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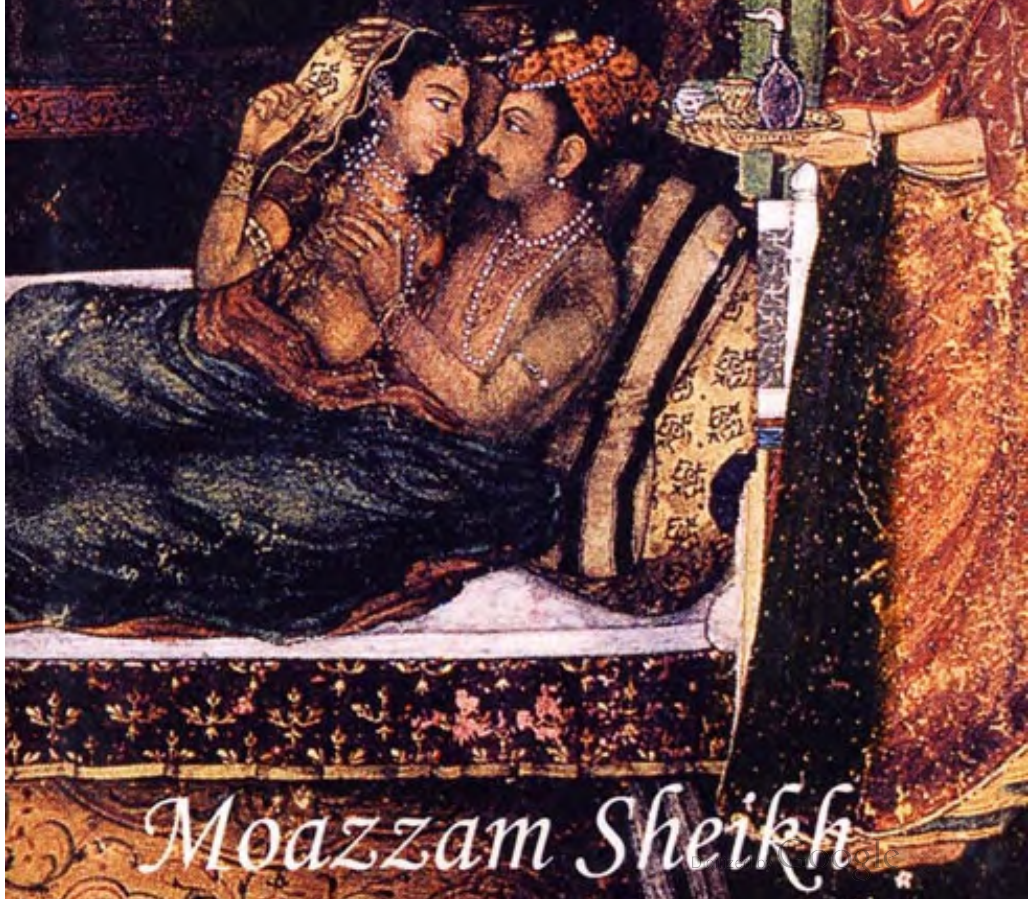
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# *The Idol Lover*

*and Other Stories  
from Pakistan*



*Moazzam Sheikh*

**THE IDOL LOVER**  
**MOAZZAM SHEIKH**



*The Idol Lover*  
*and Other Stories of Pakistan*

MOAZZAM SHEIKH



Ithuriel's Spear  
*San Francisco*

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*Cover illustration: Dara Shikuh and a young woman on a terrace, attributed to Balchand, Mughal India, c. 1645. Detail. Hotel Drouot sale catalogue, 1982.*

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— Moazzam Sheikh

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*To Amna and Amar, my two eyes.*

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## *Monsoon Rains*

THE EARLY SHOWERS of the monsoon had struck the night before with full rage. Soon, the streets of Lahore would become rivers in August, carrying mud and filth. The frightening thunders were heard up till the end of the night, and the single wooden door in the room, which opened to the balcony, seemed already wet and swollen. Masud paced back and forth in his room, impatiently, nervously, like a caged cat. His face was dark and haggard. Eyes small but deep, restive, and shoulders bent as if an invisible weight rested on them. If one looked harder, one saw a little cut under his pointed chin which he was in the habit of rubbing occasionally. He stopped for a second next to the table and lit another cigarette, staring at *Imroz*, the Urdu newspaper folded on the table. The desire to read the paper had deserted him. She was usually very punctual, he cogitated, for her survival depended on it, but now, as it continued to pour buckets outside, she was more than an hour late.

He stopped pacing and, looking out towards the balcony, saw the dark, vicious clouds which filled the frame of his balcony door. The wind caused the rain to fall at an angle, away from it—the rain water was running aslant on the balcony floor to a hole in one corner, falling on the muddy sidewalk like a fall. He went out to the balcony and stood under the tin roof. Resting his hand on the metal

grille, he looked out to the back of her house—the pale, yellow wall being whipped by the merciless rain. From four stories up, he could look at her window which opened into the back alley, but now was shut tight. It would remain so throughout the monsoon. The rain fell on the tin roof like an unpleasant, out-of-tune sitar melody, and feeling irritated, he stepped back in.

He sat down on a chair, jumpy, his legs shifting position, his feet shaking slightly, and every time he moved, the chair squeaked because of its loose joints. Now, he was aware of the emptiness that suddenly gripped him.

Smoke rings drifted from his lips while his eyes raced all over the wall and its cracked surface. He needed her—the monsoon, the smell of the earth in the air, the subdued noises of the human beings out on the street, soaked and hurrying, the howling of the wandering dogs, and the solitude within him made him ache for her company. The comfort of her flesh, the odor of her skin. Was he addicted to her? He could not answer. She had never skipped a work day, he reflected, as he paused again, even when she'd had a light fever three weeks ago.

He decided on impulse to walk to her house and inquire what had stopped her today. Or perhaps it was the crying rain that called him out to see her naked misery. He grabbed his umbrella and, putting on his rain coat, walked down the dirty stairway, which stank with such severity that it reminded him of rotten flesh every time he came to it. He could arrange for someone else, he thought as he descended, but, no, he enjoyed her presence. Was she on her way? He might even run into her on the street. The thought pleased him momentarily.

Masud Sheikh lived in a decrepit building, one of the remains of British rule, a red, thin-tiled building with a Victorian façade. The landlord rented out the small rooms to bachelors or married men, and some women too, who came to Lahore from other places to find work. But Masud had lived all his life in this city, in the old city encased

behind thirteen decaying gates and, unlike others, rented this place in order to forget the past.

At the foot of the building were five shops—a bakery, a laundromat, a grocery store, a hardware store, and a barber shop. At the barber shop people sat gossiping all day long, listening to the radio tuned to Noor Jahan, or to Ashfaq Ahmed's Hidayat Allah every evening at seven. In the morning to the Radio Pakistan, Lahore and in the afternoon to Akashwani (All India Radio). The men played cards, drank tea, and discussed political matters.

Jumma Khan, the barber, was the fulcrum of information and subject matter to these gossips—he was how the stories really spread.

It was Jumma, one afternoon, who out of consideration, had suggested that Masud hire a cleaner, one of the Christian women from the nearby slums.

"Arrey, Masud *sahib*, you should get a sweeper for your room. It keeps the place clean," Jumma had said, looking at him in the stained, warped mirror, his scissors dancing—*clip, clap*.

"Do you know any, Jumma, whom you can trust?" Masud had asked with the same subtlety.

"Not at the moment," Jumma had said, gripping Masud's hair between his fingers and pulling it up, "but I will certainly keep my eyes open and let you know." And Jumma had smiled into the mirror, becoming a secret sharer. Later, Jumma had added, "Even Allah doesn't prescribe loneliness, Masud *bhai*!"

Masud remembered the conversation now as he climbed down the last steps out to the street, into the rain, breathing hard. Having come out in the open, he felt a nakedness creep into him as he faced Jumma, who knew every terra incognita a heart could know and every truth hidden behind a pair of eyes, light or dark. The news of his desperation, he feared, would spread now among the card players, the indolent tea sippers, and then the other neighbors. Masud saw Jumma Khan from the corners of his eyes and hurried his steps.

"Ah-ha! Masud *bira... ader*, where to, in this rain?" Jumma's voice replaced the thunders of the monsoon. Mostly to annoy Masud, he liked to enunciate the word *biraader* by breaking it into its paused syllables.

Masud stopped under the umbrella, the rain beating as hard as possible to subdue any sound. "To the post office, Jumma. How have you been?" waving his hand.

He moved on without waiting for Jumma's answer, but he had hardly gone a few steps when he heard Jumma exclaim, "*Alhamd-o-lillah!*" followed by a spiteful laugh. And it was then he remembered, irritated by the laughter, that the post office was in fact in the other direction. He felt a shrinking sensation as he walked away from the building, and noticed a sense of panic on the street.

He had become deaf to every other sound except that of the rain. Turning right from the Pakki Thatti sherbet shop to the Choorā *basti*, he walked three streets south, along the meat market, and faced the wall with the hole—there were advertisements painted on each side of it. People went through this hole instead of going half a mile farther to the iron gate installed by the city municipal corporation. He ducked his head down and came out the other side, having closed and reopened his umbrella. He stood in the neighborhood of the servant class, mostly the dark Christians who were, as some believed, the crop of British seed and fertilizer.

After the masters had vanished, the leftovers from the British domain had become the rags of this society, a society which claimed human equality as its basic pillar. At the corner of the two extremely narrow alleys to his left he saw a small *paan* shop—a small boy squatted behind a glass box and a few empty cold drink bottles. A tin shade jutted out from above giving shelter to two skinny men, standing, drinking their tea. The men gave Masud a curious look, then laughed and went back to their conversation.

It was the windier side of the street—he tightened his grip on the umbrella. He noticed as he walked on

children of different ages, though mostly boys—some naked and some in shorts, running in various directions playing the rain games—accepting the gift from heavens. Sheltered underneath his umbrella, he examined the houses to the right and left, registering the paleness of the walls and doors which hung askew even though they were chained and locked. It was a long row of small, one room houses, huddled together as if scared, often without an alley between their walls or a verandah on the front. No tree grew on this street.

Here, the rainwater in the middle of the earthen street was already a few inches deep. He walked on the narrow sidewalk, slippery with mud. He made out her house and halted in front of its soaked, uneven wooden door, from which a lizard-like chain dangled. As he decided to strike his knuckles against the door, an unknown fear surrounded his innards and checked his hand. He felt weak in the knees, his fist remained suspended in the air. The frost of his breath appeared in rapid compressions. Closing his eyes, he jangled the chain, weakly, as if in a dream. He looked to the street where the weak, lean children played with an old tennis ball, throwing it to each other with loud, shrieking sounds, jumping up and down, sinking their dark legs into the brown water. Though he could hear their sounds, it seemed that the yelling and shrieking did not reach his ears but his heart, piercing to the middle. Suddenly he reacted, as if caught off guard to the creaking door and its rusted hinges, and turned his head with a start to face a gaunt figure emerging from the lightless room, grimacing at him with missing teeth.

Two alarmed eyes flickered in the old man's deep sockets. But then his face softened, his gaze moving from scared, to perplexed, to barely concealed contempt. His stare seemed to penetrate Masud's and Masud felt guilty of some inexplicable crime, as though he had something, even if vaguely, to do with this man's fate.

After an awkward silence, the host, moving aside, motioned Masud to step inside, having guessed who he might be.

"Come in from the rain, *Babu-ji*," he said. "Nasima is home."

Masud stepped in with hesitation, folding his wet umbrella and shaking the drops of water onto the dried mud floor. The man's hospitality was already beginning to oppress Masud. He tried to adjust his eyes to the darkness of the room. A stove made the room smell of kerosene oil. He made out the figures of a woman and two children standing next to the stove to stay warm. The flame cast a faint, dancing light on them. The woman's face was stricken with surprise, or fear—one could not tell. The man closed the door. On the wall Masud noticed a cheap calendar with Hazrat Jesus—arms stretched benevolently above the months of the year.

"*Salaam-alaikum*," the woman mumbled.

"I thought you might have hurt yourself," he said to Nasima, though not meeting her eyes.

The water dripped at equal intervals from the ceiling into a tin bucket, *tip, tip, tip*, in the middle of the room, splashing onto the mud. The sound of the leak inside, somehow, seemed louder with each silent second like an explosion.

Coming a little closer to him, to the centre of the room beside the bucket, she said, "It's been hell here, Masud *saab*, the leak and the children..." but her voice trailed off when she saw his uninterested face, and the subjugated desire in his eyes. His prolonged silence made her uneasy—however she managed to speak again: "I thought you wouldn't mind my not coming in the rain today, and—" Her voice sank into the sound of the water dripping.

Masud saw her lips moving, but did not hear what she said. His mind was somewhere else. In his mind he was back in his room, Nasima's naked body on the bed beside his. Then suddenly he saw the same bed empty, and was reminded of his loneliness. He remembered the first time he'd seen her dark, naked back, as if made of sandal wood, and her hair like a black river. Vexed, he looked at her husband, who stood crossing his arms to hide his

naked, hairless chest, except for the grayish patch around the navel, and the old man smiled faintly upon meeting Masud's eyes. Masud wondered briefly how such a broken old man has acquired such a lovely young wife, but the subject did not really interest him. Masud looked away to the flame in the stove, and cleared his throat.

"I have invited," surprised at hearing his own sound, and at the ability to lie with confidence, Masud began slowly, his voice deep and needy, glancing back to Nasima, "some friends tonight for tea. If you could, please, come for a short while?" His eyes rested, briefly, on her breasts, obscured behind the shirt she wore of thin material, before moving his stare back to her lips.

"Yes, yes. Why not, *ji*? Yes, Nasimay!" the old man's voice startled Masud. "Go, go and do a quick sweeping I mean why not..." and at the end of his words he coughed, pushing his chest against his arms and bending forward, as if in obedience. A child stepped forward to the old man and grabbed his dhoti cloth.

Nasima moved to leave, staring at her children, and leaned to pick up her *dupatta* from the string bed. Masud thought of Jumma Khan and his cunning laughter, and halted at the door, the old man freezing behind him. "You don't have to come with me. I have to run an errand on my way home, so it'd be better to wait about half an hour and then come." Masud opened the door.

Holding her *dupatta*, Nasima nodded and then looked at her husband, who was looking at the rain falling on the brown bed of water.

Opening his umbrella over his head, Masud hurried out into the rain as though his body was burning. Walking down the street, he felt his insides filling with rage, and as he approached his house, sneaking through the hole, he didn't avoid the puddles, his shoes becoming drenched and muddy. He took quick steps and his heart beat faster. He spotted Jumma, from a block's distance, sitting under the tin shade that jutted out from the building facade.

"Wah! Allah's blessing is this rain, Masud *saheb*, the crops are thirsty and waiting, and here Allah is ever merciful. Arrey, Masud *bhai*, I wonder what happened to our Nasima today?" Jumma took a deep puff from his Kashmiri hookah; the water in the bottom of the hookah gurgled angrily. But before Masud could answer, or ignore the question, Jumma cackled, "Those lazy Christians. *Ya Allah!* those damn Farangees should have taken their filth back to Inglistan I say." He shook his head as if with disgust, but Masud knew it was more with malice and mockery.

"Jumma-ji," Masud snapped, "who would clean our Muslim toilets then? Who would wash our arses." Leaving Jumma stunned with the tip of the hookah's mouthpiece hanging in his grip, Masud walked inside, folding his umbrella.

\* \* \*

With his head encased in his palms, leaning, he sat motionless, feeling nauseated, weightless. He tried to clear his mind of thoughts, but they kept crowding his head. He should not have gone, he reflected with bitter embarrassment; a man could lose all his decency faster than any other thing he possessed: money, health, love.

He came out of his doldrums, on the verge of having drowned, on hearing the door creak; he looked up and Nasima was halfway in the room.

She stood staring at him, the rain drops sliding from her face, her clothes, her hands.

"So when are those guests of yours coming? In this rain?" she asked, smiling, a bit teasing, a bit sarcastic.

He just stared at her.

She shivered with cold and squeezed the wetness on her arms with her hands. It took a while to register, but then he got up quickly, grabbed a towel, and extended it to

her. He then changed his mind and began wiping her hair, shoulders, arms, and then the rest of her body himself. She stood there, staring at the ceiling, later at the lizard that stared back at her. He suddenly kissed her lifeless lips with the ferocity of the monsoon rains, escorted her to his *takht-e-shahi*, to his Taj Mahal.

\* \* \*

Soon he crumbled to the side, breathing heavily, eyes closed, relieved. She kept her eyes open, but covered them with her right elbow, perhaps, to shade them from light. Perhaps. He felt he was slowly sinking, like a stone, into the depths of an immense ocean. The numbness in his body alienated him to his surroundings. The constant fall of the rain and the unvarying sound of it seemed to dull the sense of desire now. The silence started to cut in his heart. He knew he had to speak or else he would become a reef.

"Who was *he*?"

"Who? My husband, who else!"

"Yes, the old man. Does he know?" he asked, feeling bitter at the taste of his words, acknowledging his own defeat.

"Yes, he knows. They *all* know..." she whispered.

He wanted to know who they all were, but he did not. He longed for a trace of emotion in her voice, an inkling of compassion, sympathy, or even pity, but her tone fell flat. Suddenly he remembered the man's sickly stare, glowing beneath the ashes of his life. The burning, coal-like eyes of the old man now moved closer and closer, thrusting inward, pushing against his own eyes, his brains. It felt as if two red hot suns had gotten inside his skull and his face would melt any moment. A scream came to his throat, but got stuck inside his mouth. Then he heard Nasima's

husband crack with laughter, "Yes, yes, why not, *sahib*. Why not!? *Ha ha ha!*"

The anger rose inside him and he wanted to break something, smash something, a pot, a picture, a memory. He wanted to scream aloud, 'pimp, rascal, *bhaenchod*, coward,' but deep down he grew angrier at himself, feeling an urge to curse his own loneliness.

She raised her elbow and turned to look at his face. He looked at her, his anger dissipating. "You should get married." She said. "Even when you are with me, you remain sad. Even when you are caressing me, your eyes remain sorrow-soaked. That is not good." They both smiled an unexpected smile, their dark-rimmed, lifeless eyes becoming alive for a moment, glowing like dying cinders.

He began kissing her, and then his hand caressed the inviting curves of her body. He felt the lack of the same feeling on the other side. He thought of asking her to respond the way she would to her husband, but then he forcibly stitched his lips. Perhaps she does not love him either, he thought. To his surprise, she squeezed him with renewed aggression, wrapping her arms around him.

"Nasima," he hissed.

"Wha—" she hissed back.

"Marry me."

"Silly man. I *am* married," she answered, laughing.

"Then run away with me," and hated his words as soon as they left his mouth.

"I have children." She looked into his eyes and her grip around him relaxed. After a very short silence, she held him tighter, and with some unknown cruelty, dug her nails into his shoulders.

"Nasima... your husband... is too weak... sick."

She moaned, as if in response.

"He's a guest of a few more days," he whispered, as he introduced his hardness inside her.

Her body stiffened. "What? What did you mean?" Her

voice grew in fear. "Why do you talk like that? What right... because you can pay me?"

She trembled with emotion, pushing him away with her palms, and started to sob, shaking with sudden jerks. He felt angry, miserable, and heavily rolled over to his side, feeling impotency settle in him, his own existence disappearing into a dark cloud.

He wrapped a white sheet around his waist, like a dhoti, and pulled another over her. She had, however, stopped sobbing and was still.

"I... I am sorry, Nasima," he said, failing to meet her eyes.

"Don't say such things again please," she murmured, as though talking to herself. She did not look to him either. He stared at her naked feet.

She sat up on the *takht*, her legs dangling, and put on her brassiere. He grabbed his wallet and took out three ten rupee bills. She had already gotten dressed, and now turned to say farewell, seeing his extended hand with money.

"But this is too much, and you—" she said.

"That's okay... please... I mean..." he replied with wandering eyes. "And ... take two or three days off. I'll be all right. You know Ramzan is approaching too." He forced a smile.

She seemed to be lost in thought, then snapped out of it and said, "*Shukria*," gratefully, and rushed out, shutting the door behind her. His hand reached for his cigarettes. He thought he could finish a whole packet, and maybe smoke two more tonight and die in his sleep. A spider slowly began to crawl around his heart.

\* \* \*

Three days later the rains still had not relented, and the streets were like rivers. The wheels of the horse carriages turned in the water slowly, scooping up water on their wooden spokes and pouring it back on the street; occasionally the wind blew, angling the rain this way or that way, at times rocking the windows and doors fitfully.

Here and there a wall collapsed or a roof caved in. Masud remained inside his room, going out only to buy milk for tea or *chappatis* at the *tandoor*. He tried not to think too much of Nasima, of her not being here with him, or her husband. Or his voice. But once in a while the old man's ghost appeared before him, mocking slyly, "So, *sahib-ji*, am I going to die soon? Am I? As you put it to my wife, a guest of how many days? So soon?" He tried to dismiss the ghost as fast as possible, but sometimes it returned. "*Ha ha ha!* Well, if you say so... I am going to die, and you can have Nasima all to yourself. But do not forget my children, Masud-*sahib!* Hee hee hee!"

One day as he sat in his chair, smoking a cigarette and reading the *Akhbar e Jahan* weekly, a sudden knock at the door jolted him. He felt a tinge of uncertainty and, nervously, stood up and opened the door, imagining it to be Nasima. With that conjecture, his longing for her exploded. But, to his surprise, a young woman of no more than eighteen, with big impatient eyes, stood at the door, and then as he lowered his eyes fleetingly he noticed her firm and inviting breasts.

"Yes? Bolo!" he asked.

"*Salaam, babu-ji,*" the girl's voice trembled, as she tried to smile.

"*Wa-alyekum...*" he nodded.

"*Ji,* Nasima will not be able to come for a few days," his voice was beginning to gather strength, "I thought you might need... a sweeper."

He immediately wanted to tell her to go away, but ended up saying, "*Huh?* Oh! Yes, come in, yes. I—"

Perhaps he felt a wave of pity rising inside him. A young beautiful Christian woman fresh as a flower. Poverty and the need to prostitute her body, he thought, would turn her into a skeleton of tired bones in less than ten years. He noticed the broom in her hand. She walked in after him and placed it against the wall, closing the door behind her.

He discreetly observed her small but firm breasts. Then, he sat down and lit another cigarette. Putting out the match, he inhaled the smoke and, as he shook the match-stick, breathed out a huge silvery cloud. His gaze fell, through the obscurity of the smoke, on her feet, and the sight perplexed him. Her *shalwar* had slipped from her waist to the ground, covering her feet. He lifted his head, registering her naked legs, and found her absorbed in unbuttoning her shirt. For a moment he thought he was dreaming, the smoke distorting his vision, his sense of reality, but then a sudden rage overpowered his calm.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"*Sahib-ji*," she shuddered, like a scared child.

"Yes, I asked you what you are doing!"

"She spoke reluctantly: "*Sahib-ji*, that Jumma Khan has sent me here, he said..." They looked at each other, speechless, as if two statues placed behind glass in a museum.

Masud saw her naked legs, smooth and innocent, like running water—then her half-revealed breasts, offering solace, then dark eyes. Masud felt his anger being subdued by a familiar sense of weakness—desire began to burn inside his veins, his limbs trembled and ached.

The woman was nervous at first, but she regained her composure. "The other *sahib*," she spoke with a soft voice, "who lived at the end of the hall paid me five rupees... every time I came to clean."

The smoke clouds had dissolved into the air. Freeing her legs from her *shalwar*, holding the open collar of *kurta*, she took a step closer.

He lay on his *takht*, next to her. Looking at her, he tried to catch the disappearing warmth of her young breath. His thoughts flashed to Nasima and back, and he realized, without much sadness, that anyone could replace the sense of comfort Nasima brought. He felt happy and light. And yet sad. Somewhere down on the street a radio played a *ghazal*, the sound of Farida Khanum's voice, rising to his balcony like smoke.

He stood in the balcony door, and she, now sitting up on the *takht*, hooked up her brassiere, bringing her hands behind her back. He looked at her back, shiny and smooth like a bathed neem leaf, stretching and contracting, the bones of her young spine stacked neatly on top of each other. On her waist he looked for his finger prints.

She got up and put on her *shalwar* and shirt, rolling her shoulders and adjusting the cups of her brassiere. She caught him looking, and smiled at him.

"You have a sick husband?"

She stopped smiling, unsure of his words, "*Naa, Sahib-ji*, I am not married," she answered with a short giggle.

"A sick brother?"

"*Naa, Sahib-ji*, but I have a sick father with T.B. and my mother lost her legs years ago," she said quickly, without emotion.

He took two ten rupee bills out. Giving them to her, he said, "Come back tomorrow, if you can." She took the bills and carefully tucked them inside the elastic of her bra. But as she put the money away, she stopped, remembering.

"Oh, my God! I almost forgot to tell you, my bad memory!" she said, putting the top of her finger to her lips.

He stared at her, at her girl-like innocence.

"I forgot to tell you that Nasima's husband, Chacha John, died last night... too much cough and fever."

Masud knitted his brows, relaxed them. It became difficult for him to breathe. He felt dizzy and held on to the back of the chair. The old man's face appeared and disappeared from his sight.

She grabbed her broom and said, smiling, "*Shukria, Sahib-ji*, I will see you tomorrow," and left the room.

The cigarette in Masud's hand was shaking. He walked to the balcony, and looked at Nasima's home. He slammed the door shut and chained it. But the dark clouds hung on the outskirts, threatening to come back and drown the city with their rage.



## *The Idol Lover*

*The loneliness inside me, the duality of my person...*

—Kishwar Naheed

### 1.

**IN A RECURRENT DREAM**, appearing sporadically and nearly unchanged, he would recognize himself, more from the intimacy of the dream than from his own face, in the midst of a prolonged, abysmal fall. Before he could die, he would wake up with a shriek, sit up in bed, and panting—soaked in perspiration, wonder why none of the other soldiers in his barracks had woken to his scream. Just then, or nearly, two dark eyes of a woman would appear and stare at him in the darkness, and as if taking a cue from those eyes he would then turn on his side, afraid, still half-asleep, learning once again that he had just dreamed a dream within a dream. A scorpion of fear would flex its tail in his heart, forcing him to keep his eyes closed.

*Naeb* Subedar Prem Lal Singh was of a proud and proven Rajput stock. His forefathers were among the Hindu warriors who, under the tutelage of Raja Ranjit Singh *Kana*, had held off the British from entering the five rivers. According to family legend, while defending the Punjab, two or three of his forefathers had achieved martyrdom, and the knowledge of this profound sacrifice obliged Prem Lal to keep his head high with pride. A century later his ancestors had once again proved their mettle fighting for the British. Not just in India but also in the Middle East and Africa, the list of martyrs was longer than the list of those who returned with missing limbs, like his uncle Mukhan Singh *Tunda*.

Prem Singh stood out from other non-commissioned officers of the 502 Punjab Core in the Delhi Cantonment for his ever-glinting, dark bluish-copper skin. Sweat or no-sweat, he also left an image of his face stamped in people's minds, due to his unusually high cheek bones, broad forehead, slightly mismatched, half-Chinese eyes, but above all for his oil-tweaked, proudly twirled mustache that curled upwards to touch the hollow of his cheekbones. As a veteran of two wars with Pakistan, once on the western frontier and once on the eastern, his stocks would always be high among his peers no matter where he was stationed. One could safely assume that he had seen Dacca; and, yes, indeed, he had even seen the great General Arora snatch the medals off the shirt of the Tiger of Bengal—Gen. Niazi—ripping the fabric where they had been pinned, and throwing them into the dirt. He even remembered the quickness with which Prem's eyes had followed the medals to the ground. Those hawk eyes he was so famous for. The shiver he'd experienced in his spine then seemed to have left its memory there, like a permanent taste of poison.

In the service of the Indian Armed Forces he had been stationed all over the country, east west north south, you name it, and yet there were only a handful of places he considered worth remembering, Lucknow being the best, closely followed by Hyderabad of the Nizam and the hijras. The worst was Calcutta he would tell an acquaintance or a new recruit snidely, but when asked why he thought so low of a once great city, he would admit, reluctantly, that it was more of a feeling than any particular experience; it was like not being able to breathe easily, he would say, or to sleep well. But, *ah!* he would sigh deeply and say, "I'll always remember, *wah!* Lucknow and the delicate balconies of the houses there... and the women...."

He would also recall the intermingling of Urdu and Telegu, the Chaar Minar, the Nampally Station, and the malignant tree shadows in the sweltering heat of the Hyderabad afternoons.

Since adulthood he had been drawn to Hindustani classical music, the mysteries of *raags*, *thumris* and *ghazals*, which was quite unusual for a person of his rugged background—the son of peasants who traditionally loved *bhangra*, *sang joogni*, or listened to *qawwali* music. After all, he was only a senior *naeb* subaltern, a man without a college degree. He became the butt of jokes behind his back for this obsession with *raags* and their *raaginis*. To add yet another shade of ridicule, it was known in the vicinity of the Cantonment District and beyond that he carried with him a small transistor radio day and night, rain or shine. It couldn't be seen, but everyone knew it was hidden inside one of his pockets. In fact, a friend had even joked once, "*Oe-hoy*, do you take your shower too with it, *enh?* *bhai saheb?*"

"I'm a religious man, Bunnay Miyan-ji; see, this is my pocket-sized Gita, made in Japan," he had answered with a smile.

But Bunnay Mian wasn't the kind whose hair had gone gray from the sun alone, and his kind knew precisely when to lash back, so, as expected, he retorted, "*Bhai saheb-ji*, the Gita-*shita* is fine, I agree one hundred and one percent,

but *kabhi kabhi* one should, I must say, step inside a temple as well, *naheen?* And offer a *pranam* to the gods made in Hindustan with Hindustani material." There had followed a roar of laughter from the listeners, bench-sitters. The sister-fuckers! The tea sippers! Prem had bestowed them with the appropriate appellations, silently.

"What can I do, *Miyan-ji?* Your gods won't let me inside their home," he'd replied. "Their scorn checks my feet at the door. Besides, I'm a lover, not a worshipper—my sins are too heavy for any god to forgive."

One of the tea-sippers had shaken his head and exclaimed: "Prem-*ji*, you're a lost soul—lost." Another man, aged and toothless, had added, though good-humoredly, "Go, go listen to your *ghazals*, *Mussla bhaenchod!*"

Walking away, smiling, he repeated, "not a worshipper... *Mussla Bhaen....*" At times, Prem doubtlessly yielded to the Muslim assumption of his people as being idol lovers.

### 3.

With the grayness of more than four decades in his hair, Prem Singh remained a bachelor, such an oddity in this culture for a man with a steady income and government privileges that it lent tongue to spicy tales of impotence, betrayal, and unrequited love. One rumor was that ever since he'd seen Bhoomika he had been in love with Smita Patel the actress, who had recently died in labor. Another version had it that their distracted subaltern in fact adored Shabana Azmi because she was not only an actress but also a social worker and the daughter of a poet. A local *chai-walla*, a boy, went so far as to claim that he had actually spotted a Shabana Azmi poster on his bedroom wall with all the faces of the male actors scissored out. But then frequent stretches of imagination of this sort are in a sense what Hindustan is all about.

The reality, however, was quite different from what entered idle ears: Prem Singh had been born in Rang Mahal, Lahore, and while only a year old had lost both his parents to the madness of Partition. He and his relatives somehow managed to reach India alive as beggars, uprooted like trees in a storm, some half-insane and a few beyond recovery. Orphaned, he managed to finish high school, low second division, and then joined the army as a corporal. In the beginning he would hide his face under the bed sheet and cry, missing his estranged half-insane relatives, while the other soldiers slept soundly, or so it seemed, in the same barrack, a few snoring occasionally. He especially missed his younger uncle, Makhan Lal Singh *Tunda*, who'd gone mad after the Partition and hung about the nearby alleys during the days, by turns chasing after stray dogs and being chased by them. Sometimes Prem would have to go two neighborhoods down to find Makhan *chacha* sleeping by the roadside with his mouth ajar for the flies' inspection, the dried snot blocking his nostrils. Prem would wake him up, dust his clothes, and lure him back to the house. The service and the two wars took him farther and farther away from his already reduced family, and now he would only receive the occasional letter written by a stray cousin or a distant relative announcing the death of an uncle or an aunt. Replying, he would pay his condolences and add I am deeply grieved to hear about.... I am sorry to say that I cannot get to attend the *chitta* burning. Yours obediently, Prem. And as time went on he finally lost the sense of ever having had a family, and soon became quite disenchanted with the idea of getting married and forming his own little nest.

Many years before in Lucknow, however, he had had a short bitter-sweet love affair with a Muslim school teacher. She taught at the Cantonment High School, inside the military compound, and coming inside and on her way out to the street she walked past the window of his office twice a day, five days a week. The steady and determined click-

click of her heels against the concrete pavement alerted the men and distracted them from work. Along with the other soldiers, he admired her youthfulness. As discreetly as possible, his eyes, too, ravished the cut and trim of her figure. He couldn't behave in a vulgar manner the way others did, with their whispers and moans, straight out of the Hindi movies, of *wah ji wah!* or *hai ram! margya ji!* What a gait, what a waist! Despite his discretion, she had caught him looking at her with the subdued flame of longing in his eyes. Each time, his blood had burned from embarrassment. Still, the next day, as soon as he recognized the strike of her heels on the pavement, his head turned to her automatically in defiance of his shyness. This game of looking and not looking, of averted glances and hesitant invitations, the beckoning of her curves written in the ancient language of loneliness—across the blackboard of his desire—went on for a few months.

Then on one of those rainy days when the streets of the old city become small rivers and clouds pump in continuously from the west, our Prem Singh—in the best of Lucknavi attire, his mustache freshly oiled, curled, and pointed—found himself standing outside her door on two shaky feet, distractedly gripping an umbrella, suffocating in the push and shove of whether to knock or still turn away gracefully.

Then a few years later in Hyderabad he had seduced with his manly persistence a Christian sweeper woman, dark as charcoal, with big dark eyes, eyes that cut and healed at the same time. Her eyes were the knife, he liked to think, that entered your flesh with a dash of balm on its tip. She was the wife of the gardener who tended the grounds of the premise. Prem once brought her silver bangles from Agra, and a pair of silver anklets from Jodhpur. She would wear them only when she came to visit him. During one monsoon he slept with her almost every day for a whole month, still he felt alone and lonely at night. While the husband mowed the grass, tilled the small patches of

earth, and watered the plants and mulberry trees close to Prem's window, Prem would lie beside her, dissolved in her presence, hearing the swish-swosh of the lazy sickle. He would examine her dark skin for long moments, like a soldier mapping out a dangerous territory in the night, and savor the clove-like odor of her back. He was mesmerized by the color's absorbency. Is it the color of nothingness? Is there such a thing as nothingness? Is death nothingness? he would reflect.

Only from time to time now did he think of the Muslim school teacher, her voice and its sadness echoing in his mind. Then he would remember how much he had enjoyed the sight of her narrow waist and small, shapely hips as she would get up in the morning to bring him water or tea, and often Ghalib's, Dagh's or Momin's *ghazal* to recite in bed. But for some strange reason not much had remained of the Christian woman's memory, and every time he tried to conjure up scenes of the sweltering Hyderabad afternoons when their bodies lay locked like mating snakes, all he could muster was a nostalgic whiff of her odor in his nostrils, like a scent of death. If this thought came to him while he was trying to sleep, he turned on his side, then shifted to the other, from the heaviness of the memory. Or from the lack of it. Yet, when asleep he would dream of her dark eyes.

Prem-ji, or Premiya, or Premi, as he was sometimes called by his colleagues, received the order of transfer one day as he was sunning himself outside his barrack in Delhi. Holding the paper in his hand, he felt an unfamiliar tinge of melancholy; the lower lid of his right eye fluttered a few times, as it did when he had something on his mind. He wasn't afraid of going to Kashmir, nor was he afraid of death. He traced the restlessness of his heart to the young prostitute, Baby Madhubala, to whom he had been growing quite attached. If he had been married in time, his daughter would have been her age, but this thought did not bother him. The young prostitute had auditioned for All India Radio twice and failed both times, yet it was her determination that had impressed Prem, along with her succulent lips and her openness to planting a kiss wherever he desired. When a little drunk, our *naeb* subaltern would ask her to sing a *ghazal*—but, alas, she was not classically trained and was not good at singing *ghazals* or *thumris*—her voice did not know the contours of nostalgia the way, he recalled, the Muslim teacher's had. At most she could sing songs from the films *Pakeeza* and *Mughal e Azam* and *Mahal*, acting out the lines, also, from her favorite films. Once she startled Prem as she'd spoken, "I am not a phantom, but a reality," with such seriousness that it took him a full moment to realize that this was a famous line from the movie *Mahal*. She could be Meena Kumari one minute, the other Nutan, and Asha Parekh the next. This acting business of hers bothered him a bit, though he pushed the thought to the periphery of the zone of comfort in his mind.

He had moved out of women's lives before, and would again, without an apology or an excuse, with no promises to return or write a letter, a *prempatr*, without regret or even guilt. He steeled his heart, reprimanding himself silently:

"O *bhaenchodaa!* You can't lose your heart to a *bazaari* woman. Snap out of it, *o bubber shera!* move on. *Hulla hulla hulla!*" In less than a week he had packed up and was off to the valley, in the back of a jeep with two full subalterns, Anand Hira with his pakora-nose and Ranbir Malik without a chin, one stiffer than his uniform and the other sagging like a quilt, neither with the slightest taste for Hindustani classical music or courtesans—now followed by a caravan of mud-green trucks bearing the five hundred strong men of the Five-O-Two Punjab regiment.

For some days after his arrival, he felt unsettled by the impossibility of holding anyone's gaze on the streets for a decent minute—their downcast or averted eyes made him want to approach them and order, "Look up! Look at me, *saaley!*" Initially, it made him want to strangle them. But that cold anger had dissipated in a week, leaving an iciness behind in his fingers, and now he too kept his eyes wandering, a restless pair of hawks, as if searching for a lost childhood of his innocent memory. People emerged from the *masjids* and *mandirs*, shops and houses, with faces seemingly devoid of any impulse to offer *salaam* or *namaste*, or to smile. It was as though he had been stationed in a graveyard full of wandering ghosts and shadows. The shuttered windows frightened him. Looking up at the balconies where clothes dried on a string, fluttering in the wind, he was reminded of the people missing from those clothes.

On his day off he would venture outside the barracks in the afternoon and look up at the famous sky of the valley, which now appeared colorless to him, and feel that people had polluted the sky as well. As he walked back to his room, plucking a flower here and a leaf there, the air he breathed stifled him, as though evacuated of its fragrance and music. He was a man who kept his thoughts to himself for the most part, and only conversed with his own demons during his long nights alone. He had been ruminating on how to meet a tribal woman, if there was such a thing here,

from the nearby hills, Hindu or Muslim or even Buddhist, anyone with firm thighs and breasts and a pussy from *swarg*. Religion was nothing to him but a hurdle to getting in bed with someone, a potential deterrent which he desperately tried to avoid. Every evening, he would trim, oil, and twirl his mustache to his heart's content, and once done go out for a lazy stroll and listen to the little Japanese Gita. Early the next morning he would be patrolling the streets and alleys and city outskirts with fellow soldiers, sometimes in an army Jeep, leaving behind at sudden turns an agitated ghost of dust. Sometimes he was ordered to maintain a tight checkpoint at a certain fork of streets where one of his men stood behind a machine gun inside a bunker, his helmeted-head visible through the hole like a turtle.

## 5.

One very hot afternoon as Prem fought off the suffocating heat by drinking glass after glass of lemonade and sucking on pieces of ice while listening to Begum Akhtari sing a *thumri* set in the *raag Mishra Kafi* "*Jab se Shyam sidhare, ho...*" his thoughts were interrupted by the sudden arrival of the short, stocky corporal Subhash Thakur, whom a few soldiers had nick-named Gol-gappa. He turned down his radio. Subhash, from a Bengali peasant background, had a tremendous respect for Prem Singh because the son of the Rajput had been promoted twice since he had known him. He had on a few occasions earnestly attempted to strike up a friendship with his Prem-ji, but nothing had ever materialized, they remained no more than acquaintances. There was no doubt that Prem was to blame for this failure, as he was extremely cautious by nature except for his propensity to yield to the needs of flesh. Cautious as he was, he had unconsciously

adopted certain prejudices, beliefs not informed by direct experiences. All Bengalis, to him, were brainy and thus intrigue-driven, they were cowards and not hard-working, and even when he saw Thakur sweating under the sun digging a trench or carrying a heavy sack of flour, he could not bring together in his mind Bengalis and hard work. It was that simple. But Subhash had his own analogy for the unrequited friendship—he ascribed it to Prem's inability to appreciate the river song aesthetic of Bengali poetry. Subhash assumed, to his discomfort, that Prem thought of him nothing more than a bong, a simpleton.

Now Prem Singh smiled. "*Aao, bhai Subhash-ji, ki haal aye?*"

"*Durga maa's grace, bhai saheb. Accha-ji, listening to gajols?*"

Prem Singh, uneasy, shrugged his shoulders as he clicked off the sound. Then he asked, "How's family-shamily, Thakur?"

"*Durga maa's blessing, saheb.*" Then he added, "Wife's letter arrived today. All is fine, *ji.*"

'Well, what brought you to my humble abode, *bhai?*'

'Oh *ji, naeb sahab, tusi ko Caapitan Khanna saheb* is calling, *ji,*' said Thakur.

Prem Singh went to his room and changed into his uniform, took one quick look in the mirror, chiefly to assure himself of the stiffness of his mustache, then hurried to present himself to the newly arrived Captain Khanna. Dank and dimly lit, the new Captain's headquarters was a temporary office like many others, situated on the other side of the Mess Hall, which Prem visited, to his acute displeasure, twice a day. He preferred eating out in the mixed company of civilians, as the rare sight of a woman late in the evening pleased him immensely. As he now crossed the untended garden which separated the two pale-yellow-bricked buildings, his eyes scanning the overgrown grass and weeds and dried hedges, he caught the incipient sound, in the depth of his mind, of rusty scissors

going *swish-swosh swish-swosh*. But instead of the image of the scissor-blades his mind conjured up the misty memory of the Christian woman's dark legs curling around his. As he ran up the steps to the entrance, he felt somehow he was carrying the extra weight of someone else's existence inside him. He shook his head forcefully to clear it of any distraction, then opened the door. At least for the next hour, his country needed him, and the Captain must have his attention.

A young, handsome Captain Khanna sat behind the desk with files on one side and an ashtray on the other. Prem Singh halted after entering the door and saluted. Khanna motioned him to stand at ease and he reluctantly relaxed. The red glow ringed by ash at the burning end of the cigar between the Captain's teeth cast a sudden bright circle on his face. Prem Singh then realized that Subedar Malik and Hira were also present in the room—noticing that he was about to salute them, the latter shook his head and winked at him. The Captain stood up, leaving his cigar slowly burning in the ashtray.

"Our country needs us again, Singh *saheb*," said Khanna.

"Yes, sir," answered Prem. He stole a glance at the other two men in the room, their eyes turned to their superior. The weakly lit room resembled a hospital ward. Captain Khanna informed him that five experienced soldiers of different ranks had been selected by the High Command. Under Prem's leadership they were to leave the following evening for a highly strategic point near the Kashmir border in an attempt to capture, dead or alive, a band of infiltrators trained in Pakistan about whom the Indian authorities had been tipped-off. Captain Khanna scrutinized his face for any reaction—there was none, and satisfied by Prem's stolid expression he then spread across the table a large map, detailing the zones of activity. Holding the dark brown cane, he tapped with its pointed tip crucial points of intersection as he invited the other two subalterns over

for a look. A dust-covered light bulb above their heads shed a dismal light on the map of two Kashmirs. Prem's eyes traveled with the tip of his Captain's cane along the curvy red lines, and he nodded whenever he felt Khanna's eyes fix him. Throughout the briefing, Singh remained focused and silent except for once when he caught himself sniffing rather unconsciously—at that moment a sudden faint but sad giggle of Baby Madhubala of Dilli had burst into his mind. Was she doing her Sharmila Tagore routine? He sniffed it out, *Hunh...! Hu...!* and then rather comically squinted his brows which no one in the room noticed.

"Is everything clear, *Naeb?*" the Captain asked, concluding.

"Yes, sir."

"Good luck then."

"Thank you, sir."

As he stepped out into the harsh light of the day, he felt mildly perturbed for no clear reason, and as he walked off he decided the scorching heat must be responsible for the sudden discontent in his heart.

## 6.

The next day just at sunset an Army jeep picked up the six men from Intelligence Headquarters and after a long journey of countless zigzags dropped them off at an abandoned-looking check-point bunker. But soon two soldiers appeared and saluted them. The six men returned the salute. The Jeep made a U-turn, awakened another agitated ghost of dust, and soon disappeared.

Within minutes the five commandos and Prem Singh were walking southward from the bunker in search of the desired trail. They walked for more than three miles, zigzagging along the waists and hems of the hills to arrive

at the edge of their mission zone. All six of them kept a ready finger on the strong spring of the trigger, holding their guns tightly on the uneven paths. They knew they could be finished off here, ambushed in the dark by an already alerted enemy. Two hours later they reached the spot taken as their main compass-point. Under the glow of a mini torch held by a Tamil soldier, Prem Singh unfolded on a fairly flat rock a map showing hundreds of thin black and red and green lines canceling each other all across the crumpled surface. Twenty minutes later, their precise mission set and memorized, the five strong men branched out in five directions like a trembling human hand only to criss-cross each other every forty to fifty yards. The men were under order to return before sunrise. The five soon disappeared behind the trees and bushes, into the jaws of the night. Subedar Singh, with a mild pang of guilt, looked at his wristwatch, and sighed, "An hour still!"

An hour later he pulled out his transistor radio from the inner pocket of his green-khaki jacket. In one movement he flicked it on and brought it extremely close to his right ear, running his finger meticulously over the black dial. It was a Wednesday night, and Islamabad Short Wave One transmitted a two-hour long program of *ghazals* every Wednesday and Friday night. The stations from across the border were hard to pick up in the Valley, but back in Dilli the sound poured in like a stream of clear water, even during the monsoon. After he had arrived in Sri Nagar he had asked a dozen or so intimidated people if they knew of a local station that played *ghazals* or classical music sometime during the week. It was like trying to engage ghosts in a conversation. But one night, as he was sipping Kashmiri *chai* at the Sheikh *bhai's* stall, Sheikh *bhai* raised his hand automatically to the big radio set into the wall to change the station where a few tired voices were discussing the political calamity in Afghanistan. Sheikh *bhai* himself liked *ghazals*, but settled for what Prem would call the pseudo *ghazals*—still it owed to Sheikh *bhai's* restless hand

that Prem discovered the local station that played them. Islamabad Short Wave One—which he was now trying to tune—he had found by keeping the radio on for long hours, fiddling with the dial as he strolled along the verandah, fending off the boredom that always threatened to overwhelm him in the absence of a woman's intimacy. He hated modern Hindi film music, which one heard at every shop, and it depressed him to reflect on what kind of music people had fallen prey to. For this reason alone he would always remember his time with the Muslim school teacher, her impeccable taste in music and poetry—he would always remember the love with which she sang *Mir*, *Ghalib*, *Dagh*, *Faiz*, *Munir*, *Kaifi Azmi*, the way she would explain a verse from Kishwar Naheed, *with wounds it chisels the figure of decline*, for instance, or a couplet by Iqbal.

He had learned to ignore the constant hissing that tended to underlie the music here as a form of sinful curses from the past lives of the listener. Only on rare occasions, when the sky was clear and the wind was quiet, did the radio capture the clear sound of a voice. Even then the sound would suddenly warp and wave, fading in and out. The vanishing of the voice in the midst of things made him pull at his hair, or brought him to tears; he would imagine crushing the cockroach of a radio under the wrath of his heel. But he would think twice, and the sanctity of his holy Gita remained untouched.

Now he moved the dial forward with his index finger and waited, then ran it backwards. He repeated this a few times at different speeds, but without luck. He had to keep the volume extremely low. He recalled the second time he had gone to the teacher's house in the evening for tea and had stayed the night—they had had to speak in whispers because she lived with her grandfather who in his old age was going blind but not deaf. No matter how carefully and slowly he moved the dial all he got was a crackling sound, as if the enemy were mocking him from inside the radio. He grew flustered, shifted the radio up and down

around an imaginary axis, tilting it left, tilting it right. He had to suppress again the urge to smash the radio against the jagged edge of a rock some ten feet away from him. He remembered that it had begun to drizzle towards the end of that evening, and as he observed the light rain through the fluttering curtains she had asked him if he would like to see her room. They could talk with their normal voices there she had added, and giggled softly. Her mouth at that moment had made him think of Punjabi rosebuds. Since then, he had addressed her as *Gulab*, or simply *Gul*, in his mind. He had stayed the night. It had been the most fulfilling night of his life. Yet he'd never fallen in love with her. But he would often recognize the red-tiled verandah of her house in his dreams, and sometimes felt her presence behind his ear, as if whispering *Gulab*....

He clutched the radio tightly in his grip. He realized he was beginning to sweat, and then, as he shifted the radio to his left hand the tip of his thumb slipped off the dial and he fleetingly caught the sound of a human voice, sending a jolt to his heart. His body tensed with heat, as though engulfed in a *chitta* burning. This time he caught the voice and did not mind the devil-sent crackling which wounded his heart more than his ear. Mehdi Hassan—he recognized the voice instantly, a voice so deep and tranquil he thought he would weep. There must be some truth to what Lata had said, he reflected, that Bhagwan's chariot had passed through his throat. To him the voice seemed to emerge from the depths of the Indian Ocean in the shape of pearls. What if he were caught with the radio up to his ear? He would certainly be court-martialed, he thought as a sweat of worry pearled on his forehead. But he had hardly lowered his hand when the singer's voice, smooth as the morning breeze, reached the end of a famous verse with a nascent tremor, then rose like a wave, drowning every other thought in him. The fear of getting caught or having his head blown off by an enemy bullet dissipated. The hand clutching the radio moved back to his ear.

"I like your skin, I'm fascinated by its deceptive shades," she'd whispered into his ear after kissing the lobe. The memory almost made him move the radio away. Getting out of bed, she would involuntarily hum a half-forgotten *ghazal*, and her voice in its morning huskiness would waft like smoke to his nostrils as though he could smell the voice, the words, even her moments of silence.

He recognized the notes of the *raag* in which the *ghazal* was being sung: Basant Bahar, a night *raag* of the Purvi thaat, sung slow and in lower notes, with a long *alap*. Basant Bahar's dominant note was *pa* with *ma komal* with *ma ga ma ga* in the ascendant and the addition of *ra* in the descending scale. The *raag*'s primary concern, if he recalled it correctly, was to heighten the sense of longing with a tinge of joy. He noted that Mehdi Hassan was throwing the *sam*, the cyclic stress on the word "*andaz*," making Prem's entire body react at that point, as if in a spasm, to the *sam*; a pair of invisible hands was playing the set of tablas inside his mind.

*umr to sari kati ishq e butaan mayn, Momin,  
akhri waqt ab khak mussalman hongey*

"All my life I spent adoring idols, Momin!" Prem remembered explaining this particular couplet to Subhash Thakur and Kashi Nath one night. "At the last hour, I cannot pretend to be a Muslim." Thakur had nodded his head and Kashi Nath swayed his torso, though Prem had thought that both had failed to grasp the essence of the couplet. Now Prem Singh suddenly found a new meaning within the meaning—such was the world of *ghazals*, and so much, he mused, depended on how long one had known the couplet and how deeply or crudely, the singer interpreted the verse. He was drowning in his own universe of music. The combination of the voice and the harmonium was like two ancient rivers falling into an embrace. *Oh!* This would leave him drunk for days. In the singer's voice resonated a

unique relationship between the consonant notes of Basant Bahar and the soul of the couplet. The voice, he felt, poured from a silver decanter filling the goblet of his solitude.

Big, dark eyes, silent and forgiving Christian eyes—he often called them the eyes of Jesus, and sometimes the eyes of Mariam. He hated her shyness though, her stubborn refusal to sing—even *bande matram*. When she lay next to him she would suddenly close her eyes, as if she were closing the doors and windows of her house to him. And her silence on the day of his transfer was like cobra fangs suspended an inch from his heart. The fact that he never felt any remorse for lying to her, telling her that he was leaving on a temporary assignment in fact surprised him. But her silence, he knew, would hurt him once he had left. Yes, her silence—he would scream *bhaenchod ki batchi!* silently, knowing those dark eyes knew his white lie.

It was past midnight. He had drunk in an hour of *ghazal* music like an addict who needs his hit of hashish. The radio was back in his pocket. He looked at his watch, then up at the sky, finally resting his gaze on the thin crescent sleeping in the dark. The weak moonlight had added a thin coating of silver to the earth, the distant landscape, the tree tops, the peaks of the distant mountains were mysteriously visible and if a wild animal had climbed up there now and howled, Prem considered, he would be able to make out the beast's silhouette. He glanced casually at his rifle, which he had left leaning against a tree a few inches from his feet. The bayonet had dug into the wood, leaving a shallow cut. He grabbed the rifle and gripped it as if ready to rush out and ambush. The absurdity of this urgent stance brought a soft smile to his face. He let go of the weapon with one hand and lowered its butt onto the ground. "*Taab e nazara hi naheen, aayina kya dekhney doon*" the words of the *ghazal* flowed back to his consciousness, then slid down to his lips. "You cannot bear the sight, how can I let you see the mirror; you will become a portrait struck with wonder."

"Take me to a *mandir* someday, Premu," the schoolteacher had asked him. "Divali too is coming." They were standing under the tin-roofed shelter on the back verandah of her house. It was dark except for the faint glow from the small lantern hanging by the door, the smell of kerosene oil hung in the air. Holding her face in his strong hands, he had tried to read her eyes—their past, their many mysteries—as they stared back at him without shyness.

"I don't go there, haven't been to one in such a long time I wouldn't know the difference between a *mandir* and a *gurdwara*," he had answered with neither guilt nor contempt. "Why?" she had asked. "'Why? because I hate gods, or perhaps I'm scared of gods and goddesses, scared of their stony eyes. Those hardened stares stifle me."

It was at this point, after a long silence, that she told him that she had been married once, that now she was a widow, a young widow. His hands had slid down to her neck, then her shoulders, and then he had hugged her, and the limp embrace of her arms around him made him ask how her husband had died. She had remained silent. He had insisted on knowing. Her husband, she told him then, clutching his shirt fabric, had been a journalist who worked for The Hindu, and she had loved him. Hearing this, he had released her to hold her face in his hands once again. She continued, "He was killed as he was returning home from work on the tenth of Moharram when he ran into a Hindu mob," which had clashed earlier with a Muslim one at the other end of Umeed Street. "Someone had recognized him and his scooter," and the shouts had erupted—"Catch that *sala harami*, that son of Babur! Get the Mughal bastard! "

"By the time Aurangzeb died, Rajput blood had already claimed Mughal veins." Prem had read that in a book. She had stopped crying at the memory of her husband a few years back. She believed in life, not death, she had told Prem. In the slightly pungent smell of the kerosene, he uncupped his hands from her face. Perhaps he should have held her, comforted her, planted a caring kiss on her

half-moist lips he had thought hours later, but he hadn't been able to muster the desire. That moment of apathy gradually had turned into a memory of cowardice that tugged at his conscience from time to time.

It was two in the morning now, and he glanced up at the moon, which seemed to be growing. "*Navak andaz jidhar deeda e...*," he caught himself singing quietly again. Midway through the *ghazal* he thought: what kind of a soldier have I become? He was seized with a sudden uneasiness, an unpleasant sensation of having been used, or cheated by a higher authority. Governments? Gods? Fate? Who? Who could he blame? He questioned himself quite loudly in his mind. Whom could he blame for this inertia of his soul? All his life, it seemed, had been put to useless goals, and all he was left with was his loneliness and the heaviness of being. The fact that he had never said good-bye to Qurrat-ul-ain, the teacher, weighted him with guilt now. He stared hard into the distance, then blinked and breathed deeply, having learned from experience that deep breathing always drove his thoughts away. He spat on the ground in mild disgust and began to pace back and forth, keeping a vigil in the pale darkness as he strove to avert the thoughts that were poisoning his mind, to re-focus on his soldiers, his precious men who would be returning soon. He even brought his fingers to his mustache to give it a stylish twirl, but his hand lost the desire midway.

The thought of not being able to go to Pakistan, to go and visit Lahore, the city of his birth, to walk through the Anarkali Bazaar or sit by the bank of the river Ravi crept over him with sadness. Looking at his boots, quite visible under the moonlight to which his eyes had grown adjusted, gave him a sudden feeling of nakedness. Uncomfortably, he shifted his gaze to an unfocused spot on the earth away from his boots.

Prem Singh realized that he had been staring at a crawling insect as it inched ahead with remarkable slowness. He watched the insect with the seriousness of a

thinker as it drew itself away from him, and in that moment of absorption he noticed that the insect was carrying a smaller insect in its mouth. Prem considered for a minute the kind of fight the victim being carried off might have put up. Could it be still alive, and in fact struggle out of the grip of the bigger insect's mouth? Before he knew it he had lowered himself almost to a squatting position, observing the hunter and the hunted. He had put one knee on the ground to stay closer to the insects when his ears pricked up at the sound of a faint rustle. He froze, his neck tensed. An invisible lump formed in his throat.

He gripped his rifle with both hands ready to fire instantaneously at the slightest danger. His eyes, like a wounded cheetah's, darted frenetically in the darkness, suspiciously interpreting every ambiguous pattern of light and shade. He breathed slowly. One knee glued to the ground, he stayed where he was. He heard the soft rustle again, shorter in length by a fraction of a second this time, so that even by concentrating he was unable to detect the direction from which the sound had come. Suddenly Prem was gripped by a fear of being killed by the enemy before he could even spot him. He felt the sweat break out under his armpits and on his forehead—a drop actually slid down the side of his nose and disappeared into the abyss of his mustache. His ears caught the sound again, and for a second he thought he'd caught a subtle movement somewhere quite a distance off, but he couldn't be sure. Holding the rifle in his hands, closing one eye, he sighted through the target-lens. He narrowed one half-Chinese eye, keeping the other closed, penetrated with his burning gaze the fabric of night, and detected a form resembling a human lying flat on the ground. His heart began to pound, matching a particular rhythm of the tabla: *bhoom bhoom babhoom, bhoom bhoom babhoo....* He squinted harder. There! He spotted the half luminous head of a man, then witnessed the entire body stealthily crawl up the side of a hill like a maggot. He surveyed the landscape around the

man, hoping to catch sight of his fellow infiltrators, but he spotted none. Swinging the cross-hairs back to the man's head, Prem adjusted the rifle's aim to a perfect bull's-eye.

He wanted to wait for the enemy to finish his climb and arrive at a little plateau-like area where more of him would be exposed to the bullet—that way he would have a better shot at capturing the bastard alive. He waited with a tortoise's patience. "Is my enemy Kashmiri?" A strange thought at a very inappropriate time. If he is one from our side, then...? *Hummph!* Then the bastard is my countryman, isn't he? And what if the *harami sala* is from Muzzafar Garh, or Pakistan? Oh, Babur's son is still an enemy infiltrator and a big motherchod on top of that. Prem was aware of an unsettled sense of happiness at knowing he had the fool pretty much in his pocket. Suddenly he aimed the muzzle to the sky, catching the moon in the cross-hairs, but quickly brought the weapon back to the crawling head. "What if he is Punjabi?" The thought amused him, but as it faded it left an unsettling trail. "He could be a Rajput, or a Mughal with Rajput blood in his arms, his legs, his head." Prem shook his head to derail the undesired train of thoughts. "*Navak andaz jidhar deeda e jana...*" Mehdi Hassan's voice awoke in his mind without any warning, curving and rising with every other syllable, and Prem noticed that his hands were shaking a bit. The voice, in his mind, was throwing the *sam* on the word "*andaz*"—splitting it, "*an da*"—and the fingers of the tabla player were following him like a maddened snake. This sudden intrusion vexed him.

The thoughts he had tried to banish earlier found their way back into his mind once more. So what if he is a Punjabi, so what if he is a *kanjar* Rajput, he's still a *bhaenchod* Mussla and a murderer of innocent Hindus. *Bham! Bham!* His mind fired two bullets. Didn't they color their hands with our blood? With a surging pain, the thought which he had tried to bury a thousand times, resurrected in him: the vague memory of his parents whose lives the conflagration

of Partition had consumed. "Look," he'd pointed to his eyes, "look deep into my eyes, Qurratulain Begum, do you see the small flames way back in them?" She had first nonchalantly looked into them, narrowed her eyes, then as if a little frightened she had withdrawn from him, though still staring at his face, obscurely understanding the depth of his pain. He spoke again, "Those are the fires still burning from my childhood. Bhagwan is my witness, I have tried to put them out, I have tried and tried and tried... but they keep flaring up again.... I am a live volcano, Qurratulain."

Prem Singh saw the man approach the plateau and tightened his grip on the rifle. He prayed, "O Bhagwan, give me *shakti*!"

The infiltrator seemed young at a distance. Prem tried guessing his age. Unlucky *bhaenchod*! Prem felt a moment's pity for the wretched soul.

"FREEZE, WHOEVER YOU ARE, OR YOU'LL BE SHOT!" Prem took a few strong steps forward, then heard his own echo talk back to him. "FREEEEEEEZE! WHOOOO...." The man froze where he was and remained motionless.

"NOW PUT YOUR HANDS UP AND STAND UP SLOWLY. NOW PUT YOURRRR... NO SMART MOVES, YOU HEAR ME?" he yelled. "NO SMART MOOOO...."

The man put his hands up in the air, as he half stood, but then, as if judging the direction and distance of Prem's voice, he started running downhill, veering away.

"I said, 'FREEEEEEEZE!'" But the man kept running. Prem ran out from behind the bush, craning the muzzle to follow the running head. Bending his knees a bit, he curled his index finger on the cold trigger, then pressed it. BHAM! A Rajput, a warrior, an excellent marksman, he had awakened the night. His finger still pressed against the trigger, he felt as if the bullet had pierced his own lungs. His body was suddenly made of holes, drenched in a monsoon of sweat. A maddening violence was about to explode somewhere in him and he would be a man in a thousand pieces. Yet in the midst of the fury inside him he detected a dim voice

singing, singing something in his mind... Qurratulain's voice... mingling with the vicious pounding of his heart... He noticed the smoke still oozing from the end of the barrel, a crack in the mirror of night. And as he peered straight into the night, he felt he was staring straight into the Christian woman's dark eyes—into Maryam's eyes. He was suddenly afraid that she would close them, shutting the doors and windows of her house of memory on him. A burning howl was lodged in his throat and he wished it were only a dream within a dream.

## *The Cow*

**DAZZLED AND FRIGHTENED**, Vidia watched wide-eyed as the two ugly but impressive army trucks approached the red-tiled bungalow, disturbing the puddles on the brick path. The mud green trucks snored like sleeping giants, curving effortlessly along the circular drive and hugging the well maintained lawn, finally coming to a halt where the servants waited.

Going on nine—his oily black hair falling over a tense forehead—he hid behind his father's short but lanky figure and only tilted his head out to observe the sweating men who came with the trucks to help unload. Under his father's watchful eye, the dark off-duty soldiers made sure no wood was chipped, glass broken, books dropped or fabric ripped. When his father moved a step or two to his right or to his left, Vidia followed him like a scared shadow, firmly clutching the hem of his white shirt.

As far as his father was concerned the mission had been accomplished, nothing mishandled or broken—a sign of divine help and good karma. Due to the benevolence of Bhagwan the rest would follow smoothly and end well. Such were the expectations of a simple but diligent man.

It was in the late afternoon, after the trucks had left, as servants attached to the house stood waiting under the porch roof, praying the rain would not renew, that Sir John William Lowery's glinting four-door sedan made its

very grand appearance at the same gate to the momentary awe of the servants. But recovering from the spell, Vidia's father dashed to the car to open the back door for the newly transferred Englishman from Chandigarh. As it slowed down with royal calm, its reflection shimmered on the wet-tiled drive.

Vidia, whose right hand still clutched the end of his father's shirt lost balance, and fell on the ground. The servant registered his son's fall, hesitation catching up with him for a moment, but he re-focused his attention to welcome the fatigue-stricken faces behind the windows.

"Good afternoon, Your Excellency!" Vidia's father greeted his handsome, grey haired master as he opened the back door, adding, "Welcome to the hospitable and grateful city of Lahore, Your Majesty!"

The fallen Vidia recovered quicker than a bolt of lightning, and now stood very straight, ashamed, as if naked. Nervously, he wiped his now dirty palms against the front of his khaki shorts, his eyes downcast.

Mr. Lowery seemed annoyed and smirked as he returned greetings while still in the car. He took in the front of the mansion and seemed pleased at the size of the front lawn. He displayed a thin smile and his vast forehead glinted as he emerged from the vehicle, towering over Vidia and his father.

There followed his stiff and fatigue-stricken wife, and their daughter who could not have been more that seven or eight. The younger Lowery was older than his sister by a handspan and a bit more, eleven or twelve perhaps, and occupied the front seat beside the turbaned driver. He did not wait for his door to be opened and, exiting the car introduced himself—like a benevolent ruler—to the servants. "How do you do? I am William Malcom Lowery Jr."

Through his misty eyes, Vidia saw his father tremble a bit, red-faced, as he took William's hand. Taken by surprise and feeling elated, the father commanded his son, on second thought, to offer greetings to the new masters.

The obedient, yet indignant son joined his small palms and raised them nose-high, reverentially, and, with a tremor in his voice, he offered, "*Namaskar!*" He briefly bowed his head.

But William had already run up the front steps of the roofed verandah and into the front room, and it was from inside that Vidia heard the echo of the white voice, "It's so dark in here, mother!"

## 2.

The judge's bungalow had huge lawns around it. In the back, on the other side of the hedge, were the servants' quarters. Vidia's family occupied one of them. In the other two were the gardener and his wife, and the newly arrived driver.

The gardener and his wife, well into their late age, were childless and despite their Muslim faith had somewhat adopted Vidia, who addressed them as *Taya-ji* and *Tai-ji*. Vidia's father had studied up to matriculation and his mother knew how to read and write only Urdu. Although old-fashioned when compared to her husband, she was only moderately religious. She maintained a little temple with Ram and Hanuman displayed on a wooden altar in one corner of her room, but also enjoyed watching movies, especially the ones with Noor Jahan or Ashok Kumar.

After a tiring day at school, Vidia often stood behind the hedge watching William and his friends play cricket through the lacework of leaves and branches. Watching the Englishman and his wife hosting their guests in the warm, sultry evenings of Lahore was not of much interest to him.

Like the majority of women in Punjab, Vidia's mother too woke up early, but, in her case, not with prayers in mind but more from the habit of watching the darkness ebb, and

listening to the sound of her favorite sparrows—for whom she would put rice out, left over from the night before.

Her father had been a school teacher who believed more in the advances of science than the miracles of avatars. Her mother was a religious woman, always wanting to go on a *yatra*. Vidia's mother often thought of herself as a creature stuck between two worlds—an earthly *trishenko*. Soon after she woke, she would wake Vidia too, except on Sundays when he liked to sleep late. Vidia insisted on milking their only cow with his own hands. He'd feed her, milk her, and, after removing the bucket of milk from underneath her udders, bathe her with affection and devotion. The cow, in return, submitted to his gentle touch.

One afternoon, as was his routine, Vidia hid behind the hedge, holding his breath as he peeked at William sunning himself in a lawn chair, his eyes shut, hands tucked behind his golden head. William wore light blue shorts and a white under shirt. As he was enjoying the sun, he happened to open his eyes and stare in Vidia's direction, noticing movement behind the grid of green leaves.

"Vidia?" he asked, squinting. "Oh! *Hel-lo!*"

Vidia could not believe he'd been caught.

"Is that you? Come to this side of the hedge," he commanded. There was no answer, yet the darkness among the leaves remained. "Would you fancy playing cricket?"

Vidia froze on the spot at the sound of William's voice and his ability to respond vanished instantly. His small heart fluttered.

With the grace that came naturally to him, William sat up, got out of the chair and walked over and around the hedge, confronting the little boy's terrified face.

"What's the matter? Did you not hear?"

Vidia gawked at him.

"Are you scared?"

But before waiting for a reply, his hand shot up to strike at the frightened boy's cheek. Vidia flinched, awaiting the slap. But then suddenly the raised hand retreated. As he

recovered his senses, a nascent smile on the white face puzzled him.

Except for the basic phrases he heard over and over, he understood little in English. But the masters had learned to communicate with their subjects in a hodgepodge of Urdu and English. "*Tum cricket play karta hai?*" asked William. Vidia's body relaxed a bit. William waited. Vidia finally nodded.

From that moment on the boy's fear of being near William began to fade away. He was learning English in school and was a very quick student, and after school William was his willing, benevolent tutor. However, he still couldn't bring himself to feel comfortable at the sight of other white people, whom he referred to as William-babu's people. It wasn't only the color of their skin but the whole disposition of personality which marked them in the eyes of even simple-minded children not only as rulers, but as different people.

On his way to school, shepherded by his mother or the gardener's wife, he encountered white people only occasionally. But his mother would sometimes take him to the zoo near the Assembly Hall where it was common to spot a white person yelling at a dark-skinned hawker or a driver. Drunken white soldiers, too, weren't a rare sight if one strolled long enough on the royal Mall Road. The awe of the sight of a fine-looking Victoria, *tick-tocking* on the tar, carrying a well attired white couple impressed and oppressed Vidia. He had noticed some brown people in the Victorias as well, but somehow that didn't scare him.

Oddly enough, William and Vidia grew to be fond of each other in a rather short span of time—chasing grass-hoppers and butterflies, playing cricket or soccer, climbing trees and making up tales wherein they were the heroes—killing *djinn*s and demons, breaking magic spells, conquering cities, demolishing castles, and marrying the king's daughter. Recently they had been wandering off to a nearby open field situated between the Government

Officers' Residence and the Lahore Cantonment's northern edge, re-enacting Tarzan or Robinson Crusoe adventures.

Vidia's father was perplexed and advised him to curtail his play time, his mother scolded him after he did poorly in his mid-year exams, even as his English improved, and the gardener noticed Vidia's deteriorating Urdu handwriting on his wooden slate and chided him for being distracted and careless.

But, above all, they knew he was a sensitive child and felt nervous and worried about William's growing fondness for him—the son of a brown-skinned servant. If something went missing from William's room, they feared, Vidia would be accused and perhaps all the servants whipped. It would jeopardize his father's job too.

There were reasons to be worried. William could be shamelessly disrespectful towards the servants and order them around if he was in a foul mood, though this behavior had lessened recently.

Yet none knew how to stop William from crossing over to their side of the hedge. Vidia recognized the torn feeling inside him. Although he feared the whiteness of these strangers, he couldn't deny its powerful hold on his imagination.

It is true that, despite the discomfort William carried to their quarters, they did enjoy his charm and his frankness made him popular even among the servants of other houses. Soon, William had taught Vidia how to ride a bicycle and for this there was no measure to his joy. He even rode William's blue Raleigh in his dreams sometimes.

Mrs. Lowery did not approve of her son's lengthy sessions and freer attitude with the servants at the cost of his European schoolmates. Mr. Lowery, however, was less concerned, or even, one could say, indirectly encouraged his son's excursions beyond the tight ring of white India and teased his wife occasionally by implying that it was important for the rulers to get to know their subjects. This sort of humor did not sit well with her and only added to her anxiety and consternation.

One bright day William came home from school, threw his bag on the sofa, and, without finishing his lunch, dashed off to Vidia, where he found his skinny friend sitting near his cow, watching her quietly. He didn't mind the distraction and the moment he saw his friend—for he now referred to William as "my friend, *mera dost*"—his face lit up.

"She's a Goddess—she's an avatar," Vidia said.

William, who was just about to suggest that they play Tarzan and the gorilla, was taken aback. He guffawed a little, not meanly, but enough to hurt Vidia and push him into a mild confusion. It was natural for Vidia to find solace in his cow as he turned to look at her mesmerizing skin—every once in a while a tremor ran through her length which amused Vidia for no obvious reason. The gardener had told the boy once that the tremor meant Bhagwan's chariot ran through her hide. Now, feeling bad, William offered to teach his friend how to throw a leg-spin and a googly. He later also showed Vidia a precise placement of the fingers and thumb upon and around the stitched seam crucial for the tricky twirl.

### 3.

The vast, empty land, conquered only by wild bushes, weeds, straws, neem, kikar, greenberry and pipal trees, squirrels, snakes and chameleons, was a short walk from the bungalow. The farmers from the nearby villages brought their herds of sheep and goats, horses and mules to graze there and take a dip in the filthy pond.

William and his friend had started to slip off there and would roam and wander aimlessly for hours at a time, hanging about the pond, watch cows resting in the water, skimming rocks, and watching the ripples spread, widen, and touch the hem of the pond.

"Did you know, Vidia," said William one afternoon as they perched by the pond, "that Great Britain is in a state of war?"

Vidia remained silent. He looked at his friend for a moment, then turned to watch the ripples William's pebble had created.

"If Great Britain loses the war," William added after a brief pause, "my father is sure, she will lose India too. Vidia tried very hard to grasp the meaning and how it affected the two.

"That will be very bad!"

The war among European countries affected India too: shortages of vegetables, beans, meat, metal, and men, who were dying in someone else's fight, some coming home crippled, some not at all. Even the gardener and the driver, despite their lack of worldly knowledge, frequently debated the war and its eventual outcome—how it might affect them here in a land many thousand miles away from the German aggression. The gardener's nephew had died fighting the Turks at Gallipoli, although the gardener himself had been at some distant point a sympathizer of the Khilafat Movement, which even Gandhi supported.

"But my *bau-ji* says," Vidia decided to add his two stolen pennies to console his friend, "that the white masters cannot lose this war."

"But the Germans are white too." All of a sudden Vidia was confused and could not figure out who was fighting who.

"Gora masters cannot lose." Vidia repeated.

William's face swelled with the mixed color of pride and disdain, and his tongue gave way to bitterness, as he blurted out, "Oh, Vidia, your father is stupid—his little native head can't understand what's going on, can it? England will buckle sooner or later. Just look how France did."

The hurt showed plainly on Vidia's dark face, darkening it further.

"Vidia," William softened his voice apologetically, "Look here—no one stays at the top forever. Do you know the Greeks, the Romans, the Persians? No one even knows where Alexander the Great is buried!"

Vidia was truly perplexed and remained silent for a long while. William too was sunk in distant thought.

Then, reluctantly, Vidia asked, "William-*babu*, who is... Alegas...sander the Krate?"

William gave Vidia the kind of look his father parted with for the benefit of his mother or sometimes the gardener, saying, "*Bhaa-ji*, you don't understand...."

"I should've known," he said. Then, abruptly, "He conquered the world. From Greece to Egypt to India. Boy, you're such a burden sometimes."

The names of those countries lit a wick of excitement in Vidia's mind and he quickly saw himself riding on a horse through the planes and mountains of India, Egypt and Greece, but then checking this flight of fantasy, he recalled that only a few days back he had stared at the unintelligible world map in his geography book.

Suddenly, he remembered a small mound of earth in the middle of a dry plane, the dry grass growing around it like a crown, as he'd seen it from a train window two years ago. That mound had reminded him of graves. He thought of mentioning it to William, suggesting that it might belong to this afore mentioned world conqueror, but he refrained, experiencing a sudden sense of shame, and a lack of self-confidence.

\* \* \*

A light shower at the end of October clanged the winter bells and people ritually took out their blankets, quilts and sweaters. In the coming weeks quilts and blankets were laid out in the sun and dusted clean. Vidia's mother became

overly cautious and made sure Vidia had his shirt and sweater buttoned up all the way. As soon as Vidia entered the school he unbuttoned the top of his shirt and sweater and stayed that way throughout the day; but he buttoned them up again on nearing home.

The judge's family had been visited by another family, and William had been busy with the guests. Now with the visitors gone, William appeared at Vidia's door, wearing a brown corduroy jacket and a blue winter cap resting at an angle, like a detective's in the movies. Vidia came out and stood next to him, tucking his small fists inside the yellow pockets his mother had patched on to a red sweater. Vidia had felt abandoned and missed his friend, but soon the two were chatting and laughing as William went on to make fun of his guests, telling how one of the boys still wet his bed.

William happened to be sketching the huge belly of the boys' father and how his enormous, spiraled mustache moved as he chewed the food when he picked up a fallen twig—as Vidia was rolling over with laughter while covering his mouth—and swung it, as if playing a cricket shot, onto the cow's smooth, shiny back. The cow wrenched and groaned with obvious pain. Unexpected terror froze Vidia. He caught the animal glaring at him, accusingly. Her protest and the tail's violent flap had encouraged William to take another swipe at her, and he was about to translate his whim into action when Vidia pleaded, "Don't hit her, William-babu, please."

"How can a cow be God, Vidia?" William's mood had suddenly changed from humor to malice.

"Because.... "

"I believe I detected the gardener, the old fool, taking a lusty peek at your God," William smirked, turning away, "Watch out!"

The two remained silent.

On the walk home, William suddenly picked up a rock and hurled it at the chirping birds in the trees. They panicked and scattered.

Later the next evening, William invited Vidia to his room. This was something his mother had recently allowed with reservations. William had sprawled his storybooks on the carpet and both sat looking at the illustrations. Vidia was so engrossed in a jungle book that he didn't even hear William calling his name, and only when William shook him lightly by the shoulder did he notice William holding a framed painting of a European-looking man in non-European attire with a crown of thorns on his head. There were drops of blood where the thorns had pricked the pale skin.

"Do you know who this is?"

Vidia had no idea and looked at William dumbfounded.

"He's the Lord Jesus Christ—Mohammedans call him Issa. He is the Son of God."

Vidia gaped.

"He died for our sins," William added matter of factly, as he took the painting back to the other room. He returned with chocolate.

Vidia sat staring, speechless, with a tight stomach. Gradually, as Vidia diverted his attention back to the storybooks, the trinity of three faces—of Tarzan, Jesus and William—began to resemble one another.

\* \* \*

Even after many days the thought of their resemblance would not recede from Vidia's mind, and soon the faces of his father and mother, and even his own, began looking like that of his cow's. The whole thing felt absurd to him, but he could not shake it off. One night he dreamt Tarzan was riding Vidia's cow and whipping her while Vidia ran along crying and shouting, "Yes sir, yes, sir!" A bearded Jesus in

ragged clothes and William with his father's pipe in his mouth emerged from an alley and, while Jesus held Vidia's hands and tied them with a rope, William forced the crown of thorns down on Vidia's head—as he struggled to free himself of the crown by writhing and jerking his head, he saw his mother calmly drawing her son's attention towards the huge Tarzan, who now perched atop Vidia's father's shoulders, coaching his transport across the pond.

Vidia's fear of strange dreams was gradually overcome by his desire to be Tarzan himself in his dreams. He also began to notice, as he sat observing the cow in the afternoons, that every once in a while the sunlight falling on the cow's wavering skin changed its color, for brief intervals, from patchy brown to a bright, shimmering complexion, almost white.

#### 4.

One cloudy afternoon the two boys wandered off to the abandoned plain, running, laughing, repeating old jokes. William stopped under a giant tree, with Vidia following right behind him. Tired, Vidia yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. William took this opportunity to tickle Vidia's armpit. Vidia jerked and giggled, retreating. William advanced, his hands creeping forward, pretending to be Dracula—*Aw haw haw...I am gonna get you....* This routine had become a part of their growing friendship. Vidia hated and loved the game at the same time. He now retreated, giggling, until he backed into the ancient tree. There he slipped and fell. Soon, William was atop Vidia's belly, baring his teeth, groaning like a blood thirsty creature. He pinned down Vidia's flailing hands under his knees and let lose his tickling orgy. Vidia's body convulsed violently and his shrieks echoed across the plane. There

were tears in his eyes. Then William suddenly stopped. He looked straight into his friend's eyes and a sly smile on his face. He released Vidia's palms from under his knees, but remained sitting on him.

"Hey, Vidia, have you ever done it with another boy?" William's voiced dropped a register as his breath quickened.

"Done what?" gasped Vidia.

"Let's do it to each other!" Vidia felt the full weight of William's body, and his groin, which seemed to be growing, bearing down upon him.

"Do what, William?" Vidia whispered, but guessed what William might be suggesting, as he had recently discovered the secret world of masturbation at school. William brought his soothing voice to full use, softening it a little, and explained what he had meant as he brought his pink lips within a shot of Vidia's ear, and probed softly, "Will you?" He added, "Please."

Vidia stared blankly.

William whispered, "We will stop if you don't like it, okay?" He then added, "I promise, I swear upon—Vidia! my mate! It's natural—all boys do it!"

Vidia remained immobile and silent, his body flat on the ground, except for his raised head.

William was getting irritated at what he considered Vidia's very apathetic and insolent behavior. "Come on, Vidia," he said in irritation, "There's nothing to worry about. I *know* you'll like it. We'll stop if you—" his tone was urgent, commanding.

Vidia felt vexed—fearfully excited, but too afraid to understand. Reluctantly, he submitted to his friend's request, nodding.

William untied the cord of Vidia's trousers and pushed them down to his ankles. He then told Vidia to push up his shirt and sweater—baring his back—and lie down on the ground, facing a patch of dry grass. Unbuttoning himself, William made himself comfortable on top of his friend's

back, applying a glob of spit from his mouth to the front of his little penis, as warmth and a giddy sensation reached new heights through his groin. William tried not to hurt his friend—however, that consideration soon became secondary. Fear of acknowledging pain overwhelmed Vidia. A silence seemed to have descended over the world. Only occasionally did Vidia recognize the sound of his own breath.

Vidia felt suffocated under his friend's weight in motion, all the while resisting the undesirable penetration. Every muscle of his body had tensed. His face was a dark crimson as his senses began to return to him. He thought a mongrel was barking at them from quite a distance. He was intensely afraid of being caught like this.

"Slow, William... please, *oieee maa!*" Vidia gasped.

"Make sure she doesn't end up as the old crook's feast while you're having fun," William whispered into Vidia's ear.

"Who?"

There was no answer, only rapid breathing.

Vidia was thrown into confusion. He had never thought about it, save alone worried. But why had William brought this up now? Vidia just wanted this intrusion over, yet a fear had gripped him as though something worse might be waiting for him once this ended.

After a few long minutes William convulsed and went gasping, first resting his weight on Vidia, then rolling off. The first reaction Vidia had to the weight off his back was to convince himself that nothing had entered him, yet he felt he'd been violated. But there was consolation that his turn was next. Vidia was contemplating his next move when William jumped up to his feet suddenly, with a shriek, pulling his pants and buttoning them up, shouting almost hysterically, "Oh Lord, Vidia, let's run home. I am late. We're supposed to visit Uncle Jonathan for dinner. Oh mother! I am going to get grilled, Oh no! Hurry up then!"

Vidia felt cheated, bewildered, as he saw his friend sprinting homeward. He stood up too, tied the knot and

mimicked his violator. As he, too, ran home, he grew aware of the uncomfortable attraction he felt towards William's power over him, and the way he had fooled him.

All evening, and the whole of next day, Vidia was confused and agitated, and in spite of the effort he made to forget, he felt he had been robbed in broad daylight. Night, he slunk in his cozy bed quietly, feeling his body shrink to the size of a tiny mouse under the darkness of his huge quilt. Uneasily, he climbed the cold mountain of sleep, wishing he were William.

Come morning, his mother as usual woke him up after dawn. First he washed his face, then carried water and hay for the cow. He perched himself on a small pile of red bricks and watched her masticating, then foaming around her mouth, and flogging her back with her long, restless tail.

His glances darted, uncomfortably, over and over again, to the gardener's quarters. The animal's fidgeting bothered and annoyed Vidia, but he dared not look her in the face. Like a grown up man, he crossed and uncrossed his legs. Then suddenly, he stood up and went inside. When he came out, he held in his hands a slab and a grindstone. He went in again and brought out all the white chalk pieces he had stolen from his classroom and began crushing them with the grindstone to a fine powder. When done with grinding, he took a full look at the cow. In less than an hour he had covered her entire skin with the dull white chalk powder except for the four hooves.

Impatiently he waited for William to wake up and come out to the back lawn. Vidia had not experienced the kind of restlessness that now coursed through his veins—he incessantly tore off leaves from the trees and snapped their crunchy surfaces. Every time the cow shivered and shook off a layer of white puff, he would add more immediately. The sun had risen by now and the trees' foliage was creating intricate shadow patterns on the earth, but all of that failed to calm or distract him. He began to feel hungry

and was getting angry. He finally spotted William appear in the doorway of the big house—his heart fluttered. He ran up to the green hedge and yelled out loud, “William-babu, here!” waving his hand.

William stood in his pajamas and rubbed his eyes. He yawned and said, “Good morning, Vidia!”

“Will you please come over here? I want to show you something.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Will you please...?”

William dragged himself towards the quarters in a dreamlike state, yawning a few times. As he crossed the dividing line, his legs turned to stone. He gaped at the cow and the white puffs that flew off her skin every now and then as she trembled. He turned to Vidia, whose eyes seemed to be pleading for something, some assurance of having done something in the right direction. The boys stood there without speaking. The cow groaned a few times, as though registering her displeasure at being an object of their games. But the boys had something else on their minds. Their eyes spoke, but in a language neither understood.

## *The Barbarians and the Mule*

*Each of us seeking to top the other's tale—for that's the rule  
in this country: Whoever tells the best story wins....*

Jonathan Tel—*Spleen; Or, the Goy's Tale*

*The secret of love, the lovers reveal, is not to abandon the weak  
knowingly.*

—Waris Shah

**HE LAZILY REMOVED HIS CAP** and wiped the sweat off his face with it, then smacked it against his right leg, twice, before putting it back on, adjusting the cap's side above his ear. First, he cursed the heat, then kicked the big, cemented boulder to shake the dust from his new army boots, or perhaps from boredom—he couldn't tell. Soon he began whistling a new catchy song whose words he vaguely remembered, but the tune trailed off, and he fell silent, thinking with a mixture of pride and trepidation, pondering still the reasons that had brought him here from such a long distance. But the distance was a relative concept, he considered.

Man's conscience and a sense of duty can even call him to the gardens of death. He looked far ahead into the parched stretch of land, part his and part not, an ambiguous claim, that wretched, ambivalent thing called life, and squinted his eyes at the periphery where he could make out the front line of beaten houses, battered shacks covered with corrugated roof of gray material. Stretches of barbed wire occasionally glinted in the distance if he moved. The heat had driven everyone inside, even his comrades, except him, so it seemed. Should he pity himself? No, never, he whispered. The occasional glint annoyed him. He looked up, far beyond, to the sky—was it also only part his? What if it is the last sky? No bird in sight. What a ruthless stretch of eternity! He lowered his gaze again.

Somewhere in the middle of the barbed wire and him, emerged a nicely paved road, which reminded him of his home country, and bridged over the dirty, unpaved street that crawled to the small town into the distance. The nice road swerved once again and disappeared to the left. Roads and streets fascinated him. He could stare at them for hours, thinking about their metaphorical quality, their resemblance to life, how they lured you to a journey, and how they took you, often, nowhere.

"Some coffee? Do you want some coffee?" came the sergeant's voice from inside the two-room post, behind which at a distance raged a big, long wall running in both directions—protecting inhabitants from the barbarians around it. He was a wall too, made of brick and mortar, to protect innocents from the barbarians, the butchers. Behind the wall he could see the upper flats, still unfinished and uninhabited. But these were sacred empty rooms, dearer to him than his own precious life.

"No, thanks, I'm fine," he answered.

"Oh, I love your accent." The laughter of other soldiers sitting inside the room resounded and died.

Irritated, yet amused, he looked at the sad and pathetic mule tied to a pole at the side of the rooms. He

was conscious of the possibility, rather certain at times of it being a fact, that they were jealous of his toughness precisely because they could detect, see through it a more refined, and poetic soul. He wasn't a thug, like them. He was a soldier poet, not a philosopher king exactly, but one who could see beauty in a bullet. The presence of the flea-ridden animal perplexed him, but he was in no mood for asking questions, not on his first day. He would allow himself no distraction. This did not fail to remind him, however, of a story he had read in a literary magazine many years ago. He tried to remember the title of the story, but it eluded him. A Hasid is throwing stones at the exterior of a dance hall and crying aloud, *Sabbath! Sabbath!* From one corner of the square emerges a secondhand dealer swatting his donkey with an olive branch while crying, *Alte zakhen!* The Hasid first asks the dealer in Yiddish, then in Hebrew, if he were a Jew: *Atah yehudi?* The man doesn't answer, perhaps, for fear of being stoned, if he were a Jew indeed. The owner of the mule simply responds by repeating, *Alte zakhen!* The poor thing!

Suddenly, then, the face of Layla, his Persian ex-girlfriend, a Sephardic Jew, rose in his mind shimmering in the heat; uncomfortably he remembered her parting words, "Your ears are as big as a donkey's; if only you'd ever use 'em," before she stormed out of the café—and his life. Something made him nostalgic, made him miss the city he'd left behind, the city of writers, both failed and successful. *I could've been a writer, a novelist, a good novelist, if I'd stuck to it.* He was always at unease about his big ears, though the rest of his face contained a certain charm and attraction which women found pleasing. Her last words colored with the hurt she'd felt at his hands had wounded him deeply, but now, with the distance of time, the echo of those parting shots, in fact, amused him. His lips curled in a suppressed smile. Yet, to his amazement, he still could feel the ache, and the smile gave way to that unique feeling of loss.

He took out a packet of cigarettes from inside his trouser pocket. With the cigarette dangling from the side

of his lips, he lit the matches while keeping an eye on the dirt road and put the packet back. Just then a light wind blew and put out the stick before he could light it. He struck the matches again, cupping the flame this time, and turned his head towards the post. Just then he tensed up, his hands freezing around the struggling flame. Far into the distance a human head glistened, approaching. He put out the matches and tossed the cigarette onto the dirt. His eyes narrowed in fear and uncertainty.

"Saul," a quiver in his voice.

"What? What's up?" came the reply.

"A mule is on its way here." With those words out of his mouth, he became aware of the other animal's presence.

All the four soldiers emerged at the slightest notice and looked in the direction of the moving head. But soon there was a sigh of relief as the head acquired a torso accompanied by the head of a small child perched in front on the bar of the bicycle. The heat created a mirage of water between the incoming bicycle and the awaiting soldiers, who realized that it was his first encounter as a reservist on duty. The four smiled, partly from irritation and partly from satisfaction at finding their young recruit alert and doing his duty well. Saul motioned the two soldiers and they reluctantly walked back into the shade.

"You know what to do," said Saul. "I'll just watch you from a distance. Don't be intimidated, all right?"

He nodded.

"You can handle the mule," said the sergeant as he took a few steps back and sipped from his coffee mug.

"But deal with him as you would a snake." That was Ben, the shortest of all.

The bicycle came to a halt some ten yards from them as he drew his palm up, ordering the man to stop. He had expected the two to be nervous, even scared. But the faces of the barbarians were expressionless. But, then, the older man's face, hardened by the sun, broke into a submissive smile. The little boy jumped off the bicycle.

"Move closer," the young soldier ordered. He felt something essential stiffening in him.

The man started walking with his transport and the boy.

He studied his buddies from the corner of his eyes and suddenly he had the feeling of being in a war movie, possibly *The Eagle Has Landed*, and the clouds of uncertainty and heroism hovered just above his head. For some unexplainable reason their vigilance annoyed him, as though the purpose of their presence was not to lend him a moral support but to mock him into something he was not willing to do. He resented the tyranny of their silent gaze, their inherent authority; he felt molested. But he knew what to do and was determined to rise to the occasion.

"Where are you coming from?"

"From the village," answered the man, pointing backwards.

"Does the village have any name?" This time his voice softened unexpectedly. Perhaps, he was aware of his accent. The man offered the name: "Deir Yassin."

The soldier nodded disinterestedly.

"Where are you going?"

"To my house, over there," the man pointed to the area in the distance where he had been looking earlier.

Slowly but firmly, he took a step closer. "What's in the sack that's on the back of your bicycle?" His voice regained the confidence that had ebbed a moment ago.

"Food items, *habibi*."

"Who is this boy?" (*Did I say that right?*)

"My son."

"Papers?" (*I'm sure I said it right!*)

The man had already reached for his shirt pocket, and produced the identification papers for him.

"Where is his identification?" he pointed to the boy.

"His name is written on my paper."

"But where is his paper?"

"He is not an adult."

"Don't give me that crap and shut up. I can see."

The man fell silent. The young reservist stared into the man's eyes for a long minute, as though searching for a sign of defiance, but found none; the man's servility, strangely enough, only added to the disgust he'd already felt for these creeps, the enemies of his chosen people. Then he looked at the boy—into his stony eyes—something made him uncomfortable and he looked away.

"Open your duffle," softening his voice.

The man complied by placing the cloth sack onto the dirt and untied it from the top. The sack revealed mostly food items: rice, lentils, fava beans.

He ordered them to step back, almost shouting; and he instantly realized he had overacted. The man obeyed; but the boy stood there beside the items. The father reached for his son's arm and pulled him back.

"Is he deaf?"

"He is a child, *habibi*." The man tried to smile.

"Snake is a snake." He whispered, but loud enough for the rest to hear.

The man's smile disappeared.

He folded the paper.

"Do you not agree?"

The man remained silent, a bit puzzled, perhaps even wounded.

"A snake is a snake whether young or old. Repeat it!" he ordered as he once again challenged the man by looking straight into his eyes. The man's gaze changed from being of bafflement to cold anger, the young reservist seemed to detect. This only made him happier.

"Repeat if you want to get home today."

"A snake is... a snake..." the man paused.

"Whether young or old."

"Whether... young or old."

"Now you are listening, *mule*," but he suppressed the 'mule' part from being overheard clearly, and this bothered him. So he repeated:

"Mule!" aloud.

It was at this point he felt a wave of unexpected enchantment swarming in his heart at finding the man acknowledging his humiliation, his accepted inferiority. But for some acutely bizarre reason Layla's whisper distracted him, *or was it just a laugh?* He became conscious of his ears, and could feel them turning red. But the father and the son were not looking at him. *Thank God!* He was briefly tempted to look at the sergeant too, but he subdued the urge, which, surprisingly, allowed him unexpected satisfaction. He then flicked the folded paper, quite stylistically (probably under the influence of Paul Newman), onto the dirt and waited for the man to pick it up. The man did not move. The delight he'd experienced just a moment ago faded.

"Any weapons?"

"No, sir."

"Strip!"

The man seemed confused. He looked to the sergeant, who was reigning in his glee, with a silent request to intervene on behalf of the helpless. Then he looked to the short one, but the stern face, in fact, scared him for the first time.

"But, sir, be reasonable. *Habibi*, you can check me through my clothes—my son—."

"Shut your trap! Do I have to repeat it?"

Silence.

The light breeze stopped again, making everyone intensely aware of the heat.

The man, downcast, reluctantly started taking his shirt off. Below his hairy chest, the protruding belly almost looked comical. The man bent his knees to untie his shoes. He stopped momentarily and implored, "Sir, for the sake of my son...."

"Even a mule is better than you, for it listens!"

Soon the man stood naked in his strong but pudgy body. His face had darkened and eyes grown moist even under the ruthless heat of the day. All his clothes lay in a pile over his beaten leather shoes. The shame he had felt earlier

had given way to an impotent rage, and later to resignation. His shoulders stooped beyond their natural capacity. The man had, as if in the passage of humiliation, forgotten his son—but perhaps not. Conceivably, he felt if he embraced the humiliation, no harm would come to his son, who stood as a mute witness to the theatrics of power.

“Put your filthy underpants on,” The soldier ordered.

The man obeyed once again, ever so grateful. The man whispered “Shukran...” The young reservist squinted his brows—thought he’d heard *Shaitan* instead. His ears turned into molten iron.

“What the fuck did you say?” he yelled in English, unconsciously—quickly pointing his rifle at the man, then lowering it just a tad.

The man answered through his choking voice, “ ‘Thank you’, I said, ‘thank you.’ ”

“So the cunt understands English, the rascal, no—the snake,” he corrected himself. “That’s right. Liar, you old snake!”

The man shrugged, as though resigned to the infatuation of the bullet.

He must have cut a hilarious picture with his head bowed, with any kind of stiffness gone from his spine, and the swollen belly, because the sergeant and the shorty burst out laughing almost in synch. Hearing the laughter, the other two rushed out from the office.

*Layla, the night of my life! If I kill this man, I’ll dedicate it to you, my love! You who thought I was shit, a failed piece of shit. I was nothing—how wrong you were, my Persian pearl, you who still sing nocturnes to my soul, how wrong! I am a contender! Not an ass with big ears but a contender!*

“Good job, but wrap it up quickly.”

His mind began to suck back the elation he had felt earlier and he was pondering over another form of humiliation he could heap on the man and that too before the son (see, Layla?) when the sergeant’s voice annoyed him.

Just then the phone rang. One of them went in to answer it. A laugh was heard from outside.

"Who is it, Big D?"

"Mr. Saffire," came the reply. "He wants to know how the new reservist is doing."

"Fuck Mr Saffire—well, tell him he's doing fine."

He tried to refocus—tried to bring all his faculties to a decisive meeting thoroughfare inside his mind, like he was on a whale hunt.

Just then he remembered the emaciated donkey tied to the pole.

"Okay, you snake, let's cut it short; now listen, you cooperate with me and I let you go," he proposed in a mock friendliness.

The man seemed willing to do anything to have the spell of misery over with. His eyes widened a bit.

"All right, then; go over to your father over there, lift the tail and plant a wet kiss on the asshole like you do in your bedroom. Make it a bull's eye; no cheating! In return you go home with your son and thank your Allah."

The man's face flushed with blood and for a moment he could not hear anything.

The soldiers exchanged glances with a mix of surprise and admiration.

The man was brought back to his senses by the soldier's yelling *Or I'll have to shoot your balls* before he found himself moving voluntarily. The fourth soldier had ended the briefing over the phone and did not want to miss the Oscar level performance. All five of them watched the man trudge, as if on stage, as slowly as possible, with death written on his back, over to the donkey and then stand still. Their gaze pierced the back of his head.

The man closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them slowly, summoning the courage, and lifted the donkey's tail, while fearing a kick in return, but the animal remained calm, not even bothering to shoo the flies away. The man closed his eyes again and brought his lips close to the animal's asshole, to kiss, with the kind of serenity one acquired while offering prayers and remembering God.

He paused for a moment. He seemed to check his breath. A pin drop silence. The soldiers too had stopped breathing. Right then another gust of hot wind blew, raising dust and fallen leaves in its mobius ire. The man planted the kiss and slowly leaned back, his head hung low. He remained there, still, as though ashamed to face the world, swallowed by darkness. The soldiers breathed a sigh of relief. Then the short one began giggling, almost in a fit, as if from a deep sense of sadness, which encouraged the others to relax as well. The sergeant clapped, "Bravo! Bravo! Well done, my Yankee Doodle Dundy."

"Dandy," corrected one of the soldiers.

"Shut up." The giggles died down.

Nothing in the world had prepared anyone, neither the soldiers, nor the chronicler of this tale, above all the sergeant for what they would confront as they turned on hearing a faint sound behind their back. The boy, that little feeble thing they had forgotten, erased from their memory, written him off—that little snake—venom hardening in his pores, the emaciated invisible little man, yes, that half-man had dared grab a piece of rock. The young soldier, the rookie reservist (the failed American novelist), was in shock, frozen on a pause button, thinking it to be an act of his imagination. Then, something central stiffened inside him, his eyes bulged, then narrowed, like a hero in a war movie... what we have here is a failure to communicate! A man rising to the occasion, he slowly raised his rifle, taking aim at the boy's chest.

"Drop the rock, son," shouted his father with an unexpected ferocity that rattled the soldiers' nerves.

The four soldiers, the sergeant, and the boy's father witnessed the boy's face turn igneous, fearless, as the hand holding the rock rose in a gesture of inconceivable defiance to strike at the tormentors of his father—and the usurpers of his land.

It was clear that the innocence of the stone had scared everyone.

## *Fountain in the Desert*

AT THE END OF THE CORRIDOR with a painted caravan of camels on its desert walls, he parted a bead curtain. After a peek, he stepped inside the intimate reception area, noting arabesque arches painted on the walls. On a wall to his right, a belly dancer poured wine from a ruby-studded decanter into a bearded, hooked-nose sheik's silver cup.

The décor had a calming effect. Despite the initial unease, it took him very little time to feel at home. *Weird!* he thought. *Is it a common enough feeling? If so, how come I didn't have a clue?* He looked around. The atmosphere made him feel like he had walked into an episode from the *Arabian Nights*. But it would be unfair to take him to task over the certainty of the episode since he'd only heard of the classic, never read it. But he was proud of himself for even making that connection.

More importantly, he had to remind himself: *It's okay to be here.* It was all very familiar, although he'd never been to a place like this before. Was it the color and serene glow of electric candles or the atmosphere on the walls? *Perhaps the chandelier,* he considered. Everything in the room contributed—still, that couldn't explain all. Was it

the welcoming face at the reception desk? Or a pair of blue eyes behind the silken veil she was wearing? A blue-eyed *houri*! Was it the way another woman in the room sat on a barstool flipping through a *femme* magazine, looking majestic? He couldn't see her face, but the calm apparent in her back—smooth and without a trace of tension—cried out loud for a nod. It clicked in his head.

He believed, even in the most tormented nook of his heart, that such pure peace was possible, but it must emerge from within, like a fountain in the desert responding to the thirsty heels of a newborn. This calm, this ease, the silence! Conscience of man is strange; it can feel at peace even inside the slaughterhouse! But isn't man's conscience, too, a slaughterhouse?

Initially, he'd wished he'd brought one of his buddies with him, but now he was glad he'd come alone. Perhaps if the experience was good, he'd spread the word. He was relieved he'd finally made the decision to enter, overcoming heavy moments of indecision. He knew the most difficult thing in the world is just that—decision—be it in a cave, a heart, a mind, a hole, a war.

Deep down he knew he did it not so much for his own fulfillment but for a grander purpose. Entering the Babylon Brothel was tough—a near impossible feat for a man of conscience, but superior forces (he knew in his heart) would guide him *in*. He was glad of the values his parents had imparted to him. He was thankful and humble. His heart welled with pride knowing that his country worked on those principles.

The receptionist caught him looking again and smiled; her eyes widened behind the veil, welcoming warmly. He smiled back in shyness, offering a gentleman's nod. He took off his cap and eventually registered that her face—he was *certain*—genuinely lit up at the sight of his clothes. Yet the very next moment he was feeling blemished. He'd always been uneasy at a world enslaved to images. There should be no need to parade ones credentials around, he believed.

He checked his smile, averting his eyes to the wall on his right. He registered its blue sky with a sharp crescent in the upper left corner. A civilized society should work on trust (at this precise thought he felt an itch in his balls—he didn't satisfy the urge—he was proud of his self-control) and honor, not on the power of images. One should be allowed to walk up and announce: *This is what I am and this is what I have earned with my hard work, sir! This is what I am entitled to and this is what I want!* Perhaps that's a bit unrealistic in a real world. He looked at the back of the woman who was busy reading. He liked the fact she hadn't turned around. He looked away, to the top of the counter kept in neat order. There he noticed the palm tree table lamp. For a second he thought he detected an insurgent—like a phantom—hiding behind the tree.

This time the receptionist formally greeted him on behalf of the establishment, adding, "We are proud of you and glad to see you alive and well," and noted that they—the business she worked for—were the finest in town in their own peculiar way. She pointed to the wall speckled with post cards and explained that most of them were from his brothers arriving in the period of the last few months, some not so whole (she laughed good-naturedly)—with problems and handicaps of course, but doing fine.

He took a cursory look at the wall. Next, she tactfully made sure "You are at the right place for the right reason, aren't you?"

He affirmed. She looked relieved. She then sketched out other details—highlighting comforts and gadgets—that came with the main item for a miniscule extra price. The price of the main *item*, she said, was divided into two ranges. That information puzzled him at first. He was sickened momentarily at the idea of money being the measure of love and it showed on his face. The receptionist was an old hand, though she didn't look her age, and quickly smoothed out the ebb and tide of his brows by presenting a small album divided in two sections. He was not interested in the main

item photographs in Section One because it, probably, reminded him of neon signs in American cities.

While the receptionist guided him through the album and politely cajoled him to "Pick one main item, please," he had something else on his mind.

He unloaded his question, "I saw the special advertisement in a respected New York daily—" and he was reassured that prices indeed had been cut in half for soldiers returning.

"There is a further discount of twenty percent if you have a limb missing—anything from a finger to leg."

He wanted to acknowledge how grateful he was, but the emotion choked his voice and he had trouble fighting back his tears. He realized his heart was brimming with love for his country—no, no, in fact, for a grander humanity—as a true Christian spirit ought to feel. And make no mistake, he was in possession of an intense urge to unload some of that love rather sooner than later.

He then wondered if his old man had been this lucky! If he'd ever been offered things on half-price! What were the measures of love when Pa was young? Did he too come to a place like this when he returned? The receptionist's voice freed him from this vexing thought. "You can trust me" she said and joked, laughing and winking. "I'm not a politician, I'm good at getting soldiers embedded with the kind they want."

To make things easier for her inexperienced patron, the veiled receptionist offered to choose on his behalf. "If I may?" she asked (adding that it was a common service she and her colleagues selflessly provided to newcomers—especially the soldiers).

He felt morally obligated to tell her she had correctly read his mind. The feeling that made mobius leaps in his veins made him ashamed as his mind tagged her as *O daughter of Babylon*, and before she could close the album, he found his finger pointing to an Asian face, smiling, *smirking*? Because—convinced—the woman in the picture

seemed to be saying with the silence of her parted lips, "I need your love, *hun*, desperately!"

With a thank you, the receptionist closed the book. For a second, he was fooled into thinking that words of gratitude had leapt out of the woman in the photograph's mouth. He liked the ambiguity in her face. His heartbeat quickened and his throat went dry, gulping with discomfort. He decided he wanted a drink when he heard the receptionist quoting the price. Holding the key to the Bali Beach Room, he learned that bottled water came with the price, but if he wanted alcohol his companion would assist him, gladly, as she would in other matters as well, such as ordering fried onion rings or an X-rated video. *People do that*, she explained, *for emotional reasons. We do not judge. We understand their needs*, she emphasized with measured compassion. Once again, as he walked away, an overwhelming feeling of gratefulness—tinged with raw patriotism—swept through him. The woman sitting at the stool didn't turn, but he felt as if she wished him luck.

Warmth cascading into his soul like molten lava, he entered a room without windows. All his adult life he hadn't been able to decide whether he was a private person or scared of loneliness. Was he an introvert or extrovert? Most times when he entered rooms without a window he became tense or dizzy. Today, he wanted to hold his ground. He remained still, staring at the wall. He wrestled with the desire to carve out a hole there and imagined re-entering. He believed—with all his heart and mind—in man's power to think and act in the mirror of his conscience and reshape the world. Not be ashamed of his burden. Man is what he can do. Any thing that comes in the way of progress must perish. But he had to accept the wall now – like destiny manifested even before he stepped into town.

A few quiet moments passed before he heard a knock on the door.

"Hi!" She waved at him. He nodded, tense. "Mind if I join you, Mister?" She had already entered. He was relieved

to see she looked like her photograph—he was dealing with honest people. She was short—dark eyes, dark hair, exotic, already luring the quiet animal in him out. He experienced exhilaration—he didn't know what was appropriate to say. He felt like telling her he already loved her, but he shut up, suspicious that it might sound ridiculous.

"Welcome to Babylon!"

*O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed...* he nodded again.

"How are you doing today?" she said, flirting.

"Fine, thank you. And you, ma'am?"

"Oh, it could be better," she said, "but *you're* gonna take care of that!"

Smiling, then parting her mouth she licked her lower lip. "I like your uniform. You look very handsome in it." He blushed and looked away before looking straight into her eyes.

"I am very grateful, ma'am, for the opportunity to be with you."

Taken aback, she giggled nervously, "My pleasure!"

"I'm glad to be alive, ma'am."

"Cut that '*ma'am*' stuff out—we're friends here, honey."

She softened her voice and sized him up. He became tense. She sensed it and walked to the light switch and turned it down, lightening their shadows.

"Isn't this better?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you."

She came within inches of him. He was motionless, still holding his cap. She stared at it, prompting him to place it on a table. She reached for his shirt and unbuttoned it. She ran her palm over his hairy chest and felt his heart hammering away.

"Does it feel good?" she asked. He was pleased by the sincerity in her voice.

Yes! He felt like telling her about the kind of love he was feeling for her. Right then, he felt her free hand crawl over his crotch. He checked his breath.

"Oh, my, you're cooked!" she exclaimed.

"Can I hug you?" he pleaded.

"Go ahead. Oh my, *my!*" she said.

He hugged her as she held his butt. His hips stiffened. She humped him lightly and waited for his response. She humped him again.

"I am glad to be alive," he said.

"I'm glad too." He kissed her head, then lowered his lips to her forehead, to the right cheek, and as he approached her lips, she backed off. He persisted and she pecked on his mouth and withdrew.

There was a moment of awkwardness.

"Honey, we don't do that." She paused, then added, "I mean, we can't tongue and kiss, you know, in half-price."

He hugged her again. "I love you," he said.

"Oh! I love *you*, baby." she gyrated against his crotch. He responded now and grew agitated.

"I want to love—"

She led him to bed, but asked if he'd prefer the couch. He said he preferred the bed. That reminded him of home. "Your call, honey," she said. She started to undress him. Soon he was sitting on bed, naked, shivering. She stroked his cock a little, and kissed the shaft. "Oh, hunk, you are so hard. Y'know you could be in movies! I want it *in!*"

"Come on, baby, let's fuck... *fuck me like you fucked the enemy.*" Hisbody stiffened. She undressed herself. She asked him to lie down, relax. She leaned over and massaged his cock with the insides of her breasts. She fished a condom out from the drawer and rolled it down his cock.

When she asked, he said, "I'd like to be pinned down by you."

"Bang away, my commando! Oh, darlin', show this pussy the *magic wand!*" She sat on top of him, helping his member slowly inside her. He held her arms and convulsed.

"That's your Babbling Tower entering my Hanging Garden," she giggled.

"Oh, God! Oh, *Jesus!*" he cried.

"I want to hear you say *Ya Allah!* That's what most of them say now."

"*Ya Allah!*" was exactly what came out from his lips.

"Oh, yeah, that's it! Now tell me how many sons of bitches did you kill?"

"Enough!... that's enough, *oh God!*"

"Tell me... *no!* don't stop moving... tell me...," she insisted.

He didn't move—as if dead.

"Now, now, don't stop, relax, breathe, keep it comin', baby."

"Please, slow down!"

"Talk to me, honey! You love my Asian pussy!"

"I do... I..."

"So, tell me how many you killed?"

He moaned.

"Now, now, don't look away."

"I don't know."

"Course you do. *I* do. You killed..."

Oh yeah, yes, ma'am. I did... I did it... for my... *counntry*, but I..."

"You bathed them with Agent Orange, shampooed them with napalm."

She stopped all of a sudden. "Sorry, honey," she sounded sincere, "Is all this war talk making you cagey? I should've asked. Don't cry, honey."

He didn't respond—his eyes brimming with tears. But he didn't cry.

"It is just that most soldiers really get off on it, the war talk, the *bang-bang, shoot-shoot*. They like to recreate combat in their head. But there are others, too, who want to forget. We can do it either way, *your* way. We can go to a comfort zone of *your* choice. Would you rather be in Paris, 'Frisco, even the Vatican, or Taj Mahal, or even here, in the moment?"

He shook his head. He whispered he liked the Taj Mahal, the love story behind it. "Taj Mahal is cool," he repeated.

They started moving again.

"Did you know," he gasped, "*mahal* means Palace?" She said she knew it. That surprised him. "Did you know—"

*Was she retaliating now, the Taj Mahal in essence just a grave?* In a swift, fleeting moment, he recognized her eyes had once been a harbor of death, and that frightened him. His need to have a window in this room intensified. Just as he was coming, he imagined himself convulsing in his own casket alternately laced with his country's flag and miniature windows. Melancholy gripped his heart.

*Is he sobbing? Why?* she wondered.

*Or laughing?* She disengaged and wiped herself. *By the river of Babylon...* the words rang in his head. She handed him another towel. *There we sat down, yea, we wept...* He felt naked and reached for his underpants. He stopped sobbing, quite and pensive. Then he became irritable, but soon melancholy returned as it often does. He prayed she wouldn't ruin it by turning it into a business thing. His hopes faded.

"It's totally up to you if you wanna tip," she was smiling her business smile.

"Would things have been different had there been a window in here?" he wondered. One must accept things as they are sometimes.

"Oh, sure...." He reached for his wallet and yanked a twenty out for her. He expected some money back, ten or more, but she took the whole thing. He didn't demand—he didn't want to look cheap. Soldiers are not cheap.

"Are you in town for a few more days?" she asked.

He nodded, his eyes brightening.

"Come again."

He didn't know how to respond. He wished she'd stay and talk with him. He wanted to tell her he didn't kill anyone for personal reasons. It was an act of duty—to save humanity, to spread civilization. He was simply, proudly filling in his old man's shoes. He was not a psycho out to rape and kidnap, steal and kill. He felt like falling down on

his knees and crying, to beg her to listen to him. She hurried to the door, cranked up the light, then turned the doorknob, and said, "Thanks for coming, *hun*," and started to leave.

"How did you get into this?" He couldn't believe his own words.

She froze, framed by the doorjamb. She gave him a look, "You mean—?"

"The whoring business." He didn't know he was capable of such poison. He felt ashamed, but resisted down casting his eyes.

An aged smile broke over her face, and she fluttered her long eyelashes rapidly as if she were a Barbie and said, "It runs in the family, dear...", before vanishing.

*Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones...*

He buttoned up his shirt and went down to the lobby. The madam at the counter was not there. His woman wasn't there either. As he stepped out to the sidewalk, he wasn't sure if he'd enjoyed the encounter. Perhaps it was the half-price curse. It felt to him as if everyone was out to milk him. He felt depressed: despite the fact that he was a good man and his heart was full of love, everyone treated him as a fool, a bumpkin—from the government to the whores. He looked to the right and then to the left. Both ways looked similar and unappealing. All he wanted was a drink.

He felt he was in a foreign land, his throat getting drier by minute, his lips cracking. *Why do I feel a stranger here?* He was thirsty. He wished a fountain would sprout suddenly in the desert of his being. He walked, not knowing where he was headed.

## *Snakeskins*

ON SECOND THOUGHT, my meeting with him appeared to be the result of precise planning. But who had actually planned it? I could not be certain. Fairly possible, too, that I had completely forgotten that at a fixed hour of a fixed day I would find him waiting for me.

I could detect the shine in his eyes from a distance as I emerged from the lane that appeared blind on entering, though it was not. He stood up and shouted excitedly, "Hey man, my heart-mate! I've been waiting for you all this time. You're a heartless soul! Whose ass have you been hiding in?"

How indeed different, the tone of a friend is, I should add, from a mere acquaintance! He couldn't contain his sheer joy and beckoned me to walk faster. Although I wanted to slow down so my eyes could feast on his restlessness, I found myself being pulled against my will to the magnet in his hand. Then, just then I remembered—with a minor shock—I had in fact left home to buy fresh okra at the main Vegetable Market. I further remembered with some discomfort that later I had run into Big Head, walking his usual frantic walk like a disoriented zebra, the moment I had reached the turn of the Old Mansion. The

moment he spotted me he began mumbling (before I could inquire after his well-being), "A big, monstrous calamity has come down on us there and you are getting your chess pieces whipped!" I stared at his lips. *Chess pieces?* What sort of rubbish was he spouting? I was deeply puzzled. He soon entered a narrow alley with alacrity, then bounced back—only to disappear again, this time into another alleyway behind the red-bricked Old Mansion. Vaguely understanding his hand gesture, I took a right turn and headed toward 'Your Beloved Tea House.'

I now advanced in the opposite direction of the main Vegetable Market. The curiosity that had awakened from hearing the word "calamity" grew in my mind. *Calamity? What kind of calamity? So, really, it has finally happened... just what I had feared... but....* The tea house was quite far and one got there through a maze of countless twisting and turning lanes, some tarred and some earthen.

Sunk in thought, I had barely covered half of the distance when I sensed Actress Extra sneaking up on me (I don't know why but I can always sense her coming), but just as I turned, she spoke as though in a dream, "*Believe me, I feel really sad. Granted, it is no one's fault, but still! Anyway, let it be, what difference does it make now?*" And we both continued walking with our heads bowed. When she turned left, I followed suit.

"But all this—"

And all I had to do was utter those words when she snapped, "I said let it be! Some other time, please!"

I didn't understand a whit and I don't know why I felt more and more embarrassed inside. I felt vexed since that wasn't my typical behavior. The skin of my face felt tired from pretending to look sad, yet I was certain a tragedy had taken place which not only required that I feel sorry but made the act highly essential.

When we approached 'Cold-Cold Drinks' and she said to me, "You go on. I'll be following you in a minute," I realized I was going somewhere else. How and when

did I again take this turn with her? Wasn't I on my way to witness a *calamity*?

As I said, "All right, then," and moved on, I caught her voice behind me, bargaining—

"Señor, how much for this snake?"

A shiver ran up my spine, and I hastened my pace. I was, once again, following the direction of someone's finger.

I could detect the shine in his eyes from a distance as I emerged from the lane that appeared blind on entering, though it was not. He stood up and shouted excitedly, "Hey man, my heart-mate! I've been waiting for you all this time. You're a heartless soul! Whose ass have you been hiding in?"

"That's a strange alley!" I said. "It curves in a weird way before opening onto the field. I mistook it for a blind alley." I shook his hand, but he pulled me closer for a hug. Then sitting me down, he said, "I came straight here after making love to your wife. I didn't even go to the office, thinking I should at least tell my dearest friend...."

He was saying more words, but his voice now had faded. He seemed quite happy from the expression on his face. His voice struck my ears once again.

"Where did you get lost, you old fart?"

I shrugged my shoulders, smiling. Then, pointing up to the sky, I rotated my hand as though screwing a bulb in the air. He smiled again and said, "But, really, you are an ass!"

I started laughing with abandon, soon followed by him, *ho ho ho!*

"Why, did you forget?" he sipped his tea noisily, reminding me that someone (I had no idea who) had placed a cup of tea in my hand too.

I could barely mumble, "I had set out to run... but perhaps I had forgotten...."

"Anyway, let's change the subject," he said. "Tell me, is all well at your work?"

I poured some tea in the saucer and began to sip after cooling it down by blowing on it. "Everything is fine," I said. "But there's too much work. Files are piled on top of each other... I *hate* work."

"Listen to me and listen carefully: who gives a flying fuck? And, yes, I don't give a damn about your job either."

*He's got to be a very close friend of mine for talking to me in such an intimate manner*, I decided. But my memory at that point had walked into deep freeze. Despite the effort, I couldn't figure out who he was and how I had come to know him.

We both stared up into the sky, at a patch of clouds drifting slowly. Then we looked down searching for its shadow. We couldn't find it.

"What date will the Full Moon of Anxiety be?" I asked, it seemed, for no reason at all.

"You seem tired. How is your constipation?" he asked, and fell silent, then spoke again. "Every time I listen to you you're whining about your job, crying over your files. Man, if you feel the job's ripping a hole up your ass then why don't you quit? There are other things one can do, *after all*," and he winked as he said "after all." I tried to decipher the wink inwardly while smiling outwardly. In response, I winked back at him and slapped his thigh playfully.

"My little prince, your brain for sure works like a fire cracker. You are a knight in shining armor!" I had difficulty believing those words had come out of my mouth.

He relaxed in his chair and smiled sweetly.

I noticed his thin mustache.

"Man, now I know. Sister-in-law screws superbly, and how she moves! My, my, like if she stopped she'd turn into a witch. My friend, I was screaming! You kept it a complete surprise as though hiding it from an evil eye," and he winked again. "She took care of me for full two hours, may God keep her in His benevolence. What a lovely pussy, loud and clear, brother, that words fail to—"

I shifted in my chair for the time, experiencing anxiety as I listened to him.

"She too, rest-assured, must be massaging her legs at the moment. My condition is beyond any massaging though. But, Mr. Kind Soul, it was a grand gathering, I mean really, very enjoyable, though I swear, she's put on years and grown a big hole after all that ploughing and tilling.... "

I felt a wave of anger rising in me. *Who the hell is this person? His speech is so vulgar.* My anger inched up, and feeling helpless I wondered why I wasn't able to resist. And on top of that, I kept smiling with embarrassment. I felt as if I had come to be stuck in a comic book.

Now his voice drowned sometimes and sometimes rose above surface, but his words remained indecipherable. I felt extremely agitated, trapped. Had I walked into a magic spell? I had been listening to a barrage of vulgarity about my wife from this stranger; I neither protested nor showed anger. What's was going on?

Then I turned to him and bobbed my head as though saying, *What's... going on?* But his gaze was fixed on my shoes. It was then that I wondered where I had left my shoes. He looked up, into my eyes. His voice re-emerged. "Okay, brother, no need to get angry now, as is your habit...."

I think I was still smiling, but—

"It is possible that I have over-praised sister-in-law. What can I do, o dear, partly the political situation is such and partly the nature of a thing called pussy. But let the election pass and since I am bound to get the conservative, religious votes, I'll give you a try as well," and he winked as he said "try."

I suffered a severe jolt. But I recovered and winked in reply and heard a mild sound of something cracking inside my eyeball. I thought he said "You, be careful!" This time I patted the outside of his leg and I heard myself say, "*Click, click, click!*"

"Seize the land and put up a fence."

I saw my two right hands, one silvery, the other darker.

Then, right before my eyes, he placed his long penis (two-headed) in my hands, one silvery, the other darker. Wonder-struck, I just gawked. His entire body was beginning to stiffen up mechanically and he was slipping from his chair. He seemed to me to be a frozen, yet animated image on celluloid.

Within a brief spell of time he had completely fallen down on the ground and shrunken to a cardboard man. In my two fists I held two snake skins instead of a two-headed penis. I stared at them momentarily. A voice came from somewhere, "Mister, will you take more tea?"

I began to recall, slowly, slowly, that I had left home to buy fresh okra from the main Vegetable Market. Maybe now if I tried I could wrap this up before the dream ended, because I wasn't certain I would have the opportunity once outside the dream. I stood up immediately and became aware of the gushing wind as I began walking. If a pair of eyes had seen me from either side, they would have thought the snake skins were pulling me instead.

## *Kissing the Holy Land*

**THE BITTER TASTE OF COFFEE** was still in my mouth when the captain announced the landing. I felt the invisible coffee grains on the tip of my tongue and feeling irritated I spat them out between my right armrest and the window, making sure no one was witnessing this. My cousin, Sultana, was famous for reading coffee cups. In mine she had seen a bear with wings, green mountains, and an ocean. It all made sense now; I was going to California. I had arrived in New York, my port of entry, from Pakistan on a TWA plane and was now bound for San Francisco. This was the first time I had ever left my country.

My father had lived in New York for two years in the early fifties, and since then he had always been in love with the Big Apple. He took great delight in telling us about his stay in New York. He told his stories over and over again, driving everyone nuts. One of his favorite tales was about his arrival at the Hotel Ambassador. A tall, handsome white man in his twenties, with blue eyes and blonde hair, stood waiting in his crisp clothes for my father. He advanced in my dad's direction to take charge of his suitcases. It was as if the East India had invaded again. My father felt unprepared for this. He simply was not ready to let a white

man who resembled his white ex-master carry his luggage. My father perhaps thought that all whites were related. On seeing the white man bend his knees to take the suitcases, my father felt as if someone had dropped a *fanoos* on his head. Pulling the suitcases closer to himself, he shrank with humility and fear.

"Good Morning, Sir. You must be Mr. Malik," the bellboy said with a smile. My father at last understood that this man was not directly related to the Queen of England.

Things have changed. My mother warned me strictly against taking a stroll in any inch of New York City. People who came told stories of what could happen to them in cities like New York, Detroit, or Los Angeles. With all these thoughts I shuffled out of the plane onto the land that was famous for the Statue of Liberty.

I, along with other non-Americans, was going to be interviewed by an immigration officer. I was nervous. I had known a man back home who was deported twice from the States. He did not give up and got in the third time. He had told me that he hated people who worked for the immigration. Finally my turn came, and it seemed as if the officer did not like my Gandhi-resembling face to begin with. He asked me stupid questions about why I came to this country and how I got the visa and so on. It was at this moment that I wished I would dissipate before his inquisitive eyes. Tired and jet-lagged, I was about to choke and pass out, without warning, under the barrage of questions when he let me go with a sarcastic nod. I was troubled, and discouraged, by his sense of hospitality.

I was flying to San Francisco from New York in three hours, and I had to spend those hours at the airport. I had lost any desire to sit and catch some sleep. I walked from one airline counter to another, one waiting area to a different one, establishing imaginary friendships, nodding my head in approving gestures as if it were okay with me if strangers from distant shores wanted to share the

same roof of the airport with me. I had put my luggage in a locker, after losing two 25-cent coins, and was free to move unencumbered through Kennedy Airport. I grew up admiring American presidents.

I was thinking of Mr. Kennedy at the time I happened to walk by an American family. The man looked surprisingly like John F. Kennedy. He had the same intelligent eyes, and elegantly arched eyebrows. His sons looked like little Kennedys to me. I must have been staring at them for some time when I noticed that one of the little Kennedys was noticing me. I quickly turned my eyes to a TV screen about six inches away from the boy's head, pretending as best as I could that I had not noticed them. I thought that this Kennedy family did not want any media and my attention, and with this thought the respect for the nearby family grew immensely in my heart.

People said "excuse me" or "pardon me" every time they bumped into me. My hand reached into my pocket, a common instinctual gesture for a Pakistani, to see if my wallet was still there. But I was getting better at dodging people, who seemed to be deliberately taking aim at my shoulders. I somehow managed to reach the big cafeteria section, and with a look of confidence borrowed from Dilip Kumar, I started to read the menu beneath the neon sign. I searched for familiar dishes. I must have stood in one position for a good fifteen minutes reading the menu up and down, left and right, getting more and more indecisive.

A young woman behind the cash register noticed my confusion and asked, "May I help you, sir?" I was mesmerized by her voice and I looked in her direction. I felt nostalgic, like one feels after having watched quite a few American movies. She repeated her question. "Why did she not work for the immigration?" I wondered. I mumbled something to her in my Urdu-medium English which she could not make any sense of. I tried mumbling again, but this time the sound betrayed me as it refused to come up to even the back of my mouth. Sadly, she gave up

on me, as a new customer walked up to her. I wanted to say, "Hey, she was talking to me, sir, it's my turn," but my fear transformed my English into some kind of an ancient language. Sanskrit perhaps? Becoming embarrassed, I left.

Yet her face was stuck in my head. It grew like a small red apple with two green grapelike eyes. A light blue ribbon curled around her pony-tail. I still hung out in the same lobby. I hid behind a gigantic pillar, barely craning my head out. I was good at hiding from women I liked and desired. The image of her face added pressure on my bladder and increased my hunger. I went back to the restaurant. A big red M, which I had missed before, greeted me now from the wall behind her. The name tag on her shirt said, "McDonald's... Anna... Have a nice day." *There are sixteen Annas in one Rupee.* I was not sure whether her name was McDonald's or Anna.

"May I help you?"

My ears waited for her to finish the sentence, yet she repeated the same line, "May I help you?" Perturbed, I said, "I... *ji...* would...." She leaned forward, resting one hand on the counter in order to hear me better. Her leaning made me feel very uncomfortable about my ability to speak English. I raised my finger in the direction of the menu, as if in protest. The line was piling up behind me. She turned, like a ballerina, to look where my finger pointed and got me a cup of coffee. My first cup of coffee in America. "Why did she not call me sir this time?" I was profoundly puzzled.

Holding my coffee, I walked away from her, dejectedly. A man almost knocked the coffee out of my hands, but—to his disappointment—I dodged him. He smiled sheepishly and said, "Pardon me, sir." A gush of blood ran through my arteries. The coffee in my hand trembled. I took a good look at his face as he scooted past me. Astonishingly, he resembled the late president Lincoln. The same beard and the hollow cheeks, very black-and-white features and the button-eyes. I thought he must be related to President Lincoln's family. I felt lucky to run into people

from distinguished families. I stole a seat in the corner of a lounge and, as I sipped my coffee, thought about Anna or McDonald's. I checked my money. It was still there.

I was looking at a woman who sat opposite me. She seemed to be in her early twenties, quite my age, and her face was as fresh as a newly blossomed flower on a prairie. She crossed her legs and looked in my direction. As I was slicing my heart for her, a man showed from somewhere like a movie villain and sat next to her. He had two beer bottles in his hands. I had seen beer before. She took one from his hand and clinked it with his before she sipped from her bottle. It made me a little depressed. Yet I was impressed by the fact that one could drink alcohol at such places. That was not possible in Pakistan. In Pakistan, in my beloved country, one could not even drink in one's own living room. One had to be locked inside a dream to do it. I understood the value of freedom to drink. I wanted a beer. I wanted to celebrate. Oh, I wanted a beer to celebrate my first day in America.

I got myself a chilled Dutch beer and searched for a nice and quiet and comfortable place to sit down and enjoy my first drink, a place where there were only newly blossomed flowers but no villain to pluck them. But I found neither. I was holding my beer like a precious Wills Cricket Trophy. I chose a seat next to a big window through which I could see one side of the runway. I watched the planes land and take off. The beer had a strange taste at first, as if rotten fruits were crushed inside. But with a few gulps, as my stomach cried "fire," I started to feel good, and the song, *Main sharabi naheen, main sharabi naheen*, started to reverberate. I had heard that people could get drunk if they did not stop in time. I was curious to know what it would be like being drunk. The Koran declared that drinking was a sin. I remembered that my mother and the mullah in the mosque backed it up. "Too much of everything is bad." I promised myself to stick to only one. I felt relaxed.

I felt very relaxed.

I remember what else I felt: I felt that the world and its people were beautiful. Their eyes, noses, and lips, of all dyes and fits, and the sounds they made were beautiful. Their clothes, shoes, and the cars they drove, the neon signs and the animals and the noises they uttered were beautiful. The people who worked for the immigration and the people who were deported were beautiful. Armies were beautiful and the villages and the towns and the people they wiped out were also beautiful. I felt my head was spinning a little faster now. The movies, actors, actresses, directors and writers, composers and singers, stunt fighters, the extras, and the audiences were beautiful. The presidents of America and of other countries, the students who detested these presidents, the lonely thinkers and the co-opted intellectuals, the editors, the newscasters, the milkmen, the postmen, the Olympic stars, the businessmen, and the smugglers and the federal security officers who were hired to catch the smugglers were all beautiful. I thought New York, all fruits, vegetables, all meats, lentils, rice, wheat, rye, corn, and the entire concept of eating was beautiful. The concept of love and all the love stories... and... and I thought money... yes, money—with the president's faces on it—was beautiful, very beautiful.

The first bottle of beer had been consumed to its full extent and justified. I do not remember getting up and buying myself another beer. I simply do not. My head was spinning like an atom in a smasher, and my bladder informed the atom upstairs that it was going to explode any moment. Just one and a half bottles had knocked all the senses out of my switcher. I got scared. So I did a little praying to God and myself and tried to channel all the energy from different pressure points to my body to one focus, my knees, and, as I tried to recall some Iqbal for help in vain, I said, "You can do it."

My knees showed some strength and dignity, and my hips elevated my existence about six inches from the seat.

I stayed in that position for two minutes as if I had frozen in a snowstorm.

"You can do it," I repeated and fell back to where I had been two minutes ago. A line from Iqbal fleetingly came to me: *Only the warriors fall in the battlefield*. I felt a jolt in my head. The beer ice-skated inside my skull furiously and tried to seep out through the joints. I thought I had fallen from grace. My head spun in the opposite direction now, and a feeling of nausea overcame me. I was worried. I rose up with some effort and whispered, "You can do it, you can do it."

My memory was not mine, at least half of it. But the good news was that I was walking, walking towards the restroom, and nobody, not a single soul was bumping into me. No one was saying "I am sorry" or "pardon me" or "*excusez-moi*." For a moment I thought I was alone in the world. Then, as I had just thought of opening the door, it opened by itself. Actually, a man who looked like a carbon copy of Nixon was walking out. He saw my face and preferred to stand aside, making dubious room for me. I could not trust his face, and yet, hesitant, I slipped in. It was hard to walk with a spinning head. My bladder guided me to the urinal. I rested my head against the water pipe while I unzipped. The water pipe was as cold as the chilled beer. I took a piss and fell asleep, my head reclined against the pipe. But a man's laughter sent a tremor up my spine as it undazed me. His face looked extremely familiar, but before I could figure anything out, he was out of sight. I zipped up and began to walk out like one tries to come out of a quagmire.

Once again, a man opened the door just before I could touch the handle. The man facing me looked worried as soon as he saw me. My knees betrayed me as I passed him, falling like an eagle shot down.

"Are you okay?" I heard his concerned voice. Out of anger, fear, and shame, I refused to understand his language. I tried to get up, but the armies of will power had

been crushed. However, involuntarily, my hand reached for my pocket. The power of money, I thought, could only revive my failing spirit. It was as if my hand moved into a zone of void, a pair of cataract-stricken eyes searching in the dark. There was nothing. The money was gone, the entire wallet, with my mother's photograph, vanished. My hand groped for the slightest trace of money, helplessly. The empty pocket felt very tragic. I began to choke, then weep, and then cry hysterically. *Which president's relative could have stolen my money?* By now my body had converted into an elegant arc—the dome of a doomed mosque—from hip to head, with mourners and admirers around. I rested my head on the carpet and cried and cried.

I heard the same voice: "Are you feeling ill?" The man put his hand on my shoulder. "He seems sick, let me call the airport medical people."

Right then I heard another voice: "No! No, no, no... he's kissing his new homeland. He's happy; he's crying with emotions, I believe. I did the same ten years ago. Am I right, my new friend? He's not sick, believe me. He's kissing the holy land of opportunity. Hey, man! Welcome to America." The man delivered his speech with spark and passion, and left.

An older man, with a slight accent, bent next to me and whispered in my left ear, "Young man, you must love this fucking country. I love it too. Welcome, son. Whoever pays taxes, this country belongs to him."

My own howl reminded me of the sounds of unseen animals we used to hear coming from the edge of the city.

## *Ache*

**IF SHE HAD NOT LIVED** across from the store where I had recently started working I would have never have had the chance to notice her. Standing behind the register, I would watch her through the door and the grilled window as she walked up or down the 24th Street. The *bindi* on her forehead made her less likely to be from my side of the border, though I could've been wrong. I knew I had a knack for losing bets. After seeing her walk by I would grow less focused for the rest of my shift—making mistakes with customers' change. Agha Munawwaran, my boss from Isfahan, pointed out again and again a better way to count—he was a soft spoken, sweet man incapable of getting upset. I tried to tell him that the slip was not on account of my dislike for money. Rather, in response to something money could not buy. To make matters worse, I did not have very much of it. I considered myself lucky to have found work so soon, but I found it difficult to juggle a full load of classes and a part-time job. Even when I understood most of the lectures, the kind of English I heard took its sweet time to sink in.

I finally pointed her out to Agha one day and asked him if she ever came to the store. When he nonchalantly

replied, as if repressing a smile somewhere, *yes, she often did*, I felt discouraged. As Agha and I became more relaxed around each other, I pumped him for more information. He didn't have any. But he did offer one day that he found Indian women very attractive, the best, he said, making a tulip with his fingers, then kissing the tips. She was certainly older than me—something about her demeanor said so. She always seemed to be wearing a dark pair of pants and a red jacket with beige squares. If she was heading home, she would be carrying groceries. She took quick steps and her gaze did not wander, or at least not toward the store. Her family lived on the first floor of a two-story Victorian flat. The curtains were always drawn in the front bay windows and only rarely did I have the opportunity to witness a lit room, or catch a glimpse of a flitting shadow.

Soon I came to realize that at least two more people lived with her: an older woman—perhaps her mother, and a young man who looked roughly my age. He came to the store a few times while I was behind the counter. I tried to chat him up but he remained unresponsive and maintained his pensive, dignified coldness—oblivious to my bait of friendliness. He spoke Urdu with an accent. I once asked him where he was from but he asked me point blank why I wanted to know. I was speechless and felt humiliated. Perhaps he had sensed a typical Indian-Pakistani habit on display here: getting closer to the woman through her younger brother by buying him candy or story books. Or perhaps he was taking his anger on Miandad out on me. The humiliating experience did add to my knowledge of her being someone who was not primarily a Hindi speaker, though I had no way of finding out what she spoke as her mother tongue. Genuine curiosity turned into desire. I was dying to hear her speak, to savor her intonation and the cadence of her voice. I wanted to watch the movement of her mouth. Was she a Gujrati, a Tamil or a Malayalam speaker?

I hoped I would run into her so I could offer to carry her grocery bags. I am sure my mind had stolen this image from a movie. I prayed for her to come to the store to buy something so I could give her whatever she bought free of charge. I told Agha, pretending it to be a joke, that if she ever shopped here, he must allow me to not charge her, but subtract it from my paycheck. Of late, my boss had taken to egging me to assert myself and approach her. He was convinced she'd go out with me if I dared ask. I tried to explain to him that I had no courage when it came to speaking with women I was attracted to, but, I added, I would try when the moment beckoned.

Nothing significant happened for the whole next month. By then I had mustered enough courage to fake a run in a few yards from her house. I purposely nearly collided with her and said in Urdu, *mu'aaf kijiye ga*, but I doubted instantly if she'd even heard me. She didn't even notice me.

This failed encounter dampened my spirits. If I could see her once or twice a week, I realized I could live off her image for a few days without losing appetite or the desire to go to my classes. As each day passed, I began to feel more stricken. Strangely enough I regretted not having been engaged to Salma, my father's colleague's daughter, despite her parents' perseverance. That would have saved so much trouble, anxiety and time. I was attracted to Salma once it was revealed to me that the proposal was in the air. That would have given me enough reason to write her letters—even just the thought seemed romantic. Being the kind of person I was though I doubted I would have allowed myself to be distracted by someone I might never be able to ever talk to.

American elections were coming up and I was being initiated into the politics of the country. I knew very little about what the two main political parties stood for. Slowly but surely I found myself sucked into the sexiness of the American election process. It was during those elections that I watched George Bush Sr. suddenly stop whatever he

was doing to announce the death of General Zia-ul-Haq, the dictator president of Pakistan, in a mysterious plane crash. The American ambassador and another high level American diplomat were also among the high ranking victims of the crash. Vice President Bush referred to the General as his friend and that decided for me then and there that I was not going to be a Republican—the fact of being able to vote or not to vote did not even cross my mind. That week my fiance-to-be wrote me the strangest love letter one could hope for. The first few lines she wrote a few nice things about me, then half a page down, the tone changed to admonishment and concealed threats. She asked me to stay away from even the thought of marrying her—she revealed she was in love with another boy, *Yes!* She introduced him as a boy from her neighborhood, adding there was pressure on her to yield to her parents' coercion. She said she had no intention of ever marrying me or moving to America. The boy she loved played cricket seriously and, she believed, would join the national team some day soon. I could only feel relief.

Meanwhile a tall man came to stay with the family of my mystery woman across the street. Anand, the tall man, was friendlier than the other man in the house, and the first time at the store asked me my name, where I'd come from, and what I was doing in San Francisco, as he purchased his cigarettes.

By his second visit his friendliness had turned to an older brother type of affection due to our age difference. He was in his early thirties and taught film in a small town near Chicago. He would ask after my family in his sweetly accented Urdu on entering the store. He told me his father had been to Lahore before Partition. We learned through him that he and his host family across the street were from Madras. Also, he was not related to them. This bit of information gave me concern. His best friend since childhood had abandoned the family and was content to drive cab in New York—he had quarrels and fights with

his wife, and his own mother and brother sided with her. The woman I felt drawn to was his friend's wife, the old woman his friend's mother. The younger brother worked part-time somewhere and took classes at the City College of San Francisco. I was too young to tell whether I was sad at her husband's absence or happy.

My finals were going to start within a week and I was miserably behind. I asked Agha if I could take a few days off and whether he or Stewart could fill in. Agha showed understanding and told me not to worry. Stewart and I had become good friends over the last few weeks. He was funnier than Agha and I liked his irreverent attitude towards religion and American government. He made fun of his own people as well and didn't spare even the likes of Jesus or Jesse Jackson. He once had to explain to me why he kept referring to a middle-aged African-American man as Uncle Tom—which was different—he added, from a Peeping Tom, which I thought I was becoming.

Anyway, I caught the 48 Quintara bus going north and got off to take the underground Bart train at the 24th Street Station. I had barely begun down the stairs, when I spotted her at the very end of the escalator, moving closer. I slowed down and then froze, my eyes riveted to her face. She stared ahead. My hand moved up involuntarily and waved at her. The gesture demanded her attention. In the space of a split second, she half-waved back, then looked puzzled; as she then made an attempt to appear irritated at the uninvited intrusion, but she could not contain her baffled smile. But it was no nod of recognition. As she averted her eyes, I meant to shout: "I work at the Isfahan Grocery Store!" But I couldn't manage to peel it off my throat. First shyness, then despondency, crept over me as the escalator took her up and up and past me. It was in the state of heart-filled-with-sand that I took my English Speech final.

A sudden shuffling took place at the apartment I rented with four other people. Two Indians shared the big room, and a Nigerian and Iraqi shared the other room. I slept in

the large storeroom adjacent to the kitchen, opening at the other end to a balcony above the backyard we were not allowed use because it belonged to downstairs neighbors.

Both Indians spoke Telugu with each other and worked at an Indian restaurant. I addressed both of them as Jimmy-*Bhai* and *Babu*; The Nigerian's tribal name as I understood it was Chuku. His Christian name was Jerry. The other three addressed him either as *Hey Chief* or *Yo Chief* or Chuku, but I preferred Jerry. He was a senior at San Francisco State and had only one more semester to go. Amin from Iraq worked at a small pizza shop in the Mission named after Frida Kahlo. The Telugians addressed him behind his back as Mr. Frida or Mr. Kallu even though he was fairer than both of them. I was the youngest, the most shy or perhaps just unconfident.

There had been an ongoing argument in the apartment over the pile up in the kitchen sink and despite promises about cleaning schedules the piles refused to budge. Jerry and Amin moved out, getting a two-bedroom apartment of their own, plus Amin had found a blonde girlfriend. In their place two Yellow Cab drivers moved in, Amarjit Singh from Ludhiana and Bashir from Lahore, my hometown. Both loved to watch Hindi movies and play Gin Rummy.

One particular night I felt giddy all over. For the first time ever she had looked in the store's direction for a long minute and she looked again, halting momentarily, before she turned to climb the stairs. This indecision aroused me. I erected a variety of scenes in my mind, mostly from Hindi and Urdu cinema, scenes dealing with first meeting, scenes dealing with confession of love, even singing and hugging trees. It was deeply ingrained in me and that bothered me because most of it was so unreal and hokey. I came home that night, immersed in her and found my apartment latched from inside.

But before I could knock or bang Amarjit opened the door and motioned me to keep quiet. It turned out one of

them had brought home a hooker and she was charging very little, a mere ten dollars. The veins in my body began to swell. I had no intention of passing up such a bargain. A golden luminosity completely engulfed my vision. It seemed like an eternity, a short life in vertigo, mine. At the end of the day when I headed to my cubbyhole at the back of our kitchen, I felt like a passenger who'd gone to the railway station with excitement yet halfway down the journey he realized he had boarded the wrong train. It was painful to acknowledge but hard to deny that I enjoyed the ride despite the wrong direction. I woke up next morning with my flesh aching sweetly from head to toe.

I got off at 24th Street and heard a born-again Evangelical Christian man preaching out loud to the commuters. I saw Stewart sitting with his girlfriend in the Café La Bohème window. She rarely smiled, but when she spoke her voice was always soft. She also preferred to not straighten her hair, as was the vogue. Stewart smiled, but I had difficulty smiling back. I walked ahead with too much clutter in my head and wobbly legs. Agha was bound to get on my case. I could handle Agha, but seeing her would roil me. I thought to myself—*If she shows up today, I won't be able to look her in the eye.* I tried to tell myself I was being sentimental and real people in the real world worked differently. The heart has its needs and the body sometimes demands things like a raging elephant, I reasoned. But, no, something had broken within and I seemed unable to fix it.

Strange, but I failed to give wrong change to customers, but Agha did notice how downcast I was. He asked if everything was all right back home. I felt an acute need to talk to Agha and make a hard confession. Not only that I had slept with a hooker, I also felt I loved her. I even told her more than once. During the moments of seeing a beautiful naked body and soon entering her, fondling real flesh, I had forgotten the fact that four other men had been with her only recently. I also felt I had insulted the Indian woman across the street and my nascent feelings

for her. My weakness scared me. I wish Agha had noticed the words lodged in my mouth and pried them out with his fingers.

The semester came to an end. Surprisingly I did alright, no A's—but no D's either. But things back home took sudden turns and I could barely gasp for air. My father suffered a second heart attack and the doctors insisted that he get a pacemaker. I was asked to come back during the winter break. My mother sounded exhausted on the phone. I also received another letter from my father's friend's daughter explaining this time that there was never anything serious between her and the boy she had previously mentioned as her flame. She wrote she had been thinking about me romantically. At the end of the letter she said she still had a heart where I could write my name down. Suddenly the world seemed like a true replica of the kind of movies I had grown up with and disliked.

I decided to go back and perhaps never return, though I was not going to marry her. I told Agha about it and I told Anand and Steve about it as well. I had a four-year multiple visa and if things did not work out, I could always come back. Steve agreed. We promised to stay in touch. Agha advised me to come back and finish education. Anand showed up toward the end of my shift and hung around to converse. He liked to talk about the Partition and effects of colonialism on India and now Pakistan. I mostly listened since most of what he talked about went above my head.

Then, at the end of our one-sided conversation in English, serious-faced, he said in Urdu, lowering his voice, he wanted to buy a packet of condoms. I could not hear any sound. All I could muster was to ask what kind he wanted. He pointed to a blue packet. I had a feeling he didn't want Agha to know. I refused to take his money, and though he insisted, I said it was on the house. Agha watched me from the middle of the aisle where he was shelving cans of anchovies. Anand bade us goodnight and left, remarking, I should make an effort at reading history.

I lay awake that night for many hours unable to sleep. I could see their silhouettes entangled, I could hear his whispers, her moans. I could hear the bed squeaks punctuated by the hammering against my breast. I had never known her name. I had never heard her speak. She would probably never know a thing about my feelings for her. I tossed and turned.

I thought of getting up, knocking on her door and saying—I *have been in love with you for an entire semester and I don't even know your name and now I am going back to Pakistan perhaps never to come back. Even if you don't tell me your name, I'll remember you for a very long time.* I got up and drank some water. I was jolted to see the face of the hooker pop up before me. It disturbed me. Had I lied? Had I lied to myself? Do all truths have the potential to turn into lies?

I flailed. I finally fell asleep and remember cursing Hindi films before dozing off. But once inside the dream I caught myself walking downhill, a duffel slung over my shoulder as I turned to take one last look at the woman I was leaving behind, who now sang—in a very high-pitched, virginal squeak—a familiar song of parting: pleading with me to come back. But I could see the bus waiting for me at the bottom of the hill.

## *Gypsy Leaves*

*... and that inspires me to also count the gypsy leaves.  
I have kept a record not only of the deceased....*

Intizar Husain—*A Letter from India*

### 1.

**IT WAS A COLD WINTER NIGHT.** I had gone to an evening of Urdu poetry at the Chandani Restaurant to read some of my new poems along with other expatriates from Pakistan and India—living now in and around the greater San Francisco Bay Area. The expatriates from South Asia arranged those gatherings a couple of times a year. Agni had called personally, informing me of Faraz's arrival from Islamabad especially for the annual occasion. I had never been an ardent fan of Faraz, still I went, promising to share my recent work, some of which had been recently published without my consent—courtesy of friends—in the Fall issue of *Aag*, a complimentary copy of which the editors never bothered to send me, let alone any money. I only heard about my poems from friends over long distance phone calls. One of them said the poems were "quite

impressionistic," and another, "rich in metaphors with an irritating sense of displacement." I remember Imtiaz, then residing in Qatar, found them "erotic in a tragic way." *Have you been grazing lately, Habib?* I asked him. But of late, poetry was not coming to me, nor did I seem to be going to her.

Agni and I had a short fling a year back, and when we parted two weeks later, I felt as though something in me had snapped forever. The best thing for me would have been to cut her off completely, yet that was the only thing I could not bring myself to do. I could not even tell her to stop calling me. Besides, we had common friends and acquaintances, not to mention the literary circle. The worst still, when I could not see her, I could feel her, sense her camphor-like presence—sometimes around me, sometimes inside me.

As usual I was late, and entering the crowded hall I smiled sheepishly at Agni (as though I had been caught), who sat with her orange bindi and large kohled eyes next to a graying Ahmed Faraz, the poet of the youth. He was flanked by minor cronies on both sides. She averted her glance slightly to the young poet I had never seen before, as he stood reciting a poem whose words wafted quite sensuously, mentioning rain, wet leaves and maroon earth with restless worms, seeds parting the earth—the sloshing sound of wind knocking at the window glass, rattling the blue-edged frames, and a lone woman wandering restlessly from room to room inside a big, empty bamboo house desiring a stranger's gentle touch on her bare shoulders, the caressing of the breeze on her neck, and the stranger's lips on her ankles...

For a minute I thought Agni was speaking in my heart. I took an empty seat in the last row and tried to feel relaxed and not weighted down by the atmosphere. For a fleeting moment I saw myself sitting in the guest's chair, but I shook that thought quickly.

It was after the Sunday afternoon radio show Agni and I did together—as I was asked to fill in for Raja Aftab,

who had gone back to Hyderabad for the Eid—that our short affair ensued. I had nurtured a huge crush on Agni since I saw her the first time, at Ustad Sultan Khan's *sarangi* concert. Whether it was her piercing glance or the *alap* of the *raag* Malkaus that ignited my heart and mind, only God can tell. Agni hailed from Allahabad, and so did her husband. Both spoke very refined Urdu despite being post-Partition children and studded their conversations with couplets of Ghalib, Mir, Faraq and Faiz, Qasmi and Munir and many other poets. They had seemed such a happy couple, and soon, right before our very eyes, they grew apart like two rivers separated by an ever rising rock of fate. In fact, before I ever had the chance of knowing her, I had had the occasion—more than once actually—to have a small chat with her husband at an Indian restaurant in Berkeley, where I had found him lunching alone. On Agni's account, I was envious of him, even jealous, yet I liked the guy, admired his pleasant countenance, and was eventually sad for him. After they broke up, he moved up north within four, five months, getting a transfer by his law firm. In his place he left a rumor behind that someone, a woman, liked him up there.

After the third rehearsal at her producer friend's studio she offered me a ride since it had started to drizzle. Though I could simply walk home, as I had done the previous two times, I yielded to her offer, feeling—subconsciously—something between us had taken place, a spark, a silent dialogue, an exchange of the language that only eyes scribbled. Now when I look back it seems all the traces of those subtle hints have been erased, yet the obscure vagueness of those moments lingers on. Throughout the ten minute ride we both sat in an oppressive silence, but my mind was as much made up as hers. I decided to ask her in for a cup of Pakistani (*Indian?*) *chai*, and that is exactly what I did. She accepted readily, as though this was a play we had been rehearsing all along, and she knew her cues and dialogues to follow at the end of the ride. Once inside

my house my self-confidence soared, yet I waited for the right situation to tell her how much I felt attracted to her. At the end of our *chai*, instead, it was she who had said, "I like you a lot."

The image of a candle, as I looked at her then, rose before me, and instead of the circling moth, I saw smoke rising.

That at first had taken me aback, but I had calmed down and said, "I am attracted to you too, but..." and she had cut me off, saying, "I would like to kiss you."

I had moved near her and she had offered me her lips, the sweetest nectar—the taste made me forget the pain of previous breakups. Encouraged, and in ecstasy, and in need, I carried my begging bowl to all the four corners of her body. In my dare, I surprised her (I still remember the joy in her widened eyes) as her petals deepened in color and opened up to my taste buds. My sense of smell collected, forever, the essence of her fire as it etched its image inside my nostrils.

She had stayed the night. And then many more nights that followed. It felt as if she were the night I closed my eyes in. But, perhaps, we had come together ("*I am scared! Hold me,*" her words spoken during our first night would haunt me) without much thought, too soon, and with too much fire. The fear of falling in love so intensely with someone barely known had singed her ability to pause, take a stock of the situation, and proceed again—to love. After all she was going through her divorce and we never talked about it. Our love-making carried an electrifying intensity neither, it seemed, had known before. I had told her the next morning: *You are Fire, you are the Agni of my heart!* Instead of taking a time-out, she decided to quit the game, and withdrew from the immediate circle of my life.

"I don't want to turn into an ember. I need to breathe," she said.

I thought I understood her need for fresh air then.

"I am sorry if I have hurt you."

"Will you come back to me? I will wait."

She had looked at me, holding back the tears, then shook her head.

"I don't know."

I had watched her go, with a howl traveling inward. She had left her Indian *chai* unfinished. I drank it afterwards.

I felt like a tree burnt down by St. Ignatius.

The unfamiliar poet had finished, people were clapping, and I saw Agni getting up and then walking towards the podium to announce the next poet up. It was Hamida Rizwan, from Karachi, and whom some of my friends had nick-named *Karachi ka sohan halwa*. Whether she extemporized or read from memory was hard to tell. Being short, I was out of Agni's line of vision, and through a crevice made between the necks of people sitting before me I caught her glance, quickly, as she sat down again, searching in my general direction.

\* \* \*

*Rising, magical, high and high  
Falling, beaten, down and down.*

—Nizami

Everyone hovered around Ahmed Faraz during the interval, chatting him up and getting their copies signed. I walked to the lobby, where a few South Asians served *chai* and *samosas*. I got myself in the queue, which seemed to have started at more than one point, yet the inability to form a single, straight line, of mostly men, somehow, gave me a sense of security, as though I wanted to be shielded from danger I could not put my finger on. I got my *chai* and sought refuge at the far end of the lobby. I had barely lit a cigarette when I noticed a familiar face hurriedly headed

my way. Somehow I knew that the man, who could not be more than twenty-five, was not just walking off on some errand but looking for me. As I noticed a few single bills clutched in his right hand slightly ahead of his body, I recognized him and knew instantly that I had forgotten to collect my change.

“Your change, *bhai*.”

That is how I met him, the one with death in his eyes. Perhaps it was his honesty that compelled me to ask whether he was from India or Pakistan, perhaps I wanted to know without being direct if he were a Hindu or Muslim, too; maybe something in me wanted him to be Pakistani only, and perhaps it was because my self-esteem was at its lowest those days that when he told me he was indeed from Karachi, I was driven to ask him his name.

“Iqbal Ignatius Massih!” said he, smiling and walking away. Though I smiled back courteously, I was left with a bitter spit in my mouth. At first I tried to dismiss the feeling, acknowledging it as an over-reaction—Oh, come on, you’re being over-sensitive (politically correct you know) yet, come evening, I could no longer dodge the dart of guilt aimed at my conscience. I had not expected him to be Christian. Was it a reaction to how we were made to believe in the whiteness of America? I could not, it seemed, however unconsciously, allow a Christian to represent Pakistan, a part of me, however, ignored—and as more of that feeling pervaded my mind, I was a little ashamed of myself. The feeling oppressed me, eventually, immensely. I felt I needed to see him again to explain everything, stand under the confession-shower, and feel relieved. At the same time, however, I felt I was unable to stir, like a rock in the desert. As more time passed and my conscience began to nag me less and less, I became conscious of his extraordinary beautiful, hazel eyes surrounded by his absorbing dark skin. His face was apple-shaped, as we say in Pakistan. His features were sharp with a thin-bridged nose, and a set of pearly teeth gleamed from behind a pair of thin lips.

Once or twice, as I lay in my bed, tossing and turning, either lamenting the loss of Agni or some other woman I had spent some time with recently, or paying a price for a too-late-in-the-day cup of coffee, Iqbal's eyes would suddenly arise in my mind as though they had been there all the while, a pair of spies, tailing me all day long, and I would begin to question myself if: *Could I be a closet homosexual?* Perhaps I was attracted to men as well! That anxiety faded soon, however—even if not completely—as I realized that I still dreamt of women, felt clearly attracted to them, even to those who were in their fifties yet with enticing bodies; felt like falling in love with them every other week—masturbated recalling their faces, imagining them in my favorite positions—got in the habit of conversing with them during the imaginary act even if it mostly meant, *Oh baby oh love oh honey....* I felt, also, a strong pull towards women who were not attractive, but displayed an unmistakable serious, studious, thoughtful look, like a professor of a poetry class explaining verse and meter in the English language and how post-modernity had preceded modernity; how the progress of literature was circular, not linear; how Averroes was (*and was not*) the founder of hermeneutics—how, how, how... How *The Invisible Man* was, in a way, about me—how I, too, could have written Camus' *Fall*. How I am a gypsy leaf in the wind of Time.

My mind chained to those thoughts, I would check in a bookstore and pretend to read, hoping to pick up a woman there. It worked twice. I told them I was a poet, a trilingual one, remembering I hadn't written a decent line in over a year. I could not even decide if I wanted to write in English or Urdu. Eventually, I got bored with the game, the books, the authors, the readers. I failed, when the occasion arose, to carry on a literary conversation with them for more than two minutes. Marquez meant less and less to me; *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seemed rubbish, or almost, and a conspiracy to oppress me. Rushdie felt

like a co-opted idiot, only fit for *The New Yorker* and for Op-Eds. The dance with women kept changing and I kept stumbling. Yet I kept chasing after the mirage of not being alone (I missed my brother from time to time and accused *him* of his untimely death).

A few times it would be the kind of glasses they wore. Occasionally, I found myself attracted to slightly cross-eyed women, too. But that was extremely rare. Once or twice I imagined a harem, in a palace on the coast of Turkey, of flat-chested, red-haired Irish women. Certain men intrigued me too—the mongrel kind—but failed (*as if it were their failing*) to stir anything deep in me as I checked them out marching on their way to or from work on Market Street. From a voyeur with an intellectual bent, I had become a mere scopophilic. I wished a hand would close my eyes as a favor.

## 2.

I had just had a sudden, swift encounter with a woman who sucked me off for twenty dollars—I bargained and she dropped her price—under a palm tree, as I was cutting across Dolores Park at night. How did she know I was vulnerable and needy! Shouldn't she be nervous approaching the wrong person? (or the right person at the wrong time!) Did she just take a chance? I could have been a cop in plain clothes. I could have been a psycho on the loose murdering hookers. Heck, I could have *been*.... I was not doing great emotionally these days (I had called, twice, myself—from my own phone) and my work was a mess. I could not even remember when I had ceased being a word lover and become a money chaser, and though I knew I hated Hollywood, chain stores, and image bites, I kept gormandizing on them, as if I had chosen my own punishment. I often thought of giving everything up and

go live in Mexico with what little savings I had—pick up some Spanish, marry an Indian, and just try to chill out there. I was a wreck.

I zipped up, feeling lighter (as if the woman had swallowed my pain, even if temporarily), and veered around the hill in the park. I remembered I had once written a poem (in Urdu) about a lonely black woman, a panhandler, maybe someone like her, saying *Asslam-wa-alaykum* to a Hindu woman tourist from India. I had an urge to tell her about it, but the hooker was swallowed up by the darkness behind me. Was darkness swallowing her pain? Was Agni, too, giving me her pain as a life-time achievement award? Had I aged so much!? It was as I cut through the row of trees planted in the middle of Dolores Street that I saw a cab slowing down and then stopping completely a few paces as it passed me. It reversed. I thought the driver might need help with directions. The moment the driver's face came under the ghostly street light, I recognized the hazel eyes. I had no desire to run into anyone, but an artificial California smile teased my facial muscles.

"Remember me?"

"At the *mushaira*!" I nodded and shook his hand, reaching through the car window.

"Come, I'll drop you off."

"Arrey no, *bhai*, I'll walk. It's just a few blocks."

But he dismissed my attempt to wiggle out of his offer, and issuing two friendly clicks of the tongue, and motioning me—with the shake of his head—to come around the cab, he leaned to open the door. Dropping my resistance, I walked around to sit beside him. Right then I drew a complete blank and for the name of God could not remember his name. In order to overcome my unease at the sudden amnesia, I said, "So, what's up, big guy?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and, perhaps guessing from the direction I was heading, made a U-turn. Taking my hands out of my pockets, I rested them on my thighs

and asked casually, "Everything all right back home, man?"

He caught my reference, which I had intended only unconsciously, to the persecution of Christians in the Punjab, but it was difficult to tell from his smirk whether it was directed at what was happening to the Christians or the flatness of my tone.

"Oh *sh*—" I quickly looked at my hands in disgust, cursing the hooker under my breath for the sloppy job she had done. His gaze at my half-risen hands was short, abrupt—soon he looked straight, keeping his eyes on the empty street, ignoring my stifled invective. For some strange reason I knew that he knew the whole story, not to mention the obvious smell of my semen. The park was the hood for such encounters. Though embarrassed, I decided to not give a fuck about it.

"How's work?" he finally asked.

"It's all right. The Public Health sector is in a mess."

There was another moment of silence.

"Which way do I turn, *janab*?"

Soon he was saying good-bye to me. I tried to look into his eyes and found darker bags under them. And the eyes were blood shot.

"Been working long shifts?"

"One has to... one has to in this work, *bhai*."

"But why drive a cab?"

"Freedom, *bhai*. No boss, no supervisor!"

I saw a slave, running, with the illusion of freedom, tied to his shackles. Iqbal Ignatius Massih, my countryman, caged—for twelve hours a day—inside the moving metal box especially built for him, courtesy of General Motors or Ford.

"Be careful!" I said.

I gave him my phone number before we parted. That night I had my first anxiety attack.

He called me two months later to see if I wanted to have coffee with him at Muddy's Café. Agreeing, I jumped in the shower. Dressed casually, I walked out of the house to meet him. He was already there drinking his coffee when I arrived.

*"Assalamo-o-alaykum!"* he greeted me. I returned his greetings.

I went to get my coffee and returned to the table.

*"You know my mother's eye color is hazel also."*

*"There is no one in our family with this color,"* he said.

Interesting! Once again I could not tell if my comment had amused or annoyed him. I thought his smile was so deceptive it was already beginning to bother me. I was tempted to draw his attention toward the possibility of his being a bastard. I checked my cynicism, for I was, I realized, in desperate need to know someone who could open his or her wounds to me without any deliberation. The last thing I wanted to do was to befriend a chameleon. It was perhaps my way of putting my own loneliness in the back seat.

*"My name is Asad Alvi. Now tell me your full name one more time."*

*"Iqbal Ignatius Massih."*

*"Why do all the Christians in Pakistan have Massih at the end of their name?"*

*"Not all,"* he looked at me. *"Some would have Gill and Chauhan and what not."*

I knew instantly it was a stupid question. There was a brief silence that we both realized had to be broken soon.

*"How long have you been here?"*

*"I came here in '84."*

"Did you come here as a foreign student or...?"

"No, brother, *ammi* and *abba* and the children, we all came together. Our aunt, who had moved to the States in the early seventies, sponsored my *ammi*. *Abba* was near retirement, but he took an earlier one..."

"Oh, I see... So where did you live in Karachi?"

"Near the Cheelwali Kothi by Tariq Road..."

I knew that neighborhood quite well. Every year, I would go to Karachi to spend my summer vacations there with my relatives. I also knew that sculpture of the eagle that had once sat atop the big, three-storey house at the corner was no more, had fallen prey to the strong Arabian sea winds, fierce monsoons, and a general lack of care.

Talking to him was a bit nostalgic—he made me remember the city, its lanes and its Sadr Bazaar, Teen Talwars in Clifton, and the Jheel park, Gandhi Garden, Metropolitan, the traffic noise, the noise of the bustling crowds, the noise of the shopkeepers, Husain Di Silva Buildings each named after Mughal emperors, voices of friends and relatives, their faces, expressions, playfulness, meanness, jokes, pranks—in short, I revisited the whole film of my life spent in Karachi in a few seconds. In those few moments I relived the days and nights of my first love, who was my maternal cousin and went to Ayesha Bhawani school—the joys and agonies that had come with it, knowing we would never be married because she was older and would be married off much sooner than I would. How I always remembered the early suggestions of her breasts! Now, the bitterness was gone, leaving behind only a faint sadness.

"Will we forget each other... when we are married to different people and have children?"

"No!" she had answered. I could still see her lowering her head, shaking, smiling. Her voice in my memory shook me from time to time, but less and less now.

I felt the need to tell Iqbal what Karachi meant to me, a visitor from Lahore. It was the image of Karachi being

modern and western that pulled me to the Arabian Sea every year or so. The sight of women in skirts gave me the illusion of being so close to the modern world though I could not yet enter it. The sight of navy officers and sailors made me think somehow Karachi was connected to Normandy, not Sindh. I would write letters to my friends back in Lahore in my less than cohesive English believing it would excite them the same way my auntie's letters from Los Angeles excited me. Karachi was a mirage that I would chase for a month or two and then return to Lahore's earth. Some of the relatives I had in Karachi lived a ratatouille of very western or shall I say modern—even bourgeois—life style.

Looking back, I can see how Iqbal's Karachi had wreaked havoc with my life. The mirage I wasn't able to chase down in Karachi has continued to allude me in San Francisco as well. Maybe I should have stayed back in Lahore, and been contented with its dilapidated Tollinton Market and Charing Cross and Lawrence Garden. But all have since then vanished, either effaced or Islamicized.

But after riding the memory roller-coaster, I was sure that, in the end, I belonged here. However fucked up my life seemed to me these days, my life was here. Pakistan was the country of the past. San Francisco was my city. With my mother's death five years ago in Lahore and father's ten years ago in Karachi, my remaining ties with Pakistan were cut. It was easy to lose sight of that, but I had to remind myself: I was not a rooted tree but a breakaway leaf. I had not visited Lahore for the last ten years and had not even bothered to reply to Aqeel's wedding invitation. I had been writing a story set in a new narrative, a different story whose characters had nothing to do with my past. My characters had no face yet, lacking in manipulations.

And yet there was something powerful, pleasant and disturbing in his jaundice tinged eyes and stricken face and the way we sat facing each other with our coffees and talked, comparing life here and there.

I was connecting with him unlike I had with other friends, both Americans and South Asians. His warmth made me realize the coldness of my American friends and even myself. He reminded me of Karachi and the dark and skinny youth of my auntie's neighborhood near Khalid Bin Waleed Road. I could suddenly see myself running with a tennis ball, jumping in the air and throwing the ball at the lanky batsman on the other end, convinced it was not I, but Imran Khan of Lahore visiting wrath upon the minions of Karachi.

Why had I given so much power to this stranger all of a sudden? Was he powerful or I weak? Was it he who had the might to crack the shell of my lies? But what lies? I could see a can of worms opening. When you are venerable, can anyone take a mighty swing at your shell of lies?

I realized, however, that a lot had to do with him being a Pakistani, yet we seemed to be headed in different directions, the way he spoke about his roots, and listened to me reluctantly uttering my discomfort with my roots. I remembered how once I had lied about my mother being French who left me with my father. The way he described what he liked and missed about Karachi, and what he liked and did not like about San Francisco, and how I was rather glad of the choices I had made, the culture I had come to adapt (he admitted he could never eat pork and go down on a woman and I did not tell him that I loved doing both), all those things excited me in an uncomfortable way and at the same time left, though I sensed that as each moment passed, a bitter taste in my mouth.

"Are you going through a period of identity crisis?" I finally asked him.

He looked at me as though I had dropped a pinch of salt on his wound.

"You grew up in Pakistan not being able to identify with the direction the country was crawling to." I spoke again.

"I have more difficulty," words came out haltingly from his lifeless lips, "coming to terms with the materialistic culture here. I feel like I am owned by the chains here."

"And you don't think you and I felt chained in Pakistan? *Bhai*, chains are everywhere. It is how you get used to them and make the best of it." I said.

"For some things perhaps, sure. But it is not what holds people together. It is not the chains there. Here, it is what defines you and people don't seem to be bothered by it—loving the product and feeling proud of it. I know I am not finding the right words. I can't explain it."

I didn't think he knew that I understood what he meant. I was partly playing the devil's advocate and partly I was angry at his inability to make this place his home, bad or worse. Come now, people even live under occupation and apartheid—they don't hate the place and run away—they hate the system and fight against oppression.

"Well, with freedom comes the option of being able to make right choices most of the time. You must take responsibility if you continue to take wrong steps," I said.

"Sometimes a wrong step can land you inside a pothole and unless someone lends you a hand, it's the pothole that's your new permanent home," he laughed.

"Why don't you go back if you think you could be happier there?"

"You can't go back. I can't go back to Karachi. It is not the same city, I hear."

"Well, I can't go back either, but I have made the effort to call this place home and I love it. Come on, you can get laid with a different woman every month. Okay, I am joking only. But really, you can date a Jew, a Christian, a Hindu, anyone and it's not anyone's business. You just have to...."

"I agree but it is not that easy for everyone. There are always people who fall through the cracks. Those cracks can be pretty deep for an outsider."

"That's the issue. You have to stop feeling like an outsider," I said smugly.

"I can't help it," he said. "You remember Munir Niazi's shair: *jis shehr mein bhi rehna....*"

"...uktaa'e hu'e rehna." I provided the rest.

We laughed and sipped our coffees. I looked around suddenly, aware that there were people around us, but I was relieved since no one seemed interested in our conversation. Most had their own loud chatter floating over ours. I looked hard into his eyes.

"Is that why you drink?"

His look was blank at first.

"And shoot?" I added.

Then his face grew painfully grim. I could smell his stench, the stench of alcoholics, every time he opened his mouth. I wondered if he'd ever been to an AA meeting.

"I..." he paused. "That's not the problem though."

"But drinking at work, and driving on top of that can be a problem."

He laughed a short laugh. I wondered if he still had his license.

"I know how you feel, but perhaps you yourself are, like the rest of us, partly to blame."

"No one is blaming anyone, Asad *bhai*."

"Well, you seem to be..."

"I am sorry if I gave you that impression."

"Let's leave it."

Our coffee was now going cold.

"The mechanical life of people here is overwhelming," he began. "Either I feel suffocated here, or the only person in a gigantic hall of emptiness."

"Well, do you have a girlfriend? Or—boy..."

He smiled weakly and shook his head.

"I had a girlfriend. We broke up about a year ago."

"I am sorry to hear it." I gathered from his voice he was still hurting.

"One year is a long time. You need to move on."

But he went on a tirade of how the women in America were heartless, insensitive, materialistic, only after sex, and change men like they were used cars. The comparison made me laugh, but it only antagonized him further. I wanted to slap him across his face and tell

him to shut up. I tried to calm him down. But he was on a roll.

"Their culture is so empty, Asad *bhai*, in fact, they have no culture. They need to learn from us, our poetry, music, manners, culture..." His sentence trailed off into an unconvincing giggle.

"Iqbal, even *I* as a Muslim felt suffocated *there*, and you...." I was just plain irritated.

"It has nothing to do with religion, Asad *bhai*, it has to do with culture. It has to do with society, how a human being treats another, how the neighbors come to your help, what in essence a person's priorities *are* in life."

We had, sooner than I had wished, reached a point of divergence. I guess the fault is partly with me as I failed to understand him—his unease, his anxiety, his pain, from that point on (for it was clear that he was throwing rocks at my glass palace), and the level of our conversation began to nose-dive before our very eyes.

As we chatted on, before I left, about movies and TV shows of our childhood, and the sensational cricket matches with India, I knew we were simply bartering in decoys.

#### 4.

I lost nineteen thousand dollars in the first five minutes that fateful morning. The stocks I owned in a San Francisco-based internet company were splitting the next morning, and I had placed an order of one thousand shares. Splitting, it rose to 162 the moment it opened (a late night news report had added an unexpected charm to the company and I didn't know) where it locked my one thousand shares, and by the time I sold my shares, that is in the next five minutes—at the market price—it had dropped to 98 for an uncanny reason (but some blamed the real

estate sector). I could not believe that I had lost virtually all the savings I had accumulated in the last two years. Sitting in front of my computer, staring at the glittering, blinking symbols and quotes of various trading companies change colors, I felt my face aging, like in a sci-fi movie, the skin and padding underneath melting from its own internal heat. I could have waited it out (as many others must have had done), but I had been in a very vulnerable state of mind and had not been making well thought-out, rational decisions for the last few weeks. I must have sat frozen facing the screen for many long minutes with a numb mind. I remember first fearing that I was going to have a heart attack, but was soon aware a mild paralysis attack had seized me. I thought "*I might be in a nightmare.*"

I began to hear the traffic sound again at some point. A screech of a car coming to a halt. I seemed to be participating in a hop-dance in two virtual worlds of reality. It briefly brought back the memory of an LSD experience, the day I came close to understanding infinity, which seemed to metamorphize now into a never ending archway of pain.

Though I gradually recovered from the deep freeze, I had no desire left to breathe, stir, blink, let alone go to work that morning. Had I not been stunned into near death, I might have tried to cancel my order, though, I realize now it was a second too late.

It was as though my hand yielded to an inner force and reached the phone, dialing a number I thought I had forgotten. A coy, female South Asian voice—not Priti's (Agni's real name)—answered uncertainly, and responding to my morose voice, informed me that Agni had sublet her apartment before heading off to Karachi. I thought I misheard her. So she repeated it for my benefit. Suddenly I remembered something. For the last few years but one, I had been maintaining a diary of fictional dreams, dreams which never came to me, or at least occurred only partially, but upon writing I embellished them with all sorts of twists and turns that pleased my

fancy. I took out the notebook and after flipping through pages found the page where I had entirely made up the dream in which Agni asks me to come to the mesmerizing greenery of Karachi with her. Although I inform her that Karachi is a desert, she insists the city is famous for its palm trees and lakes. On the second page, we eventually go there, and one day as we are rowing a boat up the river that cuts through the city, crocodiles attack me, not her, and I fight for my life. The rest of the page was blank. I recalled that the flow of my imagination, then, had abruptly ceased.

\* \* \*

I brought home a young brunette, a sort-of-college student/part-time hooker with dark eyes and a tan and was humping her from behind on the edge of a couch, trying hard to keep my gaze fixed on the poster of Mohenjodaro ruins (courtesy of Pakistan tourism) hung on the wall, when I felt a severe pain shoot in my chest first and then a similar pain travel up my left arm. In my humping, I began to gasp for air. I lost my balance and fell stiffly on the couch. The sort-of-college student stayed where she was, doggy-style, giggling but annoyed, thinking, perhaps, I was pulling a stupid prank—however, she soon caught me fighting for my life. Within a minute a raging fire ignited inside me and I was howling. I only vaguely remember her rushing to the phone.

When I regained my senses, I was at the hospital in the emergency room, and the doctors assured me that the danger was over. I was transferred a few hours later to a room I shared with four other patients suffering from different ailments. The sort-of-college student had saved my life I realized, for she could have just as well panicked, and, afraid of landing herself in jail, simply disappeared.

I was grateful to her, yet I was nervous asking about her from the medical staff. How would they know? How would I explain? It began to depress me.

A day or two later I learned that the area of the heart where a heart attack occurs becomes permanently damaged, dead. The heart from then on has to live with a set of expired muscles. I was made aware of this by a polite professional. Perhaps some memories are nothing but a tapestry of dead muscles. But it would have been better if memories of Agni, and of my maternal cousin too, were buried in and around those muscles. I wished the blood in my heart could course through without even touching that ruin. However, the more I recovered day by day, the more I thought about my cousin in her adolescent years, about her dark, sensitive eyes, her frail torso, her careful manner of almost tip-toeing. Her non-accessibility was beginning to pain me and I was afraid of my weak heart. I wanted to recover and start afresh, putting all losses and gains in the trash basket. I wanted a clean slate. *Will I have one, I asked, Just once? Will I?*

It was not as if I had become attached to the hospital for the care and comfort it had offered me for a week (not to mention the bill), rather it was the idea of going home. As I was helped into my street clothes this scared me. I knew my loneliness was waiting for me at the door of my Dolores Street apartment.

I think for the first time in a long, long time I longed for a sibling, or siblings, but what a hopeless longing it was! It only reminded me of the death of my brother—his funeral, the grave, the whole cemetery we had to pass through to get to his own grave.

The nurse called a cab for me. He walked me to the elevator, and both of us waited for it to stop at our floor. I could not tell if I felt better or worse. I avoided meeting people's gaze, even as they seemed to greet me.

Then, as though in slow-motion, I raised my eyes, registering the front of a stretcher appearing from the right

end of the gallery, introducing a man's head—his eyes closed—then the rest of his body under a white sheet.

The stretcher bearer turned to where we stood—as though we were waiting in a mourning vigil. And there was Iqbal's face—with drips journeying into his skin. The few seconds that it took for the stretcher to reach us seemed to have traversed eternity. His dark face was ashen. I was torn between calling his name and silence. He slowly opened his dazed eyes and I believe they momentarily met mine as he was taken away. He did not recognize me. Or *did he*? Heroine overdose? Nervous breakdown? Paki bashing? Loneliness?

The elevator arrived, the doors (reflecting the distorted me) opened, and we entered. The cab outside the hospital lobby waited. As the driver got out to open the back door, I recognize his unmistakable Punjabi face. The Forces of Nature had provided a fresh replacement for the defeated Iqbal. I thanked the nurse for his kindness and the cab took off. Once on the main road, the driver tried to break the ice by asking, "From Pakistan, are you?"

I shook my head, meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror, and returned his disappointed smile. "I wish. No, I am from India."

"Speak Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi?"

I shook my head again without the smile this time. "No, no, no. I am from Tamil Nadu, Madras. We speak Tamil there, not Hindi."

Embarrassed, the smile vanished from his face. The soft seat was ready to envelope me and I tried not to think of Iqbal. The car drove on as if it were taking me over the cliff, and I began to prepare for the inevitable.

## *When Man Sleeps*

**CALM AS THE TURQUOISE WIND** over the Pacific waters, I sit in a trendy, trifle over-priced, café—'A Clean Well-Whited Place.' I venture here mainly to relax and sip my espresso—to ponder, to cogitate and forget. A place of illusions to gather the rust of my stagnant dharma. Under the gaze of soft lights at a small round table in the company of strangers, it occurs to me that I—a mute witness—am traveling through a unique zone, a world slipping through the cracks of words: like in a dream.

Everything appears alarmingly normal I must confess, and people frighteningly at peace—undisturbed, unruffled, as if asleep. This calm, however, frightens me, and I feel an urge to shout, something—anything. But of course I don't. Perhaps I can't. Have I become prey to civility?

A friendly, hard working Mexican couple of European descent owns the cafe. Their lineage can be traced in the kind of food they serve: Greek salad, Mediterranean platter, Sicily plate. Next to Zapata hangs a photograph of a white man and a woman; a little distance, above the grinder, is the Pope, and to its right Cantinflas.

All the actors—I mean the workers here—are young white women. Except for the dishwasher. I think he's Cuban,

or Salvadoran, or Costa Rican, maybe even Nicaraguan. In any case, I howl, silently, *Viva Castro!*

The women who work here, though it's strictly a matter of taste, are very attractive—beautiful, their curvaceous yet slender shapes please the eye. That, I believe, is good for the business. The place is always packed, especially in the evening. I can't decide whether this place adds to my nostalgia or kills it.

I like the music they play: Shahram Nazeri, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Los Van Van, Hamza al Din of Numibia.... When a worker puts on some *qawwali* music, I tense up, sensing people seem to acknowledge me just a tad more, as if *I'm* the *qawwali* that's being played. I observe people carefully, turning it into a fun game because—I assume—they don't know it. But, then, I suspect, some of them must be observing me too. It's like hide-and-seek. It's mostly quite pleasant here except for when a street person imposes himself on us—uninvited—and asks for alms. The owner, thank God, neither likes, nor tolerates it. That's when the dishwasher is dispatched to the scene and he tells the pan-handler to leave. Normally, I must concede, Mr. Panhandler complies.

Cafes are very popular in San Francisco. They form a life style here: Café Culture. Like the boats in the veins of Venice; or the brothels in Amsterdam. People café-hop here, never forgetting to carry a book with them. I've been carrying *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for the last four months. It seems like every fifth person I encounter is reading this book, like we're all in one enormous Solitude Book Club without knowing it. In San Francisco, people speak of writers with reverence, describing them often with metaphors, allegories and allusions, or twisting clichés into a labyrinth of de-meaning simply to get to the point. One gets to hear poesy of this kind: "*Then Henry Miller came into my life....*" Or, "*Ah! Kafka crawls in my vein....*" Or "*Rush*" and "*Die,*" deconstructing Rushdie.

People stop and chat with you if they recognize a book. "Hey, it's a great book, man!" And if you like the person

you ask, "Ah, you've read it?" And if the person hasn't walked away yet he or she admits: "Yup, long time ago, when I was in ninth grade."

Someone at the counter has put on Flamenco music—I think it's Paco de Lucia. I love those minor chords, melancholy dripping from the strings like honey. Suddenly—I don't know why—Pakistan comes to mind, yet I'm not able to recollect anything concrete. Instead, I nibble on my cheese cake. It's delicious and expensive, but I like it and I can afford it. I think I'll try the carrot cake. The red-haired waitress yells out a name: "Pablo!" meaning Pablo's food is ready. This overwhelms me—I am impressed. I like the entire system, and the concept behind it. It's not like Pakistan, where nowadays you can't trust others even with your own meal. It's not like Ethiopia, where there's no food. Or Bangladesh, where people are too weak to eat, metaphorically speaking.

I'm happy here—make good money, save some too. And I love to travel as well. Not like Ibn e Batuta, making an ass of himself in Hindustan, or like Marco Polo, who never got to see the Great Wall. But for fun's sake. Or more for the sake of the idea of fun.

I pay four hundred and fifty bucks for my room in a nice Victorian flat with bay windows. One of my roommates is French, the other a Swede. Albert the Frenchman and I try our best to impose our cultural superiority on each other: He has his revolution, I my eternity. Impressionism vs. Sufism. He shakes his Proust in my face, I wave Ghalib, and so on. Not too long after I moved in here, the golden Swede, Ingrid, and I found ourselves intricately tangled in bed. *Monogamy*, she confided one night, *isn't for me*. I responded, *it isn't my forte either*. Though I don't like to admit it, she has brought fragile whiteness to my life. A milestone on the road to assimilation. It has been depressing for her to learn of her country's role in the Iran-Iraq war. But for all those Nobels and free sex, I say, give the Swedes two thumbs up. My soul-searching Rumis mistook me for

an Indian during the roommate interview, but by the time they realized their miscalculation—that I wasn't related to Gandhi and had never bathed in the Ganges, the landlord had already cashed the check. *Bingo!*

Since then both of my whirling Rumis have complimented me, on occasion, on the finest Pakistani hashish; it's the best we've had, they say. Every time I pay my rent, I can't help thinking that a family of ten can survive for ten months in Somalia on it.

Back to the café. Sunday nights. Free live music, right here. I see a musician getting ready to play his trumpet. People are excited, but they act blasé. The trumpeter is heavy, round-cheeked, around fifty. Black, but not *black* black. Women love to love musicians, and men musicians love to be loved. Now he places the music sheet on the stand and dusts and shines his trumpet. People nod to him and he nods back to some, selectively. *Howdy, howdy, howdy!* Nice tits! *Howdy!* Almost all the customers are white except for a handful like me. But we behave like them. I spot two handsome black men with white women, the model-type, one to my right and one to my left. No black women here. The big man caresses the first note, and I am reminded of the angel Israfel, in the Koran, the ear-deafening announcer of the doomsday. I can picture him saying, with a wink, O yes God-ji, I get it, I get it! The time has indeed come, *ho ho ho!* I will now *ha ha* end the world in *D-for-destruction-totally-flat-like-a-chapatti—Major, Sir!*

The *Solitude* in hand, I squint my eyes when I think someone's staring at me, as if I know the piece. I am familiar with the titles of some of the pieces and the names of their composers, it comes in handy when one gets into a discussion about music. Oh shit, another street person has just walked in. He'll spoil the music! Suddenly I don't feel safe anymore and I'm alert and cautious. The beggar, the damn fool, heads towards me as the trumpeter plays *ta dhin ta dhin ta dhin* as a matter of principle I don't ever give out change *tut tut tutta thaaee* he smells my thought and

stops two tables short *tri kiti dhun tri kiti dhun* the young blonde man at the table turns to the painting of a fish on the wall *taka dhin ta taka dhin dhin* it's not Picasso's *na dhin na dhin dha dhaee* the blonde man has no change surprise surprise *na dhir dhin na na dhir dhin na* empty pocket he conveys sorry buddy *dha dha dhin dhin nanana* the beggar whispers something *tut tut thae tut* the man hands him a cigarette *tut tut thae tut* he asks for more *thae thae tut thae* the blonde man is generous he hands him another cigarette *ta dhin ta dhin tri kiti dhun tri kiti dhun dhun dhun*.

The musician is spitting a mixture of air and saliva inside the trumpet, harder and harder, like he'll never get another chance. His glistening cheeks have ballooned beyond reason. I want to slide a pin through them. With that thought, I want to laugh, but, alas, I know, once again, it's improper. I'm being watched, oh yes, I know I know. Just when we, the customers, are beginning to feel antsy and annoyed at the pan-handler's prolonged presence, the dishwasher is dispatched. To our relief.

"I telled ju, *didn't I*, not to bug the customer?"

"Hey, bro! I ain't buggin', only beggin', man."

Our little Cuban pushes him a bit. In return, the beggar smiles, while barring stained teeth of resistance. The worker applies the wisdom of repetition.

"Hey, man, don't push me, man," the beggar protests. The pusher dismisses the protest and pushes again. "I said, *don't push me*, you deaf or what?" But, it's precisely the push what he gets.

"Fuckin' wetback, go back to your fuckin' Mexico!" The pushed one uses his last card.

"Ju fucking monkey, ju go back to Africa. I was burn here."  
*Viva Castro!*

*Burn, born, burnt.* I feel nervous on hearing his thick accent. Although, people in San Francisco are fascinated with foreign accents, not every accent makes it to the New York Times best seller list. Seems I have the kind of accent that lets me sit out here dirtying the dishes, not washing

them back in the kitchen, but who decides these things? Still it's always interesting to see two minorities clash out in the open. Once the street person has been pushed out, now harassing an orange-jacketed, back-packed tourist, the atmosphere inside grows relaxed. Peaceful as the sand at the bottom of the ocean.

I glance at a young couple by the window, they're looking out, up. The night is tender and the moon, like in Neruda's ode or in Faiz's couplet, full. In fact, it's not the full moon night, but it helps a bit if one thinks it is. More romantic that way. I'm half way done with my cake, my delicious little cheese cake. I want to get a refill, but there's a long line. Paintings hang on the walls of this cafe. The style I can't describe—perhaps it's café-ism. People ogle these paintings with discernment. Some laugh too—as though catching the humor beneath the colors—but always with admiration. Everybody in this city, in one way or another, is an artist. Then, by the grace of God, every third person is a writer, too. Most are reincarnations of Bukowski or Carver. Most have an unpublished manuscript or two thousand pages of daily journal. Many, too, are poets. Various cafes hold poetry readings, the atmosphere is always very friendly—anyone can pass for a poet, anything for poetry. It's good for art, it's good for business.

I hear a siren. It's not of war but a police car. It's a small matter—it's important to maintain peace—it's the true duty of the system to protect one's wealth from someone who doesn't have it. Everyone looks to the window as a police car bullets by, it's lights spinning. In a few seconds the sound disintegrates like smoke in the polluted air. It seems the trumpeter is mimicking, oh yes mimicking the sound of the siren. Suddenly he decides to rest his cheeks, and smiles; we all clap, and now he gets up to accept alms, his rightful tip, turning his straw hat upside down. I donate two quarters.

He reclaims his seat. Holding her glass of burgundy, a woman of forty-ish struts up to him and chats with

him. This touches him profoundly, it appears to me, and I believe I would like him to scratch his crotch just as I catch myself scratching mine. But my hand stops as I become conscious of the act. As she sits down she knocks over his trumpet with the touch of her toes. We all hear the clatter, as the trumpet skates away; their hands reach out, at the same time, and their heads collide.

*"Oooooeee... Aaaaaeeeeee ...."*

The man finally clutches the instrument by its neck and sits it on the stand, disdainfully, holding the trumpet at fault, gesturing to the woman, *hit's awl right, dear, naw big deal, only an hinstrument. Please 'cept hits 'pology.*

The musician laughs at something, then laughs harder, jerking his head, as if trying to shake off something from his memory. Just then I remember my dream from last night. Or the night before, as it unwraps itself fold by fold. In a bright deserted alley, I see myself attacking a man, hitting a faceless person with a baseball bat, striking his head, killing. The person shrieks, yelps, howls, cries, his skull cracks. The blood appears, as he falls on his knees in slow motion, hitting his head on the street. Hands joined, he begs me to stop, but his voice doesn't reach me. His blood gushes on to the ground, turning into a red mirror. I stare at him stolidly as he dies—going limp like a sack of sand. And I realize that I'm dreaming a dream within a dream of another dream. I witness death as calmly as possible. Without guilt, remorse, or anger. Or pity. In short, I feel nothing. When I sleep, I believe, my conscience sleeps too.

Another scary looking street person walks in. I immediately recognize her from the side-walks of my neighborhood. She's among the most memorable fixtures here—she's weak and pale, but her deathly paleness doesn't show on her night skin. She's somewhere between thirty and fifty; her body'll die sooner than she. She's glued to one spot, frozen, as though she's a painted protest on a movie billboard. It seems she's hounding for an easy target.

Her eyes, I notice, glow red as if she sleeps in a furnace. We look at her, nervously, annoyed, a bit scared. I stop breathing too in a comradely way. She's fit her fists inside her pockets. The image of a small "gun" inside one of the two pockets emerges in our heads. The sound of people twittering comes to a comic halt. I hate situations like these. Dying in a place like this in a senseless shooting is not why I left Pakistan. I hate being caught between the black and white world. I stop corroding my cake, not willing to take any chances, for the sight of the cake might attract her, like a fly.

I think of God, *Allah*, *Ishwar*, and beg for mercy, protection, *please please please!*

She's the center of attraction and, hell, she knows it. Damn! She knows it for she represses a mean smile. *Bitch! You mean b—* She charges in the musician's direction. Oh, he's not gonna like it, but thank God, it ain't me. The musician and his friend show their concern by staying too calm. She halts and quickly holds her hand out, her open palm a begging bowl. The two at the table jerk back, looking at her dark, empty hand. Quickly, their eyes, full of fear, shift to the mysterious bulge in her other pocket.

"Spare me some change for food, sir, miss?"

The fat man carefully examines the lump in the pocket once again. Helpless, the seated woman turns to the musician like the Israelites to Moses.

"Could you, please, sir, ma'am, spare a quarter... a dime... a nickel... a pen?" She's distracted by the tip-hat.

The blood shoots to the dark man's eyes; we know he's had it. "Run along, girl—ain't got nothin' here for you—and don't you be lookin' at ma hat, okay? It's *mine* and I worked ma ass off for hit."

She stands like a twig, unmoved by his passionate speech, as though she's heard better. I notice the dark man's adam's apple move, glistening in the dark of his throat.

"You're botherin' customers, kid, one don't need to be a rocket scientist to see that." In a different situation this would have earned him laughter, a clap, even a standing

ovation, but now he might be playing with fire, with his life. The lump is still there. The short-necked owner of the cafe rushes to the scene. I expect her to pull the gun out and *Bang! Bang!* with a *You fucking foreigner!* He grabs her by the arm and pulls her away. I guess she's decided to not kill him. She's weak and cooperative. Perhaps time has taught her to not resist. She's learned to like peace too.

"Come on, please, spare me a penny, will you?" she delivers her last lines as she's carried off the stage.

The musician writes her off with the wave of his hand. Air begins to travel in our lungs again. The owner escorts her out to the world and scolds her. *You're the sinful Eve. Don't enter my Paradise again.* I think of the missing dishwasher. Will he get fired now? We all feel relaxed. The scary, red-eyed woman presses her nose against the big window glass and stares at me like a ghost. Of the dead man in my dream? I squint my eyes to see her better. I realize my stupidity. I notice her trembling lips, a flutter in the darkness; even her teeth don't produce a glint. She seems to be saying, "It ain't fair," or "Can I have a tiny piece of your cake, sir?" Before I can take my eyes off, I catch myself mumbling: "No, you cannot, never, ever, have a bite of my cheese cake. And now will you please fuck off? I didn't come to America to feed the likes of you."

People feel relieved, they revert to normalcy. An extremely sexy looking woman exclaims, "Jesus Christ!" to the man who's started pressing his lips onto her neck. Rolling his eyes behind thick, greasy lenses, Mr. Dracula moans, "A fucking loser!" in solidarity. I stare at the woman's long, white, almost bare thigh and feel a royal erection. Then I go back to my cheese cake. A woman at the counter puts on a nice piece of music: Brazilian Jazz. Black Orpheus? It cheers people up, makes them happy. Life suddenly seems a never-ending carnival of the mind, in the mind, for the mind. It is once more like a dream.

Once again I say *Thank you God, thank you Allah, thank you Ishwar, thank you thank you thank you*. I feel like Yasser Arafat, frothing with gratitude.

Nobody likes disruptions, troubles, tragedies, calamities, wars. We like peace, love, sex, business, trade, prosperity; we like cafés, music, art, poetry, with or without rhyme. Or meter. Or reason. We like sleep, any time of day; we like dreams, any length.

**MOAZZAM SHEIKH** was born in Lahore, Pakistan. He is a librarian at the San Francisco Public Library and teaches at City College of San Francisco. He writes and translates fiction from Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi and English. His stories and translations have been published in USA, Canada, England, India, Pakistan and Nepal. In 2004 he edited the critically acclaimed, *A Letter from India: Contemporary Short Stories from Pakistan* (Penguin, India). He is one of the founding members of *Another Subcontinent*, a website about South Asian society and culture at: <[www.anothersubcontinent.com](http://www.anothersubcontinent.com)>. He lives with his wife and son in San Francisco.



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—Amritjit Singh, Langston Hughes Professor of English, Ohio University

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