

## The Old Croc \*

ADAM ISA QAZI was quite a character. May Allah forgive his sins! He died doing what he loved most. All we heard was that he had asked his wife for a glass of water, hiccupped once or twice as he loosened his tie, and then dropped dead on the sofa. After saying a silent prayer his wife and daughter-in-law moved away from the corpse. It reeked of whiskey.

They called in a doctor from their local Gujarati community and he came quickly. "Where did he go? When did he leave? When did he come back? What happened after that?" he asked absently. Between sobs, Adam's wife, Sarah, told the doctor that he had left the house at eleven o'clock that morning and returned at three in the afternoon. The doctor's name was Husain Nanji. He knelt down to check the dead man's pulse, looked into his eyes, glanced at his blue nails and finally stood up.

"I knew this would happen sooner or later," he sighed as he stood silently by the corpse. "I'll call Ismail, Khadija Bibi, Musa Patel and Qasim Gora," he said later as he went toward the door. "You needn't worry. They'll spread the news. Okay?" He was at the stairs when he turned around and poked his head into the room again and asked, "Have you made arrangements for the funeral yet?"

Sarah shook her head.

"Tomorrow you should, I think."

She nodded.

"You'll have to ring Yusuf in Karachi now. How is he going to get here in time for the funeral?"

Sarah looked at the doctor helplessly. Tears were streaming down her face.

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\*The translator would like to thank the author for going over the translation and approving it.

His tone softened. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I can do it. I think he should be able to make it after all. Does he still live at the same address?”

She nodded. She didn’t expect any more consolation from the doctor. Nor did her daughter-in-law. Unlike the deceased, comforting women with hugs and embraces was not the doctor’s forte.

After he had gone, Sarah collapsed on a chair and broke down. “I knew this was going to happen, but not like this,” she sobbed. “What will they say when they come to take him away? Oh Allah, not like this ... not like this!”

“Calm yourself, Mother! Allah will make everything all right,” her daughter-in-law, Ayesha, called from the other room.

A little later, when she raised her head, she saw Ayesha kneeling over the corpse with a cup in her hand. She was dipping her finger into the cup and daubing Adam’s lips and gums with some liquid.

“What is it? Zamzam?”<sup>1</sup>

Ayesha went on doing what she was doing as if she were embalming a corpse. She then took hold of Adam’s chin and opened his mouth, pouring the rest of the contents down his throat and wiping off the water that dribbled from his lips.

“Cinnamon,” she said.

The two women exchanged a knowing glance. The evidence of booze on Adam’s lips was gone. They had seen him use the trick of gargling with cinnamon water whenever he was going to meet elders in a drunken state. In the days when he could afford one, he used to keep a mouth freshener in his pocket for unexpected situations, but otherwise his antidote was cinnamon.

Ayesha started making the phone calls. Some of Adam’s relatives lived in Johannesburg. Others lived in nearby towns. His elder sister was in Pietermaritzburg. His daughter and son-in-law were in Santiago, Chile, but no one knew their exact whereabouts. The doctor had promised to call her husband but Ayesha wondered if he would come to his father’s funeral. Even if he wanted to come, how would he arrange for airfare on such short notice? “You’re always broke!” she used to chide him. The

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<sup>1</sup>Water from the sacred well of Mecca. The water of Zamzam is regarded as a “purifier of soul and body” and pilgrims take it home. Muslim tradition connects the origin of the well with the story of Ibrahim (Abraham). It was opened by the angel Gabriel to save Hajira (Hagar) and her son Ismail (Ishmael), who were dying of thirst in the desert.

thought made her smile.

She kept herself busy. After making the phone calls, she attended to the limp form on the sofa. She undid his shoelaces and took off his shoes. As usual, he wasn't wearing any socks. Gently, she lifted his head and tugged at the tie underneath his collar.

"Gently Ayesha!" Sarah said to her, feeling pity for the dead man. "Don't hurt him." But Ayesha had already managed to free the tie. She lifted his legs up onto the sofa and positioned them as if Adam had fallen asleep there without bothering to change his clothes. She knelt close to his face, sniffed and went to the kitchen to boil a kettle of water.

Funeral prayers were recited at his burial. Holy water was sprinkled inside his grave and then on top of it after it was covered with soil. Adam had never been to the well of Zamzam. He had never performed the Hajj. In fact, he had never left South Africa. He was born here and he died here. It was a curious thing because it was quite common in his community to perform the first Hajj during one's youth and to keep going back whenever the chance availed. There were many people who had been to Mecca three or four times. But Adam could never save the money. His hands were like sieves. Whenever a rand appeared in them it vanished before reaching his pockets. He couldn't even afford to pay for his son's education. Adam's relatives had to collect the funds to pay the tuition in India for two years. But his son's education ended because the money ran out. He came back to South Africa without completing his degree and languished here for four or five years. These days the young man was trying to find his bearings in Karachi where he had some other relatives. It was hoped that one day his parents and wife would join him there, since Adam had no social standing in Johannesburg. For a while Adam had run his own businesses but when they failed he began working for others. Now things had come to such a pass that no one would employ him. How could they entrust their store to a man who would disappear in the blink of an eye with a blanket or a hair drier to make a gift of it to one of his old flames? The young men called him "Old Romeo." The girls called him "Old Croc." He ogled them and tried to hug and touch them, all the while pretending to be some cuckold uncle showing affection. Alcohol had dried up and shriveled his body so he looked like an old crocodile dozing on the riverbank. But woe betide anyone who came near him for there was still enough strength in his tail to bring down his prey.

“He never says die,” the girls would tell each other. If some innocent asked why, they would reply, “Try going near him and you’ll find out soon enough.” In his own way, Adam Isa Qazi was popular and, if nothing else, he was a source of entertainment.

In his youth Adam had opened shops of his own several times and in several different locations. This was at the time when his father had just left him his savings, and wholesalers were happy to give him goods on credit.

The first time, some twenty-four years ago, people were pleased to see that Haji Aesop’s son, who had already managed to acquire the reputation of a rake while he was young, was making amends by standing on his own two feet. On the afternoon when the store was to have its grand opening, his father’s friends arrived with their grandchildren and their nephews and nieces. Out of goodwill they all came to buy token groceries or, if nothing else, some candies for the children. Adam was ecstatic. His young wife standing beside him was also very happy. She would take the money with a shy “Thank you!” and distribute the candies among the children. She had wanted to give the candies free, but giving merchandise away was not considered a good omen. Once or twice, as she was taking money from a woman she knew, she wiped her tears and said, “I can’t refuse, you know!” and her obliging customer, pressing the money into her palms insisted, “No, you mustn’t. That would be a bad omen.”

This throng crowded the shop so long that other passersby were also attracted by the hullabaloo. When a few whites and blacks began to come in all the friends wished him good luck and began to leave. Some of the elders offered him their parting words of wisdom. “Work hard brother,” they said, “No hanky-panky!” “No hanky-panky!” Adam replied solemnly.

That day Sarah stayed at the store until dusk. Even during the days that followed she would drop by to do errands at odd hours. She would rearrange things on the shelves or polish and dust them, and generally do whatever was needed. But the customers stopped coming and the business went sour.

One night, after things had begun going downhill, Adam said to his wife, “I think we need a salesgirl.” Sarah froze as if she had just seen a snake. She had been aware of Adam’s waywardness before their marriage, and even after their marriage she knew whenever he strayed. She thought Adam was a lot like his roguish father. When his father was alive Adam never had to lift a finger, and when he died, he had somehow left enough behind for Adam to live on, though it was a wonder that Adam had man-

aged to run the store for as long as he had.

Adam was fiddling with a chop bone left on his plate. He didn't want to start a conversation. His saving grace was that he had spoken of the salesgirl after the children had finished their meal and gone to their rooms. When he mentioned her he was simply stating a fact. He took it for granted that his wife would accept it. Sarah began to clear away the plates without saying a word. Her silence made no difference to him. He turned on the radiogram for a while and listened to Indian songs. Whether the children were doing their homework or not was not his concern. Later Sarah heard him talking to somebody in Gujarati outside the house. His loud laughter indicated that he was happy. The thought of hiring a salesgirl had lifted his spirits.

He returned around eleven o'clock and slipped into bed. He still seemed happy. He was lying on his back staring at the ceiling with his arms folded across his chest, breathing deeply. "We need a salesgirl," he said softly, "otherwise there won't be any business."

Sarah's body went rigid. "Am I not good enough?" she snapped.

Adam turned on his side and looked at her. His breath smelled of rum. "No, not you," he said. "Everyone knows that you're my wife."

"So?"

"People want to have a little fun. They want to flirt. A salesgirl can do that. But not you. Not on my life!" The last remark was made with some bravado.

"So you want to hire a strumpet to flirt with your customers?"

"That's the point. It's good for business."

Sarah realized that it was futile to argue with him. "Stores with salesgirls are always packed," he was saying, "but look at us! Not a soul." She didn't say anything. She wasn't going to believe for a moment that by turning down her offer Adam was protecting her virtue. And when he caressed her earlobe with his fingers and said, "Mirdula Moolchand is looking for a job," she pushed his hand away and wished him good luck.

Adam chuckled. He wasn't laughing at his wife's jealousy. He was laughing because he was drunk. When he stopped laughing, he started snoring. Sarah remained awake and thought about the girl, Mirdula. The two women knew each other. Once Mirdula had come to their house for dinner. Even then, Sarah had felt her husband's eyes roving. But they had different social circles and the two women had been out of touch. Mirdula's husband had left her a few years ago. Sarah suspected that she had gone to Cape Town. Another rumor was that she had settled in England. But what difference did it make? If the girl was single, then she

was an easy catch. Even if Adam didn't know her and she had a husband and children, Adam could have had her for his salesgirl by persuading her husband that a girl of such personality and talent had to be in public relations. His cherub face and lanky body did not betray his wicked ways. Her husband would have easily entrusted her to his evil guardianship without any misgivings. "Find her a job," her husband would have said. But then, he was a sly man himself and using his wife to get ahead wasn't beneath him.

Sarah turned to face her husband. She propped herself on her elbow and rested her head in her palm. For a long time, she just looked at her husband's face. It seemed unlined, free of all cares. In the room next door, she could hear her children playing. She didn't feel like telling them to keep quiet or to go to bed. Their laughter calmed her. They would go to sleep themselves, she thought. Yusuf was nine. Hafsa was two years younger. When her friends used to ask her if she was planning to have more children she would always tell them with a chuckle that "This is the end of the road." She laughed silently when she remembered this and thought how true it was. Prayers were what she needed now. Life with Adam seemed to be headed for the Kalahari Desert where there would be no food or shelter.

She fell asleep and dreamt that she was in a bazaar far away from sparkling department stores and city lights, and the people there were roughly jostling past her. The lanes were narrow and muddy, and the shops looked like tiny alcoves in the walls. African women, carrying their babies in blankets on their backs, were busy buying trinkets. There were Indians in the crowd too, the kind which the white Afrikaners called "coolies." She saw her father-in-law among them. He made his way through the crowd and came to a stop right in front of her. The next moment she saw him turn into Adam's grandfather. She knew this in her dream although she had never seen Adam's grandfather. He looked poor and grimy, and his clothes were shabbier than those of her father-in-law.

She awoke to find her neck hurting. She put her head down on her pillow and tried to sleep again. But something was bothering her. She was afraid. "What was it?" she wondered. Just that Adam was going to hire a salesgirl? What was so strange about that? She shouldn't feel surprised. How many of their acquaintances had secretaries and salesgirls who were invited around for dinner and treated like friends of the family. Indian women were clever. So what difference did it make whether they were teachers, nurses or salesgirls? Some women just worked in one place and others kept changing their jobs. Some were free spirits and others were

conservative. And in her mind Sarah put Mirdula Moolchand among the women who changed jobs, slept around and drank.

In his last days, her father-in-law had asked her for one favor. “Adam is what he is” he had said. “You know that. He needs you more than the kids need you. The kids are still young. They’ll be okay, but look after him. Without you he’ll be lost.” He said something along those lines again on the day he died. “Don’t worry about the kids. They’ve taken after you and they’ll be all right. But you have to look after Adam. He must start working as soon as he can, otherwise all the money that I’m leaving behind will go up in smoke. I’ve tried telling him this but he won’t listen.”

After his father passed away it took Adam a year to listen to her. That was when he realized that the household expenses were becoming hard to meet and his nights out were no longer affordable.

“What are we going to do?” Sarah thought as she remembered these things. “Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it,” she told herself. If nothing else I’ll start working myself; I’ll work anywhere, if not in Transvaal then in Natal or in Cape Province. My brother-in-law’s department store will always be there to fall back on. “I should be prepared for anything,” she said to herself as she went to sleep.

It was a prophetic thought because from the day that Adam mentioned hiring a salesgirl to the day that Ayesha gave his gums and lips the smell of cinnamon, Sarah, and even her children, had to be prepared for anything. The children knew all of their father’s nicknames. Everyone called him by his real name if they were within hearing distance, but otherwise he was called Old Romeo or Old Croc or The Boozer or The Philanderer; and these names reached them through other children. When that happened they would be too embarrassed to even look at each other and they would act as if they weren’t hearing things about their own father, but only about some stranger whom they didn’t know.

One day Yusuf found Hafsa looking for a word in the dictionary. There was no other book beside her for which she seemed to need the reference. Nor was she doing her homework. The dictionary belonged to Yusuf. “Is it such a difficult word that you can’t find it in your own dic-

tionary?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hafsa replied and shut the book.

“What is it?”

Hafsa hemmed and hawed. “Satyriasis or something like that,” she finally relented.

Yusuf frowned. He tried his luck with the dictionary and asked where she had read it.

“Show me,” he said.

“I’ve only heard someone say it,” she replied.

When Yusuf pressed her she admitted that she had heard some very learned person say that their father had satyriasis. Her eyes welled with tears. She hugged Yusuf and started to weep. “Why is Papa like this?”

“Like what?”

“You know, like this. One person calls me Old Croc’s daughter. And someone else calls me Miss Majnun.<sup>2</sup> You know all his names. Don’t they call you names too? Don’t you have to listen to all of this?”

Of course Yusuf knew it all too well. How many times had he helped his drunken father up the stairs? Not once had he dared to look at the faces peeping at father and son from behind the doors and windows in the stairwell. So when his sister asked him, he broke down in tears. “I do,” he said crying, “but you’re talking as if he has some disease!”

He had heard from the other boys about sexually transmitted diseases. Was his papa suffering from some venereal disease? It was a disgusting thought. In the past he would have thought nothing of finishing his father’s leftovers or drinking his lemonade. “We shouldn’t drink from his glass,” he said to his sister resolutely. “Maybe he has an infectious disease.”

He could not say “venereal” for fear that her curiosity might be piqued further. But the conversation set his mind racing. The names of countless salesgirls rushed through his head, women of different colors, religions and ages. He knew that they were all loose women since his friends would taunt him, “Your father has found another loose woman.” How could he fight all of them? How many mouths could he shut? In one way, they were his friends, but in another, they weren’t. A deep chasm separated him from them. He couldn’t cross the void and they

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<sup>2</sup>The tragic romance of Majnun, who becomes mad in his love for Laila, is a story from pre-Islamic Arabia. The tale of the two lovers, kept apart by their families, ends only when they are united in death.



wouldn't come to him. When he was feeling inferior to them, his only consolation was to think that such and such a boy had started drinking behind his father's back. At least he didn't drink. At least he didn't smoke. Some of his friends bragged about their sexual adventures, adventures which his own father had begun long ago. At least he didn't womanize. Even the two years that he'd spent studying in India, where there was no one to watch over him, were spent without women. Nor did he have any here in the South (as the place was called) where there was no lack of loose women—"the type my father likes," a voice inside his head completed the thought.

Brother and sister clung to each other and wept. Then they sat side by side on the bed and wept some more. Yusuf held his head in his hands. Hafsa buried her's in a pillow. Their mother appeared outside the door. "Yusuf, Hafsa! What are you two doing in there?" She opened the door and gasped.

"What's happened? What's wrong?" she cried out. A deluge of questions followed but the children kept shaking their heads.

"I know what," she sighed. "You've heard something about Papa."

She gently pulled the pillow out from under Hafsa's face and pressed Hafsa's head against her bosom. "I know," she said. "But you two are grown up now. You should have gotten used to hearing such things. Look at me!" she said glancing down at Hafsa's wet neck. "Do I ever cry?" She stroked Hafsa's head and ran her fingers through Yusuf's hair. "Your father's not a bad man," she said quietly. "Believe me! He's good at heart."

Both children were used to their mother's lies. She couldn't deny that he drank because that was obvious. When he was drunk he would talk without caring who was listening, whether young or old, woman or child. Once he started raving he wouldn't stop. Some children understood him, others didn't. Between bragging about his adventures, he would tell obscene jokes at the top of his voice. People had seen him keep women on the pretext that they were salesgirls and assistants. There were all sorts of speculations.

Sarah swallowed her tears. "All lies, all of them! I know your papa. When he's drunk he can't hold his tongue. But who doesn't drink here? Everyone drinks. Come on! Get up and wash your face."

She tried to sound cheerful. "Today mother and daughter will bake a cake, all right? Yusuf loves to have a cake, doesn't he?"

Yusuf stood up. "What was that word, Hafsa?"

Hafsa pointed to the table where the word lay written on a slip of

paper with different spellings. Yusuf picked up the paper and left. "I'll look it up in a friend's dictionary and tell you," he said as he went through the door.

"Tell you what?" Sarah looked at her daughter.

Hafsa stared back. "Whatever it is that Papa's got," she said.

"A disease?"

"Perhaps."

"Too much drink damages the liver," Sarah said. "How many times has Dr. Nanji told him to stop but he won't listen. I think that's what's wrong with him." But the fact was that she wasn't convinced herself. An alarm bell began ringing in her head. She broke into a sweat and fell back on the bed. After hesitating for a moment, Hafsa reached over and pulled her mother's head against her breast. She was seventeen or eighteen years old and the two women were becoming friends.

In the evening while Sarah was bringing the food from the kitchen and Hafsa was laying the plates on the table, Adam was already seated, impatiently rolling a glass between his palms. He had nothing to do these days. He was neither running a store nor working for anyone. Yusuf came in and pressed a piece of paper into Hafsa's palm. Hafsa kept working. After her father had started eating ahead of the others, and her mother and Yusuf had also turned their attention to their plates, she ran into the kitchen and read the note. "Abnormal sexual desire in a man, sexual longing," the note said. The word was correctly spelled in capital letters.

"Hafsa! What are you doing in the kitchen?" her mother called out.

"I was looking for the shrimp pickle," she said as she returned to the table.

"We ran out of that ages ago."

The two children ate contently. They were relieved that their father was not suffering from a venereal disease, but there was still nothing to be cheerful about.

Adam finished his meal first and said that he was going out. The others were eating slowly. After he had gone they ate even more slowly. Sarah picked up a morsel, put it back down on her plate and looked at her children, "So what's wrong with your papa?"

Yusuf and Hafsa spoke at once, "We don't know. Nothing!"

"I've seen everything. Yusuf gave you a note. You weren't looking for the pickle. You were reading his note."

Yusuf left the table without a word. He wandered around on the streets for a long time. The fact was that even in that large city he didn't have a single friend. He had always had a hard time in the South. Every-

one knew him by his father's reputation. His own character didn't matter. His luck hadn't changed even after returning from India. He wasn't sorry that he'd had to return without completing his degree. That much he had foreseen. Everyone knew that Adam was hardly sending him any money and the charity of his relatives wasn't going to last. Besides, he'd been weighed down by shame in the Gujarati community ever since he was a child. Coming back without a degree didn't increase his burden. He looked back on his life. It was a childhood habit that he'd never quite given up. When did a classmate first tease him at school? When did his father first open a store? When did his father first put his arm around a salesgirl's waist and nudge her towards a customer? He remembered that his father didn't come home that night. His mother had gone to bed and Hafsa had fallen asleep over a book. He remembered being upset when he went to bed. "Should I tell Mummy or not," he'd kept asking himself. What he had seen should never have happened. Is Papa like this on other days too? "Mummy knows nothing," he thought to himself. She should know everything. But if I tell her that Papa had his arm around the girl she'll be hurt. Maybe she'll get angry and shout at him. "Do whatever you like," she might say, "but don't do it in front of your son." And his father might start beating him because when he got drunk he lost his head.

In those days he had many things to confide to his mother. How many times had he seen his father put his arm around a salesgirl and look into her eyes, pulling her towards him as she tried to wriggle out of his embrace. Sometimes he'd even seen him flirting with his female customers. All the customers who flirted with his papa were, in Yusuf's mind, loose women. He had picked up that phrase from his friends, and since he was quite young, he had begun to put women into two baskets—the "loose" and the "not loose"; and in his mind the entire female population of the country—white, colored, Asian and black—slowly divided itself into these two categories. For him it became a game that he played with his friends or by himself—not much different than placing bets on whether or not a girl was wearing panties underneath her skirt. The loser had to buy cigarettes for the winner. But the skirt game came much later and took a lot more courage.

His people, the Indians, were anxious, he thought. They talked among themselves as if some great upheaval was about to happen which would force them to leave the country. He knew that they liked white rule, whether English or Afrikaans. They felt safe being watched over by whites. It was quite another matter that the Afrikaners called them "coolies" in private, and sometimes even in public. For the Afrikaners, all

the Indians who had come to South Africa were the same. They were bonded labor, the coolies of the British. They didn't care that Adam's father had come here to run a business, and that others like him had come as teachers and professionals. Sarah's father was a self-made man, educated and proud, who had chosen to spend his last years in wealthy South Africa rather than in his impoverished homeland. No, for the Afrikaners every Indian was a coolie. Adam himself didn't mind being called a coolie. Other Indians called the blacks "bastards," but he didn't use that term. The fact was that he liked black women. He was happy where he was. South Africa was being parceled up into homelands: white on one side and colored on the other, Indians here and Zulu there. But what difference did it make? Politics didn't interest him. Intellectual conversations bored him. He knew that the blacks and the whites loathed each other and that they both hated the Indians. "People are full of hatred," he would say, "but what have I got to do with them? They may as well go and drown themselves in the ocean for all I care!" The thought of going back to India never crossed his mind.

For Yusuf these things mattered. If bad things came to pass those with money would be the first ones to leave for England, India, Pakistan—wherever. What did he have? Where could he go? There was nothing left of his wages at the end of a month. He earned a dismal sum and he hated his relatives who probably only employed him because they took pity on his father.

The same people had once taken pity on him when his father's so-called business failed. They saw how studious the son was and they decided to send him to Aligarh, in India. One June morning they gathered at Port Durban to bid him farewell. It had seemed to him then that, except for his body, which came from his mother, he owned nothing. The warm woolen suit that he was wearing, the blankets that he was carrying, the summer clothes for India, the new pair of shoes, all these things were donations from people who were probably saying, "Poor boy! His father is a rake." They had bought him the ticket and given him money to last a month or two. Now they were counseling him. "Be brave! Try not to miss your mother and sister. Study hard and come back a doctor."

No one said anything to him about missing his father, who stood next to him shivering in an old overcoat. The strange thing was that his father didn't even know who was paying his son's expenses. He had been told that Yusuf was going to Aligarh, like so many other Indian boys who left South Africa to study in India. He had seen Sarah busy with the preparations, and during the long, idle hours which he passed in his last

shop, he had wondered how it would all come together. Like the politics of the country, he couldn't grapple with the thought. But it didn't matter anyway. He was thanking everyone profusely who had come to say goodbye to the apple of his eyes. And his eyes were full of tears.

The ship steamed away from the jetty. Yusuf stood on the deck for a long time. He could see people waving at him. His mother and sister stood to one side and every now and then his mother would wipe her eyes with her handkerchief. He saw Hafsa hug her mother and he saw his father, like a circus clown, jumping up and down and waving goodbye with both hands and then turning to embrace the men around him.

"Oh how my heart aches," he was crying. "He's my only son!" But the others laughed at his whining, and soon Yusuf disappeared from their sight and they vanished from his.

To those who are afflicted by every kind of misery in their own country, exile brings a peace of mind. The boys at Aligarh called him by his natural name, Yusuf, and no longer was he the "rake's boy." Everyone thought that like most Gujarati boys, he belonged to the merchant class and was the son of a tycoon. His self-confidence began to return. His cowering mannerisms disappeared. He started taking an interest in the local politics of the Muslim League and Congress. One day he realized that many of the Gujarati Muslim students who had come to study from all over the world were migrating to a country that had suddenly appeared on the map—Pakistan.

Whenever he received a letter from his mother and sister his joy knew no bounds. But his mother's letters told him that it was becoming more and more difficult for her to keep him in India. The relatives who had sent him there in the first place had promised to pay for two years of university and five years of medical college. His mother and sister chipped in as much as they could. The arrangement was that once Yusuf started earning, he could gradually pay them back. But the charity of his relatives proved unreliable and the lack of money became a constant worry; like the buzz of a mosquito or a flea in the bed—always there. And so it came to pass that one day Yusuf found himself back on the jetty in Port Durban where his parents and relatives now stood to greet him. Sarah hadn't seen her son in two years. She had tears in her eyes but no one could tell how much shame was mingled with her joy. Hafsa flew into his arms. She was crying too. Yusuf's face was drawn. But his eyes were dry. He had cried on the journey from Aligarh to Bombay and from Bombay to Port Durban. But now he felt nothing but shame. A little apart from the three of them stood Adam. He was smoking a cigarette. He had barely slept the

night before because he had gone to bed without a drink. But he was hoping for some work to turn up. Besides, Sarah had told him that Yusuf's school days were over; now he was going to work. Adam took this to mean that Yusuf's education was complete and that now Yusuf was going to be the breadwinner of their family. What else could he wish for?

Before going to sleep, Yusuf thought about his father's reputation, thoughts he knew his sister shared. It was some consolation that his mother didn't have a similar reputation because there was no shortage of women, of all ages and all colors, who did. Yusuf even fancied a few of them himself but he tried to keep his mind free of such thoughts. Whenever such notions came into his head, his heart started beating fast and beads of sweat appeared on his brow. My grandfather was like this! My father is like this! Am I turning into my father? Why do these thoughts haunt me? He felt a sense of disgust and pity for his father, but no love. It had been three years since he returned from India. But nothing had changed. He had neither tasted alcohol nor been with a woman, and his self had shrunk back into that cocoon called "the rake's boy."

Sarah was in the room next door, reading in bed. Someone else was buying, so Adam had returned home drunk. His snores were echoing through the entire house. Sarah looked at his gaunt face and then drew back to look at him from head to foot. He was so different from other heavy drinkers. Alcohol seemed to pass through his body without a trace. He wasn't fat. Nor did he suffer from high blood pressure or any of the other alcohol-related illnesses which had taken the lives of so many men in the Gujarati community. His lean frame seemed so peaceful, so relaxed, unencumbered by politics, business worries or the squabbles of domestic life. If only she and her children shared his fortitude!

When Adam was working, he used to split his earnings into two halves. One half he kept for himself and the other half went towards household expenses. When he fell from grace in business, his standing rose among his drinking buddies. People enjoyed drinking in his company because a single peg of whiskey would unravel him like a ball of yarn. Men who can't hold their liquor usually either start weeping or turn into thugs. But Adam turned into a storyteller, like the author of the Arabian Nights and the Kama Sutra combined into one. How to seduce a virgin? What happened to such and such? His stories were drawn from his own experiences, from everyday gossip and from philosophy. At these

sessions someone would often coax him to start another business, and if he was completely broke then one of his drinking buddies offered him work for the next day.

It was around this time that a fellow named Ibrahim appeared on the Johannesburg horizon. He was the bright promise of a down-and-out family. Adam told his wife that Ibrahim had arrived in Durban and would be in Johannesburg in a few days. She stopped what she was doing and asked, "Has he become a doctor?"

"How should I know?"

"Is he coming for good or only for a few days?"

"I don't know. I don't think his father even knows. He told me this news as if his son, who mind you has been raised on other people's crumbs, has come to conquer South Africa after conquering India and Pakistan. The bastard was drunk."

Ibrahim had not been raised on charity. There was a big difference between him and Yusuf. He had been living in India and then in Pakistan for the past six or seven years. His mother's relatives in Bombay and Karachi were financing him quite happily and there was no obligation on him to pay back this debt once he became a doctor.

"He's a good boy," Sarah said.

"When did I say that he wasn't?"

Sarah looked at her husband. The father of a daughter who was of marriageable age should have shown some interest in such a boy. But Adam was oblivious. His face had no expression. He criticized Ibrahim's father because he made others pay for his whiskey and wouldn't even spare a cigarette for anyone. As he was about to go out he said with some irritation, "What right did that bastard's son have to study in India?"

"He had every right," Sarah snapped. "His uncles are rich. They can afford to pay for their nephew's education and for the household expenses of their sister. They're not like my brothers." She was in tears now. She couldn't add that, unlike Yusuf, Ibrahim didn't have to cut short his education, nor was he obliged to repay his relatives. Those words drowned in her throat.

When Yusuf returned in the evening Sarah asked him in a casual tone, "I've heard that Ahmed Patel's son is back."

"He's here for a while, yes," Yusuf said. "He and his mother are looking for a bride."

Sarah's heart started to beat faster. She wanted to hear more.

Yusuf took off his shoes and socks. He planted his feet on the cold floor. "Mummy, I think that running this household is becoming a bur-

den on all of us, including Hafsa. Why don't we invite him for dinner?"

He had taken the words from her mouth. "Of course," she said. "Our Hafsa is all right, isn't she?"

"All right? She's a lily, fair and delicate."

Sarah knew how much the two siblings adored each other. Comparing his sister to a lily was his way of complimenting his mother.

Yusuf worked in a hosiery factory in those days. One day he met Ibrahim on his way home. They started walking together. Ibrahim was brimming with confidence. Unlike Yusuf, he didn't mumble or hunch his shoulders. They talked about Pakistani politics. Yusuf didn't know anything about the new country. Then Ibrahim started talking about South African politics. Yusuf was mildly interested but only to the extent of knowing when he would be able to get out. Finally Yusuf summoned up his courage and invited Ibrahim for dinner. Ibrahim made excuses. "Another time," he said. He would be here for three or four more weeks before he returned to Pakistan to take his final-year exams.

"And then?" Yusuf asked timidly.

"Back to the pavilion," he joked. "I hate both India and Pakistan. They're filthy, beggar countries. I'll come back here and start my own practice."

They came to a roundabout and Ibrahim started to leave. Yusuf collected his wits and reminded him, "Don't forget you must come and have dinner with us." He knew how much his mother wanted this dinner to happen.

A fortnight later Ibrahim came with his parents. During the interval he had gone on a trip around Pretoria, Cape Town, Lady Smith, Pietermaritzburg, Durban and several other places. Everywhere he went he was treated like a celebrity.

Adam, quite unaware of these machinations, chatted with Ibrahim as if he were his equal. He was noticeably cool towards Ahmed Patel, and as for Ibrahim's mother, he limited himself to politely answering her questions. The two mothers were meeting for the first time. They felt awkward in each other's company and Sarah excused herself to help Hafsa with the dinner. But Hafsa stunned Ibrahim with her beauty. He couldn't believe that there were such exquisite girls in the world. Several times during the meal he tried to make conversation with her. Each time she lowered her eyes modestly and didn't say a word. The dinner was a success.

At the wedding Hafsa truly looked like a lily in her gown. Ibrahim appeared in a brand new suit. The two seemed made for each other. But



Adam remained cool towards Ahmed Patel. As the *nikah* contract was being read Adam wondered how his wife had arranged the wedding all by herself. Both households were penniless. The moment came to say the prayers. He raised his hands. "Ibrahim's uncles would have paid for his expenses," he thought. "But who paid for ours?" Instead of "Amen" he said "Never mind." The guests stared hard at him. "Is he drunk?" someone mumbled. But he wasn't drunk. When the bride left he was a tearful father, holding his wife's hand.

After the wedding, Ibrahim went back to Pakistan. He promised Hafsa that he would invite Sarah and her over to visit him soon, and if they wanted, they could also make the Lesser Pilgrimage to Mecca on their way. He could afford it, after all he was the only male child in his maternal grandfather's line.

Hafsa's wedding put an end to any remaining worries that Adam might have had about the family. Yusuf also alleviated his concerns by becoming the dray horse of the house. Time passed. Hafsa and her mother went to Mecca and then on to Pakistan. Ibrahim returned to Johannesburg and started his own practice. Hafsa had a son. Soon after, at the age of twenty-two, Yusuf was married to a girl named Ayesha. At this second wedding, Adam appeared pensive. He seemed bewildered, perhaps because he couldn't get over the fact that his son was now getting married. When the time came for the prayer he raised his hands, but instead of reciting the verses he mumbled to himself, "How old was I when I got married?" Instead of "Amen" he said, "Around twenty." The remark startled the guests around him. Someone shook him by the shoulder. "Whose wedding is this?"

"My son's," he said thrusting out his chest.

Against all odds, relations between father and daughter-in-law turned out to be excellent. Yusuf and Sarah avoided his company, but Ayesha would sit down with him after meals and listen to his yarns. She didn't mind if his breath smelled of alcohol. She never told him off. She took care of his needs and attended to his errands. In gratitude, Adam would occasionally buy her chocolate. One night he bought her some perfume.

Yusuf teased her when he found out. "Better beware!" he said. "You know what the girls say about him, don't you?"

"Old Romeo?"

"That's not all. You're not from Johannesburg otherwise you'd have

known his other names as well.”

“Old Croc?” she raised her eyebrow.

“Yes. That’s why you have to be careful.”

“Are you serious?” she said.

Yusuf laughed and held her head in his hands. “Did I scare you?”

“With what? I’m not afraid of crocodiles.”

They changed the subject. Yusuf told her that he wanted to go to Karachi to set up a business. Ayesha was happy where she was but was prepared to go and live in Karachi once Yusuf had settled in.

Ibrahim and Hafsa were content with life in the South. They usually visited Hafsa’s parents on weekends and Hafsa used these occasions to criticize her brother’s plans. “Why should we leave this country?” she would say. “We were born here and we belong here. Eventually everything will be all right. We have just as much right to this country as the blacks and the whites. I don’t feel claustrophobic here. Why should I? We’ve paid our dues.”

“No one believes that,” Yusuf would always reply. “The whites say that we were only coolies. We’ve been paid our wages and now we should leave. The blacks say that we’re loyal to the whites; that in a war against apartheid we’ll be on their side.”

“But we’re neutral!” Hafsa would insist. “We don’t oppose or support anyone.” And the fact was that she practiced what she preached. In her own small way she did all she could to be kind to her black servants.

Sabira Bibi was a good mother-in-law for Hafsa. She had long ago learned the art of living in peace with a drunkard husband. It’s true that Ibrahim drank, but here in South Africa didn’t just about everyone drink? Even men who now had long grey beards had tried everything in their time before turning to religion. Her father-in-law was a happy-go-lucky fellow. Come evening he would get restless. Then out he went for a couple of hours, and when he came back he would be in a blissful calm, as though he had turned into a still lake without even a ripple on its surface. Hafsa never felt his presence in the house, nor his absence.

Adam was just the opposite. He had a presence. He made sure that everyone knew when he was around, but when he wasn’t around no one missed him. In fact, the atmosphere relaxed whenever he went out. Sarah and Ayesha chatted as if they were girlfriends, and if Yusuf was around he joined them and they all gossiped for hours. But one day Adam didn’t come back at his usual time. Normally, he would eat at home—perhaps because nobody would buy him a meal. So when he didn’t appear at the table for lunch or for dinner, everyone grew concerned.

Yusuf went out looking for him at his usual haunts. After a long time he came to one place where he was told that yes, his father was inside, plastered out of his mind. He went in and saw a throng of people standing around his father. Adam's hair was ruffled. The top button of his shirt was undone. His tie was loosened. His shirt was sticking out of his trousers. In his hand he held a yellowish drink which might have been beer or whiskey. It seemed that he had been drinking for a long time. The other men around him were also drinking but their hair was in place and their ties hadn't been loosened. Some of them had taken off their jackets and slung them over their shoulders. It was a mixed crowd of mostly young and middle-aged men along with a few older fellows—listening with all ears to Adam's yarn.

Yusuf had gotten used to his father's drunken tales. But what he was about to hear him say in this place that night was so shameful that he was soon wishing the ground would open up and swallow him whole, or that he would disappear from this city.

His father took a swig from his glass. "I have no respect for a man who has no manhood," he announced.

"He's going to tell his own tale," someone joked.

"Yes, yes! My tale, not yours, and it's not a tale. It's a fact. There's one thing that I've never done in my life. Whatever you say? I've never lied. Let me tell you. I had already put Ibrahim to the test. There was a woman here from the Seychelles, Martha, or Maria, or Mary or something. She was as white as porcelain," he said, touching a plate, "porcelain white she was, a little heavy yes, about my age, maybe a few years younger. But no matter! She loved her liquor. One swig would get her going. The more she drank the more aroused she got. Booze was her appetizer!"

"A real aperitif!" a young doctor said.

"The bitch drank like a fish," Adam continued. "One night she woke me up. 'What's the matter,' I said. She'd had four times more whiskey than me but she still appeared to be completely sober. I looked up at her. She seemed old. Before I took her to bed she seemed like a twenty-year old, but now she looked like a seventy-year old. What happened? She put her dentures in her mouth and started to shake me even though I was awake. 'What's wrong,' I said again, and just to lift her spirits I put a 'darling' at the end although she looked more like a demon than a darling—and a toothless one at that."

The young men around him were listening intently. The older ones seemed a little weary. Yusuf stood frozen where he was. He wasn't brave

enough to drag his father away. But he couldn't leave either. His curiosity was piqued. What role did Ibrahim play in this tale? He knew that the story would spread like wildfire through the Gujarati community and then into the other Asian communities, just as they had in the past. But was there any truth in what he was saying?"

Adam was trying to remember the name of the Seychelles woman again. "Angela, Grace..."

"Martha!" someone shouted.

"How do you know?" Adam started. "Did you sleep with her too?"

The man was embarrassed. "Go on," he said.

"Maybe her name was Martha," Adam pondered. "Yes, it definitely was Martha. She put in her dentures and said to me, 'Darling, I'm going to die.'"

He roared with laughter. "The bitch had drunk from the glass she soaked her dentures in. It was filled with hydrogen peroxide. No wonder her teeth sparkled like that. Oh! I forgot to mention. I slept at her place that night.... So, I said to her, 'Why did you do that?' and she said, 'I had too much gin and I woke up feeling thirsty.'" Here he doubled up with laughter again.

He couldn't stop laughing. "She was talking about having had too much to drink as if she drank less on other days. That bitch swam in alcohol like fish swim in water. And there she was saying to me, 'I drank too much.' At whose expense? At my expense! Anyway, she put her finger in her throat and vomited. It smelled of shrimps and gin. 'I won't die, will I?' she asked me, and then, after I assured her that she wasn't going to die, she fell asleep as if nothing had happened."

Adam swayed where he stood and then he sat down. Yusuf relaxed a little. His father was boasting to a crowd of drunkards, he thought. The gathering would disperse shortly and he would take him home, as he had done many times in the past. But then Adam suddenly started again. "In those days, Ibrahim was here on holiday from Pakistan. He was young. His parents had sent him to India to study medicine. He studied for two years in a college where there was no one who could speak Gujarati, let alone anyone from the South. He spent several years in Pakistan but his accent remained the same. He returned unchanged. His face hadn't aged. When he went South, I mean to South India, I heard that he wasn't the type to let one slip."

Adam cast a glance at his audience. "Let what slip?" he asked them in a wicked tone.

"What?" they echoed.

“Booze!” he laughed so hard this time that people thought he would bring the roof down. Yusuf began to sweat. Adam was still delirious with laughter. “You thought I was going to say a pussy, didn’t you?”

“News of his return spread,” he continued. “Everyone from Cape Town to Durban knew that he was back. It seemed as if an atom bomb had been dropped. He was about to become a doctor and his father—who had lived on the charity of his in-laws—strutted about like a peacock as though he had sent him to India. The bastard! To me he looked like this one ostrich in the Johannesburg zoo that walks around with its beak in the air to see who might be willing to offer it a morsel of food.”

Someone poured half a glass of whiskey in Adam’s cup. Others also poured in a little until his glass was full again. He made bows all around and said “Thank you!” at each donation. Yusuf stood and watched this added insult helplessly.

“Anyway! I don’t know how I started talking about that ostrich,” he said. He took a swig from his glass. “I was telling you about Ibrahim when he came to visit Johannesburg. Now he’d been a smoker since his school days. But he neither coughed nor rasped. I met him many times before he left for the South, I mean South India. Even then his index and forefinger were yellow from nicotine. They were definitely yellow now. In fact, they had turned black. But everything else was the same. He even tied the same old knot. A tight little Wilson. So he was wined and dined everywhere. He was here for six weeks. Remember, he had come by ship, not jet. Someone else’s son would have flown back every year. Not him! His poor mother had cried for him. But what could she do? Her husband had sieves in his hands big enough for an elephant to pass through, a rand was nothing. Bastard leech!”

His eyes became teary. “Bastard always drank from me but he never offered me a peg. Not a drop.”

After sulking for a moment, Adam slammed his glass down on the table. “There’s that ostrich again,” he laughed, “and here I was talking about Ibrahim. I was sitting next to him at this party, you see. I said to him, ‘Do you miss South Africa?’ He took a cigarette from his Gold Flake pack and said, ‘This is the only thing that I miss.’ ‘Why?’ I asked. He said that he couldn’t find a cigarette like that in India. Then he offered me one. Together we made a plan. What plan you say?”

When no one said anything he said himself, “We planned to get plastered. But how could I know what would happen next. Only Allah knows. Man is surely a victim of fate.”

“Hear, hear!” the crowd cheered. “You were a victim, we know.”

“I think we planned this booze-up at the place of the woman who had swallowed the hydrogen peroxide. How could I know then that he was going to become my son-in-law? And the woman was really appetizing! I introduced them to each other. I can’t remember her name, Grace or Martha or whatever. There were a few of us there. Everyone was drinking. He was the youngest but when it came to drinking there was no difference. He could hold his last drink just as well as his first. Someone asked the woman later, ‘How does he rate Mary?’ and she sat down in Ibrahim’s lap and wriggled. ‘He gets full marks,’ she said. Then Ibrahim suddenly stood up and tipped over the whiskey bottle. All of us put our lips to the table and drank every drop that fell over the edge. A few even licked the table top, holding out their tongues and barking like dogs.”

Adam was now beginning to slur his words. His body was reeling from side to side. The people standing around him were starting to glance in Yusuf’s direction. Yusuf’s wits had abandoned him long ago. He no longer knew what to do. The right time to smuggle his father out of there was long past. He was angry at himself. Why did he have to stand there waiting for the truth to come out like this? Until then, only his father had bared his bottom in the community. Now the whole family was exposed.

Adam started to turn sober after a while. “Some time ago, Yusuf’s mother asked me, ‘What kind of boy is this Ibrahim?’ I said, ‘First class!’ How was I to know that he was going to be my son-in-law? Oh Allah! Man is surely a victim of fate.” Now he started to cry.

His glass was three-quarters full. Someone tipped it out and filled it with beer. “You need a few gulps of malt water,” he said. “Drink this.”

“I have no complaint about Hafsa becoming his wife,” Adam said suddenly perking up. “But I can’t tolerate the fact that my daughter has gone to the household of that ostrich who always drank my booze and never offered me a drop. Jew bastard!”

The crowd started to disperse. Adam was left sitting in his chair. He was slumped over on the table, snoring. One man who was part of a group of older fellows sighed and said, “The Qur’an tells us, and I’ve heard this myself, that Allah has made man a weak creature.” The others nodded in acquiescence.

Yusuf closed his eyes in disbelief. He went over to his father and asked him to come home. Two other men who had stayed behind offered to help but Yusuf waved them off. “It’s all your fault that he’s in this state,” he said to them in a harsh tone.

“Our fault?” They looked at each other. “But we’ve always seen him

like this.”

Adam staggered up onto his feet. “I’ll tell you the truth,” he slurred. “I drink to drown my sorrow ... my sorrow for having given my daughter into the family of that bastard ostrich! That stinking skinflint Jew! I have nothing against his wife. She’s a fine woman and I have nothing against the boy.”

After Yusuf had dropped his father onto his bed, he went to his room and sat down on his own, holding his head. “What happened?” Ayesha and Sarah asked him. “Did he have too much to drink? Why are you upset?” Yusuf didn’t reply. He turned over on his stomach and buried his face in a pillow. Sarah sat down next to him and ran her fingers through his hair. “What’s wrong? Won’t you tell Mummy? Did he get into a drunken brawl? Did you have to hear his nonsense?”

Yusuf was crying. “Everyone will know by tomorrow,” he said between sobs.

“Know what?”

“The whole city will know.”

The phone rang. Hafsa was on the line. She seemed cheerful. Her son had been doing funny impressions of Indian film stars and had the whole family rolling with laughter. “Mummy, you had to be here to see it. He’s such a clever mimic! He can imitate all the characters. He does the old mother scolding her drunken son so well, and the swordsman, and the thug who says, ‘Give me the money!’”

But she felt that her mother was a bit quiet. “Are you all right?” she said.

“It’s nothing.” Sarah tried to sound cheerful. “Yusuf is upset because of Papa. He’s crying in his room.”

“I know when he’s hurt. He is my brother after all. But I’m sure that there’s a reason. Can I talk to him? I’m sure he’ll tell me.”

“All right, I’ll try,” Sarah put the receiver on the table and went to fetch Yusuf. After a long wait Hafsa heard Ayesha pick up the phone. “He won’t come,” she said.

When Ibrahim came back home that night Hafsa demanded that they go to her mother’s house immediately. “Something is very wrong,” she said. Ibrahim didn’t pay much attention. “Like what?” he asked. “Papa must have drunk too much again. Maybe he went on a rampage, got arrested. Maybe he threw a tantrum in the house.” That’s normal,

isn't it?" he retorted.

But Hafsa's will prevailed and they went. They left their son with his grandmother and Ibrahim skipped dinner. Along the way, Hafsa kept up a steady recitation of the *Ayatu 'l-Kursi*<sup>3</sup> verses from the Qur'an while Ibrahim hummed movie songs.

When Yusuf heard that his brother-in-law had arrived he locked himself in his room. Hafsa stood at the door beseeching him to open it. When there was no reply she had the wild thought that maybe he had hung himself. She yelled out to Ibrahim, who was amusing himself by watching Adam's sleeping form.

"Open the door or we'll break it!" she shouted.

"Go home sister," Yusuf finally replied.

Ibrahim tried to push his way in. "Open the door, Yusuf. This isn't funny. You know that Papa is an alcoholic. He's drunk too much but he's not dead. So why are you upset?"

"Get out of my house!" Yusuf shouted back. "I don't want to see your face again."

Ibrahim stood still, stunned. Sarah dragged him to one side and apologized. "Son, don't take it seriously. He's raving mad." But Ibrahim no longer seemed his cheerful self. He took out a handkerchief, wiped his face and lit a cigarette.

The women gathered outside Yusuf's door again. "Shall we break down the door?" Hafsa said in a timid voice.

"If you do that you'll see me dead. I promised that I wouldn't do anything, didn't I? I'm telling you the truth. I don't intend to do anything crazy. You're lucky that people respect you. You can go and visit whomever you like, sleep whenever you like. I'll be okay but I just won't be able to sleep."

Hafsa said a tearful goodbye to her mother, heaving with sobs as if it was her wedding night again. All along the way she recited prayers and Ibrahim sat motionless like a stuffed owl.

Yusuf opened the door after Hafsa had left. His face looked wild. He saw that Sarah and Ayesha were crying. "Mummy, if I had a gun I would have killed them both," he said.

"Killed who?"

"Papa and Ibrahim."

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<sup>3</sup>"The Throne Verses" from the Holy Qur'an (2:255-ff); mostly recited by Muslims to seek God's protection and succor in times of adversity.



He began weeping like a child. The two women looked at each other in despair. Sarah held him close to her, and when she could no longer hold back her own tears she left him to Ayesha and went to her room.

Ayesha shut the door and sat next to Yusuf. They fell asleep close to daybreak and awoke soon after to the sound of Adam shouting, "I want eggs. Didn't I tell you? I don't want just one, I want two. I want an omelet."

Yusuf started to get up but Ayesha grabbed his arm and tried to stop him. Dragging her with him, he went into the dining room, where Adam was playing a tune with the knife and fork.

"How are you, son?" he said cheerfully.

"What happened last night?" Yusuf growled, his eyes glinting red.

"How do I know?"

"What happened before Ibrahim's wedding?"

"Some ritual I suppose?"

"Ritual! Who was Martha?"

"Martha?" His eyes widened.

"Martha, Mary, Angelina or whatever!"

"Who?" Adam asked innocently.

"The bitch who drank the glass full of hydrogen peroxide."

Adam was confounded. "Was I talking nonsense last night?"

"Nonsense!" Yusuf hissed. "Some nonsense that was." He lifted a chair and slammed it down on the floor.

Adam lowered his head. Very slowly he repeated the sentence from last night. "How could I know what was to come. Only Allah knows. Man is a victim of fate."

Yusuf couldn't talk to his father after that.

For several days Ayesha and Sarah didn't leave the house. Yusuf put on a brave face and kept going to work. But if he felt like a caterpillar inside a cocoon before, now he felt like he was trapped inside an iron shell, deaf to the world. Adam spent two long, dry evenings at home. On the third day, he went out for a drink.

Hafsa rang her mother and told her that she was asking for a divorce, but Ibrahim didn't want one. "And I can't come back home, Mummy," she said. "I'm not like those girls who go to live with their parents after their divorce."

"I don't have another home, Mummy. Where can I go? I feel ... I

feel as if Papa is my husband and Ibrahim is my father. I think I'm going crazy. I don't know what to do or where to go anymore!"

"You're right, child," Sarah said, "but don't think about divorce."

Ibrahim had the same answer for everyone: "It's a sickness. They call it alcoholic dementia. The old man is confused, you see. He remembers nothing from that night. If he did then he wouldn't be going out and about. He'd be sitting at home hiding his face. He confabulates. That's all." Then to show his broad-mindedness, Ibrahim would say, "Despite all this, I still call him Papa. I haven't disowned him." But people just looked at him as if he must be joking.

Hafsa and Ibrahim started sleeping in separate beds. Sarah visited her only when Ibrahim wasn't around and Hafsa no longer went to visit her parents. She also laid down conditions for Ibrahim if they were to stay together: that they would go to live in another country where they would have nothing to do with their community in South Africa, and that her second child—for she was pregnant—would be her last.

Ibrahim had to relent. If he got divorced no respectable family would give him their daughter's hand. His practice had failed and his friends had abandoned him. One day he came into Hafsa's room and announced that they were going to Santiago, in Chile. "I have some influential connections there," he said.

Hafsa kept playing quietly with her child. Ibrahim sat down. "Look! We hardly knew each other before we got married. Our life really began after our wedding. Let's not think about our past. Wouldn't that be for the best? I mean for us, for our kids, to just concern ourselves with when our life began together?"

Hafsa didn't reply. Ibrahim got up to leave. "Now I'm the victim of double apartheid," he said, trying another tactic. "One apartheid is imposed by the Afrikaner Nationalist Party and the other by the Asians. I can't mingle with the whites or the Indians. And there's even a third apartheid—yours! Our house has been divided into homelands. You, Mummy and our son live in one part, and I live in the other."

This time Hafsa couldn't help laughing. Ibrahim was pleased. "Sometimes it seems like you three whites have a bungalow on some huge kraal, and far away from it, where the greenery ends, this nigger lives in a hut."

"And Papa?"

“He doesn’t exist! But his ghost haunts the kraal.”

Hafsa relaxed. The tension between them eased. She felt sorry for being hard on Ibrahim. On the eve of their departure, Sarah, Ayesha and Yusuf came to say their good-byes. Hafsa had asked them not to bring her father along in case Ibrahim or her father-in-law were home.

The four women wept. Sarah and Sabira Bibi couldn’t look into each other’s eyes. Both of them considered themselves responsible for loosing their children. Sarah believed that it was all her husband’s fault. Sabira Bibi thought that it was her son’s.

Suddenly, Sabira Bibi’s husband walked into the room with his cane. “How are you?” he greeted his in-laws cheerfully. Without any idea of what was going on, he started talking: “Ibrahim is going overseas with his wife and kids. I think he has received a really good offer. See, there’s no fun living here anymore. Today the African National Congress rules, tomorrow it’ll be the United Party. I don’t think the black bastards will leave us alone. We’ve worked here all our lives to put a little bit away and they’re jealous. Sister, you’ve found a good son-in-law and we’ve found a good daughter-in-law. She takes good care of me. I tell you, when Ibrahim and his family go, I’m going too.”

The four women stared at him in silence.

A few months later, they got a letter from Santiago. Hafsa wrote how much she missed Yusuf and Ayesha. “I’m very happy here,” she said. “No one knows us. We’re perfect strangers.” There was no mention of Ibrahim and no message for her father. The envelope had no return address either.

Yusuf arrived in Johannesburg before his father’s funeral. He’d been away from his mother and wife for two years now. He stood by the grave lost in thought. When the time came to say the prayer someone raised his hands for him, and after everyone had said “Amen” they had to nudge him to bring them down. Many people asked him about Ibrahim. “Did Hafsa get the telegram? Perhaps the poor girl still doesn’t know that her father has passed away. He was a good man.”

Someone else related that in Adam’s last days he had given up booze and was planning on performing the Hajj. “I didn’t know that he was so sick,” said another. “What month is it? July? I met him in April. On the ninth, someone tried to assassinate Hendrik Verwoerd. I saw him on the tenth. He was very happy that someone had at least tried to kill the man.”

“I met him the same day,” another man said. “He was saying that all

blacks, Asians and colored people are cowards. They only know how to hate. It took the courage of a white farmer to pull the trigger.”

“But he was saying that the farmer should be punished because his bullet didn’t find its mark and Verwoerd got away. Yes, and he was laughing as he said this.”

When they came back home, Yusuf sat quietly with his wife and mother. Everything had gone so quickly that he hadn’t had time to think.

“Is Hafsa all right?” he asked his mother.

“She writes every four or five months. The children are fine.”

“How is she going to find out about Papa?”

“He has been long dead for her anyway. She never asks about him in her letters.”

When they went to bed that night Ayesha asked him to come back to South Africa.

“I can’t breathe here,” he said.

“We can leave Johannesburg and live somewhere else. It is a big country.”

“I’m finally beginning to settle down in Pakistan,” he said, “and you want me to come back here where everyone remembers me only as the rake’s boy?” Tears welled up in his eyes.

“After you left, he became a changed man. He stopped drinking and began to pray,” Ayesha said.

“Really?” Yusuf sat up. The conversations he had heard at the funeral began to ring true.

“Yes.”

“Swear it.”

“I swear by Allah,” she said, silently asking Allah’s forgiveness. She was sure that he would never talk to anyone about his father anyway. The wound was too deep. And so he would never find out the truth.

“May Allah forgive him,” he sighed. “I’ll get an obituary published in the leading newspaper in Santiago so that Hafsa also prays for him.”

They lay side by side lost in their own thoughts. “Can we have a child?” Ayesha blurted out suddenly. “I feel lonely here. So does Mummy.”

Yusuf chuckled. “I’ll take you with me to Karachi. You won’t feel lonely there.”

“That won’t work. We need a fourth person in the house. Now we

haven't even got Papa.”

Any other time mention of Papa would have annoyed Yusuf. But now he was seeing his father in a different light: a pious, sagacious man who was planning to go to Mecca for the Hajj and who might have visited him in Karachi before returning to Johannesburg.

The next morning, while Yusuf was still asleep, Ayesha slipped out of bed and went to Sarah's room. Sarah had just finished saying her morning prayers and was about to lie down again. “What's the matter?” she said getting up.

Ayesha put her finger to her lips and whispered. “Mummy, never mention the cinnamon. I've sworn to Yusuf that his father had given up drinking. He believes me now.”

Sarah's eyes filled with tears. She hugged Ayesha and the two women held each other for a long time. “Mummy, I'll have to pay penance for swearing on a falsehood, won't I?” she said. “Otherwise some other calamity will fall upon our heads.” □

—*Translated by Azhar Abidi*