

# The Escape

**Short Story By Qaisra Shahraz**

## THE ESCAPE

In the packed prayer hall of Darul Uloom mosque in Longsight, the Imam concluded the Eid prayers with a passionate plea for world peace and terrorist activities in Pakistan to stop. Seventy three years old Samir, perched on a plastic chair because of his bad leg, kept his hands raised, quietly mouthing his own personal prayer.

“Please Allah Pak, bless her soul! And let me escape!”

Rows of seated men had arisen from their prayer mats and reached out to energetically hug others and offer the festive greeting, “*Eid Mubarak!*” Samir took his time. There was no-one in particular he was seeking to greet or hug at this mosque. Most of the men around him were strangers and of the younger generation, several sported beards – a marked shift between the two generations. His face remained clean shaven. Nowadays he prayed at the Cheadle mosque, joining the congregation of Arabs and other nationalities for the Taraveeh prayers during *Ramadhan*. Nostalgia tugging at him, on a whim, Samir had asked his son to drop him off in Longsight to offer his Eid prayers at his old community mosque.

Painfully rising to his feet Samir began the hugging ritual, smiling cordially. Unlike the others leaving the hall, he loitered; in no hurry to get out. At the door he dutifully dropped a five pound note in the collection fund box.

Whilst looking for his shoes he bumped into his old friend, Manzoor – they greeted, smiled broadly and warmly hugged. Outside, in the chilly autumn day, his friend, who lived a street away from the mosque, invited him to his house for the Eid hospitality of Vermicelles, *sewayian* and *chana chaat*.

The smile slid off Samir’s face; he was reluctant to visit his friend’s house – afraid of the old memories, shying away from the normality, the marital bliss of his friend’s home. In particular he was loath to witness the little intimacies between husband and wife. The look. The laugh. The teasing banter.

Instead he waved goodbye to his friend and stood waiting for his son. “I’m being picked up,” he informed a young man kindly offering him a lift home, before sauntering on his bad leg down the street.

“I have all the time in the world!” He wryly muttered to himself, savouring the walk down streets he had cycled and scooted along for over three decades. A lot had changed, the area now thriving with different migrant communities; the Pakistanis and the Bengalis living side by side with the Irish and the Somalis. Many Asian stores and shops had sprung up. The Bengali Sari and travel agent shops jostled happily alongside the Pakistani ones and the Chinese takeaway. Mosques catering to the needs of Muslim community had sprung up, from the small Duncan Road mosque in a semi-detached corner house to the purpose built Darul Uloom centre on Stamford Road. The Bengali mosque for the Bengali community on one corner of Buller Road was only a few feet away from the Pakistani and Arab Makki Masjid on the other corner. Not surprisingly on Fridays, for the *Juma* prayers, the street was gridlocked, with an occasional police car monitoring the situation.

He noted that the Roman Catholic Church and its primary school on Montgomery Road had disappeared, joining the quaint little National Westminster Bank branch that had been in the middle of Beresford Road with a communal vegetable plot at the back. That had been pulled down twenty odd years ago. St Agnes church was still there, however, at the junction of West Point and Hamilton Road and it still enjoyed healthy Sunday morning congregations.

Samir stopped outside a shop on Beresford Road that had been called Joy Town twenty one years earlier. It had been his children's favourite toyshop, especially on Eid day, when they ran to it with their *Eidhi* money, eager to buy cars, skipping ropes and doll's china crockery sets. In its place there now stood a grocery superstore with stalls of vegetables and fruits hogging the pavement area. On Fridays and Saturdays families, like Samir's, who had moved out of the area still returned to do their shopping, visiting their favourite halal meat and grocery stores; carting boxes of fresh mangoes, bags of basmati rice and chapatti flour back to their cars. The hustle and bustle of these shops always brought out a smile in him.

His son, Maqbool, a well-to-do sportswear manager, dutifully returned to pick him up half an hour later. By that time, Samir was shivering with the autumn chill in his *shalwar kameez* and *shervani* and gladly got into the warm car. He had wanted to go to Sanam Sweet Centre to buy a few boxes of Asian sweets to distribute to friends but he hesitated, suddenly overcome by trepidation.

"Do you want to go somewhere else, Father?" his son asked, as if reading his mind.

Samir shook his head; loath to inconvenience his son further, feeling guilty for already taking up enough of his time.

"No. Let's go home." he murmured, eyes closed.

He had a large five bedroom detached house but with his wife and family gone all the joy of living had fled. He kept himself in the master bedroom, hating to enter the other rooms in the house, especially the one with his wife's clothes. Only when the grandchildren visited did he unlock some of the doors. He spent his time in his new favourite spot, the chair at the dining table next to the window and radiator. He sat there leafing through *The Times*, the *Daily Jang* and *The Nation*, watching the traffic go past on the busy road.

His son dropped him off at the door with the words, "Will collect you in an hour's time." Samir nodded and watched him drive away before letting himself into the house. Another hour to kill. He shrugged. It was better here on his own, with the TV and the newspaper keeping him company, than politely waiting around at someone else's house for dinner.

He felt hungry; but the dining table in front of him lay dismally bare. On Eid days it was normally stacked with bowls of delicious food: boiled eggs, *sewayain*, *chana chats* and a hot tray of *Shami kebabs*. And these were just the breakfast starters, heralding a busy festive day of eating.

Last year his entire family had been there. If he closed his eyes he could see his children helping themselves to the food, with him happily beginning the *Eidhi* money giving ritual. Five pounds notes for the little ones, ten for the older teenagers, and crispy twenty pound notes for his daughters and daughters-in-law.

In the steamy warm kitchen with the noisy fan purring away at the window, the smell from a pot of pilau rice and trays of roast chicken and kebabs in the oven would set everyone's mouths watering. Dinner was a prompt affair; always at one o'clock, served by the women of his household, moving elegantly around the room; their rustling *ghrarars* and *lenghas* sweeping the floor and the long *dupattas* hanging at their sides. The boys would be in their *shalwar kameez* and *sherwanis*. By two, the whole family would be sitting around the table chatting, relaxed and happy, some still spooning away trifle and *gajar halwa*.

The thought of all that food set Samir's stomach groaning. He could not wait that long. In the kitchen he tipped some cornflakes into a bowl; it was not *chana chat* or *sewayian* but would keep him going.

He twice checked his pocket for the money, mentally counting the number of notes he should have. This was the bit of Eid day that he particularly enjoyed, glimpsing the excited faces of his grandchildren taking the *Eidhi* from his hand. In the old days a one pound coin delighted his children. After dinner they excitedly ran off to Joy Town to buy gifts of their choice. When Maqbool arrived, Samir was well into his second hard-boiled egg, smiling sheepishly at his son, who mentally chided himself for leaving his father to eat alone at home.

Samir's whole family was gathered in his eldest daughter's house and he was the last to arrive. In the living room, his second daughter-in-law, Mehnaz, stood up out of respect to vacate her seat for him.

"Stay seated my dear," he offered, perching himself instead on a chair near the door. The women were busy in the kitchen, sorting out the crockery and the sauces. All had happily adopted the British custom of bringing a dish since their mother had died. His eldest daughter was carrying a tray of roast meat through the hallway to the dining room. Catching her eye, Samir smiled politely.

His youngest grandson, Rahel, jumped into his lap, startling him and bringing a smile to his face. Samir lifted him up to offer a tight hug. Then holding out a five-pound note he beckoned to his older grandson, a six-year-old, who was stood scowling a few feet away. The child shyly sidled to his grandfather's side, plucked the note from his hand and ran off.

"Would you like something to eat before dinner?" His daughter came to enquire, the blender with the mint sauce in her hand.

Samir shook his head.

Nodding, she disappeared into the kitchen leaving Samir to smile, watch, listen and respond where appropriate. That is until the seat became too uncomfortable for his bad leg, forcing him to take the one vacated by his eldest grandson near the window. He bleakly stared out through the net curtains, watching passers-by, who probably had no idea that in this Muslim home they were celebrating *Eid ul Fitr*.

Eyes filling up, Samir kept his face averted towards the window; there was nothing to celebrate on his first Eid without his beloved wife. Sorrow suffocated; desperation tearing at him. If he could only turn the clock back. How he longed to have this Eid dinner at his own home and with her hosting it; instead of sitting awkwardly here as an interloper.

An hour later, he dutifully spooned food into his mouth; making no comments apart from the polite "everything is very nice" to the women of his family. He did not pick on the chillis or criticise the curry sauces as he had always done with his wife's cooking. His sons, of a different generation and attitude, were happily munching away at their roast meats, whilst he stealthily hid a raw bit of chicken leg under a napkin on his plate.

By the time the *gajar halwa* and tea were served, Samir's mind was made up. He waited; heartbeat accelerating. When there was a lull in the lively conversation he ventured to inform his family, licking his dry lips carefully.

"I want to tell you something..."

They turned to stare. His daughter, Roxanna hushed her little girl sitting on her lap with the words, “Abu-ji is speaking, shush!”

“I want to go back home – to Pakistan.” Samir announced, “To visit my family...stay there for a few months. It’ll be good for me... it’s the right time... with your mother gone.... I need a change of scene and I have plenty of time now!” he explained, smiling. “It would be lovely to visit some places of my old life. Also good to spend some time with my sister and brother and their families.”

Complete silence greeted his words.

“A few months! Are you sure about this, father? We’ll miss you!” His eldest daughter had found her tongue.

“You’ll all be fine without me. Anyway you can phone me every day... you’ve all got busy lives and families, so it won’t be that bad to have me disappear for a few months. I’ll hardly be missed.... This trip will be good for me... I need to go....” He stopped himself from saying, “I need to escape,” voice petering away, giving them a glimpse of the abyss inside him.

Discomforted and not knowing what was the right thing to say, they prudently ended the discussion. Their father had always made his own decisions – very rarely paying any attention to other people’s opinions. Their mother had battled for years to influence him, and died having never quite succeeded.

“Where will you stay? Lahore?” His youngest daughter, Rosie, boldly asked.

“Yes! In our family home of course, with my brother – where else?” he replied sharply, annoyed at his daughter’s question and semi-hostile tone.

Rosie did not bother answering. Instead she covertly exchanged a pointed look with her sister, which their father neatly intercepted. Samir’s face tightened. “You need to understand Rosie that just as this is your family – I have the same back home....They care about me and want me to spend time with them.” His tone harsher than he intended.

The word “back home” had just slipped out of him again. It was a curious use. For a few seconds he was lost in thought. Why did he say that? Was Manchester not his “home”? After all he had spent over forty years of his life in this city? The other place was just his birthplace, his country of origin and reminder of his youth. Surely these facts should make Manchester his home?

He shrugged these thoughts aside, willing his mood to lighten; he now had a goal: to occupy his mind with tasks, and he loved tasks above all. The big task facing him now was what presents to take for his family and his two college friends in Lahore. He promised himself that this time the three friends would treat themselves to a walk through the tall, elegant Victorian corridors of the Government College of Lahore where he had studied.

Three days later, Samir had flown out from Manchester airport, taking his “other family” in Lahore by surprise. They gushed with greetings, hurriedly assembling their shocked faces even though inside they were all amok. “What was he doing here, all of sudden? How long was he going to stay? Which other relatives was he visiting and for how long?” These questions battered simultaneously in all their heads.

Samir’s face fell, quickly averting his eyes, astutely picking up the tell-tale signs from their faces and body language. Two days later, after visiting the local Anarkali Bazaar, taking a leisurely walk down the famous Mall Road, and spending time with his sister’s family in her

villa in the Defence area, he headed for the village where his parents were buried. There he was amicably greeted by his host, a second cousin, who hosted all relatives visiting his parents' graves.

After some refreshments, Samir headed for the cemetery on the outskirts of the village. Well maintained, tall tangle wood bushes grew around it, keeping the wolves out. Eyes blurred, Samir gazed down at his parents' graves. His father had adamantly made it clear that he did not want to be buried in the overcrowded city cemeteries. "I want fresh air, shade of a tree and plenty of space around – and make sure you leave space for your mother. Don't just throw us in any hole!"

As obedient sons, they honoured their father's wish and duly visited the village of their father's ancestral home and bought a plot of land. Thereafter his sister and brother made annual journeys to the village, to offer a feast and *hatham* prayers for their parents souls.

Samir perched himself on the low wall circling the plot with his parents graves. The tranquillity around him had him thinking about his own burial place. Of course it would be Manchester's Southern Cemetery. He could not imagine his children traipsing back to Pakistan to visit his grave in a land that was foreign to them. He now understood why his father was insistent on keeping a place for his wife. Remembering his Sabiya, he bowed his head. The loneliness crushed. He ached to have her back. Two years ago they were both here, sitting at the same spot.

He watched a herd of milk buffaloes being shepherded back to the village. Feeling a tiny bite, he looked down at a line of ants running down the brickwork. Laden with small scraps of leaves, the ants were zigzagging around his feet. He moved his foot away and glanced over his shoulders at the brick making quarry and kiln, spotting a group of peasant men pushing trolleys stacked with bricks. Two women were carrying small baskets loaded with baked bricks on their heads. Feeling sorry for them and the hard work that the women had to do in order to feed their families, Samir was reminded of the second mission that had brought him to this village – his wife's charitable work. He had to visit the widow.

He turned to look back at the graves, taking his fill, etching the picture in his head. Was this going to be his final farewell? Standing over his mother's grave, soft sobs shook his large body. It was a strange world. To be buried continents away from one's own parents. Why was he crying? For his parents who had died decades ago or for his beloved Sabiya?

"Life is a cycle!" He mused. He was in his seventies but still demurred from being called "old." God only knew where the rest of his ancestors were buried – most probably in India, before the partition. People were born and slid through the cycle of life and then disappeared, with some leaving no trace.

"Samir, stop thinking like this – it's morbid!"

He raised his hands to say a final fervent prayer over his parents' mounds.

His host family had gone to a lot of trouble in their offer of hospitality. The women had begun scurrying around the courtyard the moment he arrived. A hen had been snatched from the chicken coop in the far end of the courtyard and quickly dispatched to the cooking pot. The rice for the lamb biryani had been soaked. The pink custard powder was energetically whisked in a bowl. Not content with the home cooking for their special "velati" guest from "London," the host had enlisted the help of the village cook. A fabulous chef, it was widely said that people always licked their fingers after eating his tasty chicken shorba.



The women had happily obliged. Mina, the daughter-in-law was seven months pregnant, expecting her first child, and hated squatting on the floor whilst cooking on a pedestal stove. As well as that, she had to maintain her modesty; it was quite challenging, keeping herself well draped in front of the male guest. Her pregnancy was causing her a lot of embarrassment. She was “huge,” everyone kept telling her.

With a last lingering glance at his parents’ graves, Samir followed the path to the village central square with its old majestic looking Minar tree where his driver was waiting. His brother had kindly loaned both their driver and the car for his use whilst he used his motorcycle. Ahead of him he saw a young man pulling a suitcase and dragging something else.

Bemused, Samir stared wide-eyed, temporarily transported to another time and place. He still kept his bedroll canvas bag in his garage in England, never having had the heart to throw it away. It was a memento, a part of his life. Too many memories were caught up with it. The frayed brown leather suitcase, stuffed with all his important documents, including his British nationality, was still kept under his bed.

There are special moments etched on peoples’ minds; for Samir it was the one of him dragging a big bedroll and a large suitcase from Victoria coach station through the streets of London: deeply mortifying to this day. Why his arm and fingers did not fall off still amazed him. Tired, hungry and harassed, he and his friend stumbled thankfully into a Victorian house with a Bed and Breakfast sign; two Pakistani migrants from up north wanting to try their fortunes down south in London.

It was actually his friend’s breezy confidence, smart use of English, cocky winsome smile and flirtatious winks that had successfully got them a room late at night, winning over the elegant old lady with her purple rinse. The purple hair colour of many older women in those early days fascinated him. Why did they like such a strange colour?

Samir shuddered, tasting the raw fear he had felt then as they desperately sought a place for the night. “What if we don’t find a room, where will we go and what will we do?” He had silently agonised, panicking at the darkness falling around them. It was his friend’s optimism and high spirits that had saved him from making a fool of himself. There was a moment he was ready to squat on the pavement and shed bitter tears, bemoaning his stupidity in leaving a warm room and a cosy bed in Blackburn.

Sharing a double bed with his friend capped the humiliation of that day further. His friend had joked at their sleeping quarters and went soundly to sleep. Samir had sidled to the edge of the bed, shivering in the thin, coarse blanket making his face itch, afraid to pull it over himself and of waking his friend. In the end, he had got up and pulled out his own five inch thick Pakistani quilt from the bed roll.

His love affair with the English capital was both doomed and short-lived – it was not for him – too anonymous. He knew no-one and felt shy and uncomfortable wherever he went – stumbling and stammering over the carefully chosen English words and phrases he had mastered to buy bus tickets, packets of Benson and Hedges or order something to eat. Intimidated by the huge buildings and mad evening traffic, he smiled when he saw brown faces, mainly of Sikhs and Indians. He did not come across many Pakistanis.

After taking some souvenir photographs with an expensive camera he had brought from Pakistan, posing in his smart suit in front of one of the Trafalgar Square lions and outside the queen’s Buckingham Palace gates with the guards, Samir had happily fled. He wished his

friend well with his love of London. Years later, when he came across him he laughed aloud. His friend had become a true Londoner, down to the cockney accent.

For Samir, London was simply too much, making his life a misery and stripping away his self-esteem. Lacking his friend's confidence, easy going manner and ability to make new friends, Samir missed the cosy comfort of a small town like Blackburn. After two weeks he had escaped, happily dragging his bed roll and his brown leather suitcase with him.

He went to another friend, who welcomed him with open arms, letting him join two other tenants in his two-bedroom terraced house. Apart from the kitchen all three rooms were used. Even the front room had a single bed hogging the area near the window and the open coal fire. That was the owner's room. The kitchen, with its big coal fire warming the room, was the hub of their communal life, where they took turns cooking meals, smoking and chatting, lounging on hard wooden chairs around a small kitchen wooden table. Three of them had young families in Pakistan.

Samir stayed put, intent on earning money to support his family back home by doing overtime and long shifts. *Keema lobia* became his favourite dish. He became a good cook, very proud of his culinary skills. His first chapatti painstakingly rolled with a long empty sterilised milk bottle was a good try. His three fellow home mates praised him heartily, rewarding him with the teasing words, "Your cooking is better than our wives back home!"

His landlord found him a job in the cotton textile mill, after he was pressured to turn down a job in a special nursing home in Darwen.

"You will be working with mentally ill people, are you mad? You'll become mad yourself!" His fellow tenants had cruelly scoffed, frightening him into scurrying into the reception room and leaving a hurried note to say no to the job before he had even started.

In the Darwen textile mill, the huge dark machines intimidated him; but he quickly mastered the skill of working with and around them. It was dull and demeaning work. With his good education behind him, he often heard himself dryly echoing "If Abba sees me doing this, he'll have a fit!" His father had forked out a lot of money for the fees for a top college and expected him to do a "clean" respectable office job, not working in some "grotty" mill as his youngest son once termed it years later.

The pay packet however, had kept him smiling. The thrill of counting the bank notes through the little top corner, and feeling the angles of the six and three penny bits through the brown paper, and the occasional half-crowns— small sums but mighty big pleasures they provided then.

In those frugal days, they felt duty bound to keep each other in check; the talk then was always about "going back home." They were not here to waste money on luxuries or on themselves. Exceptions were only made for gifts for their children. Samir had not only his wife and one daughter to support, but also his father to appease, who had never forgiven him for leaving home and doing menial jobs in mills in "*Velat*."

The only thing that could win over his father would be the building of a new house, to illustrate his economic well-being and to support his younger brother's family. Three years later, having had enough of textile mills and with his family having joined him, he escaped to the big city of Manchester and started his own manufacturing business. It was a time when knitwear manufacturing was a booming industry in the Northwest and Ardwick had become a manufacturing area. Many Pakistani migrants entered this trade. Samir too purchased an old



factory for his knitwear business. It was also a time of social and communal uncertainty. Enoch Powell had done his bit; frightening the host community with his racist speech citing “the rivers of blood” and leaving the migrants in fear of being thrown out of the country. When the Ugandan refugees started to arrive in the early nineteen seventies, after their expulsion by Idi Amin, his friends were very dismal about their own fate in the UK, fearing that they too would be thrown out. For some, the mission or the next urgent goal was to build houses back home to return to if things really got bad in England.

Unlike his friends, Samir had faith in the British justice system and its fairness. He never for one moment believed that something similar could happen in Britain. Unlike some of his friends his savings went not into a *khoti* or a villa in Lahore, but in gradually working his way up to a better standard of living for his family, progressing from a terraced house to a detached house in a good area. He concentrated on his children, their education and careers. And the decades simply slipped away, melting away his youth and gradually severing the links with his homeland. His retirement was forced on him; he did not welcome it.

Samir smiled at the young man with the suitcase and turned into the village lane to pay a special call. In the widow’s home there was panic as the youngest of the three girls whispered to the others that a man from *Velat* was standing outside their door. When their mother spotted the foreign visitor she nearly fainted, but recovered soon enough. Bursting into sobs she stared at the husband of their benefactor, muttering behind the fold of her long shawl, and gushing the welcome greeting: “*Bismillah! Bismillah!*”

She owed a lot to this man’s wife.

Her three teenage daughters had rushed ahead into their *bethak*, to make the room presentable. The crocheted-edged table cloth was quickly straightened and dusted, the mirrored beaded cushions on the leather settee hurriedly plumped up and the pair of knitting needles and women’s magazine snatched and shoved under the table.

Red-faced and brimming with pleasure, the widow led their very “special” guest into their humble living room, with the walls lined with their best china propped on wooden sills. It was a quaint sight for him, reminding him of the old days when his father would take him to tour some village for a “taste of the other life and warm hospitality of the rural people.”

Samir did not know what to say; both touched and embarrassed by their humility and behaviour.

“Please don’t bring any refreshments, Cola or Miranda bottles or such – I have a bad stomach,” he glibly lied, saving them the bother and cost of purchasing the bottles from the local village shop. “I just wanted to see how you all are – and how your daughters are doing – I know my wife always visited you – as she did with the other homes she sponsored....” He stopped, eyes filling up, his Sabiya in front of him.

The widow again burst into loud sobs. “We are so sorry about your wife’s death, she was such a wonderful soul and so good to us! We miss her so much, and she phoned us every month – calling us to the butcher’s house to chat with us... always checking that we had enough money for my daughter’s expenses and enough grain!”

“Yes – she was a good soul! And we all miss her!” Samir lowered his head to hide his tear swollen eyes. The widow touched by his grief, stared in wonder, mouth open, showing her row of uneven top teeth and two missing lower molars. She quickly closed her mouth in embarrassment when he looked up.

Samir looked at the girls shyly staring at him, and could not stop the outburst. His sobbing caused the girls' eyes to fill up. They were used to crying from an early age. Their mother had become a crying machine and often they ended up aping her. Today they found the sight of this older man from England, crying over his wife, very poignant. He was thinking, "My wife has made a difference to these wretched girls' lives!"

Sobering, he wiped his cheeks clean with a tissue proffered shyly by the eldest daughter. As if reading his mind, the widow reminded him, "Your wife got my oldest daughter married, she helped us with the dowry... here is that daughter... she's visiting us at the moment." Then her gaze switched to her other daughters. "Who will now finance these girls' weddings?" Poverty had forced her into straight talking, to unabashedly appeal to the good nature of well off people like him.

Samir had thought ahead. His pension, even if he did not touch the rest of his savings, would be enough to support this household – an ideal way of honouring his wife and her dying wish. Her last words to all her children and to him had been, "Do not forget all the families that I've been supporting in my life – earn their heartfelt prayers by helping them. Don't forget to keep my register of widows safe. Don't let anyone die of poverty or ill health! Display your humanity and offer generously your *zakat*."

His eyes on the four heads modestly draped with dupattas, Samir meditated on one possible way for these girls to get out of this poverty trap and offered. "Sister please educate your daughters... send them to any colleges that you like. I'll pay all their fees and other costs."

The girls' eyes widened and lit up in wonder. The *Velati* man would do that for them! Go to the town college. The girls' minds were swimming. Their poignant looks and smiling faces cut him to his soul. His own children, including his two daughters, had been educated to the highest degree level and had access to great opportunities. Did these poor girls not have a right to the same? He was suddenly struck and dismayed by the inequality of life. How some had everything whilst others simply worried about the next meal!

The youngest girl moved away from the doorway as Samir's village host, who had followed him to the widow's house, entered the room. Catching Samir's eyes, the host signalled to him that dinner was waiting. Samir hastened to add before rising from the settee.

"Don't worry about anything, Sister. I'll take care of your financial situation and make sure that you get your remittances on time, including for the wheat. You have our phone numbers, Please phone for any extra financial help needed. I'll take care of the furniture for your daughter's dowries just as my Sabiya did for your eldest daughter... I have to go now and may Allah Pak look after you all!" He felt in his jacket pocket and shyly placed a three-thousand-rupee note in the youngest girl's hand, lowering his gaze in embarrassment in the face of their gratitude.

He politely followed his host out of the small courtyard before turning to look back at the girls shyly peeping out of their door. "This is their humble world!" he mused, "And I live in a large house all by myself." The thought terrified him.

He politely smiled to the other villagers that he passed in the lane. There was no-one he recognised and no welcoming look of sudden recognition. And why should there be? He chided himself. He was over seventy years old – and so far he had not seen a soul of that age group in the village.

That night he returned to Lahore to his brother's family. Fear of hospitality had made him flee the village, afraid that if he stayed the night his hosts would incur the cost of breakfast and afternoon dinner the following day. He was familiar with their generosity and excellent hospitality. Already they had spent a lot on his behalf. Until the entire dining table was covered with plates of cakes, pastries, boiled eggs and parathas they would not be happy.

In his brother's home there was no element of guilt – no waiting upon ceremony. They knew what he liked, and so for breakfast his brother would fetch some warm *kulchas* from the local bakery and the tea would be supplied by his sister-in-law.

Drinking a cool glass of *lassi*, Samir instructed the driver to take him back to Lahore, the city of his birth, the old Mughal capital of India. He wanted to call on the way at the famous Data Gunj Darbar, a favourite shrine of his mother. In his childhood days she eagerly took him to pay homage to the saint buried in the tomb, visited by thousands every day from all over the world.

Outside in the Darbar courtyard, the *daig* men were fast at work, serving food from their big pots to the needy and to those keen to take the *tabark*, food offerings, home for their family. When the man distributing bags of pilau rice touched him on his arm, Samir was lost for words and nodded, taking the bag of rice with him inside the building. In the large hall amidst the crowd of male and female devotees, peering through the open windows at the tomb draped with a green and gold embroidered sheet, Samir offered special prayers for his wife's soul, tears gushing out of his eyes. Then a prayer for himself. He repeated the word "escape" again.

As he sheepishly entered his ancestral home, the mouths of his brother's family fell open. They had not expected him back that night. In fact, they thought he was touring another city and here he was, large as life. Both parties energetically avoided eye contact. His brother's family quickly recovered. They had been lounging around on sofas. It was eight o'clock and the popular drama was about to be telecast. The wife and daughter began panicking. Was their guest fed or did they have to scurry to the kitchen to rustle up a meal for him? Reading their minds perfectly, Samir wryly held the bag of rice in front of him.

"I got my meal from the Darbar, I'm sure it's delicious. Don't worry about me, just carry on watching," With those words he left them to their drama, before excusing himself. "I'll go up to my room and have a shower."

"Yes, please do!" His sister-in-law quickly offered with a toothy grin and orangey *sak*-stained lips, sitting down to enjoy the drama with her daughter.

He came down precisely after nine pm, having given them time to finish watching their serial. In that time, he had showered, eaten the rice from the bag with his fingers and started to gather his belongings. They were expecting him and hurried to greet him, his niece standing up.

"Are you sure you will not want a meal?" His brother asked, not happy at Samir not eating. "The *darbar daig* rice was wonderful. Good to eat *tabark* sometimes. It reminds us gently what life is all about – our stomachs. Getting food into our bellies is what we work for, don't we?" His brother cynically nodded, a director of a firm and now retired. He still had two daughters whose marriage and dowries he had to arrange. It was not just the matter of food for him. He envied his brother for having all his children wed and settled. No worries, saving that of having lost a wife.

Aloud he instructed. “Bano, go and make tea for your uncle!”

A smile fixed on her face, the eldest daughter left for the kitchen, whilst everyone else watched the news.

“Tomorrow morning I will check flight times.” Samir slipped in the information whilst sipping his tea. Heads turned, TV forgotten, surprise written on their faces.

“What brother! Already? You’ve only been here for just a week!” The sister-in-law rushed to speak.

“I think a week is enough - time to go home!” He replied, a gentle smile peeping across his features as he remembered his daughter Rosie.

Dumbfounded, they stared back at him, but did not challenge or question him further as to why. “He must be missing his children,” his brother echoed in his head. Once more all heads turned to the programme. As the eldest daughter got up to take the cups back to the kitchen, she smiled at her uncle asking if he wanted some more tea. He smiled back; it was the first full smile she had accorded him since he had arrived. Then she surprised him and her parents further with her kind offer.

“Uncle, please give me your laundry. I will see to it before you leave.”

“You stupid girl! Your uncle is not going yet!” Her father chided, red-faced. “He was only saying it. We are not going to let him go yet.”

His wife quickly echoed the same. “No brother, you are not going yet.”

“Don’t worry, Bano! I’ll get my clothes washed at home.” Samir said, surprising himself. Twice he had used the term “home.” Was not this his home, the place where he was born?

Chastened and the smile deleted, the eldest daughter took the tray of crockery back to the kitchen. In the lounge her uncle from England had already decided. He stayed up for some more polite talk and then went up to his air conditioned room. Picking up the remaining items littering the dressing table he threw them into his suitcase. His love affair with the city of his birth was over.

On the plane he found himself sitting next to a man called Ibrahim, of his age group and size; both overweight and uncomfortable with the economy seats and the narrow leg space in front of them. After exchanging polite chitchat they soon got into serious talking and were onto the question as to why they were visiting their country of birth and youth.

“The homeland?” Samir ruminated over the term and shared his musing aloud with his fellow passenger, who had similar home circumstances, including being a widower.

“The one that you have just visited, or the one that you are returning to? The place where you have spent most of your adult life? Which homeland are you trying to escape from?” Samir elaborated, making the man’s sun beaten forehead groove into three deep pleats.

“Escape?” Ibrahim was disconcerted by the term. Samir nonchalantly went onto explain. “I am escaping back to the UK – and to a new home.”

“New home?”

“Want to join me?”

The man looked blankly at him, wondering whether this was a joke. Samir chuckling went on to explain.

He returned home not having met the two college friends or walked down the tall nineteenth century corridors of the Government College of Lahore. Strangely, it really did not matter to him.

Two weeks after his arrival, Samir had moved to an elderly people's home, leaving his five bed roomed detached house to his four children but keeping his savings and shares to see to the needs of the family he had promised to support. He made a new will, instructing his Solicitor that when he died one of his children would carry on supporting the widow and her daughters. He got his eldest daughter to phone the widow, to reassure her that he had not forgotten his promise. Social and cultural parameters had to be maintained. He was a man and would keep his distance from the widow and not compromise her honour, her *izzat*. They needed his financial help which his wife used to provide; now he would take over her role.

When he spoke to his brother on arrival in Manchester, he was asked when he would return to his homeland. After a pause Samir asked, "Homeland? Which homeland? I'm home...." An awkward silence followed. Then he had added laughing, "You can visit me next time."

A week later, the friend he had met on the plane arrived with his daughter, carrying his suitcase. Ibrahim took the room three doors away from Samir's, his gales of laughter echoing down the corridor. Pure joy raced through Samir lifting his spirit as he rushed to show his friend around the home, enthusiastically explaining and reassuring, introducing him to the other house guests he had befriended, Penny and Derrick.

"It's the right decision my friend. You won't regret it. Wave goodbye to loneliness and heartache... We are the new English *babus*, living in old people's homes, the ones we used to ridicule once upon a time! Meals on wheels for us now – we have worked so hard – time to enjoy ourselves now, hey!"