

# The Smiling Buddha

(Excerpted from the *Chakiwara Chronicles* of Mr Iqbal Changezi,  
Proprietor, Allah Tawakkul Bakery)



THESE BIZARRE, TRAGIC AND SOMEWHAT PREPOSTEROUS series of events (yes, every tragedy has a smattering of comedy after all) that I witnessed in Chakiwara and in which I had a minor role, all began on the morning of 17 July, 1952.

The reason I remember the date is because I keep a diary, a chronicle of sorts, where I record important events or stories every day. On days when nothing interesting happens, I write, 'Nothing interesting happened' under the date. This chronicle has now spread to over seven thousand pages and it could even be turned into a book of eight or nine volumes. In these times of sluggish markets and a general indifference to literature, I don't think any sane publisher would even touch this manuscript with a bargepole. I don't care. I only write it to feed my habit – or addiction – and my friends, Muhammad Deen Asp, Qurban Ali Kattar and others have assured me that the manuscript will certainly be published under their supervision after my death with great ceremony and fanfare. Why they should wish to preserve my personal treasure for the coming generations is beyond me. The chronicle, naturally, is full of bilge and drivel, much like myself. As far as its writing is concerned, I hope that readers who understand me will forgive my nonsensical banter.

I have not used any specific method or care in selecting or structuring the events of this chronicle. I have tried to shape them into a story, even though many would argue rather uselessly with me over calling this a 'story'. They can go to the devil for all I care.

I will call this 'The Story of the Smiling Buddha'. It could also be named 'The Chinese Dentist' or 'The Last Act' but I think 'The Smiling Buddha' is most appropriate because whether one agrees or not, the Buddha played a crucial role in giving a twist to these thrilling events. I am convinced of this.



On the aforementioned morning, I was standing outside Allah Tawakkul Bakery on a ladder with a paintbrush in my hand, painting the bakery's signboard. All businessmen know that the first principle of success is keeping up the appearance of the shop: it must be clean, shiny, and overall in a tip-top condition. It had occurred to me that morning that perhaps the declining sales of bread could be shored up by repainting the dirty and faded letters of the bakery signboard. Painting signboards is not easy; it is far more demanding than writing a three-hundred page novel. I have seen painters who ended up painting themselves while trying to paint a signboard. The painter, who is not in the most comfortable position, grapples with the looming hazard of toppling from the ladder on the passersby below. And yet, painting is not without its pleasures. My colours were coming out bright and fine, and I whistled away as a heady rush of happiness overcame me.

Then out of nowhere I heard something that sounded like an agonized whimper; a long, drawn-out 'HAAEY'. I looked below. Near the foot of the ladder stood my friend Qurban Ali Kattar dressed in the coat-pant that I had lent him last week. His mouth was covered with a handkerchief and there was an anguished expression on his face, which sported an imperial beard. He was staring at me. The sudden, unexpected appearance of this

ghost-like figure startled me and I staggered. The bucket slipped from my hand and a large dollop of thick green paint splashed straight on his face and soaked his clothes and a part of his beard. Without paying much attention to his grumbling laments (I couldn't even hear them properly), I asked him what made him quit his soft, warm bed so early in the morning. I reminded him that the bakery didn't open before 8 a.m.

'Changezi yaar! Come down,' he said impatiently. 'You have toppled the paint bucket on me as revenge but I won't say anything. You will regret this later. In any case, I am very ill and if you don't wish your friend an early death then I need to be taken to a doctor urgently.'

'Why should I take you? Why don't you walk there yourself?' I said.

'With illnesses such as mine, the moral support and care of friends is extremely important,' Kattar said. 'I don't want to go alone. What if I collapse on the way to the doctor?'

'What has happened to you?' I asked.

'Changezi yaar, really, I am extremely ill,' Kattar said. 'If something happens to me, imagine the terrible vacuum that would be left in the world of literature. You think this whole thing is just a joke?'

'I am only asking you what the illness is, and why are you holding that handkerchief to your mouth?'

'My gums hurt so much. I couldn't sleep all night. Aaeye! Haeye!' Kattar groaned. 'I have a shooting pain in my head and body. Changezi! I think the recent nuclear tests have made the atmosphere toxic and given rise to radioactivity. I think I have become radioactive.'

I sent Qurban Ali Kattar towards a water tap and calmly finished the work at hand. When I came down he was sitting

on the steps of the bakery with a long face. Even after rubbing and scrubbing his face with water, the paint was still stuck to his beard and nose.

I unlocked the door of the bakery and settled him in an armchair.

‘Changezi yaar!’ he said. ‘Get me a steaming hot cup of tea. It might reduce the pain.’

I made tea. Meanwhile, he put his hand in the jar and ate two or three small cakes because he claimed he was unable to chew buns or biscuits.

‘When will you take me to the doctor?’ he asked. He actually appeared to be in great pain.

‘Not taking you to the doctor,’ I said. ‘Wait for the shops to open up. I’ll take you to a dentist. You’ll be fine once your jaw tooth is pulled out. He’ll probably charge four or five rupees to remove it. If you don’t have the money with you, run home and get it first.’

He said he wasn’t in a condition to go to his flat so I lent him five rupees. It was about 9 a.m. and Muhammad Deen Asp had also arrived. We helped the weeping, moaning Qurban Ali Kattar to a Chinese dentist’s shop on Marriot Road. Let me tell you, it was a very interesting scene. A few people came to sympathize with the unfortunate patient, asking what had happened to him. Some even thought we had kidnapped the novelist but they did not intervene to help him, thinking it must be for a good cause. On our way, we encountered ex-comedian Chakori in his excessively tight hat, who decided to accompany us for moral support. By the time we reached the Chinese dentist Ah Fung’s shop, the patient was wailing and kicking like a suckling baby and we had to almost lift and carry

him. Finally, we succeeded in offloading him on an empty chair inside. We tried to silence him with words of consolation and even appealed to his manhood but this only made him wail even louder.

When we reached his shop, Ah Fung was busy fixing an old woman's mouth. He looked at the new patient a bit oddly and I think he even gave us a faint smile.

'What happened to the young gentleman?' he asked.

'His jaw hurts,' I explained.

'Okay, he wants it removed?'

We did not know the young gentleman's intentions but we nodded in agreement.

'Bas, I will take one more minute,' said Ah Fung.

The dentist's one minute was indeed one minute. The old woman vacated the revolving chair and we got hold of Qurban Ali Kattar and firmly lodged him in it, ignoring his protests.

Qurban Ali Kattar said he didn't want to lose his jaw tooth but the old dentist asked him to open his mouth wide and with his deft fingers, located the aching tooth. He made a knocking sound and shook his head.

'The young gentleman has very, very severe pyorrhoea,' he addressed us as the guardians of the patient. 'My advice would be to have all the teeth removed. For now I'll remove the jaw tooth.'

The novelist tried to get up and run from the dentist's chair but Chakori and I held him down by his shoulders. Ah Fung started working the moment I gave him the signal. He thrust a syringe into the aching gum and handed Kattar a medicated cotton ball to place on it.

Meanwhile, the novelist who had penned countless romantic tales and death-defying adventures was hanging on

to his chair like a terrified child. He gave us the look that a sacrificial goat gives the butcher right before getting butchered. He still seemed inclined to run off but our merciless stares left him affixed to his chair.

Ah Fung was an artist when it came to his work. He first cracked a few jokes, then talked about the weather, and then his pincers made a swift leap into the novelist's mouth. Next thing we knew, the aching tooth had been plucked out.

'Help! Help!' Qurban Ali Kattar shouted. 'I don't want my tooth removed.'

'Sit quietly, Kattar,' I said. 'It's already removed. No need to make a fuss. Everyone's looking.'

Ah Fung showed the novelist his bloody tooth. But only after great difficulty did Kattar believe that it was actually his own tooth. I was about to suggest that he save it as a souvenir but the dentist threw it away in the basin next to his chair. The novelist sat slumped as if he had lost all will to walk after losing one tooth and a few drops of blood. In fact, he was probably expecting us to carry him home on a stretcher. Ah Fung put a medicated cotton ball on the aching gum and gave Kattar a few sulphide tablets. He looked truly amazed when his terrible pain vanished. We thanked Ah Fung for saving our friend and asked our novelist to pay him five rupees. He shuffled in his pocket for the note.

'Changezi yaar! I cannot find it!' he said. 'Are you sure you gave me five rupees?'

Ah Fung was looking at us, so I quickly paid his five rupees and asked the novelist to vacate his chair because other patients were waiting. When we were leaving, Ah Fung bent down and said, 'Young gentleman's teeth are in a terrible state. He must



immediately have all teeth removed. I will make him a brand new set. A very good one, first class!’

And just like that, we started visiting the dentist two or three times a week. It wasn’t easy to convince the novelist to get all his precious teeth removed. It took Asp and me whole days and many hours of argument to achieve this feat. He was reminded of the consequences of not having his teeth removed. We made it clear to him that his pyorrhoea was in a highly advanced stage and if he didn’t get his teeth removed his chances of death were fairly obvious.

‘Who cares about poor Qurban Ali Kattar,’ he said, testing the loyalty of his friends. ‘What difference does it make to you if I die?’

‘It would make a huge difference,’ I said. ‘Who will borrow my shirts and ties? Who will come for breakfast at the bakery every morning?’

‘Changezi, you are such a scrubby miser! Do you really value these silly things more than the friendship of someone like me?’

Clearly, Kattar’s sense of humour had nearly gone extinct and he didn’t appreciate my cheeriness.

So we offered him some more arguments to convince him against dying too early, which seemed to appeal to him. We told him that if he died an early death, Urdu literature would go bankrupt and it would be impossible to fill the tremendous void he would leave. We pleaded with him in the name of Urdu literature itself to please allow us to have his teeth removed. Muhammed Deen Asp took a different approach. He explained to Kattar that with his current set of teeth, further success in his romantic ventures was highly doubtful, but if he got a sparkling new set installed then he would look many years younger and

that way, half of Chakiwara's female populace would be in his pursuit wherever he went. And so, just like that, the novelist finally conceded to the advantages of having his teeth removed, and since the dentist's fee and the cost of the new set was going to fall entirely on Iqbal Changezi's head, this free makeover didn't seem like a bad deal to him. 'I did not know,' he said, 'that my friends were so devoted and cared so deeply for my welfare. I am proud of you, friends.'

After that, it became routine for us to visit Ah Fung's shop. The novelist had agreed to have all his teeth removed and get a new set installed in their place. He often reiterated that he was doing this only to make his friends happy. Ah Fung, noticing Qurban Ali Kattar's generally decrepit state, would remove one tooth every three or four days. Asp or I would always be present for support during these visits since Kattar didn't have the courage to go there alone. Sometimes, even Chakori accompanied us on our trips. He was one of those people who never worked and yet somehow managed to get by. A short, skinny man with Mongolian features, he was an interesting fool who babbled at random and recounted funny anecdotes from his Bombay days. His brown penetrating eyes would stay fixed on the dentist; he observed his movements with singular concentration as if he wanted to learn dentistry. As we discovered later, this was exactly what he was doing. Sometimes, he'd fetch poor Ah Fung's instruments and would try to win his approval with fawning banter. Ah Fung also looked pleased with him and laughed at his jokes. Asp and I however, were always wary of the actor despite his easy and jocular manners. We were never completely enamoured of him and could see that his eyes gleamed with a certain cunning.

Due to our regular visits to Ah Fung's shop, everything there became familiar to us – the tooth and gum charts, images of gigantic, coiling heads of fire-spouting dragons, the medicine bottles in the open cupboard behind the corner table. From beneath the blue curtain peeped two steps that went up to the room where the dentist lived. There might be many dentists in this city with similar arrangements but what was unique to Ah Fung's place was a bronze statue of the Buddha, seated in repose, performing religious penance. It was on a shelf just above the dentist's chair from where it used to catch our attention and quicken our blood. This Buddha was different from others – it was a heavy, ungainly Buddha whose ugly features created an aura of depravity and wickedness rather than of peace and serenity. On top of his head was a sculpted cone-shaped tower, some nine inches high. Whenever I saw it, I felt a cold shiver run down my spine, as if this vile Buddha was alive and watching me. We got used to seeing him but this feeling of unease never left us, and we never understood why the dentist had placed it right in front of his chair. Maybe to render his patients numb with terror so that they wouldn't pay much attention to their freshly pulled-out teeth.

Ah Fung was himself a gentle and benign Chinese man whose face showed no signs of wickedness and whose crooked brown eyes often started sparkling with glee on hearing Chakori's wisecracks. In his white dentist's robe, this emaciated man of nearly fifty, fifty-one years, wearing golden-rimmed spectacles, looked more like a Chinese philosopher than a dentist – a bit like Confucius – who bore no inner resemblance to the hideous and chilling statue on the shelf. We usually collect only those pictures and decorative items that resonate

with us even if we are oblivious of them. But who can say what turbulent emotions rage like waves in the deep, silent ocean of a human heart? On the left arm of that gentle Chinese man, a fire-spewing dragon was tattooed – a savage symbol of his race – but the tattoo and that statue bore no resemblance to his genial personality.

One day, I finally asked Ah Fung about the Buddha; where did he find it and why was it so different from other Buddhas and if he had placed it there in order to frighten his customers. (Often while we were on our way to the shop, the novelist Qurban Ali Kattar would complain that this statue had not let him sleep the previous night, and in his nightmares it had chased him with outstretched arms.)

Ah Fung gave me a quizzical look as if he was not at all expecting such a question from me. It is likely that no one had ever asked him about it before.

‘Mr Iqbal! This is a Buddha from the Ming era. Some two thousand years old. Made by one of the emperor’s famous statue-makers, Hunsha. A friend who knows a lot about statues has told us. When the Red Army was entering Shanghai, I saw this statue while escaping. It was lying in a heap of junk outside the Hall of Justice. I liked it and picked it up. I don’t know much else myself...’

He said this while working on one of Chakiwara’s hookers, a slightly chubby girl who was getting a filling in her teeth (because all sorts of people in Chakiwara visit his shop). She rolled her eyes flirtatiously and said, ‘I also like it. I like it, bas. I am going to take it sometime.’

‘You are not going to take it, little madame,’ Ah Fung said with feigned seriousness. His eyes gleamed flirtatiously.

‘Oh, you just watch, Ah Fung-ji.’ She pressed his nose between her fingers playfully.

‘Madame, sit still,’ Ah Fung said, doing his work. ‘This Buddha has been with me since ... It was with me when I went to Hong Kong, it was with me when I went to Siam. It was with me when I went to Malaya. A curio merchant offered five thousand dollars for it. I told him, “Nothing doing, my friend.” Now it’s with me in Karachi. Mr Changezi, the thing is, I have developed an association with it. I feel that if this stays with me then everything will be all right for Ah Fung. There will be no danger for Ah Fung. And if it’s not with me then some disaster will befall. This is my superstition.’

We laughed at Ah Fung’s ridiculous superstition; the chubby girl laughed the most and she repeated that she would pinch it someday. But Ah Fung was now deeply serious and I began to understand his superstition a bit. If we think about it, all of us are superstitious about something or the other. I have an oil lamp in the bakery with a large crimson globe. It’s useless, it hasn’t been lit in years but I never feel like parting with it and I wouldn’t sell it to anyone even for thousands of rupees. I feel that the destiny of Allah Tawakkul Bakery and my own are somehow mysteriously linked to this lamp, and without it, things would not be the same.

I am of the opinion that men who live alone – that is, ones without wives and children – often fall prey to such superstitions. And Ah Fung was a very lonely man. He had neither child nor wife. He was a stranger in an alien land. All kinds of people visited his shop. Quite often they were women of all types and ages – some were housewives, some hookers. He was a master of his work and his rates were reasonable.

His demeanour towards his female patients was made of professional good humour, and he indulged in the occasional teasing, which his clients enjoyed; he was quite popular among them. I believe that he occasionally spent a night or two with a call girl in his room right above his shop, but these things don't cure loneliness. There are many Chinese restaurants in Karachi and many Chinese are also dentists, many are in other businesses, but as far as I know, Ah Fung did not find friends even among his compatriots. Very few ever visited him and he didn't go out to meet them either. However, despite his aloofness, he kept a tab on their news and state of affairs. Quite possibly this reticence in him was out of tight-fistedness, a common trait in the Chinese people. He was quite cautious with his money. But at the same time, it could also have been out of his natural shyness.

It took me about a month and a half to get the novelist's teeth removed one by one. During this period, Qurban Ali Kattar managed to write at least two novels – *The Comforting Beauty* and *The Secret of the Terrifying Statue* – and fell in love with nearly all the good-looking women between the ages of fourteen and thirty that visited Ah Fung's shop in his presence. Our beloved novelist, like most creative artists, possesses a sensitive, compassionate heart, and he is perpetually in a state of passionate love. (During those days he'd visit me at the bakery and read out his day's work, meaning two or three chapters of his novel, and sigh and pine in the absence of the women he had last seen in Ah Fung's shop.) But there were no limits to his ingratitude. Everything that we – Asp and I – were doing to keep literature alive by getting his teeth extracted, all the things we did to encourage and support him in his love affairs,

he showed no appreciation for any of it. In fact, he repeatedly complained that his friends didn't help him and for that reason none of his romantic exploits were ever successful.

We tried to assure him that the bakery would continue to provide the milk, rusk and biscuits to keep his soul and dilapidated body together (it wasn't possible for him to chew solid food given the condition of his teeth) and that his occupation as a lover would receive a tremendous boost from his new set of teeth. But attempting anything beforehand would be useless because any girl in her right mind would not cast even a glance towards a man with that floppy a mouth – and that too, a novelist.

Now the issue was to get the new set of teeth for the novelist. Ah Fung's charges were four hundred but he was willing to accept three-fifty from us. Due to a shortage of money, we kept delaying the matter. Qurban Ali Kattar went to his publisher to collect the royalties of his previous books and the payment for the new ones. The publisher took both novels and handed him a hundred rupees for each manuscript, saying that the demand for his novels had declined greatly because some 'smart' young men had entered the arena and they didn't hesitate even one bit in revealing the complete details of human 'ennui' in their writing.

One morning we were actually talking about the new set (Qurban Ali Kattar was talking and I was helping Asp load bread and pastries into his van) when ex-comedian Chakori dropped by. He looked flamboyant in his pleated jacket and blue trousers. He was wearing a felt hat and carried a stick in his hand. We knew he was a dandy but we had no idea where he found all the money for these flashy excesses.

‘Good morning, gentlemen! Kattar sahib, are you feeling well? What is this talk of new teeth?’ Chakori always spoke to us in a particularly amiable manner. And although we had known each other for over a year now, we could not reach a level of comfort and familiarity with him that would allow us to communicate with each other in a more informal manner. Despite spending so much time together, Asp and I didn’t know much about him. He never told us anything about what he did, where he lived or where he found those fine hats and clothes. He was around forty, forty-five years of age. Crooked, brown eyes, large ears, a broad forehead. Even at this age, his body was flexible and skinny. It had a kind of restless energy that was neither particularly attractive nor repulsive. There were glimpses of the old comedian in him still. But he wasn’t a funny man; it would be difficult for someone who didn’t know him to say that he was a comedian by simply looking at him. I know a few things about his previous life – even if not much. (I’ve met many people who still remember Chakori’s films and antics, and they still beam if you mention his name.)

Fifteen years ago, Chakori was a well-known name in the Indian film industry. He appeared with Siddhu Pandey – who was a rotund fellow with a baby face – they both appeared together like Laurel and Hardy, and their silly antics and clownish buffoonery were greatly entertaining. Millions grew fond of them. Usually they performed in action films, doing minor roles as the hero’s comic friends or accomplices, or in the role of lovers who get fooled by the girls. Then, I think, Siddhu Pandey died. Chakori appeared in a few films after that but didn’t get very far. He disappeared from the world of cinema and nobody knew what had happened to him – if he was even



alive or not. He simply vanished. And now, a few years after Partition, he had surfaced in Chakiwara's Ghareeb Nawaz Hotel in the company of Shahsawar Khan – the inventor of the Magic Ring. That's where we met him and it was only after three or four months that it dawned upon us that this man was the same famous comedian, Chakori, who was celebrated everywhere and the mere mention of whose name caused people to break into smiles.

Chakori said good morning to the novelist and asked how he was doing.

'Chakori yaar! Don't ask how I am doing. Sometimes I think you're the only friend I have left in this world,' he said, making a despondent face. 'I have been asking these people to get me a new set of teeth... They all conspired to get my teeth extracted. Now how can a renowned novelist, author of over fifty novels, face his fans or other people with a flabby face? Even my publishers have turned their backs on me and, what is more, Mr Chakori, I cannot eat anything other than milk biscuits without my teeth!'

'You come with me,' Chakori consoled him. 'I will go to your publisher with you. I will teach him a lesson.'

'No, I don't want to see that bastard's face,' Kattar said. 'He wants me to write bilge that he can sell under the counter. He tells me to write that! Tells me! Qurban Ali Kattar! Who sacrificed his personal ambitions so selflessly to serve Urdu literature!'

'You are right, Kattar sahib,' Chakori said. 'You are the pride of Urdu literature.'

After loading the van, Asp drove away in it and I joined their conversation.

Chakori said, 'Kattar sahib is right. His new teeth should be fixed soon. I remember that in Bombay, at the Pradhap Cine Toon where I used to work, there used to be a beautiful, noble Parsi actor, T. Karanjiya. You must have heard of him. The actress Madhbali was madly in love with him and really wanted to marry him. Karanjiya agreed because Madhbali was very beautiful and also very wealthy. Their wedding date was fixed. One day before the wedding, Madhbali went to Karanjiya's room in the studio where he was putting on some make-up. He had put his dentures in a glass of water for them to get cleaned. You know how repulsive a man looks without his teeth, so when Madhbali saw Karanjiya, she screamed and ran out the door. Forget about marrying him, she refused to even appear alongside him as a heroine anymore. Very few people know that the sparkle on the pearl-white teeth of T. Karanjiya – that heartthrob of millions of women – was completely fake.'

Chakori's pointless anecdote had nothing to do with the matter at hand but still Qurban Ali Kattar whimpered and threw a murderous glance towards me as if I was solely responsible for his revolting appearance and black fortune.

'Kattar yaar, you will get the set. Let some money come in,' I said, consoling him.

'Let's go to Ah Fung right now and place an order for a new set,' Chakori said. 'Actually I have some business with him too. I came here so that I could take you along. Changezi sahib, he thinks highly of you, please intercede on my behalf. I want to work with him as an apprentice for a while. It won't take me long to learn dentistry. In fact, I have learnt a lot already just by observing him. Dentistry is a good vocation, if nothing else, at least one can lead a respectable life. I have never told you

about my financial affairs. What's the point of worrying one's friends? I don't have a job right now. I will only help Ah Fung at his shop and he won't have to pay me anything.'

I didn't expect Chakori to say something like this. For a moment I was nonplussed because what he said was completely 'out of tune'. It wouldn't have surprised me if the novelist had said this because such fancy schemes often spring from his creative, introspective mind and, to be honest, there could've been good reason for a novelist to do such a thing. For instance, making a dentist the protagonist of his novel or to have the good fortune of extracting the teeth of beautiful women might help further his own romantic interests.

But what do we know about other people's difficulties? Chakori was already a penniless loafer. Maybe he wanted to earn an honest living with this profession. And if he just wanted to live a respectable life, then why not? Shouldn't he be allowed to do so? Why not? But in my heart of hearts, I thought it unlikely that Ah Fung would take anyone on as his apprentice.

'And,' Chakori added, 'I will personally arrange to get Kattar's sahib's set made for cheap.'

We got on the tram and got off at Ah Fung's shop on Marriot Road. He was occupied with an old Makrani woman's teeth. There were two or three other customers in the shop too. We ordered a new set for Qurban Ali Kattar, whose measurements were already with Ah Fung. Then I asked Kattar to pay a hundred-rupee advance from what the publisher had given him. At first, Kattar made an unhappy face but then quietly handed the hundred-rupee note to Ah Fung.

'Mister Changezi,' he said, 'there wasn't any need for this!' but then quickly pocketed the money. He seemed happy about the advance.

I said to him, ‘Your friend, Mr Chakori, would like to learn dentistry.’

Ah Fung thought I was joking. ‘And why does our friend Mr Chakori want to learn dentistry?’

‘He says he’d be able to earn a decent living. Can you keep him as your apprentice for two or three months? He will only observe the work and help you out.’

‘Apprentice, Mr Changezi?’ He lowered his eyes.

‘As I said, he will only observe and help out.’

For the first time he looked at Chakori. ‘Mr Chakori, are you serious?’

‘Mr Ah Fung, I really want to learn this work,’ Chakori said. ‘I already understand it a little bit and would be able to assist you.’

‘We had a boy who was my assistant but he left. I do need an assistant, but an apprentice ...’ His voice trailed off.

‘Mr Chakori will work like an assistant boy and will work without a salary.’

‘Look, Mr Changezi, you are my friend. I can’t say no to you. But I want to do some thinking to see if Mr Chakori will be able to work here or not,’ said Ah Fung. ‘Why don’t you come here at six o’clock when I finish up, and then we’ll talk.’

When we – Chakori, Asp and I (Kattar had left us immediately after drinking his milk at five in the evening, saying the creative mood was upon him, and he wanted to prepare the structure of his novel using the latest techniques that his publisher had told him about) – reached Ah Fung’s shop at 8 p.m., he was closing for the night. He was waiting just for us. After shutting the shop, he led us to the small alley next to it where a door opened to a flight of stairs leading to his flat. This flat remained padlocked during his work hours. There was

a direct way to this place from inside the clinic where a set of stairs went through his workshop.

Climbing the narrow flight of stairs, we crossed a gallery and reached a long room adjacent to the workshop, some fourteen by eight feet. At the centre was a large, low table; next to the wall stood two tall wardrobes. On the other side of the room was Ah Fung's tiny kitchen. There wasn't any furniture except for a large fridge and a small ladder. What the purpose of the ladder was, we didn't find out. From here, we entered Ah Fung's bedroom. In the corner was a single bed with a foam mattress. On the side table was a Chinese table lamp and a transistor. There were lanterns hanging on the walls, emblazoned with dragons and other patterns. And on the floor there was a red rug while a couple of comfortable armchairs were placed next to the wall. It was a cosy room but without too many frills and trappings.

Ah Fung turned the lights and ceiling fan on. We settled on the chairs and he on his bed.

'You will have tea, right?' Ah Fung said. 'I'll just put some water in the kettle to boil.'

We started making small talk when he returned. I asked, 'Ah Fung, you didn't marry?'

'Ah marriage! Whom will I marry, Mr Changezi? No woman loves poor Ah Fung!'

Then we asked him when and how he had come to settle in Karachi. He told us that his father was a government doctor in General Chiang Kai-shek's regime, and that they lived in Canton. Ah Fung was the youngest among four brothers and was very weak when it came to studies. His father often beat him. He escaped from home to Shanghai when he was fourteen.