

fiction

Grandmother's Wardrobe

by Aali A Rehman

Continued from last week

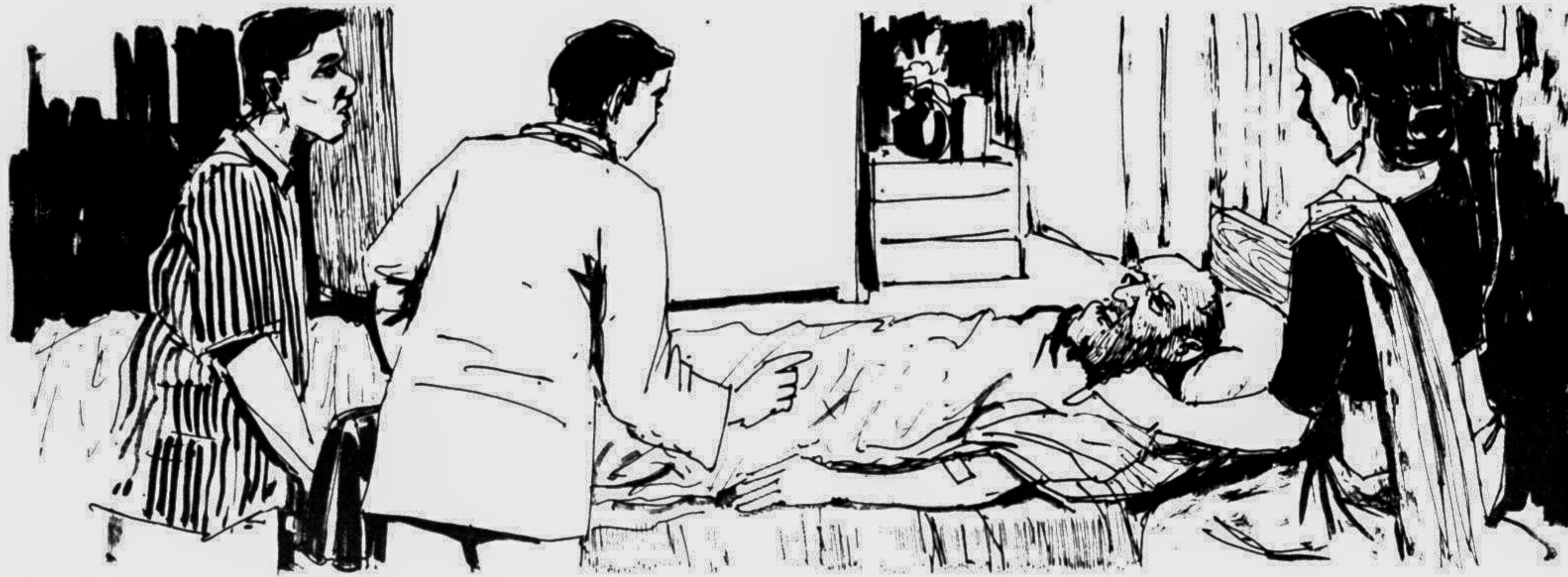
THE inscription on yet another one he looked at closely was unmistakably in Devanagari script though angular and crudely cut. The language was not Bengali or he would have been able to read it. It was either Hindi or Sanskrit. As he laid the coins out on his table, he realized what they were. They were coins of the Indian princely states of British times and, judging from their crudeness, dated most probably from much earlier than the twentieth century. They were hand-cast, not machine-made. What were they called, these coins...? *Mohurs, pagodas and fanams*, if he remembered correctly. How ancient were they? And were they really gold? He pulled open his desk drawer and looked for the magnifying glass that he sometimes needed to read small print. But though he rummaged through the drawer he couldn't find the glass. Amer must have taken it away to play with, as he sometimes did. Clicking his tongue in regret, Mr Osman contented himself with arranging the coins into a row on the table and then gazing at them with his hands in his lap. They are coins and they are gold, he told himself a few moments later, and suddenly scooped them up in both hands.

And, he thought as he turned to gaze at the open wardrobe in wonder, there are so many of them that they are treasure — a treasure hoard! But, he paused as another thought chilled and sobered him, whose are they, whose is this treasure? Where did it come from? Who put it there? Had this hoard belonged to his parents? He could not believe it. How was it that his parents had never disclosed its existence to either him or his brothers? If they had accumulated these coins over the years — as admittedly it was a tradition among his father's generation to convert family savings into bullion or gold coins — they would surely have let their children know about it during their own lifetimes. Mr Osman's father had been a stern as well as a taciturn and distant parent who had never been in the habit of either asking his sons' advice or taking them into his confidence about his affairs. But surely, if he had intended this wealth to be inherited by his children — as what else could have been his purpose? — he would have arranged for its safekeeping or its disposal long before his death. On two or three occasions before his last illness he had discussed the division of his property and assets with his eldest son, Mr Osman's elder brother, but he had never mentioned that there was anything in his possession as substantial as this hoard. And neither was there any mention of it in his diaries, which Mr Osman had read many times and which had lain in a drawer of the wardrobe for years.

No, Mr Osman decided as he stood in the middle of the room with the smell of Amber *attar* swirling around him, this heap of gold could not have belonged to his parents. And, evidently, no one else in the family had known about it. The wardrobe would never have become an old and unwanted piece of furniture if anyone had. The coins must have been hidden in it from long before his father bought it. In fact, so cleverly concealed was the hiding place that it was highly probable the wardrobe had been specially built for the purpose.

So whose were they then, these coins? The obvious answer was that they must have belonged to the original owner of the wardrobe. Mr Osman searched his memory, and seemed vaguely to remember his mother talking about his father having bought the wardrobe at a sale of some kind, an auction, on a business visit to Calcutta from where he had had it crated and shipped by rail to their home. What kind of a person could the owner have been? Some Marwari merchant of the city? A rich landowner, a *zamindar*, Nawab or Raja, who had prudently stored away part of his revenues and rents in gold? Or may be an English Sahib, a Colonel or Major or District Collector, whose hedge this was against an impoverished retirement in England, and who had this wardrobe custom-built for the express purpose of hiding his perhaps ill-gotten gains? Whoever it may have been, it was a wonder that the wardrobe had been sold with the treasure inside — perhaps because the owner had died and no one else had known about it. That would explain the auction his mother had talked about. The family or the next of kin may have sold off the personal effects of the deceased owner. It was another wonder that the gold had remained undetected, undiscovered inside the wardrobe for so many decades.

As he stood there, he suddenly realized that there might be a clue to the



ownership of the coins in the drawer itself, a document or letter or something else. Pulling out the drawer as much as it would go, he passed a hand over the surface. There was nothing except the coins. He tried to pull up the velvet lining at one corner. But it was stuck fast. He turned to the wad of cotton next, passed his fingers through it and, picking it up, shook it violently. Nothing. Could there be something inside the casing of the drawer? Could he take the drawer out completely and look inside the casing? He tasted the weight of the drawer by pulling it horizontally a little. It seemed to be extremely heavy and he doubted whether he could remove it from the wardrobe by himself. There was nothing, then; no clue to the original ownership of the coins — unless it was the little brass plate affixed to the shutter which gave the name of the makers of the wardrobe. He looked up at it: "Hoosein and Hoosein, Cabinet Makers, Calcutta and Bombay." Did the firm still exist? If it did, perhaps, even after all these years, they would have the name of the person for whom they had built the wardrobe.

Mr Osman sat down on his stool in front of the drawer and reflected. Should he try to discover who the owner had been? Although he asked himself the question, he knew that this was next to impossible. More than half a century had passed since his father had bought it in a city that was now in another country. He had himself never been to Calcutta and knew that he would not want to go now. And even if he did, he would not know where to begin looking. But was it absolutely necessary for him to find the original owner of the wardrobe? Finders keepers, he thought. Had these coins been found in the ground somewhere they would have been treasure trove. In this case, besides, his father had bought the wardrobe with the treasure inside and it had then become his personal property. Technically therefore, the treasure had belonged to his father. This line of reasoning made Mr Osman feel a little better, but some of the doubt still remained in his mind.

He stood before the open drawer and began to count the rows of coins. When he had finished, he still stood there, looking down into the drawer and the coins that still looked like brass buttons. After a long moment, he took a deep breath. The excitement of the past half-hour had left him feeling a little dizzy. His whole body seemed to be tingling and felt damp, as after a hot bath. He took up the purple cotton pad and put it back where he had found it. Then, after replacing the wooden sheet on top of the cotton, he carefully pushed the drawer shut. When he had felt and heard the twin click as the locks engaged, he looked at the front panel of the wardrobe. The drawer had slid smoothly and firmly into place with hardly a crack between its edges to show that it had been opened.

In a few more minutes he had replaced everything that he had taken out of the wardrobe. The floor of the room, he noticed, was dusted with tiny purple shreds of the cotton. Finding a rag, he went down stiffly on his knees and carefully swept all trace of it away. As he stood up and looked about him, the air in the room suddenly seemed close and dense despite the whirling ceiling fan. He switched the fan and the light off and, opening the door as silently as he could, stepped out into the little adjoining porch that faced the street.

It was cooler outside on the porch and he stood for a while breathing in the slight and soft northern breeze. To his right, above and beyond the street light, the sky was dark and punctuated by stars. The dawn was still some time away. Unfolding his canvas deck chair,

Mr Osman sank down into it and stared unseeingly out through the steel grille that surrounded the porch.

He felt tired, his forehead and arms were sweaty, but thoughts crowded his mind. Although he had no idea how much the coins were worth, this much he realized that they amounted to a small — or even a large — fortune. What should he do with it? Share it with his entire remaining family? Keep it for himself, give it to Marufa? She was, after all, the worst off among his children — she was, indeed, the worst off in the whole extended family. If anyone deserved this windfall — this unlooked for, unexpected wealth — she did. She, who had so patiently and uncomplainingly put up with the relative poverty of her life so far. And moreover, it was because of her, her request to him to be allowed to use the wardrobe, that had led to his discovery of the secret drawer. The money that the coins would bring would pay off Jalal's debts, the debts that only the previous evening had brought the lines of worry to Marufa's face, those lines which Mr Osman always hated to see in her still youthful face. It would provide for a better education for Amer and Amena than the one they were now getting.

There was no knowing how much the coins would fetch if they were sold. Perhaps there would be enough for them to get rid of this aging house and move to a nicer area of the city, to the outskirts, on the edge of the countryside, away from the noise and the crowds of this street, to live a better life with rather more comforts than they had now. After that there might even be some money left over for him to indulge himself... in what? In all his life he had had few aspirations, few ambitions. He had worked at his job, kept himself and his family in moderate comfort, provided for the few luxuries that his wife and children had asked for. He had wished for no more, and now, in his old age, he could not think of what he would like to do. Perhaps, he thought as he looked out into the darkness, he could travel — beginning first with a trip to Calcutta to see if he could discover the identity of the original owner of the wardrobe? Or maybe he could go once again on the Hajj. He had gone the first time soon after his retirement, making the journey on a crowded ship. This time he could go by air, as everybody else did these days, and stay longer... but would it be right to perform the pilgrimage on money found in this manner?

He shook his head in the darkness and admonished himself: These decisions were for afterwards. He should think about what he should do right now. How should he break the news about his discovery to Marufa, Jalal, and the children? He felt a little thrill of pleasurable anticipation as he imagined himself calling them into his room and dramatically revealing the pile of gold to their astonished eyes. How would they react, what would they say? He could imagine Marufa exclaiming in wonder and astonishment, with her hands on her cheeks, as she usually did when something pleased her or when she received surprise presents. Amer and Amena would probably want immediately to get their hands on the coins, to feel them and look at them closely — and, he suddenly thought, they would want immediately to run out and tell all their friends about the treasure found in their house. Whereupon rumours would spread in the neighborhood and people would come to ask about them. No, he should probably tell Jalal and Marufa first. There would be time to show the children the treasure after three of them had decided what to do with it.

What to do with it... that question kept returning. A ripple of anxiety went through him suddenly. Money, especially a lot of money, always brought trouble and disagreement into a family. He had seen friends and relatives suffer from the effects of the division of inheritances and common property. Would his discovery of these coins result in anything like that? Would his elder daughter and his son, both of whom lived abroad, insist on their shares? And what about his own elder brothers and their families, who could also claim ownership of the wardrobe? Would they have anything to say about the gold found in it? Would this treasure, this heap of gold, bring unhappiness and discord into his family?

Mr Osman closed his eyes, leaned back into the canvas back of his chair and tried to stop thinking. If only if only his wife had been still with him. She would have known how to deal with these problems. The thought sent a pang through his heart of longing and loneliness. She should have been here, he found himself saying with silently moving lips. She should have been.

But he had had long practice in suppressing memories of his wife, memories that brought only pain and no solutions. He rose from the chair and grasping the cool dew-damp bars of the grille looked up and down the street to stop himself from thinking further. In front of him, across the street and a little to the left, there was a roadside motorcycle workshop, shuttered only with bamboo fencing, where a single bulb still burned though there was no one to be seen inside. Beside the workshop was a row of three small betel-nut and cigarette shops. In front of these, he could make out figures asleep on the ground. The breeze had freshened somewhat in the last few minutes and was now rustling leaves on the roadside trees. The eastern sky was still dark but he could sense that the dawn was near. He felt light headed, probably from lack of sleep. The breeze, though cool, had not dried the sweat on his skin. Time to get back to bed, he thought. Or may be he should wait until the *Azaan* sounded and go to bed after offering his prayers.

Folding up the deck chair he had been sitting on, he went back into his room and closed the door to the porch. The light that he switched on seemed to flood the room with blinding brightness and he raised a hand to screen his eyes from the bulb. As he did so his head swam with dizziness and the room seemed to tilt and sway. He momentarily had the unpleasant sensation of standing in empty space and felt at the same time his knees buckling. Something hit him on the back of his head. Moments before he lost consciousness he realized that he was lying on the floor, looking up at the ceiling.

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His eyes opened to bright sunlight falling in a rectangle on the white-washed wall. Someone was shouting or quarreling somewhere nearby. Rickshaw-bells and hawkers' cries floated in the air.

He was lying on his side. In front of him a woman in a cotton-print *saari* was standing with her back to him, doing something at a table. He stared at the sunlight on the wall and then shifted his gaze to the woman's back. She appeared to be rearranging the things on the table, tidying up. It was Marufa.

He had been asleep and had dreamed incessantly. He had dreamed of Marufa too. But why was she here, at this time of the morning? He tried to ask her the question but only a low, hoarse whisper escaped his lips. His mouth was dry and

his throat ached.

The whisper was nevertheless loud enough to make Marufa turn quickly around. She looked at him for a second with widened eyes and then knelt swiftly beside his bed. "What did you say, Baba?" she asked in a high-pitched voice. "What did you say? Are you awake, Baba? Do know who I am?"

Mr Osman rolled his tongue in his mouth and swallowed painfully. "Yes," he said hoarsely, but more clearly than before. "Why are you here? What's happened? What time is it?"

Marufa's face broke into a smile and she put an arm over him. "You are awake, Baba! You're all right, aren't you, Baba? Nothing's happened," she said delightedly and then immediately contradicted herself. "You've had an accident. You fell down and hurt your head. But you're all right now. You do recognize me, don't you? I'm Marufa, Baba." She moved her hand to his face and laid it on his cheek. "You had an accident," she said again.

Accident? Hurt his head? Mr Osman tried to turn over on his back but Marufa restrained him. "No, Baba," she said. "Don't move right now. Lie still. You've hurt your head. There's a bandage on your head. And there's saline needle in your arm."

Mr Osman looked down at the tube attached to his left forearm and raised it a little. His arm ached and he could only move it slowly and in jerks. He felt his forehead with his other hand. There was indeed a bandage all over his head and down beside his ears and under his chin. Accident?

"Don't move, Baba," Marufa said again, pressing gently on his shoulder. "Don't move right now. I'll call the others." She rose and shouted excitedly for someone before coming back to kneel at his bedside again.

Amer came to stand beside him but only had time to ask "How are you, Grandfather?" before being sent away again by his mother. In a few minutes, during which Marufa continued to talk, Amer came back with a young man in a white coat and a stethoscope round his neck.

"How are you, uncle?" the young man asked cheerily before pushing Mr. Osman gently onto his back. He proceeded to apply the stethoscope to Mr Osman's chest, shine a flashlight into his eyes, and tickle his feet. "How are you feeling?" he asked again.

"My arm hurts and there is an ache in my throat," Mr Osman told him.

"That's all right, that's fine," said the young man. "The aches and pains will go away in a few days. Now I want to see what you can do. Can you raise your arms?"

"Yes," said Mr Osman, but the man made him raise his arms two or three times, then his legs, bending them at the knees, and finally told him to try to turn his head from side to side.

"I think he's all right," said the young man to Marufa after Mr Osman had gone through these movements. "He's very lucky and I think he'll probably be back to normal, very soon. But he should be under observation for a few more days." The man smiled at Mr Osman, patted him patronisingly on the shoulder and left.

On the man's departure Mr Osman finally asked the question that had been bothering him for the past several minutes. "Where am I, Marufa?"

Marufa leaned close to him. "You're in the hospital, Baba. You've been here for some time. And we were all here with you. Jalal and Amer and Amena. And uncle Naseer was here for quite a long time." This was Mr Osman's cousin. "And yesterday a lot of people came to find out how you were. Almost everyone from our neighborhood came." "But how did I get here?" Mr Osman

asked. "I don't remember coming here."

Marufa held his hands in her own. "We brought you here, Baba. In an ambulance. When we found you lying on the floor we called a doctor and he said that you should be admitted to hospital. You were unconscious."

She said slowly, as if trying to make him understand: "You had an accident, Baba. You fell down from your bed and hurt your head. You were very sick — you were unconscious for more than three days."

The doctors thought at first that you must have had a stroke. But they weren't sure and they said at last that you must have a serious concussion. They said that if you don't regain consciousness by yourself they would have to try some other kind of treatment. Thank God, you're awake now, thank God you're talking."

Mr Osman passed a hand over his eyes. He said, after a few moments: "I don't remember falling down from my bed. I don't remember coming here."

Marufa said gently: "How can you, Baba? You were unconscious when we found you on the floor that morning. And you were unconscious all this time. Since day before yesterday, you would open your eyes but wouldn't respond when I talked to you. The doctors told me to keep talking to you all the time and to call out to you. I've been doing it since then, but you wouldn't reply and it was only this morning that I was beginning to think that —" she choked off the rest of her words.

"I was asleep," Mr Osman said weakly, in his still hoarse voice. "I was asleep. And I heard your voice in my sleep. And I dreamed of you, and of Jalal, and the children I was talking to you about something. About something very important. But I can't remember what it was."

He looked up at her appealingly, and at Amer who had re-entered the room just now. His voice rasped in his throat as he said: "And I don't remember having an accident. I don't remember falling off the bed."

On Wednesday, grandfather," Amer said. "No, not Wednesday, the day after — Milly found you lying on the floor in your room early on Thursday morning. You had lost a lot of blood. You must have fallen down and hurt your head against the corner of Grandmother's wardrobe."

"Grandmother's wardrobe!" Marufa cried out. "That wretched wardrobe! If only hadn't asked you to clean it out for me. It's all my fault. You tired yourself so much doing it — that must be the reason that you fell and hurt yourself."

Mr Osman looked up at her again. "Mother's wardrobe? Did I clean it out for you? Why?" Because I asked you to, Baba. Because I wanted to use it for some of my things, my winter clothes. You spent all Wednesday morning rearranging the things in it. Don't you remember?"

"No," Mr Osman said slowly. "No. I don't remember anything like that. But I think I dreamed of the wardrobe too. There was something I wanted to tell you about it?"

"It doesn't matter, Baba," Marufa interrupted him. "Don't talk too much now. You'll remember everything when you're all right. The doctors think that your memory might be affected because of your concussion. But they said the important thing is that you recognize all of us and remember our names. And you do. You recognized me as soon as you regained consciousness. That's the important thing. I'm sure when you've recovered fully all of the things you've forgotten will come back to you. But now I want you to stop talking and rest. The doctors who came just now said that the specialist will come and see you when he makes his rounds in the afternoon."

The specialist came that evening and poked his body all over with steel instruments and made him go through all sorts of complicated movements and joked with him and told him he had nothing to worry about, that his memory would, just as his daughter had told him, come back to him eventually, and all that he had to do was look to his diet, take plenty of exercise and not allow his blood pressure to rise. It wasn't a stroke this time, apparently, but it could have been.

But Mr Osman did not remember, even months later when he had resumed his constitutional and his five times a day walk to the mosque for prayers. The wardrobe still stood in its corner as before, though it was packed now with Marufa's winter clothing, but he could not remember what it was that he had dreamed about it.

"Don't worry, Baba," Marufa would occasionally tell him soothingly on her evening visits to his room. "It will all come back to you one of these days. I'm sure it wasn't anything really important."