

## Blown by the Wind

**G**RR ... grr ... the trams are running. Cars swish by. Buses loaded with human beings are moving along, rattling the earth. Motor rickshaws go buzzing about everywhere. The sidewalks are jammed with people. Everybody is going somewhere, some slowly, some fast. The passing cars throw crooked flashes of light on their faces. On every side neon signs are flickering, blue and yellow and pink and green, some of them so huge that their blinking off and on jolts my senses. People are going off the sidewalks and into the stores, or coming out of the stores and going onto the sidewalks. The electric lampposts standing calmly by the side of the street stare at it without moving, spreading wave after wave of uniform light everywhere. After making the road bright, where does this flood of light go that another wave needs to be sent out to follow it? A steady stream of brightness has to be maintained to keep the road lit constantly. As soon as the source stops sending new waves of light, darkness takes over. Is nothing left of the old light? The road refracts it; some of the rays go into the atmosphere; some reach my eyes so that I can see the road. But where do the rays which bring the image of the road to me disappear after doing their work? Do they sink into my eyes and perish there? Then my eyes must be the burying ground for the light. Tiny rays thrown into the atmosphere by the road keep moving forward, grappling with the darkness, making way for themselves. But the darkness ... it keeps pressing in so that the tiny, helpless rays, exhausted by their struggle, ultimately give up and vanish into the abyss. I had thought that light was eternal. But in reality it is weak and worn and perishable—much like me. So, are only death and darkness eternal then? Death ... yes, I know I'm dying. Today I don't even have enough strength in my legs to walk to the doctor's. I should have hired a rickshaw. All right, maybe I should do it now? Why doesn't this doctor tell me what I'm suffering from? Sends me back home every time with empty words of reassurance. I don't have a

fever, or any coughing fits; but I'm shrinking away, getting paler all the time. For some days now my left side has even begun to feel heavy. I'm not really very old, only about forty. It looks like I'm fated to be buried in this city. And how strange the soil is here! Coarse and grainy, like semolina. No, more like granules of sugar. The crunch it makes when it's stepped on is so annoying. It feels as if you're crunching a mouth full of grit with your teeth. The color is yellow, like the eyes of a jaundiced person. Some people like to think of it as golden. Well, to each his own. The soil of my homeland, on the other hand, had a gray tinge to it. Every spadeful brought up many clumps of soil. And what a fresh earthy fragrance it had. What kind of city is this with soil that has no fragrance? Only a bit of color—call it yellow or golden. Now that the shadow of death has begun hovering over me, I wish I could be buried in the soil of my homeland. Come on, there's no need to be so pessimistic. It isn't a serious ailment. I'm going to be all right in a few days. The screeeeech of a car's brakes. "Are you blind? Man, you could have been dead just now!" Someone pulled me back by my collar. Oh, dear Lord. Didn't see the red light at the crossing. I've begun perspiring and panting. Should look at the papers under my arm. Do I have the x-ray? The urine test report? Where's the blood test report? Did I drop it somewhere? Maybe I forgot it at home. It's in my pants' pocket. Thank God. Everything is all right. The light has turned green. Let's move.

At last, the clinic. White doors, milky-white glass panels. Inside there'll be a flood of white light and some bodies with sad faces, each hiding its pain, each waiting quietly for its turn. At times there will be a mild groan or a "hoon." Tiny waves of sound, blocked by the wall, spiraling upward and gathering under the ceiling. But perhaps not. The ceiling fan will be going so fast that they'll bang against the walls and smash against the floor, flowing out and receding and rolling around our feet until they find some way to escape from the labyrinth of shapes and forms to surge upward and lose themselves in the sea of sounds where every wave of sound that ever existed on earth is still present. But perhaps the air from the fan doesn't affect them at all. How many sounds there must be to carry the entire weight of history? Oh, there must be many. But after all, how many? We still haven't developed the means to tally our thoughts and feelings. Most of the sounds will just be meaningless chatter or mindless raving. Along with that, there will be sighs and sobs, and cries of pain. There may be some laughter, some hard-hearted comments, some attempts at self-deception. There'll be the roar of canons, but not the flying smithereens of bodies. There'll be the clamor of the victorious,

but not the corpses skewered on lances. This sea will be a very incomplete history of human emotions, since it won't include the smiles and tears which have been our most frequent means of expression. I should wipe my perspiration here, near the stairs, and calm myself down. It doesn't look nice to walk in all flustered. What will people say?

Three or four people are sitting inside. My arrival has badly shaken the network of their thoughts. They raise their eyes to take one look at me and then sink back into their thoughts. Soon the dark girl in a skirt will appear showing off her dark legs above the knees, bare and smooth. Buried in the soft flesh of her legs, her knees seem to be made of rubber. No sharp angles anywhere, only roundness. You can't tell where the knee-bone starts and where it becomes lost in the flesh. Her manner will be so polite and correct as to show her utter lack of concern or interest. Who cares if you live or die? Wearing high-heels on the rubber floor she'll move about on her toes with such cockiness that you'd think the clinic was in business only because of her. If the doctor kicked her out, the flood of tears would never cease. There she is. She can smell a new patient.

"Your name, please?"

"Masood Ahmad."

She writes it on a slip of paper.

"Your first visit here?"

"No."

"Then give me the old slip." She takes it. "Please wait for your turn to be called." She opens the outside door, looks out at the street and calls, not too loudly.

"Peter, Peter. Not getting bored, are you?"

"No, no."

Burrrrrzzz. Flustered, she turns back from the door. The smile that had appeared on her lips for Peter hasn't disappeared altogether. Its remnants are still visible. She points to a patient—it's your turn. Go in, please.

In a chair in front of me a fat woman with her face bleached white sits belching. Her whole body is hanging loose, her big, flabby breasts resting on her distended belly. From behind her eyeglasses, her bulging, tortoise-like eyes look around the room idly and in disgust. Must be some Seth's wife. In my homeland the Lalayans used to look like that, going around the Company Park in their victorias in the evenings. I never saw any expression on their flat faces. They always had a blank look, no object ever aroused their interest. Whether it was some disturbance on the

roadside, or a man passing by singing some tune, or blooming flowers, or smiling children, or undulating trees, or vast stretches of green grass—it was all meaningless to them. At the “cool well” the half-dead horse pulling their victoria would stand with its head bowed, panting and swishing its tail, while the old coachman would push and fight the crowd of customers to bring back a plate of *aalu-puris*, and after putting it in front of the Lalayan he would go back to bring a glass of water. When the Lalayan had finished eating the *puris* she would sit staring aimlessly, tortoise-like, in the void, her eyes bulging behind her eyeglasses. A little while later, sitting in their victorias looking exactly the same as they had when they came, they would return, belching, and disappear into the inner chambers of their bungalows. Their abundance of wealth had done to their minds what steel shoes do to the feet of Chinese women. But my homeland was now beyond the borders. The Lalayans had all been left behind. It was because of them that I left my home, forsaking the bodies of my parents, my brother and my sister, coming here with only their memories. How had those belching Lalayans managed to get over here too? It would have been far better if I had brought Kamini along. She was not a Lalayan. The food in her home was divided among eight people; she could never have gotten enough to turn into a Lalayan. Her father only earned eighty rupees a month working all day as a supplies clerk in the hospital. How bright and sparkling Kamini’s brown eyes were, as bright as the vision of the future in every person’s mind. Her simple home stood in a row with others like it. There was a bo tree in front so enormous that even in the searing heat and blinding glare of the summer afternoons there was nothing but peace and the life-giving darkness of dusk beneath its dome of large green leaves. Golden-haired Kamini would sit on the platform built around the bo’s trunk, her body wrapped in a sheet of homespun, taking the seeds out of melons. Naked children from the neighboring homes would stand by her, their hands stretched out, asking for seeds. It’s tiresome work, picking seeds out of melons. The whole afternoon she would go on taking them out and placing them in empty hands. “Krishan, you’ll only get a seed if you first go wipe your nose.” “Munnay, what is that guck on your face? Go wash it off under the tap.” “Talloo, wait, it’s not your turn yet.” “So, Razia, when do we celebrate your doll’s wedding? Tomorrow? All right, we’ll all gather here to cook the rice.”

“I’m going to eat all the rice.”

“No, Raje, you will not. We’ll each eat what we get as our share.”

How big is a seed? The empty hands would soon be stretched out

again. Dear God, if you were Kamini I would have stood naked before you all my life with my hand stretched out whether you placed a seed in it or not. But how could I have brought Kamini here with me. She died even before the dawn of Independence.

“Are you Masood Ahmad?” I was terror-stricken.

“Yes.”

“Go in. It’s your turn.”

The room had become empty. I moved towards the doctor’s office while that dark girl moved towards the outside door, perhaps to inform Peter that his time of trial was just about over. In the light of the table lamp, the doctor was bent over my file.

“Did you get your x-ray done?”

“Yes.”

“The other tests?”

“Yes.”

“Show them to me.”

He looked very carefully and for a long time at the x-ray and read the report. Then he glanced at the test results.

“How are you feeling?”

“The same as before.”

“Is there anyone with you?”

“Pardon?”

“Any relatives, etc.?” An unwitting smile on his lips.

“I’m all alone in the world. Who could be with me?”

“Look ... you have cancer of the liver. But it’s nothing to worry about. It’s in the early stages. You should get yourself admitted into the government hospital. You’ll be all right.”

My heart stopped beating, my breath got stuck in my chest, and my head suddenly became light and started swimming. I was staggered. So my fears were not unfounded.

“Doctor Sahib, the days of a cancer patient are numbered, I know. But can you tell me how much longer I do have?”

The doctor stood up and put his hand on my shoulder. My shirt, like the rest of my clothes, was drenched. “Don’t be alarmed. Get yourself into the hospital tomorrow. You’ll certainly recover.”

“Doctor Sahib, please answer my question.”

“Even if you don’t get any treatment at all, you can still live for at least a month and a half.”

Buzzzzzzzz.

“Elizabeth, give this gentleman some water.”

The water felt thick and heavy in my throat, as if I was swallowing molten metal. I put it aside after drinking just a sip.

“Should I call a rickshaw for you?”

“No, no. Doctor Sahib. I’m not too upset. This stage had to come sooner or later, only it’s come a little sooner than expected.” I felt that my voice was coming from far away, as though I was talking in a dream.

Out of the clinic, I walked to the crossing. Almost all the stores were closed. At the end of the crossing I sat down on the steps leading to one of the shops that was closed. Even now my mind is still numb, paralyzed. There’s a frenetic commotion going on in a tiny section of my brain. I can barely grasp onto one thought when it disappears, making way for another. The second has barely entered my brain when a third barges in. That one’s not fully secured yet when the first one tries to re-enter. Right now my mind is like a room full of mice with a limited number of holes for them to hide in when the cat suddenly appears. Some dash into the holes quickly. The rest run about frantically, scrambling to get inside. Those already safe inside want to peak out to see if the cat is still there. My head has suddenly become too heavy. It’s hard to hold it up. Should I rest my elbows on my knees and hold my head in my hands? Shut my eyes? The noise of the traffic is continuous. Oh, my God, I can’t keep my eyes closed; it feels like I’m about to die. I can’t keep them open either; that scares the daylight out of me. In front of me, in the darkness, there’s an ocean of gleaming bloody eyes. Why is this night staring at me so intently with its innumerable eyes? Has it already started searching for its prey? The red eyes in this sea of darkness have begun to race by. The light at the crossing has turned green. Let me press this area a little to see how it feels. Here, below, in the corner, a small spot, about the size of a piece of gravel, has become hard like a stone. Slowly this hardness will spread, and even before my whole liver becomes rigid I’ll be dead. The doctor says it’ll all be over in a month and a half. I’m not getting myself admitted to the hospital. I don’t want to separate myself from life in order to die. As long as I can stay on my feet I’ll keep moving about. When I’m no longer able to do that I’ll breathe my last in my *kothri*, my small, dingy hole. My neighbors will place my dead body along the edge of the open sewer that passes through the area and they themselves will take over my *kothri*. No, I’ll give it to Shado before I die. There are so many people in her family. How can they all fit into one little hut? That’s why half of them have to stay away during the day. The young ones sleep along the sides of the sewer. If they have two huts they’ll be more comfortable. I have 200 rupees left over from my medical expenses. I’m not going to buy

any more medications or pay the doctor's fees, so this should be enough for my keep. I don't eat much anyway, I don't even feel hungry. I can hardly bear to look at food. Peter and Elizabeth have passed me by on the road, a yard away, holding hands. Peter had a cigarette stuck in his lips and was walking triumphantly, just like my dog Moti when he came to me once out of the bushes carrying a small mouse in his mouth. His head was held high, almost touching his back, and the end of his tail was standing straight up. As long as the mouse continued twisting and turning he continued jerking it in his mouth. After it was dead he put it down on the ground. For a while he walked around it proudly, then lost interest. A small hawk flew down and snatched the mouse away. I was sitting on the edge of the bridge. Moti was lying near me, his snout resting on his paws. Quiet, a little sad, alone, alienated from everything else in the universe; where had all his earlier enthusiasm gone? The mouse, which had briefly generated so much excitement for him, was in the hawk's claws. But he had, in fact, lost interest in the mouse long before the hawk had taken it away.

Elizabeth was talking and laughing at the same time. I shouted, Elizabeth, Elizabeth! Listen to me! I have something important to tell you, something that will be of use to you. Every soul is a jigsaw puzzle, and the pieces of the puzzle aren't just scrambled, some are missing. We try to put our puzzles together by taking pieces from other souls. But our puzzles are never finished because the borrowed pieces belong in someone else's puzzle. In fact, every puzzle comes with a few pieces missing. That's why no one's picture can ever be complete. The day our souls discover their missing pieces, the world will be transformed into heaven. Our souls are thirsty, terribly thirsty. Sex is only a mirage—made of sand, not water. It's only a fleeting fancy that makes us think our thirst is being quenched, that our souls are reaching their fulfillment, that the missing links have been found. Nothing like that ever actually happens. After this temporary excitement the two of you, like Moti, will be sitting on your paws staring into space while the hawk makes off with the mouse. Listen, Elizabeth. I know all this. I'm speaking from experience. But they continued moving away from me, each with an arm around the other's back. Why are you shouting? Everyone has to experience it for himself. Remember how madly in love you were with Safia, how intense your passion was, like an erupting volcano or an advancing storm! You couldn't even go through your day at the office without her image floating before your eyes the whole time. You'd rush over to her house as soon as it was evening. The moment the two of you were alone together you would stare into her eyes

and your life seemed to be focused on that one point. But when her family started the negotiations for her marriage to someone else, your whole world fell apart. Her eyes puffed up from crying. You made offerings and pledges at the shrines. You got amulets from *pirs*. Then finally your wish was granted and you got married to Safia. That first night we were together after being separated for eons, what warmth and gentleness the night brought to our union. We thought our souls had attained completion. But then weariness, irritation and boredom began to set in. These are just names for the loneliness and the void we keep trying to fill by fitting out bodies onto each other. What an absurd solution! We used to fight over trifles for hours, afternoons, days. We didn't have any children. Perhaps she was barren, or perhaps I was sterile. For fear of public scorn we stayed together in that hell for six years, but finally parted. Why think of those things now, now that death is at hand? I should prepare myself for it. I should buy the shroud tomorrow, talk to the man who does the ritual washing of the dead, look for a place for the grave. Two hundred rupees should be enough for all that. I'll probably have fifty or sixty rupees left over for my keep. That should be enough. Ha! Ha! Perhaps I should also call some suitable *maulvi* and go through the prayer for the dead beforehand. I'll wrap myself in the shroud and lie down in front of the people. After the prayer I'll thank the participants, tuck the shroud under my arm and return home. Ha! Ha! You stupid idiot! Did you ever show such forethought or make such formal preparations for anything in life? Why do it now for death? It'll all be done. Like a drop, I'll become part of the sea of eternity. Why worry about this body? The nail clippings which were once part of my body, where are they now? The tip of the little finger on my left hand, which got caught in my mother's sewing machine and which the doctor removed and threw away—where is it now? Time and again Mother would tell me not to touch the sewing machine. How many raps on the head did I receive? "You'll be sorry if your hand ever gets caught in it." Then one day it did get caught. I was screaming and wailing with my face hidden in my mother's soft, moist breasts. Her heart beating fast, she held me tightly in her arms. "What did you do now? Oh my God, what am I to do?" The children from the neighborhood who had come running, stood in front of me aghast. Young Kamini was there too, her face pale and her brown eyes wide open with fear, gaping in astonishment.

"Kapil, run to the hospital and get the boy's father?" Tugging his shorts up over his naked stomach and snorting his snot, Kapil ran. From over the wall Kapil's mother raised her head and asked, "What's



happened, Masoo's mother?"

"Got his finger caught in the machine. God, if I had known I would never have left it uncovered."

From behind the jute curtain, Kalu, the sweeper who was cleaning the gutter, asked anxiously: "What happened, Bibi? Observe *purdah*. I'm coming in." My mother quickly pulled the front of her *dupatta* down over her face. Broom in hand, dripping black muck, Kalu rushed in. His black body was glistening with sweat, his dhoti was pulled up in a *laangar*, and he had a soiled turban on his head. Throwing his broom to one side, he told the children to move and began turning the wheel of the sewing machine a little bit this way and that. My screams reached the sky. "Brother, let it be, lest you do more damage."

"No, Bibi, the needle is out of the finger. Good boy, Masoo, take your finger out," and he pulled out my trembling hand with its blood-soaked finger. Holding the palm of my left hand in my right hand, I was twisting and turning as Kapil's mother, clad in a soiled black-bordered sari, came in panting. Her blouse had permanent lines of filth along the pudgy folds of her stomach, and her pale body carried a faint odor of turmeric and *asafetida*. "Masoo's mother, don't worry. Everything will be all right."

"Kapil's mother, my heart is sinking."

"One should have courage. By Bhagwan's grace, the wound is not too deep."

Kalu picked me up in his arms and started walking towards the hospital. My mother came up to the jute curtain at the door.

"First go to his father."

"Bibi, don't worry about anything."

My screams had become sobs now. There was a whole procession of kids following behind us. Through his thick brackish mustache, which had coiled and covered his upper lip and teeth, Kalu said, "Young men often get hurt. It's no big deal. You shouldn't be crying."

At some distance, behind our living quarters, were the sweepers' quarters. In the open space in front of them, during the time of Gugga's anniversary celebrations, Kalu would sing Gugga like a lord, through his

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<sup>1</sup>Gugga was a Rajput prince turned religious mendicant. At first he was a disciple of Guru Gorakh Nath, but later he became a follower of a Muslim saint. His grave is located somewhere in Rajasthan. He is more or less a mythical personage but is the patron saint of the class of sweepers, leather-workers,

thick brackish mustache, in the evenings. Flags of different colors would be raised, and tambourines and metal tongs played. Grain gathered from the houses in the area would be simmering in a cauldron. Then Kalu, his eyes closed, almost bending over, his bulky mustache twisting into a different angle each time, would sing the couplets in his high-pitched voice. The beat of the tambourines and the tongs would quicken and all the sweepers would join in the ululation that was mournful and protracted like shadows in the evening. No one from the other communities was interested in their celebrations, except the children.

“Will they share what they’re cooking in the cauldron with us?”

“Shame on you, Masoo. How disgusting you are! And how greedy! These people are untouchables. Sweepers. Why would we eat their food?” Kamini was a Brahmin’s daughter. If she didn’t worry about caste and ritual impurity, who would?

Manu’s hands cast long shadows, reaching over centuries to help build walls of hatred in human hearts. But Kamini, by questioning and searching for answers, had punched many holes in that wall. She believed in equality among human beings. Her father wanted so much for her to become a doctor. She would sit in her clinic wearing her white coat. Outside there would be long lines of patients. Wealth would rain from the skies. All their misfortunes would evaporate. But instead she was expelled from college—because she wanted to push all of mankind’s suffering, hunger and injustice into the Indian Ocean before the dawn of the next day. Crazy, wasn’t she? Can things ever be done that way?

“Why are you sitting here?” The night watchman stood in front of me. Indeed, why was I sitting here. “I’m leaving, brother.” Late at night, on a deserted road, near a store full of wares, a solitary individual—a watchman would ask questions. He pulled on the lock to check. It was all right. But suspicion still lingered on his face. He was sure something was amiss even though he couldn’t figure out exactly what.

As my body shrinks it’s getting heavier, as if my legs are made of lead. It’s difficult even to lift a foot. It’ll get easier when the body warms up after walking a bit. It would have been better if I had died of heart failure. But dying that way would have denied me the fuller impression of life

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cobblers and tanners. His life story has been set down in verse, and during his anniversary celebrations, which last ten days, this story is sung. The sweepers celebrate the event with great zeal, but the Hindus and Muslims are largely unconcerned spectators.

that I've developed now. Today I've been swallowing life with my eyes, as it were, in such big morsels that my mouth would have overflowed, and they would have choked me and made my eyes bulge. The whole city is asleep now. I should be going back to my hut. No, this city never sleeps. Even in deep slumber one of its eyes remains open, like a snake. In front of the movie theaters, near the railway station, and at the taxi stands there will still be small islands of people. There will be tea boiling and *paans* being prepared; it might even be possible to find some place to eat. Tall, giant buildings stand quietly around me and in between them I go crawling like something small and contemptible, an ant. What difference would it make if I were trampled underfoot? Life is continuously beginning and ending in a million different ways in the universe. The buildings seem to be slithering towards me on all sides. Yes, they're advancing on me, trying to besiege me. They have quickened their pace, started running now. Oh ... I had fainted. Should sit down right here on the sidewalk. My whole being is shaking like a deer being chased by hounds. I must have panicked. Death isn't that painful. It causes its victim to become unconscious before killing him, like a doctor anaesthetizes his patient before surgery. Death's victim doesn't feel anything when it finishes its job. Karmoo, the washerman, had just gone to the market to buy soda when someone stabbed him in the stomach because his name was Karim Bakhsh. He fell off his bicycle into a gutter. The police carried him to the hospital on a cot. Kalu, the sweeper, went running to Karmoo's dwelling place. "Sardaran, Sardaran, Karmoo has been hurt. Come to the hospital." Her head covered with a white chador, she stood in a corner outside the operating room holding one-year-old Shado on her hip and crying inconsolably behind the veil pulled over her face. Her eyes were melting into the cloth, but no sound was coming from her mouth. A wave of fear had swept through the hospital. Everyone was nervous and terrified. They had all thought that the riots were only going on in the city. The occasional news of a stabbing that did reach them seemed to always come from somewhere far off, and by now such news had become so commonplace that people had begun to take it in stride. Every new incident was forgotten after a moment of feigned surprise and astonishment. Our area had been safe. How was it that the riots had now reached our doorstep? The Hindus and Muslims separated into small groups and began talking in whispers. Children were afraid to say anything to each other. The lack of trust began showing in people's eyes. The tone of their voices had become raspy. Kamini, with Zafar's cooperation, formed a society to help those affected by the riots. Its eight

or ten members belonged to different faiths. I was also a member. We had been given a room in the hospital where we kept our things during our hours of duty while we were busy answering calls, collecting funds, supplying milk and food and medications to the wounded, and consoling their families. I came into the room panting. Kamini and Zafar were mixing sugar into a drum of milk. Kapil was at the sink washing the mugs they would use for distributing it.

“Kamini, Kamini, someone has stabbed Karmoo, the washerman.”

“What? ... Who did it?”

Becoming angry, Zafar said, “Can’t you guess who would have done it? Each of us deserves to be murdered according to the other side. Someone must have done his duty.” Kamini was mortified. “But he never harmed anyone, did he? He was the one who washed everyone’s dirty laundry.” “Who cares about that?” Zafar answered. Kapil asked, “Is he hurt badly?” “I haven’t seen him. I hear he was stabbed in the stomach. He’s still in the operating room.” “Let’s go, Masoo. You come too, Kapil. Prithi will be here soon. Zafar you distribute the milk with him. We’re leaving.”

The door opened. Karmoo was being brought out on a stretcher. We all gathered around him. His eyes were shut, his chest heaving like a bellows. Karmoo, the man who used to greet everyone with a servile crouch, had become very important today, but he was unconscious and too far away to notice his celebrity. The white sheet covering the mattress on the steel bed in the ward was one that he himself would have washed, while sweating profusely. It was also perhaps the first time in his life that he himself was lying on a sparkling white sheet. Sardaran stood near the bed, the edge of her chador clenched between her teeth, weeping bitterly. Smiling faintly, Shado lifted the veil off her mother’s face to take a look at her, but seeing her mother crying she felt alarmed and hugged her. Kamini’s father, my father, Kapil’s father, Babu Jalaluddin, and the rest of us were all standing around the bed. Kalu couldn’t think of anything to do. Feeling confused he started massaging Karmoo’s feet, saying, “Oh, what’s all this? What has happened? Bibi, don’t lose heart; if Bhagwan wishes, everything will soon be all right.” Shado was upset by the crowd and began to cry. Kamini lifted Shado up, and supporting Sardaran took them both outside onto the verandah. Karmoo continued breathing like a bellows, his stomach heaving up and down furiously. Doctor Mohan Singh, the chief surgeon in the hospital, the one who had operated on Karmoo, came out. Tightly tied up beard, white turban, dignified visage, eyes full of contentment; he stared quietly at Karmoo for some time.

“I’ve sent someone to the market to get the medicines we didn’t have in the hospital. The next twelve hours will be critical for his survival. Let’s see what happens, Babu Jalaluddin.”

“Sir.”

“Please, look after his wife and family.”

“Yes, sir. Don’t worry.”

Till eight that night Karmoo remained unconscious, his breathing still going fast. Suddenly he pressed his feet together firmly and forcefully on the cot and began slowly drawing in his legs. His arms got buried in the bedding and his back rose in the middle. His neck began stiffening as it tilted backwards, until his chin was facing the roof. His whole body was in severe agony; he looked like a piece of clothing being rinsed after washing. Being unconscious, he wasn’t aware of any of this, of his own agony. The onlookers’ hearts were about to burst however. His wife screamed, her chador falling off her head. She hugged him and began crying loudly. Well, it’s good in a way; when I die there’ll be no one looking at me whose heart might burst, no one who’ll scream, whose chador will slip off her head. There’ll be no one who’ll have to hug me and cry aloud. I came into the world quietly; I shall leave it even more quietly. When my younger brother was born my parents’ faces were glowing with joy for three or four days. They must have felt about the same way when I was born. But Sardaran and Shado’s stepfather will feel more joy than that when they hear that I’m leaving my hut to them. When my sister was born the faces that had reflected so much joy at the birth of a son, had darkened. They had become somber and pallid. Is it because daughters are a burden? But Shado isn’t a burden on anyone. In fact, for the past ten years she has been carrying the burden of Sardaran, her dissolute husband and their progeny. Every evening, as the shadows darken, she goes away in a rickshaw. Every night she has new customers with whom she haggles. Grinning lifelessly like a skull, she sells herself throughout the night and returns home before morning, sloshed, her money hidden in her brassiere. How feeble is the human body, giving up before bearing even half the burden that the soul can carry. In just ten years her soft, fresh skin has begun to look worn and old. The body’s curves are still visible, but it won’t be long before they too are beaten down by time. For sure, she’ll become a ruin within a few years. Where will the others get their meals from then? The father disappears now and then, for years at a time. Lovingly and indulgently, Shado used to send her stepbrother to school every morning, hoping he would grow up to support the family. He was twelve when he was caught pick-pocketing. It

was discovered that he hadn't been to school at all the past year.

"Masood Sahib, are we destined to go on sinking into the heap of filth like this forever? Won't there ever be a time when we can start getting out of it? Won't there be a turn for the better so we can begin leading a neat, clean life?" How could one beaten chess piece tell another that those who seemed to be outside of the heap had actually sunk further into it than we had? She starts crying whenever she sees a wedding procession. Not out of jealousy, out of a sense of deprivation. Her mind's eye begins to dream of a small house, a loving husband and a sweet child. Once she became pregnant. Her mother said, "I've talked to a midwife. She'll clean you up. You won't feel any pain."

"I don't want to have an abortion."

"Daughter, you won't feel any pain. Everything will be done smoothly."

"I'm not afraid of pain, I don't want to lose my child."

"For God's sake, don't say that. Agree to it."

"Why does it bother you so much? You've borne half a dozen of them, but when I want a child it begins to give you a pain in the butt. He'll grow up here with all the others. What's the big deal?"

"What will the people say—their virgin daughter is pregnant!"

"Virgin? Virgin? You bitch, am I a virgin?"

Burning up with anger, Shado was beating her belly with both hands. "I'm a virgin? I've slept with the whole city and I'm still a virgin? You turned me into a hooker at fourteen to fill your stomachs and today you tell me I'm a virgin! If I'm a virgin why don't you go and look for a husband for me?" Exhausted, she fell down on the bed. She was shaking with sobs, like a corpse being gnawed at by dogs. "Shado, in reality we should be doing only what is expected of us." Her father beat her senseless, and the midwife cleaned her womb. Now she drinks even during the day, so much that she can hardly see straight. She breaks dishes, fights, weeps, swears—using vile words to curse at others in the family, at the world, at God. Huge tears from her mother's eyes keep falling on the ground.

"Why do you drink so much, Shado? That won't solve any problems, will it? You can still have a child if you want one. Why kill yourself this way?"

"Oh Masood Sahib, what child are you talking about? That was just an excuse, something I just made up. Who's crying for a child? Aren't there enough in this house already? Hundreds of thousands of them roam the streets of this city. I can pick up any one of them. That's not the issue

at all. I just felt as if I was drowning in sorrow, I was suffocating. So I thought I should spread my wings a little, try to fly. It would be fun. That was it. You're such a simpleton, talking about ideal things. Sex is a gift that men and women give to each other as a token of love. Ha! Ha! Ha! What a thing to say! Love! ... Gift! ... Token! Women like me find a new man every day. Respectable women settle down once and for all with just one man. The real fun would be if they each earned their livings separately, yet lived together all their lives. What's the difference? Once there was this son of a bitch, Anwar. I fell for him. For a whole month I met him regularly, and only him. Didn't even take any money from him. But there were too many of those gifts and tokens that you talk about. His family found out. He got a sound thrashing. For a few days I shed some tears—phony tears, just to put up a show for myself, as though I were really in love. Actually I had gotten tired of him already. It was good that it was over. I was better off unshackled.”

The wind has picked up. Empty cigarette packets, pieces of newspaper, and scraps of paper soiled with grease and oil are flitting about on the empty street like living beings. An ear-splitting noise, somewhere behind me, is rushing towards me. Is it a railway engine? Is some building falling down? For a moment I was scared out of my wits. It was only a tin can being propelled forward by the wind. It rolled itself into the gutter.

“Give me a double cup of tea.”

With every sip life began to pour into my frigid body. It isn't that cold, just blustery. We never have winters here. But my body has become feeble. Once in August my teeth even began chattering. The air was so heavy that not a leaf stirred. I was drenched in sweat, yet I was shivering. The hospital gates with metal bars were shut. Ambulances full of the wounded were coming in and leaving empty. Periodically the thud of the boots from the patrolling Dogra soldiers could be heard from over the wall. I was putting a cold compress on Zafar's forehead. He had been shot in the chest. He was unconscious and breathing like Karmoo. The silent intervals between the volleys of shooting were becoming deep and heavy, pulling me down with them into the depths until the next volley. The door opened and Kamini stood inside the room. Zafar was her classmate. The two had been expelled from college for making speeches to the workers. Did they love each other? Perhaps it was just an affection founded upon mutual collaboration and camaraderie. She was crying. I took her to the window. So many fires were blazing outside that even in the middle of the night it looked like the glow of early morning.

Everywhere flames were leaping up, trying to lick the sky.

“Why have you come now?”

“I was perturbed. Something was happening to my heart.”

“Go back home, Kamini. If your father finds out he’ll be upset.”

“I don’t care. I can’t leave Zafar in this state.”

I turned around to change Zafar’s dressing. “Wait, I’ll do that.” She sat down near him in a chair. Running through the corridor a nurse came in.

“The rioters have gotten into the hospital.”

“How?”

“By hiding in the ambulances. You two have to get away from here.”

“Get away? Where to?”

The doors of the rooms and the wards began banging. Screams, cries, shouts. Pandemonium. Quarreling.

“Come on, Kamini, let’s go.”

“I’m a Hindu. No one will harm me. You’d better leave quickly.”

I heard a huge explosion coming from the area where our living quarters were located. There was only one house belonging to Muslims there, and that was ours. Kamini stood up, thought of something, and then sat down again. I ran out of there at full speed, crossed the whole corridor and stepped into the dark compound. Kalu, the sweeper, was coming from the other side. He caught me firmly by the arm.

“Masoo.”

“Yes.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Have you gone mad? Come this way.” About a hundred yards in front of me a cloud of smoke was rising from the courtyard of my house. Kalu pulled me away and brought me to the hospital wall. Slinking along the wall, we came up to the bo tree. First he helped me climb up and then he himself came up and sat down with me, holding me in his arms. Every limb of my body was shaking. It took half an hour before it became quiet, then there was that same stillness. Kalu climbed down. “You stay here. Let me go see how things are.” Before it was the terrible noise and commotion; now it was the gnawing stillness. It took Kalu half an hour to return.

“Masoo, come down. Let’s go.” I started moving towards my house. “No, not that way. There’s still danger there.” Again he held me by the arm and moved towards his own home.

“What happened to my family?”



“Nothing. Everything is fine.”

“But Kalu, why was there smoke rising from the courtyard of my house? It must have been bombed.” I was hoarse and about to cry.

“Young men don’t cry. Be quiet. We’ll be caught if someone hears you.” He hid me under his cot, spread out several quilts on top, and closed the door. Early in the morning he opened the door.

“Kalu, where are my father and mother, and Razia and Pappoo?” Kalu stood there speechless. “Where are they?”

“What can I tell you? They aren’t anywhere.”

“None of them?”

“None of them. *Kaljug*, the age of evil and corruption is upon us. Why doesn’t the earth open up and bury us all inside? Last night they took Kamini away. Damn them. She told them time and again that she was a Hindu, but they looked at Babu Zafar’s name card and said, ‘If you’re a Hindu. What are you doing in a Muslim’s room?’ There wasn’t anything about her to distinguish her from others.”

Doctor Mohan Singh brought his car to Kalu’s house and took me to the camp. He wanted to say something to me but couldn’t. There was sorrow, shame and grief in his eyes, as though he felt personally responsible for everything. Our car entered the Company Park area. In the center of a vast plot lay Kamini’s naked body. Her golden hair, spread on the green grass, was moving gently in the breeze. “Kamini! Look! The morning of freedom for which you wore homespun has dawned. See how bright and glorious it is! Today we’ve driven all cruelty, oppression and suffering into the Indian Ocean.”

I passed by her body without pausing. In my mind her golden hair is still blowing in the breeze on the green grass, but it would have become one with the dust of my homeland long ago. How I wish I too could have become *that* dust! It would have been better.

“Hey, mister, what’s the matter? Is everything all right?”

“Why?”

“You’re crying.”

“Oh, yes. I was just remembering something.”

I should go to my hut now. My tired limbs will only give me peace if I stretch them out on the cot. It’s late at night too. What do you mean “night?” It must be almost daybreak by now. In one night so many events from my life have passed before my eyes. So many complete, living pictures have moved across the screen of my mind. How real dreams are, and how dream-like reality is. How intense and sharp and dazzling life’s colors are in the present. Grief and accidents are unsettling. Joys are easily

erased, boiling over quickly like milk, though the memory of them is soft, gentle and absorbing. Past sufferings don't overwhelm, they pass on like shadows, slowly and quietly. Past joys don't disturb, they just cling to the heart, pressing gently and giving it warmth before moving on. The memory of one's friends leaves a sweet agony behind; the thought of one's enemies spreads a smile across the lips. Safia was fond of belching. She used to pester me, "Why don't you put in a claim? We'll get some property too. My father has done it, so have my *phupha* and my *khalu*. There's hardly anyone who hasn't. And they didn't leave any property behind so why don't you put in a claim too?"

"Put in a claim for what? My father lived in government housing. It was his only property. He considered that to be his home all his life, and he died there with his whole family. If you want I can put in a claim for my father, my mother, Razia and Pappoo. Or for Kamini's naked body. Or for Kalu's loving heart. Or for Shado's chastity. I could put in many claims like that, but the department would never accept them."

How dark our *basti* is. The tiny huts seem to have moved aside, and they stand with their hands folded like blind children, as if covered by the majesty of the tall, bright buildings. There are so many neon signs. If they could be broken into small bits and distributed to the hut-dwellers, no hut in the city, let alone those in our *basti*, would remain dark. Bhrrrr ... bhrrrr. A rickshaw stops. Shado steps out. She's staggering on her wobbly legs. Soon she'll grab on to the wall and feel her way to her hut with both hands. Stopping and starting, she's trying to sing her favorite song in a voice hopelessly out of tune. After one bar there's a long pause. Maybe she's forgotten the song, or given up the idea of singing. But no, she starts up again, still out of tune. She can't even say the words properly.

Tell me something hopeful, *jogi*.

When will my beloved come home?

Then she starts laughing out loud. Which *jog*? What hope? Whose beloved? It's all lies and deceit and trickery. There's nothing really. Don't believe in anything.

On the loudspeaker the sound rose: Allah-o-Akbar. Allah-o-Akbar. Was God still alive in the heavens? □

—Translated by Faruq Hassan