

PATRAS BUKHARI

Six Humorous Pieces

[TRANSLATORS' NOTE: Sayyad Aḥmad Shāh Paṭras Bukhārī (1898–1958) was born in Peshawar. He graduated with an M.A. in English literature from Government College (Lahore) and pursued higher studies at Emmanuel College, Cambridge University in Britain. Beginning in 1922, he taught English literature at Government College and later at the Central Training College, also in Lahore. Patras Bukhari joined All India Radio in 1937 becoming its director in 1940. In 1952 he was appointed Pakistan's permanent member of the United Nations and was appointed the Deputy Secretary General of the UN's Department of Information two years later. He passed away following a heart attack in 1958.

Patras Bukhari ranks among the most outstanding writers of humor in Urdu. He gained this reputation following the publication of *Paṭras kē Mazāmin* (Patras's Essays). These eleven essays originally appeared in the magazines *Makhzan*, *Nairāṅg-e-Khayāl*, and others in Lahore between 1923 and 1928 (Vajāhat 'Alī Saṅdēlvī, *Intekhāb Mazāmin-e Paṭras*, 2003). The publication date of this volume of collected essays remains uncertain: his grandson's "authoritative" website lists it as 1927, Saṅdēlvī writes that the volume was first published in 1928, and *Kulliyāt-e Paṭras* (Kitābī Duniyā, 2005) has the date as 1934. Of these essays, two have already been published in English translation: "Dogs," translated by Mohammad Gill and Muhammad Umar Memon, in *AUS* 18 (2003) and "A Married Man," translated by Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad, in *eXchanges* (Spring 2007); six appear here for the first time; and three remain untranslated: "Lāhaur kā Jughrāfiā" (Lahore's Geography), "Urdū kī Ākhirī Kitāb" (The Last Urdu Book), and "Anjām Bakhair" (A Happy Ending).]

Cinemaphilia*

A TITLE like "Cinemaphilia" promises racy anecdotes, and yet this essay is

*"Cinema kā 'Ishq," from the author's *Kulliyāt-e Paṭras, volume 1*. Edited by Shīmā Majīd (Lahore: Buk Ṭāk, 2003), 90–95.

going to disappoint you because I'm going to write about personal insult and injury instead.

But please don't think that I object to films or have no interest in them. Since childhood I've angered my parents and older relatives by going to films. But these days, thanks to my friend Mirza Sahib, the very mention of the word "film" sets me off. As soon as I hear it, my mind is flooded with painful memories, and as a result I'm becoming more pessimistic by the day.

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First of all, God has never seen fit to have us reach the theater on time. This is on no account due to any laziness on my part, but rather to my "friend" Mirza Sahib, who has, God is my witness, brought me more suffering than most enemies.

I ask him if he'd like to go to the movies a full week beforehand so that he'll be ready when the time comes and will have arranged things so that he's free from work.

"Hey, why not?" he answers nonchalantly. "Aren't I human? Don't I need some entertainment too? And anyway, have I ever been so cold as to refuse any of your invitations?"

Shamed by his words, I can't respond at first. Then I manage to squeak out, "So this week, if at all possible, let's arrive on time, okay?"

Mirza Sahib usually shrugs this off, since my suggestion barely pricks his conscience. I don't dwell on his lateness but say enough for him to get the idea.

"Films start at six these days, don't they?" I ask.

"Well, I don't really know," Mirza Sahib answers with disarming innocence.

"I'd say six."

"But you don't know for sure?" "Six—trust me."

"If you're so sure then why bring it up in the first place?"

What am I supposed to say to that?

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And so, friends, I arrive at his house at four o'clock on the appointed Thursday with the idea of quickly getting him ready so that we'll arrive on time. But when I get to his house, there's not a soul in sight. I check all his favorite rooms. I look through all the windows. I shout into every mouse hole. But all to no avail. Frustrated, I sit down in his room. I start whistling and I keep this up for fifteen minutes or so. Then for another fifteen minutes I doodle. I light a cigarette. I walk out to the front door and stand

on the threshold looking this way and that. Everything's as silent as a graveyard, so I return to his room and start reading the newspaper. Every now and then I call out his name thinking he might have come into the adjoining room or the one directly overhead—if he was sleeping, he might have just woken up, or if he was bathing, he might have just come out of the bathroom. But my voice echoes in the vastness of the house.

At last, around five thirty, he makes his appearance, coming out of the women's quarters. I suppress my roiling anger and focus on maintaining my composure.

"Your Highness, you weren't here all the time, were you?"

"I was here."

"You didn't hear me calling you?"

"That was you? I thought it was someone else."

I close my eyes and thrust my head back. I clench my teeth and swallow my anger.

"So are you coming or not?" I ask.

"What? Where?"

"Oh, you're a fine specimen! Aren't we going to the movies today?"

"Ah, the movies, the movies!" he says sitting down in a chair. "The movies are fine. I thought there was something I was forgetting. It's good you've reminded me or I'd be worrying about it all night."

"We can go then?"

"Why not? But I'd like to change my clothes. God knows if the good-for-nothing dhobi has brought any clean ones. Do you know how to straighten out dhobis?"

If murder weren't a capital offense, I would certainly kill him at this point. But what can I do? Who wants to waste away their days in prison? I can't do anything.

"Mirza, for God's sake, have mercy on me!" I plead. "I've come to take you to the movies. I haven't come to help you set things right with your dhobi! You're really very rude. It's already past a quarter to six and you're still sitting here dickering."

Mirza smiles disconcertingly and gets up. His smile seems to be saying, "Don't worry. We're not going to interfere with your childish desires!" Saying he'll be back in a minute, he leaves to change his clothes.

Mirza takes so long changing his clothes that if I were in charge of things I'd make a law forbidding him to ever undress.

He comes sauntering back after half an hour, chewing on a paan and carrying another.

I get up and walk over to the door, but when I turn around he isn't there. I go back inside. Mirza Sahib is standing in a corner looking for

something.

“Hey, let’s go!”

“Don’t worry—I’m coming. What’s the rush?”

“What are you doing now?”

“I’m looking for some tobacco for the paan.”

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The whole way there, Mirza Sahib strolls along taking his own sweet time. I forever find myself several steps ahead and often have to wait. As soon as he catches up, I start walking, but I quickly leave him far behind and have to wait again. The result is that even though I walk two or three times as fast, I never get there any sooner.

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We buy tickets and go inside. The theater is pitch dark. I start blinking. I can’t make out anything. Then someone says, “Please shut the door.”

God, where am I supposed to go? The aisles, the seats, the walls, the people—I can’t see anything. I take a step forward and my head knocks against one of those buckets hanging on the wall in case of fire. After a while, vague shapes appear from out of the darkness. I decide a darker spot in the audience must mean there’s an empty seat. I hunch over and start in that direction. I stumble over feet, trip over ankles, dodge ladies’ knees, and finally land in someone’s lap. He pushes me off and, helped along by people shoving, I reach an empty seat.

“See, I told you we should hurry up. Look how you’ve disgraced us, you ass!”

But after this heartwarming verbal display, I realize that the person sitting next to me, whom I’ve mistaken for Mirza Sahib, is actually someone else.

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I turn my attention toward the screen and try to gather my wits enough to figure out which film is playing and how much of it we’ve missed. But all I can discern is that there’s a man and woman hugging each other and they’re evidently in love. I’m waiting for some subtitles to explain what’s going on when suddenly the man sitting in front of me begins to stretch his arms above his head grandiosely. In the meantime, a good two or three hundred feet of the reel clip by. After he winds up his stretching, he starts scratching his scalp. Once done with that, he leaves his hand resting on top of his head. In order to see anything, I’m forced to lower my head and look through the gap between his arm and torso. Sitting like this, I

look just like someone who's snuck into the theater without a ticket. A little while later, the man notices a mosquito or some other bug on his seat and veers over to the right side.

Wretched me, I have to duck to the other side. But then the mosquito decides to migrate to the other side of his seat and both of us veer, changing sides again.

We keep this game up. He dodges right, I dodge left. He veers left, I veer right. This guy has no idea what kind of game he's playing with me there in the dark! I want to go buy a ticket for the seat in front of him. After sitting down, I would say to him, "Hey, buddy, just try to see what's going on now!"

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I hear Mirza Sahib behind me. "Hey, why can't you just sit down and let me see!"

I close my eyes to check my anger. I consider murder, suicide, or poisoning. I say to myself, "To hell with this movie! I swear on my mother's grave, I'll never come again! And if I do, it won't be with that wretched Mirza! I'll get here five or six hours early. I'll buy a ticket for the first row in the upper balcony. I'll make sure to fidget as much as possible. I'll wear an enormous turban. I'll stick my two canes on my seat and drape my coat over them. And under no circumstances will I invite Mirza!"

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But how can I control myself? The next week I see a poster for a good film, go immediately to Mirza's, and the first thing out of my mouth is, "Hey, Mirza, do you want to go to a movie next Thursday?" □

Hostel Life*

OF COURSE I went to college and in due course graduated with a B.A. But during all the years—it seemed like fifty—I was in school, I was given permission to live in a hostel only once. How and when God's favor fell upon me in this way are the makings of a story.

When I passed the college entrance test, my high school principal came by to express his congratulations, close relations invited me over, sweets were distributed around the neighborhood, and everyone at

*"Hōṣṭāl mēñ Paṛḥnā," from the author's *Kulliyāt-e Paṭras*, volume 1. Edited by Shīmā Majīd (Lahore: Buk Ṭāk, 2003), 35–47.

home—who due to some form of collective myopia had previously taken me to be a worthless and unpromising dunderhead—suddenly realized that I was actually quite the Renaissance man and that my upbringing would affect countless future generations. Thus, all sorts of suggestions were offered concerning my future.

Because I had barely passed my final high school exams, no university was itching to give me a scholarship. But as no one in my family has ever had, thank God, to ask anyone for money, some of my family—in particular the relatives that had long ago moved into the area to grub off of us—took great pride in the fact that I would *not* get a scholarship. Some of the main sycophants made as if I hadn't gotten a scholarship because the examiners realized how rich my family was, and these relatives showed no restraint in praising the examiners' discretion and lofty conduct. In any event, we had a lot of disposable income and it was decided that this promising student—me—should continue his studying not only for personal advancement but also for the good of our country and perhaps even for the good of all humankind.

I was asked what I thought about all this. Never before had I ever been asked what I thought about anything. But now things were quite different: an impartial and honest adjudicator—the university—had confirmed that I wasn't a lost cause. How could my parents ignore me now? I suggested they send me to England as soon as possible. From listening to the speeches of various political figures, I'd picked up on the fact that the Indian education system was far from perfect and I tried to impress this upon them. I had read in newspaper advertisements that in your free time at English colleges you could study journalism, photography, creative writing, dentistry, ophthalmology, espionage, and countless other highly remunerative and exciting vocations, and all for hardly any money at all. In short, you could become a master of everything before you knew it!

But my suggestion was immediately rejected since there was no precedent in our town for sending anyone to England: no one had ever sent their son there and therefore no one knew what conditions I might face. After this no one ever asked my opinion again.

My father got together with my high school principal and a respected local official and they decided that I should be sent to Lahore. When I learned this, I was terribly disappointed. But after hearing about Lahore from various people, I came to realize that there was no real difference between London and Lahore. Among these friends who knew Lahore, some spoke about the movies and some about the theater. Others talked about all the things you could do while wandering through town. Still others spoke sentimentally about the romantic mood of the Shadara

neighborhood and its evenings. And so, after hearing all about the city, I came to the conclusion that it was a pleasant enough place, ideal for a first-rate education. Then I went about devising my plans for the future. Of course I allotted some space for studying, but not more than was necessary since I didn't want to overburden myself and make it impossible to enjoy anything at all.

But their good advice didn't end there. Had they limited themselves to the rather ordinary suggestion of sending me to Lahore, I would have had no complaints. But they began to butt their heads into everything and my father, after listening to their comparison of living in a hostel to living at home, decided that a home is a mecca of purity and cleanliness whereas a hostel is a hellhole of sin and misconduct. The principal and the other man were very smooth talkers and they distorted many facts. In the end my parents started to believe that hostels were dens of iniquity and that if students weren't taken care of properly in Lahore they would wind up drunk in some roadside ditch as soon as they got there, or would commit suicide after losing thousands of rupees gambling, or would impetuously propose marriage to ten or fifteen girls even before they finished their first year!

And so my parents decided that, while I should be sent to college, I shouldn't stay in a hostel. Going to college was absolutely necessary, but staying in a hostel was absolutely out of the question. College, great; hostel, terrible. College, absolutely; hostel, unmentionable.

My parents took it as their life's mission to find a way to protect their son from the ill effects of living in a hostel. Necessity is the mother of invention, so after wracking their brains they came up with the address of some uncle living in Lahore and enlisted him as my guardian. In order to impress upon me the significance of this relation, they went through sheaves of genealogical charts and told me that when I was a suckling babe he had loved me to no end. Finally I accepted that he was indeed my uncle and it was decided that I'd study at the college and live at his home.

Up till then I had felt a rising sense of anticipation about being sent off to college, but suddenly this new obstacle had appeared. My spirits sank: in order to assert his new authority, my uncle was bound to supervise me more closely than even my parents would; my intellectual and emotional life would suffer, and, consequently, the whole point of my going to college would be undermined. And that's just what happened. Every day my interest in the world shrank, and something like mold began to grow on my mind. Once in a while I was allowed to go to the movies, but only if I took my uncle's kids along, so what was the point in

going at all? My theater-going stopped with the play *Indar Sabhā*. I wanted to learn how to swim but my uncle would repeat his homily, “It’s only swimmers who drown because those who don’t know how to swim never set foot in water.” He decided which of my friends could come by the house. He dictated how long my coat should be and how long my hair, and he was very strict about these two things. Every week I had to write two letters home. I was forced to smoke on the sly in the bathroom and singing was strictly forbidden.

I didn’t like this regimented lifestyle at all. I was able to get together with friends and could even go for walks. Joking around was allowed too, but I missed not having the license to cut loose every so often. I gradually developed some idea of when my uncle was usually at home, where I could sing without being heard, which corners of a room were visible from the room’s open doorway, which doors you could open from the outside, and which servant was sympathetic and which was loyal to his master. After this initial period, I was able to live a little more freely, and yet every day I saw the students who lived in the hostels and they seemed to walk with a certain grandeur and easy confidence. Every day my envy grew; every day I tried to find a way to improve my situation. I reminded myself that disobeying your parents is forbidden in every religion. So I’d have to ask it as a favor. I’d have to put my weak case before them and relate some anecdotes to convince them how things really were—may nothing stand in my way!

When I returned home for summer vacation I was ready with a number of short but comprehensive and convincing things to say. My parents’ chief objection to my living in a hostel was that the freedom granted there was extremely harmful to young men. I had come up with thousands of examples to convince them of the hostel’s strict rules. I cited some terrifying and tear-jerking examples of the superintendent’s harsh ways. I closed my eyes and recited a story about poor Ashfaq: One evening he was returning to the hostel when he sprained his ankle and so arrived two minutes late. Only two minutes. The superintendent immediately sent a telegram to this boy’s father requiring him to appear. He called the police to investigate. And he froze the boy’s allowance for a month. Just imagine that! Now how couldn’t they see?

But this only caused my parents to disapprove of the superintendent and didn’t clarify anything about the advantages of hostel life. Then one day I had the chance to tell poor Mahmood’s story. One time he went to see a movie. As his bad luck would have it, he made the mistake of buying a ticket for the two-rupee tier and not the one-rupee section. Then, because he wasted a rupee, he was never again allowed to go to

the movies.

But this too didn't impress my parents. From their reaction, I deduced that I should have made it the difference between a half-rupee ticket and a one-rupee ticket.

All these efforts brought no results, and again I returned to my uncle's house.

The next summer my strategy changed somewhat, since after a year's education my thoughts were more mature. The anecdotes I had recounted about the benefits of living in a hostel now seemed stupid to me. I switched over to lecturing about how a person who never gets the chance to stay in a hostel will never be able to fully develop his personality. Outside a hostel your personality will never evolve. I continued lecturing about this in a philosophical fashion for a number of days, providing insights from a psychological perspective. But then I realized I'd need to give some examples, and when it came time to do that I found myself struggling: the students I liked at school weren't the types you could use as character models in front of your parents. Everyone who has had the opportunity to go to college knows how important innovation is in trying to convince your parents, and yet the crucial insight comes about only by chance or divine revelation. On the other hand, some enlightened sons are able to convince their parents to send a money order every week!

God provides for even the dumb.
Maybe being smart isn't so great.

For a month and half I availed myself of many opportunities to express how one's personality development is dependent upon living in a hostel. Then one day my father asked, "So, what, after all, do you mean by personality?"

I had been waiting for God to grant me just this opportunity.

"Okay, take a college student for instance. He has a mind and a body. He needs to keep both in good condition. However, we identify people by something else as well. This is his personality. His personality isn't related to either his body or his mind. It's possible that your body and mind might both be sick but still your personality ... No, I mean your mind should be good, otherwise you would be insane. But even then, if it did come to pass ... I mean, if your personality is ... Wait, I need a minute to think about this."

My father waited patiently for half an hour. When I still couldn't think of anything to say, he got up and left.

A couple of days later I realized my mistake. I shouldn't have used

the word “personality.” That word doesn’t have any zing. “Character” would have been a much better choice. And so I started dropping the word “character” whenever I could. But this didn’t work either.

“By character do you mean behavior or something else?”

“All right then, behavior.”

“So in addition to keeping your body and mind in good shape, you should also make sure your behavior is sound?”

“That’s just what I mean.”

“And living in a hostel will improve your behavior?”

“Yes, sir,” I said hesitantly.

“You mean that students living in hostels are more religious? That they do more for the country? That they tell fewer lies? That they’re better people?”

My high school principal had once very clearly answered these questions in an awards assembly. If only I had been paying attention then!

So for the next year at my uncle’s house I was always singing the song, “Even the sad autumn days pass ...”

Every year my request met the same end, but I never lost hope. Every year I failed to get my way, and yet I would approach the task with ever renewed intensity the following year. Each time I cited brand-new pieces of supporting evidence. The year after I failed to make headway with the words “personality” and “character,” I switched to emphasizing the regularity and self-restraint characteristic of hostel life. The year after that I took to presenting how living in a hostel gives you many chances to get together with your professors and how these extracurricular encounters mold you into a perfect man. The following year I ended up talking about the advantageous environmental factors associated with living in hostels. Cleanliness was valued especially highly and monitors in charge of swatting flies and mosquitoes were stationed here and there. The year after that I went on about how, when officials come to the college, they shake hands with every single boy living in a hostel, and how this enhances your reputation and influence. Then as the years wore on, I stopped trying to ply them with reasonable arguments and instead began relying on passionate ones. At first my parents had been willing to engage in conversations about the pros and cons of hostel life. Later they developed the habit of rejecting the idea immediately. Some years after that they dismissed me with a laugh, and in the end things reached the sorry state wherein, as soon as they heard the word “hostel,” they would chuckle derisively and ask me to please remove my august presence to another room.

Don’t imagine that they loved me any less—it was never that. In

reality, the only change that occurred was that I lost some of my previous authority around the house because of a few unfortunate incidents.

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It just so happened that I failed my first-year comprehensive exams and the same thing happened the following year. After this happened several more times, my parents stopped paying any attention to my expressed desires. On account of my failing the exam over and over, my tone of voice became somber and full of pathos, but it lacked its earlier eloquence, and my opinion no longer had any significance.

I want to talk more about these years of my college career for two reasons. First of all, so that you can appreciate my life's ups and downs, and secondly, so that you'll become acquainted with the inherent flaws of the examination system.

Why did I fail my first-year comprehensive exams? This is very easy to explain.

I had studied diligently for my final high school exams and so had managed to squeak by. The university spoke highly of me, but suggested I take the math test again.

And so, for my first year at college I decided to do math as one of my main subjects in order to avoid studying again for the math test I'd failed in high school. Everyone told me not to choose math, though no one could tell me why. Still, when the college president gave me the same advice, I abandoned my plans. My first year exams consisted of English, Persian, and History. At the same time, I still needed to retake my high school math test, so instead of three subjects, I was actually studying for four. If you've had a lot of experience taking tests at college, you can imagine how things stood for me. I was studying too many things and my thoughts got all muddled. If I'd only had to prepare for three subjects, not four, I could have spread across the first three the time designated for the fourth. This would have made a big difference. And if I had been studying for just one test instead of three, I would surely have passed that one. But what ended up happening was the only thing that could have happened. I mean, I wasn't able to give any one subject the time it needed. I passed my math test all right, but in my college exams I failed English, though that was expected since English wasn't my native language. However, I also failed both Persian and History. Just think about it: if I could have given over the time I'd used studying for my math test, then...! But I've already presented that argument.

Failing my Persian exam was a very shocking turn of events for someone like me coming from an educated family. And to tell you the

truth, I was very embarrassed. The following year I washed my hands of that mess when I passed Persian. Then the year after that I passed History and the subsequent year, English.

According to the letter of the law, I should have received my diploma, but what could be done about the university's childish objection that I needed to pass all three subjects in the same year? There are many students who, because of their temperament, can't study unless they're able to devote their full attention to one subject. Is it really necessary to confuse them by asking them to study three things at once? I gave my complete and undivided attention to one subject each year and passed, as I should have. It's true that I didn't even attempt to study for the other two subjects, but I did prove that I could pass whichever subject I chose.

Each year for three years I failed two subjects, so I decided to expand my studying as much as possible. If I couldn't change the university's ignorant and meaningless rules, then I'd have to buckle down. And yet, after thinking about it for a while, I realized it would be difficult for me to pass all three subjects at once. First I'd try to pass two subjects in the same year. The first year after adopting this strategy, I passed English and Persian, and the following year, Persian and History.

My list of yearly failures looked like this:

1. English, History, Persian
2. English, History
3. English, Persian
4. History, Persian

It was as though I'd purposefully explored all the possible ways of failing two subjects at once. Having exhausted all permutations, I set my sights on failing only one subject. The following list outlines my subsequent failures:

1. History
2. English

Having gotten this far, I thought about what was left for me to do and realized my misery would soon be over: there was only one subject left to fail! After I failed Persian, there would be nothing left to do but pass. And yet this would be very difficult. Was there some miraculous inoculation against further failure which would guarantee that after failing Persian, I'd pass everything the following year? I eagerly awaited failing for the last time—not that I wanted to fail, but after failing this one last time I fully expected to pass everything the following year, once and for all.

Every year after returning home, I'd prepare my parents before telling

them about my exam results. Then I'd reveal the results all at once because dragging things out is a waste of time and causes unnecessary suffering. My method was that, as soon as I'd arrived home, I would admit that I wasn't going to pass. Often my parents wouldn't believe me. This would make things difficult. I knew very well what I'd written as answers, and if the examiners checked the tests while sober, there would be no chance for me to pass. I wanted my well-wishers to understand all this so they wouldn't be shocked when the results came in, but they interpreted my explanations as a sign of humility. After the first few years my father would immediately believe me since experience had taught him that my guesses about this were never wrong, but others would never stop repeating their reassurances, "Oh no, sir!" "What are you saying, sir?" "How can you say that, sir?"

Once again I had to return home prophesying that I was going to fail. My only comfort came in knowing it was the last time.

Knowing it would be my last year of college, I decided to bring up the hostel issue once more. I had one year left, and since I hadn't yet had the chance to live in a hostel, it was now or never, otherwise it would be straight from years of living at my uncle's to setting up a house of my own. Only one year was left for me to experience freedom!

Before making my final request, I carefully organized everything I was going to say. I went over my points in front of my professors (now the same age as me) and had them write letters to my father exhorting him to let his son live in a hostel the following year. I asked the parents of successful students to do the same. I went through the university records to prove that most alumni had lived in hostels, and that no one living outside of the hostels had ever received a monetary prize, medallion, or any award. I wondered why I'd never used this method of persuasion, and it did prove very useful. My father's objections weakened and he began to consider my points. But a doubt still lingered. "I don't understand why studious boys can't study at home as well," he said.

I replied by noting how the hostel boasts of an atmosphere conducive to studying. You could find the same environment in the homes of Aristotle and Plato but nowhere else. Whoever popped their heads into a hostel would find everyone deep in their studies. Even though two or three hundred boys lived in a hostel, it was as quiet as a cemetery, and that was because everyone was busy in their individual studying. In the evening, students could be seen debating in the hostel's courtyard. At dawn you would find each and every student walking outside with books in hand. Students discussed philosophy and math and history everywhere they went—in the cafeteria, the common room, the bathroom, and on the

verandah. Those who liked English literature would talk among themselves all day in Shakespearean dialects. Math majors would phrase their thoughts in algebraic equations. Persian students would discuss things by exchanging quatrains. History aficionados would ...

And so finally my father granted me permission.

While waiting for my exam results, I wrote to the school announcing my intention of returning. I wrote letters to all the friends I was sure to be seeing the following year. I passed along the good news that I was going to make collegiate history owing to the fact that, after such a long career, I was finally going to live in a hostel, and I told them how I was going to pass down my accumulated wisdom to the new generation. I assumed that I would naturally be a sort of father figure around whom the young pups could frolic. I wrote the college president, once a classmate of mine, to bring to his attention that not only did I expect several privileges to be granted to me while living at the hostel; I also wished to be exempt from several rules.

But after all this, just imagine my bad luck—I passed! Whatever wrong had been done to me, I didn't care because it was all over. And yet just think how foolish the university was to pass me and lose out on a regular source of income! □

Mabel and Me*

MABEL WAS STUDYING in the women's college, but since the two of us were studying the same subject at Cambridge we often met during class. We were also friends. We had many common interests—she liked art and music and I pretended to know all about them. We often went to galleries or concerts together. We were both studying English literature and we were always talking about books. If one of us “discovered” a new book or writer, we would always tell the other and then get together to critique where we felt that was appropriate.

But in our friendship, there was one problem. We were both raised in the twentieth century and thus believed in the equality of the sexes, yet our behavior contradicted this. In certain situations, Mabel felt as if privileges were due to her just because she was a woman, and at other times I would boss her around as though it was my duty as a man. In fact, I was

*“Mēbil aur Maiñ,” from the author's *Kulliyāt-e Paṭras*, volume 1. Edited by Shīmā Majīd (Lahore: Buk Ṭāk, 2003), 96–100.

very embarrassed that Mabel was better read than me. She had impugned my dignity as a man! Sometimes my manly Asian blood would course through my veins, and throwing aside modern decorum, I would insist that man is God's supreme creation. In response, Mabel would harp about women's equality in such an exaggerated fashion that it seemed as if she truly believed women were the masters of the universe and men were no better than reptiles.

How could I ignore her challenge then when she bought ten books and tossed them into my room a week later informing me that she'd read them and that if I would read them too we might talk about them later?

First of all, I could hardly read that many books in a week. But suppose that, in order to uphold male honor, I did choose to forego sleep and spend my nights reading, even then I'd need more than a week to really understand them since several of them were sure to be about philosophy or criticism. After a week of taxing diligence, I would have to admit to her—a woman—that I'd failed to understand them completely.

While she was sitting in my room, I listened meekly. She went on in a very learned and arrogant way. When I opened the door for her, lit her cigarette, or got up from my most comfortable chair to offer it to her, she thought I did it not out of respect for her femininity, but rather, because of her brains.

After she left, my embarrassment and shame gradually turned to anger. It's easy to sacrifice your life and renounce material possessions, but occasionally even the best people—in order to preserve their honor—resort to using ruses and stratagems. Consider it my moral deficiency, if you want. Nonetheless, this is what came about: The next time I met Mabel, I set about pronouncing my opinions even about the books I hadn't been able to read, and I did it very prudently. That is, I didn't mention any details. I spoke in general terms and very ingeniously rendered my judgments so that it sounded as if what I was saying was brand new.

When Mabel asked me about some novel, I said nonchalantly, "Yes, it's good, but not that good. The writer failed to internalize the most contemporary thought. But still, even then, it has something to say. It's not bad, not bad at all."

During this performance, I kept glancing sideways at Mabel, but she didn't detect any of my hypocrisy. I said about a play, "I read it, but even now I can't decide whether it would have the same impact on stage. What do you think?"

*

This is how I saved my honor and passed the burden back to her. I would

opine about a book of criticism, “It seems like this critic has been slightly influenced by eighteenth century thought. There are signs of this in places. And what he says about poetry is interesting. Very interesting, very interesting.”

In time I became an adept in this kind of artistic jargon. I was amazed at the way I was able to speak so eloquently about books I’d never read. My embarrassment disappeared, and this had a salutary effect upon my mood.

I had become Mabel’s intellectual equal. She was forced to acknowledge my erudition and expertise. If she could read ten books in a week, then after only two days I was ready to tell her what I thought about them. Now I was never embarrassed in front of her. I reveled in the supremacy this conferred upon my masculinity. Now when I offered her my chair or lit her cigarette, I did so feeling full of myself, as though I were a healthy young man protecting a completely helpless young girl! If the righteous don’t appreciate what I had accomplished, then so be it, but at least I want to be congratulated by the brotherhood of men!

Women will curse me over and over, first for my deceitfulness and secondly for using it to trick a woman, but I want to say to them in my defense that many times when alone I’ve reproached myself. Time and again I began to detest myself, and it became difficult to forget that I’d faked knowing things about books I hadn’t read but Mabel had. So she had won.

Although she never figured this out, I didn’t read those books. She never learned how truly little I had read, but I knew. And as I thought about this, my peace of mind disappeared. It made me feel I was nothing compared to her—a woman. At the beginning I’d considered Mabel very knowledgeable, now she seemed like a goddess of purity and integrity as well!

*

Whenever I’m sick, I get emotional. If I read a cheap novel when I have a fever, I often cry nonstop. After returning to good health I laugh at my temporary sentimentality.

It was my bad luck during college to come down with the flu. It wasn’t a severe case or very painful. Nevertheless, all the small sins I’d committed up till then loomed large in my mind. When I thought of Mabel, my conscience pained me and I tossed and turned on my bed.

She brought me some flowers and asked how I was. She administered some medicine. She felt my forehead to check for fever. Tears streamed from my eyes. My voice burst with remorse.

“For God’s sake, please forgive me!”

I confessed my crimes and, to punish myself, revealed every last detail of my trickery. I named each and every book that I had professed knowledge about without reading.

“Mabel, remember how I went on and on about the several books you gave me last week? I didn’t actually read a single word of them. I must have said something or other that gave me away.”

“Not at all,” she answered.

“For example, the novel. I didn’t read that. When I was going on about the characters, I was spouting pure nonsense.”

“There was some truth to what you said.”

“When I said the plot was too loose, was that right as well?”

“Of course, the plot was certainly like that in places.”

Then we laughed about what I had done. When Mabel was ready to go, she asked, “So, should I take the books back?”

“Give this repentant soul a chance to mend his ways!” I pleaded. “I haven’t read them, but I want to. Leave them here. Anyway, you’ve read them already.”

“Okay, I’ll leave them here then.”

After she left, I turned to open the books for the first time, but not a single page had been cut! Mabel hadn’t read them either!

After that I believed wholeheartedly in the equality of the sexes. □

Obituary*

ONE DAY Mirza Sahib and I took chairs out onto the verandah and sat down to enjoy each other’s company in silence. When you’re old friends, there’s no need to talk all the time as silence can be enjoyable too, and this was true for Mirza Sahib and me.

We were both deep in thought. God knows what Mirza Sahib was thinking about, but I was turning over in my mind the problems of our day. Once in a while a car would pass by on the distant street. My state of mind is such that whenever I see a car, I always start thinking pathologically about injustice and begin devising ways by which the world’s wealth can be divided evenly among all people. Should I be walking down the

*“Muḥarram kī Yād mēñ,” from the author’s *Kulliyāt-e Paṭras*, volume 1. Edited by Shīmā Majīd (Lahore: Buk Ṭāk, 2003), 100–116.

street when a car brushes past, if its exhaust or any dust that it may churn up lands on any part of my body—my lungs, my mind, my stomach, my spleen—then, after getting home, I take out my high school chemistry text with the hope of finding a formula for making bombs.

I went on sighing for some time. Mirza Sahib didn't pay any attention. Finally I broke the silence, "Mirza, what's the difference between us and animals?"

"Well, there must be something, right?"

"I'll tell you."

"Go ahead."

"Nothing! Did you hear that, Mirza? There's no difference between us and animals, or at least between me and animals—no difference at all. Yes, yes, I know what you're going to say—you're always nitpicking. 'Animals chew their cud, you don't. Animals have tails, you don't.' But what's the big deal about those things? All they prove is that animals are superior to me. But there's one way we're exactly the same. Both of us walk wherever we're going.

"What can you say to this? Nothing. Share anything that comes to mind. No, just forget it. There's nothing you can say. I've been walking since the day I was born! By foot! You don't know what it means to walk by foot. It means to be on this earth in such a way that one foot or other is always sure to be on the ground. I mean in all my years, I've gotten around by putting one foot on the ground and lifting the other. Then I put that one down and lift the other. One ahead, one behind. One behind, one ahead. I swear walking is a good way to lose your mind. It kills your imagination. It numbs you. It makes you dumber than a donkey."

Throughout this harangue, Mirza Sahib smoked his cigarette with such indifference that I wanted to cry over how heartless my friends were. I turned away from him, writhing with contempt and hatred. It seemed as if Mirza must not have agreed with me—as if he found my thoughts nothing more than hot air, that he found my complaint about always having to walk everywhere not worthy of any attention, that he thought I wasn't good enough for anything but that. In my heart of hearts, I thought, "All right, Mirza, whatever. But just watch me now!"

I gritted my teeth and leaned forward on my chair's armrest. Mirza turned to look at me. I smiled, but it was filled with venom. When Mirza was fully prepared to listen, I punched out my words one by one, "Mirza—I'm—going—to—buy—a—motorcar."

I looked away from him in feigned indifference.

"What did you say? What are you going to buy?"

"You weren't listening? I'm going to buy a motorcar. It's a kind of

vehicle that many call a motor and others call a car, but because you're a little dim-witted I used both words so that you would be sure to understand."

"Humph."

Now I started to smoke a cigarette just as nonchalantly as Mirza had earlier. I turned up my nose, brought the cigarette to my mouth and moved it away in a style that would have made the most famous actors envious.

After a little while, Mirza repeated himself, "Humph."

I thought my plan was having some effect. It was taking hold, but I wanted him to say something so that I'd know to what extent my words had sunk in. But all he said was, "Humph."

I started in on him.

"Mirza, I don't know everything about you, but as far as I know you learned several languages at school, college, and then at home. And what's more, you know some words that are never spoken at school, college, or in proper homes. But all you say is 'Humph.' You're jealous of me! Mirza, in Arabic we would use the word '*hasad*' [malice] to describe your present state of mind."

"No, that's not it," he answered. "I'm only thinking about the buying part. You said you're going to buy a motorcar. So, my dear boy, 'buy' is a verb that usually requires money and other things. The other things will take care of themselves, but where are you going to get the money?"

I hadn't thought about that yet. But I didn't lose courage.

"I can sell some of my more valuable possessions."

"For example?"

"I'll sell my cigarette case for starters."

"Great, that's worth, what, three annas? If you can manage to collect twenty-five hundred or three thousand rupees like this, then everything will be just fine."

At that point, I decided to postpone the conversation to a later date and turned away from Mirza dejectedly and sat silently. I couldn't figure out where people got all their money. I thought about it a lot. In the end, I decided that they must steal it and this calmed me for the moment.

Then Mirza spoke.

"I'll tell you something. Get a bicycle instead."

"There's still the money problem."

"For free."

"For free? How?" I asked in surprise.

"Think of it as free. After all, where's the honor in asking a friend for money? But if you can't accept a favor, then what can I do?"

At moments like these when joy overcomes me I laugh, and this laughter is full of (1) the laughter of innocent children, (2) the high spirits of youth, (3) the music of bubbling fountains, and (4) the warbles of nightingales. I laughed deeply and my smile was so broad it seemed as though the corners of my mouth might never return to their original positions. I know that unexpressed emotions can give you a heart attack, so when I was finally convinced that I had laughed enough to match my joy, I asked Mirza, "Whose bicycle is it?"

"I have one. Why don't you take it?"

"Say that again! Say that again!"

"Yes, I have one. What's mine is yours. Take it."

Believe me when I tell you that shame washed over me. I started sweating profusely. People don't make such sacrifices voluntarily these days. I scooted my chair over next to Mirza. I couldn't decide how to express how unworthy and grateful I felt.

"Mirza, first I want to apologize for the coarse, bitter way I was talking to you just now. Secondly I want to confess something to you, and afterwards I hope you appreciate my candidness and grant me the bounty of your compassionate heart!

"I always thought you were an unrefined, stingy, selfish and manipulative person. Look, don't get mad—people sometimes make mistakes! But today you've proven to me your honorableness and how much you value friendship. You've shown me how I'm prone to hatred and twisted thinking and how mean-spirited I am! Please forgive me."

My eyes filled with tears. I was almost to the point of kissing Mirza's hand and hiding my face in his lap in order to stifle my crying. But then he spoke.

"Stop it! What did I do to deserve this praise? I have a bike. I can ride it or you can ride it."

"Mirza, I won't take it for free. That will never happen."

"That's just what I was afraid of. You're so particular that you never accept favors, but with God as my witness, this is nothing."

"Well anyway, tell me how much the bike really cost."

"You're embarrassing me. Friends don't talk about money with friends, and moreover it wouldn't cost as much as I paid for it. Back then it was expensive."

"How much?"

"One hundred and seventy-five rupees. But in those days, bikes weren't so popular and they cost more."

"It's real old?"

"No, just a little. My boy rode it to and from college and he graduated

less than two years ago. That being said, it's a little different from bikes today. These days bikes are made of aluminum and they're so cheap anyone can buy one. The old ones had real strong frames."

"But Mirza, I'll never be able to give you a hundred and seventy-five rupees. How would I come across that much money? I can't even give you half that."

"I'd hardly ask you for the full price. I don't actually want anything, but ..."

"No, Mirza, you must take something. Okay, why don't we do this—I'll put some money in your pocket. When you get home, count it. If it's enough, tomorrow send the bike my way. If not, send the money back. Let's not talk about this anymore. I'll start feeling as if we're doing business."

"Whatever you say. I still think you should just forget the money. But I know you won't agree."

I got up and went inside. I reckoned that people usually pay half price for used goods. But when I'd told Mirza that I couldn't even pay that, he didn't object. No, that simple soul had told me to take it for free! But how could I do that? After all, it's a bike. A mode of transportation. Just like a stagecoach, a horse, a car, or a tonga. I opened the box where I kept my money and saw that I had only forty-six rupees. Forty-six rupees isn't a good sum. Forty-five or fifty would be okay. But I didn't have fifty, and if I had no problem giving him only forty-five, then why not forty? Numbers ending with zero seem better. Okay then, I thought to myself, I'll give him forty rupees. God willing, he'll accept it.

I went outside clutching the forty rupees and stuffed them into Mirza's pocket.

"Mirza, don't consider this the bike's price, but if you accept this paltry sum from your impoverished friend, if it doesn't sit poorly with you, then send the bike along tomorrow."

When Mirza got up to leave, I reminded him again to send the bike the next morning. Then before he left for good, I said once more, "Around eight or nine in the morning. Don't be late! Bye! And, Mirza, look, think of how much money I really wanted to give you! Bye! And thanks a lot. I'm indebted to you. And please forgive my presumptuousness. Just once in a while I slip up like that, right? Tomorrow at eight, no later than nine. Positively. Bye!"

Mirza replied, "You'll have to wash it. And oil it and stuff. If my servant has some free time, I'll have him oil it. Otherwise you'll have to."

"Yes, yes. Everything will be taken care of! Make sure to send it by eight or even seven thirty. Okay? Bye!"

That night I lay in bed thinking about all the trips I would be able to take on my bike. I made up my mind that in the next two or three days I'd go around for another look at all the famous historical buildings and ruins in the neighborhood. Then the following summer, if it proved possible, I'd take a bike trip up to Kashmir and thereabouts. Every morning bright and early I'd take the bike over to the canal for some fresh air. In the evening, after the temperature dropped, I'd bike along the smooth street gracefully passing all the people out strolling. The dying light of the sun would bounce off the bike's metal. The bike would shimmer and it would appear as though a crane were flying along just above the ground. My joy-filled smile was still on my lips. I had a hard time stopping myself from rushing over to Mirza and hugging him.

Throughout the night, I dreamed of praying to God that he wouldn't prevent Mirza from giving me the bike.

As soon as I got up the next morning, my servant broke the good news that the bike had already been delivered.

"So early?"

"Actually, it arrived last night. You were sleeping, and I thought I shouldn't wake you. Mirza's servant also brought along a wrench."

I was shocked that Mirza had sent the bike so quickly, but I decided it was due to his conscientiousness. He got the money, so why not send it quickly?

"Look, leave the wrench here," I said to my servant. "And, hey, wipe down the bike really well. Go down to the bike repairman at the intersection and bring back some oil. And, hey! Where the hell are you going already? This is important. Bring back a funnel and lubricate the bike wherever it needs it. And tell the guy not to give you any cheap oil that will just ruin it. A bike is very delicate. When you're done, take the bike outside. After I get dressed, I'm going to take it for a ride. And, look now—clean it well but don't rub too hard or the polish will come off!"

I drank my tea quickly. In the bathroom, I sang ecstatically, "Let's go to the jasmine garden . . ." Then I put on some clothes, shoved the wrench in my pocket, and went outside.

When I got to the verandah, I saw a strange type of machine. I couldn't quite make out what it was.

"Hey, you—what's this?" I asked my servant.

"It's the bike, sir."

"Bike? Whose bike?"

"Mirza Sahib's."

"And the one he sent last night, where's that?"

"This is it."

“What the hell are you saying? You’re telling me that this is the bike that Mirza Sahib sent me last night?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh.” I began to look at the bike again.

“Why didn’t you clean it?”

“Sir, I’ve already cleaned it two or three times.”

“Then why is it dirty?”

My servant thought he shouldn’t answer this.

“You brought the oil?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You oiled it?”

“Sir, I tried but there’s nothing to oil. No joints.”

“What?”

“Sir, the joints are all covered in rust and grime. It’s all caked on.”

I slowly approached the contraption that my servant said was the bike. I looked closely at its different parts and decided that it must indeed be a bike, and yet it was clearly something from before the modern era and primitive compared to even the inventions of the spinning wheel and those types of things. Spinning its wheels, I looked for the sockets that someone must have oiled a long time ago. But I could find nothing. My servant spoke up, “Sir, the oil’s spreading everywhere. There’s no place for it to soak in.”

“Okay, then drip some on from above. That works too.”

At last I got on the bike. As soon as I started pedaling, it seemed as though a corpse, cracking its bones, was coming back to life against its will. In front of my house, there’s a slope and the bike started to pedal on its own, but at a speed that made it seem as though the asphalt was swimming across the ground. All sorts of sounds were emerging from different parts of the bike. Something that sounded like *cheen-chaan-choon* was coming from beneath the seat and from the back tire. *Khat-khar-khar-khar* was coming from around the mud flaps. *Char-charkh-char-charkh* was coming from the chain and pedals. The chain was very loose. When I pushed down on the pedals, the chain stretched out and then contracted giving off a *char-char* sound. Then it loosened again. The back wheel swayed as it revolved. It turned all right, but it wobbled from right to left and left to right. The track it left in the dust of the street made it appear as if a drunken snake had slithered by. It had mud flaps, but they weren’t in the right place. It seemed as if the only use they could possibly serve was that if you were biking north and the sun was setting, then the tires would be spared the sun’s full heat. The front tire had a large patch on it so once each revolution the tire would lift up and this

would throw my head back. It seemed as though someone was constantly hitting me beneath my chin. The tires were a chorus of *choon-choon-phat, choon-choon-phat*. As the bike picked up a little speed going downhill, it caused something like an earthquake and woke up the other miscellaneous parts of the bike, which then started emitting their own peculiar sounds. People were startled. Mothers hugged children to their breasts. Amidst the *kharar-kharar* cacophony, the sound of the wheels could be heard, but because the bike was going faster now, it wasn't *choon-choon-phat* but *chachoon-phat-chachoon-phat*. Every part of the bike was mumbling in some obscure language.

The increased speed didn't go over well with the bike's difficult temperament and two changes took place. First, the handlebars turned to one side sending the bike in that direction against my will. Then the seat suddenly sank about six inches and I was pedaling with my knees knocking against my chin. I was entirely bent over at the waist, and added to that my head was being constantly snapped back and forth by the front wheel's playful shenanigans.

The low seat turned out to be extremely uncomfortable, so I thought I ought to correct it. I stopped and got off. Suddenly there was complete silence all across the world. It seemed as though I had just left a noisy train station. I pulled the wrench out of my pocket, adjusted the seat, fixed the handlebars and got on again.

I hadn't gone two feet when the handlebars suddenly dropped down so far that the seat was now a good foot above them. My body was flung forward and my entire weight was pressed down on my hands as they gripped the handlebars and absorbed the front tire's jolts. Imagine how things stood for me—from a distance I must have looked like a woman kneading dough! I couldn't stop thinking about how silly I looked so I started to sweat. I glanced to my right and left. Before I had gone even a mile, everyone was staring down the road at me enjoying the sight of my troubles.

The handlebars had dropped. A little while later the seat did too so my entire body was just about touching the ground.

"Look, what's he doing?" A boy asked, as though this rude little brat thought I was performing some stunt. I got off and adjusted the handlebars and seat again.

But once I was back on the bike, the same things happened. My hands and body were rarely at the same height, and even when they were, I worried whether the seat or the handlebars would sink first. As a result, instead of riding confidently without a thought of what was to come, I raised my behind off the seat a little. However, this meant that my

weight bore down unevenly on the handlebars, causing them to sink again.

After two miles passed and the bike's seesaw motion seemed to have regulated itself somewhat, I decided to take it to a mechanic to have its screws tightened. I angled toward a bike shop.

Hearing the bike's noisy approach, everyone in the shop turned from what they were doing to see what was going on.

I summoned up my courage.

"Please fix this."

A mechanic came forward. He had an iron rod in one hand that he used to callously rap on different parts of the bike during his inspection. It seemed as though he reached his opinion quickly.

"How much of this you want fixed?"

"You're very rude! Can't you see that it's just the handlebars and the seat that need a little adjusting. What else? Please fix it straightaway. How much will it be?"

"I shouldn't fix the mud flaps?"

"Yes, do those too."

"It'd be a good idea to fix everything else while you're at it."

"All right, go ahead."

"But that's impossible. It'll take two weeks. You'll need to leave it here."

"How much would it be?"

"Not that much—thirty or forty rupees, I'd say."

"No, just do what I asked you to and leave the rest to me."

He quickly adjusted the handlebars and seat. As I was about to go, he said, "I tightened everything, but the screws are threadbare and they'll go loose in a minute."

"What insolence!" I shouted. "You took my money for nothing?"

"Sir, didn't you get this bike for free? It's your friend Mirza Sahib's, isn't it?" He turned to someone behind him. "Lallu, isn't this bike the one Mirza Sahib brought in last year to sell? You recognize it, don't you?" He turned back to me. "This bike shouldn't be ridden. It's ready for the museum."

"No, Mirza Sahib's boy rode this bike to and from college and he graduated less than two years ago!"

"That's all fine and good, but Mirza Sahib had it when he was in college."

My spirits plummeted.

I slowly walked the bike away, but even this was difficult. It strained parts of my body that walking a bike usually didn't and pain was spread-

ing over my legs, shoulders, waist and arms. The thought of Mirza kept coming back, but each time I tried to push it away lest I go mad, and in the first stage of this madness I would convene a meeting in front of his house where I would recite a long speech concerning his hypocrisy, his lack of honesty and his deceit. I would warn everyone now, and all those to come in the future, about Mirza's bad character. Then after falling disconsolate, I would light a bonfire, jump in, and commit suicide by immolation.

Instead, I decided to try to sell the bike for whatever I could get and rest content with that. A loss of ten or fifteen rupees isn't a big deal—at least then I wouldn't have wasted the full forty.

I found another bike shop along the road and pulled over. The shop owner came out, but I was at a loss for words because I'd never been in the position of having to sell anything.

After extended deliberation, I stammered, "This is a bike."

"So?" the shopkeeper said.

"You'll take it?"

"Meaning?"

"I'm selling it."

The way he looked at me made me think he suspected I'd stolen it. He looked at the bike again. Then at me. Then at the bike. It seemed as though he couldn't make up his mind which one was the bike and which one was the man.

"What are you going to do after selling it?" he asked.

I had no idea what to say to that.

"You mean what am I going to do with the money?"

"That too, but what's the guy going to do who buys it?"

"Ride it, what else?"

"Okay, then what?"

"Then what? Just ride it. What else is there?"

He turned to speak to his assistant. "Khuda Bakhsh, can you come here? Someone wants to sell a bike."

The esteemed Khuda Bakhsh looked at the bike from a distance as though he could smell it. Then the two consulted with each other. In the end the owner came back to me.

"You're really selling it?"

"Why else would I be here? Did I come all the way from home just to have the honor of exchanging words with you?"

"How much do you want?"

"How much are you offering?"

"Really?" "Yes."

“You sure?”

“Are you going to tell me or go on teasing me?”

“Three rupees.”

My blood burst through its floodgates. My entire body quaked in anger. “You low-down, bloodsucking son of a swindler! You can insult me all you want, but never insult this bike in the way you just did! I’ll never forgive you.”

And with that, I got back on the bike and set off down the road in a blind fury.

I couldn’t have gone twenty feet when the ground seemed to spring up at me, the sky above my head separated and wound up between my legs, and all around me the buildings shifted places.

Once I recovered from my fall, I found myself sitting very nonchalantly on the ground as if this was something I did for pleasure. People were standing around me and many were laughing. I was still in front of the shop where I’d just had my fruitless discussion. I inspected the scene and noticed that my front tire had become detached and wobbled over to the opposite side of the street, and the remainder of my bike was resting on the ground near me. I quickly tried to rectify the situation. Crossing the road, I grabbed the front tire with one hand. Then I went back, yanked the bike up and started off down the street. I did this without thinking since the bike was hardly so dear to me that I would bother with it otherwise.

But why was I making such an effort? And where was I going? What did I have in mind? Was I really going to take this wreck somewhere?

My answer: Just wait and see. For the time being, I thought it best to leave the scene since everyone was watching me. I admonished myself to keep my head high and march off resolutely. Whoever was laughing could laugh. Crass people exist everywhere. After all, what had happened? Just an accident. Nothing more. Don’t look at anyone. Keep moving ...

I could hear rude things being said about me, “Mister, don’t leave in a huff!” “Stupid bike, I’ll teach you a lesson once we get home!”

One man was holding his son’s hand. He motioned toward me and said, “Look son, that’s a circus bike. Its wheels are all funny.”

But I walked right by them. Before long I was outside of town and my steps grew steadier. The tension wracking me for the past several hours eased considerably. I kept on going, all the way to the river. I stopped on the bridge and, with the same peace of mind you feel when you drop a letter in a mailbox, I dropped both tires, one after the other, into the river and then turned back toward town.

I went straight to Mirza's and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

"If you would, please come outside," I said. "How could I enter the house of such a God-loving soul without first washing my feet?"

He obliged my request. I presented him with the wrench he had been so generous as to include free of charge with the bike.

"Mirza Sahib, why don't you take this? I don't need it anymore."

When I got home, I went back to my high school chemistry text to search for a formula for making bombs. □

The Saint of Mureedpur*

PEOPLE ARE often surprised that I never talk about my hometown. Many are amazed that I never travel there, and when they ask why I always find a way to avoid answering. They begin to get suspicious. One imagines there's a court case pending against me and that I'm hiding from the law. Another thinks I must have been a servant, or that someone has accused me of fraud so I had to flee. Someone else says my father disowned me and won't let me in the front door. In fact everyone has their own theory. Today I'm going to eradicate all these misconceptions. God, please see to it that the readers judge me fairly!

The story starts with my nephew. Looking at him you would think he's just your average nephew. He does have my best qualities, but he's also picked up some silly habits as well; he has one trait, however, that has never before materialized in my family with such intensity. That is, he respects his elders, and to him I represent some sort of god of knowledge and art. I don't know what gave him this foolish idea and can only imagine that in the best families sometimes this attitude appears spontaneously—I've often seen well-bred sons offer respect to their elders in such an effusive manner that you would think they were from an entirely different, lower-class family.

One year I attended the Congress Party meetings, though it would be more accurate to say that the meetings arrived at my doorstep. I've said time and again, and I'm still able to say without reservation, that what happened was not due to any fault on my part. People think that I ar-

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ranged to have the Congress Party hold their meetings nearby just to show off the reach of my influence, but this is only jealousy. I do often bring vaudeville comedians to town, and I've invited theater companies several times as well, but when it comes to the Congress Party, I've always kept my distance, so I'm not going to say any more about that.

Nevertheless, when the Congress Party is holding their yearly convention next door, who is so abstemious that he won't go over? In those days, for one reason or another, I had a lot of free time and so, like one of the idle, I dropped by and ended up listening to all the speeches. I stayed all day, every day. Then, after returning home at night, I would write a note to my nephew outlining my thoughts on the day so that he would have my eyewitness account for future use.

Later I learned that my nephew opened these letters with great respect and ceremony, and I've been able to deduce from a number of things that his routine included washing his hands, feet and mouth—just like at the mosque—before reading them.

First he read them to himself and then out loud to his friends. Then he would take them around, first to where people came to buy newspapers and then to where the village savants hung out. He would recite exaggerated stories of my exploits and then turn the letters over to the local paper and its country bumpkin editor who would publish them with fawning solicitude. The paper was called the *Mureedpur Gazette*—not a paper with an archives. It had a press life of a couple months before it hit some financial problems and folded. An APB on the editor would read like this:

Skin color—tan
Conversation style—philosophical
First impression—thief.

(If anyone knows where he lives—God rewards the virtuous!—please contact the Khilafat Committee of Mureedpur (KCM). Moreover, if anyone subscribes to his newspaper, the KCM will absolutely not be held responsible.)

I've also learned that the newspaper used my letters for an edition on the Congress Party which they printed in such quantities that you can still see its pages used for packing in general stores around town. At any rate, everyone in Mureedpur praised my writing talent, perceptiveness, strength of mind, and patriotism. Without my knowledge, I was installed as a national leader and several poets wrote encomiums about me that the *Gazette* then printed.

I was entirely unaware of how I was being honored. It's true that God

bestows blessings wherever He likes, but how could I know that I had penetrated so deeply into the hearts of my compatriots and all just from having written a handful of letters to my nephew? Who would guess that this ordinary man who passes silently through the streets without raising his gaze from his feet is being worshipped in Mureedpur?

After writing those letters, I had completely forgotten about the Congress Party and all related matters. I didn't subscribe to the *Gazette* and my nephew, intimidated by my advanced years, never wrote to me about any of what was transpiring—about how I had become a political leader. I'm sure that if he had told me, I wouldn't have understood what he was talking about. Nevertheless, people had somehow taken to me.

Organizational meetings began popping up all over the country on account of the bad blood that was rising. Everyone with a table, chair and vase was convening one.

During this season of meetings, I received a letter from the Indian Youth Association (IYA) of Mureedpur bearing the following message:

We here in your hometown of Mureedpur are pining to see you. Everyone is restless to behold your glowing countenance and to be enlightened by the purity of your thoughts. Granted that the entire country has an inexhaustible need for your Blessed Soul, nevertheless your hometown has first claims upon you since

The trash of your hometown is dearer to you
Than the flowers of paradise....

After putting forth three or four such irrefutable claims, the note requested me to go to Mureedpur to give a lecture exhorting the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Reading the letter, I was astonished beyond belief, but after stepping back to consider the matter, I gradually became convinced that the citizens of Mureedpur could truly discern the souls of men!

I am a weak person so I immediately fell prey to the intoxication of grandeur. Suddenly my hometown seemed very dear. I was filled with pity at the insensitivity my countrymen showed toward their homeland. A voice inside my head said, "You alone are capable of leading these people and looking after their welfare! God has entrusted you with the power of judgment and vision! Thousands of people are anxiously awaiting you! Get up! Hundreds of people must be camped at the Assembly Hall already!"

And so I accepted Mureedpur's invitation. I sent a telegram ahead, writing in an officious tone that I would arrive in fifteen days time on such-and-such train and that no one was to come to the station to meet

me because I didn't wish to disturb anyone's work since that was what India most needed—action and industry.

Up until the date of the meeting, I was constantly busy writing my speech. From morning till night, a carousel of phrases filled my mind:

Hindus and Muslims are brothers.

Hindus and Muslims are indivisible—like heat from the sun!

India runs on two wheels. Which two? Listen up, friends—Hindus and Muslims!

Those communities who grab onto the rope of Harmony prove how highly developed they are, and those who yield to Acrimony will be left behind by History! Et cetera, et cetera.

As a child I had read the schoolbook story “Two Oxen.” I got it out again and read it, writing down all the details. Then I remembered another story. It was about a dying man who called his sons together and brought out a bundle of sticks. He told them to break the bundle, but they couldn't. Then he untied the bundle and gave one stick to each boy. These they easily snapped in two. This was how the man taught his sons a lesson about the importance of togetherness. I wrote down this story too.

When I thought about the speech's beginning, I decided to start off like this:

My beloved countrymen!

Troubles are piling up on top of your head

Misery is everywhere

Evil omens are encircling you

Listen, a voice emerges from all around—

Just think about who you were ...

What's happened to you?

Look at how you've fallen!

India's revered poet Maulana Altaf Husain Hali from Panipat wrote these lines many years ago. How could he know that with the passage of time, every day these sorrowful words would seem ever truer? This is exactly where we're at in India ...

And so on and so forth.

Then I thought I would paint a painful picture of India. I would point at poverty and more poverty, fractiousness, etc. Then I'd ask everyone to consider the cause. I'd repeat what others usually say—colonialism, the climate, and Western culture—but I'd prove all of these wrong before revealing the true reason—Hindu-Muslim communalism. I'd finish up by exhorting everyone to unify, and I'd conclude with a couplet:

Come, O Nightingale, so that we can lament together
 You can sigh, "Oh, my Rose!" And I'll sigh, "Oh, my heart!"

After thinking deeply for a week or so, I came up with something like an outline for the speech. I wrote it out so that I could refer to it at the meeting. It looked like this:

1. Preamble—Hali's poetry, recited in a strong and aggrieved voice
2. India's current circumstances
 - a. Poverty
 - b. Communal enmity
 - c. Communal leaders' programs of self-interest
3. The reasons
 - a. Colonialism? No
 - b. Climate? No
 - c. Western culture? No

So what then?
 [Pause to look over the audience while smiling.]
4. Tell them the real reason is Hindu-Muslim communalism

[Pause for cheers of support.]
 Describe how things are & speak of communal violence in a tearful voice
 [Perhaps more cheers of support. Allow some time.]
5. Conclusion—Repeat usual homilies, especially those about unity (couplet)
 [Return humbly to my chair, acknowledge everyone's cheers, get up after a minute & wave to the crowd.]

I read over this outline every day until the day of the meeting and practiced the important phrases in front of the mirror. I also worked on the suggestive smile I planned to use after point #3. I practiced turning my head as well—from right to left, left to right—so that during the speech, everyone would be able to hear every word I said.

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The trip to Mureedpur took eight hours. I had to change trains at Sanga. Some enthusiastic members of the IYA were there to receive me. They draped flower garlands over my head and gave me fruit and snacks to eat.

From Sanga to Mureedpur, we discussed issues of political importance. When the train arrived at Mureedpur, there was a crowd at least three thousand strong shouting one slogan after another. The volunteers urged me to show myself, "Stick your head out! The people want to see you!"

I complied. With garlands around my neck, I held an orange in one hand. When the crowd saw me, they started shouting with even more

fervor.

I left the station without any difficulties. They ushered me into a waiting car and the procession started off in the direction of the Assembly Hall.

When I entered the Assembly Hall, I saw that a crowd of around five thousand had already gathered and in a single voice were shouting chants in my honor. Red banners right and left bore messages of praise for humble me: “You are India’s Salvation!” “Welcome home!” “India needs action!”

I was led to a chair on the stage. In front of everyone, the MC hugged me and kissed me on the forehead. Then he began introducing me, “Gentlemen! This renowned leader of India has been called here today to address us!”

Hearing his prompt, I tried to remember the introduction to my speech, but I was experiencing such a strong case of stage fright that I was forced to look for my notes.

When I reached into my pocket, I couldn’t find them. All at once I felt a chill ripple down my entire body. I reassured myself that I had many other pockets and there was no need to worry. Trembling, I checked all remaining pockets. Nothing. The hall began to reel. My heart began to pound. My mouth went dry. I patted each pocket a dozen times, but there was nothing! I wanted to burst into tears. Out of helplessness, I began to bite my lips. The MC was repeating himself, “It’s impossible to express how proud Mureedpur is of him. Every century and every country sees only a few who for humankind ...”

Oh God, what should I do? I was going to talk about what a poor state India is in. No, first I should say how unworthy we are. But “worthy” isn’t the right word. I should say “uncouth.” That’s not right either. “Uncultured” ...

The MC spoke, “A political mind of the first order. Everyone knows of his sincere compassion and patriotism. This is all well known. But he is such a gifted public speaker that ...”

How does my speech begin? In a speech about Hindu-Muslim harmony, you should repeat some homilies. But that comes last. What about that smile I was going to do?

“I promise you that he’ll move your heart!”

The MC’s voice was drowned out by cries from the crowd. The world before me was vanishing into darkness. Suddenly the MC turned to me, but I have no idea what he said. Nonetheless, I realized it was time for me to deliver my speech, and that I’d have to get up.

Some unknown force spurred me forward. I stumbled but regained

my balance. My hand was trembling. The hall was vibrating with cries. I was just about to faint. The rallying cries echoed around me like the sound of waves crashing down upon the head of a drowning man.

Where should I begin my speech? I'd need to talk about the self-interest of political leaders, but what else? I was going to tell a story too, the one about the heron and the fox. No, what was it? "Two Oxen" ...

Suddenly the crowd fell silent. Everyone was looking at me. I closed my eyes and grabbed the podium for support. Now my other hand was trembling as well. I latched it onto the podium. It felt like the podium was trying to run away and I had grabbed it and was holding it up! I opened my eyes and tried to smile. My mouth felt like it was filled with cotton.

"My beloved countrymen!"

But contrary to my intentions, my voice came out faint and frail. Several people giggled. I cleared my throat. Some others couldn't stop themselves from laughing. I built up my courage and set myself to speak loudly.

This time my voice leapt from my lungs—I was practically yelling. This elicited many guffaws.

"My beloved countrymen!"

But I couldn't remember what I wanted to say after that. Scores of things were milling around in my head but nothing stuck.

"My beloved countrymen!"

Now the crowd's laughing was starting to irritate me. I was being mocked! I resolved to say whatever came to mind and reassured myself that all I had to do was start and everything would turn out fine.

"My beloved countrymen! Many people say that India's climate is bad, I mean that there are many bad things in India. Do you understand?"

Pause.

"Bad things! But this, I mean what I just referred to, isn't true."

Uproarious laughter.

I felt like I was about to faint. I couldn't remember what to say next. Suddenly I recalled the story about the oxen so I thought I could go on.

"Yes, what I'm trying to say is that ... there were two oxen living together despite the climate and colonialism ..."

Raucous laughter.

At this point I realized that what I was saying sounded rather random. I thought I might as well tell the story of the bundle of sticks.

"For instance, take a bundle of sticks. Usually sticks are expensive because in India there is a lot of poverty and so many people are poor. And so, nearly as if a bundle of sticks, I mean look here, if ..."

Thundering and lengthy round of laughter.

“Gentlemen! If you don’t use your heads, your community will be extinguished! Evil omens are encircling you!”

Laughter and cat calls, “Get him out of here! We won’t listen to any more from him!”

“Sheikh Saadi said, ‘When anyone in your community acts up ...’”

Someone called out, “What the hell’s he saying?”

“But let that go. At any rate no one can doubt that ... Come, O Nightingale, so that we can lament together / You can sigh, ‘Oh, my Rose!’ And I’ll sigh, ‘Oh, my heart!’”

Reciting this couplet really worked me up. At the same time, the crowd began shouting at me. I yelled out, with fire in my voice, “Those communities that now are fully developed, their lives are alert and aware and their governments are all powerful ...”

Everyone’s laughter and agitation grew even more.

“Your self-interested political leaders are deaf to your calls. The history of the world is witness to the fact that in all aspects of life ...”

But then the crowd’s laughter and jeering got so loud that I couldn’t hear my own voice. Many people were standing and shouting at the top of their lungs, and I was shaking from head to foot. Just like the first raindrop presages the storm to come, someone in the crowd summoned up the courage to throw an empty cigarette pack at me. After that several wads of paper fell around me on the stage. But I continued speaking, “Gentlemen! Remember! You will be destroyed! You are two oxen ...”

When the “rainstorm” started in earnest, I thought it best to exit the frenzied gathering. I jumped off the stage and sprang for the exit.

The crowd followed me but I didn’t look behind me as I ran. Over and over I heard people shouting unkind things so I increased my pace, making for the station as fast as I could.

When I got there, a train was waiting at the platform. I dove headlong inside and the train began to move.

Since that day, I’ve never been invited back to Mureedpur nor have I ever wanted to return. □

Early Yesterday Morning*

IN THE END it turned out that I had set my own trap. It was my mistake to

*“Savērē Jō Kal Ānkh Mērī Khulī,” from the author’s *Kulliyāt-e Patras*, volume 1. Edited by Shīmā Majīd (Lahore: Buk Ṭāk, 2003), 48–55.

mention in passing to Lala Kripa Shankarji Bramachari that my exams were approaching and to request that he wake me up, seeing as how he got up early anyway.

It seemed as though he'd been waiting for exactly this opportunity. As soon as he got up the next morning, he came pounding on my door in the name of God. For a while I thought I was still dreaming. I reasoned there was nothing to worry about as I would soon wake up and recite the *lā ḥaul* verse to protect me from evil. But the pounding only got louder: dear readers, the wooden walls began to shake, the drinking glass on the stand started to vibrate like a musical instrument and the calendar on the wall began to sway like a pendulum! At that point, it was impossible to remain asleep. The pounding continued so ferociously that it not only woke me, it also woke the souls of my dead ancestors. I yelled, "Okay! Okay! Thank you! I'm awake now! Thank you very much!" But this fine soul didn't seem to hear. Oh God, what have I brought upon myself? Is he trying to wake up the sleeping or resurrect the dead? Jesus brought the dead back to life, but I bet he just whispered, "Up!" If they got up, fine—if not, too bad for them. He wouldn't waste too much time on them. No rousing round of cannon fire. Even with Lalaji's knocking, I wasn't about to spring out of bed to unlatch the door. Only connoisseurs of sleep can understand how difficult it is to persuade yourself to get out of bed. It wasn't until I turned on the light that the pounding subsided.

Then, dear readers, I looked through the window at the sky, saw the twinkling stars and thought that finally I would discover exactly what a sunrise looks like. But when I went around looking through all the windows, I didn't notice any of the telltale signs of the false dawn that my elders had described to me. It wasn't even that late yet. I began to worry that we were experiencing an eclipse. Then something occurred to me and I called out to Lalaji.

"Lalaji, Lalaji!"

"Yes?"

"What's going on today? It's really dark."

"What do you expect at three in the morning?"

My whole body went numb.

"It's only three?"

"Not exactly three, about seven or seven and half minutes past three."

"You idiot! You fool! What did I tell you, to wake me up or not to let me sleep at all? You think it makes you look good to wake me up at three? You think I'm some railway guard? Even my grandfather is still asleep at three. You fool, how did you figure I would last the whole day if I got up at three? I'm too rich for this. Really, for God's sake!"

I really wanted to hit him, but then I thought that it wasn't my place to reform every man, woman, and child on earth. I should mind my own business. I turned off the light and went back to sleep grumbling.

I slept until my usual ten o'clock, as is proper for all respectable men. I washed at noon, had my cup of tea at four, and went out for a stroll in the cool of the evening.

I returned to my hostel later that evening. I was a young man full of the usual youthful desires and, on top of that, the evening had a romantic feel to it. A light breeze was blowing and I felt like throwing off my usual restraint. As I entered my room, I was singing with undisguised enjoyment, "If anyone gets to caress her hair, it's me..." I was about to start snapping my fingers along with the song, but then one of my neighbors yelled out, "Hey, mister!" I stopped myself and listened for the voice.

"Is that *you* singing?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to call it singing, but what can I do for you?" I answered.

"Please, if you could—you're disturbing me."

And with that, my high spirits suddenly died. A voice inside my head said, "Look, you worthless idiot! Look at how hard they're studying." Dear readers, I fell to my trembling knees and prayed to God that he would help me begin studying industriously and regularly.

Wiping tears from my eyes, I summoned up my courage and sat down at my desk. I gritted my teeth. I loosened my tie. I rolled up my sleeves. But still I couldn't figure out what to do next. Books with red covers, books with green covers, books with silver covers—all kinds of books lay in front of me in a heap. But I couldn't decide which one to read, so I decided to put them into nice orderly stacks.

I set the big books to one side. I arranged the small books in different piles depending on their relative sizes. I made a note of how many pages were in each book and then added these figures together. I counted the number of days until April fifteenth. I divided the number of pages by the number of remaining days. I'd have to read five hundred and fifty pages a day! I let none of my anxiety show, but I felt a pang of regret that I hadn't gotten up at three. But then I considered the effects of missing out on sleep from a medical perspective and I quickly recovered my senses: getting up at three would have been foolish. It would be best to get up sometime between five and seven. Then I could both keep my health and implement a rigorous study schedule. This would be killing two birds with one stone.

Of course everyone knows that if you're going to get up early, you also have to go to bed early. And since I had already eaten dinner, I

decided to go straight to bed.

Getting into bed, I wondered if I should have Lalaji wake me. While I'm disciplined enough so that I can get up whenever I need to, nonetheless I felt as though I might as well have Lalaji do me the favor.

"Lalaji?" I cried out half-heartedly.

"Plus ..." he boomed back.

I became even more apprehensive that he was angry at me. I sputtered out my request, "Lalaji, you went to a lot of trouble this morning. I appreciated it a lot. Tomorrow if you could wake me up at six, I mean six o'clock in ..."

Silence.

"Just after six—are you listening?"

Still nothing.

"Lalaji?"

His voice was sharp when he replied, "I heard, I heard. I'll wake you up at six ... Three gamma plus four alpha plus ..."

"That's, that's great—"

May God free me from obliging myself to others!

Lalaji is a real good guy. Just like he said he would, the next morning at six he unleashed a thudding barrage on my door. It was more like a reminder because, even then, I was poised to wake up. If he hadn't woken me, I would have woken up myself the very next minute. But since I had asked him to wake me, I was obliged to thank him. He acknowledged my thanks by stopping his assault on my door.

What happened after that remains unclear. There's bound to be some difference of opinion. Anyway I'm sure—and even ready to swear—that I woke up. I remember reciting the *kalima*, as any good and virtuous Muslim would. I also remember that I rolled onto my side, as a sort of prelude to getting up. After that I'm at a loss. Perhaps I tossed off my blanket. Perhaps I wrapped it around my head. Maybe I coughed. Maybe I started snoring. At any rate, I know for a fact that I got up for good at ten. God alone knows if I was studying or sleeping between the time that Lalaji woke me and ten o'clock ... No, no, I must have been studying. Or maybe I really was sleeping ... At any rate no one will be able to discover the truth. Who knows? Perhaps Lalaji really woke me at ten, or maybe by some mistake six o'clock turned into ten o'clock. Who am I to interfere with the workings of God? And yet all day I had the sneaking suspicion that the fault lay only with me.

But, dear readers, witness how good I am! Suspecting my mistake, I reproached myself all day. And yet I didn't let on about any of this to Lalaji. I thanked him, and so as not to discourage him, I went on with

great satisfaction about how it was only due to his courteous favor that I was able to put to good use the pleasant early hours of the morning. Otherwise, as usual, I would have slept till ten.

“Lalaji! I can’t believe how clear your mind is in the morning! I swear to God, you remember everything you read. Morning is a true mystery of God’s creation! I mean, if morning happened twice a day—I mean, once in place of evening, too—then just think how wonderful things would be.”

Lalaji praised my witty commentary and asked, “So you want me to keep waking you up at six then?”

“Yes, yes, of course. You really have to ask? Of course.”

That evening I set out on my desk the books I would study the next morning. I scooted my chair close to my cot. I hung my coat and scarf from the back of the chair. I set my winter cap and gloves within reach. I checked for the matches I kept underneath my pillow. I recited the *Āyatu’l-Kursī* three times. And with the best intentions in the world, I fell asleep.

I awoke with a start the next morning upon Lalaji’s first knock. With my blanket still over my head, I wished him a good morning in my most cheerful voice. I coughed vigorously so that he would understand I was fully awake. This satisfied him, and he left.

I praised myself for having the necessary strength of spirit and determination to wake up so fast. I said to myself, “Hey, getting up in the morning’s nothing! I was afraid for no reason.” Another voice inside my head answered, “What else? You lose courage very easily.” I responded, “Isn’t that the truth. It’s only my laziness that prevents me from getting up this early. Right now in Lahore there must be thousands of lazy people deep in the pleasant folds of sleep who know nothing about what’s going on in the world around them. Then there’s me, answering duty’s call, awake and as fresh and cheerful as a flower’s bloom. I’ve proven myself a better lad than I thought I was!” Then my nose got a little cold so, without thinking, I covered it with my blanket. I thought to myself, “Wow! I really did get up early today. If getting up like this becomes a habit then I’ll be able to read some of the *Qur’ān* and pray at the dawn service. After all, religion’s the most precious thing. Look at me—I’m becoming more and more of an atheist every day. I’m afraid of neither God nor His Prophet. I’m thinking that hard work alone will be enough to pass my exams. Poor Akbar died thinking this, but we didn’t pay any attention to him.” (The blanket slipped over my ears.) “It looks like I’m the first one up today. It’s very early, four hours before classes start. Amazing. God, how lazy the college administration is! Every able-bodied person should be up by six. I

don't understand why classes don't start at seven." (Blanket over my head.) "So it's six o'clock. I'll be able to study for three hours straight. The only question is which book I should read first. Shakespeare or Wordsworth? I think Shakespeare is better. His wonderful works are inspired by God, and what could be better in the morning than communing with God? But, oh, it isn't good to start the day with gut-wrenching, emotional reading. I should read Wordsworth. If I read him, I'll feel calm and peaceful, and my soul will find some relief in nature's charming quietude. But Shakespeare ... no Wordsworth's better ... Shakespeare ... *Hamlet* ... But Wordsworth ... *Lady Macbeth* ... *Madness* ... *Madness* ... *Meadows* ... *Sanjar* ... *Sanjar* ... *A spring breeze* ... *I'm a daredevil* ..."

The puzzling thing is that when I next stuck my head out from underneath the covers to begin reading Wordsworth, it was already ten o'clock. I have no idea how this happened.

I met Lalaji in the corridor at school.

"Sir, I called out to you earlier this morning. Why didn't you reply?"

I laughed loudly. "Lalaji, don't you remember? Didn't I say good morning to you? I was already up by then."

"Yes, but later around seven I asked you the date and you didn't reply."

I looked at him with an expression of absolute shock, as though he had gone crazy. Then I mustered a look of grave consideration and furrowed my brow in a show of intense concentration. I maintained this look of profound contemplation for about thirty seconds. Then I smiled and said, "Yes, well, at that time, you see, I was praying."

This impressed Lalaji and he left. I bowed my head like an ascetic withdrawing into his cave and went off to my classroom.

Now this has become my daily routine. Wake for the first time at six. Wake for the second time at ten. If Lalaji should call out to me in between, I explain later that I was praying.

My pining heart was once so full of desire! I wanted to wake up with my precious head lying upon a golden pillow, the first rays of the sun falling on my curly, black hair, the flowers in my room giving off their soul-refreshing morning aroma, an elegant hand strumming the strings of a lute, and this very goddess—her voice overflowing with love and gentle sweetness—singing, "Wake up, my dear!"

My paradisiacal dream would slowly dissolve into the music's waves, and consciousness would lift darkness's light veil—that pleasant talisman! I would feel someone looking at me with love. Bewitched, I would turn to look into her eyes. An irrepressible smile would further brighten the morning, the song "Your face is all radiance!" would surge and then self-

consciously fade away!

But the reality is that I'm awakened by a ruckus at my door and someone yelling, "Sir! Sir!" Four hours later the college's gong is struck indicating ten o'clock. And in the intervening hours, the sounds of alarm clocks falling to the floor, hot pots turning over, doors shutting, book covers slapped shut, chairs dragged along the floor, and people gargling, clearing their throats and coughing—all of this sounds like some light classical musical composition. Honestly.

Reality falls so short of my dreams, I'd rather die. □

July 1925

—*Translated by Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad*