

VAALIDA AFZAAL ALI (AKBARI BEGUM)

A Selection from
Goodar ka La'l
(A Jewel Among Rags)

RESPECTED readers, we've come upon each other quite by accident. This place where you're requested to take a leisurely stroll is not a recreation spot. Actually, eyes such as yours, which are accustomed to beholding *kothis*, bungalows, and interesting scenes of gardens and deserts, will be disturbed by this scenery. Oh, forgive me, I've started a conversation without first greeting you in the appropriate manner. But you didn't say "*salaam-alaik*," "Ram, Ram," or anything like "good evening" either. Anyway, let's take a walk around inside the house that you see right there.

This small room, which has a coarse sheet spread out over a mat and also a charpoy in one corner, is probably the sitting room of the house. Come through this second door. This is the entrance to the house. As soon as you come in you see a flimsy curtained wall created by a sheet of cloth for the purposes of *purdah*. The courtyard of the house is very spacious, much more spacious than it should be, although the actual living space is inadequate. The design and layout of the house suggest that the inhabitants are of ordinary means and poor taste. To the left of the curtained wall is a thatched roof under which sits a stove on one side and a hand-mill for grinding wheat on the other. Nearby is a misshapen charpoy. In one corner there is a jumbled pile of grain bins, and there are also spice containers strewn about. In front of the thatched roof area there is a gate made of reed-stalks that is latched at night and in the afternoon. Across from this there is an old thatched shed that contains a chicken coop and a store of firewood. In this shed there are also a number of worthless items like broken cots with their strings hanging loose, clay pots, miscellaneous objects of no use, and garbage scattered about. A mangy dog is tied to a peg in one corner of the courtyard and in front of him lies a chipped bowl filled with dirty water. Not far from the thatched

shed is a mud-brick latrine whose stench makes one's head spin. On the south wall of the courtyard there is a window outside of which are several flowerbeds, extending over many square yards, which are planted with seasonal vegetables. There are a few *baila*, *chambeli*, *motia* and rose plants as well. A mehndi bush is also growing there. Now look in front of you. There is a long thatched roof under which two small rooms, facing north and south respectively, have been created by adding mud and straw partitions that can be closed with reed-stalk fastenings. Behind this thatched roof are two more small rooms. If they had three doors then two spacious courtyards could have been created. Facing north and situated in the middle is a small courtyard built on a raised foundation which is so high that people have to use a mud platform situated in front of the threshold for going in and out.

Across from the sloping thatched roof there is a forty-year-old lady sitting on a large bedstead. Her hair is slightly gray. In her ears there are tiny gold hoops with many of the beads missing and in her nose there is a discolored turquoise bob. On her wrists she has glass bangles and on her fingers silver rings and a silver mirrored thumb ring. Dressed in a shabby red *kurti* which has a purple border edged with undyed cloth, a gusseted *gharara* stitched from wax-colored chintz cut in narrow widths, which also has a purple border, and wearing a pink dupatta of coarse muslin, she sits with a paandaan open in front of her cutting up betel nuts into tiny pieces. Another woman, who is over forty-five and is wearing a *susi* pajama and a shirt with a flared hem, and who has a plain gray dupatta on her head, is sweeping the floor. A dirty old durrie of coarse cotton covers a cot, and sleeping there is a girl of about fifteen. She has a wheat-colored complexion with fine features and is wearing a coarse chintz, narrow-width pajama that has a purple border, a twill shirt with green edging, and a yellow dupatta of coarse muslin. On her wrists are silver bangles and in her nose is a tiny hoop with a single bead. An eight or nine-year-old boy is sleeping on a small charpoy. He's dressed in a sprigged muslin shirt with a *nijaaf* over a tapered *markin* pajama that has grease and ink stains on it. Next to the flowerbeds there's a bedstead blanketed by a sheet of thick cotton along with a durrie; the pillow covers are also clean and white and, instead of just one pillow there are several. Under the bed there's a pot filled with water and near the headrest there's a tin box containing paans. A stout young man, twenty-four or twenty-five years old, of medium height, somewhat on the dark side, and with a few smallpox marks on his face, is sleeping on this bed.

Bivi: I say Bua, first you should have prepared Kher Ali's hookah and then started sweeping. If it's not ready when he wakes up he'll start grumbling.

Ghasiti: (the maidservant) Bahuji, I already filled it and also told Munshiji, but he just stretched and went back to sleep.

Ameerunnisa Begum: (the *bahuji*) He came back around twelve from Appo's and then he was smoking the hookah. He went to bed at one. God bless him, he should go to work, it's getting late.

Ghasiti: God bless her, look at Bibi Iqbal. She has been awake since early morning.

A beautiful young girl whom one could, without exaggeration, call a ruby among rags appeared from the small room facing north. Although she was only eleven she could be called "full moon" in terms of her beauty and grace. Of average height and with a well-proportioned build, she had a fair, glowing complexion, soft, delicate hands and feet, and pretty teeth that glistened like pearls or rose petals. To augment her loveliness God had blessed her with good nature and intelligence. On coming out she greeted her mother with the greatest respect and then rolled up her white bedding and took it into her room.

Come, let's look at the condition of this room from the inside. Oho, how clean and tidy it is. This is the only place in the whole house that appears well maintained. Since the roof is thatched there's a danger that insects and other pests will fall through it, so a sheet of cloth has been stretched across the ceiling. Because this cloth might get dirty quickly and look soiled, it has been dyed orange and, even though the fabric is coarse cotton, a frill delicately surrounds the edges, making it appear beautiful. The walls have been coated with a mixture of *neela thottha* and white earth in order to keep out scorpions. Small slats of wood are resting on nails hammered into the walls and everything is arranged neatly on these shelves. There are sewing items on one, books on another, and the Kalaam Majid [the Qur'an] on a third. On one or two shelves there are flowers, trees, and bouquets made from paper. There are clothes hanging neatly from two or three pegs. On a small table one can see study materials and there is also a chair nearby. Not far away stands a high bamboo morha. The embroidered tablecloth is of ordinary cotton, but the embroidery is very fine and delicate. There is just one durrie lying on the floor, but how clean it is. In one corner sits a small *chauki* with a durrie spread out over it. Prayer beads, neatly arranged in a spiral, are resting on the prayer rug. The water vessel for ablutions is polished and clean and one corner of the prayer rug has been turned over.

She placed her bedding on the morha and then came back out to roll up the bedding from a cot whose occupant we haven't seen because he had become involved in his daily routine before we arrived. She took his bedding into the raised courtyard. After putting the bedding down she offered salaams in a sweet gentle voice to a handsome fourteen or fifteen-year-old boy and he replied in a very affectionate tone. We've determined at first glance that he is the beautiful girl's brother because there is a great deal of similarity in their features, coloring and demeanor. This boy's clothes consist of a pure white cotton pajama and kamiz, and a waistcoat of Ludhiana cloth. Other than the waistcoat, his garments are all hand-stitched. Surely they've been stitched by this pretty little girl. The boy went out and greeted his mother politely. Then he picked up his cot and took it inside before carrying his sister's cot to her room. The pretty little girl picked up a Turkish cap, removed the cloth in which it was wrapped, brushed it and placed it on a shelf next to a mirror which hung on the wall in the boy's room. She also made his bed.

Someone called at the door: "Take the milk." The boy carried out a copper bowl. The girl retrieved a key from her pocket and opened a small cupboard. She took out four biscuits, which were a dozen for six paisas, poured two teaspoonfuls of sugar in a saucer, got out two small bowls, put everything on a small tray and placed the tray on a stool. Her brother brought in the fresh goat milk and both of them had breakfast. Afterward the girl put back the leftover sugar, washed the saucer and the bowls and put those back in the cupboard as well, then locked it and deposited the key in her pocket.

The boy got ready for school. The girl locked the courtyard door and gave the key to him as he left. She returned to her room, removed a white burqa from the clothes peg and placed her bag under her arm. She was also wearing a pure white cotton kamiz, which she stitched herself, a white muslin covering, and a loosely-stitched pajama, different from the tight one her brother was wearing. Everything was so clean that there wasn't a spot of grease or ink anywhere. Because there was a danger of the burqa becoming caught on something, it was cut somewhat high. She was also wearing white socks and, since high-heeled shoes weren't allowed, she donned a pair of simple sandals and came out. Latching her door she said to Ghasiti, "Can you take me to Ustaniji's."

Ghasiti: Child, wait just a bit.

Girl: No, I'm late already. I woke up late today.

Ameerunnisa: Why girl, do you think a person should get up in the middle of the night?

Girl: Ammajaan, at Ustaniji's house the boys who study with Maulvi Sahib arrive a little later and they stand around in the courtyard. I feel embarrassed walking through the crowd. Actually the girls come even before I do.

Ameerunnisa: May God bless you. You've already read the Qur'an and you've even reviewed it several times and also read some books on religion. You've also already observed the Fast, and learned sewing and embroidering from Ustaniji. You're grown up now, don't go there anymore. Learn how to make *gokbru* and *banat* edging, how to stitch Hindustani clothes, and how to cook from your older sister Kherunnisa. God forbid, it's not like you're going to work.

The Girl: Ammajaan, please let me continue for another year. Ustaniji is teaching me the *Kalam Allah Sharif* (the Qur'an) with the meanings and she also tutors me in mathematics and some other important subjects. She also teaches me to sew the kind of clothes Bhaijaan wears and gives me better instruction in cooking than Apajaan does. Girls who are older than me come every day. My teacher knows stitching better than Apa. Apa can only sew Hindustani clothes but my teacher knows every style there is. She teaches me how to embroider delicate vines.

Ghasiti: All right then, let me take you first.

Girl: Ustaniji is so considerate she sends her own *mama* to escort me home in the evening. I feel embarrassed to give her so much trouble.

After she had left, Ameerunnisa woke up her older son. He began smoking the hookah while he was still in bed. She turned to the younger boy.

Ameerunnisa: Shakir, O Shakir, wake up and see how the day has advanced.

Shakir: (stretching) So what? Let me sleep a little longer.

Ameerunnisa: You're not going to school?

Shakir: (turning on his side) What do you care if I don't? What a wonderful dream I was having. You woke me up for nothing.

Ameerunnisa: (holding him by the hand) Will you keep dreaming or will you go to school? Mind you, you'll receive a whipping again.

Shakir: (rubbing his eyes) I'll get the whipping, not you. I was selling beans in my dream and had collected so many cowries, but then you came from somewhere and woke me up for nothing.

Ameerunnisa: (laughing) I didn't come from anywhere. I'm just afraid you might return from the *maktab* with a teary-eyed face.

Shakir: What do you care?

The older son was listening to this conversation. Suddenly, without warning, he got up and boxed the boy's ears. The boy sat up and began bawling.

Kher Ali: You wretch! The devil's offspring! (with his tongue caught between his teeth) Get up and wash and go to the *maktab*.

With that he curbed his tongue and, picking up the hookah and a water-pot, he made his way to the toilet. The mother wiped her child's tears and pacified him lovingly. Still feeling angry, he continued cursing his older brother under his breath. His mother got down some mash dal and some stale bread from a hanging basket for him to eat. He kept on sobbing while he ate. When he was finished he tucked the *juzdan* and his *takhti* under his arm without washing his hands and headed for the *maktab*.

Ameerunnisa: God bless you. Now go straight to the *maktab*. Don't get tangled up with anyone along the way.

But this noble gentleman was not one to pay attention to such advice. He stopped off at several places. Many were boys he had fistfights with and many were boys with whom he engaged in verbal brawls. Finally, after two hours, he arrived at the *maktab*. When Masterji asked the reason for the delay, he babbled some gibberish. Then, he opened his book and started reading. His entire day had been spent selling his mother's dal and raw sugar cubes to the neighborhood boys for cowries, so how could he read now? His compassionate mother's warning proved right and the switches began coming down on him. While he's being punished for making a profit, let's stroll back to the house.

The older son came out of the toilet after an hour. He washed his face in the bushes, took from his mother the paan to which she had added a pinch of tobacco, and then walked into his room and put on his clothes. With great difficulty a tight pajama of Delhi *markin* was tugged over his heels with the aid of a piece of paper and then it got stuck at the calves. Finally, he had it on. The folds were adjusted. Taking the *angarkha* from the clothes peg he donned it, maneuvering the sleeves with some difficulty for they too were tight. The sleeves were ragged from innumerable washings and also torn in one or two places. Over this he put a black vest and then tied a red handkerchief around his neck. From the clothes peg he removed a three-finger high cap embroidered with artificial gold thread, corrected the parting in his hair, and then placed the cap on his head at an angle. After this he took out a pair of *saleem shabis* embroidered in glossy thread which were wrapped in paper and slipped them on his feet. Finally, flourishing a red cane in his hand, he came out looking

like a regular dandy. The maidservant had already prepared his hookah. He took the pipe and drew on it. Amma was waking up the girl.

Kher Ali: Amma, why are you waking her? Let her sleep. She doesn't have to work. She'll get up when she wants to.

Ameerunnisa: The water-carrier will be coming along shortly.

Kher Ali: *Arre*, put a covering on her or something. She's just a child, she's played in his lap all these years.

Ameerunnisa: You're late today.

Kher Ali: I'm not going to the *chauki*. I've taken a day off. I'm going to Appo's. I'll also have lunch there, don't cook anything for me. Amma, why don't you speak to Phopho? If you are going to tell her then do it, otherwise tell me you won't. I'll do something about it myself. After all, how long will I sit around like this? My friends have had families for such a long time. Majid has children now.

Ameerunnisa: Mian, I'm more worried about this than you are. But the two or three matches I have in mind you're not saying yes to. If you agree, I can arrange something with Kherunnisa today, but to tell you the truth I don't have the nerve to bring up the question of Roshan Ara Begum.

Kher Ali: Throw Kherunnisa into the ashes! I'll marry Roshan Ara and no one else.

Ameerunnisa: Why, you can't use force here. She's someone else's daughter, and if her parents don't want to give her what can you do? A person should know how long his coverlet is before stretching his feet. In the first place, why would they consider a poor family like ours? And if we didn't ask for Kherunnisa's hand for Akhtar, why would we expect them now to agree to give their daughter? And if, by some stroke of good fortune, we do get her, then, my dear son, we won't be able to provide her with the luxury she's used to. All I know is, those who are poor fit best with others like themselves. One should neither bring a girl from a rich family nor give one.

Kher Ali: Appo is married into a poor family, isn't she?

Ameerunnisa: Their station is still above ours and secondly, Hamid has a job.

Kher Ali: And I don't? Hamid has just started working. He was a student at the time of his marriage and, if you ask me, his status improved only after he was married. Hamid's sitting room, Appo's bedroom, the verandah and the bathroom—Appo was the one who had them all built. And it was Appo who hired a servant to watch the door.

Ameerunnisa: Hamid was studying, but he was doing—what do they call it—“mittle” (middle). And his job is better than yours. He’s a *na’ib tehsildar* and earns fifty rupees a month. You’re still just a clerk at ten rupees a month. And for that too we have to be grateful to Hamid. He put in a good word to Chacha. And then Hamid’s temperament is different from Roshan Ara’s. Hamid loves us dearly while she can’t even bear to hear our name mentioned. She’s not only versed in English, Persian, Hindi and God knows what else—she has all five arts—so what kind of an opinion can she have of us? And she can’t get along with Amma. Also, right now, while she’s unmarried, she’s living in an area that has as much space as a family would need, with more room upstairs and downstairs, as well as a garden, and not one but two or three servants in attendance. No, my dearest, I don’t see this desire of yours coming to fruition.

Kher Ali: You’re not thinking of my welfare. Look how good it was for Phopho to have Appo married into her family. God willing, when I get Roshan Ara I’ll no longer live in this rotten house, and what need will I have then for this ten-rupee job? Her parents will take me in as a live-in son-in-law. But I won’t live with them. We’ll all move to the house that’s in her name and we’ll fix this house up and rent it out. We’ll get our share of the inheritance and live in great comfort. Akhtar loves her very much and her share will be more than that of the other two sisters. I’m certain that he’ll also allot her an income of at least two or three hundred rupees a month.

Ameerunnisa: (laughing) This is all Sheikh Chilli type talk. I’ll be your guest whether you like it or not. Akhtar will never allow the marriage to take place. You’ll see, he’ll get Tajammul Hussain as a match for her.

Kher Ali: Why, I’ll kill the wretch! I’ll kill them both. I’ll see to whether or not she marries Tajammul. Am I not Phopho’s nephew? Do I not have some rights? It’s settled. You go today and take care of this once and for all. I’ll visit a fakir, he’s very accomplished. God willing, my fortunes will be reversed. Appo is my sister, Phopho holds me dearer than she does Akhtar.

Ameerunnisa: It was my duty to give advice. She’s not only rich, she’s also very finicky. Don’t get involved in this muddle. Even if the marriage goes through she’ll make life difficult for you. She’ll always regard you as inferior. Why, has anyone ever seized sugarcane from an elephant?

Kher Ali: What can that unfortunate creature do to me? I’ll straighten her out so much that she’ll lose all her lordly airs. As for that nuisance Feroz Mehri—I won’t allow her to enter my house. And I’ll make Roshan

Ara wear the veil in front of everyone except Rashid Hasan. And I certainly won't let her even breathe Tajammul's name. All right, hurry up now. I'm leaving, give me some paan and tobacco. The tobacco has lost its edge, I'll freshen it before I go.

Amma put kattha, *chuna* and tobacco on one-quarter of the paan and handed it to him. He headed out haughtily and Ghasiti went away with money to buy the day's provisions. As the day advanced the sunshine increased.

Ameerunnisa: (shaking her shoulder) Wake up Maqbool Begum, my sweet, the sun is on you now.

Maqbool Begum: (whining) Hai Allah Mian, let me sleep, I'm feeling so wonderfully lazy.

Ameerunnisa: Child, one of your in-laws might arrive for a visit. Phopho might come or even Kherunnisa. Get up now.

Maqbool Begum: Hai Allah, you won't let me sleep.

Ameerunnisa: You must be hungry, you went to sleep early in the evening. Get up and eat.

The mother awakens her with great difficulty. For a long time she sits on the bed rubbing her eyes. She yawns and stretches and then she gets to her feet. Taking the stale bread and dal stored in the basket from last night's supper, she begins eating.

Ameerunnisa: I say, what is this laziness? You didn't even wash your face. First you couldn't be troubled to eat and now you can't wait.

Maqbool Begum: I'm so weak with hunger. When I was asleep I didn't feel anything.

Ameerunnisa: (laughing) And what if I hadn't wakened you?

Maqbool Begum: I wouldn't have felt the hunger pangs while I was asleep.

Ameerunnisa: Iqbal is younger than you, and look how early she wakes up.

Maqbool Begum: Don't say that wretch's name in front of me.

Ghasiti: God forbid—what has she done to you?

Ameerunnisa: You're always cursing her. She doesn't pester anyone, she keeps to herself. She wakes up in the morning, says her prayers, rolls up her bedding and then, donning her burqa, leaves for the *maktab* and returns in the evening. If she stays home she studies or embroiders, and if she's not doing that she goes to the kitchen to help *mama* with kneading the dough or browning the spices, or she'll make roti. If she sees me doing something she immediately takes over my chore.

Maqbool Begum: Yes I know what kind of a daughter she is. The only person who keeps her in line is Aka Bhai. Everyone else has been hoodwinked by her.

Ameerunnisa: How has she hoodwinked you? She can't stop calling you "Apajaan, Apajaan." It would be more appropriate if you sewed clothes for her since you're the older sister, but instead, she's the one who stitches your clothes as well as her own.

Maqbool Begum: So she shouldn't then. All we have to do is spend a few paisas and anyone will stitch clothes for us. How lucky she is—everyone dotes on her. When we go to visit, Bhai Akhtar and his sister don't talk to us properly. But when it's her, they invite her to stay at their house. What a pretty twenty-rupee durrie they sent her to use in her room, and also a chair. They've never sent us anything. And they also give her money and clothes on Eid and Baqr-Eid, even if Appo and Phopho don't give us poor creatures anything.

Ameerunnisa: Why do you take your feelings of envy out on her? She keeps saying she doesn't want anything. But she does know how to take care of her things, and the poor girl uses every paisa of her own money for all her expenses, including clothes, shoes, and books. Brother and sister pay the dhobi for the wash from their own pocket. And we don't get a regular milk delivery so they also pay for milk once in the morning and again in the evening. But you—you misspend everything you get.

Maqbool Begum: Well, they must have the milk because they can't swallow stale bread. No one stops them from eating.

Ameerunnisa: Well they study, and if they don't drink a *taka's* worth of milk how can they do that?

Maqbool Begum: I say, that's nonsense. Shakir is also studying.

Ghasiti: By God's will, their education is more difficult. Shakir has been reading the primer for six months now.

Maqbool Begum: Just stop taking their side now.

Ameerunnisa: Child, speak softly, your voice will carry to the other side.

Maqbool Begum: (eating) Dadda, Dadda—oh my God! Is she deaf? My throat is hoarse from screaming. I pray that their eardrums burst and they become mute for not replying to us.

Ameerunnisa: Child, your throat is like a torn drum. Your in-laws are just on the other side of the wall, have some shame.

Maqbool Begum: Softly? Why even you accuse me. Look I'm screaming and she's not listening.

Ameerunnisa: She's busy with some chore. Tell me, what do you want?

Maqbool Begum: My dear mother, could you bring me a little gur? This dal tastes a bit sour.

Ameerunnisa: My goodness! These children won't leave the gur alone. What will I do if tomorrow or the day after he asks for it. He brought it home for himself.

She goes inside and, after dipping her hand in the jar, returns empty-handed and angry.

Ameerunnisa: There's no sign of any gur there. Did you start in on it like an ant? You're not one to leave it alone and now he'll scream at me. He's in a bad mood because of this new whim of his. He has a beard now and still isn't married. I'll be rid of all this aggravation when he has a wife to take care of her husband's things.

Maqbool Begum: (in a whining voice) Why are you scolding us? Your dear one must have eaten it. We don't even know where it's kept.

Ameerunnisa: Everyone is dear to me. Who was the one who used to mix it with chanas every day and eat it with Najaf?

Someone rattles the chain on the door and Maqbool runs into her room.

Ameerunnisa: Who is it? Come in.

A woman: (coming in) Bhabi salaam. Why were you getting so angry? What's the matter?

Ameerunnisa: Qamarunnisa, what can I say. These children have made life miserable for me. Kher Ali had brought home some gur which, when he felt like it, he occasionally ate after a meal. The children have finished it off without my knowledge. Now when he asks for it, what will I say?

Qamarunnisa: Bhabi, they're children, don't feel so annoyed. The other day your nephew sent us some ten seers of gur. You know Yusuf Raza doesn't touch such things, and anything so rich doesn't suit me. Kherunnisa is also not that fond of eating. It's just sitting there. I did tell him to take some over to his brother's children, but he probably forgot. (calling out) Kherunnisa, daughter, come here, will you.

Kherunnisa: (coming to the window) Mumani salaam. What is it Amma?

Qamarunnisa: Child, you didn't send the gur over for the children.

Kherunnisa: Amma, it's all weighed and put in the jar. I forgot.

Kherunnisa is dressed in a narrow-cut twill *gharara*, a pink dupatta with black edging, a beige-colored shirt embellished with a ribbon and

with pink cuffs that are embroidered with a wavy border. She's wearing an amulet around her neck, tiny hoops in her ears, and anklets with small round bells. Her anklets tinkling, she came in with the jar.

Ameerunnisa: (seeing the jar) Why this is just like the one Kher Ali brought. He said Imamuddin had given it to him.

Qamarunnisa: Imamuddin had gone to get it and it was he who brought it for us as well. Now what you must do is separate Kher Ali's share, put it in the *bukhari* and lock it, then give the children the rest.

Ameerunnisa: What children? Hasan Raza and Iqbal don't touch it and Maqbool doesn't eat it all the time. But this Shakir of yours is a real devil.

Qamarunnisa: (laughing) Bhabi, he's just a boy.

At her sister-in-law's insistence she saves a portion for Kher Ali, stores it in the *bukhari* and puts a lock on the lid. Then she sends Maqbool a little of the gur. Qamarunnisa and Kherunnisa return home. Soon afterward, Najeeb Khan Changi's daughter, Najaf, arrives in a doli and Maqbool greets her warmly and takes her to her room. Why don't we also now have a look at this room. Oho, we're feeling very uncomfortable now that we're here. There's one bed in the room and it has a broken leg supported by bricks. Because the foot section is in tatters, the center of the bed is sagging. A soiled durrie covers part of the bed. There are playing cards scattered about in one corner. The floor is red from paan spittle and there are splatters of the same on the walls as well. Under the bed, in one corner, there's a pile of betel nuts that have been chewed and spit out. On the other side, the floor is wet and muddy. Cobwebs hang from the ceiling and walls. Flies and mosquitoes abound because of the dankness and the filth. Dirty clothes lie off to one side. Maqbool takes her friend and, sweeping aside the things on the bed with her hand, she sits down there with her. For a while the two chat and laugh and giggle, then they play with dolls and, when they get bored with that too, Najaf Khanum suggests they play cards.

At twelve o'clock Hasan Raza returns from school.

Hasan Raza: Amma, did you send Suraiya Jabeen [Iqbal] lunch yet?

Ameerunnisa: No, not yet.

Hasan Raza: Send it then, this is her hour for a break.

After this conversation about his sister's lunch, he unlocks his door and goes into his room. When he has changed his clothes he comes out and finds four chapatis along with a small bowl of *kuddoo gosht* set out on a soiled tablecloth.

Hasan Raza: Ammajaan, does lunch go out wrapped in this tablecloth every day?

Ameerunnisa: No, she leaves a white towel, a bowl and a plate.

Hasan Raza: She didn't leave all that with you today?

Ameerunnisa: No, she did, but Maqbool sent for the *dabi bare* in the bowl, and the plate went to Phopho's for *sevaiyan* which Maqbool took to her friend along with rotis wrapped in the white towel.

Hasan Raza: (with some irritation) Ammajaan, it's degrading that food be sent to someone's house in this fashion.

Ameerunnisa: Well, it's your doing, isn't it? Does she have to work? We're poor and whatever there is in the house we eat. Taking food over to someone else's house is difficult.

Hasan Raza: She's not asking for pulao or korma for someone else's house. All she's asking for is cleanliness. She's bought some copper utensils for herself but those are never where they should be and you end up sending her food in such a disgraceful manner.

Ameerunnisa: Well, we had a guest in the house. Should the girl have taken her food in the unpolished utensils? What's this mine and yours business—whoever needs something should be able to use it.

Hasan Raza: I agree, but don't place the blame for all this on Suraiya Jabeen's studying. If you had asked me I would have given you another towel and plate.

Hasan Raza brought her a white towel, a plate and a bowl. Placing the rotis on the plate with the bowl of *salan* on top, Ghasiti wrapped everything in the towel and carried it to Suraiya Jabeen.

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Lightning and rain are my tale
Some of it truths about my tears, some my
distress

Life's experiences attest to the fact that there is no country or nation where marriage deserves to be called marriage in the true sense of the word. For example, even a husband and wife who share something as rare and precious as harmony and love, eventually become tangled in different kinds of anxiety and distress and are forced to reminisce longingly about the peaceful, carefree lives they once enjoyed before marriage. But marriages in Hindustan, especially the marriages of Hindustani Muslims, are not really marriages, they are ruination. In some households the concept

of “flesh and blood” is seriously considered; that is, lineage and class should not be flawed in any way, and actually, this is a very appropriate consideration because if such distinctions are not made then the character and conduct of the children suffer unfavorable consequences. Children will exhibit the same temperament as their parents. However, one shouldn’t completely drown in the search for “flesh and blood.” As a matter of fact, it’s quite necessary to keep other things in mind as well.

Some people attach their daughters to totally illiterate, uncouth men for the sake of wealth. Some stupid mothers give their daughters away in response to family obligations and pressures, and in these cases marriages take place at a very young age. The boy is barely sixteen or seventeen and his nature and character can’t be determined at this age. Ah, these oppressed individuals of Hindustan are forced by the loyalties of their parents to become a prey to marriage, they smolder all their lives and then finally go to sleep in their graves. They leave this world in a state of extreme anguish. May God bless them with great rewards in the afterlife for the cruelty they have endured and for their patient suffering. Ah, the oppressed women who leave this world must, by God’s grace, sleep peacefully, but those [men] who hope that a horrible end will follow the sorrowful lives of these women, may they be tormented until the day of judgment. When he recalls the disconsolate manner in which the poor woman turned away from her mortal life, may the memory of the dying woman’s helplessness torment him more than the shock of imminent death and make him shed tears of regret. Ah, parents of Hindustan, have mercy on your beloved offspring and have mercy on the hearts who will love your beloved offspring, who will shed tears at the helplessness and oppression of your beloved offspring. Don’t entrust them to cruel, unkind, illiterate, uncouth vagabonds merely for the sake of wealth, family obligations, or out of concern for flesh and blood. Don’t entrust them to husbands who possess hearts that can’t distinguish between good and bad or truth and lies, who ascribe equal value to a stone and a ruby, or rather, give preference to the stone over the ruby, who can’t value your faithful icons of chastity, virtue and modesty, the ultimate symbols of decorum, talent, intelligence and good behavior, and who, ignoring them, will become caught in the tangles of those who are indecent, shrewd, ill-mannered, lacking in talent and disloyal—the ultimate symbol of greed and selfishness—and thus bring their world to ruin. So, observe now that a similar scene presents itself. Sarkar Dulhan, that is Nanhe Mirza’s wife, has received no comfort or joy since the day she was married, but she is from a good family, she is upstanding in character. Although she has been

a prey to sorrow and pain since the day of her marriage, she is more distressed than ever at the moment because of her husband's disappearance. It is two o'clock in the afternoon. The heat is intense. Her mother, uncle, the kitchen help—everyone is asleep, but she is tossing and turning. She cannot feel a moment's rest.

*

Preparations for the engagement begin on both sides. At Kherunnisa's house the arrangements have to be supervised by Hamida Begum, but on this side too Hamida Begum and Nawab Begum are in charge. And why not? They are the ones bearing the expenses. Four tailors are installed outside and four seamstresses are brought in to take care of the sewing in the house. The walls in Kher Ali's house have already been white-washed because of the wedding. Floor coverings, durries, floor sheets, and lighting devices have been rented for the occasion.

On the appointed day Kherunnisa is bathed and bedecked as a bride with mehndi, jewelry and clothes. A floor covering is laid out in her small room and the bedstead is tightened to make it firm and then moved to one side.

The two aunts and a female cousin help Kher Ali dress up as a bridegroom. He dons a red tight-pajama of Hindustani *gulbadan* with a Lahori silken waist cord and puts on *saleem shahi* shoes embroidered in pure gold thread, a white *gach* shirt, and a pink satin achkan. He places a Banarsi dupatta around his neck, a silken handkerchief on his head, garlands of flowers on his wrists and neck and a sehra on his cap.

There is one tray of batashas, several others containing coconuts, and one tray each of almonds, pistachios, dried dates and misri. A tray for the bride contains jewelry made from flowers, a sehra, a gold ring, set with a gold bead instead of a gem, and a wedding band. A paisa, a rupee and a sovereign are stitched into a narrow strip of red silken cloth. Beautiful coverings, which came with Hamida Begum's dowry, have been placed over all the trays.

Carriages have been rented. The groom's mother, sisters and other female relatives are seated in one or two of the covered carriages, and riding in the horse-driven carriage are the groom, his friends, male relatives and Ameer Ali Beg. Forming a procession to the best of their ability, they start off to the accompaniment of music and dancing. Shakir, whose clothes are also new and made of silk, is with the men. All of this is distasteful to Hasan Raza but, dressed in suitable and appropriate clothes, he

reluctantly accompanies everyone. However, he lags behind because dancing is the one thing he abhors most. Taking the long route, the procession arrives at the bride's house.

Hamid Ali's friends and relatives are present here to receive the guests. Hamid is a decent man so his friends are also those who stay within the bounds of civilized behavior. They welcome the guests graciously and offer the groom's party elaborate hospitality as is the custom. First the nai presents the guests with sweet drinks. Mirza Ameer Ali Beg places ten rupees in the bowl as he has been instructed. Next paans and cardamom pods are distributed and hookahs and *pechwans* are placed before each guest.

The female in-laws get out of the carriages inside the house. At first a spray of water, spouting out from the door to the courtyard, is sprinkled in front of them and then they're seated with a great deal of respect and deference. The *domnis* begin singing welcoming songs to the accompaniment of a drum. Married and unmarried girls, widows, mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law—the *domnis* spare no one when it comes to the obscene profanities that are a part of their songs. And for this they are generously rewarded. Suraiya Jabeen is rooted to the ground with embarrassment but finally she gets up and returns to her house. Since there is dancing taking place outside as well, Hasan Raza and Yusuf also choose not to stay in the center of the wedding assembly and stroll off to where a *namak chashi* dish is being prepared in a large pot.

Afterward the female in-laws are given sweet drinks, and a garland, each one made of flowers and twisted golden threads, is placed around their necks. Then a woman brings a small bowl of sandalwood paste. After first dabbing a little on the foreheads of the in-laws, she begins rubbing it off vigorously with a coarse, rough handkerchief, a process that is quite painful; it brings tears to the women's eyes but it's a custom and they have to endure it with smiles and laughter. One or two of the guests who are high-spirited give this woman a taste of her own medicine. After all, the in-laws aren't outsiders; they're related to each other on both sides.

Then everyone starts putting a mark on the bride. The bride sits with both of her hands on a handkerchief which covers her face. Suraiya Jabeen is sent for to put on the bride's *sehra*.

Hamida: Even now you had to go and hide in the house. You couldn't stay here.

Suraiya Jabeen: Apajaan, there was singing going on here so I left.

Hamida: Oho, what a *mullani* you are.

Suraiya makes no reply and fastens the sehra around her sister-in-law's head. Her mother gives her five rupees for tying the sehra. An *imam zamin* is placed around the bride's arm. A hairy coconut, toasted grams, batashas, almonds, pistachios, five fistfuls of dried dates and five rupees are placed in her lap, and the ring and the wedding band are put on her fingers. Shouts of "Congratulations" arise. The first-look ceremony begins. First Nawab Begum takes a look at the bride's face and then slips gold bracelets on her wrists. Her mother-in-law gives her five rupees and Hamida Begum and Qamarunnisa do the same. Another five rupees are offered on behalf of Ameer Ali, and Suraiya is handed two rupees to make her gift. All the other relatives also view the bride's face and bestow as much as their means and their status will allow.

When the ceremony of *salaami* is over outside, the bridegroom comes inside for the *salaami* ceremony. Women from both sides offer as much as they had given to the bride during the first-look ceremony. Altogether the *salaami* adds up to one hundred and fifty rupees. A loud-mouthed female says, "Mian, always be a dog at this threshold."

Qamarunnisa: Why should he be a dog? He's our own son, dearer to us than Hamid Yusuf.

The in-laws were getting ready to leave. A gold-embroidered, gold-edged handkerchief made of *gokhru*, an *imam zamin*, a ring and a wedding band for the bridegroom, fifty silken handkerchiefs trimmed with just a gold edging, two and a half mans sweets for distribution among family members, and a large pot of *mutanjan* for *namak chashi* was sent off with the groom's family. On their return to their house Kher Ali and his friends have supper and then all the men settle down on a floor covering in the outer courtyard. The dancing girl performs all night and the bridegroom and his friends tease her with sly, obscene remarks. The hoo-kah is freshened intermittently. And why not? After all, the groom has earned a hundred and fifty rupees, and he's not spending anything on the wedding from his own pocket.

At the girl's house too the *domnis* sing all night. In the morning sweets and dried fruits are distributed in both households. There is some talk like this at the time of the breaking of the hairy coconut:

Ameerunnisa: By God's will, may a new pit come out of it so that she may have a son like the moon.

Hamida: Son, daughter—all are Allah's bounty.

As it happens an old and well-worn pit emerges which silences everybody.

Ghasiti: The first child will be a girl.

Nawab Begum: The first daughter is like a son.

Half of the dried fruits and the money are distributed among the brides in the family. The rest is divided into two parts and is given to Suraiya Jabeen and Maqbul Begum. Maqbul Begum divides her share into two and sends one part to Najaf; she is also a sister after all. The handkerchiefs, except the one for the bridegroom, are also distributed. Suraiya Jabeen took off the edging from hers and gave it to her mother.

*

Suraiya Jabeen makes several very fine, delicate copies of the picture and wraps them in a silken handkerchief which she has embroidered herself. She has decided to send them to Shakeel Ara. Then, God knows what passes through her mind, she removes the handkerchief and wraps the pictures in paper before she gives them to an attendant to take to Shakeel Ara. The pictures have been prepared expertly and beautifully. Everyone likes them. Roshan Ara, who is particularly interested in photography and who takes very good photographs herself, has high praise for the pictures. Since Suraiya Jabeen has the plates she designs new pictures using only the top parts of the originals. In one she puts Hasan Raza by himself, in another Ashiq Abbas is flanked by Hasan Raza and Yusuf Raza. One can say without exaggeration that she produces at least a dozen pictures. When she is done, she takes a magnifying glass and peers closely at everyone's features. God knows what passes through her mind but she suddenly tears up all the pictures and throws them into the coal brazier. As long as the papers are burning she stares at them and when they're reduced to ashes she retires to bed.

But on the following Sunday we find her engaged in the same activity. This time, however, she produces a new innovation. Taking the pictures of every famous man and woman she can find in her room, she puts his picture next to each of them separately. In another photo she places his picture in the middle and creates an oval design by arranging the other pictures around his like a halo around the sun. Then she arranges all the pictures on a table and after examining each one minutely with the magnifying glass, she addresses herself thus:

"Can I exhibit these pictures in front of my brother? Or can I show them to my sister-in-law or anyone else? Or can they, like furniture, be a part of the décor of my room? Or ...

"No, not at all! So, should I hide them by storing them in my suitcase? The pictures of a strange man? Even though these are the result of a

lot of hard work on my part and they reveal my creativity as an artist? But this goes against my conscience, and my *conscience* [in English] upbraids me.”

Like the other pictures she tears them up and throws them into the fire.

“I made some pictures last Sunday and burned them and this Sunday too I was engaged in a similarly absurd task. So it’s best that I destroy the plates from which I’ve made these copies.”

Having decided to do this she proceeds to break nearly two dozen plates with the original images on them, and then, breathing a sigh of relief she goes to her bed and lies down.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake in taking the plates from Shakeel Ara Begum. This was not at all proper. But why is it my fault? I had refused but Bhabi Afzaal insisted that I take them. God knows what she had in mind when she gave me the picture. All of them are experts at every kind of painting and photography. Oho! I remember now. She also took my picture in Akhtar Hasan’s garden. Why did she do that? Oh, so what. They’re nawabs, I’m the sister of a poor professor: *What connection does the earth have to the sacred sky?*

“I’ve been learning medical science for four years, I passed my entrance exam by studying without any real purdah so I shouldn’t be so weak as to see a piece of paper and become obsessed with it. Sure, the features reveal an unusual intelligence and discernment, also good nature and refinement, but what concern is it of mine? My Bhaijaan is master of what is good and bad for me.

“Then ... (after a moment’s silence) Isn’t it possible that after I finish my education I might devote my life to the welfare of those of my own sex? Without salary or any other compensation teach at the Aligarh Women’s School? Besides the other subjects also teach medicine as the need arises? And offer treatment when the occasion calls for it? To meet my own needs I could earn enough by providing treatment to the respectable women there. My Bhaijaan and Bhai Yusuf Raza are both planning to live in Aligarh. They’re here only until I finish my education. They’re both planning to devote two hours each day to teaching at the regular girls’ school. So what’s the harm if I decide to do the same?

“Perhaps Bhaijaan will not agree. How will it harm him if he doesn’t force me against my inclination?

“At the moment my age is twenty-two years and because of my educational needs I don’t observe the formal Hindustani purdah strictly. By God’s grace I’ve lead my life properly up to now. I haven’t experienced

weakness even in my thoughts. If I want to lead an independent life, my guardians will be worried about me for maybe eight or ten years. But if I want to live by shutting my heart to the pressures of the world then there is no reason for them to worry. Isn't my previous lifestyle enough to satisfy them?

"May God help me! How weak I am. No, no. I'm faithful to my dear brother. He has done what no brother has ever done for a sister. He has always been desirous of my future welfare and well-being. At such a young age he endured not only the vicissitudes of his own life and education but mine as well and allowed me to get the education I wanted. Now, when the time has come that he should be relieved of his responsibility toward me, I'll present my opinion opposing his because of the weakness of my heart. No, no, this will never happen. It's true, I'll be distressed. But I'll never express an opinion that contradicts my brother's. There's still almost a year left until I'm finished with college, and that only if I pass this year. This year I may not feel the way I have up to now.

"Bahaijaan and Bhabi Sartaj are my relatives and they've always been considerate of my feelings, but why are their other relatives, especially Shakeel Ara and her sister-in-law so nice to us? And in the same way Shazada Shakeel has been friends with Dulha Bhai and Bahaijaan since they were children, but Bahaijaan and everyone else make a point of praising Nawab Farrukh Hasan, always saying how he's very amicable and pleasant whenever he meets them. Actually, the whole family is very friendly and sociable. No one exhibits any arrogance or pomposity. Bahaijaan always has nothing but praise for Nawab Agha Ashiq Abbas Hasan, and indeed how warmly he greets Bahaijaan. It's been four years since he came to Lahore and he has stayed with Bahaijaan continuously. My Bahaijaan speaks highly of him, frequently praising his manners, his knowledge, and his other qualities. I've seen his picture. One can tell by looking at his face that he's a very intelligent, learned and good-natured person.

"Oho! It's one o'clock and I'm still awake. I must go to sleep now. I haven't been getting enough sleep for many days. I seem to have lost my appetite as well. Perhaps it's because I don't sleep properly. If my health fails my studies will suffer. I should take some sleeping medicine. This morning Bhabijaan was inquiring after my health. I know that I'm somewhat lethargic. This isn't right. I'll take one dose of the medication for sleeping so that I can rest peacefully for the remainder of the night. And in the morning I'll start taking the medication for improving my appetite. I've received a letter from Shakeel Ara Begum. Should I write her a reply or not? Not replying to a letter is bad manners. If I do reply then she'll

write me another letter and our association will grow, but I don't want to get too close to her.

“Ah! I'm just a poor professor's sister. She's the daughter of a nawab. The wife and daughter-in-law of princes. She and I don't belong together. I hope she doesn't come to Lahore for the exhibition. I'll write to her and say I won't be able to write again because of a lack of free time. Well, it's two o'clock now. I won't be able to sleep.”

With this in mind she gets up and takes a small dose of the medicine which won't last more than two or three hours. □

—Translated by Tabira Naqvi

Glossary

angarkha (*aṅgarkhā*): a type of garment worn by men.

bahuji (*bahū-jī*): daughter-in-law; “ji” used as an honorific.

banat (*bnāṭ*): gold or silver lace or edging.

bukhari (*bukhārī*): a hole or pit in a corner of the house to store grain—granary.

chauki (*čaukī*): a small low wooden stool.

dahi bare (*dahībarē*): a snack consisting of small patties made from lentil flour and dipped in whipped yogurt flavored with spices.

domnis (*dōmnī*): dancing girls.

gach (*gač*): a type of coarse cotton cloth.

gharara (*gharāra*): a garment with flared legs and pleated borders worn by women.

gokhru (*gōkhrū*): type of intricately worked edging used on women's garments.

gulbadan: a type of fine silk cloth.

imam zamin (*imām-zāmin*): a ribboned band containing money and tied on the right arm to invoke the aid of the Imam in warding off bad luck.

juzdan (*juzdān*): a cloth in which books, especially the Qur'ān, are wrapped; a satchel.

kothis (*kōṭhī*): bungalows.

kuddoo gosht (*kaddū gōshī*): dish of meat and a squash-like vegetable.

kurti (*kurtī*): a shirt worn over *shalvār* by women (also *kurtā*, which is worn by both men and women).

maktab: a school.

mama: (*māmā*): nanny.

markin (*mārkin*): a type of cotton fabric.

mullani (*mullānī*): feminine of mullah—a cleric.

mutanjan: a dish containing both sweet, flavored rice and pulao, rice cooked with spices and meat.

neela thotha (*nīlā-tʰōtʰā*): type of poisonous chemical mixed with whitewash and used on interior walls to repel scorpions, etc.

naʿib tehsildar (*nāʿib teḥṣīldār*): assistant district officer.

namak chashi (*namak ḥashī*): any salted food that will be tasted first in a ceremony.

nijaaf (*nijāf*): probably a design that is part of the shirt in question.

pechwans (*pēḥvān*): a hookah having a long, coiling snake-like smoker's pipe.

salan (*sālan*): equivalent of curry.

salaami (*salāmi*): gift of money given to bride and groom.

saleem shahis (*salīm-shāhī*): special kind of flat shoe worn by men and women.

sevaiyan (*sevaiyān*): vermicelli.

susi (*sūsī*): a type of woven cotton with its own particular design.

taka (*takā*): a copper coin equal to two paisas.

takhti (*takhtī*): a wooden tablet used to write on to learn the Urdu script.