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Interregnum

Then did I know how existence could be cherished,
Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy.
—Emily Brontë

Guzāshtīm-o-guzashtīm-o-būdanī hame būd
Shudīm-o-shud sukhan-e mā fasāna-e aṭfāl
We left it all behind, and off we went; what was fated,
came to pass.
We were done, and our doings became tales for the
children.
—Kisā'ī Marvazī

This insignia has been in our family for generations, indeed, its existence in our family dates back to the time the earliest traces of our family history itself are found. Consequently, the history of the insignia runs parallel to that of our family.

Our family history is uninterrupted and almost complete, because my forebears were fond of preserving their accounts and family tree. This is why its continuity, from its earliest beginnings down to the present, has remained unbroken, except that there have been interregnums in that history, such as …

I

My father was an illiterate man and worked odd jobs. He was in command of many skills. As a child, I was convinced that he knew every

craft there was, but his true skill was masonry, which was also his true profession. Still, if because of bad weather or some other reason he couldn't find masonry work, he would do wood carving or something else instead.

I grew up at his knee and after I opened my eyes his was the only face I saw for a long time. I have no real memory of my mother, although I do remember certain things from the time I was still at her breast. I used to cry a lot in those days. But my father, rather than amuse me, would just lay me flat in his lap and gaze silently at my face until, as I looked into his, I would quiet down on my own. Obviously, my father couldn't have looked after me all by himself; he had to work, after all. But from the memories of that time, which cannot be trusted anyway, my mind has preserved no other image than his face, and even of that image only this much: in a verandah, he is bent over me gazing at me silently, and along with his face I see a part of a high ceiling, a few tattered red and green paper decorations hanging from its beams.

As I grew in awareness, I realized that my father stayed away from the house for fairly long stretches of time. This happened with such clockwork regularity that I soon developed an intuitive sense of his departure and arrival times. At both these times, indeed slightly earlier, I would kick up quite a ruckus. As he would leave, I would pick up pieces of bricks from the rubble in the courtyard and hurl them at him, until some worn-out old crone from the neighborhood would come and pick me up. There were quite a few such women near our house, and a couple of them remained with me while my father was out. Often they would be accompanied by filthy-looking children. My anger would subside after my father had left and I would be absorbed in either listening to the stories these women told me or playing with the children. But as the time of his arrival approached, I'd start fussing all over again. The moment he stepped into the courtyard I would rush at him and start hitting him with my small, weak hands. Now he would kick up a ruckus even greater than mine. He would scream and flail in agony, as though I had crushed his bones to pieces. Finally, I would calm down and attend to him. He would baby-talk the instructions like a child, and I would accordingly massage his body, stroke it gently or blow on it, wiping away mock blood from his mock wounds, pouring imaginary medicinal mixtures into his mouth from equally imaginary vials, while he, to indicate how awful they tasted, made such horrible faces that I would break into laughter.

At that time, indeed until his last hour, I did not know that he was my real father. I used to think that he was an old servant of my family

who had loyally brought me up. And he was more to blame for this misunderstanding than I was. He treated me really as though I were his master's son. Accordingly, I treated him badly. But I also loved him, in my own wild way, which meant there were always a few minor wounds somewhere on his body.

When I was a little older, his departures began to bother me even more. Now, sometimes, I would hide his tool bag, or replace a few tools with pieces of wood or brick, until he began to store the bag on a shelf high up on the wall. When the shelf came within my reach, the bag disappeared one day. For the next several days, my father did not go out. Instead, he settled in the verandah under the red and green ceiling decorations and set to carving in wood. He worked with such concentration that I was afraid to intrude on him. But I was even more afraid that he might soon give up his carving, grab his masonry tools, and go out to work. So I tried to come up with a way to get hold of the bag and make it disappear permanently. I went searching for it throughout the house without telling him what I was after. Most of the doors opening into the inner halls remained closed and I did not know what lay behind them. Their corroded old-fashioned padlocks made one think that they hadn't been opened for ages, their keys most likely long since lost. The bag, I concluded, was not behind those doors. But the house also had many doors that were not locked. Behind them I discovered empty rooms and chambers. One could tell they had been repaired only recently after their furnishings had been moved out. Some still had water on the floors. That my father had also done masonry work in our home surprised me. Marveling at this, I wandered off to a large door near the western wall of the house. It was a double door. The figure of a fish was engraved on each panel. I had been unaware of its existence in the house. For a long time I contemplated about what might lie behind it, pressing it firmly with my hand as I thought. I was certain this door did not lead to an empty room. To confirm this, I opened it just slightly and peeked inside.

My eyes first encountered a series of long wooden shelves. Then I saw many oversized books neatly arranged on those shelves. My schooling had not yet begun, but I felt faintly drawn to the books, so I stepped inside to give them a closer look. I noticed that books were also piled up on the ground near the wall directly across from me. I moved forward to have a look, but I was distracted. Beyond the stack of books an old man, his eyes closed, was lying belly-up on a mat next to the wall. Amid the scent of old papers he appeared no more than an old dog-eared book himself.

I drew back a step. I could hear my father gently tapping with his

hammer some distance away as I stood gawking at the old man lying on the mat. From his hair and clothing he looked to me like a beggar. I had just bent over, my hands on my knees, to take a closer look at him when his eyes popped open; he stared at me quietly for a moment, and then his lips moved.

"Come, Prince," he said. "Shall we begin the lesson?"

A lunatic! I thought, and ran to my father. He remained engrossed in his work. A length of fine silver wire was coiled around the fingers of his left hand and he held a delicate little hammer in his right. On an octagonal wooden platter which lay before him, he had used all his ingenuity to engrave in various ways designs of curled leaves, and was now pressing the silver wire into their extremely fine veins. Sensing my presence, he lifted his head and smiled softly.

"So," he said gently. "Where did you wander off to?"

"Over there … Who's that old man?" I asked.

"I see, you have found your teacher," he said and turned back to his inlay work.

"Teacher?" I asked.

"But what exactly were you looking for?" He answered with a question of his own. And I remembered.

"The bag, " I said, "the tool bag. Where is it?"

"You won't find it."

I started to get angry.

"Where is it?" I asked again.

"You won't find it."

I got even angrier. Just then he asked, "What day is it today?"

I told him, still angry, and then demanded, "Where is the bag?"

"Your lessons begin the day after tomorrow," he said with perfect equanimity.

I had just opened my mouth to yell something nasty at him when he suddenly extended his hands and drew me close to him. He gazed into my face for a very long time. The blend of hope and sadness in his eyes made me completely forget my anger. His powerful fingers were digging into my wrist and shoulder and his body was trembling gently. This image of my father was very beautiful to me.

"Let go of me, you old coot!" I said, laughing, and feebly kicked at the wooden platter. This caused some of the silver inlay to come undone. My father quickly let go of me. The wire wrapped around his fingers had left a mesh-like imprint on my wrist. I held my wrist out to him. He gently rubbed on the mesh imprint, blowing on it for a long time, and

then said, "Starting the day after tomorrow." And yet again, "The day after tomorrow."

2

The thought of beginning my lessons did not please me. All the next day I remained put out with my father. By evening, though, curiosity about my teacher got the better of me. On the third day I followed my father eagerly into the room behind the door with the fish. The teacher was squatting on the mat. My father seated me in front of him and started to pick up the books piled up on the floor and arrange them on the high shelves, until only a single book remained.

"Be a good boy," he said, "and pick it up."

All this seemed amusing sport to me. The book was heavy but I managed to lift it, and at a sign from my father I set it before the teacher. The teacher placed his hand on it and smiled softly, and I wondered why just the day before yesterday he had looked like such a beggar to me.

"Open it, Prince," he said.

Except for a few pages in the beginning the book was entirely blank. That day, holding and guiding my hand, the teacher made me write something on the first blank page. It pleased me greatly to see something from my own hand in so large a book. I wanted the teacher to have me write some more, but my father spread out his arms and drew me to him. His body trembled gently. Holding me, he spoke with the teacher for a while in hushed tones. God knows what symbolic language the two used; I couldn't understand a single word. Nestled in my father's arms, I let my eyes sweep over the row of fat tomes on the high shelves. Finally, my father walked out with me.

From then on I spent the greater part of my time with the teacher and became all but oblivious to my father, so much so that I didn't even notice for a good many days that he had once again started to go out to work, taking his tool bag along. But the teacher was always there, surrounded by big, fat books behind the fish-panel door. Perhaps he lived there. I would often see him lying belly-up near a pile of books on the floor, his eyes closed, looking like a beggar. Hearing me approach, he would open his eyes and repeat the same words:

"Come, Prince, let's begin the lesson."

He never had me read, though he did teach me how to write fairly

quickly. Every day, after a rigorous writing exercise, he would have me sit in front of him and would commence talking. Some days he would tell interesting stories of distant times and far away places, but mostly he talked about my own city. He would tell of the fortunes of families living in different quarters of the city: how such-and-such a family in such-and-such a quarter made its mark, how it then was ruined; which of its members survived and what condition they were in now. Interesting stories they were, but the teacher narrated them without enthusiasm, so I remembered them only as an assortment of disjointed pieces. However, he described the quarters in such a way that each of them seemed like a live human being, distinct from the others not only in disposition and character but also in appearance. He would grow excited and go so far as to claim by a single glance at a person he could tell which quarter of the city he came from, and even the different quarters he had lived in. At the time I laughed at his claim, yet today I find something of this ability in myself as well.

Sometimes, talking away, the teacher would stretch out belly-up on the mat and close his eyes, and I would start browsing through the books piled on the floor. During these browsings I discovered that I could also read, but the massive handwritten manuscripts remained entirely inaccessible to me. Some of them were not in my language, and others were so convoluted in their verbal structures and script that only after the greatest reflection could I get even the vaguest grasp of their import, and even this never stayed with me longer than a fleeting moment. On such occasions, anger toward my teacher would surge up in me; I spoke to him very rudely many times. Once, as he lay quietly listening to me with his eyes shut, something flashed inside my head.

"Are you deaf, you bum?" I yelled and picked up a heavy tome and hurled it at his chest. The very next day I was enrolled in a small school near my house.

I studied at different schools in the city. At first, my father walked me to and from school every day. When I came out after school ended for the day, I would find him quietly leaning against one of the trees some distance from the gate. The moment he saw me, he would come forward, grab my books and sometimes even try to pick me up, but I would scratch and tear at him and rip myself away. On days when he was late in coming, I would leisurely make my way home and insist the next day on going alone. Eventually I was going to and from school alone all the time. In time, I also started to go out on my own in my free time or on holidays

and made my acquaintance during this period with good company and bad. I roamed all the different quarters the teacher had described to me: den of hypocrites, of cowards, of sycophants, and of troublemakers.

During one of these forays, I spotted my father in the market.

He was standing in the section where day-laborers and artisans gathered every morning looking for work. He had placed his tool bag between his legs and was talking softly to some people nearby when his eyes fell on me. He left his bag on the ground and hurried over to me.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I answered.

He looked at me with questioning eyes for a little while and then asked again, "Has something happened?"

"No, nothing," I answered again.

"You've come to see me?" he asked, then added, "In that case, you should see me at work." He laughed softly.

Just then a laborer called out his name. My father returned to his bag, where a middle-aged man stood waiting for him. He asked my father a question, then explained something at length, repeatedly waving his hands through the air in a motion describing the shape of an arch or dome. He was wearing on his fingers several rings studded with large precious stones, and twirled them rapidly with his thumb. His loud, rasping voice stood out in the mélange of voices, but I could not make out what he was saying. Some time later my father picked up his bag and started off, following the man. It occurred to me that at least I hadn't replaced one of his tools with a piece of wood or brick. But instead of satisfaction, the thought stirred a gentle sadness in me. And the sadness surprised me. I returned home straight away. And even though I busied myself the entire day arguing over trifling matters with the teacher, I missed my father the whole time. It nagged at me that I still hadn't seen him doing his masonry work. I considered this a failing on my part, but it didn't occur to me to make up for it.

One afternoon while wandering around I found myself in front of one of my old schools. For ages, it had been lodged inside some historic old building; it was still there. The building had been dilapidated for a long time; when I'd been a student there, one of its roofs had caved in. Thereupon, my father withdrew me from the school because I had been sitting under that very roof moments before it came crashing down. Returning after such a long time I noticed that the broken-down wall around the school compound had been repaired. But the old outer wooden gate, with its flowers of iron studs and the small door in the

lower portion of the left panel, had disappeared and been replaced with a steel grillwork gate, behind which the high archway that gave access to the main building was clearly visible. People were walking by on the other side of the archway, even though it was a holiday. Thinking I might run into an acquaintance, I went in through the gate and proceeded toward the archway. When I came close to the arch I spotted on its façade a pair of the same fish that were on the door of the teacher's room at home. I was astonished that as often as I had visited the school I had never noticed the fish until then. I gave them a close look. The arch's decaying façade was being restored. The fish, like the rest, were chipped here and there. The tail of the one on the right was missing, and the empty space had been roughly filled in with orange-colored putty which my father, leaning against a couple of diagonally mounted poles, was now carving into the shape of the fish's tail. He had wrapped a piece of cloth around his head, so I couldn't see who it was. I recognized him by his bag, which was resting against the right-hand base of the arch, a few tools peeking from its mouth. I observed him, lost in his work, for a while, then picked up a wad of the putty from the ground and tossed it at him. It struck the pole near his foot and fell back down. He looked down, laughed softly, and said, "So you've found me out."

His voice seemed to me to be coming from the gaping mouth of the broken fish. He turned back to his work and said nothing for a long while.

Finally I asked, "How long are you going to stay perched up there, you old coot?"

"You're right, it's time to go," he said. "But I still have a little work left to do. It won't take long."

In a little while he climbed down. He held an assortment of small tools in his hand, and washed some of them off in a nearby water tank. He removed the cloth from his head and used it to wipe them dry, then looked at me and smiled an exhausted smile. I took the tools from him and returned them to the bag, and the two of us started walking toward the gate. About midway he stopped, looked over his shoulder and examined his day's work for a while, then started off again toward the gate.

Four or five days later when I saw him leave the house with his bag, I asked, "Where will you be working today?"

"The same place," he said. "And I'll be back late again."

But shortly before noon that day, a fight broke out among some students; the scaffolding on the arch was jostled in the fray, and my father lost his balance and fell from where he was working on the fish to the

school's stone floor.

At the time, I was at home arguing some trifling matter with the teacher. My father was carried home by some laborers. In their peasant dialect, they gave a vague account of the accident and returned to work. His body bore no mark of injury, but his eyes showed that he was in pain. The teacher and I laid him down on the bed.

For several days my father there lay quietly and my teacher sat silently at his bedside, while some old neighbor women looked after both of them. During this time I ventured out several times but turned back after I had gone only a short distance.

One day on my way home I thought of the arch and the broken fish on its façade. I turned around and headed for the school. This too was a holiday. I went and stood before the arch. One of the fish had been restored. The network of scales carved on its back looked as though every single scale had been cast individually and then set into the fish's body. Each scale was slightly raised in the center, tapered off around the edges, and intertwined with the neighboring scales. There was a small round hole in place of the fish's eye. I felt as if the fish were staring at me with its mouth gaping open. I turned my eyes away. On the upper portion of the other fish, the putty had been completely removed, so that a semicircle of thin bricks underneath them could be seen. Even the crude, protruding bricks described the outline of a fish. The outline sharply contrasted with the finished fish on the right and made the façade look crooked and furrowed. The scaffolding was still in place. I grabbed one of its poles and gave it a slight push; the diagonally-mounted pole at the upper end collided with the arch, making a light tapping sound. The sound seemed to me to be coming from the fish's gaping mouth. Then the sound turned into a human voice, which in its peasant dialect was inquiring after my father's condition. My eyes fell on a man standing under the arch. He was one of the laborers who had carried my father home. I briefly answered his query and he praised at length my father's skills. He used a variety of masonry terms with which I was unfamiliar. He mentioned a number of famous historical buildings in the city in whose repair and restoration he had collaborated with my father. He even told me his name and insisted that I let my father know that a laborer by that name had inquired after him. He then asked me to wait while he entered into a nearby chamber, emerging with my father's tool bag. He heaved a deep sigh as he placed the bag in my hands. He looked considerably older than my father. He heaved another deep sigh and was about to say something when somebody called him from inside the school. I saw

him step into the arch and turn left. The tools clinked softly inside the bag, and even though I was looking down I once again felt that the fish on the right was peering at me through the hole in its eye, its mouth gaping open. I arranged the tools in the bag and went out onto the street through the school's grillwork gate. When I got home I put the bag on top of a pile of books in the teacher's room and went out.

In the verandah my father was still lying quietly as before, my teacher, still sitting at his bedside.

3

My father couldn't go back to work after his fall at the school; in fact, he couldn't even get out of bed. For several days he lay there so perfectly still and quiet that one suspected he had sustained a brain injury and lay comatose. But once when I tried to move his bed to the book room, he indicated with his eyes that he did not wish to leave the verandah where he had spent every season up until then. Gradually he resumed talking, but in a faint voice. One day he beckoned me to come near him. And the teacher, still perched at my father's bedside, got up and withdrew to the book room.

"My work is done," said my father, making a sign for me to sit down on the bed.

I remembered how he had turned his head to look at his day's work; I sat down on the bed and placed his head on my knees.

"There's still a fish left," I said, lowering my head to look at him.

He looked at me without speaking a word. I saw in his eyes the reflection of my face along with the decorations hanging from the beams of the ceiling, or perhaps I merely imagined it. Just then he turned his face to the other side and said, "Help me sit up."

After he was seated, propped up by several pillows, he became absorbed in thought. Never before had he seemed to me to be a thinking individual. But now, sitting propped up on a pile of pillows, dressed in clean and proper clothes, he was engaged in thinking about something. Then for the first time, I vaguely suspected that he might be my real father.

"When only this house and you were left," he began, gazing at the ceiling, "I realized I had to do something."

I was certain that he was about to narrate his life story, but he continued staring silently at the ceiling and thinking. Then he turned his face

aside and said, "Go. Go take a stroll."

"I don't feel like it," I said.

He took my shoulder and drew me gently toward him. His grasp was frail and his hand, tremulous.

"Only a few possessions were left," he said, almost in a whisper, "I made sure they didn't dwindle any further. It'll seem like a lot to you."

I remembered the closed doors with rusted padlocks. I said, "I don't need possessions."

"I've also added a little," he said, again in a whisper.

"I don't need anything."

"It's there somewhere, amidst it all," he said. "I didn't look for it; you do it." He paused.

"*It*"—he emphasized the word—"could be in the books too."

With that he grew visibly weaker. I ran to the teacher's room. He got up as soon as he saw me. I grabbed his hand and dragged him to my father's bed. My father turned his face to look at the teacher, and then at me. As he looked at me, he gained control over his halting breath and said, "Don't ever lose it; it is our insignia."

I looked at the teacher and asked him with a sign what my father might be referring to, but he sat deathly still as though he heard and saw nothing. My father's eyes, however, their brilliance faded, seemed to be looking at something.

"What is it?" I asked, bending over him.

"It has led to bloodshed," he said in a faint voice, and his hands tightened into fists. His breathing again grew irregular.

The teacher still sat sunk in voiceless immobility and I was at a total loss as to what to do. I was fully convinced now that I was his real son; at the same time I was confused about what to call him. So I just held his shoulders and quietly watched as different colors passed across his face. Shortly he began to look much better. And he said in a perfectly lucid and composed voice, "Go, take a stroll."

I could not say no this time. I let go of his shoulders and walked out of the house.

My father didn't last long. He spent his last days lying quietly in bed; he would groan softly now and then, but if asked what ailed him, he would not say. Once when I insisted, appearing irritated at his reticence, he said only this: "Who can say?"

Two, maybe three days later the teacher shook me awake from my afternoon nap, and no sooner had I opened my eyes than I knew that my

father had died. But when I rushed to his bedside I found him alive. The minute he saw me he extended his hand and seized my shoulder and began to speak quickly. His voice was terribly faint. I bent over him to hear him clearly, but still I could not understand what he was saying. When I leaned closer, I could only make out that he was whispering something in baby-talk. Just then he lapsed into a coma, and at some point breathed his last.

For a while after my father's death I remained perfectly calm. With great care I consulted with the teacher about the last rites and personally decided on every detail. But when the arrangements got underway, something went off inside my head and I became very upset. In my agitation I concluded that it was not my father but I myself who had died, and further concluded that it was I who was the father. Soon the two conclusions began to look like one and the same thing and I started doing all kinds of absurd things. I picked up broken pieces of brick from the rubble in the courtyard and started throwing them onto the verandah; I lapsed into a dialogue with myself which I conducted in baby-talk. I took the water which had been prepared for the ritual cleansing of my father's body and poured most of it on myself, then dumped garbage into the remainder. I unfolded the length of white cloth which had been sent for to wrap his body and draped it around myself; and when they started off with the bier I created such hindrances that several times the body nearly fell to the ground. I made such a fuss that people even forgot to offer the customary condolences. In the end, I was seized, brought home forcibly, and locked up inside the house where the comforting words of the weeping old women so enraged me that I forgot all about my father's death. But I didn't show my anger to the old women and, quite unexpectedly, fell asleep.

I slept into the next day. I had a few dreams, but they had nothing to do with my father or his death.

For three days I remained in a daze. Several times during the day the teacher came to check on me. He would gaze at me silently for some time and then leave. On the fourth day I recalled that my father had asked me to look for something and I started rummaging for it madly throughout the house. My search took me to the fish-engraved door. I entered the room and began grabbing the books from their neat rows on the shelves and throwing them down on the floor. I riffled through them without reading. A cloud of dust settled on the floor and bookworms, like silvery fish, slithered out of the books and began crawling every which way.

Meanwhile my eyes fell on the tool bag lying on the pile of books by the mat. I sat down near the bag and lingered there for a long time. When night came, I fell asleep where I was.

That night I saw my father in a dream. He was standing in front of the arch, his head turned back to look at it and his eyes peering up at the fish he had restored. The fish returned my father's gaze with a shining eye.

The next day I picked up the tool bag, strode out of the house and went to the same spot in the market where my father used to stand. It was late and the laborers were already gone. Still I stood at that spot for a long time and nobody paid any attention. Finally, the teacher came along looking for me. He grabbed my hand and led me back home. When he tried to reason with me on the way, I ripped his clothes.

My wrangling with the teacher continued unabated for several days. In the end, he stopped coming to my house, but saw to it that I was sent my meals regularly. Filthy young vagrant girls and bad-postured twittering old hags would knock at the main door, stuff a bundle of food in my hands, and silently withdraw. But one day I saw my teacher standing behind the girl who had brought my food, his hands resting on her shoulder. When he saw me, he stepped forward. He gazed at me silently for a few moments and then said, pointing at his chest, "Now it's finished for *me*."

That day, for the first time, I looked at him closely in the daylight. His face was a web of wrinkles and he looked more of a beggar today than ever before. We stood facing each other for a long time without a word, and the girl went on scratching her head with both her hands. Her long nails made a rasping sound as she raked her matted hair, which made me recall the man with the slew of rings on his fingers who had hired my father in the marketplace. I thought again of the time I had picked up my father's tool bag and gone to the marketplace, and how the teacher had brought me home.

"I haven't treated you well," I said in a low voice.

Either he didn't hear my words or chose to ignore them, instead looking at me fixedly as though he expected something from me. Even earlier he sometimes looked at me that way, which provoked an involuntary anger in me. This time, too, I felt irritated and lowered my eyes. I wanted to say something, but before I could, he turned around and placed his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Now for Tahira Bibi," he said to the girl and retreated, taking small, slow steps behind her.

When both had disappeared from view, I realized that I had failed to ask the teacher in.

I didn't know where he lived. The old women in the neighborhood could only speculate and suggest different addresses. But when I went to those addresses, I didn't find anyone who knew him. I wasted several days in this pursuit, but it did afford me the opportunity to go through more or less the whole city once again. In my wanderings I paid particular attention to the historical buildings of my city. I inspected closely the sections that had been restored and easily detected many examples of my father's handiwork. Fish carvings never failed to show up on some door or gate of these buildings. Even the doors of the city's old crumbling houses bore them. Each of the fish appeared to me to be the work of my father, and each broken fish reminded me of the one he had restored on the school archway.

During those strolls I became firmly convinced that the fish was the insignia of my city. I felt as if I had solved an obscure puzzle. At the same time, I sensed that the solution was more obscure than the puzzle. Thoughts of my father assailed me, until during one stroll, as I was approaching the ruins of a little-known historical building, I abruptly turned back. On arriving home I picked up the mat from the teacher's room and spread it out in the verandah in place of the bed where my father had last slept. Directly above the mat red and green decorations were hanging from the beams of the ceiling. I noticed that this verandah too had seen some repairs, as had the ceiling in many places, where applications of plaster were visible, except for the section with the decorations. No repairs here, and the old sagging plaster looked as though it would crumble down any day. I wished it would crumble at that very moment, and lay down on the mat and closed my eyes. Just then someone rapped at the main door.

The same girl who had accompanied the teacher on his last visit to the house was standing in front of the door. She was scratching her head with one hand and in the other she held a large piece of fruit of a sort in season then, which she kept attacking with her teeth.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

After groping a while for a suitable place to bite into the fruit, she said, "Tahira Bibi has sent word that your teacher is no more."

For a fleeting moment I imagined that the teacher was standing with his hand on her shoulder. I stared at the girl for so long that it made her blush.

"When?" I finally asked.

"Days and days ago. I've come here three times to let you know, but you weren't home."

"Who all are in his house?"

"In the teacher's house? Nobody."

"Who looked after him?"

"Tahira Bibi. She'd come over."

"Who is she to him?"

"I don't know."

"Where does she live?"

"Tahira Bibi? Don't know."

Thereupon she turned around to leave. After a moment I closed the main door, and just as I was turning away I heard another knock at the door. I opened it. The girl was standing there again. This time she held a ball of red cloth in her hand.

"I forgot this," she said, as soon as she saw me, and handed the ball to me. "Here, take them. They're keys."

"What sort of keys?"

"I don't know. Tahira Bibi sent them."

I closed the main door.

Standing on the mat in the verandah I unwrapped the ball. It was a scrap of some thick but exceedingly soft fabric with a bunch of old-fashioned keys tied in one corner. The smell of the fruit was wafting from the cloth, so I hurriedly untied the keys and dropped the cloth on the floor at the foot of the mat and began counting the keys. Rust had recently been scraped off of some of them. The largest key, with minuscule digits engraved all the way around the eyelet, bore a resemblance to the teacher's face, but why this should be so eluded me. I put the keys under the mat, lay down once again and closed my eyes. I remembered my father's death in the very same spot, made my body rigid and stretched out my legs. I felt the softness of the fabric against my heel. With my eyes closed, I arched my body and picked up the red rag, rolled it into a ball and was about to throw it away when I noticed the smell of fruit had entirely vanished from it. As I drew it closer to my nostrils I had a hint that a different smell was trapped in it. My eyes opened involuntarily. I unfolded the scrap fully and smoothed it out on my palms. It was a large handkerchief with a green silk fish embroidered in the center. The web of scales had been embroidered with tiny stitches that had come undone here and there. But at this point my attention was focused more on the faint smell which seemed to circulate through the handkerchief than on the sight of the fish. I rolled the handkerchief back into a ball and smelled

it, drawing a deep breath. The scent would rise slowly and then subside, like the breathing of someone asleep. I was interested in scents and was quite a connoisseur of perfumes, but I was unable to isolate a single element of this compound smell. I kept inhaling it with great concentration for a long time; it felt as though it had slowly left the handkerchief and descended into my chest. I could not recognize the smell, but I was quite sure that had it been the slightest bit more pungent I would have suffocated there and then.

When my eyes began to close with sleep, it occurred to me vaguely that I was lying right where my father had breathed his last, and that I had just now heard the news of my teacher's death. But before the thought could produce any effect, I drifted into sleep.

I saw my teacher, but in the dream he appeared in the form of a young girl, and I, as often happens in dreams, didn't feel a bit surprised.

❐

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon