

ASHFAQ AHMAD

## Havens

THE old man received the token and sat down on the bench. It'd probably take a while for the check to clear, especially one in four figures. It'd shuffle from desk to desk before it arrived at the cashier's....

The old man tossed the token bearing number 24 into the pocket of his waistcoat, rubbed his shaven head and thought that all this would have taken no more than a few minutes had Asif been here today. And even if it had taken longer, at least they could have passed the time chatting. But Asif could have been here only if the evening had come sooner, or Vaheed hadn't poked out his head from behind the edge of the rooftop. And Vaheed wouldn't have poked out his head if the noise hadn't stopped suddenly. If only caution had prevailed at that moment, Asif would have been sitting here with him on the bench today waiting for the check to be cashed. Vaheed had made the fatal mistake, Asif had paid for it, and the old man was left to grieve over the horrible error for the rest of his days. But, if Asif were around, the old man wouldn't be sitting here holding the token in the first place, would he?

Images of the nights when three shadows went about their work with quiet diligence in the dim light of the hurricane lamp inside the barn whirled before the old man's glazed eyes and howled like the wind. One of the shadows would pry open the casing of a cartridge with a knife and separate the gunpowder from the slugs; the second would pour the powder from two shells into one casing and pack it down with the stem of the hand fan. Then he would remove a lead slug from the khaki bag and shove it into the mouth of the cartridge, closing it off with a round piece of cardboard secured with thin rice-paper and glue. Meanwhile the third shadow kept its accomplices cool with a hand fan during the unhurried operation. From time to time he would collect beads of perspiration off their temples on his outstretched finger, raise his arm and jerk them off his finger in midair with a flick of his thumb: it looked as though some

magical crystal in his palm had suddenly shattered, its shards flying off in all directions. Breaking the stuffy silence that muted even the sound of their breathing, this third shadow, picking up a freshly packed cartridge, would say, "Asif, son, perhaps you forgot to put a slug in this one." Which would send a tremor through the deathly silence, like the hoot of an owl taking off from the red eyes of a railway signal in the wilderness. Asif would roll the cartridge in question gravely toward Vaheed, wipe the sweat on his raised thigh and begin to count the cartridges.

Finished, they would pull out a wheat sack and stash their work behind it, then go out of the barn dusting their clothes. The door would close, swallowing the sight of the hurricane flame, and they would walk out into the courtyard, where some would be fast asleep, others turning over just before waking up.

The day finally arrived. The sacks were moved aside and the stash was brought out and put into bags, which were then distributed among them. Vaheed went to his house with three bags, Allah Din took two and positioned himself on the roof of the stable, shaded by a banyan, and Asif made himself a fortification behind a couple of sandbags out by the mango grove. Vaheed sat on the rooftop of his house leaning against the wall of the staircase. This natural fortification was the best by far.

The attack came at noon. The raiders appeared from the clump of mango trees. Most of them were mounted on horseback and carried handguns and hunting rifles; the rest, armed with javelins, spears, and swords, stormed in on foot, shouting war cries. The absolute quiet in the village perhaps gave them the impression that the residents had already fled. But when a gunshot fired from behind the sandbags lying on the raised foot trail across from them spilled the brains of the rider in front, all hell broke loose. Fire was returned, war cries thundered like cannons, and mountains of dust spiraled up from the horses' hooves. But each time, all this managed to fell only one of the attackers, mounted or on foot, followed by the resonating cries of the *kalima*. Frightened battle wails exploded like stale firecrackers, sending shivers across the sky and earth. The sun bore down with a vengeance, turning faces the color of mustard flowers.

Some of the attackers managed to slip unnoticed into the stable. Asif alerted Allah Din loudly. Forthwith steel bullets rained down from the banyan, and the attackers, picking their way cautiously through the huts of the *halal-khors*, came within Vaheed's range. His double-barrel swooped up like the hood of a cobra from the roof's edge and spat out two gems. A wall of dust shot up and the Jogis responded with fiery

arrows which struck the walls and fell back down harmlessly.

Asif's handgun had become so hot from constant firing that he was having difficulty loading and firing it. And then there was the banyan, dropping its leaves so profusely that he could hardly take aim. Only Vaheed was having a relatively easy time of it. All he had to do was to move the barrel leisurely along the top of the roof's edge, take aim, duck his head and fire.

When no fire was returned for quite a while, Vaheed raised his head cautiously a little to peek. Instantly, a bullet shattered his skull, and he slumped over right where he was without even uttering a sound.

The gunshot made Asif look in the direction of Vaheed's perch and say to the old man who was lying next to him, "Abba, you hold the fort here; I'm going over there."

"But Vaheed ..." The old man, still lying beside Asif, turned his eyes to look at Vaheed's rooftop and left the sentence unfinished.

Asif crawled his way across the rooftops. Just as he was climbing over Vaheed's roof he heard the sound of a door being battered in. He quickly hung from a branch of the *neem* tree arching over the wall and jumped into the courtyard.

Vaheed's father, who sat leaning against a pillar in the verandah expecting the door to break open any minute, stood up with a start when he saw Asif. He was shaking all over. Asif grabbed the old man's wrist and hustled him over to the cow's stall with the chicken coop under it. He pushed him inside the coop through the narrow opening and blocked it with a piece of wood.

The door broke down. Asif leapt into the bathroom and hid there.

Slowly, other fortifications also crumbled. The cries that had pierced the sky earlier abated in the face of death. But the sound of metal striking metal continued to mount. Perhaps it was the attackers' own arms clanking and clashing against each other.

People who had gathered inside Asif's house fled from the back door and took cover in the lush cornfield near the mango grove. The old man pushed the cornstalks aside with his trembling hands and searched far into the distance with his eyes. There was no sign of Asif anywhere.

Vaheed's father did see a corpse in the bathroom when he eventually made his escape from the coop at night, but he couldn't identify it.

All the same, Asif hadn't come back, and the old man was waiting for his return. To this day ...

None of this would have happened ... but for Vaheed. If he hadn't poked his head up, if the noise had kept mounting, if Allah Din had just

shot a whole bunch of them dead, if the evening had come just a little sooner—perhaps Asif could have escaped to the safety of the cornfield. But more than anything else, if Asif's mother had had a modicum of foresight, she wouldn't have had him over for Eid in the first place. She would have let him stay in West Punjab, like the rest of her children. Then again, if he hadn't stayed away from his mother most of his life, she surely wouldn't have asked him to come home for Eid. And this thought, more than any other, hobbled now and again like a cripple across the old man's mind.

He saw Asif, seated on a table in the veterinary hospital, was swinging his feet and repeating his multiplication tables: one-times-two-is-two, two-times-two-is-four ... And then he would dip the pen in the inkwell and, as he gazed at the numbers and beat time with his feet, tap the pen into the inkwell for a long time as if they were pestle and mortar.

The old man's relations with his wife weren't good at all. Their conjugal unhappiness was the result of a forced marriage. He was a successful veterinary surgeon but an unsuccessful husband. His wife had been unable to live with him for more than a year ever since they got married. Something or the other would displease her, and she'd instantly send for a tonga and leave for her parents'. The children, too, had lost their bond with their father. Hearing their mother run him down so often, they had come to look upon him, the Doctor Sahib, as a stranger. For his part, the Doctor Sahib too had become indifferent to his home. Back in the evening from the day's grueling work on the animals, he'd stretch out in his easy chair, smoke his hookah-pipe as he read the newspaper, and think about everything in the world except his own home. During just one such evening Rahim Bakhsh, after currycombing the horses in the hospital and wiping his face with the edge of his turban, walked over to the Doctor Sahib, cleared his throat and said, "Doctor Sahib, I'd like to go on leave for four days. May I?"

"Four days?" the Doctor Sahib asked, his eyes still glued to the paper, "is everything okay?"

"I want to go home, Doctor Sahib."

"Home?" the vet asked, surprised. "Why would you want to go home?"

"Eid's coming, Doctor Sahib. Not much fun celebrating it away from the children, is there?"

"All right, all right. You may. But ... All right, you may." The old vet said hurriedly and started to draw on his hookah.

It had been three years since the old vet had last seen his children.

During this time, although he had had his salary sent to his family regularly, he had not bothered to visit them himself, or even to send them a letter. He usually went to bed early in the evening. So the question of being haunted by their memory didn't arise. Now that Rahim Bakhsh had brought up the matter of leave, the Doctor Sahib suddenly remembered his children. He spread the newspaper out on his lap and thought about them for a long time, becoming increasingly inert as his thoughts ran on.

Rahim Bakhsh's leave granted, the vet also left for home, advising the Compounder that he would return after Eid.

Asif was now four years old. Unlike his other siblings, he showed no fear of his father and stuck close to him the entire time the vet stayed home. When time came for the vet to leave, the boy began to fuss and cry, insisting that he wanted to go with him. The vet gladly agreed to take him along. This muted any resistance the mother may have had. Besides, what was the point of holding the boy back? A son who showed so much attachment to his father could not possibly belong in her own camp anyway.

Asif felt a sense of exhilaration living at the veterinary hospital. He would see all kinds of animals the whole day long, hear their strange calls, and feel amazed at the amount of blood his father had to spill. Aslam, the Compounder's son, would show up around noon time, and the two of them would scoop up quantities of moist sand from under the wooden stand for the water pot and slap it over their feet. Then they would pull their feet out, leaving a neat little shell which they called "*Allah Miyan ki ghor*." They would decorate the igloo with all kinds of odds and ends, in which cork-lids and small paperboard boxes predominated. Before long a small fist would go up in the air and come down hard on the back of one of the *ghoris* accompanied by a jeering cry, "*Teri ghor phus!*" ("Your house goes splat!") The owner of the smashed *ghori*, caring little about the destruction of his own home, would immediately flatten his rival's.

Next they would build a large home together—one with a spacious front yard with a garden and a swimming pool in it. Dozens of large and small rooms would be fashioned around a big central hall. Toy water-buffaloes, horses, and camels would be tethered in the grass patch on one side of the garden and a cork serving as a mock car would be placed in the garage near the main entrance. Bits of broomstick would be driven into the floors of the rooms for men and women, polite and cultured, staring at each other across a respectable distance. Asif and Aslam would then abruptly spring to their feet, hold hands, and jump over the walls of the

jointly-built house, an irrepressible itch rising in their insoles, chanting: "*hathon se banaya tha, pa'on se mitaya hai*" ("we built it with our hands, now we crush it with our feet"), as the house disintegrated and scattered away.

Meanwhile if the Compounder Sahib happened to pass by, he would whack his boy a few times over the head and threaten Asif, "I'll tell Doctor Sahib." Asif, displeased at the humiliating treatment of his friend, would thumb his nose at the Compounder and yell back coarsely, "Go right ahead. Tell him. Not once, but a hundred times. You think I care? Just who do you think you are?"

The Compounder Sahib never told on him, though.

In the evening Asif would go over to Aslam's and sit beside his mother near the hearth and listen to her tell stories. She was a religious woman. She didn't know any fairytales, only stories of the prophets and saints. Asif stayed there until late in the evening. Meanwhile the Doctor Sahib would retire for the night, and Rahim Bakhsh, having added yogurt starter to the pitcher of warm milk, would grab his hookah, walk over to the Compounder Sahib's, and sit outside puffing away. Every quarter of an hour or so he would bawl, "Asif Miyan, come out now, let's go."

"Okay, okay," Asif would shout back but stay where he was. When it was quite late and Aslam's mother, too, prepared to retire, she would sweetly persuade him to go back home.

The day Aslam was enrolled in school the entire world turned dark for Asif. Somehow he persuaded his father to have him enrolled too. Together the two boys created such a hubbub throughout the hospital building that everybody became fed up—everybody, that is, except the Doctor Sahib. He remained unaffected by the boisterous conduct of the boys. Although he loved order and peace around himself, he nonetheless found it hard to scold Asif. For one thing, Asif was the youngest child; for another, he had not sided with the home government in the civil war raging in the family.

Consequently, there was not a single bottle throughout the hospital with its cork left in it, and not a syringe to be found that hadn't been used to squirt red or blue dye. As for the small cardboard pill-boxes, why, their only purpose was to be placed under the hooves of animals and then watched as they were squashed. Twice already the Doctor Sahib had had to replace the broken lens of his eyeglasses. His fountain pen, after the point had been dipped into glue, had become practically useless. It could neither write nor hold ink. Bedding would be rolled up and used for riding until it became flattened out like a pillow. The boys did fear

Rahim Bakhsh, but wouldn't listen to the Doctor Sahib. They'd play in his presence, raise hell with their noise, turn somersaults. How could he stop them?

During the first days of each new month Rahim Bakhsh would take the Doctor Sahib's salary over to the latter's wife. As he was getting ready to leave this time, Asif started to fidget and insisted on coming along. The vet tried to reason with him, even attempted to bribe him, but the boy refused to budge. He kept on repeating, "I'll go to Amma. I'll go to school there." Against his wishes, the vet had to let him go.

Three days later as Rahim Bakhsh was preparing to return, Asif told his mother, "I'll go back to my father's and play with my friend and study there."

She didn't stop him, and he rode off with Rahim Bakhsh.

The Doctor Sahib was sitting in the shade of the *neem* tree writing out prescriptions. He saw Rahim Bakhsh in the distance coming along mounted on his horse. He was keeping the animal to an unusually slow pace today. As they came near the hospital, Asif peeked from behind Rahim Bakhsh and shouted, "Abba, I'm back!"

The vet felt as if his wife had openly mocked him.

This time the vet treated his son with a measure of indifference. He'd now frown at his antics and even deal with him sternly on occasion. In the evening he would sit him down and himself teach him the *Qaida*. He would go over his work on the wooden slate and at night, as he lay down on his bed, have Asif repeat the numbers.

The very restrictions which had made Asif flee his mother had caught up with him here at his father's. "I'll return to Mother next time Rahim Bakhsh goes to her and never come back," the boy resolved firmly.

When the new month arrived he started to weep and throw tantrums. The disturbance bothered the vet, indeed so much that he sent him back. But this time not only scoldings and threats but actual beatings awaited him at his Mother's. She was especially peeved at the way he had just decided to up and go with his father.

Rahim Bakhsh had to stay on for a whole week, to put a fresh coat of mud on the roof and to whitewash the rooms. Throughout that week a silent irritation wracked Asif, caused less by the step-motherly behavior of his own mother as by the realization of how much he missed Aslam. The memory of his friend would assail his thoughts now and then and make him miserable. So when Rahim Bakhsh finally got ready to leave, Asif clung to his legs and begged, "Take me to Father again. Please!" The older man patted him lovingly on the head and said, "I will, I will. But

you must get your mother's permission first."

Asif went to his mother tentatively, anxiously, and expressed his desire to return to his father. She had just finished thrashing his older brother, and now she flew into a rage: "Yes, yes, why not? Go! All of you! Go to him! May you all perish!"

Asif took advantage of her temper tantrum and hopped on the horse behind Rahim Bakhsh.

This time the Doctor Sahib let Asif alone but lashed out at Rahim Bakhsh, who was used to Doctor Sahib's tongue-lashings and took this latest assault in stride.

The vet started to show greater severity in the matter of Asif's education. He would give him more work, make him stand in the evening and memorize numbers and poems, and have him do writing exercises twice, instead of once, on the wooden slate every day. He also made him get up quite early in the morning.

Only now did the boy appreciate the true value of his mother and the relative ease he enjoyed at her place. But alas! there was no way he could return to her.

At the beginning of the next month Rahim Bakhsh again went to her village. Asif shied away from asking his father for permission. And even if he had somehow found the courage to ask him, chances were that it would have been denied.

It wasn't fun playing with Aslam anymore. There was never enough time, and the two could only talk in the briefest snatch. And besides, Asif was no longer permitted to go to Aslam's house. Thus all those stories Aslam's mother hadn't yet told him were choked off.

Fed up with an ordeal which lasted the better part of day, the boy even thought of feigning illness. At least that would allow him to stay in bed and take it easy for a few days during which he could recall and savor the bright memory of the days when his Father hadn't yet appeared on the scene. But he didn't know of a suitable way to fake being sick. He fretted and fidgeted about for a few days. In the end a vicious headache and fever confined him to bed. The severity of headache and the searing fever, however, did not abate. The old vet tried to administer treatment to the boy for a few days himself. Then one morning he sent him to the Civil Hospital with Rahim Bakhsh. The hospital medicine was atrociously bitter, but did no good. Whenever alone with Rahim Bakhsh, Asif nagged him to take him to his mother, but the old man ignored the boy's repeated requests. One day Asif even hesitantly brought up the matter before his father, who brushed it aside curtly.



From here on out it was a constant litany of “Mother! Mother!” It got to a point that the old vet couldn’t fall asleep, something he found absolutely intolerable. If he loved anything at all, it was sleep. Forthwith he sent for a tonga and dispatched the boy to his mother, medicine and all. Then he dragged the cot onto the verandah and fell onto it, and slept like a log.

Although Asif’s fever had subsided by the time he reached the village, he continued to remain in bed, fearing that if he got up, his mother’s care and gentle ministrations would immediately cease. Soon, however, he had to vacate the bed for his elder brother who had meanwhile gotten sick. They thought it was the usual ordinary fever. When a whole week passed and the temperature wouldn’t come down, the elder brother’s condition growing progressively worse, they had to send for the old vet. He arrived the same evening and examined the boy. The nearest physician was called in. He administered injections. The fever disappeared in a short time. Asif’s brother would now look intently at anybody passing by his bed.

As the old vet prepared to leave, Asif insisted on coming along. The vet flatly refused. Asif broke into tears, which elicited a sharp rebuke from the father. When Asif tried to enlist his mother’s help, she got very irritated and snapped, “What do you think you are going to get there? Some fancy reception? Like the one you got the last time, huh? Why are you so eager to go there? He took you along just to look good and honorable, and you go and get all puffed up. Go look at yourself in the mirror. Pale as turmeric! Two days of fever and he packs you off to me. It’s A’s goat but B’s supposed to feed it! I can’t believe a father can be so heartless. Well, if he cares nothing about what I say, what makes you think he’ll give a hill of beans about what you want? He’s after his own pleasure—where will he find the time to look after you? Isn’t my dry bread better than his buttered toast? And my spanking better than his rotten sweet nothings? You stay put here, the way I have to, like someone with a broken spine. If you dream of palaces, you’ll make your life miserable living in a shed.”

She probably wouldn’t have launched into such a long, loud harangue but for the vet who happened to be in the adjacent bathroom brushing his teeth. It was meant for him to hear.

His bag packed, the vet ordered Asif, “Get ready. Right this minute! I’m taking you with me.”

Overjoyed, Asif quickly packed a small bundle for himself and set it next to his father’s bag. The train station was about a mile, maybe a mile and a half, from the village. The vet avoided riding on horseback and

always traveled by train, even if it took longer.

The mother patted Asif on the head lovingly as he was about to leave and said, “Son, don’t you come running back tomorrow! If you live there, you will get good education and you may even become a Sahib. What have you got here? Only a mother’s love.”

On their way to the station Asif tried to talk to his father a couple of times but the vet didn’t respond and kept walking. Winding their way through the clump of reeds and *beri* bushes outside the village, the vet suddenly stopped, snapped off a thick reed stalk and struck Asif on the shoulder with it mercilessly. The boy shrieked in pain and leapt away. His bundle fell out of his hand and rolled onto the ground. He turned back to look at his father. His eyes sought mercy, but all he saw was a pair of blue eyes fixed on his exposed legs. And then it was like incessant bolts of lightning thunderously striking the boy’s delicate frame. Each blow that jolted it shot a sensation of heat through the part that had been struck. The heat, like a snake rearing up from mud where it had lain buried, suddenly shot up like a column of fire through his body and made it burn. The snake sank back into the mud, an acid spot on the skin which continued to burn as it writhed. The lightning struck again; another snake hissed. Before long the boy’s auburn body was a barren land covered with numberless spotted snakes. He walked faster, even slowly ran, like a camel, but this did nothing to diminish the intensity of the blows. Through his incessant cries he managed to beg, trembling, “Abba, forgive me, I beg you! Abbaji, I beg you!” But the vet kept on whipping with the same cruel intensity. “Bastard! Stinking back-biter! Snitch! Complaining about me to that bitch! Well, this will teach you—you despicable brat, son-of-a-bitch, pig’s offspring. Such a lowly woman daring to talk to me like this? Me, the son of a Saiyid, who has never allowed anyone to address him disrespectfully, using *tu*. Yes, *tu*. You hear me, bastard?”

With each “*tu*,” the “*zoon*” of the reed, gained in resonance as it came swishing down on the boy’s body, but at each blow he only repeated, “Abbaji, forgive me, I beg you! Abbaji, I beg you!,” which slowly turned into the sobs of the dark-eyed human imprisoned in the well of demons in the fairytale.

The vet tossed away the reed a little distance from the station and handed Asif’s bundle to him. At the station he bought two bananas, ate one himself and gave the boy the other, which he didn’t eat but tucked into the bundle. A while later Asif went into the small tin rest-room to urinate. Inside, he examined the marks left by the unforgiving reed on his

thighs and legs. As he did so, tears gushed out of his eyes. Putting his hands over his face he twice screamed “Mother! Mother!,” then wiped his tears on his shirt and came out.

Countless pigeons were billing and cooing on the corrugated tin roof of the waiting room and only the continuous sound of their flapping of their wings and scratching claws broke the pervading stillness. A few passengers were dozing at the small rural station, and a vendor was selling fruits, cigarettes, *daal-roti*, and *sharbat* from his basket. There was only a single sign in the entire waiting room: PLEASE FORM A QUEUE TO BUY YOUR TICKET. Drinking water was available inside a small green shed on the open part of the platform. The coat of paint on the benches was overlaid with a thick layer of grime. The mixed smell of fruits, cigarette smoke, *pan* spittle, coal smoke, and corroded iron hung in the air.

The vet gazed at Asif’s face, washed clean from an abundance of tears and brought him a glass of *sharbat* from the vendor, but the boy didn’t feel like drinking. All the same, he took a few sips in sheer terror of his father and continued to stare at him in a despondent submissiveness. The vet downed the remainder himself and then sat down close to the boy.

At the next station he bought Asif a tangelo. When the train moved, he started to browse through the newspaper he had borrowed from a fellow-passenger. Asif sat huddled against the window, looking at the trees zoom past the window at a terrific speed and the cables of the electrical poles bob up and down dizzily. Now and then his slack lips seemed all of a sudden to make an involuntary clapping sound. His breath entered his nostrils brokenly, in a chain of little gasps, and his body was shaken by short, spasmodic jolts, like a lorry stuck in the mud making a strong and determined effort to come unstuck. A cool sensation coursed through his body as a sob quietly escaped the compartment through the window.

When they arrived home Asif, without any prompting from the vet, spread out the *dari*, took out his book from the bundle, and started studying. In the evening, like a wound-up toy soldier, he came and stood by the vet’s cot, folded his hands over his chest and started to recite:

*Musāfir gharīb ek rastē mēñ thā*  
*Vo čōrōñ kē hār<sup>h</sup>ōñ mēñ jā kar p<sup>h</sup>āñsā*  
 A poor traveler on his way  
 Was ambushed by a band of bandits

After the poem, he recited the twos table and was about to start on

the threes table when the vet told him, "That's enough. Now go and sleep."

"*Accha ji* (Yes sir)," he said, then lay down on the cot next to the vet's and immediately fell sound asleep.

When the vet pushed aside the mouthpiece of his hookah and got up to make his ablutions, he spotted Asif's bundle lying open on the verandah. Leisurely he walked over to it and poked through it. Under the last item of the boy's clothing he saw the banana and tangelo.

There were no more pranks at the hospital, and no noisy ruckuses. Aslam's mother told her boy several times to bring his friend along for the stories, but how could he if Asif himself didn't want to? Aslam suggested that they build sand houses, reminded him of all those fun-packed games they had played together in the past, even tempted him to swipe things from the hospital, but failed to revive Asif's interest. In the end he just gave up and instead made friends with the grave-digger's son Mehndi, severing friendship with Asif.

The boy's somber appearance, his impenetrable silence, cast a pall over the house and affected the old veterinarian deeply. When he walked, he brought to mind a newspaper page knocking about in the courtyard under a hazy afternoon sun. And when he spoke, only sentences from the book and numbers from the tables came from his mouth. "*Accha ji*" poured out of him like the remembrance of God morning, noon and night.

One day the vet bought for him at the bazaar a small piano that spilled forth sweet notes. Asif tried out each note on the keyboard once and then put the instrument away in the closet. On occasion Rahim Bakhsh would take it out for his younger son, who would play it as he sat near his father in the kitchen.

Often as the old vet stretched out on his cot for an afternoon nap he would ask the boy, "Well, aren't you going to play the piano for us?"

With his customary "*Accha ji*," Asif would open the closet, take out the instrument, and after playing each note once, he would ask, "*Bas ji?*" (Will that be enough, sir?) and stand for a long time waiting for the vet's next order.

Now and then in the evening the veterinarian's voice shot forth from inside the house, "Asif Miyan, what are you doing standing there?"

"I'm just waiting, *ji*."

"What for?"

"*Ji*, Rahim Bakhsh has gone over to the oven to have the *rotis* baked."

"But, son, why are you standing there?"

“*Ji*, Rahim Bakhsh asked me to stand here by the kitchen and mind it.”

“Tell him to shut the door when he has to go out.”

“*Accha ji*.”

Seeing that Asif was doing his exercises on the wooden slate for the fourth time, the vet would walk in and tell him, “That’s enough work for one day, son. You must stop now.”

“*Accha ji*,” the boy would say mechanically, and stop writing at once.

Some evenings when he lay down to sleep rather early and had pulled the covers over himself, the vet would ask, “So early? What’s the matter, Asif Miyan?”

“*Ji*, nothing.” He would immediately sit up.

“Oh, don’t get up! Stay in bed!”

“*Accha ji*.”

As hard as the vet might try, he couldn’t bring back the old days. He lured Aslam with gifts for help in the matter, solicited advice from Rahim Bakhsh, but nothing worked. Asif’s earlier gaiety could not be regained.

Once and only once during this entire time was he seen to express a measure of exuberance. That was when a jet-black mare under the vet’s care gave birth to a piebald colt with a pair of blue eyes. The mare’s *angrez* owner had had it admitted to veterinary hospital a few days before it was due. Around noon Lalu, the Jamadar, called Asif over and said, “Come, Miyan, let me show you the colt.”

The colt was lying on a bed of straw. The mare was champing at the bit and slapping her tail again and again to get rid of a pesky fly. The colt had a lovely tapered snout, straight ear tips, and fetlocks twice as long as its mother’s. It had a black spot about the size of a small book on its slender neck, and its mane was jet black, with a few blades of straw sticking in it.

“Lalu, I want to look from up close,” Asif said. “I’m going in.”

“Hold on.” Lalu stopped him. “Let me go and muzzle her first, and tie her reins.”

Lalu went in. He removed the bit from the mare’s mouth and fitted it with a muzzle. This done, he tied her with a rope threaded through the iron hoops on the walls at either side of the animal.

The mare spat when she saw Asif come in and began to paw the floor with her front hooves. But Asif was not intimidated at all. He strode over and sat next to the colt and began to remove the pieces of straw from its

mane. Its ribs showed through clearly as it breathed. The fuzz on its body was soft as silk and shiny as wool and its shoulder muscles were quivering involuntarily. Its eyes were as blue as the sky and its soft hooves looked like big pieces of turnip. Its tail was white and its rump black.

Caressing the colt's head Asif said, "Lalu. I want this colt. I'll ask father to get me a small saddle made, and then I'll ride it and go and see Amma Ji. But I won't stay with her. I'll be back before evening."

Lalu started to laugh. Gently stroking the colt's neck, he said, "But, Miyan, the colt isn't ours to keep. It belongs to the Sahib. If Doctor Ji could buy it from him, then, yes, it could be ours."

"I'll ask Abba Ji. He will buy it for me—won't he?"

"Of course, he will, but Miyan ..."

"But what, Lalu?"

"Nothing ... Surely he will, he will. Why wouldn't he?"

The veterinarian happened along, holding a syringe filled with some liquid. He overheard Asif and felt a thrill of pleasure at the boy's excitement. As Asif was leaving the room, the vet hid himself in the stall next door, where a water-buffalo with a broken leg lay in traction.

In the evening the vet begged the Sahib repeatedly to sell him the colt but the man kept refusing, although he did promise to let him keep the *bachhra log* until the *baba log*'s heart had had its fill.

When the vet lay down in the verandah for his afternoon nap, Asif quietly got up and stole into the colt's stall. Seeing how much Asif cared for the colt and how gently he treated it, the mare too had developed a fondness for the boy.

For hours Asif would sit there talking to Lalu or his son about horses. Sometimes when the vet got up from his nap and didn't find Asif around, he would pad his way over to the animal house and quietly listen to his son talking to the colt for a long time. But the enchantment didn't last long. One evening it too died.

It died precisely when the vet got into his head that perhaps Asif should say all those things to him too.

Asif had just collected fistfuls of *chane ki daal* from the kitchen and was on his way to feed it to the colt, when the vet spoke to him from behind his newspaper, "Son, the young ones are not fed grain."

"*Accha ji*," he said and dropped the *daal* back into the canister.

"He will eat grain when he grows up," the vet added. "For now, his mother's milk is all he needs."

"*Accha ji*."

"You like the colt?"

“No, no,” Asif faltered.  
 “Well I do. I like him a lot.”  
 “*Accha ji.*”

The boy slipped into the room softly. He opened his satchel and started to memorize a poem. Behind him the vet thought wistfully, “It would have been better if I hadn’t said anything, and even better if I hadn’t even seen him.”

Too late now. Asif stopped visiting the colt altogether. At the slightest movement the mare would turn its head expectantly toward the door, and the colt, lying on its bed of straw, would keep flicking his ears as he remembered his friend. But Asif, perched on his gunny sack, would continue to drone out:

*Unhōñ nē liyē us kē kaprē utār*  
*Kiyā ghā’il aur adh-muvā mār mār*  
 They robbed him of his clothes  
 wounded him and beat him so badly he  
 nearly died

stretching with a flourish the word “*utār*” in the line so that it sounded like “*ut ‘aar.*” Even this morning as the old man walked out of his nephew’s bungalow in the first light to collect the money on Asif’s life insurance policy he had heard the gardener’s daughter singing loudly as she gathered flowers:

*Musāfir gharib ek rastē mēñ thā*

Coming to the same line, she too intoned, “*ut ‘aar.*” The old man quickly hid behind a blood orange tree and stood immobile until she had strode away. “*Ut ‘aar! Ut ‘aar! Ut ‘aar!*”

“Twenty-four, twenty-four!” the cashier called out. “Come, brother, collect your money if you’re here.” Then he started to examine another check.

The old man slid his hand in the inside pocket of his waistcoat. Token twenty-four. He gave it a short quick look and closed his fist over it. He picked up his turban, put it on his head, and walked out of the bank building with his fist still clenched over the token. Outside in the compound, he swung his arm with all his might and opened his fist. The

token went flying and landed on the bank's roof. Up ahead near the telegraph office a few tongas were waiting to get riders to the train station. Two tongawallas made a dash for him and began tugging him in different directions. The old man made no resistance. One of them eventually succeeded in carrying him off like a prize won in a contest, and he got into the tonga.

On the platform up ahead the train was loudly blowing its whistle. Just as he opened the door of a compartment and stepped in, the train started to move.

A couple of hours into the ride the old man began to feel tired and terribly unhappy and got off the train at some rural station. He let himself out through the barbed wire fence and started to walk along the train tracks in the ruts left by cart-wheels.

It had been cloudy since the morning, perhaps it was raining some distance away. He started to walk quickly. As a *yakka* rode past him, the coachman asked, "Baba, headed to Baryala?"

"Yes."

"Well then, hop in. Rain's on the way. Two rupees would be fine. You don't want to get soaked, do you?"

"No, I'll be fine. I'll get there." The old man's feet started to move faster.

"All right, how about a rupee and a half?"

"No, brother. I want to walk."

The coachman twirled the reins, whipped the horse cruelly on the belly, and started to croon:

*"Dē gayā dō-annī kbōṭī  
Hō bābā dē gayā dō-annī kbōṭī  
hō bābā dē gayā, hō bābā dē gayā ..."*

He duped me with a counterfeit two-  
anna bit

Ho Baba, duped me with a counterfeit  
two-anna bit

Ho Baba, ho Baba, duped me ...

The dark clouds sailing directly overhead thundered back, "*Baba! Baba! Baba!*" And fat drops came pitter-pattering down. The old man raised the collar of his drab khaki overcoat and slowed down a bit. The clouds roared violently and it started to rain, a noisy drizzle, followed by merciless torrents.



The old man's turban was soaked through and felt like a bucket of water. His white beard hung down like a wet cat and his coat felt as stiff and heavy as a diver's wetsuit. Over and over again, his chappals stuck to the mud, and his bare foot would slide forward. Coming to the river he looked behind him. The station building had disappeared completely. In fact, the entire area around it had been swallowed by darkness. In the small quarter by the riverbank the digger's wife was busy cooking. The light from the hearthfires filtered through the window and put up a feeble resistance to the ubiquitous darkness, but not for very far. He stopped briefly by the wall of the quarter, squeezed the water out of his beard and sleeves, and then started walking again, the cold wind assaulting his old body like so many spearheads.

It got darker still. The track was straight and the village only God knew how far. A dull pain crept slowly up his ribs a few times, his feet staggered, his breath faltered, and his eyesight dimmed—but the old man kept pushing on. Finally, after two hours of walking, he spotted a platform. The lightning flashed and he gave it a hard look. It was the village's *panghat*. He walked around it and entered into a *gali*, which ended in a wide open field, lined on three sides by an assortment of low mud-and-brick houses with a large pond on the other side. Walking past the refuse pile he entered into a compound. A two-wheeled cart was lying upside down in a corner. Straight across from it a fire blazed in an underground oven under a thatched shed. Women were sitting around the oven huddled against the cold and making small talk. In front of the shed, a bonfire was burning on in the courtyard of the rectangular brick building with a tiled-roof verandah running around it. A cluster of boys seated before a man were doing their lessons, swaying back and forth to memorize faster. A barrel that served as a letter-box hung from a column in the verandah

The old man approached with slow, deliberate steps. He leaned against a column and said in a pale, weak voice, "Master Ji! I'm an educated *muhajir*. Please let me work as your assistant. —I absolutely never beat children."

The children seated near the fire raised their heads and just gawked at the man. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

## Glossary

Abba (*abbā*): father; daddy.

*Allah Miyan ki ghori* (*al-Lāh Miyān kī ghōrī*): literally, “God’s mare or mount”; here, “lady-bird.”

Amma (*ammān*): mother; mom.

*angrez* (*aṅgrēz*): an Englishman or Englishmen.

*baba log* (*bābā lōg*): children; a boy or lad; the writer is here imitating the Hindustani spoken by the English. The word “*lōg*” (“people”) is used frequently and indiscriminately in this variety of speech.

*bachhra log* (*baĉhrā lōg*): a colt, calf; the writer is here imitating the Hindustani spoken by the English. The word “*lōg*” (“people”) is used frequently and indiscriminately in this variety of speech, sometimes, as here, with entirely unintended comic effect.

*beri* (*bērī*): the jujube tree or its fruit.

*chane ki daal* (*ĉanē kī dāl*): split chickpea or gram.

Compounder: the person who mixes, prepares, compounds allopathic medicine for the physician.

*daal-roti* (*dāl rōṭī*): cooked lentils and bread; the simplest and cheapest meal.

*dari* (*darī*): a cotton rug.

*gali* (*galī*): a narrow street, lane or alley.

*halal-khors* (*ḥalāl-khōr*): meat eaters, but a meat that comes from an animal slaughtered in the religiously sanctioned manner; Muslims.

Eid (*īd*): stands for either of the two major Muslim festivals, *Īd al-aẓḥā* or *Īd al-ḥijr*.

Jamadar (*jam‘adār*): a janitor; a sweeper; a cleaning man.

*kalima*: Muslim declaration of God’s oneness.

*muhajir* (*muhājir*): an emigrant, immigrant; here, those Indian Muslims who migrated to Pakistan after 1947.

*neem* (*nīm*): a tree with small, bitter, berry-like fruit.

*pan* (*pān*): a betel leaf; a chewing mixture prepared with betel leaf, grated betel nut, and *catechu* and cured lime pastes, with or without chewing tobacco and cardamom pods.

*panghat* (*pang<sup>h</sup>at*): a well or tank from which water is drawn or taken.

*Qaida* (*qā'ida*): a primer, a first reading-book.

*rotis* (*rōṭī*): a round, flat bread, much thinner but considerably bigger than a pancake, baked on a convex iron griddle; also can signify a whole meal.

*Saiyid* (*saiyid*): a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad; the highest honor and sign of noble lineage.

*sharbat*: a sweet drink made from fruit extracts; a syrup.

*tu* (*tū*): second person pronoun, indicative of contempt on account of one's lower social position or lineage.

*yakka* or *ikka*: an open, single-horse carriage.