ASAD MUHAMMAD KHAN

Ma'i Dada

Like the three names of maya, "Grandfather" Ma'i's names were also three: Majeeta, Majeed, and Ma'i Dada. Those who called him Majeeta had given up the ghost during his lifetime. The few hoary old men who called him Majeed, or "Arey Maan Majeed," lingered on for a while longer. To the rest—and this included the whole town—he was at all times Ma'i Dada.

His real name though, as he himself stated, was Abdul Mazid Khan Esoop Ja'i. Thus, in the police papers, ration cards, state hospital records, and finally in the register of the cemetery, he was entered as Abdul Majid Khan Yusuf Zai—a name which would have been inscribed on his tombstone as well, had he left an heir, for that was his will. But the neighborhood *dhobis* had spread the rumor that by caste he was a Hindu *teli* who hadn't even been circumcised.

The reason Ma'i Dada himself gave for the absolutely disgraceful conduct of the *dhobis* was that as a strapping young man he had managed to offend them in the matter of their womenfolk, and this progeny of foul animals had had it in for him ever since.

All I know about his exploits in the *dhobi* quarter is that as a young man he was really something to behold, and that his last heart-throb, Jamrat Dhoban, died in 1965 at the ripe old age of seventy.

I have also seen a crumbly sepia photograph, shot from one of those old box cameras, in which an eighteen- or twenty-year-old Ma'i Dada is shown staring straight into the camera lens—holding an iron-tipped club reaching all the way up to his earlobe, a gigantic *paggar* on his head, his eyes, looking like stars, heavily anointed with collyrium. The late Phupha Abba had taken this snapshot. He was the first in the whole town, in eighteen-hundred-something, to have sent to a Parsi firm in Bombay for a camera, which had arrived COD. The scandal-loving gossips of the family had spread the rumor that Ma'i Dada used to kidnap women for

Phupha Abba and his cronies and was their main contact with the local high livers. But this was pure wickedness. Phupha Abba was a genuine Pathan who had memorized the entire Qur'an by heart. As for Ma'i Dada—well, wasn't he a Yusuf Zai after all? How could he even imagine stooping to such base things? It is said that Phupha Abba had bought him a *tapancha*, which he likely never even fired but which he nonetheless frequently used to throw a scare into people.

I remember Ma'i Dada making frequent reference to this pistol. Long before Partition, some stinking bastard—or, as Dada put it, some *azal giraphta, bhaan ka ghora*—had swiped it and the *dhobis* had spread the rumor that the thief had sold it to the junk-dealer for its weight in crispy sweet flats of *gajak*. Ma'i Dada was badly shaken by the incident, and he was all set to report the theft to the police, but people talked him out of it saying, "Are you looking for trouble? Don't you breathe a word to the police! An unlicensed weapon! Are you out of your senses? They'll just book you instead."

Ma'i Dada felt utterly helpless. He stewed in his juices and waited for years to discover the son of a dog who had his *tapancha*, so he could rip out his guts and tie them around his neck. Or, as he put it, "around the neck of that *azal giraphta, bhaan ka ghora*."

To rip out someone's guts and hang them around his neck was his favorite threat. And the phrase "*ajal girifta*" he had heard from my uncle who, back in those days, was particularly fond of reading *Tilism-e Hosh-ruba* out loud to us.

It was Ma'i Dada's considered opinion that all these tomes—*Tilism-e Hosh-ruba*, *Qissa Tota-Maina*, *Anvaar Sohaili*, and such like—were perfectly O.K. But this English education, it turned a man into a "sissy"—a "*naamard*." He used this word for "coward," and often regretted it tremendously: "What an outrage! Ever since these Pathan *bachchas* have started to learn English, not one person in the family has managed to commit a single *katal*."

One day Father overheard the comment and gave him such a tongue-lashing that Ma'i Dada remained out of sorts with everyone for a full four days. He didn't talk to anyone. Finally, on the fifth day, he signalled for me to approach him and confided in me that "Aligarh has spoiled your father. He wasn't at all like this before. Now what is this? I say something perfectly proper and he flies off the handle. For no reason at all."

But one thing is beyond dispute. Others didn't receive half as much love from him as Father and all of us brothers and sisters did. He was fond, though, of our entire clan—the "*kutamb-qabeela*" in his words. He

would tell me: "I'm the *mashtar* of the *saakh-sajar* of your *kutamb-qabeela*." And that "nowhere else have I seen such a *chaaron khoont saakh-sajar*."

By "*saakh-sajar*" he meant "*shajara-e nasab*"—the "genealogical tree." But what "*chaaron khoont saakh-sajar*" could possibly mean, I neither asked nor did he volunteer to explain.

And I can vouch for the fact that as far as my family and clan was concerned, Ma'i Dad was clearly an expert on its genealogical tree.

It was customary with the elders of this now-defunct line that as soon as a boy had acquired enough competence to write his name, his *dada*, *taya*, *chacha*, or father would hand him the genealogical tree and say, "Here, now, son, make a hundred copies in clear, neat hand." Of course the genealogical trees could only be written with reed-pens and the thickest, blackest ink. Writing the names of our ancestors with a pencil or a fountain pen was considered the height of indecency, indeed a veritable outrage against religion, a "*mudakhalat fi'd-deen*." To draw the tables properly took whole months. But it was a non-negotiable matter, a determinism of birth which could not be escaped. After the tables had been completed, the family patriarch of the time would call in the boys to examine their handiwork. After he had had them recite the gamut of *kalimas*, the *al-Hamdu Shareef*, and the four *Quls*, he would have a boy repeat his main and branch genealogical lines from memory and reward him with a machine-minted rupee. To forget a link anywhere in the chain was inconceivable, simply because So-and-So Muhammad Khan, son of So-and-So Muhammad Khan, and his own son So-and-So Muhammad Khan had for months roamed, swords unsheathed, in the boy's very dreams. How could *anyone* forget them?

My *dada*, though, contrary to the other family patriarchs, usually looked the other way if a boy turned in poorly calligraphed work. Boys are human, after all. But if by mistake they entered, in place of So-and-So Muhammad Khan, son of So-and-So Muhammad Khan, the name of some other So-and-So Muhammad Khan, and Dada caught it, his wrath was sure to follow. The pens would practically be broken on the offender's fingers. "You pig! What—you're turning my grandfather of the purest pedigree into a bastard!" Back then, we couldn't understand why Dada got so upset over this—All right, we'll correct the mistake. What's there to get so angry about?—but now I guess I dimly understand the reason for the severity that characterized our people. Separated from its native land by thousands of miles and several centuries, so that it had nearly forgotten its own native tongue, this Pashtun clan was fighting a losing

battle to preserve its lineage, at least on paper.

For some of them also occasionally married into Shaikh and Mughal families, and a few miscreants didn't even hesitate to marry the daughter of a Syed. God forbid! To extract service from a woman of the Prophet's own family, even on occasion to scold her—the very thought of such disgraceful conduct was enough to send shivers down the spine.

So like all other male offspring of the family, I too had to endure the torment of copying genealogical tables, a torment as mandatory as circumcision. On the face of it, managing eight generations between Alamgir Badshah and myself shouldn't have been particularly hard. But they were warriors, and didn't have much of a grasp of family planning. Well, I felt completely overmatched. For instance, So-and-So Muhammad Khan had sired five sons, who collectively sired twenty-eight or twenty-nine, of which only two were childless: the remaining twenty-six or twenty-seven had left X number of children, and they, in turn, Y number of children … and this only halfway down, to the fourth generation. Just then, an explanatory genealogical table would be thrown at us into the bargain: O.K., son, now figure out these four generations from their mother's side.

Another misery, one even more complex and layered, would get underway at this point. Rarely if ever did they marry outside the clan. After all, purity of blood and bone had to be preserved. All this created a messy situation for me. A *dada* or *nana* by one genealogical reckoning turned out to be my *chacha* by another, and a *mamun* by still another somewhat remote computation. And no argument—period. How could it be otherwise! Several thousand sheets can't all be wrong. Now then, this gentleman, who is dead set on marrying my *phuphi*'s daughter—he will become my brother-in-law; but if you look him up in column five of the branch-line of the table, then he'll be a brother, albeit by way of a somewhat circuitous computation.

The torment made me literally cry out. Just then, like a timely angel sent by God, Ma'i Dada would walk in to rescue me. Within seconds he would solve the knotty problem. He would stay with me for hours, unravelling knot after genealogical knot and giving a boost to my sagging spirit all the while.

It never even occurred to us to ask him about his own lineage. And if the thought ever did cross our minds, we probably refrained from asking out of deference to his sensitivity in the matter, made keener still by the *dhobis*' gossip. Once a venerable old lady good-naturedly asked him, "Well, Majeed, you have crammed the genealogies of just about everyone,

but do you know your own?" Ma'i Dada responded with the same good-naturedness, "Yes, Biya, why not? Here: Samser, son of Samser, son of Samser, son of Abdul Mazid Khan Esoop Ja'i," and then burst into roaring laughter. This historic joke of Nadir Shah Durrani had been related to him by none other than Uncle.

If a single two-word term could describe his ambition for us boys, it was "Pashtuniyat Expert." One with full knowledge of the "Pathan Saga." Pushto, one of the grandest languages on earth, is spoken something like this: *dagha da rora da pista da badaam rora da heeng* … It infinitely appealed to us that our ancestors had stormed the territory of the infidels—*kuffars*—holding forth in such a grand language, and had stood in the midst of swarthy *bheels*, *korkos*, and *gonds*, fearlessly raising the cry "God is One!"—and in this language no less! How this would have awed the locals!

Among my peers in the clan I perhaps had the most fertile imagination. I would take in every word that spilled from Ma'i Dada's mouth, my eyes wide and mouth open in sheer astonishment. While the other boys my age spent their time flying kites and playing field-hockey, I would sneak up to the rooftop of our *baarah* and the small dingy rooms there. Lying on the corrugated iron roof ten or fifteen hundred miles away from my clan's native Teerah, and two hundred and fifty or three hundred years distant from my Pashtun ancestors, I would fight tribal wars, or—after Ma'i Dada's favorite expression—throw myself with full fury into "*dandam danda* and *talvaram talvar*."

My favorite game during summer vacations was to sneak into the dark storerooms chock-full of old broken furniture and other discarded odds and ends, or to underground vaults and salvage a desirable piece of some corroded, half-broken weapon from the pile of arms covered over by cast-off farming tools. I would remove the rust and bring the metal underneath to a shine. Once in a while I would even find a whole sword or dagger, so disfigured by corrosion that it looked as heavy and artless as a plough, scythe, or *pasa*. The piece would stir the strangest thought in my mind: this sword, which now looks no better than a plough, scythe, or *pasa*, is perhaps our family—originally a soldier by profession, but now, as it lies cast off on the ground, reduced to farming by "disuse" or "misuse." And so, in an effort to breath some life into my corroded soldier, I would stage a performance before an audience of the young men and women of the family. Donning the torn *farghul* of embroidered brocade that belonged to my *par-dada*, half a sword bound to my waist, and spouting Pushto expletives (invented—you guessed it—by Ma'i Dada

himself) I would sally forth and challenge the *kuffar*, reciting Pushto martial odes. This theatre, this restoration of arms, greatly pleased Ma'i Dada. And he participated with us in this game for hours. He was, as he let it be known, born amid the clanking of arms, and loved weaponry of every description.

In the tumult of 1946–47, Muslims fleeing their homes in the neighboring non-Muslim states were arriving in droves in our area, because ours was a Muslim-majority town (perhaps it still is) and the state had been settled by the Pathans. One day Ma'i Dada rounded up from the railway station a family of artisans who specialized in making and refurbishing weapons. He had them wait in the *baarah* and himself went looking for Father, whom he eventually found at the school. Only God knows how he convinced Father that they were homeless people who had nowhere to go, and as he had provided shelter for four such families already within the *baarah*, Ma'i Dada argued, "Miyan, you really must find space for them as well." Later, after much effort and the subtlest maneuvering, he managed to get a room emptied for the immigrants. He hauled empty wooden crates, took apart the boards, cleaned out a small space and set up a tiny enclosure within the *baarah*. Come next day the newcomers had dug a hole and set up a bellows and started churning out knife after knife and sword after sword. The very first *zanbiya* was fashioned especially for Ma'i Dada, its sheath covered with brocade cut out from Mother's old quilted waistcoat. And thus, after the dearly departed *tapancha*, Ma'i Dada became the proud owner of a thoroughbred *zanbiya*. Referring to the painful period between the pistol's disappearance and the acquisition of the *zanbiya*, Ma'i Dada, almost smiling for the first time, offered this explanation: "Now this *tapancha*, you could say the Creator meant *some* good to result from its disappearance. It was meant to be. Who knows, I might have gotten angry and stuck it in the guts of some *bhaan ka ghora*. Which would've gotten me into trouble: the police, booking, courts—and all the rest of it." When someone raised the doubt, "Ma'i Dada, what possible *good* could the Creator have intended by taking away the *tapancha* and granting the *zanbiya*, for you could just as easily stick the *zanbiya* in the guts of the ill-fated *ghora,*" he laughed heartily and, patting the brocaded sheath gently, shot back, "Rascal! Who do you think I am—the Khoojee?"

My uncle had introduced him to Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar's character Khuji, and I had introduced him to Cervantes's Don Quixote. But Don Quixote he couldn't grasp at all. He would say, "White men—they're all plain lunatics!"

It was precisely at this time that the state government started to take a harder look at licenses for firearms and any weapon with a blade longer than a few inches. New licenses were still issued, but only after much begging was done and influence wielded, and against an atrocious annual fee—a "*jiyadti ki baat!*" The initial problem, however, was to obtain the license itself. Ma'i Dada had Mother plead with Mamun, a big-gun officer in the police department, to use his influence. And Ma'i Dada got lucky. A license for the *zanbiya* was issued against an annual fee of twelve annas, which Ma'i Dada hated to pay every time. But at least it gave him the peace that no "*bhaan ki ghori gormint*," let alone anyone else, would dare confiscate his *zanbiya* now. Before using their good offices both Mother and Mamun had had Ma'i Dada swear by the Qur'an that he would never ever threaten anyone with his *zanbiya*. "No, Miyan, no. I'll swear by anything you want, no *azal giraphta bhaan ka ghora* will ever…" and so on.

Once every year Ma'i Dada would gather together the licenses for his own weapon as well as for the myriad guns, rifles, scimitars, swords, daggers, and dirks registered under the names of my father, mother, *tayas*, *chachas*, *phuphas*, and *khalus* and get in line to pay the renewal fee. When he returned, he would start babbling straight from the men's *devrhi*: "What injustice! We have seen and heard of the time when not one, not two, but a full half-dozen cannons used to stand ready at the palace of So-and-So Muhammad Khan, even though he was no prince regent himself. No *azal giraphta bhaan ka ghora* would dare cast even the slightest disapproving glance at him. And that other So-and-So Muhammad Khan, although no prince regent either, had sixteen hundred swords.… And those other weapons, all the *sarohis*, *tighaz*, *khandas*, *kirchis*, *zanbiyas*, *katars*, *khukhris*, and *pesh qabzes* one ever saw."

Father used to say Majeed should have been the custodian of the state's armory. The sight of weapons increased the volume of his blood. Then one day the government issued an order for all arms to be deposited forthwith in the state storehouse. Ma'i Dada heard the news with a sinking heart. For the next two days he spat insults and indecencies. After the anger had subsided some, he prevailed upon some of my elders, and they collectively suggested to Father that if a deposit had to be made, let it be only of the weapons licensed to the family, but not those others that lay safely hidden away here and there in the underground vaults, storerooms, and inside the walls, as a trust we bore of our ancestors. They had never been entered in any register, so it was prudent to have them refurbished and kept ready, for times were bad. And besides, Pathan *bachchas* kept

themselves ready even when times were good.

Father was a strict Aligarian—a man of principles. Under no circumstances would he want to go against the government's express orders. Besides, he said, what good were weapons stashed away a hundred years ago? Why court unnecessary headaches? Let's just drop the matter right here. A disappointed Ma'i Dada gave in, but only outwardly. We boys could well see that some mysterious activity was going on all around him—in our courtyard, in the *dhadas*, the subterranean vaults, and in the staircases—and all entirely unbeknownst to Father.

Anyway, the licensed weapons were turned in. A few of the family elders and Ma'i Dada loaded the whole lot into two tongas and hauled it over to the police storehouse, had them make out deposit receipts, and returned home empty-handed.

When I got back from school I saw Ma'i Dada squatting in the *devrhi*, leaning against the wall, head bent low over his knees, as if he'd just returned from burying a blood relative. The pain had penetrated so deep that he wasn't even hurling obscenities at anyone today. A few days later, when he once again had to go to the storehouse, this time to turn in the arms of one of my *tayas*, Ma'i Dada didn't come back.

News arrived that he had been arrested and was cooling his heels in the main police lock-up, treating everybody to the choicest profanities. Within minutes the entire clan stormed out to mount a rescue operation. Though just an ordinary retainer in the household, he had nonetheless been raised at the *devrhis* of the Mirza'i Khails. Most importantly, even if an outsider, he was, after all, still a Pathan—How could we abandon Ma'i Dada as a circle of menacing uniforms drew tightly around him?

Mother right away got into a tonga and went to the home of her brother who worked in the police. Banging her *sarota* on the table over and over again, she ordered her brother to have Ma'i Dada returned home "right this minute." And: "Miyan, you have locked up one of our own ancestral workers; today an old man, tomorrow you won't hesitate to tie up our own sons. Was it just for this that our forebears cleared away the jungles with nothing but their swords and set up this state—eh?" My mother's majestic wrath was a sight to behold that day. She rambled on and on. After all, she was the paternal granddaughter of Ghalib's disciple Navab Yar Muhammad Khan Shaukat. The caring nature of a thoroughbred *navabzada*, the linguistic power of a robust poet was in full display.

Mamun was totally flabbergasted. "But Manjhli Aapa, at least we should first find out why he's been locked up. Please listen, I'm sending someone to look into the matter this minute. Please do go inside. At least

have something to eat with us. I urge you …" But Mother, like a rock, stood her ground, right there in the man's sitting room, dicing betel nut with the *sarota*, possessed with a grandeur that inspired only awe. Mamun's entire household sat around her in a reverential hush, without stirring, each content with a single biscuit and a cup of tea, until Mamun simply had to slip into his uniform and go take care of the matter himself.

Less than two hours later, Ma'i Dada was safely back in our *devrhi*, going over his tale for the benefit of some two dozen illustrious Mirza'i Khails.

Aside from the abusive volleys of "*ajal girifta*" and that other expression, all I was able to understand was this: When he arrived at the storehouse to turn in *taya*'s weapons, head constable Sukhia Ram—a *teli* by caste who, "in spite of his police uniform didn't look like a cop at all"—was in charge of the deposits that day. Ma'i Dada's and Sukhia Ram's first mutual misfortune was just that: the latter happened to be on duty. Had Bela Singh Thakur or head constable Gulab Khan been on duty instead, none of what transpired would have taken place at all.

Sukhia Ram's first offense was that he smiled at Ma'i Dada. He then topped it off with a series of other egregious mistakes, such as calling him a *bare miyan*—an old man—and offering him the peon's stool to sit on. Ma'i Dada stood to one side and just stared at the man, a volcano rising inside him. The final—unforgivable—wickedness that blew the volcano's top was that "that *teli ka bachcha* had the audacity to pick up a blade from our weapons pile and, puffing away on his stinking *biri*, start nonchalantly sharpening his pencil with it."

"It happened to be the *pesh-qabz* of none other than Navab Ghaus Muhammad Khan Fateh Jang Bahadur. Its grip was made of agate with a delicate floral design so skillfully carved that it looked as though it had been molded from wax. The blade bore the distinguished name of that *jannat*-dwelling ancestor in gold, and an inscription in Persian to the effect that it was crafted by an Iranian artisan especially for Navab Bahadur, who used to hunt lions unmounted, fighting them face to face."

Well, it boiled down to this: first, Sukhia Ram was a *teli* by caste, and second, smoking his *biri*, he used the dagger of paradise-dwelling Navab Ghaus Bahadur to sharpen his pencil.

Shouting "*azal giraphta*," or maybe "*bhaan ka ghora*," Ma'i Dada gave head constable Sukhia Ram such a whack that it sent his *biri* as well as his pencil flying. Only then did he turn to inform that son of a *teli*: "That weapon is the legacy of *sher-bachchas*, not your vegetable-chopping knife," and "It had already become polluted when your hand first

touched it, and I kept my peace; but now that you *bhaan ka ghora* are sharpening your pencil with it, I'm not going to let you live," and so on.

Obviously, Ma'i Dada had to be taken to the lock-up.

The police chief was in a fix. A civilian had beaten up a minor three-ribboned police officer in uniform and obstructed him in discharging his duties.

On the other hand, the state had not yet been merged into the Indian Union. A Pathan *navab*, in the shadow of *mahi-maraatib*—rank and insignia—still ruled as absolutely as he wished from his cozy seat on the state throne. It was his name that resounded from the pulpits of a thousand mosques in the Friday sermon: *May God perpetuate his dominion and his power!* —even as his grip on the staff of the state flag had begun to slip, and the ball of state annexation had been set rolling in New Delhi.

Several hundred noble and not so noble Pathans—all from the *navab*'s prosperous and not so prosperous, educated and not so educated, cultured and not so cultured, but nevertheless influential, clan—stood surrounding the main police station when Mamun arrived at the scene. It wasn't for nothing that he had graduated from Aligarh with a major in Psychology. In less than twenty minutes, without once referring to his privilege or power, he smoothly persuaded his subordinate officer that what had happened was not motivated by criminal intent or by hooliganism, but rather by irritation and the wounded ego of a proud tribe losing out to history. The station chief was a Chauhan Rajput by caste, who perhaps could empathize with the agony of defeated hands accustomed only to brandishing swords. Moreover, he had no wish to create fresh problems for his superior officers on account of a silly pencil-pushing head constable.

And so *havaldar* Sukhia Ram received a summons stating: "It has come to our attention that as a rare and priceless weapon of tremendous historical importance to the State was being handed over to your care …" and so on. Sukhia Ram was dragged in to explain.

Father sent Ma'i Dada away to the family estate to rest awhile. This was made necessary partly by the fact that Ma'i Dada had now taken to narrating, before anyone and everyone, the story of how the former chief of the state storehouse, *havaldar* Sukhia Ram, fell from grace.

Who could have known that we boys would be obliged to witness Ma'i Dada's own near fall from grace. On some matter or other Father became hugely displeased with him. Right away, he had a room cleared out for him elsewhere in the *baarah*. And so, for the first time ever, Ma'i Dada was forced to make a home for himself far from our *devrhi*.

What happened was this: After Grandfather's death, one of our sisters married outside the clan, perhaps the first time this had ever occurred. The groom was highly educated, but a civilian to the core. He came from a family that knew nothing of warring and fighting. After the wedding, as was our custom, he was taken to Ma'i Dada for the rite of *salaami*, to receive the customary gift of two rupees from him, for, of course, he was his elder. Since no elders were present at the moment, we boys were charged with helping him out through the ritual. Ma'i Dada hadn't been feeling well at the time. He saw the new *damad* and smiled, then mustered enough strength to sit up. We put pillows on either side of him to prop him up. He received the *salaam* from the groom and passed his hand over his head by way of benediction, and conferred the *salaami* gift of two rupees. And then he unrolled before him a veritable register of "Pashtuniyat"—i.e., Pashtun lore.

For a full two hours the young man sat with his mouth gaping open as he took in Ma'i Dada's revelations. After an exhaustive harangue on the "*saakh-sajar*" business, Ma'i Dada next told him that "these Mirza'i Khails are a very gutsy clan, and so ferocious that one dare not even look at them askance. And these forty-odd houses in the *mohalla*, set up one next to the other, happen to be interconnected. Each house has a window opening into the adjacent house large enough to allow a man along with his sword or *rafil* (rifle) to pass through easily. So if one of the Mirza'i Khail houses on this side of the *mohalla* is attacked, a hundred or more armed Pathan *bachchas* can scramble from both sides in less than ten minutes to bring the situation under control and annihilate the attacker. For instance, in such-and-such year, So-and-So Muhammad Khan, after cutting down the *na'ib kotval*—and his horse along with him—over some trifling matter, made a clean escape by passing from window to window, house to house. So then, this is the advantage of having the interconnected houses." And these connected dwellings also fostered brotherhood and closeness among the relatives, which Ma'i Dada illustrated thus: "There was a certain Bachchu Miyan of ours, and so-and-so *par-dada* of his had murdered so-and-so *par-nana* of his on a matter no more significant than this: They had both been invited to a *valima* banquet. The *par-dada* was already there when the *par-nana* arrived. At the time there was a law-suit over some property going on between them. Nothing serious, though. Litigation, criminal assault, and such like were common among them. *Dandam-danda aur talvaram-talvar* was also a common enough occurrence. And why not? They were *sher-bachchas* after all. They had to occupy themselves somehow. Well, anyway, when the *par-nana* started to

remove his shoes—since the guests at the *valima* were to be seated on the carpet—one of the shoes sort of fell on the shoes of the *par-dada*, who was already there and closely observing the movements of the newcomer. Just as the shoe of the arriving *purkha* fell on the shoes of the other *purkha*, the latter flew into a rage. He got up, shouted 'Beware!' and with a single savage stroke of his sword completely severed the offender's head, which rolled away like a corncob."

The collars of the groom's new wedding *sherwani*-coat were soaking up the beads of sweat that kept dripping from this face. He had had three drinks of water already and was totally ill-at-ease. Since it was getting quite late, we escorted him to the women's quarters.

The next day a storm exploded. Ma'i Dada was ill. Father didn't say anything to him, but he kept thundering to Mother: "Majeed's gone absolutely mad! He scared the *damad* practically out of his wits. The poor boy went home and lay down in a daze, asking the girl over and over if what all he had heard was true, if she wasn't the progeny of bloodthirsty murderers, if swords weren't drawn at her home on the slightest of pretexts, if her people didn't still attend *valima* banquets wearing swords so they could kill each other all the more easily. This is really the limit! Why did he have to dig up all these dead bodies? No family is free of some measure of craziness, but do they run around advertising it? For heaven's sake! …"

A week later a room was prepared in the *baarah* and Ma'i Dada was obliged to have his belongings moved there.

Away from the *devrhi* his illness worsened. So even though we didn't leave him alone for a minute, the truth is he felt quite lonely there. He had somehow found out that *manjhle miyan* had become upset over the incident with the *damad*, which is why he had been removed from the *devrhi*. A feeling of despondency had settled all over the *baarah*. One day he started to say: "These days Mazid Khan Esoop Ja'i has become a burden on the earth. You could say it's his *tem* to leave." He wanted to send for Father and make up with him. So I went to Father and told him that Ma'i Dada was gravely ill, so would he please go and see him. When Father arrived, Ma'i Dada practically lit up. He chatted about the "*nukhson*"—meaning the prescriptions—written out by the *hakims* and *vaids*; the inevitable "*azal giraphtas*" and "*bhaan ka ghoras*," etc., also got going; and then, clear out of the blue, he said in a chipper voice, as if telling Father a joke, "Manjhle Miyan, perhaps I offended you in the matter of the *damad* and maybe that's why you've had me thrown out here." Father jovially said something or the other. I was watching how

Ma'i Dada's illness, his grief, his joking manner—which was obviously a pitiable attempt to patch things up with Father—had all affected Father. Ma'i Dada continued, "Miyan, as it is, *mase-allah* you are a father yourself now; but you were a mere toddler before me once. You *cannot* understand the wisdom underlying my plans. As the saying goes, better to err on the side of caution, I have cautioned the lad, 'Take heed, you don't know who you're dealing with. We're Pathans.' And so, *insa-allah*, the boy will stay in line."

That very same day Father gave orders for the repatriation of Ma'i Dada back to his old quarters in the *devrhi*, which brightened him up like the rains after a long drought. His condition began to improve some. But he had become very old, and it didn't seem as though he'd last much longer. Mother relented and allowed his old flame Jamrat to look after him. She'd come and wash his face, help him change his clothes, feed him cracked-wheat porridge with her own hands, pour tea into the saucer and hold it as he gulped it down. The routine continued for months. Father had him seen by several doctors, different treatments were tried, but Ma'i Dada's condition kept steadily deteriorating. As he had no strength left to go to the toilet, half of his bedding had been folded up and the rope meshing of the *charpa'i* pulled either side to form a hole, an enameled copper basin placed directly beneath it. Jamrat had willingly taken on the responsibility of cleaning him after the toilet, etc. But she was a family woman and couldn't stay nights. During the night, I'd often see father walking over to the *devrhi* carrying potfuls of warm water and hear the ensuing frail protests and cries of Ma'i Dada. He couldn't stand the thought of Father taking care of him. When Mother offered to send for a servant from her *maika* to take care of him, Ma'i Dada vehemently said he would have none of that. My father was at least acceptable, because he had been a child before Ma'i Dada once. So he was like a son; it's different with sons. "I cannot allow my person to be exposed or otherwise seen in a compromising condition before *gers*—outsiders," he told her. "Biya, you'd better send me to the hospital before doing anything like that." But everyone knew that he wouldn't last even two hours in a hospital. He had let it be known that "I want to die in this very house." He frequently slipped into semiconsciousness and remained there for hours on end. Jamrat and we boys during the day, and Father during the night, tried to keep him as comfortable as we could, but we were all exhausted.

It was this exhaustion and confusion that led Jamrat to overlook an express command of Ma'i Dada's. As he lay comatose, I happened to see him "in a compromising position": He hadn't been circumcised.

I returned from the *devrhi* quietly, my tiny head full of questions. The continuous hum set off in my head by this new and bizarre discovery would not let me be. I went up the rooftop, strolled in the *baarah*, sat by Mother, and traipsed about. But Ma'i Dada was very sick and he truly loved us a lot. Before long I was back in the *devrhi*. I heard him yelling at Jamrat in a frail halting voice and cry. She'd probably told him what had happened.

"*Bhaan ki ghori*, you've disgraced me just as I'm about to die.… What will the boys think?" I heard him break down in sobs. A brief silence. And then: "Oh, well—a *teli*'s son will always be a *teli*'s son. He doesn't become a Pathan even if the Pathans have reared him."

It was impossible to remain there in the *devrhi* anymore. So I strode out to the *baarah* again.

Is it really true, then, that Ma'i Dada had been lying to us all his life? All those neighborhood *dhobis*—they were telling the truth all along? I felt cheated, as though somebody had sold me a fistful of sand as sugar. But the matter was such that I couldn't even tell anybody about it.

He lived on for another three or four days, shuttling between unconsciousness and waking.

Several months after his death I dropped the question on Father—the one that had remained my constant companion ever since the day the humming started in my head, giving me no peace. He was passing by the *devrhi* on his way to the mosque when he saw me standing quietly by Ma'i Dada's room and stopped. He put his hand on my shoulder ever so gently and said, "What's the matter?"

I told him what I had seen that day.

He stood there for a while in silence, and then said softly, "Whoever he was, he loved you and wanted you to learn to live with honor and dignity like your forebears. And that's what you should remember. Understand? Now, go play."

Then, just as he had started to move, he broke his stride, turned around and snapped angrily, "And listen, don't let any son-of-a-bitch tell you he wasn't a Muslim! Don't let anyone say he wasn't a Pathan!" ❐

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon