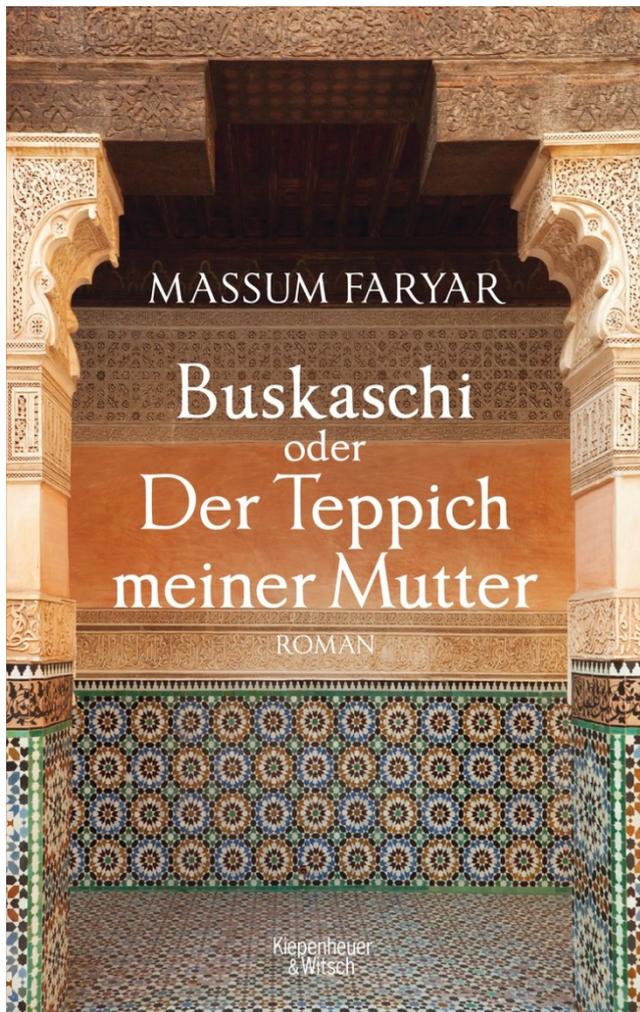


Sample Translation (pp. 11-19 and 39-66)

Buzkashi or My Mother's Carpet **by Massum Faryar**

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Book One

Memories of the Garden of Eden

As every Friday, my mother put our washing things in a bag before breakfast, pulled her chador over her head and said, 'Off we go.' As every Friday, I crawled back under my blanket and shouted, 'I don't want to go with you and join the women. I want to go to the men with my father.'

My refusal to follow my mother to the women's bathhouse was mere show, well aware as I was that I would immediately be called again: 'No, you're coming with me,' but it really wasn't easy to bear it there. In the women's hammam the noise was always deafening. There was a lot of talking and shouting, children crying all over the place, countless voices echoing round the large, hot steam-room.

On this particular Friday, however, that place, which until then I had only associated with torment and the loss of my male dignity, was to acquire a very different significance in my young life. If there's one childhood experience that I'm especially fond of looking back on, then that is it. Whenever during puberty I lay alone on the flat roof of our house, I would close my eyes and go through everything again:

I was standing outside one of the occupied cubicles, that were simply shut off from the outside by the towels the women hung over the opening, waiting for it to be free. All at once the damp towel slipped down, revealing the secret of the cubicle. A woman was sitting soaping her thighs on the tiled step under the tap, that gave a trickle of water. Her long black hair was covering part of her face and her big, heavy breasts as well. Never before had I seen a completely naked woman, and such an exceptionally well-formed figure at that. I stared at her, unable to move. She looked up, seemed to recognise me and smiled. It was the beautiful wife of our neighbour, the miller. She asked me if I wanted to wash myself too. All I could think of as a reply was a shy nod.

'Come on in then.'

Before anyone could see me I slipped into the cubicle and sat down next to her on the step. She stood up and hung the towel back over the rail. 'Shall I soap you?'

Once more I nodded.

Holding my shoulder with her left hand, with her right she rubbed soap over my back, then my chest, into my hair and over my face, as I stared at her breasts swinging rhythmically, the tips of which reminded me of the pomegranates in our garden. And I loved pomegranates.

'Close your eyes, otherwise they'll sting,' she told me, opening the tap. Lukewarm water poured over my head. She squatted down in front of me, rubbing soap over my feet, my knees and thighs, allowing my half-open eyes a view of her hidden mysteries. I saw her shoulders as rocks over which her tresses wound like black snakes. My eyes then focused on her long, slim

neck with throbbing veins that disappeared in the dusk of her breast; it seemed to me like some strange musical instrument. I felt myself being seduced by the devilish figure my father would often curse after he'd got out of bed and then say he had to go to the hammam straight away to give himself a good wash before going to prayers. As she rubbed the soap over my stomach and chest, my heart was pounding fit to burst. I was terrified I might hear my mother calling me any moment. She too was washing herself in one of the many cubicles. Our neighbour, seeming to sense my agitation, filled a plastic bowl with water several times and rinsed me down.

'What are you called?' she asked.

'Shaer,' I whispered in her ear.

'Oh!' she said with a delighted laugh. 'A lovely name. It suits you. How old are you, my little poet?'

I hesitated.

'You're already going to school, aren't you?'

'Yes. I'm in second year. I'm older than I look.' I wasn't lying, I was a rather small child.

'Then you shouldn't be allowed to come to the women's hammam any more.'

'I don't really know about that,' I said. 'Can I soap you as well?'

She nodded and handed me the soap. As she did so I couldn't resist giving her a clumsy kiss. I pushed the soap down between her full breasts and soon found myself in that paradise of dreams my father had told me about. My hand slid farther down to touch her thighs. But as I shut my eyes, determined to abandon myself fully to that paradise, I heard my mother's voice. Cautiously I peeped through a gap beside the towel. My mother was walking up and down the narrow gangway between the cubicles, calling my name.

'Off you go now. That's your mother calling,' the woman said softly.

Abruptly dragged away from this newly discovered world, I crept on all fours, peered out under the towel curtain, saw my mother going down the gangway and quickly slipped out of the cubicle. My mother, wrapped up in a large bath towel and carrying another, was about to leave the bath area but turned round quickly just then and called out, 'Where have you been hiding? Why didn't you answer?'

My attempt at a laugh, to give her the impression I'd just been playing a game to annoy her, failed miserably when I realised that the arousal between my legs hadn't gone down yet.

'I... I fell asleep.'

'I can see that,' said my mother, pointing her finger. She draped the other towel over my shoulders, took my hand and led me off firmly in the direction of the clothes lockers.

We went home and from then on I counted the hours, days and nights until my mother would ask me again to accompany her to the hammam. But when the long-awaited Friday finally arrived, she made no preparations for me to go with her. 'You're going with your father.'

'No!' I screamed, furious, 'I'm going with you.'

'No, my son. You've always begged to be allowed to go with your father. Now you're going with him.' And with that she went out.

She was being mean. I screamed and wept as I'd never done before at any time during my childhood. My father did everything he could to try and calm me down and get me to go with him to the men's bathhouse. But nothing he did could help me get over my rage.

Two weeks later — by then I felt somewhat better — my father sat down on the terrace beside me and said, 'My son, if you come to the hammam with me, I'll give you a present you'll never forget for the rest of your life.'

'What kind of present will that be?' I asked.

He took off his Afghan hat, made of best-quality karakul fleece, and put it down on the ground. Then he ran his fingers through his silver hair, looked round the garden behind me and said, 'Do you know who I am? I'm your father, of course, but where does your father come from? What do you know about his past? About his history?'

'Nothing,' I replied, unsure of where this was going.

'So how would it be if you learnt where your father spent his childhood, his young years, and what it was like?'

I remained silent. He picked up his hat in his left hand and started to pat it, gently and playfully. 'None of your brothers and sisters knows about this,' he went on. 'Not even your mother knows my whole story. And no one would be as interested in my past as you will be. I'm sure of that. I have to tell someone these stories, that plague me every night in my dreams, and I've chosen you for that, because you're just the right person for it.'

'I am?'

'Yes, my son. I trust you and I know you won't tell anyone else about it. From today onwards we're going to the hammam together. I'll begin with my early childhood and tell you about a period from my life each time. Hmm? What do you say to that?'

He gave me a challenging look, but I turned away.'

'With the men it's not as loud as among the women. And after the hammam we'll go to the market together and eat some fish. You like fish, don't you?'

I found it difficult to resist this tempting offer, so I let myself be bribed by him. From that

point on I followed him to the men's hammam every Friday after he'd said his morning prayers. In the bathhouse we always found a corner where we were alone together. While we sat there and washed ourselves slowly, he told me the story of his life that he related in beautiful language and vivid images that to my ears sounded like a long fairytale that he thought up bit by bit. After the hammam we went to the nearby Friday market. We ate freshly fried fish, drank tea, played cards and chatted. At times he behaved like a child, sometimes he would speak to me as if I were a grown up. Thus it was that I began to see my father in a different light and for the first time had some idea of who he had once been and who he was now.

One day, after I had been going to the hammam with him for several months, we came across the miller in the baths. He was sitting on the hot floor, his short legs stretched out, having a massage. His fat belly was hanging down over his lap and his thick body hair looked like the fur of a wild animal. We laughed at him.

'Every time I see that bear in the hammam,' my father said, 'I think of his wife, regretting that I can't go into the women's hammam.'

This made me jealous. In my imagination our neighbour's wife in the women's hammam belonged to me. 'Oh Agha,' I retorted. 'She's nothing like as beautiful as she looks in her clothes.'

'Don't say that. Your mother keeps on telling me about her beautiful legs. Just between ourselves, I sometimes dream it's her sleeping beside me instead of your mother.'

'Is that the woman the devil sends to you on nights after which you have to wash yourself?'

'Yes, that's the one. But you mustn't tell your mother that. She'd kill me.'

Later on, when we were sitting in the fish shop, I wondered whether he was just saying that in order to provoke a reaction, to hear the things he wanted to hear from me. But my father was too clever not to have an idea of what was going on inside me.

Now he was trying to allay my jealousy. He poured me some tea and when the food arrived, he went on, 'That with the woman next door won't happen again. It's a long time since I've dreamt of her.'

'How can you be sure of that? After all, you said the devil is always and everywhere, that he seduces men in their sleep by making them dream of other women.'

'I have established that it's when I eat too many juicy fruits in the evening that I dream of another woman. As I'm sure you've noticed, for a long time now I've only drunk a cup of tea after dinner — and tea without sugar at that.'

Pulling a fishbone out of his teeth, he quietly observed me as my expression relaxed, then suddenly smiled and brought up something that he'd probably been thinking about for the whole year. It wasn't fair, he said, that he confessed all these things to me and kept my secrets to myself. So what had happened the last time I went to the women's bathhouse?

He was giving me the opportunity finally to get over it. 'I was with her,' I confessed.

My father raised his thick eyebrows then peered at me, eyes screwed up, and said, 'That's what I thought. Now I can be proud that we share a beloved.'

After I'd told him about my experience, in the course of which I described our naked neighbour's round, reddish nipples as like the tips of the pomegranates in our garden, he licked his lips and said, 'The fact is that just as you'd begun to make your senses receptive to the wonderful mystery of women, to seek out with your heart their splendid, round, juicy fruits, your life began to take on the hue of a fairytale. But basically that was just a little foretaste. Just for a moment the man appeared behind the mask of childhood. You felt like a fairytale prince in a paradise that was big enough to get lost in. That's why you were immediately thrown out.'

'What a pity,' I sighed.

'But in return you've gained something else. If the curtain in the bathhouse hadn't fallen down before your eyes, not only the secrets of a beautiful woman would have remained hidden from you but also your father's secrets. And who knows? Perhaps you'll meet her again in paradise.'

'How do you mean, in paradise?'

'In the women's hammam you let yourself be driven by your desire and sinned. Now you have to be a good boy for the rest of your life.' He gave a sly grin. 'You know the story of Adam and Eve, don't you. They spent their childhood in paradise. But then after they'd tasted of the fruit of the forbidden apple tree, they were sent out into the penal colony that is the world to be tested a second time. At least that's what it says in the Bible. The Creator certainly didn't intend mankind to enjoy the Garden of Eden that easily.'

'Why were apples forbidden and not pomegranates? After all, they're much sweeter and juicier. and they have vitamins too.'

Father laughed. 'The apple is the fruit of knowledge, but of knowledge that's not just a process of reasoning but also a sensual experience in which the inquisitive person satisfies himself but which unfortunately also entails the loss of innocence.'

He took off his hat. His thick silver hair, neatly combed back, gleamed in the sunshine like a snowy hill. His brow furrowed as he went on in measured tones, 'To lose a person you love,

your house and home and your childhood there — to lose all that is no less painful in our memory than the loss of paradise. You too will later remember these days as Adam remembered his lost paradise.’

‘Does that mean I’ve lost my innocence through my curiosity in the hammam?’ I asked.

Now he looked at me with his sly smile again. He put on his hat, gave me a wink, and bent his head slightly, his long, arched eyebrows looking like two far-off falcons, wings outspread.

‘Hm, yes, your experience in the women’s bathhouse,’ he said. ‘Just imagine the women’s hammam — God forgive me the sinful comparison — is paradise. The miller’s wife, let’s say blessed by Shaytan, is the apple tree, her breasts the two fruits hanging from it and... well, yes, the towel falling down is the snake that wants to tempt you to take a bite of the apple. You dash into the cubicle and join the beautiful woman, who’s as naked as the day she was born. And, far from the eyes of the world, you bite into that juicy apple.’

Father looked at me as if he were trying to read my thoughts. ‘What are you thinking just now?’ he asked.

‘Nothing. I’m just wondering whether one lousy apple’s worth getting forbidden and punishing the person for it. What kind of game is that? Why didn’t God think of something else?’

‘Hmm.’ My father raised his eyebrows. ‘The old gentleman up there probably forgot about the pomegranate. Perhaps that’s the biggest worm in the apple of creation.’

He gave me a wink and we both laughed.

2

A few years later — I was already becoming a young man — we still sometimes talked about his past. Father’s stories were often set in Herat, the town where we lived, and concerned his best friend; every time he mentioned him, it was as if he were saying a magic word: Talib Aziz. This name contained a special power deep within my father’s heart, and cast a spell that went with us through the years. Father had merely to speak the name of that man and we would all fall silent.

The name of Talib Aziz, who because of his learning was also called Mawlana Aziz, was often accompanied by another. That was the name of the reforming king, Amanullah, who during the time of my father’s youth, the 1920s, had dreamt of abolishing the influence of religion on the affairs of state and taking Afghanistan into the twentieth century.

Years later, when I was already settled in Germany, thinking about my father's childhood and youth would make me no less sad than thinking about my own past. Whether it was memories of experiences that seemed like paradise or of tragedies that took you through hell, for many years I'd tried to banish my life in Afghanistan, that I'd left at a young age in 1982, from my mind. Only when I saw my mother for the last time, in the autumn of 2008, did the past come to life again inside me.

[...]

[END OF SAMPLE PART I]

Book Two

Under the Spell of the Weeping Willows

Part One

1

Shortly after midday prayers on a mild spring day in 1919 a young peasant boy in Jikan happened to notice a loud gathering of men in the interior courtyard of the mosque in his village. The boy was called Sharif, he was on his way home from working with his father, a wretchedly poor peasant who slaved away for a landowner. He actually felt too dirty in his work clothes to go into a house of prayer and his hands were dark red from the juicy mulberries he'd picked.

He'd never seen the mosque from inside, the reason being that he had no time for it. Sharif was his father's only child and had to be at his father's beck and call from dawn till dusk. He dug over the ground, sowed, watered the fields, helped bring in the harvest and guarded the cows and sheep. Even though he did all that patiently and without complaint, his father not only burdened him daily with new tasks but would frequently reward his efforts with scoldings and beatings.

Other children went to the Koran school in the mosque every day and learnt to read the words of Allah. But even though he was nearly ten, Sharif still couldn't read. On the other hand he was admired by everyone in Jikan for his riding skills. When he raced off on a stallion, taking every obstacle, deftly juggling with a ball as he did so, the people prophesied that one day they would be acclaiming him as a master of buzkashi.

It was above all to Osman, a vegetable merchant to whom he regularly sold their produce, that he owed this ability. Osman was at least seventy years old and, although not rich, was addressed as Khan out of respect. When he was young Osman Khan had won many riding competitions in Herat and was now passing on his knowledge and skills to Sharif, who had hopes of one day being among the best players in the country.

Perhaps it was the influence of his quiet, gentle mother that had helped him retain the ability to dream of a better life and to seek happiness in everything he did. When he heard her softly singing, he felt as if a weight were lifted from his heart, and when he was in despair, having no idea what to do next, he would ask her advice. But for a few days now she had been ill in

bed and the previous evening his father had used him badly. He'd pulled him out of the saddle, taken away his whip and given him a good thrashing.

Sharif went into the mosque. In the terraced inner courtyard the talib, the young servant of the mosque, was standing beside the mullah, a small man with a gentle smile on his face. The mullah clapped his hands several times to get the men to quieten down and listen to the Koran student, whose name was Aziz. He cleared his throat and began to speak in a loud, clear voice with a Pashtun accent, 'In the name of the Almighty I beg permission to be allowed to say a few words to you, my fathers and brothers.'

There was now complete silence in the courtyard and they all held their breath as Talib Aziz began to speak.

'The encounters between our nation and the powerful British are unique in the history of our country. Twice they have come into our country from India. The first time, exactly eighty years ago, they brought a little present — a king of their choice! A war broke out that only one of them was to survive...'

'Dr Brydon!' Osman Khan interrupted with a loud shout.

He was in the row in front of Sharif. Sharif liked the man, whose long, thin face with its pointed black-and-silver beard gave him the look of an old goat; he not only taught him to ride but often shielded him from his father's fits of rage.

'Thank you, Osman Khan. I would hardly have remembered the name myself,' the talib said, to the amusement of the rest, and went on, 'but that was not enough for them. A good forty years ago they once more waged war on us and brought us a ruler by the name of Abdulrahman.'

'Death to the traitor and despot Abdulrahman,' shouted Osman Khan.

Laughing, the men turned to look at him. Sharif had no idea what it was all about. He asked a man standing beside him who Abdulrahman was.

'He founded the present state of Afghanistan, but he signed a disgraceful treaty with the English and gave away extensive areas of the country to British India,' the man whispered to him.

The talib, who had accepted the shout from his audience with a grin, raised his finger and went on, 'As you yourself know, Osman Khan, the old emir has been dead for fifteen years. Also his good-for-nothing son who succeeded him. But with his grandson Amanullah a new chapter in our history is beginning.'

The crowd applauded. Now Sharif found it was getting exciting. Recently he'd heard that the king had been murdered while he was asleep in his hunting lodge and his youngest son,

Amanullah, had ascended the throne in far-off Kabul. Sharif wriggled his way through to the front of the gathering until he was standing next to the arbab, the village headman. The talib emphasised his speech with sweeping gestures and leant so far forward as he spoke that it seemed as if he wanted to get as close as possible to each one of them.

‘If we look at our country from outside, it is firmly in the grip of British India. Its development has come to a standstill, which is why we are so alone and cut off from the rest of the world, why we suffer drought, poverty and epidemics. However hard our farmers work, they hardly earn enough to keep themselves alive, never mind their families.’

‘Shabash, Talib Aziz! Well spoken! Bravo!’ Osman Khan spoke out again, this time to the applause of the gathering.

Now the talib clenched his right hand and stood erect. ‘Dear fathers and brothers, the hour of the Afghan people has come. As we all know, our new king, Amanullah, has declared jihad on England and British India and proclaimed the complete independence of Afghanistan.’

The courtyard echoed with cheers and cries of Allahu Akbar. The talib’s piercing eyes surveyed the faces of those around. Sharif watched him, full of admiration. He looked taller and sturdier than he really was and now Sharif understood what it was all about. It was about jihad, a war that would free the country and give the farmers more than just bread and water. He started to applaud and the others joined in, clapping their hands.

‘Our homeland is mother to all of us,’ the talib went on and encouraged the men of Jikan to join the popular volunteer groups that were supporting the poorly equipped Afghan army. And Sharif, who was wondering whether it was his despair that had brought him to this place at precisely this time, suddenly felt that his own fate was bound up with the fate of his homeland, his ‘mother country’, of which so far he had known little more than that it gave them good soil to till. He was filled with both sadness and fear, joy and courage.

To the enthusiastic cries of the crowd, the arbab climbed up onto the podium carrying a large portrait of King Amanullah that he held up.

Sharif pushed his way right to the front and admired the royal portrait: a young man, wearing a crown and a coat festooned with medals, holding a sword. A loud hubbub and heated discussions broke out. Eventually it was agreed that they would go together to the great demonstration that was to be held the next Friday in nearby Herat. But who and how many of the enthusiastic bearded men would actually join in the jihad was a question no one was interested in any more. The village in the most westerly province of the country was very far away from Kabul.

The gathering dispersed, each of them going on his way. Only Sharif stayed behind in the

courtyard. He wanted to speak to the talib alone. He was keen to find out more about the things that were causing such an upheaval in the country, to learn where the English lived and whether he, Sharif, might be able to fight on horseback. So he went down a long corridor to the talib's room, that was behind the prayer room. Once there he hesitated. Perhaps he ought to go home so that he could take his mother to the doctor if she felt worse. But his father could see to that. He knocked softly.

Soon Sharif was sitting with Aziz, the Koran student, taking a cup of tea on the sunny roof terrace of the mosque. From up there life looked simple and good. Before them lay the village with its houses of clay, the narrow, dusty streets and the little bazar with the gentle curves of its domes; now and then cries rang out, but too far away to understand. Stretched out behind them were the extensive fruitful fields and orchards from which a pleasant breeze was blowing.

The talib was holding a tesbih, a string of prayer beads with ninety-nine light-blue, shining glass beads. The little beads were in constant movement. 'Now then, what is it that brings you here?' he asked. 'If I can find an answer, you shall have it.'

Sharif's eyes were shining, the words came pouring out. 'Is it possible that I too can set off for England with the mujaheddin, or am I too young for that? I can ride very well, you know, no one's anywhere near as good as me. And will I get a rifle? How long will it be before we've defeated them, and how long are we going to stay in their country?' He briefly paused for breath. 'Will we come back as heroes, and is war a fine thing, talib jan?'

The Koran student grinned when the boy didn't call him by his name but 'talib dear'. 'Oh, my dear,' he said, 'if wars were actually fine things, then the whole of mankind would be happy, but in that case they wouldn't need any more wars.'

In simple words he explained to Sharif where Afghanistan and India, Russia and England were in the world and why the English had come from far-off Europe. He told him about the rivalry between the world powers that in the nineteenth century had led to two occupations of Afghanistan and many wars.

Sharif had to concentrate very hard to follow even the general sense of what the talib was saying. He wanted to know why the English kept on coming into the country and what they wanted. 'Did they like our tomatoes and melons so much?'

The talib gave a delighted laugh. 'That would have been a good reason. Where else in the world can you find such heavenly fruit as here in our country?' He sipped his tea, observing as he did so the subtle reactions in the face of his young visitor. 'Have you ever been in the

mosque before, Sharif? I can't remember ever having seen you. If you came once or twice a week, you would soon be able to read and write.'

Sharif nodded. 'I'd like to. Very much. But first I must talk it over with my father.'

'Good, Sharif jan.' Talib Aziz nodded, putting his tea glass down. 'But now it's time for my prayer call.'

He stood up and went to the edge of the roof terrace. Then he raised his head, facing west, placed his thumbs behind his ear lobes and began, eyes closed, to call the faithful to their afternoon prayers. Sharif lay down on his back on the mattress and let the sound of Talib Aziz' voice wash over him, sweeping him into a prayer for his mother. The dark, warm sound seemed to him like a gigantic, powerful wave driving him upwards. Slowly his gaze drifted up to the sky, where it caught sight of a white cloud and, as if spellbound, remained fixed on it. It was shaped like an eagle that, wings outspread, was looking down at him from a distant world. Or was he himself a feather in the breast of the majestic creature, right next to its beating heart?

Still in the grip of this feeling, Sharif said goodbye to the talib and got home as evening was approaching. There his father was waiting for him in the doorway, his face red with fury, the whip in his hand. 'Your mother's ill, she has to go and see the doctor at once and you only get back home now?'

Sharif felt the lash of the whip and screamed at the stinging pain.

As Sharif left the village, night was beginning to fall. His mother was in the saddle behind him, clinging to him. If at all possible he wanted to get to Herat before it was completely dark. On the way he talked to her now and again with comforting, loving words. He made no mention of the fact that he was furious with his father and could still feel the pain from the lashes on his back. Instead he went on rapturously about his experiences in the mosque, about his intention to learn to read and write under the Koran student and about the new king.

'Amanullah, our new king, wants to build schools everywhere, Nane. In Jikan as well. I'll go there and eventually I'll become a doctor and heal the sick. They're even going to build a hospital in Jikan.'

'God grant that may be so, my son, may Allah use the hand of the new king for giving,' his mother replied in a weak voice. Then she began to sing softly to herself.

They came to a small river with weeping willows along the bank. The Jikanis were proud of the trees. They saw in them wise men bowing their heads to the ground in humility or women in mourning, their long hair hanging down to their laps. For the villagers this little river was a life-giving stream bringing water to their dry fields and quenching their animals' thirst. Sharif

often drove the sheep there, and whenever he was tired and sad, he would sit on a stone and rest under the green vault of a weeping willow.

Shortly before his horse reached the river, he reined it in and stopped. The narrow wooden bridge curved in a high arch over the water. He wondered whether he should risk riding over the old bridge with his mother, some of the planks were rotten, so it might be better to use the new bridge, though that was some distance away and it would take longer to get to the doctor's. Unsure what to do, he looked round and up at the sky. Bluish light was falling on the weeping willows, bathing their thin branches and slim, dark-green leaves in melancholy twilight.

He looked more closely and saw that there was a nightingale and an owl above him. How strange, they were perched on a branch beside each other, the first singing out loud, the other listening in silent thought. And the air was filled with a strong scent of lilies, that for the first time he found unpleasant. He asked his mother what she thought, checking whether she was firmly in the saddle and felt secure enough.

'The Almighty will lead us,' she replied, going on quietly to herself, 'How beautiful the weeping willows are, my son. May their magic help you to overcome all rivers and bridges and reach the castle of your dreams.'

'Oh, Nane,' Sharif said, tenderly patting her knee with the flat of his hand then giving the horse a light slap on its rump. It stepped onto the bridge, that started to sway under its weight, and proceeded to climb it. His mother was murmuring verses from the Koran. Sharif let the reins slacken. After a few steps the horse shied and stopped. He stroked its neck. It would be better, he thought, if he were to dismount, then he could lead his mother and the horse over the bridge. However, as he jumped down, the horse reared and his mother fell, plunging into the river, before Sharif could hold her. He cried out, unable to believe what was happening, ran quickly from the bridge across the stony riverbank into the water and bent over the unconscious figure.

'Nane, Nane,' he wailed, in tears.

The water was flowing over parts of her body as if nothing had happened. Her head was between two stones and he could see blood from her temple mingling with the clear water that bore it off on its long journey. Grasping his mother under the arms, Sharif dragged her to the bank. He kept on begging, pleading with her to open her eyes but she gave no sign of life. Sharif was shivering all over, running to and fro, he could hardly breathe, couldn't weep, couldn't think. All he could do was cry out, hitting himself in the face, but his cries grew quieter and shorter. He felt as if God had declared the world was ended and the thought of

returning home with his dead mother seemed to him like plunging into the deepest abyss of hell. He put his hands over his head, stared at the lifeless figure of his mother, knelt down, sobbed and fell unconscious.

2

It was midnight when Sharif came round and he was in a strange room. He was lying on a mattress. Beside him the talib was sitting with a damp cloth in his hand. There was a paraffin lamp on a table.

‘Where am I?’

‘You’re in my room,’ the Koran student said.

‘My mother, my poor mother...’

‘Don’t torment yourself, Sharif, your mother’s condition is better.’

Sharif sat up. ‘She’s alive?’

‘Yes. Calm down. She was unconscious. As far as I know, she’s back home now and sleeping.’ For a while neither spoke. Then the talib handed him a glass and said, ‘Now have a drink of water.’

The boy drank the water and breathed a sigh of relief.

‘I go for a walk every evening after prayers,’ Talib Aziz told him. ‘You were fortunate that I found you yesterday. Osman Khan was just coming home from town and we brought you back here together. But now you need to have something to eat to get your strength back.’

The talib brought a plate of food — a hard-boiled egg, goat’s cheese, some vegetables — and a cup of tea. Apart from an early breakfast and a few mulberries Sharif had eaten nothing all day.

‘Osman Khan has told me a lot,’ the talib said. ‘I mean about you and your father. As I hear, he even whips you. I’m sorry about that, Sharif. Well, I suppose when people want to avoid the whip themselves, they lash others.’

After a short pause for thought, he went on, ‘I don’t know your father well. He never comes here to the mosque, though I’m sure he says his prayers at home. But Osman Khan seems to know him well. And he likes you very much. He told me he’s been teaching you to ride. He says you’re the boldest and wildest buzkashi horseman in the whole area and one day you’ll win the game and lay the dead goat at the feet of the king.’

Sharif looked at him calmly with his nut-brown eyes, but said nothing.

‘Well anyway, we’ve decided you should stay here with me until you feel better. From now I’m here to look after you and the mullah’s in agreement as well. As you can see, I’ve only got a small room, but it’s enough for the two of us. So be my guest. If you like, you can come to the Koran school every day. Once you’ve learnt to read and write, you’ll see what treasures await you here.’

Talib Aziz stood up and took a fat tome from the bookshelves. ‘These are the poems of Hafiz,’ he said. ‘Have you ever heard the name of Hafiz?’

Sharif shook his head. Aziz sat down on a chair between the shelves and the table on which the paraffin lamp was burning.

‘He lived in the fourteenth century in the Persian city of Shiraz and, just imagine, by the time he was eight he knew the whole of the Koran off by heart. But since his father died when he was young, he had to work for a baker to earn the money to keep his family.’

Talib Aziz opened the book as if he were going to read a poem from it, but then he closed it again, smiled and said in an amused tone, ‘There’s a story I must tell you about Hafiz when he was a young man: One day a man came to the baker’s where he worked. He was a cloth merchant and he had seven beautiful lengths of the finest silk with him, each in a different colour. Hafiz wanted absolutely to have one of the pieces, but the man said all seven were a present for his beloved. Hafiz laughed and said, “I’ll bake you a loaf with seven different herbs that you can give your beloved instead of the seventh piece of silk. And I’ll write a poem for her — in your name of course — that will delight her.” The man was astonished and said, “You write poems? What are you going to write in your poem about the woman who has conquered my heart: Your hands are as beautiful as...” But Hafiz broke in, “Just wait and see, Uncle. Say yes or no.”

‘ “I say yes. And I’ll sit outside your shop and wait until you’ve finished the poem and the herb bread.”

‘The cloth merchant waited until Hafiz came out to him with a freshly baked loaf and a poem. The love poem was so beautiful and the bread smelt so good that the man was beside himself with joy and gave Hafiz one of the lengths of silk. From then on he came to the shop every day asking for a poem for his beloved.’

Sharif liked the story and wanted to know what the love poem was about.

‘The poem was about the silk and the bread. The young poet had written that the seventh piece of silk was very long and wide and was laid out for her in her lover’s house — covered with the most exquisite food for his beloved.’

‘And the loaf of bread was one of those delicacies?’ Sharif said.

‘Correct! It’s said that the cloth merchant encouraged Hafiz very strongly to become a poet.’

The talib opened the book once more, leafed slowly through it and stopped at a page. But he didn’t immediately start reading aloud; instead he held the book in his hand and went on, ‘In all these poems he sings the praises of love, nature, the beauty of his beloved and good wine.’ Looking at the page where the book was open, he smiled, shook his head in wonderment and said, more to himself, ‘Now why does he praise wine so often? I’ve never really worked that out. Oh well, everyone interprets his verses differently.’ He cleared his throat, raised his eyebrows and started to read:

In dawn’s clear light the nightingale

Spoke to the new-blown rose:

‘Be humble, bow your head,

For many a fair flower this garden knows

That bloomed like you and now is gone.

‘I grieve not that I will know death’s throes,’

The rose said with a laugh,

‘But a lover true should not disturb

With bitter words his love’s repose.

If you would drink the dark-red wine

That from life’s goblet flows,

Many a tear will wet your cheeks

Before your eyes shall close,’

How often had Sharif seen a nightingale near a rose but hardly paid any attention to the picture they made. That the nightingale might be in love with the flower had never occurred to him and the lovely, amusing way the poet had made them court each other pleased him very much.

Talib Aziz closed the book and stood up. He kissed it before he put it back on the shelf. But he must have seen in Sharif’s eyes the silent wish to hear more, for he took another off the shelf and read out the title: *From the Ghazals of Rumi*. Holding the book, he went over to the windowledge and came back with a glass of water. He seemed to be tired. ‘He’s probably had hardly any sleep because of me,’ Sharif thought with a sense of profound gratitude. Talib Aziz stood in the middle of the room, leafed through the divan and held the page, slanting, in the

light of the paraffin lamp. Then he cleared his throat and began to recite in passionate tones, powerfully, with feeling.

Listen to the reed-flute's song of woe,
Bewailing separation from its home:
'Since from my reed-bed I was forced to part,
Men and women all bewail my aching heart.
I seek a breast by yearning's anguish torn
To share the sorrow of a soul forlorn.'

'Have you seen a nay before?' Talib Aziz asked after a short pause.

Sharif nodded. 'I've seen one and heard one. Some shepherds play a flute like that.'

'True. And what does it sound like?'

'It sounds plaintive and full of longing. Once I was even there when a shepherd cut one.

From

the tall reeds, down by the water.'

'There, you see,' said Talib Aziz. 'The reed bending in the wind and singing the eternal, mournful song of the world's dreams. But now imagine these reeds as the home and origin of a flute. Just think of the nay you're blowing as the child of a reed plant that has been cut out and worked by human hand. And since then it has been lamenting and longing to be back with its roots. The poet Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Balkhi, also called Rumi, compares a person's soul wandering round the world, searching for happiness and love to the yearning sound of the nay drawing him on.'

Talib Aziz looked at the window. Dawn was already breaking and from the side Sharif could see the exhaustion on the dark face of the Koran student. But he continued to talk, untiring. He told Sharif that musicians accompanied the nay with the rehab, an Afghan stringed instrument, and the Indian tabla, a pair of drums. Then he went to the bookshelf and showed the boy the book by the eleventh-century mystic, Abdullah Ansari from Herat. 'Have you ever been to his grave?' he asked.

'No,' Sharif replied.

'We ought to go and see it as soon as you're better. The tomb, a mausoleum from the fifteenth century, is an important place of pilgrimage. It's surrounded by mountains, in Gazargah.'

'Isn't that somewhere near Jikan?'

‘More or less. It’s to the north-east of Herat and higher up. Many famous men are buried there beside Ansari. I tell you, Sharif jan, there are so many interesting places in that ancient city. Have you been on the Khwaja Ghaltan?’

‘No.’ The boy was glad the talib had sat down again, it meant he felt less overawed by him.

‘To the north of Herat there’s a low mountain, well, a hill really, called Khwaja Ghaltan. Its name comes from a saint who’s buried there. If there’s a special wish you want fulfilled, a particular question to which you’re looking for an answer or if you’ve a difficult decision to make, then you go to Khwaja Ghaltan for advice. You lie down at the top of the hill with your head on a flat stone and speak your question silently to your heart. Then you cover your face with your hands, close your eyes and rock gently. If the hill makes you start to roll with its secret powers, that means the pir, the holy old man, is going to give you an answer. If you roll straight down to the bottom, then you can be sure that your question or wish will be answered in a positive sense. If the pir is going to reply in the negative or warn you against a particular course of action, he makes you roll down across the slope.

‘And what does it mean if the mountain doesn’t make me roll down at all?’ Sharif asked.

‘Good question,’ Talib Aziz said, pointing his finger at Sharif. ‘That means the sage doesn’t want to give you any advice.’

‘Oh dear, what a pity!’ Sharif had visualised the mountain so clearly that he actually took this third possibility as a real answer to his secret questions.

‘There is another possible way of finding out something for yourself,’ Talib Aziz added. ‘For that we have to go back to the Divan of Hafiz.’

Exhausted, the talib rubbed his eyes and looked out of the window again. It was beginning to get light outside; not light enough yet to call the faithful to prayer, but late enough to put an end to the evasions and tell the boy the truth, now that he’d forged a link that would allow him to say what had to be said.

Sharif watched the Koran student as he went back to the shelf, took out a book and leafed through it, lost in thought. All at once the whole business seemed strange to the boy. Why was the talib telling him all these things and why had he said he should stay with him from now on? He thought of his mother again, of the accident the previous evening, and his heart started to pound furiously. He looked for the talib’s eyes, that so far had filled him with faith and joy. But now they gleamed like two black cat’s eyes in the moonlight and frightened him.

‘Talib Aziz,’ Sharif called out. ‘Could I find an answer to my question in Hafiz?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

The talib gave him the book and sat down beside him. Sharif closed his eyes and opened the

book in the middle. His hands were trembling. Talib Aziz took it from him, turned over one page and read out loud:

My body's dust is the veil
Shrouding my soul's face;
Oh joyful the moment when
That shroud will be whisked away.

The boy understood immediately and let out a cry of unrestrained anguish. The talib put the book down, and took him in his arms, seeking in vain for words that would comfort him. 'Your mother was fortunate. It's every Muslim's wish to die in the night before Friday dawns so that their coffin will be laid on the bier the next day in the great Friday mosque before a thousand of the faithful, who will include them in their Friday prayer. Then we'll bury her in the afternoon, at the feet of the holy saint Ansari. What good fortune!'

Sharif couldn't weep, he just howled, howled like a young lion racked with pain, full of sorrow and lament. Eventually, when his voice had almost gone, the tears finally came. The mullah of the mosque came running, old Osman Khan as well. Both tried to calm him down.

Sharif felt as if God had thrown him into one of His hells, the hottest, loneliest, darkest. And he felt as if it were not only his body burning there but his soul as well. He could feel the flames, again and again, until his blood and his tears had dried up, until his face turned pale and he could no longer cry nor feel nor breathe. Drained of all his vital strength, he fell into a long, deep sleep.

His mother was buried that same day outside the mausoleum of the poet Ansari. Sharif himself was in bed with a high temperature and Talib Aziz took care of him. After that there were two days' of mourning for her in the village mosque in Jikan. Emotionally Sharif lacked the strength to join the people going to the prayer room to pray for his mother. He lay on the mattress in Talb Aziz' room and mourned for her alone. He wept and wept until he fell unconscious or asleep. And every time he woke, he started sobbing and crying again.

On the third day, when the period of mourning was over, Sharif woke early from troubled dreams. He was completely exhausted and still difficult to communicate with. Talib Aziz made breakfast and sat down with him.

'It's a beautiful spring morning outside, Sharif djan. I feel like going for a ride to the Ansari Museum and I'd be happy for you to join me. And afterwards I might ride on to the Sabzak

Pass. Do you know where that is?’

Sharif didn’t say a word.

‘The Sabzak Pass is on the road between Herat and Baghdis. I’m sure you’ve heard of that region to the north-east of Herat. Do you know what it’s famous for?’

Sharif remained silent, so the talib went on, ‘For its beautiful mountains and valleys that are a real paradise; for its flowers and the Murghab River that flows through it. And for what else? Has anything occurred to you that I’ve perhaps forgotten?’

‘Pistachios,’ Sharif said quietly.

‘There, you see! And where exactly do these pistachio trees grow? Do you know that?’

‘On hills.’

‘Correct,’ said Talib Aziz. ‘They grow in a mountainous area between Baghdis Region and Turkmenistan. In that case I’m quite sure you know the Sabzak mountain pass.’

Sharif looked at him with his small, reddened eyes and murmured, ‘Sabzak is a valley of death.’

‘Yes.’ Talib Aziz nodded. ‘Many people have lost their lives in that valley. Two years ago my whole family did. My parents, my elder brother and my little sister.’

Sharif was shocked at this. He sat up and said, ‘I’m sorry about that, Talib Aziz. I didn’t know. How did it happen?’

‘In a similar way to your accident, brother. Our carriage fell down into the valley. I was the only one to survive. But let’s eat our breakfast first, then I’ll tell you about it. Your mother is lying, happy, at the feet of the saint Ansari, as does my family as well. Our mothers died in the same way, Sharif, and they lie close to one another. I specifically asked the mullah for that. Fate has not only brought our mothers together but us two as well. And as soon as we’re finished, we’ll ride off there together on my horse.’

Sharif found comfort in these words, they took away his fear and the feeling of being alone and lost. They ate their breakfast together on the mosque terrace. Then they left the village and rode to Gazargah.

The Ansari Museum was on the edge of the mountains and consisted of two courtyards through which a path led to the mausoleum. Sharif’s mother was buried in a spot where both named and unnamed dead were at rest round the grave of the Pir-e Herat, the Old Man of Herat — kings and the sons of kings in large, magnificent tombs, poor people in small, forgotten ones. Their heads were aligned to the north, their faces to the west, to the Kaaba. The walls and prayer alcoves of the interior courtyard were decorated with miniatures and

fine tiles; the saint's grave was on the eastern side, enclosed by iron railings. A green flag was flying at the northern, head end. Pilgrims were standing round the large tomb, as they had for centuries: healthy and sick, blind and crippled, rich and poor. They all laid their foreheads on the iron railings and prayed that the poet would heal them and bring them good fortune.

Beggars and orphan children were sitting on the ground here and there, asking for alms.

Sharif, who had never been there before, awoke from his stupor at the sight of his mother's grave, realising for the first time that the bad dream was real. But after the giddiness that overcame him at first and the many tears he shed, he found some comfort and relief: his mother was at rest in an idyllic place, protected by a saint and poet, and arm in arm beside the mother of a man he'd taken to his heart. Now he felt the need to learn more about the similar loss that man had suffered two years previously and to share in his mourning as well.

It was a long way from Gazargah to the Sabzak Pass and the route led eastwards along the mountains. They galloped across vast steppes, over mountain passes and along valleys covered in wild flowers. They saw shepherds, nomads' tents, all kinds of livestock and songbirds. Sharif had never been in this area before, had never seen such a tremendous landscape or breathed such invigorating air. The farther they went, the more it seemed that a weight had been lifted from his heart .

Finally they rode along a twisting mountain track that in some places wound its way higher and higher up the slopes above the valley. Before the sun set, they came to a high place from which a dizzyingly steep valley, the broad, green valley of death, opened up on their right. There they dismounted from the horse they were sharing. As far as they could see, they were surrounded by mountains. Directly below their feet was a magnificent terraced slope that led down to the equally magnificent valley of death. Among the straggling greenery and poppies at the bottom were the remains of human and animal life: wrecked vehicles, bones and clothes. Sharif's eyes shied away from the murderous depths and settled on a dead tree trunk that had grown out horizontally from the slope. He had to sit down and close his eyes. Talib Aziz tethered his horse to a rock and gave it something to eat. Then he squatted down beside Sharif and, after he had said a prayer, started to tell him about what had happened.

'The nomads, the tents, the children — this is where my heart belongs. Just to see them makes me feel safe. I grew up with the children of farmers and shepherds, but also with the children of nomads. We weren't well-off. We lived in Ghasni, in the very east of the country, my father was mullah in a mosque. That's why I knew most of the Koran off by heart by the time I was ten. In our region there are tribal mullahs, all of whom I know. I got some

education from them as well. And anyway, I loved books even when I was a child. — Are you listening or do you need to be left in peace?’

Sharif opened his eyes, ‘I’m listening. Go on please.’

Now Talib Aziz told him about his brother. When he was very young his cousin had been engaged to him; they were to be married later. But a few years ago her family had moved to Badghis. Two years previously Aziz’ family had decided to visit her family to make the arrangements for the wedding together — a journey that ended in their death. ‘It took us ten or twelve days to get to Herat in the carriage,’ Talib Aziz said. ‘We spent the nights in caravanserais.’

‘Who was driving the carriage?’

‘My father. My brother was on the seat beside him, my mother, my little sister and me behind them. We were nearly there and then it happened, at precisely this place.’

Sharif closed his eyes again.

‘Everything happened in the fraction of a second... The carriage skidded and tilted over to the right... the horse shied and made an odd sound... the carriage went over, taking us all with it... I heard cries of ‘Allah!’... While we were falling I tried to get hold of my sister, to put my arms round her, but I was thrown out of the carriage... I landed on that funny tree there.’

Sharif squinted at the dead tree on the slope.

‘... then I lost consciousness.’ Talib Aziz took Sharif’s hand and stood up before he could start to sob. ‘Come on, let’s watch the sun go down.’

They climbed a bit higher and sat down on a top facing west. There, on the horizon, the sun seemed to be about to sink into a sea of blood. Sharif heard the continuation of Talib Aziz’ tragic story. The nomads had found him, unconscious, and taken him with them. They had also taken the bodies of his family to Herat and buried them in the grounds of the Mausoleum. Aziz had spent several days with the nomads in Gazargah and then slowly discovered the city. The first place that had fascinated him in Herat and given him refuge and peace of mind was the Masjid Jami.

‘It’s an incredibly large Friday mosque,’ Talib Aziz told him. ‘I slept there for many nights and enjoyed it: in the prayer halls, in the courtyard, in the park... wherever I wanted. Then once I led the prayers in the park for a little group that had missed evening prayers and I received much praise for it. That was how I got to know the mullah of Jikan. The rest you can work out for yourself.’

They sat there for a while longer. Finally Talib Aziz stood up: ‘We have to get on Sharif jan,

so that we're out of this labyrinth of mountains by evening prayers.'

The went to the horse, mounted and set off back to Herat. But they continued their conversation. Sharif wanted to know why Talib Aziz hadn't gone back to where he came from.

'It's important for me to be close to my parents and my sister and brother so that I can visit their graves regularly,' he replied.

But there was a further reason. Both when he was awake and when he was asleep, he told Sharif, from time to time he heard a flute that was calling to him from far away. That had been happening for several years now — ever since he'd learnt about the life and works of the poet Rumi. Since then it had been his wish to stay somewhere where he would be close to him.

'Except that since I've been here in Herat,' Talib Aziz said with a laugh, 'when I hear a far-off flute it's not so often the Turkish city of Konya that comes to mind any more.'

'Which place does come to mind then?' Sharif asked.

'If only I knew,' the talib replied, paused and looked at the horizon where the sun had set, leaving above it a blood-red, ominous-looking sky. Sharif fixed his eyes on Talib Aziz' face; in the red glow it looked to him like a luminous flame. The expression on his face and in his eyes told him that he was speaking more to himself: 'I'm afraid, however, that it's the call of a home that could be anywhere and everywhere because in the end it doesn't exist for me. All I know is that it's a call from somewhere far-off and unknown that is luring me to eerie places with a challenge to find a home there.'

Sharif's heart sank. Don't go off sometime or other,' he murmured, putting his arms round Talib Aziz and looking towards the horizon with him.

3

When we went to the men's hammam together my father didn't say very much about the time he spent in the mosque. 'I don't find it easy to talk about that,' he would say, 'even though it was very exciting for me. I had to follow strict rules and my everyday life followed a regular routine.'

It seemed to me that his memories of it — hard, but also good, liberating ones — were too sacred for my father and I let him keep his secrets. His own father, a simple, coarse peasant, had banished him and didn't want to have him back or even to see him again. Talib Aziz had taken him in and treated him with the love and care of a real brother. He had done everything

he could to make his little room in the mosque a home for my father .

He had shared his bread with him and his belongings as well. He had stood by him through difficult times, taught him to read and write, read out instructive poems and beautiful stories, familiarised him with ancient wisdom. Every Friday he had taken him to prayers in the city and on long walks until late in the night.

Thus the grief my father bore in his heart had slowly turned into strength and love, and his deep feelings of guilt into acceptance.

Three years after he'd gone to live with Talib Aziz, Sharif knew large parts of the Koran off by heart. He collected alms for the mosque and called the faithful to prayer. Later he even taught the children in the Koran school. He had turned into a devout boy, a second talib they all admired. However — he didn't want to have anything to do with riding any more, and certainly not with any games of buzkashi. All his dreams of that had vanished. The caravan of time continued on its way, until seven years after his mother's death — by then Sharif was around sixteen — another page was turned in the book of his life.

One spring afternoon he was going, as usual, from door to door collecting alms for his mosque. The only place he avoided was the old alley where his father was still living — not because he hated him, he knew what a difficult time his father had. As he went past Osman Khan's house he saw the old fruit and vegetable merchant sitting on his little terrace. He was drawing on his hubble-bubble with relish and drinking tea.

'Wouldn't you like to take a cup of tea with me, Sharif?' he asked.

'Why not? With pleasure.'

'Well sit down, then.' The old man was pleased. 'Look, the tea cups are quite new. Do you like them?'

Sharif sat down opposite him and poured hot, fragrant tea into the blue cups decorated with white patterns.

'Yes, they really are particularly beautiful.'

After they'd exchanged a few remarks, Osman Khan looked at the boy and started to talk: 'Well, my lad, when I look at you now, I can believe in miracles. How can it be possible for such a brave, charming boy to be the son of such a pig-headed idiot? Has he said a single word to you in the last seven years?'

Sharif laughed. 'No, Uncle Osman, he hasn't. I hardly ever see him and when I do see him, he behaves as if he didn't know me. Our mullah and Talib Aziz have often asked me whether I'd like to go and see him. I said no, because I know that it would be too difficult for both of

us.'

'Quite right too,' said Osman Khan, taking a sip of tea and shaking his head in bewilderment. 'I couldn't believe how quickly he married again. They say he's even had another child.'

'I've heard that too and I'm very glad about it. He's still my father and I hope that one day I'll be able to help him.'

'Yes, but then you'll have to make something of your own life,' Osman Khan said. 'Years ago we all thought that the next master of buzkashi would come from Jikan. I don't want to take the devil's part, but how long are you going to stay in the mosque? Don't you want to find a proper job, to support yourself and, some time or other... start a family...?'

Shaking with a coughing fit, Osman Khan put down his hubble-bubble.

Sharif laughed. 'I've not really thought about that yet.'

'Look, Sharif.' Osman Khan cleared his throat then went on calmly, 'My whole life long I've been taking fruit and vegetables to the town and selling them. Everything a village like Jikan has to offer. Everyone in Jikan knows I'll buy their produce. You know that. I've got lots of customers in Herat. Many people in the bazaar know me and trust me. Now...'

Again he was taken with a violent fit of coughing. Sharif gave him his tea and waited until he was able to talk again.

'Now I'm old. I can't tell you how old, Allah alone knows exactly how many years it is, but I feel weak. I'm often ill and spend the whole day slaving away, I keep coughing but I can't give up my hubble-bubble. I simply can't manage any more. My little store over there's full of vegetables slowly rotting away.' He took up the hose of his pipe again. Sharif had a good idea what he was going to say. During the first weeks after his mother died Osman had often asked him to come and live with him. But then the old man had realised that he was happy and well looked after in the mosque and hadn't brought it up again. This time, however, Osman Khan sounded more serious than before.

'You shouldn't smoke so much, Uncle Osman,' Sharif said.

Ignoring this, the old man spat out and went on: 'I have no wife and no son. I built this little house here years ago — with clay and brick, as it appears, but actually with blood, sweat and tears...' He cleared his throat and sighed; he seemed to be deeply moved. 'If you would like to, my son, you can come and live with me. I've often told you that before. If you like you can have the front room, the one facing south. By now you've learnt the Koran off by heart, you've got that for life now. And there's still a buzkashi master somewhere deep inside you. In the north, where the game comes from, hardly any riders are taken seriously before they're

forty. So you still have plenty of time and I hope that one day you'll take up your old dream again. But before that I'd like to wave my magic wand and bring out something else that's there inside you.'

He looked at Sharif with an expression of profound faith and goodwill.

'Once I wanted to train you to be a leading buzkashi rider, but now I want to make you the best fruit and vegetable merchant in the village — or even better, in the whole bazaar. In two years' time people will be fighting over your grapes and potatoes. So what do you say to that? No, wait a minute, you don't have to say anything now. Please take your time and think it over. And discuss it with your friend Talib Aziz, I know he only wants what is best for you.'

When Sharif got home he decided to forget his conversation with Osman. He wasn't going to tell his friend about it.

A few days later, it was in the afternoon after Friday prayers, Sharif and Talib Aziz were sitting by the edge of a market square in Herat drinking tea at a samovarchi's. As every Friday there was a loud and cheerful crowd in the bazar. People were enjoying themselves, eating, drinking and playing. In front of them some men and children were standing in a circle watching a wrestling match between two young men. From time to time they clapped, cheering one or other of the wrestlers.

The sun was burning down. Sharif and Talib Aziz, were sitting on a carpet and leaning against a tree, glad of the shade and the gentle breeze that occasionally caressed their cheeks as they watched the motley crowd in the square.

At some point Talib Aziz took out his tesbih, started to pray with it, then unexpectedly turned to Sharif. 'You went to see old Osman a few days ago, what did he have to say?'

With a brief laugh, Sharif immediately told him what the fruit and vegetable merchant had proposed.

'But that would be the best for you,' Talib Aziz said with a wink, giving him a challenging look.

Sharif was very surprised to hear this from his teacher, whom he only knew as a devout servant of God.

'All those years ago your destiny sent you to the mosque, and therefore to us, because you couldn't cope in the world outside and not because you felt called to lead a spiritual life. When you were a child you had certain wishes and dreams, my brother. You've lost sight of them. That was inevitable, but their roots are still there inside you. Now that your soul is healed and your mind matured, isn't it time you sought to make your way in the world

outside?’

These words, however gently they were spoken, sounded harsh and strange to Sharif. He remained silent. Talib Aziz must have seen the sombre look on Sharif’s face. He asked the samovarchi to bring two more glasses of tea, then turned his attention to the wrestlers: ‘I’m betting on the one with the black belt.’

Sharif looked at the square, but couldn’t see the wrestlers very well through the crowd watching them. Talib Aziz put the new glass of tea down in front of him and went on in a cheerful tone: ‘We are all naturally happy to have you in the mosque and that you feel you’d like to stay. In seven years you’ve made as much progress as others do in seventeen. But the one thing we are concerned about is your future. To be honest, I’d already spoken to Osman Khan about that. Have you never, over the last few years, thought about returning to the world outside the mosque?’

‘Not really,’ Sharif replied. ‘I’ve always been so at home with life in the mosque that I’ve never felt like thinking of anything else.’

Talib Aziz laughed and placed his hand on Sharif’s shoulder. ‘That’s very understandable, of course. But I took you to the mosque for you to develop into a man who can cope with life, not to become a mullah, my friend.’

‘Yes, that may well be the case, but...’ Sharif took the liberty of asking his teacher a question of his own: ‘How do you see your own future?’

Talib Aziz gave him a smile, looked past the people standing round the wrestlers and gazed into the distance. The street opposite, usually full of people, horse-drawn carts and mules, was fairly empty, the shutters closed. A gadi, a splendid carriage pulled by magnificent horses and decorated with good-luck charms and bells, drove past.

Talib Aziz took his hand off Sharif’s shoulder and replied, ‘We both went to the mosque and became Koran students for similar reasons, Sharif. Two years apart, of course. But at that point I had had some education, you none at all. On the other hand you already knew what you wanted your future to be when you were young, while I still have to find the vision that is within me. Perhaps I have none at all, who knows?’

He stared reflectively at the old carpet they were sitting on and, after a short silence, went on as if he were talking to himself: ‘If you don’t meet yourself in your innermost dreams, then you have to look outside them. But whether you can meet yourself out there is an open question. Perhaps you have to go somewhere far away, out into the desert, on travels, get to know different people, different places, perhaps you have to have a variety of experiences, make a few mistakes in order to mature and find out who you really are.’

Sharif now recalled that recently the talib had often been lost in thought. He smiled as he looked at him and asked whether it could be that he'd heard a flute in his sleep again.

For a while Talib Aziz said nothing, just stared into space, his eyes only half open but with a broad smile on his face. Sharif knew the expression, the talib always looked like that when he was about to tell him something important. Eventually he looked up and answered Sharif's original question with one of his own: 'What do you know about Mullah Moshki Alam?'

Sharif laughed and, as if this were an examination question, told the talib everything he knew about the famous man who, in 1879, had declared jihad on the British. 'Until the last day of his life he fought against tyranny and for justice, which was why King Abdulrahman hated him so much. And his son after him.'

'Then you know quite a lot about him,' the talib said.

'More at least than I know about you.'

Talib Aziz laughed. 'That could well be true. But there are a lot of people who think they already know everything about me when they know something about that man who's been dead for a long time.'

'How's that? What have you to do with Moshki Alam?'

Talib Aziz laughed. 'I'm his grandson. That's why I keep myself to myself.'

Sharif stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. 'You?'

'Yes, me. He was my mother's father.'

Talib Aziz told him more about his ancestors, who since 1747 had played an important role in the politics of the region at the time when the foundations of an independent country were being laid. Then he talked about tribal conditions among the Pashtuns and how difficult it was to belong to such a community and at the same time to be able to think and act independently of it.

'I'm in contact with some influential men and religious scholars,' he said. 'If they ask me to join a jihad, I can hardly say no.'

Sharif stared at the pattern on the carpet: a caravan with brown camels in a wide desert landscape. He thought he could hear his own heart beating.

'I'll soon be going away from here, Sharif,' Talib Aziz said. The he remained silent.

Sharif was in a dilemma. On the one hand he was overcome with pride to have as his teacher and friend a man to whom everyone in the country would show respect as soon as they heard the name of his grandfather. On the other hand, after the last thing Talib Aziz said he felt the same as he had when his mother had died and he refused to accept it. Most of all he would have preferred to remain silent, but his disappointment made itself heard in a puzzled question:

‘And which jihad would that be?’

Through a gap left by the crowd of onlookers in front of them Talib Aziz’ gaze returned to the two wrestlers who, one more exhausted than the other, were still tugging at each other. He had certainly heard the question but didn’t answer it.

But Sharif stuck to his guns. ‘The British have recognised the independence of our country, our people are hoping and expecting things to get better in our country, and we have a king half the world is proud of...’

Talib Aziz broke in: ‘The jihad is against that king, my brother. ‘For good or for ill.’

Clapping and cheering broke out among the onlookers as the boy with the black belt lifted his rival up over his head and flung him down onto the ground. Sharif suddenly felt dizzy, the square in front of him turned into a dark abyss. He stared into the gaping maw but couldn’t see anything, anything at all.

‘It’s a mistake,’ he heard himself say, a statement that generations down to the present were to repeat, sick at heart. And he was bold enough to add, ‘Your grandfather would never have done that. Forgive me for saying this: Allah protect you, but may Allah see to it that you’re not successful.’

[END OF SAMPLE]