter wept and cried: ‘You have dishonoured my family and disgraced my daughter! Who will marry her now?’

Then the King said: ‘Would it please you if I marry her to my son?’

And so it came about that the daughter of a humble woodcutter was married to the King’s son.

Then the King removed his crown and placed it on the woodcutter’s head.

‘Yes ji yes.’

The story ends.

Mother asks blessings for our family: ‘As Pir Khurkain’s troubles eased, as a woodcutter’s daughter married a Prince, as the passerby recovered his sick son-in-law: so help us ease our troubles too, great Trouble-Easer and Behram-Yazad, and make our wishes also come true. Amen!’

The room is scented with incense and foggy with smoke. Almost all the golden chickpeas are peeled, their dark husks floating in the silver bowl. Mother gives me three chickpeas and a few jagged bits of crystallized sugar, and pops some chickpeas into her own mouth. She will now distribute them, giving no more than the prescribed three to visitors and members of our household.

My bottom hurts from sitting so long on the hard floor. I feel ennobled—God-blessed. It didn’t occur to me until many years later to question my mother. How did a Muslim woodcutter, who went for Hajj to Mecca, get tangled up with Zoroastrian angels and Zoroastrian prayers? By now I am aware of the bitter memory, dating from the Arab conquest of Zoroastrian Persia in the seventh century, that still burns in the communal memory.

Mother is taken aback by my question. She looks bewildered and a crease forms between her eyebrows. ‘That is how my grandmothers and aunts told the prayer and that is how I tell it ... I have faith in Mushkail-Asaan and Pir Khurkain’s story ... Invoking him has eased my troubles ... the angels have seen me through some very difficult times,’ she muses aloud, and then her face and eyes acquire a beatific glow. ‘But that is what happens when one lives cheek by jowl with people of other faiths—saints jump boundaries and the barriers of animosity fall.’



Their Language of Love

Large eyes darting like startled moths, the slender girl in a red sari emerged nervously from the doors at Kennedy Airport. She anxiously scanned the row of waiting faces in the arrivals lounge and, the anticipatory smile on her lips fluttering, felt her eyes begin to smart. The fear that had lurked unacknowledged in her subconscious during the flight now leapt into her mind like a bolting horse: Nav was not there to receive her.

Roshni paused, blinking back tears, and then, yielding to the pressure from behind, self-consciously trundled her heaped cart past the small groups of relatives and friends who were effusively greeting the other passengers arriving from Bombay and Ahmedabad.

Roshni came to a hesitant stop and stood at a short distance from them. She felt intimidated by the vast hall in which she found herself and by the crush of people bustling purposefully on all sides. Nav would expect to find her here: that is, if he turned up at all. An Air India stewardess flashed her a smile of recognition, and checking her brisk passage stopped to ask, 'Everything all right?'

Roshni nodded, touched by her concern. 'Yes, thanks.'

The stewardess had been especially kind to her on the flight. She, along with many other people on the plane, had guessed that Roshni was newly married by the Banarasi silk sari and the festive red glass and gold bangles that reached halfway up her forearms.

Roshni leaned against her cart. The stewardess's concern had comforted her, and despite her anxiety, she began to take in her surroundings. The sheer size of the hall, the illumination from concealed lights that approximated daylight, the glittering expanse of glass, steel and marble soaked into her consciousness. And it suddenly struck her that she was in America, the fabulous country of her fantasies, of *Newsweek* and rock-stars and MTV, the home of her husband! She was overwhelmed by a glorious surge of excitement: the exhilaration that attends the traveller to faraway lands. Her excitement tempered with worry, she willed her wandering mind to provide her with a next step of action.

As the crowd before her thinned, Roshni noticed a block of chairs ahead of her. People were lounging in weary postures, their hand-luggage strewn about their feet.

Realizing she could keep an eye on the arrivals point from there, Roshni pushed her cart towards a dumpy little grey-haired Indian woman sitting in the front row, her slippers stretched out to a small bag on her cart.

Smiling timidly, Roshni glanced at the vacant seat next to her. The woman made a small accommodating movement in her chair, and said, 'Sit, sit. I'm also waiting ... For my son. Who's coming for you?'

'My husband,' Roshni said, shifting to Gujarati. She guessed from the woman's accent and the drape of her sari that she was from her own home province, Gujrat.

But the way Roshni had said '*my husband*', and the rush of blood to her dusky face, caused the woman to lower the dangling heels of her slippers to the floor and turn to her with an indulgent grin. 'Achaaa,' she drawled, employing the versatile word to declare her pleased comprehension. 'So, you're a brand new bride! How long have you been married?'

'Almost a month.'

'Congratulations! Live long. See much-much happiness. Where are you from?'

'Bulsar.'

'I'm also from Gujrat,' the woman announced on a note of triumph, delighted by a coincidence that, given the population explosion of Gujratis all over the planet, was not so surprising. 'From Ahmedabad. It's quite close to Bulsar,' she said, getting specific. 'What does your husband do?'

'He's a computer analyst.' The crisp English words imbued Roshni's speech with unintended primness.

'Aachaaa,' the woman said dragging the elastic word with a wry but amiable touch of wide-eyed awe. 'Then he must be verrry clever!'

Roshni smiled and nodded her head in bashful concurrence; and, believing she may have sounded as if she was putting on airs, compensated for it by chattily volunteering more information. 'He's just got a job with an American company in upstate New York, in Albany. He's going to show me around New York for a few days and then we'll go to the small town where he's working. He told me that I would like it. Once we get there he will teach me to drive a car.'

The woman studied the girl. Her gaze lingered on the wide, gold-embroidered sari border, the red bindi on her forehead, the centre parting in her hair that lacked the red powder customary to Hindu brides. 'You know,' she said, shaking her head from side to side, 'at first I thought you were Hindu.'

Roshni flushed. She knew she sounded exactly like a *Gujju*. In fact Roshni, who was dark for a Parsee and self-conscious about it, had decided during her teens to use her

small-featured chocolate looks to her advantage the way the south Indian girls did. She took to wearing vividly coloured saris with contrasting borders that complemented her sultry beauty, and coiled her long hair in a silken knot at the back.

Dressing this way had changed the way Roshni saw herself. It also influenced her conduct and attitudes. And her sense of identity with the majority Hindu community had imbued her with a confidence she lacked in the company of her siblings and cousins; brash, lighter-skinned creatures who wore miniskirts and dresses, played the piano and affected Western mannerisms. Roshni had taken to practising classical Indian ragas on the sitar.

Observing the girl's acute discomfort, the woman shifted ground and made a series of sympathetic clicking noises with her tongue. 'It's not right,' she said pursing her mouth reprovingly. 'Your husband shouldn't keep you waiting like this ... But he'll come, don't worry. One has to drive such long distances here. If there is a problem, my son and I will help you.'

Roshni looked at her gratefully. After a few minutes of further chatter she asked, 'Could you mind my luggage while I go to the toilet?'

'Go, go,' the woman said, nodding. 'Freshen up.' She made a small, kissing sound with her lips.

Roshni had barely returned to her seat when she spotted Nav. She shot up from her chair, and pitching her voice discreetly, called, 'Nav, Nav.'

Nav's worried face cleared with relief when he saw her. And as he strolled over to her, Roshni's heart stilled. He looked so attractively at ease and debonair in his jeans and striped T-shirt. Now that she had the chance to observe him neutrally, without the critical assessment of her relatives and friends who had found him alternately too tongue-tied or too patronizing, too tall or too pale, he looked startlingly handsome. More in his natural element here than he had been in dilapidated and dusty old Bulsar. A happy catch in her lungs stopped her breath.

'Hello,' Nav said, and bashful about hugging his wife in public, lightly touched Roshni's shoulder. Then he placed his hands in a 'can-do' businesslike way on the cart.

Roshni glanced at the Gujrati woman with a smile of leave-taking, but the woman, her short legs once again stretched to the cart, was peering at Nav through narrowed and contentious eyes. Clearly she was not about to permit any leave-taking without venting her feelings.

Following the trail of Roshni's disconcerted gaze, Nav also looked at the woman. And, lying in wait for him to do just that, the old woman promptly said: 'Is this good? Your bride comes all the way to America for the first time, and you make her wait like this? It is shameful!'

Nav's laid-back American pose at once vanished and he became as polite and contrite as was expected of an Indian youth being chastised by an elderly woman.

From the corners of her eyes Roshni observed the change in Nav's personality as he made his excuses. She was pleased; the man she was married to still cared about what people from their part of the world thought of him.

In the taxi Roshni said: 'I thought you weren't coming.'

'You knew I'd come.'

'I was frightened.' Roshni sat sullen and huddled in her corner.

'Don't be silly. There were hundreds of people around you. This is New York, not Bulsar. You've got to learn to be strong-hearted and independent if you want to survive in America.' He made a disgusted noise. 'That interfering old Gujju woman got you all worked up.'

'But I *was* frightened.' Roshni was emphatic. She looked stonily out of the window. A tear trickled down her cheek.

Nav slid across the seat and diffidently draped an arm around Roshni's shoulders. 'I'm sorry. I did my best to be on time. I was longing to see you. I put the alarm on for five o'clock to catch the earliest train ... I've had to come a long way, you know.'

But Roshni turned her face away and became as stiff as a bristly reed-broom in his embrace. She sniffed.

Nav raised his skinny buttocks to awkwardly dig into his jeans pockets. He handed Roshni a tattered tissue. Then, exerting more pressure, he drew her closer.

Roshni maintained her approximation of a rigid reed-broom. But her heart, that Nav had so peremptorily ordered to be strong and independent, fluttered and pounded helplessly.

Sensing that her behaviour reflected her fear and confusion at being so far from home—and entirely dependent on a man she scarcely knew—Nav was swept by a wave of tenderness and sexual excitement. 'I'm sorry, darling,' he said, surprised at how easily the unaccustomed endearment tripped off his tongue. 'I didn't mean to be rude or bossy ... Please, forgive me ... Please don't be like this,' he pleaded until Roshni was reassured and her resistance crumbled. She buried her wet, reproachful face in his bony chest and her travel-exhausted body gradually grew languid and trusting in his arms.

Nav gently stroked Roshni's back and slender neck. He kissed her forehead and her fragrant hair—all the way to the Catholic Seminary on 108th Street and Broadway, where he had booked a room for their week-long honeymoon in New York.

In the next few days many of Roshni's fears and misgivings regarding her husband—whom she scarcely knew despite their nervously and ineptly consummated marriage in the small bedroom reeking of whitewash in Bulsar—had been replaced by cautious trust, and

a burgeoning passion. And when, in the throes of lovemaking he felt every fibre in him aglow with delight and his blood sing, he would whisper: ‘God, I love you ... I will give you the moon and the stars ... don’t ever leave me ...’ Roshni’s delighted womb, too, would sing, and she would cry out for love. For Nav was as ardent and tender a lover to the exotic girl he had married as he was an instructive and informative guide to her in New York. After all, he had chosen Roshni above all the other girls shown to him in Navsari, Surat and Bulsar.

They visited the Statue of Liberty, the zoo at Central Park and stood braced against the exhilarating gusts that made it difficult for them to hear each other speak atop the Empire State building.

But the bossy aspect of Nav’s personality, which had provoked Roshni in the taxi, kept rearing its aggravating head like a leery squirrel. Roshni became resigned; Nav was a compulsive instructor, and there was little she could do but accept his peculiar brand of benevolence.

Always prepared to enlighten the country bumpkin from Bulsar, which he grandiosely assured Roshni was as removed from worldly ways as it was remote from New York, Nav drew upon a reservoir of experiences and mishaps in the United States to forewarn and forearm his bride.

And if Nav was an indefatigable instructor, his bride was an astute judge of character. Roshni had it within her realistic and sympathetic grasp to intuit the fragility of Nav’s buffeted ego. She registered, almost by osmosis, the assaults it had endured. From her own reactions she gauged the bewildering nature of the culture-shock—the adjustments demanded of newcomers to this opulent land. She grasped that the challenges Nav had already faced shielded her, and she had the native intelligence to bolster his frail ego in order to strengthen her spouse for their mutual benefit. It was a challenge demanded of the new country. Even though Nav was teaching her to adjust to it, he was also a newcomer to the life outside the university that had sheltered him for four years.

Nav soon discovered within himself a surer strength, and was privately thankful for his unexpectedly diligent and, if not appreciative, at least understanding pupil.

On a bright Saturday afternoon, the fourth day of their honeymoon, Nav proudly paraded his wife, radiant in an emerald shot-silk sari with a plum border, on Madison Avenue. Nav’s chest swelled. Strutting beside her he noted the admiring and approving glances she drew their way. And when Roshni had had her fill of gazing at the captivating window displays, and became restive to go into the stores, Nav tactfully navigated her into a bus instead.

While Roshni excitedly looked out of the window at the deep gorge the immense buildings made of the road and the cosmopolitan carnival of camera-toting tourists, Nav

gazed covertly at the amiable stranger, colourful as a tropical butterfly, who had become his wife. In the lottery of fate that allotted wives, he felt he had picked a winner.

The bus took them all the way to Lower Fifth Avenue, and deposited them at the gates of Washington Square in Greenwich Village. Roshni took hold of Nav's arm as they sauntered through the throng of holidaymakers, surprised by the range of activities going on, all of them competing for their attention.

They stood before small tables, watching speed chess and backgammon. 'Why don't you try?' Roshni asked, and Nav prudently replied, 'I'm not good enough.'

His humility took Roshni by surprise. She pressed his arm closer, and the yielding softness of her flesh pulsed through Nav's blood like feathery threads of happiness as they watched skateboard experts show off by jumping over three trash cans set out in a row, and graceful Frisbee enthusiasts perform amazing feats.

At first they only heard the preacher.

They drifted closer and Roshni spotted, through a shifting screen of other idle drifters, a respectably suited, middle-aged preacher, energetically waving a Bible and belting out God's Word through a mike attached to two small amplifiers.

'He's a Protestant proselytizer,' the knowledgeable husband informed his wife. 'Let's watch him for a bit. They can be quite funny sometimes.'

Roshni lowered her thickly fringed lids and glanced at her spouse from the corners of her dark eyes. At this moment Nav sounded as insufferably stuffy and patronizing as Roshni's family had been at pains to point out to her in Bulsar.

But how could they determine, in a few hectic days, the finer aspects of a personality she was herself only just discovering? The tender, passionate and vulnerable facets that were beginning to shimmer for her like the diamonds cut by the famous artisans of Gujrat.

Meanwhile, the man of God appeared to be in a frenzy. The muscles in his brown face were bunched in tight knots that jumped as he yelled: 'Jesus Saves! I've found the Lord! Amen! I'm a genuine Holy Ghost. I got the Holy Ghost power! Hallelujah! Repent sinners, repent. The end of the world is coming! Now is the time! The end of the world is coming.'

Roshni stared at him, fascinated. People were ambling past them and except for a few children and a young, well-dressed couple who looked like European tourists, nobody paid him much attention. The preacher's fierce oratory and obsessive style reminded Roshni of an eccentric priest who occasionally visited Bulsar to exhort the twenty-odd bewildered Parsee males gathered at Kharegat Hall—for want of anything better to do—to march straight to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva and wrest back Iran, the land the Parsees had fled fourteen hundred years ago, with their importunate demands.

‘Jesus saves! Glory to the Lord! Hallelujah! The end of the world is coming!’ roared the preacher, ‘The Jesus people are coming!’

‘He *is* funny,’ Nav said, and Roshni, smiling, concurred.

‘Repent! I have found the Lord,’ bellowed the preacher. ‘The Lord will find you, sinner!’

And the proselytizer made a smart little turn on patent leather heels and unexpectedly pointed a long and rebuking finger at Nav.

Believing that the condemning finger was directed at some unfortunate sinner behind him, Nav glanced swiftly over his shoulder. No one stood behind him.

Nav turned his scarlet face to the preacher and said—with commendable calm considering his shock—‘I’m not a sinner.’

‘Everyone’s a sinner. The Lord knows. Repent! The Lord will show you the Way. Accept Jesus into your heart. He died for your sins. Amen. Glory, thank the Lord. Repent!’ And since great truths bear reiterating, the preacher, tirelessly repeating himself, exhorted: ‘The end of the world is coming! The Lord Saves! Amen!’

‘Zarathushtra will take care of my sins, my good man. I’m a Parsee. I believe in my Prophet Zarathushtra!’

Nav sounded very like a fabled uncle mentioned by Roshni’s father. The uncle had irritated a New Yorker some years ago with his sermon that Zoroastrians didn’t smoke because they venerated fire, and thus couldn’t give him the cigarette money he had asked for. The aggravated New Yorker had snarled: ‘O yeah?’ pulled out a knife and relieved the uncle of his wallet, and nicked his testicles.

‘Thou shall not place false Gods before me!’ thundered the preacher, who had by now turned a swarthy red. ‘There is only one path to our Lord. Hallelujah! Turn to the Saviour or you’ll burn in everlasting hell. Repent before it’s too late! The end of the world is coming! Glory to the Lord!’

Nav made a slight, reflexive movement that rippled through his muscles, readying him for combat, and Roshni let go of his arm.

‘It’s fundamentalists like you who are causing all the trouble and violence in our world,’ Nav shouted in a voice as terrible as the proselytizer’s and, swiftly glancing at Roshni for approval, continued, ‘If you did a decent day’s work we’d all be better off.’

‘I work in the vineyard of the Lord! I seek lost sheep to return them to the fold. I’m a genuine Holy Ghost—I got the Holy Ghost power! Hallelujah! Glory, thank the Lord. Repent. The end of the world is coming!’ boomed the twin speakers.

Thinking up a storm of responses, Nav waited for a pause in the preacher’s prattle—and became vaguely conscious of a quiet but somehow menacing presence near them. At the

periphery of his distracted vision Nav got the impression that the presence had an abnormally bulky scarf wrapped round its neck and shoulders.

And then, saying 'Ho!', Nav staggered back. He tripped over a stone and his legs flying out from under him, fell on his scant buttocks. Roshni shuffled reflexively to help her husband, but was startled at once by the same sight that had sent Nav to the ground.

The distracting presence had a thick, eight-foot-long boa constrictor wrapped round his neck and shoulders, and for all Nav had shouted 'Ho!' and fallen flat, the lean man with the boa remained as still and detached as a statue of Buddha, if one could imagine a six-foot four-inch African American Buddha with freckles, a pencil mustache and running shoes.

The crowd that had gathered round Nav and the preacher during their spirited exchange at once shifted their attention to the stationary figure with the huge constrictor wreathing, pleating and slithering round his chest and arms. The boa, as thick as a man's arm, as splendid in its sophisticated designer coat as a model, raised its sleek head, flicked out its forked tongue to examine the man's moustache, and curled around sinuously to explore what was going on in the back.

The preacher, looking distraught at having the rug pulled out from under his act by the reptile, shifted his attention. Grasping the opportunity to beat a retreat, Nav and Roshni stumbled headlong into the welcoming centre of a Three-Card-Monte card game.

A burly black dealer, displaying a fuzz of cropped hair and a flattened nose, was bent over the three cards he was expertly sliding on an improvised table made up of two cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other. He was slick, fast, intent, and as he juggled the cards he talked up a storm to attract an audience. 'Twenty-dollar twenty-dollar—which is the Ace of Spades, pick out the Ace of Spades. Twenty-dollar twenty-dollar—watch the Ace of Spades, pick out the right card.'

A player, so thin and tall and young that he appeared to have outgrown his jeans, fixedly followed the movements of the dealer's quick hands which were, for all their size, as supple as a conjurer's. The skinny young player rubbed his chin and deliberated for some seconds; then he hesitantly picked out a card.

It was the Ace of Spades.

Shouting, 'O'rrright!' the youthful winner jubilantly twirled around and waved a little wad of twenty dollar bills high above their heads. His victoriously whirling head was shaved above the ears and abruptly crowned by a flat disk of thick hair.

An alert and admiring spectator, sporting an old-fashioned Afro and a scar that ran from cheek to lip across his otherwise handsome face, shook the winner's hand and thumped his back. The excited young man had obviously had a run of luck and was about to try again.

Nav and Roshni watched the dealer juggle the three cards on the cardboard table. Every once in a short while he would lift up the Ace of Spades to show its position and busily start sliding the cards face down on the table again.

Out of the three games they watched, the skinny youth picked out the Ace of Spades thrice.

It looked reasonably simple and clearly it was above board. The dealer wasn't wearing a jacket, and he had his shirt sleeves rolled up over his bulging forearms. He couldn't very well slip a card up his sleeve or indulge in chicanery without being detected. Or so Nav thought. All one needed to do was to carefully watch the dealer's clever hands and outwit his fat fingers.

Nav moved closer.

The dealer glanced at him briefly out of surprisingly light eyes, and pretending indifference, shouted: 'Twenty-dollar twenty-dollar, watch the Ace of Spades.'

Exhilarated by his bout with the proselytizer, and shaken by his humiliating encounter with the boa constrictor and his subsequent fall, Nav felt compelled to match his discerning eye against the dealer's skill.

'Ten dollars,' Nav said, astutely bargaining. He glanced swiftly at Roshni to ascertain that he had impressed her with his shrewdness. 'I don't have any more money. Ten dollars.'

'Twenty-dollar twenty-dollar, pick out the ace of spades,' the dealer said, ignoring Nav and the ten-dollar bill he held between his index and middle fingers.

Meanwhile the Protestant proselytizer had set up house near them.

'Gambling paves the way to hell!' he boomed through his microphone, and to Nav it felt as though the deceptively innocent-looking amplifiers had singled out his ears for their assault.

'Thou shalt not gamble! The end of the world is coming! Repent. Jesus saves!'

'Ten dollars,' Nav said speaking more assertively, and also loud enough to be heard above the din. He wagged his two joined fingers back and forth making the ten-dollar bill flutter.

The dealer glanced about. The excited young winner had turned his long and narrow back on the game and was busy talking to the admiring spectator with the scar and the old-fashioned Afro. Nav appeared to be the only candidate.

The dealer unravelled his massive beige palm saying, 'Okay, just this once,' and pocketed the bill Nav handed him as swiftly as a lizard snapping up a fly on a whitewashed Bulsar wall.

Roshni observed the gesture and was struck by its significance. There was as little hope of the bill being recovered by Nav as of the metaphorical fly being stuck back on a wall.

Not too perturbed at the possibility of her boastfully savvy and perennially instructive husband being diddled out of ten dollars, Roshni observed her spouse with interest.

Nav was intent and alert. His keen eyes followed the dealer's shuffle and a smug aspect spread over the spare flesh covering his sharply defined features.

Nav's arm suddenly shot out, and his hand, like a serpent striking, picked out the middle card.

It was the five of hearts. The wrong card.

But hope is an indestructible part of human nature and Roshni could almost feel Nav being suckered into thinking the next time he'd win his money back.

Roshni moved closer to warn her husband, but before she could express her misgiving Nav gave the dealer another ten dollar bill. Roshni stared at Nav as he watched the deft conjurer's hands with hypnotic intensity. The smug aspect was no longer in evidence; it had been replaced by a perplexed frown.

Nav abruptly and triumphantly pounced on the card to the left of the centre—and picked out the seven of clubs. He gawked at it in disbelief.

Almost absently Nav took out another ten dollar bill from the new lizard-skin wallet Roshni had brought for him as a gift. Again he pounced. Again he lost.

All at once it dawned on Nav that it was real money he was dishing out and losing so fast. The suspicion that had had no time to manifest itself, now shot into his mind like a dart. He had followed the dealer's hands exactly and knew exactly where the ace of spades should have been. Nav was sure the man had somehow changed the card.

'You're cheating,' he shouted, mortified and indignant.

The dealer's startling yellow eyes turned muddy and locked on Nav's with a dirty look calculated to turn his feet cold. Nav's toes shrivelled into little frozen shrimps inside his woollen socks and gym shoes.

The tall youth in the outgrown jeans who had won so spectacularly earlier, scoffed and said 'Ha!' in an intolerably superior way.

'Call on the Lord for salvation!' the preacher bawled in the course of his own fiery discourse, and inadvertently ignited further sparks in the little scene going on between Nav and the Three Card Monte set-up.

'I'll call the cops for salvation!' yelled Nav, unconsciously echoing the preacher. 'You can't cheat me!'

Nav noticed that the euphoric winner and the admiring spectator with the scar had closed ranks with the dealer. Too late, he realized they were the shills. He was abashed and outraged at having been so easily taken in.

Now the three men combined to glower down on Nav with malignant looks calculated to chill his bones.

Nav's body responded to the glares, and he felt the sweat begin to form on his forehead.

But thirty dollars is thirty dollars, and it constituted a substantial chunk of his scarce resources as a junior computer analyst in upstate New York.

'Give my money back, you bunch of crooks, or I'll have you locked up!' Nav threatened ominously, but the icy shiver that zipped through his spine made his voice quaver.

Not to be outdone, the proselytizer, in the course of his unwitting discourse hollered: 'The only salvation is the Lord! Lightning shall strike the sinner!'

'Why you dirty little squealer,' the dealer hissed. He grabbed hold of Nav by the V-neck of his blue hand-knitted cardigan, and Nav's Adam's apple bobbed up a notch higher.

As if in a nightmarish trance, Roshni saw Nav teetering almost on the tips of his gymshoed toes. She noticed with a sense of shock how extraordinarily elongated and narrow he looked with the clothes on his chest all crunched up in the dealer's giant hand.

Their fists clenched, the two shills moved on Nav like lightning striking.

Roshni suddenly and instinctively let out a shrill, long, bloodcurdling screech and then, certain that her husband was being maimed and murdered, screamed, 'Police, help police! Murder! Murder!'

The dealer lifted his cropped head in surprise, and observing the foreign woman in a sari screaming like a demented trumpet, quickly cast his eyes about. He must have seen something that agitated him because he abruptly let go of Nav and snatched up his cards.

The youthful shill who had scoffed at Nav with such wounding superiority, dismantled the table with a swift kick that sent the cardboard flying.

The dealer and his partners ran in three diametrically different directions and evaporated among the skateboard acrobats and Frisbee enthusiasts before the two cops in navy uniforms sauntered up to the scene of the crime.

His cardigan askew, his shirt half out of his trousers, Nav was too embarrassed to give an account of the scam to the complacent cops.

When Roshni hysterically told them of her husband's losses and how close he had come to being murdered, one of them looked her up and down in her sari and laconically

remarked, 'Everybody knows those guys always rip you off. Y'guys must be from someplace else. He's lucky he didn't get his pockets picked.'

Consumed by curiosity, hanging on to the megaphone and the little Samsonite attaché case in which he kept his amplifiers, the preacher had moved closer with his props. His brown eyes bulging, he craned his neck and danced from foot to foot to peek over the heads of the small crowd.

Once he grasped what had happened, the man of God waved his Bible, moulded his fiery features into a righteous glower and, putting his megaphone to his mouth, bellowed: 'The wages of sin are death! Glory to the Lord. Thou shalt not gamble! Vengeance is the Lord's! Amen! Repent! The end of the world is coming! Hallelujah!'

The policemen winced at the onslaught on their ears and raised their capped heads. The burlier of the two cops took a few menacing steps towards the preacher. The preacher hastily turned away and belted out God's Word with his back to the crowd. But one could tell from the wobbly note in his thunder that his aggrieved heart was no longer in his sermon.

As they rode the succession of buses to the seminary, Nav remarked: 'Well, my dear, one lives and learns. Remember, one never gets something for nothing in America, and if you're stupid enough to expect to, you'll get ripped off. I hope it's been a lesson to you.'

Roshni, who had maintained a suitably sympathetic silence as she observed her husband's bruised face slowly discolour and grow puffy, gave his arm a squeeze. She lay her head on his shoulder, and said: 'I'm glad you stood up to that horrible bully!'

The next morning Nav told Roshni that he was taking her out for lunch to a very special place.

She was still in bed. 'Let me see your face first,' she said, and propped herself on an elbow to examine it.

Nav promptly moved his face to within an inch of hers and grabbed her amorously.

But Roshni's alarm for his wounds was too great to allow for amorous shenanigans. She pushed Nav away with a strength and vehemence that surprised him, and shouted, 'I want to see your face. Not your damn cock!'

Nav, shocked by the unexpected words that issued from the naive lips of his bride from Bulsar, let go of Roshni. He stood up, looking dazed. Was there to be no end to the surprises this unusual girl was to awe him with?

Roshni got out of bed and, holding Nav at a suitable distance by his pajama-suit front, much as the Three-Card-Monte dealer had held him the day before, scrutinized his face. It appeared to be even more puffy and swollen. But in the dingy room with light coming in only from a narrow curtained window, the colours appeared less strident.

Roshni took pains to get all dressed up and added the finishing touch by putting on the delicately dangling ruby earrings given to her by Nav's mother. After grabbing a quick cup of coffee and some doughnuts in the Seminary hall at noon, they rushed off to catch a bus.

Nav followed Roshni through the impressive glass doors of the towering World Trade Center. He had not seen Roshni in the navy silk sari with a magenta border (that matched her earrings) before. She was glowing duskily and Nav felt she was growing more beautiful by the moment. Nav was glad he had decked himself out in brown trousers and a brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

They stood in line for the elevator. When the doors opened to receive them, Roshni gingerly stepped into the curved glass cocoon as if she was stepping into the next century.

Although her senses were awash with wonder, Roshni stared impassively at the rapidly receding marble floor and the dwindling green incandescence of the atrium. Nav had cautioned her not to gawk and gush like a tourist: she'd stand a good chance of being mugged if she did.

It seemed to Roshni that every day she discovered something to enchant her in her new country. Mindful of her husband's tuition, she absorbed the enchantment discreetly, hoarding the throb of her heart like a secret treasure. As she shot into the sky in the glass and aluminium missile Roshni could scarcely believe that she, the ugly duckling of her family in Bulsar, had stumbled somehow into this magical new world with its blazing lights, rocketing elevators and incandescent indoor gardens with huge overhanging trees. How gladly she'd show off all this splendour to her relatives when they visited. She yearned to see the expressions of wonderment on their faces.

The captain led them to a small table. They sat across each other as the restaurant rotated centimetre by centimetre to give them a privileged bird's-eye view of New York. But Roshni only looked through the glass when Nav pointed out a landmark that was familiar to them. Otherwise the fringed darkness of her eyes, soft with unfathomable emotion, remained on her husband's abused face.

In the harsh light pouring in from the sky Nav's battered skin displayed all the colours of the rainbow. And lit also by happiness from within, Nav was radiant. 'Do you know,' he said, the sweep of his arm embracing Manhattan, as his eyes caressed Roshni, 'more money changes hands in New York in one hour than in a whole year in Bombay?'

'Really?' Roshni said, leaning forward in her chair and placing her arms, folded one upon the other, on the table. Surrendering to the moment of bliss she looked at her young husband tenderly. 'God, you really know so much! You're quite amazing.'

'If you stick around with me you'll become pretty amazing too,' he teased. 'It's only because I've been here longer. You'll soon have trivia of your own to share with your family when they visit.'

Roshni smiled. She knew him well enough by now to decode his speech.

This was their language of love.





Sehra-bai

Sehra-bai suffered a stroke two years ago. She goes through phases of intense reminiscence. She is aware that her mind is reliving an old memory, yet the memory is so immediate that all the emotions that accompanied her then, are with her now. Sometimes unbearable hurt surfaces, and her poor forehead crinkles up with her inability to cope with the rage, or guilt, or sadness that swamps her.

When Ruby notices this, and she is not unduly rushed, she holds her mother's wasted body. Often she rubs her face against Sehra-bai's and strokes her chest beneath the collarbone to calm her as she listens to her mother. At such times Sehra-bai might unburden an old pain her mind brutally resurrected, and they discuss the episode as if it has present currency. They structure new strategies to cope with the situation, until Sehra-bai feels more in control of the events that had rendered her so helpless then.

And, almost as often, she preens—gloating at her wit in putting down some past rival, or her charm in vanquishing an ancient foe. At such times, like a geisha expertly flipping open a delicately wrought fan, Sehra-bai audaciously unfurls the radiant spectrum of her vanished beauty. It is unbearably poignant—this seventy-two-year-old woman, propped up with pillows, pinned by paralysis to her bed, recalling the sunlit moments that peaked amidst the darkened hollows of her life like snow-capped mountains.

Late one December evening, when Ruby wheels her mother from the living room to her bedroom, Sehra-bai is in a chirpy mood. Ruby is exhausted. They've watched *Fawlty Towers*. It has been Sehra-bai's favourite show ever since it suddenly popped up on Pakistan TV screens in the 1980s. Tonight they watched John Cleese stomp his wacky way through a roomful of befuddled guests in the hotel he runs with such lunatic abandon. Alternately supporting her stomach and wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, Sehra-bai hooted with laughter. She is not ready for bed. 'I want to talk for a bit,' she says when Ruby removes her headscarf and shawl. 'I know I won't be able to sleep.' The night nurse has already placed her hot-water-bag in her bed and is turning down the comforter.

Ruby stands before her mother's wheelchair, her hands hanging helplessly down her sides. 'Can we talk tomorrow? I'm ready to drop.'

‘Nonsense,’ says Sehra-bai. ‘Wait till you hear what I’ve to say; it’ll refresh you, I promise! Please?’ she pleads.

The sprightly gleam in her mother’s eye warns Ruby. She knows from experience that Sehra-bai will keep the house awake unless she is permitted to have her say. The nurse turns from stacking and smoothing the pillows to raise resigned eyebrows. She shrugs her plump shoulders and throws Ruby an amused glance.

Ruby capitulates. ‘Oh, all right,’ she says, wearily, as if indulging a capricious child, and wraps the fine old cashmere shawl back around Sehra-bai’s legs. She sits down on her mother’s bed and the nurse positions the wheelchair closer to her. The bed is raised on bricks to make it easier for them to lay her down. ‘So? What do we talk about?’ Ruby asks as the nurse quietly leaves the room and shuts the door behind her.

Pointy chin and toothless mouth parodying the prim, grave expression of her youth, Sehra-bai tells her daughter: ‘Whenever I went to the Central Bank in Nila Gumbad, it was ‘pens-down’ time. You never knew that, did you?’

Ruby is puzzled. The tiny Parsee community she belongs to has a tedious reputation for loyalty and hard work. And Parsee bankers were hardly the type to abandon their duty or loyalty and lay down their pens in a seditious labour strike. Nor were the Hindu and Sikh bankers who fled Lahore at Partition likely to; or the staff of Muslims who replaced them after 1947. This was especially so during the days of the British Raj that her mother is harking back to.

Ruby recalls childhood visits with her mother to the cavernous, neon-lit Central Bank hall, segmented like a hive by shallow mahogany panelling, with legions of brown men bent over enormous ledgers like so many drones. In summer their shirt pockets bore ink stains and were stuffed with pens and pencil stubs.

‘Pens-down time?’ Ruby asks, frowning over the rim of her glasses, peering suspiciously into her mother’s sanguine, gimlet eye.

‘Yes,’ says Sehra-bai, girlishly prim, exactly as she would have spoken at that time she refers to as her ‘heyday’. ‘Jal Jariwalla gave them the permission to. Pesi Cooper too, when he became bank manager. Whenever I walked into the bank, the men were permitted to put down their pens!’

‘But what on earth for?’ Ruby asks, feigning astonishment, although by this time she’s cottoned on to her mother’s drift.

‘So they could stop working to look at me! What else!’

Eyes twinkling, face flung back and lit up in a series of mischievously breaking smiles and silent laughter—the kind that ignites sparks of unruly joy in the hearts and eyes of Sehra-bai’s children and grandchildren, whom she keeps attracting to her bedside like expectant honeybees—she adds, ‘I freshened their eyes.’

‘Oh, Mum, you’re too much,’ says Ruby, laughing despite her earlier inclination to remain indifferent. She bends forward to nuzzle her face against her mother’s headscarf. Sehra-bai has merged her daughter’s earlier contention about being ‘too tired’ with her own assertion that what she has to say will ‘refresh’ her, and given them narrative context. That’s sharper than anything Ruby could ever conjure up at such short notice.

‘I told you I’d freshen you up,’ says Sehra-bai gleefully, and her conceited smile stretches her mouth until it breaks in a triumphant chortle.

Ruby kisses the top of her head. ‘You did,’ she says, ‘I’m so freshened I won’t be able to sleep.’ They chat for almost an hour until, finally, Ruby calls the nurse and together they lift Sehra-bai onto the bed.

‘How many boyfriends did you have, Grannums?’ Perin asks. She is besotted by her grandmother.

Ruby sits back with an affectionate half-smile. She enjoys these exchanges between her daughter and her mother.

‘None. We didn’t have boyfriends in my days,’ says Grannums firmly. ‘Your grandfather was my first boyfriend. Not even kissy-cuddly allowed before marriage.’ A touch of mischief lifts her tone and she adds: ‘But when the family went to the cinema, and it was dark, he would hold my hand.’

‘And after marriage? How many boyfriends did you kissy-cuddly with?’

Although Sehra-bai indulges her granddaughter brazenly, there is a limit to the familiarity she will permit. She stops short of allowing it to undermine her authority as grandmother. Perin frequently skirts the periphery, and tests the limits of her grandparent’s tolerance. This mixture of devotion and teasing, obedience and indulgence, has forged an inextricable bond between them.

‘I had no boyfriends! Not the way you mean boyfriend ... silly girl,’ says Sehra-bai, tartly. ‘But I had admirers. Many.’

‘Really Grannums? Tell us! Who?’

‘I’ll only name the ones who’re dead.’

‘They must all be dead by now,’ declares Perin heartlessly. But Perin’s voice is mellow with affection. No matter what her grandmother says, or how truculently she frequently behaves, Perin’s demeanour and tone are consistently indulgent. Otherwise impatient, often short with her parents, Perin has a limitless store of patience where it concerns Sehra-bai. She loves to engage her easily distracted grandmother in little chats, and has become expert at ferreting out family secrets.

‘A lot you know!’ says Sehra-bai, affronted. ‘The older I grew, the younger my admirers became.’ But her bravado is fragile, and Sehra-bai looks uncertain. She’s not sure they

believe her.

Ruby signals her daughter with her eyes, and Perin immediately changes her tack. She leans over to tenderly smooth the wounded crevices that have formed between Sehra-bai's eyes.

'It must feel like the touch of dove-down,' thinks Ruby, covertly observing her daughter through a thick fringe of lashes. She is suddenly suffused by a curiously satisfying sense of well-being. It is somehow appropriate that they should switch roles—the granddaughter as nurturer. Only the very young possess that surfeit of tenderness to lavish on the very old.

Holding her grandmother's hands captive in hers, Perin extracts the names of Grannums's dead admirers. Sehra-bai's memory somewhat blurs the distinction between the dead and the still alive. But Ruby knows them all.

At cricket matches and dinner parties Ruby still runs into her mother's 'younger' admirers—who are by now old codgers. A healthy assortment of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, they ruminate aloud—respectfully, of course—with remarks like, 'We were all in love with your mother,' or, as G. Moinuddeen recently told her, 'When Mrs Edulji and Mrs Kandawalla promenaded up and down the Mall in Murree, the entire male population of the hill-station turned up to look at them.'

Even in her heyday, before age and respectability turned Sehra into Sehra-bai, her mother couldn't possibly have been aware of all her admirers.

Ruby's was a manically isolated and angular adolescence and there was a stage when, prickly with complexes, she resented her mother's relentless allure. The more accessible her mother became to others, the more confoundingly distanced from herself she appeared to grow. In an explosive mixture of indignation and envy she blamed Sehra-bai's attraction on a conspiracy of duplicitous ruses and heartless depravity, and ached to expose her mother as artful.

But Sehra's attraction was unselfconscious and effortless. The beautiful are no more accountable for the extravagance of their allure than the brilliant stellar objects for the cosmic flotsam they attract.

In the photographs of her teens, and in her marriage photographs, Sehra is beautiful in the willowy way of a Botticelli virgin. And later, past her middle years, she again achieved the pliant gravity of Botticelli's modest Madonnas.

In her heyday, though, she had the needy, vampy, vulnerable quality that was so achingly captivating in Marilyn Monroe. Also a Gemini, Sehra had the same breathless innocence and anxiety to please that characterized the American icon; and, attached to that wishful, defenceless face, the erotic mould of a Hindu goddess.

Sehra favoured filmy chiffon saris. Arranged at the shoulder in neat pleats and held by a gold pin, the adhesive drape of the material veiled a velvet span of beige midriff. The substantial tilt above her ribs, sculpted by the wicked fit of her bra and the seam of her short sari-blouse, drew male eyes like bedazzled beacons. And although her impulse to please was egalitarian, Sehra placed her trust only in impeccable men of formidable restraint.

A more or less permanent entourage of distinguished men befriended Sehra over the years, and God knows she needed befriending. But Ruby doesn't think her mother was ever adulterous. Her upbringing and the prevailing mores precluded that.

Born under the sign of the twins, Sehra's dual nature allowed her to be pleasing even to women. In the spring evenings the Jariwallas, the Coopers, the Bharuchas, the Adenwallas, and the Kings chugged up in their fifties autos to the Lahore Gymkhana Club and congregated at one of the benches in the Lawrence Gardens. Since a bench held at most five persons, they brought along canvas chairs and, for lightweights like Mr Jariwalla and Mr Cooper, folding stools. Ruby ran between the flower beds with the other children, and lay or sat on the grass when she was done with playing.

Ten years younger than her husband Rustom, Sehra was the youngest in their group. Cast in the role of the quintessential ingénue, she was petted, teased and indulged. Sehra was also the recipient of much avuncular and 'aunt-ly' advice. Originally from Calcutta, she had arrived in Lahore after her wedding. Full of trepidation as a young transplant, she had played by the rules, and adopted the role assigned to her—that of the perpetual youngster who never overstepped her bounds or trod on another's turf.

Sehra revelled in the resulting acceptance, and the Parsee men and women, elevated by the evening scents of mown grass and sweetpeas and the abundance of roses for which Lahore is famous, took Sehra under their wing. When the creation of Pakistan in 1947 left her family behind in India, the embrace of their wings grew more protective.

The Jariwallas arrive in the early afternoon in a chauffeur-driven, locally-assembled 1994 Toyota and are escorted to Sehra-bai's bedroom. Hirabai Jariwalla's constant hilarity and the old-goatish glint in Mr Jariwalla's dissembling eyes lift Sehra-bai's spirits. In their company she is more like her old self, gracious and hospitable, and less contrary. The Jariwallas are persuaded to stay to lunch and Sehra-bai is brought to sit at the head of the table.

Ruby believes Mr Jariwalla was one of her mother's earliest admirers, and like most of that elite coterie, her confidant.

Mr Jariwalla has always carried his integrity in the fixed contours of his boyish face. Well into his eighties by now, the retired banker still retains his trim form and straight bearing, and his precise and soft-spoken ways.

Hirabai, his plump consort, as loosely fleshed as he is tightly wrought, is his laughing-Buddha, his lucky talisman. Originally from Bombay, she shimmied through her years in Lahore like an even-keeled boat, and has arrived at the calm shore of an arthritic and liver-spotted old age without rancour. She is helped to the other end of the table by Ruby and sits there in her flame-red sari, cracking jokes and giggling like a palsied strawberry set in a Jell-O of infectious merriment—a contagion that has induced a goatish and incurable twinkle in her spouse's adoring eye ever since the day Jal J first met his thirteen-year-old fiancée at their engagement ceremony in Bombay.

'He plucked the words right off her lips ... he granted her littlest wish,' says Sehra-bai after they leave. 'When your husband is that good to you, you don't care about anything else ... you don't care what goes on in the rest of your life.' And later that evening when they gather round her bed, she is still in a philosophical mood. 'He kept her so happy, Hirabai didn't even fret all that much when her only son died.' Sehra-bai's eyes become glazed and ruminative, and she sighs. 'That is how it is when your husband is devoted to you. It cushions life's blows.'

'Did Grandpa make you happy?' asks Perin. 'Did he pluck the words right off your lips?'

'He was deaf when I spoke,' says Sehra-bai with equanimity. 'He never heard me.'

'But Grandpa was devoted to you,' asserts Perin protectively, as if she was around when her grandfather was alive.

'Yes,' says Sehra-bai. 'In his own way he was devoted to me.' Although her voice is confident, her eyes, diffident, shift to Ruby.

Ruby accompanied her mother to the Central Bank ever since she could remember. Mr Jariwalla was chairman of the bank. Mr Cooper was chairman after him.

Whether she was going to the locker to change her jewellery, or with ledgers and files on some business errand assigned to her by Rustom, the trip to the bank was a formal occasion. And as befitted formal occasions, it was heralded by certain rites.

Sehra bolted the bedroom doors and, removing the massive middle drawer from her cupboard, staggering under its wooden bulk, dumped it on one of the beds. She then pushed open the little doors of the secret chambers cunningly concealed on either side of the vacated spaces in the cupboard. When Ruby grew older she helped her mother remove the drawer and fetch the precious contents of the secret chambers.

Perched sideways on the bed Sehra opened the little boxes lined with velvet to examine the diamond and emerald necklaces and earrings, the gold and ruby choker set, the delicately painted gold meena-work sets, the cloth pouches so heavy with gold guineas Ruby needed both hands to lift them, the heavy, hand-wrought twenty-two-carat gold chains, belts, bracelets and dangling earrings. Sehra would ponder over them and set aside

the items she might choose to wear at forthcoming events. The gold guineas, embossed with Queen Victoria's profile, were always at hand to give as wedding, Navjote, and newborn baby gifts. The jewellery that Sehra decided to relinquish to the bank locker she would wrap in silk scarves and pack into a leather handbag reserved for the occasion.

Tucked beneath her arm, the bloated handbag was inadequately concealed by the ends of Sehra's sari as, Ruby in tow, she swished solemnly across the dusty black-and-white squares of the bank floor. Her purposeful air and the preoccupied pucker of her lips indicated the enormity of the task she was about to accomplish—a transaction that was, at the very least, commensurate with the stature of her husband's standing.

No one was fooled, not even the handsome turbaned Pathan security guard from the Khyber Pass who stood double-barrelled guard outside the entrance and militarily salaamed when mother and daughter entered the building. As they put down their pens, the bankers sighed: and the sighing bankers knew that whatever worldly airs she might put on, no matter what important reason she might assign her mission—whether she'd come to balance a discrepancy in her husband's ledgers or to remove jewellery—Sehra-bai was there to distract them from their drudgery and to refresh their eyes.

As they ogled the goddess carting gold to the bank's steely vault, they hoped she would exchange a few words with them on her way out. But when Sehra arrived bearing ledgers, memos and files, they knew their turn would surely come. Sooner or later, courting help, Chanel-scented, she would spread the ponderous ledgers before them and, listing forward, follow their clever pens as they made the requisite entries, adjustments and corrections—a hair's breadth from her charmingly packaged bottom and bosom.

But first, swishing across the black-and-white floor, Sehra would head for the chairman's door, which the salaaming doorman opened with adroit timing. Flashing her splendid teeth in a winsome smile, Sehra breezed in just as Jal J, flushed of face and ears, dapper in his pin-stripe suit, courteously stood up behind his mahogany desk. He welcomed her with a glad and indulgent eye and, with compact movements of his arms and head, graciously indicated the two chairs opposite him.

Sehra, as was her wont, planted her globular rump on his desk instead. Ruby, her presence barely noted, primly parked herself on a cane-bottomed chair.

With practised movements of her hands and shoulders, Sehra adjusted her sari across her chest and, leaning back on the heels of her hands, placing one svelte sari-sheathed knee over the other, swung her leg with its pretty shoe.

Swinging her shoe right under his nose, she chattered away, engaging Jal J in a discourse leavened by innuendo and repartee, and an occasional exuberant laugh that penetrated the bank corridors and echoed in its lofty halls.

'Why weren't you and Hirabai at the Lawrence Gardens last evening? I missed you so much ...' she might ask with a flirtatious glance from the corner of her eyes, and then add,

‘I missed both of you.’

‘If I knew you were coming I’d have come too.’ Jal J’s caressing murmur implied a double-entendre Ruby was too young to fathom, and Sehra too old not to. ‘I’d have—’

‘Hired a band?’ Sehra interrupted, and her tart tone implied a warning: there is a line he may not cross before the child.

‘That too,’ murmured the chastened banker, his pale skin lightly flushed. ‘But I would have certainly brought you chocolate cake.’

His proprieties once again intact, smiling neatly beneath his goatish gaze, the impeccably behaved and soft-spoken banker matched his client’s wit, and continued to flirt back with commendable cool.

‘And what about now? What will you get me now?’ Sehra leaned forward to accommodate her cleavage to Jal J’s stealthy gaze.

‘Anything ... anything you want.’

‘*Anything* I want? What will Hirabai have to say to that?’

‘She will say: Give her the stars and the moon ... Give her chicken sandwiches ...’

‘And mango juice.’

Just as Ruby began to wonder about the curious puffiness around the snug fit of Jal J’s trousers, Mr Jariwalla buttoned up his coat and primly sat down. Ringing for the chaprasi he asked him to bring chicken sandwiches from Shezan and two bottles of mango juice for Sehra and Ruby, adding: ‘Use your bicycle and be quick about it.’

Is there an impropriety in viewing one’s mother as a sex object, even if she is an ex-sex object? But that is the only way Ruby knows to view her. The mould of her mother’s body and the voluptuous wallop it packed could no more be ignored than the sudden puffiness that formed behind Jal J’s fly whenever they were alone in his office ... or the clear split in her mother’s dual nature that could express an exuberance so contrary to the reserve she displayed to her children.

Sehra had an enormous gift for friendship, and although she produced three children, little talent for motherhood.

It is a balmy afternoon on New Year’s Day. Decked out in a lemony house-gown, cocooned in shawls, supported by Ruby, Sehra-bai is brought out to the veranda to greet visitors. Level with the lawn, the veranda is lined with stunted palms and curling chrysanthemums in clay pots. A green thicket of nasturtium leaves swells from Sehra-bai’s feet to flow over a rising rockery. The garden is fragrant with flowers, and the scent from neighbouring gardens. The bad mood Sehra-bai has been in all morning has morphed into sudden bouts of hostility, but Ruby doesn’t allow this to affect her own mood.

Mr and Mrs Cooper call. Colonel Manzoor and the Phailbuses from across the street call, and four committee members of the Parsee Anjuman bring Sehra-bai a pineapple cake with 'Happy 1995 to our President' written on it. More chairs are brought out and the circle spills over on to the lawn.

By the time Aunty Tamy drops by laden with Indian sweets and curried chicken, and raucously announces her presence with her customary 'Where is my Sehra-bai? How is my Sehroo-veroo?' it is late afternoon and they have moved indoors.

Exhausted and peevish, Sehra-bai barely countenances her friend's hearty New Year's greetings and cheerful chatter. Aunty Tamy is not related to them, in fact she is not even a Parsee, but she is one of Sehra-bai's closest surviving friends. She is also the favourite and most faithful visitor. No one has ever seen her lose her temper. She is a few years younger than Sehra-bai and still a handsome woman with lazy-lidded hazel eyes, softly curving cheekbones and lips the shape of lipstick advertisements. Brown hair, streaked with grey, frames her oval face in becoming sweeps before it is coiled in a large bun at the back.

Aunty Tamy accompanies Sehra-bai, who, too tired to walk, is wheeled to her room and prepared for bed.

'Arrey wah! Look at the gorgeous gown madam's wearing,' she exclaims, when the shawls are removed and the splendour of the crewel-stitch embroidery on Sehra-bai's housecoat is revealed. She tells Perin: 'Why is your grandma sitting at home? Take her to the Burt Institute's ball!'

Still frequented by Anglo-Indians and the more Westernized among the Indian Christians, the Club is no longer the posh hangout it was during the Raj. Aunty Tamy turns to Sehra-bai: 'If you go dancing in that dress you'll be the belle of the ball.'

The cords on Sehra-bai's neck thicken and grow rigid. She turns away her angry face.

'What's the matter with my friend?' Aunty Tamy inquires affectionately and at the same time casts a concerned glance at the others.

'We've had visitors all day,' explains Ruby. 'She's exhausted, I guess.'

'I don't like you,' says Sehra-bai sternly to Aunty Tamy. 'You say one thing but you mean another. You were making fun of me. You are cruel.'

'Arrey Sehroo, you know I'd never tease you if I thought it angered you,' says Aunty Tamy, matching her friend's solemn demeanour.

'You think I can go dancing? You think anyone will look at me?' Sehra-bai's tone is scathing.

'My poor, poor baby,' coos Aunty Tamy and leans over to embrace her friend. 'I've hurt my Sehroo-veroo's feelings ... I'm velly velly sorry.'

‘Don’t talk to me like that,’ says Sehra-bai, glaring at her friend. ‘Don’t talk to me as if I’m a baby.’

‘You know I’m joking,’ says Aunty Tamy. ‘If I can’t joke with my friend, who can I joke with?’

Sehra-bai’s eyes become sly slits. She makes a sudden grab at the pashmina shawl wrapped round Aunty Tamy’s shoulders and tries to snatch it away. In doing so she has gotten hold also of the silk sari beneath it. As Aunty Tamy almost topples on her friend, her arms shoot out and she grabs the wheelchair just in time to prevent an injury to herself or Sehra-bai.

Seizing her unexpected advantage as her friend teeters inches from her face, Sehra-bai hisses: ‘Give it back to me ... you slimy conniver!’

Ruby and Perin rush to intervene, but regaining her balance Aunty Tamy tidies her sari with slightly trembling fingers and at the same time assists her friend to unwrap the shawl. Clutched triumphantly by Sehra-bai, the shawl lies in a heap on her lap.

‘It is your shawl,’ says Aunty Tamy. ‘You gave it to me in Murree Hills years ago, remember?’

‘I know I gave it to you,’ says Sehra-bai. ‘Do you think I’ve forgotten? I want it back.’

‘Keep it,’ says Aunt Tamy.

‘Mum, you can’t take it back,’ says Ruby trying to pry the shawl loose from her mother’s talon-like grip. ‘You gave it to her.’

‘I can,’ says Sehra-bai, hanging on to the shawl as if her life depended on it.

‘Let Grannums keep it,’ intercedes Perin protectively, and winks at Aunty Tamy behind Sehra-bai’s back.

‘Yes,’ agrees Sehra-bai promptly. ‘Your daughter has more sense than you ... If you mind so much, give the *Currenty* one of yours,’ she adds, using the unpardonable and obnoxious pejorative applied to Indian-Christians and Anglo-Indians.

‘Mumma! How can you say that,’ cries Ruby, almost ill with embarrassment. ‘I’ll bring you another shawl, Aunty Tamy,’ she says apologetically. ‘You’ll freeze.’

‘Let the whore freeze,’ says Sehra-bai.

Aunty Tamy leaves. Ruby and Perin see her to her car. It is dark outside and the mercury has dropped below freezing. Aunty Tamy has covered her head with Ruby’s Kashmiri shawl and wrapped it round her throat and overcoat. ‘I’m sorry this happened,’ says Ruby. ‘It’s these Halcyon tablets the doctor’s given her. Instead of tranquillizing her they make her abusive.’

‘Don’t worry. I don’t mind,’ says Aunty Tamy. ‘My poor friend, I know how she feels; she’s trapped by her sickness.’

A few months after her stroke, when she was still herself and her personality had not changed so much, Sehra-bai had said: ‘I’m in a cage ... caged like a canary.’ Another time she’d fretted: ‘My body has become my jail ... I want to be free.’ Ruby had assured her the daily physiotherapy would soon restore her control over her body.

‘You’re so right,’ says Ruby gratefully. ‘She’s trapped in her body. You understand her so well.’

‘We’ve been through a lot together,’ says Aunty Tamy, getting into her little Suzuki, for once serious. ‘Shared a lot of good-times bad-times. She knows everything about me ... and I know everything about her.’

Ruby shuts the car door and as Perin moves to one side, the light from the porch ignites the wetness on Aunty Tamy’s cheeks. ‘My God, you’re crying,’ says Ruby, wiping the tears with icy fingers. ‘I’m so sorry ... She can be horrid but she doesn’t mean it ... She doesn’t know what she’s saying.’

‘Oh, that doesn’t bother me,’ says Aunty Tamy. ‘My friend can say anything she wants, to me. But I can’t bear to see her like this ... God should have spared my friend this ... she’s so beautiful.’

Aunty Tamy reverses down the drive. She does not require glasses even at night. Perin, standing hunched in the cold, scoots inside the moment the Suzuki’s out of the gate. Ruby walks slowly back. Aunty Tamy’s husband died about eight months back. Uncle Ahmed was a Muslim and Aunty Tamy, although distantly related to him, was Christian. They had sidestepped the hurdles of their marriage—raised by both sets of relatives—by eloping. Uncle Ahmed belonged to an old land-owning family with deep tentacles in politics. They had not been very kind to Aunty Tamy, who belonged to a distinguished Brahmin Christian family that had stocked Lahore’s colleges with a sturdy brood of professors. Many in her family had moved to England and some to Canada. Uncle Ahmed had insisted on visiting Sehra-bai even while he was recovering from his heart attack and his doctor had advised him to stay home and rest. Aunt Tamy must miss him, thought Ruby. She doesn’t show it, so they think she’s over it and we don’t consider her feelings.

Instead of the low-key day of respite Ruby had hoped for, the next day starts on a disconcertingly unruly note. Early that morning Sehra-bai slapped her night-nurse. Had Ruby not nimbly stepped back, she would’ve been slapped too. After a lunch calculated to neutralize the excess of the previous day—a mishmash of chicken soup and rice followed by banana and Jell-O—Sehra-bai’s mood switches direction and she shifts into a state of agitated dejection. She is restless. She wants to be taken out. When she’s out she wants to be brought in. She wants to visit her friend Najamai. Najamai is one of the few remaining friends who still welcomes her. Najamai is out. Sehra-bai wishes to visit friends in Laxmi

Mansions: her friends in Laxmi Mansions are dead. She wants to go to Anarkali, which is thronged with jostling shoppers, and to Temple Road. 'Why Temple Road?' asks Ruby, surprised. 'You don't know anyone on Temple Road.'

'I have my reasons,' says Sehra-bai fiercely. 'Who are you to question me?'

And when, exhausted, Ruby flees to her room, Sehra-bai's insistent cry pursues her up the stairs: 'Ruby! Come here! Ruby! Ruby! Ruby!'

Ruby covers her ears with her pillows. She recalls an old fable. A kind youth offers to carry a feeble old man home, but when they get there the old man's grip grows supernaturally strong and he never lets go. Ruby feels like that. Sehra-bai has climbed on to her back and she'll never be rid of her burden. Ruby wishes fervently she were back in America.

One of the more poignant dilemmas of migration is the care of the people one leaves behind. 'Abandons,' Ruby had thought, when her conflict between her concern for her mother and her responsibility to her family in America had made a yo-yo of her. Ruby's brothers had migrated to Canada. As devoted to Sehra-bai as Ruby was, they visited alternately, but men were not expected to stay away from their responsibilities to nurse a sick woman. Perin, who had just finished high school, had elected to stay with her grandmother. That still left two of her younger children in Houston. Ruby had flown back and forth, dizzily covering the 20,000 miles that yawned between her dual responsibilities. She was spending almost nine months of the year in Lahore.

By the time they settle down to watch *I Love Lucy* in the living room at the end of the day, Sehra-bai has quieted. In fact she becomes unusually contrite and compliant. Twice she has caught hold of Ruby's arm at opportune moments and, pulling her closer, whispered: 'Please forgive me.'

'What for? What's there to forgive,' Ruby is perplexed and mildly embarrassed.

'A lot. I've been very wicked in the past. Please say it. Say you forgive me.'

Whatever her mother might have done it could not have been unforgivable. 'Okay, if it makes you feel better,' says Ruby with an abashed smile, 'I forgive you.'

The second time she forgives her mother, for she knows not what reason, Sehra-bai's eyes cling to hers in such a helpless, bewildered way that Ruby's heart gives a lurch. After they prepare her for the night and help her lie down in her bed Ruby signals the nurse to leave them alone. She sits on the bed and, leaning forward, stroking Sehra-bai's hair back, asks: 'What is it, Mum? Something's bothering you, isn't it?'

Sehra-bai raises her head to mutely indicate she wants another pillow. The confused tumult of her thoughts has creased her brow and her eyes wander distractedly. Ruby feels her mother has decamped to some agonizing corner of her life that excludes her as of old.

‘Mum, please tell me,’ she pleads. She continues to stroke her forehead. ‘What is it, Mum, can’t you tell me?’

‘I can’t,’ Sehra-bai whispers. Her panicky eyes shift about the room and at last focus weakly on Ruby. And as if strengthened by the sympathetic contact, like a dormant volcano locating a vent, Sehra-bai’s choked voice releases her pent-up anguish in an inchoate geyser of words.

‘It hurts too much. I don’t know what to do—I don’t know who to turn to ...’ she is all but crying. ‘I know ... I know it all happened a long time ago, but I feel it’s just happened—as it was then—just yesterday. Oh, God, I feel sick. Sick with jealousy, physically ill. I wish I could rip this jealousy, this monster, out of me and throw it away.’ She yanks at her nightdress near the throat, and in frustration throws out her hand as if emptying it of something. Her defences have all crumbled and in her distress Sehra-bai clutches her daughter’s arm and half rising off her pillow, breathlessly asks: ‘What shall I do? Should I call Dr Dinshaw?’

By taking inordinately long to come when summoned, Dr Dinshaw has made it plain that they should not call him unless there’s a life-threatening emergency. He has enormous affection and respect for Sehra-bai. He visited almost daily after she came home from the hospital, and then weekly. But in the two years since Sehra-bai had her stroke his patience has worn thin. The affection of her friends, too, has frayed. It saddens Ruby. Only some members of the Parsee Anjuman board visit regularly. Sehra-bai is still president of the board. The community refuses to let her relinquish her position. They hold the quarterly meetings in her sitting room and, propped upright in her wheelchair, she contributes her increasingly futile presence. Soon tired and bored, she asks to be withdrawn.

‘What can Dr Dinshaw do?’ says Ruby leaning closer, her sympathetic tone inviting confidence. ‘You know he doesn’t show up unless there’s an emergency, and even then we can’t rely on him. Talk to me ... we’ll discuss it. It will take the edge off your hurt.’

Perin, alerted by the nurse, has quietly entered to find out what’s happening.

Sehra-bai spots her. ‘Tell her to leave,’ she says anxiously, and Perin withdraws, softly pulling the door to behind her.

Sehra-bai’s eyes again cling to Ruby’s. ‘O God. It is exactly as I felt then ... I phoned Dr Bharucha. I was crying. He came at once. It relieved me to talk to him. He was so kind. He said: “You’ll become really sick. If you allow your jealousy to take over like this it will become a monster and swallow you up. It will make you ill. You’ll sink into depression.”’ She mimics Dr Bharucha’s speech so accurately that Ruby, startled, almost believes her mother has conjured up the doctor’s spirit. ‘He gave me medicine. It had opium. Nothing mattered after that ... I was at peace.’ As Sehra-bai’s speech reverts to normalcy the eerie grip of the spell is broken. Her mother has always been an extraordinary mimic. ‘Maybe Dr Dinshaw will help me ... give me opium, too?’

‘Of course he will,’ says Ruby, gauging the full breadth of her misery. She is prepared to agree with anything to comfort Sehra-bai. ‘Tell me all about it ... what happened?’ She continues to stroke Sehra-bai’s forehead, caressing her cropped grey hair, which has grown thicker and prettier since the stroke.

‘I waited and waited for your father to come home,’ says Sehra-bai. ‘I always waited up for him, no matter what time he came.’ She pauses, and her grip on Ruby’s arm grows so tight that Ruby wonders at the strength in that frail body. ‘In the middle of the night the phone rang. I thought it was Rustom. It wasn’t your father ... It was a stranger; a man.’ Sehra-bai’s voice grows hard and gruff as it catches the venomous essence of that moment. ‘How are you Sehra-bai-ji? Why is the light still on in your bedroom? Do you know what time it is? It’s three o’clock in the morning! You’re still awake?’

‘Who are you?’ Arching over the span of years, her mother’s harsh voice recreates her fear and loathing of that moment.

‘It doesn’t matter who I am. Let’s say I am a well-wisher ... I don’t want you to wait up for that scoundrel night after night. Your precious “Janoo” doesn’t deserve you.’

‘Who are you? Tell me your name ... Show yourself! Coward!’ she says. The use of ‘Janoo’, the endearment she uses to address Rustom, indicates it is someone they know.

‘The man laughs.’ Sehra-bai mimics his guttural laugh. ‘Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha.’

‘At this time of night?’ the stranger says. ‘What will the neighbours say?’

Sehra bangs down the phone.

It rings again. This time the man’s voice is a cruel rasp. ‘If you want to know where your husband is, get into your car right now and drive to 22 Temple Road. You will see Janoo’s Morris parked right behind your good friend Begum Jalil Ahmed’s car in her house.’

Begum Jalil Ahmed is Aunty Tamy. The agony of that instant, the betrayal, is etched on Sehra-bai’s crushed face. Ruby is shocked. How can it be Aunty Tamy? Her mother’s staunchest friend? She and Uncle Jalil Ahmed were among the new lot of friends—landlords, lawyers, politicians, judges—her parents socialized with when her father suddenly burgeoned into a wealthy man and required a battery of lawyers to protect his interests. He also ventured briefly into politics. Along with most of the others the Jalil Ahmeds had remained lifelong friends.

‘Did you go?’ Ruby asks.

‘She was my best friend,’ Sehra-bai emits a strange series of guttural sounds. Misled for a moment, Ruby thinks she’s laughing sardonically. She’s not. She’s sobbing, her mouth wide open in a way Ruby has never seen her cry.

‘I’m so sorry to hear this, Mum. So sorry ...’ Ruby gently runs her hand over Sehra-bai’s cheek to soothe and console her. The peculiar sobbing stops. ‘Did you go, Mum?’ she asks again.

‘My legs and hands were trembling. Still, I quickly-quickly tried to put on my sari ... I couldn’t get the pleats right and I bunched the sari into the petticoat any-old-how. Ayah was sleeping in your room and the phone must have awakened her. She helped me dress.’ Breathless with the rush of words pouring from her, Sehra-bai is panting. ‘It was freezing that night. I ran to the car and Ayah ran out with the coat and made me put it on. “Should I come with you Bibi-ji?” she asked. I told her, “Stay with the children.”’

Sehra-bai is quiet for a stretch. Ruby remains silent—let her mother relay the experience at the pace that suits her. She wonders which ayah Sehra-bai is referring to. It must be that tall thin ayah with that narrow, delicate face they had when she was about seven. She was a refugee from across the border in India. One of the women who had been kidnapped and raped by the opposing religious group during the Partition riots. She had not been accepted back by her family because she had been dishonoured. The ayah told her stories about female giants with breasts as long and fat as Queens Road.

Sehra-bai starts speaking again and interrupts her thoughts. She appears to have come to terms with some of her feelings and her narration is more orderly. Although she is calmer, her words appear to well up from a cocoon of sadness that envelopes Ruby with its melancholy. ‘There was a thick fog that night,’ Sehra-bai says, her voice again evoking the dread ambience of that night. ‘I couldn’t see the sidewalks or the rain-ditches ... I was so hyper I could have driven through a stone wall. There was no traffic. I drove fast, like a madwoman. From Queens Road, through Mozang to Temple Road. I took the turns by instinct. The gate was open—it was one of those cheap corrugated tin-sheet gates—and I could see up the drive. Either there was less fog, or my vision suddenly became sharper. Tamy’s car was parked in the porch. Your father’s car was parked right behind it.’

Ruby lies down alongside her mother and gingerly wrapping an arm around her slack body presses as close to her as she can without making her uncomfortable. Whispering endearments and solace she presses her face against her mother’s. Sehra-bai’s old skin is still velvety and Ruby is loath to separate from its silk.

Sehra-bai’s expression is surprisingly composed, but her chest is heaving and tears are sliding down both sides of her face and into her ears. Ruby props herself on an elbow to open the buttons on Sehra-bai’s flannel nightgown. She strokes her chest beneath the collarbone and down between the sagging ruins of her breasts. She knows it will soothe her. She waits.

When Sehra-bai doesn’t say anything Ruby asks: ‘Did you recognize the man’s voice?’

‘No,’ Sehra-bai whispers. ‘I’d go to the Gymkhana Club tennis courts and I’d inspect all the men playing tennis, and wonder which one it was. I’d go to the Central Bank and

imagine it was one of the bank clerks. It was terrible. I'd play bridge at the Cosmopolitan Club and think my partner could be the man, or my opponent, or a man playing rummy or flush at the other table. I never knew who he was: he had disguised his voice thoroughly.'

'He must have been in love with you himself,' says Ruby, attempting to tease Sehra-bai out of the grip of her malaise. 'Otherwise why would he do a thing like that? Go to such lengths?'

'No. People in love don't hurt the people they love.'

'Don't they, Mum?' asks Ruby wryly.

'Your father loved me,' asserts Sehra-bai with startling certitude. 'He would never deliberately hurt me.'

Ruby is not about to argue with her. She remains quiet.

'I know you don't believe me,' Sehra-bai says. 'He wasn't the type to show it, but I was the only one he loved. The only one he trusted. He could have left his estate to a trust, but he left everything to me. He knew I would do as he wished.'

Ruby thought back to those times when Mother needed her complicity in handling Father. They would gang up on him. It used to be either to help Mother unearth something he had hidden, or to wheedle money out of him. Those were happy, lighthearted occasions, devoid of the tension and the state of alertness Father's presence in the house increasingly generated. In fact they were moments of release—akin to bolts of lightning dispelling negative charges. Father might have hidden a bracelet or ring Mother had neglected to put away, or he was being coy parting with money. Her mother's dire need gave her an unerring instinct—Sehra always knew when Rustom stepped over the threshold with cash. Not small change, but substantial sums from the provisions store, or from some deal in scrap metal or cotton he had struck. Then it was 'Janoo, don't tease me ... I know you've brought money: where is it? You've hidden it!' and they'd go through his pockets, which were more numerous in winter, and launch a search of the rooms under his wary, almost mischievous eyes. The moment they were 'hot', Rustom would jump to the rescue of his secreted loot.

When unhappy, Sehra took to her bed. Ruby recalls a long stretch—a period, perhaps, of some months—when her mother stayed in bed most of the day. With intuitive certitude Ruby links it to the horror of that anonymous phone call in the dead of night. It occurs to her that when Dr Bharucha visited their house so frequently during that time he was more a friend to her parents than a physician. Sehra emerged from this period of semi-hibernation as from a cocoon. Changed.

But it wasn't Sehra who had so abruptly changed, Ruby now realizes—it was her father who was transformed.

Moderate-looking in all respects, neither tall nor broad nor fair of face, and at one time unappealing to all women save his wife, Rustom had suddenly blossomed into a creature of irresistible attraction when it became known that he had, with characteristic quietude and reticence, become one of the wealthiest men in the land.

Faced with his unforeseen and formidable attraction—as Sehra’s once almost-unappetizing husband burgeoned with allure and confusing appetite—Sehra rallied with whatever random means she had at hand. Nature had already endowed her with a provocative figure and a lovely face and, rising to the occasion, she acquired an American bra through an American friend. It was a special cross-over bra and the satin bands criss-crossed in a way that left Sehra-bai’s nipples uncovered. The snug fit of Sehra’s sari-blouses accomplished the desired effect. Artfully embellishing her various attributes with similar ingenuity, Sehra succeeded in invoking a spectacular aura of glamour. Thinking back, Ruby believes what made her mother so irresistible to the endless line of valorous men who befriended her was not just her beauty and glamour but their auspicious conjunction with the childish innocence and make-believe that formed the bedrock of her personality.

The more mesmeric Rustom’s hooded eyes became behind their thick rimless glasses, the more they compelled other lotus-eyed women to lure him to their beds. And the more seductively Sehra’s innocence bloomed, the better it engaged illustrious men of immaculate reputation to abandon themselves to their discreet passion to help and befriend her.

That she was often distressed, Ruby knew. But as to its cause, she didn’t have a clue. Becoming adept at shielding her daughter from her worries, her young mother withdrew from her. Withdrew into herself. So that even in her happier moments, even when her splendid teeth flashed in duplicitous smiles, she concealed herself from Ruby. Ruby inhabited the same joyless house with an aloof, remote and beautiful woman who was so wrapped up in the excess of her misery—and the desperate stratagems she deployed to hang on to her increasingly mute, unassailable and furtive husband—that she had little time or energy to spare for her daughter. Except at a most rudimentary and perfunctory level. But kept from this knowledge by the neurotic, thrift-driven austerity of their lives, and an unyielding rectitude that voided all conversation within the family, Ruby had no means of understanding what was happening around her.

How did she view her mother then? From the distanced and yet necessarily foreshortened perspective of a scrawny and angular child looking up at the radiant flesh and face of a beautiful and inaccessible woman. A mysterious woman, who cried out on some nights ‘Janoo, you can’t go to her. I won’t let you.’ A child who heard the muted bursts of hushed altercations accompanied by ominous thuds—as if heavy objects were being flung about in the dark. The thump-thump of what she grew up to realize were furtive blows.

Mr Jariwalla's visits—with their concealed intimacy—can also be dated to that period.

Of unimpeachable repute and principled character, the confidant of the moment sits by Sehra's bed. He leans forward on the Spartan desk chair he has brought from the writing desk to hear her better—and the better to be heard. Sehra and Jal J converse in low voices so as not to be overheard by servants or children. Little Ruby hears only an indecipherable stream of sibilant whispers, an interminable murmur that issues from the bedroom like the burble and hiss of some unspecified animal. Once she heard Mr J say: 'You must pull yourself together, Sehra ... brooding on such thoughts can destroy you ... plunge you into depression you may never get out of.' His voice was unexpectedly strong, sustaining. So uncharacteristic of him that it had made an impression.

Did he actually say the words she recalls so clearly, or was it Dr Bharucha? Is her memory playing tricks?

Although Sehra's bedroom door was often shut, it was seldom locked. It was locked only when she opened the secret compartment in her cupboard to stash away jewellery, or the documents and cash Rustom might have instructed her to. Occasionally there was a lull in the conversation, or it was carried out in such low voices that Ruby, thinking her mother was alone, blundered into the room. She always found her mother as she might have expected to: decently clad, covered by a sheet, discreetly made-up and fetchingly prostrate with misery.

Ruby's sudden appearances put a stop to the discourse and, depending on her reception, whether she was greeted heartily or hollowly, she beat a hasty and awkward retreat. She could tell, of course, from the expression on their faces and the intimate gloom-doom ambience of the curtained room—hushed confidences still lurking among the shadowy rafters of the receding twenty-foot-tall ceiling—that Sehra's select advocate of the moment had been gravely listening, offering comfort and sage advice.

Sometimes Jal J dragged the square ottoman-stool—which still squats in a corner next to the door—and pressed it into service by Sehra's bed. Its stuffed lid opens on an array of sewing-thread reels. Wood rises six inches above on either side to proffer armrests—provided the sitter is narrow-hipped enough to fit—which Mr Jariwalla still is, and Dr Bharucha wasn't.

And later, in their turn, Mr Bankwalla? Or Mr Singh? Or Cooper? Or Justice Salamat? Or Dorab Patel? Ruby imagines it would be a snug fit for them all—except for Mr Cooper who is as slight as Dr Bharucha was corpulent.

So successfully did Sehra shield her daughter from distress, so discreetly did she deploy her confidences, that Ruby had felt shut out of her mother's life. And in her progressively bewildered isolation, shut out from life itself. By the time Ruby turned eleven, she had migrated to the charged world of romance-tinctured fantasy.

Did she judge her mother harshly then? Not then. She did not have the experience or a standard of comparison by which to judge—if one is ever qualified to do so.

But later, yes.

It takes decades, and an illness that causes Sehra-bai to confide the emotional turmoil of her past, before Ruby is at last able to unravel the mystery of her mother's despair; to decode the preoccupation that appeared to turn her mother cold and remote and absent from her.

And now, how does Ruby view her now? From the condescending and bullying perspective of a woman trundling an aged mother in a wheelchair?

Sehra-bai was having tea on the front veranda with Mrs Cooper when Mrs Cooper shouted: 'Ruby! Ruby! Come at once. Something's happening to Sehra-bai.'

Ruby had cried when her mother was in hospital, and she cried after she came home. She cried in the bathroom during the day, and at night in her bedroom upstairs. Her friends tried to console her, but they didn't know why she was crying. Did anyone know why others mourned? She mourned that her mother had been taken from her just when they had made their peace. She had returned from America to be with Sehra-bai, and Sehra-bai looked forward to doing things with her. She took Sehra-bai shopping, to the hairdressers and to Chinese restaurants. They parked before the city's unsanitary lean-tos and were served flaming kebabs and curries through their car windows. They licked their fingers clean. They called on Sehra-bai's friends, and invited her friends to lunch. Perhaps they were bonding only because she had moved so far away, Ruby thought. Resentments nursed since childhood had evaporated as if they were nothing. Ruby was flooded by feelings of tenderness and love. She was gratified to do all the little things Sehra-bai asked of her, and Sehra-bai beamed her pleasure and her approval. Ruby's existence was cushioned by contentment. Isn't that what children want? No matter what their age? Their mother's praise and approval?

And the stroke came along and snatched her mother away. Sehra-bai was drifting away from her, again withdrawing, and this time with a finality that would not be denied.



Defend Yourself Against Me

(In memory of Venkethash Kulkarni)

They are my grandparents,' says Vijay.

I peer at the incongruous pair mounted in an old gold frame holding an era captive in the faded brown photograph. I marvel. The heavy portrait has been transported across the seven seas; from the Deccan plateau in India to the flat, glass-and-aluminium-pierced horizons of Houston in Texas. The tiny, sari-clad bride, her nervous eyes wide, her lips slightly parted, barely clears the middle-aged bridegroom's ribs.

'Your grandfather was exceptionally tall,' I remark, expressing surprise. Vijay is short and stocky. But distracted partly by the querulous cries of his excited children, and partly by his cares as a host, Vijay nods so perfunctorily that I surmise his grandfather's height cannot have been significant. It was his grandmother who was either exceedingly short or not yet full-grown. I hazard a guess. She could be ten; she could be sixteen. Marketable Indian brides—in those days at least—wore the uniformly bewildered countenances of lambs to the slaughter.

We hear a car purr up the drive and the muted thud of Buick doors. The other guests have arrived. Vijay, looking sharp in a white sharkskin suit, tan tie and matching silk handkerchief, darts out of the room to welcome his guests loudly and hospitably. 'Welcome! Welcome! Arrey bhai, we've been waiting for you! *Kitni der laga di,*' he bellows in the mix of Urdu and English that enriches communication between the inheritors of the British Raj, Indians and Pakistanis alike. 'I have a wonderful surprise for you,' I hear him holler as he ushers his guests inside. 'I have a lady-friend from Pakistan I want you to meet!'

I move hesitantly to the living-room door and peer into the hall. Flinging out a gleaming shark-skinned arm in a grand gesture of introduction, Vijay announces: 'Here she is! Meet Mrs Jacobs.' And turning on me his lustrous, intelligent eyes, beaming handsomely, he says, 'Sikander Khan is also from Pakistan.'

Mr Sikander Khan, blue-suited and black-booted, his wife and her three sisters in satin shalwar-kameezes and heavy gold jewellery, and a number of knee-high children stream into the living room. We shake hands all round and recline in varying attitudes of stiff discomfort in the deep chairs and sofas covered, Indian style, with printed bedspreads to camouflage the stains and wear of a house inhabited by an extended Hindu family.

Vijay's diminutive mother, fluffed out in a starched white cotton sari, smiles anxiously at me across a lumpy expanse of sofa. His two younger brothers, unsmiling and apathetic, slouch on straight-backed dining room chairs to one side, their legs crossed at the ankles and stretched right out in front. Joanne, Vijay's statuesque American wife, her brown hair falling in straight strands down her shoulders, flits to and fro in the kitchen. As comfortable in a red silk sari with a gold border as if she were born to it, she pads barefoot into the room, the skin on her toes twinkling whitely, bearing a tray of potato samosas and Coke, the very image of dutiful Brahmin-wifedom. A vermilion caste mark spreads prettily between her large and limpid brown eyes.

I know her well. Her other-worldly calm and docility are due equally to her close association with her demanding Indian family, and the more private rigours of her job as a computer programmer in an oil corporation.

I make polite conversation with Mrs Khan's sisters in hesitant Punjabi. They have just emigrated. The differences from our pasts remain: I am an English-speaking scion of Anglican Protestants from Lahore; they, Muslim village belles accustomed to draw water from wells to the rhythm of Punjabi lore. They know very little English. Their jewellery glinting like armour, they are on the defensive; blindly battling cultural shock waves in an attempt to adapt to American ways—an environment as different from theirs as only a McDonald's hamburger can be from a leisurely meal of spicy greens eaten in dung-plastered village courtyards redolent of water-buffalo and naked children.

Observing their bristling discomfort and the desultory nature of our conversation, Sikander Khan moves closer to me. He is completely at ease. Acclimatized. Americanized.

Our conversation follows the usual ritual of discourse between South Asians who meet for the first time on American soil. Sikander moved from Pakistan nine years ago, I seven. He has an Indo-Pak grocery store in Hillcroft uptown, I teach English at the University of Houston downtown. Does he have US citizenship? Yes. Do I? No, but I should have a green card by December.

Mr Khan filed his mother's immigration papers two years ago: 'They should be through any day now,' he says. 'One of my cousins will bring Ammi-ji. It will be my mother's first visit to America.'

Mr Khan speaks English with a broad Pakistani accent that is pleasant to my ears. 'I went to the Dyal Singh College in Lahore,' he says courteously when he learns I'm from

Lahore. 'It is a beautiful, historical old city.'

All at once, without any apparent reason, my eyes prickle with a fine mist, and I become entangled in a web of nostalgia so intense that I lose my breath. I quickly lower my lids, and—the demeanour of half a lifetime standing me in good stead—I maintain a slight smile of polite attention while the grip of sensations from the past hauls me back through the years to Lahore, to our bungalow on Race Course Road.

I am a stringy child playing hop-scotch outside the kitchen window. The autumn afternoon is overcast with shadows from the mighty sheesham trees in the front lawn. There is a brick wall to my right, a little crooked and bulging in places, and the clay in the grooves is eroded. I keep glancing at the wall.

Spellbound, I sit still on Vijay's lumpy sofa, my pulse racing at the memory. Then, clearly, as if she were in the room, I hear my mother shout: 'Joy, come inside and put on your cardigan.'

Startled by the images I snap out of my reverie. I search Mr Khan's face so confusedly that he turns from me to Vijay's mother and awkwardly inquires of her how she is.

I have not recalled this part of my childhood in years. Certainly not since I moved to the smoothly operating country of my adoption. Too enamoured by the dazzling shopping malls and technical opulence of the USA, too frequent a visitor to Pakistan, I have not yet missed it, or given thought to the past. Perhaps it is this house, so comfortably possessed by its occupants and their Indian bric-a-brac. It takes an effort of will to remember that we are in the greenly-shaven suburbs of an American city in the heart of Texas, only minutes away from the Interstate 10 highway that runs clear through to California.

Bending forward with the tray, smiling at my abstraction, Joanne abruptly brings me to earth. 'Joy,' she asks, 'would you like some wine?'

'I prefer this, thanks,' I say, reaching apologetically for a glass of Coke.

'I used to know a Joy ... long, long ago,' says Mr Khan. 'I spent one or two years in Lahore when I was a child.'

Joanne has moved on to Mr Khan. As his hand, hesitant with the burden of choice, wavers among the glasses, I watch it compulsively. It is a swarthy, well-made hand with dark hair growing between the knuckles and on the back. The skin, up to where it disappears beneath his white shirt sleeve, is smooth and unblemished.

There must be at least a million Sikanders in Pakistan, and several million Khans. The title 'Khan' is indiscriminately tagged on by most Pakistanis in the USA who generally lack family names in the Western tradition. The likelihood that this whole-limbed and assured man with his trim moustache and military bearing is the shy and misshapen playmate of my childhood is remote.

But that part of my mind which is still in the grip of nostalgia, with its uncanny accompaniment of sounds and images from the past, is certain.

Selecting a glass of orange juice Sikander Khan leans forward to offer it to a small boy whimpering at his feet. I glance obliquely at the back of Mr Khan's head. It is as well formed as the rest of him and entirely covered with strong, short black hair.

My one-time playmate had a raw pit gouged out of his head that couldn't have grown hair in a hundred years! Still, the certainty with me remains and, not the least bit afraid of sounding presumptuous, I ask, 'Was the girl you knew called Joy Joshwa? I was known as Joy Joshwa then.'

Holding the glass to the child's lips, Sikander looks at me. My body casts a shadow across his face. His dark eyes on me are veiled with conjecture. 'I don't remember the last name,' he says, speaking in a considered manner. 'But it could be.'

'You are Sikander!' I announce in a voice that brooks no doubt or argument. 'You lived next to us on Race Course Road. You were refugees ... Don't you remember me?' My eyes misty, my smile wide and twitching, I know the while how absurd it is to expect him to recall the sharp-featured and angular girl in the rounded contours and softened features of my middle-ageing womanhood.

'Was it Race Course Road?' says Sikander. He sits back and, turning his strong man's body to me, says, 'I tried to locate the house when I was in Lahore ... But we moved to the farmland allotted to us in Sahiwal years ago ... I forgot the address ... So, it was Race Course Road!' He beams fondly at me. 'So, you are Joy. I remember you ... you had pimples the size of boils!'

'Yes,' I reply, and then I don't know what to say. It is difficult to maintain poise when transported to the agonized and self-conscious persona of a boil-ridden and gangly child before a man who is, after all these years, a stranger.

Sitting opposite me—if he can ever be said to sit—Vijay comes to an explosive rescue. 'You know each other? Now what d'you say about that! Childhood friends!'

Vijay has squirmed, crab-wise, clear across the long sofa and is sitting so close to the edge that his weight is borne mostly by his thick legs. Halfway between sitting and squatting, quite at ease with the restless energy of his body, he is radiant with the wonder of it all.

'It is incredible,' he booms with genial authority. 'Incredible! After all these years you meet, not in Pakistan, not in India, but on the other side of the world, in Houston!'

Triggered by the fierce bout of nostalgia and the host of ghost-memories stirred by Sikander's unexpected presence, the scenes that have been floundering in the murky deeps of my subconscious come into luminous focus. I see a pattern emerge, and the jumble of half-remembered events and sensations already clamour to be recorded in a novel I have

just begun. It is about the Partition of India after the collapse of the British Empire; about the chaos that reigns when new boundaries are drawn on the map, and their little bit of earth is pulled out from under the feet of an ethnically cleansed people.

Turning to Sikander, smiling fondly back at him, I repeat, 'You're quite right—I had horrible pimples.'

Since childhood memories can only be accurately exhumed by the child, I will inhabit my childhood. As a writer I am already practised in inhabiting different bodies; dwelling in rooms, gardens, bungalows and spaces from the past; zapping time.

Lahore: Autumn 1948. Pakistan is a little over a year old. The Partition riots, the arson and slaughter, have subsided. The flood of refugees—twelve million Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs fleeing across borders that define India and Pakistan—has shrunk to a nervous trickle. Two gargantuan refugee camps have been set up on the outskirts of Lahore, at Walton Airport and Badami Bagh. Bedraggled, carrying tin trunks, string-cots and cloth bundles on their heads, the refugees swamp the city looking for work, setting up house on sidewalks and in parks—or wherever they happen to be at sunset if they have wandered too far from the camps.

A young Christian couple, the Mangat Rais, live on one side of our house on Race Course Road; on the other side is the enormous bungalow of our Hindu neighbours. I don't know when they fled. My friends Sheila and Ravi never even said goodbye. Their deserted house has been looted several times. First by men in carts, shouting slogans, then by whoever chose to saunter in to pick up the leavings. Doors, sinks, wooden cabinets, electric fixtures and wiring have all been ripped from their moorings and carried away. How swiftly deserted houses decay. The hedges are a spiky tangle, the garden full of weeds and dry patches of caked mud.

It is still quite warm when I begin to notice signs of occupation. A window boarded up with newspaper, a pale gleam from another screened with jute sacking as oil-lamps struggle to illuminate the darkness. The windows face my room across the wall that separates our houses. The possession is so subtle that it dawns on me only gradually that I have new neighbours. I know they are refugees, frightened, nervous of drawing attention to their furtive presence. I know this as children know many things without being told: but I have no way of telling if there are any children in the decaying recesses of the stolen bungalow.

Although the ominous roar of slogans shouted by distant mobs—that nauseating throb that had pulsed a continuous threat to my existence and the existence of all those I love—has at last ceased, terrible new sounds (and unaccountable silences) erupt about me. Sounds of lamentation magnified by the night—sudden unearthly shrieks—come from a nursery school hastily converted into a Recovered Women's Camp six houses away from

ours. Hundreds of thousands of women have been kidnapped and hundreds of camps have been set up all over the Punjab to sort out and settle those who are rescued, or ‘recovered’.

Yet we hear nothing—no sound of talking, children quarrelling or crying, of repairs being carried out—or any of the noises our refugee neighbours might be expected to make. It is eerie.

And then one afternoon, standing on my toes, I glimpse a small scruffy form through a gap in the wall (no more than a slit really) where the clay has worn away. I cannot tell if it’s a boy or a girl or an apparition. The shadowy form appears to have such an attuned awareness that it senses my presence in advance, and I catch only a spectral glimpse as it dissolves at the far corner of my vision.

Impelled by curiosity—and by my loneliness now that even Sheila and Ravi have gone—I peep into my new neighbour’s compound through the crack in the wall, hoping to trap a potential playmate. A few days later, crouching slyly beneath the wall, I suddenly spring up to peer through the slit, and startle a pair of black eyes staring straight at me.

I step back—look away nonchalantly—praying the eyes will stay. A stealthy glance reassures me. I pick up a sharp stone and quickly begin to sketch hopscotch lines in the mud on our drive. I throw the stone in one square after another, enthusiastically playing against myself, aware I’m being observed.

I am suddenly conscious of the short frock I have outgrown. The waist, pulled by sashes stitched to either side and tied at the back, squeezes my ribs. The seams hurt under my arms, and when I bend the least bit I know my white cotton knickers, with dusty patches where I sit, are on embarrassing display. Never mind. Even if they offend the viewer, I’m sure my skipping skills won’t. I skip rope, twirling it faster and faster, and turning round and round in one spot I breathlessly recite: ‘Teddy bear, Teddy bear, turn around: Teddy bear, Teddy bear, touch the ground.’

And again, I sense I’m alone. I rush to the wall but my phantasmal neighbour’s neglected compound is empty.

The next few days I play close to the damaged wall. Sometimes the eyes are there, sometimes not. I look towards the wall more frequently, and notice, gradually, that my glance no longer scares the viewer away. Once in a rare while I even smile, careful to look away at once, my lids demurely lowered, my expression shy: trying with whatever wiles I can to detain, disarm and entice the invisible and elusive object of my fascination.

It is almost the end of October. The days are still warm but, as each day takes us closer to winter, the fresher air is exhilarating. People on the streets smile more readily, the tonga horses snort and shake their necks and appear to pull their loads more easily, and even the refugees, absorbed into the gullies and the more crowded areas of Lahore as the camps shrink, appear at last to be less visible.

One such heady afternoon, when the eyes blocking the crack suddenly disappear and I see a smudge of pale light instead, I dash to the wall and glue my eye to the hole. A small boy, so extremely thin he looks brittle, is squatting a few feet away, concentrating on striking a marble lying in a notch in the dust. His skull-like face has dry, flaky patches, and two deep lines between his eyebrows that I have never before seen on a child. He is wearing threadbare pyjamas of thin cotton and the dirty cord tying the gathers round his waist trails in the mud. The sun-charred little body is covered with scabs and wounds. It is as if his tiny body has been carelessly carved and then stuck together again to form an ungainly dwarf.

I don't know how to react; I feel sorry for him and at the same time repulsed. He hits the marble he was aiming at, gets up to retrieve the marbles and as he turns away I see the improbable wound on the back of his cropped head. It is a raw and flaming scar, as if bone and flesh had been callously gouged out, and my compassion fuses me to him.

Joanne is in the kitchen and Vijay is flitting between the dining table and the kitchen, filling stainless-steel glasses with water and arranging bowls containing a variety of pickles and chutneys. He places a stack of silvery platters, their rims gleaming, next to the glasses. The smell of mango pickle is strong in the room and, noticing our eyes darting to the table, Vijay's mother says, 'We have made only a simple vegetarian meal today: just a thal.' She sounds apologetic—as if their hospitality will not stand up to our expectations.

I know how much trouble it is to prepare the different vegetables and lentils that add up to the 'simple' veggie thal.

Glancing at his sisters-in-law, Sikander says, 'The girls didn't eat any lunch when they heard you were cooking vegetarian, Maajee ... They're ready to gobble up everything.'

The sisters-in-law solemnly nod.

'I've been looking forward to the food all day,' I say, doing my bit to reassure her.

Turning from me to Vijay, who is folding cutlery in paper napkins, Mr Khan facetiously declares, 'I say, yaar, Joanne bhabi has really straightened you out—you're such a well-trained husband!'

And at that moment, involuntarily, my hand reaches out to lightly feel Mr Khan's hair.

Startled by the unexpected touch Sikander whips around. He notices my embarrassment—and the unusual position of my hand in the air—and passing a hand down the back of his head, dryly, matter-of-factly, says, 'I'm wearing a wig. The scar is still there.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ...' I say, almost incoherent with embarrassment. But Mr Khan grants me a smile of such indulgent complicity that, acknowledging my childhood claim as his friend, I am compelled to ask, 'What about the other scars ... are they still ...?'

Wordlessly opening the cuff button Sikander peels his shirt-sleeve back. The scars are fainter, diminished, and on that strong brown arm innocuous: not at all like the dangerous welts and scabs afflicting the pitiful creature I saw for the first time on that mellow afternoon through a slit in the compound wall. With one finger, gently, I touch the arm, and responding to the touch, Sikander twists it to show me the other scars.

‘You want to see the back of my head?’ he asks.

I nod.

Sikander turns, and with a deft movement of his fingers lifts up part of the hairpiece to show the scar. It has pale ridges of thick scar tissue, and the hair growing round it has given it the shape of a four-day-old crescent moon.

Sikander smooths down his hair and notices that, except for the children shouting as they play outside, the room has become quiet; even Vijay has come from the dining table to peer at his friend’s scalp.

‘I think I’m out of cigarettes,’ Sikander says, patting his empty pockets with the agitation of an addict suddenly in need of a smoke. ‘I’ll be back in ten minutes, yaar,’ he tells Vijay, abruptly getting up.

While Sikander is out, Vijay and his mother huddle on either side of me, and Joanne, drawn from the kitchen by the hushed and confiding tone of their voices, pads over wiping her hands on a towel. Sitting sideways on the low back of the sofa, she joins them in plying me with questions, and volunteering information.

Could I tell them what Mr Khan looked like as a little boy? Do I remember hearing anything at all about what happened to his mother, to Ammi-ji? No? Well, they noticed Mr Khan’s reticence when the subject came up once or twice ... realized it was a matter of some delicacy, and considerate of his feelings, they stopped asking questions ...

But this much they know: except for Mr Khan, Ammi-ji’s immediate family was killed during the attack on their village ... They suspect she has been through something terrible.

Glancing at Vijay, Joanne inquires: ‘How old would she have been?’

‘Even if she had grown children, twenty-four or twenty-five at most,’ says Vijay. ‘They marry them off by eleven or twelve in the villages ... as soon as they start menstruating.’ Like many married men who have grown up in Hindu joint families, Vijay has few inhibitions about using words like menstruation.

‘You don’t recall any young woman with the boy?’ Joanne inquires, looking at me. ‘She must have been quite tall ... if Mr Khan is anything to go by ... Pretty, too ...?’

I cannot help smiling. Mr Khan is too rugged-looking to allow for any link with prettiness. But I know what she means. Mrs Khan and her sisters, too, are tall. Straight-backed rustics used to balancing goods on their heads.

They have known Sikander Khan for a long time and his mother's anticipated arrival has caused a stir within their community of family and friends. Since the focus of interest revolves so keenly round Ammi-ji, I search my memory. I dimly remember a thin, squatting figure scrubbing clothes, scouring tinny utensils with mud and ash, peeling squashes and other cheap vegetables, kneading dough and slapping it into chapattis ...

The ragged cotton chaddar covering her head was always drawn forward to shadow her profile. The colour of her form blended with the ash, the earth, the utensils she washed, the pale seasonal vegetables she peeled. This must be Ammi-ji: a figure the hue of mud, bent perpetually to accommodate the angle of drudgery and poverty. I don't recall her face or the skin on her dusty bare feet; the shape of her hands or whether she wore bangles ... or if she was tall.

All I knew as a child was that my little refugee friend's village was attacked by the Sikhs, that he had been hurt in a way that no one belonging to my child's world should.

I did not understand the complete significance of the word 'refugees' at the time. I thought, on the vague basis of my understanding of the Hindu caste system, that the 'refugees' were a low caste—like the untouchable castes—who were suddenly pouring into Lahore. And it was in the nature of this caste—much as the untouchable castes were born to clean gutters, sweep toilets and skin dead animals—to be inescapably poor, ragged, homeless: forever looking for work and places to stay.

Sikander had described some of the details of the attack ... and of his miraculous survival. His account of it, supplied in small, suddenly recalled snatches—brought to mind by chance associations while we played—was so jumbled, so full of bizarre incident, that I accepted it as the baggage of truth-enlivened-by-fantasy that every child carries within. Although I dimly realized the broader implications of what had happened, that the British Raj had ended, that there were religious riots between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and the country was divided because of them, I was too young to understand the underlying combustibility of the events that preceded the partition of India: that had driven my friends and neighbours away and turned a little boy's world into a nightmare. Although I grew up hearing stories of what had happened to so-and-so's mother, sister or daughter, I had heard no mention at all of Ammi-ji or her ordeal.

Excited by my ignorance, and the spirit of instruction burning in us all to remedy this lack, Mrs Khan and her three sisters also move closer; those who can dragging their chairs forward, those who can't settling on the rug at my feet. The entire ensemble now combines to enlighten me: in five languages—English, Punjabi and Urdu, which I understand, and Kannada and Marathi—contributed by Vijay's mother in earnest, but brief, fusillades—which I don't.

The boys and some of the men in the village, I am informed, were huddled in a dark room at the back of a barn when the Sikhs smote the door shouting: 'Open up. Open up!'

And, when the door was opened, the hideous swish of long steel swords dazzling their eyes in the sunlight, severing first his father's head, then his uncle's, then his brother's. His own merely sliced at the back, and his neck saved, because he was only nine years old, and short. They left him for dead. How he survived, how he arrived in Pakistan, is another story.

'Ammi-ji says the village women ran towards the Chaudhrys' house,' says Mrs Khan in assertive Punjabi. Being Ammi-ji's daughter-in-law she is permitted, for the moment at least, to hold centre stage. 'They knew what the Sikhs would do to them ... women are the spoils of war ... no matter what you are—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh—women bear the brunt ...'

Rather than fall into the hands of the Sikhs, the poor women planned to burn themselves. They had stored kerosene ... but when the attack came they had no time ... Thirty thousand men, mad with blood-lust, waving swords and sten-guns!

Mrs Khan casts her eyes about in a way that makes us draw even closer, and having ascertained that Mr Khan is still absent, whispers, 'Ammi-ji told me once that she went mad! She would have killed herself if she could. So would you ... so would I ... She heard her eleven-year-old daughter scream: "Do anything you want with me, but don't hurt me. For God's sake don't hurt me!"'

We look away, the girl's tormented cries ringing unbearably in our ears. Joanne and the youngest sister, Shehla, brush their eyes. But by the time we are able to talk again, Mrs Khan's moment is over, and the medley of languages again asserts itself: 'God knows how many women died ...' A helpless spreading of hands and deep sighs.

'Pregnant women were paraded naked, their stomachs slashed ...'

'Yes-ji, and the babies were swung by their heels and dashed against walls.'

Much shaking of heads, God's help and mercy evoked.

'God knows how many women were lifted ... but, then, everybody carried women off. Sikhs and Hindus—Muslim women. Muslims—Sikh and Hindu women.'

A general clucking of tongues: an air of commiseration.

'Bhagwan, help us,' sighs Vijay's mother.

'Allah, have mercy on us,' says Mrs Khan, echoing her evocation, and in resounding Punjabi again asserts her authority as chief speaker. 'His mother had a bad experience ... very bad,' and when she has our full attention, again lowers her voice: 'Ammi-ji never talks about it, but those who knew her when she was recovered, say ...'

Here Mrs Khan stops short. Having second thoughts about disclosing what her mother-in-law never talks about, she makes a deft switch and in a banal, rhetorical tone of voice says, 'She saw horrible things. Horrible. Babies tossed into boiling oil ...'

Sikander Khan, who has bought his pack and smoked his cigarette outside, quietly comes into the sitting room.

Halfway through dinner two handsome, broad-shouldered Sikhs in grey suits join us. I gather they are cousins. Their long hair is tucked away in blue turbans, and their beards tied in neat rolls beneath their chins. Again there is an explosion of welcome: a flurry to feed the latecomers and a great deal of hand-slapping and embracing among the men. Considering what I heard just a few moments ago, I am a little surprised at the cordiality between Sikander Khan and the young Sikhs. I hear one of the men say in Urdu, 'Any further news about Ammi-ji's arrival?'

His back is to me—but the sudden switch from Punjabi to Urdu, the formality in his voice and his mode of address, catch my attention. There is no apparent change in the volume of noise in the room, yet I sense we have all shared a moment of unease: an incongruous solemnity.

And then the two young Sikhs move to greet the women from Mr Khan's family in Punjabi, inquire after their health and the health of their children and indulge in a little lighthearted teasing. The unease is so abruptly dispelled, I wonder if I have not just imagined it.

'You haven't invited us to a meal in almost a month, Bhabi,' says the stouter of the two men to Mrs Khan. 'Look at poor Pratab ... see how thin he's become?' He pulls back his cousin's decently muscled arms at the elbows the way poultry dealers hold back chicken wings, and pins him helpless in front of Mrs Khan. 'Have we offended you in some way?'

'No, no, Khushwant Bhai,' says Mrs Khan, 'It isn't anything like that ... It's just that I ...'

'It's just that she's concerned for your health, Brother,' pipes up the eldest of her three sisters. 'You're getting a bit too fat for your own good!' She is probably in her late twenties.

'Too fat and too fresh,' says the middle sister, Azra, saucily tossing back her long braid. Azra is at least five feet six inches tall and the braid long enough to bounce on her butt. The expression on her face is confident, intelligent, and suddenly I realize that the girls are not the gauche yokels my hasty assessment of them has led me to suppose.

Khushwant releases his cousin good-naturedly and the sisters, hiding their smiles in their scarves, start giggling. They have perked up in the presence of these young men who share their Punjabi language and rustic ways, their religious antagonisms and obligatory reserve in the presence of men dissipated on American soil.

On surer ground, the eldest sister says, 'What about the picnic you and Pratab Bhai promised us? You're the one who breaks promises, and you complain about our sister!'

Her face animated, her large black eyes roguish, she is charming in a pleasantly plump Punjabi way.

‘When would you like to go? Next Sunday?’ asks Khushwant Singh gallantly.

‘We’ll know what’s what when Sunday comes,’ says Azra, raising her head in a half-bullying, half-mocking gesture. She has a small, full-lipped mouth and a diamond on one side of her pert nose. ‘You’re good at making promises Brother, but not so good at keeping them. It doesn’t cost to just invite.’

‘I’ll take you to the beach at Galveston next Sunday, Azra-ji ... it’s a promise,’ says Khushwant Singh, trying to conceal his pleasure at being so freely addressed by this attractive person from a conservative family. ‘But only if Bhabi makes parathas with her own hands.’

‘What’s wrong with my hands?’ the pert Azra asks, holding aloft her slender brown arm agleam with gold bangles. ‘Or with Shehla’s hands?’ She indicates their youngest sister who promptly buries her face in her scarf. Shehla is not yet married. My guess is that she is fifteen or sixteen years old.

‘Have either of you given me occasion to praise your cooking?’ Khushwant Singh asks.

‘We’ll give you occasion on Sunday,’ intervenes Mrs Khan. ‘We’ll bring biryani and parathas. But, tell me Brother,’ she says, ‘what will you bring? Why don’t you bring chicken korma to go with the parathas?’

‘No chicken korma till you find me a wife.’

‘Lo!’ says Mrs Khan. ‘As if you’ll agree to our choice! There are plenty of pretty Sikh girls I’m sure, but I know your type—you fuss!’

‘I want someone just like you, Bhabi,’ says the handsome Sikh to Mrs Khan, and turns so red at his gaffe that no one is offended. ‘A girl who knows our ways.’

‘That’s what you say, but you’ll end up marrying a whitewashed memsahib!’ At once realizing her folly Azra springs up from her chair and, abandoning her dinner, hugging Joanne and holding her cheek against hers, says, ‘Unless it is someone just like our Joanne Bhabi—she’s one of us. Then we won’t mind.’

Joanne takes it, as she accepts the smaller hazards of her marriage to Vijay, in her twinkle-toed and sari-clad stride. She told me about a year back, when we were just becoming friends, that she felt content and secure in her extended Indian family. She tried to describe to me her feeling of being firmly embedded in life—in the business and purpose of living—that she, as an only child, had never experienced. Joanne comes from a small New England University town where her father teaches medieval history. I haven’t met her family but I gather they are unpretentious and gentle folk.

Joanne collects the empty dishes and as she retreats to the kitchen she indicates she wants to talk to me. I pick up some platters and follow her. As I help load the dishwasher she looks over my shoulder to make sure we're alone, and says: 'Aren't they something else?!'

I know she's referring to Mrs Khan and her sisters.

I nod.

'That Azra! She blurts whatever comes into her head ... I don't mind, at least she's honest,' says Joanne.

'The tall one with the diamond nose-pin?' I ask, recalling how pretty the girl looked, and how unaffected, as she hugged Joanne. 'Once you get over the satin pantaloons, she's stunning,' I admit.

'I think Khushwant's taken a fancy to her,' Joanne says. Then, with a conspirator's gleam in her eye, she adds: 'They could use a bit of help from us ... at the picnic perhaps?'

I'm taken aback. I presumed from Azra's bold manner and the child bobbing at her knee that she was married. Besides, doesn't Joanne realize the magnitude of the religious chasm that separates a Sikh man from a Muslim woman?

'Isn't she married?' I say aloud.

'She was. Her husband died in a tractor accident in their village three or four years ago.' Her tone is uncharacteristically short. 'She can marry again, can't she?'

Joanne ought to know me better. I'm offended.

'Khushwant has a green card. That will take care of Azra and her son ... they need help,' she says. Then in a tone of voice I find particularly irksome, she adds: 'As a widow she has no future in Pakistan, you know.'

'Joanne,' I say, precise and angry. 'I'm not the type who objects to widows re-marrying. But she's Muslim and he's Sikh, for God's sake!'

'So what?' says Joanne. 'They both speak Punjabi, eat the same kind of food so far as I can see—and they obviously come from the same cultural background.'

'Just because they have the same rustic ways and share country-bumpkin attitudes,' I say, affecting a snotty convent school accent 'doesn't mean they have the same background. She's from a part of Punjab that went to Pakistan, he's from Indian Punjab. The Punjab was also divided during Partition, you know.'

'You think I don't know that? After being married to a Hindu for ten years? What I do know,' Joanne counters 'is how much living in America changes people.'

There it is: the incorrigible ‘can do’ American ethos! ‘You naive, American nitwit,’ I say, laughing. ‘You’ll have the families at each other’s throats. You just heard what the Sikhs put Mr Khan’s family through. If they flirt a bit it doesn’t mean that they can marry!’

I call Joanne a ‘naive American nitwit’ when I feel the need to assert my right to be critical of dominant American ways and mores. Joanne accepts it in the spirit it is meant, and is not offended. But the sudden slick of moisture shining in her eyes alarms me. Looking at me out of those affecting brown eyes she pleads: ‘Let’s give it a try, Joy. Don’t you think they’re too civilized to go around killing each other—at least in America?’

‘You’d be surprised,’ I say, but the edge of my anger is dulled. I suspect she’s right. I doubt either Mr Khan or the Singh brothers will set to immediately sharpening scythes and meat-cleavers as their forebears might do in their villages back home.

It is the Sunday of the picnic. Vijay and Joanne give me a ride in their rattling Chevy. Followed by Khushwant’s massive old Cadillac and Mr Khan’s only slightly less massive Buick, we roll on to the sandy dunes of Galveston. Our Chevy is pretty well-stuffed: Vijay’s brothers, mother, children, hampers, us. But the gaudy stream of humanity pouring from Mr Khan’s and Khushwant Singh’s cars is a tribute either to the space available in the cars, or to the passengers’ ingenuity in accommodating themselves to the space available.

Mr Khan and his family begin their drift towards us, the women navigating a difficult passage through the silvery dunes in their stiletto heels. Mrs Khan and her sisters are dressed as if for a wedding. Mr Khan greets us affably, but the exchange of pleasantries between the women and us is eschewed. Instead we gawk at each other in polite consternation and embarrassment: I at their high-heeled sandals, satin pantaloons and embroidered chiffon scarves, and they at my brown legs brazenly exposed in shorts.

That Joanne’s are exposed is accepted: but the sight of my naked legs, coming as I do from a puritanical culture, is for them scandalous and disconcerting. In the last Punjabi film I saw in Lahore the entire audience, composed mostly of men, burst into applause and utterances like ‘O, God! She’s killed me!’ when the buxom actress raised her skirt to briefly flash six inches of calves.

To make matters worse Mr Khan irately remarks: ‘Didn’t I tell you to wear household clothes? I knew you’d be bloody overdressed and uncomfortable in this heat.’

Their sullen faces growing set and defiant in their alien surroundings, the sisters again bristle with manifestations of the dark inferiority I had previously noticed. Sensing their ugly mood the nervous children begin to fidget and whimper. The eldest sister spans her little daughter’s hand from her mouth saying harshly: ‘How many times must I tell you not to stick your fingers in your mouth!’

Moved by her sister's disciplinary spirit, Mrs Khan lunges at her son and as he tries to escape between the shimmering forest of his aunt's satin pantaloons lifts him clear off the sand and begins paddling his wiggling behind. 'I told you not to move from my side!' she scolds. 'You'll come to your senses when the ocean snatches you up!'

The pert sister and the other women from Mr Khan's family also begin tormenting the children. They issue warnings of dire consequences and spank the heads and backs of those within easy reach.

Resolving to let my bathing suit remain safely concealed beneath my shorts and T-shirt forever, I turn warily towards Mrs Khan and her sisters. Smiling and beaming in an effort to draw their censorious eyes from my offending legs, I greet them in Punjabi. We had become so comfortable with each other that day at Vijay's dinner that I feel it is up to me—more at ease in this alien culture and having learnt to be less self-conscious of my body—to put them at ease. As they respond to my efforts, they courteously withdraw their eyes from my legs.

Children, hampers, aunts, uncles, sisters—we drift in a noisy procession to the beach, startling the broiling Texans in varying stages of undress and sun-burnt torpor. Joanne is in high spirits. 'Have you noticed,' she remarks 'how people from India move only in bunches ... even if it's just a trip to the cinema, or to the shopping mall, they're never alone.'

Their heels sinking in the sand and ankles twisting, the women at last remove their shoes. Coiling their long chiffon scarves to form cushions on their heads they place their sandals on them, and hitching up their shalwars to mid-calf, overcome by curiosity, they run to the edge of the inviting ocean. They come to an abrupt halt to eye the foaming line of receding waves suspiciously.

Mrs Khan has been to the beach before and slowly ventures in up to her knees.

Holding their children with one hand, and their hitched-up shalwars with the other, the sisters finally drag the protesting offspring into the water until the waves froth about their knees. I wade past them, conscious of my bare legs amidst all their clothing and stop a little ahead. The waves cover my shorts. Joanne, in her black swimsuit, is already much further in, her head bobbing above the swells.

Vijay, his brother and the young Sikhs, move in among the women. They are coaxing the children to be less afraid—and let go of their mothers—when a wave, catching the women unawares, soaks them to their thighs; screaming they let go of their pantaloons and their sputtering children, and in his cheery, authoritarian manner Vijay steers the choking, dazed and whimpering kids into the shallows. While he minds them, Khushwant and Pratab, having shifted their attention to coaxing the sisters not to be afraid, tug them a little way towards me. The gold bangles on Azra's arm flash as she tries to shake her hand

free from Khushwant's grip. I drift backwards, beckoning them, and, reluctantly, her eyes wide with trepidation, Azra permits herself to be led.

Holding on to each other, inching deeper and deeper, the sisters slowly accustom themselves to the movement of the sea. There has been a storm the day before and, in the aftermath of the storm, the sea is unnaturally calm. A smattering of dead fish litter the wet sand. Emboldened by the somnambulant ocean, the sisters reach to where I stand, waist-deep in water.

I feel something brush against my legs. Azra squeals, and almost losing her balance shouts: 'Something's grabbed my legs, hai!'

Having sneaked in amongst us, delighted at having scared his sister-in-law witless, Sikander surfaces, and after spewing a fine mist from his mouth, gleefully remarks, 'You'll drown like stones with all that gold weighing you down.'

The sisters splash his scarred body—the scars barely visible once you get used to them—and say, 'Shut up, brother,' and the bold big sister says, 'So what? You'll be happy to be rid of us!' and even the shy, unmarried Shehla teases, 'Yes—admit it, brother,' and Mrs Khan tells them, 'Hai, how can you say such things—he would give his life for you all,' and Azra, the diamond in her nose flashing as she mischievously tosses her plait, says, 'He thinks we eat too much ... too many mouths to feed.'

Having abandoned themselves to the mood of adventure and frivolity imparted by the ocean they are giddy with delight.

'I wouldn't like to lose all of you at once,' says Mr Khan, feigning a lunge at Azra. 'Just one sister at a time.'

Azra screams, and tries to shelter behind Mrs Khan, when I notice a sudden change in her expression—a startled look of disbelief and terror. The other sisters too have caught sight of the swell that is coming at us like a moving mountain. I feel the familiar grip of panic; even though in the past two years I have learned that something about the movement of the ocean against the sky distorts the proportions and the mountain will resolve itself in a buoyant and manageable bulge by the time it reaches us.

Having no way of knowing this, the sisters scream and rush from the advancing menace. The wave breaks behind them in a churning wall of foam and they go under in a blue and red billowing of wet satin. Coughing and sputtering they try to right themselves, and grabbing hold of each other's arms and legs, they go under in pairs. Blinking their inflamed eyes and painfully coughing, they crash towards the shore as if chased by bull buffaloes in their village.

And all this time I am guffawing, tears rolling down my cheeks. Sikander watches me intently, his initial mirth and broad grin thinned to a quivering line. He must think it strange that I should laugh so immoderately. I turn away. How can I explain that I'm

laughing more at myself than at the village-belles? Laughing at remembered follies, crushing embarrassments and comical social gaffes when I reacted—not so long ago—with as much panic and confusion to the new environment, to the alien situation.

After a while the sisters, drawn irresistibly by the sense of abandon and freedom of motion bestowed on them by the ocean and by the presence of the handsome Sikhs, re-enter the sea.

Later in the sultry afternoon we converge on the durries spread on the sand. The sisters flop like exotic beetles on our striped durrie, their wet kameezes clinging to them in rich blobs of colour.

Khushwant and Pratab stagger across the sand, gallantly conveying pans of hot chicken-korma, mutton curry and spicy biryani. They busy themselves undoing the knots from squares of cloth in which the large copper pans are wrapped to keep the food warm. We hold out our steel platters and they begin ladling the food into them.

Immediately there are outcries of ‘Enough, enough, Bhai,’ and we hold out our hands to prevent the ladles from serving more.

Azra suddenly squeaks: ‘What’s this brother? You want me to die of hunger?’

Khushwant is squatting in front of her empty platter, making an elaborate pretence of shaking the last drops of gravy from the ladle into her plate.

‘It’s for your own good. I don’t want you to get fat,’ he says. ‘I like you the way you are.’ He has the good sense to blush.

‘Stop picking on her,’ says Mrs Khan only half joking, and I too notice the stern frown on Mr Khan’s countenance.

‘I know who’s getting too fresh for his own good,’ says Azra, and swiftly snatching the ladle from Khushwant, springs to her feet. Caught unawares Khushwant falls back on his elbows. Azra whacks him with the ladle and his white kurta is stained yellow with turmeric. Khushwant scrambles quickly to his feet, and Azra chases him over the sand into the shallows.

‘I told you they get along,’ whispers Joanne.

But Mrs Khan frowns. Everyone has noted the little escapade and by the time Azra returns, swinging the ladle, the carefree mood of the picnic has shifted ominously. Mr Khan has solemnly filled his plate and withdrawn to eat at a little distance from us. Azra at once notices the reserve and becomes subdued. When Khushwant and Pratab bring their plates over to our durrie, she turns away and keeping her eyes averted, responds to their queries in stern monosyllables.

I get up, stretch, and amble over to Sikander.

The still-warm parathas and the delicious food revive our appetites. Sikander again heaps his plate with mutton curry and, crossing his legs like an inept yogi, sits down by me. We both lean against an outcrop of rock, and I finally broach the subject that has been obsessing me: I would like to use his family's experiences during Partition in the novel I am writing, I tell him. Will he share them with me?

I gathered from the remarks Mrs Khan let slip on the night of the party that Ammi-ji was kidnapped. But I want to know what Mrs Khan was about to say when she checked herself. I feel the missing information will unravel the full magnitude of the tragedy to my understanding and, more importantly, to my imagination. Instinctively I have chosen Sikander Khan, and not Mrs Khan, to provide the knowledge. His emotions and perceptions will, I feel, charge my writing with the detail, emotion and veracity I am striving for. As we eat, sucking on our fingers, drinking Coke out of cans, I ask Sikander about the attack on his village—trying, with whatever wiles I can, to penetrate the mystery surrounding Ammi-ji.

Seeing that we are engaged in serious conversation the others leaves us alone. Sikander's replies to my questions are candid, recalled in remarkable detail, but he balks at any mention of Ammi-ji.

I don't remember now the question that unexpectedly penetrated his reserve, but Sikander planted in my mind a fearsome seed that waxed into an ugly tree of hideous possibility, when, in a voice that was indescribably harsh, he said: 'Ammi-ji heard street vendors cry: "Zenana for sale! Zenana for sale!" as if they were hawking vegetables and fish. They were selling women for fifty, twenty and even ten rupees!'

Later that evening, idling on our durries, watching the sun sink beneath the pollution-crimsoned clouds on the horizon fade, I ask Sikander how he can be close friends with Khushwant and Pratab. In his place I would not even want to meet their eye! Isn't he angry at the Sikhs for what they did? Don't the Sikh cousins know what happened in his village?

'Why quarrel with Khushwant and Pratab?' he says quietly. 'They weren't even born ...' And then, his voice again taking on that hard, harsh edge, Mr Khan says: 'My uncles, who crossed the border in a caravan of Muslim refugees, brought with them a stable of kidnapped Hindu and Sikh women ... I saw them only a few times ... I'll never forget their eyes ... We Muslims are no better. We did the same things ... Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, we are all evil bastards!'

Mr Khan calls. His mother has arrived from Pakistan. He has asked a few friends to dinner to meet her on Saturday. Would I dine with them? Ammi-ji appears to remember me as a little girl!

I get into the usual state of panic and put off looking at the map till the last hour. It is major trauma—this business of finding my way from place to place—missing exits—and

often terrifying motorists as I swerve, hazard lights blinking, precariously shifting lanes as I pull up to the shoulder, to consult the map. Thank God for alert American reflexes: for their blasphemous, chastising, wise, tooting.

I find my way to Mr Khan's without getting lost. It is a large old frame house behind a narrow neglected yard on a road between Montrose Boulevard and the Rothko Chapel.

Sikander, resplendent in a raw-silk salwar and kurta brought by his mother, ushers me into the house with elegant formality. Uttering phrases in Urdu, which translated into English sound like this: 'We're honoured to have you visit our humble hovel. We can't treat you in the manner to which you are accustomed ...' he presents me to his mother. 'Ammi-ji this is Joy—our neighbour from a long time ago. Recognize her?' he says, grinning, obviously not expecting her to.

Ammi-ji, a buttery-fleshed, kind-faced old woman, her grey hair covered by a blue nylon chaddar, strokes my arm and, peering affectionately into my face through clouded eyes, saying, 'Mashallah, you've grown healthier. You were such a dry little stick,' steers me by the elbow to sit next to her on the sofa.

Through my polite, bashful-little-girl's smile, I search her face. There's no trace of bitterness. No melancholy. Nothing knowing or hard. Just the open, acquiescent, hospitable face of a peasant woman who is happy to visit her son and greet his friends. It is difficult to believe this gentle, contented woman in home-spun clothes was kidnapped, raped, sold.

As more guests arrive, the sisters line up opposite us on an assortment of dining and patio chairs carried in for the party. The living room is typically furnished, Pakistani style. Small, carved tables, bearing onyx ashtrays and plastic flowers in brass vases, are scattered between the armrests of chairs. Hand-woven rugs with floral patterns and geometric designs lie in front of fussily upholstered sofas. The drapes are thick and dark, and the atmosphere is permeated with the sterile odour of careful disuse.

Vijay, princely and fey in tight churidar pyjamas, cream kurta and curly-toed slippers, arrives with his mother and Joanne, bringing with him a snooty-looking couple who barely glance our way and who he has only recently met. Joanne looks languorous in a navy sari with a gold border.

There is a loud exchange of pleasantries. Vijay notices me across the length of the entrance lobby. 'You found your way okay?' he calls from the door, teasing. 'Didn't land up in Mexico or something?'

'No ... of course not!' I yell back.

The couple are of South Asian origin, but their 'attitude' sets them apart. They could be from Uganda or South Africa, where their ancestors served as indentured labour in the colonies to begin with and then became millionaires at Independence: that could explain

their 'attitude'. They are both fair, plump and smug. They talk exclusively to Joanne, the only White American in the room, and to Vijay, husband of the status symbol and the person who invited them. They toss a few remarks to Mr Khan, their host.

The sisters, condescended to a couple of times and then ignored, drift to the kitchen and disappear into the remote and mysterious recesses of the large house. I become aware of muted children's voices, quarrelsome, demanding and excited. Mrs Khan and the older sister return. Lumpish with jewellery, quiet and sullen, they drag their chairs to huddle about a lamp standing in the corner. Azra soon joins them. She is stunning in an emerald green ensemble. She brings her hair forward over her shoulder to scrutinize her braid, and I notice the diamond nose-pin has been replaced by three emeralds set in gold.

Dinner is late. We are waiting for Khushwant and Pratab. Mr Khan says, 'We will wait for fifteen minutes more. If they don't come, we'll start eating.'

Hungry guests with growling stomachs, we nevertheless say, 'Please don't worry on our account ... We are in no hurry.'

Conversation dwindles. The guests politely inquire after the health of those sitting next to them and the grades of their children. We hear the doorbell ring and Mr Khan springs up from his chair, saying, 'I think they've come.'

Instead of the dapper Sikhs, I see two huge and hirsute beggar-fakirs—the kind of unpredictable holy-men we see in India and keep our distance from. Their dishevelled ash-streaked hair, parted at the centre, bristles about their arms and shoulders and mingles with their spiky black beards. They are wearing muslin kurtas over white singlets and their broad shoulders and taut muscles show brown beneath the fine muslin. I can't be sure, from where I sit, but I think they have on loose cotton pyjamas. They look indescribably fierce. It is an impression quickly formed, and I have barely glimpsed the visitors, when, abruptly, their knees appear to buckle and they fall forward.

Mr Khan steps back hastily and bends over the prostrate men. He says, 'What's all this? What's all this?'

The disconcerted tone of his voice, and the underpinning of perplexity and fear, gets us to our feet. Moving in a nervous bunch, displacing the chairs and small tables and crumpling the carpets, we crowd our end of the lobby.

The fakirs lie face down across the threshold, their hands flat on the floor as if they are about to do push-ups. Their faces are entirely hidden by hair. Suddenly, their voices moist and thick, they begin to cry, 'Ammi-ji! Ammi-ji! Forgive us.'

The blubbering, coming as it does from these fierce men, is unexpected, shocking; incongruous and melodramatic in this oil-rich corner of the pragmatic Western world.

Sikander, in obvious confusion, looms over them, looking from one to the other. Then, squatting in front of them, he begins to stroke their prickly heads, making soothing noises

as if cajoling children. ‘What’s this? Tch, tch ... Come on! Stand up!’

‘Get out of the way.’ An arm swings out in a threatening gesture and the fakir lifts his head. I see the pale, ash-smearred forehead, the large, thickly fringed brown eyes, the set curve of the wide, sensuous mouth and recognize Khushwant Singh. Next to him Pratab also raises his head. Sikander shuffles out of reach of Khushwant’s arm and moving to one side, his back to the wall, watches the Sikhs with an expression of incredulity. It is unreal. I think it has occurred to all of us it might be a prank, an elaborate joke. But their red eyes, and the passion distorting their faces, are not pretended.

‘Who are these men!?’

The voice is demanding, abrasive. I look over my shoulder, wondering which of the women has spoken so harshly. The sisters look agitated; their dusky faces are flushed.

‘Throw them out. They’re badmashes! Goondas!’

Taken aback, I realize the angry, fearful voice is Sikander’s mother’s. I turn around.

Ammi-ji is standing behind me, barely visible among the agitated and excited sisters, and in her face I see more than just the traces of the emotion I had looked for earlier. It is as if her features have been parodied in a hideous mask. They are all there: the bitterness, the horror, the hate: the incarnation of that tree of ugly possibilities seeded in my mind when Sikander, in a cold fury, imitating the cries of the street hawkers his mother had described, said, ‘Zenana for sale! Zenana for sale!’

I grew up overhearing fragments of whispered conversations about the sadism and bestiality women were subjected to during Partition: what happened to so-and-so—someone’s sister, daughter, sister-in-law—the women Mrs Khan had categorized as the spoils of war. The fruits of victory in the unremitting chain of wars that is man’s relentless history. The vulnerability of mothers, daughters, granddaughters, and their metamorphosis into possessions; living objects on whose soft bodies victors and losers alike vent their wrath, enact fantastic vendettas, celebrate victory. All history, all these fears, all probabilities and injustices coalesce in Ammi-ji’s terrible face and impart a dimension of tragedy that alchemizes the melodrama. The behaviour of the Sikhs, so incongruous before, is now essential and consequential.

The men on the floor have spotted Ammi-ji. Their voices weak, they mumble, ‘Ammi-ji, forgive us: Forgive the wrongs of our fathers.’

Behind me Azra says, ‘Oh my God!’

There is a buzz of questions and comments. I feel she has voiced exactly my awe of the moment—the rare, luminous instant in which two men transcend their historic intransigence to tender apologies on behalf of their species.

Again she says, ‘Oh God!’ and I realize she is afraid that the cousins, crawling forward with small movements, are resurrecting a past that is best left in whatever recesses of the mind Ammi-ji has chosen to bury it.

‘Don’t do this ... please,’ protests Sikander. ‘You’re our guests ...!’

But the cousins, keeping their eyes inches off the floor, say, ‘Bhai, let us be.’

The whispered comments of the guests intensify around me.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘They are begging her pardon ...’

‘Who are these men?’

‘... for what the Sikhs did to her in the riots ...’

‘Hai Ram. What do they want?’

‘God knows what she’s been through; she never talks about it ...’

‘With their hair open like this they must remind her of the men who ...’

‘You can’t beat the Punjabis when it comes to drama,’ says the supercilious guest. His wife, standing next to me, says, ‘The Sikhs have a screw loose in the head.’ She rotates a stubby thumb on her temple as if she is tightening an imaginary screw.

I turn, frowning. The sisters are glaring at them: showering the backs of their heads with withering, hostile looks.

And, in hushed tones of suitable gravity, Mrs Khan says: ‘Ammi-ji, they are asking for your forgiveness.’ Silence, save for the swish of cloth as we turn towards Ammi-ji.

Then, addressing the men on the floor, speaking on her mother-in-law’s account, she says: ‘She forgives you, Brothers.’

Azra and her older sister repeat Mrs Khan’s magnanimous gesture, and, with minor variations, also forgive Khushwant and Pratab on Ammi-ji’s behalf.

‘Ammi-ji: come here!’ Sikander has the military air of an officer determined to stop this nonsense.

We shift, clearing a narrow passage for Ammi-ji, and Vijay’s mother darts out instead looking like an agitated chick in her puffed cotton sari. She is about to say something—and judging from her expression it has to be something indeterminate and conciliatory—when Vijay, firmly taking hold of her arm, hauls her back.

Seeing his mother has not moved, Sikander shouts, ‘Send Ammi-ji here. For God’s sake, finish it now.’

Ammi-ji takes two or three staggering steps and stands a few paces before me. I suspect one of the sisters has prodded her forward. I cannot see Ammi-ji's face, but the head beneath the grey chaddar jerks as if she is trying to remove a crick from her neck.

All at once, her voice, an altered, fragile, high-pitched treble that bears no resemblance to the fierce voice that had demanded, 'Who are these men?', Ammi-ji screeches, 'I will never forgive your fathers! Get out, shaitans! Sons and grandsons of shaitans! Never, never, never!'

She becomes absolutely still, as if she will remain there forever, rooted, the quintessence of indictment.

They raise their heads to say, 'We will lie at your feet to our last breath!'

In a slow, deliberate gesture, Ammi-ji turns her face away and I observe her profile. Her eyes are clenched shut. The muscles in her cheeks and lower jaw are quivering in tiny, tight spasms as if charged by a current. No one dares say a word: it would be an intrusion. She has to contend with unearthed torments and private demons. The matter rests between her memories and the incarnation of the phantoms resurrected at her feet.

The men reach out to touch her slippers and they lay their heads at her feet in the ancient gesture of surrender demanded of warriors.

'Leave me! Let go!' Ammi-ji shrieks, in her shaky, altered voice. She raises her arms and moves them as if she is pushing away invisible insects. But she looks exhausted and, her knees giving way, she squats before the men. She buries her face in the chaddar.

At last, with slight actions that suggest she is ready to face the world, Ammi-ji wipes her face in her chaddar, and rearranges it on her untidy head. She tucks the edges behind her ears and slowly, in a movement that is almost tender, places her shaking hands on the shaggy heads of the men who hold her feet captive. 'My sons, I forgave your fathers long ago,' she says in a flat, emotionless voice pitched so low that it takes some time for the words to register. 'How else could I have lived?'

On my way home, hanging on to the red tail-lights of the cars on the Katy Freeway, my thoughts tumble through a chaos of words and images—Azra's face, pale and drawn, her head bowed; Ammi-ji's weary capitulation; the sisters' frozen stares ... Perhaps the surreal gestures of these young men will go some way to ease the ancient animosities ... allow Azra and Khushwant to marry. During dinner I notice Khushwant's complex contrite glances, stealthily seeking hers ...

Joanne is right: living in America changes people—I can sense the changes in myself ... yes ...

And then fragments of a poem by the Bolivian poet Pedro Shimose churn up to drown the images. The words throb in an endless, circular rhythm:

*Defend yourself against me
against my father and the father of my father
still living in me
Against my force and shouting in schools and cathedrals
Against my camera, against my pencil
against my TV-spots.*

*Defend yourself against me,
please, woman,
defend yourself!*

~

Author's Note

I have to admit that I am a novelist by inclination and not a short-story writer—even my short stories, as you will no doubt notice in this collection, tend to be lengthy.

My first short story, 'Breaking It Up' was published by Serpents Tail in Britain in the 1980s. Amanda Conquay, who was then at Heinemann, UK, liked it and persuaded me to expand it into a novel. Youth allows one to blithely undertake what one might balk at in later years, and I turned the short story into my novel *An American Brat*. In the year it took me to do this, Conquay left Heinemann and the new editor rejected the novel. The considerably changed and polished version was published by Milkweed in America in 1994.

'Defend Yourself Against Me' was the second story I wrote. It contained material that I wanted to include in my novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. Novels, however, determine a path all their own and it was only after I finished *ICM* that I realized there was no room in it for my fateful meeting with Mr Sikander Khan at a party in Houston. His horrific experiences as a nine-year-old, when his village was attacked during the 1947 riots, had provided the crucial chapter titled 'Ranna's Story' in *ICM*. The dramatic material that I was unable to include thus shaped itself into this short story.

The two stories about Ruth were written only a few years ago. These included memories of my friendships with various American women who had lived in Lahore from the 1950s to the early 1990s. In these stories, particularly in 'Ruth and the Hijackers', the role I assigned Raj is interchangeable with the character of my brother, Minoo Bhandara, and the role he played in providing me with the dramatic incidents that propel the story.

'A Gentlemanly War' is based on the 1965 war between India and Pakistan, and my family's experiences of it. The acquisition of the Murree Brewery by my father, P. D. Bhandara, in 1947 accurately reflects the progression of Prohibition in Pakistan. The occasion when my mother, brother and I trooped across the road to the President's House at the beginning of the war, is a fictionalized depiction of our meeting with Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was then the Foreign Minister of Pakistan. By this time the Brewery House, our residence in Rawalpindi, had morphed into the President's House during the first martial law imposed by Field Martial Ayub Khan.

The remaining stories do not require any explanation so I will leave them alone.

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First, as always, I thank Khushwant Singh for reading the manuscript of this collection and recommending it for publication. My affection and admiration for him have grown over the years and I regret not being able to personally express my sentiments to him. When I called him during my last visit to Lahore, he said, 'When are you coming to see me? I am 94!' I did not have the heart to tell him I was not well enough to travel and due to have spine surgery. I miss him sorely and if it is in the stars I will do my best to travel to Delhi solely to see my beloved friend.

I thank R. Sivapriya for publishing this collection, and Ambar Sahil Chatterjee, not only for his superb editorial wizardry but also for inspiring the stunning jacket cover for *Their Language of Love* and the designs to match it for all my other novels.

I learnt that Ravi Singh and Diya Kar Hazra are no longer with Penguin. I wish them well wherever they are.

And I thank Penguin for steadfastly publishing me over the years.



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