



memoir

# Abba at War — IV

## Hiroshima Mon Amour

by Kaiser Haq

**A**BBA'S unit was billeted virtually within walking range of Hiroshima. The devastated city exerted a strange magnetism and he visited it whenever he could, whether on official business or during off-duty hours. It brought home to him each time the full horror of modern war, induced the tragic and elegiac emotions, made him meditative. Driving through the city one could see only a few walls still standing to their full height. All else was rubble and cinder amidst which people grubbed for relics of loved ones. Sombre, resentful, they pointedly ignored any questions, their eyes flashed angry signals as they lit upon the Union Jack on the uniform.

Abba was in the habit of stopping at an American canteen just outside Hiroshima. One day he noticed a very attractive Japanese girl working there as a salesgirl. Irresistibly drawn, he engaged her attention by asking the prices of various things and, surprised to find her speaking quite good English, asked her where she had learned it.

'Hiroshima was my home,' she said. 'I was visiting relatives far away when the bomb fell. My relatives didn't allow me to return when news of the wholesale devastation reached them. And anyway, what would I come back to? Home and family had vanished without trace. There was nowhere I could stay in Hiroshima. To spare me the shock of facing this my relatives insisted I remain with them.'

The girl's voice choked, her eyes misted over. She paused a while, sighed painfully, then continued.

'A single bomb had brought Japan to her knees, deprived us of our freedom, destroyed my world. The war over, one day I came back alone to Hiroshima. But what was it I saw, city or cemetery? I was overcome with rage and terror at what had happened. I shook uncontrollably in every limb. My sorrow and impotent rage burst forth in a wild scream. Unnoticed by me, an American had been watching me for some time. Perhaps he felt sorry for me. He came up slowly and took my arm. Angriely I shook free. He said many consoling things, gave me shelter. It was he who taught me English and got me this job.'

Abba was moved and said how he felt. The girl warmed to the spontaneous sympathy. They chatted away like old friends.

Abba asked for a sheet of paper and began writing.

Your words have aroused deep romantic longings. I'll remember you all my life. I long to love you with all my heart. Were it possible, I'd take you to my homeland; but you have accepted someone's protection, and I am not at liberty to take you with me. I'll drop in to see you every time I go this way. I long to say goodbye with a parting kiss on your rosy cheek. But I won't do so; I'll save it for the future. The exchange of affection between us today is such that it will find fulfilment not in union but in separation. As if I've found you completely in not winning you, I do not know whether this completeness would have been attained in union.'

Abba would later wonder what made

him write this; all he could say was that he couldn't but.

As he was writing the girl read on with total concentration. That the words touched her was clear from her expression. When she had finished she stood still, speechless. Abba too could say nothing. Then, with heavy heart he said 'Sayonara.' He never met the girl again. He had ended the romance of a moment, the excitement of transient infatuation. But no, he affirmed firmly, it wasn't infatuation, it wasn't illusion. That moment revealed man's true identity, proved that war had failed to destroy love.

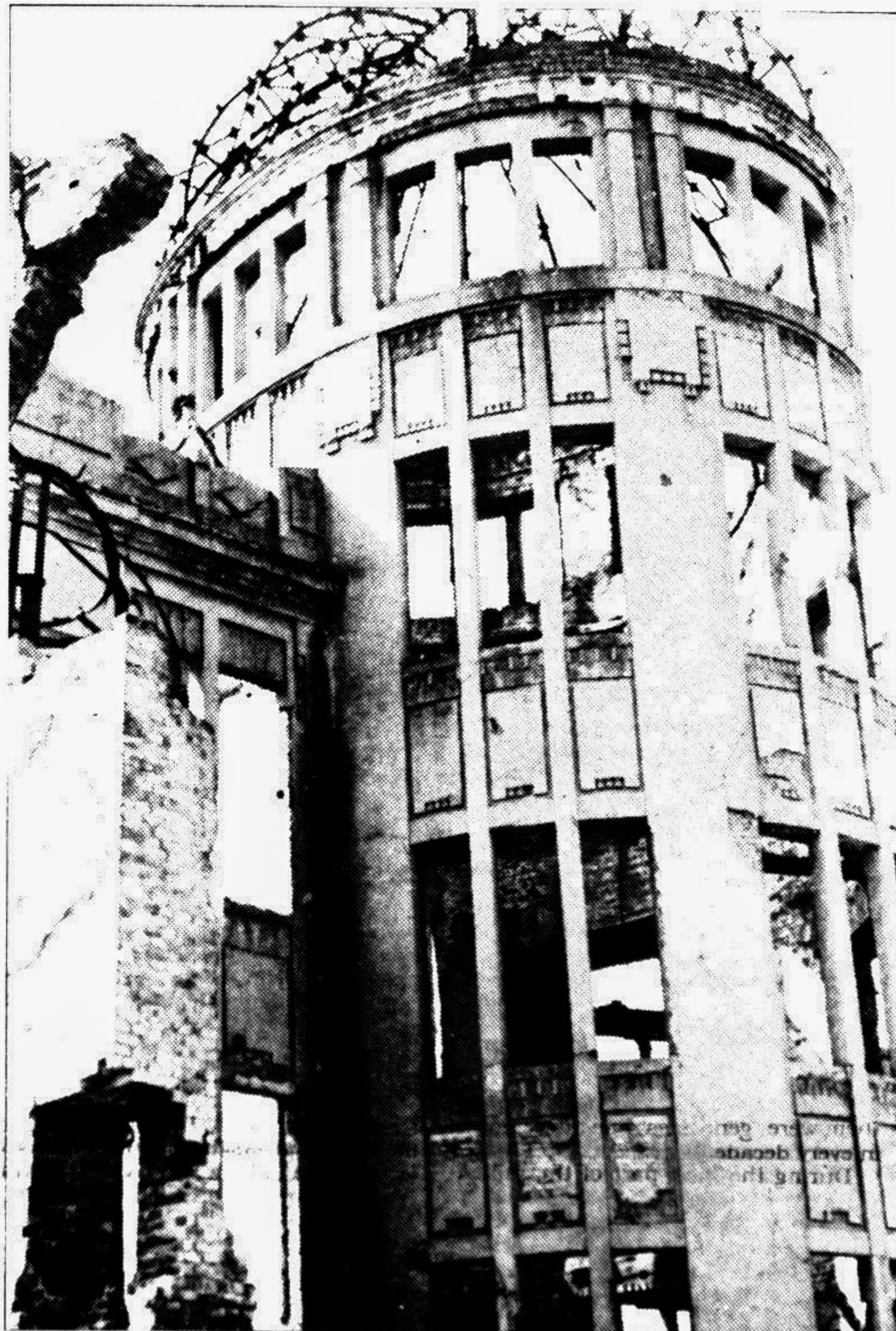
Japanese POWs began coming home. 'I saw one of them in Hiroshima,' Abba begins the most cinematically vivid description in his book. 'He was in uniform. He stood alone, the only sign of life amidst ruins. His eyes frantically scanned the rubble, looking for the lost past, a home laden with childhood memories, filled with the voices of loved ones. No sign. He dashed this way and that, buttonholing people in the vicinity, plying them with desperate queries. Evidently none had any satisfactory answer.'

Watching the scene from a distance — he was the camera — Abba was moved to tears. The Japanese soldier gave up his quest for information. He sat down in the middle of a blighted field. A vast blankness in his eyes. Such are the wages of defeat, thought Abba. If his country hadn't been vanquished, the Japanese soldier mightn't have suffered such loss. If Japan had been victorious Abba might have been facing the same fate now. A terrifying thought. For years afterwards Abba recalled the scene with such an intense emotion — empathy leading to terror — that his body hair stood on end.

Before a year was out, a new Hiroshima rose Lazarus-like. Abba and his friends now went there to experience the vernal, not tragic, emotions. Young men and women lounged in parks, the latter smilingly ready to pose for snaps with uniformed strangers. Sometimes Abba would visit the Kubuki theatre or watch a Japanese musical in a cinema. Rather surprisingly he and his friends took to Japanese music, though the lyrics were impenetrable, and bought records for playing on the unit gramophone.

A letter from Captain Hambury, now married and back to civilian life in England, asking for Abba's photograph occasioned a visit to a professional photographer. At delivery time Abba asked for the negative as well. But he didn't know the Japanese for 'negative' and the photographer had next to no English. Hilarious attempts were made to overcome the language barrier, till the photographer had the sense to fetch a girl with some English from a neighbouring establishment. But she hadn't come across the word 'negative'. Abba asked her to get her English-Japanese dictionary, which fortunately had the word.

The girl asked Abba and his friends to her house, a one-room affair where she lived with her parents in spectacular poverty. Her father was a weaver of mats who earned barely enough for one square meal a day for himself and his family. But the hospitality shown warmed the hearts of their guests, who at parting were asked to come again. A



The only structure in Hiroshima that survived the nuclear blast

Punjabi called Abdul Aziz made good use of the open invitation, frequently taking chocolates from the canteen. One day he came back with a gift from the girl for Abba. A square inch of wood on which she had painted a mountain down whose slope ran a sparkling stream on whose bank sat a youth and a maiden. The romantic overture was touching, but Abba didn't respond.

Abdul Aziz was piqued. 'I take so many gifts but she is interested in you.'

'Don't you see why?' Abba said. 'My English is better than yours. She would like to be friendly with me so that I will help her improve her English.'

A new park, beautiful greenery around a pretty pond, a haunt of lovers. They lay mouth to mouth on the grass and behind bushes were discernible more vigorous activity. Abba was stupefied at such a naked display of sexuality. He couldn't look his friends in the eye. Overcome with disgust for life, he rose slowly, as if drained of energy, went to the water's edge and lay on the grass. His legs felt numb. After what seemed a long time he got up and dangled his legs in the water. A gentle breeze was stirring ripples, caressing his face, limbs. He sighed in relief, refreshed. Nature in her serene, soothing aspect once more; the lovers had upset him by showing nature's demonic side.

Revived, Abba could enjoy the evening once more. He even made a Japanese friend, the only member of the country's two thousand strong Muslim community he actually met. 'Me Mohamedan,' the Japanese said. This turned out to be all he knew of his professed faith.

For several months after they got to Japan the Occupation Force lived on tinned food. A few days of this were enough to drive the Indians to desperation. Occasional dried meat rations hardly improved matters. Abba and his friends decided to forage in the countryside for a chicken every Sunday. The first time a farmer asked for three times the hundred yen they could afford. One of the soldiers sneaked up to the coop and quietly extricating one of the chicken pussyfooted back to the jeep, which shot forward without delay, while the hundred yen were flung at the peasant, who ran after them a long time screaming. With a dozen bottles of sherry to go with the chicken, Sunday evenings in the NCO's mess were merry affairs.

The sepoys had a tougher time. To raise money for the supplement of fresh food they flogged on the blackmarket

their weekly cigarette ration — four packs, worth a couple of hundred yen — and chocolates and toiletries bought cheap from the canteen.

Inspired by the example of their betters the unit's sweepers too procured a chicken. A Havildar intervened: it was against regulations to bring food from outside and cook it on unit premises. The sweepers turned to Abba for help. 'Go ahead,' he told them. 'If anyone objects tell him I have a share in it.' When the meal was ready they invited Abba to share.

A Punjabi friend sneered, 'How can you eat with sweepers?'

Abba replied with a nice distinction that revealed caste-sense and sexism coexisting with his conspicuous liberal attitude. They are sweepers, not latrine-cleaners, he said. They don't touch excrement. So they are like housewives, their task is to keep the house neat and clean. If they cook in a hygienic way I'm prepared to eat with them every day.'

Henceforth whenever the sweepers cooked something special, they'd invite Abba.

But Japan was starving. As soon as it was light raggedy people of all ages could be seen scouring the military garbage bins for the previous night's leftovers. One day a man was caught stealing two slices of bread. A British Major kicked him down the stairs. He lay at the bottom, blood dribbling from mouth. The Indians were moved to pity but in the presence of a British officer didn't dare offer assistance. They murmured to each other: why did he try to steal? If he had asked a sepoy he'd have given him the bread without hesitation. As a colonised people it was natural for the Indians to look upon the defeated Japanese with sympathy. Conversely the Japanese were friendly towards their fellow Asians, in particular because they were compatriots of Subhas Bose, the nationalist who had raised a rag-tag army from amongst Indian POWs to fight alongside the Japanese.

In an attempt to improve the diet the authorities imported a consignment of giant sheep from Australia. Two fell to Abba's unit. One was slaughtered straight away and devoured. More fat than flesh. Still, better than tinned food. The second, saved for later, was put under the care of Andy, a Madras sweeper addicted to alcohol. While he was under the influence his charge went AWOL. The unit rounded on him, issued an ultimatum. Find the beast or we'll bury you alive. Andy went looking, came back with a sheep. Without delay it was put to the sword. Then men from another unit came looking for a lost

sheep. They said the dead sheep, which had been flayed already and was being hacked to pieces, looked like theirs. Not a claim easy to substantiate, especially against the vociferous protests of Abba's unit. The other unit withdrew.

Summer 1946. Ramadan. Muslims in the British and Commonwealth forces fasted from dawn to dusk. They became news: Japanese papers and magazines published features on the practice. At iftar, the breaking of fast in the evening, Abba found it hard to eat the dry chapattis, the unit's staple. He had got into the habit of downing them with beer, which he couldn't do now; all very well to be cavalier about the Islamic interdiction on alcohol the rest of the year, but not when you are trying to acquire merit through fasting. Fruits and tomatoes were the answer but they were so costly he couldn't afford enough. Consequently this turned out to be the worst Ramadan of his life and he lost quite a bit of weight.

On Eid day, marking Ramadan's end, the Muslims in Abba's unit travelled in a convoy, lustily shouting Allah O Akbar, 'Allah is great', to a prayer meeting arranged on an open field some distance away. Curious natives watched their progress, others crowded round the field to watch the novel proceedings. Never before in Japan had there been such a large gathering of Muslims at prayer.

Like all Muslims Abba waxes eloquent over the Eid congregation as a perfect expression of the brotherhood of man and man propagated by their faith. A sepoy may stand in front of a General, who will humbly bend his head to the ground, inches away from the sepoy's feet. Prayer over, sepoy and General embrace like brothers.

Cameras clicked away as the Muslims went through their callisthenics-like movements. Within days copies of the photographs were on sale as souvenirs.

The Eid feast was a huge affair to which British and Commonwealth officers were invited. They came happily and dipped their fingers into the curry. Indian-style. After the meal Abba's friends egged him on to say few words on Islam. His confidence rose as he went along and before long he was descending on controversial matters like Muslims in Indian politics, the Hindu-Muslim riots then raging in Calcutta, who was to blame, what should be done, etc. etc. The Officer Commanding, Major Grant, kept looking at his watch every few seconds. When Abba finished a Canadian Colonel tartly commented that politics was best left alone in such a speech and Major Grant said it was too long for the occasion.

American patrons of Japanese girls willing to do it named them 'Pom Pom girls'. 'Anata Pom Pom OK?' ran the formula pass, anata meaning you. 'Poverty drove the girls to prostitution,' Abba commiserates, before noting with disgust that 'The girls ran after yankee soldiers like bitches in heat.'

A fellow Havildar who patronised Pom Pom girls — one evening Abba caught him smuggling in one, but didn't snitch out of comradeship feelings — was laid up with VD for a long stretch, much to Abba's satisfaction: 'The blighter didn't escape Allah's punishment.'

It wasn't all prostitution of course, but when romance bloomed, it was only to be cut short when the soldier returned home. One Japanese girl leapt into the water and swam after the ship bearing her lover away. The captain spotted her, had her picked up and handed over to port authorities.

Abba was assigned to give 'Roman Urdu' lessons — i.e. Urdu written in Roman script — to his OC, Major Grant, who as an officer in an Indian regiment was required to pass a test in the subject. The OC had built himself a thatched attic, where he'd often loll in an Adamic state, perhaps reading. When Abba knocked he'd ask him to enter and calmly use the book as fig leaf.

Dissension arose between the British and Indian troops in Abba's unit over the sale of coveted items at the canteen. The salesman, who was British, would tell Indians that he was out of stock, yet produce the goods, as if by magic, when a Britisher asked for them. In protest the Indians flung away the things they had bought and declared a boycott of the establishment. An uproar ensued, the Officer Commanding summoned a *darbar* at which he asked Abba to explain the cause of it all.

What the Indians had done amounted to subversion of discipline, for which punishment could be heavy. Something had happened to make Indians more daring. Parliament in London had just passed a bill approving plans to grant independence to India.

Gathering courage, Abba told the whole story.

The OC listened sympathetically, then asked, 'What will satisfy you?'

'Sir, please partition the canteen into two,' they said in unison.

The OC deliberated quietly, then agreed. The Indians had their own canteen, with an Indian salesman; the British had theirs. The Indians were thrilled; it gave them a foretaste of independence.

'Are you happy with this arrangement?' a British sergeant-major asked Abba. 'The Indians are yet to get what will really make them happy,' Abba replied, 'But for the soldiers in this unit this is quite satisfactory.'

'What you are hinting at is far in the future,' retorted the sergeant-major. 'True because Parliament has passed this. Bill, doesn't mean you'll get complete independence.'

'No point debating that now. Time will tell.'

A circular came from Headquarters asking for names of those who wanted to be released. Abba put down his name, as he had always meant to, and was surprised that a Punjabi friend, Havildar Nazir Malik, did so too.

'Soldiering is in a Punjabi's blood,' Abba said. 'Why do you want to become a civilian?'

In reply Nazir Malik narrated a harrowing experience on the retreat from Manipur in Assam. It turned into a rout before a vigorous Japanese advance. Nazir Malik and a friend set off on foot, carrying nothing but haversacks and rifles. On a lonely jungle track they came upon a soldier shot up in both legs with shell splinters, screaming horribly. He turned out to be a fellow Punjabi, Nazir Malik and his friend would have liked to carry him to safety, but how? There were only forested hills all around for miles.

'You'll find the going rough by yourselves,' the wounded man said. 'How can you think of carrying me? I have a blanket. Wrap it round me and lean me against a tree. That way I'll lie in peace till I die.'

Nazir Malik and his friend did as asked and sadly continued on their way. After a while they saw a truck speeding towards them. It had no passenger, only the driver. Seeing the two men the driver stepped on the accelerator; he was in such a funk he couldn't waste time picking up anybody. Nazir Malik levelled his rifle at the driver and shouted at him to stop. The truck groaned to a halt; the driver was unarmed. Nazir Malik and his friend wanted to take the truck and pick up the wounded man, but realized the track leading back to him was too narrow. They couldn't leave the truck driver alone and go to fetch the wounded man; the driver would vanish with the truck as soon as their backs were turned. So they gave up the idea and saved their own lives.

The thought of the wounded man haunted Nazir Malik. What had happened to him? Did he die alone in that godforsaken wilderness? Did some wild beast devour him? Malik shivered at the very thought. 'I won't ask my worst enemy to join the Army,' he finished. 'It's a merciless world. It turns men into beasts.'

The story haunted my childhood. 'Why didn't Malik frog-march the driver at the point of the gun to go and help him bring the man back?' I asked. 'Malik's friend in the meantime could have stood guard over the truck.'

Abba had no answer. 'Maybe Malik couldn't think of this solution under the pressure of events,' he speculated.

I kept wondering of the wounded man, I couldn't accept that some lives, like some stories, could end so horribly.

When the release orders came a big tea party was organised to bring the officers and men together for the last time. The OC at the time was an Indian Christian from Bombay, Major Patkar, a bit of an wag. He came with his wife, a hefty Englishwoman. (Theirs was a rare instance of marriage across the colonial divide.)

When it came his turn to speak Major Patkar turned to Abba and said, 'I hope Mr Haq on his return to India will become Defence Minister.'

Abba blurted out, 'If Major Patkar's wish comes true he will be made Field Marshall.'

Major Patkar rounded off with mock-advice to his men. 'Many of you will marry when you go home,' he said. Then indicating his portly spouse, 'But I entreat you not to marry someone like my wife. I've had to abandon my brothers, sisters, even my patrimonial estate for her sake.'

Mrs Patkar chortled away. When he had finished the Major said to her, 'See how I can prattle in your tongue!'

## poem

### Love: As on Soap Operas

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan.

There you have it  
love is as big as a bill board.  
It has to be guilt: dark: secret: over the top,  
or like an amputation: painful, a loss  
eventually forgetting it was ever there.  
or it must be sudden: there: not there: there again,  
or too demanding: bratful mixture of highs  
rush, thirst, cowardice, glazed, impossible  
to reason with, blind, hurting filling,  
crests and crests of trust, a hopeless gush  
unable to force back, or stop for future.

It has to be  
fragile, sulking, salty glistening  
mostly frightened, bewildered.  
Credulous that it had come  
impatient that it waited so long,  
already crying, because it will be gone.  
Love is it: something more: possibly even real,  
makes one feel responsible  
invent promises, lies, sugared deceptions,  
mushy poetry for aches that existed  
before the script ever was. Love is weak.  
It parades proximity, calendars of togetherness, even jilts.  
Blissfully it knows nothing about plainness, or simple answers or  
inevitables or conclusions. Viva soaps!

