

MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

The Bitch¹

THE LOUD THUMPING on the door and the continuous, insistent shouts of “Open up!” resounded in her brain like the long drawn-out groan of a bucket hitting the water in a deep, dark well. Her sleep-laden and half-willing eyes opened slowly, but the very next moment the khol-like darkness that tinged the faint light of early dawn began to fill her eyelids, and they shut again. They drooped like heavy blankets, gently pressing on her eyeballs, sending them off to slumber. But her ears, out of sync with her eyes, were buzzing. They wanted to shut their windows against the new assault of the early rising invader—and yet they were buzzing.

This struggle between hope and hopelessness, which perhaps sleep’s torrent would have drowned out quickly, didn’t last long enough, for now even the door hinges were beginning to shake and the sounds were emanating from a throat that was more impatient, restless, harsh and hoarse. “Open the door, open the door,” the sounds were penetrating her brain like thin sharp needles and were tearing the blanket of sleep to shreds. She could hear the caller between his shouts of “Open up, open up” also muttering unpleasant things, indicating unpleasant intentions, and swearing under his breath in between pauses. And not only that,

¹“Ḥarāmjādī” was first published in the Urdu monthly *Adabī Duniyā* in 1941 and later in a collection of the author’s short stories *Jazīrē*. This translation is based on a reprint of the story in *Askarīnāma: Afsānē, Maḥāmīn* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel, 1998), 39–57. The story is based on a conceit suggested by the title “Ḥarāmjādī,” which is a rustic, dialectical variant of the standard “ḥarāmzādī.” The literal meaning of “ḥarāmzādī” is “illegitimate (woman),” but the local mid-wife’s use of the term doesn’t imply that Emily is a bastard, rather more the order of an interloper, someone invading her turf and her cultural space, behaving out of line with the local customs and norms, a woman of loose morals. In Urdu, the implication of “ḥarāmjādī” is more forceful than “illegitimate” or “bastard,” and more closely approximates the English “bitch.”

someone was advising him to pick up rocks and pebbles from the street and throw them at the house. Eventually she opened her eyes wide and slapping her hands on the bed she called out, "Nasiban, look who's there." There was nothing new for her in all this. Ever since she had been posted to this small provincial town as a midwife, this was a daily routine: the shouts, the banging, the bitter struggle between duty and rest, the same annoyance and then the same retreat—all as usual. She had to get up and leave early and then spend all day watching newborns arrive protesting and screaming, flinging their hands and feet about; inspecting the progress of the new babies; going back and forth to the town's area office for registering births and deaths. She could barely find time for lunch and a little rest in the afternoon, and even that wasn't always possible because babies don't care a twit about things like appropriate time or place—four o'clock in the morning, twelve o'clock noon, two o'clock at night, every hour, every moment she had to be ready to answer the call—"Here I am, here I come." And the babies, they kept coming so fast, like little stones hurtling along in a mountain spring. Popular talks about birth control had been unable to travel down the dirt and pothole-ridden road that connected Daulat Nagar with the city, and if somehow they could have managed to crawl there, it was a sure thing that the folks there would not regard them as worthy of the least attention for they knew very well that the birth of babies was ordained by God. And what power did man have in the matter? Eighteen-year-old boys, fifty-year-old men, inexperienced young girls, middle-aged women, all of them with an astounding industry and singleness of purpose, as if they were laborers toiling in the factories for the purpose of national defense, kept adding to the number of urchins playing in the roadside drains. And what could those poor souls do anyway. They were helpless at God's command. In short, babies were arriving: dark babies, pale babies, babies as red as plucked chickens, and occasionally fair babies, thin bundles of skin and bone, or otherwise some plump healthy babies with kinky hair, others soft pulpy flat-nosed babies like voles, others hard like wood, babies of every conceivable kind and color.

Emily had heard her grandmother say that once when she was small it had rained frogs, and these frogs weighed as much as half a pound each. Sometimes Emily would think—and the thought would make her smile in spite of herself—that these babies were those very frogs, yellow half-pounders.

And it was just for the purpose of watching each and every drop of this yellow frog-rain dripping away that she had to wander all the livelong

day through the broken cobblestone roads of this small town, through dark, dank, narrow lanes, through dust and dirt, past heaps of garbage, and red and yellow dogs that kept barking away, and shopping places chockfull of farmers' carts and [women] grass-cutters. The narrow streets always had sandy shoulders on both sides, and the drains, they had to be right in the middle, their blackness usurping a large part of the road like smeared kohl from the eyes of a country woman. Sweepers cleaned these drains and dumped the muck on the road itself. So, to protect her sari from the filth, she had to wear her high-heeled black shoes instead of her pretty light-blue sandals. The high heels made her wobble because of the innumerable stones sticking out from the surface of the road. The boisterous frolicking of the thoughtless brats playing tip-cat by the roadside invariably caused her clothes to get stained. Thankfully, however, she always managed to get home with her eyes and teeth intact. And the heat! She felt as if she would surely melt away with sweat. Despite the narrowness of the streets, the sun shone with such piercing intensity that she felt sparks dancing on her body, and her parasol printed with blue flowers became nothing but a burden. When she walked down the road stumbling and balancing herself on high heels, burning and roasting in the sun, the sound of the *alha* being chanted in the distance, the clack of the drum, the loud, harsh cackles of the card players sitting under the trees in groups seemed hateful and sneering like the buzzing of big fat flies making sleep impossible in the afternoon, and she would be lost in memories of the city she had left four months ago. But now, the city had gone to the land of dreams that eluded recall in the morning even after a thousand tries, and faith in its delicate beauty kept her heart restless all day long. She imagined she saw a light somewhere ... a sparkle, an openness, a vastness—a bit of greenery floated in front of her eyes ... and then she would again be stumbling along trying to keep her balance on that street of burning pebbles, drains, and gritty sand. Even imagining the room with an electric fan didn't help diminish her feverish, burning pain. Yes, if by some stroke of luck she happened to be free one night and got the chance to lie awake in bed, then pictures of city life glided past her eyes, clear and bright like those on a cinema screen. She could stop any picture she liked for as long as she wanted. But if, in the midst of enjoying these pictures, she was reminded of the scenes she had to confront every day, then her weariness and dejection would slowly rise up again. The walls of the house would close in around her with their nightly darkness, her heart would sink, her breath become short and labored and her reeling brain would at last be drowned in the oblivion of sleep, and she would dream

that she was back in her old hospital, but this time its walls and doors seemed to be oozing something like apathy instead of friendliness, her limbs were frozen into immobility, and some unknown fear was weighing on her heart. She had this dream three or four times during the night, and in all honesty comparing these two lives should obviously have produced such an effect on her. Admittedly, in the city there were also dank lanes, broken roads, dust and dirt, and naughty urchins; it wasn't that she was unaware of them. Like a bird on the wing, careless and content, she would sit on the cushions of a tonga, swaying lightly, and would pass by those neighborhoods once in a fortnight or so. Her world was in the main hospital of the district, away from those other localities. What an open place it was, she would never forget the sweetness of the air there all her life. There was a wide blacktop road in front of the hospital, swept twice a day, it always shone like glass. In the evenings, when she stepped out onto the road for a stroll with her friend Dina, cool breezes blowing across the meadows caressed her eyes and cooled her brain. Her sari would flutter in the breeze, a lock of hair would fall and sway back and forth on her forehead and her gait would become light and brisk. How pleasant and enjoyable it used to be to talk during these walks. There wasn't a trace of dirt or grime there. The hot winds of May and June sped over the white buildings and glass structures of the hospital, headed for the city, and not even a shadow of the harshness and melancholy of the afternoon could touch the rooms cooled by electric fans. When she passed by with a stately air, adjusting the hem of her sari, the servants at the hospital would greet her from all sides addressing her as "memsahib, memsahib," though everyone here addressed her as "memsahib" too. Sweepers would stop sweeping the roads when they saw her approaching. Even the zamindar of these parts spoke to her using the polite form of address, "aap," but still one couldn't capture that ambience here. That awe, that grandeur, that feeling of authority, that her presence was an inalienable part of the hospital, a living embodiment of the cool, grave white building, of its invisible but unshakable laws and principles. No one could stir in protest once faced with the hospital's knife. In the same way, everything entering her zone of authority had to fall in line with her wishes. They always began preparing the wards ahead of her inspection round of the patients. She would rebuke even the paying patients, for she couldn't tolerate betel leaf juice on the walls of her clean ward. At the slightest lack of care or violation of instructions, she would rudely yell at even those who were most likely to give themselves airs. She always spoke to people using the familiar "tum." But the women here were very outspoken. They were scared

and afraid of her, but didn't miss a chance to answer back. After trying for several days, she had given up hope of keeping them in line and let them do pretty much as they liked. And these women didn't know the first thing about cleanliness and proper management. Even in summer a woman in labor was promptly shut up in a room crowded with winter bedding, earthen pots filled with rice and other grain, broken string-beds, pots and pans, containers full of coal, bundles of cotton twine and the matted-down batting from quilts, plus all kinds of odds and ends, while someone lighted a brazier and put a pot containing a concoction of herbs on it. In some homes they would quickly begin to smear the floor with cow dung which would get unstuck from people's feet and make the floor a mess, totally unfit for walking on, and the moisture of the cow dung would mingle with the heat of the coals making breathing impossible. All the women of the house, and there would be at least four, would barge into the room with their smelly clothes and, in their nervousness, upset all the things inside so that one couldn't find even a rag. All this clatter and the loud whispers, and the groans of "*Ya Allah*," coupled with the constant opening and shutting of the door as the women went in and out, woke the children of the house who, not finding their mothers by their sides, would start whimpering, their older sisters would try to soothe them by making comforting sounds and gently patting their backs as they rocked to-and-fro: "Come now, its okay, hush ... little brother's come ... you'll see him in the morning ... a tiny little brother." But the hope of seeing a little brother in the morning couldn't console them and their whimpering would turn into bawling adding to the chaos in the room. Anyway, on top of all this was the stench of dirty bedding, pillows coated with grime, rancid clothes, and the reek of long-unwashed hair—and these smells were heightened by the heat making her want to throw up. Avoiding contact with everything in the room, she would keep moving around. Spending an hour in such a room was like preparing for the punishment of hell. Agreed, she didn't have to do anything but stand there, for the women of this small town were totally unprepared to present themselves for newfangled English experiments allowing a stranger, and that too a Christian midwife, armed with unfamiliar and suspicious looking instruments to examine them. They trusted only the old midwife of their town and fragments of hard-baked clay from broken earthen pots. However, their husbands, out of fear of the town's area office, had persuaded them to tolerate the presence of that new Christian midwife in the room. Thus her burden of duty was practically reduced to nil. But the responsibility was hers after all, and she was accountable to the area

committee for everything that happened, good or bad. And her discharging this responsibility was like battling with the winds. Often young girls in their first labor screamed and thrashed their arms and legs about so much that it was very hard to control them, or some would be so scared that they wouldn't move at all. Mothers of three or four children, with the confidence gained from their own experience, were even more problematic. They certainly weren't ready to give any importance to the peculiar instructions given by this sari clad Christian woman who walked the streets unveiled. They would even pause between groans and start instructing the local midwife, and Emily had to keep biting her lips and remain silent. As for the local midwife, why would she listen to Emily? She was convinced of her own superiority and Emily's incompetence; besides, she realized that Emily's presence was a threat to her own income so she made it her duty to contradict everything that Emily said. Emily had hardened herself to disregard the sarcastic remarks of the local midwife, but after all, her heart wasn't made of stone. And the local midwife's behavior had made other women bold as well. They would gather around the bed paying little attention to Emily, and she would be left standing behind all of them. And all she could do was stamp her feet with annoyance and keep calling out to them, trying to get their attention.

After passing through all of these travails she had to go each time to the town's area office to register the birth. Seeing her, the clerk's eyes would light up with a leer; in a semi-mocking way he would bare his black, betel-stained teeth from behind his small beard and big moustache, and pushing a chair towards her ask, "Well memsahib, boy or girl?" The closeness of the thick, stiff, black hair of the moustache scared her, and she felt that suddenly those hairs would be electrified, stand up and brush against her face. She would recoil with fear and revulsion, avoid meeting Bakhshiji's eyes, and try to finish her work as soon as possible.

Having dealt with these obstacles, she would usually get home around eight or nine in the evening, tired and disheartened. When your steps fall every which way and your head is tight and reeling, and when there's no coordination between the limbs of your body, how the hell could you have an appetite? She would unbuckle her shoes kicking them off into a corner and take off her clothes with such impatience that Nasiban the maid would have to take them out for ironing the next day. After pushing some strange food down her throat she would just fall on the bed. The minute she put her head on the pillow, the walls, the trees, the whole world would start spinning around her. Her brain would throb trying to burst out of her head. Her head kept sinking into the pillow but

she felt as if the pillow was pushing against it. Her arms would become numb. Her palms felt like lead and she couldn't raise her hands. Likewise, her legs refused to move and her back would become a lump of stone. She wanted to think about her old hospital, but couldn't recall anything in its entirety. The windowpane, the iron leg of a patient's bed, the wheels of a car, the crown of a neem tree, betel-stained black teeth and thick, stiff moustaches—one by one all these would flash before her eyes like lightning and disappear with the blink of an eye. She longed to add a room to the windowpane but the most she could add was a latch. In fact sometimes the leg of the iron bed would be lodged in her mind like a stake and wouldn't budge despite her attempts to get rid of it. The crown of the neem tree would never have a trunk ... then a drain with sandy edges would begin to flow onto the emerald crown of the neem, betel-smearred black teeth would smile through the panes and bushy stiff-haired moustaches would bristle impatiently ... different shapes would merge with one another, fighting, jostling, colliding, trampling, racing from one end of her brain to the other ... bunches of countless stars burning in the black sky streamed into her eyes like buzzing insects, dancing, and her burning eyes closed slowly, lulled by the sleep-inducing tapping in her temples ... when she fell asleep those shapes broke into even smaller fragments that would float in one by one and want to impose themselves on her brain. One would arrive and push the first one out. And while this tussle was going on a third one would barge in. Their competitive wrestling made her repeatedly start in her sleep and she would throw open her eyes with a soft groan ... then stars, whole bunches of them, would start filling her eyes ... and it wasn't until dawn that these shapes tired and left their battlefield, and then a gentle breeze would begin to blow and Emily would be lost in deep sleep ... but before she could sleep to her fill, the continuous and stubborn shouts of "open up" resounded in her brain—the same shouts, the same banging, the same bitter conflict between duty and rest, the same annoyance and then the same retreat.

Nasiban returned from answering the door. Emily had been summoned to Sheikh Safdar Ali's house. And the caller insisted that it was "urgent," she should get there quickly. Everyone who comes along says that—"hurry." Why should she hurry after all? Is she their paid servant or do they bestow a fortune on her? Hunh! Hurry! Are they going to die if she doesn't get there? And anyway, what will they get from having called her? Those worthless hags say, "What the hell does she know?" What the hell does she know? Nothing. O.K. then, let them stay put in their houses. Who wants to go beg them? What the hell does she know? These

people couldn't even have dreamt of the many instruments she had seen: sparkling, sharp, with ivory handles—and Dr. Cartfield's lectures, how painstakingly she explained the human anatomy with diagrams and pictures, knows nothing—huhh!

A smile played on Emily's lips. At first she felt like letting them know that she wouldn't get there quickly, that she wouldn't go at all. But then she thought, those people are ignorant after all, their ranting doesn't harm me, and anyway, it's my responsibility. Therefore, she said to Nasiban, "Tell them to go, I'm coming." Satisfied, she rolled over, eased her head down onto the pillow and closed her eyes. She stretched out one arm on the cool bedsheet and put her hand on her face. She wished she could empty her mind entirely and lie still. But the thump thump of her heart was pounding in her ears, and every once in a while a rock would suddenly hit her brain—"quickly"—making the nerves on her forehead and temples taut and feel ready to burst. She had to go quickly—quickly—and this is what she was paid for, thirty rupees a month by the town's area committee—she had to go quickly ... but she couldn't really sacrifice her health for the sake of duty. Last night again she returned very late. She was human after all, not a machine—now she felt that her head was aching, her lower back tense, her shoulders and legs lifeless. Getting up quickly in such a condition would be injurious, especially in the air of this little town where her health was steadily deteriorating. Only last month she ran a fever for four days. And then, what would she accomplish by going there? Those people don't need her that badly—it would be better to get some more sleep.

She would have slept but the morning sunlight streaming through her fingers just wouldn't allow her eyes to remain shut. She slid her hand down from her eyes and shut them very tightly. She was drifting back to sleep now, but each time she dozed off cries of "Buy some milk," "Hey Kalu, Oye!" "Get up, get off! Not going to school!" and the sounds of Nasiban breaking sticks and banging pots startled her. Trying to sleep like this made her eyes water. Her head throbbed and her forehead became hot. Desperate, she now lay straight and buried her face in her arms. Her limbs felt heavier and unable to move. She began to grind her teeth at those cries and noises, at the demanding summons of "You're needed quickly!" and at the morning moon and the smallness of the town. She wished she could wrap herself in some sheet that would cover up those cries and noises and that summons of "You're needed quickly!" Cover up the morning moon and the small town. Some sheet none of them could reach under, and where she could lose them, forget herself, lose herself ...

She felt two strong, familiar arms encircling her body, holding her tightly ... it seemed as if someone had suddenly taken away her headache ... just ahead in the distance two eyes gleamed and seemed to smile and she let herself relax in the embrace of those arms ... Her body was as light as the wind, her head swayed softly, gently waving in the breeze. It was peaceful, it was quiet and she could only hear her joyful heart beating ... The two arms were holding her body close ... two strong, familiar arms.

She opened her eyes, slowly, fearfully. The morning's moonlight was gleaming. Nasiban put a pot on the stove. The goatherd was collecting goats from the neighborhood and the pulley on the well was spinning furiously. She looked up and her eyes began searching for something in the air ... two almond-colored shadows began to descend, her eyelids fluttered and slowly, slowly her lashes touched and closed, as if trying to enmesh those shadows ... the shadows stopped after a short distance. They stumbled and faded gently, melting in the breeze ... the eyes were now seeing the colorless morning sky. Her neck sagged and her arms fell apart—two familiar arms—but they weren't here.

After lying listless for a little while, she began to remember Williams. Long, swept-back hair, broad chest, red-veined eyes, swiftly moving, thick lower lip, sideburns extending to the earlobe, dark shadow of a shaven beard on olive skin, high cheek-bones beneath the eyes and strong arms ... those arms embraced her tightly so many times in a day ... she would become helpless in their grip and, sometimes irritated, she would recoil, but he would respond with more caresses ... and place warm, moist kisses on both of her cheeks ... and many times during the course of a day ... certainly a strong smell of alcohol was on his breath, but he lifted her in his arms with such ardor and madly kissed her face, hands, neck, bosom and then laughed ... "My Love, hahahaha ... E M I L Y dear, beloved, hahahaha."—how well he took care of her. Holding her in his arms, he would ask, "What kind of sari will you get this month, my love? A red one would suit this bosom! Tell me. Do you like this? Hahahaha."—and he never allowed her to go out in the afternoon. If she was called by the hospital, he would send back a reply saying that Mrs. Williams was sleeping—he would prepare tea before she woke up and place it on a table near the bed—and how lovingly he embraced her—but he isn't here!—if he were here he would never have allowed her to go anywhere so early. If he were here she wouldn't have gone anywhere herself. He would have smashed the heads of such people who banged on the door in order to wake her. But only if he were here!—but if he were with her then why would she be here—

But—some other faces emerged—it's good he wasn't with her—his hair was tangled and tousled and he was chewing his lips as though he would make mincemeat of them—and how cruelly he beat her with a cane, saying, "Want more ... comes back from there thinking no end of herself..." And if memsahib hadn't arrived upon hearing the noise, who knows how much more he would have beaten her—Emily searched for scars on her arms—it was good to be rid of such a cruel man. How bloody his eyes were—and he had begun to drink so much toward the end—but if he were here he wouldn't have let her leave so early—admittedly he would stay out with Rosa until late at night, but his behavior with her remained the same, or at least it seemed so. If she herself hadn't gotten so upset and hadn't berated him every hour of the day, perhaps matters would not have reached such a pass. He held her close so lovingly. How could she bear to have him stay out with Rosa—Rosa, black as a griddle, bones sticking out on her face, thin as a reed and fond of wearing a dress, thought she was a real memsahib. Learned a few phrases of English and became such a showoff that her feet wouldn't touch the ground—don't know what Rosa had that he was so taken by her—she needn't have bothered, he would have tired of her anyway—would it have mattered if she allowed things to go on for a while as they were—but he had beaten her callously—yes—so what if he beat her once—he was ashamed of it himself and reluctant to face her—and if Dina hadn't egged her on so much, she wouldn't have filed for divorce. Dina needled her just to have fun—what kind of friend was she—she won't speak with Dina now. If she meets her by chance, she'll look the other way and walk on, and if Dina speaks to her she'll tell her frankly that she doesn't want to be friends with traitors. If Dina gets upset, let her. Now she had been transferred from the city hospital. Now it's no longer a daily concern, she doesn't have to speak to her ...

In this way, she kept on agonizing over Dina's treachery. Then Nasiban called out to her, "Memsahibji. Get up, the sun has risen." She sat up confused and looked all around. She really needed to get going. Still, she stretched her arms several times and rubbed her head on the pillow before getting out of bed.

She washed her face and sat on the bed waiting for tea. Adjusting the kindling in the stove, Nasiban said, "Mansain was saying, 'Your memsahib is as scarce as the Eid moon, never drops by ...' Why don't you visit her one day, memsahib. She thinks about you a lot."

Should she go to her place—what would she do there? One is made to sit on dirty, broken string-beds—what could she talk about with these

women? Except tell them stories that so and so gave birth to a stillborn baby, so and so endured so much pain, and so and so suffered from such and such illness. How much longer could she produce such stories for them? It seems they don't want to hear anything else, and these women are so uncouth. They're all over her with their stinking clothes ... she felt such revulsion in accepting paan from their hands, but she has to, there is no way out ... they keep half smiling as they talk to her, almost mocking her ... eye her as if she were a thief and would steal something the minute their attention is diverted ... why are these women so wary of her? Is she not a woman like them? Or is she a monster? These women are really very silly! And when she visits them in their homes their signal sends the young girls running inside to hide. From there they take turns peeping at her, and if her eyes meet theirs, they quickly move away and sounds of giggling can be heard from within; if they're compelled to come before her, they emerge hugging themselves, their dupattas wrapped from head to toe as if she would steal something just by looking at them, as if her glance would defile them. She thoroughly dislikes their behavior. Don't they have confidence in her? Do they mistrust her? It's better not to go to visit them. Let them stay at home with their daughters—and those dirty children, smeared with mud, noses running, half naked, stomachs protruding. They come and stand in front of her and scrutinize her, as if she were a strange, unfamiliar animal, newly captured—and when she talks to them, they run right away—they're totally ill-mannered, like animals ... absolutely—and strangely enough, on her arrival the women start sweeping the house. It becomes difficult to breath with all that dust. They think nothing of one's health. And why should a person go there at the risk of falling sick—and their men, their behavior is so embarrassing. They always sit in the foyer, blocking the entrance, and they don't move until she gets very close—“Move the hookah away, move it away.” They take so long to get up that she becomes anxious—must be doing that deliberately so that she has to stand there for a while—and when she goes inside she can hear their laughter—how uncouth they are—the English respect women so much—that old priest who used to come by, what a good man he was. He would always speak with everyone individually. In fact, he even recognized her—on Sundays they used to go to church, all of them together—her—Dina—Kitty—Mary—Sheila—and, yes, Mercy—how they would make fun of Mrs. James. She would lag behind them, out of breath, umbrella in hand. And what did she have, poor woman, she was simply a bag of bones—returning from the church was even more entertaining. We walked together laughing and cracking jokes

—and Sheila, Oh my! Was she funny! What faces she used to make. When she began laughing she couldn't stop—but there's nothing like that here—a person doesn't live with people here or so it seems—really, can the people here be called human? Anyway, she hardly has any time to spare. She's on her feet all the time—and who wants to meet the likes of them—just animals—no one to talk with, no one to laugh and joke with. Come back from work and flop on the bed, that's all—as for Nasiban, all she can talk about is her son who ran away or that she has quarreled with her husband—that there was a splendid *baraat* at her place the other day. So what? What are they to her, how is she concerned? Or at the most Nasiban scares her unnecessarily by talking about thieves—once she told her a story of how some people had lured the midwife of the neighboring district and what they did to her—all lies, do such things happen? But what if it happens to her—no! It's an irrational fear. People would stop going out if such things happened. And how would work get done? The old woman is crazy. Someone has misguided her—still, one can't trust this place. Who knows what might happen. She has no one, too—it would have been better if she weren't a midwife. Personally, she wanted to become a teacher, and Papa wanted that too, but Mama just wouldn't agree—so much time has passed since Papa died—twelve years. So many years have gone by but it seems as if it were yesterday—he loved her so—brought her to school every day—her seat was near the table—and the English teacher, what a good man he was—never said a word, even when she didn't bring her homework—and the boys thought she was something else. She was the only girl in the school. All the boys would glance at her covertly, avoiding the teacher's eye. That fat Karamchand stared at her too. As if she thought he was handsome—and that Azeem—he was so innocent, so pale and emaciated, but he had such large eyes. He would gaze at her too, but if their eyes met he would lower his eyes bashfully and start wiping his face with a handkerchief. Oh! How she would secretly laugh at that. One day she happened to get to school early. He was approaching from the opposite end of the veranda. When he got near, his face was flushed and he began looking in all directions nervously. He stopped by her side and began to say something ... timidly, he caught her hand and dropped it quickly. Seeing her nervousness, how distressed he had become, and how earnestly he had appealed to her, "Don't tell anyone." She had laughed for many days afterwards, whenever she remembered the incident—how gentle he was, really—if she could remain in school, how wonderful it would be—but those days are gone. Now she's here, alone, away from the world. There's no one to talk to—

not even a letter from someone. Every day she asks the postman if there's a letter for her, but the reply is always the same, "No." And if there is a letter, it's only the long manila envelope—On Her Majesty's Service—instructions from the district's Health Officer—do this, do that—if someone were to listen to her she could do this or that—an unnecessary nuisance—but where would she get a letter from anyway? If only Auntie would write from Delhi, wouldn't be such a big deal, but she doesn't care to write—it's been years—she should visit Delhi—it's a good city—such wide streets and so many cinema houses—and him—he's there—well—he—

The raucous cawing of a crow startled her. The sunlight had crept halfway down the wall, a crow was screeching "caw, caw, caw," and she was lying on the bed with her legs dangling below. She had to leave early and had wasted so much time lazing pointlessly. She began to vent her anger on Nasiban, berating her for not bringing the tea. Nasiban replied that she thought memsahib was sleeping. In fact, she thought, had she really been asleep all this while, she would have been so much the better for it. She asked Nasiban to bring the tea quickly.

She washed her face again, gulped the tea somehow and went to get dressed. Opening up the large metal box where she kept her clothes, she began to think which sari to wear. White with the red border—but she wore the same color every day—white saris get dirty very easily. They're good for just a day—are impossible to wear two days in a row—the blue sari caught her eye from underneath the pile—why not wear this one—but those people will leer at her if they see her in a blue sari—all of them stare at her whenever she passes by. She detests this habit of ogling—and those zamindars, they pretend to be well mannered! Anyway, this is the way it is—when she goes past they laugh behind her back and taunt, "*Arre jaar!—Abey Majid, zara lijiyo* [grab her]!"—someone clears his throat—as if she doesn't understand all this—let them try such a thing in the city—she would have taught them a lesson—but what can she do here. She has to give in—it's because of them that she has given up wearing bright saris and wears white. But they harass her nevertheless—now if she goes out in a blue sari today, who knows what they will do—then she should wear white—wear white every day—is she afraid of them—let them laugh, they won't eat her up. What can they dare do to her?—She'll start wearing bright saris again—challenge them to do what they dare—most certainly, they'll laugh—so what—today she'll definitely wear a blue sari.

After putting on the blue sari, she sat herself in front of a mirror to comb her hair. Sleep deprivation had made her eyes red and puffy. She picked up the mirror and examined her eyes. Why was her complexion getting so dull, her skin had become rough too—when she was a young woman there was such a radiance on her face—so what if she had a dark complexion, her skin shone—her Auntie always said to Mama—“You have a nice daughter”—and now—

She put the mirror aside and began to inspect her body from head to toe, astonished, like a peacock seeing its feet—the flesh on her arms was sagging and she had gained some weight and her hands were so hard—her hair dry and rough, much thinner too—as for agility she has none now—how fast she used to walk and for such long distances. But now her back began to hurt even during a short walk.

She took a deep breath and stretched her arms. The dullness of her face and the loose flesh of her arms had an effect on the color of her blue sari, making it fade. Halfheartedly she brushed her hair, leaving several strands floating untidily. Her hair was done now but she kept on staring at the mirror, her mind squeezed itself into the swollen eyelids that were beginning to smart from staring at one particular spot for so long.

When she put away the mirror she noticed the Bible sitting on the corner of the table close to the wall. Papa had given it to her for her birthday when she was little. She hadn't opened it in ages and it was layered with dust. The Bible reminded her of Papa so much that she was compelled to pick it up. There was her name inscribed on the flyleaf. She had written it herself but now the ink had faded. She was in the fifth grade when she wrote it. She was amused to see her own unformed handwriting and recalled having a green fountain pen in those days. She decided she'd buy a green pen on her next visit to the city. But then she thought that the pen wouldn't be of any use to her. She didn't have to write much.

Papa often reminded her to read the Bible. She was now ashamed of her negligence and started turning the pages—Genesis—Exodus—she turned the pages faster—Book of Ruth—Jerome—Matthew—where should she begin—Adam—Noah—The Flood—Abraham—The Ark—The Cross—Jesus—church bells—we went to church together, laughing and joking—

Eventually she couldn't decide where to start; she had to leave soon and there wasn't enough time. But she made up her mind to read the Bible every morning—or at least on Sundays—but one must pray every day—it's bad not to pray—Mama never allowed her to go to bed before

saying her prayers—really, it doesn't take much time—and if it does, so what—the business of the world goes on.

She tried to empty her mind and closed her eyes. But despite batting her eyes, first Mama and behind her Papa and the street in front of the church, the bells, the group of laughing friends who went to church all entered into her eyes. She opened them wide and shook her head vigorously as if trying to dislodge them. Eventually her mind became empty and quiet. Only her heartbeat was pounding in her ears and in her head. She shut her eyes again, joined her hands and repeated the prayer: Our Father, Who art in Heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Upon opening her eyes she felt a little closer to inner peace and tried to smile. Once again she glanced at the mirror and wished she could pray for something special. But what?—Someone?—that she be transferred to the city—but she will have to face Williams—this small town is better than having to do that—what else?—there was a story in which a fairy had promised to fulfill three wishes of a man—but what?

Musing, she rubbed her arms, but couldn't think of anything—she was getting delayed so she deferred her prayers and wishes for later and grabbing her umbrella stepped out.

As she walked along the street she was driven by the thought of getting there quickly. After the sluggishness and languor of the morning she felt a sense of exhilaration in the exercise. The light warmth of the sun and the brisk walk had quickened her pulse, and oblivious of the open drain, gritty sand and pebbles, she concentrated on covering the distance as fast as she could. If she felt that her pace was slowing she lengthened her stride. The roadside urchins weren't up and about yet so she didn't have to care about the safety of her nose. When she passed beneath the shadows cast by the walls her pace quickened even more.

Soon she reached the main square. Sheikh Safdar Ali's house was a short distance from there and she began to feel reassured that she wasn't too late. As she was walking along she suddenly noticed a storeowner. He was smiling and signaling his neighbor—was he doing this on seeing her?—possibly they were laughing at something else, she was late—she had moved away from them when she heard: “The sky is blue today ... its been a long time since it was blue”—she wanted to turn back and hit that lout with her umbrella ... come what may, she would stop here and tell

them that she couldn't bear this any longer and she knew exactly what they meant when they made those remarks—how long could this go on?—her feet felt like lead, as if they weighed a ton, and her legs trembled making her stumble several times as she walked—but those eyes that ogled her from all directions made her go on without stopping. She shrank into her sari, wrapping its loose border securely around her bosom and with a bowed head pulled her feet off the road ...

When she reached the house of Shaikh Safdar Ali, she saw him smoking a hookah in the front room along with some men. On seeing her he stood up, and in a complaining tone, as if she had slipped up on some rare opportunity for which he sympathized with her, said: "Aahh memsahib ... you came very late."

"Er ... yes ... I was delayed," she said as she moved in the direction of the women's quarter. When she got to the doorway she saw the local midwife crossing the courtyard with a bundle of clothes in her left hand and a jug of water in her right. Twirling the jug she heard her say, "You know ... that bitch hasn't stepped out from her house yet." □

—*Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi*