

HUMERA AHMED

JEHANGIR HOUSE
and Other Stories



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S t o r i e s M a t t e r

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*In memory of
my sister Sarosh and brother Salahuddin*

We miss you

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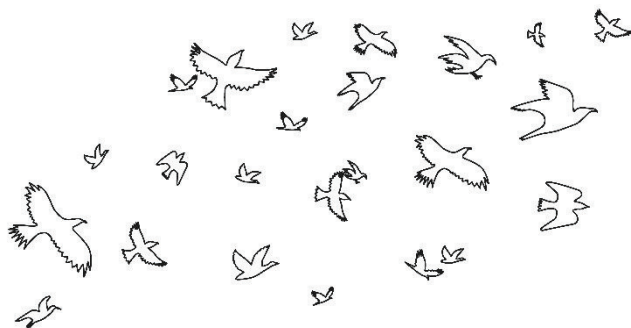
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- 1) Jehangir House - Literature Alive British Council Journal
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- 13) The Missing Bracelets- Indus Women
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- 16) A Requiem For Mahboob Manzil- Statesman
Festival Issue
- 17) Post Office Clerk Becomes Guava- Statesman
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- 18) My Grandfather's House- Illustrated Weekly

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THE FALLEN IDOL

On approaching Sunrise apartment, I saw a small crowd gathered around the ambulance which conveyed Sohail's body from the hospital. The compound of the building had a most sullen atmosphere. He had died at midnight from a massive cardiac arrest.

An anguished Salma was being helped down by someone probably a neighbour. Zaid, our brother and the ambulance attendant lowered the shrouded body from the van. A number of eager hands quickly grasped the stretcher, immediately taking it into the lobby and into the lift to their flat on the seventh floor. Salma however just stood there, transfixed and in shock. I got out of the taxi and walked towards her. Someone, probably, a neighbour was trying to console her. She

suddenly saw me: Her dazed eyes focused on me and tears trickled down her cheek. “Asma! You have come.” Her voice was choked with emotion.

“How could I not, Salma.” I whispered. She grasped me tightly and broke into sobs. “He is gone Salma... gone forever.”

I heard whispers amongst the women in the compound “Who is she?” They had never seen me before. One of them answered. “She is Salma’s sister. She stays in England.”

“Let’s go up.” I said gently, embarrassed and awkward, still finding it difficult to comprehend, that the woman I held in my arms was the sister I had parted from nearly twenty years back, bitter and resentful for taking Sohail away from me. I had vowed never to meet her again. And I may not have been here today if Zaid had not rung up two days back informing that Sohail was in the ICU and the doctors had given him less than 48 hours! I had been shocked by the news but still felt diffident and hesitant – the pain of betrayal still lingered.

But I wanted to see him, perhaps for the last time. However on landing at Mumbai airport, I heard of his demise. The finality of death does assuage anger and then there were the two young girls – I was needed to be around.

Pale and worn out, Salma was a shadow of her former self. Now, I felt mortified: I may have never forgiven myself, if I had held on to the past. Except for Zaid, there were hardly any close relatives present. Our parents and Sohail's were no more and his only sister had died in an accident a year back, childless. Her husband had promptly remarried. With their mother berserk with grief, I wondered how the two young girls, eighteen-year-old Rana and seventeen-year-old Sana were coping with their fathers demise.

I found them, bent over his inert body crying and sobbing as Zaid and some of the ladies tried to disengage them. One of them chided, that it was un Islamic to cling to the dead. The body had to be bathed and taken for the afternoon prayers. The men had already made all preparations for the ritual bath. But the girls were beyond reasoning, till Salma requested them. As they moved away from his inert body, I saw Sohail 's face and stood in my tracks. His face was puffed and aged and his burnished hair was sparse and gray. At forty five he not only looked ten years older but carried very little vestige of his good looks. Death had glazed his mesmerizing eyes which were closed forever.

Oh, those eyes! How they had captivated me. The years fell away. I was back in our small house in Juhu and we were expecting Sohail, a distant cousin from my mother's side who had come to Mumbai for his post-

graduation in General Medicine. It was his day off at the hospital and he was coming for dinner that night. My mother was planning a match between him and Salma who was twenty then – a full four years older to me.

“I am sure, he will like Salma.” Who will not, I thought enviously. Salma was fair and pretty. Everybody seemed to like her. She had a number of proposals but my mother did not think they were good enough for her. She wanted a well-qualified, good looking boy from a respectable family. Being a doctor made Sohail imminently suitable.

And as for his looks – we were all awaiting agog when the door bell rang. I rushed and opened it. There he stood, tall, slim and handsome. His dark expressive eyes smiled down at me while my heart missed a beat. My mother immediately brought Salma forward. He made an ideal match for her lovely Salma. She wasn’t sure of anything else. But an hour later, as the conversations progressed, I realized that he seemed to like me –or at least paid more attention to me than to Salma. But when I made this remark after he left, my mother was quite dismissive: “Obviously he can’t give attention to Salma so soon. You are a kid and he just wanted to be nice to you.” But Salma didn’t agree.

“I think he likes Asma’s vivacity. Most people do.”

“Her impertinence you mean?” Zaid interjected. “Let’s not jump to conclusion after such a brief meeting;

he is here for two years and for all you know, he may be attached to someone back home or he may prefer one of his fellow students.”

But with time our friendship grew and I started falling in love with him and I was definite that he too loved me. Oh how impatiently I waited for his weekly offs when he visited us. Two years went off, nay, little more and then after two years was when he got his degree. But then came the proposal - for Salma not me! It seemed appropriate to everyone except me. I hated Salma and my manoeuvring mother.

“No! NO. You cannot come in. Get out of here!” I heard Zaid shouting and saw considerable disturbance near the entrance where a small crowd had assembled. Sohail’s body was no longer lying in the drawing room - they had taken it for the ritual bath.

What could be the matter? Why was there such commotion? Why was Zaid so angry? I made my way to the entrance and saw it blocked by Zaid and a woman clasping two small boys between the ages of eight and ten. She was tall and lanky - dressed in a garish green sari, her visage dark and plain and her long thin hair awry. She was a crass and uncouth specimen of the female sex - a flouncy! Why had she come here? What did she want? One of the boys looked up and I was startled: he had Sohail’s eyes!

From behind I heard Salma's voice : "Zaid let her come in" Seconds later I saw her making her way to entrance of the flat. Zaid who was glowering menacingly at the woman turned around and his eyes blazing said: "Let me handle this."

"This is my problem not yours." Salma answered calmly and extended her hand towards the woman saying gently, "Come sister."

And as I watched shocked, the woman walked in with the two boys. A whispering wave rippled in the gathered mourners "Who is she? Why has she come?"

The lady who had informed others of my relationship with Salma seemed to be aware of the woman's existence and role in the family (she was most probably Salma's neighbour and confidant) led the woman inside where most of the women mourners were assembled. I confronted Salma "From where has this brazen hussy landed here?"

"Mind your language Asma." She gently rebuked me." She is Sohail's second wife."

I felt I was hit by bomb shell. I nearly fainted and had to be steadied by Salma and her friend who took me into a bedroom - one of the girls. There, I just plonked myself on the bed and covered my face with my hands trying to conceal the so visible shock. But I failed miserably and mumbled, "It can't be true. Sohail could

not do this.” I looked up pleadingly at Salma for confirmation. She wrung her hands helplessly and said, “Very unfortunate but true. She is also the mother of his two sons – the boys who are with her.”

I swallowed hard as a stab of pain passed through me at this most unpalatable information. If I had known this, I would have forgotten him long ago. He would have died that very day itself. How could he have fallen so low. Imagine marrying such a slut of a woman and that too when Salma was still with him. And yet despite his gross transgression she had continued to care for him. She had been nursing him through his long illness. How could she accept it? Why did she do it?”

I still could not comprehend this disastrous fact. The how and why of it disturbed me. I asked Salma “How could he marry that woman? Where did he meet her? Was she, his patient?”

“You ask too many questions. It is now not relevant. She is his wife and that’s it.” Salma answered resignedly.

Zaid came in and announced that they were taking the coffin to the cemetery. We could come to bid farewell till the door. Salma got up and went to the room where that woman was sitting and beckoned her to follow.

“Aren't you coming? She asked, as I showed no sign of movement.

I shook my head. I never ever wanted to see him...

“He is dead now. Forgive him. “Zaid said putting his arms around me. I nodded and reluctantly got up as they lifted the coffin. Zaid joined them and I whispered “Khuda Hafiz.”

That night after all the visitors had left including his second wife, we sat huddled together, Salma, her daughters, Zaid and me - all of us lost in our own grief. My grief was different: it was for a dream lost, an idol smashed.

I turned to Zaid: “Why did he marry that woman?”

“Because he didn’t love me. He was bored with me” It was Salma who answered irritated.

“Oh Salma stop it” Zaid intervened. You know he did care. It was just one of those moments...”

“What moment? Surely, he couldn’t have been attracted to her.” I asked indignant “He had taken to drinking and she was a bar dancer.” Zaid explained. “Then she was pregnant and he had to marry her.”

“But why did he start drinking?”

“He missed you. He had wanted to marry you.” Salma muttered in anguish. “But our mothers insisted that he should marry me.”

I was completely taken back by this confession.

“What are you saying Salma?

“It’s the truth.” Zaid confirmed as I continued to look stricken.

“But why was he so weak. Why did he not speak up? Why did he have to submit to parental pressure? Why? Didn’t he realize that his silence, his cowardice, destroyed three lives!” I was indignant.

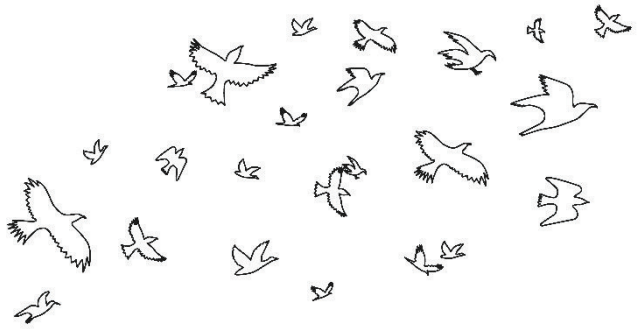
“Forget about me. I loved him and I have the girls. You must move ahead Asma. Forgive and forget and move on, if you cared about him. Care about us.”

I felt hot tears roll down my cheeks. “You know I did. But now I think I did not love the real Sohail. I had loved an illusion, an illusion that I had created in my mind.”

So this was the finale of my love for Sohail. I had never thought it would end like this. To think I had wasted years loving a man so weak: a man, who couldn’t withstand pressure, couldn’t be loyal to Salma – a man who had been a failure as a husband and father. I felt empty and lost as Salma gathered me in her arms.

“But you have come back to us. You have come home.” She consoled me. I nodded. I had.

.



THE HEALING

Tahir sat dazed. He couldn't believe he had heard right. He didn't know which was more shocking: the fact of what had happened to Masuma or the question that his family was posing to him.

"Tahir! What have you decided?" He heard his sister Salma ask again.

"What is there to decide? We are engaged. The marriage is to take place tomorrow."

"She is still under trauma. I don't think we should go ahead with the marriage." His mother said.

"But is it possible to postpone the marriage at this stage?" he asked.

“Postpone? We should cancel– you can’t get saddled to such a mental wreck.” His mother muttered angrily.

“How can you react in this manner? This mishap could have happened to Salma... and if Masuma had not informed Salma, we would have gone ahead with the marriage.”

“But, now knowing it and also the fact that he was her brother’s friend...” Salma was cut short by Tahir, who asked sharply,

“What are you hinting at Salma?”

“I mean, she knew her rapist, she would have had some idea about his character.” Salma argued.

“How can you talk such nonsense? Since she is so distressed, let’s not have all the ceremonies. Just let’s have the Nikah...” he suggested.

“How can we cancel the ceremonies?” His mother asked aghast.

“Why not? You were debating whether to cancel the marriage. Just give some excuse.”

His mother looked miserable and Salma grumbled: “How terrible – to have such a lacklustre wedding...”

Tahir found this breast beating disgusting. A month back they had considered him the luckiest guy to get a

girl like Masuma. “So pretty, so innocent faced.” Salma had cooed.

He too had been overjoyed when he received her consent. He remembered the first time he saw her. She had entered like a whiff of fresh fragrant air, in a pink sharara suit, her raven black straight hair cascading down her back, smiling shyly, straight into his heart. They had got engaged but were unable to meet since he was posted in Kalimpong and she was in Kolkata. Moreover she was shy and reticent. All he learnt about her was that she was passionate about painting and music. She played the harmonium and had won several art competitions.

Salma informed him that it was music which had brought her in contact with her brother’s friend– a singer. It was while returning from a musical event, when her brother was busy carousing with his girlfriend that she had accepted a lift from that guy and this horrific incident had taken place. Salma and his mother blamed Masuma for attending the musical night and accepting the lift, they held her parents responsible for allowing her such freedom.

“Now we have to bear the brunt of it. That guy has gone scot-free,” his mother moaned.

Tahir was more concerned about Masuma’s mental state. Salma had said that, during the Mehendi ceremony she seemed distraught and later she rang up and

informed about the horrendous incident. When he heard of it, he felt a gunshot go through him. The ground beneath his feet seemed to give away. Through a haze he heard Salma say that Masuma was sobbing on the phone, saying that she hated men. She didn't wish a man to touch her again. And then immediately Salma confronted him with the question: "Now what do you want? Should we call off the marriage?"

Tahir was clear in his mind that he had to marry Masuma- he could not back out - he was committed to her. But he was also seething with anger against her brother and that guy whose identity he didn't wish to know-whose face he didn't wish to see. It would haunt him whenever he was close to her. Though he had shut up Salma, and no matter how much he shrugged it off, the devil kept whispering in his ear, a worm kept gnawing in his mind: How much did she acquiesce? Was she complicit?

When his mother informed Masuma's parents about their daughter's admission, they implored them not to break off the marriage.

"We have consulted a psychotherapist and she has assured us that she will become normal: all she needs is a little care and understanding."

With Tahir adamant to go ahead with the marriage, there was little his mother and sister could do. The grand

function was cancelled and a quiet Nikah ceremony was performed the next evening. He was not concerned with the gossip, the questions, excuses and explanations given for the cancellations of the function. He was only concerned about Masuma who, even in the red gold bridal dress looked so miserable; the gentle confidence in those soft dark eyes had been replaced by intense fear and hurt.

With trembling lips she had asked him the reason for marrying her – a ravished mental wreck. He didn't miss the underlying sarcasm with which she had inquired if there was some award for such chivalry or some high place reserved in the heavens. It had seemed too filmy to profess his love. Time would reveal it to her.

He had simply answered, "I'll tell you someday."

"But whatever your reason may be, I do not wish any man to touch me..." she broke down hysterically weeping. He had assured her that he would never touch her until she wanted him.

He had brought her to the serene and green Tea Estate with its hills covered for miles with refreshingly aromatic tea shrubs. He hoped that the tranquility of the place, being away from prying eyes and wagging tongues would enable her to regain her confidence and trust: heal her.

In the beginning she didn't show any response. For weeks she lay huddled inside her room -impervious to everything around. Then gradually she took interest in the house keeping. He was pleasantly surprised to have his creature comforts taken care of – he no longer had to bother about missing buttons, badly ironed clothes or indifferently cooked meals. She brought comfort and order in his life. But she still cringed from any physical contact. He wondered if she would ever care for him– love and trust him. Salma had said that she loathed herself – as a woman always does in such an event. She is conditioned to believe that it was her fault. And didn't he despite his love have this nagging doubt? He shrugged away the thought.

Soon spring set in and the button roses bloomed. One evening when he returned home, he found her filling her canvas with the green tea shrubs and the snow peaked mountains. Her eyes gleamed and he was certain her face lit up when she saw him. But the distance between them remained as spring turned to summer.

With the monsoon, the hills came alive with gurgling springs and gushing waterfalls. He had to go to Kolkata for a conference. It was the first time he would be out for nearly four days! Masuma seemed worried and nervous. He tried to allay her fears: "Don't worry. You'll be quite safe. Supriya and her husband can be relied on." But in his mind, he hoped that her worry was indicative

of her longing for his presence –that his absence would make her realize she cared for him.

II

As Tahir's vehicle moved out of the gate Masuma suddenly realized how much his presence mattered to her. She suddenly felt a sense of emptiness around her.

At the dining table, her eyes kept turning to his vacant chair, the food seemed tasteless.

“What's the matter memsahib?” Supriya asked.

“I am not hungry. Don't make such elaborate meals when Sahib is not here.”

Supriya smiled knowingly: “You are missing Sahib.”

Masuma didn't respond. She was acutely aware that she was not just missing Tahir –she was realizing that life without him was unbearable. She tried to fill her time with painting the tea gardens, the tea leaf pickers, the pine covered mountains, the snow peaks. But it didn't seem to recompense.

She suddenly realized how her perception of life had changed since she first came here on a wintery day when an icy wind was blowing. She had confined herself inside her room – ruminating on her miserable fate. A number of questions had assailed her. What was her mistake? Going to the concert with her brother? Trusting his

friend? Why did he do this to her? Why? She remembered her struggling, fighting him, the blinding slap on her face and the cudgel on her back before she passed out. These questions and painful memories had kept boring into her mind, jabbing into her heart. Weighing heavily on her mind was a sense of obligation to Tahir who had annoyed his mother and sister by marrying her. Who had, in his mother's words poured coldwater over her wonderful plans of celebrating her only son's wedding. She was certain that he had probably done it out of a sense of commitment. To divert her mind from the painful procrastination she decided to start taking care of the house. Surprisingly as soon as she got involved in the housekeeping and looking after Tahir, she felt she was fulfilling her role, her duty and a sense of well-being returned.

Then it was spring and nature renewed itself, new leaves sprung, flowers blossomed, birds sang and she felt a desire to paint this new world. Slowly, gradually, the painful incident receded and so also did those lusting eyes which had haunted her. And she became more conscious of Tahir's fine light brown eyes, clear, gentle and caring.

Spring gave way to summer and now the monsoons had set in and as the earth awakened with their life giving water, she felt the stirrings of desire – the desire for a loved one, especially when it rained yesterday morning.

And she realized that the loved one was Tahir. She remembered standing in the verandah, breathing in the cool scented air. Then a few minutes later, it started raining. She watched it for some time; it brought memories of her carefree childhood days. She ran out, feeling the rain on her face, hoping that Tahir was with her.

III

Tahir was to return at about 2 or 3 pm to the Tea Estate as his train reached Siliguri by 11pm from where the journey by road took three hours or so. But when he didn't turn up by 5pm, Masuma contacted his office and was informed that the train was delayed by four hours! But as the clock kept ticking and there was no sign of him, she panicked. There was no message from him or from his office. At about 8 pm the phone was dead! At 9 pm Supriya came to serve dinner. She too was worried when she learnt that Tahir had not sent any message.

"I hope there is no landslide. It happens very often during the monsoon and cars are stranded for days. We can only know tomorrow. Please have something to eat and don't worry."

But she couldn't eat a morsel. She asked Supriya to put the food away and go home. She went to her room and for the first time after that incident, she prayed, pleading to God for Tahir's safe return.

It was 11 pm when she heard the sound of the car and realized that the gate was bolted. She rushed out in the pouring rain to open the gate, her relief and joy reflected in her eyes.

Tahir was quite taken back to see Masuma's drenched lithe figure dashing towards the gate in the pouring rain and opening the gates, her eyes full of concern and anxiety. Though he gently chided her for brashly running out in the rain, he was hopeful – it was a sign that she cared. As she bustled around the kitchen, making him hot chocolate, laying his clothes on the bed, Tahir watched her tenderly, certain that the morrow would bring them closer.

But in the morning, she looked unwell and by evening she had high fever and was oblivious to his presence. He tried to contact the Estate doctor but he was stuck out somewhere in the rain. As the night wore on, she went into a delirium. He watched her helplessly, her face flushed, eyes closed, her raven black hair streaming on the pillow. The cold water compresses he had been applying on her feverish forehead, for the past six hours seemed to be having little effect on the fever. He looked at the telephone helplessly: it had gone dead again – the lines disrupted by the lashing rain. The nearest hospital was 10 miles away and it was dangerous driving down the hills in this rain. But he couldn't just sit there wringing his hands. He decided to take the risk.

Just when he was walking out, he heard her moaning and saw her stir. She mumbled “Water.” Tahir put a few drops in her mouth, touched her forehead and hands – the fever seemed to be subsiding. He took her temperature and sighed with relief: the fever had gone down considerably. But she looked so weak, her fair complexion dull and pallid. She had not eaten the whole day! He called out to the maid to prepare some hot tomato soup.

When Supriya, brought the soup, he tried to put Masuma in a sitting position but she seemed too weak.

“Sahib, just hold her.”

He hesitated. He didn’t wish the maid to see Masuma cringe. But when he held her, she didn’t react, but just sat inert in his arms while the maid fed her. After that she went off to sleep.

He walked over to the arm chair, sat down exhausted and drifted into an uneasy sleep. He awoke hearing the sound of crashing glass. Masuma had woken up and had tried to take the glass from the side table. But her hand struck it and it fell to the ground – smashed to pieces. She mumbled “Sorry, ” as he poured water in another glass and helped her drink it. As she gulped the liquid gratefully he was certain he saw tenderness in her eyes which he had never seen before. The next moment she had lowered her eyelids and sunk back on the pillow

perspiring. He checked her fever. It had gone down completely. He breathed a sigh of relief as she turned sideways removing the blanket and through her thin shift he saw the deep gash below her neck. He gently touched it; she shivered.

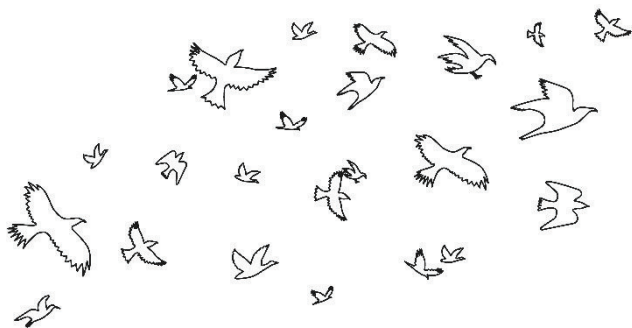
“How did this happen?”

“He hit me. I was struggling.”

He felt a twinge of guilt, for having doubted her.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not any longer.” She whispered and turned around. Their eyes met in the soft light of dawn. The rain had stopped and a clear cool wind was blowing. He gently touched her face and she smiled that old shy smile that had captured his heart.



THE SUNSET

Sana marked the date on the calendar her hand trembling, her eyes bright with unshed tears. It was 24th September, their twelfth wedding anniversary and maybe the last one together. She took a deep breath and peered inside the bedroom where the nurse was giving Asim a sponge. She felt a twinge of pain every time the nurse sponged him; it hit her, the devastation the cancer had wrought on him. His once lithe, well knit body was now skin and bones: he had lost nearly fifteen kilos in the past one month. His face was pale and ashen. Each night when she snuggled against his thinning body she was made acutely aware of life ebbing away. The doctors had given him six to eight weeks at the most. Realizing that not much could be done for him, she had brought him

home - to their flat in Nepean sea road with a view of the Arabian sea –and vowed to make each day memorable.

But when each day, she glanced at the calendar, and heard the clock tick way, she felt despondent: she felt she hadn't done enough to lift his spirits. But today she felt particularly low. It was their twelfth wedding anniversary. If he had not been so ill, they would be celebrating it at their farmhouse in Alibag with a few close friends. She pondered: what could she do to make the day unforgettable. Understandably she couldn't call over their friends for dinner. His close friends had telephonically wished him and also sent bouquets of flowers; his favorite fragrant tuberose and yellow roses were all over the house, in vases, tumblers and glass bowls. But when she greeted him in the morning with a bunch of tuberose, he had lifted his cheek and pointed at it. She had smiled and kissed it, wistfully remembering that this was how he had wished her every year.

The nurse had finished the sponging and drying, and he had been dressed in a freshly laundered Kurta Pajama. Despite the havoc wrought by the deadly disease, he was still good looking. She remembered how her cousins and friends had envied her luck at getting such an eligible match.. Asim was one of the rare boys in the community who had been in the prestigious institutions of IIT and IIM and had a very promising career in a multinational company. But now she was an object of

pity – a young woman with two children and a bleak future, though financially Asim had ensured that they were secure. Many felt sorry for such a splendid career being cut short so tragically. But Asim consoled her saying that perhaps things may not have gone well in future and hindered his rise to the top.

The maid ushered the children all dressed for school, into the bedroom to say goodbye to him. She saw him kiss them both. After the children waved goodbye to her she carried in his breakfast - oats with milk and strawberry shake. Strawberries were out of season but since these were considered beneficial in inhibiting cancer cells, she bought them at exorbitant price. She had made a list of natural herbs, fruits and vegetables which were said to control cancer and tried to use them in his meals even though the doctors had given up hope. Early morning she gave him fresh wheat grass juice, from the tender shoots she had grown in mud pots. Asim smiled indulgently at her attempts and tried to cooperate though he missed his Kababs and Biryani. Since today was special, he wondered if he should he request for it. But seeing the anxiety in Sana's eyes and her efforts for his well being, he changed his mind. When she asked him what he would like to eat on this special occasion, he said he wanted chocolate cake.

“Really!” Sana looked surprised. Every year they had a Mughlai style feast – of a number of meat preparations!

She was apprehensive he would expect the same and not be able to digest the stuff.

“This year we will celebrate in the style the kids will enjoy with balloons and cake.” He said with a smile.

“That’s a great idea. And what would you like as a gift.”

“You have already given me those tuberose. To make this occasion special I would like to watch the sunset with you.”

Oh wonderful!” she gasped delighted. They both loved watching sunrises and sunsets from various points, in the hills and the beaches, an activity which became occasional with the children’s schedule and interest- they were too young to appreciate it.

“Why do adults like nature so much?” Henna had inquired seeing them become ecstatic watching the sunset from their farmhouse in Alibag or from the balcony of the small study room window, where she would wheel him today to watch the sunset. She checked the newspaper column to ascertain the sunset timings. It was at 6. 30 pm. The children returned at 4 pm. She would have to organize the cake cutting between 4-30 and 5 pm and then send the children out so that they could watch the sunset together undisturbed. But till then, there were a number of tasks to be performed.

She rang up her friend Uttara, who ran a successful business of homemade chocolate cakes and ordered one for delivery by 330 pm and sent the driver to buy balloons, confetti, candles etc while she prepared his lunch of broccoli soup, salad, yoghurt and a vegetable curry. After lunch Asim took a nap while she busied herself decorating the dining room. She then took out the clothes for the children: for Henna, a pink frock with delicate lace which Asim had brought for her birthday and for Asad, the jeans and tee shirt he had brought during his visit to UK. She herself decided to wear a dark green chiffon sari with the emerald studded necklace which Asim had presented her on their wedding night.

By the time the cake arrived the room looked bright and festive. She changed her sari, put on the necklace and dabbed her favorite scent. Soon the children arrived and were excited at the prospect of blowing candles and cutting the cake. While they changed, she went in to help the nurse ready Asim. He was lying on the bed his eyes closed. Without opening his eyes he asked "What Sana, is everything ready?"

Yes" She replied "Except you. What will you wear?"

He opened his eyes and seeing her in the dark green chiffon, his eyes glowed in the pale face. "You look lovely. But what can I change into -everything will just hang on me."

She swallowed hard. It was true. He was just skin and bones.

“I’ll wrap that beautiful Pashmina shawl you got last winter from Srinagar.”

The children were thrilled with the arrangements. Seeing their delight Sana felt that this was much more fun than the formal dinners or even the barbeque parties at their farmhouse at Alibag.

“You know daddy, yesterday my teacher celebrated her twenty fifth anniversary. She says it was her silver jubilee. Your silver jubilee we will celebrate in real style. We’ll be real grown up then.” Henna said in her usual bubbly way.

Sara blinked off the tears as she saw Asim struggle with his.

“Yes. You too will be real grownup. Henna you will be a lovely lady and Asad will be a strong handsome young man and I am sure very successful in whatever calling you take up. But then perhaps you may not be as innocent and carefree as you are now. Come give me a hug. I want to remember you as you are now.” His voice was slightly choked, his eyes dark pools of pain, his hands trembled as he enveloped them in an embrace.

When the children left for the park his eyes followed Henna.” Oh, how I wish I could see her grow up. She will be lovely like you.”

“Like I was, when we got married.”

“You’re still lovely though not as lissome. But plumpness becomes you,” he said gently pinching her dimpled cheek. She smiled as she remembered, the wedding night when he had carried her in his arms to the bed. Watching his dreamy gaze, she realized that he too was thinking of that night and overcome by an unbearable sadness, she broke into sobs.

“Now don’t, Sana don’t. Remember we still have to see the sunset together. It’s a nice day and I am sure the sunset too will be splendid.”

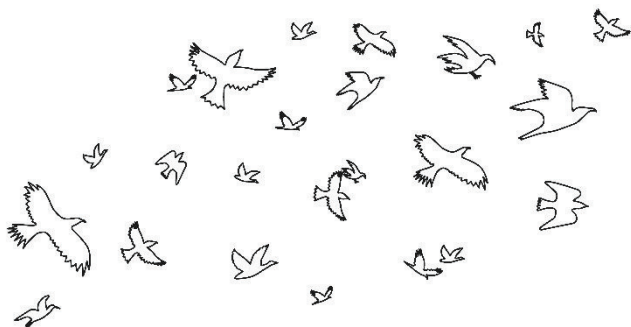
It was 5. 30 pm. There was still time. She went over to the balcony which had been sanitized, the window panes had been cleaned to ensure a clear view. She didn’t wish to open the windows –with his low immunity he was prone to infections. She peered out. The sun; a small luminous ball of fire was still high above the horizon. The sea was a bright sparkling blue. She wondered how many sunsets they were destined to see together. They had seen so many but each had a uniqueness of its own. Though she loved it setting on the hills, Asim liked it on the sea. But it was in Bulandshar, in his family house located in acres of farmlands that they had found it most enchanting. There the sunset was accompanied with so many sounds and sights which one never encountered in the city: the tinkling of cowbells, the buzz and chirping of birds returning sometimes in a composition to their

nests, and as dusk settled, the crickets sang and the fireflies glowed.

Satisfied with the cleanliness, she prepared some green tea which they could sip while watching the sunset. She then wheeled Asim to the balcony. The sun was now growing big and glowing orange as it gradually descended. As it turned fiery red, the sky was a riot of colors. A few minutes later it touched the sea waves, which were now ablaze with color. It then suddenly sank in the sea leaving a glowing multihued horizon.

“There it goes.” Sana whispered and Asim discerned the anguish in her voice. He knew that she was thinking: one more day in their life was getting over...He gently touched her hands and whispered “Sana, thank God for this moment. Life is so uncertain. We all have to go. I could have died yesterday and not seen this wonderful sight today. Let’s make our life like the sunset which gathers so much color and splendor in a few moments, making it memorable. Let’s live in the moment and not worry about the future. God only knows what will happen in the next moment.

Sana put her arms around him savoring their togetherness as dusk gathered around them. Minutes later she beheld the evening star, Venus which brightened the darkening sky just as love brightens life...



REPENTANCE

Sadia was surprised that the Professor of Botany had brought them to the Nature Trail Park to show them the Glory Lily or *Gloriosa Superba* which grew in such abundance in her aunt Zaheda's house. The plant was indeed glorious, multihued with green, yellow and flaming orange petals. She had heard from aunt Zaheda that the plant had many healing properties and she used it in making medicines. She decided to confirm this fact as Zaheda aunty had given a dose of it to her sister Sharifa to induce labor pains.

“I have heard that it has great medicinal value.”

“Yes, every part of it, petals, leaves, seeds, and tubers– all these have healing properties. These are used

to cure a number of ailments from stomach ulcers to gout, rheumatism, piles, and skin disease; it is also used as a laxative and for lessening labor pains.”

“And also, for inducing abortion. Mandy had taken recourse to it, last year.” Ritu her classmate murmured in her ear.

Mandy or Mandira, one of their classmates, if rumors were to be believed, got pregnant every year by a different boy and always managed to abort it. But Sadia wasn't interested whether Mandy used the powdered tubers of this lilac or not. She was keen to know whether it could give relief to her itching skin, which Khalil, her brother-in-law suspected to be scabies. The thought of Khalil brought color to her cheeks—she had got herself in an emotional maze and couldn't find her way out. Every day she made a vow to get out of the relationship but by evening her body craved for his touch. Guilt and fear were tearing into her system and seemed to erupt in acne all over her face. She wanted to end the affair before Sharifa suspected anything. Today, she thought she would tell him that they couldn't carry on like this when he came to her room that night. He usually did on Saturday night as he could sleep late in the morning. She walked to the bus stop trying to formulate appropriate words to break it to him as gently as she could. But her resolve melted as soon as she heard a car screech to a halt and heard Khalil's husky voice.

“Hello, pretty lady. Can I give you a lift?”

Her heart missed a beat as it had always done, from the first time she had seen him when he had come to see Sharifa. She smiled and got into the car.

“You look tired. Was the trail too long? Shall we drive down to the river and have some kebabs at Sulaiman’s?” his piercing dark eyes and charming dimpled smile made her blush.

“Sharifa must be waiting for us,” she mumbled. He smiled. “We will take some for her. You know she doesn’t like going out. It’s also not advisable in her condition.”

She nodded, as always conscious of his nearness and her desire for him. It was not just his good looks which disarmed and impressed: it was his animated expression, geniality and wit which had bowled everyone when he had come to see Sharifa. Sharifa on the other hand was petite and pretty but quiet and shy. Sadia had felt that she was not suitable for Khalil and was certain that he would not select her. Her mother too was doubtful. But to their surprise he had agreed to marry Sharifa. But then Sharifa’s qualities of being sweet-tempered, self-possessed and good at housekeeping were well known. It was presumed that she was an ideal wife and daughter-in-law material. Sadia liked to believe that Khalil had married

Sharifa to please his mother. She was sure that he would soon tire of her.

But as time passed, it seemed that he was happy with the choice: they got on well. Within a year they had their first baby – a boy. There was great rejoicing. Then just six months later Sharifa conceived again. In the fourth month, due to her delicate health, the doctors advised bed rest. The baby too needed to be taken care of. Their mother was keen that Sharifa should shift to her place but Sharifa didn't wish to leave Khalil. It was then decided, on Sharifa's request that Sadia would stay with her till the delivery. Sadia had willingly agreed; her college was not far from her sister's place and she could attend to the baby without missing her lectures.

“When are your exams? Hope you are preparing for it.”

“Two months away.”

“Only two months! That's quite near. You need to concentrate on your studies. I suggest you go home, so that you're not distracted here.”

Sadia was quiet taken back at his suggestion. “Then how will Sharifa manage? Her health isn't any better now than when I came. She is in now the seventh month!”

“You needn't bother about it. I am going to take leave to look after her and the house.”

“But, why do you wish to take leave now. You can take it closer to my exams and Sharifa’s due date.”

“I am getting an assignment which gives sufficient flexibility and therefore will get time to attend to Sharifa. You can relax and focus on your studies.”

Sadia was deeply agitated at his insistence that she should return home. She had wanted to end the affair, but she had not expected him to take the initiative. She had hoped, that he would persuade her, might even plead with her not to. He would reluctantly acknowledge his deep dependence on her—his need for her. And here he was so coolly, telling her to go home. Did she matter so little to him? She felt the anger surge within her, but tried to control herself and replied calmly:

“I need to revise some lessons with Ritu. We are doing combined study at her house which is close by. Once we have finished the exercises, I shall go home.”

“As you please. I just wanted you to know that there is no compulsion on you to stay.”

She felt the redness coming on her face. She clutched her fists and bit her under-lip. He knew very well what her compulsion was: she was desperately in love with him. After all it was she who had taken the initiative in forging the relationship. She had literally seduced him. She had hovered around him, in flimsy alluring clothes when he would be working late in the

drawing room, on the computer, trying to attract his attention by regaling him with spicy news or showing her concern by making coffee for him or offering to massage his tired back. One night, as she leaned over him swaying her long black tresses, he hadn't been able to resist her any longer. He had seized her in his arms, calling her a she devil and covering her face and body with kisses. The memory of that night made her hot with desire for him. But he seemed to be impervious to her feelings: he seemed lost in his thoughts. What could be bothering him?

On the way home, Khalil stopped at the florist and brought some red roses. She felt elated for a moment, but suddenly realized it was Sharifa's birthday. He had bought the roses for her! She felt distressed that he had remembered it. Would he remember hers? Was he even aware of the day?

"Great. You remembered Sharifa's birthday. Do you know I was born three years two months after her?"

"Yes. Sharifa told me. Sometime in June, isn't it? You will have completed your exams by then."

She grimaced. He probably wanted the message to sink in: she will be in her house and not here for the birthday. It was nearly 9 pm when they reached home. Sharifa was in the bedroom. Sadia strode ahead – she

didn't wish to be present when Khalil presented her with the flowers.

Sharifa wasn't dressed for the occasion. In her everyday clothes – she looked pale and tired. She had just put the baby to sleep. She greeted Sadia with a wan smile.

“Adil has been very restless today. Why are you so late? Where is Khalil? He said he will pick you up – that was quite some time back.”

“He is coming. I came in ahead just to wish you many happy returns of the day Sharifa.”

“Oh God! I had completely forgotten. Thanks Love. Thanks for remembering. I wish I had made something special for dinner today.” Sharifa said as she came towards her and gave her a warm hug.

At the sound of footsteps, Sadia disengaged herself muttering,

“I must go now. Good night. See you tomorrow.”

As she stepped out of the room, Khalil entered with the bunch of roses and a gift under his arm. Averting her eyes she walked across to her room flustered by the dramatic change in events. She went to the mirror: had her blotchy skin made her look so unattractive that he was put off by it? She knew it was not so? Khalil was not superficial. She was still many times more attractive than Sharifa. Probably, it was guilt: perhaps he was ashamed

of his weakness. Whatsoever be the reason she was mortified at being discarded so summarily. It was one thing for her to call off the relationship but that he should take the initiative was unpalatable and painful – especially when he still had such a hold over her. How was she to get over it – over him?

That night she could hardly sleep. She kept tossing and turning: her mental anguish and seething jealousy made her bed full of nails. She couldn't bear to face him.

In the morning, Khalil was his usual pleasant self, very attentive to her but also clearly distancing himself from her. It was as if they had never been intimate. But what she found most unbearable was his overriding concern for Sharifa. He had always been caring but now he seemed to be over-anxious. She wanted to get away from their presence – or her annoyance and envy could lead to unpleasant consequences. She would decide during the week end whether it was suitable to return home and she would also visit Aunt Zahida regarding her acne and itching skin.

But that evening when she returned home, she was surprised to see her mother and aunt Zahida with Sharifa. Their mother rarely visited Sharifa – their house was at the other end of the town and she was reluctant to travel alone.

“How come, you and Zahida aunty are here? All well I hope?” she asked looking anxiously at Sharifa, who responded with a smile, her soft brown eyes serene.

“Yes, my dear. All is well by the Grace of God. But what has happened to your face? Are you so very tense about your studies?” Zahida aunty asked.

“The acne is terrible. Zahida you must do something about it soon.” Her mother’s voice was anxious, eyes worried.

Sadia looked puzzled – she couldn’t understand why so much fuss was being made over her pimples!

“Ma. What’s the problem? Why so much fuss?”

The baby cried and Sharifa lifted him and went out. Zaheda aunty and her mother exchanged glances. Then Zahida aunty cleared her throat. She usually did so before making, an important announcement.

“Sadia, my dear child. You know Altaf, my husband’s nephew—he is coming from Kuwait next week. We thought he will be a good match for you. His parent’s, – my brother-in-law and his wife are agreeable, if you both like each other.”

Sadia was completely taken back. She was still reeling from the after effects of her entanglement with Khalil and couldn’t envision herself in another relationship. That too with Altaf! She had met him

nearly ten years ago, then a gruff, lanky lad of eighteen. A great bore. Well, he may have changed in the intervening years and was supposed to be doing well in Kuwait. But it was all happening too soon and she wasn't prepared for it.

"Ma, I have my exams and I don't want to think about marriage for a year or so. I'd very much like to do some diploma after my graduation, so as to equip myself for a job," she pleaded.

"Oh. You can do all kinds of diplomas you desire. But for now, you have to be at your mother's place, looking your best when he comes to see you. So, collect your belongings. You are coming with us." Aunt Zaheda's voice was firm and her mother didn't seem to be in a mood for any remonstrance. Sadia resignedly went in to collect her belongings, which to her chagrin had already been packed by Sharifa.

"Damn her!" Sadia muttered. She now suspected – though it was very unlike her sister to connive – that Sharifa was not only aware of the proposal, but probably eager to see it materialize. Was it because she had become suspicious about her and Khalil? Then it suddenly crossed her mind: was Khalil too aware of it? Was this the reason for his changed behavior?

"Hurry up Sadia. The autorickshaw is here." She heard Zaheda aunty call.

She hurried down and found her mother and aunt already in the verandah with Sharifa.

“God be with you and take care of yourself,” her mother said hugging Sharifa. Aunt Zahida also blessed her. But Sadia scowled and made way to the autorickshaw.

“All the best Sadia.” She heard Sharifa’s voice and turning around gave her a searing look before getting into the autorickshaw.

“Why are you behaving in this sullen manner? You didn’t even wish her goodbye,” her mother chided her.

“Why should I? She seems so keen to get rid of me. Couldn’t even wait for me to reach home.”

“What are you talking about?” Her mother looked at her sharply. “I had rung her up and asked her to pack your stuff.”

“You mean to say, she is not aware of the proposal?”

“Yes, I told her. What’s wrong with it?”

The auto turned the lane in which Zaheda aunty stayed.

“Why are we going to Zaheda aunt’s house?”

“To drop her and pick up the paste for your acne and blotchy skin.”

Her mother continued to sit inside the auto while Sadia went in with Zahida aunty to collect the paste prepared from the tubers of the Glory lily plant.

From the kitchen window, she could see the blazing orange red flowers of the plant. Suddenly the Professor's words flashed in her mind:

"Aunt, is it true that the powder of these tubes can be lethal? That's what my Botany Professor said."

"Yes. If you take more than 6gms or so. Here's the paste. Put it on morning and evening, let it dry for ten minutes, and then wash off with rose water. Your acne will disappear in a few days. Also drink warm water every morning. You will glow my dear and Altaf will not be able to resist you."

Sadia eagerly took the paste and put it in her bag. She cared too hoots about attracting Altaf but it would be worth trying her aunt's medicines if she could again ensnare Khalil. But this time she wouldn't give in- she would make him grovel - she would really punish him.

She bid her aunt goodbye and got into the auto in which her mother had been impatiently awaiting her. As they made their way home, Sadia's mind was in turmoil: she knew that she had no future with Khalil, but she found it difficult to let go of him and accept someone else in her life. If only, some other woman instead of Sharifa had been there, she would have tried to

blackmail or browbeat Khalil into divorcing her. But now, all she could do was to wring her hands and compromise.

The next few days she tried to concentrate on her studies and follow the regimen prescribed by Zaheda aunty. Soon her skin was glowing – clear of blemishes and acne.

“You look lovely, my dear, ” said Zaheda aunty – who arrived a day before Altaf and his family – giving her an admiring look.

Sadia, however, felt her heart freeze at the thought of her meeting with Altaf. She didn’t know how she would react, if he liked her. But under pressure from her mother and aunt she dressed up for the occasion.

It was nearly 7 pm when they arrived and she was shocked to learn that Khalil too had been invited and was already there in the drawing room with them.

“Why is he here?” She asked trying to still the panic in her voice.

“I called him. He is the son-in-law. He has a right to be here.” Aunt Zahida informed.

“Really! Does he also have a say in the selection?”

“Can. But the decision will be yours. Now let’s go in,” her mother said adjusting her dupatta.

She swallowed hard and walked into the drawing room. The moment she entered, her eyes fell on Khalil and her heart missed a beat. She quickly lowered her eyes and walked and sat near Altaf's mother who beamed at her admiringly: "God be praised, Sadia has grown into a beautiful girl."

She looked up and saw the approving gleam in Altaf's bespectacled eyes. He was a neatly dressed, average-looking, somber-faced young man – so different from Khalil. She turned away trying to hide her disappointment: she didn't feel any attraction for him.

Her mother however seemed keen about the match. "I was so happy when Zaheda brought Altaf's proposal. It is difficult to get such eligible boys, nowadays."

"For that you should thank Khalil's parents. They praised Sharifa's so much, we immediately agreed." Altaf's father said.

"Yes", confirmed Altaf's mother. "Sharifa is such a gentle, loving girl and such a good homemaker."

"I am really blessed to have Sharifa as my life partner." She heard Khalil say and a stab of jealousy and hatred for Sharifa mingled with anger for Khalil pierced her. If he thought he could assuage his conscience by palming her off on Altaf, then he was a damn fool.

But the main problem was convincing her mother, who the very next day started pressing her to accept the proposal.

“What is lacking in him? On what grounds should we refuse him?” She asked.

“He is not my type.”

“What’s that? She asked puzzled. “Do you like someone?”

“No. But, I don’t like Altaf.”

“What is the reason for your dislike?”

“There is no particular reason. I don’t want to get married yet.”

“His parents aren’t in a hurry. They will have the engagement now and the marriage after six months. They said you can continue your studies after marriage and are not averse to your working. What more do you want, ungrateful child?”

Sadia couldn’t hold back her resentment any longer, “I want a husband as smart and amiable as Sharifa’s. After all I am so much better looking.”

“Shut up, you vixen! What do you have, except a pretty face? Your vile temperament will not change. You were always competing with your sister, snatching her things. You have forgotten that for two years after your

father's death, till his pension was released, she did tuitions after college – so that you could complete school.”

“I know you always preferred her to me.”

“Yes, because, unlike you, she understood my difficulties. With my failing health, I don't wish to delay your marriage. I have decided to accept the proposal.”

Despite Sadia's pleas, her mother gave consent and it was agreed that a week later they would have the engagement in a small ceremony. Sadia was heartbroken: the very thought of living her whole life with Altaf seemed unbearable. She was mad with Khalil for going out of the way to facilitate the engagement. Moreover, he was not taking her calls. She, therefore decided to confront him. She went to his office and barged into his room. He was taken back seeing her.

"What's the matter?"

Are you asking me? You know I don't want to marry Altaf. You know I love you.”

He looked pained, “I am sorry Sadia, for whatever happened. For your sister's sake, I beg you to forget and forgive... ”

"I love you. “She cried embracing him.

He gently disengaged himself, whispering, "Take hold of yourself Sadia. I cannot leave Sharifa.

She moved away from him, her eyes blazing, "So you love her?"

"Yes."

Let's see if Sharifa will remain with you when she learns..."

"I beg you, Sadia spare Sharifa. She is not in a condition ...please for the sake of our son... our unborn ..." Khalil broke into tears.

Sadia turned away and walked out of the room unable to bear his tears; she realized the intensity of his love for Sharifa. Helpless and despondent she mulled desperate options: running away and even committing suicide by taking an overdose of the Glory Lily paste. Then an evil voice whispered a way out of her predicament: she tried to still the voice, but it persisted.

A few days before the engagement ceremony, Sharifa came over to stay as Khalil had to attend an urgent court case in Dehradun. She looked very pale and Khalil seemed very concerned about her wellbeing and relaxed only after many assurances from her mother.

In the night, since Sharifa wasn't keen to have dinner, her mother asked Sadia to make soup for her. While making the soup, she remembered the paste

which aunt Zaheda had given her, and like one possessed, she stirred a large spoonful of it into the bowl.

Placing the bowl in a tray, desperately stilling her agitated mind, trying to silence her conscience, she walked to her mother's room where Sharifa was resting and stopped short, hearing Sharifa's pleading voice.

"Ma, Sadia doesn't seem happy about the marriage. Please don't force her."

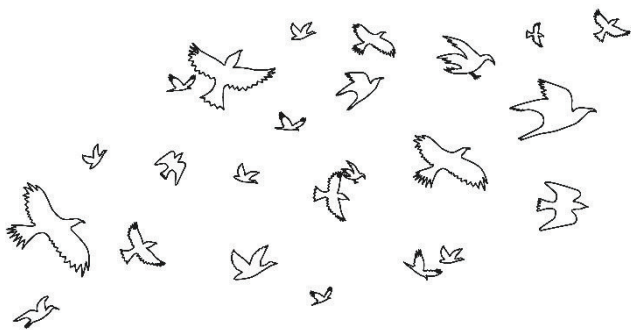
"You always take her side. Now be reasonable. What is lacking in the boy except that he is not dashing – flamboyant? She is a very superficial girl. She doesn't know what is good for her."

"Ma give her some time. Let her exams be over. She is so hassled. I haven't seen her so disturbed and sad before."

Sadia felt contrite: like umpteen times before, Sharifa was taking her side, she was concerned about her happiness, her well-being. As she stood hesitant and confused, her eyes met her little nephew's – he had toddled to the door and was staring at her– his eyes innocent and trusting. Disconcerted by his innocent gaze, she hastily walked back to the kitchen, as her mother came and picked him up. Her heart was thumping badly. Her hands were numb. The trust in the child's eyes brought forth the memory of a nightmarish incident, from the deep recesses of her mind like a burst

of lightening, shaking her very being. The incident had taken place when they had been visiting their grandmother's farm in the village. She was about seven years old and liked chasing the chickens and the goats on the field. One late afternoon, when Sharifa and her grandmother were sleeping and her parents had gone visiting relatives in a nearby town, she had wandered out and had chased the chickens far across the empty deserted fields. She soon realized that she had gone too far off into unfamiliar land and the sun was setting. Nervous and frightened, she started running as darkness gathered around, and fell into a deep pit. Terrified she screamed for help, but the house was far away and the fields deserted. Then it started to thunder, lightning flashed across the darkening sky and rain started pouring, drenching her, muffling the sound of her cries as she howled miserably. The incessant rain lashed her face, and to her horror water started filling in the pit. Panic seized her and with all her might she called out to Sharifa and like magic she heard Sharifa's answering call. Anxious that Sharifa shouldn't miss her – she screamed, "Help me! I am in the pit." Then a light flashed across the darkness and she heard the sound of men's voices. Moments later a torch flashed on her face and she saw Sharifa's dear face, contorted with crying. With her were the two farm hands who pulled her out. Sharifa hugged her and cried with joy- seeing her safe and sound.

That night, as their grandmother tucked her in a warm bed, she had asked Sadia, what would have happened to her, if Sharifa hadn't come to rescue her? Sadia remembered replying very confidently that she trusted her sister to always be there when she needed her. And in all those years Sharifa hadn't broken that trust. But what had she done? She had responded to her love and trust with such perfidy. Tears of repentance streamed down her cheeks as she poured the soup into the sink.



RENUNCIATION

As the train entered Palakkad town – the entry point to Kerala from Coimbatore, Swami Surya Narayan was unable to resist the wave of nostalgia which swept over him at the sight of the familiar landscape and the feel of the balmy breeze on his shaven head. He had left Kerala as Ravi Kumar thirty years ago. Nostalgia, sentimentality, emotional bonding to family, home, material wealth was forbidden in the ascetic life he had entered. And despite his vows and the Renunciation ceremony, for the nth time in his life, the thought that nibbled his mind returned: What had he renounced? Wealth? He had none. Parents? They had died when he was sixteen. His siblings Sunil and Shanti who had been twelve and ten at the time of their death in a bus accident were well

settled. Shanti was blissfully married to an army officer and had a bonny baby; Sunil had become an IPS officer and was posted in Orissa. They didn't need him nor did his old grandmother who had her two sons and a brood of grandchildren to take care of.

As far as career was concerned he had been just a petty clerk in the Post office which he had joined at age eighteen to fend for the family. And the idea of marriage and settling down he had given up when he was twenty, on the very day he learnt that Martha had entered the nunnery. So, when just before his twenty sixth birthdays he decided to leave home and take *Sanyas*, he wondered what he was actually renouncing. Just memories and the feel of the sea breeze and the sight of the emerald green paddy fields and the swaying coconut palms, and yes, the cool water in the ponds of his native village...

Thirty years was a long time to be away from the land of his birth. Most of the years as a student were arduous, the discipline strict as he mastered the Vedas and ancient Philosophy, spend hours in meditation. And then there was the awesome ceremony when his Guru named him Swami Surya Narayan. He was now head of one of the important units of the order and had been selected to conduct meditation camps in Kerala for a duration of three months!

As he entered the land he had been born in and grew to manhood he was certain that no one would

recognize him in his saffron clothes with a grey grizzly beard, lean cheeks, and thin unsmiling lips to be the same strapping handsome, fresh-faced, clean-shaven young man, who acted in epic dramas in Ernakulum. But in Perumbavoor, in the *tharvad* which his great-grandfather had built, he wasn't so sure. His aunt and cousins, who had seen his father when he was in his thirties, would definitely discern the resemblance- that is if they were still there. He had heard that Kerala was urbanizing very fast and many families were leaving the rural areas for the cities. In his mind flashed his grandfather's small estate of 15 acres, and he remembered the paddy fields and the rubber plantations surrounded by coconut palms and dotted by small ponds, some filled with fish and others in which ducks waddled placidly. It was ten miles from the town of Perumbavoor, and these fertile green acres in land crammed Kerala was equivalent to 40 acres in Northern India, especially Eastern Utter Pradesh, in which he spent most of his ascetic years. He wondered if the hillock was still there - the one which had rubber trees on it.

Suddenly the sight of the spires of the huge Syric - Malabar Cathedral of Our Lady of Lourdes brought him to the present, as the train moved into Trissur - the temple town where Martha's grandmother lived and where she had been taken forcibly by her parents. He was told that she had entered the convent and taken her vows

as a nun. He wondered in which diocese she was – if she was in Kerala.

At the station, two nuns got in and as they made their way past his berth, he had a brief glimpse of their faces: one was young and the other middle-aged, both somber-faced, dark complexioned. Despite all his attempts through the years to suppress her memory, Martha's face sprang in his mind – the dark melting eyes, the fine upturned nose, the glowing olive complexion, black glossy hair, and the slim, graceful figure. But like him, she too must have changed and now would be middle-aged and probably clumsy and stout.

And what about her father's curio shop in Perumbavoor which contained brass and copper lamps for puja and statues of popular deities and saints. Was it still there? He remembered that it was there that he had seen Martha when he went to purchase a lamp for his grandfather's puja room. It was late evening. She was helping her father, as she did so every day after college. He had liked a brass lamp with five petals, which was located in the corner of the shop. As she walked beside him he was conscious of the fragrance of jasmine powder, the copper sheen of her glowing skin and her cute nose. She was quite tall, reaching up to the lobe of his ears, perhaps five feet five inches...

“Oh God!” He murmured realizing that he was lapsing into those memories he had suppressed so brutally.

But memories have a way of impinging on you when you most desire to resist them. When the train drew into Aluva, where passengers for Perumbavoor alighted, and where he had worked for some time in the Post office, a plethora of images (painful and happy) surged in his mind. It was enroute from Aluva to Perumbavoor that the bus in which his parents were travelling had met with an accident. They had been rushed to hospital but were declared dead on arrival. He remembered the horrible night their bodies were brought to the *tharavad* (the traditional family house of the landed families), where the last rites took place. In one corner of their land, beyond the paddy fields and rubber plantation, a spot of 300 sq. yards had been earmarked, screened by coconut palms and rubber plants, for the family cremation ground. He remembered, the desire to renounce the world, had come to him as he stood watching the flames rising from the pyre. It had become a resolve the day he heard Martha had entered a nunnery.

The cremation ground encircled by trees gradually became known as the ‘sacred grove’ and his grandmother had decreed that no tree in this grove could be cut. She went there often, late evening. As rays of the setting sun suffused the grove with its soft light, she sat and

meditated and said she felt the presence of the departed. He had gone there, on the eve of his departure, but unfortunately, he didn't have any such experience.

He noticed that Aluva station had been enlarged. It was now being connected to the Metro rail. The Post office in which he had worked – if it was still located there, was a km away. A week after his visit to her father's shop Martha had walked into the Post office to purchase some Postal Stationery. He had been surprised that she had come all the way to Aluva to buy envelopes and Postcards rather than buy at Perumbavoor where she lived. She said she had just alighted at the station from Trissur where she went every weekend to her grandmother's place. And after that, as their friendship developed her visits to the Post office increased. Not to buy stamps or conduct Postal business, but just to meet him. His colleagues at the Post Office encouraged the romance by manning his counter while they visited a restaurant and spent time together. Later they would meet near the canal which ran past his fields, just a mile away from the sacred grove under the shadow of the rubber plant covered hillock which rose from his family fields.

Then one day suddenly their idyllic romance ended. It was when they were walking down the cobbled path in the old Jewish quarters in Cochin that her brother saw them. And a terrible scene had followed – right outside

the synagogue. He tried to shake off her memory as it brought in its wake that passion-filled night near the pond where she came to inform him that she was being sent away to her grandmother's place. She had high fever and her body burned beneath his. She had pleaded with him – to take her away to Bombay (now Mumbai) where they could start a new life. But saddled as he was with the responsibility of his siblings he ruefully declined.

“Swami Ji, Namaste.” Two young men in saffron robes, disciples of his Ashram were greeting him. The train had drawn into Ernakulum station where he was to alight. On the station, there were was a group of disciples waiting with marigold garlands to welcome him.

Inside the secluded Ashram, surrounded by lush greenery, some miles away from the noise and traffic of Ernakulum, he conducted his meditation classes. And once again the discipline and commitment he had inculcated over the years made his mind calm and tranquil and he again connected with the Divine. He was no longer plagued by the memories of the past that had engulfed him when he had journeyed to Ernakulum.

11

Just 50 km away in Cochin town his sister Shanti who lived with her adopted son Gopal, heard from her neighbor Mala that a Swamiji who hailed from Kerala had come to Ernakulum. Mala's son, Prakash a lad in his

early twenties who worked in the Post office had seen him being welcomed by the monks in saffron robes at the station. Mala had known that Shanti's brother had left home and had joined an ascetic order. Before informing Shanti, she tried to ascertain more details from Prakash. No photograph of Ravi Kumar was available; he had destroyed all his photographs before he left. But when she learnt that the Swami was tall and in his mid-fifties, an age and height that seemed to match with the description Shanti had given her, she asked Prakash to locate the ashram he was residing in. The Post office, she knew had a vast network and Postmen were well versed with the localities. Many a time through their familiarity of the place and local contacts they correctly delivered vaguely addressed letters.

Prakash through his contacts in the Railway Mail Service was able to get the chart of the passengers travelling in 2nd AC on the day he had seen the Swami alight and learnt his name and age. Then the next stage of inquiry was the most difficult: to trace the exact Ashram where he was residing. Prakash had no clue of the different orders and their specific Ashrams. Nor was he well placed in the Postal hierarchy to elicit such co-operation from the Postmen working in Ernakulum district. But his persistence paid off and he was able to locate the Ashram where Swami Surya Narayan was undertaking meditation classes.

When Shanti heard this news, she was consumed by a strange mix of excitement, fear and doubt.

‘But, how can we be sure he is Ravi Chettan?’ She asked afraid of even hoping to see her beloved elder brother. Time and fate had dealt with her cruelly. A couple of years after he had left home, her husband and infant son had died in a road accident. Worse was to follow: her brother Sunil married the hoity-toity daughter of a well-placed IAS officer, who was reluctant to have Shanti stay with them. Sunil sent her some money – a pittance really which she supplemented by giving tuitions. But now Gopal provided her with all the comforts she needed. He had done well. He had passed the bank entrance exams and was now Manager in the local branch. She had wanted him to get married but he was reluctant to do so. Though he said he was afraid his bride may turn out to be hostile to her, like her sister-in-law, she suspected it was also self-doubt. He was uncertain about his parentage – of his antecedents. She could see the questions in his eyes – questions she found it difficult to answer. She wondered if she should sound him about the Swami and then decided not to. Once Prakash was able to get an audience from the Swami, she would request him to accompany her.

And that opportunity came much sooner than she had expected. The Ashram was located just 50 km away from Cochin and Prakash had managed to get an

audience with the Swami, on Friday afternoon just a day before he left for Trivandrum where he was holding a meditation camp.

But Shanti had a difficult time persuading Gopal to accompany her. He considered the whole exercise to be a wild goose chase which would only end in disappointment. But he didn't have the heart to refuse her, seeing the hope in her eyes. So, he took a day's leave and they drove down to the Ashram.

111

Ravi Kumar couldn't believe he had heard the young student correctly when he informed him that a woman called Shanti and her son Gopal wanted to meet him.

"Shanti, did you say?" he asked wonderstruck.

The young man nodded, "She is very keen to meet you. It is with great difficulty that she has been able to locate you ..."

He knew no other Shanti than his sister. The thought of seeing Shanti again after all these years gave him goose pimples. Should he meet her? Would he be able to control his emotions? But then another thought struck him: what is the strength of vows and renunciation if he couldn't control his feelings.

“Should I give time tomorrow morning, since you are leaving the day after?” The student asked.

He nodded hardly hearing what the young man was saying. His mind was whirling: he couldn't believe he was to see Shanti after all those years. How had she managed to trace him? Was she coming alone? Was her husband accompanying her with little Gopal? Oh, he couldn't be little any longer. Of that he was certain. Must be nearly thirty-one now, married with children. That night he couldn't sleep. His sister's lovely face, fair smooth skin, thick black glossy hair swam before his eyes. In his mind's eyes were two images of her and both kept impinging on each other: the one before marriage and the other after. Before, was of a simple country girl, who just applied talcum powder and kajal and never wore trendy clothes. Sheltered and protected, she grew up unaware of the ways of the world and was married immediately after graduation. But after marriage she changed: she acquired a chic and sophistication that made her unrecognizable in a few months. Everyone in Perumbavoor had been awed by her style and poise. She looked like a film star.

By morning Ravi Kumar had mentally sketched a picture of Shanti as he imagined she would look. He was certain she would still be sophisticated and attractive, though albeit matronly. Perhaps like the Bollywood film actress when they hit fifty. After performing Yoga and

the daily Puja he took an hour-long meditation class. He had just finished the session when one of the students announced that the lady and her son had come, and asked his permission to usher them into the audience hall. He nodded and walked slowly towards the hall. He felt calm after the meditation session. He walked with measured steps, his gaze lowered and took his seat on the raised platform.

The lady came and touched his feet. A wave of shock passed through him as he stared at her. The woman was thin, pale with graying hair tightly coiled in a bun. She was dressed in white sans jewelry and make-up. There was no Tali around her neck. But she was Shanti and the realization hit him like lightning: she was a widow. And despite all the self-control he had exercised for years through meditation, and the elaborate vows he had taken of renunciation, tears rolled down his eyes.

“Shanti!” He whispered.

“Ravi Chettan.” Shanti’s eyes were wide, her voice choking with emotion “it is really you!”

Then the next moment her head was on his chest as she clung and wept. Overwhelmed by her weeping and his grief at her widowhood, he completely forgot for a few moments the vows he had taken when he was inducted as a Swami by his Guru on the banks of the Ganga. But years of discipline enabled him to control his

emotions and he said as calmly as possible. “Shanti I am sorry for what happened to you. Where is your son Gopal?”

She gestured to the young man beside her. Ravi Kumar looked at the young man who stared at him with “Martha’s eyes “and another bolt of lightning hit him and darkness descended before his eyes. The next moment he slid on the ground, unconscious. He was rushed to the hospital. He had suffered a massive heart attack. Shanti wept and prayed for his recovery. Gopal stared at the Swami in a daze: he couldn’t understand the shock in the Swami’s eyes when his eyes met his. He was also surprised that the Swami’s nose resembled his. Was he related to him?

Hours later he saw him open his eyes and whisper, “Martha. Where is Martha?”

“She is no more. She left him with me.” Shanti replied.

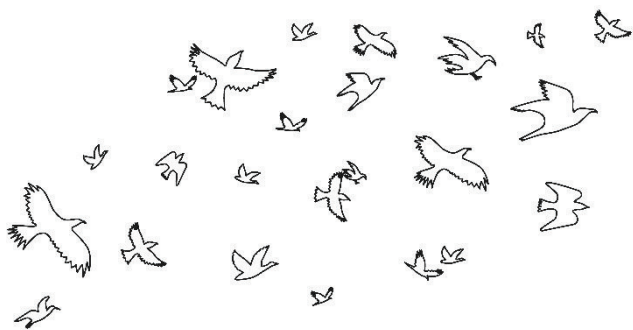
“She named him Gopal?” He heard the Swami ask.

“No. I did, as my Gopal was no more.” It was clear to Gopal that the Swami was his father! All the pieces of the puzzle which had bewildered him for so long now seemed to fall in place. He now understood why his mother Martha had left her family and moved to Bombay. Why when she was about to die she had left him with Shanti who had changed his name from Alex

to Gopal. And with understanding came empathy. He reached out and gently touched Swami's hand.

Ravi Kumar bit his lips in pain. All the vows and penance of renunciation hadn't prepared him for such an eventuality – such sorrow. He had never thought that when he took the renunciation vow, he was forsaking his child, Martha and his widowed sister. And he was acutely aware that despite the Vows and the Renunciation ceremony, he had not passed the test. For can a living, flesh and blood man just by the performance of a death ceremony, really die? Can one really renounce love and responsibility till the last breath?

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A DIFFERENT SKY

As the Air India plane took off from Heathrow Airport Ayesha let the tears she had kept in check flow down her cheeks. She was leaving England where she had been born and lived all of her eighteen years except for brief sojourns in Dubai and Mumbai- perhaps for good. But this sense of displacement had begun more than a year back when her father had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. As the countdown started, he became obsessed with the afterlife, and regretted digressing from practicing his faith, after Jean filled the vacuum left by Ayesha's mother's death, nearly a decade ago. As the dreaded disease spread its tentacles he desperately turned to God and prayers. He also became very anxious about Ayesha's future. For all his emotional

bonding with Jean and love for Christopher, her son from an earlier marriage, he was apprehensive of her influence on Ayesha and fearful of her marrying a non-Muslim. A few days before his death he had called his sister Shamim and made her promise to take Ayesha to her house in Sussex after his demise or send her to her maternal grandparents in India

His death had therefore dramatically changed her life. She lost her home, friends and her freedom. She was forbidden to meet Jean and Christopher to whom she was very close. Now her life was strictly monitored by her aunt under the guidance of the Mufti of the local Islamic Center. She had to don the Indian attire of Salwar Kameez and cover her head but was fortunately exempted from wearing the Niqab which her cousin Amena did when she stepped out of the house. Her daily routine was rigorous: besides attending the local school and preparing for her A levels, she attended the Islamic school for learning the Quran, study the Life of the Prophet and his Companions and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs as also the fundamentals of Islamic Jurisprudence. And all the while she was made acutely conscious of her gender which determined her gaze, her garments, her speech, her gait, in brief her whole personality. She had never ever been so conscious of being a Female –her genitals now seemed to determine all aspects of her life and world view!

“Are you a vegetarian or non veg?” She heard the Airhostess, ask her co-passenger. Now that was not the only choice she had to make. If it was non veg, she had to ascertain whether it was Halal. She didn’t want to ask, so she just mumbled vegetarian even before the airhostess asked her. Exhausted she stuffed herself with whatever was placed before her and dropped off to sleep, waking up just minutes before the flight landed in Mumbai.

As soon as the plane landed, frenetic activity followed: belts were unbuckled, mobiles switched on, people scrambled to open overhead lockers and made a beeline to get off the plane. As she took down her cabin baggage her mobile rang. It was grandfather and as rehearsed for days, she greeted him with the customary Salaam and asked about his and grandmother’s health. He sounded quite jovial when he informed, “You can identify me from afar. I look distinguished with my silvery locks, blue jacket over a Khadi Kurta.”

Half an hour later, she found him standing with a “Welcome Ayesha” placard. He was tall and distinguished looking –the old Nawab type. He reached out and hugged her warmly: “You look so much like your mother. Your grandmother’s going to get very sentimental. So be prepared for being drowned in her tears.”

As they drove from the airport to aunt Roshan's flat in Cuffe Parade nearly 30km away in the warm, humid rank smelling air, she felt she was in a different world, nay in many worlds: of skyscrapers, corporate offices, glitzy Malls, shanties, mosques, churches, temples, all co existing around crowded roads cramped with cars, buses, auto rickshaws, scooters, motor bikes, beggars, urchins selling wares at traffic lights! As she looked around bewildered, grandfather beamingly announced,

"You are just in time for Asma's engagement party. It's in the evening. The match was fixed just a few days back. The boy is in Jeddah - a bright boy, decent family."

"Today!" She gasped. Now this was too much to ingest: she had hardly stepped in the country and she had to face a new set of people. Life seemed to have become a roller coaster ride or one of those action-packed Hindi films. As she expected there was great excitement in the brightly decorated spacious flat, which overlooked the Arabian sea. Grandmother, still chic at seventy -unlike aunt Roshan, a successful lawyer who had wrapped her dowdy self in yards of Muslin - was all agog to meet her. Her bright eyes were bleary with tears. "You are even prettier than she was at this age. She didn't have such a glowing skin. Must be the English weather. You are going to be the cynosure of all eyes at the engagement"

Grandfather laughed "But the men won't get a chance to see her. Poor guys." The bridegroom 's side

had wanted a segregation of men and women. Hence the boy's side ceremony was to be in their neighbor Mr. Jaleel's house. Grandmother sighed, "Life styles are changing so fast and it is the young who are calling the shots. Now girls cover themselves in front of cousins and male relatives. But never mind, Ayesha will accompany us in a burqa. Men can discern beauty even behind the Niqab." And everyone laughed at her remarks

But the events of the evening proved grandmother right: the gravitation pull of the sexes defied the Purdah and the Burqa. She had accompanied her grandparents and male relatives to Mr. Jaleel's place where grandfather was to present the ring and garland the bridegroom whose mother would perform the same ceremony on Asma. As per Islamic tradition, the bride and groom could not touch each other before the Nikah. This was such a pity because Asma looked lovely in a magenta pink Sharara and smelled heavenly after the elaborate aromatic beauty treatment.

The groom was a good-looking boy with a bushy beard, very particular about following the fundamentals of the faith and was considered extremely fortunate for being posted so close to Mecca that he could perform the Friday prayers in the mosque near the House of God. His family members too, frequently visited the Holy site. Feeling lost in the gathering of bearded men and black shrouded women, Ayesha looked around for an escape

and suddenly became conscious of being watched. Turning around her eyes met the piercing gaze of a young man. He was different from the assemblage: tall good looking, clean shaven, casually dressed in shirt and pants. He smiled and she hastily looked away and moved towards the divan where the groom and his parents were seated for the ceremony. She heard her grandfather call out:

“Ayesha, get the ring.”

She handed the ring which he presented to the boy, who displayed it to the bright-eyed relatives and friends gathered around and then slipped it in his index finger. Everyone said a prayer in Arabic and grandfather garlanded the groom, and then his parents, as sweetmeats and dry fruits were distributed around.

That night, sleep eluded Ayesha. Within twenty-four hours she seemed to have traversed continents and different civilizations: London, Jean, Christopher, Dad and her friends all seemed to belong to another life but to which she still cleaved and dreaded this baffling new life. But in the disturbing kaleidoscope of images, one lingered on: the piercing gaze of the good-looking young man. Who was he? She wondered before sleep overtook her.

In the morning grandmother was very excited. Even in her shapeless burqa Ayesha's fair beauty had attracted

attention and grandmother had at least three proposals lined up –all from rich devout Muslim families.

“They are very rich and the boys are religious. They were impressed by your attire and behavior. I should congratulate Shamim for training you so well.”

“But I don’t want to marry so soon. I wish to study further.” Ayesha pleaded

“But they are all so well to do, you don’t have to work.” Asma intervened.

“Ok.” Grandfather said. “No hurry. Let her take her time. She is still young. What do you want to study?”

“Not really decided. When Dad was ill and I was looking after him, I thought I will become a doctor or nurse. But Shamim aunty says Muslim girls should not become nurses. So, I was thinking of taking Biology and...”

“Admissions are over for the degree courses. You can do some short courses. How about fashion designing?” Asma suggested. Ayesha shrugged her shoulders -she didn’t feel inclined towards it.

In the week that followed Ayesha realized to her dismay that the world she now inhabited was really narrow: it was so restricted and so regimented, it seemed robotic. The day centered around ablutions, prayers, planning elaborate meals, playing host to friends and

relatives who came visiting, return visits, shopping, attending marriage parties etc. The men were busy in their businesses which didn't tie them down to a 9-5 job and they discussed Halal (religiously accepted) ways of making money which meant not taking interest etc. They were obsessed with following the most correct interpretation of Islam (as directed by the respective religious school) which centered around the manner of conducting prayers, keeping the right sized beard and ensuring that the women conducted themselves with propriety. Obedience to husband and male guardians was the hall mark of woman's piety and goodness. Ayesha couldn't take it anymore. There was no place here for music, art, theatre, cinema, books -all those things which were part of her life before her father developed conscience pangs. But why were these considered impious? Why was piety confined to ritual of prayer and denial of innocent pleasures? She was supposed to erase her past-it was not Islamic. And the attitude of her grandparents was puzzling. Though quite liberal and fun loving (they had a Television set and a state-of-the-art Music system in their room), but they didn't interfere with the life style adopted by their zealous family They had accepted it. But she couldn't. The future seemed bleak. Then suddenly life took a new turn. One morning when she responded to the bell, in walked the enigmatic young man and smiled,

“Hello. I am Asad Mr. Jaleel's son.”

Grandfather introduced them to each other. Asad was a doctor and he had come to check grandfather's Blood Pressure, as he had been feeling a little uneasy. While she served tea, with relief she heard them discussing not religion but the new Shahrukh Khan film. Grandfather drew her into the conversation asking Asad's advice for undertaking a useful course. He advised her to do a course in medical technology. After he left, aunt Roshan scoffed, "He is looking for an assistant in his camps. His parents are quite fed up of him. Mr. Jaleel wanted to set up a clinic and diagnostic center but he prefers working at the Municipal Hospital and is associated with some charitable NGO which conducts camps in Slums and remote God forsaken villages." Ayesha suddenly felt a window open in her cloistered life. She got herself enrolled for a Diploma in Medical Technology course. Grandfather encouraged her while others frowned on her friendship with Asad specially when she assisted him in the medical camps in various slums of the city.

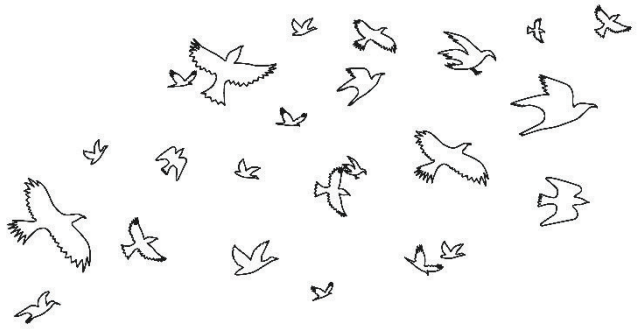
"People are talking badly about you. You are damaging your reputation," they chided. It was considered un-Islamic to go around with a man who was not your Mehram (one who is not your husband or blood relation). They criticized his lack of piety: he didn't pray, he didn't keep a beard, he had non-Muslim friends. And worst he didn't care about money.

“You are making a big mistake. Asma warned. “It will be tough living with him. You don’t know when he will take off to the villages.”

“You are assuming too much. First let him ask me.”

But two years later he did. It was while she was assisting him in a health camp of malnourished scrawny children most of them orphans in a Madrassa located in a slum. In the past one-year Ayesha had seen his concern and devotion and she realized as she watched the joy on the faces of the children he was attending to, the true meaning of piety. It was not in ritual prayer but in trying to brighten the lives of the sick and the needy. And with it came the consciousness of her heart’s desire: She loved Asad and wanted to be a part of his life. He seemed to sense her train of thoughts. “I am going on transfer to Parbhani next month. Will you come with me?”

She smiled and nodded her head. As their eyes met, she realized for the first time since her arrival, that she had come home. And a warm glow filled her heart at the thought of their future together. The sky looked different –bright and shining and the breeze felt cooler.



FAREWELL AUNT HUSNA

In an anguished voice my brother informed that Husna Aunty was no more. For a few minutes, it didn't register. Though in her late eighty's, she was fit and looked twenty years younger than her age and was as charming as ever. She was my dad's cousin, and had been married in the family – to her cousin, who was also dad's cousin. A feisty lady – she personified charm, grace and dignity and who besides being an exemplary home maker was able to make a difference in the lives of many people. As the news sank in, I felt devastated. Husna Aunty's death marked the end of an era of gracious living, generous hospitality and a concern for the old, the feeble and the ailing which some of the old Hyderabadi aristocratic families were known for.

I couldn't attend the funeral as I was in Mumbai. But a few days later, I went to visit uncle, her 90-year-old husband, who was bedridden, in the hundred-year-old haveli which he had inherited from his father, a Nawab. Located in the old city of Hyderabad, it was set in 10 acres of land, surrounded by bungalows of the erstwhile Nawab's extended family and small tenements of his retainers and their families – a habitation of nearly 300 people! Presiding over this huge household and caring for their well fare was one of Husna Aunt's top priorities.

As I made my way, from the Hyderabad airport to the haveli, my memories went back to the summer of 64, the first time I met her in my conscious life. We were visiting Hyderabad, from Calcutta (now Kolkata), where my dad was then posted, on his home town LTC. Hence, we were travelling first class which meant a lot to us. We had never had a whole carriage with plush berths all to ourselves: it was as big as our bedroom, with an attached bathroom! We were therefore very excited at the prospect of spending nearly 20 hrs. in it ~playing our favorite indoor games.

But my mother had a different plan – she had decided to use the time to groom us, to teach us etiquette, so as to prepare us to meet dad's aristocratic relatives who had last seen us as toddlers. They were annoyed when Dad had married outside his aristocratic

clan and she was apprehensive that she would be held responsible for our uncouth ways.

So instead of playing games and generally relaxing, we had to learn the elaborate etiquette system followed in the Nawabi culture while my dad looked on amused. He was busy catching up on his reading. "Bend low, and salaam, and don't raise your head till they bless you. And when you are served, or given an extra helping, salaam them. Say this – don't say that... And don't speak out of turn – be quiet specially you two." She said pointing to me and my younger sister as we were as boisterous as our two brothers. We were quite taken aback, for up till now my parents had never differentiated between us – there were no separate set of rules of behavior for girls.

We were therefore fearful of meeting Dad's awesome relatives and staying in the stifling atmosphere of the family haveli in a joint family, for ten days! I thought I was better off reading my favorite fairy tales in the children's library at Belvedere.

But as the train drew into Hyderabad's Nampally station we had a pleasant surprise –meeting Husna aunty and her husband. I was completely bowled over by her: she was so charming, so pleasant, so gracious and affectionate. She and mom were of the same age and were great friends and uncle was also very fond of Dad. They greeted us with a cheery "Hello."

But then the other inmates of the haveli were different, especially the older generation who seemed to put us under a scanner, critically watching how we dressed, sat, stood, ate, spoke. But thanks to Mom's rigorous lecture, we managed to keep her head high. But if we didn't feel hemmed in, it was due to Husna aunty-who took us out to snazzy shops and happening clubs or just on a drive along the city's Tank Bund area making the visit memorable. Over the years I have marveled how she was able to straddle two worlds so effortlessly.

Then when Dad was posted to Mumbai (then Bombay), and Aunty on her way to USA where many of our relatives had migrated, stayed with us and I became aware of her multifaceted personality. Married at seventeen to her cousin who reportedly had fallen in love with her – she carried on with her studies. She said, she was inspired by my mom, who was the first graduate and post graduate in the family. So, aunty too did the same – and became the first in her family. And like Mom she took to social work. She was instrumental in rescuing a few young girls who were being forcibly married off to old Arabs. But though I admired her, I felt that the credit should also go to Uncle for his unstinted support.

I suddenly came back to the present, as the car halted outside the imposing arch, the entry to the Villa. I felt a lump in my throat. It was the first time I was entering it without her being there to welcome us. We

got down and walked through the wonderful landscaped garden –each flower and stone had been tended under aunt’s supervision. And then into the drawing room where many sad faced relatives sat paying their condolences while our forefathers’ grim portraits on the wall reminded us of the ephemeral nature of life. I walked towards a shelf which had family photos: of Aunt as a bride, as a mother, grandmother, great grandmother, all in a celebratory mood; photos of her smartly turned-out receiving awards from VIPs’ – always smiling, contented with life. I realized that I had had never seen her cry or raise her voice; she was always soft spoken, even tempered – in control of herself. And she was always well turned out, suitably dressed for the occasion.

I went inside – feeling her absence in every nook and corner. In her bedroom, her two-year-old great grandson was calling out for her. His parents looked lost – not knowing how to explain where she had gone.

I walked to her bed side. On the table was a book in Urdu – a translation of Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Letters from a Father to a Daughter* –a compilation of the 31 letters which Nehru wrote to Indira from jail. Inside on the front page, Auntie had written: “A book that inspired me – to be a seeker, of knowledge, to love nature ... to care for the downtrodden and so I translated it in Urdu...”

“Are you going to publish it?” I asked my cousin – her son.

“Yes. It is being published. She had wanted it to be distributed freely in the Urdu schools so that the children could also be inspired by it, as she had been.”

As we stood talking, a young man entered, with a bundle of copies of the book in Urdu. He was Sayeed, Rehmat bi’s son. Rehmat Bi was one of my aunt’s maids. I remembered that he had lost his father when he was about nine and Aunty had taken over the responsibility of his education and also assisted him in setting up a desktop printing press.

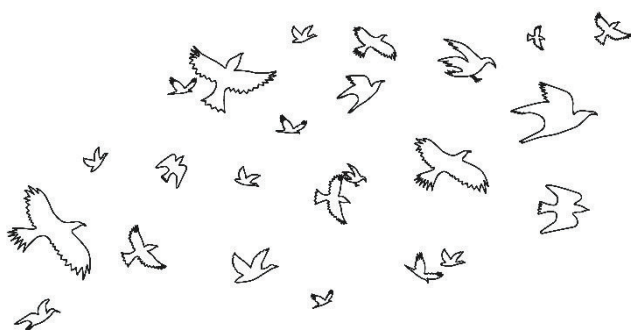
“He refuses to take any money for it – and is also distributing these copies.” My cousin said.

“That’s the least I can do to ...” Sayeed broke off in a choked voice.

My cousin said, “There are many more whose life she had transformed, many whom we didn’t know. They were present at the funeral – they all were remembering her. She has left behind a more lasting legacy than this stone and mortar building and the beautiful garden. Her life was successful.”

I couldn’t but agree to his surmise. She was a wonderful example of a life well lived and would always be an inspiration for us.

“Farewell Aunt.” I whispered as I left the Villa.



CHERISHED

Fatima was in a tizzy: there was just an hour for the bridegroom family to arrive for Naaz's Mehndi ceremony. She had been busy throughout the day or for that matter for the last few days preparing the house for Naaz's wedding. It was a large bungalow with nearly seven bedrooms, a huge drawing cum dining area. But it was inadequate for all the close relatives who planned to stay with them. Hence in one wing she had to make arrangements for the male relatives and in another for the female, besides keeping separate rooms for the elderly members. The spacious drawing cum dining room had been converted into a function hall, decorated with strings of mogra flowers and confetti hangings. Her daughter Rana, along with her cousin had made

exquisite floral designs with rose petals and sprinkled rose water all over. Her husband Azhar had taken care of the exterior arrangements and decorations: a large pavilion had been erected and string of lights twinkled from the roof, the branches of the trees and flower bushes in the spacious garden.

Close relatives had started arriving and while Azhar received them, she rushed to the bedroom to get dressed. She opened the closet and took out the Zardozi embroidered pale yellow silk sari specially purchased for the occasion. She hadn't been keen to wear this color but it was the theme color of the ceremony. It made her skin look sallow and reminded her of her disastrous Mehendi ceremony nearly twenty-four years back. She shook off the memory of that evening and concentrated in pleating the folds of the sari when her mobile rang. It was from Parveen, Naaz's maternal aunt! Fatima knew why she had rung up. Obviously to remonstrate for not inviting them to the wedding! She picked up the phone and was taken back to hear Azra, Naaz's mother's shrill voice. She disconnected the call angrily. How did she have the gumption to call her. But then Azra could do anything, which was common knowledge. The mobile rang. She ignored it; she had to get dressed soon. She quickly draped the sari, applied some makeup while the mobile kept persistently ringing. Before leaving the room she decided to answer it otherwise Azra would continue to pester her. This time it was Parveen. She was pleading:

“Fatima, Azra is here. She wants to meet her daughter just for a few minutes.”

“But for that, you will have to take her father’s permission. I can’t do anything.” She replied curtly.

As she disconnected, she heard the sounds of the dholak reverberating in the house. Rana and the other girls had choreographed a number of film songs connected with the Mehndi ceremony. The bejeweled, vivacious young girl cousins all dressed in yellow ghagra choli’s swirled on the floor, their skins aglow and fragrant with constant rubbing of yellow turmeric and sandalwood, around the glowing, blushing and demure bride bedecked with flowers, her fair hands and feet intricately patterned with henna designs.

Quite a few of the relatives were sitting on the comfortable chairs lining the wall, clapping and tapping the ground in tune with the music. She went around welcoming them and they embraced her and sent blessings on the bride for a happy life. But quite a few were aware that Azra had landed in Hyderabad and was keen to attend the wedding: she had been sending pleading messages to them to request her ex-husband Aslam to allow her to meet Naaz, just for a few minutes. Fatima was certain that she would not depart after the meeting her but stay on taking center stage, causing consternation to her ex-husband and embarrassment to

the family. But that was Azra, uncaring, unrepentant and totally self-centered.

“What audacity!” One of the elderly aunts murmured, “to expect to be invited. It’s good that Naaz does not have her traits and was brought up by Fatima ...” Fatima moved away. She had heard herself being praised for her patience, her goodness her graciousness many times and Azra being derided for her capricious and wayward behavior. But what had she attained for her patience - a life of compromise. In place of the good looking and highly qualified Aslam an American Citizen, to whom she had been engaged, she had to marry his younger handicapped brother! And all because Azra had succeeded in captivating him with her beauty and vivacity. On the day of her Mehendi ceremony, they had got secretly married and to save face, her father and father-in-law persuaded her to marry Azhar. She had been shattered: at 26 she had been upstaged by her 19-year-old student, ditched simply because she wasn’t beautiful enough. Her future seemed bleak-her chances of finding an eligible match remote. She had nothing against Azhar -he was kind and considerate -but it was a compromise and it rankled badly and did till date. Hence, she felt a sense of poetic justice when after a few years Aslam came back heartbroken with two small children because Azra had left him for his much younger cousin!

“Fatima aunty”, she heard Omer, Naaz’s brother call out to her, from the verandah and saw Azhar shuffling towards her, “Uncle wants to speak to you.” She knew the moment she saw Azhar that Azra had got in touch with him. Azhar asked Omer to attend to the guest and only when he was out of hearing muttered “She has spoken to you also.”

“Yes. What can we do. You can at best ask Aslam bhai.”

He was silent for some time trying to marshal his thoughts.

“I find it very dif.. fi.. cult.” he stammered

“It is not easy. But you will have to. The decision is his.”

“But how does she expect him to agree after all that she did to him?

Fatima shrugged her shoulders. “Please go and ask him. I have to go back to the hall to start the ceremony.”

As he limped his way to the male section of the house, Fatima wondered what Aslam’s reaction would be to the request. She had been instrumental in causing him so much humiliation and suffering. When he had divorced her and brought the children to India, she had filed a suit in the US Court accusing him of taking the children away without her consent and he was

imprisoned for nearly ten years! When he returned to India, he had drastically aged –at forty-five he was a tired old man. But Azra hadn't given up and pursued the case for custody of the children in the Indian Courts for nearly two years. But she lost the case when the children declared in the court that they wanted to stay with their father. She had however kept track of them through her sister Parveen.

She heard Azhar's shuffle and turning saw him coming towards her with an agitated Aslam, his hands and lips quivering nervously. He mumbled

“Fatima, I have left it to Naaz. You ask her.”

“There are so many people there...”

” But we have to let her know. Any way she will come to know. Azra must be messaging all and sundry.”

Fatima walked into the function hall just as Rana was coming out to call her.

“Where were you mum? Everyone is waiting for you.”

Without answering her daughter, she walked to Naaz and gently lifting her veil whispered “Your mother would like to meet you.”

Naaz startled, opened her eyes wide. “She is here ?!”

“No. She will come if you agree to meet her.”

“And Dad, what does he say?”

“He has left it to you.”

She looked uncertain for a moment, and then said resolutely. “OK, she can come after the ceremony. Once the guests have departed.”

It was past ten when Fatima led Naaz to her bedroom. Azhar had messaged her at about 10 pm that Azra had already arrived and was waiting in their bedroom.

As soon as they stepped in the room, Azra dashed to embrace Naaz crying “Oh Naaz, I am so happy to see you my darling child.” Naaz stiffened and stepped back and calmly looked at her mother. The resemblance was striking as far as complexion and features were concerned but the expression and demeanor was different: she didn’t have her mother’s vivacity and bright eyes. Her eyes were dark liquid black pools, her face, still and calm and her demeanor gentle and composed – a quality which she seemed to have acquired from Fatima.

“Azra wasn’t dissuaded by her daughter’s lack of warmth. “You don’t know how I have longed to see you. You look as I had imagined you would be. Beautiful.”

“Is it something so great to be beautiful? Is it an achievement?”

Azra seemed taken back for a moment but then gushed: “I am so happy that you have found such a good boy. I have always prayed for you to be happily settled in life.”

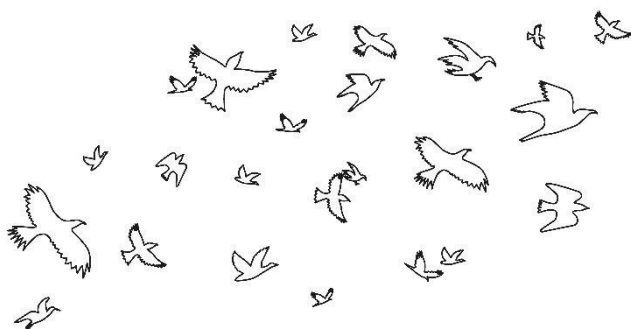
“Yes, do thank God and then Fatima aunty. Whatever we are, Omer and I, it is because of her.”

Azra’s face fell; she swallowed hard.

Fatima remonstrated: “Azra doesn’t have to. One doesn’t thank one’s mother. You know, I didn’t differentiate between you and Rana.”

” Yes, I know. When we were given a choice in court we opted for Dad, but the reason we did was because of you – for the love the devotion and care you have given us.”

Tears streamed down Fatima’s cheeks, as she heard Azra’s sob and Aslam’s sigh. For the first time in her life, she understood the power of sincere, selfless love and years of pain and regret disappeared. She walked over to Naaz and hugged her. For the first time in her life, she felt truly cherished.



MARIGOLD HOUSE

The car screeched to a halt in front of the only double storied house on the street - a dilapidated structure situated amidst over grown weeds and brambles and unhinged windows with broken panes. I couldn't believe this forlorn, desolate place was Marigold House, my maternal grandfather's house. I had spent nearly ten years in this place - right from the time grandmother had brought me here after dad had remarried, a year after my mother's death. I was then 8 years old. I had lived here, and only intermittently visited my dad in Calcutta as Kolkata was then known, during the summer vacations. But even in those few weeks, I had badly missed my grandparents and Marigold House with

its spaciousness, it's beautiful flower crusted garden and the acres of orchards of mangoes and guavas.

Then when I was 18, grandmother died and grandfather thought it was better for me to pursue my higher studies in England, where my father had migrated. And then after grandfather's death, I lost touch with my relatives and Marigold House. The main reason being my maternal uncle created severe fissures in the family by breaking his engagement to his cousin and marrying a waitress in USA. I learnt that this had naturally created a great furor in the closely knit family and all my maternal relatives had decided to sever ties with all of us i. e. grandfather's progeny which included me. Uncle didn't care a damn and settled down in USA and decided to sell of Marigold House. This came as a shock to me, since the house had been an abode of so many memories: of mine and my mother's. But there was little I could do. I couldn't afford to buy the place. I had just completed my studies and was looking around for a job. But a few years later I was surprised to learn that the house was still not sold. Uncle was finding it difficult to find a buyer for it – one who was ready to pay the requisite price for it. I didn't understand what he meant by requisite price? He didn't elaborate. That was nearly two years ago.

Then last week, I was visiting Singapore, and had a halt in Mumbai for a day. Since the house was just 100

km away, I hired a car and drove down, ruminating on the wonderful times I had there. My grandparents had really pampered me: trying to compensate for my mother's absence. They had gone out of their way to make my life comfortable and happy.

I got down from the car, my eyes moist and stared at the ramshackle structure- at the devastation which time and nature had wrought: the walls were moss covered, wild plants were bursting out of crevices and the beautiful lattice covered balcony above the porch was hardly visible so aggressively had the wild creepers entwined into the lattice framework. The garden around the porch had disappeared- only the bougainvillea continued to bloom: their bright red and purple flowers mocking the shabby run down structure. It seemed that place had been shuttered up for ages and it was impossible to make it livable again. I just couldn't visualize staying in it. Perhaps disposing it off was the only solution, I thought dejectedly and cast a sorrowful glance around the house. And then I noticed, I saw a green and orange dupatta blowing amidst the narrow gap of the guava trees which were visible from the broken down garage. It seemed strange that someone could live in there. Someone who dressed in such vibrant colors. Perhaps a young girl. I opened the creaking iron gate and was about to step inside when the driver called out, "Sahib, I don't think it is safe. Any of those unhinged windows can come crashing down any moment."

He was right. Moreover, the grass around the porch was more than two feet high interspersed with thorny brambles and filled with all kinds of insects. I was certain there would be snakes around too. But I was also sure that I had seen some one move. Was the place encroached by miscreants? How had they got in? Who could I ask? The neighborhood had drastically changed. Where once stood the sprawling bungalow of my grandfather's friend Mr. Saxena, opposite our house, there was now a six storied tower- Blue Star Apartment. Perhaps some of the residents in it may be aware of the goings on in this decrepit complex. I therefore made my way across to it. At the blue painted iron gates was the watchman: a middle-aged man with a long streaming gray beard and a haunted look in those eyes. He looked familiar, I could however not place him.

"How long has this house been lying vacant?" I asked him.

He looked at me with a strange expression in his eyes.

"Have you come first time to this area? Are you interested in buying the place?" He asked in a high-pitched voice. I smiled. I wondered how this man would react if I told him that the place belonged to my grandfather. But I didn't. I casually inquired: "Is it for sale?"

"Rafi sahib has been trying to sell it for the last five years. But there are no buyers. Because the place is haunted by chudails and a jinn. "

"Jinn's in the house! Co-habiting with chudails!" I repeated dazedly. But how did he know my uncle's name and address him as Sahib? I gave him an intense searing look. I saw his lips quiver nervously; his left eye twitch, and then I noticed the scar running up his neck which he had tried to camouflage with a muffler. It came back – those eyes and voice. I immediately recognized him. He was Hussein; the orphan lad brought up by grandfather, a sort of Man Friday to him, greatly trusted, until the day he ran away with a wandering mendicant. He returned a few years later dressed in black from head to toe, long hair and beard, proclaiming to have supernatural powers. He built a small hut for himself in the back yard behind the cattle shed. Grandfather though very annoyed with him permitted him to reside there till he was able to get some place. He, however, continued to stay there – practicing black magic, distributing talismans and exorcising evil spirits. He boasted of summoning Apsaras (celestial beauties) and had offered to do so for me. I declined – I was sixteen then.

Now, he was a watchman in this tower. What had happened to his witchcraft? I wanted to know why he didn't he exorcise the chudails and jinn as he was reputed to do before? I asked

"Hussein!" I asked, "What are you doing here?"

He looked puzzled: "Hussein? Who Hussein? My name is Mustafa. "

"Really?" I immediately realized his game plan but decided not to unravel it- at least for some time.

"So, Mustafa. Have you seen the chudails?" I asked.

"Yes Sahib. One of them. She takes the form of a beautiful girl and ...

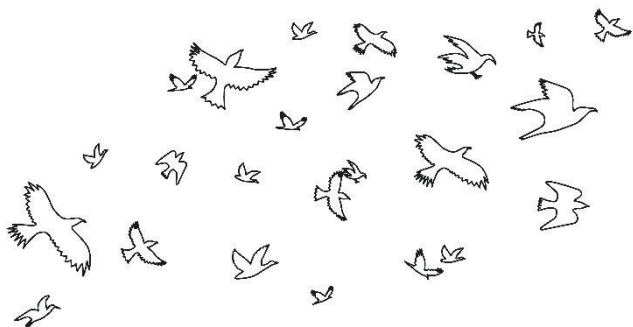
"Yeah. I saw her too. She was wearing a green and orange dupatta" I said scrutinizing his face, which had turned pale.. His lips were quivering. I continued, "And what about the jinn. Does he dress in black and has a haunted expression in his eyes..."

By now, Hussein's hands were trembling. I caught him by the collar and pulled out the scarf and pointed to the scar.

"Come on Hussein. Your game is up. Tell me the truth ...who is that girl there. Otherwise, I will expose you."

He looked terrified. He folded his hands and said: "That girl is my niece, Salma. "

I smiled. I had a game plan to buy the house from uncle at an affordable price and keep it as my ancestral legacy, in the family.



JEHANGIR HOUSE

Tasneem and I stood transfixed. There was no sign of Jehangir House –that two storied solid structure surrounded by a pretty flower garden behind which was a limpid little creek! In its place was a six storied building –Sea View Apartments, surrounded by a cement compound and the creek seemed to have been filled and given way to an ugly box of flats.

We stared, bewildered: hoping to find some familiar sight. We saw the Gresham Villa- darkened with ivy and battered by decades of monsoon –still standing there. We did not know the inmates –they were a snooty business family who lived ensconced within high walls of the villa oblivious of the folks around. But we were desperate. After all, Tasneem had lived there for seven

years – years of fun and frolic before she had migrated to the States with Wasim.

We were stopped rudely at the gate of the Villa by the watchman- a ferocious red bearded Pathan, who gruffly inquired: “Whom do you wish to meet?”

Tasneem replied, “We don’t wish to meet any one in the Villa –we just want to know what happened to Jehangir House, the one next to the villa.”

“Oh, ho, that was years ago. It was pulled down five years back.”

“What happened to Mrs. Jehangir and the other tenants?”

“Tenants? I don’t know anything about them?”

He added his mouth twitching, “The landlady sold the property to some builder and migrated to the States where her son had settled down. And another lady, Punjabi woman...”

“Mrs. Sonu Chawla,” Tasneem eagerly informed.

“Yes, some such name. She expired one night when it was windy and raining.”

Tasneem gave a gasp, “Oh No! She can’t be dead.”

“She died some months before the landlady sold the house. The landlady had this strange fixation that the dead woman’s ghost haunted the place.”

We both shuddered but didn’t find this story unusual or strange. Mrs. Jehangir was prone to such weird visions even in those days when Tasneem was her tenant and I had come to stay with her for some months.

The red beard could tell us no more. Dejectedly we made our way back to Sea View apartments, trying to recapture those happy days, nostalgically, especially the summer of 1977 when we were both in our early twenties, brimming with confidence and verve to take on the world.

That year was memorable one: my first exposure to freedom. It was my first chance of being on my own, in a city like Mumbai. I had been selected as a management trainee and I had to do a stint in the head office in Mumbai. I therefore had come down from Lucknow and had stayed with Tasneem, my maternal cousin, then a college lecturer and a tenant of Mrs. Jahangir. More than a decade had passed since then and today, we were it seemed two very different women. Tasneem had been battered by a brutal husband and I was bitter and frustrated in a small conservative town, married to a boor. We had both taken some time to get together again and get back to the city where we had lived earlier on.

I remember so vividly the time I had spent on the first floor flat, overlooking the creek and beyond it the blue expanse of the Arabian Sea. The creek was a refuge –several birds made it their home during the winter and white egrets flocked in hundreds and covered its waters like snowflakes. Mrs. Jahangir, the landlady lived on the ground floor facing the garden. She had built the house in the sixties with her husband's gratuity. She was an elderly woman whose only son had married an Italian and settled in the States. To keep her company, she had Rabia, her middle-aged niece –thin and pale who spent most of her time listening to her aunt's spooky stories and fantasizing about men –at least that is what we learnt from her conversation with us “I couldn't bear to be laid by any of those puny men who proposed to me”, she had said more than once. We in turn promised to be on the lookout for a big, brawny, muscle flexing guy for her. Perhaps she didn't have any faith in us: she evinced disinterest. We therefore diverted our attention to the more dynamic twice divorced Mrs. Sonu Chawla.

Sonu was totally scatter brained but cute looking with a mass of brown curls with silver highlights. Her source of inspiration was Jackie Kennedy married to Onassis. She kept on fretting: See how Jackie has remarried. So why can't I? “She had many suitors mostly retired army officers but none who could hold a candle besides Onassis; and she was not satisfied with anything less. Sonu was however very popular since she was the

only one who possessed a television set. And in those days, it was a must for us to see the Sunday film. It was quite a ritual for us to troop down into her flat and lift the heaps of clothes strewn everywhere: on the sofa, the chair, the bed etc. and settle down to watch the TV in pin drop silence –except on occasions when Miss Advani made her appearance. She was unmarried and garrulous, spinning boring yarns and we were tempted many times to throw her in the creek. We were saved from our murderous temptation when Tasneem was presented with a Television set by her parents.

This Advani had introduced us to an elderly guy as ‘Daddy Jee’ but we soon discovered that ‘Daddy Jee’ was actually her boyfriend and had for himself a wife and six children.

And what about Tasneem and me? Besides watching TV and the breeding egrets, we were savoring freedom, dating two air pursers who brought us gifts from faraway lands. And the forbidden foreign gin and wine. All these would have of course horrified our parents had they come to know. They never did.

Thinking of the horror I was reminded of the spine-chilling story we saw on TV titled ‘The Third Angle’. It was about ten or so when the programme started. Only Tasneem and I were watching and the monsoon had set in. The story was set in Goa and the scene was a pub where a girl kept putting a coin in the juke box to play

her favorite tune: she seemed to be waiting for someone because she kept glancing at the door. A considerable time lapsed and the arms of the clock neared twelve. Still the girl sat listening to the same song and waiting. The pub was now deserted except for the owner and three boys. She shivered –the pub had become perceptibly cold –one of the boys offered her his coat. She walked into the Ladies. A few minutes passed but she did not come out. The minutes lengthened into half an hour and still there was no sign of her. The boy who had lent her his coat got worried and fearing that she may take his coat, went and knocked on the door. There was no response. They pushed it open. It opened: it wasn't locked; but no one was inside. There was no way she could have escaped. She seemed to have vanished –into thin air.

The pub owner informed that she came every Saturday night, sat and listened to this song and then went away at midnight. She however did not belong to the village. Further enquiries led the boys to her address in another hamlet. Their knock at her door was answered by middle -aged woman who shocked them by saying that her daughter was dead –that she had died two months ago!

“How can that be? She was there last Saturday. She took my coat” the boy desperately pleaded.

The woman fetched a coat from inside and enquired, “Is this yours?”

It was and the boy took it from her in a daze.

“It is so every Saturday night.” the poor woman lamented. “My daughter had gone to the pub to meet her boyfriend, but he didn’t turn up and, on her way, home she met with an accident. Since then, every Saturday her spirit haunts that pub and she plays the same song which she had while she was waiting for him.”

The boys thanked her for the coat and went away completely baffled. When they related the story to some friends in that hamlet, they were stunned to hear that the girl’s mother had died –two weeks ago!

The programme ended abruptly. We had just sat there, staring at the empty screen. Neither of us had the courage to switch off the TV. Then suddenly the bell rang. We both quaked: who could it be? It was past eleven-thirty. Then there was complete silence. The bell didn’t ring again. I tip-toed to the peephole: no one outside. And then it all came back to us: the stories Rabia had narrated. It seems that Mrs. Jehangir had been seeing figures moving through the door and vanishing through the window. We both sat upright: the gentle swishing of the palm leaves gave us the jitters. We kept the light on and sat reciting some prayer which had been thought by our respective mothers to ward off evil spirits. It was only when the sky lightened that we dropped off exhausted to sleep.

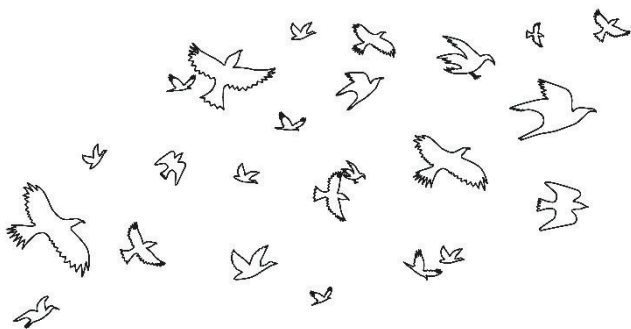
“Let us go back Shama” Tasneem said, “Jehangir House is only a memory.”

I nodded. As we walked away, the lines from one of Eliot’s poems reverberated in my mind:

Houses live and die: there is a time...

.... For the wind to break the loosened panes...

No. I shook my head. Sadly, it had been given a premature blow in the prime of its life –it was ruthlessly pulled down- a victim of unnatural fears or real. Now there was Sea view Apartments. Modern.



DESTINY

No! She thought that man being introduced by her friend and hostess Salma couldn't be Sajjad. Sajjad in Chicago? Impossible! She went a little closer and peered and then froze. The man was indeed Sajjad! Though gray and haggard it was unmistakably him. And the garishly dressed plump woman besides him must be his wife. She felt a lump in her throat as memories of their parting flooded her and she hastily excused herself and bolted from the drawing room. She took refuge in the bath room but the old memories came flooding back: haunting her. After all those years to be facing him ! But how changed he was! How different from the first time she had met him at his cousin and her friend Nafisa's wedding! But that was nearly twenty years ago.

Twenty years ago, she in her early twenties, a graduate from J. J School of Arts and a commercial artist in a leading advertising company, had met Sajjad Haidar, an attractive, serious and idealistic doctor. And though till then she had scoffed at the idea of love at first sight she had fallen irrevocably in love with him. She was sure she could spend her whole life with him-in any part of the world.

Since that part of the world happened to be a one – horse town set between the Balaghat ranges and the Manjura river in the district of Osmanabad, her mother and friends were aghast when she accepted Sajjad’s proposal.

The wedding had been the usual affair: the *nikah* and *ruksati*. But since they were to leave for his town the next day, rooms had been booked at the hotel. She had felt repelled by the idea of spending her *suhag-raat* at the hotel. But she had silently followed him into the room, her heart pounding and her nerves all flutter. He was smiling and moving towards her. She had stood transfixed, eyes glistening with tears and her mind in turmoil. This was not how she had imagined it. She was however surprised when he took her hands in his, gazed deeply into her eyes and said softly: “I know how awful you feel. One doesn’t look forward to a wedding night in a hotel room. If you agree we can have it at my place – my home where I grew from child to man.”

She had wanted it – to achieve a union in his surroundings. She remembered wistfully their wedding night when they had achieved a oneness. It had been a moonlit night –the moon was so bright that its light shimmered in their bedroom through a prism and the emerald in her ring glistened green and the diamond shone luminously against his black hair as her fingers entwined it.

The days had flown by sketching, performing chores around the house with her mother-in-law, sitting and chatting with Sajjad, and later in the still dark night they would be together, their love melting into each other.

But as time passed the hope in her mother-in- law's eyes gradually turned to despair and she started dropping hints that Sajjad should remarry. He didn't seem to take the hints and therefore she had come out bluntly. "You are my only son," she had said "and it is your duty to provide me with a grandchild. If Arjumand cannot conceive then you will have to remarry."

She had held her breath while she had watched Sajjad's reaction. His tone had been gentle but firm: "Ammi, Arjumand can have a son only if God wills it. And if I have to have a child it will be only from her."

But the same Sajjad had made a complete *volte face* when his mother was diagnosed with cancer. The old lady had sobbed that she would die without her wish

being fulfilled and that thought seemed to have completely overpowered his reason.

She could never forget that day when he had broken to her the shattering news. It had been raining, poring after months of drought and the parched earth sighed in relief exuding a fragrance she found intoxicating. Now, she thought the earth would sprout the seedlings, the leafless trees would again become green and the flowers again bloom. But not her womb. Hot tears mingled with the rain.

“Arjumand! You’ll catch a cold.” She had heard Sajjad as he came up from behind while she stood drenched in the rain. He had taken her inside and she had changed into dry clothes but the water continued to drip from her straight black hair. Sajjad had gently rubbed her hair with a towel but when his eyes met hers, he realized that they were wet with tears not rain.

“Now what is the matter?” he had asked in a concerned voice. She had broken down sobbing. “What is it, love?” he had asked again.

“Oh Sajjad!” Why is my womb so barren; so, unlike the earth?”

He had taken her in his arms and gently kissed away her tears. And then said, “Arjumand, it seems that it is not God’s will.”

She had looked into his eyes and found them filled with pain. Was it *fait accompli* that she could not have a child? She felt her body tremble. Sajjad tightened his arms around her and said softly: "I have something very distressing to tell you." She had felt fear grip her heart. What was he going to tell her? That she was incapable of having a child? No, he had told her while her face was still warm from his kisses that he had agreed to remarry and the marriage was to take place within a month. She had been stunned. He had pleaded with her; he was, he said helpless and assured her that the other woman was nothing more than a surrogate womb.

She had remained silent. What could she say if he had decided to take destiny in his hands? But that day, after he went to the hospital, she had left his house forever with a request for a *Khula* or separation.

But the ways of God are strange. Just a couple of days before the wedding she realized that she had conceived. But she did not inform Sajjad. Why should she? Had he not given up hope of her ever conceiving? Was she supposed to contact and tell him that God had given her a child? No, she had decided that she would never let him know.

As soon as she had her separation, she had left India and joined her brother in the States. Here she had their daughter, with Sajjad's velvet black eyes and dark curly

hair. She had named her Mehek- the name Sajjad and she had chosen for their unborn offspring.

There was a knock at the door and she heard Salma's anxious voice inquiring: "Arjumand? Are you there?" She had opened the door saying, "Why, what's the matter?"

"Amer is looking for you. Why did you just disappear?"

"Salma, that couple you have been introducing..."

"Who? Sajjad Haidar and his wife?"

"Yes. He is my ex-husband..."

"Oh no! I didn't know, love. Aslam invited him. Mrs. Haidar is related to him -distant cousin. But now it has put you in an embarrassing position. I suggest you make an exit from the other door. I will tell Amer."

"No. I can't just leave Mehek and Amer. Amer may misunderstand. I will have to face the situation. By the way, how many children do the Haiders have?"

"None. Mrs. Haider has some problems."

Arjumand lowered her eyes. She didn't wish Salma to see the triumph and joy in them. She felt ashamed at her reaction: but she was after all human. And human beings didn't forget or forgive so easily. With averted eyes she replied, "I'll join you all in a few minutes." She again

went to the bath room and had a quick look in the mirror. The visage reflected was older. more mature than the one which had left Sajjad ten years ago, but she was still pretty. Time and life had not treated her unkindly. She had been lucky to meet and marry Amer.

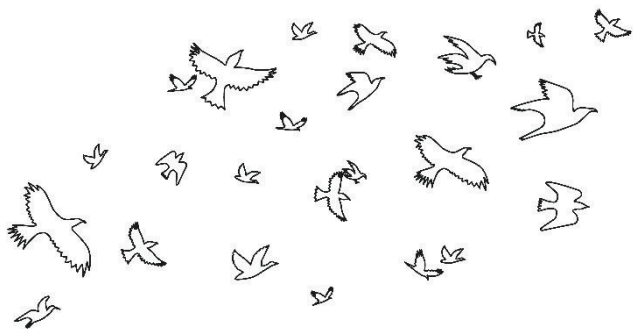
Amer, a widower with two sons had been a close friend of her brother. He was a gentle, kind and affectionate man in his early forties. A warm and relaxed friendship developed between them. And when Mehek was about four Amer had proposed to her and she had accepted, mainly because she wished to provide Mehek with a family. She had never regretted it. If the marriage lacked the passionate intensity of first love, it was amply compensated by a calm, mature understanding. Amer was a devoted husband and a considerate and affectionate father to Mahek showering her with the same love and affection which he did on his sons. Though enveloped in the warmth of a contented marriage she could neither wipe away the memories of her first love nor the deep hurt within her. And today...

She shrugged her shoulders and walked into the drawing room she was completely taken back to see Amer and Sajjad standing together. But while Amer spoke Sajjad's eyes were glued to Mehek who was sitting a few feet away. Seeing the direction of his gaze Amer had called Mehek and she heard him say, "Sajjad, this is my daughter Mehek."

Sajjad's eyes were filled with anguish. Was not Mehek the name he and Arjumand had chosen for their unborn child.

Amer had sensed her presence and turning to her said with his warm smile: "Where have you been? I want you to meet Dr and Mrs Haider". Sajjad's eyes met hers; with recognition there was anguish and remorse in them. He could hardly believe that Destiny had played such a cruel trick on him. Arjumand stood before him smiling, serene and pretty, with her husband. She had found contentment in the arms of another man. And the fragrance of the child he longed and prayed for filled the house of another man. Yes, she was his child -he knew for certain. She had his eyes and hair. She had the name which they had both chosen. Had Arjumand conceived when he had told her about his intention to remarry? Why had she not informed him? But had he given her the opportunity? He had been so eager to please his mother. He had trampled on her feelings; simply to gratify those of his mother. A lump rose in his throat. His mother had died without seeing her grandchild though Mehek had been born in her life time. His sacrifice had been in vain and he was saddled with a woman he neither loved nor respected. Watching Mehek, he felt pain at this loss and his suffering showed on his face.

Arjumand understood his suffering. A wave of pity enveloped her, replacing the hurt: she no longer held any rancour against him. On the contrary, she forgave him and the past ebbed away. She looked steadily into his eyes and in a calm and gentle voice said: "Hello, nice to meet you."



TWILIGHT

It was nearly 6 pm. I made one more attempt to contact my father who was somewhere in Madhya Pradesh. For the last half an hour his mobile was coming switched off. Now too came the same message. I presumed that he was attending one of those Tafseers or meetings on studies of the Quran. Dejected I closed the file I had been trying to read and walked out of the office. My mother would be impatiently waiting for me in that wretched ward no 32.

Half an hour later I reached and heard the Ward Matron bellowing, "Visiting hours are over. All Visitors leave immediately." As usual the visitors scrambled to their feet, their eyes moist, peppering their goodbyes with prayers as they took leave of their near and dear

ones. Most of the patients in this ward were in a critical stage of some gastro intestinal disease, their dismal condition reflected in their hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. But still their eyes glimmered with hope- unlike my mothers who was in an advanced stage of cirrhosis of the liver. She was often admitted for treatment of cirrhotic ascitis. Besides she was also under such acute depression that the hospital authorities had considered my presence necessary and I had been permitted -as a special case - to stay overnight in the ward.

I made my way to her bed. Mother was lying inert staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Hello Mom” I said. There was no response. Not even a faint smile. I got up feeling miserable and walked towards the window and peered out at the multi-hued sky. The sun had set but darkness had not yet settled in. It was the time between sunset and dusk - the time known as twilight, the semi darkness that envelopes the earth before the night sets in- providing rest to tired minds. But tonight wouldn’t bring repose to her or to me.

Our lives had gone absolutely haywire in the past one year -ever since she was diagnosed with this fatal illness. She had been the anchor of our lives: my dad’s, of Sahir, my 12 year old son and myself. Both my brothers were settled abroad and were understandably worried and though they often rang up to enquire and

offered financial help, the whole responsibility of looking after her fell on me as my father suddenly took to religion and joined the Tabliqi Jamat – a religious reform movement whose members went across the country, preaching, trying to reform the wayward, persuading them to emulate the life of the Prophet. He thought that by doing this he would earn some brownie points with God and perhaps the Almighty would cure my mother.

But his constant absence from home, especially when she was to be admitted in hospital, had her down in the dumps and aggravated her cirrhotic liver. And I had to manage my job, worry about Sahir spending the night at a friend's place while helplessly watching her – acutely conscious of her life ebbing away. The doctor's prognosis was that there was no cure for it - it was only a matter of time. All they could do was to remove the fluid from her stomach which periodically bloated up – and this condition would continue till the end.

I heard her murmuring. I bent close to her. She was whispering, my father's name...

“What is it Ma?” I asked gently touching her hands.

“He didn't come today also. Has he not returned?”

“No.” I whispered and she sighed a deep, disappointed sigh.

“He thinks he can benefit you more by his prayers.” I said hoping to ease her despondency. She sighed again and muttered: “He can pray here also. He knows how much his presence means to me” Tears streamed on the pillow.

“You know dad. He can’t bear to see you in this condition. His recourse to religion may be to avoid watching you go through this tortuous treatment. Perhaps he is unable to come to terms with your illness.”

“But if you care for a person... you should be there with them in their time of need. God will give you courage- emotional strength.” She murmured

She was right- she had been his emotional anchor, his strength and support, during the many vicissitudes of fortune and the unbearable devastating tragedy of my sister Aimen’s death in an accident – twenty years ago.

“It’s the patient’s time for the enema.” I heard the nurse and turned to find her standing there with the enema catheter and bedpan. This had become a routine since the disease had badly affected her digestive system. She couldn’t evacuate without it. Normally, I assisted the nurse in giving the enema. Today the nurse on duty was a young girl who was new to the ward, and therefore unaware of my mother’s case history. She looked at her curiously and asked: “How did she get Cirrhosis? She doesn’t look the type to drink.”

I was touched to the quick. How could anyone imagine my mother- a pious and God fearing woman to be a drunkard!

“Alcohol is not the only cause for it. She had hepatitis C which led to it.” I explained in a caustic voice.

The nurse shrugged her shoulders, gave the enema and went away. But her remark continued to rankle. Why had my mother, who was so devout and God fearing, been afflicted with this terrible disease? Unable to contain my indignation, I asked her; holding her hands,

“Ma. Why did this happen to you? Why did God give you this disease?”

“It is His Will. It is a trial from Him.” She whispered.

I realized the futility of my question when I was all along aware that submission to God’s Will had been her creed- the dominant feature of her life. She had never complained, never cursed her fate: she had accepted with an unimaginable calmness and patience the horrendous tragedy of Aimen’s death which had traumatized us.

Aimen’s death and my father’s reaction to it will stay with me forever. I can never forget the Monday evening when returning from school, I saw my mother standing, anguished eyed, near the foyer of our apartment building

with a group of sombre faced ladies. A tremor went through me when she said in a low voice:

“Ayesha, Aimen has had an accident.”

She had said ‘accident’, so as to prepare me for the inevitable - Aimen’s death. She had been dead for four hours and her body was placed on ice slabs in the morgue, Aimen so beautiful, so brilliant, the apple of my mother’s eyes, was no more! And mother was so composed, she was not wailing, wringing her hands, beating her chest as most women would. Somebody whispered that she was in a state of shock and therefore was unable to weep. But Mrs. Aggarwal, our neighbor disagreed. She had been with her when she went to the hospital and had seen her response when she first saw Aimen’s dead body. She had seen her uncover Aimen’s face tenderly lift her head in her hands and whisper:

“God, she was yours, in safe keeping with us. Now she is returned to you.” Everyone gasped, when they heard this - astounded by her faith and courage.

But her courage was still on test. We couldn’t contact father -he was away on tour. Single-handedly she made preparations for the funeral. She kept murmuring as she went about the task:

“It is my last service to my child and nothing should be amiss.”

I was of course of no help. I was rather a hindrance, hysterically weeping and cursing fate! But my grief paled before my father's, who returned a day after the funeral. He entered the drawing room filled with teary eyed mourners and seeing some relatives gazing at Aimen's photographs in the family Album realized she was no more. He went berserk with grief and I, who had never seen him shed a tear, saw him wail loudly. He had to be injected with a heavy dose of sedatives to prevent him from running amok into the street.

Aimen's death devastated us. It left a void in our lives, which could never be filled. Our lives were never the same again, though mother's spiritual strength and patience helped us to live with the loss...

Mother's moral strength was again on test, when my marriage- an arranged one - ran into troubled waters. Nisar had been in love with another woman- this marriage had been forced on him by his ailing parents. His father's death eased the pressure- he renewed the relationship despite the fact that we had a two year old son to consider. He wanted to marry her. And if it wasn't acceptable to me -I could go my way, and take a divorce. But my father was against it -he had wanted me to compromise, he wanted me to accept the other woman in his life ! He warned me of social disapproval -I would find it difficult to remarry. And it would be difficult to

raise a child as a single mother. But I could just not reconcile to sharing a husband.

Mother had stood by me - she understood my pain. She didn't believe in passively accepting the conditions of the patriarchal system and didn't want me to be stuck in a loveless marriage and Sahir to grow up with divided loyalties and the embarrassment of having a bigamous father.

Most importantly at that juncture she helped me to become financially independent. Highly educated herself -she was the first girl in her family to acquire a post-graduate degree and take up a job as a lecturer and rise to the post of a principal, from which she retired a month before she was diagnosed with this dreadful disease.

But what surprised me was that a woman as strong as her, who had backed me, supported me in learning to live on my own terms, so desperately missed her husband - felt so abandoned and helpless ...

"Tomorrow morning we'll remove the fluid. Since her sodium levels are so low we will have to put her on a drip." The senior doctor informed after examining her.

I nodded, bracing myself for the painful removal process.

After dinner, I spread a sheet on the ground beside the bed and lay down, intermittently getting up to check on her. She pretended to be asleep but the pinched expression and pursed lips indicated she was still disturbed by father's behavior - after years of togetherness and close bonding (that elicited admiration of friends and relatives) she didn't expect to be forsaken like this! And I watched helplessly the devastation the disease had wrought on her. Images of happier times, captured in the family album came to mind. What a handsome couple they made? They both looked like movie stars! She, fashionable and pretty; with her moon face, doe eyes, curly hair. One of my friends said she looked like Nimmi - a star of the yester years. I had repeated it to her, thinking she would be flattered. But she wasn't. She had replied with mock disdain: "I look like myself." Now that vivacious, gutsy and charming woman was just a shadow of her former self.

The next day, nearly ten bottles of fluids was extracted -each bottle containing a litre and half! Her bloated stomach became flat and the swelling in her feet subsided.

"Have you contacted your father?" She whispered as the evening drew near.

"I'll ring him up late in the night. He must be in the prayer meeting now."

She turned away despondently. I mulled asking the doctor for discharge. At home, in the familiar surroundings, with Sahir near her – she was more at peace. But then she looked so exhausted, that I wasn't confident if I could manage to take her home by myself. But I dreaded spending another night in the ward. So I made up my mind to request for a discharge. I got up and walked towards the doctor's room and was astonished to see my father walking in.

“When did you return?” I asked as he hugged me.

“A few hours ago.” He replied and turning to the doctor on duty requested him to discharge the patient. The doctor contacted his senior who came and explained by mother's condition. He listened gravely when they informed that there was no cure for it and her condition was deteriorating day by day.

“If there is no cure for her illness, and if fluid removal is the only way out, the same arrangements can be made at home”

“Yes Sir. But it is expensive and there is a chance of an emergency occurring...”

“I'll take the chance. I know she would want to be home. Kindly make the discharge papers.”

While the discharge papers were being prepared, I accompanied him to the ward. As we walked towards my

mother's bed, I was aware of the impact father's presence had on the hospital staff. They had not seen him earlier and were overawed by his personality. Though nearing seventy he was still very personable. His health and well-maintained physique, the envy of many of his peers, were a result of my mother's efforts and care and of his disciplined lifestyle. My mother used to bask in the compliments – she felt it was hers by right. Today his presence meant more to her than his good looks – it would reaffirm her faith in his love. With mounting excitement, I went to her as she lay on her side, with her back to us.

“Ma, see who is here.”

She turned around and the glazed expression vanished: her eyes lit up.

“Afzal! You have come!” She cried with joy.

“Yes. I have come to take you home and take care of you.”

An hour later we were in the taxi, on our way home. My mother's face was calm, her eyes serene, her head lay gently on my father's arm. No matter how independent and strong she appeared – she was emotionally dependent on my father as he had been on her. They were a blessed couple. But I wondered how and why he had decided to come back – to leave his missionary work.

After we reached home, and mother was made comfortable in her bed, he narrated the epiphany he had experienced the evening before. As he sat in a large gathering assembled in a Mosque in Delhi listening with rapt attention to the learned preacher from Saudi Arabia, on ways of attaining Salvation, his attention was distracted by the sight of a poorly dressed, scrawny, middle aged man in front of him, who was being prevented from leaving the sermon. He heard the man plead that he had to go as his son had sent in a chit informing of his wife's accident.

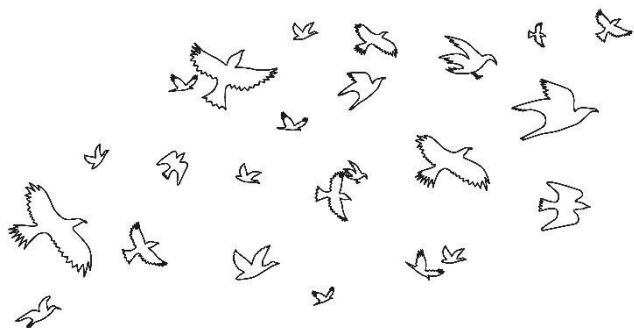
"God will look after her." He was curtly told by the devout Khidmatgaar

"That's true but it is my duty to take care of her." And he heard that shabby decrepit man quote one of Prophet's sayings:

"The best of you are those who are best to their wives." And then he saw him walk away from the huge gathering. In an instant it flashed in my father's mind: the semi educated unkempt man had found his Path to Salvation while he was still searching it in the sermons of the Mullah. Service to humanity was the highest creed and he had abandoned the woman who had been with him through thick and thin. The next minute he got up and walked out of the Mosque ignoring the glowering eyes of the speaker and of the learned Ulema assembled on the stage. He took the first flight and returned to

Mumbai to be with his wife when she needed him the most.

Overwhelmed at what I construed as divine intervention; I walked over to the window. The sun had just dipped in the sea. It was twilight –the time between dusk and night. I looked at my mother’s tranquil face and knew she was ready to face the night – whatever it may portend: a night of disquiet or a blissful state of deep sleep.



THE MISSING BRACELETS

It was nearly midnight when we returned from Shama's wedding reception. Shama was my sister Naaz's sister-in-law (her husband Nisar's dead brother's wife), Amena's daughter. We were exhausted as we had spent a whole week in wedding arrangements. The arrangements had been lavish as the bridegroom was working in Dubai and his family was eager to flaunt their petro dollars to the hilt. Amena despite her widowhood and straitened circumstances, had, with the financial help from her parents and from Nisar, Naaz's husband, had put up a good show.

So after the hectic activity and considerable tension everyone was relaxed with most of the extended family leaving the next day, I planned to stay a day or two more

to help Naaz and Amena in rearranging the house. Tired, we retired to the room where the female relatives had been put up. It was originally the sitting room but the furniture had been removed and the floor was covered with carpets on which with white sheets were placed with bolsters.

“Ah. Now I can sleep peacefully, ” crooned Amena “getting a daughter married is proverbially taking a bath in the Ganges.”

I wondered why this proverb was used to accomplish an onerous obligation. And was getting a girl married such a difficult task? Naaz, pretty, affable and mild tempered had no such problem and I had met my husband in college. But then Amena was a widow and Shama was choosy: she didn't wish to live with in-laws.

“Now you all can get up late tomorrow.” Naaz said “But I will hardly get any sleep. Asad is getting so restless. He wakes up any time in the night and wanders around. I am really tensed up about him.”

“Why don't you leave him with us? With five of us lying here, he cannot wander about much, ” I said.

“That's a good idea, ” Naaz replied as she removed her jewelry. “This is really heavy,” she said taking out her necklace.

“Isn’t this the same set which your mother -in -law had presented to you at your wedding?” One of the cousins enquired.

“Yes. But these Kangans,” she said removing the heavy gold bangles intricately and beautifully inlaid with tiny rubies and pearls, “were presented to me when Asad was born.”

We all gasped. The pair must have weighed more than 30gms of gold.

“Must have cost a fortune!” I exclaimed. “It has been handed down for three generations. I am told Nisar’s grandmother belonged to a Nawab family and this was presented to her at the time of marriage. She had given to Nisar’s mother when he was born.”

After we had admired the Kangans, Naaz placed the jewellery between two bolsters and we lay down and gossiped. But just as the momentum of stories was picking up we heard Naaz’s mother -in -law’s shrill voice.

“Naaz where are you? Your son has woken up and he is creating such a racket here.”

Naaz’s mother -in- law tended to exaggerate. Little Asad was a peaceful child, only a little hyperactive. Almost 15 months old, he had started crawling around -pushing away objects which got in his way and sometimes accidentally breaking them.

Naaz rushed picked up her son and came and placed him in our midst. Asad was delighted to be the centre of attraction of so many women particularly his aunt, and after Naaz left with her jewelry, we continued playing and baby talking with him for some time. Finally, at about 2 am, he fell asleep and so did we.

We were awoken at about 8 am or so with Naaz and the servants frantically searching for the gold bracelets. It seems that when Naaz checked the jewelry in the morning – she had not done so in the night – and found the gold bangles missing! She thought that these might have got concealed in the bolsters! The bed sheets and carpets were removed but there was no sign of the bangles. By afternoon Naaz's mother –in- law, Nishat Begum, - a difficult lady even in normal circumstances – had worked herself into frenzy. At first the servants were the target of her fury: their quarters were searched; they were reported to the police. But the police interrogation yielded no result. Then she directed her anger at Naaz, lambasting her for being careless, foolish, unworthy. The poor girl was beside herself with repentant grief. I wanted to remonstrate with Nishat Begum but Naaz begged me not to.

“She is very upset and is suspicious of everyone. She has called a holy man, a mendicant, Baba Maqbool to open a *Faal*.”

“Oh God! Does she still believe in the efficacy of such things?”

“She is desperate. She considers the Kangans to be an heirloom”

Baba Maqbool had a formidable reputation for witch craft and also for being able to overpower evil spirits and jinn's. Middle aged with large rolling eyes, a booming voice, long, unkempt, unwashed hair, untrimmed beard, dressed in a long green shirt and sarong, his neck encased in a number of amulets, he struck awe and fear in everyone. He conducted the *Faal* behind closed doors of the room from which the bangles were suspected to have been stolen. I was not present but Naaz later told me about the procedure. He had first said a short prayer and then randomly opened the Quran and then turned seven pages and then placed his finger on the 7th line but the meaning of the lines was not clear. Hence he took a verse from the Quran, wrote it on a large white cloth, above which the names of the suspected persons were written – commencing with the servants, followed by the cousins and relatives present that night and ending with mine! Then the cloth was nailed to the wall and it was foretold that within a month either the bangles would be found or the thief would be caught. I was stunned: I had no idea that Nishat Begum was suspecting me! I left Meerut that very day and returned to Delhi.

A month passed, but neither was the thief caught nor were the bangles found. Their disappearance remained a mystery. Naaz said that Nishat Begum's frustration was increasing day by day. She took the loss of the bangles as loss of face – a loss of honour. She would stare at the list of suspects nailed on the wall and curse them, wishing misfortune to befall them. Her desire for vengeance became so severe that she again called Baba Maqbool to summon the evil spirits and jinn's and destroy the person who had taken away the bangles.

A fortnight later, I was horrified to get a phone call from Nisar that Asad who had a bad bout of diarrhea, was serious and hospitalized. I rushed to Meerut, but he had passed away before I reached. Naaz was besides herself with grief and so was Nishat Begum. Nisar was stoically silent. The whole extended family, friends and neighbors were plunged in grief. The thought of never seeing Asad's cherubic face and innocent smile, listening to his baby talk was heart rending. The house seemed so empty without him – it was unbearable. One couldn't believe that just two months back we were celebrating a wedding in this very house.

“It is bad luck. Someone has cast an evil eye on our happiness.” Nishat Begum moaned. And then turning to Amena she said “Your son-in-law was the harbinger of

bad luck. Ever since the marriage we have been dogged with one calamity after another.”

We all shook our heads in disgust. Nishat Begum would never change. She was superstitious to the core and would find some scapegoat to blame. But for the moment we were more worried about Naaz, her condition was pitiable. She hadn't slept for three nights! She was given sedatives and put to sleep.

We were awoken early morning with a terrible scream from Naaz. When we rushed, she was lying unconscious in the corner of the room where we had slept with the baby Asad and in her hand were the missing bracelets! In front of her was a bronze urn in which some plastic flowers were placed.

Naaz gained consciousness after two days! And when she did; she went into a fit of uncontrollable weeping. But she wouldn't speak. Later in the night, between sobs she told her husband: “ Nisar we are responsible for Asad's death. We killed our child.”

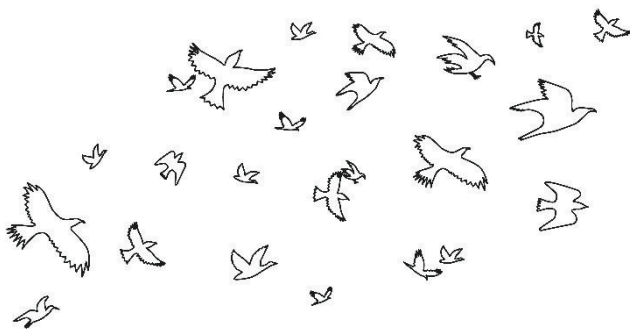
Nisar felt that she, overwrought by grief and was mentally unhinged. He tried to console her, but she was inconsolable. A day later she said between sobs. “It was Asad who had taken the bangles and dropped them in the urn.”

“ How can you say that?” Her mother-in-law asked in a sharp voice.

“He told me. He came in my dream and told me the bracelets were in the urn. I went there and found them in it.” And she broke down crying hysterically

There was a stunned silence followed by a crashing sound. Nusrat Begum had collapsed –she fell on the ground with a thump. She was unconscious –her heart beats were slowing down. She was rushed to the ICU. Two days later she left the world. The much-searched gold bangles lay in her drawers.

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THE ANNIVERSARY

As soon as Laila saw Shirley Adams breeze into the beauty parlour she was certain that Shirley would look out for Veronica who was off duty today. It was unusual for Shirley not to have fixed an appointment earlier with Veronica. Her dazzling smile, her bright eyes, clearly indicated she was in a celebratory mood.

“How come you are free at this time?” asked Najma, the in-charge of Miracle Beauty Parlour.

“Oh I have taken half day off from work. I need to get a lot done. Where is Veronica?”

“She is on leave.”

“Oh. No!”

“Anything special you wanted to get done?”

“Special? Najma, it’s my fifth wedding anniversary. Veronica kept a tab on the important events in my life. How come she is not here?”

“Congratulations Ma’am. Sorry, I forgot the day in the rush of work. Veronica had an emergency. Her mother is hospitalized. I have another appointment or I would have personally attended to you. But Laila here is also very good.”

Shirley had barely noticed Laila: the girl looked so dull, in her drab dress and was so shy and self effacing. She wondered whether she should take the risk. She appraised her critically. The girl was young about twenty two, of average height, fair complexioned and even featured but her long straight hair was very severely tied in a tight bun; she could look pretty if she changed her hairstyle and dressed in brighter colors. Shirley was however impressed by her quiet dignity and air of competence.

“You are a trained beautician?”

“She has a diploma in Beauty Care and Hairstyling from a well-known Institute in India and nearly a year’s experience.” Najma informed

“Really? OK then. Will do. I need a facial and my hair styled. Hope you’ll guide her Najma.”

“Sure. Laila, first wash Madam’s hair. And prepare the ingredients for the herbal facial.”

“It’ll take you some time to get to know my preferences,” Shirley calmly explained to Laila. “Veronica was an old hand. I used to have a different hair style for the four important occasions. Besides our respective birthdays, there were four occasions we celebrated: our first meeting, our first date, our engagement and wedding. For my wedding anniversary, I want the braided style, like the one I had when I got married “

“You are very lucky ma’am, to have so many events to celebrate. ” Laila murmured, a shadow crossing her face at Shirley’s gleaming smile.

“Yes. I am. We love each other as much as we did on our wedding day. What about you? Are you married?”

“Yes.” Laila’s voice was low and subdued.

“Arranged marriage?”

“Our families knew each other very well –family friends.”

“Then you two must have liked each other.”

"Our families were conservative. We were not allowed to meet or get to know each other."

What she couldn't tell anyone was that their marriage was one of convenience. Imroze had married her on the rebound and her parents had accepted the proposal simply because he was an engineer and a Green Card holder. An average looking girl like her with no dowry couldn't have got a better match.

"More than family conservatism, it's also because of Laila's nature. She is very reticent and shy. It might be because she was sandwiched between a brilliant and beautiful sister and a much-pampered younger brother." Najma intervened overhearing the conversation.

"But why should you have an inferiority complex. You too can look pretty, if you make some effort. Surely your husband is not against your looking good. Does he want you to wear the veil or insists on wearing such drab dull colors."

"No. Nothing of that sort." Laila replied. "He is very liberal."

"Then don't waste time my dear. You'll not be young again. Make yourself and him happy."

Laila pondered: was Imroze happy with her? He had wanted a smart, outgoing and stylish girl like Yasmin, the bride his mother had chosen for him.

"When is your wedding anniversary?" Shirley asked

Laila hesitated and then mumbled, "Day after tomorrow."

"Wah! That's great. Must give you a new look. I am sure Imroze will be pleasantly surprised," Najma said.

"I don't know. He has been seeing me like this: simple and plain since I was a child."

"He may like you as you are. But will be happy to see the transformation." Shirley piped in. "Men get bored easily. They desire variety: in dress, food, companionship. So, if you don't reinvent yourself, they may look elsewhere."

"Imroze isn't that type. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't make an effort to please him. So it's settled. The day after, you have an appointment with me, early in the morning. OK. No excuses." Najma said

Laila nodded but she wasn't sure if it was the appropriate thing to do. She didn't know how Imroze would react. It would remind him of the painful incident which led to their marriage. She could probably consult his sister Kubra who stayed nearby and who had been her sister Asma's close friend.

Kubra was delighted to see her. "So, what are you planning for your wedding anniversary? This is your first, together."

Laila was quite taken back at the matter-of-fact tone of her question. It seemed as if Kubra had taken for granted that they would be celebrating their anniversary like all normal couples

“Kubra you know the circumstances in which the marriage took place. Do you think Imroze would like to be reminded that he was rejected by Yasmin and had to marry me.”

“Oh forget Yasmin. Imagine a modern, educated girl like her agreeing in the first place to marry a man without meeting him and then creating such a scene. But Mamma was also very much to blame: she should not have concealed the fact of his artificial arm from her.”

“But I am surprised that her family wasn’t aware. Most people knew of the accident in which Imroze lost his left arm.”

“Now let’s forget the past. You must move on. Imroze definitely wants to. He has put that incident behind him.”

“Has he?”

“Yes, of course. What makes you think he hasn’t? Take my word for it. He has got over it. He is happy with you. But he is not sure about you. He thinks you are withdrawn. Perhaps because you were pushed into the marriage and are conscious of his defect.”

“I am not! What makes him think so? It is true that I had not been prepared for the marriage. How could I? I was given just two days to get used to the idea.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No. Certainly not. I always liked him. But I had never thought of a future with him or for that matter, with any one in particular. But I am sure I wouldn’t have got a nicer person than him.”

“Then you like him. So, show him. He needs an affirmation.”

“How? I do try to make him as comfortable as I can. Has he ever complained?”

“Laila, you have played the handmaiden too long to Asma. I know, she is a stunner. But now, you have to come out from her shadow. No one is comparing you to her. He does appreciate your house keeping skills. But he is also looking for companionship. I know you are nearly eight years younger to him but he is a fun-loving guy.’

“I know. He used to be very witty. The way he imitated Muneer uncle –it was hilarious.”

“He also likes going out, seeing plays, eating out. He likes to see his wife well turned out– not a drab.”

“Najma wants to change my hair style--cut it short. Do it up in a high pony tail.”

“That’s a great idea. But you need to wear something more colourful. Enough of beiges and grays. There is a magenta suit in your trousseau. Imroze likes that colour and it will give a glow to your skin.” She went and opened her wardrobe and took out a jewelry box.

“Here’s a string of rubies to go with it.”

“Kubra you’re so... ’ There were tears in Laila’s eyes.

“Now, no getting senti. Tell me about the effects, later on. I want you to start your memories from this day onwards.”

That day, from the moment she got up she was in a whirl of excitement. And Imroz too seemed to have a spring in his walk –or did she imagine it? Was he aware of the day?

And Najma true to her word really transformed her. She hadn’t imagined she could look so attractive. Evening came and she wore the magenta suit and ruby studded dangles, and a string of rubies around her neck. She glanced at her wedding photograph, placed on the mantle. How pensive Imroze looked in the photograph? Otherwise, his pleasant face was so relaxed. And she looked so pale, so tense and diffident--so different from her present self. She wondered at Imroze’s reaction. She

looked at the clock. It was seven. He should have been home by now. Where was he? She rang up his office. There was no response. He was perhaps on his way with Mukesh, their neighbor and Imroze's close friend with whom he shared the car pool.

Imroze was at that moment buying a bouquet of red roses for her. Mukesh smiled, "So finally you're going to declare your love, old chap."

"Hoping to. Feel a little awkward."

"It'll be fine; no need to be nervous. Laila is such a gentle girl."

When they walked into the foyer, Mukesh thoughtfully took Imroze's briefcase: "I'll bring it with me. You go up with the roses and a nice big smile."

"You make it sound as if I was meeting her for the first time."

Mukesh smiled as Imroze self consciously made his way to the apartment. He had been visualising this moment the whole afternoon -what he would say, how he would greet her and what would be her reaction. But what he had not imagined, had not expected, was the glowing lovely girl who opened the door. He just stared speechless, till he heard Mukesh's cough behind. Laila smiled: "Come in Mukesh Ji."

“ No thanks. Wish you a very happy wedding anniversary. God bless you both.”

Laila thanked him and took the brief case. Imroze quietly shut the door his eyes still fixed on Laila.

“I am so glad that you wanted to celebrate the event, Laila.”

Laila nodded, blushing. They stared at each other as if they were seeing each other for the first time

“You look lovely.”

He fumbled in his pocket and took out a small box. And the next moment he was on his knees in front of her. “Laila, will you marry me?”

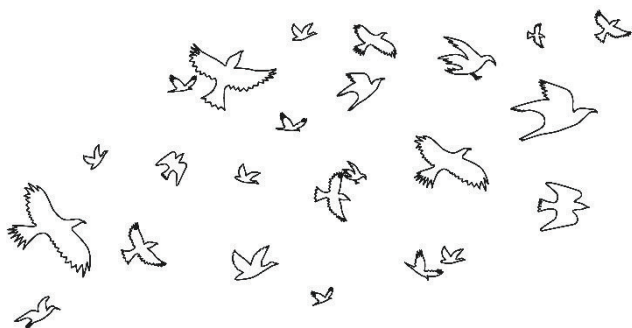
“What? We are already married.”

“Yes. But that was at the behest of our parents. From this day onwards, our marriage is through our choice.”

“I do.” she whispered as he slipped the ring in her finger and gently kissed her cheek.

“From this moment let’s starts our life, and not from when we officially wed.”

She laid her head on his shoulder. She no longer envied women like Shirley. She had her own memorable moments to celebrate.



THE NEW HORIZON

With a start Saira awoke to the call of the muezzin.

Today of all days, she must not forget her prayers. She thanked the Almighty in Sijda for having realized her dream to make Arshad a doctor.

It had been Asad's wish. His last letter from Dubai had been full of it. He felt the life of a doctor in the villages of India -serving the poor and needy -was more worthwhile than the materialistic existence in Dubai. At least his son would be able to live the life he had visualized but which the constraints of fortune had not allowed him.

Yes, that had been his last letter written just two days before his death in a road accident.

At twenty her world had been shattered. She was a hapless widow with a year old son, with very little money to see them through. Since Asad had married her against his parent's wishes, she couldn't expect anything for them.

"Morning, Ma!" Arshad entered with a beaming smile- that endearing smile of Asad! He was Asad's replica: the same soft brown eyes and burnished hair which gleamed in the sunlight.

"Aslam alaikum betay, " she said a little perturbed that Arshad never bothered to keep up their customary greetings which she so assiduously tried to imbibe in him.

"You should have said your prayers today, " she rebuked. He responded with a grin. "Ma, are you going to rebuke me or going to give me some tea? I have to be on morning duty and also be ready for the convocation in the evening. Can you believe it? Your son will be Dr. Arshad then. Feel proud Ma?"

Saira glowed with pride. "Yes, my son, " she said, handing him the teacup.

As he took it, she had a glimpse of that ugly scar, and as usual, a stab of pain passed through her.

How often she had winced with pain at the sight of that scar, but today it triggered off painful memories.

"My poor darling child, " she murmured as she remembered the incident, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Arshad was gulping the tea, impervious of her emotion. He was as usual, in a hurry to attend the hospital.

"Bye, Ma see you in the evening. Dress well. Wear the Kanjeevaram I bought for you, OK?"

Smiling through the tears, she said, "I will dress well but the Kanjeevaram I am going to wear only on one occasion and now that..."

"Oh, there we go again! Right onto my wedding, I have to rush. Bye, Ma. "

"Khuda Hafiz, "she said.

It seemed that he had forgotten that incident when his hand had been burnt so brutally. But Saira could never forget. How had it all started?

Yes, it had been in winter. An icy wind had been blowing outside; her mother had been coughing incessantly inside.

She was trying to put little Arshad to sleep, and Taibah Khala who had been visiting them had given that ill-fated proposal. She had been completely taken aback

and had protested vehemently when her mother requested her to consider the offer.

She had pleaded as usual, what would happen to her and the child when she was no more? Taibah Khala had become more persuasive. She had stressed the need of a father for Arshad.

"A child needs a father. Arshad is still young and will accept. A couple of years more and it will be too late. Moreover, it is not easy to manage a growing boy. And can you with your teacher's salary realize your husband's ambition to make him a doctor?"

With this, she had clinched the argument. Saira had nothing to say further. It was for this she lived. And though she could never have imagined any other man in Asad's place she had consented to marry Jaleel Kazi, a widower with two children aged six and eight.

But what a mistake it had been! She shuddered as she remembered those dreadful days. First of all, a woman should not marry someone when she still loves another. Yes, she had never forgotten Asad. Their brief marriage had been idyllic. Perhaps the brevity had been a safeguard against disillusionment.

Whatever the reason, the fragrance of those days was still fresh in her memory, and she remembered them more keenly when she was with Jaleel.

She was always consciously comparing. His touch, his caress was sheer agony. It brought memories of Asad's caresses, and she froze in his arms.

Did he realize that? Of course, he did. A dog can, so why can't a man. And especially when the motivation for marrying her was not providing a mother to his children but because he was smitten by her prettiness?

He had seen her at the school where she taught and had decided to marry her. The frenzy of his jealousy he directed at the child who resembled the dead man he detested. He was always looking for reasons to punish him.

It became a daily affair for her two stepsons Ali and Nadeem to pick a fight with Arshad. Then Jaleel blamed Arshad, spanked him made him go hungry to bed. Her heart bled for her child, but she felt helpless. What could she do? Where could she go? Her mother had expired, and she had no one to turn to.

But one-day things reached a point of no return. Saira remembered the day. She had been getting ready for school when she heard Arshad's heart-rending scream from the kitchen. She rushed there and found that Jaleel had burnt the child's hand as a deterrent against hitting Ali. She had never believed that he was capable of such cruelty.

In a split second, she decided: No matter what, she would leave his house forever. She had rushed with Arshad to the hospital and never returned to Jaleel Kazi. As she couldn't give him "talaq"(divorce) which was his prerogative, she took a "khula"(legal separation) foregoing her "mehr"(sum of money in consideration of marriage).

The drawing- room chimed six, and with a start, she realized that she had to be at the convocation hall in an hour's time. In a mad rush, she draped the green silk which Asad had presented her 20 years back. Powdering her face, she took a last quick look at herself in the mirror.

The reflection was indeed complimentary. In spite of streaks of gray, she didn't look much older than the day Asad had taken her out in the same sari to the Ritz.

"Oh Asad, how I wish you were here today!" The tears rolled down her cheeks but quickly wiping them away; she rushed to the convocation hall.

She was in time: the function had just commenced. Her heart glowed with pride and joy as Arshad ascended the stairs to take his degree. Tears again flowed – tears of joy.

Outside Arshad hugged her, "Ma, you look lovely. I am glad you wore this sari and not those awful whites. "

"Congratulations Saira. " A voice came from behind. It was a familiar voice, a voice she detested. It was the voice of Jaleel Kazi.

She swung around and with shocked eyes looked at Jaleel after 15 years. He had completely grayed and had become shrunken and pale. Time had not treated him kindly.

"Congratulations, " he repeated. "Your son has become a doctor. She looked at Arshad who was watching them nonchalantly. Should she introduce him or not? Jaleel came to her rescue with a smile, "We have met. "

Arshad did not acknowledge this Sara was startled at the strange turn of events. How did Jaleel and Arshad meet? Did Arshad recognize Jaleel?

Jaleel was speaking again. He was telling her how Arshad had saved Nadeem's life some days back when he was severely injured in an accident. It was Arshad's presence of mind that had saved his son.

"I must thank you, Saira, for you have made your child a good doctor.

"He turned to Arshad. "Son, you went away that day before I could thank you. Today, I want not only to thank you but also beg forgiveness for..."

Before Jaleel could finish, Arshad said gruffly, "It's O. K. I was only doing my duty, " and quickly walked away.

A bewildered Saira hastily excused herself and tried to catch up with her son who was striding ahead briskly. His behavior was inexplicable. Did he know the identity of the man?

"Arshad!" she called out breathlessly. "Wait for me, son. "

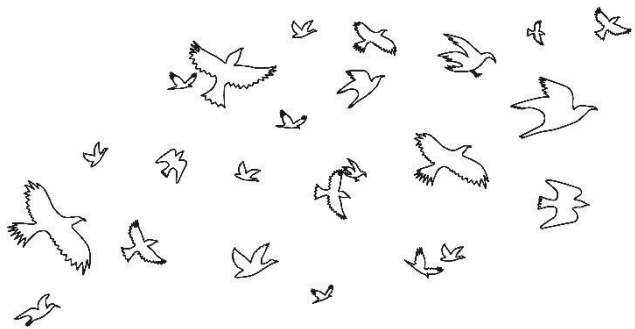
He slowed down till she caught up with him but he was silent, withdrawn, so she too didn't broach the topic. But, as soon as they were at home, she asked, "Arshad, did you know that the gentleman was your stepfather?"

"Yes, Ma, and I also recognized Nadeem when they brought him in -bleeding." He paused for a while and then continued, "I want to confess Ma, for a moment I was blinded by an overpowering desire for revenge. It was easy. I could just allow him to bleed to death. No one would know. I was alone on duty. But this was only for a moment, for the very next instant I realized the gravity of the responsibility which we, doctors shouldered. I cannot use my knowledge-the knowledge to save lives - to wreak revenge. A man goes to a doctor in the throes of pain, with hope and faith, and places his life in his hands. And I wanted to make use of it for vengeance! For personal vendetta! I couldn't do it. I did my best, and by the grace of God saved him.

Saira cried with joy, "Shabash, my son! Today you have become a doctor in the real sense of the word. You have broken the shackles of revenge and bitterness. I am proud of you. "

She moved towards the window and flung it open. It was a glorious night. The moon shone like a silver ball amidst a thousand stars, and a fragrant wind blew.

Through the bright moonlit night, she could see a new and bright horizon- a horizon without the bitterness of the past. She was sure there was a beautiful future ahead.



A REQUIEM FOR MEHBOOB MANZIL

A week ago, I received a call from my brother Asif. He had terrible news. Mehboob Manzil, my maternal grandfather's house, had been sold! My uncle had signed the sale deed with a construction company which, after demolishing it, would replace it with a shopping complex!

It wasn't as if the news was a bolt from the blue. For quite some time uncle had expressed his inability to maintain the place since he and his children had settled down in London. But it had seemed a distant possibility and not a harsh reality staring us in the face. The realization that Mehboob Manzil would no longer be there was unbearable. Asif too was miserable. He wanted to go and bid farewell before the bull dozers claimed it.

“Will you come?” He asked. I wanted desperately to go but I just couldn’t leave Akram and the children and fly down.

“Why not bring the children along. They will never have the opportunity to see Mehboob Manzil and therefore never get a glimpse of our childhood days.” He sounded nostalgic.

“I wonder if they will appreciate it; ours was a different generation. However, I will get back to you in a couple of days, ” I assured him. I did get back to him and confirmed my programme. Akram was initially reluctant to let me go. He couldn’t understand my longing for India. Akram’s family had been part of the ruling elite of a princely state and had, after its accession to the Union of India, migrated to the UK. Akram had been brought up in UK but had later migrated to USA when it opened up as a haven for doctors.

Surprisingly, the children -Atiya 15, and Ali, 12-were very excited. They had seen photographs of Mehboob Manzil pertaining to the 70’s: a large, impressive bungalow set amidst lush vegetation –woods, orchards, with a riotous burst of bougainvillea and marigolds. What the photograph didn’t convey were the sounds : the clucking of the hens, the mooing of the cows, the chattering of the monkeys, the chirp and flutter of birds, the laughter, giggles and mirth of the inmates. I could never explain to them what Mehboob Manzil meant to

us as children. It was, after the cooped up flat in Bombay and the severe restrictions, our closest version of fantasy land.

I joined Asif in London. From there we flew to India. It was a windy June morning when we drove down to Mehboob Manzil. Asif and I were apprehensive of the changes wrought by “time’s winged chariot” in the 20 intervening years. We were certain the place must have deteriorated after my grandparent’s demise, but we were not prepared for the sight that met our eyes. The whole place had been transformed beyond recognition. Twenty years ago it was the only bungalow for a mile or so. Today it was smothered on both sides by cemented shopping complexes. The place looked strangely foreboding, the portico shorn of its canopy of bright bougainvilleas, the window shuttered, and the walls darkened by rain and pollution. We alighted from the Maruti in a daze.

“Mama, it doesn’t faintly resemble the photographs.” Atiya’s and Ali’s disappointment was obvious.

“Houses like men, live and die and they grow old. Some grow gracefully and some do not.” I replied sadly. Yes, Mehboob Manzil resembled an old woman who had been abandoned by her children and was longing for extinction.

I wondered what Mehboobunissa Begum, my grandfather's mother would feel at the sight of the house which was named after her. Her name had meant beloved but it was an irony of fate that her husband, an exceedingly handsome man, had never loved her. He deplored his wife's plain looks and had tried twice unsuccessfully to marry beautiful girls. But both the girls to whom he was betrothed succumbed to the cholera epidemic. He was then reconciled to his wife. He died, a couple of years later, leaving her a widow at 25 with six children of whom my grandfather was the youngest.

"Do you think anyone is there?" Atiya asked, staring at the desolate place.

"Maybe ghosts or jinn's, " Ali piped in

"Ahmed Miyan and Mahadeo must be in there. Uncle had made it a condition in the sale deed that they should be provided." Ahmed Miyan had been grandfather's valet and Mahadeo was the gardener. Their respective wives too worked in the house. Saleeman cooked our meals and Lakshmi performed other chores.

Asif knocked on the door. There was no response either from Ahmed Miyan or Mahadeo or from the ghosts.

"Let's go to the side entrance -the gate which opens near the kitchen, " Asif said. Atiya grimaced - the path was full of slush.

“Come on” Asif beckoned us, carefully stepping on the protruding bricks.

“These indicate someone is inside.”

With great difficulty we managed to get across the garage and the barns and reached the gate to receive another shock. The garden had disappeared. It was submerged by weeds and wild plants. The woods and orchards had given way to single- storied nondescript houses and the pond where Omar and I had met for the last time, had vanished. In its place stood a hideous factory producing animal fodder!

Our disappointed laments seemed to have reached the inmates for we heard the shuffle of footsteps and the kitchen door creaked open and a wizened and bent Ahmed Miyan warily peered out. He took some time to return our greetings and when he did, it was with a dejected lament.” O Bibi. Everything is lost. The contractor will be coming any time to demolish our Mehboob Manzil.”

“What arrangements have been made for you till the complex comes up? “I asked as we stepped into the dark, soot- ridden kitchen.

“A room has been hired for us near the chowk, ”

“How is Mahadeo?”

“Bad. Very Bad. Each day life seems to be ebbing out of him.”

Ahmed Miyan and Mahadeo had been great friends –they performed in the folk drama which took place at harvest time in our fields. These dramas which were performed by torchlight and lanterns invariably had Mahadeo playing Majnu to Ahmed Miyan’s Laila. The only time a rift appeared in their friendship was when Mahadeo’s son Sampat and Ahmed Miyan’s daughter Zarina fell in love, and after months of “koochy cooing” in the woods around the pond brought shame to their fathers, and sorrow to their mothers. Sampat was turned out of the house and Zarina was rushed by Saleeman to her village, after a crude abortion by a midwife. There she was married off to a man old enough to be her grandfather but she had died in a year’s time - in childbirth-and her son had been brought up by the old man’s step children since he too had soon followed her.

“Where is Zarina’s son?” I asked

“Oh Ghulam Rasool. He is in Bombay, drives an autorickshaw and is the father of two.”

We stepped into the adjoining room, which had been used as a breakfast room but now served as a living room for Mahadeo and Ahmed Miyan. On the string cot lay Mahadeo, a shadow of his former self. I couldn’t believe he was the same man who was the district’s

acclaimed wrestler. His eyes were bright with recognition but he could not lift the paralyzed arm to greet us. It was the same arm which he had used to thrash Lakshmi. But strangely enough Lakshmi had enjoyed the beating sessions, and we could hear her laughing and jeering in Marathi, "*Marla tow Marla :Marun tow paye.*"(You have hit but try hitting again.) Then we would hear the resounding sound of beating, laughter and jeers. One day my grandmother admonished her. "Don't you realise that you are inciting him?"

Her reply totally flabbergasted grandma."You know when he beats me, the tassel of his cap bobs up and down. I find it very funny. It makes me laugh." She giggled. Grandma gave up in despair.

We moved to the next room which had been a living room furnished in the traditional style, the floor covered with durries on which were spread sheets of sheer white and the walls were lined with white bolsters while portraits of venerable ancestors peered down benevolently on their burgeoning progeny. One of the windows of this room opened into grandfather's office and client room, and sitting on the window sill, concealed by the curtains, I had witnessed many a criminal's confession which gave me nightmares. I still remember those dammed faces: the hot-headed youth who had axed his father to death; the lascivious Patvari

who had raped his niece; the angry Pathan who had stabbed his nagging wife to death.

My grandfather, a leading criminal lawyer, saved them all from the gallows, an act of omission which he dreaded would damn him on the Day of Judgment. But he was optimistic of Allah's mercy and would humorously enact a drama which would take place in God's court, when he and the government pleader Mehmood Akhtar, a devout Muslim and grandpa's bête noire, were presented before God.

The Lord after hearing the angel's resume of their deeds would pronounce judgment. Grandpa was to be banished to hell and Mehmood Akhtar to enter heaven. Grandpa would bow his head in submission and make a rush towards hell, while Mehmood Akhtar would open his brief to argue that all his good deeds had not been recounted by the angel. God puzzled by grandpa's response would ask, "Are you pleased to go to hell?" My grandpa would reply, "No Me Lord. But since in life I have disobeyed your command, let me in death at least, follow it." And God would be pleased and decree that grandpa be sent to heaven and the argumentative Mehmood Akhtar be sent to hell.

And then very pleased with the denouement, grandpa would continue his business of saving criminals.

"What is amusing you?" Atiya asked puzzled.

I was silent. How was I to explain that each nook and corner of this house evoked a memorable event, sometime funny or happy and sometime sad. We stepped into a huge latticed verandah which had served as a ladies' sitting room. At one end was a huge takht on which grandma generally held "in house" meetings with her relatives. Occasionally she also invited her friends. There would be hectic discussions and often they would switch to Persian or a coded language in which "fe" was prefixed to each word. We kids were desperate to decode it so as to be privy to all the secrets. We needn't have bothered. As we discovered later, there was rarely any juicy gossip or sex scandal; it was usually an exchange of news of their menstrual cycles, pregnancies, delivery problems.

But sometimes serious matters came up; of death, disease and suffering. One occasion etched in my mind was of my grandma recounting her mother's death. It seems that when they were bathing her mother's body, she sneezed and got up. The initial horror gave way to rejoicing which was, however, short lived since she informed them that she had returned only for two hours and would go back. To their excited queries on the other world, she was silent. An hour later her sister who lived in a neighboring district arrived and wept with joy to find her alive. But very soon joy gave to disappointment as an hour later my great grandmother, Farhatunisa Begum, lay down and once again became a corpse.

On the northern side of the ladies' sitting room was the impressive Western -style drawing cum dining hall. It was here that I first saw my cousin Omar, no it was not really the first time as I had known him since childhood.. He had been the "fatty" of the group. Later he was a callow ungainly youth. Then we did not meet for nearly six years during which time he was at the Defense Academy. In the intervening period, he had changed so much that it seemed as if I was meeting a stranger, suave, smart with striking good looks, a Captain in the Army. I was 19 then, susceptible to good looks and smart uniformed officers.

I was also conscious of my attractiveness and was elated at its confirmation in Omar's appreciative gaze and that moment fell irrevocably in love. There were no obstructions in our way. On the contrary, our respective parents would have been only too happy. But Omar was an incorrigible romanticist. He wanted to obliterate the ties of kinship and the familiarity of childhood through a romance which found expression in secret meetings in the woods around the pond. But these meetings were few since there were too many peering relatives around and escaping to the pond at midnight was risky. But the danger of being caught heightened the excitement and romance. We felt as if we were enacting a role in a Hindi movie.

But the roles were short. War broke out and Omar had to join duty. The night before his departure was our last meeting. It was a moonlit night and the pond was shimmering silver. We were acutely aware of our impending parting under the shadow of a war and the inevitable happened.

Twenty days later, when Omar was reported missing in action, I was in an unenviable state: anxiety mingled with fear. I had no courage to live Sharmila's role in Aradhna. But my fears were unfounded: the night was to remain a memory and had not left an imprint of Omar. A week later when the news of his death reached us, I was shattered. But I could not give vent to my grief.

"Ayesha, Ayesha," I heard Asif's voice and came back to the present and found his arms around me and the puzzled look in my children's eyes. I realized that my face was wet with tears.. "It's Ok Ayesha." Asif said gently. "Life goes on."

I nodded and as we walked across a row of rooms which had served as bedrooms during the vacation, I saw my reflection in a broken mirror. The image was hardly flattering, a middle-aged woman with streaks of grey, sallow skin and bleary eyes who bore hardly any resemblance to the lissome bright eyed girl of 19. Asif was right. Everything in life is transient.

As we stepped out of the house, I hesitatingly asked Ahmed Miyan, "Is there any news of Sampat?"

"Bibi he is no more. But he has two children- a son and a daughter. The boy is about 18. will call him to perform the last rites."

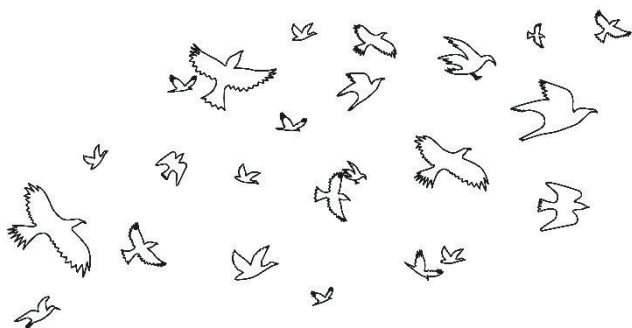
"I am glad you have taken all measures."

"There they come," Ahmed Miyan moaned as a truck with six workers with pick axes and crow bars halted in front of Mehboob Manzil.

"Let's go" Asif yelled. "I don't wish to witness this."

I pressed some money into Ahmed Miyan's palm for Mahadeo and hurried to the car.

As we drove away, I had a last look at Mehboob Manzil, our abode of memories. It looked as desolate and rundown as its inmates. I thought it was perhaps an act of mercy to let it go when it was still standing rather than allow it to crumble into ruin. In any case it could never return to its past glory. It would however, remain cherished in our memories for ever.



POST OFFICE CLERK TURNS INTO A GUAVA

Published in the Festival issue of 1998 of The Statesman

On 6June, I received Ela's letter. Ela is my childhood friend who having married Anil - an engineer in USA -way back in the eighties is happily settled there with two fine sons. Though we meet once in three or four years, we correspond frequently. And through our letters we not only exchange news of our families and careers but also views on diverse subjects such as books, films and theatre. As far as books are concerned, we have almost the same taste and since most of the Indian writers are published abroad, it is through Ela that I am introduced to the latest releases. I therefore await her

letters, quite certain that they would carry some book reviews. I am rarely disappointed.

This time, too, Ela had a new arrival to announce. It was Kiran Desai's first novel *Hullabaloo in a Guava orchard*.

"You know Ayesha," Ela wrote. "Kiran is Anita Desai's daughter. You remember her novel *In Custody*?" I had not read the novel but had seen the film. I could never forget Shashi Kapoor as the aging Urdu Poet. It was a remarkable performance but I was despondent not at the decadence and passing of an age but to see Shashi, the heart throb, so bloated.

But Ela continued, "Kiran is very different in style and content. Her book, to quote Salman Rushdie, is 'lush and intensely imagined' and portrayed with humour, a world gone slightly mad." I was impressed. So, Salman Rushdie had already read the book! Not that I am a fan of Rushdie. I could hardly go beyond 15 pages of his *Midnight Children*. But he is held in such high esteem by the Western literary world that his praise definitely tilted the scales in her favor.

But what could Kiran Desai have written to create such an impact? Why of all the places, was there a hullabaloo in a guava orchard?

Ela's next para carried the answer. She wrote "The novel is highly imaginative one. Actually, it is a fantasy.

The hero Sampath Chawla is crazy and so is his mother Kulfi. I didn't know women in Northern India had such strange names. The town Shahkot in which the novel is located is unlike any town in India. At least there were no such towns when I lived in India." It seemed to me Ella was implying that with her departure sanity had also departed from the country. Ela, I thought, hadn't changed. She always had a very high opinion of herself. I remember her writing a month after she had left, asking if life was the same in India. Obviously, it was. Anyway, I think I should not digress. So onto Ela and her comments.

"The boy Sampath," she wrote "is a post office clerk. "I felt a sense of affinity. I had been associated with the post office, in a managerial capacity, for the last fifteen years. So very interesting. But the next sentence curbed my enthusiasm." Sampath," Ela wrote," was fed up of the post office and of the Mr. DPS and fleeing duty, climbed and settled on a guava tree. And from this tree he started spouting words of wisdom to one and sundry that came to have a glimpse of the Tree baba. The news spread and people started coming for his darshan from far and near and his family started becoming rich.

But Sampath could not enjoy this abode for long. A band of local monkeys swooped down on the orchard and developing a taste for the liquor, created a hullabaloo in the orchard. Poor Sampath! The mere

thought of leaving this paradise and returning to the mundane world filled him with horror and he intensely longed to be one with nature. His wish was fulfilled: he turned into a guava!”

Fantastic, I thought. Better than the fairy tales where Cinderella’s coach turns into a pumpkin or a toad into a prince. Quite charming, really. I could present the book to my son Adil who was turning eleven on 15July.

“But,” Ela said “what I didn’t like was the disparaging comments Kiran Desai has made about the post office.”

Disparaging comments about the post office! What on earth could this Kiran Desai have written for Ela to feel so strongly. After all, Ela was always critical about the postal delays. And one of her favorite verses was Ghalib’s *Khak ho Jayenge tumhe khabar hone tak* i. e. “I will turn to dust by the time you get the news of my death,” describing the lethargy with which the post carried letters.

Hence, I was keen to get hold of the book and undo the damage which Kiran had done to the post office. And so the next day I went to Khan Market and purchased the book. The cover carried a picture of a monkey leaping towards a branch. I was surprised. I had expected to see Sampath reclining on the branches of the guava tree. I was keen to see how he could: for I couldn’t

imagine a full-grown man on the slender branches of a guava tree. The guava trees I had climbed as a child could only take the weight of children and therefore, we had considered them a safe refuge from the grown-ups who couldn't climb up to catch us. Perhaps this guava tree was sturdier than those I had seen, or perhaps Sampath was a light weight. Anyway, since Sampath was unlike other men, the guava tree could also be unlike other guava trees.

I plunged into the book which began with Sampath's arrival in the world which coincided with a windy storm and a crate of Red Cross supplies being dropped by a Swedish plane befuddled by the storm. Sampath was, therefore considered lucky. But as he grew up, he was a failure and a disappointment to Mr Chawla who somehow managed to get him a job in the post office. The post office is unlike any post office and it is in the depiction of the post office that I cannot exercise the so called "willing suspension of disbelief. "Being imaginative is one thing but being fallacious about a public institution is another! I felt this false image needed to be rectified, at least to Ela. Hence that night after everyone had retired fagged out with the relentless heat, I sat down to pen my observations on the post office. I wrote.

Dear Ela,

Received your letter dated 29May. It has been an unusually hot summer, with the mercury soaring to 45 and 46 degrees. But never mind the heat which I forgot as I read your review of Kiran Desai's book. I was goaded in buying and reading it. I agree that the book is very, very imaginative but I am sorry to say that even the post (as depicted) is a figment of Kiran's imagination –like Kulfi, like Sampath, like Shahkot it does not exist. Unlike you I am still with the post office, and therefore cannot brush away the facts by saying "that things have changed since I left. "I feel duty bound to put the matter in its proper perspective. Imagine Ela, a post office where the head of office is a DPS which, as you know, stands for Director of Postal Services. Even in the USA, the post office is under a Postmaster or Post mistress. Why, for that matter, even the remotest village s in Himachal which probably sell three postcards, will have a branch postmaster. But this Shahkot will not. And then this weird office has other functionaries besides our hero Sampath, that is Miss Jyotsna who is described as a postal worker. Now I don't know what Kiran means by postal worker. It sounds like social worker –doing all sorts of postal work. I presume she is the stamp vendor, or counter clerk, but there is no mention of her interaction with any member of public. Sampath is of course a sorter since he reads all the letters he is supposed to sort. But there is no postman and no water woman. And you have the DPS piling onto it as if this was the only post office

under his jurisdiction. In actuality a DPS has about six to seven divisions under him and each division is made up of fifty to sixty post office with most of these having much larger manpower than the Shahkot post office. And then there is the strange absence of unions. No postal system exists today without the unions who could have simply curbed Mr. DPS's power and probably had him suspended for misusing his powers and drafting the Shahkot staff at his daughter's wedding. They could have gone on strike when Sampath was punished for stripping in a drunken state at the DPS's daughter's wedding.

But strangely enough Sampath goes scot free for greater omissions. He is reading letters by steaming them open over mugs of tea. He therefore becomes privy to other people's secrets which he discloses later from his tree abode, which gives the impression that he is a soothsayer.

I have come across many frauds in the post office: there is actually a monthly statement of frauds. There is money order fraud and saving bank fraud where money is pilfered. But I have not come across someone who steals people's secrets. Sampath is a greater fraud than those who just steal money: his is a breach and misuse of the trust reposed in the post office.

And as for boredom in the post office- it is possible only when time hangs heavily on your hands. And this time, my friend, is a scarce commodity, even in a post

office. There is a gamut of activities taking place at the same time. Customers are being served at the counter, letters are being sorted for delivery and for onward transmission to the destination and in between irate complainants there are also pleasant acquaintances who probably just drop in to collect their letters and have a hot mug of tea. Then there is the water woman, if you are lucky to be in a post office which has not replaced her by that cold impersonal machine-the water cooler.

When I joined the service the water woman was a romantic figure harking back to the legend of Shakuntala. Indeed, each water woman imagined may even have moulded herself after Shakuntala and the postal clerk as also the postmaster as Dushyant. Only this romance didn't flower into marriage but led to scandals and union complaints and the hapless divisional superintendent had to invariably intervene banishing Shakuntala, sorry the water woman, to another post office.

If the water woman is a vanishing cadre there is another more interesting cadre of post women emerging. That reminds me of a really juicy anecdote which would have shocked Kiran and she may have given a very different title to her novel. Perhaps it would have been *Hullabaloo in a Post Office*.

The incident took place just within a month of my joining. One morning a well-dressed young man burst

into my room looking extremely agitated and thrusting an envelope in front of me exclaimed, "See what your postman has done?"

"My postman? "I asked indignantly "How does he become mine?"

The man sensing my irritation explained, " I mean one of the postmen working in a delivery office in your jurisdiction."

"Well, what has he done?"

"See for yourself." He said, handing me the envelope.

I took the envelope. It was heavy. It contained photographs. Curious, I flipped the envelope open and took one out. I was flabbergasted. It was a photo of a voluptuous woman in the full bloom of youth posing in the nude!

"What the hell is this? How can you give such photos?"

"Madam, I have not taken these photographs, but one of your postmen."

"But how have you come across it. Was it posted to you?"

"No. These were given to me by the postman. He said he had the negatives."

“How does it concern you?”

“These photographs are of my wife. She is having an affair with the postman with the assistance of the Postmaster.”

I was shocked. Things were shadier in the post office than I had ever imagined.

“How does the postmaster come in the picture?” I asked puzzled.

“He does. He has arranged the beats in such a way that these two are together.”

There in a flash I remembered a recent complaint from the husband of one of the post women alleging an affair between her and a postman with the connivance of the postal authorities. So, he was the hapless husband in question. Poor man, I pitied him and was curious to see the postman. What had attracted the woman to him ? What did he have, that this man did not? I shrugged away the thoughts. I remembered that in the case I had already taken action to transfer the lovebirds (after checking with the concerned inspector that there was some truth behind the allegation) to distant offices from where they did not have the opportunity to meet. I told him so. He was relieved and thanking me profusely for having saved his marriage went away.

That incident however gave food for thought; on the institution of marriage, the emancipation of women symbolized in the post women and the licentiousness and promiscuity of modern life, where men and women meet frequently. But I could not reflect on it for long: some union leader wanted to see me with some staff problems

I was, however, quite elated at my success in solving the problem. But then, I was to be confronted with many more in my career. What? Some more amorous tales? You might be wondering? What is happening in the post office? No. Not just amorous ones or romances but a gamut of emotions: of jealousy, greed and grief too. After all the Post is a microcosm of humanity, with its concentration of a large manpower. It encompasses all types: the profligate, the modest, the lazy, the conscientious, the brave, the coward, the cheat and the trustworthy. I can relate several incidents of bravery and courage in times of flood and fire, earthquakes, riots and bomb explosions as well as felony and forgery of lakhs of rupees.

So you see, the life and work within a postal system is hardly dull. Hence, I feel that Sampath's wish for escaping it is no reflection on the functioning of the post office. I am sure you agree.

While I was busy defending the post office, the weather outside had changed dramatically. The dull

pallid heat had given way to a gusty wind which rustled the trees. At that hour of the night the rustling of leaves and the swaying of branches seemed unnaturally loud. A storm seemed to be brewing, perhaps like the one in which Sampath was born. Perhaps one was being born even today. I hoped his father would not find a job for him in the post office. The wind was gathering momentum. A window creaked: the next moment it swung open and then banged shut. It awoke Ahsan who came out of the bedroom wondering what I was doing at that time of the night/day. It was two o'clock!

“What are you up to?” he asked peering over my shoulders as I hastily folded my papers.

“Nothing much, ”I replied “Preparing for a meeting tomorrow.”

“What could be so important in a post office to work so late?”

I felt my anger rising: what did Ahsan know except to lecture philosophy to a bunch of green horns. But I thought it was no use picking up an argument I was too tired any way. Outside, the wind was howling. Ahsan walked towards the balcony “Come Ayesha just see how alive the atmosphere is.”

It was: the trees which had been still were swaying vigorously. From afar we heard a booming sound.

“What’s that?” he asked

“Perhaps the sound of thunder.”

“But it is different.” Yes I thought, it was different, unlike the usual thunder.

” Could it be a plane crashing, befuddled by the storm.”

“Or a landing of extra –terrestrial beings. Or a nuclear explosion, a simultaneous one by India and Pakistan to draw the match.”

“That’s a little too imaginative. Surely the sounds wouldn’t reach us in Delhi.

“The wind may have carried it along.”

We laughed. We seemed like two crazy coots, talking such nonsense. The weather seemed to have brought in a change of mood. It had been days since Ahsan and I had laughed and talked like this. Ahsan went to the kitchen to drink water and returned with two apples and a guava. “Hungry?” I queried.

“Not really. Let celebrates.”

“Celebrate what?

“The nuclear explosion of India and Pakistan. Now we have something in common. This and the sanctions.”

“It’s not funny. What a lot of heat it has generated and also a hullabaloo.”

“As long as it remains a hullabaloo it is OK, it should not become a holocaust.”

I felt scared at the prospect. Seeing me serious, Ahsan said, come take what you want; your favorite is guava, ”

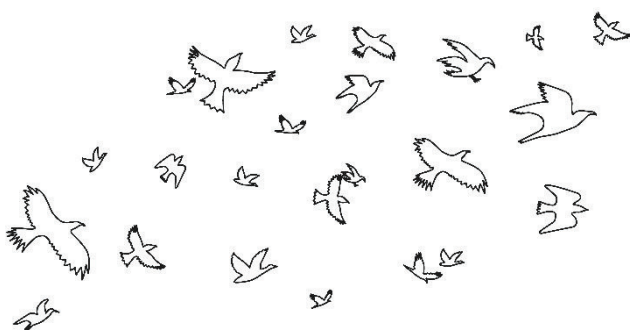
“No not in this weather. I think you shouldn’t have it.”

But Ahsan didn’t pay heed. He had both. Outside the first drops of rain were soaking the parched earth and the same heady fragrance which had sent Babur into raptures emanated and enveloped the atmosphere.

Having consumed the guava and the apple, Ahsan gave a satisfied belch.

“Come, ” he said, “let’s call it a day. “I followed him to the room. He dropped off to sleep as soon as his head touched the pillow. But sleep evaded me for some time. I thought of the guava Aslam had eaten –and then chided myself for being softheaded to be carried away by a crazy book, then dwelt on the influence of the printed word on the mind. Then ruminated on the need of developing a reading habit among the people and then was confronted by India’s literacy problem, and then I thought of ways and means of making India’s millions

literate and then wondered why the great leaders hadn't done it, and then I drifted off into an uneasy sleep, dreaming of atomic explosions and postal clerks becoming guavas and guava shops being reconverted into post offices!



MY GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE

It was not the house my grandfather built. It was a house he bought from a Marwari and improvised upon. It was an unusual house: an old edifice with cobbled roof and arches together with a modern superstructure—a delightful combination of the old and the modern, an amalgam of the Hindu and Muslim. It was one of the first double-storied houses in the district and all you needed to tell the friendly tonga-wallah by way of address was: “Take me to the house,” and lo and behold, you were at my grandfather’s house.

To us children who regularly visited it every summer, it was the ultimate in joy and desire. The portico was covered with mauve and red bougainvillea

and there was a *mandvah* of *mogras* and *balia gulabs*-roses which grew on creepers!

There were fruit trees: guavas, mangoes, white tamarind and believe it or not *sitaphal*(the local name for custard apple) and *ramphal* trees. My heart is numb with fear: what with *ramphal* and *sitaphal* trees and a huge pipal tree, with a well below it and the house of a Hindu converted into a Muslim abode! Oh, dear save this place. But no fears the sale deed lies safely in my grandfather's embedded safe.

But the Marwari rued the day he sold the auspicious house to my grandfather and it is said that till this day one can hear his heart broken cries near the hammam.

Indeed for some time we believed it to be unusually auspicious: all my aunt's *dolies* and my mother's too had departed from this house. And prosperity poured in: the godowns were full of grain and the embedded safe stuffed with notes, as my grandfather, a criminal lawyer, won one case after another

The Marwari's contention was that the luck was caused by the blessings of the giant pipal tree whose branches were reflected in the cool, clear waters of the well. The well was also no less a miracle: when draught stalked the land, its waters quenched the thirst of man and beast alike. It was a sight worth filming: the sexy local

women in *kashtas* delicately balancing pots on their heads, their hips swaying gracefully.

Of course, now with the municipal pipes having reached all, we are deprived of such delectable sights.

Besides the fruit trees, my aunt had planted lemon and pomegranate trees. The pomegranate trees were just outside the old- style box toilets. While the pigs gorged on our droppings in the boxes below, we who had no sense of hygiene, sat and munched pomegranate seeds above. And the lemon tree produced such an abundant harvest of the yellow fruit that we could easily have run nimbu pani shop and earned a neat income.

These were not the only attractions; there was my loving affectionate grandmother and my lovely petite aunt with her auburn hair and laughing black eyes; and there was my mama, as handsome as Clark Gable and who entertained in as lavish a style as the old nawabs. With the house there were the servants: Bina -bi, a cranky shriveled 80; Hussein miyan, a crazy dotty chap in his forties; and Murtaza, hapless and bewildered bastard in his teens. Bina- bi was quite a woman or may have been in the prime of her youth; her dress was a designer's dream. She wore a choli, tied in the front and instead of a billowing skirt she wore clinging churidar with a dupatta draped around. At that age her sagging breasts, which reminded me of dried figs, were repulsive, but in her youth, she must have been irresistible.

“That I was” confirmed Bina- bi. “How else could I have kept my husband from those Banjara women floating around.”

“Are the Banjara women very beautiful?” we inquired out of sheer curiosity.

“Oh yes, my dearies. They are the most seductive sorceresses in their back less mirrored cholis.”

Hussein miyan was an institution: about him there were several stories. He claimed to have mastered witch craft- *Jadu Tona*. He hadn’t married but he didn’t need to: he had a mantra by which any of the *paris* would spend the night with him whenever he desired. There was the *lal pari* and the *safed pari* and the *sabz pari*. All he had to do was to apply the right perfume and stand on one foot with one eye open for three hours. We were fascinated by these stories and eager to have a glimpse of these *paris*. but he would never allow us to come in his hut. Once, with great difficulty, we managed to peer into his hut, but from the height of the mango tree and the precarious position on the swaying branches all that one could discern was Hussein miyan and someone who resembled the *dobhis* daughter.

But the most memorable days were those when my aunts got married. The whole place was lit up and decorated like a Christmas tree. Everywhere there were relatives and friends floating about and the air was heavy

with the aroma of delicious food. My uncle in a white suit looked more handsome than any movie actor. I was fully decked up: a plump six-year-old in a *gharara* rolling around looking important.

There was an uproar outside: shouts of “The *baaraat* has come, the *baaraat* has come” rent the air. The band marched along, playing a raucous filmy song which I cannot remember. Any way that was hardly important. What was, was my first glimpse of the bride groom. So, hold your breadth while I give a first-hand account of it.

The car glided into the portico and everybody rushed to open the door. I peered through the tangle of legs and arms. Out stepped a suited elephant- I mean a man who resembled ...no, a man who was as huge as an elephant.

Everyone was trying to shake hands with him. My uncle garlanded him. Why? He surely couldn't be the bride groom. I nudged my smiling uncle, “Where is the bridegroom?” I whispered. He gave me a scathing look and in an acerbic voice asked sarcastically, “Can't see? Need specs.”

I was totally flabbergasted. I rushed into the house to give the horrifying news, but stopped short, aghast when I heard my aunt who was coyly peeping out of the window with her friends' chirp, “Doesn't Amin look handsome?” The girls giggled and one said, “Beauty lies

in the eyes of the beholder. “Did it? I wondered. Something must then be wrong with her eyes.

Anyway, she was exceedingly happy. I just couldn’t comprehend it. Many years later when I realized the full significance of marriage and what it entailed, I couldn’t but admire the skill and dexterity of my uncle. To make love to a woman one-fourth of his size without crushing her under his weight!

Actually, this realization dawned on me when my aunt Shagufta- the pretty one with the auburn hair- got married. It was midnight, three days after the wedding. I was descending the stairs to attend to nature’s call when I heard my mother speaking in an agitated voice to my aunt’s mother -in-law. “How come nothing has happened till now?”

“Don’t worry,” explained my aunt’s mother -in-law. It didn’t happen in my case too- for nearly 15 days. Every time he would come near me I would start shouting and he would withdraw fearing he would awaken the whole house, ” she giggled. My grandmother and my mother didn’t. They were not amused. They refused to believe that such reticence and control was inherited. Pointed questions were asked and an ultimatum was given. The deed should be performed that night. And it was done. What a shining example of filial obedience!

These nocturnal visits of mine were both enlightening and educative. One midnight as I was descending the stairs, I saw light in my grandfather's room and heard a woman's voice and stopped in my tracks. I tiptoed towards the door and peered through the chinks in the door. Lo and behold! The scene was worth picturizing. There was my splendid grandfather, a fine figure of a man- as fine a man as can be in his sixties - with a hoary moustache which curled upwards menacingly, and my grand aunt Nafisa begum, stout sixtyish, with bull eyes, plumply seated in the arm chair. My grandfather was waxing eloquent about those eyes. "Nafisa Begum what eyes you have and what a body! Taj Miyan never appreciated you." I couldn't see her body- she was swathed in five yards of thick white cotton. What was he talking about? Perhaps the past. I was stunned. Good God! To have seen the body of his brother's wife! The words from the bible or some holy scripture flashed before my horrified eyes! Oh God, I prayed, forgive them. Let the sins of the grandfather not visit his grandchildren. All is not well in this house.... I moaned.

And then for days I went around with a haunted look. Like a zombie. No like Hamlet, after he learned the heinous truth. Wasn't my plight the same? I thought it was.

"What is the matter, Ayesha? Have you seen a ghost?" Just like my mother to notice when I am

disturbed and attribute to ghosts. My mother was obsessed with ghosts and jinns. The house she was born in- her grandfather's house- was infested with ghosts and jinns, specially the jinns. They were everywhere, performing all kind of activities from bathing and washing to multiplying. I sometimes felt like asking her if she had ever seen the jinns copulating. But I didn't dare. So how could I now divulge the terrible secret of her father. Would my mother believe it? I bit my lips and kept mum. What's the matter Ayesha? My mother asked with concern. Not able to control myself I blurted out all that I had seen and heard. To my horror my mother instead of being shocked started laughing.

"Oh Ayesha, oh!" she chided with amusement." Has this been bothering you- all these days."

"What's so funny?" I asked. She was so strict with me. I had to cover my lemon sized breasts with a dupatta and was chided if it slipped. And here she was amused!

"In your days, did women go around showing their bodies?"

"Oh no! I was only amused at Abba's English. What he meant was 'figure. ' Ha! Ha!"

"OH- ho" I said as realization dawned on me, "But then in those days women wore lose kurtas or loose home-made blouses over the saris. So how was it possible to notice her figure?"

“Yes. But Nafisa Chachi was different- she was from Bombay. She wore tailored well-fitting blouses. And she wore nylon saris. Sometimes, her *pallav* slipped and we had a glimpse of, ” she giggled and added “of her well-fitting blouses.”

So, this *pallav* dropping was an old trick- probably the most oft-used weapon in the limited arsenal of the traditional woman!

“How sexy!” I exclaimed;

“Don’t use such language,” scolded my mother. “And wear your dupatta properly. “She was back in her reprimanding role. I scowled at such double standards. But old habits die hard and I adjusted my dupatta without a murmur.

And I could go on narrating stories of the young old and the middle aged. Every nook and corner of the house abounds with memories It was a miniature world...But I am overwhelmed by nostalgia.

My grandfather’s house is now deserted. My aunts are married and gone to far- off lands. My grandparents are no more. So is my devastatingly handsome uncle. The servants: Bina-bi and Hussein miyan are dead and Murtuza has wandered off to no one knows where, hopefully to a place where none can taunt him about his birth,

Though the trees-the pipal and the lemon and the pomegranate – still stand there, they are old and withered. No cows moo and no chicken cluck in the barn. The courtyard is overgrown, but the bougainvillea and *mogras* still bloom. The old Marwari still weeps in the spooky and moss-covered hammam- but there is no one to hear his cries.