

# I DARED TO CALL HIM FATHER

THE MIRACULOUS STORY  
OF A MUSLIM WOMAN'S  
ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Bilquis Sheikh  
with Richard H. Schneider



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To my grandson Mahmud  
my little prayer partner  
who has been a source of joy and comfort to me  
through many lonely hours

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# I

## A Frightening Presence

The strange prickly feeling grew inside me as I walked slowly along the graveled paths of my garden. It was deep twilight. The scent of early narcissus hung heavy in the air. What was it, I wondered, that made me so uneasy?

I stopped my walk and looked around. Inside my home some distance across the broad lawn the servants were beginning to flick on lights in the dining area. Outside all seemed peaceful and quiet. I reached out to snip off some of the pungent white blossoms for my bedroom. As I leaned over to grasp the tall green stems, something brushed past my head.

I straightened in alarm. What was it? A mist-like cloud—a cold, damp unholy presence—had floated by. The garden suddenly seemed darker. A chilling breeze sprang up through the weeping willows and I shivered.

*Get hold of yourself, Bilquis!* I scolded. My imagination was playing tricks on me. Nevertheless, I gathered my flowers and headed quickly toward the house where windows glowed in warm reassurance. Its sturdy white

walls and wooden doors offered protection. As I hurried along the crunchy gravel path I found myself glancing over my shoulder. I had always laughed at talk of the supernatural. Of course there wasn't anything out there. Was there?

As if in answer, I felt a firm, very real and uncanny tap on my right hand.

I screamed. I rushed into the house and slammed the door behind me. My servants ran to me, afraid to make any comment at all, for I must have looked like a ghost myself. It wasn't until bedtime that I finally found the courage to speak to my two maids about the cold presence.

"Do you believe in spiritual things?" I asked, on concluding my story.

Both Nur-jan and Raisham, one a Muslim, the other a Christian, avoided answering my question, but Nur-jan, her hands fluttering nervously, asked me if she could call the village mullah, a priest from the mosque, who would bring some holy water to cleanse the garden. But my common sense had returned and I rebelled at submitting to the superstition of the ignorant. Besides, I didn't want any word of this to spread in the village. I tried to smile at her concern, and told her, a little too abruptly I'm afraid, that I didn't want any holy man on my grounds pretending to remove evil spirits.

Nevertheless, after the maids left the room, I found myself picking up my copy of the Quran. But after struggling through a few pages of the Muslim holy book, I wearied of it, slipped it back within its blue silken case, and fell asleep.

I awakened slowly the next morning like a swimmer struggling to the surface, a thin, high chant piercing my consciousness:

*Laa ilaaha illa Ilaah,  
Muhammed resolu'lla!*

The sing-song words drifted through my bedroom window:

There is no God but Allah:  
And Muhammed is his Prophet.

It was a comforting sound, this Muslim call to prayer, because it seemed so utterly normal after the previous night. It was a call I had heard almost without exception every morning of my 54 years. I envisioned the source of the rolling chant.

Some moments before in the little nearby Pakistani village of Wah, our old muezzin had hurried through the door at the base of an ancient minaret. Inside its cool interior he had trudged up curving stone steps worn smooth by the sandals of generations of Muslim holy men. At the top of the prayer tower, I could imagine him hesitating at the carved teak door leading to the parapet to catch his breath. Then, stepping outside to the railing, he threw back his bearded head and in syllables fourteen hundred years old called the faithful to prayer.

Come to prayer, come to salvation,  
Prayer is better than sleep.

The haunting cry floating through the morning mist across cobblestone lanes in Wah still cold from the October night drifted across my garden to curl along the house's brick walls now ruddy in the light of the rising sun.

As the last wisps of the ancient chant hung above me, I remembered the eerie experience in the garden the night before, and quickly turned to morning routines that would be comforting just because they were so ordinary. I sat up and reached for the bell on my bedside table. At its musical tinkle, my maid Nur-jan hurried in out of breath as usual. Both of my maids slept in a room adjoining mine

and I knew that they had already been up for an hour, waiting for my call. Morning tea in my bed was a must. Nur-jan began laying out my silver brushes and combs. She was a willing teen-aged girl, plump and giggly, but a bit clumsy. When she dropped a brush, I scolded her sharply.

Raisham, my other maid, older and quieter, a tall graceful woman, slid into the room bearing a large covered tea tray. She placed it on my bed table, drew back the white linen to expose the sterling service and poured me a cup of steaming tea.

Sipping the scalding ambrosia, I sighed in satisfaction; tea was better than prayer. My mother would have been shocked at my thought. How many times had I watched her place her prayer rug on the tiled bedroom floor, then, facing the holy city of Mecca, kneel and press her forehead to the rug in prayer. Thinking of my mother I looked over to the dressing case on my table. Fashioned centuries ago of sandalwood and covered with engraved sterling silver, it had belonged to Mother and her mother before her. Now it was my heirloom to treasure. After finishing two cups of tea I leaned forward, a sign for Raisham to begin brushing my graying waist-length hair while Nur-jan carefully worked on my nails.

As the two worked, they gossiped in easy familiarity about news from the village, Nur-jan chattering and Raisham making quiet, thoughtful comments. They talked about a boy who was leaving home for the city and a girl soon to be married. And then they discussed the murder that happened in a town where Raisham's aunt lived. I could sense Raisham shudder as the news came up. For the victim had been a Christian. She was a young girl who had been staying in a Christian missionary's home. Someone had stumbled across her body in one of the narrow lanes criss-crossing her village. There was supposed to have been an investigation by the constabulary.

"Any news about the girl?" I casually asked.

"No, Begum Sahib," said Raisham quietly, as she carefully began to work a braid in my hair. I could understand why Raisham, a Christian herself, didn't want to talk about the murder. She knew as well as I did who had killed that girl. After all, the girl had forsaken her Muslim faith to be baptized a Christian. So the brother, infuriated by the shame this sin had brought upon his family, had obeyed the ancient law of the faithful that those who fall away from their faith must be slain.

Even though Muslim edicts may be stern and harsh, their interpretations are sometimes tempered with mercy and compassion. But there are always the zealots who carry out the letter of the Quranic law to the extreme.

Everyone knew who had killed the girl. But nothing would be done. It had always been this way. A year ago, the Christian servant of one of the missionaries ended up in a ditch, his throat cut, and nothing had been done there either. I put the sad little story out of my mind and made ready to get up. My maids hurried to the closet and returned with several pairs of clothes for my selection. I pointed to an embroidered one, and after they helped me dress, they quietly left my room.

Sunlight now flooded my bedroom, giving its white walls and ivory-colored furnishings a saffron glow. The sunlight glinted from a silver-framed photograph on my dressing table and I stepped over and picked it up, angry, because I had put the picture face down the day before; one of the servants must have set it up again! The engraved frame enclosed a photograph of a sophisticated-looking couple smiling at me from a corner table in a luxurious London restaurant.

In spite of myself I looked at the picture again, as one does who keeps pressing a hurting tooth. The dashing man with dark mustache and burning eyes had been my husband, General Khalid Sheikh. Why did I keep this picture!

Hate surged within me as I looked at the man I once felt I could not live without. When the photo had been taken six years before, Khalid had been Pakistan's Minister of Interior.

The glamorous-looking woman next to him had been me. As daughter of a conservative Muslim family that for four hundred years or more had been landed gentry, I had been hostess to diplomats and industrialists from all over the world. I had been accustomed to sojourns in Paris and London where I spent my time shopping on the Rue de la Paix or in Harrods. The lithesome woman who smiled from the photo no longer existed, I thought as I looked in the mirror. The soft, pale skin had bronzed, the lustrous black hair was now streaked with gray, and disillusionment had etched deep lines in her face.

The world of the photograph had crumbled into fragments five years before when Khalid left me. Suffering the shame of rejection, I had fled the sophisticated life of London, Paris and Rawalpindi to seek refuge here in the quiet peace of my family's ancestral property nestled near the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. This land contained the little country village of Wah where I had spent so many happy days as a child. The gardens and orchards had been planted by many generations of my family and the big stone palatial home with its tower, terraces and huge echoing chambers seemed as old as the snow-crowned mountains not far away. My aunt lived in this house and so, desiring further seclusion, I moved to a smaller house built on the outskirts of Wah, which promised the solace I needed.

It gave me even more. For when I arrived, much of the extensive garden had become overgrown. This was a blessing, for I buried much of my sorrow in the lush soil as I plunged into the restoration of the grounds. I made some into formal flower beds and left some of the area natural. Slowly the gardens, with a natural musical spring,

became my world until by then, the year 1966, I had the reputation of a recluse who secluded herself amongst her flowers.

I looked away from the silver-framed photo in my hand, placed it face down again on the table and turned to my bedroom window looking toward the village. Wah . . . the very name of the village was an exclamation of joy. Centuries before, when this was but a hamlet, the legendary Moghul emperor Jehangir traveled through here and his caravan stopped to rest by a spring. He gratefully sank down under a willow and exclaimed in joy, "Wah!" thus naming the area forever.

But the memory of this scene gave me no release from the unsettled feeling that had been hovering over me ever since the strange experience of the evening before.

However, I tried to dispel it as I stood at my window. It was morning, a safe time with familiar routines and warm sunlight. The previous night's episode seemed as real, but as remote, as a bad dream. I drew the white drapes aside and breathed in deeply of the fresh morning air, listening to the hissing of the sweeper's broom on the patio. A fragrance of wood smoke from early morning cooking fires drifted up to me and the rhythmic thumping of water-mill wheels sounded in the distance. I sighed in satisfaction. This was Wah, this was my home, this was, after all, safety. This was where Nawab Muhammad Hayat Khan, a feudal landowner awarded "The Star of India" by the British, had lived a hundred years or so ago. My family was known throughout India and Pakistan as the Hayats of Wah. Centuries ago the caravans of emperors would turn off the Grand Trunk Road to visit my ancestors. Even in my earlier days notables from all over Europe and Asia would take the same road, once an ancient caravan route across India, to see my family. But now, usually only members of my family would follow it to my gate. Of course, this meant that I didn't see many people who were not part of

my immediate household. I did not much care. My house servants were enough company. They and their ancestors had served my family for generations. Most important, I had Mahmud.

Mahmud was my four-year-old grandson. His mother, Tooni, was the youngest of my three children. A slim, attractive woman, Tooni was a medical doctor at Holy Family Hospital in nearby Rawalpindi. Her former husband was a prominent landlord. However, they had an unhappy marriage and their relationship deteriorated a little each year. During their long, bitter disagreements, Tooni would send Mahmud to visit me until she and her husband reached another uneasy truce. One day, Tooni and her husband came to see me. Could I keep one-year-old Mahmud for a while until they settled their differences?

“No,” I said. “I do not want him to become a tennis ball. But I will be willing to adopt him and raise him as my own son.”

Sadly, Tooni and her husband never could settle their differences and they finally divorced. However, they did approve my adopting Mahmud, and it was working out quite well. Tooni came to see Mahmud often and the three of us were very close, particularly since my two other children lived far away.

Later that morning Mahmud pedaled his tricycle across the brick terrace shaded by almond trees. He had been with me for over three years, and this lively cherubic child with deep brown eyes and button nose was the only joy of my life. His pealing laughter seemed to lift the spirit of this secluded old house. Even so I worried about how he would be affected by living with such a downcast person as me. I tried to compensate by making sure his every need was anticipated, and this included his own servants, in addition to mine, to dress him, bring out his toys and pick them up when he was through playing with them.

But I was troubled about Mahmud. For several days he had refused to eat. This was particularly strange, for the boy was always visiting the kitchen to cajole my cooks into giving him snacks. Earlier that morning I had walked through the terrazzo entranceway out to the terrace. After exchanging a warm hug with Mahmud, I asked his servant if the child had eaten.

"No, Begum Sahib, he refuses," the maid said in a near whisper.

When I pressed Mahmud to take some food, he just answered that he was not hungry.

I was really disturbed when Nur-jan came to me alone and suggested timorously that Mahmud was being attacked by evil spirits. Startled, I looked at her sharply, remembering the disquieting experience of the night before. What did all this mean? Once again I asked Mahmud to eat, but to no avail. He wouldn't even touch his favorite Swiss chocolates that I had imported especially for him. His limpid eyes looked up to me when I offered him the package. "I'd love to eat them, Mum," he said, "but when I try to swallow it hurts." A cold chill ran through me as I looked at my little grandson, once so lively and now so listless.

I immediately summoned Manzur, my chauffeur, also a Christian, and ordered him to get the car out. Within an hour we were in Rawalpindi to visit Mahmud's doctor. The pediatrician examined Mahmud carefully and he reported that he could find nothing wrong.

Fear chilled me as we rode back to the house. Looking at my little grandson sitting quietly beside me, I wondered. Could Nur-jan possibly be right? Was this something that went beyond the physical? Was it . . . something in the spirit world attacking him? I reached over and put my arm around the child, smiling at myself for entertaining such ideas. Once, I remembered, my father had told me about a legendary Muslim holy man who could perform mira-

cles. I laughed aloud at the idea. My father was displeased, but that was the way I felt about any such claims. Still, today, holding Mahmud close as the car turned off the Grand Trunk Road onto our lane, I found myself toying with an unwelcome thought: Could Mahmud's problem be related to the mist in the garden?

When I shared my fears with Nur-jan, her henna-tipped fingers flew to her throat and she begged me to call the village mullah and ask him to pray for Mahmud.

I debated her request. Even though I believed in basic Muslim teachings, for several years I had drifted away from the many rituals, the praying five times a day, the fasting, the complicated ceremonial washings. But my concern for Mahmud overcame my doubts and I told Nur-jan that she could call the holy man from the village mosque.

The next morning Mahmud and I sat impatiently awaiting the mullah. When I finally saw him making his way up the steps of the veranda, his thin, ragged coat flapping about him in the chilling fall wind, I was both sorry I had asked him and angry that he wasn't walking faster.

Nur-jan brought the bony old man to my quarters, then withdrew. Mahmud watched the man curiously as he opened his Quran. The mullah, whose skin matched the ancient leather of his holy book, looked at me through crinkled eyes, laid a gnarled brown hand on Mahmud's head and in a quavering voice began reciting the Kul. This is the prayer every Muslim recites when he is about to begin any important act, whether to pray for the sick or to enter a business agreement.

The mullah then started to read from the Quran in Arabic. The Quran is always read in Arabic since it would be wrong to translate the very words that God's angel had given the prophet Muhammad. I became impatient. I must have started to tap my foot.

"Begum Sahib?" the mullah said, holding the Quran out to me. "You, too, should read these verses." He referred

to the Sura Falak and Sura Naz, verses to be repeated when one is troubled. "Why don't you repeat these verses as well?"

"No," I said, "I will not. God has forgotten about me and I have forgotten about God!"

But at the hurt look on the old man's face I softened. After all, he had come here at my request and with Mahmud's welfare in mind.

"All right," I said, taking the worn volume. I let it fall open, then read the first verse my eyes fell on:

Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and those who are with him are hard against the unbeliever. . . .

I thought of the Christian girl who had been murdered, and about the mist that appeared in my garden shortly after she was killed, and above all about Mahmud's mysterious ailment. Could they be related? Surely any angry spiritual power would never link me and Mahmud with a Christian. I shuddered.

But the holy man seemed satisfied. Despite my reservations he returned for three days in a row to recite verses over Mahmud.

And, just to complete the series of mysterious, unsettling events, Mahmud did get better.

How was I supposed to think about all these happenings?

I was soon to find out. For without knowing it, events had been set in motion that would shatter the world I'd known all my life.