

HASAN MANZAR

Rocking Chair*

DAYBREAK WAS just around the corner but Yalda was still awake. She had been up since eleven or twelve o'clock when the guests who had come to congratulate the couple had finally departed and Ibn-e Hasan had walked into the room.

The room was dimly lit and somebody, God knows who, had hung paper decorations above the bed to resemble a canopy. The curtains were new, so was the bed. The smell of new furniture and fresh flowers filled the air. Outside, the moon of the eleventh shone brilliantly in the space between the two houses giving the appearance of a narrow alley.

She had been sitting on the bed all night playing distractedly with her big toe, just as she had done years ago while reading in bed. "If this is the beginning, God knows what the end might be!" she repeatedly felt like saying, but no matter how hard she tried her mind refused to think beyond that. A strange regard for tradition always got in her way—a feeling she couldn't shrug off easily.

They had been together for years, but only today had she become aware that Ibn-e Hasan snored. Perhaps his nose had been broken sometime playing hockey and become a bit crooked in the middle. Lying next to her, he looked more innocent than on other days—more or less the way he was in his childhood—with no ability to sulk or feel offended, with no suspicion or doubt on his face. For the last five years the fear that he might take offense or become suspicious had prompted her to timidly do his bidding.

He would always tell her: "meet me on such and such day, at such and such time" at some appointed place, and then walk away. He didn't give a thought to the fact that the appointed place was miles away from her home or that she had begged off saying she wouldn't be able to get

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there. Ibn-e Hasan couldn't care less if Nana was sick on a given day—that is, when Nana was still alive—and she had to take him to see the doctor. Nor did he care about the day Baji, her elder sister, had arranged a soirée for her writer, journalist and cultured friends and Yalda was in charge of providing hospitality. Sometimes he would even get angry and snap, “Can't she take care of it herself?”

“Poor thing, she does all her work herself!”

“So are you dying to sit around with these people? Or does Baji want you to?”

Once this sort of talk got started she had no choice but to remain silent or the matter would get out of hand and Ibn-e Hasan would begin threatening “By God, if I ever see you again ...”

After every tryst, regardless of how tired she was and before he had a chance to hear her say “no,” he would fix the time and place for their next meeting and walk away. She would stand frozen for a while, at a loss to decide which way to go, and then set out in the direction of their two houses that stood face to face but were so far apart that neither of them had set foot in the other's house in years.

Even when he was leaving she would never ask him where he would go, but whenever they met he always subtly tried to pry out whether she took the bus to get there.

“I didn't ask anyone for a ride,” she would retort, which made him ask in a huff, “Who said anything about a ride?”

“No one,” she would reply without emotion, furtively glancing around the dark alley or the seats at the very back of the cinema hall—afraid some familiar face might be coming along or somebody might be watching. From their relatively dark corner in the park—deliberately chosen by Ibn-e Hasan—she watched the children in the fading daylight rolling round on the grassy areas, tumbling and sliding down the slopes, and chasing after one another while their parents repeatedly called to them to stop now and get ready to leave. Slowly the park would begin to empty and the moments Ibn-e Hasan had waited for would arrive. Then, only one heart was beating quickly—Yalda's. The breast of Ibn-e Hasan was like a transistor radio that beat despite being devoid of a heart. Before leaving he would again try to casually find out whether she would go straight home or stop somewhere along the way; and if she was going straight home, was she going to go by bus or rickshaw.

Yalda had never felt the need to know when Ibn-e Hasan himself would return home. If he got back late, she would hear the car come to a halt and honk, or, if he didn't have the car, the doorbell would ring and the wrought-iron gate would rattle and open. If he had stayed out all

night, muffled voices would first be heard from a corner room of that big house, as if someone was trying in vain to suppress their anger. Then, in another part of the house, Ibn-e Hasan could be heard talking loudly to his mother, as if he wanted this other person to hear. The first voice belonged to his father who, long ago, when she was a little girl, used to call Yalda over to him saying, “Baiti” (daughter). But now, if they ran into each other in the street, either Yalda panicked and made a quick detour or, if the encounter had been too sudden, he simply passed by her with his head down. Spotting him, Yalda would quickly cover her head and look down too, pretending not to have seen him, feeling somehow guilty.

On the mornings Ibn-e Hasan had been absent from home all night, Yalda would sometimes find his younger brothers hovering around her house, as if trying to discover what was going on inside, even attempting to peek through her windows at times to see if he was hiding there. When Ibn-e Hasan arrived home there would be a commotion and his father would come out of the house muttering. Then Ibn-e Hasan could be heard yelling, “You just watch, Mother, one of these days I’ll leave this house for good. Does he think I’m some kind of prisoner!”

After that the front door would be heard slamming shut and, if the car was around, its door slammed too. Yalda would slink behind the curtain of her window and watch him leave.

The entire responsibility to track him down on such occasions—or after he had suddenly disappeared somewhere feeling irritated by her failure to arrive at their rendezvous on time—fell squarely on Yalda. She would send him all kinds of messages through his acquaintances, such as: “Please tell him that Baji has brought the book he wanted from the library” (it was always a book in the category Baji called “turd”), or “We will take care of the work he wanted done.” Sometimes, as Baji was leaving for the College, she would ask her to call him, though it was difficult because his phone number kept changing, along with his job.

Now and then Baji would snap peevishly, “Why can’t you get rid of him, you silly girl, and live a more purposeful life?” Then Yalda would break into sobs, prompting Baji to relent and say with feigned anger, “All right, I will, but Bitto (darling), are you sure he still has the same number?”

Yalda would nod her head and, after Baji had gone, would wonder why she couldn’t be like her. In a way, Baji was absolutely right: What good was her B.Sc. degree when she couldn’t even look for a job out of fear that it might upset him? The last thing Baji said when she was leaving echoed in Yalda’s ears for a long time: “Someday you’ll get fed up and dump him.”

Baji would walk by Ibn-e Hasan's father brazenly, without covering her head or bothering to change direction. And if by chance the old gentleman's gaze fell on her, she never missed the opportunity to fling an "*Adaab!*" at him, which always startled him and he would look away scowling and walk on, as if she had stung him.

Baji would say, "Bitto, ever since I grew up, Ibban's father has started observing purdah around me. And here you are trying to make me his *samdban!* How will I ever get along with him?"

"But, Baji," Yalda would reply facetiously, "who ever said a *samdban* has to get along with her *samdbi?*"

"All right, let's talk about you. Would the two of you, father- and daughter-in-law get along? Would you wear a burqa when going out if he ordered you to, like your would-be *jaithani?* Who knows, he might even tell you not to bare your face in front of me! After all, I'm halfway to being a man."

Yalda would answer wistfully, "Oh, it will never come to that."

"In that case. Why don't you dump him?" Baji would repeat her refrain.

"And can you dump your Habib Sahib?" Yalda asked diffidently in her defense one day—diffidently because she didn't want to hurt Baji's feelings, nor in fact did she bear any grudge against Habib Sahib.

"Dump him—why? He doesn't consider me his bond servant or property," Baji said, adding boldly, "And neither do I him. A relationship between two dear friends—that's all it is."

Her words were solemn, her tone dignified. Only a small-minded person with a wicked heart could laugh at them.

"Even so, Baji, your case is more hopeless than mine," Yalda said with feigned mockery.

"Neither he nor I have based our relationship on any kind of hope, so what is there to be hopeless about?"

"The difference in religion, for one thing. And, besides, he's married."

"Disregard the second point," Baji explained. "His marriage has been over mentally for quite a while now. As for the first, neither of us has ever given it much thought."

After thinking a while Baji said, "Perhaps this is the very reason the two of us feel mentally close, we think alike. The rest is pure nonsense: the same religion, the same age, being unmarried, fair-skinned or dark. Once you feel mentally divorced, does any of this matter? Even if you continue living together for years?"

Yalda's thoughts drifted to Habib Sahib, whom she deeply respected. After Nana's death, when Baji was feeling very much alone, it was he who

always lifted her spirits. It was through his encouragement that Baji learned to forget her own troubles and start taking an interest in the world around her. Habib Sahib's friends and acquaintances had started gathering once a week in this very house, and both Baji and Yalda waited eagerly for that day. Now, Baji's old headaches had returned with a vengeance since last year and again it was he who was encouraging her to accept the doctor's advice to have surgery, saying, "Don't worry about Yalda, I'll look after her." To which Yalda retorted brusquely, "I'm not a child who needs to be looked after."

But Baji didn't go for the operation. Some surgeons thought a time bomb was ticking away inside her head and it might go off any minute. Still, she wouldn't relent. "I'm not about to go off to my death leaving her all alone. Let her first get married. We'll worry about my surgery later."

So her headaches continued, as if something was festering inside. She carried all kinds of pills in her handbag and took them surreptitiously, both at the College and during the soirées at home. When Yalda caught her taking a pill now and then, Baji would say innocently, "Last night I caught cold in bed; my whole body is aching."

The soirées at home were now the only occasions when she could socialize because, at the behest of Ibban's family, their neighbors and even their own relatives had long since stopped associating with the two sisters. More men than women showed up at these soirées and the meetings were regarded as acts of crass shamelessness in their eyes.

Ibn-e Hasan hated these gatherings. Whenever they took place, he would report to her which of his family members said what about the arriving participants. "If it weren't for Baji's presence, I would have told you not to participate either."

Hearing somebody say something or read from their work during one of these gatherings, it would occur to her that in Ibn-e Hasan's presence she was a totally different person who listened quietly to whatever he said, and she wondered about it. Then she would remember what Baji had said: "You've made yourself his captive!"

At times she would muster up enough courage to express an opinion about some item being presented during a soirée and everyone would listen attentively.

Often when Baji returned from some meeting or event quite late in the evening she would swallow a pill on an empty stomach to alleviate her headache and then she would start vomiting. Rubbing her back gently, Yalda would say, "You must have been drinking tea on an empty stomach again. How many times have I asked you to take some biscuits along when you go out? I could easily put them in your bag, if only you

would let me. But when would you ever listen?"

Sometimes during these gatherings, when people were listening attentively to a piece, Ibban's younger brothers and their friends would make some loud comments outside the window and dash off. Baji had even overheard them making unseemly comments to Yalda when they caught her out alone on the street. They never dared to target Baji. These were the same boys she had seen Yalda play with years ago when their mother was still alive and the members of the two households mingled freely with each other.

Later the boys got bicycles. At first they asked their younger siblings and Yalda to hold the cycles steady so they could get on and ride. After they became adept riders, they grew tired of the younger kids because it was hard to give them rides and race with the neighborhood boys at the same time. When Yalda felt left out and cried Nana bought her a bicycle of her own. He found a greater resemblance to his deceased daughter in his younger granddaughter than in the older one and always catered to her smallest whim. When the boys refused to hold the bike steady for Yalda and she came home in tears, the old gentlemen went out with her into the open area facing the house and held it for her himself. Yalda hopped on and began to pedal. She tumbled a few times but in the end managed to keep her balance. The old man ran behind her holding the bike and cried, "Shall I let it go now?" "Yes," she said and circled the whole area while Nana stood still panting for breath. When Yalda passed near him she cried, "Nana, grab hold" and he quickly took hold of the back of the bike to let Yalda get off. The neighbors watched the scene amused, but no one offered to help.

The women also watched this scene from behind their windows and after a few days, when Yalda had become quite good at getting on and off the bike herself, it became the talk of the neighborhood: "Playing with boys—why, she's becoming one herself!"

One evening, after she had added a few more years to her age, she parked her bike on its stand in the open area and was busy putting the chain back on when Ibn-e Hasan came strolling by with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his pants and asked with apparent nonchalance, "What happened?"

Yalda looked at her hands covered with black grease and replied, "Nothing. Every now and then the chain comes off."

He jiggled the bike a couple of times, spun the pedal forward and

backward, and then gave his verdict, "It needs to be overhauled."

Yalda only truly loved two things in this world: her bike, which she always kept squeaky clean and in good condition, and the rocking chair. She had gotten the bike, but was longing to have a rocking chair for years. She had seen her first rocking chair at a gentleman's house when she was in the fifth or sixth grade. It sat on the verandah near some large flowerpots and the man was sitting in it rocking slowly back and forth reading a big, fat book.

With the voices of other children filtering in from a distant room, Yalda was casually looking around the tidy, nicely decorated rooms and wandered onto the verandah where she was transfixed by the sight of the man and his chair. She stood there and watched him, fascinated. He raised his head once and asked her name and where she had come from. Satisfied, he started rocking back and forth again reading his book. After a while, he noticed her fascination with the chair and asked, "Would you like to sit on it?"

"Yes, please," she said timidly.

The man put the book face down on a small table that was nearby and said, "All right, have a seat."

She sat down and the man asked, "Have you ever sat on a rocking chair before?"

"No," she said and then added sheepishly, "this is the first time I've ever seen one."

And so the two started talking. "Is this your reading chair?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But you can't write when you're sitting on it."

The man had a good laugh and, still chuckling, said, "True, but when I'm not reading I can think very interesting thoughts."

"Think interesting thoughts—really?"

"Well, not exactly think. They just come into my mind themselves."

Yalda immediately fell in love with this function of the chair more than any other. She thought: I'll ask Nana to buy me a chair like this one. I'll sit on it and read storybooks and rock and think of interesting things and talk with Nana about them.

This daydream was broken after a few moments when the man asked, "May I sit again, please. I'd like to go back to reading my book?"

"Yes, of course."

"Are you finished rocking? Is that enough?"

"Yes." Yalda caressed the armrests lovingly with both hands and stood up. Then she said "Thank you" to the man and walked out of the verandah where, for the first time in her life, she had seen a chair of that

kind.

But Nana couldn't satisfy her wish. Years later, a few days before he died, he kissed her and said, "I couldn't fulfill one of your wishes." Then, unable to hold back his tears, he added, "I'm carrying the regret of that with me as I go too."

She understood what he meant and quickly put her hand on his mouth, embraced him and cried.

Her heart sank when she heard Ibn-e Hasan say that her first love "needs to be overhauled."

She had heard the same ominous words from the other boys: without an overhaul a bicycle became useless and wouldn't last long.

"How do you do it?" Yalda asked anxiously.

"You don't do it. You get it done."

"Where?" she asked, thinking.

"At a bike shop. And you have to sit there all day waiting for it."

Her spirits sagged. Once or twice Nana had taken her bicycle to the shop to have a puncture repaired, but she didn't want him to have to do this much work. The poor man could hardly walk without gasping for air, and Baji had even stopped sending him out for groceries some time ago. So Yalda pleaded with Ibn-e Hasan, "You have it done for me, okay?"

He brought his mouth close to hers and said, "You'll have to give me a bribe, then I'll have it overhauled first thing tomorrow." His mouth reeked of cigarettes.

"What kind of bribe?" she asked.

"A kiss ... on the lips," he blurted out without flinching.

Yalda fell silent. She stood at the threshold between childhood and adolescence and knew what he was driving at.

"You think it over. An overhaul needs to be done every month or the bike will become a piece of junk."

She didn't really dislike him. Turning red from shame, she asked, "Where?"

"After sunset ... in the alley behind your house."

But in the evening when she heard his voice and stepped into the alley, he collected his bribe and then went back on his word. "I'm not taking the bike for an overhaul. You haven't paid me in full."

Yalda asked in a whisper, "What do you mean, in full?"

"That was only half of it. You kiss me now."

That evening, for the first time in her life, Yalda sensed that she had

come under his control, perhaps forever. And in this new way of life there was regret mixed with happiness.

Seeing Yalda starting to ride her bicycle in the open area and her sister walking to and from the College, without either of them observing proper *purdah*, Ibn-e Hasan's mother and older sister began saying that the two girls were becoming corrupted and that Yalda was not only walking freely on the streets like boys, she was picking up their habits too.

The other women in the neighborhood were easily swayed to agree with their opinion because Ibn-e Hasan's was the most notable family on this small street and women came from far and wide to participate in the *majlises* held there. At the beginning Yalda had been called "daughter," then she became "Yalda" and finally she was just "that girl."

When Nana died, and Yalda hadn't yet finished her last year at school, and Baji was seen roaming around freely during the first days of Muharram, and even on the very Day of Ashura' itself, with Habib Sahib—a "*ghair mazhab-wala*" (a non-Shi'a) as far as they were concerned, the two sisters were barred even from the *khichra* feasts that were an old custom at Ibn-e Hasan's home to which almost every acquaintance was invited.

They stopped even making any reference to Yalda's family now, except on the nights when Ibn-e Hasan stayed out quite late. Then his mother would say, "Don't sit there, go see if he's over at the house of those wretched women."

"No, it's absolutely quiet there," the boys would come back to report. Or, if they were sent to look for him early in the evening they would say, "There's a lot of ha-ha ho-ho going on there. People are sitting around chatting." If occasionally poetry was being recited during a *soirée*, they would spice up their account: "It's like a scene from the movies over there. People are reciting *geets* praising the sisters."

It must have been at a rendezvous during the time Yalda was attending college that Ibn-e Hasan told her, "It's no fun meeting like this ... for a few minutes. Neither of us can talk freely."

"So?"

"So we need to meet somewhere private. Make some excuse to Baji and come. I'll be waiting for you."

“Come where?”

Slipping a piece of paper into her hand he said, “This has all the directions. Just do as it says.”

After coming home she read what it said: “This is a very backward country. Here, boys and girls love one another on the sly, as if they were thieves. Tomorrow, take bus number such and such for such and such place at 2:30. Get off and walk back twenty steps. I’ve already measured the distance from the bus stop to the alley. You’ll find me there. Make sure you don’t miss this stop. When I see you, I’ll start walking. Follow me to my friend’s apartment. He won’t be there at that time. I have the key to the apartment and we can stay there a whole hour. We can talk as much as we want. It’s your job to find the right excuse to be away from home. After our meeting, you go straight home. I’ll return to my house after sunset.”

Yalda was feeling quite dazed when she returned home around 4:30. It was as if her soul had left her body. Bajji wasn’t in the house so Yalda went to her room and threw herself face down on the bed. She tried to cry, hoping to find some relief that way, but she couldn’t shake off the feeling of still being under some spell. She couldn’t summon any tears. Just before she left, Ibn-e Hasan had asked, “You’re happy, aren’t you?” She didn’t reply. Then he had stepped out onto the balcony, stuck a cigarette in his mouth and watched the traffic go by three stories below. When she tried to go over and stand beside him to somehow free herself from her jumbled thoughts, he motioned with his hand for her to stay inside, saying, “Not here, somebody might see us together from down below.” Then he darted toward her, held her by her waist with both hands and said, “Go home smiling. You’ll always remember this day.”

“And you, will you remember it too?” she asked, looking straight into his eyes. Her emotions were numbed, an experience she’d never had before.

“I have an incredible memory,” he said. “I’ve yet to find anyone who has a sharper memory than mine. How can I ever forget this day? Anyway, you’d better leave now.”

“And you? Do you plan to stay here forever?” she asked smiling. Ibn-e Hasan’s words had cast a spell over her. She realized that since they had grown up they’d never had time to talk so freely before.

“I’ll smoke another cigarette. By then you’ll have caught the bus home. I haven’t decided yet where I’ll go from here.”

Once back in the solitude of her home that wondrous spell began to dissolve. But even then her condition was scarcely better than an automaton. Without thinking, she put the kettle on to make tea and in the same way went to bathe.

When Baji returned Yalda was deep in thought sipping tea. Her earlier jumbled thoughts had by now started to gel and this succeeded in giving a new form to the sense of joy foisted on her by Ibn-e Hasan. She was thinking: "What happened was unintentional." This reduced the tension in her body a little.

Baji was alarmed when she saw Yalda's face and asked, "What happened?"

Yalda was startled too and said faltering, "Nothing much. I was just thinking about my future."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Baji said, "As long as I'm alive you have no need to think about your future. Give me a cup of tea. I'm too tired."

Yalda got up to get the tea.

That was the end of the matter. However, the day sank its talons deep into her mind like an eagle. Ibn-e Hasan could now summon her wherever he liked and she would fly there.

There was a period when people also suspected that Ibn-e Hasan's older brother, who was studying to be a doctor, was taking an interest in Yalda's sister. But it proved to be only a rumor. In those days they talked the same way about his brother flirting with nurses. All of this had already been long forgotten, and would probably have remained forgotten had Ibn-e Hasan not blurted out angrily to his mother one day, after hearing accusations leveled against himself, "Look what a phony Abba is! Has he forgotten about the time when Bare Bhaiya was going out with nurses to the movies all the time? And going crazy over Baji? But since Baji didn't wear a burqa and Abba would never agree to a daughter-in-law who didn't observe purdah, she was saved from this family, otherwise she'd be a prisoner here and Bhaiya would be having a good time somewhere else."

"Stop! Hold your tongue!" Amma admonished. "What if your Bhabi heard you?"

But a furious Ibn-e Hasan continued, "Is there anything he hasn't done in his life? Then just to please Father he marries a burqa-clad woman and instantly becomes a saint, all his sins forgiven forever. And me ..."

Amma slapped his face and said, "You're out of your mind. You don't

care at all whether you're talking about old people or young. Look what you've done—your younger siblings are suddenly all ears. Shame on you!"

"No, the shame is on him and his wife!" Ibn-e Hasan shouted.

The sound of someone groaning inside was heard and everyone dashed toward it.

At night, when Ibn-e Hasan was brought before his father the old man turned his face away and continued doing *tayammum* lying in bed. A cold wind was blowing outside. "Abba has a pain in his chest," someone announced.

Ibn-e Hasan heaved a sigh of relief. He had feared that if the old man decided to die right then he would have to hear for the rest of his life that it was his insolent tongue that brought on a heart attack and did him in.

He stood there tongue-tied for some time, but his mother's wailing and the mounting pressure from his siblings finally made him swallow his pride. He said from a distance, "Abba, please forgive me."

When the old gentleman didn't say a word, even after Ibban repeated his plea several times, his mother exhorted him: "Ibban, change your attitude. Don't ruin your own future. He's your father, not your enemy."

Ibn-e Hasan stood there indifferently, holding his arms with his hands. Finally, Amma spoke, "Go, he's forgiven you. Go sleep now."

In a way this was a ceasefire declaration. He had barely stepped out of the room, his arms still crossed over his chest, when he heard his father say, "I'm telling you, he'll never change."

Ibban slowed down. He heard: "You say he won't change as long as those two girls are in the neighborhood. I say, even if they move to another neighborhood, another city, or even another country, this son of yours will eventually find his way there."

Not long after this episode Ibban left for England. His friends and younger brothers came to the airport to send him off. Yalda sat heartbroken with her sister in a far corner of the departure lounge. Baqar and Ali Jawad exchanged a meaningful glance. They were both thinking the same thought: "Oh, *they're* here too!"

After that the attention of the two boys drifted off toward the sisters and remained riveted on them the rest of the time at the airport. When will they look at Ibban, they wondered, and what will they do when he leaves the lounge to board the plane? When people start waving goodbye from behind the glass panels will these women too—one of whom

they used to address not long ago as “Baji”—slowly but surreptitiously wave their hands in farewell?

However, that didn't happen.

At the departure call, Yalda stepped forward, walking with surprising dignity. Baji stopped some distance away from her. Their calm but firm dignity gave Ibban the courage to leave his brothers and walk over to Yalda.

Once again Baqar and Ali Jawad exchanged a meaningful glance.

Out on the tarmac travelers were going up the gangway with their carry-on bags and children in tow and the dutiful airhostesses stood receiving them.

Yalda was crying but Ibn-e Hasan was at a loss how to console her in front of everyone. Just then Baji stepped forward, placed her hand on his shoulder and said, “Goodbye and good luck!” Then she grabbed Yalda's hand and led her out of the lounge.

Ibn-e Hasan's brothers were in a hurry to get home so they could paint the picture of this utterly shameless and brazen public spectacle for the benefit of their mother, Bhabi and their sisters.

During his two years in Bradford, all kinds of news made its way to the two houses, for some of which he had only himself to blame. In his letters he exaggerated the account of his life there, if only to brag. Other news was conveyed to the two families by those returning from England, according to which he was playing bingo, had started dancing, and was spending the better part of his time hanging out in bars, which were called “pubs.”

One reported, “Every week he's spotted at Indian films with a different English girl,” or, according to another, “at English films with a *desi* girl.” This last was a real cause of worry for his mother. It carried the potential danger that he might just stay on in that country. As for the English girls, well, they couldn't harm her older son? So how could they harm her Ibban? But the *desi* girls were something else again. They were known to be persistent and tenacious. Once you walked into their trap, it was difficult to free yourself. An English girl was just a diversion, an object of amusement at best. So no danger there!

Then the rumor was heard that he might not have finished the course he had gone for but nonetheless had found a job in a firm. He had even married an English woman who was quite a bit older than him and—this was reported by many—had started to use all kinds of drugs.

At first the frequency of his letters to Yalda slowed to a trickle and then, later, when they started coming one after another in a torrent she found his thoughts becoming so incoherent that she had difficulty forming any clear opinion about him, except that he was more mentally disturbed in England than at home. "I won't come back. I hear that you're putting your B.Sc. to work, I mean you've taken a job in some firm." ... "Rumor has it that Baji has married Habib Sahib." ... "Someone told me that you've started attending those soirées now too; or rather, Gul Hasan reports that he even saw you in one such gathering at somebody else's home. You know that inside I'm a religious man, a deeply religious man, and I'm against women attending soirées with men present." ... "You've stopped replying to my letters. Have you formed another relationship? You're too independent for your own good. Mark my words; Amma will never accept you as her *bahu*. Don't ever even imagine that I'll break with her just to marry you, although I know of ways to win her over." ... "I'm not addicted to drugs. I only take the 'confidence pill, courage pill' as you do once a day for you know what? Are you still taking those? Don't be offended. I'm just joking." ... "These days I'm living in digs, a kind of *kboli*, you know, and I eat in restaurants, except when I'm running low on dough, then I cook, or now and then one of my English girlfriends cooks. A packet of powdered soup, add some water and bring to a boil, an omelet and some mashed potatoes, which I call tasteless mash. I like this simple fare a lot better than our awfully heavy diet." ... "Sometimes I think you won't turn out to be a good wife, regardless of who you're married to." ... "Some days I don't eat at all and these days I'm not even going to work. My sleep has completely vanished." ... "These wretched white girls, besides boiled vegetables and omelets what can they cook?!"

Then, after a silence of two months, he wrote:

"I returned from the hospital just yesterday. I've been told that I tried to kill myself, but I don't remember anything. My legs shake when I go out, so I stay in bed all day. My dear Yalda, please ask Baji to find some way to send me money for the return fare, otherwise, if I have to stay here much longer, I'm going to end up killing someone. I can't stand the rampant immorality of this place. Habib Sahib is a journalist and I know he is well connected. It shouldn't be too difficult for him to arrange an airplane ticket. Perhaps you realize that with my command of English any auto firm would offer me a job and I'll be able to pay back the loan to Baji from my first check. After that I'll marry you. This is my final decision."

But when Ibban returned and Yalda and her sister went to meet him at the airport, his talk was as incoherent as his letters. As soon as he saw them he said: "The first thing I want to do is prostrate myself at Abba's feet and beg forgiveness—because he's a great man." Then he planted his hands firmly on Baji's shoulders and said, "You don't know it, but Abba has Amirul Momineen Ali Ibn-e Abi Talib's spirit in him. He's his reincarnation."

His eyes were red, his face filled with sadness, and a strange, sweet-smelling odor was coming from his mouth in spurts. He seemed to be in a great rush and several times he collided with other passengers and airport staff. Once or twice he even whistled, the tune being neither recognizably eastern nor western. At Customs, he told the officer who was inspecting his bags, "Go ahead, check. Check thoroughly. Who knows, you might find something useful in this pile of junk."

Yalda observed the entire drama mesmerized, like a statue watching its devotees stream into the temple. Baji gave her a look full of compassion, but she was too transfixed to notice.

Outside the airport Ibban hailed a taxi and began loading his bags. Baji was watching him fascinated, as if he was some being from outside her world and utterly incapable of hurting her no matter what he did.

Without a word to either of them, he got into the taxi. The taxi had scarcely gone a few meters when he poked the driver on the neck and said, "Stop!"

The driver could be heard swearing at him loudly. Baji remarked, "Looks like Ibban's had a bit too much to drink."

Ibban got out of the cab, walked over to Baji and said, "Forgive me, I forgot to thank you and your friend. I'll hand over the whole of my first paycheck to you and, if that isn't enough, the second as well."

After the cab had gone, Yalda's tears gushed out and drenched her cheeks. She said in a strained voice, "Baji, please forgive me!"

Soon the whole neighborhood was abuzz with the rumor that the two sisters had worked some magic spell on Ibban and that it was at their behest that he had come back from England without finishing his education. And the utter shamelessness of it all was that, to get him to abandon his studies, they had even sent his return airfare. Either those who frequented their house were in cahoots with conjurers or else the money did come from the sisters and, if it did, there was no telling what its source might be.

Ibn-e Hasan's younger brothers now openly made Yalda the butt of their enmity. One of them would pass by her threatening, "One day this face you're so proud of will be gone." Baji and Yalda both knew that they

were quite capable of carrying out their threat. They could disfigure her and people wouldn't even consider the perpetrator a criminal. On the contrary, society looked on the likes of them as self-respecting, honorable men. And there was no lack of admirers.

Yalda started hearing Ibn-e Hasan mumble in his sleep. It was as if a reel of film she had been watching all night suddenly caught on something and snapped. It couldn't possibly be just a dream because it was neither disorderly nor incomplete the way dreams usually are.

It was still dark outside but the first morning birds had started chirping. Stretched out on the bed, Ibn-e Hasan began thrashing his arms and legs as if someone was choking him. "Bannu, shut up! Bannu, shut up! I'll shoot you. I will ... I will ..."

Yalda shook him saying, "What's the matter? What's the matter? How can Bannu be here?"

Ibn-e Hasan relaxed his body and said, "*Qabbaltuki ... li-nafsi ... 'ala ... al-mabr ... al-ma'lum ...*" the words spilling out in fragments.

He was drenched in sweat and repeating "*Qabbaltuki li-nafsi ...*" in a litany interrupted by sporadic shouts for Bannu to shut up. Then he broke down crying and sobbing, "Please, for God's sake, be quiet, stop talking ..."

When he came to he saw that Yalda was struggling to get him to sit up and drink some water. Gradually his gasping subsided and his pounding heart began to calm down. Smiling faintly he said, "How come you're here?"

"You called me here," she laughed, but her voice was tinged with sadness.

"The way I used to?" he asked after a brief pause.

"No, after consenting to have me as your wife in the *nikah*," she replied, yawning. "And you were affirming *that* just now in your sleep too."

"Oh, so that moment has already come and gone too," he said, rubbing his eyes.

Her head heavy with sleep, Yalda nodded.

Ibn-e Hasan lit a cigarette and, concentrating, he said, "I was sitting between your *vakil* and mine, and whenever yours asked mine the "*muwakkalti-muwakkalta*" question, Bannu would interrupt and say ..."

He stopped short.

Yalda remained silent.

After a pause he said, "Bannu didn't even bother to take part in the

arrangements for the wedding. Jawad and Baqar and my friends put up these flowers and decorations. So how did he manage to walk into my dream?

“All the people who were there last night were sitting right in front of me: your girlfriends, Baji’s acquaintances, my friends, and the friends of friends who had been invited to make up for the absence of my relatives, and God knows who else besides, maybe even a few dead ones.”

Yalda spontaneously cried, “Ya Ali!”

“One of them was that Sajjad fellow who was my classmate in engineering. It may have been during his final year of studying that he was found dead in his room. And yes, our Dada was among them too, sitting quietly to one side. He resembled your Nana a bit.”

“Ya Ali!” Yalda again cried out in fear.

“I saw Baji in that crowd too. She was constantly walking back and forth between the women’s quarters and the men’s. Then when the *nikah* got underway, Bannu suddenly materialized from God knows where and plunked himself down behind my *vakil*, and whenever your *vakil* asked a question, Bannu would repeat the same word.”

Yalda continued sitting quietly.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what he was saying?”

Yalda felt tears catching in her throat. “I know,” she said. “He was reminding you before you said ‘Yes’ that you were marrying a woman your mother wouldn’t want to look at. But he wasn’t saying anything to you.”

Ibn-e Hasan mustered up his courage and asked, “Were you dreaming the same dream?”

“How could I? I was awake all night,” she said. “In any case, the word isn’t new to me. I heard it often during your two-year absence. The people in this neighborhood only know me by one name now.”

Then, getting up, she added, “*Randi* (slut)—that’s the word, isn’t it?”

Ibn-e Hasan stayed in bed and quietly watched Yalda press her head against the window’s grill trying to peek at the sky, which had started to turn reddish. Then she went into the courtyard.

Lying there, Ibn-e Hasan tried to go over the events of the past several weeks in his mind. During the time he was ill Abba had come to his room only a few times, and stayed no more than a few minutes. It was different with Bhabi and Amma, though. They did visit regularly and both were very good at reciting prayers and blowing over you. Bare Bhaiya had

come home for just twenty-four hours, and how many of those had he spent in Ibban's room? Perhaps a few minutes, during which he sat unconcerned. And when he was leaving he didn't fail to take a parting shot, "Do you still intend to return to England to finish your studies?" What does he think? That he's the only one able to earn a degree abroad?

After much deliberation a proposal for the hand of a girl from a prosperous branch of the family was sent with much pomp and ceremony. However, when her people hesitated and inquired about what he had accomplished during the two years he was in England and whether the rumor was true that he had married an English woman there, his father felt he himself was the intended target of the slur.

The slight trace of happiness this activity had stirred up dissipated quickly. Once again Ibn-e Hasan started staying away from home all day and returning late at night. On hearing him return one day, the old gentleman remarked to his wife so that Ibban would hear: "The horse will soon be back in his stall!"

Ibn-e Hasan shot back, addressing his mother, "After all, the poor creature was a man. How long could he stay at the animal hospital!" He was hoping the remark would cut the old man to the quick, but that didn't happen. Instead, his mother asked, "What's all this talk about the animal hospital?"

"But surely something was said about returning to the stall. Or tell me there wasn't. Of course, I'm a liar. What else is new?"

The old man commented from the other room, "Yes, sir. This is an animal hospital. Not a place for humans."

Ibn-e Hasan didn't respond. The old man continued in a harsh tone of voice, "Yes, if this is an animal hospital, why should humans live here. What business have they got here?"

Then one day Bare Bhaiya unexpectedly came to the house to take his children somewhere far from that atmosphere. Mother asked him, "So did *dulban* have a letter sent to you secretly?"

"Perhaps a blackbird whispered in my ear. Whatever. I just want to take the children away for a while. You and Father are welcome to come too, if you like."

"All three children?" Mother asked.

"Yes."

"This will interfere with the education of the older two."

"But here they're getting the wrong kind of education."

Mother felt embarrassed and decided to keep quiet.

Silence spread through the house. It was Bhabi's departure, more than the children's, which weighed heavily on everyone. She was virtuous and accomplished, and she never corresponded directly with her husband, the letter was always sent from one of the children and was read out to her *sas* before it was mailed. But more than anything else, she held *majlises* and was beyond compare in *sooz-khvani* (reciting Shi'a elegies). Her departure was also blamed on the two sisters, and through them on Ibban who was hell-bent on destroying the family. Bhabi didn't even care to say goodbye to Ibban when she was leaving. Later Batul came and informed him, "Manjhle Bhaiya, Bhabi and Bare Bhaiya have left."

When he didn't respond, she remarked, "I have a feeling they're gone forever."

"And do you think I'm going to stick around here forever?" Ibn-e Hasan shouted. "Go ask them to come back. Things around here will be put right ... to Abba and Bhaiya's liking." And then in a loud voice he said, "I'm going to marry Yalda. Whoever likes can come to our wedding."

Surprisingly, this declaration caused neither earthquake nor doomsday. And from Abba's corner, instead of hearing the sound of a stroke coming on, there came, "It was illness that drove him here. I swear by Janab-e Amir, if I suspected my wife's morals in the least, I would say that Ibban ..."

Whereupon Mother quickly chided him to be quiet, "You're talking nonsense."

"Wedding—huh? He's not about to marry," Abba yelled. "He'll be back before long, just watch."

(Ibn-e Hasan laughed insipidly.)

After that his nights were spent in hotels or at friends' homes and, finally, he rented a place far from their own neighborhood—Yalda's only condition—and set it up for the wedding with his two younger brothers, who were helping him at God knows whose behest, Abba's or Amma's, so that not all contacts were severed.

After Ibban abandoned his parental home, his brother Jawad quickly became the link between him and Amma. While helping to decorate the house, he reported, "Mother was crying, but she was happy too. She told me secretly, 'In the end, everything will work out fine.'"

Ibn-e Hasan knew that his mother recited the "Nad-e Ali" every day and must now be supplicating Maula Ali Mushkil-Kusha to assist him. At first she must have asked him to make Ibn-e Hasan lose interest in Yalda; and now, to make the marriage a success and to make Ibban return to the

Straight Path.

And yet no one from his family attended the wedding. Even Ali Jawad and Bannu, who were a bit closer to him, dropped out of sight after he became a bridegroom.

After the wedding ceremony Ibn-e Hasan brought Yalda home. Girl-friends from her college days kept her busy inside for quite a while and he socialized with friends outside in the enclosed yard. He was in no rush to go in. Yalda wasn't new to him after all.

Later, he asked his office boy, who had stood guard at the house throughout the *nikah*, the nuptial ceremony, to fix him some tea so that he could relax and relieve the accumulated fatigue of the day.

Meanwhile Baji dropped by and spent some time with Yalda. As she was leaving she said to Ibn-e Hasan, "I'm hearing the bomb ticking in my brain now too and I'd like to have it diffused before it goes off." Just as she stepped out she said "Good luck!" and her "Goodbye" was heard after she was already out the door.

After the last guest had departed, he asked the office boy, "What will you do now?"

"Sleep."

"Where?"

"Here, of course."

"I'm afraid we don't have an extra bed. Go home. You'll sleep better there."

A roguish smile flitted across the boy's face. Ibn-e Hasan gave him a rupee note and said, "I plan to sleep late. Come back around ten or eleven and ask Begam Sahib what groceries will be needed."

A good hour after the boy's departure, dragging his feet, Ibban entered the room where Yalda was sitting on the double bed decked out in her bridal regalia. When he saw her, he couldn't suppress a laugh and said, "So that's how you look as a bride!"

But she heard him as if in her sleep and only woke up when Ibn-e Hasan dragged out the stool from the dressing table with his foot.

When she jerked her head a few times to wake herself fully, he asked, undoing his tie, "Aren't you tired?"

"No. I was feeling relaxed."

"Like you felt when you reached the meeting place on time?" He repeated some of Yalda's own words to tease her.

"No, not like that. I feel relaxed because now I won't need to reach

the meeting place on time. Now you'll come home on time."

Then, watching him remove his shirt, she asked, "Shall I take out your night clothes?"

"You know where they are?"

"I've already gone through every single thing in the house. I even know where the leaves, sugar and milk are for the morning tea."

This oddity of life—that a brand new bride should rummage through the whole house the very first night—made him laugh. He went into the kitchen to fetch some water. As he was about to take his pill, she asked, "What's that?"

"My confidence pill," and looking her in the eye he said, "my courage pill."

"Why do you need that now?"

"How would you know what I need or don't need," he said harshly. "I know what I need."

"But now I'm with you."

"You've always been with me, or somewhere around. Why should it be any different today?" Then he added bitterly, "There's nothing new for me in living with you. Absolutely nothing. Do you know—who actually made the decision for us to marry?"

Yalda just gaped at him.

"I was in no hurry. We were meeting quite regularly anyway. It was a good, simple, carefree, easy life. Things could have just continued the way they have for the past several years. Meetings—sometimes cut short, sometimes carried to fruition. What are friends' apartments and homes for when they're not around, otherwise hotel rooms, provided I had enough money in my pocket?" He added, laughing, "Here nobody asks whether you're husband and wife or how long you need the room. You only have to make sure you're dressed properly and speak English. If you wear *desi* clothes and speak a local language, the management gets leery."

He laughed at his own words for quite a while, which prompted Yalda to ask, "So anyway, who actually did make the decision about marriage?"

Suddenly becoming very agitated Ibn-e Hasan blurted out, "Abba's blessings, what else? Abba made it possible. I mean he said: 'Marriage—forget it! Those two sisters will go on fleecing him their whole life. They'll devour his earnings ...'" Then he practically screamed: "In other words, he thinks I'm such a total jerk that someone could fleece me for my whole life and I wouldn't even know it. Now do you understand how we got married?"

Yalda kept staring at him. After he popped his pill, he said, "Aren't

you going to change? It's already quite late. Take off your jewelry and things and go to sleep. You've played the bride long enough."

This much he remembered, and also that he had walked over to the bed, but he had no memory of anything that happened after that.

"What a strange night!" Ibn-e Hasan smiled as he thought about it. "My buddies make it sound like such a big deal! Well, I spent mine sleeping."

He was beginning to feel drowsy again but fought it off, afraid that the same dream might torment him and make him feel humiliated and ashamed: Bannu brazenly using *that* word for his wife in front of everyone. Would Bannu and the others now call Yalda "Randi Bhabi" when they talked about her? In any case, they already called her "*randi*." I'll shoot them if they do.

Once when his eyes opened he saw Yalda with her hands raised reciting the "*Du'a-e Qunut*" just like his mother. Then he watched her bowing and prostrating and he went back to sleep. This image of a woman was quite acceptable to him. It foreclosed any possibility of her ever walking out on her man.

After finishing her prayer Yalda placed her rocking chair by the window and settled into it, gently caressing its arms for a long time. Then there was a knock and she got up to open the door. It was a boy from her old neighborhood holding a bag.

"What do you want?" she asked.

The boy handed her the bag and said, "His mother has sent this for you."

"Whose mother?" she asked, unable to trust her ears.

"Ibban Bhai's mother."

She asked the boy to come inside. The bag contained things for breakfast—puris, potatoes, halva—and a *sijdagah* made of *kbak-e shifa* in a small pouch, along with prayer beads and an invitation to an annual Majlis-e 'Aza arranged by some other family. At the end of the invitation the *momineen*, that is, the true believers, were urged to honor the time. Yalda didn't know the sender, but, by sending it to her indirectly, Zainab Bua had, in a manner of speaking, extended a hand of friendship, because if Yalda could come to the gathering she might be able to pat her affectionately on the head.

"Who is it?" Ibn-e Hasan shouted from inside.

"A boy from the old neighborhood."

He got up in a flurry, wondering whom she might be talking to. Then he saw the boy and promptly went back in.

The boy asked, "Have you looked at the whole house?"

"Yes."

"You know you can go up to the roof—there's a way," the boy said.

"I didn't know that."

"But I do, so I'm telling you. I helped carry Ibban Bhai's things here and I brought this big water pot and the flowerpots myself."

After she brewed the tea and brought it in, Ibn-e Hasan got up and took out a pill. She took the vial from his hand and said, "Your confidence pill?"

He nodded.

In a concerned tone, Yalda asked, "You still need these?"

A frown creased his forehead, but he remained silent.

"This marriage hasn't changed anything for you?"

"How would it change anything?" he asked in a huff.

"Like the change I'm feeling; that it's the start of a new life."

"You think this is a new life for you? Ibn-e Hasan said bitterly. "You already started your new life quite some time ago."

Yalda felt as if she had been struck by a bolt of lightning. And then the shock that comes after such a bolt spread over her mind and body.

He started to sip his tea. Then putting the cup back down he tried, for the first time since last night, to be intimate with her. Taking hold of her shoulder tightly he lowered her onto the bed and said, "Marriage has even killed whatever desire I used to feel in meeting you secretly before. This is the only change I feel. Want to hear more?"

However, Yalda's mind was somewhere else. She saw one of his hands slithering over her stomach as if he was searching for something. Then she heard the sound of footsteps going down the stairs and sat up, quickly pushing him away.

Standing in the courtyard, the boy was calling to her. From right where she was, Yalda asked, "Are you leaving?"

"Yes. Please latch the door."

"Wait. I'm coming."

Rummaging through her purse, she stepped into the courtyard. The boy was jubilant: he was holding on to a kite he had disentangled from the power lines. She gave him a five-rupee note and said, "Please give my regards to his mother."

Pushing the note toward her the boy asked, "What's this for?"

"For you. For the work you did yesterday."

After the boy was gone she collected the tea service, carried it to the kitchen and began washing. She had no idea what she was thinking or even whether Ibn-e Hasan was in the bedroom, the bathroom, or had wandered off somewhere.

Meanwhile, inside Ibn-e Hasan had lit a cigarette and was puffing away with one leg crossed over his knee. He had nothing to say to Yalda.

Yalda's mind was also blank, as if the terrible back-and-forth that had racked her mind all night had finally ended.

Suddenly she had the eerie feeling that the kitchen walls had disappeared and she was washing dishes out in the open. Children were playing in the space between the two houses and beyond that a bullock cart was hurtling along with someone inside. A passerby noticed her and waved. She waved back. Then a voice was heard, "Close your windows. The air is very dusty." Yalda replied: "Where are the windows that I should close?" "That's even better," the voice said, "all the dust will be swept out and carried away by the wind." Yalda burst out laughing.

But a moment later, when she turned around, she was startled because Ibn-e Hasan was standing in the doorway staring at her. "Why did you laugh?" he demanded.

She tried to walk away without replying but he blocked the door and asked: "Is no one from your family coming to take you home?"

"Who's left in my family to do that except Baji? And she must be exhausted and sleeping."

"So who will take care of these customs? Won't you go to your *maika*?"

God knows why he was saying all this. Did he really mean that someone should come and escort this bride of one night back to her *maika* as the custom required, or was he mocking this marriage as he had earlier when he said "You've played the bride long enough."

Yalda felt that the snake had struck with his hood again and bitten her—a bite she had been helpless to prevent, indeed she had longed for, since childhood when she had stared into the eyes protruding from the top of that hood. The thought occurred to her: and perhaps I'm still prepared to continue playing that game of helplessness.

Ibn-e Hasan walked over to the kitchen window and looked around at the scene outside. The alley between the two houses was quiet; the only sound came from the clinging vines rubbing against each other. So who had Yalda seen that made her laugh?—he wondered. Perhaps nobody. Satisfied, he sat down on a stool and said. “I think Baji should come herself around ten or eleven to take you back home.”

“So that the in-laws can watch their *babu* get out of the taxi,” she retorted.

“No. That’s not it. I thought this was some sort of custom: the bride visiting her *maika* the second or third day after the wedding.”

“Huh,” she said, tossing the tea leaves in the trash.

The two of them stood far apart and neither intended to come closer.

“You seem preoccupied,” he said. “What are you thinking?”

Yalda didn’t respond and went off toward the bedroom. Ibn-e Hasan sat in the kitchen for a long time. In a certain sense this life was new for him too, and quite novel. Now he would have to provide for another person. Hire people, such as a washman, a sweeper, and an errand boy for the groceries. And, yes, take care of the expenses of the household. “Oh, what a mess I’ve gotten myself into?” he said laughing and lit a fresh cigarette.

As she lay on the bed, Yalda wondered: How did I get here? Could this be fidelity? Absolutely not. I knew what kind of person he was, so how did I wittingly decide to spend my whole life with him just because he asked me to marry him once? True, he had said many times before, “When we’re married . . .,” but he never said it seriously. This time, though, after he left home for good following the argument with his father, he did say to Baji for the first time in my presence, “I want to marry Yalda. I have no one to make the proposal, so I’m making it myself. Tell me, will you agree?”

Baji’s eyes closed briefly. Then she opened them and looking at Yalda said: “You answer. The question is really meant for you.”

“Yes,” Yalda answered in a low voice.

She laughed at her “Yes.” “Oh, how terribly orthodox I am in my beliefs! When I said ‘Yes,’ was I not brooding over the same old question: would I ever forgive myself if the marriage didn’t take place? As if this was the only way to recover all I had lost, the last, desperate move of a gambler hoping to break a losing streak and recover his losses. I, too, am a gambler wagering all the capital I have left in a last desperate move. If I told Baji about it, I know what she would say: ‘This belief of yours—it’s

more materialistic than spiritual. All you've done is change one label for another, and why, to become something in the eyes of the world. But you never even gave a moment's thought to what you really wanted to become. Still, all is not lost. There's time. Think it over." The last bit echoed in her ear and her mind in Bajji's voice.

She felt a weight lifting from her head.

As she was drifting off to sleep she vaguely heard Ibban ask, "Are you asleep?"

"No," she said, opening her tired eyes.

"I was thinking, you'll be spending your whole life cooking, why don't we eat lunch at some Chinese restaurant today."

"In broad daylight?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, nothing," Yalda said. "I'm just used to meeting you in dark alleys and dingy, little restaurants, or in the seats at the very back of some out-of-the way cinema hall." She sat up and while tying her hair in a knot added, "It feels a bit strange."

He said, laughing, "Good heavens, who's asking you to meet. We'll go together."

"Oh, I've experienced that, too," she said. "Even now when I remember that place—your father's clinic—my very soul starts to tremble. Even though it had a padlock on the outside, people suspected something was amiss and started banging on the door shouting that someone was inside. And then somebody said, 'I saw Naqi Sahib's boy go in the back door with someone.'

"Well, that 'someone' was me and my heart was pounding away and my legs were trembling. Do you remember all this?"

"No," he shook his head, pouting.

"I remember every single moment of that night. They pulled very hard on the small rusted back door. And then, in that miserable situation, God finally heard my prayer. One old man's voice was raised, 'You must be mistaken. It's pitch dark in there.' Then some other people said, 'If it was someone from Naqi Sahib's family, he would have opened the lock and gone through the front door.' Nobody was listening anymore to the young man who said, 'I know what Naqi Sahib's second boy looks like. I'm not mistaken.' Then the same angel of mercy came to my rescue again. 'Let's go!' he said, and the sound of their feet walking away over the rubble in the alley receded into the distance. Don't you remember any of this?"

"No," he said, feeling testy, "I don't."

"And some time after the crowd had gone you sent me out, but you

yourself stayed behind hiding. My shoes made so much noise crunching the pieces of wood and tin and glass that I was afraid those people might hear and come back. But even if they had, they wouldn't have harmed me. I would have pretended to be just some woman covering her face with a faded brown burqa, and I could have made up any excuse for being there. At any rate, you were perfectly safe inside. That night I didn't hear you ring the bell and bang on the gate until three o'clock. Your every move is always so perfectly planned! But ..." she said, suddenly becoming angry, "what an imperfect memory you have! If those people had caught you that night, you would definitely remember everything now!"

This unexpected assault totally rattled him. After a brief silence he said, "All right, if you don't want to eat out in a Chinese or some other restaurant, then get busy with cooking something. The errand boy will be here any minute to ask what groceries you want him to get. Or if you like, I can go out to buy meat and vegetables. You know how to cook, don't you, or are you like those wretched English women?"

She remained silent as if immersed in deep thought.

"But I'm sure Baji will come to get you," he said. "She must know more about this custom than you do. In that case we'll both have our lunch there ..."

Yalda interrupted, "This custom should have been carried out years ago when—as you put it—I started my new life, or some words to that effect dripping with sarcasm. Unfortunately, she couldn't come to escort me home from your friend's apartment. If you had given her the address, she might have done it. She might even have met your friend's family." She enunciated the last words, looking straight into his eyes.

He was surprised by her tone, but even more by the way she looked him in the eyes when she spoke. Finally, all he could say was, "Your ideas have changed a lot."

The two of them remained quiet for some time. Eventually Yalda got up, took the new iron from its box and, for no particular reason, started to press some clothes. Ibban had nothing to say. Her own mind was flooded with ideas and she didn't know which one she should talk about first. She stood the iron up, switched it off, and said without a trace of concern or worry, "I had thought that since we hadn't met for a long time you would be eager for a 'meeting,' but apparently I was the only one feeling eager."

He laughed shamelessly as he said, "What was new in you for me to feel eager about? I was exhausted and I slept through the wedding night."

"Just as you did in your English digs, I suppose?" she said, sitting down on the bed.

"Come here," he said, stretching his hand out to grab her, "I'll tell you

how I used to sleep in England.”

She cringed slightly and backed away.

“You’re not offended, my queen, are you? Don’t make a face. You don’t look nice when you do.”

Moving further away she said, “These comments of yours will come in handy.”

“What comments?”

“These comments about not looking nice.”

“Don’t be silly!”

“I am silly, rather, I *was*. Why else would I be here today?”

Ibn-e Hasan lit another cigarette with the butt of the one he had just finished. “If you weren’t here today,” he said, “I would have considered you unfaithful.” With a quick movement of his hand he tried to grab her neck, just as he used to grab it in darkened alleys and pull her face close to his.

She quickly got up from the bed and said in utter disgust, “For some, faithfulness is nothing more than a physical concept. Something associated with the body. I’m beginning to feel that for the likes of me marriage resembles a magical charm: you marry and your old sense of guilt washes away entirely, you’re transformed into a chaste housewife. People sometimes marry off their daughters in haste and I think I’ve walked into my marriage just as hastily, without thinking.” Then, in the middle of laughing at herself she said, “And there I was thinking all these years that I was waiting faithfully for you. I never even shook hands with another man.”

Like some kind of ill-tempered monkey, Ibban snarled, “I hate you. I’ve always hated you, you bitch. One day I’ll kill you!”

“For that you’ll need to take a courage pill,” she said fearlessly. “Without it you can’t do anything!”

“I take it for a different reason.”

“So that you don’t end up under your father’s thumb again, isn’t that it?”

“Don’t provoke me,” he said, breathing heavily.

“You married me because you were provoked. You wanted to show your father that you weren’t the complete jackass he thought you were.”

Ibban became extremely agitated.

Picking up the cold iron and running it over her dupatta, Yalda continued, “Your marriage was merely a declaration of independence. Well, you’ve accomplished that much. You’re free now. Even from me. I had to have this experience and now it’s over. What I didn’t know was that getting rid of my guilt would carry such a heavy price tag: the loss of my precious freedom.” Her voice became hoarse.

“Guilt—what for?” he said stupidly. “You were mine before marriage and you’re mine after. The only thing different was that it became more difficult to see you after I got back from England, maybe because of Baji. Apparently I didn’t make a good impression at the airport.”

Without looking at him Yalda said, “Didn’t you just say you don’t love me or anything? You even honored me by calling me a ‘bitch’ a moment ago. Perhaps you, or rather we, were addicted to seeing each other on the sly, like two junkies who need each other’s company to get high and then just sit quietly facing each other until it’s time to go home. Anyway, this addiction was bound to end sooner or later. Before the *nikab* or after, it makes no difference. Now it seems to me that throughout this game of “blind buffalo” you’ve made me wear the blindfold. Today, probing deep into your soul, the blindfold has finally come off and I can see my way forward clearly. I’m glad I won’t have to be like other women and put on a charade my whole life pretending to be happily married while feeling miserable inside the entire time.”

“You’re a fool!”

“No, just a realist. At least I understand this much, even if I had to wait until today, and I’ve accepted it.”

“Such arrogance, even after marriage,” he said displeased. “It will cost you dearly.”

“And what if I don’t give it up?”

“Then I’ll ...”

“Divorce me, is that it? For the likes of you divorce is also something purely physical, with no connection to the soul. A little regret is all you can feel after losing someone, not real grief. If divorce is what it’s going to be, I’m ready for it. Of course you’ll need a courage pill for that, and another for crawling back under your father’s protective wing. But what’s the harm? You’ve left home a thousand times before and gone back. One more time won’t make such a big difference, will it? In many families children do that all the time: falling out, falling in.”

Ibn-e Hasan began crying, but, unexpectedly, he didn’t feel her come closer to him as she used to when they met after he had had a falling out with his parents. It wasn’t at all the way he had trained her. She didn’t lift his head gently, wipe his tears, or kiss him.

All of a sudden a rubber ball plopped down in the courtyard and along with it came the sound of children shouting and pounding on the door: “Our ball has landed here. Please give it back.”

Returning the iron to its box Yalda said, “Ibbaan, get up and give the children their ball.”

“Can’t you do it? You’re already standing.”

“Yes I can, but there’s nothing stopping you from standing up and doing it,” she said sitting down on the bed away from him.

“Don’t make me mad, or ... I’ll do something awful.”

“And that would call for my observing yet another custom.”

Suddenly his crying stopped. He raised his head and asked, “What kind of custom?”

The children were still at the door pounding. “First go and return their ball, then I’ll tell you.”

Having no other choice, he got up muttering “Bitch!” under his breath. He opened the door and Yalda heard him say sternly as he returned the ball, “I’m warning you. If it ever comes in here again ...”

“Yes, sir,” the boys said and sprinted off.

Returning to the room he asked again, “What kind of custom?”

“There are customs and rituals and rites for every occasion, like smashing bangles at a husband’s death, or wearing white, observing the prescribed mourning period, you know. Or if I were a Hindu, I would have to throw myself onto your funeral pyre. Heavens, what a narrow escape! With you for a husband, I’d have to burn over and over again. All these are customs for the end of a marriage. Would you like to hear about some customs that come at the beginning?”

“No,” he said in a surly tone of voice. “I’ve had enough of you.”

“But I haven’t had enough of you. Do you remember my ‘wedding’ day?”

“No,” he pouted again like a camel.

“Do you remember the place where I had to meet you?”

“No!” he barked.

“Didn’t I hear you say that no one has a sharper memory than you? And now you don’t even remember all your planning and plotting, which I had thought you must have strained your brain for days devising, but later I found out it was the usual way such secret meetings take place.

“After that it was dark alleys, secluded corners of parks after sunset, box seats at the cinema hall and cheap, dingy hotels—hurried and not so hurried meetings....”

Yalda, as if suddenly roused by some obscure detail in a dream, stuck her hand out toward Ibn-e Hasan and said, “Give me a cigarette.”

“No, you won’t smoke,” he said like a puffed up chicken, “at least not in my presence.”

“Forget it, Ibban. This is another one of the absurdities of our culture: that you can smoke but I can’t. Do you know what you look like when you’re smoking? A steam engine. All the time. But could I ever have said this to you before today? Marriage is definitely a marvelous thing. I’m dis-

covering a courage inside myself today that I never had before, or if I had it I wasn't aware of it."

"You're imitating Baji," he said, handing his lighter and packet of cigarettes to her, using it as an excuse to come and sit beside her.

"No, just hand it to me from there."

She calmly lit a cigarette. He was surprised to notice that the smoke didn't make her choke, nor did it hurt her eyes. He sensed the onset of that state of mind he often felt just before he would ask her: Who all were at the *soirée*? Where did you sit? Was Baji there the whole time or not? Another question came just to the tip of his tongue—who have you been smoking cigarettes with before?

Her body was aching all over. Releasing a cloud of smoke into the air, she said, "If you hadn't barged in just now, I could have slept a while longer. Even so, the nap has done some good. I do feel more refreshed."

Then, throwing her head back, she said, "I was deathly afraid of you until yesterday; if I had made the slightest mistake, you would have backed out. But now I'm not afraid at all. Look, I'm sitting in front of you smoking a cigarette. And even if His Excellency Tajul 'Ulama (Crown of the Learned)—and whatever other titles are appropriate—Syed Muhammad Naqi, May God extend His shade over him, and your mother were here, I would be smoking, just like this: bareheaded, one leg over the other."

Ibba became very agitated again and shouted "Don't make me angry! Otherwise you won't find anyone worse than me."

"In any case, who could be worse than you!" she retorted, flicking the ash from her cigarette into the ashtray.

"Don't provoke me!"

"You keep repeating that. But what can you do, really?"

"You have no idea."

"You'll run back to your dear mother—that's it, right?"

Ibba-e Hasan did not reply.

"Your father mocked you, so you married me to get back at him. You've succeeded. I think you should go back home now."

He laughed loudly, but it was a hollow laugh.

"Listen, Ibba," Yalda said. "You're exactly like your father. Suspicious and bad-tempered, just like him. Even so, he doesn't approve of you. I think he hates himself, that's why he can't get along with anyone who resembles him. But he's fine when it comes to your elder brother. Rumor has it that in his youth he became unhinged listening to the elegies commemorating Husain's martyrdom during one of the mourning assemblies."

Restraining himself, Ibban said, “Don’t drag my father into this or you won’t find anyone worse than me.”

The instant he said it he felt embarrassed.

“This again? Didn’t I already say no one could be worse than you?”

He started stomping on the floor.

For the first time since the evening—in fact for the first time since that original bribe left her always in the weaker position with him—she became agitated and asked, “What were you looking at through the kitchen window that time?”

“What window?”

“Stop pretending?” she railed, “And what were you searching for on my stomach?”

“Whose stomach?”

“Mine. Who else?”

“I wasn’t searching for anything. Rubbing my hand on your stomach just feels nice.”

“Don’t lie,” she screamed. “You do it all the time and I’ve had to put up with it.”

He was confounded. “Be quiet! What will the neighbors say—the wedding was yesterday and already today they’re yelling at each other.”

“Didn’t you just call me a bitch a while ago? Well, haven’t you heard that bitches bark all night long? And the sound of their bark carries a long distance.”

Ibn-e Hasan buried his face in the pillow and started crying. Yalda continued smoking in silence.

Like some crazy person, his bout of crying fizzled out quickly. Raising his head he looked at her and asked, “Won’t you lift up my head and hold it today?”

She didn’t answer.

Like a child whose crying is ignored by his mother, he said peevishly, “Those clandestine meetings were infinitely better. At least then you tried to soothe me. If I was clairvoyant, I would never have married you, and whenever I whistled you would have come running to me. By taking you as my wife at the *nikah*, I’ve shot myself in the foot. The fear that our relationship might end, which is what kept you faithful to me all these years, has been squandered.”

Surprisingly, Yalda didn’t react to this either.

His mind didn’t seem to be working. “That bit about ‘what’s new’—I just said it,” he made an attempt to absolve himself. “I really didn’t mean it. I was exhausted. The thing is, we’ve been contemplating each other for so long. What’s the rush, I told myself. After all, we weren’t meeting in a

public place ... ” he stopped short. Wasn't he simply repeating the same thing that had enraged her already in different words?

Fed up with her relentless silence, he said, “Come on, let's make up. Let's celebrate our wedding night, or, as you would say, wedding day.”

She was struck by the realization that Ibn-e Hasan's mind was a wasteland where only one type of plant could possibly grow: a cactus. This man's idea of the wedding night was the same as a million other morons: a few carnal acts—that's all. No real conversation, no desire to learn about each other's hopes for the future. It sounded like what she had heard about wedding nights from women of the uneducated classes, even some from well-to-do families, and others like her housemaid's daughter who at first cried a lot, saying, “I won't ever go back to him. He was all over me like an animal.” And to keep herself busy, she had started to come to Yalda's home with her mother to help her out as she had done before she got married.

Yalda asked her one day, “You don't like him?”

Tears welled up in the girl's eyes. She stopped what she was doing and plopped down on the floor near Yalda's chair. Then she put her head in Yalda's lap and started to cry and sob inconsolably.

Yalda asked again, “You don't like him?”

The girl shook her head back and forth.

“What's he like?”

The girl stopped crying. Lifting her head, she looked into Yalda's eyes and suddenly started to giggle. “Like a bull!” she said. Then feeling embarrassed she again buried her face in Yalda's lap, which made Yalda giggle too.

“Is he dark?”

The girl nodded.

Yalda thought a moment and then said, “Anyway, that doesn't matter. Dark or not, you can find boorishness among all stripes and colors.”

The thought immediately occurred to her: Am I not saying this because of Ibn-e Hasan? He and his family are fair-skinned and they all have bluish-green eyes.

Shaking off the thought she asked, “Is he very fat?”

“Yes,” the girl said and giggled even more loudly than before.

Yalda asked, with an air of secrecy, “What sorts of things did you two talk about the first night?”

The girl raised her head surprised and looked into Yalda's eyes as if she couldn't imagine what Yalda was driving at. “Talk? What kind of talk?”

“The kind you have on your first night—of love and endearment.”

Traces of displeasure began to show on the girl's face. “He's an

animal," she said harshly. "Animals don't talk!"

"Didn't he even greet you and say hello?"

"Yalda Bibi, what are you saying? Haven't you ever seen a herd of cattle on the road? He's one of them."

Yalda fell to thinking: Zubaida's words sounded true. Was her own situation any better than some cow wandering on the road?

The conversation ended. The girl got busy with her housework.

A week later she heard Masi telling Baji, "Zubaida has gone back home." Then as she was wringing out the laundry before hanging it on the line, she mumbled, as if to herself, "First the boy came two or three times to make up with her. Then her in-laws came to reason with her. Finally, Zubaida's father escorted her there. She must have figured out that, after all, her parents won't take care of her for the rest of her life."

First Yalda felt anger and then pity for Zubaida's helplessness. Then she thought about her own helplessness and started to cry. Walking by her, Baji remarked, "In this society the same thing happens to every woman who isn't standing on her own two feet. Why are you crying? Sooner or later she had to return to her husband."

She told Baji about the conversation she'd had with Zubaida and Baji also laughed heartily at the description of the groom.

Around eleven o'clock the doorbell rang. By then Ibn-e Hasan was through crying. The two of them had been sitting for some time in total silence. When Yalda didn't budge, he got up in disgust. Shortly thereafter she heard the feigned happiness in his voice announcing from the courtyard: "Baji is here."

He entered the room with Baji, laughing as though nothing at all had happened there a short time ago. He dutifully placed a chair for Baji right under the ceiling fan and laughingly said to Yalda, "Didn't I say Baji would come, but you were adamant that she wouldn't." Offering his cigarettes and lighter to Baji, he told her: "We were talking about wedding customs. I was saying that one custom was that the day after the wedding someone comes from the bride's family to escort her to her parental home for a visit, and Yalda was saying that she had no family other than Baji and the poor soul must certainly be too tired and sleepy to come."

Baji was looking intently at Yalda's face, which didn't correspond at all with what Ibn-e Hasan was saying.

Surprised by Yalda's silence, he asked Baji himself, "Would you like tea or do you prefer a soft drink?"

“Nothing,” she said dryly, having already turned down his offer of a cigarette.

Suddenly tears welled up in Yalda’s eyes, which even Ibn-e Hasan noticed. Seeing the uselessness of his theatrics, he quietly left the room.

Baji walked over and sat down beside Yalda. Without hearing a word from her she started to cry herself. She hugged Yalda to her bosom as if she understood the calamity that had occurred last night.

Yalda continued to sob and cry and when she stopped, Baji asked, “Anyway, what did happen? The same routine: he taking offence and strutting around; you bending over backwards to appease him?”

Yalda lifted her head and looked into Baji’s eyes. “Please forgive me Baji,” she said. “How I wish I’d listened to you years ago!”

“It’s all water under the bridge now,” Baji said. “He completely hypnotized you, right from childhood. You’ve been dancing to his tune all along. First in your home, in his home, in the whole neighborhood; and then, when the people of the neighborhood scorned us, all over town: today come to this library, tomorrow to this or that bookstall or club. How much has he robbed from you—can you even begin to guess? You made no use of your degree, just because he didn’t want you to. If you had, you’d be working today. I kept asking you to go for an M.Sc., but you wouldn’t agree to it. If you had, you would be a lecturer in some college by now. He would fight with his parents and get all worked up, and the job of appeasing him was yours.”

Yalda heard her out, her head resting in Baji’s lap. Then with her voice choking Baji said: “Do you remember the scene at the airport when he returned from England? If it weren’t for your sake, I wouldn’t have let him set foot in my house, even on the day he came with the marriage proposal. Poor Habib Sahib, to this day I’m in his debt.”

“Really?” Yalda said, lifting her head. “You never told me.”

“What could I have told you? That at my expense you were calling an extremely mediocre good-for-nothing back, someone who had failed to accomplish anything at all during his two years in England and who had indulged in every sort of pleasure there was? You knew all these things. You also knew that at the time I didn’t have much money so I had to ask Habib Sahib for help. To me Habib Sahib isn’t what Ibn-e Hasan is to you. He’s a true friend. And despite my many entreaties, he still refuses to let me repay him that loan.

“Compare this with Ibn-e Hasan. He probably still hasn’t even given you a brass band. All he’s ever done is make you run after him. I don’t think he loves you. Perhaps you fill some psychological need of his.”

“No, not psychological,” Yalda summoned up her courage and said,

“carnal.”

Baji gaped at her in amazement. She had never suspected that. Yalda again started crying bitterly. “I’ve been deathly afraid of him since the time I was learning to ride my bike.”

Wiping her own tears Baji said, “I should ask you to forgive me. I was always too absorbed in my own affairs and I neglected to guide you.”

Amidst her tears and sniffles, Yalda related to her elder sister random bits and pieces, a word or two at a time, about the hold Ibban had had on her all along. Baji had no difficulty understanding those fragments. Now and then as she wiped away Yalda’s tears and her own, she exclaimed, “You poor girl!”

While narrating the story of her woes, she remained the same old Yalda: apprehensive, reticent, the picture of sadness. But all of a sudden the same courage, the same anger and boldness she had been feeling inside since the morning returned to her. She got up and sat next to Baji, shoulder to shoulder. Fastening her hair on top of her head, she said in a firm voice: “But that spell is broken now. I myself believed that chastity was simply another name for a piece of skin. When you’ve lost it, perhaps the next best thing for restoring it is to surrender yourself to the one who took it. That’s why I felt I had to suffer through this, knowing that he is what he is. Do you know what happened here last night?”

All this while Baji had been staring at the bare wall in front of her. She turned and gave Yalda a questioning look.

“Long after all of you had left last night, he came into the room dragging his feet as if he wasn’t entering the bridal chamber, but only his own gloomy little room after a bout of gambling and drinking and intended to plop down on his ragged bed and conk out.”

“Didn’t he say anything to you?”

Stirred by the memory she spoke fervidly, “Oh yes, he said, ‘So that’s how you look as a bride!’ And then, after swallowing his sleeping pill, ‘Aren’t you going to change? It’s already quite late. Take off your jewelry and things and go to sleep. You’ve played the bride long enough.’”

“After he fell asleep, I recited the *Qul huwa’l-Lah* ... and, repeating the names of the *Panjtan Pak* (Five Pure Ones) and the Twelve Imams, I tried to fall asleep sitting up—because he was sprawled out diagonally on the bed, leaving no space for me to lie down—but sleep just wouldn’t come. I spent the entire night supplicating, using all the words I had heard throughout my childhood from Mother and, later, from Nana. I pleaded with God in the name of His Prophet, the Twelve Imams, and the Fourteen Innocents that my new life would be a success, that Ibban would change his ways for the better, and that if I had disgraced myself in

my own eyes before marriage, He would at least help me regain my self-respect, if not the respect of others. Today I've become the honor of the very man who violated me. Help me save his life ... God forbid!" she said quickly touching her earlobes, "rather, help me play an important role in saving his life."

Baji sat quietly listening to her.

Both of them knew that Ibban must be standing on the verandah eavesdropping on their conversation, which was an old habit of his. But when Baji signaled her to keep her voice down, Yalda suddenly started talking even more loudly: "Now I finally understand why people give so much importance to the top strap when a sandal breaks. It's not because the sandal won't stay on without it. It's because the sight of someone holding on to a sandal with their toes and dragging their foot attracts attention. People wonder whether they're wearing any sandals at all. The easiest remedy is to start walking barefoot."

"You're a funny girl!" Baji exclaimed. "What you say is beyond me."

Ibn-e Hasan stepped inside, strutted over to the chair beneath the ceiling fan and sat down, as if to say: "All right, let's hear what you have to say."

Baji was sitting propped against the bed's headboard and Yalda was leaning against the opposite end, facing her.

"Baji, do you remember Chanbeli Bua, the one who always began everything by uttering '*Panjtan ke sadqe*' (For the sake of the Panjtan)...? Once she was calling her son over to her so she could wipe his runny nose and the boy wasn't listening, so I said to her, 'Chanbeli Bua, say '*Panjtan ke sadqe*.'""

Baji laughed. "What makes you mention her now?"

"This," she said, looking directly into Ibn-e Hasan's eyes. "Last night when Ibban sprawled out on the bed and went to sleep, the thought crossed my mind: What would Chanbeli Bua have said if her husband—who we're told was always in jail—came into the bridal chamber the very first night, motia strings around his neck and wrists, and just slumped down right next to her and went to sleep? She always told me that before going to bed I should recite the Qul huwa'l-Lah ... and repeat the names of the Panjtan Pak and the Twelve Imams."

Ibn-e Hasan snapped angrily, "So that's what it was—just a put on, this observing obligatory prayer early in the morning!"

"For you perhaps. You have every right to say such a thing. But it's no put on for me. My nighttime prayer has been answered. For me the dawn has brought renewal. It has awakened the purity inside me. Before, I was a captive of the illusion that my destiny lay in marrying you, in living with

you and forgetting that there might be someone better than you out there. Marriage has set me free. If this isn't a prayer being answered, what is?"

Then looking at Baji she said, "It seems to me that all these years I was preparing for my own incarceration, the way people in politics do. Then I was incarcerated by its irresistible lure that it and it alone can guarantee safety, so remain incarcerated forever. Why care about your heart? However, after my body was incarcerated today, it seems my mind has been freed."

Baji kept listening attentively to what Yalda was saying. But this manner of talking—where was she headed with it? Was she...?

Yalda continued, as if she was talking to herself: "The feeling that sweeps over you after the *nikah* is that nothing is possible anymore ... Your old life is ended. This is the cutoff point. What lies ahead is a completely new life—for as long as you're able to endure this hell—becoming displeased, going back to parents, quarreling, trying to appease, being appeased, separating, divorcing, dowry, litigation over *mehr*, and, finally, the realization that deliverance from this new life is impossible." Suddenly she asked Baji, "Wouldn't you call these the ingredients of married life?"

"Go on, I'm listening." Baji was thinking: Has Yalda already reached some decision? Perhaps not a firm one. That's why she's giving one reason after another to defend it, the way people keep repeating themselves over and over to convince themselves to go through with half-formed decisions.

Without waiting for Baji's reply, Yalda continued. "But I've come to my senses today. This is the cutoff point. What I took for fidelity and lived up to—I was asleep."

Ibn-e Hasan was turning his head from side to side looking from one sister to the other. He wondered if they were conspiring against him. Yalda had already laid out for Baji everything there was to say against him.

Playing with a packet of cigarettes she had picked up from the table, Yalda said, "So, today I've woken up. That wasn't fidelity at all; it was a hypocritical norm of our society, a false belief. Just like when a rumor spreads about some house or other being haunted, having nails stuck in it, where protective charms are found in the hearth, where evil spirits reside and people have their navels rubbed—everyone believes all this with absolute certainty. I too was duped by the same kind of belief, as if I was under the influence of some spirit. Today as I was doing the dishes I opened the kitchen window and looked outside and I found that the very alleys where I used to walk with my head bowed down were surprisingly spacious. I waved at a coachman, and he waved back at me in broad day

light....”

“You had no right to wave at a stranger,” Ibn-e Hasan muttered.

“I asked him where he was going and he replied ‘Somewhere close.’ ‘Not farther?’ I asked, laughing, just to continue talking, but by then he had already moved on.”

Suddenly Ibn-e Hasan broke into a sweat. His face became even more flushed. He couldn't figure out what was going on. There were no windows or doors in the kitchen that opened onto the street. There was just one window and it opened onto a narrow lane between the two houses that wasn't even wide enough to allow two stout men to walk side by side, much less a bullock cart to pass through. Was his mind working all right? Or were the two sisters in collusion to drive him crazy?

Oblivious to Ibn-e Hasan's deteriorating mental state, Yalda went on with her account: “Then another coachman came along. I wanted to wave at him and ask where he was headed too, but he jumped off the cart and came running over to the window leaving the bullocks to go on ahead by themselves untended. He had a small earthen chillum in his hand, which some people call *sulfi*. ‘Amma, will you give me a few burning coals?’ he asked. ‘No burning coals here.’ I replied. ‘You don't cook?’ he asked. To pique his curiosity and surprise even more, I replied, ‘One could, but I don't.’ He asked again, ‘Why not? Perhaps you don't cook at all!’

“He just stood silently staring at me. The whole time he was talking he kept scraping the ashes and the layer of hardened soot from the inner wall of the bowl.

“I said, ‘Perhaps there is cooking, but on a gas or electric stove.’

“‘But you won't cook anymore?’

“‘No.’”

The thought flitted across Baji's mind again: Yalda is firming up her decision.

“‘In that case, what will you eat?’ he threw the question at me, blowing the debris out of the bowl.

“I remained silent. He stuck the base of the chillum into his mouth and blew vigorously two or three times. I was still thinking what answer to give him when he suddenly took off without another word. His bullocks had gone ahead quite a ways. My hands stopped washing the dishes.”

Ibn-e Hasan went out onto the verandah. Picking a spot where Yalda's voice wouldn't reach him, he sat down and began to smoke. He

tried to figure out whether he had lost his senses or had Yalda lost hers? His clothes were soaked in sweat, as often happened if he took too many confidence pills. Even here he could dimly hear snippets of the sisters' conversation. Now Baji seemed to be doing all the talking. She hadn't lowered her voice, but he was having difficulty understanding her. Then he saw Baji come outside and, without thinking, he raised his head and asked, "Haven't you come to pick up Yalda?"

"No, why?"

"It's a wedding custom."

"Damn the custom!" Baji replied in a surly tone of voice. Then standing in the doorway she turned and looked at Yalda sitting on the bed and said, "Give it some thought."

Holding her purse against her chest she left without saying a word to Ibn-e Hasan.

After Baji's departure a deathly silence spread throughout the house. Ibn-e Hasan had placed a chair in front of him on the verandah to stretch out his legs and was smoking off and on. Inside, Yalda was lying on the bed with one leg over the other. Ibban was beginning to feel hungry. The halva and puris he had eaten at breakfast were digested long ago. He wished that Yalda would come herself and say they should go out to eat somewhere, or at the very least say he should go to the bazaar to get some eggs and bread so she could fix some sandwiches. If she would even say that much, he would himself suggest that they go out for dinner. He was under the impression that Baji's wise counsel had dampened Yalda's anger. Why otherwise would she have said, "Give it some thought" as she was leaving?

Finally, when smoking on an empty stomach became unbearable and his hunger got the better of him, he had no alternative but to go to Yalda. Standing some distance from the bed he said, "Don't you feel like going to some restaurant? You must be feeling hungry too."

Yalda didn't break her silence.

"I'm famished," he said.

"I'm not. I'm thinking about something else."

"What?" Ibn-e Hasan felt his heart skip a beat and then it started pounding very fast.

"We've only been together a short time. Let's talk a few things over peacefully."

"We'll be together for the rest of our lives. Let's get something to eat

first; we can talk peacefully all you want afterwards.”

Yalda gestured for him to sit down and said, “I’ve heard, and even read, that in the West a couple considering marriage says: Let’s give it a try. The girl in love says in her heart: I’ll give it a try. The boy feels the same way. This is because neither can trust the other fully. You must know these things better than I do since you’ve lived there, and if you married some English woman who was older than you, you must have experienced it personally too....”

“I can swear by anyone you like,” he said interrupting her, “I didn’t marry any English woman. You’re the first woman...”

Ignoring what he said, Yalda continued, “But in the East, acceptance of the marriage proposal amounts to a *fait accompli*, something no longer open to discussion. Accepting a new family totally, becoming a part of it, living for your husband and children.... I don’t know which is right, the West or the East? But I do know this: I will never be like your mother, or your sister-in-law, or your elder sister.” She swept her glance over the whole house and said, “Has marriage brought us closer? If it has, how close has it brought us?”

His mind was completely blank, somewhat like a gambler who has made a last desperate wager and lost.

“Just as a period of long, uninterrupted privacy is needed for two hearts to come together forever, so too a period of long, uninterrupted privacy is needed to drive them apart forever. Today is the first chance I’ve had to observe you so closely.”

“All your displeasure is just because I slept through our wedding night,” he said foolishly. “For heaven’s sake, can’t we have this conversation after we’ve eaten?”

“We could—if I were going to stay that long,” Yalda shot back angrily.

“What do you mean? You can’t go anywhere without my permission,” he said, his earlier agitation returning, “not even to your own *maika*.” Then he grumbled, “Abba was right: ‘*Gurba kushtan roz-e auwal*’ (Kill the cat the very first day)! You do understand this much Persian, don’t you? A wife is just like a cat. The very first night, she too...”

Yalda’s face became livid with anger. Sitting down on the bed she said, “All a wedding night means to you is sex.”

“Yes. That’s what I’ve always heard. What else does ‘wedding’ mean if not sex?”

The brazen reply left her speechless for a moment.

Where had she ended up? she marveled. She had been traveling on this road for a long time. She was well acquainted with her companion.

Why had she pretended all along that she wasn't? Why now, when she had reached the journey's end, did she feel she had no need for a companion in the first place? And what of Ibn-e Hasan? Where would he go now? Back to his old path? And from there on a new journey with someone else? Then it occurred to her: Where will I go? Toward some new destination? Without a companion? Did I stick with Ibban all this time just to wake up the sleeping woman inside me?

"Ibban," she began resolutely. "Ibban, I'm leaving. Today for the first time I feel that I'm free."

"But you're married to me and you can't go anywhere without my permission."

Unperturbed, Yalda lit a cigarette, took two puffs and then, setting it on the ashtray, said, "Two sentences have played a crucial role in our lives."

"Which two sentences?" he asked in the listless voice of a gambler who had lost everything.

"One was your father's comment: 'He's not about to marry.' And you got mad and jumped right into the marriage pond without even thinking about whether you knew how to swim or how deep the water might be."

"And the second?" he asked, in a still more listless voice.

"What you said on the wedding night: There's nothing new for you in living with me, that's why you decided to go to sleep. This one sentence turned everything around for me. I used to think that after marriage one experienced a new life. I didn't realize that 'new' just meant a new, virgin body. The same thing that people take from the most oppressed woman in society, only to brag for the rest of their lives: 'Oh her! I was the one who took her first!' What's the difference between them and you? I'm sorry Mr. Ibn-e Hasan, son of Syed Muhammad Naqi, the pond you jumped into in such a rush, holding my hand, is only a cesspool."

She picked up the cigarette, took a drag and returned it to the ashtray.

"Where are you off to?" he asked when he saw her gathering a few of her things.

"To start my new life."

"That's already begun." He took a puff of the cigarette Yalda had left in the ashtray and said, "Right from the moment we accepted each other in the *nikah* ceremony before a crowd of people."

"Delude yourself all you want, Zainab Bua's darling, but don't try to delude me. What could be new in me for you? Whatever it is, you'll never find it. You're incapable of feeling anything because your life has gone as far as it possibly could. After the rains, whatever water is left will stagnate and become foul. My life is a flowing river. It didn't end when I stepped

into this house. I know what's new."

Resting her chin on the back of her rocking chair, Yalda said, "Now I'll do all the things I would otherwise have only longed to do after marrying you."

"For instance?"

"For instance, reading my favorite books for hours rocking gently in my chair." The image of her aging zoology professor sailed before her eyes: she had seen her for the first time in her own house with her Parker pen and Haswell's book lying open against her chest as she made some diagrams on a sheaf of papers resting on her knee. But the image faded the next moment when she heard him say, in a last feeble attempt to intimidate her, "But the marriage has already taken place."

"Then divorce me. My own foolishness and a single sentence of your father condemned me to life imprisonment. But one sentence from you has changed that verdict into 'until the court is dismissed.' Well, the court is now dismissed and I'm free."

He was confused: was she really leaving him or was this just a threat? He took the objects she had gathered up from her hands and asked, "Where will you go?"

"The same old question," she said derisively. "Somewhere—but aren't you going to ask how I'll get home or wherever I might be going? By bus or by rickshaw? And whether I plan to stop anywhere along the way? Or talk to someone?"

Ibn-e Hasan remained silent.

"As of today," she said fearlessly, "you'll never again run your hand over my stomach to inspect it. And regardless of where you see me in the city, alone or with a stranger, you'll never again be able to question me about it."

Ibn-e Hasan was speechless. His hunger had disappeared, leaving behind only a throat stinging from cigarette smoke. Yalda—that meek and mild-tempered hornless cow he had spent his childhood and his youth with—what on earth had she become in just one night! She wasn't herself. Surely it was Baji and the visitors who frequented their house that were talking through her. He muttered to himself, "I'll take care of all those wretches, and Yalda too, when the time comes. After all, sometimes wives do need to be smacked. And she needs that too."

His anger was mounting inside him. All of a sudden he screamed, "I'm going out to do something and you know damn well what it is. Don't you dare go out until I come back. By civil and religious law you're my wife and you absolutely don't have the right to go out of the house without my consent. Otherwise, remember a husband has some other

rights too.”

“Such as?” Yalda asked dumbfounded.

“You’ll find out if it ever comes to that,” he said and quickly darted out as if he didn’t want to give her the chance to say the next sentence. Yalda heard the door slam shut.

It took her a few moments to grasp the meaning of his last threat. However, instead of feeling intimidated, she burst out laughing. What would I have said if he had made this threat openly? “First take your courage pill.” I might even have brought him a glass of water.

After he had dashed out in anger Yalda began gathering up her essential things. There wasn’t much to collect. After all, she had only been there a day and a half, not long enough for things to get scattered around. And the items that came as a dowry? She wasn’t about to exchange even a word about it with Ibn-e Hasan, much less quarrel over it: a sofa ensemble, a dresser, a dining table and chairs, and, yes, a rocking chair. She had always longed for a rocking chair to lounge in reading and swaying gently back and forth. Baji had looked around everywhere and eventually found one to give her as a wedding gift. At the moment it stood facing the window where Yalda had looked out at the rose-colored sky after offering her dawn prayer.

Had it been a marriage of two hearts—the thought occurred to her—and had he hugged and kissed me before leaving for work in the morning, right now I would be rocking in that chair reading some classic.

“Dream, dream, dream!” she said, shaking her head. “Dreams take away your spirit. They have the power to make the impossible, possible. And all these years I’ve been dreaming even while I was awake. Didn’t I know he’s a bull with a swarthy complexion and a lean body, and there’s absolutely no difference between him and a fat, dark buffalo? The question is...” she said feeling angry at herself, “why did I allow myself to be a dumb cow all these years? To hell with it! No more!”

She sensed that someone was standing behind her. When he had stormed out of the house in a rage, Ibn-e Hasan hadn’t asked her to latch the door behind him, and she hadn’t given it a thought.

She turned around and found Bannu standing by the door of the room watching her, fascinated.

“When did you start walking like a cat?” she asked sarcastically. She knew Bannu considered her a woman, not a girl. He hated her and if he ran into her on the street he never failed to look at her with lust in his

eyes. She could distinguish his voice from his brothers and knew when he was poking his head out from behind a house to call her a slut.

“You also walk like a cat,” he said, deliberately trying to imply something.

After finding out the previous day that Jawad and Baqar had helped decorate her house, she had more or less come round to accepting them as her *devars* (brothers-in-law). Had she not already decided to leave her *susrat* and walk out of Ibn-e Hasan’s life forever, she would have affectionately asked Bannu to sit down and fixed him a cup of tea, but Bannu’s response incensed her. She felt an overwhelming desire to tell him to leave the house that instant. Nevertheless, like a stage actress totally immersed in her role, the next sentence escaped from her lips spontaneously, “Have a seat, Bannu.”

Bannu sat down and stared at her face.

“Is Amma all right?”

“Yes,” he said still staring.

“And Abba?”

“He’s fine too,” Bannu said, with his eyes riveted on her body.

Even the most naïve and inexperienced girl couldn’t have missed what those eyes implied.

“Will you have tea?” She asked casually in order to appear indifferent to his prodding glances.

“Why not? Only a miserable wretch would turn down tea when you’re offering it.”

“You haven’t lost it, have you?” Yalda yelled, ready to pounce at him like a lioness in a rage. All this time I was talking to you as my *devar*, but you ... you seem to have other ideas.”

Bannu, normally quite brazen at taunting her and casting amorous glances when in the company of his friends, lost his nerve totally before her assault. He had imagined that she would be easy prey.

“But what did I say?” he stammered.

“Why not say the same things to your sisters?” Yalda stood in front of him with her hands planted firmly on her hips and said, “Go on, look! Look as much as you like. Then go and give your sisters the same look. And your mother too.”

Regaining his senses Bannu huffed, “Don’t make me mad! Otherwise you won’t find anyone worse than me.”

“Your brother’s words exactly. Really, who could be worse than you!”

“I know every little thing that happened before your marriage.”

“For instance?”

“For instance, the box at the cinema—Rex. Remember the name of

the film?" His lost nerve was coming back. "Why would you? You were too busy doing your thing. *Marty*—do you remember now? The instant the lights went off, your two heads slid down below the front wall of the box. I was sitting in the last row right in front of your box and I stood on my seat watching the whole thing. I have to hand it to you, you picked the perfect film. The entire hall was empty."

Yalda's hands fell from her hips. Once again she felt the same lack of courage that had been her companion for so many years. She lowered her eyes.

At the same time the timid lion was slowly waking. He said impudently, "Ibban Bhai won't be back anytime soon. I met him on the way and he told me, 'Go reason with your Bhabi. She's gotten it into her head to go back home.' He's gone off somewhere for a couple of hours to calm his nerves."

"Meaning?"

"To drink—whiskey, perhaps."

"So, you've come here at Ibban's behest to reason with me," she said plopping herself down on the rocking chair facing Bannu. All of a sudden she was feeling very tired.

"Yes ... Bhabi," Bannu said, stressing the 'Bhabi' in a tone filled with desire.

She remained silent. Tears welled up in her eyes but they went no further than her eyelashes and she felt something catching in her throat.

Bannu picked up his courage and said boldly, "Can we repeat the scene I watched in the box? Only one of the actors will be different this time, the way it is on stage when one actor suddenly takes ill and another quickly takes his place."

The shell of timidity, insignificance, and weariness that had enveloped her mind and body for so many years suddenly burst open and scattered. She grabbed a heavy crystal vase, shaped like a tall woman, that was sitting on a nearby table and, advancing toward Bannu, said in a threatening tone, "Say that again!"

Quickly shielding his face and head with his arms and hands, Bannu mumbled meekly, "Bhabi, Bhabi, I was only ..."

"Joking," she completed his sentence for him. "Bastard, get out of my house! If you ever so much as look this way again, you'll see what I'll do to you. This head of yours will be dangling from your neck."

Bannu moved to get up but his legs were shaking badly.

Yalda caught herself and thought: "What am I saying? *My* house? If you ever so much as look this way!" As he was getting up Yalda quickly ordered Bannu, "Stay put. So I was 'easy prey' for you?"

“No, no,” he faltered, cringing.

“Don’t lie. Tell me the truth,” she said, aiming the vase at him.

“Yes, it was like that,” he said, crying. “I have a filthy mind, but for the love of Maula Ali, please don’t mention it to Ibban Bhai. I beseech you in the name of the Panjtan Pak, please don’t! Otherwise he’ll blare it out to the whole family.”

“Go on, get it all out: If I don’t mention it, God and His Prophet, the Twelve Imams, and the Fourteen Innocents will reward me for it. Would I do that for you? For the likes of you?” Then she said in a sharp, crisp voice, “Oh, how I wish Ibban would do just this one good thing in life so that everyone would see that you’re all cast from the same mould—your Bare Bhaiya, Baqar, Ali Jawad, Tannu, even your father. Every last one of you.”

“For the love of Maula Ali, please don’t bring Abba into this.”

Yalda laughed and said, “I’m not seeking a reward or anything like that. I’m leaving this house and I’ll give you the keys before I go.”

“Leaving, for how long?”

“For the rest of my life,” Yalda said, putting the vase back down as it seemed she no longer needed its protection. “And now you will do two things.”

“What?” Bannu said thankfully because he thought that by asking him to do something Yalda was letting go.

“First: From this day forward I want you and your brothers to keep your traps shut about me and Baji. I don’t want a single word about us to come out of any of your mouths ever again. Otherwise, don’t forget, I’m holding this megaphone and I’ll use it to tell the whole story of your shenanigans to the entire world. All I would need to do is call Ibban to my house once and tell him that the reason I left was that you two blood brothers wanted to have me for a wife at the same time.”

“For the love of Maula Ali,” Bannu groaned.

“And second: Go and get two rickshaws.”

“Two—why?”

“Because I’ll ride in one with my smaller things and the other will carry the bigger items and this rocking chair—my future friend. And remember, you have to stay here until your brother comes back. I’m leaving the keys with you.”

After the rickshaws had pulled away, Bannu stood in the doorway wringing his hands. It appeared as though a gloom deep enough to sink the whole world had swept away his playfulness.

It was a holiday and Baji was home. Even if she hadn't been, it would have made no difference. As she was leaving yesterday, Baji had given back the key that Yalda had had in her possession until she got married and said, "You should keep this."

"So you're back?" Baji now said with mixed emotions of joy and sadness. When she saw Yalda's things being unloaded and hauled into the house, she added in English, "I was expecting it."

After paying the rickshaw driver the fare plus a generous tip, which surprised him, she threw her arms around Baji saying, "I've come back, but not in the way you were expecting."

"Then how?"

"For good," Yalda said, settling comfortably into her rocking chair, freeing her feet from her sandals and planting them on the cool floor.

Baji stood waiting for her to say more, but Yalda's eyes were wandering all over the house she had lived in all her life until yesterday, as if she were looking at it for the first time in many years. As if she had returned home today after a long sojourn in some other country. Her bicycle, with its tires now flat, stood covered in dust under the staircase. The bed on which Nana had breathed his last was still in its place. It was here that he had hugged her a few days before he died and unburdened himself saying, "I'll carry with me the sorrow that I was unable to fulfill one of your wishes." She lovingly caressed the armrests. Baji was standing nearby, still waiting to hear more from her.

Swaying in her chair Yalda said, "What more can I say? That I'm free? Free like a bird! Like a slave whose freedom was bought by some Good Samaritan or who was set free by his owner as a reward for his hard work and loyalty?" She laughed. "I was a slave to an illusion all these years: if you slipped once, you could only hope to make up for it by continuing to live it. God knows who invented this illusion?"

"Clever man, whoever he was," Baji said, laughing. Then she bent over Yalda, kissed her and said, "Congratulations on your freedom! Let me fix you some coffee. I haven't had mine yet, as if I somehow knew you would be coming and we would have it together. Meanwhile you go eat something."

But when Baji emerged from the kitchen holding two cups in her hands, she found Yalda fast asleep. Her face was like an innocent child's who, exhausted after playing all day long, finally succumbs to sleep. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon