# *The Peacock and the Angel*

**by Aamer Hussein**

1

I was watering flowerbeds in the garden when my husband came through the gate and said:

'You'll have to be strong. Your friend ...'

He didn't need to tell me whom he was talking about.

2

I've often thought about this: there are people who are born to sorrow and others who learn to grieve along the way. I'm one of the latter kind. But you were born to happiness. How shallow that sounds. Perhaps I should say: You were born to make others happy.

3

I first met Rafi Durrani – when? I'd seen him, heard him read his stories, long before I first spoke to him. Once, at a picnic, he sang a melancholy Punjabi wedding song. I remember the way he entered a room: swaggering slightly, and then he'd bow to the left and

the right as if he were saluting the invisible angels, his thin tanned hand, raised in a salute, grazing his forehead.

He'd published his first collection of stories, *Restless Birds*, in '33, I think. Siddiq Saheb gave it to me to read. Rafi wasn't quite twenty. His writing was romantic, verged occasionally on the sentimental, but with a fresh lyricism I hadn't ever come across in Urdu fiction. People spoke of foreign influence and bourgeois sensibility. Then he published his second book. He was telling the same stories of lost loves and the frivolities of childhood evanescing like so many butterflies, but his light touch was lighter still; in place of the early tearful undertow, the new stories were fragrant with mischief, redolent of laughter. Children played jokes, students tricked teachers, girls masqueraded as boys, boys dressed up in burqas to trick their mates. One story, in particular, I loved: A young teacher, down on his luck, travels to a big city to earn his living and meets a childhood friend who gives him a job as tutor to his sister who's preparing for an exam. The young teacher falls in love with his student – or rather, responds to her virginal advances. Their love is discovered and the boy is thrown out by the girl's father. But then the girl's brother arranges for the young lovers to elope. They move to a native state, where the young couple both find jobs teaching the rulers' children. One day, the brother knocks at their door: his father has banished him too. The story ends with the phrase: 'We'll look after you now.' We don't know whether the voice is the hero's or the heroine's.

I'd started to write by then, but signed my essays with the androgynous 'S. S. Farouqi'. I, too, wanted to write a story, about a cousin of mine and the girl he fell in love with, who chose to marry his much richer best friend. But I felt guilty about liking Rafi's story, and about wanting to write a romantic tale myself, though mine was as close to the truth as Rafi's probably was.

Rafi was of medium height and medium colouring, and he seemed surprisingly weightless. In his world, darkness seemed not to exist. And yet I could recognise compassion in him, too: his wasn't the wit of callousness or disdain. He wasn't a Marxist; neither was I.

But to sing so blithely of love in a time before siege? Those were strange days. We – the scholarly, the teachers and doctors and lawyers – were trying to find a place in a world that we were increasingly aware was no longer our own; and we felt obliged to write about change, to write to change it all.

4

How I published my first short story, in 1936:

We were driving along the dirt roads from Fatehpur Sikri to Dholpur in April. The fields were bare of mustard and wheat, but along the way you could see high piles of chaff, of mustard seeds, and even higher piles of cow-dung cakes. It was the season of pumpkins and the fields were dotted with little yellow pumpkin flowers. Sugar cane saplings were still young but growing, growing. On the road, our car hit the mud-smeared rump of a hairy black piglet, which ran, bleeding and squealing, from our path. Our Hindu driver said:

'They'll bash it to death and eat it now. Those miserable untouchables. They keep them as pets. They let them out at night to eat all the rubbish they can find and then in the morning they take them to feed again at cesspools. When they're fat enough they set them on fire alive and eat chunks of their flesh while the wretches scream. If the pigs are wounded or die, they cook and eat them.'

A little way down the road, I saw a pond where egrets, their every move elegant, were washing their wings. Nearby, in a puddle or a ditch, a dun sow wallowed with her piglets around her. I'd never thought much about pigs before: when I was a girl, we weren't even allowed to mention them, they belonged with the other unmentionables like snakes and lizards and dogs. But I reached Dholpur that night and wrote. About a sow and her brood, the kidnapping of one of her piglets for food, the dispersal of the rest, the sow's lonely struggle to survive. I showed it to Siddiq Saheb, as I always did in those days. He didn't say much, just:

'Can't you make the sow into a bitch? Or a donkey? You know how people feel about pigs.'

It seemed pointless to explain to my pragmatic husband that that was the point, but then he said: It's a good story.

'Story? It's an essay...'

'It's a story. In your second draft you have to get rid of that arch and knowing tone.'

I went back to my draft. I wasn't deft enough a writer then to tell the story in a sow's voice. (Much later, though, I would write tales for children in the voices of a cat, a squirrel and a monkey.) But I came as close as possible to the sow's point of view, abandoning the bird's eye perspective of my first draft. The first editor went one step further than Siddiq Saheb: he wanted me to turn my Suwwariya into a pack-mule.

The female condition was too raw a subject for a male: he thought S. Sultan Farouqi was a man, my sow a mask for a prostitute. Hindu readers, he remarked, would think I was writing about the lowest castes. My Suwwariya was abused by pigs and men alike. I decided then to use my own name: after that I would always sign my fictions Saadia Sultan. An Urdu women's magazine, the best known in Delhi, whose editor was a family friend and had published some of my essays, rejected it outright.

'It'll be banned,' he said, 'for obscenity. Particularly if the writer is known to be a woman. Why not keep to your initials and send it to one of the progressive journals?'

The third editor I sent it to accepted it. He sent it back to me with some minor amendments and a series of delicate line drawings of fields, piglets and farmers. The pictures gave my story an innocent touch, underlined the elements I'd deliberately used and subverted, of a children's fable. I thought that effective. But the publisher ran the story without the drawings: too many pigs for Muslim sensibilities, he finally decided. The story got some attention. It wasn't banned, though some people did think it obscene, particularly from the pen of a woman. I wanted to know who'd done the drawings the publisher had rejected. Someone told me it was Rafi. The popular young writer – whose debonair manner boys envied or emulated, whose photograph on the back jacket of his book set college girls swooning as a movie star's would, whose voice on the radio programme for which he occasionally read his stories and reviewed current fiction kept housewives awake all night – was also adept with pen and ink and sketchpad.

I wrote more stories. It seemed, somehow, the next step, to turn my concerns into sharp little fictions. I wrote of characters and situations I knew. A tourist guide at the Taj who refuses a large tip. A shoeshine boy. A doctor accused of malpractice. A widow whose in-laws abuse and disinherit her after kidnapping her son. A girl forbidden to marry because her suitor is the grandson of a laundress. The only difference between my essays and my tales was of tone: if in the former I'd used irony and sarcasm to talk about social ills, in the latter I devised labyrinthine plots and coincidences to illustrate those ills and make them cohere as stories. My plotting must have owed something to the three-day story cycles I'd grown up hearing.

There was another story I added, as an afterthought, because my publisher told me my

collection was too short and I also wanted another tale about an animal. I wrote down, as I remembered it, a story my mother used to tell: a man has a pet peacock in his garden. He ties it up in a bag and feeds it through a hole. Every now and then the master asks, 'Are you comfortable?' And the peacock replies, 'I am.' Then the rains come and with them a flock of peacocks. When the peacock in the bag hears the rain and the cries of his companions he, too, begins to cry, to want to feel the raindrops on his feathers and spread his wings, to fly to the top of a tree. He begs his master to let him go. I framed the tale with the exchanges of a child who wants a peacock as a pet with her mother who tells her the tale to dissuade her. I called it 'Thirst'.

Rafi reviewed my book on his radio programme. He was disdainful about most of the stories. The sound of coins dropping into the palms of the poor jangled too hard in his ears, he said, and the garments of my hapless heroines smelt of camphor. Then there was the too-comfortable moisture of womanly tearstains on my sleeve, and the pointing finger of my well-bred distance from my material. In my sketches – he called them that – I wasn't yet a storyteller: the reformer's zeal was too present in my work. But the fables he liked: the sow and her destiny, the peacock's longing.

'The lady should be writing for children,' he said. There was a dearth in Urdu of serious stories for children. (Ah yes, there was another story he liked, the prose poem I wrote in my own voice, about the pain of giving birth, to a child born dead.)

I wanted to meet him. I sent him the draft of a long story I stayed awake to write one night till the sun came up, of a princess who falls in love with a horse. When the horse elopes with her maid she follows them to the Land of Darkness to take her revenge. Rafi sent back the hundred pages with a few pencilled amendments and seven beautiful sketches. The book came out the next year. It was read with alacrity by children and adults alike. The rumour went around that I'd allowed Rafi to rewrite the story. By then he was my best friend.

## 5

In any exchange of letters there's a writer and a reader: this is invariable. It's hard to explain. I have something to say, to impart, to confess. You listen. And sometimes you, too, start singing, your triumphs and your failures and your little tribulations. But you could be saying all

this to anyone. You're writing to make me write, that's all. Between my letters, waiting for yours to arrive so I can write again, I don't sleep, I walk around the silent house in darkness, I write and erase, erase and write. When I write, it's only to you. I live my day for you, my sleepless nights for my letters. I walk barefoot on the wet grass at dawn and see the gawdy green of parakeet wings weave patterns among the tender green of leaves. A dove in a niche looks like a painted miniature by Mansour. A passer-by kicks a puppy in a lane: it runs screaming to its mother's teat and for the first time ever I want to touch, to caress a dog. I string my words, one by one, on a thread, string fresh jasmine buds and tuberoses on it too, and then I count your words of response, one by one, like the amber beads of my rosary, my friend, my friend, my friend, thirty-three and then thirty-three and thirty-three again.

6

He wrote to me about his childhood when I told him which my favourites were among his stories, how well he wrote about children at play. His stories were a map of India undivided: he wandered around, from his native place in some unknown district near Peshawar to Delhi and back, from North to South and North again, Madras to Kashmir, Karachi to Dehra Dun, sometimes travelling for days to reach wherever his parents were posted from the boarding school in Lahore at which he spent the academic year. I, some years older, spent my early years staying in one place, a little estate – on the border of UP and MP. I was happy too. The youngest child but one, I studied at home: my father taught me Persian and some Arabic, from my mother I learnt Urdu, from an old instructress the Quran. Maths I acquired from my brother. I had no skills with the needle. My father taught at a school in Gwalior, the biggest town nearby; he only came home at weekends. In the holiday season, we travelled around our region to visit our relatives: saw its lakes and rivers, dry land and flat land and sandy stretches and rocks and grassy hills, and always, in their huts, the poor with their cataracted eyes and their sores.

I married Siddiq Saheb when I was seventeen because they said he'd let me study. I was bony, dark and tall and not very pretty; I loved books more than the accepted womanly pursuits. Dr Siddiq Ahmed Khan belonged to a scholarly family from Bhopal, but had moved to Aligarh as a student, and then to Delhi to

work in the new university; a steady, silent man, eighteen years older than me and a childless widower, he wasn't given much to speculation or reverie. In a way, he became another of my teachers. I'd started to write before we married but in our early years together, he'd suggest a subject for an essay, correct the odd ungainly phrase, and always tell me:

'Your writing is your own. Guard it.'

He'd show my work to his friends and, when the time came, send it out to publishers. We had no children except that one little girl who was born dead. Reading became my harbour. Siddiq was a professor of History and Arabic. I taught, too: children from all over our little campus came to me to learn Arabic, Persian, Urdu. I tried to teach the children of the poor along with my students but too often they'd escape me. In the afternoons, when Siddiq Saheb gave his lectures to forty or fifty students, I wrote; once a week I tried to learn to play the sitar, but since I had no great talent as a musician, I took painting lessons instead and was soon producing passable imitations of Abdurrahman Chughtai. In the evenings, I read. Philosophy, history, logic. I had little time in those years for stories. At twenty-two I wrote the book for which scholars of today remember me: a commentary on the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher Shah Waliullah and his doctrine of man's twin nature, angel and beast; his constant search for an accord between the two. My book was an amplification of the dissertation for which, studying privately, I was awarded my degree. Critics said, of course, that my husband had written it: he hadn't corrected a word, though at times he'd told me where to fill in gaps. He would always be my finest editor, never a co-writer. (I didn't write another critical work until much later, my book on Iqbal and his images of the Fallen Angel which won me a prize, but by then I was a professor and rarely wrote fiction, except for children; I was in another city, India was a reborn nation, and all the ones I loved best were gone.)

It was after the book about Shah Waliullah was published that I turned to writing essays – comic, acerbic, satirical. I used what some might call my woman's eye, though until much later I withheld my first name, keeping only its androgynous first letter, so that I could publish in women's journals as well as men's.

Rafi's entrance into my life made me restless. A bold wind would fill my sails and I'd write, write, write. What didn't go into stories went into letters, but more often the letters went into stories. Rafi and I always

wrote in ways that remained unalike but I feel that if he inspired me I, too, encouraged him. Ridding ourselves of our mannerisms, we found our voices, in counterpoint. As the stormy clouds of social evil which had overcast the skies of my stories dispersed to show the occasional fragment of blue, some light fell on a long and unknown road and I came closer and closer to ground truths, dust truths, earth truths. Rafi, in contrast, wrote air, wrote light. But how can we live without air or light?

7

Rashida Zafar. Asrarulhaq Majaz. Our contemporaries, the ones who died young. The boldest and the bravest of us. They were both, unlike you and me, on the far left. I remember Rashida best, who was four years older than I was: I'd meet her at the occasional gathering of the Progressive Writers Association, which Siddiq Saheb and I attended. (Siddiq Saheb and I, fellow-travellers, never could drag Rafi to them. The lefties don't think I'm a real writer, he'd say; too bourgeois, I am, and I don't drone on about despair.)

Rashida told me once that she'd admired my story about the sow. The rest of what I wrote was for housewives, the equivalent of making and breaking old gold jewellery and resetting lustreless stones. She was an activist, not an intellectual: she didn't have time for thinkers, with the exception of Marx and Freud. She was a doctor and a Communist and didn't believe in God. I don't think she'd have had time for my literary essays either. Her stories were of the sort Rafi hated, rocky and muddy. But for all their focus on women's bodily secretions he would never have found in them the stains of genteel tears.

Rashida died young, of cancer. It was anger, not grief, that made her write. Majaz, the firebrand anarchist poet, wrote out of fury too, about our cities and their desolate streets, our yellow dead moon like a priest's turban or the blush of youth on a widow's cheek. He died before dawn, a tramp drunk on a dustheap, on one of those mean streets he'd written about in that long poem that became the anthem of our generation. He was about thirty. His fury was always intertwined with sorrow. He was one of those born to sorrow. As you were born to happiness.

Who causes us more pain? Those who, like Majaz, leave us grieving because they turn their youth into gunpowder? Or those who drive themselves in

service of some greater good and are taken away too young by disease? Or those, like you, who leave a trail of happiness behind them like the scent of jasmine blossoms, and then disappear, one day, like petals scattered on the wind? I'm using the clichés of the traditional poetry I could never write. (You, though you mocked it so adroitly, could spin reams of it impromptu in the rhythm and metre of the classics; you'd parrot the bombastic couplets of the reformists like Hali, parody the fragmented non-verse of a modernist like Majaz. You loved Mir and Dard and Zauq and Iqbal as much as you loved anything that had ever been written or recited. I still have the annotated version of Ghalib's complete poems you left at my door before you went away.)

8

Rafi married. His wife had twin sons. He wrote another book, perhaps his best. I gave him its title, which seemed to fit: *The Angelic Disposition*. (In Rafi's world, there were no beasts. Or even the animals and birds had angelic natures.)

Rafi went abroad. War broke out in Europe, first the phoney war and then the real: we felt it coming close in '41. Rafi was fighting, flying. His letters stopped coming. What made him join Britain's Airforce? He'd never been openly anti-British like Siddiq Saheb, nor a homespun nationalist like I was, but we always felt he sided with us against the Imperialists. What dream of freedom and resistance took him up into the air on war's wings? The love of universal liberty, equality and fraternity? Or the promise of our freedom after we'd sacrificed our lives to someone else's war?

I felt Delhi's red stones weigh down on me now. People forget sometimes that it's a city of monuments, so many of its most exquisite structures tombs, in so many other places – forts, palaces, gardens – tactile shadows of uncounted defeats; reminders, too, of the failed uprising that led to the decimation of a people. I couldn't breathe there. Even the grandiose architecture of the buildings the British had erected echoed, clumsily, the memorials of the past.

I'd always grown up near water; the Jamuna, known to us quite simply as The River, flowed beneath my father's house, just a hundred steps from our back gate, and I'd played there until I was old enough to veil myself, which I did for a very few years before my marriage, but even then, in the evening, with the

women of my family, all of us draped in large shawls, I'd walk along its banks. When the tide ran low, local people would use the fertile soil to plant watermelons and cucumbers. The very same river flowed in Delhi, too, but it had started to run dry; in summer, especially when it didn't rain, it was reduced to a trickle, barely enough for washermen to rinse their piles of soiled clothes in its yellow-brown water. How could we live, I'd ask myself, in such a big city, without a limpid river, without a great body of water?

My restlessness turned into listlessness. I couldn't read or write. I'd always tried to say my prayers five times a day whenever the day's tasks allowed; if I missed a prayer or two I'd say several of them at one time. I remember how, more than once, the words 'Compassionate and Merciful' with which we begin our prayers had brought tears to my eyes, tears that hurt and left me shaking though they were, in a way, tears of joy, and I had to distance myself from that passion but afterwards I'd feel as if I'd been in a cool, cool torrent of rain, or bathed in a waterfall after a very hot day, then dried my wet skin on a piece of the bluest sky. But now if I knelt down to pray I'd see terrifying pictures, they'd burn my closed lids, and the Arabic words would run from my mind.

Once Siddiq Sahib came home from work and found me crying for no reason. He asked me why and I said I was like that peacock in my mother's story, longing for the rain and the sky, but I couldn't hear the music of the rain, I didn't know why the cries of my peacock mates had fallen into silence, and I didn't know where to go and spend my longing.

He took me away from that moribund Delhi winter. I'd accepted visits to shrines in my early years as something traditional women did, and in Delhi I'd only once visited Nizamuddin's tomb not far from where we lived, but now I felt the Chishti saints were calling me. He took me, my gentle husband, to Fatehpur and to Ajmer. At Sheikh Salim's shrine two singers were celebrating the light within us and around us, their enraptured notes seeming to soar towards the midday sun. I tied a string to the wall of his tomb and said, 'O God, bless the saint and bless the ones I love. And I am a tangled skein in your hands, untangle me.'

We went to Ajmer. I threw fistfuls of rose petals on Sheikh Moinuddin's tomb. At the grave of his daughter, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a cool breeze on my forehead. When I turned, no one was there. I paid the water carriers to pour water from their waterskins into the pool. Then I saw Rafi standing there, in loose

green clothes of a local cut. I ran towards him: I called out. He turned, smiled, and didn't answer.

'Who were you calling out to?' Siddiq Saheb asked. 'There's no one we know here.'

9

In a story I'd go back and find you'd come home. I expected you to knock at our door. But you didn't, not then: you came home eleven months later, on leave. You came to visit in your Airforce uniform. So difficult to speak when you're used to writing, to stringing words on fragile chains and watching while they swing, swing. You looked into your white china teacup. My husband went in and out of the room. You stayed silent. You jabbered. You recited poems. You'd published some detective stories, set in the high places of Indian cities, in a journal; you wanted to write some more, and make a book of them. You'd been reading Evelyn Waugh and P.G. Wodehouse in England. You left copies of their novels for me to read, forgetting, perhaps, what a chore it was for me to read English then, and how boring I found British fiction. I forgot to tell you that I was working on that novel I'd wanted to write for so long, and you were my intended reader.

I never asked what you'd been doing or even where you might have been that day in December when I thought I saw you in Ajmer.

You left. On active service. You went to war. You didn't write for months. In 1944 I got your last letter.

Nine to ten weeks after that my gentle husband came home and found me watering the flowerbeds in our little garden. He told me:

'Saadia, you've got to be brave. Your friend … Rafi Durrani was shot down near the Burmese border three weeks ago.'

I didn't say a word; I tripped, and the watering can fell to the grass. I remember water spilling on the grass and some trampled mauve flowers. Siddiq Saheb took me to the sitting room, to the armchair where he usually sat. Sprinkled water on my forehead from a glass, made me a cup of strong salted tea with his own hands.

10

*The second distinctive trait of man ... is his aesthetic sense. While a beast wants that which*

*may quench its thirst and satisfy its needs, man often requires contentment and pleasure beyond his instinctive needs... The second stage of social development is possessed by people living in civilised cities belonging to those virtuous realms that raise men of morals and wisdom. In such places human social organisation tremendously expands, giving rise to increasing requirements ... the third stage ... is reached when various transactions take place between human beings in this society, and elements of greed, jealousy, procrastination, and denial of each others' rights crop up, giving rise to differences and disputes. In such a state of affairs, there appear some individuals who are ruled by low passions and are disposed to commit murder and loot ...*

So said the sage, Shah Waliullah.

11

People write about the dead. His sister and his friend Razia wrote about Majaz. Rashida's husband, and so many others, those who knew her and those who didn't, wrote about her. They forgot you. And I never wrote about you. What would I have said? I kept a diary, hoping to celebrate our freedom from the British. Instead, I wrote about discovering how much I loved Siddiq Saheb after he fell under some fanatic's pickaxe on a Delhi street: the bastard didn't even know whom he was killing, just slaughtered an anonymous Muslim as an object of his hate. (Siddiq Saheb had gone to the slums with a group of others, Hindus and Muslims, to stop the rioting. He didn't let me go with him. He'd sent me into hiding, in another town. I came back to Delhi, despite the dangers, as soon as I heard the news. For three years at least I wished I'd been with him till the end.) Only ninety years after the last pogrom, another: this time, something like a civil war, and many said the departing foreign rulers had carved up the country so badly that it had to be that way. I'd always written carefully, almost cautiously, but now my words came like a haemorrhage, leaving me dizzy and drained, but then some other image of devastation would come back to me and I'd find the flow had gone; I'd have to prick myself, fingertips and breast, to extract drops of blood for ink in which to write. I wrote about seeing the camps of those who'd decided not to leave Delhi, the destitutes in the Old Fort, my attempts

to work with old Gandhi whom, like any other leader, I couldn't really bring myself to trust. People told me how others had died in Punjab, Hindus and Sikhs, and I tried to see in their wan faces and battered bodies the mirrored sadness of my own people; but some of the refugees, too, were killers. In such times, whom does one condemn? Whom forgive?

Your dream, though you loved Delhi so much, was to go to live in Lahore, where you'd been to boarding school and then to college. Maybe you weren't meant to see the carnage in your country. Maybe the war and what you'd seen was all you could bear. The nature of angels you believed in, the nature of beasts you could never bring yourself to describe. (The devil, too, we're told in the first chapter of the Holy Book, was once in the company of angels. He refused to bow down to Adam, God's perfect creation. God exiled him from the garden. He pledged to tempt all but the truest souls to perdition. God let him go his way, where he wanders, leading us into his temptations.)

What did you reckon with in your last hours, before you left us? Did you recognise the devil and the beasts?

Maybe angels should never grow old.

## 12

Like Ghalib in 1857 – though not with his grace – all I'd wanted when I edited my journal into a book and sent it to my publishers was to bear witness to my time. Still more, to write a testament of grief for my husband, to the lost ideals he represented. But no one wanted to publish my book. Sprinkling salt on open sores, they said in that euphoric post-national moment.

So many of those I cared for most, my brothers and sisters and friends, were leaving Delhi, Aligarh, Lucknow; some because they wanted to go, some because they had to. Some, the brave and the patriotic, stayed on. I had nowhere to leave for, no patriotism for any place.

Restless again, I went back to the shrines of the saints from which I had once returned so serene. But when I was there I asked my maker and his messenger and the saints: 'What have you done to us all, to my lost ones, to the dead?' There was no gush of cleansing tears, my eyes were dry. I had come to believe only in the beastly disposition. My angels had gone their way.

I took a train to Lahore in 1953, the year after my friend Rashida died. From Lahore, I went to Karachi by train: I travelled nearly three days. I was forty-two

years old and I'd lived in Delhi since I was seventeen. We'd just about managed on Siddiq Saheb's pittance of a salary and my earnings as a teacher and a journalist, but now, as a widow without a pension, I was destitute. My brother, who'd sent me the train fare, found me a job in a women's college in Karachi. I lived with his family in Bath Island, not far from the sea, which sometimes wafted the salt odour of fish through our open window. It took me time to get used to the camels and the palm trees and the sandstorms and the sea.

I published my memoir in 1961. They gave it the title *Partition*s; I'd called it *The Nature of Beasts*. I did my doctorate at fifty, on the influence of Rumi and Shah Waliullah on Iqbal's metaphysics. I wrote about Iqbal's vision of Iblis the Fallen, the adversary who claimed to love God more than any of His creations; that, too, became a book.

I've lived in Karachi since I arrived, neither foreigner nor native, but a citizen. (I'll be buried here, too, when the time comes.) About my involvement in social services and the local assembly to which I was elected and my internal exile during the Zia's years, I'll stay silent. I'll abstain, too, from describing the pleasure of watching my brother's children grow, and how I realised, when they became adults, that they'd only notionally been my children, and the notion was mine alone.

In my sixties, when Pakistan was thirty-odd years old and once again divided, I painted and exhibited. When that peacock longing came back sometimes, I'd always painted, anonymous shadowy forms, hunchbacks with downcast faces and veiled figures in shadowy colours, but in their shadows, which people read as metaphors of national darkness, I sometimes glimpse an unintentional resemblance to something I've lost: a smile, the angle of a shoulder, the turn of a neck, a dark lock falling on a forehead.

For a long time I missed that husband whose affection I'd soaked in through my pores and never consciously returned, accepting it as my natural reward. I missed him in that way you never know you'll miss someone who has always been with you until they're gone. Now, when I'm alone sometimes, I feel he's with me.

For a while I felt I should have gone to live in Lahore, the city in which, though he lived so long elsewhere, Rafi set some of his finest stories. But Karachi was a city where no ghosts waited for me. At the time I left I couldn't have faced another city that, like Delhi, still stank of death.

13

It was thirty years before I saw Delhi again. I'd finally completed the novel I'd abandoned because I felt there was no one left to read it after Rafi and Siddiq Saheb died. I'd stopped painting when my sight started dimming, and found the manuscript hidden between the pages of an old album, reading it with the interest with which one reads the work of a stranger and hears the remote echoes of a lost, familiar voice. I went back to work on it, changing little of what was there but adding several new chapters because I'd forgotten how it was meant to end. Somehow, I felt, it was a tribute to my lost ones, to whom I dedicated it. After a warm reception in Pakistan it had been published in India as well, in Urdu and in Hindi. People had almost forgotten I'd ever written fiction. The books on Iqbal, Walliullah, and Partition (all translated into English), a handful of stories and retold folktales for children – and my paintings, too – were what I was known for to two or three generations. But my two names, Dr Saadia S. Farooqi for my non-fiction and Saadia Sultan, with which I signed my paintings, made many people think I was two women. At one point a fine young woman wanted to publish an English translation she'd done of "The Sow" in an anthology of women's writings, but in that odd climate of military censorship they asked me if I couldn't make my Suwwariya into an ewe or a she-ass and I, once again, refused.

My novel started with the line, 'I was watering flowerbeds in my garden when my husband came through the gate, put his hand on my shoulder and said '...' But it wasn't about Rafi. It was about a young man, mischievous, but sensitive, something like I imagined Rafi to have been as a child or a youth, who loves his cousin. He goes to the city to make a living for himself, as a writer and radio artist, and when he has his first success he receives a note from his childhood friend to say he's marrying the girl the hero loved and left behind. Later, he dies.

It's told from three points of view, the woman's, the man's, his friend's, and finally the woman's again. Strange, but the husband's voice is my favourite: he marries his best friend's beloved and spends his life regretting the pain he's caused. A story (if there is a story, rather than a sequence of events) so much like one of Rafi's. But mine is over three hundred pages long, laden with the sort of descriptions Rafi delighted in when he read my prose, of rituals and customs and male pursuits and womanly things.

Just as they'd read my memoir of my husband and my widowhood as a document of Partition, they saw this anachronistic love story, this fantasy of youth, as a memorial of undivided India and its vanished gentry. I admit it's a world peopled with shadows. I couldn't summon them back, all the ones I'd loved, only their shadows.

I was seventy-two when I went back to visit Delhi. In a city now strange to me where my friends were geriatrics or phantoms and the places of my past were derelict, some young journalist asked:

'Why don't you write another volume of your memoirs? You had so many illustrious contemporaries: Rashida, Majaz, Ismat, Anis Begum, Faiz, Manto, Rafi ...'

I said, I remember them well, Rashida was the Communist and doctor, who spent her life in service to a greater good and whose ideals, in the end, were grander than any earthly love, though she refused to traffic with heaven; and Majaz was the anarchist firebrand, who in the end drove everyone away from his fire and was consumed by his own flames, as if he could only find redemption on the devil's path from the torture of the world around him.

But what could I say about Rafi? That he keeps company with angels?

Ours was a friendship that began and ended with letters. In between those, a fistful of meetings. How many times, after all did I meet him, talk to him alone, see him face to face? Seven times, nine, over about as many years? His letters to me I keep, and sometimes I've thought of collecting them into a little volume, but there's little more than a chronicle of daily events in them, and the odd quotation from something he was reading, or a word of encouragement to me about some idea for a story I'd mentioned. It's his spidery writing, peppered with English words in capitals, I study once in a while; and I contemplate the handful of pen-and-ink sketches of me he made on the backs of scrap paper; sometimes I was there and didn't realise he was sketching me, because he was so often doodling with a pen in his hand, and sometimes he'd caught me in his memory's eye (I know this now and think of it with pleasure). These things bring back more about him than any portrait.

And my letters to him: God knows where they went? His stories, and his comments on my writings, were how I knew him best. I wonder what he did with those letters of mine, whether he kept one or two with him, carried them in a pocket or a wallet wherever he went. I wish I could have them back to see the person I

was then, the I that Rafi, in so short a while, made me imagine into being.

What remained of his presence I put into Saif, my novel's mild-mannered, slightly melancholy hero. Another of my failures. The tenderness and laughter and light that were Rafi I couldn't recapture. But I did give my hero one of Rafi's characteristics – I'd noticed it every time I saw him – on one of his long thin hands, the left, a malformed little finger.

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