

IKRAMULLAH

## Out of Sight\*

IT WAS AN AUGUST AFTERNOON. The sun, lodged in a sky washed clean by the rain, stared continuously at the world with its wrathful eyes. By that time, the traffic had died down and the main bazaar of the town of Sultanpur had become completely deserted. The pitch-black road lying senseless in the middle of the bazaar, soaking wet with perspiration, had taken on an even darker hue. The shopkeepers sat quietly in their shops behind awnings fastened to bamboo poles extending out to the road. What wretch would leave his house in such weather to go shopping? Sitting on the chair inside his shop, Ismail saw his friend's eight- or ten-year-old son Mubashshir pass by under his awning, walking backwards with a satchel around his neck. A smile suddenly appeared on Ismail's face. Kids will be kids, he thought. Feeling bored and alone since he couldn't find anything to interest him, he had devised this private pastime of walking home backwards. Ismail called him over: "Hey Mubashshir, come here!"

"Coming Baba Ji," saying that, the boy climbed the two wooden-plank stairs and stood facing Ismail. His demeanor showed respect and his wondering eyes were asking, "What's the matter?"

"Why are you walking backwards? Want to bump into some bicyclist or pedestrian?"

"No, Baba Ji, I'm careful. Every now and then I turn around to look."

"Don't act silly. Walk straight up the road, face forward. Do you understand?"

The boy said yes, and as he started going down the two steps Ismail asked, "Is your father back from Lahore yet?"

"No. He'll be back by this evening."

When the country was partitioned, Ismail was hiding in Amritsar, a major city in East Punjab, where he had arrived two weeks before, having fled his ancestral town of Gobindpur looking for a place of refuge. From

---

\* "Āñkḥ Ōjḥal," from the author's collection *Bār-e Digar* (Lahore: Fiction House, 2005), pp. 62–159.

Amritsar, he set out for Lahore with the hoard of other migrants. For six months he languished in a cramped refugee camp, chockfull of people like himself. An old acquaintance at the camp told him that the Muslims of Gobindpur, at least those who had survived, had all gone to Sultanpur. Ismail went there looking for them. The majority of Gobindpur Muslims had been massacred by the Sikhs, burned alive inside their own houses. How could he have found them? One person from his own family, whose ancestors had belonged to Gobindpur, had indeed arrived in Sultanpur, but he had gone with his family to Delhi and settled there about ten months before the Partition. Later, he came straight to Pakistan from Delhi. He wouldn't have known what transpired in Gobindpur after Ismail's escape: how and in what form the final catastrophe had arrived, how Gobindpur's inhabitants were killed, or who the killers were. Were they from the town itself or from outside? And if anyone had survived, where could they be?

In Sultanpur Ismail ran into an old college friend who was stationed there as a government official. He helped Ismail get a tiny store, which was a bangles and makeup shop, and the allotment to an equally small house in a neighborhood a short distance away. Those were the only properties left by that time. The official workers broke the seal of the shop and found everything inside covered in dust. On the facing wall there was a picture with Guru Nanak Dev in the middle sitting in a contemplative posture. Bhai Bala sat a little behind cooling him with a peacock-feather fan. On the other side of the picture Bhai Mardana could be seen with a rubab in his hands. Ismail felt as if the rubab would begin playing on its own and Guru Nanak Dev would intone:

*Onkaar sat-naam karta purkh, nirbhau, nirvair,  
Akaal Murat Ajuni seb bhang gur parsaad....<sup>1</sup>*

But the Guru did not ask for the rubab to be played, nor did he say anything himself. Perhaps he was upset that a Sikh's shop was being given over to a Muslim. But then, Ismail reasoned: why would the Guru think such thoughts? To him all human beings were equal. Such musings were the province of the worldly, not the Sufis and dervishes. Ismail had sung the Guru's song about the Unity of the Godhead from grades five to ten during his student days at the Khalsa High School in Gobindpur and had often wondered what part of it went against the preaching of Islam. Why don't the Sikhs and Muslims feel affectionate toward each other? Only

---

<sup>1</sup>Translation: There is but one God, True is his name; Author of this World; Immortal His form; without fear, without enmity; unborn, self-illuminated; Perceived only through the Guru's grace.

much later did he realize that the issue was not about a difference between religious beliefs, but about the arbitrary manner in which the majority group acted. Considering the minority group low and powerless, they never tired of belittling or humiliating it.

Being the owner of a bangles-cum-makeup shop meant procuring numberless little items and selling them largely to women and children. He didn't like this arduous, piecemeal work. A few days later he put all his merchandise up for sale, even at a loss, and opened a drugstore in the same location. While switching the nature of his store he often wondered if its original owner would have done the same. Perhaps not. Perhaps he himself shouldn't have done it either. How unhappy the original owner would be to find out what had been done to his shop. From a full-grown young man, Ismail had now turned old and grizzly, but he'd been running the same tiny drugstore with the contentment of a bhikshu, a religious mendicant. He'd established a tenor of total contentment between himself and the world, with no desire at all to either become affluent or raise his standard of living. Without any expectations from life, he was blithely enjoying a freedom from all cares. A single man does not have many wants, and the shop was taking care of his needs sufficiently. That didn't mean he had always had such a Sufic point of view about life. Like every young man, his heart too was once filled with longings and desires. But what he had observed during his six-month stay at the refugee camp brought him gradually, slipping and sliding, even without receiving a lesson in Sufism from anyone, to this point of view. He had noticed at the camp how the pressure of personal wants drove men to change their attitudes constantly and adopt new ones; how people trapped between personal needs and selflessness, between animal instincts and human obligations, constantly bobbed up and down as if caught in a whirlpool. He witnessed hundreds of stories taking shape before him, most ending in victory for selfishness and success for unprincipled conduct. Sometimes the winner's face, acknowledging his own meanness and vulgarity, oozed regret at first, but as time passed he was devoid of this constraint as well. The veneer of morality, justice, scruples, charity, good manners soon fell away, revealing the green, tarnished copper of selfishness underneath. Disgrace became an everyday phenomenon, and nobody died from the pain. Tight-lipped, they all bore it as if it were a providential command. There were only two classes of people at the camp: one despairing of money, without any hope for the future, a crowd of shivering, thirsting, humiliated people; and the other a smaller, happier group of ecstatic tyrants. Ismail made up his mind then and there that if there ever were an occasion for him to migrate again, he would rather die with his kith and

kin in Gobindpur than go elsewhere looking for safety.

He was married once, but his wife passed away. They had a child, but he too died a few months after the mother. Later on, Ismail never thought about marriage. He only had one passion—reading the newspapers. The discordance and sweetness in familial relationships, the tremulous tension caused by myriad anxieties over wives and children, the indecisions and worries about profit and loss—life’s many facets, each with its own taste and flavor—he had to, and did obtain all those tastes, enjoyments, sensations, tremors, etc., through his newspapers as he walked along the tracks of life maintaining his poise and balance. He bought one newspaper himself; two or three he borrowed from others. To look at English newspapers, he went to the Reading Room. He was a patriotic Pakistani and a believing Muslim, even though he’d never offered a prayer nor observed any of the other rites of his religion. Once a year, on Eid-ul-Fitr, he would visit the mosque; if he missed that occasion, the whole matter would be deferred to next year.

At sunset, after the customers from the villages had returned home, the bazaar became deserted. At that time, two or three shopkeepers the same age as Ismail would come and sit with him to exchange views on current events and conditions. He would entertain them with tea and sweet beverages, and based on his own perusal of the newspapers would express his views with great enthusiasm on political, social, economic, national and international issues. At times, bitter arguments and differences of opinion might break out. If the tempers started to become frayed, he suddenly clammed up, which invariably caused the other person’s steam to evaporate quickly. A certain tension and displeasure would grip the group and gradually both the partisan and the impartial discussants would get up and take their leave. Within twenty-four hours, however, both parties would forget their earlier acrimony and join again and conversation would begin to flow on one topic or another. Occasionally, Bashir Ahmad also joined this company for gossip.

Bashir Ahmad was the youngest of them all. When Ismail, alone, and Bashir, with his family and relations, reached Pakistan as refugees from various parts of eastern Punjab, Ismail was in the last year of his B.A. and Bashir was just a toddler crawling on his knees. Ismail became friends with Bashir’s father, Chaudhry ‘Ata Muhammad, and their friendship endured until the latter died. He was a very sincere, loving and compassionate man, but one of his habits irked Ismail immensely. During his life Ismail had come across many Ahmadis—even here in Sultanpur, at least a couple dozen of them had been buying medicines from him. But the manner in which ‘Ata Muhammad adhered to Ahmadism wasn’t visible in anyone

else. No matter what the topic of conversation, or how unrelated it was to anything remotely religious, ‘Ata Muhammad would blurt out what the Promised Messiah had said about it, quote from the sayings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and attempt to twist the topic to fit the saying. An even more difficult stage arrived when he would recite, in a sing-song voice, the religious verses of notable Ahmadi elders in support of his arguments and, because of his lamentable lack of taste, would recite them without regard for the demands of meter and rhyme. Not without a pinch of the salt of firm belief could one swallow this recitation, and no one in the assembly had this salt available to him—no one, that is, except ‘Ata Muhammad. Neither Ismail nor any of his friends had any trouble with ‘Ata Muhammad’s belief, nor any objection to his emotional attachment to Mirza Sahib and his family. They all firmly believed that everyone had the right to their own faith and had the right to choose to accept whomsoever they wanted to be their idol. This was an acknowledged fact like a universal truth which no one ever even questioned. Once, when ‘Ata Muhammad wasn’t present, Shaikh Sardar Ali, the cloth merchant, quietly objected that Islam had been a perfect religion, complete in every aspect, so why did the Ahmadis need to introduce a new prophet? This wasn’t something the Sardar could have uttered in Chaudhry Sahib’s presence, deferring to civility and the latter’s age. And even had he tried, one of the group, or perhaps Ismail himself, would have forbidden him from turning the get-together into an arena for religious discord. In any case, no one gave any importance to Shaikh Sardar Ali’s comment, for it would have dragged on endlessly and, besides, he himself didn’t insist on pursuing it—although, in 1953, an anti-Ahmadi movement had already sprung up that resulted in much bloodshed and many incidents of arson. The rioters assassinated a goodly number of Ahmadis and torched the estates of a number of them. Numberless Ahmadis had to abandon their homes and go into hiding. The police and the army also gunned down many rioters. In order to restore peace and order, the Pakistani Government imposed martial law within the city limits of Lahore. The situation became so depraved that it seemed as though the days of 1947 had turned around and come back. When the tumult subsided, people forgot the entire sordid episode as if nothing so life-wrenching had ever happened. When a stone is thrown into a stagnant pool and splits open the scum on the surface, you think the surface will never be whole again, but it soon comes together as if it had never split in the first place. One major factor that made the creation of Pakistan possible was the establishment of religious tolerance among the various factions of the Muslim population. Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a follower of the Shi‘a denomination, yet every faction submitted to his orders and instructions

without the least hesitation and acknowledged him as their Quaid-e-Azam, their great leader. The spirit of religious harmony created in those early days seemed to have been shattered permanently in 1953, but as soon as the agitators of the disturbances, who were after political gains, were put behind bars, one had the impression that the nation's previous harmony had been restored without suffering any impairment.

The Munir Inquiry Commission dragged on for months. The common man wasn't particularly interested in it, but the fear in the faces and eyes of the Ahmadis was only too visible even days after the establishment of peace and order. They were scarred badly. Their trust in their fellow citizens in the affairs of daily life was shaken, their sense of pride was wounded, as though a dear friend slapped you across the face. Their social life was restricted to their co-religionists. It took them years to recover from their state of uncertainty. The Munir Inquiry report gave them some hope. Following the riots, Chaudhry 'Ata Muhammad became taciturn for some time, and his attendance at the gatherings at Ismail's shop was considerably less frequent. It took him about two years to finally return, but slowly, to his former mood. Although the fright and terror of the days of rioting was soon obliterated from the minds of the common folk, a few of the jokes that sprang up then are still being repeated for some belated enjoyment.

Ismail loved all of his friends, but the sincere attachment he felt for Bashir wasn't shared by anyone else. Of course there were reasons for his attachment. First off, Bashir had grown up right in front of his eyes. If his own son had lived, he would be roughly the same age as Bashir. Secondly, Bashir was easily achieving everything in life that Ismail had once hoped for himself, and misfortune hadn't so far thought to waylay him. If someone close achieves what had been your own burning ambition in life, treating that achievement as your own and sharing in it isn't just a sign of magnanimity, it's also a rare natural gift that consoles the person deprived of that achievement. He may still have deep regret all through his life, but at least he doesn't cry anymore.

When Bashir did his matriculation from Sultanpur and entered intermediate-level classes in Lahore, Ismail felt as though he was living his own past vicariously, as if time had turned around softly and carried him back to the days when he himself had passed his matriculation from Gobindpur and joined the college at Amritsar. In time, Bashir completed his B.A., which Ismail had had to abandon due to the Partition. While still in Gobindpur, he read about the communal riots in newspapers, but he never imagined they would turn out to be so bloody. That all his relatives—some one hundred and fifty people—would be slaughtered to a man, was indeed something hard to imagine! His parents, brothers, sisters, and

all his close relatives had been massacred by the Sikhs. By contrast, Bashir, his parents, his kith and kin had all arrived safely in Sultanpur without encountering any bloodshed or devastation. They didn't have to suffer any mental or physical jolts, whereas Partition had turned Ismail's whole life upside down. What, then, was the point in lamenting the failure to complete his B.A. degree. If all his plans had steadily materialized as he had hoped, he could have built his life's edifice systematically brick by brick. Now it was just a tomb of regrets lodged deep in his heart. When Bashir finished his law degree, Ismail was overjoyed. It was as if he had himself become a lawyer and, come next morning, would don his black coat and go to the courts in Gobindpur while his father, putting on a coat of mock humility but actually full of pride, would go around introducing him to the other lawyers. None of this was destined to happen. Rather than Ismail practicing law in Gobindpur, it was Bashir who would practice it in Sultanpur. Just as Bashir and his entire community of some twenty families had settled on both sides of a street in a Sultanpur neighborhood, so Ismail longed to have settled down with his community the same way. But how could that be? His folks were never allowed to reach Pakistan, dispatched as they were to the next world before they could ever set foot in their new homeland.

Bashir's street was closed at the farther end; the area beyond was occupied by cultivated fields. The homes, most of them already built above or below each other, were joined by interconnecting doors. The Hindus and Sikhs who lived on this street before were likely related to one another; that must have been why they had arranged for this convenience. Houses without this convenience were now fitted with new doors and, if you entered the first house, you could now easily reach the last house without having to step out into the street.

As soon as Mubashshir came into the house, he called out:

"Amma, I want water."

"Want me to bring you lassi?"

"Yes."

"All right, then go to the bazaar and fetch fifty paisas worth of ice. You wouldn't want to drink warm lassi, would you? If you get ice, even I might have a glass."

"I can't go now. Borrow some ice from Phupha's house."

"Is this any time to knock at the connecting door? Who knows, they might be eating or resting! I don't want to bother them over a trifle. Besides, your Phupha doesn't like people knocking at his door whenever the fancy strikes them."

"I don't want to go out now. I'll drink it warm. Just bring it to me."

“Come on, son, don’t be stubborn. The ice-seller is just down the street. You’ll be back in a second. You could have already brought it home by now. Here, take this piece of cloth and the eight-anna piece. Come on, hurry up.”

After gulping down the glass of cold lassi, Mubashshir said, “Amma, starting tomorrow I’m not going to school.”

“Why? Why not?”

“The boys use swear words.”

“Look who’s talking? You’re just as foul-mouthed! The amount of rubbish you boys spill out while playing in the street—don’t I hear it? You must be using their language back at them. Of course it’ll provoke them, and they’ll get riled up.”

“No Amma, you don’t understand. There are three or four boys who make fun of Hazrat Sahib and Ahmadiyyat. The other boys start grinning and laughing. They don’t curse *me*, they swear at the abusers. Who should I curse in return?”

The befuddled mother became quiet. She had no idea what response she could possibly give to her child. Silence often becomes the shield of a weak person. She thought about the matter for a bit and then decided to persuade the boy that in a situation such as this it was best to keep quiet.

“Try not to curse them. Let them swear as much as they want. You just stay put. Don’t you have any friends in class?”

“Of course I do, but they don’t open their mouths. Only when we’re alone, then they tell me how rotten those boys are and that they shouldn’t be saying what they do. But my friends don’t dare face those boys in my presence.”

“You should have talked to your teacher.”

“I did.”

“What happened then?”

“At first he laughed. After a while he said he would admonish those boys. But he hasn’t done anything so far, not even called them over to talk to them.”

Sunk in despair and caught in the whirlpool of a similar foreboding, both mother and son were quietly wondering for a long time. Just as a drowning man grasps at a straw, the presence of one gave confidence to the other. At last, Mubashshir broke the silence and repeated his earlier resolve: “Amma, I’m not going to school tomorrow. They’ll swear at me again, and the boys will laugh again.”

Mothers quickly see through the troubles that ail their children. Nature perhaps has endowed them with this special ability. Mubashshir’s mother had perhaps suffered a similar ordeal during her own school days and so



could empathize with the boy's heartache and understand his helplessness at the debasement caused by his classmates—although in her own days it couldn't have gone beyond bitter verbal exchanges. She pulled Mubashshir towards her and wrapped him in her arms. Tears welled up in her eyes as she stroked his head with her hands. But she also knew that if she allowed those tears to fall from her eyes, Mubashshir would lose what little courage he had. She had to hold them back. And she did. But the effort gave her eyes the same dry, vacant look of people trapped in slavery.

“Son, how many places will you avoid going to? Have faith in God; He Himself will do justice by us. This is nothing. Prepare yourself for worse to come. If you give up hope now, how will you withstand the future? Tomorrow, your father will himself walk you to school and talk to the teacher. Have no dealings with those boys. Let them say what they will. They'll tire out on their own in a day or two and quiet down.”

When the British made up their minds to quit India, the news spread like a rumor to the most distant rural areas of the country dotted with villages and stricken by ignorance and poverty. People who should have jumped with joy, instead, suddenly became hushed, as if overwhelmed by some unexpected news of a mishap. Everybody seemed to be whispering fearfully: what was to happen now? And how? Mired in by this uncertainty, they were beset by a thousand different worries and anxieties of their own. They couldn't believe the land that had comforted and sustained them like a mother's lap, whose soil had for generations received the dust of their ancestors, was not only going to withdraw its support, but even spit them out like bitter fruit. And not just these people, even those who had lived and breathed politics every day of their lives couldn't believe that whole populations would be shunted off to another place merely on religious grounds—something unparalleled in human history. In those days, Hindu-Muslim violence had spread like an epidemic in many places in India—today in Noakhali, tomorrow in Bihar, the day after in Naushehra. The temperament of the people had so changed that they became indifferent to the agonizing deaths of the innocents and to the helplessness of their descendants. What concerned them most was whether the followers of the other religion were killed in greater or smaller numbers. A sigh of relief if the number was great, and if not, worry over a plan for revenge. Humanity was being slaughtered, but Man had been left out of the count. The only countables were either Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims. As 6 June 1948, the date on which Britain had announced it would quit India—which some believed and others thought it a lie—drew nearer, the sense of unease and fear increased. And in the larger cities, it was followed by frequent stabbing incidents. That was perhaps one way to verify the truthfulness of the an-

nouncement. Sometimes the situation in the country seemed to change rapidly, but at other times the country seemed to wallow in the same age-old inertia. In any case, a stifling fear of death was sinking its claws deeper and deeper into people's hearts in that uncertain atmosphere.

Because all the colleges had been closed down, Ismail, now in his final year before graduation in Amritsar, returned home to Gobindpur, traveling the eighty-three miles by bus and train. During that journey, he observed for the first time unmistakable flames of hatred and aversion for him in the eyes of his unknown Hindu and Sikh co-travelers, whereas before those eyes exuded indifference. Hindus constituted the major part of the population in his ancestral town and owned just about every kind of business. Eight or ten lawyers and two or three doctors practiced here. And the town of some forty thousand only had about seventy Muslim households, located some distance away in a small settlement at its outer edge. All the services, which were the responsibility of the area committee to provide, were practically nonexistent in this settlement. By and large the Muslims belonged to the weaver or oil-pressing castes and were still plying their established ancestral trades. It's another matter that those castes, originally Hindu, had converted to Islam somewhere along the way, which didn't improve their social status or financial standing. The town's area was pretty wide and many far-flung villages were encompassed within it. The landholders were few, and all Sikhs who generally cultivated their own farms. If tenant cultivators were employed, they also tended to be Sikhs. There, population-wise, Sikhs predominated. The workers in the villages were Muslim, all low-caste *kammis* [service castes]. The followers of Gugga Pir, the sweepers and leather-handlers, were in addition to the *kammis* and, as everywhere else, were considered creatures a notch below human. They had no particular social color, or cultural shape or form. Very much like water, they adopted the habits and manners of whatever majority they found themselves amongst, even naming their children after those of the majority. Although Guru Nanak had given mankind a manifest lesson in throwing caste distinctions overboard, it hadn't worked out quite that way in practice. A sweeper or leather-handler could convert to Sikhism and would then be branded a religious Sikh, but socially he would still be treated as an untouchable. For those who touched or handled human waste, their own being remained a veritable term of abuse. They might do anything, live anywhere, but they always remained sweepers or leather-handlers. They were considered the lowest of the low because of the accident of their birth. The attitude of the Muslim society towards them and towards the new converts from among them was no different from that of the Hindus and Sikhs towards their own lowest castes.

Ismail's grandfather worked the oil-press all through his life, and Ismail's father, after graduating from the eighth grade at Khalsa High School, decided to become a Hindu lawyer's scribe rather than ply his ancestral trade, wishing ardently for his son to receive an education and become a lawyer. And just when it seemed that dream might come true, he and his entire family were swallowed alive by the whirlpool of the communal riots. The news of bloody Hindu-Muslim riots came in from different parts of the country, hundreds of miles away, splattered across the front pages of the newspapers. Whenever Ismail saw such news, a tremor ran through his body and a wriggling fear began troubling his mind. But life, spread out in the streets around the Committee Reading Room, crawled drowsily along as usual like an ox tied to an oil-press. Simple farmers and their equally unsophisticated women came from the villages to buy necessities and innocently haggled with the shrewd Hindu shopkeepers. Never before had the thought crossed Ismail's mind that he had been engulfed by a majority of non-Muslims. It was the newspapers that awakened this feeling in him. When he read in today's papers that Master Tara Singh had unsheathed his sword on the steps of the Assembly Chambers in Lahore and declared as he waved it with a flourish: "It is the power of the sword that will now decide the matter. The Sikhs are ready. We have to bring the Muslims to their senses," the thought occurred to him that if someone in the reading room jumped up to kill him, he would not know how to defend himself, except die quietly. The thought of the lurking danger gave way to a fear of dying, which began to mushroom inside him like a nuclear cloud. Initially vague, the dread soon assumed a distinct shape. Like a stormy river, it rushed toward him hissing and screaming. He wanted to flee somewhere, but his feet, as often happens in dreams, refused to budge from the reading room floor.

Time and again Ismail wondered at the fact that no one had so far relayed Master Tara Singh's message to these people—a flock of sheep roaming around the bazaar, busily foraging for whatever they can find, a bush here, a lump of grass there. Even if they knew how to read the newspapers and did read them, nothing would stir them until someone angry and red-faced got on top of a high platform to make a determined effort to incite them and, in a divinely commanding voice, unleashed his fury proclaiming that the crafty, scheming Muslims were the enemy of the Sikhs; that Muslims had made all kinds of plans to demolish their faith and destroy them; that Muslims were the enemy of the ten Gurus and reviled them; that now the Sikhs had exposed all their wicked schemes and there was no cure except to kill them all—only then would they pounce upon him like wild beasts. Ismail's fear of immediate danger did ultimately let

up, and his wildly palpitating heart and heaving breath did calm down. Nonetheless, he came to realize that, given the situation in the country, it wouldn't be long before someone ferocious and red-faced arrived and ordered them to commence the genocide. Although the fear of imminent death had been temporarily averted for him at the time, he could distinctly hear the danger ticking away like a time bomb for him, for his parents, his brothers and sisters and all the other Muslims of the town. Now, though, the majority, in spite of its potential to crush and trample, and quietly busy with its daily chores like a tamed wild animal, looked harmless and innocuous enough. Watching this same flock of sheep, no one could say that one day it would turn into a pack of vicious beasts. A person could not trust such a brute for long. At other times he felt that he had no reason to fear harm from the Sikh majority, after all he had been living with them for ages in a state of mutual trust; if they hadn't hurt him so far, why would they do it now? His real fear came from "the shadow," whose dreadful, furious, incendiary eyes followed his and every other Muslim's smallest move from behind every tree, door, wall and roof. The majority was just a tool—a lifeless tool with no will of its own; what made it work was the same devilish "shadow." He trembled with fear to think of the future.

He left the reading room and wearily returned to his house in a lane in one of the town's densely populated areas. His father had rented this house from a Hindu. At the entrance to the lane, bordering the main road, stood the lawyer Lala Ram Dayal's gargantuan three-storied house, one of whose doors opened onto Ismail's lane. Ismail's father worked as a scribe for this lawyer. After reaching home, a stupefied Ismail approached his mother who was sitting on a *peerhi*, sautéing some food in a cooking pot. He stood silently in front of her and wondered how best to broach the subject without scaring her but still letting her appreciate the seriousness of the deteriorating situation. He was still wondering when her mother looked up and asked: "What's happened, Ismail? Why are you looking so pale?"

"Mother, riots have broken out throughout the country; doesn't look as though they'll let up anytime soon. Thousands have been killed. Gobindpur is filled with Sikhs and Hindus. We're in danger here. Mother, they're going to kill us and all the other Muslims in town and burn down our houses."

"Come on! Why would they do that? We haven't done anything to them—have we? You talk as if the Hindus and Sikhs have just dropped in here out of nowhere today. Why, son, we've been living with them all along, ever since the world was created. Never had the slightest disagreement. You've become delusional. Is that what education does?"

Her serenity flustered him. "Don't you know the whole country is on fire? Riots are everywhere. And here you want to know why they would kill us. Why were innocent Muslims killed in Noakhali? Why were Muslims mass murdered in Bihar? Only after they fall on you suddenly with swords drawn, then you'll know."

"Go somewhere quiet and do your studies. Such things only take place in big cities. Nothing will happen here. Have faith. You don't want us to just up and leave our house and home, do you? Just because of riots? And anyway, where do you want us to go? Has anything like this ever happened? Go, God will protect us."

Just then someone knocked at the door. Ismail went out and saw that two of his old schoolmates, Sunder Singh and Brij Narayan Sahni, had come to see him. He opened the sitting room and asked them to have a seat. The room only had two chairs and a bed that was laid out. Sunder Singh picked up the books scattered on the bed and set them to one side and then half-stretched himself out on it. Sahni and Ismail took the chairs. Both guests felt as comfortable and informal as when they were in their own houses. After graduating from high school, Sunder Singh got himself a job as a clerk with the Municipal Committee while Sahni, when he felt able to, helped his father in his small bangles and makeup store. However, Sahni spent most of his time reading communist literature or traveling from one village to another, forming farmers' organizations. After doing some reading on his own, Sunder Singh adopted the same line of thinking as Sahni. Their genuine feelings and their desire to do something truly worthwhile had, of course, not failed to affect Ismail. However, since he belonged to a socially and economically somewhat depressed minority, he felt his primary responsibility lay in extricating Gobindpur's Muslims from their backwardness, rather than worrying over the state of the whole of mankind. Another reason he couldn't join them in working for the party was that without a conception of God it was impossible for him to bring the universe and its operation into his focus of understanding. He was as much of a communist sympathizer and a Muslim in those days as he remained throughout his life.

"Hey, Sunder, how come you aren't in your office today?" Ismail asked.

"Sunday, my dear fellow. And Sahni, as you know, is free almost every day. We hadn't seen you in quite a while, so we decided to inquire after you today."

"Did you read Master Tara Singh's statement in the papers today?"

"Yeah, wouldn't you say he's boiled over a bit too much?"

Ismail said, "But one gets the impression from the papers that the Sikhs approve of his declaration of war against Muslims."

“Many of Master Tara Singh’s close relatives were murdered in Pindi. Their houses were also burned down. Perhaps Master Ji is provoking the Sikh community to extract his own revenge. This isn’t politics, but down-right deceitfulness. In any case, they’re not interested in real politics, only in playing with the feelings of gullible people, whom they do their best to warn that their religion is in great danger. And all this to blackmail their own community! The dazzling light of the twentieth century has completely blinded the common man who’s been groping around in the darkness. Feeling helpless, he walks right into the bosom of religion, and his smooth-tongued leaders, after showing him sympathy, make him do whatever they want.”

Ismail said, “Yeah, sure, that’s how it is. And it will take ages to cure this ignorance. But what will happen to us in the meantime?”

“What do you mean?” Sunder asked.

“Amazing! You, so well-informed and even you need to be told! Oh, well, you’re right too, in your own way. Only the one who wears the shoes knows where they pinch. All the heat from the raging fire of the riots is for me, not you. The sword of death is dangling over my head, not yours. Okay, if you don’t understand, let me make it plain for you: When are you ‘infidels’ going to make short work of the few Muslims hemmed in by the enemy majority in a town as far-flung as Gobindpur?”

Both Sunder and Sahni cackled, and seeing them laugh Ismail began to laugh himself.

“For a few months now,” Sahni said, “more and more people are rushing to join the daily parades of the Rashtarya Sevak Singh. On top of that, they’ve also started getting trained in the use of weapons. Something to worry about, don’t you think?”

“This Shastarya Sevak Singh has sprung up only recently,” said Sunder, “but the Khalsas, Akalis and Nihangs have been parading for ages, decked out in their uniforms and equipped with swords and lances. That doesn’t make any difference. What you need to be aware of is this: the riots have been going on in the country quite a while already, but no killing has taken place on religious grounds in Gobindpur or within a fifty mile radius. And there won’t be any.”

“Sunder Singh, how can you say that?” Sahni asked.

“Well, of course the riots will spread and reach villages and small towns like Gobindpur, as you say. But by that time, India will have been reduced to ashes by the fury of the blaze. Our political leaders, even if they know nothing else, must realize this and they’ll put the breaks on the riots before that happens.”

“Yeah, sure, like they’ve got that many brains! The country is tottering

on the brink of a blazing conflagration, the world is watching and waiting for it to keel over any moment, and at a moment like this Master Tara Singh makes a declaration of war, pouring oil on the fire. What a remarkable demonstration of intelligence! The leaders can jumpstart the riots but they have no power to stop them. Once they start, riots have a mind of their own and take their own course.”

“Friends,” Ismail said, “By the time it is proved which of your two theories is correct, I and the other Muslims of Gobindpur will already be in the next world. Over here, our immediate concern is how to survive, over there you two are busy explaining the independent psychology of the riots.”

Ismail’s complaint provoked immediate silence. Sunder and Sahni realized they hadn’t really given the dangers the Muslims of the town were facing the kind of weight that the present circumstances required. They also realized that their failure to put themselves in Ismail’s place and look at the situation from his point of view was a sure sign of their immaturity. A lack of concern for the worries of others is a form of selfishness; only by overcoming such tendencies can people distinguish themselves from the animals. In a way, this is perhaps the first step towards becoming human.

Finally Sunder spoke, “The danger is definitely extreme, but it’s not immediate. We still have some time. Sahni, let’s go and see what’s happening in the Gurdwara and what those Rashtarya Sevak Singh guys are up to—what they’re planning. Ismail, we’ll be back by two. Don’t worry. We’re with you. We’ll come up with some plan.”

After they left, Ismail came out into the street and stood there for some time, uncertain of himself. Then his feet began to move, as if on their own, towards the Muslim quarter. A crooked, unpaved alley ran through a cluster of haphazardly built mud houses, with a stink-spewing drain in the middle that followed the serpentine courses of the alley itself. Filthy water spilled out of it in many places and flowed into the alley. Weather-beaten, shapeless wooden doors, full of cracks, stood wide open, and children, without a stitch of clothing on their bodies, moved about freely in the courtyards, as usual. To Ismail, the quarter appeared to be wrapped in an ominous fog in which nothing could flourish except failure. And now, unbeknownst to its inhabitants, time had stretched a cloud of death over it. They still knew nothing about the swords hanging over their heads. “O God,” Ismail entreated, “Will the stories told in the New Testament about the condemned communities which misfortune caught unawares be repeated again? But these are Muslims, God! They’re innocent, poor, hard-working folks. Have pity on them, Lord.”

An echo resounded in his heart: “Ismail, take a good look around you!

Whoever fails to walk in step with the world is obliterated by the blowing sands of time. To maintain the balance.”

For a long time Ismail kept calling out to God, “Why have you forsaken us, Lord?” But this time no response echoed in his heart. Only the heavy, bluish, acrid smoke rising from the dung-cakes spread everywhere in the settlement stung his eyes, throat and palate. He could see women through the open doors as they rushed about in their courtyards with grimy dupattas thrown behind them on their backs and their faded, worn-out clothes fluttering. Their continuous occupation with tasks as fruitless as that of the honeybees nearly made him cry. Despite such punishing labor, their hives remained empty of even one drop of honey. Why talk about honey or hives or bees when before long the very branch which was the site of all this intense activity would be lopped off!

There was a small piece of flat land beyond where the alley ended. Here, Baba Shahu had set up a loom by placing wooden stakes about four feet high in the shape of an X and stretching a nearly forty-foot-long warp thread over them. The two loose ends of the thread were tightly wound around the fat, iron nails driven firmly into the ground. Holding a big, heavy brush with tremendous difficulty, Baba moved it along the entire length of the warp and then back. This back and forth would go on for hours. Such labor at his age! Ismail’s heart overflowed with pity. He approached the man and said, “Greetings, Baba Ji.”

“Greetings. May you live long!” Baba blessed him and stopped to look at him closely. His head and white-bearded face were unsteady. On his fair, luminous forehead, partly hidden beneath his white turban, the black *mehrab*-shaped mark of piety went nicely with his low, husky voice and mellow, humble bearing.

“Son, I didn’t recognize you. Which family are you from?”

“Sir, I’m Munshi Muhammad Din’s son.”

“Muhammad Din? Wasn’t he Kalu the Teli’s son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come close to me, my dear; let me give you my blessings. You’re almost like my own grandson. Your grandfather, may God rest his soul, was a very close friend of mine. Kalu the oil-presser and Shahu the weaver were known the world over for their wrist-fighting contests and for singing folk songs at the fairs. The oil-press that now belongs to Taja was originally yours. After Kalu’s death your father sold the building, oil-press and ox—everything, to his cousin Taja and went to live in the city. So tell me, have you too become some lawyer’s scribe?”

“No, Baba. I’m still a student in Amritsar ... in the fourteenth grade.”

“Bravo, bravo! So, you’re going to become a big officer, then, eh? How



did you happen to come this way today?"

"I came to see Uncle Taja for a bit."

"Fine, fine. May you live long! This way we also got to see you. Taja is at home. I've just come from visiting him. And, yes, tell your father to come and show us his face someday. It seems he's angry with us, maybe more because of our poverty and ignorance than any other reason." Saying this Baba began applying the brush again. Ismail moved along.

Just past the flat piece of land, he found himself in another alley like the previous one. He hadn't gone far when he spotted Uncle Taja, who was ensconced on a cot, his blanket wrapped around him, absorbed in thinking and smoking his hubble-bubble. Tethered some distance from him on the opposite side was his ox, which looked even more contented than Taja himself, his eyes shut, quietly masticating. Inside the kotha, Taja's wife and her nine- or ten-year-old sister were hard at work cleaning the oil-press, impervious, as it were, to the world around them. When his uncle saw him approach, he quickly made room for him on the cot and said, "Come on, son. How are you? Come, sit." He called, "O, Barkatay, come over here. See who's come." Barkatay appeared. She was a twenty-year-old woman, or maybe twenty-two, with a taut body and a complexion as sallow and fresh as the early morning—in other words, the youthful image of Punjabi womanhood. A heart still able to beat couldn't help feeling drawn to her alluring features, to the pull of her stunning body. The confidence with which she approached and then stood there left no doubt that she was conscious of her charm, and even more conscious of how relentlessly it worked. She wore silver studs in her ears. Her lips were hazel-brown from rubbing walnut bark and the gleaming white teeth between them looked like white jasmine buds. Her black dupatta had been thrown behind her on her back, and she had rolled her sleeves up to the elbows. Her hands and supple arms were smeared in oil-cake, with drops of oil dripping from her hands. With a pleasure mingled with surprise, she chirped as she saw Ismail: "What a pleasant surprise! Our Babu is here! How lucky that you lost you way today and came hither! When did you get back from Ambarsar?"

"Three or four days ago."

"Son, haven't you returned a little sooner than usual this time?" Taja asked.

"Yes, Chacha. The riots have started, so the Government has closed all the schools and colleges in Punjab."

"Damn these rioters. They've made living difficult for everyone." He looked towards Barkatay and said, "But our Shida is still going to school these days, isn't he?"

"Dear God! Do you know anything about anything besides your ox

and oil-press? Shida doesn't go to a government school. He goes to study with the Maulbi in the mosque."

"Chachi, the girl who was cleaning the oil-press with you—isn't she your oldest?" Ismail asked, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. She understood his joke. Feigning anger, she shot back, "Come off it, you. Babbling away without knowing anything. Do I look that old to you? You know very well who she is. She's almost nine, while we've barely been married seven years. We have, may God guard him, only one child, Shida."

"Chachi, get him admitted to the government school. When he passes grade four, then send him to the Khalsa School."

"How is sister Rajjo?"

"She's fine. She was cooking when I left."

"She's forgotten us totally since she went to the city. Once she came back wearing a burqa and behaving very poised and reserved as if she was some queen. We all laughed at her. She never came back after that. Looks as though she was offended. Tell her to let it go. Everyone has forgotten about it. She may come back in her burqa a hundred times. No one will laugh at her again. She's given up visiting for no reason at all."

Taja was feeling embarrassed that Barkatay had started talking in front of him about that incident with Ismail's mother. To change the topic he said, "Will you go on talking forever or show Ismail some hospitality? Something to eat or drink?"

"Okay, I'll bring milk for him."

"No, Chachi. I don't want milk. Just a glass of lassi with a pinch of salt will do."

"But it's been so long since you were last here. Okay, I'll put some sugar in it." She smiled and turned with such coquetry that her silver studs swayed and her teeth sparkled brightly. The seductive attraction of his aunt's body and his own fear of succumbing to it made him cringe. "It's not right that I like Chachi so much," he thought with alarm.

As soon as she left, Ismail remembered why he had come there. To insure secrecy he dropped his voice as he said: "Chacha, there's no time to go on sleeping. Something must be done or else the Gobindpur Muslims will be slaughtered inside their houses."

From Ismail's cautious tone, Taja had, in fact, gotten the hint to be circumspect, but he rejected the need for it. He attributed Ismail's effort to a mere lack of spunk so he spoke irritably and loudly: "Who would dare kill us? You think these lalas would do that? Do they have the guts? Wouldn't I drink everyone's blood if they tried?"

"Calm down, Chacha! A little patience! This isn't the time for impetuosity. Let's try to understand the situation. This is not a fight between

ten or twenty people in which one person's show of resolve might turn things around. It's a battle between two nations in which there are hundreds of thousands over here and the same number over there. Tara Singh, the leader of the Sikhs, has declared open war against the Muslims. The lalas themselves won't have much to do with it. At most, they'll help the Sikhs with some money. You know there are Sikhs everywhere in Gobindpur. If a band of a few thousand pounces on you, what would you do, alone and empty-handed? Tell me that."

"Have they done anything provocative yet?"

"How long does it take for something like that to start? There's still time. We'd better prepare ourselves."

"I used to have a spear; don't know where it is now. The blade may even have become rusted."

Hearing that, Ismail burst out laughing. He said: "Chacha, we have to plan to save the mohalla in case of an attack, and nothing will be done without involving the residents. Surely the mohalla will provide the manpower, but we'll also need money to buy weapons. Let's do it this way. Tonight, I think I'll come back here after the *Isba* prayer. You ask seven or eight people from the mohalla to come over to your place. Let's consult with them before making any plans."

"Yes, son. You're right." This last statement, Taja, like Ismail, uttered in a hushed voice.

Initially Tara Singh's declaration had no effect on the Sikhs of the area. Life in the town followed its usual, peaceful course until early one morning Sunder Singh knocked on Ismail's door. "Ismail," he said, "It looks as though things are beginning to get hot. Some Sikh leaders from Amritsar, Kapurthala and Lahore have been staying at the Khalsa School hostel since last night, and since the Government has imposed a ban on public gatherings, they plan to give public speeches under the guise of *keertan*. Men are being sent to the neighboring villages to round up Sikhs. Prominent Sikh leaders have been holding meetings inside the hostel area since last evening. Nobody has a clue about what's cooking there, but we'll find out anyway, tomorrow, if not today. Things might get out of hand after the public meeting. An angry, anguished mob might attack your house or overrun the Muslim mohalla. A rioting mob can do anything. I'm very worried about you."

"Why do you worry so much, Sunder Singh? If that's how we're supposed to end, that's how it will be. What can we do?"

"Why don't you and your folks come over to our house?"

"And this will remain hidden? They'll discover it in no time at all. We have to die anyway; why put you through trouble and, into the bargain,

bring destruction on your house? Let's wait and see how things evolve."

At 3:00 p.m. Sunder came again and told him: "The English Deputy Commissioner and the Police Captain managed to get there with an armed guard. I don't know how, through some stratagem I guess, they didn't allow the meeting to take place. All the visiting leaders were forced into a special lorry and sent away from Gobindpur. Catastrophe was at hand but has been averted. I think we should wait for the decision of the Boundary Commission. That will settle things down."

"Who knows, the decision may take forever to arrive? We'll have died of fright by then."

"Don't you worry, Ismail. We won't let you die like that. You're not alone. All the comrades in the area are with you."

One evening Ismail's father said to him: "Lala Ji is calling you. Go! See what he wants. He's in his office at the moment."

"What does he want with me?"

"How do I know? Come on, get going. Remember, one day it will be from him that you'll learn to be a lawyer."

He left for the Lala's office, which wasn't far, wondering what the man might want to tell him. He greeted him and took a chair. Lala Ji got up, shut the door, came back and sat down. Then he began talking cautiously: "Son, I know that the lives of the Muslims in this area are in danger. It's good that as an educated young man you're aware of it. But in your inexperience you've ignored the fact that Gobindpur Muslims constitute only a very tiny minority, even less than the pinch of salt added to the flour. What can a couple of hundred in a population of twenty thousand possibly do? If you think you can ensure their safety with handsaws and swords, you're completely wrong. And if a liberal-minded person like me, whom the sectarian Hindus consider their enemy just as much as they do the Muslims, has found out, without ever stepping out of his office, that you've started collecting weapons, you can expect everyone else in Gobindpur to know about it too. You're not planning on inciting the already enraged sectarians to attack you with the ruse of self-defense—are you? Now they're hell-bent on making you their first victim. My advice to you would be to leave Gobindpur immediately. Disappear in some big city until the situation has become normal again. Once you're gone, I'm sure the Congress-wallahs, the socialists, the peace-lovers and the humanists will bring the situation under control and enable the local Muslims to ride out this chaotic time in peace and quiet. I'll explain everything to your father. You just leave here quietly sometime tonight."

Ismail was alarmed to hear all this. He went straight to Sunder Singh and Sahni. They decided that since it would be dangerous to travel by bus

or train, they should avoid taking the paved roads and instead walk Ismail to Amritsar using the dirt track. They also thought it the better part of wisdom to give a wide berth to the bigger towns that lay along the way and not to enter any of the Muslim villages because of the potential danger posed by Singh's beard and long hair. Sahni was a frequent visitor to the villages in the area, where he had helped set up many farmers' organizations. Although he had not walked to Amritsar on foot before, he was generally familiar with most of the paths and had peasant worker-friends in the villages who could easily set them up for the night. Ismail's name was changed to Balram; his real name was hidden even from Sahni's best friends. The distance to Amritsar was about eighty miles. The three of them set out the same night and arrived in Amritsar in four days. After leaving Ismail outside the Muslim mohalla of Sharifpura, Sahni and Singh turned back.

When Bashir reached home, the sun was about to set and, in the courtyard, the sparrows had already begun their descent into the thick foliage of the tall, umbrella-shaped jujube tree for their nightly stay. They had struck up a deafening chorus. Bashir's wife and son sat on cots laid out in the water-sprinkled courtyard. On summer nights this was where they slept. Like the sparrows, they too were set for their nightly rest. The aroma of jasmine and moist earth was wafting all around, though it would be a while yet before the *raat ki rani* began to give off its fragrance. He enjoyed the incessant hullabaloo of the sparrows—which might have irritated another person overcome by the day's fatigue and oppressive heat—simply because it was his own home and the sound was a factor that made the house a home. Where else besides your own home could you find this feeling of affinity with your own being! It was another matter, though, whether self and home might both have their own secret regions that stay hidden from their owner.

The day's scorching heat, the restlessness of the journey and two days of being continuously knocked about in offices had taken their toll on Bashir. He was dejected, his shoulders slouching. After returning his greeting, his wife, seeing how immensely tired he looked, withheld the question that was on her lips, "What happened?" Bashir sat on the cot and began taking off his shoes. He told his son to go to the drawing room, which also doubled as his office, and tell the scribe that he was back and would be there after his shower. When he emerged from the washroom after changing his clothes, his wife was waiting for him, sitting on the cot, ready with a tray of food. As he started to eat she finally did ask, "So, were

you able to accomplish anything?”

“Only the expected. We met all of them, the D.C., the S.P., the D.I.G. and the Home Secretary, but they all repeated the same thing: “The A.C. and D.S.P. present at the scene know the situation better and can better judge whether there is any danger to public peace. Come to us only after they’ve refused to listen to you.”

“Didn’t you tell them that you’ve already met with them and that despite the dangerous conditions they’re not willing to cancel the rally?”

“We did.”

“So?”

“So what? The same old tune: the officers present at the scene were responsible and reasonable. If they thought about it in a particular way, then that must be right.”

“In other words, they didn’t cancel the rally?”

“No.”

“Will the organizers of the rally tell them after we’re dead and gone that the Ahmadis were right after all? You should have pointed out that all the flyers have the D.S.P.’s name as the plaintiff. He’s already joined our enemies. How can anyone expect fairness from him?”

“We did point that out.”

“Then?”

“They said that by being present at the scene, he’ll be better able to observe the rally and ensure our security. His presence will prevent speakers from making inflammatory statements to the crowd. If a speaker does try that, he can stop him there and then.”

“And you agreed to it?”

“What else did you expect us to do? Did we have a choice?” he asked, a bit harshly.

“You had no choice? What does that mean? The lives of a handful of people surrounded by a majority gone wild...”

“Yes, yes, I know. If you think you could have presented our case so much better than Master Lateef and I could, why did you stay home? Why didn’t you come with us?”

This time Amtul looked intently at Bashir’s face, red with anguish, and then tears began to roll down her cheeks.

As he washed his hands Bashir thought: the people who had really caused his anger and irritation had been left behind in Lahore and its district offices, and here he was spilling out his anger on this poor woman who had been worried sick and whose anxiety had spurred on her passionate curiosity. He left for his office as soon as he had washed his hands.

Bashir’s younger sister Nasira and two other women who lived on the

same street, Masi Jannat and Taj Bibi, came in and sat down quietly near Amtul. They thought she would soon tell them herself how Master Lateef and Bashir's journey to Lahore had turned out. When she didn't speak for a long time, the visitors obviously assumed that the news wasn't good. But how bad? Bashir's sister couldn't hold back any longer and asked, "Bhabi, was brother Bashir able to make any headway in Lahore?"

"No. The big officers flat out refused to cancel the rally."

"What?" they fearfully exclaimed in unison and then fell silent. Sounds from the street fused together into an interminable hum and pierced their numbed eardrums—a carefree guffaw or the catchy call of a pushcart vendor rising now and then in the discordant hum. The street was busy as always, yet here these women sat on cots drowned in worry over themselves, and even more over the lives of their loved ones. A small boy sat on another cot a little ways away from them, his legs dangling, holding his chin in both hands, worrying about going to school again the next day and what might happen there. His heart fluttered continuously from the dread sweeping over the women's faces. He wasn't aware of the exact reason for his tremors, but he knew that the public rally in the city's grand mosque this coming Friday posed a serious danger to him, his family and all the residents of their street, and that it had particularly to do with their being Ahmadis. Would the organizers at the rally call them "Mirzai dogs," as Dulla and Mehmand, his classmates at elementary school had done? Would they swear at Hazrat Sahib and then laugh and make faces? Why would they do that? What quarrel did they have with Hazrat Sahib and with them? What had they done? He could never imagine that he and the other residents of the street might abandon Ahmadiyyat. He could never have done that because he considered Ahmadiyyat sacrosanct, as inevitable as his birth. And it was the same for the rest of the denizens of the street, as natural as being born with a beating heart, two eyes, two ears, and one nose. What could he and they do about it? To change his faith wasn't in his power, nor in the power of the residents of his street.

A full moon hiding behind the umbrella-like spread of the jujube tree was peeking through its foliage and laughing uproariously, scattering the laughter all around like a subtle shower of moonlight. Moonlight mixed with the pungent smell of *raat ki rani*, borne by the cool, gentle breeze, spilled sweetly into the whole courtyard as a harbinger of life's beauty. But those four quiet women and the sad boy didn't notice it. They just drifted helplessly, each in their own torrent of fear. The boy, his heart overcome by the looming thought of persecution, began to cry, quietly for a while and then with sobs. He tried to throttle the sobs, but now and then one escaped. "Someone seems to be crying somewhere," Masi said.

The other women nodded as if Masi had spoken about something past and faraway. Only after some time did it dawn on them that it was their own Mubashshir. Amtul went over to him and gathered him in her arms. “What’s the matter, son? Why are you crying? What’s happened?”

Barefoot, Nasira ran to the drawing room to get the boy’s brother and knocked at the door.

“Poor boy,” Tajan said, “he must have gotten scared.”

“In such fragrant moonlight, fairies and genies fly about,” Masi observed. “Maybe some genie has affected him.”

Tajan said, “Masi, the genie of the rally is more than enough for us. We don’t need any other genie to scare the poor kid.”

Bashir opened the door and asked: “What is it, Nasira?”

“Mubashshir is crying and won’t quiet down. Won’t tell us anything either. Have a look at him, please.”

Amtul briefly told him what had happened at school that day.

“Until now no one at school bothered him or any of our other kids on religious grounds,” Bashir remarked. “The mere mention of the rally has started all this. The continuous speeches of the preacher have spread the poison of prejudice, even in the minds of the innocent children.” Bashir took the boy from Amtul and said to him, “Son, the scourge of this rally will be over in a couple of days. After that, I’ll take you to school myself. Don’t worry. Everything will be all right. There’s nothing to cry about. Tomorrow and the day after you’re not going to school. All right?”

Bashir clasped his son to his breast and patted him, and the boy was a little comforted. The uneasiness about going to school was the one thing that had been conveyed to the others. Actually, Mubashshir had a pile of anxieties that had been gradually mounting the last few days—starting with the fingers pointing at him in the bazaar, and the stony, silent stares; the whispered conversations in faltering, flighty words; the ashen, perturbed faces of those near and dear to him; the broiling abhorrence and oozing malice of the long-bearded men in the street toward the stubbly growth on his father’s chin; and the oppressive shrinking and narrowing of his immediate environment. If he shook off one layer of fear, another appeared in its place. Tired of the never ending sequence, he looked at the faces of his mother, aunt and the other women for some comfort, but when he found them collapsing under the weight of despair, he too fell apart.

When the touch of his father’s comforting hand on his back and the confident tone of his voice assured the boy that the danger was there but not severe or immediate, he fell asleep. As Bashir turned to go back to his office after laying the boy down in bed, Masi said, “Bashir, son, listen for a



moment to what I have to say.”

“Yes, Masi, what is it?”

“Son, you know, my Munawwar is addicted to wandering about. I cannot hold him back no matter how hard I try. I’m very scared of the wind that’s blowing these days. Whenever he leaves home, I get worried sick. Everybody else is smart and canny. If there’s a disturbance in the bazaar, they would know how to save themselves; what would that simpleton do? Do you think I should take him to Rabwah for a few days?”

“Masi, perhaps you should do that, but where will you stay in Rabwah?”

“In the guest house of the *Jama‘at Khana*.”

“Look, Masi. Just as there’s this rally against us here, Lord knows, there may be many more going on in other places. As you already know, we’re not allowed to recite either the kalima or even *bismillah*. If we do that, the police arrest us. It’s a crime for us to say our prayers in someone’s presence. Threats of murder have become a daily routine, and these aren’t just empty threats. People are really being killed. Every member of our community, at all times, everywhere, is a target of the terrorists. How many of us can the Rabwah people accommodate in the guest house? Disgusted by this permanent state of fear, many people have even left the country. But please don’t worry. We’re still trying to stop the rally. Even if we fail, we’ll ensure everyone’s safety and the safety of their property.”

In response Masi of course said, “All right, as you say; we won’t go,” but her face suddenly fell. She held her forehead in her hands as if sunk in despair and began staring at the ground. She had thought that given Munawwar’s disability, the situation called for a different course of action and that Bashir Ahmad hadn’t given it proper consideration. If Bashir had given them a letter to the in-charge of the guest house, he would surely have accommodated her and Munawwar. It was only a matter of a few days, anyway.

Amtul noted her anguish and quickly said, “Masi, don’t worry. We’re all here with you. There’s no cause for worry. By the grace of God Almighty, these days will pass without any incident. Keep on praying for His grace. Take care, though: for the next two or three days don’t let Munawwar go out. If he’s adamant, put him in a room and lock the door. Even if he cries, don’t open the door.”

Noting how Amtul’s comforting words had managed to pull the old lady out of the depths of her despair and how she acknowledged the constraints of the situation, Bashir said, “Masi, you’ll see, as soon as the gathering is over, everything will return to being as it was before. People won’t even remember a word of, let alone be affected by, the heaps of falsehoods the speakers will have hurled at us. The ‘professionals’ have

created the whole situation. We can't blame them either; they rely for their bread and butter on the continuation of the unrest and having the state of mischief and discord prevail."

Masi's real name was Jannat Bibi and she was about sixty-five. Even she didn't know exactly how old she was. Twenty years ago, her husband Chaudhry Naseer Ahmad, Bashir Ahmad's real uncle, passed away. Who awarded her the title "Masi" and when and why, no one knew. The residents of the street were related to each other in one way or another, so every one was connected to her through a variegated network of relationships. But everyone addressed her as Masi. Even her only son Munawwar Ahmad called her Masi. Unlike the other residents of the street, Masi wasn't born into an Ahmadi family. Many years before the partition of the country, when Naseer Ahmad had tied a sehra to his forehead and gone to her village with a big procession to marry her with great pomp and show, she and her parents didn't know that Naseer Ahmad and his parents were Ahmadi. And even if they had, by the time of the engagement or the wedding it wouldn't have made any difference. They believed that Ahmadi were a sect of Islam like any other. However, if Naseer Ahmad had been found deficient by even a grain in being a Rajput, no relationship at all would have materialized between the two families. Even if that had happened by mistake and the mistake was discovered at the time of the wedding, as had been the case with Jannat Bibi and Naseer Ahmad regarding the Ahmadi connection, the wedding procession would have been sent back without the bride. The matchmaking relatives who knew Naseer was an Ahmadi treated it casually; they didn't even bother mentioning it to Masi's parents as something of particular importance. After the wedding, just as Masi accepted Naseer Ahmad, she also accepted the Ahmadi dispensation. This package deal wasn't meant for her family members, only for her; nor did her in-laws use her to put any pressure on her parents. So long as the elders in the bride's family were alive, the relations between both sets of in-laws remained warm and cordial and they socialized quite a bit. Her parental family even accepted the continuous proselytizing, which remained totally ineffective because they refused to add, modify or amend the faith they had inherited from their elders. Masi also went through the Ahmadi oath of fealty, for doing so would have been essential for her to keep peace in her household, to obtain Naseer Ahmad's love, and to maintain her equality with the women among her in-laws. In her parents' house, religion had meant something needed to perform celebratory and mourning rituals, and in her new home, too, she continued to feel religion had about the same importance. She had also started saying her prayers, for it was an established practice in her father-in-law Gamey

Khan's house, and she didn't wish to suffer belittlement. She did notice that there was greater emphasis on religion and its rites and rituals in her new family, which she sometimes felt went beyond necessary and reasonable limits, but she wasn't in a position to object to any of this, so she gradually became inured to it. In the matter of religion she refused to be involved in the troublesome business of asking questions about what, why and how: everyone, she believed, had to have some religion; so now that she had accepted Ahmadiyyat, she might as well follow it genuinely, and she was indeed doing it. However, she couldn't quite accept the tacit, verbally even unaccepted, but in practice quite effective custom of *peer-shahi* that went on in the hearts of the followers of Hazrat Sahib and his family. Of course she did have respect for the women of the First Family, but never such devotion that, out of passionate intensity, she would roll at their feet and lick their soles. There was another difference as well: none of the venerable personages of her former religion was present in this world, whereas those of Ahmadiyyat were still alive. It is relatively easy to construct halos around great men who are dead since they only live in the thoughts of believers and don't return to the world in flesh and blood. Their halos can only grow more brilliant with time, not lessen in their splendor. To conceive of a human being who is present before your eyes as "light upon light" isn't easy. Feelings of envy, jealousy and rage inevitably intervene. When devotion is subjected to the crucible of these feelings, it often emerges at the other end in strange laughable forms. This was how Masi thought about the issue: religiously these people might well enjoy a lofty position, but they were no Rajputs. They belonged to other castes. In her view, no caste could be more elevated than the Rajputs. Naseer Ahmad might well show them great respect and regard—that was his business. But he had a higher station than they did; firstly, because he was a Rajput; secondly, because he was her husband.

When the country was partitioned, she had observed how the oppressive conduct of the majority had forced them to leave their homes, their belongings, and the graves of their ancestors and move over to this side. Now they were facing another majority, of their own kind, which was forcing them to give up their faith or their lives would be made impossible for them. Why should she do that? she exclaimed in her heart. More than faith, it had now become a matter of pride for her. Then again, she considered it her birthright to ensure the safety of her feeble-minded son and herself in whatever way possible. Masi did indeed have many children born to her, but they all died in infancy. Munawwar was the only one who survived, and he was now nearing thirty—over six feet tall, but in mental abilities no different than a three-year-old. Early in the morning, Masi would

send him out in a suit of clothes freshly laundered by a washerman, but when he returned his clothes would be wretchedly filthy. He would never make any change in the way she dressed him. If she buttoned the top button of his shirt, he wouldn't open it no matter how hot or stuffy it felt. In the winter, if she inadvertently left the collar of his jacket upturned, upturned it remained the whole day. If anybody else tried to fix it, he wouldn't let them touch it and say, "No, no, Masi would beat me up." For every job he didn't want to do, he would use the same excuse. Actually, the poor woman didn't even utter a harsh word to him in anger, let alone beat him. His sagging body had the plumpness of a suckling babe. With his flabby stomach, slouched shoulders and stooping neck, he would wander about the alleys and bazaar lost in his thoughts. Whether it was a monkey show or some juggler performing tricks, a crowd gathered to buy tooth powder or potency pills, Munawwar was sure to be there. Masi purposely had him sport a short, light, French-cut beard so that in every which way he would appear to be an offspring of the Chaudhry family. She wanted everyone in Sultanpur to remember that Munawwar belonged to that family so that, after her own death, if Bashir Ahmad ever turned dishonest and didn't give Munawwar his share from the profit of his ancestral land, at least there would be people to sympathize with Munawwar's pitiable condition and take Bashir Ahmad to task for his conduct. What would happen after Munawwar died—she couldn't allow her thoughts to stretch that far. The management of Munawwar's land was in Bashir Ahmad's hands. Of its income he would regularly remit ten percent every month, with her permission, to Rabwah, and hand over the rest to her with the breakdown written on a slip of paper. Bashir Ahmad was a scrupulously honest man and Masi expressed complete trust in him. She never counted the money—at least not in Bashir Ahmad's presence—and she always returned the slip of paper to him there and then rather than holding on to it herself. Given the circumstances, this was the proper conduct. Every shopkeeper of the city, indeed every resident, knew and recognized Munawwar. When he got tired of wandering, he just sat himself down on the stoop of any shop he happened to notice first. The shopkeepers laughed and joked with him, and he laughed with them, without understanding the jokes, and talked with them innocently just like the kids. If anyone offered him tea or water, he would drink it. He never asked for anything himself, nor bothered anyone. People found him very endearing. If some kids tried to tease him, they would be scolded away. Some credulous people elevated him to the level of a saint. Some gamblers haunted him, hoping he might reveal the winning numbers to them. When he felt hungry, he just got up and walked home. Sometimes he would go to Ismail's

shop. Lovingly, Ismail would make him sit down in a chair and always say the same thing: “Come! How are you, the innocent member of the family of the wise? Come along.”

With a somewhat silly smile he would sit down and look around sheepishly, too shy to meet Ismail’s eyes.

“Munawwar, son, listen. Never give Masi any trouble. Your paradise is under her feet. You’ll never find such comfortable shade anywhere else in the world.”

“Masi good.” And then he would lift the end of his shirt and spread it towards Ismail, and the latter would say, “Yes, it’s a very fine shirt. Who gave it to you?”

There was pride and a sense of belonging on his face: “Masi!”

After Munawwar left, Ismail heaved a stoic sigh and exclaimed, “I wonder why God allowed him to be born into the family of such wise and intelligent people? As a punishment for them or a lesson for others?”

Taj Bibi, the woman who had come along with Masi, was about thirty-five. It was the first time in three years that she had set foot in Amtul’s house. She wouldn’t have come even today except that some pressing questions needed quick answers. Some evil forebodings were bothering her; a vague trepidation was eating her up from within—what’s going to happen? It was no longer just a personal question; it was a palpable dread, a wavering dread, that hung everywhere in the air and put her nerves on edge. It was nighttime and her husband hadn’t returned home. Lord knows where he’d gotten stuck. If he were home, she would have sent him instead. Now, weighed down by her own worries and desperately needing to find some comfort, she’d come to see Masi. As soon as she came in, she fired off the question, “What news have brother Bashir Ahmad and Master Lateef brought from Lahore?”

“Tajan, sit down first. I’ll tell you, Bibi. Everyone knows they’ve returned, but not what they have accomplished there, at least not yet.”

“All right, tell me, is the meeting still on?”

“It isn’t clear yet.”

“If it is, what will become of us? They might attack us.”

Masi said, “Listen, Tajan, what you want to know can only be found out from where you’re loath to go. Come on, let’s go to Nasira’s house. If we don’t get the answers there, we’ll go to Amtul’s. You don’t have a feud with her, do you?”

Tajan uttered a longish “No,” and then added, “Hardly.” More than those two words, her tone and the cadence of her voice betrayed her true feelings: an assertion of her benevolence—as if saying, “we don’t hold on to grudges very long, even against our enemies”; a muted admission of

anguish, a complaint about the pressure of unfavorable circumstances; and in between a mild note of having acted against her will in deciding to go. Tajan stood up and followed Masi slowly. Fear was now driving her where, under normal circumstances, she would never have considered going.

There was a time when Amtul and Tajan had a great friendship. And even now they weren't involved in open warfare; only a limited, private cold war was raging between them. The neighborhood women knew about it, though none of the men did; and even if they did, they couldn't care less about the squabbles among the women. The matter was simply that Taj Bibi had asked for the hand of Amtul's younger sister, who was studying for a master's degree, for her younger brother, a high school graduate and a patwari who owned six or seven acres of land in the Noor Nagar village. Instead of treating this proposal as something she would look at sympathetically, Amtul felt rather offended. She didn't say anything, just waved her hand contemptuously in rejection and turned her face the other way. Finally, when she did speak, all she said was: "Was a patwari the only man left for my beautiful, educated sister?" Tajan felt so small that she didn't know where to hide. This exchange pretty much ended their relationship. However, Taj Bibi took no small pleasure now from the fact that Amtul's sister, nearing thirty, was still a spinster and a teacher in a girls' college, while her brother was happily married and had even fathered a son. What had prompted Tajan to ask for the match was that her brother combined three qualities that were hard to come by in an eligible suitor: he was a Rajput, he was educated, and he was an Ahmadi. She would tell herself confidently: "Let's see how she finds an Ahmadi, a Rajput and an educated one at that, for her sister. I bet her sister will remain a spinster all her life and die pining for a husband. Go ahead, enjoy your master's degree, hunh!"

In the meanwhile, three or four neighborhood women with half a dozen of their kids in tow walked hesitantly into the courtyard. Soon a few more women came in. A veritable crowd of women and children gathered. Cots and just about anything one could sit on were dragged out of the rooms into the courtyard. A throng of women were sitting there, all holding their breath. Even the kids weren't arguing. They sat hushed, overcome by fear, as if they'd been earmarked for the slaughterhouse and were awaiting their turn to be called in. The sound of Bashir Ahmad talking softly came wafting in from the drawing room like a distant hum, interrupted now and then by a louder voice, and then a jumble of three or four voices, after which the same continuous hum of Bashir Ahmad's voice. Despite the heat, they had shut the windows and doors and were talking in hushed tones so only a low jingling reached the women sitting in the

courtyard. From the rise and fall of the voices, they could, to some extent, surmise the significance of the subject under discussion. Training their ears on the sounds, they tried their best to catch some strand of the conversation but failed. Once when Nasira tiptoed to the door and put her ear to it, she could hear Malik Muhammad Rafiq talking. She recognized his voice immediately but couldn't catch what he was saying. She had been to Rafiq's house many times, a spacious home adjacent to a street near the main bazaar. Rafiq also came from Ismail's ancestral village of Gobindpur and was a member of his extended family. He converted to the Ahmadi faith well before Partition, while he was working as an overseer at the Delhi Municipal Committee. He had two daughters and two sons, all of whom were close to finishing their education. They were a very sincere Ahmadi family. The older son, after doing his master's degree, had devoted his life to the *jama'at*, and was now the head of its Mission in Nigeria. When the second son, Nasr, did his medical degree, Malik Rafiq sought to marry him to Nasira. She knew the young man quite well and even liked him. After she started wearing *niqab*, a bashful smile spread across their lips whenever their eyes met, despite the veil, and the effect of such perfunctory encounters left her in a dazed state for days. At Malik Rafiq's constant prodding, Bashir Ahmad fearfully submitted this proposal to his father, Chaudhry 'Ata Muhammad. Chaudhry Sahib suddenly became incensed. He stood up and said: "Bashir Ahmad, what are you saying? Have you lost your senses? They may be Ahmadis a hundred times over, but I cannot marry my daughter into a family of the oil-pressing caste. You should have thought of this yourself before talking to me." Nasr went to the States, did his M.D., married a white woman and settled there. He'd been gone for five years. Meanwhile, Nasira was married off to one of her cousins, the son of her maternal aunt and an Inspector in the Excise Department. She seemed to have no complaints about her married life, but if by any chance, as now, the thought of Nasr wandered into her heart, a resigned sigh did not fail to escape from her lips.

Nasira put her ear to the door once again and tried to listen while the women all fixed their gaze on her. This time it was Munir Ahmad talking, but she still failed to catch the drift of his talk. She looked at the women, and pointing towards her ear, shook her hand in the negative. Nasira was young, a graduate and the product of the new age. She was constantly aware that whenever the sectarian balance in society went out of kilter, women were affected by it as much as men. They suffered fear and worry and were as afraid of death as the men. In fact, they faced the added burden of keeping the children safe as well as worrying about protecting their own honor. And yet even those among them who had sound judg-

ment were never taken into confidence; they were only informed of the decisions made by their menfolk. It was a man's world, and all religions, in spite of their claim to adhere to the ideals of justice and equality, in fact took an identical path in the matter, her own being no different. At this point she had to rein in her thinking because she'd been taught that issues already settled by religion should not be made contentious. Opening them up to questioning would only lead her to the doorstep of apostasy. Grudgingly, she submitted to the privilege of men in making decisions.

Frightened at seeing the pale and haggard faces of their mothers, the children tried hard to push up against their sides, as if wanting to backtrack into their mothers' wombs. The women were not privy to the individual thoughts and views of the local Ahmadi elders—those empowered to make decisions—about these issues, but everyone knew which matters needed to be decided. They had all been there for two hours already, waiting to hear the decisions. On the surface, they were steadfast and sat quietly and patiently, but their taut nerves were just about ready to snap. Had Bashir Ahmad not emerged soon after, some of them, overcome by the suspense and the suffocating smell of each others' perspiration, would have started beating up on their children, or, using the pretext of the heat, gotten into a turf war with women sitting too close to them, or loudly cursed the organizers of the Friday rally.

Initially, Bashir Ahmad was taken aback seeing the crowd of women and children in his courtyard. Then he realized that these poor women had also been under severe mental pressure for the past few days. They had assembled there because, alone, they couldn't have continued to endure this state of uncertainty in which the question of life and death had become entangled. To live in constant fear of death—one's own, one's children, one's husband and relatives—was a torment exhausting enough to crack the toughest among them. Bashir Ahmad appeared calm. He spoke in a steady voice that dispensed assurance to one and all, "Sisters, there's nothing to be worried about; by God's grace everything is going well and will even end, God-willing, in the right way. Some of us will go again tomorrow to see the authorities. Even if they refuse to cancel the rally, it won't matter. Let the rally take place; we'll arrange for our own security as we deem fit. It's not easy for anyone to attack this street. We're doing what we can to insure our safety. You need two hands to clap and we'll never become the hand that joins the other in clapping. We haven't harmed anyone, why would anyone come to harm us? The good Lord has His mysterious ways to help the oppressed. Count on His grace and forgiveness. Now please go home and sleep peacefully. May the Lord support and protect you."



The women started leaving one by one. When Taj Bibi was about to go, Amtul said: "Bhabi, please come over sometimes. It would be relaxing. I've been thinking of visiting you for quite some time now, but these household chores—they never seem to end. Let the trouble of the rally pass and I'll come by."

"Sure, do. Sister, come a hundred times. My house is like your own house."

Although the collapsing spirits received a little ballast from Bashir Ahmad's speech, a nagging doubt still lingered. As suggested by the other members of the group, Bashir Ahmad had deliberately refrained from letting the women in on two important decisions made that evening. This would have made things worse for the ones already frightened and the order and discipline that had until now held that small group together would have snapped. That order and discipline were now the sole guarantee of the group's safety since the government agencies responsible for public safety, even if not actually in cahoots with the other side, had at best remained aloof. The decisions Bashir Ahmad had withheld were as follows: Firstly, on the day of the rally, before the second watch, six Ahmadi households settled in other areas of Sultanpur would quietly leave town. And, secondly, in the event of an attack and the failure of the strong iron gate (put up by the non-Muslim residents of the street for their own security and still in good working order) to stop a formidable number of attackers from storming in, the street's residents would lock their houses from the inside, walk through the interconnecting doors to the last house, go out into the fields and from there walk to Noor Nagar, Munir's village. Every household in Noor Nagar owned some agricultural land and Ahmadis were in the majority. Even non-Ahmadis were somehow related to them. No non-Ahmadi landlord, with the exception of Sarfaraz Husain, was likely to deny them protection.

Munir Ahmad owned fifty acres in Noor Nagar. Since the landholdings in the area had continuously become smaller due to successive divisions of properties, even an owner of fifty acres was considered a better than average landholder. Taking full advantage of his B.S. degree in agriculture, Munir Ahmad had begun farming with a scientific know-how and was quite successful. In order to meet the professional demands of his enterprise as laid down in the books, he, in fact, kept his permanent residence in the village on the land itself. He was a hardworking man, disciplined, of regular habits, and a progressive farmer who immersed himself in his work. He had no interest in legal disputes, running around to the courts and police stations, or in any of the other customary activities with which landowners occupied themselves. His only misfortune was that his land

was adjacent to the land of Sarfaraz Husain. Sarfaraz belonged to the same caste as Munir. The elders of both had come from the same village in eastern Punjab in 1947 and settled in Noor Nagar. Sarfaraz had only a modest education and the mentality of a traditional landowner. He was himself a rogue and had befriended the other rogues in the area. Bribing revenue and police officers, and often working for them as their agent, was for him a means to solidify relations with them and earn some extra income. His landholding was close to one hundred acres. He didn't hesitate to use any means, no matter how low or criminal, to achieve his objective. In the past, other than a mutual dislike, there was no animosity between Sarfaraz and Munir. Not so now. Sarfaraz had contacts in the administrative office of the local police, from the Deputy Superintendent down to the ordinary policemen. Ever since the present Deputy had arrived, Sarfaraz had become a tad more arrogant because the Deputy wasn't just dishonest, he was downright dissolute. He often came to Sarfaraz's dera to have some fun.

Part of Munir's land, a two-acre triangle, was wedged into Sarfaraz's property. A few years ago, Munir planted a guava and orange orchard on the land, which had now started producing a good yield of fruit. As the water from the canal was insufficient for his other twenty-five acres of orchard, Munir also installed a tube-well on the same two acres. Sarfaraz was intent on grabbing that piece of land cheaply by any means possible, even bullying and coercion, because in his eyes it was an ideal place to set up a new dera for himself. Many times Sarfaraz had sent his scribe and made an offer to buy that land, but each time Munir had declined politely. One day Sarfaraz walked over to Munir's dera in person with the same proposal, but Munir skirted the issue. Before the current D.S.P. came along, Sarfaraz had made an attempt to take over the desired land by force, with the help of his ruffian friends. His idea was to file a civil suit claiming that Munir Ahmad had sold the land to him, handed over the deed and received full payment, but was now dilly-dallying about the transfer of the property. He planned to request the registrar to issue the registration of the land in his name, but Munir, with the help of his friends and servants, soundly thwarted the attempt. Even though Munir did manage to route Sarfaraz's scheme, a servant and one of his friends received injuries in the ensuing scuffle. One of them was injured so seriously that he had to spend a number of days in the hospital. After some running around, and taking advantage of Bashir Ahmad's professional acumen and wide contacts, Munir was able to file an F.I.R. [First Information Report] with the police against Sarfaraz and his companions, which had now been under investigation for a whole year in the court of the local magistrate. The

Ahmadis in the village had sided with Munir, not only because he was in the right, but also because he was an Ahmadi while his opponent was not. According to the F.I.R., the majority of the witnesses for the plaintiff belonged to the Ahmadi sect. When the new D.S.P. arrived he tried, with the help of some influential landholders in the area, to put some pressure on Munir Ahmad to withdraw the F.I.R. and do a deed of compromise, but Munir refused to oblige.

The Deputy was terribly annoyed by Munir's refusal to yield. He decided to teach him a lesson, and not just him but also Bashir Ahmad in particular and the whole Ahmadi community of the area in general. He thought up a plan—one tried before by many others in different places—to take the staunch, active opponents of the Ahmadis into his confidence and stir up a movement against them. He first sent Sarfaraz to sound them out. When they expressed a willingness, he met them himself and assured them of every kind of help and support. The rally was then announced; huge posters were put up not only in Sultanpur but also in adjoining areas. Well-known speakers from far and near agreed to come. The invitees from the nearby towns not only promised to come, they also promised to bring along large numbers of students from religious madrassas. After the announcement of the rally, even though on the surface life in Sultanpur remained calm, below the surface, on a level hidden from sight, a commotion had begun to stir. The attitude of the people towards Ahmadis remained normal, but in the pond of their unarticulated thoughts about Ahmadiyyat, it was as if a stone had suddenly plopped. After giving the matter some thought, they concluded: Ahmadis must be up to something against us, that's why every other day there's this outcry against them. It's true enough that Ahmadi beliefs are different from ours; it's also true that the Government's attitude towards them during the past thirty years has been harsh and unjust, not one of equality. All the same, it's possible that out of anger or a desire for revenge, Ahmadis have done things contrary to the interests of our country and religion that we haven't discovered due to our simplemindedness and a lack of time. Perhaps the people who are responsible to keep themselves informed about the activities of the Ahmadis know what the Ahmadis have done? Now, on the day of the rally, their speeches will reveal what new information they've dug up.

Common folk had no inkling that two acres of land between Munir and Sarfaraz were the real cause of the trouble, and that Sarfaraz and his companions were manufacturing sectarian strife to punish Munir and the other Ahmadis. The spreaders of prejudice weren't motivated by any principle or ideology; they were using deception to provoke gullible people and exploit them for their own goals, although the people had no reason

to suspect all that. The mature ones among them felt that, however wrong and damaging to the country the views of the spreaders of prejudice might be, at least they firmly believed those views to be true enough to promote them. If only they realized that bigots have no honesty, not even a grain of it, and they wittingly make falsehood appear to be truth.

One Friday before the rally, a lengthy speech was delivered in the main mosque of Sultanpur (the same venue where the rally was to take place) to prove that Ahmadiyyat was a menace to Islam. There was nothing new in the speech; the same recital of old objections was being heard again after many years. The speech only stirred up the old strife that had long lain dead for the public. It was the kind of snake that could devour you if you weren't levelheaded. At first, the speech frightened the audience, but the sensation proved to be short lived. It soon exited their minds, for, in reality, there was no impending danger anywhere. Perhaps they figured out that the snake was made of cardboard. As they filed out of the mosque, no one said anything about it; they'd already forgotten everything. They went home merrily talking and laughing among themselves. Once an audience has moved out of the range of such a harangue, it's hard for them to be persuaded to engage in violence.

When frightened, animals and humans react the same way: if the enemy is strong, they take to their heels; if weak, they stand their ground and do battle. Why wouldn't a majority, especially one so overwhelming, be ready to kill and be killed? Magnanimity alone—something we sorely lack as a nation—holds back violence, even when one has the strength to annihilate the other. Had the speaker wanted, he could have easily sent the audience to storm the Ahmadi in their homes. But that, of course, was not part of the prearranged plan. The speech was instead meant to introduce the audience, ahead of the forthcoming rally, to its subject matter.

As the fateful day drew near, the Ahmadi minority became more nervous and perturbed about securing its life, property and honor, while the majority continued to engage in its preoccupations free of care, totally unconcerned about the plight of the minority. During the intervening days, if the mind of someone of the majority wandered off thinking about the rally, it was merely a fleeting thought: would the anticipated drama provide the expected sensation, or would it lose steam and fade away even before that?

Sarfaraz Husain, perfectly content in his village, continued with his daily chores as if he didn't know what was about to happen. He'd paid the sum demanded by the Deputy Sahib for arranging the revenge which his enemies weren't likely to forget for generations, and now he sat waiting for the show to begin, outwardly at peace but inwardly restless. He was

afraid of failure, which could happen only if the officials at the provincial level interfered. That they had refused to do so was a piece of news that hadn't reached him yet. To gain a trifling advantage and to punish Munir Ahmad for stubbornly hanging on to his legitimate rights, he'd set the wheel of oppression in motion in such a way that three hundred innocent people of Sultanpur and Noor Nagar had been seized for a whole week by the unremitting fear of being slaughtered by the majority, while he himself sat back, relishing their awful plight. He felt he was getting his revenge. The majority was unconcerned anyway. Two jobs assigned to him were yet to be carried out. Firstly, on the night between Wednesday and Thursday he was supposed to have his men burn some pages of the Holy Qur'an, scatter them inside the Ahmadis' place of worship, and then raise a caterwaul that the Ahmadis had disgraced the Qur'an. And secondly, a day before the rally, he was to have the Ahmadi households marked with a designated chalk sign so the out-of-town attackers did not mistakenly damage the life and property of anyone else. His collaborator, the D.S.P., had purposely left town for a tour of the area so there was no possibility of any blame falling on him. He was expected to return the evening before the rally.

The students of the madrasa of the congregational mosque were busy arranging for food and lodging for the out-of-town speakers and for students from the nearby religious schools, a great number of whom had been invited to participate. On explicit instructions from their bosses, the staff of the local tycoons and industrialists were helping the students as volunteers. None of the elected government officials or the members of the opposition or of any political party had attempted to come to Sultanpur to stop the imminent disturbance, to comfort the troubled and distressed Ahmadis, to draw the attention of the officials responsible for preserving public peace to the gravity of the situation, or to persuade them to take the necessary steps. Since by law they were not going to get the votes of the Ahmadis, it was most unlikely any officials would come out to support them. Then there were those who had voted for them or had someone cast their vote on their behalf. The authorities could ill afford to alienate them and earn their animosity. Politics had always been a game of give and take. As a minority, the Ahmadis had the right to have two of their members elected to the National Assembly. However, no Ahmadi ever contested those seats. And if anyone defied the clear policy of the *jama'at* and did contest the seats, no other Ahmadi attached any significance to whether or not the candidate was elected unopposed. Ever since this law was enacted, the Ahmadis had considered it downright prejudicial and reacted by totally boycotting the electoral contests for the two seats

reserved for their sect. It was also said that the leaders of the anti-Ahmadi movement throughout the country enjoyed the secret patronage and silent support of the Government. The officials had been issued instructions accordingly. The Government's rationale was this: if by sacrificing a few dozen Ahmadis it could show favor to the national leadership of the anti-Ahmadi movement, it could easily extract big concessions from them in return in the future. Not a bad bargain at all. And, besides, it was the safest way of sacrificing Ahmadis: no outcry at the public level, no protest marches, no whining or wailing in the newspapers, no damage to the vote bank, if anything, a chance to augment it further. What difference would it make if in the surging sea of the majority, fifty or sixty dead bodies and as many houses with their belongings were offered up? Why, none at all. The briefly scattered surface would again patch up and blend, as if nothing had happened.

On Wednesday morning at 7:00 Chaudhry Bashir Ahmad, Master Lateef, Munir Ahmad and Malik Muhammad Rafiq gathered to meet the Assistant Commissioner by the road outside his bungalow, as they had planned the night before. At that time, in their anxiety and bewilderment and under tremendous mental pressure to meet him as quickly as possible, they had overlooked the need to set up a prior appointment with him, considering it irrelevant. Now, after the night's rest that had cleared their thinking and calmed their minds, independently each of them was convinced that further meetings with the Assistant Commissioner and the Deputy Superintendent would not produce any result. Nothing was to be gained by such meetings. The officials had preplanned their moves based on their own objectives, not on any thought for the safety of the Ahmadis, and would act according to those objectives. No arguments or appeals from any Ahmadis would change the established priorities.

The bungalow was situated outside the city on the road to Lahore. Now and then a bus hurtled by, raising a cloud of dust. Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, green crops glistened in golden sunshine. The green leaves of the huge, plump trees at the edge of the road and around the vast lawn of the bungalow stirred and swayed gently in the early morning breeze. The four visitors, each lost in his own thoughts, stood impervious to his surroundings. The gun-toting sentinel standing guard at the gate of the bungalow told them, "The Sahib's gone for a walk. He'll be back soon. Go inside and have a seat over on the lawn." As they moved toward the lawn, Munir just seemed to have had enough and blurted out, "The A.C. has no interest in our concerns, let alone any sympathy, don't we know that already? He's not going to do anything for our security. We'll have to do whatever needs to be done by ourselves. Let's go back."

“There’s such a thing as going by the book, which also has value,” Bashir Ahmad remarked. “God forbid, if something unpleasant happened tomorrow, they at least won’t be able to blame us for not having alerted them in time to find some remedy.”

Munir said, “Brother, the ‘going by the book’ has already been done. We’ve warned them of the danger. What more do we need to say to or hear from them? The A.C. couldn’t even stop the D.S.P. from chairing a session of the rally. What more can he do? You’ve met the provincial officials in Lahore, told them about the whole situation, but no one has done anything. Have they? You’ve even met this guy once before, and told him everything in detail. Is anything left undone? It seems to me the whole administration, from here to Lahore, is hell-bent on getting us lynched. I don’t know what they really want. Maybe it’ll become evident in a few days. Come on, let’s go back.”

Malik Rafiq said, “Munir Ahmad, you’re still young and a bit impetuous. Have some patience. What other option do we have except asking for the administration’s help and cooperation? What we could decide on our own, we did last night. That doesn’t need to be changed.”

“Many other options are still open to us, Malik Sahib!” Munir said somewhat testily, getting red in the face. “Don’t even worry about Noor Nagar. No one will dare trouble us there. As for Brother Bashir’s street in Sultanpur, if the gate is shut and two people with guns stand guard, even a crowd of ten thousand wouldn’t be able to take a step forward. Take my word for it! You won’t even need to fire a shot.”

Master Lateef was getting upset. He said, “Chaudhry Munir, you haven’t lost your mind, have you? If we so much as hold a firecracker in our hands, let alone a gun, it would be like dropping an atomic bomb on the three million Ahmadis in this country. I hope you’re not opening the path to genocide?”

Munir responded, “Well then, do what you will. I’ll have nothing to say.”

“Keep your spirits up, Chaudhry Munir,” Malik Rafiq said. “Even if the rally does take place, nothing untoward will happen. Everything will be fine, by God’s grace. At worst, some of our houses might be looted; one or two may even be torched. A half dozen of our men might be hurt; one or two might even lose their lives. You’ve chosen to follow the path of righteousness; there will be many occasions that will call for the sacrifice of blood and life.”

Laughing, Bashir Ahmad added, “Yes, these things do happen in this business.”

The A.C., a middle-aged man, had started out with the Assistant Teh-

sildar's job and risen to his current position. Kowtowing to his seniors was his special quality, and he regarded his present position as a reward for it. He walked through the gate, twirling his cane and came straight toward them. With knitted brows he spoke to Bashir Ahmad: "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"We've come to resubmit our concerns regarding the rally and to bring to your attention some new misgivings we have about it."

"This is neither the time nor the place for it. Come to my office." He uttered his words with considerable annoyance. All four felt humiliated and began to walk out. If Bashir Ahmad weren't such a popular and well-known lawyer, they wondered how insulting the A.C.'s attitude would have been. As they were leaving, Malik Rafiq seemed to be thinking out loud: two hundred people are facing death night and day, and this guy can only think about appropriate time and place!

On arriving at the A.C.'s office at ten o'clock, Bashir Ahmad found out that the A.C. was hearing cases at the moment and wouldn't be free before one o'clock. He sat down in the courtroom in one of the lawyers' chairs to wait for the A.C., hoping that he might eventually catch the fellow's attention. Half an hour later the A.C. asked him, "Chaudhry Sahib, what brings you here?"

"I need an appointment to see you, sir."

"Come to my office at three."

At three Bashir Ahmad came to the A.C.'s office with his three companions. As soon as he entered the A.C. asked, "Chaudhry Sahib, any incidents anywhere?"

"No, sir, not so far. It's to forestall just such an eventuality that we've been bothering you time and again."

"Aren't you a bit more hypersensitive than need be? Be patient. Nothing is going to happen. The number of police on duty is more than adequate to control the crowds at the rally. And, if the need arises, we can always call in additional forces on short notice from other nearby police stations and from the provincial capital. I've talked to the officials who are in charge and everything is settled. Both the D.S.P. and I have spoken to the local leaders of the Movement. They've assured us that public peace will not be disturbed, nor will the Ahmadis be harmed in any way. I think this should satisfy you."

"Sir," Muhammad Rafiq began, "we appreciate your attention in this matter. It guarantees the safety of both our lives and our property, and we're grateful to you for it. However, what usually happens on such occasions is that while the leaders talk about the difference in our faiths in their speeches, they also pile on us, at the same time, baseless and totally



fabricated accusations regarding the safety and security of the country and the safeguarding of its interests. This inflames the public who really begin to consider us the enemy. The crowd, without any leader's inducement or guidance, gets out of control and assails our houses. That needs to be taken care of."

"If you're asking me to ban the rally, that won't happen," the A.C. responded firmly. "I remember explaining to you even in the previous meeting that every sect in our country has the right to propagate and communicate its beliefs in a peaceful manner. There's no tension in Sul-tanpur, and there's no danger to public peace; so there's no justification for imposing section 144. We've already discussed with the leaders the issues they intend to talk about in their speeches. They've assured us with God as their witness that they will not say or do anything that might provoke sectarianism. If they flout this agreement, they'll both lose our trust in the future and will be punished for breaking their promise. We also have other means to punish them, and they know these well. They won't dare break their promise."

"But, sir," Master Lateef started, "our biggest worry is that when earlier incidents of arson, pillage and murder occurred on a large scale against the Ahmadis at the hands of the inflamed public, they all started exactly the same way as we see developing today. In almost every case, first a dispute between an Ahmadi and a non-Ahmadi arose over a house or a piece of land, and when the non-Ahmadi couldn't legally get his way, he used his influence and money to turn the issue into an anti-Ahmadi movement. The ordinary man is just used as an instrument and doesn't even know that a dispute over property is the real reason behind the movement. Seized by passion, he commits or is made to commit atrocities against innocents to safeguard the sanctity of his faith. In this instance, too, an unpleasantness over a piece of land between Munir Ahmad and Sarfaraz Husain has turned into a rally against the Ahmadis. When the beginnings look the same, one is scared about the endings."

"Look," the A.C. began, "this is just your speculation. It's hard to accept until we've obtained investigative reports on all such riots and thoroughly compared them, but one thing is quite certain: the responsibility for all these incidents and rallies that keep taking place all the time throughout the country lies squarely on you. Both the law and the Constitution have declared Ahmadis non-Muslims, but you haven't accepted this status, neither inwardly nor in practice. If you accepted it and then realistically determined your status and place in society for what they are, we would all be spared this daily misery, you and us."

"That indeed is a lengthy discussion and unrelated to the issue at

hand,” Bashir Ahmad replied. “Nevertheless, when you have the time, we shall discuss it. Noor Nagar is three and a half kilometers away. After the rally, it is unlikely that the excited mob will reach there still in their heightened state of emotion. And even if some do reach there, they may find it difficult to maintain their agitation. Then again, Ahmadis are a majority of those living in Noor Nagar, so, we believe, they will be safe there. There haven’t been any signs of danger there either, at least not so far. On Friday, just for that one day, if you could post some armed policemen outside our street, we should be safe.”

“I have no objection,” the A.C. said. “I can send two men yet today. But you’ll become branded in the eyes of the people for no reason, and might even give the impression that you’re asking for trouble. Anyway, on Friday at whatever time you feel the need, just give me a call and I’ll send as many armed policemen as you want.”

By the time Bashir Ahmad reached Ismail’s store he heard the call for the *Asr* prayer coming from the mosque’s loudspeaker. Greetings over, Bashir Ahmad said laughing, “Much as I’d like to enjoy your company for a bit, observing prayers on time is also necessary, for such is God’s command. An Ahmadi offering prayer in the presence of a Muslim is a cognizable offense in the national law. There are so many conflicting religious and legal demands on me. Now, you tell me what I should do?”

Ismail laughed as he took out the prayer rug from the cupboard. “Chaudhry Sahib, just say your prayers. This talk can wait.”

“So you are bent on being an accessory to the crime! I’m warning you: You can be punished for it as much as I.”

“No problem. I’m fed up anyway staying outside for so long. I wouldn’t mind an opportunity for a change of air for a few days. I hear life inside a prison is quite unusual. If nothing else, I may be able to see that new world thanks to you. Should I tell you one thing, Chaudhry Sahib?”

“Sure.”

“No Muslim has ever had a chance to say his prayers on this mat. I have put it aside only for non-Muslims, both the current ones and those who will become so in the future. You say your prayers on it, or sometimes Hasnain Shah, if he happens to be around. One of you has already been declared a non-Muslim; demands for the other to be declared a non-Muslim are in the works. The incidents of murder as punishment are besides those demands.”

As Bashir Ahmad got busy with performing his prayers, Ismail’s mind wandered off to the cataclysmic days of the Partition. Whole populations were migrating across the border in the midst of unrelenting slaughter, leaving him utterly depressed about his own distress and that of others.

Yet there was something that had sustained him and given his sagging spirit a boost. It will be different in Pakistan, in a country created only for the followers of Islam; at least we'll find enduring relief from the Hindu-Muslim strife that has poisoned our daily life in united India. But what a shame! In spite of such heavy sacrifices, the old evil had resurrected itself, this time in a ghastlier form. Perhaps there is some inherent depravity in man's nature that repeatedly forces him, for one reason or another, to soak his hands in human blood. Ismail couldn't understand why this was so.

A large-hearted person who offended neither himself nor others, Ismail's favorite and most pleasurable pastime was to get together and gossip with his friends, who included men of every faith and school of thought. He welcomed them at his store and showed them hospitality to the extent he could. He was a thinking man and fond of reading. He had an opinion on every important issue. He did express his views, but without ever wanting to impose them on anyone, nor did he want others to impose theirs on him. One idea that he stuck by steadfastly was that suffering and comfort, especially on account of wealth or women, were entirely one's private matters and it was unbecoming to talk about them. He wasn't fated to receive any comfort from a woman or wealth, but he never shared his unhappiness with anyone. When with friends, he laughed and made others laugh; alone, at night, he would cry as if he were looking at the familiar face of his old sufferings for the first time. During the fury of the Partition, his parents, brothers, sisters and all his other relatives were put to death for the crime of being Muslims. Cheerful and happy Barkatay, the fountain of a fragrant, warbling life for him, escaped being murdered in the mass slaughter only to be abducted by her assailants. He found that out one morning in the newspaper when he saw her name in the list of women recovered from East Punjab. That Barkatay was alive and in Pakistan made his heart swell with such joy that he thought it would burst through its walls. Inebriated with excitement, he left for Lahore the same instant, as though he were returning to the Gobindpur of three years ago where nothing had changed and everything and everyone was the same as he had seen them since his childhood. Over and over he tried to persuade himself that it was only the ravaged Barkatay Bibi whom the army had recovered and brought to Lahore; it hadn't picked up and brought over all the residents of the Gobindpur of three years ago, but he had little success. Logic and understanding aren't the only things needed to live! In some matters a person must also allow himself to be deceived wittingly. After running around for three or four days, when he finally encountered Barkatay Bibi, a woman once so proud of her allure and beauty, what he saw before him was a hesitant, cold and broken woman. Who was she?

He stood aghast. Nothing of the old Barkatay remained. In her empty, barren eyes, there wasn't even a shred of her old confidence. All the vanity of that proud woman had been dashed to the ground. The infinite sadness in her face was so profuse it seemed to fill the entire room. What had India's freedom done to her?

"My God! What's happened, Barkatay?"

"Wish I knew. I've been tossed about like a battered, fallen leaf." She broke into tears.

"Have some courage, Barkatay."

"Courage for what? Nothing's been spared. There's only a life that neither ends nor continues. It's just stuck in my chest."

"Why do you despair so much? There will be better days."

"Ismail, a day that is gone never returns. There's night before the next day. How am I going to live through the night?"

"Barkatay, you have no one left in the world, and neither do I. You can't stay in the camp your whole life, can you? Come with me. No one from our village has reached Pakistan. Whom else can you stay with?"

Quickly she agreed to go with him. He brought the apparition of the Barkatay of Gobindpur with him to Sultanpur. He tried very hard to restore Barkatay to her former self, but it was impossible. When he proposed marriage, tears welled up in her eyes, but she showed her consent with a nod of her head. Her soul had melted away, only her body was still there, working like a clock, without a will of its own. A year and a half later a boy was born to them. At her insistence, they named him Ramzan, after her son who had been killed in Gobindpur. Ismail saw some cheerfulness return to her face after Ramzan's birth, but only for a while. Then she fell sick and six months later she passed away, followed a few months later by the infant's death. Ismail was convinced that the boy died because of his mother's absence, while it was India's freedom that had killed the mother.

Many times Ismail asked her about the attack and what transpired in its aftermath, but her only response was that she couldn't recall anything. One Sunday morning, she was sitting in the courtyard feeding baby Ramzan in her lap, smiling and talking to him: "My son will grow up and be as brave as a lion; he'll never give ground, no matter how badly the earth shakes as the kingdoms change."

Ismail sat opposite her on the cot reading his newspaper. Suddenly, remembering something he'd forgotten, he said: "Barkatay, you haven't said a word about the attack on Gobindpur. Can't you recall anything?"

"Yes, I remember this much: when you left, the whole mohalla seemed as if it had lost its sense of pride and sunk into unmitigated despair. Taja

shook his head and said that they had lost half the battle even before it began. He didn't realize he'd lost all of it. Within a few days after you left, the isolated Muslim families from the neighboring villages began scrambling over to our mohalla for shelter. Before long quite a large number had gathered. Your folks didn't stir from their house in the city, nor did they inquire about us. Then all means of communication were cut off: we couldn't even find out anything about them. We did everything we could to look after the families that had come to our place. There were so many that every piece of flat ground, the roofs, courtyards, rooms and storerooms were all packed with people. In our house alone there were nearly thirty women and children. Taja distributed the swords, lances and axes that you had purchased among the thirty or forty young men and posted them to guard our house and everywhere else around the mohalla, including the street's entrance and exit, and he kept walking around the whole night. During the day, Baba Shahu instructed the young men in the use of the weapons, as much as he himself knew. Five or six shots were fired one night as we slept. Everyone woke up scared. It must have been around midnight. Suddenly a noise rose from the direction of the mosque. Baba Shahu came running along the street shouting, 'Watch out, there's been an attack!' Sounds of crying and lamentation shot up from every house. Ten or twelve Sikhs, brandishing their kirpans, barged into our house and started butchering women and children. Two Sikh soldiers with proper guns accompanied them. One of them screamed, 'Don't spare anyone!' The right and the wrong in this world will only be sorted out in the next. It seems to me that every killer is right and every victim is wrong. The fire and high flames in the mosque and the houses around it produced so much light you could even see a needle. Ramzan was sleeping with me but I have no idea when, in that panic and tumult, he got up and walked away somewhere. I never saw him again. Perhaps he went looking for his father. I was shouting for Taja, who was on guard duty. When one Sikh raised his sword to kill me, another said, 'Oh no, don't. She's worth keeping,' and moved forward and grabbed my arm...."

"Enough Barkatay, enough! Please stop!" Ismail yelled as he cried, overcome by emotion.

"You're the one who ran away, abandoning Gobindpur to its fate. You must listen to the whole story. Didn't you keep asking every day: How were my parents killed? What happened to my brothers and sisters? Who came? When? How many? Was there anyone from Gobindpur among them?—as if people trapped in such confusion can think or reason. You should have stayed and watched. Everything was over within two minutes and then there was nothing but dreadful silence. A person who is killed

or is spared knows only one story—the one he’s been through.”

Lying face down on the cot, Ismail’s body writhed with sobs that would not let up. Barkatay picked up the child sleeping on the cot and went inside. Her stinging jibe made him feel as if, in the youthful, throbbing moonlight, he was standing horrified and alone in the middle of a graveyard, and everywhere, as far as his eyes could see, there were nothing but graves, with neither a tree nor a building anywhere in sight. A dark, heart-rending scream rose from somewhere, passed through the middle of his body, pierced the moonlight, and flew up toward the moon. He watched it for some time and then it vanished.

While Bashir Ahmad was saying his prayers, Shaikh Sardar Ali, Sufi Ghafoor and Haji Manzoor arrived—they all had their stores in the same big bazaar and were daily visitors. By the time Bashir Ahmad finished telling his beads and was folding the prayer mat, Noor Muhammad Chauhan and Chaudhry Muhammad Ali also walked in. Chauhan used to publish a weekly paper from Sultanpur that only carried local news. The paper was just an excuse to eulogize and shower accolades on officials posted in Sultanpur, or those among the local gentry who, after a nod from the officials, presented Chauhan with gifts and offerings. People wishing to have the details of their so-called social activities published in his weekly would have them printed, in bold or regular fonts, in a large space or small, in accordance with the fees they could afford. At one time Chauhan was an ardent supporter of communism and he still believed the cure for the ills of Pakistan and other backward countries lay in adopting a socialist system. But all his revolutionary talk was reserved for social conversations; there was no place for it in his own newspaper. He was not above bending over backwards to secure an objective. When, at times, in order to achieve his objective, he needed to put out his hand to beg, he did that without hesitation. He believed that every profession had its particular difficulties, and a professional had to accept them, whether he liked it or not. His academic education was next to nil, but with hard work and study, he had acquired considerable facility with words and had a deep understanding of current affairs. In his conversations he was as sharp as a naked sword, but nonetheless a sword fashioned from cardboard, given the servile and ingratiating nature of his newspaper. He was usually hard up, making ends meet with difficulty, and so addicted to talking that whenever he got an opportunity he just sat and let torrents of eloquence flow without pause for hours. At such times absolutely nothing mattered: his financial difficulties, his wife, children, important business—everything was washed from his

mind.

Chaudhry Muhammad Ali was a small landholder of unassuming attire. He'd graduated during the time of the British and looked hard for a government job but didn't find one. Disappointed, he sought refuge in his ancestral profession of land holding and found it. He was content with his circumstances. It had been fifty years since his graduation, and even though the degree had proved useless, if anyone even now, verbally or in writing, added the letters B.A. to his name, he felt intoxicated with pride. He came to visit Ismail now and then from his village to talk about the new developments in contemporary affairs.

Placing the prayer mat in the cupboard, Bashir Ahmad asked, "What were you saying, Uncle Ismail?"

"Just that finally sectarianism has sprouted in Pakistan. Innocent people are being mercilessly put to death every other day."

"At the time the Punjab was being partitioned, whether or not any area joined Pakistan depended on the number of Muslims in that area," observed Bashir Ahmad. "That was the important criterion in those days. In those days we were lovingly being included among the Muslims. The person whose efforts brought Pakistan into being was a Shi'a, but no one objected. People unanimously accepted him as the Quaid-e-Azam. Now the maulvis are calling Shi'as infidels and getting them killed. We Ahmadis have already been declared non-Muslims, now it's the Shi'as' turn. Common folk are still as unconcerned as they were when the movement against us started. The Government is doing nothing to suppress this movement, nor is it taking any steps to guarantee our safety."

Hearing Bashir's objection, Haji Manzoor probed his brains hard but found no answer. In embarrassment he started scratching his beard and looking toward Shaikh Sardar Ali in the hope of hearing an appropriate rejoinder. Before Partition, Haji Manzoor used to sell vegetables on a pushcart in a village of eastern Punjab. When he came to Sultanpur, a cloth-merchant's store which was full of fabric worth thousands of rupees was allotted to him; thus, in the space of one day, a pauper became a prince, which he considered a special providential favor to him. Despite his knowledge of the essence of religion, he regarded fasting and praying only as a means to augment his wealth, a sort of substitute for Aladdin's magic. But he never could persuade himself to part with money, even if it was in compliance with the religious duty to pay zakat. His previous experience, even though acquired in a minor trade, came in very handy in his new profession. With his dedication and hard work he became a successful businessman. He was an active worker in the Ahrar Party before Partition; after it, even though he lost faith in his old allegiance, his prejudice against

the Ahmadis persevered. To save his skin, when he was obliged to seek shelter in Pakistan, previously the object of his scorn, he shed whatever little pride he had left. He forsook practical politics and threw himself headlong into the textile business. Now he was a prosperous man. “Bashir Sahib, please don’t make false allegations,” Shaikh Sardar Ali remarked. “It was your people who started sectarian discord in 1948 when Chaudhry Zafarullah Khan refused to offer Jinnah Sahib’s funeral prayer and stood apart from a crowd of a hundred thousand and just watched them perform it.”

Haji Manzoor laughed at Sardar Ali’s comment and chirped, “Touché! Answer that one.”

Bashir replied, “It was wrong of Chaudhry Sahib to just watch Jinnah Sahib’s funeral prayer, but to punish a whole community for one individual’s mistake, and go on punishing it continually for forty years, believing all along it hadn’t been punished enough, well, this is hardly a proper attitude, is it?”

“No, Bashir Sahib, the exact opposite is true,” Sardar Ali shot back. “From the day Ahmadiyyat was launched, your community has sought nothing other than to establish its distinct and unique identity, to be distinguished from the rest of the Muslims. Isn’t that why you people have strictly forbidden your followers to perform funeral prayers for the dead of other faiths? This is how you safeguard your community from merging into the larger Muslim nation. Of course you had a right to do that, but please don’t say that Zafarullah Khan erred in avoiding Jinnah Sahib’s funeral prayer. He was only following the orders of the organization. So if now the majority Muslims have separated themselves from you, to set themselves apart from the Ahmadis, you should be happy that they have fulfilled your own desire and legalized it.”

“Well, all right, let it be so,” Bashir Ahmad observed. “But surely it is not so unusual for two members of a single community not to wish to promote too much interaction between them and keep their social contacts to a minimum. Do you think they don’t have the right to do so? Would it result in excommunication from their community? According to Islam, if I attest with my heart that I’m a Muslim and proclaim it with my tongue, then I’m a Muslim in every sense of the word. But a law made by men tells me that, no, I am not a Muslim. When Islam has already entrusted me with the right to decide who I might be, why is this man-made law interfering in my affairs?”

Chauhan interrupted, “It’s futile now to argue who is a Muslim and who is not. The Quaid-e-Azam had already settled the issue in his address of 11 August 1947 when he claimed that all citizens of Pakistan would be equal regardless of their differences. Now it’s another matter that some



people suppressed this address because it didn't fit in with their own interest. This statement can only mean one thing: all citizens will have the same rights and responsibilities, and religious affiliation would be a personal matter, which the state would not interfere in. It will not be possible much longer to hide the Quaid's address and the guiding principles enshrined in it for framing government policy. I think it is necessary for me now to write an exhaustive article on this issue and publish it in my newspaper."

That made everyone laugh in their hearts for they knew all too well that Chauhan would never attempt to write and publish an article on such a controversial issue. Bashir Ahmad said, "And yet, quite against Jinnah's dictates we were declared non-Muslims and the declaration was made part of the Constitution. All right, fine, but if you can't treat us as Muslims at least treat us as humans. Why, we're not even given the status of animals, let alone humans. Even animals are accorded feelings and emotions to some extent, but we ... no more than rocks. The townfolk are forced to swear at our venerable moral preceptors and teachers by name. The speech-mongers get on the stage and incite ordinary people against us so they storm our houses, plunder them, and then set them on fire and kill everyone inside. No one is ever caught. We can't say our prayers, give the azan, or refer to our mosque as a mosque. What's all this? The townfolk see this cruelty taking place, yet say nothing."

Chauhan said, "Chaudhry Sahib, there's no reason to become emotional. When cruelty goes beyond a certain limit, it generates its own reaction from within itself."

"You don't mean to say—do you—that, God forbid, Islam would disappear from this country?" Haji Manzoor said in a huff. Pakistan has no meaning besides 'There is no God but One.' This was the slogan that was heard echoing from every street in the heyday of the Pakistan Movement. I saw all this with my own eyes, and that was what helped us succeed. If you go back on your word to God, His punishment will surely descend on you."

Chauhan answered, "To begin with, this slogan didn't exist in those days, at least it had nothing to do with the Muslim League. And even if we suppose that it did exist, no one can explain what it really meant or what its purpose was. The most that can be said is that Pakistan was created for those who recited the kalima. If that is so, on what grounds were Ahmadis excluded from the faith? They too recite the kalima, don't they? How did you assume from this slogan that Pakistan was created only for the Sunnis to do what they will? Haji Ji, you need to unite all Pakistanis, regardless of their religious beliefs. Forget about differences; this is the only way to

save the country. How long will you go on dividing the country on the basis of language, nationality, caste, family, religion and sect? How many will you declare are infidels? You'll end up splintering the country that way. Have you already forgotten how East Pakistan broke away? It all started with language, remember? God will not punish unity, but disunity he surely will. People are hemmed in by a plethora of problems; solve those first. Don't worry about who is or isn't a Muslim; those are all secondary issues. How long will you go on embroiling people in complications unrelated to their problems and lead them astray?"

"If all you wanted was to create an irreligious state, why did you have to go through the trouble of Partition and the loss of so many lives?" Sardar Ali piped in.

Chauhan responded, "Providence had given us a single leader of sound thinking and extraordinary political discernment, and he wanted Pakistan not to be a religious state. Later on, some people, out of sheer perversity, threw this notion overboard; hence the animosity and chaos you are witnessing in public life today. By the way, Shaikh Sahib, you were one of Pakistan's detractors when it came into being, weren't you? By what right do you now try to claim what its character should be?"

Sardar Ali was distressed by this and responded, "After all, you're a Communist, an enemy of God and His Prophet. What would you know of the greatness of Islam? Why, you were tooting your Russian horn all the time! Don't you see what became of Russia? Got blown to pieces!"

Ismail warned in an imperious tone, "If you're going to get personal, I'll end this session. Is this any way to talk?" That silenced everyone.

As a young man, Sufi Ghafoor had walked all the way to Pakistan with his family in a caravan from his native Haryana. There, after completing vernacular middle school, he had started working with his father as a weaver. When they came over to Sultanpur, his father was allotted a utensils store, so he began selling pots and pans and was still plying the same trade. For the first time in his life he experienced prosperity in Pakistan, which had made him even more humble. He always wore a white turban of unstarched, coarse muslin, which now seemed whiter than before, and sported a longish salt-and-pepper beard. In assemblies such as the one at Ismail's, he would sit, his hands folded on his stomach, as if performing his ritual prayers, his eyes cast down, and listen quietly and attentively to every word that was spoken. He said, "There's such a dearth of love in the world that if I could buy it in exchange for my life, I would distribute it among the starving populace. We should give people the sweetness of love; it costs nothing. We shouldn't inject the bitterness of dread and panic into their lives. As it is, we've embittered life quite

enough already. Let people follow whatever path they desire. Ultimately, every path, however circuitous, leads to the door of the same Creator. There isn't any other door it might wander off to. All claims and jeers are the work of the devilish ego. To quietly arouse vanity, consider others contemptible, and teach a person to be conceited—these are all among its wiles and tactics. We get trapped in its net very easily, but find it hard to escape. We should instead try to create ease and comfort for others; if we can't do that, we should at least refrain from adding to their difficulties."

Haji Manzoor said, "Without a doubt, that Sufi has spoken some very sweet words, but let me tell you one thing: the Ahmadis are so narrow-minded and prejudiced that if they were in as big a majority today as other Muslims, they would have made it impossible for us to even breathe normally or save our skins. Compared to what they would have done to us, we are hardly doing anything to them."

Everyone spontaneously burst out laughing. Ismail said, "Haji Ji, one has to admit that Sufi's words have made a very good impression on you."

"Haji Sahib's comment was blown out of proportion," Sardar Ali interjected after the laughing died down. "All right, it was untimely. But if you think about it, it bears being considered seriously and carries a lot of weight."

Chaudhry Muhammad Ali quickly remarked, "If suppositions are what you base your discussion of these issues on, you'll wander far from the truth. Keep today's situation in mind when you talk."

Just then Munir Ahmad arrived at the entrance to Ismail's store and offered his greetings. They all became quiet. Everybody knew that Bashir and Munir were closely related. Everyone gaped at Munir wondering what news had sent him hither looking for Bashir. A tingling sensation suddenly ran down Bashir's spine, as though his legs had become lifeless. Fearfully he asked, "Is everything all right, Munir?"

"Yes, it is. Don't be worried. I just came to ask for permission to return to Noor Nagar. If you need me again, I can come back tomorrow."

"You're starting so late. It's going to get dark before you get there. You know the situation we're in these days. Wouldn't it be better if you left tomorrow?"

"I've got to be there tonight. Many things need to be taken care of. There are three or four of us together. Nothing to worry about."

"All right. May God keep you safe! Don't bother coming back tomorrow. We'll call you when we need you."

After Munir's departure, the gathering resumed its prior character and Chauhan began talking, "Three people—Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Allama Iqbal and the Quaid-e-Azam—were the benefactors of this nation, and yet

every one of them had the verdict of *kufir* cast against him in his time. The reactionary forces, however, were never as powerful in their day and age as they are today. Usurper heads of state and untrustworthy and inefficient political leaders have, for their selfish purposes, blown so much air into this beast called reaction that it has swelled all out of proportion, while in truth people have been repeatedly rejecting these same reactionary forces for the past one hundred and fifty years. If this weren't the case, none of these three benefactors would ever have succeeded. The common folk want to walk in step with the times, while these reactionary forces wrapping themselves around their skirts drag them backwards."

Bashir Ahmad said, "I agree that the Muslim people have sided with new demands at every important turning point in the national life. Now listen, we managed to disregard the harassment mounted against us by some reactionaries at the behest of one politician in 1953 as a bad dream. But since 1974, Ahmadis have been subjected to a whole series of incidents of various kinds of terror, which are still continuing. Every national government has participated verbally, financially, as well as practically. Inhuman laws were instituted under which fraudulent court cases were filed against us, and to this day there is no end in sight. The majority group is totally indifferent to our plight. Even though they're not with the reactionaries, they allow themselves to be incited and used by them. There is another relationship besides Islam, it's humanity, and people all over the world stand up in support of the victim and against tyranny, sometimes even risking their lives. But here, well, no one bats an eye. Everyone knows the miserable life of the Ahmadis, yet everyone remains silent and totally uninvolved. Perhaps their hearts have turned to stone, or maybe their minds have lost the ability to comprehend."

Chauhan objected, "Bashir Sahib, you're wrong to think that ordinary folks are unconcerned or hard-hearted. On an individual level, many people are sympathetic to Ahmadis. You can see it easily from the people gathered here. But common people are no better than a crowd. And until some leader shows it the way and determines its direction, a crowd is like a flock of animals wandering in the darkness. Unfortunately, the right and proper leadership has been missing from our politics; what little leadership there is, is used to affect people's feelings for the leaders' own political interests. The reactionary circles would never have succeeded in creating such a big rift between the Muslims and Ahmadis if your community itself hadn't been a partner to it. The Ahmadi *jama'at* is a strong, organized, well-knit group with vast resources, as all exemplary organizations should be, but it has never tried to come to grips with the problems of ordinary Muslims, nor lighted their way toward progress. It has exerted all its ener-

gies toward keeping itself separate from ordinary Muslims. Perhaps it was a question of identity for you people, but shouldn't you perhaps have kept it within moderate limits? You drove people away and they went. Then again, of all the traditional and reactionary religious organizations, yours is the most shackled by tradition and reaction. All you've ever done is proselytize, but have you ever joined with ordinary Muslims on any common social, humanitarian, literary or cultural platform to develop contacts with them? So, all the other conservative, reactionary bodies like your own started butting heads with you. What else did you expect? If all your missionary work yielded one convert out of a thousand, what else could the remaining nine hundred and ninety-nine feel but that they were the prey and you were the hunters. And when did you ever hear a hunter worrying his head over the problems of the prey? All he wants is to hunt down the prey and bag it. At first people got annoyed and then disgusted with this behavior. With all your devotion to Quaid-e-Azam, did it ever occur to you to build a hospital in his name where everyone, irrespective of faith or belief, could receive treatment? You could have built a university for higher studies in science in an undeveloped country."

Sardar Ali saw an opportunity to butt in. "The organizers of the Ahmadiyyah *jama'at* have the mentality of the *baniyas*, petty moneylenders," he observed with a tinge of sarcasm. "What do they care about any country, nation, people, or even their own religion, which they view as yet another means of making money? They're only interested in gathering as many sheep into their fold as possible and getting as much wool out of them as they can to swell their coffers. They only have one slogan: Make Ahmadis and more Ahmadis so the money keeps coming."

"Look, friends, it's not our way to poke fun at someone's belief," Ismail interjected, "so that it hurts him. We get together to understand each other's point of view, don't we? And we do that to strengthen love among us, not to spread hatred. If you can't change the way you speak, better try not to show up here again."

Sardar Ali felt he needed to explain his position. "I was only talking about the attitude of the *jama'at*; I wasn't trying to hurt the feelings of anyone," he said.

Ismail said, "Look, you just repeated what Chauhan Sahib was saying, only more derisively. It might have cooled your anger; it certainly didn't help anyone else."

"If my comments have hurt Bashir Sahib or anyone else, I apologize."

Bashir said, "It's nothing. We're used to objections in whatever tone or accent they're hurled at us. The good Lord knows well whether our missionary work is for collecting money or for spreading our faith to the

four corners of the world. We're answerable to Him alone. Regarding Chauhan Sahib's comments, I'll say this on the basis of what I know of our *jama'at's* thinking. The *jama'at* would have faced objections every step of the way had it built a hospital or university, and in the end those institutions would have become victims to terror and might have even unwittingly become an additional source of clashes...."

"Bashir Sahib," Chauhan interrupted, "it wasn't an objection, only a suggestion. If you look carefully, Muslims have the same sort of objection to Ismailis as they do to the Ahmadis. But this hasn't stopped the Ismailis from setting up a medical university and a hospital of international caliber in Karachi. Did anyone object or throw a monkey wrench? No, none. Not then, and not now. In the far-flung northern regions of the country, the Ismailis have established a considerable number of small hospitals, schools and water-delivery schemes. True, there's a sizeable population of Ismailis in these areas, but a fraternal atmosphere has been created there between the Ismailis and non-Ismailis so that an environment of toleration for Ismaili beliefs has come into being."

Muhammad Ali chuckled and addressed Chauhan, "Chauhan Sahib, understand one thing: civility is not a right, nor does a person demand it. I notice that you're probably asking the Ahmadi *jama'at* to present Islam in a modernized form like the Ismailis, while, in fact, Ahmadis are every bit as traditional and conservative as all the other religious groups, and equally inclined toward the past. Ahmadis only differ from other groups in one aspect of belief; as for the rest, like all fundamentalists, Ahmadis think that the bulk of human problems and difficulties disappear as soon as one has verbally uttered the kalima. And if they don't disappear, then surely it's the result of some blemish in the quality of the faith of the person who utters the kalima; hence their overly zealous insistence on missionary work. Now you're influenced by socialism. And socialism regards this world as the only reality and demands every kind of social and economic justice right here and now. So, as I understand it, human compassion is the only realm in which you two can come together. You can and should oppose oppression in this realm. As a Muslim, I also condemn every kind of inequity and oppression."

Chauhan answered, "Muhammad Ali Sahib, what you say is correct. I am quite familiar with the beliefs and conduct of the Ahmadis, and I'm not trying to persuade them to modernize themselves. All I want is for this tension that exists between them and the majority to end somehow, so Ahmadis will be able to maintain their beliefs and live their lives without fear. I've used the example of the Ismailis simply because such a thing can happen. Surely, other people and Ahmadis are quite capable of thinking

up better ways to begin tolerating each other's point of view, but more than any other group, I think the Ahmadis need to initiate the move."

Just then some young students from the theological seminary were passing by on board a crawling tonga making announcements over a loudspeaker about the rally the day after tomorrow. The rally was spearheaded by the "Seal of Prophethood Conference" people and was scheduled to take place after the *Juma* congregational prayer. The rally was going to expose the Ahmadis' collusion with Hindus and Jews and details of the Ahmadi conspiracy against Pakistan and the Muslim world. It was to be addressed by Pakistan's well-known scholars, speakers and orators who would expose the false claims about prophethood made by the Qadianis.

"Folks, you heard that, didn't you?—perhaps a foretaste of what's to come at the rally," Bashir Ahmad lamented. "Now why wouldn't such accusations infuriate people? We repeatedly told the officials that the conference being held under their auspices will have nothing but venomous propaganda against us, and that the audience, driven mad by grief and anger, will come after us, but would they listen? They kept saying the same thing: we won't let them do it. Who can dare ask them now? If we were also allowed to speak in our defense at the rally and the audience were to hear us out, we would prove that we're not a threat at all to the people's faith, or the Islamic world or even Pakistan. If there is a threat, it is to the illegal economic and material interests of certain individuals—the real movers and promoters of this conference."

"All of us have been witness, in one form or another, to the ghastly face of the riots of 1947," Ismail remarked with an undertone of commiseration. "Bashir Ahmad was perhaps too young to have retained any memory of those dreadful days. But at least four of us were grown up when we escaped East Punjab and made it to Pakistan. How we feared for our lives! Surely, you must have tasted the horror of death hovering over your heads, at least for a few days if not for longer."

"Brother Ismail," Sufi Ghafoor joined in and said, "our caravan reached Pakistan by the Ganda Singh Wala route after four months of walking on foot and traveling by oxcarts. I'll never forget that doomsday torment we endured every single minute of that awful flight. We'd be awakened repeatedly from our sleep by fear of an attack, and our whole day was passed afflicted by the severity of our perilous trek. Children, women with newborn babies, and old men began dying in droves. Whenever the caravan decamped after resting somewhere, it left a long trail of graves behind it along the side of the road. As soon as we crossed the boundary of Pakistan my heart swelled and cried out: Please, God, don't ever let us go through that kind of ordeal again!"

Ismail added to Sufi Ghafoor's comment, "In those days fear swirled in the pit of our stomachs and never left us; day and night, it kept gnawing at us bit by bit. We were so listless that nothing interested us. And despair drove us to want to die. It seemed a lot easier to die fighting instead of being hurled into a state of lethal suspense. Those who have been through such torment ought really to stop and think about how Ahmadis have been suspended between life and death for years, strung on the same crucifix of uncertainty."

"At least you had a tangible refuge in the shape of Pakistan that you could look forward to," Bashir Ahmad interjected. "But what have we got—not even the blurry traces of a destination that might give our sagging spirits a boost."

They all fell quiet for some time, as though their consciences were calling them to account. Then Sufi cleared his throat, broke the silence and said, "No religion allows anyone to be high-handed or cruel in its name. In the matter of faith particularly, Islam has forbidden the use of coercion. Everyone is allowed to do as he pleases, even accept a stone as a god. No one else need be troubled by it. In our egomania, let's not stretch our truth so much that it makes life unbearable for others. When cruelty reaches its limit, God's wrath comes into play. Beware of that time, for nothing will be spared after that."

"Not just the Ahmadis, the Shias, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Hindus—everyone except the Sunni majority feels insecure in Pakistan," Chauhan observed. "Those among them who have the means and the opportunity are fleeing the country. This state of affairs creates doubts about the survival of Pakistan, but the Government is doing nothing about it. The public is a dumb majority and becomes even dumber in the face of organized groups. The maulvis and students of the theological schools are a relatively small body, but they're well organized and vocal. They demonstrate their power in the streets and ultimately force the Government to retreat on every front. God knows what sensitive information they have that they can bend the Government like this."

"Chauhan Sahib, even among the Sunnis there are many sects which don't get along," Sufi remarked. "When everybody else is smashed, they'll start destroying each other. You can't limit that."

"You're absolutely right," Chauhan affirmed. "To save the country from internal disintegration and create national unity, it would be better to return to the policy laid out by the Quaid-e-Azam in his 11 August speech, a policy for the exact situation in the country. It would be good to resurrect and enforce it, in whatever way possible. He was a sagacious, discerning and competent political leader and he had prescribed that policy after care-



fully evaluating the temperament of the people.”

It was quiet in the street when Bashir Ahmad returned. The kids, tired from playing in the street all evening, had gone home. He saw the light from his office cast a square shadow of the grillwork onto the darkened surface of the street as it came filtering through the window, and the whispering buzz of his waiting clients conveyed to him their fly-like, pointless unease, which he knew would cease as soon as he entered the office. Seeing him, the white spot of light enclosed by the darkness around it, chirped naturally like a bird trapped in its cage, its twittering meant only for his ears. He liked it. He looked at it again, but this time it remained quiet. The door opening into the courtyard of the house was bolted from the inside today. He knocked. His wife came to the door and asked, “Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

As she undid the latch she said, “You took so long getting home. I felt as if my life was in the balance the whole time. You know very well what a terrible time we’re going through these days. Master Lateef and Brother Anwaar arrived home long ago. Where did you disappear to?”

“Didn’t they tell you? I went to the bazaar for a while. To visit with Uncle Ismail.”

“What did the officials say?”

“Nothing much. They just kept encouraging us. The town is as quiet as ever. I just had a look. There hasn’t been any activity. Except there were some lads from the religious school going around in a tonga announcing the upcoming rally.”

“God willing, the day of the rally will also pass without problems.” Then, as if reassuring herself, she said, “Let come what may. It’s pointless to get ourselves worked up.”

“We did all we could. Tomorrow we’ll see what happens. Anyway, we don’t have a choice.”

“I have a suggestion.”

“Yes, what?”

“Shouldn’t we pack our valuables and your books and send them to Noor Nagar tomorrow on an oxcart?”

“No, we can’t do that. It will create panic in the whole street. The unity we need for collective protection will disappear and there’ll be an individual stampede to safety. Anyone who might otherwise be disinclined may take advantage of such circumstances to attack. Where’s Mubashshir?”

“Nasira came asking if the official had given any answer. She waited for a long time. When you didn’t show up, she left and took Mubashshir along. She said he’d been feeling scared since yesterday. Didn’t even go out in the

street in the evening to play. Talking might help dispel his fear and some of my own frightening thoughts.”

“Did you meet with any of the neighbors?”

“Yes. In the morning I first went to visit Taj Bibi. I thought if she could let go of her former resentment and come over here, why couldn’t I go see her. Even though I knew it was fear that had brought her here, I went to visit her anyway.”

“That was nice of you. When one is beset by difficulties, it’s better to let go of petty gripes. What did she say?”

“What else could she say? Just cried her heart out. Her house is chock-full of the dowry stuff for her two daughters. If rioting gets underway, she fears everything will be destroyed. How will she get the girls wed if that happens?”

“God will be merciful.”

“After I sat down, Master Lateef’s daughter-in-law Kulsum, Phuphi Zainab, Nasira’s sister-in-law Fatima, Batool, Qudsia, and Lord knows how many others also came in.”

“Yeah? So what did you talk about?”

“Is there any other subject anywhere these days besides ‘What’s going to happen?’ The same question echoes everywhere. Had there been only one household, its inmates would have gone crazy from fear. Since there are many, we take heart from seeing each other, and pray to God, singly and collectively, for our safety.”

“Did Masi Jannat show up too? She’s quite chummy-chummy with Taj Bibi, isn’t she?”

Amtul started to laugh and said, “She got held up today. She took our advice. To stop Munawwar from wandering around the city, she locked him up inside. She can’t very well move around herself, can she? So she’s sitting by the window outside consoling him. In the morning he was very angry. We could hear his screams even here. He’s quieter now, but Masi hasn’t let him go. She still has him locked up.”

Early in the morning, as Bashir Ahmad slept in the courtyard under the open sky, he didn’t wake up slowly as normal. His eyes popped open suddenly, as if someone had hit the light switch. The first thought that sailed through his mind was that Friday had finally come. What did God have in store for them that day? May the good Lord be merciful! The sounds of the azan came rippling through the air from loudspeakers everywhere. The night had been oppressively sultry, but a pleasant breeze was blowing now. Fresh, glistening, white jasmine was scattering its pungent fragrance everywhere in the courtyard. A swelled up jujube tree stood out front making noise like a clucking hen. Deep inside the tree, a tiny spar-

row on a branch made a short peep to check whether morning had come yet, just as Bashir Ahmad had thought that perhaps that day wasn't Friday when he first opened his eyes. On the adjoining cot, Amtul slept soundly with her hand on Mubashshir. Shaking her, Bashir said, "Get up now. You'll miss the *Fajr* prayer." In this house too, the everyday routine soon took over the newborn day. Bashir Ahmad got ready to go to the courts. Placing his breakfast before him, his wife said, "It would be better if you didn't go to the courts today. Who knows what might happen."

"Nothing will happen. There's no need to get nervous. My clients will be lined up outside the courts, waiting impatiently. If I don't show up on time, I'll be derelict in my duty. And look, the courts are the nerve center of the district. News of all sorts of incidents reach there first. Appropriate steps can be taken expeditiously if you learn early enough about any change in the situation. Sitting at home there's little I can do to insure the safety of a handful of Ahmadis in Sultanpur. Seriously, you don't think our house is a sanctuary, do you? It isn't for us anyway. For the others we're like fish in water-pots. They'll grab us and throw us whenever they want and we'll be dead and gone. In the event of an attack, we would be killed like flies with a spray pump if we're inside. Our safety lies in only one thing: that riots don't start at all. We can't just stop them cooped up inside the house."

Amtul heard him but didn't say anything and started crying, so bitterly that her body convulsed with the silent intensity of her sobs. Bashir Ahmad gathered her in his arms, kissed her on the forehead and said, "You have to give courage to the other women. How will you do that if you lose heart yourself? In hard times, if a person foregoes patience and endurance, wouldn't that be like admitting defeat even before the battle has begun?"

"It's all right. You go now. I'm okay. I was overcome momentarily. It's over now. I have complete trust in God that He will protect us."

"The rally will be held after the *Juma* prayer. I and the other workers from the street will be home after the prayer."

As Bashir Ahmad came out he saw three policemen standing outside the street's iron gate. One of them even had a Kalashnikov with him. They recognized Bashir Ahmad, greeted him, informed him that the officials had sent them there to safeguard the street and asked them to let him know about it. Bashir Ahmad said, "Thank you and your officers very much. But your presence here at this time is unnecessary; it may even be provocative. It would be better if you came here after the *Juma* prayer. Please let your officers know that three people may not be enough if riots break out. It would be more effective if your number could be increased to ten." After he left, the policemen consulted among themselves for some time and then walked back to the police station.

Bashir Ahmad finished his work at the court around half past twelve. As he was getting ready to go home, he heard an unsubstantiated report that some burned sheets of the Qur'an were found in Noor Nagar. No details were available about where those sheets had come from, under what circumstances they were discovered, or who was responsible for burning them. He immediately sensed that surely this devilry was pre-planned to implicate the Ahmadis. Anyone could have guessed that on that day of all days such an accusation could take a dangerous turn for the Ahmadis. He proceeded straightaway to the office of the Deputy Superintendent of Police to verify if such an incident had indeed occurred, or whether it was just rumormongering. And if it had taken place, had an initial report of the incident been filed? There it was confirmed for him that, no, it wasn't just a rumor. At twelve noon, a man named Sarfaraz Husain, one of Noor Nagar's residents, had submitted a report that around 10:00 a.m. a man named Muhammad Ahmad was standing in the courtyard of the Ahmadiyyah temple (which they insisted on calling a mosque) and was setting fire to some Qur'anic sheets. Munir Ahmad, Nabi Ahmad, Nasrullah and Naseruddin, all Ahmadis, were also standing in the courtyard of the temple helping and egging him on. The submitter of the report also handed over some burned sheets of the Qur'an, which he was able to salvage with difficulty, as evidence. He also stated that many such sheets lay scattered at the place in question. Besides Sarfaraz Husain, Muhammad Din, Ghulam Nabi, and Rehmat Khan were present at the scene and had witnessed the entire episode with their own eyes. When Bashir Ahmad inquired about the Deputy Sahib, he was told that he had gone to Noor Nagar in his jeep, followed by twenty policemen and two thanedars from the district capital in a police lorry. The form the circumstances had taken, thanks to the sordid plot masterminded by the enemy, assured him of the total destruction that lay ahead. For a while he just stood there, stupefied and unable to think. He didn't know what to do for the preservation of the local Ahmadis now that the administration, the religious fanatics, and Ahmadis' personal enemies had perpetrated such a frightful intrigue. Unknowingly his steps took him to the Assistant Commissioner who happened still to be in his office. Without permission, he rushed into the office and said, "Sir, the whole scheme to wipe out the local Ahmadis has now been exposed. One last time I've come to appeal to you in the name of humanity."

"Chaudhry Sahib, have a seat. You look quite worried. What happened exactly?"

"Our personal enemy Sarfaraz Husain has filed an F.I.R. against us at the police station. We've described the whole story behind his animosity

to you many times before and you know it well. According to this report, the Imam of the Noor Nagar Ahmadiyyah mosque was found standing in the courtyard of the mosque at 10:00 a.m. today setting fire to some pages of the Qur'an, and four very honorable and respectable Ahmadis, two of whom are senior citizens, were encouraging him to continue. Besides Sarfaraz Husain, there were three other eyewitnesses to the incident, all Sarfaraz Husain's personal employees. Can anyone with even the least bit of common sense believe such a story? The report was accepted without any investigation and the Deputy Sahib has proceeded to the place in question with twenty policemen and two officers so that if no disturbance had yet begun, he could help kick start it. You can easily guess the intention of the police from this. Everyone knows that Ahmadis regard the Holy Qur'an as the greatest blessing of God to mankind and know that only by following its teachings can they succeed in this world and the next? If five Ahmadis of impeccable piety would together set fire to the Qur'an on this day, what would they gain by it besides disgrace in this world and the next, and the immediate death and annihilation of the local Ahmadis to the last man, woman and child? You can imagine the calamity that will occur at the rally today when the preachers hand out this news in their own fashion to the crowd of thousands."

Having spoken his mind, Bashir Ahmad got up and started walking toward the door. The A.C. exclaimed: "Listen, Chaudhry Sahib, I'll get on the wireless right this minute...."

"You go ahead and do what you will. God be with you!"

On his way home Bashir Ahmad passed through many bazaars and alleys. He felt that the attitude and manner of the town's residents was somewhat different that day. The praises of the Prophet were coming high and loud and without a break from the mosque's loudspeakers. Many stores were shut. There were fewer customers than usual in the bazaar. Compared to the other Fridays, there was a larger crowd today, all in freshly washed clothes, with spotless white caps on their heads and flip-flops on their feet as they moved gracefully toward the grand mosque. The second they hear this patently false news of the Qur'an burning, he began to think, these people will be instantaneously transformed into a passionate, boiling, uncontrollable flood of hatred and anger, and surge forth to take their revenge. Their egotism will never allow them to tolerate a minority as small as an ant thumbing its nose at a majority as big as an elephant. There will certainly be all kinds of people—educated, bright, and sober—in the crowd, but no one will attempt to verify the assertions thrown at them from the pulpit, nor wonder if it was even possible for any Ahmadi, given his beliefs, to commit such a heinous act. No, these

simpleminded people won't go into such details; they'll jump into the crowd instead and fall ravenously upon a small settlement of innocent people to torch their houses and murder them with fearless impunity.

The bewilderment generated by the present state of affairs and dread of the consequences plunged Bashir Ahmad into a dark cave of hopelessness. For a few moments he stood at the side of a street stunned, like a statue. Then he called upon God in his heart and came to the realization that this was no time to sink into deep thoughts or speculate about the future. He knew he had to focus his thoughts on the immediate situation and make decisions based only on the exigencies of that situation. He decided he would make only one decision at a time and leave the rest to God. God will always do what is best for His creatures.

When Bashir Ahmad stepped into the house at about two, a frightened Mubashshir came up to him and started staring at him. He hugged Mubashshir up against his legs and rubbed his head lovingly with his hand. Mubashshir's condition aggrieved him. He realized that they had failed to provide a sense of security for their children, a natural right at that age. He asked Amtul, "Has there been any news from Noor Nagar?"

"No. Were you expecting any? I'll warm up the food for you."

"No, don't. I don't have time for that. Has nobody come from Noor Nagar either?"

"No. Who were you expecting? You don't even have time for a meal? Is everything all right?"

"No. Nothing is all right. Someone has set fire to the Qur'an in Noor Nagar and pinned the blame on the Ahmadis. Now only God knows what will happen to the innocent people there."

"This mischief has got to be the handiwork of Sarfaraz Husain. Who else could commit an act like that? Did you not inform the police?"

"It never came to that. The one who burned the Qur'an also went and filed an F.I.R. against us. We knew nothing; what could we have reported? A police detachment has already gone to Noor Nagar headed by the Deputy. If the place was still peaceful, it won't remain that way after their arrival. Here, the rally is in progress. You can hear it over the loudspeaker. Whoever is speaking now is accusing the Ahmadis nonstop and hurling lies about them. In a couple of hours we'll find out whether the menace will turn in the direction of our street or toward Noor Nagar. My guess is that because of the incident, it'll move toward Noor Nagar. The local population there would never agree to terrorizing the Ahmadis, or looting or torching their houses. They would have to get mercenaries from outside for that. But maybe not, the fired-up students at the rally will start marching to Noor Nagar on their own. Right now I must go call Master

Lateef and the other dignitaries of the street to my office to tell them about the recent developments. Then they can decide what steps to take next.”

Everyone was at home and got together at his call. Bashir Ahmad told them everything he knew about the incident at Noor Nagar and added that, in his view, an immediate reaction was more likely to take place there rather than in their own street. Besides their own security, they had to think of how to help the Ahmadis in Noor Nagar. The audience was struck dumb as soon as Bashir Ahmad had finished speaking. No one said anything. The terrible din of the speech going on at the rally had circumscribed the entire silent room like a thundering, rushing monsoon cloud. It was as if the little birds, their heads stuck under tree branches and their turbulent hearts beating fast and furious in a violent storm, were now face to face with the demon of death and destruction aiming to stagger them with its roar.

Finally, Master Lateef broke the long silence. He spoke as if he were talking to himself: “Who could possibly have imagined that Sarfaraz Husain would fall so low as to burn the Qur’an and lay the blame at our door just to grab a few *kanals* of land to which he is in no way entitled! As regards the problems of the Noor Nagar Ahmadis and how we can help them, nothing can be decided until someone from there comes and lets us know.”

Bashir Ahmad said, “Instead of waiting for someone to come from there, why don’t we send someone from here to find out about the situation there.”

“But if there’s really trouble there, wouldn’t our man be walking right into it?” Taj Bibi’s husband Anwaar Ahmad remarked, and added, “He might even lose his life.”

“Let’s send Ismail, the pharmacy man,” Bashir Ahmad suggested. Later, as an afterthought, he added, “But he’s too old. He may not be up to such a nerve-racking expedition. I think it would be better to send Chauhan. He’s a journalist, so no policeman would question him. Let me go and talk to him.”

“I’m not at all in favor of sending anyone who doesn’t belong to the Ahmadi community,” Master Lateef voiced his objection.

Everybody supported Master Lateef and Bashir Ahmad’s proposal was shot down so he observed, “Trust is a two-way street, never one-way. Ismail and Chauhan both hold very clear views about life that do not allow any partiality or prejudice. As regards religion, they both uphold the total freedom of the individual and are against state interference. I am fully aware of their qualities and limitations. If we trust them today in this minor matter, we may well expect some positive action from them tomorrow. It’s due to this lack of mutual trust that we’re under the dark clouds

of oppression and nobody comes forward to speak on our behalf about truth and justice. Thousands of people are at the rally. They're listening to baseless accusations against us and believing them. And all because of the trust, though eminently misplaced in this case, the speakers have created in them."

"To begin with, the issue isn't a minor one," countered Master Lateef. "Secondly, this is not the time to try new experiments. It would be better if you set them aside for another, more appropriate time."

Again everyone affirmed his argument, and again Bashir Ahmad had to remain quiet.

"You hear the sounds blaring out of the loudspeakers, don't you?" Muhammad Sharif pointed out, "Even if you ignore the speakers' condemnation of the Ahmadis, at least you can easily infer from the thundering, noisy response of the mob that there must be thousands of people in the audience. As soon as they hear the news about the Qur'an burning, their relentless torrent is going to wash away the few houses on this street like straw."

In an attempt to allay his fears, Bashir Ahmad said, "Muhammad Sharif Sahib, don't get so worked up. Have faith in God and His succor. Didn't He keep Noah's ark safe in the flood? Didn't He make the swallows defeat an army of elephants? Fear is an infectious disease; a person catches it easily from others. Keep your wits and courage about you. This is a time of trial; God-willing, it will end well for us."

"The residents of the few Ahmadi houses scattered in different areas of town have all locked their doors and left this morning," Lateef informed the group. "Good for them. At least their lives will be safe, and since their houses are located inside other localities, they won't be torched, perhaps only looted. When they come back, they'll at least have a roof over their heads, which is not the case for us: our houses will surely be looted as well as burned, and we might even lose our lives if we stay here. There's no guarantee that we'll be able to save our honor either. Why don't we abandon our houses before the rally ends? As planned, every house has prepared for departure. The women have already packed their valuables and their burqas are ready to be donned. The doors of the last two houses of the street that open onto the fields have been left unlocked, and doors that open into the street are ready to be locked from the inside. Within five minutes of a decision to evacuate, a population of eighty-nine individuals will be out in the open fields."

"And then, where do we go?" asked Anwaar Ahmad. We had decided to leave for Noor Nagar in an eventuality. Now that doesn't look safe. So where do we head off to now?"



“The decision about where and how a family will proceed will have to be made individually by the head of each household,” Master Lateef offered. “My own view is that a neighborhood in any village, town or city where there is hope of getting shelter will do. Right now, this town and Noor Nagar are under threat. The rest of the country should be comparatively safe. As soon as peace is restored, we’ll return to our homes.”

Ahmad Din added in a low tone: “If they’re still there!”

Lateef looked at his face closely; then, with a bitter smile, he exclaimed, “Right you are, sir!”

Bashir Ahmad suddenly spoke up, “No, no, Master Sahib. It shouldn’t be this way. The responsibility for some families will have to be assumed by others. For example, I’ll take Masi Jannat and Munawwar with me. Muhammad Sharif’s mother is paralytic and can’t take a step on her own at all. His children are small, he can’t carry them all alone. We’ll have to decide right now who will help in the transportation of such families. Young men should volunteer their services for such work. Right now you should make a separate duty roster for each young man and make him understand in detail what he’s expected to do. Anwaar Sahib, please take a pen and paper and make a list of the young men.” Then he addressed Master Lateef, “If we can evacuate the whole population in five minutes, we still have plenty of time. The entrance to the street has a strong iron gate. It will take the mob some time to break it down or scale it. Besides that, the houses will be locked from the inside. We’ll have about half an hour before the mob gets into the street and starts entering our houses. By that time, we’ll be easily out into the fields and on our way to our various destinations. Only then will the mob be able to get inside the houses. If we leave right now, it will be like asking for trouble. Have some patience and wait. It’s possible we may not have to vacate our houses at all. In the meanwhile, we’ll find out what the situation is in Noor Nagar.”

Thinking about the situation, Noor Ahmad wondered aloud, “The F.I.R. was filed at noon. Now it’s half past four. No one has come from Noor Nagar to give us any report.”

Muhammad Sharif said, “They must be trapped in their own misery. Who would come to tell us?”

“If we inquire from the police station, we’ll certainly find out something or other about the situation there,” Bashir Ahmad observed. That would make it easier to come to some decision about how to move people over.”

“The rally is still going on,” Lateef said. “The ones who aren’t inside the meeting hall are split into small groups and are standing here and there in the street, talking. The atmosphere must be getting heated up

against the Ahmadis. It would be dangerous for an Ahmadi to even step out of this street, let alone head off to the police station. The second someone from Sultanpur points him out, the fanatics from out of town will make short work of him.”

“All right,” Bashir Ahmad gave in, “we’ll wait.” Then he addressed everyone: “Did you notice the trickery of the Administration? Since this morning, they have entrusted three policemen to the security of this street. What security can three policemen provide if the mob turns this way? They’ll turn tail the minute they see the mob. There’s one thing, though; if some new policemen have come on duty, they might perhaps have some news of Noor Nagar.”

He got up and looked out. The same three policemen on duty in the morning had closed the iron gate and sat behind it smoking in the street. In the meantime, the people gathered in Bashir Ahmad’s office heard the Imam and chief preacher of Sultanpur’s Jamia Mosque screaming into the loudspeaker, “The enemies of God and the followers of a false prophet have set fire to the Qur’an in Noor Nagar. They have challenged the lovers of the Prophet and the guardians of the sanctity of the Qur’an. It is imperative upon every Muslim to reach Noor Nagar right now and punish these enemies of Islam. One hundred staff-bearing students, their shrouds tied around their heads, are ready to set off for Noor Nagar. Join them and live up to your religious obligation.” No sooner had he finished than a tumultuous noise rose from the meeting hall. For many minutes thereafter, the air vibrated with the ear-splitting slogans of “Go, Go, Go to Noor Nagar.” When the loudspeakers were turned off, it seemed to the people in Bashir Ahmad’s office as if a sudden, crushing silence had engulfed them, and that what they had just heard wasn’t reality but a hallucination or nightmare. During the preacher’s announcement and slogans, they were gripped by a feeling of stark terror and silently stared helplessly at each other’s faces with questioning looks. Then they began evading each other’s eyes, and a strange embarrassment overtook them. Meanwhile Rehmat Ilahi from Noor Nagar entered the room perspiring heavily and, after greeting them, said, “It took me three hours to do this one-hour journey. Lord, with what difficulty have I gotten here! I had to walk through the fields!”

A volley of questions rained down on him to tell them the whole story.

“Wait a little,” Bashir Ahmad said to the man. “Take a drink of water and catch your breath first. Then we’ll talk.”

After his perspiration had dried, Bashir Ahmad asked him, “How did the incident of the burning of the Qur’anic pages take place? And who did it?”

“Nobody knows who did it or how. Around twelve noon, when Maulvi

Mahmood Ahmad opened the mosque for the *Juma* prayer, he saw some half-burned sheets of the Qur'an flying about in the courtyard. He gathered them, put them in a plastic bag and placed them above the spare copies of the Qur'an in the cupboard. Meanwhile people started coming in for the prayer. Whoever came in had a few partially burned pages in his hands. When I got there, I saw a dozen young men walking around the mosque, on Maulvi Sahib's order, collecting the scattered half-burned sheets and putting them in plastic bags. I joined them. We picked up each and every sheet. We were all wondering what kind of crazy person would do such a thing, certainly no one in his right mind would. None of us even considered the possibility that it could be part of a conspiracy against us. We all agreed that some kid had happened upon a box of matches and a sheaf of some old pages from the Qur'an and just indulged in his passion for setting fire to paper. Around 1:30, while the sermon was still in progress, the police surrounded the mosque. A Deputy and two thanedars entered the mosque. Maulvi Muhammad Ahmad, Nabi Ahmad, Nasrullah and Naseruddin were handcuffed and handed over to two policemen who put them into the police van. When they searched the mosque, all they could find were the half-burned pages of the Qur'an inside the cupboard and they took those into their custody. A temporary police post has been set up in the village and it has been announced that anyone who steps out of his house before 5:00 a.m. will be shot. Gun-toting policemen are patrolling the streets. I have no knowledge of what happened after that. I came to inform you folks."

"The rioters must have set out for Noor Nagar by now," said Bashir Ahmad, thinking. "How they're treated when they get there, or what they do to the Ahmadis, will depend on the behavior of the police. Anyway, our first job is to arrange for the bail of the four who have been arrested and see what direction the police will attempt to take the investigation. If it supports Sarfaraz Husain and his claim, then we must file a protest with the local, district and provincial officials and do it in a timely manner. We must communicate to them immediately every attempt of the miscreants to twist the facts."

After he had gone that far, the policemen guarding the street knocked at the office door. When they were called in, one of them said to Bashir Ahmad, "Sir, the rally is over. Nobody has dared to come this way. By God's grace the whole street and its residents are perfectly safe. We would have confronted them if they had dared. Even now, if there's any service we can render, let us know."

Bashir Ahmad asked, "Were you given food and refreshments on time?"

"Yes sir. You've been very kind. We were well looked after."

Bashir Ahmad said to Master Lateef, “Master Ji, please give each one of them a hundred rupees.”

When the money had been handed out, Bashir Ahmad said to them, “We thank you very much. You have our permission to leave.”

After the policemen had left, Bashir Ahmad suggested, “I think Anwaar Ahmad should go out on his bicycle and get some news of the situation in the city, whether there’s peace and quiet or whether there’s been any change on account of the rally and the news of the burning of the Qur’an. And also, Anwaar Sahib, I don’t think it would be wise for you to venture into the area of the Jamia Mosque. Participants from distant areas and students from neighboring towns will still be there. They won’t start leaving until tomorrow.”

With the departure of the policemen and Anwaar Ahmad, and the disappearance of tension from the faces of the dignitaries, everyone felt that the danger of immediate riots had been postponed and that things were returning to normal. Now everyone started to make some excuse to get up and leave. Finally, only Bashir Ahmad, Master Lateef, Muhammad Hanif and Rehmat Ali from Noor Nagar were left in the office.

“The news of the Qur’an burning and the imposition of a curfew in Noor Nagar,” Bashir Ahmad began, “won’t take long to spread throughout the country. It may echo even in the halls of the provincial and central governments and instructions will be issued demanding immediate action for the preservation of peace. If this not very well-known place becomes the center of everyone’s attention, it’s very likely that rioting may not erupt in Sultanpur after all.”

“I don’t agree,” Master Lateef said. “Aren’t you assuming too much? It won’t take much for the local administration to create trouble and then come up with the excuse that the public became so enraged by the Ahmadis burning the Qur’an that all their efforts to control them failed.”

Bashir Ahmad considered that for a while and then said, “Yes, Master Sahib, that is also possible. In the end, everything hinges upon the intention of the local officials.”

Meanwhile Anwaar Ahmad returned from his tour of the town. “The stores and streets are all open,” he informed them, “and people are busy with their usual occupations. There’s no obstruction anywhere. The educated, informed people think that someone has exploited the rally to launch a veritable campaign of hostility against the Ahmadis. But such people aren’t too numerous and even though they’ll call a spade a spade, they won’t take any practical step in support of their view. Some people are terrified by the incident of the burning and are sure God’s wrath will now descend upon them. Many are just standing around, totally stunned, asking

each other in hushed tones, ‘Why in the world did the Ahmadis do such a thing?’ But I didn’t see anyone in a rage or stirred up. The four Ahmadis arrested and brought here from Noor Nagar are in the police lockup. I didn’t see them; I just gathered information about them and came back.”

“Shouldn’t we perhaps send them food and other necessary things,” Rehmat Ali suggested.

“Don’t worry,” Bashir Ahmad assured him. “Everything will be taken care of, but we still need to find out what transpired in Noor Nagar after you left. Guess I’ll have to go myself to find out.”

“Bashir Sahib, did you think carefully about what Anwaar Ahmad just said?” Master Lateef asked. “What I gathered from it is this: the people who come together and make a crowd, namely the public, are straddling the fence at the moment. If someone incites them, they’ll get up and go along with him and do whatever right or wrong he makes them do. But if someone told them the real facts, they would step down from the fence and quietly head home. We have no means to communicate our views to them, nor can we get in touch with them indirectly. There’s no one around to talk to them on our behalf either. I don’t know any. Do you? Even if there were such a person, there hasn’t been that much understanding between him and us to make him believe what we say. Nor has any attempt ever been made to create such understanding. Who can we look to, to come forward in such critical circumstances and explain our point of view, to tear up the curtain of lies and have the courage to tell the truth? He should be someone the townsfolk trust and believe. So, under circumstances such as these, all we can do is depend on the administration. If the administration desires, Sultanpur can remain safe, but don’t we already know which way they’re inclined? Now as for the Government’s secret instructions about us, well, we have no inkling of them yet. Chances are they wouldn’t be in our favor either. Perhaps it’s under the cover of the same instructions that the Deputy has been helping his friends. And the A.C., as you already know, is a weak man.”

“Master Sahib,” Bashir Ahmad answered, “your analysis is perfect. We and the public suffer from a lack of mutual trust; nonetheless most ordinary people usually stay in a neutral position. There are plenty of people in every town and city who consider religious strife such as this a danger to the peace and well-being of the country and are against those who start it. But they’re not organized. Not long ago, I offered a proposal in this connection, but it was rejected. Anyway, to depend entirely upon the administration to guard the property, life and honor of some eighty or ninety people would be putting all our eggs in one basket. And you’re quite familiar with the chameleon-like character of the administration. It can’t

be trusted.”

“I hope you won’t mind if I say that your proposal was turned down with good reason,” Master Lateef quickly remarked. “It was an entirely different matter. It had to do with communicating information upon which other decisions were to be based. Entrusting someone inexperienced and unconcerned with this sort of matter could have been dangerous. Now you’re talking about trying to establish contact with the public. In that regard, it would be good if the people you trust do succeed. And even if they don’t, because of being incapable or ill-intentioned, there won’t be much damage. The situation will stay as it is. It won’t deteriorate further.”

“Master Sahib, how can you expect any positive results if those wishing to inspire trust themselves begin without it,” Bashir Ahmad argued. “Anyway, I’ll go and talk to Ismail and Chauhan. Let’s see what help they can give us in the matter.”

It was already dark when Bashir Ahmad reached Ismail’s store. The lights had already come on in the bazaar. Then again, not many customers show up in the main bazaars of Sultanpur in the evening. It was the same that day. This lack of bustle and activity wasn’t due to the rally; it was a matter of daily routine. Alone, lost in his thoughts, Ismail was taking papers out of the table drawer and examining them, as though looking for something in particular. Bashir’s greeting startled him. He looked at him, smiled and said, “Array, Bashir Sahib, you? You really shouldn’t have come out this way today.”

“The rally is over and done with. What’s to worry about now? Even if I had come out during the rally, no one in Sultanpur would have dared raise his hand to me—you know that. Where is your ‘gang’? They didn’t get together today?”

“Shaikh Sardar Ali and the Haji were both at the rally. Afterwards they must have gone home tired. Ahmad and Sufi were here, but the loud-speakers were so noisy you could hardly carry on a conversation. Disgusted, they finally left too. Chauhan didn’t show up today. I don’t know where he’s disappeared.”

“Ismail Sahib, is there a way to inform people that the goal of this rally was not to safeguard a particular religious viewpoint, that it was a squabble over a few *kanals* of land between two people, one of whom, unfortunately, happened to be an Ahmadi. That’s what transformed a molehill into a mountain and threw the lives and property of hundreds of people into jeopardy. Had the two parties involved been of the same faith, the matter would never have gone beyond the courts, and ordinary people wouldn’t have become involved. What ignited the gunpowder was actually the difference between the beliefs of the parties. The incident of the

Qur'an burning is indeed regrettable, but it's still a link in the same chain. The truth about that is also hidden from the public. The public needs to know who those people are and the ends they were pursuing that has resulted in the commission of such a beastly act."

"Who did such a crazy thing—do you know?"

Bashir Ahmad told Ismail whatever details he knew at that time and repeated: how do you inform people of the truth so their anger cools down?

"Isn't this precisely the duty of the newspapers?" Ismail said, and added, "But I don't think any newspaper, not even at the national level, can be persuaded to show enough courage to go against the policies of the well-organized religious parties and publish the explanation you've given."

"If Chauhan could publish these details in his weekly, at least our position would become clear to the local population and they would see how groundless their complaint against us is."

"This week's issue is already out. It'll be distributed tomorrow so nothing new can be included. The next issue will be out in a week. By that time whatever is to happen will have happened and any after-the-fact explanation would be pointless. Again, if you ask me, it would be difficult for Chauhan to publish it. I doubt if he would go against the wishes of the A.C. and the police. You're already familiar with the trust he enjoys with the town's important people. If he tells the truth, people will say he sold out and is telling lies. And given his reputation, his readers will believe this immediately. That would harm your case more than help it.

"Another way would be to stand at the corner of the main bazaar or in some crowded chawk and have someone state the facts briefly and truthfully, without dressing them up. This isn't a big city, you know. Just two or three speeches of this sort and every child in town would know the true facts. It would be difficult for any preacher afterwards to exploit anyone emotionally merely by the strength of his lies, or persuade them to become willing tools for his selfish motives.

"There's only a danger until the out-of-towners, especially the students herded here in large numbers, have left. Now, in such a short time, how and where will you find a person who's trusted by people and whose words are believable?"

Looking straight into Ismail's eyes, in an attempt to appeal to him, Bashir Ahmad said to him with all gravity, "Instead of looking elsewhere, Ismail Sahib, I suggest you yourself give it a try?"

Ismail erupted in a hearty laugh. "Chaudhry Sahib," he said, "you couldn't be more simpleminded! It's one thing to sit in a chair, within the four walls of your own store and broadcast your views, and quite another to stand in front of a hostile mob and talk it into changing its beliefs. I

wish I had that kind of skill, but I don't. And also, please remember one thing: don't ever let your vanity get the better of you to try such a thing yourself, or even allow anyone from your *jama'at* to try. Before you had so much as opened your mouth you would be physically assaulted and violently removed from the premises. I've been watching the conduct of religious hatred since 1947. It's only waiting for an excuse to flare up; once it does, it spreads everywhere like wild fire."

Deep lines of despair cut into the faces of both men. They sat quietly for a long time, each sunk in his own thoughts. At last Bashir Ahmad stood up, saying, "So, there's no other option now except to look towards a dishonest administration."

"Yes, that's just what the situation demands."

On his way home Bashir Ahmad was thinking that in his haste he had tried to work miracles. Such a job required careful planning. To attempt to do something quickly that by its nature demanded a much longer time was plain stupidity. True, a stitch in time does save nine, but sitting forever waiting to apply a stitch where there is neither a rip nor even any cloth is equally stupid. To grow a mustard crop, you must first prepare the ground, then plant the seeds, and then wait four months while you water the land and take care of it. First the plants will raise their tiny heads; then slowly, after some time they'll take the shape of the crop itself. The impatience of one's desires can't force the plants out of the earth sooner.

Along the way, he ran into many acquaintances. Some just greeted him and kept going. Some he shook hands with. Some he even inquired about their welfare and with some he had rather lengthy conversations. Everyone's attitude was normal; he couldn't detect anything unusual. "Would these people kill me because my religious belief isn't the same as theirs?" he wondered. "No, they would never do that. I mustn't allow mistrust to creep into my heart. They're nice, simple-hearted folks, but like all simple-hearted folks, easily deceived. But then, we haven't done anything to save them from deception either. If we had, long ago, prepared them mentally for the kind of crisis they're facing today, I wouldn't be having the apprehensions I have now." When he left Ismail's company, he was quite disheartened by Ismail's refusal and by the blow Ismail had delivered to his own vanity. Now, though, he could see that Ismail was right in what he said, that what he said was based on facts. In this unsettled time, Ismail wasn't trying to dodge anything. He had carefully analyzed every aspect of the issue and shown him how his proposal was unworkable at this time.

As he approached his street he saw that the gate closed in the morning was still closed, even padlocked from the inside. When he called out his son Mubashshir's name, a young man from the roof of the house next to



his own responded, "Uncle, I'm coming down."

The young man opened one half of the iron gate just a wee bit and quickly closed it again and secured the gate with the padlock after Bashir Ahmad entered.

"This is a good thing you guys are doing," he said.

"Master Sahib has ordered the gate to remain closed and locked at all times. He has asked one alert young man to stand guard on the roof of each of the four corner houses of the street. The watch will be maintained until morning in four-hour shifts. The duty roster has been set up. At midnight Aslam will take my place. I'll hand the key to the gate over to him and go to sleep. At four, he'll wake me and go to sleep himself."

"Where is Master Sahib?"

"Sir, he's having his supper."

Hearing the word supper, he suddenly felt his own need for food. He turned towards his own door, saying, "Son, ask him to visit me in my office when he's finished eating."

A frightened Mubashshir opened the door and scanned his father's face despondently. Bashir Ahmad patted him on his head. In the light of a single bulb in the courtyard, some women wrapped in white dupattas sat quietly on three cots with their heads hung low, immersed in thought. Bashir Ahmad recognized his own wife, his sister, Masi and Taj Bibi, but couldn't recognize the other two women. After greeting his sister, he asked her, "Nasira, please bring my food to my office."

Masi said, "Son, Bashir Ahmad, we're about to leave. Come here and eat out in the open. It must be hot in your office."

"It's not a problem, Masi. You stay. I've got to be in my office anyway."

"Son, tell us just one thing. How long is this trouble going to last? I've locked Munawwar in his room since yesterday morning. You know he's a free-flying bird. I don't think he can take this imprisonment much longer. He weeps bitterly, and when he does I start to cry with him. What can I do? My heart breaks seeing him in this condition."

"Masi, if you could just somehow get through this one more day, everything will be all right afterward. Munawwar will be able to roam the town freely as he did before and there won't be any danger to him."

Taj Bibi, feeling helpless because of the circumstances and after a great deal of hesitation, slipped her dupatta over her forehead and pulled it down even lower with her hands. For the first time in her life she finally mustered the courage to address Bashir Ahmad directly: "Brother, what's going to happen to us? I'm exhausted thinking about it. I can understand nothing, nor does anyone tell me anything. Why is it that people have so suddenly become thirsty for our blood? What wrong have we done? Where

are we going to go this time if we are uprooted yet again?”

“Sister, today was the most difficult day of all. By God’s grace it has passed without incident. We can expect some danger until tomorrow afternoon. If that passes in peace and quiet, it will all be well again, God willing. Please don’t be too worried.”

“How can I not? You wouldn’t know, but our whole lives we’ve denied ourselves even little things to arrange all the necessities for the dowries of our two daughters. The wedding date is only fifteen days away. If some wretched ones rob us of their dowries, what are we going to do? How will we send off our daughters?” She hid her face in her dupatta and began crying.

“Sister Taj Bibi, have some courage. Crying won’t solve anything. We had nothing at all when we arrived here, we left everything we owned behind for fear of the Sikhs? We were penniless. Now, by God’s grace, we hardly lack anything. Don’t lose heart. The toughest time is already over. Tomorrow will also pass peacefully.” Bashir Ahmad’s voice rose a little as he spoke.

Meanwhile, one of the two newly arrived women said, “For six months my old mother has lain in bed. Her health is so precarious that she’s almost at her last breath.”

“All the necessary arrangements are in place. If, God forbid, there’s an assault, the young men who’ve been assigned that duty will take her out on a cot.”

“As far as the bus station, fine. What will we do after that? How would we proceed from there? Mother isn’t even fit to travel by bus or train.” She began crying and said through her weeping, “The neighbors on the street won’t let us leave now. They say that if we leave, it will start a stampede: everyone will abandon their houses and run. And a stampede, as you know, would surely invite an attack. Our houses will be looted and torched. Tell us what we should do. Had we left earlier, we’d have borne whatever loss was our fate, but at least we could have taken our mother away to die in some decent place. Who knows when the enemy will come charging in.”

“How can anyone predict when the enemy is going to be here, or if he’s going to be here at all? Maybe he relishes it more by dangling us on the gallows. What’s he going to do when he arrives? Will plundering our houses satisfy him or will he also need to burn them? Will he be happy killing us or would he much rather see us writhing in pain and agony? His one obvious and clear objective is to make us so miserable that we abandon our faith in desperation. That’s not going to happen. We’ll give up our lives, but not our faith.”

The woman sensed irascibility and a hiss of anger in his voice. She

looked at his face once in astonishment and then started weeping and sobbing loudly. Amtul got up, wrapped her arms around her and comforted her lovingly.

All of a sudden Masi spoke up authoritatively, “Bashir Ahmad! Relax! Have some patience, son. Cooped up inside the house, we suffer more than you do. Our troubles and difficulties have become as big as mountains, which you know nothing about. Perhaps all this running around sustains your heart a bit, getting good news and bad, discovering what’s happening or is likely to. But for us, days and nights have stretched to infinity. Then there are these frightening thoughts that crowd our minds, the lurking fears that weigh on our hearts. When they totally suffocate us, we run here helplessly in the hope that we may find some means of solace. We don’t come to bother you.”

“You’re right, Masi. Actually, I’m feeling quite tired. Perhaps I couldn’t control my voice. God has brought us so far under His protection. The danger exists only for a few more hours. That too shall pass, by His grace. Please don’t let yourself worry too much.”

Then Bashir Ahmad spoke to the woman whom he hadn’t met before, “Bibi, ... sister, please don’t be sad. Tomorrow morning, after the *Fajr* prayer, in whatever way possible, I’ll arrange for you and your mother to leave here safely.”

Masi called, “Nasira *beti*, bring your brother his meal!”

“Masi, I’ve laid it out in his office.”

Master Lateef began telling Bashir Ahmad, “Rehmat Ali and I took food over to the police station.”

“Good, but did you get to see the detainees?”

“Yes, we did. Well, it was just a matter of a few rupees, anyway.” Both of them began to laugh.

“I’m worried about Uncle Nabi Ahmad and Brother Nasrullah. They’re both quite old. At this age they should be resting and taking it easy, not going through some horrific detention in this miserably hot weather.”

“Array, Chaudhry Sahib, what do you take them for? They’re full of vigor and courage. They’ve already had their first run-in with the thanedar.”

“How’s that?”

“When the call for the *Maghrib* prayer was heard, our people asked Maulvi Muhammad Ahmad to lead the prayer and lined up behind him. The thanedar passed by them and stopped. He said, “The Ahmadis are not allowed to pray in the open. What you’re doing is against the law. Stop the prayer right now.” But they kept it up. When they had finished,

he came again and said, “I warned you but you didn’t stop. I’ll have to register a challan against you.” Whereupon Uncle Nabi Ahmad blurted out, “A while ago we performed our *Asr* prayer here. And we’ll also perform our *Isba* prayer here. Your coercive laws mean nothing in the eyes of God. So long as we’re here, you may lodge five challans a day against us. We don’t care.”

“Then?”

“Then we don’t know whether he filed the challans or not. Perhaps he gave up the idea, considering the amount of paperwork involved. When they offered their *Isba* prayer, the thanedar was there in the police station, but he didn’t raise any objection.”

“I wish they hadn’t made all that fuss with the present situation. Anyway, tell me, did you get any fresh news of Noor Nagar?”

“We inquired from the scribe at the police station, but at that time no good or bad news about Noor Nagar had come to light, so we guessed that the curfew was still on and it was quiet there. Perhaps no news itself could be taken as good news.”

“Master Sahib, it was announced on the loudspeaker that a hundred students have left town. Even if no one from the local population joined them, a hundred club-carrying students is a sizeable number. They can create havoc if they’re bent on harming thirty or forty unarmed Ahmadis confined to their homes. The wonder is, though, where have they gone? Perhaps the police officers thought that if anything happened in Noor Nagar during the curfew, the responsibility would fall squarely on them and they would have a hard time explaining it away so they may have cancelled the entire plan of assault and plunder. Now, how can we know if the students were stopped before they left or if they were asked to turn back midway. The D.S.P.’s main objective was to teach Munir Ahmad a lesson and send a warning to the Ahmadis of Noor Nagar. That has been accomplished. Let’s hope nothing untoward will happen there now.”

“If they can’t do anything in Noor Nagar because of the constraints of the circumstances, I hope they don’t turn up here in the morning to punish us instead.”

“I doubt if that would happen. Had Noor Nagar been a town rather than a village, the rally would have taken place there. Sultanpur’s misfortune is that it’s the only big town in Noor Nagar’s vicinity so they were naturally forced to choose it for the rally. The real target of the D.S.P. was Noor Nagar. That whole incident of the Qur’an burning was just a ruse to turn people’s attention in that direction.”

Undone by the day’s heat, fatigue and worry, Bashir Ahmad finally fell on his bed in the courtyard at 11:00, but couldn’t fall asleep. In every

which way, the more he tried to force himself to sleep, the more it shunned him. He told himself countless times that whatever shape circumstances were going to assume tomorrow morning must surely have solidified in the womb of time by now. His worrying about it wouldn't change anything; it would only make him more nervous. The mind has its own *modus operandi*, its own logic. If it was ever contented with what the tongue told it, it would court its own disaster. Whatever step it would take next must first be measured against its own touchstone of what is good or bad for it. And if ever caught in a state of indecision, it keeps both the body and soul in a state of relentless tension.

Tired of constantly tossing and turning on the cot, Bashir Ahmad sat up. Amtul and Mubashshir were sound asleep on the cot next to his. He felt envious of their sleep. Then he thought: who knows, with their nerves frayed by fear they might suddenly wake up from horrid dreams and feel envious of his sleeplessness. Treading softly, he walked up the stairs onto the open roof. Mahmud, a distant nephew, was standing guard. The other boy, Siddiq, finished with his duty at 12:00 and was now sleeping on the cot. The atmosphere was close and muggy as a result of heavy rains on the distant mountains. The moon, nibbled on one side like a child's stale flatbread, glowed feebly as if through a dusty glass. A weary silence and the pale moonlight spread all around. Beyond the closed gate of the street, the trees stood still and looked like their own shadows. Toward the bazaar side of the street, the chain of haphazard, interconnected houses was so quiet that it resembled the ruins of some devastated city, not a place where humans lived. In a few places, the faint glow of electric bulbs inside their hanging blue fixtures was too feeble to light up anything besides the surrounding silence.

At first Mahmud was surprised to see him, but then he thought that Bashir Ahmad must have come to check on whether he was remiss in his watchman's duty. He went up close to Bashir Ahmad and spoke very quietly, as if taking care lest the silence be stirred up by his voice and crash and scatter everywhere, informing the enemy of their secret watch. The enemy might use this knowledge against them—might even send them to their deaths.

"Uncle, go and rest. Working all day must have tired you. You can rest assured, I won't fall asleep while on duty."

Bashir Ahmad smiled to hear that. "No, son, I haven't come to nose around. I just couldn't sleep. It's so miserably muggy downstairs, so I thought I'd come up. No one would behave irresponsibly during this difficult time, I know. This would have disastrous consequences for everyone. You're a very cautious young man even under normal circumstances. How

could you possibly go to sleep while on duty?"

One of Mahmud's ardent wishes was to be like Bashir Ahmad. Hearing his praises, his neck stiffened a little and a smile of pride and gratefulness crept over his lips. Walking along the wall which served as a cover against detection, turning in all directions, lifting himself on his toes, he watched over the very depressing night and the even more desolate moonlight for a long time wondering whether he had raised his toes to look outside or to peek inside himself. Perhaps he was that night, or that night was him. Once, in the distance, he heard the faint bark of a dog. It seemed to come from inside the well of night, the last yelp of a canine before drowning. In the senseless quiet of an indifferent desert, the bark was the dog's last desperate attempt to feel some remnant of life before the darkness closed in on him. Then a thought flitted across his mind: What if the farmers had watered the fields we had designated for our escape? It would be one hell of a job making the women and children wade through mud.

"What time is it now, Mahmud?" Bashir Ahmad asked.

The young man looked at his watch and said, "Quarter to three, Uncle."

"Yes, I remember. There is something for you to do."

"Tell me."

"After the *Fajr* prayer both you and Siddiq should go to the stand and get a comfortable cab for Lahore. You know Safia Bibi, Abdul Rashid's wife—she wants to take her sick mother to Lahore. Get her carefully seated in the cab. The driver will drop them off wherever they want to go in Lahore. Fix the fare with the driver. Take the money from me and pay him in advance."

"Will do, Uncle, just as you wish. Be assured."

Bashir Ahmad had just turned to go back down when he heard someone call from near the iron gate, "Bashir Sahib, Chaudhry Bashir Sahib!"

Bashir and Mahmud looked at each other as if asking whom it could be. Bashir Ahmad peeked over the restraining wall. He saw four men standing in the bazaar outside the locked gate.

"Who is it, brother?"

"Rehmat Ilahi's younger brother Mushtaq Ali from Noor Nagar. I've got three other boys from Noor Nagar with me."

"Is everything all right?"

"We'll tell you when you let us in."

Within five minutes every house on the street was awake. Voices were heard. Lights came on. It seemed like sehri time during the month of Ramadan. Bashir Ahmad opened the door to his office and seated the young men. Within minutes a crowd of men of every age, young and old, gathered in the room. Rehmat Ilahi and Master Lateef also walked in.

Mushtaq Ali and his three companions, none of whom was more than fourteen or fifteen, were so nervous and scared that they found it difficult to describe the incidents in a continuous, coherent manner. In the middle of one thing, they would jump to something else. “Tell us,” Bashir Ahmad asked Mushtaq Ali, “did anyone die, ours or theirs?”

“No.”

“Thank God. At least that’s comforting news. Now tell us, was anyone injured?”

“Yeah, they torched everything we had.”

“Answer only the questions I ask. Things will come later.”

“Yes, there are injuries.”

“On our side or theirs, or both?”

“Only on our side.”

“Who and how?”

Mushtaq Ali looked at his brother Rehmat Ilahi, as if he alone could understand his words, and said, “Towards the west of the village ... at the edge of the settlement ... inside the street ... the lone Ahmadi house, you know, Ghulam Ali Kashmiri’s—the man who drives Uncle Munir Ahmad’s tractor and whose family came from somewhere else to settle here ...”

“Fine, fine, Mushtaq Ali. Go on. What happened to them?”

“The club-wielding guys got to their house first. They forced them to open the door and kicked and slapped them. Then they threw all their belongings out into the street, poured some kerosene over the pile and set it on fire. You know Ghulam Ali’s wife, Sakina? At first, she just stood near the burning stuff and cried. Then she began pulling and dragging things out of the fire. At that, one man hit her hard on her back with his club. She fell into the fire face down. Ghulam Ali pulled her out and started pouring dirt on her clothes to put the fire out. Now they’re bringing her here on the potter’s cart.”

“What were you doing so far away from your house?” Bashir asked.

“I didn’t go there.”

“So, who told you all this?”

Looking toward one of his companions, he said, “This is Amjad. He’s Ghulam Ali’s son. He told us all this as we were coming here.”

When Bashir Ahmad looked at Amjad, he saw the boy had both of his hands on his face and was crying and sobbing inconsolably. Rehmat Ilahi got up, pressed Amjad to his chest, kissed him and comforted him.

“Mushtaq Ali, it would be better if you told us just your own story,” Bashir Ahmad said. “Just forget what happened to others and how. Tell us how you came to know about the attack?”

“What attack? There wasn’t any. No cannons were fired, no bombs fell.”

“Okay. Forget about the attack. Just tell us what happened to you.”

“Our Noor Nagar mosque is located towards the east, a short distance from the street. There is some vacant land around it. The mosque itself would be about fifty *karams* from our house. There are three other Ahmadi houses near ours. They’re joined to each other. In front there is a road and there is farmland behind. The other houses are on the left and right, at some distance.”

Becoming impatient, Bashir Ahmad said testily, “We know the location and the geography of your house. Tell us the story. What happened and how?”

“I was asleep with my family outside in the courtyard when, around eleven, my Maa Ji woke me up and said, ‘Look, there are flames rising from the area of the mosque.’ My father and I wanted to check the flames, to see what they were about and where they were rising from. If the mosque was really on fire, something had to be done to put out the flames. When we opened the door to see where the other residents of the village were, we saw about fifteen club-wielding men standing outside our four houses. Seeing us, one of them quickly moved forward and threatened us loudly in an angry voice, ‘You dogs! Go back inside your houses. We’ll kill you if you try to come out.’ Scared, we went back inside and quickly barred the door. The man’s ferocity and the conditions that had prevailed during the day convinced the women and children inside the house that the situation was serious and they were trapped. They all started crying. The same kind of hue and cry rose from the other three houses. It’s inconceivable that our neighbors wouldn’t have heard all this lamentation and crying, but no one came to our rescue. After a while, fear muffled the cries but the sobbing continued. We couldn’t even imagine what was going to happen to us. Every member of the household, both big and small, sat holding his breath, waiting for death. Just then someone knocked at the door so violently that we thought it would disintegrate and that the men outside would barge in and kill us. The same person who had threatened us earlier, moved forward and shouted, ‘All the men and women in the house, come out as you are, come out in the street. If you try to pick up anything, we’ll kill you.’ So all of us came out into the street. Our neighbors have a son named Rafiq. Maybe about ten. He found the threats and rebukes of the man so frightening that he went up the stairs and hid on the roof instead of coming out. In the confusion, no one paid attention to whether or not he’d come out. The men forced out the residents of the other three houses the same way and then splashed kerosene, or perhaps petrol, on the houses and set fire to them. They kicked and punched us and told us to get lost. When the houses caught fire, Rafiq was standing at the parapet calling out



to his father loudly and crying. The stairs had caught fire. His father ran to the fields in back of the house and started begging him to jump down. Finally, Rafiq mustered enough courage to jump. He was safe but both of his legs broke. I only know about these two wounded ones; Lord knows how many more have been injured. My father took all of us to the house of his sister who is not an Ahmadi. No Ahmadi household in the village is safe anymore. While we were on our way to Phuphi's house, we met Ghulam Ali and Amjad who were coming to our place to see Rehmat Ilahi. My father told Ghulam Ali that Rehmat Ilahi had gone to town to see Chaudhry Bashir Sahib. At that, Ghulam Ali told me to take Amjad with me, go to Sultanpur and tell you what had happened here and also that he is bringing Amjad's mother to town on the cart. He wants you to make arrangements for her immediate treatment. Amjad and I were leery of walking the deserted paths at night, so we persuaded Zafar and Majeed to come with us. Their houses have been charred as well. Amjad passed through the whole village on his way and he said that the belongings of not a single Ahmadi house have been spared. And the isolated houses were completely burned."

"Who identified the Ahmadi houses?"

"We don't know."

"There was to be a curfew in Noor Nagar until 5:00 a.m. Rehmat Ilahi Sahib told us that, when he left the village, armed police were patrolling the streets. Where were they when the rioters burned the belongings and set fire to the houses?"

"We don't know where they were. We didn't see any police."

All this time Zafar and Majeed sat like scared cats, staring at Bashir Ahmad.

It was oppressively muggy during the night but a pleasant breeze started blowing by early morning. This is how the signs of the breaking of the heat and closeness appeared during the last days of August and then vanished. Ever since Ismail came to Sultanpur he had remained single, except for the short time when Barkatay was alive. After her death, he had again lived alone. Loneliness weighed heavily on his nerves and the thought of an aimless life sometimes drove him to the brink of craziness. Often at night, regardless of what time it was, he would leave the house in an agitated state and wander aimlessly through the deserted streets and alleyways. Gradually, he overcame his disorder to a large extent and, rather than fighting it, made peace with it. He found solace in small things, such as listening to the radio, reading newspapers and magazines, working in the

kitchen, or cleaning the house, and he began deriving a kind of pleasure and joy from them. Then one day, during this routine that lasted for months, a thought suddenly appeared from somewhere that loneliness was churning inside his heart like a furious, black whirlpool and might pull him in at any moment. At other times he felt as though the whirlpool that had been relentlessly eroding the inner walls of his heart, might someday burst through its crust, leaving behind a shapeless and colorless substance, like a wet kite in the hands of a child—two sticks and a wilted, dripping, discolored piece of paper.

He had finished reading the newspaper and was now watering and sharing in the joy of jasmine and *raat ki rani* plants gently swaying in the breeze. The month of August came every year, the same August in which his parents, sisters, brothers, all his relatives were slaughtered by the Sikhs for the crime of being Muslims. “Did it help the murderers, or benefit the Sikh religion itself in any way? No. Did the Muslims and Islam suffer any loss? No, except that those thirty or thirty-five people lost their lives. Most of them would have died by now anyway. Barkatay and I escaped—she was spared because of her youth and gender, only to die later grieving over those who had perished. And I, who saved himself by fleeing from the battlefield, am still alive to celebrate the anniversary of their deaths and my own cowardice—a cowardice on which even Barkatay had put her seal of disapproval and certified it. Many Augusts have come and gone, and on each day of this month I have seen how the sun and the monsoon moisture blend together to produce the same fierce smells in the soil, the crops, the houses, the trees and the growth along the river bank that I had come to know in August 1947. The Biyas used to be my river in those days, just as much as Gobindpur’s. It no longer belongs to me, though it still belongs to Gobindpur. Even the Ravi, of which it used to be a tributary, isn’t ours anymore. Perhaps this same fragrance, which also wafted from the growth along the banks of the Ravi, was just to console and comfort me, but the river and I both forget it as soon as the rainy season is over. The events of the past keep coming back to me in the order they happened, perhaps only to sadden or, even worse, to embarrass me.”

A fearless golden sunlight had stretched out on the outer wall of the courtyard. Ismail looked at his watch. It was close to seven. He made tea and warmed the water for his shave. He put both the tea and the shaving kit on the table in the courtyard, rolled up his bedding, and drank his tea sip by sip sitting on the bare cot. Then he looked carefully at his face in the mirror: “It wasn’t so bad in my youth, but now this dark, wrinkled face has been taken over entirely by white ants. Whoever said that termites never attack ebony? If I didn’t have to shave, I’d never look at the mirror.

What's left to look at, anyway?"

As he was lathering his face, the stacks of complaints about his old age got folded up in his mind and sent to their appropriate compartment, to be opened again the very next day.

"If the religious strife, and the sectarian riots that flared up later as a result of Partition, hadn't gotten in my way, I would have spent my life quite differently as a well-known, prosperous lawyer in Gobindpur. I would have had my own clan, my family. I would have been the head of a small Muslim community and instituted many different projects for their betterment that would have been needed in today's world. But then, it's possible I might not have done any of those things; even there I might have run an ordinary drugstore or been unsuccessful as a lawyer. Perhaps I never had the ability to go very far. 'If the ocean weren't an ocean, it would have been a desert.' Anyway, this may be what it is, but by what right did the Sikhs uproot me from Gobindpur and fling me here, and slaughter, though innocent of any crime, every member of my family?" Moisture welled up in his eyes and he quickly caught it in his towel. If it had spilled out, it would have streaked the lather and spread it over his whole face.

"All his life, Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, talked about peace and reconciliation, and preached love and affection among people. He strove to eliminate the high and low created by caste divisions and gave mankind a lesson in equality based on the bond of humanity. From Mahavira and Guatama Buddha to Guru Nanak Dev, every great reformer in India considered caste discrimination an insult to mankind and spurned it, but every time, the selfish nature of those who wanted to benefit from it gradually took over. Leave aside India, even in Pakistan, a purely Islamic country created by partitioning India, the remains of the caste system still exist to this day in some form or other. Such is the force of the preaching of the family priests and Brahmins on people's minds. To preserve their authority and material advantages, they warn the simple folks about the heartrending consequences that will result from disobeying them, and the frightened people are thus psyched up to continue the oppression proposed by their priests, throwing all the established verities overboard. This is what the priests did in the Europe of the Dark Ages too. There, to avenge themselves on their detractors and adversaries and to demonstrate their control and authority over people, the priests dubbed them heretics, sorcerers and witches and had them burned alive at the stake. Whenever that happened, the darkness of the Dark Ages became darker still and its layers thicker and denser.

"Sultanpur is a town of one hundred and fifty thousand, and the total

population of Ahmadis, including the children and seniors, cannot be more than one hundred. For the past fifteen days, this fistful of people, in full view of the hundred and fifty thousand, have been spending their days shuddering with fear. There isn't a moment of the day or night when the fear of death leaves their hearts. Is this huge population not able to see what's happening, or does it just not want to? Is deliberate ignorance a convenient way to escape the ire and fury of the other party and avoid the pangs of conscience? The majority appears so content, as if every individual in town is perfectly happy and cheerful in his home and faces no danger at all. To this day I can't put out of my mind everything I went through during the riots of 1947. There are many others here, the same age I am, who faced similar deadly incidents back then and haven't forgotten their experience. Don't they understand the Ahmadis' fear and disquietude? Why don't they? Have they forgotten the menace that stuck to their walls and doors? Have they forgotten the eyes of the women and children bursting from the pressure of countless questions? Can't they remember how they prayed for help from the Invisible World, yet no help arrived? Has that time been erased from their minds when every footstep bore ill will and every moving thing was an enemy? Will they not even move their little finger to save the lives of one hundred people from the jaws of death? To save themselves from destruction, the Ahmadis have banged their heads up against the government offices time and again, and received the same standard answer: Your complaints are just illusions. Can no one else see what the Ahmadis are seeing?"

Around nine, Ismail got ready and left the house. He locked the door and walked slowly into the street. There, some people stood facing west, quietly staring at the sky. He also looked toward the west and, like the others, was struck dumb. He was confused and worried, and his lips didn't move. About three or four blocks in the distance, clouds of smoke rose quickly, shot straight up, shifted a little to the east in the direction of the wind, and then spread over the entire sky.

"Has someone's house caught fire?" Ismail asked.

A young man answered, "Baba Ji, the whole street of the Mirzais is on fire."

At the time of Partition, when Ismail was desperately seeking some refuge in Amritsar, he had witnessed the Muslims' Katra Jaimal Singh trading district burning, very much like the conflagration in front of him today. The Hindus and Sikhs had set it on fire to punish the Muslims for partitioning the country. So, all the apprehensions which the officials had been treating as illusions for the past fifteen days had, as if to eradicate their doubts once and for all, become real and were now staring them in the

face! But what difference did it make? Those who were destined to be looted, were looted.

“Is there anyone inside the houses?” Ismail asked.

“No, they sneaked out the back doors into the fields before the fire started.”

“Who told you this?”

“I’ve just been to the street myself. There’s a mob outside in the main bazaar. I heard some people say that before the street gate could be pulled down, all the residents had escaped. I went around the street to the fields in the back but saw no one there. Who knows where they’ve taken off to?”

“Did you hear who set the fire?”

“They say it’s the work of students from the local and outside theological schools, joined by some boys from the city. They had some special kind of powder with them. They drizzled it and the second they threw a matchstick into it flames flared up. You can’t see anything along the street. It looks like a clay oven for roasting corn.”

A bit ashamed, his head bent low, Ismail thought as he walked, “How do you teach a person who has suffered himself and yet doesn’t have any feeling for the troubles of others?” He left the street and turned into the main bazaar toward his store. It was half-past nine, yet the shops were still closed. Usually the bazaar was in full swing by nine in this weather. Today, perhaps fear of the fire has kept the shopkeepers away. They must have thought that, given the circumstances, if the mob decided to plunder their stores there would be little they could do? Traders are usually more sensitive than other people regarding money matters. Ismail looked at the sky once again. The smoke was still rising with the same volume and speed. Suddenly he saw the chunky, dull-looking Munawwar running toward him in his clumsy, unwieldy way, followed by three club-wielding young men with two others. It looked as if Munawwar would fall down any minute. As the boy came near, Ismail stretched out his arm, stopped him and asked: “What happened?”

“Hitting me, they hitting me....”

Ismail told him in a loud voice, “Munawwar, Munawwar, I’m Baba. You’re safe with me. Don’t worry. No one can hurt you. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Have courage.”

Soaking in perspiration and shaking profusely, Munawwar was finding it hard to breathe. Tears were streaming down. He felt a little less panicked after he finally recognized Ismail.

Coming out of his house with his mother and the other people, and going through the fields, Munawwar had been utterly sick of his imprisonment of the past few days. As soon as he reached the main road, he

pulled himself free of his mother's arm and ran. Who had time at that moment to run after him and catch him? His mother wailed and lamented a lot, but no one bothered. Finally, she went after him herself. Even though she had lived in Sultanpur for ages, she had no knowledge of the streets, paths and roads. She might have known them if she had ever stepped out of the four walls of her house, but what could she do now? Driven by motherly love, crying inside her chador, she wandered through the unknown and unseen streets.

The three students with clubs were from out-of-town. Ismail knew the other two. One was Shaikh Sardar Ali's son Asghar, and the second his friend Nemat Khan. In the meantime, many other people also gathered at the scene and the crowd became thicker. In a loud and authoritative voice, Ismail asked, "What do you want with him?"

"This guy is a Mirzai," one of the students answered, "and the Mirzais are responsible for subverting Islam. So, this guy deserves to be killed."

Noticing their menacing expressions and ghastly looks, Ismail modulated the tone of his voice but kept its gravity, composure and confidence intact. "You three do not know that this man that you are bent on killing is neither a Mirzai, nor a Muslim, nor anything else. Don't you see he has no intelligence to form any opinion or adopt any faith. His ability to know or memorize the basics of any religion is equal to zero. In killing him you will not be killing a Mirzai but someone who has the mental capacity of a child less than five years old. You will be killing an innocent person for a crime he cannot commit. Your two companions, Asghar and Nemat, who have identified this person as a Mirzai and suggested killing him, are well aware of this fact about him. Aren't you, Nemat and Asghar? Speak up now."

"You're right," both said.

"All these people who have gathered here are residents of Sultanpur. Every one of them knows this boy. Ask anyone you like whether what I've told you is right or wrong."

Ten or fifteen people in the crowd spoke up in unison, "Yes, it's right."

The five of them were feeling very small now. They lost their nerve in the face of a crowd of adversaries and had turned around to slink away from the scene when Ismail called out, "Wait! Listen to one more thing before you leave. I'm addressing these students especially. This earth is the common possession of all mankind, and everyone believing in any faith has an equal right to live on it. If you care to take notice, the non-Muslims are far greater in number in the world than Muslims. If everyone starts thinking that anyone who does not have exactly the same faith as we do, or who is not like us, should be killed, then by tomorrow morning,

not even one person will be left alive on earth. Learn to listen to the viewpoints of others and have the patience to understand them. Go now.”

Those who had come with the intent to murder were now finding it difficult to run away and avoid meeting the eyes of the onlookers. As he walked toward his store holding on to Munawwar’s arm, Ismail was thinking:

“If they had killed Munawwar today, would Ahmadiyyat be finished? No. The Sikhs killed hundreds of thousands of Muslims in India and forced millions of others to migrate here. Did Islam come to an end? No. Even today there are hundreds of thousands of Muslims still living in East Punjab. Such conflicts have nothing to do with religion and everything to do with group psychology. A majority group, by virtue of being a majority, holds enormous power within itself. At some level, the mind is aware of this and, as a result, wants it to be acknowledged. A weapon is a powerful tool. You give it to a kid and he’ll surely try to use it. If there is no control and discipline to go along with it, what is happening now will occur unavoidably. When the boys who had come out to murder saw that they had become a minority in an opposing crowd, they took to their heels. Had I listened to Bashir Ahmad’s suggestion and come out yesterday to explain to the people in this very bazaar the real reason behind the rally, they would certainly have listened, and it’s very likely the houses and the property of the Ahmadis would have been spared.” □

—Translated by Faruq Hassan and Muhammad Umar Memon

### Glossary

*Asr* (‘aṣr): one of the five mandatory prayers performed by Muslims in the late afternoon.

*challan* (čallān or čālān): in India and Pakistan it generally refers to the ticket issued to the offender for traffic violations; here it stands for a police report.

*dera* (dērā): house or dwelling by the fields.

*Isha* (‘ishā): last of the five mandatory daily prayers performed by Muslims at night.

*Juma* (jum‘a): Friday.

*kufr*: disbelief.

*Maghrib*: one of the five mandatory prayers performed by Muslims at exact sunset.

*Masi* (māsī or mausī): mother’s sister; also used as term of respect.

*peerhi* (pīḥī): a low, hand-painted stool.

*rubab* (rubāb): a lute-like musical instrument.

*sehra* (sehrā): bridegroom’s headdress.