IKRAMULLAH

Regret

Someone called me and gave me Ehsan's message. He said Ehsan wanted me, no matter what, to go see him. He was back from England after his heart surgery. He was annoyed about the fact that I had not gone to see him before he left for England, when he was ailing, and now that he was happy to be back, I must go visit him. He was impatient to meet with me. This happened about ten or twelve years ago. In those days such surgery would not have been available here. Even though he and I have lived in the same city for the past forty or forty-five years and feel affection and fondness for each other, there are times when several years go by without a meeting. And if we do run into each other by chance, we are so wrapped up in our own affairs that after a warm embrace we lapse into talking perfunctorily and soon afterwards go our separate ways. In order to live our lives, and in keeping with our domestic and professional—call them social—exigencies, we have unwittingly chosen separate spheres of life for ourselves and have become helplessly trapped in them. Indeed, this has become the way of life in all big cities in the world. But, perhaps, this may not be the whole truth, for, in fact, in my case my wife's obstinacy has also been a major factor. She dreads the man. In fact, she is unwilling to accept him as human. She says human company doesn't make a ghoul become human. Many times I have tried to reason with her that Ehsan's physical features have been that way ever since childhood, his strange habits and manner only making his image worse, but that he should not be shunned for his unsightly appearance. Underneath he's a guileless man, indeed a simpleton, without even a trace of artifice in him. By temperament he is sympathetic and high-minded. He talks so sweetly that, on the one hand, he charms his listeners, and on the other, makes them wonder if it is still possible in this day and age for someone to be so candid about himself and others. Then again, he is also a distant relative, a childhood classmate and a friend. I at least enjoy his company and

wonder how and why he is so misunderstood. In order to explain the extent of his simplicity and lack of guile, I even told her an incident from our adolescence. In those days, a giant-size fried *papar* used to cost a paisa. Ehsan's *mamoon* had given him a rupee on Eid or some other occasion. And what did he do with it? Why, of course, buy *papars* for the whole rupee and march into my room holding the lot in both hands. He put them in front of me and said, "Come on, eat."

Confounded, I looked at his face. "So many? What are you going to do with all these?"

"Eat them. What else?"

"Even twenty people couldn't finish them off. How will the two of us?"

"Just watch me."

"Come on. Stop this nonsense. What's the story?"

"No story. For a whole year I had been craving *papars* but couldn't get hold of even a paisa from anywhere. My mouth watered whenever I passed by the *papar*-seller's stall. I know if I had asked *Aapa* for a paisa she wouldn't have refused, but how could I ask her? Farman brings home just thirty-five rupees each month, and *Aapa* has to stretch them from one month to the next. I know because I'm the one who goes out to buy the groceries. At the end of the month we have to ask the shopkeepers for credit. Three or four months ago I swiped a paisa from the grocery money. When Mother asked me for the account I said one paisa had fallen into a gutter. She didn't say anything. Tucking the paisa under my trouser-belt, I went straight to the *papar*-seller's. For a long time I stood near him. Finally I came back with the paisa still intact and put it on Mother's palm. When she asked if I had taken it out of the gutter I said no, it had been on me all along. She said I could keep it if I needed it, but I told her no, I had no use for it. Then I cried, and she cried with me. After that I never thought about *papars*. Today, when I got a rupee, I thought I should punish my hedonistic self with a weapon of its choice."

I ate two *papars*. He could barely eat ten, all the while cursing his appetite. The rest, all fifty-two of them, we took out and distributed among the beggars and the children in the streets.

My wife laughed derisively and snapped, "Bravo! That was very smart of your friend, and you should be applauded too for crowing about it. I thought he only looked a fool but he's downright crazy."

I was saddened to hear her say that. Never before had I thought her capable of such heartlessness. I didn't think a person needed to develop a particular ability to sympathize with others in their suffering or to enjoy,

like all good things in life, Ehsan's truthful and candid manner. She had no idea that poverty could show its effect in many ways, all extremely varied.

It's strange. My parents, so long as they were alive, didn't think well of Ehsan either. They weren't afraid of him, but loathed him nonetheless. In our childhoods he wasn't allowed to come to our house, and I was also strictly forbidden to see him. In my wife's eyes he was a soul escaped from hell charred inside and out by its intense heat. She said, "He's ill-omened. He'll spread misfortune wherever he goes and ruin anyone who meets him. For God's sake, stay away from him. Don't ever let him come inside my house or cast his shadow over my children."

Ehsan had never married, and to preserve my domestic life it was essential for me never to invite him to my home. Because of my wife's constant objections, I finally gave up even visiting him occasionally at his flat. Ehsan never complained about my growing indifference, nor did he insist on continuing the relationship. Although I could sense that he wished I'd continue to see him sometimes, he never said so.

In school he had already failed a few grades. When I passed seventh grade and he flunked eighth, we became classmates. We were friends already, but now we became really close. We were also distantly related to each other, but how exactly I could never figure out. Whenever Ehsan's mother, whom he called *Aapa*, was in a good mood, she would prattle on giving the names of some men and women—who had thought it fitting to leave this world without making our acquaintance—and, linking them to my father and grandfather, would declare us to be related to each other as uncle and nephew, or cousins, or in some other way. Listening to her engrossed in a litany of strange names would surprise us at first, but then we would laugh out loud at the absurdity of those names and the pointlessness of the effort to recall them. In our ignorance, we didn't realize that back in those days middle-class people gave themselves the kinds of names that now the lower classes had started adopting. My father disliked Ehsan's family a great deal. He would turn his face away in disgust whenever the name of Ehsan's father, Bashir Ahmad, was mentioned. Perhaps he thought that now that the family was down on its luck the slightest acknowledgment of their existence might encourage them to borrow money from him. Or perhaps the reason was that in his time Bashir Ahmad had quit his *tahsildar*'s job with the British on the grounds that working for the British was like being a traitor to one's country. He had subsequently joined the Congress Party and eventually landed in jail, leaving his family to starve. My father, who felt rather big about his job as

reader in an English Deputy Commissioner's Office, might well have resented the slight implied in that act.

We had been classmates for about two months when, during the break one day, I invited him to have *qulcha* and spicy curried grams with me. He said he never had any money. I told him I had some. We joined the many other students sitting on their haunches in front of the *qulcha*-and-curried-gram-seller outside the school gates. We bought one *qulcha*, broke it into two, and put the porcelain saucer of curried gram in front of us. A small meatball, as big as an *aamla*, rolled from side to side in the saucer as each of us formed our morsels, deftly leaving it for the other. Finally I said, "Ehsan, you have this meatball. I don't want it."

"No, you take it. I don't eat buffalo meat."

"Why?"

"I see a live water buffalo in it, all smeared with dung."

I looked into his eyes to see whether he was telling the truth or just putting me on, and asked, "Don't you see a live sheep in mutton?" His long, dark, stork-like neck was always stiff. Above it loomed a face with its features chiseled sharply like the edge of a sword. Under his taut skin you could see not only his prominent bones but also the tightness of each tendon. Through his deep purple, thin, pinched and unsmiling lips he said, "No, I don't." His small, black eyes, frightful and without lashes, constantly darted quick glances in every direction, as though expecting an accident to happen any minute. Besides the fear flashing through them, his eyes also carried the unflinching defiance of a dying man who has resolved to lay down his life for his cause. Perhaps his father, in getting himself hanged for insurgency against the English, had left a noose dangling around his son's neck as well, so that every moment of his life Ehsan had been waiting for the planks to slide from under his feet and his eyes were perpetually blazoning that message. I rolled up the meatball in my last bit of bread and put it in my mouth. Its spiciness stung my tongue, like a glowworm flashing its light two or three times, then it went down my gullet and soon my tongue forgot its pain. When I handed Maula, the *qulcha*-and-curried-gram-seller, a two-aana piece he gave me back an aana. I suggested to Ehsan, "Let's buy another *qulcha*," but he said, "No, keep the aana. It'll come in handy some other time."

With our tongues still burning from the chilies, we walked back into the schoolyard and stood in the shade of a *sheesham* tree. In the blazing heat and searing wind, the boys were playing soccer barefooted, kicking up dust in the tiny yard. Whoever got hold of the ball would run with it in whatever direction he liked, while all the other boys tried to stop him.

Ehsan took off his cap—which was made of plush, not lambskin as I had mistakenly assumed for a long time—lifted the edge of his militia shirt, and wiped the perspiration off his greenish clean-shaven skull. His head rested on top of a spindly body, scarcely thicker than a bamboo. His cap would constantly slip off of his head and land on his ears, its sides buckling under their own weight. He wore it tilted to one side, in the style of his hero Mustapha Kamal Pasha. When he lifted his shirt I noticed that his stomach was as lean as a greyhound's. Above it was an emaciated rib cage. When he breathed, the skin between the ribs moved in and out. Below the rib cage was a small triangular bone which was constantly active. I had a wondrous sensation: Oh, he's very much alive inside!

Ehsan said, "The English class is about to start. Did you do your homework?"

"Yes, more or less."

"The British are on their way out. They're losing on every front and the Germans are about to take over. It's the time to study German yet these stupid instructors insist on teaching us English. I'm not even going to touch English—let Master Zubair kill me if he wants."

Ehsan's argument was both weighty and quite appealing. There actually was talk everywhere about the imminent defeat of the British, and I thought that if they were sure to go away it was pointless to learn their language. For now, it was wonderful that we would be rid of English; as for German, we'd deal with it when the time came. But Ehsan's argument would've been useless before my father who stuffed English into me with the help of punches and profanities. Ehsan's father was dead. He was free. But mine was alive, and I was his captive.

"Well then, it's settled," Ehsan said. "We don't have to go to English class now. The next class is theology; we already know theology. The last period is geography. Well, skipping a couple of classes in a day won't hurt. Let's go for a walk. Tomorrow when we come in we'll submit a note saying we developed a stomachache during the break today."

I couldn't say no. Hurriedly we collected our schoolbags from the classroom on the second floor of the decaying old fort-like building and quietly snuck out. The school stood on the edge of the Grand Trunk Road. A narrow side street, which started just opposite from the school went skirting around my neighborhood, Husainpura, across the railway tracks and crossing, and ended up in the Civil Lines area. Ehsan started off down this road, raising dust with his slippers. I was feeling nervous. What if someone saw me and told my father? I'd have hell to face. Ehsan didn't have to worry about such matters. Everything around us was awash

in the yellow blazing sun. Like Noah's flood, the heat was not just pouring down from above; it was spiraling up from below. Our eyes couldn't find comfort anywhere. The dazzling sunlight reflecting off of every surface was piercing our eyeballs like needles. The wind was searing. Even the tarred surface of the road had begun to melt. The houses of the residents of my neighborhood were lined up on our right. On our left we first passed Sufi Nazir's factory and then the bungalows of Shaikh Aftab, Professor Jafri, and Mr. Pick. These were followed by the high, forbidding walls of the leather goods warehouses and the power-loom factories which were emitting heat along with the muted whirring of their machines. A water pump the size of a mailbox, which had been installed by the Committee, was noisily hurling water against a grave-like cement platform. Ehsan put his cap on the faucet, splashed water on his hands and face, and then rubbed his wet hands on his shaven head. Meanwhile I felt as though I was suspended on a cross out of fear of being caught, scarcely able to even think of cooling myself down with water. Hiding my face behind my schoolbag, I kept walking, hugging the wall. As I passed by my alley I scarcely stole a glance at it. In the empty alley, double-storied houses of redbrick stood shoulder to shoulder, quietly baking in the merciless sun. The green, blue and white upper-story windows stood silently behind screens fashioned from thin bamboo reeds. They must have been shut firmly to keep out the searing heat. The thought that the windows at my house would also be shut gave me a little courage. Melon peels had blocked the narrow, cement gutter running along the unpaved alleyway, and dirty water was running everywhere. At the intersection, the *qulfi*-seller, a piece of cloth over his head, was sitting on a long wooden board attached to a wall and dozing off in its shade. The large earthen pot of *qulfis* on his cart had been covered with a wet piece of red rag. He'd straighten up now and then, call out his product, and then sink back into himself again. Taking strides as long as a camel's, Ehsan caught up to me.

"It's a scorcher today, *yaar*."

"That's for sure."

"Let's go to Cold Well and drink some water."

"That's too far. I have to be home by the time school lets out."

"It's not that far, Saeed. You're worrying for nothing. If we cut through Company Bagh, it's just on the other side."

The gate was closing just as we reached the railroad crossing but the pedestrian passage was, of course, still open and some men carrying their bicycles aloft were passing through the turnstile. Ehsan said, "*Yaar*, the train's coming. Let's watch it. Then we'll go."

"Your house is right by the tracks. Haven't you watched enough trains already?"

"No, that's not it. What kind of train at this time—that's what I want to know."

"If it isn't a passenger train, it'll be a freight train. What of it? Let's go."

"It won't take more than two minutes. Let's watch it. It'll be fun. Every passing train makes me want to hop on and ride off somewhere far away."

"You've traveled so much already—Mianwali, Multan, Montgomery, Lahore, you've been to all of them. Still not satisfied?"

"The only journey I remember is the last one, when I went to Lahore Central Jail. I was ten at the time. I don't remember any of the others. I was far too young."

The gatekeeper inserted two keys into the iron box near the tracks. The bell that had been ringing continuously stopped. When he turned around Ehsan greeted him with a loud, "*Assalam-o-alaikum,* Maulvi Sahib." The Maulvi gave him a close look, straining to recognize him. Perhaps he was an old student. Then holding the *paan*-spittle in his mouth, the Maulvi raised his face skyward and responded, " *Wa alaikumas salaam.*" Ever since I could remember, I had been watching the Maulvi in his blue uniform lowering and raising the crossing barriers. On the other side of the network of tracks, along the railway's boundary wall, stood the eight-by-ten-foot platform the Maulvi used as a mosque, a fringe of whitewashed bricks running around it to mark the area. There he led the faithful in prayer five times a day and taught the Holy Qur'an to the children in the morning. Everybody called him the "Hindustani Maulvi." As soon as the engine poked its head out a little ways from the signalman's post, the Maulvi, wearing his thick, squeaking *poorbi* shoes, fashioned from local leather and soaked in oil, hustled into his one-room living quarter, the small empty space in front of which had been turned into a courtyard by hanging a jute curtain around it on a barbed wire. He lifted the curtain, entered the courtyard, and grabbed the signal flags from the cot. Then he came out and walked over to stand in readiness, green flag in hand, a little beyond the gate, in front of the brick watchman's post that looked like a box facing the tracks. Now even the pedestrians and bike riders had stopped crossing, and the whitewashed bricks across the tracks had become more glaringly visible in the pale sunlight. On this side shimmered the Maulvi's long black oil-soaked beard and his heavy *poorbi* shoes. The blue uniform came from the British, while the shoes

were Eastern. The oil and the mosque were local. The long beard with no mustache were the Maulvi's own.

The chugging engine was steaming ahead in all its glory. It gave a warning whistle. A puff of steam flew upward. The sharp whistle went through the still sea of sunlight like a spear and then the sun was as blinding as ever. As he shoveled the coal, the fireman in front of the open pit of the boiler looked like a burning white flame himself. A leather water bag tied to the boiler's door handle swung along with the engine's movement. The engineer was stationed in the midst of the heat unperturbed.

Ehsan said, "It's the army special. No wonder I couldn't figure out what train was passing through at this time!" As the railcars whizzed by I saw men clad in army uniforms moving about inside. The train picked up speed. The noise of the rolling wheels became louder. Dust rose. Ehsan shouted, "Guys, don't become fodder for the guns! Why lose your lives for a mere twenty rupees? Go back." The train passed. I shuddered at Ehsan's exhortations. He was going to be caught, and so was I. My father would skin me alive. This was the very reason he had forbidden me to fraternize with Ehsan. The guy was dangerous, no doubt about that. The bell began ringing again. The Maulvi removed the keys from the box where he had inserted them earlier and went to raise the barriers. We started crossing the tracks, which were embedded in the road like the circuits of a transistor radio. Two or three tongas and a lorry chock-full of peasants stood on the road waiting for the gates to open. Having shoved coals into the gas cylinder at the back of the lorry, the driver's assistant, wiping off perspiration, was now busily blowing air into the cylinder through a bellows. It took the lorry another couple of minutes after the gates were opened to be fully ready to move.

On our right, for about seventy or eighty yards, a low barracks made of small bricks ran parallel to the Hukam Singh Road. Behind it were two other similar barracks, and beyond them a fairly wide parade ground. Guava, mango and plum orchards were spread out for quite some distance along the edge of the ground and the train tracks. Opposite the orchards and across the tracks were the Muslim neighborhoods of Husainpura, Sharifpura and Tehsilpura, in that order, and at the end of the barracks there was a huge, sprawling banyan tree, with the building of the Special Police, the prison, and the living quarters of the Officer-in-charge around it. The shade of the banyan was for everybody. (Some people could always be found under it playing "cops and robbers," taking the game for real. A little ways from the road, on the left, was the rear

wall of some bungalows. A round, arched and closed cement embankment—which suddenly emerged from the bowels of the earth at some point and disappeared just as mysteriously near the railway crossing—ran alongside the road. As children we had heard that it carried water to the reservoirs of the Darbar Sahib, but we never could confirm it for ourselves. When we reached the age when we could have verified it, the Partition of the country changed the setup of everything around us.

We reached the banyan and continued on toward the hand-pump. After we had our fill of water, the tree's shade felt so cool and comforting that we plunked down to rest for a while on some of the bricks that lay around. Suddenly screams, cries, and the sound of desperate pleading—as though someone were being slaughtered—rose from behind the prison walls, along with the sounds of slapping and heavy swearing. I stood up and looked at Ehsan. He said, "Sit down. It's no big deal. The police are interrogating somebody."

I said, "No, let's leave now."

Just then a policeman emerged from the prison, and we saw him dart off toward the office. When he noticed us he yelled, "Aye, what are you doing here? Get lost." We were back on the road again.

I asked, "Ehsan, was this how the police interrogated your father when they arrested him?"

"Man, you're a real dolt. My father wasn't a common thief or a dacoit; he was a fighter for India's freedom. He openly declared his crime the very first day he raised the cry "Long live revolution." What could the police interrogate him about when he had nothing to hide? Of course they found ways of harassing him in the jail, but that was a different kind of punishment. For example, they would deny him food, put him in solitary confinement, withhold medication when he fell ill, prohibit visits, hold back his mail, deny him B class, subject him to hard labor, and so on."

"But those punishments couldn't be as severe as these beatings."

"Kiddo, you know nothing; you'd have screamed your head off in one day. You think going through solitary is child's play? That's the toughest of all punishments. Even the hardest nuts get cracked under it."

I was far from being convinced. Since the matter concerned his deceased father, I merely expressed surprise and kept quiet. Taking slow, measured steps, like slumbering horses ambling along a familiar track. Braving the searing wind and enduring the prickly needles of sunlight, we reached Company Bagh.

The incredibly pungent odor of the flowers and trees—so pungent it smelled like hot spices—greeted us, penetrating our nostrils. We didn't mind it, but we didn't feel exhilarated by it either since as the blinding light of the sun had by now sucked every drop of freshness from it. A pack of cigarettes lay glistening in the sun on the other side of the street. Ehsan dashed to it, picked it up and opened it. It was empty, as expected. He shoved it in his pocket. Neither he nor I smoked, but collecting empty cigarette packs was his compulsion. We all have our own. It was a very personal mania, though sometimes, out of affection, he would let me share in it. Three or four shoeboxes, which he had stashed like a treasure in the space between the ceiling of his room and its crooked brown rafters, were chocked full of just such packs. He was absolutely sure no one knew about their existence. One day as he stepped into the house he saw his older sister, Safia, with one of the boxes, which she had removed from its place. She was sitting on the cot and poking through it. At one time Safia was a teacher in an elementary school. Then someone snitched about her father's being a Congressite who had died in jail, and she was fired from her job. At first Ehsan was stunned by her prying, and then he started to cry. She laughed, just as the person who had snitched on her at the school must have laughed, while he was crying, just as she, or rather the whole household had cried, when she was fired. She said, "Come on, take your box. I was just looking at it. I swear, I didn't take anything from it. I promise I won't touch any of your things again. Forgive me."

Going around the Purdah Club, we came onto the road that lay in the dusky shade of some thick trees. I said, "Nice and cool! Aah!"

"See? That's why I wanted you to come. On our day off, I sometimes come and sit here the whole afternoon."

"All alone?"

"Why not?"

"Doing what?"

"Nothing much. Just sitting around."

I could see on his face that he regretted letting me share in that secret of his; perhaps he was afraid I would talk to others about his abnormal, quirky behavior. So, to cover himself, he added, "The reading room of the Ranjit Singh Library opens at 4:30; I go there to browse through newspapers."

"Rajit Singh Library?"

"Yeah."

The buildings around here, all of them, had been put up by Ranjit Singh for his Ram Bagh. Some of them now housed clubs for the native

and British officers. The finest of them all, which Ranjit Singh had probably built for his own living quarters, now housed the library. In another building right across from the library, also erected by him, was the women's Purdah Club, and in yet another of his buildings, the offices of the Municipal Committee for the management of the Bagh were located. One building near the Bagh had been added to the Civil Hospital. Ram Bagh was spread over a huge area at one time. It began where its gate stood now. It was apparent from the name of the gate that it had served as the entrance to the Bagh from the city side, which could not have been more than three quarters of a mile away from where we stood. The British had reduced the size of area of the Bagh and renamed it Company Bagh.

"Why on earth is it called Company Bagh? Was any particular company given the contract to build it, one that raked in money by selling entrance tickets to it?"

"Don't know why the Angrez called it that. They could have just as easily named it Committee Bagh, after the committee that oversees its management. That would have made more sense. Maybe it's called Company Bagh because people come here in groups, in the company of other people."

"That makes no sense. A person can also come here alone, the way you do. …"

We couldn't figure that one out and moved on, still wrestling with the puzzle. In the meantime a carriage transporting children home from school passed us by, and two more soon after.

"School's out," I said. "Let's go back."

"The younger children get off sooner. Our school lets out at the time the call for the *zuhr* prayer goes up. There's still time. You can walk a little faster, though."

Five or six boys, our age, carrying schoolbags and clad in neat khaki shorts and white shirts, whizzed by us on their bicycles talking in English. Ehsan asked me, "Do you know which school they go to?"

"No."

"They go to the school run by the Christian missionaries, the one at the end of the Mall. You know what? There they start teaching English from Grade One. And they teach all the subjects in English."

"But, *yaar*, how would they teach Urdu in English?"

"You dummy! Why would they need to teach Urdu? All you need to know is English, to become a government official. But just watch what happens to these guys when the Germans take over. Poor fellows, they'll

become just like us—neither of us knowing any German. They'll curse all that time they wasted studying English. Instead, they should've seen a bit of the world. Hey Saeed, guess what the fees are like at that school!"

I took a long shot and said, "About ten rupees a month?"

"TEN rupees a month? Are you crazy? It's fifty rupees. Got it?"

"Come on, *yaar*, it can't be. That's about as much as my father makes in a whole month."

"And that's why you go to that lousy school—no better than an orphanage. And their school—it's like a plush bungalow in the middle of a huge park."

"Who told you all this?"

"Well, I saw the school by chance; I just wandered by it one day as I was walking on the Mall. Have you heard the name of Lala Krishan Lal Advocate, the one who is the President of the City Congress?"

"No."

"Well, it doesn't matter. In the old days, Farman and I used to go to his home to ask him to find a job for Safia. Then later, when she was fired from her job, we used to go there to try to get her reinstated. That's how I became friends with his son, Kishore. He also goes to that same school. He told me all these things."

"Do you still go to Lala's?"

"Only when we have some problem. He's a very kind man."

The two of us came out of the Bagh's eastern gate, crossed the narrow Mall Road made desolate by the heat and the sun, and walked over to the small Cold Well. It lay under the foliage of some thick, green trees, shaded by a tin shed. Its mouth, about seven feet in diameter, had been divided in the middle by a board: one side reserved for Hindus and Sikhs to drink from, the other for Muslims. Its outer wall was about four feet high, with a small platform around it. A man used to sit all day long on the Hindu side of the well, offering water in crystal glasses. On the opposite side, a tin cup, secured by a chain to a steel drum, rested on the platform for the use of Muslims. In the evenings, when visitors came in large numbers, a Muslim attendant also showed up. A channel flowed into this yard—about a *kanal* or *kanal*-and-a-half in size—from its eastern side, carrying water from a canal. A smallish mosque stood by the bank of the channel, and a shop, whose owner was a Hindu, was located in the western corner. He sold *puris* in the evening, and both Hindus and Muslims ate them without any qualms. When we passed by the shop, chickpeas were boiling in a cauldron and potatoes in a wok. Two workers were busy kneading flour while the owner, having planted himself on a metal chair,

was reading the Lahore-based Hindu newspaper *Veer Bharat*. We drank to our heart's content from the tin cup. The water was so cold and so sweet that it refreshed us completely. We never ceased to wonder how on earth wells could produce such cold water in this heat—water even colder than ice water. We experienced the same surprise that day too. Ehsan asked, "So what do you think—was it worth coming here?"

"Yes."

"I'll go fetch the newspaper from Lala," he said. So he did. We sat down on the edge of the channel and began browsing through it. The paper had the usual fare: news of skirmishes between the Japanese and the Allied Forces on the Burmese border, in the Assamese hills, in the tribal regions of Imphal, and in other areas, etc. Ehsan had another favorite hero besides Mustapha Kamal Pasha. He was General Rommel, the man who had scored victory after victory against the Allied forces. Ehsan was absolutely convinced that Rommel was invincible. His devotion to the General had reached such a point that Ehsan had even begun to see halos around the General's head in pictures. But Rommel had returned to Berlin after suffering a defeat in Africa and dispatching his forces to Italy, and it was all quiet on that front so there was no news about him in the paper. Ehsan took it from my hands and went over it again from end to end, only to be disappointed at not finding the news he desired. "I don't believe that he was defeated there," he said. "His retreat may have been a tactical move. And if he's really been defeated then surely Hitler has stabbed him in the back, jealous as he must have been at all his victories. Rommel has to return to Africa to conquer Egypt and occupy the Suez. Unless he does that the Japanese army and the Indian National Army won't be able to invade India through Burma, and the British won't be ousted from India."

The news of the Bengal famine, including three pictures, appeared on the inside page. One of the pictures showed the half-naked skeleton of a woman lying dead under a huge banyan with a small sack lying close to her head. An equally emaciated child sat near her and was trying to wake her up as two men riding their bicycles passed by the corpse and the child. The second picture showed an old man, fallen by the roadside, face down, still holding a staff in his hand, either dying or already dead, and the caravan of starved, half-naked people was moving along, leaving him behind. The third was of a famished eleven-year-old girl, her agony and helplessness etched on her face. She seemed unable to do anything about her drooping shoulders, her dangling arms, and tilting neck. Only her large, desolate eyes showed any signs at all of life.

"There is still hope in her eyes," I said. "Timely help may yet save her."

"I saw my father in jail four days before he died," Ehsan said. "T.B. had made his body as thin as this girl's, and he had hope in his eyes too, just like in her's. But he was dying. And he did die four days later. Eyes are perhaps the last things that die."

I began reading the news of the famine. The price of rice had shot up from seven-and-a-half rupees a maund to fifty rupees. The irresponsible transfer of stockpiles of rice to the battlefront and to foreign countries was identified as the cause of the famine, and the Muslim League government of Bengal was held responsible for its failure to alleviate the suffering of the victims. In Ehsan's eyes, the Muslim Leaguers were the lackeys of the British, for whom the death of 400 million Indians meant absolutely nothing.

"We're merely insects in the eyes of the English, not human beings. I feel like taking off for Bengal," Ehsan said.

"Do you have anything to feed the starving?"

"No, nothing at all. But at least I'll die, like they're dying."

Just then I spotted the Maulvi, who was standing by the channel drying himself with a clod of earth after urinating. I said to Ehsan, "Get up, let's go. The Maulvi is getting ready to give the call for the *zuhr* prayer."

Ehsan returned the newspaper to Lala. We noticed that inside the shop the workers had finished kneading the flour for the *puris*.

Tucking our schoolbags under our arms, we started back, walking briskly along the Mall that ran parallel to Company Bagh. I don't know what Ehsan was pondering, but I had only one thought hovering inside my mind—why did Ehsan need to go to Bengal? As it was, he was starving here, and might well starve to death one day. Passing by the girls' college we saw the students piling into tongas and buggies to go home. Some unfortunate ones, like us, were trudging along on foot in the scorching sun. Entering through the second eastern gate of the Bagh, which was straight across from the college, we found ourselves back inside. We passed by a bunch of girls without once turning around to look at them. Firstly, because the sun was too hot, and secondly, because nature hadn't yet fitted our eyes with those lenses that suddenly make girls look colorful and smart. It wasn't that they were altogether beneath our notice; to us they seemed rather like the small paper flags fluttering in the wind in front of the cinema-halls. In a strong wind some of those flags would tear, and even fly away, without causing any grief to anybody. By

the way, in those days some strange thoughts did flicker and crawl out of the ant holes of my mind, like, why not stand on my head and call those girls? Near the edge of the road I spotted an empty cigarette packet. I ran and picked it up and showed it to Ehsan. He looked at it casually and said, "Useless. I already have two or three like this one. Throw it away." At the rejection of my gift I looked at him with eyes like a hungry pup staring at someone eating in the hope of getting a morsel. At least I felt that way. Ehsan said, "Newer and unusual packets from truly marvelous brands, with pictures, are found only near the railroad tracks. We'll look for them there."

When we got back to the railroad crossing, Ehsan turned towards his house, walking on the dirt path alongside the tangle of cables which lay bending away from the railway lines. He was avoiding the signal cables that ran just above the ground toward the outer signal. His house was the first one in a row of six or seven nondescript houses facing the tracks about a hundred and fifty yards beyond that outer signal. Fruit orchards sprawled out on three sides of this cluster of houses, while the train tracks stood right in front, and beyond them was Sharifpura and the rest of the city. The houses of Sharifpura were quite near the tracks, their backs facing the tracks like a high, impenetrable, forbidding wall. At the tracks I paused between the gates of the crossing to look at Ehsan as he made his way home. The six tracks, resting upon thick gravel of gray stone, were diligently engaged in the pointless task of refracting the light, throwing it, fountain-like, back into the ocean of sunlight. In this blinding glare Ehsan continued on, walking along the wild growth of *bhang-bathu* in the dusty, lifeless shade of the plum trees. With every step the flapping sound of his slippers could be heard, and dust, as hot as the sand in an oven, flew up and fell onto his feet. In the distance, the white outer signal stood against the hazy, faded blue sky like an extended arm barring the way. In this barren landscape all I could see was this one person advancing toward the southwestward leaning sun, taking its onslaught directly on his face, his head bent like a porter.

The monthly rent for Ehsan's house was five rupees. Inside, there was a triangular concrete verandah with two pillars, but the floors of the two rooms, the courtyard, and the vestibule behind it were unpaved. A crude bathroom had been fashioned out of the empty space under the stairwell by hanging a curtain over it. The Municipal Committee had largely ignored this settlement. The gutters flowing out of the houses emptied into whatever low-lying spot they could find. Electricity hadn't reached here yet, though it had been available in the city for the past thirty years.

Ehsan's mother would laugh and ask me, "Aye Saeed, ask your father to get us a permit for kerosene oil. Ask him to have it made out for a whole canister. It shouldn't be hard for him; after all, he works in the Deputy Commissioner's office. On second thought, don't bother. I'll come to your house and ask him myself." But she never did visit us with that request. Her courageous ability to laugh at things through her toothless mouth, in spite of the incredible suffering she had endured all alone, never ceased to amaze me. And when she really burst into laughter, she always made sure to cover her mouth with her *dupatta*. She had a large face and a wide forehead. The color of her skin was as pristine white as *motia* flowers in full bloom. Her body was heavyset. She was very sensitive to the heat. Her perspiration-soaked, white muslin shirt would cling to her back, and she would continually cool herself with a small handheld fan. Ehsan's father had owned a huge three-story *haveli* inside the city. It had been built by his grandfather in prosperous times in the past. After Ehsan's father was fired from his job, they had to sell it in order to meet the family's household expenses, pursue the various court cases, and be able to visit him in jails in distant cities. They were forced to move from those spacious quarters, easily worth a hundred rupees a month in rent, to this house with a monthly rent of five rupees.

Like any other afternoon, a heavy, stale odor hit my nostrils as soon as I entered our lane. I slowly climbed the stairs of my house near the chowk and went into my room, the windows of which opened onto the next lane. I dropped off my schoolbag and climbed another flight of stairs to the room where my mother was sleeping, oblivious to everything, with my sisters on either side of her. Her handheld fan had fallen on one side. A wrought-iron grating covered a square opening on the floor to let the breeze flow through to the floor below. Children's legs and other small objects could easily slip through it. The small objects would, of course, go straight down and land in the courtyard on the lower level; the children, on the other hand, would get caught in the grating, fall down and cry for a while, but then learn to walk along the side. Jumping across the grating, I went over to the hearth in the corner. First, I downed a whole glass of water from the new clay pitcher. In a wicker basket lay two *rotis*, and there was some curry with two potatoes and a small piece of meat in an engraved copper bowl—my share of the meal. I had a headache and could only swallow a few mouthfuls. In front, on the clothesline, two of my father's shirts and pants, as dry as a crisp *papar*, were flapping around in the wind. At four, my mother, half-awake and half-asleep, would heat up the coal-iron and press these.

Our school closed for summer vacation a few months later. Except for Sundays, Ehsan and I spent every day together until four o'clock in the afternoon. He would come to my house in the morning and the two of us would just sit around in my room—it had a very low ceiling and looked like a box—either gossiping or, occasionally, doing some of the homework assigned for the holidays. Sometimes I would start reading one of the storybooks which I had gotten from a pushcart vendor in exchange for my old, seventh grade books. Ehsan had absolutely no interest in stories. Tales of genies and fairies, hardships endured by princes, the agonies of princesses separated from their lovers—all of these were meaningless to him. He went after solid facts, like the things found in the books on history and politics which he wanted to read but which were beyond our means, and which I had no interest in whatsoever. Sometimes we would go out on a stroll to the outlying areas of the town. I had to get back home before my father returned and, equally important, Ehsan had to be out of my house by then. I can't speak for Ehsan, but I wasn't under any pressure to study or do household chores. Although I enjoyed having a fair amount of freedom, lately I'd begun to feel a strange uneasiness, a nameless anxiety. I wanted something to happen. But what? That was always shrouded in mist and never became clear. The things my parents talked about began to sound false and hollow. I began to hate my house and often wondered if I should leave it and run away. One day I happened upon my sisters' doll chest. I shredded their dolls into bits with scissors. My sisters cried, my mother got angry, but I kept smiling, unperturbed, and went down the stairs into the lane.

The windows of my room opened onto the street some eight or nine feet below. A huge house, which looked even taller from my low-ceilinged room, stood facing my windows across the eighteen feet of the lane. Its four tall windows, door-length high and always covered by yellow, reed screens, opened a little higher onto the same lane. There was no boy our age in that house, just a thin, tawny matchstick of a girl, Parveen, who had made it to the eighth grade like us. The only other people to be seen in that house in the daytime were a few women of assorted ages, though in the evening one did see two or three men entering the house, tired from their day's work. At first, Parveen didn't even seem like a proper girl. Looking like a wasted little mouse, she would be seen in the morning capering about in the lane barefoot and humming with a bowl in hand, on her way to buy yogurt. And every evening she would be at Maulvi Daoud the sherbet-seller's place with her *sipara* for her lesson. Because she was a rich man's daughter, her lesson was over quickly, lasting only a few

minutes. While the other twenty-five or thirty boys and girls would sit on folded knees for hours on end on the wooden boards fixed to the Maulvi's shop and the adjoining stores, rocking back and forth, loudly memorizing their lessons. For some days now—it didn't escape my notice—Parveen had begun to look more like a woman—her walk had steadied, her *dupatta* was draped more carefully around her body, and her eyes were cast downward. Watching her come into the lane this way made me feel pity for her—a sprightly and vibrant girl being smothered for womanhood. We would sometimes spy a colorful *aanchal* glimmering behind the yellowing reed screens, or see dark eyes watching our room and us through reeds pushed apart by fingernails. That annoyed me a lot, for Parveen had not been concealed behind a veil yet, nor did any of the other women in her house observe purdah around us. Why, then, this peeking? Was it that she wanted to watch us when we were least likely to be conscious of being watched!

One day, Ehsan and I were lying on a mat disconsolate and inert like dead bodies, with books and notebooks scattered around us. We weren't exactly tired or asleep, yet we had scarcely wiggled a finger, much less turned over. We weren't sad or unhappy, just weary. Our souls were frozen senseless by boredom and our minds and bodies were defenseless against it. The lane below was bustling with life, as was the upstairs of my house, and film songs blared from the radio in the house across the way. Whenever possible we savored those songs, letting each one penetrate through our pores into our very beings. At that moment Kanan Bala was singing in her bold, saucy voice, like a *koyal* hopping from branch to branch. But even this favorite song of ours failed to create the slightest stir in our frozen emotions. We had neither the desire to live nor the wish to die—we just floated like a pair of dead bodies on the still surface of the lake of weariness. At last, making an extraordinary effort, like a rocket moving out of the gravitational pull of the earth, I shook myself and picked my way slowly up the stairs as if sleepwalking. I grabbed my father's single-barreled gun and pulled it out of its case. Then, yanking a cartridge out of the ammunition belt, I returned downstairs. I said to Ehsan, who was still sprawled out on the mat, "Look, this is a gun. There'll be a loud bang when I fire it."

He sat up in alarm to see what stranger was talking to him. My voice and its tremor were strangers to me as well. I was saying, "Look, this is a cartridge. This is how you load it into the chamber." Ehsan screamed, "No, no, don't fire. You'll hit someone." I clanked the chamber shut and said, "This is the safety-lock. See, now, it's unlatched. Here, I'm cocking

the gun." Ehsan, still sitting, pushed the gun with his hand so that its barrel aimed upward. The gun flew backwards out of my hand, its butt hitting the wall, and then it fell down as if dead on the mat. The room became so filled with the fumes of gunpowder that we began to cough. We were stunned and our ears were ringing. The agitated voices of Hasna the provison-seller and Pheeka the butcher were heard from the lane: "Baoo Saeed, what happened? Say something, man!"

"It was nothing, brother. Just a firecracker."

Parveen's mother, older sister, sister-in-law, three children, and Parveen herself stood framed in the window across the lane like portraits of fear. Her mother was calling to my mother, "What happened, Saeed's mother?" I came to the window and said, "Auntie, it was just a firecracker that went off."

"Oh Saeed! Who ever sets off such booming firecrackers inside a house? Why not set it off out in the lane if you're itching for it so? Crazy boy, scared the hell out of us for nothing."

My mother came thumping down the stairs bareheaded and barefooted. She was terribly agitated and nearly out of breath. "Did anyone get hurt?" she asked.

"No, Auntie, we narrowly escaped," Ehsan replied.

"Thank God," she said, holding her head in her hands as she collapsed onto the mat with a thud. At this point we couldn't even use the firecracker as an excuse, for the gun lay on the mat as proof of the crime just like the dead body of a victim, having ripped a portion of the plaster—about six-inches in diameter—out of the opposite wall, which had then crumbled into a pile on the floor.

"So, you had your fun, eh? Satisfied now? What if something had happened? What would we have done, eh? See if your father doesn't skin you alive today!"

I was feeling a bit ashamed, also fearful at the thought of the evening's coming reprimand. But, in spite of everything, the thought of having created all that commotion by an intentional act, and the feeling of contentment that followed the disappearance of weariness—made me feel quite good.

It was even more surprising for me to see signs of fear and astonishment on Ehsan's face. Wasn't he happy to see the end of our boredom? Or, perhaps, he wasn't bored after all; perhaps I had only assumed that he was as bored as I was. Perhaps he was just lying on the mat dreaming about a past different from what it had actually been. A past in which his father had never joined the Congress Party and had never been jailed, in

which he and his mother hadn't had to knock about from jail to jail just so that they might visit him. A past in which his father had not died, was still the *tehsildar* that he had always been, and they still lived in their ancestral mansion, they still had their old, horse-drawn carriage in which to ride to Cold Well to eat *puris* every evening, and every morning he himself, like Farman, put on his shoes, had a breakfast of two *parathas*, drank tea with white, not raw, brown sugar in it, and pedaled away on his bike to the English school to study.

"You rascal, get up and go home," Mother said to Ehsan. "And if I ever see you set foot in this house again, you'll be sorry. Sneaking in here like a thief early in the morning, unbeknownst to anyone! You good-for-nothing brat, now you're even ruining our child. Do you ever think of leaving once you're here?"

Ehsan rose from the mat, put on his slippers and shuffled out, dragging his feet.

So Ehsan used to come to my house. Now I started going to his. One day we started out from his house, walking along the train tracks on our way to see Forty Wells. Even though Ehsan warned me that the place was quite far, I didn't listen. The Forty Wells were a great source of fascination for me back then because of the story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves, which I had recently read. I was convinced that the legend's remnants must still be lurking around the Forty Wells. At least a few of the forty thieves must still be there, sitting around in their long, flowing robes. Ali Baba himself must have remembered his forty thieves when he heard the name "Forty Wells" and—who knows?—he might have even gone there. Maybe I'd meet him there. In reality, those forty wells were tube-wells that the town had installed to meet its water needs. They should have named each well after one of Ali Baba's thieves.

It took a while for us to pass through the Sharifpura neighborhood, then we entered Tehsilpura. After we had crossed through that, fewer and fewer houses could be seen, until finally there were none. Dense mango and guava orchards spread out on either side of the train tracks running to infinity on their long, raised bed of grey gravel. Ehsan told me that the farther of the two tracks on our right was for trains coming from Delhi and the nearer one was for those going to Delhi. The third set of tracks veered sharply left, toward Pathankot, as it neared Forty Wells. Both the inbound and outbound trains blew a long whistle as they reached that bend. There was also a big board by the bend with the word "WHISTLE" inscribed on it in English, and surely the engineers must also have had their orders to blow the whistle at this point. We abandoned the small

dirt trail and tried to walk on the tracks. Ehsan's slippers made it difficult for him to keep his balance so he took them off and tucked them under his arm. Still he tottered once or twice and stepped on the gravel, which made his feet start to bleed. He put his slippers back on and said, "Look, if we keep playing around like this we won't be able to get back before the afternoon. Walk fast." Here the trail had become even narrower because of infrequent use. As we could no longer walk side by side, we started to walk one behind the other. On one side was the gravel and on the other, nearer the higher ground of the orchards, were underbrush and weeds. Sometimes we would hear the watchman's "Ho, ho," shooing away the birds. These sounds, which sometimes seemed to come from nearby and sometimes from quite far away, had a music all their own—not sad nor pained, just conveying a hint of command. We found them pleasing whenever they could be heard, perhaps because they made us aware of the presence of other humans in the forest and lessened our fear of being isolated. Now and then two or three flocks of screeching parrots would fly over our heads from the orchards on one side to those on the other—greenish arrows flying noisily against the blue background of the sky.

"*Yaar*," I said, "can't these parrots fly with their mouths shut? After all, other birds fly too, but none of them creates such a racket. Seems like they're making fun of us."

"All right, so now it's the parrots you have to pick a quarrel with. If they heard you they'd perch straight across from you on a tree and laugh so hard you'd begin to cry."

"Parrots talk, but do they also laugh?"

Ehsan broke out laughing. I did too. The issue was lost in our laughter, though it never got resolved.

"Look," Ehsan said, "I'm going to cross over to the trail on the other side of the tracks. I haven't spotted even one new cigarette packet since morning. You keep an eye out too." He went across the tracks to the other side. I noticed two or three birds with feathers as soft and smooth as silk sitting huddled together on the telegraph lines, all puffed up, like rolled cotton balls. I asked, "What are those birds called, Ehsan?"

"*Kaal chiri*," he answered.

He picked up a rock and hurled it. It hit the pole with a "*tunn*" and the birds took off. They flew close to the wires, swooping up and sailing down in a wavy motion, then disappeared from sight.

"You made them fly away for no reason," I said.

"Come here and listen to this. You'll find a lot more birds like that up ahead."

I went and put my ear to the pole.

"Do you hear anything?"

"Yeah, just a jingling—like something's about to happen, but nothing does. It's continuous."

"That's coming from the cables, it'll keep on like that. I was asking about the "*tunn*." It sounds different inside the pole. You missed it. Here, try now."

He picked up a handful of stones from the tracks while I stood ready close by. As soon as he hit the pole with one, I ran and stuck my ear to it. The noise inside the pole didn't sound as sharp as it did outside; it sounded smoother and more rounded, like an echo. Eventually the echo subsided. Ehsan's eagerness and insistence had made me think the experiment would be something like a kaleidoscope for the ears. But it turned out to be nothing of the sort. I listened a second time and a third time, but my opinion remained the same. Disheartened, he began taking aim at the pole with the remaining stones. I joined in the game. We agreed to hurl five stones each from a distance of fifteen steps. Whoever hit the target more often would be the winner. Suddenly he screamed, "Look, the train!" I looked. The grandeur of the train approaching full speed was something out of this world. For the first time in my life I stood awestruck, watching this magnificent sight: a jet-black engine hurtling forward, spewing smoke and raising a storm of dust in its wake. In less than a minute, first the engine and then the noisy, rattling cars whizzed past us. The fleeting images of faces and quick flashes of fabric colors flitted before our eyes. The earth vibrated for a while and a dust- and straw-laden wind that had picked up made us feel we were in the midst of a squall.

"That was the Bombay Express," he said. "Its scheduled arrival at the station is 10:30. Looks like it's on time."

"Did you pick up any packets?" I asked.

"No. The rare ones can't be found here. We've come too far from the station. The kinds I like are found, at the most, no farther than the tracks near my house. We'll have to go to the station someday."

We crossed back over the tracks to our previous trail, the one we had been trudging along before because it was in the shade, and walked, one behind the other, for about fifteen or twenty minutes. It was a long trek and we had little time left. A water channel, running through the two orchards on the left, passed under the railroad bridge. We stopped to

examine the bridge. We were panting and our clothes were soaked in perspiration. The tracks here were laid over iron ties, instead of wooden, and through the open spaces between them we could easily see the muddy, fast moving current below. We kept picking up stones and dropping them into the water, enjoying the *glup, glup* of the water and its spurts.

"How about catching some fish?"

"There're no fish here," he said. "What would you catch? I tried once, using a piece of muslin as a net. The canal-digger wandered by. He said all the fish are caught at the barrage and the big canal. None reach here."

I threw a dry leaf in the water and ran to the other side of the bridge. The leaf floated under the bridge and continued on into the channel. I was happy that my leaf was moving forward and was going to travel to the very ends of the earth. Later, another flock of screeching parrots flew overhead. When they were exactly above us, I lifted my face and screeched back. I felt as if the last bird of the flock turned its red beak towards its spindly green tail, looked at me and laughed, and then hurried away. The thought saddened me that, should I ever run into this friendly parrot again, I probably wouldn't recognize it at all. I realize today that fellowship is something you cherish in your heart. That parrot is as good a friend of mine today as it was when it turned around to look at me, laughing companionably.

"Let's put an ant on the leaf this time around," I said. "As a passenger on our raft."

"All right. Let's stick two leaves together. The passenger will be happier in a roomier boat."

Ehsan snipped two mulberry leaves from the orchard. We linked them together with a few dry sticks and shaped them into a funnel. A fat ant was rushing along the trunk of a tree. I grabbed it, put it on our tiny leaf-boat and released the boat into the water. But the boat careened and started to float on its side, allowing water to flow in and out freely. We saw the ant thrash its clumsy-looking legs about in a desperate attempt to save its life in the swift current, but then we couldn't see where the powerful surges of the rushing water took it. I ran over to the other side. The leaf-boat was stuck in the grass on the bank and was empty of its lone traveler. I picked it up, turned it about and looked at it closely. Then I threw it away. We felt sad about the tragic end of the creature we had wanted to be the Vasco da Gama of the ant-world. Inwardly a little peeved at each other, we stood there for a while in hushed silence.

"If only you hadn't tried to be so smart," I said, "the ant would have made it to the other side."

"Why didn't you warn me that the boat would capsize?"

"Didn't you already know that?"

"All right. Let's put an ant on a flat leaf this time."

Another poor ant was captured and set afloat on the water on a dry leaf. It reached the other side of the bridge safely and we yelled, "It's here, it's here." The way it stood in the middle of the leaf madly rubbing its forelegs together told us that it was neither happy at the free ride nor cared much about adventure. The stupid thing wanted simply to stay alive. For a while we did see it sitting disgruntled on the leaf, sailing away in the middle of the channel, but we don't know what became of it afterwards.

We returned and sat down across from each other on opposite banks and stuck our feet into the cold water. For a while we sat peaceably enough, but then we started splashing water at each other with our feet. To save his cap from getting wet, Ehsan took it off and placed it at a distance. He looked like an entirely different person the minute he stepped out of his Mustapha Kamal Pasha disguise. A fresh wave of exhilaration washed over us with each new splash of water, the heart wishing for more from the enemy. Soon we resorted to splashing water with our hands as well. Our clothes were soaked. I said, "We have to dry our clothes now."

"Don't worry," he said. "They'll be dry soon. What are summers for?"

"May take longer while you're in them."

"In that case, let's go across the tracks. We'll take off our clothes and have a swim in the channel. In the meantime the clothes can dry. The current is fast here and, besides, who knows how deep the water is under the bridge. Over there, it only comes up to my belly button, and it probably comes up to your chest at the most."

We walked across the tracks to the other side of the bridge in our wet clothes, making "*shleping*" sounds. Ehsan said, "You sit down facing Forty Wells and shut your eyes. I'll rinse my clothes, spread them out in the sun and then jump into the channel. Open your eyes when I tell you to. If you cheat even a little, I swear, I'll never speak to you again."

"What's the big deal? I have to spread out my clothes too."

"I don't know whether you will or not. If you break your promise, I'll start off for home in my wet clothes."

"All right, all right," I said. "Hurry up, now."

It seemed as if a whole century had passed. I asked, "Should I open my eyes now?"

His voice came from behind me, "Yeah, go ahead."

I turned around to look. He stood ten feet away, still fully clothed. "What happened?" I asked surprised.

He came near me and said, "Why, those coal-gatherers … they're headed straight this way. What could I do?"

Two girls of about fifteen or sixteen, clad in *ghagras*, were coming along from the direction of the city. Their eyes were focused on the ground between the tracks for the Delhi trains. They were talking slowly as they picked up pieces of half-burnt coals from between the tracks and stuffed them into pouches slung over their foreheads and dangling behind their backs. Having walked unshod on the stony gravel for an eternity their feet had become so calloused they couldn't be injured like Ehsan's. They caught up with us and soon passed us by. I said, "Go on, their backs are facing us now. You can spread your clothes out to dry. I doubt they would care to look back at you, and you're not a piece of coal they might want to pick up and toss in their pouches."

Irritated, he said, "In that case, why don't you go first?"

I took off my shirt and spread it in the sun and then entered the water with my pajama on. Covered by the water, I took it off, squeezed it and, still standing in the water, spread it out along the bank.

"Why didn't I think of that?" Ehsan said.

We tried to teach each other how to swim, though neither of us really knew how. Then, like birds, we splashed the water around for some time. The sudden, heavy rumble of an approaching engine startled us. Soon the engine and the carriages passed us by like a dream. Ehsan said, "Frontier Mail—the queen of all trains. It'll be at the station at 11:30."

I mumbled, "I only heard it when it was already upon me." Then I asked Ehsan, "There were two silver-colored compartments with some English writing on them, weren't there?"

"Those were the names of the compartments—"Gul-e Yasmin" and "Gul-e Neelofar." Even in this weather it's as cold inside of them as it is in December. Only big officers, Englishmen, Rajas and Maharajas travel in them."

"They must use slabs of ice to keep them that cold."

"No, they use machines."

"If they're so cold in summer, they must be freezing in winter."

Ehsan chuckled, "The same machines warm them in winter."

"How do you know? Have you ever traveled in one?"

"No, Mahmood told me. He's my cousin, my maternal uncle's son. He's a captain in the British army. He always travels in that compartment. These days he's stationed at the Imphal border. *Aapa* says Safia should be married to him. Farman, however, doesn't agree."

"And you—what do you say?"

"Nobody asks me. But you wouldn't expect me to agree to my sister marrying someone who's in the army of the English who killed my father, would you?"

"Is he the same uncle who sometimes gives money to your mother?"

"He is the only maternal uncle I have."

"And is it his wife who comes to your house and starts searching for new purchases to figure out how much money her husband may have given your mother?"

"Yes. *Aapa* says when the police came to search the house during my father's life they didn't do as thorough a job as her *bhabi* does."

"What a witch, *yaar*!"

"She finds fault with *Aapa* all the time. Poor *Aapa* just sits and listens, never answering back. Once, not long after my father's death, she said to *Aapa*, 'Ever since you married, you've been a burden on us. How long can we go on paying your expenses. First your husband languished in prisons, then, utterly sick of you, he just up and died.' *Aapa*'s face contorted in anguish when she heard that and her tears started coming down. Seeing her cry, I began to scream and went to the gutter and threw up. Aunt said, 'Look at this, not only do they leech off of us, they shed tears as well.'"

"How, then, will that woman ever come round to letting her son marry Safia?"

"Mahmood is an only son, and he has told her in so many words that if he ever marries, it will be Safia, or he will not marry at all. Now that her interest is at stake, she's softened a bit lately."

We stood quietly in the water feeling sorry about this state of affairs and all but forgot our games. At last I broke the silence and said, "*Yaar*, I'm dying of hunger."

"Me too."

We quickly put on our clothes. In the distance the same girls were now coming back, this time picking up coal between the Pathankot tracks. Ehsan asked if I had any money on me.

I searched my pocket and screamed with joy, "Got it. I have an *aana*."

"That's plenty. Let's go into the orchard and ask the gardener to sell us some mangoes. After we've eaten them, we'll go home. Let's not go to Forty Wells today. It's getting late."

Muted light, as at dusk, and cloying silence greeted us inside the orchard after the blinding glare outside. Gigantic, sprawling mango trees stood laden with small yellow fruit. The guavas were as green as the leaves, still very small, about the size of tiny balls, and without any hint of fragrance or color. The plum trees had all been picked; however, now and then a red plum hidden somewhere behind the leaves still showed itself. Patches of furtive, dappled golden light fell quietly here and there on the reddish soil, like so many intruders. The smell of trees, fruit, and wet earth wafted unseen through the orchard. The cry of "Ho, ho," very much a part of the orchard's atmosphere, would sometimes rise from a corner and then die down. A clay pellet fired from a fully-stretched sling-shot was heard whizzing through the leaves and a flock of parrots flew up creating a ruckus like a pack of mischievous children. The flutter of their wings in flight was a joy to hear and sounded strangely intimate, like one's own heartbeat. Dry leaves crackled and crumbled underfoot. We ignored them and moved on, perhaps because they weren't human. Sometimes a sparrow, a dove or a pair of green pigeons could be seen moving about amid the leaves. Two or three agitated mynah-birds were walking about the ground as though they had alighted especially to carry out an inspection. I guessed from the birds' movements and their attempt to take shelter in the trees that it must be about one or one-thirty in the afternoon. I said, "I've never seen a parrot move about, or seek shade at noon."

"Yes, because they're green."

"What difference does that make?"

"The Holy Prophet's mausoleum is also green; that's why heat doesn't affect it."

The reference to such a sanctified and lofty name just about swept me off my feet.

We had walked almost to the middle of the orchard now. A middle-aged man wrapped only in a sarong, his belly bulging out, sat on a large cot, smoking a hooka. Baskets full of different varieties of mangoes lay around him. Twenty paces away, a tall, lean young man, also draped in a sarong but naked from the waist up, sat baking thick *rotis* on a griddle. The wriggly blue smoke and its acrid smell made us feel a strange regret, tinged with shame. A black-clay pot tied to a string hung from the branch of a mango tree directly above the young man's head. Close to the pot

also hung a brand new water pitcher, its mouth covered with an inverted clay bowl.

Ehsan said, "Mehr-ji, may we have an *aana*'s worth of mangoes."

In a royal gesture, as if he were Emperor Akbar, Mehr-ji pointed toward a basket and said, "Take a bagful." The mangoes were small and dry. Since Ehsan's shirt hem was larger, he stretched it out and I started filling the makeshift pouch with fistfuls of mangoes. He kept raising the hem up until his navel was bared, and I kept stuffing it with more. Whereupon Mehr shouted, "Enough, that's enough. It's more than a bag." Afraid, I pulled up my hands, letting the mangoes drop back into the basket. Ehsan started to walk ahead of me. Coming to a *jaman* tree, he emptied the pouch at its roots and said, "Come on. Let's drink some water first."

"From where?'

"Oh, just come along."

He went back to the gardener. "Mehr-ji, we'd like to have a drink of water."

Mehr-ji called out, "O Rammu, give the boys some water."

Rammu brought down the pitcher, filled the bowl and gave it to Ehsan. He drank halfway and then handed the bowl to me. We weren't particularly thirsty since a lot of water had already gone inside us during our attempt at swimming. I was still drinking when a cry was heard in the distance, "Mehr-ji, a thief, a thief!" Straining his back, Rammu rushed off in the direction of the cry saying, "Mehr, Nikku seems to have caught somebody stealing mangoes." We sat down, leaning against the tree trunk, and started sucking on our mangoes. Barely five minutes later what do we see filing in but the two coal-gathering girls followed by Rammu and Nikku in his loincloth. Nikku was a boy of about eight or nine. A slingshot as big as he was hung from his shoulder and a cloth-bag filled with clay pellets dangled from his neck. The girls' arms and hands were black from coal; even their faces had black smudges on them. A half-eaten mango in hand, they walked along smiling and talking casually, as if nothing special had happened. Their white teeth sparkled between their darkened lips like strings of pearls. Rammu was clearly having fun chiding them, "So, you thought you could pluck mangoes freely as if the orchard belonged to your father, did you?"

"Oh, go away, we didn't pluck them. They were lying on the ground, rotting. Did the sky fall down because we picked them up?"

Nikku was out of breath, beside himself with emotion. He said, "Brother Rammu, they're clearly lying. This younger one was standing on

the shoulders of the older one plucking from the Sindhuri mango tree by the tracks. When I saw them I yelled and grabbed the older one by the legs. Both of them came tumbling down with a thud. The younger one got up and gave me a few whacks on the back. But I didn't let go."

"Oh shut your trap, you little runt. Quit bragging. You aren't more than a couple of inches above ground. Can you even see anything higher than yourself? We didn't pluck anybody's mangoes."

Rammu bared his teeth in a cackle and said, "You'll find out soon enough, when somebody plucks *your* mangoes."

In his innocence, Nikku agreed with Rammu chiming in, "Yeah, then you'll find out."

The older girl gritted her teeth and fired back, "Watch your tongue, buster! We're not waifs. The people who look after us aren't dead yet."

It wasn't just Nikku, at the time even I couldn't understand the reason for the girl's chagrin.

We got up and went to Mehr's cot to watch the spectacle. Nikku started to explain, but Mehr hushed him, "Wait, Nikku my son. All right girls, now tell me how many mangoes did you pluck?"

"We didn't pluck any. Just picked up these two from the ground." They showed the two half-eaten mangoes they were holding in their hands.

"All right, either sit down and make a hundred pellets of clay, or give me an *aana* each, or dump all this coal right here."

Nikku said, "Mehr-ji, I hope you won't let them go. It'll be fun to watch them roll a hundred pellets each."

Rammu stood smiling roguishly with his hands on his bare waist. "It will be night before they're done, if at all. Get up, the clay's over there. Fetch the water from the channel and get started. Way to go!"

They started pleading, "Mehr-ji, have mercy on us. In God's name, please forgive us. We'll never set foot in your orchard again."

Suddenly Ehsan said, "Take four of our mangoes for their two, but please let them go."

Mehr was annoyed by this interference. "Two for one, eh? Do you know what the fine is for stealing one mango? It's a hundred mangoes. Do you have two hundred mangoes?"

"No, I don't. But you can take all we have."

"Mehr-ji, please forgive us. We touch your feet. Now even the fine's been paid."

"If I see you stealing one more time, you'll get it from me. Go now."

Before leaving, the older girl looked straight into Ehsan's eyes and said, "Babu, may God give you a bride as beautiful as the moon," and then the two fled from the place like parrots taking flight.

They had, of course, pleaded much, but their faces showed neither repentance nor alarm. Even while they were apologizing, they appeared unaffected by the words they were uttering, as if they were merely going through the motions. Mehr refused to take the mangoes from us and said, "If we didn't act so strict, the orchard would be ruined before evening."

During the last few days I had noticed that whenever I visited Ehsan, he would be waiting for me outside on the verandah and we would immediately take off along the tracks, either in the direction of the train station or of Forty Wells. It wasn't like that at all in the past. When I visited him I used to find him puttering around inside the house. Now he even rejected out of hand all my proposals to walk to some street or neighborhood, or to Company Bagh. It seemed as if he was tied to the railway tracks, his hawk's eyes always searching for something around them—empty cigarette packets, I assumed. Once or twice we ran into the same girls, but they would just titter and walk on. Ehsan became a different person the minute he saw them, a little nervous, a little agitated. If they happened to be far, he tried to catch up to them in a hurry; if they were close by, he tried even more quickly to get away. Back then I didn't know that these were the signs of love. Then again, my mind was somehow fixed on the notion that love was something that happened between princes, fairies, princesses and sons of viziers. It was inconceivable to even imagine that love could sprout between Ehsan and a couple of coal-gatherers. One day, on our way to Forty Wells, we saw them again, walking quite some distance ahead of us. Ehsan nudged me to hurry. We almost ran to catch up with them. By the time they had gotten near the orchard by the channel, the distance between us had shrunk to about a hundred yards. Suddenly Ehsan said, "Let's go back!" I stared at his face and said in anger, "What do you mean?" He was a bit taken aback, perhaps less because of the way I'd spoken and more because he had come to the point where he would have to confess one of his weaknesses to me. He kept walking, or rather dragging himself quietly behind me for quite a while. Then he came up next to me and said, "I'll tell you. The older girl, I want her to be in front of my eyes all the time. I never want to take my eyes off of her. But when we do come face to face, I get so flustered I want to flee."

"Come on," I said laughing. "Don't give me all that. Let's go talk to them. It feels good to talk to them."

"At least find out their names."

"Come on, we'll ask them."

When we got really close to them, he blurted out, "Saeed, for God's sake don't ask anything. Let's go back."

When they heard our voices, they turned around and halted. The Pathankot tracks, curving sharply, were heading off somewhere far away. The vast green field in front was so large it could have swallowed both Poras and Alexander's armies easily enough. The two tracks for the Delhi trains, scared of the vastness, were moving quietly along one edge. In the empty field off in the distance, an isolated bungalow stood in the scorching sun. The few eucalyptus trees around it couldn't have protected it much. The chain of tube-wells started just beyond the bungalow, which housed the office and residence of the superintendent of the wells. The girls were laughing amiably. I went to them and asked, "You've come so far today?"

The older one said, "We came looking for coal. And you?"

"Oh, just to see Forty Wells."

She took a fistful of roasted grams from the end of her *chunri*, put them in her mouth and started chewing loudly like a she-goat. "So, go see them," she said.

"What are your names?" I asked.

"Why do you need to know our names?" the younger of the two asked.

"My friend wants to know."

"Does your friend not have a tongue in his mouth?" the older one said. "Why doesn't he come and ask himself?"

I turned around to look at Ehsan. He stood far away near a telegraph pole cowering like a thief.

The younger one also stuffed a fistful of grams in her mouth, and saying, "The sun is killing me," she went and sat down in the shade of a big *sheesham* near the crops at the edge of the fields. The other girl opened the end of her *chunri* towards me and said, "Have some. They're nice and hot from the sun."

I took a fistful and began munching. She then moved toward the *sheesham* and said, "You come in the shade too, and ask your friend as well."

We sat on the ground in a circle. The older one said, smiling, "You were asking our names. Well, I'm Lali and she's Toti. She's my cousin, my aunt's daughter, and a friend as well. Anything else?"

Ehsan raised his eyes, once, to look at Lali's face, and then lowered them. Surprised, I asked, "That's all? Lali, Toti—nothing before or after?"

"What more could there be?"

I became quiet. I was under the impression that "Begam" or "Khanam" was appended to every woman's name. But then it occurred to me that such tags would really have ill-suited names like Lali and Toti.

"You've been coming around here for some days now. Where did you scavenge for coal before?"

"In the railway yard. That place has plenty. We could fill three or four bags in a day. Here we have to walk for miles and yet find very little, scarcely enough to fill one bag. In the yard, although the place is very small, many engines come and go several times a day. Every two or three hours when they stir the furnace with the fork, a lot of coal tumbles out along with the ashes."

"So why did you quit going there?"

"Come, Toti, you tell them. I can't."

"There was a lineman there, as black as an engine. He wanted Lali to sleep with him or never come there again to pick up coal. We went up the stairs to the balcony to see the head-lineman. When he heard us out he laughed, 'Well then, go and sleep with him.' When Lali started crying, he said, 'All right, don't. What do you want me to say?' When we complained to an engine-master about it, he also laughed and said, 'Nothing strange about that, is there? What have you got to lose? On the other hand, it would please him very much.' Then we went to the Big Sahib, you know the one who gets pushed up and down the tracks on a trolley. The men who pushed his trolley turned their faces and snickered. The Sahib snapped, 'No one is allowed to pick coal in the yard. The man was right to stop you. You people use it as an excuse to steal railroad property. Watch it, or I'll have you locked up.' Nobody listened to us. It was so easy to pick up coal there; we weren't about to call it quits so easily. So we didn't show up for a few days. But then greed got the better of us. We thought the lineman must have forgotten all about Lali by then. So we returned. We had gathered only a little bit of coal when the same lineman showed up. He said, 'I knew you wouldn't be able to stay away, that you'd be back. You even complained to the big boss. Did anything happen? Come this way now.' He had come out of the room below the balcony which always remained closed. That day the door was open. Lali turned pale. She grabbed a couple of rocks from the tracks. When he came to take her by the arm she hurled a rock at him. It hit his forehead, which started bleeding. He slumped over right there. We dropped our

bags and took to our heels, stopping only when we'd gotten to our tents. We haven't returned to that place since."

Just as soon as the story started, Ehsan, who had been sitting there ill at ease until then, was drawn into it and, before long, he was completely engrossed. If a deaf person were there he would have understood the whole story just by watching the expressions on Ehsan's face. His nostrils flared up and he asked, "What was the name of that lineman?"

Lali said, "Why? Are you going to go fight with him? What would you do with his name? Forget it."

I asked, "Didn't the men in your family do anything about it?"

"Nobody asked us and we didn't say anything," Lali said. "What good would it have done anyway? We are *changars*. Our men lie about in the tents, drugged, day and night. They don't do any work. They couldn't care less how their women make a living. Only if a woman ran away would they risk everything to bring her back. That's a matter of livelihood, you know. Our marriages are all arranged within the tribe. Like Toti, here, she's getting married to my brother."

Feeling bashful, Toti hid her face in Lali's shoulder. She said, "Oh sush, Lali, or I'll tell them that you're marrying my brother."

"We people raise chickens, goats and donkeys to sell them. Our women look after all the work. The only thing our men get involved in is petty larceny—that is, if an opportunity offers itself. The women make toy elephants and horses with waste paper, straw, and scraps of cloth. They weave winnowing fans and mold clay toys that are baked in kilns. The older women go from street to street selling these things. We also make clay ovens. We can do every kind of work. If there is no work, we even beg for alms. We work day and night, but even then we get only one meal a day. Wherever there's a festival or a fair, we load our wares on the animals and go. Like two and a half months ago we came here for the Baisakhi fair, and we'll move on to some other place in a few days."

Oblivious to everything else, Ehsan was listening to Lali talk. I said, "The Frontier Mail went by long ago. It must be one o'clock. Get up; let's get going."

"Lali, I'm dying of thirst," Toti said. "Let's find some water first."

But Lali was asking Ehsan, "Why were you offering that fat man all your mangoes that day?"

"Why, he was humiliating you, wasn't he?"

For a brief moment a smile, filled at once with gratitude and a curious awareness of her own smallness, appeared on her face, but then she became deadly serious. Staring Ehsan straight in the face she stood up to

her full height before him, as if with her next move she would step into him and lose herself completely. "How many of them would you stop from humiliating me?" she said. "Humiliation has been my companion since birth. It's been my twin."

Ehsan said, "Don't let it upset you. God doesn't create people less worthy or more worthy of honor. It's the powerful and selfish who make them so, in order to exploit the weak. The revolution will set everything right." He was speaking Farman's language.

"Nothing will happen. Such is our lot in life. Nobody can do anything about it." Then she looked at Ehsan and said, "Come again tomorrow. The same place. Now go. We'll go separately. If you accompany us, people will make fun of you." She started laughing again.

The next day when I got to Ehsan's house at my usual time, Safia said, "He was here on the verandah a little while ago, walking up and down, up and down."

"He isn't here anymore."

"Then he must have stepped out."

"Where to?"

"When you go out with him on your rounds every day, do you tell me where you're going?"

Feeling a little ashamed, I started to go. She jeered, "Tut, tut. All alone, what will you do today?"

"Something. You be quiet."

She began to chuckle. Ehsan's mother said, "Safia, you brought the boy almost to tears. Don't do that, daughter. He comes here so devotedly." Then she said to me, "Come Saeed. Sit down here, son. Ehsan will be along soon."

But I didn't sit there. I returned home, feeling resentful at his fickleness. Now I realize that my resentment was out of place. On my way home, despite my annoyance, I kept thinking of the time when he had started crying in the midst of singing. That morning, we had gone out on our stroll. Eventually we ended up at the Darbar Sahib. First we completed a circuit of the pool and then we crossed over the bridge and stepped into the Harmandar Sahib, built right in the middle of the pool. The high, bright marble edifice with its golden dome stood glistening in the sun. The marbled walls and hallways had colorful floral inlays, just like in Muslim architecture. But there were also some peacocks, pigeons and parrots, fashioned out of the same material. On the altar, the highest place, a *granthi* sat reading from the Granth Sahib while a man standing behind him, fanned it respectfully with a *churi*. Below sat a band of sing-

ers, chanting hymns. Devotees came, touched the ground in front of the holy book with their foreheads, and sat down for a while listening reverentially to the hymn singing. Then they went and lined up in front of the man who was handing out *karah-parshaad*. Reverently they extended both their hands, received the *parshaad* and moved on. I was looking for some idol there. When I didn't see any I thought, they must keep it hidden and only bring it out at appropriate times. In those days idol-worship was believed to be part of every religion except Islam. No one was talking inside the Harmandar Sahib. Tongue-tied from awe and dread we stood respectfully for some time, all the while afraid—at least I was—lest someone should step forward and say, hey, these are Muslas, get them. And then only God knows what kind of treatment we would have been subjected to. On the way out we didn't touch the ground with our foreheads but, like others, did receive our tiny share of the *karah-parshaad*. I was watching Ehsan, waiting for him to eat his so that I might eat mine. At last we came out of the Darbar Sahib with our fists still closed. When I was about to eat my share, Ehsan said, "Wait *yaar*, let me think. We're Muslims. Should we be eating this at all?'

"It doesn't have any meat in it, so we needn't worry over whether the animal was properly slaughtered."

"You probably don't know this, but after frying halva the Sikhs slash at it vigorously with swords to make it what we'd call *jhatka*."

"But halva isn't anything living that could be slaughtered, is it? It would still be halva." Saying this I slipped it into my mouth. Ehsan stood thinking for a while, but then he too ate his. Swallowing it, I said, "Wasn't much, was it?"

"*Tabarruk* is always like that. It's not to fill your stomach."

"*Yaar*, I didn't see any idols there."

"Why should there be any? Idolatry is forbidden among the Sikhs just as it is among the Muslims."

The fact was so new to me I had difficulty believing it. And, although I didn't disagree with him, I concluded that surely he must be mistaken. From Katra Mahaan Singh we cut through Paathi Ground and came to the Gol Mosque of Sharifpura. Then we took a straight lane and soon found ourselves at the tracks in front of Ehsan's house. I should have turned towards my house after crossing Paathi Ground because my house was nearer to that, but four o'clock was still three hours away. Why be holed up in my house so soon? Why not spend some more time with Ehsan shooting the breeze? We climbed the stairs and went onto the rooftop. For sure it would be hot there, but it was also the only spot in the

house where we could find the privacy we were seeking. We moved about aimlessly in the blazing sun, jumping up to spy on the neighborhood through the peep-holes in the wall which stood at about the height of a man along the edges of the roof. The nearby roofs were totally deserted, not a living soul anywhere in sight. Winding alleys, straight paths, whatever we saw was desolate. The ogre of sunlight had sucked life out of everything and put it to sleep. The dust-coated greenery of the parks was spread far and wide like a drab green stationary cloud, with a blue but equally dull sky resting over it like an overturned bowl. In back of Ehsan's house a crow sat panting on a fat, white, misshapen limb of the scrawny *peepal* tree. It cawed a couple of times and then, getting tired of its perch, flew off toward the drab green cloud. We couldn't bear the sun any longer. We went and sat under the cabin-like structure on the stairs. As we were quite tired, we leaned our backs against the wall, stretched out our legs, and perspired vigorously in silence. Ehsan started to sing softly:

Don't cry my heart, don't cry
How may I comfort you …

He was singing so well that I gazed at his face in wonder. Unaffected, he went on. I thought I saw tears falling from his eyes. But how could I dare ask what was bothering him? Perhaps they weren't tears; perhaps they were only beads of perspiration. Had they been tears his voice might have choked. But he was still singing in a sorrowful voice. If they were really tears, he himself didn't know he was shedding them. After the song ended, he shut his eyes and sat quietly for a while. When he opened them, I thought they were brimming with moisture. Standing up I said, "O.K., I'm leaving now." He didn't say anything, just nodded once. On my way home a single thought occupied my mind: if he was crying, why was it? Was he thinking of his father's painful death? Had the circumstances of his family become unbearable? But neither of these had anything to do with the subject or the melody of the song. The next day I kept asking him but he just smiled and remained silent. Perhaps he himself didn't know that he had been crying. Today, fifty years later, one possible answer to the riddle comes to mind: perhaps even before seeing Lali that day, he knew he was going to lose her and his utter helplessness in the matter had made him cry.

The third morning he stealthily came up the stairs to my room and whispered, "I'll be down in the street. Come quickly."

I was astounded to see him without his ubiquitous cap, in fact so astounded that I forgot my own annoyance with him and asked, "What happened to your cap?"

We started off for his house threading our way through the alleys and then along the tracks. A drumbeater in the street was announcing a blackout that evening from eight to ten. I said, "Again? What a pain, *yaar*! You don't have to worry about this sort of thing. No civil defense man can come to your area. You can keep the lights on as long as you want."

"There's a blackout at our house every night. Whether anyone comes there or not, the lantern is put out every night at eight, to save oil."

"You pulled a nice one on me the other day. You slipped away before I could come."

"When they passed by I waited for you for some time. But when you failed to show up, I went after them."

"What ever happened to your cap?"

"Lali made me stop wearing it. She asked me if I had seen anyone my age wearing a cap like that. She said it didn't look nice on me, that I should stop wearing it. How could I tell her that I wore it to honor the memory of Mustapha Kamal Pasha—the only Muslim general in contemporary times to have fought and won against the British. She wouldn't have grasped all that. And besides, she asked so lovingly that I couldn't very well refuse. When the hair starts growing in a few days I'll look O.K."

"So, now you're going to flaunt English-style hair as well, eh? What happened to all your declarations?"

"The hair doesn't matter. The real issue is equality among human beings."

"Two meetings with Lali and you've already made all human beings equal?"

"You're a little piqued, aren't you, *yaar*?"

"And you seem a little happier than one need be." We both laughed.

"So what did you talk about the last two days?" I asked.

"Both days Lali didn't gather any coal. Toti did it alone. Lali had made herself so beautiful that she didn't even look at all like the old Lali. She was wearing different clothes and she had bangles up to her elbows. Wait till you see them. They should be along soon. Lali was asking about you. She said I should definitely bring you along today."

"Oh, I see. That's why you took the trouble to show up so early this morning!"

When we reached the verandah of his house, we saw a very long train filled with white-folks halting at the signal, right in front of us. The soldiers, miserable from the heat, were swarming out of the doors and windows of the third-class compartments in their shorts and vests—filthy-looking, terribly sweaty, and coated with dust. As soon as the train came to a complete stop, armed Indian soldiers, with their rifles cocked, posted themselves in front of every door. I said, "Even Indian soldiers don't look that wretched. For what crime are these English soldiers being punished so badly?"

"They're not English soldiers," he said. "They're Italian prisoners of war, rounded up by the English after Rommel's retreat in Egypt. Because they're white, the English are transferring them to some cooler, hilly place in Delhousie. They've built a P.O.W. camp there. At the station they'll hitch a second engine to the back of the train. Then the same train will pass in front of us on the Pathankot lines. Let's go watch them up close."

Meanwhile a crowd of half-naked children had gathered on both sides of the train. They were making a terrible racket with their laughing and loud entreaties, and the prisoners were tossing packets of biscuits, chocolate and cigarettes toward them. Because of the guard the Italians couldn't step out of the train, nor could the children get close to it. When we got near the train a prisoner tossed a box of biscuits at us. We looked at it for a while. Then I said, "Pick it up, *yaar*. It's a freebie." Ehsan made a V sign with his fingers and held it up for the prisoner to see, saying to me, "Watch how angry this makes him." The Italian shook his finger to indicate denial; then he made the same V with his fingers pointing downwards. We played this game with the man for a bit and then returned to the verandah. I asked, "Have you ever seen a real living Englishman?"

"Yes, once, but from a distance. My mother and I were returning after visiting Father. As I was trying to board the Frontier Mail at the Lahore station, I saw two Englishmen come out of the refreshment room and go into the air-conditioned compartment. A white soldier was moving people aside to make way for them on the platform. Then another time an Army special loaded with white soldiers stopped here for a second."

I asked, "*Yaar*, do you suppose they gave us biscuits because they think we're like the famine-stricken Bengalis?"

"Who knows? Maybe they did. Anyway, most Indians do look starved. Did you read the news of the famine in the papers? *Yaar*, the British have treated the Bengalis very cruelly. Such harsh punishment for

demanding independence! About a million have already perished. Only God knows how many more will follow them. Do you remember the pictures we saw at Cold Well?"

"Yes, I do. They sent a shudder through me."

"They were nothing compared to the ones that are coming out now. You won't be able to eat the whole day if you so much as look at them—corpses lying about in the streets being torn up by dogs and crows. It tears my heart every time I read the stories that are printed. One woman had gathered a handful of rice for her children by walking up and down the road between the station and the rice warehouse the whole day. As she was returning home in the evening, another hungry man snatched it from her and ran away. The poor woman could do nothing but cry."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, what always happens. She must have died, and the children must have died too."

"Isn't anybody doing anything for the Bengalis?"

"As a matter of fact, grain *is* being shipped to Calcutta from this part of the country on the freight trains, and I myself have seen such trains passing by here. But whether the government over there can manage to get it to the needy is something else again."

Talk of famine put us in a gloomy mood and we sat staring at the tracks in awkward silence. After the train transporting the Italian prisoners had moved on, the Frontier Mail went clattering by on the same tracks, stirring up the dust as well as the empty biscuit boxes and chocolate wrappers which began to dance about in the air. The biscuits that I had eaten made me belch loudly and I felt strangely embarrassed.

The Frontier Mail had come and gone and still there was no sign of Lali and Toti. Ehsan seemed visibly worried. "Let's go have a look by their tents," he said. "I hope they haven't decamped and moved on."

"If their men find out about us they'll beat us up."

"We'll just look from a distance. It isn't far from here either, we only need to go up to the bend where the road to Ambala forks off."

We reached the gypsies' encampment winding our way through the orchards. It was deserted. Only ashes swirled about in a dozen or so hearths that had been fashioned by slapping a bunch of bricks together, and donkeys' droppings were lying about here and there. A strange melancholy feeling, a sinister desolation pervaded the whole site. The tribe had apparently packed up and moved sometime during the night.

When we returned, Ehsan went up the stairs. I was called over by his mother.

"Eh Saeed, did you ever give your father my message about the permit?"

Instead of replying, I just stood there staring at the ground.

Safia said, "*Aapa*, he's too scared of his father. He wouldn't have had the spunk to talk. Everybody is afraid of him. He's so irritable."

"Son, if you had told me that I would've tried to find another way. But here I was sitting and waiting for the permit to arrive. There's nothing to buy in the market: rice, cloth, sugar, kerosene, you name it. And we can't afford the black-market prices. Here we don't even have electricity. A canister of kerosene could've given us a little bit of comfort for a few days. Things weren't all that bad before, but the damned war—it's ruined everything. God's curse on it. It shows no signs of ending. Four years and it's still raging on."

I went upstairs. Ehsan was sitting on a cot near the covered part of the stairs, sunk in deep thought. In the blue sky, a bevy of kites flew about in a circle above our heads. Dark clouds were advancing from the northeast. A whiff of cool air hit my face and hair. I sat down beside him. Lali and Toti's departure hadn't affected me at all, but Ehsan had taken it hard. Looking back, it seems that Lali had etched the pink line of romance a shade too deeply on Ehsan's impressionable heart. After some time I said, "It's going to rain. I'll leave now."

"Fine."

As I stepped out of the vestibule, I saw a young Sikh standing in the lane holding onto a bicycle. "Is this Farman Sahib's house?" he asked.

"Yes it is," I said.

"If his mother is in, please, I'd like to speak to her."

When I went inside to tell her, both the mother and daughter gasped together, "God have mercy!" *Aapa* carefully covered her head with her *dupatta*, walked over to the door and asked from behind it, "Yes, son, what's the matter?"

"Maanji, I work with Farman at the factory. Today, around ten in the morning, the Putli Ghar police came to the factory and took him away. Farman made a speech in a meeting of the Putli Ghar handloom workers five or six days ago. The police claim that he incited the workers to destroy property and assault the owners. But don't worry; it's not a serious case. He'll be out soon on bail. The Party is working on it. I'll bring you his salary for the current month. And this, here, is his bicycle. Please take it."

I moved forward and took the bicycle.

Aapa said, "Son, such lawsuits are nothing new for us. Those who care for others must face them. Why worry, God will look after us. But thank you for coming and letting us know."

Holding the bicycle aloft, I walked up the four steps into the vestibule where I found *Aapa* leaning against the wall and Safia, her eyes filled with tears, offering her a bowl of water. *Aapa* had turned pale and was perspiring profusely. Supporting herself on Safia, she lumbered into the courtyard and sat down on a cot, holding her head in her hands. She seemed to be saying to herself—the same old cycle has started again. Oh, how I wish it hadn't. I don't have the strength to take it anymore.

Safia sat beside her quietly, shedding tears and massaging her shoulders. *Aapa* opened her eyes and said to me, "Go get Ehsan," and then to Safia, "You can be sure the police will raid the house by tonight, if not sooner. Put all of Farman's papers and files in a sack and give it to Ehsan. Tell him to take it to Mamoon's house right this minute. Tomorrow we'll look for a safer place. And all those posters and Party papers lying behind the stairs, take them to the backyard and burn them."

When Ehsan came down she told him, "Safia will give you a sack of papers. Take it to Mamoon's house and then go to Lala Krishan Lal's office and ask him to apply to the magistrate for Farman's bail."

Ehsan said, "But the Lala's been behind bars himself for a while now."

She fell into thinking and then said, "In that case, go to Saeed's father at the courthouse and ask him to find a lawyer to arrange for the bail. Also, tell him that I'll be coming to see him this evening. We must also arrange for somebody to post the bail if it's granted."

In the evening Ehsan's mother came to our house with Safia in tow to talk to my father about Farman's lawsuit and to ask him to find a guarantor. I was afraid my father would give them a piece of his mind, but he surprised me. Not only did he listen to them patiently, he also assured them pleasantly enough of help, conducting himself with exceeding politeness throughout the conversation. And my mother, in a rare gesture of hospitality, instantly dispatched me to Maulvi Daood's for some sandalwood sherbet which she then offered to the guests. I had often heard my father make incredibly scathing and hateful remarks about this family. If I was now having difficulty figuring him out, it would have been even more difficult for Ehsan's mother and Safia to guess his true feelings about them. Later on he did a lot of running about for Farman's bail and even got them the permit from the Civil Supplies Department. All this was far too confusing for me. If he hated them so

much what could explain this immense compassion and show of warmth now? Why display so much courtesy in their presence and so much hatred behind their backs?

After they had thrashed out every aspect of Farman's case, my mother, as if to carry on with the conversation, broached a new subject. "*Aapa*," she said, "shouldn't you also be thinking about Safia's marriage now." Hearing that, Safia got up and went into the other room to be with my sisters.

"Daughter, I *am*—day and night. My brother has asked for her hand for his son Mahmood. Farman is opposed to the match, but I have said yes. True, the man who had promised to fight for India's freedom laid down his life in order to remain true to that promise. But this doesn't obligate me—does it?—that I should ruin the life of a simple stay-at-home girl for the sake of India's freedom? First she gets fired from her job—why? because her father was a Congressite. And now I shouldn't marry her off because the young man serves in the British army. Doesn't that amount to a double punishment for the poor girl? Let Mahmood come back home on his next vacation. I'll get her married, whether Farman agrees or not, and I'll send her off, if it comes to that, in the very clothes she has on."

Straightforward and pure-hearted, Ehsan's mother was one of those rare people whose tongues said only what lay in their hearts, who met life's problems head-on and dealt with them regardless of their severity. They always met a person, no matter how wicked or ill-intentioned, with an open heart, and didn't leave a backdoor open to escape when things got tough.

Farman's arrest did a lot of damage to me personally. My secret was out. My parents knew right away that even though Ehsan didn't come to our place anymore, I, nonetheless, visited him every day. I was sure I was going to get it the minute Ehsan's family left. But I was absolutely bowled over when Father demonstrated unusual forbearance at my blatant disobedience of his order. He admonished me, but mildly, giving the same advice much more gently which he had meted out very sternly before.

"Son, we tell you this for your own good," he said, "not because we've got a grudge against Ehsan. But, let's face it, he's very irresponsible and he's a drifter. He's already failed three times in school. And besides, he takes after his father and brother in temperament. He isn't afraid of getting into trouble himself so why would he care if he dragged you into it as well? Take this court case, for example. Farman brought it on himself. Would you call it a wise move? There is hardly any food in the house

and he goes about making speeches to rouse the workers. He knows full well that without his salary everybody in the house will starve. But did he consider that? No, not for a minute. He just went ahead and spat everything out. They're all like that, except *Aapa*. That poor woman has spent her entire life fighting battles all alone that they started. Brother Bashir Ahmad did it, and now Farman is following in his footsteps. Tomorrow Ehsan will do the same. A streak of insanity runs through all of them. It can't help but show itself."

My mother interrupted, "Sons take after their fathers. It's your family, after all. As for *Aapa*, an outsider, the poor woman just got trapped."

"Precisely why I keep telling your son to stay away from Ehsan. I know he has the same streak in him. I had it too; in fact, I still do. Many times I think of doing something wild." He laughed and looked at Mother expecting approbation, adding, "At least they had a *haveli* which they could sell to make ends meet. We don't even have a house of our own. But it has to be granted that *Aapa* is a very brave woman. She has never asked anyone for help and has dealt with her monumental problems very discreetly. No matter what, she kept in touch with all the relatives, shared in their joys and sorrows, and never tried to blame anyone else for her misfortunes. Now Safia is to be married to someone whom even many big shots would die to have for a son-in-law. The boy is a captain in the army. Must be getting around fifteen hundred rupees. Are you listening? Fifteen hundred rupees a month! My whole ten months' salary barely amounts to that much."

My mother butted in, "Yes, the good Lord has rewarded *Aapa* for her patience. Finally, her wishes are granted. That's right, God may take a long time, but He's not blind. He does reward."

"And Farman, my own blood, my own nephew, what does he say? 'Tell them no. We don't want this match.' Just look at him! That's why I say all three have their heads screwed on backwards. They're complete idiots."

A few days later I discovered that my father had decided to pull me out of Muslim School and enroll me in a Government School at the end of the holidays so that I might be rescued from Ehsan's company. My father succeeded in his plans, but only to the extent that the switch pretty much ended my association with Ehsan. Whether this change had any positive effect on my academic performance or on the formation of my character is debatable. I was given to wandering by nature, and it didn't take me long to seek out my own kind at the new school. Some of them were Hindu and Sikh boys. The company of new friends introduced me

to new types of vagrancy. Since this school was far from my home, a bicycle was purchased for me. First, the range of my vagrancy widened and then, because of the sudden onset of a change in my temperament, my preferences also evolved. The nature of vagrancy itself changed with these circumstances. We started smoking, but only now and then. In time it was the incurable addiction of the movies that got the better of us. I seemed to be in a big hurry to grow up, all because this would make the girls take notice of me. It pained me to look at myself in the mirror and find that my face still showed no sign of a growing mustache, and that the soft greenish down on my upper lip was still there. To tell the truth, even smoking was taken up in order to parade around as a grown up. A dark moss had begun to grow on Ehsan's cheeks and upper lip, but that fool wouldn't even start shaving. Perhaps he was thinking of wearing a beard. He still came to see me, secretly, every ten or fifteen days. In the beginning we even went out together for a stroll, but now I'd soon tire of his company. It seemed we no longer shared anything in common. I began to wonder whether there was any point in my continuing to see him, especially when his presence became a source not of pride but of embarrassment for me before my fashionable and relatively well-to-do friends. One time, when I was forced to introduce him to my friends, they simply didn't take any notice of him, and it was obvious that he wasn't feeling comfortable in their company either. He soon left my room. After he was gone, Madan asked, "*Yaar*, what is he, this uncle-ish character?" All three of them chuckled. I admitted in a rather hushed tone that he was a distant relative. The matter came to rest there.

After Rommel's retreat the African front came firmly and completely under Allied control and the theater of action shifted to Europe, where the rest of the war was now going to be staged. In the Far East, not only had the Japanese advance been halted, the Allies also took back some of the islands the Japanese had seized earlier. I don't know whether it was because of the war, or *Aapa*'s counseling, or the shock he must have felt when, feeling ashamed of my parents' attitude towards him, I told him the real reason why I had to change schools, but Ehsan definitely took a second look at his academic plans. When I graduated to the ninth grade, he made it there too. It wasn't long after the beginning of classes when Farman was given a six months' sentence. Ehsan was forced to quit school and take up a job as a salesman with some Muslim shoe-seller in Katra Jaimal Singh. By the time Farman could be released and find another job, I was already in the tenth grade. After wasting another year, Ehsan once again enrolled in the ninth grade at Muslim School. He spent much of

his free time in the neighborhood reading room on the main street square. Mornings, he read the Urdu newspapers published from Lahore and looked at the pictures in *The Tribune*. He returned in the evening to look at the pictures in the English newspapers from Delhi and Calcutta. However, these evening visits were terminated during his employment at the shoe shop because he got off from work quite late. The small shopkeepers around the reading room addressed him as Bao Ehsan and accorded him a respectful place in their midst. Wherever he sat down, a gaping throng of tonga drivers, pushcart salesmen and other people from the working class, besides the neighboring shop owners, surrounded him and, equipped with the fresh information received from him, made unsuccessful attempts to peer into their futures. When they found nothing there, they commented with an air of resignation: "Governments change every day. What difference does it make to us? We'll always remain down and out, always toiling to scrape up enough to put two square meals a day on the table for our families."

After the slaughter of the Khaksars, no new Muslim movement had emerged. The demand for Pakistan hadn't picked up momentum yet. At most it was a battle cry whose political value amounted to no more than a vague threat. While politically the Muslims flaunted an attitude of indifference and devil-may-care, inwardly they couldn't have been more rattled or agitated. And in this district with a one hundred percent Muslim population, Ehsan, clad in his *pajama-kurta* made of coarse, homespun cotton, laid out before the masses, in great detail and with compelling argument, the Congress position—namely, freedom for India and the absolute necessity of revolution—and vehemently opposed the establishment of Pakistan. His audience heard him and dismissed him, though scarcely anybody actually opened their mouths. Once in a great while one of them might express his doubts muttering under his breath, "Well, why then is the Congress Party crowded with Hindus? Surely they must see some advantage in joining it. Why else this scramble?" Then the doubter would be overtaken by despair, "The English will never let go of India, nor will India ever gain independence. Things are going to go on and on like this. But at least Jinnah does talk about the Muslims." Unable to stomach this praise of Jinnah, a tonga driver, who had perhaps spent some time in the company of Ahrars and Khaksars, started telling story after story about how the top leadership of the Muslim League was hopelessly Westernized and cherished the English. Ehsan described in detail the views of the Muslim ulema and the popularity the Congress enjoyed among the Muslims of the North West Frontier Province. All this back

and forth produced the same result it always had: people who had come there to find some way out of their confusion left even more confounded than before. The Hindus had embraced India's freedom as their sole, distinct, clear and definite political objective. Muslims, on the other hand, didn't have the foggiest idea what they wanted or who to turn to for leadership. To them every political solution seemed like the proverbial "out of the frying pan into the fire." At most they would think about one thing: if only the good old days of the Khilafat-e Rashida could somehow return. How to live in today's world, and what its demands were going to be, was something nobody paid any attention to, nor even had the ability to grasp.

In the past Parveen had seemed to be a rather unremarkable girl, but by the time she reached the tenth grade she had turned into quite an attractive young lady, tall, graceful, and glowing. Her sallow complexion had, as it were, become burnished, and her liquid black eyes had taken on the same winsome, endearing quality as a doe's. In my own mind, I had fallen head over heels in love with her like some fairy-tale prince, with union or death being the only options left. The reality was that we were only playing at the game of love. As a little girl she had played with her toy dolls; now she was through playing with those. She had become a doll herself and turned me into one as well. Our love amounted to no more than smiling and casting loving glances at each other as we stood face-to-face in the windows. We still hadn't gotten the nerve to go beyond that. But this became quite a diversion for my classmates, Aslam, Mushtaq, Madan and Rajinder, who visited quite often at my house. They lost no time in dubbing her Laila and me—a fairly heavyset boy—Majnun. No matter what the conversation was about, they would find a way to slip in a reference to Laila-Majnun, obliquely if not expressly. To say something witty with a double meaning, or to say something indirect with just the right amount of humor is not everybody's cup of tea. But, although their simpering attempts often yielded nothing more than meaningless or inane comments, I nonetheless enjoyed their joking quite a bit, and never wanted them to quit the subject. Every one of their remarks smacked of envy or jealousy, which I found quite comforting. And besides, no matter what they said it made me feel a tinge of pride—a pride that gave me a strange sense of achievement. Gradually, these incidentals came to have greater importance for me than Parveen's love, which had been the cause of it all.

Mushtaq's father had retired as a Deputy Superintendent of Police. In those days such jobs were generally reserved for the English and rarely

fell to the lot of an Indian. Aslam's father was a doctor—a specialist in what was, back then, the incurable and fatal disease of tuberculosis—and was raking in money with both hands. Madan's father had been given the title of Rai Bahadur by the English and was a Sessions Judge. Rajinder was the son of a rich contractor. I wasn't someone of their class, but I was dying to be counted as one. My room was the hangout where they all gathered to escape from the peace and ordered neatness of their own bungalows and to have a taste of freedom, or to smoke or to just shoot the breeze. There were no servants here who would report to their mothers on their sons' activities and their acquaintances. We would roll around like dirt-covered donkeys on the matted floor, turn somersaults, or tangle with each other like wrestlers. Here, there was no fear of breaking anything or messing up the décor. We would openly indulge in obscenities and tell dirty jokes with perfect ease. My parents never imposed any restrictions on their visiting me, perhaps because they mistakenly assumed their son was socializing with the children of the beau monde. They didn't know that friendships only thrive among equals, friendships with those higher or lower than oneself inevitably become self-effacing or patronizing after a time. We mostly talked about movies and movie stars, or else we tried to gauge the beauty of the daughters of the city's rich and famous from the scandals circulating about them. Sometimes, in order to show the superiority of the lifestyles of their families over others, my friends would describe their trips to different hill stations or their visits to posh hotels. Or they would talk about the styles, cuts, and colors of their clothing and the specific occasions and times when it was appropriate to wear this or that, or about their pride in owning, or their regret over not owning, some rare breed of dog or the choicest brands of automobiles, watches or radios. In short, their speech never failed to communicate a sense of arrogance over what they did possess, or of wistful longing for certain material comforts or bodily pleasures that had eluded them thus far. When their conversations went far beyond my social position or financial means, I would tire of my flights of fancy and drop down to the mundane reality of facts. I would wonder then whether genuine expressions of compassion for suffering humanity had departed from my life along with Ehsan. Slavery, backwardness, misfortune and famine—these were not the issues that occupied our minds. And yet Rajinder's and Madan's sympathies lay with the Congress even though, unlike many other Hindus, they neither wore homespun cotton, nor served the Congress in any other way. They did respect Gandhi and Nehru though. When I told them the story of Ehsan's father, they listened closely to each

detail, speechless with wonder and reverence. Afterwards, whenever they had occasion to meet Ehsan, they visibly treated him with honor and due appreciation. Mushtaq and Aslam, on the other hand, remained totally unaffected by the story of Ehsan's father's martyrdom for the country and the resulting misfortunes for his family.

My friendship with these four lasted about two or two and a half years. In any case, it wouldn't have continued beyond the matriculation exams since they all had resolved to go to Lahore for their first year of college, while I was destined to enroll in a local college. However, the occurrence of two events in quick succession pretty much ended our friendship even before the exams. Madan's sister was getting married in January. He invited the other three but ignored me altogether. This prejudicial treatment shocked and tormented me. For the first time in my life a strange sense of my own lowliness and a feeling of disgrace gripped me. I felt like a fool, cut off from everybody, alone, utterly alone. I couldn't figure out what had happened to me. I couldn't have been excluded because I was a Muslim, two of the others were also Muslims. I had never been to Madan's home, so none of my actions could possibly have offended his parents. I didn't shed any tears, but my heart was crying out. Again and again, I was reminded of Ehsan who had always been treated this way by my parents. Eventually I found out that my suspicions were justified. Madan's parents had refused to invite me because of my father's lower social status. So, I was not one of them. I was whatever my father's and my social status implied. Friendship was a meaningless thing. The real thing was class. A crow doesn't become a peacock by sticking a few peacock feathers in its tail.

After that, Madan, out of embarrassment, never came to my house, but the other three did drop by now and then. As usual, I accompanied them to movies or on bicycle rides through Company Bagh, but my heart—now that I had been made conscious of my true worth—was bereft of the love I had felt for them earlier.

It was a very pleasant evening in mid-February. A touch of spring had animated the weather. A clean cool breeze was blowing playfully around us, stirring up joy in our hearts and refreshing our bodies. We decided to park our bicycles on Lawrence Road and walk as far as we could along the Mall. Since Aslam had to leave early and we were, at any rate, heading in the direction of his home, he hung onto his bicycle. Walking leisurely, taking in the pleasurable weather, we came up to the Lawrence Road intersection and went along on the sidewalk of the quiet and peaceful Mall, going in the opposite direction from Cold Well. Colonial-style

houses stood in all their majesty and grandeur on both sides for a distance of about ten *kanals*. (How could the English, who had built such bungalows, ever have left India easily?) We started playing a game flicking our cigarette butts. We would hold them between the thumb and middle finger and then strike them with the forefinger to see how far they would fly. The milky white light falling from the electric poles on either side of the street had become stronger with the deepening evening shadows, so visibility had shrunk down to the light bulbs themselves, along with the twelve-foot-wide street and the two-and-a-half foot tall *sinthiya* hedge illumined by them. Everything else had vanished. Once in a while a cook or a waiter passed us on his bicycle, or a slow-paced tonga lazily plodded along. We left the sidewalk and started walking in the street. When I flicked a cigarette butt, it went sliding along the road, turning a few somersaults and throwing off sparks along the way before it became caught in the base of the hedge on the other side. Although in terms of the distance covered my cigarette butt was second to Mushtaq's, which had gone straight across the hedge, mine put up a fine display of fireworks in the street that we all enjoyed heartily. Meanwhile, we saw three girls coming up ahead some hundred yards away. They were talking and giggling among themselves, moving their bodies flirtatiously. Rajinder suggested that I light a cigarette immediately and that, when we had come alongside the girls, I should repeat my earlier performance, but this time make the butt stop right in front of their feet. It would be fun to watch them jump up with fright. Considering myself an expert in cigarette flipping, I got ready. The girls, all three of them, were pretty. The effort they had put into their makeup and their outfits made it obvious they were headed towards some party. Especially the girl in the middle, she was exceptionally beautiful in a sparkling white silk sari with a low-cut matching blouse. She looked like some fairy who had come down from the sky for a stroll and who would soon fly back. They were entirely engrossed in their own conversation, totally oblivious to our presence. When we got near them I ejected the cigarette butt, but instead of gliding along the surface of the road it flew straight up and went toward them like a rocket. I was scared that it might fall on one of their heads and God knows what damage that would do. Too late now, the arrow had already left the bow. I had a faint hope that it would land on the opposite sidewalk instead and I would be spared embarrassment and regrets. But it went straight into the blouse of the girl in the middle. She didn't scream, only started hissing and shifting her weight from foot to foot fretfully because of the sensation of being burned. The other girls tried, one after

the other and without success, to stick their fingers inside her blouse and remove the offender. Aslam immediately took off on his bicycle. The rest of us stood facing the girls feeling contrite and wanting to help, but unable to do so. Lord knows how, but within just a short time a crowd of people gathered on this otherwise deserted street, everyone wanting to know what had happened. In the meantime four boys, quite a bit older than us, happened to come by on a couple of bicycles. Taking full advantage of the situation, they tried to establish themselves as the heroes. First they politely asked the girls what had happened. When the girls didn't answer, they turned toward us, "You must have done something. Come on, out with it!?" By then the girls had somehow managed to extricate the remains of the burning cigarette and hurried on without a word. I breathed a sigh of relief. We would deal with what was to come next. At least the poor girl was out of the misery I had brought upon her. The boys, who had depicted themselves as full of grief and anger in front of the girls, were now bending over with laughter. One of them addressed us, "Bravo! Whichever one of you did that is a remarkable marksman." Afraid that the girls' real guardians would come after us, we took to our heels. But luckily no one came.

We assumed the matter was over and done with. But, despite his swift retreat, the girls had recognized Aslam because he lived in their neighborhood. And through him we too were discovered. Before long, news of the incident, with all its details, made it to the homes of Mushtaq and Rajinder, who put the blame squarely on me. The girls' families didn't confront my father about the matter, probably because in such delicate situations, where one's girls are involved, the exchange of words with one's inferiors can only bring more disgrace. Only Rajinder's father complained to the headmaster, in a private letter, that there were goons like Saeed in his school who incited their relatively innocent children to commit such horrible and dangerous mischief, and that it was his duty to reprimand and discipline such individuals, etc., etc. It was my good fortune that within a few days the tenth graders were going to be excused from attending classes in order to prepare for their exams. The headmaster only summoned me and gave me a stern rebuke. Mercifully, he let me go and also didn't summon my father. That incident pretty much ended my friends' visits to my place and our going around together.

As long as the war continued it seemed not to be taking place on earth but on some other planet. Although it didn't concern anybody here, its effects were, of course, painfully noticeable in the scarcity of consumer goods and the exorbitant prices. Once in a while we also had to suffer the

inconvenience of blackouts. Every third month or so mock exercises were conducted to drill the public in air-raid defense. The siren would be sounded and the police would run frantically to chase people out of the streets as they stood making fun of the mock air raids. Without the willing cooperation of the public, a large-scale drama such as that can't be staged successfully. The whole project becomes as ridiculous as trying to weigh a frog in a balance. During the entire war, no one had even heard gunfire, let alone a bomb explode. Although the world's most devastating war was being fought and hundreds of thousands perished, for our people it had no more significance than a game because it wasn't our war. My insensitive friends suspected that the sole purpose of the war was to deprive them, from the day they attained consciousness to their last dying breath, of Chinese garments of the finest silk and of high-quality English suits. They were convinced that the war was not going to end before Doomsday, and it pained them that their parents had enjoyed all the rare things in life whereas they themselves had been denied.

Whenever Ehsan came to visit me he would take me aside and advise me never to try to befriend Parveen, that such things in one's own neighborhood amounted to folly, and that if I was, nonetheless, genuinely interested in her, she should be told never to show herself at the window when my friends were around. How could I tolerate such an affront to my honor—her showing herself to others so openly? But, of course, that advice went the way all such advice goes. It was heard but conveniently ignored. In fact, that Parveen didn't show herself in the window when my friends were around was precisely their complaint against her. The attachment I felt for her, which even I, in those days, took to be genuine love, was less that and more a form of self-conceit. Why, she must have appeared to them to be an equal of Sassi and Sohni after the fabricated and much embellished stories I had been telling them of my meetings with her. My good fortune made their breasts burn with jealousy, so much so that the merest spray of water would have made them hiss with a burst of steam. One time they became so enflamed with a longing to catch a glimpse of her that they skipped school with me and stood waiting on the street to her school for hours in the unforgiving sun. Her beauty pained their hearts even more, and when she looked at me with a tender smile, they were almost toasted. I felt like I was in seventh heaven. Compared to brats brought up on the streets, the ones raised in the loneliness of bungalows, under their parents' watchful gaze, tended to be really quite naïve and innocent because they faced the realities of life much later.

As soon as the war ended it seemed as if an electric current passed through India's political climate. The atmosphere became more strained and tense by the day, and people, although not knowing exactly, felt in their bones that something was going to happen. But what? It was impossible to divine. Even the most astute political leaders were unable to say just what might emerge from the shadows of the future. Heated discussions erupted among people in the streets and bazaars. Speculation was rife, and so were open displays of hopeless sentimentality and maudlin self-pity, without any sense of decorum, and all done on social and, particularly, religious grounds with generous references to history. During the time when the Muslim League became a household word among Muslims and the cry for Pakistan was raised, my father, like most Muslims, became a staunch supporter of Pakistan. Every evening after supper, the elders and notables of our street would perch on the raised porches outside our homes and discuss politics. Young men and boys could sit there, but they weren't permitted to express their opinions. To those who opposed the creation of Pakistan, my father would say, "Is there anyone who knows the Congress better than we do? Didn't we nourish its foundations with our blood? Why, my own elder brother, he died in jail for the sake of the Congress, writhing in pain, racked by tuberculosis. But now we can see through Gandhi and Nehru's bigotry and the Hindus' relentless and eternal prejudice against Muslims. And this prejudice is not going to disappear. Indian Muslims have been forced to demand a separate homeland for their own survival. This is the only solution now."

He would be asked, "And what about the Muslims who would be left behind in India? Who would guarantee their safety?"

"Why, the Hindus who would be left behind in Pakistan," he'd answer.

Even the leaders could not have guessed then that there would be a transfer of population, and on such a massive scale at that, on the basis of religion. Later on, at the time of Partition, the blood of the innocents that was shed in the Panjab could not be matched for a comparable area even by the bloodiest war in the history of mankind.

Maulvi Karam Din said, "Brother, bartered marriages, as anybody knows, just don't work. How do you suppose two hostile nations and races can be trusted with the safety of their minorities on the basis of barter?"

In the two years preceding Partition, when the idea of Pakistan had become a watchword in just about every household, and when every child

was yelling out "Pakistan Zindabad" in a frenzy, critics like Maulvi Karam Din were struck dumb and clammed up in fear for their lives. In the tempest of emotions all reasoning and logic was swept away like so much straw. Ehsan would come especially to tell me, "Don't be misled by all this noise and tumult. This is nothing but the crafty handiwork of the British. When they saw India slipping out of their hands they decided to break it into bits so that it would never emerge as a world power. Watch it! lest you become a partner in this crime by siding with the Muslim League."

What I say now goes back to the time after the establishment of Pakistan. My father's petition for an evacuee property was turned down by the claim's officer for some reason. I was with my father. He raised such a fuss over this that I became very upset. He was describing his disagreements with Maulvi Karam Din on the porch in the street outside as the "ideological battles we fought in every street and alleyway with the enemies of the Muslim League and Pakistan."

When I was in college, Muslim students staged a demonstration in the Hall Bazaar against the government of Khizr Hayat in the Panjab. Ninety percent of the police consisted of Muslims, who had, by then, switched their sympathies to the Muslim League. They engaged in a very mild—indeed loving—clubbing of the demonstrators. A club hit me on the thigh. Because I was at the head of the demonstration, I was whisked away to the police station. I sat there for about three hours along with the other students who had been picked up. There they served us a cooled sweet sherbet to drink and other goodies. By evening I was home. That incident my father now blew up into: "We suffered beatings by the police for the sake of Pakistan. We were dragged through the streets. We were incarcerated. Our brothers and sisters were cut to pieces in the riots. Our houses were torched. Our property was looted. Is this how you reward us for all our sacrifices?" The officer-in-charge panicked and accepted my father's claim as submitted. My father kissed the officer's hands in gratitude and came out.

It was inevitable that this continual incitement of hatred should erupt in the worst kind of riots. People who had not so much as heard a shot fired during the entire war were now frantically grabbing their daggers and *kirpans* and cutting up innocent human beings to claim their share in perpetrating violence. The individual had disappeared in the aggregate of his fellow-believers. A single unit didn't count—it could be severed and dumped with impunity; the collective entity was all that mattered. The

numbers of the enemy versus those of one's own faith slain were touted proudly like cricket match scores.

Once started, the riots continued sporadically until after Independence Day on the 15th of August. On that day we sat barricaded behind the tall iron gates of our neighborhood. About a month earlier Ehsan and his family had abandoned their unprotected house in the open area and moved into Sharifpura. There too the gates stayed closed at all times. Permission from four guards had to be obtained before one could visit another quarter. The guard of one neighborhood would call out loudly to his counterpart in the other asking whether such-and-such person could come across. The other would respond in the affirmative. Only then would the person concerned dash across the street dividing the two residential areas—a street that at one time had buzzed with life but was now completely deserted—and go into the intended neighborhood. Unless absolutely essential, such back-and-forth movement was discouraged. Ehsan's *mamoon* felt compelled to leave his home in the inner city and seek refuge with some relatives in Sharifpura. The collective resistance of the Muslims had pretty much ended in this Hindu-majority city, and the entire Muslim population had moved to these two neighborhoods for safety, at times as many as six families piling into a single house. Even the air was becoming insufficient, let alone food. It started to stink everywhere. After two hundred and fifty years of bondage to the English, an independent India had come into being. Pakistan had been formed a day earlier. The defeated Muslims of this city looked heartbroken, their faces pale, their eyes downcast, in mortal fear of an attack any minute, which, fortunately, didn't materialize. It didn't materialize because the Hindus and Sikhs suspected that the Muslims had a lot of manpower and stockpiles of weapons. Finally, the Muslims were able to board trains which stopped near their respective neighborhoods and make their way safely to Pakistan.

A year and a half before that, Safia and Mahmood had been married and we all had had great fun participating in the wedding. Now, on the first morning of independent India, Mahmood, outfitted in his army uniform and accompanied by six soldiers from the Baluch regiment, pulled his army truck into the street facing our lane. After identifying himself to the guards at the gates, he came to us and told my father that he had first gone to his own house in the inner city and had found it razed to the ground, the cinders still glowing like charcoal embers in an oven. Only the back wall, blackened by smoke, still held its ground, standing tall and unyielding. He didn't have time or he would have knocked that down

too. He had just picked a burning coal from the ashes of his ancestral home, lit a cigarette, and walked away to Ehsan's house. He saw a Sikh's dead body lying prone beside the railroad tracks, with his bicycle lying close by. Ehsan's house was locked up. That gave him hope—perhaps they were alive. Earlier, the sight of his charred ancestral home had made him weep for his sisters and parents.

"There's no cause for alarm," my father said. "They're alive and well and at Abdul Latif's house in Sharifpura."

At breakfast, Mahmood said, "All the houses in Ehsan's area were locked up. Dogs roamed the street and the stench from the corpse wafted everywhere. It was quiet, terrifyingly quiet. Suddenly a flock of parrots took flight from a mango tree and went screeching over my head." He laughed. "My hand immediately went for my pistol. I thought the enemy had done something. But the Sikh lay there, as dead as ever."

I wanted to ask him whether the parrot that had once turned around in flight to look at me and laugh was in that flock. Then I thought, who knows, it might've flown over to Pakistan already.

"Were brother Bashir Ahmad alive today," my father said, "how incredibly happy he would have been to see his efforts finally bearing fruit. He'd have found a good position in the Congress government and something might have also trickled down to people like us."

"But, Uncle," Mahmood said, "I can tell you on the basis of information received from the headquarters that not a single Muslim Congressite in the Panjab has been spared from suffering at the hands of the Hindu rioters. Some had their houses looted or razed, and some have even been killed. What protection did Phoophi and her family receive, anyway?"

Because it was closed on all sides and the number of residents had increased six-fold, there was a crush of people in the narrow lanes of our neighborhood at all times. People sat on cots or terraces or on the ground, quiet, subdued, waiting for death, staring at each other with dazed, fearful eyes. Someone, as if talking to himself, would whisper in the other's ear, "Brother, what will happen now?"

"The same thing that will happen to everybody else. Don't worry. By the grace of God, everything will turn out O.K."

Five minutes later, this other person, in order to hear the same answer from the first one, would ask, "Brother, what will happen now?" And the first man would recite the same formulaic answer. Bands of terrified children roamed about the streets all day long. No one even dared to talk loudly much less get into mischief.

When Mahmood was done eating his breakfast, my father asked him very humbly, "If there's room in the truck, please take us along."

"Fine," he said. "But absolutely no baggage."

"The hell with the baggage. We're lucky to get away with our lives. You've been like an angel of mercy for us."

"Let's leave here together. We'll go to Sharifpura, pick up the others and then head off to Lahore."

After it was decided to leave for Lahore, I ran to my room to change my shoes. Across the way Parveen stood in her window—her hair dishevelled, her clothes crumpled, her face distraught, and yet she appeared even more becoming. The news of our departure for Pakistan had swept across the whole neighborhood the minute Mahmood showed up, and she, too, had heard it. A curious smile flashed across her face for a second and then died away—a smile entirely free of grief, remorse, or complaint. I have tried to explain it to myself a hundred different ways since then, but to no avail. I was still standing there facing her when she gently bolted the window shut. Her eyes were devoid of all expression.

When we came out of the house a crowd of thousands stood waiting, taking Mahmood to be the savior. Everyone began asking, "What will become of us? When will we be taken to Pakistan? What lies in store for us?" Mahmood stood up on an elevated front porch, picked one person in the crowd, and asked, "All right, what do you want to know? The rest of you please keep quiet."

The man said, "There are thousands of Muslims in these two neighborhoods. What's being done for their safety? How will they get to Pakistan and when?"

"Frankly, I don't know," Mahmood said. "And neither does anybody else for that matter. I've barely been able to arrange for a truck to take my parents and some relatives to Pakistan. No plans have been made for your evacuation so far. It's a situation of total chaos. The number of army personnel we have is extremely limited. Since no one imagined that the transfer of such a huge bulk of the population would be required, no plans or schemes were drawn up. We rush to wherever we sense greater danger. I'm sorry, I can't give you any immediate help. However, I do promise to communicate your concern to the headquarters. God willing, something will be done soon. For now you will have to depend upon your own resources to insure your security."

Faces, animated by a ray of hope a moment ago, wilted again. Many people made personal requests that he take their ailing mothers, or daugh-

ters, or themselves along, but Mahmood gently made them understand that there was really no room in the truck.

As we headed for the truck, so many people stood watching us wistfully that it was impossible to make our way through. Mahmood was walking ahead, then came my father, who was shaking hands with the people following him. After my father came my mother, with a small pouch of jewelry tucked under her arm, then my two sisters, and, last of all, me. Before stepping out of the gate I turned around to look. Parveen's window was shut. From inside the high truck, I stood up to look again. It was still closed. Perhaps she had also shut the window of her heart on me—forever. But the curious thing was that the window of my own heart, which didn't seem open earlier, burst wide open as though hit by a strong gust of wind. Forty years have passed, and it is still open, but she hasn't turned up, nor have I ever heard any news of her.

When I went to see Ehsan, I was thinking that he must be lying in bed moaning and wailing, vials of medicine lined up on the bedtable. After all, he had gone through a major surgery. I was still climbing the stairs when I heard, instead, the sound of his boisterous laughter. "I'll be darned—he's hooting like a bugle," I said to myself. Lali had gotten him to give up wearing his cap and let his hair grow; Pakistan had made him abandon his outfit of coarse, homespun cotton; and he had probably switched to wearing trousers of his own accord. His facial features were as unsightly as ever. Inattention had made his false teeth look uglier than the real teeth of someone who neglects taking care of them. His beady, lusterless eyes still darted as furtively as they had in the past, giving one the impression that he was fast and foxy, which in reality he was not. Perhaps because of the effects of aging, ashy patches had appeared here and there on his face. His skin, which never had any glow to begin with, now appeared as hard as a buffalo-hide.

After coming to Pakistan, Ehsan moved in with Mahmood, whose bungalow was located in the cantonment, and he never left there. A couple of times I rented a bicycle and went to see him, but he refused to go out with me anywhere. He asked how he could now face the same people before whom he had always denounced the creation of Pakistan, when he had been forced to take refuge there.

Farman would leave the bungalow early in the morning for town and return late at night. After ten days of sustained effort he finally succeeded in having a house allotted to him in Krishan Nagar and a shop on

Brandreth Road (where there used to be, and still is, a market for iron-work goods and machinery). Since Farman had worked in factories before, he knew a little about the iron and machinery business. Today he's a successful businessman and a factory-owner worth several millions. In those early days, when refugees from India had not yet started to arrive in large numbers, an allotment, which took no more than a couple of days for other claimants, still took Farman a good ten days. And this was because the other claimants from his former city complained, "He's a Congressite. So was his father who died in jail. Tell him to go back to India. What's he doing here anyway? This property is *our* right." This would intimidate the junior employees of the claims office into prolonging action on Farman's request. But, finally, a superior officer had the courage to recommend favorable action, arguing that now that Farman and his family were already here, they could be expected to live here permanently. No matter how one regarded them, they qualified as refugees and, hence, deserved to be allotted a house to live in and a shop to earn their living. To Farman's complainers the officer said, "Forget about the past. Those who have come here are Pakistanis and have the same rights as other Pakistanis."

My father too got it into his head to have a business. He managed to get a store filled with cloth allotted to himself. He named the store ZAHEER & SON and started selling silk and satin. I said to Ehsan, "Brother, why don't you take advantage of the wealth left behind by the Hindus? Make some effort and ask for a store or something."

He said, "I worked in a job back there and I'll do the same here. I won't breathe a word to anyone about my political views. That way I'll at least spare myself ridicule and embarrassment. And, besides, I don't have any political views anymore. Pakistan has come into being. May it last long. But it won't solve the problems for which we wanted to have the partition in the first place." The day Farman moved with *Aapa* into his allotted house in Krishan Nagar, Ehsan set out for Karachi where he found himself a job as a clerk in the accounts department of a British export-import company, eventually rising to the rank of Superintendent. His superiors were happy with his diligence and his honesty, and his colleagues respected him for his courtesy and pleasing manners. To pay for his medical treatment he borrowed the maximum allowable against his provident fund; his company contributed the balance as a gift.

The minute he saw me he yelled, laughing, "Hey, here comes my buddy!" For a few moments he stood with his hands outstretched and his face beaming with affection, then he came forward and hugged me. Four

of his friends, two men and two women, were with him. When they saw their guru welcoming a stranger so warmly, they stood up too. Ehsan had now developed a small potbelly which seemed unnatural on his otherwise slim frame, and his soiled, faded T-shirt looked tight around the middle. He seated me on the sofa next to him and then spoke to a girl, "Tim, make some tea for him, and quickly, please. Good girl." Then he asked me to get up, saying, "Let's go in the other room. They'll be able to talk freely here and we'll be at ease there."

For a long while we talked about his trip and surgery. He said, "I had a strange experience. Two nights and one day just disappeared from my life as though they never existed and neither did I. It was like seeing a snippet, a brief glimpse of death. It gave me a taste of what death would be like. A total nothingness, where there is neither light nor darkness, neither sound nor silence, neither pain nor joy, no sensation or consciousness. Just empty space. It's difficult to imagine absolute nothingness while one is still living. Sleep is different. We're alive during sleep, and, actually, in a sense, more fully alive than when we're awake. The third day the doctor got me out of bed and made me walk without a support. And I walked."

In the meantime the girl came in and placed tea before us. She was about to leave when Ehsan asked, "Did you offer tea to the other guests also?"

"Yes. They're already having theirs." She lingered briefly, staring at Ehsan, just in case he might want her to do something else. When he didn't speak, she left. I asked, "*Yaar*, what kind of name is this—Tim?"

"Such girls don't really have any names. Their parents give them one name, they call themselves by some other, and they give their clients yet another. I believe they do this to lose all sense of their identity, and they do it so totally that if they ever wanted to retrieve their identity, they wouldn't be able to. Perhaps this ruse allows them to assume, and to derive false satisfaction from the assumption, that while Tim is out walking the streets luring clients, the virginal Ruqaiya is still at home, as pure as ever." He paused, thought for a while and then said, "Perhaps it isn't really an assumption. It *is* the reality. After all, it's the body that's involved in those transactions, in order to support itself, never the heart. Anyway, as I was saying, every client calls them by the name of his choice. And I don't need to tell you that there's a name stuck in everyone's cranium which he carries with him to the grave." As soon as he uttered those words a loud bell sounded in my mind echoing Parveen's name. I had goose bumps all over. At first I flinched but then suddenly became

sad. Ehsan was saying, "This profession is really about filling the spaces left in men's hearts by other women. In other words, you could say these women are obliged to play the roles of men's former lovers. Which is all well and good. But the minute somebody begins to like them for themselves, their identity and individuality return. That's when they become the victims of crimes of passion. Even they don't know when someone has stopped using them to fill an empty space and started to love them for themselves. Now, where there's love, there's bound to be jealousy. And where there's jealousy, there's also murder."

Apparently Ehsan's flat had been open for such girls right from the beginning. They could come in anytime, eat whatever was there or cook for themselves if they wanted to, wash and clean themselves there, even stay for two or three days if they needed a place, and leave anytime they wanted to; no one stopped them. Ehsan had this yen for being in the company of females and talking with them. Numberless girls must have visited there, but the amazing thing was that he never formed any kind of liaison with any of them. They could not bring their clients to the flat, nor were they allowed to make deals with friends who visited him. But, of course, they were free to do as they wished outside the flat. Ehsan said that it felt nice to have pretty girls in colorful clothes walking about the house. He didn't smoke in the past or even now, but his fascination with colors had taken him near and far in search of empty cigarette packs in his youth. He said, "These girls are like empty cigarette packs. People use them and throw them away. Back in the old days I had to go looking for empty cigarette packs. But these days, they come here on their own. I give them a feeling of belonging, which they seldom get anywhere else in the world. They spend some time here which helps them recuperate psychologically, as it were, and then move on. This girl, when she started coming here, gave her name as 'Nilofar.' I gave her the name 'Tim'—because her eyes twinkled, like an oil-lamp. For some time, she was called 'Twinky,' but then she became 'Tim.' When she's with the rest of us, she laughs, titters, chuckles and banters with the other girls. Then her face glows. But if she retreats into herself, that glow fades. It may even die out completely. If she recovers and joins in with the others, the glow returns. When I take her aside and ask her what's the matter, she tells me her mother had a seizure again that morning. There wasn't a paisa in the house. She had to leave her mother unattended to go out and make some money to pay for her treatment. But as of that afternoon she still hadn't found any client. She'll try again in the evening, she says. She worries that her mother will have another fit in her absence. She also fears that her

mother might already be dead when she gets home with the money. You're fond of writing stories, aren't you? Each of these girls is a complete novel in herself. I could give you enough material for ten or fifteen stories in one evening. These streetwalkers are really the most oppressed of their profession. Though everyone, of course, knows the truth about them, they're forced to keep up a façade of respectability in their own neighborhoods and among their own relatives. The girls who sell themselves openly in the bazaar, on the other hand, have their whole 'family-at-large' behind them. If the family is well off, they train their girls in singing and dancing to give them those skills. Then there's also the fact that this sort of profession isn't looked down on among their peers. Compared to these streetwalkers, even the girls of Lali's gypsy tribe have it better: at least their lives are psychologically more secure because among them selling one's body isn't considered all that immoral. These street girls, on the other hand, are unskilled laborers with their bodies. And, in the end, they're as good as dead as soon as their bodies begin to sag."

I believe it was the memory of Lali that had driven Ehsan to turn his house into something of a shelter. Perhaps the idea that someday even Lali might come by, needing a respite from her arduous life, may also have been lurking somewhere in his mind. Lali had given him love and confidence and had introduced him to sexuality. Her love was still alive in his heart. He never cared for the rich and powerful—their pretentiousness, as he would say, disgusted him—and he never aspired to become one himself. Some opportunities to engage in business did come his way, but he found his humble job far too satisfying to give up. In the same way, he despised women who were heavily made-up or were vain about their beauty. His heart only went out to those who were like him, simple and oppressed by circumstances.

He remained an ascetic for a long time. There used to be a telephone operator in his office, a girl named Nazo. Her husband had run way to the States leaving her and their two small children behind. Nazo's mother, who was paralyzed, lived in Lahore, and Nazo had to send her money every month. The older child, a girl, went to some English elementary school. The younger child was a boy. Nazo had her own house but her salary was too meager to meet all the expenses so Ehsan brought her, along with the children, to his house. That way she at least was rid of her immediate financial problems. Nazo reasoned that so long as this fool remained sexually aloof she ran the risk of being driven out of his house at any time. She trapped him, assuring him of her love, and it was decided that they would marry. Her first marriage was still intact so

she had to file for divorce. They ran around the courts for two, two and a half years. When at last the divorce came through, she ran away with some fat cat, leaving the children with Ehsan. He looked after them like his own. He would take the daughter to school every day on his motorcycle, lugging the son along as well. Two months later Nazo returned, full of airs, and whisked the children away with her in a car. Ehsan wept with tears after they had left, and he grieved for a long time over having been misunderstood. He would have done all this anyway, even if that stupid woman hadn't deceived him in love. But it's impossible for someone dishonest to consider anybody honest. Ehsan's friends often brought liquor and consumed it at his place. He had no objection. After the children were wrenched away from him, he started drinking, at somebody's suggestion, to drown his sorrow. But it didn't sit well with him. It gave him a feeling of claustrophobia, accompanied by a loss of control over his limbs. He was anxious to snap out of this state, but intoxication takes its own time to wear off. He was afraid that the feeling of suffocation might become permanent.

Ehsan was so repentant about propagating the Congress ideology before Partition that he found it hard to support any other ideology afterwards. At a personal level, he was now influenced by socialism and regarded it as the only panacea for the poor and the downtrodden. But he never said a word to anybody in support of it or took any practical steps to promote it. He told me once: "My friend, who knows, tomorrow even socialism may betray us, and to save my life a second time I might have to run for cover under the umbrella of capitalism. I'm a common man and I've learned the hard way that a common man had better not deviate from the ordinary political course, otherwise his wife and children will have to go through much suffering. While he has his belief in an idea or an ideology to sustain him through his misery, his poor family, who lack his conviction, are needlessly dragged along into much hardship by the complications created by him. There is no such thing as absolute truth in this world. Truth is always on the side of victory. Your father did the right thing, and Farman was also right in doing what he did after coming to Pakistan."

In his adolescence and youth, the desire to gain India's freedom from British domination had reached the point of being a deep emotional crisis for Ehsan. But apart from nursing hatred and ill-will for the British, he had done nothing practical to bring that freedom about. At most he'd hit his listeners with a fiery speech supporting the Congress during one of those political discussions that broke out in the sidestreets of our neigh-

borhood at the time, and then walk away. Likewise, his second passion was the unity of the Islamic world and the upliftment of Muslims among the nations of the world. Whether the desire for Muslim unity was a consequence of his hatred for the British, or whether he had embraced the hatred of the British in the cause of Muslim unity was hard to tell. In any case, he never observed the exoterica of religion. After coming to Pakistan, he adopted a somewhat Sufi-like attitude: "Don't harm anyone; love everybody; serve everyone; each is right in his own way; the political maps and economic conditions of nations change automatically at their appointed time as ordained by nature; man's efforts to effect change are not likely to make any difference." At one time he considered the Congress infallible; now, though, he conceded that "its leadership had become so entirely preoccupied with the mission to expel the British that they had lost touch with the realities of life around them. Trusting that the validity of this mission was an incontrovertible universal truth, its leadership had come to believe that once India was freed, all its citizens would live in peace and harmony for all times to come, and that all the country's problems and differences would be resolved forthwith. In their misguided assumption they completely failed to notice, much less do anything about, the lack of faith, the mistrust and the fear that was increasing continuously at the national level among a minority as visible as the Muslims. When they did finally direct their attention to the problem, it was already too late. In their slowness, or rather, their delinquency, they stupidly assumed that the support of a few Muslim ulema was representative of the wishes of 100 million Muslims. The general Indian temperament was, and still is, one of religious fanaticism. Despite having lived next to each other for a thousand years, the followers of every religion in this country are so intolerant of the followers of the others that they haven't made the slightest effort to understand them."

He went on to say, "Let me tell you what happened once. One time, which turned out to be the last time, *Aapa* and I went to visit my father in Lahore Central Jail. There the officials scheduled our visit for the next day. We had to spend the night in Lahore. Now, I don't remember how we got to the house where we spent the night. All I remember is that when I woke up the next morning and found myself in an unfamiliar place, I got terribly confused and agitated. It was an open rooftop with a single cot. I was lying on it and my mother was squatting on it nearby, the way she squatted on a railway platform waiting for the train, quiet and absent-minded. The gentle morning breeze felt pleasant. Once in a while the call of a milk-seller wafted in on the breeze and then vanished.

Pots and pans began clanging, hand-pumps began moving. The melodious sounds of *bhajan*-chanting, accompanied by a harmonium, poured into my ears for the first time ever. I liked it. I got off of the cot and moved around to take a look. Everywhere I glanced there was a sprawl of redbrick walls. I peered down into the courtyard. A long line of cots, with an assortment of bedding, appeared before me. Some people were still sound asleep. Others, limbering up, were walking about slowly, half-awake, taking care of their various needs. An elderly man was sitting in lotus position, as erect as if he were a statue. Astonished, I asked my mother what the man was doing. She said he was performing his morning *sandhya*. I asked what that was. She said it was their *namaz*. I said then why didn't they say their *namaz* properly, as we did. My mother told me to shut up and stop talking nonsense."

Ehsan looked towards me and resumed, "*Yaar*, the Lahore of those day was so amazing! So beautiful! The Mall, and the area east of it, which was settled after the arrival of the English! It looked as though somebody had built a tasteful assortment of large, dazzling buildings, in a variety of attractive architectural styles, on the empty spaces in a park. Yellow painted tongas on wide, open roads, their drivers wearing similar uniforms with a gleaming number engraved in brass on their turbans. In one such tonga, sitting on the back seat with *Aapa*, I started out, from God knows what neighborhood, to see my father at the jail. The young son of the people we had stayed with the night before sat on the front seat next to the driver. Up until then, *Aapa* and I had traveled alone to the jails in far-off places in the Panjab, but here, at the insistence of our hosts, *Aapa* let the boy come along. He was to stay with us until he had seen us off at the station after the visit. When the tonga reached the Mall, I noticed the Sweepers' Cannon. Curious, I asked the boy what it was. He told me it was Sweepers' Cannon. It seemed like a strange object, with an even stranger name. I wondered in amazement why the sweepers would want to build such a thing and how? The cannon was mounted on a platform smack in the middle of the road. Surely, I thought, it must have meant something special to the English for them to display it so prominently. It was jet-black, with rings of brass, enormous wooden wheels, and a long, high neck. When we passed near it, I poked my head out through the canvas of the roof and the mud-guard, and asked, 'What does it do?' The boy said, 'It gets stuffed with gunpowder and fired at the enemy during a war.' I asked, 'Do the British use it to kill Indians?' The boy just smiled and kept quiet.

"I wasn't happy sitting in the backseat even before, but now that so many new and interesting things were passing me by unobserved, it became essential to move to the front seat. Even though *Aapa* said I was being too restless and would fall off, I climbed into the front seat, partly with the boy's help and partly holding onto *Aapa*'s shoulders. Woolner's life-size statue, in the posture of some great administrator with books in hand, stood on the side of the Mall in front of the Senate Hall gate. Across from it, in front of the gates to the museum, was the white marble statue of Sir Ganga Ram, sitting comfortably in a chair. Lajpat Rai's black statue—in which he is shown making a speech with his index finger raised—was also there somewhere. There were tall green trees and, behind them, even taller redbrick buildings. And there were flowers and shrubs in empty spaces here and there. No smell of fumes hung in the air, as it does nowadays. I was trying to drink everything in, wide-eyed and wonder-struck. The statues were a novelty for me; they seemed to add an elegance to the beauty of the Mall. When we passed in front of the Tollinton Market, there were no chicken feathers flying about nor was there any stench of rotting meat. The number of tongas, the volume of traffic, the activity and movement of people multiplied as our tonga moved forward. But there was no noise. Sweepers had been stationed at many places, with buckets and shovels, to remove the horse dung. In the center of the General Post Office intersection, lush green grass glistened within a circular patch, with traffic flowing around it in an orderly fashion. There were giggling girls with the borders of their headgear flying about in the air, lively young school boys holding onto their books, as well as office clerks and, at times, milky-white, golden-haired English ladies flying about on their bicycles. Now and then a shiny car would whiz by between the two rows of tongas. It was a time when the exhaust from automobiles and motor-rickshaws hadn't yet sullied the pristine sunshine, made ever so agreeable by gusts of the fresh, morning breeze. The dense foliage of *jamun* and *peepul* shaded both sides of the road. The Ganga Ram Trust building and the horseshoe-shaped Dayal Singh Trust building stood in the sun, smiling with it, radiant, clean, their plaster intact. It was the same with the Lakshmi building in Regal Square and the Dinga Singh building in the Beadon Road Square. The official buildings, of course, were imposing and majestic, but these privately built structures also had an impressive beauty and grace, a character all their own, which didn't fail to affect the onlooker. They all played a major role in making the Mall a part of the landscape in your dreams. In those days these building were still young, not decrepit and run down as they are today. The marble

statue of Queen Victoria sitting on a throne was ruling India from under a *barah dari* at the Charing Cross. Behind it was the grand Assembly Hall with the Shah Din Building in front of it on one side and the Freemasons' Hall on the other, all adding to the splendor of the Mall.

"I turned around to look at my mother. She was gazing God knows where, wrapped in her chador, lost in her thoughts, unaffected by all these wondrous sights which were stirring up so much commotion in me. I was completely enraptured by the magical charm of this city. I said to her, 'Why don't you leave me here? I'll walk about the streets during the day and go sleep with Father in the jail at night.' *Aapa* remained silent.

"We met Father in some officer's room. All I can remember is that a small, lean bespectacled man came and sat in a chair. *Aapa* was crying, while the man did most of the talking. I didn't feel at all eager to meet this stranger, nor did I know how to meet, if necessary, someone called 'Father.' So I occupied myself by scrutinizing the room and its furnishings. When the allotted time was up, the man who was 'Father,' patted me on the head and said, 'Put your heart into your studies, do you hear?' I nodded in acknowledgment. I was in a big hurry to get out of there and start our tonga ride through the streets all over again. As *Aapa* stepped out of the jail's vestibule, she suddenly began crying so bitterly that I was stunned at first. Then I started to cry myself. The boy who was waiting for us outside made us sit down in the shade of a *peepul* in the yard which faced the entrance. He brought her some water. After about half an hour *Aapa* was finally able to pull herself together enough to walk to the road and get inside the tonga. Today, fifty years later, I feel that India was bound to get her freedom one way or another, if not in 1947, then maybe in 1957. Father gave up his life and squandered his property for no reason at all. He yielded us up as well, especially *Aapa*, to a suffering whose deep scars still persist today."

For a long while Ehsan and I sat in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Meanwhile Tim came in. She turned on the light and then asked, "Why are you two sitting in the dark? Supper is ready."

Ehsan asked, "Have Siddiqi Sahib and Manzoor Sahib eaten?"

"They waited for you playing chess for quite a while. Half an hour ago they left. Chandni's gone too. And I'm leaving now."

"Listen, have you eaten?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Nonsense. Go bring the food here. We'll all eat together. And then we'll pray for you."

She chuckled and went away to bring the food. Ehsan asked me, "*Yaar*, would you have fifty rupees on you?" I took out a fifty-rupee bill and gave it to him. When Tim came in with the food, he gave the money to her saying, "Take it. Buy medicines for your mother. The money is not mine; it's Saeed Sahib's. So you aren't required to pay it back either."

She clutched the bill quietly in her fist. She wanted to thank me but felt too overwhelmed to open her mouth. An uneasy smile flashed across her face and then faded. After the meal, she grabbed her purse and left. Because we had been busy with eating, and the conversation had taken a different turn, the sadness that had descended upon our hearts lifted.

I said, "Ehsan, did the Congress not value your father's life enough to offer your family protection during the riots?"

"No, it wasn't like that. They did offer to protect us. But whether they did anything for their Muslim workers at the national level, I don't know. While we were still in our old house near the railway tracks we received a message saying that they would send us to some safe place if we wanted. Then later, after we moved to Sharifpura, Pandit Krishan Lal, the City President of the Congress, came himself in a tonga looking for us. It was on the same day that you arrived to take us along with Mahmood, but it was a couple of hours earlier. We just about fainted seeing him at our doorstep. Farman said, 'For heaven's sake, what's this? Coming to a Muslim area all alone?'

"Pandit Ji said, 'Don't worry about me. No one will harm me. I'm here in one piece, am I not? So what's the worry?' He seated Farman, *Aapa* and me in front of him and said, 'You know the situation here. It's dangerous for you to stay in this city any longer. Of that I'm sure. I suggest that you move to Delhi. Arrangements have already been made for an army escort to protect you during the move and for you to have a place to stay after you get there. If you wish to remain in Delhi, you're welcome. As a matter of fact, the whole of U.P. is perfectly peaceful. But if you want to go to Lucknow instead, that can be arranged. In two or three months, when conditions have returned to normal, you can come back. Riots can't go on forever. This madness has to end one day.'

"*Aapa* replied, 'How can we live apart from our loved ones. Just think, my daughter and son-in-law are in Lahore. They have to live there. How can I abandon them? All of our relatives are waiting to move to Pakistan. It is they who give our lives a measure of happiness and well-being. How can we possibly live alone in India without them? You took so much trouble. We shall never forget your kindness for as long as we live.'

"He said, 'This is no favor, sister. It's my duty. Brother Bashir Ahmad made the freedom of India possible by sacrificing his life. His children and you will make both India and us proud by deciding to live here. I beg you, don't leave. All this uproar will die down in a few days. Soon everything will be all right.' *Aapa* said, 'For better or for worse, we've made up our minds to leave with our family. If the conditions get better, we'll come back.'"

Then Ehsan looked at me and said, "*Yaar*, I think *Aapa* made a wise decision. In a population of hundreds of thousands, how many people does it take to make up a man's world? A few friends, some relatives, a handful of acquaintances and enemies—the rest is all a jungle even if it's a city of a million people. Nature has designed man to live in a small world. How far can he see? A few miles across a sea or a desert, even less if he's in a city. How far can he walk? Twenty or twenty-five miles. That's all."

"When *Aapa* declined the offer, did you say anything?"

"There was nothing to say; after all, she'd put the matter to rest so firmly. Though I did think it wouldn't have hurt to take a free ride to Lucknow and Delhi and see a bit of the world. But it would have been a pretty costly ride. We would never have made it here." ❐

—Translated by Faruq Hassan and Muhammad Umar Memon