

ABDULLAH HUSSEIN

Night^{*}

SHAUKI, where are you going?" the woman asked.

"Nowhere," replied the man quite cheerfully.

"Hey, slow down a little. I'm tired."

"Okay."

The two continued walking in silence.

"Shaukat," she repeated, "for God's sake ..."

"Huh?"

"Where are you going?"

"*Chale pavan ki, cha-a-a-al...*" He sang a half-line from a popular film song.

"Shauki, be quiet," the woman admonished. "People are listening."

But the man paid no attention and kept on singing. Soon the woman lagged far behind. Suddenly he stopped and looked around. The woman trudged up to him puffing and carefully holding the lower folds of her sari that kept getting tangled in her legs. Beads of perspiration gleamed on the tip of her nose.

The man turned around and stared at her as if trying hard to make out who she might be.

"Come on, let's go home," she said, catching her breath.

"Okay. Let's go." He stuffed his hands in his pockets and began to walk, but in the wrong direction. A slight quiver of some vague fear could be heard in her voice as she repeated, "Let's go home." She knew all too well where they were headed, after all, she had been his wife for quite a while now.

Passing by the largest bazaar of this splendid seaside town, the man began going right into its center instead of skirting around it.

Lampposts lining the streets poured forth their milky, fluorescent

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light, stores and showcases glittered, while rickshaws, cars, donkeys and all sorts of people walked through the bazaar. As the two of them approached the next intersection, she tried one last time, "Shauki," she said, "we just had tea."

"I'm hungry," he replied.

"Guddu is home—all alone."

"I'm hungry," he repeated.

They crossed the square, entered Dilkusha Restaurant, and sat down facing each other at their favorite table. "Shauki," she pleaded, "listen to me."

He lifted his head and stared blankly at his wife. She continued, "We'll have a drink of water and then leave. Okay?"

"Whatever you say," he replied and began studying the menu.

"Or maybe just tea ..." she began. At the same instant that vague fear, which had made her voice tremble a short while ago and which always caught in her throat, disappeared, replaced by an equally old, equally familiar aversion—a feeling of utter despondency. (Much later she came to understand that what she feared was not her husband but this feeling.) She had only come to recognize the feeling over the past year—from the time her husband's downfall began—but during that time it had matured into something robust and invigorating that sustained her. A sadness that slowly changed into stubbornness and comforted her, just as almost all intransigent feelings do, in a strange sort of way.

Raising his head from the menu, he asked, "What would you like to eat?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, really?" he asked, his eyes dancing. "Eat a little something, my dear."

She looked away. Her lips tightened and the look in her eyes gradually took on a stony rigidity. A few tables away, a young boy was talking away like crazy with his friends. When he saw Shaukat and his wife enter, he sat up slightly and then slowly leaned back. He was frightfully young. It was perhaps the first time such a beautiful woman had looked at him so boldly. He seemed excited by it, but was too shy to look at her eyes. He blushed a deep red and resumed talking loudly, fidgeting in his chair. From where he sat, he could hardly have seen the forlorn look in her eyes.

"The yellow set is gone, too," she said. "The yellow set of china."

"Oh, how sad," he said. He took giant-sized bites of food.

"It was the first thing we bought," she said out loud to herself, "after

we got married.”

“How much did you get for it?”

“You just eat your fill, Shauki. Why should *you* care?”

“So, should I starve instead?” he growled.

“Certainly not.” For the first time she looked him squarely in the eye. “Eat as much as you can.”

He attacked his food again. She watched his long, delicate fingers drip with gravy as they formed and re-formed huge morsels, and his long, prominent jawbones as they went about their work with the cool, unfeeling precision of a machine. She was repulsed. “Have some manners, Shauki!” she said.

“This is a free country,” he answered and continued to eat.

Her eyes narrowed, then widened again; soon the same glassy hardness returned. She turned her face away and began looking toward the boy again. Finally, her husband wiped his gravy-covered fingers on his napkin and leaned back in his chair. For a long time she stared tenaciously at the once clean, crisp white napkin made of home-spun fabric that now lay crumpled on the empty plate with red and yellow stains all over it. Sensing his hand move toward her, she clutched her purse. For a while they both tugged at the black, oblong leather bag. Then she loosened her firmly-pressed lips a little and hissed through clenched teeth, “I’ll pay.”

“Okay,” he chuckled, “you pay.” He pulled his hand away, leaned back in his chair and began to look at the boy.

The woman took out a handful of change from her purse and counted out enough to pay the bill. Dissatisfied with the meager tip she left, the waiter stiffly began wiping the table. She sprang to her feet and said, “Let’s go.”

“What’s the rush?”

“No. Let’s go.”

As they walked out of the restaurant, the boy rose slightly from his chair, then sat down again, watching them disappear into the distance with his big, sad eyes. Outside on the sidewalk and in the bazaar, the electric tubes overhead cast their cool, white fluorescent glow. It was a September evening and sea gusts, heavy with moisture, hit hard against their faces. Crowds of people and cars and pack animals scurried every which way. He walked on. At the bus stop he broke his stride.

“Come on,” she said.

But he put his hands in his trouser pockets and started to whistle as he glanced around.

“Shauki,” she spoke almost gently, “we can walk.”

“I’m tired.”

She sighed and then said, “Okay, but are you sure you won’t fall asleep on the bus?”

“I won’t.”

The sight of the double-decker bus pulling up to the stop sent a wave of child-like excitement through them. She boarded ahead of him, bounced up the stairs to the upper deck, and took a seat in the very front row.

They both loved to ride double-decker buses. Right after their marriage, when they had tramped around every bit of their beloved ancestral town on foot, they would buy tickets and sit in the top front seats of double-deckers riding around town just for fun. Then they moved to this city where double-deckers were rarities that only ran on a few special routes.

“We’re flying,” she said cheerfully.

“Flying!” he agreed.

The bus had emerged from the main bazaar and was now traveling on a side street where most of the shops were closing or had already closed. The light from the stores that were still open pierced the darkness outside like so many bright patches flying past them. The dim, eerie lights on the streets and sidewalks heightened the sense of distance. A fleeting memory of happier days suddenly lit up their faces as they pressed them against the window, peering down below onto a sea of bicycles, rickshaws and pedestrians surging backwards.

“Tickets?” the conductor asked.

As she fished for money, Shaukat peeked into her wallet and smiled roguishly. “Do you know,” she said almost as soon as the conductor was gone, “what this is from?”

“The yellow set of china?”

“No, we haven’t got the money from that yet.”

“Then?”

“From the red sari.”

“Which red sari?”

“The one you gave me last year for Eid.”

The bus jerked to a stop. Through the small opening by their feet, they saw the driver pick up one of Ibn Safi’s detective thrillers and begin reading from where he had left off at the previous stop. A few people got on, climbed upstairs and sat down randomly throughout the upper deck. The driver put his thriller face down by the steering wheel and the bus lumbered on.

“This sari.” He reached out and felt the fine, green silk. “I paid a full 150 rupees for this.”

“Shaukat,” the granite look suddenly disappeared from her eyes as she leaned toward him and said in a voice surging with emotion, “this is the only gift you ever gave me before we got married.”

“I saved for six months to buy it,” he said. “I didn’t get much spending money at that time, you know.”

“And it was the first gift you ever gave me—remember?”

“You really liked green.”

“And you were too embarrassed to give me something small.” She laughed softly, then added, “You wanted to give me something expensive.”

“Even now ...” he reached out to feel the sari again, “it looks almost new.”

“Shaukat—” She cried out in disbelief. Then she put her hand on his arm, ever so tenderly, and said, “I’m not going to sell this, Shauki, not ever.”

“It’s still just like new.”

“I won’t ever sell this,” she repeated. “Shauki, this was your first, your very first ...”

“You have others,” he blurted out, suddenly irritated.

“Which other ones?”

“The ones Riyaz gave you,” he was quick to answer. “Those cheap, green ones.”

“Those!” For an instant her eyes bulged in dismay, but, just as quickly, she regained her composure and said, “Those are gone, too.”

“Where?”

“Where everything else went.”

He looked straight ahead and muttered, “I wonder how much ...”

She sat frozen, chewing her lip in quiet humiliation.

“Chintzy green ones,” he repeated.

“They weren’t chintzy,” she protested feebly.

“He’s such a cheapskate.” He laughed with visible scorn. “Our friend.”

“Shaukat!” Her glassy eyes narrowed as she screamed in a whisper.

Neither spoke a word for the rest of the bus ride. At the next stop, she followed him down the stairs onto the sidewalk like a wound-up mechanical doll. They walked side by side. Just as they turned the corner toward their apartment, she suddenly stopped and announced, “Shaukat, I want to get a job.”

“Where?”

“Wherever I can get one.”

“Good luck!”

They walked up the dim, stone stairway to the second floor. He unlocked the apartment door and they entered a large room. The walls and floor of the room were bare and all the windows were shut. A table with a few books on it stood along one of the walls, and the only light in the room came from a table lamp. A child was asleep on the floor in the midst of a few toys, his dirty cheeks streaked with tears. She ran and leaned over the boy, felt his forehead and caressed his cheek. Then, picking him up ever so carefully, she kissed him and took him into the other room. Shaukat stood in the middle of the room and stared blankly for a while. Then, utterly listless, he began to undress, letting his clothes drop right where he stood. Once undressed, he went into the other small room where he threw himself on the bed. The child was sleeping on another small cot. Clothes hung from a few pegs on the wall above some suitcases that were stacked against it. A handbag lay atop the only table in the room. On the wall, a naked light bulb burned. Sitting on the small cot, she caressed the child for a long time. Finally, she got up, took off her sari, folded it neatly and put it on the table, turned off the lights in both rooms, opened the window facing the street below, and then quietly took her place beside him on the bed.

A moth had been battering about the windowpane in desperation. The darkness hummed with the faint, dull flapping of its wings and with the breathing of people, awake or asleep, in the sprawling apartment building. Occasionally a car passed by, throwing a pale, dim light into the room.

“Unh unh,” she resisted. Then in a resolute voice she said, “No.”

He growled like a tomcat.

“No, Shauki, no,” she repeated. “I don’t feel like it.”

“My dove,” he said, wheedling her, “my dear little dove.”

“Oh Lord!” she moaned. “For God’s sake!”

The moth must have found a way out. Only the dull hissing sound of human breathing, which later began to sound like cold sighs of mourning, remained in the darkness. And it felt terribly stuffy inside the room.

He rose from the bed, stood for a while in the center of the room, arms dangling, and then went into the other, larger room where he turned on the table lamp and sat down in the chair. He sat there for a long time with his elbows on the table, his arms outstretched across it, and his eyes fixed on a blank sheet of paper. His body was perfectly calm: every joint,

every muscle, every nerve fit perfectly in its place, and his blood flowed as smoothly as oil through a streamlined machine. The gentle heaving of his breath was like wind blowing through a neem tree, lightly hugging every vein of every leaf as it flowed briskly by. He was an intelligent man who had just made love to his wife with the perfunctory haste and impetuosity of an intellectual. He appeared in perfect control of himself, relaxed and fully gratified, as brilliant ideas stormed his mind without the least difficulty, without even the slightest effort. “Now,” he thought, “I’ll write.” He always thought that, but the sheet before him remained as blank as ever for the wound in his heart was still raw. And it hurt.

She appeared in the doorway, a tortured expression in her eyes, and then, walking over to the table fearfully, she sat on one corner looking at him intently. And she recalled. She recalled a body, his body, that until a year ago was so shiny and smooth, arrow-straight, slim but strong, youthful in its grace, lovable, kind and giving, its ligaments forever pulsating with unbounded life. She recalled how that body could once completely encircle her but had now become insufferably abusive, caustic and distant. It no longer had anything to do with anyone and was as cold and unfeeling as a machine.

He, too, raised his eyes and took her in, all of her.

Leaning back against the creamy yellow wall, she reminded him of the luscious, sensual maidens in Renoir paintings. No one would have guessed that she had given birth to a child and breastfed him for a full two years. In the rose-colored glow of the table lamp, the faint, pale ochre hue of her body—so well-formed, shapely and supple, and so utterly mysterious—blended well with the creamy yellow of the wall and yet, at the same time, somehow seemed quite distinct from it. A wave of painful remorse shot through his whole being as he looked at that deaf, mute, unthinking body, timeless and, in spite of all that, still very robust, and now almost a stranger. He remembered the past.

He remembered the past for it, too, had its own special color—that tawny yellow that imbued the time long ago when he was just a small boy and got up early in the morning to go to school with the servant escorting him and carrying his satchel. And there were two ways to tie the satchel: with two knots or just one. The first way, you tied the left and right hand corners of the cloth and then the ones on the top and bottom; in the second, you simply secured the right and left flaps and only tied the ones on the top and bottom. Sometimes he tied the satchel one way, sometimes the other; and sometimes he carried it himself instead of having the servant carry it for him. He was his own master and could do as he pleased:

if along the way he took a fancy to tiny, colorful pebbles, he was sure to stop and collect them and then find a smooth spot to throw them at a target while the servant implored, "Come on, sir, it's getting late. Khan Sahib will be angry again." But who cared. He would let the servant's urgent pleas go in one ear and out the other; they were powerless before his youthful ambition. The neem tree on the way to school—its countless, low, overhanging branches, making it so easy to climb—offered a special attraction, and it was a ritual to climb it. High up, the wind blew briskly and easily through the thick lush foliage. He loved to put his feet on the rotund limbs and stick his head up among the leaves facing into the wind. Then, suddenly one day it would be Baqar Eid. Although it now coincided with scorching summers, at that time it occurred during winters. His hands would be smeared with a thick paste of henna and wrapped in old newspapers, and he would spend the night, half-awake, half-asleep, holding these two stumps. After a restless night, he would wake up early and chew the thread off to unwrap the paper. The dried henna would flake off, but his fingers would still feel too stiff to stretch. After he had doused his hands in water and scrubbed off the remaining henna, the deep red would show. He would proudly hold up his hands to others, each claiming that his own hands had turned out to be the deepest red. Before his shower he would be sure to find some pretext to sneak a peek into the room where everyone's new Eid clothes had been laid out on trunks and suitcases the night before. Then, all dressed up in festive new clothes, he would go with his father to offer the Eid prayers. After prayers, he would stay home just long enough to collect his Eid tips and then run off to his uncle's where another Eid tip awaited him. Then he would rush straight off to the fairgrounds where he and other children would eat sweetened tamarind and ride on the Ferris wheel, clinging to each other with their eyes shut tightly. By the time he returned home, the goat—a sacrifice in his father's name—would already have been slaughtered. But the real thing happened the day after Eid when, very early, well before the crack of dawn, his father would come into his room to wake him up. He would feel peeved at having to give up his warm, cozy bed so early and would linger on, fidgeting under the rustling covers, often falling back to sleep while his father waited expectantly, knife in hand, urging, "Shauki, just touch it, son." He would rub his eyes and open them just enough to see the shining blade, then sit up in shock, put out his frightened hand, and barely touch it. His father would leave with the knife. His sleep would be gone—who could go back to sleep after such an unsettling sight! He would wrap a scarf around his ears and squeeze his hands

under his armpits following his father out, shivering. Outside it was quite bright—and he would witness a scene that horrified him, but he watched anyway. The butcher, having pulled down the goat by the drain, would slit its throat with that same knife while his father stood nearby. Standing directly behind his father, he only dared to open one eye to watch the gore flow into the drain while the goat's legs were writhing on the ground, a rasping sound spurting from its slit throat, and its crazed eyes fixed on the sky in an empty, frozen stare. He felt horrified but strangely elated. All these things were now tinged with that faint earthy yellow and lived in that fabulous realm of the past from which he had long since been exiled.

Then one day he saw a long coffin in the courtyard and found out that his father had died. In spite of the wailing and sobbing in the house, a strange silence echoed through the air. The strangest thing, though, was that to this day his memory of his father was the memory of that coffin. Whenever his father's name was mentioned or whenever he remembered him, what came to mind was the image of that coffin and never his father's face. Now those events, too, had acquired that same yellow complexion and smell.

Then it all ended. They suddenly became poor. The servant and his own sense of tremendous superiority over him, his carefree life, and that heart-piercing spectacle every year on Eid—nothing, absolutely nothing was spared. Slowly he began to grow up. And he didn't understand any of it.

"Jal," for the first time he called his wife by her name, speaking very tenderly, "put your clothes on."

"Let's go," she said standing up and putting her hand on his shoulder.

They turned the lights off in both rooms, walked to the bed and lay down together. There was darkness all around and the air inside the room felt heavy and stifling. Again the past was beckoning him—that vast, comfortable country, tinted with morning gold.

He had shared a profound intimacy with a girl who lived in the neighborhood, right where the alley took a sharp turn. He went to school with her. He was in the sixth grade and she was in the fifth. They played together for hours, sometimes at his house, sometimes at hers. Her body was the same light golden color as butter, and just as soft, smooth and flawless. When she laughed, her cheeks dimpled, her eyes twinkled like fireflies, and bells jingled in her throat. She always threw her head back when she laughed, her Adam's apple bobbing up and down, and he wanted to reach out and touch it. He never tired of running his fingers

over her throat, down onto her chest and arms, which tickled her, and he became very sad whenever it was time to go home. She was always laughing, and one day, in laughter, she asked, "Want to see my tummy?" and pulled her clothes up to show him. It was so flat, her stomach, merging with her waist, golden, smooth and spotless, with just a slight shadow on her belly button. He put his hand forward to touch her stomach and let it linger there as she stood quietly without moving. Suddenly, he took his hand away and pointed to her shirt, "Take it off ... and *that*, too," and, touching her other clothing, he added, "I want to see the whole of you." Doubling over with laughter, she took off the rest of her clothes and stood with her arms crossed in front of her, her back to him—her entire body shaking in a paroxysm of suppressed laughter. Enchanted, he gazed at her body, taking in every single detail: the faint creamy yellow luster, the golden fuzz, the youthful bloom, long slim legs, narrow slight buttocks, spine as taut as an arched bow, and thin delicate shoulders—all of her ... and suddenly he felt his own body soaring upward in perfect weightless ease. Deep down, somewhere in his heart, it all felt like sheer bliss.

The image of the girl became etched into his heart forever. Later, whenever her name was mentioned or when he thought of her, it was this image that came back to his mind. In the grove of his memory that neem tree and this girl appeared with the same hue, the same fragrance—both were comforting to his heart and infused his body with the energy to fly.

He heard nothing at all the night she died of cholera, nor did anyone mention anything about it the next morning. As he passed her house on his way to school, he did notice some commotion but thought nothing of it. At recess, he searched for her everywhere and was terribly disappointed when he didn't find her. When he returned home from school, they had already come back from burying her. For a long time he wandered around her house but none of her family paid any attention to him. He climbed to the rooftop and went to the spot in the room where he had seen that captivating image. It was a long time before he got up, stuck his head out the window and began looking around aimlessly. Suddenly his glance fell on his own house. He was shocked. He had seen it from this vantage point many times but never before had it looked as run down as it did now: discolored by smoke, streaked by the rains, one of the balcony walls entirely collapsed, and broken bricks strewn all around. That instant he resolved firmly in his mind that he would become a rich man.

With his hand resting on his wife's stomach, he drifted off to sleep.

Early the next morning she found herself in Riyaz's plush office. She was leaning forward, sitting almost on the edge of her chair. Her child sat in the chair next to her, dangling his tiny feet and staring at the ceiling. Riyaz sat opposite them in his great big swiveling chair, leaning his elbows on the large glass tabletop and running his fingers through his hair.

"How is Shaukat?" he asked.

Hesitant, she replied, "Okay."

"Okay."

She stared blankly at her fingernails. "Uncle," the child said, "I want to read."

"Read what, Guddu?"

"What?" The child was puzzled. "I want to read a book, Uncle."

"Ha, ha," laughed Riyaz, "you're still very young, son."

"I'm already four years old."

"Ha, ha." Riyaz took out a few more sweets from the drawer and gave them to the boy who began eating them eagerly.

"Riyaz," she said, leaning forward, "I want to start working."

"Where?"

"Wherever I can find a job."

He gave her a long, deep pensive look. "If you like, you can work for me."

"No," she replied quickly. "I'm going to check about my old job."

"At the college?"

"Yes."

"That job can't possibly still be open," he said. "It's been two years."

"It might be."

"Mommy," interrupted the child, "buy me a book."

"Okay."

"Deedle-deedle, deedle-doo."

"Guddu," she admonished, "sit quietly."

"Uncle, buy me a book."

"I will—soon. Just be patient, son."

Riyaz got up, took a large gift-wrapped package out of the drawer and slid it across the table toward her.

"No, Riyaz," she declined uneasily. "No."

"Jal ..."

"No, Riyaz. You keep it."

"But ... why Jal?"

She stared at the package and said softly, almost imperceptibly, "He knows, Riyaz."

“About what?”

“About the saris, about all the saris you gave me.”

“I never tried to hide it.”

“Even so, I never told him about them.”

“Never mind” he spoke nonchalantly, “what difference does it make? After all, I feel so ...”

“Riyaz!” she raised her arm as though trying to defend herself.

“Okay, let’s drop it,” he laughed. “But we’re at least old friends.”

“Riyaz, for God’s sake ...”

He rose and began pacing around the office.

The child, playing with the package, asked, “Mommy, what’s this?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Deedle-deedle, doo-dil-daa.”

“Guddu, be quiet.”

“Jamal,” Riyaz came over and sat near her on the table. “Only one year ago you were so happy—remember? Whenever I saw you, I felt a warm glow in my heart. I had lost you, but I was happy—because I knew you were happy.”

“Riyaz!”

He began pacing the room again. “Jal, what’s happened?” he asked. “Tell me what’s happened?”

“I don’t understand at all, Riyaz,” she answered, shaking her head in dismay.

“He was a simple, normal, intelligent man,” he began, “and ...” he added sadly, “a fortunate man, too. We grew up together, I’ve known him forever. Then, all of a sudden, something happened to him. Jal, I wonder if you know and you’re keeping it from me?”

“I don’t, Riyaz,” she said with a lump in her throat. “I don’t understand at all. All he does these days is gorge himself on food, sleep, and clown around. I can talk my head off from morning to night and he couldn’t care less. He squanders what little money there is. And ...” she wanted to mention his violent, animal way of making love but stopped short, adding instead, “there’s nothing left in the house.”

Riyaz stopped his furtive pacing as he reached the window. Opening it, he put both hands on the sill and reminisced. “You remember, Jal, don’t you, the day he beat me in the college union elections? After the results were announced that day, he came up to me so graciously to shake hands, but I refused. You stood in front of the faculty room watching us.”

She sat silently, tracing invisible lines on the glass tabletop with her

fingernails.

“Afterwards,” he continued, “when I was left alone in that auditorium, gaily decorated with paper flags and banners, when everyone else had gone, and the shame, the crushing feeling of defeat, had waned, I watched a violent storm blow away our posters, his and mine, and thought, “This man is truly worthy of her.” That day my life took a decisive turn. That day I lost you to him forever.”

“Riyaz,” she cried, “what’s the use of remembering all those things now?”

“You know, Jamal,” he turned around abruptly and leaned against the wall. “He who takes a fall in the daring days of youth can never stand fully upright again.”

She watched him, her eyes glistening with memories. He laughed gently and returned to his chair. “But what happened?” he asked waving his hand in the air. “This has really become a mystery to me. No incident, no accident, nothing—so what’s the matter with him, Jal?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her eyes suddenly moist with tears. “I don’t know anything.”

“Mommy,” the child called, “Mommy,” and then he tried, “Uncle.” Neither paid any attention.

She wiped her eyes dry and got up. “I’m going to the college for a while,” she announced. “I’m leaving Guddu here.” She leaned down, tidied the boy’s hair and explained, “Guddu, I’ll be back in a little while. You stay here with Uncle.” Kissing him on the forehead, she left.

When Shaukat finally woke up, he found his breakfast covered and neatly set out on the table. Sunbeams filtering through the window fell directly on it. He got out of bed, rinsed his mouth and had breakfast. Then he clasped his hands behind his head and lay down to watch the particles of dust floating in a wide beam of sunlight—a favorite pastime of his lately. It gave him a feeling of weightlessness that reminded him of flying. He had eaten his breakfast during that brief respite of calm which follows waking up and now he was trying to go back to sleep in the few remaining moments of that calm. He turned over in bed, facing the wall—a dusty, yellow wall. Before dozing off, he recalled that bright yellow hue, now accompanied by a smell—of fresh honey, of the bristly *sharin* flowers that suddenly flooded your nostrils as you wandered along a certain street on a summer evening and you knew that somewhere nearby there

was a *sharin* tree, or possibly that someone was watering a parched *sintha* plant, or maybe it was all just the past.

He remembered the university in their ancestral hometown, with its tall slender cypresses, expansive lawns, and old moss and ivy-covered buildings that had huge square columned verandahs, wide, stone staircases, and high-ceilinged rooms. Each building had its own separate minaret and a narrow, spiral staircase leading up to the turret. The door of the turret was kept locked at all times. Then, the day after that handsome fifth-year chemistry student with a permanent forlorn look in his eyes broke down one of the doors and jumped to his death, the doors of all the turrets were plastered over. And he wrote an account of the incident in the university magazine, which won him great popularity; and as university correspondent for one of the local newspapers he dealt with the same incident in an excellent article which established his fame. He was the leader of the debating team, known for his fiery rhetoric. He was the top student. He was here, there, he was all over the place.

The Riyaz-Shaukat duo was the talk of the entire campus. Even though they were each other's rivals for popularity, they were bosom buddies. Suave, jovial and carefree, Riyaz was an excellent athlete. He held the record for the 440-yard dash and was vice-captain of the field hockey team. His father owned an English-language newspaper and had given Shaukat a part-time job as a correspondent to help him pay for his studies. After hockey and track practice, Riyaz usually dropped in at Shaukat's and the two of them took off on their bikes searching for news stories around town and chasing girls in other neighborhoods (they were heroes to the girls in their immediate neighborhood and had to keep up their image). Over time, Shaukat had become almost a family member in Riyaz's household: he argued with Riyaz's mother as a son would and bossed around his sisters like an older brother. Often he stayed there for dinner and carried on heated political discussions afterwards with Riyaz's father while a bored-to-death Riyaz yawned and, unable to take it anymore, slapped him on the back saying, "Enough! My father's blood pressure is high enough already."

When Riyaz broke the record for the 440 dash, Shaukat spent a full three days coming up with a suitable caption to go under Riyaz's portrait in the university magazine. Riyaz almost burst into tears thanking him. And, as if to return the favor, Riyaz literally fought half the people in the hall to keep them from hooting Shaukat down during his speech in the intervarsity debating match.

Those were the exhilarating, saffron-yellow, deep emerald days of

youth when hearts throbbed with unbounded energy, eyes shone with invincible determination and, as if perched on a summit, you felt ready to soar at any moment. The days when the otherwise insignificant things in life—like the laughter of bidding farewell fading into the stillness of the night, like a loving pat on the back or the strange, cordless, telepathic rapport of minds and the momentary sparkle of the eyes (like when you're sitting quietly and suddenly both of you think of the same thing and you're startled a bit, then your eyes meet and you know intuitively what the other is thinking, and neither of you says a word and you just continue sitting in perfect silence), or the sound of footsteps outside on the verandah suggesting a familiar presence (like on interminable summer afternoons when you're sitting alone and you remember someone and wish so much that you could see him and at that very moment he arrives), or your own private jokes (which amuse you only when you remember them in the midst of a group)—somehow gave you a feeling of deep camaraderie, and by meeting just a couple of like-minded friends you felt all your wishes had come true. Greed had not yet tarnished your relationships, heartbreaks were still far away. In those days, both of them were happy and fulfilled in their own worlds.

Then suddenly one day that girl joined the history department. Shaukat and Riyaz were in the final year of their M.A. programs when Jamal Afroz Ansari, whom everyone called Jal, entered. She always wore green saris—which prompted the less sophisticated boys to dub her the Green Fairy. She wrinkled her auburn eyebrows when she spoke, especially when she became excited during a discussion. This made her appear very authoritative and majestic and, as a result, she was a successful debater. Both Riyaz and Shaukat had met her just after they had started college and she had come from her girls' college to participate in a debating match. She was wearing green that time, too. A rather tall, skinny girl with a nice high forehead and auburn hair, looking so vulnerable that at the start of her speech they had tried to boo her down. But once she glared at them, looking them straight in the eyes with confidence, and said something in her stabbing manner, they backed off and kept quiet. They were to meet her many more times after that day.

For a while they timidly stayed away from her when she entered the university. She was no longer the spindly, frail girl she'd been when they saw her years ago; she was truly a blossoming woman. Her skin was the color of honey and she had a broad, high forehead. Her hairline was smooth and straight and she combed her thick hair carelessly into a loose bun. She spoke with an air of authority as she knitted her brows slightly,

and bore herself with impenetrable reserve.

Independently, they each took note of these and similar inhibiting signs, but also of her immense grace and loveliness, and they began moving closer towards her and apart from each other. First they stopped mentioning her name between them, then there were jeering remarks, and then their friendship slowly waned as each went his separate way.

Shaukat wrote stories and made speeches and won trophies. He had Miss Jamal Afroz Ansari named the vice-captain of the debating team and printed a full-page picture of her in the university magazine with a glowing caption underneath. Riyaz advanced to the captainship of the hockey team and won the intervarsity championship. He made full use of his father's riches: he had a number of fine suits tailored and bought himself a small new car that he drove to the university every day. Riyaz and Shaukat were both at the peak of their popularity and success, and they both looked at her tense with expectation: whom would she ultimately choose? Shaukat would step onto the dais and after his "Mr. President, Honorable Judges, Ladies and Gentlemen" he would immediately glance at the first row where she was sure to be seated, tilting her bright forehead upwards, her slightly squinted eyes staring at him. He would look at her intently for a moment and then look away, as sentence after telling sentence rolled out of his mouth with such ease and vigor that he felt as though he were soaring. After each quarterly issue of the magazine came out, he would watch her all day long from the corner of his eyes as she leafed through it, waiting expectantly for her comments.

And there was Riyaz—whenever he made a good pass on the hockey field he was sure to glance at that green sari among the crowd of thousands, or run past her, panting for breath, after he had won an important race. On one pretext or another, he always managed to keep himself in her view. When the debating team went to Karachi, he took a few days off and went along. There, he joined the local boys in booing wildly during Shaukat's speech. Even so, the Shaukat-Jamal team won the trophy. As the two emerged from the crowd of their admirers, Riyaz walked up to an overjoyed Jamal and congratulated her. She thanked him and the two talked for a while. Seeing them together, Shaukat cut away and walked up onto one of the verandahs to watch them. When, finally, she excused herself and came over to Shaukat, he asked her, overstepping his bounds for the first time, "What were you two talking about?"

She smiled, "He was congratulating me, that's all."

His heart sank and jealously swelled up in his head. Feeling hurt and angry, he said, "It took that long to say congratulations!"

“You do think you have a claim on me, don’t you?” she snapped in dismay.

For a whole week afterwards he didn’t dare to go anywhere near her. These otherwise terribly insignificant things were somehow bringing him slowly toward heartbreak.

The decisive moment came when both he and Riyaz announced their candidacy for student union president. By this time, they had almost stopped talking to each other. A few days before the election, though, when Shaukat was just coming out of the snack bar, he found Riyaz waiting for him at the door. Riyaz came forward, put his hand on Shaukat’s shoulder lovingly, as in the old days, and said, “I hear you’re running, Shauki?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Don’t.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll lose, that’s why”.

“Just worry about yourself, friend,” Shaukat said with a confident, jeering laugh.

“You don’t have a chance, Shauki.”

“That remains to be seen,” said Shaukat, terribly on edge.

They glowered at each other for a long time. Finally, Riyaz removed his hand. “Okay, it’s up to you,” he said leaving “Just remember, though, Jal won’t be on your side.”

Shaukat’s heart skipped a beat, but he managed an empty, mocking laugh, saying “We’ll see about that.”

Support groups were formed, schemes devised, posters printed—a lot of campaigning went on, and mudslinging, too; scandals arose and slogans were thought up and the youthful, carefree souls waged war upon each other with wild abandon. Neither approached Jamal though; they both waited. Finally one day on the verandah she stopped Shaukat herself.

“There’s a lot of commotion around these days, mister,” she said with a laugh. “You’re really busy!”

“Not really.”

“Who else is running?” she asked, feigning ignorance.

“Ha, ha,” he tried to drown out his discomfort in a laugh. She became serious. “You haven’t asked me, Shaukat.”

“Asked you what?”

“For my vote.”

“Your vote?” He blushed. “Well, isn’t it mine already, Jal?”

“My, my—so sure!”

“Why not?”

She laughed in response, as if to say, “Very well then, Shauki.”

Riyaz seemed to have lost that very instant.

The day Shaukat won the election, his supporters carried him to Riyaz’s camp on their shoulders. They danced jubilantly around their rivals and stripped them of their trousers, right there, in full view of the faculty. Finally the professors had to break up the crowd before a riot broke out. That day Riyaz disappeared from the university.

He was never to return. A few days later Shaukat simply received a one line note: “Congratulations to Shaukat and Jamal.” He read it and got a laugh out of it, but Jamal was saddened. Later they heard that Riyaz had become the London correspondent for his father’s newspaper. That same year Shaukat placed first in his examinations. The next year he received the gold medal from the chancellor and he and Jamal got married. Within a few years he had become the best-known and highest paid freelance journalist in town. The search for new worlds, opportunities and successes soon brought them to this city which only had a few double-decker buses, and those only on a few select routes. They were very happy for some years after their marriage. But those times of bright success and achievement were now part of the past. He fell asleep thinking about their warm, golden color.

When he woke up it was well past noon. Jamal had not yet returned. He got up and dressed and then rummaged through her drawers for some money. He pocketed what he found and then sauntered out. Bright, mid-day sun stung his eyes so he quickly shielded them with his hand. Continuing on this way along the sidewalk for quite some distance, he came to an intersection, removed his hand, blinked a few times, looked around and then set off in one direction. Soon he found himself at the seashore. People were strolling along the beach. He stared at some and watched others casually. He entered the restaurant and took his favorite seat by the windows overlooking the ocean. The warm, abundant sunshine shone outside on the sandy beach and the surface of the water, but there was no escaping that deep, melancholy blue that seemed to loom everywhere in the atmosphere these days. A moist, heavy breeze, permeated by the distinct smell of the ocean, wafted through the dining hall. Breathing deeply to ease the oppressive heaviness of his heart, he planted his elbows on the table and fixed his gaze on the scene outside. People were beginning to come inside and food was being served. Some were drinking beer. Salim, a poet friend of his, appeared in the doorway accompanied by his

wife Jamila and a businessman friend, Karim Bhai. (Rumor had it that Karim Bhai was currently supporting Salim.) For a while the three glanced around the hall, then they came and sat at Shaukat's table.

"Hi, Shaukat."

"Oh, hi." He was startled. "Hello, hello."

"Where have you been hiding these days?"

"The Garden of Eden, where else?" he said. "Getting in shape."

"Huh? Oh, meet Karim Bhai Karachi-wallah," Salim introduced them. "And Karim Bhai, this is my friend Shaukat Mahmud, the country's leading newspaperman."

"A newspaperman?" Karim Bhai asked. "A journalist?"

"Yes, yes, a journalist," Shaukat and Salim replied simultaneously.

"Very great!" the middle-aged, dull-looking Bohra opened his boorish mouth and let out a clumsy laugh. "A very great journalist!" He was already quite drunk. He tried a few times to attract the attention of the waiters rushing past them and then, all of a sudden, he became terribly upset and began pounding the table. "Dammit, what's this mix-up here?" He yelled, "Waiter! Waiter!"

When the waiter came, Karim Bhai ordered three beers and a lime juice.

"I'm planning to eat, too," Shaukat said.

"He's planning to eat, too," Karim Bhai blurted. "Sure, sure, and later ... sala."

"Sala—great!" Shaukat gave him a friendly whack on the shoulder and laughed.

The waiter brought the order. Karim Bhai grabbed the mug and began gulping down his beer. Salim and Shaukat sat holding theirs. Jamila watched Shaukat closely in between sips of lime juice.

"It's been a while since I've seen your name in print," Salim remarked.

"It's also been a while since I've seen my name in print," Shaukat replied. "Surprising, isn't it?"

"Why aren't you writing?"

"What should I write?" he asked innocently.

"Sala, it's all screwed up here." Karim Bhai began pounding the table again. "Waiter! Waiter!"

The waiter brought him a refill.

"Bah!" Salim emitted a dog-like grunt. Then he laughed and said, "I wrote a new poem."

"Writing poems is also a very useful thing. About as important as get-

ting in shape, I'd say. Congratulations!"

"Sala, everyone's dead over here," Karim Bhai began drumming on the table again making a racket. "Everyone's dead!" He was yelling so loudly that the waiter scampered back to set another full mug in front of him.

"What's this I hear about moving the capital?" Salim asked.

"They're putting it on wheels," Shaukat answered.

"Huh?"

"Once they've put the wheels on they'll fill it with gas and herd it along the Garden of Eden."

"Why aren't you writing these days, Shauki?"

"I wonder about that myself," he answered. "Strange, isn't it?"

"Oh, how I long to see your delightfully scandalous writing again!"

"Salim," for the first time he sounded both serious and interested, "let me hear your poem."

"Oh, it's nothing," Salim laughed.

"Come on. Let me hear it."

Salim coughed and cleared his throat. He peered into space for a minute. "You are Lord of the heavens," he was speaking in a soft, melodic voice. "You are Lord of the heavens, I am master of the earth." Soon he was altogether absorbed in his own voice as he recited the poem.

Shaukat's face brightened up as he listened. He almost forgot about the scene outside. But as soon as the poem finished and Karim Bhai began making his racket again, Shaukat's face became dull, his pupils shrank and froze, and he started staring outside languidly at the sandy beach bustling with shiny bodies in splashy floral prints, wide-ribbed straw hats and dark glasses. The three sat drinking their beers in silence. Suddenly Salim squirmed in his chair. "Shaukat," he said, leaning forward and feeling somewhat uneasy, "what are you doing these days?"

"Nothing."

"Why don't you write?"

"Write what?" he asked. "What can I possibly write now?"

There was another helpless silence. Karim Bhai was so drunk by now that he could barely get half the beer into his mouth, and the other half splashed on his clothes with each gulp. Jamila gently pushed her glass to the center of the table.

"It's a pleasant day," Salim observed somewhat sadly.

Both Salim and Jamila started looking at Shaukat's face, which had brightened up suddenly. He was looking at them with shiny, cheerful eyes.

“Have you read *Day*?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“A very subtle piece.”

“What?”

“*Day*.”

“Day what?”

“The novella” he said curtly.

Salim and Jamila exchanged quizzical looks. The same cold, glassy stare returned to Shaukat’s eyes. Once again he was looking outside at the muddy blue.

Suddenly a jug full of water slipped from a waiter’s hand and shattered into pieces in the middle of the hall. Just as suddenly, Karim Bhai buried his mouth in his mug and broke into loud, uncontrollable sobs. Salim set his elbows on the table and watched him calmly for a while as he cried into his mug and blabbered, “Sala, they’ve really screwed it up this time. Sala, they duped my Prince, my Prince, hu, hu, hu.” Then Salim grabbed Karim Bhai’s arm to help him as he said, “Let’s go.”

Karim Bhai got up with difficulty, the mug still glued to his lips, and stumbled along beside him.

“Come on,” Salim said to Jamila, but she just sat there without saying anything, tapping the tabletop with her fingernails.

“So you want to stay for a while?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then. See you later, Shaukat, and,” he added with a laugh, “take good care of my wife. She’s in love with you, you know.” Then, supporting a sobbing Karim Bhai on his shoulder, he walked him toward the cashier.

Still confused, Shaukat looked inquisitively at Jamila who explained, “They shot Prince today.”

“Prince?”

“Karim Bhai’s best horse.” She leaned on the table. “He was leading in the race today when he tripped and broke both forelegs. Then and there they shot him in the head. What a pity! He was such a beautiful animal!”

Shaukat leaned back in his chair as a bright lively color floated across his face bringing in its wake the vivid, lucid memory of a scene from his high school days.

Early one morning he was riding to school on his bicycle when, all of a sudden, a handsome young man, riding bareback on a feisty horse, galloped into view. At the intersection the horse snorted and reared up on

its hind legs, waving its shod front hooves in midair. He had stopped his bicycle along the side of the road and watched, resting one foot on the ground. There wasn't the slightest trace of panic on the rider's face. The tremendous brute force he was exerting to gain control of the horse made him grit his teeth, which made him look as though he were laughing. He seemed to be wrestling with the unruly animal, standing in the stirrups and hanging by the reins. Within minutes he brought the horse under control. Putting its front legs down on the ground again, the horse neighed and sped off, kicking millions of dust particles into the golden morning sunshine.

There was nothing extraordinary about the horse's departure, but sitting here now and seeing that murky blue color surging up outdoors and assaulting him through the window, the memory of that wide, shimmering white, well-groomed back, the rider confidently seated astride it, and the two of them moving along in perfect harmony, grace and balance came back to him and reminded him that his heart, too, had once been an exuberant, restless Arabian thoroughbred.

Salim, who had by now finally managed to free the mug from Karim Bhai's lips, paid the bill and stepped outside supporting him by the arm.

"What would you like to drink, my pet?" Shaukat asked Jamila.

"Lime juice."

Shaukat ordered another lime juice for Jamila and some food for himself.

While he ate, she took one small sip, leaned slightly forward, and said, "Shauki, did you go to see Riyaz?"

"No."

"Why not?"

He continued to eat in cold silence.

"You promised, Shauki."

"What?"

"That you would go to see him once."

"When did I promise that?" he said, his eyes dancing mischievously.

"When?" She waved her hand in frustration and continued in an uncertain voice, "Only a week ago, that's when. Have you already forgotten all about it?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, Shauki," she shook her head in exasperation. "Now you're even starting to tell lies."

"That's nothing difficult." He returned to eating.

"Shauki," she put her hand on his arm lovingly. "I'll accept that you

... listen to me, Shaukat.”

“I am listening, my sweet.”

“Once at least,” she timidly touched his shoulder, “talk to him. I’m sure you can bring him round. Just once, Shauki ... for my sake.”

“For your sake! How much more do you expect me to do for your sake?”

“For my sake!” she blurted. “What have you ever done for my sake?”

He stopped eating for a second and stared at her—another one of those golden faces that pleased him so. They had been together during college as well as at the university, and although she had fallen madly in love with him, she never admitted it to anyone. She was one of those women who are able to attain a sense of fulfillment and wholeness merely by quietly loving someone. He knew it but could do nothing for her. He had never felt attracted to her. And yet, at this moment anyway, her bright golden face seemed infinitely desirable.

He finished eating and stood up. “Okay,” he said blankly, “let’s go.”

They left the restaurant.

“Shauki, go slower,” she pleaded as she struggled to keep pace with him on the sidewalk.

In a little while they entered the imposing, seven-story building of the Daily —. Newspapers were stacked in the large hallway where the packer boys were tying them into small, neat bundles. From the basement came the whining drone of the presses. The distinctive smell of newsprint hung everywhere. They took the elevator to the fourth floor. Men wearing glasses and carrying briefcases milled about in the galleries and corridors, or stood talking as they wiped beads of perspiration off their brows.

“Hello, sir,” a reporter interrupted his conversation with a friend and came toward him.

“Hello,” he looked at the man with blank, unrecognizing eyes and moved on.

“Who was that?” asked the reporter’s friend.

“You don’t know him?” he exclaimed. “Why, that’s Shaukat Mahmud.”

“Really?” the friend was jolted. “So that’s Shaukat Mahmud!”

“Yes, the pioneer of modern journalism,” said the first one with a tinge of sarcasm, then added, “on his high horse.”

“But Anwar,” said the second, “have you read his articles on Bengal?”

“Sure I have,” Anwar answered irritated. “I’ve read a lot of his stuff.”

“I’ve wanted to meet him for a long time. He hardly writes anything these days.”

“Yeah, well, he’s a big shot now.”

“Was that woman his wife?”

“That’s not his wife! His wife is ...” Anwar joined his middle finger and his thumb, winked, and let out a slight whistle, “A-1, I mean A-1!”

Shaukat and Jamila walked up to the door which bore the sign “Managing Director.”

“Come on,” Shaukat said.

“No, you go in. I’ll wait in the office with his secretary. And Shauki,” she pleaded, “try your best. My prayers are with you.”

“V for victory,” he answered as he opened the door and entered the air-conditioned office. Riyaz sat bent over his desk wearing black-framed reading glasses. He was writing something on a piece of white paper. Shaukat pulled out a chair and sat down facing him.

“Hello.”

Riyaz looked up. He removed his glasses and put them on the glass desktop, then leaning back in his chair and letting out a deep sigh he said warmly, “Hello Shauki.”

“Hello, Riyaz,” Shaukat’s eyes aimlessly scanned the room with its large, framed pictures on the walls.

“Long time no see,” Riyaz remarked affably.

“You haven’t been around either.”

Riyaz laughed, “I was right here.”

“And so was I, ha, ha, in a manner of speaking.”

Riyaz leisurely filled his pipe, lit it, and began puffing on it lightly.

“Well, how have you been?” he asked.

“Fine. Just fine.”

“Jal came by.”

“When?”

“This morning. She got a job.”

“Where?”

“At the college.”

“You’ve lost weight, Riyaz.”

“I have?” he laughed somewhat uncomfortably. “No, there’s been a lot of work lately, that’s all.”

“Oh, you’ve begun working hard?”

“Come on.”

“Riyaz ...” He squirmed in his chair a bit, then settled down, resting his elbows on the table.

“She’s starting from the first of the month,” Riyaz said. “Although it’s only temporary....”

“Riyaz,” he cleared his throat, “I’ve come about a job.”

Riyaz’s eyes retreated into their sockets. He stared at a painting on the wall. “I bought this Sadiqain painting just today. How do you like it?”

“I like it fine, just fine.”

“And now,” Riyaz rose, I’m commissioning him to do some murals for this spot.” He pointed at the wall to his right. “What do you think?”

“Riyaz,” Shaukat spoke up, quickly rising from his chair, “I’m looking for a job.”

“A job?” Riyaz acted startled, as though he were hearing it for the first time, and laughed. “Sit down, Shauki. *You* need work?”

He sat down quietly.

“But you’re a famous man. Your pen is worth a lot—or at least, it used to be.”

“Worth, my foot! I only came to ask for a little space in your newspaper.”

“You were our star correspondent, Shauki,” Riyaz spoke with a tinge of sadness. “And you left us.”

“Star correspondent—my foot!”

“You said that any newspaper in the country would consider itself fortunate to have you writing for it, and you left us.”

“Okay, Okay,” he rose to his feet, laughing and quivering with anger all at once. “I was proud of my pen and I’ve paid for that pride. But that doesn’t prove my pride was unwarranted. What it does prove, though, is that you, the gods of journalism ... are ignorant.”

“Sit down, Shauki,” Riyaz said gently. “Who says your pride was unwarranted? Even today you could do absolutely first-rate reporting if you chose to. But, these foolish ideas—if only you could ...”

“Absolutely first-rate?” Shaukat yelled. “Is that first-rate reporting? This stuff that you do or commission others to do for you, that stuff I used to do? This sleazy sensational garbage? This second-rate fiction? You’ve never seen first-rate reporting, Riyaz!”

“I read a lot of newspapers from all over the world, Shaukat. And even if I didn’t, it wouldn’t make any difference. Journalism is a business.”

“But I want to make an art of that business. I want to raise its standard and bring it to a level where perfect rapport is created between the writer and the reader, where they both can be spared these sweeping generalizations and engage in a free and intelligent dialogue like civilized people. Are these crazy notions?”

Suddenly the light on Riyaz’s intercom lit up. He reached over and turned the switch. “Professor Sharif is here to see you,” came the voice of

his secretary. “Five minutes,” Riyaz answered quickly as he switched the intercom off. He leaned down and took a package of papers out of the bottom drawer. There was a thin layer of dust on it. When he spoke, there was a trace of irritation in his voice.

“We argued about all this exactly one year ago today, you must remember. There’s no point in repeating it. Your articles,” he pointed to the package, “I’ve had them for a year but I don’t dare print them. I don’t know much about literature. These may be good literature, but they’re not good journalism, that much I know. Talent you have, Shauki, business sense you don’t. I’m not blaming you, I’m simply stating my position. We have to give the public what it wants. That’s what journalism is all about, the world over.”

“Riyaz,” his spirit sagged, “give me a chance. I’m sure I can bring about a revolution in journalism. I don’t have any business experience, but I do know the public. Readers aren’t as dumb as we make them out to be. We mold the public’s taste—good or bad. I guarantee you that my readership will be what it once was, if not right away, then certainly within six months.”

“Tell me one thing, Shauki,” Riyaz stared at him intently and asked, “who planted these crazy ideas in your head?”

“Crazy ideas? I don’t understand.”

“All this stuff about art.”

“Leave that out of it.”

“You were doing just fine and all of a sudden you just couldn’t hand in anything worth much. What happened?”

“Our reporting of public life isn’t much different than our stock-exchange reports anymore. And we seem to have destroyed public opinion altogether. Journalism could use a bit of creativity, Riyaz, couldn’t it?”

Riyaz filled his pipe quietly, Shaukat continued, “I’m not asking for a large salary. I’m ready to start all over again. You can give me raises gradually, very gradually, Riyaz. Just give me a chance.”

“I can’t take that risk,” Riyaz summed up his position, suddenly very fed up. “We can’t stay in business if we give the public your kind of stuff. I’m buying two more papers and plan to increase our feature articles. I can’t very well go in for these crazy experiments, just for your sake. The market is highly competitive. If the paper were to hit a slump, that would pretty much be the end of it. You’ve seen it happen, far too often.”

“You don’t forget the past, Riyaz,” he exploded. But he quickly overcame his anger, moved toward the edge of his chair, and pleaded, “We were ... we were friends once, too, weren’t we? Remember? I stayed up

three nights to write that note for you in the magazine, remember? I know people who to this day remember that note word for word. The day is still vivid in my memory, as though it were just yesterday, when you decided to run for captain and came to me and said there was politics going on, that some others were supporting Ashraf, and I said, "Don't you worry, Riyaz, if politics is what they want, then we'll give it to them." Politics, yes: in the magazine, in the team, everywhere, inside and out, and I did it, I ... remember?"

"Shaukat, you're losing it." Riyaz's face was red with anger. "Listen," he said, "I'll give you an advance. Go away to some quiet spot for a bit. Take care of your health and have a good, hard look at your work." He took a fat, fine black leather wallet out of his pocket, counted out ten hundred-rupee bills and shoved them across the glass tabletop. Then, startled by Shaukat's reddening face and quivering lips, he quickly added, "Don't think of it as anything else. It's an advance. That's all."

A blistering rebuke formed on Shaukat's lips as he sprang to his feet. Just as fast, Riyaz switched on the intercom and said, "Show the professor in!"

"Yes, sir," came the secretary's voice over the intercom.

Riyaz overcame his anger. "My friends can see me anytime, even without appointments, but I feel obliged to see those who have appointments with me."

The door opened. A middle-aged professor walked in followed by Jamila. Riyaz was surprised but pretended to take no notice of her and moved towards the professor, extending his hand.

"Come in, Professor, please come in."

Fists clenched, teeth gritted, eyes bloodshot, Shaukat stood poised to spring at any second. Then, feeling Jamila's fingers on his arm, he suddenly relaxed, as though pints of warm blood had just been drained from his body. His eyes lost their gleam, and he followed Jamila out of Riyaz's office with his head hung very low.

Neither spoke the rest of the way. During the bus ride, he looked woodenly at the scenes as they glided by outside. When they reached his apartment, he headed straight to the bed and slumped down on it. Jamila stood at the window watching cars dashing through the street. A little while later, she joined him on the bed. He kissed her impetuously a few times without uttering a word and then slowly lay down holding her waist.

Afterwards, she found herself standing beside the bed for a long time, watching him breathing deeply in sleep. His dull, glassy eyes were half

closed and he was sleeping soundly with his mouth wide open. His delicate but strong, white, proud beloved body—well-rounded prominent shoulders, long, thin arms, broad chest covered with light, golden hair, sleek, taut belly, narrow waist, round, limber, muscular thighs, long calves—now lay vanquished and exhausted.

She sat down on the floor, holding the edge of the bed, and broke into slow rhythmic sobs.

After some time, she got up, looked in the mirror on the wall and arranged her hair, then she slipped out quietly, closing the door behind her.

When he woke up, the sunlight was beginning to fade. Drops of perspiration speckled his forehead. A large greenish-yellow fly buzzed incessantly against the skylight pane. Lying flat on his back, he listened to the sad, monotonous hum of its wings and watched the afternoon light spread over the room. Finally he got up and walked over to the window. Cars sped by on the street below, leaving bluish clouds of exhaust, and people walked rapidly along sidewalks. Occasionally they would recognize one another from a distance, wave, smile empty smiles, and go on. A portly old woman mumbled inaudibly to herself or to the child holding her finger as she moved along, deftly guarding him from the crowd. A bus screeched to a halt. Some passengers clambered down and went their way. Others, waiting to climb aboard, formed a queue, then all at once the stampede began with their pushing, shoving and swearing at each other as they tried to get on. A beggar woman holding out her hand to everyone became trapped in the scramble somehow and got jostled around. Unaware of the jostling, a dog began leisurely crossing the street. The bus left noisily, spewing out clouds of exhaust. A bitter yellow taste spread in Shaukat's mouth. "Money!" he sneered, "money!"

Sensing the stares of a few passersby looking up at him, he drew back from the window. He looked at himself in dismay and began to change. Then he walked out, without bothering to close the door.

On the sidewalk, the beggar woman thrust her hand in front of him. The shadows of the apartment buildings lay sprawled across the street in the waning golden sunlight. An attractive young woman in a yellow sari breezed by stirring in him a sense of deep comfort. His lifeless eyes became mobile again. He stopped and turned on his heels to look at her as she continued on her way, taking small, measured steps, swinging her arms, swaying her hips, carrying the gentle swellings of her breasts modestly—drifting further and further away, as elusive as the past, and also as comforting. He didn't resume his walk until after she had entered her apartment.

Yes, he thought, he had been very happy for a few years after winning Jamal. He had done everything he could to prove himself worthy of her. He had perfected the best possible form of exaggerated, sensational reporting and become famous throughout the country. His daily column was printed in the largest newspaper and his average readership ran into tens of thousands. Important and influential editors hounded and begged him but he would not give them the time of day. In those days they lived in a splendid apartment, which Jamal had decorated with antique Spanish furniture and thick crimson English velveteen drapes. There was a huge refrigerator in the kitchen, and Jamal could sit on a stool and cook in stainless steel pots on her electric stove. (Where did it all disappear in the brief period of a year?) The white telephone would ring day after day and he would answer it, leaning over his writing table, with such an air of confidence and authority and in such a lively tone of voice. Yes, indeed, he had been very happy for a few years because he was doing all of it for Jamal's sake. Jamal. An old, scintillating memory came to mind.

April was nearly over and spring was at the end of its glory. Finals were finished and Jamal had invited all her friends for tea. White poplars lining the backyard stood tall and majestic in their silent splendor and the changing season had cast its quiet spell over the golden afternoon.

Inside, Jamal mingled among the crowd of friends with a feeling of perfect ease. The soft, familiar sounds of "Jal ... Jal ..." amid the boisterous, youthful laughter announced her vital presence in different parts of her spacious living room. Even though every single man in the party that afternoon knew perfectly well that she was Shaukat's and Shaukat hers, none showed even a trace of jealousy. They were all blended together, by that open honest laughter that only Jamal could inspire, and appeared completely happy and at ease. When she moved, she seemed to carry the entire decor of the room along, and when she stopped to talk with someone—affable small talk, no more—it was as though all of life's grace and repose descended upon that person, a sense of wholeness that delighted and restored a man. Jamal was one of those women who did not need to love a man to feel whole—rather, men felt whole just talking to her and seeking her friendship.

On that golden afternoon in late April, standing alone by the window, teacup in hand, Shaukat marveled at the whole scene as he took in the glory of that moment—that unique and altogether immortal moment when he heard the true melody of Jamal's being for the first time and saw, as though in a flash, the very texture of her exquisite tapestry. He concluded, then, that she was one of those women who inhabit the dreams of

young men but are seen so seldom in real life that when they do appear—it makes no difference whether they are close by or far away or whether they belong to someone else—their gracious warmth and inner radiance, their caring nature and the natural simplicity of their minds instantaneously transform them into lifelong memories. Such women are the property of no one man; they are the collective aesthetic resource of one and all. (That scintillating moment was still alive in his memory.) Jamal, who was now his wife, he was doing all of it for her sake, and he was the luckiest man in the world.

It was around this time that Riyaz suddenly resurfaced. One day, after Shaukat had come back from his trip to Bengal, he found Riyaz sitting in his living room. They greeted one another with great affection and warmth, as old friends do. It seemed as if the bad times had been forgotten. He noticed that Riyaz had grown sober and his manner of speaking betrayed a faint sadness.

Riyaz told him that he had purchased a newspaper. He wanted to turn it into the city's best. He needed fresh blood and might ask Shaukat's help with that. Shaukat had assured him of his full cooperation, and the two friends had lapsed into reminiscing about old times.

Shaukat began to write regularly for Riyaz's paper and made it one of the top three in less than a year. Riyaz then decided to create a chain of newspapers and started publishing a weekly and a fortnightly as well. Both turned out to be great successes. Once again a brief period of heartwarming closeness, reminiscent of their earlier friendship, ensued. Yes, for a few years he had been very happy!

Still, even then, the deep golden yellow that filled the space around him began to show traces of a creeping melancholy blue. He hadn't been fully aware of it then, but in retrospect it all seemed very clear. Now, and even in those days, that feeling of wholeness, that sense of perfect harmony that gave his body comfort and a quiet, tranquil strength, had disappeared. He had often experienced such comforting strength in his childhood right after performing ablutions and saying prayers, (never during the prayers, though, only afterwards) and this feeling persisted until the state of ritual purity was somehow broken, and in his early youth he experienced the same feeling after writing a short story. He had lost it now. Moving quickly along the path of success, he had no time for it. He kept putting off trying to regain it. Every once in a while, though, he sensed a dull weight on his heart and stopped in his tracks. When, subconsciously, he was reminded of his prominent—and consequently very vulnerable—position in journalism, of his high standard of living and his

excessive work, he would put down his pen halfway through an article and lean back in his chair to recollect that golden color that eased his heart, or he would think of writing a short story to recapture that rare and wondrous feeling. He would take a deep breath and say, “After this, for sure,” and lean over his article, putting off work on the story to some future moment once again.

How many times had he pushed those brilliant ideas back into the nooks and crannies of his brain assuring himself that in the near future he would be prosperous enough to quit his present hateful work, or at least reduce it drastically, so that he’d have time to concentrate comfortably on stringing those sparkling ideas into one beautiful chain and regain that invigorating feeling. That day never came.

He was never able to let up in that frantic pursuit and those sparks in his mind slowly dimmed. Eventually one day, as he sat pushing his pen along on the paper, he stopped for just one moment as though taking a breath. He couldn’t continue. It was like an engine that continues clattering along on its own momentum for a while, even after it has run out of fuel, but stops dead once it’s turned off and can’t be started again. He shuddered as he looked about and saw that turbid, murky blue closing in on him. In an instant he realized with frightening certainty that the soothing golden color had become an irretrievable part of the past.

He abandoned everything else and sat at his desk, pen in hand, staring at empty sheets of white paper, unable to write a word for three days. He searched in vain for a drop of life’s nectar in every crevice, in every corner of the garbage dump of his mind, then he gave up, realizing he was unable to write short stories: “I’ll turn journalism into an art instead.” It was all downhill from that day on.

SCREEEECH! A fast-moving car slammed on its brakes and a dapper young man behind the wheel leaned out and yelled harmless obscenities. Shaukat raised his head, laughed sheepishly, and ran across the street. The sun had set. Some boys were playing cricket along the sidewalk.

Suddenly he broke his stride and looked up at the horizon. Sunsets in this city were always delightfully abrupt, unlike those in his hometown where evening colors evolved gradually. Here, day seemed bright and sunlight lasted right up to the very moment of sundown, then a strange color—a flaming pink and lilac with streaks of blue—shot across the sky all at once and nightfall would only be moments away. In the interval of these minutes, the entire swarming population of the city came to a sudden halt, or at least seemed to. Rows of streetlights went on in an instant and the headlights of cars flashed by in the street. Right before ones eyes,

the guise and complexion of the city changed and a distinct difference could be discerned in the sound of people's voices, in their gait, and even in the traffic noises. These few minutes were the boundary separating the two cities, a "no-man's-land" in which one could feel the special, incessant, inner heartbeat of the city.

At that time of day, standing at the edge of night, he had listened again and again to the fast, merciless and saddening drumbeat of this population. He felt its dank indifference chill his bones and quicken his heart. Now, this music flowed in his veins once again. He had become one with the rest of them.

He looked around indifferently. A cricket ball whizzed by, barely missing his head. He ducked instinctively. The boys threw their bats into the air and shouted merrily. He went his way, deftly avoiding them.

The pace of the populace hadn't become intolerably fast yet. Suddenly, a row of street lamps overhead lit up as far as his eyes could see. He was slightly startled and abruptly took a right turn into a small, deserted lane where the street lights hadn't come on yet. The only sounds were the damp sea wind whooshing past and the bits of old newspaper caching on his legs before being swept along in front of him. One by one, lights were being turned on in the apartments lining the lane. A red curtain fluttered in a second-floor apartment and he could hear a radio playing. Bing Crosby was singing "India" so he stopped below the window to listen to that song from the past. A woman appeared at the window, leaned out and glanced around, then she said something to someone inside and giggled.

He jumped as the street lights popped on lighting up the whole lane and then continued along. It was night now and the true beat of the city had settled into place in the background. Cars sped by, their headlights blinding pedestrians momentarily. The lights were also on inside a few cars and you could see corpulent, cigar-chewing men behind the wheels, dressed in sharkskin jackets. Their middle-aged wives in gold-embroidered saris sat next to them, looking out the windows with immense self-satisfaction. Their children lounged in the back seat, avidly reading comics. Attractive, well-groomed, healthy families, probably rushing off to dine or go to the movies with other families like them.

He stood on the curb for a long time, waiting for the traffic to let up, then he got a bit flustered and crossed the street. Up ahead, chic young men in snug pants, hands resting modishly on their hips, stood here and there in groups teasing shapely girls who breezed by in tight outfits, lips pressed together, giggling. This scene, too, appeared very heartwarming

and he stopped for a while to watch.

Crowds of people bustled in and out of the large stores facing him. There was a bookstore that people visited only occasionally, strolling through it looking around casually as though in a museum.

Traffic slowed and he ran across the street. Crowds of people surrounded him on the sidewalk. There were students on their way to night schools after the day's grueling work and there were boorish, uncouth, *biri*-smoking millionaires who had just sold stocks and were now jabbering away in the city's comical, commercial jargon—"S.O.B., Screwed up, Going rate, Market, Brisk, Slump"—that city people exhale like their own breath conjuring up the image of a donkey's carcass that has sprung back to life and, having shaken off all the vultures pecking at it, makes straight for the heart of the city, braying loudly and spreading fear and shock among the people. There were also women with their beautifully boring faces lifted up as they did their shopping swinging shiny plastic purses and intellectuals who carried their brains on their shoulders like street vendors carry their wares. There were petty clerks who had become so used to life's indignities they would waste their entire evening chewing just one paan. There were beggar kids panhandling and rickshaw-wallahs pedaling away with their butts lifted off their saddles leaning over the handlebars—a source of quaint amusement for the old American women tourists. This simpering crowd of fallen humanity jostled along up and down the street with mouths gaping, eyes shut, pocketed hands dumbly jingling coins and lips parted in stupid, heedless laughter.

Becoming more and more uneasy, he dodged his way out of this crowd, out of this commonplace tale of cruel and unjust human relationships written in bold letters but never actually read.

He came upon many bright and many half-lit areas along his way. In one spot, Shaukat saw a paan-seller alone in his stall with his head bent low over the paan he was making. He heard the strains of an old, familiar tune playing on the man's radio. That tune hounded him like a haunting memory. Again and again he tried to focus in on it, but failed.

He had now walked into an expensive neighborhood where the streets were lit dimly in the soft, muted light of the street lamps. The front and back lawns of spacious homes luxuriated peacefully under bright yard lights, and colorful curtains fluttered serenely on the doors. Inside, public officials sat gossiping about the problems and private lives of high government officials. They may have been phoning for movie reservations or complaining about the country's appalling economic condition. There were also powerful industrialists expressing frustration over work-

ers' strikes as they stared angrily at the neighboring bungalows of the public officials.

Their bubbly, feisty teenage children roamed the streets aimlessly in small bands, smoking cigarettes clandestinely behind the sweet-smelling hedges of some tart citrus, or racing their motor scooters up and down the streets uproariously.

That tune was still pursuing him. He stopped for a while and tried hard to pinpoint its source in the past, but it evaded him once again. Two scooters zoomed past him. As he longingly watched them disappear in the distance the lively glint momentarily returned to his eyes. His arm rose involuntarily and he called out after them in a quiet, almost gentle voice, "Bravo!"

He wanted to yell and wish those golden youths the best on their doomed march, but he stopped short because it suddenly dawned on him that his own heart was now stone dead—the same heart that had once soared long and high like a stout, fearless bird.

Shaukat tiptoed into his apartment. Guddu was sitting on the floor leafing through a small, thin book. The sound of dishes clattering came from the kitchen. Guddu's face blossomed when he saw him and he spread his tiny arms and shouted, "Daddy, Daddy!"

"Guddu," he spoke lovingly as he sat down beside the boy and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Reading."

"Deedle-deedle, "deedle-doo," he said. "Deedle-deedle, deedle-doo," Guddu repeated, his eyes glowing mischievously.

"Deedle-deedle, deedle-daa."

"Deedle-deedle, deedle-daa."

Father and son burst into ringing laughter. Jamal peeked out of the kitchen, smiled and pulled back her head.

"What are you doing, son?"

"I already told you. I'm reading."

"Really? Since when did you start reading?"

"Uncle gave this to me," the boy thrust the book under Shaukat's nose.

"Who?"

"Uncle Riyaz."

Shaukat looked through the book. The title was *Golden Sayings for*

Children. He laughed, “Ha, ha.”

“Ha, ha,” echoed the child as he put his arms around Shaukat’s neck and started to swing. “I can read it.”

“Wow! You can? But you don’t know your ABC’s yet.”

“I can!” insisted the boy.

“Okay, then read it!”

“This, here. It says ‘Always tell the truth!’”

“Wow!” Shaukat was truly surprised. “When did you start reading?”

“Uncle Riyaz bought this for me.”

“Ha, ha,” he put the book down on the floor, “you don’t know your ABC’s.”

“But I can read it. I can! I can! I can!”

“Shauki,” Jamal appeared at the kitchen door, “Guddu is pretty smart.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” she came and sat by him on the floor. “I read it for him once, just once, and he already knows it by heart.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Guddu, show Daddy how you can read.”

“This says, ‘Always tell the truth!’” said the boy.

“Ha, ha.”

“And this, here, ‘Work hard!’”

“Ha, ha,” he leaned down and kissed the boy’s forehead lovingly. “Doodle-doodle-daa.”

“Doodle-doodle-daa,” the boy repeated after him.

“Deedle-deedle-doo.”

“Deedle-deedle-doo.”

They both burst out laughing again. Chanting “doodle-doodle,” he began tickling his son who started to squirm and turn somersaults of laughter. When he got to the wall his hand fell on a broken toy. He looked at it and cried, “Daddy, my plane broke.”

“Oh, how did that happen?”

“It just broke,” answered the child. “Daddy, make me another one.”

“Make you a plane?”

“Make me a plane.”

“Okay,” he tore a page out of the book and began to fold it into a plane.

“Daddy!” the boy screamed. “Not out of that, out of newspaper!”

“Out of newspaper?” He continued making the plane.

“Daddy tore my ‘Always tell the truth!’”

Shaukat made the plane and flung it into the air with a loud “Zooom!”

“Daddy, Daddy, give it to me.” The boy stretched out his hand and ran after him.

The airplane shot out the window and floated down into the street. The boy clapped in delight. Shaukat tore out another page.

“Daddy, not from that!” the boy shrieked. “Daddy tore my ‘Work hard!’”

“All right, All right,” Shaukat said with mounting irritation, “I read it too,” and finished making the airplane.

“Give it to me, Daddy, give it to me,” the boy shouted. He snatched the plane from Shaukat’s hand flying it around the room making “Zooom, zooom” noises and clapping his hands in sheer childish delight.

Jamal, who had meanwhile returned to the kitchen, appeared at the door. “Shauki, dinner is ready.”

“You’re fantastic, my turtledove,” he said. “I’m starving.”

Without a word, he eagerly ate his dinner. Guddu fell asleep in his mother’s lap soon after. When they finally got up, turned the lights off and went to bed, the air in the room felt terribly stuffy. A few moths drubbed against the walls and windowpanes. And then came the sound of her voice, “No, Shauki. Unh unh.”

“My dove, my little turtledove.”

“God. Shauki, what’s gotten into you?”

“Sweetheart,” he coaxed her. “My love, Jal.”

“For God’s sake,” she pleaded. “For God’s sake.”

Early the next morning Jamal was sitting in Riyaz’s living room. Riyaz lounged on the sofa across from her. He had on white flannel trousers and a bright yellow polo shirt. For the past hour he had been on the phone continuously, talking to his office. Guddu returned from his solitary wanderings on the verandah and sat beside her. “Mommy,” he said, “can I go down to the street?”

“No.”

A few minutes later he asked again, “Mommy, can I go down to the street?”

“No, Guddu!” she replied sternly. “You may not go down to the street!”

Guddu began swinging his legs energetically. Riyaz suddenly put down the receiver and sat up straight. “What a miserable life we newspapermen lead,” he commented. “No rest, even on Sundays.”

“Yes, I know,” she laughed, “I’m married to one.”

Riyaz looked at her with deep, sad eyes. She winced and, avoiding his stare, looked around the room. On the walls, old group photos hung between large framed paintings. All of his trophies and cups, dulled by time and neglect, lay scattered on tables. The green drapes were gathered up in shiny brass curtain rings and a steady sea breeze flowed pleasantly through the room.

It was Sunday morning. (When she had gotten up, Shaukat was still asleep. She had tried in vain to rouse him, and then had gone ahead and fed Guddu breakfast. After that she left, closing the door of the apartment quietly behind her.) Outside, a bright morning sun shone brilliantly over lush green lawns. Boys were playing cricket on the sidewalks.

When Guddu asked for the third time, “Mommy, can I please go down to the street?” she was thinking that it was the first time she had been inside Riyaz’s house. One other time, just after Riyaz had moved to this city, she had seen the outside of the house. One day she had been waiting to catch the bus home after teaching classes at the college (where she worked mainly to kill time) when Riyaz pulled his green Buick alongside her. He sat resting his elbows on the steering wheel, staring at her in a strangely wistful manner.

“Hello Riyaz,” she said with a smile. (He had once been so cheerful, she remembered.)

“How are you Jal?” he asked.

The depth and gloom in his voice made her heart go out to him, so when he offered to drive her home, she quietly opened the door and sat down beside him. She couldn’t resist even when he said, “Let me show you my house,” and turned his car toward it. They arrived at the spacious mansion and he took a long time to show her around its neat, expansive, manicured lawns, its well-trimmed hedges and rose bushes, talking continuously in his authoritative and strangely carefree manner (which did not lack at all in childlike bragging—she remembered—but, at least, it was delightfully free of the nouveau riche need to show off). Finally, she had to insist on being taken home. Now today, all alone with Guddu in tow, it felt very strange to be inside this house.

“Shaukat dropped in,” Riyaz said.

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

The telephone rang again. For a few seconds he stared at the cold, lifeless instrument with bleary eyes and listened to its shrill, piercing ring. Then he picked up the receiver mechanically. "Hello."

He listened to the voice at the other end, moving his fingertip on his close-cropped moustache, and then said in a loud, urgent voice: "Tell Khwaja Sahib to book a seat for the sportswriter on tonight's flight and arrange for some cash for him too. He must leave tonight no matter what. Tell Anwar to get a complete report on number two-zero-seven from the Ministry of Information and bring it to me by four o'clock. Is that article ready? It is? Good. I want to take a look at it before it goes to press. And the Chamber of Commerce speech? Okay, okay, now don't disturb me until four o'clock. And, yes, tell the operator to hold all my calls. I'm *out* until four o'clock, understand?"

He hung up, paused, leaned back against the sofa and said, "I tried to help him in any way I could, Jal. He's so wrapped up in himself that he won't listen to anyone. I'm afraid he's becoming one-track minded. I needn't tell you what a precarious business journalism is. There are a few basic rules ... well, you know. I can't allow him to screw them all up."

Guddu yanked the book out of his pocket and thrust it toward him. "Uncle, make me an airplane".

"Hey, did you rip this?"

"Daddy made airplanes out of it," the boy answered innocently.

"Ha, ha," he took the book and began to turn the pages. "This is to be read, son."

"Make me a plane," the boy insisted.

"We don't tear books, son, we read them," he replied gently.

"And then what?"

"Well, after you've read them, you become a big man."

"No. I want you to make me an airplane," the boy whined.

The telephone rang again. He grabbed the receiver with visible annoyance and snapped, "Hello." In less than a second his voice changed and he continued in a tone of affected cordiality. "Ah, it's the Colonel. Where have you been hiding all this while? I wore myself out asking everyone about you." He peered over the phone at Jamal and grimaced, shrugging his shoulders in irritation, then sprawled out on the couch and continued talking to the Colonel cheerily.

During the past hour he had spoken in that same authoritative congenial tone with his chief editor, chief reporter, press superintendent and half a dozen sub-editors, and several times in between he had spoken with his secretary giving sundry instructions, reminding her each time that

he was not to be disturbed until four o'clock.

While all this was going on, Jamal examined him thoroughly for the first time. She was shocked. Under his eyes, deep dark circles had appeared from lack of rest and he was growing visibly thinner. As he spoke on the phone, he filled his pipe and when he lit it his hand shook, and one leg kept twitching nervously. He was driven by bursts of nervous energy and was compulsively doing several things at once. The hair on his temples was almost completely gray and, in spite of the short, brisk movements of his body, she saw exhaustion and waning strength in his face. Was this the same person—Jamal let her eyes close as she reflected gloomily—who once ran on the track with the grace and speed of a cheetah?

Yes, she thought, Riyaz Ahmad Zubairi was a grand man, indeed. The day she first noticed him was indelibly etched on her mind: she was walking along on the grounds of the university one wintry afternoon when, suddenly, her glance fell on a young man running in a woolen track suit and spikes. She stopped short. In her amazement she blinked her eyes a few times and then stared hard at him. She stared for a long time. She had never seen anyone run as gracefully as he did: his feet seemed to barely touch the ground, each stride lifted his entire body into flight; his body seemed ready to leave the ground at any moment and lift itself into space with astounding speed and ease. The movements of his arms, back, shoulders, neck, head and legs were all bound together by one common beat and evoked the symphonic harmony of a musical composition. The 440 yard oval track reverberated with the magnificent symphony of that solitary young runner's footsteps.

After he was warmed up, he peeled off his track suit and laid it aside. Underneath, he only had black silk gym shorts on. His solid, light-complexioned body glistened in the afternoon sun. For a long time she had stood there looking at him as he ran lap after lap with his head rhythmically leading his body.

Many times since that day—so many times she could hardly remember—she had seen that beautiful, radiant body perform many a feat. She would watch from the sidelines in breathless amazement, or clap her hands with unrestrained joy as he demonstrated perfect yogic control over his body on the hockey field. His "body dodge" was famous among hockey players throughout the country. Whenever he had the ball and went for the goal, players from the rival team would tumble wherever they tried to intercept him.

On campus he always managed to be where she could see him. He

was omnipresent. It was this tremendous bubbling energy that made him irresistibly attractive. Slowly, secretly, she began to feel drawn to him.

This attraction threw her headlong into a protracted, murderous struggle. She stood, as if suspended, between these two men. At long last, her female intuition told her that the perfect harmony which is possible between a man and a woman could only be realized with Shaukat. Shaukat's attraction was perhaps not as obvious as Riyaz's but it grew stronger as you got closer. He had an innate intelligence that gave off a continuous glow from somewhere deep inside. It radiated strength and generated a sense of well-being in those who came near him. Unlike Riyaz, he was capable of more important things in life—things that mattered and counted—and the faint natural odor of his body aroused her even today ... Oh God!

Riyaz got off the phone and sat up straight, trying to suppress a yawn.

"Guddu," he called.

Guddu had been inspecting Riyaz's trophies and came running with outstretched arms. "Uncle, make me an airplane."

"Come and sit beside me There, that's a good boy."

"Uncle, make me ..."

"First read this," he put the book into the boy's hands, "then I'll give you a real airplane."

"A real airplane? Honestly?"

"Sure." He gave Jamal a quick glance, "I'm buying a two-seater."

"Why?"

"Why? To fly, of course."

"Can you?"

"Of course I can. I have a license and I have eight hours of flying time."

Jamal raised her eyebrows in appreciation.

"I'll take you out for a guided tour of the sky. Will you come?" he laughed.

She kept looking across the room at the wall.

"I bought that last year," he volunteered.

"Is it a print?"

"A print! To this day I have not hung a print in this room. All of these ..." he motioned with his hand, "are originals."

"Oh!"

"Now I'm having murals painted here," he pointed to the wall across from them. Then, seeing her absently scanning the wall, he got to his feet and said, "You haven't seen my house yet. Come, I'll show it to you."

“Oh,” she laughed nervously, “It’s a very nice house.”

“Come, come. You haven’t even seen it. Let me show it to you.”

“Uncle,” the boy called out. “The plane!” But the two of them were already out of the room.

“This is the banquet hall.”

It was a large rectangular room with its floor set in smooth black and white tiles. Lustrous ebony tables, supported by massive legs, stood in the center of the room. They were covered with yellow silk tablecloths and set with sparkling silver cups and an assortment of decorative vessels. Red and black sofas with small round tables in front of them rested against the walls. On all four sides there were huge plate-glass windows as high as the ceiling, draped with thickly-pleated, green silk curtains. Pictures in heavy gilt frames occupied the space between the windows, and an exquisite glass chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling.

“I ordered this chandelier from Czechoslovakia,” Riyaz mentioned as he flicked the switch and the entire hall was flooded with light. Jamal’s eyes were dazzled.

She heard him say, “They do the finest cut-glass work in the world there.”

Jamal was still trying to focus her stunned eyes as she followed Riyaz into the next room.

“This is the cocktail lounge,” he explained.

As they entered the room, her feet sank halfway down into thick, soft carpeting. The room was decorated with antique Spanish furniture and the windows were covered with heavy crimson velveteen curtains. A walnut bar with tall swiveling stools in front of it stretched along the entire length of the wall on the right. A large floor lamp of black stone stood on one side.

“You like Spanish furniture, don’t you?” Riyaz said. “I had all this imported from Spain. Even this velveteen.” He reached out and touched the curtains.

As they passed through a narrow corridor, Riyaz casually opened a door. “This is the bathroom.”

It was the size of a regular room. There was an electric water heater in one corner. The floor and the lower half of the walls were covered with light green tiles, and the red stone sunken tub in the center looked more like a miniature swimming pool. The medicine chest, flanked by full length mirrors, was crammed with bottles of assorted sizes. The sink and tub faucets were tinted with gold. Riyaz went in and turned them on full blast. Hot and cold water gushed forth. He looked at Jamal, grinned and

came out.

They crossed the corridor and went into Riyaz's study. It was comparatively small. The walnut bookcases were packed. A large leather sofa sat next to the desk and a floor lamp with a yellow shade stood behind the sofa. In one corner there was a phonograph on a table and a large cabinet jammed with records stood nearby. A few records lay scattered on the table. Heavy curtains on the doors and windows completely blocked out the outside world. It was absolutely quiet in the study. Jamal sat down tentatively on the corner of the table and asked with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "Have you read all those?"

"Ha, ha." Riyaz quickly opened the other door of the study that led into the bedroom.

In that room their feet disappeared completely in the soft pile of the plush blue rug. Everything in the room—the heavily pleated drapes, the lampshades, the bedspread, the telephone on the bed table, the pajamas carelessly tossed on the chair, the velvety slippers neatly set on one side, the magazine and newspaper folders—was a shade of blue, a deep evening blue.

"This rug is two hundred years old," Riyaz was explaining. "I was wandering around the carpet bazaar in Kabul when this caught my eye. It was made in Bukhara. It came with a book describing its history. How many people have owned it, how many times it has changed hands, it's all described in the book. I paid a full hundred and twenty thousand Afghani rupees for it, that's about thirty thousand rupees here. Two hundred years old—just think! And it still looks new. See! Take off your shoes and feel it," he said as he did just that. "Feel it," he repeated as he dropped to his knees and began removing her shoes.

Jamal saw her slender foot sink deep into the velvety pile and luxuriate in its foamy softness. For a moment she let her foot rest on the rug and feel the tickling sensation of its nap on her skin.

"Two hundred years," his voice seemed to be coming from far away. "Just think! Bukhara, Samarkand ..." There are such fabulous places in the world, she thought. All at once she felt herself transported two hundred years back in time, into the royal palaces of Bukhara and Samarkand. She imagined herself getting ready to attend a royal banquet while a servant on bent knees, his head bowed, shoe in hand, waited on her. She was the mistress of all those mysterious, dimly-lit palaces with their priceless furnishings and their full entourage of well-mannered servants. She could do anything with just a flick of her finger.

For a few long moments she stood there as though in a trance while

Riyaz, still sitting on the rug, looked up at her, puzzled. Then, just as suddenly, her flight of fancy came to an end. She returned from those ancient times and those dark, mysterious feelings. Her foot began to tremble as the foamy surface of the wool pile gently tickled her sole. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked apprehensively at Riyaz.

“Riyaz.” Her voice choked.

“Come, I’ll show you the swimming pool,” he quickly suggested in his usual carefree manner and got up to leave the room.

“Stop it, Riyaz!” she screamed, “for God’s sake!” and quickly slipped on her shoes and ran out. Riyaz ran after her. She stopped short when she reached the living room.

“Jal, are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m all right,” she answered, wiping the tears from her eyes and managing a smile. “You have a very lovely house,” she added, feeling a little ashamed of herself.

Riyaz smiled despondently. “I’ve collected the best things from all the countries I’ve been to, Jal, and I’ve socialized with the finest men and the most glamorous women the world over. But you,” he paused, “to this day you have never looked at me, have never so much as touched me. It’s as though I were some sort of untouchable.”

His voice quivered as he uttered these last few words. To hide his emotion, he quickly turned around, walked over to the small coffee table beside the wall and started twirling the ashtray with tremulous fingers.

Jamal looked around listlessly, not quite knowing what to do. Outside on the verandah, Guddu was running around yelling “Zoom, zoom,” pretending that his book was an airplane.

The wind blowing through the room had become quite warm now. Boys were still playing cricket on the sidewalk. Riyaz’s polo shirt had once fit snugly but now it hung limply on his back. From behind he looked like a young boy with a slim neck and prominent shoulder bones. Jamal stood there watching him and felt herself swept away by a feeling of remorse. She slowly walked over to him. Leaning slightly over the table, he was staring at a small snapshot which Jamal hadn’t noticed earlier. She looked at it now and was shaken. It was a picture of the two friends, Shaukat and Riyaz, standing on the verandah of one of the university buildings. Both wore identical white trousers and short-sleeved blue silk shirts. Their arms were nestled around each other’s necks and they were chuckling merrily. The flowerpots on the steps of the verandah were full of blossoms. It was spring.

A wave of pain stabbed through her body. She had built relationships

with both of these men. She had loved one and regarded the other as a dear friend. Ultimately, time had destroyed them both. The prime of spring was now frozen in a photograph, reminding her that life had given her plenty, but she had wished for even more. She laid her head on Riyaz's trembling shoulder and shut her eyes as her overwhelmed heart sobbed, "Where are you Shauki, where?"

Meanwhile, he was sitting in the restaurant watching the scene on the beach. He had just finished his meal and the old waiter, his friend, had already cleared the dishes. (While he was wiping the table he had chuckled, "Now don't you doze off here, sir," and Shaukat had answered, "I'm planning to do just that. In a few minutes, just watch." And the old man's mouth had opened in toothless laughter.)

In those few moments of vacuous calm Shaukat sat tapping the tabletop with his fingers, watching the seagulls bobbing on the surface of the water. The dining room was crowded. People were busy eating and talking at once. A strange, dream-like hum pervaded the room. He yawned several times, becoming sleepy.

Then the strangest thing happened. There was a violent beating of wings and the entire group of gulls took flight. Water cascaded off their soaring wings and fell on the surface of the sea in pearly-white droplets that sparkled in the sun. He looked overhead to find the cause of the gulls' violent commotion and spotted a hawk-like bird that he had never seen before in this area hovering above them ominously. Where could it have come from, he wondered.

Suddenly the hawk gathered its wings and dove into the swarm of gulls with the speed of a bullet and then soared up again. The meek aquatic birds screeched faintly, helplessly, then scattered. The hawk turned around and swooped down again.

Even from where he sat, he could clearly see the hawk's strong, agile pinions and its sharp, preying eyes. Color flushed across his pale, bleached face and the familiar exuberant gleam returned to his eyes. All of a sudden, the turbid, viperous bluish-green mist that seemed to assault him relentlessly everywhere these days dissolved like vapor in the sun, leaving only the sandy white beach, the uproarious foaming sea, the bright sunshine and a clear blue sky. In that warm, effulgent honey-colored expanse, everything appeared so lucid, so snug and in its proper place. His heart felt strangely light and relaxed. He pulled all the cash out of his pocket, put it on the table and stood up. The gulls had vanished, and the hawk was circling triumphantly in the sky.

"This is all yours," he said cheerfully, putting his hand on the old

waiter's shoulder. "I'm leaving now."

Outside, he saw the hawk with its wings spread wide, flying toward deeper waters, self-absorbed, unconcerned, free! Mesmerized, his gaze fixed on the bird, he began to follow it.

In the dining room, people jumped out of their chairs and started crowding around the windows and doors. They stood terrified and breathless as they watched the water rising up to his knees and then swirling around his waist.

"Oh my God!" cried someone in a terror-stricken voice. A plate fell and broke somewhere in the hall. The stillness of the afternoon deepened. In the stunned and breathless crowd, a woman broke into quiet, rhythmic sobs. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*