JAVED SHAHIN

If Truth Be Told

The bus slowed down, then stopped with a jolt. The conductor, who had been dozing, popped his eyes open, looked groggily at the passengers, who had been dozing as well, and said in a sleepy voice, "Passengers for Chawk Garh Maharaja, this is your stop."

He repeated his call a few times. Some peasant men and women picked up their bundles and got off the bus. The conductor looked through the bus again, walked over to Ahmad, shook him by the shoulder, and said, "Bao-ji, this is Chawk Garh Maharaja!"

Ahmad started. He couldn't remember when he had dozed off. He knew he had still been awake when the bus reached Trimu Irrigation Headworks, and later when it pulled into Atthara Hazari. After that he had no recollection. He had succumbed to sleep. He hurriedly picked up his overnight bag and got off the bus.

Outside he looked at his watch. It was six-thirty in the morning. It was a beautiful morning in March. The chill still hung in the air and stung whenever the wind blew. He regretted not bringing along a sweater. He sat down on the dirt ridge running along the edge of a field by the roadside. The dull, sluggish feeling that follows interrupted sleep clung to him. The sun had meanwhile risen and was slowly spreading its goldenness over the neighboring wheat fields, where the spikes had already sprouted but were still green, and the grain inside hadn't fully matured. Tahili trees ran along both sides of the road, forming a long arch. There was a tonga stand nearby, as well as a few shops, which were closed at this hour. Only the shop that fixed bicycle flats was open. Another establishment, which looked like a restaurant and lodging, was just opening. Outside it, a man was trying to get the stove going.

By now Ahmad had shaken off both his sleep and his sluggishness and was waiting for the restaurant to open so that he could get some breakfast. Meanwhile a couple of buses had pulled up, dropped off some

passengers, and gone off again. When he noticed the proprietor put the kettle on, he got up and walked over to him. The man invited him to sit inside.

The restaurant was fairly spacious. There were three or four wooden tables and various chairs were scattered here and there. The place hadn't been cleaned yet. It looked as though it had been left in the mess it was in at closing time the night before.

Spotting a washbasin against a wall, he took out a toothbrush and paste from his bag and started to brush his teeth.

"Bao-ji, shall I fix you some breakfast?" the man by the stove asked.

He ordered toast, fried eggs, and tea and went back to brushing. By now he could feel pressure building in his bowels. He asked the proprietor for the restroom, and the latter pointed toward the staircase. When Ahmad came back downstairs, a car stopped in front of the restaurant. Three men got out and walked inside. One of them went over and ordered breakfast, then joined his companions who had taken seats around a table. Just then a boy in his mid-teens dashed in and hurriedly started wiping the chairs and tables.

"Where were you?" the man at the stove yelled.

"I overslept, Ustad-ji," the boy replied softly.

"Must have been hanging out at Gama's shop again last night, watching some film," the man yelled again. "Bastard! You can't shake off your bad habits, can you?"

"No, Ustad-ji, no," the boy pleaded, still wiping. "It wasn't like that at all."

"Hurry up! Don't you see Babu-*loog* are waiting."

The boy began wiping even more energetically.

"How far is Hazrat Sultan Bahu's *darbar* (shrine) from here?" Ahmad asked the proprietor as he waited to be served.

"Six, maybe seven miles. Why, are you going there?"

"Yes," he answered tersely.

The proprietor told him that the tongas would start operating shortly.

One of the three newcomers, who couldn't help overhearing this exchange, addressed Ahmad, saying, "We're going there too. You can come along with us if you like."

He felt terribly relieved: that was one problem out of the way quickly! He scrutinized the men. They wore *shalvar-qamis,* and from the way they talked appeared to be small-time businessmen. After finishing his breakfast he went over to their table. They came from Faisalabad, he found out

in the course of the conversation, and were on their way to Leiah. Since they were in the area, they had decided to stop off and pay a visit to the tomb-sanctuary of Sultan Bahu. Later, driving with them to the shrine, Ahmad gathered that they were contractors for the collection of tolls levied by the Municipal Committee on the movement of goods from one city to another. They were going to Leiah in connection with their work. When they asked Ahmad about himself, he said only that he was a state employee in Lahore who had come, as they had, to pay a visit to the shrine of Sultan Bahu.

This was to satisfy the men's curiosity. The truth, however, was quite different. For his part, he had never felt any interest in visiting and making petitionary prayers at saints' tombs. Even in Lahore, he had never bothered to visit Data Darbar or, for that matter, any other saint's shrine. Not because he belonged to a religious sect that considered such practices heretical, but because he was secular in his thinking and didn't believe in such things.

The real reason he was going to a shrine now was that his mother had left his house twenty days before and had yet to be found, in spite of an extensive search. Every three or four months, the old lady would come from her village to spend a few days at his place. Touchy and irritable in the extreme, she would invariably get into a tiff with his wife or him over something or other, take offense, and leave, going back to her village or to her daughter's home in Okara—never to set foot in his house again she would always say. This had happened countless times. Nonetheless the old lady would eventually return of her own accord, the whole incident forgotten, or he would go and pay her a visit, and she would remember nothing of what had happened before.

On this occasion too, it was a trifle. When he returned from work his wife told him that Mother had gotten into an argument with her and left in a huff, declaring as usual that she was not coming back, and even going so far as to say, "Next time my son sees me, he'll be looking at my dead body." He knew Mother was to blame for most of these tiffs, so he didn't ask for details and retired to his room quietly. He telephoned Okara in the evening, but his sister told him that Mother hadn't shown up there. The next day he sent the servant to her village to inquire about her. She wasn't there either. His father came back with the servant. His anxiety mounted. She could not possibly have gone anywhere but one of these two places. But then he remembered how much his mother loved to visit saints' shrines, and this thought put his mind somewhat at ease. After all, hadn't she spent several nights and days at a time at the shrines of Shabaz

Qalandar, Baba Farid Ganj-e Shakar, Baba Bullhe Shah, Data Ganj-Bakhsh, Bibi Pak-Daman, Hazrat Mian Mir, and Sultan Bahu? She had become great friends with several women attached to those shrines. Whenever she visited a shrine, she would speak of the experience as if in a trance. She was especially close to a woman at Hazrat Sultan Bahu's shrine. Whenever she visited it she would end up staying a week. Together she and this woman would dole out free food to visitors at the shrine. They had even declared themselves foster sisters.

When no news of her was forthcoming and a whole week had gone by, he took leave from work and set out in search of her. He looked for her in all the shrines in Lahore. She wasn't there. He did find out, though, that the *malangs* (dervishes) who were permanent fixtures at these sanctuaries did know his mother. Next he went to the shrines of Baba Bullhe Shah, Farid Ganj-e Shakar, and thence to Shabaz Qalandar's. When he described his mother to people there, they all seemed to know her. Every year or two she visited the place. But she hadn't come so far this year, he was told. Only Sultan Bahu's shrine was left. He was positive he would find his mother there, or at least some trace of her. He boarded the one o'clock bus bound for Darya Khan and got off in the morning at Chawk Garh Maharaja.

The dome of the shrine appeared in the distance. They arrived shortly and the car came to a stop. They got out and strode to the shrine's front entrance, where they took off their shoes, held them in their hands, and stepped inside the courtyard. They deposited the shoes in a safe corner and proceeded toward the tomb chamber. More than half the courtyard was filled with people. Quranic recitation was in progress on loudspeakers. His companions told him that this went on nonstop day and night. They first circled around the tomb and then stood in one spot and joined their hands in prayer. Afterwards, each put a sum of money in the donation box at the head of the tomb. When they told him that they were ready to return, he excused himself saying that he wanted to stay awhile longer. The three shook hands with him and left.

In the time it took him to circumambulate the tomb in the big hall and offer his supplication, his lungs had become suffused with the pungent odor of aloes sticks, incense, and a myriad of other sweet smells. A heavy, cloying feeling overwhelmed him. He started to feel better once he stepped into the fresh air of the courtyard. He walked for a while along the side that was relatively shaded and then sat down. The sun was shining brightly and had flooded the entire courtyard. It was Friday. Visitors, most of them peasant men and women, had been streaming in in great

numbers since the morning. Their worn and dirty clothes bespoke their poverty, and their sunken cheeks and the sadness in their faces revealed the melancholy tenor of their existence. They had come to Sultan Bahu seeking some release from their oppressive lives, some comfort for their troubled hearts. The same crush of dispossessed humanity could be seen at any and every shrine. Ahmad had observed people crying inconsolably and making abject entreaties as if a shrine were the only place left for them to turn. Then they would remove their few coins tied up in the ends of their torn *dupattas* or dingy turbans and put them reverentially in the collection boxes. Those who themselves had difficulty making ends meet were feeding, instead, the useless bunch of idlers who hung out at these shrines. What a cruel business! Who would make their wishes come true? Hear their prayers? They were illuminating Sultan Bahu's *darbar*—but who would light their own homes? A wave of anguish shot through him.

Meanwhile the sunlight had inched its way to his resting place. He got up. He had to look for Mai Allah Rakkhi, the friend his mother stayed with during her visits here. He moved about in the courtyard. The recitation of the Holy Book was still going on. Suddenly his eyes fell on a *malang* in a green robe. He looked like one of the shrine's residents. Ahmad strode over to him and with a throbbing heart asked him about Mai Allah Rakkhi.

"Yes, surely. She's here," the *malang* said. "Come with me, I'll take you to her." He gestured for Ahmad to follow. They walked to the far corner of the courtyard. There in the unpaved part of the yard the *malang* stopped in front of a cell. The door was closed and latched from the outside.

"This is her place," the *malang* said. "You stay here. I'll go and look for her." He went back to the yard and disappeared in the milling crowd.

Ahmad hadn't slept the whole night. He was feeling very tired and sleepy. It was difficult for him even to remain upright. He sat down on a platform nearby, taking his overnight bag off his shoulder and laying it down near his feet. His eyes had begun to close with the onslaught of sleep. Just then the *malang* reappeared, with a woman in tow.

"This is Mai Allah Rakkhi," he said, approaching Ahmad.

The woman gave Ahmad a penetrating look. She was spare and tall. About seventy. She had a tawny complexion, bulging eyes, and a sharp nose. She unfastened the latch and gestured for him to enter. The *malang* did not come in, and went away crying, "*Ya Bahu! Ya Bahu!*"

A mat with a cotton quilt on it was spread out on one side in the cell.

Mai Allah Rakkhi invited him to sit down on the quilt.

"Son, what brings you to me?" she asked him after he sat down.

"Mai-ji, I'm Sardar Begum's son. You know her, don't you?"

"Why, of course, my son. She's my adopted sister."

"Mai-ji, she left the house some twenty days ago. I came to see whether she isn't with you."

"Son, she comes here all the time and stays for several days each time. If you ask me, she's a fakir at heart. Family and all that, that's just to go along. Her heart is not in it. But for some reason she hasn't shown up yet this year. I think about her every day."

Ahmad's heart sank. His last thread of hope had snapped. What more did he need to know?

Mai Allah Rakkhi, however, continued on her own: "She does everything with such love and devotion when she's here. Together we sweep the courtyard and distribute food to the visitors. She likes it here so much that she won't leave—I have to send her away. I reason with her, 'Look, Sardari, you've got children, you've got grandchildren. They need you. Go to them. If you leave them and stay here, God won't be pleased with you. You've earned true *fakiri*, even as you live and work in this world. Just pray for your family's well-being when you come here to visit. You mustn't renounce the world. It will hurt your children.'"

The woman's voice seemed to be coming from far away. She stopped and stared at his face. He told her the places he'd gone searching for his mother before he had come here. This brought an expression of concern to the old lady's face.

"How terribly sad!" she said, breaking her silence. "She used to visit all the other *darbars* as well and tell me about them. Sometimes she would ask me to come along to visit them. But how can I leave here? I've a particularly demanding job. I've got to take care of practically all the chores; Hazrat Sultan Bahu is especially kind to me." After a brief pause, she continued, "But Sardaran Bibi, where has she gone? Why is she causing so much trouble for her children? For the sake of Hazrat Sultan Bahu, may she be well wherever she is."

Silence prevailed for a few minutes inside the dim cell. Then she asked, "Shall I get you something to eat, my son? The *langar* must be ready now."

"No, Mai-ji. I had breakfast at Chawk Garh Maharaja. But I've been traveling the whole night and would like to rest a bit. Would it be all right for me to take a nap here?"

"Of course, son. By all means. Let me fix the bed for you properly.

Sleep all you like, I won't bother you. I'm off to the *langar*. And I'll close the door behind me." She got up.

He stretched out on the quilt. His mother's face hovered in his mind for a while and then he dozed off. When he got up it was around three in the afternoon. He had been asleep for a long time and must go now, he thought. When he opened the door, he found Mai Allah Rakkhi sitting on the low wall at the edge of the courtyard. The minute she saw him, she said, "You were asleep, my son. I didn't wish to disturb you, so I decided to sit outside. I've brought you food. Go back in. I'll bring it right away."

She went to one side and returned with a few *rotis* and some *daal* in a container. By now Ahmad was beginning to feel quite hungry. But the shock of not finding his mother dampened his appetite. He felt terribly depressed. When the Mai saw his condition, she tried to comfort him, "Don't be sad, my son. Your mother will certainly come back. Of that I'm sure. Why would she want to hurt you? If she comes here, I'll personally bring her to you. Don't worry. I won't let her go anywhere else. Now, here, eat your food."

She took out a bowl and filled it with the *daal* and laid out the *rotis* on a handkerchief. Ahmad sat down on the quilt and started to eat. Meanwhile Mai Allah Rakkhi continued: "God knows where she's wandered off to! May He keep her well! May Sultan Bahu keep her in his protection! My heart tells me that she will definitely come back. Don't you worry, son...."

He ate a little bit, and then after reminding the old lady once again about his mother he crossed the courtyard and went out the front entrance. A few tongas stood a short distance away. He got in the one bound for Chawk Garh Maharaja.

As soon as the tonga started he lit a cigarette, his second since morning. But a few puffs later his thoughts had drifted off again to his mother. He felt totally crestfallen that he had not found her at the shrine. He had fastened his last hope on this place. Now even that was gone. How would he face his father? The poor old man, how miserable he'd feel. His father had tried to insist on coming with him; only after much pleading had he been able to talk him out of it. The old couple lived in the village. Each was the other's greatest support. Even though his mother was haughty and the two had difficulty getting along, nonetheless they took care of each other. How would his father manage now? How would he live all by himself in the village? Who would watch over him? At such an advanced age the departure of one partner usually... The very thought made him shudder. It had always bothered him that his father had become so used

to living in the village that it was well nigh impossible to get him out of it. Whenever he'd had to spend a few days in Lahore, he couldn't wait to go back. Travel was such an ordeal for him. After his retirement he'd had a tube-well dug on the cultivable stretch of the land he owned. He'd planted a large orchard of mangoes, *maltas*, guavas, and *jamans* next to the well, and lived a contented and happy life there. What would happen now? How would he live there all alone? Where had Mother disappeared to? This was really horribly unfair to everyone. His elder brother and sister had looked at him with such scorn in their eyes, as though he were to blame for her disappearance. Everybody was constantly badgering his wife about it: What happened? What caused the tiff? After all, would Mother take such a serious step without a good reason? People just don't walk away from their comfortable homes for no reason at all, do they? His wife was beginning to feel like a criminal. She swore by God to everyone who would listen that the squabble was far from being serious enough to provoke such a drastic reaction: as usual, the minute she'd arrived from the village the old lady had started chiding her for being thriftless and had kept up a litany of "You won't let my son's household prosper!" Ahmad's wife had asked repeatedly, "What woman doesn't want her own house to prosper?" Moreover, whatever she bought, she bought with her husband's endorsement. But the old lady refused to see it that way. Finally, fed up, his wife had invited Mother to move in with them for good and take charge of the expenses. This wasn't such a big thing, was it?

The tonga was moving along at a steady speed. They had gone half the distance already. The delicious aroma rising from the wheat fields on either side of the road hung over everything. The sun was shining less fiercely now. The sky looked clear for as far as the eye could see. And the breeze was becoming pleasantly cool. Perched on his front seat, the coachman was humming away, absorbed in his thoughts. Now and then he whipped the horse out of sheer habit. Suddenly he threw a question at him: "Bao-ji, what do you think, will Bhutto Sahib's life be spared, or will they hang him?"

He thought for a few seconds in silence. He had no interest in politics, nor had he given the matter any thought. His silence prompted the coachman to renew his question, "Tell me, Bao-ji. A terrible injustice, wouldn't you say?"

"It's hard to be sure. These are government affairs," Ahmad said dismissively, to get him out of his hair. The coachman got the message. He returned to his humming.

The clip-clop of the horse's hooves rose distinctly from the road.

Farmers' mud houses, studded with cowdung cakes that had been slapped on the walls to dry, were seen on either side. Farther on, the tonga came to a stretch of road that was pitted in places, causing the horse to slow its pace.

He would reach Chawk Garh Maharaja by five-thirty, he thought. And if he were lucky and caught the bus soon enough, he might reach Lahore by midnight. Part of him was also wondering whether he should perhaps go to Okara instead, via Jhang and Sahiwal, to inform his sister about developments thus far and plan his next move. But he quickly abandoned that idea. For one thing, it would prolong his journey needlessly, and for another, his father must be waiting impatiently for him in Lahore. But what did he have to tell him, really? The thought made him sad. His last hope had now abandoned him. Where else should he look for his mother? He was feeling very confused. Where might she be at the moment? And in what state? An incessant buzz filled his head. All of a sudden the proverbial bond of motherly love and affection had begun to look very tenuous indeed, and meaningless as well. Where had Mother disappeared to, throwing the entire family into this endless torment? This sort of thing could be a bane one's whole life!

Twilight was spreading by the time he reached Chawk Garh Maharaja and got out of the tonga. He stood by the edge of the road to wait for a bus to Lahore. But suddenly, he changed his mind. He didn't feel like setting out again so soon. He still hadn't recovered from the exhaustion of the first trip. He walked toward the restaurant where he had eaten his breakfast in the morning. Abbas, the proprietor, recognized him right away and said, "Bao-ji, so you've paid your visit to the *darbar*?"

"Yes," he replied and then asked him if there was a room to spend the night.

"We've got three rooms upstairs. Visitors to the *darbar* who arrive late in the day stay with us."

He led Ahmad upstairs and showed him the rooms. Two were large and had three or four cots each. The third was small with only two cots, but had an attached bath. Ahmad liked this one better. "What's the price?" he asked.

"Twenty rupees," Abbas said.

"All right then. Make it ready."

"Please take a seat downstairs. I'll take care of everything."

Leaving his bag in the room, Ahmad went down the stairs and left the restaurant. Darkness was deepening, and the evening chill with it. Birds had returned to their nests and were twittering noisily. He walked

some distance and then stopped to watch the people getting on and off the buses. Lights had come on in the few shops nearby. The town of Garh Maharaja was up ahead. He thought of going there for a while, but then decided against it.

He felt chilly. Again he regretted not bringing a sweater along and returned to the restaurant. Meanwhile Abbas had readied the room. He had laid out fresh bedsheets and a quilt which looked clean enough. Ahmad examined the bathroom. It too looked clean.

"Bao-ji, we know just what our customers want!" Abbas remarked, noticing that he seemed satisfied with the room. "If you need anything, just ring," he said, pointing at the bell.

Just then Ahmad heard children's voices coming from the room next door. He asked about this, and Abbas told him it was a family from Rawalpindi—husband, wife, and two children. They'd come to the shrine to give thanks. It seemed that one of their wishes had been fulfilled. They would go to the shrine to greet the saint in the morning.

He had eaten very little of the food Mai Allah Rakkhi had brought him that afternoon, partly because his mother's absence at the shrine had suppressed his hunger and partly because the food was rather bland. But now he had a good appetite. He closed the room and went downstairs. Abbas recited the menu and he selected a vegetable dish and some *rotis*. After the meal he lit a cigarette and stayed at the table until he had finished smoking. Eating in an ordinary small-town restaurant and spending the night away from the commotion of noisy Lahore and the gatherings of friends seemed to him a wondrous experience. How incredibly free he was feeling! If only he could spend a few days in such freedom! Humans fashion their own shackles! And their own prisons as well!

He returned to his room and opened the only window that overlooked the street. He peered into the darkness. The tonga stand was empty and most of the shops had also closed for the day. He looked at his watch. It was getting on toward nine o'clock. A gust of wind fluttered the pages of an old calendar that hung on the wall in back of him. He remained standing at the window, peering into the darkness outside. The window of the next room was six feet away, and he could hear the voices of the Rawalpindi family clearly. A child was whining, pestering his mother to tell a story. Groggily the mother was telling him to go to sleep. But the child was insistent. Ahmad then remembered his own childhood. He too used to pester his mother for stories at bedtime. She had already told him all the stories she knew about jinns, fairies, and princesses. Indeed she had recounted them over and over again. There was one story

in particular which he never seemed to have enough of: "Ma! tell me that story. The one about Nana Abbu, when he ran into a she-ghost …"

"I've told it twenty times already. Let it be, won't you?" she'd say, feeling tired and irritated.

"No, Ma, just one more time, please," he'd beg her.

"All right," she'd start. "Your grandpa was a *tehsildar* (sub-collector of revenues). One day a messenger visited him in the evening and said that the Deputy Commissioner wanted to see him about some important matter. He was to be at his bungalow at eight in the morning. The city was some thirty miles from your grandpa's *tehsil*. There weren't cars and trains back in those days to let your grandpa reach the Deputy Commissioner Sahib quickly. People traveled on horseback. Since it was a long journey, your grandpa saddled the horse and set out that very evening."

At this point he'd look closely at his mother. This was where the action started! "What happened next, Ma?" he'd ask, rapt with interest.

"First get me a glass of water."

He'd dash off to do it.

"Well now, … what was I saying? May God keep you well."

"That Nana Abbu set out that very evening."

"Oh, yes. So he set out that very evening. It didn't use to be as populated as it is today. Roads used to be quite dreary and desolate. There was even a jungle on the way. As your grandpa was passing through it, he heard a woman crying. Then she appeared and started to run alongside your grandpa's horse, begging him to let her ride with him, because she was terribly tired from walking for such a long time. Your grandpa, though, didn't answer her and rode on. The horse was rearing up, stomping its hooves forcefully on the ground and getting out of control."

"Whatever for, Ma?"

"Because she wasn't a real woman. She was actually a she-ghost in the guise of a woman. And horses, you must know, are in reality benevolent spirits. They can recognize evil spirits right away. Anyway, your grandpa's horse began to rear up and neigh loudly. Meanwhile the woman kept begging to be allowed to get up on the horse's back. Your grandpa turned a deaf ear and kept on riding, while she kept running alongside the horse. Your grandpa was a truly brave man. Anyone else in his place would have lost his wits and fainted."

"But, Ma, it's just as likely that she was a real woman who had lost her way," he'd cut in. "She just wanted Grandpa to give her a ride."

"No, no!" his mother would say emphatically. "This was no woman.

Your grandpa had seen that her feet were on backwards, and her hair was so long it went all the way to her ankles."

"Was she pretty, Ma?" he'd ask eagerly.

"Where did you ever hear of she-ghosts being pretty?"

"What happened then?"

"Well, she kept tagging along. She'd cry, then laugh, begging him all the while to let her ride with him on the horse. Your grandpa refused to respond to any of her entreaties and kept riding along. Meanwhile traces of morning began to appear. When it got light, she cursed your grandpa up and down and ran off, disappearing into the jungle."

"Ma, why didn't Grandpa let her ride with him? Poor woman, she must've been terribly tired." His grandpa's hard-heartedness seemed to bother him.

"Fool! No sane person would allow a she-ghost to ride with him!"

"Why not, Ma?"

"That's enough. Go to sleep now! I'm feeling sleepy too. I can't answer your foolish questions."

She'd turn over in the bed and fall asleep. Meanwhile he would think: If only he had been riding behind his grandfather on the horse! At least he could have seen what a she-ghost looked like. Timidly he'd ask, "Ma, where have she-ghosts disappeared to now?"

"It's gotten very populated these days. Lots of empty land has been settled. Maybe they've hidden themselves in the jungles. Okay, go to bed now. Don't ruin my sleep. Once something gets into your head, it just won't quit."

He'd shrink back, daunted, unable to find the courage to ask her any more questions, and at some point he would fall asleep.

Ahmad had been standing at the window for quite a while and could feel the heaviness of sleep in his eyes. He moved to the bed, pulled the quilt over him and sat with his back against the wall. The open window had let the evening chill into the room. It was dead quiet in the room next door. Perhaps the child had fallen asleep without his mother telling him a story.

Ahmad went on thinking, still leaning against the wall: In the past ten days he had searched for his mother in every conceivable place he thought she might be. At least now nobody could say that he hadn't looked enough, or had been negligent or tardy. But in a secret corner of his heart he knew that all his running about was merely for show, to satisfy the world, his relatives, his conscience. The truth was that he had never loved his mother in the way a son should. The two were not close,

and the roots of their alienation extended deep into the past. What bothered him especially was that his mother had never tried to find out why things had become so cold between them either. From his earliest childhood he had seen his mother only as an imposing, headstrong woman who always wanted to have her way. Even his father was totally helpless before her, which made Ahmad even angrier with her. Worse yet, she wanted to run the affairs of his own household, just as she pleased. That he absolutely couldn't allow. She would constantly carp at his wife and even taunt her for coming from a poor family. If he intervened, she would let him have it too. The biggest problem, though, was that all this went on in front of his children. They were bound to be affected. And this made him very unhappy.

She was no different in her daughter's home. She could never get along with her son-in-law. Whenever there, she would interfere in their personal matters, and of course it was only natural for the son-in-law to be displeased. If anyone tried to stop her, she'd curse them up and down, pick up her bundle, and leave. In the village, she constantly unleashed her wrath on her husband. At harvest time, her generosity would know no bounds. She'd dole out a bagful of grain to anyone who showed up and put on a long face, and she wouldn't give two hoots about what her husband said. In short, almost everyone was unhappy and fed up with her. And yet nobody could muster the courage to let her know it. Now that she was gone, everyone was anxious. That was natural. But deep inside everyone was also feeling tremendously relieved.

A wave of tranquility swept through his heart. He had admitted a bitter truth. He felt incredibly light, as though tons of weight had been lifted off his mind and body at last. And not knowing when, he fell asleep. ❐

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon