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Prafulla Ray, John W. Hood

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Where There Is No Frontier

When, after fifty-one years, Abdur got down apprehensively from the second-class compartment of the train at Azimabad station, the winter sun was starting to decline in the western sky. The sunlight had lost its shine and was the colour of faded turmeric, and the north wind gusted like a mad, unbridled horse.

His full name was Abdur Hussein. He was sixty, of medium height and slender build. There were heavy shadows under his eyes, and he had prominent jawbones. His eyesight was no longer strong, and he wore heavy-framed glasses. His whole body bore the marks of age: his skin was rough and wrinkled, and his hair and beard mostly grey.

Abdur was wearing a very crumpled pajama and a sherwani, over which he had a long-sleeved woollen pullover. Even that was not enough to stop the indomitable cold of north India, so over the pullover he had a thick woollen shawl wrapped around himself. On his feet he wore heavy sandals. He carried a large leather suitcase in his right hand and, in the other, a holdall containing his pillow, a thin mattress, a pair of blankets, a bedcover, and sundry odds and ends.

Two years after Partition, when he was nine, Abdur and his family left Azimabad for West Pakistan and settled in Karachi, where they lived in the very crowded part of the old city, a locality that became a colony for Mohajirs, the Urdu-speaking Muslim refugees from India.

He had two reasons for coming back to India after fifty-one years. One was to go to Ajmer Sharif; the other was to come to Azimabad and visit his elder sister, Fatima, who had remained behind when the family went to Pakistan after Partition. Many people had told them that they would have no security in India and that their future would be bleak, so it did not make sense for them to risk staying. However, Fatima's father-in-law, Sheik Badruddin, was a dogged character who said simply that he and his family would not be leaving his country, the land of his birth, for anywhere. Let happen what may.

Before Partition and for some time after, there had been clashes between Hindus and Muslims that had culminated in arson, bloodshed, and

murder. No person of either community would trust anyone of the other; there prevailed only mutual hatred, malice, and suspicion. Once the terror had reached a height for the Muslims and groups of them started leaving for West Pakistan, Badruddin still did not succumb to mistrust of others, believing that not all men had lost their humanity.

It was not possible for an ordinary man like Abdur to travel from Pakistan into India at the drop of a hat. After days of running around and experiencing all sorts of harassment, he had almost given up hope when he was given a fifteen-day visa. Having left Karachi by plane, he had to travel by train from Delhi to Ajmer Sharif. From there he had come to visit Fatima in Azimabad. Returning the same way he had come, he would have to go back to Delhi and take the plane to Karachi.

Abdur had arrived in India some seven days back. When he was leaving home, people had warned him again and again that Muslims, especially Pakistanis, were unsafe in India. In the seven days since arriving in India, he had done a lot of traveling by train, bus, and taxi, but so far he had had no reason to believe that there was any threat to him at all. India was a huge country with millions of people, and no one had even looked at him twice. However, for the few days that he would be there he would have to be careful. He would not neglect the warnings of his neighbours in Karachi.

Abdur got down from the train and waited, looking all around with immense wistfulness in his eyes. He was not alone, as many other passengers had got down from the train too, and a good many people all over the platform were waiting with their luggage to go to various destinations. The whole station concourse was bustling.

When his family had relocated to Karachi, Abdur had been terribly nostalgic for Azimabad, but after a few years he no longer felt that way. Thousands of other Muslim families had left India and crossed the border with them, and because he had a new country, new friends, school, and his studies, the insignificant town of Azimabad in some corner of Uttar Pradesh started to become as vague as a remote star. At the end of the winter day he returned, however, all his memories started to come back, one after the other.

Abdur recalled the one-storey red building of the station of fifty-one years earlier and its platform spread with brick dust. Since then, there had been some additions. The platform in those days had been bare, but at one end of it there was now an imposing shelter, set up to offer passengers protection from the rain and the intensity of the sun. Abdur also noticed, close to the ticket counter, a big stall where tea was available and many types of sweets were on display in a glass showcase; above the showcase were big glass jars with a variety of biscuits and savoury items, and beside the jars was a stack of loaves of bread. The tea stall too had not been there before.

Fifty-one years back, Azimabad had been an insignificant station with only a couple of up trains and a couple of down trains running through in

a whole day. There would be a bit of activity when the trains came in, but for the rest of the time the entire station concourse would remain quiet and still, as though sunk in a profound sleep. Both up and down trains used to run along a single line, but now another pair of tracks were laid out, and on the other side of the line a new platform, also with a shelter, had been built.

As he stood at the station, it seemed to Abdur that since Partition there had been a great increase here in the number of people and their hustle and bustle and constant come and go. He was reminded of Karachi and how many people were there when his family arrived after Partition. In fifty-one years, there had been a population explosion, and dense crowds were everywhere all the time. Indeed, all over the world people were increasing like insects, so why should Azimabad be any exception?

Abdur brought himself out of his reminiscing. He looked at the passengers on the platform for a few moments but did not recognise any face, though it soon occurred to him that the people he knew in Azimabad when he went to Karachi would have changed so much that he would not be able to recognise them anyway. Moreover, how could he say how many of the people he knew then were still alive? And even if they were, there was no reason to think that they would have all come to the station right then. And if anyone should remember him, was there any resemblance at all between his boyhood appearance and the way he looked now? Surely no one in Azimabad would know him.

Abdur waited no longer but moved with the throng towards the gate.

When he had arrived in India some seven days back, he bought a post-card from a post office in Delhi and wrote a note to his elder sister, Fatima, telling her that he would very soon be visiting her, but he was not able to say with certainty on what day he would arrive. She would probably send one of her sons to the station. But would the man be able to recognise Abdur? Fatima's eldest son had been only one when they had left for Pakistan. Who could say what that one-year-old boy looked like now? Anyhow, if no one came to pick Abdur up from the station, he would have no trouble finding Fatima's house in the northern part of the town. And now as he set foot in Azimabad, the old picture of its streets and its various localities started to appear before his eyes.

The ticket collector, wearing a black coat, was standing at the gate. After giving him his ticket, Abdur walked a few yards away to the flight of stone steps, and although they had all been damaged by the constant tread of feet, they were still much as they had been at the time of Partition. On his way down, Abdur remembered that there had been altogether twenty-five steps; he counted them, and the number was still the same. Memory, with its secret storehouses, is a strange thing.

When he reached the bottom of the steps, Abdur was struck by how busy it all was. At the time of Partition, there had been a narrow brick-dust road here, on one side of which were three or four shops with tarpaulin

awnings and cracked tin roofs. The shops sold tea or paan and biris. On the other side, a few tongas would stand, waiting for passengers. The tonga drivers and their horses would doze for almost the whole day, as though they had been weighed down by the deep and unending indolence of this remote place. The appearance of the area had totally changed. The old brick-dust road had been sealed and enlarged so that it was ten times wider, and on both sides were rows of shops as far as the eye could see. Four or five feet of the road had been taken over by the shopkeepers for the display of their wares, while in the shops, crowds of people buzzed around like flies. The scene was exactly the same as that of the station area in any mofussil town in Pakistan, and in this regard there was no difference between the two countries.

Abdur noticed a line of tongas waiting under some luxuriant pipal trees. At the time of Partition, there would not have been more than three or four tongas; now there were at least ten. There were also many autorickshaws under some trees on the opposite side. Who could say when they had come on the scene, for there had been no autorickshaws when Abdur's family had left India. Old Karachi swarmed with autorickshaws, but Abdur did not really like to travel in them, and so he went to the tonga stand under the pipal trees. He hired one and climbed up with his suitcase and his holdall, and the middle-aged driver set off.

The road was a confusing turmoil of hordes of pedestrians, bullock drays, autorickshaws, tongas, vans, handcarts, and so on. Brandishing a whip that hissed in the breeze, the tonga driver kept on shouting at the top of his voice, "Come on, get a move on! Get out of the way!" And it was not only him; other drivers of tongas, autorickshaws, and vans all called out in the same manner as they forced their way through the traffic. It took fifteen or twenty minutes to get clear of the station precinct, and then the road was a lot less busy.

Azimabad town was quite a way from the station. Abdur recalled clearly a brick-dust road joining the station with the town; they were now travelling along it, but it was no longer how it used to be. Fifty-one years ago, there had been vast stretches of stony land with bushes and jungle on each side. Since then, the jungle had been cleared, and in its place were countless big houses and an occasional temple.

The sun had now sunk in the west and was obscured by the taller houses. The dim reddish glow that lingered in the sky would last only a few more minutes and then the winter evening would come down. The arrangements were almost complete, for the day was no sooner coming to its end than the dew was falling softly all about and the north wind was like the blade of a knife, cutting at exposed parts of the body.

However, Abdur had not noticed the decline of the winter's day in this mofussil town of Uttar Pradesh. Suddenly he called to the tonga driver, "Hey, brother!"

The driver, wrapped in a grey blanket, looked over his shoulder and said, "Yes?"

"The town has changed quite a lot, hasn't it?" Abdur said.

"Oh, yes."

Gesturing to both sides of the road, Abdur said, "Once all that was open land."

The tonga driver was a very courteous man who knew how to be respectful to his passengers. Looking in front of him, he answered, "Yes. Now you won't find a hand's breadth of open space in this town. Just houses and houses." He paused for a moment, then went on, "To my mind the town's become too big!" He was very likely an uneducated man, given his pronunciation of "town" as "tone."

"As the population grows, so does the town," said Abdur.

"True."

Around the neck of the spirited horse drawing the tonga was a string of brass bells that, with the rhythm of the animal's movement, made a sweet, melodious sound. Sitting on the thick piece of sackcloth placed over the hard and cold seat on the timber decking, Abdur felt that in this ancient carriage he was being taken back to an existence now fifty-one years past. It was a strange thing that, having come such a long way from distant Karachi to see Fatima, he should recall the faces of Ramu, Lachhman, and Dhanua. He thought of so many others too, whose names he had forgotten. All of them had been his friends and playmates in the same class at the Azimabad primary school.

As Abdur thought of Dhanua, an image of his friend's face suddenly appeared clearly. He recalled how long back Dhanua's father, Lajpat Singh, and his mates had started a riot in Azimabad just before the Partition. Despite the friendship of the sons, Abdur's family was not spared, and those men tried to burn the family's house down. Who knew if Lajpat Singh was still alive? If he were, how would he react to Abdur's sudden arrival from Pakistan? Deep down, Abdur felt very ill at ease.

Having set foot after a long time in the land of his birth, Abdur found all kinds of thoughts invading his mind; no sooner had one gone than another came. His anxiety over Lajpat Singh did not last very long, however, as he recalled two tonga wallahs, Fakira and Hanif. Fakira was a truly fine fellow. Sometimes, if he did not have any passengers, he would let Abdur and his friends get up onto the tonga, and he would take them on a round of the streets of Azimabad. Hanif, though, was terribly quick tempered and peevish, as though every few minutes the blood was rushing to his head. He would not let Abdur and his friends even come close to his tonga, and if they did, he would let out a stream of abuse. However, Abdur and his friends were very persistent, and while Hanif was looking ahead, perhaps driving the tonga, they would quietly go behind and swing from the decking. But Hanif had ten pairs of eyes and could sense all that was going on,

and without even turning around he would brandish his whip at the back while the tonga kept going.

“Brother!” Abdur called.

“Yes?” the tonga wallah answered immediately.

“Do you know Fakira and Hanif? They must be very old. Are they still alive?”

“Who are they?”

“A long time ago they drove tongas in this town.”

The driver thought for a few moments and suddenly, as though he had just remembered, said, “Oh, yes, I remember. Uncle Hanif and Uncle Fakira stayed in the old quarter of the town. But they both died ten or twelve years ago.”

Hearing of the death of two men familiar to him in his childhood made Abdur feel a little sad. When his family went to Pakistan, Hanif and Fakira would not yet have been forty. If they had died ten or twelve years ago, they would have been at least seventy-four or seventy-five—not a short span of life. Most people do not live as long. Nevertheless, he still felt heavy hearted for the two tonga wallahs.

A little river called the Motiya flowed through the middle of the town of Azimabad. When they came to it, Abdur was dumbfounded. In his boyhood days, a sturdy timber bridge over it joined the two parts of the town. Pedestrians, tongas, cycle rickshaws, bullock and buffalo drays, and a few motor cars all used it to go from one side to the other. But not a splinter of that old timber bridge remained. In its place was a concrete bridge three times as wide, with footpaths and a row of lampposts on each side.

As they crossed the bridge, Abdur asked, “I say, brother, when did this bridge replace the old one?”

“About thirty, thirty-five years ago,” said the driver.

Abdur asked no more questions as he looked wistfully at the bridge. It seemed that very little remained of the Azimabad of his childhood.

The driver turned around and said, “Can I ask you something?”

Abdur was a little surprised. “Yes, yes. Go ahead.”

“Listening to you speak, it seems that you’re returning to this town after a very long time.”

“I am.”

“Did you live here?”

“Yes.”

“Where do you live now?”

The tonga wallah’s curiosity was innocent and there was nothing suspicious in the questions he was asking, but in a flash Abdur was reminded of his neighbours’ repeated warnings that he not let anyone know, as far as was possible, that he was a Pakistani.

Abdur retreated for a moment. He had lived in India until he was nine years old, and in that time he had never set foot outside of Azimabad

except for a visit once to Agra and Delhi. After going to Karachi, what little connection he had had with India faded in time so that he now knew almost nothing of the country. Of course, he had heard the names of a few big cities, and on arrival from Karachi he had landed in Delhi, where he had once gone in his childhood. Aside from Delhi, he knew only such names as Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Cuttack, and Bangalore. Almost in a panic then, Abdur said, "I live in Calcutta." He tried for the life of him to sound natural lest the driver should be in any way suspicious.

"Calcutta's not all that far away," said the tonga wallah, "yet you're coming here after so long a time!" He sounded quite surprised.

It suddenly seemed to Abdur that the man was becoming nosy, cross-examining him like a lawyer. What if he should carelessly answer some question and so create difficulties for himself? He would have to stop the man. Casually, Abdur said, "There are so many problems with my business..." He did not go on any further.

Cordially the tonga wallah asked, "Do you have any family here—father, mother, any relatives?"

To have answered the tonga wallah truthfully would have invited many other questions, some of which might have made Abdur quite uncomfortable. Quietly and indistinctly, he muttered something incomprehensible. The driver guessed that he was not going to get an answer to his question, and he said nothing more.

The tonga had crossed the bridge and gone over to the other side. Here the road ran through the most privileged quarter of Azimabad. Inside the large compounds were grand mansions of a bygone age, and in front of these were flower gardens, lawns, and pebbled driveways. Fifty-one years ago, each home had a carriage pulled by a healthy horse with a shiny coat; in only a few was there a motor car. The upper-class neighbourhood was much the same as it had been before, except that it had grown many times larger.

Apart from just one Jankinath, Abdur could not remember the people to whom these houses once belonged. He remembered the name of Jankinath because two years before Partition, the English District Magistrate had come to Jankinath's house from the district town. Abdur had heard from his father that the white saheb was a high-ranking officer and that such an important man had never before been to Azimabad.

There had been great excitement in the quiet, insignificant little town. Jankinath-ji, dressed in an expensive coat and trousers and wearing on his head a turban of five yards of cloth, had gone directly to the station, along with the other important people of Azimabad. In order to prevent the dust of the town from getting onto the shoes of the District Magistrate, a red jute carpet had been spread over the entire platform and the steps leading down to the road, and to impress such a historical event on the memories of the people of Azimabad forever, Jankinath-ji had brought four musical

bands from Allahabad. Abdur's father had told him that a Muslim chef from a famous hotel had also been brought in.

Abdur remembered how Jankinath-ji had taken the DM to his own house in an open carriage drawn by six horses. An attendant dressed in a splendid uniform stood on a platform at the back of the carriage, all the while holding a colourful silk umbrella over the DM. Abdur could still remember the scene, for in those times the visit of an English DM was a truly grand event in such a small town, and in order to see him in person the people of Azimabad had crowded together on both sides of the road. Abdur's father had taken him along.

In front of the procession were two of the bands; then came Jankinath-ji's carriage as the guide, followed by the DM's carriage in the middle, after which came a number of the distinguished citizens of Azimabad. Bringing up the rear of this splendid cavalcade were the other two bands.

Within three months of the DM's visit, Jankinath was awarded the title of Rai Bahadur. One night on returning home, Abdur's father had broken the news in a voice full of pride and excitement, for there could never have been a Rai Bahadur in Azimabad up until then. In his childhood days, Abdur was not able to appreciate how much honour was attached to the title and to the one who received it, but it had seemed to be something quite momentous.

Abdur wondered if Jankinath was still alive. He stopped himself from asking the tonga wallah lest his curiosity should provoke an unwelcome question in return. He then noticed that evening had started to fall. Lights were on in the houses, the rows of streetlights were lit, and the cold was more intense.

They reached the locality at the far northern end of Azimabad with its very many houses; one part of it was a Muslim quarter, the other Hindu. The locality was much the same as it had been fifty-one years before, and Abdur had no trouble recognising it. He got down from the tonga with his suitcase and holdall, paid the fare, and had a good look around at the maze of unprepossessing houses of the old locality, the Muslim quarter much duller than the Hindu one. Even on this winter evening, many people were in the streets. Abdur remembered that Fatima's father-in-law's house was very close, about a five-minute walk from the main road, and that a little further in was Abdur's old family home.

Many narrow lanes led into the Muslim quarter, but Abdur quickly realised that after all these years he had no idea which one he should take to get to Fatima's house. Fatima's husband's name had been Sheikh Ziaul. If Abdur mentioned his name, surely someone or other would be able to point out the house to him. He was just about to ask someone on the street when two men came out from an alley on his left. One of them was his age, heavy looking and of medium height; he had a bushy moustache and wore a dhoti and a full shirt, over which was a warm shawl, and on his head was a woollen cap. He was evidently a Hindu. His companion was in his mid

thirties, thin, and frail looking; he had a longish face, big eyes, sharp nose, and a tidy, well-trimmed beard. He wore a pajama and long kurta, over which was a thick woollen sweater, and a round cap was on his head. It could be assumed that he was a Muslim.

The two men walked straight up to Abdur. The elder man—the Hindu—looked at Abdur and kept his eyes on him for a few moments. Then he asked, “Are you Abdur Hussein?”

Abdur was taken aback. He said, “Yes, I am. But I do not recognise you.”

Immediately the man cried out, “You old owl! You ass! I’m Dhanno—Dhanua!”

In their childhood, Dhanua had been rather skinny and frail. Who would ever have thought that fifty-one years later he would have put on so much weight! There was not the slightest resemblance between the boy of those days and the Dhanua of today. However, one thing had remained the same: the intensity of his expression of emotion. He was always loud, for he could not speak without shouting.

Abdur could not have imagined meeting his boyhood friend in this way. Yet he was very much taken by Dhanua’s heartiness, which momentarily returned him to their childhood. Abdur embraced him, saying, “After so many years, we are meeting, Dhanno!”

“So many years!” Dhanua—or Dhanpat—said, “We’ve now grown old. Who would have thought that I would ever meet you again in this life!”

There was a pause. Then Dhanpat, indicating the young man beside him, said, “Of course, you don’t recognise him. He’s Latif, sister Fatima’s younger son, your youngest nephew.”

When Abdur and his family had left for Pakistan, Latif had not yet been born, and now, when the long journey of Abdur’s life was drawing to a close, he had come to India without any knowledge of this nephew.

Latif bent to touch his uncle’s feet, and Abdur raised him up and held him close. He said, “My boy, may you live for a hundred years.”

A few moments later, Latif picked up Abdur’s suitcase and Dhanpat took the holdall. Abdur objected, but Dhanpat exclaimed, “Hey, you old owl, you’re a guest in India. Please let us welcome you. Come on.”

They went into the alley opposite Latif first, followed by Abdur and Dhanpat walking side by side.

Dhanpat said, “Since sister Fatima got your letter, Latif and I have been going to the station two or three times every day. But there are seven or eight trains a day coming here from Allahabad, and we didn’t know which one you’d be coming on. We were both going again just now when we saw you getting down from the tonga. But if you had sent a letter letting us know, then—”

“I didn’t know how long I would be at Ajmer Sharif, so how could I tell you on what day I would leave there for Azimabad?”

“Oh, I see,” said Dhanpat, slowly nodding his head.

Abdur asked, “My appearance has changed utterly, like yours, so how did you recognise me after all these years?”

“I didn’t. I just guessed.” Dhanpat hurriedly explained that he knew everyone in Azimabad and that Abdur was expected to arrive at any time, any day. When he saw a man of his age getting down from a tonga, it occurred to him that there was an eighty percent chance it would be Abdur.

Abdur smiled.

Then Dhanpat said, “Now tell us all about yourself. What work do you do in Pakistan? How many children have you got? Your wife—”

Abdur interrupted his friend. “You can hear all about me later. But first tell me about yourself.”

Dhanpat gave a rapid two-minute account not only of himself but of various things about the town of Azimabad. After Abdur and his family had left, Dhanpat had not gone very far with his education and had left school after twice failing eighth class. After spending a few years as an unemployed layabout aimlessly wandering, he eventually trained as a motor mechanic at his father’s insistence and then opened a garage. He had made good money. He had a son and a daughter. The boy had passed B.A. and now worked in a government position, living in Lucknow. The girl was married and lived with her in-laws in Allahabad. There were no real problems in his family, though the health of his wife and father were a worry as they both suffered from this disease or that.

Abdur was so overwhelmed with emotion at seeing his old friend after many years and by Dhanpat’s affectionate generosity that he had momentarily forgotten Dhanpat’s father, the Rajput kshatriya Lajpat Singh, and those other men who, at the time of the riot just before Partition, had set fire to Abdur’s house. So many people like Lajpat had been the reason for his family’s going to Pakistan, people who nurtured immense anger and hatred for Muslims. Their murderous and violent looks at the time of the riot were indelible in Abdur’s memory. It had seemed then that they would rip him and his family to shreds, but somehow, by the mercy of Allah, the family had survived. However, Abdur’s fear had lingered for a long time after moving to Karachi.

In fact, Abdur was stung by the news that Lajpat Singh was still alive, and a strange pang of fear erupted inside him.

Dhanpat continued, not looking at Abdur, telling him that none of the prominent citizens of those times was still alive. Rai Bahadur Jankinath, the big businessman Mahavirprasad Shrivastav, and the government lawyer Baburam Gupta and all their ilk were now dead, but all of Abdur’s close boyhood friends were still alive. Ramu had made millions as a contractor and lived in the grand mansion he had had built in Lucknow, coming to Azimabad for a few days once every year or two. Lachhman had got his degree in science and taken up a position in Delhi with a noted pharmaceutical company. Baiju, of course, was still in Azimabad and had a

number of warehouses beside the Motiya river that stocked rice, paddy, wheat, sesame, linseed, and mustard seeds. It was a family business that Baiju now supervised.

Dhanpat also remarked that the old times had completely changed. Apart from the riot, Azimabad had gone a long time without any disturbance. It had been a peaceful town, free of agitation, through which the stream of life flowed slowly. However, after a few years, bloodshed, highway robbery, and bank holdups increased remarkably, and for this the political leaders who came after Independence were very much to blame. They gave refuge to ruffians and gun-wielding thugs who helped them hold on to power. At election time, these scoundrels cast fake votes, the genuine voters not going near the voting booths for fear of the pistols and bombs. Those who created the parliamentarians would get away with murder and robbery, and the leaders would not lift a finger. Should the police arrest any of these hired thugs, a phone call to the station would ensure his immediate release. The leaders had given them licence to do as they pleased.

Dhanpat was still talking when they reached the house of Fatima's father-in-law, an old-style, two-storey home. Through the main door was a paved courtyard, on one side of which were a bathroom and a kitchen. Facing three sides on both storeys were many other rooms.

The house had been hazy in Abdur's memory, but now everything was starting to come back to him. Fatima's father-in-law had had it built just before her marriage. The new house had been painted crimson, and the doors and window frames green, and it had had a sparkling appearance. How he used to enjoy coming here from time to time after his big sister's wedding! But the house was no longer what it once had been. The plaster was coming off various parts of the walls, exposing the brickwork; the cornices were broken; and in one place, the head of a banyan sapling was poking through. And there were so many cracks in the courtyard! The house had gone a long time without proper maintenance, and its days seemed numbered—with luck, maybe ten or twelve years.

Lights were burning in all the rooms as they crossed the courtyard and entered the main part of the house. There was an amazing stillness all around them; yet once there had been so many people in that house, and all the time, the noise of children running about resounded from the ground floor to the roof. Now there seemed to be no one but the three of them, although the sound of sizzling coming from the kitchen meant that someone was cooking.

Inside was a wide passage, on the left of which were three rooms and on the right of which was the staircase leading to the upper floor. Many of the steps had become damaged and uneven. Going up the broken staircase behind Latif, Abdur suddenly felt anxiety welling up inside. He had come to see Fatima for the first time since he had left for Pakistan as a nine-year-old boy, a long fifty-one years ago.

Latif led him and Dhanpat into a huge room that Abdur recognised as the bedroom of Fatima and her husband, Sheikh Ziaul. Electric lights were burning from the tops of the walls on two sides. As far as Abdur could remember, the decor of the room had not noticeably changed. As before, there were three or four bulky almirahs, an old-fashioned dressing table, a few cushions, a couple of chairs, and the like. Right in the middle was an immense crafted bed, beside which were three or four small, low tables. A few feet away was a television set on a high stand.

Under a thick layer of dirt, the furniture was dark and dull. Evidently, it had not been polished for quite a long time.

The grubby bed was made up on a mattress a foot thick; an elderly lady was lying on it and had a blanket over her. She had a thin, emaciated face, pure-white hair, a broad brow, and a dull look in her eyes. Seeing the three men, she turned aside and groped beside the pillow for her glasses, put them on, and said in a weak voice, "Oh, Dhanno and Lati, you have come!" Apparently, Lati was the pet name of Latif.

"Yes, Mother," said Latif.

Now wearing her glasses, the lady—Fatima—said, "There's someone with you. Who is it?"

In a gently jocular tone, Dhanpat said, "Oh, Sister, you ask who? Can't you recognise him?"

Fatima slowly raised herself up and fixed her gaze intently on Abdur's face for some moments, as though searching. She then took a breath and said, "Is it you, Munna, come from Pakistan?"

How many years had it been since Abdur had heard his pet name! After the deaths of his mother and father, no one had called him by it, and he had quite forgotten about it. But Fatima had not forgotten.

Abdur looked straight at Fatima. When his family had left India, there was an album amongst their chattels. It contained photos of Fatima's wedding, of the wondrous fairy princess his sister had seemed to him then. And now before him was this aged, bedridden, frail lady, like a heap of ruins. The blood of the same parents ran through the veins of both of them, yet how remote was the woman. He was Pakistani, she Indian; between them was not only a fifty-one-year estrangement, but also a virtually impenetrable frontier.

As he looked at this ageing and frail old woman, his heart ached terribly, and from its depths there emanated something like a howl that seemed to gather into a lump and stick in his throat, so his breathing was stifled. It was as though by some strange and mystic force he had crossed the frontiers of time and geography and was now returning to his childhood.

Nevertheless, he tried to speak, but at first his throat seemed choked. He almost ran and sat beside Fatima, and then with great difficulty he gave voice to his words. "Yes, Sister, I am indeed your Munna."

Embracing Abdur's head with her two frail and trembling hands, Fatima burst into sobs. Through her tears she said, "You remembered me after all this time! I've grown very old. It won't be long before I'll be no more. I'll be under the ground." Her body writhed in a cascade of sobbing.

Abdur was infected by Fatima's emotion. He had, indeed, endured much tumult in the last fifty-one years. Riots, murders, arson, Partition, leaving India and going to Pakistan—it had all been a continual struggle for survival, one that had hardened him. He did not cry easily, but at that moment he felt that his eyes were bursting with tears. His voice choking, he said, "Don't cry, Sister. Don't cry."

But Fatima's crying did not stop; rather, her tears flowed even more.

After a short while, Fatima settled down a little and took her hands from around her brother's head. Under the strain of her sobbing, her breathing had become heavy. Abdur said, "You are getting distressed, Sister. Lie down now."

But Fatima remained sitting up. Catching her breath, she said, "After all these years I am seeing you again. How can I lie down?"

"I'll stay beside you. You can talk lying down." With great affection, Abdur supported his elder sister by the shoulder and helped her to lie down. Taking her frail hand in his own, he asked, "How did you get like this?"

It was Latif who answered the question, explaining that Fatima had had a stroke three years back. On top of that, she had developed a liver ailment and shortness of breath. Indeed, he couldn't reckon the number of ailments that had come to occupy his mother's weak body.

Alongside Latif, Dhanpat spoke up. "Look at this," he said, pointing to a bedside table on which there were bottles of various kinds of medicines and countless packets of capsules and tablets. "Your elder sister survives by the doctor and his medicines."

Abdur nodded slowly and sadly. He said nothing.

"Abdur," Dhanpat said, "I can't stay any longer. I have to get back to the garage. I'll come again early tomorrow morning." To Fatima he said, "Goodbye, Sister. After all these years, you now have your brother, so don't cry anymore. You'll only make yourself sick."

Once Dhanpat had gone, Abdur asked, "Does he come here every day?"

"Not every day," said Latif. "Usually twice a week, to see how we are getting on. He looks after us."

Fatima said, "That time when I was so sick, he took me to the hospital. I was unconscious for three days, and he stayed there with me day and night. He also set Latif up in business. I can't tell you how much he has helped us. We rely on Dhanno so much. There's no one like him."

Abdur was dumbfounded. The son of Lajpat Singh, who had started the riot in Azimabad and tried to burn down their house, was now the stalwart of Fatima's home! Before Abdur could say anything, Fatima said, "You

have come such a long way on the train, you must surely be tired. No more talk now, while you go and wash your face and hands and change your grubby shirt. Then come back and have some tea with me.” She asked Latif, “Has the bed been made up in Uncle’s room?”

Latif inclined his head. “Yes,” he said.

“Tell Bano to put some hot water in the bathroom and then to make tea and puris and bring them up here. Tell her to bring some sweets too.”

Abdur did not know Bano, but he did not ask about her. He would surely meet her sooner or later.

Latif left the room and came back in a few minutes. Fatima said to her son, “Take Uncle to his room now. Give him some fresh soap and a towel and show him the bathroom.”

Picking up Abdur’s suitcase and holdall, Latif took him to a room on the right. He put the luggage on the floor and switched on the light. It was a very big room, though not as big as Fatima’s, and was exceptionally clean and tidy. In addition to a sturdy and freshly made up bed on one side, were an almirah, some wicker stools and cushions, a wall mirror, a table, and a chair.

Latif said, “This is your room.”

Abdur guessed that the room had been spruced up especially for him. He sat on the chair, took off his shoes and socks, and put them to one side. He opened his suitcase, and as he was taking out a shirt and pajama to wear about the house, it occurred to him again how extraordinarily still the whole place was. Thus far, he had not seen anyone other than Latif and Fatima, though there was someone called Bano, as yet unknown.

For a time after Partition, there had been some correspondence with Fatima’s family, which then became irregular and eventually died out. Through it, however, those family members who had moved had learned that Fatima had two sons and two daughters. Of course, the first son, Niyaz, had been born while Abdur’s family was still in India; the other three had been born after they left. They had also got a letter telling them of the death of Fatima’s father-in-law, Sheikh Badruddin, but Abdur could not remember any news of the death of her husband, Ziaul, reaching Karachi. He had no knowledge of who his nephews and nieces were, how they were, and what they were doing.

Abdur told Latif to sit down and asked him, “Is there anyone other than you and your mother staying in this house?”

“No,” said Latif. He told him that his elder brother, Niyaz, had gone to live in Munger after his marriage. He was heartless and selfish and did not visit the house in Azimabad. The two sisters were married; the elder one, Nurbanu, lived in Rae Bareilly, and the younger, Mumtaz, lived in Saharanpur. However, the two daughters were so busy that they could hardly ever visit.

There was a brief pause, then Abdur asked, “How far did you get with your education?”

“I passed matriculation,” Latif replied.

“What work do you do—service or business?”

“I have a small business. I get stainless-steel utensils from a big merchant in Allahabad and sell them here at five-percent commission.” Latif considered for a moment, then said, “It was Uncle Dhanno who took me to meet the merchant. He stood surety for me and provided the capital so that the business could get established. All my savings had been spent on my sisters’ weddings, so I had to borrow. Of course, I’ve paid him back.”

In Fatima’s father-in-law’s house—as in Abdur’s family home—there had never been strict observance of purdah, and in their younger days Abdur would often take Dhanpat there. Everyone from Sheikh Badruddin down had liked him very much. Even after Abdur had gone to Pakistan, Dhanpat’s coming and going alone to the house had in no way been restricted; later, during hard times, he had always been by Fatima’s side and had put Latif on his feet, even though there was no blood connection between him and Fatima’s family. Even their religions were different. Abdur’s heart was full of gratitude to Dhanpat.

“You’ve not married?” Abdur asked Latif.

“I did, but—”

“But what?”

Looking downcast, Latif said, “The marriage didn’t last.”

“Why not?” Abdur was a little surprised.

Latif told him that he had married a girl from a wealthy home, one used to luxury. She wanted this, she wanted that, and Latif found it impossible to satisfy his wife’s cupidity. The biggest problem was her unwillingness to live with her mother-in-law, an aversion encouraged by her own family. However, Latif could not even think of leaving his mother, and consequently there developed unrest, petty squabbling, and acrimony until eventually the relationship broke down.

After a pause Abdur said, “You are still young. You have a long life ahead of you. Find a nice girl from a good family and get married again.”

Latif explained that there was no certainty that marrying again would fill the family with joy or bring a smile to his mother’s face. Who could say that the same kind of troubles would not start up once more? Better the way he was than that.

Abdur could see that the experience of the first marriage had made Latif wary and unwilling to tread that path again. Abdur would have liked to see his nephew happily married, but what could he do about it? He had come to this country for just a few days; once he had returned to Karachi, the memories of Azimabad would grow dim and the concern he had felt for Latif probably would fade too.

The sound of a woman's voice came up from the ground floor. "Latif-bhai! I've put the hot water in the bathroom."

Although he could not see her, Abdur guessed that the woman must be Bano.

Latif opened an almirah on his right and took out some soap and a fresh towel. "Come on, Uncle," he said.

Having washed his face and hands and changed his clothes, Abdur went back with Latif to Fatima's room. As before, his sister was sitting up on one side of the bed. Almost immediately a big stainless-steel tray bearing puris, halwa, and gulab jamuns was set down by Bano on a fresh white towel laid out beside Abdur on the bed.

Bano had a strong, hard appearance and must have been a little over forty. She was wearing a thick shawl over a cheap chintz salwarkameez. Her skin was of a copper colour, and there were smallpox scars on her fleshy face.

Fatima pointed to Abdur and said to Bano, "This is Uncle, who has come from Pakistan." Then she said to Abdur, "She is like a daughter to me. Four years she's been here now, looking after all the bother of the house. We couldn't survive a day without her."

So Bano was the housemaid, a courteous woman of gentle nature. She bowed and greeted Abdur with "Adab," then said, "I've heard all about you from Latif-bhai and Auntie. We've all been looking forward to your arrival."

Abdur smiled.

Fatima said to Bano, "What are you giving Uncle for dinner tonight?"

"There's some meat, fish, vegetables," Bano replied.

"Prepare it well. Oh, and make some kheer. But before you put it all on the oven, give Uncle some tea." Fatima paused. Sadly she said, almost to herself, "I see my brother after all these years and I can't even cook for him..."

Bano had gone.

After a little while of eating in silence, Abdur said, "I've heard everything from Latif. It's very sad, Sister. I can understand your daughters not being able to come and see you. Girls don't have that freedom after they get married. But why hasn't Niyaz come to Azimabad since his marriage?"

Fatima remained quiet for a while. Then, tapping her forehead with her finger, she said sadly, "I don't blame him. It's my fate."

Abdur sensed that Fatima would make no complaint about her eldest child. After a few moments he said, "And Latif's marriage broke down. He needs a family."

"I've said so many times. But he doesn't agree. What can I do then?"

"How will he get by when you have gone?"

"There's nothing I can do about that. What must be will be."

In other words, Fatima had committed everything to fate. This was very likely part of her becoming old, sick, and frail. All of Fatima's will, all her spirit, had been spent.

Again Abdur was about to say something, but Fatima went on. "You've heard all about us. Yet even though we were born of the one mother, I know virtually nothing about you. I heard the news of Father's and Mother's deaths, but tell me about Asma and Nazzu." Asma and Nazzu—or Nazim—were their sister and brother, who also had gone with their parents to Pakistan.

Abdur told her about them as he went on eating. After Partition, the family went with countless others across the border and straight to Karachi. Nabab Hussein—the father of Abdur, Fatima, and their siblings—and hundreds of thousands of Indian Muslims like him had the idea that if they could reach the land of their dreams, Pakistan, they could hold the moon in the palm of their hands. Their joy knew no bounds as they looked forward to the big mansions that were being made ready for their accommodation. But as soon as they set foot in Karachi, they were sent to a refugee camp and their dreams were shattered.

However, Nabab Hussein was not one to be kept down. He was an exceptionally honest, enterprising, and hard-working man. While staying in the refugee camp, he set about working to restart his life in his new country. With the aid of a government loan, he opened a small cloth shop in the market of old Karachi. He was not willing to remain in the refugee camp, so as soon as he had arranged the finances, he rented two rooms in an old barrack-type house and moved in with his wife and children. The children were then enrolled in school.

Within a few years, the business had grown and its income had increased, so Nabab Hussein left the small shop and opened a big one. With some money he had saved, he bought a house. However, as soon as he had got his family established, he developed a fever and died after a few days. Abdur had just completed his matriculation, Asma was in Class Nine, and Nazim was in Class Seven. They were all thrown into uncertainty.

Abdur had been a very good student. He had thought that he might go as far as a master's degree, but his wish was not to be fulfilled. After mourning their father's death, he took over the shop in order to support the family. His business grew from one shop to three. He had Asma married once she had completed her matriculation. Nazim passed his B.A., took a job in government service, got married, and now lived in the government quarters. Of course, Abdur got married himself after Asma's marriage, but not long before his wedding, another tragedy struck with the death of their mother. Abdur had one son and a daughter. The boy was doing a master's degree in science, and this year the girl would present for her B.A. final examinations, after which her marriage would be arranged.

Although Fatima had got the news of her parents' deaths, she had not known anything about her brothers and sister. She said nothing for a long time, then asked, "Nazzu and Asma are in Karachi then?"

Abdur nodded slowly. "Yes," he said.

"Do you see them?"

"Oh, yes. They visit on holidays. I visit them too."

"They're all well?"

"Yes."

"I really long to see them. But it won't be in this life. Will you tell them to come here if they can?"

"Of course I will."

Somewhat distractedly, Fatima said, "There are often reports in the newspapers of unrest in Karachi."

Abdur explained that Karachi was a big port city and that it had its experience of bloodshed and gunshots. There was, of course, the Sunni-Shia rivalry, but there was also the unwillingness of the original residents to accept on fair terms the Urdu-speaking refugees who had come from India. Although a long time had passed since the birth of Pakistan, they still would not break bread with those who had settled there after fleeing India. As a result, there was continuing mutual mistrust and unrest as well as political turmoil, strikes, mass arrests, police shootings, agitation.

Fatima looked anxious. "None of you have been attacked, though?"

"Don't worry, Sister," said Abdur. "We had to learn to live with all of this as soon as we got there."

Again there was silence. Then Abdur went on, "In Karachi we often hear of serious attacks on Muslims in India. It seems that anyone could be killed at any time. You have no fear of that then?"

Latif was sitting on a chair beside them. He told Abdur that the turbulence created by the destruction of the Babri Masjid had spread to Azimabad, where, after the bomb blasts in Bombay, the situation had become volatile and riots had broken out. The Muslim locality had been targeted. However, Dhanpat and many men like him had put a stop to that. There were also several political parties that had organised peace marches. At that time, Dhanpat and others spent many days defending the Muslim quarter.

"But—," Latif said.

"But what?" asked Abdur.

"Though they don't actually say it, there are many people who don't want us to stay in India. Pakistan was established as a separate state for Muslims—and they say we should go there."

Abdur suddenly felt very concerned for Latif and his people. He said to Fatima, "Sister, I haven't seen you in such a long time. I wasn't aware of all this. If you approve, when I return to Karachi, I will try to bring you and Latif to us there." He did not know what the necessary procedure was or

even how possible it was to bring two Indians across the border, but what he said carried with it his fear and anxiety.

Fatima said, "But just a little while ago, you said that they don't like Indian Muslims. You've been there a long time, so it's all right for you. But if we suddenly turned up, would they be happy about that?"

Abdur was a little embarrassed. He could not think of anything to say.

"There's no need to worry," said Fatima. "Just as there are bad men here, there are also good and honest ones—much more so. I trust in them." She paused for a moment, then said, "After Independence, my father-in-law and my husband wouldn't let any of us leave the country. As long as I live, I'll stay in Azimabad."

There was a resolve in Fatima's tone that was not to be resisted. It was as though she had taken on the doggedness of her father-in-law and husband. She would not leave her country to go anywhere.

A thought suddenly occurred to Abdur, and he said, "Not just Niyaz, I won't have met any of my other nephews and nieces before leaving. I made some guesses and brought salwar-kameez-dopattas, Pathan kurtas, and some cloth for trousers and shirts. I'll give them to you tomorrow. You can pass them on."

Abdur had heeded the warnings of his neighbours in Karachi and had kept quiet about visiting Ajmer Sharif and visiting his elder sister. But when he awoke the next morning, he felt emotionally overwhelmed and restless. He had been born in this town and had spent the first nine years of his life here; not only had he lived here, but his father and his grandfather and his grandfather's grandfather—five generations—had been born, had grown up, had been educated, and had worked in Azimabad. Having come back here after so long, who could say if there were any chance that he would ever return? So he decided that he would look around the town and would visit the house that his family had left behind.

Abdur washed himself, had some tea and breakfast, and asked Latif, "Do you have any pressing work today?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'd like you to come to our old house with me."

"Certainly. You're here for just a few days; I'll come with you."

"It won't be any disturbance to your work?"

"No. I have someone to look after things. From time to time, I'll drop in to check up."

But just as they were about to leave, a great number of people from the Muslim quarter, ranging from young boys to old men, suddenly appeared, all of them with boundless curiosity on their faces. Somehow the word had got around that Nabab Hussein's son had come from Pakistan. Latif brought the older ones inside and offered them seats, while the younger ones crowded outside the door and children peeped through the windows.

One frail-looking old man who must have been eighty or even eighty-five said, "My name is Jan Mohammed. Nabab Hussein was my friend. I heard that your father and your mother had both died. I was very sad to hear it." He paused for a moment, then continued. "Son, I knew you in your childhood so long ago. Your appearance has changed completely."

Abdur was unable to recognise Jan Mohammed, but he could hardly say so directly. He smiled and said, "Uncle, I have now turned sixty. I couldn't look like a boy forever."

"True..." The old man slowly nodded his head.

Another old man asked, "How are you all getting on in Pakistan?"

"We manage," said Abdur.

The other men put to him question after question concerning the state of things in Pakistan, what the people from Azimabad were now doing, who was doing what work, and so on. Abdur told them what he had told Fatima about Pakistan the night before. He also mentioned that the majority of those who had left Azimabad had settled in Karachi and were working in business or service professions. A few families had gone to Lahore, but Abdur had no connection with them and could not say how they were.

In the midst of all the hubbub of their conversation, Dhanpat arrived. He pushed through the crowd into the room and said to the men of the Muslim locality, "What's all this? You've already got news of Abdur?"

As one, they answered yes, then said that they had been hearing about things in Pakistan.

Dhanpat could see, from the way in which Abdur was hemmed in, that he would not be able to easily get away. Yet Dhanpat had decided to take him around the town and, if they had the time, to take him to his own house and his garage.

Trying not to offend anybody, Dhanpat said respectfully, "Uncles, please don't be angry. Abdur will be here for a few days and will go to all your houses. But now, please be so kind as to let him take leave of you."

On hearing Dhanpat's words, the old men insisted that Abdur visit them all and share a humble meal with them. Were they not able to entertain the son of Nabab Hussein, their regrets would know no bounds. Abdur calculated that if he accepted the invitations of so many men, he would have to stay in Azimabad for at least twenty days, and there was no possibility of that. However, as a means of getting away, he promised to eat at all their houses.

After the men had gone, Abdur raised his eyebrows in a look of amusement and asked, "And what was your purpose in driving them all away?"

Dhanpat replied, "I was rescuing you. Otherwise, who knows how long you would have remained captive!" He paused for a moment, then said, "Are you going to just sit here in the house? Come, let me show you the old town."

"I've already asked Latif to do just that. I had no idea that you would come back so early. Just as we were thinking of going out, all the men arrived. But I want to go and see our old house first."

“All right. Let’s go then.”

The three of them left after taking leave of Fatima.

In Abdur’s boyhood, most of the roads in the Muslim quarter were unpaved; only on one or two was there any asphalt. Now all the roads were sealed. On both sides, the houses were so close together that they touched each other.

Many of those who had come to greet Abdur had not returned to their own homes but were chatting in groups on the road. Seeing him again, they pursued him like jackals. Women of various ages looked curiously through the windows of every house, and those people who were sitting on the front veranda or courtyard getting some of the winter sun called out a few words, having guessed that the companion of Dhanpat and Latif was the son of Nabab Hussein, who had come from Pakistan.

It was about a fifteen-minute walk through narrow, winding lanes from Fatima’s house to Abdur’s old family home. The house was not as it had been before. When Abdur’s family had left for Pakistan, it had had two storeys, but now it had another top floor. The whole place had recently been painted, and the smell of fresh paint still hung around the doors and window frames. The front courtyard was very much the same as before. There, an old man with a quilt wrapped around his body was half-lying on a charpoy while five or six little children were making a racket all around him. From the outside, it could be guessed that a good many people lived in the house.

Dhanpat took Latif and Abdur up to the old man and called to him, “Uncle Akbar!”

The old man quickly sat up, supporting himself on his hands. He was over eighty, but his movement was by no means impaired, and his eyesight too was quite good. Seeing the three of them, he said, “Oh, Dhanno, Lati. I see you have brought someone with you.”

“Yes. This is Abdur, the son of Nabab Hussein,” said Dhanpat.

“Which Nabab Hussein?”

“The one who was the owner of your house.”

“You mean the one who took his wife and children to Pakistan after Independence?”

“Yes.”

Akbar was quite taken aback. He looked straight at Abdur and asked, “You’ve come from Pakistan?”

“Yes, I have,” answered Abdur.

Suspiciously, Akbar asked, “You’ve suddenly come to India?”

Abdur could guess at the cause of the old man’s suspicion. Before leaving for Pakistan, Abdur had heard that one Akbar Ali had given some cash to his father to live in their house. It must, indeed, have seemed very suspicious that the son of Nabab Hussein should suddenly turn up so many years later.

Before Abdur could answer him, Akbar Ali again asked, “Have you all come back to India?”

In other words, the old man was worried that Abdur had come back to India to settle in the house. Abdur smiled to himself and said, "No, uncle. There is no possibility of our returning here." He then explained the reasons that had brought him to India.

Akbar Ali's worries dispersed, and it suddenly occurred to him that he was not being exactly hospitable to the son of Nabab Hussein. In a fluster he said, "Why are you standing up? Sit down, sit down!"

They sat down very close to one another on the charpoy. The children had become quiet and stood at a distance, looking attentively at the unfamiliar Abdur.

Akbar Ali said to the children, "Go and tell your parents to come here to me right now."

The children ran off. Then Akbar's three sons and their wives, accompanied by the children, came out of the house and stood near the charpoy.

Akbar Ali introduced Abdur to them all and said, "This house once belonged to his family. Now, fifty-one years later, he has come from Pakistan to visit the home of his forefathers." He paused, then said, "But first, give him tea and sweets. Then I will show him the house myself."

Although he had eaten breakfast not long before, Abdur could not avoid eating again. The wives of Akbar Ali's sons brought balushai, laddus, and spiced hot tea. He had to have it all.

When Abdur had finished his tea and sweets, Akbar showed him around the house. Abdur could remember very clearly which room had been his, which had been his brother's, which had been his sister's, and which had been his parents'. As he looked at it all, a tremendous wave of nostalgia welled up in his breast.

Latif and Dhanpat did not accompany them, but remained sitting on the charpoy in the courtyard. After Abdur came back and was about to take his leave, Akbar Ali suddenly remembered something. He called Abdur over to a corner of the courtyard and said to him in a low voice, "It is good that you have come from Pakistan, son. There is a rather urgent matter—"

Abdur was taken aback. "What matter?"

Akbar Ali told him that, before going to Pakistan, Nabab Hussein had given him the right to the house for about ten thousand rupees, but had not had the property registered by the court. Nabab Hussein had been in too much of a hurry to get away with his wife and children. Afterwards, of course, Akbar Ali, through bribes and stratagems, had had the house put in his name. However, to his mind there remained a hitch: what if the title deed was with Nabab Ali and one day his sons returned and wanted their house back? Then there would really be a problem.

Abdur said, "Father never told me any of this. The deed to your house is not with us either. You don't have to be concerned about that, uncle. If I ever return to India, I won't want the house back." He paused, then said,

“Apart from that, we are foreigners. Why would an Indian court pay any heed to us?”

“I believe what you say,” replied Akbar Ali, “but what about your brother and sister—”

“They won’t want it either.”

“But I have one request to put to you.”

“What request?”

Akbar Ali told him that if he would write on a stamped affidavit that he and his brother and sister would never claim title to the house, then Akbar Ali could die free from worry.

“I will do as you ask,” said Abdur. He had heard that many Hindus did not want those who had left India to return. Now he could see that there were also some Muslims who were not likely to welcome them back either.

Abdur, Dhanpat, and Latif walked out from the old house onto the main road and took a tonga. Indicating Abdur, Dhanpat said to the tonga wallah, “My friend here has come back to Azimabad after a very long time. We want to show him the town.”

“Right,” said the tonga wallah.

As it had seemed to Abdur when he had come from the station the day before, Azimabad had grown tremendously. He had no idea how many new neighbourhoods there now were. He noticed two big parks, a girls’ college, a big hospital, a couple of fine nursing homes, even a sports stadium—none of which was there fifty-one years ago.

And so the noontime passed in sightseeing.

Looking up at the sky, Dhanpat said, “We should stop now. I’ll drop you two home, and in the afternoon I’ll come and take you to my garage.”

Dhanpat let Latif and Abdur get down at the main road in front of the Muslim quarter and went on his way. Three hours later, he came back to take them to his garage, which was in the middle of the town at the Chowk Bazaar.

In Abdur’s boyhood days, the Chowk Bazaar was very small. It had little shops on each side. Under a high roof, the vegetable sellers, fishmongers, and butchers were all spread out, and on each side were several old one- or two-storey tin buildings. But now the place was barely recognizable to Abdur. The old buildings had been pulled down and new ones put up. There was also a rather grand supermarket, as well as a line of many shops, banks, a post office, private telephone booths, a Xerox office—more than Abdur could take in. To one side was a vast courtyard where about a hundred scooters, jeeps, and private cars were parked.

Dhanpat’s garage was on one side of the Chowk Bazaar. Inside a tall shed was a workshop for cars, autorickshaws, and scooters and, next to it, a well-appointed office with a desk, chairs, and a telephone. Dhanpat took Abdur and Latif to the office, where they sat down. He told one of the men

working in the shed to bring tea and biscuits and then called to the neighbouring shopkeepers to come and meet Abdur. Some of the people who had brought their cars in for repair also wanted to be introduced.

There was a tremendous curiosity about Pakistan. Abdur answered their various questions as he had those of Latif, Jan Mohammed, and others in the Muslim quarter. However, a few discordant voices were among them: "What do you want in coming back to India, Mian?" "We have a billion people in India. Don't try to burden us with any more."

As he listened to all this, Abdur's face became pale. But Dhanpat exploded. "What are you all saying! He hasn't come here to put any burdens on anyone. His sister is in India, as are his nieces and nephews and other relations. He has come to see them. After a few days, he'll be going back."

"It's best that he does," said a few of them.

Having shut up the garage at eight that night, Dhanpat was taking Abdur and Latif home. He said, "Don't worry about what those people said. They're just a pack of ignorant pigs."

Abdur was not offended by it. He shook his head slowly and said, "There are also such people in Pakistan. Let anyone from India go there—he too will be unwelcome."

It was about twenty minutes by tonga from the Chowk Bazaar. On their way, Dhanpat suddenly remembered something. He said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you."

"What was that?" asked Abdur.

"I was telling my father about you. He asked me to bring you to our house. When will you come?"

This startled Abdur, and he saw once again the image of Lajpat Singh setting fire to their house fifty-one years before; he felt beset by a strange sense of panic. Why should the man be inviting him? No, he would not meet that man at all, though he did not say that to Dhanpat. Abdur remained silent for a little while, then said, "I am in Azimabad for only a few days. I'll go and see uncle before going back to Karachi."

"But you must eat with us when you come."

"All right."

Once a day, Dhanpat went to Fatima's house to try to get Abdur to go with him to his house; in an endeavour to avoid this, Abdur took up the invitations of the old men of the Muslim locality, though he had originally thought not to accept anyone's.

Dhanpat was greatly put out. Becoming angry, he said, "What is it with you? I've told you how my father sends me every day to bring you to our place. Why do you have some objection to coming to our house?"

With an embarrassed look, Abdur said, "Don't be angry, Dhanno. The old men of the locality keep at me so much, I can't say no to them."

"I have been asking you too."

Abdur did not respond except to take the hand of his old friend in his.

Then, in no time at all, came the day for his return to Karachi. His visa would expire in a few more days, and he would have to be on the plane to Pakistan.

Abdur had decided to catch the local three-o'clock train to Allahabad and then take the Delhi Mail. He would arrive in Delhi the following evening, spend the night at some hotel, and the next day do some shopping. He would have to spend that night too in Delhi, and the next day he would fly to Karachi.

He had already announced the time of his departure, and since morning, the atmosphere in the house had been glum. Now and then, Fatima would break into a feeble sobbing. Taking her two hands, Abdur said, "Don't cry, Sister. I'll come again." But as he spoke, his voice ran dry and he felt a strange discomfort welling up inside him. Latif was a manly man and did not cry like his mother did. Nevertheless, his face was marked by a profound melancholy.

Dhanpat had said the day before that he would return around one thirty, and he and Latif would take Abdur to the station and put him on the train to Allahabad.

Abdur was still uncomfortable with Dhanpat. Dhanpat no longer insisted on Abdur's going to his house, though it was clear that he was terribly disappointed. However, Abdur still had not told him why he would not go.

Later in the morning, Fatima brought out from the almirah a jewel box and took out of it an old necklace, an emerald, a few rings, and some earrings and said, "Take these and give them to your family."

Abdur was taken aback. "No, no, don't give these to me."

"Can't I give something to my own brothers' and sister's children if I like?"

Abdur explained that he was a foreigner and unable to take away any gold or jewellery or anything of value. He would have to surrender it at the airport.

With a sorrowful look Fatima said, "They're my things. Why can't I give them to my own family?" And covering her face with her hands, she began to cry again.

Abdur had great difficulty consoling his elder sister. He explained that it was the law and he could not thwart it. It would be especially dangerous for him to take gold and jewellery out of the country.

Dhanpat arrived just before one o'clock. By then, Abdur had packed his suitcase and holdall and had had his lunch.

"All ready?" asked Dhanpat.

Abdur nodded. "Yes."

"Come down with me for a moment."

"Why?"

“I need you to.”

Dhanpat went out with Abdur to the alley in front of the house. An old man was sitting in an autorickshaw there. He was in his mid-eighties, and it was obvious that he was very frail.

Indicating Abdur, Dhanpat said to the old man, “Father, here is Abdur.”

Abdur had not thought that Lajpat Singh himself would come. His heart started to thump.

Lajpat got out of the auto and, taking Abdur’s hand in both of his, said, “I sent word through Dhanno time and again, but I know why you never came. Son, a long time has passed since Independence. We were not in our right minds then. I treated your family appallingly. I used to think then that if the Muslims left, it would be for the good of India. Later, with a cool head, I came to see the injustice of that. I wanted you to come to our house so that I could say this to you. You didn’t come, so I had to come to you.”

Abdur could only look at him, stunned. Was this the same Lajpat Singh who one day had set fire to their house?

Lajpat went on. “After you had all gone, I told Dhanno to look after whoever had remained in the Muslim quarter, especially your sister and her children.”

Abdur tried to speak, but his words would not come out.

Lajpat continued. “My son, you have all suffered so much on my account. Now, more than fifty years later, no one can do anything about it. Forgive me.” Catching his breath, he said, “Next time you come to India, be sure to come to my house.”

Abdur mumbled, “Of course I’ll come, Uncle.”

Because of his continuous talking, Lajpat was quite out of breath and could not remain standing any longer. He added, “Son, I have grown very old. My body is very weak. I have suffered from fever for the last fifteen years, and it now troubles me greatly. I must go home and lie down. Good-bye...”

Abdur remained standing there for a while after Lajpat Singh’s autorickshaw had gone around the bend in the lane and out of sight. He felt that he would have to return to India—not just for Fatima and her family, but for this man too.

Translation from Bengali by John W. Hood