

SAFIA SIDDIQI

## Strangers, Friends

SEEMA DREW ASIDE THE OLD CURTAINS and looked out of the window. The sky was overcast and soft drizzle was slowly falling on the green grass, making it even greener. Everywhere looked sad and desolate. No one could know the gloom, the sadness that she felt. She pressed her forehead against the glass of the window and began to sob. Today, in this gloomy atmosphere she missed her own home, her mother, her father, her sisters, her brothers. Her home, her own home where throughout there was bright sunshine, where her friends were. Her home, where all those who loved her lived, where she had had her own room and where the delicate scent of jasmine, borne by the wind, came in through the window and made the air all fragrant. The blue cotton curtain would wave in breeze. In the mango season, the fragrance of the dancing mango blossom was everywhere. In the evening she would sit in the corner of the garden, talking to her friends or reading novels.

She turned her head and looked into the room. And look at this room! How dark it was—wallpaper peeling from the wall, the carpet on the floor so old that you couldn't tell any longer what its original color had been. Big, old fashioned, heavy armchairs, and the sofa with its threadbare loose cover. Sideboard and the table with all the polish rubbed off. The great heavy bed was so old that the very sight of it made her angry. She felt like striking a match and setting fire to the whole lot. Clean the room a thousand times and it still doesn't look clean, she thought. Sometimes she felt so sick of it that it made her cry.

Today how many memories were coming back to her! Back in Karachi she had just taken her B.A. exams and was planning to go and spend the holidays with her brother in Rawalpindi when one day her aunt

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“Ajnabi Dōst,” from her collection *Pahlī Nasl kā Gunāh* (Lahore: Allied Publishing House, 1992), pp. 116–40.

came and whispered something to her mother. Then her mother, father and aunt held a series of secret meetings. A registered letter was sent to her brother, and her mother talked to her sister on the phone. And then one day some people came to tea. Her mother sent for her aunt to come in the morning and then both of them had told her to take particular care to get herself ready for their coming. She was completely perplexed. What was going on? What was all this secrecy about? And who were these visitors who were so important? She simply didn't understand; and she still wouldn't have understood if her cousin Rukhsana, who was her friend as well as her cousin, hadn't whispered to her what it was all about. What a bright girl Rukhsana was! As soon as Seema thought of her a smile came to her lips; what a mischievous and lively girl! She had explained everything to Seema in detail. A boy had come from England where he was doing his C.A. His father was ill with a heart condition and it was to see him that the boy had come. His father wanted to see him married. They were people of good family and lived near her aunt. So all this was about Seema, Seema's life and happiness, yet nobody had ever said anything to her or ever asked her anything. Nobody had included her in their conversations. Things are done in a strange way in our country, she thought. Nobody asks the girls anything until everything is settled. Seema didn't understand what had happened or how it had happened. Every-thing had been settled. She was married and within a few weeks of her marriage she came, in tears, to England. Even now it all seemed a dream, she still couldn't believe that her mother and her father were thousands of miles away. This old fashioned two-roomed flat was a prison, where she passed her days from morning to night and night to morning. Her husband wasn't interested in any kind of recreation. For him, his studies were all important. He'd yielded to his parents' pressure and married, but his aim in life was to pass his examinations. He had taken particular care to see to it that his wife's presence should not interfere with his studies in any way. He would come home from the office and at once start preparing for his exams. And Seema would have to amuse herself sitting quietly in front of the TV, watching some idiotic program. There was nothing happening in her life. She didn't even feel like writing letters. Every now and then, on the weekend, someone would drop in and things would brighten up for a little while.

Her husband thought that visiting and being visited was a waste of time, so he had only a few friends. Among them were Mr. Rahman and his wife, and Seema liked them very much. Neither of them was very highly educated but they knew how to live. They were always happy. Five

days a week they worked in a factory, and on weekends they would get out and enjoy themselves. Mr. Rahman had had a very ordinary education and had come to England simply to earn money. But he was quick to recognize how he was placed. He knew how to get by in the conditions in which he found himself. Mrs. Rahman always wore a blouse and a tight jeans and black boots, and wore her hair short. How smart she was! Seema was very impressed. They hadn't been in this country very long, but they had taken its ways and you would have thought they had been born and bred here. And the most important thing was that they were both happy. When Mrs. Rahman had shown Seema her wedding photographs, she hadn't recognized her. There she was, in her loose-fitting, long *qamīz* and her *dupaṭṭa*, the long scarf covering her head, long earrings in her ears, bangles all the way up her arms, her eyes modestly lowered. What a difference between this slim, shy girl and Mrs. Rahman! She felt very envious of her. How happy she was, and how contented with her life!

One day Mr. Rahman and his wife had come to see them and they were all talking together. Seema was telling Mrs. Rahman how lonely she felt and Mr. Rahman said, "Seema, why don't you get a job somewhere? Then you won't feel bored anymore."

She didn't say anything; she was wondering what her husband would think. Her husband said to Mrs. Rahman, "Maybe you can get Seema a job where you work."

Seema's heart began to beat faster: that would get her out of these four walls.

"Well, Seema, shall I ask them?" Mrs. Rahman said.

"Yes, do, I'm fed up with feeling so lonely."

"But, Seema," Mr. Rahman said, "what will you do in Jamila's factory?" Her husband answered for her.

"The same work as Jamila does."

"No," Mr. Rahman said, "that's not the kind of work for her to do. She is an educated woman, she ought to look for office work of some kind. It doesn't seem right that an educated woman do factory work."

"But what sort of office work can I do? I haven't any experience." Seema was again dejected.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't get a job," Mr. Rahman said. "Learn to do a bit of typing."

"I did once learn to type," Seema said, "just for my own interest, but it's been ages since I did any. My speed must be very slow."

"So what? All you need is practice, you can start going to evening classes. The fees aren't very high, and there are two or three classes a

week.” Seema felt deeply grateful to him and because of him, her husband didn’t offer much opposition.

The next day she began to run around, inquiring about evening classes. Along with typing classes she began to attend English classes as well, so that she could practice speaking English. Now, she no longer felt the burden of days passed in idleness; and at last the day came when she felt sufficient confidence in her typing to start looking for a job. She sent off applications and made phone calls, but everywhere she applied, she was asked what work she had done before, and because she had no previous experience, she was turned down. Mrs. Rahman sometimes phoned and sometimes came to her home, and if she hadn’t encouraged her, she would have given up long ago. But now when she was turned down everywhere she applied, she gave up all hope. The fear of loneliness, of a life of emptiness oppressed her. She was tired of reading newspapers and magazines and of writing letters. She’d stopped going out altogether. Her husband was preparing for his final examinations and devoting every minute to his studies. He didn’t like Seema going anywhere on her own, and so she couldn’t go out. Anyway she didn’t know her way about. And people were careful not to come to visit them because everybody knew that her husband didn’t like people to come when he was studying. If anybody forgot he would soon remind them that he was still extremely busy.

In those days Seema got to the point where she simply longed for somebody to talk to. Her husband worked, either at home or in the library, and she simply didn’t know how to get through the day.

One day she was listlessly looking through the pages of the local paper when the words *situation vacant* caught her eye. When she read what it said, her hopes rose, because the advertisement was for a job in which no previous experience was required. The small firm needed an office clerk. Seema phoned right away and asked for an appointment. And on the following day, when she went to the address, she discovered that it was so near that if she got the job she could walk and wouldn’t even need to take a bus. On the way home after her interview with the manager her feet hardly touched the ground, she was so happy. Even now she couldn’t believe that next week she would be starting work. That evening, eager to share her happiness with somebody else, she phoned Mrs. Rahman. Mrs. Rahman too was extremely pleased. Seema was both pleased and nervous. She was taking a job for the first time in her life, and on top of that, she would be working with English people. In her heart she prayed to God to make things easy for her.

When she arrived for work on the first day her heart was beating fast. People must have seen from her face how nervous she felt. But when she was introduced to people there, her nervousness decreased somewhat. There were only two people in the office. One was the manager—his name was Geoffrey but everybody called him Geoff—and the other was an elderly man who was probably not far off retirement. His name was Anthony Wilson, but everybody called him Tony. The boss was Mr. Hendrick, but he was in the Head Office and only occasionally came to see how things were going. The office was on the first floor of the building and below it, on the ground floor, there was a little factory, employing ten to a dozen people. The men worked on the machines and the women in the packing department. It was a really friendly atmosphere, with everybody working happily together. There was a girl there whose name was Beverly, but everybody called her Bev. She was a tall healthy black girl who was always laughing. Everybody teased her and she made a nuisance of herself to everybody. You could hear her laugh all over the factory. Her lovely body shone as though it had just been polished. She wore tight fitting fashionable clothes and sandals with really high heels. When she came clack-clacking up the stairs, making jokes and laughing aloud, Seema felt full of envy for her and full of admiration for her beauty. She would think to herself, “Who says that beauty has anything to do with color?” Her experience soon convinced her that friendliness and good manners are enough to make anybody popular. They break though all the barriers of color and race and make everybody a human being like everybody else. Bev was a model of a living vital person for her. How nervous Seema had been, and what a support Bev’s warm and friendly behavior had been to her. On her second day in the office, she had been putting paper in the typewriter when Bev had come to see Tony about something; when she saw Seema she smiled at her and said, “Hello, when did you start work?”

“Yesterday,” Seema said.

“Oh, I was very busy yesterday. I’m sorry I didn’t come up. Generally I come up every day to have a chat. What’s your name?”

“Seema.”

“I’m Beverly, but everybody calls me Bev. Can I call you Sim? It’s a nice name.” She winked mischievously and said, “Don’t you be afraid of Geoff, he’s only the manager, the boss is Hendrick and he never says anything to girls. If this chap gives you an order, don’t bother about it.” She laughed aloud and looked towards Geoff and then turned to Mr. Wilson and said, “How are you, Tony love?”

“I thought you weren’t talking to old men today.” Mr. Wilson answered, straightening his glasses.

“You aren’t old, you’re as good as ten youngsters like Geoff.”

Geoff pretended to be angry, “Get out,” he said, “otherwise I’ll pick you up and throw you out of the window.”

“Oh yeah, are you strong enough for that?” she spoke laughingly and clack-clacked down the stairs. Seema too was laughing at her.

“Nice girl,” commented Mr. Wilson smiling in Seema’s direction.

“Yes,” said Geoff, “the problem with her is too much talk and not enough work.”

It didn’t take Seema long to learn the job. Geoff helped her a great deal, not only as a manager but to some extent as a friend. He was about the same age as Seema and a very simple and straightforward boy. They treated her as an equal and explained all the work to her. There wasn’t a lot of work; typing a few lists and filing a few receipts. Because of Geoff’s friendly behavior towards her she didn’t feel nervous about asking him anything. Mr. Wilson too was very kind to her. He would chat with her and tell everything about himself without ever asking her anything about herself. Gradually her shyness disappeared and the time began to pass very pleasantly. Mr. Wilson did his best to keep her happy. He sensed that she was lonely. When she talked to him she felt content.

Mr. Hendrick reminded her of her uncle. Like him, he was a tall man, with a healthy body and a handsome face and a beard. The only difference was that Mr. Hendrick’s beard was brown and her uncle’s was black. The first time he saw Seema he had behaved very courteously towards her—spoken to her, asked how she was and bade her welcome.

“He’s a great man,” she thought to herself, “he’s the boss but he talks to everybody and asks them how they are. He never scolds anyone or flaunts his authority.” She was very impressed by him.

Mr. Wilson constantly praised her work. “How hard she works!” he said. “She never wastes a single moment.” Whenever she heard him say this, she felt depressed. “There isn’t anything I can waste my time on.” she thought. “I can’t laugh and joke the way Beverly does, because the way I was brought up doesn’t permit it. My husband hasn’t got time to do anything about my loneliness; he doesn’t even notice that I have any needs. If I were to go out roaming about the West End all night, I would be late to work in the morning. I’ve got all the time in the world, but nothing to use it on.” Then she would get a choking feeling in her throat. “If God calls me to account for wasting time,” she thought, “I shall dispute with Him. Why did You make me so helpless?” I shall ask him,

“so weak, under such constraint that I had no power, even over myself, or over any of my actions, or over the use of my time? Why did You make me an aware human being and then put me under such constraint that another person, who is not in the least interested in me, is put in authority over me?” And the flame of revolt would flare up in her heart. A wave of depression would come over her, and although her eyes were dry, her heart would be weeping.

It was only a few weeks to Christmas. Seema had been working there about a year. Her husband was fully occupied. He would be taking his final exams in January, but Seema didn't find things so bad at home these days. In any case she was hardly ever there. All day she was in the office. Mr. Wilson and Geoff were always scoring points off each other and Seema would enjoy listening to them. And Christmas brought more work too. Seema sometimes had to stay late, but she had no objection to this. After all, what was there in her own home to make her anxious to get back?

It was a very cold morning, so cold that it seemed it was going to snow. She arrived at the office shivering. Mr. Wilson had a heavy cold, his old bones no longer had the strength to stand up to such cold. He was coughing a little too. Seema took off her coat and then went off to make tea for him. She had only just switched on the kettle when Mr. Hendrick arrived. Everyone was astonished to see him so early in the morning. When they saw his face, it was only natural they should feel nervous. He was not smiling his usual attractive smile, on the contrary, he looked extremely angry. Seema felt very nervous, and quickly went and sat down in her place. Her heart began to beat quickly. Mr. Hendrick was asking Geoff about some order. The order was an urgent one and it was to have been delivered the day before. Mr. Hendrick had personally promised the company that he had given the order, that there would be absolutely no delay. He had also impressed this on the foreman in the factory and now, on his way in, he'd asked him about it. He'd said that the goods had been ready and that he had phoned the office and informed them. It was due to the carelessness of the office people that the delivery had not been made, and now he was asking Geoff about it. Geoff's face had turned pale. Seema didn't know why, but she stood up and spoke, “Excuse me, sir.”

“Yes?” He turned towards Seema.

“Sir, it was my fault, I forgot to tell Geoff the factory had phoned to say that the goods were ready. I'm really sorry, sir.”

“Oh,” Mr. Hendrick suddenly paused, “never mind, the delivery can

be made today, it's not all that late," he said slowly.

"Thank you, sir, you may be assured that it won't happen again. I feel very ashamed." Seema said.

"It doesn't matter, things like this happen sometimes." His tone had at once become kindly. "Alright Geoff, you make immediate arrangements for delivery." He paused a moment and then said, "Since it's your responsibility, it is you I called to account. If I said anything that offended you, please disregard it." And he turned and went off towards the stairs.

"Thank you, sir," Geoff said in a weak voice and sat down heavily in his chair.

"Well done!" said Mr. Wilson, between his coughs. Seema was in a sort of trance; how quick she had been to tell Mr. Hendrick such a big lie! She still couldn't believe that what her ear had heard had really happened. After a few moments, Geoff got up and came over to her. She was filing papers but she stopped of her own accord and looked up.

Geoff put his hand on her shoulder and bent down and said, "Thank you, Sim." She hadn't the courage to look at Geoff and quickly got up and went off to make the tea.

Geoff had been working in the firm for seven years. He had begun as a trainee manager and because he was hard working and intelligent, he very quickly learnt the work. Then two years ago, when the previous manager had retired, he became the manager. His quiet courtesy made him popular with everyone, and Mr. Hendrick too was very well satisfied with his work and treated him like a son. Geoff lived with his old mother, he had no brothers or sisters and was very shy, so he had never managed to make friends with girls. Apart from his work, there were only two things in life of any importance to him: watching football on TV and doing crosswords. He was quite different from most boys. Over the course of time Seema had learned all about him from what Mr. Wilson had told her. Geoff had always been diffident about talking to Seema but had slowly become a little freer than he had been previously. Seema liked his blue eyes, but now when she saw him standing so near, she at once took fright. Why did she hesitate to meet his glance? She didn't know.

After this incident, Geoff's attitude gradually changed. Now he would talk freely to Seema and time would pass very pleasantly. In the mornings when she arrived at the office Mr. Wilson would say to her between coughs, "You are looking very pretty today, Sim," and Geoff would smile and say, "Old man it's time you stopped paying compliments to girls. That's what's given you your heart condition." Mr.



Wilson would smile and reply, "There's nothing wrong with my heart, and when I talk to girls, it makes it even stronger." Seema too would laugh. One dark winter morning Mr. Wilson looked at her and said, "Sim, you bring sunshine to this place. How much nicer things are since you came."

Geoff smiled and said, "Tony, you're right sometimes," and Mr. Wilson laughed.

Seema looked at Geoff and said, "Do you want tea as well? This is Mr. Wilson's signal, when he wants tea, he starts singing my praises."

Geoff laughed, "Dirty old man," he said, "no I'm not saying it because I want tea. When you make tea, you'll give me a cup too." He looked up from the register at Seema, and those blue eyes seemed to dominate her.

Now she would often feel as if those smiling blue eyes pursued her wherever she was. She'd think with a start, "What is the matter with you? Have you gone crazy?" She felt as though any moment now, her secret would be discovered. And then she would ask herself, "What secret? Is it a secret that I like being with people? That's not a sin. So why do I feel like this when I haven't done anything wrong?"

One day, during lunch time when she was window shopping, she saw a blue shirt in a shop window. The shirt wasn't all that striking but she liked its color. She went in. The shop assistant asked her, "What size collar would it be, madam?" and she gave a start and quickly began to feel in her purse to see whether she even had any money with her.

"This tie will go well with the shirt, madam," the assistant said.

"Very well, I'll take that too," she said.

"Is it a gift, madam? Shall I wrap it?"

"Yes please," she replied.

She put the packet in a plastic bag and went back to the office. Then it suddenly hit her. "What on earth have I done?" she thought. "Who have I bought this shirt for?" She looked all around her to see if anyone had witnessed anything, but Mr. Wilson was talking to one of the drivers, and Geoff was on the phone. Seema began to feel ashamed, then she told herself, "Good God, if I have bought a shirt, is that a sin? I'm a married woman, can't I even buy my husband a shirt?" And her conscience was satisfied.

At dinner that evening she said to her husband, "These days all the shops are decorated for Christmas; there're lots of nice things in them."

He went on eating as usual.

"There're some very nice shirts in that shop in the arcade. You ought

to buy a couple.”

“I don’t need any shirts at present. And I’m not such a fool as to buy things just before Christmas. Christmas is an excuse to rob you. If I do want to buy one, sales start after Christmas. Things will be cheaper and I can buy one then.”

She kept quiet for a minute or two and then said, “I saw a shirt there, with a matching tie and I liked it a lot. Shall I get it for you?”

“No, I don’t need a shirt or a tie. Why are you so keen to throw your money away?”

She stopped eating and got up from the table feeling absolutely furious. She had wanted to please him, and if only for that reason, he might have said yes; but to him, money was everything and there wasn’t a hope that he’d ever spend a penny more than was absolutely necessary. She did the washing up, inwardly seething with anger, her hot tears falling into the hot water in the sink. Next morning, she put the packet just as it was, into the cupboard, banishing even the thought of ever giving him a surprise and, for all practical purposes, forgetting that it was there.

It was two days before Christmas, and today was the last day to work. At four o’clock Mr. Hendrick was giving a Christmas party. When she got dressed in the morning, she put on a dark silk sari. The weather was dry but extremely cold. When she got to the office people looked at her in amazement and in admiration. The boys in the factory whistled as she passed and she walked into the office. Mr. Wilson cried out delightedly as soon as he saw her, “Hello, hello! Seema dear, today you look absolutely lovely.” He got up and came towards her. “Thank you my dear for the present.”

The night before when she had left the office, she had left a box of cigars for him on his desk when he wasn’t looking. Now he gave her a box of chocolates. She looked all around; there was nobody except Mr. Wilson in the room. To this day, Geoff had never once been absent. A few moments passed and then she could wait no longer. “Hasn’t Geoff come? He’s alright, isn’t he?” She was astonished to find she was feeling embarrassed. After all, there’s nothing wrong in asking after somebody whom you work with.

“Yes, yes he is alright,” Mr. Wilson said, nodding his head. “He’ll have gone to the Head Office today. He’ll be coming on here after that. He has to make the arrangements for the party there too. And he has to bring the things for the party here this evening.”

At lunch time, instead of going home she made do with a cup of tea in the office and talked to Mr. Wilson. She told him about her father and

her mother and her family. Today, for the first time for many days. She was missing them terribly and the words stuck in her throat and tears came to her eyes. She tried to keep back her tears as she gulped down her tea. Mr. Wilson didn't say anything. He was probably thinking of his own children, separated from him as Seema was separated from her father, by thousands of miles. One son was in America and another was in Australia. Then Geoff appeared, festooned with all manner of parcels, and the atmosphere lightened at once. They began to get ready for the party. She went downstairs with Mr. Wilson into the hall, where the packing was usually done. It was a wonderful sight there. All over there were colored flags and balloons and on the side there was a table with food and drink set out on it. After a little while Mr. Hendrick came in with Geoff. He shook hands with everybody, wished them all a Merry Christmas, had something to drink and then went away. After he left the whole atmosphere changed, somebody put on a cassette and music began to play. The hall began to ring with laughter. Beverly had a bunch of mistletoe in her hand. "I'm just trying to catch Geoff," she said. People were laughing and clapping their hands. Beverly had got her bunch of mistletoe over Geoff's head and was holding him fast, and he was twisting and turning and doing his best to get away. Seema stood fascinated with a glass of fruit juice in her hands, looking on with envy at all these people laughing with one another. Then someone started to dance, and people put down their glasses and joined in. Some of the boys couldn't find a girl and so began to dance together, with one of them taking girl's part. Seema watched their antics and couldn't restrain her laughter. She was still laughing when somebody suddenly took hold of her hands and said, "Seema, come on." This was Beverly. "Sorry, Bev, I can't dance," she replied. She turned around and saw Geoff standing there. He too had dressed carefully for today's occasion. His brown hair was falling over his forehead and Seema suddenly thought how nice he looked. His blue shirt matched the blue of his eyes. She felt a sudden impulse to tell him how handsome he was looking. This feeling was so strong, so intense, that she couldn't stop herself and did tell him. "Thank you, madam," he put his hands on his breast and bowed to her. There was a mischievous smile on his face, and for a moment his eyes were fixed on Seema's face; then he slumped down onto a chair beside her and said, "Give me something to eat, I'm starving."

"Why didn't you get anything to eat in the Head Office?" she asked, handing him a plate.

"No, nobody bothers about me." He darted a quick glance at her.

"I'm worn out with getting things ready for the party; I'm really tired."

"Well, now you can rest during the holidays. We've got two weeks."

"Yes." He looked hard at Seema as he put his glass to his lips. "And you'll have a good rest too. Or are you going somewhere?"

"No, where would I be going?" She suddenly felt very depressed; she would miss all this laughing and talking all through the holidays. She leaned back in the chair, and suddenly a sprig of mistletoe fell into her lap. She panicked when she saw it. Geoff was looking in the other direction and pretended not to notice. She slowly picked it up and quietly put it in her purse. The party began to draw to a close and people started going home. Seema helped the other girls to gather up the plates and things and then, when all that was done, went upstairs to get her coat. Mr. Wilson had already gone. She put on her coat, and as she went into her room to get the handbag, she saw by her desk a small packet, complete with a little card bearing her name. She was very surprised and was looking at it when Geoff came into the room.

"Did you put this here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"When I wasn't looking?"

"Yes, I learnt that from you," he said.

She was startled and was relieved when she looked at him to see he was smiling.

"I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter."

"Thank you, Geoff, what a pretty packet; it seems a shame to open it."

"I'm no good at buying presents, I'm glad you like it. And it's I who ought to thank you." He came very close to Seema, "Your Christmas present was the first one I got."

Seeing him so close to her, she felt very nervous. "Merry Christmas, Geoff," she said holding out her hand to shake his.

"Merry Christmas, Sim," Geoff took her cold hand in his and gripped it firmly. The warmth of his hand set her all aglow. After a little while he said, "Come on, I'll give you a lift home. It's very cold."

"No, thank you," she said. "Good night." And with heavy steps, she began to go down the stairs. "My house is only a few minutes walk from here," she said. "I'll walk."

Throughout the Christmas holidays she was ill. First she got a cold, then flu and then God knows what else. She spent most of the time in bed, either dozing or crying, with her head hidden under the blanket. She

didn't know herself why she was crying. The tears just came and wouldn't stop. Her husband spent all his time preparing for his exams. There were only four weeks left. A day or two before the holidays were over, she tidied up the house, took the clothes to the launderette and then ironed them. And the day she got up early and got ready to go to work, she felt as she left the house as though she was coming out of jail. Lying in bed all those days had made her face pale and she was feeling weak.

And now as she breathed in the fresh air she felt a real joy. In the two weeks how often had she left the house? Three or four times, and that too only when she had to. Staying there in the house she had begun to feel a sort of suffocation. But what was there to go out for? She thought to herself, "Oh God, what sort of life is this?" There had been a time when she was sitting her exams and had hid herself in odd corners of the house to study. Sometimes the unending streams of visitors used to make her cross; and then her mother would scold her, "You crazy girl, a guest is a gift from God." She thought to herself, "Mummy you were right, perhaps God has punished me; because now, for days together, nobody comes to see us and I don't go to see anybody." She began to cry. She felt like flying to her mother right away to lay her head in her lap, and cry and cry and cry.

These winter days and nights were passing just like her life was passing, morning, evening, night, all wrapped in the cloak of darkness; the artificial light was all that set them apart. Her life was like that, without the sunshine of desire, without a ray of hope. She too lived it by artificial light. The love and affection of these strangers supported her, but that too was an artificial support. She had no relationship with them other than the simple human relationship. But still, that was a great support to her. It was a Saturday morning when a letter came from her brother. As soon as she received it, tears began to stream from her eyes. Her father had had a heart attack. God had spared his life but he was extremely weak and was still in the hospital. She was alone in the house and her father's face appeared vividly before her. Her eyes swollen with weeping, she was trying to do the house work, when Mr. Rahman and his wife arrived. Their arrival at this time was a great comfort to her. Their words of sympathy again broke down her self control. She'd just dried her eyes and gone into the kitchen to make tea, when her husband returned from the library. Mr. Rahman and his wife talked to him and he soon agreed to let her go to see her father. Mr. Rahman even promised that he would himself make arrangements for the ticket. There would be no interference with her husband's studies. Mrs. Rahman put her arms

around her and Mr. Rahman said, "Seema, you have to promise me that you won't cry. When people cry, it scares the wits out of me. When Jamila was saying farewell to her relatives when we got married, they all cried so much that I was in a terrible state, and she herself was weeping and wailing so much that I said to my brother, 'Look, tell these people that they can keep their daughter with them if they like, but tell them for God's sake not to cry like that. Tell them I'll go back on my own.' And I did go back on my own. My family were very cross with me. She came to join me afterwards."

Seema burst out laughing, "Did you really do that?"

"Yes, it's absolutely true." Mrs. Rahman said. "But you can't help crying. There's nothing you can do about it. And then if I hadn't cried, everybody would have said, 'She's not in the least upset about leaving her parents.' And I was upset. And more than anything else, I was crying because I was afraid. I was thinking, 'God knows what he'll be like. I don't know anything at all about him. I'm leaving everybody to go all those miles away with a stranger.' It takes a lot of courage. We innocent, homely girls know nothing about the world. It's a great injustice to us. Thank God, he's taken very good care of me."

"Oh, come on! There was no need to make such a meal of it!" Mr. Rahman saw that the conversation was taking a serious turn and said, "The way she was sobbing her eyes out, I was afraid that any minute she'd give up the ghost."

"Well, it was a long journey she was going on," Seema said.

"Long journey! My God." Mr. Rahman laughed aloud. "How many thousands of miles is Rawalpindi from Sialkot? It wasn't until we'd been married for three months that she came to England, and I myself went to fetch her. I'd warned her that if she cried, I'd leave her behind."

"So what happened, Jamila, didn't you cry at all?"

"Not at all," said Mr. Rahman. "She didn't shed a single tear and I began to feel ashamed of myself."

"And you were crying so loudly that I was quite alarmed." Mrs. Rahman immediately went on the offensive.

"You can't help it," Mr. Rahman said. "All your elders come together to see you off, and you look at them and think of all the love and affection they've given you and how unworthy of it you've been, and you feel ashamed. And then they say, 'We're meeting now for the last time, we shan't see you again.' And you feel really upset. Alright, Seema, that's a firm promise, you get ready and, God willing, within ten or twelve days we shall get a booking."

Seema couldn't sleep all night. Her head was full of memories, pleased with the thought that, after all this time, she would be seeing them all again. But why wasn't her heart rejoicing? What was it that was troubling her?

The next day she got out her album and looked longingly at the pictures of everybody in it. What a lonely time it had been since she had left them all. It seemed as though it had been centuries. "Oh Mother," she thought, "how cruel of you to send me off, all of a sudden like that, so far away with one whom I'd never seen, about whom I knew nothing, about whom I still know nothing." She looked at the pictures of her mother and father and her heart filled with resentment against them. But at once she bowed her head and began to pray for her father's recovery. On that day, for the first time in many days, Seema performed her ablutions and said her prayers, and for hours together prayed for her father's health. How contented she felt. But what sort of contentment was it, when something was still troubling her?

When Seema got to the office that day, she was in a very good mood. In the course of conversation she told Mr. Wilson about her father's illness, and he comforted her. That day Seema felt a new pleasure in her work. The thought of going back brought a whole army of forgotten memories. The girls who had been her friends, her little brother and sisters, her older brother, her older sister, father, her aunts, her two grandmothers—one by one she pictured them all. She was so happy that it seemed that she would grow wings and fly freely in the sky like a bird. She could feel herself trembling with joy. When Geoff came into the office, having done the round of the factory, Mr. Wilson told him about her father's illness and said she wanted to go and see him. Geoff assured her she still had some leave due her and that there was no problem. Then during lunch break, he brought his mug of tea, pulled up a chair and sat down beside her. Seema began to tell him about her brothers and sisters, and didn't notice how the time was passing. The telephone rang and she realized with a start that the lunch break had been over long ago. She felt embarrassed and began to apologize, "I'm feeling very homesick," she said, "and that's why I've bored you at such length."

Geoff got up, patted her shoulder and said, "I enjoyed it very much listening to you, and I didn't even notice the time."

Within a week everything had been settled. She had been granted leave and she'd got a seat on the plane. She was due to leave on Monday morning and she spent that Saturday and Sunday getting ready. She was so busy that she had no opportunity to think about herself. When the

plane took off, she undid her seat belt and breathed a sigh of relief. She suddenly felt tired. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. But although her body was tired, her brain was absolutely fresh. While she had been getting ready, she'd felt as though she was already with her mother and father, thinking of them, talking to them and seeing them before her very eyes. Now she was flying home and the thought of it filled her with joy and contentment.

But after some time she felt as if she was leaving something behind, that she'd forgotten something, that physically she was on her way home, but spiritually, some part of her had got left behind. It perplexed her, that although she was so happy, she felt somehow incomplete. She began to look back at her past life, on those happy colorful days when she was a student. She thought how she had pictured her future husband in those days—not a picture of a handsome prince; as just a simple straightforward man, educated, affectionate, cultured, and nothing more. All she had wanted was a husband who loved her with all his heart and was not only a husband, but also a friend and companion, who would share her joys and her sorrows.

In those days on moonlit nights, she would stand for hours by the jasmine bush, thinking how she would furnish and decorate her future home, how, like a good housewife, she would keep it clean and beautiful. It would be filled with love and laughter, there would be jasmine climbing over the entrance to the verandah and both of them, in the silence of the night, would stand there talking in the fragrant air, bathed in the moonbeams. Now and then he would ruffle her hair with his fingers and smile and say, "Sim, I've been keeping you happy all this time. Now make us some tea."

And then when married life began, she felt at once that her mother and father had ruined all her dreams. In the beginning she used to cry a lot. Her husband never even asked her to sit down beside him, let alone talk to her. He never once asked whether there was anything she wanted. He used to talk to her only when he had to. Sometimes she used to think that perhaps once his examination was behind him, he might change a bit, but these hopes too were soon dashed. She thought, "Even if a man does have some object in life which keeps him as busy as he is, he still doesn't have to stop living."

Her dreams had been nothing more than dreams. Real life wasn't like that. But then she would look at other people and see how their experience contradicted her conclusion. And then her job had introduced her to a new world, a world in which the way of life was quite different from the



world in which she had been brought up. Being out at work had allayed her feeling of suffocation but it had also sharpened her sense of being emotionally deprived. And now two blue eyes were looking at her and smiling. How freely that quiet and shy boy had begun to talk to her. Whenever he came close to her she felt weak and afraid that she might, without thinking, do something she ought not. How considerate he was! If she felt the last bit unwell, he would immediately tell her to go home and rest. What a nice man Geoff was! A sincere, affectionate companion, a really good friend. When he had said good-bye to her, he had taken her hands between his and said, "Come back, quickly, Sim." She could feel, even now, the warmth of his hands.

The flood of memories upset her. She felt mixed up, and a strange sort of depression overcame her. Her head began to throb and she opened her handbag and felt inside it to see whether somewhere amongst all the other things in it she could find an aspirin tablet. Suddenly her fingers came into contact with something wrapped up in a white handkerchief. She undid the handkerchief, and in it was a dried up sprig of mistletoe. For a while she turned it over and over, and then put it back in her bag, leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

She had been back in her old home a week now. Her mother and father had been overjoyed at her coming, and her younger brothers and sisters ran about doing things for her so willingly that she could hardly believe that these were the same children who at one time had had to be wheedled and bribed into doing the least little thing. Everyone was delighted to see her, and all day long there was a constant stream of visitors coming to see her. Once things settled down a bit she began to gather her thoughts together and review this former life of hers. Everything was just as it had been, and yet somehow things had changed—a change that she could feel but not describe. Had these people changed? "Not at all. Not changed, just moved on a little. Whereas I'd wanted to see them just as they had been before, when I parted from them," she thought.

She saw the mark of advancing old age on her elders' faces, and this unsettled her. Her younger brothers and sisters had left school and were now in college. When she saw how seriously they took their studies she was amazed. She remembered the days when they used to besiege her with demands to help them with their homework. And her cousin Rukhsana—laughing, jolly, vivacious, carefree Rukhsana—was now married, a properly dressed, well spoken lady: Rukhsana, who had never bothered to choose clothes that went together, who would grab clothes

from the wardrobe and put them on, saying she hadn't time to see what went with what, and didn't care. Seema's heart sank as she thought of her now. Then there were Shama, Razia, and Rehana. What good friends they had been to her!

It made her smile to think of the good times they'd had together, lying on the floor in their rooms with the door shut, eating peanuts, singing and talking at the top of their voices. None of them had time for these things any more. They were all scattered now, one a housewife immersed in her domestic tasks, one away at university, one out at work. All of them going along their chosen paths. And what do I want? she asked herself. And what am I? The same Seema as before, or what? Yes I have changed too. What changes conditions of life bring about in people, changes of which they aren't even aware! She remembered a recent occasion when some of them were discussing the changing fashions in clothes and jewelry, and she sat there like an idiot with nothing to say. What did she know about fashion? Nothing, absolutely nothing. She felt as though she were a foreigner. In the first place, the English climate determined both the fashions and the necessities of life. And then it's only when you go out and about, meet different people and go to parties that you need to think about nice clothes. She envied them the kind of life they led; and there they were casting envious eyes on her way of life. What did they know of her loneliness in her new life? The very thought of it troubled her and unsettled her. She looked back on her life and felt that it had been like that of a flower, shedding its petals one by one as autumn came on. If she'd been able to change in pace with the changing times, perhaps she would not have felt so despondent; but she had not, and this was why she felt it so keenly. Not like the others. They saw that she'd changed, but it didn't worry them.

I am no longer a part of my family, she thought, or of my circle of friends. Intellectually and emotionally the ties are still there, and yet in a way I am an outsider, no longer sharing their values. Outward show and display aren't important to me anymore, while for them maintaining their status is everything.

What tricks life plays on us! she thought. These people who were my friends still love me, still think of me as one of them; and yet there is something about them that makes them strangers. And for me now, in a strange country and a strange environment, it is strangers whom I feel to be friends. □

—*Translated by Ralph Russell*