

Osama The Demented
A Play by Farzana Moon

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Cast of Characters:

Osama	A terrorist in hiding
Sameera	Osama's wife
Niazi	A mulla
Amani	A beautician

Act One

Scene: A large cave cradled between the low ranges of Pamir mountains in Afghanistan. The cave is lit by one naked bulb over the hearth, the wire visible from one end of the wall to the other. To the left of the cave is a fairly large opening—the mouth of the cave, leading outdoors. To the right is a cavernous chamber, used as sleeping quarters. The sitting area of the cave is cluttered with rugs, bales, cushions and newspapers. The wall facing the audience displays a collection of rugs woven by Osama. Against the wall, to the right is a large table laden with jars all labeled, herbs and roots in sacks or scattered. A kerosene stove sits at the edge of the table, pots and kettles right beside it, and behind it a disarray of cups and saucers. A rugged stool is pushed under the table. Not far from the table is a big rock used as a stand for radio/tape player, dusty cassettes heaped at the bottom. Besides that heap is a metal box, secured with a rusty lock. Rugs are scattered over the floor too, and facing the stage to the right is a handloom displaying half woven Twin Towers, accompanied by another rugged stool. To the left of the wall is an open pit of fire—hearth, encircled by stones for cooking. The wall behind it displays pots and pans. A set of buckets, kettles and containers are arranged neatly beside this makeshift hearth. A flute and an old harmonium grace a Mukkuri kilim in a palette of ochre and apricot. One Makarov pistol and a Kalashnikov rifle are abandoned carelessly by the handloom. When the curtain opens, Osama's back is toward the audience. He is seated at his handloom, examining his Kalashnikov rifle. Sameera is hovering over her table mixing herbs, while something is simmering in a pot over the kerosene stove. Amani is seated by the hearth, churning her ladle over a big pot on the open fire, her hookah beside her neglected. Niazi is squatted on a Mukkuri kilim in the middle of the sitting area, evoking a gypsy tune on his flute. Osama's voice erupts forth, loud and doleful.

Osama

*Tis all a chequerboard of Nights and Days
Where destiny with man for pieces plays
Hither and thither moves, and mates and slays
And one by one back in the closet lays*

Niazi

Why must you recite this quatrain of Omar Khayyam, Osama? War, not poetry, has been your avocation, if not your profession?

Osama

(Turning, while stroking his wispy beard)

War with words is the only option left, Mulla Niazi, to men like us, who have grown old. Carpet weaving is sheer poetry, you would agree. Words woven into the colors of death and destruction! These Twin Towers will live forever like a living, throbbing *brand of memory*. Can't you see the blood in their veins, claret red, and the beautiful wounds! Burgundy! Burnt peach. Yes, carpet weaving is like music on a harp, can't you hear the notes? A song rippling thirty times over, an accolade divine.

Sameera

(Swinging back to face Osama.)

Bahhh! Music indeed! You have grown senile, Osama. Ten odd years since *Nine Eleven*, and you are still torturing the wool of the lambs. All these rugs of ugliness! Such atrocious colors! Your other wives and your horde of children left you, no wonder! And why did I stay? A devoted, barren wife to untangle the knots of zeal in your stupid head, perhaps!

Osama

(Waving his arm)

Shut your mouth, Sameera! You stayed to drive me crazy with your preaching. And to corrupt my body with your foul herbs, which you still manage to gather from the blasted land of God's own earth. Nothing grows in Afghanistan, but bullets and your herbs come walking to you on all fours from all corners of the world.

Sameera

(Edging closer.)

Oh, yes! These herbs, my demented husband, have given you some semblance of sanity all these years. Preaching, yes. Instead of hurting, if we could channel our energies to healing? Brewing herbal wonders than creating explosive atomizers of death and destruction? You married an herbalist and you didn't even know, while juggling bullets and torching the minds into wildfires of hatred and bigotry. For your benefit alone I am brewing this syrup, which you find foul-smelling, is that it? Silver-green leaves of poppies, its seed pods ground to powder, and only the purple flowers of midsummer, I have mixed and fermented. And when the brew is ready, you take but one teaspoon, and you will sleep like a child. All the paranoid of your pain, fear, hatred vanishing like a dream!

{Niazi teases the strings of his harmonium, while Amani puffs on her hookah.}

Amani

And I am doomed to cook for a mulla, a dreamer, and a terrorist! All imprisoned in this morgue of a cave for life, for life?

{Sameera prances back to her table. Osama leaps to his feet.}

Osama

A terrible cook you are, Amani! More skilled in cooking with your tongue than with your hands! What comes out of your tongue scalds the flesh, and the dough kneaded by your hands is the bread of affliction.

Amani

(Brandishing her ladle with one hand and sucking on her hookah with the other.)

I wish it were true, mighty Osama, I wish? I was a beautician if you remember, not a cook? Tyranny of your Taliban turned me into a slut, scavenging for food and shelter, if not into a harlot, lusting after dirty Arabs like you?

Niazi

{Still playing his harmonium)

Now this chemistry of arguments is turning into a symphony most charming. I was a peddler of charms and incantations, before I became a mulla. Now, now. Let's make sense of our sorry existence in this dark cave of Afghanistan. Why are we still hiding? Our beautiful Afghanistan, always wearing the rags of poverty, why? The wretched truth is, Afghanistan is the Jerusalem of the power-hungry and greed-mongers. It was peaceful and prosperous under the reign of king Babur. Four centuries later, the shopkeepers of Britain came poking holes into our holy mountains, then seizing the gold-paved streets of India...

Osama

(His eyes blazing.)

Cease your tirade, Niazi, my head is hurting. You would be better off studying the Quran than haranguing after the heathens.

Niazi

(Heaving him up slowly, and threading his way toward the rug of Twin Towers.)

Heathens in all of us! The plight of Afghanistan can be summed up in a few words. British left us with communal violence, Russians filled our coffers with hatred and rebellion, and Americans added to this by encouraging zealots and cutthroats to rule over us. Rebels and exiles like you, Osama, loaded with the ammunition of zeal and bigotry? And now America has carved out another home for the zealots, Iraq!

Osama

(Knotting his hands behind his back into fists.)

Who are you calling a bigot, Mulla?

Niazi

(Standing still, and without looking at him.)

You and your Taliban! And all the hoodlums known as Al Qaida, and you the biggest of them all.

Sameera

(Carrying a bundle of twigs.)

Now, now. My dear Mulla, and my dear, dear husband, curb your moods and tempers. I am in no mood to salve your wounds from the cannonballs of your fists. Besides, my paste from the pale roots of belladonna and its fruit is all finished in curing the colics, fevers and rheumatics of the few loyal Afghanis who still keep me well supplied with herbal treasures.

(Thrusts out a few twigs into the hands of Niazi, holding the rest to Osama.)

Sameera Continued

Be careful with these oak twigs. They are my medical tools for gathering herbs. Go, find me the resin Asafetida. I would dry and pound it into a powder. One pinch of it, and all the ailments of the stomach are cured. And I do believe you are sicker in your stomachs than in your heads?

Osama

(Knocking the twigs down from Sameera's hands.)

I might be senile, but am not stupid, my lily of Kabul! Asafetida comes from the fennel grown in Persia. If I don't die here in this cave, I would take you to Persia with all your jars of earth science to poison the heretics.

Amani

(Exclaiming suddenly, and cupping her head into her hands.)

My head is spinning like a globe, and no herbs in sight from the windswept fields of Bengal to the jungles of Sahara!

{All watch her speechless. Sameera flies to her table of herbs.}

Sameera

Let me fetch my tincture of yellow coral from the east. I ground it with great care in my marble basin, for great efficacy. It cures many ailments. Especially, the terrible, pounding headaches!

{Sameera rubs the oily liquid around Amani's temples, frowning to herself.}

Amani

(Deliriously, pushing her hookah away.)

Gandhiji, I have heard—that prophet of nonviolence could have had a better chance of staying healthy while fasting-unto-death, if he had but put his mind to studying the herbs than spinning the wheel?

Osama

(Pacing and thinking aloud.)

She has gone daft. Pound some sense into her head, Niazi, with wisdom from the holy Quran. Sameera's herbal quackery is not going to cure her of her hallucinations.

{Niazi shakes his head mutely, while Sameera begins to rub Amani's back.}

Amani

I am not daft, you pious fool! Calling others heretics? And you yourself no Muslim! Do you even know that Islam means reconciliation, not violence and disruption? Could you ever absolve yourself of that loathsome evil you unleashed on *Nine Eleven*?

Osama

Not daft, but whipped by the waters of perdition! One whole decade since the Twin Towers fell into their own rubble of pride, and you still ascribe evil to the purity of Jihad?

Sameera

Jihad! Every maggot in the world knows, Jihad is the inner strength to fight evil from *within*, not to spread evil on the face of this earth. *Walk gently on earth*, our Prophet said.

Amani

(Swaying to her feet abruptly.)

One whole decade and our Prophet still turning in his grave in grief—the apostle of peace and the protector of the orphans and the widows! So much innocent blood! And didn't you spill your guts out with laughter on that day of tragedy? Gloating over the brutal ignorance of your own young louts! The fanatics, whom you nurtured with the poison of hatred and vengeance?

Osama

I was laughing, yes, at the arrogance of the *Superpower* being sucked into the furnace of devastation! Laughing at the warlords of the world, prowling everywhere to be the policemen of this earth to satisfy their pride and greed! Does the impious beautician remember what happened two years prior to that hateful day of tragedy, as you call it? Grand missiles of America pounding the streets of Afghanistan, that's what happened. You were there when an old man stood weeping and lamenting the loss of his family and home, all consumed by the hellfire of bombs from the sky. *What I have done to America*, you saw his wrinkled face and white beard, soaked in tears? Didn't you?

Amani

(Cradling her head into her hands and tottering toward that black hole of a sleeping quarter.)

Oh, yes. Whatever, whoever? Bombarding the earth and the rocks, killing little ants—us Afghans? And rascal Osama, still living, still breathing the dust of hatred and vengeance. I must sleep. But believe you me, Sameera's herbs are powerful. Someday, they would cure the hot flashes of enmity, violence, malevolence.

{Exit Amani. Sameera gets to her feet, wringing her hands.}

Sameera

My herbs, more precious than gold, are priceless! Not to be sold in this bazaar of ignorance, where insanity fetches millions and wisdom buried alive under the clods of dirt.

Osama

Oh, yes. We can sell your concoctions in vials of gold at exorbitant prices. People love to buy what they can't afford. And once bought, they would become the relics of sanctity, exuding the scent of bliss. No one would like to part with them; especially, the guardians of such sanctified lies, even willing to ransom their lives if the aura of sanctity could be kept and maintained.

Niazi

(Waving his arms frantically.)

Now that Amani has gone to bed, I sure would go hungry to bed tonight. Sameera can't cook. My cooking is not fit for dogs. And you, Osama—turned weaver, would be content on chewing the wool of the sheep?

Sameera

(Turning toward her table.)

Lucky for us, I still have the paste made from the fruit of the almond. It kept many Talibans alive in hiding when there was no food or water to be found.

Osama

(Wrinkling his nose.)

Oh, no! Not that atrocious tasting paste again. It sat in my stomach for days, and you had to feed me the purgative you concocted from bryony vine. It almost killed me. I would rather chew on a bullet than taste that paste!

Sameera

(Licking the paste out of a jar.)

Your choice, Osama. We could be brewing sweet concoctions under warm hearths than becoming the slaves of mad scientists, fashioning weapons of mass destruction. I am going to bed too.

Niazi

Let me have some of that paste, Sameera, before you go. For some strange reason, I hear the thunder of war planes. The hi-tech glitz in Iraq, though long past gone, is pounding my memory to the horror of a recollection. Wasn't that the American show down, to show the world that *power* has the right to massacre? What can an ant do against the bullying of an elephant? To crawl deeper into the blood-soaked earth till bomb-sirens ring no more of the thunderous fury from the skies. And then the lowly ants could venture out—an army of ants, crawling straight to the gates of arrogance, and bloated with the blood of vengeance. Bigger and mightier than before, would they not strike back?

Osama

(His eyes flashing.)

I got it, I got it! The sanity of my insane reasoning! Massacre for massacre! Twin Towers! Why did we do it? It was the price paid in full for desecrating our Jerusalem in Afghanistan. Rivers of Afghan blood split here, years ago, was poured into the Twin Towers, spilling afresh

on the streets of New York. The same blood, o wretched Mulla, the same, I tell you. What color is American blood, can you tell me? Afghani, I know. Turned molten gold against the showers of invasions! Can't you see it in the eyes of young men? Red-rimmed, reflecting the fire of British pride, of Russian belligerency, of American arrogance! Now, that I have drained my cup of poison, would you, dear Sameera, help me brew the hemlock of sanity?

Sameera

(Vanishing into the other side of the cave.)

Can't think. Must sleep.

Osama

So, only two of us! Crazy mulla and a demented husband! What do you propose we do?

Niazi

The last sane act, or the only one in our lives, would be to turn ourselves in, to confess our sins. Hoping to escape the hellfires of Judgment Day!

Osama

Not a chance! I want to die in peace in this graveyard of carpets. If I turned myself in, a horde of morons would keep me alive on those *Frankenstein machines*, torturing me with questions foolish and heathenish. Tell me, wise Mulla, while I resurrect the Twin Towers, if I were granted another life, would I act differently?

{Osama seats himself at his loom, adding more knots. Niazi picks up his flute, examining it thoughtfully.}

Niazi

Who knows? *Mullas are garbage people*, I have been told to my face. Yet, I try to do my best, averting my gaze from the garbage inside all of us, no exceptions, believe you me. And the garbage which rots in the stinking dumps is no worse than what we hoard *within*. To get rid of the outward stink, we torch the filth, and we can do the same inwardly, purifying ourselves with the fire of love. As our Prophet said: *Life is a choice, a struggle and a constant becoming!*

Osama

A prophet of lies you are, Niazi! A mulla, a peddler, a chemist, a physicist! What are you? Who are you?

Niazi

(Squatting down beside his harmonium.)

Paleontologist for sure! Studied abroad for two grueling years before I got involved in discovering the major archeological sites at Sorkh Kotal in Afghanistan. Earth Science, my crazy Osama, as you were telling Sameera, is not that mumbo jumbo of medicinal herbs, but the study of fossils, strata and rock, layers upon layers.

Osama

(A volley of mirth escaping his lips.)

Crazy, but not stupid! I was humoring Sameera. Besides, those long spans of time into which I must have been sucked before I came to this earth, are forgotten. Precambrian, Paleozoic, Mesozoic, Cenozoic, all that hocus-pocus in geological time line, don't you think? Billions of years old, and we still can't live in peace?

Niazi

(Choking with mirth.)

Look who is talking! An infidel and a tyrant! And bigoted, for sure! Such a dolt, branded as a terrorist, real for sure, God's truth! Osama, dear Osama, still pretending, in this dear hole of a cave, that his knowledge in science, poetry, theology is irrefutable. We humans are only forty

thousand years old. Earth is four-point-six billion years old, to be precise. And wise mammals have known this earth and the sky for fifty four million years.

Osama

(Sniveling while knotting.)

I was your saint and a prophet when the Twin Towers collapsed. And now I am an infidel. Hell and damnation in your mouth, Mulla! Your brain is frozen solid, turned into a glacier of ice. Go back to Ghazni where you came from, or better yet to Iceland to study the glaciers. Might thaw your archeological brain?

Niazi

(Leaping to his feet.)

Stupid, stupid, Osama! There are no glaciers in Iceland.

{Niazi pirouettes on his feet. Osama watching him opiatly.}

Osama

What are you doing, you heathen?

Niazi

(Laughing)

I am whirling on my toes to be united with my Beloved.

Osama

(Incredulously.)

Do you belong to one of those filthy sects of the Sufis?

Niazi

(Whirling.)

May hellfire burn your tongue, Osama. Our Prophet was the First Sufi of Islam.

Osama

The eternal fires of hell are under your toes, Niazi, stop! Our Prophet, a Sufi, you heretic?

Niazi

(His one hand poised palm up, the other palm down.)

An ignorant Wahabi calling me a heretic! Don't you know this is how our Prophet bestowed blessings upon Ali and upon the world? *I am knowledge and Ali is its gate*, the Prophet sang after performing this dance of Love and Unity.

Osama

(Lumbering to his feet.)

Those Shia dogs taught you all these flints of heresy! I will exterminate them all before flinging you down from the peaks of the Himalayas.

Niazi

Shia dogs and Wahabi jackals! Who are the infidels and who the believers, killing all brethren in faith? A pack of wolves, oppressing holy land of our Prophet!

Osama

(Knotting his hands behind his back.)

Who are you calling, Wahabi?

Niazi

You and your Arab oppressors, the keepers of Kaaba! Choking the throat of Mecca and Medina with a noose of lies, with man-made laws, and holding those laws as sacred, Islamic? God's earth, they have turned into a prison, stifling the rights of women. Imagine! Our Prophet, the apostle of equality for all, both men and women! Yes, Wahabis! The lords of torture and distortion!

Osama

I am no Wahabi, a true Muslim, I am! How dare you insult me, you dirty maggot? And dare not forget, I am still the commander-in-chief of Islam, and I will flay you with my bare hands if you malign my character, or the Face of Islam.

Niazi

The Face of Islam, you yourself have disfigured, don't you know? And you are no commander-in-chief. *Commander* without command! *In* trouble. *Chief* of lies! Come, Osama, let me teach you bhangra, if not the Sufi dance. You would sleep better after a vigorous exercise and would have fun too.

Osama

(Exclaiming.)

Sufis again, those Masters of sorcery and sycophancy! Who is the master of your madness and idolatry?

Niazi

Deride not your own idols of worship, Osama. Rumi from Balkh, your dear, dear poet! He is not only my Master, but your lord too.

Osama

(Drifting toward the table.)

My Lord, o stinking wretch of a Mulla, is Allah. But tapestry of fears is closing around me.

Yes, bhangra might help. Or Sameera's false science of herbs!

(Opens one jar.)

Osama continued

A clover with four leaves she has ground to fine powder. She told me, it brings great powers to see through illusion, to heal the sick and to escape harsh circumstances.

{Osama licks the powder with his finger. Niazi steals behind him, his gaze fixed to the pot over the kerosene stove.}

Niazi

What foul decoction? It looks like the infusion of olive bark and its leaves, to reduce fevers, that much I know.

(His finger is singed while turning the stove off.)

Niazi continued

God's wrath, I will die of this searing pain, if not of burns.

Osama

(Unlidding another jar. Then applying the paste to Niazi's finger.)

No, you old simpleton, you won't! This paste from the ground root of lily heals the burns like magic. You would live to be another couple of million years, at least. I got it! You were wrong. Human beings have been on earth for two whole million years.

Niazi

(His knees buckling under him. He falls flat on his back.)

The baboons and the orangutans, if that's what you mean! I am coming down with fever.

Dying. Oh, these chills. Am I becoming a part of the Great Ice Age?

Osama

(Singing with glee.)

I was a speck of dust measured in molecules

Now I am a rising mountain peak, snow-capped

I was forgotten like coffee grains in an empty pot

*Now I am surging light leading a multitude
 You erased my famine, unpicked my anger
 Your energy changes my voice, it radiates my heart
 Now I am alive with the ore of words pouring
 From my lips like molten lava glittering with joy*

Niazi

(Pressing his head with both hands.)

Rumi is going to pluck your heart out of your breast, if you mutilate his verses with a voice so vulgar.

Osama

(Capering before sprawling beside Niazi.)

Sublime and vulgar! We are poets and scientists. Lovers and murderers! Sufis as well as sinners. Drunk with the soma of hatred and gone stark mad for the dearth of killing!

The Curtain

Act Two

Scene: The same as in Act One.

When the curtain opens, all four characters are engaged in a bhangra dance, in accompaniment with the music from the cassette player. Amani and Sameera are dressed in floral prints, much like the nomad women of the mountains. Niazi has donned a cap and a gray cloak over his white baggy outfit, his cap and a matching vest stitched with tiny mirrors. Osama has decked himself with red cummerbund and a matching scarf tied over his turban. The music reaches a crescendo, the ladies swooping down to their knees, and the men standing behind them, rocking back and forth and clapping. At the end of the music, all scatter laughing. Sameera turns to her table, lighting her kerosene stove. Amani capers toward the hearth, throwing a handful of tea leaves into the pot, and blowing into her hookah. Niazi follows Sameera, while Osama stands still in the middle of the stage, brooding.

Osama

Strange dream I had last night. Twin Towers growing out of my ears, then poof, all smoke and darkness!

Amani

(Stirring the pot, while still cradling her hookah.)

Your spleen is all chewed up with guilt, Osama. Your stomach too, all bad and churning. Not strange, matching your temper. Lucky for you, the tea I am making this afternoon is mixed with vervain herb called Enchanter's Plant. It soothes the ailments of the spleen and the stomach.

Osama

(Murmuring to himself.)

How enchanting. Your tongue works wonders more wondrous than any herbs or concoctions.

Sameera

(Over her shoulders.)

With a sprig of rosemary under my pillow, I slept like a child. Though, none of you believe me when I tell you of its wondrous qualities. Rosemary, great for inducing sleep and protecting the sleeper from nightmares!

{Osama seats himself at his loom, moody and taciturn. Amani keeps smoking her hookah, smiling to herself. Sameera is mixing herbs with her back towards them.}

Niazi

Can't say that for myself! A sleepless night. A long, long night! The worms in my stomach kept me awake, pinching and squirming. And now my intestines are all jumbled up.

Sameera

(Declaring.)

Why, Mulla! You should have told me. I have this tincture made from the tree bark of pomegranate. Here, take some, it would drive out all the worms from your intestines.

Amani

(Laughing.)

She wouldn't tell you, of course! This tincture is a great curative for women's complaints too. She herself uses it every month without fail.

Sameera

(Turning, her eyes flashing.)

Shame on you, Amani. You can't keep your mouth shut, I tell you! I have saved up enough lotus leaves for the moontides, and their taste is not bad.

Osama

(Coughing.)

No one cares about my ailment. This nagging cough that I get every alternate day!

Sameera

(Taking a few steps toward Osama, and then stopping suddenly.)

Just because you refuse to believe your gums and mouth are swollen! That infusion from the aromatic gum of myrrh which I took so much pain in making would not only stop your cough, but would pump your lungs too, and they would be screaming for fresh air.

Niazi

(Tiptoeing toward Osama.)

Your gums and mouth, swollen! Let me look, eh?

Osama

(Waving his arm.)

Death's own vultures! Get away, Niazi. My heart is swollen. Aching, aching.

{Niazi canters back to his former seat, drumming the key of harmonium in some sort of fury. Amani is watching everyone, smoking her hookah religiously. Sameera edges close to Osama.}

Sameera

Poor Osama. From the golden flowers of calendula I made a paste thick and creamy, its leaves I grinded, then boiled the mixture in water. An herbal remedy fit for a king! One teaspoon full, and your heart would be young and strong.

Osama

(Murmuring.)

If it doesn't break.

Amani

Would be a miracle if your heart of stone could break? Aching, perhaps, to toss some pebbles as votes into the ballot-box of your favorite candidate?

Niazi

(Abandoning his harmonium, and picking up his flute.)

You are not that old, Amani. You possibly wouldn't know about the days when Afghans voted by dropping almonds into the teapots. And now, how convenient, Afghanistan selects its presidents, not Afghans! A grand coup, if we are lucky? Watching the hated ones exiled, if not on the gallows?

Osama

(Absorbed in trying a jufti knot of four warp strands instead of two.)

Alien invaders still in command! As long as the US devil holds the strings to puppet presidency, exile is not a choice and death by the civilized barrel of a gun, one gaping hole of mercy.

Sameera

(Returning to her table thoughtfully.)

Not politics again? Anything but politics! My healing herbs are much to my taste than whistling bullets in arguments, and the missiles in hate-mongering.

Niazi

Do you want me to entertain you with a story, Sameera?

Sameera

(Arranging her jars.)

Anything, but the horror of plotting and scheming!

Osama

(Murmuring to himself.)

Weaver of carpets I am. No more time for plotting and scheming. Trying this jufti knot is like wading inside a whirlpool of absurdities.

Amani

You should be weaving kilos and prayers rugs, not those atrocious looking towers.

Niazi

Anyone interested in my story? The snake story which I tell only in a rare mood of goodwill!

Amani

I am afraid of the snakes. We have plenty of them outside our cave.

Sameera

(Mixing some herbs.)

Snakes are beautiful and charming. Go ahead with your story, Niazi.

Niazi

Well! A young man awakening from his sleep notices a snake leaving his room, then slithering out of his house into the street. He is so afraid that night after night, he can't fall asleep. His health is suffering and his business is in shambles, because he cannot concentrate on his work.

His friends comfort him, saying: *why can't you sleep, the snake is gone from your house?* But he keeps repeating deliriously. *How can I sleep when my house has become the road of the snake?*

Osama

(Jerking himself up to his feet.)

Yes, American warlords! The serpents of dissention! Causing rifts in our country amongst clans, borders, continents!

Amani

(Stumbling to her feet.)

Afghanistan is not your country, Osama! Why don't you go back to Yemen where you were born? You brought all this chaos and devastation over our heads, didn't you? Along with your fundamentalist brothers—the snakes of intrigue, teaching them hatred and violence! Unruly gangsters from all over the world, charmed by your riches and cunning. The Uzbeks, the Chechens, the Egyptians, the Sudanese, the Filipinos, the Algerians, the Kashmiris, the Pakistanis, the Bangladeshis. Didn't you herd them all together under the banner of Al-Qaida? Afghanistan is my country. Leave us, and the curse would be lifted. Sudan didn't want you, Saudi Arabia exiled you?

Osama

(Pacing, his brow wrinkled.)

I am saving you the grief of losing your tongue, Amani! For, the day I cut your tongue to pieces and feed it to the dogs, will be the day I leave. Why should I leave? Afghanistan is as much my home as of the Tajiks, Pushtuns, Hazaras, Qizilbashs, and of many a horde mired deep in ethnic rivalry. I established my claim on this land when I built a village across from the Herat Road.

Amani

That prison of barbed wire! Naked floodlights and ugly townhouses, punctured with Holy Scriptures which should have been left intact inside the Quran, not exposed to be despoiled by power-hungry foreigners. You bequeathed that village to Mulla Omar—the king of zeal, no wonder?

Niazi

(Getting to his feet, and joining his hands in a gesture of peace.)

Let's not start this madness all over again, or we would be cutting each other's throats!

Sameera

(Turning around and singing.)

The very name Pushtun spells honor and glory

Lacking that honor, what is the Afghan story

I can see the great covered bazaar of Kabul, burning, burning. Centuries ago, wasn't it? British leaving, torching our beautiful Kabul to flames.

Osama

(Stopping in his act of pacing.)

Madness running quicksilver in her veins! Come, Amani, let's have some of your tea, it might soothe our nerves. I am in the mood to give lessons in weaving, washing and coloring.

{Amani obeys without a word. She fills four tumblers, serving others and keeping one to herself. The others keep talking while she is busy serving.}

Niazi

My stomach is growling for mutton kebabs and stewed chicken.

Sameera

Your wish would come true, if those louts bring us our groceries.

Osama

(Seating himself at his loom, and sipping his tea absently.)

These are no ordinary colors, mark you. Take this Persian blue—the color of paradise, for example. It was made from the crushed leaves of indigo, finely powdered, and then fermented in a vat with potash, slaked lime and grape sugar.

Sameera

(Gurgling her tea down and laughing.)

Sugar madness, Osama! Your head is the honeycomb of senility, I tell you. A million times you have told me how colors are made. The Birbul Blue made from alum, indigo and cinnabar, all ground and sifted, wool soaked for ten hours, then boiled, beaten and washed in water mixed with kurds and whey. Then cooked again, beaten and dried, for hours, for hours. Oh, my head is spinning.

(Flounces back to her table.)

Sameera Continued

Must find some herbs to cure my head fever!

{Amani is touring the rugs on the wall, while sipping her tea. Osama seems absorbed in his own thoughts. Niazi waves his arms, chuckling to himself.}

Niazi

Another recipe for blue if anyone wants to know? And you all are interested, I am sure. As easy as it goes! Just a mixture of the root of spurge, a skin of onion, St. John's Wort, leaves of tanner's Sumach, berries of Buchthorn, flowers of Camomile, stigma of Saffron, stem of Sage, and all of Bastard Hemp. A dyer from Tabriz gave me this recipe. Do you know, gold and yellow colors are made from onion skins, weld, vine, autumnal apple leaves, pomegranate skins, and saffron crocuses. And if you need black, simply use walnut husks and iron oxide.

Amani

Is this Pazyrk or Bukhara? Ugly chequerboard design! You can't even tell the difference between men and horses in here. This rug must have been dyed in iron solution, the colors are corroding.

Osama

(Leaping to his feet, and picking his Kalashnikov rifle from the floor.)

Oh, my jars of indigo soaked in alkaline liquid! How could I forget? It has been weeks.

Amani

(Screaming.)

Don't kill me, Osama, don't. I didn't mean to offend you.

Osama

Don't act like a fool, Amani, more so like a retard! I don't kill women, only men and beasts, the same difference. Only going out to look for my jars, they shouldn't be in the sun for more than eight weeks.

Amani

(Whimpering.)

A retard talking to a retard!

Sameera

(Laughing.)

You forget, Osama. That indigo has been fermenting in your urine. Didn't you tell me so? And why must you carry your assault rifle? Not a living soul here miles around.

Osama

I prefer to live in this cave, not in the stomach of a saber-toothed cat, mind you. And there are many a predators lurking down the hills, I am sure.

Niazi

While you are at it, Osama, don't forget to feed your horse. Or, better yet, fetch his fodder from that *Crater* of a hole, if there is any left?

Osama

(Turning to his heels.)

What are mullas good for? If not preaching, then feeding the horses! Come, help me.

Niazi

(Lumbering to his feet.)

When mullas become companions of the scoundrels, their careers in preaching are finished.

Unless, of course, if they are paid for teaching the noble virtues of hatred and vengeance.

{Exit Osama and Niazi. Sameera returns to her table, adding more herbs into her pot, which is simmering on the kerosene stove. Amani riffles through the pile of carpets by the wall.}

Amani

All the kilims and cowdanis! Why does Osama weave so much ugliness? He used coarse goat hair on these, it is obvious. Feel them, they are sandpaper stiff. Worthless stuff!

Sameera

(Replacing the old kettle on the stove with a new one.)

What seems worthless to you, is prized beyond belief continents away. Those cowdanis—prayer rugs with a mihrab like niche in the mosque, are being sold in Herat and in the bazaars of Mashhad in Iran, fetching great prices.

Amani

(Edging closer, and peering over the kettle.)

Making a dent in his millions, I reckon. What are you brewing now?

Sameera

(Laughter trickling down her lips uncontrollably.)

A witch's brew! No. Just softening the rootstock of mandrake! It eases the ailments of the lungs, is good for inducing sleep, and a great cure for melancholy.

Amani

(Sniffing and pouting her lips.)

Just like Osama, you are. He is possessed with the need to weave rugs, and you with the greed for herbs. Why must you have jars upon jars of medicinal herbs, as useless as the kilims and the cowdanis?

Sameera

How can you say that, Amani? These useless herbs, as you say, have kept us sane and healthy amidst our madness'. Paradoxically, I mean. We know we are mad in this whaling absurdity of an existence, and yet by the sheer virtue of such knowledge—this madness and absurdity, we are holding on to the reeds of sanity. Creatively, if not pugnaciously!

Amani

(Standing on her toes before falling into a heap over the Ardebil carpet of medallion design.)

I am the only one sane around here, if you didn't know. I pretend to be mad just to humor you all.

Sameera

(Flinging herself down across from Amani, and snatching a pillow into her lap.)

Life is a great pretense, isn't it? Pretending to be sane when mad and going stark mad, when sanity holds us in its pincers of grief and despair. We humor ourselves; thinking, that we humor others by accepting and protecting their ignorance. Osama humors me, by labeling my herbal experiments under the field of *Earth Science*, not even knowing that my love for herbs originated from my studies in geology and paleontology. Both of us humor each other, deluded by the mists of wisdom or ignorance, or both?

Amani

Deliciously and arrogantly insane you are! No doubt left in my mind anymore. If you think yourself so wise, queen Sameera, and all of us whaling mad, why don't you concoct some herbal remedy to cure our madness'? It would be wise if I may suggest to test it on your own self first.

Sameera

I have. An herbal wonder! Amazingly simple and astonishingly efficacious! The root of parsley, powdered fine, and mixed with wine, makes the memory shine like a mirror, and heals the brain.

Amani

(Laughing.)

Happily drunk, if not drugged, you are reaping great pleasure out of our stupidity and ignorance, no wonder. And who supplies you with wine?

Sameera

(Joining her in her mirth.)

Pious mulla! He is addicted, don't you know? And this is no ordinary wine, I tell you. A mixture of dates and barley with the right amount of petals from white and yellow roses! Himalayan tulip seeds, and the roots of wild perennial madder.

Amani

More like a recipe by some dyer from Tabriz to color the wool for carpets! I wouldn't touch it even if you fetched it straight from the rivers of Paradise. What other concoctions you brew and preserve, which might ease my stomach, if not my sadness?

Sameera

Your lungs need more caring than your stomach or heart! Lungs, all black and rotting with the soot from your precious hookah! The dried skin of orange fruit will cure both your lungs and stomach. Yet, I am more interested in brewing an infusion from the flowers of orange tree, extracting oil from their petals, which alone brings stupor.

Amani

What new madness is this? Why should you concoct something which brings stupor?

Sameera

So that we can all die as painlessly as possible.

{ Amani leaps to her feet, flying toward the hearth. She grabs her hookah, puffing on it furiously. Her eyes are shining with fright as she inches her way back toward Sameera. }

Amani

You mean. You mean to kill us all?

Sameera

(Smirking and gloating.)

Including myself.

Amani

Why?

Sameera

Because, you numbskull, they are going to use our bodies as sieves, with bullets holes as big as walnuts.

Amani

Who? I am afraid of death.

Sameera

The foreign devils, you idiot! The Americans prowling our skies over the hills! They are going to find us. Greed is going to win. Their greed to possess our country as a gateway to East and the greed of the poverty stricken Afghanis to claim the reward in millions set over the head of Osama.

Amani

Oh, no! Not Osama. No one can kill him.

Sameera

Oh, harlot most base and wicked! My doubts stand corrected. You are in love with my husband!

Amani

I hate him, you wicked witch! I hate him.

Sameera

(Laughing hysterically.)

How can one hate, if one is not passionately in love in the first place! Yes, love is noble. The only virtue! The only passion capable of nurturing envy, hate, jealousy and violence of the raging oceans, more savage than the volcanic hungers of pride and ambition.

Amani

Now, you are raving. Raving mad and jesting, I know. You don't believe a word of what you say, and you forget all in a jiffy. And yet, you might be crazy enough to kill us all. When do you plan to do it, just for the sake of argument?

Sameera

The day Osama finishes his weave of Twin Towers. A sign for us to begin our Sacred Journey Home!

Amani

(Taking a deep puff on her hookah.)

Sacred Journey!

Sameera

Yes. We come into this world, crying, exiled from Home. And we return, wearing smiles as our death shrouds, most willingly, in absolute surrender. Polished with the pale gold of humility and with gratitude!

Amani

Ashen and stinking, more likely! What if Osama never finishes his rug of Twin Towers?

Sameera

This wretched hole of a cave can't accommodate us another decade. We must go then. Osama would have to come back another life to rebuild the real towers from the sweat of his brow, if not from the blood in his veins.

Amani

What use killing ourselves if we are doomed to be born again and again into the everlasting misery of this glorious existence?

Sameera

And yet, you would find *killing* very rewarding. You would be my accomplice in death, I am sure of that.

Amani

(Giggling and darting fearful glances all around.)

Yes, I would be. You are right. Hey, what do you hide in that octagonal box? It's called Baz-o-band, mulla told me. Such beautiful metal, beaten white, but the lock is ugly. Why do you keep it locked?

Sameera

(Mellifluously.)

It contains the most precious of gems, all priceless and sparkling. I will show them to you one day, when I make a tree of jewels. Alive and throbbing, not like the tree of life Osama knotted, Josheghan-style, in a desert palette of burgundy and...

{Osama storms into the cave, carrying a bundle of twigs, and screaming. Amani and Sameera are jolted to their feet. Osama drops the twigs over the carpet.}

Osama

Allah, All Merciful! Who is going to help me? My horse has jaundice. My horse! My king of Kabul, is going to die. Do you have any herbs, Sameera, to cure my horse?

Sameera

Hold your horses, Osama!

(Turns to Amani.)

Sameera Continued

Fetch me that pitcher of ale, Amani. The one you have been hiding under the pile of rugs.

Osama

(Shocked.)

Ale?

{Amani plods toward the sleeping quarters of the cave. Sameera Saunters toward her table.}

Sameera

We don't keep ale for our health, do we? Your precious horse would die of jaundice, if we didn't have any ale. Do you want to save your horse, or not? I have a tincture of saffron and turmeric, and it has to be mixed with ale to cure jaundice in a horse.

{Amani returns. She is hugging a blue pitcher of ale, avoiding Osama's feverish gaze. She settles the pitcher on the table, whispering to Sameera.}

Amani

Why so much fuss about a horse? It's not like one's child is dying, or a dear one in the family. (Swings around abruptly, sailing toward the clutter of twigs.)

Amani Continued

And what are these twigs doing here? I almost tripped.

{Amani scoops the twigs into her arms, carrying them toward the hearth, and dumping them on the floor furiously. Osama stands there still, his gaze shifting from Sameera to Amani, his look befuddled.}

Osama

Don't know what got into Niazi? He wants to teach us khattak dance now. He is bemoaning his lot out there. Shedding tears and exclaiming: *What are these dirty millions for, if one can't even buy bhutans!*

Amani

(Murmuring to herself.)

Dancing toward death! Why does one need bhutans to journey into the world nether?

Sameera

(Pounding a yellow paste on the saucer with a spoon.)

Here, Osama. A cure for your jaundiced horse! Make sure it doesn't stay on his tongue, flush it down with water. Have faith, Osama, and remember, there is a cure for everything but a broken heart. No herbs in the world could glue it back together. Though, it could be bandaged. Little consolations seeping through its tiny gauze holes to comfort or aggravate the hurt!

Osama

(Claiming the saucer, and turning to leave.)

Can't understand a word you are saying. Must tend to my horse!

{Sameera watches Osama leave without saying another word. Amani is dumping the contents of her kettle into a bucket, grumbling to herself.}

Amani

Must make another pot of tea! There is sour taste in my mouth, and my throat is itching. Do you have any columbine leaves, Sameera, I can boil? Mamma used to tell me they soothe all aches of the mouth and throat.

Sameera

(Laughing and returning to her table.)

You will never be a skilled herbalist, Amani, I am sure. Of course, I have columbine leaves.

And columbine roots and flowers. I make a decoction out these to ease gully suffice, and a salve to nurse the rheumatics. Here, I can spare a few.

Amani

(Snatching the leaves from Sameera's hands and scurrying back to her hearth.)

You never did care about my pains. Always preaching! Always boasting of your wisdom and knowledge, not only about herbs, but about everything?

{Amani throws the leaves into her kettle, stirring. Sameera just stands in one spot, tossing her head right and left before speaking.}

Sameera

Herbs speak to me. I can hear them. Your pain is silent. Besides, you complain too much. Half of our ailments are of the mind, not of the body. If we didn't talk about them, they would go away.

Amani

Bahhh! Why do you spill your guts out then when you have spasms? Moaning and cursing the heavens for your agony of the flesh. Why don't you shut your mouth during those spasms, and let your agony melt away?

Sameera

(Chastened.)

I haven't had those spasms since the past two solid months. Didn't you notice? Oaks don't grow here where mistletoe can make its home. Its berries are panacea for all ills, if you only knew. Those dirty peddlers brought me some a couple of months ago. A tisane of the powder of the dried berries I made with great care. It cured my spasms, and it is also good for palsy. If I mix it with birdlime and make a poultice, it will heal sores.

Amani

(Giggling besottedly.)

I should have cured you in a jiffy if I put my mind to it! I have a jar of resin squeezed from hemp, brought to me from the East. And I know what to do with it too. Very simple it is, half a teaspoon of this resin, and all spasms are gone, caput! It soothes all sorts of pains too, and coughs and headaches, and stimulates...

{Niazi stumbles into the cave, limping and groaning. He falls into a heap in the middle of the room.}

Niazi

God's curse! Stung by a snake! In Allah's name, do something before the poison reaches my brain. Allah's Mercy, I am dying.

{Amani tears the scarf off her throat, tying it around his leg tightly. Sameera has flown back to her table, searching for something frantically.}

Amani

Lay still, this will keep the poison reaching your thigh. Sameera has jars full of poisonous herbs to kill poison with poison. Didn't I warn you many moons ago, and begged you to keep a pinch of burnt asters with you when you go out, to ward off snakes?

Sameera

(Carrying a dirty jar.)

This is the only thing I could find. A poultice from the leaves of juniper! Boiled and mixed with the oil of its berries, it is bound to cure snakebite.

(Applies the poultice vigorously.)

Sameera Continued

It also soothes the aches of the joints, as well as pain of gum and tooth, and cures gout and rheumatics.

Amani

(Bouncing back to her feet.)

Oh, go spill your knowledge on the grass. His gums and teeth are fine, and he doesn't have gout or rheumatics. I know where your potent poultice for snakebite is?

(Flying to Sameera's table and searching under it.)

Amani Continued

The one made from the oil of St. Johnswort. It would draw venom from snakebite, you told me. Oh, here it is.

Niazi

(Pleading.)

Oh, no, don't. Not another poultice. This one is helping me, I believe. Let me be...just sleepy. Wake me up on Judgment Day.

Sameera

(Ignoring Amani, who stands behind her peering into her jar fixedly.)

Yes, you are going to live, Niazi, unfortunately. This poultice is getting dark, sucking out all the venom from your leg. Just you rest. Sleep will revive you.

(Getting to her feet and turning to face Amani.)

Sameera Continued

If you had made tea from the ivy leaves, instead of columbines, it would have been better. A great antidote for snake venom!

Amani

(Haughtily.)

No ivy leaves left. You used them all, when you made that paste for dressing the wounds for burns.

{Osama straggles into the cave, rubbing his eyes. His voice is hoarse and strident.}

Osama

Allah, Most Merciful, don't strike me blind. First afflicting my horse with jaundice, now taking my sight away!

{Amani just stands there, clutching her stomach.}

Sameera

Allah is going to strike us all blind, Osama, if you don't stop screaming. You would live yet to see your horse cantering.

(Guiding him by the hand.)

Sameera Continued

Here, lay your head down over this pillow, stuffed in your favorite mafrash you knotted so daintily. I will get the tincture from the oil of jasmine leaves. So sharp your sight would become that you would see stars in daylight!

{Sameera floats toward her table, Amani following, still clutching her stomach. Osama lays there moaning. Niazi begins to snore. Sameera snatches a small tin can from the table, returning to Osama, as if oblivious of Amani, who is following her like a shadow in utmost silence. Sameera rubs the tincture over the eyelids of Osama, gently and carefully.}

Sameera

Now don't open your eyes yet. Not until I tell you.

Amani

(Groaning and pleading suddenly.)

Sameera, Sameera. My stomach is like a stone. It's hurting. I can't breathe. I think I am dying. Give me something. It's awful. I am afraid of dying.

Sameera

Am I the only one alive in here! Everyone dying right and left of me and no grave diggers in sight! Oh, Amani, be sensible. You know where things are, all labeled. Get yourself that bottle of sesame seed oil. Suck a few drops, best for the bowels. Take your burnt asters with you when you go out to relieve. Don't come in running, screaming for venom suction. That oil is mixed with wine, and good for troubled stomach.

{Amani searches for that bottle, and then takes a swig and rushes out of the cave. Osama moans, his voice weak.}

Osama

May I open my eyes now, Sameera? I am being sucked into darkness, profound and unfathomable.

Sameera

By the Grace of Allah that's bliss supreme! If you only knew! Yes, Osama, open your eyes and be grateful to Allah that He has restored your sight.

Osama

(Sitting up, his eyes fluttering open.)

Gracious Allah, I am cured!

(Notices Niazi sprawled over the carpet.)

Osama Continued

What's wrong with him?

Sameera

(Wearily.)

Got stung by a snake, that's all!

Osama

(Jumping to his feet.)

Stung? Allah! Is he dead?

Sameera

(Tonelessly.)

Calm down, Osama! No one can die in this cave as long as I am alive, and as long as the poor fools keep me supplied with herbs. Can't you hear him snoring? Pity, that I can't strain the poison out of his tongue.

Osama

(Stumbling toward his loom.)

All an illusion! This life, this dream. You! These towers, my curse! How do you, Sameera, manage to live in this cave?

Sameera

(Opiately.)

A little spark of love still alive in my heart! Love is the breath of life. When it dies, I will die, you all will die. Love *is* this dream, this life.

Osama

(Weaving a few knots.)

What is love?

Sameera

A pebble in the heart of a mountain!

Osama

A pebble?

Sameera

Yes, dear Osama, a pebble. Longing for the heart of a mountain to crack, so that it can become a part of the universal love so very abundant and enveloping!

Osama

Mountains have no hearts, dear Sameera. You have surely gone daft.

Sameera

Have you never heard the splintering of the mountains, water gushing out as the fountain of life? This is love in all its purity. A song for life, the music of living and the dance of loving!

Osama

(Leaping to his feet.)

Oh, my head is whirling like a mad dervish. Niazi wanted to teach us khattak dance. I know a few steps. Let's practice, Sameera. We will surprise him in the morning.

{Osama begins to dance with imaginary bhutans in his hands.}

Osama

The spirit of Hafiz has entered my bruised heart.

(Singing while dancing.)

Osama Continued

When no one is looking

*I swallow deserts and clouds
 And chew on the mountains knowing
 They are sweet bones
 When no one is looking and I want
 To kiss God
 I just lift my own hand to my mouth
 (Kisses his hand.)*

The Curtain

Act Three

Scene: The same as in Act One.

When the curtain opens, all four characters are engaged in khattak dance, music blaring from the cassette player. In the background close to the table is a jewel-tree, all aglitter with precious gems, its base wrapped in burlap. Amani and Sameera are donned in colorful dresses with billowing sleeves. Niazi is wearing a loose cotton robe tied at the waist with a green puttoo—shoulder shawl. Osama is wearing a striped chapana—long coat, the red scarf over his turban floating freely over the left side of his ear. Niazi and Osama are twirling their twigs, while Amani and Sameera are tapping theirs together, upward, downward, then sideways. Tapping and twirling, they come together as partners, their twigs meeting and parting, and each dancer repeating the same motion with all the dancers. When the music stops, the men pirouette their way out of the cave, twirling their twigs and singing in unison.

Niazi and Osama

Song

*Hunting we go, hunting we go
 We are going to have a rabbit for dinner
 Rabbit for dinner, rabbit for dinner*

{Sameera plops herself by the jewel-tree, laughing. Amani capers her way toward the hearth, tosses her twigs into the fire, then returns to Sameera, capering and laughing.}

Amani

Oh, why I am laughing? My heart is beating like a drum. And my head! This hammering and pounding headache all of a sudden!

Sameera

You have been dancing in your sleep, Amani, that's why? Do yourself a favor, taste a spoonful of that infusion which I made from the rose petals. It cures any headache, even a Migraine. Mixed with honey, it purifies the blood too. Your blood is all thick, congealing in your head too, I suppose. You are going to have a brain hemorrhage one of these days, I fear.

Amani

(Licking the paste out of a jar.)

Why do I poison my blood with your herbal concoctions, I don't know?

(Rubbing her wrist.)

Amani Continued

Oh, I would die of rheumatism, if not of blood poisoning.

Sameera

(Rearranging her jewel-tree.)

Agony of death will make you linger for centuries, if you don't nurture faith in my herbal medicines. Your limbs would be tortured with gout next, if you didn't use that salve, as I advised. That salve which I made from the leaves and berries of the bay tree. Oil pressed from the leaves painstakingly, and my hands are all calloused after grinding those berries.

Amani

(Slipping a cassette into the player.)

Music is the cure for all ills, if you put your heart into studying the notes, instead of grinding the roots of ugly trees. To think of it, I was dreaming all night, holding on to your promise to teach me the secrets of your gems.

(Seating herself by the jewel-tree.)

Amani Continued

And here it is, this tree of light! Tell me all about these gems, Sameera, before the dirty mulla and your crazy husband return. Please!

Sameera

(Murmuring to herself.)

I hope you live long after me to teach the world the real worth of these gems, but you won't.

Amani

(Gazing at the jewel-tree reverently.)

What are you saying? Your voice is dying. You must try one of your own herbal concoctions.

Sameera

(Plucking out one turquoise.)

Nothing, I was saying nothing. Ah, my tree of light. Look at this blue turquoise from Persia. If it was set in a ring, and if Niazi would have been wearing that ring, no serpents would have come near him. This gem has the power to protect one against all sorts of danger, or contagion.

Amani

Now, if this is not earth science, then it must be pure witchcraft. Isn't that true? Gems of the earth, wrenched out from deep yonder by warlocks and studied by the witches? I wonder if you are a witch. Do you cast spells, or write down incantations?

Sameera

(Laughing.)

I am a witch for sure, if you believe in witches! Here, feel this red carnelian. It is used to dispel witchcraft. Also brings peace, and tempers anger. If you wore a bracelet of carnelians, you would never suffer any disease of the lungs, and your teeth would attain the sheen of pearls.

Amani

(Heaving herself up under some spell of delirium.)

It's so clear. I can read fortunes through it. What's happening to me?

(Pacing and going in circles alternately.)

Amani Continued

Now don't tell me. There is a ruby, red as blood, on your jewel-tree. You must crush it into powder, mix it with wine. It would clarify the blood, and bleeding would stop.

Sameera

(Snatching another jewel from the tree.)

Allah, why I am cursed to live in this asylum of madness? Cease your blathering, Amani. Come here, you fool and a numbskull. Don't you want to learn about the gems? Here's a bloodstone.

Green chalcedony, flecked with red spots. Let me rub it over your head, it cures tumors. You sure have a tumor growing in you head, I can tell. Your head does look swollen, have you noticed?

Amani

(Capering, and laughing hysterically.)

I can see, I can see. The topaz on your jewel-tree, it cures lunacy. Give me that...

{Niazi and Osama storm into the room, panting and frightened. Osama is waving his arms.}

Osama

Shut that heathenish music off, Sameera! And why are you dancing this dance of death, Amani?

{Sameera shuts off the music. Amani is suspended in her act of whirling. A faint rumble from outside enters the cave. Niazi flings himself down near his harmonium, emptying his pocket of bark, seeds and leaves. He is murmuring to himself.}

Niazi

Fates are leering at us. We are going to die.

Sameera

Amani is possessed by lunacy, Osama, leave her alone. We all are! Why? You went hunting?

Why have you come back empty handed, barking orders? No meat to nourish our bodies?

Osama

Our bodies would be chopped to chunks of meat, if not minced by bombshells, or turned to charcoal! Don't you hear the thunder of warplanes? Foreign devils are invading our skies once again. Afghanistan has become their gateway to subjugate and tyrannize.

Sameera

(Getting to her feet, and drifting toward Niazi, as if sleepwalking.)

Ah, lunatics all! High in the skies! Inside the caves. On top of the hills! In oceans wide, over the continents boundless.

{She stands peering over Niazi's shoulders at the clutter of bark and leaves.}

Osama

(Belligerently.)

Why are you standing there mute and flustered, Amani? Have you really gone mad? Pity, that you don't have a husband to save you from the affliction of dementia. Why didn't you marry?

Amani

(Laughing suddenly.)

Men! Why? A horde of numbskulls driving their wives crazy with their bloated prides, and egos swollen to the size of the mountains!

(Scampers toward the hearth. Scoops out tea leaves from her basket, crumbling them into her fists.)

Amani Continued

I never married because I had the misfortune of wearing a fresh lilac one accursed day in May. And don't you know anyone who does that, falls under the curse of never to marry.

(Dumps tea leaves into her pot, stirring vigorously.)

Amani Continued

Oh, such vicious lies, I must not tell. I was married, yes, to a fool and an ignoramus. Left him dying in a ditch where shrapnel had hit him. He was a fanatic, always killing people in the name of religion. Just like you, Osama.

Osama

(Swaying toward his loom.)

You would be left in a ditch too, with your brains gutted out, if you start that religion thing again.

{The rumble from outside is getting louder. Only Amani is aware, listening, her look dazed.

Osama begins tying knots. Sameera seats herself opposite Niazi, feeling the clutter of dried herbs with her hands.}

Sameera

Where did you find these treasures, Niazi?

Niazi

(Teasing the keys of his harmonium before responding.)

The very last loot from the graveyard of the unfortunate and the adventurous! Schund flowers, which would prevent me from future snakebites. The bark of chaulmugra tree, if you are skilled to squeeze some oil out of it, good for curing leprosy! Sumbul and khus-khus root from India, you might figure out the usefulness of these. A handful of cutula leaves, to cure fevers and cholera, I know. And malva flowers, to ease the discomfort of a sore throat. Champa leaves...

{A thunderous rumble from a bombshell crumbles the jewel-tree, all gems scattered. Amani screams, cradling her head into her hands, rocking back and forth. Niazi stares dumbfounded. Osama closes his eyes. Sameera crawls toward her shattered tree. She is gathering her jewels, on her hands and knees.}

Sameera

Oh, my jewels most precious! I should have kept them locked in my casket.

Osama

Death and darkness! That's it. They got us now. A bomb hit the next cave, barely a mile from here, I can guess. We would die, smoked out, nowhere to escape. Nowhere?

Amani

(Whimpering.)

I don't want to die, not like this. This wretched life, and yet death more wretched than living in this hole of a cave!

Niazi

So, this is it! Judgment Day, already! The purgatory of life snuffed out in a flash. A puff of smoke entering the gates of hell! I must confess, now that my end is near. Really here! I too am afraid of death. What's the choice? Food for worms, or ashes of this miserable flesh whirling eternally between the hurricanes of doom and damnation! I think I am sick. Going to faint! Die before dying.

Sameera

(Salvaging one pearl out of her scattered jewels, and exclaiming.)

Here, I found my pearl! I can always pound it to dust. Mixed with lemon juice, it can cure all manner of fits.

(Half moaning, half maudlin.)

Sameera Continued

But we don't have lemon juice. Ah, but this emerald!

(Kisses the stone reverently.)

Sameera Continued

Powdered in a tincture would prevent fits...

Amani

(Bouncing to her feet as if stung.)

In Allah's Name, Sameera, the man is dying, and you are admiring your gems! I know what emerald is good for. To be buried with the dead with the promise of eternal life.

Sameera

(Abandoning her jewels, and heaving herself up.)

How would you know, you dull-witted harridan! You have no soul. Emerald, if you only knew, confers knowledge of the soul and eternal life. Cures flux and poisoning from...

Osama

(Screaming and watching his hand in horror.)

Where does this wart come from? All of a sudden! From nowhere? If bombs don't kill me, this wart would.

Amani

(Her eyes flashing.)

This world is coming to an end, with your puny little wart! For you, isn't it?

(Floating toward Niazi.)

Amani Continued

Your dear friend is dying, and you don't even know or care?

Osama

(Iratly, his gaze still fixed to his wart.)

He is not dying, just pretending. He is good at dissimulation, I know. And this is not a little wart... the size of a walnut, it is. And it is growing too, I can see. Soon, it would be a mountain. My hand would be crushed under its weight.

Sameera

Old mulla pretending and mad Osama exaggerating! Who wins the prize of deceiving, if not being deceived? The pretender, or the disillusioned, is yet to be decided? But first, dear Osama, why don't you go out and see if your beloved horse is cured of jaundice. No harm in plucking out just one hair from its mane, just to tie it around your little wart. It would fall off by morning. {Niazi keeps laying there supine. Amani is hovering above him, her arms akimbo. Osama is on the verge of tears.}

Osama

Tapestry of fates, how each knot mocks and crackles! The whole world has turned against me, even my own wife! I know you have a salve, Sameera, made from the sap of banyan—the fig tree of the Indies. Why don't you fetch it, you told me it removes warts? Standing there, gloating, are you not? And mocking still? I know you have that salve, because I remember you also made a decoction out of the banyan's fruit to cure the pains in my chest and throat.

(Waving his arms desperately.)

Osama Continued

All of you! You malefic trio! You have turned against me. My enemies all!

Sameera

(Laughter trickling down her lips.)

You have become your own enemy, Osama, alienated from your own *self*, and alienating us all. The choice is yours, much like the despotic prudes: *Either you are with us, or against us?*

Niazi

(Somersaulting to a sitting position and chuckling.)

Allah's Grace, I am cured of my fears! I don't care if I die or go to hell. I would be waiting at hell's gate to welcome the prince of lies. What's his face, I don't even remember his name? All I remember is that he is the twin opposite of Cassandra. Both afflicted with the same gift-curse. She was gifted with the prophecy to tell truth, with the injunction that no one would believe her. And he gifted with the power of telling lies with a great assurance from Above that everyone would believe him.

Amani

(Shaking Niazi by the shoulders with a feverish glee.)

I can never forget his name. Bush, Bush! Burning Bush. Don't you remember the joke emailed to us when we lived in better condition than this hole of a cave. This is what it said: *The last time people listened to a Bush, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years.* Wonder, where he is now, waging wars in his head?

Osama

(Still absorbed in watching his wart, and oblivious to the euphoric exchange between Amani and Niazi. Not even noticing Sameera's flight to her herbal sanctuary.)

Now it is turning into a boil. My fingers would fall off soon, and I would never get to finish my Twin Towers.

Sameera

(Standing still by her table, her back toward them.)

Oh, why can't we have little fun without sickness visiting us every whaling hours of the day or night! You will get your salve of banyan alright, Osama. You probably forget, but I told you I made a paste from the cooked flesh of the fruit from fig tree, and it shrinks boils instantly.

(Returns to Osama with paste sticking on her finger. She rubs it on his boil gently.)

Sameera Continued

Here, you big baby, my friend, enemy, my husband. No more complaints now, it will be reduced to just a speck on your palm. You won't be able to see it even.

{Sameera troops back to her table, washing her hands in the bucket. Amani is standing by the hearth, her sense of euphoria drained. She clutches her hookah to herself, murmuring.}

Amani

Oh, my head! My headache is returning, and my chest is congested. I must brew tea from the root of fern. It helped me last time, clearing my head and my chest.

{Amani abandons her hookah, dumps the old tea into an earthen jug, commencing with the ritual of making a fresh pot. Sameera is busy experimenting with her jars of herbs, mixing and pounding. Osama sits nursing his hand. A loud snort of laughter escapes Niazi's lips.}

Niazi

You better fix a poultice from the leaves of the fern, Amani, which soothes the burns and the bruises. Because the paste which Sameera dabbed on Osama's boil or wart, is going to singe his palm, if not carve a wound there.

Osama

(His features contorted with anger.)

How would you know, you illiterate mulla! You, with the IQ of a slug!

Niazi

(Knotting his hands behind his back in a tight fist.)

The measure of your own intelligence since you made the same remark about, what's his face? And that slug-brain managed to invade Iraq, boiling the Iraqis into the cauldrons of their own precious oil, if not turning their country into a desert of petrified rock. If a slug can conquer the golden wells of Iraq, I, at least, can possess the knowledge of a few herbal remedies.

Osama

(Beginning to pace.)

Power-hungry, greed-mongers! Remind me not of that.

Niazi

(Smirking.)

Why, Osama? Because it hurts you to remember your precious Saddam being pulled out of an anthill with American tongs. Lucky, if you can efface the memory of human folly and degradation. Had you not touched the *towers of pride* with your Babylonian zeal and false piety, your precious Saddam would have been living in his palace, and his soldiers not submitted to the humiliation of sex, violence, obscenity. And so much bloodshed! Innocent Iraqis dying in droves. Men, women and children screaming with terror against the bombshells, day after day, week after week, year after year, for how long, I forget. And how many thousands dead! And the desecration of the Quran, all your fault, Osama! A viper, donning the mantle of Islam! You are vile, malefic, vengeful and heartless. Not a single tear did you shed when the blood of the innocent victims gutted the streets of New York. The whole world stunned, mourning. And you, laughing! Now, you weep often. Copiously and needlessly! Without regret, without rhyme or reason. Why, why? No heart, no conscience. Madness, madness all! Madness everywhere.

Osama

(Seating himself at his loom, forlorn and dejected.)

Now that you have drained the cup of your madness, and the vial of my evil genius, would you care to admit that men without hearts are obeyed and feared the most, also styled as heroes to be remembered till eternity? Goodness is forgotten, and evil cherished with awe. It might as well be reverence, for the future generations never tire of paying homage to the masters of mass murder and mass destruction. Cruel and heartless, yes, but no fool can lead self-righteous hordes into the arena of slaughter and carnage. And that's a fact, be it in the name of religion, on the tablet of a personal belief, right or wrong, it matters not. What matters in the end is that might is always right, deceit and cunning too, since they are the guardian angels of *power* and *ambition*.

Niazi

(Settling himself in a heap beside his harmonium.)

Madness is chiseled into your very bones, Osama. Insults upon insults are flung at you, and you chew on them like the morsels of gratification. Selfish and egotistic, and still relinquishing not your crown of zeal! You would never taste the sweetness of regret and contrition. An abject sinner that you are, you will die un-forgiven. Rolled into your own death shroud of Twin Towers, you would be roasted in the eternal fires of hell, forever and forever.

Osama

(Laughing hysterically.)

A dirty mulla wearing the rags of piety! Impenitent himself and preaching the virtues of penance!

Amani

(Claiming her hookah again, and puffing on it greedily, her look glazed.)

We should sneak across the borders into Pakistan. I am afraid again, afraid of death. We should have gone to Pakistan years ago. Showers and comfortable beds, at least! It would be wonderful to feel clean, physically at least, before death.

Sameera

(Over her shoulders.)

Did you say, Pakistan? The friends of the feringhis! Close to a thousand of our friends captured by the Pakistanis, half of them tortured to death, and the rest either brutally murdered, or handed over to the masters of arrogance in America, to be caged and tortured. I would rather lay myself flat under the tanks of the Russians than seek refuge in Pakistan.

Niazi

Fear is visiting me again, too. We should move to another cave before we are blown to bits.

They have discovered our hideout, I am afraid. The next bomb would be falling right over our heads.

Sameera

(Turning her attention to her scattered jewels. She is scooping them into her hands, and dumping them inside the chest.)

Have no fear, death is a welcome friend. Don't you smell its fragrance in the air?

Osama

In this airless hole, you mean? I smell only the reek of enmity and insults.

Sameera

Finish your rug of Twin Towers, Osama. Latest at the stroke of midnight! You might never get another chance, another lifetime?

Amani

Don't finish that rug, Osama! Sameera is going to kill us all the day you finish your weaving.

Osama

(Amusedly.)

How? By her witchcraft!

Niazi

(Watching Sameera, as she sits there contemplating her jewels.)

Yes, something strange. I have noticed that too. Experimenting with poison? And not just for snakebites, mind you.

Sameera

(Her gaze sweeping from one to the other.)

Isn't death by poison more merciful or less harrowing than the mountains crashing over and mutilating our bodies before agonies of the flesh cease?

Osama

(Dreamily.)

Do you really mean to kill us, Sameera?

Sameera

(Laughing.)

With amulets and incantations, if possible! And by witchcraft, if necessary. But not with poison!

Niazi

(Pressing his stomach, his voice rasping and agonized.)

Oh, my innards are knotting and twisting. I am really sick, not joking this time. Help me, Sameera, even with poison, I beg.

{Osama's attention is reverted to his palm once again. Amani is lost in the luxury of her hookah. Sameera's gaze sweeps over from one to the other, unseeing. Suddenly, she jumps to her feet, cantering toward her table sprightly.}

Sameera

Everything must fit the puzzle of time and place. Not time for poison yet.

(Using her mortar and pestle to pound some seeds.)

Sameera Continued

These seeds from the little spiny shrub of furze cure the ailments of internal organs. But I am grinding them to a fine powder, so that you can swallow without complaining.

Amani

So very kind and generous of you, Sameera! Caring for us and saving our lives, while plotting to kill?

Sameera

(Carrying a spoonful of powder and glass of water for Niazi.)

My plotting would kill no one, if all of you were not so paranoid of dying. Here, Niazi, swallow this poison, and live.

Niazi

(Gurgling down the rancid powder and struggling to his feet.)

I better go and lie down. Feeling so queasy! It is better to pretend that I died in my sleep, than am tricked into ingesting poison.

Sameera

(Cheerfully.)

The venom in your heart, Mulla, is much more potent than any poison administered by the loving hands of a woman.

{Exit Niazi into the sleeping quarters of the cave.}

Amani

Love's curse! Allah's Mercy! You are keeping furze in this cave? Don't you know, to bring furze into one's house is surely to invite death?

Sameera

(With a tinkling of mirth.)

And don't you know diamonds ward off plague and pestilence, including death? And why do I keep a pouch of diamonds beside my pillow? Not for my health, I am sure. And certainly not for the fear of robbery! No sane person would enter this cave, even if dying of hunger. These diamonds won't buy me a loaf of bread either, for bread has become more precious than kingdoms. Yes, kingdoms ruined and devastated. Fields upon fields, incult and fallow, scarred by bullets and missiles! Who would sell bread in such a place, tell me? Even if one had a few grains stored somewhere to make bread, that person would guard each grain as he would nuggets of gold.

Osama

I wish I can eat my chunky gold watch. Pretending that I am feasting on Qabli pilaf? Ah, the taste of mutton, rice and onions, garnished with shredded carrots and raisins. Reminds me of a man who got lost in the Arabian desert. Dying of hunger and thirst, he espied a bag in the

distance. Joyfully, he ran to claim it, thinking, that it contained food. But when he ripped it open, the pearls fell hugging the golden sands, and the man cried: *No one can imagine the joy and ecstasy of my thoughts in finding this bag; thinking that it contained food, or the agony and bitterness of my disappointment in discovering it to be full of pearls.*

Amani

(Whirling and dancing.)

Look, Osama! The pearly gates of Paradise are shut forever, and the gates of hell are flung open to receive you. Death! I can smell the reek of death. No fragrance, but the odor most foul and loathsome.

Osama

(Bouncing to his feet with a sudden alacrity.)

Let's dance the dance of death, then. Singing, rather raising bootless cries to shatter the pearly gates! We would shake the very foundations of heaven, setting it ablaze with the fires of hell, laughing and swirling. Laughing and swirling, till we become like the little atoms, hot and searing, absorbed into the furnace of the Sun.

{Osama slips a cassette into the cassette player. Both Amani and Osama dance, laughing and tapping their heels together. Sameera watches them, smiling to herself. When the music dies, Amani collapses over the carpet, wringing her hands and shrieking.}

Amani

Oh, my liver is on fire! This awful burning! Help, sweet Sameera, help me. Let me not die thus. You know I am afraid of dying. I will drink your poison tomorrow, willingly and gratefully. But not today, not as I am now, not this way! No, I don't want to go like this.

{Osama stands there in utter immobility, his hands knotted together behind his back. Sameera stirs, flying toward his table.}

Sameera

A glorious physician that I am, I would fain pretend that glory has its price. Sickness sickens me. Ill and tormented *within*, I strive toward eradicating ailments. And yet life is glorious, and yet again, it has turned out to be much like a metal base and of low quality, tarnished with fears and illness', needing polishing and scrubbing at every whaling hour of the day or night.

(Shaking Amani by the shoulders and offering her a brittle flower.)

Sameera Continued

Here, chew on this dried flower of violet. It cures ailments of the liver.

Amani

(Tossing the flower into her mouth, her jaws working like a blender at low speed.)

Thank you, Sameera. You have a good heart. Yet I can't forget what you told me about violet flowers. *The ancients believed the violet flowers were once dancing girls whom Venus beat purple out of jealousy.* Oh, I am dying. Could someone, please, drag me to my carpet with the tree of life. I want to die in peace.

Sameera

Come, Osama, be gallant for once. Carry her to the comfort of peace in death, on her own bed. I can't bear to see her die in front of me. The tree of life woven on her replica of Josheghan carpet may save her.

Osama

(His eyes glazed with shock and disbelief.)

Die! Is she going to die? Have you fed her poison?

Sameera

(Waving her arms.)

Oh, life's curse! Even humor has become a rare commodity in this cave. No, Osama, of course, not! She is going to return to the pain in living, in the morning, in the morning. Please carry her to her bed. Death of humor is the death of life. And yet, we have survived so far without the salt of wit.

{Osama obeys, carrying Amani into his arms toward the sleeping quarters. Sameera watches them disappear into darkness, then murmurs to herself.}

Sameera

Useless now to hope for wisdom! But a fool's wit, even that, yes, it can carry a world on its shoulders.

{Osama returns, screaming and waving his arms. His fingers are all twisted.}

Sameera

Now what? Your wart is no more, is that why you are screaming? Is Amani dead, or Niazi, or both?

Osama

(Incensed and gasping for breath.)

Your stupid jokes, Sameera. Your wit has gone dry, brittle and rotten. Can't you see, I am afflicted with gout, my fingers all twisted?

Sameera

What do you propose to do about it, Osama?

Osama

I need help, you idiot. Have you gone blind?

Sameera

You expect me to run over to my table of herbal wonders, grunting consolations and swooning with sorrow over your pain, don't you? You expect me to fetch you some healing salve, and to lull you to sleep?

Osama

(Pleading.)

Please, Sameera, my fingers are going to fall off. You want me to finish the Twin Towers, don't you? With my fingers twisted like this, I would not be able to tie a single knot. You are expert in healing, dear Sameera. Help me, Sameera.

Sameera

(Sprinting toward her table.)

Keep your flatteries inside your cankerous heart, Osama, and be comforted. I do have something. Always. Playing the part of a healer, and I do it so well in its entirety. Why, because I am a part of that whole, which is unfathomable to most. I was a poisonous plant before I became a serpent. Then a lioness before I became a daughter of the mountains. Next, I will be an angel, of death, or of mercy, I don't know which?

(She pours oil into a jar, shaking it vigorously.)

Sameera Continued

This ointment from the evergreen herb of rue is made just for you, a miraculous cure for gout and rheumatism.

{Sameera turns, dipping her fingers into the jar, while approaching Osama. She massages his fingers, dabbing oil generously.}

Osama

You are going to kill me, Sameera. My fingers are on fire.

Sameera

Doctors cut you open to heal you, don't they? And this fire is going to purify your blood, if not your heart. Go, rest a while, your hands would be as baby smooth as the day you were born.

Osama

Are you sure? I won't die in sleep?

Sameera

You have to finish the Twin Towers this evening. Go, you need rest.

Osama

Won't you come? I can't sleep without you.

Sameera

In a few minutes, Osama, after I knead the dough of euphoria! We all would be needing that tomorrow, I am sure.

Osama

(Swaying toward the sleeping quarters.) Your dry humor again.

{Osama disappears into darkness. Sameera plops herself down in the middle of the room, peering into her jar. Her lips tremble, as she repeats the quatrain recited by Osama in Act One.

Sameera

*Tis all a chequerboard of Nights and Days
Where destiny for man with pieces plays
Hither and thither moves, and mates and slays
And one by one back in the closet lays*

The Curtain

Act Four

Scene: The same as in Act One. Music and songs from the radio are the only cheerful sounds in this hospital of a cave. Everyone is ill with the exception of Sameera.

When the curtain opens, Sameera is seated at her table of herbs. Amani is curled up by the hearth. She is moaning, her fingers patting the shawl around her neck tightly wound. Niazi is seated by his harmonium, spitting in a brass spittoon before rubbing some salve over his arm, bruised by scratching. Osama is lolling against one round pillow. He is wearing cotton gloves, and pressing his legs. A small hole in the ceiling of the cave is visible, through which sunshine is pouring a ribbon of gold, the spiraling of dust particles in there shuddering and sparkling. Osama's gaze is tracing this ribbon of gold, as if fascinated by the specks of dust, enacting a gold-dance of light and shadow.

Osama

Who is bombing our Jerusalem now, I don't even know? Have you noticed that big chunk of a hole in that ceiling? Lucky that we were sound asleep on the other side, or one of us would have gotten hurt. Died more likely, with that chunk of a rock on one's head! Where did it fall, I don't see any?

Sameera

(With her back still toward the audience.)

I saved it as a souvenir. A pillow for my head as long as I live! If I don't change my mind, flinging it back as a meteor shower of bullets over the lands far and alien. Destroying them completely, so that they never hit our Afghanistan, ever again?

Amani

Look who is talking? This is not your country. You all, all of you are aliens in Afghanistan. (Pressing her neck, her features contorted.)

Amani Continued

I don't know where you all came from, but I know about Osama. The misguided child of the militant Wahabbis! The dirty Wahabbis!

Osama

(His gaze shooting daggers.)

I am not a Wahabi I told you before! I follow the religion of Prophet Muhammad. Your tongue would turn to ever-smoldering log of fire if you say that again.

Amani

(Groaning and laughing simultaneously.)

At least my tongue would match my neck then. It is hot and heavy like a log. But you can't stop me from saying the truth. You have forgotten the religion of Prophet Muhammad. You follow the religion of Muhammad ibn Abd al Wahab. Exactly his teachings, enforcing prayers, building the schools of fanaticism, segregating the women, condemning music and much more! All such injunctions unknown during the life of our beloved Prophet!

(Heaves herself up to a sitting posture, cradling her neck into her hands.)

Amani Continued

Oh, my neck. Why I am saying these things! Sweet Sameera, where is that paste for my neck? I am dying. What I am afflicted with? What do you call this disease? Some, big scary name, can't even pronounce.

{Sameera doesn't respond, as if oblivious to all. Osama ducks his head in between his knees, rocking back and forth. Niazi turns his head toward Amani, still scratching his arm.}

Niazi

You have scrofula, Amani. Your lymph glands are going to choke you to death, and your neck is going to crack like a twig. Have you ever heard of tuberculosis, that's what you have! We are going to burn your body, your clothes too!

(Waving his hands and laughing.)

Niazi Continued

Let us die laughing. I have scurvy, and it feels like I swallow a big tooth every time I breathe.

(Spits into the spittoon, his mirth arrested in a fit of coughing.)

Amani

(Her eyes sparkling with fear.)

Oh, no, I am not going to die. I am so very afraid of death. Sweet Sameera, you were making that paste. Why don't you answer? You have a good heart, help me. I will fix your jewel-tree when I get better. Allah, don't let me die.

Sameera

(Getting to her feet with a sudden alacrity, madness shining in her eyes.)

Stop blabbering like an idiot, Amani! You won't die, not as yet. Not unless a rocket hits you.

And this paste which I am making is from the leaves of this vegetable called rocket. A sure cure for scrofula! But it has to settle first.

(Darts a fiery glance at Niazi.)

Sameera Continued

I am also making a poultice for this insufferable Mulla, who has convinced you falsely that my husband is a Wahabi.

Niazi

(Crunching his jaws right and left before exclaiming.)

Osama is a Wahabi! He told me so. Recounting to me the whole bleating history of the Wahabis with gloating and with an air of self-righteous frenzy! The religious frenzy of the Wahabis.

Sacking of the holy shrines at Karbala! Butchering the Turks in Syria, and burning villages.

Why do you think the women in Afghanistan were oppressed so... oh, I can't go on? My gums are spongy, and my heart is bleeding. Like Amani says, sweet Sameera, you are our only hope.

Scrofula, or King's Evil is going to stay with her if you do not help. And I am going to die of the bleeding into the tissues. You were making that poultice to stop this itching, where is it?

(Starts scratching his arm furiously.)

Sameera

(Mirth and mockery shining in her eyes.)

Time is a panacea for all ills, impious Mulla. If we could only give time—be silent, all diseases would be gone, all fears withered.

(Steals a look at Osama.)

Sameera Continued

My husband sleeps, the victim of gout. You should have seen his hands, all twisted. Must be feeling better, since I rubbed them with the ointment for rue? Your scurvy would be gone too, Niazi, but you must wait. Distilling of oil from the needles of evergreen fir takes time. The inner bark of fir, I am soaking in hot water, and will make you poultice for your rashes.

{Sameera hugs herself, closing her eyes as if praying. Osama lifts his head up, staring at the ribbon of light, as if mesmerized. Niazi murmurs to himself.}

Niazi

Time running in rivulets of pain, oceans of sorrows following!

Amani

(Groaning, her head falling into her lap.)

Give me something, anything. Opium! My neck is digging into my chest.

Osama

How beautiful! These specks of dust! Dancing, dancing. Gold, glittering!

Sameera

(Her eyes shot open.)

Keep looking, Osama, you might find a princess in that light of gold and glitter.

Osama

A princess! Have you been chewing on the flowers of mandrake? The Plant of Circe!

Niazi

Fates and furies I see in her eyes. She is going to turn us all into pigs and piglets.

Amani

(Lifting her head up.)

Death and plague! Why is everyone staring at me? Do you see horns on my head?

Sameera

No one is staring at you.

Niazi

A living nightmare!

Osama

(Drumming his stomach with his gloved hands.)

Does gout give one stomach cramps too?

Sameera

Do you want me to entertain you all with a story? Might take your minds off pains till herbal concoctions are ready?

Amani

Make it a long one, Sameera, to lull me to sleep.

Niazi

Reminds me of my childhood! Mamma and measles. She, reading from the good book to keep me from scratching!

Osama

Is this story about a princess living happily ever-after?

Sameera

Yes, a dancing princess in the dust-gold of Sun.

(Starts pacing.)

Sameera Continued

In ancient times, a daughter was born to a king. All her brothers and sisters thought she was very ugly, even her mother believed so. The king's heart was filled with aversion for this ugly daughter of his. Throughout her tender years she was taunted for being ugly, and was barely nine when locked into a dark tower by king's orders. Everyone was relieved and soon forgot about her. Years passed, and the little girl became a grown woman, fed more by her own shame and guilt than by the scraps of food left to her by the palace servants. One day an earthquake shook the tower and a part of the roof split open, carving a gaping hole. Sunshine flooded through it, and the princess covered her face with her hands, crying: *Oh, Lord of the Heavens, do not shine on me. I am ugly and unworthy of Your glory.* Nonsense, a Voice boomed. *My light belongs to all. No one is ugly or unworthy in my sight. Step into the light, and feel My all-*

embracing Love. The princess obeyed, dancing in light, melting into specks of shimmering dust, soaring up to the heavens in ecstasy. People of that kingdom witnessed that miracle, saying: *whenever you see sunlight in a dark place, you can see the golden dust that is the princess dancing.*

{Sameera returns to her table somnambulantlly. Amani starts coughing. Niazi follows suit, spitting and gasping for breath. Amani starts dumping dried buds into a bucket of water, hoisting over the flames.}

Amani

I will make a bucket of tea this time, to cure all ailments. The only way I know how! Sameera's potions are taking too long to distill and settle. Tea made from the winter buds of poplar cures coughs. And you, poor Mulla, can bathe in it for healing your wounds, which you are carving with your own hands. Your arms all red and sore!

Sameera

(Over her shoulders.)

For bathing, yes! No one drinks your tea, Amani. Pots and pots of them streaming down the mountains, if not gutting the gutters?

Osama

(Thumping his knees with his gloved hands.)

Oh, this searing pain! Dear Sameera, would you rub that ointment of rue on my fingers again? It helped me last night, and now they are stiffening again?

Amani

(Giggling deliriously, while stirring tea in the bucket.)

Watch out, Osama! She would pour acid on your hands. All your fingers would fall off, and all your pain would be gone.

Niazi

(Chuckling and scratching.)

Just punishment for you, Osama! Twin Towers chasing you to the very desert of damnation, and blood of the innocent caked in your throat.

Sameera

(Swinging back with an abrupt violence.)

One wretch of a Mulla! Leave poor Osama alone. Why can't you forget about those Towers of Babel, for once? Past is gone, and buried under the dust for the past ten long years. Present is dusty with pain, and future hoarding violent storms. Yet many a burdens could be sloughed off, if we carried not past hurricanes over our shoulders.

Niazi

(Struggling to his feet, but succumbing down into one heap.)

How could we? When shoulder-launched missiles and whistling rockets still defile the streets of Kabul and Kandahar! Give me one good reason, one good reason to forget the past, the cruel mockery of Osama and the vain savagery of Operation Enduring Freedom?

Osama

(Eliciting one snort of laughter.)

Whose side are you on, Niazi? *Either you are with us, or not with us.*

Sameera

Mad Mulla and poor husband! Just for the sake of clarity, let me inform you as to who used this expression first, almost half a century ago. The shopkeepers of London, of course! The imperial

scum during the war of Independence in India, brandishing this slogan: *Those who are not with us are against us.*

{Osama just gazes at his unfinished rug longingly. Niazi watches Osama, frowning to himself.}

Amani

A witch centuries old you are, Sameera! Your memory, perhaps, cherishing eons of wars or crusades by imperial hordes or savage barbarians! Mulla asked you about one reason? I forget what... that's the span of my memory. But you are throwing at us some filth of a jargon without rhyme or reason.

Sameera

My reason wars not with your madness, Amani. How could you catch the subtle rhythm of my reason, when you don't know what reason is? Forgetting even, what Mulla said. You have lost it all. Yet, I am willing to give one reason for forgetting the past, if you have the patience enough to hear another story?

Niazi

(To himself.)

Another happy ending! I am all for it.

Amani

(Deflated and humbled.)

It would distract him from scratching. He is driving me crazy with his spitting and clawing.

Osama

Go on, Sameera. My mind and my fingers are numb. Can't work on my beautiful rug? Might as well fill my emptiness with words, if not with reasons?

Sameera

(Murmuring and pacing.)

Life has a reason, so do pain and insanity. Well, this is the story of four monks on their way to a hermitage. They come upon a stream, where a young girl is standing. She wants to cross the stream, but is afraid that her pretty dress would be spoiled. One of the monks carries her over his shoulders, helping her cross the stream. The girl is thankful, and leaves. The monks resume their journey. All the three monks who had not offered their services to the girl, start accusing the helper monk of violating the vows of chastity, of coming in contact with the body of the young girl. The journey is long, and they rant and preach, while the helper monk remains silent. Suddenly, he stops, saying: *It only took me a couple of minutes to carry that girl from one end of the stream to the other, and I put her down and out of my thoughts, but you are still carrying her.*

Amani

I don't understand. What has this to do with reason?

Sameera

You have lost your mind, you numbskull, and no reason can restore it to sanity. The reason behind this is not to carry the burdens of the past, so that your journey toward death is not heavy and cumbersome.

Osama

(Ruefully.)

Human nature, dear Sameera! Not even a saint can accomplish this task of forgetting, save alone this impious mulla.

Sameera

(Standing still, only her eyes straying from one to the other.)

Human nature can be changed from evil to good, rather nurtured to pluck out evil thoughts, and yet again, it can be transformed further into the blossoming of creativity, farther from destruction, on the road toward construction. Creating goodness, recreating beauty!

{Amani pours tea into a tumbler, sipping absently. Osama smiles besottedly. Niazi limps to his feet.}

Niazi

Such vain ideation, Sameera! Your madness outweighs the mountains of insanity in this whole wide world. No. Human nature cannot be changed.

Osama

Arguments silly as these make me forget my pain. Human nature changes like the season, and no rocket science needed to come to such a conclusion. How can you deny that it does—change?

{Sameera returns to her table. Osama closes his eyes. Amani keeps sipping her tea. Niazi slumps down to his former seat.}

Niazi

I also have a story to prove my point. It is as goofy as the story of golden dust as a princess. Once there was a saint sitting by the bank of a river, trying to save the life of a drowning scorpion. Every time he tried to lift the scorpion out of water, it would slip out of his hand due to the excruciating pain he could not help but suffer by the sting of the scorpion. One man watching the saint being stung several times, edged closer, exclaiming: *Why do you keep trying to save the life of this scorpion when it keeps stinging you?* The saint replied: *Young man, it is scorpion's nature to sting, and it is my nature to save the lives of a living creature. If this ignorant creature can't change its nature, how can I, a lowly one, change mine?*

Amani

(Toasting her neck with the hot tea of tumbler in her hand, spilling some on her shawl.)

No saint, if he had no faith in saving the life of that ignorant *viper*. Without faith nothing is accomplished. A ship was drowning in the sea, and all the passengers started praying and lamenting with the exception of one. That man told everyone that the ship would be saved, and everything would be fine. The ship was saved. The men asked him how he had the foreknowledge of ship's safety. That man replied simply and calmly. *I didn't. I only had faith, thinking to myself that if we were saved we would be grateful, and if not, no one would be alive to know of their vain fears and supplications.*

Osama

(His eyes still closed.)

A pair of Scheherzade and king's fools, weaving strings of tales to keep their heads from being chopped off. And I don't even have the strength or the means to kill even a fly.

Niazi

This scurvy is going to kill me with its own secret weapons of assault, if I don't pluck it out by its roots. Come, Sameera, is the poultice from the bark of fir ready? Don't bother distilling oil from the needles of fir. Just bring me the needles, I would stick them in my wounds, pretending that I am the master of acupuncture, and would get well.

Osama

(Groaning and chuckling.)

A porcupine thinking itself the lord of the east! Healer and healed! Sure! I wouldn't mind sticking my fingers there, drawing some blood and infusing it into my gout-ridden hands.

Sameera

(Without turning.)

Be patient, Mulla. I am working on your poultice.

Amani

(Pleading.)

What about my rocket paste, sweet Sameera. My neck is ballooning with the force of helium.

(Pressing her neck.)

Amani Continued

Oh, this vicious pressure. My neck is going to fly off my shoulders soon.

Niazi

(Laughing dementedly.)

At least your head would still be on your shoulders, without the support of a neck, of course.

(Uttering a loud groan.)

Niazi Continued

Oh, I am dying. Now I know your wicked designs, Sameera. You are concocting poison, I can tell. You are not making any paste or poultice, just deceiving us. You would watch us groan and scream in throes of agony, and you would not lift a finger to help us. The more atrocious our pain, the more your conceit and gloating! Your ears would burn against the agony of death from our throats, and then, and then, you would feed us poison with your own hands.

Osama

(Covering his ears with his gloved hands.)

Madness, madness all!

Amani

(Refilling her tumbler with more tea.)

Oh, I knew she would kill us!

Sameera

(Putting a kettle on her gas stove.)

All of you! May devil hasten your journey to hell! I am brewing tea to soothe the nerves of all my stinking patients, before the remedies are done...oil needs to be distilled, paste to be settled, poultice to be hardened. All this hard work would go to waste if you didn't calm your nerves with this tea first. To insure efficacy, you must, be patient and try to calm yourselves. Oh, such a thankless task! And what do I get in return? Suspicious evil and vile accusations! You are possessed by evil, Mulla, hell and damnation dancing on your tongue. You are! Iblis, Lucifer, Mephistopheles, all three in one! Evil, evil, evil! Devil, Dijin, Demon, all evil!

Niazi

Devil is good. Not evil.

Sameera

(Swinging back, her eyes blazing.)

How so?

Amani

(Stultified.)

Devil, good?

Niazi

Devil is goodness incarnate, as you would see in this story...

Osama

(Interrupting hilariously.)

Another poisonous tale of scorpions, bathing in the ocean!

Niazi

(Heedlessly.)

A priest is going home at night, and espies a wounded man. The street is deserted, and the man is pleading for help. The priest keeps walking, thinking to himself that probably he is some robber or a murderer, and deserves death. The man's pleas and groans are getting louder and urgent, and the priest takes pity, retracing his steps. After discovering that some robber wounded this man, the priest begins to bandage his arms, asking: *Who are you? Devil*, the man says. *I have nothing to do with you then, I am a pious man of the church, a priest*, the priest shrinks back in horror. *I am your friend*, the man groans. *Devil is no friend of mine. You are a stranger to me*, the priest is getting angry. *I am no stranger, you know me. And friend I am, of the whole world, indeed. People worship God for the fear of the devil. All talk of love, goodness, compassion is the kernels of my being. If you let me die here tonight, you would regret if not lament. Before dying, I would tell the whole world that the devil is dead. No one would worship God then, churches would be razed to the ground. You would have no job, and would be miserable the rest of your life.* And what do you think the priest did? He took the devil home and saved his life, of course.

Osama

(Leaping to his feet, waving his arms.)

Allah's truth, Mulla, if you don't recant what you said, I will kill you! Making devil the king of the world, and shoving God into the void of nothingness?

(Spittle forms little bubbles at the ridges of his mouth.)

Osama Continued

A viper, you are. A lout and a scoundrel! The most deplorable of creatures on earth. You have turned apostate.

Niazi

(Spitting in his spittoon.)

Killing me with your fingers twisted, and your brain all knotted just like your ugly rugs! What does apostate mean?

Amani

(Groaning and giggling.)

That means that you have turned into a toad, and would be stoned to death, if you dared step out of the waters of corruption.

Osama

(Glowering.)

You know what I mean? Turning away from the religion of Allah! Blaspheming, and wallowing into the ocean of heresy.

Sameera

(Murmuring.)

I should brew tea from swallow-warts—the flowers of Asclepcas. A great cure for epilepsy, hysterics and convulsions!

Niazi

(Derisively.)

A toadstool talking about religion! I can tell from the poison in your breath, Osama, that you are more venomous than a serpent. What if I were a Jew or a Christian, turning away from God and Scriptures? Or Sikh or a Hindu, whipped by some fiery conviction to become a Buddhist?

Osama

Infidels all! All heathens! Allah's truth, Allah is One. Islam is the only true religion, and Quran the only true Holy Book.

Sameera

(Hysterical mirth rippling down her lips.)

Insanity, not hysterics, have entered this dark hole of a cave, and into our minds and hearts. Truth, dear ones, is a relative term, with many faces and countless eyes. To you what seems truth may be a lie to others? And no one knows, no one knows.

Osama

(His knees buckling under him. He succumbs to the floor, reclining against his pillow.)

You too blaspheme, Sameera. Truth is one. How could it be many?

Amani

(Madly and deliriously.)

My truth! Your truth! Our truth!

Sameera

Allah's Mercy, Amani, your pain has lent you the clairvoyance of a saint. How profound, the trinity of truths! You have explained it so well.

Amani

(Baffled.)

Have I?

Niazi

And how would you explain it, Sameera, the wise one? No one understands it, you said so.

Osama

(Closing his eyes.)

With another tale of a princess dancing in the dust, no doubt!

Sameera

(Beginning to pace.)

A Sufi tale, if you can open up your minds and hearts. In a kingdom far away one generous king ruled a selected group of people. One day he assembled his viziers, telling them that his subjects were getting into the habit of telling lies, and that he wanted all his people to tell truth. A vizier suggested that the king should build a gate to the city, posting guards. Whoever wishing to enter the city would be asked a question, and if he answered truthfully, he would enter, if not, he would be hanged on the gallows across from the gate. The vizier's suggestion was put into affect, and a proclamation sounded in the city to insure that everyone entering the city should tell the truth. The morning after everything was in order, the first person to approach the gate was a Sufi. The guard asks: *where are you going? To tell you the truth, my friend, I am going to be hanged on those gallows today*, the Sufi replies. *I don't believe you. You are lying*, the guard protests. *Well, then, hang me. Isn't it the king's edict concerning lies? That would make it a truth*, the guard is angry. *Yes, your truth*, the Sufi walk past the gate.

Niazi

Who cares about the truth! Pain is clawing at my flesh, and I want to be comforted. Is the poultice of fir ready, Sameera? And the oil from its needles!

Sameera

(Gazing into space.)

Yes, almost.

Amani

(Whimpering.)

Where's my rocket paste? I am dying. Now, my stomach is hurting too.

Sameera

(Sadly.)

I would have found for you the fruit of the cypress to ease your stomach, but you won't be needing it now.

Osama

(His eyes shot open.)

You have the fruit of the cypress! It brings health and strength, I know that much. And you are not giving it to any one of us. You want to kill us, why?

Sameera

(Her gaze sweeping from one to the other with a sad tenderness.)

Do you think I am going to kill you all?

Amani

(Tremulously.)

That's what you told me. I don't know. Yet, I have my doubts.

Niazi

Considering, you are taking too long. Rather stalling, or making excuses that rocket paste is settling, or the oil from the needles is not distilled? I don't know what to think. And that strange brew that you are brewing!

Osama

You are mad, Sameera, and in your madness you are capable of doing anything.

(Takes his gloves off.)

Osama Continued

Look, my fingers all twisted again. Why don't you bring that ointment of rue, and prove our doubts wrong?

Sameera

(Turning toward her table.)

It's all mathematics, dear Osama, all mathematics.

{Amani and Niazi watch her silently, their looks glazed.}

Osama

Mathematics? What has healing to do with mathematics?

Sameera

It's all math, if you only knew? Existence is math, this science of the earth and the skies. Joys and pains too. Hopes and dreams, for sure. *Negative*, you go down. *Positive*, you go up. This is the Herculean Law of Nature. If you wish to escape falling into the lowest pit of misery and degradation, be *positive*. Avoid negativity with great fear as if you were fleeing plague. Yes, *positive*. The Cross of Success! To breathe renewal and freshness in life, escaping death and ugliness.

Osama

Dear Sameera, come out of that mode of madness. Bring us the salves.

Sameera

Why, I am ready.

Amani

Me first, sweet Sameera!

Sameera

(Pouring tea into a cup.)

If you are ready, here's the tea to purify your mind and soul first.

Niazi

Hurry, Sameera. I would drink anything to escape the sting of these scorpions in my flesh.

{Sameera drifts toward Amani. And then feeds her a spoonful of tea.}

Amani

You promised rocket paste next, yes.

{Sameera goes to Niazi, as if she had not heard what Amani said. Gives him a spoonful too.}

Niazi

It tastes like dust and ashes.

{Sameera edges closer to Osama. Her hand trembling while feeding him another spoonful.}

Osama

I would rather you rubbed me with that ointment of rue with your dear hands.

{Sameera is plodding back to her table. The eyes of Amani, Niazi and Osama are closing, their bodies growing limp. Sameera stands there with her back towards them all. She puts the spoon down, turning, cradling the cup between both her hands. Takes a few steps, her gaze wandering from one to the other! She stops in the middle of the room, bursting into laughter, her eyes glittering.}

Sameera

Euthanasia, thou art woman! Men kill only for sadistic reasons. Doctors, for the reason of insanity, and soldiers for the reward of valor! Ironic, isn't it, they get paid for it too.

(Glides toward Amani.)

Sameera Continued

They profane the name of God who kill in the name of religion.

(Stands towering over Amani.)

Sameera Continued

Sweet Amani. Fear of death no more, her soul dancing toward nothingness.

(Staggers toward Niazi.)

Sameera Continued

A pious mulla, and then a mad heathen, now a lump of absurdity!

(Walks toward Osama slowly and deliberately.)

Sameera Continued

Poor Osama. Dear beloved. Twisted fingers, spirit silent and deformed. Pearly gates are shut forever, no houris to welcome. His soul on fire, scorching the very heavens, before hurling itself into the furnace of hell!

{Looks over her shoulders, then tiptoes to the middle of the room. Stands there peering into her cup.}

Sameera

My turn to die now? Must I, like Hir, like Juliet? My friends, all sleeping so peacefully, they might wake up to mock my corpse.

{Dashes the cup to the floor, the amber liquid soaking into the dusty, Waziri rug.}

Sameera

No! I am neither Juliet, subservient to the whims of Shakespeare, nor Hir, the victim of the wild imagination of Waris Shah. No, I choose not to die.

{Scampers toward the loom. Snatches the unfinished rug of Twin Towers from its loom, dumping it over the body of Osama.}

Sameera

No, I will not die. I would go whoring instead, on the streets of Kabul. Plenty of American soldiers there to seduce with guile, and be seduced to attain the glory of a Murderess Divine.
{Runs toward the mouth of the cave, then runs back.}

Sameera

Must not forget my jewels!
(Picks up her chest of jewels.)

The Curtain