


I DARED TO CALL HIM FATHER

THE MIRACULOUS STORY
OF A MUSLIM WOMAN'S
ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

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A Frightening Presence

The strange prickly feeling grew inside me as I walked slowly along the graveled paths of my garden. It was deep twilight. The scent of early narcissus hung heavy in the air. What was it, I wondered, that made me so uneasy?

I stopped my walk and looked around. Inside my home some distance across the broad lawn the servants were beginning to flick on lights in the dining area. Outside all seemed peaceful and quiet. I reached out to snip off some of the pungent white blossoms for my bedroom. As I leaned over to grasp the tall green stems, something brushed past my head.

I straightened in alarm. What was it? A mist-like cloud—a cold, damp unholy presence—had floated by. The garden suddenly seemed darker. A chilling breeze sprang up through the weeping willows and I shivered.

Get hold of yourself, Bilquis! I scolded. My imagination was playing tricks on me. Nevertheless, I gathered my flowers and headed quickly toward the house where windows glowed in warm reassurance. Its sturdy white

walls and wooden doors offered protection. As I hurried along the crunchy gravel path I found myself glancing over my shoulder. I had always laughed at talk of the supernatural. Of course there wasn't anything out there. Was there?

As if in answer, I felt a firm, very real and uncanny tap on my right hand.

I screamed. I rushed into the house and slammed the door behind me. My servants ran to me, afraid to make any comment at all, for I must have looked like a ghost myself. It wasn't until bedtime that I finally found the courage to speak to my two maids about the cold presence.

"Do you believe in spiritual things?" I asked, on concluding my story.

Both Nur-jan and Raisham, one a Muslim, the other a Christian, avoided answering my question, but Nur-jan, her hands fluttering nervously, asked me if she could call the village mullah, a priest from the mosque, who would bring some holy water to cleanse the garden. But my common sense had returned and I rebelled at submitting to the superstition of the ignorant. Besides, I didn't want any word of this to spread in the village. I tried to smile at her concern, and told her, a little too abruptly I'm afraid, that I didn't want any holy man on my grounds pretending to remove evil spirits.

Nevertheless, after the maids left the room, I found myself picking up my copy of the Quran. But after struggling through a few pages of the Muslim holy book, I wearied of it, slipped it back within its blue silken case, and fell asleep.

I awakened slowly the next morning like a swimmer struggling to the surface, a thin, high chant piercing my consciousness:

*Laa ilaaha illa Ilaah,
Muhammed resolu'lla!*

The sing-song words drifted through my bedroom window:

There is no God but Allah:
And Muhammed is his Prophet.

It was a comforting sound, this Muslim call to prayer, because it seemed so utterly normal after the previous night. It was a call I had heard almost without exception every morning of my 54 years. I envisioned the source of the rolling chant.

Some moments before in the little nearby Pakistani village of Wah, our old muezzin had hurried through the door at the base of an ancient minaret. Inside its cool interior he had trudged up curving stone steps worn smooth by the sandals of generations of Muslim holy men. At the top of the prayer tower, I could imagine him hesitating at the carved teak door leading to the parapet to catch his breath. Then, stepping outside to the railing, he threw back his bearded head and in syllables fourteen hundred years old called the faithful to prayer.

Come to prayer, come to salvation,
Prayer is better than sleep.

The haunting cry floating through the morning mist across cobblestone lanes in Wah still cold from the October night drifted across my garden to curl along the house's brick walls now ruddy in the light of the rising sun.

As the last wisps of the ancient chant hung above me, I remembered the eerie experience in the garden the night before, and quickly turned to morning routines that would be comforting just because they were so ordinary. I sat up and reached for the bell on my bedside table. At its musical tinkle, my maid Nur-jan hurried in out of breath as usual. Both of my maids slept in a room adjoining mine

and I knew that they had already been up for an hour, waiting for my call. Morning tea in my bed was a must. Nur-jan began laying out my silver brushes and combs. She was a willing teen-aged girl, plump and giggly, but a bit clumsy. When she dropped a brush, I scolded her sharply.

Raisham, my other maid, older and quieter, a tall graceful woman, slid into the room bearing a large covered tea tray. She placed it on my bed table, drew back the white linen to expose the sterling service and poured me a cup of steaming tea.

Sipping the scalding ambrosia, I sighed in satisfaction; tea was better than prayer. My mother would have been shocked at my thought. How many times had I watched her place her prayer rug on the tiled bedroom floor, then, facing the holy city of Mecca, kneel and press her forehead to the rug in prayer. Thinking of my mother I looked over to the dressing case on my table. Fashioned centuries ago of sandalwood and covered with engraved sterling silver, it had belonged to Mother and her mother before her. Now it was my heirloom to treasure. After finishing two cups of tea I leaned forward, a sign for Raisham to begin brushing my graying waist-length hair while Nur-jan carefully worked on my nails.

As the two worked, they gossiped in easy familiarity about news from the village, Nur-jan chattering and Raisham making quiet, thoughtful comments. They talked about a boy who was leaving home for the city and a girl soon to be married. And then they discussed the murder that happened in a town where Raisham's aunt lived. I could sense Raisham shudder as the news came up. For the victim had been a Christian. She was a young girl who had been staying in a Christian missionary's home. Someone had stumbled across her body in one of the narrow lanes criss-crossing her village. There was supposed to have been an investigation by the constabulary.

“Any news about the girl?” I casually asked.

“No, Begum Sahib,” said Raisham quietly, as she carefully began to work a braid in my hair. I could understand why Raisham, a Christian herself, didn’t want to talk about the murder. She knew as well as I did who had killed that girl. After all, the girl had forsaken her Muslim faith to be baptized a Christian. So the brother, infuriated by the shame this sin had brought upon his family, had obeyed the ancient law of the faithful that those who fall away from their faith must be slain.

Even though Muslim edicts may be stern and harsh, their interpretations are sometimes tempered with mercy and compassion. But there are always the zealots who carry out the letter of the Quranic law to the extreme.

Everyone knew who had killed the girl. But nothing would be done. It had always been this way. A year ago, the Christian servant of one of the missionaries ended up in a ditch, his throat cut, and nothing had been done there either. I put the sad little story out of my mind and made ready to get up. My maids hurried to the closet and returned with several pairs of clothes for my selection. I pointed to an embroidered one, and after they helped me dress, they quietly left my room.

Sunlight now flooded my bedroom, giving its white walls and ivory-colored furnishings a saffron glow. The sunlight glinted from a silver-framed photograph on my dressing table and I stepped over and picked it up, angry, because I had put the picture face down the day before; one of the servants must have set it up again! The engraved frame enclosed a photograph of a sophisticated-looking couple smiling at me from a corner table in a luxurious London restaurant.

In spite of myself I looked at the picture again, as one does who keeps pressing a hurting tooth. The dashing man with dark mustache and burning eyes had been my husband, General Khalid Sheikh. Why did I keep this picture!

Hate surged within me as I looked at the man I once felt I could not live without. When the photo had been taken six years before, Khalid had been Pakistan’s Minister of Interior.

The glamorous-looking woman next to him had been me. As daughter of a conservative Muslim family that for four hundred years or more had been landed gentry, I had been hostess to diplomats and industrialists from all over the world. I had been accustomed to sojourns in Paris and London where I spent my time shopping on the Rue de la Paix or in Harrods. The lithesome woman who smiled from the photo no longer existed, I thought as I looked in the mirror. The soft, pale skin had bronzed, the lustrous black hair was now streaked with gray, and disillusionment had etched deep lines in her face.

The world of the photograph had crumbled into fragments five years before when Khalid left me. Suffering the shame of rejection, I had fled the sophisticated life of London, Paris and Rawalpindi to seek refuge here in the quiet peace of my family’s ancestral property nestled near the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. This land contained the little country village of Wah where I had spent so many happy days as a child. The gardens and orchards had been planted by many generations of my family and the big stone palatial home with its tower, terraces and huge echoing chambers seemed as old as the snow-crowned mountains not far away. My aunt lived in this house and so, desiring further seclusion, I moved to a smaller house built on the outskirts of Wah, which promised the solace I needed.

It gave me even more. For when I arrived, much of the extensive garden had become overgrown. This was a blessing, for I buried much of my sorrow in the lush soil as I plunged into the restoration of the grounds. I made some into formal flower beds and left some of the area natural. Slowly the gardens, with a natural musical spring,

became my world until by then, the year 1966, I had the reputation of a recluse who secluded herself amongst her flowers.

I looked away from the silver-framed photo in my hand, placed it face down again on the table and turned to my bedroom window looking toward the village. Wah . . . the very name of the village was an exclamation of joy. Centuries before, when this was but a hamlet, the legendary Moghul emperor Jehangir traveled through here and his caravan stopped to rest by a spring. He gratefully sank down under a willow and exclaimed in joy, "Wah!" thus naming the area forever.

But the memory of this scene gave me no release from the unsettled feeling that had been hovering over me ever since the strange experience of the evening before.

However, I tried to dispel it as I stood at my window. It was morning, a safe time with familiar routines and warm sunlight. The previous night's episode seemed as real, but as remote, as a bad dream. I drew the white drapes aside and breathed in deeply of the fresh morning air, listening to the hissing of the sweeper's broom on the patio. A fragrance of wood smoke from early morning cooking fires drifted up to me and the rhythmic thumping of water-mill wheels sounded in the distance. I sighed in satisfaction. This was Wah, this was my home, this was, after all, safety. This was where Nawab Muhammad Hayat Khan, a feudal landowner awarded "The Star of India" by the British, had lived a hundred years or so ago. My family was known throughout India and Pakistan as the Hayats of Wah. Centuries ago the caravans of emperors would turn off the Grand Trunk Road to visit my ancestors. Even in my earlier days notables from all over Europe and Asia would take the same road, once an ancient caravan route across India, to see my family. But now, usually only members of my family would follow it to my gate. Of course, this meant that I didn't see many people who were not part of

my immediate household. I did not much care. My house servants were enough company. They and their ancestors had served my family for generations. Most important, I had Mahmud.

Mahmud was my four-year-old grandson. His mother, Tooni, was the youngest of my three children. A slim, attractive woman, Tooni was a medical doctor at Holy Family Hospital in nearby Rawalpindi. Her former husband was a prominent landlord. However, they had an unhappy marriage and their relationship deteriorated a little each year. During their long, bitter disagreements, Tooni would send Mahmud to visit me until she and her husband reached another uneasy truce. One day, Tooni and her husband came to see me. Could I keep one-year-old Mahmud for a while until they settled their differences?

"No," I said. "I do not want him to become a tennis ball. But I will be willing to adopt him and raise him as my own son."

Sadly, Tooni and her husband never could settle their differences and they finally divorced. However, they did approve my adopting Mahmud, and it was working out quite well. Tooni came to see Mahmud often and the three of us were very close, particularly since my two other children lived far away.

Later that morning Mahmud pedaled his tricycle across the brick terrace shaded by almond trees. He had been with me for over three years, and this lively cherubic child with deep brown eyes and button nose was the only joy of my life. His pealing laughter seemed to lift the spirit of this secluded old house. Even so I worried about how he would be affected by living with such a downcast person as me. I tried to compensate by making sure his every need was anticipated, and this included his own servants, in addition to mine, to dress him, bring out his toys and pick them up when he was through playing with them.

But I was troubled about Mahmud. For several days he had refused to eat. This was particularly strange, for the boy was always visiting the kitchen to cajole my cooks into giving him snacks. Earlier that morning I had walked through the terrazzo entranceway out to the terrace. After exchanging a warm hug with Mahmud, I asked his servant if the child had eaten.

"No, Begum Sahib, he refuses," the maid said in a near whisper.

When I pressed Mahmud to take some food, he just answered that he was not hungry.

I was really disturbed when Nur-jan came to me alone and suggested timorously that Mahmud was being attacked by evil spirits. Startled, I looked at her sharply, remembering the disquieting experience of the night before. What did all this mean? Once again I asked Mahmud to eat, but to no avail. He wouldn't even touch his favorite Swiss chocolates that I had imported especially for him. His limpid eyes looked up to me when I offered him the package. "I'd love to eat them, Mum," he said, "but when I try to swallow it hurts." A cold chill ran through me as I looked at my little grandson, once so lively and now so listless.

I immediately summoned Manzur, my chauffeur, also a Christian, and ordered him to get the car out. Within an hour we were in Rawalpindi to visit Mahmud's doctor. The pediatrician examined Mahmud carefully and he reported that he could find nothing wrong.

Fear chilled me as we rode back to the house. Looking at my little grandson sitting quietly beside me, I wondered. Could Nur-jan possibly be right? Was this something that went beyond the physical? Was it . . . something in the spirit world attacking him? I reached over and put my arm around the child, smiling at myself for entertaining such ideas. Once, I remembered, my father had told me about a legendary Muslim holy man who could perform mira-

cles. I laughed aloud at the idea. My father was displeased, but that was the way I felt about any such claims. Still, today, holding Mahmud close as the car turned off the Grand Trunk Road onto our lane, I found myself toying with an unwelcome thought: Could Mahmud's problem be related to the mist in the garden?

When I shared my fears with Nur-jan, her henna-tipped fingers flew to her throat and she begged me to call the village mullah and ask him to pray for Mahmud.

I debated her request. Even though I believed in basic Muslim teachings, for several years I had drifted away from the many rituals, the praying five times a day, the fasting, the complicated ceremonial washings. But my concern for Mahmud overcame my doubts and I told Nur-jan that she could call the holy man from the village mosque.

The next morning Mahmud and I sat impatiently awaiting the mullah. When I finally saw him making his way up the steps of the veranda, his thin, ragged coat flapping about him in the chilling fall wind, I was both sorry I had asked him and angry that he wasn't walking faster.

Nur-jan brought the bony old man to my quarters, then withdrew. Mahmud watched the man curiously as he opened his Quran. The mullah, whose skin matched the ancient leather of his holy book, looked at me through crinkled eyes, laid a gnarled brown hand on Mahmud's head and in a quavering voice began reciting the Kul. This is the prayer every Muslim recites when he is about to begin any important act, whether to pray for the sick or to enter a business agreement.

The mullah then started to read from the Quran in Arabic. The Quran is always read in Arabic since it would be wrong to translate the very words that God's angel had given the prophet Muhammad. I became impatient. I must have started to tap my foot.

"Begum Sahib?" the mullah said, holding the Quran out to me. "You, too, should read these verses." He referred

The Strange Book

to the Sura Falak and Sura Naz, verses to be repeated when one is troubled. "Why don't you repeat these verses as well?"

"No," I said, "I will not. God has forgotten about me and I have forgotten about God!"

But at the hurt look on the old man's face I softened. After all, he had come here at my request and with Mahmud's welfare in mind.

"All right," I said, taking the worn volume. I let it fall open, then read the first verse my eyes fell on:

Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and those who are with him are hard against the unbeliever. . . .

I thought of the Christian girl who had been murdered, and about the mist that appeared in my garden shortly after she was killed, and above all about Mahmud's mysterious ailment. Could they be related? Surely any angry spiritual power would never link me and Mahmud with a Christian. I shuddered.

But the holy man seemed satisfied. Despite my reservations he returned for three days in a row to recite verses over Mahmud.

And, just to complete the series of mysterious, unsettling events, Mahmud did get better.

How was I supposed to think about all these happenings?

I was soon to find out. For without knowing it, events had been set in motion that would shatter the world I'd known all my life.

After these experiences I found myself drawn to the Quran. Perhaps it would help explain the events and at the same time fill the emptiness within me. Certainly its curved Arabic script held answers that had often sustained my family.

I had read the Quran before, of course. I remembered exactly how old I was when I first started learning Arabic so that I could read our holy book. This was the day every Muslim child began to unravel the Arabic script. I was four years, four months and four days old.

The moment was marked by a great family banquet, to which all my relatives came. It was then, in a special ceremony, that the wife of our village mullah began teaching me the alphabet.

I especially remember my Uncle Fateh (we children called him Grand Uncle Fateh; he wasn't really my uncle—all our kinsmen are called Uncle or Aunt in Pakistan). Grand Uncle Fateh was a relative very close to our family, and I remember clearly how he watched me at the cer-

emony, his sensitive aquiline face glowing with pleasure as I heard again the story of how the angel Gabriel began giving Muhammad the words of the Quran on that fateful "Night of Power" in the year 610 A.D. It took me seven years to read the holy book through for the first time, but when I finally finished, there was cause for yet another family celebration.

Always before, I had read the Quran as an obligation. This time, I felt I should really search its pages. I took my copy, which had belonged to my mother, relaxed on the white eiderdown coverlet of my bed, and began to read. I started with the initial verse, the first message given to the young prophet Muhammad as he sat by himself in a cave on Mount Hira:

Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created,
Created Man of a blood clot.
Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous,
Who taught by the Pen,
Taught man that he knew not.

At first I was lost in the beauty of the words. But later on in the book there were words that did not comfort me at all:

When ye have divorced women, and they have reached their term, then retain them in kindness or release them in kindness.

My husband's eyes had been like black steel when he told me that he didn't love me anymore. I shriveled inside as he spoke. What had happened to all our years together? Could they be dismissed just like that? Had I, as the Quran said, "reached my term"?

The next morning I picked up the Quran again, hoping to find in the curling script the assurance I needed so des-

perately. But the assurance never came. I found only directives for how to live and warnings against other beliefs. There were verses about the prophet Jesus whose message, the Quran said, was falsified by early Christians. Though Jesus was born of a virgin, he was not God's son. So say not, "Three," warned the Quran against the Christian concept of the Trinity. Refrain; better is it for you. God is only one God.

After several days of applying myself to the holy book, I put it down one afternoon with a sigh, got up and walked down to my garden where I hoped to find some peace in nature and in old memories. Even at this time of the year, the lush greenness persisted, brightened here and there by colorful zinnias that were still in bloom. It was a warm day for fall and Mahmud skipped along the paths where I had walked with my father. I could picture Father now, walking beside me, wearing his white turban, impeccably dressed in his conservative British suit. Often he would call me by my full name, Bilquis Sultana, knowing how much I enjoyed hearing it. For Bilquis was the first name of the Queen of Sheba and everyone knew Sultana signified royalty.

We had many good conversations. And in later years we enjoyed talking about our new country, Pakistan. He was so proud of it. "The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was created especially as a homeland for the Muslims of India," he said. "We're one of the largest countries under Islamic law in the world," he added, pointing out that 96 percent of our country's population was Muslim, with the rest made up mostly of scattered groups of Buddhists, Christians and Hindus.

I sighed and looked up beyond my garden trees to the lavender hills in the distance. I could always find solace with my father. In his later years I had become a companion to him, often discussing our country's rapidly changing political situation with him and explaining my

views. He was so gentle, so understanding. But now he was gone.

I remembered standing by his open grave in the Muslim cemetery of Brookwood outside of London. He had traveled to London for surgery and had never recovered. Muslim custom requires that a body be buried within 24 hours of death, and by the time I reached the cemetery his coffin was ready to be lowered into the grave. I couldn't believe I'd never see my father again. They unfastened the coffin lid so I could have one last look at him. But the cold gray clay in that box was not him; where had he gone? I stood there numbly wondering about it all as they re-fastened the coffin, each shrill squeal of the screws biting into the damp wood, sending pain through me.

Mother, with whom I was also very close, died seven years later, and now I felt as if I was completely alone.

There in my garden, shadows had lengthened and again I stood in twilight. No, the comfort I had sought in memories proved only to bring aching. Softly in the distance I could hear the muezzin's sunset prayer call; its haunting strains only deepened the loneliness within me.

"Where? O Allah," I whispered to the prayer rhythms, "where is the comfort You promise?"

Back in my bedroom that evening I again picked up my mother's copy of the Quran. And as I read I was again impressed by its many references to Jewish and Christian writings that preceded it. Perhaps, I wondered, I should continue my search among those earlier books?

But that would mean reading the Bible. How could the Bible help since, of course, as everyone knew, the early Christians had falsified so much of it? But the idea of reading the Bible became more and more insistent. What was the Bible's concept of God? What did it say about the prophet Jesus? Perhaps after all I should read it.

But then came the next problem: Where would I get a Bible? No shops in our area would carry one.

Perhaps Raisham would have a copy. But I dismissed the thought. Even if she did, my request would frighten her. Pakistanis have been murdered for even appearing to persuade Muslims to turn traitor-Christian. I thought of my other Christian servants. My family warned that I should not employ Christian servants because of their notorious lack of loyalty and untrustworthiness. But I didn't let that bother me; as long as they could fulfill their duties, I was satisfied. Doubtless they weren't very sincere anyhow. After all, when the Christian missionaries came to India, they found it easy to make converts among the lower classes. Most of these were the sweepers, people so low in the social order that their work was limited to cleaning the streets, walks and gutters, and we didn't want them working in our homes. We Muslims called these servile ones "rice Christians." Wasn't that the reason they accepted a false religion, mainly to get the food, clothes and schooling the missionaries doled out?

We looked upon the missionaries themselves with amusement; they busied themselves so eagerly over these poor creatures. In fact, only a few months before, my chauffeur, Manzur, asked if he could show my garden to some local missionaries who had admired it through the fence.

"Of course," I said gratuitously, thinking of poor Manzur who evidently wanted so much to impress these people. A few days later from my drawing room window I watched the young American couple stroll through the garden. Manzur had referred to them as the Reverend and Mrs. David Mitchell. Both had brown hair, pale eyes and were wearing Western clothes. *What colorless creatures*, I thought. Even so, I did pass word on to the gardener to give these missionaries some seeds if they wished them.

But thinking of them gave me my answer to getting a Bible. Manzur would get one for me. Tomorrow I would give him the assignment.

So I summoned him the next morning. He stood at attention before me, the nervous twitch in his face making me uneasy, as it always did.

“Manzur, I want you to get me a Bible.”

“A Bible?” His eyes widened.

“Of course!” I said, trying to be patient. Since Manzur didn’t know how to read, I was sure he didn’t own a Bible. But I felt he could get one for me. When he mumbled something I could not understand, I repeated, simply but firmly, “Manzur, get me a Bible.”

He nodded, bowed and left. I knew why he was resisting my request. Manzur was made of no firmer stuff than Raisham. They were both remembering that murdered girl. Giving a Bible to a sweeper was one thing; bringing a Bible to a person of the upper classes was quite something else. Word of this could get him into deep trouble indeed.

Two days later Manzur was driving me to Rawalpindi to see Tooni.

“Manzur, I do not have the Bible as yet.”

I could see his knuckles whiten on the steering wheel.

“Begum, I will get you one.”

Three days later I summoned him into the house.

“Manzur, I have asked you to bring me a Bible three times, and you have not.” The twitch in his face became more noticeable. “I’ll give you one more day. If I do not have one by tomorrow you will be fired.”

His face turned ashen. He knew I meant it. He wheeled and left.

The next day just before a visit from Tooni, a little Bible mysteriously appeared on my downstairs drawing room table. I picked it up and examined it closely. Cheaply bound in a gray cloth cover, it was printed in Urdu. It had been translated by an Englishman 180 years before and I found the old-fashioned phraseology difficult to follow. Manzur had evidently got it from a friend; it was almost new. I leafed through its thin pages, set it down and forgot about it.

A few minutes later Tooni arrived. Mahmud ran in with great excitement because he knew his mother would have brought him a toy. In a minute Mahmud raced through the French doors to the terrace with his new airplane, and Tooni and I settled down to our tea.

It was then that Tooni noticed the Bible resting on the table near me. “Oh, a Bible!” she said. “Do open it and see what it has to say.”

Our family views any religious book as significant. It was a common pastime to allow a holy book to fall open and point blindly at a passage to see what it said, almost like having it give a prophecy.

Lightheartedly, I opened the little Bible and looked down at the pages.

Then a mysterious thing happened. It was as if my attention were being drawn to a verse on the lower right-hand corner of the right page. I bent close to read it:

“I will call that my people, which was not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall be, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called sons of the living God.”

Romans 9:25–26

I caught my breath and a tremor passed through me. Why was this verse affecting me so! “I will call that my people, which was not my people. . . . In the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there shall they be called sons of the living God.”

A silence hung over the room. I looked up to see Tooni poised expectantly, ready to hear what I had found. But I could not read the words out loud. Something in them was too profound for me to read as amusement.

“Well, what was it, Mother?” asked Tooni, her alive eyes questioning me.

I closed the book, murmured something about this not being a game anymore, and turned the conversation to another subject.

But the words burned in my heart like glowing embers. And they turned out to be preparation for the most unusual dreams I have ever had.

3

The Dreams

It wasn't until evening that I again picked up the little gray Bible. Neither Tooni nor I referred to the Bible again after I switched the conversation to another subject. But throughout the long afternoon the words in that passage simmered just below the surface of my consciousness.

That night I retired to my bedroom planning to read and meditate. I took the Bible with me and settled among the soft white pillows of my bed. Once again I leafed through its pages and read another puzzling passage:

“But Israel, following the Law of righteousness, failed to reach the goal of righteousness.”

Romans 9:31

Ah, I thought. Just as the Quran said; the Jews had missed the mark. The writer of these passages might have been a Muslim, I thought, for he continued to speak of the people of Israel as not knowing God's righteousness.

But the next passage made me catch my breath.

For Christ means the end of the struggle for righteousness-by-the-Law for everyone who believes in him.

Romans 10:4

I lowered the book down for a moment. Christ? He was the end of the struggle? I continued on.

For the secret is very near you, in your own heart, in your own mouth. . . . If you openly admit by your own mouth that Jesus Christ is the Lord, and if you believe in your own heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:8–9

I put the book down again, shaking my head. This directly contradicted the Quran. Muslims knew the prophet Jesus was human, that he did not die on the cross but was whisked up to heaven by God and a look-alike put on the cross instead. Now sojourning in a lesser heaven, this Jesus will someday return to earth to reign for forty years, marry, have children and then die. In fact, I heard that there is a special grave plot kept vacant for the man's remains in Medina, the city where Muhammad is also buried. At the Resurrection Day, Jesus will rise and stand with other men to be judged before God Almighty. But this Bible said Christ was raised from the dead. It was either blasphemy or. . . .

My mind whirled. I knew that whoever called upon the name of Allah would be saved. But to believe that Jesus Christ is Allah? Even Muhammad, the final and greatest of the messengers of God, the Seal of the Prophets, was only a mortal.

I lay back on my bed, my hand over my eyes. If the Bible and Quran represent the same God, why is there so much confusion and contradiction? How could it be the same God if the God of the Quran is one of vengeance and punishment and the God of the Christian Bible is one of mercy and forgiveness? I don't know when I fell asleep. Normally I never dream, but this night I did. The dream was so life-like, the events in it so real, that I found it difficult the next morning to believe they were only fantasy. Here is what I saw.

I found myself having supper with a man I knew to be Jesus. He had come to visit me in my home and stayed for two days. He sat across the table from me and in peace and joy we ate dinner together. Suddenly, the dream changed. Now I was on a mountaintop with another man. He was clothed in a robe and shod with sandals. How was it that I mysteriously knew his name, too? John the Baptist. What a strange name. I found myself telling this John the Baptist about my recent visit with Jesus. "The Lord came and was my guest for two days," I said. "But now He is gone. Where is He? I must find Him! Perhaps you, John the Baptist, will lead me to Him?"

That was the dream. When I woke up I was loudly calling the name, "John the Baptist! John the Baptist!" Nur-jan and Raisham rushed into my room. They seemed embarrassed at my shouting and began fussily to prepare my toilette. I tried to tell them about my dream as they worked.

"Oh, how nice," giggled Nur-jan as she presented my tray of perfumes.

"Yes, it was a blessed dream," murmured Raisham as she brushed my hair.

I was surprised that as a Christian, Raisham wouldn't be more excited. I started to ask her about John the Bap-

tist but checked myself; after all, Raisham was just a simple village woman. But who was this John the Baptist? I had not come across the name in what I had read so far in the Bible.

For the next three days I continued reading both the Bible and the Quran side by side, turning from one to the other. I found myself picking up the Quran out of a sense of duty, and then eagerly turning to the Christian book, dipping into it here and there to look into this confusing new world I had discovered. Each time I opened the Bible a sense of guilt filled me. Perhaps this stemmed from my strict upbringing. Even after I had become a young woman, Father would have to approve any book I read. Once my brother and I smuggled a book into our room. Even though it was completely innocent, we were quite frightened, reading it.

Now as I opened the Bible, I found myself reacting in the same manner. One story riveted my attention. It told of the Jewish leaders bringing a woman caught in adultery to the prophet Jesus. I shivered, knowing what fate lay in store for this woman. The moral codes of the ancient East were not very different from ours in Pakistan. The men of the community are bound by tradition to punish the adulterous woman. As I read of the woman in the Bible standing before her accusers, I knew that her own brothers, uncles and cousins stood in the forefront, ready to stone her.

Then the Prophet said: Let him who is without sin cast the first stone (John 8:7).

I reeled as in my mind's eye I watched the men slink away. Instead of supervising her lawful death, Jesus had forced her accusers to recognize their own guilt. The book fell into my lap as I lay there deep in thought. There was something so logical, so right about this prophet's challenge. The man spoke truth.

Then three days later I had a second strange dream:

I was in the bedchamber when a maid announced that a perfume salesman was waiting to see me. I arose from my divan elated, for at this time there was a shortage of imported perfumes in Pakistan. I greatly feared running low on my favorite luxury. And so in my dream I happily asked my maid to show the perfume salesman in.

He was dressed in the manner of perfume salesmen in my mother's day when these merchants traveled from house to house selling their wares. He wore a black frock coat and carried his stock in a valise. Opening the valise, he took out a golden jar. Removing the cap, he handed it to me. As I looked at it, I caught my breath; the perfume glimmered like liquid crystal. I was about to touch my finger to it when he held up his hand.

"No," he said. Taking the golden jar he walked over and placed it on my bedside table. "This will spread throughout the world," he said.

As I awakened in the morning, the dream was still vivid in my mind. The sun was streaming through the window, and I could still smell that beautiful perfume; its delightful fragrance filled the room. I raised up and looked at my bedside table, half expecting to see the golden jar there.

Instead, where the jar had been, now rested the Bible!

A tingle passed through me. I sat on the edge of the bed pondering my two dreams. What did they mean? Where I had not dreamed in years, now I had two vivid dreams in a row. Were they related to each other? And were they related to my recent brush with the realities of the supernatural world?

That afternoon I went for my usual stroll in the garden. I was still bemused by my dreams. But now something else was added. It was as if I felt a strange delight and joy, a peace beyond anything I had ever known before. It was as if I were close to the Presence of God. Suddenly, as I stepped out of a grove into a sun-flooded open area, the air around me seemed to be alive with another lovely fragrance. It wasn't

the fragrance of flowers—it was too late for any of the garden to be in bloom—but a very real fragrance nonetheless.

In some agitation I returned to the house. Where did that fragrance come from? What was happening to me? Who could I talk to about what was happening to me? It would have to be someone with a knowledge of the Bible. I had already swept aside the thought of asking my Christian servants. In the first place it was unthinkable to ask information of them. They probably had never even read the Bible and wouldn't know what I was talking about. No, I had to talk to someone who was educated and who knew this book.

As I considered this question a shocking idea came to mind. That would be the last place I should go for help.

But a name kept returning to me so compellingly that I finally rang for Manzur.

"I want you to get the car out for me." And then as an afterthought I added: "I'll be driving myself."

Manzur's eyes widened. "Yourself?"

"Yes, myself, if you please." He left, reluctantly. Rarely had I taken my car out that late in the day. I had been an officer in the Royal Indian Army women's division in World War II and had driven ambulances and staff cars thousands of miles over all kinds of terrain. But wartime was one thing and even then I was in the company of someone. The daughter of a feudal family was not expected to drive her own car in normal life, especially not at night.

But I knew I couldn't risk Manzur knowing what I was about to do and resultant servants' gossip. I was convinced there was only one source where I could find the answer to my questions: Who was John the Baptist? What was this fragrance all about?

So it was with extreme reluctance that evening that I headed for the home of a couple I barely knew, the Reverend and Mrs. David Mitchell, who had visited my garden that summer. As Christian missionaries, they were the last people with whom I'd want to be seen.

4

The Encounter

My car idled in the driveway. Manzur stood at the driver's door which he kept closed until the last moment protecting the car's warmth against the chill of that autumn evening. His dark eyes were still questioning my decision, but without comment. I got into the warm car, settled behind the wheel and drove off into the twilight, the Bible on the seat beside me.

Everyone knew where everyone else lived in this village of Wah. The Mitchells' home stood near the entrance of the Wah cement works from which my family derived part of its income. It served as the center of a strange little community about five miles outside of town. The homes had been built as temporary quarters for British troops during World War II. I recalled from the few times I had ventured into the area that the drab, uniform houses had lost most of their whitewash; their tin roofs showed signs of much patchwork. A strange mixture of expectancy and fear filled me as I drove along. I had never been in a Christian missionary home before. I was hopeful of learn-

ing the identity of my mystery man, John the Baptist, and yet I feared a certain—what should I call it, “influence?”—from those who might answer my question.

What would my forebears think of this visit to a Christian missionary? I thought, for instance, of my great-grandfather who had accompanied the famed British General Nicholson through the Khyber Pass in one of the Afghanistan wars. What shame this visit would bring on my family! We had always associated the missionaries with the poor and social outcasts. I imagined a conversation with an uncle or aunt in which I defended myself by telling them of my strange dreams. “After all,” I said in the scene I was playing out in my mind, “anyone would want to find out the meaning of such vivid dreams.”

As I approached the Mitchells’ area in the dim light of early evening, it was just as I remembered it, except that the look-alike bungalows seemed, if possible, even more drab. After searching up and down narrow lanes, I found the house near the cement works, just where I thought it would be, a small, whitewashed bungalow, sitting in a grove of *shisham* (rosewood) trees. As a precaution I started to park some distance away until I caught myself. I was being far too afraid of what my family thought. So I parked squarely in front of the house, picked up the Bible and moved quickly toward the front door. The yard, I noticed, was neat and the screened verandah well maintained. At least these missionaries kept their place in good repair.

Suddenly the house door opened and a group of chattering village women from the minority Christian community filed out, dressed in the typical *shalwar qamiz*, a loose pajama-like cotton outfit, with a *dupatta*, a head scarf. I stiffened. They would know me, of course; nearly everyone in Wah recognized me. Now the story would be gossiped all over the area that Begum Sheikh had visited a Christian missionary!

Sure enough, as soon as the women saw me in the light that came from the Mitchells’ open front door, their chatter ceased abruptly. They hurried past me to the street, each touching hand to forehead in the traditional salute. There was nothing I could do but continue toward the door where Mrs. Mitchell stood staring out into the dusk.

Up close she looked just as I remembered her, having seen her at a distance about town, young, pale, almost fragile. Only now she was wearing a *shalwar qamiz* like the village women. As soon as she saw me her mouth fell open.

“Why, Begum Sheikh!” she exclaimed, “What? . . . But . . . come in,” she said. “Come in.”

I was glad enough to step inside the house, away from the village women’s eyes, which I knew would be fixed on my back. We went into the living room, small and simply furnished. Mrs. Mitchell drew up what appeared to be the most comfortable chair for me near the open fire. I glanced at the confusion in the middle of the room, which Mrs. Mitchell began to attend to.

She explained that she had just completed a Bible study with some local women. Then she gave a nervous cough. “Would you like tea or coffee, Begum Sheikh?” she said, brushing back her hair.

“Neither,” I replied. “I have come to talk, not to drink tea.” I looked about. “Where is your husband?”

“He’s on a trip to Afghanistan.”

I was sorry. The woman standing before me was so young. Would she be able to answer my questions?

“Do you know anything about God?” I asked suddenly.

She sank down into one of the cane chairs and looked at me strangely. The only noise in the room was the low hiss from the flames in the fireplace. Then she said quietly, “I’m afraid I don’t know as much as my husband knows about God, but I do know Him.”

What an extraordinary statement! How could a person presume to know God? Just the same, the woman's odd confidence gave me confidence, too. Before I quite knew what was happening, I found myself telling her about my dream of the prophet Jesus and the man named John the Baptist. Strangely, I had difficulty controlling my voice as I related the experience. Even as I told her, I felt the same excitement I felt on that mountaintop. Then, after describing the dream, I leaned forward.

"Mrs. Mitchell, please tell me, who is John the Baptist?"

Mrs. Mitchell blinked at me and frowned. I felt she wanted to ask if I had really never heard of John the Baptist, but instead she settled back again in her chair. "Well, Begum Sheikh, John the Baptist was a prophet, a forerunner of Jesus Christ, who preached repentance and was sent to prepare the way for Him. He was the one who baptized Jesus and who pointed to Jesus and said: 'Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.'"

Why did my heart skip at the word *baptized*? I knew little about these Christians, but all Muslims had heard of their strange ceremony of baptism. My mind flitted to the many people who were murdered after their baptisms. And this also happened under British rule when supposedly there was freedom of religion. Even as a child I had put the two facts together: a Muslim was baptized, a Muslim died.

I looked up. How long had we been sitting there silently?

"That is what I was afraid of," I said.

"What were you afraid of?" she asked.

"I was afraid that John the Baptist was pointing me to Jesus. If I choose Jesus, I lose everything!"

"Mrs. Mitchell," I continued, my throat tight, "forget I am a Muslim. Forget the problems we have with Jesus being called the Son of God. Forget about our believing

that the Bible has been changed. Just tell me one thing: What has Jesus done for you?"

The room was quiet again. Mrs. Mitchell seemed in no hurry to speak. Then she told me what God had done for her and for the world by breaking that dreadful deadlock between sinful man and Himself by personally visiting this earth in the flesh, as Jesus, and dying for all of us on the cross.

There was another long silence. Finally, hardly believing my own ears, I took a breath and heard myself saying quite distinctly, "Mrs. Mitchell, some peculiar things have been happening at our house lately. Events of the spirit. Good and bad, both. I feel as if I were in the midst of an immense tug of war, and I need all the positive help I can get. Could you pray for me?"

The woman appeared startled at my request. Then, collecting herself, she asked if I wanted to stand up, kneel or sit down as we prayed. I shrugged, suddenly horrified. All were equally unthinkable. But there was this slender, youthful woman kneeling on the floor. And I followed her!

"O Spirit of God," said Mrs. Mitchell in a soft voice, "O God, I know that nothing I can say will convince Begum Sheikh who Jesus is. But I thank You that Your Spirit can take the veil off our eyes and reveal Jesus to our hearts. O Holy Spirit, do this for Begum Sheikh. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Yes, God, that is exactly what I want," I added.

We stayed on our knees for what seemed like forever. I was glad for the silence, for my heart was strangely warmed. At last Mrs. Mitchell and I arose.

"Is that a Bible, Begum Sheikh?" she asked, nodding toward the little gray volume that I clutched to my breast in one hand.

I showed her the book.

"How do you find it?" she asked. "Easy to understand?"

"Not really," I said. "It is an old translation and I am not at home in it."

She stepped into an adjacent room and returned with another book.

"Here is a New Testament written in modern English," she said. "It's called the Phillips translation. I find it much easier to understand than others. Would you like it?"

"Yes," I said, not hesitating. "Thank you. And now I think I've taken too much of your time."

"Start with the Gospel of John," Mrs. Mitchell advised, opening the book and placing a bit of paper in it as a bookmark. "That's another John, but he makes the role of John the Baptist very clear."

Then she told me a story from the Bible about wise men from the East who had sought and worshiped the Messiah, then had a dream to avoid Herod, the Gentile ruler, on their return home.

"God *does* speak in dreams, then!" I exclaimed. "If the Bible tells about God speaking in dreams, then I know He has spoken to me in my dream. I don't usually dream, Mrs. Mitchell, but I had another dream that I don't understand. I know it has something to do with Jesus, too."

My other dream about the perfume salesman seemed so . . . bizarre. But as had happened several times already in this strange evening, I found myself filled with a boldness that seemed almost to come from outside of me, and I told her about my dream and asked if she could explain this dream for me.

She thought for a moment. "I can't think of an explanation right now, Begum Sheikh, but I'll pray and ask God to show me."

As I drove home, I experienced for the second time that same fragrant Presence I had sensed in my garden earlier that day!

When I got home that night, I read a little out of the portion of the Bible called the gospel of John, in which

the writer talked about John the Baptist. This strange man clad in camel hair, who came out of the wilderness, calling people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. And then, there in the safety of my own bedroom, seated on my divan, surrounded by memories and traditions that were four or more centuries old, a thought slipped sideways into my mind, unbidden, unwanted, quickly rejected. If John the Baptist was a sign from God, a sign pointing toward Jesus, was this same man pointing me toward Jesus, too?

Of course the thought was untenable. I put it out of mind and went to sleep.

That night I did sleep soundly.

As the muezzin called me to prayer the next morning, I was relieved to find myself seeing things clearly again. What a bizarre series of thoughts I had toyed with in the night! But now as the muezzin reminded me where truth lay, I felt secure again, away from these disturbing Christian influences.

Raisham came in just then, not with tea but with a note, which she said had just been delivered to the house.

It was from Mrs. Mitchell. All it said was: "Read Second Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 14."

I reached for the Bible she had given me and searched until I found the chapter and verse. Then, as I read, I caught my breath:

Thanks be to God who leads us, wherever we are, on Christ's triumphant way, and makes our knowledge of Him spread throughout the world like a lovely perfume!

I sat there in bed and reread the passage, my composure of a minute ago shattered. The knowledge of Jesus spreads like a lovely perfume! In my dream, the salesman had put the golden dish of scent on my bedside table and said that the perfume "would spread throughout the

world.” The next morning I had found my Bible in the same spot where the perfume had been laid! It was all too clear. I didn’t want to think about it anymore. Ring for tea, that’s what I must do. Ring for my tea and bring life back into its proper focus quickly before something else went awry.

Even though Mrs. Mitchell had invited me back, I felt it best not to return. It seemed a prudent, logical decision that I must now investigate this Bible on my own. I did not want to be pushed by any outside influence.

However, one afternoon Nur-jan rushed into my room with an odd look in her eyes. “The Padri Sahib and Mrs. Mitchell are here to see you,” she gasped.

My hand flew to my throat. Why would they come here? However, quickly composing myself, I asked the maid to bring them into the drawing room.

David Mitchell, a lanky man with crinkly eyes, radiated the same friendly warmth as his wife. The two seemed so happy to see me that I forgot my discomfort over them coming to my house.

Mrs. Mitchell started to shake hands, then at the last minute threw her arms around me instead. I was stunned. No one outside the family, not even our closest friends, had ever embraced me in this way before. I stiffened but Mrs. Mitchell appeared to take no notice of my reaction. I found—in retrospect, I have to admit—that this display pleased me. There could have been no sham in her greeting.

“I’m so happy to meet ‘the Flower Lady,’” David exclaimed in a jovial American accent.

I glanced at Mrs. Mitchell and she laughed. “I should explain. When you came to our house, I wanted to let David know right away by telegram for we had often talked about you since we visited your garden last spring. However, I didn’t want to use your real name, to protect you. As I was wondering how to refer to you in the wire, I glanced out my window and saw the flowers that had

grown from the seeds your gardener gave us. The name came to me, ‘Flower Lady,’ and that became our code name for you.”

I laughed. “Well, from now on, you can call me Bilquis.”

“And please,” she said, “call me Synnøve.”

It was a strange visit. I suppose I was half-expecting pressure from the Mitchells to accept their religion, but nothing of the sort occurred. We drank a cup of tea and chatted and at this time I did question Jesus being called the “son of God,” for to Muslims there is no greater sin than to make this claim. The Quran states again and again that God has no children.

“And this ‘trinity’?” I asked. “God is three?”

In answer, David compared God to the sun that manifests itself in the three creative energies of heat, light and radiation, a trinity relationship that together makes the sun, yet singly is not the sun. And then shortly afterward they left.

Again for several days I found myself alone with two books—the Quran and the Bible. I continued to read them both, studying the Quran because of the loyalty of a lifetime, delving into the Bible because of a strange inner hunger.

Yet, sometimes I’d draw back from picking up the Bible. God couldn’t be in both books, I knew, because their messages were so different. But when my hand hesitated at picking up the book Mrs. Mitchell gave me, I felt a strange letdown. For the past week I had been living in a world of beauty, not a visible garden created by me from seeds and water, but an inner garden created from a new spiritual awareness. I first entered this world of beauty by way of my two dreams. Then I became aware of this world a second time on the night I met the indefinably glorious Presence in my garden. And I had known it once again when I obeyed the nudging that prompted me to visit the Mitchells.

Slowly, clearly, over the next few days I began to know that there was a way to return to my world of beauty. And reading this Christian book seemed, for reasons that I could not grasp, the key to my reentering that world.

And then one day little Mahmud came up to me holding the side of his head and trying not to whimper.

“My ear, Mum,” he cried in a pain-filled voice. “It hurts.”

I bent down and examined him carefully. His usual ruddy brown complexion had paled, and although Mahmud was not a child to complain, I could see the tear stains on his little round tan cheeks.

I put him right to bed and crooned softly to him, his black hair too stark against the pillow. And then, after his eyes closed, I went to the telephone and rang the Holy Family Hospital in Rawalpindi. Within a minute Tooni was on the phone. She agreed that we should check Mahmud into the hospital the next afternoon for a complete examination the following day. I would be able to stay in a room adjoining hers and a maid would be given a smaller room adjacent to that.

It was toward evening when we checked into the comfortable arrangement. Tooni had the evening free to spend with us. Soon, Mahmud and his mother were giggling over some pictures Mahmud was coloring in a book she had brought him. I was propped up in bed reading my Bible. I had also brought the Quran with me, but by now I read the Quran out of a sense of duty, more than interest.

Suddenly, the room lights flickered, and then went out. The room was dark.

“Another power failure,” I said, exasperated. “Did you see any candles?”

In a moment the door opened and a nun stepped inside with a flashlight. “I hope you don’t mind the dark,” she said cheerily. “We’ll get some candles shortly.”

I recognized her as Dr. Pia Santiago, a slightly built, bespectacled Filipino who was in charge of the whole hos-

pital. We had met briefly on a previous visit. Almost at once another nun came in with candles and in a moment warm light flooded the room. Mahmud and Tooni resumed their coloring and I was left to make conversation with Dr. Santiago. I couldn’t help notice her staring at my Bible.

“Do you mind if I sit with you for a while?” Dr. Santiago asked.

“It would be a pleasure,” I said, assuming it was just a courtesy visit. She moved a chair near my bed and with a rustling of her white habit sat down.

“Oh,” she said, taking off her glasses and wiping her brow with a handkerchief, “has this ever been a busy night.”

My heart warmed to her. Muslims always had respect for these holy women who give up the world to serve their God; their faith may be misplaced, but their sincerity was real. We chatted, but as the conversation continued, I could tell that this woman had something on her mind. It was the Bible. I could see her glancing at it with mounting curiosity. Finally she leaned forward and in a confidential tone asked, “Begum Sheikh, what are you doing with a Bible?”

“I am earnestly in search of God,” I answered. And then, while the candle burned lower, I told her, very cautiously at first, then with mounting boldness, about my dreams, my visiting with Mrs. Mitchell, and my comparing the Bible and the Quran.

“Whatever happens,” I emphasized, “I must find God, but I’m confused about your faith.” I realized that even as I spoke I was putting my finger on something important. “You seem to make God so . . . I don’t know . . . personal!”

The little nun’s eyes filled with compassion and she leaned forward.

“Begum Sheikh,” she said, her voice full of emotion, “there is only one way to find out why we feel this way. And that is to find out for yourself, strange as that may

seem. Why don't you pray to the God you are searching for? Ask Him to show you His way. Talk to Him as if He were your friend."

I smiled. She might as well suggest that I talk to the Taj Mahal. But then Dr. Santiago said something that shot through my being like electricity. She leaned closer and took my hand in hers, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Talk to Him," she said very quietly, "as if He were your father."

I sat back quickly. A dead silence filled the room. Even Mahmud and Tooni's conversation hung between thoughts. I stared at the nun with the candlelight glinting off her glasses.

Talk to God as if He were my father! The thought shook my soul in the peculiar way truth has of being at once startling and comforting.

Then as if on cue everyone started talking at once. Tooni and Mahmud laughed and decided that the parasol should be colored purple. Dr. Santiago smiled, rose, wished us all well, gathered her habit about her and left the room.

Nothing else was said about prayer or Christianity. Yet I moved through the rest of that night, and the next morning, stunned. What made the experience especially mysterious was that the doctors could find nothing wrong with Mahmud and Mahmud kept saying that his ear did not hurt him one bit. At first, I was irritated at all the time and trouble this had taken. Then the thought occurred to me that perhaps, just perhaps, in some mystic way God had taken advantage of this situation to bring me into contact with Dr. Santiago.

Later that morning Manzur drove us all back to Wah. As we turned off the Grand Trunk onto our lane, I could see the roof of my home through the trees. Usually, I looked forward to home as a retreat from the world. But today there seemed to be a difference about my house, as if something special would happen to me there.

We drove up the lane, Manzur sounding the horn. The servants ran out and surrounded the car. "Is the little one well?" they all asked at once.

Yes, I assured them, Mahmud was fine. But my mind was not on homecoming formalities. It was on this new way to find God. I went to my bedroom to consider all that had been happening. No Muslim, I felt certain, ever thought of Allah as his father. Since childhood, I had been told that the surest way to know about Allah was to pray five times a day and study and think on the Quran. Yet Dr. Santiago's words came to me again. "Talk to God. Talk to Him as if He were your father."

Alone in my room I got on my knees and tried to call Him "Father." But it was a useless effort and I straightened in dismay. It was ridiculous. Wouldn't it be sinful to try to bring the Great One down to our own level? I fell asleep that night more confused than ever.

Hours later I awoke. It was after midnight, my birthday, December 12. I was 54 years old. I felt a momentary excitement, a carryover from childhood when birthdays were festivals with brass bands on the lawns, games and relatives coming to the house all day. Now, there would be no celebration, perhaps a few phone calls, nothing more.

Oh, how I had missed those childhood days. I thought of my parents as I liked to remember them best. Mother, so loving, so regal and beautiful. And Father. I had been so proud of him, with his high posts in the Indian government. I could still see him, impeccably dressed, adjusting his turban at the mirror before leaving for his office. The friendly eyes under bushy brows, the gentle smile, the chiseled features and aquiline nose.

One of my cherished memories was seeing him at work in the study. Even in a society where sons were more highly regarded than daughters, Father prized his children equally. Often, as a little girl, I would have a question to ask him and I would peek at him from around the door of

his office, hesitant to interrupt. Then his eye would catch mine. Putting down his pen, he would lean back in his chair and call out, "Keecha?" Slowly, I would walk into the study, my head down. He would smile and pat the chair next to his. "Come, my darling, sit here." Then, placing his arm around me, he would draw me to him. "Now, my little Keecha," he would ask gently, "what can I do for you?"

It was always the same with Father. He didn't mind if I bothered him. Whenever I had a question or problem, no matter how busy he was, he would put aside his work to devote his full attention just to me.

It was well past midnight as I lay in bed savoring this wonderful memory. "Oh, thank You . . ." I murmured to God. Was I really talking to Him?

Suddenly, a breakthrough of hope flooded me. Suppose, just suppose God were like a father. If my earthly father would put aside everything to listen to me, wouldn't my heavenly Father. . . ?

Shaking with excitement, I got out of bed, sank to my knees on the rug, looked up to heaven and in rich new understanding called God "my Father."

I was not prepared for what happened.

5

The Crossroads

"Oh Father, my father ...Father God."

Hesitantly, I spoke His name aloud. I tried different ways of speaking to Him. And then, as if something broke through for me, I found myself trusting that He was indeed hearing me, just as my earthly father had always done.

"Father, oh my father God," I cried, with growing confidence. My voice seemed unusually loud in the large bedroom as I knelt on the rug beside my bed. But suddenly that room wasn't empty any more. He was there! I could sense His Presence. I could feel His hand laid gently on my head. It was as if I could see His eyes, filled with love and compassion. He was so close that I found myself laying my head on His knees like a little girl sitting at her father's feet. For a long time, I knelt there, sobbing quietly, floating in His love. I found myself talking with Him, apologizing for not having known Him before. And again, came His loving compassion, like a warm blanket settling around me.

Now I recognized this as the same loving Presence I had met that fragrance-filled afternoon in my garden. The same Presence I had sensed often as I read the Bible.

"I am confused, Father ..." I said. "I have to get one thing straight right away."

I reached over to the bedside table where I kept the Bible and the Koran side by side. I picked up both books and lifted them, one in each hand.

"Which, Father?" I said. "Which one is Your book?"

Then a remarkable thing happened. Nothing like it had ever occurred in my life in quite this way. For I heard a voice inside my being, a voice that spoke to me as clearly as if I were repeating words in my inner mind. They were fresh, full of kindness, yet at the same time full of authority.

"In which book do you meet Me as your Father?"

I found myself answering: "In the Bible." That's all it took. Now there was no question in my mind which one was His book. I looked at my watch and was astonished to discover that three hours had passed. Yet I was not tired. I wanted to go on praying, I wanted to read the Bible, for I knew now that my Father would speak through it. I went to bed only when I knew I must, for the sake of my health. But the very next morning I told my maids to see that I was not disturbed, took my Bible again and reclined on my sofa bed.

Starting with Matthew, I began reading the New Testament word by word. I was impressed that God spoke to His people in dreams, five times in the first part of Matthew. In fact, He spoke to Joseph on

behalf of Mary. He warned the Wise Men about Herod, and three more times He addressed Joseph concerning the protection of the baby Jesus.

I couldn't find enough time for the Bible. Everything I read, it seemed, was directing me to take some kind of closer walk with God. I found myself standing at a great crossroads. So far, I had met personally, the Father God. In my heart I knew I had to give myself totally to His Son Jesus or else to turn my back on Him completely. And I knew for certain that everyone I loved would advise me to turn my back on Jesus. Into my mind crowded the memory of a special, precious day years before when my father took me to our family mosque, just the two of us. We stepped into the soaring vaulted chamber.

Taking my hand, Father told me with great pride and with strong identification that twenty generations of our family had worshipped there.

"What a privilege you have, my little Keecha, to be part of this ancient truth."

And I thought of Tooni. Surely this young woman had enough worries already. And there were my other children; although they lived far away, they too would be hurt if I "became a Christian." And then there was my Uncle Fateh, who had watched so proudly the day I was four years, four months, four days old and began learning to read the Koran. And there was beloved Aunt Amina and all my

other relatives, some hundred "uncles," "aunts" and "cousins." In the east, the family becomes *biraderi*, one community, with each member responsible to the other. I could hurt the family in many ways, even interfere with the opportunities of my nieces getting married, as they would have to live in the shadow of my decision if I chose to join the "sweepers". But most of all I worried about my little grandson, Mahmud; what would happen to him! My heart caught at the thought of Mahmud's father. He was a very volatile man, who might easily try to take the boy from me. If I became a Christian, therefore clearly demonstrating that I was unstable.

That day as I sat reading and thinking in my quiet room, these thoughts seared my heart.

Suddenly, the realization of the pain I might inflict on others became too much for me and I stood up, crying. I threw a wrap around me and walked into the cold, winter garden, my refuge where, it seemed, I could think best.

"Oh Lord," I cried, as I paced the gravelled path, "could You really want me to leave my family? Can a God of love want me to inflict pain on others?" And in the darkness of my despair, all I could hear were His words, the words which I had just read in Matthew:

Anyone who puts his love for father or mother above his love for me does not deserve to be mine, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.... Matthew 10:37-38

This Jesus did not compromise. He did not want any competition. His were hard, uncomfortable words, words I did not want to hear.

Enough! I couldn't take the pressure of the decision any longer. On impulse I ran back to the house, summoned Manzur and announced to the somewhat startled housekeeper that I was going to Rawalpindi. I would be gone for a few days. She could reach me at my daughter's if there was a need.

Manzur drove me into Rawalpindi where I did spend several days feverishly shopping, buying toys for Mahmud, perfumes and saris for myself. Not surprisingly, as I continued my spree, I found myself drifting away from the warmth of His Presence. Once when a shopkeeper spread out a piece of cloth and showed me the gems embroidered in a rich design, I suddenly saw the shape of the cross in the pattern. I immediately left the shop. Was God trying to tell me something?

The next morning, I went back to Wah, neither determined to remain a Muslim nor determined to become a Christian. Then one evening as I relaxed before the fire, I found myself picking up the Bible again. Mahmud was in bed. It was quiet in the living room. A wind in the garden rattled the windows, the fire snapped and hissed.

I had read straight through all the Gospels and the Book of Acts, and that night I had reached the last book in the Bible. I was fascinated by Revelation, even though I understood very little of it. I

read as if directed, strangely confident. And then abruptly I came to a sentence that made the room spin. It was the 20th verse of the third chapter of Revelation:

See, I stand knocking at the door. If anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will go into his house and eat with him, and he with me.

I gasped, letting the book fall in my lap. This was my dream, the dream where Jesus was having dinner with me! At the time I had no knowledge of a book called Revelation. I closed my eyes and once again I could see Jesus sitting across the table from me. I could feel His warm smile, His acceptance. The glory was there too, just as it had been with the Father. It was the glory that belonged to His Presence!

Now I knew that my dream had come from God. The way was clear. I could accept Him, or reject Him. I could open the door, ask Him to come in permanently, or I could close the door. I would have to make my full decision now, one way or the other.

I made up my mind and knelt in front of the fire. "Oh God, don't wait a moment. Please come into my life. Every bit of me is open to You."

I did not have to struggle, or worry about what would happen. I had said Yes. Christ was in my life now, and I knew it. How unbearably beautiful.

Within a few days I had met God the Father and God the Son. I got up and started to prepare for bed, my mind whirling. Did I dare take one more step? I remembered that in the book of Acts, at Pentecost, Jesus had baptized His followers with the Holy Spirit. Was I supposed to follow this same pattern?

"Lord," I said, as I laid my head back on my pillow, "I have no one to guide me except You Yourself. If You intend for me to receive this Baptism in the Holy Spirit then of course I want what You want. I am ready."

I awoke at 3 am.

"Lord," I cried, "If these words of Yours are true, then please give this baptism to me now."

Suddenly I was filled with wonder and awe. For in that pre-dawn room, I saw His face. Something surged through me, wave after wave, flooding me to the tips of my finger and toes, washing my soul. Then the powerful surges subsided, the heavenly oceans quieted. I was completely cleansed. Joy exploded within me and I cried out praising Him, thanking Him.

The next day I roamed through my house silently praising God, hardly able to contain the joy within myself. At lunch, Mahmud looked up from his pancakes and said, "Mum, you look so smiley!"

"Guess what Mahmud," I said, "We are going to celebrate Christmas at the Mitchell's home!"

"Christmas?" said Mahmud.

"Yes, it's a holiday celebration," I said, "a little like Ramazan."

That, Mahmud did understand. Ramazan was the month of the Muslim year when Muhammad received his first revelation. So for this month, each year, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset each day until at last the drums thunder in the mosques and we load ourselves with delicacies, sweet and sour fruit, spinach leaves dipped in batter and fried, delicately cooked eggplant, succulent kabobs.

Christmas, I supposed would indeed be a little like Ramazan. And I was right. When David met us at the door of the Mitchells' house, the scent of delicious cooked foods floated around him, and laughter sounded from within the room.

"Come in! Come in!" he exclaimed, drawing us into the living room filled with a holiday spirit. A Christmas tree glowed in the corner and the laughter of the two Mitchell children, just a little older than Mahmud, rang out from another room. Mahmud happily joined them at their play.

I could not contain my joy any longer. "David!" I cried, using his first name without thinking,

"Who told you about the Holy Spirit Baptism?" he asked. "Who told you?"

"Jesus told me," I laughed. "I read it in the Bible's Book of Acts; I asked God for it and received it."

Both David and Synnove at first looked bewildered, but suddenly they rushed to me. Synnove put her arms around me and broke into tears. David joined her, then the three of us stood together with arms around each other praising God.