RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Shame

Salman Rushdie

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About the Author

Salman Rushdie is the author of *Grimus, Midnight's Children, Shame, The Satanic Verses, Haroun and the Sea of Stories, The Moor's Last Sigh, The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Fury, Shalimar the Clown* and *The Enchantress of Florence*, one collection of short stories, four works of non-fiction, and is the co-editor of *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*.

He has received many awards for his writing, including the European Union's Aristeoin Prize for Literature. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres. In 2008 *Midnight's Children* was adjudged the 'Best of the Booker', the best novel to have won the Booker Prize in its forty year history.

ALSO BY SALMAN RUSHDIE

Fiction

Grimus
Midnight's Children
The Satanic Verses
Haroun and the Sea of Stories
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FOR SAMEEN

SHAME

A Novel

Salman Rushdie

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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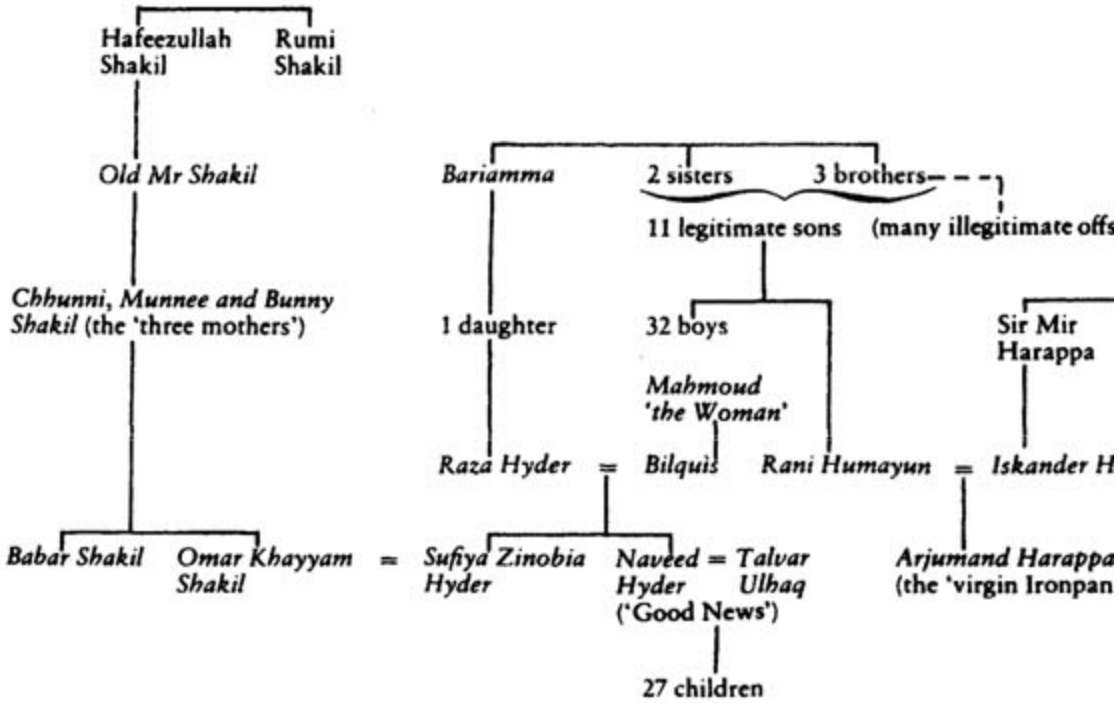
Escapes from the Mother Country


Hafeezullah Shakil
Rumi Shakil
Old Mr Shakil
Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny Shakil (the 'three mothers')
Babar Shakil
Omar Khayyam Shakil
Bariamma
2 sisters
3 brothers
11 legitimate sons
(many illegitimate offs
1 daughter
32 boys
Mahmoud 'the Woman'
Raza Hyder
Bilquis
Rani Humayun
Sir Mir Harappa
Iskander H
Sufiya Zinobia Hyder
Naveed Hyder ('Good News')
Talvar Ulhaq
27 children
Arjumand Harappa
(the 'virgin Ironpan

CHAPTER ONE

The Dumb-waiter

In the remote border town of Q., which when seen from the air resembles nothing so much as an ill-proportioned dumb-bell, there once lived three lovely, and loving, sisters. Their names . . . but their real names were never used, like the best household china, which was locked away after the night of their joint tragedy in a cupboard whose location was eventually forgotten, so that the great thousand-piece service from the Gardner potteries in Tsarist Russia became a family myth in whose factuality they almost ceased to believe . . . the three sisters, I should state without further delay, bore the family name of Shakil, and were universally known (in descending order of age) as Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny.

And one day their father died.

Old Mr Shakil, at the time of his death a widower for eighteen years, had developed the habit of referring to the town in which he lived as ‘a hell hole’. During his last delirium he embarked on a ceaseless and largely incomprehensible monologue amidst whose turbid peregrinations the household servants could make out long passages of obscenity, oaths and curses of a ferocity that made the air boil violently around his bed. In this peroration the embittered old recluse rehearsed his lifelong hatred for his home town, now calling down demons to destroy the clutter of low, dun-coloured, ‘higgling and piggling’ edifices

around the bazaar, now annihilating with his death-encrusted words the cool whitewashed smugness of the Cantonment district. These were the two orbs of the town's dumb-bell shape: old town and Cantt, the former inhabited by the indigenous, colonized population and the latter by the alien colonizers, the Angrez, or British, sahibs. Old Shakil loathed both worlds and had for many years remained immured in his high, fortress-like, gigantic residence which faced inwards to a well-like and lightless compound yard. The house was positioned beside an open maidan, and it was equidistant from the bazaar and the Cantt. Through one of the building's few outward-facing windows Mr Shakil on his death-bed was able to stare out at the dome of a large Palladian hotel, which rose out of the intolerable Cantonment streets like a mirage, and inside which were to be found golden cuspidors and tame spider-monkeys in brass-buttoned uniforms and bellhop hats and a full-sized orchestra playing every evening in a stuccoed ballroom amidst an energetic riot of fantastic plants, yellow roses and white magnolias and roof-high emerald-green palms – the Hotel Flashman, in short, whose great golden dome was cracked even then but shone nevertheless with the tedious pride of its brief doomed glory; that dome under which the suited-and-booted Angrez officers and white-tied civilians and ringleted ladies with hungry eyes would congregate nightly, assembling here from their bungalows to dance and to share the illusion of being colourful – whereas in fact they were merely white, or actually grey, owing to the deleterious effect of that stony heat upon their frail cloud-nurtured skins, and also to their habit of drinking dark Burgundies in the noonday insanity of the sun, with a fine disregard for their livers. The old man heard the music of the imperialists issuing from the golden hotel, heavy with the gaiety of despair, and he cursed the hotel of dreams in a loud, clear voice.

‘Shut that window,’ he shouted, ‘so that I don’t have to die listening to that racket,’ and when the old womanservant Hashmat Bibi had fastened the shutters he relaxed slightly and, summoning up the last reserves of his energy, altered the course of his fatal, delirious flow.

‘Come quickly,’ Hashmat Bibi ran from the room yelling for the old man’s daughters, ‘your fatherji is sending himself to the devil.’ Mr Shakil, having dismissed the outside world, had turned the rage of his dying monologue against himself, calling eternal damnation down upon his soul. ‘God knows what got his goat,’ Hashmat despaired, ‘but he is going in an incorrect way.’

The widower had raised his children with the help of Parsee wet-nurses, Christian ayahs and an iron morality that was mostly Muslim, although Chhunni used to say that he had been made harder by the sun. The three girls had been kept inside that labyrinthine mansion until his dying day; virtually uneducated, they were imprisoned in the zenana wing where they amused each other by inventing private languages and fantasizing about what a man might look like when undressed, imagining, during their pre-pubertal years, bizarre genitalia such as holes in the chest into which their own nipples might snugly fit, ‘because for all we knew in those days,’ they would remind each other amazedly in later life, ‘fertilization might have been supposed to happen through the breast.’ This interminable captivity forged between the three sisters a bond of intimacy that would never completely be broken. They spent their evenings seated at a window behind a lattice-work screen, looking towards the golden dome of the great hotel and swaying to the strains of the enigmatic dance music . . . and there are rumours that they would indolently explore each other’s bodies during the languorous drowsiness of the afternoons, and, at night, would weave occult spells to hasten the moment of their father’s demise. But evil tongues will say anything, especially about beautiful women who live far

away from the denuding eyes of men. What is almost certainly true is that it was during these years, long before the baby scandal, that the three of them, all of whom longed for children with the abstract passion of their virginity, made their secret compact to remain triune, forever bound by the intimacies of their youth, even after the children came: that is to say, they resolved to share the babies. I cannot prove or disprove the foul story that this treaty was written down and signed in the commingled menstrual blood of the isolated trinity, and then burned to ashes, being preserved only in the cloisters of their memories.

But for twenty years, they would have only one child. His name would be Omar Khayyam.

All this happened in the fourteenth century. I'm using the Hegiran calendar, naturally: don't imagine that stories of this type always take place long long ago. Time cannot be homogenized as easily as milk, and in those parts, until quite recently, the thirteen-hundreds were still in full swing.

When Hashmat Bibi told them that their father had arrived at his final moments, the sisters went to visit him, dressed in their brightest clothes. They found him in the grip of an asphyxiating fist of shame, demanding of God, in gasps of imperious gloominess, that he be consigned for all eternity to some desert outpost of Jahannum, some borderland of hell. Then he fell silent, and Chhunni, the eldest daughter, quickly asked him the only question of any interest to the three young women: 'Father, we are going to be very rich now, is that not so?'

'Whores,' the dying man cursed them, 'don't count on it.'

The bottomless sea of wealth on which everyone had supposed the Shakil family fortunes to be sailing proved, on the morning after his foulmouthed death, to be an arid crater. The fierce sun of his financial incompetence (which

he had successfully concealed for decades behind his imposing patriarchal façade, his filthy temper and the overweening hauteur which was his most poisonous legacy to his daughters) had dried out all the oceans of cash, so that Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny spent the entire period of mourning settling the debts for which his creditors had never dared to press the old man while he lived, but for payment of which (plus compound interest) they now absolutely refused to wait one moment longer. The girls emerged from their lifelong sequestration wearing expressions of well-bred disgust for these vultures swooping down to feast upon the carcass of their parent's great improvidence; and because they had been raised to think of money as one of the two subjects that it is forbidden to discuss with strangers, they signed away their fortune without even troubling to read the documents which the money-lenders presented. At the end of it all the vast estates around Q., which comprised approximately eighty-five per cent of the only good orchards and rich agricultural lands in that largely infertile region, had been lost in their entirety; the three sisters were left with nothing but the unmanageably infinite mansion stuffed from floor to ceiling with possessions and haunted by the few servants who refused to leave, less out of loyalty than from that terror of the life-prisoner for the outside world. And – as is perhaps the universal custom of aristocratically bred persons – they reacted to the news of their ruin by resolving to throw a party.

In later years, they told each other the story of that notorious gala night with a simple glee that restored to them the illusion of being young. 'I had invitations printed in the Cantt,' Chhunni Shakil would begin, seated beside her sisters on an old wooden swing-seat. Giggling happily about the old adventure, she continued, 'And what invitations! Embossed, with gold lettering, on cards stiff as wood. They were like spits in the eye of fate.'

‘Also in the closed eyes of our dead father,’ Munnee added. ‘To him it would have seemed like a completely shameless going-on, an abhorrence, the proof of his failure to impose his will on us.’

‘Just as,’ Bunny continued, ‘our ruin proved his failure in another sphere.’

At first it seemed to them that the dying shame of their father had been born of his knowledge of the coming bankruptcy. Later, however, they began to consider less prosaic possibilities. ‘Maybe,’ Chhunni hypothesized, ‘he saw on his death-bed a vision of the future.’

‘Good,’ her sisters said, ‘then he will have died as miserably as he made us live.’

The news of the emergence into society of the Shakil sisters spread rapidly through the town. And on the much-anticipated evening, the old house was invaded by an army of musical geniuses, whose three-stringed dumbirs, seven-stringed sarandas, reed flutes and drums filled that puritanical mansion with celebratory music for the first time in two decades; regiments of bakers and confectioners and snack-wallahs marched in with arsenals of eats, denuding the shop-counters of the town and filling up the interior of the huge multicoloured shamiana tent that had been erected in the central compound, its mirrorworked fabric reflecting the glory of the arrangements. It became clear, however, that the snobbishness which their father had bred into the sisters’ bone-marrow had fatally infected the guest list. Most of the burghers of Q. had already been mortally insulted to find themselves deemed unworthy of the company of the three lustrous ladies, whose gilt-edged invitations were the talk of the town. Now the crimes of omission were compounded by those of commission, because it was seen that the sisters had committed the ultimate solecism: invitations, scorning the doormats of the indigenous worthies, had found their way into the Angrez Cantonment, and into the ballroom of the dancing sahibs.

The long-forbidden household remained barred to all but a few locals; but after the cocktail hour at Flashman's, the sisters were visited by a uniformed and ball-gowned crowd of foreigners. The imperialists! – the grey-skinned sahibs and their gloved begums! – raucous-voiced and glittering with condescension, they entered the mirrorworked marquee.

'Alcohol was served.' Old mother Chhunni, reminiscing, clapped her hands delightedly at the horror of the memory. But that was the point at which the reminiscing always ceased, and all three ladies became curiously vague; so that I am unable to clear away the improbabilities which have mushroomed around that party during the dark passage of the years.

Can it really have been the case that the few non-white guests – local zamindars and their wives, whose wealth had once been trifling in comparison with the Shakil crores – stood together in a tight clump of rage, gazing balefully at the cavorting sahibs? That all these persons left simultaneously after a very few moments, without having broken bread or eaten salt, abandoning the sisters to the colonial authorities? How likely is it that the three sisters, their eyes shining with antimony and arousal, moved in grave silence from officer to officer, as though they were sizing them up, as if mustachioes were being checked for glossiness and jaws evaluated by the angles of their jutting? – And then (the legend goes) that they, the Shakil girls, clapped their hands in unison and ordered the musicians to start playing Western-style dance music, minuets, waltzes, fox-trots, polkas, gavottes, music that acquired a fatally demonic quality when forced out of the virtuosi's outraged instruments?

All night, they say, the dancing continued. The scandal of such an event would have placed the newly orphaned girls beyond the pale in any case, but there was worse to come. Shortly after the party ended, after the infuriated geniuses

had departed and the mountains of uneaten food had been thrown to the pie-dogs – for the sisters in their grandeur would not permit food intended for their peers to be distributed among the poor – it began to be bruited about the bazaars of Q. that one of the three nose-in-air girls had been put, on that wild night, into the family way.

O shame, shame, poppy-shame!

But if the sisters Shakil were overwhelmed by any feelings of dishonour, they gave no sign of it. Instead, they dispatched Hashmat Bibi, one of the servants who had refused to leave, into Q., where she commissioned the services of the town's finest handyman, a certain Mistri Yakoob Balloch, and also purchased the largest imported padlock to be found in the God-Willing Ironmongery Store. This padlock was so large and heavy that Hashmat Bibi was obliged to have it carried home on the back of a rented mule, whose owner inquired of the servant woman: 'For what your begums want this lock-shock now? Invasion has already occurred.' Hashmat replied, crossing her eyes for emphasis: 'May your grandsons urinate upon your pauper's grave.'

The hired handyman, Mistri Yakoob, was so impressed by the ferocious calm of the antediluvian crone that he worked willingly under her supervision without daring to pass a comment. She had him construct a strange external elevator, or dumb-waiter, large enough to hold three grown adults, by means of which items could be winched by a system of motorized pulleys from the street into the upper storeys of the house, or vice versa. Hashmat Bibi stressed the importance of constructing the whole contraption in such a way that it could be operated without requiring the mansion's inhabitants to show themselves at any window – not so much as a little finger must be capable of being glimpsed. Then she listed the unusual security features which she wished him to install in the bizarre mechanism. 'Put here,' she ordered him, 'a spring release which can be

worked from inside the house. When triggered, it should make the whole bottom of the lift fall off justlikethat. Put there, and there, and there, some secret panels which can shoot out eighteen-inch stiletto blades, sharp sharp. My ladies must be defended against intruders.'

The dumb-waiter contained, then, many terrible secrets. The Mistri completed his work without once laying eyes on any of the three sisters Shakil, but when he died a few weeks later, clutching his stomach and rolling about in a gully, spitting blood on to the dirt, it got about that those shameless women had had him poisoned to ensure his silence on the subject of his last and most mysterious commission. *It* is only fair to state, however, that the medical evidence in the case runs strongly against this version of events. Yakoob Balloch, who had been suffering for some time from sporadic pains in the region of the appendix, almost certainly died of natural causes, his death-throes caused not by the spectral poisons of the putatively murderous sisters, but by the genuinely fatal banality of peritonitis. Or some such thing.

The day came when the three remaining male employees of the Shakil sisters were seen pushing shut the enormous front doors of solid teak and brass. Just before those gates of solitude closed upon the sisters, to remain unopened for more than half a century, the little crowd of curious townsfolk outside caught sight of a wheelbarrow on which there gleamed, dully, the outsize lock of their withdrawal. And when the doors were shut, the sounds of the great lock being hauled into place, and of the key being turned, heralded the beginning of the strange confinement of the scandalous ladies and their servants too.

It turned out that on her last trip into town Hashmat Bibi had left a number of sealed envelopes containing detailed instructions at the establishments of the community's leading suppliers of goods and services; so that afterwards, on the appointed days and at the hours specified, the

chosen washerwoman, the tailor, the cobbler, as well as the selected vendors of meats, fruits, haberdashery, flowers, stationery, vegetables, pulses, books, flat drinks, fizzy drinks, foreign magazines, newspapers, unguents, perfumes, antimony, strips of eucalyptus bark for tooth-cleaning, spices, starch, soaps, kitchen utensils, picture frames, playing cards and strings for musical instruments, would present themselves at the foot of Mistri Yakoob's last construction. They would emit coded whistles, and the dumb-waiter would descend, humming, to street level bearing written instructions. In this way the Shakil ladies managed to recede entirely and for all time from the world, returning of their own volition into that anchoritic existence whose end they had been so briefly able to celebrate after their father's death; and such was the hauteur of their arrangements that their withdrawal seemed like an act not of contrition but of pride.

There arises a delicate question: how did they pay for it all?

With some embarrassment on their behalf, and purely to show that the present author, who has already been obliged to leave many questions in a state of unanswered ambiguity, is capable of giving clear replies when absolutely necessary, I reveal that Hashmat Bibi had delivered a last sealed envelope to the door of the town's least savoury establishment, wherein the Quranic strictures against usury counted for nothing, whose shelves and storage chests groaned under the weight of the accumulated debris of innumerable decayed histories . . . damn and blast it. To be frank – she went to the pawnshop. And he, the pawnbroker, the ageless, pencil-thin, innocently wide-eyed Chalaak Sahib, would also present himself thereafter at the dumb-waiter (under cover of night, as instructed), to assess the worth of the items he found therein, and to send up into the heart of the silent house cash monies on the nail to a total of eighteen point five per cent approx. of the market value

of the irredeemably pawned treasures. The three mothers of the imminent Omar Khayyam Shakil were using the past, their only remaining capital, as a means of purchasing the future.

But who was pregnant?

Chhunni, the eldest, or Munnee-in-the-middle, or ‘little’ Bunny, the baby of the three? – Nobody ever discovered, not even the child that was born. Their closing of ranks was absolute, and effected with the most meticulous attention to detail. Just imagine: they made the servants swear loyalty oaths on the Book. The servants joined them in their self-imposed captivity, and only left the house feet first, wrapped in white sheets, and via, of course, the route constructed by Yakoob Balloch. During the entire term of that pregnancy, no doctor was summoned to the house. And as it proceeded, the sisters, understanding that unkept secrets always manage to escape, under a door, through a keyhole or an open window, until everyone knows everything and nobody knows how . . . the sisters, I repeat, displayed the uniquely passionate solidarity that was their most remarkable characteristic by feigning – in the case of two of them – the entire range of symptoms that the third was obliged to display.

Although some five years separated Chhunni from Bunny, it was at this time that the sisters, by virtue of dressing identically and through the incomprehensible effects of their unusual, chosen life, began to resemble each other so closely that even the servants made mistakes. I have described them as beauties; but they were not the moon-faced almond-eyed types so beloved of poets in that neck of the woods, but rather strong-chinned, powerfully built, purposefully striding women of an almost oppressively charismatic force. Now the three of them began, simultaneously, to thicken at the waist and in the breast; when one was sick in the morning, the other two began to puke in such perfectly synchronized sympathy that it was

impossible to tell which stomach had heaved first. Identically, their wombs ballooned towards the pregnancy's full term. It is naturally possible that all this was achieved with the help of physical contrivances, cushions and padding and even faint-inducing vapours; but it is my unshakeable opinion that such an analysis grossly demeans the love that existed between the sisters. In spite of biological improbability, I am prepared to swear that so wholeheartedly did they wish to share the motherhood of their sibling – to transform the public shame of unwedlocked conception into the private triumph of the longed-for group baby – that, in short, twin phantom pregnancies accompanied the real one; while the simultaneity of their behaviour suggests the operation of some form of communal mind.

They slept in the same room. They endured the same cravings – marzipan, jasmine-petals, pine-kernels, mud – at the same times; their metabolic rates altered in parallel. They began to weigh the same, to feel exhausted at the same moment, and to awake together, each morning, as if somebody had rung a bell. They felt identical pains; in three wombs, a single baby and its two ghostly mirror-images kicked and turned with the precision of a well-drilled dance troupe . . . suffering identically, the three of them – I will go so far as to say – fully earned the right to be considered joint mothers of the forthcoming child. And when one – I will not even guess at the name – came to her time, nobody else saw whose waters broke; nor whose hand locked a bedroom door from the inside. No outside eyes witnessed the passage of the three labours, two phantom one genuine; or the moment when empty balloons subsided, while between a third pair of thighs, as if in an alleyway, there appeared the illegitimate child; or when hands lifted Omar Khayyam Shakil by the ankles, held him upside-down, and thumped him on the back.

Our hero, Omar Khayyam, first drew breath in that improbable mansion which was too large for its rooms to be counted; opened his eyes; and saw, upside-down through an open window, the macabre peaks of the Impossible Mountains on the horizon. One – but which? – of his three mothers had picked him up by the ankles, had pummelled the first breath into his lungs . . . until, still staring at the inverted summits, the baby began to scream.

When Hashmat Bibi heard a key turning in the door and came timidly into the room with food and drink and fresh sheets and sponges and soap and towels, she found the three sisters sitting up together in the capacious bed, the same bed in which their father had died, a huge mahogany four-poster around whose columns carved serpents coiled upwards to the brocade Eden of the canopy. They were all wearing the flushed expression of dilated joy that is the mother's true prerogative; and the baby was passed from breast to breast, and none of the six was dry.

Young Omar Khayyam was gradually made aware that certain irregularities had both preceded and succeeded his birth. We have dealt with the pre-; and as for the suc-:

'I refused completely,' his eldest mother Chhunni told him on his seventh birthday, 'to whisper the name of God into your ear.'

On his eighth birthday, middle-Munnee confided: 'There was no question of shaving your head. Such beautiful black-black hair you came with, nobody was cutting it off under my nose, no sir!'

Exactly one year later, his youngest mother adopted a stern expression. 'Under no circs,' Bunny announced, 'would I have permitted the foreskin to be removed. What is this idea? It is not like banana peel.'

Omar Khayyam Shakil entered life without benefit of mutilation, barbery or divine approval. There are many who would consider this a handicap.

Born in a death-bed, about which there hung (as well as curtains and mosquito-netting) the ghost-image of a grandfather who, dying, had consigned himself to the peripheries of hell; his first sight the spectacle of a range of topsy-turvy mountains . . . Omar Khayyam Shakil was afflicted, from his earliest days, by a sense of inversion, of a world turned upside-down. And by something worse: the fear that he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment. Through an old telescope, from the upper-storey windows of the house, the child Omar Khayyam surveyed the emptiness of the landscape around Q., which convinced him that he must be near the very Rim of Things, and that beyond the Impossible Mountains on the horizon must lie the great nothing into which, in his nightmares, he had begun to tumble with monotonous regularity. The most alarming aspect of these dreams was the sleepsense that his plunges into the void were somehow appropriate, that he deserved no better . . . he awoke amidst mosquito-netting, sweating freely and even shrieking at the realization that his dreams were informing him of his worthlessness. He did not relish the news.

So it was in those half-formed years that Omar Khayyam took the never-to-be-reversed decision to cut down on his sleeping time, a lifelong endeavour which had brought him, by the end, by the time his wife went up in smoke – but no, ends must not be permitted to precede beginnings and middles, even if recent scientific experiments have shown us that within certain types of closed system, under intense pressure, time can be persuaded to run backwards, so that effects precede their causes. This is precisely the sort of unhelpful advance of which storytellers must take no notice whatsoever; that way madness lies! – to the point at which a mere forty minutes a night, the famous forty winks, sufficed to refresh him. How young he was when he made the surprisingly adult resolution to escape from the

unpalatable reality of dreams into the slightly more acceptable illusions of his everyday, waking life! ‘Little bat,’ his three mothers called him tolerantly when they learned of his nocturnal flittings through the inexhaustible chambers of their home, a dark-grey chadar flapping around his shoulders, providing protection against the cold of the winter nights; but as to whether he grew up into caped crusader or cloaked bloodsucker, into Batman or Dracula, I leave it to the reader to decide.

(His wife, the elder daughter of General Raza Hyder, was an insomniac too; but Omar Khayyam’s sleeplessness is not to be compared with hers, for while his was willed, she, foolish Sufiya Zinobia, would lie in bed squeezing her eyelids shut between her thumbs and forefingers, as if she could extrude consciousness through her eyelashes, like motes of dust, or tears. And she burned, she fried, in that very room of her husband’s birth and his grandfather’s death, beside that bed of snakes and Paradise . . . a plague on this disobedient Time! I command this death scene back into the wings at once: shazam!)

By the age of ten young Omar had already begun to feel grateful for the enclosing, protective presence of the mountains on the western and southern skyline. The Impossible Mountains: you will not find that name in your atlases, no matter how large-scale. Geographers have their limitations, however; the young Omar Khayyam, who fell in love with a miraculously shiny brass telescope which he unearthed from the wild abundance of things that clogged his home, was always aware that any silicon creatures or gas monsters inhabiting the stars of the Milky Way which flowed overhead each night would never have recognized their homes by the names in his much-thumbed star charts. ‘We had our reasons,’ he said throughout his life, ‘for the name we gave to our personal mountain range.’

The thin-eyed, rock-hard tribals who dwelt in those mountains and who were occasionally to be seen in the

streets of Q. (whose softer inhabitants crossed streets to avoid the tribals' mountainous stench and barging, unceremonious shoulders) also called the range 'the roof of Paradise'. The mountains, in fact the whole region, even Q. itself, suffered from periodic earthquakes; it was a zone of instability, and the tribals believed that the tremors were caused by the emergence of angels through fissures in the rocks. Long before his own brother saw a winged and golden-glowing man watching him from a rooftop, Omar Khayyam Shakil had become aware of the plausible theory that Paradise was located not in the sky but beneath his very feet, so that the earth movements were proof of the angels' interest in scrutinizing world affairs. The shape of the mountain range altered constantly under this angelic pressure. From its crumpled ochre slopes rose an infinite number of stratified pillar-like formations whose geological strata were so sharply defined that the titanic columns seemed to have been erected by colossi skilled in stonemasonry . . . these divine dream-temples, too, rose and fell as the angels came and went.

Hell above, Paradise below; I have lingered on this account of Omar Khayyam's original, unstable wilderness to underline the propositions that he grew up between twin eternities, whose conventional order was, in his experience, precisely inverted; that such headstandings have effects harder to measure than earthquakes, for what inventor has patented a seismograph of the soul?; and that, for Omar Khayyam, uncircumcised, unwhispered-to, unshaven, their presence heightened his feeling of being a person apart.

But I have been out of doors for quite long enough now, and must get my narrative out of the sun before it is afflicted by mirages or heat-stroke. – Afterwards, at the other end of his life (it seems that the future cannot be restrained, and insists on seeping back into the past), when he got his name into all the papers over the scandal of the headless murders, the customs official's daughter Farah

Rodrigues unlocked her lips and released from her custody the story of the day on which the adolescent Omar Khayyam, even then a fat fellow with a missing shirt-button at navel height, had accompanied her to her father's post at the land border forty miles to the west of Q. She sat in an illicit brandy den and spoke to the room in general, in the cackle of splintered glass to which time and the wilderness air had reduced her formerly crystal laugh: 'Incredible, I swear,' she reminisced, 'we just reached there in the jeep and at once a cloud came down and sat on the ground, right along the frontier, like it couldn't get across without a visa, and that Shakil was so scared he passed out, he got vertigo and fainted, even though both his feet had been on solid ground.'

Even in the days of his greatest distinction, even when he married Hyder's daughter, even after Raza Hyder became President, Omar Khayyam Shakil was sometimes plagued by that improbable vertigo, by the sense of being a creature of the edge: a peripheral man. Once, during the time of his drinking and carousing friendship with Iskander Harappa, millionaire playboy, radical thinker, Prime Minister and finally miracle-working corpse, Omar Khayyam in his cups described himself to Isky. 'You see before you,' he confided, 'a fellow who is not even the hero of his own life; a man born and raised in the condition of being out of things. Heredity counts, dontyouthinkso?'

'That is an oppressive notion,' Iskander Harappa replied.

Omar Khayyam Shakil was raised by no fewer than three mothers, with not a solitary father in sight, a mystery which was later deepened by the birth, when Omar was already twenty years old, of a younger brother who was likewise claimed by all three female parents and whose conception seemed to have been no less immaculate. Equally disturbing, for the growing youth, was his first experience of falling in love, of pursuing with waddling and heated

resolution the voluptuously unattainable figure of a certain Farah the Parsee (née Zoroaster), an occupation known to all the local lads, with the solitary exception of his congenitally isolated self, as: ‘courting Disaster’.

Dizzy, peripheral, inverted, infatuated, insomniac, stargazing, fat: what manner of hero is this?

CHAPTER TWO

A Necklace of Shoes

A few weeks after Russian troops entered Afghanistan, I returned home, to visit my parents and sisters and to show off my firstborn son. My family lives in ‘Defence’, the Pakistan Defence Services Officers’ Co-Operative Housing Society, although it is not a military family. ‘Defence’ is a fashionable part of Karachi; few of the soldiers who were permitted to buy land there at rock-bottom prices could afford to build on it.

But they weren’t allowed to sell the empty plots, either. To buy an officer’s piece of ‘Defence’, you had to draw up a complex contract. Under the terms of this contract the land remained the property of the vendor, even though you had paid him the full market price and were now spending a small fortune building your own house on it to your own specifications. In theory you were just being a nice guy, a benefactor who had chosen to give the poor officer a home out of your boundless charity. But the contract also obliged the vendor to name a third party who would have plenipotentiary authority over the property once the house was finished. This third party was your nominee, and when the construction workers went home he simply handed the property over to you.. Thus two separate acts of goodwill were necessary to the process. ‘Defence’ was almost entirely developed on this nice-guy basis. This spirit of

comradeship, of working selflessly together towards a common goal, is worthy of remark.

It was an elegant procedure. The vendor got rich, the intermediary got his fee, you got your house, and nobody broke any laws. So naturally nobody ever questioned how it came about that the city's most highly desirable development zone had been allotted to the defence services in this way. This attitude, too, remains a part of the foundations of 'Defence': the air there is full of unasked questions. But their smell is faint, and the flowers in the many maturing gardens, the trees lining the avenues, the perfumes worn by the beautiful soignée ladies of the neighbourhood quite overpower this other, too-abstract odour. Diplomats, international businessmen, the sons of former dictators, singing stars, textile moguls, Test cricketers come and go. There are many new Datsun and Toyota motor cars. And the name 'Defence Society', which might sound to some ears like a symbol (representing the mutually advantageous relationship between the country's establishment and its armed forces), holds no such resonance in the city. It is only a name.

One evening, soon after my arrival, I visited an old friend, a poet. I had been looking forward to one of our long conversations, to hearing his views about recent events in Pakistan, and about Afghanistan, of course. His house was full of visitors as usual; nobody seemed interested in talking about anything except the cricket series between Pakistan and India. I sat down at a table with my friend and began an idle game of chess. But I really wanted to get the low-down on things, and at length I brought up the stuff that was on my mind, beginning with a question about the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. But only half the question got past my lips; the other half joined the ranks of the area's many unasked queries, because I felt an extremely painful kick land on my shins and, without crying out, switched in mid-

sentence back to sporting topics. We also discussed the incipient video boom.

People entered, exited, circled, laughed. After about forty minutes my friend said, ‘It’s O.K. now.’ I asked, ‘Who was it?’ He gave me the name of the informer who had infiltrated this particular group. They treated him civilly, without hinting that they knew why he was there, because otherwise he would vanish, and the next time they might not know who the informer was. Later, I met the spy. He was a nice guy, pleasantly spoken, honest-faced, and no doubt happy that he was hearing nothing worth reporting. A kind of equilibrium had been achieved. Once again, I was struck by how many nice guys there were in Pakistan, by the civility growing in those gardens, perfuming the air.

Since my last visit to Karachi, my friend the poet had spent many months in jail, for social reasons. That is to say, he knew somebody who knew somebody who was the wife of the second cousin by marriage of the step-uncle of somebody who might or might not have shared a flat with someone who was running guns to the guerrillas in Baluchistan. You can get anywhere in Pakistan if you know people, even into jail. My friend still refuses to talk about what happened to him during those months; but other people told me that he was in bad shape for a long time after he got out. They said he had been hung upside-down by the ankles and beaten, as if he were a new-born baby whose lungs had to be coerced into action so that he could squeal. I never asked him if he screamed, or if there were upside-down mountain peaks visible through a window.

Wherever I turn, there is something of which to be ashamed. But shame is like everything else; live with it for long enough and it becomes part of the furniture. In ‘Defence’, you can find shame in every house, burning in an ashtray, hanging framed upon a wall, covering a bed. But nobody notices it any more. And everyone is civilized.