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Unheard Lament

I WAS lying on the covered roof-terrace, reading a story by Manto in a special short story issue of *Saqi*, when there was a tap on the window—the one which connected and separated the area in front of the terrace and the upper story of the Court clerk's house.

I waited a few moments—there was another tap.

This time I placed the open magazine facedown on the bed and got up and went to the window, which was large enough for a short person to pass through standing up.

I knew who had knocked on the window. Still I asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me, of course ... me!" she said in a low voice from the other side.

"But he's not here," I said.

"I know. He has gone to Qannauj for a poetry recital ..." she said.

There was a brief silence. Then she said hesitatingly, "It's you I want to talk to."

A wave of expectation ran through me. "Wait a minute!"

I rushed over to the end of the terrace.

The inner courtyard below was hushed as was the veranda opposite. Father was visiting the estates, so there was no question of anyone being in the outer sitting room or in his room which was next to it. Pathani, the housekeeper, must be dozing in her quarters and her husband, whom the whole household called Uncle Blackie despite his fair skin, must be sleeping on the broken-down charpoy under the *neem* tree in the courtyard of the guestrooms. Their son Junior, grabbing the opportunity, was most likely holed up in some closet with a salacious novel. And Mother and Grandmother? There was a sound like a drone coming from the big bedroom directly below the roof area in front of the terrace. Mother was probably reading aloud Fayyaz Ali's second novel, which I had brought for her only yesterday. Grandmother would be listening and the maid would be pulling the fan to and fro. And Tich, obeying the order not to

set foot outside in the heat, must be twisting and turning on the dhurrie-covered floor, eyes closed, waiting for the sun to go down ... No, he must be in school.

I bolted the door to the stairs leading down to the inner courtyard, taking care not to make a sound and, returning quickly to the window, said, "I'm at your service!"

There was the sound of the latch being lifted. Then one of the shutters opened a little way and I caught sight of a wrist covered with glass bangles, a palm decorated with henna, a forefinger and a thumb with the edge of a striped and pleated muslin *dupatta* pulled tight between them, and behind it the flash of her right cheek.

"There's nobody around, is there?"

"Not a soul ... The coast is completely clear!" I opened the window all the way.

The roof on their side was a little lower than ours. That was why a few steps had been built on the other side to make it easier to go back and forth between the two households through the window. She put a foot on the steps. But then hesitated. "You come over here. There's no one at home."

It felt as if the bride herself had come for the groom, wedding parade, musicians and all.

I quickly checked all around and went down the steps to her roof.

With her other hand she pulled the border of her *dupatta* in front of her face, then turned, went up the steps and reached over to shut the window. She closed the latch and, keeping her face turned toward the window with her back to me, said, "You go on to the room—I'm coming."

There was another roof adjoining this roof and the room she had asked me to go to was next to it.

My eagerness took me almost running to the room. From its open window you could see the dome of the mosque on the other side of the street. So this is where Rusva Sahib enjoys himself!

I had visited that room a dozen times but not since she had started to veil herself in front of me.

Along the rear wall there was a bed surrounded by a mosquito curtain. An embroidered silk cover decorated the mattress. There were two doors. In the space between them there was a smaller wooden bed. On it were a folded prayer mat and a long pillow set against the wall. Between the two beds there was a round table with a glass lamp and an armchair nearby. The floor was untiled but there was a thick blue and red striped

dhurrie spread over it, stretching from corner to corner. Both the doors that opened into the room were open.

I was about to sit down in the armchair but smiled at my own stupidity and went and settled on the edge of the bed frame.

She came and stood behind one of the doors in such a way that all I could see was a calf, its shape visible through her tight-fitting poplin *pajamas*.

“Please do me a favor.”

“One, ten ... a hundred if you like!”

“Please don’t make fun, I beg you!”

My eyes were fixed on her calf caught in her tight *pajamas*. “I’m sorry. I apologize.”

I said, “But at least come out from behind there!...” I edged back and sat on the mattress. “How long are you going to stay in purdah in front of me? It’s not as if I haven’t seen you before.”

“That was then.”

“Why?”

“You were just a boy then.”

“And now?”

“Now, thanks to God ...”

“I’m a man?”

“Yes!”

“Well, you’ve got me there!”

“This is nothing to laugh about ... I really don’t know what to do.”

She stayed where she was behind the door. This looks like something different altogether.

“OK, no more fooling around,” I said. “But you’ll have to come out of there. Otherwise I’m off.” And I shifted just a little, as if I was about to get up from the bed.

She came forward hesitantly. Her *dupatta* was still drawn but so that her face was now visible and my eyes took their fill, looking at her face the way such a face should be looked at.

What a face it was!

Long lashes shading downcast eyes, the skin of her cheeks firm and tight, the nostrils quivering, a smile hovering on the edge of her lips, and the folds of the *dupatta* powerless before the rise of her breasts.

I put my hand on the bed and indicated that she should come and sit down.

She saw my gesture with her lowered eyes but sat down in the armchair—in such a way that only part of her face was turned toward me.

“So tell me now, what is it that you want me to do,” I said.

For a little while she kept her eyes on her gold-fringed shoes. Then she said, “Make him understand.”

I waited a few moments. But when she said nothing more, I asked, “Make him understand what?”

“That he shouldn’t see me anymore, of course.” She pulled the edge of her embroidered *kurta* across her rounded thighs and began to press out the creases. It was then that I saw the clouds of anxiety on her brow.

I said, “Why? I mean, if he asks why, what should I tell him?”

She began to press the creases harder. “Otherwise something terrible is going to happen to me ... Really ... I’ve been feeling scared for days now.”

I was watching her busy hands. You should take some tonic, woman, I thought to myself. It’ll revive your strength.

“If you want me to, I’ll tell him,” I said. “But your reasons seem a little weak, don’t they?”

She placed her palms together and put her hands between her thighs. “I’m not lying.... I feel scared all the time!”

“You’re probably imagining things.”

“Perhaps ... But I think Clerk Sahib suspects something.”

“But why?”

She turned her head a little, looked at me with blank eyes and then looked down again.

“I mean, why do you think that Clerk Sahib suspects something?” I said. “Rusva has never come to the house by the street entrance.... You’ve never met him anywhere else, so no one could have seen you and told Clerk Sahib.... He’s always come and gone from our roof and always when there is nobody else at your place.... Clerk Sahib is in court and the old maid only comes in the mornings and early evenings. You haven’t sent letters to each other, have you—someone could have gotten hold of those?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“For a few days now there’s been something different about Clerk Sahib. He seems to be watching me all the time.”

I was looking at her lowered eyes. What a specimen you are!

I said, “I think your fears are groundless.”

“There’s something else.... My conscience has been troubling me for days now. This is a decent neighborhood. If word gets out, I won’t be able to show my face in public again. The reputation of the neighborhood

will suffer too ... Please make him understand that this whole thing should come to an end now.... I won't forget your kindness as long as I live!"

Kindness! And in return?

A new ray of hope appeared. Yes, it was best for me to offer to persuade Rusva and to calm him down. If he agrees!

"I can see a problem," I said.

She looked at me again with blank eyes.

I said, "If he asks why I'm getting involved in all this, why you won't talk to him yourself, what am I to say!"

"No, he would never say something like that to you. You're friends.... I'm sure of it."

"I'll do whatever I can from my end. But it'll be best if you also try and explain things to him. Don't you think?"

She remained silent for a while. Then she said, "The thing is, I tried to talk about it yesterday ... I didn't dare just come out and say it—I tried to say it in a round about way. But he got upset.... The truth is, he scares me a little."

I looked at her. So this was it!

"What's there to be scared of," I said.

"Your friend is rather short-tempered."

"So what...! You're the one who started the whole affair. You can end it too."

She blushed. "Don't say that ... I never started it."

"Who was it then who asked for a copy of the *ghazal*?"

"I liked it, so I asked...! He was the one who grabbed my wrist when I put out my hand to take the piece of paper."

"But we already knew that you had been watching him secretly from behind the window."

Her face reddened even more. "And what about him watching me from behind the door of your terrace when I used to go down to see Auntie ... What's the time?"

I looked at my watch, "Half-past three."

She stood up. "The old maid comes about now.... You should go. But please don't forget."

"No, I won't.... I'll talk to him and then let you know.... Will about this time in the afternoon be alright?"

"But don't *you* knock on the window. I'll wait for the right moment and talk to you myself."

And then, like a thief, I lifted the latch of the window and crept over

to our roof, just as I had seen Rusva do, coming back through that window, many times.

The following evening, after dissecting Majaz's poem *The Wanderer* in the light of the tenets of Progressivism for two and a half miles, and with about half a mile still to go to the village of Kamaalganj, we sat down to rest on the parapet of a culvert. And for a while, in the evening twilight, we watched the fields stretching into the distance, the mango trees heavy with blossoms, the tired farmers and their tired oxen returning home; and we listened to the first notes from the birds lodged for the night in the matted banyan tree, the creaking of the occasional bullock cart passing over the bleached pebble road, the bells tied around the necks of the bullocks, and, from somewhere close by, the sound of a conch shell at a Hindu temple.

A black cuckoo made a shrill cry in the mango grove behind us. Then a one-horse carriage, its interior screened by a curtain, passed by in front.... The curtain at the back was pulled aside a little and we could see a woman's face and we kept seeing it till the carriage had disappeared into the distance.

Rusva looked toward me with his longing eyes.

"Yes, I know, I know," I said.

For a while he hummed to himself. "Listen, I feel a poem coming on."

"Commence!" I said.

He recited the poem in a song-like rhythm. The spreading darkness, the silence all around, the wide open fields and Rusva's musical voice were in perfect concert. The poem painted a picture of a meeting in a lover's chamber, picking out details of the ardor of a face, of shame-filled eyes, the body's scent, warm breaths and the fluttering of a heart. "Again the night has blazed up like lightning before my eyes" ran the poem's refrain.

"That's very good, really very good," I praised him with all my heart.

He bowed his head in acceptance of the compliment.

"It's about her, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I also took a turn around that chamber yesterday."

"You! What were *you* doing there?"—as if a scorpion had crawled out of the culvert and stung him.

"I went there to meet her, what else." I was enjoying making him

worry. “But it wasn’t my own idea to go...”

“Then?”

“I was invited.”

The scorpion stung again. “Impossible.”

Then I decided to put him out of his misery. I gave him only those details of the meeting from the day before that seemed necessary or advisable.

Rusva became thoughtful. “I don’t know what’s the matter with her.... She said the same thing to me the day before. She wasn’t very open about it but it was clear what she meant.... Seems like she’s had enough.... Who knows with a woman like that—she’s probably got someone else lined up.” He cast a searching look in my direction.

In my heart I said “amen” to the part about her having “had enough” but I quickly convinced Rusva that, first of all, I thought it a crime to even think such thoughts about my bosom friend’s beloved and, secondly, that I was sure that she had not tired of him. In fact, my impression was that she was still crazy about him. “I think the real reason is just what she said: she’s become frightened. After all, just how old is she? Can’t be more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and a novice at that.”

Rusva forgot the sting and smiled. “A novice! If you only knew what spells she can cast!”

“But to look at her ...”

“Oh yes, they all *look* innocent enough. Butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths. But once they get their claws into you ... Still, I’m not one to run away from the hunt!”

I didn’t like the look on Rusva’s face. I said without thinking, “I’ve explained things to her and got her to agree to another meeting, so that hunter and hunted can sort out their future themselves.... Judging by the way she looked, my feeling is that she wants to end the whole thing. Of course, who knows how things might work out.... And yes, she wants the meeting to take place somewhere else—not at home.”

Rusva’s Pathan temper did not flare up this time. And on the way back, after thinking long and hard, we decided where the meeting should take place and how it should be arranged.

The next day during the afternoon she knocked on the window again.

I had come up only a little while before, having had a look downstairs and reassured myself that everything was as it should be. But nevertheless, I bolted the door at the top of the stairs and also the one to the stairs

which led straight down into the alley and which were often used by Rusva.

“Come through,” I said going up to the window.

She lifted the latch on her side and then opened the window. But she didn’t come onto the steps. “No, you come over here!”

The edge of her *dupatta* did not veil her face from my eyes. It was pulled only a little way. I sat down in the armchair and she on the bed, but she still kept her eyes lowered.

“Did you talk with him?”

“Yes,” I replied and told her everything that Rusva had said to me and I to him as we sat over the culvert the evening before, including all that my bosom friend had related regarding her masterly abilities in casting spells. But not in Rusva’s exact words—in my own veiled words, so that she’d feel the hurt but not too badly.

There were tears in her eyes. “How can he say such things, the man for whom I’ve thrown away my future.... I’d be better off dead.” With the corner of her *dupatta* she wiped away the tears first from one and then the other eye. “Who do I have in this world anyway.... No brother, no sister—no family at all.... I had my mother and father. They handed me over to him and ...” She pointed toward the floor with her hand as if to say that Clerk Sahib was somewhere downstairs. “God rest their souls....” Tears welled up in her eyes again.

I turned the chair to face her. “What’s all this!” I said and stretched out my hand toward her *dupatta*. But she quickly dried her eyes herself.

“The fact is,” I said, “your Rusva Sahib, he’s a bit short-tempered. And you know that people say things they don’t mean when they’re angry.... When I told Rusva that you wanted to stop the whole thing, he was upset.... And if you think about it, would he have been so angry if he didn’t care for you so much. You don’t know but he wrote a poem about you.”

Her right hand flew to her breast and “Dear God!” flew out of her mouth and then her hand went to her lips and her cheeks reddened. “Who knows what he’s written.... Sometimes he says things that really embarrass me....” The blush deepened. “Did you hear it?”

“No.... He just told me that he’d written a really passionate poem about you. I begged him to let me hear it but he refused. He said ‘hear it at the recital.’”

“What recital?”

Then I told her that the recital was taking place on the parade ground in front of the government guest house on the night of the full moon and

that a last meeting had been arranged for that night, and I also told her why. There is a red water-tower only a hundred or so yards from the guest house. There are lots of trees around the tower and also one or two thickets. You can't see into them even in daylight. There isn't a better place to meet. "Get ready when it is Rusva's turn. He'll read his poem and leave. Wait a while and you leave too.... The seating for women will be behind the wicker screens on the veranda of the guest house. The recital will be on the lawn in front. Leave the back way, but wear your *burqa*.... I'll meet you there and stay with you as far as the red water-tower.... Then it'll just be you and Rusva.... Your humble servant will keep watch and make sure that no one interrupts your pleasure."

She was embarrassed.

"One more thing," I said. "If I cough once, that means that there is danger. If I cough twice, it means it's right on top of us!"

"But all this business with the recital and the water-tower.... Couldn't we just meet here?"

"I don't know.... It's *his* plan."

"And what if Clerk Sahib doesn't let me go to the recital? He always says that that sort of thing is just frivolous!"

"But you've been before.... Just tell him that Auntie's taking you. But make sure you talk with my mother first."

She spoke with her that very evening.

The same night, after the evening prayers, the Court clerk came to pay his respects to my mother. He sat down in a wicker chair in the outer courtyard and apologized for not having visited for such a long time.

Standing behind the door of the sitting room, Mother asked after his daughter Haseena, whose husband was in the shoe business in Kanpoor. And then she told him that she was taking his wife to the poetry recital on the night of the full moon.

Clerk Sahib uttered not a word of protest.

I sat in front of him on another wicker chair and stared at his dark complexion, his more-than-half-white beard and his large stomach that was making no attempt to hide behind his *kurta*.

When, after he had gone, I told my mother that though I had looked carefully I had seen no pockets in Clerk Sahib's *pajamas*, she said, "What use would such pockets be if you could see how they were lined!" And I went off laughing, to tell Rusva the good news.

There was a larger crowd at the poetry recital than at previous recitals, especially behind the wicker screens on the veranda of the guest house, because the news had gone round that Yusuf Sahib was also coming. Newly appointed District Collector, he was not only young and fair skinned but also always elegantly dressed. That evening he arrived in a *shervani* and *churidar pajamas* and sat down beside the master of ceremonies.

I was on my way to look over the courtyard at the back of the guest house when Kishvar, the second-oldest daughter of my lawyer uncle Mehdi, back for the holidays from Aligarh, called to me from behind the wicker screen.

“So, you’ve descended upon us again,” I said going up to a small opening in the screen.

Without becoming irritated, she said, “Will you do me a favor, my sweet little cousin?”

“What is it?”

“Give this note to Yusuf Sahib,” and she handed me a piece of paper.

“Where do you know him from?”

“From nowhere!”

“Then what’s all this secret communication... Lost all your country innocence in the city? And what if I was to tell Uncle?”

“Don’t start acting up,” she said.

The girl who was standing next to her laughed and said, “Your worship, at least read the note first!”

I unfolded the paper. It read, “Dear Yusuf Sahib, please recite one of your poems.”

“Sign it.” I stretched out my hand toward Kishvar and the opening in the screen.

“Go away, I’m not speaking to you!”

“Alright, don’t get worked up! The fact is that Yusuf Sahib doesn’t write poetry. He’s a pure Indian Civil Service man. You should have found that out first at least!”

“How do you know?”

“I just do, that’s why I’m telling you.”

“Really! Everyone writes a bit of poetry now and then.”

“However, Yusuf Sahib doesn’t. But if there is some other message ...”

“The cheek!” She stamped her foot. “Wait till I tell your mother!”

I made my way to the back of the guest house, giggling and tearing the note into little pieces.

Rusva's turn came at about ten-thirty, when the recital was in full swing.

I was already strolling behind the guest house. Rusva appeared about three or four minutes after reading his poem and went in the direction of the red water-tower.

A few moments later the door in the fence behind the guest house opened and she appeared wearing a black *burqa* but with the veil lifted. Darting looks this way and that, she walked quickly toward me and we two also headed toward the water-tower. I kept looking back to make sure that no one was coming or watching.

When we had crossed the row of trees that hid the water-tower and had reached the walled water-tank built by the English years ago, Rusva appeared from behind a tree.

I gestured with my hand for her to go to him. She walked toward him with halting steps and, as I watched, they disappeared into the thicket on the other side of the tank.

I also quietly crept over to that side, not to eavesdrop but so that I could warn them in time in case of any unexpected danger. I stopped ten or so yards short of the thicket.

For several minutes there was no sound of any kind from inside—or at least none reached my ears. Then little by little there was the sound of voices—but not a word could be made out clearly.

I moved a little closer. The voices stopped. Only the sound of glass bangles clinking once or twice. Then I heard a “no,” followed immediately by “I swear to you!” Then Rusva's voice, “Alright. It's just...” Then there was the sound of someone sitting down on the dry leaves on the ground and then a dumb silence again.

I peeped into the thicket from where I was standing but I could see nothing. I moved a little closer to the bushes but still couldn't see anything. It was not a good idea to move any closer. I sat down where I was.

The talking started up again in the thicket. This time the voices were clearer. Here and there a word was swallowed up because they were whispering, but all the same you could follow the flow of the conversation.

She was trying to explain to Rusva why the whole thing should come to an end, more or less in the same words in which she had explained her reasons to me. But at the same time she spoke of suffering, restlessness and burning desires. To convince him, she even took oaths on his life and youth and called down curses on herself. “I wish the ground would swallow me up! Let me be damned! May I rot ...” Interspersed with all this I could also hear the voice of my poet friend. To calm her down he

was urging her to be sensible and not to be hasty, but his arguments were proving ineffectual. Then he moved in for the kill. "You just want to get rid of me! Had enough...! You've had your fun and now you want to throw me out!" Then I heard the sound of quiet weeping. A sob. A long, cool sigh. And then, "If I'd known this, would I have thrown away everything!" These gentle words had no effect on Rusva. He readied himself again for the attack. "I can't live without you! I'll drown myself, I'll poison myself..." The sound of weeping stopped suddenly. "Don't ever say such things! Promise me! Or you'll never see me again, understand! How can you say these things when I'm still here!" Then there was a wordless sound, the meaning of which I would have understood even as a child. And then a rustling hush.

Quickly, I coughed twice in rapid succession.

Rusva's head appeared out of the thicket. "What is it?" There were signs of both irritation and fear in his lowered voice.

I drew right up to him. "Someone was coming."

"This way?"

"Perhaps ... I heard footsteps!"

She was sitting just in front on the floor of leaves. There was a look of fear on her face.

I don't know why but I was glad to see that she was still wearing the lower half of her *burqa*.

Rusva checked all around. "There's no one there!"

"Maybe he's gone off in some other direction. Maybe I just imagined it."

"For God's sake!" he said and turned.

"In any case, we should be going.... It's getting late."

"Just a little longer!"

"No ... I'm off.... If you want to stay, then stay all you want."

Before Rusva could say anything, she got up, brushing off the leaves from the lower half of her *burqa*.

"No, we should go now.... It really is getting late." She picked up the top half of the *burqa* from the leafy ground, brushed it and put it on.

Halfway between the red water-tower and the guest house there was a large tamarind tree. She stopped behind it and took off her *burqa*, folded it carefully and put it over her left arm. She checked her hair with her right hand two or three times, examined her clothes, turned to look at Rusva who was behind her, glanced to the left and right and quickly went into the fenced courtyard of the guest house.

The recital was still in full swing.

The following evening Rusva came to my house. For a while he sat politely downstairs. He paid his respects to my mother, received my grandmother's blessings and my mother's compliments on his poem, and then came straight upstairs.

He was happy. I knew why. But I asked for the details just the same.

He then recited to me all the hot and tender exchanges in the thicket from the night before. But he skipped over a few verses in this poetic account full of fire and ice and rounded it all off with, "Everything is sorted out and I sing of tranquility, only tranquility!"

He peeped into the clerk's house two or three times through the crack in the shutters but did not see her. He talked of this and that for a while and then left, saying he'd come again tomorrow.

He came the next day, and the next, and the next and the next—four afternoons in a row. He would peep through the shutters but would see no one; he would knock quietly on the window, but there would be no reply.

On the fourth day he began to search around for a small stick.

"What are you up to?" I asked.

"I'll lift the latch with the stick," he replied.

"For God's sake, don't do that. If there is anyone else in the house, there'll be all hell to pay."

He didn't find a stick. He paced around the terrace, again and again. Then he left.

He didn't come the fifth day and that same afternoon there was a tap on the window from the other side.

The window opened and she was there, her *dupatta* slightly drawn out, her eyes down, a little ashamed. She looked very beautiful.

She had an envelope in her hand, which she held out to me. "Give this to him—today!"

I took the envelope. A lot of glue had been used to seal it. But there was no name on it and no address.

"Don't read it!" she entreated.

"Don't worry," I replied.

"Today!" she said as she closed and latched the window.

As much as I wanted to I didn't try and steam the letter open—partly because of the amount of glue and partly because Rusva would tell me what was in it anyway, even if he didn't actually read it out to me.

And that is just what happened.

After reading the letter twice, first impatiently and then slowly, absorbing the key points, Rusva explained that she had called him. The

Court clerk had gone away with the District Collector and wouldn't be back till tomorrow. He'd asked the old maid to stay with her so it was too dangerous to meet during the day. That's why she had asked him to come at night—that very night, after eleven. By that time the maid would be fast asleep. The window would be unlatched. "But check before you come in. If the light in our room ..." (so it's "our" room now, bless her) "is on, don't come in. Wait till the light is out...."

The sun had barely gone down when Rusva arrived. He ate dinner with us. And at about ten, when Mother, Grandmother and Tich had gone to lie down in the inner courtyard, he came upstairs with me.

Before going up I told Uncle Blackie to lock the doors—Rusva would go out by the back stairs.

We immediately looked through the window. The light was still on in "our" room.

Rusva sat down on the terrace and began to leaf through books and magazines. Then he went over to look again and came back. "Waiting, waiting, waiting!" After a short pause he went over and came back again.

"It's not eleven yet," I said.

"And what if the old biddy doesn't sleep tonight?"

I laughed. "Why wouldn't she sleep.... Is she waiting for you as well?"

There were still six or seven minutes to go to eleven when he went over to the window for the fourth time, and I went with him.

We both took a peek. There was no light in "our" room.

Very carefully he opened only one of the shutters; he bent over, turned a little and went through the half-open window, going down the steps onto the roof. Then, crouching like a thief, he walked across the roof, sticking close to the wall, and went into the room. The darkness in the room wrapped itself around him.

I pushed back the shutter, bolted the door to the stairs leading down to the courtyard and lay down on the bed that had been set out on the terrace.

When he woke me there was already a faint light in the sky.

He leaned over and whispered, "Shut the door, I'm going."

"Alright," I said and got up rubbing my eyes.

He was already at the door to the back stairs. "Meet me this evening."

"Alright" I said again, bolted the door and went back to bed.

I was unable to meet Rusva that night because I had to go to Uncle

Mehdi's with my mother. I tried very hard to get out of it but she wouldn't agree. "It's rude! Anyway, they have asked for you to come especially."

The next day, by the time my father returned from the estates, the news had arrived that I had been successful in the competition for the Provincial Civil Service. Grandmother had already said two prayers in thanks. Mother was walking even taller than usual. The maid had already disclosed that she had spread a blanket of flowers at the grave of the Naugazay holy man and asked for his aid. Uncle Blackie had reached the conclusion that, mark his words, I would be District Collector some day. Junior had decided that he would remain in my service. Pathani had already thought about the arrangements for distributing sweets. Tich was in school, otherwise he would certainly have managed to squeeze at least ten rupees out of me.

When Father arrived and heard the news, the first thing he did was to hug me. Then he said to my mother "I told you so!" and repeated it to the courtyard where everyone was gathered. As God is my witness, he must have paced up and down, from one corner of the courtyard to the other, at least thirty times.

Then the sweets were brought from the confectioner Kalicharan and sent to the homes of relatives, friends, and acquaintances and alms were distributed in the area where the beggars lived.

And then my aunt arrived with her three daughters, Appia, Kishvar and Naheed, having set out the minute she had heard the news. As soon as she arrived she prayed that God would protect me from all misfortune and Kishvar immediately did a perfect impersonation of her mother's holy intonations. Everyone was roaring with laughter.

Kishvar bowed her head, pulled her *dupatta* across her face a little, raised her cupped hand to her chin and said, "This humble woman wants to pay her respects to you, Deputy Collector Sahib!"

As I raised my hand to give her a little slap, she screamed "Look what he's doing, Auntie!" and ran and hid behind my mother. There was another burst of laughter.

I saw my mother look toward my father but his eyes made no clear reply.

My aunt looked first toward my mother and then toward my father, thought for a moment and again gave me her blessings.

Then Rusva arrived. He was shown into the outer sitting room, where the bookkeeper, who had returned with my father, had set up shop and was busy doing the accounts of the estates and where it was impossi-

ble to talk openly.

Then Rusva was offered some sweets. After he had eaten a couple of pieces, first Kishvar, then Appia and then Naheed requested a *ghazal* from him from the courtyard. And when he refused, all three (but especially Appia) set up a chorus of “*ghazal, ghazal, ghazal*” until he gave in and sang a melancholy *ghazal* for them in rhythms that rose and fell.

And we carried on so for some time, enjoying ourselves.

The next day the news that the Court clerk’s wife had run away went buzzing through the whole town.

No one knew how the news had spread or who had spread it.

When the Court clerk’s maid, who had been very close to his first wife, came over to our house early in the morning to ask if his wife was there, she swore by her white hair to my mother that she had not spoken to anyone, nor would she ever do so. “My lips are sealed.”

My father, who had gone to the Court clerk’s house seven years ago when his first wife died now, seven years later, went again and was asked by the clerk, “Keep it to yourself, won’t you?”

But somehow the news had still leaked out.

Our maid had heard it from Doctor Purushuttam Das’s maid in the alley. Uncle Blackie had heard it at Nadir the butcher’s shop. Junior had been told by Navab, the land steward.

The housekeeper of Faruq Hasan, the retired deputy judge, had walked all the way to our house to tell Pathani, her close friend.

“But where has she run off to? After all, who does she have in the world that she should up and leave just because of a tiff with her husband?” said Pathani, squatting on her haunches in front of my mother who was sitting on the bed.

My mother said that she had suspected something when she had disappeared somewhere during the poetry recital. “When she came back after about three-quarters of an hour or an hour, she looked distracted.”

“What about you,” my mother suddenly turned to me. I was lying next to her on the bed, “you didn’t see her there did you?”

“Me?” It was fortunate that my face was turned away from her. “No, I didn’t see her.”

The maid was tightening a strap on the bed-frame. She stopped and said, “She’s probably got a boyfriend hidden away somewhere!”

“Not so loud, silly girl! Master is in the sitting room,” Pathani rebuked her.

But both she and Mother agreed with the maid. However, Grandmother, who was sitting on the wooden bed, leaning against a pillow, watching everyone from behind her thick glasses, said nothing.

I got up, put on my *shervani*, said "I'll be back soon," and left.

I ran into Rusva on the way. He too had heard all the news.

He took me to one side and said, "Didn't I say you can't trust women like that! Must have been carrying on with someone else as well."

"But who?"

"How do I know!"

"If you promise not to get mad, I'll tell you something."

"Go ahead."

"For a while I suspected it was you!"

He looked surprised, "Do you think I've lost my mind!"

"No, I meant that perhaps she herself had run off to you."

"And I've got her hidden somewhere?" He laughed. "You amaze me!"

By the afternoon the mystery had been solved and everyone was agreed that there could be no doubt that she had run off with her lover. The only question left was who her lover was.

"But how long can you keep even that a secret," I heard my father say to Doctor Akhlaq Husain, who had "turned up out of the blue" as my mother said.

"They say that Clerk Sahib told that slut last night that he was going to divorce her," I heard the maid tell Junior in the kitchen.

"But why?"

This the maid did not know.

But Saffu, the postman, knew. When I met him in the street, he first of all congratulated me, then gave me a parcel and then explained, "She was locked up in her room with some man when the old maid woke up. She went up and saw everything with her own eyes. When Clerk Sahib got back from his trip the next day the maid told him everything.... And she ran off during the night."

But when Pathani went over to Judge Faruq Hasan's grand house with her friend, his wife told her a very different version of events.

Pathani told my mother when she got back, "Clerk Sahib didn't go away.... He already suspected something and made his move.... He said that he was going away and that the maid would stay the night. But he didn't go anywhere.... He sneaked back at night and saw the whole show with his own eyes.... If it hadn't been so dark inside he would have been able to see the creep's face...." And her eyes darted this way and that, she grinned and, putting her *dupatta* to her mouth in embarrassment, said,

“They all look the same without their clothes on.”

Mother also covered her mouth. Then she saw me and said, “What are you doing there?”

When the man who fills all the water-tanks in the Muslim houses came to the clerk’s house in the evening and threw the bucket down into the well, it became clear that the clerk’s wife had not run away with her lover. She had jumped into the well.

After dusk Mother went across the rooftop to the clerk’s house to look at the bier. On her way back she took the old maid into that very room and made her tell all the details.

The maid admitted that she had seen the Court clerk’s wife cavorting with some man in that room. She hadn’t raised the alarm for fear of scandal. But when the clerk came back the next day she told him everything. It would have been disloyal not to. Clerk Sahib told his wife that he was going to divorce her and throw her out of the house. But that shameless hussy still refused to tell him the man’s name. And when, in the morning, she wasn’t anywhere in the house, everyone thought she’d run away with him.”

“She was saying that she had dozed off ...” Mother was in the courtyard giving Grandmother an account of what the old maid had revealed and I could hear her up on the roof. “... otherwise she would have stopped her.”

I did not hear Grandmother speak.

It must have been about ten at night.

I felt like talking to someone. I came down.

Despite the heat, Father and Mother were shut up in the inner sitting room. I could make out their low voices.

Mother was talking about a post mortem and Father was saying that only Yusuf Sahib could do something about it.

I felt a shiver.

Grandmother was saying her evening prayers on the wooden bed in the courtyard.

I went and sat down beside her.

She prayed for longer than usual. At the end of her prayers she passed her hands over her face, folded the prayer mat, leaned back against the pillow, closed her eyes and went off to wherever it was that she so often went to—somewhere far away.

When, after quite a long time, she came back, she opened her eyes again and, addressing no one in particular, she said, “That poor unfortunate woman sacrificed something more precious than her life and for such

men!”

She picked up her rosary and closed her eyes.

After three or four minutes I got up quietly and stole upstairs. □

—*Translated by Shamoan Zamir*