

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

A Selection from  
**The Realm of the Heart**

**W**HAT A STRANGE AND MYSTERIOUS TIME it is when you suddenly open your eyes and can't tell whether the sun is setting or just rising, which way your feet are going or where your head is, and you don't know where you slept and what this place is where you've awakened! It becomes urgent at that moment to locate your head and feet; you have this feeling that if you don't find out immediately you'll be lost forever.

When we were children our first reaction was tears, but then a wallop came down from somewhere and right away we were able to place ourselves, to determine where everything was. All at once fountains of mirth burst forth and to provide further proof of our presence we ran after the hens or began scrapping with one another like dogs. At that point Amma ordered us to make ourselves scarce, and this we happily did. Fleeing to the garden we proceeded to pluck off half-opened buds from the bushes and filled our laps with them.

Thus we occupied ourselves until it got dark. Then Ali Bakhsh would bring in a bunch of lanterns from behind the curtain hanging in the front doorway. The wicks were raised and lighted and the lanterns were dispatched to every corner of the house so that the walls and doors which had been engulfed in darkness were visible again.

The watchman climbed a ladder and lighted the boxed lamp at the front door. Frightened, the bushes hastily retreated into the darkness and the buds we had collected in our laps began to flower. At that time, and for no apparent reason, we were assailed by feelings of dread. A stealthy chameleon, its cheeks ballooning as it manufactured poison in its mouth,

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A fragment from her novella *Dil kī Dunyā* (Lahore:Maktaba-e Urdū, 1966?) pp. 1-65.

turned red like an ember and then scampered up the tamarind tree. And we felt as if our feet were melting like wax.

This was when that mysterious voice floated and vibrated as it travelled across the water:

*Kanhaiya, your flute has become my  
enemy . . . .*

We ran without a moment wasted, dashed through the curtain at the front door, threw down the flowers on our grandmother's prayer mat and took refuge under her *dupattā*.

“Dadi Amma! Please! Quick! Read *āyat-ul kursi!* Blow on us!”

Only when we felt Dadi Amma's “Ahmed Husain, Dildar Husain” soaked in tobacco and betel juice blow on our faces did we breathe sighs of relief.

*Kanhaiya . . . yo . . . u . . . r . . . fluuute . . . has . . . become my . . . enemy . . . .* The sound weakened and then disappeared altogether, leaving behind only the whispering of the wind.

Our father had been transferred recently to Behrach. Situated across from our spacious, two-story bungalow was the shrine of Saiyad Salar Masud Ghazi. Adjacent to the house was a garden where we spent the major part of our waking lives. At the end of a long line of modest sized quarters was a large well, and in back of the quarters were fields of corn. On the other side stood a white mosque with rows of *hār-singhār* trees and bushes of *bēlā*, *čambēlī*, and *mōgrā* extending as far as the eye could see. Not too far from the mosque was a Muslim cemetery and on the banks of the river, some distance away from the mosque, beyond the melon plantation, were the Hindu cremation grounds. The cemetery and the cremation grounds—we dreaded these two spots the most. The mysterious voice appeared to come from this direction and anything coming from over there struck fear into our hearts.

Whenever we were out of line, or if we squabbled, we were scared into obedience by references to that voice.

“She's a demon, she'll eat you up alive. She's a ghoul. If she lays hands on you she'll cast a spell on you. Don't you know what they say? A wedding party once drowned in the Ghagra stream but the bride survived. She turned into a demon and floats about in the stream to this day.”

There was something else associated with this voice. No sooner was it heard than Aunt Qudsia suffered a paroxysm; her jaw locked, she'd begin

to foam at the mouth and the house turned into an abode of anguish.

“O Mighty Qadir, bring us Qudsia’s husband,” Nani Bivi (our maternal grandmother) chanted, swaying. But Mighty Qadir seemed to have stopped up his ears because he didn’t seem to pay any heed to her pleas; perhaps he was too busy ruminating on the matter of bringing Aunt Qudsia’s husband back to her.

She had been married for nearly ten years. Her father packed off her husband to England soon after the wedding; that was one of the conditions of the marriage. In keeping with custom, he returned with an English wife, a *mēm*. Now he had a clinic in Menpuri. This is why Aunt Qudsia endlessly chanted verses from the Qur’an, spent long hours in worship and prayer, and when all of this proved fruitless, suffered from attacks in which her jaw locked and her mouth foamed. Unfortunate woman, what else could she do? She penned several letters beginning with “My master, may you live long.” She wrote: “Give me a spot in a corner of your house as a maid of the memsahib, I’ll serve you both, I’ll eat your leftovers, wear you castoffs, and if I utter one word of dissatisfaction, you may punish me as one punishes a thief. You are the master, I your slave, what better fate can I ask for than dying at your feet?” etc., etc. But the master apparently deemed it foolish to bother with a reply.

Usually Aunt Qudsia was introduced to people like this: “This is Qudsia, her husband has taken in a white woman.” People were quite impressed. At that moment Aunt Qudsia too forgot her own misfortune and experienced a certain degree of pride. Her rival was the daughter of the rulers; who knows, maybe she was distantly related to the king. Not everyone can take in a *mēm*. In a way her husband had honored her by bringing a white woman to be her rival; he could have taken in a washerwoman or a sweeper.

Aunt Qudsia was married at the age of fifteen. Six months after the wedding her husband left for England. For two years a fervid romance flourished. Her head lowered, she was seen either writing to her husband or reading one of his letters. Gradually the letters cooled off. She continued her frenzied letter writing, but received no replies. Then all kinds of bad news started trickling in. After the First World War white women diminished in value, and whoever went abroad returned with one almost as a matter of routine. But Aunt Qudsia’s husband turned out to be rather strange. There were other men as well who were bringing home white women, but once every six or seven months they also showed their faces to their Hindustani wives. Her husband, on the other hand, maintained absolute silence and made no effort to find out how she was

doing.

And that's why Aunt Qudsia became hysterical during *Urs* (the celebrations at the shrine), that's why whenever there was a wedding in the neighborhood her jaw locked, or when, in the darkness of night someone sang a song of separation, she frothed at the mouth. But this mysterious voice affected her the most, so much so that she paced restlessly, cracked her knuckles, nervously twisted the corners of her *dupattā*, and suffered an attack of hysterics.

We were picking buds off the bushes. Our laps were overflowing, but we lingered to see the lighting of the boxed lamp at the front door. Suddenly the voice floated right behind us. Our hair stood on end. We turned in surprise. She was perched on the trunk of a fallen fig tree that had come down during a storm and now sat among crumbling gravestones in the cemetery behind the mosque. Her face wore a sad look. She paused in her singing. Our feet weighed heavily, like sacks stuffed with straw.

"Let go of my *dupattā*," she murmured petulantly, as if addressing someone behind her.

Terrified, we ran away wildly. No one was holding her *dupattā*. There was no one there.

She stood up hastily, and tugging at a corner of her *dupattā* darted away laughing as though she were being playfully pursued. Soon she had disappeared into the trees.

Fear gripped us, our feet seemed to pull us down.

"We'll meet in Meerut!" In the distance her voice echoed and we ducked around the curtain on the front door and into the house.

*You, beloved, so dark, and I so fair,  
We shall gaze at each other in the mirror.*

Her voice tottered again like a top and we felt as if there were needles running down our backs.

*You, beloved, so stout, and I so thin,  
On scales we shall both be weighed.*

What a coincidence! Aunt Qudsia's husband was both stout and dark, but there were no signs of meeting him in Meerut. What could she do except have an attack of hysteria?

Nani Bivi was busy with something else. Dadi Amma, who was still murmuring over the prayer beads, blew on us, but our fear was not abated. Uff! How many grandmothers there were, and aunts, both maternal and paternal, but what good were they? There was no vigor in their blowings.

“Stay away from her, child,” the attendant at the shrine said one Thursday when we arrived there with our usual offering of flowers. “She’s very dangerous.”

“Why?”

“She brings bad luck, she ate her parents and her husband.”

“She ate them?” We thought she sprinkled salt and pepper on them and really ate them.

“If she catches you alone she’ll pull out your heart and eat it,” he frightened us further.

“Is she a demon?”

“Of course.”

“May God help us!” Uncle Machu, who had come with us, interjected. “What nonsense is this. No, dear child, she’s insane.” He glared threateningly at the attendant.

“Insane?” We didn’t like Uncle Machu’s explanation. All the romance had melted away. She’s just insane? And not insane in an amusing way either; she doesn’t smell, or rip her clothes, nor does she throw stones at anyone. Instead, whenever you chance to run into her, you find her singing.

*Beloved, I'll be a flower in your lap,  
A flower in your lap, beloved.*

What a melodious voice. That’s why Aunt Qudsia became so agitated when she heard her sing.

“Amma dear, please send for her, we’ll hear her sing.”

“No, child, I’m not going to send for that mad wretch. She’s from a good family and look how she wanders all over the place without restraint, her purdah forgotten. She’s possessed, you know; all the others drowned in the Ghagra stream, but she remained afloat for three days as if there were something holding her up.”

“But the unhappy creature sings well.” Aunt Qudsia nursed an obsession for songs. When Uncle Shabbir sang devotional songs, streams and rivulets flowed from her eyes.

“O Rasul-e Arabi, To you I offer my life,” he sang and Aunt Qudsia,

her *dupattā* held to her nose, sobbed as she swayed to the rhythm of his song. Everyone sat at attention, waiting for the paroxysm that invariably overtook Aunt Qudsia when Uncle Shabbir came and sang. Her hands would rotate, her eyes rolled up in their sockets, and foam bubbled at her mouth. Nani Bivi and Dadi Amma would run toward her to blow holy incantations on her while Uncle Shabbir, seated on the wooden divan, tried to conceal the shaking of his hands. Until Aunt Qudsia calmed down, he paced up and down outside the front door.

Uncle Shabbir was related to Aunt Qudsia by marriage; he was a brother-in-law. The only child of poor parents, he was a timid, uninteresting and ineffectual man and it was indeed lucky he was an only child; we might have had to contend with several uninteresting and ineffectual uncles instead of one. He was very thin, and nearly three feet taller than Aunt Qudsia. Humped over like a camel, he was in the habit of taking long strides when he walked.

“Shabbir Bhai, please sing something,” Aunt Qudsia would entreat in a melancholy voice. “Please, it will calm my nerves.”

“What can I sing, I have a scratchy throat today.” He always presented the same excuse. Then he cleared his throat, blinked his eyes a few times, flared his nostrils, placed both hands together between his knees, and:

*O east wind, if you travel to Tayyabba,  
Promise that you will embrace the  
curtains of the sanctuary.*

He sang in a clear, unsullied voice. You felt sorry for him. The east wind had also plugged its ears, it seemed; it didn't hear him nor did it travel to Tayyabba at his behest.

It was common knowledge that Uncle Shabbir was in love with Aunt Qudsia. But what a sluggish, timid love it was. Other young men and women in the family also loved, and what a sprightly, energetic love that was! You saw them grappling on one pretext or another, grabbing hold of each other in corners, finding any opportunity to crush one another in an embrace, snatching, tussling during a game of Parcheesi, scrambling for the dice. Grandmothers, uncles, and various aunts scolded them endlessly and cursed, but no one paid any attention to their remonstrations and the laughter and giggling continued unchecked.

Uncle Shabbir, on the other hand, never even sat close to Aunt Qudsia, never allowed even his little finger to touch her; she was

forbidden fruit which belonged to another, to a man who had put her somewhere and forgotten about her. She had recently turned twenty-five and already there were silver strands gleaming in her hair. Everyone hoped she would age quickly so the matter could be put to rest once and for all.

“No, I’m not going near that mad wretch,” the old smelly crone, Pathani Bua, retorted when Aunt Qudsia solicited her help. “That husband-eater threatens you with a stone every time you go near her.”

“What’s amazing is that the ruffians out there don’t harass her. If it had been some other girl she’d be in shreds by now. The wretch, she roams around in the woods all night dressed up in her finery. Isn’t she scared?” Chachi Bi asked.

“Why, what’s she got to be scared of?” Pathani Bua said. “No one dares to look at her with a crooked eye.”

“Why? Is she a lioness, will she tear you into pieces? She’s always alone, isn’t she?”

“No, she’s not alone, her husband is with her.”

“What husband?”

“Bale Mian . . .”

“What nonsense! Don’t be a fool, woman.”

“This isn’t nonsense, I swear, she’s the beloved of her husband, she’s a true faithful of our Ghazi Mian.”

Pathani Bua proceeded to explain in greater detail. Bua was Ghazi Mian’s beloved and this despite the fact that Ghazi Mian was martyred four hundred years ago. Love is not fettered by the chains of time.

There was an *Urs* at Ghazi Mian’s shrine every year. *Qavvālī* singers and others came from far and wide. People of every religion and caste, old and young, children, women and men, all made the pilgrimage to the shrine, acknowledged vows, received answers to their prayers.

Every Thursday the singing girls from the town and its neighboring districts arrived with their offerings. They sang *ṭhumrīs*, *dādras*, and *ḡazals* in honor of Ghazi Mian. When a singing girl was ready to surrender her virginity she would first sing and dance at Mian’s shrine. A fair was held during the flame-ridden heat of May and June and the faithful came months ahead of time and set up camps. Such enormous crowds gathered during the actual days of the fair that you couldn’t find an empty spot anywhere. Stretched in front of the main entrance of the shrine was an over-sized marquee on which the arriving devotees threw garlands, sweetmeats and money.

Flags were transported here from neighboring towns and districts.

There were sixty-foot tall bamboo poles with clusters of black or white hair attached to the top, while just below them hung streamers made from rupee notes. Anyone who got his wish offered the standard at the shrine. Dancing and leaping to the beat of kettle drums, the men arrived at the entrance of the shrine and formed a circle; a muscular man built like a wrestler, balancing the standard, stationed himself in the middle of the circle; in order to keep the banner steady, to prevent it from tipping, four other men held on to ropes extending from the spire of the standard. Then, lifting up the standard, the man danced and executed tricks with it. Sometimes he'd place the base of the standard on his forehead and wriggle his body, other times he caught it between his teeth and swayed. Finally, when everyone began sweating, or maybe when the group ran out of time (there were other groups with standards waiting their turn), the weary flag was furled around the pole like a sail tied to its mast, hefted onto shoulders and carried into the shrine through the tall entranceway. And then another flag dance began. At the end of the fair days all the flags were auctioned off.

Our mother bought flags every year for use as floor cloths. These were the best examples of tambour-work. Embroidered on the rough cotton fabric were colorful designs in the shapes of elephants and horses. Here you could see whole armies on the march with their spears hoisted, there a caravan of camels; in another corner were flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cows, along with groups of men and women exchanging secrets. We would roll around on the divans all day long, observing the scenes below us, never tiring of what we saw.

Besides the flags, those whose prayers had been heard also offered, in accordance with what they had promised, gold and silver figurines, tables, chairs, beds, and pots and pans.

All this was followed by Ghazi Mian's wedding ceremonies. A kettle drum was placed at the entranceway. Early in the morning the drum-playing commenced in an irritating manner and continued late into the night. All day one group after another came and surrounded the drum players, and sometimes one or two men broke into sad songs about lost love. As soon as one group had exhausted itself, another took its place. Women possessed by evil spirits came to Mian's door to be rid of the evil spirits; they loosened their hair and rolled their heads rhythmically from side to side, and when the person chanting holy verses blew smoke over them, they screamed and fainted. But it wasn't long before they regained consciousness and started swaying again. If the spirit were a stubborn creature it would not budge for days; red and green clubs were used to



punish it and only then, after a terrible struggle, did it depart. Happy and contented, the women who had been healed then made offerings at the shrine and went their ways.

On the fifth of the moth came the ceremony of the fan, the sandalwood ceremony on the seventh, and on the ninth the henna ceremony was observed. At night on that day, Ghazi Mian's shirt—on which the Qur'an was inscribed in its entirety—was brought out for public viewing. Frenzied crowds engulfed it. On the eleventh the ceremony marking the readying of the marriage procession took place.

A long time ago, Radha Bai, alias Zuhra Bibi, a child widow from a family in Raduli, lost her heart to Mian. Ghazi Mian appeared to her in a dream and accepted her love. She made her home in his shrine. She was known to wash the tomb with her tears and sweep the floor of the shrine with her hair every day. Her father was an oil merchant. He forcibly dragged her away from Ghazi Mian, but Radha refused to give in. All girls with the name 'Radha' are stubborn; boldly and fearlessly they announce their love, suffer every dishonor and stigma happily, and put life and soul on the line. And the dice roll in their favor. Unfavorable winds are compelled to lower their heads when confronted with the ardor of their love, people begin to worship them, sing songs about them, and finally they are looked upon as goddesses.

Ghazi Mian's Radha also had to tread on coals. She too had to drag herself through thorns. Her mother beat her senseless, her father whipped her with moistened rope and tied her to a peg in the cow's shed. And the whole village spat at her. In the middle of the night, when poor Radha, starving and thirsty, weary from her wounds and splattered with cow dung, was taking her last breath, Ghazi Mian came to her. He washed her wounds with his tears, clasped her to his sacred chest, and dipping his forefinger into his heart's blood he filled the parting in her hair with bridal vermillion.

When the demented Mira fell in love with her Girdhar Gopal the world let vipers loose in her life and gave her a cup of poison to drink and then . . . Krishan Murari's flute came to life and . . . the viper . . . turned into a garland of flowers . . . the cup of poison brimmed over with the elixir of life.

The next morning the inhabitants of Raduli awoke to the sounds of temple bells and the *azān* echoing from the minaret of the mosque. Immersed in the fragrance of sandalwood, dressed in majestic clothes, Radha lay on a bed of flowers in everlasting sleep. There was not a single scratch on her, her body glowed like burnished gold, her hair shone with

vermillion.

People in Raduli were thunderstruck. A meeting of the village elders was called. It was decided that the girl now belonged in another's house, there was no reason for her to stay in her parents' home. So she was delivered to her groom's dwelling.

The Hindus called her Radha, the Muslims referred to her as Zuhra Bibi. Her plain, unpretentious grave sat at the foot of Mian's tomb. At one end of her grave grew a tamarind tree whose bark was known to exude the fragrance of sandalwood when burnt.

Since Radha's death the Raduliwallahs had been bringing an offering of Mian's wedding procession to the shrine every year. Children were put to bed early so they could be aroused around three o'clock in the morning to witness the arrival of the procession. As soon as the familiar sound of trumpets was heard everyone was awakened. Quickly slapping some water on our faces, we all ran up to the roof to see the procession enter the village.

It's been so many years, but to this day my eyes are blinded by the memory of that *barāt*. A white steed in the front, heavily laden with silver and gold ornaments, covered with flowers, the silvery strands of the diadem kissing the hooves.

"Look, there's Bale Mian!" We thought we could really see him seated on the horse.

Behind the horse was a palanquin with fine red muslin curtains and inside the center of the palanquin was the Qur'an with a candle burning alongside it.

"The bride, the bride!" We were spellbound. The trembling flame of the candle behind the red muslin curtains appeared to take the form of a shy, reticent bride. Following the bride were the wedding guests carrying tiny umbrellas. These were decorated with small stars between embroidered bands, and beaded silver and gold tassels swung from their edges. Twirling these umbrellas like reels, swaying, dancing, the members of the wedding procession filled the streets. It was a dazzling sight. For days afterward little umbrellas continued to dance in my vision.

Sometimes when you see something very beautiful you feel a lump in your throat. Aunt Qudsia always had a lump in her throat and all she needed was an excuse to start weeping. Resting her head on the window sill, she shed voluminous tears; seeing a wedding procession always cut her to the very heart. But everyone was saddened by this *barāt*. Was this a wedding procession or a funeral? Life's doors are shut on a young, frail girl, she wants to create a world of dreams and open a small window in it.

But the stupid people around her don't allow it because she threatens their beliefs. And what happens? She shatters all their beliefs and turns away from them.

But Uncle Shabbir was neither Krishan Murari nor Ghazi Mian. He was an incomplete, hollow man. He could not turn the snarling vipers in Aunt Qudsia's life into garlands with his flute, nor could he change the cow dung that enveloped her soul into sandalwood by the sheer dint of his faith. His total assets were his two trembling hands which he could use well to stifle turbulent emotions. And Aunt Qudsia, at the age of twenty-six, was fading away like a forgotten remark. She didn't even have enough courage to be like Bua and lose her sanity. At least then people would fear her. As things stood now, her Ghazi Mian was ridiculed and pitied. There are those who are more alive in death than the living.

Bua was probably just a few years older than Aunt Qudsia. From the time when she is young, a woman's heart is filled with a thousand fears so that when she reaches puberty she thinks of herself as a fragile, unbaked clay pitcher which must encounter stones at every step. But because she had lost her sanity, Bua's fears had vanished, especially her fear of losing her honor. She was no longer a hollow clay pitcher, she was a solid rock. In a manly fashion she went where she pleased, regardless of whether it was night or day. She had somehow managed to make people revere her. Nobody really knew how, but one or two miracles came about and people began to believe. Once a ruffian, finding her alone, tried to grab her. Ghazi Mian slapped him with such fury that the man's face caved in. At another time an unfortunate fellow tried to have his way with her and it is believed that the hand which he fastened upon her wrist decomposed and fell off.

Our Uncle Machu, was an apostate. He used to say, "Every year thousands of lepers throng to the shrine with hopes of being healed. Decomposition of limbs and their subsequent falling off is not a miracle, it's a disease. And it's not unusual for an alcoholic to suffer from an attack of facial paralysis."

But we were afraid of doubting Bua. What would you do if your whole face fell in and collapsed? She had the temperament of an ogress. However, ever since we had discovered that she was not a ghoul or a spirit and was only a little mad, we ceased to be terrified of her.

One day we found her standing under the oak tree, wiping mud from her slipper. I gave her Aunt Qudsia's message.

"I'm not coming," she said rudely. "I'll come when I feel like it," she muttered and walked away toward the path on the other side of the small

bridge.

Finally, after a long time, she felt like it and there she was, suddenly. Without standing on ceremony, without saying a word to anyone, she went directly to the water pitchers, poured some water into a brass cup for herself and sprinkled some on the *čambēli* buds she had tied to a corner of her *dupaṭṭā*. Then she drew the *dupaṭṭā* over her head, placed her hands on her hips like a singing girl and started smiling. Amma had always warned us that girls from good families don't stand with their hands on their hips; only singing girls do that. While you're growing up there's a time when your hands become a nuisance, you don't know what to do with them. So, driven by the fear that I might become a singing girl if I weren't careful, I would sometimes place both hands over my head when I didn't know where else to put them.

"What is this, you wretch, why are you slapping your head?" Amma scolded me, vexed.

"Where should I keep my hands then?" I would ask wearily.

"In the fire!" She'd get more upset. "Get out of here." And I would quickly slip away.

Suddenly Bua laughed. Then she came and sat down on the divan and proceeded to adjust the folds on her tight *pajāma*. Her clothes were spotlessly clean. A starched pink *dupaṭṭā* was draped neatly across her shoulders while a small bunch of *čambēli* tied to a corner of the *dupaṭṭā* swung next to her cheek.

Unable to withstand her stare, Aunt Qudsia lowered her eyes and pretended to busy herself by adjusting her *dupaṭṭā* over her shoulders.

*My eyes are red from weeping . . . .*

She seemed to be teasing Aunt Qudsia.

*Smoking, chewing pan, my beloved  
My cruel beloved didn't come today  
My eyes are red from weeping . . . .*

Aunt Qudsia was holding her tears in the palm of her hand; she began sprinkling them. But before she could bring on an attack of hysteria, Bua leapt up and was gone out the back door in seconds.

Her voice glided in the distance: *My eyes are red from weeping . . . .*

Everyone was impressed. Bua had knowledge of hidden things, she knew how to handle Aunt Qudsia.

“She must have heard it from somebody,” Uncle Machu said. He was an apostate, you see. But no one paid any attention to his remark. After this episode Bua became a frequent visitor to our house. She’d come, sit down, and if she felt restive she’d just get up and leave.

“Come, stay,” Aunt Qudsia cajoled.

“No, no I can’t . . . he’ll be waiting for me . . . .”

And I’d imagine Ghazi Mian actually standing under the shade of the *kadamb* tree, waiting for her.

“She’s lost her wits, the unfortunate creature, and what a good family she’s from.”

“You know, she doesn’t look demented to me.”

“Why, you’ll think she’s demented only after she picks up stones to throw at you? Doesn’t she have that low-caste woman in her house, and does she give any thought to the value of money? Anyone can come in and steal all she’s got and she’ll never know.”

“Don’t say anything about her, please, I’m not sure it’s safe.”

“Why, I’m not saying she’s a bad person, am I?”

Once Maulvi Sahib, the village cleric, said to Bua, “You had better get married, girl. What good is it roaming around like this?”

Enraged, Bua pounced on him: “Why don’t you get your mother married to some ruffian walking on the streets!”

“A woman is not safe without a man by her side,” Maulvi Sahib explained.

Bua exploded: “I have a man by my side, your father’s father . . . if he hears you talk like this he’ll set your beard on fire.”

Who could chide Ghazi Mian’s cherished beloved without incurring his wrath? While returning from the well with a bucket of water one day, Maulvi Sahib’s son was bitten by a snake. Maulvi Sahib’s wife fell at Bua’s feet, rubbed her nose on her shoes and it was only then that the boy’s life was spared.

“It must be a water snake, they’re not the poisonous type,” Uncle Machu remarked. But who will listen to talk that threatens to damage belief? Fear of Bua grew in people’s hearts. She wasn’t just anybody, she was Ghazi Mian’s most treasured beloved, Ghazi Mian, who made it possible for a barren woman to conceive, who healed a leper, who turned beggars to kings and kings to beggars in seconds. Was it any wonder that he was so mindful of his favorite girl?

Since she hadn’t produced even a mouse as yet, the *mēm*, Aunt Qudsia was sure, was barren. Nani Bivi’s fasting and prayers had surely put a lock on her fertility. Allah could change everything in no time.

Nani Bivi had also made a vow at Mian's shrine that when, with Allah's grace, Qudsia's luck changed and she became pregnant, she would offer a silver figurine at his shrine.

For three years Nani Bivi's silver cradle had been placed at Mian's feet with the entreaty, "Ghazi Mian, please bless this cradle." And along with that continued the pleas to Mighty Qadir to bring Qudsia's husband back to her. But all the vows, prayers and fasting came to naught. The cradle was blessed, but it was the *mēm* who became the instrument. The day she heard the news that her rival had given birth to a daughter, Aunt Qudsia was weighed down; it seemed as if a marble tomb had been erected over her soft, newly dug grave. On the day of reckoning, the angels of death, Munkar and Nakir, would be slow to breathe life into her.

Bua, who had been absent for many days, made a sudden appearance one day. Nani Bivi was busy scolding the *nā'in* who had arrived with sweets to offer felicitations on the occasion of the baby's birth. Tossing the *ladḍūs* into the gutter, Nani Bivi threatened to shave off the *nā'in's* hair; the woman clasped her skirt about her legs and fled.

On hearing of the arrival of the baby girl, Bua began twittering.

"Listen girl, your rival's lap has been blessed, aren't you going to distribute sweets?" Then she took down the drum and broke into a medley of silly songs about childbirth.

*With bells on his ankles  
the little tot will play cham, cham,  
cham . . . .*

There was no little tot, what cursed *cham, cham* could there be? This uncalled for singing infuriated Nani Bivi. She railed and ranted at Bua who dropped the drum, left the house and trudged off to sit behind the mosque. She was gone for many days. This was not unusual. Not caring whether it was night or day, she started off on foot, wandering from one village to another. Somewhere along the way, standing on the edge of a well to catch her breath, if she heard a new song, she'd include it in her treasure of lyrics. Then she moved on. Often she travelled without food for days. The insane have great strength. We had never seen her sleeping. She wasn't bothered either by snakes or scorpions or wild animals. In the village on the other side of the stream a lion was spotted, but it stayed out of her path. We heard rumors that the lion offered her salutations by placing its head on the ground before her.

Bua told her stories of Ghazi Mian's playfulness with such aplomb that it became difficult to doubt her word. When you live next to a shrine everything seems to make sense. Mian was very stubborn and mischievous. He teased her always, tugging at her *dupattā*, clutching her bangles.

"Now listen, how did he fall in love with you?" Aunt Qudsia asked.

"His heart led him to me," Bua replied, smiling proudly.

"That's what I'm asking, how did his heart lead him to you?" Aunt Qudsia was always anxious to find out how one could win someone's heart. Although she had sacrificed her body, soul and everything she possessed, she had not succeeded in winning anyone's heart.

"I don't know, why don't you ask him yourself, he's standing in front of me, smiling." She pointed to a wall with her finger and all of us followed her finger fearfully. Our worldly eyes could see nothing, but for her the world around her was filled with blinding light.

"How did you meet him?"

"I was on my way to the well, to draw water, he stood in my path, blocking my way."

"And then?" We all moved closer to her.

"I tried to run, he clasped my wrist."

"And then?" We edged closer still.

"My father was very angry." She was in a world of her own already. "He said, we won't give him our daughter, he's a boatman's son."

"A boatman's son?"

Bua explained that Mian had taken the form of a boatman's son in order to beg for her hand; he fell at her father's feet and pleaded. But her father got angry and rejected him and arranged for marriage to someone else. A terrible storm arose while the wedding party was attempting to cross the Ghagra in the middle of the night. It was Mian, transformed as the boatman and rowing their boat, who had summoned the storm. He ignored everyone else and made an attempt to save her from drowning, but the others tried to interfere. Enraged, he tipped the boat and let everyone drown. Surrounded by flowers, Bua floated for three days on the surface of the water in her bridal clothes.

"And then?" We had moved practically into her lap by now.

"And then nothing!" Worn out, she pushed us away and left the house to wander in the cemetery in a daze, lost, singing love songs.

Bua was a virgin. No man had touched her. After the wedding procession drowned she managed somehow to get to the banks of the stream. For days she strayed in the woods. When her parents heard she

was alive they came after her to take her home, but by then Bua had retreated into a world of dreams. She refused to shatter her bridal bangles; she was a bride, and Bale Mian was her bridegroom. No one had the courage to lock horns with Bale Mian.

“He’s calling me,” she’d suddenly say and wander off into the woods, singing songs of love. Considering her wishes to be Bale Mian’s, no one dared stop her. Gradually, as time passed, certain miracles came to be associated with her and people seemed to be more and more intimidated by her. Then they began to worship her. If someone needed to ask a favor of Mian, they all knew where to go. Wherever she went she was treated with deference, and to have the opportunity of doing something for her was regarded as a stroke of good fortune. When a prayer was answered, a pink *dupattā*, fragrant oil and perfume, bangles and flowers were offered at Ghazi Mian’s shrine for her along with the offering that had been promised for Ghazi Mian. How much did she eat? She could stay without food for days. People filled large decorated trays with food and brought them to her house and she distributed the food among beggars. She had been living alone since the death of her parents. A low-caste woman took care of the house. The village washerwoman, who was careless with everyone else’s clothes and frequently lost or misplaced laundry, washed Bua’s clothes with the utmost care, making them crisp and bright. Bua owned some land, but never bothered to take any profit from it. Perhaps that was why people had begun to view her as Ghazi Mian’s cherished beloved; they too cherished her. She had no reason to fear anyone, there were thousands who were ready to surrender their loves for her. Therefore, although she was a weak woman, she was not handicapped or helpless; she claimed all the rights of a man. She moved about alone as she fancied, declared her love in aloud voice, sang boisterously, made bold comments without reserve, swore unabashedly, sat in the company of men during a *qavvālī*, and generously threw money to the singers.

During the annual fair at Ghazi Mian’s shrine, thousands of ruffians and scoundrels trooped in along with the lakhs of pilgrims and devotees; every other day you heard about kidnappings and rapes. Upper class ladies considered it dangerous to come out even in enclosed palanquins or carriages guarded by stewards. And Bua, all the while, sailed among the crowds, without a care, her *dupattā* floating behind her.

“My word, Bua, the world is a dangerous place, don’t go to the fair,” Amma warned her. “Aren’t you afraid to wander all by yourself?”

“But I don’t wander by myself, I’m not alone, he’s with me.” In other words, *her* he.



There was no one among us who could contradict her. What could you say? And if we said something she didn't like we'd be in trouble; who knows what miracle might follow.

"She's a degenerate, the wretch!" In the beginning Uncle Machu didn't approve of her at all. "And she's not mad either. She's just making fools of all of us."

That very night Uncle Machu suffered an attack of liver pain that left him gasping for breath. He kept insisting that he'd had a liver ailment for many years, but who was going to pay any attention to what he said. "He's an ignorant man," Amma acknowledged to Bua in an attempt to win her over. She secretly begged her to speak to Ghazi Mian on their behalf.

The pain would have subsided on its own, but Amma was sure he had been cured because of Bua's intervention. And she warned Uncle Machu that if he ever said another unfavorable word concerning Bua again she would beat her head with her hands. What did he have to lose? He had no children and no God, while she, on the other hand, by God's grace, was a mother and could not afford to antagonize anyone. As for Abba, she had already sworn that if he said anything hostile with regard to Bua he would surely see his wife dead. Abba had often maintained that this business of believing in saints and their followers was a sinful undertaking. But Amma's family was dearer to her than any concerns about the next life.

When our friendship with Bua grew it seemed as if we'd come to terms with God; because of Bua we felt as if we too had some connection with Ghazi Mian. Sometimes when she was in a good mood she spent the night at our house and all of us quarreled for the opportunity to sleep with her on the same bed. She exuded a wonderful fragrance, a fragrance of soft smelling, freshly dug earth. When, after several days of absence, her voice floating in song reached our ears, we became frantic with excitement and ran to fetch her. Like ants we clung to her and dragged her home. The very same voice which used to strike fear in our hearts now fell on our ears with the magic of an ancient melody.

As soon as she stepped into the house, everything brightened and came to life. The drum vibrated:

*Ho my prince, bring me some medicine  
from Delhi  
So I can be cured.*

She sang the new songs she had picked up.

*The rains are here*

*My brother, will you not put up the  
swing?*

Dark clouds swirled, rain drops fell, young hearts stirred with emotions, flames smoldered in Aunt Qudsia's eyes. Who was going to put up a swing? Aunt Qudsia became dizzy and nauseated when she saw anyone swinging. But Bua brought a length of rope from somewhere, we made a swing, and with a pillow for a seat we swung high and low. Bua sang long, high notes and Aunt Qudsia, from her place on the divan, joined in:

*My heart yearns, the clouds pour,*

*My friend, how will I endure these days of  
spring . . .*

Sitting at a distance Uncle Shabbir stared at the floor like a criminal, as though he had a hand in making the clouds pour and the heart yearn, as if Aunt Qudsia's spring had soured because of him. Qudsia belonged to someone else, she was forbidden fruit. Secretly he consulted *maulvīs*, talked to lawyers, but we're talking of the time when the Khula Bill hadn't been passed. At first no one thought of divorce because of the fear of bringing dishonor to the family. Then, after some of the rebels in the family had succeeded in bringing Nani Bivi around to the idea of divorce, Aunt Qudsia's husband stubbornly refused to give in.

Rejecting our world, Bua had created a free world of her own where she ruled. She had sealed all doors but after all she was a woman; a chink remained somewhere. We became very fond of her and sometimes affectionately made obstinate demands; when she got ready to leave we clung to her tearfully, forcing her to turn back.

"Bua, these silly children are crazy about you, why don't you take them with you?" Amma would say, and Bua would cancel her trip.

If she weren't demented, Bua was fit to be weighed in gold. She had started helping out with the household chores. Cleaning was her particular obsession. Furnished with an army of kids, she went about tidying up and threw out baskets full of rubbish. If only she could come with us back to our hometown after Abba's retirement.

"Can't she be cured?" Amma asked Hakim Sahib who used to be called in to treat Aunt Qudsia. He came to our house once or twice every

week.

“Of course she can, Begum Sahib. There is no ailment in this world for which medicine doesn’t have a remedy. Start giving her a laxative and, God willing, her mind will return to its normal state.”

Hakim Sahib had only one medicine for every ailment: Laburnum purgative. When Aunt Qudsia felt unwell, it was this very laxative that was administered to her. Not only did you feel that your life was slipping away but your body also seemed to be threatened by the effects of these laxatives. She had no recourse but to be cured and for days afterward she was afraid to even blink an eyelash for fear that it might be mistaken for an oncoming attack and people might rush with treatment. Uncle Machu too had been given these laxatives for the pain in his liver. After the first dose he threatened to kill Hakim Sahib.

“The heat from the body travels to the brain. Purging the stomach helps get rid of all noxious matter.” Hakim Sahib proceeded to throw light on the advantages of purgative therapy and everyone was convinced. Bua, however, ignored his advice.

—*Translated by Tahira Naqvi*