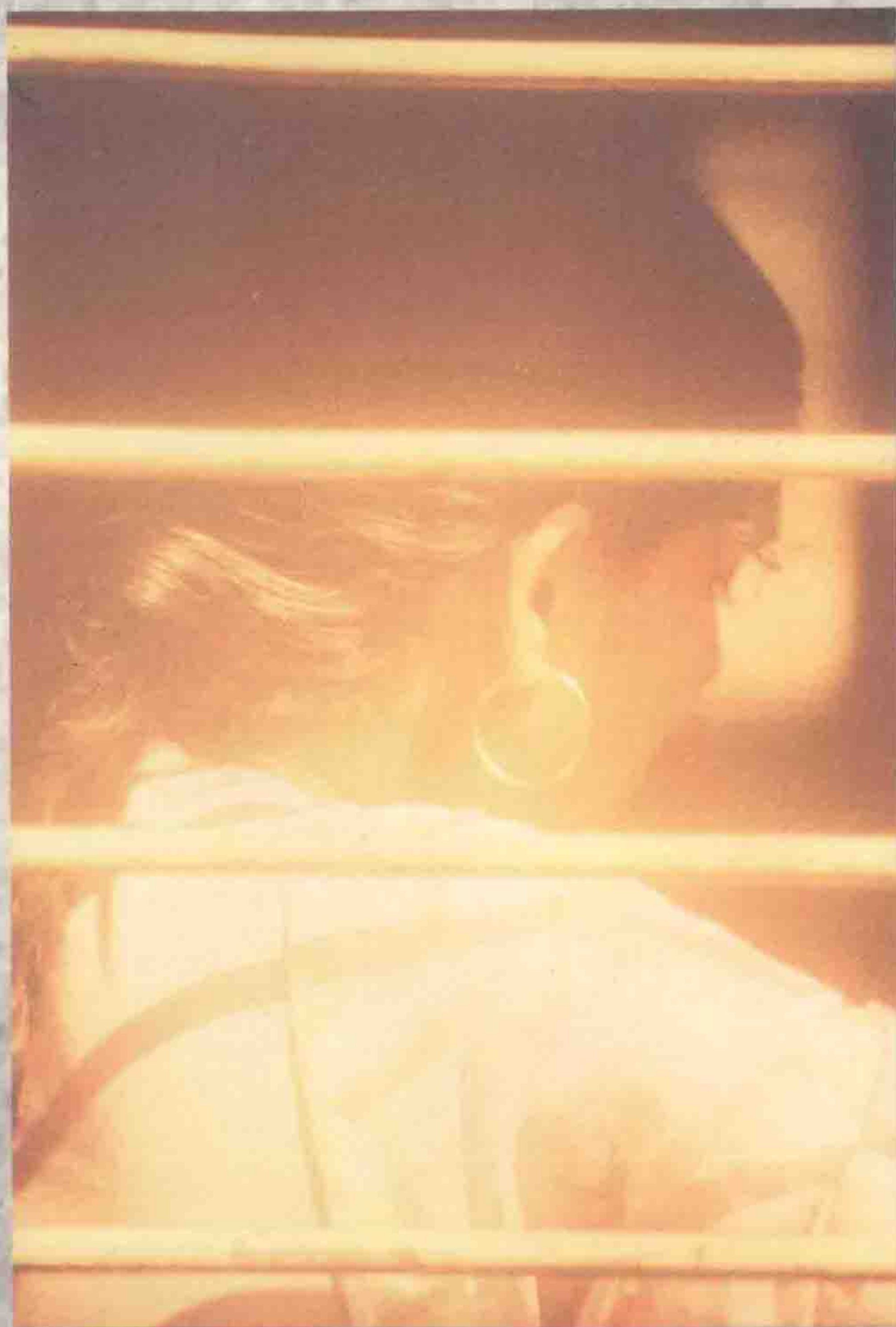




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THE TIME OF



THE PEACOCK

MEENA ABDULLAH & RAY MATHEW

THE TIME OF THE PEACOCK

Stories by
MENA ABDULLAH &
RAY MATHEW



*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
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ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

*Unit 4, Eden Park, 31 Waterloo Road,
North Ryde, NSW, Australia 2113;
94 Newton Road, Auckland 1,
New Zealand; and
16 Golden Square, London W1R 4BN,
United Kingdom*

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*First published in Australia
by Angus & Robertson Publishers in 1965
Pacific paperback edition 1967
Reprinted 1970, 1973, 1974
A&R Classics edition 1977
This New Sirius edition 1989*

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*National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data.*

Abdullah, Mena.

The time of the peacock.

ISBN 0 207 16277 8.

*I. Mathew, Ray, 1929- . II. Title.
A823'.3*

Printed in Australia by Griffin Press

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These stories were first published in the *Bulletin*, with the exception of “The Babu from Bengal” and “A Long Way”, which first appeared in *Quadrant* and *Hemisphere* respectively.

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THE TIME OF THE PEACOCK

WHEN I was little everything was wonderful; the world was our farm and we were all loved. Rashida and Lal and I, Father and our mother, Ama: we loved one another and everything turned to good.

I remember in autumn, how we burned the great baskets of leaves by the Gwydir and watched the fires burning in the river while Ama told us stories of Krishna the Flute-player and his moving mountains. And when the fires had gone down and the stories were alive in our heads we threw cobs of corn into the fires and cooked them. One for each of us—Rashida and Lal and I, Father and our mother.

Winter I remember, when the frost bit and stung and the wind pulled our hair. At night by the fire in the warmth of the house, we could hear the dingoes howling.

Then it was spring and the good year was born again. The sticks of the jasmine vine covered themselves with flowers.

One spring I remember was the time of the peacock when I learnt the word *secret* and began to grow up. After that spring everything somehow was different, was older. I was not little any more, and the baby came.

I had just learnt to count. I thought I could count anything. I counted fingers and toes, the steps and the windows, even the hills. But this day in spring the hills were wrong.

There should have been five. I knew that there should have been five. I counted them over and over—“*Ek, do, tin, panch*”—but it was no good. There was one too many, a strange hill, a left-over. It looked familiar, and I knew it, but it made more than five and worried me. I thought of Krishna and the mountains that moved to protect the cow-herds, the travellers lost because of them, and I was frightened because it seemed to me that our hills had moved.

I ran through the house and out into the garden to tell

Ama the thing that Krishna had done and to ask her how we could please him. But when I saw her I forgot all about them; I was as young as that. I just stopped and jumped, up and down.

She was standing there, in her own garden, the one with the Indian flowers, her own little walled-in country. Her hands were joined together in front of her face, and her lips were moving. On the ground, in front of the Kashmiri rose-bush; in front of the tuberose, in front of the pomegranate-tree, she had placed little bowls of shining milk. I jumped to see them. Now I knew why I was running all the time and skipping, why I wanted to sing out and to count everything in the world.

"It is spring," I shouted to Ama. "Not nearly-spring! Not almost-spring!. But really-spring! Will the baby come soon?" I asked her. "Soon?"

"Soon, Impatience, soon."

I laughed at her and jumped up and clapped my hands together over the top of my head.

"I am as big as that," I said. "I can do anything." And I hopped on one leg to the end of the garden where the peacock lived. "Shah-Jehan!" I said to him — that was his name. "It is spring and the baby is coming, pretty Shah-Jehan." But he didn't seem interested. "Silly old Shah-Jehan," I said. "Don't you know anything? I can count ten."

He went on staring with his goldy eye at me. He *was* a silly bird. Why, he had to stay in the garden all day, away from the rooster. He couldn't run everywhere the way that I could. He couldn't do anything.

"Open your tail," I told him. "Go on, open your tail." And we went on staring at one another till I felt sad.

"Rashida is right," I said to him. "You will never open your tail like the bird on the fan. But why don't you try? Please, pretty Shah-Jehan." But he just went on staring as though he would never open his tail, and while I looked at

him sadly I remembered how he had come to us.

He could lord it now and strut in the safety of the garden, but I remembered how the Lascar brought him to the farm, in a bag, like a cabbage, with his feathers drooping and his white tail dirty.

The Lascar came to the farm, a seaman on the land, a dark face in a white country. How he smiled when he saw us—Rashida and me swinging on the gate. How he chattered to Ama and made her laugh and cry. How he had shouted about the curries that she gave him.

And when it was time to go, with two basins of curry tied up in cloth and packed in his bag, he gave the bird to Ama, gave it to her while she said nothing, not even “thank you”. She only looked at him.

“What is it?” we said as soon as he was far enough away. “What sort of bird?”

“It is a peacock,” said Ama, very softly. “He has come to us from India.”

“It is not like the peacock on your Kashmiri fan,” I said. “It is only a sort of white.”

“The peacock on the fan is green and blue and gold and has a tail like a fan,” said Rashida. “This is not a peacock at all. Anyone can see that.”

“Rashida,” said Ama, “Rashida! The eldest must not be too clever. He is a white peacock. He is too young to open his tail. He is a peacock from India.”

“Ama,” I said, “make him, make him open his tail.”

“I do not think,” she said, “I do not think he will ever open his tail in this country.”

“No,” said Father that night, “he will never open his tail in Australia.”

“No,” said Uncle Seyed next morning, “he will never open his tail without a hen-bird near.”

But we had watched him—Rashida and Lal and I—had watched him for days and days until we had grown tired of

watching and he had grown sleek and shiny and had found his place in the garden.

"Won't you ever open your tail?" I asked him again. "Not now that it's spring?" But he wouldn't even try, not even try to look interested, so I went away from him and looked for someone to talk to.

The nurse-lady who was there to help Ama and who was pink like an apple and almost as round was working in the kitchen.

"The baby is coming soon," I told her. "Now that it's spring."

"Go on with you," she laughed. "Go on."

So I did, until I found Rashida sitting in a window-sill with a book in front of her. It was the nurse-lady's baby-book.

"What are you doing?"

"I am reading," she said. "This is the baby-book. I am reading how to look after the baby."

"You can't read," I said. "You know you can't read."

Rashida refused to answer. She just went on staring at the book, turning pages.

"But you can't read!" I shouted at her. "You can't."

She finished running her eye down the page. "I am not reading words," she said. "I know what the book tells. I am reading things."

"But you know, you know you can't read." I stamped away from her, cranky as anything, out of the house, past the window where Rashida was sitting—so cleverly—down to the vegetable patch where I could see Lal. He was digging with a trowel.

"What are you doing?" I said, not very pleasantly.

"I am digging," said Lal. "I am making a garden for my new baby brother."

"How did you know? How did you all know? I was going to tell *you*." I was almost crying. "Anyway," I said, "it might not be a brother."

"Oh yes, it will," said Lal. "We have girls."

"I'll dig, too," I said, laughing, and suddenly happy again. "I'll help you. We'll make a big one."

"Digging is man's work," said Lal. "I'm a man. You're a girl."

"You're a baby," I said. "You're only four." And I threw some dirt at him, and went away.

Father was making a basket of sticks from the plum-tree. He used to put crossed sticks on the ground, squat in the middle of them, and weave other sticks in and out of them until a basket had grown up round him. All I could see were his shoulders and the back of his turban as I crept up behind him, to surprise him.

But he was not surprised. "I knew it would be you," he said. I scowled at him then, but he only laughed the way that he always did.

"Father—" I began in a questioning voice that made him groan. Already I was called the Australian one, the questioner. "Father," I said, "why do peacocks have beautiful tails?"

He tugged at his beard. "Their feet are ugly," he said. "Allah has given them tails so that no one will look at their feet."

"But Shah-Jehan," I said, and Father bent his head down over his weaving. "Everyone looks at his feet. His tail never opens."

"Yes," said Father definitely, as though that explained everything, and I began to cry: it was that sort of day, laughter and tears. I suppose it was the first day of spring.

"What is it, what is it?" said Father.

"Everything," I told him. "Shah-Jehan won't open his tail, Rashida pretends she can read, Lal won't let me dig. I'm nothing. And it's spring. Ama is putting out the milk for the snakes, and I counted—" But Father was looking so serious that I never told him what I had counted.

"Listen," he said. "You are big now, Nimmi. I will tell you a secret."

"What is secret?"

He sighed. "It is what is ours," he said. "Something we know but do not tell, or share with one person only in the world."

"With me!" I begged. "With me!"

"Yes," he said, "with you. But no crying or being nothing. This is to make you a grown-up person."

"Please," I said to him, "please." And I loved him then so much that I wanted to break the cage of twigs and hold him.

"We are Muslims," he said. "But your mother has a mark on her forehead that shows that once she was not. She was a Brahmin and she believed all the stories of Krishna and Siva."

"I know that," I said, "and the hills—"

"Monkey, quiet," he commanded. "But now Ama is a Muslim, too. Only, she remembers her old ways. And she puts out the milk in the spring."

"For the snakes," I said. "So they will love us, and leave us from harm."

"But there are no snakes in the garden," said Father.

"But they drink the milk," I told him. "Ama says—"

"If the milk were left, the snakes would come," said Father. "And they must not come, because there is no honour in snakes. They would strike you or Rashida or little Lal or even Ama. So—and this is the secret that no one must know but you and me—I go to the garden in the night and empty the dishes of milk. And this way I have no worry and you have no harm and Ama's faith is not hurt. But you must never tell."

"Never, never tell," I assured him.

All that day I was kind to Lal, who was only a baby and not grown up, and I held my head up high in front of

Rashida, who was clever but had no secret. All of that day I walked in a glory full of my secret. I even felt cleverer than Ama, who knew everything but must never, never know this.

She was working that afternoon on her quilt. I looked at the crochet pictures in the little squares of it.

"Here is a poinsettia," I said.

"Yes," said Ama. "And here is—"

"It's Shah-Jehan! With his tail open."

"Yes," said Ama, "so it is, and here is a rose for the baby."

"When will the baby come?" I asked her. "Not soon, but when?"

"Tonight, tomorrow night," said Ama, "the next."

"Do babies always come at night?"

"Mine, always," said Ama. "There is the dark and the waiting, and then the sun on our faces. And the scent of jasmine, even here." And she looked at her garden.

"But, Ama—"

"No questions, Nimmi. My head is buzzing. No questions today."

That night I heard a strange noise, a harsh cry. "Shah-Jehan!" I said. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. I stood on a chair and looked out to the garden.

It was moonlight, the moon so big and low that I thought I could lean out and touch it, and there—looking sad, and white as frost in the moonlight—stood Shah-Jehan.

"Shah-Jehan, little brother," I said to him, "you must not feel about your feet. Think of your tail, pretty one, your beautiful tail."

And then, as I was speaking, he lifted his head and slowly, slowly opened his tail—like a fan, like a fan of lace that was as white as the moon. O Shah-Jehan! It was as if you had come from the moon.

My throat hurt, choked, so that my breath caught and I shut my eyes. When I opened them it was all gone: the moon

was the moon and Shah-Jehan was a milky-white bird with his tail drooping and his head bent.

In the morning the nurse-lady woke us. "Get up," she said. "Guess what? In the night, a sister! The dearest, sweetest, baby sister . . . Now, up with you."

"No brother," said Lal. "No baby brother."

We laughed at him, Rashida and I, and ran to see the baby. Ama was lying, very still and small, in the big bed. Her long plait of black hair stretched out across the white pillow. The baby was in the old cradle and we peered down at her. Her tiny fists groped on the air towards us. But Lal would not look at her. He climbed onto the bed and crawled over to Ama.

"No boy," he said sadly. "No boy to play with."

Ama stroked his hair. "My son," she said. "I am sorry, little son."

"Can we change her?" he said. "For a boy?"

"She is a gift from Allah," said Ama. "You can never change gifts."

Father came in from the dairy, his face a huge grin, he made a chuckling noise over the cradle and then sat on the bed.

"Missus," he said in the queer English that always made the nurse-lady laugh, "this one little fellow, eh?"

"Big," said Ama. "Nine pounds." And the nurse-lady nodded proudly.

"What wrong with this fellow?" said Father, scooping Lal up in his arm. "What wrong with you, eh?"

"No boy," said Lal. "No boy to talk to."

"*Ai! Ai!*" lamented Father, trying to change his expression. "Too many girls here," he said. "Better we drown one. Which one we drown, Lal? Which one, eh?"

Rashida and I hurled ourselves at him, squealing with delight. "Not me! Not me!" we shouted while the nurse-lady tried to hush us.

"You are worse than the children," she said to Father. "Far worse." But then she laughed, and we all did—even the baby made a noise.

But what was the baby to be called? We all talked about it. Even Uncle Seyed came in and leant on the doorpost while names were talked over and over.

At last Father lifted the baby up and looked into her big dark eyes. "What was the name of your sister?" he asked Uncle Seyed. "The little one, who followed us everywhere? The little one with the beautiful eyes?"

"Jamila," said Uncle Seyed. "She was Jamila."

So that was to be her first name, Jamila, after the little girl who was alive in India when Father was a boy and he and Uncle Seyed had decided to become friends like brothers. And her second name was Shahnaz, which means the Heart's Beloved.

And then I remembered. "Shah-Jehan," I said. "He can open his tail. I saw him last night, when everyone was asleep."

"You couldn't see in the night," said Rashida. "You dreamt it, baby."

"No, I didn't. It was bright moon."

"You dreamt it, Nimmi," said Father. "A peacock wouldn't open his tail in this country."

"I didn't dream it," I said in a little voice that didn't sound very certain: Father was always right. "I'll count Jamila's fingers," I said before Rashida could say anything else about the peacock. "*Ek, do, tin, panch,*" I began.

"You've left out *cha*," said Father.

"Oh yes, I forgot. I forgot it. *Ek, do, tin, cha, panch*—she has five," I said.

"Everyone has five," said Rashida.

"Show me," said Lal. And while Father and Ama were showing him the baby's fingers and toes and telling him how

to count them, I crept out on the veranda where I could see the hills.

I counted them quickly. "*Ek, do, tin, cha, panch.*" There were only five, not one left over. I was so excited that I felt the closing in my throat again. "I didn't dream it," I said. "I couldn't dream the pain. I did see it, I did. I have another secret now. And only five hills. *Ek, do, tin, cha, panch.*"

They never changed again. I was grown up.

BECAUSE OF THE RUSILLA

THE whole day—the trip to town, the nigger word, the singing kettle—was because of the Rusilla. It had flown away.

It was a small bird and of no use to the farm, but it was Lal's and its loss was a tragic thing.

It was Rashida who found it, though, Rashida and I. It was in the grass by the creek, shining red and green and fluttering to get out of the long creek grass. I saw it first and I pointed to it. But Rashida stalked it and caught it. Then we carried it back to Father. That's to say, Rashida carried it. I wanted to and I had the right because I saw it first, but Rashida didn't offer it and I couldn't ask her. She was older than I was and she had the right to decide. And besides, even though we were children on the banks of the Gwydir, we were still Punjabis and Punjabis do not beg. Even a little child like Lal knew that. And so did I. Rashida carried it.

Father looked at the bird. "Young and weak," he said. "Young and weak. It will mostly die."

"Yes," said Rashida in a proud voice, holding herself up to look at life as a Punjabi should. "It will die."

She gave the bird to me then and I took it gladly. I held it tightly, too tightly probably. Its wings flapped at my hands and I could feel, under the wings and the feathers, a wild beating like the noise you hear at night when your ear is on the pillow, and I knew it was the bird's heart beating.

So I held it more gently than before, in a cage of fingers. "What bird?" I said. "What sort of bird? What name?"

Father looked at me and frowned. I was always asking names, more names than there were words for. I was the dreamy one, the one he called the Australian.

"Rusilla," he said at last. "It is a bird called Rusilla."

"Rusilla?" I said. "Rusilla." It was a good name and I was satisfied.

I took it home and showed it to Lal, who was only four. "I have a Rusilla," I said. "It is a very strange bird, young and weak, and it will mostly die, but you can help me feed it. Get grass-seeds and blackberries. Grass-seeds like these."

He potted away gravely while I put the bird in a chicken-coop that had been left by some accident in the garden. And from that day Lal and I hunted the garden, gathering and sorting, to feed the Rusilla.

The garden was a strange place and lovely. It was our mother's place, Ama's own place. Outside its lattice walls was the farmyard with its fowls and goats (Suliman the rooster and Yasmin the nanny), and beyond that was Father's place, the wool-sheds and the yards, and beyond that the hills with their changing faces and their Australianness. We had never been to them, and Ama — that was our word for "mother"; *ama* means love—Ama told us they were very strange. But everything was strange to Ama, except the garden.

Inside its lattice walls grew the country that she knew. There were tuberoses and jasmine, white violets and the pink Kashmiri roses whose buds grew clenched, like baby hands. The garden was cool and sweet and full of rich scent. Even the kitchen smell of curry and of ghee was lost and had no meaning in that place. There was Shah-Jehan the white peacock, too. And other birds came there, free birds of their own will, the magpie day and night to wake us at morning and to bed us at night, and a shining black bird that Indians call "kokila" and Australians call "koel". But these were singing birds that came and went, came and went. For the Rusilla, the garden was a cage.

It was a cage for Lal, too. He was gentle and small and the only son because another, an elder one, had merely opened his eyes to die. Ama and Father were afraid for Lal;