



# TRAY OF CANDIES

Two Brothers and a Courtyard in Kabul

*By Qais Akbar Omar*

One day after school in 1990, two years before the civil war started, I showed Grandfather a slip I had received from my teacher for doing very well on an exam. Grandfather gave me an apple as a reward. We had more than sixty Macintosh apple trees in the courtyard, but receiving one from Grandfather was an honor. Each time any of us earned a reward-apple from Grandfather, we made sure to show it to everyone in the family and bragged about it for days. I was about to leave and find my cousins when I heard knocking on the door.

“Come in,” Grandfather said.

My oldest uncle, Gul Agha, walked in holding some papers. Grandfather had eight sons and four daughters who all lived in his compound along with their wives, husbands, and children. I had more than twenty-five cousins to play with. Of all my cousins, I enjoyed Uncle Gul Agha’s sons the most. Both were several years older than me. They had taught me how to play marbles, fly kites, and ride a bicycle.

Uncle Gul Agha sat in front of Grandfather on a *toshak* on the floor. He handed the papers to Grandfather.

“What are these?” Grandfather started reading.

“I bought a house.”

“Congratulations! How many rooms?”

“Two bedrooms, one living room, a kitchen, and bathroom, and half an acre of land around the house for gardening.”

“Very good. You should find a tenant for it.”

“I’ve decided to move there with my family.”

“Don’t you have enough rooms here?”

“I do, Father. There are enough rooms in this house even if my sons get married and stay here with their wives and children.”

◁ A tray of assorted toffee  
Minoo, New York, Sept.  
27, 2014. *Crary Pullen for  
the Cairo Review*

“Then why would you move out?”

“Because I want to be like you, Father. You started with nothing when you came to Kabul from the village. You were twelve years old. You could hardly read and write. You became the president of the bank. You built this house by yourself. If I continue to live here, what kind of example will I be for my sons?”

“We’ll talk about this over dinner.”

“Thank you, Father.” Uncle Gul Agha left the room.

I found my mother and told her the news. An hour later, everybody in the courtyard had learned about it, and they were whispering to each other. Even our neighbors asked me questions about it when I went out to buy *naan* from the bakery for dinner.

That evening, we gathered around the tablecloth on the courtyard lawn for an excellent dinner of meatballs spiced with rosemary and cinnamon, along with rice cooked with lamb, raisins, carrots, and pistachios.

After we had finished eating, Grandfather made an announcement. “You all know about Gul Agha’s house and his decision. What do you think?”

Everybody stopped talking and looked at Grandfather, who sat, as always, at the head of the tablecloth. In Afghanistan, every family has a patriarch to whom all the other members look for advice and guidance. In our family, it was Grandfather. He was nearly seventy then and spent most of his time tending his flowers in the garden of our big courtyard when he was not reading books in his room, or receiving guests who sought his help with community issues. My grandmother who had been the love of his life died when I was a year old, and he never married again.

“Basir,” Grandfather looked at my father, his second eldest son. “What do you think?”

“Gul Agha is the eldest son. So far there has never been an emergency that required us to go to him in your absence. But in case that happens, he should be here.”

“You’re telling me that you don’t want to take on the responsibility of the leader of the family if I die?”

Father opened his mouth to say something, but Grandfather interrupted him. “I got your point, Basir. I’ll come back to you later.”

Then Grandfather looked at Uncle Faruq, who was younger than Father. I did not get along with his sons very well, because we were almost the same age and we were very competitive with one another.

“Gul Agha should do whatever makes him happy,” Uncle Faruq said.

“Why, because you’re the fourth?” Grandfather said. “And it is unlikely that the responsibility will come down to you?”

Then Grandfather asked for the opinions of my other uncles and aunts. The majority said that Uncle Gul Agha should rent his place and stay with us.

When Grandfather had heard from everyone, including all his grandsons and granddaughters, he said, "From all of you I gather that you want Gul Agha to be happy, but you can't bear the idea of him and his family living far away."

Everyone nodded.

"Here's my suggestion," Grandfather continued. "Gul Agha can live in his house with his wife and children, but he must come here every Friday to have lunch and dinner with us. He continues to bear his responsibilities as the oldest brother and should be here for emergency family meetings. What do you think?"

Before anyone could answer, we heard several gunshots outside. Everybody stopped talking and looked at one another. The neighborhood was silent. Then we heard a few more gunshots.

Grandfather stood up and walked to the main gate. Uncle Gul Agha and Father followed him. I ran after them. My boy cousins followed me. Once we were outside on the street, we heard a few more shots and someone screaming. The noises were coming from Haji Kareem's house across the street. Haji Kareem had lived there alone until he died of a heart attack a year earlier. We had buried him in the cemetery near the park.

Haji Kareem had been tall and wiry with blue eyes, a bulbous nose, and close-cropped hair. His legs shook as he bent over his cane with a hunched back. He was Grandfather's best friend. He had two sons and two daughters, but none of them lived with him. His oldest son lived in Chicago with his American wife and daughter. He often showed us their photos. His daughters lived in Italy with their families. His youngest and unmarried son, whose name was Amir, lived for most of the year in Pakistan studying religion in *madrasahs* but spent his summers living at home with his father. We hardly saw Amir outside, but we often heard him over the walls shouting at Haji Kareem.

While Haji Kareem was still alive, he allowed my cousins and me to play in his courtyard at weekends because it was bigger than ours. Two tall walnut trees in the middle of the garden stood very close together. We raced each other to climb them. At other times we climbed an old mulberry tree at the far end of the garden and dove onto two sandpits below it. Sometimes we made huge sandcastles then jumped on them.

One corner of the courtyard was bordered by a one-story building that had four rooms. A huge fig tree with a massive trunk and spreading branches shaded all of them. Haji Kareem used only one room where he always kept a light on. We did not dare climb the fig tree. He told us that it was full of jinns.

Twice a year, Haji Kareem's courtyard became the meeting place for the men in our neighborhood. They discussed things that needed to be done in the community. Many family disputes were resolved there, sometimes even feuds between tribes. But after Haji Kareem passed away, our courtyard became the place for those meetings, although people could not sit in a circle because of our many apple trees.



Grandfather walked toward the main door of Haji Kareem's house.

"Father," Uncle Gul Agha said, "there must be thieves in there."

"Stealing what, old couches and rusty utensils?" Grandfather said. "There's nothing worth stealing in that house. Kareem gave everything away before he died."

"We should wait for a few minutes," Father said. "Maybe we should call the police."

Grandfather ignored him and knocked on the door. "Who's there?"

Nobody answered. Grandfather continued knocking. Many of our neighbors came out of their houses. My uncles, cousins, and some of my aunts were standing on the sidewalk too.

"Open the door," Grandfather said. "Come out. Nobody will harm you. We have no weapons."

We heard nothing. More than a hundred pairs of eyes were fixed on the door. Suddenly the gate opened. A man in his forties ran towards Grandfather. Amir ran after him holding a gun.

The man hid behind Grandfather. "He's is trying to kill me!"

Everyone fled the sidewalks, but some remained standing on the thresholds of their courtyard doors. Father and Uncle Gul Agha did not move from their places.

"Uncle Jallani," Amir said, panting, to my grandfather. "Please step aside. I'm going to kill him."

"Calm down, son," Grandfather said. "We have laws in this country. A thief should go to jail, not get killed."

"I'm not a thief, Uncle Jallani," the man behind him said, trembling. His face was pale. "I'm Kabir, Kareem's oldest son."

Grandfather turned around and looked at Kabir. He acted as if Amir were not standing there pointing a gun at his back. He opened his arms for Kabir. They embraced for a long time.

"You've changed so much," Grandfather said. He took a step back. "You were a kid when you left. Now you have gray hair. You look so much like your father, son."

"Say goodbye to him, Uncle Jallani," Amir said. "I'm going to kill him now."

Grandfather turned around and put his hand on Amir's gun. "Give this to me, Amir Jan, and stop being silly and childish."

"No, Uncle Jallani." Amir stepped backward. "I don't want you to get hurt."

Grandfather walked over to Amir, stood in front of him, and slapped him so hard we saw snot fly out of his nose. "Stupid boy. Didn't your father teach you how to talk to elders? Give me the weapon."

"No, uncle."

Grandfather slapped him again, then extended his hand and looked at Amir sternly. "Don't make me slap you again. You know better than this."

Amir surrendered the gun.

Several men ran up and held Amir's hands behind him.

"Don't hurt him," Grandfather said as he looked at Amir. "We can use our mouths to talk about this and find a solution, or I can call the police and you'll have to answer in court. Your choice."

"Please, someone call the police and the madhouse," Kabir said. "He's crazy."

"Be quiet, Kabir," Grandfather said. Then he looked at Amir, "Well?"

"Talk," Amir said softly with his head down.

The other neighbors tried to gather around Kabir whom they had not seen in years, but Grandfather maneuvered the two brothers through the growing crowd into our courtyard. There, he made them hug each other.

That night, after several cups of tea during which Grandfather spoke at length about their father while the sons sat in silence. When it was time to sleep, Grandfather sent Kabir back to his house across the street and instructed Amir to stay in our compound in Grandfather's guestroom. We all went to bed knowing that tomorrow was going to be a big day. All the men in our neighborhood would gather in Haji Kareem's courtyard to learn about the conflict between the brothers and find a solution.

### Haji Kareem's House

The next morning, I finished my breakfast quickly. On days when I had nothing else to do, I enjoyed spying on Grandfather. When he saw me, he would lay aside whatever he was reading, open a book by Rumi or Hafez, and read me a poem. Then we discussed its meaning together.

I waited on the bench in our courtyard, looking intently at Grandfather's room. Finally he walked out. He was dressed in a white *shalwar kameez* and a cream-colored turban.

"Go tell your father and uncles to come outside. Also, have your mother prepare a tray of candies. Come and sit next to me. You'll distribute the sweets."

I ran to every door in our courtyard, knocked, and told all my uncles that Grandfather was waiting for them.

My boy cousins followed their fathers to Haji Kareem's house. I ran back to our room, where my mother was preparing to leave for her job at the Pashtany Bank. She quickly opened a few bags of candies, put them in a large tray, and gave it to me. By the time I reached Haji Kareem's house, most of the men of the neighborhood were already sitting on the freshly mowed lawn. The smell of the grass was fresh, but the rest of the courtyard was covered with tall weeds. The branches of the trees hung low and almost touched the ground. The fig tree looked twice as big as I remembered. Though I was now seven years old, a chill ran down my back when I looked at it and thought of jinns. I sat next to Grandfather with my tray of candies. Amir

and Kabir were on Grandfather's left. Everybody was dressed in their best *shalwar kameez* as if they were celebrating the *Nowruz* holiday. They were sitting in a large circle on the grass.

"Everybody is here?" Grandfather asked.

"Yes," Father said. "Except for Jawad, Sabor, Sami, Adil, and Wali. They'll be here soon."

"We can start," Grandfather said. "Haji Kareem wrote a will and sent it to all his children before he died." He took out a paper from an envelope and unfolded it. The paper was yellow and creased. "In his will, he instructed his children never to sell the house unless they run into a financial crisis. He wants one of his children to live in it or rent it to someone and keep the house in good condition. No one can cut down the trees or destroy the flowerbeds. The rooms can be demolished and rebuilt, but the fig tree is untouchable. The will goes on. The walls surrounding the courtyard and the sewage system should be repaired. The electricity wires should be replaced as well, and so on. If anyone is interested in reading the rest, let me know. I'll make copies for you. It is very well written and entertaining, like the late Haji Kareem."

Everybody laughed.

"However, there's a problem. Amir wants to sell the house. Kabir wants to stick with the will. Amir is the younger son, Kabir is the eldest, as you can see. We're here today to solve the dispute between the brothers. As you all know, Kabir was not able to attend his father's funeral. He couldn't leave his job and come to Afghanistan right away. He might have lost his job and his family may have ended up living on the street. But he sent me money to cover all the costs. Haji Kareem's two daughters did not come either, because they didn't have their papers to travel. If they had come, they could not have gone back to Italy, because they are still living on immigrant visas. But they held memorial ceremonies there. Haji Kareem loved parties. He got two more parties in Italy."

The crowd laughed again.

"A week ago," Grandfather continued, "Kabir traveled to Pakistan to see Amir and talk to him about renting the house since nobody has lived here for a year. He was concerned about the leaky ceilings. Amir agreed. But when they came here last night, Amir started saying that Kabir hadn't helped their father when he had needed him; only Amir had. Amir now says that none of his siblings have any claim on the house, and it should belong to him alone."

"Yes, that's right," Amir said. He had grown skinnier and paler since I had seen him last. His beard looked bushier too. "Let them live their luxurious lives in America and Italy. Where were they when Father needed them? I was the one here looking after him, cooking and washing for him."

Kabir smiled bitterly and began to speak. Grandfather interrupted him, “Neither of you are allowed to talk. You know the rules. You talk when you’re asked questions or told to speak.”

Amir lowered his head, frowning.

Now the storytelling would begin. To provide a context for resolving the brothers’ dispute, everybody would say what they knew about Haji Kareem.

Rahmullah was the first to speak. “Ever since I met Haji Kareem, he smoked a pipe,” he said. Rahmullah was the same age as Grandfather but sounded older because his voice shook when he spoke. Everybody in our neighborhood asked for his help with their gardens because he had worked in the Ministry of Agriculture for many years. “He stuffed his pipe with the worst kinds of tobacco. He used to say with his thick voice, ‘Bad tobacco helped my body build a strong immunity. I can fight any kind of disease. I haven’t had a flu since I started smoking.’ He could be proud of his new clothes for only one day, because the next day they would have a charred hole from the pipe.”

Everybody laughed.

Hamza, the butcher, looked at Haji Kareem’s sons and said, “That bad tobacco eventually made a hole in his heart and killed him. But he was a good man. You two look so much like your father. But you’re not like him. He’d think of any excuse to have a party. While it seems you two just want to have a fight. But maybe this is your father’s way of giving us another party.” Then he looked at the sky and said, “Thank you, Kareem!”

“Your father’s generosity is known to everyone in this neighborhood,” Sayed Hossein the shoemaker said. “Before you two were born, your father had a shop in the corner. My cousins and I went there and bought anything we wanted, but we never paid. He wrote everything in his notebook. Our parents paid him once a month,” he said as he gestured Haji Kareem’s writing his accounts.

“I was your father’s friend for thirty years,” Sayed Hossein continued, “and we didn’t hide anything about our personal lives from each other. He told me that once, when your mother was away, he collected his children’s old clothes and gave them to poor people. Then he asked a friend to tie him to this fig tree. When your mother returned, he told her that some thieves had tied him up and stolen the clothes.”

Everybody laughed. Some said, “Typical of Haji Kareem.”

“Uncle Jallani,” Kabir asked, “What’s all this? Did you bring everyone here to make fun of my parents?”

“No, son,” Ali the baker answered for Grandfather. He owned two bakeries and a public bathhouse in our neighborhood. Sometimes he sat in front of one of his bakeries, playing chess. When my father and I went to his bathhouse, he did not charge me.



He said I did not use as much water as Father. “This is how things work here, Kabir. You may have lived a little too long in America. But things are done here the same way as when you were young. The reason we’re saying all these things about your family is that we all know about each other’s lives. We’re like a big family. When one family has a problem and can’t solve it, we’re all here to help them. You know this. Who arranged your father’s funeral? It was Jallani, and we helped him.”

“And let me add one thing,” Baba Sharif said. He was the oldest man in Debori where we lived. He often stood in front of our school gates and told us to collect the loose papers fluttering on the street and put them in a trash can. He told us the papers were holy, and one must not walk on them because they could be used to write God’s names. “The reason you and your brother and sisters are so accomplished is because your father wanted the best for all of you. There was no limit to your father’s ambition. What he couldn’t achieve, he expected his children to achieve. He was a free spirit to the last day of his life and rebelled against every social convention. He didn’t stop working on this garden, though he could hardly bend down. He planted those flowers that now look wilted. He built that terrace with his own feeble hands. It took him three years. Now you two may destroy all of this? What happened to your common sense?”

“I’m not the one trying to sell it,” Kabir said.

“Before you went to Pakistan, you came to my shop almost every day to buy books,” Habibullah said, looking at Amir. He owned the only bookstore in our neighborhood. It was near the grocery shop. I myself often went there on weekends and squeezed myself between the shelves to look at books. I loved their smell and colors. I would pull out a book and read the first few pages. If they caught my attention, I would sit in a corner and read more. I returned to it the next weekend. That is how I read the first part of *A Thousand and One Nights*. One day I noticed some large books in shiny covers on the top shelves and climbed a chair to reach them. When I found the *Kama Sutra*, I stopped reading other books. Several weeks later, Habibullah caught me leafing through the pages. He pulled me by my left ear to his desk. “What should I do with you?” he asked me gruffly.

“I want to buy a book,” I said.

He kept staring at me.

I put my hand on a stack of *A Thousand and One Nights* on his desk. I paid for a copy and left while he was still staring at me. That was the first book I ever bought from my weekly allowance, and I was unable to buy popcorn and ice cream for the rest of the week at school.

Sitting in Haji Kareem’s courtyard, I tried to avoid Habibullah’s eyes. I was afraid he might tell Father or Grandfather.

Habibullah continued, "Amir Jan, for you, reading books was as essential as drinking water. I'm a bookseller. I know readers can be smart and wise people. Why would you defy your father's will, Amir?"

Amir got up, adjusted his clothing, and looked at everyone. "I'm done here," he said. "This jirga is over. Nobody owns this house but me." He walked out of the courtyard.

No one was surprised. Walking out of a jirga is bound to happen when one of the parties grows angry.

"We're meeting here tomorrow at ten o'clock," Grandfather said.

Everybody left. I went home with my full tray of candies.

### **Making Rules**

Some people who were absent the first day came on the second day.

"Son," Grandfather said, looking at Amir. "No matter what you say, you can't deny your brother and sisters' shares."

"Then why aren't we in court?"

"You can do that, if you want. Sometimes, though, it is better to take care of things before they reach the government."

"Uncle Jallani, with all due respect to you and everyone here, you're all wasting your time. I'll not give a penny to my sisters. They've no share in this house. My brother and sisters left when I was ten years old. Now Father is dead, and they all claim their shares."

"We don't want a penny from this house," Kabir said. "Neither I nor our sisters. We only want to keep it in the family."

"Where were you when Mother died? Where were you when Father needed you?"

"You were not here, either," Kabir said. "You were in Pakistan, trying to be a mullah."

"Whatever you say," Amir said. "Our sisters are out of the will. I'll give you half of the house and build a wall in the middle and sell my share. But if you try to argue with me, I'll change my mind. This time I'll walk out of here and you'll never see me again. Understood, Professor Kabir, the history expert?"

"I don't want half the courtyard," Kabir retorted. "I don't want anything from this place. I want to do what Father said in the will: rent it or keep it. I can't come live here, but I'm willing to rent it. The money from the rent can go to Amir for a year, then to each of my sisters for a year, and then to me for a year."

"Who do you think you are?" Amir said. "Coming here after many years and making rules."

"I'm your older brother, and I'll do the right thing."

"What exactly have you done as an older brother for me? From the time he is a teenager, the older brother should play the role of a father to his younger siblings.

Did you do that? Older brothers should always take others into consideration before himself. Older brothers are generous. Older brothers keep watch over their siblings. I never saw you again after I turned seven. Now you make the rules!”

“You’re full of shit,” Kabir shouted.

Nobody understood what he meant. Was Kabir suggesting that Amir had eaten a big breakfast and now should use the bathroom? Everybody looked at one another and raised their eyebrows, confused. They did not know that Kabir no longer thought in Dari. Everything he said had to be translated in his mind from English into Dari. He had lived too long in America.

Kabir continued, “You’re so tiresome with your reproaches. Blaming me and wanting explanations for what can’t be explained. Get over it. Grow up. Remember: who sent Father the money to keep this place in good condition all those years? Who paid for his food and clothes and medicine? Who paid for you to have your kind of lifestyle, with no responsibility, spending year after year in *madrasahs* in Pakistan? What do you know of the things I have been through in America? You think I had an easy life there? Do you know why my hair turned gray? Why should I explain myself to you?” He stood and left the courtyard.

That meant the meeting was over for the day. Everybody went home.

Again, I took my uneaten tray of candies with me.

### Stories About America

After three days and more than a hundred pots of tea, everybody was showing signs of getting tired of all the talking while nothing was resolved. Grandfather and several of the older men stayed late and talked separately with Kabir and Amir. Sometimes we heard shouting over the wall, but we were not supposed to listen to it.

Amir and Kabir took turns staying in Grandfather’s guestroom. One night I looked through the keyhole. Amir was sitting in the dark. He took a match from his pocket and struck it. The light flared. He held the flame in front of him until it approached his fingers, then dipped it into the glass next to him, which was half full of tea. Then he lit another, and another.

My cousins and I enjoyed Kabir. He told us stories about America and his daughter, Sarah. He showed us her photos. Sarah was skinny with blue eyes and blonde hair, smiling in every picture. He also showed us photos of his house. “It is made of wood,” he said.

We laughed and did not believe him, because it looked like the houses in cartoons we watched on television every night before dinner. But when he showed us inside the rooms, they looked like ours.

In one of the pictures, we saw a dog sleeping on the couch in the living room. We also had a dog, but it always slept in his cage at the end of our courtyard.

"Its name is Charlie and it belongs to my wife, Barbara," Kabir said. "Barbara loves Charlie as much as she loves Sarah. Sometimes she lets Charlie sleep with her in our bed."

We thought it was very strange, but we did not say anything to Kabir.

Amir did not talk to us at all. We stayed away from him, because he always looked angry.

### **"Call It a Deal"**

On the fourth day, Habibullah the bookstore owner said quietly "If we don't come to an agreement today, I think we have to send these brothers to the court."

Ali agreed. "I have two bakeries and a bathhouse to run."

"Make patience your companion," Grandfather chided them politely, as Amir and Kabir took their places next to him.

"Uncle Jallani," Kabir said. "I have a suggestion. Now everybody knows the situation. In America in a case like this we vote. Whoever gets more votes, he wins. Let's vote. This'll save everybody's time."

"Let the Americans do things their way in America, son," Grandfather said. "We'll use our ways here. We'll talk as long as it takes to find a solution so both of you can walk out of here satisfied."

"I'll be satisfied when I sell my half of the house," Amir said in a sulking voice.

"What about our sisters?" Kabir asked.

"You can give them some of your half," he replied with anger rising.

"Do you know how difficult it is to even watch a woman giving birth?" Grandfather asked Amir. His tone of voice had changed. It had become thicker and louder, and he spoke forcefully. "Do you know how much pain a woman goes through to deliver a child? Of course not. You are an ungrateful, ignorant, and privileged person. Children should be named after their mothers. I don't know how we have stolen that right from women. Now you say your sisters have no shares of the house? Is this why your mother brought you up, so one day you deny your sisters their share? You study religion in Pakistan. You should know better than everyone here. Religion teaches us how to be better human beings, how to be kinder."

Amir opened his mouth to say something; Grandfather cut him off, "Don't say a word!"

I rarely had seen Grandfather get angry like this. His eyes lost their warmth. Wrinkles appeared on his forehead.

The courtyard became so quiet, it was as if the eighty men there were statues and had no breath in them.

Grandfather looked at Kabir and said calmly, trying to control his voice, "Tell us what you can offer?"

“My offer is to rent the house.”

“Stop being stubborn, Kabir,” Grandfather said. “Play your role of the older brother.”

“He’s twenty-two years old. He should learn to take care of himself.”

“Kabir, don’t lecture us. Tell us what you can do for Amir. You went away when he was seven. Treat him as if he were still seven years old, which he has been acting like lately. Do your brotherly job.”

“Amir can live here.”

“He can live here whether you want him to or not,” Grandfather said. “He has that right from his father’s will.”

“I can send him the money as I did for Father to look after the house.”

“Again, you have to do that no matter what. What can you do for Amir?”

Kabir did not answer for a full minute. “I’ll talk to my sisters and see if they can send him money for his food and clothes.”

“And what can you do for him? Stop wasting our time, Kabir! Talk like an older brother and a man.”

“I’ll pay for his wedding whenever he decides to get married. But with one condition. He must stop wasting his time in Pakistan. He should come back to Afghanistan, find a job, and hold it. I’m also willing to cover his living costs for the first three years until he fully stands on his feet.”

“And he can live in this house as long as he lives?” Grandfather said.

“Yes. But if I or one of my sisters comes back, we should be able to live here as well.”

“This sounds like a good deal to me.” Grandfather looked at Amir.

Amir did not say anything. Grandfather waited for a few moments, then looked at Amir and opened his hands as if he was expecting Amir to give him something. But Amir still said nothing.

“All right,” Grandfather said. “We call it a deal. We’ll write the contract in the afternoon.”

Grandfather looked at me. I noticed the wrinkles on his forehead were gone and the warmth in his eyes was back. He said, “Qais, get up and give everybody a candy to sweeten their mouths.”

I started to jump up with bottled-up energy to finally do my job. The last time a dispute had been resolved, Uncle Gul Agha’s second son, Nasir, had served the sweets and had bragged about it for weeks. But as soon as I tried to stand, I stumbled. My feet had gone asleep. I rubbed them and tried again to get up, but I was still unable to stand. Nasir took the tray from me as he smiled and brushed the hair that always covered his forehead with the back of his hand. I wanted to kick him. He went to everyone with the tray while I sat there pouting. But I was happy that there would



be no wall in the middle of Haji Kareem's courtyard and I might be able to play there again with my cousins.

Uncle Gul Agha looked at Grandfather and whispered, "Father, I have changed my mind. I think I would feel better if I live at home until my youngest brother and sister get married."

Grandfather smiled and slapped Uncle Gul Agha's back gently, as he said "A very good decision."