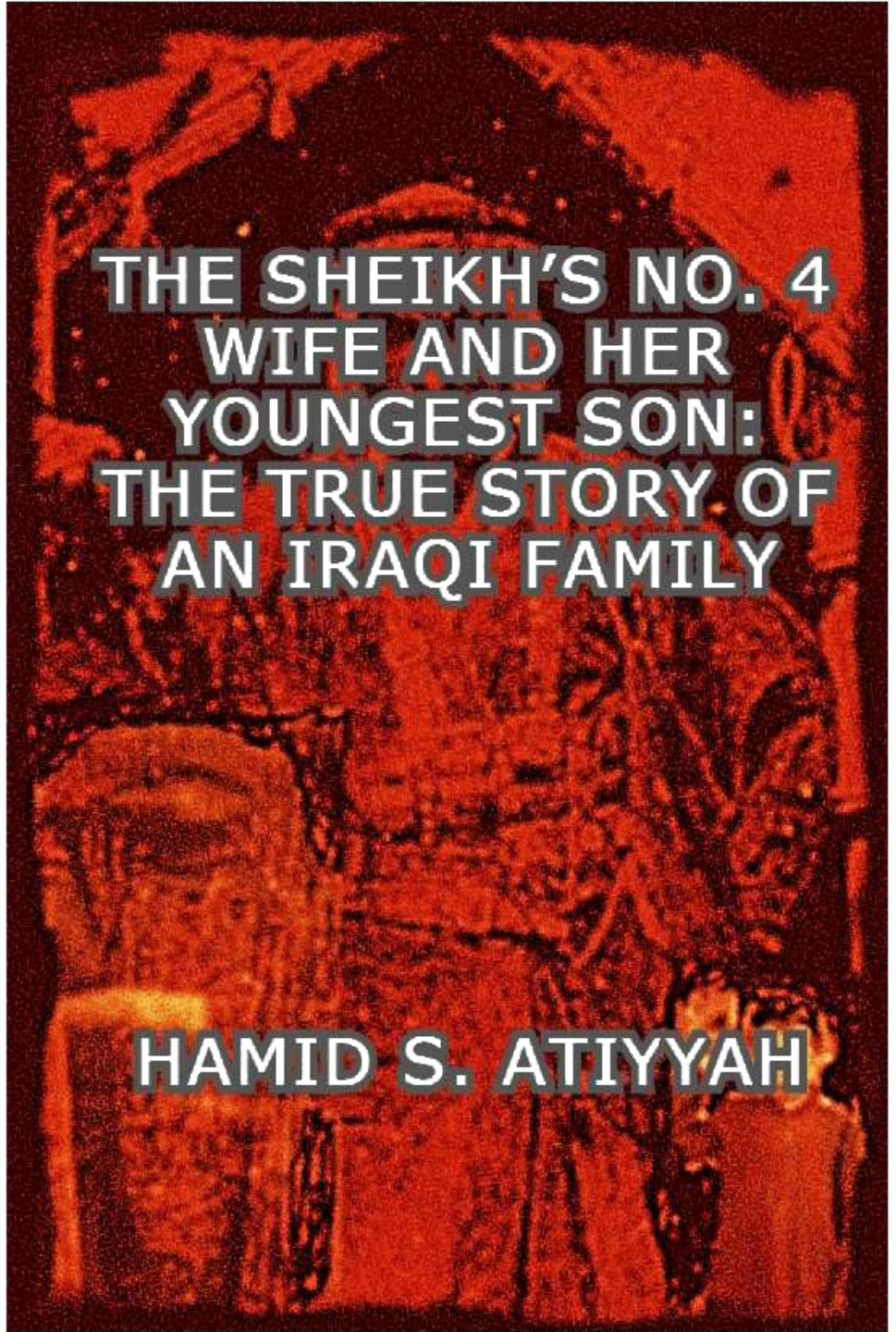
THE SHEIKH'S NO. 4 WIFE AND HER YOUNGEST SON: THE TRUE STORY OF AN IRAQI FAMILY
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Preface

This is a story about family life in a tribal Iraqi community during the second half of the twentieth century. Wife no. 4 or Yumma is my mother and this story narrates her and my turbulent lives with my father or Boya. Yumma and Boya are not their real names but children in southern Iraq commonly use these two colloquial words for addressing respectively their mothers and fathers. Another major character in this story is Habooba, a common name for a grandmother and literally means the beloved.

By telling this story, I am breaking an honored traditional norm in my community. Local customs forbid me from revealing personal information about our private affairs to anyone other than close members of our families. My reasons for defying this tradition are mainly personal. Some of these traditions are responsible for our misery. My mother was a victim of these cruel traditions and so was I. Since the injustices suffered could no longer be rectified, I wanted to expose them and point an accusing finger at the responsible institutions, traditions and persons.

Anthropological studies on rural communities in Iraq are few and western scholars or travelers wrote most of them relying mainly on personal observations and informants. Unlike these studies, this account is written from the perspective of a member of this community reporting his own family history. Was this portrayal affected by my grievances against this traditional community? I sincerely hope not because biases would only defeat the moral purposes of this true story. Also, unlike typical anthropological sources, this book presents events in a story format using the usual techniques of storytelling. The story

begins with a flashback to Boya's death scene but after that its events follow a chronological order. Since the story focuses mainly on events and characters, additional information on geography, the population and major political, economic and social developments are presented in this preface. Readers acquainted with this traditional society may skip this preface.

The events of this story begin in a village called *Um al-Laban* which literally means the place of plentiful yogurt drink. It was previously a marshland where our tribe raised water buffaloes and this is how it received its name. All the inhabitants of the village were members of our tribe who worked on my father's land as sharecroppers. They did not have electricity until the 1970s and before that they draw water for household uses from the river or irrigation canals. The village was made up of clusters of huts built on high grounds to avoid inundation during the spring flood seasons. Each cluster consisting of two or more huts belonged to one of the clans or extended families of our tribe. A typical hut is a one-story structure built with mud, and date palm branches and consisted of two or three rooms one of which is reserved for receiving and entertaining guests. Male and female members of the family sleep in separate rooms or sections of the same room but on hot summer nights they all sleep in the courtyard. A spacious adjoining room served as a stable for housing livestock.

The only house built with bricks in the village was ours. We shared it with two of my father's wives and their sons and daughters. My father kept several thoroughbred Arabian horses in a stable behind the house. Our house was also the only one featuring a reception room furnished with Western-style sofas, chairs and tables reserved for entertaining special guests of Boya such as judges, chiefs of police and other dignitaries. All other guests were received in the *mudhaif* which literally means guesthouse. The guesthouse is essentially a large hall with a

vaulted roof and an entrance at each end. Its structure is made up of arches of thick beams of bamboo rods covered with bamboo mats giving it its distinctive yellowish color. A servant sits at one end of the guesthouse where he also keeps his coffee and tea making urns, utensils and provisions. Coffee beans are grounded, roasted and brewed on the premises, and guests and tribal members in the guesthouse are treated to fresh Arabian coffee in small porcelain cups at all times of the day. At noon, lunch is served to the chieftain's guests and few members of the tribe. By custom, tribal warriors who have suffered serious injuries in previous hostilities with other tribes were entitled to have their meals in the chieftain's guesthouse for life.

My father married my mother just before the end of the World War II. She was his number four. Polygamy was common in my family and my grandfather married a total of seven women. My mother was also an *elwia*, i.e. a female descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Her male counterpart is known as *sayyid* and several families claiming this distinguished ancestry lived among our tribe. These families occupied a higher social status than farming families. Men revered sayyids , kissed their hands, and sought their advice on various matters. The religious tax known as *al-khumis*, which literally means one-fifth, is paid in part to some of them. This payment can either be in cash or kind and in some cases a chieftain may set aside the yield of a piece of his land to a sayyid .

My father was a tribal chieftain, and everyone called him sheikh but the supreme chieftain of our tribe was his elder brother. Since his brother was a prominent politician prior to the military coup d'état of 1958 and resided in the capital, my father was the virtual supreme chieftain. He made all major decisions regarding the tribe after consulting with his brothers and tribal elders. He also arbitrated violations of the tribal code, mediated settlements of feuds and disagreements and represented our

tribe with the government and other tribes. The law under the monarchy (1921-1958) recognized these jurisdictions for all tribal chieftains. Penalties ordained by a tribal chieftain ranged from small fines to severe corporal punishment and regardless of the criminal laws in effect he could authorize the death of a transgressor or pardon a murderer at will.

My father owned many thousands of acres of the most fertile land in the country. Most of our land was reclaimed marshland or bought from neighboring chieftains and only a small portion of it was inherited. Most tribes in southern Iraq came into possession of their land through conquest and grants from the government. After my grandfather's death, the tribal land came under the control of my father's elder brother who only a short time before my birth agreed to share some of it with his brothers. In accordance with tribal customs, which differed widely from Islamic inheritance laws, my paternal uncle kept half of the inheritance for himself and divided the other half among his half dozen brothers and half-brothers.

Our principal grain crop is rice. Until the 1950s, our tribesmen used traditional methods of farming passed on from one generation to another since time immemorial. Fertilizers were not used and to avoid exhausting the land some of it was left fallow every year. Animal-drawn ploughs continued in use until well after World War II. My father bought his first tractor after the war. Irrigation canals were also opened using manual labor in which all able-bodied men of the tribes took part. Tribesmen dreaded this forced labor because it was arduous and unpaid. These canals needed occasional dredging to remove the silt, and during periods of water shortage tribesmen resorted to damming the river with primitive dikes. A dike was made of bales of hay stacked across the river south of a water canal and kept in place with a large net. One of these dikes resulted in the sinking of three small British gunboats sent to burn our guesthouses as

a punishment for taking part in the tribal insurrection against the British occupation in 1920. In the late 1940s, chieftains in the area bought and installed diesel-operated water pumps to draw water from the river into their canals.

The variety of rice grown in our rice paddies is known as *anbar*, which means amber in Arabic. It was given this name because of its sweet aroma. A person walking near our rice paddies cannot fail to detect the strong aroma of the rice grains ripening in their husks. Our rice was also one of the best kinds in all the country and fetched the highest prices. Rice merchants called on my father regularly and their visits became more frequent as the harvest time approached. Every year, almost half a ton of our best rice was loaded in burlap bags and dispatched to the royal palaces in Baghdad as a gift from us to the royal family. It is a sad fact that our tribesmen who spent all summer slaving under a blistering sun to plant and harvest the rice seldom had their full of it and only in communal meals hosted by chieftains on feasts and other few occasions. Most of them resorted to selling their share of the rice crop to merchants and used the proceeds to buy essential provisions such as flour, tea, sugar and fabrics.

Our second major crop was dates. At the beginning of each summer, the date trees were manually pollinated. Although most men and even children could climb tall palm trees, my father employed men who specialized in climbing palm trees to do the risky work. The services of these men were also needed at harvest time before the end of summer. The best varieties of dates were sold in kilograms to affluent gourmets, and the more common crops were sold in bulk to local merchants or to the government dates marketing agency. Undesirable varieties were used as animal feed. Dates were an important part in the staple diet of farmers and town families of limited means. Each of these families annually purchased a supply of dates and dates syrup.

Our tribal members led a miserable life characterized by poverty, disease and insecurity. Their share of the produce was insufficient to sustain them at the subsistence level, and many of them were often driven to borrow from merchants and shopkeepers at high interests. Meat was rarely consumed in their houses and their main source of protein and animal fat were dairy products. This explains why a cow was one of their most precious possessions, and many of them would not hesitate to kill, risk serious injury or even death in protecting their cows from theft. Their poor diet, unsanitary living conditions and the profusion of marshes in their area were some of the reasons for the high incidence of serious, debilitating diseases such as malaria and trachoma among them. Local facilities for the prevention and treatment of these diseases were either unavailable or inadequate. Sick tribesmen sought the help of their chieftains in obtaining treatment at health facilities in the district capital or Baghdad. Poverty and despair drove some of them to become burglars who preyed on the meager possessions of fellow tribesmen and neighboring tribes. Tribesmen who lived in constant fear of these burglars and other internal and external enemies valued highly their weapons. A destitute tribesman was often willing to incur large debts amounting to his income for several years in order to obtain a rifle.

The decade of the 1950s was characterized by important changes in the political, economic and social fields in my country. These changes also had their impacts on the lives of people in our community including my family. At that time, increasing demand for agricultural products pushed prices to unprecedented high levels. The completion of new flood-prevention and irrigation projects was made possible with higher oil royalties earned after the government signed a new agreement with oil companies operating in the country. These projects reduced loss of life and destruction of property resulting

from annual floods and increased acreage under cultivation but also diminished the amount of alluvial deposits carried by the rivers. My father was at last earning more than enough to support his large family. Like many wise landowners he did not squander his surplus cash on luxuries and instead invested it in buying more land and farm machinery. His newly acquired knowledge of the market helped to improve his income; he built large warehouses where he stored his crops until better prices were offered for them. He bought several properties and businesses including date palm groves, town houses and a diesel-operated grain mill.

My father became a wealthy man and he wanted to show off his new wealth by building a large house in a nearby town called al-Shamia. The town had a previous name, which its inhabitants are loath to recall. It was known as *Um al-Barour* or the place where there is plenty of sheep dung. The name testified to its importance as a trading center for Bedouin tribes. Its name was later changed to Shamia, which is also the name of the major desert located to the west of the city extending as far as Syria or *Bilad al-Sham*. The river passing through the town, which is a tributary of the Euphrates, is also known as al-Shamia River. Books on the history of southern Iraq in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reported that Shamia was the administrative capital of a major district under the Ottoman rule and one of the field headquarters of the British occupation forces. The town also featured prominently in the tribal rebellion against the British forces in 1920. Some of the chieftains of these tribes continued to play an important role in Iraqi politics under the monarchy.

Most of the inhabitants of the town were tribesmen or of tribal origin and the rest came from other cities and towns. Several Jewish families also lived in the city before emigrating from the country. Their main occupations included farming, commerce, shop keeping, distillation of local alcoholic beverages and street

vending. The town's economy was entirely dependent on agriculture and trade in agricultural produce was its principal commercial activity. At harvest times, the streets of the city became crowded with caravans of camels carrying rice from the farms to the warehouses in the town. Landowners contracted the services of these Bedouins in return for a share of the transported tonnage. It was at this time also that farmers were required to surrender their crops or large proportions of them to the town shopkeepers in return for provisions obtained earlier. Although this exploitative transaction is denounced as forbidden usury by Islamic teachings, several merchants and shopkeepers practiced it. Before the beginning of winter all the rice harvested that summer, except the amounts kept by landowners in their warehouses, would be loaded into trucks and shipped to the capital or other destinations.

Tribal values and customs were the major source of influence over individual behavior and social interactions followed to a lesser degree by religious beliefs and superstitions. Since many of them had a superficial and sometimes inaccurate understanding of religion, the borders between religious doctrines and superstitious beliefs and practices were indistinguishable in their minds. All of them were Shia Muslims belonging to the Imamiya or Uthna Asharia branch of the Shia. One of the main tenets of this sect, which distinguishes them from their Sunni countrymen, is their reverence of their twelve Imams whom they consider to be the legitimate spiritual and political heirs of the Prophet. Several of these Imams are buried in Iraq and their shrines are visited by millions every year. The tomb of Imam Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, is in the city of al-Najaf which is approximately twenty miles east of Shamia. The city is also the principal center for Shia religious learning and scholarship in the world. Scholars who resided in this city rarely left it, and tribesmen who needed their rulings or

advice on religious matters had to travel to them. At that time the road between Shamia and Najaf was unpaved and most tribesmen who wanted to go to Najaf to visit the shrine or consult a religious scholar could not afford the bus or taxi fares and had to travel by boat or on foot. Few self-taught local men also gave limited religious guidance to tribesmen.

Superstitious beliefs influenced the thinking and behavior of local people. If it is not preordained fate behind their personal misfortunes and natural disasters, they reasoned it must be an act by an evil spirit or the effect of sorcery. For example, if a newborn child became ill, the parent would blame envy or a sorcerer's evil spell. To protect male children from envy some of them were dressed as girls. The most envious people are those who have blue eyes or gaps in their front teeth. Possession by demons was thought to be the main cause for mental and psychological ailments. Whenever there was a lunar eclipse, tribesmen came out of their huts beating on pots and pans to drive off the whale which they believed was attempting to swallow the moon. I remember taking part in this ritual banging on a pot from our kitchen and chanting with a crowd of adults and children with eyes fixed on the eclipsed moon: "Disgorge our moon you devouring whale!" Terrified of becoming the victims of magic spells, tribesmen and especially their women dabbled in magic or sought the help of local sorcerers. Women acquired magic beads which supposedly gave them supernatural powers. Sorcerers made a comfortable living from selling potions to remove spells or cure diseases and from preparing spells and magic concoctions.

Older tribesmen showed more devotion to religion by regularly performing religious duties such as praying and fasting and some of them visited nearby shrines. Only rich landowners and merchants could afford to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca or visit far-away shrines in Baghdad, Samara or Iran.

The most important religious occasion in our community was Ashura or the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the Prophet's grandson and third Imam of the Shia, with several of his kin and companions. For ten whole days, an atmosphere of sadness pervaded our community. Men and women looked serious, refrained from conducting social or personal functions involving merriment or festive celebrations such as weddings, stopped joking or laughing and listening to songs on the radio. Many of them also dyed their clothes black or bought black garments and raised black flags and banners over their houses and places of business. The *A'za* or the act of giving condolences was the major ritual of Ashura and it was held in the town's husaynias, which are Shia places of worship, and the chiefs' guesthouses. During this ritual, a cleric first delivered a sermon recalling the virtues and bravery of the Imam followed by a lyrical poem which brought men in attendance to tears and beating their breasts. Women observed a similar ritual called the *qiraya*, or literally the recitation. Some men expressed their devotion by taking part in the flagellates' procession in which they struck their backs and shoulders with chains while marching in the town's streets to the sad beat of drums. On the night before the tenth day, most men and women stayed up all night long to pray and lament the cruel slaying of their Imam. Children like me took advantage of this to stay awake till early hours of the next day. Religious fervor reached its peak on the tenth day with a passion play reenacting the final battle between the Imam and his few supporters against their more numerous opponents. Men wearing costumes and riding horses staged a mock battle in an empty field while a few tents were set on fire in the background. As the brave relatives and followers of the Imam were slain, thousands of spectators sobbed and fulminated at the men acting the roles of the villains. At another place in town, some men with their heads shaven struck their scalps with

swords and long knives and few of them fainted as a result of the loss of blood and exertion and were then carried off to the public baths. Some of these men even brought their children with them and slightly bled their shaven scalps with razors. My father and several members of the tribe spent the last days of Ashura in the city of Karbala where the slain Imam and his followers were buried. During that time, they performed the A'za and took part on the tenth-day procession attended by hundreds of thousands of Shia. Tribesmen participating in this procession sometimes forgot its solemn purpose and shoved and fought each other for front positions among the mourners and occasionally several them were killed or trampled to death.

One of the most important developments in our community in the post-War period was the opening of schools. Under the Ottoman rule, the Shia of southern Iraq were deprived of education. My father who was born in the 1890s was one of the lucky few who was taught reading and writing in a kutab or Quranic school. He was thoroughly proud of himself for having gained the skill of literacy under very adverse circumstances. The education needs of tribal villagers remain neglected until the present, and educated elements then blamed chieftains for opposing the opening of schools in their areas. In fact, the only school serving our tribesmen was built and financed by an educated member of our family who was also a senior member in a liberal opposition party during the monarchy era. But my brothers and cousins like the sons of all wealthy Iraqis had access to modern education provided by public and private schools in the capital and other major cities. My father wanted all his sons to finish their studies and become influential *effendis*, i.e. government employees, medical doctors and engineers. In this, he was following the example of his elder brother, a self-educated man who mingled with the best and brightest in the capital. I even suspected my father of secretly envying his

brother and wishing that he were the senator and socialite instead.

Teachers played an important role in political and other developments during this period. Their knowledge and relatively good income won them a high social status and local families considered themselves fortunate if one of their sons became a schoolteacher or one of their daughters married one. Many of the young men in our community were deeply impressed by their teachers and they dreamt of becoming teachers like them and emulated them. These schoolteachers also acted as change agents by bringing with them news and information about new developments in the various fields of human endeavors. Some of them subscribed to the liberal or leftist ideologies of opposition or banned parties and they attempted to spread these ideas among the local population. Consequently, schools and teachers at those times presented the most serious challenges to traditional institutions and customs.

Two of the teachers who taught in our town's schools later became famous men. They were Abdul Karim Qassim and Mo'ain Bissaissou. Qassim later joined the Iraqi army, rose to the rank of general and on the fourteenth of July in 1958 led a successful coup which abolished the monarchy and replaced it with a republican regime. Bissaissou, a Palestinian refugee, became a famous poet and activist. In the early 1970s, he wrote an article on his stay in Shamia for a Lebanese magazine. He was very critical of my family accusing it of exploiting our tribesmen and the people of Shamia for our selfish purposes.

Another source of influence on our small community was the radio. Our first radio bought while we were still living in our village was an impressive large contraption powered by two large batteries. After we moved to town, we obtained an electrical radio. My father and his conservative guests listened only to Quranic recitations and news bulletins. Their most reliable

sources of news and commentaries on the radio were our national broadcasting station and the Arabic service of the BBC. Many young men in our community including some of my cousins and relatives also followed news of political developments but their reliable sources were different. After the overthrow of the monarchy in Egypt and since the Suez crisis more of them listened to the Egyptian station, and the speeches of the Egyptian leader, Jamal Abdul Nasser, were very popular among them.

News of the fighting between Arabs and Jews in Palestine inflamed the passions of local people. Since eviction from one's land is one of the severest penalties in the tribal penal code, news of the displacement of Palestinian Arabs enraged our tribesmen. A few Jews in our community were harassed and their properties were vandalized. To protect his Jewish neighbors and dissuade them from leaving, my father publicly put all of them under the protection of our tribe. Despite this, most of them decided to move to the capital or emigrated.

Education and modernization weakened the hold of traditions and religion on the educated young generation in our community. These effendis as all persons who wore Western clothes were commonly called were breaking away with their traditional society in appearance as well in modes of thinking and behaving. By drinking alcohol at the local Employees Club, visiting the public brothel in a nearby city and attending the cabaret shows in the encampments of the *Kawilia* or gypsies, they were behaving contrary to religious and traditional values and norms which forbade drinking, illicit sexual relations and gambling. They rejected traditional beliefs and practices on magic and possession with demons as superstitions and some of them regarded some religious duties and customs as empty rituals. Indeed, these educated young men considered most of their traditional heritage as obstacles to modernization and progress that must be done away with. Their elders disapproved

of these attitudes and behaviors, insisted on preserving old traditions and considered calls for change as subversive attempts aimed at destabilizing society but their authoritarian and coercive methods proved ineffective in stopping them. These elders lost the challenge because they were unprepared to recognize the need for change in our community and to accommodate the aspirations of the educated and modernized new generation and allowing them a bigger role in the inevitable change process. At the national level, attempts by the monarchy to inject new and young blood failed and the scene was set for the military coup of 1958.

The effects of the coup were felt everywhere including our rural community and even within our family. One of the first measures taken by the new leadership was ratifying the agrarian reform law which limited ownership of land holdings and redefined the relationship between landowners and sharecroppers. As a result, thousands of acres of my family's land were confiscated and much of its authority over our tribesmen was also lost. Chieftains like my father and uncles were constantly targeted by the government publicity campaign which pictured them as loathsome feudal lords who exploited their tribesmen, served the interest of imperialist governments and impeded the progress of the country. My uncle who served as a minister and a senator under the monarchy became a fugitive in exile.

While our status and authority in the community declined to its lowest level the influence of the Communists was on the rise. Indeed, many Iraqis believe that the first two years of the republican regime belonged to the Communists who attracted a large membership, organized frequent rallies and demonstrations and successfully intimidated their rivals and opponents with violence or the threat of violence. Many of our tribesmen, who were mostly illiterate and had little or no

understanding of Marxist-Leninist ideology, joined the party. Local Communists set up illegal checkpoints on the roads leading to our town, and many of the town's people resorted to wearing red ties or scarves and had their identity cards covered with red plastic to avoid their harassment. On more than one occasion, Communists and their supporters marched to our house and stood outside our front yard shouting death to all feudal lords including my father, waving their nooses menacingly above their heads and threatening us with dragging to death. A Communist schoolteacher at my elementary school managed to gain virtual control over the whole town including its civil administration and population. On several morning assemblies, he demonstrated his power and ruthlessness to all staff and students by putting a noose around my neck and telling everyone that dragging to death is the just punishment for all feudal lords. I was then a very frightened and bitter ten-year-old child then.

During these two years of the republican regime that many Iraqis still refer to as the "Communist reign", the Communists antagonized almost everyone else in our country. The Nationalists hated them because they criticized and rudely vilified Arab leaders like Nasser, opposed unity plans with other Arab countries and participated in the suppression of the nationalist coup in Mosul and the ruthless retaliatory measures taken against the city's civilian inhabitants afterwards. Religious and traditional elements saw in their ideologies and practices such as the call for the abolition of religion, support for civil marriages and the creation of an armed women militia as serious threats to the social fabric. Indeed, one of the causes of their downfall was a fatwa or religious edict issued by the supreme religious leader of the Shia, the late Ayatollah Mohsen Al-Hakim, branding Communism as heretical and atheistic. Military officers also resented them for attempting to infiltrate their ranks and undermining their new positions of leadership. Merchants,

businessmen and other members of the small Iraqi bourgeoisie were anxious to block the Communists from gaining total control over the country and implementing their socialist policies. Finally, tribal chieftains accused them of alienating the loyalty of their simple tribesmen by promising each one of them a poultry farm and a schoolteacher wife.

Although tribal chieftains and Communists occupied diametrically opposed ends of the political spectrum in our country and community, they had, in my opinion, one common flaw. They were both unwilling to compromise and because of that they lost their power. At the time of the Communists' downfall we had moved to Baghdad and my father had all but lost control over his older sons. My father had enrolled all five of them in the best schools in Baghdad, Lebanon or the United States but three of them lost interest in formal education before finishing high school. That was a great disappointment for a man who believed that there were essentially only two careers in the world: having a university education or sheep herding.

My truant half-brothers may have preferred to live the life of the idle scions of rich landowners but my father insisted that they should earn their keep by helping him in running the farm. Like many young men of their age group, they had more than one reason to feel alienated from their father's generation. The establishment of the republic, modern education and the introduction of new farming techniques eroded the authority base of our elders who were no longer looked upon as role models and mentors. To educated or semi-educated young men like my half-brothers, my father with his traditional costume and tribal manners was a relic of the past. Soon after the republican coup of 1958, my father began losing control over his land. But the coup de grace came ten years later.

A period of instability followed the overthrow of General Qassim's regime in 1963 but two years later hopes of a return to

civilian rule were revived. Limited freedom of speech encouraged liberal politicians to call for the reestablishment of parliamentary democracy. Tribal chieftains returned to their villages and towns with the hope of regaining their lost status and influence. A Shia religious revival was also underway as evidenced by the huge crowds participating in the rituals of Ashura every year.

The Ba'th coup of 1968 put an abrupt end to all these aspirations. The government became a one-party system ruled by a junta of military and civilian leaders. Except for a small number of 'progressive' parties, which agreed to give the regime token legitimacy by joining a powerless coalition, all opposition parties and activities were banned. The draconian methods of the regime and its ruthless security forces brought to the minds of Iraqis bitter memories of the Communist era. The new regime converted one of the old royal palaces into a prison for political detainees and it was fittingly given the name of the 'palace of the end'. Many of the inhabitants of Shamia who had earlier joined the Communist or other parties were arrested, tortured and some of them were executed.

Political oppression was only one of the many scourges of the Ba'th regime in the decade of the 1970s. Local people called them the 'austerity years' after the government was forced by difficulties in marketing the newly nationalized oil to impose severe austerity measures. The country's economy suffered further setbacks as a result of a wide-scale nationalization program which included international and domestic trade. In Shamia, the government appointed bureaucrats to control trade in rice and other agricultural crops and their duties included certifying quality and determining prices. More bureaucrats were appointed to sell seeds and fertilizers and rent farm machinery to farmers. Eventually, there were so many bureaucrats and red tape that tribesmen joked about spending

more time in the corridors of government departments than in their fields.

Two major human and agricultural catastrophes confirmed the irrationality and unfeasibility of these new policies. Before these totalitarian measures were introduced, chieftains distributed seeds to their sharecroppers and they knew from experience that some of that seed ended in their pots or on the market. But bureaucrats were not aware of this and they thought that the warning sign on the seed bags were enough to stop them from eating or selling the rice. These bureaucrats must have known that many of these farmers were illiterate and seldom believed what the government told them. Many of our tribesmen and city people consumed the rice seeds treated with poisonous mercury and as a result suffered blindness, paralysis or death. If the bureaucrats had not delayed warning the public through the media for several days, the number of victims would have been fewer. Also, when the warning was finally announced it imposed the death penalty for anyone trading in the poisoned seed and this prompted the panic-stricken merchants to secretly dump all their stock of tainted seed in the river and consequently polluting it. Many Shias believe that this was a plot by the Sunni government to kill members of their community.

The second major agricultural catastrophe affected the date palms in the whole country including our area. Statistics showed that the number of these trees in our country declined by more than ten million or approximately one third in the 1970s. My father died in 1973 long before many of our palm trees withered. Since palm trees require a minimum of care, only outright neglect could have resulted in this. Any visitor to our area in the late 1970s could confirm that thousands of these trees were either dying or already dead. Another fact that would not have escaped a sharp observer is that most of those who worked in the fields were middle-aged or old men. Many of the young

tribesmen were enticed by high wages and generous incentives to join the army leaving only older men, women and children to farm the land and tend the palm trees. Many of these young men were killed or wounded in the war waged by the Ba’th regime on Iran in 1980.

I

"Go upstairs and let him sleep," Yumma said. We stood near the bottom of the stairs staring at each other. It was early evening and she had to open her eyes wide to see my features clearly in the dying light of a grim wintry day. She had just sidled out of Boya's room closing the door behind her in a hurry. But it was all the time my mind needed to take a snapshot of the inside of the room and store it in my memory for future self-torturing. He was sleeping on a bare, thin mattress laid on the floor. His toothless mouth was wide open and his prominent, cleft chin hung slackly above his chest. His old house robe, discolored from frequent washing, was obscenely bundled up above his knees. Yumma stood with her back to the door and her defiant posture signaled her readiness to block any attempt to enter his room.

One look at her anguished face confirmed my suspicion that she was hiding something. She had the open face of an honest person and, true to their nature, her eyes on that evening refused to take part in her clumsy concealment. Obviously, it concerned Boya's health. His labored breathing, disturbingly audible through the closed door, sounded more like death rattles rather than snoring. He had not recovered fully from the major stroke that left him with dementia two years ago, and his hypertension and clogged arteries, his doctor repeatedly warned us, threatened him with more serious repeats. "Doctors! What do they know?" he used to say. The proud, stubborn man refused to admit that he was seriously ill and in need of regular medical treatment and a proper diet. Lately his condition had taken a turn to the worse, and the thought of his death briefly crossed my mind before a prick of guilt feeling erased it.

Yumma looked at me at length and was probably considering whether to share her secret with me. Her experienced maternal eyes must have told her that her youngest son, whose twenty-fifth birthday passed uncelebrated few days ago, was still at heart a terrified, vulnerable child incapable of shouldering any major responsibility. Shielding me from the traumatic experience of witnessing my father's death must have been her only concern at that moment.

"Go upstairs and let him sleep,'' Yumma tried ineffectively to inject a note of command in her voice this time. It was obviously an act and anyone who knew her well could not be fooled by it. She was the type people described as can neither shoo a bird nor swat a fly. She was an illiterate peasant woman severely handicapped by tribal customs and stereotype. Faced with an attack, she was quick to raise the white flag of surrender. Pleading with her tormentors never won her their sympathy and she died a miserable defeated woman. One thing about her that provoked my admiration and sometimes contempt was her stubborn determination. In spite of extreme adversity and persistent defeats, she obstinately struggled for thirty years to gain a foothold for herself and her children in Boya's crowded and hazardous household.

Villagers suspected all women of having the quality of *mukur*, or scheming. If this is true then Yumma must have been the exception. Her rare attempts to impose her will on others or to enforce discipline on her children were halfhearted and ineffective. When things went against her wishes, she simply pleaded and prayed some more and waited patiently for others to pity her and her brood, which never happened.

"I just want you to be happy, even if your happiness takes you away from me," she used to tell me. Driven to tears by her love words I imagined her an angel sent from heaven or at least a saint. Later in my life my mind infected by ideas from psychology

101 and ugly stories of mothers pimping their daughters suspected her of being manipulative.

I wished she had inherited some of the courage and cold-heartedness of one of her aunts. One night this aunt was awakened by strange noises. She rose from her bed to investigate and spotted through the palm branches of the uneven fence a burglar trying to unlatch her front gate. Any other woman in her place would have awakened her husband or older son or, if she had neither, wailed, ululated, shouted for the neighbors to come to her aid or would have been paralyzed by fear but not my great aunt. She calmly fetched her ancestral sword and tiptoed back to find the wretched thief still fumbling with the latch. Without a moment of hesitation, she drew the sword from its sheath and sliced his hand off at the wrist with one stroke.

If Yumma wanted to act the role of the strict matriarch on that evening, she should have at least worn a dress to match – anything but her faded, flowery blue dress. She made that dress many years ago when she could still thread a needle on the first attempt and have a dress sewed, hemmed and ready to wear in one morning and still find time to cook our meal and clean our room. Since then, age has gradually distorted her figure and skewed all the stitches in her dresses. Still, no one laughed at her shabby attire because it was difficult to mock a face whose genuine expression of animated compassion and profound grief belonged on an icon.

I should have disobeyed her that evening. God knows I have done it often with little if any regard for her feelings. Disobeying our elders and especially our parents is a cardinal sin. Our elders rebuked dissenting young men: ‘What do you know? You were born only yesterday’. Females were put in their lowly place with fierce stares, phlegmy spits and thrashing with a stick if necessary. Rare fits of rebelliousness by young men were

contemptuously called *anfasa* or bucking, as in a bucking wild horse or a mule stung by a bee. Eventually the young grew old and they in turn repeated: 'older than you by a day more knowledgeable than you by a year'.

Climbing the stairs to my room and leaving her in charge of the dying Boya was the easiest way out for me. I still deeply regret taking it that evening. Calling an ambulance may not have saved Boya's life but would have at least lighten my burden of guilt and feelings of helplessness and stopped me from sometimes doubting Yumma's motives for wanting me to believe that he was sleeping and not dying. Did she want him dead? The thought did cross my mind and if she did, she had many reasons for wishing that.

She was old, frail and sick, and even a saintly woman and a devoted wife like her could not be blamed for wishing to be rid sooner rather than later of an overbearing, invalid husband after more than three decades of marital misery. When he married her, he was a chieftain with almost absolute powers over the lives and livelihood of thousands of his tribesmen but he was still a mere *ami*, a commoner, while she was a revered *elwia*, a female descendent of the Prophet.

In our village, opinions differ on whether chieftains or *sayyids*, male descendants of the Prophet, had more influence. Villagers daily experienced the absolute powers of their chieftains and it is not difficult to see how the notion of the divine right of chieftains inevitably took hold in their minds. They were firmly convinced that divine providence or *bakhat* favored chieftains. Most sayyids were poor but their ancestry was unquestionably the most honorable. They were believed to have the power of *t'shawir* or invoking instant divine retribution for any insult or injury to them or their families. Villagers went to chieftains to obtain employment on their lands, interest-free loans or to intercede on their behalf with government bureaucrats and

often came back empty-handed. Sayyids who were thought to have the power of healing gave their blessings generously and often freely although some of them expected and received small gifts in return. Chieftains waged war on rival tribes for the slightest provocation and savagely raided each other for loot while sayyids believed that it was their sacred duty to stop the bloodshed by standing in battlefields between warring tribes, brandishing their ancestral banners and without the slightest regard to their personal safety. They took these risks believing that tribesmen would not dare harm them intentionally and incur Allah's wrath. Few of my maternal relatives lost their lives or were seriously wounded while attempting to halt feuds and restore peace in this way. Also, a proposal of marriage from a chieftain was rarely refused and so was a sayyid 's. We kissed the hands of chieftains as well as sayyids but obeisance to the latter was voluntary and hence less humiliating and bitter. To elevate their status even further, sayyids or their supporters spread the myth that sinful sayyids are not destined to eternal fire but to a special frozen Gehenna. Obviously, none of them had experienced the harsh winter of the Arctic zone or even the milder Canadian version.

An elwia, like my mother, had a lower status than a sayyid because of her gender but she was thought to have the same powers. It was the fate of my mother the elwia to obey and serve my father the ami as any submissive, peasant wife. She diligently fetched his slippers, washed his feet, and massaged his aching muscles every day. After a stroke left him senile, she also became his private nurse and caregiver. She spoon-fed him, escorted him to the toilet, shaved his beard, dyed his moustache, and in his final months, ran after him, in her faded blue dress and with her wispy gray hair streaming behind her, from one end of our back garden to the other to cover his nakedness. She paused only to catch her breath and to plead with him to stop. Sometimes the

indignity of her situation made her sob so loudly and so despondently that even her near deaf mother, my Habooba, heard her and stopped humming to herself, and the curious neighbors peeking from behind their curtains took pity on her and went back to their chores.

Did Yumma slap the senile Boya? My brother is certain of it, but I wonder if his memory failed him on that. My brother was partial to our father while I was Yumma's staunch partisan. Having a powerful, wealthy chieftain for a father and a saintly elwia for a mother presented us with a dilemma, or that is at least how I experienced it. The choice between them was almost that between the profane and the sacred, the worldly and the otherworldly, the powerful that had everything now and the meek promised to inherit the earth later. My brother adhered to the traditional norm which required all sons to follow in their fathers' footsteps. Indeed, my mother encouraged us to do so by exalting Boya's image and unfailingly singing his praise. My brother also spent many years of his childhood and a good part of his adolescence in boarding schools where boys learned to become individualistic and insensitive to avoid being called and treated as mama's boys.

As far as I am concerned, my love for her first then my filial duty, chivalry and finally common decency dictated championing Yumma's cause because she was my mother, the damsel in distress and the only one fated to be an underdog in our extended family. But choosing her rather than Boya as my role model and the source of my moral and ethical values was not an easy decision.

"Remember how he used to cut sour overripe melons into small cubes, mix them with sugar in a large bowl and then give us some," my brother reminded me lately in defense of our Boya. Admittedly he was a good provider and my resentment of him is marred by feelings of guilt. He certainly gave me much more than

sugared melon. To mention just the obvious, without my education, which he generously paid for, I would not be able to compose these critical comments on him. But a scrutiny of a still picture of one of these rare mornings of family togetherness around a dish of sugared melons would reveal that it was far from perfect. If you look carefully you cannot fail to notice that the bowl in Boya's hand was much bigger than ours while Yumma's hands were empty. Boya ate most of the sugared melon from the serving bowl; we were content with our small portions while Yumma sat in the background ready to hand him the sugar bowl, to pour water on his hands after he finished eating and to fetch him a towel. Whether it was sugared melon, a roasted chicken or few oranges, we waited like vultures in the African Savannah for Boya the lion to have his full first and then leave the rest to us. In all these homely pictures, Yumma beamed with genuine contention although she neither expected nor received a share of the treat. I sided with the saintly, selfless elwia who, like all poor villagers, occasionally indulged herself by eating a plate of cheap date syrup and a loaf of coarse bread against the chieftain who craved and afforded sugared melon and other expensive delicacies and pleasures.

Genetics did not match our parental preferences in deciding our features and characters. I inherited Boya's long face, bulbous nose, tanned skin, sardonic smile and pouting lips. My brother is the luckier of the two of us. His generous genetic inheritance included Yumma's oval-shaped face, big eyes, enchanting smile and fair complexion. He is also a furlong ahead of me in terms of temperament. He has Yumma's serene and unperturbed nature while I am cursed with Boya's loathsome fiery temper, moodiness, arrogance and insatiable sensuality. For most of my life I hated the face that looked back at me in mirrors and disapproved of the weak and lusty person shamefully hiding behind the hideous face. Despite the similarities in some features

and traits between Boya and me, blaming him for many of my weaknesses was admittedly unfair and immature.

Slapping the senile and defenseless Boya would certainly be unlike her because she never hit any of her children although we were not always on our best manners and sometimes outright insufferable. It did not stand to reason that she would hit him after engraving in our minds that disrespect to Boya was the unthinkable, ultimate sin.

"Don't forget to kiss his hand and raise it to touch your foreheads," she reminded us frequently. "Kiss it in the morning and when he returns home." Her adoration of Boya verged on idolatry: "He is your second *rab*, a god second only to Allah," and "he is our *khaima*, the tent that shelters and protects us, and without him we're lost." He was certainly her omnipotent idol who alone was responsible for her immense share of sadness and meager joy. And comparing him to a tent was more fitting than she intended. The tent was an adequate shelter on windless days but when sandstorms raged, he flew away leaving her and us to our own modest means. Like any pious fatalistic worshipper, she stoically endured and tried hard to hide the suffering and pain inflicted by her remote idol intentionally or out of sheer neglect. But I was close enough to hear every sigh, to count every tear, and to register every blasphemous slip of her tongue. The fall of her idol from his patriarchal height must have shaken her savagely like a doll by an irate child. If she did lose her control and slapped him once, as my brother claimed, then it must have been Boya's exasperating senility or a fit of diabetic rage which emboldened her to avenge herself on the broken, oppressive idol.

Boya died twice: first as an idol and few years later as a human being. Yumma worshipped Boya the idol in the same way that slaves sometimes adored their masters, and if they had lived in ancient Egypt, she would have willingly accepted to be interred

with him. After her idol was incapacitated by illness, she continued to perform her duties toward him as his wife and the mother of his children. She selflessly nursed Boya the husband and father until his death at the ripe age of seventy-six.

She was blameless. I alone deserve the torment of my self-recriminating mind and its countless what if scenarios. What if instead of running away from my responsibility and climbing the stairs to my bedroom I had defied her order and said to her: “Step aside please Yumma and let me take my father to the hospital for the best medical care money can buy.” We did not have any spare cash at that time but we had two houses, which Boya gave to my brother and me. The price of my house, the older and smaller of the two, would have been more than enough to pay for his medical expenses. But it would have been easier said than done. These two houses were her rewards for being his loyal and obedient worshipper who never lost faith in his omnipotence and benevolence. Yumma would have rather died in abject poverty and terrible agony than allow me to sell a brick in my house.

Yumma, Boya and I may appear to be strange characters moved by unfathomable motives and displaying inscrutable emotions in a mysterious, exotic tale. Our villagers who inherited the oldest civilization on earth believe that all mysteries can be solved. An unraveled mystery becomes a tale which can then be told and retold to the old or young for many generations to draw valuable lessons and for entertainment purposes. Solving a case of burglary, for example, begins by employing a skilled Bedouin tracker to retrace the steps of the burglar all the way to his doorway or the local jeweler to whom he sold the farmer’s trinkets or to the street cattle market where he auctioned the stolen cow. Before the tracker leads them to the thief, the *wahash* or village night watchman may offer to recover the stolen items in return for a fee. This usually meant that he was

an accomplice in the robbery. Desperate to retrieve his stolen property as my maternal uncle Kafi was after his cow was stolen, the victim of the robbery often accepted the terms demanded by the watchman on behalf of his unknown partner. Nothing shocked our villagers, not even the discovery that the culprit was a son who robbed his own family to raise enough money for a dowry or to pay for his frequent visits to the gypsy camp. No one should be surprised if our story included murder, theft, abuse and extreme acts of psychological and physical cruelty all done within the same family and under the same roof. Like all other tales in our oral heritage, this is a tale retold for educational purposes only and to posthumously do justice to its characters.

Our story begins not with a robbery but with murder.

"He was barely two years old, *walidi*, my little boy. One day he came back crying and complaining of chest pains." She paused and her pupils stood motionless and focused on a remote time and place in her past. It was certainly not her intention to infect me with her melancholy but I could not possibly let her suffer alone. Her sadness weighed heavily on both of us and my only catharsis was in resenting the people responsible for it.

"Yumma, *wawa*, *wawa*, pain, pain!" Her deep breaths sounded almost like gasps as she imitated his childish cries of pain. "Your brother cried all day and night long. His ribs were broken."

I was the third of her four children. When I was born my older brother was three years old, my sister came two years later, and my other brother was dead less than a year earlier. Yumma shared Boya with three other wives, her *dhuras*. He divorced his third wife who had the last laugh by surviving the last of them by more than ten years. All Yumma's dhuras hated her because she was his youngest and favorite wife. Like all number-four wives she was commonly referred to as *al-Aziza* or the most precious and beloved. She was also the most beautiful woman in our village and a revered elwia.

Villagers believed that evil or hatred is a black spot floating in every human heart. Living together in the same house must have added more black spots to her dhuras' hearts every day until they became as black as charcoal. Yumma stayed in her room most of the time to avoid their hostile stares and rude remarks. Her child went out to play and was heedless of the blackened, burnt hearts that came out and threw ashes at him.

"They killed him," Yumma said, confidently accusing one of the dhuras and her children of the murder.

Boya's wives and children continuously fought an undeclared war of gossiping, backbiting and verbal abuse against each other. Any alliance or truce between them was as enduring as desert dunes in a sandstorm. They had gallons of bad blood between them and little else to do but to vent it on each other.

Why would a rational man marry several wives and make them, their children and himself miserable in the process? Boya must have been painfully aware of the risk involved because his father married a total of seven women and the quarrels between Boya and his half-brothers were far more serious than those ascribed to sibling rivalry. Yet unmindful of these first-hand lessons he married four women. Sexual desire was one motive behind it. Another was prestige. I can imagine him sitting in the mudhaif or guesthouse listening with open enthusiasm to one of the tribe's elders counting the merits of polygamy and listing all the great chieftains who practiced it. Also, a man may justify taking a second wife to spite his first wife but later regretted using this double-edged sword of revenge.

Being the wives of a wealthy chieftain, the dhuras sat idly all day long while several maids did the cooking and cleaning. Yumma was the exception because she preferred to do her own cleaning and cooking. This was odd considering that she was the latest, youngest, and most beautiful of Boya's wives. I suspect that her selfless nature was behind this. Boya seldom granted

anything without a fair amount of begging, nagging or both and she neither nagged nor begged for anything for herself. Boya must have considered himself extremely lucky. Having an undemanding, utterly submissive, beautiful and young elwia for a wife must have been the best deal he ever made in his entire life. He was not a miser but he hated being outsmarted or duped and loved winning. I have often seen him painstakingly haggling with street vendors over the price of tomatoes or a cheap trinket. Occasionally, they became so exasperated with his disparaging remarks on the quality of their merchandise intended only to lower their prices that they would rudely refuse to do business with him. His love of winning served him well. After his older brother appropriated half of their father's estate and distributed the other half among several brothers and half-brothers, Boya almost doubled his land holdings by buying thousands of acres from neighboring chieftains whose extravagance and shortsightedness brought them to the verge of bankruptcy. He was helped in these transactions by a half-brother who was remarkably adept in making deals and as a reward for his efforts Boya granted him a share in every deal. Possessing a wife like Yumma must have also given Boya the satisfaction of being a winner. And if she was as submissive in his bed as she was outside it then he must have really envied himself. It was too good to last and the cosmic law of balance intervened few years later when his health deteriorated and his sons took virtual control of his farm.

It also did not stand to reason that a husband after three disappointing marriages would neglect his immaculate fourth wife and leave her, a helpless woman, to fend for her life and the safety of their sons instead of showering her with affection, care and protection. When a villager battered his wife, his neighbors wondered if he had been earlier insulted by the chieftain or was unable to pay his debt to the town grocer. Abusing wives and

children was regarded as a legitimate release of steam. Because his first three wives did not treat him as a sultan, he took his revenge on the submissive Yumma. He deserted or rather fled from his strong-willed three wives but when he found the slavish one, he oppressed and neglected her.

After learning about Boya's adoration for his mother I also wondered whether he did not insist on being mothered by his wives and resented having to share their adoration with even their own children. This would explain why he failed to protect Yumma's children from the scheming dhuras. Yumma was the only wife who played the role of mother to him but he was spoiled and selfish and exploited her devotion as he had probably done with his own mother.

Boya's behavior baffled as much as it annoyed me. I prefer to cast him as an errant husband and a flawed father rather than an egoistic one. I am sometimes inclined to believe that he was unable to control his household as firmly as he should have simply because he was getting old and weary.

In the frequent battles fought in our village house, Yumma stood alone while her dhuras had scores of poor peasant women accompanied by their toddlers to support them in exchange for a cup of rice, few sugar lumps or an ounce of tea. Only the *Hadji*'s retribution–al-Hadji or pilgrim was one of Boya's titles of respect–feared even more than Allah's wrath kept them from hacking each other with axes and kitchen knives. The well-mannered weak Yumma sat in her room and ignored or pretended to ignore their snide and abusive remarks but it was difficult to keep her young and energetic children confined all day long to their small room.

"Your brother was smart, handsome and polite, my *walidi*." Her voice choked with grief.

Looking deep into her eyes from which her sadness welled every day I knew he was with us. Death took his body but left his

memory to haunt all of us and torment her continuously. Lately I had a dream about a child who could have been him. Although he was still a child in my dream, he treated me with the authority of an older brother. He led me by the hand and introduced me to a group of men in white robes seated around a table. The scene curiously resembled a painting of the Last Supper. After apologizing for arriving late I sat down in an empty chair next to him. He made a vague reference to food forbidden to him. Next morning, I woke up thinking about his remark and wondering about its significance and this inevitably brought to my mind the circumstances of his death.

Villagers believed that the dead sometimes conveyed messages to the living through dreams. Yumma insisted that he was murdered, while his accused murderers blamed his death on natural causes, a gastrointestinal infection or some other disorder.

The loss of her child was a catastrophe made even more intolerable by her conviction that he was murdered. By marrying a rich chieftain, she probably expected to be spared the grief of losing a child to malnutrition, dysentery, smallpox, malaria or some other childhood disease. She never imagined, even in her worst nightmares, that one of her children would be murdered by a member of his own family only few meters away from her. She was angry that her husband the powerful chieftain and the supreme watchman responsible for protecting all his tribesmen failed to protect his own child and prevent his death. Her disappointment with him must have been complete when he could not or refused to punish the murderer or murderers and condemned her to live the rest of her life fretting continuously over the safety of her other children.

Death was a regular visitor in our village, and it usually favored the youngest of its inhabitants. Every household in my village suffered the death of an infant or a child. Almost every mother

in the village buried a child or two of her own but losing six children was certainly the exception. Six of Yumma's brothers died one after the other. She must have watched her mother, the Habooba giving birth to each one of them and then nursing him with love and care, but days or months later, he would fall ill and die. Habooba's and Yumma's pain could not have been less and their mourning could not have been shorter over the fifth or sixth infant. The uncertainty must have also been unbearable: will the newborn survive this time or was he also fated to join the row of small, unmarked graves? Bismarck once said that he considered himself extremely fortunate for not losing any of his children in his lifetime. When Habooba's eighth child was born, her endurance was threadlike and she was prepared to do battle even with the dreaded angel of death. She gave birth to a son whom she named *Kafi al-Moat* or Enough of Death, later shortened to Kafi or Enough. I imagine her rising from her bed, her willowy figure shaking with rage and defiance, and shouting his name so loud that all her neighbors to the seventh one and in every direction heard her. The spell broke. Enough lived but death did not leave empty-handed and carried away his father instead.

By marrying a rich landowner, Yumma was hoping to escape with her future progeny from the terrible tyranny of infant mortality that reigned over Habooba's household and all other families in her village. She incorrectly assumed that a full belly, a warm, clean bed and sufficient money to pay the Hakeem's ,or traditional doctor, fees could somehow keep death at bay. Other peasant women played a terrible game of odds with death, stoically willing to concede one, two or even six children in the hope of eventually boosting their chances of winning one.

"His pain kept him awake all night. His father then decided to send him to the doctor in the nearby town." Her face usually froze at this point in her story except for her eyes moving

frantically and desperately like an ant that had just been stepped on.

“They laid his/your broken body in a canoe.” Did she say his or your? “ Al-Hadji sent one of your half-brothers with him.”

Sending her ailing child with one of the suspects accused by Yumma of breaking his ribs tested Yumma’s sanity to the limit. He probably refused to believe that one of his own sons could blatantly defy his authority and commit such a horrible deed. She was not there when they lowered his thin, small figure into the boat but she described the heart-wrenching scene in detail which she must have somehow obtained from an eyewitness. The eyewitness could only be Boya who after entrusting his dying child to his son went back to tell Yumma about it. Her description was so vivid that I could easily imagine in my mind my half-brother standing in the canoe as the listless body was handed down to him. My half-brother must have been still thin then and his eyes were not prominently crossed yet but were already full of unkindness. He was the same person who many years later commented on a similar tragic loss suffered by another half-brother:

“We are a sentimental family,” he said with a scornful smile on his face. “Our half-brother came to my house the other day and he was crying. It turned out that he was grieving over his infant son who had died a short time after his birth.”

The utter sadness and despair in Yumma’s voice as she recalled her son’s dispatch to the doctor conjured in my mind an image of him being lowered into the grave rather than a boat. Boya must have dismissed her persistent pleas as the hysterics of a raving mother.

My conceited father believed that no one in this world was more intelligent than him except his older brother, the senator. When he disapproved of the opinion of a a member of his family or tribe he rarely bothered to justify or explain his position. He

would either make clucking sounds of disapproval or repeatedly jerk his head upward. Experience taught us that after receiving this animated response it was wiser not to pursue the matter any further if one did not wish to be harshly rebuked, verbally abused or even spat on. When he disliked my reasoning, and we often disagreed, he called me an owl. Superstitious villagers considered an owl a bad omen because it lives in ruins. For some obscure and equally irrational reason they also regarded it as a stupid bird. It was certainly a milder insult than being called an idiot or a jackass. Boya would not have dared to insult Yumma because of her high social status and alleged supernatural powers as an elwia. But fear of these powers would not have stopped him from uttering his usual sounds of dismissal to her objection. His decision raised many questions in my mind. Why didn't Boya take him to the doctor himself? Was it because he expected him to die and did not want to be the harbinger of bad news to Yumma or was he indifferent and insensitive like his son? Whatever the motive for his decision was, it was callous.

I do not have any concrete evidence to support my mother's story of murder but for almost half a century our half-brothers never stopped hating us. A loathing sustained for such a long time could very well be of the lethal kind.

"The doctor was a *Nasrani*, a Christian. He gave my boy an injection and my boy died." Her voice was almost an out-of-breath whisper.

"They paid him to finish off my boy." Yumma had collected all the evidence, conducted a trial in absentia of the accused dhura, her children and the doctor and passed a verdict of guilty on all of them. It was all she could do in the absence of Boya's justice.

Yumma was naïve in thinking that she could flee with her yet unborn progeny from the horror that dwelled in her mother's home and interred six of her infant brothers to the protection of a powerful chieftain. Had her son died of natural causes like her

brothers she would have eventually accepted it as an act of fate and her mourning, even if it lasted till her last day, would have been free of rancor. In the aftermath of her tragic loss there was enough bitterness to last her a lifetime and to target many including the medical doctor who treated her son. The doctor, handsomely paid by her rich husband, was expected to use his magical powers to heal her son but he failed. When her son died soon after the injection administered by the doctor, she automatically suspected him of being in league with her son's alleged murderers. Ever since, she nursed a deep-seated distrust and grudge against doctors.

Most villagers shared Yumma's low opinion of the medical profession. Doctors and nurses brandishing needles mortified men who were not afraid of bullets and daggers. Habooba told me that medical teams often arrived to find a whole village empty after all the men, women and children deserted it to take refuge in a nearby marsh. The reason for this irrational fear remains a mystery but it was probably triggered by a medical mishap or a rumor started by a local traditional therapist.

"They said he died of intestinal infection. They lied. His ribs were broken," she concluded with certainty. Surely, a mother who has witnessed the death of six of her infant brothers can tell the difference between broken ribs and dysentery.

Villagers have a saying that a lie hangs by a short thread. Sooner rather than later, someone will pull the thread, or it would unravel by itself, and then the lie will fall to the ground and shatter like cheap glass. Yumma's account of her son's death has the firmness and durability of the strongest of fabrics. She also had ample evidence of the dhuras' hatred for her and her children which supported her accusation and made it even more convincing. And if she had fabricated it just to provoke Boya and turn him against them, then she should have abandoned it soon after he refused to believe her. She proved it by living in abject

fear of the other wives and her desperate attempts to pacify them. Her only wish was for them to stop trying to harm her other children and deprive them of their rightful share of Boya's affection and care.

"My sisters, my sisters! Why are you doing this to me?" She repeatedly pleaded with them for a respite from their harassment and they snubbed her every time.

The murder of her son was only one of her numerous complaints against her dhuras and their children, but undoubtedly the most serious one. Their cruel plots and relentless maltreatment could have driven a weaker person to madness or even suicide and she was lucky to escape with one dead child only. But she did not emerge from it unscathed. Her feelings of being grossly wronged left permanent scars on her emotional state. As far as I recall, she was either silently grieving or brooding. She also had frequent, sudden fits of sobbing which stopped only after my tugs at the hem of her dress became persistent and my tears rolled down my face. But only tickling, and she was very ticklish, could chisel a brief smile on her face and produce a few awkward, nervous chuckles.

Yumma believed that God gave me to her as *awad*, a compensation for her murdered son. According to her conception of the cosmic law of justice and balance every loss is compensated either in kind in this world or in some far greater reward in Paradise. She firmly believed that because she was as patient as Job in accepting her predestined loss and her faith did not diminish one iota, Allah gave me to her as a reward. This belief was enormously important to the psychological health of my fellow villagers who lived in poverty, squalor and almost continuous bereavement. It served them well in protecting them from becoming insane, drunkard or committing suicide. There was so much grief and bereavement in every family that before reaching the age of thirty most women dyed all their clothes

black and wore only black for the rest of their lives. Fourteen centuries earlier a famous female Arab poet, al-Khansa, eulogized her slain brother by saying that if there were not so many women around her mourning their dead loved ones, she would have killed herself. Most women in our village probably shared her sentiment.

After that, Yumma's precautions verged on paranoia. Convinced that her dhuras would stop at nothing to abort or somehow get rid of the next fetus in her belly, Yumma insisted on Habooba staying with her weeks before the expected date of delivery. She also took all necessary safety precautions such as eating only what she or her mother prepared or cooked. If any food or drink were sent to her by one of the dhura as a gift she would immediately throw it in the garbage after asking Allah's forgiveness for her ungrateful act. It was the custom in our village for women to help their expecting neighbors by sharing their meals with them occasionally. A woman other than Yumma would have secretly invited one of the children of the dhura who sent her the food to eat some of it and waited to see if the child showed any signs of poisoning or the effects of black magic before deciding on whether to eat it or discard it.

No midwife was considered above suspicion or ethical enough to resist the temptation of a gold coin from one of the dhuras as a price for smothering Yumma's newborn and then claiming that it was stillborn. She could not rely on Boya in this because he had already failed her by not defending their son or avenging his death. The fifty-something-old patriarch already had seven male heirs to perpetuate his name and was probably interested in her pregnancy only as a proof of his virility. Anyhow, the chieftain had more important things to attend to than worrying over his terrified, expecting wife and humoring what he believed to be her paranoid anxieties. At the time of my birth he was reclining on his mattress in the tribe's mudhaif, the traditional guesthouse

built with bamboo and palm branches, sipping ink-black tea or bitter Arabian coffee and listening avidly to another amusing tale told by one of the elders.

My brother, waiting impatiently outside Yumma's door as Habooba had instructed him, must have been absolutely bored by the whole affair. He was probably feeling restless and wanted it to be over soon so that he can go out and play with other children. He was obviously glad when Habooba finally cracked the door open and shouted at him:

"Tell your father it's a boy."

The other wives and their children must have heard her also. They were probably sitting anxiously near the doors or windows of their rooms waiting for the news. Of course, they knew that Yumma was in labor. They must have been ticking off the days ominously soon after they learned of her pregnancy. After hearing Habooba giving instructions to my brother to stay outside and watching her dashing into our room with a pot full of hot water and shutting the door behind her, they must have correctly concluded that the delivery was near. The house became eerily quiet after the dhuras strictly ordered their children and minions to stop making noises but Yumma probably did not give them the satisfaction of hearing her scream with pain. She had a high threshold of pain, which I inherited from her. Many years later Boya took her to a surgeon to remove a large, chronic abscess on her hand. The doctor, after obtaining Boya's consent, performed the minor surgery in his clinic without administering a local anesthetic or giving her a painkiller. She told me later that it did hurt. She was proud because the sadistic quack was impressed by her endurance. None of the dhuras was praying for an uncomplicated delivery or the safety of her unborn child. More likely, they were secretly hoping for a stillborn but willing to concede an insignificant girl.

“My brother is back,” my older brother shouted repeatedly leaving no doubt in the minds of the dhuras that the newborn was a boy. The harem section of our village house was a rectangular-shaped building, with a huge courtyard. Each wife occupied a room on a different side. Yumma and us occupied the room closest to the front entrance so that Boya would only have to walk the shortest distance to reach it. After leaving the women quarters, my brother who kept on announcing at the top of his voice his version of the news of my arrival ran through the *barani* or outer section of the house. Coming out of the house he saw ahead of him the mudhaif and to his right the stable in which Boya’s thoroughbred Arabian horses were kept.

“My brother came back,” he happily shouted as he dashed into the guesthouse announcing not a new brother but the resurrection of the dead or murdered one. He was barely three years old and even as a young man his curiosity about resurrection and reincarnation was nil. My birth was not the second coming of our dead brother but his memory was kept alive by Boya naming me after him.

It was a terrible mistake and could only be made by someone without a shred of empathy or completely stupid. Stupidity being the lesser evil would make Boya think that giving me the same name would help Yumma to overcome her grief.

Villagers have taboos and superstitions to stop them from committing such abominations. They do not believe in reincarnation but almost all of them knew or heard of someone possessed by a demon or a spirit. Boya did not only bring back the name of my dead brother from the grave but also resurrected the horrible memory of his suffering and the circumstances of his death and draped it on me like a white sheet on a ghost. The name reminded Yumma of her dead son and rekindled her grief. Eventually, she had to seek relief by giving me another name: Jabur. It was a different name but subtly preserved the memory.

She believed that my brother died of complications resulting from broken ribs and Jabur literally means the bonesetter and figuratively the healer of injured psyches.

Protecting me from the murderous dhuras became her main concern in life. Her adversaries were greater in number, strength and resources but she had the advantage of determination and devotion to her children. Spending much of her life playing the role of the anxious, vigilant and mostly solitary sentry brought havoc on her physical and psychological health, but she endured it as a career soldier survives the pains and serious risks of army life. Sometimes, my resentment at Boya for directly and indirectly causing us so much suffering was shifted on her, the easier of the two targets.

"It's all your fault. If only your family had said no to him…" And when I lost my temper completely: "Did you marry him for his money? Did your saintly family celebrate after the chieftain came asking for your hand in marriage? ARE YOU HAPPY NOW YUMMA?"

Regret came to slap my face and squeeze my heart as soon as I uttered the last word in my raving at her. These bitter recriminations almost always led her to recall the story of her marriage to Boya. It was another act in her dramatic life complete with comic relief.

"I had a mean cousin. He was a horse-breeder, married with several children. He was also our neighbor and determined to make me his second wife," she stopped and then shyly added. "They used to say I was pretty." That was certainly an understatement. She had a radiant face whose beauty was still evident despite the gray veils of age and sadness. She was beautiful enough to drive her cousin almost to the brink of madness

"He swore to kill anyone who proposed to me. People took his warning seriously and stayed away." According to tribal customs,

a man had an absolute marriage claim on his cousin. After learning that a stranger had proposed to her, he had only to say the word *nehwa* to veto the proposal. Her father is obliged by custom to refuse the proposal. Putting the intentions of his nephew to the test would be the next logical step for the father to take. If he does not come up with a counter marriage proposal his uncle may encourage the man whose proposal had been earlier rejected to offer the nephew a sum of money in return for lifting his veto. Most cousins took the compensation unless of course they were stubborn, selfish and possessive like Yumma's cousin.

"Years passed and I resigned myself to the life of a spinster. It made your uncle, Enough, so angry that one day he borrowed a rifle and threatened to kill our wicked cousin." I have seen Enough upset on only one occasion but never angry. Like his sister he never quarreled with anyone. "Habooba and I wailed and cried and held him back." The shadows of a smile appeared on her face before she continued her story. "And then this sayyid, wanted to propose. His name was Ghurab."

I met Ghurab, the name literally means a crow, once.

"I should have been your father," he told me, his eyes boldly scrutinizing me from head to toe. His remark irritated me but it only elicited a chuckle from Boya. He was short and ugly and his name fitted him perfectly.

"Ghurab implored Boya to intervene on his behalf with my cousin. After learning from Ghurab about my good looks, Boya came to my house to ask for my hand in marriage but not for Ghurab. He wanted me for himself."

The whole episode shed some light on Boya's character. After agreeing to help Ghurab, Boya was ethically bound by his word to do so. His action was unmistakably a betrayal of Ghurab's trust in him and it reflected badly on Boya's honor and good name. The case proved that not only in love and war but also in

everything else victory and its spoils belonged to the powerful. Crow was naïve and should have known better than to use a hungry falcon to hunt for him. Villagers hated crows because their color reminded them of mourning and when villagers heard the cawing of a crow, they immediately repeated a special litany against bad omens. One of the village myths also claimed that the unpopular bird suffered from low esteem resulting from its awkward walk, which it acquired after its unsuccessful attempt to imitate the dignified strides of the swallow. Yumma's cousin must have also lost much of his self-esteem on the day Yumma's betrothal to Boya was announced.

"My poor daughter had already suffered enough," Habooba told me one day. "She needed a husband to give her *sitter* or protection and children like all other girls. She was getting on in age and this was probably her last chance. Her cousin was bad tempered and mean so we accepted Boya's marriage proposal although he was an *ami* and already married."

Boya, the Crow and the horse-breeder were predators who regarded Yumma as a delectable prey. In marrying Boya, she was like the ill-fated locust, which desperately hopped here and there to escape the scorching sands of the desert and finally landed in the sizzling pan of a hungry Bedouin.

Had she married Crow, I would have been born into poverty and raised to become a sharecropper like him. But it would have been a more peaceful life. At least, Crow could not afford to have other wives who would hound Yumma and murder one of her sons.

Boya had more than one reason to celebrate when his marriage proposal was accepted. He was not only marrying a beautiful, submissive and undemanding woman but also an elwia. As a rule, elwias usually married sayyids but there were few exceptions. A chieftain considered himself extremely fortunate and blessed if he married an elwia. Did Boya then

regard Yumma as a trophy wife and thus soon after she became his wife lost much of his interest in her? Immediately after their marriage he took her to the nearby town of Najaf, rented a house for a month and hired a maid to serve them. It should not be called a honeymoon because the practice was unknown to our villagers but at least it put a comfortable distance between them and the dhuras. It was another reason for the dhuras to hate Yumma because none of them received the same privilege.

The house was haunted and in it Yumma had a premonition of the bad times awaiting her.

"The house had three subterranean floors or *sirdabs*. The first one was divided into bedrooms used during the summer when the heat in the desert town made it impossible to sleep above ground. The second level was used as a storage area for food and other perishables. The well was in the third floor. It was very convenient because in the village girls and women had to make several trips to the river or the nearest water canal every day to fetch water, wash the dishes and do the laundry. Also, a family living in such a house could survive for a long time on provisions kept in their basement without needing to go to the market. These basements were as vital as the city high wall and its other fortifications in resisting the marauding Wahabi bands that often raided the town and laid siege to it. One morning I asked the maid to go down and bring rice and other provisions for our lunch. She disappeared for few minutes and then came up panting and blabbering about seeing ghosts in the basement. After calming down she told me that she saw and heard the ghosts of children playing inside the well. I told her that she must have heard the voices of our neighbor's children filtering through the wall but she insisted that she saw them inside the well. She then told me that she would never again go down to the haunted basement. Lunch must be cooked and ready before Boya returned from the shrine of Imam Ali so I decided to go down

myself. I took the lantern from her– we didn't have electricity then-and descended the stairs reciting verses from the Koran. I had just climbed the first step with a large bag full of provisions in one hand and the other hand holding the lantern when I heard the noises. They sounded like childish giggles and their source was undoubtedly the well shaft."

"Were you afraid Yumma?" I interrupted her story, my voice quivering with anticipation and tension.

"Who wouldn't feel a little fear under the circumstances? But I was not scared out of my wits like our young maid" she said with a chuckle. "You know that if someone gives in to his fears, he could become seriously ill. He could go insane or no longer have children. We always considered the town people to be weaker than us villagers. I remember Habooba telling me that many of the people of Najaf sought sanctuary in our house from the bubonic plague which almost decimated the town's population. One of them even made a short limerick ridiculing their flight. It went like this: 'we were chased from our homes by a mouse. If it were a rat, all hopes would have been lost'. I walked to the well raising the lantern high to see inside. The maid did not lie. Three boys were inside the well. I saw them as clearly as I see you now, Jabur. Without thinking I shouted at them to come out of there before they drowned. It was silly of me to say that because they were already in the water. They looked up at me and stopped playing. I could not help thinking that they were facing danger but I could do nothing to help them. With a heavy heart I turned and climbed the stairs."

It was typical of Yumma to worry over the safety of apparitions appearing in a well. Was this perhaps a premonition or a message from the supernatural world of what the future held in store for her and her children? It is a fact that she gave birth to three sons. Bodies of water separated her from them for significant periods of time. One of them was killed and buried in a cemetery across

the river from where she lived. A river separated this world from the hereafter in some of the ancient world's mythologies. And her two surviving sons grew up and left to study overseas. My brother later severed all ties with us by changing his faith and name. I became a refugee soon after her death.

Next to her fear of the wicked plots of her dhuras she fretted over her children drowning in the river or one of the numerous water canals in our village.

"Allah gave you back to me," she said in conclusion of the story of her marriage. Yumma's thoughts never wandered far from the painful memory of her child's loss.

The story of my brother's death stopped me from going near the other wives and their children but it had no impact whatsoever on my older brother. He shrugged off her repeated warnings and appeals and went out to play in the dangerous world infested with deep irrigation canals, diseased peasant children and child-killing dhuras and half-brothers.

"He was immature and rash like a bird. Almost every day he came back to me crying and complaining of a half-brother punching him or a half-sister shoving him. I pleaded with him to play in our room or in the courtyard where I can keep an eye on him all the time. But as sure as Allah is our God, the next day he went back to them for more. It was a miracle that he survived and was not killed like his brother."

Any child in his place would probably have behaved similarly. At that time, the only toys known to village children were whitewashed sheep's anklebones and wooden tops, and there was no fun in playing with them on your own. If he did as he was told and stayed in her room, he would have to play quietly so as not to disturb his infant brother or he may be asked to look after him when he was awake. Spending all his time in the small, dreary room was undoubtedly no match to the outside world with its irresistible promise of playing endless games with other

children. Nearby canals teemed with trout which nibbled even at bare hooks. Stray donkeys stood in the shade of palm trees as if waiting for children to joyride on them. A single slingshot sent tens of birds into the safety of thin air and occasionally one fell down writhing on the ground with a broken wing or neck. My brother had the unique privilege of being treated by everyone, except his half-brothers, with the attention and respect due to a chieftain's son. The sounds of boys jumping into the canal, the cacophony of their games and the genuine mirth in their laughter were loud enough to reach us inside our room. Unable to resist the temptation, he went out to play prepared to pay the daily price of enduring few punches, cuts and bruises.

I remember vaguely the shouts, noises and laughter but I chose to stay with Yumma. In return for my loyalty and obedience, she entertained me with frightening tales about ghouls, witches, genies and ghosts. And sometimes she made up lullabies and nursery rhymes. One of them translates: You are my soul and my lung, and more precious to me than my heart and kidneys.

"You were smart and stayed by my side."

From Yumma's point of view, my survival is the proof of my intelligence. In addition to the art of survival, she taught me the most valuable and cherished truths about this world. One of those insights was that love and hatred could live under the same roof but love always greeted and smiled at its obnoxious and sullen neighbor who never smiled back. Since she personified perfect and true love in my eyes, there was no choice for me other than to cling to her like iron filings to a magnet.

"He could have drowned in a canal, Allah forbid."

She thoroughly distrusted canals, rivers and all other large bodies of water, where younger and weaker sons, who happened to have greedy half-brothers, mysteriously drowned. When one day two of my second cousins went swimming in the river and

one of them drowned, everyone assumed foul play because they were half-brothers. Whenever my brother went out of her eyeshot, Yumma's vivid imagination must have tortured her with images of bloated young bodies floating down river like the carcasses of cattle swept by a flood or bobbing and ramming their unfeeling heads against the thick root of a palm tree near the riverbank. But neither wicked half-brothers eager to push his head underwater until he stopped shouting for Yumma to save him nor fear of the *qurta*, the dreaded water nymph-ghoul lurking in the deep near the treacherous eddies and swift currents deterred my brother from enjoying a swim in the cool water of the canal on hot summer days.

The rivers in her tales cruelly broke the hearts of loving mothers like her by robbing them of their young, tender children whose breaths still held the sweet smell of their mothers' milk. Men lost their tempers on oppressively hot days of July or after foolishly gorging themselves on ripe, succulent dates in August but rivers raged in spring or early summer after swallowing whole villages complete with men, cattle, and mud huts without choking on them. As if these horror tales of drowning were not enough to keep me permanently planted on terra firma, she repeatedly warned me of the *qurtas*. These legendary female demons, which dwelled in the dark deep recesses of the river, climbed ashore at night disguised as beautiful women to lure lustful men into their embrace and then devour them alive and spit their whitewashed bones on the riverbank. Her vivid tales about the dangers of swimming in water made a lasting impact on my impressionable mind. Until now, my fear of water turns into a hysterical panic as soon as I put my head underwater or stand under a strong shower longer than few minutes. Needless to add, I never learned to swim.

My older and reckless brother who, heedless of Yumma's warnings, swam in irrigation canals and sought the company of

our sinister half-brothers and half-sisters miraculously survived while our gentler and more obedient brother perished. One miracle could not have been enough to keep him alive. Indeed, my search for a plausible explanation led me to identify four protective traits of his, which fused together to form his invincible shield. These four traits or guardian angels of a sort included his name, hobby, scars and order of birth.

My brother was named after a saint, and even the most wicked of Yumma's enemies would have hesitated long before raising a hand to strangle him or break his ribs. Even the thought of harming him was enough to fill anyone with fear of instant divine retribution which our mother's status as a descendant of the Prophet made almost certain. An unusual hobby also helped my brother to stay alive against all odds. Other children at his age were repulsed and terrified by insects but not he. His love of insects would have made the most dedicated of entomologist full of admiration and envy. The marshes south of our home teemed with insects of every species and he had only to stand patiently near a lit lantern or an open fire after dusk and observe them, with unusual delight, creep, hop or fly in droves into his lap. No insect was too big, hideous or dangerous to stop him from picking it up with his little fingers and proudly depositing it into his pocket. The most I could manage in my childish years was capturing few dragonflies and butterflies. It was considered more than a minor accomplishment among peasant children to capture one of these delicate flying insects by hand. After being dared by other children I used to creep silently behind a perched insect and then extend my hand slowly until my thumb and forefinger were not more than an inch away from touching its flapping wings before going for a quick catch. An insect must be captured intact without causing any damage to its wings and torso for the catch to be counted.

Sons of chieftains like him collected gold coins, prime cattle, thoroughbred Arabian horses and, when they were old enough to have the urge, beautiful women or effeminate boys but never insects. Alarmed and ashamed by her son's bizarre and dangerous hobby, Yumma tried everything except the threat or use of force to discourage him.

"Insects bite," she warned but he must have already been painfully aware of that. He probably refused to believe that one insect bite could result in a serious sickness, blindness or even death. And he did not abandon his hobby after learning from Yumma that a certain centipede could burrow inside his ear and end up feeding on his brains and that one ugly insect with menacing mandibles which sent other children scurrying for higher ground was nicknamed the scrotum-pincher.

"His insects gave me one of the worst frights of my life one night. After the death of your brother, I used to wake up several times every night to check on you and your brother. On that night, you were sleeping peacefully in your crib, but the mattress on which your brother slept was dark and empty. Even in the unlit room, the whiteness of his robe was usually discernable. My mind, gripped by fear and panic, pictured him tiptoeing out of the room, silently leaving the house through the harem's back door and heading straight to the deep canal or veering to the left into the rice fields. Surrounded by the dark night and the eerie shapes of rice shoots and distant palm trees, he would suddenly realize that he was lost. Disoriented and unable to find his way back, he would then begin to sob softly at first and then loudly, and the sounds which resembled the cries of a lost or injured small animal would be carried far in the still night and empty fields. My mind also imagined the hungry coyotes, wolves and boars roaming the fields and nearby marshes hurrying towards the sounds of distress. Then I took one step toward his bed and saw his head on the pillow. Relief swept aside my fears but it

lasted only a moment before I saw that his face, neck and robe–indeed all his body–were covered with what appeared to be countless sores. These were black, ugly sores that opened right in front of my eyes and moved."

Yumma was an unrivaled storyteller. Habooba was undoubtedly a better village historian and poet but there was no match to Yumma's stories. I owe my fascination with history, poetry and storytelling to both. Did I mention that they were both illiterate? Yumma taught me the fine art and skills of storytelling and that a skillful storyteller must prolong the anticipation and excitement of his listeners. One tried and tested method of doing this is by embellishing his tale with interesting background information and details and pausing occasionally to take a sip of tea and smack his lips contentedly and thank Allah repeatedly. Before the arrival of the radio and later television, tribesmen valued a talented storyteller as much as a gifted poet who glorified their real and exaggerated virtues, piousness, generosity, bravery and victories. Caliphs, princes, viziers and chieftains enjoyed the company of their *nadeems*, or storytelling courtiers so much that they probably spent more time with them than their beautiful wives and concubines. History books tell the story of one of our ancient kings who in a fit of drunkard rage was offended by the alcohol-induced insolence of his two courtiers and ordered their beheading. After waking up he was so saddened by his rash deed that he declared that day to be 'a day of mourning' and vowed to kill the first man to enter his palace on every anniversary. But not all courtiers were talented, entertaining and as valuable as the King's own were, and certainly not the court jester retained by one of Boya's second cousins. Instead of amusing us with a tale about the past glories of our tribe and the great deeds of its leaders, the short, emaciated man used to perform a boring duet act in partnership with his patron. It routinely began with the asthmatic companion

producing his outdated asthma inhaler from his pocket and applying it several times before his patron would join in by asking me in his stuttering voice: “Did you hear him fa… fa… fart?” followed by a peel of laughter. At that time, I thought the inhaler was a broken bicycle horn used as a prop in their pathetic comedy act.

After Yumma took another sip of tea followed by the mandatory sound effects of contention, she was ready to resume her story.

“Suddenly an object flew off his body and hit me right on my forehead. I screamed.” She would not have screamed or made any sound if Boya was sleeping in the room—no matter how terrifying the situation was, so I can safely assume that he was spending that summer in his favorite mountain resort abroad. My anger was stirred by the thought that if the wolves and boars roaming the fields outside or the more vicious dhuras in the next rooms had attacked us that night, no one would have come to our rescue. But every time I find a justifiable cause to be angry with Boya, she defended him and blamed fate.

“Don’t be mad at your father, Jabur! It’s our kismet. Now let me finish my story! After the flying object hit me in the face, I realized that the black objects all over your brother were not sores but insects. There must have been scores of them crawling over his face, neck, under his robe, and on the floor beside his mattress. He must have put them into his pockets before going to bed. He slept soundly while I collected all the insects and threw them outside our room.”

“Ah Jabur! It’s nothing less than a miracle for a mother’s heart to endure so much suffering and anguish without bursting. Is it possible that mothers’ hearts are made of iron? But how could they be then soft and loving at the same time? One day your brother became seriously ill. His armpits were swollen and the slightest movement made him shriek with pain. It was probably

an insect's bite that made him ill. Your father took him in a canoe to the town doctor and came back with several kinds of capsules. Some of them were as big as mothballs and just as revolting. Even a grown-up woman like me had difficulty swallowing one and keeping it down. But the swelling, fever and pain persisted."

At this point she would be overwhelmed by emotions and her tears started to flow copiously. Sometimes I tried to console her by hugging her and pressing my face against hers. Her tears dripping on my face were large, heavy and hot.

"Someone suggested taking him to the *hakeem*, Bedouin healer and your father agreed. The healer came, felt his swollen armpits and prescribed *utaba*. I was frantic. He wanted to brand my son with the red-hot embers of a burnt cloth. 'No utaba, please Hadji! Don't let the Bedouin brand my boy.' I pleaded with your father. But he shrugged my appeal off and had him carried to the guesthouse which is off limit to women. I stayed in my room and cried. When they brought him back, he was unconscious and whimpering. He smelled of burnt flesh and singed hair. Three large burn marks covered his entire nape."

Leishmania, a microscopic organism whose larva is carried by an insect, ravages the faces of many in our village. These miserable men and women had to go through life with one eye, half a nose or a cheek resembling a lunar scene at close range. They also ended up answering to the derogatory nicknames of the 'sunken eye,' the 'nibbled nose or the 'crunched cheek'. My brother who was also infected by the parasite was very fortunate to escape serious disfigurement. The scar it left on his right eyelid was barely noticeable but more conspicuous than the burn marks on the back of his neck which were usually hidden from view by his long hair and shirt collar. He was obsessed with these scars. He hated going to barbers to have his hair cut, and his discomfort changed into panic every time their snipping and trimming scissors disappeared into his blind spots. Their

persistent disregard for his instructions on the desirable length of hair on the back of his neck finally led him to boycott them and appoint me as his personal barber.

“Do whatever you like with my hair as long as you keep those burn marks covered, “ he repeated before every haircut.

The only person my brother hated more than barbers was the hakeem who gave him those almost invisible scars. He refused to listen to Yumma’s reasoning that if it was not for the healer’s traditional medicine he would have died. For centuries his kind of therapy was the only medicine our people knew and some of it whether acquired by trial and error or other means was undeniably effective. One of these hakeems probably discovered inoculation centuries ago and helped to eventually rid the world of smallpox and other infectious diseases.

“When cases of *Jidri*, smallpox appeared in our village we used to take a long palm’s thorn, draw some of the puss from a scab on an infected person who showed signs of recovering and prick the skin of a healthy person with it,” Habooba once told me. She was describing a well-established tradition practiced in the nineteenth century. My brother, however, insisted that all traditional therapists were quacks and refused to believe any evidence to the contrary.

Sickness, disfigurement and deformities terrified our villagers. Two twin brothers who lived in a shack near our town house were albinos and they were rarely seen outside their homes in the daytime. The whole community, except my uncle Enough who treated them with kindness and respect, looked upon them as misfits or abominations and shunned them. Villagers refused to give them their daughters in marriage and they had to live alone like celibate Sufi monks. Their social isolation must have also influenced their choice of profession. Fishing was considered less prestigious than farming and must have earned them little in a community where men often caught fish easily with their own

hands in the shallow waters of the marshes. Farmers rarely sold their catch of fish and if one of your neighbors in the village caught an extra fish, he would most likely send you one of them as a gift. Nothing tasted better than grilled fish and rice bread except grilled overripe fish for breakfast. Fishing was a suitable profession for the albino twins; they fished with small nets during the night or at dawn when no one was around to stare or make rude remarks at them. Working at night also protected their fair, translucent skin from the ravages of the harsh sun.

When the albinos occasionally came out in the daytime, they covered their heads with scarves and abas so that one had to come very close to them to see their translucent eyelids and recognize them. Sunlight annoyed them but probably not as much as urchins who pointed, laughed and sometimes threw stones at them. If they were strangers, children might bring out their slings and set their vicious dogs loose on them. These children, repelled by my brother's scars and hobby, probably avoided wrestling with him or even coming near him and risk brushing their hands against his scarred flesh or squeezing out with their fingers the disgusting life juices of his hoard of insects onto their faces, and clothes.

My brother's hobby even made a government engineer, a young man from the city who never in his life saw so many insects being fondly kept as pets by a child, lose his face and dignity in front of our tribesmen, which he, like all city dwellers, probably despised as illiterate savages. Whenever the engineer saw my brother entering the guesthouse, he would turn pale. My brother, with a mischievous glee on his round face, would then taunt the engineer by putting his hand in his pocket to produce an insect, or pretend to be doing so, and then wait for the mortified man to hurriedly stumble out of the guesthouse followed by the chuckles and jeers of the tribesmen. His repulsive hobby and scars gave him power over others, especially the

squeamish insect-hater type, and kept him alive until our brother was born and became the primary target of the conspiracies of the dhuras.

My birth was also a blessing in disguise to my older brother. When I replaced him as Boya's youngest son, his survival was almost assured. Dhuras are also mothers who knew very well how fond parents are of their youngest children. This is why they killed the second and not the first son and were probably thinking of doing away with me as well as soon as I was born. Yumma must have been instinctively aware of this danger even at the moment of giving birth to me but she was *nifsa*, a post-natal woman weakened by childbirth and forbidden by custom to perform even the easiest of tasks. Villagers believed that unless a nifsa stayed in bed for at least forty days she might catch a fever and die. The custom probably began as a medical rule of thumb intended to protect women from being forced by their tyrannical and selfish husbands into performing their conjugal and domestic chores immediately after childbirth. Some men must have resented this custom which restricted their freedom to do with their wives as they wished. And few may have even stubbornly refused to abide by it, but the prospect of losing their wives and having to incur the high cost of remarriage must have deterred even the most skeptical of them. Eventually, feminine cunning or what men prefer to call *mukur* or craftiness and intrigue must have been instrumental in solidifying this cultural custom into a taboo which was almost as sacred and binding as some religious laws.

Yumma who was probably more worried over my safety than her health could trust no one except Habooba to take her place in looking after us. Habooba stayed with us all day long, cooking, cleaning and washing my diapers and nursing Yumma back to health. Boya's other wives could not turn her away, though they must have eagerly wanted to, because she was an elwia and

Boya's mother-in-law. When Boya came to check on us, she greeted him from behind her aba and sidled out of the room. As soon as he announced his departure by clearing his throat and before his spit hit the dirt path outside the front door Habooba resumed her vigil beside her daughter.

If she did not have a wise mother like Habooba to support, nurture and advise her, Yumma would not have the strength and determination to overcome the trauma of a murdered child. Habooba was one of these unique women who was not only sensible but also made others and especially members of her family see reason and act rationally. Women are generally believed by villagers to have only half brains and were therefore assigned a status below men but above animals. Many also considered them unclean like some animals and spoke of them in the same way they spoke of dogs. It was only expected of women, as men maintained, to be fickle-minded and incapable of any meaningful thoughts. This belief in the inferiority of women's intelligence, rooted in their ancient tribal tradition, contradicted the religious commandments that required them to cherish, honor and obey their mothers. They had no problems in treating their wives and daughters as mentally incompetent but reconciling their tribal stereotype of women with this religious principle regarding their mothers was a thorny issue. Men's thinking was generally male-chauvinistic but their minds were not totally closed and if confronted with a case contradicting the tradition-prescribed stereotype they were willing, albeit reluctantly, to make an exception. Mothers and rarely wives of chieftains were among these rare exceptions. One of Boya's second cousins was ridiculed–behind his back of course–for consulting his mother before making any decision and never disobeying her wishes. Only in one case known to me, a woman succeeded on the basis of merit alone to reach the highest position in her tribe. Members of a neighboring tribe were so

awed by the intelligence and wisdom of one of their matrons that they chose her as their chieftain.

Courage is greatly admired in men as well as women. Every tribe has a *nakhwa* or call for assistance. This call is raised when one tribesman needs the support of fellow tribesmen in resisting the aggression of members of another tribes. Typically, this call for assistance proudly invokes the memory of a brave ancestor. We have two nakhwas in our tribe: sons of Saqar and brothers of Tuhfa. The second call to assistance is more interesting because Tuhfa is a woman. She was an exceptional woman who demonstrated extraordinary wisdom and courage. She was a common tribal woman who witnessed a decline in the tribe's fortune and status after it was conquered by another tribe and lost its tribal land. She did what chieftains and fellow tribesmen failed to do by uniting the tribe and leading them in defeating the oppressing tribe and regaining their land. As a result, tribesmen honored her by incorporating her name in one of their call for arms.

Tuhfa was not the only extraordinary woman in our tribe. One contemporary woman in our tribe dared to sit with chieftains and speak with them with more confidence and forcefulness shown by many men. Men respected her and women envied her. One of her daughters, emboldened by her mother's strong and impressive personality and misinterpreting it as a license for greater freedom, fell in love with a young tribesman. After news of her romantic affair, which was probably totally platonic, became widespread, tribesmen slandered her family and their honor. Her brothers, hounded and tormented by the public rebuke, finally killed her to restore the family's good name in accordance with tribal standards.

Habooba was undoubtedly an exceptional woman and mother. She was the tower of strength for Yumma until she recovered and was able again to look after her surviving children

and endure the egoism of her husband and the harassment of his other wives. Fathers in our village monopolized power and wealth but mothers controlled the hearts of their sons absolutely. Boya bought me nice clothes and gave me an education but Yumma and Habooba left their ineradicable marks on my thinking and personality.

"*Yabooo*!" Habooba wailed. "No one had a bellyful of misery as much as your mother. All of us – your uncle Enough, her half-brothers and half-sisters and I– banded together and tried to lighten her burden. But there was still enough to break the backbone of a strong person. If she had brought down her miseries from her shoulders to the ground, I am certain it would have caved under their weight. When you were born, I lived with your uncle on the other side of the river so I had to rise very early – before men performed ablutions for the dawn prayer and women tiptoed towards the unlit fireplace and the cow waiting in the barn to be milked. Allah be praised for giving you to us in spring" I think she used the word *marbaniat* but I could never remember correctly the ancient Bedouin names for the seasons. "The weather was mild and the flood season was still two full moons away. The fields were dry and the bridges were not washed away."

The trunk of a palm tree laid across a canal served as a bridge. Crossing on one of these required the boldness and balance of a tight rope acrobat, and together with walking and swimming made up the three basic skills taught to every child in our village. I was probably the only exception to this rule because I did not leave Yumma's room to play with other children and was, therefore, never dared by them to walk on a bridge. By the time Boya started to take me out with him, it was too late. My fears of height and of falling into the canal below allowed me a maximum of two steps before forcing me into a hasty retreat. My cold feet must have disappointed Boya who had to ask one

of the tribesmen accompanying us to carry me across. The men who carried me on their shoulders across the numerous canals in Boya's land must have also resented me and especially for hugging their heads too firmly, obscuring their visions with my frantic hands, and whimpering continuously down their ears until we reached the other bank safely. Only fear of Boya kept their bare feet steady on the shaking bridges and stopped their hands from throwing me into the murky water below.

"Are you still listening Jabur? " Habooba asked, squinting at my face. " The road to the river passed by several peasants' huts and their dogs came out in packs to bark and snap at me. I was ready for them with my stick." She said, raising her hand high and waving it as if she was holding a stick and then bringing it back to her mouth to cover a chuckle. "Nothing actually stopped these vicious dogs from attacking me and tearing me into shreds except their heavy chains. Some of the chains were two or three meters long and I had to choose my path carefully to make sure that I was out of their reach. Their racket did not stop until a man or boy came out to investigate, with one hand squeezing slumber out of his eyes and the other brandishing a rifle, a handgun or a *mugwar*." The mugwar, a club with a large tar ball at one end, was a lethal weapon afforded by even the poorest members of the tribe. During the hot days of July, the tar surface in the street melts and children used to make miniature toy muqwars from it. I made one for myself in this way but I never intended to use it against anyone. A person going out in the sun with this weapon tucked under his belt may do more harm to himself than his enemies.

"They were my neighbors and as soon as they recognized me, they greeted me politely and silenced their dogs. You cannot blame them for being too careful because it was still dark in the palm groves and their dogs could be barking at an enemy who came to slit their throats or a burglar to steal their cows. Thieves

in our village could steal the kohl from a woman's eyes without her noticing it. All of my neighbors were poor and possessed nothing of value except the few silver trinkets belonging to their wives and, of course, their cows." A cow is more precious to a peasant than a school certificate to an effendi. It was his insurance against starvation and gave him most of the simple edible pleasures in his dreary lives such as a dab of cream on coarse bread at breakfast, or a light sprinkle of molten butter on the occasional rice dish. Although their survival probably depended on cows, children hated them because they were usually put in charge of them. Boys had to graze their cows and cut new grass for their evening meals. A boy who lost his family's cows was strongly advised to stay with his relatives until the cow is found and his father's anger abated. Still their chores were much lighter and less revolting than those assigned to their sisters who cleaned the barns, milked the cows, churned the butter and collected the dung. The raw dung was molded into discs and then attached to the house's outer wall facing the sun. Dried cow pats were used as fuel and a fish meal was not complete without rice bread cooked on cow pats.

"And don't forget sugared hot butter, Habooba. It was my favorite treat." I said excitedly, remembering the times when I sat beside her with my mouth open and salivating in readiness to receive another piece of bread dipped into sugared hot, fresh butter. After gorging myself on this delicacy I would rest my head on her lap to enjoy perfect peace of mind. She would then tell me a historical tale or hum softly. And if her hand absentmindedly began searching my hair for lice I did not object.

"You remember my son!" she chuckled and covered her toothless mouth. "Now let me finish my story. It would be almost dawn when I reached the riverbank. Some days, a whole hour would pass before an empty canoe went by. Boatmen hate to navigate the strong current in the dark. Occasionally, a cargo

boat slowly sailed upstream pulled by a sailor. The sounds of his labored breathing and his feet plodding in the mud of the riverbank reached me before his gaunt face and thin body emerged from behind a clump of palm trees. Never stand in his way, my son! Because he is exhausted and too preoccupied with his footing to even notice you. If you do not quickly make way for him, he may unintentionally push you into the river and continue on his way."

I remember these sailors, their heads bowed, bodies drenched in sweat, chests muscles taut and struggling against the pull of the leather straps from which thick ropes trailed all the way back to the laden boats. When children saw a sailor pulling a boat, they immediately stopped playing, dropped their precious marbles and ran to the riverbank to chant: "May Allah help the sailor and curse the navigator's father." Sometimes an angry navigator would let go of the rudder to throw fists and swear back at us. At that time, I was unaware of the social connotations of the chant. The poor, tired sailor represented the janitors, street sweepers, common laborers, the peasantry and all the other underdogs in our community while the navigator stood for the powerful government officials, judges, bureaucrats, merchants and landlords and other figures of authority. Like the navigator, Boya sat in his guesthouse and gave orders to his assistants and peasants whose labor put cream, imported marmalade, meat, rice, white bread and pastries on our table very day. By cursing the navigators and all the exploiters he represented I was unknowingly cursing Boya and my family.

"Are you still listening Jabur? " Habooba asked, bringing her face close to mine to gaze at me, "I walked up and down the riverbank every day searching for a boatman willing to ferry me across the river. Eventually one would come along. He was usually a nice, polite young man who would jump out of his small canoe before it even touched the bank and wade into the shallow

water to hold the boat in place until I climbed into it without wetting my feet or clothes. Being an elwia has its advantages." She chuckled and her hand sprang to cover her mouth again.

Riding in a canoe was one of the terrifying experiences of my village life. Since I did not know how to swim, the thought of drowning kept my hands firmly holding the sides of the canoe throughout the trip. I had to suppress a gasp every time the boatman who steered with oars and poles changed position, rocking his canoe in the process and sometimes drawing water onboard. As far as I recall, there was always water in the bottoms of these canoes, usually not much but enough to set me wondering whether the boat had sprung a serious leak. The risk of a boat capsizing and sending its occupants to the bottom of the river multiplied during night trips. Even the most skillful of boatman may not notice a floating tree trunk until it rammed his canoe smashing it into pieces, or he may blindly steer into a strong whirlpool and lose control. One day, some emergency or an incontestable order from Boya forced us to travel by boat at night rather than wait till the next morning. It was pitch dark when our small flotilla of three canoes sailed upstream. Two female relatives and a maid shared the small canoe with me. They were all overweight and our combined weight brought the canoe to within six inches of sinking. The terrified women shrieked, admonished the boatman to be careful repeatedly and sometimes giggled nervously. In spite of the boatman's warnings their panicky fidgeting rocked the canoe and soon my feet were covered with water. It was a full-moon night, and every now and then a fish broke through the water surface, writhing in thin air and shaking its silvery body for few seconds before diving back into the dark serpentine water. Nature's display was enthralling but could not distract my mind for long from our precarious situation. At least it was dark enough and the women were too preoccupied with their fear to notice the terror on my face. One

of them even said that she was counting on me to save her from drowning if our canoe sank. Before long the boat docked near our destination and all my self-restraint was needed to stop me from jumping out of it and frantically scrambling to the safety of the riverbank.

Yumma took up the story from where Habooba stopped. "I thought our lives would return to normal after the forty days of *nifas* were over but I was wrong. You were still an infant and needed all my attention and care. And who will then clean our room, cook and wash our clothes? Certainly not a servant, never. I refused to let one near you – not after what happened to your late brother. Anyhow the servants and peasants who came every day to offer their help took their orders from the first wife and she told them to stay away from me. They obeyed her because she was entrusted by Boya with the key to the supply room."

Whoever had possession of that key controlled our household – after Boya, of course. It was the pride and joy of the stern, sad woman who had lost two infant sons. The second thing, which made her the envy of every woman in the tribe, was her even complete set of teeth. It was an extraordinary quality in the whole village in which people lost a tooth as regularly and sometimes more often than a snake shedding its skin. Their teeth fell at all times: while eating, laughing, sneezing, yawning or sleeping. You can tell that one of them has just lost a tooth by the look of bewilderment suddenly appearing on his face, his tongue prodding around in his mouth and finally his nonchalant comment as he spat it out in his open hand: "What do you know? I just lost a tooth." Women dreaded losing their teeth and ending up with the hollow cheeks of a hag or earning the nickname of "buck-teeth" because of their uneven teeth. A woman who occasionally visited my mother had four protruding front teeth and I could not stop myself from staring at them all the time and

impatiently waited for her to laugh to so that I can marvel at their extraordinary length and strange shape.

“It is not normal, Jabur” Yumma said affirmatively, “No one had teeth like her.” She probably said that to console me because all four of my front upper teeth became rotten before my second birthday. The blame for losing my teeth, as all misfortunes that happened to us, was squarely put on her dhuras.

II

"You suffered so much my son," Yumma began her account of another terrible injustice inflicted on us by the dhuras. She never regretted bringing me into this life of perpetual suffering and mortal dangers because she regarded me as Allah's gift to her and a compensation for her lost son. It was simply fated that the dhuras would torment us so much. Kismet wrote and consequently the world turned on its axis like a wheel of fortune and women in Boya's family schemed to bring about my suffering. She, like all villagers, believed that our fates were chiseled on the bones of our foreheads and only Allah could change or erase them.

It was my kismet to be born in family full of strife, confined to a single room during the first years of my life where I absorbed Yumma's fears and anxieties with every drop of her milk. The fears continued even after the premature weaning and soon after that my teeth began to rot.

"You were only few months old when one of your half-sisters came to our door. I thought she was going to swear at me or throw cow dung at us and run away as usual. She surprised me by asking politely about your health. I could not bring myself to send her away…But I was afraid of what she might do to you. I expected her to snatch you while I was not looking and run toward her mother's room or into the fields. Who knows what they'll do to you… She then took something out of her pocket and offered it to me saying that it was a gift from her mother. It was a paper pouch folded neatly into a triangle as if by a grocer or an herbalist. Inside it there was a powdery substance."

"It is a potion for stimulating the milk of breast-feeding mothers. Mix it with water until it becomes like dough and then

apply it to your breasts for an hour. My brother can then have his full of your milk whenever he wants," she said and left.

"I was a fool to believe her after all they did to us," Yumma berated herself. She was undoubtedly a great storyteller but she definitely could not have fabricated this story. To begin with, she only made up fairy tales. And a storyteller would never call herself or himself a fool – a hero frequently, a victim perhaps, but a fool, never. It is true that she portrayed herself in real life as a helpless victim wronged and persecuted by most of the people around her. She was not lying or exaggerating then and I can vouch for the truthfulness of her claims and accusations. I was there besides her or close by to witness their cruelty and wickedness towards her, and sometimes I shared the blows and abuse with her. And I have touched with my fingers and tasted her tears, as big as the pearls of the Gulf and as hot as the desert sand in July. If this story which not even the talented storytelling Yumma could have concocted is true, then all her stories about their evil doings must be true.

"I was gullible and believed that her mother could actually care for you and your welfare. I was blind. After murdering your brother and all the other evil they did to us, I should have been wiser," she went on scolding herself. "I followed her instructions and put the substance on my breast. Hours later you woke up hungry. I held you up to my breast, and almost immediately you stopped feeding, pushed yourself away from me and began to cry. I was puzzled; you never behaved like this before. I tried again and you struggled even harder to distance yourself from me. The first thing that came to my mind was stomachache. I boiled some of the herbs Habooba bought especially for you, cooled down the tea by blowing on it and gave you a spoonful. You drank it hungrily but refused again to feed from my breasts. Your father came and said it must be a minor ailment."

"I am a simple woman. My mother and brother are simple people. Still, how could I have trusted them after they murdered your brother? What kind of a human being would deliberately break the ribs of a small child? You would have loved him as a brother. He was gentle, polite and shy – an angel, just like you. I believed them because I thought there must be some goodness left in them. Even the accursed Omar ben Saad cried when he saw the Prophet's grandson lying on the desert sand mortally wounded. But they were heartless like Shimmer who took his sword and, in full view of almighty Allah in heavens, severed the Imam's head. *Yaboo*, *yaboo*, *yaboo*." Yumma wailed.

There were many arch villains like the accursed Shimmer in our family and tribe who were capable of extreme cruelty or any other vile means to achieve their selfish ends. Every year the tragic war between the forces of the saintly Imam and his evil opponents was reenacted in our village. Most young men aspired to play the role of the Prophet's grandson or one of his partisans. There was also no shortage of candidates for the role of Shimmer although they were often spat on, punched, stoned, pelted with rotten vegetables and submitted to other unmentionable indignities by overzealous spectators.

After drying her tears with her headscarf, she was ready to resume her story:

"You were still crying hours later when your half-sister showed up at our door again and said: 'My mother is wondering if you have already applied the *sabur* she sent you.' And she ran away. My son! I did it with my own hands, which I wish were paralyzed or severed on that day rather than become the instruments of your suffering." She wailed again and our sparsely furnished room echoed the sounds of the few hard slaps she administered to her forehead.

"Sabur is…" I know what sabur is. It is an extremely bitter substance used by breast-feeding mothers as a last resort to

wean their infants. Giving sabur to the unsuspecting Yumma and telling her that it would increase and sweeten her milk was an extremely cruel deception. It would have been my virtual death sentence if my family was poor and did not own a cow or could not afford the price of milk. If they are capable of such fiendish deceit then they are capable of murdering a child.

"I've heard about sabur but I've never seen it or used it before. I thought if I washed away its taste with soap and hot water you would breast-feed again. But you refused to come near my breasts again because my milk tasted like poison to you…A mother's milk gushes from a well inside her heart and then it is sweetened by her motherly love. Those who do not fear Allah threw poison in it and it became bitter." She paused to take several deep breaths and to give me the time to imagine a Bedouin dying from thirst and suddenly finding himself in an oasis, then collapsing and having to crawl the last meters to the water hole only to find a decomposed carcass floating in it.

"It is said that a true believer is never bitten by the same viper twice and you proved that you were a true believer even as an infant."

On the day when they transferred Yumma's breasts into vipers spitting white venom I cried continuously from hunger and her bitter milk and her tears also flowed copiously. Before sundown she sent after Habooba, gave her all the money left from her dowry and told her to buy a cow.

"Every day I woke up before dawn. After milking the cow, I walked or waded in the muddy fields and dark palm graves. I threw rocks at many vicious dogs on these mornings or waited for their owners to come out and give me safe passage. And I became a regular customer of the boatmen who ferried me across the river with my precious load of milk for you." Habooba picked up the story from where Yumma stopped. She told me all these details not to make me feel indebted to her or in

anticipation of some payment or compensation for her labor but simply as a historian recalling facts about our mutual life. Whatever her motives were, surely no one can repay a debt of love such as that.

Life for them was a relay race and I was the baton, which they passed between them and concentrated all their efforts on carrying me safely across the critical childhood finish line.

The dhuras, their children and retinue gloated over our misery and Boya shrugged it off.

Looking deep inside Yumma's eyes, my mind fathomed her heart and found it pierced with countless darts. The first dart pierced a picture of a small child, holding his chest and crying in agony. He was my murdered brother. The second dart was laced with sabur as white as milk and as bitter as poison. I recognized it because there is an exact replica of it stuck in my heart since my infancy. It was our first bond in suffering.

In our village, madness was sometimes the only means for a powerless person to escape an impossible situation. When a man in our village lost his mind, he escaped to the nearest desert where the invisible ears of the sand listened to his complaints without interruption. In the desert, there are no street urchins to tease and belt him with stones. We were all Bedouins before famine forced us to sell our camelhair tents and half-tamed camels and settle down and become farmers. After that, only a mad man willingly abandoned the sweet taste of ripe dates, the touch of soft green grass and the sheer pleasure of cold water passing through parched throats. If a woman became insane, she may tear up her clothes and run out naked in the public roads in front of strange men before her relatives caught up with her.

Yumma had a choice between madness and patience and she chose the latter for the sake of her children. Everyone, except the insane, needs patience–incidentally, sabur literally means patience. Patience is sometimes pictured as a thick, strong rope

hanging down from heaven. Hold it firmly, they advised me; because the firmness of the ground under your feet is but an illusion, a mere figment of your imagination and even soaring mountains could suddenly sail away into the horizons like majestic ships in an armada. On that cataclysmic day the insane may walk on thin air, and the faithless will tumble into the abyss of eternal hellfire but those hanging to the ropes of patience would surely be lifted to the heavens.

Yumma and Habooba devoted all their love and patience to us. Habooba's patience was equivalent to surviving the death of six sons and Yumma's to one murdered son. They wove their patience into a multi-colored carpet, black for bereavement over dead and murdered sons, green in memory of our great maternal grandfather the Prophet who led his people out of the desert into green pastures, and white to remind us of Yumma's milk before it was poisoned with sabur. They put me on this magic carpet and it flew over Yumma's dhuras and children, and over Boya riding on his bucking stallion. They prayed hard that I would be out of range of the dhuras envious eyes and evil schemes.

Months passed uneventfully except for the usual contemptuous stares and rudeness which Yumma had become accustomed to as part of the daily routine of her life in Boya's house. Then a windless summer day arrived on which even my paper-thin diapers hanging on Yumma's clothesline did not flutter and the still air was saturated with the acrid smell of smoke from the numerous fires lit by peasants to repel insects from their precious cows and buffaloes. On that day one of the dhuras carefully aimed her dart at me and fired it missing my heart by inches.

"We usually did the laundry in the courtyard. I was sitting on a stool in front of a large brass washing bowl full of hot water and soap surrounded by more water bubbling on a Primus and a heap of laundry. Every few minutes I raised my head to check on you

and make sure that you have not crawled out of the rug onto the dirty floor or toward the fire and scolding water. Later, one of our black maids came out of the kitchen and asked me if she could lend a hand. I refused her offer because I usually did our laundry myself and did not trust her to do a thorough job. Then she asked me if she could look after you. I didn't want to disappoint her by saying no again, and you were sitting not more than two meters away, playing with your rattle, so I agreed. All our black maids were the daughters of the emancipated slaves whom your grandfather brought back with him after performing the grand pilgrimage to Mecca. As soon as he crossed the desert, he gave them their freedom but having nowhere to go they chose to stay with him. They took their orders from the first wife who held the key to the supply room and also the second wife who terrorized them with her loud voice and bad manners."

Yumma was as powerless as the black maids were but until the meek received their promised inheritance, the powerful had the means to turn them against each other.

"I never told you this before," Yumma said in a whisper. "But I heard that one of your half-brothers made one of the black maids pregnant. Soon after that she disappeared. They said she was sent to her uncle."

Death was a frequent visitor in our home. He came in different shapes and forms but often in the guise of a dhura. He crafted a dart out of my brother's broken rib and stabbed him in the heart. He was shortly going to offer me not a red apple poisoned with sabur but a rusty spring. But we never called death uncle.

"The maid who offered to look after you that day was probably one of the sisters of the girl who mysteriously disappeared after becoming pregnant with your half-brother's illegitimate child. Minutes after she sat near you, I heard these strange noises – choking noises. I looked up and saw you lying flat on your back, your bare tiny legs kicking the air. The maid was up and running,

sandals in hand, toward the harem's door. I shouted: ‘Walidi! My son!’ and jumped to my feet. You were suffocating; your face was already crimson red and congested. I lifted you in my arms and hugged you. My mind was in frenzy. I was frantic; what am I going to do? I lifted my head towards the sky and pleaded: ‘Allah! My son is dying. Please! Not again.’ Then I cried for help: ‘Help me please! My son is choking.’ No reply came. The doors were shut and the courtyard was unusually quiet for this time of the day. Except during your father’s siesta, the courtyard continuously echoed the sounds of children running, women shouting, and maids working in the kitchen. But on that day when I desperately cried for help the place suddenly became deserted and dead silent.” Yumma stopped to inhale deeply and sigh. Her eyes were looking upward, as if seeking confirmation of her suffering from the heavens.

“You were dying. I saw with my own eyes crimson bubbles coming out of your mouth, and I knew that the end was near. I was losing my mind. I just sat there helpless and wondering what the maid had done to you. Did she break your ribs or what? Your eyes then rolled up and became milky white orbs. ‘Let me die instead of him. Please Allah I cannot bear the loss of another one,’ I pleaded with God.”

Sabur, patience, milk, broken ribs and death at the hands of dhuras were recurrent themes in our daily lives.

“Then I noticed the broken alarm clock near you. The maid must have brought it with her. I am not sure if I just assumed it or a voice in my mind told me that you must have swallowed a part of the clock. There was no time to make sure. With my left hand holding your jaw open I pushed my right hand, still covered to the elbow with suds, down your throat until it met a strange object. It could have been your tonsils or even your stomach but there was no time to hesitate so I tugged at it once, twice then it came loose and I pulled it out. It was a clock winding spring

covered with mucous and blood and large enough to block your windpipe and stop you from breathing. I hugged you and cried until you were breathing normally again."

The dart of the second wife was few inches away from piercing my heart when Yumma plucked it out.

"Few days later, the black maid came to apologize and ask for my forgiveness. She said that the suspected dhura gave her the broken clock and money and told her what to do." The plot was nothing short of the brilliant brainchild of an illiterate, wicked woman. She knew that an infant's curiosity frequently led him to put things in his mouth – especially an infant who has been lately and prematurely weaned. The price on my head promised to the perpetrator was paltry: it would have fetched her no more than few yards of a cheap fabric for a new dress or a small bag of sugar.

Yumma told Boya but he did nothing again. He chose to ignore Yumma's complaints simply to preserve his peace of mind and because he was a selfish coward.

A lump in my throat sometimes reminded me of the rusty clock part and then the lump became heavier and more difficult to swallow. A breadcrumb frequently got stuck in my throat and it made me wonder if there could be a crevice somewhere down that tube, a scar left by the metal object in which crumbs became temporarily mislaid. In my mid-thirties, a chronic sore throat sent me to a specialist who after examining me became suspicious and scheduled x-rays for me. I was worried of what the images would reveal and did not keep the appointment. The memory was painfully revived again at the age of fifty when I was diagnosed with upper lung cancer.

Maids played important roles in chieftains' households. Black and white maids were frequently instruments in the schemes of rival dhuras. A wife eager to spite her dhura may even go to the extreme of hiring a pretty maid to seduce their mutual husband.

Maids who were bribed or coerced to do such terrible deeds sometimes became psychologically disturbed or even insane. Several years later the maid of one of my paternal uncles came to visit us in our new town home. After a short polite conversation with my mother she suddenly rose from her seat and dashed out to the back garden. Yumma and I went after her and we were shocked to see her running back and forth in our large backyard shouting at the top of her voice, while her hands unashamedly held the hems of her dress above her knees. Yumma said: “Don’t be alarmed. They told me before that she has these fits. She is harmless.” They must have measured her sanity, or inversely her insanity, by the expanse of her body she exposed in public during these fits. She did not have to worry about being put in chains and locked up in a room as long as she kept her dress few inches below her waist.

Death and madness repeatedly knocked on our door and Yumma drove them away with her determination, patience and love. Habooba came almost daily to sit outside our door like a sentry, hum her poems and lullabies and lend a hand to Yumma. Her frequent visits must have irritated the dhuras but they could not stop her because she was an elwia and Boya’s mother-in-law. Habooba arrived balancing on her head a wicker basket full of milk, butter, yogurt, fruits and pastries for us and departed late in the afternoon with her basket laden with Yumma’s worries: What will the dhuras think of next to harm my little boy? Will they try again tomorrow or wait till he can walk and someday lure him into a dark corner out of view and crush his ribs?

While Yumma wanted to devote all her energy to protecting us, Boya expected her to fully perform her duties as his last and favored wife. She loyally and obediently served him in return for the absolute minimum of providing for our basic needs and stopping the dhuras from massacring us. The dhuras had the upper hand on Yumma because unlike her they did not regard

Boya as an omnipotent idol but as a husband who like all men have weaknesses and fears that made him vulnerable to manipulation. Men like him have two inklings that are often satisfied simultaneously: lusting after young women and demonstrating their virility by fathering more sons.

My dead brother was his youngest son before I inherited this dubious and dangerous honor. The dhuras hated Yumma because she was the number-four wife, murdered my brother because he happened to be Boya's youngest son at that time and loathed Boya for abandoning and humiliating them. What better way to take their revenge on Boya for adding another wife to his harem and deflate his macho ego than to kill his youngest son, the apple of his eye and the pride of his manhood? Or so they assumed because I was never his favored son. By choosing to ignore Yumma's accusations of murder against her dhuras, he proved to them that maintaining the facade of an omnipotent patriarch and guarding his peace of mind mattered most for him, even more than the lives of his sons from the elwia. If it became publicly known that he reigned over a divided household in which his youngest son is murdered by one of his wives he would have become the laughingstock of the whole district and his leadership within the tribe would have been seriously undermined. Tribesmen loved nothing more than making fun at their chieftains behind their backs. They are still laughing at one of Boya's half-brothers who after noticing that some of the grapes were missing from his precious orchard, which he was in the habit of checking daily, ordered his guards buried to their necks under the sun. After giving up on extracting a confession from them by torture he instructed them to defecate in front of him then prodded their feces with a stick in search of the telltale grape seeds but found none. Did he apologize for mistreating them and ask for their forgiveness? Absolutely not because he was a sheikh and they were his chattel.

Yumma's fairy tales taught me that every creature must adhere to its innate nature and predisposition. Accordingly, a lion must be brave, a fox sly and a hen submissive. Yumma was a submissive hen sitting on the lowest rung of the pecking order. The dhuras were sly vixen, which schemed to devour the hen and its chicks. Boya was a cowardly lion. A vixen tested him by killing his son and found him lacking in courage and determination to pursue the truth and justice. It was only a matter of time before one of the vixens and her litter took over. A brave, just man would not have hesitated to ask his wives to undergo the ultimate test of truthfulness, the *basha'*: licking a hot iron rod. According to an old Bedouin custom still practiced by some tribes in the desert, licking a hot iron rod does not affect a person telling the truth. Boya should have ordered one of his servants to build a fire, fetch the iron spatula used for roasting coffee grains from the guesthouse before summoning his wives. The truth is usually revealed before the spatula turns red-hot.

During the summer days the stifling heat drove inside all those who did not have to go out to earn a living. They impatiently waited for sundown when they could come out for a breath of warm air and to look at heavens and earth without squinting. After the men left to the guesthouse or to visit neighbors and friends, the women sprinkled the courtyard with water and waited for the baked ground to lose some of its heat through evaporation before bringing out their palm-leaves mats and home-embroidered cushions. Everyone envied rich town people who had electric ceiling fans. Others made do with a much cheaper device made locally. It consisted of a thick pad of desert thorn bushes firmly sandwiched between two grids of palm branches. Placed on a window from the outside and regularly drenched with water it cooled the temperature of the air passing through it.

On one hot, muggy evening, the dhuras sat on a mattress laid down in the courtyard chatting and laughing while a gentle summer breeze drove out the last traces of the lunch's smoke and carried the strange foul smell from their arms to my nostrils.

"One minute you were smiling and blabbering and then in the next your neck was horribly twisted and your face turned almost sideways, and you were writhing on the rug with pain," Yumma paused to draw a deep breath in preparation for the flood of painful memories. "I lifted you and ran inside our room, my tears streaming down my face. I tried everything to ease the knot in your neck: rubbing it with warm butter, giving you herbal teas and praying. But your neck stayed crooked like a broken doll. You cried yourself into sleep, and next morning it was gone. In the afternoon I carried you and went out in the courtyard. Minutes later the stiffness in your neck was back. I was convinced that an envious eye was responsible for your ailment. The second wife had light blue eyes and everyone knew that blue eyes are evil and strongly envious. I recited some holy verses to drive away the evil, burned some incense, and chanted loudly: 'May the envious eyes be pierced with every prickly thing: pins, nails, needles, spines, prickles and lastly the large thorns of a palm tree.' After sleeping for an hour, you were back to normal."

"The sun beating on our roof all morning and afternoon made our room as hot as the bowels of a clay oven, and the inundated fields – it was the rice-planting season – saturated the air with humidity. By early evening our room was suffocating and I usually took you out to the courtyard for a breath of fresh air. On that day the smoke from burning incense drove us out earlier. The maids had already swept the courtyard and were sprinkling it with water to cool it down. Thick hand-made rugs and colorful cushions were then brought out and laid down neatly for the dhuras, their daughters and retinue to sit on. Holding you in my arms, I performed this ritual for driving out the evil of the envy

eye by stepping several times over the smoke of incense burning in a small charcoal stove. The second wife produced a tube of ointment – it was commonly known as *Abu Shawarib* or 'mustache' ointment because the package featured a picture of a ruddy Englishman with a bushy mustache. As soon as a whiff of the odorous medicine reached us, you whimpered. I looked at you and your neck was already twisted and cramped. Yaboo! Yaboo! It has been such a difficult life but we thank Allah all the same."

This time, their dart was as light and innocent looking as airborne pollen or a chick's feather. It fluttered in the almost still air and before it reached me it turned into the strong, muscular hand of a mustached Englishman that twisted my head, held it firmly sideways and almost suffocated me.

Englishmen were never liked in my village after they ruthlessly suppressed a tribal insurrection and killed thousands of the rebels and burned their villages. Infuriated by criticism of the brutal methods used in putting down the uprising the British government at that time defended its 'right' to discipline 'savage' tribes by any suitable means. Our tribe joined the rebel forces under the leadership of Boya's older brother. After the failure of the uprising he fled the country on a camel, a short time before a British force sailed into our area on a punitive mission.

Habooba was among the many that came out of their huts that day to witness and rejoice in the defeat of the mighty British force at the hands of divine providence.

"The force came aboard three armed boats. The officers were *shuqur*," our resident historian, my Habooba told me. Shuqur literally means blonde and referred to the British officers. "But the soldiers were mostly Indians. They came to burn down the guesthouses of your father and uncles as a punishment for taking part in the insurrection. They were heavily armed and no one contemplated putting up a resistance. Suddenly the motorboats

sailing upstream stopped in the middle of the river and the deafening roar of their engines died out. It took only few minutes for the boats, turned sideways by the force of the current, to capsize sending all the shuqurs and Sikhs to the bottom of the river. They were strangers to our area and did not know about the dam." Habooba stopped to wipe the corners of her mouth. The primitive dam built by our resourceful people was made up of a strong net laid across the river in front of which they placed bales of hay and straw. It helped to raise the water level enough to fill their irrigation canals. Sometimes tribes used their dams to starve rival tribes living downstream or to impose heavy tributes on them. The dams were placed below water level and only our tribesmen knew about their existence. The British armed boats apparently sank after their propellers were caught in the dam's net.

"The river was much wider then and the current was strong and swift." Habooba resumed her account." "None of them survived. Our people spent the whole day fishing the drowned soldiers out of the river. There was enough loot to make everyone happy. It was your family's *bakht*, extraordinary fortitude, that sank the British boats."

On that summer evening almost thirty years after the British army riverboats sank, I was in dire need of some of my family's supernatural luck to cure me from the cramping of the British-made balm.

"They noticed your condition and must have known the cause," Yumma not only recalled the details of the injustices inflicted on her and her children by her dhuras but also relived their horrors and pains fully. "After I carried you inside our room, they sent one of your half-sisters to spy on us. She stood at the door, shock her head and raised her bushy eyebrows in mock pity and then ran back to assure them of your persistent agony."

The dhuras must have celebrated that evening by asking one of the Nubian maids to dance for them to the tunes drummed by one of her sisters on the back of a pot. My half-sisters may have been unable to resist the temptation of joining in the dancing and singing. None of them was beautiful or had a nice voice but that did not stop them, like Cinderella's ugly half-sisters, of believing their mothers' biased praise of their comeliness. A mother's opinion on her daughter's beauty often elicited the comment, uttered out of the earshot of the concerned mother and daughter: if the daughter is as ugly as a monkey her mother would still say that she is as beautiful as a gazelle.

"I begged them to stop using the ointment but they refused saying: 'Oh elwia! It is only a medicine made to heal and not hurt anyone.'"

First the sabur, then the clock spring and now the ointment but I have to admit that the last one was unintentional – at least in the beginning. Strong odors still make my neck stiff and give me stomach cramps.

"I did not know what to do. After seeing the effect of the ointment on you, they were probably prepared to bathe themselves in it every day. And who was going to stop them? Your father refused to be bothered because he was busy supervising the rationing of water and in his absence, there would be chaos and bloodshed among his tribesmen."

Recalling these sad memories was like picking the scab of a deep wound. It filled me with frustration, anger and pain. Overcome by emotions, Yumma had to stop frequently to sigh and take a deep breath or sometimes stand precariously on her toes like an aging, overweight ballerina and lift her hands toward heaven. Believing that her hands were probably resting in the palms of angels at these moments she shouted: "Allah! You never forsake me."

“Next day Habooba came up with a cure. ‘Rub some of the same ointment on your son and he’ll be fine.’ She told me. I was skeptical at first. If the smell of that ointment twisted your neck horribly, then rubbing it on you could probably kill you. But your blessed Habooba was right.”

Everyone believed that my Habooba was blessed. Women from far villages walked for many hours to knock on her door and beg her to spit in cups of water which they hungrily drank believing that the water would then turn into a balsam and miraculously cure them of all their ailments. Yumma probably made me drink water laced with Habooba’s spittle more than once and without my knowledge. Later in my life I was subjected against my will to an even more humiliating and unpleasant ritual performed by another woman which may be revealed later.

Rituals and superstitions aside, Habooba was a brave, blessed woman. When villagers prayed for their daily bread, they literally meant it. They certainly did not ask for rice, meat or sweets because when you are a meal away from starvation, bread is all the heavenly manna you can dare hope for. When one of my villagers was asked if he had ever eaten sweets, he whimsically replied that he never tasted it but a friend of his cousin licked a paper in which some sweets had been wrapped and confirmed that it was definitely sweet.

The untimely death of her husband deprived Habooba and her two children of the certainty of having bread sufficient to fill their bellies every day. Her son, Enough, was an infant then. She could not turn to her relatives because none of them had an extra loaf of bread to spare. Like most pious, poor people in our village, she eagerly waited for that special night in the fasting month of Ramadan when some prayers were answered.

“I went to sleep that night and dreamt that the gate of heavens opened and a commanding voice asked me: ‘What do you wish for elwia?’ When I finally found my voice, I said ‘I am

poor and my husband is dead. I only wish that the soil I touch with my hand turn into gold.'"

Was she disappointed when on the following day she picked a handful of soil and it remained as lusterless as always?

"The next morning, a woman came to visit me. We were chatting and then she said to me: 'They tell me a seamstress can make a lot of money from making abas and caftans. Why don't you become one?' I followed her advice and very soon after I was making enough money to feed and clothe my children and myself." She paused to kiss her palm and the back of her hand repeatedly in a traditional show of gratitude to Allah.

"You see, my son. Allah did grant my wish."

Habooba's interpretation of her dream and the manner of its fulfillment made a lasting impression on me. God did not give her Midas' touch because it is a curse and a punishment for greed. Instead, Habooba was given the opportunity to earn a living with her own hands and that is the greatest of all blessings. She was undoubtedly wiser than the wisest alchemists who fervently searched for a magic formula to transform base metals into gold. A formula was not needed, and certainly not a magical one and Midas and all the alchemists failed where Habooba succeeded.

"Few drops of the sweat of my brows changed dirt into glittering gold."

Habooba's blessed hands were indispensable to Yumma's peace of mind.

"Habooba used to tell me that her only wish in life was to see her grandchildren growing up, safe and happy. And you, my Jabur, was in a hurry to grow up. You learned to talk and walk before all other children." Yumma persistently claimed that I spoke while I was still a fetus in her womb and said: "Yumma." According to her, this 'miracle' eased her sadness over the death of her son. At this point in her story, Yumma would stop to recite her usual litany against envy and say: "Mothers cannot be too

careful because even they may unintentionally envy their children," she explained.

In my jungle-like home, survival made growing up fast a necessity. The dhuras sat on their mattresses, rubbing foul-smelling ointments on their limbs, and kept their hungry, carnivorous eyes trained on my rubbery legs. I needed sturdy legs to outrun them and a sharp tongue to repel their verbal assaults on Yumma.

"Your half-sisters used to come to our door and swear at us. Sometimes it made me cry."

I could never overcome my annoyance with her submissiveness and docility. If only she had some of the cunning and slyness of the first wife, or the viciousness and callousness of the second wife, or at least the rebelliousness of the third wife. Whoever thinks that the third wife brought disaster upon herself by disobeying and insulting Boya is naïve. It was a deliberate and calculated act which she rehearsed and performed to escape Boya's intolerable exploitation and the intrigue and plots of her dhuras. She had all the reasons to cling to her position in his household like a vine to a wall: she was then his last and youngest wife who gave him two sons and a daughter. She gave up all of these in order to escape the stifling, and often terrifying atmosphere of Boya's household. And since she could not divorce Boya she had to manipulate him into divorcing her.

"She gave us such headaches by making a scene almost daily," a cousin told me. He was a small boy at the time when all of them, Boya and his brothers and their wives and children, shared one immense compound. "She defied your father and often swore at him. He slapped her and then took to thrashing her with a stick. But she was relentless and stubborn. Finally, he gave up on her and divorced her. She left with her three children." The ecstatic first and second wives must have gloated for weeks over the apparent ruin of the third wife who had foolishly given up a

powerful and wealthy husband and undermined his affection for her children and his concern for their future welfare. On the advantage sides, she lived a long peaceful life and died of old age surrounded by her elder son and grandchildren. In contrast, her rivals fared dismally. The first wife died alone in a rented house abandoned by her husband and only son. The second wife, after becoming blind and demented, suffered from chronic kidney failure and hours before her death her eldest son had to beg a hospital's janitor, who was also the head of the local medical workers union, to use his influence in securing dialysis treatment for her.

Caught between her dhuras' hatred and Boya's indifference, the helpless Yumma resigned herself to a slavish life of perpetual suffering. It was then I discovered the power of words and clumsily came to her rescue. Yumma taught me the virtue of compassion and the art of storytelling, Habooba determination and poetry, and Boya selfishness and arrogance and one of my half-sisters cursing. As soon as my baby prattle ceased and I had better control of my tongue I lashed back at my half-sister and her family.

"I curse your mother Shalila." Shalila is the mispronounced name of my half-sister. I stood at the doorstep of Yumma's room and showered the proud, arrogant and ill-mannered shrew with invectives. "Your father is cursed Shalila" It was inconceivable to my childish brain that Shalila, the repugnant brat who took pleasure in reviling Yumma, and I were spawned by the same man. "Your mother is a jackass. Your father is a dog and your brothers and sisters are pigs," my name-calling continued unabated all day long. Yumma told me that I stood at our doorstep and fulminated at them at all hours of the day. My message to Shalila and the others was clear: henceforth no one will curse my Yumma, make her cry and get away with it unscathed.

Even as I write these curses few months before my seventy-second birthday, recalling my childish stand in defense of Yumma gives me a perverted sense of pride and pleasure.

"I pleaded with you to stop," Yumma said impassively. "But you were angry and stubborn. They probably thought I was encouraging you. You were only repeating what you heard from your half-sister, with some improvisations. They swore back at you, threw garbage, rotten vegetables and compost at our room but you were persistent. They tried mocking you but it was also useless."

"May Allah kill you Shalila and your mother, your uncle, the dirty peasant, and all of your brothers and sisters."

My half-sisters stopped laughing and swearing at us. I had won.

"It's *haram*, unlawful and ungodly to curse my poor brother and your brothers who are getting married soon," Shalila's mother shouted almost in tears. My death curses must have alarmed them because I was a descendant of the Prophet on my mother's side and my curses might well be fulfilled.

Preparations for the weddings of the two older sons of the second wife were under way. Boya decided to marry them to their cousins after they disappointed him by dropping out of school. He dreamt of all of his sons graduating from the best foreign universities and coming back to 'raise his head' and gratify his ego by becoming respectable effendis, suit-clad officials like the district governor or the town judge. Sons of rich landowners and chieftains, who dropped out of school and squandered their allowances on drinking, gambling and loose women were often hurried into early, arranged marriages.

Before the double wedding, many in Boya's family had another reason to celebrate: the disgrace of the first wife. The key to the supply room was the source of the first wife's power and a symbol of her status. She always wore it proudly around her neck and would not have traded it for the most precious necklace. Her

heart rendered dark, empty and cold by Boya's repeated insults to her womanhood and her son's neglect found a much-needed and different kind of warmth in the symbolic power of the cold metal. When the last trickle of love oozed out of her heart it was replaced by black charcoal, and the friction of the dangling key with the skin on her chest was the only thing that could produce a spark in the old, broken heart. The permanent scowl, frigid mouth and unsmiling eyes were clear symptoms of her transformation from a wife and a mother into a house matron. One day, she caught a cat snatching a piece of meat and hanged it from the doorknob of the storeroom.

The first wife was mean and stingy, the very qualities that qualified her to hold the key to the storeroom. She decided what we ate in every meal which was slightly better than what she gave to the maids.

" She gave us burnt loaves of bread, bones and gristle."

Yumma and the first wife were both victims of Boya and tribal customs but while Yumma chose to endure her plight stoically the first wife bitterly retaliated with mukur, intrigue and petty vendettas. This is why I felt nothing but pity for the first wife.

On the day of the first wife's disgrace, Boya announced his arrival by loudly clearing his throat and marking his territorial rights with a large phlegmy spit, a major slipping hazard in our house. The habitual swearing of the second wife and the chatter of the maids abruptly stopped while the courtyard took a long breath of the morning cool breeze and opened its eyes wide to the hazy sky. Boya summoned the first wife and together they went inside the supply room closing the door behind them. The slap which broke the silence minutes later was loud enough to be clearly heard by all the women and children cowering in their rooms and holding their breaths in fear and anticipation.

Boya walked out with a dejected look on his face and spat. The first wife waited a few minutes before coming out of the supply

room. Every curious eye hiding behind every window in our house noticed her flush face and the absence of the key that usually dangled on a string from her neck.

Boya was famous for his slaps. It is rumored that he once slapped a tribesman so forcefully that the man's neck became cramped sideways. The man then offered his other cheek to Boya begging him for another slap to straighten his neck. I experienced the mythical force of Boya's slap only once after pestering him to take me along on one of his summer trips to the mountain resort. It was more of a diluted sting rather than a neck-wrenching slap.

Stripped of her key, the first wife emerged from the supply room a worthless rag doll. As soon as Boya was out of earshot, the second wife roared with spiteful laughter unleashing thousands of darts at her rival.

Someone informed Boya of seeing women arriving in our house under the cover of darkness, tiptoeing into the supply room and later emerging with bags of rice, flour and sugar and crates of Ceylon tea, Persian dried apricots and sultanas. The humiliation of the first wife spread in every direction as if children had placed the story in their slings and catapulted it to villages on both sides of the river. Women visited her to offer words of comfort and also to gloat over her disgrace with sneers and winks hidden behind their veils.

Our courtyard was full of gloom and bad omens for Yumma and not even the electric light seen for the first time on the wedding night of the second wife's two sons could dissipate. The electricity was generated by Boya's diesel water pump and transmitted through a kilometer-long wire. On that night, the guesthouse overflowed with tribesmen who came to congratulate Boya, fill their bellies with rice, mutton and sweets and witness the arrival of electric light in their hamlet. Their women stood at the harem's door trying to make friends with the maids who were expected later to distribute the surplus food

from the wedding feast. On that day every member of our household except Yumma exploited the power of charity to humiliate these poor women.

The celebration finally began under the flickering light of a single light bulb. Female guests, mostly belonging to Boya's extended family, relinquished their abas and veils to their accompanying maids and began ululating at the door. All the women inside echoed their expressions of joy. Eventually, older women sitting on mattresses and thick rugs formed a circle and clapped, sang, ululated and shouted words of encouragement and praise at the girls dancing in the middle. Every few minutes one of them would rise to her feet shout *wahilia*, 'welcome my kin', and throw a handful of rock candies over the heads of the congregated women. Children immediately scurried on all fours searching for the candies, their hands sometimes venturing recklessly underneath the elderly women's thighs. Fingers were squashed, toes were stubbed and angry words were occasionally exchanged. The candy ritual continued unabated until some older women complained of aching soles and sticky socks resulting from stepping on fragments of hard candies.

The older women ate first from the food laid down in front of them in large trays and after they had their full younger women, girls and children took their places. As customs dictate, the second wife and her daughters acted the role of hosts. They heaped meat on the guests' plates, filled their glasses with sherbet and urged them to eat more. They must have stayed without food until all the guests departed. The feast was finally over and the maids were summoned to move leftovers to the kitchen where some of it was distributed among the poor women waiting at the door. Almost every guest brought with her an enormous handkerchief as big as a headscarf, a doggie bag of a sort, which she filled with meat and pastries to take home with her.

The wedding guests probably treated Yumma with the minimum courtesy reserved for distant relatives. Boya's kin always sided with his other wives and looked at us as outsiders who do not deserve a share in their power and wealth. I can imagine my mother sitting in a corner, picking at her food and pretending to be happy for the occasion. It was more than what was expected of her. One of the grooms she accused of killing her son. The other one brought home a young boar caught by a peasant and kept it in a room. He vowed to raise the boar until it was strong enough to kill and eat Yumma's sons. The first wife fearing for her safety released the boar. It was also against Yumma's nature to indulge herself in the merriment. Like all believers in the cosmic law of balance, she smiled and laughed in moderation. According to this law, every moment of happiness you allow yourself will be equalized by a moment of sadness. Misery villagers warned each other is lurking somewhere nearby counting your smiles and measuring the loudness of your laughter.

The second wife did not abide by this law and soon after she had a good reason to regret her skepticism. For a whole week the happy matron showered her two daughters-in-laws with praise and repeatedly reminded them of their duty to delight Boya's heart with many grandsons. Boya then put an abrupt end to her cheerfulness by announcing that we were moving to town, all of us except the second wife and her sons and daughters. Since their recently married sons had abandoned their studies, they must stay on the farm and help in running it. The news must have spoiled the mood of the second wife and led her to vent some of her anger on her daughters-in-law, whose nuptial henna tattoos on their hands and feet were still fresh, by accusing them of bringing bad luck to her family.

III

Yumma was happy because she and her sons were finally going to live far from the second wife. It would have been perfect if the first wife was not coming along but she was grateful all the same.

Boya's house in town was still under construction and until it was completed, we were going to move into a smaller house which he had recently bought, along with a grain mill and several lots from a Jewish merchant before he immigrated. Scorpions lived in the ground floor of the two-floor brick structure and numerous bats nestled in the wooden beams of the second floor's ceilings. But Yumma was more cheerful than the swallows which built bridges of feathers flying back and forth across the river during our first summer in town. Her happiness was, however, marred by her worries over the conduct of her older son who took to associating with unruly street urchins soon after our move. One day she caught him trying to steal her money– she always kept few coins in an old biscuit tin can on the upper shelf of her small cupboard – and he took out a small shaving blade and slashed her wrist. She stemmed the flow of blood, bandaged her hand and never told Boya.

Yumma never disciplined us. Even when our misconduct called for something stronger than a scolding, she only reproached us in the nicest possible way. Our impoliteness sometimes angered her and instead of taking it out on us she deflected it on herself by slapping her sides or hitting her forehead. Her timid disposition and the tragic loss of her son probably made her incapable of disciplining us harshly. Since she thought that everyone around her wanted to harm her children, causing us any form of physical pain was probably unthinkable to

her because it would put her on the side of our tormentors. Not only she pampered us with her devotion but she also went to extremes in order to protect and shield us from the cruel and heartbreaking world outside her room. Like all selfish brats we took advantage of her motherhood. When a nightmare kept me awake at night, I expected her to stay up sitting beside my bed until the morning. And after a long and grueling day of fasting in Ramadan she usually ate very little, but this did not stop me from waiting beside her for the evening prayer call to announce the end of the day's fasting to share in her modest meal. She patiently rolled the rice and vegetables into small balls and lifted them to my mouth. When I remorsefully urged her to eat, she said: "Every morsel of food which goes down your throat fills my stomach." Instead of criticizing me for getting a poor mark at school she said: "My poor Jabur. If I were your teacher, I would give you full marks all the time."

Yumma, who gave first consideration to the safety of her children, was worried about the dangers associated with the few modern conveniences in our small town home. The risk of slipping came with water faucets, electrocution with electric light and falling off a chair with the telephone hanging high on a wall. Villagers ascribed any inexplicable phenomenon to the doing of genies, the invisible mischievous supernatural creatures. Water pipes were possessed by a short-tempered genie that bubbled and cursed at the slightest turn of a faucet. But the water genie was considered harmless compared to the fire-breathing electric dragon. I remember watching fearless grown-up men standing for a long time in front of a light switch–then as big as my fist–their hands advancing, hesitating and then retreating before making the final plunge. I was repeatedly warned of the electric demon, which unlike the sun did not poke out an insolent staring eye but slyly laid down in waiting for an unsuspecting child to reach for it. Never shake hands with it, I was told, because once

it gets hold of you it would not let go. It would lift you up in the air, twirl you around like the Eid's Ferris wheel, sucks all your life energies and spit you out like the husk of a watermelon seed. The black charred remains of dead horseflies and moths strewn on the floor under the single, bare bulb hanging from the ceiling of our room were certainly more effective than the most graphic of these warnings.

Like all inanimate things such as graves, wells, ruins that mysteriously developed voices and emitted eerie sounds, the telephone was also considered haunted. Only Boya used the instrument at our home, which resembled a hand-operated coffee grinder. I wanted very much to lift the receiver and listen to the voices inside it but I could not muster enough courage to disobey my father, climb a chair and reach for it.

Boya's town properties in addition to several thousand acres of land were all acquired after his marriage to Yumma. According to her, this change in Boya's fortune and their marriage were fatefully interconnected.

"He called me his lucky charm,'' Yumma told me. "Before our marriage he used to work for his older brother who took all the income of their land and paid him a salary. Shortly after our marriage his brother unexpectedly decided to divide the land and give Boya his share. It wasn't much but he managed to double his holding and become a wealthy landowner. Once he opened a saving account in my name and twice it won the first prize in the annual lottery held by the bank." She forgot to mention that before opening the account he made her sign a power of attorney to him. He probably opened the account in her name so that he can truthfully swear to his sons and relatives who asked for money that he did not have any. Yumma never touched that money although she would have liked very much to use some of her winnings to help her family. Moving into our town house must have made her even more painfully aware of the sharp

contrast between the prosperity of her husband and the poverty of her mother and brother.

It was a wonder that Yumma after expending so much love and effort over her children could still have much left for Habooba, Enough and the rest of her family. One afternoon I found her squatting near the faucet in our courtyard. The cement sink under the faucet was full of pots and plates and beside her there was a heap of fresh bran. Before detergents were sold in our town, women used bran to scrub the grease from their kitchen utensils. She was crying; her tears streamed down her cheeks while her hand picked a handful of bran. I asked her why she was crying and she said that her half-sister had recently died. I was surprised to see her mourning the death of her half-sister, who never came to see us once, and especially after witnessing and experiencing the cruelty of my half-brothers and half-sisters.

Yumma wanted very much to help her mother and brother but she was timid and insecure to ask Boya. He did not believe in sharing some of his good fortune with his in-laws. Some wives resorted to stealing from their household budgets and provisions to give to their families but not Yumma. It did not make sense to me that Boya was wealthy and provided us with most of the comforts of life while my grandmother and my uncle and their family were poor and lived in a mud house. I felt guilty whenever I saw my cousins running around in our discarded old clothes or sitting down to their regular meal of coarse brown bread, vegetable stew and few dates. But if I were staying for lunch at their house, they never failed to put on their food mat a large rice dish topped with a whole molten bar of butter and a roasted chicken from their small, precious flock. My feelings of guilt did not stop me from gorging myself on the rice, meat and sweets.

Enough earned his living as a sharecropper on one of my relatives' estates. "A large area of that land belonged to my family,'" Yumma told me. "But Boya's relatives made unlawful

claims on our land and that of many poor farmers like us and with their influence and generous bribes registered the deeds for our land in their names. We then had no choice but to work as sharecroppers on the land which used to be ours." Like other dispossessed villagers, Yumma thinly disguised her anger and resentment at the exploitation and injustices of the rich and powerful chieftains in bucolic words of wisdom. "Nothing fills greedy eyes," she used to repeat, "except a handful of dirt", or "evil is a tiny black spot in every person's heart, and if you let it grow it will fill your heart and make it as black as a starless night." But she probably made up some of these sayings as educational material for the moral training of her children.

Yumma or someone else should have made up the following saying: if men's hearts were as open and visible as their hands, none of them would leave his house in broad daylight. Men's hearts were full of greed and the greediest of all of them were those who had the most, the chieftains. They owned most of the land and orchards but they still craved more.

Villagers complained of their greedy chieftains behind their backs. "They had their fill of rice, meat and sweets ever day but they still want the few morsels of food eaten by their destitute tribesmen," they used to say. The tribe was supposed to be a single, large family that shared the same ancestry. This is why tribesmen called my father Boya and expected him to treat them with the same care and compassion of a father. Tribesmen, who reacted violently to the slightest insult, tolerated their chieftain's abuse by regarding it as a form of paternal discipline. This rationalization was necessary for these proud, individualistic tribesmen in order to maintain their sanity and a semblance of dignity and self-respect.

"Much of the land owned by your family belonged once to another tribe," Habooba told me. It was never the intention of Habooba or Yumma to turn me against my kin although they had

serious, legitimate grievances against them. Like most tribesmen they were the victims of the chieftains' injustices but they had a long time ago given hope on winning any kind of redress.

"The land belonged to a chieftain called Hai'wan," Habooba informed me. Hai'wan literally means animal. Parents in our village strongly preferred boys to girls but they chose beautiful names for their daughters and the ugliest and most repulsive names for their sons. They called their daughters 'beauty,' 'gazelle,' 'filly,' 'flower,' and other such names but their sons spent their entire lives answering to names like 'crow,' 'frog,' 'snake,' and 'garbage'. The reason for this strange naming custom is their pathological fear of envy. Giving their sons ugly names was intentionally done to protect them from envy because, they reasoned, who would envy a person named 'garbage'. Some of these superstitious tribesmen were so terrified of their sons being envied that they disguised them as girls in public. To make the disguise convincing they paraded them in dresses, let their hair grow to shoulder length, applied kohl or mascara to their eyes and pierced their ears and adorned them with earrings. Young girls were usually observed wearing dirty rags and carrying their younger siblings. If a stranger sees a child in a relatively clean dress and attracting parental attention and care rather than being treated with the negligence and abuse reserved for girls, he would most likely become suspicious and query the father about the child's gender. It is ironic that these people who valued masculinity above everything else and regarded manliness as the most cherished trait resorted to disguising their boys in dresses to protect them from envy.

Hai'wan's name may have saved him from envy but it did not help him in repelling our marauding land-hungry tribesmen.

"Hai'wan was furious over the loss of his land," Habooba resumed her account of how my family annexed Hai'wan's land. Since his name meant animal it could also be called the Animal's

farm. Before and after our capture of it, the farm bore many similarities to George Orwell's fictitious Animal Farm. The chieftains were certainly 'Napoleonic' in their tyranny and the tribesmen were incorrigibly fatalistic in their submissiveness.

"After Hai'wan and his tribesmen were driven out of their land, they found refuge with a neighboring tribe. But they could not survive without land so one day he sent a force of forty warriors to regain it. The force succeeded in occupying a small mud fort belonging to your tribe and taking its sole sentry as prisoner. As soon as they heard about the raid, warriors from your tribe surrounded the fort." Hai'wan was clearly an incompetent chieftain and an inept military strategist, otherwise he would not have lost his farm easily or instructed his warriors to occupy that fort.

"The gun battle between Hai'wan men and your tribesmen lasted few days. The lines of supply for the besieged force were eventually cut off and they ran out of ammunitions. Your tribesmen hesitated for a while because they suspected that the sporadic gunfire from inside the fort was a trick intended to lure them into making a premature attack. Then the sentry imprisoned inside the fort somehow managed to slip away from his captors, climb to the top of a wall and signal to his kinsmen to attack. He was immediately recaptured and put to death." That was the second fatal mistake committed by Hai'wan men. By killing the sentry, they gave my tribesmen the excuse to claim the traditional right of vengeance.

"Within minutes the fort fell and all of Hai'wan forty warriors were captured. Your tribesmen slit their throats. It was carnage. Their women came later to collect the bodies and the scene broke our hearts." Habooba overcome by the horrible memory paused cradling her head in her hands. "I must stop now Jabur because I have a headache."

Soon after the massacre of his warriors Hai'wan sent one of his tribesmen to assassinate one of my great uncles. The aging chieftain was riding on his horse when the single bullet of the assassin found him. Upon hearing of his death, the Ottoman local governor, a close friend of the slain man, repeated his name, collapsed and died. Our chieftains lost no time in taking their revenge. They led a surprise raid on the tribe harboring the ill-fated Hai'wan and his followers and when it was over the dispossessed chieftain, his host and scores of their tribesmen were killed. This marked the tragic finale to Hai'wan persistent attempts to regain his farm.

My sister was born three years after my birth. Her name in Arabic translates 'arrows'. Boya undoubtedly chose the name and Yumma had no say in that. It was an uncommon name in our family and village. He must have heard the name in the capital or the mountain resort. I wonder if he knew someone named Arrows and wanted to preserve the memory.

Yumma's happiness over the birth of her daughter was short-lived because soon after Boya announced that he was enrolling my older brother in a boarding school in the capital. She must have gasped in shock and hit her side in her typical expression of sadness upon learning that her son was going to stay away from her for nine months every year. She told me that she cried bitterly and pleaded with Boya for days to reconsider but he was adamant. He told her that he was doing it for the good of their son. Yumma could not understand how a school more than two hundred kilometers away could be better than the local school near his home where she can lavish her love and care on him.

The construction of our house was completed after my brother's departure to his boarding school in the capital. Everyone called it "al-Hadji's palace". It was certainly a palace compared to the peasants' hovels whose outer mud walls were obscenely studded with drying cow pats and their thatched roofs

were often breached by the long, dust-rousing fingers of the sun in the summer and the insufferable drool of winter. I was certainly delighted to leave the small house to the scorpions, bats and genies and move into Boya's palace with its impressive portals, colonial façade, spacious rooms, alabaster fireplace, comfortable sofas and chairs, mahogany dinner table and buffets, heavy silver cutlery, thick Persian carpets and beautiful sprawling gardens. It was also the answer to the prayers of a lonesome child who was often discouraged from playing outside by his overprotective mother. It took me only a quick survey to map my private playground within the house. In our backyard a large, fenced garden full of fruit trees and date palms begged me to come out and play. The stairs were marked for running up and down and the balustrade for sliding down when there was nothing else to do. The storage rooms where they kept the cauldrons and provisions were for playing hide and seek with my imaginary playmates. A little imagination also helped to transform the lines and shapes on the Persian carpets into roadways, rest stops and petrol stations for my small caravans of toy cars, which sped under the watchful eyes of woven animals through the stupendous Persian vistas. The woven scenes of deer frolicking near water holes encouraged my imagination to leap over the fences of our home and village-bound minds into the freedom of the world outside. Those deer were certainly much tamer and peaceful that the real fawn given to Boya by one of his friends as a gift. It stubbornly refused my extended hand of friendship which was often full of tasty morsels. The wild young animal must have regarded me as its hated animal warden who cruelly took it away from its mother. My hand could have been full of sabur as far as the distressed fawn was concerned. We kept it in the garden and one day it found the front door open and bolted through it. The next day it was recaptured and brought back and Boya decided to have it slaughtered and

cooked. I wish that I could write that its meat was stringy or bitter and that I spat it out but my memory is totally blank on that.

Our new house made us the envy of everyone in town and especially the dhuras. This unnerved Yumma immensely. Like Pomegranate Seed, the heroine of one of her fairy tales, Yumma was convinced that her survival depended on remaining inconspicuous and thus unenviable. When Pomegranate Seed was abducted by the cannibalistic witch, she was thin and unappetizing and the witch decided to fatten her up before devouring her. Resisting the temptation of the delicious meals prepared by the witch required tremendous will power from the undernourished little girl. But she was wise for her age and her survival depended on it. By eating sparingly, she survived long enough to finally find a way to escape the witch's castle. Living in Boya's palace, which was figuratively a sumptuous feast, alarmed Yumma who believed in the cosmic law of balance and reciprocity and the value of keeping a low profile and led her to burn incense to ward off evil almost daily. Her foreboding was soon fulfilled by the arrival of the first wife.

While the first wife probably envied Yumma's rising star in Boya's household, I envied the first wife her fine teeth. It was unfair that she, a woman in her fifties, should have perfect white teeth while my teeth rotted causing me much pain and embarrassment. As far as I recall my four upper front teeth were always rotten, first the milk teeth and then the permanent ones. My father was rich and my mother was dotting but still sweets can be ruled out as the main reason for the decay. Yumma firmly believed that my premature weaning with sabur was responsible.

Eyes never failed to notice my decayed, ugly teeth and the words of sympathy that followed were equally hurtful. To avoid the rude stares and the sarcastic as well as sympathetic remarks I stopped laughing and self-consciously minimized my smiles. My

speech was also adjusted to expose my teeth the least. Yumma begged Boya to do something about it and he finally me took me to a dentist in a nearby city.

It was my first visit to a dentist—actually his diploma qualified him to be an assistant dentist but he was still better qualified than the local barber who pulled teeth with a pair of plier. I had no inkling of what was in store for me and Yumma did not prepare me for the ordeal. The young man in white knew Boya well, called him al-Hadji, and greeted us cordially. The first tooth he pulled out was thoroughly rotten and loose but the pain was nevertheless excruciating. My reaction was totally involuntary: I howled with pain, pushed his hand aside, jumped to my feet, and dashed out of the clinic down the steep stairs and out to the street. As I ran aimlessly in the unfamiliar street, I could hear Boya shouting instructions to our chauffeur. My flight came to an abrupt stop at an intersection and before deciding on the best escape route, two strong hands held me by my waist and raised me in the air. Our grinning chauffeur lifted me to his shoulder oblivious of the pummeling of my little fists and my pleas to take me back to my mother. A frowning Boya roughly grabbed me by my collar and yanked me up the stairs. The awaiting assistant dentist pulled the other rotten teeth and we drove home.

Yumma gasped and slapped her sides at the sight of my tear-washed face. Her reaction brought more tears to my eyes, this time of indignation rather than pain. She tried to calm me down with her soothing words. She must have said something like: I wished he pulled out my teeth a thousand times instead. In comparison the most sympathetic words uttered by Boya, if he was not still angry at my shameful conduct at the dentist's office, would have been 'you will grow up and forget it'. I must have also heard these words immediately after my circumcision and on the following days during which the throbbing pain continued unabated and I had to endure the added humiliation of walking

without underwear and carrying my robe away from my waist to avoid any painful contact. But some of the pain was forgotten when my Habooba took me out for a donkey ride or to buy sweets.

Sweets can rot a child's teeth but wicked men carrying gifts of sweets can ruin or even end his life. Yumma, Habooba, Enough and some of our guests occasionally brought me sweets. This expression of love or courtesy pleased me more than a moist kiss on my cheek or a smothering hug. Yumma never told me not to accept sweets or other gifts from strangers. But her warning would have been ineffective because the slim, young man who appeared at our front door one morning soon after our move into our palace introduced himself as my brother. I had not seen his face before but at least he did not resemble the stern, hateful Shalila or her brothers.

He unlatched the gate and let himself in. Holding my tiny hand in his, we ascended the few stairs leading to the front porch and walked into the guest hall. He then stopped, produced a toffee from his pocket and offered it to me. He led me to a recess near the guest bedroom and stood behind me. My recollection of the scene is blurred but I see myself in it removing the toffee from its wrappings while he stood behind me. I am certain that he had exposed himself and was about to sodomize me when he had a change of heart. He then covered himself and cursed me repeatedly before leaving in a hurry. I have always assumed that he would have strangled me after raping me and before he carried out his vile deed, he must have heard noises from inside the house and made a hasty retreat.

Almost twenty years later the same half-brother attacked me with a club. This time I clearly saw hatred and murder in his eyes. If Enough did not stand between us and our farm manager did not threaten him with a loaded revolver, he would have probably thrashed me to death. He was certainly capable of that because

many years later he gunned a man in cold blood in front of his house. Others must also bear responsibility for his wickedness: Boya who abused his mother and abandoned him and a society in which pedophiles publicly and proudly bragged about their conquests. Is it divine retribution that my people should suffer devastating wars, crippling economic sanctions, foreign occupation, civil war and terrorism?

IV

"Boya is taking us with him on a pilgrimage," Yumma announced one day. She was excited because we were going to visit the shrine of one of her revered ancestral Imam located more than a thousand miles away in Iran. We were journeying by land in our new American car. Boya's stuttering cousin and his wife were also coming along in their own car.

The news of our imminent departure traveled down the river to our village and the dhuras scooped it out of the water and drank it. It must have tasted like sabur or even poison and filled their veins with fresh envy and anger. If they had only known the whole truth, I am sure that they would have felt sorry for us, or perhaps gloated over our misery. They assumed that Boya bestowed more of his attention on us and sooner or later would grant us a large share of his wealth. Although they were proven wrong, their hatred for us continued unabated, as if it had a momentum of its own. Any discerning person who was not cursed with a slave mentality would have seen Boya's palace to be nothing more than a gilded prison and that he relished the role of the warden. He was clearly a domineering person who insisted on controlling the lives of those living with him completely. When he was at home we spoke in whispers and walked on tiptoes. The slightest noise irritated him and earned us a scolding. His decisions were not always wise but he expected complete obedience and loyalty from all. And he did not understand children well. When one day we tried to escape his strict rule regarding siestas he instructed Yumma to look for us and make sure that we spent the whole afternoon in bed. He refused to recognize that unlike old men like him –he was in his

fifties then-–children regarded siestas as a sort of punishment. My brother and I hid while he and Yumma roamed the house searching for us. I can still remember his threatening voice reaching us in our hiding place and how terrified I was of his anger and chastisement. Although the punishment was a mere scolding and a violent yanking by the collar, the fear was unforgettable. The dhuras and their children who did not have to live like this every day should have considered themselves lucky and pitied rather than envied us

The long journey by car was as monotonous and boring as a siesta in Boya's household. I sat in the front seat squashed between Boya and the driver. Boya sat leisurely and the driver needed to use the gearshift often and I was in their way. Almost half a century later I still involuntarily confine myself to the least space possible by sitting with my shoulders stooped and my knees tightly pressed together. Neither of them paid attention to my needs or comfort. I longed to put my face outside the window to breathe fresh air and enjoy the whole scenery instead of inhaling petrol fumes and glimpsing only the treetops, distant mountain peaks and a flat sky. My only relief from this suffocating and uncomfortable situation came during infrequent rest stops. It was during one of these stops that my sister was kidnapped or so Yumma thought at first.

At the outskirts of this remote mountain village, a crowd of its Iranian inhabitants in their distinctive colorful, baggy costumes appeared from nowhere and surrounded us. Our chauffeur sounded the horn repeatedly but they refused to budge. There was a hint of panic in Boya's voice as he shouted and gesticulated at the throng of smiling and prattling faces to clear the road. Although the men were apparently peddlers who sold their merchandise to travelers, it was difficult to dismiss the nagging suspicion that they could be highway robbers in disguise. Earlier in the journey I heard my elders whispering about ruthless

mountain robbers who ambushed travelers, stole their money and valuables and then slit their throats. “They stripped men and women of their belongings down to the skin,” one of them said with a shudder. The crowd finally forced our car to a stop, and the mountain men lost no time in moving on us from all sides. It was probably nothing more than a marketing technique planned and rehearsed by all of them. Before we had the chance to roll up our windows, their hands were thrusted inside the car laden with their merchandise of prayer beads, cheap rings, handkerchiefs and other small trinkets. And then someone inside our car said: “Elwia take your daughter!” Yumma was reaching for her when two strange hands snatched her and disappeared.

“‘Hadji! My daughter.’ I shrieked,” Yumma recalled. “I was frantic. My daughter has been kidnapped. I tried to open the door and go after the kidnapper but the weight of bodies pressing from the outside stopped me. I pleaded with them to give me back my daughter but they answered in their incomprehensible language, averting their eyes all the time. Believing that these men were actually baby-snatching *kawilia* or gypsies in disguise I was angrily urging Boya and the rest to rescue my daughter when someone said; ‘Look elwia!’ I looked at the crowd and finally saw her small body, still wrapped in her blanket, floating on a sea of hands. The word ‘elwia’, pronounced in their heavy accent, was echoed by the crowd like a chant or a litany as each one of them kissed her tiny hand reverently and passed her to the next pouting lips. My worries were not entirely gone until she was back in my lap. Jabur! My hands were never kissed so many times in my whole life and, of course never by strangers,” she said signaling the end of her story with a chuckle.

A misunderstanding also led me to resent these foreigners temporarily. By then I had become used to having a second name, Jabur and a noncomplimentary nickname Abu *Thurma* ridiculing my lack of front teeth. Some children who were not

intimidated by Boya's high status in our community taunted me with this nickname and it made me furious. My reaction was equally strong when an old woman selling figs in a town, we passed through during our pilgrimage shouted this nickname at me with a big grin on her face. Thinking that this humiliation has followed me all the way across mountains and a desert to this place, I was naturally angry. Our chauffeur actually had to restrain me from attacking the old woman who stood there looking rather baffled by my outburst. He spoke their language fluently and explained to me that the woman said *bufurma* which is a polite invitation in Farsi. She was only urging me to sample her figs. I was deeply ashamed with myself for ranting at her but my pride stopped me from apologizing.

Making hasty conclusions and regretting them later was one of my many weaknesses. Other major flaws in my character are stubbornness and arrogance. It is fashionable to blame such excesses in adults who suffered from abuse in their childhood on their feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. Hitler's behavior is sometimes psychoanalyzed in these terms and I hate to be classified with him. I now firmly believe that my childhood, no matter how traumatic it was, give me no excuse to be unkind, unjust or cruel to others. Yumma and Habooba suffered many times more than I did and they never reciprocated by kicking back at their tormentors or the world at large.

Another incident during our journey to the shrine was almost fatal. It was nighttime and we had made an unscheduled stop to relieve ourselves. Few days earlier, the mountain ranges had suddenly come to an end and were replaced by a vast desert. Boya got out of the car to flex his joints and I followed him. My ancestors were correct in avoiding travel at night when scorpions, snakes, and also genies came out to hunt. They must have also looked forward to star gazing as a much-needed change from the monotonous desert scenery and repetitive

mirages. This activity was not only entertaining but also educational and taught them all they knew about astronomy.

"Your father was standing on the road shoulder and you stood facing him not far from where our car was parked," Yumma said. "I stayed in the car and your sister was sleeping in my lap. It was as dark outside as the bottom of an old pot except for a thin patch of the desert road illuminated by our car's headlights. I could tell from your head movements and gesturing hands that you were saying something to your father. But I could not hear the words because the window was rolled up to keep out the desert night cold. Boya later told me the details. You said: 'Boya! Beware of the cigarette on your leg!' Your warning did not make sense to him at all, and he must have dismissed it as the ramblings of a tired, sleepy mind of a child. Boya used to smoke but he stopped after his brother, the senator, lost a lung to tuberculosis. When you repeated your warning, he decided to humor you and slightly opened the flaps of his robe for you to see that no cigarette was crawling up his leg. Boya is always full of poise and dignity and I have never seen him jump or run in panic like he did that night. He later told me that he saw a thin, short object, which looked like a piece of rope, flying from the spot where he stood. The hissing noise it made sounded to him like a slingshot or an arrow slicing the air. Your father leaped, scooped you up with one arm and hurriedly boarded the car.

"'It was a viper. Did you see it flying?' He said breathlessly. We cried and thanked Allah for his mercy. She stopped, smiled and said proudly: You saved Boya's life. What looked like lit cigarettes to you were the viper's eyes glowing in the dark. It was crawling up his stocking. He saw and felt it and then jumped to dislodge it. If you had not come out of the car and saw the snake's eyes shining like a cigarette's ember and warned him, Boya would not have lived to see another day. A moment later the snake would have sunken its fangs in his leg and he would have died a horrible,

agonizing death. Even if it was a slow poison it was nighttime and we were hundreds of miles from the nearest town. These desert snakes are fast, ruthless killers and Boya was not a sayyid .”

Most villagers including Yumma were convinced that sayyids were supernaturally immune to snake bites. A snake, which made a nest for itself in the beams of her family home’s ceiling, often terrified Yumma by landing unexpectedly near her feet. In spite of this, they gave the snake the freedom of their house because they believed it was put there by fate to protect them. She also told me about one of her uncles who, trusting in his supernatural powers over snakes, recklessly handled poisonous ones. Villagers who crowded his guesthouse daily were thrilled and awed by his daring feats. “One day he was bitten by an udder. The sight of his swollen body was horrible and he died in agony,” Yumma told me.

It is true that I did not risk life or limb in rescuing Boya from the snake but I was undoubtedly the instrument of a benign fate that night. Death was poised to put out its burning cigarette in Boya’s heart when I offered him an ashtray instead. He was not prepared to admit this, not in front of me at least, because he was a proud man and feared that it might undermine his authority over me. In our village, saving a person’s life does not impose specific obligations on him such as becoming your slave or loyal servant but it was considered the greatest of favors.

Instead of rewarding me, he treated me as his lucky charm and unintentionally made many subsequent days of my life miserable by taking me with him on most of his local trips. Whether or not he shared the back seat with a guest passenger, I was usually told to sit in the front. The back seat was strictly reserved for his equal in status, and even his older sons did not qualify for this privilege. Bumping my head on the dashboard and holding my breath against the stench of petrol fumes were two of the discomforts produced by riding in the front seat. Boya ignored my allergy to

strong smells already confirmed by my strong reaction to the dhuras' balm because like all villagers he did not consider an ailment serious unless it resulted in severe pain or death. Although he regarded me as a lucky charm, he did not lavish on me the attention and care given to a mascot but treated me rather like a scout whose fellow tribesmen had dispatched ahead of their caravan to warn them of enemies or robbers waiting in ambush for them. A scout served as an expendable early warning system. If he did not return, the tribe assumed that he was killed in an ambush, prayed for his soul and then changed their route.

Boya insisted on taking me with him on these trips when all I wanted was to stay home and play with my few toys, run idly in our back garden or simply put my head on Yumma's lap and listen to one of her enthralling tales. Almost every week we traveled to a nearby shrine city. One of Boya's half-brothers also came along. During the first half-hour, we drove on a dirt, pockmarked road surrounded by reedy marshes on both sides. Our chauffeur did his best to avoid the potholes and ditches but when his maneuvers failed, I ended up bumping my head or bouncing up and then falling hard on my bottom. Before long we were bound to find ourselves driving behind a slow-moving bus or lorry stirring a mini dust storm behind it. Even with windows rolled up, the interior of our car was soon saturated with dust. Until we overtook it, I suffered tremendously, my chest pumping hard to filter the air, my tongue working the dust particles out and my fingers trying to squeeze them out of my burning eyes. Three quarters of the distance to our destination, we came upon a pontoon bridge erected half a century ago by the British occupation forces. Its single lane was barely wide enough to accommodate our car, whose bulky frame forced terrified pedestrians, crossing on the bridge at the same time, to stand sideways and clutch for dear life the thick cable that served as a railing. The constantly shuddering and swaying bridge, the noise

of the water gushing and gurgling underneath, and my fear of deep water made every crossing a harrowing experience. In the back of my mind, Yumma's voice rose to warn me yet again: "Jabur! If I see you playing near the river, my heart would beat fast until it explodes. You don't want that to happen to your dear Yumma?" I dreaded the thought of losing her more than the perils of deep water. Yumma was my champion and savior who pushed her hand down my throat all the way to my heart to pluck out the dhuras' dart. The flood of their hatred would have eventually swept me under if Yumma had not lifted me up to a safe perch on top of her bobbing head and I clung to it desperately like a shipwrecked to a plank. But she was tens of miles away when we made those risky crossings.

The worst of my fears almost came true one afternoon. We were crawling behind an old battered lorry, another relic of the British occupation period nicknamed the 'flat-nosed' because of the distinctive shape of its hood. Halfway up the steep embankment, the lorry groaned loudly, stopped and then began to reverse uncontrollably. As the few feet separating us from the lorry were rapidly shrinking, panic inside our car was intensifying proportionally. Boya screeched orders at the chauffeur who muttered something incomprehensible while his hands shifted gears indecisively. My whimpers rose few decibels with every second. I wanted to scramble over the cushion and take refuge with Boya in the back seat but he was not Yumma and I was not sure that he would welcome me with open arms. I closed my eyes firmly and waited for the impending collision that was going to wreck our car and push it with us inside off the bridge and into the deep water. Less than ten feet away, the lorry swerved and fell into the river with a loud splash. I opened my eyes just in time to see its red cabin sliding underwater and the driver swimming away from it. Our situation was still precarious and our chauffeur was faced with a difficult choice. If a loose or missing plank was

responsible for the accident, then we may still end up in the bottom of the river as well if we continued forward. But since reversing on the thin, unstable bridge was probably more dangerous, our chauffeur decided, after consulting with Boya, to drive forward and hope that the cause of the accident was a mechanical failure or a human error. After clearing the high embankment safely, the drone of insects greeting us from the palm grove sounded more melodic than sweet music to my ears and the damp breaths of the thick vegetation was more invigorating than the morning breeze.

It is difficult sometimes to discount the superstitious belief that I was *manhoos* or born under an unlucky star. Yumma firmly believed that I was under the influence of a strong evil spell prepared or ordered and paid for by her dhuras. Whether it was bad luck or black magic the end result for me was the same. As Boya's youngest son, or 'the last of the grapes clump' as the common description goes, I expected to be pampered and cherished but instead I was weaned prematurely and almost killed. And after saving Boya's life I was entitled to his ever-lasting gratitude and favors but he used me as a lucky charm and exposed me to unnecessary risks. The narrow escape from a fatal collision with the lorry on the pontoon bridge was only one of many. On another occasion, he dragged me with him on a canoe ride inside the marshes where he shot at and missed several wild boars, which were destroying his crops and threatening the lives of his tribesmen. The boars that were charging our canoe changed course after hearing the rifle shots and disappeared into a reedy thicket. Unlike most tribesmen, Boya was not a good marksman, and on a hunting trip in the desert in which I was again his silent, discontented companion he also missed a partridge pecking the dirt not more than ten feet away from the muzzle of his shotgun. On that trip he allowed me to sit with him in the back seat so that I can observe his hunting skills in action

or perhaps to put me out of range of his straying bullets. The lethargic, stupid bird waited for our car to drive almost on top of it and for Boya to load and aim his gun and then fire, through the window on my side, before flying away. He smiled awkwardly in embarrassment, spat in disgust and said nothing.

The roads were dangerous, the drivers were reckless and traffic policemen were absent during our frequent road trips. Any father would have seen the risks involved and opted to keep his son at home. Boya was more adept as a chieftain than as a father. Whenever our car crossed the median to overtake a slow-moving vehicle, he either ignored or failed to notice the terror in my eyes, my hands firmly pressed against the dashboard to avert a painful bump and my foot slamming an imaginary brake pedal. My frequent bouts of motion sickness were a nuisance, which bothered him temporarily, and he paid no attention to my haggard face and nodding dizzy head. He never asked me during these trips whether I was thirsty, hungry or needed to relieve myself although he was well aware of my near pathological shyness–a character defect for which I totally blame him and Yumma. Accompanying Boya on these trips against my will taught me the unhealthy habit of retaining my body wastes for many hours. Oftentimes, he left me with the chauffeur who also abandoned me in the car and went to have lunch or sit in a café. Street urchins, whose envy and wickedness were aroused by our new, shiny car, stopped to gawk, make faces and swear at me. There were too many of them and I could not leave the car unattended and run after them. The frustration of not being able to return an insult or an injury began to build within me from an early age.

I suspect that the motive behind these frequent trips to holy cities was not purely religious. Boya prayed regularly, performed pilgrimage twice, and visited shrines in which our revered religious leaders were entombed, but he was not a devout

person. None of his children were given basic religious instruction, and almost all of them did not practice their religion and they routinely and publicly broke commandments on gambling, drinking alcohol and fornication. Boya and the majority of his sons and tribesmen believed, and contrary to our religious teachings, that debauchery did not sully a man's name. But if the reputation of one of their women was tarnished by even a malicious, false rumor, then only her crimson blood can erase the blemish on their honor. Also, Boya did not demonstrate a strong religious fervor by obtaining or reading religious or prayer texts. For some mysterious reason, however, he kept picture cards depicting Jesus Christ with a huge exploding halo around his head and his extended hand holding a big shiny, golden heart. I found them in a drawer one day while Yumma was cleaning his room. She allowed me in the room only if either Boya or she was present. Apparently Christian missionaries targeted him or these were given to his sons who studied in private Christian school and he kept them out of curiosity.

If the purpose of these trips was not religious then could it be political? Everyone assumed that Boya unlike his older brother, the senator, and his younger brother, the member of parliament, had no political ambitions. According to the unwritten division of labor among these three powerful leaders of our tribe, Boya's brothers promoted the interests of the family through their political activities and connections while he kept the family and tribe united behind them. The royal family, which ruled our country at that time, could not have wished for subjects more loyal than most members of my family. While our lips kissed the royal hands, our hands fed the royal lips. Every year, my family loaded several lorries with bags full of our finest rice and dispatched them to the royal palaces. In return for our loyalty and gifts our family was rewarded with political influence. Boya was undoubtedly a staunch royalist, but he must have also

harbored secret and deep bitterness toward his older brother for treating him like a ‘concubine’s son’ who is fit only to perform the lusterless job of managing the farm. Anyone in his position would have envied his brothers who basked in the limelight of political power, rubbed shoulders with royalties and pashas and enjoyed city life. What led me to these conclusions about Boya’s secret political ambition was an event, which still baffles me. As I mentioned earlier, we loved to apply our minds to a mystery until it became a tale. The mysterious event was Boya’s involvement in a tribal insurrection, which will be revealed later.

Ruling out religion and politics as possible reasons for these trips leaves only one other explanation, namely lusting after women. A man who had four wives could seek others. Women in the eyes of tribesmen were mere sex objects or in the actual words of one tribesman: ‘all I need of a woman weighs two pounds or so’, meaning her sexual organs. Yumma’s testimonies and my own painful observations of his behavior in his old age confirmed this. Yumma not only told me fairy tales to amuse me, but she also confided in me her disappointments and pain at Boya’s peccadilloes. It must have been of some cathartic value for her. It was also during these highly emotional sessions, which filled me with resentment at Boya’s injustices towards her, that I received my basic training in empathic listening. Later in my life, many friends, acquaintances and colleagues of mine capitalized on this quality by making me their private confessor. Some of them eventually regretted disclosing their innermost secrets to me and shunned me because of it.

“My family laid down one condition for accepting al-Hadji’s marriage proposal,” Yumma told me one day. This was either a slip of her tongue or an unavoidable burst of repressed resentment because she did her best to inculcate in our minds a glorious and heroic image of Boya. In her eyes, Boya was not only our father whom we are obliged by Allah’s commandments to

cherish and respect but also, and more importantly, he was our sole provider and benefactor. Our very survival depended on his continued willingness to provide for our needs, and after living with him for years she must have had good reasons to fear that his paternal commitment could not be taken for granted. This, and not fear of her dhuras' machinations, was the main cause of her insecurity. Knowing how much he liked to be obeyed, respected and adored she encouraged us to feed his insatiable ego.

"My family wanted him to swear a solemn oath in one of the holiest of our shrines never to commit adultery." She added.

Boya consented. It was a shocking revelation. Why wasn't he offended, or even outraged by their condition? Any honorable man would have angrily withdrawn his marriage proposal and no one would have reproached him if he later persecuted Yumma's family for suspecting him of being an adulterer. It did not matter whether they were untouchable, descendants of the Prophet because he was a powerful chieftain and had a reputation to maintain. Unless of course their suspicion was justified. Yumma's family was naïve for believing that a man can easily swear off a habit rooted in his character and which he believed that his power and status gave him license to indulge in.

Whether he took me on his trips as a lucky charm or to cover up a sinister pursuit, he uncaringly left me in the car bored, hungry and retaining my bodily wastes.

Yumma suffered as a result of Boya's repeated breaches of his solemn oath. She chose to accept her suffering with the patience and resignation of a saint or was it cowardice? And like all saintly women, she was rewarded with miracles. Saving Boya's life from the venomous snake was one of these miracles. It rightfully belongs to her because I was merely an instrument of Allah's favor towards her. Boya's death would have surely resulted in our financial ruin and exposed us to other dangers, and she had

prayed hard for this not to happen, at least while her children were unable to fend for themselves. Soon after, Yumma threaded another gem in her necklace of miracles.

"It happened during a pilgrimage to the shrine in Iran also. You and your baby sister woke up one morning complaining of stomachache and fever. Everyone including Boya left us at the inn and went out sightseeing and shopping. You were both sleeping on a mattress on the floor while I sat beside you crying and praying. Sometime later, I heard steps climbing the stairs and ran to the door expecting to see Boya. Instead a strange man, his eyes piously downcast, was standing on the landing. As I hastily retreated inside our room, he said: 'Elwia! I've learned of your children's illness and brought them medicine.' I was speechless. Who was this man? Who told him that I am an elwia? And how did he find out about your illness? My curiosity was irresistible and it finally led me to crack the door open and take a peek. He was gone, but something on the landing caught my attention. There were two small pieces of candy on the staircase's rail near the spot where he was standing. You and your sister could hardly open your eyes and were certainly in no condition to eat candies so I put them under the tap for seconds and then rubbed one on your lips and the other on your sister's. Hours later, your fever was gone and you were healthy and running around." After inhaling deeply, Yumma continued in an impassioned voice. "He was my grandfather the Imam whose shrine we came all this distance to visit. Allah answered my prayers and sent him with medicine for both of you."

This miracle occurred almost half a century ago at a time when a medical team, brandishing syringes and vaccines vials, sent even our brave tribesmen into hiding in the marshes. The bitter taste of medicinal pills, capsules and syrups made me retch and vomit more than the motion sickness resulting from a trip in Boya's car. Yumma accidentally or miraculously stumbled on the

idea of sweetened medicine that children could find palatable. If she had been aware of her discovery and managed somehow to exploit it commercially, she would have made us a fortune, but of course miracles and fortunes never go together.

The implications of the premature death of six of her brothers followed by her father's sudden death persistently gnawed at Yumma's mind. If Habooba, the God-fearing, pious mother, was predestined to suffer such a tragic loss and its devastating consequences, then fate could be hiding worse surprises for her. Yumma who never stopped worrying over her children regarded the survival of three of four of them to be the greatest of all miracles. But miracles of the kind that made people kneel and kiss the ground in devotion also kept occurring.

We were staying in a boarding house in one of the capital's suburb not far from another holy shrine when this alleged miracle happened. The owner and manager of the boarding house was a pretty Iranian widow in her early thirties. Her deep, nasal voice and distinctive laugh were unforgettable. Traditional families like ours preferred boarding houses to hotels, and all of them were curiously owned and managed by women.

The beneficiaries of this miracle were again my sister and I.

"You were four years old and your sister was only one. We shared the same large room and you and your sister slept on the same mattress. Every time we came to visit this shrine, we rented rooms in this boarding house. It was private, clean and the owner knew Boya well. The next morning after our arrival, I lifted your pillow to tidy your bed and what I saw made me gasp in shock and terror. Under the pillow, two deadly yellow scorpions lay motionless. I dropped the pillow and swiftly carried both of you out of the room. The house was quiet and empty except for the three of us. I finally convinced myself to go back and kill the scorpions before they hide in a nook and come out later to sting one or both of you. These were desert scorpions and their stings

could be lethal especially to small children. After depositing both of you on a sofa and instructing you not to move I armed myself with a broom and went inside the room. To my amazement, the scorpions had not moved an inch from their places on the mattress. I assumed they were sleeping. Killing them on the mattress would have made a mess so I decided to push them off the mattress and then kill them. I poked them few times with the broom but they remained motionless. The scorpions were dead, I finally concluded. They looked unscathed and intact but were still dead. Every night of our stay in the boarding house I personally unrolled the mattresses and made up our bed. When you went to bed the previous night, there were no scorpions dead or alive under your pillow because I checked and made sure of that. Dying scorpions do not simply look for a pillow to hide under and wait for death. One dead scorpion was difficult to explain but two could only mean one thing: a miracle. Nothing less than a miracle saved you and your sister from the two deadly scorpions which lurked under your pillow that night."

In addition to these occasional miracles, Allah gave Yumma the remarkable navigational instinct of our Bedouin ancestors to guide her safely through the desert of her marriage life infested with the serpent-like dhuras and their scorpion-like children. She could have closed her eyes and let her faith guide her on the right path laid down for her: constellation after constellation in the heavens, stroke by stroke in the water, and step by step in the sand. But she kept her eyes open wide enough just the same for our sake. Her anguish over our survival led her to take extreme precautions such as instilling in my heart the fear of everything in life until it eventually became my protective shell and solitary prison. Although she did it for the best of intentions, I was not always prepared to forgive her for making me a weakling.

Yumma's frightening world of fiction was full of fierce genies, haunting ghosts, rampaging giants, ugly ogres and evil witches.

They invariably had one purpose or preoccupation in life: harming or devouring unsuspecting children who foolishly and stubbornly did not heed their mothers' warnings and wandered away from their loving and protective care. Yumma knew all the fairy tales to etch this message on my impressionable young mind.

One of her tales taught me the value of staying close to the safety of home and motherhood and not straying far from her side and ending possibly as the guest in a strange village with bizarre customs. In this particular village, men, women and children never died naturally because whenever one of them fell ill his family and neighbors killed and feasted on his or her flesh. Another story warned me of committing the folly of confiding in anyone or anything because even an inanimate well could somehow develop a voice and reveal your secrets to all those who came to draw water from it. Also, I learned from another tale not to allow appearances to deceive me because an apparently pious man who wore ankle rattles to warn off ants and other tiny creatures off his path -as he falsely claimed- was eventually exposed as an imposter and a charlatan, tarred and feathered, paraded faced backward on a donkey in the town square, and pelted with rotten vegetables before driven out of town. The monstrous *qurta* was, of course, waiting for children who wandered off from their mothers' side to swim in the river. Standing in Yumma's shadow was always safer than exploring caves and ruins where bats dwelled and sometimes got themselves entangled in your hair and would not fly away until they saw their ugly reflections in a mirror of gold, which even Boya could not afford to buy. Before falling asleep on the roof of our house, my eyes anxiously searched the horizon for the giant *tantal*, which according to one of Yumma's tales had an insatiable appetite for children's flesh.

In a real world populated by evil dhuras and a supernatural one teeming with terrifying creatures, my only sanctuary was in Yumma's shadow. My insecurity forced me to spend most of my childhood perched on her shoulders, sitting in her lap or orbiting her at a close range. Her strong protective instinct overreacted to the external threats surrounding us by restoring metaphorically the umbilical cord connecting me to her. Decades after her death, it sometimes feels as if the cord is still running all the way from my mind here in Canada to her grave tens of thousands of miles away.

When Yumma's overprotection became oppressive I sometimes mutinied against her. It happened once on a mild summer evening, which brought the neighborhood boys out for a game of village football. Boya was not expected back from the café for another hour when Yumma showed up at our front gate and yelled at me to go inside. At first, I ignored her but she persisted until my temper flared. She greeted me with a smile as I ran toward her with closed fists. Her surprise was as intense as her pain when I hurled two fistfuls of soil at her face.

"Oh! why my son?" she said retreating inside our house and wiping the specks and tears from her eyes. I stood there for a moment torn between my remorse and the joyful sounds of my playmates. The night had already arrived in the palm groves bringing with it a swarm of insects for the lone streetlight in front of our house and subliminal fear to my heart. A deep sense of loneliness made me run after her and she was waiting for me inside with open, forgiving arms.

A reasonable amount of fear may be necessary for survival in Boya's dangerous household but too much of it became crippling. Did I ever defy her strict ban on climbing trees and going near the river? Yes! While other boys of my age bragged of climbing the tallest and smoothest of date palms, I crawled up dwarf or hunchbacked trees, one hand and one foot at a time,

clutching the trunk for dear life while other boys walked on them like acrobats with hands stretched out for balance. Life is full of challenging trees, and you cannot help hating yourself for choosing the dwarf ones every time.

I did swim in the river once but only after its water became so shallow from a severe drought that men waded to the other side without wetting their knees. One day she even gave me some dough to use as fishing bait and was delighted when I came back hours later with four small red snappers. But my shyness and timidity had their advantages and helped to save me from much more than drowning or serious falls from tall palm trees. Once I followed a group of boys leading a stray cow into a dry canal but after I realized the nature of their beastly intentions, I ran home trembling.

What made me different from the other boys is that being a victim drove me to side with other victims rather than aspire to become a victimizer. Boya also considered himself a victim of his older brother who appropriated half of their father's land, deprived him of a role in national politics and kept him on a short leash. Like all tribesmen, he believed that his pride could only be restored by revenge. His need to avenge himself became more urgent after a royal visit to our town by the last king, his uncle and a large entourage. The royal motorcade was greeted by a huge crowd of cheering and applauding town people, jubilant tribesmen emptying their rifles in the air, and a contingent of knives-wielding butchers who contrived to paint the road red with the blood of scores of sheep, steers and camels. The royal visitors were regaled with a sumptuous lunch at my uncle's house, Boya's younger brother, and later the king held a general audience in which he accepted petitions from tribesmen. I envied one of my half-brothers who told us later that from a high window overlooking the inner courtyard in our uncle's house he saw the king kissing a petition presented to him by a tribesman.

It was nothing more than a public relations stunt by a spoiled and otherwise arrogant royalty. I watched the festive party from our front garden with a neighbor's boy who insisted that the king did not defecate and then cleaned his orifices with water or pebbles like the rest of us.

Someone should have informed the king and his uncle that the real chieftain who ensured our tribe's loyalty to the royal family was Boya, not his brother the senator or his other brother the member or parliament. Boya who built the first palace in town and furnished it with luxurious sofas and thick Persian carpets fit for a royal visit must have been disappointed. The following year he accepted a large sum of money in return for staging a small insurrection.

It was uncharacteristic of someone like him and he should have also known better not to take one of his sons as his accomplice. One of my uncles paid his life for the indiscretion of making his eldest son his drinking companion. Villagers then scorned those who sneaked under the cover of darkness into the employees' club to drink or buy liquor. It was not a proper club with a membership and its main clientele were not employees. The British occupation administration gave it this name rather than a bar so as not to offend local morality. Landowners, merchants and other wealthy patrons of the clubs had their chauffeurs waiting for them by the door to whisk them back to their homes before someone saw them reeling and blabbering in high states of intoxication. Drunkards of limited means usually left earlier to avoid the risk of mugging at the hands of young thugs. A popular limerick repeated by boys of my age encouraged beating up and stealing drunkards. A drunkard who dared to risk going out before sundown should consider himself fortunate if he only suffered the humiliation of attracting a small jeering and clapping crowd around him and managed to protect his head from their missiles of pebbles and cowpats.

Boya's half-brother preferred to get drunk in the safety and anonymity of his home, and eventually his eldest son became his drinking companion. When the son became a delinquent drunkard, everyone blamed his father. My cousin shocked his family and relatives by bragging of his burglaries which deprived some unfortunate destitute villagers of their threadbare rugs, silver trinkets, brass household utensils and cows. But the murder of his father was even more shocking.

My memory of the funeral procession and the reception afterwards is a vague collage of grim-faced men drinking bitter coffee in minute cups, haughty chieftains offering their hands condescendingly to the muttering lips of subdued minions, tribesmen emptying their rifles and pistols in the air and bored children like me hating every second of the tedious ceremony. My salvation finally came at the hands of my uncle, Enough, who gave me a ride home, after obtaining Boya's approval, in the motorboat which he was operating. Enough was busy that day ferrying mourners back and forth between our town and the home of my slain uncle in the boat belonging to a rich merchant.

Months later, the identity of the murderer became known, and my uncle was avenged according to tribal customs.

"Your uncle was assassinated by a hired killer," Yumma told me. "Your father paid someone to have the assassin killed." Chieftains and rich people did not have to soil their hands with the blood of their enemies because they could afford to hire part-time assassins.

" Your cousin had his father murdered." Boya did not learn a lesson from the brutal murder of his half-brother otherwise he would not have taken one of his sons as his partner in a political conspiracy and risked exposing himself to extortion.

"After the insurrection failed, the authorities arrested your half-brother and detained him in an infamous prison in the middle of the desert known as Salman's Hole. Any other person

convicted of such a serious crime would have languished in prison for a long time. Boya convinced his brother, the senator, that it was a rash action by an irresponsible young man, and your uncle used his influence with the Regent to secure his release," She also revealed to me that the Communists paid Boya to stage the failed insurrection. If anyone other than her had told me this I would have laughed in his or her face. But she was Boya's confidant and could not have made up the story because she knew nothing about the Communists except that they were nonbelievers. Communists still write about this staged insurrection glorifying its objectives and praising some of its 'heroes' including my drunkard half-brother and cousins.

"After his release, your half-brother demanded his share of the money paid to Boya."

Immediately after the unsuccessful token putsch, a rumor about Boya's treasure was circulated and widely believed. Villagers whose daily diet consisted of radishes and barley bread talked with open envy about his alleged millions. I remember distinctly the crude attempt by a second cousin to extract information from me about Boya's treasure. I was five or six at that time.

"Everybody says your father has three and a half millions. Is it true?" he queried me. I told him that I did not know. It was the truth. "You can tell me. I'm not a stranger. I'm your cousin," he persisted.

The rumor made the dhuras and their children hate us even more because they assumed that he was keeping it for us. Boya laughed at it claiming that he barely made enough money to provide his large family with a decent living. During most of my childhood, the alleged treasure was a recurrent central theme in several of my fantasies in which I played the rescuing hero, Boya and Yumma the victims, and the dhuras and their children the villains. Yumma's tongue slipped once or twice and mentioned

the treasure but refused to give further details. I assumed that he had probably sworn her to secrecy. Also, before he went into hospital for an operation, he showed her a secret compartment in his cupboard in which he hid some money but nothing like a treasure. The closest I came to see the legendary treasure was on the day when we moved into my brother's house in the capital. On that day, Boya surprised me by asking me to go to bed early. The request aroused my suspicions. Grinning mysteriously, Yumma whispered to me: "Do as he tells you because he does not want you to see him moving his treasure." Her words stirred up my curiosity even further and I waited on the landing in the dark until I had a glimpse of Boya pulling a burlap bag behind him. The noises produced by dragging it on the floor sounded to me like the tapping of Long John Silver's wooden leg.

Years later, three of my half-brothers intimidated a frail, old Boya into handing his treasure over to them. Soon after that, Yumma told me that the treasure was as ill-gotten as that of the infamous pirate of fiction. The treasure which had aroused the poor villagers' envy, intensified the hatred of the dhuras and their children for us and fired my imagination consisted of jewelry and uncut stones bought from a burglar. Yumma was not saddened by the loss of Boya's treasure because she believed that unlawful gains disappeared like ashes on a stormy day, got into your throat and suffocated you, or painted your face gray with misery. Boya's purchase of the stolen treasure annoyed and perplexed me. Could it be that Boya considered himself more entitled to it than anyone in the whole district because their rightful owners had by then left the country and could not possibly be located? As any Allah-fearing villager knew, the treasure was stolen and hiding it in our home brought misfortune upon all of us.

When I took several bundles of Boya's money from his safe I was four-year old then and had no conception of it being haram or forbidden. His room was off-limit to all of us unless Boya or Yumma gave us permission to enter it. On that day, Yumma left me alone in the room after tidying up. After looking through the drawers for colored pictures, my curiosity led me to the large safe in a corner of the room. On previous occasions they did not object to me playing near the safe or pulling at its handle but not when it was open. On that day a tug at the handle indicated that it was unlocked, but it took much more effort to swing the heavy door open and reveal the neat stacks of cash, deeds and legal papers. A voice in my head convinced me to take some of the money to buy Yumma all she ever needed and for myself all the sweets and toffees my heart desired. The temptation was irresistible; I stuffed as many wads of money as possible inside my pockets and between my robe and body, walked out of the room, climbed down the stairs and almost ran into the arms of the first wife. In my haste to carry the loot to Yumma I had not taken any precaution to avoid the first wife's watchful, suspicious eyes and long ears. Her persistent spying on us caused Yumma to speak to me in whispers. Whispering eventually became a habit of mine and a cause of complaint by family and friends.

"What do you have in your pockets?" the first wife asked me.

"Money," I said nonchalantly.

"What do you intend to do with it?"

"Buy things for Yumma and myself." I said.

Her reaction took me by surprise. She suddenly thrusted both of her hands into my pocket and under my robe and roughly took all the money. Before walking away with all my loot, she threatened to tell Boya about his thieving son. She refused to listen to Yumma's pleas and insisted on keeping the money as evidence to show to Boya. Undoubtedly, her interest in my misconduct was limited to its usefulness in discrediting Yumma

and her children in Boya's eyes. She wanted to make a big issue of it and even sent after one of Boya's half-brothers to consult with him. Boya thoroughly disappointed the first wife by dismissing the incident as the laughable mischief of a four-year-old.

In her efforts to keep a shiny image of Boya in my mind, Yumma heaped all the blame for her suffering and our troubles on her dhuras and their children. It was actually more of propaganda campaign aimed at convincing me that he was also a victim of their villainous schemes and intrigues. The image she wanted to impress on my mind was that all of us, including Boya, were being stewed in the same huge steaming cauldron around which the cackling dhuras ran in circles. A more accurate representation of our situation would place all of the wives including Yumma inside the cauldron and Boya carrying more kindling to stock the fire raging under it. He was spared the scorching heat until the supreme law of balance, reciprocity and justice caught up with him and then it was his turn to be stewed. Each one of his wives including Yumma struggled to save herself from his boiling cauldron. Yumma presented herself as the young, devoted wife whom he must spare to serve him in his old age. The second wife filled his lap with sons whom she then manipulated into eroding his authority until he had none. The third wife glued spines and thorns to her skin and forced him to spit her out. The first wife was the first to lose her youth and beauty and ignored by Boya and abandoned by her only son, she transformed herself into a hound and hunted for him and she almost transformed him into a toy bird on a string.

Village boys did not have rich fathers who could afford to buy them toys so they had to improvise and make their own. They made a toy wagon from a discarded slab of wood and four spools, a walkie-talkie from two empty match boxes and a piece of thread and when they caught a bird, they sometimes turned it

into a toy. If a boy is not hungry enough to kill the scroungy bird, pluck its feathers, roast it on a small fire and then eat it, he may tie a string around one of its legs and play with it. The bird could fly but only as far as the length of the string allowed it.

Rustic wisdom tells us that a bird can fly if its wingspan is enough to carry its weight. Similarly, a man can soar only if the strength of his mind is greater than the downward pull of his groin, which is the loose body part affected most by the force of gravity. The downward pull of the groin is not to be taken lightly. It could debase someone to the level of that man whom I saw one morning emerging from the palm grove bordering our house. With his pelvic region firmly attached to the hind-part of a dog and at the same time trying desperately to hold on to his aba and headgear he looked as if he was attempting to learn the kozachok, a folkloric Russian dance. Men, women and children, alerted by the bitch's yelps and growls came out of their huts and orchards to watch, point and cruse the wretched man. Before the dawn of the following day, almost everyone in the whole village knew about him and his shameful copulation and since then the mention of his name always inspired derision and some reference to dogs. I later learned that the man's groin was caught in the vise-strong contraction of the defiled dog's genitals.

Transforming Boya into a captive bird must have given the first wife double satisfaction. It gave her a measure of control over Boya and spited his other wives. Yumma managed to escape all her dhuras except the first wife who yanked Boya's string and he came and carried her like the mythical Roc to Yumma's side.

"She pimped for him," Yumma told me. I was seven or eight-year old when she made this grave and shocking accusation. She never forgave her for that. Allah instructed men who wanted to marry more than one wife to treat all of them fairly and equitably. Some argue that it is a mandatory precondition, and since no ordinary man can fulfill it men should not have more

than one wife. Tribesmen ignored religious rules which conflicted with their customs and personal interests and desires. Religious teachings aside, traditions dictate that a husband belongs to his last wife, and Yumma was Boya's youngest and prettiest fourth wife. Yumma never forgave the first wife for persistently scheming to rob her of her rightful position in Boya's heart and household.

"She fetched him that girl with the diseased head." Yumma accused her angrily. At that time, they had been married for almost ten years. I distinctly remember the teenage bride with the bald spots on her head. Skin diseases terrified local people, and sometimes a person with a minor skin ailment was treated and shunned like a leper even by his closest relatives. Alopecia or 'bald spots' was common in our village and those afflicted with it kept it a well-hidden secret to avoid ostracism and ridicule.

A full and long mane was at the top of the list of local standards of feminine beauty. The young girl with bald spots was extraordinarily fortunate to find a husband. Still she must have felt insecure because he could at any time send his unwholesome wife back to her parents and demand a full refund of the dowry. The girl, her husband and family must have been surprised and delighted by Boya's offer to pay for her treatment by a specialist in the capital. Yumma would not have objected to this act of charity, expected from a chieftain like Boya, if it was just that and nothing more. But why her and not one of the numerous tribesmen suffering from more serious illnesses? Yumma's suspicions must have reached a peak after learning of the involvement of the first wife. The girl was invited to stay in our house for several days before her departure to the capital.

At the tender age of six or seven my knowledge of the intricate webs of human relations and passions was rudimentary. My attitude toward the girl was a mixture of revulsion and sympathy. Except for her self-conscious adjustment of her head-cover every

few minutes, she behaved like a typical teenage bride. Evidence of her recent wedding could still be seen in her fading red-polished nails and the faint traces of henna tattoos on her hands and feet. She could not have been older than sixteen, and possibly as young as fourteen, and the innocent child still lurking within her developed young body yearned to come out and play with me.

The first wife infuriated Yumma by putting the young bride in a room next to ours in the hareem section and showering her with attention.

“Elwia! What are you doing?” the first wife said spitefully to my mother who was busy washing dishes in our backyard: “You wash dishes while that girl is upstairs with your husband.”

I remember vaguely that my mother was so angry at my father’s infidelity that she left us and went to stay with her brother. I am not sure of this because it is unlike her to rebel against Boya’s absolute authority and leave us unprotected with the first wife. Yumma also told me about another of his alleged infidelities with three young women who were the local high-priced call girls pimped by their mother. If Yumma did actually leave us it must have been for a day or two.

Yumma must have nursed a secret grudge at Boya for preferring a diseased girl and common prostitutes to her. As the custodian of his bedroom she would know if there were any improper relationship between him and the girl. Since she could not vent her anger on our lord and sole provider, she shifted all the blame onto the first wife accusing her of arranging the whole sordid affair and shamelessly corrupting Boya’s morals.

Yumma’s enthusiastic attempts to impress a favorable image of Boya on her children were defeated by her own inability to hide her resentment toward his entire household, most of his extended family and sometimes and inadvertently at him as well. She wanted us to adore him because she thought it was essential

for our survival and self-interest. She also had to suppress her negative feelings toward him to win small favors for her brother, Enough. Her persistent begging succeeded in convincing Boya to lease his grain mill to Enough. When my half-brothers protested that Boya was showing favoritism to Yumma's family, Enough offered to transfer the lease to anyone willing to pay the steep rent to Boya. No one took him up on his offer because only someone with his skills and ability to service and repair machines could squeeze a modest profit from operating the mill. After signing the lease, Enough built a small mud house for his family and Habooba in a palm grove not far from our house. Yumma was happy to have Habooba near her and I was also finding a father figure in Enough.

Villagers believe that mothers intentionally encourage their children to love their maternal relatives to spite their husbands. Habooba was a second mother to me and Enough had all the qualities a child in my age would like to see in his father. He was generous, kind and affectionate like his mother and sister. Tribesmen expected sayyids not only to be Allah-fearing but also to look saintly with radiant faces that glowed with inner saintliness and tranquility and Enough was one of the few sayyids who qualified. His politeness and good manners pacified even the most quarrelsome of his tribal customers who haggled with him and demanded preferential treatment.

All of us, except Yumma, took Boya and his money for granted. He was a wealthy landowner and it was his responsibility to provide for the welfare of his family. We were even disappointed with him for not surprising us frequently with the extra cash or gifts that made the difference between duty and love. He was not a miser but he put a high value on money and was not willing to accommodate the frivolous desires and whims of his large family. He seldom gave us more than the necessary minimum for a comfortable life and only after repeated pleas. He saw it as a

wise policy to conserve our small fortune but we regarded it as humiliation ritual by a controlling patriarch. Like some beggars we considered the extra money or some other privilege he reluctantly bestowed on us as hard-earned compensation for our abasement. In fairness, if he had not kept a tight grip on his money purse, we would have all suffered. There would have been no savings to invest in buying more land, opening irrigation canals, building houses for his several sons and sending them to the best school.

Boya's money fed, clothed, and educated me but Enough was the perfect model of generosity in my eyes. My poor uncle ate coarse bread and stewed vegetables on most days of his life but he gave me a silver coin every time I visited him in the mill. The prospects of getting another coin propelled my reluctant feet amidst the grumbling camels waiting outside the mill and across the threshold clogged with men and women loaded with bags of grain and flour. I stopped at a safe distance from the noisy machinery and watched him with open admiration as he, standing precariously on a high wooden platform, lifted pails of grain and tipped them inside a giant funnel-shaped receptacle. That alone made him a fearless hero in my eyes because one wrong move could have sent him to a certain horrible death inside the jaws of the grinding machine. From where I stood, I could hear him shouting at his assistant and customers but he did this only because of the loud din produced by humans, animals and machines. Outside the mill he seldom raised his voice and never to scold or quarrel with anyone.

"Don't go near the belt. It can kill a strong adult if he gets himself entangled in it." He often warned me during these visits. The huge belt ran almost the entire length of the place and its cracking noises conjured in my mind the image of an invisible genie lashing with its whip at the huge wheel to rotate it continuously. One Friday morning my uncle took me on a tour of

the forbidden back chamber of the mill. The place was quiet except for the cooing of the pigeons nestled in the beams of the ceiling, and the air inside smelled strongly of flour, dust and oil. In one corner of the room, a belt came through a large hole in a wall and turned around a wheel before disappearing into another hole. There were also tools and machines parts strewn everywhere. My nose then caught a whiff of a strong, nauseating smell which reminded me of the petrol fumes of Boya's car – except it was stronger and fouler. He told me to watch my steps as we came upon a large pit, which was half-full of a thick, black oily substance.

"This is why I want you to promise me not to go inside this room," he said emphatically pointing at the tar pit.

Enough was different from typical fathers in our village who always shouted at their children, scolded them for no reason at all, and beat them up mercilessly for the slightest fault or disobedience. One of them was heartless enough to suffocate his young child in the chief's guesthouse. The man who brought the child with him on that day farted and because tribesmen considered it dishonorable and shameful the man surreptitiously smothered his child to death and then claimed he did so because the child and not him farted and brought shame on his family.

Boya was by far better than a typical rural father but he shared with them, and Machiavelli's Prince, the belief that it is better to be feared than loved. When Boya entered a room, everyone stood up, his daughter fled to hide behind closed doors and his adult sons regressed to a childhood state of fidgeting and hand-wringing.

The traffic of love between parents and children often moved on bridges made up of hands. The touch of Yumma's or Habooba's hand on my cheek eased my toothache or at least made me forget it long enough to fall asleep. And the power of love transmitted through their hands rather than the magic of

their litanies and incantations helped me to conquer my fears of the night and its imaginary fearsome creatures. One way of returning their love was by kissing their hands. Kissing Boya's hand or one of his numerous relatives was, in comparison, an expression of respect and abasement imposed on me. Having a large extended family meant suffering a large number of hands that must be kissed. Obnoxious relatives pushed their hands in my face and expected me to kiss them on every encounter – whether at home or in public. It was sometimes difficult to tell whether this or that elder relative deserved to have his hand kissed or not. Boya or Yumma were usually close by to cue me with: "Kiss his hand! He is your father's second cousin." Or: "Kiss her hand. She is your paternal grandfather's seventh wife." Kissing hands under duress was a humiliating ritual and its unpleasantness was magnified sometimes by my sensitivity to the age, size, texture and odor of the hand. But love made insignificant the coarseness of Habooba's hand, the lingering odors of onion and detergent on Yumma's and the flour and grain dust on Enough's.

If a child could choose his or her own father, Enough would have been my first choice despite his poverty and large family. Enough was also my childhood's hero who saved my finger. During one of my regular visits to the grain mill he left me alone for few minutes to attend to a customer. It was long enough for me to get my finger entangled in the chain of his battered bicycle. When my feverish attempts to extricate my finger failed, my tears rolled down my face and my mind pictured images of mutilated hands like those of the countless men, women, and children in my village who lost a finger or two to a sickle while harvesting crops or cutting grass for their cows. Enough came and calmly sat by my side assuring me that everything will be all right. A minute later my finger was released a little bruised and reddened but intact. Boya would have lost his temper, scolded

me and yanked me from my robe, but not Enough. He smiled at me, told me to wipe my tears and added:

"How can a I ever face your mother if you were seriously hurt?"

One of Enough's coins probably paid for a two-minute peak inside the *Sanduk al-Wilayat*, literally The Box of Countries. It was a primitive hand-operated projection machine encased inside a hand-painted wooden box elaborately decorated with beads and small mirrors and pushed by its owner around on four wheels. The appearance of the Sanduk in our town always attracted a crowd of boys most of whom were penniless onlookers. When my turn finally came, I gave the man a coin, pressed my eyes to the peepholes and gazed inside. The man then cranked the box and the machine inside whirred projecting blurry pictures of distant lands, volcanoes, elephants and other exotic sceneries. The change left from Enough's coin after paying the Sanduk's man bought me an ice-cold bottle of siphon or soda.

Sons of chieftains and rich merchants bought the friendship and loyalty of other boys with gifts of money and bottles of siphon and later on as adults with free meals and drinks at restaurants or a night of entertainment at the Kawilia, gypsy camp. Boya, however, did not give me enough pocket money to do that. Like most rural parents he regarded childhood as a superfluous phase in life and wanted his children to grow up fast, toughen up and become productive adults like him. Children were treated as a nuisance and routinely abused by their parents, chased with sticks and profanities by policemen, slapped and kicked by irate shopkeepers and drenched with pails of dirty water by café waiters. It is unsurprising that some of them grew up to become sadistic security policemen, torturers, and even tyrants.

Only stray dogs were treated more harshly than boys and frequently at the hands of these same boys. A stray dog was a legitimate target for their frustration and aggression. At the sight

of one, they would immediately form into a gang to pelt the poor animal with stones, chase it around and if captured they would tie a rope around its neck and drag it around in the streets. It horrified me to see these small boys, jumping with joy, laughing and thoroughly enjoying the slow and brutal torture of a small, helpless animal. A tortoise returning to the river from a foraging trip to a palm grove risked being spotted by one of these boys who may kick it upside down and then summon his comrades to join him in another sadistic game. I stood watching one day while a gang of boys tortured a tortoise to death. After ganging up on the creature, one of them managed to tie a string around its tiny neck and drag it around while the others clapped their hands, whistled and jumped in frenzy. They then flipped it on its back and took turn in balancing themselves on its belly to see who can stand on one leg for the longest time. It fouled the air with the stench of its fear, which drove its tormentors away before it expired. I hated myself for not having the courage to stop them or at least express my disapproval of their cruelty. One of the neighbor's boys who stood there watching and laughing later became a hangman who dispatched many of the dictator's opponents and boasted of the bonus he received each time. Others were killed in the dictator's wars.

Months later I was lying down on a mattress in our sitting room; semiconscious, feverish and yearning for the cool and soothing touch of Yumma's hands as that dying tortoise must have longed for the safety of the river. Two pairs of expensive shoes stood less than a meter away from my half-closed eyes. These could not belong to the street urchins coming to stand on my belly because they were always bare footed. The shiny shoes spoke to each other. The strange pair of shoes said something incomprehensible in the unmistakable voice of my uncle made permanently hoarse by many years of heavy drinking and

smoking cigars, two habits inherited by his sons killing one of them with cirrhosis of the river and another with throat cancer.

"We don't expect him to live for long," Boya's shoes replied in a tone of voice as calm and scorching as summer days on which, villagers believed, dates ripened quickly. The strange pair of shoes, which must have often been splashed with whisky and sprinkled with cigar ashes, showed no reaction to the fateful words. After they turned and walked away, the liquid spirit of the tortoise rose from the river and entered my body. I lay down on my back and waited for death to rescue me from the unbearable cruelty weighing down my body.

Boya stood there with his brother and watched me. He did not even squat beside me for a second to feel my burning forehead. The venomous sap was crawling up my leg but he did not utter a single word of warning to send it away into the dark desert. It was another unforgivable betrayal.

But Yumma was there with her infinite faith in Allah's mercy and the interceding powers of her grandfathers and she prayed continuously and nursed me back to health. Unafraid of the contagious spirit of the dying tortoise she put her face, not her shoes, next to my face. She did not have Boya's manly strength and resources but she was always there when I needed her.

If someone used the word *khatia* often, you can safely assume that person to be kind and compassionate. *Khatia* is an empathetic expression of sorrow over the plight of a wronged or unfortunate person. Yumma repeated this word when I told her about the dying tortoise and the man in agony whose leg was speared with a barbed spear. Her heightened sense of empathy made her an avid listener and she attentively listened to all my stories. After witnessing a revenge murder in town, I was impatient to go back and tell her the story. Minutes earlier, the man was sitting beside me on the same bench in the café where Boya abandoned me after telling the café owner to keep an eye

on me. In hindsight, the man acted suspiciously; he fidgeted and spoke loudly and aggressively to the café owner. After drinking his tea and paying for it he walked toward the main street. It was not long before the sound of gunfire rose from the same direction and he came running toward us carrying a gun in his raised hand. He ran past the café, turned right and disappeared inside the police station. After taking his revenge, it was probably the safest place for him in the whole district.

While Boya, like all fathers, wanted me to grow up quickly into a *rajal khishin*, literally a tough adult, Yumma who continuously worried over my safety preferred to keep me glued to her side. Every time I left our house and until I returned safely, her imagination tortured her with the worst scenarios: slipping into the river and drowning, savagely chewed up by vicious dogs, hit with a stray bullet from the rifles and guns of feuding men, kicked by a donkey or overrun by a speeding bus. When I complained of her compulsive anxiety over my safety, she told me: “Because you don’t know yet how to look after yourself.”.

A silly confusion one night revealed to me the terrified child hiding inside her and how much she had to struggle to overcome her fears and hide her weaknesses for our sake. It was a clear summer night. Yumma, my sister and I climbed the stairs to the roof where Yumma had earlier laid down our bedding and mosquito nets on our cots. We usually slept on the roof on hot summer days. We sat together on Yumma’s bed soaking up the coolness of her bedsheet and listening to the sound of distant music and songs coming from the café radio across the river. A sudden stirring inside one of the beds caught our attention. Thinking that a burglar was hiding from view under the mosquito net, I shrieked with fear and was immediately joined by my sister. We pressed ourselves against Yumma side seeking her protection against the presumed intruder. Despite my almost total preoccupation with my safety, I did not fail to notice

Yumma's fright. All three of us continued to shiver and shout for help, until my brother's face came from underneath the mosquito net. He had earlier gone to bed without telling Yumma. Our shouts awakened him and he was too afraid to show his face assuming that a burglar had sneaked into our roof.

My disappointment with Yumma's weakness did not diminish my dependence on her because there was simply no alternative. Boya always happened to be elsewhere whenever we most needed him. He was away on one of his numerous trips when our house was burglarized. The thief managed to break into our house somehow, carry Boya's suitcase to the roof of the servants' quarters and after finding nothing of value in it left it there. Boya was also away when a rabid dog entered our garden and could have bitten one of us. Yumma, the first wife, the maids and I cowered behind closed windows and watched the dog pacing our front and back gardens. One of the maids broke down into tears after another maid said that a person bitten by a rabid dog was usually chained down to a tree by his family and left there to die. After spending hours under siege, our rescue came at the hands of a tribesman who came to ring our front-door bell and saw the dog. He alerted a neighbor who brought a shotgun and killed the dog.

Boya dismissed Yumma's worries with a shrug and he laughed at her story about the black magic. One of the maids had told her that she saw a woman digging a hole in front of our house and burying something in it. There was only one explanation acceptable to Yumma: black magic. She took all necessary precautions to deprive her dhuras from the means of putting spells on us. All our nail clippings and strands of hair left on our combs were burned and never discarded in the garbage where an enemy could find and use in making harmful spells. A sudden illness of one of us always called for evil spells counter measures; she would ask Habooba to buy incense and they would huddle in

front of a charcoal grill burning the incense and filling our room with its suffocating sweet-smelling fumes and the drone of their incantations. They spent hours praying and blowing on their fingers to drive away the demons unleashed on us by the dhuras.

V

Against Yumma's wishes, Boya enrolled my brother in a boarding school in the capital. It prompted her to warn me tearfully: "If you go away also, I'll die of grief." Boya insisted on sending my brother to the school in the capital because he wanted his sons to get the best education and make him the proudest father and landlord in the whole district. Yumma regarded schools and especially a boarding school in another city or a foreign country of being a sort of dhura intent on robbing her of her sons. She remembered how the first wife lost the affection of her only son after he spent several years studying abroad. He not only forgot the sweetness of his mother's milk but also came very close to committing the unforgivable sin of apostasy. His brother told Boya the horrifying story of finding him wearing a large cross in his Christian boarding school. After his graduation, my half-brother found employment in the capital, married and settled down. He almost never came to see his mother and he and his wife made her feel like an unwanted total stranger on her brief annual visits.

To counter any possible alienation of our affections by schools and future wives, Yumma never tired of reminding us of how much she loved us in plain words, poems, rhymes, and stories. Her favorite and most affective story was about the man whose wife persuaded him that only his mother's heart could cure her chronic illness. Could there be a woman that evil and a man that gullible? It was a question my young mind did not ponder at that time. The man was on his way back to his wife after murdering his poor mother and cutting out her heart when highway bandits intercepted him. The most moving part of the story was at this

point when the mother's heart miraculously spoke begging the bandits to spare her son's life.

I stayed and went to the local school which was only a five-minute walk from our house except on rainy days when the dirt road turned into puddles of rainwater and mud. Unlike most of my schoolmates, I wore my Wellington boots and did not need to wash my feet in the river or a puddle before entering school. My woolen clothes kept me warm on cold mornings while other children shivered, struggled to control their chattering teeth and jostled in front of the fire lit in an old oil barrel in the courtyard. Teachers who were mostly nationalists or Communists and openly despised landlords and tribesmen in general as uncouth and uncivilized illiterates treated me indifferently except my first-grade teacher. His oval, kind face and jovial disposition more than compensated for his uncommon obesity which must have intimidated the mostly malnourished, skinny locals. He always wore a suit, a white shirt and a tie to school, brandished a meter-long rod which he used often as a pointer and sparingly on students, and popped watermelon and pumpkin seeds in his mouth and spat out the shells between enunciating the alphabet or rhymes. He claimed that his addiction, which must have been a source of constant irritation for the school janitors, was medically beneficial in keeping him from overeating and ridding his intestines of parasites. When I conveyed his regards to Boya, he smiled and promised not to forget the necktie. Boya always returned from his summer holiday abroad with gifts of neckties, shirts and socks, and one of those ties was destined for the first-grade teacher.

Every morning, the obese teacher made us stand in a neat line in front of a huge pot in which gallons of powdered milk bubbled and turned into a tasteless, watery liquid. We must have looked like beggars in a shrine holding our tin cups in our hands. Under the stern eyes of the obese teacher, a janitor filled our cup with

the steaming pale white liquid and handed out our daily rations of cod-liver pills. Neither claims of sickness nor sounds of retching, whether true or faked, spared us the ordeal of having to swallow the foul-smelling pill.

Going to school gave me an additional measure of freedom of movement that took me as far as the police station at the other side of the river but much of the town including the bazaar and the local cinema were still off limit to me. Even when no part of our small town was forbidden territory to me, I remained more loyal to Yumma than a homing pigeon. She did not have to clip my wings to keep me from flying away or joining the flock of a rival pigeon keeper. If circumstances had freed both of us of anxiety and fear of real and imaginary enemies, she may have lived a happy life and I may have grown up to be an eagle unlike my father, with a wing force stronger than the downward pull of my groin so that no woman, even one more cunning than the first wife, could tie a rope around my foot and turn me into a toy. Yumma worried continuously over my safety but she did not clip my wings. She convinced Boya to enlist me in the boy scouts and allowed me to spend a whole day camping with fellow scouts in the ruins of an ancient city not far from our town. When Enough invited me to spend a night in his new mud and brick house she readily approved. After playing with my cousins for hours I was treated to a sumptuous meal of rice, meat, vegetables, fruits and sweets. In the evening, they brought out a new bedding for me and Habooba told us one of her spellbinding stories. One hour after everyone had gone to sleep, I was still wide-awake and crying silently in my bed. When homesickness refused to go away, I woke up my uncle and asked him to take me to Yumma. It was almost midnight and the roads at this hour of the night belonged to the vicious dogs and burglars. Enough lifted me to his shoulders and carried me all the way to my mother.

When my world expanded too much and too soon for me, I almost got lost and neither Yumma nor Enough was there to find me. The trip to the capital was meant to be a special treat by Boya and his half-brother also came along. The streets were milling with people who came out to celebrate the crowning of the young king. Posters of the king in a white army uniform were pasted everywhere. In the afternoon we went to the fairground where a man jumped from a high platform into a small shallow pool that was only three times the size of Yumma's laundry pail and two daredevils raced on motorcycles inside a latticed orb. Boya and his half-brother decided on grilled fish for dinner at one of the riverbank restaurants. After dinner I became bored and asked for Boya's permission to go and sit in our car. I threaded my way through the crowded pavement toward the parking lot but our car was gone. After a short futile search, I gave up and decided to go back to the restaurant. But there was one problem: all the restaurants looked alike. After walking up and down the street several times searching for Boya's familiar face in the crowded restaurants and trying to hold down the tears I was getting tired and desperate. I thought it was a matter of time before a gypsy or a pedophile would notice my situation and abduct me by force. I distinctly remember a popular love song coming from the radio of a street vendor and it became permanently associated in my memory with that painful experience. It was the longest half hour in my life before Boya and his half-brother emerged from a restaurant angrily shouting my name. My relief to see Boya took out the sting from his harsh words.

"This means that I won't see you until *Krufus*," Yumma said miserably. Her mispronunciation of the word Christmas – Krufus means parsley – did not amuse me. Every Christmas she received a special gift: two whole precious weeks with her elder son. This time it was my turn to go to the boarding school in the capital. I

was only ten. My gloom intensified as the day of my departure approached. It was going to be my first long-term separation from Yumma and I resented Boya for supplying the bitter weaning sabur this time. My brother, half-brothers and numerous cousins disliked this boarding school intensely. On one Friday evening, my proud brother cried and begged Boya not to take him back to school. I sat inside our car and watched them with tears in my eyes. They were standing in front of the school's front gate and our chauffeur was taking my brother's small suitcase out of the car when suddenly my brother bolted and ran down the street. Our chauffeur caught up with him and brought him back to an angry Boya who slapped him once and then led him inside the school.

Yumma followed us to the street and sobbed as she waved goodbye. Before our car turned into the paved road and our house disappeared from sight, loneliness was spinning its cocoon around me. My mind was preoccupied with terrible images of the boarding school when our car made another turn into a dirt road running through a thick palm grove. Since the bloody feud with a neighboring tribe my family have been travelling this bumpy road instead of the main highway passing through the land of our new enemies. Villagers blame their acts of aggression including murder on their excessive consumption of eggplants. The popular vegetable dish is thought to somehow intensify a person's aggression and lead him to behave rashly and violently. Another common belief associates consuming large amounts of ripe dates in summer with increased sexual activities. In reality, a dispute over the ownership of a strip of barren land rather than an eggplant dish incited my family to attack the neighboring tribe. Armed with machine guns, rifles and pistols our tribesmen led by members of my family boarded three small trucks, drove to our neighbors' village and ambushed the unsuspecting tribesmen, killing and wounding more than two dozen of them.

Immediately after news of the raid reached him, the district governor ordered the detention of Boya and a number of his brothers and relatives in the town's police station. Every day, several trays heaped with food enough to feed half the town's population were carried to them. All the policemen and prisoners shared in the meals including the notorious inmate of the maximum security cell, also known as the ninth cell, because the ninth level of Hell is the hottest, who was sentenced to death by hanging for massacring in cold blood forty members of the family of a rival chieftain. They all sat together, ate and told funny stories. Few days later, a royal decree transferred the district governor to another post and replaced him with a new governor who signed the release order for Boya and his relatives. The disputed land was forfeited to the other tribe as blood money.

Before depositing me at the boarding school, Boya took me to the shops in the fashionable street of the capital. The school had given him a long list of things to buy for me including suits, shirts, sweaters, socks, handkerchiefs, towels and sheets which must be obtained from a certain department store and labeled according to instructions. My heart was pounding in my ears as Boya walked inside the school's gate holding my hand firmly followed by our chauffeur with my suitcase. The middle-aged headmistress, wearing heavy make-up, cordially welcomed Boya, the father of former students of her school, uncle to several more, and more importantly, the brother of a senator. It was probably the only time I saw her smiling in almost nine months counting from that unhappy day. As soon as Boya was out of the office, she and her sister turned toward me, criticizing my baggy clothes, clucking and frowning at my disheveled mob of hair, handling me like a leper by my sleeves and in short treating me like an enfant sauvage.

Yumma was hundreds of kilometers away and my brother was in his boarding high school somewhere in the big city and I was

at the mercy of a group of Amazonian women who ran and taught at the coeducational elementary school. The teachers were all middle-aged, foul-tempered and ugly women with difficult foreign names that took me more than a week to memorize and match with their faces. They treated the students ruthlessly, shouting at them, calling them names, and punishing them for the slightest infraction. Every day, knuckles were rapped with two wooden rulers tied together, ponytails were savagely pulled, and occasionally someone was sent to the headmaster's office. The recluse middle-aged man stayed in his office most of the time leaving much of the duties and responsibilities of administering the school to his wife and her sister. When light to medium corporal punishment failed to produce the desired scholastic performance or acceptable general conduct, the errant student was dispatched to the headmaster for a thrashing with a bamboo stick. Being hen-pecked by his domineering wife and female relatives did not justify, in my opinion, his notorious cruelty. Terrified students refused to walk willingly into his office and had to be dragged, pushed and almost carried inside like some convicts to the gallows.

During the entire nine months of my stay at the boarding school I felt as battered and humiliated as the unfortunate female herder whose water buffaloes turned against her one morning. It was a spectacle not to be forgotten and from the safety of the riverbank a crowd of onlookers including myself followed in horror and fascination the ordeal of the young, beautiful girl. The enraged beasts tossed her in the air like a rag doll, bounced her on their heads like trained circus seals did with balls and as soon as she landed in the water she was flying again. It lasted until the animals lost interest allowing her, bruised and half-naked, to swim ashore. The foul-tempered teachers subjected me regularly to the same abuse – mostly verbal.

I tried hard to merge in the herd of students but it was an impossible task. Their skins, due to large doses of Turkish blood, were several shades lighter than my permanent tan; their dialect was distinguishable from mine by its vocabulary and pronunciation and most of them belonged to different religions or sects. They were also four years ahead of me in learning English. Boarding students were no better than their daytime mates. They also treated me with the typical arrogance and condescending patronization reserved by city people for villagers. Although we slept six in a room on camping cots separated by a distance less than half a meter, we were worlds apart. It was as if their only source of amusement was making fun of students with rural origins like me. I am happy to report that their faces and names have long ago disappeared from my memory, melted by the heat of their hostility, contempt or indifference toward me.

The dining room of the boarding school was a virtual torture chamber and enduring three meals every day in it used up all my patience and nerves. I had to force-feed myself food that my family would have been ashamed to give away to beggars or stray animals. The soups were watery, the meat fibrous and the bread fossilized. Twice a week at least we had vermicelli soup. The sight of it was enough to turn the color of the boy sitting in front of me from ghostly pale to greenish white. After gulping down one spoon of the murky, wormy liquid he began to retch. We were strictly instructed to ignore him. If Yumma were within earshot, she would have been by his side, holding his head, comforting him and pushing away his bowl of soup. But Yumma was far away and the sickly boy was ready to vomit on his plate and mine. At the last moment, the female supervisor of the dining room, another relative of the headmistress, came to our rescue and escorted the boy outside for a breath of fresh air.

Vermicelli's days were definitely the best times for ridding ourselves of the loaves of rock-hard bread. The bold students among us ran to the window and threw them out and ran back to their seats before the return of the supervisor. After unsuccessful attempts to chew and swallow the stale bread, made even more difficult by my rotten front teeth, I resorted to stuffing them inside the large pockets of my baggy pants. After meals, I hid them behind a large cupboard.

My survival skills developed in ten years of living in Boya's household served me well during my first year at the boarding school. I carefully observed and made mental notes of all the things that displeased the headmistress and her staff and avoided doing them. I also spent hours rehearsing in my mind their dialect, distinctive gestures and table manners. But there was nothing to be done with my looks, which betrayed my origin and species like a weed in a rose garden, or if you ask Yumma, vice versa.

"How did you get such eyes?" or "Will you exchange your eyes with mine?" the headmistress' daughter asked me occasionally. The envious undertone of her voice would have sent Yumma into a frenzy: burning incense, ordering a new charm and reciting all the prayers known to ward off the evil eyes of envious women. The young woman was the uncrowned princess of the school and the darling of her parents. She was fair, tall, willowy and, in spite of her slightly aquiline nose and almond eyes, beautiful. Her dresses looked as fashionable and expensive as those worn by models on the covers of magazines displayed in the newsstand across from the school. Her fiancé came to see her daily driving a new expensive American car.

My eyes were certainly bigger and darker than hers were but it was their sad expression, which must have aroused her instinctive motherly kindness toward me.

Two months after leaving Yumma, winter arrived earlier one night in full force with heavy rain pelting the windows and thunderclaps keeping me awake. I curled up under my blanket, closed my eyes and sent my thoughts for a little family warmth with Yumma. The voice of the headmistress' daughter rising from the first floor interrupted my thoughts and aroused murmurs through the room. With my eyes closed I tried to track her movements by analyzing the volume and direction of her voice: she was now climbing the stairs, walking down the corridor past the bathroom where we took our weekly showers – and after which sometimes she came to inspect the inside of my ears for wax – and finally she was inside our room.

She stopped beside my bed and asked me if the thunder frightened me. We were supposed to be asleep by this time and I was wondering whether or not it would be wiser to pretend to be asleep and leave her question unanswered. Before making up my mind I felt her lifting the blanket and her long, slim body stretching beside me. She threw her arms around me and hugged me like Yumma used to do. I stayed perfectly still and a little nervous by the touch of the strange body. A flash of thunder illuminated the bed next to me and its occupant who had moved his head closer to me was whispering something incoherent. He repeated it again before my mind pieced together the words. The obscene suggestion annoyed me as much as a fly in my glass of milk. It proved to me that people carried sabur not only in sachets to prematurely wean unsuspecting children but also in their thoughts to rob others of the few simple, innocent pleasures in life.

Someone must have given the headmistress' daughter an overdose of sabur and without the love and care of a mother like Yumma she found the bitterness unbearable and committed suicide months after her nightly visit. Now I know that what

attracted her to me was the reflection of her deep sadness she saw in my eyes.

Final examinations were over, the dormitory was closed and we were dismissed for the summer. I left the boarding school enriched with few words of English and burdened with new disappointments and anxieties. Boya's relatives hated us for sharing with them his wealth and power but the fellow students with whom I lived, studied and dined for nine months had absolutely no legitimate reasons to be cruel and inconsiderate toward me. My first experience with life away from home was a big disappointment.

That summer proved to be untypical, and its events changed our lives and made many plans and resolutions redundant.

VI

We were visiting my half-brother in his rented house in the capital when the big event of that summer took place. Few months earlier he had returned from abroad with a university degree to enjoy the pampering of a happy and proud Boya. A small crowd of relatives led by Boya met him at the airport and they were all treated to an expensive dinner of grilled fish. Boya's happiness was cut short by the fateful events of that summer.

It was early morning on a hot July day when we were awakened by the cacophony of human voices and gunfire coming from the main street. A statement read by a broadcaster suddenly interrupted a military march on the radio. As the faceless voice announced the overthrow of the monarchy and the formation of a republican government in its place, faces around me became grim and pale. A frantic check of other stations confirmed it. At that moment our houseboy came inside to tell us that a man carrying a telephone set told him that mobs were ransacking and looting embassies and public buildings and the telephone he was carrying was the last of the office furniture in the British Embassy. The sound of sporadic machine gun fire could now be clearly heard from the direction of the main street.

A cousin came later that morning with a wide grin on his face and a carnation buttonhole. He shrugged off my half-brother's rebuke and left. A plausible explanation of his glee, which contrasted sharply with the long faces around me, eluded me until I knew more about the complex world of human motivation and relationships. My cousin, like many young men in our family and society, resented his domineering father who was far from perfect, and therefore whatever may annoy his father was a

cause for celebration. While the elders in my family lamented their loss of influence and privileges, many of their sons secretly rejoiced and congratulated themselves on their bourgeois sympathies with the dispossessed workers and peasants. The same explanation could also be offered for the mutilation and dragging in the street inflicted on the body of the King's uncle after almost all members of the royal family were lined up in front of their modest palace and shot. The uncle was not only a father figure to the orphaned king but he was also the grand patriarch of the government and the whole country and on that day, fathers were not cherished in my country.

When it was safe to travel, Boya came and took me home to Yumma. The change in government had obviously depressed Boya's mood. He rarely left the house and few of his relatives or friends came to visit him. He sat for hours alone toying with his worry beads or listening to the radio. But the awaited communiqué announcing the reinstatement of the monarchy never came. After learning of his decision not to send me back to the boarding school I was grateful to the republic for making that possible and became another son happy at the expense of his father.

One evening, a small crowd congregated in front of our house and we watched in horror from our windows the angry mob brandishing guns, machetes and nooses and shouting death to feudal lords.

Days later we woke up to find the whole town under siege by military units. A curfew has been imposed and armed soldiers posted in every street were shouting at residents to stay off the streets. The shops across the river were all closed, the radio in the café was unusually silent for this time of day and its benches were empty. Stray dogs having the freedom of the town on that day came out to leisurely sniff at garbage piles and sleep in shady spots forbidden to them on ordinary days. The river was also

running happily with eyes wide open, undisturbed by the offensive sight of men squatting and defecating on its banks.

A soldier standing guard near our front gate rolled a cigarette and told a neighbor's son and me the story of the long scar on his hand. He had all the distinctive features of our tribesmen: a tanned skin, a haggard face and a bushy moustache. Except his shaikh was not Boya but his superior officer whom he called 'uncle' and stood to attention in his presence.

Boya greeted the senior military officer affably and invited him into the reception hall reserved for our distinguished guests. After declining politely, the officer explained that his government had received reliable information about a large cache of weapons and ammunition kept by our tribe and he was ordered to search for and confiscate. Boya laughed nervously and denied having any weapons. He then pointed in my direction and addressed the officer in a solemn voice.

"I swear by the life of my son that we have no weapons here." The officer believing Boya ordered his soldiers out of our house and left. Boya did not tell the truth – unless he did not consider the Colt revolver hidden inside the first wife's underwear a weapon. Hours before the arrival of the officer and his men, Boya was walking around the house searching frantically for a place to hide in his revolver. The first wife stood up and told him in an authoritative voice which she never used with him before – not in front of us at least – to hand over the gun. She disappeared for a few minutes inside her room and then came out empty-handed. When he asked her where she hid it, she smiled coyly and pointed gingerly at her midriff. Boya lied and lying under oath was a terrible sin which villagers believed could bring divine retribution on the liar in the form of a serious illness or even an agonizing death. And one does not take a false oath on the life of his son unless he does not put a high value on him.

Next morning the troops, unable to find a single weapon, withdrew to their barracks in the district capital. What army officers did not understand was that in the absence of a higher peace-making authority tribesmen considered their weapons the only effective deterrent against feuds escalating into tribal wars. They were not prepared to surrender their weapons to any government even one claiming to support their causes.

We sighed in relief at the return of a modicum of normal life to our town and even managed to smile at the amusing story behind the government's decision to send in the troops. A distant relative of Boya trying to curry favor with the military junta sent them a telegram pledging the undivided loyalty of our alleged fifteen thousand armed tribesmen. The rulers who were put in power by few units of the country's army of fifty thousand men were understandably alarmed by the false claim and sent a whole division to investigate.

I eagerly waited for school to begin so that I could tell my friends about my adventures in the boarding school and impress them with my few words of English. But these stories were never told and the English words were soon forgotten. From day one at school, my friends distanced themselves from me, and the rest of my classmates openly treated me with contempt and hostility. In previous years, the bullies in my school did not dare pick on someone like me whose father was a chieftain, lived in a big house, owned a chauffeur-driven American car and could have easily used his influence to ruin their families. The republic took away all my shields and exposed me to the compounded persecution of the bullies. I ignored their insults, name-calling and jeering but when one of them finally attacked me physically I retaliated like the cornered kitten in a popular children rhyme. It was the favorite rhyme of our obese first-grade teacher who popped pumpkinseeds in his mouth and wore Boya's imported ties. He repeated it so many times that all the students in his class

memorized the words before the end of their first week in school. It told the story of a brute who finding a stray kitten inside his room began to kick it until its distressful noises were heard by the whole neighborhood. When the kitten found itself cornered by the boy with no possibility of escape it sprang on him and bit and clawed him so fiercely that his cries were also heard by the whole neighborhood. The rhyme concluded with the following message: whomever does injustice to others will eventually get his comeuppance.

The message of the rhyme was lost on those boys who tortured and killed stray dogs and tortoises and men who mutilated and dragged in the streets the naked body of the king's uncle and of course the bullies who persecuted me. The rock of one of these bullies hit me in the small of my back and before I turned the bully lunged at me forcing me to the ground. Stunned at first, I managed to fend off his punches until the spirit of the cornered kitten kindled my anger and determination and led me to counterattack with a lust for broken bones and spilt blood. We were finally separated and he never bothered me again.

Boyas in my town seldom identified with the abused kitten but dreamt of becoming Antars, heroes like their fathers, uncles and elder brothers. Antar was a brave warrior of ancient times who led his tribesmen in battle, slayed many braves and won the accolade of other warriors and the adoration of beautiful women. Since swords have become obsolete and bragging about real or imaginary romantic conquests was nothing less than suicidal, the urge to achieve Antar's status made pedophiles of many of the men in our town and tribe. This sexual perversion became the rite of passage for many boys and a despicable habit among many men.

During the first year of the republican era when my friends shunned me, an aspiring Antar whose father used to slavishly kiss Boya's hand surprised me with his offer at friendship. Eventually

he made his intentions by suggesting one day that we play the Antar game. “I’ll let you play Antar first if you let me play Antar afterwards,” he suggested. Enraged I picked up a large stone and threw it at his head. It missed him but its size and my fierce indignation kept him permanently afar.

My suffering during that school year seemed endless. Every morning the nationalist and Communist teachers, whose comrades and military allies were now in control of our country, rounded the students up in neat rows like little soldiers to sing the new national anthem and present their hands for inspection. For more than ten minutes, the school courtyard echoed the rapping of wooden rulers on knuckles, already chaffed by the frosty weather and washing in cold water, followed by loud offenses and insults: “ Long nails! Why? Is your father a crow?” rap-rap; “Filthy hands! Does your father clean septic tanks?” rap-rap; “No hanky! Is your mother an ape?” rap-rap. I wondered to myself whether these irate teachers had eggplants for breakfast.

If the hypothesized correlation between consuming eggplants and aggression is correct, then one of these teachers must have been addicted to it. He was a Communist from the city. The villagers whom a lunar eclipse still drove them out of their mud hovels banging on their pots and pans to frighten away the whale swallowing the moon and wanted to spend the afterlife in paradise sitting in the shade of evergreen trees and making love to beautiful *huris* found his Marxist-Leninist ideology to be pure gibberish. In order to win the support and loyalty of villagers, the Communists promised them heavens on earth by assuring each one of them a poultry farm and a schoolteacher for a wife. Still, many of the simple-minded villagers considered ludicrous the exhortation of the Communist to put a noose around the neck of every enemy of the proletariat and drag him to death in the streets so that the Communist Paradise on earth can be realized. It made as much sense to them as the idiot village straddling a

palm branch and ordering it to fly him to *Chen wa Machen* or China.

Like all his comrades in my country at that time, this Communist teacher was inseparable from his noose. There were several men in our city, such as Boya, who fitted his characterization of the enemy of the proletariat but he chose me as a representative of all of them. One day during morning roll call he left the ranks of his fellow teachers, walked to where I stood frozen with terror and slid his noose around my neck.

"This will be the inevitable fate of all reactionaries, feudal lords and other enemies of the proletariat," he shouted. The principal, his assistant, teachers, janitors and all the students repeated his words in a thunderous voice. I felt like a shipwrecked that woke up to find himself in a cannibals' cauldron. Until few months ago, these cannibals were my friends and neighbors. After telling Yumma about what happened to me in school we cried together and she beat her shoulders and hit her sides repeatedly. Boya, the cowardly lion, reacted typically with a shrug of his head and: "Don't pay attention to him."

Every morning while other students worried about receiving a few raps on their knuckles for forgetting to wash their faces or clip their nails I dreaded the touch of the coarse noose on my neck. My suffering filled me with frustrated loathing and after hating my Communist teacher to the extent of wishing him the same fate he ordained for me there was still enough to hate my schoolmates who treated me like a leper and despise my other teachers who picked on me.

The images of these tormentors retained in my memory are faceless except the Communist teacher with his round white face and bushy Stalinist moustache and the consumptive dark boy who led the ceremony of saluting the flag every Saturday and Thursday. In spite of the gaunt face, sunken eyes and sallow skin of a typical malnourished boy, he was a consummate performer.

While he passionately and impressively sang his adoration of the republican flag, my imagination conjured a crowd cursing the republic and shredding its flag. I now suspect my resentment toward him was motivated in part by jealousy.

Witnessing his flogging was one of the few pleasant events of that year. Did the principal and his assistant also envy him his popularity? The principal wielding his dreaded bamboo cane ordered the terrified boy to take off his shoes and lie on his back in front of the assembled students. Even under these extremely unfavorable conditions, his theatrical talents were evident. But the principal was unmoved by his animated and touching contrition and pleas for forgiveness and mercilessly thrashed him on the shoulders and abdomen – to my unashamed sadistic delight. I do not recall the reason for his punishment but it must have been very serious, most probably sodomy. He was finally subdued by the janitors who lifted his legs high in the air to slip in the leather harness in preparation for the dreaded corporal punishment known as the *falqa*. Everyone except me winced at the sound of the cane hitting the soles of his feet. His shrieks of pain reached a crescendo never registered by him before during the salute-the-flag ceremonies.

The humiliation of that obsequious boy did not end with the administration of the falqa. Few weeks later one of the students ran around the courtyard telling everyone that a large snake has come out of the flag-saluting boy. We found him near the latrines lying on the ground writhing in agony, with his short and underwear around his knees. My dark side came out to gloat but a ring of curious and horrified schoolmates obscured my view. The sight of the principal walking rapidly toward us baring his clenched teeth and waving his cane in the air was enough to disperse us. The janitors then carried the boy inside the teacher’s office. According to one unconfirmed rumor the boy was using the latrine when a large worm partially emerged from his

intestines and he ran out terrified into the courtyard with the worm trailing behind him. Inside the office the principal threatened a very reluctant janitor with dismissal if he did not pull out the worm with his hand.

After that shameful incident a less-talented boy replaced him in saluting the flag and singing the national anthem. The principal probably considered the worm-infested student unworthy of conducting the solemn rituals. Intestinal worms or belly snakes as villagers commonly called them constituted a minor health problem in comparison with malaria and trachoma but still featured in local folktales preserved by Yumma. The heroine of one fairy tale was a beautiful princess and the only daughter and sole heir to her father's throne. Naturally she had numerous suitors from whom her father chose the most eligible to become her husband and future king. After a festive wedding celebration, she woke up the morning after to find her husband dead. The palace physician insisted on whispering the result of his examination of the dead prince in the king's ear: snake poisoning. All the royal guards thoroughly searched the castle but no trace of a snake was found. When the princess' second husband met with the same fate, it was rumored that a curse had been put on the royal family. After the death of her third husband under the same circumstances, marriage proposals from princes and emirs dried up. The king desperate to find for his daughter a husband who will sit beside her on the throne and protect the kingdom from greedy neighbors reluctantly consented to her union to a commoner. The despairing king then gave two orders to his vizier: complete the arrangements for the wedding on the set date and make secret preparations for the funeral of the groom on the morning after. During the wedding ceremony everyone avoided looking at the groom believing that this was his last night alive. This is why no one noticed him when he lifted the cup of juice given to him by his bride to his lips but

did not drink from it. When they were together in their bedroom he yawned uncontrollably and then reclined on the bed and fell asleep. It was only an act and with one eye slightly open he noticed that his bride was not shocked by his strange behavior. When her breathing became even, he rose quietly, took out his sword, cut his palm deeply and then sprinkled salt on the wound to keep himself awake all night long. Fully alert and prepared with his sword drawn, he sat on a chair near the bed and waited. Shortly after midnight he heard rustling noises coming from the bed and saw the bed sheets covering the princess moving and from underneath them slithered out a hideous reptile. The groom raised his sword and with one stroke sliced off its head. The shrieks of the dying snake awakened the princess who after seeing the snake writhing in its blood ran to her husband and thanked him sincerely for rescuing her from the yoke of the snake in her belly.

This fairy tale fascinated me as a child especially the part about the young groom cutting his hand and sprinkling salt on it. It was in my opinion the ultimate act of heroism. But its subliminal message did not become clear to me until much later in life. A story about a bride whose belly hosts a poisonous snake has an obvious anti-marriage and anti-woman bias. Its author, but not necessarily its narrator, could have been any mother afraid of losing her son to a possessive, strong wife who may turn him against her like the one that convinced her husband of the therapeutic effect of his mother's heart.

Before the end of the first year under the rule of the republican junta, the whole town was squirming under the heavy thumb of the Communist teacher who intimidated everyone including the mayor and chief of police. His machine gun-toting comrades, stationed at checkpoints on the main roads leading to our town, stopped and searched vehicles and checked identity cards. Cards wrapped in red covers were given a cursory look and returned to

their owners while those defiantly carrying green-covered cards were sometimes dragged out, insulted and punched. The red cover was obviously the distinguishing mark of the Communists and their sympathizers while their archrivals, the nationalists, used green covers. My identity card had a colorless, transparent cover indicating my neutral position in this political feud.

The red teacher had all the aspirations and qualities of which his idols Marx or Engels disapprovingly identified with a typical oriental village despot. He aspired to become a medieval warlord with absolute authority that even powerful chieftains like Boya never achieved. He planned to make the official campaign to collect donations for the poor his coup de grace in which he would demonstrate his triumph not only over the harsh elements of winter but also the frozen hearts of wealthy landowners and merchants.

On the charity campaign day, the town looked more festive than on happy religious holidays. A heavy downpour did not deter enthusiastic teachers from marching students in the streets under red Communist banners and posters. Earlier the Communist teacher had turned a large office on the second floor of the police station into a broadcasting studio. Several loudspeakers were already installed on the roof of the building to relay his exhortations, threats and insults to the town's population. A young female student from the local girl school and I waited pensively in a corner of the office for our turn at the microphone. We were chosen to act in a brief radio drama authored by the teacher especially for this occasion. I played the role of a poor boy that complained to his mother, played by the girl, of the cold and hunger. Choosing a landowner's son for this role was intended to send a chilling message to all the rich men in the city. In spite of my numerous rehearsals at home, my performance was uninspired and unconvincing. My partner played her part adequately but I stumbled through my lines and

my ears burned with disappointment and shame in spite of the cold weather. Afterward the teacher read a list of all the landowners, merchants and shopkeepers in town and their donations in cash or kind, to the campaign. Boya was on the list for forty bags or four tons of rice. Those on the list including Boya had no inkling of their pledges until the teacher announced it over the microphone, and none of them dared to object or failed to deliver. Like a malevolent cowboy, the red teacher had only to twirl his noose in the air and everyone in town scurried toward the corral.

Villagers hanged holy verses or pictures of holy men on their walls to protect them from evil. Our wall was adorned with an image of an open palm that was supposed to ward off evil eyes. The custom of putting pictures of political leaders and film stars beside holy pictures or in their places began after the republican coup. Our new leaders apparently liked to see their pictures on walls as much as film stars did, and owners of homes exhibiting these were spared accusations of being reactionaries or enemies of the republic. Shop and café owners lost no time in buying and nailing pictures of our leaders on their walls as charms to avoid harassment. Boya also bought pictures of our Sole Leader surrounded by his leading Communist and leftist supporters and nailed them to a wall in Yumma's room.

Accounts of my daily sufferings at school moved Yumma to defiantly tear down the pictures of the revolutionary leaders from her wall and replace them with those of our religious leaders. She also nagged Boya to send someone to plead my case with the school administration. He dispatched my half-brother whom Yumma accused of killing her son. Relief did not come until the summer vacation. Almost twenty-five years later, I sat with my cousin, Enough's eldest son, reminiscing about the events of that year. He was a student at the same school and like me had disturbing memories about the red teacher.

“We had a chubby student in class. His family owned water buffaloes. You may remember him.” I did remember him. “Every time the Communist teacher came to our class, he told him to go to the blackboard. Then he ordered us to close our eyes.” Every one of them probably had one eye half-open and the teacher knew it. “In front of the whole class he buggered the boy.” No one in my accursed town and ignoble country came to the rescue of that boy. Recently, I read an article on the internet praising the courage and deeds of that Communist teacher who repeatedly raped that helpless boy in front of his classmate.

Four years later another coup brought the nationalists to power. Most people including conservative people in our town were happy to be rid of the Communists, their nooses and the boring television programs imported from Communist countries. They pulled down the pictures of the executed Sole Leader and his aides and replaced them with pictures of their new rulers. Many of the Communists, including probably the communist teacher, were imprisoned, tortured and summarily executed.

In the meantime, the summer vacation was coming to an end and my fear of returning to school was rising faster than the level of water in our river after the snow melted in the north. My deliverance from the town’s school and its cruel teachers and students came in an unexpected announcement from Boya that we were moving to the capital. Apparently, he was also tired of living under virtual siege in his house and being extorted by self-appointed thugs like the Communist teacher. Before the coup he used to introduce himself as “the brother of the senator” but now all he wanted was the anonymity of living in a crowded metropolis. Needless to say, I was elated.

Boya rented a small two-story villa across the road from the lot where he was building a new house for his graduate son who made him immensely proud by returning from abroad with a university degree rather than a blond wife like some chieftain’s

sons did. Yumma's feelings about our move were mixed. She was certainly happy for me but could not help being disappointed at having to share the new smaller house with the first wife and two stepsons. But Yumma had a tremendous reserve of patience and faith. As long as Boya, her idol, was still looking after her and her children she would not give up hope of one day securing a home for each of her two sons.

Before we settled down in the rented house, Boya took us back for a short one-day visit. Yumma wanted to fetch her clothes and two small worn-out rugs, which she had to leave behind for lack of space in Boya's car. The second wife and her grown-up sons and daughters who moved into Boya's palace immediately after our departure gave us a hostile reception. Yumma discovered that the padlock on her trunk was broken and all her worthless belongings were missing. They heaped insults on injury when one of the second wife's sons came into the sitting room and unprovoked began swearing at Yumma. He was Boya's co-conspirator in the putsch financed by the Communists several years ago during the monarchy era. Since his release from jail he had given up politics and devoted his life to managing Boya's farm and to drinking, gambling and abusing his wife for giving birth to daughters rather than sons. Yumma and I endured his barrage of verbal abuse in silence. One of his sisters incited by his bravado charged Yumma in frenzy, screaming and punching her on the head. She could have been the one who gave Yumma the bitter sabur that ended up on my tongue but I am not certain. She was not Shalila whom I, in my early childhood, defeated in a match of swearing. But this half- sister was no less wicked and she was repeatedly punching my Yumma who took the blows without even putting her hands up to protect her head. The girl was almost twice my age but I was blinded by fury when I jumped to my feet and pummeled her repeatedly on the face and shoulders. Surprised and hurt by my attack she tried to retreat

yelping in pain but I, oblivious of her mother's indignant shouts of protests and Yumma's attempts to restrain me, held her back by her ponytail and slapped her a few times. She finally managed to escape, ran into an adjacent room and shut the door behind her. I stood there panting with unspent rage and holding in one closed fist a tuft of hair and her broken golden necklace, which I later contemptuously threw on the floor.

Boya learned about the fracas but chose to ignore it for the sake of preserving his peace of mind. By that time, he was actually powerless over his uneducated sons who preferred 'to herd the sheep', to borrow his own expression, rather than complete their studies. Like many chieftains and rich landowners bedazzled by modernity he was disenchanted with farming and dreamt of seeing all his sons in suits and ties, sitting behind desks, shouting orders at their subordinates and customers or wearing white robes, and with the authority vested in them by their numerous diplomas hanging on the walls of their clinics dispensing cures to hordes of patients. His first son managed to obtain a university diploma and sit behind a large desk for a number of years before his Bedouin or 'sheep-herding" instinct caught up with him and soured his relationship with his superiors and colleagues. He was so insufferable that even his influential uncle and patron, the senator, was unable to salvage his career. The three next sons, in chronological order, broke Boya's heart by choosing to herd the sheep. His fifth son, the graduate, was like a downpour to his parched fatherhood and, with the gratitude of a fallow land to a tending farmer, Boya opened his deep pockets and invited his graduate son to pamper himself with a new house, a Mercedes and a chieftain's ransom in cash. Even when he proved himself to be a sheep-herder disguised in a suit by drinking, gambling and staying up every night Boya chose to look the other way. Everyone knew that he had a Christian girlfriend whom he brought to our house to bed on

Thursdays after Boya and Yumma left to visit a local shrine. I met her at least once in our home and she was overfriendly.

Boya encouraged us to follow the example of our graduate half-brother. “Now that the republican regime has confiscated most of our land, you have no choice but to study hard and obtain your diplomas,” he urged us. Actually, he still had hundreds of hectares of the best rice-growing land in the country but his sheep-herding sons were keeping most of the income. According to Yumma he was reduced to begging them for money.

Our graduate half-brother had another admirer in addition to Boya and his girlfriend: our neighbor’s daughter. She lived across the street from us and the window of her upper-story bedroom overlooked our front garden. Like many girls born and raised in traditional families, she was taken out of school after reaching puberty. When she was not required to help her mother in the kitchen, she was probably spying on us or listening to romantic melodies on the radio. Looking down on our courtyard she was bound to see my handsome, young, flashy and loud half-brother and she fell in love with him, his shiny gel-covered thick hair and Mercedes. Like Boya, she and her family were ashamed of their rural roots. Her father was a junior employee in a second-hand clothes business until his employer practically gave him the business for free before leaving the country. Soon he had enough money to buy a house and then a second house for a second and younger wife. The prosperity of her family, her youth and modest beauty made her a prize catch for many bride-hunting young men but not my half-brother who was wealthier, drove a Mercedes, had a university degree from abroad and was loved by another modern girl who visited him openly in his house. She must have been painfully aware that no reasonable young man like him who had everything would give her, the uneducated daughter of a secondhand clothes merchant, a second look. Even though he lived, breathed, laughed and met with his girlfriend

only meters away across the street from her home he was as remote as the high mountain peaks in the north. Only a magic carpet could fly her to him and to find it she turned to magic. Our chauffeur's wife told her about a certain sorcerer known for his supernatural powers and the chauffeur arranged for an audience with him in the room above our garage. The chauffeur and his wife revealed the details of what transpired between the lovelorn girl and the sorcerer. The sorcerer instructed the chauffeur's wife to stay out while he held a séance with the girl. After demanding and pocketing his fee in advance, the sorcerer disrobed and asked the shocked and terrified girl to touch his private parts. She indignantly refused but he insisted explaining that it was essential for the magic spell to take effect. The chauffeur's wife was asked to mediate between the two and she finally achieved a compromise in which the girl would only do it with her hand wrapped in a soft rag. She later discovered that the charlatan private parts did not operate any magic carpet which could fulfill her dreams.

Yumma considered my half-brother worse than a plague and just as contagious. Contrary to Boya's wishes, she did not want us to emulate him because raising us up to become decent human beings was more important to her than success in our studies. Unlike Boya who had money and paternal authority on his side, she had to work hard to make herself heard and obeyed by her sons. Sharing the same house with our half-brother whom she considered morally corrupt threatened to undo all the hard labor of her maternal love. Her anxiety became more pressing after she witnessed his corrupting influences on another half-brother that was also living with us at the time.

That half-brother was definitely the missing link between the sheep-herders and graduates among Boya's sons. Like the sheep-herders he wanted all the joys of life by way of the shortest routes and without expending a lot of effort. But he could not

achieve this without the money which Boya promised to give generously only to graduate sons who made him proud. When villagers heard of someone like him, they would smile and say: “Ay! He is like the crow who tried to imitate the swallow’s walk and after failing at that could not remember how a crow walked.” He hated schools, failed his examinations repeatedly but kept promising Boya to do better next year: “I’ll pass my exams next year and make you proud of me.” His eagerness to become like his graduate half-brother, own a Mercedes and have a Christian girlfriend without delay made him forget his promise to Boya and instead of studying hard he fell in love with another neighbor’s daughter. Since he did not have the money to pay a sorcerer’s fee, he spent endless hours listening to romantic songs on the radio. I hid behind a curtain shaking with suppressed giggles and watched his silly impassioned mouthing of the melodious lyrics. The frustrated lovebird spread his wings wide, soared high, hit the ceiling fan and Yumma caught him. She had him in her palm and could have squeezed all the songs out of his larynx but instead she gave him a word of advice and set him free. If she had told Boya of what she saw him doing to whom and where, a thousand “I’ll make you proud of me” would not have saved him from Boya’s wrath and a future of sheep herding.

Her deep resonating voice gave them away.

“I opened the door expecting to see her dusting the room, and indeed there she was.” Yumma said and then awkwardly and with her eyes averted continued “She was in bed with your half-brother.” The black maid was a divorce′ in her late twenties or early thirties and the mother of a young son. If one of the dhuras had stumbled on this she would have lost no time in telling Boya.

“He came to see me later, kissed my hand and swore not to repeat it again,” Yumma said. The crow that tried to walk like a swallow was fortunate to have been caught by the kind Yumma and not Boya or one of the wicked dhuras. Yumma opened a

window and let him fly away unharmed. It would not surprise me to know that she encouraged Boya to send him abroad to complete his studies.

The departure of my half-brother did not make our house less crowded but it meant having a bed of my own. Until then, Yumma, my sister and I shared the smallest room, which twenty years later my wife wanted to convert into a walk-in closet. Its furniture consisted of Yumma's old wedding cupboard, a small rug, and our bedding rolled up and stacked in a corner. We slept on the floor with Yumma in the middle. On most nights I slept with my nose hidden in the folds of my pillow or blanket to escape the suffocating smell of henna. If I had complained about it to Yumma, she would have probably blamed my allergy on her dhuras' addiction to pain ointments. Once in a month, she applied henna to her graying and thinning hair –she was in her late forties then –and kept it overnight to achieve the maximum result. She claimed that henna cooled down the temperature of her head. At night, the scent of the drying henna became intense and its flakes dropped everywhere including on my pillow where I hid my oversensitive nostrils.

The smell of henna in our claustrophobic bedroom irritated me but the insecticides made me sick. Insecticides came third in effectiveness, after prayers and burning incense, on her list of defenses against natural and supernatural adversaries.

"My son! We must protect ourselves," she emphatically responded to my complaints about her overindulgence in applying insecticides. Her trust in the benefits of these chemicals was unshakable. At least once every week, she sprinkled the poisonous grayish powder all over our room. She did it to keep the ants and cockroaches from eating her stockpile of food in the cupboard, which occupied more space than her clothes and gave it a permanent smell of stale bread and mothballs. Living with

Boya and her dhuras have taught Yumma to expect a deluge at any time and she did not want us to be swept away unprepared.

Yumma arsenal also included an *Imshi*, a hand spray full of kerosene. At the sight of a fly or a mosquito, she picked it up and started pumping the air full of obnoxious fumes. In summer, she closed the door and windows an hour before bedtime and applied the kerosene Imshi until the room smelled like a gasoline station on a humid, hot, windless night. And she had more in her arsenal. Our defenses would have been seriously breached, Yumma was convinced, without the lice powder. This chemical had the same name of manufacturer, color, odor and packaging as the insecticide except for a picture on the packet showing a huge louse lying belly-up, which Yumma considered to be the ultimate proof of quality control. Although I never had any lice in my hair Yumma did not take chances because my sister had long hair and attended a public school in a poor neighborhood. After dousing generously my sister's pillow she sprinkled some of it on hers and mine.

Yumma had also cultivated the assistance of a non-human ally in her war against insects: a gecko. "Don't harm him," she used to tell me "because it rids us of mosquitoes and flies." I secretly promised to leave it alone as long as it did not drop on my head or creep up my leg while I slept. The lizard assured by our peaceful intentions colonized the walls of our room and nestled under a religious picture.

I had plenty of good reasons to hate the nighttime: my childish fears as well as the stench of henna and insecticide and stale food. Yumma disapproved of my irrational sentiments.

"Don't hate the day or night because blessings could come down upon you at any time. And don't curse the summer because it is too hot or the winter for chilling your bones because you don't know when good fortune will knock on your door."

Odors did not haunt me at night like the terrifying ghosts and demons but my senses, undistracted by other things except my fears, became hypersensitive to them. There was no escape from the air saturated with kerosene fumes and the vapors of insecticide powder, and at ground level I was surrounded on one side by the smells of henna drying on Yumma's hair and on the other by the stench of sweating mothballs and stale bread in the cupboard. Sometimes, I willed my imagination to leap over all the suffocating odors to the upper shelf in Yumma's cupboard where she kept sweet-smelling mouth-watering toffees. These were kept for her guests and relatives who were often ignored or rudely treated by other inhabitants of our house. Occasionally she offered me a toffee which I then slowly consumed to allow all my senses to savor the experience. My eyes feasted on the beautiful colors of its wrapping. My hands felt its smooth, silky texture while my ears listened to its strange crackling noises. Only after inhaling deeply its aroma I would deposit it in my mouth.

Enrolment in the Jesuits High school was an essential phase in the plan drawn by Boya for the transformation of his sons from potential sheep herders into suit-wearing graduates. My turn to begin this phase came at the tender ago of twelve. By that time almost two years had passed since our move to the capital but my manners still betrayed my countryside origin and often provoked the ridicule of my classmates who could be as cruel and insensitive as village boys. Fortunately for me, the Jesuits teachers favored disciplined and polite students like me and did not tolerate students meddling in politics. But they were still teachers like the Communist teacher who terrified me with his noose and threats of dragging me in the street to death. My distrust of teachers remained with me even after becoming one myself but I wanted to be a different kind of teacher whom students could trust and like rather than fear. Fifteen years after

enrolling in the Jesuits high school and minutes before giving my first lecture, a veteran colleague put his hand around my shoulder and gave me the following piece of advice: “Don’t fool yourself! You’re marching into a battlefield so make sure you don’t lose.” Even the amusing, and occasionally kind first-grade teacher who wore Boya’s imported ties, popped pumpkin seeds in his mouth and warned us of the wrath of abused kittens came into our class well-armed with a cane and a hand capable of delivering hard slaps at the slightest provocation. The thoroughly defeated students at the boarding school were transformed by the draconian methods of its Amazonian staff into trained circus animals. But the red teacher is undoubtedly responsible for my worst assumptions about teachers: that there is a tyrant inside each one of them eager for conquest and absolute rule.

If he had lived at the medieval times of the Inquisition, the red teacher would have made a very dedicated Jesuit. But those modern Jesuits would have been horrified to learn that a contemporary fellow teacher used to put a noose around the neck of a ten-year-old and publicly condemned him as the enemy of the people. There was a vicious rumor circulating among students about the priest who trained junior students in the skills of playing baseball. The only evidence advanced in support of this malicious rumor was the way in which he stood close to them while teaching them how to hold a baseball bat. I refused to believe then it because suspecting one of these religious celibates of being a pedophile who abused children like the red teacher was unthinkable, almost sacrilegious. Little did I know then.

Although the Jesuits were friendly, fair and never used corporal punishment they were still teachers who had in their hands the power to make Boya proud of me by handing me a diploma or to give him cause for sending me back to the countryside and a tedious life of sheep-herding.

The Jesuit priests also shared with Boya the title ‘father’. All fathers at school and the one at home preferred to see me studying my textbooks and doing my homework rather than reading a novel or a magazine or daydreaming. Being in Boya’s presence unconsciously activated all Yumma’s commandments on filial duty: address him respectfully, never raise your voice in front of him, do not look him in the eyes, walk a step behind him, and kiss his hand and raise it to touch your forehead. I was conditioned to fear, respect and kiss the man called Boya or father. All the Jesuit fathers at school automatically aroused these emotions and once or twice I stopped myself just before kissing a Jesuit’s hand

What impressed me most about them was their dedication to their vocation in the same way that Yumma was engrossed in mothering us. They were so good at their job that most of the time others simply forgot their other calling. Chieftains like Boya and his brothers trusted them with the education of their children without giving any thought to the fact that they were clerics serving a different faith. Perhaps the strongest proof of their dedication was the cemetery near the chapel in the school. There were few graves in it then but enough to testify to their sincere intention to build roots in their adopted country. Houses may be demolished and land expropriated but graves lasted until the final judgement. Graves must be the loneliest places on earth and men who left their villages to live in the city or even another country insisted on a burial near their families in their homeland. Old villagers never tire of morbidly reminding their younger relatives and friends of their duty to visit their graves. “Don’t forget to visit my grave and recite a prayer or two for my salvation.” They would say. Close relatives are expected to do more: “I’ll be waiting for you to come and sprinkle water on my tomb to soften my bed of hard soil and my pillow of solid rocks.” Yumma frequently drove me to tears by telling me about an

ungrateful son who gave a donkey driver few coins and his mother's dead body and instructed him to bury her in the nearest graveyard. An even more ungrateful son in another story became tired and bored on the way to the graveyard and dumped the body of his mother beside the road.

During the following summer, Yumma rarely put down her hand fans made of colored palm leaves, but the stifling heat was not entirely to blame for her ruddy cheeks and pouting mouth. Two stepdaughters arrived with the onset of the heat to "take the breath out of me" or "sit on my chest", to borrow two of her favorite expressions. They also irritated her by repeating the following words: "This is our house and he is also our father and we want to finish our studies in the capital". Yumma was certain that the two girls were only scouting and soon their mother would follow in a full-scale invasion of our house.

Life has not been kind to my half-sisters also. A sallow complexion, rampant facial hair and a widening girth foretold a grim, lonely and childless future for the older half-sister. The younger half-sister was taller, slimmer and cheerfully paid more attention to her looks especially her peroxide blond hair. It was the same hair which years before I yanked in a fit of rage after she punched Yumma. She and I never forgot that incident.

"You pulled my hair and hit me," she reminded me smiling coyly. Her statement was reproachful but the tone of her voice was unmistakably submissive. Older villagers had these words of wisdom for younger men of marriage age: "Beware of women! They are like jackals and no matter how mighty a lion you think you're, unless you show them your fangs, they'll urinate on you." Another wise saying advised a bridegroom to slit the throat of a cat on his wedding night to intimidate his bride. I always wondered whether any bridegroom followed this advice literally. My half-sister regarded pulling her hair and breaking her golden necklace as the undeniable proofs of my superior masculinity.

Alarmed by the sudden arrival of the two girls, Yumma spent more time praying to Allah, the Prophet and all her saintly forefathers to protect us from their evil intentions. She concluded every prayer by rising to her feet, extending her open palms upwards and shouting:

“Allah, when will I be rid of them?”

Yumma was waiting for the miracle that would grant her and her children their own home unshared by her dhuras or their children. Miracles happened on her accounts before like the sweetened medicine for my sister and me, the two dead scorpions under our pillow, and saving Boya from the deadly viper. She also witnessed miracles happening to others.

“Today a miracle happened in front of my own eyes which will be consumed by maggots one day,” she said excitedly. Swearing by one’s eyes is a very solemn oath. Maggots will inevitably eat all eyes but the unjust that give false witness may be resurrected blind. “Every time I visited the shrine, I saw this blind woman praying. Today, she suddenly got up and shouted repeatedly: I can see. I can see.” Months later, she came back from visiting the same shrine with the story of another miracle. “Today, a woman was crying and saying: ‘Merciful people! Has anyone seen my purse? All my money is gone and I don’t even have the bus fare.’ The shrine was packed with pilgrims and most of them must have followed with eyes wide open with wonder and awe the levitation of a black purse onto the top of the silver mausoleum. “It actually flew overheads,” she said empathetically in response to my skeptical look. “The place became as quiet as the desert at noon when a minute before you could not hear your shouts.” My skin crawled but my rational mind demanded concrete proof. “Suddenly the crowd parted leaving a man in the center of the empty circle. The man was also rising in thin air,” she paused for a second and then corrected herself “No! He was being lifted up by an invisible force and when he reached this height” she said

indicating an average man's height with her hand "he was slammed into the floor, lifted up and then slammed, again and again. He was the thief who pinched the poor woman's purse."

As long as miracles continued to happen Yumma never gave up hope of one day having an abode all to herself and her children. My wish of witnessing a miracle that would strengthen my faith and make Yumma happy was regrettably never realized. I envied my half-brother whom she caught in bed with the maid when he came home one day, a short time before his departure, to tell us about a miracle he had just seen.

"All of a sudden the bus on which I was riding and every car in the street stopped and drivers, passengers came out to join pedestrians in shouting, pointing and running together. An accident would not attract this much attention and excitement and a demonstration or a riot would send most people running in the opposite direction before the security police arrived. After exchanging few words with a pedestrian through the bus window a fellow passenger said loudly: 'He claims the ground opened and swallowed some donkey drivers and their animals.'" My half-brother assured us that he would not have believed it if he had not seen it with his own eyes. He went on to describe how the donkey drivers were buried to their waists in the street asphalt and begging the horrified onlookers for help. Their donkeys were also half-buried inside the ground and they brayed frantically while trying unsuccessfully to free their legs. The following day a newspaper report quoted several eyewitnesses' accounts confirming these strange happenings, which took place after workers began demolishing an ancient grave. It was later revealed that the grave belonged to a saintly sayyid who lived many centuries ago.

My half-brother's belief in miracles in combination with his repentance must have endeared him to Yumma but the half-sisters annoyed her by reminding her of their sinister mother and

her evil schemes. Until the awaited miracle happened, Yumma tried her best to coexist with and placate her adversaries. Allowing the older half-sister to give me my weekly bath may have been one of these acts of appeasement. She was desperately trying to build a bridge between her dhura and us where until then there has been nothing but the thin air of suspicion and the acrid smog of animosity.

"Today, your sister will give you your bath." Yumma declared. When I was a child Yumma put me in her copper laundry pail, sat on a stool beside me, drew her sleeves up and lathered me with a bar of olive oil soap. The strong smell of the cheap soap suffocated me, and water pouring over my head made me hold my breath in terror. I stopped whining only to inquire if it was over.

A thirteen-year-old is not a child and does not need the assistance of his mother or half-sister in taking a bath. Yumma thought otherwise claiming that my scrubbing was not thorough. There was no shortage of justifications for the brevity of my baths. Yumma must have observed my fear when she poured water over my head and my stubborn refusal to immerse my head in water. If they had wanted me to apply the loofa on my body as eagerly as a bride on her wedding night, they should not have chattered around me about bathroom fires with graphic descriptions of their consequences and especially after seeing the horrible scars on the face of a relative after a bathroom accident. The inside of our small bathroom resembled a scene from hell in Dante's Divine Comedy. The most serious threat came from the fire burning in a pit under the bathroom. Every time one of us wanted to take a bath, the fire was lit to heat up the cauldron placed on top of it. Less than half a meter separated a person taking a bath from the raging fire. And every few minutes he must splash the hot tiles with cold water to avoid getting his feet seriously scorched. Minutes after entering the

bathroom, my throat tightened and my breathing became labored as a result of the saturated air and thoughts of a possible explosion plunging me into the fire pit underneath. I would then sit on a wooden stool and mix hot and cold water in a container before beginning my ablutions.

“I am not taking off my underwear,” I insisted.

“You must wash all your body,” Yumma said

“I won’t,” I said

“Since you’re shy, I promise not to look, “ my half-sister offered me a face-saving compromise.

The fire was lit; the water was steaming hot; the soap and loofa were ready and my half-sister was sitting on her stool waiting for me. There was no escape. Squatting inside the bathroom, I assumed the position of a hedgehog by burying my face between my legs. And I made myself as untouchable as the thorny animal: I shut my eyes and cried and shrieked to bring about a speedy conclusion to my ordeal. It must have been equally unpleasant for my half-sister who came out of it thoroughly soaked and her hard labor unappreciated because she never volunteered again to give me a bath. Her motherly instinct was later entirely devoted to her mother after she became blind and disabled.

VII

My passage from childhood into adolescence was difficult. Yumma wanted me to remain a child under her wings so that she could look after me. Boya refused to involve himself in the details of my rearing. My older brother was never around long enough for a strong bonds to develop between us and he showed no interest in preparing me for the world of adulthood. In the end I was left to my own resources and burdened with fears and insecurity feelings, growing up was inevitably an awkward and joyless experience. The child in me refused to fade away and leave the nascent adult to bloom and take control. Others ventured out, succeeded or failed and generally lived their lives while I sat on the sidelines, weighing the options, studying the consequences and generally vacillating.

My innocent childish appearance, especially my large bovine eyes and pouting lower lip saved me from one predator. She was another neighbor's daughter–not the one who sought the help of a sorcerer to win the love of my graduate half-brother nor the one secretly loved by my half-brother who consorted with the fat maid. She was a divorce' in her early twenties. Few months earlier she sued her husband for divorce and won the case. She went to court prepared and when the judge asked her why she wanted a divorce her reply was ready.

"My husband ignores the food in the middle of his plate and eats from that which is near the rim."

Her statement was an allegory or a riddle but the judge immediately interpreted it and delivered his verdict.

“Say no more!” he ordered her with a look of contempt on his face. “Your marriage is hereby annulled.” He was probably a clever judge who frequently congratulated himself on his remarkable ability to ‘decipher even an erased word,’ or ‘catch the truth in midair’ as the expressions go. Of course, any woman willing to endure the public ridicule and humiliation brought upon herself by such an admission to escape an unbearable marriage could have used this justification. What if she was actually describing her husband’s table manner and not his reprehensible sexual appetite? Some men and women do work their forks, knives and spoons inward.

After winning her divorce our neighbor’s daughter went back to live with her mother. She befriended our maid and one Thursday afternoon she came to visit her friend. Boya, Yumma and my sister had earlier left to visit the local shrine leaving me alone with my books and magazines. I heard our front doorbell ringing and looking down from an upstairs window I saw the maid opening the door and inviting her inside. They talked briefly then the maid smiled and pointed at the house.

She walked inside the room and sat beside me. My knowledge of ‘table manners’ at that time was rudimentary and entirely theoretical and her proximity irritated me. After five minutes of mock wrestling and discouraged by lack of initiative on my part she got up.

“You’re still a boy!” she said angrily and left. Although her description of me at the age of thirteen was correct, I felt offended.

Few other women, also making the same assumption about me, shocked me on two occasions at least by their explicit comments and discussions. Some of them who could not have been blind to the darkening growth on my upper lip possibly

enjoyed breaking a taboo by talking obscenely in front of a boy who had one foot in childhood and another in adolescence. Here is one example:

“On her wedding night – mind you she was marrying her third husband, his great grandmother came down from her room plucking her pubic hair.”

I closed my eyes or looked away to hide all possible signs of comprehension and shock. Then there was a thinly veiled discussion involving a maid and two other female visitors on the subject of female orifices. Surely any woman would know this anatomical fact about her body so why bring it up in front of a boy who was old enough to be curious at least?

Men generally used riddles, gestures and body language in discussing such topics in front of children or young boys. I found the custom unnerving and silly and refused to take part in it when I was old enough to do that. They also used riddles as a kind of oral IQ test to measure intelligence of boys in the village. One example of these riddles was: “what looks like a bowl inside another bowl and dives into the sea?” Shrewd mothers taught their sons the answers to these riddles so that they can make their fathers proud of them by answering them correctly. Upon hearing their correct answers, relatives and friends are expected to comment: “Bravo! Only a lion could have sired such a cub” so that the fathers can feel proud of themselves also. On the other hand, a father whose son proved his ignorance repeatedly was likely to be scolded with these words: “He takes after his stupid mother and his retarded maternal uncle.”

Tribesmen who used the most creative metaphors and amusing anecdotes won arguments in our village. An example of such wittiness would be: You can leave your coffee urn on coal embers all night long but you cannot trust an uneven stove not to spill your teakettle. Another common metaphor went as follows: your pot can stand on three stones but your house needs

four columns. Many men used this metaphor to justify marrying four wives. Some women were brainwashed into accepting this logic. Either Yumma or Habooba tried unsuccessfully one day to convince me that tribal chieftains like my father and grandfather – he married seven wives but no more than four at one time – needed more than one wife to prepare food for their numerous guests. Of course, you cannot expect a man to declare publicly: I am lustful and would like to marry a second wife, or I no longer find my wife desirable and would love to lay my hands on younger flesh. Instead he would say: "I need another pair of hands to cook for my guests". This slaving pair of hands always come with other desirable feminine organs and accessories. Since doubting a man's words to his face could easily lead to a feud, reality in our world was often expressed in riddles and metaphors and words and expressions played an important role in camouflaging real intentions.

Maids were employed to cook for their employers' guests but often ended up in their beds and were sometimes shared by several males in the household. Yumma was willing to do all the cleaning and cooking in place of the maids hired by the first wife because she feared their corrupting influence on the morals of the significant males in her life. "You can't imagine what this maid said to me today?" she confided in me. She was furious

" 'When is al-Hadji coming back?' she asked me. I scolded her and told her to mind her own business. And then she said: 'I need money because my family is poor.'"

Another maid resigned after complaining to Yumma: "I can't work in your house. No one pays attention to me. My previous employers usually showed interest in me."

Yumma who complained of neither summer nor winter because she could never tell when good fortune would come knocking at her door was truly happy that summer after my two half-sisters left us to live with their brother in his new house and

the maids found new and more accommodating employers. But Yumma's happiness would never be complete and the most she hoped for was temporary relief from her misery. Her picture stored in my memory showed, in black and white, a middle-aged woman slightly overweight, with anxious eyes and a sagging sad mouth.

"If your father passes away – Allah forbids, your half-brother, the graduate- would immediately throw us out into the street. This house and everything in it belong to him."

And as long as the first wife was still living with us, Yumma would never feel happy. She could never forgive her for scheming repeatedly to rob her of Boya's affection and care, and of using magic spells to harm her children. Even a reformed and repentant first wife failed to win Yumma's forgiveness and approval. The first wife was finally convinced that she had no chance of winning her long feud with Yumma. She was old, abandoned by her son and previous allies and an aging Boya had no use for her services anymore. Hopeless of making any further worldly gains, she turned to religion. She was lately spending more time at her prayer rug wearing white prayer shawl on her head all day long and a fake martyr's mask on her face. When she was not praying, she complained to anyone, except Yumma, willing to listen to her about the pains of aging and an assortment of physical ailments. In an attempt to break out of Yumma's siege of silence and contempt she made friends with the mother of the divorce' whose ex-husband had unorthodox 'table manners'. Yumma automatically suspected any friend or acquaintance of the first wife of being an accomplice in a sinister scheme against her. The widow and her small family lived in a mud hut with no electricity or running water and the first wife took pity on them and allowed them to draw water from our garden tap. Yumma would not have objected to this charitable act if it did not bring the young, pretty divorced daughter inside our house few times

every day. Who could blame her for erring on the side of spousal and motherly caution after seeing Boya's short string being manipulated by his first wife and my half-brother sleeping with the maid. Everyone must have heard the snide remark about divorced women: "Don't expect her to give it up easily after having had a taste of it"

Yumma's determination to stop the widow from taking water from our garden tap stunned the first wife who never expected such determination from the timid and submissive Yumma. Boya's absence – he was on his usual summer trip to the mountains of Lebanon – left me as the only male and the ultimate authority in our household, and this is why the first wife came to me complaining of Yumma's uncharitable behavior.

"Your mother never behaved like this before," she said bitterly.

At that time, I would have preferred Yumma to be her usual benevolent self but after giving it some thought I believe it would have been as ridiculous as a condemned man forgiving his executioner and slipping him a gold coin before he chopped off his head. Until then Yumma's life has been the personification of the religious dictum: it is always better to be the oppressed rather than the oppressor. But she was tired of playing the role of the oppressed and wished only to spend the rest of her life being neither the oppressed nor the oppressor.

"The widow has gone too far. She now has a hose running from our garden tap to her hut. This is Boya's house and he pays the water bills."

The first wife retreated to her prayer rug, her white shawl flapping around her head like a flag of surrender. Her days of scheming and concocting magic spells were over, and all hopes of arousing some tenderness in her son's heart toward her or winning back her previous authority in Boya's household were lost. Her salvation became then her main concern. Advanced age and ill health must have made her painfully aware of the little

time left for her to atone for her sins and secure a place in paradise for herself.

VII

Our house in that winter echoed the impassioned prayers of the first wife for a peaceful eternity, of Yumma for the safety and welfare of her children and of my prayers for personal power.

Reactions to my newly found spirituality varied. Boya was mildly amused and my brother and half-brothers made fun of it. Yumma, however, was bewildered and somewhat saddened because she assumed that all pious persons like herself and even the repentant first wife were in desperate need of divine assistance. Every night and after a long and tiring session of prayers I went to bed hoping for a vision, like Habooba's, in which the heavens would be rent asunder and a thunderous but kind voice would ask me to state my wish. My reply was ready and well-rehearsed. I wanted to have the powers to realize all my dreams. The first thing to which I would apply my new powers was building Yumma a house that would make all her dhuras cry with envy. After that I would use it to rid the world of all injustices and punish the wicked beginning with the red teacher and the pedophiles. In retrospect, I was the living proof that messianic aspirations are often born out of an inadequacy complex.

My prayers went unanswered because all I wanted was to become more glorious than my graduate half-brother and more powerful than Boya. My promise to do God's work on earth was only thrown in to sweeten the deal. My prayers failed even to rise above our roof because compared to that of Habooba my faith was as strong and enduring as a bubble. She was truly grateful for everything, even those of little value. Observing a piece of bread discarded in the gutter she bowed down, or in her old age squatted, picked it up, kissed it, and lifted it up to her forehead, once, twice, and sometimes three times before placing

it on a ledge or inside a crevice in a wall where it could not be stepped on. In contrast, I would lower myself to pick the crumb only if no one was looking and provided it was relatively clean and may even bring it close to my mouth but without kissing it and then raise it to my forehead but without making physical contact. My gesture was obviously perfunctory and lacking in conviction. Unlike them I took my daily bread and the rice, meat, vegetables, fruits and sometimes sweets served with it for granted and bartered with Allah for more

After failing to obtain Sufi powers through prayers, I turned to magic. Yumma believed in magic and accused her dhuras of using it against us. The wives of chieftains and rich merchants in our district, excluding Yumma, were avid collectors of magic pebbles or beads. Villagers believe that these beads were originally genies capable of transforming themselves into any shape or form. According to local beliefs also, genies are invisible to all except wolves. When a wolf saw a genie in the desert it gave chase to it, pursuing it relentlessly. In order to evade a chasing wolf, a genie may transform itself into a pebble or a bead. If the wolf urinates on the bead, local legends affirmed, the genie inside it would forever lose its ability to metamorphose and regain its original form. Shepherds tending their animals in the desert came across these genies ossified in the form of oddly-shaped and colored beads, collected them and sold them to villagers, especially women desperate for magical powers. Beads possess various powers, such as swimming across rivers and poisoning adversaries, which can only be discovered through trial and error. These magical tools were not for the faint-hearted or novice and one woman was reported to have inadvertently poisoned herself by wrongfully using her magical bead upon herself

Unable to obtain any of these beads I turned to Yumma’s amulets. She had many of these prepared especially for her

children. We found them everywhere: stashed in the folds of our clothes, sewed inside our pillowcases and at once she made me wear one on my arm like an armlet – right above my elbow where it cannot be seen. Warning me against tampering with them was like ordering Ali Baba not to enter the famous cave after describing to him in details the treasures inside and revealing to him the secret password for opening it. My thirst for power was stronger than my fear of the consequences of breaking the seals on the amulets. After Yumma left to the local shrine one Thursday afternoon I was ready to begin the daring exploration armed only with a pair of scissors and all my courage. The single piece of paper I found in each of the three amulets featured the same scribble made in identical handwriting. After copying the holy verses and the assortment of strange terms, words and numbers set in geometrical configurations in my notebook I tried to put the amulets back together. I obviously failed to cover up my disobedience because few days later Yumma discovered the unsealed amulets and became worried of what the spirits would do to me in punishment.

I was convinced that the secret of the amulet was hidden in the combination of words and letters. The mullah, or minor cleric, who recounted the stories of the heroic struggles and sacrifices of our martyrs used only words to make hardened men weep. The women reacted more strongly to the same accounts told by female mullahs, and even Yumma's heartless dhuras were moved to beating their breasts and faces in grief by their sermons. In my childhood I dreamt of using a book like the mullah's to keep all the dhuras in tears all the time. Believing in the magic of words, numbers and geometrical shapes I wasted days trying to find the correct combination but the magic proved elusive.

After giving up on Sufism and magic I tried literature. According to Yumma, my literary talents sprouted at the early age of four.

“Boya was so proud of you. Every evening after returning home he went straight to your bed. I begged him to let you sleep but he insisted on hearing one of your stories. You sat in your bed rubbing the sleep out of your eyes and made up a new story for him every night,” she said. I never imagined that my attempts to impress Boya and make him proud of me began at such an early age. “Your tales were mostly about animals: the sly fox, the wise rooster, the cowardly hen, the brave lion and the wise wolf.”

This budding talent did not surprise Yumma who claimed that poetry flowed with our blood. Almost everyone in the village believed himself or herself to be a poet. Habooba could recite hundreds of poems, some of which were hers, and Yumma made up rhymes to amuse her children. Many years later, my neglected talent was resurrected by the words of a fortune-teller. I was accompanying Yumma on a visit to a shrine when she led me into the women’s section. The place was crowded with praying women and small children running around. I followed in her footsteps as she threaded her way towards the back of the hall until she stopped in front of an old woman.

“Could you please see what the future holds for my son?” Yumma asked her.

The old woman nodded, picked up a thick volume and opened it. Few seconds later, she raised her head and said:

“Your son will become a famous poet,” she said and closed her book. Yumma paid her a silver coin and we left. At the door I searched Yumma’s face for any sings of disappointment at the woman’s prediction but found none. Unlike Boya who expected me to make him proud by becoming a brilliant brain surgeon or a successful engineer, she only wanted to see me living safely and contentedly.

For a year or so, my life was shaped by this prediction. Both poetry and magic used words and good poetry was almost as powerful as magic. Caliphs, emirs and chieftains showered poets with gifts to win their praise or at least to buy their silence. Beautiful women admired poets and some risked death by having secret amorous liaisons with them. Ordinary men and women applauded poets as much as the heroes whom poets glorified. And students had to memorize their poems in order to earn their diplomas and impress their Boyas.

My motive to become a poet was certainly strong. My imagination was also vivid and healthy enough to produce absorbing daydreams and terrifying nightmares. But I knew nothing about the techniques of composing classical poetry. Several months of ardent efforts to teach myself these skills convinced me to look for something less complicated. The idea of writing a novel came to me one day after another frightening crossing on the pontoon bridge near our hometown in the countryside. The novel was going to report through flashbacks the stories of the passengers of two cars heading towards the bridge from opposite directions. I chose a tragic end for my story. One of the bridge attendants had fallen asleep on a moonless, foggy night and the two cars collided and fell with their passengers to the bottom of the river.

I impatiently waited for the summer holidays to begin writing my novel which was going to be my debut in the literary world and bring me, as the fortune-teller predicted, success and fame that would fill Boya with more pride than the diploma of my half-brother. It took me months to prepare a satisfactory outline of my novel but it took my English teacher five minutes one morning to abort my dream of becoming a renowned novelist. The jovial priest walked into class carrying his briefcase in one hand and a hard-covered volume in the other. Immediately after Hail Mary he told us, holding the book high above his head for us

to see its cover, that it was an interesting novel which he had read recently and wanted to share his appreciation of it with us. The mention of a novel immediately attracted my undivided attention and I listened in disbelief first and then in utter disappointment to the friendly priest outlining the plot of my novel. All the major elements of the two plots were almost identical: the passengers in the two cars, the flashbacks and inner thoughts, and finally the fatal accident on the bridge. When I told a classmate after class about it, he accused me of lying

I should have been proud of myself for conceiving the same plot of a published novel written by a famous novelist but my resentment and anger left little space for anything else. My mind tortured me with the thought that if this unlikely coincidence could happen once, there is no guarantee of it not happening again. And I knew from personal experience how much contempt people feel towards a plagiarist. When one of my Arabic compositions was not marked the best in class as usual, I was naturally disappointed and consumed with jealousy toward my classmate who stole the honor from me. After listening with the rest of the class to the first two lines of his composition, my jealousy turned into contempt. His whole composition was copied from Gibran's The Prophet. I unenthusiastically joined in the clapping after he finished reading his essay convincing myself that Gibran certainly deserves the accolade. How I wished I could stand up and spitefully expose my dishonest classmate but the prospect of being called a snitch and upstaging the teacher stopped me. There was little consolation in dismissing the whole episode as another example of the world's injustice.

When the fortune-teller prediction of my rise to literary glory failed to materialize, I felt as useless as a broken pot. According to villagers, 'nothing is more useless than a discarded, broken pot.' If random kicks by pedestrians did not shatter it, children would pick it up and throw it against a stone or a wall until it was

reduced to tiny pieces. Only Yumma peering through the highly sensitive lenses of motherly love could see the broken pieces of my ego and cared enough for me to undertake the tiring task of pasting them together again and again.

To overcome the powerlessness and disintegration of a broken pot inside me I became an avid reader. My two favorite subjects were literature and history. Novels sucked me inside the weightless world between their covers where I temporarily forgot my inner fragility. History books, which reminded me of Habooba's fascinating accounts, assured me of the survival genius of the underdogs of past generations. To deserve my admiration and respect, a novelist must possess the courage of Dickens in condemning history and siding with the powerless against the injustice of Robespierre's guillotine and the industrial Revolution's workhouses.

The Jesuit school librarian was so impressed with my devotion to the written word that he allowed me the unique privilege of unlimited access to the hallowed books stacks. My first encounter with rows and rows of bookshelves on which hundreds of volumes were neatly stacked brought to my mind the brutal death of a famous Arab scholar who lived more than a thousand years ago. My interest in learning about his life and works intensified after a classmate nicknamed me Jahiz, or bug-eyed after him – actually my eyes were large and not bulged. My namesake was browsing in the library one day when a row of books accidentally fell on him and he was crushed to death under the weight of the heavy padlocks and metal chains used to protect the invaluable manuscripts from theft.

My new refined taste in books did not entirely displace my appetite for the comics, the glossy magazines and the cheap novels. One day I made the mistake of inquiring from my patron librarian about a collection of horror stories and he gave me a disapproving look over his reading glasses.

“You usually read a better class of books,” he said and added with the hint of a smirk, “Anyhow this book has been borrowed by one of the Fathers.”

My new obsession with books unexpectedly gave me some of the powers, which I had been desperately seeking elsewhere. Almost weekly, it pulled me out of the private worlds of my daydreams and dragged me out of the relative safety of my home into the crowded streets and abroad a bus heading toward the market for secondhand books. The heat inside the market, which dates back to medieval times, was stifling even on mild summer days in spite of its tin roof and proximity to the river. It was originally a leather market and several of the shops still displayed leather bags, drums, shoes, and sandals. Almost every Thursday afternoon, I overcame my agoraphobia and braved the elements and the nasty odors of recently tanned leather goods and sheepskin coats to spend pleasurable hours in the market. I soon won the status and privileges of a regular customer with the book hawkers who frequently greeted me by lifting newly obtained titles high above their heads to attract my attention. Like my patron librarian at the Jesuit high school they knew a bookworm when they saw one. While they kept a sharp eye on other customers reminding them repeatedly not to thumb the pages roughly and occasionally pushing away rudely those who came only to gawk at the pictures of women in bikinis, they allowed me to freely browse through their books and magazines. And if I did not find an interesting title, they would promise to have more for me to choose from next week.

Every one of my secondhand books and magazines was bought with money saved from my small weekly allowances. The ritual of obtaining the allowance was thoroughly humiliating and distasteful because Boya seldom gave anything unless I begged for it repeatedly. Yumma had to become a beggar in her own home. His sheep-herding sons continued to beg him until they

took over control of his farm and then reduced him to the status of a beggar. He sometimes heaped insult over insult by suspecting me of trying to cheat him.

“Are you sure you haven’t already taken your allowance?” he asked me, his hands leisurely searching for the right change in his pockets. I swore repeatedly to convince him of my truthfulness and honesty. I was inclined later in life to give him the benefit of the doubt by convincing myself that it was nothing more than a pathetic attempt at wittiness by a father who followed traditional customs by never allowing himself the pleasure of becoming familiar with and close to his children. The ritual ended with me pocketing my allowance and kissing his hand and raising it to my forehead in gratitude. Another father seeing his son’s interest in serious reading would have increased his son’s allowance as an encouragement but Boya was firmly against spoiling his children. In fairness he did actually buy me one history book but then took out the joy from it by instructing me repeatedly to concentrate on my textbooks.

Book covers were my escape doors to places far from the oppressive atmosphere at home, from fears of the dhuras and their schemes, and from the taunting sarcasm of my classmates. While I was hiding between the covers of books, Yumma’s dream of having a home all to herself and her children was finally nearing fulfillment. Only days after his return from his summer vacation abroad Boya was confronted with an unexpected request from his first wife.

“Hadji! I want to spend my last days praying and getting ready for my eternity. All I want from you is to set me up in a rented house or a room near a shrine. Please! I’ll never ask for anything else,” she pleaded.

Boya and Yumma were stunned. Until then, everyone assumed that she would reside with Boya for the rest of her life because her son would not take her and she refused to live alone. After

spending most of her past life scheming to be near Boya she now wanted to leave and be on her own. It was incredible. Boya hesitated thinking that her request must be a temporary whim which she would soon regret. Yumma urged him to approve but suspected the new piety and mysticism of the first wife to be nothing but a subterfuge.

"A fox never changes his sly nature," Yumma assured me. "Did I ever tell you the tale of the fox who pretended to be pious?" I lied telling her that she didn't. "There was this fox who liked nothing better than eating hens. He used to capture them from a farm not far from his den. After losing few of their sisters, the hens laid down a plan to guard their coop against the raids of the sly fox. Each day one of the hens was assigned to be a lookout for the fox. The scheme worked perfectly, and every time the fox came to snatch a hen the lookout hen would raise the alarm and everyone scurried into the safety of the coop. Deprived of his favorite meal and outsmarted and humiliated by a flock of flightless birds, the fox was naturally infuriated. Several weeks passed and the fox was not seen near the coop once. Eventually few of the hens became reckless and began to wander far from the coop, a behavior that displeased the older, more disciplined hens. When the fox finally showed up, he managed to come dangerously close to the coop before the sentry that was leisurely picking the soil saw him and raised the alarm. If he wanted to, he could have probably caught two or three fat hens but instead he smiled and greeted them with the words: "Salam peace on you!". By that time the hens had all gone inside the coop and shut the gate behind them. Most of them, however, stayed near the fence to have a look at the fox and his new attire. He was wearing a turban on his head and from his neck dangled a long string of prayer beads.

After clearing his throat, he addressed them:

“Do not be surprised, dear gentle sisters! What you see in front of you today is a new, reformed creature. I know that I have been wicked and cruel to you, my sisters. But I have repented, made my peace with Allah and came today to ask you humbly for your forgiveness.” He said and knelt on his forward paws. “But before you generously grant me your forgiveness, I insist on paying for my wickedness and proving myself worthy of your kindness by serving you for the rest of my life. Please grant me this wish! It’s the least I can do for you. And rest at ease because I have vowed to survive on bread and water only from now on”.

The hens were astonished but even those moved deeply by the fox’s eloquent declaration of repentance were not prepared to forsake their instinctive suspicion of their mortal enemy. The sly fox knew it.

“I know it is difficult for you to believe and trust me so I’ll sleep here,” he said pointing at a spot near the entrance of the coop, “Until you no longer doubt the sincerity of my intentions.”

For a whole week after his self-declared redemption the fox sat, prayed, ate his frugal meals of bread and water and slept at the same spot –except when the farmer came to feed his hens. On the eighth day a bold hen came out and pecked the ground not one-meter away from the spot. And he did not even complain or move away when another hen accidentally or not pecked his tail. The following day the hens woke up to find a pile of freshly harvested seeds in front of their coop.

“It is my gift to you dear sisters. I assure you that these were not stolen. No! Never again! I found them in an abandoned field at the edge of the desert. I am getting old and frail but still hope to atone for all my evil deeds before my final day,” the fox said in a voice quivering with emotions. The hens deeply impressed by his generosity were ready to believe him. They met and decided to do the decent thing of inviting him inside the coop where it was dry and warm. One of them even suggested

enthusiastically that he could be useful in guarding their coop against other foxes and predators. The fox reluctantly and humbly accepted their invitation and the rooster who spent most of his time perched on the roof came down to greet him. The hens were so much impressed with his good manners that they entrusted him with looking after their chicks and teaching them the arts of survival. The next day the rooster and the hens were eating seeds and breadcrumbs from the fox's hand when he suddenly pounced on them. Within minutes the place was littered with mutilated bodies. Not a single bird, large or small, survived the fox's surprise attack. After days of living on bread and water only, the famished fox gorged himself on succulent meat and hot blood."

The message of Yumma's fairy tale was clear: do not trust foxes to become reformed even if they are wearing turbans and carrying prayer beads. In her eyes, the first wife will always remain a sly fox ready to pounce on her and her children and shred them to pieces. This is why she could not believe that after twenty years of feeding us bitter sabur the first wife was going away and leaving Boya and the house all to ourselves. Yumma did not celebrate by laughing or clapping because her joy has been permanently neutralized by her long suffering. And she was of course a firm believer in the law of cosmic balance which dictated the following: if happiness and sadness are interconnected, then it is better not to let the seeds of joy grow into a tree that gives half-sweet, half-sour fruits. But I am sure that she gave few coins to the beggars in the nearest shrine. And she did not forget to discreetly throw after the car that drove away the first wife and her belongings seven pebbles which local beliefs expected to rise as barriers against the return of an undesirable person.

After the departure of the first wife Boya suggested hiring a maid to help Yumma but she refused and sent after Habooba. I

was appalled by Yumma's decision to put my grandmother in the storage room adjacent to the kitchen. The room was dark and smelled like the inside of a dry-goods store in the bazaar. "Where can I put her? Boya sleeps upstairs and this is the only empty room downstairs," Yumma argued. At night the summer heat drove Habooba to sleep on a metal cot in the backyard.

"What would the neighbor say when they see your old mother, my Habooba sleeping in the garden. Even a maid deserves better than this. How can you expect me to lay down in a room and enjoy the cool, humid air of the air cooler while she stews in the storage room? Or eat in our dining room with Boya while she waited for our leftovers in the kitchen?" I shouted at Yumma.

"Habooba understands," Yumma assured me calmly. " We can't annoy Boya or expect more from him. It is his home and we're all his guests. He can throw us out at any time."

I listened to the argument of her insecure mind and blamed everything, including her unkind treatment of her saintly mother, on Boya. Habooba probably never complained in her life –not even when her six sons died one after the other, or her husband passed away and left her penniless. Having dedicated her life to the welfare of Yumma and Enough she totally and stoically accepted Yumma's readiness to sacrifice everything, even her mother's comfort, for the sake of her children.

Yumma exploited my old Habooba fully. During Boya's long absence from home, she sent her every few days to buy groceries and vegetables. It took the frail, old woman more than two hours to walk to the nearby market, purchase all our needs and return balancing a fully laden straw bag on her head. I felt sad and helpless seeing her struggling through our doorway, breathless, ashen faced and barely able to keep her head straight under the heavy weight. Yumma's justification helped only to intensify these feelings.

“We have to stand together and help each other. We can’t afford to antagonize Boya. If he abandons us, we’ll have no one to look after us. Enough would surely welcome us in his home but he already has a large family. And an angry Boya is bound to lease the grain mill to someone else and deprive your uncle of his livelihood.”

With Boya’s yoke around Yumma’s neck, his chains on her hands and his shackles on her feet, Yumma’s logic was bound to be flawed. I ran away from it to Habooba who always greeted me with a cheerful smile. Unlike her daughter she can still laugh but like all village women she hid it behind a hand. Also, when she was not doing anything, she liked to hum to herself.

“Don’t hum loud or the Hadji will hear you,” Yumma warned her unnecessarily because she always hummed softly. Humming or some other form of catharsis would have certainly helped Yumma in ridding herself of some of her anxiety.

A whole winter went by during which our home was blessed by the absence of the first wife and Habooba’s humming. Summer also came back with a pleasant surprise for me. Boya was preparing to spend his summer vacation in the mountain resort abroad and he wanted me to accompany him. The last time I asked him to take me along was six years earlier and his reply was a slap to my face.

It turned out to be the worst summer of my life, worse than the summer in which I lost half a lung to cancer, and the following summer in which a terrible predicament drove me to call upon the dead Yumma and Habooba for help. During that summer Boya pushed me out of the safety of his ark onto a small raft in a shark-infested ocean. The injury of that summer is still alive within me and whenever the throbbing and pain subsided Boya’s hand would rise from his grave to sprinkle salt on it.

Boya’s decision to take me along to the mountain resort was certainly a delightful surprise. Finally, my cherished dream of

seeing the breath-taking vistas, which until then I have only admired on post cards, and visiting the places where my absorbing novels and glossy magazines were published was going to be realized. Yumma was grateful that, unlike my brother who was leaving to begin his university studies abroad, I was coming back to her side before the end of summer. Still her tears streamed down her face as she walked behind us to our front door and stood waving goodbye with one hand while the other ritually sprinkled water on the ground to ensure our safe return. The memory of her tearful goodbye kept me awake for many hours during my first night in the resort.

The trip was boring at first but later it became a nightmare. Half a century separated Boya and I, and our relationship was formal and strained by excessive, empty rituals. We arrived at the mountain resort with diametrically opposed expectations. He came to enjoy the mild weather and forget his worries about the uncertain future of his farm and his rebellious sheep-herding sons. After spending most of his life wading through the infested water and thick mud of rice paddies he wished to rest his feet on the firm dry floor of a shaded café or put them up on a soft mattress and take long siestas. Dejected and disappointed I sat with him in the cafés or lay down in the next bed and remembered the time when he left me waiting for long hours in the car. I had finally entered the magical sandook al-wilayat, the box of countries only to remain a mere spectator. Driving up to higher mountains was unthinkable because of Boya's hypertension and he was uninterested in the sea because its humidity probably reminded him of his rice paddies and the sweating heat during the planting season.

He decided everything and never once asked me: "Where would you like to go today?" And even if he did, he expected to hear only the polite reply of any son of my age: "as you wish Boya". I tried sulking to attract his attention to my boredom but

he only made fun of it. After the arrival of his brother, the senator, we spent many hours of every day in a café together. They reminisced about old times or sat in silence while I counted the minutes until lunch or dinnertime. Occasionally, an acquaintance of my uncle would join them in finding more faults with the republican regime in our country and its supporters. When they did not discuss politics, they pathetically compared personal ailments, symptoms and medications.

The mornings in the cafés were dull but certainly much less tedious than the afternoons when Boya took his siestas. At least in the café I could entertain myself by watching other patrons, especially families on vacation. It was an educational exercise that gave me a glimpse into a different style of family life and relationships. The parents drank their morning coffees, smoked, read newspapers or made small talk. But the freedom of the place was generously granted to their small children who ran around laughing and shouting or stood behind the iron railings and watched the deep valley below. They were seldom reprimanded or told to sit quietly in their seats. I envied most the girls and boys of my age, who read their magazines, sipped their lemonades and soft drinks leisurely and behaved generally like miniature adults. And when they said something, their parents put down their newspapers or tiny cups of Turkish coffee, listened to them attentively and answered them with the seriousness due to adults.

None of these boys and girls knew as much as I did about history, literature and even politics but my elders ignored me thoroughly. My envy turned into self-loathing as my mind took a step out of my body and looked at me critically from the outside. It saw a timid boy, sitting rigidly and uncomfortably in his chair, and covering his boredom with a polite smile. I blamed Boya for imposing a childhood straitjacket on me and stunting my personality. In his household he insisted on being the only

responsible adult while all his dependents were treated like children. Many years later, the external examiner, who evaluated my doctoral dissertation, complained that students who came from my native country always agreed completely with his opinions. I told him about the Boyas who gagged their mouths, strapped their legs to their chairs and instructed them to nod their heads in agreement whenever addressed by their seniors

When the sight of other more fortunate boys and girls became too painful, I turned my attention to the valley below us. My imagination transformed it into a private theater complete with action, sound and backdrops. The amplified chirping of birds could be the sounds of a marching army or the shouts of a band of pirates on the attack. A car climbing a dirt road could be driven by a spy who is unaware that on the other side of the mountain a sniper is aiming his powerful rifle at one of his car's front tires and will squeeze the trigger just before he reached the dangerous bend in the road. A hunter carrying a shotgun on his shoulder is actually a man driven insane by thoughts of avenging the murder of his father. My mind imagined inside the mist that rose from the direction of the capital a giant beautiful woman climbing back to her house on top of the high mountain after a morning dip in the sea. As the mist engulfed the café I listened carefully to her footsteps and flared my nostrils to catch a whiff of the iodine in the spray.

It was also during these mornings at the café overlooking the valley that I had my first peek of the hidden, darker side of Boya. The discovery shocked, disappointed and angered me. It was my duty as a son to treat him with total respect and obey him all the time but why was Boya behaving in the same slavish manner toward his older brother and his monarchical friends? He greeted them with the same excessive respect, which a powerless tribesman showed to his chieftains before the republican coup. He gave them his undivided attention, totally agreed with their

uninformed opinions, laughed at their unwitty remarks and spoke to them only when they addressed him. In the presence of these more powerful persons his proud, arrogant mask dissolved revealing a Boya who was as insecure and full of self-doubt as I was. It must have been these flaws in his character which led him to marry four women and to accept nothing less than absolute obedience from members of his households. He was not a cowardly lion but just a coward.

Men in our village including Boya and his brother were expected to suppress their emotions in public. Their cold apathetic reaction to news of a sad fatal accident that summer shocked me. It all began with the arrival of my cousin accompanied by his wife, his newborn daughter and father-in-law. The two grandfathers behaved like typical patriarchs who had more serious things to think about and do than show interest in their tiny granddaughter. When, few days later, my cousin announced that he was driving back home, his elders did not advise him to drive carefully on the dangerous international highway. The next day my uncle limped into our hotel's lobby to inform Boya and his son's father-in-law that my cousin's car was involved in a serious collision with a lorry. He and his infant daughter were slightly injured but his wife died later in hospital. Except for an undistinguishable whisper, and one mouth becoming tense, the three faces were frozen masks. A stranger passing by our table would never have guessed that they have just been informed of the tragic death of the daughter of one of them who was also the daughter-in-law of another. I probably looked the saddest of the four of us as my mind recalled the young mother who was only the day before whispering sweet nonsense to her infant daughter and ignoring me completely.

VIII

When I came back from that summer vacation, I was a different person. Boya lost all his halos and the icon picturing Yumma in my mind slowly faded.

A couple of weeks after arriving at the mountain resort I was bored and homesick. He must have noticed it and invited me to sit in his lap. I was his little boy again. I never remembered such affectionate moments with him as a little child. His hand patted my back and must have slipped to my backside.

When men did not want boys to witness their rare displays of emotion or hear their secrets, they would order them to "go play outside" or "ask your mother if she needs anything from the bazaar". Boya should have conformed to this custom before making that shocking revelation. As soon as he uttered those words, revealing yet another secret dark side of his personality he fell from his lofty alpine height faster than a meteorite.

"I escorted a sissy boy to my hotel room but could not perform," he lamented.

His friends smiled, chuckled and said nothing. My face registered no emotion but inside my mind a giant hammer rose and fell repeatedly at the paternal idol shattering it into small pieces. Not even Yumma's magical touch and prayers could ever make it whole again. We expected our idol and shepherd to be omnipotent and immaculate but instead he revealed his weak and flawed character.

I was then convinced that his touching of my backside was not accidental.

My resentment toward him for causing us much suffering was replaced by deep contempt – of the kind I reserved for the red teacher and his likes. All that day I listened to the persistent,

angry inner voice of my scorn and by morning I was ready to stage my first insurrection against him. Skirmishing with him to the extent of deserving a slap or worse continued for few days.

“Must you pick your nose in public? It’s unseemly.” This was my first attack on his immaculate façade.

“What did you say?” he replied angrily and continued without waiting for my reply. “Behave yourself! You are becoming insolent.”

My attempts to annoy him continued the next day with a verbal assault on his obnoxious habit of spitting in public places.

“Why don’t you carry a handkerchief and spit in it? It is not hygienic to spit everywhere.”

He was a tribesman at heart and not much different from his pre-Islam ancestors who did not hesitate to commit infanticide and sacrifice their children for the sake of their own selfish interest.

The next morning, we were walking out of the cafe when I deliberately provoked him by asking for something, which I knew he would refuse. The strongest protest allowed a boy of my age in my family was to sulk for few hours. Everyone knew me to be a polite and well-behaved son who never disobeyed his father. Swearing at Boya was totally unexpected and stunned all of them including my uncle, the two distant cousins who were visiting us on that morning and most of all Boya. He stopped going up the short flight of stairs from the street to their usual café and turned around. His face was livid with rage as he quickly descended the two steps separating us. And he would have at least given me several hard slaps if his brother had not stopped him. Lifting his cane high in the air, the ex-senator shouted at his brother: “Leave him alone! He is only a teenager.” Little did the ex-senator knew about his brother or did he knew and cared less.

At the same time my two cousins were pushing me inside a taxi and instructing the driver to take us down to the capital. One of

them was the same second cousin who came on the day of the republican coup wearing a boutonnière. He was one of those who resented controlling boyas enough to celebrate the victory of the rebellious young officers over the old guards. Throughout my verbal onslaught on Boya he was smiling probably in enjoyment of the public humiliation of another boya and not in an effort to diffuse the tension.

The father-haters soon proved themselves to be as vile and repulsive as the fathers. While we were getting out of the taxi in front of their apartment building, an old begging woman, as old as Habooba, approached us. The father-hater curtly dismissed her and as she turned to walk away, he pinched her bottom. Her reproachful look and "Allah forgive you" directed at all of us were more painful than Boya's legendary neck-wrenching slaps.

After staying with my cousins for few days I went back to Boya. His reception was cold, almost hostile. It turned out that during my absence Boya, with some convincing from his brother, had decided to make an appointment for me with a 'nerves doctor' at the American hospital. By our village's definition, 'nerves doctors' treated the insane. It brought to my mind terrifying images of men sitting in locked rooms surrounded by their excrement and shouting in pain and frustration or running, filthy, half-naked, and longhaired in the street to escape the teasing and stones of cruel children.

If they knew would they send Boya rather than me to the nerves doctor? No! They were all like the tribesman who farted in his chief's guesthouse and instead of taking the blame and lose face claimed that it was his little boy and smothered him to death.

The 'nerve doctor' turned out to be a psychoanalyst who treated me with the same respect and attention fathers treated their children at the café overlooking the deep valley. The little knowledge gleaned from my readings helped me tremendously

in articulating my replies to his questions. He listened with interest to my candid, but carefully-edited, description of family life in Boya's household complete with Yumma's suffering, the murder of my brother, my premature weaning with sabur, the attempt on my life and even the silly but terrifying episode on the roof of our house. But I could not bring myself to tell him about Boya's offending finger, his shocking revelation about the sissy boy and his falling from grace in my eyes.

Boya told me later that the psychoanalyst was quite impressed with me. Few days later we flew back home.

"My son! You look very pale," Yumma said to me." People who spend a month in the mountains come back with rosy cheeks and smiles as wide as trays, except you. You're ill-fated just like your Yumma."

Yumma perceived my profound sadness but she was not a mind reader and did not have x-ray vision to detect the gaping wound inside my soul which Boya constantly sprayed with salt. Life is full of difficult choices and a serious personal commitment to doing the right thing makes them even more difficult. Telling Yumma, who was also one of Boya's helpless victims, would only multiply her misery and she had already suffered enough for one lifetime. We were both trapped inside our dependencies on Boya and rattling our chains would only open the inflamed sores on our wrists and ankles.

My predicament was made even more oppressive by having to face it alone. When your idealized protector and champion turns out to be a coward and a traitor, then there is no safe haven left in this world. It was a devastating discovery which led me, not out of curiosity like Pandora but almost fatefully, to lift the heavy metal lid somewhere in my mind letting out every kind of fear and misgiving. At night, these monstrous thoughts came out to haunt me with a vengeance.

I also learned from experience that you could not escape from this terrifying, real world to the temporary oblivion of an imaginary world without paying a price. Every time you crossed the bridge from reality to fantasy you must pay with the hard currency of a piece of your sanity. Eventually the borderline between the real and the imaginary fades away and by that time you will probably have little or nothing to pay for your safe return to the real world.

At night my fears drove me across the bridge and into an unmapped world where anything is possible and life-like. It carried me almost every night to a desert in Egypt where, according to one of my old history books, a demon reportedly attacked and sometimes sodomized travelers. He attacked male travelers only and the vanquished party in the ensuing struggle was sodomized. Villagers living at the edge of that desert had one question to ask traumatized travelers staggering into their village. Who was sodomized, you or the demon? Travelers subdued by the demon perished few days later in horrible agony consumed by hideous worms gnawing at their entrails.

The nights following the summer in the mountain resort were too short to accommodate all my fears and they eventually overflowed into my days and laid them waste. Every teacher, fellow student or man in the street was suspected by me of being a metamorphosed demon and precautions were necessary to guard against their evil intentions. When our car was not available to drive me home, I had a choice between riding the bus and walking the ten miles to my home. Any sane person would have taken the bus especially on rainy or hot summer days but my sanity was overruled by my fears every time. If the bus was crowded, my fear dictated walking regardless of the weather. The wide gap between the back and bottom parts in seats on double-decker buses left my lower back exposed to passengers sitting behind me whose fingers may be as offensive

as Boya's. Only by standing with my back resting against the bus's interior panels gave me some assurance against the likes of him. Otherwise, it took me almost two hours of brisk walking from the school campus in the suburb, across the bridge and then another four mile before an anxious Yumma, usually waiting behind the front gate, greeted me.

The nightly escapes of my mind proved even more disastrous when demons stumbled onto the road back to my bedroom. They arrived in droves to hide under my bed, in the cupboard, behind the door and in every dark nook in my room. Moving the bed into a corner did not improve much my defenses. Only staying awake and keeping my eyes wide open, alert and continuously scanning the room gave me some relief. Every night and after a short, desperate struggle with my fears I turned on the light and stayed awake until dawn.

Many nights of insomnia passed before Yumma found out. She had risen to perform her dawn prayer and noticed the light in my room.

"You are awake my son?" she said standing at my door, already looking anxious. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine Yumma," I said unable to hide the weariness in my voice. "I just can't sleep. I haven't slept a wink for several nights."

"*Ya*!" she exclaimed in horror beating her chest. "Are you sure you're not ill? Does your stomach hurt?" She was already beside my bed, feeling my forehead and kissing my hand.

"I feel fine. I just can't sleep." I whined.

"Don't go to school today. I'll ask Boya to take you to a doctor. I'll sit here by your side and you close your eyes and try to sleep," she said, sitting on the rug beside my bed. Holding my hand in hers she began reciting holy verses stopping only to ritually puff at the evil spirits in my room. Few minutes later I was fast asleep. The following night she also came and sat on the rug until the morning. And for several nights afterwards, I slept while she

stayed awake exhaling at my ethereal demons and stroking my head or slept fitfully lying down on the thin rug but she never complained. Despite her prayers and incense burning, my demons sneaked back every night and hid in their usual places waiting for Yumma to leave my side.

Yumma lamented my deteriorating health by saying that I had become a “shadow of my usual self”. My nerves became frayed and the slightest provocation drove me into a fit of rage, frequently directed at Yumma or my sister.

Yumma finally convinced Boya to take interest in my case. My symptoms must have reminded him of my rebellious behavior in the mountain resort. Our family tree, weakened by much intermarriage, did have few oddly twisted branches on which two uncles who left their homes only to see their ‘nerve doctors’ sat. And there was the neurotic Shalila, my half-sister whom I triumphed over in a cursing match. Worried over my sanity, Boya took me to a ‘nerve doctor’. Unlike the psychiatrist at the American hospital he was not interested in my life story and after learning about my sleepless nights prescribed a strong sedative.

Several visits to the doctor and countless tranquilizing pills failed to improve my condition. Yumma was by then convinced that one of her dhuras had cast a spell on me and was prepared to seek help from the supernatural world. I was desperate to try anything except the ultimate ritual for neutralizing an evil spell – having a woman urinate on my leg. The first of Yumma’s remedy was relatively easy.

“Wash your body with this *khalas*, deliverance bowl,” she said handing me the small copper bowl on which special prayer were inscribed. She walked with me to the bathroom door reminding me of what words to repeat and how to perform the ritual ablutions. Inside our small bathroom on top of the fire pit, visions of demons dancing in the fire underneath the tiles with heir red-

hot tridents aimed upwards kept my eyes wide open and burning from soap.

After several washings with the ritual bowl failed to end my misery, Yumma turned to the local shrine. If a blind woman regained her eyesight inside the shrine then surely removing the spell cast on me should be a mere trifle. As the date of our planned visit to the shrine approached, my apprehensions increased. I was worried that she might be prepared to go as far as the relatives of some of the ill or insane persons brought into the shrine – few of them were raving lunatics or terminally ill. As a last resort, their relatives took them to the shrine and shackled them from their necks or hands to the silver sarcophagus. I did not expect that ritual to help much except perhaps to stop the lunatics among them from running amok. I promised myself not to let Yumma or anyone else tie me to the tomb like the insane even if it meant spending the rest of my life sleepless. I was therefore immensely relieved when it turned out that the ritual consisted only of a short prayer for my cure recited by one of the shrine's custodians. Still the cleric managed to embarrass me by reminding me loudly to repeat the words of the prayer after him and by raising his voice in prayer and attracting the attention of other pilgrims. They probably thought I was seriously ill or one of these harmless, pacified insane. I was glad when it was over and the cleric, after taking most of Yumma's small saving, left us to search for others in desperate need of miracles.

When my sleeplessness persisted Yumma decided on a more drastic measure. By then she was seriously worried that I was on the brink of losing my mind. The only possible cure left was whipping me with the green belt of a sayyid. My uncle Enough was a sayyid but he was not experienced in this field and he never wore a green belt and Yumma did not qualify on account of her gender.

Our chauffeur, the same one who arranged the meeting between our neighbor's daughter and the wicked sorcerer, recommended a sayyid whose belt was reputed to have rid many of their demons. Yumma, dismissing my strong objections, made arrangements for us to visit the sayyid and because my condition was causing her much pain and anguish, I finally relented and agreed to go along. The sayyid lived in another town, almost two hundred kilometers south of the capital. After a two-hour drive we stopped near a cemetery where the sayyid , according to our chauffeur and guide, conducted his exorcisms. Our chauffeur went to announce our arrival and came back to tell us that we would be received shortly. He then walked in another direction and disappeared behind the ruins of an ancient dome. To our surprise, we saw him talking to one of my half-brothers. Yumma's face became grim and she abruptly ordered me back into the car. She obviously suspected some foul play involving the sayyid, my half-brother and our chauffeur. When the chauffeur returned alone, Yumma told him that she had changed her mind and ordered him to drive us home.

My relief was as immense as the chauffeur's real or fake surprise. Villagers repeated terrifying accounts of these exorcisms performed with a sayyid 's belt. There was no physical pain involved from the lashing, they insisted, but the demon always fought back before abandoning its host.

Eventually I was able to stop taking tranquilizers to calm my nerves. By that time my demons had acquired human features: Boya's finger, the thick moustache of the red teacher, the toothless mouth of the man copulating with the dog and the Antars' revengeful looks.

The events of the first fourteen years of my life left indelible marks on me. Sometimes I convince myself that all my illnesses, the disturbed sleep, indigestion, hypertension and lung cancer, were rooted in those traumatic years.

But my story is not about to end. Three years later, Boya was still unfaltering in his late sixties. Yumma looked ten years older than her fifty years. I was seventeen and ready to go abroad for my university studies. Yumma was naturally heart-broken.

“Your brother can look after himself but you are ...,” she said without completing her statement.

She could have described me with any of the following adjectives: immature, inexperienced, or helpless and she would have been correct. I was her youngest son who could not handle the dangerous world on his own. She did everything possible to protect me from the plots of her dhuras, the noose of the red teacher, and my own fears. Convinced that her work was not done yet she pleaded with Boya not to send me abroad but he insisted that it would be for my own good. He thoroughly disapproved of local universities where, in his view, students learned more about politics and women than their courses. My brother was already enrolled in a prestigious university, he argued, and it was my turn to join him there.

Yumma came out of our front gate to sob bitterly, wave goodbye, and offer the ritual libation of water for my safe return. She stayed behind but my demon came along. His name was not on my passport and he required neither a ticket nor a visa to make the trip. He sat comfortably on my shoulders and positioned his mouth close to my ear to have the first and last words on everything.

My studies required my undivided attention and full effort but I still found the time to meet and become acquainted with several students. Some of them became my friends for many years. Each one of them had a story to tell and one or two of these stories were dramatic. Most of them had an uncontrollable urge to tell their disappointments and frustrations to anyone willing to wipe their tears with few chosen words of sympathy. My sympathy rooted in my own suffering was much in demand

because it was genuine and heart-felt. Some of them now probably regret baring their souls to me. But I never told my story to anyone before writing this book.

Not all confessions and confessors won my sympathy and understanding. One of them in particular earned my everlasting contempt. My first impression of my Saudi neighbor in the students' dormitory was indeed very favorable. After observing his prayer rug hanging on the wall of his room, I felt an instant liking for him. His plumb cheeks and crossed eyes gave him a childish appearance. A week later my initial liking was replaced by revulsion. My roommate and I were standing outside our room when our seemingly pious neighbor approached us with a sly grin on his face. After the usual greeting, he was impatient to tell us about his 'naughty adventure' as he called it.

"This morning I was coming back from a lecture and noticed this sissy boy from the junior school. I invited him to come with me to my room," he said. My eyes were hanging on his fleshy mouth and cross-eyes hoping for the admission that it was all a fabrication made up to amuse us. Instead his smile became wicked and his account unmistakably sinister. "I did not want to spoil the sheets. There was only my prayer rug so I took it down and did the sissy boy on it."

Everyone was smiling and nodding their heads: the red teacher, the men who copulate with dogs, the village Antars, Boya, the second cousins and a hoard of faceless men from every city and town and village in this wretched world, and of course my demon. I alone was furious at all of them: the culprits, the bystanders, the amused and also God for doing nothing about this abomination. After hearing this story, praying became impossible. Every time I faced God, my mind conjured an obscene picture of my pedophile neighbor 'doing it to the sissy boy'. It became imprinted in my mind like the image of a mud hut in my village that is never complete without the cow dung drying

on its exterior walls. No matter how honest, kind and hard working the people of that house were, you could not recall them without the drying pieces of dung. Or perhaps subconsciously I was looking for an excuse to stop praying. My rift with God lasted ten years. During this long period of time, my faith remained alive inside me like a small pilot light in an unlit furnace. God continued as ever to hover above us in His enormous blue rescue ship from which countless ladders were lowered down. I had only to lift a hand and reach for one.

Almost thirty years later I came across a relative of this student who did sissy boys. My curiosity was stronger than my awakened revulsion and led me to ask about him. His relative cryptically told me that he was in a horrible state and to please pray for him. I imagined and wished the worst for him.

The smile on my roommate's face lingered long after our neighbor concluded his account. It was his semi-permanent Ghat-induced smile. Several times every day and after dragging himself from bed, he brewed a pot of tea and then took out few leaves of the mild narcotics from a bag in which he kept a year's supply. He munched on the substance and sucked its juices with sips of sweetened strong tea. He was generous with his drugs and tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to interest me in a mouthful. While my revolting neighbor did it to sissy boys probably to get back at the pedophiles who abused him in his childhood, my roommate was putting my reputation and future at the university at risk by his stockpile of Ghat in our room. I expected the police or the university security officers to force their way into our room at any time and drag us away for detention after searching our room and finding the narcotics.

Other acquaintances at the university were also generous but with the wrong things. A chain smoker offered me a cigarette every time he lit one. Another who regularly obtained the services of a prostitute was willing to share her with me.

Invitations to drinks came from everyone. Most of them also wanted me to join in their 'fun' of laughing loudly in public places, treating snobbish restaurant waiters rudely and stealing ashtrays from cafes. When one of them invited me to watch 'a breath-taking scene from his room', the last thing I expected was the distorted silhouette of our chemistry professor's wife taking a shower behind the frosted glass of her bathroom's window.

The first school year at the university was finally over and I was heading home.

Yumma told me her dream on the morning after my arrival on a late flight from Beirut. After ten minutes of ringing the bell and banging on the front door I was angry with myself for foolishly deciding to make this visit a surprise. My mind was scanning the front garden for a spot to spend the night when our front porch light was turned on and the smiling face of my sister appeared at the door.

I woke up next morning to find Yumma sitting by my bedside anxiously waiting for me to open my eyes.

"My *walidi*! My soul and lung with which I live and breathe! I dreamt of you flying on a white horse. You circled around the house and then landed on our roof."

Yumma was happier to see me than a child on his first feast with its promise of new clothes, generous pocket money, and visits to the fairground.

"Allah brought you back to me as He brought Joseph back to Jacob. Thank you, God," she said kissing her hand and lifting it to her forehead repeatedly.

After asking me about my grades Boya ignored me but Yumma wanted me to sit beside her all the time.

"My eyes are famished for the sight of your face. Come! You must sit here, beside me." She gazed at my face like a half-blind person trying to read a faded scroll. I suspected that she was

trying to find out whether behind my cheerful mask, I was still her frightened little boy.

Habooba still sat in the storage room in the daytime and slept on the broken cot in our back porch. She also told me to sit beside her so that she can see me clearly. It saddened me to note that her black pupils had turned grayish. She had also become almost deaf and made me repeat almost every word loudly. The ravages of aging were apparent not only on Habooba but all my loved ones. Yumma had to support herself on her hands and call on God to help her before rising from her prayer rug. When Enough came to see me the constant tremor in his hands flicked cigarette ashes all over his clothes.

Boya was making his last stand against aging by shaving every day, dying his hair and moustache regularly and going out almost daily. But he admitted that he no longer had much authority over his cow-herding sons.

“Study hard!” he advised me. “Don’t put your hope in the farm. The government is bound to take what is left of it. And your brothers,” he sighed and continued. “They don’t give us much anymore. Your only hope is your education.”

“Hadji! Jabur is your son, the lion’s cub who will make you proud of him.”

“Bravo, bravo, my son the lion.”

Calling me a lion should have made me proud but instead it irritated me profoundly because it reminded me of their high unrealistic expectations. Villagers bestowed this honor on a provider whose family did not have to beg to survive. In their view the world is a jungle and a man must do all he can to secure his family livelihood. By the same logic it is better to be a night lion or thief than a helpless dependent woman. A medical doctor definitely deserves to be called a lion but Boya no longer had the money to pay for many more years of study at the private medical college and I eventually lost interest.

X

I did not become fearful and timid by choice. Yumma can testify to my courage and how I stood up to my half-sister Shalila, tore up another half-sister's hair and broke her necklace, went back to the elementary school every day to face the red teacher and his noose and fought and won over the antars in our town. But the sheer force of my tormentors was overwhelming. Even at home with Yumma there was no escape from the ridicule. My brother, the deserter, and half-brothers made a habit of laughing at my bulbous nose, an indisputable proof of Boya's parentage. I suspect I was a stand-in for our father whom they would not dare laugh at him in his face. My rotten teeth, which Yumma blamed on my premature weaning with the murderous dhura's sabur, gave them more ammunition for their cruel sibling rivalry until they denied me my natural right to full toothy smiles and undisciplined laughs. Even after wearing dentures I was constantly worried over my dentures becoming loose or falling out of my mouth as a result of a violent sneeze or involuntary probing with my tongue.

My shame even tried to turn me against Yumma and Habooba. I imagined my fellow students who were rich, elegant, refined and spoke proudly of their parents unexpectedly walking into our home to see me sitting on a thin rug having my usual lunch of rice and eggplants and meet Yumma who would stop sweeping the floor to greet them. My humiliation would be complete if they left through the back door and observed Habooba lying on a tattered mattress under the clear eyes of the heavens whose gates opened for her one night. I certainly did not wish for a snobbish Yumma or a Habooba who punctuated her speech with

foreign words and spoke endlessly of her summer vacations in Switzerland but a tidy home with enough space, love and respect for all would have been sufficient.

I was one of many misfits at the university and we all lacked the power to stay afloat. Unable to control his addiction to the mild narcotics, my roommate failed his courses and was dismissed from the university. Another acquaintance whose domineering father coerced him into an early marriage committed suicide. A girl drew her strength from putting out her cigarettes in her palms. Other misfits, however, fared better. My pedophile neighbor could still be observed walking back and forth from classes through the grounds of the elementary school. A strong ego and a stubborn determination helped another misfit to overcome his numerous handicaps including short stature, dark skin, pockmarks, and poverty. When others laughed at his short-stature, he laughed with them blaming it on his overindulgence in gymnastics. He spited rich students who drove sport cars by bragging in front of them of his excellent grades. He shouted at those who refused to listen to him and sang, usually in French, at those who made fun of his chronic sniffling. To prove to all his superior abilities, he learned German and French and after graduation became a very successful career diplomat. His courage and determination would have earned him the respect of villagers who usually despised misfits. Experience has taught me that putting on a show of courage is enough most of the time but even this became forbidden to me after wearing my precious, fragile dentures.

At that time, we did not know that the courage of the military officers who rose against their elders and took over their seats of power was nothing more than a pretense. Dazzled by their shinning stars, colorful ribbons and stunning parades, our eyes could not penetrate into their disguises to detect the misfits cowering behind them. It took a devastating war to expose the

pretense and tear up the disguises. On the first day of the Six-Day War, the euphoria swept everyone including those haunted by the pain inflicted with cigarettes, leather belts and unattainable expectations from their boyas. They all hugged their transistor radios and whistled to the tunes of military marches throughout the second day. On the third day, men took out their worry beads and women became pensive. On the fourth day, children were unusually quiet and stayed in their rooms most of the time. On the fifth day, radios were abruptly silenced and put back in their usual places on side tables or mantelpieces. On the sixth and last day, discolored spaces appeared on walls where pictures of military leaders were previously hanging.

Classes were suspended and groups of students were volunteering to join a militia in support of our defeated armies. But my brother and I were packing our suitcases in preparation for our long trip by car and train to our home country. My embarrassment would have been less if all doors in the dormitory were not open and their dejected occupants who were sitting on their beds or pacing the hallways did not see me carrying my suitcase rather than a backpack and heading home rather than marching to the battlefront.

Two days later we were united with Yumma who was delighted to see her sons before the holidays. Boya criticized the inept military leaders without gloating over their defeat. Our unscheduled visit was soon cut short by a letter from the university informing us of the resumption of classes.

The war in the battlefield was over but not in our minds, where it was persistently replayed again and again to the last painful scene. The defeat had finally unmasked all the official heroes, officers, domineering boyas and other false idols who have selfishly been running our history in circles for centuries. The departing souls of the dead soldiers rising to heavens were shedding their last thoughts and I ran around eager to collect

them in my lap. The thoughts, more bitter than weaning sabur and as angry as a man in our village betrayed by his wife, gave me the determination to crawl from under my rock and face the world.

It was a difficult transformation. Until then I was part of the fodder which fueled the machines of the boyas, military leaders and other false idols. The transformation required me to rise from the bottom of a world as dark as the oil pit in Enough's mill, crawl precariously on the thin belt through the hole in the wall and into the machine's grinding entrails before emerging into the daylight through the funnel shaped mouth. It was educational and breathtaking like Jonas' deliverance from the whale combined with Dante's tour of the Inferno.

I came out a new man ready to do battle with all oppressors: tyrannical boyas, military rulers, and predatory teachers. My defiance continued over many years and eventually it won me the honor of a secret file kept by the university security office. Others were classified as Communists, nationalists, fundamentalist, extreme rightists but I was given the unique distinction of being branded a 'revolutionary'.

Boyas and his likes were not prepared to acknowledge defeat. My sister was about to become their new victim and I had to do battle with them to save her.

Boya was pressuring her to marry one of our cousins. The next day I flew back to discover that the marriage contract had already been signed. My sister said that she never gave her consent and adamantly refused to go through with it.

I was angry with Boya for not consulting us. Boya, believing himself to be still our idol offered no justification for his action. He reacted to all my impassioned arguments and pleas by aiming his nostrils snobbishly at the ceiling and repeating: "I know better." My vehement opposition to the marriage plan stunned Yumma.

“I thought it was best for all of us, especially you. Your half-brothers are always scheming against you and they have all Boya’s kin on their side. The marriage would give you strong allies who will speak on your behalf and defend your interests.”

Gaining an advantage over our greedy half-brothers would have been useful but nothing was worth sacrificing our sister’s happiness for. When the rejected cousin visited us the next day, I could not control my anger sufficiently to treat him with tact and diplomacy and he left vowing never to divorce her. Our sister remained his wife on paper for ten eyes and this was the best of reasons to resent Boya for.

“Hadji, my chicks!” Yumma pleaded with Boya repeatedly. The minimum she expected from him was to stop his ego from trampling down her runts or feeding them to the rest of his litter. Other members of his family demanded and sometimes took without waiting for his permission. She continued to obey, cherish and care for him even after the others betrayed, humiliated, scorned, and abandoned him. She served him like an amah and wanted him only to look after the welfare of her children. Boya insisted on doing it as a favor even though he bred us into captivity, trimmed our wings and forbade us to do anything without his prior approval. After his sheep-herding sons usurped all his authority he made a final show of power by ruining our sister’s life.

X

I returned to my university with a large doze of bitter sabur circulating in my veins. Even graduation from the university failed to cheer me up after learning that I must serve a whole year as a conscript soldier in the army before continuing my higher studies.

“Get another passport,” a friend advised me and added that he knew a lawyer who could arrange it. The suggestion led me to question the value of my country. It was the place where all my oppressors lived: Yumma’s dhuras, my half-brothers, the red teacher, the antars and the military rulers. I went with my friend to see the lawyer. He received us in his pajamas and did not offer us the courtesy of a cup of Turkish coffee because he correctly predicted that a student like me could not afford his steep fees.

The deadline for obeying my conscription order was approaching and it was time to do so or “face the dire consequences” as the embassy official warned me. Yumma’s happiness to see me lasted few minutes after noticing my frown. Boya escorted me to a well-connected cousin who promised to do his best but nothing came out of it. Boya was by then old and powerless and did not qualify for favors even from close relatives.

A long queue of dejected young men stood in front of the conscription office. The line moved slowly and the stifling heat forced some of those standing in front to search for a shady spot. None of us imagined that this would irritate the officer inside to the extent of sending one of his aides out brandishing his thick military belt to thrash the waiting men into forming a line again.

When it was finally my turn, I was told to report to the training camp next week.

The training camp was located in a remote neighborhood of the district capital, a twenty-minute drive from our town. Enough's oldest son who was also doing his military service but with a different unit came along. The taxi dropped us on the main road and we walked the rest of the way. The camp sat in a large depression which was a marsh before the water evaporated or diverted leaving behind a layer of soft grayish silt. It reminded me of the haunted patch of land south of our town home. That piece of land was an eyesore but inexplicably the palms in it gave the most exquisite and delicious dates. One of these rare palms was known as the 'green' because the dates ripened without their color changing from green to yellow while another gave exceptionally large fruit nicknamed the 'calf's testicle'. Since it was unlikely for palm growing in silted land to give high yields and quality dates, supernatural forces were thought to be behind it. This explanation was supported by a rumor that the land was used as a cemetery. Illegitimate infants and slain adulterous women were secretly buried there in unmarked graves without the ritual washing and shrouds. A neighbor's son came running one evening from the direction of that rumored cemetery and breathlessly told us that ghost were chasing and pelting him with stones.

The training camp proved to be just as terrifying as the secret cemetery but without the exotic dates.

My cousin helped me to make my bed and then I walked with him to the camp's gate. When I returned my bed was covered entirely with insects. Twenty years ago, finding these ugly creatures on his bed would have delighted my brother but I hated insects especially cockroaches that scurried out of outhouses like the filthy ones in the military camp. More

disturbing and painful memories of my childhood were resurrected by life in the camp in the following days.

On the first day our senior training officer gave us our orientation lecture in which he likened us to cheap clay pots that he will break into small pieces, and then remodel in body, mind and soul after the army fashion. The army, he also told us, was now officially our father, mother and sole deity all rolled in one and we owe sole allegiance to it. After dividing us into smaller units, his assistants began attacking our egos by insulting us and calling us names for no reason at all. When one trainer learned that I was a university graduate he said to me scornfully: “Don’t expect any special treatment here just because you’re a university graduate!”

Villagers can judge the freshness of a fish by examining the head because the rot begins there. But in the case of my army unit, the decay had evidently spread everywhere and when the fish head appeared on the second day the stench of death and putrefaction saturated the air. Our commander made a dramatic entrance by dashing after his terrified orderly who was sobbing loudly and calling repeatedly on his father to come to his rescue. Impending disaster invariably reduced all villagers, including proud boyas and antars, to blabbering children. The commander walking briskly to catch up with his retreating orderly shouted at him to stop and followed it with a barrage of obscenities. Animated fury and loathing made his swollen, ugly face even more repulsive. The orderly, torn between his fear of infuriating his superior further and his urge to flee, sagged to the ground and curled his body into a fetal position. After swearing and kicking at the defenseless young man few times, the commander returned the salute of his deputy and returned to his office. We later learned that our commanding officer was furious at his orderly for serving his usual breakfast of shish kabob and fried tomatoes and onions lukewarm instead of sizzling hot.

Our commander had another good reason to be angry. He never fought in a battle and probably did not care whether our army wins or loses in war but he feuded with another officer over a sissy soldier in another unit and lost. According to the story which fellow conscripts retold with relish, his humiliation did not end there. Unable to accept his defeat graciously he picked up a fight with his rival. His superiors, displeased more by his violent conduct than his sexual taste, transferred him from his previous command post in a prestigious tank division to our remote training camp. Surely, if they had disapproved of his sexual tendencies, they would not have banished him to a camp full of young, vulnerable conscripts. The story led me to wonder if the commander was angry on that day over his cold mutton breakfast or the cool reception of the orderly to his sexual advances.

After my mind gave consideration to those disturbing thoughts about the commander, it was only natural for me to receive with trepidation his summons to report to his office one morning. Our commander was the type who delegated delivering good news – if any - to his subordinates while keeping for himself the sadistic pleasure of meeting humiliation, abuse, and punishment. The commander's friendly reception and a wide grin that did not sit comfortably amid his mean features, made me even more suspicious of his intentions.

Red lights were flashing inside my head after he ordered me into his jeep. My mind was then seriously rehearsing killing him brutally but before deciding on the safest way to dispose of his body he informed me of the purpose of our short drive. We were going to see a colonel in the division headquarter. I was delightfully surprised to learn that the colonel was a distant relative of mine. I secretly enjoyed observing my commander standing at attention and saluting my relative who firmly announced that he was putting me under his protection.

“If you have any complaint, I want you to come directly to me,” he urged me. My uncle Enough informed me later that he contacted my relative and asked him to look after me.

I felt somewhat secure under the eagle’s wings of my relative, the colonel. Naturally, I greedily wished for more than protection but he either did not have the necessary clout or was not prepared to obtain more privileges for me. Some conscripts in our camp were virtually being pampered. Those with powerful connections were assigned clerical jobs and worked comfortably in the cool administration office while we plowed the training ground in our heavy boots under the burning sun. One conscript reported to duty only once a month to sign the pay rolls. Everyone envied him until someone told us the horrible price paid by him and his family for this privilege. This conscript’s father was a chieftain, a close friend of the President of our country, and a frequent overnight guest at the presidential palace. The man had no political affiliation or ambitions but his frequent visits to the palace attracted the attention of the secret police. One night he was dragged from his bed in the palace to the secret police headquarters where he was charged with plotting to overthrow the regime and executed at dawn. According to this bizarre story, few days passed before the president learned of the execution of his friend and guest. He reportedly apologized to the family of the man and offered them the blood money in accordance with tribal customs. Relatives of the slain chieftain refused the compensation and asked instead for the exemption of his son from military service. That son was the conscript whom we had envied and hated.

Every day in the military camp we woke up at dawn, breakfasted on petrified loaves of bread, drank tea brewed in an old petrol barrel, and endured the swearing and obscenities of our superiors. Officers treated us like prisoners of war that deserved to be humiliated and mistreated for no reason at all. If

one conscript failed to obey an order instantly, his whole unit was made to run several laps around the field or crawl on the hot ground. Anonymous threats did not curb sadistic officers. Some were ‘accidentally’ shot by conscripts on guard duty or were found floating in rivers or buried in shallow graves. The army simply replaced them with other merciless officers.

After two months of grueling training in the summer heat I felt thoroughly exhausted. I even had nightmares in which the corporal responsible for our unit was ordering me to run faster, put my chin up and straighten my back. Relief from this torture could be bought with bribes. Money would also buy me few hours of rest in a soft clean bed in the local inn and a decent meal instead of the staple thin onion stew served every day in our barracks. Boya refused to give me the money claiming that his sheep-herding sons did not give him enough to spare. On my next leave, I suggested that we all move to my brother’s house so that I can lease the old one. Yumma was against it. She told me that she wanted my brother to be the first to live in that house. Her refusal led me to question her love for me. I always thought that I was her favorite son and by right. It was I and not my brother, the deserter, who stood by her side, shared her sorrows, cried with her, and defended her to the best of my abilities. Yumma was certainly willing to sacrifice our sister’s happiness for the sake of our welfare but all tribal mothers expected their dispensable daughters to put the interests of their families first. Sadly, Yumma was apparently prepared to sacrifice my welfare so that my brother can have the momentary satisfaction of cutting the ribbon to his new house.

In a fit of anger over their refusal, I picked up our old radio and threw it to the floor. My violent behavior convinced my alarmed parents to change their minds and they agreed to move into my brother’s house. Yumma, however, insisted that we use only the first floor. It was at that time also that the existence of Boya’s

treasure was made certain and this intensified my disappointment with my parents. Boya had the money to help me but instead he chose to abandon me to the mercy of army corporals.

The rent money made my life at the training camp less harsh. It bought me decent meals and precious hours of rest at the local inn and there was enough left to bribe the corporals. My offer was carefully worded to avoid offending them. At first, they insisted that they needed nothing from the shops in the capital but on the second time they gave me a list. Fortunately, they did not ask for anything expensive. They offered to pay me for the things I bought for them but after I said that these were gifts, their hands came out of their pockets empty but eager to shake mine.

My gifts made them more tolerant of my less than standard performance at the training field. It even saved me one day me from a court martial. There is a story behind it that must be told first. I was on a short leave and on my way to see my uncle Enough in our hometown. I had planned to take a taxi but agreed to share the ride with another passenger who begged us to take him along because he had urgent business awaiting him. We were waiting for the government inspector to give our driver the necessary permit–most things by then required an official permit–when the passenger sitting in the backseat began a thinly veiled conversation with the driver about Boya. The two men were complete strangers to me but I felt that their grudge against Boya was strong enough for them to spill over on me.

“Have you noticed the resemblance to his old man?” the passenger asked the driver.

“Yes, they look very much alike,” the driver said smiling.

“The nose is the same and the arrogant features…” the passenger said.

His words were so full of loathing that I expected him any second to draw a dagger from underneath his jacket and slit my throat. I knew that my terrified mind was going to torment me with this thought until the last minute of the trip –if its worst expectation did not become a reality sooner than that. Going through with the ride would have been foolhardy so I waited until the attendant signaled his permission to the driver before getting out of the car. They shouted at me to go back and swore at me but I walked away shaking with rage and frustration. Few days later, a fellow conscript was offering his small revolver for sale and recklessly and thinking only of the two men who inexplicably hated Boya and his family I bought it. On that same day, our training officer accompanied by his sergeants and corporals came into our ward to conduct a random search for contrabands in our lockers. We were ordered to leave immediately and there was not enough time to slip the revolver into my pocket. Keeping a weapon in my locker was a court-martial offense punishable with years in the stockade. They were bound to find it, I told myself, and right beside the gift I intended to give to the corporal later that day. After ten agonizing minutes the same corporal came out and told us that we can go back. He must have personally searched my locker and after seeing his gift declared it to be clean of contrabands. Buying the revolver was foolish and bribing the corporal was immoral but I, thinking like any common tribesman, convinced myself that unusual circumstances threatening my own survival and welfare called for unusual measures. It was kismet and not by choice that I was born in this country full of cruel and corrupt people.

The penalty for minor offenses in our camp was three nights of detention. Most conscripts thought lightly of it but I was in a hurry to finish my year of service and return to civilian life and every night spent in detention did not count. A conscript told us one evening that he was going to pester the corporal until he

gave him three days of detention because a ‘sissy conscript’ was also in detention.

The detention room was undistinguishable from other rooms in the camp except for its barred windows. During the daytime, the inmates took turn at the window, pleading with those walking by to fetch them cigarettes and sandwiches. At night the lights were left on. The conscript who eagerly wanted to spend three nights in detention said that he and other inmates were planning to offer the guard a bribe in return for looking the other way.

The second worse thing, after detention, was night guard duty. No other duty was more sacred to the officers than that. It was the litmus test of their unit’s discipline and, even more importantly, a necessary precaution against coups. Fellow conscripts gave me the following advice before my first guard duty: “memorize the password, don’t let them catch you snoozing and never surrender your Kalashnikov to anyone other than the officer on guard duty”. But they forgot to warn me of the fatigue, the boredom, the eerie howling of dogs and coyotes in the distance, and the insects. One of my worst childhood nightmares came true during one of these guard duties. It was past midnight and I was sleeping fitfully between two shifts when I felt the movement and heard the buzzing sounds in my ear. I jumped to my feet in panic and the scratching movement became even more frantic. My hand flew to my ear, probing, pulling and pounding. But the insect – I was certain by then that it was an insect – was firmly lodged inside. My unsuccessful attempts to extricate the insect from my ear continued as my mind recalled what Yumma told me once about an insect that sneaked into the ear of an unsuspecting, filthy child and then burrowed its way to his brain to feed on it. It also reminded me of the worms picked by a maid in Boya’s household out of a sheep’s brain before cooking it. The worms were pink and plumb

and were almost indistinguishable from the brain matter. All the scientific knowledge gleaned from my biology textbooks – and it was one of my favorite subjects – evaporated and were replaced by this folkloric nonsense. The insect thrashing and buzzing inside my ear was proving that Yumma and not my biology textbooks and professors were correct. Its death throes lasted for a long time before it suddenly stopped and a large segment of the insect covered with wax came out.

Survival in a training camp called for turning a blind eye to injustices, controlling your temper, and winning the friendship and confidence of people with rank. I learned the values of all these axioms from experience because an act of injustice made me lose my temper and only the intervention of the friendly corporal and other conscripts saved me from the consequences of my foolish reaction. We were marching back from the parade ground when those in front of me suddenly broke rank and ran forward leaving a gap in the line. Before I made up my mind whether to imitate them and risk angering the sergeant or keep on marching properly, a powerful hand gave me a push from behind. My involuntary reaction was swift and almost deadly. In one movement I swung the Kalashnikov with the bayonet still fixed on it from my shoulder and toward my assailant. It was a precisely executed stabbing attack taught to us during the previous weeks of training. If he had not leapt backward just in time, the sharp bayonet would have certainly pierced his lungs. He was a Kurdish career sergeant who had been in the army for over twenty years and was transformed to our unit only after his combat unit was ordered to destroy the villages and scorch the fields of his ethnic people. His initial shock was quickly replaced by rage and he charged at me. Luckily for me the corporal and other conscripts arrived just in time to restrain him. His determination to break every bone in my body disappeared after

someone told him about my father the chieftain and my cousin, the ex-minister.

After the mandatory three months of basic training, our daily drill duties became much lighter but we sweated more profusely sitting down and wondering anxiously about our next assignment. Every conscript's mother was praying at that time that her son would not be sent to a combat division in the north. Our mood became even more depressed upon hearing of the daily arrival of a truck full of dead soldiers at our division's headquarters. Everyone told me I should not worry because graduates were always assigned desk jobs. Their prediction was proven correct and weeks later I was transferred to a military base near the capital.

I was happy to be back at home with my family, eating homemade meals and sleeping in my own bed. Anyone possessing basic knowledge of English and a dictionary could have performed my job, which involved a spelling check on English words in contracts and orders for spare parts. Conditions at this base were relatively more tolerable. The connection of the corporal at our office to the military secret police was an open secret and spying on officers and monitoring military movements left him little time to pester conscripts like me. He was later credited with playing an important role in foiling a coup attempt by a number of officers stationed in our base. The attempt happened on a weekend and by the time I reported to duty on Monday all the conspirators were shot or imprisoned and the state of high alert was over.

Like a prisoner keeping a tally on the wall of his cell, I diligently marked every day of my mandatory conscription service on a calendar. It did not actually make the remaining days fewer or shorter but it offered me the satisfaction of transforming a day, a month or even a year, into a tally or a number on a calendar. An early discharge was as sweet but also as least probable as

winning the first prize in the national lottery. At first, I refused to believe the rumor circulating one day that conscripts could soon obtain an early discharge after paying a reasonable amount. When it was officially confirmed a week later it was indeed as sweet as winning the grand prize in a lottery. Within a week the money was paid, the necessary paperwork was completed and my discharge order was signed. Only the sons of rich families could afford to pay the ransom money demanded by the cash-strapped government leaving the sons of poor farmers and workers to fight and die in its wars. It also put at least one farmer in my village on the horns of a painful dilemma after his conscript son begged him to raise the necessary amount by selling their cow. What if this miserable father kept the cow and later on his son was seriously injured or killed in combat?

Ten days after my discharge, I arrived at the university but I was late for admission into the winter term. Help came from the least expected source. A sympathetic waiter at the café located across the street from the university succeeded in convincing the university registrar who was having a cup of coffee at the café that morning to make an exception in my case and admit me.

I was grateful to the friendly waiter and happy to back in the university but also mad at the world for being so absurd and haphazard. Selfish, capricious and cruel human beings are responsible for this absurd world. Like the aggrieved Pied Piper, I wanted my revenge on them. But instead of putting a magic spell on their children and leading them away I wanted them to give up their future progeny willingly. If humankind is destined to self-annihilation, I told anyone willing to listen to me, then why not bring forward the inevitable end without the horrors of an apocalypse. The world will come to an end peacefully and painlessly within a century if everyone stopped breeding. This outlandish idea of mine was inspired by a line of poetry carved on the tomb of a medieval blind poet who never married or

fathered children: “this has been brought upon on me by my father but I have not inflicted this on anyone”. It also fulfilled my wish to punish Boya and like-minded fathers who betrayed their sons and daughters. If this idea became a reality, then women like the hated dhuras would no longer give birth to children who would make the lives of saintly women like Yumma miserable.

My obsession with the annihilation of the human race drove me to confront every thesis with an antithesis. For example, I carried a copy of Mao Tsung’s Red Book into a seminar to spite the professor who supported the American War in Vietnam. Repeating my story with the red teacher never failed to annoy the Communists and their leftist supporters. A brief account of my experience of military life left the nationalists dejected.

The end of my unsuccessful eccentric crusade coincided with Boya’s sudden arrival. My brother and I found him wandering about in the university campus after a fellow student told us that an elderly man in a customary tribal garb was seen asking for us. I felt the curious stares on my back as I lifted his hand to my mouth and kissed it. Anyone who saw me performing this traditional act of filial obeisance would probably laugh at my face and despise me if he hears me preaching again about my grand universal schemes. Disgrace was like a huge wave, which leapt over the beach sand, the crowded seaside streets and the high-rise buildings to drench me from head to toes.

Boya’s behavior puzzled us. It was the first time he visited us at the university and he always wore a suit and a tie on his trips abroad. And why did he insist on calling his visit a pilgrim? We thought that he was joking when he told us that he came by bus until he produced the bus ticket. One of his sheep-herding sons apparently convinced him to travel by bus so that he can give us the money he saves on the plane ticket. Boya was old and unwell and our half-brother must have been aware of the risk involved in sending our ailing father alone on a long bus trip. He was

clearly disoriented but we thought that this was due to fatigue and not to a stroke suffered on the long exhausting trip—until months later. After a weeklong rest in his favorite mountain resort, he returned home by plane.

Few months after Boya's unexpected visit, a letter from home arrived requesting my urgent return. I found Boya's household in turmoil. Boya had become senile and his sheep-herding sons wanted him to stay at home and give them free reign in managing his property. He had been inconsolable, Yumma told me, especially after they had sold his car. His graduate son in whose name the car was registered came by one day, took the car and sold it. He claimed that it was best for Boya who needed to stay at home and rest. He and his brothers promised to use the money from the sale of the car to pay for the farm expenses.

"They want him dead," Yumma insisted. We agreed on that but her story on how they made him senile was implausible.

"They fed him the brains of a donkey," she confided in me.

Villagers believed that a person, and regardless of his age, became senile after consuming a piece of a donkey's brain. According to Yumma, his sons must have fed him a small dose of the concoction every time he visited them. After Enough, who came to see me, confirmed Yumma's diagnosis, my rational mind was prepared to reconsider. After all, these villagers who inherited some of the oldest civilizations of the world may know something that modern science has yet to discover.

"Don't eat or drink anything in their homes! Please Jabur!" Yumma pleaded with me.

Her warning came to my mind few days later when one of my suspected half-brothers offered me a cup of tea. Refusing his hospitality would have been an unforgivable breach of traditional etiquette. Unless a donkey's brain has a distinctive color, strong taste or repugnant smell, it would have been impossible to detect it in the fragrant bitter dark brew.

Before I left to meet with my half-brothers, Yumma told me about other attempts on Boya's life. The first unsuccessful attempt took place during his last visit to his farm. He was sitting on a mattress outside his guesthouse when suddenly some of his son's retinue and paid thugs appeared from nowhere and emptied their Kalashnikovs and rifles in the air few inches above his head. The shock and apprehension could have triggered a heart attack in a person with Boya's medical condition. Boya managed to leave the scene apparently unscathed but he was obviously shaken. His son scored a small victory over his father who never set foot in his farm again.

Another sheep-herding son made the second attempt on his father's life. Boya was staying over at this son's house, which like all his sons' houses was built by Boya. At dinnertime they had an argument and Boya angrily left. It was late at night and the street was empty. Rain was still pouring and he must have been drenched before reaching the bridge. In the dimly lit street, he slipped and fell into a patch of mud near the bridge.

"How could they hate their father so much?" I asked Yumma in horror. Yumma and I had more reasons to resent the old patriarch.

Boya was trying to get up when his son came out of the dark and offered him a hand. Did Boya forget his anger and smile at his son for coming to his rescue? His serious illness had certainly mellowed him and he never gave up hope on his sheep-herding sons even after they repeatedly disappointed him by failing in their studies, taking control of his land and selling his car. He became angry with me one day when I told him that his sons feared him but loved his money. He tolerated me and my stinging opinions probably because he regarded me as his half-insane son with yet unproven intellectual pretensions. It was foolish of me to expect Boya to admit that he failed as a father and that his sons coveted his wealth.

Boya probably did not remember my low opinion of his sons when one of them came out of the dark, held his hand firmly and, instead of helping him up and wiping the street mud out of his face, pulled him toward the riverbank. If his son had succeeded in pushing Boya into the river, it would have been a perfect murder. I imagined the ashen-faced, tearful son telling the police that that they were sleeping soundly in their beds when the senile Boya inexplicably decided to leave his warm bed and brave the dark muddy streets. Of course, he would not forget to mention Boya's medical condition. And he would go on to say that his father must have lost his footing in the dark, slipped and fell into the river. The police would never suspect foul play.

A Good Samaritan did appear at the last minute. "Allah sent him," Yumma is confident. A man was crossing the bridge to the side where Boya and his son were struggling. He later told Enough that he saw two shadows: a man standing up and another sitting nearby in the muddy street. He had no doubt in his mind that the former was dragging the latter toward the river. Did Boya beg his son for his life or did fear and disbelief render him speechless? It was almost a scene from King Lear but unlike the famous Shakespearean tragedy this was real. Neither Boya nor his sons have read the play but even if they had it would not have prevented them from committing the same follies and injustices.

The man swore to Enough that he recognized Boya's son. "He raised his head, saw me, turned and hurried down the street toward his house." The man was shocked to see Boya sitting in the mud, his clothes wet and his face streaked with rain. He helped Boya to get up and escorted him to the house of one of Boya's relatives.

It was expected of Boya's relatives and tribesmen to abandon him in his time of need. If by a sheer far-fetched coincidence, they were all looking out of their windows on that night and saw

him lying in the mud and his son pulling him toward the river they would have closed their windows and went back to their beds. If that man who surprised Boya's son was a tribesman he would have probably looked the other way telling himself that it must be a feud and therefore none of his business. Luckily for Boya, he was a Good Samaritan from town.

Boya lived but he became restless after his graduate son conspired to sell his car and pocket the money. Almost daily, Yumma had to block his way to the front door to keep him from going out. He occasionally managed to sneak out behind her back. On these occasions and until his return many hours later, her worries kept her pacing aimlessly inside the house, praying for his safety, cursing his ungrateful sons and crying over her bad luck. Every time he ventured out, he became disoriented and could not find his way back without help. Her eyes became moist when she remembered the kind strangers, who brought him back in their cars or taxis, humored him and led him gently by the hand. "I wish he had sons like them," she said.

Boya's sheep-herding sons were determined to destroy him. It was not enough to control his land, deprive him of his car and take his 'treasure'. Those idlers who were in their forties lived off his money which paid for their basic needs, luxuries and many vices. They must have hated him for being powerful and successful and they wanted him dead because his presence reminded them of their failures and dependency on him.

Convinced that my half-brothers hated Boya mainly because of us, Yumma pleaded with me to stay away from them. I tried to reason with her that unless an agreement with them can be reached over the farm we would have no money to buy food and other necessities. She said that they had enough food and other provisions to last them for years – at least until we graduated and returned. To prove her point she led me to the storage room. Before she even opened the door, my allergic nose was reacting

to the strong smells of dry goods. Yumma was not exaggerating. There were enough provisions to keep a grocery in business for a whole year. I counted at least twenty bags of rice, each weighing one hundred kilograms, stacked neatly against the walls. There were fewer flour and sugar bags and I assumed the crates in one corner were full of tea. Some of the cartoons and boxes displayed the brand names of American detergents and soaps, which have neither been imported nor made locally under license for over a decade. Yumma's hoard revealed to me the depth of her insecurity feelings which Boya's money could not dispel. She must have expected that one day he would lose control over his sons and the flood of their selfishness and greed would sweep us under if we were not prepared. Her premonitions were proven correct and she stocked her ark well in preparation.

Boya's first wife managed our household until she left for a self-imposed exile. After Boya became ill, Yumma had to take responsibility. She was old, frail, inexperienced and without resources or support. Using only the basement in my brother's house became a necessity because without a maid she could not clean all three floors. After the car was sold, they could not get fresh bread every day so she bought and installed a clay oven in our back garden. She prepared the dough from her ample supply of flour and baked the bread herself. I was terrified to see her hand protected only by an old sock disappearing inside the flames repeatedly to attach the balls of bread dough to the sides of the oven. She dismissed my objection saying that if every son in the village were like me nobody would have eaten freshly baked bread. Then I noticed that the small stack of dried branches was not enough to bake ten loaves. When I mentioned this to her, she pointed at a heap of dry trash. She had told me earlier that she had to throw the garbage in the garden because she can no longer carry it up the stairs and to the street. I

assumed that she was planning to use it as compost not as fuel for the oven. Villagers used cowpats as fuel in cooking but this was the capital where bread was usually baked in gas-fired ovens. She listened to my heated lecture on the risks of food poisoning and then resumed her unhygienic baking.

She endured all the tiresome and disagreeable tasks resulting from Boya's deteriorating health patiently and without complaint, except his incontinence. Since she insisted on keeping the washing machine in its mint condition until my brother returned to inaugurate it, she had to do all the washing manually. Almost daily the basement reeked of urine and damp clothes. He was cantankerous and pestered her to give him a bath every time he soiled himself. They had to climb to the first floor where there is a bathroom. This was the only option in winter but in summer she found an easier alternative. She used to lead him, and sometimes pushed him gently, to the part of the porch hidden from view by the garage above. She then helped him to take off his clothes and used the garden hose on him. Every time she took him out for an outdoor shower, I climbed to the forbidden upper floor to avoid seeing him naked and hearing him squealing and complaining about the cold water.

The new burdens and resulting stress were bound to affect her sooner or later. Yumma was still the great incomparable mother who loved her children immensely but she was now prepared to do more than sacrifice her comfort, pray endlessly and burn incense for their sake. An incident involving my sister and a stray dog exposed a new side of her personality which puzzled and annoyed me.

Every day my sister commuted to the university by bus. Unlike her two brothers, she was seldom given a ride in our car. As Boya's only daughter who finished her university education in the sciences, she was by his own standards superior to his sheep-herding sons. But he paid little attention to her and her

impressive achievements – and tried to marry her off to one of her cousins at the age of seventeen – because she was a girl who according to village norms ‘did not count’. Lately she had to run rather than walk from the bus stop; she arrived breathless and complaining of a stray dog following her all the way to our front door. Unlike our brother, our sister hated insects. And unlike me she never rode on a donkey or in a donkey’s cart, herded a neighbor’s cow with his children, or looked down the throat of a grumbling camel. The sight of a cow munching grass in a field across the street from her was enough to panic her.

Weeks later I heard a commotion in the basement and went down to investigate. Yumma was standing in the garden, holding in her hand a heavy iron pipe. At her feet the body of a small dog was lying down listlessly. There were no signs of blood or injury but I knew that the stray dog was dead. Yumma’s hand shock slightly and the heavy pipe fell down to the grass with a thud. She looked dazed and frightened but she was also eager to justify her deed to me.

“I had to do it. Yesterday, he frightened your sister off the sidewalk and into the path of a speeding car. She miraculously missed being run over.” I have seen her before submitting to verbal and physical abuse without even a word of protest. But she drew a line in blood when her children were threatened. She turned into a wild biting and clawing kitten because she believed that the stray dog threatened her daughter’s life.

Enough arrived and we left together the following day to meet with my half-brothers.

Yumma followed us to the door repeating her warning against eating or drinking in their home. “Don’t forget that they fed your father a donkey’s brain,” she reminded me. The donkey’s brain and their other attempts on Boya’s life were certainly not on the agenda of our meeting. But the one who allegedly tried to push Boya into the river had a long list of grievances against Boya. It

sounded almost like the character assassination ploy used in some defenses to shift the blame from the culprit to the victim. He first complained that Boya acted foolishly once by refusing to donate money to an official campaign and could have “ruined us all.” Enough who was actually present when the local officials came asking for donations later told me the whole story. Boya explained to them calmly that he was not prepared to give money to what he considered to be an unjust cause. The officials who expected everyone to donate money without any objection were stunned and threatened him with imprisonment but he was adamant and they had to leave empty-handed.

“He also insulted me,” my half- brother continued his defense. “He told me that I came down from his testicles.” It was very difficult not to smile after hearing these words. In school they taught us a famous saying which drew a parallel between a tongue and a horse and how both must be reined or controlled to avoid injury and ridicule. It was a good piece of advice in countries where tyrants and murderous sons went unchallenged. I wanted to shout at my half-brother who was unconvincingly playing the part of the aggrieved son that Boya’s description was scientifically correct and furthermore the semen which spawned him came down the same tube Boya used for relieving himself. But I reined in my tongue because a man accused of trying to kill his father by throwing him into the river and feeding him a donkey’s brain was not to be trifled with and also because I inherited more of Yumma’s politeness and less of Boya’s occasional audacity.

My half-brother surprised me with his offer of an olive branch. He and his other half-brothers were willing to give me a free hand in managing Boya’s farm and our share of the land. It meant sacrificing six months of study but I had no choice but to accept. My first duty was supervising the distribution of seeds to our farmers. Many of them also asked me for loans. It was customary

to grant the needy of them small interest-free loans at this time of the year and I had to dip into my small savings to find the necessary money.

I later found out that his olive branch was full of thorns and that it was only a trick concocted by my half-brothers to lay their hands on the invaluable seed. After that, we were left with no bargaining chips. The confrontation was imminent even if I had not dismissed their handpicked farm manager. The decision taken on Enough's advice turned out to be a preemptive strike forcing them to prematurely reveal their real intentions. They lost no time in filing a lawsuit claiming that Boya had already sold most of his land to their mothers and sisters and succeeded in placing a lien on Boya's holdings. The sale contracts were actually legal maneuvers approved by Boya to avoid further confiscation of his land by the government. Boya showed up and filed a counterclaim with the district governor. My half-brother who resented being called 'the fruit of Boya's testicles' was summoned and he haughtily justified his claim by asserting that Boya was senile and he intended to have him declared mentally incompetent. I reminded the district governor that all our land originally belonged to Boya who was entitled to at least the income from his remaining share. The governor then glared at my half-brother and said to him:

"If I see your father again in my office complaining about you, I will put you in jail."

Anyone except our heartless relatives and tribesmen would have been horrified and scandalized by the way my half-brothers treated Boya. The ailing old man who was once a proud and powerful chieftain did not deserve to be humiliated in public, called senile in court, and deprived of his livelihood by his sons who owe everything to him. Our victory, however, was short-lived. It was obvious to them that their schemes were bound to fail if Boya continued to put his case in front of non-tribal

sympathetic officials like the district governor. They were also wrong in assuming that selling his car would permanently keep him from coming to their town. But he could not make the two-hour trip unescorted and this is why they declared me, his escort, persona non grata.

They hatched a plot to kill me or at least to scare me into leaving town and chose the most feeble-minded and dispensable of them to execute it. He was the one who attempted to sodomize me when I was three years old. Enough and I were walking on a dirt road in Boya's land when we saw him coming toward us accompanied by our new farm manager. I thought he was bringing his hand from under the folds of his aba to greet me but instead it came out holding a thick club. He raised it high and charged me spewing insults and obscenities. Our farm manager who was a distant relative of my half-brother on his mother side leapt forward and took out his revolver. Judging our situation to be utterly hopeless, I was gripped by fear. They were armed and could shoot or thrash us to death and then make their escape undetected. The unexpected then happened. Instead of shooting us, the farm manager was pointing his gun at my half-brother. My half-brother, puzzled and disappointed by the turn of events, swore at us and left.

"The scoundrel said that he wanted to talk to you. He used me as a cover for his wicked plot," our farm manager said angrily.

Enough took the revolver and placed it in my pocket telling me to use it if necessary. Someone told us later that this half-brother was seen meeting with another half-brother a short time before the incident. The next day I left vowing not to return to the farm again.

I wanted to go back to my university and resume my studies. My master's thesis was then near completion and required only few more months of intensive work. I needed money and after spending all my savings on loans to our farmers I was penniless.

Selling our Persian carpets was a painful decision to make. Selling the furniture was usually the last resort that a person took after falling on hard times. These carpets were my indoor recreation fields during my childhood on which I spent countless joyful hours staging mock car races and Bedouin raids on caravans. Having to deal with the crafty bazaar merchants and let them into our house to view the carpets made the transaction even more unpleasant. I bought a bus ticket with some of the money from the sale and hid the rest inside the frame of one of my paintings, said goodbye to my loved ones, and left holding the painting firmly in my hand.

Within a year I got married, graduated and spent all my money. Going back, finding a job and supporting my family should have been the next logical steps. But this meant exchanging the freedom from responsibility that automatically came with my status as a student for the grief and bitterness resulting from my renewed involvement in my family's unending tragedy. There was also my parents' deteriorating health and nothing terrified more than the possibility of witnessing their death. I promised myself to go back after obtaining my higher degree but first I had to visit my family, raise money to pay for my tuition and other expenses and obtain the necessary official permits.

Few days after my arrival, Boya's health took a turn to the worse. The doctor came to see him and gave him a shot to lower his blood pressure. I called one of my half-brothers to tell him about Boya's condition. When I suggested putting him in a hospital, he said.

"Is your mother tired of nursing him?"

A nephew, the son of my half-brother whom Boya insulted by calling him 'the fruit of my testicles' came the following day to examine Boya. After applying pressure to Boya's toenails, the medical students declared that his condition was fair and left. I said to myself angrily that Boya's semen, which produced the

‘fruit of the testicles’, and in turn this nephew must have been heavily contaminated with urine.

When Yumma ordered me to go upstairs and let Boya sleep, he was already in a deep coma resulting from a major stroke. In the morning she woke me up and told me that Boya was dying. Half an hour after my emergency call, an ambulance stopped in front of our house and its driver and an orderly came down, put Boya on a filthy stretcher and carried him into the ambulance. The hospital was a ten-minute drive from our house but we had to stop at a police checkpoint at the gate. After inquiring about the nature of Boya’s illness they allowed us to drive in.

Boya was wheeled inside an emergency room and I was told to wait outside. Ten minutes later a doctor came out and after asking about my relationship to Boya he said harshly:

“Why didn’t you bring him earlier? We might have saved his life.”

I stood in the hospital corridor plastered to a wall and listened in a daze to the doctor’s reprimand. Would he have understood if I told him that it was the fault of the dead Boy? I wished that I could also tell him about my old and ailing Yumma who can no longer nurse Boya and about his sons who took his money and wanted him dead. Before judging me, he must also know that I am the youngest of all of Boya’s eight sons and the least qualified to take responsibility for his condition. And while I was taking blame for Boya’s death, his negligent and selfish sons must be going about their life as usual and soon after our father is buried, their lives, but not mine, would return to normal.

Of all his able-bodied sons I was left to carry his body with the help of two or three cousins from a drawer in the morgue and place it into his coffin. I noticed that the harsh expression of disapproval, which often intimidated me, was gone from his face and was replaced by the tranquility of deep slumber. His ungrateful sons tortured him but he was lucky to have the

faithful Yumma to look after him until his death. She may have occasionally been too tired to indulge him but she never abandoned or mistreated him because he was ‘the father of her children’ who rightfully deserved her loyalty and care.

We buried him in the family cemetery, which occupied the basement of a two-story building. I always hated that place even when no one was yet buried in it. It had few rooms upstairs and, on few occasions, we stayed overnight there. Images of ghouls and demons creeping out of the empty catacombs and climbing the stairs toward my bedroom kept me awake for many hours during these nights.

Customs dictated seven days of mourning for a chieftain like Boya but he was given only three. At first, the sheep-herding sons refused to pay for the expenses claiming that Yumma was keeping all his money. I strongly denied that but it was my word against theirs and all of our relatives were on their side. Even a tour of our house including the moldering provisions in the storage room, the clay oven and trash kept in the garden and Yumma’s moth-eaten clothes in her cupboard would not have convinced them otherwise.

My half-brother who promised to make Boya proud of him and was caught by Yumma in bed with the fat maid arrived few weeks after Boya’s funeral. It was his first visit in almost ten years and it turned out that his only objective was collecting his share of the inheritance. His persistent demand for money led to the hurried sale of a small property in the capital. After collecting his share, he immediately left.

My own share of the sale was sufficient to finance two years of my studies abroad, and after obtaining my visa I was ready to leave with my wife. Yumma made no attempt to convince me to stay. My sister also encouraged me to go. Did they sense that I needed a higher degree to bolster my weak ego and cover up my deficiencies in the same way that the title hadji, or pilgrim was

needed by a crooked merchant in my town to cover up his dishonest practices?

Two years later, my sister arrived seeking medical attention for a chronic kidney ailment. Large stones lodged in her kidney gave her unbearable pain and the doctors back in our country advised her to have them removed surgically. Looking after her helped to bring my wife out of a depression which followed her mother's death. It was then my turn to feel depressed after hearing the disturbing news about Yumma's health brought by my sister. She had been diagnosed with diabetes and the advanced cataracts in both eyes required an urgent operation.

I was terrified. Going back to plan Yumma's operation would put me face to face with the kind of responsibility I dreaded. I could not stop tormenting myself with the worst possible scenarios. What if she becomes a blind or even die on the operating table? Even if it was the fault of a doctor, a nurse or the hospital I would still blame myself for failing to make the right choice and others will also find fault with me. My older brother should have gone in my place but he was the beetles-loving deserter.

"You came on my account," Yumma greeted me happily. "You came to bring back my eyesight." Knowing me very well she must have been aware that if my love for her were not greater than my fears I would have stayed away. She must have felt sad for putting me through this and at the same time glad because I was doing it for her sake. She tried her best to make it easier for me but she was also terrified of losing her eyesight.

"Who'll guide me to the bathroom if I go blind? And who will stop me from tumbling down the stairs," she repeated.

I took her to several eye specialists and all of them prescribed surgery to treat the cataracts. One of them became suspicious and asked me: "Has she been hit on the head lately?" I firmly said no. It was a lie but the truth was too shameful and painful to

reveal to a stranger. My cousin, Enough's son, told me the story a short time after my arrival. He was studying in his room when he heard a commotion. He came out to investigate and found the first wife's only son pummeling Yumma on the head with his fists. He managed to hit her several times before my cousin pushed him aside. My half- brother whose inability to control his temper resulted in his early retirement then escaped. Yumma told me that he sat in front of her accusing her of mistreating his mother in her final days. Instead of blaming himself for abandoning his mother and leaving her to die alone in a rented house he wanted to displace his own guilt on Yumma. Yumma was not prepared to humor him by shifting all or some of the blame on Boya or herself. Unable to forget or forgive all the suffering and humiliation brought upon her by the first wife she blurted:

"Your mother was nothing but a pimp."

It was untypical of her to speak ill of the living or dead but they tell me that persons with diabetes are prone to act rashly sometimes. She agreed to go on a diet, and even promised to give up her favorite dish of rice and date syrup to lower her blood sugar. Ten days later she was ready for the operation.

After she was wheeled inside the operating room, I sat with my cousin in the lounge outside. My eyes returned every second to check on the glass panel on top of the operation room's door. As long as the light stays on, she will be all right, I told myself. Summer was the season of power blackouts and this small hospital may not be equipped with an emergency generator. The eye surgeon recommended the hospital and it was unthinkable for me to suggest another. Less than thirty minutes later the lights went off in the lounge and the operating room was plunged into pitch darkness. Holding my breath, I waited for the emergency generator to turn on but instead an orderly brought out kerosene lanterns and candles.

It had to be me, I moaned to myself pacing in the semi-dark lounge and losing control of my mind rapidly to rage and anxiety while Yumma underwent a delicate eye surgery by candlelight that dimmed and flickered. Power was not restored yet when they wheeled her out. The surgeon walked out after her and assured me that the operation was a success and Yumma's eyesight had been saved. While Yumma slept off the effects of the anesthesia I went out with my cousin to have a quick dinner in a nearby restaurant. I ate sparingly but enough to contract a nasty strain of dysentery.

I decided to stay with Yumma overnight. Her surgeon came, checked on her bandages and instructed the nurse accompanying him to keep her lying on her back and immobile for the next twenty-four hours. His warning that a sudden or violent movement could result in the loss of her eyesight intensified my worries but I assured myself that the qualified nurses in the hospital would know how to deal with such cases.

On few occasions in the past I was the one sleeping comfortably in bed while she stayed awake watching over me and nodding. It happened every time sickness or night terrors disturbed my sleep. This time I was lying on the hard sofa watching her when she suddenly stirred, called my name and told me that she needed to use the bathroom. She agreed to stay still in bed and wait for the nurse. Minutes passed after ringing the bell but no one came and Yumma was losing patience. After promising Yumma to be back without delay I ran out of her room. The nurse was sleeping soundly in her station at the end of the corridor. My whisper turned into frantic shouts but only a vigorous shaking woke her up. She struggled out of her cot, wobbled toward a cupboard to fetch a bedpan.

"Please take the bedpan and let me go back to sleep," she pleaded tearfully with her eyes closed. "You can do whatever you like but let me sleep." The surrealistic picture of that day in the

hospital, which began with the performance of the operation by candlelight, was now complete. When they told me that every person in the country is working two or three shifts to make ends meet, I did not think that nurses were also included. I took the bedpan and ran back to Yumma's room.

Yumma left the hospital two days later. After removing her bandages, the surgeon told her that she must wear glasses for the rest of her life. Yumma who had probably expected a miraculous restoration of her eyesight was disappointed. She wore the glasses for few days only and then took them off complaining of dizziness.

"The operation failed," she said bitterly but after seeing the unhappy look on my face added "But you came to make me better, my Jabur, and nothing else matters." I flew back to my wife and university wondering if Yumma could possibly be thinking that the operation was intended to blind her. Since the death of my brother after a doctor treated him, she never trusted doctors.

This time my separation from Yumma did not last long. Ten days after graduation' my wife and I were heading back to her side. We stayed in my brother's house because the tenant in my house refused to leave and the law was on his side. Yumma had become older and frailer and still complained of the unsuccessful operation. Habooba was much older and rarely hummed to herself anymore. We were living together and this time none of us had any travel plans – not yet at least.

I expected to teach at the university but was told party membership was a prerequisite. I refused to join the party even if it meant giving up on my dream of becoming a teacher. It was a big disappointment. I had to accept a minor position in a training institute. Almost everyone between the age of fifteen and fifty had by then become a party member. Some of them claimed that their only motive was to avoid harassment but I

believe they lied. They all wanted a share in the power, the perverted pleasure of terrorizing others and winning undeserved privileges. My brother was one of them. I pleaded with him to stop going to party meetings before he became a full-fledged member and had to spy on people, torture prisoners and even take part in executing opponents of the regime. Months later he told me that he had followed my advice. He was lying. Almost ten years later, a teacher at the same college who joined the party with my brother told me that he never missed a meeting.

My brother did not leave the ruling party but he deserted us. It was not something new. He always put a distance between himself and us. I was to him the weird brother who preferred to stay home and read a book rather than frequent bars and sleep with prostitutes. I did him another service. Every weekend, he stayed late in our half-brother's house gambling and drinking. On these nights, our ailing mother stayed awake until he came back. She never stopped suspecting her husband's kin of trying to do away with the rest of her children. I reasoned with him to stop going to these parties if not for his sake then for the sake of our mother and he eventually stopped going there.

My brother was not careful in choosing his associates. One of them became a fugitive of the dreaded security police. They met during their student years and resumed the friendship after their return. The son of a wealthy Christian who owned a luxurious hotel was also a university lecturer like my brother. My brother blamed the oppressive work environment and the lack of freedoms in our country for his friend's departure. Months later, the truth behind this sudden exit was revealed to me. A lecturer who worked in the same department with my brother's friend lost favor with the party and was transferred to the training agency. He told me that this friend turned his father's hotel into a garçonnière for his amorous encounters with his female students. Other lecturers also benefitted from his services. He

left the country in a hurry after learning of an of an impending investigation by the security police. If my foolish brother was implicated in this scandal, he would have spent the rest of his life in jail if not killed by a relative of one of these students.

Having a home for her and her children only was Yumma's most cherished wish and it was finally fulfilled but she was still unhappy. It was as if her misery had a momentum of its own and even after its main causes–the persecution of her dhuras and Boya's tyranny–disappeared, the unhappiness continued. I hate to admit that my brother and I contributed to it. My conceitedness made me assume that her only wish in life was seeing us safe, happy and near her. It was Boya who sent us abroad to finish our studies and make him proud but she also encouraged us to comply with all his wishes. In trying hard to please Boya and secure our future against the loss of our land and fortune we became insensitive to her needs and feelings. Like Boya she probably carried in her mind an ideal picture of us and we failed to match her expectations. We certainly did not provide her with the usual reasons for happiness that any typical mother in our village looked forwarded to as the crowning achievements of her life of toil and misery. She may have dreamt of a dynasty bigger and better than that of the second wife complete with daughters-in-law ready to obey and serve her, several grandchildren sitting in her lap, calling her Habooba and pestering her for stories, and regular visits by existing and acquired relatives who came to gossip, ask for favors or to simply envy her and her good fortune. Like all mothers in the village she probably imagined herself arranging the marriages of her sons and daughter, selecting trousseaus and jewelry, buying new furniture and beddings, and supervising wedding feasts. She was denied all these duties and responsibilities which gave other mothers immense pleasure and elevated their status within their clans. My parents approved of my marriage but neither of them

arranged it or attended the ceremony. Her joy in arranging the marriage of my sister turned into bitter disappointment after my sister insisted on having it annulled.

My brother and I came back with the high diplomas, which Boya had planned to hang on the walls of his guestroom but by then he was dead and buried. It was also too late for Yumma to regain her peace of mind, which she lost shortly after joining Boya's household. As a result, there was more than enough sabur to make all our lives bitter. The excess bitterness overflowed from our house and every house in our country into the streets of every city and town and neither wind nor rain could sweep it away. The bitterness finally reached the dangerous mark when the ruler of our country called himself the Boya Leader thereby giving himself absolute authority over our lives.

The Boya Leader demanded our total loyalty and adoration in exchange for curbing his sheep-herding jailers and torturers. His informers and supporters were everywhere harassing people to join the ruling political party. In desperation I wanted to find a job abroad but Yumma vetoed my plan by saying that she wanted to be buried near her holy grandfathers.

"Bury me anywhere near my grandfather but not in Boya's cemetery." She insisted.

It was probably the only time she clearly and firmly expressed her wish to separate herself from Boya and his relatives. But only death was going to put all her grievances against them to rest.

While the supporters and informers of the Boya Leader relentlessly persecuted me at work, Yumma's deteriorating health and dimming mental faculties gave me no respite at home. She stopped taking her medications and her diabetes and hypertension became uncontrollable. She simply refused to believe that several spoons of sugar in her tea three times a day could kill her and accused us of trying to starve her to death. She became angry with us for taking away her hoard of stale bread,

biscuits and sweets. Terrified of dying from hunger she persuaded Habooba to share her food with her. It was painful to listen to my grandmother repeating Yumma suspicions and accusations with conviction.

Yumma's mood was further soured by the appearance of large boils on her back. Every few days, my sister sponged them with warm water and squeezed them dry only to see them reappear few days later. Yumma scoffed at me for blaming these on her diet. Instead she convinced herself that the cause was black magic. She had often accused her dhuras of using magic to harm her and her children and firmly believed that Boya's dementia resulted from ingesting the magic potion known as the Donkey's Brains. But I never imagined that she would accuse her children of using black magic against her.

My brother, the deserter, hastened her death.

"It is my fault," my sister told me. "I blame myself for what happened."

"He told me one day that he wanted to get married and could I recommend one of my friends to him and I did nothing." This is why my sister blamed herself. In our society it is usually the mother's job to arrange the marriage of her sons and since our mother was old and infirm the responsibility shifted to our sister.

Kismet put this girl in his path but it did not ordain their marriage. She was his student and younger than him by fifteen years. "Wherever I went she was there standing in my way," he told our sister. Such women reminded men in my village of *qurtas*, the river sirens who seduced men and then ate them. My brother lived most of his childhood and youth in boarding schools far from our village and its telling tales. He was desperate enough to believe that the girl was in love with him not his prestigious job, big villa overlooking the river and his Mercedes. I had just finished my studies when he told me about his marriage plan and spent the last days before my trip home shopping in

Oxford and Regent Streets with my wife for a wedding gown and a fine suit. We paid for them with our money. The dress and suit were never worn because her parents objected to her marriage to a Muslim.

They continued to meet after her parents disrupted their marriage plan. He used to bring her home and they spent several hours together. Whenever we saw him carrying his mattress into the reception hall, we knew that she was coming to see him on that day. He behaved shamelessly in front of our mother and sister. Our mother was terrified of her though she never laid eyes on her. She was convinced that her son's girlfriend was a witch who wanted to harm him and her. Our mother became obsessed with this imaginary witch and with neutralizing the spells she was casting on us. Her heath suffered as a result.

She went through all the usual rituals for breaking the evil magic spells which she believed were making her incontinent and producing the boils on her back. I have seen her performing those rituals countless times before but this time the roles were reversed. I used to be the victim of the magic spell; she was my savior and her dhuras were the evil witches. But now I was the enemy and she was the victim who must save herself from my magic. She sat on her sofa, draped with a sheet to cover the nylon underneath, and glared at me. When she thought that I was not looking in her direction she began to read holy verses and puffing in my direction to ward off the magic. One day I found traces of feces on my chair. This was the last resort of villagers to remove a magic spell.

Her behavior made me sad and angry. Knowing that her suspicions were the figments of her demented mind did not make it less painful. My anger usually became intense on days when the supporters and informers of the Boya Leader harassed me at work. I will regret losing my temper at her for the rest of my life especially since she was by then living her final days.

My mother's worst nightmares became a reality when her elder son ordered her to move out of her room so that he can have it ready for his bride. His girlfriend had told him that she was now willing to elope with him. It was his house but our mother begged our father for over twenty years to build it for her beloved son. He could have humored her fears and postponed his marriage or at least allowed her to stay in her room and chose another room. Throwing her few belongings out of her room and down the stairs was the final blow to the mother that spent her life begging for her children. Few days later, she had a stroke.

Her death was sudden. She was walking out of her room one morning when she staggered to the floor and was unable to stand up again. We rushed her to the nearest hospital where she was admitted into the overcrowded women ward. Every hospital in the capital was at that time full of soldiers wounded in the Boya Leader's war against our Iranian neighbors. Hours later she woke up, sat in bed, and looked around her for few minutes then she held my hand and kissed it. Did she, like the priest in Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov, foresaw the misfortunes awaiting me or was she saying goodbye to her loving son?

She died in the afternoon. We buried her in the public cemetery as she had wished. Most of the graves around her belonged to young soldiers killed in the Boya Leader's war. She was a victim like them and she also fought and suffered but for a noble cause and for a much longer time than any of them. Two months later, my superior at work asked me:

"Why don't you take a vacation abroad?" It was the last chance to escape the war and oppression in my country.

Postscript

Only loss of honor drove a man to abandon his village and tribe. I left my country because the Boya Leaders, antars, red teacher, my Boya, his sheep-herding sons and countless others turned its heart into a lump of burnt coal. It would not let go of me and kept sending its oppressors after me. Even the ghost of Yumma and all her miseries came along. Forty years after her death she visited me in a dream and was angry with me for having left her for so long. Was she telling me that my death is imminent?

The Black Land is an old name of my ignoble country, not because of the dense groves of palm trees as they claim. Black are the nights in which all their monsters and melancholies awaken. Even their sunny days turn black with smoke, ashes and bereavement.

My brother was the first of my tormentors to arrive. I was living and working in Egypt when he unexpectedly showed up at my door. His tattered half-empty suitcase was meant to convince the airport security police that he was going on holiday and not skipping his job and country. He left not to escape our heartless country but to marry his student. Her family finally gave their consent but only if they wed in another country to spare them the scandal. It was a lie. He lied again asking me to teach him how to pray. I was like the foolish chickens who believed a turbaned fox swearing off eating them.

My next stop was Saudi Arabia, my wife's homeland. It was one of my least favored places on earth but supporting my family made it necessary. A gang of five from the heartless country conspired to make my stay as intolerable as possible. The first one complained to all of his English wife's refusal to sleep with him. He flirted with the wife of the second one who told everyone that her husband keeps the underwear of his American girlfriend carefully hidden. The third one, married to an Irish woman, was a self-appointed

informer of the embassy. All three of them violated the terms of their scholarships by not going back because they dreaded ending up at the frontline. But they all hated me for opposing the Boya Leader and his war.

The fourth claimed that his family had been prevented from joining him for political reasons. He was unconvincing. Few young men of military age were given travel permits but not their wives and children to ensure their return to their military or civilian posts. Families of active opposition members who stayed behind were jailed or executed. Years later, my suspicions were proven right. He was another informer.

The fifth one, a cruel and selfish megalomaniac who often described himself as 'we the elite', regularly belted his son for wetting his bed. One evening his daughter sleepwalked into our apartment. They were in the habit of leaving their children unattended for a late-night ice cream treats. His wife said buying ice cream for all their children cost too much money. Neglecting their children came to the attention of the children protection services while he was a student in America. They threatened to take the children away if they continue to show signs of malnutrition. He told me one day that he gave the self-appointed embassy informer some of his wife's jewelry in support of the Boya Leader's war. It was either this or risk a telltale report by the informer to the embassy. Even this dire possibility would not have enticed him to donate more than the minimum and the least expensive. I was angry at him for offering two of his wife's earrings on my behalf. Was the cheapskate expecting me to compensate him? Earlier I sent the creepy informer back emptyhanded after he came to collect my donation. He knew beforehand my anti-war stand but he came to testify to it in his report. If the stingy egotist who belted his boy was telling the truth then he must have done it to spite me. He could not allow me to trump him morally by refusing to support the war financially.

My reunion with my brother in London lasted few days. I was on holiday with my family and he had just left Libya after four months as a university lecturer which he described as nightmarish. All this time he and his wife lived in a hotel because the university did not provide them with accommodation. They had to share a bathroom with other guests and he complained about having to stand guard in front of the bathroom's door every time his wife used it because it did not have a latch. It was an absurd story but I believed him at the time. Only much later, I pieced together the truth.

He was not the same brother I knew. His bullying days were gone and replaced by acute paranoia. He left without telling his employer and with only one suitcase so as not to attract attention at Tripoli airport. He later contacted a Kuwaiti friend of mine to find employment for him. Few days later, my brother was offered a good position and told to report to the Kuwaiti embassy to have the visa stamped on his passport. He came back shortly saying that he saw from far a demonstration in the embassy's neighborhood and decided to try the next day. It happened that our embassy was nearby and he was worried that the opposition may have organized that demonstration. It was too much of a risk for him in case demonstrators were being pictured and passersby including him may appear in these pictures. His paranoia had become pathological. He finally had the visa stamped and flew to Kuwait.

I came back from my holiday to a letter from my government demanding my prompt repatriation. Soon after, another formal letter arrived giving me the choice between my immediate return or at least a ten-year jail term. None of the cowardly gang of five received similar ultimatums. Sometime later, the consulate informed me that my passport had been revoked and will not be renewed. My diagnosis with hypertension happened a short time after.

A year before the expiry of my passport I resigned my job and was preparing to leave in search for a solution to my impending

statelessness. My wife's uncle stopped me with a promise to obtain permanent residency permits for me and my children. Less than a month before my passport expired, we discovered he was lying. I suspected it was a payback for my refusal to steal a book for him from my university library more than ten years earlier.

Only three days before my passport expiry, we arrived in Syria. Without a valid passport I was stuck and my family had no choice but to share my predicament. There were no job opportunities for me, only one insufferable relative and no friends. Few exiles from my country were just as mean as those left behind.

" I can arrange for you to have a valid passport to travel and work in the Gulf," a leading member of the opposition told me. My hopes were naturally raised but only for a minute." On second thought why should I help you? Let your relative do it," he added.

My relative's elder son who occasionally visited us brought me unsolicited news of the exiles. He told me they were angry at me because I did not attend their meetings. "Why is he arrogant?" they queried my relative's son. One day he told me there was a bloody fight with machetes among some exiles over the privileges of a sissy boy.

What I dreaded most back in my country happened here. During an interrogation by the security police I found out that my letters were opened and read. Since I spent most of my time at home except for an hour or so with my obnoxious relative every now and then they had no reason to suspect me. The ranking security officer told me that the burden of proving my innocence fell on me. At the last minute, my relative vouched for my innocence not out of kin loyalty but to save his face with other exiles. Whoever informed the security police on me knew of my innocence but was moved by malice to do it. Since I had no quarrel with local people it can only be one of the exiles who resented me for not paying homage to them.

It was the turn of my brother to add to my misery. He had resigned his job in Kuwait and somehow reached Portugal. He called to ask for ten thousand pounds to finance his new export business. Since the success of his business venture was guaranteed as he assured me no more money would be required. It was one fourth of all my savings from six years of work. I couldn't say no because he was my brother.

Six months later, he called again to tell me that he had spent all the money and needed more. I was shocked and wrote back telling him that I had no more to spare but he was welcome to join me in Syria and share what remained of my savings. He refused my offer because his wife could not call her family from Syria. He stopped calling and writing for close to ten years. Later, he admitted he lied to take my money.

With that money I would have bought a small apartment instead of immigrating to Canada, a country which I thought rightly belonged to its native people and wild animals. This was my third and last stop in my long forced exile. It was just as melancholic if not more. Canadian employers denied me even a clerical job for lack of Canadian experience. My children were bullied and harassed at school. Refugees from my native country shunned me and the only one who offered his friendship asked for my teenage daughter in marriage to his unemployed uneducated son. I refused and he stopped calling. Suffering Canada was much heavier than the proverbial last straw and my back was much weaker than that of a camel. Two years after arrival, I was diagnosed with carcinoma but my wife till this day believes it was a case of malpractice. If it was cancer then Canada gave it to me because the immigration medical checkup gave me a clean bill of health. In fairness, if my country was not so heartless, I would never set foot on this frigid country full of frigid people.

My brother called for the first time in ten years to congratulate me on my successful cancer operation After that we called each other regularly. Sometimes he stayed over the phone for more than an hour. He talked much about God and the supernatural world. I consider myself to be a religious person but I do not go on about it all the time. At first, I was happy that he finally found a purpose and meaning for life but later I had these nagging doubts.

"I think my brother has gone mad," I told my wife. She laughed at me and said that my brother was always a levelheaded person. " He sounds like a lunatic. The worries and paranoia must have affected his mind." But she refused to believe me.

"He talks like those religious fanatics, but not like our own," I said to my wife after another long telephone call. "He talks more like a …Christian." My wife laughed at me and said: "You're imagining things".

Few Weeks after getting a Canadian passport I flew to London to see him. Instead of the warmth expected between siblings after sixteen years of separation, a conspicuous tension overshadowed our meetings. Something was also odd about the way his wife treated him. She was curt, almost rude to him, and his behavior toward her was submissive. On the third day, a Friday, we had fish for lunch at their apartment. I asked for a rug to pray on and he brought me what looked like a new doormat. While I performed a short prayer, I could hear them speaking in the kitchen. Their words were incomprehensible but I clearly made out the tones of their voices. She was angry and he was submissive and apologetic. The next day I confronted him. He admitted that he had converted and changed his name and that of his family. He now called himself Michael. All bartenders in our native country are called Micha, short for Mikha'el. He claimed that he converted after a stone statue of a saint became animated and made the trinity symbol toward him. Another miracle got him out of Kuwait just before the Iraqi invasion. His only proof was the time of his departure flight,

3:00 pm, the trinity again. If our mother who was thrilled by miracles could hear him, she would have shouted praise to Allah and her grandfather the Prophet. But she would have been saddened to hear her elder son condemn her and all her family to eternal hell in the afterlife for following what he called a false religion. Regarding our father, he claimed that he like all polygamous men of the wrong faith held orgies with all his wives. Not Boya for sure. I could not imagine him in the same bed with his sullen first wife- the second was banished from his household- the insolent third wife and Yumma the bashful elwia.

I have two plausible theories with no supernatural intervention on why and when he converted. The first one assumes that her family made it a precondition for their marriage. This would explain leaving his job and country abruptly. They were already married in church. He lied when he asked me in Egypt to teach him how to pray. Why suffer living in the shabby Libyan hotel with no latches on its latrines unless it was the only one willing to overlook their lack of a marriage certificate by a *qadi* not a priest. I wondered if his wife refrained from going to the latrine for hours while he lectured at the university.

My second theory on his conversion is no less dramatic. When his younger student became infatuated with him, he was a university professor with a doctorate from a prestigious foreign university, living in a huge villa overlooking the Tigris river and driving a new expensive car. She was no different from another fair lady from the same country who told my wife that she married her husband whom she called an ugly hunchback because he was the only rich suitor and owned a car. Unlike the humpbacked husband, my brother lost everything soon after marriage. The professorship was gone. The car, the money and the good family were past history. On top of all these, he could not give her children because of an old case of syphilis. She wanted something back, a

compensation for her loss and disappointment. I am not sure if she demanded his soul or he volunteered it.

He is free to choose his religion and condemn me to hell but he had no right to lie and deceive me. For a whole decade while my family and I rotted in our diaspora, he lied and cheated us and took our much-needed money. If the stone statue which pointed three fingers at him to lead him to the right religion presented him also with a cheque for ten thousand pounds, he would not have to swindle it out of me, his brother of the wrong faith. For ten years more he pestered us to convert like him. I drove away the Jehovah witnesses who came to my door with a brief counterclaim but he persisted with calls, letters and emails. I had to finally say enough is enough and gave up on him. He was furious and like a typical tribesman avenged his bruised ego by conspiring with one of our half-brother to deprive me of what was left of my meagre possessions.

All mothers in my village including Yumma instructed their sons: “Your brother is like the belt supporting your back”. Men wore belts before going out to toil in their fields. Women also tied a cloth around their waists. I was the belt that supported my brother’s back in his times of need and in return he broke my back.

I visited my country only once in almost forty years. It was under occupation and those who were not crushed by the invaders’ tanks or perished as collateral damage in its bombings begged to have their pictures taken with one of the foreign soldiers. By then all my official documents were revoked and new ones could not be issued without payment of heavy bribes. I left full of revulsion and then wasted ten years of my life writing on that sad state. Now there is only more revulsion and despair.

After writing this account of Yumma’s and my turbulent lives I have become less of a loving son. I hold her responsible with Boya for much of my chronic fears and miseries. There is little forgiveness left in my heart for them. I forgive her

overprotectiveness which scarred my personality with excessive timidity but I cannot overlook her complicity in Boya's poisonous fatherhood. She should have refused marrying the polygamous Boya whom her family suspected of philandering. The murder of her son and the attempts on my life were more than enough cause for any mother to leave his household. He undoubtedly deserved her contempt after cheating on her with the bald new bride and the prostitutes. Instead, she wanted me to adore him because he was rich and powerful. She also took my love for granted and favored my brother who deserted her, hastened the hour of her death and condemned her to eternal hell. He was also Boya's favorite son because I did not hide my disapproval of him and his corrupt way of life. I have finally disowned both of them, my cheating brother and my heartless native country.