

QAISRA SHAHRAZ

*A Pair
of Tears*
& OTHER STORIES

'A subtle and important insight
into old and new cultures'

ELIZABETH BAINES,
Author of *THE BIRTH MACHINE*

Praise

‘Qaisra Shahraz movingly depicts the tensions for those caught between cultures old and new. Characters struggle with the concept of homeland, relationships between generations, and changing roles for women, and often triumph. A subtle and important insight.’

Elizabeth Baines, Author of *The Birth Machine* (Salt)

‘Qaisra Shahraz is in a position to bring to readers issues that most of us in the West are scarcely aware of at such a human level. She has the ability to bring East and West together through her writing.’

Jane Camens, Executive Director, Asia Pacific Writers & Translators,
Australia

A Pair of Jeans

and other stories

Qaisra Shahraz



HopeRoad: London

Dedication

This collection is for my lovely nieces, Sumer, Sophia, Sara, Zarri Bano, Sana, Safa, Maryam and Alissa.

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Preface

I first came across the name of Qaisra Shahraz when I bought the anthology *Holding Out* (Crocus, 1988), and read her short story called *A Pair of Jeans*. Its subject caught my attention: a young Muslim woman in England is torn between Western values and her loyalty to her family with its very different attitudes and value system. Teaching it successfully at my university, I found that it met with a very favourable response and gave rise to lively discussions.

I wrote to Qaisra, who invited me to come to Manchester - which I did in the same year that I included her story in my anthology *Writing Women: Twentieth Century Short Stories* (Cornelsen, 1991). And I experienced her overwhelming hospitality. Incidentally, another of Qaisra's stories *The Elopement*, which I had come across in the anthology *Black and Priceless* (Crocus, 1988), was co-published by myself and two other editors in: *Invitation to Literature* (Cornelsen, 1990).

Qaisra has become a well-known and well-loved figure in Germany, not only in our schools, but also in our Universities of Education. Teachers find her descriptions of her own background and writing engaging and stimulating, and she has visited Germany on a more or less regular basis.

Today it seems remarkable to me that we have known each other for 23 years and never lost touch. I have witnessed a young woman grow into an internationally acclaimed and respected author, who moved beyond short-story writing to try her hand at highly ambitious novels. *The Holy Woman* (2001) and *Typhoon* (2003) won international acclaim, and I felt gratified when she invited me to contribute to the first monograph about her literary output: *The Holy and the Unholy, Critical Essays on Qaisra Shahraz's Fiction* (2011).

Although she has spent most of her life in England and works professionally as an education consultant and college inspector, I perceive her to be living in both worlds - the British as well as the Pakistani Muslim world. Her short stories may therefore be set in either location, but she peoples them invariably with characters of Pakistani background or origin,

like Noor in *Zemindar's Wife*, the disillusioned village elder in *The City Dwellers* and Samir in *Escape*, lost between his own two worlds of Manchester and Lahore.

I regard Qaisra as an author who is loyal to her faith and at the same time tries to bring home her values to readers of different backgrounds and different faiths - to bridge those two different worlds. She never preaches, but she opens doors to let us see new and unfamiliar scenarios and to meet unexpected characters who invite our response. And I am happy that we have been friends for such a long time.

Dr. Liesel Hermes, Karlsruhe

Former President of the University of Education, Karlsruhe, Germany

ZEMINDAR'S WIFE

“Aren’t you going to the *Zemindar*’s dinner, my son?” Kaniz asked her twenty-year old son, Younis, reading a book at his desk. She waited; fearing his answer. The rest of the family were ready to shoot off to the *Zemindar*’s *hevali*.

The *Zemindar*, the feudal Landlord, following the century old custom of his family, had invited the fellow villagers for a sumptuous dinner. Since the invitations arrived, a hubbub of excitement had reigned in each household. This morning there was a feverish tension running amongst the young women and girls about clothes, glamour and who would be wearing what. Above all, today they would gain a rare glimpse of their proud, youthful and very beautiful Chaudharani, the *Zemindar*’s wife – what a climax to good feasting. Always, a great honour to be invited to the *Zemindar*’s palatial residence, especially to eat, but what was the occasion this time, quite a few villagers mused, gossiping.

“You go! I need to read!” Younis, studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the Lahore Punjab University could not hold back the sarcasm from his voice.

“It will only take an hour or so, my son. Quickly eat and then return home.” Kaniz regretted her words, seeing his face redden.

“Mother, I am not starving! My studies are far more important than eating a sumptuous dinner off the *Zemindar*’s special china plates! You go if you must. You’ve talked about nothing else since the invitation arrived. It makes me sick the hold that he, and the proud bitch of a wife he has, have over you all”. Kaniz stepped back, shocked.

“My son, what terrible language! How can you call the Chaudharani that?”

Troubled, she left her son. Education had changed him. Above all, he had become very abusive when he talked about the *Zemindar* and his wife. Younis hated the feudal system, disliking the feudal clan in their village, their wealth and the power they had over the villagers. Kaniz wondered how the haughty Chaudharani would receive them; still bitterly able to recall queuing up excitedly with the village women under the *hevali*’s veranda. Their simple loving hearts were swelling with warmth to welcome the new wife. She, with one look of disdain from her cold emerald green eyes, dismayed them. They quickly learnt the lesson; she was of a superior breed, they were nothing but country bumpkins. They had no roles in her

life, only as servants, inferior mortals to do her bidding. Rebuffed and humiliated, Kaniz and the other women had retreated from the *hevali* and into themselves.

Younis looked out of his bedroom window, with a cynical twist to his lips. The street was packed with men, women and children, all dressed in their very best, hastening towards the *hevali*, a large whitewashed imposing building on the top of the hill. It was and was meant to be different from the rest of the humbler village dwellings. Even men who had migrated out to the West or to the Arab countries, hadn't been able to build a *khoti* to compete with the splendour of the *hevali*.

Younis returned to his book on Karl Marx and note taking for his seminar. He wondered whether the *Zemindar* would miss his presence.

The object of his thought, Sarfaraz Jhangir, a man of thirty-seven years, was sitting on his horse, on the outskirts of the village, inspecting the sugar cane fields on his land. Apart from a few plots, most of the land around the village belonged to him, and before that to his forefathers. He gained his income from the cash crops that the land produced. Most of the villagers, apart from those who owned the land, worked for him. He paid them good salaries, but the profit from the crops was his, as the owner of the land.

Sarfaraz checked his watch. He'd better get back to the *hevali*, to welcome the villagers. After handing his horse to the stable boy, Sarfaraz crossed the courtyard to make his way to his private quarters. There in his bedroom, he stood still against the door, lips parted. Staring at Noor, the light of his life.

His wife, sitting in front of a large mirror, was making up her face. Her long hair fell in loose auburn waves around her shoulders. With the afternoon sun streaming through the window, it glinted like flames of fire.

He tiptoed across the room to stand behind her, holding her gaze in the mirror and letting his fingers thread through her hair; momentarily closing his eyes, revelling in the sensuous feel of it. Bending down he kissed the bare skin of her shoulders around her neckline, his eyes dipping to the voluptuous curves of her breasts, outlined against the crepe of her tunic.

"Allah Pak, how gorgeous she is!" He marvelled; his heartbeat quickening as it always did when he saw her dressed in her wedding finery and in a state of undress.

His passion was suddenly checked, by the cold glint in her emerald gems for eyes. She was angry with him, as she had been for the past fortnight.

Ever since she had heard that he was giving a party for all the villagers. She couldn't make sense of it. What was the special occasion? This wasn't the time of Eid or any other festival.

In fact, she was furious. Why was her husband wasting his wealth? The dinner was costing a fortune. It wasn't a minor affair to feed over two hundred people, providing two meat dishes. The slaughter of dozens of lambs and sheep would stain their *bavarchikhanah*, kitchen. What was worse, it sounded as though Sarfaraz wanted this dinner business to be a regular event.

She had wanted to go to her parents' home as a sign of protest, but he had insisted that she stay and host the dinner with him, arguing that it wouldn't be very good for his *Izzat*, his honour, not to have his wife at his side, especially a wife like his, an asset to show off.

By nature she was a proud, haughty woman. Her beauty, wealth, and upbringing as the daughter of a rich influential *Zemindar*, had all contributed to that haughtiness. Today, however, that haughtiness had a dangerous element to it. The last thing she wanted to do was to entertain hordes of village bumpkins. Nevertheless, if she was going to be the hostess at the dinner party, then she had to look the part. She had her reputation at stake. It was almost as if she was going to be put on show – she mustn't, therefore, disappoint them.

She didn't!

The village guests were sitting at round tables. All heads and eyes were riveted on Noor as she entered. A hushed silence fell on the courtyard; even the birds seemed to have stopped singing, entranced by her appearance.

Noor walked gracefully to her seat; a tall, elegant, beautiful woman, fully aware of the spell she had cast over her audience. A shadow of a smile played on her full, luscious, glossy lips. Since her teenage years, when she had become aware of her beauty, she knew how to exploit it and to command attention, respect and authority. In her case all three went hand in hand. What she hadn't realised and wouldn't have cared about anyway, was that it was her beauty which intimidated people.

She sat down, and let her gaze indolently fan over the groups of people assembled, all gazing at her. She smiled at everyone, but at no one in particular. Manners and breeding had been drilled into her from an early age. The coldness that emanated from her green eyes, and the stiff

composed manner she adopted, intimidated her guests and further heightened the barrier between them, her husband, and herself.

The men tried to resist the impulse to keep looking at her. It was wrong and immoral for a man to look at another man's wife, no matter how attractive she was. The women, on the other hand, didn't take their eyes off her, nor, for that matter, did they make any pretence to do so. Dinner was one thing, but to be able to feast their eyes on their elegant, beautiful but haughty Chaudharani, their mistress, was an added bonus. They had to admit that she had done justice to her looks and the occasion.

Their eyes kept wandering to her beautiful, well sculptured features. It was almost as if Allah had been carried away when it came to Noor. She was different. They had never seen such beautiful green eyes – cold though they were, nor hair of such colour. It cascaded down in open waves over one shoulder. It was all visible from under the delicate pink chiffon *dupatta*, the scarf which was draped casually around her shoulders and over her head. It formed a becoming frame for her hair and face. Her rounded milky white wrists were covered by delicately designed gold bangles. The women tried to count how many she wore – there were at least two dozen on each arm. Probably she had more gold on her arms than all the village women put together.

The bangles matched the delicately designed beautiful necklace, which lovingly embraced her neck and the ear studs hugging her ears. Her shalwar kameez suit was flowing and classically cut. It had obviously been cut by fine *derzi*, the tailors from the city rather than those in the village. The women's eyes almost hypnotically wandered from her beautiful long hands with well-manicured and polished nails, to the attractive feet, visible in elegant, and dainty black mules, which showed off the fairness of her skin. It was almost as if they had been kept wrapped in cotton wool. She had probably never been out in the hot afternoon sun in all her life.

They all waited for her to say something. They had already listened to the *Zemindar* welcoming them to the dinner party. The waiters had begun to lay the tables and to place soft drinks and salad bowls on the tables. Somehow the tense, electric atmosphere that had prevailed since the *Zemindar*'s wife had entered, had affected everybody. Nobody spoke, but they waited uneasily for somebody to say something.

Suddenly something did happen. A four-year-old girl, managed to wriggle off her mother's lap, and dash straight towards the Chaudharani.

Everyone was startled out of their unease. How would the Chaudharani react?

Noor too was surprised when this gorgeous four-year-old bounded straight forward towards her lap. Much to the surprise of the onlookers, her luscious pink lips spread out into a broad smile, and she held out her hand to the child. She had always been partial to beauty, in particular to beautiful children. She held onto the child and smiled down at it, but she resisted the urge to pick her up and put her on her lap. Alone, she might have done it, but not here in front of over two hundred people. She didn't want to be seen giving more favour to one child than to others. It had been bred into her from an early age, that one must treat everybody the same, and never show favouritism amongst the villagers – otherwise they forgot their place, and began to exploit the situation, and it was also unfair.

She could see the mother's cheeks glowing with happiness and embarrassment. Later that same mother would be boasting to all the other village women, how the Chaudharani had taken to her child. So Noor restrained the impulse to ask the child to sit with her, but the warmth she displayed towards the child had a miraculous effect on the people in the courtyard. They all relaxed. Her eyes were now warm, matching the genuine smile on her lips. Noor took the child as a cue.

Getting up, she spoke! Her voice was attractive, which complimented her physical looks.

“Welcome everybody. I hope you'll show your appreciation of our hospitality by doing justice to the food, prepared by our clever *halwais*, the chefs.”

The welcome speech was music to the villagers' ears. Her speech, though formal and short, had brought her closer to them. She told the little girl to return to her mother. The girl, smiling, turned to go to her mother. Noor sat down again, next to her husband, and kept watch over the proceedings. She wanted everything to run smoothly and as planned.

When the food was being served, Noor took her leave. She had done enough! Her husband watched her go. He wished she had stayed a bit longer but he was grateful and couldn't complain. She could have thrown a tantrum and stayed inside. No, he was married to an intelligent woman, with good breeding, and one who would never let him or his *izzat* down, no matter what she was like in private. She had performed her task much better than he had anticipated.

He hosted the dinner right to the end, talking to each and every family and making small talk. In particular he spoke with Younis's family. He enquired casually as to why Younis hadn't come, as he had seen him since he had returned for his summer holidays. Kaniz, Younis's mother, replied that he wasn't feeling well. The *Zemindar* naturally made the right response to Younis's mother, but his mind was buzzing with ideas; he was certain that her son had deliberately not come. Who the hell did Younis think he was anyhow? He was a village upstart, just because he had gained some college certificate. The boy's arrogance even surpassed that of his wife's. Did he think that he could challenge the authority of the village *Zemindar*, a person of class, status and wealth? All of Younis's degrees couldn't compete with that. Nevertheless it nettled him that Younis had not come. It was a deliberate snub and it troubled him. He wanted men like Younis to be on his side and not opposing him; after all Younis could thwart all his plans!

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In every household that evening, when the villagers returned home, the talk centred not on the dinner, but on the *Zemindar's* wife. Her beauty and haughtiness were both already subjects of everyday conversation, but now they talked about her amazing warmth. She wasn't so bad after all, and she was human like anybody else – she too smiled genuinely just like normal people. Now they all looked forward to next week's dinner, not just because of the wonderful food that they were sure to get, but that they would surely catch another glimpse of their landlady. They wondered what she would be wearing then. As the Chaudharani stayed inside the *hevali* most of the time, and travelled to and fro in a car, it meant that they rarely came in contact with her. It was generally the custom of the rich and high bred families to make their women folk, in particular the young women, inaccessible to the general public. They were too precious to be soiled by coming in contact with ordinary people or people of a lower status. They weren't to be ogled at by any *Nethu Pethu*, any Tom, Dick or Harry.

Noor had obeyed the customs of her family and made very few public appearances. When she did, however, she didn't quite flaunt herself, but on the other hand she didn't attempt to hide from the public gaze, as some of the elder women did in semi-*purdah*. No *purdah* for Noor. Her beauty was there to be seen and enjoyed, and not to be hidden from the public gaze.

When the following week approached, people began to wonder, amongst themselves, as to why their *Zemindar* was inviting them to dinners? One occasion was enough, but not week after week. Why was he doing it? Why would any man in his position do it, they mused.

Younis, with his typical cynicism, had already managed to cast a shadow over his parents' eagerness to visit the *hevali* for dinner. Their eagerness had nauseated him. He thus sowed the seeds of doubt in their minds, which cast a gloom over their visit.

Again the Friday afternoon proved to be a great event for the villagers. The *Zemindar* had invited a *tamasbeen*, with a bear, to entertain them. Everybody, especially the children, loved the bear's antics. To top the event, Noor made her spectacular appearance. Again she was beautifully dressed in elegant clothing. This time the smile actually reached her eyes, when she greeted and welcomed her guests. Moreover, she stayed a few minutes longer than last time. Again her guests were honoured, gratified and humbled by her presence.

Noor had drunk in their openly speculative and admiring glances – she was used to them, particularly when she was out shopping in the city's shopping parades. Here it was a gratifying experience. This is what it felt like to be a Chaudharani, the mistress of this rural community. You gained admiring glances, but you worked to gain respect. To perform the role of a landlady, a Chaudharani, is what she had been trained to perform well. In Noor's case, her beauty had given her that extra edge. It enabled her to have almost a charismatic influence on the people she came in contact with.

Later that evening, Noor sat reading some magazines, but the pictures escaped her notice. She was thinking about her husband and the feast they had been putting on and would be on future occasions. He hadn't mentioned next week's feast, but she knew that it was on the cards. He had already ordered lambs to be transported from the neighbouring village. Why was he doing this? What was the purpose behind this goodwill? His innate generosity couldn't be the underlying factor. There was a limit to one's generosity.

Her attention was caught by the voices she heard in the hall. She remembered her husband's solicitor going with her husband into the office. Apparently he was now leaving. They had been locked in that room for over an hour. Throwing the magazines aside, onto the chair, Noor arose and headed for the office. The servants were nowhere to be seen. Her husband

had gone out with the solicitor. She went straight to his leather-topped desk and rifled through the papers. A tight knot was beginning to form inside her. Surely her husband had not gone mad and decided to do something rash with his inheritance. Her curiosity was getting the better of her. Finding nothing of importance on his desk, she took the key from his drawer to open the safe. There she sifted through some documents and took them out. She returned to the desk, and sitting down, began to read them.

There was a report saying that there were substantial deposits of bauxite in the area of the village. There was a recommendation that the bauxite should be mined by open cast methods. That's what he was up to; he needed the villagers' land to mine for bauxite. She had seen the devastation which opencast mining had caused, in other areas. How could he be planning to do the same for their beautiful fertile valley! As she read document after document, her mind somersaulted into action.

She sat back in his leather swivel chair and rocked to and fro while staring into space. Then in a clean deliberate move, she tore each document one by one. There had been eleven altogether and she had torn them at such an angle that they couldn't be put together again. She felt no repugnance for what she had done. She didn't fear her husband's anger as her inner integrity was more important than his anger.

With a steely look in her green eyes, she waited for her husband to return. The torn documents lay strewn on the floor around her. An hour later, he came into the office, and was surprised to see her there. He was further surprised to see the torn pieces of paper on the floor. He looked questioningly at his wife. He bent down to rummage through the torn bits on the floor, and on seeing what they were, his eyes shot at his wife. Her own steely gaze didn't waver under his.

"What have you done, Noor?" He said, with his voice trembling with anger. She noticed, with satisfaction, that even in anger he called her with respect, her full name. "Have you gone mad?"

"No, I haven't gone mad. I think that it is you who have lost your head. Is that what the dinners were in aid of? So that you can psychologically blackmail them to sign those documents for you?"

"Well I would be paying them!"

"What would you be paying for? For them to lose their livelihoods? It's a form of moral and psychological blackmail. You are feeding them so that they cannot refuse to sell their plots of land to you. I find that despicable. I

may have my faults, but this is something that I will not let my husband stoop to.”

“You do not understand, Noor. It would only be for three years; they could have their land back after then.”

“What sort of land would they be getting back? The land would be sour and no longer productive? How could you destroy so much of what your family has protected for generations?”

“We will make a lot of money! We could choose to live somewhere else! You just don’t understand! Fortunately these documents could be reproduced”, he snorted as he left the room.

“Well, I’ll just have to rip them up again!” she shouted after him. “And” she continued, “You are not going to host any more dinners, unless you can guarantee that you will not do this again.”

She couldn’t quite understand her feelings. It wasn’t just about her repulsion for opencast mining, but why did she feel so bad about her husband doing what he intended to do. It was the prerogative of landlords to buy and sell land from and to the village people. Why did it, therefore, seem such an underhand thing to do - for her husband to buy the land. It wasn’t the buying of the land from them that she objected to but the psychological pressure he would impose on the villagers, who didn’t want to sell, but would feel obliged to do so, just to please the *Zemindar*, especially as he had feasted them. Her mind revolted from the idea. It was too demeaning and it was against the grain of their traditions and reputations.

Sarfaraz, as he walked back to his bedroom, did not know what to do. Her look of scorn had touched a raw spot in him. He was passionately in love with his wife, and had gone to extreme lengths to win her hand in marriage. He couldn’t, therefore, jeopardise his relationship with his wife. Her action in tearing up those documents and the way that she had reacted didn’t bode well for him. He was placed in a very difficult situation. The desire to buy the land and use it for mining, vied strongly with his desire to stay on good terms with his wife. He still wasn’t sure whether she loved him. She had never said so. On the other hand, she had never said that she didn’t. Their relationship was not on an equal footing. He had given everything to her, including his innermost thoughts and feelings, and she, on the contrary, had remained coolly detached from him, although she humoured him in every way. What he couldn’t bear was to estrange her further over the land issue. Already she had been on frosty terms with him

since the idea of the dinners cropped up – who would have thought that his wife would be such a self-righteous woman. He had married her for her looks and her beauty, but he feared that one day she would get the better of him. It seemed that there was more to her than he had been led to believe. Now what about the dinners? He didn't know whether he should go ahead with Friday's feast or not. It was a question of saving one's face. He waited patiently for his wife to join him. She came one hour later and seemed once again her normal self. The matter was not raised again.

During the afternoon of the next day, while Noor was preparing to watch a new Indian film on their video, her woman helper, Bilkees, came running to the room, looking worried.

“What's the matter, Bilkees? Has something happened?”

“Yes, Chaudharani-ji. Younis, Kaniz's son has died.”

“The one who was studying at the university in Lahore?” Noor asked. Although she never met any of the villagers personally, she knew most of them by name. Younis and his family in particular, were brought to her attention by her husband, especially about the interest he displayed to the family and the animosity he had against the educated young man. Noor's human intuition had enlightened her to the fact that her husband saw the young man as a sort of threat to himself and his plans. More than anything he feared his education.

“Yes, Mistress, the same one. He was their only son, and so very precious to his family.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that. How did he die?”

“The coach carrying him collided with a car, while he was returning to Lahore.”

“Does the *Zemindar* know?”

“Yes. He has already started to make arrangements to have the body returned home. He has been to see the family to express his sorrow and to tell them that he would be looking after and provide food for the guests who came to offer their condolences.”

“Thank you, Bilkees, for telling me. Can you also tell me when my husband returns home?”

He didn't arrive until much later, and by that time she had gone to sleep. When she woke up the following morning – he had already left. She had wanted to talk to him and to ask him some questions.

The *Zemindar*, as befitted his role, headed the *poorie*, the gathering of the relatives and neighbours to express their sorrow at Kaniz's home. He saw men crying for the young man. He, on the contrary, could not shed a single tear. He tried, but he couldn't. He was aware that this man had had enough education to realise what would happen to the village, if it was going to be used for bauxite mining. He had feared him as his only threat. But now he was dead and a threat no longer, and although he knew it was the thing to do, he couldn't cry for him. He had cried for a young girl who had died a few months ago, but here his tear ducts failed him. This was a time when he needed to cry to show that he shared the sorrow felt by the young man's family and friends.

The guests were thrown into a dilemma by the *Zemindar*'s invitation. They didn't know where to go. They had to offer their sympathy to Younis's family, yet the meals were being prepared at the *Zemindar*'s *hevali*. It was an awkward situation. To be seen going to the *hevali* was tantamount to stating that they were keener on the rich meals they would have at the *hevali* rather than the simple food they would be offered in Kaniz's home. Some guests found it more diplomatic to stay in Kaniz's home, even though they knew they would be offered *dhal* - lentils rather than lamb.

By the second and third day, the number of guests going to the *hevali* had dwindled to a few. The funeral had been held. The guests still kept coming, but most stayed in Kaniz's home. There were so many guests that they had spilled over into her neighbour's guest room and courtyard. After all it was their son who was dead; it had nothing to do with the *Zemindar*.

As the *Zemindar* remained out of the village most of the time for the following three days, Noor had very little time to communicate with him. She watched the proceedings in the village with interest from her window in the *hevali*. She had sent her condolences to the young man's family. By the fourth day, nobody came to the *hevali*, although full meals had been laid out and it had been well announced in the village by Bilkees herself. Noor learned that Kaniz had got the local village chef, to cook two *daigs*, huge pots, of meat and rice. Whether they meant it or not, it was a snub to the *Zemindar* and his dinners, nevertheless. Noor identified with the situation keenly; what would she do in their situation?

That evening she decided that she would do something that she had never done before. It wasn't the done thing for a Chaudharani to do nor encouraged. She decided to visit Younis's family's home to pay her respects

and offer her sympathy in person. Landlords often visited the homes of their villagers – that was the done thing; for a landlady, however, a Chaudharani, as young, beautiful and haughty as Noor, it was unthinkable. An ocean lay between her and the village women. For a Chaudharani to visit any villager's home was an honour indeed. It almost set a stamp of respect on the family which she visited. Noor, the proud lady from the city, going there personally doubly affected their reputation.

She went unannounced, with Bilkees, in the twilight hours of the night – no pomp or ceremony. When she entered the threshold, her tall, heavily shawled figure visible to all, a hushed silence fell on the crowd of people gathered in the small courtyard. Mouths and eyes gaped open. Hushed whispers floated from mouth to mouth in disbelief.

“The Chaudharani is here! The Chaudharani is here!” were the strange words.

There was an uneasy and eager shuffling of feet and bodies, as the village women awkwardly looked around as to where the Chaudharani could sit. Which place in that shabby courtyard, heaving with human bodies? There was no ideal place for her to sit to do her justice, even if they vacated the whole courtyard. They gazed up at her in awed admiration. Even in the semi-darkness of the courtyard, her beautiful face shone out from the cowl hood of her outdoor black chiffon overcoat. It was bare of makeup, but still incredibly beautiful.

Kaniz came forward with dignified confidence. Even in her sorrow, her eyes brightened with satisfaction. The Chaudharani had come to her home. It was an honour and a humbling experience. Very befitting her son's status – her five foot body stood tall indeed.

Having come this far, Noor was not in a mood to flaunt her class and cultural differences and her innate pride. In fact, she found it irksome and was very much aware of the havoc her arrival had created. She whispered gently to Kaniz, as she stood in the middle of the courtyard, surrounded by women, of all ages, sitting on rugs on the ground – all temporary struck dumb. She didn't want any fussing.

“*Assalama-Alaikum*. I have come to pay my respect and offer condolences on the death of your beloved son.” She offered, before quickly whispering “Listen, it doesn't matter where I sit, but not here in the courtyard.” She wanted to get away from the crowd of gaping women and the claustrophobic smallness of the surroundings.

“Yes, yes, of course!”

Kaniz quickly led her to her *bethak*, the lounge, blushing, hurrying to dust the sofa for the Chaudharani. The sofa was always reserved for very special guests. And who could be more important than their young utterly beautiful Chaudharani – she was their Benazir Bhutto.

With her beautiful manicured hand she gracefully slipped off her chiffon overcoat and sat down. She was wearing a shalwar kameez in subdued colours which, as with everything she wore, seemed to etch and show off the contours of her body.

Squatting on a small footstool, with her daughter hovering shyly beside her, Kaniz welcomed the young landowner’s wife. Bilkees stayed outside; it was her opportunity to meet up with and gossip with some of the village women. They talked about Younis. What a tragedy it was for him and his family. He had so much going for him. It wasn’t fair for somebody so young, their only son, with so much potential to die – just like that.

“Yes, Chaudharani Sahaba, he was our future. He was all we had. Apart from the land we own here, we have nothing.” Kaniz was openly weeping, sniffing in the folds of head shawl. At the back of her mind she noted the dazzling green of the Chaudharani’s eyes as they shone with unshed tears. Her chest bowed with pride. The landowner’s wife was shedding tears for her son. Gratified, she swallowed in the sight. Her son had labelled her as a ‘proud haughty bitch’ and now she was shedding tears for him. “He was our means of livelihood. We had invested our futures in his education. He was going to graduate this year, and then get a job in the city, and we were going to live in Lahore. Now we have nothing! No son. No livelihood. No future. Not even the documents for the land. Our son said that we should ask for them, but we were always embarrassed to do so.”

“Who has your documents?”

“Our *Zemindar*, your husband”, Kaniz stuttered after a short pause.

“Oh!” Taken aback, Noor averted her gaze from Kaniz. In her mind, images of her husband’s plans leapt back, the solicitor’s visit and the documents she had ripped up. Knowing what her husband had been planning, she was troubled to learn that he had their land documents. She wanted to find out as much as she could, without arousing Kaniz’s curiosity or animosity.

“How long has my husband had those documents?”

Kaniz was lost in thought, she hadn't expected this question. "Oh, a very long time; and before him, his father had them. It is a village tradition to keep them safe in the Zemindar's safe. Most of us have never owned such a safe, and there is always a fear of them being destroyed or stolen."

"I see", answered Noor, feeling more and more uncomfortable.

With decades of maturity behind her, Kaniz had noticed the mistress's unease and decided to speak more boldly to Noor, even though she feared offending her.

"My son told us that perhaps the *Zemindar* might not wish to return them to us, especially if he was interested in buying the land himself. Most of the villagers had always been afraid of that possibility. The land means so much to us... Our lives are entwined with that land... We eat from it. Yet if ever the *Zemindar* wanted to buy the land, we couldn't refuse him. He is always so good to us; how could we refuse him – it is unthinkable." She paused, scanning the landowner's wife's face. The latter was looking down. "Yet without the land we have no future, especially now that we have lost Younis." Kaniz's eyes swelled with tears, and she drew the fold of her head shawl to wipe her eyes again.

Noor sat awkwardly on her hostess's sofa and held out her hand to her; it was a spontaneous movement borne out of human empathy and concern. Kaniz took it, holding onto the beautiful hand and drawing comfort from the contact with the Chaudharani and reaching forward. It was a novel experience to hold her delicate hand, a hand so soft and smooth. It was worrying to that her own chapped hands might chafe the soft skin of the other woman's. For her hand had never done any form of physical work. Did such hands actually exist?

"If it makes you feel better, I'll get the documents returned to you – you have my word on it. My husband has so much land already, why would he want yours? He even inherited some from my parents as part of my dowry, when we were married two years ago." Noor smiled at her hostess, attempting to reassure her.

"Oh, I think that would make us all feel much better." Kaniz beamed back. "Do you know, Chaudharani Sahaba, I hope you are not offended by what I am saying, but some people were afraid of losing their land." Her eyes suddenly dipped. "They couldn't see any reason for the dinners, and felt that by going to them, they were being put into a position where they were obliged to sell him their land."

Noor coloured in surprise as to how much of her husband's intentions and plans had become known to the villagers. Noor felt that she must reassure them. Did her husband think they were all blind to his devious plans?

“Oh dear, no! I am not offended. I can assure you that my husband will do no such thing.” She responded with a tone rising to lofty heights. “He is just trying to act his role of *Zemindar*. You should not be afraid of his generosity and hospitality – there are no strings attached. I can assure you.” Now she stared into her hostess's eyes with a challenging look. In her head, she just hoped that her husband had, by now, changed his mind.

“I must be going. You have other guests to attend to.” She politely informed – ready to leave. It was then that a four year old girl bounded into the room and saw Noor. She dashed towards her and embraced her body. Noor stood frozen as she looked at the young child. The humanity asserted itself as she looked down at the child on the floor and swung her into her arms and hugged her against her chest. It was at that moment that the girl's mother stepped into the room. Seeing her daughter in a tight embrace with the with the Chaudharani brought immediate tears to her eyes, Three other women peered over the woman's shoulders too and glimpsed this rare sight.

Noor was oblivious to the reaction around. All she knew was that she wanted to go on hugging the child against her body. It felt so good. At the back of her mind the words tapped “I want a child of my own.” Her husband had been pressurising her – but she had resisted so far. Now she knew – she needed the maternal fulfilment of a baby in her arms and against her breast.

The seconds ticked away, everyone watched as the Chaudharani held on to the four year-old in her arms. “Please don't go yet!” Kaniz asked gently but boldly. “Have something to eat.” Noor looked at her hostess above the child's face, unsure of herself.

“You must have something to eat – it is only *saag*, spinach, I'm afraid, but you are most welcome to join us. “Kaniz offered tentatively, desperately hoping, yet knowing that the landowner's wife would politely decline.

Noor stared into Kaniz's eyes and read the appeal and the message in them accurately and the human appeal for equality. Noor capitulated, stepping out of the armour of her class, material wealth and background that divided her from these women. She gently lifted the child back to its

mother, as she smiled at her hostess. “Yes, I will stay for a little longer and taste your *saag*. I love the village *saag*.”

Kaniz sat back in surprise, for that wasn't the answer that she and the other women, hovering about, had expected. A ripple of whispering went through the women that the landowner's wife was going to eat with them.

She quickly beckoned her daughter, who was also taken aback, and gave her some instructions. They had never dreamed that the Chaudharani would have something to eat in their home. There was a scuffle to get the best china to serve to their honoured and unexpected guest. A table was pulled aside and a lock was opened. Kaniz's face glowed in disbelief and pleasure to think that the Chaudharani Sahaba was actually going to taste her *saag*. Noor sat down and watched the proceedings calmly. She knew that she had bestowed an honour by accepting their offer, but she didn't want them to go to any trouble as she watched their movements to serve her. She didn't quite know why she felt like that, as normally she would have expected it and took delight in all the pomp and ceremony relating to an occasion. But not today, for she felt guilty for causing them trouble. If anything, now she felt a little embarrassed by it all.

Kaniz's teenage daughter, Miriam, shyly placed things in front of their elegant, beautiful and very special guest. Mother and daughter couldn't take their eyes off her. They were full of adoration – for they wanted to hold onto this moment for eternity. They only felt embarrassed that they could only offer her such a humble dish. Noor was touched and heartened by their warmth and hospitality, and she smiled sincerely from her heart and felt deeply happy in herself. Bilkees, who had stayed out in the small corridor, also couldn't believe her eyes, when she came in and saw her mistress eating. A special three-course dinner had been prepared in the *hevali*, as Noor's parents were coming to visit her and she should be eating with them. Instead, she was quietly ploughing her way through the humble village spinach, the food that most of the villagers ate twice a week.

If she had entered without pomp and ceremony – she left with both, as well as leaving a happy, cheering audience behind. Seven chattering women, trailing behind, accompanied her all the way back to the *hevali*, looking after her and guiding her, making sure that she reached her home in safety, and with her elegant sandals didn't trip on any of the stones on the cobbled lane. They were riding on the high tide of the occasion and gratified to be in her company, each vying for attention, each one wanting

to say something personal to her but lacking the courage. What could a simple villager talk about to a Chaudharani – everything and yet nothing. Her higher station in life forestalled natural discourse between them.

On reaching the *hevali*, Noor kindly and politely thanked them for their company and sweetly said her goodbyes. She disappeared, with Bilkees, through the lamplit gates of the *hevali*. The women turned back down to the village, now freely chattering amongst themselves, still overwhelmed by her charismatic personality. They all agreed on one thing, that the *Zemindar's* wife seemed a kind person, with a warm heart and understanding personality. At least Kaniz now thought so. She was so unlike the person that they had first met.

Noor, too, had undergone a unique experience. She had enjoyed her visit and learned a lot from it. In her heart, she knew that she wouldn't think twice about visiting them again, even if her husband forbade it. Above all, she felt as if she had matured, as a woman and a human being. She would now fulfil her husband's wish for a child – for she ached for it too.

After she had entertained her parents, she returned to the subject of the visit. She knew one thing, she thought as she cleansed her face in the mirror and brushed the long tresses of her hair. She wouldn't let her husband buy their land. "Over my dead body" she thought. Her beautiful mouth twisted cynically. She smiled into the mirror – the villagers weren't the simpletons, her husband took them for. In fact, if anybody, it was her husband who was the simpleton. They had seen straight into his drama and they weren't going to part with their land, for all the dinners he was offering them!

...ooo000ooo...

It was *Eid-Ul-Fitr*, the first Muslim festival that the village was celebrating and the one everybody looked forward to – especially the young women. As had become the custom, the *Zemindar* gave each daughter from every household in the village a present. Normally it consisted of fabrics, for *shalwar kameez* suits. This time the Chaudharani had taken this task onto herself and with a relish. She had carefully chosen the materials; she had ordered rolls of fabric.

Since her last visit down to the village, she had made three other visits. On each occasion it was a death that had prompted her visit. It was the cue for her to mingle with them; social barriers and her husband's etiquette still

prevented her from mixing with them all the time. During those three visits, she got to know some of the younger women and took a liking to one in particular, because she was well educated and intelligent. She refrained however from inviting her to the *hevali* although she wanted to, but it would be showing favouritism. She didn't want that at all. She did, however, send some magazines and two novels down to her. The woman had been truly gratified.

On the morning of the Eid, the daughters, accompanied by their mothers had been called to the *hevali* to receive their presents. They were all assembled in the large drawing room. They were especially honoured to be allowed to come into such a room, with wall-to-wall carpeting. All barefooted, they were afraid to tread on the soft carpet pile in the large airy room, not wanting to crush or soil it. Normally they received their gifts in the large courtyard or out on the verandas. This time, the Chaudharani had insisted that Bilkees should open up the drawing room for their guests. Her woman helper's eyes had widened.

"Why do we have rooms, if we are not to use them, Bilkees?" Noor waspishly reminded her.

"But Chaudharani-ji, do you know what will happen to the carpet? What if they spill anything on it? And their feet – half of them will be coated with dust!"

"They won't spill anything and never mind their feet. Anyway, they will be offered refreshments outside in the dining room."

"What! In the dining room?" exclaimed Bilkees, thunderstruck. "Why, you only use it for your family? You are not allowing these gauche village women to sit at your wooden walnut designer suite? I think you are going too far, Mistress. It will go to their heads; they will boast to everybody at having sat at your table! In your seat!"

"Let them, Bilkees, if it gives them pleasure – all the better. Now come on."

Bilkees just shook her head in dismay. What had happened to her Mistress? Had she taken leave of her senses? Parameters had to be maintained and social barriers fenced in place. That was how there was order and how things worked. The Mistress was going to create chaos, where nobody knew the social boundaries. She shrugged, for she would leave it to the Master to sort out his wife, after all it was not her job or role to do so.

The girls and women waited in the drawing room in a state of uneasy excitement. The *Zemindar* and his wife the Chaudharani Noor Sahaba entered. The *Zemindar* welcomed all the village women politely and told them that this time his wife would do the honour of presenting the gifts. Noor stepped forward, looking as breathtakingly beautiful and elegant as ever, making some of the young women envious. “Yes, I hope the young ladies will like the fabrics I have chosen for them from the city. For some girls, I have included something else. It is something that their fathers left with the *Zemindar* for safe keeping, but I am sure that you all can look after your own property now.” She paused. “It is your documents and deeds”, she uttered softly lifting the folds of the fabric and holding out the papers. As she did so, she cast a quick challenging glance towards her husband. He had paled, losing some of his poise. He caught her steely glance and something flashed in his eye, and the smile on his face ebbed away, replaced by a look of anger. She stared at him for a further few seconds and then before everyone’s eyes she handed the first gift to Kaniz’s daughter and then to the others. Kaniz’s face beamed as she stood next to the wall. In each case, as she did so, she took out the document, read out the name, and showed it to the woman and then handed it the daughter.

By the time the twelfth and final document had been given away, the *Zemindar* felt that he was losing his composure entirely and turned away to look out of the window into the courtyard. He didn’t want to face the group of women when he was not in control of himself. When he was able to pin a smile to his face, he turned and joined his wife. He felt that he needed to say something to save face. His wife had given away, back to their owners, the deeds that he wanted, and he felt it would look strange if he didn’t mention them. After all they were supposed to be in his safekeeping. She had very adeptly destroyed his plans, but he had to do something to save face. He had to give the women the idea that the documents were coming from him, otherwise the villagers would think it was his wife who was giving them away. Who ruled this household – he or his wife?

“Thank you everyone for coming!” he uttered with authority. His shoulders stiff with anger, he had turned to the women and stepped in front of his wife, shielding her from them. She had very neatly usurped his role. “I hope you will keep these documents safe. These are your properties, and we thought that we would take this special occasion to return them to you. Please take them home and hand them to your menfolk. If you do, by any

chance, wish to sell them, please sell them to your neighbours, rather than outsiders.” He deliberately refrained from saying that they should sell them to him. He stepped back and moved to the window and looked out onto the lawn of the courtyard, expecting the women to leave.

Summoning a smile, Noor stepped forward again and thanked the women for coming and wished them *Eid Mubarak*, a happy Eid. They returned the greeting and Bilkees, who was standing near the door, led the women out.

Closing the door, Noor turned to her husband. He was still standing near the window with his back to her. She surveyed his tall, tense, body, as she went to sit on the sofa. She waited for him, expecting him to explode.

He was aware of her presence in the room, and the tense silence that reigned in the room after the departure of the women. He didn't trust himself to turn and face her. He was unsure of what he was capable of or how she would react. He waited and when nothing was forthcoming from her, he turned and stood two yards from his wife. He seemed to be towering over her seated body. Exuding aggression, he looked down at her face and into those cold green eyes. They were at their coldest now and just stared defiantly in return. He tried to dominate her with his manly glare, but her eyes didn't waver nor fall away. They just calmly stared into his. He stepped back disconcerted and dumbfounded.

Noor patiently waited for his explosion. He was owed that and he had the right to it, but she was determined to stare him out; after all she was in the right. She had done the right and humane thing, even though it had angered her husband. For sure, she knew that she had ruined his plans, but now she was a defender of the villagers. Was the choice to be the villagers or her husband? Had she already jeopardised her marriage and her relationship with her husband.

The towering *Zemindar*, in his turn, was holding a tight rein on his temper. His eyes scanned her beautiful face. He had never been so angry in his life, and with his wife it was the first time. She had done an unpardonable thing! His mind was also signalling and flashing all sorts of troubling images; above all, that of his wife's capacity to undermine his authority and to usurp his role: the master, the *Zemindar*, of the village. He struggled with the concept again. Who was the master in his marriage? Who was in control, he or she? By her action, her *juruth*, in doing what she had done, she posed a direct threat to him as a man, as a husband and as a *Zemindar*. His head filled with the thought that she wasn't just the

decorative wife he had chosen, but she posed a greater and more dangerous threat, one that he had been hitherto unaware of. His heart sank.

He had ignored her previous action in tearing up the documents in the office – indulging her. This time what she had done went far beyond tolerance and indulgence. She had not given any form of indication of what she was going to do, nor had she consulted him. He had almost lost face in front of the village women. But the most alarming thought which thundered through his mind was what would she be capable of doing next? Would he ever get to know her mind? Would she ever open up to him?

Noor had an inkling of what he was thinking; she was both very intelligent and astute. As the seconds ticked away on the large clock on the wall, they both tried to read each other's mind as to what was to happen next. Both were fighting from their own corners and both were struggling. Both were proud and neither of them saw themselves as compromising. She knew that if it came to the crunch, she would have to leave his home as a matter of principle. He struggled with the reality of the situation of living with such a wife, trying to weigh one side against other. He recalled his own obedient mother, always looking up to his father. He remembered one incident when she had spoken in front of another man in a slightly disparaging tone, and his father had never let her forget it. He had thundered and verbally lashed out at her. His mother had literally shrivelled and didn't come out of the room for two days. His father had established who was the Master, and whose words held power and authority. And in the old days, he had heard about his grandfather beating his grandmother over minor things – that was his brutal way of controlling his wife.

He, on the contrary, was finding himself powerless, even to verbally abuse her, let alone assert his male dominance, as a husband, and as a *Zemindar*. His mind reeled from the thought, that if he let her get away with this action, she would always go against his decisions and undermine his authority. Would he then end up as a puppet in her hand? He didn't know what to do; he just stared down at her in utter despair.

She had now averted her gaze, and was looking out of the window. He continued to gaze down at her beautiful face, which was now in profile. His eyes swept, almost with hypnotic compulsion over the slim column of her beautiful neck, the soft curtain of hair framing her face. The strong beautiful features of her face were almost chiselled to perfection, and he longed to touch them, even if he wanted to strangle that slim neck of hers.

He could explode. He had read her signals right. She would leave him, rather than compromise her principles. He could abuse her or woo her. He knew this wasn't just a whim on her behalf. She had done this on humanitarian grounds. Life without her loomed empty. Not to have her in his room, in his arms, before his eyes – it was an unimaginable thought. She was the light of his life – the *noor*. Did he want to live in darkness?

It had taken him seven years to win her hand in marriage. He had lost the best years of his life in being infatuated with her, and wanting nobody but her; turning away so many eligible women, just waiting for her – watching her grow into womanhood. When he finally won her hand, and she agreed to marry him, he was thirty-five years old while she was still twenty-three. He had heaped present upon present on her family and her, and had to compete with many suitors, some even from her clan, her *baraderie*. He loved her madly, but he had no inkling as to whether she felt anything for him, if at all? She was a good wife, performed her marital duties well, but had emotionally kept herself remote from him. Her haughtiness still remained. It had both repelled and attracted him simultaneously. He still didn't know why she had accepted him in the end, and he didn't want to know either.

Now, at this moment, it crashed upon him that she was the centre of his world. The land and bauxite mines paled into insignificance, but he must keep that fact a secret. All he knew, at the moment, was that he was walking along a tightrope. His marriage and his relationship with Noor were hanging in the balance. She wouldn't be bullied by him - he knew her well. She would have no second thoughts on leaving him, especially as she believed that she was morally right and he was in the wrong. Those deeds did belong to the villagers and not to him. Her defiance seemed to spill out of the curves of her lips. Her body too, cried out its own language in defiance.

What was he going to do? Could he cope with a wife like Noor, who threatened his social and patriarchal order? Yet he could not give her up. Life without Noor was tantamount to dying. He caved in.

He bent down on his knees in front of her and levelled his face to hers. She turned to look at him, surprise colouring her face. Then his hand went to the nape of her neck. An alarming thought dashed through her head that he was going to strangle her. Instead, he gently brought her face closer to

his, his eyes on her lips. His fingers moved upward to thread themselves in the silken folds of her hair. Could he bear to give all this up?

She looked into his eyes, the coldness ebbing away from hers, surprised at his action. Then he laughed. The rich, masculine laughter rang and echoed round the room. Then in her firm, strong voice, with no trace of humility and fear, she asked him.

“Is there anything to laugh at, my *hazoor*?” She had used the word *hazoor*, denoting respect, deliberately to reinstate his position, his authority, as her husband. The use of the word wasn’t lost on him. It gratified him and his body relaxed with it.

“I think so, my beautiful and wonderful wife. I have spent a fortune on dinners and feeding the whole village just to get them to sign their deeds over to me. Then my wife just hands them back on a plate!” He stared down into her face, his fingers now moving over her mouth.

“Aren’t you angry, anymore?” She tentatively asked, holding her breath slightly.

“Exceedingly, but there is more to life than bauxite. You are right about the devastation that the mines would cause. I don’t want anything to come between us. Having spent seven years in winning you, do you think I am ready to lose you so that you will probably be snapped up by another man before a month passes? I am not stupid nor a simpleton. I don’t want anything to jeopardise our marriage and our relationship. You looked after the needs of the villagers, when I was blinded by the thought of making money. I nearly made a fool of myself, but you saved me – I am honoured in having a wife like you. I now have the feeling that you will be the making of me yet, my beautiful Noor.”

Noor smiled. The warmth flooded into her eyes, now glowing like gems. The facial planes of her face relaxed, as she accommodated it against his fingers. She had just managed to jump a great hurdle in her life. She was in no hurry to leave her *hevali*, her village, her people, and above all her *hazoor*. Live was about giving and taking – she had gained but also given. Respect for him had outweighed her pride.

Without thinking, Noor’s hand went to his face in the form of a caress.

His eyes widened slightly. It was the first spontaneous movement she had made towards him – for he had always reached out to her. He was deeply moved. He looked down, to hide the look from her. Those twelve land documents had brought her closer to him. He caught her hand in his and

brought it to his lips. She bent forward towards him and revelled in the feeling of his lips against her palm. It was another humbling and wonderful experience. Instead of abuse, she had received warmth and love from her husband. How she loved him. She breathed shyly into his ear, "I want a child of my own!"

THE MALAY HOST

Eyes on the crispy banknotes Aziza Hamat tiptoed into the living room. Reaching the table she grasped the woven jute money basket, pulled her shawl over it and turned. Then froze.

From the doorway, Abdul's eyes chilled. Clutching the small basket against her chest, Aziza glared back.

The sound of car wheels crunching to a stop on the gravel outside had her turning to the balcony window. Abdul Hamat took his chance and leapt forward, startling her and snatching the basket from her tight fist. Foreign banknotes fluttered down to their feet. Hissing abuse in Bhasa Malay, he squatted on the floor.

"Kitchen!" he ordered, grasping a handful of colourful notes with different motifs and numbers.

Tearfully, Aziza stumbled out of the room and went down into her soot-stained hot kitchen and blazing cooking fire.

Swiping her wet cheeks with the end of her shawl, Aziza watched; fascinated by the hungry flames licking the sooty, simmering, aluminium pot of meat, ready to topple over and then obediently retreat as she lifted the lid.

The slamming of the car door quickened Aziza's heartbeat. 'It's now or never!' She vowed biting her quivering lower lip.

"Ibrahim! Ibrahim!" She softly called, tapping the creamy soot-plastered wall with the wooden cooking ladle.

A burning log fell from the cooking fire, just missing her foot. Aziza stepped back, toppling the three-legged stool behind her and the hessian bag propped on top; the rice grains spilling out of it onto the wooden floor.

"This is it! The last straw!" she shrieked under her breath.

It had taken her weeks to nurse the other blistered foot. Grabbing the log from the floor, she left the kitchen by the other little door and went down the steps. Tall rubber and palm trees flanked the three sides of the house.

Like many other rural Malay houses, it was built on a raised wooden platform, standing on eight sturdy wooden stilts and overlooked the jungle. Turning the corner, Aziza called again. "Ibrahim!" Ducking her head, she slid under the platform.

At the front of the house the passenger car door was slammed shut. Aziza crouched, hiding behind a stilt.

The log with its one end glowing held tightly in her hand, Aziza glimpsed two pairs of sunburnt legs, the gravel crunching under their feet. They were the seventh lot of white legs entering her home today. The hairy ones belonged to a man dressed in blue knee-length shorts. The hem of the woman's floral country dress reached above her knees.

Another pair of masculine denim-clad legs and brown feet, slid in view.

The thudding sound of movement in the room above made Aziza lift her head - heart still, lips parted.

“Ibrahim”!

Aziza's hands shook, imagining the key turning.

In the sunshine, the Tamil driver turned to his passengers. Wiping the sweat from his forehead with a cloth, he announced.

“Sir, here we are for our next spot of sightseeing. – a very special place – a Malaysian country house” he grinned with satisfaction, looking up at the quaint wooden building he visited daily. He loved both the house and the wily old host with his receding grease scraped hair, gracious manners and fantastic command of English.

Margery and Robert, a retired couple on a tour of South East Asia, stared in awe at the black and white painted house, standing on a raised wooden platform. The facade was indeed impressive with tall trees, mass of other foliage and pots of colourful orchids and hibiscus bushes strategically lining the sides of the wooden steps leading up to the house.

“It's a Malay version of a Welsh country cottage, Bob,” Margery marvelled, continuing to feast her eyes on the picturesque scene before them, “An opportunity to see a real Malaysian house – how enchanting, Bob. How lucky we are!” She smiled in delight.

“Look” Robert nudged her on the arm.

An elderly Malay man stood on the porch – smiling and beckoning for them to come up. Something was digging into Margery's heel. She bent down to remove her sandal. It was then her startled gaze levelled with that of Aziza's, squatting under the platform, half hidden behind the stilt. Margery smiled and waited. But the Malay woman didn't smile back. Instead she treated her to a pointed hostile stare. Disconcerted and the smile slipping from her face, Margery stood up to follow her husband into the house whispering to him. “Bob there is a woman hiding under the house!”

Their host stood in the middle of the room, a warm smile of welcome spread across his narrow face.

“Salam. Welcome to my home, lady and gentleman.” He jovially began, charming them with his gentle accent.

“Thank you.” They echoed together, curiously looking around the large, tidy room. Its four wooden shuttered windows were thrown open, allowing a warm breeze to flow through the room. ‘It’s as if we are standing on a raised platform in the middle of the jungle!’ Margery voiced in awe.

The host’s brown face split into a wider smile – his line of greyish-black moustache more pronounced, and gestured for them to sit down.

Margery smiled her thanks as he gallantly drew out a chair for her. Then suddenly sobered, remembering the woman down below.

“This is my house,” continued the Malay host, sitting down on another chair. “Please make yourself at home and feel free to look around.”

His European guests shyly let their eyes fan over the rows of greying sepia and black and white family portraits in glass frames hanging on the two walls.

Getting up, their host proudly pointed to one picture of a young man in a military uniform.

“This is me, when I was young. And this - my mother – She got married at fifteen and had me at sixteen!” he explained, nervously laughing, expecting them to look surprised, “Come and look. It’s alright. You are welcome.”

Robert and Margery peered at the photographs.

“Is this your wife? She’s very beautiful Mr -?” Margery asked, staring at the picture of a young woman dressed in traditional Malay clothes with a serene expression on her face.

“I beg your pardon, Madam!” Colour flooded his cheeks making them a shade darker. “I haven’t introduced myself properly. I am Abdul Hamat and you are...?” His eyes on Margery, the wide smile fixed firmly in place.

“Margery, and this is my husband Robert”, she volunteered sitting down again.

“Welcome to Malaysia, Margery and Robert. This house belonged to my father. That man there.” He pointed to the portrait of another male. “He opened our home to the public forty years ago. Since then we have had thousands of foreign visitors - thanks to this friend of ours. They come from all over the world. Are you from the UK, Madam?”

“Yes – Wales actually.”

“Right, Madam Wales. Let me show you something special.”

He padded in his soft sandals to the far corner of the room. Robert and Margery turned to look.

“This is our bridal dais, where the bride and groom sit together when they get married. Please Madam Wales, would you like to sit on it and have a photograph taken with your husband?” He giggled, seeing her gaze drop. “You can pretend that you are a Malay bride. All my guests love having their photos taken in that corner. Come Madam, you must try it!” He coaxed with his beaming smile.

Exchanging a nervous glance with her husband, Margery got up – worried that the ‘small thing’ the swing seat would not take both their weights. Robert sheepishly offered.

“You sit down, Marge. I’ll take the photo.” And laughed, explaining to the host. “I don’t think it will take us both, Mr Hamat, we are big people, huh. We really don’t want to break your family heirloom!”

Abdul Hamat openly giggled. “Yes, you westerners are tall people - probably your wife then.”

Margery gingerly squatted down on the cerise quilted-satin padding of the dais under the attractive canopy drapes. Smoothing out her dress over her legs, Margery glanced up at their smiling host standing beside her, whilst Robert snapped away with his digital camera. “I wonder how many other foreign women have sat in this ridiculous position” she cattily echoed in her head.

Their host, still with a smile, ushered them through a door leading to the rest of the house with the words “Mind your head – you tall people”.

The Tamil driver remained behind at the table, reading a newspaper.

A scraping sound against a door and a heavy grunt made Margery and Robert look expectantly at their host as they stood in the shadowy little hallway between two rooms. His smile slipping and his head turned the other way Abdul Hamat explained in a low voice. “The room on the left is our private room. The only one we keep close to the public - where as you will understand - my family – our women can gain some privacy.”

He had now stepped into the other room on the right.

“This is our bedroom. Come in, please!” His eyes averted, Abdul Hamat stood beside a bed. There was a square wooden table with a cotton floral tablecloth and a chair. Another open door led out onto a balcony at the side of the house.

Ducking their head to enter through the low door, Margery and Robert gently stepped on the polished wooden floor.

“This is our bridal bed. Used to be my parents’. Of course, it’s a bit small by your standards” He stopped as another thudding sound had his guests turning the other way.

Behind them Aziza peeped from the door, half in and half out of the room. Margery stared. It was the woman from under the house. All three were looking at Aziza and the glare of her coal black eyes.

Wanting to communicate her thanks for letting them into their home, Margery smiled.

Abdul Hamat’s fists tightened at his sides.

“Ah - this is - my – Aziza,” he offered brightly, the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth but not quite reaching his eyes. “She can’t speak English.” And went onto explain.

Then abruptly turned his back on Aziza, signalling with his hand from behind his back to disappear.

“Key!” She hissed in her language.

“Later!” He snarled under his breath in Malay.

Panicking, Aziza’s poise faltered – her eyes on the two guests staring back at her. Then she withdrew. Margery was left admiring the woman’s native dress with its long green and turquoise crêpe de chine tunic, a matching ankle-length skirt and a scarf tied tightly around her head and draped over her shoulders.

The visitors were now shown the balcony. “Oh this is heavenly, Bob!” Margery exclaimed in delight. “I can see the jungle from far beyond. Wow!”

“Yes, Madam Wales,” the host proudly chuckled, standing by her side, delighting in her childlike response. “We are very lucky to have a jungle for our garden!” His face brimmed with a wide grin. “Isn’t it lovely, Madam? This veranda is very important for our women. We are Muslims, as you know. Here, at the side of the house our women can have some privacy to enjoy both the sun and the breeze. Also it is safe here, away from the snakes from the jungle. Oh don’t worry, Madam, there are no snakes in this house!” He hastened to explain, seeing the look of horror on her face. “My mother always sat here – her favourite spot in the house and told us stories in the afternoons whilst preparing vegetables for the dinner- you see - there is always a cool breeze up here – Madam, come and sit on this stool, close

your eyes and imagine that you are in my mother's days. Is my English ok? Come Madam. You won't fall!" he patted the stool. "It's strong. Don't worry - it will not break – women of all sizes have sat on it." He chuckled, this time his body doubled over. "There was this big American lady ..." he stopped himself, drawing in his cheeks filled with silent laughter, remembering his manners.

Margery politely looked away not relishing hearing about the incident of the unfortunate American woman and instead gazed at the huge flapper-like leaves of the tall trees. Robert placed his arm protectively around her shoulders.

Aziza tiptoed back into the room, watched them for a few seconds – praying that they would not dawdle too long in the house. Abdul Hamat did not see her pull a small parcel tied in an old rag from under the mattress of the bed and then scurry to stand outside the other door, softly calling. "Ibrahim - Soon! I will get the key."

Still on tiptoe she went down to the kitchen and dropped the two small parcels containing money and jewellery into a small aluminium pot and propped it near the door.

Hand trembling, she waited listening to their footsteps.

On the balcony, Margery wrinkled her nose. "I can smell wood burning, Robert."

"That Madam Wales - is our Aziza cooking the dinner down below." Their host was quick to explain. "Come and see our lovely kitchen. I am sure it's different from yours. We still like to use wood like the old days- In this house we don't like modern cookers. You can taste our special stew later."

Margery reluctantly got up from the stool, "I could sit here all day, Bob," She mourned, wanting to savour the scene for a few more minutes.

They followed their host to the kitchen on a lower level, gingerly standing on the wooden steps. Margery wondered whether they could have strangers inspecting their house in Bangor like this. The thought horrified her.

From the steps, their eyes skirted over the sooty paintwork, the kitchen items dangling from the walls and the open fire with its aluminium cooking pot on top. Kitchen furniture consisted of two wall cabinets crammed with crockery, a stool and one old wooden chair.

Aziza stepped into the kitchen from the other little door - her face paling at the two visitors staring curiously down at the piece of burning wood in her hand. Her face breaking into a polite smile and eyes steady she put the burning log back under the cooking pot.

Abdul Hamat addressed Aziza in Malay. Keeping her eyes on the fire, she muttered something back. Margery and Robert looked away, unable to understand but feeling the tension in the air.

Their amiable host turned to them, pinning a bright smile to his face.

“Here, Sir, take a picture. You can show your friends back home what an old-fashioned Malay kitchen looks like.”

Margery now wished to be gone. The body language, the expression, and the look in the woman’s eyes spelt to even the dimmest that they were intruders and had no right to be patronisingly surveying her kitchen and taking snaps!

Margery caught her breath. “We have stepped into a domestic volcano!” flashed the alarming thought. Immediately, she dismissed it as her imagination running away with her.

Aziza was puffing air into the hearth to fan the flames.

“Does it take a long time to light?” Margery asked, now disliking the host. It wasn’t he who had to cook this way!

“Oh no, Madam Wales. Only a few seconds.” Abdul Hamat breezily explained.

“Come. Let’s go back to the main room upstairs.”

As they disappeared upstairs, he softly commanded Aziza in Malay. “Our visitors are going. Please bring them some soup and bid them goodbye.”

“To hell with them! I have said goodbyes to thousands already - what difference will it make today if I don’t. Anyway, I’ll do it later and in style! Give me the key, and get them out of here! Or you will regret it!” the voice chilling.

Abdul Hamat’s poise didn’t falter, but the body had stiffened. He would deal with her later. He followed the guests back into the dining room. The driver was still sitting with his head bent over the newspaper.

“Please, let me offer you some refreshments. You must taste our warm hospitality. Aziza!” Abdul Hamat called from the door.

“Please don’t bother.” Margery coloured, hastening to add “We already had a good lunch before we came,” not wanting to see the woman again.

“If you are sure!” he looked pleased.

Margery nodded her head vigorously.

“Ok then. I wonder if you don’t mind signing our visitor’s book” He held up a pen and a thick register with frayed edges, evidently having passed many hands. Abdul Hamat proudly rifled through the pages, blotted with hundreds of black and blue signatures and addresses. “You see I get visitors from all over the world and they all sign it!”

“We will do the same and with pleasure, Mr Hamat.” Robert quickly obliged with his signature and then passed the book to Margery, exchanging a knowing glance, as their host discreetly placed a small money basket full of currency notes on the table. Abdul Hamat peered over Margery’s shoulder, pleased with her comment. With the register signed, he glanced at the money basket.

“These, as you can see, are kind donations by people like yourself who visit my home.” His hand was now in the basket, “... notes from different parts of the world.” Then he felt the tissue paper come into his hand instead of banknotes. Anger shot through his wiry body - he would definitely be dealing with her today!

Margery and Robert hid a smile. From what they could see their Malay host was doing very well indeed.

Robert took out a ten pound sterling note from his wallet and placed it on top of the pile of other notes. The taxi driver smiled, inclining his head appreciatively. The host was now politely looking away – out of the window.

Then he held out his hand to them. Margery was unsure whether to shake hands with him or not. As a Muslim, he would not normally be shaking hands with a woman.

Instead she offered. “Thank you for sharing your lovely home with us. It has indeed been quite an experience!”

“My pleasure, Madam. I hope you have a safe journey back home.”

“Please thank your wife for us.” Margery added watching the host’s face with interest. Abdul Hamat politely inclined his head, smiled once again and waved them off.

“You know, Margery,” Robert began as they reached their car “I don’t know how that woman can manage in that kitchen of hers, the smoke – I can smell it from here.”

“I told you, Bob.”

They turned to the patter of feet running from behind the house. It was the woman. Ignoring them Aziza ran up the steps and stood in front of a highly embarrassed Abdul Hamat. Muttering and shaking her head at him, she shoved her hand into his trouser pocket. He grabbed her tightly by the wrist. She pulled away and ran down to the driver, speaking to him in rapid Bhasa Malay. "Please help me! I must get him out. The key- I need the key". Mouths parted, Bob and Margery looked on.

"Key? From where?" The driver asked.

"Look!" She pointed down to the wooden platform. The driver's eyes widened in shock.

Then Aziza rushed back to Abdul, this time managing to pull the key out of his pocket and ran into the house with the driver sprinting behind her.

"Ibrahim! Ibrahim!" Panic ridden, Aziza fumbled with the key in the lock.

Throwing open the door, she ran to the man lying on the floor in the small bedroom.

"Please help him. He can't walk!" She urged the driver as he gripped the man from under his armpits to pull him up into a standing position. Resting his arms on their shoulders, they dragged him out of the house with a burst of energy and hobbled down the steps.

Abdul Hamat looked on, horrified.

They laid the man on the dry grass, away from the house. Aziza cradled his head in her arms, tears streaming down her line creased cheeks.

"Aziza!" Abdul Hamat shouted from the porch.

"Come and take a last look at your precious show house, Abdul Hamat!" she jeered in return.

"What are you saying, you mad woman?"

Body shaking with hysteria, Aziza pointed to the house.

Abdul Hamat scrambled down, two steps at a time.

"You mad woman!" He cried peering at the flames at the sides of the house. His worst fear realised. She had once threatened. Today she had done it!

"Quick! Water! It will all go up. Aziza!"

She looked on. He rushed to the water pump at the back of the house and soon appeared dragging a bucket of water.

"Too late!" She watched him throw the water on the burning wall. "The kitchen is on fire, too! I made sure of that."

Bob and Margery remained rooted to the spot. Unable to speak or move. Should they run and help their host? The woman had indeed gone mad.

Abdul Hamat was back with another bucket. Then stared helplessly at the flames greedily licking away at the front porch, coiling around the plant pots. The driver took the bucket of water and threw it on the flames.

“Bob, that man was inside the house!” Margery at last managed to exclaim.

Her husband nodded – bemused, looking around and then staring down at the woman squatting on the ground and muttering into the man’s ears.

“Ibrahim! Are you all right?” Aziza tenderly brushed strands of his grey wet hair from his face.

“Why was he locked up?” The driver whispered in Malay, standing beside Aziza.

“He locked him up!” Aziza accused pointing her finger at Abdul Hamat.

“Your husband? Why?”

“No! The one locked up is my husband– The other is my brother. He locks Ibrahim up every time visitors come – ashamed of his disability – done it for the last thirty years.” Aziza’s dark eyes darted fire.

“For thirty years!” the driver ejaculated.” He is a man - Why does he let himself be locked up?”

“Because he is mentally retarded. He...” The words jammed in her mouth, as she pointed once again at the host. “He... He married me off to Ibrahim so that he could have this house after our parents died in an accident.” Dazed Abdul Hamat was watching his house go up in flames. The fire now gripped the upper level of the house.

Enraged Aziza got up and dashed to Abdul Hamat, poking him hard on the chest. “You have robbed me of my home, my youth, my freedom - my life in fact - made us prisoners of your greed and tyranny. Well look...” the voice shook with tears and hysteria “Well now you can have it all! The ashes!”

Shaking his head in disbelief, Abdul Hamat winced when he saw her pull out a thick wad of banknotes from her tunic pocket and swished them in front of his eyes. “The money - from the basket- that you made from our misery!” Her eyes large in her weather-beaten face, she was now giggling like a child. “I’m taking it all with us. Finally escaping from you. You stay and watch - the ashes – the home you turned into a museum and a fortress

for me and my husband. See!” She held up the palm of her right hand to show a raw blister “I burnt it with this”.

“This is government property! And you have destroyed it - you stupid, mad woman! You will be jailed for this!”

“I don’t care!” Standing on her toes to be level with him, she snarled into his face.

Then sauntered back to the driver. “Please take my Ibrahim to hospital. Please help me!”

“You have gone mad!” Abdul Hamat shouted, running to her and pulling at her arm. She pushed him back and bending down cradled Ibrahim’s head in her arms once more.

“Ibrahim, my darling we are free. I won’t let anyone lock you up ever again. You will always sit out on the veranda with your coke. I promise. All day - if that is what you want - I’ll see to it - my dear husband” She wept over him, eyes tender.

With a wobbly smile, Ibrahim looked up into her eyes.

Aziza pulled him up and let the driver help them into the car.

Robert and Margery stepped aside. Too afraid and embarrassed to say or to ask. They had simply become invisible.

“Is no one going to put out the fire?” Robert finally ventured to croak as he saw the driver get into the car.

“It’s too late, Sir. There are no fire engines in this area. In any case by the time they arrive, the whole thing will have disappeared.” His eyes averted from his passengers, the driver looked at the burning building through his car mirror. “Do you mind if I take this lady and the man to the hospital, he needs seeing to.”

“Not at all.” Margery quickly got into the car. “Come on, Bob”

“But the host – Margery – we can’t just leave him behind - Not like this! What is he going to do?”

“Shush –just get in, Bob.” She pulled her husband into the car and waited for the driver to explain. It was all too surreal for them.

The driver was not in a mood to divulge anything, however. The woman had suffered enough indignities in her life already, than to have it capped it further by sharing it with these western tourists.

Ibrahim was belted into the front passenger seat. Aziza stiffly sat next to Margery. They had exchanged a quick nervous smile before Aziza gazed out of the car window. The driver turned to his other passengers. His eyes

not quite meeting theirs in the driver's mirror, he asked. "Sir and Madam would you want to try the scorpion farm now or the Batu Caves?"

Bob and Margery turned to look back. Their Malay host stood stooped against the tree, staring at the remains of his house. "Don't worry, Sir, I will go back for the host later!" the driver reassured.

"Margery— Did we do the right thing leaving that poor man?" Three miles later Margery whispered "Did that really happen, Bob, or did I imagine it all?"

Her husband was staring at the wobbling head of the passenger in the front seat.

A PAIR OF JEANS

Miriam slid off the bus seat and glanced quickly at her watch. They were coming! And she was very late. Murmuring her goodbye to her two university friends, she made her way to the door and waited for her bus stop to approach. Once there she got off the bus and hurriedly waved goodbye to her friends again. She pulled the jacket close to her body, becoming suddenly very self-conscious about her jean-clad legs and the short vest she wore beneath it. It had, unfortunately, shrunk in the wash. All day she had kept pulling it down to cover her midriff. Strange but she felt odd in her clothing. Yet they were just the type of clothes she had needed to wear today; for hill walking in the Peak District, in the North West of England. Somehow here, in the vicinity of her home, however, she felt different. As she crossed the road and headed for her own street, she was very conscious of her appearance and hoped that she would not meet anyone she knew. She tugged at the hemline of her vest; it had ridden up yet again. With the other hand, she held onto the jacket front as it had no buttons.

Her mind turned to the outing. It had been a wonderful day, but her legs ached after climbing all those green hills – still it was worth it. Her eye on her watch, she quickened her pace. It was much later than she had anticipated. She remembered the phone call of yesterday evening. They said they were coming today. What if they had already arrived? She glanced down at her tightly jean-clad legs. As soon as she got home she must discreetly make her way to her room and quickly get changed.

Just as Miriam reached the gate of her semi-detached house, she heard a car pull up behind her. Nervously, she swept round to see who it was. On spotting the colour of the car and the person behind the wheel, her step faltered – colour ebbing from her face. On the pretence of opening the gate, she turned round and tried to collect her wits about her. Too late! They were already here. Her heart was now rocking madly against her chest and the clothes burned her. She wanted to quickly rush inside her home and peel them off. She clutched at her jacket front, covering her waist.

She braced her shoulders. She could not scurry inside. That was not the way things were done, no matter what the circumstances. Calmly let go of the gate and turned round to greet the two people who had by now stepped out of the car and were surveying her. She didn't realise that she had let go of her jacket too. It fell wide open, revealing the short vest underneath. Their eyes fell straight to the inch of flesh at her waist. The woman was her

future mother-in-law, a slightly frail woman dressed in shalwar and kameez with a chador around her shoulders. The elderly man, behind the wheel earlier, was the woman's husband. He seemed to tower behind his wife.

Miriam found herself unable to look either of them in the eye. A watery, hesitant smile played around her mouth. She did not know what to do, or how to act. Her cheeks burnt in embarrassment; poise now very much lost. And yet these were the very people she wanted to impress. All she was aware of was the surreptitious glances they darted at her. In fact not at her as Miriam, but at the figure, the appearance she presented clad in a pair of Levis and a skimpy leather jacket to top it off. This was not the Miriam they knew, but a stranger; a western version of Miriam. She immediately sensed their awkwardness. They too were caught off guard and did not know what to do with themselves – in particular with their eyes. The father-in-law was bent on avoiding eye contact with her, by studiously looking above her head.

He pushed the gate open and in two strides had crossed the driveway and was now solidly knocking on the front door. Miriam stepped aside to let the woman pass, silently walking behind her husband. Miriam followed them in a semi-daze. As she closed the gate behind her she remembered with mortification that while the woman had accepted her mumbled greeting, by her reply '*Walaikum Assalam*', the father-in-law had ignored it. That was not like him at all.

Miriam's mother, Fatima, opened the door to her expected guests, beaming in pleasure and warmth as she beheld them. She had not expected Miriam to come with them, however. When she saw her daughter hovering behind the two guests, Fatima received a shock. Never before in her life had Miriam glimpsed such a dramatic change in her mother's face. Normally she wouldn't have batted an eyelid if her daughter had turned up at her door at 11 o'clock at night, as long as she knew where she was and with whom and at what time she was returning home. Today, however, she was viewing her daughter's arrival and appearance through a different set of lenses. In fact, through the lenses of Miriam's future in-laws – the view just didn't look very good.

In one glance, she took in her daughter's appearance. The jeans which wouldn't have normally aroused her interest, today stood out brazenly on Miriam's body, tightly moulded against her full legs. Fatima couldn't quite make herself understand why she felt ashamed of her daughter's clothing

and why she was suddenly angry with her, for being seen like this. Her eyes gaped at Miriam's midriff showing through. Heat was now rushing through Fatima's cheeks. An inch of her daughter's flesh was visible! Her mind reeling and the urge to usher her out of sight strong, Fatima communicated her displeasure and desperately signalled with her eyebrows, to her daughter to go up and change into something more respectable. Miriam understood and was only too glad to oblige.

Squeezing past her mother and out of sight of their guests who had now entered their living room, Miriam almost ran up the stairs to her bedroom. Once there, she shut the door behind her and breathed out deeply. Her earlier feeling of tiredness and exhilaration from the hill walking had vanished – instead discontent had taken its place. A mere two steps into her home had led to another world. The other she had left behind with her friends on the bus. She shrugged the feeling aside. What mattered now were the two people downstairs. And they mattered! Her future lay with them.

Going further into the room she peeled off her jacket, vest and tight pair of jeans, and let them fall, lying in a clutter on the woollen carpet. She looked down at them with distaste. Her mouth twisted into a cynical line. "Damn it!" Her mind shouted – rebelling. "They are only clothes. I am still the same young woman they visited regularly – the person that they have happily chosen as a bride for their son in their household."

"Deny it as much as you like, Miriam", her heart whispered back. "It's no use. They have seen another side of you – your other persona."

The other 'persona' had apparently, by either sheer accident or mere contrivance, remained hidden from them from the very beginning. When they first saw her at a party, she was dressed in a maroon chiffon sari and on each later occasion she was always smartly but discreetly and respectably dressed in a traditional shalwar kameez suit. Never at any time had they glimpsed a tightly jean-clad Miriam with an inch of midriff showing! In fact, judging by her mother's expression and lack of composure, it must have been a nasty shock! For now, they were seeing her as a young college woman who was very much under the sway of western fashion and by extension its moral values. Muslim girls do not go outdoors dressed like that, especially in the short jacket, which hardly covered her hips, and a skimpy vest. She had heard of stories about in-laws who were prejudiced against such girls. For they weren't the docile, the obedient and sweet daughters-in-law that they preferred. On the contrary, they were seen as a

threat and portrayed as rebellious *hoydens*, who did not respect either their husbands or their in-laws. Miriam was all too familiar with such stereotyped views of women.

From her wardrobe, she pulled off a blue crepe shalwar kameez suit from a hangar. As she put it on, her rebellious spirit reared its head again. “They are only clothes!” her mind hissed in anger.

She could not deny the fact however, that having them on her back she had embraced a new set of values. In fact, a new personality. Her body was now modestly swathed in an elegant long tunic and baggy trousers. The curvy contours of her female body were discreetly draped. With a quick glance in the mirror, she left her room. It was a confident woman gliding down the stairs. She was now in full control of herself. There was to be no scuttling down the stairs; her poise was back. Her long dupatta scarf was draped around her shoulders and one edge of it was over her head.

Once downstairs in the hallway, outside the sitting room door, she halted, her hypocrisy galling her. She was neatly acting out a role, the one that her future in-laws preferred. A role of a demure and elegant bride and daughter-in-law – dressed modestly, with her body properly covered. Yet she was the same person who had earlier traipsed the Pennine countryside in a tight pair of jeans and walking-boots and who was now dressed in the height of Pakistani fashion. The difference lay in what her in-laws regarded and termed as an acceptable mode of dress. Or was she the same person? She didn’t know. Perhaps it was true that there were two sides to her character. A person who spontaneously switched from one setting to another, from one mode of dress into another – in short swapping one identity for another. Now, dressed as she was, she was part and parcel of another identity, of another world, that of a Muslim-Asian environment. Ensnared now in the other home ground, her thoughts, actions and feelings had seamlessly altered accordingly.

Her head held high, Miriam entered the living room. Once inside, she felt four pairs of eyes turn in her direction. She stared ahead knowing instinctively that apart from her father’s, those eyes were busy comparing her present demure appearance with her earlier one. It was amazing how she was able to move around the room at ease, in her shalwar kameez suit, in a manner that she could never have done in her earlier clothes amongst these people. She sat down beside her mother, acutely aware of her mother-

in-law's eyes; discreetly appraising both her appearance and her movements.

After a while, the conversation flagged. Fatima was doing her very best at entertaining and trying to revive a number of topics of interest to the other couple. The two guests, however, seemed to shy away. In particular, from the one concerning their children's marriage in six months' time. Miriam sat up, noticing that they were ill at ease and had made no direct eye contact with her. This was so unlike their usual behaviour. There were moments too, when husband and wife had exchanged surreptitious glances. Fatima was now quite anxious. From the moment her guests had stepped into their home, her instinct told her that something was wrong. She was ready to discuss the subject with them. But first she requested her daughter to bring in some refreshments. The dinner had already been prepared and laid out on the dining table in the kitchen.

Miriam was only too happy to leave the room; behind her a hushed silence reigned. She pottered around the kitchen, collecting bits and pieces of crockery from the cupboards. Her own hunger had vanished. The appearance of those two people had done a miraculous thing to her metabolic system. She was arranging the plates and glasses on the tray when she heard their voices in the hallway. They sounded as if were saying goodbye to her parents in the hallway. Surprised, Miriam hastened and picked up the tray. Were they going already? They hadn't eaten anything! The table was laid for dinner. She called "Auntie" addressing her future mother-in-law. She turned and smiled. They were in a hurry to get home, because they had guests staying in their home, she informed.

'That is a lousy excuse', Miriam thought. If they had guests at home, why did they bother to come in the first place, anyway? Still dwelling on the subject she returned to the kitchen and put the tray back on the table. What a waste of time!

The two parents-in-law walked to their car in silence – both were lost in their own thoughts. The silence continued during their journey. There was no need for communication. Somehow they could guess what the other was thinking about and read each other's thoughts fairly accurately. On reaching home, the so-called guests to whom Begum had referred earlier, had apparently gone. Their elder son, Farook was not yet in. The younger was

upstairs, studying for his ‘GCSE’ examinations. They could hear the music from the CD disc blaring away. He loved listening to songs as he revised.

Ayub shed his jacket and hung it in the hallway and went straight to the living room. Begum followed behind, also taking off her coat and outdoor shawl. Switching on the television, Ayub sat down in his armchair. Begum hovered listlessly near his armchair for a minute, looking down at her husband – waiting. Then mechanically folding her woollen shawl into its customary neat folds, she left the room and went upstairs to her bedroom to place it in her drawer. For a few moments she stood lost in her thoughts, looking out of the bedroom window. Mrs Williams had another car. This was the third in six months. What did she do with them? Then she heard her husband call her name, his voice supremely autocratic.

Mrs Williams and her love of cars put aside, Begum returned to the living room and sat down on the sofa opposite her husband, waiting for him to begin. Her heartbeat had automatically quickened. The seconds were ticking away into minutes, and her husband, however, still had made no move to say anything, his gaze on the newscaster. Instead she picked up the Urdu national newspaper ‘Daily Jang’ from the coffee table, and began to read it. More precisely she was pretending to read it, the words were a blur in front of her eyes.

Ayub, at last, stood up, stretching out his legs. Striding across the room, he switched off the television. Returning to his chair, his pointed gaze now fell on his wife.

“Well”, he began softly.

It was now her turn to play; she pretended not to hear him or understand the implication of his exclamation “well”. Now that the moment of reckoning had come, she absurdly wanted to prevaricate – to put the discussion off.

“Well, what?” she responded coldly, buying time, peeping at her unsmiling husband over the edge of the newspaper.

“You know very well what I mean! Don’t pretend to misunderstand me, Begum,” he rasped under his breath, not at all amused by her manner, tone or her words.

Begum calmly examined the harsh outlines of her husband’s unsmiling face. She was lost. She did not know what to say, or how to say it, although she knew the subject he was referring to. Thus her lips would not open, she simply stared at him.

“Well, what do you think of your future daughter-in-law? I thought you told me that she was a very “sharif”, a very modest girl. Was that naked waist what you would call modest?” He lanced at her.

“I am sure she is.” Begum defensively volunteered, feeling hedged. After all she was the one who had originally taken a liking to Miriam.

“Huh!” Ayub grunted. “Sharif! Dressed like that! God knows who has seen her. Would you like any of your friends and relatives to have seen her as she appeared today, would you Begum?” The voice was cutting.

“But she’s a college student – college students do dress like that. Haven’t you yourself joked about tatty jean-clad university students?” Begum boldly persisted.

She wanted to excuse Miriam’s mode of dress to herself and to him; she knew she was not going to make a success of it because, secretly in her own heart, she very much agreed with her husband.

“Tell me, in those clothes of hers, would you be proud to have her as your daughter-in-law? I know I am not. You talk about her being a university student. Well, have you any idea what sort of company that she might be keeping with that lot. You’ve only seen her at odd times, and always at home. Do you know what she is really like? Have you thought of the effect she could have in your household? With her life style, such girls also want a lot of freedom. In fact, they want to lead their lives the way their English college friends do. Did you notice what time she came in? She knew we were coming, yet that had not made any difference to her lifestyle. Do you expect her to change overnight in order to suit us? People form habits, Begum, do you understand? Are you prepared for a daughter-in-law who goes in and out of the house whenever she feels like it, dressed like that and returns home as late as that? Don’t your cheeks burn at the thought of that bit of flesh you saw? Imagine how our son will feel about her! I hope shame! And what if she has a boyfriend already – have you thought of that? What if she has a boyfriend already? What if she takes drugs? What if... What if... So many questions to ask ourselves! Do you know, we do not know this girl at all, Begum! Can you guarantee that she will make our son happy?”

He paused strategically, waiting for her to say something. Begum, bemused, had nothing to add. The talking had become his arena not hers. He continued.

“You know of a number of cases where the educated, the so-called *modern* girls have twined their husbands around their little fingers, and expected them to dance to their tunes. Are you prepared for that to happen to your beloved son? To lose him to such a daughter-in-law? Have you the heart for that?”

Begum just stared, listening quietly to her husband’s angry lecture. Deep down, however, in her own heart, she agreed with much of what he had said. Rattled by his tone and his words, she, however, was reluctant to voice her agreement. She hadn’t quite anticipated the direction towards which the conversation was heading. After 25 years of marriage, she could read him like a book – his words, their nuance, the tilt of his eyebrow, the authoritative swing of his hand, the thin line of his mouth spelled only one message.

She had already jumped ahead. With a sinking heart, she had guessed correctly the conclusion, the outcome of this discussion. She did not know how to react in front of him, nor did she disagree with him over anything he said. Not one jot. Her own thoughts had run in a similar direction. When she saw Miriam, standing near the garden gate with her jacket open, similar thoughts had whizzed through her mind too, although she would not have voiced them in such a harsh way. Her perception of what her daughter-in-law should be like did not quite tally with the picture that Miriam presented to them or to the clear picture that Ayub’s words had conjured up. Why did that stupid girl have to wear those jeans and that vest today of all days? She angrily groaned inside her head. And why did Ayub have to see her like that?

She had always reckoned on a conventional sort of daughter-in-law – the epitome of tradition. Definitely not one who was so strongly influenced by western form of dress, culture and probably feminist ideas as Miriam. The mad girl had no qualms about blatantly showing a part of her body in a public place. Begum shuddered.

What about Farook, their son? How would they deal with him? Luckily, it was not Farook who had initially befriended Miriam, but she herself. A glimpse of Miriam at a Mehndi party (hen party), had tugged at Begum’s heart. From the first moment, she had fitted the epitome of what her future daughter-in-law should be like – young, beautiful and well educated. She had just obtained three ‘A’ levels, at high grades from school, and was now doing a geography degree at the university.

Begum had liked the way Miriam had behaved – ever so correctly and gracefully. Above all, she had liked the way she dressed herself. How ironic that assumption was after today’s event. It was the way the black chiffon sari had hugged her slender figure, and how her hair was elegantly wound up in a knot at the top of her head – just perfect. She was neither over-dressed, nor over-decked in jewels, nor over made-up as some of her peers were wont to be. Nor for that matter was she over-boisterous or making a spectacle of herself as some of her friends did. In short, she had viewed her as the epitome of perfection, everything that was correct and appealing. She definitely had stood out from amongst the other girls. Looking back now, two years later, Begum was sure that, not her son, but she herself had fallen in love with Miriam at first sight, and not just that. Her name ‘Miriam’ wove a magic spell around her. It had a special ring to it and she had loved using it.

And there was more – Begum had taken a real liking to Miriam’s parents too, especially her mother. And, liking one’s child’s in-laws, particularly the mother was an important part of the equation. She knew of cases where the two mothers-in-law hated each other’s guts and never quite got on with each other. Begum and Miriam’s mother, Fatima, met for the first time at the Mehndi party. After that, they became warm friends and were seen to be in and out of each other’s homes. With the subject of their growing children’s futures looming on their domestic horizons, the two mothers had, as a matter of course, discussed and dwelled at length on the subject of their children’s marriage prospects.

Farook and Miriam had also met each other soon afterwards. Often accompanied by their parents, they too, took a liking to each other. They found they were very compatible in their interests and personalities and had a lot to laugh about – often giggling together. When their parents suggested the idea of marriage – both heartily agreed. Farook just couldn’t help grinning all over. Miriam was struck with sudden shyness, her cheeks burning. Soon afterwards an engagement party was held for the two. In order to let them complete their respective courses, the wedding was to be postponed for a year or so.

That was a year ago. Today Farook’s parents went to meet Miriam’s, in order to discuss the arrangements for the forthcoming wedding in six months’ time. They were to decide on the date and discuss possible venues for the two receptions. Instead they had returned home, without even

mentioning the word wedding. Yet their thoughts were very much centred on that subject. However, more importantly on Miriam herself – her clothes and her body!

“Well?” Ayub’s cold prompting brought his wife to the present.

Begum turned to look at her husband once more and calmly waited for him to finish what he was going to say. There was a speculative gleam in his eyes.

“What are you going to do?” He rasped.

This time she could not pretend to misunderstand him.

She faced him squarely – poised for a battle. Yet as she was about to utter the words her heart sank. For she saw her Miriam fast disappearing from the horizon. But then as she tried to clutch onto her image in her mind, there arose that one of her in that silly pair of faded jeans, and that ridiculously short vest. Her heart sank. It had to be. It was better to face the matter now than regret it later. The problem was, how she, Begum, was going to deal with it. She did not have the heart nor the courage to play the role demanded of her; nor the one that she inevitably had to play in this drama. Knowing her husband, she knew for sure, that he would leave it to her – to sort out the situation with the two parties; her son and Miriam and her family.

Once again, she looked her husband directly in the eye.

“You truly don’t want the wedding to take place then?” she tentatively asked, still desperate to hold onto Miriam.

Begum’s gaze fell. His eyes crushed.

“I thought I had already made myself obvious! What do you think?” He was enraged and he let her know it.

“I suppose I agree with what you say, but how are we going to go about it?” Begum stammered, the boldness gone, now very much resigned to both her and Miriam’s fates.

“I leave that entirely to you – especially as you were the one so hot on the girl. I am sure we can find lots of other women for our son, women who have a more discreet taste in clothing and a good understanding of female modesty. Similarly, I am sure her parents will find a man more suited to her lifestyle than our son, a man who has the capacity to tolerate her particular mode of dressing, for the want of a better word.”

They heard the front door open. That must be their Farook. They stopped talking and stared at each other. Begum’s heart was thumping away,

dreading talking to him about Miriam. She felt like a traitor. Quickly getting up she went into the kitchen to get his dinner. She hoped he would go straight to his room first. Ayub picked up the newspaper and began to read it.

Miriam had just got in from university, when she heard the 'phone ringing. She dashed down from her room to answer it. She faltered - it was Aunt Begum. She quickly obliged Begum in her request to speak to her mother and called her mother. Leaving the 'phone she went into the living room and sat down to watch television.

Fatima left the meal she was preparing and went to speak to Begum. They talked for nearly five minutes. There were several moments of awkward pauses on either side of the telephone receivers. By the time the conversation ended a pinched look had settled around Fatima's mouth.

Begum had nervously said her 'Salam'. Fatima had quite literally forgotten to return the greeting at the end, but silently put the receiver down. Her eyes stared at the wall.

At the other end, with her head bent over her legs, Begum thanked Allah that it was over and done with. She sank down against the banister of the stairs. She felt bad, oh God, terribly bad. She had hated herself every minute of that conversation and the role she had been forced to play. Putting herself in Fatima's position, she realised how painful it must be for her. How would she feel if she had found out that her daughter was to be jilted at the last minute?

Mechanically, as if in a daze, and with her hand held against her temple, Fatima, for her part, went into the living room. Going to the sofa, she sat down and absent-mindedly pushed the cushion aside and stared in front of her, at the fireplace.

Miriam did not notice anything unusual about her mother until she realised that her mother had not said a word since she entered the room. "What did Aunt Begum say?" she asked quietly – her heart's rhythm had altered for some reason.

"I – I," Fatima stalled as she sought to answer her daughter's question. She was not yet ready to divulge what she had learnt. She was still reeling from the shock herself. What would it do to her daughter? She turned her face away from her daughter.

“What is it, Mother?” Miriam’s heart had now gained a steady sharp beat. Dread entered. “What did Aunt Begum say?” she asked again.

Unable to control herself any longer Fatima bitterly burst out with, “She said that your engagement had to be broken off!”

Miriam paled. Her heart had now sunk to the pit of her stomach. “Why, Mother?” she said quietly. She was amazed at how clearly her mind was functioning, although a buzzing sound seemed to hammer in her head.

“She said that they came yesterday to inform us, but found it impossible to get around to doing so. Begum says that her sister insists that her daughter was betrothed to Farook. That they were well-matched together. She says she is very sorry and apologises, but apparently her sister comes first.”

“Liars! What a lousy excuse!” Miriam’s mind screamed, but she uttered not a word – instead left the room.

She ran upstairs to her bedroom, and closed the door behind her. Standing in the middle of the room, she drew in a deep breath.

Where did this sister come from? Why was it she was never heard of before?

“Not to marry Farook?” Miriam voiced loudly. Why, only yesterday she was planning how they were going to lead their lives together. In fact deciding in which area they were going to purchase their house, after they got married and had jobs.

Her mouth twisted into a cynical line. In her heart she knew. From that first moment she saw them that night in her jeans and short vest, she had had a dreadful premonition. She had known, although she had denied it emphatically to herself, that something was wrong or bound to go wrong. Their faces, their body language had told the whole story.

The buzzing sound was still hammering in her head. Going to her wardrobe, she pulled it open and looked inside. Her eyes sought wildly and her hands rummaged through the clothes and the hangers, until she found what she was seeking.

She pulled off from the hanger the repugnant looking article and threw it on the floor, as if it burned her to hold it. She stared at it as if mesmerised by it. Then with her foot she gave it a vicious kick. Her mouth resumed its cynical twist. Her friends would never believe her if she told them.

The shabby-looking and much worn pair of jeans lay nonchalantly near the end of the bed, blissfully unaware of the havoc it had created in the life

of its wearer.

She stepped over the pair of jeans and looked at herself in the long mirror on the wall. Eyes widening, she scrutinised her face and body for any tell-tale signs of her inner turmoil. Her face looked haggard. The mouth, which was normally full-lipped, was now a thin, sharp, pinkish line. There was a certain stiffness about her, the way her shoulders sloped down; as if carrying her body was an immense ordeal.

Angrily, she swept away from the mirror and went to the window to look down at the lawn and flower beds in the rear garden. Ideas and thoughts jolted and formed in her head, each vying with the other for attention. One idea, however, lodged itself firmly in her mind: Farook and his parents weren't going to get away with it!

"They can't do this to me!" her mind screamed. She didn't know whether Farook knew about this matter, but she was going to make sure that he definitely did and there was only one way of finding out if he didn't! She noticed that the flowers below were in full bloom. The colour of those roses reminded her of the bridal bouquet she was planning for herself. All of a sudden, her body relaxed and she felt a certain calmness descend over her as she closed her bedroom door behind her.

There was no rushing. She simply glided down the stairs and had begun to dial Farook's phone number on her mobile by the time she reached the hallway. As the phone bell pipped away at the other end, her heart skipped a beat for a fraction of a second. What if his mother or father picked up the phone? What would she say to them? She was about to snap her mobile shut when rebellion surfaced again. She shook her fears aside. So what if they answered the phone! She would deal with them and the situation as it arose. To her dismay, nobody answered the phone at the other end. She tried again, defiantly letting it ring for two minutes – somebody was going to answer it one way or another.

Her mother came out of the kitchen and saw Miriam with her mobile phone held fast to her ear. Miriam heard her mother's approach, turned and caught her eye. Fatima shot her a questioning glance. Who was she ringing? A worried look crossed her face.

At last, somebody picked up the receiver. The ringing stopped and the word "hello" was audible to Miriam's ear. Relief shot through her. It was her Farook. She greeted him first with "hello" and then with the Arabic

“*Assalam-a-Alaikum*”, “Peace be upon you!” She then reverted to speaking in English.

“Farook, it’s Miriam.” She tried to control the rhythm of her heartbeat and keep her voice steady.

“How are you, Miriam?”

“I am fine...” She was staring at her mother. Fatima was desperately signalling her to end the call.

Miriam ignored her mother’s shaking hand and turned to look instead at the picture of a landscape on the wall opposite, concentrating on what she was saying.

“Are you alone at home, Farook, or are your parents with you? If they are there, I want us to meet in the Student Union.” Tone brusque.

“Usman is with me. Mum and Dad have gone out. They’ll be back soon though; did you want to speak to them?”

“No, it’s you... I wanted to speak to you, Farook.” She paused for a few seconds, her heart thudding again, and then continued, still in control.

“Have you heard anything about us, Farook?”

“Us? No. What do you mean Miriam?” He was now quite intrigued.

“Just as I thought.” Her voice hardened. A bitter laugh echoing in her head. “It’s probably too soon for them to break it to you. They are probably deciding what to do and how to put it to you.”

“Miriam, you’ve got me all puzzled now. Come on girl, what is going on?” He nervously laughed.

“I am sorry Farook – just talking to myself. I know it’s all in riddles to you, isn’t it? Look, I can’t say much more over the phone, but can I come and see you at home, and then we can talk together with your parents?”

“Of course you can, Miriam, but really, you’ve now got me all worried, I must say.”

“It’s nothing to fret about. I’ll tell you in a short while. *Hudah Hafiz*.” Her voice and thoughts were calm again.

Miriam switched off her phone and faced her mother. Fatima noted the distinct mutinous line of her daughter’s mouth. She struggled to say the right thing but not want to bruise her daughter’s ego further. She had a duty, however, to advise her as a mother, but the right words just failed to spring to her aid. Finally, she softly offered: “Miriam, that wasn’t the right thing to do or say.”

“The right thing to do?” Miriam ejaculated – stung. “Do you think Farook’s parents have done the right thing by me?” she hissed, her betrayed eyes darting an angry beam of light at her mother.

Fatima realised her blunder. It was a mighty wrong thing to say under the circumstances. Of course her daughter had the right to feel as she did. So Fatima attempted to placate her with her next words.

“I am sorry, Miriam, I didn’t mean that. It’s just that I thought that instead of you contacting Farook, it should be us, your parents, doing it in the first place – that is the seemly thing to do.”

“Oh Mother! There you go on again about ‘seemly’ things. There is nothing ‘unseemly’ about me contacting my own fiancé.” She laid extra stress on the word “own”. “After all, I am engaged to him, am I not? Or have you forgotten that too?” Angry heat was rushing out of her cheeks.

“No I haven’t forgotten! There is no need for your sarcasm.” Fatima snapped back, also now quite flushed, beginning to get irritated with her daughter and the situation in which she presently found herself.

“I just mean that your father and I should go firstly to visit Farook and his parents to discuss the matter. Do you think that we don’t care about you – about how they have jilted you, and on what grounds? After all, it’s a matter of our *Izzat*, our honour, the way we are being treated so shabbily – that our daughter is dropped like a sack of potatoes. I was under a great deal of shock when I listened to Begum earlier today on the phone, but now the shock has worn off, and like you I am very, very angry.” She passionately ended, hoping to clarify her own feelings and position to her daughter.

Miriam shrugged. “You can sort that out with father, Farook and his parents, but I am going to see Farook personally and right now, mother!” A defiant tilt arched her eyebrows above her flashing eyes. Hoping that her mother had understood the message, Miriam swept round and went upstairs to her bedroom.

Fatima stared after her daughter helplessly – she was in a real dilemma. She wanted to tell and advise Miriam that she shouldn’t meet Farook, until they themselves had met his parents. At the same time she felt deeply for her daughter and wanted to support her in any way that she could. Never before had she felt the gulf between Miriam’s generation and her own so keenly. The generation and culture gap lay between them as wide as the ocean. She never did this sort of thing in her youth. Unthinkable! No matter

what happened, the parents saw to everything. It was they who resolved problems; children did not take things into their own hands.

Pakistan was so far from Britain; it was another place and she was thinking of another time. As her daughter had said, it wasn't a matter of what was the right thing to do convention-wise, but it was time for positive action. If Miriam thought she had a right to consult Farook about this matter, then she had every right to do so, and she, as her mother, would support her! Times had indeed changed. They lived and were brought up in different worlds, traditions and cultures. Above all, the world was quickly changing around them.

Returning to the lounge, she stood listlessly in the middle. It was a pity that her husband was not in. He would have seen to everything. What would have happened if, instead of her, her husband had picked up the phone? She wondered wryly, would Begum have said the same to her husband that she had said to her? Probably not, she thought cynically.

Inside, her blood raged, feeling so terribly bitter. What had their daughter done, to deserve to be treated in such a fashion? It was a great insult for all of them.

She herself had so liked Begum. Up till this evening she had prided herself on gaining a good *kourmani*, a mother-in-law for her daughter. They had also become good friends over the time they had known each other. And now this!

She heard her daughter's steps on the stairs – light and jaunty. Miriam entered the room. Fatima turned to look at her daughter. Her eyes widened ever so slightly as they swept over Miriam's body. Then her gaze met Miriam's and was held there. There was a challenging look in her daughter's eyes. Fatima registered the look and accepted it wordlessly. Miriam waited for her mother to make some comment about her appearance. Under her mother's shocked gaze she held herself tall and erect; the mutinous line of her mouth very much prominent.

"I am going to see Farook, Mother" she softly informed and waited, giving her mother sufficient time to say something. Fatima said nothing, her gaze dropped. Miriam then turned and left the room.

The outside door clicked shut behind her. Fatima moved to the window. It looked onto the front garden and its driveway. She saw her daughter shut the garden gate behind her. Then placing one hand in the pocket of her

faded pair of jeans, while the other held the short jacket tightly against her chest, Miriam began to walk away.

PERCHANVAH

Kaniz Bibi had just been to see her *pir*, her spiritual guide, in the next village. Her face glowed with happiness. Getting off the bus, she walked through the fields of her village. She couldn't wait to see her friend Neelum.

Just ahead of her, she spotted one of her friends and hastening her pace, called out to her.

Her friend stopped, turning round, and on spotting her, smiled at her, "Assalam Alaikum, Kaniz Bibi. How are you?"

"Wa Laikum Salam, with God's blessing, I am well. And you and your family?" she asked in return.

"We are all well, Mashallah, with God's blessing. Where have you been? Have you been visiting your relatives in the city?"

"No. I've just been to the shops and to visit my *pir* in the next village."

"Is there anything in particular that you want to see your *pir*, Sister Kaniz?"

"Yes." Unable to contain her delight, she held up her bulging shopping basket, *tokerry*, to her friend. The latter looked at it with interest. Kaniz flicked off the lid, revealing balls of blue soft wool.

"Who are you going to knit for?" Her friend asked. Kaniz smiled, creasing her face with fine lines. Her friend gave her a knowing glance. Kaniz smiled in response. Unable to contain her joy any long, she burst forth.

"We've been blessed, Sister Zakia." Her friend now fully understood her. It was a known fact in the village that Kaniz had been desperate for a grandchild. Married for five years, up till now her son and daughter-in-law had not been blessed with a child.

Kaniz held up her hands in a gesture of prayers to Allah and thanked him. Her friend followed suit and did the same.

"I am so pleased for you, Sister Kaniz. How many months have passed?"

"Oh, just three months."

"Is everything alright with the pregnancy?"

"So far, yes. I have sent her to the city to be checked over by the doctors. I have stopped her from doing any physically demanding work, and forbidden her from going to any houses with '*chilla*', women in confinement and those where a miscarriage has taken place. My *pir* has especially tutored me to beware of *perchanvah* affecting my daughter-in-

law. He has advised us not to go in a house where there is a likelihood of *perchanvah*, evil shadow, being present, and from maintaining any physical contact with any woman who has miscarried, and thus her shadow, *perchanvah*, affecting my daughter-in-law.”

“Oh don’t worry, Sister Kaniz, your Faiza is a healthy, young woman and you’ll soon be blessed with a healthy young grandson.” Zakia gave her friend a generous embrace.

“My *pir* says the same. He is sure my Faiza is going to have a son. And I believe him.” said Kaniz hugging her friend in return. “Are you going back to the village, Zakia? Let’s walk together.”

The two friends walked together, engrossed in a conversation about their children, neighbours, *pirs* and friends.

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In Kaniz’s home at that time, Faiza had just finished washing the marble-chipped floor of the veranda and the central courtyard. They had a woman helper to help with the household chores. Today, however, Faiza had insisted on cleaning the floors herself, particularly when her mother-in-law wasn’t in. The latter had stopped her doing any household chores, apart from cooking.

The outside door facing the veranda opened. Faiza looked up, expecting her father-in-law to come after praying in the local mosque.

Salma stood awkwardly in the doorway, not knowing whether she would be welcomed inside or not. Her eyes quickly scanned the courtyard and veranda to see if anybody else was around. Her facial expression conveyed her inner unease.

On seeing her best friend, Faiza was at first surprised and afraid, and then common sense asserting itself, she smiled.

Salma gestured with her hand to ask if anybody else was in the house. Faiza shook her head, and then nodded her head to call her in, feeling guilty at the same time, as if she was committing a crime. Her friend Salma too, felt like a criminal for some reason or other, knowing that with her *perchanvah* she shouldn’t be visiting her pregnant friend. If Faiza’s mother-in-law, Kaniz, found out or saw her!

Faiza got up from the floor and moved towards her friend. As she went halfway across the courtyard, she slipped and fell with a thud on the

concrete floor, emitting a cry of pain and shock.

Horrified, Salma moved to her friend's aid, emitting the word "*Allah Pak*", God help them.

"Are you alright, Faiza?" she asked earnestly, as she helped her to sit on the *charpoy* in the courtyard. "Oh God, you shouldn't move so fast in your condition, particularly on a wet floor."

"Yes, I know." Faiza said, her voice low, still in pain. "My mother-in-law is always telling me not to do work like this. I thought that as she was out today to the next village, I would do it today. I don't know why, but I seem to have a craving to do household chores."

"Are you sure, you are alright?"

"I am just bruised around my thighs. I'll be alright soon. How are you Salma? You shouldn't be here, you know. If my mother-in-law sees you here, there will be trouble."

"Oh come on, Faiza. You don't believe all that crap, do you? It's old wives tales. I am your best friend. I don't mean you any harm. It is not my fault that I have had three miscarriages. You don't believe in *perchanvah*? These superstitions that we've inherited from the old Hindu customs? How can an educated modern young woman like you believe in it?"

"I know, but all women can't be wrong. They really believe it. What can you do? It's no use arguing. You can never reason with them. Our *pir* has been feeding the same ideas to my mother-in-law."

"But it's not fair, Faiza. How would you feel if you were in my shoes? I am discriminated against and victimised. Do you know what it feels like, to be shunned from any contact with young pregnant women? I am being treated as an evil spirit. They think that my mere shadow will harm them. One pregnant woman even refused to eat the pudding that I had prepared the other day. It is as if my *perchanvah* had infected the pudding. The whole thing is incredible. How can my miscarriages affect another woman? You tell me?"

"I don't know Salma. It's just the way these superstitions have perpetuated themselves over the centuries."

"It's not fair for those women who have miscarried. I feel soiled, tainted and hurt. I cannot begin to describe to you the suffering I have undergone, not only at the loss of my babies, but also the way that some women have treated me. Instead of offering sympathy, they have recoiled from me."

“I am sorry, Salma. I suppose that I am just as guilty as my mother-in-law. Anyway, I haven’t seen you for over two months. Was there anything you wanted to see me about, that you risked coming in?”

“Yes, I have some good news. I don’t know if you know, but I went to Peshawar two days ago to see a lady doctor, a gynaecologist. She told me that the reason I have miscarried is that I have a loose womb of some sort, making it difficult for me to have full term pregnancies. She suggested some sort of drug treatment. She told me that in about six months’ time, everything will be alright for me to have a normal healthy pregnancy.”

“Oh, I am so glad for you, Salma.” So saying, her natural love for her friend asserted itself, and she grasped Salma by the shoulders, and hugged her in a warm embrace.

It was at that very moment that Kaniz Bibi entered her home. She stopped dead on seeing her daughter-in-law locked in an embrace with *that* girl. She was livid. Blood thundered through her veins. The bulging *tokerry* with the wool fell out of her hands. She couldn’t trust herself as to what she was capable of. She just stood there staring.

Faiza was the first to spot her. Her face paled, and she jolted away from Salma. Shocked by her friend’s action, Salma too looked towards the door. On seeing Kaniz, Salma’s cheeks suffused with colour, partly from guilt and partly embarrassment. From the darts of anger shooting out of Kaniz’ eyes and the fallen *tokerry* on the floor, spilling its contents on the wet floor, Salma sensed the tension and danger of the situation and the predicament in which she had placed herself. She truly felt like a criminal.

Should she apologise? But for what? Her mind rebelled. On seeing her best friend? She had done nothing wrong. The look of horror in Kaniz’s face and eyes distressed Salma. It was almost as if Kaniz Bibi had expected her to murder Faiza. Her mind reeled from a sense of helplessness and distress.

Not wishing to bring Kaniz’s wrath on herself, she quickly stepped away from Faiza, and side stepping Kaniz, as she stood in the doorway, Salma walked out, feeling damned, soiled, inadequate, belittled and insulted.

Kaniz remained standing in the same place for a few more seconds, staring at Faiza, who by now had dropped her gaze, feeling awkward and embarrassed, knowing fully well that her mother-in-law was very angry with her.

She came forward and started to scoop up the balls of wool from the floor.

Kaniz stared down at Faiza, seeing the blue wool for the first time. At last she broke the silence.

“**That** girl is after us. How many times Faiza, have I told you to have nothing to do with her. She has now shed the *perchanvah* from her recent miscarriage. How could you be so stupid? Don’t you care for your baby? If you don’t, we do. We want this baby badly.”

“Of course I do, Auntie. It’s just that I couldn’t turn her away from the door. It would have been cruel and inhuman to do so. She hasn’t been here for the last two months. And she is my best friend.”

“I don’t care whether she’s your best friend or not,” interrupted Kaniz, cutting her short. “Friendship doesn’t come into it. What matters is your health. Until you’ve had the baby, or unless she gets pregnant meanwhile, I want you to have nothing to do with her, or any other woman with the *perchanvah*. If you don’t care for your child, at least consider our wishes and feelings. I want a grandson. Our *pir* has said that you will have a son. How’s that?”

Faiza’s cheeks glowed with delight. Boys were always wanted, especially first time. It would be a great honour indeed to have a son.

“Now we have got this *perchanvah* of **hers** in the house. I’ll have to do something about it.” Her mother-in-law continued, as she moved briskly across her courtyard into the *bavarchikhanah*, kitchen. There she took out a pinch of red chilies from the container and returning to the courtyard called Faiza to stand in front of her. She ritually circled the air over Faiza’s head and shoulders with the chili powder still between her fingers.

Then she checked Faiza’s neck to see if she wore the amulet with some holy words written by the *pir* on it.

The amulet, *tweez*, around her neck was to ward off the evil eye.

“I think that from now on, I had better stay at home, all the time. I don’t trust **that** girl. If she sets a foot in our house again I’ll...”

“You’ll what Kaniz Bibi?” Her husband asked, returning from the mosque. He had heard what she’d said. “Nothing” Kaniz said defensively.

“You women! You were talking about Salma. Why can’t you stop victimising the poor girl? When will you women stop your superstitious ways and customs? Do you think that swirling chili powder over your daughter-in-law’s head will insure her good health? Huh”, he laughed.

Kaniz kept a tight rein on her anger, as she confronted her husband.

“You always find it so amusing, don’t you? You delight in belittling our beliefs, don’t you?”

“I find it utter nonsense. It is *shirk*, against the teaching of Islam and it is inhuman. How would you feel if Salma was your daughter, and somebody treated her, the way that you treat her?”

“Bah! You men! You don’t understand anything. Let me tell you what my *pir* has told me.” She smiled at him.

“What did your *pir* tell you this time, Kaniz Bibi?” He silkily asked, loathing the influence that the *pir* had over his wife and other women.

Kaniz looked at him gloatingly. “He said that we are going to have a grandson. He had a dream and a premonition.”

“Oh well, that’s great, if he said that. What will you do if it is a girl? Will you return it to him?” He chuckled.

Kaniz turned away from him exasperated. It always ended like this. He managed to nettle her, and she turned away from him, stronger in her beliefs than ever.

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The next day, early in the afternoon, a lot of guests arrived unexpectedly in Kaniz’s home. It turned out to be a very busy afternoon for both Kaniz and Faiza, as they fed and entertained the guests including preparing the *hookahs*, the smoke pipe for the two elder male relatives.

It was while she was making *chapattis*, flattened bread, in the kitchen, in the evening, that Faiza felt herself get wet between her thighs.

Her heart stood still. The *chapatti* in one hand remained poised in mid-air, while the other on the flat topped pan was almost burning. “Oh *Allah Pak*”, she moaned under her breath.

“This is not supposed to happen,” she thought. She was three months pregnant, therefore shouldn’t be menstruating. It could only be one thing! Her mind refused to register how her body was physically functioning.

Nobody else was in the kitchen. Leaving everything, she got up to go to the *ghusl khanah*, bathroom. As she walked, she felt her thighs getting wetter and wetter against her linen trousers, *shalwar*.

“Oh God help me”, she cried wildly to herself. To get to the bathroom, she had to cross the courtyard. Against the evening breeze, the guests,

Kaniz Begum and her husband were sitting on cane chairs.

She kept a low profile as she crossed the courtyard, drawing her clothes around her body. She let her long linen shawl drape down to her ankles, in an attempt to cover the wetness of her *shalwar*.

In the bathroom, her hand trembled as she worked on the string, *nallah*, holding the *shalwar* in place around her waist. Once opened, she glanced down at her body, her heart full of dread and expectations.

She closed her eyes, feeling faint. It was what she had feared. She leaned against the tiled wall and shower head. What did one do in this sort of situation? Go and squat on the toilet bowl or go and lie down. She found the former option distasteful. If she went to lie down, she would draw attention to herself. She didn't relish that. They would ask as to what was the matter with her. Oh God, above all, she couldn't let her mother-in-law find out.

For a few minutes, she stood against the bathroom wall with her eyes closed, and her heartbeat accelerating by the minute. She didn't want to spell out the words in her mind - that she was losing the baby. It couldn't be! God couldn't be so unjust! Then she remembered the guests.

She washed herself, and changing into different clothes, she returned to the kitchen to finish making the remaining *chapattis*. She then whispered into Kaniz's ear that she was tired and wanted to lie down.

"Of course, my dear, go and lie down. You should have told me earlier, Faiza darling." Kaniz looked at Faiza indulgently. The look cut Faiza to her soul. Oh God she doesn't know and she wants the baby so much. Please God help us.

Quietly Faiza slid away to her room and lay down, not bothering to change. Putting on an old sheet on the bed, and an extra layer of quilt padding in the middle, Faiza lay and waited. She was still getting wet.

Her husband, Ali, having returned from a visit to the city, came to visit her. She pretended to be asleep. He went away and returned later and lay on the single bed in the room and went to sleep, having switched off the light.

Through the window she saw the stars in the sky. Three of the guests had wanted to sleep in the courtyard in the open on *charpoy*s, wooden cane beds, especially as it was so warm. One elder gentleman was still puffing away at the *hookah*, its base still making a gurgling noise in the silence of the night, as he half reclined on the *charpoy*. The other, in the nearby *charpoy*, was snoring away.

Faiza tossed and turned in her bed, unable to sleep. Then at about three o'clock in the night, her abdomen wall seemed to somersault into action as she felt a strong spasm of pain. Before she knew it she had let out a high-pitched scream. It broke through the silence of the night awakening everybody with a start.

She clamped her hand on her mouth, but it was too late. Lights were switched on everywhere, and the shuffling of feet could be heard. The first person to appear at her bedside was her husband, and then came her mother-in-law, standing near the bed, shock and concern mirrored all over her face. Her father-in-law switched on the light. They stared at her sweat-beaded face and her bent body.

“Are you alright, my dear? What is the matter?” Kaniz’s voice shook with fear.

Faiza shook her head and pointed to her lower body.

Kaniz’s eyes widened in shock and horror, her mouth dropping open. She shook her head from side to side, one hand held against her chest. Then collecting her wits about her, she gestured to her husband and son to leave the room. After they had gone, Kaniz stared pointedly at Faiza’s pain-racked face.

Gingerly, and with trepidation, Kaniz lifted the quilt off Faiza and glanced down at her body. Then she dropped it as if it had burnt her. She stepped back in horror and shock, with one hand clasping the back of her head and the other at her throat. Then before her eyes, Faiza bent double with pain, and she let out another scream.

Through clenched teeth, Kaniz called her son to go and call the *dhai*, the village midwife.

She perched herself on one corner of the bed and rocked herself back and forth as if in a trance. Then she came to herself. She reached out to Faiza, and gently massaged her head and shoulders to soothe her.

Rocking Faiza’s body against her own, Kaniz began to cry, as the reality of the situation dawned on her afresh. All her hopes, wishes gone to the clouds. There would be no grandchild. The ache in her heart was devastating and unbearable. Faiza too began to cry. Not so much for the baby and herself, but for her mother-in-law’s sense of loss.

When the midwife arrived, Faiza lay in Kaniz’s arms, her eyes closed, her body weakened by the contractions of her womb. Birkat Bibi, the midwife, began to work quickly, apologising to Kaniz and expressing her

sorrow at this misfortune. Normally she found her role as the local midwife very rewarding, particularly when she delivered healthy, bouncing boys. It meant that her own payment would be topped up by lots of other presents, and she would be personally congratulated on her work. On occasions like this, however, she kept a very low profile, and felt guilty for receiving any payment for the help, care and treatment, that she gave to the woman miscarrying or delivering. She felt very sad for this mishap. Like everybody else in the village, Birkat Bibi knew how important this baby had been for the family.

Having seen to everything, and with Faiza refreshed, washed, and resting in another bed Birkat Bibi accepted some tea and biscuits. It was then that she asked Kaniz, what had happened and had she any idea why Faiza had lost her baby?

Kaniz had been hovering in the room, lost in her sorrow. At Birkat Bibi's words, her head shot up. She was struck by pain, like a bolt of thunder.

"That *charail*, that witch, Salma! She's been after Faiza, since the day she learnt of my Faiza's pregnancy."

"What? Which Salma, Kaniz dear?"

"Salma, the baker's daughter, who still lives with her parents", Kaniz spat out. "She has miscarried three times, as you well know, in the last two years. You have seen to her, haven't you? She has not left my Faiza alone. Just yesterday she was here and actually embracing Faiza. Can you believe it Birkat Bibi? Everything in this house is soaked in her *perchanvah*."

The midwife tactfully kept silent. She knew what Salma's problem was. She was the one who had suggested that she see a gynaecologist in the city. At the same time, she knew all about some women's beliefs and superstitions. She, herself, didn't believe them. As she had to work with these women and to provide a service for them and was often generously financially rewarded by them, it wasn't in her interest, therefore, to argue with them. She often found herself irked by her pandering to their whims and superstitious by her silence and geniality. As a midwife and nurse, her creditability would be in question if she started to imbibe and perpetuate some of the women's beliefs.

She felt sorry for Salma, knowing that she had been made the scapegoat for this miscarriage. She had already found out why Faiza had miscarried, by asking her whether she'd fallen. Faiza had told her but had pleaded with

her not to tell her mother-in-law. Thus Birkat Bibi maintained her silence. She left soon after saying she would return in the morning to see Faiza.

For the rest of the night Kaniz sat in vigil near Faiza's bed. Her eyes full of anger and pathos. When her husband came into the room in the morning, having said his morning prayers in the mosque, she gave him a crooked bitter laugh.

"You thought I was crazy. That it was only old women's tales. See what has happened in this house. We've lost a grandchild within one day, since *that* woman has been in our house. You think that I spout nonsense. You ridiculed me and my rituals. I suppose you are going to say it was all a matter of coincidence. Isn't it strange that our healthy daughter-in-law suddenly miscarries the very next day after embracing a woman with a *perchanvah*. You think I talk nonsense, Javed-ji." She raised her voice as she said his name.

He didn't reply. There was nothing to say. He was very bemused by the event. There was nothing to ridicule. Just a sense of utter disbelief. He didn't believe his wife, but on the other hand, it was all so strange. Were these women, after all, right about amulets, *tweez* and so on. He shook his head sorrowfully and left the room.

The guests, of course, though they didn't discuss the matter openly, knew what had happened in the middle of the night. They had come to spend a few pleasant days in Javed Salman's house. Now a cloud of doom seemed to have enveloped the household. Everybody sat around the courtyard in hushed silence; the only sound audible was that of the black crows from the tree in the courtyard.

By nine o'clock, after supervising the breakfast prepared by the woman helper for the guests, Kaniz couldn't wait any longer. She put on her outdoor *chador*, and left the house. She collected her best friend, Neelum, and made her way straight to Salma's house.

In Salma's house, her mother, Zeinab, was clearing away the dishes in the *bavarchkhana*, the kitchen, while she was sweeping the veranda floor with a *boker*, a broomstick. They were suddenly disturbed by the thudding sound of the outside door. Mother and daughter exchanged surprised glances, thinking who could it be at this time of the morning. The postman had already been.

Zeinab went to open the door, with the words of greeting "*Bismillah*" on her lips, as she let the two visitors in. She was taken aback by Kaniz's

whole manner and the expression on her face, as she stood tall and erect in the middle of the courtyard, her whole body seemed tense, as if ready to spring.

“*Khair Hey*, Sister Kaniz? Is everything alright?” She asked.

“No, everything is not alright!” Kaniz exploded, taking advantage of the cue offered by Zeinab’s question. “Our Faiza miscarried last night”, she said, pinning her full gaze on Salma.

“Oh, I am sorry, Sister Kaniz. Oh I am!” Like everyone else, she knew how precious the baby was for Kaniz’s family.

“So you should be, Zeinab.” She deliberately omitted to say the complementary word: Sister. The omission was not lost on the others. “Your daughter has been after my Faiza since the day she conceived. Just because she keeps miscarrying herself - she made sure that Faiza couldn’t have a healthy baby too.”

“Hang on, Sister Kaniz. This is utter nonsense. What has my Salma got to do with Faiza’s miscarriage? Miscarriages are a medical, physiological matter. In Faiza’s case to do with her body and not my daughter. I have tolerated your superstitious ways and whims about *perchanvah* and *chillah*, but this is ridiculous. It goes beyond the pale of reasoning and rationality.” Zeinab ended, with her cheeks red with anger.

“Huh, Sister Neelum, listen to this woman. She thinks it is nothing to do with her daughter. Don’t you think that it is a great coincidence that I saw Salma in my own home, embracing the life out of Faiza, and the very next day my daughter-in-law loses her baby? I suppose you think that I imagined all that? Didn’t you go to our house yesterday, Salma?” Kaniz turned once again to Salma, who was standing awkwardly near one of the pillars supporting the veranda, her mouth dry.

“Did you, Salma?” Her mother asked, her voice coming out in a screech.

“Yes, Mother.” Salma’s voice came out low; she was utterly distressed by the whole affair.

“You see! If I were you I would keep your *namoush* daughter under lock and key, until the right amount of time has expired. Rather than letting her go gadding about and spreading her *perchanvah*, shadow on healthy pregnant women.” And so saying, she swished her *chador* shawl over her head and shoulders and made a dramatic departure, with her friend, Neelum, following in embarrassed silence.

For a few seconds, mother and daughter stood on the spot as if turned to stone; overcome by the cruelty of Kaniz's remarks and accusations. At last, Zeinab sat down on the *charpoy* and looked at her daughter, who seemed to have shrunk against the pillar. Zeinab was angry with her daughter, but also distressed on her behalf, knowing what she must be feeling.

"Salma, Salma, how many times have I told you not to have anything to do with your friend until she's had the baby? I know that we don't believe this *perchanvah* rubbish, but some of these village women do. They have imbibed the concepts and beliefs right to their souls. No amount of argument or reasoning will persuade them otherwise – least of all Kaniz. Why did you go yesterday? And why, of all things, did you have to go and embrace Faiza? You have just played into Kaniz's hands."

"It wasn't me, Mother, it was Faiza. She embraced me, when I told her about me seeing the doctor and that everything was now going to be alright. It had nothing to do with me, Mother. She fell yesterday, right before my very eyes.

"What? Why didn't you tell Kaniz?"

"I was too shocked and horrified to tell her. I am sure that Faiza hasn't told her."

"But this is an outrage!" Zeinab shot up from the *charpoy*. "*Allah Pak*, that woman is going around spreading rumours that you have caused her daughter-in-law to miscarry, when it was her fall that did it. I'll not let her get away with it. Come on Salma, get your *chador*. She will not victimise you any more, or make you a scapegoat. I'll see to it."

"Where are we going, Mother?" Salma's eyes mirrored her horror, her lips quivering in distress. She didn't want to be drawn into the unsavoury limelight any further.

"We are going to Kaniz's house to sort out this matter once and for all."

A few minutes later, the mother and daughter left for Kaniz's home. Zeinab's wiry body was erect in anger, whereas Salma, since learning of the miscarriage, had lost all confidence in herself. She recalled Kaniz's vindictive word *namous*, evil, as she had called her. Perhaps she was. Perhaps if she hadn't gone to see Faiza, she might not have slipped and thus lost the baby. Perhaps there was something after all in the concept of *perchanvah*. Perhaps it did affect women. How could her mother persuade the woman to believe otherwise?

When Zeinab and Salma entered Kaniz's courtyard, all the people assembled there turned to survey them. Salma's cheeks grew hot with embarrassment, and she drew further behind her mother.

On seeing them, Kaniz's eyes had widened in disbelief. Zeinab calmly and with an unwavering focus, glanced over all the people in the courtyard. There were men and women, both old and young. All of them looked in their direction. A hushed silence had descended in the courtyard. Four of the women, who also knew Zeinab and Salma, now speculated as to what was going to happen next. They had noticed in surprise that Kaniz didn't issue a welcoming greeting as was the custom or stand up to receive the two women.

Zeinab, too, for her part, had dispensed with the customary greetings and gestures of social etiquette. She just stood there, tall, in the middle of the courtyard, the exact stance that she remembered that Kaniz had took a short time earlier in her courtyard. Now it was her turn.

It was Javed, Kaniz's husband who broke the silence, irked by his wife's rudeness.

"Welcome, Sister Zeinab. Come and sit down." He drew out a high-backed chair for her under the tree. "If you've come to see Faiza, she is resting in her room."

"Thank you, Brother Javed. It is not Faiza who I have come to see. For you see, Kaniz has forbidden us to see her." She enjoyed watching the fleeting expression of irritation pass over his face. "I have come to see you, Kaniz, and these women assembled here, and Kaniz's spiritual guide, *pir*."

"Oh! About anything in particular?" He asked.

His wife interrupted him, as she ejaculated: "Why do you want to see my *pir*? What has he done to affect you?"

"Oh he has done a lot. He is the one who has stuffed silly and gullible women like you with sheer nonsense and made my daughter into your scapegoat for Faiza's miscarriage."

For the first time in her life, Zeinab didn't care about mincing her words. After all Kaniz hadn't minced hers. She had almost accused her daughter of murder. She felt no shame in talking about miscarriages, a taboo subject like sex and pregnancy, while in the presence of men. Today wasn't a normal day, however, and she didn't feel normal. Everything had been taken out of proportion.

Javed had been irked and bemused for years by the influence that the *pir* had on his wife and some other women, and welcomed this speech, even though it was a *baesti*, an insult, to have his wife called silly in front of all these people. He was very angry now and he suspected that his wife had done Zeinab and Salma a great wrong, to have brought this normally, most gentle, pleasant and dignified woman to speak in a manner in which she had done.

“Kaniz, what have you done? Have you been blaming the loss of our grandchild on that *masoum*, innocent child? This is ridiculous. You cannot go around doing that.”

“Trust you, Javed, to delight in me being insulted!” Kaniz could hardly speak - her own anger was choking her, “And in ridiculing me.”

“It is not a matter of ridicule”, Zeinab continued. “It is a matter of religious and social debate. Where does it say in the *Quran* or *Hadith* about *perchanvah*? For those are the books and sources of our faith? Anything else is *shirk*. Where has the *pir* got his ideas from? Is he a woman? Is he a doctor? Is he an authority on all female health matters?”

“We all know that you do not believe in *pirs*. That doesn’t give you the license to ridicule *ours*.” She stressed the word ‘ours’, hoping that her husband would support her. However from Javed’s facial expression, it seemed that the contrary was true and he appeared to be gloating, as this was his chance to discredit her *pir*. Kaniz felt very bitter and very much alone.

“No. It doesn’t. You are right, Kaniz. I respect holy men, *pirs*. They are very intelligent religious men. People like us do need them, to guide us in all religious and spiritual matters. It is their lack of knowledge in some female matters and meddling with superstitions passed throughout the centuries that I abhor. You have yourself told all of us that your *pir* said that a woman who was expecting should avoid contact, or even the presence of such a woman into the same room as someone who had miscarried. With some of you women, that has meant that you not only insensitively shun but also offend women like my daughter, who have had the misfortune to miscarry on more than one occasion. It is not a disease that you can catch. Some of you have even refused to eat food that Salma had cooked and put in front of you. All this I have observed and tolerated, but what has been the outcome of your superstitious ways? You have harmed and hurt young

minds, and sensibilities of women like my daughter. You have belittled her and, in fact, insulted the whole essence of humanity and womanhood.”

“I will not listen to any more of your nonsense!” Kaniz said as she stood up to face Zeinab, her body quivering with rage.

“But I haven’t finished yet, Kaniz. I suppose it is alright for you to come storming into my house and accuse my daughter of witchcraft and virtual murder. You said that my Salma caused Faiza’s miscarriage. Well, has your Faiza told you that she fell?” Zeinab stopped and waited for the words to register in Kaniz’s mind.

Kaniz’s lips dried up as she stared at Zeinab. “What? I didn’t know anything about her falling!”

“Well, why don’t you go and ask her?”

Kaniz got up to go. Zeinab, Salma, Neelum and Javed followed her.

In her room, Faiza lay awake. She had overheard everything in the courtyard. As she heard the footsteps coming towards her room, her heart started to thud wildly. She had dreaded this moment.

They all came in and stood around her bed. She spied her friend, Salma, standing behind her mother. She studiously avoided looking her in the eye.

Kaniz looked down at her daughter-in-law. There was a message in her eyes that she desperately wanted Faiza to interpret correctly.

“Faiza, your friend, Salma, said that you fell yesterday. Did you fall?”

Faiza looked her mother-in-law calmly in the eye.

“No.” As she said it, she caught the surprised crushed look in Salma’s eyes. She quickly averted her gaze. She had just faced the moral choice of either betraying her friend or allowing her mother-in-law to lose face. She knew how much the baby had meant to her parents-in-law. She had lost the baby through her own fault. She had been warned about wet floors. She couldn’t have capped her mother-in-law’s *baesti* in losing face in public too.

Zeinab glanced inquiringly at her daughter. She, with her eyes brimming with bitter tears, had left the room in distress. She couldn’t believe it. Her friend had lied and had thus sealed her fate with *perchanvah*, and made her the scapegoat.

“Well, apparently, your daughter-in-law is not only a liar but also a coward.” Zeinab spoke bitterly, as she left the room and came into the courtyard. She turned to look back at Kaniz, who had followed her out.

“Don’t think that the matter is now closed, Kaniz. I am going to invite your *pir* to come to our village and give his version of the ideas you have

perpetuated in the village.” Then with a dramatic gesture of her hand, pointing around the courtyard and the house, she continued. “Moreover, *perchanvah* is now in your house. Now that your daughter-in-law has miscarried, according to your rules and *ressmeh*, no household with a pregnant woman should welcome her or nor will they visit your house. Now, it is your Faiza who will be the one to be shunned. As you seem to think, that if anyone miscarried in the next two or three months, it will be due to your Faiza’s *perchanvah*. As you have made the rules, you must now live by them. You cannot have it both ways!”

So saying, Zeinab made a dignified departure. Her daughter having already run ahead, mortified and wounded to her very soul at her friend’s betrayal.

Kaniz stood in the middle of the courtyard, amidst the amazed glances of her women friends and guests, her mouth opening and closing. For once in her lifetime, she was lost for words.

THE ESCAPE

In the packed prayer hall of Darul Uloom mosque in Longsight, the Imam concluded the Eid prayers with a passionate plea for world peace and terrorist activities in Pakistan to stop. Seventy three years old Samir, perched on a plastic chair because of his bad leg, kept his hands raised, quietly mouthing his own personal prayer.

“Please Allah Pak, bless her soul! And let me escape!”

Rows of seated men had arisen from their prayer mats and reached out to energetically hug others and offer the festive greeting, “*Eid Mubarak!*” Samir took his time. There was no-one in particular he was seeking to greet or hug at this mosque. Most of the men around him were strangers and of the younger generation, several sported beards – a marked shift between the two generations. His face remained clean shaven. Nowadays he prayed at the Cheadle mosque, joining the congregation of Arabs and other nationalities for the Taraveeh prayers during *Ramadhan*. Nostalgia tugging at him, on a whim, Samir had asked his son to drop him off in Longsight to offer his Eid prayers at his old community mosque.

Painfully rising to his feet Samir began the hugging ritual, smiling cordially. Unlike the others leaving the hall, he loitered; in no hurry to get out. At the door he dutifully dropped a five pound note in the collection fund box.

Whilst looking for his shoes he bumped into his old friend, Manzoor – they greeted, smiled broadly and warmly hugged. Outside, in the chilly autumn day, his friend, who lived a street away from the mosque, invited him to his house for the Eid hospitality of Vermicelles, *sewayian* and *chana chaat*.

The smile slid off Samir’s face; he was reluctant to visit his friend’s house – afraid of the old memories, shying away from the normality, the marital bliss of his friend’s home. In particular he was loath to witness the little intimacies between husband and wife. The look. The laugh. The teasing banter.

Instead he waved goodbye to his friend and stood waiting for his son. “I’m being picked up,” he informed a young man kindly offering him a lift home, before sauntering on his bad leg down the street.

“I have all the time in the world!” He wryly muttered to himself, savouring the walk down streets he had cycled and scooted along for over three decades. A lot had changed, the area now thriving with different

migrant communities; the Pakistanis and the Bengalis living side by side with the Irish and the Somalis. Many Asian stores and shops had sprung up. The Bengali Sari and travel agent shops jostled happily alongside the Pakistani ones and the Chinese takeaway. Mosques catering to the needs of Muslim community had sprung up, from the small Duncan Road mosque in a semi-detached corner house to the purpose built Darul Uloom centre on Stamford Road. The Bengali mosque for the Bengali community on one corner of Buller Road was only a few feet away from the Pakistani and Arab Makki Masjid on the other corner. Not surprisingly on Fridays, for the *Juma* prayers, the street was gridlocked, with an occasional police car monitoring the situation.

He noted that the Roman Catholic Church and its primary school on Montgomery Road had disappeared, joining the quaint little National Westminster Bank branch that had been in the middle of Beresford Road with a communal vegetable plot at the back. That had been pulled down twenty odd years ago. St Agnes church was still there, however, at the junction of West Point and Hamilton Road and it still enjoyed healthy Sunday morning congregations.

Samir stopped outside a shop on Beresford Road that had been called Joy Town twenty one years earlier. It had been his children's favourite toyshop, especially on Eid day, when they ran to it with their *Eidhi* money, eager to buy cars, skipping ropes and doll's china crockery sets. In its place there now stood a grocery superstore with stalls of vegetables and fruits hogging the pavement area. On Fridays and Saturdays families, like Samir's, who had moved out of the area still returned to do their shopping, visiting their favourite halal meat and grocery stores; carting boxes of fresh mangoes, bags of basmati rice and chapatti flour back to their cars. The hustle and bustle of these shops always bought out a smile in him.

His son, Maqbool, a well-to-do sportswear manager, dutifully returned to pick him up half an hour later. By that time, Samir was shivering with the autumn chill in his *shalwar kameez* and *shervani* and gladly got into the warm car. He had wanted to go to Sanam Sweet Centre to buy a few boxes of Asian sweets to distribute to friends but he hesitated, suddenly overcome by trepidation.

"Do you want to go somewhere else, Father?" his son asked, as if reading his mind.

Samir shook his head; loath to inconvenience his son further, feeling guilty for already taking up enough of his time.

“No. Let’s go home.” he murmured, eyes closed.

He had a large five bedroom detached house but with his wife and family gone all the joy of living had fled. He kept himself in the master bedroom, hating to enter the other rooms in the house, especially the one with his wife’s clothes. Only when the grandchildren visited did he unlock some of the doors. He spent his time in his new favourite spot, the chair at the dining table next to the window and radiator. He sat there leafing through *The Times*, the *Daily Jang* and *The Nation*, watching the traffic go past on the busy road.

His son dropped him off at the door with the words, “Will collect you in an hour’s time.” Samir nodded and watched him drive away before letting himself into the house. Another hour to kill. He shrugged. It was better here on his own, with the TV and the newspaper keeping him company, than politely waiting around at someone else’s house for dinner.

He felt hungry; but the dining table in front of him lay dismally bare. On Eid days it was normally stacked with bowls of delicious food: boiled eggs, *sewayain*, *chana chats* and a hot tray of *Shami kebabs*. And these were just the breakfast starters, heralding a busy festive day of eating.

Last year his entire family had been there. If he closed his eyes he could see his children helping themselves to the food, with him happily beginning the *Eidhi* money giving ritual. Five pounds notes for the little ones, ten for the older teenagers, and crispy twenty pound notes for his daughters and daughters-in-law.

In the steamy warm kitchen with the noisy fan purring away at the window, the smell from a pot of pilau rice and trays of roast chicken and kebabs in the oven would set everyone’s mouths watering. Dinner was a prompt affair; always at one o’clock, served by the women of his household, moving elegantly around the room; their rustling *ghrarars* and *lenghas* sweeping the floor and the long *dupattas* hanging at their sides. The boys would be in their *shalwar kameez* and *sherwanis*. By two, the whole family would be sitting around the table chatting, relaxed and happy, some still spooning away trifle and *gajar halwa*.

The thought of all that food set Samir’s stomach groaning. He could not wait that long. In the kitchen he tipped some cornflakes into a bowl; it was not *chana chat* or *sewayian* but would keep him going.

He twice checked his pocket for the money, mentally counting the number of notes he should have. This was the bit of Eid day that he particularly enjoyed, glimpsing the excited faces of his grandchildren taking the *Eidhi* from his hand. In the old days a one pound coin delighted his children. After dinner they excitedly ran off to Joy Town to buy gifts of their choice. When Maqbool arrived, Samir was well into his second hard-boiled egg, smiling sheepishly at his son, who mentally chided himself for leaving his father to eat alone at home.

Samir's whole family was gathered in his eldest daughter's house and he was the last to arrive. In the living room, his second daughter-in-law, Mehnaz, stood up out of respect to vacate her seat for him.

"Stay seated my dear," he offered, perching himself instead on a chair near the door. The women were busy in the kitchen, sorting out the crockery and the sauces. All had happily adopted the British custom of bringing a dish since their mother had died. His eldest daughter was carrying a tray of roast meat through the hallway to the dining room. Catching her eye, Samir smiled politely.

His youngest grandson, Rahel, jumped into his lap, startling him and bringing a smile to his face. Samir lifted him up to offer a tight hug. Then holding out a five-pound note he beckoned to his older grandson, a six-year-old, who was stood scowling a few feet away. The child shyly sidled to his grandfather's side, plucked the note from his hand and ran off.

"Would you like something to eat before dinner?" His daughter came to enquire, the blender with the mint sauce in her hand.

Samir shook his head.

Nodding, she disappeared into the kitchen leaving Samir to smile, watch, listen and respond where appropriate. That is until the seat became too uncomfortable for his bad leg, forcing him to take the one vacated by his eldest grandson near the window. He bleakly stared out through the net curtains, watching passers-by, who probably had no idea that in this Muslim home they were celebrating *Eid ul Fitr*.

Eyes filling up, Samir kept his face averted towards the window; there was nothing to celebrate on his first Eid without his beloved wife. Sorrow suffocated; desperation tearing at him. If he could only turn the clock back. How he longed to have this Eid dinner at his own home and with her hosting it; instead of sitting awkwardly here as an interloper.

An hour later, he dutifully spooned food into his mouth; making no comments apart from the polite “everything is very nice” to the women of his family. He did not pick on the chillis or criticise the curry sauces as he had always done with his wife’s cooking. His sons, of a different generation and attitude, were happily munching away at their roast meats, whilst he stealthily hid a raw bit of chicken leg under a napkin on his plate.

By the time the *gajar halwa* and tea were served, Samir’s mind was made up. He waited; heartbeat accelerating. When there was a lull in the lively conversation he ventured to inform his family, licking his dry lips carefully.

“I want to tell you something...”

They turned to stare. His daughter, Roxanna hushed her little girl sitting on her lap with the words, “Abu-ji is speaking, shush!”

“I want to go back home – to Pakistan.” Samir announced, “To visit my family...stay there for a few months. It’ll be good for me... it’s the right time... with your mother gone.... I need a change of scene and I have plenty of time now!” he explained, smiling. “It would be lovely to visit some places of my old life. Also good to spend some time with my sister and brother and their families.”

Complete silence greeted his words.

“A few months! Are you sure about this, father? We’ll miss you!” His eldest daughter had found her tongue.

“You’ll all be fine without me. Anyway you can phone me every day... you’ve all got busy lives and families, so it won’t be that bad to have me disappear for a few months. I’ll hardly be missed.... This trip will be good for me... I need to go....” He stopped himself from saying, “I need to escape,” voice petering away, giving them a glimpse of the abyss inside him.

Discomforted and not knowing what was the right thing to say, they prudently ended the discussion. Their father had always made his own decisions – very rarely paying any attention to other people’s opinions. Their mother had battled for years to influence him, and died having never quite succeeded.

“Where will you stay? Lahore?” His youngest daughter, Rosie, boldly asked.

“Yes! In our family home of course, with my brother – where else?” he replied sharply, annoyed at his daughter’s question and semi-hostile tone.

Rosie did not bother answering. Instead she covertly exchanged a pointed look with her sister, which their father neatly intercepted. Samir's face tightened. "You need to understand Rosie that just as this is your family – I have the same back home.... They care about me and want me to spend time with them." His tone harsher than he intended.

The word "back home" had just slipped out of him again. It was a curious use. For a few seconds he was lost in thought. Why did he say that? Was Manchester not his "home?" After all he had spent over forty years of his life in this city? The other place was just his birthplace, his country of origin and reminder of his youth. Surely these facts should make Manchester his home?

He shrugged these thoughts aside, willing his mood to lighten; he now had a goal: to occupy his mind with tasks, and he loved tasks above all. The big task facing him now was what presents to take for his family and his two college friends in Lahore. He promised himself that this time the three friends would treat themselves to a walk through the tall, elegant Victorian corridors of the Government College of Lahore where he had studied.

Three days later, Samir had flown out from Manchester airport, taking his "other family" in Lahore by surprise. They gushed with greetings, hurriedly assembling their shocked faces even though inside they were all amok. "What was he doing here, all of sudden? How long was he going to stay? Which other relatives was he visiting and for how long?" These questions battered simultaneously in all their heads.

Samir's face fell, quickly averting his eyes, astutely picking up the tell-tale signs from their faces and body language. Two days later, after visiting the local Anarkali Bazaar, taking a leisurely walk down the famous Mall Road, and spending time with his sister's family in her villa in the Defence area, he headed for the village where his parents were buried. There he was amicably greeted by his host, a second cousin, who hosted all relatives visiting his parents' graves.

After some refreshments, Samir headed for the cemetery on the outskirts of the village. Well maintained, tall tangle wood bushes grew around it, keeping the wolves out. Eyes blurred, Samir gazed down at his parents' graves. His father had adamantly made it clear that he did not want to be buried in the overcrowded city cemeteries. "I want fresh air, shade of a tree and plenty of space around – and make sure you leave space for your mother. Don't just throw us in any hole!"

As obedient sons, they honoured their father's wish and duly visited the village of their father's ancestral home and bought a plot of land. Thereafter his sister and brother made annual journeys to the village, to offer a feast and *hatham* prayers for their parents souls.

Samir perched himself on the low wall circling the plot with his parents' graves. The tranquillity around him had him thinking about his own burial place. Of course it would be Manchester's Southern Cemetery. He could not imagine his children traipsing back to Pakistan to visit his grave in a land that was foreign to them. He now understood why his father was insistent on keeping a place for his wife. Remembering his Sabiya, he bowed his head. The loneliness crushed. He ached to have her back. Two years ago they were both here, sitting at the same spot.

He watched a herd of milk buffaloes being shepherded back to the village. Feeling a tiny bite, he looked down at a line of ants running down the brickwork. Laden with small scraps of leaves, the ants were zigzagging around his feet. He moved his foot away and glanced over his shoulders at the brick making quarry and kiln, spotting a group of peasant men pushing trolleys stacked with bricks. Two women were carrying small baskets loaded with baked bricks on their heads. Feeling sorry for them and the hard work that the women had to do in order to feed their families, Samir was reminded of the second mission that had brought him to this village – his wife's charitable work. He had to visit the widow.

He turned to look back at the graves, taking his fill, etching the picture in his head. Was this going to be his final farewell? Standing over his mother's grave, soft sobs shook his large body. It was a strange world. To be buried continents away from one's own parents. Why was he crying? For his parents who had died decades ago or for his beloved Sabiya?

"Life is a cycle!" He mused. He was in his seventies but still demurred from being called "old." God only knew where the rest of his ancestors were buried – most probably in India, before the partition. People were born and slid through the cycle of life and then disappeared, with some leaving no trace.

"Samir, stop thinking like this – it's morbid!"

He raised his hands to say a final fervent prayer over his parents' mounds.

His host family had gone to a lot of trouble in their offer of hospitality. The women had begun scurrying around the courtyard the moment he

arrived. A hen had been snatched from the chicken coop in the far end of the courtyard and quickly dispatched to the cooking pot. The rice for the lamb biryani had been soaked. The pink custard powder was energetically whisked in a bowl. Not content with the home cooking for their special “velati” guest from “London,” the host had enlisted the help of the village cook. A fabulous chef, it was widely said that people always licked their fingers after eating his tasty chicken shorba.

The women had happily obliged. Mina, the daughter-in-law was seven months pregnant, expecting her first child, and hated squatting on the floor whilst cooking on a pedestal stove. As well as that, she had to maintain her modesty; it was quite challenging, keeping herself well draped in front of the male guest. Her pregnancy was causing her a lot of embarrassment. She was “huge,” everyone kept telling her.

With a last lingering glance at his parents’ graves, Samir followed the path to the village central square with its old majestic looking Minar tree where his driver was waiting. His brother had kindly loaned both their driver and the car for his use whilst he used his motorcycle. Ahead of him he saw a young man pulling a suitcase and dragging something else.

Bemused, Samir stared wide-eyed, temporarily transported to another time and place. He still kept his bedroll canvas bag in his garage in England, never having had the heart to throw it away. It was a memento, a part of his life. Too many memories were caught up with it. The frayed brown leather suitcase, stuffed with all his important documents, including his British nationality, was still kept under his bed.

There are special moments etched on peoples’ minds; for Samir it was the one of him dragging a big bedroll and a large suitcase from Victoria coach station through the streets of London: deeply mortifying to this day. Why his arm and fingers did not fall off still amazed him. Tired, hungry and harassed, he and his friend stumbled thankfully into a Victorian house with a Bed and Breakfast sign; two Pakistani migrants from up north wanting to try their fortunes down south in London.

It was actually his friend’s breezy confidence, smart use of English, cocky winsome smile and flirtatious winks that had successfully got them a room late at night, winning over the elegant old lady with her purple rinse. The purple hair colour of many older women in those early days fascinated him. Why did they like such a strange colour?

Samir shuddered, tasting the raw fear he had felt then as they desperately sought a place for the night. “What if we don’t find a room, where will we go and what will we do?” He had silently agonised, panicking at the darkness falling around them. It was his friend’s optimism and high spirits that had saved him from making a fool of himself. There was a moment he was ready to squat on the pavement and shed bitter tears, bewailing his stupidity in leaving a warm room and a cosy bed in Blackburn.

Sharing a double bed with his friend capped the humiliation of that day further. His friend had joked at their sleeping quarters and went soundly to sleep. Samir had sidled to the edge of the bed, shivering in the thin, coarse blanket making his face itch, afraid to pull it over himself and of waking his friend. In the end, he had got up and pulled out his own five inch thick Pakistani quilt from the bed roll.

His love affair with the English capital was both doomed and short-lived – it was not for him – too anonymous. He knew no-one and felt shy and uncomfortable wherever he went – stumbling and stammering over the carefully chosen English words and phrases he had mastered to buy bus tickets, packets of Benson and Hedges or order something to eat. Intimidated by the huge buildings and mad evening traffic, he smiled when he saw brown faces, mainly of Sikhs and Indians. He did not come across many Pakistanis.

After taking some souvenir photographs with an expensive camera he had brought from Pakistan, posing in his smart suit in front of one of the Trafalgar Square lions and outside the Queen’s Buckingham Palace gates with the guards, Samir had happily fled. He wished his friend well with his love of London. Years later, when he came across him he laughed aloud. His friend had become a true Londoner, down to the cockney accent.

For Samir, London was simply too much, making his life a misery and stripping away his self-esteem. Lacking his friend’s confidence, easy going manner and ability to make new friends, Samir missed the cosy comfort of a small town like Blackburn. After two weeks he had escaped, happily dragging his bed roll and his brown leather suitcase with him.

He went to another friend, who welcomed him with open arms, letting him join two other tenants in his two-bedroom terraced house. Apart from the kitchen all three rooms were used. Even the front room had a single bed hogging the area near the window and the open coal fire. That was the owner’s room. The kitchen, with its big coal fire warming the room, was the

hub of their communal life, where they took turns cooking meals, smoking and chatting, lounging on hard wooden chairs around a small kitchen wooden table. Three of them had young families in Pakistan.

Samir stayed put, intent on earning money to support his family back home by doing overtime and long shifts. *Keema lobia* became his favourite dish. He became a good cook, very proud of his culinary skills. His first chapatti painstakingly rolled with a long empty sterilised milk bottle was a good try. His three fellow home mates praised him heartily, rewarding him with the teasing words, “Your cooking is better than our wives back home!”

His landlord found him a job in the cotton textile mill, after he was pressured to turn down a job in a special nursing home in Darwen.

“You will be working with mentally ill people, are you mad? You’ll become mad yourself!” His fellow tenants had cruelly scoffed, frightening him into scurrying into the reception room and leaving a hurried note to say no to the job before he had even started.

In the Darwen textile mill, the huge dark machines intimidated him; but he quickly mastered the skill of working with and around them. It was dull and demeaning work. With his good education behind him, he often heard himself dryly echoing “If Abba sees me doing this, he’ll have a fit!” His father had forked out a lot of money for the fees for a top college and expected him to do a “clean” respectable office job, not working in some “grotty” mill as his youngest son once termed it years later.

The pay packet however, had kept him smiling. The thrill of counting the bank notes through the little top corner, and feeling the angles of the six and three penny bits through the brown paper, and the occasional half-crowns—small sums but mighty big pleasures they provided then.

In those frugal days, they felt duty bound to keep each other in check; the talk then was always about “going back home.” They were not here to waste money on luxuries or on themselves. Exceptions were only made for gifts for their children. Samir had not only his wife and one daughter to support, but also his father to appease, who had never forgiven him for leaving home and doing menial jobs in mills in “*Velat*.”

The only thing that could win over his father would be the building of a new house, to illustrate his economic well-being and to support his younger brother’s family. Three years later, having had enough of textile mills and with his family having joined him, he escaped to the big city of Manchester and started his own manufacturing business. It was a time when knitwear

manufacturing was a booming industry in the Northwest and Ardwick had become a manufacturing area. Many Pakistani migrants entered this trade. Samir too purchased an old factory for his knitwear business. It was also a time of social and communal uncertainty. Enoch Powell had done his bit; frightening the host community with his racist speech citing “the rivers of blood” and leaving the migrants in fear of being thrown out of the country. When the Ugandan refugees started to arrive in the early nineteen seventies, after their expulsion by Idi Amin, his friends were very dismal about their own fate in the UK, fearing that they too would be thrown out. For some, the mission or the next urgent goal was to build houses back home to return to if things really got bad in England.

Unlike his friends, Samir had faith in the British justice system and its fairness. He never for one moment believed that something similar could happen in Britain. Unlike some of his friends his savings went not into a *khoti* or a villa in Lahore, but in gradually working his way up to a better standard of living for his family, progressing from a terraced house to a detached house in a good area. He concentrated on his children, their education and careers. And the decades simply slipped away, melting away his youth and gradually severing the links with his homeland. His retirement was forced on him; he did not welcome it.

Samir smiled at the young man with the suitcase and turned into the village lane to pay a special call. In the widow’s home there was panic as the youngest of the three girls whispered to the others that a man from *Velat* was standing outside their door. When their mother spotted the foreign visitor she nearly fainted, but recovered soon enough. Bursting into sobs she stared at the husband of their benefactor, muttering behind the fold of her long shawl, and gushing the welcome greeting: “*Bismillah! Bismillah!*”

She owed a lot to this man’s wife.

Her three teenage daughters had rushed ahead into their *bethak*, to make the room presentable. The crocheted-edged table cloth was quickly straightened and dusted, the mirrored beaded cushions on the leather settee hurriedly plumped up and the pair of knitting needles and women’s magazine snatched and shoved under the table.

Red-faced and brimming with pleasure, the widow led their very “special” guest into their humble living room, with the walls lined with their best china propped on wooden sills. It was a quaint sight for him, reminding him of the old days when his father would take him to tour some

village for a “taste of the other life and warm hospitality of the rural people.”

Samir did not know what to say; both touched and embarrassed by their humility and behaviour.

“Please don’t bring any refreshments, Cola or Miranda bottles or such – I have a bad stomach,” he glibly lied, saving them the bother and cost of purchasing the bottles from the local village shop. “I just wanted to see how you all are – and how your daughters are doing – I know my wife always visited you – as she did with the other homes she sponsored...” He stopped, eyes filling up, his Sabiya in front of him.

The widow again burst into loud sobs. “We are so sorry about your wife’s death, she was such a wonderful soul and so good to us! We miss her so much, and she phoned us every month – calling us to the butcher’s house to chat with us... always checking that we had enough money for my daughter’s expenses and enough grain!”

“Yes – she was a good soul! And we all miss her!” Samir lowered his head to hide his tear-swollen eyes. The widow touched by his grief, stared in wonder, mouth open, showing her row of uneven top teeth and two missing lower molars. She quickly closed her mouth in embarrassment when he looked up.

Samir looked at the girls shyly staring at him, and could not stop the outburst. His sobbing caused the girls’ eyes to fill up. They were used to crying from an early age. Their mother had become a crying machine and often they ended up aping her. Today they found the sight of this older man from England, crying over his wife, very poignant. He was thinking, “My wife has made a difference to these wretched girls’ lives!”

Sobering, he wiped his cheeks clean with a tissue proffered shyly by the eldest daughter. As if reading his mind, the widow reminded him, “Your wife got my oldest daughter married, she helped us with the dowry... here is that daughter... she’s visiting us at the moment.” Then her gaze switched to her other daughters. “Who will now finance these girls’ weddings?” Poverty had forced her into straight talking, to unabashedly appeal to the good nature of well off people like him.

Samir had thought ahead. His pension, even if he did not touch the rest of his savings, would be enough to support this household – an ideal way of honouring his wife and her dying wish. Her last words to all her children and to him had been, “Do not forget all the families that I’ve been

supporting in my life – earn their heartfelt prayers by helping them. Don't forget to keep my register of widows safe. Don't let anyone die of poverty or ill health! Display your humanity and offer generously your *zakat*.”

His eyes on the four heads modestly draped with dupattas, Samir meditated on one possible way for these girls to get out of this poverty trap and offered. “Sister please educate your daughters... send them to any colleges that you like. I'll pay all their fees and other costs.”

The girls' eyes widened and lit up in wonder. The *Velati* man would do that for them! Go to the town college. The girls' minds were swimming. Their poignant looks and smiling faces cut him to his soul. His own children, including his two daughters, had been educated to the highest degree level and had access to great opportunities. Did these poor girls not have a right to the same? He was suddenly struck and dismayed by the inequality of life. How some had everything whilst others simply worried about the next meal!

The youngest girl moved away from the doorway as Samir's village host, who had followed him to the widow's house, entered the room. Catching Samir's eyes, the host signalled to him that dinner was waiting. Samir hastened to add before rising from the settee.

“Don't worry about anything, Sister. I'll take care of your financial situation and make sure that you get your remittances on time, including for the wheat. You have our phone numbers. Please phone for any extra financial help needed. I'll take care of the furniture for your daughter's dowries just as my Sabiya did for your eldest daughter... I have to go now and may Allah Pak look after you all!” He felt in his jacket pocket and shyly placed a three-thousand-rupee note in the youngest girl's hand, lowering his gaze in embarrassment in the face of their gratitude.

He politely followed his host out of the small courtyard before turning to look back at the girls shyly peeping out of their door. “This is their humble world!” he mused, “And I live in a large house all by myself.” The thought terrified him.

He politely smiled to the other villagers that he passed in the lane. There was no-one he recognised and no welcoming look of sudden recognition. And why should there be? He chided himself. He was over seventy years old – and so far he had not seen a soul of that age group in the village.

That night he returned to Lahore to his brother's family. Fear of hospitality had made him flee the village, afraid that if he stayed the night

his hosts would incur the cost of breakfast and afternoon dinner the following day. He was familiar with their generosity and excellent hospitality. Already they had spent a lot on his behalf. Until the entire dining table was covered with plates of cakes, pastries, boiled eggs and parathas they would not be happy.

In his brother's home there was no element of guilt – no waiting upon ceremony. They knew what he liked, and so for breakfast his brother would fetch some warm *kulchas* from the local bakery and the tea would be supplied by his sister-in-law.

Drinking a cool glass of *lassi*, Samir instructed the driver to take him back to Lahore, the city of his birth, the old Mughal capital of India. He wanted to call on the way at the famous Data Gunj Darbar, a favourite shrine of his mother. In his childhood days she eagerly took him to pay homage to the saint buried in the tomb, visited by thousands every day from all over the world.

Outside in the Darbar courtyard, the *daig* men were fast at work, serving food from their big pots to the needy and to those keen to take the *tabark*, food offerings, home for their family. When the man distributing bags of pilau rice touched him on his arm, Samir was lost for words and nodded, taking the bag of rice with him inside the building. In the large hall amidst the crowd of male and female devotees, peering through the open windows at the tomb draped with a green and gold embroidered sheet, Samir offered special prayers for his wife's soul, tears gushing out of his eyes. Then a prayer for himself. He repeated the word "escape" again.

As he sheepishly entered his ancestral home, the mouths of his brother's family fell open. They had not expected him back that night. In fact, they thought he was touring another city and here he was, large as life. Both parties energetically avoided eye contact. His brother's family quickly recovered. They had been lounging around on sofas. It was eight o'clock and the popular drama was about to be telecast. The wife and daughter began panicking. Was their guest fed or did they have to scurry to the kitchen to rustle up a meal for him? Reading their minds perfectly, Samir wryly held the bag of rice in front of him.

"I got my meal from the Darbar, I'm sure it's delicious. Don't worry about me, just carry on watching." With those words he left them to their drama, before excusing himself. "I'll go up to my room and have a shower."

“Yes, please do!” His sister-in-law quickly offered with a toothy grin and orangey *sak*-stained lips, sitting down to enjoy the drama with her daughter.

He came down precisely after nine pm, having given them time to finish watching their serial. In that time, he had showered, eaten the rice from the bag with his fingers and started to gather his belongings. They were expecting him and hurried to greet him, his niece standing up.

“Are you sure you will not want a meal?” His brother asked, not happy at Samir not eating. “The *darbar daig* rice was wonderful. Good to eat *tabark* sometimes. It reminds us gently what life is all about – our stomachs. Getting food into our bellies is what we work for, don’t we?” His brother cynically nodded, a director of a firm and now retired. He still had two daughters whose marriage and dowries he had to arrange. It was not just the matter of food for him. He envied his brother for having all his children wed and settled. No worries, saving that of having lost a wife.

Aloud he instructed. “Bano, go and make tea for your uncle!”

A smile fixed on her face, the eldest daughter left for the kitchen, whilst everyone else watched the news.

“Tomorrow morning I will check flight times.” Samir slipped in the information whilst sipping his tea. Heads turned, TV forgotten, surprise written on their faces.

“What brother! Already? You’ve only been here for just a week!” The sister-in-law rushed to speak.

“I think a week is enough - time to go home!” He replied, a gentle smile peeping across his features as he remembered his daughter Rosie.

Dumbfounded, they stared back at him, but did not challenge or question him further as to why. “He must be missing his children,” his brother echoed in his head. Once more all heads turned to the programme. As the eldest daughter got up to take the cups back to the kitchen, she smiled at her uncle asking if he wanted some more tea. He smiled back; it was the first full smile she had accorded him since he had arrived. Then she surprised him and her parents further with her kind offer.

“Uncle, please give me your laundry. I will see to it before you leave.”

“You stupid girl! Your uncle is not going yet!” Her father chided, red-faced. “He was only saying it. We are not going to let him go yet.”

His wife quickly echoed the same. “No brother, you are not going yet.”

“Don’t worry, Bano! I’ll get my clothes washed at home.” Samir said, surprising himself. Twice he had used the term “home.” Was not this his

home, the place where he was born?

Chastened and the smile deleted, the eldest daughter took the tray of crockery back to the kitchen. In the lounge her uncle from England had already decided. He stayed up for some more polite talk and then went up to his air conditioned room. Picking up the remaining items littering the dressing table he threw them into his suitcase. His love affair with the city of his birth was over.

On the plane he found himself sitting next to a man called Ibrahim, of his age group and size; both overweight and uncomfortable with the economy seats and the narrow leg space in front of them. After exchanging polite chitchat they soon got into serious talking and were onto the question as to why they were visiting their country of birth and youth.

“The homeland?” Samir ruminated over the term and shared his musing aloud with his fellow passenger, who had similar home circumstances, including being a widower.

“The one that you have just visited, or the one that you are returning to? The place where you have spent most of your adult life? Which homeland are you trying to escape from?” Samir elaborated, making the man’s sun beaten forehead groove into three deep pleats.

“Escape?” Ibrahim was disconcerted by the term. Samir nonchalantly went onto explain. “I am escaping back to the UK – and to a new home.”

“New home?”

“Want to join me?”

The man looked blankly at him, wondering whether this was a joke. Samir chuckling went on to explain.

He returned home not having met the two college friends or walked down the tall nineteenth century corridors of the Government College of Lahore. Strangely, it really did not matter to him.

Two weeks after his arrival, Samir had moved to an elderly people’s home, leaving his five bed roomed detached house to his four children but keeping his savings and shares to see to the needs of the family he had promised to support. He made a new will, instructing his Solicitor that when he died one of his children would carry on supporting the widow and her daughters. He got his eldest daughter to phone the widow, to reassure her that he had not forgotten his promise. Social and cultural parameters had to be maintained. He was a man and would keep his distance from the

widow and not compromise her honour, her *izzat*. They needed his financial help which his wife used to provide; now he would take over her role.

When he spoke to his brother on arrival in Manchester, he was asked when he would return to his homeland. After a pause Samir asked, “Homeland? Which homeland? I’m home....” An awkward silence followed. Then he had added laughing, “You can visit me next time.”

A week later, the friend he had met on the plane arrived with his daughter, carrying his suitcase. Ibrahim took the room three doors away from Samir’s, his gales of laughter echoing down the corridor. Pure joy raced through Samir lifting his spirit as he rushed to show his friend around the home, enthusiastically explaining and reassuring, introducing him to the other house guests he had befriended, Penny and Derrick.

“It’s the right decision my friend. You won’t regret it. Wave goodbye to loneliness and heartache...We are the new English *babus*, living in old people’s homes, the ones we used to ridicule once upon a time! Meals on wheels for us now – we have worked so hard – time to enjoy ourselves now, hey!”

THE ELOPEMENT

The telephone was ringing again. The three women in the living room jumped visibly. They exchanged quick glances, silent messages transmitted from the eyes travelled to and fro.

No one spoke.

The phone began to ring persistently. Two pairs of eyes turned to one figure seated by the window.

Suriya Qureshi encompassed her two teenage daughters in one glance, noting their nervous movements. Apparently they didn't know what to do. They were waiting for a sign from her. Waiting to see whether she would get up and answer the phone herself.

She disappointed them. By the nod of her head she motioned her youngest daughter, Farina. Out of her three daughters she was the good conversationalist. She could cope with any situation. Farina, however, drew further into the settee and nudged her elder sister Nadia.

“You go”, she hissed.

Nadia got up very reluctantly, stepping on her sister's feet as she made a dash for the door and disappeared into the hallway.

In the living room, mother and daughter stared at one another, their hearts literally in their mouths, their ears cocked to the conversation going on over the telephone.

In both heads the same thought hammered. Was it *her*? They waited, trying to glean their information from the nuances of words and phrases that Nadia was using. The mother's head fell back against the sofa.

It was not *her*. It was not Rubiya. Nadia would not be speaking to her like that. Her words were too polite and stilted. It sounded as if she was speaking to her Aunt Jamila. Not her again. Did she hear correctly? Or was it her imagination? Nadia was talking about Rubiya. Surely Jamila had not found out about Rubiya — surely not. Oh God! She could not bear it. She felt faint. Her heart was beating rapidly.

“I bet she has found out, and is now trying to find something out from Nadia. She is very good at doing that. Oh God, why didn’t I answer the phone and shut her up”. Surely Nadia hadn’t gone mad and blabbed out the truth: Suriya for a moment did not realise that she was speaking out her thoughts. Only when she looked at her daughter did she realise that she was speaking out aloud.

She ignored her daughter. She must do something. She must call Nadia and herself have a word with Jamila. Just as she got up from her seat she heard the clicking sound of the phone, as Nadia replaced the receiver on its cradle. Too late.

Nadia entered.

Two pairs of eyes turned towards her, scanning her face quickly for any tell-tale expression it might betray. She gave her mother and sister a watery smile, knowing too well what they were thinking about. She came further into the room and sat down gingerly in the vacant place beside her sister. She addressed her mother.

“It was Aunt Jamila. She wanted to know whether Rubiya would sew a *Shalwar Kameez* suit for her..”

“What did you say?” Suriya interrupted her daughter quickly.

“I told her that Rubiya was out, visiting a friend of hers. Therefore she could not say whether she was able to or not. She then added that she would drop in later this evening or tomorrow afternoon with the suit.”

Nadia exchanged a significant glance with her mother.

Suriya’s heart sank. Oh God, Jamila on top of everything else. She feared this sister-in-law as she did no other person, excepting her husband. Jamila, with her eagle eyes and her sharp mind she was sure to find out the truth. They could not lie to her — not to her. She was sure the horrible truth was written on their faces. Jamila would sense immediately that something was amiss. In fact everything was amiss. They were not the same, their thoughts and actions weren’t the same. It seemed that since yesterday afternoon they had entered another world, a theatre in which they themselves were strangers, puppets in fact, with Rubiya as the puppeteer.

She still marvelled at the fact that her husband had not found out. It was a sheer miracle that Haji Farook Din did not know that his elder daughter, Rubiya, had not been seen in the house since yesterday morning. He had no idea that she had left home and eloped with a young man, God knew where to. A two minute telephone call from a phone box yesterday evening gave

them the most hateful, the most shocking and shameful information. She was going away with this man, and that was all they needed to know. Suriya Qureshi and her two daughters had reeled with shock.

When the phone call had come, Haji Farook was not in. Nor was he in when Farina had rushed in with the unbelievable news that she had seen Rubiya getting into a car with a strange man and drive off without saying anything. Farina omitted to say that she had seen the man with Rubiya before. At breakfast time, Haji Farook had not commented on his daughter's absence. He probably thought that she was upstairs somewhere or still asleep. It would not have occurred to him in a thousand years that his eldest daughter was missing — that she had not slept in her bed, but was out there in the night with some young man, God knew where. Her mind revolted from the picture of this man.

Why the news would kill her husband. He would never recover from the shock. What had happened to the father of that disgraceful affair they had heard about last year. The father, long after the affair was over, was in and out of hospital. Haji Farook would never be able to hold his head upright in public, in their community, amongst their relatives and friends.

Had she herself not died a thousand deaths since yesterday afternoon? She still could not believe that this was happening to her, to them. It could not be. What had they done to deserve this? It was an unreal world she had entered since Farina came with the damning news. It was a long nightmare, from which she must wake up. Oh, *Allah Pak*, she must. It had to be a nightmare. In a few seconds her complacent, happy and respectable — oh so respectable world had toppled: to be replaced by this shame and nightmare. Her daughter, surely, could not do this to them. She could not be so cruel and so shameful. They did not deserve this treatment. Her father a Haji too! Shame on her!

They had heard of such an incident some time ago. But they had shuffled it aside in their minds. It had no relevance for them. Shame and filth was attached to this incident. Theirs was a respectable family. And both the parents could not conceive any of their daughters committing that shameful crime. They'd felt sorry for the parents who had to suffer the consequences of their daughter's crime. Suriya recalled with bitterness the twist of fate. Once they had pitied those parents, now they were to be pitied. She couldn't bear the thought. How would she show her face amongst her friends? What had Rubiya done?

Suriya closed her eyes in anguish, breathing heavily, her body was rocked by silent sobs. She drew her *dupatta* over her face, in order to hide it from her two daughters watching each and every movement of hers. Rubiya had thrown it all away. Her reputation, her parents', her honour, her *izzat* and theirs, all at one go. What had she done? Again Suriya found it hard to believe that her daughter had left home, perhaps for good and committed that heinous crime. The images it conjured up in her mind left her feeling nauseous. Again the injustice of it all struck her. Every fibre, every cell of her being loathed her daughter. She had no right to cause such suffering in their household, to cause such havoc in their lives.

At the moment only she and her two daughters knew about this. She daren't think what would happen if her husband found out or any of their relatives, especially Jamila, who would never allow them to recover from the incident. On the contrary she would gloatingly force her point home; that this was what happened if you gave your daughters too much freedom and let them become too *Westernised*. Suriya closed her eyes tightly — wanting to shut out the picture of the world outside. She'd never be ready to confront the world outside.

For how long could the three of them hide the truth from her husband and other people. Jamila said she was coming and she was bound to find out that Rubiya was not to be seen anywhere. Already one day had passed. This afternoon had given her a taste of what her ordeal was going to be like if Rubiya did not return. The sudden appearance of one of Rubiya's friends had thrown the three into jitters, so that they had to resort to excuses and lies. All the time they'd felt guilty at guarding their shameful secret. It was the most trying moment of their lives. They fidgeted with their rings, their hair, their bangles and their clothes, hardly paying any attention to what Rubiya's friend, Neelum was saying. Their thoughts were with Rubiya and the telephone. Their monosyllabic replies were very stilted. The girls were sure that their own nervousness would arouse suspicion. They wished their visitor gone and the time to pass quickly.

Even amongst themselves the subject of Rubiya's elopement was a taboo. It was too terrible to discuss openly. Farina and Nadia were unable to voice their thoughts openly. Both of them condemned their sister's action. "How could she do it?" they queried. "Had she taken leave of her senses? Did she feel no sharm?" They shuddered at the thought of their sister being in close proximity with a strange man. They tried to put themselves in her place and

imagine what she felt and what must have compelled her to do what she did. Their minds, however, shied away from the situation. They knew the man Rubiya was infatuated with. There was no other term to describe this relationship. While Rubiya might have described it as 'love', they would have labelled it as infatuation and sheer madness. Although younger than Rubiya they knew their limits. They despised their sister's action in wanting to ape their English girlfriends by having a boyfriend too. It would never work, they were sure. Rubiya was just infatuated and she would return. They would tire of each other soon enough, especially when they couldn't survive in a social vacuum, surrounded by shame and rejection.

Nadia cursed herself over and over again. She was the one to be blamed. She knew what was going on but had done nothing about it. She ought to have warned her mother about it. Now Rubiya was lost forever. Even if she came back, she would carry the stigma, the stain of her action forever. The shameful deed would be labelled on her for eternity. But worst of all she had let her family down. The disgraceful deed would shroud all of them for the rest of their lives. Rubiya and their chances of marriages — well that was another story...

Rubiya had not only slammed the door on her future, but theirs too. Rubiya's elopement would definitely mean that their own freedom to go when and where they pleased would be curtailed. They would be made Rubiya's scapegoats — in fact, made to suffer for *her* crime. Already their mother had lost her trust in them. It was almost as if she expected both of them to do a disappearing act — as if they too would elope any minute. Thinking back, neither of the two sisters had been out of doors since yesterday afternoon.

Worse still, there was going to be social repercussions too. Friends and relatives would be pointing accusing fingers at them - referring to them as sisters of the girl who had committed that horrible crime. They would be in the limelight and each and every action of theirs scrutinised and criticised. If their father found out...

Both of them shuddered at the thought. Why he would never allow them out of their front room door. What had too much freedom brought them? Nothing but shame and disgrace. They would always be the butt of his anger. They felt sorry for their father. He would never be able to lift his head in public. Always he would be surrounded by shame. From a very

respectable member of their community he would become the victim of the community's gossip; of their pity for fathering such daughters.

Their mother too was a bag of nerves. She had not eaten or slept since yesterday night. At night she paced the house, keeping her eyes glued to the window pane in case Rubiya turned up. She did not. From nine o'clock this morning she had not left her seat by the window. Her eyes often wandered out, hungry for Rubiya's appearance. If the telephone rang she jumped up in her seat. She did not have the nerve, however, to go and answer it herself. They understood. She would not know what to say to Rubiya, if it was her again. Although her mind and heart cursed Rubiya for what she'd done, every time the phone rang she shrank inwards. She did not want to speak to her. Her mind had already cast her out as her daughter. No love remained in her heart for this daughter. Only a loathing and burning shame, which made her want to curl and shrink in the sofa.

Since yesterday afternoon their house was a shambles. The everyday routine of washing and tidying up was lost. The girls still marvelled at themselves. Despite what they were going through, they managed to cook the evening meal, although in silence, and to act as normal as possible when their father came home for dinner yesterday afternoon and last night. It was not too difficult. After staying with their parents for what they felt was an adequate time so as not to arouse their father's attention, Farina and Nadia escaped to their rooms. At some time or another they had dropped the hint that Rubiya was upstairs in her room. During the rest of the evening they waited nervously in their rooms, expecting any minute for their father to blow his top. Flicking through some paperbacks they waited with their beating hearts until ten o'clock. Everything however appeared normal downstairs. They'd even heard their father laughing at something. They'd felt sorry for their mother's predicament.

When their father actually came upstairs and went to bed, their hearts stood still. They couldn't believe their luck. They sighed with relief. Their father did not know! They marvelled furthermore when their father did not notice Rubiya's absence at breakfast time too, the next morning.

Tonight, however, was going to be different. Their father was bound to notice Rubiya's absence. What if he took it into his head to go and see Rubiya — see how she was doing. They'd earlier dropped a hint about her having a headache or something. Then they would have to tell him the truth. They dreaded that time.

At six o'clock when their father came home, the girls felt very edgy. They did not know what to do with themselves; how to behave; what to say. All they seemed to be doing was exchanging silent glances with one another.

Mother and daughters dreaded the time when their father would mention Rubiya. In Nadia's head, a plan was already forming. If her father wanted to visit Rubiya in her bedroom, then she'd sleep in Rubiya's bed, and pretend to be her and hope for the best that he wouldn't wake her up if he saw her fast asleep. They'd toyed with their meal not feeling very hungry, but were very much aware of the tension mounting up in the dining room. It was almost tangible; they were sure they could slice their way through it with a knife.

Back in the living room, after the meal and the clearing up in the kitchen, television held no interest for them. Usually Thursday evening found themselves glued to their TV set, especially for 'Top of the Pops'. Today, however when their father switched onto another channel, the girls did not bat an eyelid. They'd hardly noticed the prancing figures on the pop stage. Their thoughts were elsewhere. They were busy devising ways of creeping out of the room without arousing their father's interest. Haji Farook, an intelligent and perceptive man, couldn't help but notice their fidgety movements. At one stage in the evening he commented on their noncommittal remarks and monosyllabic rejoinders.

At about nine o'clock he got up and went out of the room. The girls relaxed. When they heard him climb the stairs, they looked at their mother. Fear was etched on her features. They too were afraid. What if he took it into his head to look at Rubiya, they asked themselves.

Nadia got up resolutely. She knew what she was going to do. Her father was in the bathroom. They could tell by the treading of his feet above. Perhaps she still had time to carry out her plan. She went out of the room.

Suriya heard the backdoor open and then click shut. What was Nadia up to she asked herself. It was not the day for the dustbins to be placed outside. She waited for her to return so that she could ask her this. At the same time she was listening to her husband's footsteps upstairs. Her heart had begun to beat a tattoo again. Her husband's footsteps were now in Rubiya's room.

This was the moment. This was the time they all dreaded. Now the whole world would explode. Suriya shrank inwards — she could not cope with this!

Farina was listening to her father's footsteps too, her eyes staring above at the ceiling.

Neither the mother nor the daughter noticed the living room open and a young woman dressed in outdoor clothes enter the room. When Suriya caught sight of her, she almost leapt out of her seat. Farina's mouth stood open, unable to believe her eyes. It was almost as if they were watching a Shakespearian play at the Royal Exchange Theatre. "Rubiya," she whispered the magical word. Surely her eyes were playing tricks on her. For there stood Rubiya, looking worn out and dishevelled. She was apparently struggling to stick a brave and confident expression on her face, but without much success.

Not daring to look at her mother, she addressed her sister.

"I came the back way", she said quietly as if in explanation of how she got inside the house. She held the key to her sister. As the steps thudded down the stairs, three pairs of eyes turned to the door. Rubiya swivelled a desperate look at her mother. Suriya stared back, her face expressionless. Her mind was already thinking ahead. She'd loathed her daughter, but she was in control once again. She was the puppeteer now, not Rubiya her daughter.

Haji Farook on entering the room, noticed his eldest daughter standing in the middle of the room. A baffled expression settled on his face. He looked at his wife and his youngest daughter, Farina. He returned to look at Rubiya.

"I thought you had a headache. Nadia just told me you were asleep".

He noticed for the first time the outdoor summer jacket that Rubiya was wearing and the handbag she was clutching to her side. Haji Farook looked at his wife for an answer. Suriya had already decided upon her answer two minutes ago.

"Rubiya went to Jamila's house just before you returned home. Jamila wanted her to sew a *kameez* for her. Nadia did not know about this. Jamila has just dropped her off...."

"Go to bed child. You look tired. You should not have gone with Jamila if you had a headache"

With a wave of his hand, Haji Farook dismissed his daughter. Unaware of the charade-like nature of the situation, he settled in his seat to await the Nine o'clock News on BBC1. Rubiya could not believe her luck. He did not know!

Damn the man! Damn him! her mind cursed. She would never be the same again. She was a fool.

Thankfully she made her exit. Her head held high, she muttered her “Goodnight” to no-one in particular. As she left the room she felt her mother’s and sister’s eyes boring into her back.

THE CITY DWELLERS

Sher Khan got on the bus from his village, heading for the city of Lahore. Almost the entire village had come to see him off, out of respect - the men, women and children. He was a *busurgh*, one of the two remaining village elders. The children ran alongside him and offered salaam. The young women, whom he treated as his own daughters, ducked their covered head in front of him out of respect, so that he could pat them on the head, as was the custom for an elder *busurgh*.

As he sat on the bus, his self-respect and dignity was never higher. The young men had helped him with his *ghitries*, his three parcels, onto the bus. The three parcels were presents, mainly home grown vegetables and pastries for his two lifelong friends, who were now settled in Lahore, a large teeming city, once the capital city of Pakistan and the home of the Mughal emperors.

Sher Khan was looking forward to meeting his two friends. He had spent his childhood, youth and most of his adult life with these two friends in the village. This was the first time he was going to visit them, since they had left almost a decade ago. The friends had often visited him in the village. He always offered his home and his warm hospitality whenever they visited.

He was dressed in his best, crisply starched clothes which his daughter-in-law had prepared for him. He donned his *pagh*, his special turban, on his head and had dyed his white hair and beard with henna and trimmed his moustache.

The journey on the bus was a lonely one. He wished that he had brought his wife with him. The coach reached Lahore on time. It was almost evening. Sher Khan, struggling to hold his three parcels, got off the coach. He hadn't realised how heavy they were. There was always someone to carry things for him, so had never carried anything before. The village lads had carried them for him. Now he stood on the pavement with two of them on the ground near to his feet, and one in his arm. The hustle and bustle of the city disconcerted him - the traffic, the people, the buildings, and anonymity of it all. Nobody knew him, and nobody was going to rush to help him with his parcels. He anxiously rummaged through the pocket of his jacket to find the paper with the addresses of his two friends. The paper was still there and he felt himself sigh with relief.

Seeing a taxi, he waved it to stop, and the driver helped him into the taxi. As he neared his destination, Sher Khan remembered that he had not written to his friend to tell them he was visiting them. He hoped that they didn't mind his coming out of the blue, like this, but they never wrote to him when they came. He recalled his own and his family's pleasure at receiving guests no matter on which day or at what time they arrived, so he assumed that his friend and his family were the same. As the taxi wove through the maze of small streets and bazaars, exuding different smells of the city, Sher Khan almost felt nostalgic. He missed the clean, fresh air of his village fields. Here it was a crowded scene, verging on almost a slum. Houses and living quarters were packed into one another. He wasn't sure where one accommodation started and another ended. The lanes were teeming with life, with people and traffic. Eventually, the taxi drew to a halt and the driver pointed to a small building. It was a shop. Sher Khan looked at it, confused. His friend hadn't told him that it was a shop.

"Are you sure, young man, that this is the right place?"

"Oh yes," replied the taxi driver, "there is the number. The people you want probably live above that shop. You go up those stairs." Sher Khan spotted the two concrete steps leading to a door, and with the driver helping him with his parcels, he stepped out.

As the taxi drove away, Sher Khan looked around helplessly. How was he going to take his parcels up? He summoned the courage to call to the shop vendor, nearby, selling make-up and toiletries, and asked if he would allow his young assistant to help him? The man obliged quickly.

"Yes, of course, Baba-ji." He answered using the respectful term of 'Baba-ji', for an old man. Sher Khan's face brightened at the man's answer. The young man came and lifted the three parcels effortlessly.

Together they climbed the steps, and went through the door to find more stairs, which they climbed to the top to find themselves in a dark hallway. Sher Khan knocked on the door.

"You should have rung the bell, Baba-ji", the young man said.

The door opened and a young woman stood in front of them. She stared blankly at them both with no words of greeting from her mouth. Her head remained prominently uncovered. Sher Khan's facial muscles faltered into a semblance of a smile.

"Salam Alaikum, my daughter. You must be Noor Ali's daughter?"

“Wa laikum Salam, yes.” She answered. Her face didn’t light up in the way his own daughters and daughter-in-laws did when they faced a guest. Without a further word, she disappeared inside, leaving both standing outside. Sher Khan found this an unpleasant and a novel experience to be left standing at the door. He was used to being treated with pomp and ceremony, whenever he deigned to visit any household or relatives in the village.

“Mum, there is a *buddha*, an old man, standing at the front door and talking about dad.” Sher Khan heard her distinctly say, although it was in a hushed tone. His cheeks coloured in indignation. He had never been referred to in such an offensive term as *buddha* - ‘old man’. He was always called uncle, father-figure, or the respectable term *busurgh*, but never *buddha*. The girl hadn’t quite endeared herself to Sher Khan. Sher Khan, of course, made allowances that they had lived in the city for a long time, and therefore they wouldn’t remember him.

Then Noor Ali’s wife appeared. She was pleased to see him and recognised him. She bade them to go into their *bathek*, their guest room. Sher Khan turned to the young man and thanked and tipped him for his help.

“*Bismillah*, come in, come in!” Noor Ali’s wife beckoned. Sher Khan looked around at the dwelling, as he stood in the darkness of a small central courtyard. There were probably just four rooms around the central courtyard. It was a small place compared to the one they had owned in the village, which had the huge open courtyard and a large *pasars*, the living rooms. He entered the *bathek* and asked for his friend, Noor Ali, and was told that he had gone out shopping and would be back later.

Sher Khan sat perched on the high-back chair, unsure whether he ought to recline on the *palang*, a chaise longue. The woman, as was the Muslim custom, left him alone. It wasn’t right for a woman to entertain a man, without the presence of her husband. Sher Khan looked around the room with interest.

He must have dozed off on the chair, for suddenly he heard voices. His ears pricked up as he heard his friend’s voice. Through the crack, between the wall and the door, he caught a glimpse of his old friend. His wife was talking to him, apparently telling him about their guest.

Sher Khan watched his friend’s face with interest. He noted with dismay and humiliation that his friend’s face didn’t light up as he expected, at being

told of his arrival. It was a bitter pill for Sher Khan to swallow. When Noor Ali, walked into the room, a few seconds later, Sher Khan found it difficult to look his friend in the eye. His body worked mechanically as he got up and greeted his friend with an embrace, in the normal fashion. Sher Khan marvelled at the change in his friend, and his greeting. It didn't tally with the glimpse he had earlier of him - now everything was suspect. Again he recalled that look, that naked raw look, without the urbane veneer and polish. The week of expectations of exchanging news and marvelling in each other's company seemed a dream. It was almost as if they were strangers. They exchanged news and pleasantries, yet they weren't on the same wavelength; the mutual rapport was missing.

After years and years of being worshipped as a village elder, whose every word and sigh was a law and command onto itself and whose ideas and wishes were respected, here, Sher Khan felt as if he had been robbed of his identity. It all came as a crushing blow to Sher Khan; firstly there was the attitude of the young daughter, then the manner in which he had been abandoned with just a cup of tea and dry biscuits, and finally the reaction of his own friend.

His friend asked if he'd eaten; Sher Khan replied that he wasn't hungry. Noor Ali almost shouted to his wife to find out if dinner was ready. She replied from the kitchen that it was on its way.

"It's alright, my friend. I had a heavy meal before I left the village." Sher Khan said, trying to make light of the matter. "Your wife didn't know I was coming."

"You should have written. I would have gone to pick you up from the coach station."

"I know that I should have, but it was no problem in getting to your home."

"How long have you come for? I hope you are going to stay a week with us, at least." His friend volunteered.

"I think that I can only spare a day." Sher Khan heard himself saying. He didn't know what made him say that, but it just came out. Perhaps it was due to his friend's lack of enthusiasm on hearing that he was here, or perhaps it was his pride that hadn't let him say otherwise or to tell the truth that he had indeed come to spend a week in Lahore with him, and to see the city. His friend had often stayed for weeks.

“Ah, that’s a pity.” Noor Ali replied, not bothering to ask why Sher Khan could only ‘spare a day’, and the matter was closed.

Sher Khan dropped his gaze from his friend’s. Disappointment and humiliation vying with each other, was mirrored in his eyes. His friend hadn’t pressed him to stay. Apparently he was the unwanted guest. Sher Khan moved awkwardly on his chair.

Noor Ali kindly asked him to sit on the *palang* and put up his legs, as he must be tired from the long journey. Sher Khan did so, but as a shy awkward guest, and not as a lifelong friend. A few minutes later, mother and daughter brought in the dinner. It all fitted on one tray: there was one curry casserole, some chapattis and a small plate of salad and water. Sher Khan noted that his friend hadn’t expected anything else. As he shifted the potato cubes around his plate with his chapatti, Sher Khan recalled bitterly how his daughter and daughter-in-law waited hand and foot on their guests, cooking up different dishes and sweets, including those things that were not as widely available in the village, as in the city, where everything was accessible round the corner in the small bazaars. His daughter-in-law looked after their guests, even to the extent of bringing a bowl of water for him to wash his hand, and preparing a smoke pipe, a hookah, for him to smoke. There was no bowl of water here for him to wash his hands.

Early next morning Sher Khan arose and didn’t know what to do with himself. Should he make it known to his hosts that he was awake? Normally, in the village, he arose with the call of the muezzin from the central mosque. Here, he had heard the mosques ringing with calls at about six o’clock, but nobody had stirred in the household. Not knowing where the local mosque was, he decided to say his prayers at home, on the prayer mat provided by his host the previous night, after his ablutions.

Sitting on his bed, cuddled up in his quilt, and missing his morning hookah, Sher Khan timed them. The first sound he heard was at eight o’clock, much too late, according to his village standards. Outside, the traffic was in full swing. By this time, his daughter and daughter-in-law would have finished the household chores, as well as serving breakfast. How he missed them and his early morning breakfast.

Here, in Lahore, in his friend’s house he had breakfast at about nine o’clock. The *parathas*, buttered hot chapattis, were cooked at home, the rest of the halwa, the breakfast, and the chana curry were brought from a local breakfast take-away in the bazaar.

After some more small talk, Sher Khan decided it was time to leave. His friend and wife pressed him to stay, saying that they would show him around the bazaars and some sightseeing to some museums and the Shalamar Gardens. Sher Khan, still doubting their sincerity, told them that he must leave. They didn't press him further. As well as the parcel of presents for his friend and his family, Sher Khan also gave money to Noor Ali's daughter.

Sher Khan reached his next destination before eleven o'clock. He had taken a taxi from his friend's home. The hustle and bustle of the crowded scenes of the inner city ebbed away, as Sher Khan's taxi ploughed through the clean, leafy almost deserted outer suburbs of Lahore.

There were very few houses or shops. There were definitely no bazaars, but shopping plazas. He now saw only large and well-spaced-out beautiful *khoties*, villas. Sher Khan marvelled at the elegance and the splendour of these beautiful buildings. At the same time, he began to feel the stirrings of unease in the pit of his stomach. The second friend, unlike Noor Ali, who lived in humble surroundings in the inner city, had certainly progressed well in the world. Sher Khan had heard how well his friend had done. How he had opened a factory with the help of his three sons, since he had left the village.

The reality of the gulf between his own standard of living and the way of life of his second friend, washed over him, in wave after wave. As he paid the driver, he stood outside the gigantic elegant villa of his friend. The taxi disappeared and he found himself standing outside the white filigree wrought iron gate. There wasn't a soul to be seen in the wide street.

Sher Khan peered through the large gates, and saw a beautifully kept lawn and flower beds and the elegant alabaster pillars of the large porch with its marble chipped floor. He tried to open the gates, but they wouldn't open. He shook them hard and suddenly a large dog bounded out from somewhere from the back of the villa. It stopped on the other side of the gates and bared its teeth. Sher Khan stepped back in fear, his heart beginning to thud inside his chest. A middle-aged man appeared and stood near the dog. From his clothing and general demeanour, Sher Khan guessed this man to be one of his friend's home helpers or servants.

“Assalama-Alaikum, Aba-ji. Did you want to see anybody?”

“Yes. I have come to see my friend Mohammed. Does he live here?”

“Yes. He has gone to the factory, but he will be here soon. I’ll take the dog away first and I’ll open the gates so that you can come inside and wait for Sahib. You should have rung the bell. It is over there on the pillar.”

“Oh, I didn’t see it.”

“Just wait there while I press the button to open the gates. You see they are electronically controlled.”

Sher Khan stood and watched, marvelling as the gates parted as if by magic. They disappeared behind the high walls, draped with shrubs and rose bushes.

Just at that moment a shiny, well-polished black saloon drew up at the villa and finding the gates open, went through. Sher Khan moved aside, and looked carefully into the car. He saw his friend Mohammed sitting in the front seat beside one of his sons. Mohammed stared back at him, blankly to Sher Khan’s dismay. There was no trace of recognition in that look, or if there was, it was well hidden. It was almost as if Mohammed had looked right through a wall, and not a lifelong friend, whom he had seen three years ago in the village.

The car disappeared from sight as it went round the back of the villa. Sher Khan remained standing outside; his mind and heart were in a whirl.

The manservant returned: “Baba-ji. Mohammed Sahib has returned. I’ll inform them about you.” Sher Khan noted the use of ‘them’ as he referred to his employer.

Sher Khan tried to swim out of the swamp of humiliation and claw back some of his own dignity and human respect.

“No. It’s O.K. Just give him this.” He passed the second parcel he had brought with him to the manservant.

“Who shall I say gave this?”

“It doesn’t matter. Say an old friend. He probably doesn’t remember me. I’ll be off then. Assalam Alaikum.”

“Walaikum Salam. Are you sure you won’t come in? Shall I call a taxi for you?”

“No, it’s alright; I’ll find one on the way.” Sher Khan didn’t want to bump into his friend, and therefore hastened away.

It was more easily said than done, Sher Khan thought as he walked forlornly from street to street, hoping to catch a glimpse of a taxi. In this area people had cars. They didn’t need taxis, he told himself, as he went into one *khotie* to ask if someone would call a taxi for him. In the end, one

kind young man drove him to Lahore's coach station where he caught the coach back to his village.

Mohammed was handed the parcel that Sher Khan had brought for him. He looked at the gauche parcel with distaste. He wanted to distance himself from his past life in the village.

"An old friend of yours came and left this, but he wouldn't come to meet you."

"Yes, yes, I understand." Mohammed remembered the old man and the face, but didn't want to be reminded of it. "You take it, Ali. It is probably some *sag*, some spinach. I've had my fill of it, in all those years I spent in that village."

The servant took the parcel to his quarters, at the back of the villa, and gave it to his wife. She marvelled at the packet's contents as she unwrapped it. As well as fresh vegetables, there was *ghee*, purified butter, home-made pastries and three hand-embroidered pillow cases, with crocheted lace edges.

At that moment, Sher Khan was deep in thought, in the coach, wrestling and debating with himself as to what plausible excuse he could give to his family and fellow villages for returning after just one day, when he was supposed to be away for two weeks.

The only plausible reason he could come up with was that the city wasn't for him, nor its people, the '*sherries*'.

THE DISCOVERY

In order to please his wife, Jamil had decided to clear up their spare bedroom. She was always reminding him of that room. It was a small room, which they hoped to set up as a baby's room, for their forthcoming child in six month's time.

Now as Jamil shifted himself around the contents of the room he found it hard work. Different types of boxes and bags had to be sorted, their contents rifled through, and quick decisions made as to what could be discarded and what ought to be kept.

Much of the stuff in this room belonged to his wife, Rubiya. There were magazines, books, clothes and bags of all sorts. There were three other carrier bags to sort out and then the room would be dusted and wiped clean. In fact, beautifully clean before his wife arrived home from her work. He looked at his watch. There was still an hour to go. He had plenty of time. In fact all of this would be finished in perhaps half an hour's time, and he could then start with the dinner. It was his occasional day off from work. He was definitely making the most of it in pleasing his wife. He'd vacuumed the entire house in the morning, Then he had worked on the bathroom later in the afternoon. And now for the last hour had been working in this room. Today the dinner would be ready for her for a change. He smiled to himself, imagining her look of pleasure as she surveyed the work he'd done.

The box finished he grabbed another carrier bag. He peeped inside and put his hand in. Dust flew out. There were a lot of very dusty papers and pamphlets. He flicked through the papers — reading quickly, to see what they were about. Here was another paper, but this time he recognised his wife's writing. As his eyes followed the words on it, his mind froze.

Jamil threw the paper back in the bag as if it burned him, and stood up, his face set and his eyes glaring out of the window. He bent down and lifted the bag. Taking the piece of paper he'd just thrown in, he kicked the bag aside and left the room. He shoved the paper into his trouser pocket. He was going downstairs, and then he changed his mind and came up again. Pushing the door open, he entered his bedroom.

The first thing that caught his eyes was the framed picture of him and Rubiya as Bride and Bridegroom "Dhullan" and "Dhulla" on the dressing table. Jamil purposely walked to the dressing table and once there he flung the picture onto the floor. The glass frame broke into three pieces. He

looked at them, but didn't bother picking them up. Rubiya's radiant, jewel-clad face stared back at him. He turned away.

He walked to the window and stared out in space, not seeing the green open field in front of him. He swore under his breath. He fumed. To think he had spent the entire day working away cleaning the house in order to please *her*. "The filthy hussy" - the words came out again under his suppressed breath. Moving away from the window he flopped down onto the bed. He switched on the bedside radio. Thoughts and anecdotes whizzed through his mind. He wanted a distraction. Madonna's No. 1 hit didn't mean anything to him. He switched the radio off and pushed his face into the pillow. All the hints and thoughts which had meant nothing to him earlier now fell into place like a jigsaw puzzle. Now he understood why she didn't go to that wedding. The damned excuses she'd used. And he a blind fool, worshipping her for her gorgeous face, had played to her tune. He detested himself. Now he understood why she avoided some of her friends!

Jamil was still staring at the ceiling, he couldn't tell for how long, when he heard the front door open. That was *her*. He didn't move a muscle. Normally he would have raced down the stairs to greet her, to hug her. Not today. He heard her call him. Then again. No sound escaped his lips. Then she was clambering up the stairs. And was now in the bedroom. He needed time to think, to decide. He didn't want to see her face.

"Oh, here you are", Rubiya spoke over her shoulder, as she peeled off her outdoor coat, 'Because you didn't answer, I thought you had gone outside.'

Wordlessly, Jamil got off the bed and went outside onto the landing, his hand balled inside his pocket, fingering the piece of paper. His hand clenched it. His wife was speaking again. "Did you clean the small room then, Jamil?" she called. He was unable to prevent the retort that came out. "Yes. Guess what I found there?" The words sounded rough and alien to his ears. They were laced with anger and bitterness. He pushed the door open and went inside the room.

Rubiya was lying languidly on the bed, flicking off her high stiletto court shoes. He looked down at her close cropped hair with brown highlights, her well-made face accentuating her regular well-formed features. She looked very attractive in the sleek maroon jump-suit hugging her body. Normally he would have been by her side on the bed by now. At the moment he was seeing her through the eyes of other men. The vision sickened him. God knew, how many men she had attracted with her looks, looks which

nauseated him at the moment. Wasn't he himself allured by them? But whereas before he'd thought he was the only one entitled to admire her looks, now he wasn't so sure. There was definitely someone lurking about from her past, whom Rubiya had tantalised. Unable to bear the picture it conjured up in his mind he wanted to hit out.

Instead he drew out the piece of paper and flicked it down onto her chest. He wanted to erase that confident, self-possessed smile from her face. Shaking a curl from her eyes, Rubiya got up on her elbows and picked up the paper. As she recognised the paper and her eyes traced the words on it, the smile was whipped away, as Jamil had anticipated. The words, written by herself five years ago, stared back at her. She froze. She was living a nightmare. She'd always imagined her husband confronting her with her past deed, but never for the world imagined that her own hand would betray her. She looked again at the piece, the hateful words swimming before her eyes.

'My darling. Rashid, I am ready to do what you suggest. I will leave home and my family in order to be with you. I will contrive a way in order to go away with you. I will meet you in the afternoon at 2.00 p.m. near the post office at the end of the road.'

Her heart was beating erratically. The self-assurance which was earlier etched on her features was there no more. She stared back at her husband. Jamil looked pointedly into her eyes. He didn't trust himself. He certainly didn't trust his tongue. He wanted to lash out at her, call her the horrible things that she was. He wanted to even do physical damage to her. He looked at her body again. It was soiled for him. He was the only one with whom she had a physical relationship, but the thought of the other man, Rashid, being near her, was driving him insane. She was ugly, she was tainted.

He lashed her with his eyes. She felt hedged in. Between them stood another world — a world of Rubiya's past. Her past had caught up with her. She saw the hate and loathing imprinted on his face. She must make an effort to defend herself. She couldn't bear the look on his face. She got off the bed and flicked the paper in the basket. Her mind was still dizzy from this outcome.

"Oh, that letter was written while I was still at school. All girls were writing such letters in those days. And I did the same" She finished lamely.

Jamil, however, had already left the room, banging the door behind him. The next minute she heard him go outside, and the car started to purr into action and away it was gone.

Rubiya sank onto the bed and covered her eyes with her hand. From a happy evening she was looking forward to it had turned into a nightmare. Oh, God, he knew. For two years she'd made every effort to hide that stupid, lousy secret of hers. And here it was, now in the open. She'd always imagined Jamil's feeling of horror and revulsion, but somehow now that he knew it seemed much worse. She remembered the look in his eyes. He had looked at her as if she were something hideous. She hated that look. She'd never seen it before. Always he had looked at her if not with reverence, at least something near to it. Now she knew that look would never return.

He was a good husband. Unlike so many couples, they had an equal relationship. They'd had lovely times together, and she knew he adored her good looks. She caught sight of the broken picture frame. Somehow the action was symbolic. It meant he couldn't bear the sight of her. The broken pieces mirrored the tainted image that Jamil had of her now in his heart and mind. Her mind still reeled from the shock. To think, a small action could have such disastrous results. All she had done was to go away with a man for a day, whom she later detested. Nothing had come out of it and she'd returned. She hadn't even let him get within an arm's length of her. Who would ever believe her?

She braced her shoulders. She was going to make an effort to redeem herself in Jamil's mind and to save her marriage. She was certainly going to try. She would explain to him everything. She looked at the clock. She didn't know whether the dinner was made or not. But if it was not she would make it. She went downstairs into the kitchen and found it wasn't.

The next evening Rubiya was making dinner again. Jamil was out. He had not told her where he was going. Nor had she asked, fearing his earlier sarcastic remark. "What is it to you where I am going? Unlike you I am not likely to go off with anybody." Rubiya had flinched from his remark, hurt to her very soul. Normally if he made any sarcastic remarks she'd never let him get away with it. She would lash out immediately and lace her own remark with as much sarcasm as she could muster. Not this time, however. It was not her right, her priority. If she did, he would only taunt her as he had done last night.

She remembered the previous evening. She told him everything when he returned home. She might as well not have bothered. He was deaf to any pleas, her explanation. He was not affected in any way. The new spectacles through which he was viewing her weren't to be removed. They were well and truly stuck. When she mentioned 'dinner' he'd barked at her that he'd already had it elsewhere, but she needn't ask where. Again she had fumed inwardly, unable to retaliate. She didn't know how to react. She'd never been in such a situation with him before. That horrible deed was making her more and more vulnerable. If she called him, he didn't bother answering her. The table wasn't set for the breakfast. Nor was hers made. He had eaten and then departed for work, without even saying goodbye. At night he'd lain by her side, but made no effort to touch her. On the contrary, she had the impression that if she touched him accidentally he would have flinched.

Did he hate her that much? She was still the same person. Surely he couldn't change that much towards her. Where was his love, his gentle, considerate ways? He hadn't changed! What was changed was the image of her in his mind and he had changed to suit that image. She hated the image he created of her in his mind, as a soiled wife, an image in which he had lost both respect and trust.

Her day at work was clouded by what had happened the previous evening. All day her mind dwelt on Jamil, on what he was thinking and how he was going to behave tonight. To say that she had not liked his mood last night was the understatement of the year. Her mind buzzed over remarks she could make in order to defend herself, if the situation arose. The situation didn't arise. He wasn't in when she got home. She waited patiently, prepared the dinner and then ate it by herself. Three hours ticked away. He still hadn't returned. Nor had he phoned her to let her know where he was. If he had done that at any other time, she would have been in a blazing temper by now, and would have flared at him the moment he entered the door. Now, however, she feared the repercussions, if she approached him about it. She was shaking with anger. In her mind she saw a picture of Jamil gradually turning into a tyrant and she herself gradually becoming more and more obsequious because of his discovery.

Rubiya shoved the plate away from her. She might as well have been eating sawdust. No! It couldn't be. It was a psychological blackmail. No person had the right to dominate another in such a way. The situation revolted her. If Jamil stayed in this mood and taunted her whenever it suited

him, she would be a silent sufferer always, taking the brunt of his anger, and unable to air her own.

No! She wasn't going to go through that again. She had too much pride. She wasn't made to be smothered under someone else's feet. She'd already been smothered enough. She wasn't going to relive the nightmare of three previous years spent at her parents. There she was made to suffer for her deed daily. Her mother, who never forgave her for what she had done or what she made them go through during those two fatal days made her a perpetual scapegoat for her anger. She was not to be trusted any more. Unless accompanied by either of her two sisters she was not allowed to go anywhere. Her mother feared that she might elope again and bring disaster upon them all.

Over the three years she saw her normal buoyant self being smothered under her mother's tyranny and the obsequious mantle she was forced to wear. In her mind there flashed a vision of her reliving those three years but this time for life, and with her husband. A shudder escaped from her spine. She loved her husband, and wanted to save her marriage; there was no doubt about that, but not at the expense of her sanity, of her emotional survival. She was not born to receive her husband's taunts for the rest of her life, for a supposed crime. Life could not be so unfair. She tasted gall in her mouth.

With shaking hands, Rubiya pushed her plate aside and got up from the table. She turned away from the kitchen, without giving the dishes another glance. The pretty china plate perched on the edge of the table had no place in her mind. It could fall and break for all she cared. She banged the door behind her and went up to her room. She too could bang doors as much as she liked. In a strange way she felt better for it. She wasn't born to be locked up in a marriage where she danced to her husband's tune.

Almost mechanically she put on her coat and got her handbag. She left everything as it was and went downstairs. She was not sure what she was going to do, but she knew one thing — she was not going to spend this night in this house. She wasn't going to go through yesterday evening again. Opening the door she stepped outside. A blast of cold air attacked her face, the street lamps shining in the dark. She pulled the collar of her coat closer to her face and slammed the door behind her. Strangely, the foggy she earlier experienced disappeared. Her mind was clear. She was back to her normal self; the self of her teenage years. She purposefully walked

towards the garden gate. She had suffered enough for her crime. Tonight she would go to her parents', but later she would set up her own home, by herself if need be. Thoughts of her forthcoming baby didn't affect her. Setting up a home by herself would create another murmur in her community. She'd already lost everything, this action of hers in leaving her home and living by herself wouldn't cost her much. She braced herself for her parents' reaction when they found out she was abandoning her home, her husband and her marriage. Bitterness seeped through her. She didn't care a dime for what they thought. Nora Helmer's slamming of her house's door in Ibsen's *The Doll's House* came to her mind. She recalled the twittering of Claire Bloom in the screen version of the play. Her mind revolted from the picture of herself twittering around Jamil, dancing to his tune. She was a twentieth century Muslim Nora. A Nora who was slamming the door not only on her husband but also on her past.

Once on the road she hailed a taxi. When asked where she was bound, "A turn round the whole city", she replied. The night, and its accompanying darkness did not bother her. A hysterical giggle rose in her throat. She imagined her parents' look of horror when they confronted her on their doorstep at 2 o'clock in the morning. The cord of convention was truly severed.

About the Author

Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Qaisra Shahraz, is a prize-winning and critically acclaimed novelist and scriptwriter. Her two novels, *Typhoon* and the *Holy Woman* have been translated into several languages. Born in Pakistan, she has lived in Manchester (UK) since childhood. Qaisra was nominated for the ***Asian Women of Achievement Awards*** and for ***The Muslim News Awards for Excellence***. In 2012 she was named one of the 100 influential women on the ***Pakistan Women Power 100*** list.

Novels by the same author

- Typhoon
- The Holy Woman

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