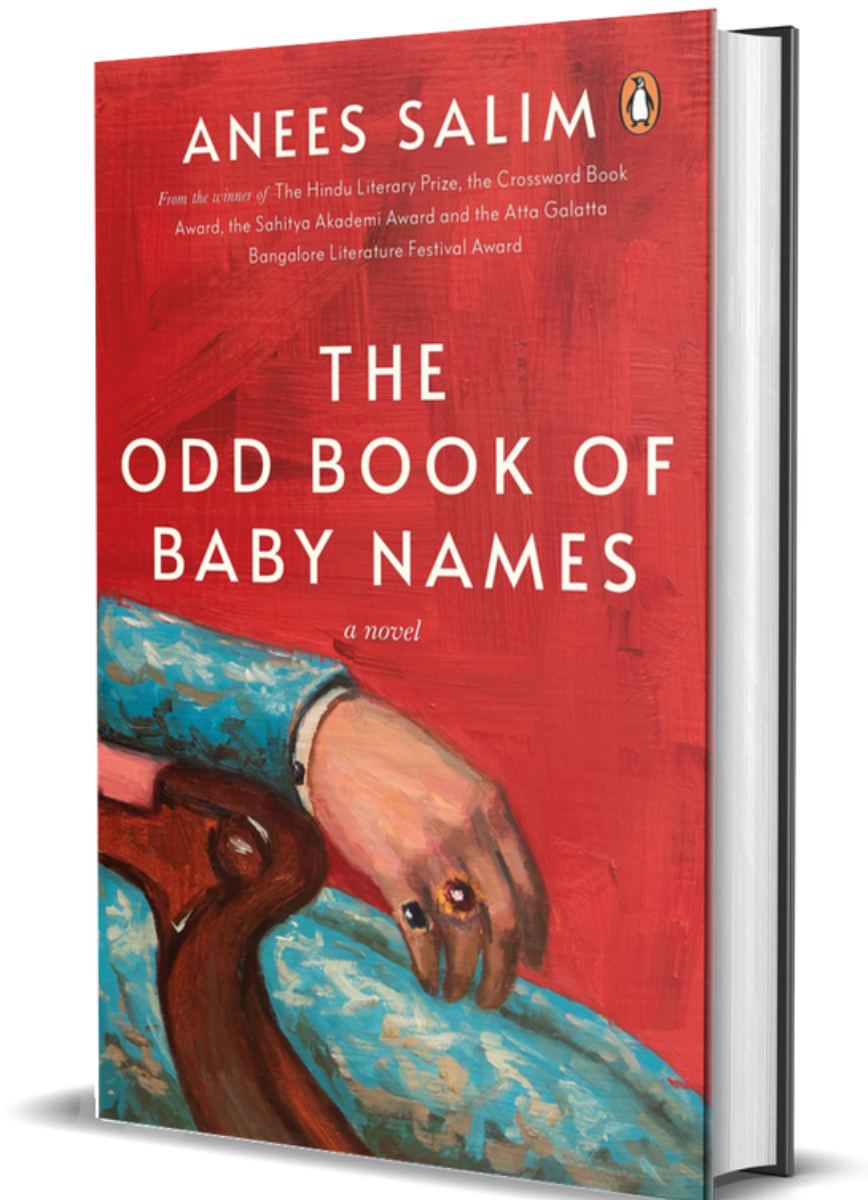


# The Odd Book of Baby Names

by

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An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature



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## **Moazzam, *the respectable.***

This is my side of the story.

Azam, my half-brother and archenemy, will tell you the same story, but in a different way. He is certain to crop up from nowhere, probably in the next chapter, and give you a completely different version. We live in the same palace, but we lead parallel lives.

It was an afternoon of fierce sun and still trees, of slow clocks and static clouds. And it, like any unbearably warm afternoon, made me take refuge in the marble bathtub that stood on short cabriole legs, surrounded by tall walls the colour of pistachio shells. Beneath the bathroom door, the sun shone in the rough shape of a sabre, its edge looking freshly sharpened and bloodthirsty.

The tall mangosteen behind the bathroom swarmed with birds—busy little sparrows with ivory undersides. They often landed on the ventilator with a quiet flutter of their wings and peeked inquisitively down the wall. At the peak of summer, I sometimes found the dirt from their feet on the rim of the tub, sometimes even traces of their droppings around the drain, and I knew thirst had driven them into my bathroom. To reclaim my sense of bathroom privacy, I ordered that a bowl of water and a plate of millet be placed in a corner of the balcony. But that settled only the trespassing part, there was still no escaping the angry twittering that funnelled in through the ventilator and

filled the bathroom with a music that equalled the sound of 100 maracas.

That day, of which I have no clear memory of the morning but a vivid recollection of the afternoon, I was lying neck-deep in lather, listening to the anthem of sparrows, when I heard a loud shriek from somewhere beyond the hallway. The sparrows, hundreds of them, maybe even thousands, fell quiet at once. That was the most silent moment in my life, probably the only moment when I heard silence and recognized it—a silence so intense that it hurt my ears. I dragged myself out of the bathtub and flew down the passage to the Chamber until a servant stopped in his tracks to gape at me. Only then did I realize that I was wearing only an armour of lather and a few accidental prettifications by way of rose petals.

By the time I had wiped my body clean, dried my hair and slipped into a robe, the sparrows had started to sing again—if you can call that flat, almost unbearably shrill refrain singing.

A small group of people had gathered around my father's bed, whispering instructions to each other. When they spotted me at the door, their whispers turned into mimes. I felt 1,000 eyes on me; I felt more naked than when I strode down the passage dripping soapsuds. Someone touched me lightly on the shoulder and asked about Azam, and at exactly that moment, he walked in. The doctor hurried in a little later, smiling apologetically at no one in particular. Placing a knee on the edge of the bed so that he could deal with his patient better, he inspected my father.

His smile vanished. He straightened up and looked patronizingly around. Then, with an eye on the frail frame on the bed, he broke the news.

'His Highness is alive. Very much so.'

***Azam, the greatest.***

A word of caution: if you listen to drunks, you are left with a bitter aftertaste. Somewhere in this palace, a fat man sits in his bathtub with a bottle in his hands and makes a show of reminiscing between long swigs. We may have the same kind of lips and same kind of voice, but he lives a different life—a life which sometimes looks far worse than mine, and at other times significantly better. We have different lives, but the same father.

Like every fallen ruler, my father harboured a grudge against historians. I would have been surprised if he did not. They never did him justice, but then historians seldom do justice to the fallen. They were never in agreement about the count of his children. Some put the number as exactly a dozen, some a little under fifty, but the most imaginative ones credited him with 149 progenies. It sounded like the number of people a ferry had sunk with.

While historians were constantly frowned upon, gossipmongers flourished in the palace, unbeknown to my father. They spun yarns at will, dubbing him as eternally eccentric, perennially lusty, or insanely malevolent. I found their tales laughable and harmless, except for the one about the book of baby names. Everyone I knew had heard about it, and everyone I wanted to hide its existence from, which included my own mother, wished to be in possession of it. But nobody could get hold of it, not even Moazzam, who seemed to have an easier relationship with my father than me, and whose naked run through the palace had already become the talk of the town.

Only I, as a child, had a glimpse of the book. In spite of the volume of secrets it was rumoured to hold, the book was slender enough to pass through the mouth of a charity box. Its pages, almost as flimsy as butter paper, crackled under the weight of

the fat fountain pen that was pressed into service every time my father was told, in a whisper or with much fanfare, that he had successfully sired another child. The book must have been custom-made in the same fashion as most of the palace stationery, else the coat of arms would not have been on the tawny cloth binding. I did not care much about the number of names my father must have written in the book, nor about the poetic touch to them. Like any dissident son, I was more concerned about the poetry of the will and testament my father must have composed in the book.

What necessitated such a cryptic register was the history of poor memory that ran in the family like an incurable disorder. Most of us were unthinkably bad at memorizing names, some even to the extent of forgetting their own. Hence this farce of a book, which was always kept under lock and key and brought out only when the fruits of my father's tireless liaisons demanded a new entry. My encounter with it was brief, but the memory of it stayed with me forever, rekindled along with the bitter taste of the concoction I was made to swallow that morning for my colic. My father was sitting on a divan, a bolster between his legs, a pen oscillating between his chin and the little book. 'Baabar,' he exclaimed as he wrote something, perhaps that very name, in the book. Then he snapped the book shut, slipped it into his pocket and walked indolently away.

In various stages of my adolescence, I rifled through many lockers, innumerable vaults and every pocket of his countless robes. There was no trace of it. He must have locked it away in the most inaccessible closet the day aphrodisiacs had been proven worthless. But in a palace rich with collectibles, the most guarded chests are also the most hounded grounds. And locks, after all, are like the haughtiest of women—after a certain

point they just give themselves away, meekly surrendering their contraptions to insistent keys.

The news of my father's death, which was proven wrong immediately afterwards, renewed my interest in the book of baby names. I had a sneaking suspicion that someone was desperately hunting for it on the sly. Not Moazzam—he was too busy hunting for his bottle when he was not drinking from it. It was someone else, someone faceless who was sure about his name being there in the book, and possibly the details of his inheritance, or a servant who kept stealing from the royal chests. Such things happened not infrequently at Cotah Mahal. Only a few weeks ago, a cook was caught bartering a pen from my father's collection for a bottle of cheap liquor in the flea market. If the book was stolen and sold, it was certain to resurface as a ridiculing piece of history, the cursive handwriting of its author so well-known to historians. But the prospect of ridicule didn't worry me much, I had long insulated myself against mockery. But the possibility of Cotah Mahal being given to Moazzam, the favourite son, and the lesser palaces to me, the prodigal one, angered me. I wanted to find the book of baby names just to dip it in petrol and surrender it to flames.

### ***Humera, the bird that soars the highest.***

Mother opened the door and let the news of Papa's death tiptoe in.

I stood at the top of the stairs and listened to her sniff and sob.

When she retired to her room to grieve in private, I sat under Papa's portrait and thought of him the way they would be thinking of him at that very moment.

Two wives. One healthy as a horse, the other dead as a doornail.

Innumerable children. Two born from lawful wives, the rest out of wedlock.

Countless concubines. Young and old and everything in between. And my mother, who was his lover, not his mistress.

May Papa's soul rest in peace.

### **Moazzam, *the respectable.***

I am not drunk. I am not exactly drunk. Anyway, I am not as drunk as Azam would want you to believe. I am just a little bit blurred.

Well, who wants to come in next? Say your name and tell us the meaning of your name, if you know it, and roll.

### **Hyder, *the one who is as brave as a lion.***

My name is Hy . . . Hy . . . Hyder. Please be . . . be . . . be patient with m . . . m . . . me. People lo . . . lo . . . lose patience when I sta . . . sta . . . start to spea . . . speak. But once I get go . . . go . . . going things set . . . settle down.

The dream jo . . . job came rather late in my li . . . li . . . life, and after having done many less . . . lesser jobs in many parts of the o . . . o . . . old city and then the same jo . . . job in many win . . . wings of Co . . . Co . . . Co . . . Co . . . Cotah Mahal, I am lucky to be here in the Chamber, sitting in a posh room and watching an old man die a little more every day.

It was only my sec . . . sec . . . second year in royal service, and I was ha . . . hand . . . handpicked for the job from seven

similarly experienced people who worked in different parts of Co . . . Co . . . Co . . . Cotah Mahal, unknown to each other owing to the unimaginable di . . . dime . . . dimensions of the palace and the sheer size of the army of serv . . . serv . . . servants. I was working in the north win . . . wing, nursing an ageing princess who had been lan . . . lan . . . languishing after a severe stroke, when I was summoned by Dr Faiz to the infirmary that had a view of a dead fountain. The doctor, who . . . who . . . whose hair and shoes were the same shade of shiny black, looked me up and down as if he was to recruit a bo . . . bo . . . bodyguard and no . . . not a male nurse.

When I told him my name, the doctor frowned. ‘Are you nervous?’

I shook my head, meaning no.

‘You always stammer?’

I nodded my head, meaning yes. A smile sprang to the doctor’s lips.

‘Had His Highness not been in a coma, I would not have even considered you for this job,’ he laughed out. ‘And even if I did, you would have been sacked the very moment you opened your mouth.’

I co . . . co . . . could not decide whether he was making fun of me or His Hi . . . Hi . . . Highness, for we both stam . . . stam . . . stammered, and we both probably stammered the same way—sta . . . sta . . . starting with a serious stutter, steadying up mi . . . mid-sentence and fal . . . fal . . . fal . . . faltering again.

He questioned me as if I were a con . . . con . . . convict, and then sent me back to the north win . . . wing where I sat by the para . . . paralysed prin . . . prin . . . princess, pray . . . praying that the doctor would disapprove of the other six candidates. A punishingly slow week passed before I heard from the doctor



again. After bowing gleefully at the princess, I walked so . . . sou . . . southwards. It was a journey long enough to have taken me from my home to the Lake Hu . . . Hu . . . Hussain, at the end of which I stood in another part of the same building, outside a room that was double the size of my home.

The doctor stood by a window, and I stood behind him like his shadow, still and silent, and lis . . . listen . . . listened to him listing out the rules of the Chamber.

‘Break even one rule and you will be terminated from service immediately,’ the doctor said and turned to look towards the bed that stood at the other end of the room. That was when I had my first glimpse of His Highness outside por . . . portraits and photographs. For a moment, the spacious bed looked like an oc . . . oc . . . ocean, and he, withered and tiny, a blue bedspread pulled up to his chin, like a man about to be drowned. His eyes were closed. In the days that followed, I was to find out that he had not opened them since Christ . . . Christmas.

In my first hour in the Chamber, I made friends with Salim, the man who did the other shi . . . shi . . . shi . . . shift, who gave me so many warnings that I shud . . . shuddered to think of the days ahead. A cat nap, he said, had cost my predecessor his job. The poor man had chosen to close his eyes for a few sec . . . seconds at the exact moment Dr Faiz had decided to pay his patient a surprise visit. The doctor found his patient and the nurse fast a . . . a . . . asleep and waited for either of them to wake up. When the latter woke up, he was promptly handed a letter of ter . . . termination and banished from the palace, the pay for the whole day cut from his salary, though he had slept only for ten minutes. I used to sleep a lot in my days with the paralyzed princess. But she being lesser ro . . . ro . . . royalty, there were no particular rules to follow, and I drifted in and out of sleep as I plea . . . plea . . . pleased.

Never, Salim cautioned me, steal. Everything in the Chamber was secretly numbered and every week they audited the valuables secretly. From the golden nail clipper to the silver cuspidor, there were seventy-two precious items that were on the list, which was cross-checked every week. The Chamber, he said, was a thief's paradise. But the palace, he warned, was crawling with spies. I decided not to take anything home from the list of seventy-two, even though I could count only sixty-six portable pieces worth smuggling out. Salim probably lied about the number just to keep me worried about the missing articles, so that I wouldn't have any time left to plan a theft.

I, Salim claimed, nearly didn't land the job. A lady with the rich credentials of an insomniac, who worked as a nanny in the south wing, was the top contender for the post. But His Highness' sons wouldn't approve of her. They wouldn't trust him with a lady even when he was too weak to keep his eyes open. I decided to neither sleep in the Chamber nor steal from it. By working my way into the Chamber, I had attained the biggest goal of my life and would not attempt anything that might cost me the job I had nearly been found unfit for. From here, there was only one road ahead for me, the one that led to the old princess' room, to a life almost as ordinary as hers.

Never, Salim advised me, goof up. But how could I possibly make a mistake when I was supposed to just sit by a deathbed and merely watch someone die? I was doing a watchman's job in the guise of a nurse. How could I go wrong?

I spent the first two days wondering how someone who showed no visible sign of being alive could let out such long and loud farts. Every time His Highness broke wind, I stood up



even though no rules warranted such action, and when a couple of hours passed without the sad tune sneaking out of the quilt, I suspected he was dead. On such occasions, I would kneel by the bed in secret defiance of the ru . . . ru . . . rules and press an ear to His Highness' gaunt chest. His heart . . . be . . . be . . . beat always sounded like the last drops of a dried-up stream hitting a bed of pebbles. I didn't actually hear them, I saw them, as tiny as tea . . . tea . . . teardrops, dripping, dripping, dripping. I didn't want that sound to stop, I wanted it to last forever, at least till I was too old to work. Which other jo . . . jo . . . jo . . . job would pay you to sit under a chandelier and watch a former king . . . ki . . . ki . . . king, who was also your father, die?

On my third day in the Chamber, the long silence under the qui . . . quil . . . quilt started to wo . . . worry me, and I knelt by the bed and placed an ear lightly on the flat chest. The sound of a stream dripping onto pebbles had stopped. The silence of his heart meant it was my final day in the Chamber, my last chance to touch Hi . . . Hi . . . His . . . Hi . . . Hi . . . Highness the way a son touches his father. I quickly bent down and planted a kiss on his forehead. It was like brushing my lips against the hardened bark of an ageing tree. Then I . . . I . . . I began to run. Startling pigeons, startling the guards, startling the sweepers, I ra . . . ra . . . ran till I was in the patio where sunlight lay on the floor like silver bars. Azam looked up from the newspaper he was reading and stared blankly past me.

'Hi . . . Hi . . . Hi . . .'

'What?' he asked.

'Hi . . . Hi . . . His . . . His . . .'

'What the hell?' he asked.

His High . . . High . . . Highness has passed away,' I said, forgetting to bow. I dreaded he would shout at me for let . . . ttti . . . ting his father die while I was on duty. But he closed the



newspaper slowly and folded it. Then he placed it on the metal table and sank deeper into the chair. ‘Does Moazzam know?’

‘I . . . I . . . I . . .’

‘Don’t bother to answer,’ he said.

I ran back. When I turned a co . . . cor . . . corner, I saw the double doors of Moazzam’s room open. He trotted out, naked except for blobs of foam. His eyes were wi . . . wi . . . wide open, but they did not seem to see anything, for he ran past me without even sparing me a glance. Then he stopped, turned around and hurried back to his room. His wet footprints looked like something permanent on the red car . . . car . . . car . . . pet before quickly blending into the thread . . . wo . . . work. Lumps of foam slid down his calves and a few rose petals stuck to his rump like open wounds.

A few minutes later, our eyes met briefly when he, properly dressed, stood in the Chamber, waiting for the doctor. His face, unlike mine, didn’t bri . . . brighten up when the doctor declared his patient not dead. He turned sharply and left the Chamber. Shortly afterwards, Azam left too.

### ***Humera, the bird that soars the highest.***

Papa didn’t die.

He will never die.

Long live the king, even though he has long ceased to be one.

### ***Shahbaz, the king’s eagle.***

Except when the summer peaked, the wall of the alley wore the waxy green of pepper elder plants. When we were children,



we would pluck them on our way to the madrasa and, after pinching off their heart-shaped leaves, use their stems to erase the tangle of letters the previous day's Quran lessons had left on our slates.

The poetic streak in me first came to light on the day when I, hardly eight, precociously termed the wall that stretched from the mouth of the alley to the edge of the tributary as the Wall of Erasers. Our Quran teacher was so impressed with my choice of words that he asked me if my father was a poet. Someone tittered at the back of the class and said Sultan and I were the Azam and Moazzam of the alley. Everyone knew who they were, and I felt a strange sense of pride at being equalled to Azam. I don't know how Sultan felt about it. I never asked. The teacher said I had a way with words. And I felt good about that too. From that day, the alley came to be referred to as the Wall of Erasers among the group of children who went to the madrasa together.

The height of summer always turned the wall of the alley a tired sea green first, and eventually, with the plants wilting down to a fine brittle, a deep brown. Stripped of the leafy coating, it stood naked till the rains came, millipedes occasionally crawling out from the gaps between the scorched brickwork, eager to curl up and play dead when poked with twigs. Sultan and I prodded them into rings, whisked them into pouches shaped out of mango leaves, and smuggled them into the madrasa. We placed them under the mat when no one was looking and waited with fake indifference for the Quran teacher's knees and forehead to crush the rings into fine pulp when he went down to his knees in prayer. After the prayers, he caned the whole class. Sultan and I found an eerie sense of contentment in the fact that the retribution for our follies was evenly distributed among forty-odd boys, many of whom did not even know why they were being so meanly flogged.



After classes, we played marbles in the alley. Sultan and I against a bunch of boys from another street who, like us, probably did not mind being rebuked for reaching home late. We played in the shade of a condemned building that had ochre walls and latticed windows. When Sultan brought his marbles out, others stepped back with a resigned look on their faces, like people who know they are destined to do nothing but wait. He strolled around the formation that the scattered marbles made on the alley floor, a finger pressed to his lower lip. Upon finding the best angle to shoot from, he knelt down and made the constellation of marbles change shape with a mere flick of his forefinger. *Ching, ching, ching.*

His full name was Sultan Mir Qamarudin Khan. Too grand a name for a boy who lived in an alley like ours. Then, so was mine: Shahbaz Mir Qamarudin Khan. A few years after we came to know why we had such strikingly similar names, that we were the illicit children of the ruler, the black fever claimed Sultan. When his body was lowered into the grave, which could still have accommodated him had he died half a century later, I heard the clatter of marbles. *Ching, ching, ching.*

Every time I walked past Sultan's house, it filled me with a high degree of disbelief that he was still a thirteen-year-old boy, without even a trace of a moustache, while I, into my late twenties, already had a few strands of grey in my hair and the kind of beard only philosophers and vagabonds sported.

We had identical homes. All the houses in the alley, for that matter, were identical; lime-washed and low-roofed. But my door was less identical because it was fortified with such a big lock that it provoked laughter, and then suspicion. Neighbours were often overheard wondering if I was secretly handed a little fortune by the palace. What they didn't know, and what I didn't want them to know, was that my house treasured such a

wealth of poetry that anyone with a deep love of verses would be tempted to break in and slip away with compositions that were yet to see the light of day.

A narrow path ran through the Wall of Erasers all the way down to a senile tributary of the Moosa River, where clothes and cattle were washed, often side by side, with the same amount of devotion. The vicinity of the tributary was sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse. It constantly fed the alley with a soothing breeze, rustling curtains and calendars, whistling a near-rhythm. But in summer, when the waterbody punctiliously dried up, the wind brought in the stench of bad times, and old people started to talk, almost wistfully, of the terrible epidemic from sixteen years ago, when piles of corpses lay rotting on the riverbank for want of pyre wood. Until the wind dropped and the stench eased itself away, I kept my face averted from the tributary, a balled-up handkerchief, moist with attar, positioned under my nose. This caused the neighbours to sneer at me.

The sun had turned the tributary into a blinding sheet of nickel, and Sultan's mother, silhouetted against the shimmering expanse, sat on the edge of the bank, kneading laundry like dough. She sized up my shadow before looking up and smiling—the same crooked smile as her son, who smiled only when he was unbearably pained.

'What's new, Shahbaz?' she asked.

So she obviously hadn't heard about Abbajan's death. Most people still hadn't. I sensed a strange feeling, something that bordered on pride but not quite pride, welling up inside me at the prospect of breaking the news to her. But I didn't want to do it immediately. It was like holding onto a candy even when you badly wanted to eat it, because once it was eaten it could not be eaten again. I found the moment that stretched between now and the point of Sultan's mother turning inconsolable

inexplicably poetic. I stood staring across the sparkling tributary, attempting to piece together a statement about Abbajan's death, fully aware that no matter how plainly I put it, it would have the same impact on her.

The far bank was a mirror image of where we stood; the same kind of steps, the same type of tiny houses, and a similar path snaking away to the distant outline of the Four Minar. All of a sudden, I remembered that the mosque behind the Wall of Erasers had recently acquired a pair of loudspeakers, and they could shatter the moment I had found so poetic, the moment that stood like a wire fence between coldness and grief, a boundary made of silence. At the prospect of the imam's voice booming through the neighbourhood, announcing in forced solemnity that Abbajan had passed away in his sleep, in peace, I leaned over Sultan's mother, my hands on my knees.

'Ammi,' I called. She looked up casually, still smiling, but her expression changed when she saw the scowl on my face.

'What?' she asked.

'Ammi,' I said, leaning closer. 'He has passed away.'

She cast an angry look at me. 'Who has passed away, Shahbaz?'

'He,' I said, with a sweep of my hand that covered a fraction of Abbajan's lost kingdom: the far bank, the near bank, the tributary, the outline of the Four Minar, the clutter of buildings in the south, a train crawling across a bridge in the west. I could not have given her a bigger clue than that.

She stared furiously at me. Then she lifted her hands, as if to pray for Abbajan with her hands wide open. Wailing at the top of her voice, she brought her hands down so violently on the washing stone that many of her glass bangles broke and fell to her feet. The expressiveness of her grief reminded me of her profession; she was a nautch girl in Abbajan's court and so



was my mother. For a moment, I thought of my mother and wondered if she would have done the same thing had she lived to see him die.

Sultan's mother lifted her hands again and hit them against the washing stone. Again and again. Until all her bangles were broken and her forearms were naked except for a few tendrils of blood.

'Ammi,' I called softly, trying to hold her hand. 'Let me take you home.'

But she pushed my hands away with the energy and obstinacy of someone possessed, and, quite unexpectedly, tore the front of her blouse into two unequal halves. I wanted to look away from her breasts, big and surprisingly erect for her age, but found myself staring at them, swallowing. Her nipples looked like soaked raisins. The nipples Abbajan and Sultan had suckled, with different kinds of hunger, with different gibberish in their mouths. Abbajan must have hurt them with his teeth, he must have laughed when she complained, and then he must have given them comforting kisses. I sensed a strong urge to go down to my knees and press my lips against her nipples, and slowly suck the raisins dry. I straightened myself up and hurriedly walked away, leaving her on the bank, bare-chested and howling, the shards of her glass bangles beginning to float downstream like dead fingerlings.

Later—not much later though—when I heard that the news of Abbajan's death was nothing but a rumour, I imagined Sultan's mother glaring at her naked hands and grinding her teeth. I would not dare cross her path again, not before Abbajan had breathed his last, the news of his death was confirmed, and people started speculating about his funeral. I tried to keep her out of my mind. But I kept thinking about the raisins, waterlogged and rich, waiting to be slurped dry.