

ZAMIRUDDIN AHMAD

Damnation

A HALF-HOUR EARLIER, the color of the baby booty had been pale sky-blue; now it appeared to Meher dark grey. There it was: tiny, still on the needles, unfinished, lying next to the knitting bag on the table in front of the open window. Her gaze moved from the booty and ascended to the sky, which had been cast in twilight for some time but was not yet completely dark. Looking at the sky framed by the open window, she imagined that the rising smoke was a twisting dragon winding its way upward from the ground. She was lying in bed half-seated, propped up by two pillows against the headboard. Straightening herself, she sat up completely and once again fixed her gaze on that portion of the sky where the twisting dragon showed itself. *No! The sky is clear. I was only seeing things. The night before last, just over there, first the rising smoke and then the flames, you could see it so clearly from here. Tich however had said that the fire must be a couple of miles away.*

If only for a brief moment a faint smile had tried to make its way to his lips, only to disappear.

Won't you ever stop calling me 'Tich?'

Never!

And if I were to start calling you 'Fatty,' then?

I'm not a fatty. I'm not fat anywhere.

Shall I tell you the place where? Or rather, the places?

Tell! And when Shaukat told her by reaching for her, Meher stopped his hands with both of hers, and sitting herself down in his lap gestured like a cop directing traffic But the vanished smile didn't return to his lips.

Again supporting herself against the headboard, Meher lay back half-

"Pātāl," in *Nayā Daur*, Nos. 85–86 (n.d.), pp. 123–139.

way, and her eyes again fell upon the half-knitted booty which had by now turned completely dark. She tried to recall just when she had begun the booties, but she couldn't remember for sure. —It had been a long time, she decided. She got up and put the booty and needles in the knitting bag.

When Meher turned she saw that Pathani was leaning against the frame of the door that opened out onto the portico. "Shall I turn on the light?" she asked.

"Sure."

Pathani felt for the switch and turned it on. Meher blinked her eyes a few times and sat down in the easy chair near the open window next to the bed.

"Come on in."

Pathani entered the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Shaukat Mian isn't home yet?"

Meher knew that Pathani knew very well that "Shaukat Mian" wasn't home yet, but she said anyway, "No, not yet."

"He must be on his way."

"Yes, he must be."

Pathani came over to the chair and squatted down on her haunches. Resting her right elbow on her right knee, she supported her right cheek in the palm of her right hand and said, "You should lie down, Bitya."

"I will."

"The lady-doctor said you shouldn't sit."

"I know. But I can't stay lying down all the time."

Pathani pretended not to hear. "It's already happened once. That's why she told you to be so careful."

"I am being careful."

Meher herself heard the irritation in her voice. She felt contrite.

"Haven't I been lying down all these days?"

Pathani remained silent, and this deepened Meher's remorse. She became angry with herself. *Why did I have to take it out on her? And especially now, with the troubles she has.* She felt like crying at the top of her lungs. Just scream. She got up from the chair and went to lie down. But before she got into bed she cast her eyes downward and said, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Pathani caught a glimmer of the pain that lay concealed behind her apology. She became unsettled deep inside, and scolded her very affectionately.

"Don't be silly, Bitya."

And supporting the other elbow on the other knee, she rested the other cheek in the palm of her other hand and changed the subject. “Why don’t you have a glass of milk? Today too you haven’t eaten anything all afternoon.”

“No thanks.”

“Or if there’s anything else you feel like eating . . .”

For the past few days Meher had had a craving for *gōl gappās*. But this was not the time. In these circumstances just the thought of requesting something for herself became an occasion for remorse. *If someone were to know, what would they think!* Quickly, she replied, “No, I don’t think so.”

Pathani put both of her hands on her knees and was about to get up when, from somewhere in the distance, the stillness was rent by the sound of gunfire. She sat down again and Meher closed her eyes. They both felt like stuffing their fingers in their ears, but really they were both listening, anticipating more. But the firing was over as quickly as it had begun. Pathani muttered something, and Meher heard her and opened her eyes. Her eyes fell on the vanity which, instead of being in the dressing area off the bathroom, was placed near the foot of the bed. The entire bed was visible in its large mirror. Seeing the reflection of her stretched-out body her mind briefly wandered off somewhere; she snapped out of it and reproved herself.

As she passed in front of the table on her way out, Pathani stopped at the framed picture standing near its edge. It was a picture of a young man with a conspicuous smile, a smile that possessed his entire face. Pathani looked at it, her eyes filled with a combination of love, faith, pain, and sorrow. A sound escaped her lips, the same sound most women like her make when overtaken by terribly bad news, their right hands rising in alarm to their chests. She bent over and wiped clean the entire picture with the end of her *dupatta*, taking care neither to crack the glass nor to somehow wipe off the smile. When she moved toward the door, Meher said, “Could I have that picture, please?”

Pathani picked the picture up from the table and gave it to her. Meher, lying back as she had been earlier, opened the drawer near the head of the bed and, avoiding the gaze of the smiling young man, slowly placed the picture inside the drawer and closed it.

“He asked me to move the picture somewhere else.”

Pathani at first didn’t understand why “Shaukat Mian” would want such a thing. Instead of leaving the room she sat down on the bed near Meher’s feet. Then, like a lightning bolt, the reason flashed into her mind, and in its light she began to see the situation clearly.

“It’s one of His mysteries,” she said, thrusting her index finger skyward. “God only knows! He gave me two, He took both away.”

Pathani had the impression that hearing yet again the tired old news of the loss of her sons had brought a shiver to Meher’s body. Raising Meher’s feet, Pathani placed them in her lap and began to gently massage her calves. Meher tried, but Pathani wouldn’t let her withdraw her feet.

“Today Shaukat Mian must have met with Khan Sahib.”

Meher couldn’t decide if this was meant to be a question or not. And if it was, then for whom—Meher or Pathani herself? Or had she just spoken what was going through her mind? In any event, hearing Pathani’s words was like having a great burden removed from her chest. *We’ve at least managed to cross this bridge. Or we’re soon about to.* Meher’s heart told her that this was the reason Pathani was spending so much time hovering around her room—to find out whether or not Shaukat had met with her husband and seen how he was faring. She had come up a couple of times during the day, too, with this especially in mind. There was no other reason. But since Meher had not opened her eyes even after she heard her coming, Pathani took Meher to be asleep and so returned downstairs. She pretended to be sleeping because she thought it best for Pathani to ask Shaukat himself about her husband’s welfare. And besides, what did Meher know anyway! Had Pathani asked, what could she have told her? But now that the old woman had broached the issue, Meher would have to say something. She responded, “Yes, he did say something to that effect.”

“He mentioned it to me too as he was leaving.”

When Pathani said nothing more, Meher thought, *Okay, that’s the end of it*, and quickly removed her feet from Pathani’s thighs. But Pathani remained silent for only a moment.

“It’s been four days.”

“Yes.”

Pathani became silent again. She was thinking, *Shall I say it or not?* Finally, she said it: “He hasn’t come over since after the funeral.”

Meher was afraid she would go off again, repeating everything. But Pathani said only this: “He told me he would come again the next day.”

Meher blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. “Maybe he isn’t feeling well.”

“Who? Khan Sahib? No, Bitya! He’s never been sick a day in his life! Look how old he’s gotten! Why, he’s never even had so much as a head cold! Believe me!”

“The roads are closed these days. That must be holding him back.

And besides, the transportation”

Pathani didn't think Meher's point was worth finishing. “Transportation? That's a good one, Bitya! You think he needs some kind of transportation to get here?”

Meher really did think so, so she said: “Yes. It seems to make sense.”

“Perish the thought! He comes on foot!”

“He's very courageous.”

Meher felt Pathani swell with pride at hearing this praise for her husband.

“When is he ever at home? He's forever going out. He comes back only after he's walked for miles.”

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely.”

Pathani became quiet, and Meher thought, *Okay, good, that's eased her heart a bit.* But in a short while a different Pathani said from somewhere else, “Since yesterday I've been having such terrible thoughts. I don't know why”

Meher sat up, reached over and put a hand on Pathani's knee, and said, “Why worry yourself needlessly? Shaukat will be here soon.”

A few minutes later there was the sound of a car pulling up outside.

Pathani peered out the open window and informed Meher, “Shaukat Mian is here.” But when a few minutes had passed and he still hadn't come up, Pathani went downstairs saying, “I'll go put a kettle on. Maybe Shaukat Mian will want some tea.”

And when Shaukat did come upstairs, it looked to Meher like shadows were hovering about his gaunt face. She saw him take his keys out of his pants pocket. He was about to put them on the dressing table, just where the picture had been, but he stopped. He turned his head and looked over toward her, but she gave no answer to his silent question. Shaukat put the keys back in his pocket and anxiously sat down in the easy chair. Supporting himself with both his hands, he began to stare at the floor. Meher waited for a bit and then asked, “You stopped downstairs?”

Shaukat raised his head to look at her, and for several moments kept looking at her, silently.

“I ran into Siddiqi Sahib's wife.”

Meher waited, but when he didn't continue she spoke up. “She came up this afternoon. She said she was waiting for him. I told her we wouldn't let her go until Siddiqi Sahib's completely recovered. She just broke into tears. Poor thing.”

“Just now she was crying too.” Again, he began to stare at the floor. “Siddiqi Sahib’s in a bad way.” Then he said in English, “I think they’ll have to amputate his leg.”

“Why?”

“Gangrene. His room smells of it. And he was looking at me like I posed some kind of danger to him. I don’t know if he even recognized me or not. When I offered my *salām* he just mumbled something and then said nothing.”

“His wife was saying he can’t sleep. When he does manage to doze off, he gets agitated in a matter of minutes and sits bolt upright in the bed. And then the same screaming starts all over again.”

“All his children, right before his eyes . . .” The next word caught in Shaukat’s throat.

“Shall I make some tea for you, Mian?”

Shaukat raised his eyes; Pathani was standing in the doorway.

“No thanks.”

“Come now, have some tea, won’t you?”

“Sure, why don’t you,” Meher sided with Pathani.

“I had some at work. Have you had any?”

“No, I just don’t feel like it. Did you have anything to eat today?”

“Yes.”

Meher thought better of asking him for the particulars—*where did you go, what did you have*. He was sure to ask her the same thing, sure to point out that she too had eaten nothing. She had already come up with her answer, but Shaukat remained silent. And Meher was taken aback.

Pathani had until just now been standing in the doorway, but when the phone rang in the next room and Shaukat got up to answer it, she quietly went downstairs. When Shaukat was through with the phone, he came back into the room but didn’t tell Meher who had called. He just sat down next to her bed. Meher again found cause to be taken aback—this was not like Shaukat at all. She slowly reached out and drew his head to her shoulder. She asked who had been on the phone, and Shaukat answered absently, as though something long forgotten had suddenly come to mind.

“It was him . . . Kalimullah.”

“But they’ve gone to Islamabad already.”

“He had to stay and sign some papers or other for the house. He’s going back tomorrow.” Shaukat was silent for several moments. “He only found out about it when he got here . . .”; he left the matter hanging. And after more silence he said, “He wanted to come . . . to offer his

condolences. I wouldn't let him."

Meher was again taken aback. "You wouldn't let him?"

"It amounted to as much. I told him this was hardly the time."

Shaukat got up and began to pace. Having made his way back and forth a few times he stopped abruptly and said, "I stopped at the cemetery on my way home. That's why I'm late."

"I was just about to ask."

"It looked like a carnival there. I've never seen so many people in a cemetery before. Maybe you should come along one of these days."

With this Meher felt like her heart had been mercilessly wrung by some great stern hand. She sat upright in her bed. Taking Shaukat's hand and sitting him down next to her, she said, "Why don't you lie down for a little while?"

Shaukat lay down and began to stare at the ceiling. Meher searched his pants pockets and took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She lit one for him, took a drag, and put it between his lips. Eyes closed, he smoked the cigarette, tapping the ashes on the floor. She looked now at him, now the burning tip, now again at the ashtray lying nearby on the table. She just knew it wouldn't be appropriate to get it for him. Shaukat opened his eyes. He glanced at the cigarette, which was half gone. He rolled over onto his side, his back to Meher. He reached out his hand and stubbed out the cigarette, and with his index finger he began to trace random forms in the scattered ashes on the floor.

"Have you eaten anything?"

Meher answered his question. She was thinking that his response would be something like "That's not eating," that he would drive the point home, like when he left for the office in the morning, by reminding her how Dr. Sitara had stressed the need for a wholesome and complete diet. But Shaukat didn't say a thing. Not one word. Positive or negative, not a single sound came from his mouth. And the consternation that accompanied her amazement grew even more intense. She couldn't shake the intensity of her dismay, and so just kept stroking Shaukat's hair. Finally she said, "Why don't you change your clothes."

"Sure."

But he didn't get up. He just kept staring at the ashes on the floor. Suddenly he turned over onto his other side, facing Meher, and said, "I went to Pathani's house today—there's a curfew there as well. I had a hard time getting permission . . ."

He got up, leaving this hanging as well. Meher thought he was going to change his clothes and then pick up the story, but he wasn't headed

toward the dressing area. Instead he closed the door, bolted the latch, and came back and sat down next to her.

“There’s nothing left there anymore,” he began, trying to maintain his equanimity. “Nothing but burned-out houses. No one knows who’s alive and who’s dead. All I could find out was that they’ve found several corpses. Some burned beyond recognition.” He stopped. “Animals!”

Meher shut her eyes tightly. Resting her head on her knees, she kept listening to the rise and fall of Shaukat’s voice—which hospitals and morgues he had gone to, how many dead bodies he had seen, how many wounded, how he had seen several corpses so disfigured that even their own families would likely be unable to recognize them. But of those bodies which were recognizable, there was none he might even have vaguely suspected as Khan Sahib’s—although there was one military man who told him that a body had been found in Pathani’s house. Meher was overcome by a chill that left her entire body trembling. She opened her eyes. Shaukat was sitting with his head hung low.

“So what do we do?”

It took Shaukat a while to understand her question. When he finally did understand, he said, “We’ll just have to tell her.”

“I suppose so.”

“You should tell her.”

“Me?!” She recoiled like people do when they see a snake or a scorpion a few paces ahead of them. “No! I will not be the one to tell her!”

Shaukat acted as though he expected just such an answer. He said, “All right then, I’ll tell her myself.”

He went into the dressing area and returned wearing his *kurtā-pajāma*. He paced again for a short while, and then went and stood in front of the open window. The scarred moon, pasted like a *bindī* on the forehead of the open sky, became the focus of his attention.

“Did you bring my medicine?” Meher asked.

“Your medicine!” Shaukat said, returning from somewhere very far away. “Yes. I did.”

Meher waited for a moment, but when Shaukat didn’t move she said, “Could I have it? It’s time for my evening dosage.”

Shaukat went outside. Meher heard him call Pathani, asking her to bring a glass of warm milk. “You shouldn’t take your medicine on an empty stomach,” he said as he came back into the room.

“I’ll take it with water,” she said. “I don’t feel like any milk. It makes me nauseous. For the past few days, I’ve just been taking it with water.”

“I see. But you haven’t eaten a thing. You should put something in your stomach.”

Meher became silent. Several minutes later Pathani came carrying a glass of milk and a mug of tea on a small black tray. She gave the milk to Meher first, and then offered the tray to Shaukat. He looked at Pathani’s face. Pathani said to him, “Drink the tea, Mian.”

Shaukat said nothing and took the mug.

“Would you please get my medicine?” Meher asked.

Shaukat went into the dressing area and returned with two pills. Meher reached out her hand and Shaukat placed the pills in her palm. Meher cast an inquiring glance at them.

“Sitara changed the medication,” he said. “The other was too hard to get.”

Meher put one of the pills in her mouth. She drank two swallows of milk, put the other pill in her mouth, and took some more milk. Then the rest of the milk, her eyes closed and with a deep breath, as people do with bitter medicine. She gave the empty glass back to Pathani who was standing with the tray next to the bed.

Shaukat was sitting on the edge of the easy chair slowly sipping his tea. He said to Meher, “Why don’t you lie down now.”

When Meher had lay down Shaukat took another swallow of tea, and then offered the mug back to Pathani. She came over to the easy chair, took the mug from his hand and peered inside. It was half full.

“I really don’t feel like any tea.”

Pathani turned to leave.

“Just a second. . . .”

Pathani stopped.

“God knows I tried, but I couldn’t go today. I had no time.”

Meher quickly rolled onto her side, turning away from Pathani.

“I’ll definitely go tomorrow. All the same, I did make some inquiries. It’s all quiet there.”

Meher shut her eyes.

“If it’s possible, I’d like to go with you, Mian.”

“Certainly.”

Pathani left, and Meher opened her eyes. “What did you just do?”

“I don’t know.” His head felt like several drills were boring into it. He rested it on the back of the easy chair.

Much later, after Shaukat had asked Meher if the milk had made her nauseous, and she had responded that it hadn’t, after Meher had told him that whether he was hungry or not he should still eat something, and he

had ignored her, after he had smoked three cigarettes one after another, after utter silence had descended and receded who knows how many times, after Shaukat had seen Meher slowly sink into the river of sleep and had switched off the ceiling light and switched on the thick-shaded table lamp, Meher turned in her sleep and a moan escaped from her lips. A short while later, she moaned again, but this time her eyes opened, and she saw that Shaukat was leaning over her.

“What’s the matter?”

“It hurts.”

“Where?”

She took his hand and placed it on her abdomen where she felt the pain. “Here.”

Very soon the pain became severe. Meher tossed and turned. She bit her lower lip and pressed her abdomen with both her hands. All at once she seemed to go into a daze. A shadow of fear began to spread across her face. She sat up, timidly put her left hand between her thighs and touched her white *šalvār*. With her other hand she quickly raised the bottom of her *qamīz*. She looked in horror and screamed, “I’m bleeding! Shaukat!”

Meher got up and began to go into the bathroom, but Shaukat took her by the shoulders and laid her back down. He covered her legs with a blanket and then brought some towels from the dressing area. Searching for the knot he untied her *šalvār* and removed it; he folded a thick towel and placed it beneath her. After he had bolted to the next room and phoned Dr. Sitara, he came back and sat down on the edge of the bed next to Meher. He took her hand in both of his and told her that the doctor was on her way.

When the doctor arrived, Pathani and Siddiqi Sahib’s wife came upstairs right behind her, but they stopped in the portico outside the room. After she had thoroughly examined Meher, the doctor told Shaukat that Meher had already had a miscarriage. She probed around with some questions, to which Shaukat gave some outwardly satisfactory answers, but he could tell by her face that she was not completely convinced. She said nothing about it, however. When the bleeding had just about stopped, all she said was that she would return in the morning to clean Meher up, that now it wasn’t possible.

After the doctor had left, Shaukat and Meher saw that Pathani and Siddiqi Sahib’s wife were both crying. With a wave of her hand, Meher called them over to her. By turns both sat down next to her and stroked her head. Siddiqi Sahib’s wife recited some prayers and blew on her

auspiciously, and in a short while returned downstairs. But Pathani was insistent that she remain at “Bitya’s” side all night. Only when Shaukat had explained to her that the danger had passed did she agree to leave, and only then on the condition that they let her stay in the next room, so that should the need arise, she could be called immediately.

When Pathani had left, Shaukat shut the door and sat down by Meher’s side. She lay flat on her back. Her chest was gently rising and falling, and her eyes were closed. She wasn’t crying now, but her eyelashes were still moist. Without opening her eyes she reached her hand out to Shaukat. He put his hand in hers, which she first put against her cheek and then to her chest. Shaukat felt the burning in his eyes, felt it want to become tears. He seized her hand and pressed his lips to it, then placed his head on the back of it. The burning did become tears, and they flowed from his eyes in streams. Meher opened her eyes, and for a while she felt the burning of the silent liquid dripping onto the back of her hand. Very gently she removed her hand from under his head and stroked his dishevelled hair a few times. She said in English, “I understand, Shaukat.”

And she too began to sob.

—*Translated by G.A. Chaussée*