IKRAMULLAH

The Old Mansion

THE three lived in a single room. There was a room above it and another below. Every time the tenant in the upper room dumped out some water, it was these three whom the occupant of the room beneath them shouted and cursed at. Only after they told him they were not the ones who had emptied the water would he go after the real culprit. Likewise, when the man below turned on the faucet, which cut off the supply to the man on top, it was the three in the middle whom the latter called to account. They would point at the door of the offender, and the man would fall on him like a maniac. The three were quite fed up with the location of their room. A couple of times they even brought up among themselves the idea of moving out, but stopped short, for they were not likely to find another room with such low rent and, more importantly, right in the heart of the city. Moreover, the man above and the one below weren't exactly living in a paradise either, so why should they try to find a room on the top or the ground floor? No place came without its peculiar problems. Why court new troubles? Why not quietly endure the ones they had? They'd gotten used to them after all, hadn't they? Let it be. No harm done.

The three had identical names. Then again they didn't. Only the first names were the same, the rest different. People called them Chota (the youngest), Manjhla (the middle one), and Bara (the oldest) for convenience. I guess that'll do for us too. No compelling reason to use the names their respective parents had given them in the hopes they would turn out to have the qualities the names implied. But wishes are like flowers. By the end of the day only the stem remains, the petals fall off or are plucked out and scatter away. The men looked no different from a naked stem—dried up, shriveled, scrawny. So people dropped the formality of calling them by their names.

Bara had been around for the last sixty, maybe seventy years. "Around" in a manner of speaking—he seemed to merely roll in whatever

direction he was pushed in this noisy and crowded world. When the massacres started in Bihar and his people fled, he fled with them. Some were killed on the way, others made it to the safety of East Pakistan in dire straits, and he with them. When death sentences were doled out to people for the sole crime of being Pakistanis, they fled East Pakistan, and he with them. He boarded a ship and, buffeted by the waves of the inner and outer sea alike, made it to Karachi. When Biharis became the target of frequent arrests and other punishments in Karachi, he moved to Lahore. The frequent divisions and partitions had taught him that the most effective strategy for survival in such situations lay in making a run for one's life. Groups would round up members of the opposite group and make short work of them, fully convinced that this was the easiest, most expeditious way of ridding society of impurities. After all, it was entirely possible that one of his own group might confuse him with the opponent and kill him. He had seen that happen, though for his part Bara was neither a staunch Muslim nor Pakistani nor even Bihari Muhajir. All he had ever wanted from the world was to be able to make ends meet, or if that was too much, then perhaps to have a meal a day. One could see just by looking at his face that he was still ashamed of the event of his birth sixty or seventy years ago. The shame simply wouldn't wash away, even though he had not been a participant in this crime, only its result. It was as though he were trying to hang his own dead body for murder. If anything, his embarrassment grew worse with time. It seemed he'd never die. In the end, he would simply liquefy from shame and flow like water into the sewer, careful not to bubble out of the gutter and get in anybody's way. He exuded his sense of shame before one and all—except for his two companions—as if he guilty of some misdeed. Had it occurred to him that his life was the constant source of his shame, he would have certainly ended it. His mother had died when he was still a child living in his village. People would commiserate, "How sad, your mother died,' and he would feel it was his fault that she died. He fled Bihar as a young man, made his escape from East Pakistan in his middle age, and took flight from Karachi as an oldster, and throughout these vicissitudes remained steadfastly shame-ridden; there was no need for his mother to die each time.

Manjhla found him sitting at Data Sahib's *darbar* (shrine) one day, immersed as usual in shame. It seemed he had no one to look after him. Afraid that without proper care or protection the old man might die at the shrine, Manjhla had brought him along to the room with smoke-blackened walls and chipping plaster where he and Chota had been ten-

ants for the past several years.

Bara told Manjhla his name and stuck Azimabadi at the end. Azimabad was a good 200 miles from his village and he had never been there in his life. Why did he always indulge in this totally unnecessary misrepresentation? Oddly, this never caused him any shame. After all, one needed a bit of pride to live, never mind how you got it, otherwise there would be no difference between a human being and dirt.

Manjhla was a frightened man. Frightened of what? He couldn't tell. But he was up to his ears in fear. Anything that entered his mind instantaneously transformed into fear. He was even afraid of himself. Anybody might do anything, at any time, like a loaded shotgun. And so could he.

He came from a small village in Gilgit in the foothills of a large mountain two days' journey from Skardu. A trip either way required a night's stay en route. He didn't like living in Lahore. But he liked having his old father stay alive, along with his two young orphaned nephews and himself. He had to accept his "like" and "dislike" together, because his native Gilgit had no jobs to offer. At the end of each trip to the village he would return more convinced than ever that next time he went back the mountain would have vanished, and so would the orchards, the river, even his village. If he couldn't go home one summer, fear instead of blood ran in his veins for the rest of that year. Two fears especially plagued his life, and due to them he would never step out of the house without wrapping a piece of cloth round his head and face. He feared that his eyes might accidentally fall on a woman he did not know, and in punishment, he might have to burn in Hell in the afterlife. That he was already in Hell in this life, without eyeing a stranger woman, meant nothing to him. His other fear was the feeling that his face and bearing somehow looked different from the general population of Lahore. God knew what this might prompt the locals to do to him. In reality, nothing untoward had ever happened to him. Fears, however, follow their own paths, and past experiences rarely manage to hold them back.

One reason why he took a liking to Bara was that his short, sparse beard (never mind that it had turned grey) and the features of his face resembled his own, except that his complexion was darker. It was entirely possible that at some point in the distant past people from Gilgit had ventured forth to Bihar and settled there, or maybe it was the other way around. The human breed is like the wind: it can strike out in any direction and end up anywhere at all. Whether this had actually happened or not, the fact is that both had started out from faraway regions and ended up together in Lahore looking for work. Manjhla was mortally afraid of

dying in Lahore and being buried there. Bara, on the other hand, couldn't care less. He no longer had a native place to feel passionate about. Sure he remembered now and then the streets and lanes in which he and his little friends had played together naked. What of it? One remembers a lot of things, does one die over each and every memory?

Chota too was blissfully free of such hangups. He was a native of Punjab, and enjoyed the rare distinction of being homeless in his own home. He wore a perpetual smile on his face, which bore a scar from a cut about a half-inch wide extending from the left corner of his lips across the jaw, past the ear, and all the way to the base of his neck. Since the facial muscles had been pulled taut to the left, it gave him a permanently smiling expression. When wracked by worry over some matter, he appeared rather to be smiling; when he cried, he seemed to be laughing, and when laughing, crying. He had obliterated the difference between the two acts in one fell swoop. Whether he laughed or cried, the sounds that came out of his mouth resembled those of a toothless hyena staring with hunger and longing at the half-eaten carcass of an animal and laughing—or crying (your guess). His grandfather had owned four acres of land and made do with the yield all his life. He had adopted two sons and a daughter and married them off. When he died, Chota's father and uncle worried that two acres apiece wouldn't be enough to feed their families. The uncle sold his share to Chota's father in installments and struck out for Karachi in search of work, taking his family along. He never returned or had any further contact with the village. When Chota's *phupha* died without leaving an heir, his wife inherited four acres of land from him. And when she too died, Chota's father went to claim it for himself and his younger brother as their sister's heirs. But the deceased sister's *devar* confronted him with, "When your father died, did you remember to give your sister, my sister-in-law her share of the land? Instead, you dragged her to the *tehsildar* and had her relinquish her claim in your favor. Some cheek you've got now to come and claim her share of the inheritance according to the *shari'at*."

Chota's father wouldn't budge and insisted on taking possession of the land then and there. In the ensuing scuffle, he was murdered on the spot, and the murderer went after Chota to finish him off too, as he was the last surviving heir. His mother was hacked to death with swords as she tried to shield him, her only child, from the attackers. He received several wounds, and the attackers left him for dead. His maternal grandfather brought him to his village. He was fifteen when this grandfather died, and his maternal uncle put him out of the house. He drifted off to Lahore

looking for work and started living with Manjhla in a room in this crumbling mansion which some Hindu had built in the beginning of the twentieth century. Chota owned six acres of land—on paper, that is. In reality, he could neither take possession of it nor raise any crops there. Indeed he couldn't even set foot in his native village without risking death at the hands of his enemies, one of whom had now become an M.P.A. to boot.

This mansion constructed from outsize bricks laid with red limes mortar had a *devrhi* tall enough to allow an elephant, *hauda* and all, to pass through it easily. Even back when it was built, the days when elephants had been in vogue were long gone, but humans usually take their time in perceiving change, adjusting to it, and freeing themselves of old habits of thought. The *devrhi* led to a spacious courtyard bordered by verandahs on three sides with rooms directly behind them. The same floor plan was repeated exactly on the second, but only partially on the top floor, which had galleries roofed with corrugated metal in place of verandahs. Drainage ditches ran along the edge of the courtyard and the walls of the *devrhi* and emptied into the main gutter outside, into which the garbage from the upper floors was channeled through steel drainpipes. Where the pipes had ruptured, the broken or missing portions had been repaired by nailing metal foil to the walls. Thanks to this novel solution, all day long filthy, stinking water dribbled down the walls where the pipes ran and emptied into the ditches. If a careless tenant upstairs dumped a large amount of water all at once, the half-clogged pipes overflowed into the courtyard. Stepping inside the *devrhi*, one felt one had walked into the middle of an open sewer. The red lime mixture continually filtered down from between the bricks of the ceiling and walls in a fine, powdery shower. During the British period the *devrhi* had had a massive main gate that was regularly closed every night. Now, however, it gaped open at the street night and day like a sleepless eye. Most likely, rioters had smashed the gate in 1947, or the immigrants had used it for fuel. Something had happened to the gate, but no one knew exactly what.

There were about as many families living in the mansion as it had rooms. Some were the children of former allottees—those allotted these rooms in settlement of property left behind in India—some were tenants of the heirs of allottees who had made their way out of the cycle of poverty and moved to better places. The women carried out their household chores or work—mostly handicrafts, which they made on commission for local merchants—perched on charpoys laid out across their rooms in the verandahs or courtyard. Their filthy-looking children frisked

about in the courtyard without a scrap to cover their bodies. A woman dared not intrude upon even an inch of space in the room of another, for this and numberless other trifles could land them in fights lasting the entire day and sometimes dragging the men into them as well. Perhaps it acted as a safety valve for the pressures caused in the mind by such ills as cramped space, overabundance of children, the crush of tenants, poverty, and disease. The number of hearths in the verandahs and courtyard matched the number of rooms. A few old women worked for salary and meals as domestics in the homes of the families in the neighborhood. The men sold all kinds of wares on pushcarts, pulled rikshaws, did odd jobs, ran shops, or worked for hire.

The despondency, dissatisfaction, and uncertainty about the future that had haunted the emigrants who were settled in the mansion in 1947 still dogged its current occupants, the only difference being that now even the native people had begun to feel their sting. Like the emigrants who missed their former homes, the ill-fated crumbling mansion looked homeless, and seemed to miss its former occupants just as much. Nobody took care of it, because collectively they were all supposed to.

A large, octagonal bay window jutted out of their room a couple of feet into the street like a miniature balcony. Seen from the street, it seemed to have four sides growing out of a large lotus flower made of stucco above and below the window, while the other four sides seemed to be on the inside. The window had panels of stained glass and was permanently sealed from inside with wooden boards nailed in the shape of a cross, because it might, like any of the other bay windows in the building, come crashing down any time. If it could have been opened, it would have opened on the street like a royal enclosure of exquisite latticework from which the king might give an audience. And if it had been the old times, one could even envision the three giving audience to their subjects: Bara shyly, Manjhla terrified, and Chota smiling. After all, Bara and Manjhla had something of the Mughals in their faces, now distorted into their present haggard looks.

A narrow walkway, no more than a couple of feet wide, its corroded metal roof supported by a wooden frame and thin, carved pillars, began at the side of the bay window and ran along the row of rooms. Its flooring was missing in many places and one could see the street below through the gaping holes. The metal roof had come undone in spots and slapped in the wind like a spring; the stronger the wind blew, the more it rattled. The wooden frame and the delicately carved supports had turned white like desiccated bones strewn across a stretch of desert. The boards of the

frame, too, had come loose and hung down or curved upward here and there. Above the *devrhi*'s arch a pair of lions, carved in red stucco and only dimly visible through years of smoke and dirt, stood catlike on their hind legs; like two friends being photographed together, they looked helplessly into the camera lens with the portions of their eyes still intact. Their tails had chipped away almost entirely, and their manes partially. The artisan who fashioned them had given them bodies like that of a she-goat, so that they appeared, strangely and simultaneously, a little ridiculous, a little pitiable, and a little mean. Nowadays one can see any number of such one-eyed, truncated lions roaming the streets of Lahore, some of them even called "Lions of Punjab."

The evening had deepened, and the encroaching darkness had hushed the bustle and noise of the day. The three sat in their room talking. Without the straw of their friendship, they would have drowned long ago in this sea of people called Lahore. Evening was the only time when they could each forget about their defining traits and feel the taste of life on their tongues, bittersweet. And they liked it.

The heavy, late-evening air pressed down the stench rising from the courtyard, packed with charpoys on which young and old, women, men, children, slept away as though drugged, as the empty pushcarts, large upturned wicker baskets, ropes lying coiled like snakes, and cold hearths waited in immobility for their owners to rise. And under some cots, cats and dogs were seen side by side in peace, rooting for bread crumbs or bones from which the last fiber of meat had been sucked off.

"Bare Miyan," Chota began, "you didn't marry?"

"I wanted to, *yaar*, but it just didn't happen," Bara cooed like one of the pigeons that roosted in the balcony for the night.

" 'Didn't happen'—how so?" Manjhla asked.

"Well, you see, when I'd just arrived in Dhaka, I found myself a place in the area in where a lot of Bihari emigrants had set up homes. There was this girl there. She too came from Bihar. I liked her a lot. Whenever we ran into each other in the lane, we would stare at each other. This went on for quite some time. One evening, when the lane was deserted, I saw her coming along and accosted her. 'Listen,' I said.

" 'Go on,' she said.

" 'I will die without you.'

"She drew back from modesty, gave a little smile, scratched the ground with her big toe, and said, 'Well then, talk to my Baba.'

"In that single instant the scent of her body permeated my whole being.'

"So did you go see her father?' Chota asked impatiently.

"Yes, sir, I did. He asked me what I did. I told him that I pulled rikshaws.

"' 'Do you own the rikshaw?' he asked.

" 'No. I rent it.'

" 'All together, how much money do you have?'

" 'Forty, maybe fifty rupees.'

"He said, "Come back when you have your own rikshaw and a thousand rupees in your pocket."

"Well, I left. Soon she got married and I gradually forgot about the matter. Not her scent though. That stayed with me."

Chota was smiling as he sighed. A sudden commotion outside in the verandah interrupted them just as they were about to break out in a hearty laugh. It sounded like some woman being murdered and screaming for help. They hurriedly pasted their dominant traits back on their faces. Chota opened the door, smiling as usual, and peeked out. "Nothing!" he said. "Some cats are having a fight." Then, sitting down, he said, "Is that all, Bare Miyan? Just once in seventy years? You didn't try again to get married?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. One more time. But never mind. It's getting late and tomorrow is a workday. Go to sleep!"

"No, Bare Miyan, finish your story."

"Well then, in Karachi I met up with a woman, an emigrant from Bihar like myself. Her husband had been murdered in East Pakistan. She had three children, the oldest about ten years old. I started to frequent her hut. She was extremely poor. Well, who wasn't? But she showed me great hospitality. I was sort of leaning toward it, and a couple of friends encouraged me besides, but this one had no scent. I refused."

Once again there was noise outside, but this time it sounded muffled, like the moan of a child, followed by the sobs and cries of a woman. The three perked up their ears again, but Chota tried to put their minds at ease. "No call for fear or shame," he said. "That's just the way cats wail at night. They'll move on. Sleep now."

The three fell asleep. In the morning they found out that in the room next door an eight-month-old infant died for lack of medical attention in the arms of his teenage mother, recently arrived from Swat. The mother kept crying while the father, who must have been in his mid-twenties, lay in a drugged sleep on the next cot after a shot of heroin. So it had not been cats after all.

The three men had no worries. But that didn't mean that they were a

happy lot, either. Happiness doesn't really exist in the world. Let's just say they did not or could not indulge in their misery. Their ability to feel anything at all had been snuffed out. Driven from pillar to post the whole day long like pack donkeys, they had come to look upon life as an arduous journey through very rough terrain. Their hardship was a necessary component of the journey. A crumbling, filth-ridden mansion, hunger, disease, drugs, children dying like flies, the life-squeezing suffocation of cramped space, fights over trifles, and worse yet, daily visits by the police, with the obscenities they shouted at the tenants and the way they humiliated every man, woman, and child—through it all, the three would just sit, with their differentiating traits plastered across their faces, and look on in total indifference. So did the others, as though it were all happening to someone else, in some other city, while they were merely reading an account of it in the newspaper.

Fifty years had gone by; the country had passed through several governments, but the mansion and its residents remained without a home, without a country. It seemed that the rulers, all of them, were identical siblings in every respect, and these residents of the mansion were their step-brothers. But why the jealous mistreatment? The mansion dwellers weren't exactly Joseph in beauty. Here even a twenty-year-old woman looked like an old hag and a prepubescent boy of ten, a mature young adult. The step-brothers had robbed them of their innocence, beauty, youth—everything!

The night felt close and stuffy. The light from the streetlamps filtered in through the remaining window panes and reached their eyes in shades of red, blue, and green, which irritated them. They cursed the man who had thought of putting in stained glass, to make it all look fetching no doubt. Bara said edgily, "I feel like smashing the panes that are left. That would let in some breeze at least."

"If you feel so hot, we can go and stand on the verandah," Chota offered.

But the usual glut of charpoys greeted their eyes down below in the courtyard. A child would ask for water, the mother would get up cursing, walk over to the pitcher, drink a glass herself first, then give some to the child and fan him to cool him off. Slowly she'd succumb to sleep and her hand would stop moving. The child would start crying again, and she would hurriedly resume fanning. Meanwhile the Swati youth returned from somewhere, removed the padlock from the door and went in. Chota remarked, "When he left here in the evening he had his wife with him. How come he's returning alone?"

"Maybe she wanted to go back home and he went to put her on the bus or something," Manjhla ventured in explanation.

Chota began, "This Moti Begum (Madame Pearl), …"

"Moti Begum, who?"

"Oh, the fat one. You know her. The one who sometimes comes here in the afternoon all powdered and rouged to visit with the women in the courtyard when they do their embroidery and needlework? I know she's lured two or three women into going out with her for six, seven hours at a time."

"So?"

"Don't you understand? She takes them out to turn tricks. All the other women know that too. But they keep quiet. They're afraid that if they spill the beans, all hell will break loose. Or maybe as a precaution: what if they themselves needed her help at some point?" Chota laughed in his peculiar way.

"Their men don't know about it?" Manjhla asked.

"God knows. But if they see a hint of prosperity suddenly appear in their homes and want to keep quiet, well that's their business."

"Chota, you're in on all the gossip!" Manjhla said.

"Of course. You know why? Because I socialize with everyone. All you ever do is tremble from fear, and you, Bare Miyan, can never have enough of feeling ashamed."

"And what do you do—smile?"

Chota laughed, his hyena laugh, then he said, "You can buy anything in the mansion—liquor, heroin, hemp, women, labor, you name it."

"You're too suspicious, Chota," Manjhla said. "You *will* go to Hell. That's enough. Go to sleep."

"Don't get angry," Bara said. "Maybe Chota is telling the truth. I've seen this happen before. First in Dhaka, then in Karachi, maybe here too. Misery and helplessness always drive people to sell themselves."

A few days later, when the three returned from work in the evening they found the residents standing in small groups and talking on the street outside the mansion, inside in the courtyard, and in the verandahs. Manjhla, quaking with fear, said, "It looks like something terrible's happened."

Chota, smiling, joined one of the groups and promptly returned to fill in his companions: "Rumor has it that the City has declared the mansion dangerous and ordered its demolition."

"These rumors always turn out to be true in the end," Bara remarked, in deep shame.

Chota continued, "Someone was saying it will be torn down tomorrow, but another man said nothing of the sort was about to happen, that it was all a lie. Somebody else said that Sardar Rustam Khan's *qabza* men had met some of the allottees and offered to buy their rooms at a thousand rupees apiece, plus permission to live rent-free for six months. They refused, saying the offer wasn't good enough. The men taunted, "Okay, wait until tomorrow. When the City pulls it down, you won't get even a penny, and you and your families will have to sleep on the pavement, into the bargain. Only Sardar Sahib can stop the demolition. He's already bought up the shares of other allottees." Only God knows whether this was some kind of ploy or was true. Anyway, they left asking them to think it over, and promised to return at midnight to get their answer."

Just then the Swati girl, lovely as a doll, came daintily down the stairs, alone, clip-clopping her fancy sandals. Draped from head to toe in her chuddar and looking straight with her clever black-bee eyes she sped past them to the *devrhi* and then out to the street, where she waved down a rikshaw. She had a brief exchange with the rikshaw puller. Both smiled, and she hopped in and left.

The three looked at each other. Was this the same mother who had sat the whole night long holding her dying child, too frightened even to cry in a loud voice? Or walk out to the verandah and shout for help in her native Pushtu, because she was a stranger here? Or muster the courage to kick her drugged husband awake? Bara said, "If only hands meant to fan babies weren't lifted to hail rikshaws for such purposes!" And the three went back to their room.

A commotion continued inside the mansion throughout the night. People kept coming and going, talking among themselves. Schemes were hatched. The three couldn't sleep well. When they set out for work in the morning they saw armed police and City forces standing outside the mansion, ready to move in with their pickaxes, bulldozers, trucks and bobcats. An officer from the City was in charge of the operation. Some of the residents of the mansion were talking with him, thrashing their arms about and beating on their chests.

"Why weren't we given advance notice?"

"We posted notice three times on the mansion."

"It's plastered with notices. How did you expect us to see it there?"

"Well that's not our fault, is it?"

"If Sardar Rustam Khan had bought out the mansion, you'd go back quietly. But you won't listen to us."

"That's not true. Anyway, you have three hours to clear out. After

that, I'm not responsible for any damage."

The three immediately returned to their room and started packing. Just then the man who lived in the room above them came stomping down the stairs straight into their room and asked, "No water and electricity again today?"

"That's right," Chota answered, smiling.

"That fellow below you is a real bastard. He isn't going to give up until we give it to him."

"He didn't cut them off. Not today. It's the City. They're tearing down the mansion."

"Why?"

"It's dangerous."

"So what? If it fell, it would have crushed us. Maybe a few cats and dogs as well. The pigeons roosting on the balcony wouldn't have gotten hurt; they'd have flown away. If the mansion collapsed, it wouldn't have done those stinking City bastards any harm, just like the pigeons."

The three went on packing their belongings.

"This mansion is rock solid. It'll last another hundred years. You hear me? All it needs is a little bit of repair. Where will we go? The City doesn't understand."

The man stomped down the stairs. The three picked up their belongings and strode out of the mansion—Bara shyly, Manjhla fearfully, Chota smiling. Once again they stood on the street wondering where to go next. ❐

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

Glossary

devar (*dēvar*): husband's younger brother.

devrhi (*ḍēvṛʰī*): threshold, ante-chamber, entrance hall.

hauda: an open seat placed on an elephant's back.

M.P.A.: Member Provincial Assembly (of Pakistan).

Muhajir (*muhājir*): an immigrant, refugee; here, a Muslim who migrated to Pakistan at India's partition in 1947.

phupha (*pʰupʰā*): husband of father's sister.

qabza (*qabẓa*): lit., possession, control; "*qabza* men" stands for bullies working at the behest of a mafia leader to evict poor people from their property by use of terror tactics and coercion.

shari'at (*sharī'at*): Islamic religious law.

Tehsildar (*teḥṣīldār*): a sub-collector of revenue.

yaar (*yār*): buddy, pal.