

ALTAF FATIMA

When the Walls Weep

HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGES ARE GRADUALLY BEING EASED OFF THE STREETS
OF LAHORE

(A newspaper headline)

WILD ANIMALS ARE A NATIONAL RESOURCE: IT IS OUR DUTY TO PROTECT
THEM

(A poster on a wall)

And the wall says: I am not that wall the builder made with the help of a mixture of mud, cement and concrete. I am that wall made by the sun and the moon which human beings call the beautiful Hills of Margalla. And I wish I could show the poster to the owner of the black Mercedes that knocked down a child sitting behind his brother on a scooter very near a school, crushed him and drove away.

And what of that other child, the one I must travel so far to find?

Perhaps he is waiting for me.

But he doesn't even know that we're going to get him.

It doesn't matter. His blue eyes, his jute-blond hair.

He must be very lonely there, and unhappy.

The story that Gul Bibi told the villagers is the one I watched, scene by scene, for six months. But I swear by the dark night that I have not heard a word of it until today, though I have it all on tape within me, from start to finish, and in her own words.

Who? What? When? Why?

She herself will answer all your questions.

You only have to bear in mind that she's a woman—a woman of the valley, at that. And all valley women—never mind which valley, Kashmir, Kaghan or Kalash—remind one of ripe apples hanging from boughs on

the trees of their gardens.

The characters of this story are all central: there are no extras. This is more or less the sequence in which they appear, according to the plot. A widow whose winsome daughter has just been wed. A blonde, blue-eyed foreign woman. And a blonde, blue-eyed tourist—or if you want to discard the cliché you could call him a research scholar, a student of anthropology—well, let's continue, just listen to the tape.

Someone in the bazaar had told me that a job was available in the Rest House. A foreign lady had just arrived. She needed a servant. I was starving. I lived near the mosque by the corner of the bazaar in my shack made of sticks and thatch. After marrying off my Mahgul I lay among my baskets like a rotten apple. When Mahgul left, her uncle stopped sending me money for my expenses, and I was starving. I went along as soon as I heard about the job and started work straight away. But the woman seemed a bit mad to me. Eccentric. She'd write all night with her light on, then fall off to sleep, wake up suddenly and stalk around her room. She'd be putting paper in her typewriter before the first call to prayer and I'd hear her tapping away. Then she'd wake me up, calling, Gul Bibi, get me some coffee. I couldn't stand this habit of hers. During the day she'd go off into the woods to collect herbs, roots, leaves. Once she asks me, Gul Bibi, she says, does anyone practice white magic in your village? I'd been wondering about her for a while, anyway. These are devilish practices, I tell her clearly, we Muslims don't play around with magic. If our own herbs and poultices don't work we go down to some holy man for an amulet. And we don't even have a holy man in our village. After that, I started to watch her. At night she'd take off all her clothes and stare at her naked body in the mirror. She'd go on staring, and then begin to weep. But without a sound. Strange. Mahgul's youth had taken mine away, and the sight of this woman's was bringing it back. I thought her spells must be working on me. But I had to feed myself somehow, after all. She was a good woman, though. Just kept on writing, tapping away, then one day she'd go off to town with a stack of those papers of hers. She wouldn't come back for days.

The tape breaks off at this point.

This is when he appears, in his blue jeans and checked shirt under his Peshawari fur jacket, his Swati hat and his back pack and his camera. And settles in the Rest House. (Wait ... I've sorted out the sequence of the tapes again. Just let me adjust the sound a bit.)

He settled in so comfortably that I just assumed he was her man. I hardly needed to ask her about that. She'd spend whole days in the

woods, gathering her sticks. And he, perched for hours on the white rocks by the Naran, would bait the trout hiding in its waters. He'd trap about a seer of trout a day ... (Stop. When my boys tried to catch some trout in the Naran they were stopped by a guard. Who created a great fuss. And we thought, well, if we can't have trout, we'll have some corn on the cob instead. It's so sweet, so succulent here. Grains of corn, fields of maize ... thoughts, like a top, spinning here and there, at the gates of schools, around hours of play, horses, silence, seed-pearls ... And a child with eyes as light and clear as the waters of the Naran and hair as bright as sheaves of corn waiting, waiting ... For whom? For me, perhaps ...) Cut! The button of the tape recorder's been switched on again. Automatically—or by demonic interference?

The voice: a man in the bazaar.

—After the foreign lady left, the man that Gul Bibi had taken for her lover stayed on for another week. And then one day with his pack and his camera on his shoulder, he strolled up to the Rest House's cook on his long legs, and told him to give Gul Bibi her mistress' keys when she got back.

—I saw him go off on the Kaghan bus. Gul Bibi was ill that day. She lay on her bed in her shack all day, with her scarf over her face. When I gave her the key the next day she couldn't believe it. She went on repeating to the Mullah, the gentleman shouldn't have done that, he shouldn't have left the lady's keys with Gul Khan. Who knows what he's walked off with ...

—She didn't even know his name. Twenty days went by since he'd left, then thirty. The lady hadn't come back yet. Gul Bibi hadn't been properly paid, and since she wasn't working, how could she claim a salary? These foreigners ask you for an account for every penny you claim. Then one day no one saw Gul Bibi all day. The door of her house, too, was locked. When even the last bus to Kaghan had gone down, a ten-year-old boy called Sultan brought a message to Gul Bibi's daughter: Your mother has married Shakoor. She's left with him on the last bus for Batrasi. Shakoor has found work in the forest there. This key belongs to the foreign lady. Give it back to her when she returns.

—The message amazed everyone. There was no man by that name in our village. Another thirty days went by; someone said they'd seen the foreign lady at the bus terminal with her luggage. I thought of telling her where she could find her key, but she went straight from the bus to Gul Bibi's daughter's house to get it. That, too, amazed us.

The next voice, soft, tiny. Maria's.

—I met her at the Balakot lorry depot. She had henna on her hands and her wrists were full of bangles. She was dressed in flowered chintz, and the ribbon of her braid was decorated with little bells. She looked pregnant to me. Her eyes lit up when I teased her about it. Then she told me herself that she'd left my key with her daughter. I'll have to look for another woman to help me out now: I'm meant to stay on for another two months. (The voice begins to fade. A long sigh.) I wouldn't have expected this of you ... John?—

Cut.

The voice of the man from the bazaar again.

—It all lasted exactly five months. I've counted on my fingers. Autumn has begun. The desert wind is pregnant with snow. That's how it was then, the weather, when she got off at the lorry depot one day. She was dressed in black, her wrists were bare, her face desolate, her hair disheveled and her belly like a barrel. She floated along like a bubble to the house of her daughter who was standing at the door with a dish of flour in her hands. She fell into her arms and began to weep and wail. We all had to point out to her that she should have some concern for her daughter's condition. We tore her away, with difficulty. When we asked her what the trouble was she said that Shakoor had done battle with jinns in the Jungle, and the conflict had killed him. The jinns didn't even spare his corpse; they spirited it away.

—What will be, will be, we said, in all events you have to thank the creator ...—

The tape suddenly winds to its end and snaps off. Because I had fallen asleep. I always feel sleepy when I'm worried. When I went to the office earlier today the newspapers had arrived and quite by mistake I picked them up. Boom. Boom. On every side the stench of burning flesh. The smell of dust risen from fallen houses and buildings. Tanks. The reek of rotting corpses. Lord, how these newspapermen exaggerate. Here in a place like Naran you can't even believe what you read. Lord, you made the earth so beautiful, and people's hearts so ... where do I go now, so full of fury? I'm not going back. I'll lose myself here, in this beauty. The boys tremble: But school opens soon, they say. You can't spend your life grieving over everyone's sorrows. And I haven't even reached the place where the child with blue eyes and hair like corn ...

So. The account of his birth.

And this is the testimony of an aged midwife with twisted hands.

—Maria was always concerned that there wasn't a hospital around

here, not even a dispensary. How long can people survive on herbs and roots and incantations? Someone should at least set up a maternity center. We'd actually taken her for a doctor at first, and we'd land up at her door with our aches and pains and blisters. The poor thing would begin to weep and say in gestures, I'm no doctor, she'd say, but you couldn't expect them to believe her. The result was that she'd be relieved of all the medicines she'd brought along for her own use. This time she'd spoken to all the big shots around and they'd ended up unloading their own woes on her; doctors won't work here, they said, they don't like it, they want to stay on in their big cities where money is good. Maria was left in tears once again.

—I'd say, trying to console her, don't worry, there's always God. Then she took off. And look at the ways of the Lord, mother and daughter delivering their babies at the same time, and I tried to take care of both of them. Both of them gave birth to males. I bathed them and dressed them, and when I took Gul Bibi's son to the mullah and asked him to whisper the name of God in his ear, he panicked and put him down on the ground as if the child were the devil's spawn. What kind of child is this? he roared. Hair like corn and eyes like sapphires. He was terrified. I gestured to him to keep his silence. He's given to us by God, so do your duty and whisper His name in his ear. And when Gul Bibi his mother saw the boy, her smile vanished in tears, and then she quietly died.

—Afzal Khan, Gul Bibi's son-in-law, still asks me every time he catches me alone: Are you sure my mother-in-law gave birth to this child? Then raise your hand in the direction of the Ka'ba and swear that my wife has nothing to do with him.

—And each time I've raised my hand and said: Mahgul's only connection with the child is that he came from her mother's belly. He's so young, the boy, and the woman whose mother's womb harbored him doesn't have it in her power to protect him, for her husband wakes her up at night and demands: Tell me the truth, is this child really your mother's, or did the midwife place him by your mother's side in the middle of the night just to protect you? If that's the story then I swear by God I'm going to shoot him with this bullet. And he shows her the bullet and says: So that ... so that ... he can never again play such games with someone else's life. That's why Mahgul begged Janet, who was leaving the place after a long sojourn there, Madam, she said, take him away with you, since Mother died I've even been afraid to give him a piece of bread, he doesn't have a well-wisher or a protector. —

Yes, Mahgul, he isn't a trout, he doesn't belong to a protected species. So you have to be patient. We both have to be patient. And wait for the time when ...

In my distress, I've come out here, to the bazaar. On the slope leading down to it is a mosque made of wood, from which I can hear the muezzin's (unamplified) voice. He never sings before or after the call to prayer, but just now he's reading aloud from the Qur'an. And when the woman who was buried alive is asked: What was the crime for which you were executed—what then?

That will be the hour when
The sun will be enveloped
And the stars will lose their light
And mountains will walk
And the seas will become flames
And the book of reckoning will be opened
And the skin of the skies will be ripped away
And all, in this hour of revelation, will be revealed.

And watching all this the walls of a city weep, and within me the walls of my being are drenched in the drizzle of my silent weeping.

And bright letters proclaim on the hills of Margalla:

WILD ANIMALS ARE A NATIONAL RESOURCE! IT IS OUR DUTY TO PROTECT THEM! □

—*Translated and abridged by Aamer Hussein*